



Chapter 21

Macalister got the four of them on to a RAF Dakota flight out of Hamburg that evening. He insisted on putting them up at the Piccadilly. 'I've still got the warrant book for this operation and even if I didn't, Rani could afford it. As far as I'm concerned she's been on the books since 1941, and that's a hell of a lot of deferred pay.' He arranged a discreet little ceremony at the Knightsbridge Registry Office, witnessed by himself and a startled WREN that he pulled off the street. 'Zina will take a bit longer. If you want her legally recognised as your child you'll have to adopt her. Stupid, isn't it?'

Rani went shopping. 'I need clothes and so does Zina. I'll look for somewhere permanent to stay. Is there a pharmacy nearby?'

'You don't need makeup', said Smith gallantly.

'Flatterer!'

Smith was put through an intensive two days of debriefing. For some reason there was considerable urgency about it. The only concession Mac made to Smith's personal administration was to have him issued with a demob suit. 'I don't suppose I can let you be seen in the street in SS uniform', he said, in a tone of voice that implied that to save time he would if he could. 'Do you know the silliest thing about your little jaunt? If Hitler had gone to the Alpine Redoubt the war would have been over quicker and with fewer casualties. There was nothing there to fight with. Berlin, now - Berlin cost the Russians over 100,000 casualties. I think that's how the old bugger wanted it. He was just having a lend of all those people - Goebbels, Speer, Walther, you - who were trying to persuade him to do what he always intended.'

'Thank you for that flash of hindsight, Control', said Smith, 'it makes the whole thing seem totally futile, somehow. What I would like to know is why I was not posted missing, as arranged.'

Macalister's face clouded over. 'I sent advice off to RAF Casualty and the Red Cross and assumed that they would take it from there. That was sloppy of me. The process was aborted. I've since followed the paper trail. It ended in Dancer's office. I can't tell you any more than that.'

'Then perhaps I should ask him.'

'Perhaps you should. You're seeing him tomorrow. We'll have finished your debrief by then, but I somehow feel that I won't have been able to write it up for him in time. Be careful though. The beast is dangerous



even when uninformed. You'll also find that things are changing around here.'

Indeed they were. The anteroom to Dancer's office was almost deserted and strangely quiet. The head dragon quickly put her nail file in a drawer as Smith entered. 'Please try not to upset him. He's taking the end of the war very badly. The Americans have made it clear that they don't want our help in the Pacific.' Dancer was sitting behind his desk. There was not even one slim folder in sight. Smith noted that there were new chess pieces on the board, red instead of black, positioned for the start of a game. Well, not quite. The red pieces were forward two rows, along the centre line of the board.

'You disappoint me', Smith said.

'You disappoint me, *sir*,' Dancer replied.

'I had expected, *sir*, to see your black king toppled on the board. Isn't that the convention for checkmate?'

'This is a new game.'

'Let me guess. We haven't even started yet and The Red is already well advanced.'

'Leaving white with little room for manoeuvre.'

There was an awkward silence. Dancer spoke again. 'I, too, am disappointed. There was no better result from this operation than from the Hess fiasco.'

Smith felt his colour begin to rise. Why did Dancer always want to provoke him? 'Goebbels' broadcast about Hitler staying in Berlin didn't exactly come out of thin air, you know.' Damn, it had worked again; here he was claiming credit for Rani's work, and expressing himself badly at that.

Dancer ignored the solecism. 'Too late. By then Patton and Patch were already wheeling south, across the Danube towards the Alpine Redoubt. Anyway, information that everyone is given for nothing is not a tradeable commodity. It was of no use to me. It could buy me no credit with the Americans, could it?'

'Silly me. I thought we were trying to beat Hitler.'

'How, by shooting him with a Russian revolver? Fancy being blown by having a suspect weapon. Thunder and lightning, man, how much more unprofessional can you get?'

Dancer's words doused Smith's rising temper like a bucket of cold water. The revolver. Gustav had told him that it was the culprit, but Strauss said



it was not, and Strauss had no reason to lie. But why would Gustav lie, and why did Dancer think the lie was the truth, though both were irrelevant? Thunder and lightning?! Smith's head was spinning, and the words had to sort themselves out as they emerged, but his voice was measured.

'I'm afraid that your man did not do exactly as he was told. Gustav denounced me in writing. He wanted to give me a chance to escape, so he told me that the revolver had been found, which is what I imagine you ordered him to arrange. He didn't and it hadn't. That came later.'

Dancer's face was an impassive mask. 'Imagine is right. You should be more careful about what you say. That is fantasy worthy of Gruenberg.'

'I also imagine that you're worried. Even our masters draw the line at shopping our own agents. It's bad for morale.'

Dancer leant back in his chair. 'Indulge me. Why on earth would I do such a thing?'

'I can only guess, but I suspect that it was of a piece with the leak about Walther's negotiations. For the life of me I couldn't see a British interest in that, but it makes sense in the context of your private obsession with Bolshevism. If Hitler sees that there is no chance of an understanding with the West, and simultaneously finds that Stalin is gunning for him personally, his only hope is to persist with trying to engineer a collision between the Russians and the Americans. From your point of view, if that fails he has no option but to put his all into trying to hold your red line back a row, which at the very least will send another 100,000 Communists to hell with him. Certainly worth one miserable Flight Lieutenant, wouldn't you say?'

'Very ingenious. Wish I'd thought of it. You and Hitler were right in one respect though; the Americans are the key to the immediate future of Western Europe. The one thing we, the French and especially the Germans can't afford is for them to pack up and go home the way they did in 1919. Our old sot Churchill has done his country one last service by ensuring that they stay to administer a zone in occupied Germany.'

Smith was exasperated. 'You actually think that an ultra-capitalist state rubbing up against an ultra-marxist state is a prescription for a stable balance of power in Europe?'

'Stable, no; balance, yes. And Britain will again have played her traditional role of ensuring that no single power is in a position to dominate Europe.'



Smith could see that he would get no further. 'Look, I'm sure you've also got a plan whereby Britannia will again be able to rule the waves but frankly, I don't give a tinker's damn. Give me my passports and I'll be off.' Dancer examined his glasses. 'I only pay for results. You should know that.'

'That was not our deal. I was to go to Hamburg: you were to get me two passports.'

'That is not my recollection. Did you make a note for file?'

Smith could not help smiling. 'You know, my wife predicted that you'd say something like that.'

'Your wife?'

'Yes. And anyway, I really don't need the passports. She and our daughter will be travelling on mine from now on.' Dancer was now genuinely disconcerted. He stared at his empty desk as if willing it to bring forth a briefing note that would explain.

'Oh', Smith went on, taking a sheet of paper from his pocket, 'and she also asked our daughter to draw a present for you.' The drawing was of one stick figure chasing another. 'The one in front, with the glasses and moustache, that's you. The one behind you, with the horns and tail, that's the Devil. The thing in his hands is a pitchfork.'

Dancer's voice was contemptuous. 'So what's this, a tinker's curse?'

'The Sinti do not curse; it's a prophecy.' Smith said, walking to the door. 'Think of it as Gruenberg's last.'

Dancer picked up the paper, crumpled it into a ball and threw it into his ash tray. As he watched the door close behind Smith, a thin filament of smoke drifted past his nostrils. Something was burning. He looked at the ash tray. The paper was alight, unfolding as it burned. The figures on it twisted and turned in a macabre dance, and were consumed. Dancer stared at the ashes for a long time. He took a bottle of scotch from a desk drawer and poured himself a stiff drink. He told himself that he was only doing it to see how steady his hands were.

Smith stepped out into the sunlight of the street. Across the way, Rani and Zina were waiting. Rani had used every one of their clothing coupons on a hooded red cloak and pink dress for Zina, and a stunning powder blue suit for herself. They looked wonderful. Rani took his arm. 'How did he like his present', she asked.

'He screwed it up and threw it away.'

'Good.' She smiled enigmatically.



Smith vaguely felt that there was a question begging to be asked here but, as was often the case with Rani, he could not quite figure out what it was. Anyway, small hands were pulling the two of them into a trot. Ahead was the park, and swings, and all the promise of spring.