jerry sohl

point ultimate

a science fiction novel

POINT ULTIMATE

by

JERRY SOHL

In the year 1999, the Enemy had taken over, and were enforcing their deadly hold with a weapon so effective that any attempt at rebellion seemed doomed to failure. For the entire population had to report every month for booster shots against the plague; without them, death was supposed to come at once.

But Emmet Keyes of Spring Creek, Illinois, knew he had a secret weapon that would give him thirty extra days of life to locate the organized resistance movement that was rumored to exist; he was determined to devote himself to this cause.

Imprisonment and near-death are his initial rewards, but in the end, he wins a victory of a strange and surprising kind.

JERRY SOHL is part-time reporter for the Bloomington (Ill.) *Daily Pantagraph* and one of our most successful writers of science-fiction as well. Among his previous books are COSTIGAN'S NEEDLE, THE HAPLOIDS, THE TRANSCENDENT MAN, and THE ALTERED EGO.

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BOOK CLUB
EDITION

TIMELINER

by

CHARLES ERIC MAINE

All the laboratory animals used to test the dimensional quadrature device had perished. But Dr. Hugh Macklin was determined to run a low-power test with himself as subject. Seconds after the switch had "accidentally" been thrown to full power, Macklin found himself eighty years in the future with a new body and name—on the moon!

Macklin had, in fact, become one of the ten or so Timeliners of the universe, a "psychotemporal parasite," whom death could not destroy but only send farther into the future to take over someone else's identity. Ultimately, time being a curve and not a straight progression, he finds himself in the most fantastic possible position, listening to the story of his own murder.

Charles Eric Maine is an Englishman. He has published a previous science-fiction novel and his screenplay "Spaceways," was a successful science-fiction film.

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JERRY SOHL

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TO MY SON, ALLAN

CHAPTER 1

Emmett lay still, as he had lain for more than an hour, his muscles weak with tension, forcing himself to study the pattern of ceiling wallpaper.

It wasn't time to move—yet.

He glanced at the clock on his dresser. If he heard no noise in the house in the next five minutes, then he would start.

He turned back to the wallpaper, following the design here and there across the many cracks, imagining the curlicues continuing where the paper was faded or where it had fallen away long ago.

This may be the last time I see you, ceiling, he said to himself. If what they say is true, I will never come back. Never. The thought chilled him. A tremor convulsed his right leg. He tried to quiet it.

But even if I don't come back, even if there is no way to fight, it will be better than this life, better than applying for a permit and marrying Mary Ann and living at her house or living at ours, and putting in for a residence permit and waiting until they say it's all right to move into a house the government would allocate. What you really do is wait until somebody dies and then go and live in their house.

The thought of Mary Ann brought her picture to his mind.

Thin, Mary Ann. Pale of face and birdlike, her eyes already dulled with hopelessness, her back bent slightly at the shoulders. They ought not to work her so hard. But of course her family had to eat.

It had been fun being children and sweethearts and defying the laws. But there had been no disobedience for years now. Kids were allowed a large margin for error. Adults were not. At twenty-six, Emmett Keyes had ignored his last command more than five years before. He had to conform, if he was going to remain in Spring Creek.

But he wasn't going to stay.

He was leaving. Tonight.

He turned to the clock again. It was exactly three.

The Time.

Holding his breath and moving slowly and carefully so the bedsprings would not squeak, Emmett slid from beneath the covers. When he reached a sitting position, he sat there for a while listening. There was no sound except the swish of the faded curtain as it brushed the shredded shade at the moonlight-filled window.

He had no need to dress, since he hadn't undressed. Oh, it had all been planned. Years ago, it seemed. He moved his feet to the side of the bed. Blood flowed faster within him now, tingling in his arms and legs which he had held still so long.

He rose, picked up his bag, tiptoed softly to the door, avoiding the familiar creaking boards, remembering how many times he had done this as a kid, filled then with the simple joy of violating the curfew, he and the other members of his gangs, to roam the countryside for devilment.

But this was not for devilment, this violation of everything. This was for real. Maybe forever.

Emmett walked quietly past his parents' room, thankful their door was closed. He went down the steps slowly, skipping certain ones.

He sighed with relief when he reached the bottom.

Suddenly the door he had passed upstairs flew open and a white figure rushed to the head of the stairs.

"Em!" His mother, a wraith in the dark, stood looking down at him. She was quickly joined by another white-clad figure, his father.

"Em!" his mother repeated. She seemed to float down the stairs, and he thought, How graceful she is! And he was filled with love for her. In a moment mother and son stood silent, facing each other, at the bottom of the stairs.

"*Must* you, Em?" she asked quietly. His father moved down to join them.

Emmett nodded. "I've been planning it for a long time."

"I know . . ." She looked away. He knew her eyes were filling with tears. He had hoped there would be no moment like this.

"It's not as if I were a punk kid or something," he said.

His father placed a hand on his shoulder. "I was born in 1945, the year the first bomb fell," he said. "This was a free country then. It's worth fighting for, Em, but you won't get a chance to fight. They'll get you first."

"There must be resistance somewhere," Emmett said. "What about the Millenaries?"

"They're mostly religious."

"I've heard that's just a front, that they're going to rise up in two thousand."

"I don't think so. The commies couldn't let them keep organized the way they do if there was danger of that."

"I can't stay here, Dad."

"If you go, it will be the last time we'll ever see you," his father said. "They're thorough. You know that, the little you've seen of them. I've seen a great deal more."

"But we can't keep on like this, virtual slaves, always having to run to them for permission for this and permission for that!"

"Oh, Em!" His mother put her arms around his shoulders and he drew her to him. "It wasn't always like that, Em. And maybe it won't always be. But you can do so little. Won't you stay? We need you."

"Your mother's right, Em. We're going to need you more and more as time goes on. We're not getting any younger, you know."

"Somebody's got to do something . . ."

"Not you, Em. Not Emmett Keyes, son of a farmer in Spring Creek, Illinois. Not you alone against a world ruled by the Enemy."

"I could try."

"Better men than you have tried."

Emmett could barely see his father's face in the darkness, but he didn't have to see it to know the strength in it, the wisdom of the eyes, the firm line of jaw, the strong back and the strong hands. He knew his father was right, too, but he had his own conscience to face and he knew he couldn't stay, that he could not live out his life never raising a hand against oppression.

"I can't stay," he said dismally. "I've tried for five years to stay."

"It won't be easy for us when they find out," his father said gently.

No, it won't, Emmett thought. And that was the worst part of it, that was the only thing that could make him change his mind, that and the realization they could never write to each other, never see each other again probably.

"I'll stay," Emmett said evenly, "if you are afraid of what might happen to you if I leave."

For a moment they were silent. His mother moved away from him into the arms of his father as if for protection from this thought.

Finally his father said, "Go, then. We're not afraid."

"You'll need a good breakfast," his mother said, breaking away and moving through the darkened room to the kitchen.

A half hour later they opened the back door for him and he stepped through it.

"Good-bye, son," his father said, extending his hand. They shook hands warmly. "Good luck."

"Good-bye," his mother said. She put a palm on each side of his head and drew it down and kissed him.

He turned and moved away from the house.

"I'll tell Mary Ann . . ."

He could not look back.

CHAPTER 2

The fields were wet with dew and his shoes were getting muddy, but Emmett didn't care. It would soon be morning and things would dry out in the May sunshine. When the shoes dried, he'd give them another good waxing. That was the way to keep shoes.

As he walked in the quiet, dark early morning of the countryside, he despised the necessity of keeping to the fields and wooded areas. Why couldn't a man walk along a road wherever he wanted to go or, better yet, ride along a road the way a man should? There had been a time once when travel permits weren't needed. Would that time ever come again?

He shifted his bag from shoulder to shoulder. He had used what he thought was good judgment in filling it. Matches, candle, hunting knife, wax, scissors, an old map of Illinois, needle and thread, razor, soap, fishhooks and line, cord, salt, a flask of water, water purification tablets (his father had saved them for years and Emmett hoped they were still good), and the lunch his mother had prepared for him. Every item needed. The bag—really a blanket which served to carry these things—would be a little lighter when he ate his lunch.

He wished he had a sleeper. Or a heater. That way he could

last a lot longer. As it was, it was going to be tough. He didn't try to fool himself about that.

Where was he bound? Away. Anywhere. Just away. Away from Spring Creek and everyone he knew and the dull life of working for the commies and trying to meet quotas.

What would happen if he was caught? Maybe one of the slave-labor camps in Utah or Nevada. Maybe they'd cut him off from his booster. But they'd have to catch him first.

He grinned as he jumped a small stream after surveying the other side to make sure there were no electric eyes or alarm systems there. It was only another cornfield freshly planted. He was amused because of the thought of the booster. He had carefully selected the day to depart—the day after booster time. That would give him thirty days until the next time. With good luck they might not miss him for a whole month, if nobody noticed he was gone, and if Mary Ann didn't tell. He was sure she wouldn't, though she would be terribly put out to know he had left without bidding her good-bye.

He laughed aloud at another thought and then quickly looked around to make sure he had aroused nothing. He must remember not to be carried away like that. But what made him laugh was the thought of the alarm that would go out for booster stations to be on the alert for him, knowing that he would be forced to report somewhere by thirty days or a few days thereafter or suffer the consequences. They knew no one could live without his booster.

But Emmett had one weapon they didn't know about.

He didn't need his booster shot.

It was strange, but he was the only person he knew who was immune to the plague. Everyone else had to report at the time or suffer the sickness, insanity or death that was sure to result from not getting a booster. But not Emmett Keyes.

He recalled with grim humor the one time he had missed his shot, remembering how he had expected to come to a terrible end within a few days when he realized what he had done. His parents had taken him to the station when he was eleven for the

regular monthly inoculation. There had been a crisis at the station that hour, and the nurses had their hands full with a man who had deliberately missed his shot—tempting the consequences as many did, hoping they'd find themselves immune, which nobody ever did—and he was nearly mad with fear and sickness. They had made him pay a hundred dollars before they administered his shot, the penalty for failure to report on time. His wife paid it. The man recovered quickly, left quietly.

In the excitement Emmett, no different from other children who did not like the shots, sneaked through the line and out the back door, feeling rather proud of himself and not thinking at all about what might happen to him.

A few days later a flier with a red star on its side settled in the Keyes back yard and a commie—he looked enormous to Emmett then in his big coat and red-star armband—got out. Emmett's mother, beside herself with fright and drying wet hands on her apron, came flying out of the kitchen. His father came up out of the fields.

The commie demanded to know why their son had not reported for a booster. They told him he had, that there must be a mistake. The commie then demanded they produce the son, one Emmett Keyes, age eleven.

His father had come in the house for him, found him at the second story window where he had been watching the proceedings with wide eyes. When he was taken out in the yard, his father, holding his hand tighter than he had ever held it before, said, "Look, here's my son. Does he look like he's going to die?"

The commie looked him over and grunted something. Then he asked in a loud voice, "Did your mama and papa take you for your booster?"

Emmett told no untruth when he said, "Yes, sir."

Then the commie reached out, grabbed Emmett's left arm roughly, setting a small instrument over the identity strip beneath the skin of his forearm, set his eye to a small peephole and read what was there. Then he made a notation on a paper and,

without another word, turned and climbed into his flier. In a moment he was gone.

That was as close as he had ever been to a real Communist official. He had taken his boosters regularly after that.

He surprised his parents by telling them he had not taken the shot after all. At first they refused to believe him, but when he threatened to do without the next shot to prove it, they looked at him strangely and shook their heads at the wonder of it. They discussed it many times, but they never breathed a word of it outside the house. And of course they never mentioned it without looking for microphones first. His father was sure there was one in the house somewhere after the commie officer had visited them, but he never found it. They did not discuss the immunity again for some months for fear someone would be monitoring their conversation.

The fact of his immunity made him wonder if there could be others who might be immune. But through the years he became convinced this wasn't possible. He had seen too many lawbreakers take their punishment—sent home to die lingering, agonizing deaths without their protective vaccine—to doubt the need of the shots. He recognized it as the surest hold the Enemy had over them all.

And it was only his immunity that gave Emmett Keyes the chance to do what he was doing. If he had to report for a shot, he could last no longer than thirty days. Without having to report, he was freer than anyone he knew. He could last—a lifetime?

For thirty years the need for the monthly injections had been the rule of life for everyone in the United States and the other occupied countries—for four years longer than he had been alive. It began in 1969 when the Enemy H-bombs wiped out Washington, D.C., and Chicago. The United States had tried to retaliate in kind, only to make the tragic discovery that the Enemy had discovered something that tipped the scales of war in their favor and made the outcome certain: they had somehow devised an impregnable barrier against aircraft and missiles.

There was no alternative. The United States had surrendered

quickly after the Enemy ultimatum to prevent any further loss of life. The annihilation of the United States as a world influence left other countries without protection, and they gave up in a few days in the face of the invulnerable Red giant.

The Enemy became the undisputed ruler of the world and took over the old U.N., naming it instead the United Nations of Communist Peoples and pretending to use it for the settlement of national differences. But the Enemy were the sole arbiters and all important decisions were made abroad and not in the United Nations buildings in New York.

No sooner had the United States capitulated than the Enemy made a surprise announcement. Just to make sure of their eventual conquest of the United States, they said, they had let loose all over the world a new strain of bacteria, a preventive measure in case the United States and any ally had somehow managed to get through to Enemy cities.

Emmett knew the history of it all; he had been taught the glowing story in school. How the Enemy magnanimously agreed to inoculate every man, woman and child in the world. There was hesitancy on the part of the public for the first thirty days. But when thousands suddenly began to succumb to the plague, there was a rush for the booster stations so generously provided by the conquerors. Some people died or went mad waiting in line to be inoculated. Enemy doctors and nurses worked around the clock for three days until everyone had been given a preventive shot. No American doctor or nurse then or since ever handled the vaccine.

People thought the vaccine would make them immune for a long period, but they soon learned the shots were to be necessary each month for the rest of their lives. And so the pattern of conquest and control became evident and booster time began, that time of the month when everyone reported to his nearest booster station to get his shot and to be seen by the Enemy doctor and officer there who also checked on taxes, on how well quota requirements were being filled, keeping an eye on the women

to make sure none of them was unlawfully pregnant, doling out birth control pills for five dollars each.

A birth permit became something to work years for. The cost was five hundred dollars, including pre- and postnatal care and the use of a hospital station delivery room. Everyone used these facilities because if they did not and could, by some stretch of the imagination, have a child outside the hospital station, the infant could live no more than a month, since it would be denied its first booster.

As he plodded across field after field, Emmett suddenly remembered there was one group immune to the plague: the gypsies. Or was this just so much hearsay? He had been hearing they were immune all his life, assumed they were. But now, considering the uniqueness of his own freedom from the disease, he wondered.

What was there about gypsies? No identification written under the skin of their forearms. Was this true, too? If they were unregistered, then they were not eligible for hospitalization, rations, government work or other benefits. But what about their babies? Were they born immune?

There had been gypsy bands camped near Spring Creek many times. He remembered their tents, their colorful clothing, their signs which proclaimed their speaking acquaintance with things occult, the future. He and some other boys had watched the families at a safe distance, finding, to their disappointment, that they were no different from their own families, hanging up the wash, reprimanding the children, seemingly happy with their lot of continuous roaming. In that one thing they *were* different, however. Emmett was sure they didn't need travel permits, were free to go where their spirits moved them.

He had never asked a gypsy if he was immune, had never been that friendly with one, heeding his mother's advice to be careful and not go too near them, that the gypsies might kidnap him. He recalled several adolescent crises when he wished the gypsies *had* spirited him away. Now he only regretted that he had heeded the parental admonishment that had kept him at such

a distance from them, for if they were immune and didn't need travel permits, he would fit in very well with such a group—if they would have him. He'd have to find a band. But where to look?

The stars were fading and the sky brightening and the countryside quickening to the new day. Birds twittered in excitement in the trees he passed, and Emmett heard a rooster crow far away. He walked more slowly now, knowing that with each passing minute he would be less of a shadow in the woods and field, and knowing too that farmers are early risers and that he should move out of the fields and take to the roads.

By sunup he estimated he had walked a good ten miles, sat down to rest and wet his lips from his water flask. Then he withdrew the wrinkled, faded map and unfolded it on his knees as he sat under a bush at the side of a dirt road.

He was near Springfield; he knew he should head east or west to skirt the city. He looked at the map, decided to pass Springfield to the east, and in so doing pass Decatur to the west, heading in a northeast direction toward Chicago, keeping away from the hard roads. The dirt roads would be better for daytime traveling since their shoulders were narrower and shrubbery grew nearer the roads, offering quicker cover. On a highway he'd be easily spotted, just as easily stopped. He could hardly imagine officials using dirt roads; they had seldom passed his home near Spring Creek.

He walked, taking to the fields now and then to go by houses that were too close to the road. The sun in the cloudless sky bore down and it was warm. He decided to ration himself with the water when he found it half gone. He was immediately thirsty. But he knew his survival depended on his control. He kept his hands off the water flask.

Once he saw a shadow move across a field, walked and watched it idly, thinking how much like a bird it was. Then, in a single action, he looked up, saw the small flier whispering through the air, and fell to the ditch, rolling beneath a hedgerow, breathing hard, his heart hammering.

Another time he was luckier. He heard a turbo, was well hidden in the weeds beside a culvert before it came in sight. He was thankful for the whir of the turbocar which, though not loud, was a distinctive sound. Once again his heart thumped its protest as he watched the old car and its lone occupant buzz by.

At noon Emmett sought the seclusion of a small timbered area, spread out his blanket and ate the sandwiches his mother had prepared. He was hungry and ate with gusto, and as he finished he wondered where and when he would eat again. He examined his water flask, wished he had provided a larger one. It was hardly a quarter full now. Water, he could see, was going to be important soon.

It was near sundown. He had passed a thousand farms, it had seemed, had tumbled into a hundred ditches on as many occasions of passing fliers and turbos, skirting areas where farmers were out in the fields planting. He had to stop sometime, somewhere. He needed water first, a place to stay second. He could always sleep in a field or a forest—he had his blanket to cover him —but he needed to get near a farmhouse for water. How to do this?

He worked it out very logically, he thought. He might sneak into a barnyard, fill his flask from cattle drinking troughs. Or he might find an old hand-pump well, though this would probably be too near a house and would make too much noise. His other choice was being very open, just going up to a farmhouse, explaining he needed water. What reason would anyone have for refusing such a request? Everyone, all the people he had seen and all the people he was likely to see in the days to come, were oppressed people, were they not? They would have no feeling about him except perhaps envy in the joy he must feel in moving about. They might even be sympathetic enough to give him a meal and send him on his way with their blessing. That is what he was sure his parents would have done for such a traveler. It would have been an event, having someone such as he stop by. It would be much more sensible, therefore, to be friendly and

open, he decided. To sneak water would provoke inquiry and possible unpleasantness.

He walked a few more miles until he came to a farm that looked a little better than others he had seen. The fields were neatly plowed, the house was newly painted and the barn was still bright with paint from a year or two ago. He saw a clean yard, white fencing, the farmer himself in his overalls and straw hat, the woman coming in from the chicken yard. They must be an industrious couple, keeping their place like that, he thought. There was a turbo in the yard. A new one. A dog was asleep on the stoop.

The dog was first to notice him as he stepped into the driveway from the road. It looked up as if trying to recognize him. Then it must have rejected any resemblance to anyone it knew and suddenly moved down the steps and across the yard, barking.

"Hi, old fella," Emmett said, stooping a little and holding out his hand, palm upward. "Come on, fella. Come on."

The dog looked uncertainly at him, whined a little in its confusion, then, as if deciding there could be no evil in someone who spoke so nicely, lowered its head, wagged its tail and came forward.

Emmett scratched the offered ears, saw that the farmer had turned in the middle of the yard and was watching him. The woman stood on the steps.

"Here, Bill!" the man called, walking toward Emmett. "Here, boy!"

The dog lurched away and ran for the man, walked obediently at his side as the two men approached each other.

"How do," the farmer said heartily, showing wide-set white teeth in a disarming smile. He was a large man in clean overalls, a sunburned man, wisps of white hair jutting from beneath his straw hat. "Where the devil did you come from?"

"Just passing by," Emmett said. He was pleased with the friendliness of this man. "Thought I might get my water flask filled here."

"Well, now, water's one thing we got plenty of. You just come on right in."

The farmer turned and together they started up the driveway.

"Name's Tisdail," he said. "Cad Tisdail. The Cad's for Cadwallader. Ain't that a name for you?" He laughed a little.

"My name's—" caution slowed his tongue—"Elmer Pease."

"Glad to know you, Elmer."

"Nice farm you have here, Mr. Tisdail."

"Oh, it's nothing special. Been farming all my life. Wouldn't rightly know how to do anything else, I 'spect." He called to the woman. "We have a visitor here, Ma. Name's Pease. Elmer Pease. Wants a little water. This here's Mrs. Tisdail."

"Pleased to meet you, ma'am." Emmett took in the cold, gray eyes, the appraising look.

Mrs. Tisdail nodded slightly, went into the house.

"By golly, Elmer, it's been a long time since we had somebody drop in like this so casual like. You look like you've been traveling some."

"Yes, sir, I have," Emmett said. "I've been traveling all day."

"I 'spect."

Emmett saw the quick glance down at his forearm, drew his left hand up to his face to run fingers along the bristles of his jaw. The eyes did not follow.

"You come on in with me. We'll get that water right out of the tap."

Emmett followed him into the house. The kitchen was neat and clean and he found the smell of food in the electrocooker almost overpowering. It made his saliva run.

"Is there," he said impulsively, "anything I could do for a meal, Mr. Tisdail?"

Tisdail was halfway to the sink. He turned and looked at Emmett in surprise. "Why, you must be hungry, son. I hadn't thought of that. You just stay and have something with us. We'd be glad to have you. And you don't have to do a thing. Sure mighty happy you happened along. Don't know when we've had anybody to supper. Hey, Ma!" he bawled. "Elmer's going to stay

for supper." At the sink now, he turned on the faucet, let it run. "There's your water for you."

Emmett dropped his bag to the kitchen floor, undid the cord around the neck, picked up the water flask.

"Sure nice of you to let me do this, Mr. Tisdail," he said, going to the sink.

"Don't you think a thing of it. Just glad to have somebody besides Mrs. Tisdail to talk to." He chuckled. "You should have come a little earlier, around dinnertime. We really had a meal then. This is just a little leftovers."

"It will be mighty welcome, Mr. Tisdail, believe me. I don't know when I've been so——"

He sensed rather than heard movement, flinched and caught a heavy glancing blow on the side of the head. Next he felt the full force of Tisdail's body. The flask clattered in the sink. He put up hands to ward off a second blow. He caught the force of the heavy object on the back of his hand, slid along the sink, fell, hit an obstruction that tossed him sidewise. He rolled across the floor.

He saw the livid face of Tisdail coming toward him now, the smile gone, the eyes bright with fury, the mouth open, the teeth clenched. He saw, too, the wrench in the man's hand.

As Tisdail fell on him, Emmett rolled to one side, found his face among the items on his blanket. The blade of his hunting knife gleamed in the bright kitchen light. He lashed out for it, caught it, clutched it tightly and rolled from the man.

Tisdail spun toward him, eyes white, the wrench poised. It rushed for his head, hit his shoulder a deadening blow, Tisdail twisting to bring it to bear again.

Rallying diminishing strength, Emmett brought the knife up from the floor in a quick arc, felt it hit something, then sink home.

Tisdail stopped with the wrench poised in the air, surprise on his face. For a moment the smile almost returned. Then his face went flaccid, his eyelids drooped. The wrench clunked to the floor, Tisdail's head lolled forward and he fell heavily against Emmett.

Emmett moved to get out from under the man, stopped when he saw Mrs. Tisdail standing in the doorway, transfixed, her eyes round and wide, her face white, her jaw working convulsively, a hand on the doorframe for support. Then she slowly brought her other hand to her throat as she sank slowly to the floor, moaning and staring at her husband.

CHAPTER 3

Emmett twisted free of the man, lurched upright, his hand on the table for support. Then he looked down, saw that his hand was covered with blood.

Sickening, he staggered to the kitchen door, went outside and retched. The dog watched him curiously.

I've killed a man. I've killed a man. The thought, so foreign to his nature, throbbed in his brain. It was as if his old life had ended just before the attack and that this new life, this new person he was, had been born of the violence of it. He didn't like it, didn't want any part of it, killing a pleasant fellow like Mr. Tisdail. But why had the man assaulted him?

The calm of evening, the lengthening shadows, the reassuring sounds of the farm steadied him. It couldn't be that a man he had killed lay just inside the door behind him. It had been some horrible dream. In a moment he would awaken in his room at home. He wanted to think that, but he knew it wasn't true. He was seized with a sudden impulse to run, to get away from there, to strike off across the fields and go until he dropped from exhaustion. He drew a long breath and put the thought away from him. He had to go back inside to get his blanket and the things on it.

He turned and opened the door with his unsullied hand, forced himself to walk through it.

The woman was where he had left her, in the doorway, staring. She seemed to be unaware of his presence.

"Mrs. Tisdail," he said, fearful that she might come alive at any moment to seek revenge. But she did not move.

He went to the sink, washed the blood off his hand, watchful of her. He used a dish towel to wipe away the blood on his sleeve.

He turned to her again. "I—I didn't want to—kill your husband." There, the words were out in a rush, the admission of what he had done, and they seemed to be too loud for the kitchen. They reverberated among all the things in it, the chairs, the table, the cooker, the pots and pans and dishes and silverware, and the meaning of what he had said did not comfort him.

"All I wanted—was a little water for my flask—and Mr. Tisdail said I could have some. He even turned on the tap for me. Then—"

Mrs. Tisdail turned her head slowly and looked at him. The eyes were blank, uncomprehending.

"And then he came at me. I was filling the flask. He even invited me to stay for supper. It was right after that, while I was filling the flask that he started to come after me with that wrench. I—I had to fight, Mrs. Tisdail. *Had* to. It was him or me. I didn't even think what I was doing. I didn't have time to think."

She stared at him, still unmoving.

"If he'd hit me square with that thing I'd be on the floor where he is right now. Believe me, Mrs. Tisdail, I didn't want to do it. I swear I didn't. Can't you understand that, Mrs. Tisdail? Can't you? Can't you see it was him or me?"

The sight of the woman, so gaunt, so small, so slight, and the knowledge of what he had done to her life with this man, tightened his throat. His eyes smarted with tears.

"I know what he must have been to you, Mrs. Tisdail," he said, trying to find some way to ease her pain and his own. "And I'm sorry. But he shouldn't have tried to kill me."

She blinked her eyes and she saw him now. And the look was strange, not what he expected, for it seemed to hold no malice.

Then she looked away, at the floor, and opened her mouth a little to speak, the lips hardly moving.

"I'm glad he's dead," she said so softly he wondered if she had spoken at all.

She looked up. There was a little color in her face now and her breasts rose and fell as she breathed more deeply. Her eyes held his.

"He was no good and I hated him."

Emmett's senses reeled. This admission did not go with the pretty farm, the white fencing, the neatness and industry evident in every part of it. He examined her face, saw tragedy there, and the hopeless look he had seen so many times. It was a wonder he hadn't seen it before. But the farm had fooled him.

Mrs. Tisdail struggled to her feet. She looked older than her husband, a wisp of a woman with short, graying hair, a pale face with sunken cheeks and lines around her mouth, a face without vitality, a face ready for wrinkles. She looked as if she had been drained of life but continued to live only because her heart had refused to stop beating.

Now she stood there looking at him steadily. "Yes, I hated him." She seemed to take strength from the words. "Can't you guess why?"

Emmett said nothing, wondered what could have engendered such a feeling in such surroundings. The Tisdails were far better off than any farmers he had ever known. What could it have been? Why should he have been able to tell?

"You saw the fields, didn't you? Did you see how nicely planted they are? Did you see the new paint on the house? The barn was painted only last year. Do you suppose Mr. Tisdail did all that? Do you?"

"Well, it's quite a job, considering all there is to do on a farm," Emmett conceded. "Didn't he do it?"

"He did not. Not Cad Tisdail. Why should he lift a finger when all he needed to do was phone the county office to have some men sent out to do it?" She looked down at the inert form on the floor.

"Well, Cad, you can't go to the viewphone now, can you? You can't tell them you're dead and to send some men out to help you, can you? You're beyond all that."

Mrs. Tisdail caught her breath, wrenched herself away from the door, came over to the sink where Emmett was standing and looked out the windows there. He could see tears in her eyes.

"He asked *them* for help?"

"That's right. The man on the floor is the Turncoat of Christian County. The man who would sell your soul if he could make connections. A collaborator."

Emmett looked at the huddled shape and found new revulsion there.

"After the bombs fell and the plague came, Mr. Tisdail let the commies know which side he was on. There was no favor small enough for him to render, there weren't enough hours in the day for him to prove his loyalty to them. That's why this farm looks the way it does."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Tisdail. I didn't know."

She turned to him. "Do you know why he attacked you? He could have killed you easily. He has an arsenal of weapons here. He could have done you in with a heater, or he could have used a sleeper. But not Cad Tisdail."

"Why did he try to use that wrench then?"

"When he brought you in I knew what he was thinking. You live so long with a man and you know what he'll do. Cad had a flair for the dramatic. His plan was to knock you out, put a few bruises on himself, a few scratches here and there—he might have asked me to put them on—then he'd call the county office over in Taylorville and tell them what a struggle he had with you. And then he'd think his stock would have gone up a few more points. But he didn't have to do that. His stock was already at the top. They didn't need any more proof of his loyalty. But Cad was always afraid they'd tell him some day they didn't need him any more."

"I wish I had known. I wouldn't have come——"

"I'm glad you did come. Only I felt sorry for you when you walked up the driveway. But there was nothing I could do."

"It must have been hard for you—all these years—feeling the way you do."

"Hard?" She smiled wanly. "It wasn't hard. Not really. It was easy letting him do these things. It would have been harder trying to stop him. I wish now I had had the courage to do it. But then I'm a woman and I was married to him and I cherished the dream that sometime he would see the error of his ways, that some act would restore his rightful place in the community.

"He wasn't *really* a bad man. I think he was afraid more than anything else. When we were first married and moved here, we had a mortgage and a few cows and chickens. But we had our pride. We worked from sunup to sundown. And people visited us and we visited them. I had many friends and so did he. He was what you'd call jolly, then. He belonged to farmer organizations, a lodge in town, and even a luncheon club over at Taylorville.

"Then the bombs came. And the conquest. I don't have to tell you how many friends we had left after he showed which way he was going to go. Now nobody ever stops in here any more. No self-respecting person would ever stop at the Tisdails'. This is off limits. Communist territory."

"Was it that bad?"

"Worse. You know what kind of people came here? Party members, Communist officials. Even an Enemy officer stopped here once. The model farm, he said it was. The perfect example of occupation loyalty."

"He was that open about it?"

"From the first. He spied, pried, pressed and informed on everyone, including his best friends. It wasn't long after the bombs fell that he became a vital cog in the occupation machinery hereabouts. Of course we took our boosters just like everyone else, but we didn't have to go to the station for them. Oh, no, not the Tisdails. We were on a route of collaborators. The third of every month they'd stop by to give us our vaccine. And taxes? There

weren't any. We could get a travel permit anytime we wanted. We didn't have to pay for a baby permit—and believe me I thought perhaps that might help Cad see things right—but we were never fortunate enough to have a child. Cad insisted I go to a hospital station to find out why, but I refused to go. Perhaps I should have swallowed my pride. Maybe things would have been different. . . ."

She was silent, lost in her own thoughts, which left Emmett standing awkwardly by, not knowing what to do. A dead man on the floor, the man he had killed, and he should be moving on, getting away, yet he didn't want to leave her just yet, couldn't just walk out, leaving her alone this way.

How different the Tisdails were from the people he knew! His own parents had never compromised with the Communists. They had lived with it, it's true, but they had never done anything for them. They complied with the rules because they had to, not because they wanted to.

"I'm only an old woman," she said finally, turning away from the windows, "an old woman filled with the thoughts of an old woman. I shouldn't be standing here telling you these things. They mean nothing to you."

"They do mean something," he said gently. "They mean that as long as there are women like you there is always a chance some day this country will be free again."

"Free again?" She smiled at him. "It's a wonderful thought. But it's hopeless. I know. I've seen them. They're thorough. They have weapons. And we are all shackled by the booster. We always will be."

"I've heard the gypsies don't have to have boosters."

"Maybe they don't. There are always exceptions to rules."

"But why wouldn't they be susceptible?"

She shrugged. "I never thought much about it. I've never heard it discussed."

"They should have succumbed, it seems to me. It can't be right they're immune."

"Perhaps not. I don't know."

"You don't know where any gypsy bands are, do you?"

"No. Are you one of them?"

"No. I—I was thinking of joining such a band."

Mrs. Tisdail gave him an appraising look. "Who are you? And why is it you're traveling about this way? Don't you have a travel permit?"

"No, I don't," he confided, certain he could trust her now. "Like you, I don't like life under the Communists. I was on my way to see what I could do about it."

"Do you think you will get very far? You almost didn't get past this farm. How will you manage your boosters?"

"I'll manage somehow."

"Yes," she said, taking in his broad shoulders, the strong brown hands, clear blue eyes. "I think you might." Then her eyes were drawn once again to the form on the floor.

Emmett followed her gaze. "I shouldn't leave him there."

"Leave him right where he is. It's got to appear as if I killed him."

"You can't do that!"

She met his look squarely. "It's the only way . . . for you."

"But what about you?"

"Don't worry about me."

"But you just can't stay here and tell them that! They'll take away your booster—they'll—"

"I told you not to worry about me," she said sharply. "Now I've got to get you something to eat and send you on your way."

"But I can't let you do it! Don't stay—come along with me, but don't stay!"

She reached into the sink and picked up his water flask, started to fill it under the tap. "Don't you stop me in the one thing I can do to help you and, in turn, help the country I used to know. It's you who are important. Not me. My life's over, done with. We've got to save yours while we can."

"But . . . !"

"Will you shut up!" She faced him, angry. "Already we've spent too much time talking. Here." She handed him the flask.

"Now you take this wet rag and go over the room and clean everything you've touched." She jerked open a drawer, pointed to a tray of knives. "Pick out the knife that is nearest the size of your hunting knife. You'll have to replace yours with it. We don't want your knife for evidence, you know."

He did as he was told.

Later, when he had eaten and when she had prepared a lunch to take along, she led him to another room where she opened a large cabinet on the wall. Inside were weapons he had never seen before.

"That one at the top is the biggest heat gun Cad had," she said. "He used to tell people it could burn a hole in inch-thick armor at a mile. It's too big for you, though."

She pointed to smaller heat guns, some with telescopic sights and others not so equipped, in graduated sizes. There were several old-fashioned rifles and automatics, and at the bottom were three sleep guns, one of them a small, compact, pistol type that she picked up.

"This sleeper will fit into your pocket," she said. "You'd better take it. As far as I know it has never been fired."

Emmett found the sleeper lighter than he thought it would be and cool to the touch. It must have been made of magnesium steel, he thought. It was black and efficient-looking.

"Thanks, Mrs. Tisdail."

"I only wish there was more I could do for you."

On the way out of the room Emmett noticed a small panel at one side of the room. It glowed with many lights.

"That's the annunciator," she said. "Cad insisted it be installed. He was always afraid somebody was going to come up to the house and kill him. This would give the warning. It rang a bell when you turned into the driveway."

"Do many places have systems like this?" Emmett asked, reflecting on how lucky he had been to set off no warnings in his night-and-day trek, though he had known of the danger.

"Most collaborators have them. But I don't think they're much good. If you know where they are you can get by them easily

enough by crawling under them as if you were going under a fence. They're not set that low. If they were, all the cats and dogs and rodents would be setting them off all the time."

The sky held little of what remained of the day when they stepped out of the kitchen. The dog came up, nuzzled Emmett's hand as he stood, not knowing what to say to this woman who had helped him.

"You could take the turbo," Mrs. Tisdail said, "but they would know something was wrong then."

"What are you going to tell them? How are you going to explain your killing him?"

She smiled and, in the area outside the house, illuminated only by the porch light, her face looked young. He fancied she had been an attractive girl in her youth.

"I'm not going to tell them anything," she said.

"They have ways," he said.

"Have they?"

"You ought to know."

"I do know. Now will you please go?"

He hadn't noticed her hand on his arm until he turned to go. He turned back, hating to leave her there to face them.

"Good-bye, then," he said, not moving away. He wished there was something he could do for her, some last thing.

And then he knew there was something.

He reached up to her shoulder, pulled her forward and kissed her.

For a moment her arms were around him, her cheek against his, and she sobbed.

Then she pushed him away.

"Please go now."

"Good-bye, Mrs. Tisdail," he said, turning. He knew he could not look back now.

He started down the driveway, the dog trotting at his side.

"Good-bye," she said. "Good luck . . . and thanks."

Emmett went out into the night to the road.

He could still feel the coolness of her lips.

CHAPTER 4

It was a night to beware of because it was clear and the light from the full moon was everywhere. It would have been wiser to have taken refuge in a wooded area and not to have exposed himself as a moving object on such a night, but Emmett was driven to be far from the Tisdail place by morning.

Armed with the sleeper and with a pocket bulging with currency, he felt a confidence he had not known before. But he'd have to be careful how he used them. People who were loose with their money were regarded with suspicion in Spring Creek. It was probably no different anywhere else.

And people with sleepers were Communists.

He took to the roads because he felt he had been brash in trusting the fields before. The annunciator panel in the Tisdail home had changed that for him. There would be no warning systems on the roads. And they would be faster.

But the unending roads made him drowsy. And no wonder, he told himself, remembering all he had been through. But he did not sanction it. He forced himself to keep alert. There could be no sleep for, say, fifteen miles yet. If he could walk three hours, then he'd chance getting out the blanket and sleeping for a while.

But how will I wake up? And instantly he thought of his alarm

clock at home, an old-fashioned, round-faced, luminous-dialed clock his grandfather had given him. He wondered if it had run down yet, wished he had brought it along. But he laughed when he remembered its loud ticking. It would have roused the countryside. Too bad I don't have a wrist watch, he mused, thinking of those he had seen on display in Spring Creek. But who bought them? Certainly not anyone in the Keyes family.

A sudden yapping at his side jarred him. A dog rushed from the underbrush, snarling and darting at his leg. Emmett backed away. The dog nipped his trousers and he heard the fabric tear. Then he remembered the sleeper, brought it to bear on the barking dog, pressed the trigger, heard a click. The dog slumped in the middle of the road.

Though fearful the animal would revive at any moment and renew its attack, Emmett picked it up and carried it to the roadside ditch. A sleeped dog in the middle of the road might give rise to questions.

When he started down the road once more, he tried concentrating on his surroundings, not wanting to be surprised again. With each step down the lonely road he made himself watchful of all things, hearing the animals that skittered away in the underbrush as he approached, seeing the endless procession of dark shapes that were trees and bushes going by, being particularly careful when passing farmhouses, and wondering at the same time who lived in them, whether they were meeting their quotas, were managing to pay their taxes, wondering if they were happy.

Perhaps in some of the houses he passed lived people like his mother and father—good, loyal, hard-working people who prayed for the day when they'd once again be free, people who were dismayed by nothing, had seen suffering, who had themselves suffered, but who could not move from their subservient position because of the boosters. That and the ever-present commies and occasional Enemy.

And some of the houses were homes for people who had things a little better, men and women who had more than adapted

themselves to the occupation. These were the people who went along, not caring what the new government decreed, but supporting it and thinking it wise to do so. They did not exactly curry favor, but they did not object to special treatment for themselves.

And in a few of these houses were people like the Tisdails, where husband or wife or both left nothing undone to show the victors they meant to help with the occupation all the way, even though it might mean suffering for others. These were the farmhouses he should have passed most carefully, but he had no way of knowing which they were.

A sudden scurrying in the bushes at the side of the road halted him, his hand ready to draw the gun. It had been a noise much louder than that made by small animals.

A figure emerged from the parted foliage. It was a young man.

"Hi," the youth said. He was smiling. He couldn't have been more than twenty at the very most.

Emmett backed away, ready for any sudden movement, trying to guess why such a youngster should be abroad at this hour. It was at least an hour after curfew.

"Watcha got in the bag?"

The voice came from the other side of the road and Emmett whirled in time to see another shape loose itself from the bushes there. He backed still farther, drew the sleeper. He didn't like the looks of this, glanced over his shoulder to make sure no one was behind him.

But there was.

In a matter of moments the road was filled with youngsters. He could see them better now. They were all teen-agers. They stood in a rough circle and they were grinning.

"We're your friends," one of them said.

"Yeah."

There was a little laughter.

"Hey, what's he got in his hand?"

"Looks like a gun."

"It *is* a gun," Emmett said. "A sleep gun."

"A sleep gun!" one of them jeered. "Hey, he thinks he's got a sleeper!"

"Only big shots got sleepers."

"Maybe I *am* a big shot," Emmett said. "Did you think of that?"

They stood a little uncertain. Then one of them said something filthy. It wasn't the largest boy.

"Sure looks like a sleeper."

"Aw! He probably carved it out of wood."

"Let's get him!" A figure darted toward Emmett. But others failed to join him.

"Wait a minute, you guys," a younger voice quavered. "He ain't done nothing, has he?"

"He's walkin' through our territory, ain't he?"

"Yeah. How about that? You got a travel permit?"

"With this sleeper," Emmett said, "I don't need a travel permit. Now are you fellows going to get out of the way or do I have to blast a path through you?"

A fellow bigger than the others detached himself from the circle. "You better hand everything over——"

"You better stay where you are," Emmett warned.

The youth stopped. "You hand your stuff over and we'll hold it while you fight one of us."

"Two of us, Bob! He's a big guy."

"O.K. Two of us, then. I guarantee the fight'll be fair and square. Then we'll let you go."

A few of the boys were unable to hold their chuckles at this.

It was just a kids' gang. Emmett had realized that when he first saw them. But even a group like this could be mighty rough if it had a mind to be, for he had once been a member of such a gang. He remembered how much fun it was after being held down all day to steal out at night and see how much hell could be raised. His group had challenged many a stranger, had been in many a fight. But he didn't remember ever stopping a man with a sleeper.

"Look," Emmett said, "I don't want to have to use this sleeper. But I'll have to if you don't move on and let me alone."

"Quit your kiddin'."

"Whose side are you on, anyway?" Emmett asked. "Commie or American?"

"You tryin' to be funny, Mister?"

"We ain't on anybody's side," the leader said. "We're on our own side."

"We're for ourselves."

"Hey, he's stallin'."

"Yeah. Let's have the fight."

"Make him fight, Bob."

"O.K.," Bob said, stepping toward him, "but first we got to see what's in that bag." The others started to move in too.

There was no alternative. Emmett squeezed the trigger of the sleeper. There was a satisfying answering click.

The leader slumped to the ground without a murmur. Two youths behind him in the fringe area of the gun's effectiveness, tottered, tried to walk a few feet, and collapsed.

"Geez!" It was the only sound and it came from a single throat.

The group, halted by their sudden loss, stood uncertain again. But only for a moment this time. Then there were yells, and they scattered, some running down the road, others disappearing into the fields.

"Hey, you!" Emmett cried at two slow starters.

They stopped their flight and turned. He could see the fear in their faces.

"You forgot your friends," he said. "You'd better get them off the road."

The moon had moved halfway across the sky before Emmett, numb with weariness, the bag a leaden weight on his shoulder, struck off from the road into a wilderness of weeds, brambles, bushes and trees. He went more than a hundred yards into the area before he took the bag off his shoulder and opened it.

He felt better after he had eaten a little of what Mrs. Tisdail had prepared for him, washing it down with water from the flask.

He relived what had gone on at the Tisdails' as he did so, and he wondered how things were with her at that moment.

He looked up through the tall trees to the moon, guessed from its position it was long after midnight. Then he looked for a likely place to spread the blanket. Two trees growing close together on a small rise about twenty feet away seemed to offer the best place. It had the further protection of shadow from the foliage of nearby trees.

In a few minutes Emmett had the blanket rolled about himself in the natural hollow at the roots, his head resting on a large root branch for a pillow, his eyes on the sky and a few cloud formations that marched along. It made him feel as if he were on some large boat, sailing smoothly over a quiet sea, the trees being the masts. He felt very serene. . . .

The snap of a twig jarred him suddenly to wakefulness.

Emmett's nerves jangled with a sense of emergency, yet he did not move. Something had awakened him. But what?

He saw nothing except the profusion of the thicket on the other side of the small clearing, the trees stretching higher than he could see without turning his head. There was a breeze now. He could hear the sough of it through the leaves. But otherwise nothing had changed.

Then he heard the cracking of small branches and underbrush. It grew louder.

Now he could hear voices.

Had they hunted him down?

Emmett threw off the blanket carefully, found his sleeper and knife, crouched in the shadows.

The snapping and crackling seemed to pervade the entire area now. His grip tightened on the gun.

Then he saw them, a group of shadowy figures moving single file across the clearing. They moved swiftly, did not seem to be looking for anyone. At least they did not look to the right or left; they kept their eyes straight ahead. Occasionally he heard a voice.

The string of people passed within a hundred feet of him, and he assumed, when the last one had disappeared, that this

was all. He was about to get up when he heard more voices, saw another group closer now. These were not in single file but in twos and threes. And then they had passed from view. There was only one last person lagging behind a little, within fifteen feet of him.

Emmett watched the last figure move across the clearing, limping a little. When it reached the rise on the other side, in full view and silhouetted against the sky, it stopped and sat down, removing a shoe.

Emmett rose cautiously, moved behind the twin trees where he had made his bed, made a wide circle through the underbrush, his eyes never leaving the person on the rise. These people were not looking for Emmett Keyes. That much was plain. And they did not fear detection. Otherwise no one would stop in plain sight and remove a shoe.

Once Emmett stepped on a twig. It snapped with a sound that was like thunder in his ears. He froze.

The person on the hill glanced toward him, then returned to the shoe.

Clouds often darkened Emmett's view of the rise. He could not then be sure that the person was still there. But each time the moon brightened the area he saw the figure. The person was through with the shoe now and seemed to be resting.

When Emmett had wormed his way to within six feet of the person's back, the figure rose and started off in the direction of the others.

Hoping the companions had gone far beyond hearing, Emmett ignored caution, jumped out of the bushes and rushed the figure.

It whirled. Emmett saw a surprised face brightened by moonlight before he threw himself at the knees.

They both fell heavily to the ground.

Emmett rolled a little, darted his arm out around the other's neck. He sat up. There was a furious squirming, a clawing at Emmett's arms and hands. The fingernails were long and sharp and felt like razors drawn across the fingers and knuckles.

He looked down and saw the hair of his opponent and let loose of—her.

She wrenched away, breathing in gasps, one hand on the ground for support, the other on her throat. She turned her head and the moonlight brightened her pale face, dark eyes and black hair. She looked at him furiously.

Emmett could only gaze at her in astonishment.

"You . . . you . . . !" She compressed her lips and shook her head angrily.

"I didn't know you were a girl."

"You nearly choked me to death."

She massaged her throat, coughed several times, continued to shake her head. Finally, she brushed back a few wayward strands of hair, tucked them in place, and rose. She was dressed in a short dark jacket, slacks and—she looked for and found her hat, a shapeless felt. She put it on her head. It didn't look bad there at all, Emmett decided, getting up.

They stood looking at each other.

"Who are you?" she asked. "Why did you attack me?"

"You lost the battle," Emmett said. "You're the one who's going to answer the questions."

She put her hands on her hips. "Is that so? Well, we'll see about that. The boys will be back directly."

"The boys?"

"Yes, the boys."

"I'm not waiting for any boys," Emmett said, reaching out for her hand. "You come along with me."

She eluded his grasp, turned and ran.

He sped after her, caught her arm and spun her around.

For a moment they stood together like dancers, breathing hard at each other. She was young, a head shorter than he and her eyes looked up unflinchingly into his. He liked the smell of her, the size of her. He tightened the grip on her arm behind her. She involuntarily moved hard against him. She snorted and shoved him away.

"All right," she said. "I'll come. But you can do what you like, I'll not answer any questions."

He led her back to the twin trees.

"You were sleeping here?" she asked in surprise. "Why?"

"Why not? A man has to sleep, doesn't he?"

"But in a place like this?"

"I can think of worse places."

She sat on a thick root and looked at him. "I don't know of anybody these days who sleeps in the woods."

"What were you doing in the woods?"

"What were *you* doing in the woods?"

Emmett grinned. He saw her look at his teeth. "You're the hardest woman to get an answer out of I ever saw. What's your name?"

"What's yours?"

He stopped grinning. "I could get you to answer. You know that, don't you?"

"Maybe. But you wouldn't know if it's the truth or not. And they'd find you and you'd be sorry."

"Who'd find me, the boys?"

She nodded.

"Who are 'the boys'? Your brothers?"

"Maybe."

She presented a comely picture in the moonlight, sitting on the root, her arms behind her and supporting her, one trousered leg atop the other, the foot moving a little. How in the world could he have thought her a man? At a hundred feet it should have been obvious. But then, he had not been expecting a woman.

Emmett tried to analyze what drew him to her. Perhaps it was the moonlight that softened her face. Maybe it was her hair, for there was a lot of it and it flowed away in gentle curves from her forehead back to her shoulders. Or was it her challenging, unafraid manner? There were no girls like this in Spring Creek. . . .

He watched her, saw her take a piece of yarn from a jacket pocket and tie up her hair. As she did so, her jacket pulled open

at the front and he could see the press of breasts against the blouse there. He caught his breath, looked away.

Then he was conscious of her eyes on him. Damn it! Why did he have to feel like a schoolboy before her?

"You make a habit of this, I see," she said.

He looked up, wondering what she meant, saw that she was looking at the equipment near his blanket.

"What are you running away from?"

"Maybe I'm just touring the country."

"Nobody tours the country. Unless he has a permit. And if you had a permit you wouldn't be doing it like this."

"But this way I get close to the earth and people. You, for example."

"And far from commie eyes, is that it?"

"That depends on who you are." Emmett fondled the sleeper. "And what you are."

"Well, I'm not a commie, if that's any help," she said. "My guess is you're not either."

"If there's anything opposite to a commie, I'm it."

"You feel that strongly about it?"

"More strongly than that."

"There ought to be more of you."

"You mean more of *us,* don't you?" He darted a sharp glance at her.

"Of course."

It didn't sound convincing. But she was right about the questions. How could he tell which were true answers and which not —even if he should wring her neck, and he had no desire to do that. If she had been less attractive, less agreeable and less friendly, he might have been more militant about the interrogation, but her decisiveness and her confidence didn't help.

What to do with her? He puzzled over several ideas, decided the best thing would be to send her on her way and to move in the opposite direction at top speed. That was the only sure, safe thing to do. But he found himself putting off the move.

"Why so quiet all of a sudden?"

"I'm trying to decide what to do with you."

"Oh?" She smiled. "Don't I have anything to say about it?"

"Not a damn thing," he said sharply. "Maybe I should just sleep you and move on. It's a cinch I can't get any information out of you."

"Is that really a sleeper?" she asked.

"Yes, it's a sleeper. I've used it twice already today."

"Where did you get it?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

"I'd like very much to know."

"Why?"

She smiled again. She turned her head slightly as if listening. It seemed to Emmett he had heard a sound, too.

"I think the boys are coming," she said. "I told you they would."

From out of the clearing behind her came two figures.

CHAPTER 5

The two figures were men dressed as the girl was, in dark felt hats, jackets and trousers. The moonlight was behind them, their faces were in shadow.

As they approached, Emmett rose, his sleeper in his hand.

"You can put that away," the girl said, rising. "We're your friends."

"Yeah," Emmett said drily, "I've heard that before. It seems everybody wants to be friends with me. But it always turns out bad for me."

"What happened, Ivy?" one of the men asked, joining her. Emmett kept the gun ready, but the two made no menacing move.

"I got something in my shoe," Ivy said. "I stopped to get it out and the next thing I knew"—and she indicated Emmett with a nod of her head—"he had tackled me."

The two men looked at him.

"He means no harm," Ivy said. "We've been having a session of questions without answers. Only I think he's even more curious than I. He was sleeping right by the trees here."

"We stopped at the road," one said. "When we counted, you were missing."

"Did the rest go on ahead?"

"They're probably at the point right now."

"Good. We mustn't keep them waiting."

"You'd better come along with us, Mister."

Emmett advanced a step, put the gun out where they could see it. "And I think you'd better stay here. I have a lot more questions to ask."

"I'm sorry," Ivy said, "but we've got to go. Perhaps if you go with us some of your questions will be answered. We can't leave you here."

"You forget that I could keep you all here and ask questions of you after you awaken."

They stood looking at him.

Suddenly an arm from behind circled his throat, he was tripped and fell violently to the ground. The fall knocked the wind out of him.

A moment later he saw there were three men. And the girl was standing over him with his sleeper in her hand.

"We wanted to save you that embarrassment," she said. "Now I have your gun and in a moment I'll have your knife. Then you'd better gather up the rest of your equipment and come with us."

"Are you sure he's all right?" one of them asked.

"No," the girl said. "But he said he was anti-commie."

Ivy stood by while they helped Emmett pack his few belongings. Then they set out across the clearing, Emmett sandwiched between a lead man and the girl. They did not talk but walked briskly, moving like shadows among the bushes and trees with such a definiteness of direction he wondered how often they made the trip.

They came to a road and paused. One of the men moved across first, then waved the others to come. Once on the other side, they started through a plowed field with undiminished pace.

In ten minutes they came to a large outbuilding. It was dark, but a few whispered words opened a door and they passed through to a lighted interior.

It was an old implement shed, illuminated by a single gas lan-

tern hung over a rafter in the center of the room. There were new boards where the windows had been. The shed was nearly devoid of farm devices, but it was filled with eyes—eyes that bored into his, some of them distrusting, others fearful, several curious. The eyes and the shadows on the old walls belonged to half-a-dozen men and more than twenty women, all dressed in dark clothes.

"Who is this?" asked a lean, tall man who moved toward them from a small group on the far side of the room. His voice was low, clipped and authoritative. As he neared him, Emmett saw that his clothes, while dark, were tailored to fit him. And he saw too the alert blue eyes, the sureness of step, the air of authority.

Ivy spoke up. "He's a man who held me up for a while. He was sleeping in the woods, says he hates commies."

"Really?" The eyes crinkled in amusement. "*Do* you hate commies?"

"Yes," Emmett said. "Does it make a difference?"

"Let's see your hands."

Emmett hesitated, wondering why this man, so evidently the leader of the group, should make such a request.

"Let's see them," he commanded. When Emmett still hesitated, he grabbed a hand, felt of the wrist, looked at his identification on the left forearm, then examined the right.

"What's your name?"

"You're lucky if you get him to tell you," Ivy said. "I tried hard to find out myself."

"Elmer Pease," Emmett answered. "What's yours?"

"Where are you from, Elmer?"

"I'll tell you that when you tell me who you are and what all these people are doing here."

"I'm afraid I can't do that."

"Also," Ivy said, offering the gun and the knife, "he had these."

The leader took them. He examined them for a moment, then looked at Emmett. "Where did you get these?"

"Why should I tell you?"

"A little unusual, carrying a sleeper, wouldn't you say?"

"Only commies carry sleepers," someone ventured.

"And Enemies," someone else added.

"He ain't got the build for an Enemy. He ain't fat enough."

There was laughter at this. Emmett looked around at the faces. They were not friendly now.

"They're right, you know," the man said. "Can you explain?"

"I can explain," Emmett said evenly, "but I'll be damned if I will."

The leader stared at him for a moment, then he held up the gun to see it better in the glow of the lantern. "Serial Number AK2560892. Model six. I'd like to know who this sleeper belongs to."

Emmett was surprised when the man turned his back and walked away.

He turned to Ivy. "Friendly bunch," he said.

She eyed him coldly, said nothing.

Emmett now was conscious of the stares of those in the room. As he stared back he tried to make sense out of it all—this gathering, the predominance of young women, the trek through the woods. But nothing jelled. The only thing that didn't puzzle him was what they wore. Dark clothing would be less conspicuous at night in the woods.

They seemed to be waiting for something, these people. They didn't even speak to each other. It was uncomfortable and nerve jangling. He looked at the leader who now sat on an old sawhorse. Others looked at him, too, but none of them talked to him. He turned to look at Ivy. A nice name, he thought, viewing the pale, smooth skin of her face. The moonlight hadn't lied; she was still lovely. Dark eyes, delicate nose, full lips. Red lips. And flowing hair. She, too, was watching the man who had spoken to him, a man who now sat lost in thought, staring at the wide boards of the shed floor.

For what seemed an interminable length of time the man sat there, looking as if he were arguing with himself. This puzzled Emmett still more. Finally he appeared to have come to some conclusion, rose and came to Emmett swiftly.

He didn't like what he saw in his eyes.

"Why did you lie about your name?" he asked.

Ivy muffled a cry and moved away. Everyone was looking at him now, and some of them moved toward him. Emmett put down a feeling of panic. How did he know he had lied? Was it a wild guess? A bluff?

"What makes you think I was lying?" Emmett asked with as much conviction as he could muster.

"Your name is Emmett Keyes and you live in Spring Creek," the leader said. "And you are carrying a sleeper assigned to a man named Cadwallader Tisdail."

"Tisdail!" One of the men ran up to the leader. "He's a commie if I ever saw one. He lives on a farm about twenty miles south of here."

"I would suggest that you tell us how you manage to have a commie sleeper, Mr. Keyes. And in the meantime—" He nodded to the men.

Emmett was seized roughly, his bag taken, his pockets emptied. And all the while his brain groped for the answer to how this man could have known his name, the fact that the sleeper belonged to Tisdail. It was impossible! But still it had happened and while he was being held, others were spreading his belongings on the blanket.

The leader leaned over and picked up the large roll of currency. "When they sent you out on this job," he said, "they didn't want you to be without funds, did they? Maybe they thought you might even buy yourself out of a situation like this."

"Nobody sent me out on any job," Emmett protested.

"No? Is it that you just happened to have this gun and this money?"

Emmett looked from the leader to the faces of the others around him, faces of six men. Dark, sullen, angry. He found the face of Ivy beyond the inner circle. It was expressionless—or did he fancy a look of pleading in her eyes?

He sighed. "All right, I'll tell you." Hands released his arms. The buzz of conversation ceased.

"I killed Tisdail," he said. "I killed him because I stopped at his house for water and he attacked me because he wanted to show his commie bosses he had done something."

"And then you stole the gun and the money?"

Emmett looked the leader square in the eyes, tempted to lie about that and leave Mrs. Tisdail's name out of it. But they had known his name and who the sleeper belonged to, so did they also know about Mrs. Tisdail? The look of distrust in the eyes had vanished with the truth. He could not chance a return of it by lying now.

"No," he said. "Mrs. Tisdail gave them to me. She has always been an anti-Communist and she hated what her husband had turned into. She said she would take the blame for his death."

"Why should she do that?"

"Because she wanted me to be free to do what I had set out to do."

"And what had you set out to do?"

"I left Spring Creek because I hated life under the occupation. I thought I might find an anti-Communist group to join. Or join a gypsy band and travel with it until I found such a group. That way I could travel without a permit and without being molested."

The leader was thoughtful now. He frowned a little. Then he said, "How did you kill Tisdail?"

"With that knife."

The eyes of everyone went to the knife on the blanket. The leader knelt, took it up and examined it.

"The symbol of resistance," he said softly. He sighed and rose. "There must be many young men like you, Keyes, eager to have done with the occupation. But a knife"—and he looked at it again —"is such a puerile weapon." He shook his head as he faced Emmett.

"What a pity it is that men like you can't rise up and set things right. I know how you must yearn for freedom, how you long to change this world to make it a better place for you and your children. But you are all enslaved by the booster, and courage

alone can't pull you through it no matter how hard you want it to."

"We can try," Emmett said firmly.

"What kind of talk is that? You can try to die, too, for that's what will happen to you when your booster day passes—or if you should be caught roaming the rural areas. In that case it would be slow death in a slave-labor camp. I don't have to tell you that. What puzzles me is that you should have started out at all, knowing all these things."

"What about you? You and these people here? You are moving about and you don't seem to worry about being caught."

"We are what we are because, if we weren't, we'd be dead or dying. And when you are so close to death, you cease worrying about it."

"But you are fighting the occupation and that's what I want to do. I want to be one of you."

The leader smiled. "We aren't fighting the occupation. We aren't the resistance group you think we are."

"What are you then?"

The big man looked at him with steady blue eyes. "I wish I could tell you."

"Sir," a man to the leader's right spoke up, "there isn't much time."

"I know." He looked at his wrist watch, then at Emmett. "My advice to you is to go home and forget everything that's happened. Perhaps some day you will be able to help change things."

"That," Emmett said with some force, "is what's wrong today. Go home. Sit around and hope for better things. I'm sick and tired of doing that."

"There happens to be nothing else you can do, Keyes. I only wish there were. I'm sorry."

Emmett snapped his jaw shut before he said what he was afraid he'd say. What was wrong with this man? Couldn't he see how useful Emmett could be? What kind of a movement was this that refused to take a good man?

And then he thought of his freedom from the necessity of booster shots. At least the leader didn't know about that. Perhaps it would make a difference if I tell him, he thought. But some inner voice cautioned him not to reveal it.

"See that Mr. Keyes gets on his way," the leader said to the men around him. Then he walked away, glancing at his wrist watch and saying, "We have ten minutes more."

The shed filled with whispered conversations and the shuffling of feet as the members moved around. Two men pushed Emmett's belongings to the center of the blanket, and Emmett knelt down and finished the job of arranging them and making the blanket bag. As he did so, his heart sank, for nowhere did he see his currency, his knife or the sleeper. How could he get along without them?

He stood up wearily, lifted the bag to his shoulder. Ivy moved to his side.

"You'll need these," she said, handing him the three missing items. "Come on, I'll show you the way."

Outside, the moon was low on the horizon, the air quiet and cool. The girl led him across a field and stopped at a hedgerow. She turned to him.

"I'd better not go any farther."

She stood close to him, her eyes wide and glistening. The moon caught a soft curve of cheek and the shadow beneath. Now a slight breeze caught at her hair, sent a lock of it over her eyes. She brushed it back. He hadn't realized until then she had not worn her hat.

"Thanks for the sleeper—and the rest," he said. He felt the pull of her. It moistened his palms, shortened his breath.

She put slender white fingers on his arm. "I know you're not going home. He—the leader knows it, too. But you can't come with us."

"I wish someone would explain things to me. I'm not a child."

"I know that." The grip on his arm tightened a little. Her fingers were like fire, even through his jacket. "You mentioned gyp-

sies." He could hardly hear her, close as she was. He leaned forward.

"Gypsies?"

"Yes. I know where there is a band." She turned to look beyond the hedgerow and pointed with her other hand. "It's about ten miles from here. That way. The band is in a town called Cornwall. They'll be there for two days." She turned back to him. "They may be able to help you."

"Thanks."

She didn't move. Her cheek looked cool. He reached up, ran his finger tips across it, up to her hair. Her cheek was warm and soft, her hair silken.

Now she set white teeth firmly into the roundness of her lower lip and the grip on his arm was tighter still. He looked at the lip and the teeth and her eyes, and the pull of her was greater than ever.

Suddenly she released his arm. Now he found her lips hot, her body soft and warm and yielding as he held her.

"Ivy . . ."

She broke away. "You'd better go."

"Come with me."

"No. I can't."

"When will I see you again?"

"Perhaps—tomorrow." She turned and ran back toward the shed.

She stopped and turned.

"Good luck." The words floated to him across the darkness of the empty field.

The blackness of the shed swallowed her.

CHAPTER 6

Emmett stood for a long time at the hedgerow, trying to unwind things, hoping to make sense out of all that had happened, and looking for clues that would guide him on his way.

Twenty-four hours ago he had been in his bed, tossing fitfully, awaiting the hour to leave, more awake than asleep, eager for the great adventure.

When he had left his house, he was sure of his simple purpose, his single objective, and the way ahead looked clear and definite. He was a man out to combat the enemy, and the enemy was everywhere. He had expected to find people clearly divided into collaborators and dissenters, and by avoiding the collaborators and seeking the help of the dissenters, he thought he might find the anti-Communist organization he was looking for. He had also felt that by making known his intentions, airing his views in the right place at the proper moment, those who could use his help might even come to him and urge him to join them.

But it had been nothing like that. At first he was only interested in putting miles between himself and Spring Creek. And when he had reached what he considered a proper distance, where his face would be the face of a stranger, he had sought out what he had thought were industrious people, perhaps even

people like his mother and father. And the genial Cad Tisdail had appeared to be just that at first. And what had happened? He turned out to be a collaborator. Not just a simple sympathizer, but a party worker. And then the horrible struggle and the killing. He had not been ready for that. He grimaced as he remembered it.

After that his objective once more became a matter of distance, miles between the Tisdails' house and the place he would spend the night, foregoing any search for gypsies or contact with people. And then the incident with the youngsters and the necessity of his revealing the possession of an unlawful weapon. And what after that? Flight again. Flight, flight, flight.

And when he finally reached safety, when he finally searched out and found an isolated spot in the woods where he should have been safe from everything and where he should have been able to rest for a few hours, even this was not to be his, for he was wrenched from rewarding sleep by the passing of a weird assortment of men and women in dark clothes.

Then the interview in the shed, when he offered his services. What mad world was this? Would he ever find what he was looking for? Would he ever come upon a group who would welcome him, teach him what could be done about the occupation? Or was the spirit of freedom so dead that nowhere was there a fight to restore it? Or was it everywhere people in dark clothes who ran through the woods at night and, when questioned, said they were not fighters?

He lay down at the hedge so he wouldn't be seen because he saw shapes coming out of the shed now. The group was leaving. Now he had to decide. Shall I follow them? Where will they go? Or should I go north as Ivy suggested, to find the gypsies? But gypsies I don't know about, and this group is here right now and they are going somewhere and I ought to find out where it is. I ought to know what they are up to, what it is they do if they don't fight.

But even as he thought this, he did not move to go. And he knew why. It was because of a girl. A girl with black hair, white

fingers, red lips. Soft lips. And as he thought of her he wondered which figure was hers among those moving across the field at right angles to him, where she was going, why she seemed different from the other women in the group. He once again felt the warmth of her lips, the grip of her fingers on his arm, the way she brushed her hair back into line . . . the way she said "good luck."

They were gone in a few moments. He rose and his bones ached from the dampness. He stretched, put the bag on his shoulder and pushed through the hedge.

He would go find the gypsies. And maybe—just maybe—she would be there. Tomorrow, she had said, hadn't she? Maybe he'd see her tomorrow.

He traveled north in the chill of the hour before dawn when earth is at its quietest, hearing only the sound of his feet, the whoosh-whoosh as he went through weeds and grass, and now the crunch of gravel on a road, thinking: Maybe I've just left home and I've been dreaming while I've been walking and all these things haven't really happened to me and it isn't dawn yet and I'll walk until noon and then I'll sit beside a creek and eat the lunch my mother made for me.

But he knew it hadn't been a dream because he could feel the roll of currency in his pocket and he could feel the bulge of the sleeper in his jacket pocket.

He trudged on north now, the only man on earth, walking, walking, walking. No turbos. No fliers. Not even the animals that usually ran away at his approach.

It was chilly. His hands were cold. He put them in his pockets.

Suddenly the road branched. He took the more northward one. It was a little better than the other, he discovered when he had gone a few hundred yards. He didn't like it, but it stretched north and if he had traveled in the right direction, Cornwall should be up ahead there somewhere. Perhaps five more miles.

He walked a little faster. He wanted to reach the town before daylight.

The road changed to a composition surface. He passed a few

intersecting roads, tempted to go down them instead, but reasoning the road was improved because it led into a town. Perhaps he was nearing Cornwall.

Now there was no farmer's field on either side of the road. No fencing, either. Why? Cultivated land reached the limits of Spring Creek, why not here?

Was that a stand of clover? Grass? He could not see well now that the moon had set.

He stopped. Up ahead was a—what? It was on the right side of the road about a half mile away. It looked like a building, but it was taller than any he had seen outside of a town and there was something on top of it. Could it be some sort of structure on the outskirts of Cornwall? A grain elevator? A silo? He wished the moon were out.

There was little cover at the sides of the road now. But in the fields there were clumps of bushes and a few trees. Odd that they should be there if the field was clover.

What was it?

He walked to the side of the road, stood there undecided for a moment, then walked down the shoulder, jumped across the ditch and climbed the other side.

Now he was at the edge of the gravel and weeds, looked down at the field.

It was grass.

He reached out his hand to feel of it.

A light as bright as day blinded him.

He jumped to his feet, saw that the light came from above the building far away on the right. Instantly he fell to the ground, rolled into the ditch.

Now there were other lights. They moved quietly over the area he had just left. He could see the weeds and larger stones at the edge of the ditch in sharp relief against the black sky.

What was this?

He crept along the ditch bottom, thankful the ditch was there, moving slowly until he was more than a hundred feet from where he had been when the light first struck him.

Light burst around him. Only then did he hear the hiss of the flier above, pinpointing him on the ground with a narrow beam. There was no use to run now.

He looked frantically up and down the ditch. Fifty feet away was a culvert and sewer opening. If he could only reach that . . .

Emmett hardly heard the whir of the turbo before it braked to a sudden stop on the road.

A figure bounded out, started for him.

Emmett felt his panic leave him as he drew the sleeper. There was only *one* of them.

He pointed it, pressed the trigger, heard the click and knew, with consummate relief, that at least he'd get this one. Then he could move on.

But the man did not drop.

Emmett fired again. Again and again. The range grew shorter and shorter.

Then a numbness struck him, lights swirled in his head, and he felt himself floating softly to earth.

It cushioned him nicely.

He could feel the sleep sweeping over him, a pleasantness he did not want to resist.

And then there was nothing.

CHAPTER 7

Emmett floated gently in sleep's fringe area, aware of the white sky and the small black sun in the middle of it, his body and his mind suffused with the tingling deliciousness of semiconsciousness.

Then, as if he had been struck a body blow, he realized that the white was not the sky and the small black thing in the center of it not a sun. His mind reeled as he tried to orient himself, tried to place what he saw. And when he could not, his heart leaped.

He sat up, panic sweeping him. He was in a bed.

Where is this?

He shook his head. It helped his mind vault the distance of time that lay immediately behind him until he was back in Spring Creek and he was leaving the house and not looking back and there were fields he was walking across . . . and the fight . . . the woods . . . and a girl named Ivy . . . and his mind rushed through all that had happened until the lights had blinded him and he had tried in vain to drop the man before him with his sleeper.

He looked around, saw the small room, the single window. New clothes were on a chair nearby. But nowhere did he see his old clothes, his bag, his money, the sleeper. He looked down at himself, saw that he was garbed in a loose-fitting shirt and pants.

He got out of the bed, found himself groggy and unsteady, but he made it to the window and looked out. Spread before him was a nicely landscaped lawn as far as he could see. It was filled with white benches, curving cement walks, fountains, pools, trees and bushes.

It was early morning—or was it late afternoon? He couldn't for the moment decide whether he was facing north or south. He examined the window. The pane was thick, unbreakable plastic. It was not made to open. Turning back to the room, he saw the green-carpeted floor, the delicate green tint of the paneled walls, and the bed he had just left. High in the walls were duct openings. In the wall facing him was a door. But it had no knob.

He went over to examine it, saw a red button where the knob should have been. He pressed it. The door slid open noiselessly, disappearing into the wall. The room opened to a corridor.

Emmett hesitated for a moment, undecided whether or not to put on the new clothes first. The door closed silently. He pushed the red button again. It opened. Satisfied it would open when he wanted to leave the room, he took the clothes from the chair.

The shoes were soft and flexible, sponge-soled and kind to his feet, a contrast to the heavy, hard boots he was used to wearing. The trousers were black and of soft texture, as was the white shirt, and both were cool to the touch.

The bright hallway on the other side of the door presented a small problem because there were doors at either end. He decided to try the one on his left, but it did not open when he pressed the red stud. He tried the other. It opened.

He was not prepared for what he saw next, for it was a room as large as a house and it was filled with a strange, soft glow. He stood near the door that hissed closed behind him, wondering at the beauty of it. In the center was a large pool and in the middle of it was a white statue of a nude woman holding aloft a bowl from which water cascaded among the lilies below. Around the fountain pond were lounges and chairs and small woolly carpets, and near the walls were statuary, fresh flowers in tall vases, and small garden plots in which flowers were grow-

ing. On the walls were many paintings. The room was so spotlessly clean he hesitated to step farther into it, the air was so cool and the total effect so restful he felt moved to sit in one of the chairs.

A doorway at the far end opened and a thin man came through it. He paused for a moment, then came forward around the pool. He walked stiffly, as if he had an injury. When he came within speaking distance, he stopped. His black eyes indicated nothing, his face was expressionless.

"Follow me," the man said. Then he turned and walked toward the door he had come through.

Emmett followed.

The man led him to another smaller but lavishly furnished room at the end of which a man sat in a chaise longue, a drink in his hand.

"Come here," the man commanded in a clear voice. And as Emmett walked to him, the man's eyes never left his face. His guide went around the chair, took a position behind it facing Emmett.

"Sit down."

Emmett sat in a nearby straight-backed chair and stared at the man with the drink, a fat man with a pasty face, pale blue eyes and thin strings of black hair running across an otherwise bare pate. The pink jowls, puffy cheeks and eyes were quite a contrast to the thin face of the man behind him.

Emmett glanced at the man's thick neck, the huge midsection and the pudgy fingers that gripped the glass, and wondered what kind of a man he was, for what he saw was not very impressive. Then he studied the eyes and found the answer there. They held none of the hopelessness Emmett was used to seeing. He saw authority there. And strength. And intelligence, too.

The man stirred a little and said, "I'm Alfred Gniessin." The voice was a low rumble. "Welcome to my villa."

Emmett said nothing. From his accent and the name and the lush surroundings there could be no doubt the man was an En-

emy and the man behind him his servant. This, then, was how the victors lived.

"Jascha and I have been waiting for you to wake up. You have been sleeping more than ten hours." He turned his head slightly. "You may turn it off now, Jascha."

Jascha moved to a nearby panel. Before he pushed a button, Emmett caught a glimpse of the view on one of the screens above it. It was the room he had slept in, viewed, he could see, from the little black device in the ceiling.

"What brings you here?" The fat man drained his glass with obvious satisfaction, set the glass on a small serving table. Jascha picked it up, prepared another drink.

"I brought myself here."

The eyes opened a little wider. "Is it going to be like that?"

Yes, Emmett said to himself, it's going to be like that, just as it was when I was questioned in the shed. Only now it's not questions from a person I could expect to be sympathetic. Are you going to tell me my name and where I'm from too? Are you going to be as clever as they were, Mr. Gniessin?

Emmett sighed. "Let's say I was just walking by then." And you can carry on from there.

"All right. Let's *do* say you were walking by." He took the new glass. "Then let's find out why you picked four o'clock in the morning to do it."

"There is very little traffic at four in the morning."

"There may be very little traffic, but people who move about at that hour are a little more conspicuous than they would be at four o'clock in the afternoon. You discovered that, didn't you?"

"It seems *you* discovered that."

"That's still not saying why you came here."

"Believe me, I didn't want to come here."

"I'll go along with that."

"You should have let me pass by."

"You stopped yourself when you set off the alarm."

"I didn't know it was there or I'd never have done it."

"Where were you going?"

"Just a little jaunt. I'd never seen the country."

"We didn't find a travel permit among your things. Did you lose it?"

"I didn't have any."

"Oh?" The eyes were coldly amused. "Now we're getting somewhere. It takes a lot of courage to travel without a permit."

"I wasn't restricted as I would have been with a permit."

"But why should you travel at all? Didn't you know it was dangerous?"

"I was willing to take that chance."

"Where did you come from?"

Emmett looked at the eyes. Gniessin, he wanted to say, questions like that were asked me not too long ago and it didn't do me a bit of good to lie about it. But the people who were doing the asking were smart. Somehow they managed to find out a few things about me. Now why don't you do the same?

"Come now, don't you want to tell me?"

"Frankly, no."

"I see." Gniessin grunted, sat up, put the drink on the table, then faced Emmett with his hands on his knees and a grin on his face. "Well, Emmett Keyes, things haven't changed much in Spring Creek since you left there before daylight yesterday morning."

Then Gniessin laughed, stood up, drew his lounging robe around him, tied the belt tightly about the waist. "You people are all alike. I've been in your country for twenty years and I've never seen one of you who didn't underestimate us."

He stopped being amused, leaned over to talk to him. "Don't you suppose it was an easy matter to check you from the number on your forearm? Why do you think it's there? Do you think we are fools? Do you?" His face was flushed and he turned away without waiting for an answer.

Yes, I understand about the number. That much I do see. But suppose you tell me how this other man knew. I'll bet you couldn't tell me that.

Gniessin picked up a square of paper from the small serving

table. "Now that you can see it will do no good to lie, why don't you tell me where you were going and why?"

"I didn't like the life I was living in Spring Creek," Emmett said. "So I got out."

"What was wrong with it?"

"It led nowhere. It was empty."

"Didn't you have a girl?"

Emmett darted a glance at him. It was an unexpected question, but the eyes told him nothing. "Of course I had a girl." He tried to think of Mary Ann, but the face of Ivy kept superimposing itself on Mary Ann's.

"Then it couldn't have been entirely empty, could it?" Gniessin went back to the chair, sat down and reached for the remainder of his drink, examining the paper he had picked up a moment ago. "What was her name?"

"What difference does that make?"

"Was she good looking?"

"Fair."

"As young as you?"

"A year younger."

"Did you ever . . . a . . ." Gniessin's smile was a lascivious one.

"That, Mr. Gniessin, is none of your damn business!"

"Oho!" Gniessin's face was a fatuous grin as he raised his glass and some of the liquid sloshed out. "Listen to him, Jascha! An admission of guilt if I ever heard one. Look at his face!" He peered at Emmett as if trying to see him through a fog. "Why don't you tell us all about it? Where did you do it? In the hay?"

The head was invitingly close and a surge of hot, angry blood stirred Emmett to action. He rose, balled a brown fist and took a step forward. His arm shot out, headed for Gniessin's nose.

The blow was stopped abruptly by Jascha, who stepped between them with surprising suddenness, grabbing Emmett's arm at the wrist. The grip was strong.

"All right, Jascha," the fat man said.

Jascha let go and Emmett massaged his wrist. Jascha stepped

back to the other side of the chair and Emmett eyed him with new respect. For such a thin man . . .

"Sit down," Gniessin said roughly. He fingered the paper he held. "You're rather quick tempered, Keyes. A thing like that is bound to get you in trouble wherever you go. You were saying you didn't like life in Spring Creek."

"Life anywhere dominated by the Communists is not worth living."

Gniessin looked up at him with narrowed eyes. "That sounds like a sentence from some revolution primer."

"It's a simple fact."

"I suppose life would be rather dull for someone with your adventuresome spirit. Isn't it a pity we can't give everyone a free hand?"

"Why can't you?"

"Do you suppose there would be any of us left if we did?"

"Good riddance, then."

Gniessin frowned. "I haven't heard talk like that for years. It rather surprises me. I had supposed people who ventured opinions like that were purged long ago. But you're the new generation, and I can see it's there as strong as ever. I'm afraid our work here will never be done."

"It won't be if you insist on keeping the people down at the slave level. You make them get a permit to marry, a permit to live in a house, a permit to buy this and that—everything but spit and you'd make them get a permit for that if you knew how often they spit when the name of the Enemy is mentioned——"

"That's enough——"

"It's hard getting enough to eat without saving all your hard-earned money to buy a permit to have children and pay the exorbitant taxes and——"

"Will you shut up!" Gniessin roared. Then he scowled at him. "How far do you think you'll get talking like that? Carry on that way and you'll land in a camp in Utah or Nevada. As district director for the Occupation Forces, I could send you there."

"I don't give a damn who you are. You could be the Enemy Premier, and I'd still tell you what I think of you."

"Pretty strong talk for a person in your position, Keyes. You're a fool. I could send you to a camp just by signing my name to the commitment papers."

"Just because I didn't have a travel permit?"

"I admit it's a minor violation." Gniessin gave him a long, hard look. "But there'd be no question about it if I stated you murdered a party man named Tisdail."

A sense of weakening frustration swept over Emmett. He knew. They all knew. Everyone. Was there no act, no movement, no thought that was secret any more? If he could do nothing that escaped notice, then why had he tried at all? Why, in fact, did he leave home? Perhaps his father was right. Maybe there was nothing one man could do, especially against forces that had the faculty of knowing everything he did.

"And your parents," Gniessin was saying. "I could send them away, too."

Emmett said nothing. Perhaps he had been handling things wrong. He shouldn't be so vehement, so eager to strike out at the Enemy and let everyone know it. Maybe Gniessin was right. Maybe he was acting the fool. This shouting, this name-calling —that wasn't the way to fight them. He'd have to remember that.

"You are silent," Gniessin said. "That's an improvement. You should try a little control. And as far as the permits are concerned, do you suppose I have anything to do with them? The laws under which you people are living were made ten years before I came to America. Now I don't want to commit you to a camp; it would be a crime to send a young fellow like you to his death. But don't press me too far, Emmett Keyes, because I will send you there if I have to."

He went back to the paper he held. "Now where was I?" He scanned the sheet. "Quite a few things in that bag you were carrying. You had a good hunting knife, some excellent items for survival, and you had two things that puzzle me very much." He looked up quickly.

Emmett forced himself to stare at the man. Go ahead, tell me about the currency and the sleep gun. It's been done before. You knew about Tisdail, so I suppose you know about them, too.

"That sleeper," Gniessin said. "Where did you get it?"

"Found it."

"I suppose you found it in the middle of the road right next to all that money?"

"That's right."

Gniessin shook his head. "It takes an ordinary man quite a few years to amass that much money. A pity he should have been so thoughtless as to leave it right in the middle of a road. But even that's understandable. But no ordinary man has a sleeper."

Emmett was surprised. Gniessin evidently didn't know the sleeper belonged to Tisdail. Or was there another reason for this line of questioning?

"I'm an ordinary man," Emmett said, "and I had a sleeper."

"You only think you're ordinary. How many party members do you think have been murdered in the past twenty years? No, Keyes, you are anything but ordinary. But tell me about that group you met in the woods. I had imagined everything in my sector was quiet and serene, and now I find young men and women are running about under the cover of darkness. Who were those people you met and what were they doing?"

"I don't know anything about them," Emmett said, suddenly glad he had nothing to reveal.

Gniessin turned his head to Jascha, saying, "Do you believe him, Jascha? Or do you think he is holding out? If he's just being unco-operative, we ought to commit him to the new camp in Nevada, don't you think? They need men out there."

"Sir, you have already——"

"Shut up, Jascha." Gniessin sipped his drink and looked at Emmett. When Emmett said nothing, he went on, "Perhaps you really know nothing about them after all. Well, it's not important. They shouldn't be hard to catch, and then we'll have the whole story." He put his drink down. "When they are, Keyes, they'll be brought here and you'll have a chance to see them again if

you stay. This villa isn't a large one, as villas go. I have no family, no children. But there's room for a man like you. Unless you'd rather go West and work yourself to death."

"I'd rather be on my way." Have a date in Cornwall, Gniessin. A rather uncertain date, to be sure, but I still have it.

"You wouldn't find life in this villa unpleasant. It's at least more healthy than tramping around the countryside without a travel permit. As a district director, I'm supposed to get along without outside help, with only the company of people like Jascha here. But they are strictly limited and offer little in the way of sparkling conversation. You won't be alone. There are two like you here, a man named Bradshaw who does the cooking, and Dr. Smeltzer. I'm sure you and the doctor would find much in common." He put what was left of his drink on the serving tray, and when Jascha reached for it, he said, "No more, Jascha."

Once again the fat man pulled his robe around him and stood up. His eyes were lower than Emmett's because he was not so tall. "Either way there's no escape, in case you were thinking you would stand a better chance of escaping if you stayed here. You'd never leave here alive. Maybe you don't believe that."

"I'll take your word for it."

"Well, then, which will it be: Camp or life here?"

There was no choice. Emmett had heard about life in the Western deserts. Men were sent there and never came back. Several persons from Spring Creek had been sent West when their crimes had transcended the usual violations. There had been no letters, no word from them. And letters addressed to them had never been answered. It was as if they had simply ceased to exist. Death by being deprived of a booster shot was a blessing by comparison.

"You find it difficult to decide? Is it so hard to determine which is the lesser evil: Life with Alfred Gniessin or death in Nevada?"

"I was just remembering some things I had heard about camps. There is no choice, of course."

"I didn't think there was. Well, now that you will be living

here, the question of your booster arises. When did you get your last?"

"A few days before I left Spring Creek."

"Then there is plenty of time. Jascha, make a note of that. Then take Mr. Keyes to see Mr. Bradshaw. As soon as Dr. Smeltzer—a—recovers, send him down."

CHAPTER 8

The door hissed closed behind him. At a table in the kitchen before him stood a short, stocky man with bulging eyes. The way the man slowly blinked them reminded Emmett of a frog. This was evidently Bradshaw, the man Gniessin had referred to.

"You Keyes?" The man made no effort to move from the table.

"And you're Bradshaw?"

"Yeah." The eyes finally left Emmett and the man started to roll dough on a lightly floured board before him. His hands were quick and sure, his pudgy fingers deftly grasping the edge of the dough and turning it now and then between rollings.

Emmett moved from the door and took a chair on the other side of the table. Bradshaw continued to work wordlessly.

Though the kitchen was large, Bradshaw seemed to be using only part of it. It was brightly lighted, warm, and filled with hunger-evoking aromas of a meal in preparation. There were shiny copper pans and kettles, shelves filled with ingredients, racks of utensils and allied equipment—quite unlike the kitchen he had expected. He had imagined the meals would be prepared electronically, with no need for a cook, which was what Bradshaw seemed to be. Yet even as he looked around, Emmett could see large machines at the far end of the room. They could be electronic devices for cooking.

"At least you ain't a zombie."

Emmett was startled. Not with what Bradshaw had said so much as he was that he had suddenly spoken.

"Zombie?"

"One of them robots."

"Robots?"

Bradshaw looked up in surprise. "Where you been? You knew Jascha was a robot, didn't you?"

"No." That explained the unnaturally stiff walk, the lightning movement when Jascha grabbed his wrist! He had heard there were such things as robots, but he hadn't really believed it until now.

"There's a dozen of 'em around here. I call 'em zombies because they got a faraway look in their eyes. All but Jascha."

Bradshaw placed a piepan upside down on the rolled dough and cut it with a pastry wheel. "Took me a long time to get used to 'em. They still give me the willies once in a while, these guys, the way they walk around with that vacant look."

"Jascha doesn't have a vacant look."

"No, he don't, just as I said. He's the best looking and most natural actin' one of the bunch. But you oughta see the others. Jascha's warm, but the skin of the others—if you want to call it skin—is cold. His eyes are almost human and his voice sounds better than the rest. Jascha's been here only four years. The others were here when I came."

Bradshaw made the last cut of crust, held the pan aloft and eyed it critically. Satisfied, he put it down and stared thoughtfully at the far end of the kitchen. "I'll never forget the day Jascha came. Mr. Gniessin brought him down here and he said, 'Bradshaw, I want you to meet a friend of mine.' And then he introduced Jascha. I shook hands and didn't think nothing about him not smilin' or nothing because Mr. Gniessin's friends ain't the smilin' kind. Then Mr. Gniessin started to laugh and told me what a big joke it was. He told me Jascha was a robot."

"How long have you been here, Bradshaw?"

"Ten years. See that stuff back there?" He waved a hand at

the equipment at the other end of the kitchen. "That's the push-button kitchen. We don't use it much any more. Oh, it does a good job on some things, but it can't whip up very good crab soufflé or crêpes au Kirsch, and Mr. Gniessin goes for fancy dishes. No machine can outdo a human when it comes to making stuff like that.

"I was working at the Hotel Ingles in the East—maybe you heard of it—when Mr. Gniessin walks in. He was stayin' there for a couple days. He comes back to the kitchen and tells me I'm supposed to start workin' for him. No self-respectin', exclusive joint like the Ingles would think of offering robot-made food, but nobody realizes it. That's what drew me to Mr. Gniessin right away, because he tasted the difference. He's a connoisseur, Mr. Gniessin is."

"He looks as if he enjoyed eating," Emmett conceded.

"You know what he was doin' before I came here? He was tryin' to cook. You never seen such a messed-up kitchen. But I cleaned it up and started right away. You know the first thing he asked for? Danish beefsteak, with crêpes caviar as an appetizer, a tossed salad, and a lemon meringue pie like the one I'm makin' now, for dessert. I told him, I said, 'We ain't got no caviar and I can't find no garlic for the salad.' He just nodded. In half an hour there was some in the kitchen. It's been like that ever since. He makes out the menus days ahead of time, and I tell Jascha what I need. I never have to worry about whether I'll have so much of this or so much of that to cook with."

Bradshaw put the pastry shell in a small oven behind him, set the controls and turned to shelves where he gathered up a mixing bowl and some ingredients with which he started to work on the table. "It really means something to a guy like me to have somebody appreciate what I make. Mr. Gniessin never lets a meal pass without sayin' how good it is."

"Back where I come from," Emmett said evenly, "we had trouble getting sugar, to say nothing of garlic. I don't believe we ever had any of that."

Bradshaw didn't get the point. "The hotel had trouble, too.

Sometimes I forget how things are on the outside. Where did you come from?"

"Spring Creek."

"Where's that?"

"South of Springfield."

"Why'd you leave down there?"

"Because I thought things might be better someplace else."

Bradshaw paused in his stirring to look up. "You mean things were bad?"

"Oppression's bad anywhere. It just seemed worse in Spring Creek."

"Oppression ain't a nice word, Keyes. I don't think of it that way."

Emmett took in the soft flesh, the well-fed look of the man, and for the first time realized Bradshaw didn't have that hopeless look in his eyes either. He was on the point of making a tart reply when he remembered his experience with Gniessin. He said only, "How do you think of it?"

"As sort of being under their protection," Bradshaw said firmly. "We proved we couldn't handle our own business and now they're handling it for us."

"When was the last time you were any place but here—out among the people to see how they're living their lives?"

"I've been out. I seen it." Bradshaw stirred his mixture a little faster.

"Did the people look happy?"

"It's the people's own fault if they ain't happy," the cook said stubbornly.

"Yeah," Emmett said drily, "they all can't have plushy jobs cooking for the district director."

Bradshaw stopped stirring and glared at him. "That's a dirty thing to say, Keyes."

"If you ask me, it's a dirty thing to be so hand in glove with a man like Gniessin."

"Don't you go sayin' nothin' against Mr. Gniessin. He's been more than kind to me."

"He's a Communist, isn't he?"

"Yeah, sure he's a Communist. So what?"

"He's the Enemy, Bradshaw, that's what. He's a Communist and a member of the occupation forces."

"The Enemy? Maybe you don't know it, but the war's over. It's been over for thirty years. And with the conquerors here there's goin' to be no more wars. They'll handle things right. Why, we was lucky they took things over. Otherwise we might all be dead. You might never even have been born if things went on the way they were. You ask Gniessin about it. He'll give you the straight dope. The way things are now we ain't got a thing to worry about. Let *them* do the worrying, see? Ain't it better that way?"

"Didn't you ever hear of a thing called freedom, Bradshaw?"

"You mean the way things used to be? I don't want any part of that." Bradshaw separated the yolks and whites of several eggs.

"What about the people on the outside?" Emmett asked, finding it difficult to keep his voice under control. "The people who have to work themselves to death trying to scrape together enough money to pay the taxes, to get a marriage permit, housing permit and all the other permits the Enemy sells, do you suppose they're happy?"

"They ain't worried about bombs, are they? The only thing they got to do now is work, and it goes against their grain that for once in their lives they got to work. I've seen unhappy people all right, Keyes. They are the lazy people, the people who want something for nothin'."

"What about being denied their boosters because of some mistake, just to serve as a gruesome example to others? And what about the men—the fathers, husbands and young men—who have been sent to the labor camps in Utah? I suppose that's all right too?"

"There's laws," Bradshaw said, never stopping his steady stirring of the mix. "They are supposed to be obeyed. The happiest people are those who do."

"Enemy laws. Occupation laws. Everything for the Enemy and party members and nothing for the rest of us."

"Those who obey the laws get along best. You ever tried going along, obeying the laws and payin' respect where you're supposed to? You'll find it much easier than getting all riled up about it. Why don't you count all the good things and try to go along with the way things are? You'll never get into no trouble that way. You might even find yourself getting a kick out of it."

Emmett turned away. He couldn't look at the smug face, and he didn't want Bradshaw to see his anger. "Thank God everyone's not like you. If they were, there never would be a chance of making this a free country again."

"The trouble with you," Bradshaw said, "is that you ain't got the vinegar worked out of your system yet. After you've been here a while you'll settle down."

"I don't intend to be here that long"—and anger suddenly exploded—"you goddam commie."

The mixing spoon hit the side of the bowl. Bradshaw leaned on the table, his face coloring. "You watch what you say, Keyes. Nobody calls me a goddam nothin'."

"Maybe traitor would be a better word," Emmett said, turning to face him. "Or should I say commie lover?" He mouthed the words as if they were unclean.

The eyes were wide now, the face white. Slowly the hands moved from the table and one of them rose to the knife rack overhead. Bradshaw brought down a long knife.

"You just say one thing more, Mister," he said, laying the knife carefully on the table, the point of it toward Emmett. "Just one thing more."

"At least you haven't lost your self-respect," Emmett said, rising warily, his eyes on the other. He was larger than Bradshaw; he had that advantage. But Bradshaw had the knife, and a wicked-looking knife it was, with a foot-long blade and a gleaming edge. But somehow Emmett couldn't find it within himself to care, for Bradshaw was suddenly a symbol of all that he had come to hate: the fickleness and inconstancy of people, their

abandonment of ideals for an illusory security, justifying their cowardice and weakness by saying their overlords could manage their affairs better than they themselves could.

For all these reasons Emmett was ready to do battle.

But the battle never began.

The door through which Emmett had passed what seemed an eternity ago suddenly hissed open and through it came a gray-haired man attired in what Emmett by now presumed to be the dress of villa dwellers: a white shirt with ample sleeves and tailored at the waist, black trousers and black shoes.

The man was nearly as tall as Emmett, well-proportioned, large-shouldered, but carrying the heaviness of middle age. His face was ruddy, his eyes bloodshot. There was perspiration on his high forehead, circles under his eyes.

He did not come to them. He stopped halfway, and as he saw them, Emmett on one side of the table and Bradshaw on the other, a faint smile played at the ends of his lips.

"Quite a tableau," he said. His voice was low and well modulated. "I only hope Gniessin was watching you. Too bad I had to interrupt."

Bradshaw glanced toward the ceiling. Emmett followed his gaze and saw the button there.

"It must have been much more interesting than the Tri-D programs tonight," the man said, advancing to the table. "What was the question? Right versus wrong? Or shall I make a shrewder guess and say democracy versus tyranny?"

"I just hope he was watching," Bradshaw said thickly. "I hope Mr. Gniessin heard every word."

"He knows how you feel, doesn't he, Bradshaw? He needs no re-evaluation of your loyalties. But of young Keyes, here, the incident, I'm sure, only corroborates what he has already discovered about him." The man smiled and extended his hand. "I'm Dr. Smeltzer."

Emmett took the hand. He was surprised to find it cold and moist. But the grip was strong. There was a brightness about the eyes he had not seen at first. There was something else there too,

but he could not determine what it was. Something in the glance, or in the way the man looked that was not right.

"I must apologize for taking away your intended victim, Bradshaw," the doctor said, "but you no doubt would have botched the job with the knife anyway."

"The quicker you get the hell out of here," Bradshaw said surlily, "the better I'll like it. That goes for both of you."

"You just tend to your cooking. I'll take care of the butchering."

Bradshaw glared as they left the kitchen.

Emmett Keyes had been in a doctor's office only once, and that as a child. His mother had taken him there when he had become so feverish he had lost his senses. But he had recovered in the office and recalled it as a dusty, bare place, and the doctor an old man in a dirty white coat. He could even now picture the old leather examination table and the stuffing that showed through the many cracks in it. Dr. Smeltzer's office was nothing like that. This one was filled with gleaming chromium, stainless steel, lucite and an endless array of devices the functions of which he could not even guess.

The doctor had been silent on the way to the office, leading him down hallways, leaving Emmett to stare at the back of his neck as they walked.

Now the door slid closed behind them and the doctor said tersely, "Sit down, Keyes, and take off your shirt."

When he did not sit down at once, the doctor said, "I've got to give you your bracelet. But first I'd better check you to make sure you're all right, though you're about as healthy a specimen as I've ever seen."

Puzzled, Emmett sat on the white metal stool Smeltzer had indicated, and took his shirt off. "What's this about a bracelet?"

The doctor appeared not to have heard, saying, "I'd better mix the anesthetic." He opened a small plastic cabinet, withdrew a bottle, uncorked it and shook some powder into a small screwtop vial which he then filled with water. He screwed the top in place,

set it in a machine. He pushed a button and the vial vibrated furiously, the raucous buzzing filling the room.

"There's a scanner and a microphone in this room," the doctor said, wrapping the blood pressure band around Emmett's bare arm. "But that vibrator makes so much noise Gniessin can't hear what I'm saying. But he can still see us." His head was so close Emmett could see the pores in his perspiring face. "So just nod once in a while. Don't look interested. And talk only if you have something important to say. There's not much time. Do you understand?"

"I think so," Emmett said dubiously, but willing to go along under the circumstances. The doctor pumped the rubber bulb, watched the pressure indicator.

"When the robots brought you in last night, I anesthetized the forepart of your brain and awakened you from the effect of the sleeper with another drug, as Gniessin ordered me to. The procedure rendered you partly conscious, but the anesthetic reduced your inhibitions and judgment to zero. You answered every question, told him everything, why you left home, what you hoped to do, the fact that you killed a man—you even told him who and what he was—and some vague story about meeting a group of people running through the woods. Despite his questioning, Gniessin couldn't get much from you about them. After the session, which you couldn't possibly remember, I put you to sleep again."

So Gniessin hadn't checked into his past! He, Emmett, had told him instead, and Gniessin hadn't learned what he knew the mysterious way the leader in the implement shed had. And Gniessin hadn't got very far either, he realized, because his later question showed he didn't know the details about the gun and the currency. It was safe to assume he had heard nothing about Mrs. Tisdail; otherwise he would have surely mentioned her. As far as the group in the woods, what could Emmett have told him about them?

"I'm telling you this," the doctor went on, "because I want you to know I'm on your side. I was going to warn you about Brad-

shaw, but I see you've already found out about him. He's dangerous, Keyes. And he's a tattler. So watch yourself. He carries a lot of weight with Gniessin."

The doctor deflated the arm band.

"If you want to be a friend of mine," Emmett said, "then tell me how I can get out of here."

"There is no escape. Believe me, Keyes, there is no escape."

"Think so?"

"I know so."

"I'll get out . . . somehow."

"I'm warning you not to try. Gniessin will send you to a camp if you do. Now I've got to turn that damn vibrator off. I didn't need it anyway, but Gniessin won't know the difference."

He went over and clicked off the machine, saying, "Blood pressure's O.K." He came back with a stethoscope. "How's the heart?" He put the cup to Emmett's chest and listened. "Fine heart you have there."

The doctor sighed, rose, put the stethoscope away and picked up the vial from the vibrator, working with it over his desk. When he turned around he had a hypodermic syringe in his hand.

"That bracelet I mentioned a little while ago—it's a thin and narrow band you'll wear around your wrist. The flesh will grow over it in a few days. I'll have to deaden the tissue while I make the cut for it."

Before Emmett could protest, Smeltzer pressed the viewphone key. In a moment, Gniessin's face appeared there.

"I'm ready with Keyes, Mr. Gniessin."

"Bring him in then." The face vanished.

"Each of us," the doctor said, injecting an anesthetic beneath the skin of Emmett's left wrist, "carries a coded identity bracelet on his wrist. Mr. Gniessin will put yours on and from then on the electronic brain that runs this villa will know who you are and what your privileges are. Otherwise every time you stepped outside the robots would let you have it with a sleeper. They're

not very efficient visually, you see, but their scanner eyes can read one of these bracelets a half mile away."

Smeltzer used a scalpel to make a shallow cut around the wrist. Emmett was surprised to see so little blood. He could feel the pressure of the knife, could feel it cut, but felt no pain.

"We're ready for Gniessin now," the doctor said, rising.

CHAPTER 9

At the first touch of the hand on his shoulder Emmett jerked up to a sitting position, alarm shocking him to wakefulness. What he saw swept the last shreds of sleep from his brain.

It was a face like a Halloween mask, and it belonged to the creature who stood at the side of his bed. The flesh of the face was of porcelain consistency, the cheeks fiery red and the eyebrows too thick and black.

"Breakfast," the robot said harshly. Emmett was startled to see the lips move clumsily in simulated speech.

He looked at the eyes and saw what Bradshaw meant about the vacant stare. They were like a doll's eyes, immovable and unexpressive. But they were not unseeing, for Emmett could look into the lenses.

The robot was at a disadvantage at such close range. If it had stood across the room or in a darkened area, Emmett might have mistaken it for a human being, for it was dressed in villa clothes and was otherwise human in size and shape. But at this distance, how different it was from Jascha!

"What time is it?" Emmett said, climbing out of bed and wondering if the robot would answer.

"Six forty-five, sir."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome, sir."

Emmett stretched, looked out the window and saw the bright day. He wondered if the robot had a clock among the profusion of wires and muscles and tendons inside. He glanced at the robot who stood unmoving at the bedside.

"What's your name?"

"Igor, sir."

"Spell cat."

"C-a-t."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome, sir."

"Go to hell."

There was no response.

"You may go, Igor."

The robot shuffled out.

"You're two minutes late, Keyes," Gniessin said sourly from the head of the table. The ever-present Jascha stood behind him. The fat man glared at Emmett as he approached the table.

"Breakfast is served at seven o'clock sharp."

Bradshaw goggled at Emmett.

A pity I'm leaving here this morning, Emmett thought as he sat down next to Dr. Smeltzer, or I'd push those teeth of yours down your throat, Bradshaw.

Smeltzer said, "Good morning. How's the wrist?"

"It's all right."

"Let's see it."

Emmett brought up the left wrist. The doctor examined the area where the plastic bracelet Gniessin had given him the night before had been sewn in. There was a dark line of cut, crisscrossed with stitches.

"It's healing nicely."

"You may serve now, Boris," Gniessin said to a waiting robot.

It was a bountiful breakfast: Orange juice, ham and eggs, fried potatoes, toast and jelly, biscuits and butter, and coffee.

"Well, Keyes," Gniessin said, helping himself to a large share of ham and eggs from the platter the robot held before him, "you're one of us whether you like it or not, now that you have your coded identity ring. I hope I don't have to remind you breakfast is at seven, lunch at noon and dinner at six. You will be informed of any deviation."

"Punctuality," Dr. Smeltzer said, "is a Gniessin fetish, Keyes, as you will learn."

"It is a virtue, not a fetish, Doctor," Gniessin replied. "As a doctor you ought to know its value. I learned it as a colonel in the army. Troops are more efficient if there is regularity. And troops are people. The body adjusts itself to such things, seems to work better that way."

"It's a pity your body doesn't know that," the doctor said. "Particularly in regards to elimination."

"You're the doctor," Gniessin said. "It's your business to see that it does."

"I do my best, but sometimes I think it's a losing battle, considering what I have to work with."

"The doctor feels chipper this morning, Keyes," Gniessin said, smiling thinly. "Maybe we ought to do something about that. Something like short rations, perhaps. Eh, Doctor?"

Dr. Smeltzer was silent.

Bradshaw nodded. "Mr. Gniessin is right. About regularity making efficiency, I mean. I run the kitchen that way. Back at the hotel you had to run things that way or you'd get nowhere. That's where I learned it."

Gniessin plastered butter on a biscuit until it was an inch thick. "I presume you slept well last night, Keyes?"

"I slept all right."

"Better than trying to sleep under the stars, don't you think?" He shook his head as he ate. "Nobody should be forced to sleep outside. Do you like your room?"

"It's all right."

"If you get tired of it, there are a dozen others you can sleep in."

"This house," Smeltzer said, "has more bedrooms than anything else. You might ask Bradshaw about that. He's tried them all."

"You ought to get in on it," Bradshaw said. "Or is your heart still in Peoria?"

"When it comes to filth," Smeltzer said, "you can't beat Bradshaw. He has yet to arise from among the lower animals."

"Come now," Gniessin said, "let's not bare our collective breasts to Mr. Keyes. He will learn all about us soon enough as it is. Breakfast ought not be a time of recrimination. Let's have some of that lofty discussion of yours, Doctor."

When the doctor said nothing, Gniessin said, "For your information, Keyes, Dr. Smeltzer is one of those who believes that progress died in nineteen sixty-nine."

"It did as far as I'm concerned," Emmett said.

"I'm sure you know all about it. How old were you at the time?"

"I've heard about it."

"And that makes you an expert of course. But Dr. Smeltzer goes you one better. He believes there can be progress only when there are wars."

"That's not at all what I believe," Smeltzer said. "It's true we made technical progress during wars, but it is also true there has hardly been a time when we were without wars."

Gniessin smiled as he chewed. "I suppose our advances in the field of robotics are nonexistent because there have been no wars."

"We were on the eve of important discoveries when you people took over."

"The earth satellite, I suppose. The rocket to the moon. I'm afraid that was not progress-to-be for the sake of society, Doctor. That was for the military and the axiom about who controls the moon controls the earth."

"It has been man's dream to conquer space, even such an infinitesimal part of it as from here to the moon, and the Communist victory prevented it from becoming reality."

"We could have done it if we had wanted to," Gniessin said smugly.

"Why didn't you then?"

"It was no longer necessary. We conquered the world without it."

"It's you who look at it from the point of view of the military. You just proved it by what you said."

"Ha! And you Americans didn't, eh, Smeltzer?"

"Some of us, perhaps. But you haven't seen the end of it all yet. While you are sitting around getting fat, there are a lot of people who are getting tired of being trodden on. You know what happened to Rome."

Gniessin laughed, dabbed at his thick lips with his napkin. "Unfortunately, Doctor, there are no barbarians to overthrow us."

"And what a pity it is!"

Gniessin laughed again. "You see, Keyes? The doctor thinks nothing of parading his carefully nurtured prejudices before us all. It makes for lively conversation, don't you think?"

"What he says is true. There will come a day when you people will be run out of the country."

"What a revolutionist you'd make, Keyes! It's a pity you weren't born at a time when it could be used to advantage. As it is, you are only ridiculous trying to combat a perfect system, a smoothly co-ordinated occupation that was going on before you were even born."

"I hope it goes on forever," Bradshaw said. "The world has never had such security."

"And you've never had such Saturday nights, have you?" Smeltzer said.

Gniessin raised his hand. "Let's not start that again, gentlemen. We have other things to think of. Such as what duty our new guest shall perform. Do you know anything about massage, Keyes?"

Emmett shook his head.

"You will," Dr. Smeltzer said. "Gniessin's been looking for a masseur for years. I'm afraid I haven't quite filled the bill."

"You have been fair, Doctor. But I need someone I can depend on. Someone young and strong and willing to learn from scratch. I know you always considered it beneath your dignity."

"That's not all I thought of it."

"I know what you think about men who feel they need massage, Doctor. But it's merely an opinion. Take a look at Keyes's hands. They're big and so is he. It seems to me he should be an able pupil. Will you teach him?"

"I'll be glad to let him take over."

"Good. Then this afternoon we shall start at the usual time." He looked up to Jascha, saying, "The chair, Jascha." Jascha slid the chair out as Gniessin got to his feet. "Now, if you gentlemen will excuse us, Keyes and I have a little walk to take."

Gniessin lumbered along the corridors like a great bear, puffing and wheezing with effort and occasionally stopping to get his breath. Jascha was a silent shadow.

Emmett followed, wondering where Gniessin was leading him. It was some time before he realized the district director was taking him on a tour of the house, opening doors of rooms as he went, watching Emmett's face for a sign of interest as he showed him the architectural splendor of such places as the ballroom on the third floor, the comfort and serenity of the Tri-D viewing rooms, the variety of bedrooms. What ease there was here! If only some people he knew in Spring Creek could tour the place as he was—how their eyes would pop! And how they'd change, too. They'd no longer try to convince others of the magnificence of the commie program. What his mother could have done with one of those robots!

Gniessin talked on and on about the house, but Emmett's mind soon wandered from it and its wonders. He was thinking instead of the broad expanse of lawn outside the house and how far it was to the road. What he was seeing made him only more impatient to be off, to get as far from the villa as possible—at least to Cornwall and the gypsies he hoped would still be there. The gypsies . . . and Ivy. His breath shortened every time he thought of her.

At length Gniessin led him to a large room lined with shelves of books—more books than Emmett had ever seen outside of a public library. And Gniessin turned to watch him as he looked at them.

He was impressed more by the number of books than by the fact that they were books, for he had never developed much taste for reading. Most library books harped on what a privilege it was to be a member of the working class, and told over and over how brilliant the Enemy mind was, suggesting again and again that the Western world follow the Communist lead. He had read enough of that stuff in school.

The few works of fiction he had been forced to read invariably ended with the conversion of the hero—or heroine—or both—to the Communist point of view, with their ultimate dedication to greater things, usually better co-operation with the occupation forces and a boosted energy output for increased production. The moral of it all was that this brought great peace of mind.

He had once secretly read a worn, ragged volume of *The Federalist* a friend had passed to him, but he didn't understand it.

"Take a look around," Gniessin said. "Look at some of the titles."

Emmett moved to the shelves, expecting to see some of the books he had escaped reading in school. But he was surprised to find these weren't books like any he had seen before. For one thing, they were all shapes and sizes and each was bound differently. In public libraries nearly all the books were the same size, bound with the same brown cloth and marked with a red star on the binding. He didn't see a single red star here.

He looked closer, saw one volume entitled *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* by Rousseau. He wondered what it was about. Nearby was *Meeting of East and West*, by Northrop. He crossed over to a shelf across the room, saw *Magnificent Obsession* by Douglas, *Tom Jones* by Fielding and *The Old Man and the Sea* by Hemingway.

"Well," Gniessin said, "what do you think of them?"

"Biggest collection I ever saw."

"These books represent twenty years of painstaking collecting, Keyes. I've found them hidden away in attics, in cellars, trunks, walls, safes, in the upholstery of furniture—almost anywhere you can imagine." The fat man strode to a shelf and took down a thick volume. "I've even got one of these. Ever seen one before?"

"What is it?" Emmett asked, taking a step toward him.

"A Bible."

"No," Emmett said truthfully, "I've never seen one." He didn't add that he understood old families usually managed to keep a Bible or two cleverly hidden away.

Gniessin returned the book to the shelf. "People don't read much any more."

"Can you blame them with the tripe the libraries are stuffed with?"

"Even if these books were in the public libraries, I think people would rather watch their Tri-D."

"People around Spring Creek don't watch Tri-D. They don't even have sets."

"Spring Creek's pretty far out in the country, Keyes. You have to go to the city to find Tri-D to amount to anything. And despite what you're thinking, the people who have the sets there can really afford them."

"Are any of them non-collaborators?"

Gniessin snorted. "Your world is divided into collaborators and non-collaborators, isn't it? Why don't you divide it into those who respect the laws and those who do not?"

"Why should we obey your laws? We didn't make them!"

Gniessin shook his head resignedly. "You have a fixation on that subject, haven't you? Behold, the aggrieved nationalist!"

"I only know what is fair and what is not."

"I will give you credit, Keyes. You are more voluble than most of your kind. I will even go so far as to say that you show considerable intelligence. But intelligence alone isn't everything. It doesn't tell, for example, what has gone on before."

The director gestured with his arm to include all the books in the library. "Since man first learned to write he has been con-

cerned with such questions as victory and defeat, good and bad, liberty and tyranny, dictatorship and self-government. Millions of words. Millions of ideas. And you talk as if you've just discovered something. Believe me, Keyes, it's old. Older than you. Older than I. It's as old as man himself. And the matter with which man was so concerned for so many centuries was finally settled in 1969. The Communist victory liberated him."

"That's not what most people call it," Emmett said, moving away to look at book titles again. "They talk about the time before you came and their eyes glow."

"Old people are always talking about the good old days. They do in my homeland, too. It doesn't mean a thing, except their joints are aching, their blood is slow, and they remember a day when it wasn't so."

Emmett forced himself to look at book titles. Did Gniessin really think times were better since his kind came? That kind of talk angered him. But he did not want to jeopardize his position by allowing it to show.

"What you need, Keyes, is a historical perspective." Gniessin walked to the end of the room. "Here's Hans Kohn's famous book, *The Twentieth Century, a Midway Account of the Western World.* You ought to read it. It takes you up to nineteen forty. And here's an even better one." He drew out a thick book. "This takes you up to the very end. Dr. Otto Listenheim's *Two Centuries of Crisis: U.S.A., 1769–1969.* It's very comprehensive. Of course you should balance the propaganda in it with a few authoritative Communist volumes."

Emmett took the book. "It looks as if it would be pretty stiff going," he said, mostly because Gniessin seemed to demand some remark at this point.

"You have to pay for everything in life, Keyes," Gniessin said, running a pudgy finger along the binding of a row of books. "Education is no exception."

"I have all the education my kind can get. Eight grades and high school. If I had wanted to take a fealty oath I could have gone on."

"You can go on here. I have no objection to your reading. Here's Milton's *Areopagitica*. He was an aristocratic republican, a humanist by taste and training. In the book he makes a classic defense of freedom of speech."

He walked backward, inspecting titles. "Here's Toynbee's *A Study of History*. You might try that, though it's often dark and brooding. Cellini's *Autobiography*. Enlightening. Want to know something about the eighteenth century? Locke's your man.

"And how about some light reading? Here's Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa*. It's about the sexually blissful maidens of that South Pacific isle. And here's a couple of Frank Harris books. You aren't educated until you've read these."

Gniessin seemed to forget Emmett was there. He moved about the library, pulling out a book here and there and telling Emmett he ought to look into them, exclaiming ecstatically over some, damning others, until he had more than a score of books jutting over the shelf ends.

Then he turned to Emmett and said, "But you won't read them all, I suppose. Maybe you won't read any. However——"

"A turbo is at the south entrance," Jascha announced with such suddenness that Emmett jumped.

"Who is it?" Gniessin asked.

"It's Mr. Sunberg."

"I will leave you here," Gniessin said. "You can lose yourself among the books until lunchtime."

Emmett breathed a sigh of relief when Gniessin was gone, waited five minutes, then moved out of the library.

There would never be a more opportune time for escape.

CHAPTER 10

Emmett encountered no one on his way outside. Doors opened as he pressed their red studs and he passed through. Once outside, he didn't hurry. He wandered over the lawn near the house, his movements slow, his manner casual. He wanted to give the appearance of a man on an inspection tour.

He walked in widening circles, past flower beds, pools and arbors, losing himself now and then among the hedges, bushes and trees. Once he came upon a robot operating a lawn mower. The robot never glanced up at him.

When he had gone several hundred yards, he chanced a look back at the house and saw a bright white building in the sun with a gleaming silvery spire projecting a hundred feet into the air. It had a number of glistening metal arms that Emmett guessed were part of the electronic system. On the roof he could see several fliers and wished he had one of them now so he could fly over the warning system. Just what he would do when he reached it, he didn't know.

He came to the end of the lawn and stopped. Before him lay gravel that dipped into a ditch and then up to a blacktop road. He walked along the lawn edge, examining the ground in each direction, looking for the warning device he knew was there.

He found it a few hundred feet away, a small scanner cube on

the end of a metal shaft about five inches high that protruded from the earth like a warning finger.

He examined it closely for a long time. The scanner was many-sided, a lens in each face. Just beneath it was a grilled area. Probably a microphone and speaker.

What to do about it? How to cross it?

He thought a long time before he worked out a plan of action.

He rose as if he had tired of looking at it, sauntered away as if he were going back to the house. In a few steps he was behind sheltering bushes.

He took off his shirt.

He rushed out from the bushes, threw his shirt over the scanner, then wound it round and round until there were several thicknesses covering the eyes.

Then he ran along the gravel until he found a large, sharp stone that fitted comfortably in his hand.

He ducked back behind the bushes to wait.

"It is useless to try, Keyes."

Emmett whirled at the voice, expecting to see a scanner he had overlooked. Instead, he saw Dr. Smeltzer standing nearby.

Gniessin had sent Smeltzer to spy on him!

In a frenzy of action Emmett rushed the doctor, striking with the rock in a wide arc for his head.

The doctor lurched aside. The rock grazed his head.

"Stop!" Smeltzer cried, grasping the arm with the rock and holding it.

Emmett pounded the doctor's head, face, neck and shoulders with his free hand, jerking furiously to loosen his other hand.

"Don't!" The doctor cringed at the blows, still gripping the arm. "Don't be—a fool!"

A mighty wrench freed the hand. The doctor fell to his knees. He looked up. "Go ahead—you—damned fool!"

Emmett stood with the rock ready to crash it down on the now unprotected head. But something in the doctor's face held him.

There was a whir of an approaching turbo. Both looked in the direction of the sound.

"If you think Gniessin sent me, you *are* a fool," the doctor said. "I was trying to stop you from doing something ridiculous."

Emmett moved away to see the turbocar beyond the bushes, still keeping Smeltzer carefully within range of action.

"If you were planning to hit whoever comes to take your shirt off the scanner, you're wasting your time, Keyes. Gniessin wouldn't come himself, and the robot he'd send has reflexes many times faster than yours or mine. Besides, there's something you don't know."

For Emmett it was a moment of agonizing indecision. He could see the turbo coming to an abrupt stop on the road opposite them, and he wanted so desperately to get out of the villa he felt more prone to action than deliberation.

"There is no escape," the doctor said. "Don't you suppose I would have fled long ago if there were?"

A robot stepped out of the turbo and ran up to the scanner. It unwound the shirt, let it fall to the ground, then turned and went back to the car.

Even then Emmett felt he could hit the robot with the rock. But still he did nothing. Finally, when the robot entered the car and sped away, he let the rock fall.

He turned angrily to the doctor. "I shouldn't have listened to you. I should have knocked the robot out of operation and taken that turbo. You're supposed to be on my side. At least you said you were. Why did you ruin everything just now?"

Smeltzer rose, rubbing a shoulder. "You're wrong about knocking that robot out. I doubt that you could have done that. But even if you had, you'd only end up back at the house. The robotic brain would have driven the car back by itself."

"I'd have jumped out. I would have been free."

"For a few moments. Gniessin would have sent a flier after you. The brain would have controlled that. There would have been no robot inside. It would have landed near you and moved closer and closer, cutting you off no matter which way you wanted to flee. Then Gniessin would have talked to you through one of the speakers in the flier, telling you to step inside or suffer the

consequences. The flier is armed, you know. And you would have stepped inside, I think."

"What makes you think all that would have happened?"

"Because it happened to me nine years ago."

Emmett looked away. It sounded true. It could have been.

"Did you wrap your shirt around the scanner, too?"

"No. I smashed the scanner with a rock." He took Emmett's arm. "Come with me." They walked away, and after they had gone a short distance, the doctor said, "That scanner was too close. We can talk over here." He led the way to a secluded area surrounded by several trees and bushes. There was a bench in the middle of it. "Sit down. You don't have to be afraid of scanners here."

Emmett sighed, conscious of the lump of frustration in his stomach. The near attempt had taken a lot out of him. "I'll have to think of some other way to escape. There must be a way."

"For years I tried to find a way. There isn't any. I don't try any more."

"Why not? Surely you must know everything there is to know about the villa by now. You ought to be able to find a way."

The doctor shook his head. "It's human frailty versus the machine. Imperfect humanity against a perfect robotic brain. A brain that remembers everything. It has a thousand eyes, a thousand sensitive fingers. It operates just as efficiently whether Gniessin is here or not. If it were only just Gniessin, it would be easier. But you're up against a machine."

"Where is this brain?"

"Beneath the house. Buried in concrete. It's powered by a giant reactormotor, the same one that powers everything else in the house." The doctor grinned wryly. "Once I thought I might get to it to shut it off, but no one except Gniessin can get near it. I don't know if even he could shut it off."

"Who put the brain there?"

"Gniessin didn't, if that's what you're thinking. It's standard equipment for district directors. There must be several hundred of them in the country." Dr. Smeltzer sat beside him, drew up a

knee and held it in locked fingers. "Even Gniessin doesn't know all its potentialities. Sometimes I think he's a little afraid of it." He chuckled. "In a way, he has reason to be."

"Why?"

"It's smarter than he is. It does all his thinking and the thinking for all the robots. They get their power from it and they relay all their information to it. It's bombproof and completely automatic, equipped with radar, high-cycle guns, and thousands of other gadgets and weapons of offense and defense."

"And I had to walk into all this," Emmett said glumly. "Just like walking into a web and trying to wriggle free."

"You've been wriggling only one day. Think of me. I've wriggled in vain for years."

"But you don't wriggle any more, is that it?"

"That's right." The doctor leaned back against the hard stone of the bench and stared into the cloudless sky. "Maybe I've been a fool. Maybe not. But if I had to do it all over again, I can't see how I'd do it differently." He turned to Emmett and smiled. "But you don't know what I'm talking about, do you?"

Dr. Smeltzer rose and walked about the enclosure. "To understand it, you've got to know a little about me. I was born in a tempestuous time: nineteen forty-three. Right in the middle of a war. My father was a lieutenant colonel in the medical corps and I was out to emulate him. By nineteen sixty-nine, I, too, was in the medical corps, a new doctor, twenty-six years old, full of ideas and a will to work them out."

"And then the bombs fell," Emmett said.

Smeltzer nodded. "And then the bombs fell. No more army. So I went back to Peoria where my father once had a practice and set up an office. It was a miserable time. Few drugs, hardly any instruments. I could have become a staff member of a commie-run hospital, but I didn't want to have anything to do with those slaughter houses. In the commie book nothing is more expendable than life."

"Yes," Emmett said. "I know."

They sat in silence, the sun warming their shoulders, a gentle

breeze tugging at tree branches and bushes. A bird sang a few notes above them, then flittered away.

"For thirteen years no one worked harder than I, caring for the people who streamed to my office. Some days I had no sleep at all. The pity of it is that I couldn't do more, but with no affiliation with an occupation forces hospital—which is to say all hospitals—I had difficulty getting supplies. But during those thirteen years I never swerved in my decision not to treat all who came to see me. Of course I couldn't treat half the women and I suppose you know the reason why."

Emmett shook his head.

"Because they were the unlawfully pregnant. Each one wanted me to perform an abortion. But I still clung to the old professional ethics. 'I'm sorry,' I'd say. 'I can't do it. No doctor should.' And then they'd wail about what would happen to them, these women who either weren't married or had no birth permit. There was a preponderance of the latter. Everybody couldn't afford birth control pills, you know."

"Why shouldn't they wail about it?" Emmett said. "A lot of them in Spring Creek were sent to desert camps because of that."

"I realize that. The occupation forces are more strict about the birth rate than anything else. But a doctor can't take a life, least of all that of an unborn child."

"The commies don't care whose life it is, once you step out of line, Doctor. If you took one life, you'd be saving another, at least in this case."

"No, there was another way, though I hadn't intended mentioning it."

"What was that?"

The doctor turned and looked at him for a long time. "I sent them to a rest home I knew about. Let it go at that. There they could have their children without risk. But the Enemy caught up with it eventually."

"And then did you have to perform abortions?"

"Not until after LaVonne came." He stared up in the sky, his eyes glowing with warm reminiscence. "She was a beautiful girl.

But she was also pregnant. I asked her if she was married. She said she was, and then she broke down and the story came out. Her husband had been sentenced to a slave-labor camp, had run away and she had lived with him in the woods for weeks before he died from not having his booster. The pregnancy dated from then.

"It was a terrible thing for her to have to go through and there was something about her that touched me. She didn't care much about living, but she thought if she had an abortion she might live out her life wrecking the occupation as much as she could. She made me suddenly furious with the occupation . . . and I found myself in love with her—something I thought would never happen, for I had lived thirty-nine years in love with one thing: Medicine. Now there were two."

"What did you do?"

Smeltzer sighed. "I bought a permit to marry and a few days later I bought a birth permit. We named the boy Tom and he's still in high school in Peoria, thank God."

"And your wife?" Emmett asked gently.

"She's living there, too. I saw her a year ago. She thinks I'm a doctor at a labor camp. I could never tell her about Gniessin and this villa, of course."

"But how did you ever end up here?"

"I didn't walk in, I can assure you of that." The doctor strolled about the area in front of the bench, occasionally glancing at Emmett as he talked. "LaVonne and I often talked about the large number of unlawful pregnancies and the fact that there was no longer a—a rest home to send them to. Nature has a way of propagating the race despite all the things we try to do to stop her, including those five dollar pills and the high cost of birth permits. We estimated one out of every fifty girls go to camps because of the so-called illegal conception. So we decided to do something about it. And I changed my mind about abortions. I don't know how many I performed before I was caught. And a little of me died, I think, each time I did it. But I saved a lot of lives, I guess."

"And you were finally arrested?"

"I lasted only two months. How the commies ever found out about it, I'll never know. But the case came to Gniessin's attention as director. And the next thing I knew I was here, and it was either become Gniessin's personal physician or the camp for myself and LaVonne and a commie upbringing for Tom."

"So you chose to come here."

"Yes." Smeltzer rose and stretched. Then he turned, put a foot on the bench, saying, "We're not supposed to be here, you know—you or I or Bradshaw. An Enemy doctor comes once a month to give Gniessin his booster and check him over, and when he does we all have to stay out of sight, for Gniessin's supposed to get along only with robot help. He's told me most directors have human help and the doctors wink at it. It would be a damned lonely life with only robots to talk to."

"But if there are Enemy doctors, why does he need you?"

"He's overweight, he's got high blood pressure, and he doesn't take care of himself. You see how he eats and drinks. Even has his own cook. And all that pastry! It's disgraceful. So the day before the Enemy doctor comes, I fill him full of drugs, give him a colonic irrigation, a massage, steam bath and insist he go easy on the food and drink—at least until after the doctor has gone. He's never failed a physical yet. God help us all if he ever does!"

"You mean he'd be out then?"

"They'd send him back home. And who knows what would happen to us—before or after!"

"So Gniessin has his troubles, too."

"And he doesn't seem to care. He's happiest when he's overindulging, and when he has those parties of his."

"Parties?"

Smeltzer nodded. "Every Saturday night. That's when Bradshaw shines. You'll get used to them. Might even find them interesting at your age. I never go, but I've performed abortions as a result of the parties, if that will give you an idea of what they're like."

CHAPTER 11

Saturday was going to be different. Emmett could see that right away.

It began at breakfast with a notable absence of innuendo. Emmett, for once, was able to eat his meal in peace, while Smeltzer was silent, Gniessin studied, Bradshaw alert, and Jascha unusually watchful.

"What's the latest count, Jascha?" Gniessin asked suddenly.

"One hundred and twenty-two, sir."

"That's about ten more than last time, isn't it?"

"Eight more, sir."

Gniessin cocked an eye at Bradshaw. "You hear that, Bradshaw?"

"It won't make any difference, Mr. Gniessin. I ordered plenty. And I got the electrocookers all set up and on the job already with most of it."

Gniessin nodded absently, saying, "Let's go over that menu again, Bradshaw. You sure there's enough variety?"

"The way I got it figured, we start 'em out at a table in the fountain room," Bradshaw said. "We fill it with caviar rissolettes, almond parmesan fingers, ham and fig rolls, lobster canapés—and I'm having some butter variations for the canapé bases."

"Any avocado?"

"I ain't plannin' any."

"Better get some. They go well, I think. And that ought to round it out. But remember not to have too much. Jascha?"

"Sir?"

"How about the bartenders?"

"Arrangements have been made for three from Springfield, sir."

"Good. When we had nothing but robot bartenders nobody seemed to care, but once we had a real bartender and he was swamped with orders. Why do people think robots can't mix drinks as well as human beings? You always mix mine, Jascha, and I've never had reason to complain. What about the meal itself, Bradshaw?"

"They'll get started with vichyssoise, jellied tomato bouillon, four juices——"

"That will give them plenty of choice."

"—and then roast turkey, Alaskan venison roast, fried chicken, lobster farci, frogs' legs poulette——"

"Don't forget the rosemary on the venison."

"I ain't ever goin' to forget that again, Mr. Gniessin. No, sir. Not after forgetting it last time."

"Well," Gniessin said, frowning thoughtfully, "that ought to do it, don't you think? Plenty of salads, I suppose."

"Seven salads."

"Desserts?"

"Four pies, five cakes and sauces——"

"Any cherry mousse?"

"We had that last time, Mr. Gniessin."

"Let's have it again. I like it."

Emmett was waiting for him when he came out of the steam room, the massage table ready, the mineral oil on a table nearby, the towels handy. When the door opened and Gniessin walked through the rolling steam like some demon materializing from within a puff of smoke, Emmett said, "Dr. Smeltzer said he didn't feel well, so he won't be down."

Gniessin snorted as he drew a large towel around his enormous waist. "I see it's Saturday again. Smeltzer's always indisposed on Saturdays because he doesn't approve of these parties of mine . . . only he's never missed a massage session before. Check on that, will you, Jascha?"

Jascha, who had been standing silently at the side of the door to the steam room, moved forward, saying, "He's in his room, sir. At the moment he is lying on his bed. There is sweat on his forehead."

Emmett handed the fat man his drink. He wondered why Gniessin took the steam baths at all if he insisted on immediately replacing all the liquids he had lost.

"Sweat, eh?" Gniessin handed the empty glass to Emmett. "Jascha, send Igor to the safe and get the doctor the usual dose, will you? I had forgotten and the doctor is too proud to ask. Of course he would have in an hour to two." He turned to Emmett. "Do you think you can manage without him, Keyes?"

"Maybe."

Gniessin crawled on the massage table with some difficulty, sprawling out on top of it like a giant bug ready to be pinned. He sighed. "You don't have to do too much, Keyes."

Emmett oiled him and started to knead the man's shoulder muscles the way Dr. Smeltzer had taught him, finding them soft and yielding. How could a man ever let himself get into such a condition? It revolted him to massage the flaccid flesh.

"The back of your hand," Gniessin said. "The striking. That's the best."

Emmett changed to the percussion stroke, rapping the loose muscles sharply with the edge of his hands, up and down the back, the buttocks, the legs.

"Harder. Harder, Keyes!"

Emmett obliged. Gniessin grunted and winced, his breath short and rasping. But he did not tell him to stop. Emmett pounded even more furiously. It amazed him how much the fat man could take.

When Emmett's own muscles tired, he changed to the friction

movement, rubbing the legs briskly. But Gniessin would have none of this. He rolled over, sat up, and waved him to stop. "Enough. I'll shower now. Lots of things to do."

He slid off the table into clog shoes Jascha had ready for him. "Jascha here tried to give me a massage once, Keyes. He only needed to be told once how to do it, but he couldn't control the power of his pounding. Nearly broke my legs. Had black and blue marks for weeks." He laughed. "And Jascha's supposed to go with me everywhere, but you notice he doesn't go into the steam bath. He tried to do that once, but he almost didn't make it to the door to get out. When they built Jascha they didn't compensate for such extremes in temperature and such humidity. In that one respect my body is better than his. But don't let that give you any ideas, Keyes," he said, giving him a sidelong glance, "because Jascha stations himself at the door. And there is only one door."

"Dr. Smeltzer has the vial now, sir," Jascha announced.

"Good," Gniessin grumbled. "I hope he'll be feeling better soon." He paused as he started for the shower, turning to Emmett. "It's not that you don't do a good job, Keyes. It's that I have more important things to do on Saturday. As a matter of fact, you're better than Smeltzer."

"Thank you," Emmett said stiffly.

There was no sense in ruffling the man. Let him think Emmett Keyes had given up all thought of escape, that he was beginning to adapt himself to the villa environment. Then some day when Gniessin would awaken, the robot would tell him that Emmett Keyes was no longer in the villa.

The doctor may have given up trying to get out of here, he told himself, but I never will. There is a way out; it is just a matter of finding it. No single thing could be so perfect there isn't a flaw somewhere.

Even if it takes years? he asked himself. Even if it takes years. And then he thought of Ivy and her black, flowing hair and he realized he had been thinking a lot of her lately. Years, indeed. It wouldn't take years. It *must* not take years. It had to be soon. Because of what he had to do. And because of Ivy.

Rounding a hallway corner after the massage, Emmett came upon Bradshaw and Smeltzer talking animatedly. As he approached them, the two stopped to glance at him.

Emmett had left Smeltzer pale and shaking as if with a chill. And here he was as ruddy as ever, the very picture of health! "That stuff Gniessin sent down to you certainly did the work," Emmett said. "What the devil was wrong with you?"

"I feel much better now, thanks," the doctor said.

Bradshaw leered. "I'll say he's better, Keyes. He was afraid Gniessin was goin' to forget again, weren't you, Doc?"

Smeltzer's face darkened perceptibly. "You keep that mouth of yours shut, Bradshaw, or——"

"Or what?" Bradshaw laughed. "Pretty brave guy now, ain't you? But half an hour ago——"

"You shut up, Bradshaw," Smeltzer snapped.

"Ever see a dope addict, Keyes? Take a look at the Doc here. He ain't worth a damn without the stuff."

Smeltzer's hands whipped from his sides and reached for the cook's throat. Bradshaw moved, but not quickly enough. When the hands found their mark, the bulging eyes protruded even farther as the doctor's grip tightened, the thumbs exerting tremendous pressure on Bradshaw's Adam's apple.

Bradshaw twisted, his clawing hands searching Smeltzer's head and face for a vital spot. The pair fell heavily to the floor and rolled over. Then Bradshaw's fingers found the doctor's eyes. Smeltzer grunted, let go of the neck and grabbed Bradshaw's wrists, tried to pull the hands away from his eyes.

"All right, Bradshaw," Emmett said, "let go."

"You—keep your—goddam nose—out of this," Bradshaw hissed through his teeth. The doctor winced and cried out.

It was an unequal match now. Emmett's fist caught Bradshaw on the cheek. He fell sideways to the floor. The doctor scrambled away, his hands still shielding his eyes.

The cook, stunned, looked at Emmett vacuously. Then, with a cry of rage, he leaped from the floor toward him, arms flailing. Emmett stepped back a little, aimed for the nose and connected

with a satisfying *spat*. The man was sent back to the floor on his rump.

Bradshaw did not get up. He looked darkly at Emmett, tried to stem the flow of blood from his nose with his sleeve.

"You son of a bitch," he cried. "You just wait. Just wait. I'll fix your wagon."

He got up from the floor, still holding his sleeve over his nose, and moved down the hall.

"Thanks," Smeltzer said, getting up. "I shouldn't have lost my temper like that. I'm no match for him; I'm not match for anybody. You heard what he said."

"Yes. I heard."

"Well, now you know." He sighed, ran hands over his gray hair, avoided Emmett's eyes. He looked up at the scanner in the ceiling. "I hope Gniessin enjoyed it. He always tries to get Bradshaw and me to go at it. Gives him kicks, he says."

"He was in the shower, I think. I left him there."

"I was just coming down to see how you were getting along. I couldn't go without the—stuff. Sometimes I think I'll go crazy when Gniessin holds out on me like that."

"How long have you been on dope?"

Smeltzer smiled ruefully. "I didn't play fair with you before. How do you suppose I could perform all those operations, all those abortions? I had to have something so I could live with myself. I thought I could give it up whenever I wanted to. But I can't. At first Gniessin let me administer the shots to myself whenever I wanted to, but lately he's been doling them out, trying to keep me in line, he says. That's why I don't try to escape any more. I couldn't get any on the outside. And that's also why I can't help you. Do you understand now?"

"Yes," Emmett said, feeling helpless before the man's addiction. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry for me. I have only myself to blame."

By six o'clock Saturday more than ten sleek, new turbos were lined up in the parking area and the roof was full of expensive-looking fliers. Emmett had imagined that only Gniessin and the

villa had more than enough of everything, but now he saw there were areas of plenty elsewhere.

He stood at a second floor window watching the turbos roll up to the house and discharge passengers. He was surprised to find all the men dressed in black suits, shiny, black shoes, black bow ties and white shirts. What kind of nonsense was this?

Then he saw the women. What women! He forgot the men as soon as he saw the first one. Each was more beautiful than the last, all young and dressed in colorful, low-cut gowns, wearing silver and gold high-heeled shoes, and each wearing a flower above the left breast.

"Pretty, aren't they?"

The voice startled him. He looked around, found Dr. Smeltzer at his side, also looking down at the newest group heading for the house.

"They're beautiful. Who are they?"

"This is a formal occasion," Smeltzer said. "The men have come to do obeisance to the king."

"Gniessin?"

"That's right. Most of them are county directors, loyal party workers and their—guests."

"The women?"

"A few are wives. But they and their husbands know enough to leave early. The rest are—girls, that's all. Haven't you ever seen girls before?"

"Sure." Emmett reddened. "But I never saw any like these!"

Smeltzer looked at him curiously. "I suppose this is a strange thing for you. As I recall, there aren't very many formal dances or parties in the hinterland any more." He gestured to the people below. "These girls are lucky—at least they think they're lucky. They managed to make it to one of Gniessin's parties. They get a lot of special favors for that. Personal favors and privileges for their families. The sky's the limit. It's a variation of the oldest profession. . . ."

They watched another car drive up, and Smeltzer said, "See those men? See how they smile? In a moment they'll be inside

and there'll be handshaking and backslapping. Just like the old Rotary Club meetings. Each one will make it a point to greet Gniessin effusively and tell him how well he looks. And when they leave they'll tell him what a wonderful time they've had. But if they could get away with it, Keyes, any of them would be glad of a chance to knife Gniessin in the back."

"You mean they hate him?"

"He's an Enemy, isn't he? A member of the occupation forces. They hate him first of all for that, even though they might pretend not to. And then he's the top dog and they hate him for that. And then they hate each other, too. But you'd have to see them in action downstairs to believe it."

"If they hate him, why do they come?"

"It's part of the old game for power, the mad scramble for authority. Sometimes new positions are created here on Saturday nights, and old ones eliminated. And often the men along with them. A dog-eat-dog existence, really. Gniessin is king, don't you see, Keyes? And the king can do no wrong, even if this whole affair is immoral. I don't know if parties like this are held anywhere else, but I do know Gniessin, and this is his idea of a good time. Most of the people here despise him and his parties. And still they come. Why? Because they're afraid not to."

Emmett looked out to where the lawn ended in the distance. Another car was coming up the winding road to the house. An idea was beginning to take form in his mind.

"Can any of these people leave when they want to?"

"I suppose."

"How do they get by the barrier?"

"Well, when they come in, there's a robot at the entrance that hands them a bracelet. The brain keeps track of them all easily. Jascha tells Gniessin who's coming and going. And when Gniessin gets so loaded he doesn't care any more, Jascha doesn't tell him. He just goes ahead, and he and the brain take over for him."

"What would happen," Emmett said, turning from the win-

dow, "If you cut out the bracelet I have and I substituted it for one of theirs?"

"Let me ask you instead what would happen to me if I did?"

"Yeah. I see what you mean. But if I did it myself?"

"You'd have to put on one of those monkey suits to get out the door—if you could pass the robot at the door *and* the robot at the end of the road *and* if the brain wasn't watching you at the time you made the switch, which it would be, *and* if it's not listening to you right now, which it probably is."

Emmett turned back to idly view the occupants of the newest turbo arrival. Then he glanced at a flier that was making a long arc through the sky toward the roof. Maybe it did present unusual difficulties, the exchange of identity bracelets, but it was worth remembering. . . .

CHAPTER 12

The fountain room buzzed with talk and rippled with laughter. Beautiful women stood everywhere, nodding and chatting, smiling, exposing white teeth, long, tanned arms and backs and perfect shoulders. The men were not handsome, but they were clean-shaven and immaculate in their black suits. Some of the guests helped themselves to drinks being circulated on large trays by robots; others preferred to order their own from the bar.

Emmett had never seen such elegance, such a wonderful display of feminine loveliness, such social grace. Neither had he ever breathed such exotic perfumes. He wandered among the assemblage like a man in a daze, absorbing the sights and sounds and smells.

Once he passed a stately blonde sitting alone on a lounge chair beside a piece of black statuary, and, as he did so, she looked up at him in a friendly and inviting way. He found himself blushing and hurried past.

Then he saw Gniessin, bright-eyed and flushed, the center of a large group of men and women at the fountain's edge, talking and gesturing and laughing now and then. And every time he laughed, those around him laughed with him, some more heartily than he.

And once he saw Bradshaw. The stocky cook was bent over a comely girl on a lounge, a drink in his hands, engaged in lively discussion. The girl did not seem to care that his hand brushed her hair once in a while.

Emmett saw others talking together, some in small groups, some in pairs, and the sound of it all filled the room.

He was approached by a robot waiter, took the offered drink. It was sweet-tasting and burned a little, but once it was down it seemed to clear his head and made the people less exalted, much more real and friendly.

He looked around, saw the blonde again. She was still alone, and she caught his eye. Then she crossed her legs daintily, her long, pink formal hanging in folds nearly to the floor, only the gold slipper showing beneath it. She rocked the foot fetchingly and smiled.

This time Emmett did not blush as he neared her.

"Are you alone?" he asked. Her hair, he decided, wasn't really blonde. It was golden and it shimmered in the light. Her face was heart-shaped, she had a tiny nose and petulant lips.

"Not really," she said in a throaty voice. "But I am for the moment. Won't you sit down?" She patted the seat beside her.

He sat down, saying, "Why were you smiling at me like that?"

"Because you are the best-looking man here."

In spite of himself, Emmett felt the beginnings of a new blush. "What about the man you're with? Isn't he good-looking?"

"Mr. Henderson?" She laughed. "No. Not unless you think glasses and a bald head are what make a man handsome."

"Where is Mr. Henderson?"

"He's gone after a drink for me. He's probably hung up somewhere. Or he's getting an extra for himself. He has quite a capacity."

"Who is he?"

"Mr. Henderson?" She raised her eyebrows. "Oh, he's the county director for Logan. But who are you? I haven't seen you before."

"Do you come to these parties often?"

"I haven't missed the last dozen or so. But let's talk about you." She laid a cool hand over his, and smiled.

"I stay here at the villa."

"At the villa?" She sounded as if it were incredible.

"What's wrong with that?"

"Oh, nothing. Only . . ." For a moment her warmth had dissolved, but it came back stronger than ever. "Really," she said, patting his hand, "there's nothing wrong with that. It's surprising, that's all. That little man with the popeyes is the only one I've heard of who stays here, outside of Mr. Gniessin. He's the cook, they tell me. What do you do?"

"I really don't have any special job yet." How could he tell her he was Gniessin's masseur? "What's your name?"

"Shirley Lynn."

"Pretty name for a pretty girl."

"Well, you can be gallant!"

"Where are you from, Shirley?"

Just then a short man with a red face, a bald-headed man with glasses, stopped before them. He glared at Emmett as he handed a glass to Shirley.

"Mr. Henderson," Shirley said. "This is Mr. Keyes. He's been entertaining me while you were gone."

Emmett rose, offered a hand. It was shaken loosely. The man grunted an answer and turned to talk to the girl.

Emmett drifted away. After all, there were many girls.

The sound of a gong reverberated through the room. It was followed by a momentary lull in conversation. Then everyone in the fountain room started talking at once more excitedly than ever, hurriedly finishing their drinks and canapés, and heading toward double doors that had slid open. There was much giggling and laughing and pushing and shoving during this movement, and once a dark-haired girl grabbed his arm and said, "Come on, Handsome. Cheer up. This is a *party!*" There were chuckles in the immediate area. And then her male companion pulled her away.

Emmett was jostled toward the doorway, people talking and

yelling to each other inches from his ear, some blowing their breath in his face. His pulse quickened with the feel of the crowd, the shouting, the excitement, expectancy, the release of restraint, and the warmth that the three drinks had given him. It *was* an occasion. He smiled.

Dinner was served in the third-floor banquet room. It was an uproarious dinner at first—until the initial course had been consumed. There was much laughter, some isolated shrieks and resulting roars. Then things quieted down as people started to eat in earnest.

Emmett ordered roast turkey and all the trimmings. He found it easily the most wonderful meal he had ever eaten. Looking around, he found a young girl opposite him avidly consuming her fried chicken as if she were afraid she'd never get another meal. And he wondered how she fared between Saturdays. And even as he wondered, he paused to watch others. This meal was something special for nearly all of the girls. You could tell that from the way they tied into it. The men were a little slower and seemed to savor it less. He guessed food was no problem for them the other six days of the week. He looked for but could not find the blonde.

After the meal there was a period of sober talk while the robots cleared the tables. The beetling-browed, mustached man to his right, who had eaten noisily during all courses, introduced himself importantly. "I'm Taylor," he said, offering his hand, "director for McLean County," and, without waiting for Emmett to identify himself, went into a long harangue about the obdurate peasantry and how, even after all these years, they were still unable to see the simple beauty and wisdom of communal life.

"It is a pity, isn't it?" Emmett said. "Maybe we shouldn't have given up. Maybe we should have let the Enemy bomb us to death. Then there wouldn't be any complaining, would there?"

"Well, now," the man said, opening and closing his mouth like a fish gasping for water, "that would be going pretty far, wouldn't it? And they would never have done a thing like that. They're too humane. Yes, sir, much too humane. We were the warmongers. Why," and he leaned forward as if to impart a secret, "did

you know they invented the atomic bomb back in the early nineteen thirties? Yes, sir, it's the truth. They developed atomic energy for peaceful purposes, didn't want to give it to the world, knowing what would happen to the peaceful purposes. They were forced to reveal it when the Western powers stumbled onto the discovery in the forties. If they hadn't stepped in to save the world when they did, why we'd all be dead now."

"Frankly," Emmett said, getting up, "don't you think we'd all be better off dead?" He left the man sputtering an answer he didn't wait to hear.

An hour later the bars were opened in the banquet hall, music rolled out of the speakers all over the building and couples danced. The lights were turned low, and some couples took to darkened corners to exchange talk of private nature.

Emmett walked the halls and the banquet room, studying faces, most of them flushed now, and all the faces of people enjoying themselves. He saw the blonde once when he went to a bar to get another drink. She was there with her escort and managed to smile at him. He didn't get a chance to talk to her.

He watched the dancing for a while, wished he knew how. He saw Gniessin on the floor, a slip of a girl in his arms, and he saw Bradshaw, too, executing some complicated step that the girl he was swinging around didn't seem to enjoy.

Much later the music stopped and the number of couples in the banquet room and in the corridors dwindled. He had had his fill of drink, of food, of music, conversation and the sight of women and men.

He went to his room, feeling relief when the door slid shut on everything in the rest of the house. He wasn't sleepy, went to the window, could see nothing outside. How the other half lived. That's what this was. The era of plenty for these people, for these collaborators, leaders and workers, and their girl friends. And for the rest of the people in the area, it was an era of pain and misfortune and hard work and trying not to think of how bad things were, how good they used to be. Who was worse, the man who adapted and co-operated and won for himself some of the

gravy, or the man who stubbornly refused to embrace any of it but who refused to rise up against it?

Rise up against it. He snorted. How could anyone rise up against it? He, Emmett Keyes, was the only man he knew who could because he was the only man he knew who was not touched by the shadow of the booster. And he had risen to fight it. And now he was as helpless as if he, too, could not live without a booster. A one-man revolution gone wrong, hamstrung and tied, a servant of the master.

He undressed for bed, his mind still dwelling on the plenty for some, the little for the rest, and his own inability to do anything about it.

The door slid open and Shirley came through. She leaned against the closing door, her eyes bright.

"Are you alone?"

"Yes, I'm alone. Don't you believe in knocking?" Emmett reached for his lounging robe.

She suddenly saw him the way he was and uttered a little laugh. "Well!" she said, putting her hands on her hips. "I didn't expect this!"

"What did you expect? Henderson?"

"Him?" She laughed, came in, threw her beaded handbag on his dresser and arranged her hair in the mirror. "He's out like a light. I left him in his room. Aren't you glad to see me?" She looked at him in the mirror.

"Should I be? What do you want?"

She turned. "Should I want something?"

"Else why should you come here?"

She smiled and came over to him. "Isn't it enough just to come and finish our conversation? It was interrupted, you know."

"Was it?"

"You were asking me where I was from. Don't you remember?"

"Vaguely. Where *did* you come from?"

"Atlanta. A little town in Logan County. Just off Route sixty-six." She sat on the bed next to him. "Don't you like me?"

"Sure I like you."

"You don't act like it."

"What am I supposed to do, turn handsprings?"

She frowned. "You are an odd one. I help get Henderson fried so I can come here and . . . I had a terrible time trying to find your room until I thought of asking one of the robots."

She ran a forefinger up his arm to his shoulder, following it with her eyes until it reached his chin. Then she looked at him. Her blue eyes were wide, her lips not quite closed. Emmett saw the fine curve of shoulder, the smooth expanse of flesh over her breasts. . . . She moved toward him.

He kissed her. Her lips were cool.

"Look," he said, pushing her away, "supposing this guy Henderson wakes up and starts looking for you. Should you be here?"

She looked at him with puzzled eyes. "Why not? I'd rather be here than with him, don't you understand that? And if he wakes up and I'm not there, why that's his fault for falling asleep."

He got up from the bed, went to the window. "I still don't understand it. How did you ever get mixed up in a thing like this?"

"Are you serious?"

He could see her reflection in the window. She was still on the bed, looking at him intently. "Yes, I'm serious."

"Well. . . . It was a year before I got a chance to come. And then I wasn't sure I'd make it. There's lots of competition, you know."

He turned to her. "Is this the goal of every young girl in Gniessin's district? And if it is, why should it be?"

"Of course it isn't the goal of all the girls. Some of them know they'd never make it. But increased rations, not just for you but for your whole family and anybody you choose, providing you don't overdo it, isn't that a worthwhile goal? Don't you know how it is to live on the outside?"

"Of course I know."

"It isn't as if you were signing your life away. You only have to come to twenty-five parties and then you're through. You don't

have to pay any taxes any more or buy any permits even if you get married and have a family."

"You mean somebody would marry you after this?"

"What do you mean!" She stood up. "Just what do you mean 'after this'?" Her eyes blazed.

"But what man . . . ?" He stared at her.

"I don't know what you're talking about, but you'd be lucky to marry an ex-party girl, Mr. Emmett Keyes. No taxes for either of you, no permits to buy, just as I said. You think we never get married? Why, they choose only the prettiest girls!"

"Who chooses only the prettiest girls?"

"The county directors. They get up their party, an equal number of men and girls. Sometimes a girl even marries a director. That's happened."

"And I suppose you consider that lucky?"

"I certainly do."

"How long has this been going on?"

"Why—ever since I remember." She looked around the room. "You really live here and you don't know that?"

"I live here," he said slowly, "but I'm just beginning to learn a few things. What happens if you get pregnant?"

"That's why they have a doctor here."

"Have you——"

"No I haven't, if it's any of your business." She glared at him, her nostrils flared. "I don't know what I ever saw in you. I thought you were nice when I saw you down there in the fountain room. I couldn't understand why you should be alone. But now I see why. No girl would have you." She turned her back and with her high heels digging hard into the rug, she flounced to the door.

She halted in front of it, turned to him. "Aren't you going to stop me?"

"Why should I?"

She came back in the room. "I forgot my purse." She picked it up, looked at it, then at Emmett. Her eyes softened. "Look," she said, "I don't want to go back to that Henderson."

"He is pretty much of a mess. I'll grant you that."

She pouted. "Aren't you going to ask me to stay?"

She was ravishing, a woman he had never seen the likes of before. Something out of a picture book. And viewing her this way, seeing the entreaty in her eyes, and feeling a simple physical stirring within himself for her, he said, "You can stay if you want to."

The bag plopped back on the dresser.

CHAPTER 13

The door slid open at his touch. Emmett entered Dr. Smeltzer's room. He was surprised to find the doctor lying in bed with his clothes on. As Emmett approached him, the man rose on an elbow.

"Keyes," he said hoarsely, "for God's sake get Gniessin to give me my ration. I've been calling him over the scanner, but he only laughs. He tells me I've got to take part in the next party or he won't give me any more."

The man wet his lips, his eyes round and staring, his face pale and dewed with sweat. "Please, Keyes! I'll do anything in the world for you if you'll only convince Gniessin . . . !"

"Well, why don't you tell him you'll go to the next party then?" Emmett suggested, coming over to the bed.

"I did! I did!" the doctor wailed. "I told him I'd go. I told him I'd swear I'd go."

"And still he refuses?"

"He just laughs, Keyes. Laughs at me." The man was nearly to the point of tears. "Tell him. *Tell him!*" He cried the last words. "He tells me he wants to be sure. Tell him I'm sure, won't you please, Keyes?"

"Isn't this the day the Enemy doctor comes?"

"Yes, yes, this is the day. Will you do it?"

"Well, then Gniessin will need his shots, won't he?"

"He got those last night. Please, Keyes——"

"I was just on my way for the massage."

"Please hurry!"

"What time is the doctor coming?"

"Tonight. *Don't stand there, damn you!* Oh!" The doctor put out a trembling hand. "I didn't mean that. Honest, I didn't, Keyes."

"Well, if we're supposed to get out of sight, he won't leave you in this condition."

"No, he won't. I know he won't. But I can't stand another minute of this. I've got to have it—goddamit, can't you understand? *Can't you?*" The doctor covered his face with his hands, fell to one side and buried his head in the covers, crying.

"I'll do what I can," Emmett said, leaving the room. He was filled with sudden loathing for the doctor, tried to overcome it by telling himself it wasn't the doctor's fault. Gniessin should never let him get in that condition. There was this streak in Gniessin, this inhumanity to others. It was too bad for Smeltzer.

He had gone to see the doctor to learn something about the visit of the Enemy physician, thinking perhaps Smeltzer would accompany him to the massage session to administer the necessary drugs; but the doctor had done it Sunday night. He shrugged as he walked along. Perhaps Gniessin had to assimilate the ingredients overnight. That was their business. But he wondered where he was supposed to go when the other doctor arrived. Well, Gniessin would know.

He pushed open the massage-and-steam-room door, found Jascha stationed at the small door to the steam chamber.

"How long has Gniessin been in there, Jascha?" he asked, preparing the massage table.

"Twenty minutes, sir."

"He should be coming out soon."

Jascha said nothing, watched Emmett uncork the mineral oil, arrange a sheet on the table. When he finished, Emmett walked

to the door to look through the lucite window. Jascha moved menacingly in front of him.

"Think I'm trying to get at him, Jascha?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I'm not. Couldn't see anyway because of the steam."

Emmett went back to the table to wait. He sat on it, swinging his legs and looking at Jascha.

"What time will the Enemy doctor arrive, Jascha?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Does he usually arrive at night?"

"Yes, sir."

"What's his name?"

"I can't tell you that, Mr. Keyes."

"How long does he stay?"

"There is no predetermined time."

Emmett looked beyond Jascha's head trying to see some activity in the steam room. Gniessin ought to have been out by now.

Jascha's head jerked slightly.

Emmett had heard it, too.

Gniessin was doing or saying something in the steam room.

"Help!"

The word was plain. They both heard it now.

Jascha's eyes glowed.

"Open the door," Emmett said. "Something's wrong with Gniessin!"

"Help!" It was fainter.

"Open the door!" Emmett jumped from the table and rushed to the door. Jascha flung him back with his arm. Emmett staggered back against the table.

"You stay there," Jascha said. Then he whirled, whipped open the door. He staggered back as the steam billowed out.

"I'm sick!" The voice was weak. "Help—me!"

"He needs help, Jascha," Emmett cried. "You can't go in. Let me go in! We've got to get him out of there!"

"You stay!" Jascha said.

"Jascha!" It was nearly a scream.

Jascha plunged into the steam room.

Emmett was behind him.

Together they made their way to the far end. Gniessin was sprawled out on the top step, his eyes glassy, his head lolling. He tried to focus his eyes. The mist swirled around his head.

"It's you, Keyes—and Jascha—I need—I—" His eyes suddenly opened wide in surprise, his hands slipped off the step and his head hit it with a dull thud. The eyes were still open, he was sucking his breath and suddenly there was an awful gurgling sound above the hiss of steam.

Jascha was at his side, his powerful arms about him. He lifted him from the step, walked one pace, and stopped.

The robot swayed.

Gniessin slid out of his arms, fell in a heap on the floor.

Suddenly the robot moved sidewise—fast—hit the wall a resounding *thud* and clattered to the floor of the steam room.

Emmett stood transfixed, looking first at Gniessin, then at the immobile robot.

Then he gradually became aware of the hiss of steam and of sweat running into his eyes, down his throat, and he could taste the saltiness of it when he wet his lips. His shirt and trousers clung to him.

And then he knew Gniessin was dead.

And the thought crashed through to free him.

His mind raced. What to do? Get Smeltzer? Bradshaw? Try to revive the robot? Maybe Gniessin. It could be he wasn't really dead.

No, no! Don't revive anybody! Now just wait a minute. Calm down and get hold of yourself, damn it! Don't do anything rash!

He stood quietly, trying to control his jackhammer heart. He wiped the sweat out of his eyes.

Gniessin and Jascha. Both gone!

No, he wouldn't revive anyone, he thought calmly. He wouldn't even let anyone know.

There was only one thing to do.

If it could be done.

He turned and walked slowly to the door. It was open. He stepped through. It felt cold in the massage room. He looked up at the scanner. Are you watching me? he asked himself. Well, let me do this then. I know you know something's happened to Jascha. But maybe you don't know Gniessin's dead. Maybe you're not doing anything about it because you're waiting for orders from Gniessin. Well, just sit tight, brain, and let me proceed. Just let me do this one thing.

He walked to the massage table, nonchalantly picked up the mineral oil bottle and the sheet. He carefully folded the sheet. Then he walked back into the steam room.

Once inside, he did something he had forgotten to do before. He looked at the ceiling. He saw with relief there was no scanner there. There was a chance, then. He glanced back at the door. The steam was so thick he could hardly see it.

He bent down, rolled Gniessin over. Then he went to the lowest step, broke the mineral oil bottle.

Back to Gniessin again. He started to cut the man's left wrist. There was a coded identity bracelet there and Emmett Keyes meant to have it.

He cut quickly, almost savagely. There was little blood. He isolated the bracelet, was surprised to find it very much like his own. With trembling fingers he undid the catch, slipped it off.

Emmett put it to one side, gritted his teeth and, with the sharp edge of the piece of mineral oil bottle glass started to cut around his own left wrist. Blood spurted. He moaned with pain and felt faint, but he kept determinedly on.

He had it now. It was loose. But how to loosen the snap? He sought the answer with fumbling fingers, working feverishly and frantically. Oh, God, let my fingers unsnap this thing. . . . There!

It was off.

He snatched Gniessin's bracelet, snapped it in place on his own wrist. There was a pool of blood beneath where he had been working. He put his own bracelet on Gniessin's wrist, took up the sheet and ripped a long ribbon from it. He applied the tour-

niquet to his left arm at the elbow. Next he bandaged his wrist tightly.

He breathed a sigh of relief, stumbled from the room, leaned against the massage table, gasping for breath. He was weak and dizzy.

He had one more job to do.

He looked around, saw a weight scale in a corner. He had seen Gniessin use the device, went over to look at it. It was bulky. He tried to pick it up, found it heavy, but thought he could manage it. He carried it into the steam room.

When he dropped it on Jascha's head, there was a dull crunch. There were cracks in Jascha's skull now.

He left the steam room, closed the door behind him.

Now came the big test. He clenched his fists, leaned against the massage table.

"Tell Igor I want him," he said in a loud voice.

There was no answer.

He waited, counting the seconds until sixty of them had passed. Then he said irritably, "I told you to send Igor to me. He should be here by now."

"He is coming, Mr. Gniessin," the speaker said.

Mr. Gniessin! His heart leaped. The brain was fooled! The coded bracelet had done it. But caution! Smeltzer had said the brain was smarter than Gniessin. Could this be a trick? Was the identity bracelet enough?

Presently Igor came through the door.

"Igor," Emmett said, "go to the safe and get Dr. Smeltzer his usual ration and take it to him. He's in his room."

"Yes, sir."

The robot shuffled out.

Emmett was exultant. I'm Gniessin now. I'm king of the castle!

The Enemy doctor!

The Enemy doctor was due that night. That was something he had almost forgotten. He would have to get out of there fast.

He left the steam room.

Dr. Smeltzer was feeling better already when he got there.

"Igor just left," the doctor said, making an effort to smile as he sat on the edge of the bed, the empty hypodermic at his side. "Thanks for convincing Gniessin I needed it." He shook his head, wiped the forehead with an edge of the sheet. "You haven't any idea how it is, Keyes——"

"Don't talk," Emmett said quickly, casting a glance at the scanner. What must the brain think of his being addressed as Keyes?

"What happened to your wrist?"

"I said don't talk," Emmett said sharply. He found a sheet of paper on the dresser. "Do you have a pencil?"

"In the drawer there, I think." The doctor made no effort to get up. He only sat on the bed and looked at him dazedly. "What's going on?"

Emmett sat at Smeltzer's dresser. *Gniessin is dead,* he wrote. *He died in the steam room. I have changed bracelets with him. The brain thinks I'm Gniessin. Call me that.*

He handed the slip of paper to the puzzled Smeltzer, stood between the man and the scanner as he read it. How else to communicate with the man considering all the sensing devices around? Smeltzer, he saw, was agitated as he read it, rereading it and then turning frantic eyes on Keyes, his mouth working, his tongue running along his lips.

"I . . . I . . ." he started to say bewilderedly. Then he blinked several times in an obvious effort to control himself. "I'm sorry to hear that, Mr. Gniessin." His eyes were pregnant with questions. He glanced fearfully at the scanner. Then he said, "If it's something important you have to say, Mr. Gniessin, you could instruct the brain not to monitor it. You could ask it to interrupt for only something important."

"Of course." Would this work? Or was this just a wild suggestion? Emmett turned to the scanner. "Cut off the scanners and microphones in this room until I instruct otherwise from another point. Interrupt only in an emergency. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Mr. Gniessin." There was an audible click.

"Can you hear me?" Emmett asked.

There was no answer.

"So it is true!" Smeltzer said, eyes glowing. He rose from the bed. "You're wearing Gniessin's bracelet! How did you kill him? How did you get by Jascha?"

"I didn't kill him. He went into the steam room and didn't come out for a long time. Then we—Jascha and I—heard his voice calling for help. We both went in. Jascha tried to carry him out and collapsed right along with Gniessin."

"His heart." Smeltzer nodded. "Yes, it was his heart, all right. I told him he took a chance every time he went into the steam room. No man in his condition should have done that. But Gniessin wasn't the kind of man who'd listen to you." His eyes went to the bandaged wrist again. "Here, you better let me see that."

"That can wait. That Enemy doctor is due tonight. We've got to get out of here."

Smeltzer's face was one of surprise. "Out of here? I can't leave here!"

"I'll tell Igor to bring you all the stuff there is in Gniessin's safe. That ought to take care of you until you work something out."

The doctor nodded vigorously. "Maybe there *is* a way. I'd be able to see LaVonne! And Tom! We'll go somewhere together." He was jubilant. "I can't believe it, Keyes. It must be a dream."

"It's no dream the way this wrist is beginning to hurt."

"We've got to do something about that. What did you use to cut with?"

"I broke the mineral oil bottle."

"There's apt to be infection. We'd better go to my office."

"Wait." Emmett frowned thoughtfully. "Before we leave this room we'd better work things out. There ought to be a plan. First we'll go to your office and you can take care of this wrist. Then we'll go to the roof and get a flier."

"You can drop me off in Peoria."

"We'd better get two fliers."

"Two?"

"You can take the other one."

"But I couldn't leave here in a flier. The brain wouldn't let me."

"You could if Mr. Gniessin said you could."

"That's right, isn't it?" Smeltzer smiled. "I keep forgetting that. This is wonderful . . . wonderful . . ." And then his face clouded.

"What's the matter?"

"Oh, I just thought of LaVonne. I'll have to do a lot of explaining. And she doesn't think I'm addicted any more." He brightened. "But I'll tell her the truth. Maybe she can help me out of it. Maybe she can get me off the stuff. God knows I want to be rid of it."

"The whole thing won't be easy."

"I realize that. I don't know where we'll go or what we'll do. Or what we'll use for money." He looked up. "Say, do you suppose Gniessin's got some money around here somewhere? That's half the battle when you're moving around, you know. You can do anything with money."

Emmett nodded. "I hadn't thought of money. I was thinking of weapons. But money will come in handy."

"And we've got to go where we're going before the doctor gets here. I see that now. Once he gets here and finds out what's happened. . . . Supposing we're in fliers when he arrives and the brain tells him where we are? He'll order the brain to bring the fliers back. And then we'll be back here again. Only we won't be guests."

"I think I've got a way to stop that," Emmett said. "I'm ready to go to your office now if you are."

CHAPTER 14

"It's a nasty wound," Dr. Smeltzer said, getting the sutures ready. "You really hacked away with that piece of glass."

"I was in a hurry," Emmett said.

"I believe it."

"I thought maybe Igor'd come through the door before I made the transfer." In Gniessin's name he had cut off the sensory devices in the doctor's office. "Do you think I should get rid of the bracelet once I get out of here? If I did, I'd have to cut it off. My wrist ought to look like hamburger by that time."

Smeltzer shrugged. "Who knows? Maybe you should just leave it. You can't notice it, just looking at it. Maybe it will come in handy."

Emmett remembered the way his wrist had been examined in the implement shed. "And it might do just the opposite, too."

"The thing that amazes me, Keyes, is how you are able to operate as Gniessin without Jascha. I should think the brain would wonder about that. Didn't you say anything to it about him?"

"I figured the brain knows Jascha's inoperative."

"You must be right. Otherwise you'd never get away with it."

"I thought it best to leave well enough alone, Doctor. As it is, it's best nobody—especially the brain—finds out Jascha's got sev-

eral cracks in his upper story. It seems a heavy object fell on his head. A scale, in fact."

"Well, then there shouldn't be any trouble in that department."

Emmett winced when the doctor inserted the curved needle.

"Still hurt? I'll put on a little more anesthetic." He let a few drops fall on the livid flesh. "Where are you going when you get out of here?"

"Oh, I don't know. North, I guess." Into Emmett's mind flashed a picture of the land north of the villa as seen from the roof, a spread of treetops, an end to the lawn and the farms beyond. Cornwall was in that direction. The gypsies would be gone now, but he'd learn where they went, for wherever they were, there's where he'd find Ivy—maybe.

He looked at the doctor closely, saw his concentration, his back bent to the task of sewing up the jagged cuts he had made in his flesh. There was no trace of Smeltzer's weakness of an hour ago. Now he was calm and entirely natural. If ever a man could be trusted . . . but the commies might catch him and if they did, if they deprived him of what he needed, he'd tell them all he knew about Emmett Keyes. Including where he was going. No, he couldn't tell the doctor anything about the gypsies or about Ivy.

"Still going to hunt anti-commies, eh? Well, it's a worthwhile ambition. But it's also a hopeless one, don't you think?"

"What about the Millenaries? Aren't they the underground?"

Smeltzer shook his head. "They're a bunch of crackpots, if you ask me. They think the world's coming to an end on December thirty-first, nineteen ninety-nine, at midnight. They're all making plans to die. I've heard their speeches."

"Couldn't it be a cover-up?"

"Not from what I heard. All gobbledegook."

"How about the gypsies, then," Emmett said casually.

"Gypsies? Well"—the doctor glanced at him for a moment—"something I said out in the garden, about the home we had

for unwed mothers-to-be or illegally pregnant women. Do you remember that?"

"You said something about how you managed to send them there until the Enemy closed it."

"That's right. But it's not exactly the truth. What really happened is several men came to me and pretended to be patients. There was nothing wrong with them, so I was on my guard. Then they started needling me about my political sympathies, which is nothing unusual, considering all the investigators there are. But there was something about each of these men that was different from the usual spy, don't ask me what it was, just the way they said things, the way they asked the questions. Finally, when they seemed to be satisfied I was no commie sympathizer, one of them asked me if I would send all the unlawfully pregnant women to him. He said he had an arrangement whereby the babies could be born without fear of occupation interference or reprisal."

The doctor completed his sewing, put his materials away.

"Did you send anybody to him?" Emmett asked.

"Not directly. I merely told the girls that such a place existed and gave them the address. It was a sort of last resort and I let them make up their own minds. They had a choice between the certainty of occupation punishment or the uncertainty of this other thing. Of all the women I told that to, none ever came back. But I found out in two cases that the girls left their homes —just disappeared. I don't know what happened to them, but I know the Enemy didn't get them. They always publicize each case where a woman is caught in that condition, you know, including the punishment."

"Yes, I know. Do you suppose the rest of them went to this address you gave?"

"I think so because one day one of the girls returned and told me there was no one at that address any longer. She said she learned there had been a fight between occupation police and the people who lived there. More than a score of persons were arrested. The next day this girl herself was arrested because

she had been seen near the place and somebody reported her for asking questions. That in turn made me curious about the whole thing and I did a little discreet investigating of my own. It ended in a blank wall. Nobody knew the group who inhabited the house, nobody knew where the girls had been taken, though the traffic in unlawful pregnancies had been going on for some time, from what I could gather. But the reason I tell you this is that several people said they thought the people were gypsies. Don't ask me why. The people I talked to—mostly patients of mine—only mentioned their dark complexion. After making the inquiries I thought I'd be arrested myself, but I had been secretive enough and escaped it at that time."

"And you never saw the men again, they never gave you another address?"

Smeltzer shook his head. "No. They must have been in the group that was arrested. That's when I started the abortions. And you know the rest of that story."

There was a knock on the door.

Both men whirled, startled. The doctor dropped a packet of surgical needles and they fell open on the floor and scattered.

"Who can that be?" the doctor whispered, looking with anxious eyes at Emmett. "The other doctor never comes until after dinner."

"Wouldn't the brain have interrupted to tell us he was here?"

"It must be Bradshaw."

The knock was repeated. Louder now.

Emmett wished the scanner was operating so he could ask who was at the door. There could be no further delay without arousing suspicion.

"Come in," Emmett sang out.

The door slid open and Bradshaw came in quickly.

He stopped short when he saw them. His eyes darted about the room.

Finally his eyes came to rest on the sutured wrist. They grew large. Then they narrowed.

The man looked at Emmett and now Emmett knew he knew

the truth. Behind the eyes were questions and an intensity of hate Emmett had not thought possible in the man.

"What the hell do you think you're doing, Keyes? Why's your wrist like that?"

"He developed an infection around his identity bracelet," Smeltzer said. "I had to take it off and sterilize the infected area and put it back."

"I asked Keyes," Bradshaw said.

"The doctor's right, Bradshaw."

"Is he?" He smiled thinly, went to the viewphone. In a moment the head of a robot appeared there.

"Yes?"

"This is Bradshaw. I thought you said Mr. Gniessin was in Dr. Smeltzer's office, Boris."

"He is, sir."

"Have the brain scan the room and tell me who's in it right now."

"The room's not monitored, sir. Mr. Gniessin ordered the devices cut off momentarily."

"I see. Can you tell who is in this room through any device on the phone?"

"Yes, sir. Yourself, Dr. Smeltzer and Mr. Gniessin."

"Thank you."

"You're wel——"

Bradshaw snapped the viewphone toggle, turned to face Emmett. His smile was a triumphant one. "Something's happened to Mr. Gniessin and you're wearing his identity bracelet, Keyes."

"Now what would make you think a thing like that?" Emmett said, returning the smile and getting to his feet. Bradshaw must not leave the room.

Bradshaw saw what Emmett intended. He glanced at the door as if measuring the distance. Then he suddenly leaped from the table, something shiny in his hand.

Emmett had expected a move toward the door. He was caught off balance. Something hard hit his head. There were brilliant flashes. He went down.

There was a scuffle. Emmett could see it through pain-dimmed eyes. Two men hitting each other, moving about above him. He shook his head to clear it. He started to his feet.

A heavy body collided with him and he staggered, but did not fall. Then for a moment Bradshaw's evil face was inches from his own.

Then the man was clawing at his wrist!

This he must not do!

Emmett wrenched himself free. Bradshaw lunged. Emmett pivoted. The cook went by.

Now they were a few feet apart and Bradshaw was turning for another charge.

Emmett balled a fist, clenched his teeth and advanced before the man could come at him. He rushed a little, feinted, saw the opening Bradshaw left as he threw up an arm to thwart the blow. Emmett's fist connected solidly with the man's midsection. The cook gasped, doubled over.

Emmett's only other blow of the bout, unleased a moment later, caught Bradshaw on the side of his jaw. His head snapped to one side and he fell.

Emmett stood looking down at the fallen man from whose lips blood ran in a bright red trickle. Then he looked at the doctor. There was an ugly gash in his head.

"You all right?" Emmett asked, breathing hard.

"I'm still in one piece, if that's what you mean. But Bradshaw nearly knocked me out with that colorimeter. I don't know why I didn't put the damn thing away." He came over to the cook, fingering the cut on his forehead. "What are we going to do with this hot-tempered bastard?"

"I know what I'd like to do with him," Emmett said. "But I think I'll be real nasty and not do anything right now. He'll never find another Gniessin to cook for, so he'll eventually be relegated to the outside again. Then he'll find out how bad things are."

"You'll never convince a man like Bradshaw. He'll work his way into another easy job somewhere."

"Perhaps. But right now I'll have Igor put him away for a

while. Lock him in his room. Then he'll have a long time to think how wonderful the occupation is. Then I suggest we get out of here before something else happens."

"I'm ready," the doctor said. "I've been ready for ten years."

CHAPTER 15

The flier purred softly and smoothly through the late afternoon sky, the farmlands below a mosaic of greens cut sharply by ruler-straight roads and meandering creeks and rivers. This is the heart of the corn country, Emmett mused, and it looks much as it did a hundred years ago, if you'd take away the tractors in the fields and the turbos on the roads. You couldn't tell from the flier this was no longer the land of the free.

There was comfort and safety in the air, particularly in an occupation forces flier such as this one that glided serenely over the quiet land. There was no enemy in sight. Who could challenge a flier from the villa of the area director? Who would dare to?

For the first time in many days Emmett felt secure. Not because of the flier alone, but because he had two guns in his jacket—a sleeper and a heater, both small, compact and powerful. And in his trousers pocket was a bundle of currency of all denominations, a hundred times as much money as Mrs. Tisdail had given him. And on the seat beside him was a box of booster vials and a syringe. Dr. Smeltzer had urged him to take them. Emmett didn't tell him he didn't need them. The less Smeltzer knew, the better.

Together they had ransacked Gniessin's room, though ransacked is hardly the word for their brief look into drawers and cabinets and files. There had been no time for any prolonged examination of microfiles of correspondence, directives and miscellaneous information. Emmett regretted that he couldn't spend a few days going over it all; he could have learned a lot. But speed was vital.

The arms stores had stymied them for a while. They entered a large room and looked over the hundreds of weapons there, trying to find small ones. But there were only rifle-size sleepers and heaters, some with infrared devices, others with telescopic sights, still others with gauges and scales and calibrations that made no sense to either of them. But all were obviously too large to carry. It had appeared for a while as if they would have to leave the villa weaponless, until they went through one of Gniessin's desks. There they found a cache of smaller guns and appropriated two sleepers and two heaters.

With their guns and money, the two went to the roof and moved among the four fliers there, deciding to take the two smaller ships. It was then that Dr. Smeltzer suddenly remembered his vials of morphine and had to go back after them. When he returned he said he had enough stuff to last him a year.

Emmett entered his flier, established contact with the brain through flier instruments and directed it to allow Dr. Smeltzer to take off. Then he waited until the flier bearing Smeltzer was out of sight before he lifted his own flier in the air. There had been no incident, no alarm, no restriction. And the flier was easily managed.

Once out of sight of the villa, Emmett contacted the brain again. "This is Gniessin," he said. "I have just learned that the doctor due tonight is an imposter. His flier must be destroyed when it comes within range. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Mr. Gniessin."

Then Emmett relaxed in the luxury of his first flight. With the Enemy doctor out of the way, he and Smeltzer would gain more time.

Now before him came a break in the continuous unrolling of trees, clumps of bushes, houses, pastures, fields, roads and streams. Buildings appeared and there was smoke, and then suddenly there were streets below him. Emmett swerved in a long curve and sought a suitable landing place. He lowered the flier gently as he circled the area.

When he edged the flier to the ground it was in the rear of a row of houses. He could have landed in the center of town, but he did not want to make a landing of record or speak to anyone officially. An official might have known Gniessin. Emmett could learn just as much this way and learn it much more safely.

No sooner had the wheels touched the ground than three children dispatched themselves from their game near one of the houses and ran for the flier. A woman appeared in a doorway. She yelled to the children. Emmett could not hear what she said. Then she moved inside and closed the door.

Emmett got out of the machine, the children standing nearby, solemn-eyed, open-mouthed.

"Is this Cornwall?" he asked the largest child, a white-faced boy of about ten.

"Yes, sir."

"Good."

Emmett walked briskly across the yard to the house, the children following silently. He knocked.

The door opened and a vast woman emerged like something prehistoric coming out of the underbrush. Her face hung loose on her cheekbones and the bridge of her nose, and skin sagged in folds on her neck. Her eyes were frightened. She glanced anxiously at the boy before she looked at Emmett.

"I'm the area director for the Occupation Forces," Emmett said gravely. "I am looking for a gypsy band that stayed in Cornwall for a few days." Let her think the occupation forces were so stupid they wouldn't know where a thing like a gypsy group would be at any hour.

"They was here," the woman said. It was then he saw that she had no teeth. "They left a few days ago." There was no

love for him in her eyes. You're a good woman, Emmett said to himself. A good woman in spite of your poor diet and your lack of teeth, for I can see what you think of the occupation and that's why you're in the condition you are.

"Do you know where they went?"

"To Reardon, I heard."

"Reardon? Where's that?"

The woman gave him a surprised look. "Twenty miles that way." She pointed to the east.

"Thanks."

The woman, recovered from her surprise and realizing all he wanted was this small bit of information, eyed Emmett malevolently. He supposed occupation officers were used to being looked at that way. She hadn't done anything wrong. She had answered the questions. But she hadn't volunteered anything. And that pleased Emmett. He reached into his pocket, peeled off a hundred dollar bill from his roll. That would feed a family for six months. He held it out to her. "Here, take this."

Her eyes brightened with fury, and her breath was fast. Suddenly she spat. "That's what I think of the occupation," she said. "I've waited a long time to do that. Now go ahead and arrest me. I don't care." She straightened as if she dared him to.

"I'm not going to arrest you," he said gently. "It may surprise you, but I feel the same way myself. Now take this money and forget where it came from." He reached for her hand, put the bill in it, closed the fist and walked back to the flier, the children pattering behind him.

He waved to them as the flier rose in the air. They didn't wave back.

High above the town he turned east and set the controls. Next stop Reardon. He snorted. Maybe it's all a wild-goose chase, this searching for gypsies. Maybe they're not immune. Maybe they're not anti-commie. Maybe they have nothing to do with what Dr. Smeltzer was talking about. And worst of all, maybe I can't reach Ivy through them. He suddenly realized that the last thing worried him more than he cared to think. Or, if Ivy is with such a

group, maybe she is arrested now. Certainly she and the others were violating the laws moving around the way they were in the middle of the night, just as he was. And perhaps some action Gniessin hinted at when he first arrived at the villa had already been instituted and the group wiped out or denied boosters or sent to the labor camps.

He forced himself to think of other things. He would know soon enough who and what the gypsies were and whether or not they could help him. He took to watching the landscape fly by steadily, never ceasing to wonder at the greenness of it, and how neat the land looked from this height.

He was jarred from his occupation by a sudden shaking of the flier. It shuddered and dipped. His eyes flew to the fuel gauge. Plenty of fuel. What was wrong?

The flier stopped mid-air. It was absolutely stationary for a moment. Then it started again, veering southward.

Toward the villa!

He grabbed the controls. They would not respond to his urgent twists. It was as if an iron hand had taken them over.

Somehow his plan had gone awry. The doctor must have circumvented Emmett's order. And now the brain—or whoever was giving the orders—was bringing Emmett Keyes back.

"This is Gniessin," he said into the microphone. "I demand an explanation of what is happening!"

There was no reply.

He looked out the curving window, saw the countryside moving by quickly now. At this rate he'd soon be back at the villa. That must not happen.

Emmett reached into his jacket pocket, fumbled trying to get out the heater. At last he had it. He aimed it at the dashboard, pressed the trigger.

At such close range the metal and plastic of the instrument panel melted quickly, sparks flew about the cockpit and smoke rolled from underneath it.

Suddenly he felt the flier drop. He looked out, saw the land

rushing up to meet him, heard the screech of wind past the air vents. It seemed an eternity before——

A violent jolt knocked him about the interior of the flier while sounds of crunching, tearing metal deafened him. Then it was quiet.

He could look out below and see the ground. He moved to the edge of the cockpit to see why the flier had not crashed to the earth. As he did so, the machine, out of balance, fell sidelong, jarring him again. Now there were branches around the flier and a hasty examination showed he was about twenty feet from the ground. He tried opening the door. It was wrenched shut. Once again he brought his heater into play, melted the thick plastic upper half of the door, waited for the edges to cool, then carefully climbed out. He slid down the sloping side of the flier, went from branch to branch until he was within jumping distance of the ground. Then he remembered he didn't have the booster vials. Well, he wasn't going to climb up after them.

Now he'd have to move. Someone knew he wasn't Gniessin and had tried to get him back. Now they'd come in person, they'd find the ship and then they'd start looking for him. He'd have to be far away by that time.

The sun had just about set in the west, judging by the tinge of orange-red on the tops of the trees. He jogged eastward through the trees.

Emmett had not gone more than a few hundred feet when he suddenly realized he'd have to get rid of Gniessin's bracelet. As long as he wore it, he'd be easily spotted no matter where he was. Though the thought of tearing it out of his wrist was a painful one, the thought of being a beacon for a search party was a worse one. But he had no piece of mineral oil bottle now, no knife, no anesthetic.

He increased his pace, was gratified to see an end to the trees in a few minutes. He ran in the twilight across cool fields and over fences and down rows of sprouting corn. At length he came to a house.

No timidity now. No hesitation. He ran up to the barn. Noth-

ing in it but cattle. He went through it, came out the yard side, crossed this to the house. A thickset, bushy-haired farmer was working over a weeding machine. As he turned startled eyes to the man running up to him, Emmett's forefinger closed on the sleeper's trigger. The man crumpled like a rag doll.

A long-haired dog trotted around a corner of the house, stopped short when it saw Emmett. A moment later the dog was a mound of fur on the ground.

Into the house. The slat-thin, sallow woman's eyes mirrored her fear. Her mouth opened for a scream that never came. She fell heavily against the set table, then crashed to the floor, most of the dishes falling to the floor with her.

The sound of running feet now inside the house. A young slip of a girl came through the door to the kitchen, never even saw Emmett, having eyes only for her mother on the floor. She soon joined her there.

A man with flaming, disheveled red hair, lather still on one side of his face, rushed into the room. He slumped along with the others.

Emmett stood still and listened. It was quiet now. He could hear only the thin whine of a motor somewhere, the bawling of cattle.

He hurried to the bathroom, saw the medicine cabinet at once. There was a safety razor with a lathered head on the sink. He took the blade out of it, carefully cut the stitches in his wrist. The blood dripped into the sink. The bracelet was loose now. The fingers of his right hand slipped in the sweat and blood in his effort to unsnap it, but he finally succeeded.

His wrist ached as if he had been cut to the bone, but he forced himself to set Gniessin's bracelet carefully on the sink edge and looked through the medicine cabinet for an antiseptic. He found some, sprinkled the powder into the cut, then ran a plastic bandage around his wrist. No stitches now, but it would have to do.

Next he took up the bracelet, washed it under the faucet and put it into his pocket. He knew where he'd get rid of it. He walked out of the bathroom, found a man's bedroom, confiscated a pair

of trousers, a belt, shirt, socks and shoes. He put them on, took out the bracelet, tied it in the center of the small bundle he made of his villa clothes, then moved to go out-of-doors. On his way out of the kitchen he picked up an old metal dishpan.

Outside he searched through the farmer's pockets, found a ring of keys. Next he scoured the ground until he found a nail. Using a large rock, he pounded a tiny hole in the dishpan. Then he tried all the keys until he found the one that worked the ignition of the old turbo in the driveway at the side of the house. His wheels spit gravel as he started out of the yard and turned into the road headed east.

Half a mile up the road he came to a bridge. He stopped the turbo on the far side, went down to the edge of the river. Spring rains had swollen it. The water was moving rapidly. Grinning with satisfaction, he set the bundle of clothes carefully in the middle of the dishpan, steadied the pan on the water, gave it a shove to the center of the stream. He watched it go swiftly downstream. He guessed it would fill with water in an hour, far down the river. Then the clothes might stay afloat a while longer before they became sufficiently waterlogged to sink. Let the bracelet be a beacon now. Let it draw their sensory devices. And let them figure it out when they found it. He chuckled as he walked up the bank to the turbocar. He'd be miles from where they'd find it.

CHAPTER 16

Emmett had almost despaired of finding the gypsies when he came upon them at the turn of a corner on the outskirts of Reardon.

There beneath the early night sky, where the fields and farmlands began, was the gypsy assembly. It was every bit as he remembered it: colorful tents, bright fluoros that hung in strings from tent to tent, the spot-lighted banners atop each center pole, and off to one side the gypsy trucks and trailers. The sight of it gave him a twinge of nostalgia, for as a child gypsy time had always been a favorite time for him and the rest of the kids in Spring Creek. When the gypsies came, there was the fascination of watching them erect their tents, unload their wagons, and trying to guess what each trunk and box contained. When the gypsies came there was always plenty to do and plenty to see. As he neared the camp the old feeling of excitement swept over him.

Already there were people on the short midway milling around, inspecting posters, listening to barkers, and just visiting, for the gypsies had always helped bring people together. It was like being home to Emmett to walk down this street, though he could not remember ever having seen this particular gypsy group before. The offerings were different.

He grinned when he saw the first poster. It declared that in the tent behind it was "the greatest collection of reptiles and amphibians in the world," and promised a look at every snake, lizard, alligator and salamander in existence. Emmett wondered how many of them were alive. There was the added attraction of a big-muscled handler who, the poster went on, "had mysterious power" over the creatures, including the deadly coral snake.

The bawling of the barker at the next tent drew Emmett's attention. He was extolling the talents of a man who could eat fire and glass and swallow swords. He was right inside, the barker said, and ready to begin. The price was only ten cents. Emmett moved on.

A single poster was stretched between two poles above the entrance to the next tent. Upon it was painted a crude representation of the human palm and lettered above it was:

MADAME
LE GASTA
TELLS ALL
NO PROBLEM TOO BIG
NO PROBLEM TOO SMALL
Your Future—10 Cents

Emmett gave the other tents only a passing glance. One advertised a "Man of the East" who endured unspeakable pain for the love of it. He shared the tent with a man who had been in a trance ever since the travelers had come to Reardon and who defied anyone to awaken him from it as long as they were in town. Another tent was occupied by a magician who, the poster declared, astounded all who saw him. He was scheduled to saw a woman in half "before your very eyes" at the next performance. Also advertised were several other feats equally unbelievable.

Emmett returned to the palmistry tent, paid a woman in a green robe at the tent flap and went in.

A smaller tent was inside, one of rich red brocaded cloth, and it stood at one side of the larger tent, many chairs facing it.

Dimly seen in the dark, draped interior were a table and two chairs. One of them was occupied by an old woman.

"Come in," she said in a squeaking voice. "I am Madame Le Gasta. Your future is known to me. Come in, come in."

Emmett crossed to the small tent. The flap rolled down behind him as he seated himself across from her. A harsh light from above illuminated her wrinkled face, throwing her strong features into prominence as she reached for his hand. Her head was covered with a purple hood, her ears were hung with ornaments that jangled as she moved her head. A yellow shawl fell in many folds from her shoulders down her black dress.

"I see a troubled path before you," she said as she ran cold fingers across his palm. "You are not happy, but do not give up, for your life line is a long one. What troubles you now will soon pass if you work toward your goal. I also see you are in love. Would you like to know if the girl loves you?" She lifted her head and looked at him. Her eyes were small, bright and hard. "It will cost only ten cents. A small price to pay to find whether a love is true. Is that not so?"

Emmett tossed a quarter into the tray at the side of the table, part of the change the woman at the entrance had given him.

"Ah," the woman said, grasping his hand firmly, "the gods are good to you. The young girl does love you with all her heart. She is longing for you at this very moment. You should go to her and comfort her. You should tell her you love her." She let go of his hand and looked up. "You have another question?"

Emmett took out a twenty-dollar bill. He put it carefully in the tray. The old woman's eyes were on the money and seemed to have difficulty drawing away from it. When she finally managed to look at him again, her eyes were smaller and narrower than they had been.

"What is the question?"

"Are gypsies immune to the plague?"

The eyes were surprised. "I have told fortunes for many years," the woman said. "In all the years of my time I have not been asked such a question. Why must you know this?"

"The money," Emmett said, "was paid for an answer, not a question."

The gypsy shook her head and her earrings tinkled. "It is not so. We are no more immune than you are. Why do people say this thing of us? It is not so."

Emmett leaned forward. "Then you must go for your booster like everyone else?"

"Of course. Can you tell me one person who does not? Who are you? Why do you ask this?"

"And do you have an identification number on your left forearm?"

"But of course." She looked at him, puzzled. Then she moved a draped arm upward and exposed her left forearm. There on the skin mottled with age was plainly written the woman's identification. She withdrew the arm, saying, "There are many legends about the gypsy. They are not true." Her attempt at a smile showed teeth yellowed with her years. "Another question?"

"No. I have no more questions." Either the woman was lying or he'd been a fool for hoping gypsies were different from other people.

When he arose to leave, Madame Le Gasta made no move to return any part of his money. Although he didn't think the information she had given him was worth twenty dollars, he didn't want to argue about it. The flap lifted and he walked out of the small tent. Now there were several people in the chairs waiting for Madame. He turned to go out.

"This is not the way out," a husky gypsy man said, stepping in front of him. "You came in this way. The exit is over there." He pointed across the tent.

For a moment Emmett felt like pushing the man roughly to one side and proceeding. Then he thought the better of it. He was in enough trouble already. He turned around and went across the tent.

He lifted the flap there and stepped through.

He was hit a violent blow on his head.

On his back on the ground and barely on this side of con-

sciousness, Emmett dazedly realized he was being robbed. His muscles would not respond to the message of urgency he sent them.

"Goddam commie," he heard a man say. "You'd think he'd have more sense. Imagine flashing a roll like this at Maggie!"

The other man whistled. "She was right, all right. How much you think is there?"

"I dunno. . . . Hey! What's this?"

"Two guns! I'll be damned!"

"This guy's no regular commie. Say—ain't I seen him somewhere before?"

"Naw. If he'd been here before, you think he'd ever come back?"

"Just the same, I think we'd better let Bruno see him."

Emmett managed to lift his eyelids. He saw two blurred figures before him. He struggled feebly to rise.

"Well, what d'you know! He's waking up!"

"A regular rugged guy, ain't he?"

This time Emmett succumbed quickly to the invitation to sleep.

"Filthy commie!"

The light hurt his eyes at first, but he gradually got used to the fluoro in the ceiling. His head ached terribly. He moved a hand up to feel how badly injured it was. To his surprise he felt only a small bump.

He moved his arms behind him and sat up.

"Filthy commie!"

He looked into the eyes of an old man sitting at the other end of the truck, an old man with a sleeper in his hand pointed at Emmett. The hand trembled. With a shock Emmett saw the man had only one good eye. The other was a sunken slit.

"I'm no commie," Emmett said.

"Bruno will find out if you're a commie or not." The old face wrinkled into an evil grin. "And then you know what's going to happen? I'm going to kill you."

"I tell you, I'm no commie." Emmett brushed hair out of his eyes. How long had he lain asleep in the truck?

"I ought to kill you right now. I could say you tried to get away." He chuckled with the thought this evoked. "But I'd better wait for Bruno. Bruno will know what to do."

"I don't know what you're talking about, Grandpa," Emmett said wearily. "All I can tell you is I'm no commie."

Grandpa spat at him, moved the sleeper up a little. "You killed my son and you killed his wife. And now you killed Arno. It's going to be your turn now."

Suddenly the truck's rear door was flung open and through it came one of the men Emmett had seen with Ivy in the woods. But he no longer wore the dark suit of the woods. Now he was clad in a flowing red cape, a black turban, tight-fitting trousers, and a red shirt.

He started when he saw the second person.

It was Ivy, her long black hair falling to one side of her head as she stepped into the truck.

"Ivy!" He started to get up.

"You stay where you are!" the younger man commanded.

Emmett sank back and looked at Ivy in surprise. She stood still, saying nothing, her dark eyes sad. Seeing her, Emmett felt the strong pull of her again. But why didn't she say anything?

And then he saw her clothes. They didn't make sense. There was a green cape tied around her shoulders, and she wore a sheer red blouse through which he could see the white of her bra, form-fitting black shorts, hip-high stockings and green high-heeled shoes.

"Filthy commie!" the old man said again.

"What's he talking about?" Emmett asked. "He's been calling me that ever since I woke up. You two know I'm no Communist. You found that out at the implement shed."

"We were fooled, Em," Ivy said.

"You were *not* fooled," Emmett said firmly. "Where did you get the idea you were?"

"Why did you come here?" the younger man asked. "Did you think you could find out something more?"

"Will someone please tell me what you're talking about? Ivy, listen to me. I came here looking for you. And now everybody's calling me a Communist."

"I'm sorry," Ivy said, "but it appears you *are* a Communist."

"I am not!"

"Yes, he is, Bruno. Yes, he is!" the old man said excitedly. "I can tell a commie when I see one."

"Quiet, old man," Bruno said. "Keyes, we had a brother, Ivy and I. We thought a lot of him. He was with us when we were in the woods. He was caught because of you. If he isn't dead, he soon will be."

"He was my younger brother," Ivy said. "A sweet-tempered boy who wouldn't harm anybody."

"Where do you get the idea I had anything to do with it?"

"Don't act so injured, Keyes. Did you think you could bribe information out of an old woman with a twenty-dollar bill?"

"Maggie's smart," the old man said, grinning. "Maggie's as smart as they come."

"Hush, Grandpa," Ivy said.

"Grandpa's right this time," Bruno said. "Grandma Maggie did the right thing when she alerted the boys. She caught sight of Keyes' money and knew only a commie or a high level collaborator would be carrying around that much. The boys did what they always do in a case like that—relieve the person of his extra funds. It helps the cause. But they didn't count on you having so much, Keyes—or having those two guns. They knew right away you were a spy."

"You thought you were smart, didn't you," the old man said, leering at him. "But you didn't count on Maggie or Bruno, did you?"

"Just because I carried so much money and have a couple guns!" Emmett snorted. "I had a gun and a lot of money before."

"But you didn't arrive in Cornwall," Ivy said. "Remember?"

"Of course he didn't go to Cornwall. He went to his bosses

and told them what we are doing. They in turn told the area director and he sent the security police after us. It was only luck that we managed to finish our mission first. Most of us managed to get away. All except Arno."

"They killed him?"

Bruno shook his head. "They captured him. It would have been better if they had killed him, considering what he's going through. But he won't talk. Not Arno."

"Let me kill him," the old man pleaded. "Let me do the job." He moved toward Emmett.

"Not yet," Bruno said firmly. "Dead, Mr. Keyes won't be worth a thing."

"Must you kill him?" Ivy looked at her brother frantically.

Bruno's lip curled. "What do you suggest?"

Ivy turned to Emmett, teeth biting the smooth line of her lower lip to keep it from trembling. Her eyes were moist. "I—I believed you, Emmett. I thought you'd be in Cornwall when we got back. I told Bruno it couldn't possibly be you, telling on us that way. And then when you didn't come——"

"I can explain."

"Explain, Keyes?" Bruno laughed in his face. "Just the way you explained you were an anti-commie and had Ivy believing your every word?"

"It was true!" Emmett cried. "What kind of a thing are you trying to pull here? Doesn't a man have the right to say anything?"

"Sure," Bruno taunted, his eyes going to Emmett's bandaged wrist. "The boys were curious about your wrist. They said it looked as if you took off your commie bracelet. Supposing you start with that."

"Damn right I'll start with that. It wasn't my bracelet in the first place."

"Whose was it then?"

"It belonged to Mr. Gniessin, the area director."

"Mr. Gniessin?" Bruno laughed at him. "I can imagine Gniessin parting with his bracelet. Especially to you."

"It was not of his own free will," Emmett said levelly. "I took it from him."

"The hell you did," Bruno said with obvious disbelief.

"Maybe he did," Ivy said.

"You can believe him if you want to, Ivy. But Gniessin's own identity bracelet—well, I've heard of some pretty weird things . . ."

"Gniessin was dead, you see."

Now they looked at him with genuine interest.

"When I left you near the implement shed, Ivy, I started walking north. But I made a misstep and wound up a prisoner of Mr. Gniessin at his villa. That's why I never came to Cornwall. When I touched the grounds of the villa I was sleeped. While I was unconscious a doctor there anesthetized part of my brain and I told nearly everything I knew. Later on Gniessin told me he had sent someone out to arrest your group. I never heard any more about it. But I never said anything voluntarily."

"He's lying," the old man said. "He's a dirty commie and he's lying his way out of it."

"We'll hear him out, Grandpa," Bruno said. "Then we'll decide."

"Gniessin was fat," Emmett said. "His health was not good. It became my job to give him his massages. Yesterday in the steam bath he died of a heart attack. That's when I traded the bracelet he had ordered me to wear for the one he had on his wrist. That's the way I managed to escape from the villa. I took a flier, but after I left Cornwall it suddenly veered off toward the villa, so I burned out the controls with the heater. It fell into a grove a few miles west of here. You can check on that part of it. I sleeped a few people at a farmhouse, cut out his bracelet, set it afloat on a river. I confiscated a car and headed for Reardon."

Bruno frowned. "If Gniessin is really dead. . . . My God, that would change things." He stared at Emmett.

"He's lying," Grandpa said.

"I don't think he is," Ivy said slowly and wonderingly.

For a moment they stood silent searching for the truth in each

other. From outside came the sounds of the camp, the monotonous spiel of a barker, martial music from one of the shows, the hum of many voices. As they listened they suddenly heard another sound—the hiss of many fliers.

There was an urgent knock on the door. Bruno and Ivy exchanged sharp glances, then she opened it. A pale-faced man with frightened eyes stood there. He looked over his shoulder. Then he stepped quickly into the van.

"What's the matter with you, Geronte?" Bruno asked. "You ought to be out on the midway."

Geronte pointed a finger at Emmett. "They're looking for him," he said excitedly.

"Who's looking for him?"

"Security police and occupation men—they're all over the place. And now the fliers!"

"Control yourself, man! What's going on?"

Geronte gulped, his eyes wide. "I was standing at the snake tent, listening to Berne, when men started drifting over to the camp from the street. They mixed with the crowd, but they didn't say anything to anybody or each other. You know how it is when you get a bunch like that."

"I told you so," Grandpa said. "I told you, Bruno. He's brought them with him. Now they'll find out . . . !"

"Shut *up*, Grandpa!"

"They split up, Bruno. And not a single one of them listened to Berne. They just kept moving around, looking the faces over. Some even went into the tent. And now there's the fliers!"

"Get hold of yourself!"

"The sky's full of them fliers, Bruno. And they got searchlights! This is the end!"

"We've got to kill him," the old man cried. "We've got to get rid of him before they get us!"

"We've got to do no such thing," Bruno said firmly.

"But they're after him and they'll find him here," Geronte wailed. "And he'll tell them everything."

"Grandpa," Bruno said in sudden decision, "you and Geronte

get out on the midway. Try to steer them someplace else, try to get them off the track. Anything, but keep them occupied. And I don't mean fighting. That's the last thing I want."

"All right," the old man said sulkily, "but I say kill him right now. That way we'll be one jump ahead of them."

Geronte and the grumbling old man left the truck and the door slammed shut after them.

"They're after me, all right," Emmett said. "Whoever took over things at the villa is good and mad. They want my hide, the Enemies do. And they want to ask questions about Gniessin and the money and weapons I took, the robot I put out of commission, the doctor I helped escape and the cook I locked up in his room."

"I wish Johannes were here," Ivy said.

"Well, he isn't," Bruno said. "But he'd know about Gniessin. If he doesn't, he ought to."

"Are we going to stand here and talk about it?" Emmett asked irritably. "Or are we going to do something about it? If it's all the same to you, I don't want to go back to the villa."

"What can we do?" Bruno said thoughtfully. "They're bound to search the truck sooner or later."

"Those two guns I had would help," Emmett said. "That way you'd find out for sure which side I'm on."

Bruno shook his head. "That would be suicide. If there are fliers with lights up in the sky, two little guns aren't going to help. Once things start happening, they'll sleep this whole area and then move in and separate the good from the bad. No, there must be another way."

"I hope there is," Emmett said impatiently. "I have a feeling time is running out."

"I think I have the answer," Ivy said calmly.

CHAPTER 17

"We can hide him in the illusion box," Ivy said.

Bruno gave Emmett a critical look. "He's too big."

"He isn't either. The box is too big for me, but he can squeeze a little can't he?"

"Well, maybe so. We can try, anyway."

"Come on," Ivy said, grabbing Emmett's arm.

Emmett offered no objection, did not delay them with questions. Anything was better than standing weaponless in a truck, waiting for the security police to arrive. In the darkness outside the van they picked their way across the weed-choked lot to the rear of one of the show tents. Once Emmett glanced upward. He saw the glimmering lights of several circling fliers. Then they ducked under a flap and were in the tent.

Folding chairs were set theater-fashion in the center area facing a raised platform stage at one end.

"This is our show, Bruno's and mine," Ivy said softly, leading the way down the center aisle and running up the three steps to the stage, slapping aside the curtain there. "Bruno is Uneldo, the Magician, in case you haven't caught on yet. I'm Lura, his assistant. It used to be father's and mother's show and this stuff is mostly theirs."

The stage was a clutter of brightly painted boxes, tables, drapes, cloths, gleaming metal containers. A bird chattered in a red cage, an enormous die blocked their way until Ivy pushed it to one side with the toe of her shoe. Bruno lifted aside a small table filled with playing cards, an old opera hat, wands, flowers, glasses, scissors, and a coil of rope. He reached down and, with Ivy's help, slid out a long, black box, moved it downstage to within a foot of the curtain, and arranged it carefully there.

Bruno lifted the lid and said, "Think you can get in there, Keyes?"

Emmett looked inside. The black interior made it difficult to judge how big it was. He guessed he'd have room enough with a little pushing and squeezing here and there.

"We promise not to saw you in two," Ivy said. "You'd better see if you fit."

"I'd feel a lot safer out here with a couple guns," Emmett said. "Don't you think they'll lift the lid and find me here?"

"They may lift the lid," Bruno said, "but you won't be there. Now get in."

Emmett shrugged, stepped into the box. He hesitated, still not sure this was the wisest thing to do.

"Will you please get down so I can close the lid?" Ivy said. "They'll probably come charging in here any minute."

He was too long to lie on his back, so he turned on his side, drew his knees up a little. Now he looked up at them, feeling an agony of helplessness.

"You all set?" Ivy said, leaning over, worry lines in her forehead.

"I guess so," he said miserably.

Then she smiled. "You have no idea how silly you look down there, Em."

"Close it up," Bruno said severely, frowning and working furiously at something at the side of the box.

Ivy leaned farther, planted a kiss on his lips. Then she drew back, saying, "Good-bye now."

The top of the box slammed down deafeningly. Darkness

rushed in. For a moment Emmett had a feeling of panic. Then he forced himself to calm down.

I am a sardine, he told himself. I've just been packed, a special sardine in a special can of my own. And soon somebody's going to open this can and I'll be on somebody's table and they'll stick a toothpick in me and . . .

"Ready, Emmett?" Ivy asked. Her voice was clearer than he thought it would be.

Ready for what? he wanted to ask.

"Brace yourself."

There was something else?

Suddenly the box dipped slightly, silently, then rolled smoothly to one side. Something clicked ever so softly in place.

Now he could feel cool air, and he could hear feet moving about above him. He was no longer in the box—at least not in the box on the stage. It must have been two boxes, one inside another. The one he was in had been moved to one side and underneath the stage.

It was quiet now. As quiet as—a tomb. He shuddered.

"You're sick." The words jarred him. He hadn't expected to hear anyone talking. It was Ivy.

"I'm *what?*" Bruno asked in surprise.

"Sick," Ivy said. "You can't go on with the show. We can't put on a show with Emmett down there, you know."

"Oh. . . . Mmm. I'd forgotten about that. Better get the word to Berne. Don't want him giving the spiel then."

Their footsteps clicked across the floor and down the stage steps.

Then it was still.

He felt panic mounting again, forced it down. I won't get ill, I'm perfectly comfortable, I'm resting. In fact, I may even fall asleep. He emptied his mind of every thought, tried to keep it that way, letting only colors wash over it. . . .

A heavy step on the stage brought him back. He must have

dozed because it took him a moment to remember where he was. Now there were several other footsteps. And voices.

"When did you give the last show?" The voice was deep, demanding. The feet dragged. The floor creaked with movement. "See anything around there, eh, Carl?" This last was nearly a shout.

"Nothing out here, Captain." Emmett could hardly hear this voice.

"You were saying—a—about your last show, Mr. Le Gasta."

"About half an hour ago it was." Bruno's voice.

Well, this was it. Let's get to it. Let's open the box. And then let's get out of here.

"You didn't see anybody with a bandaged left wrist, eh? A tall man, broad-shouldered, dark-haired?"

"You could answer that description yourself, Captain. Except for the bandage."

"Eh? What's that? Well, come to think of it, I guess I could. Yes, of course." A wheezy laugh. "Quite an outfit you've got here. You're the magician, eh? Could you make a man disappear? Maybe you have. Heh-heh. That would be something, eh? How about you, Miss? Did you see a man like that, a man with a bandaged wrist?"

"No, sir."

More feet walking around.

"Take a look around, Carl. Outside."

Creaking boards. "What's this?" The explanation. "What's that?" Another explanation. "Show me how it works."

Emmett was getting warm. He was sweating. He didn't know how long he had been asleep or even if he had been asleep at all, but his muscles were protesting the position he was in. He tried flexing them. It worked all right for a while, but then even that didn't seem to do any good. In the meantime, the captain wanted to see more tricks.

Finally Ivy said, "Captain, Bruno was going to cancel this show. He wasn't feeling well. And here he's doing tricks for you.

I think he'd better stop because if we're going to do a show at all he needs a rest."

"Weren't feeling well, eh? Well, that's too bad." Creaking boards. Dragging feet. "What's in this box?"

"Oh?" Did the captain catch that quaver in Ivy's voice?

"Just our saw-illusion box," Bruno said.

"I get sawed in half in it," Ivy explained.

"Really?" The captain's voice was taken with the idea.

Emmett heard the top of the other box being raised.

"Big enough to hold a man, you know?"

"It would have been a good place to hide, Captain. But you would have found him."

"Saw her in half."

"What?"

"I say, saw her in half. I've never seen a woman sawed in half."

"I'm sorry, Captain, but I can't."

"Why not?" An injured tone.

"Captain, I told you my brother's not feeling well."

"I order you to saw her in half." The feet were placed wide apart.

This is it. This is where he finds out. I wish I had been more insistent. Now he'll find me in this box and it will be all over. And back to the villa. Maybe I won't even go back. Maybe I'll just be sent right to a labor camp . . .

"You don't know what you're asking," Ivy said. "My brother's been working too hard. He should be in bed. You don't have any idea how much working this illusion takes out of you."

"You come back any time," Bruno said. "You and your family. I'll give you a private show."

"Humph." The captain coughed. "Well, all right. That's a promise?"

"That's a promise."

"Didn't see anything outside, Captain," a voice reported.

"Stick around, Carl. We're just about through in here. You

missed some good magic tricks." The foot pounded heavily on the floor. "What's under here, eh?"

"Nothing," Bruno said. "Just the supports for the stage."

"A man could hide there, though."

"Well, I suppose."

"Let's have a look, Carl."

Steps going across the stage. Down the stairs.

Emmett tensed himself. They'd find him surely now!

Suddenly the box jerked sidewise. Then it slid silently along, stopped, then rose and clicked into place.

After a few moments Emmett heard voices below him.

"Nothing under here."

"You sure? Flash your light over there, Carl. We'll see what that is."

"There?"

"Right. Only candy. Must sell lots of candy, eh. Not a bad life, eh, Carl? You see that girl?"

"Yes, sir."

"Yes. Well. Humph. We've looked everywhere, haven't we?"

"No trace of him around here, sir."

"I guess not. Withdraw the cordon then. This was the last place. He's skipped. Notify the fliers."

Emmett watched the four turbotrucks ahead of his as they whirred through the night, their headlights faltering fingers that felt their way along the old blacktop road, for there was only a thin slice of moon to save the world from complete blackness.

"Now do you see why I invited you to ride up here?" Ivy said, running hands through her hair to let it fly in the breeze. "Plenty of fresh air, you can see the scenery without looking through a window, and last of all it's private."

The last vehicle of the five was the stake truck driven by Bruno. All the magician's equipment had been neatly arranged on the truck bed, with the tent folded carefully to cover it all with several thicknesses. And now they sat at the very top of this just above and a little behind the truck's cab.

"Is it always this quiet on the road, Ivy?"

"At this hour of the morning it is."

Emmett chuckled. "That reminds me of Mr. Gniessin. Once he said things that moved around at four o'clock in the morning were much more noticeable than they were at any other time."

"From all I've ever heard about this Mr. Gniessin I imagine a lot of people are going to be happy he's dead."

"All except the collaborators, favor seekers, county directors and people who stood in well with him. The new man will set up his own system, I suppose."

Ivy turned from the headlighted view of the road ahead. She studied Emmett's face. "Know something?" she said.

"What?"

"You're different."

"I am? In what way?"

"I don't know." She frowned. "You're—stronger, I guess." She looked back to the road, squinting her eyes against the wind. "Before, you didn't seem to know what you were doing. You weren't sure of yourself. Now you . . . I guess it must be the experiences you've had. You've learned many things."

"It's true. I have learned a lot." He sighed. "But the things I've learned haven't been happy things."

"You're a realist now. You know what the score is. You know they can't be beaten no matter how hard you try. But you are enough of a realist to know that they will never be beaten unless somebody makes a start somewhere, sometime."

"That's right. Everyone seems to want to give up. Everybody except me. And you, and the others. I was lucky to find you people."

"Were you?" She smiled fetchingly.

"Except for a while there when you two were going to let Grandpa finish me off."

Ivy laughed. "Grandpa still doesn't think you can be trusted."

"The memory of what happened to your father and mother, is that what affects him?"

Ivy nodded. "They were caught. Just like Arno. We never saw them again."

"What I don't understand is why the occupation forces let you operate. Members of your family and your gypsy group get caught one by one or two by two, but still they don't arrest the whole lot of you. Why?"

"That's easy to answer, Em. We provide needed entertainment for such places as Cornwall, Reardon, Spring Creek and where we're headed now, Marblehill. The rural people are more subjugated than city people. They don't have half the opportunities of the people in the metropolitan areas. Maybe it's because they can be kept track of so much more easily, I don't know. But you rarely see a Tri-D antenna or a current model turbo or flier out in the country. And only once in a blue moon does somebody downstate get a robot. I think there are several in Springfield, but outside of area directors' villas, I don't know of any except in Chicago. So it's a red letter day for them when Madame Le Gasta and her troupe hit town. It's the same with all the gypsy bands. In the Enemy mind the advantage of letting us operate must outweigh the disadvantage of having us do this little business on the side."

"Do they know exactly what you're up to?"

"Sometimes I wonder." She looked at him thoughtfully, her eyes far away. She brushed back her wayward hair absently. "Of course we don't know too much about it ourselves. It's better that way, you know. If you're caught, you can't tell anything. That's why we never call each other by name when we're working in the area. For example, you never knew the name of the leader back there at the implement shed, did you?"

"I still don't know his name."

"Johannes. Martie Johannes."

"*That* was Johannes?"

"Of course."

"How did he know who that sleeper belonged to? And how did he know my name? And how——"

"Hold on!" Ivy said, laughing and putting a hand over his

mouth. "Don't ask me about those things. Johannes knows more than anybody I know. He's a mysterious man. A powerful man, Em. The most powerful man I know. Sometimes he scares me."

"And he's on our side."

"Yes, thank God he's on our side."

"Did he know about Gniessin?"

"Yes, he did. Isn't that amazing? When Bruno talked to him by phone he told Bruno he understood Gniessin had died. But say"—and she looked at him with quickening interest—"when Bruno told him about your being immune, he wanted to know all the particulars. Bruno said he told him he didn't know any more than what you told him, but Johannes wants to see you tomorrow night. He's got some questions he wants to ask you. He seems to be excited about you for some reason."

"Tomorrow night's the delivery night?"

"Yes, but don't tell anyone I told you. With some people you still have to prove yourself. I think even Bruno hasn't become absolutely convinced about you."

"How about you?" Emmett asked, grinning. "Are you convinced yet?"

"Among your many loyalties, there is one I'm not so sure of," she said.

He moved to her side, tried to convince her with a kiss just how deep his loyalty was. When she could get her breath again, she said she'd never question it again.

"At least not until I recover," she added.

He lay back on the canvas and looked up at the stars, his hands behind his head.

"These pregnant girls you tell about," he said, "must be like the ones Dr. Smeltzer sent to the address he was given. You have your addresses and you start from there, is that right?"

"That's right," Ivy said. "We don't get all the unlawful pregnancies, of course. But we get some of them. Now tomorrow night in Marblehill we'll escort a group to Point One. That's where we pick up Johannes. I think there are twenty points in our sector altogether. From one point to another we may go by

truck, car, flier or boat. Or we might walk, as we were doing the night you found us.

"Sometimes the girls are local girls, sometimes they come from the East, and we're just one of the links in the big chain from the East to Point Ultimate in the West somewhere. And don't ask just where in the West. Johannes won't talk about it."

"But what does he want with all the pregnant women? What does he do with them?"

"I don't suppose he does anything with them. They're not very far along, most of them. You'd hardly know some of them are pregnant. But they've all been promised they can have their babies in complete security if they go along with men like Johannes. It's been going on for years."

"And the Enemy doesn't know?"

Ivy shrugged. "I suppose they know for some reason many of the illegally pregnant disappear. I don't know if the girls ever go back to their home towns or not. I doubt it. They'd have a lot of explaining to do, and besides, I know they don't go back because otherwise the information about what they've been through would come out sooner or later and we'd get stopped."

"And your mother and father were caught doing this thing?"

"Yes. About five years ago."

"And still you keep it up." His hand sought hers. "I think you're very brave."

"I'm not brave, Em. I know I'm going to be caught some day."

"Oh, no, you won't."

"No. What's to prevent it? And if you come in with us, you'll be caught some day, too."

"I've been caught before."

"You've been lucky. You're lucky to be immune, too. The first man I ever saw who was. I imagine that's what's got Johannes going."

"You know, Ivy, I thought all gypsies were immune. I've heard that all my life, grew up with that notion, in fact. And that's why I wanted to find gypsies. I wanted to join them. I thought I'd be with my own kind that way."

"I only wish it were true." She sighed. "But we're just like everybody else. If we don't take our booster when the time rolls around, we come down with the symptoms."

"Do all gypsies feel as your group does about the occupation? And do they work on this undercover project?"

"Heavens, no, Em. We've traveled around a great deal. We've seen other groups with permanent travel permits. Some of them never were gypsies until the occupation came. Others that were claim life is better under the occupation. It means less diversion for most of the people and as a result the gypsies are more welcome in the communities they visit. So they don't want to change it."

"Then I was really lucky to run into your group."

"Do you think so?" She ran a finger underneath his chin and made him look at her.

"I mean from the standpoint of anti-Communism. I could have been thrown out of some groups for what I'd say."

"Some of them are bad, too. Bruno and I often talk about it. And they have no attractions, have nothing much to offer. People tell us ours is the best one on the road. We're trying to keep it that way."

"What does Grandpa do?"

"He's been failing. We don't ask him to do much any more. Lost his eye during a fight ten years ago when he used to run the show and he's been going downhill ever since. His specialty was mind reading. I don't remember it, but my mother used to tell me how good he was."

"Maybe that's what I should take up."

"Mind reading?"

"I've got to do something with the show. I just can't stay in the illusion box all the time."

"You have to stay out of sight until all this blows over."

"I don't think it will ever blow over."

Ivy had turned to lie on her stomach, chin on her hands, looking down the road. Now she reached for and gripped Emmett's arm.

He rolled over to see her frightened face staring ahead.

He saw the line of turbotrucks grinding to a stop.

There were three turbos across the road before them, each with a red star on its side.

They heard Bruno get out of the cab, watched him go out into the road and stand there with his hands on his hips, looking toward the lead truck. He turned around and looked up at Ivy, starting to say something. Ivy stopped him by putting a finger to her lips and shaking her head.

Just then a lone flier hissed in the air up at the head of the line. It started toward them.

CHAPTER 18

As one person they turned toward the rear of the truck and clambered down over the canvas and jumped to the road. It was dark behind the last truck, and the flier hissed toward them, its searchlight probing the turbos and their contents.

They dashed across the road into the ditch and up the other side. The fence was no hindrance at all. They ran across an open field and Emmett wished he had been watching his surroundings just prior to the stop so he could tell where to run. Ivy tugged at his arm, pulling him left. He had no better plan, so he followed her.

In a few moments they came to another fence and went over it. And a few moments after that they were in the middle of a farm wood lot trying to get their breaths.

There was no sound of pursuit.

"You shouldn't have come," Emmett said, breathing hard. "You should have stayed at the truck. They'll check up and find you gone. Then they'll know something's wrong."

"I didn't stop to consider what I should or shouldn't do," Ivy said, sinking to a stump. "I just found myself doing it."

They listened, silent, as a flier hissed by in the dark overhead.

"That was close," Ivy said.

"I shouldn't have come. I should have gone somewhere else. Now you and the others are in trouble. They know I'm with you. It was a bad move."

"It wasn't either." She moved to his side. "I'm glad you came and so is everybody else. We've been in bad spots before. Somehow we always manage to get out of them."

He took her shoulders and made her face him squarely. "No, your group will always be under suspicion until they're sure I'm not with you. I've got to move on, away from here, don't you see that? I want you to go back up on the road and join Bruno as if nothing has happened. You can explain to him. Believe me, Ivy, it's the only way."

Her face was white in the pale light. "You mustn't, Em. I can't let you go like that. You've got to stay. We need you—and I need you worst of all." Her lips were pressed close together and she looked away.

He shook his head. "No, Ivy . . ." And then he was moved deeply by the concern in her face for him. Gently, he drew her to him and kissed her. She clung to him, saying his name over and over.

"I don't want to go, Ivy——"

"Stay then."

He drew away. "What's the use of this? What is there for us? We can't ever get married. Where would I get the permit? And what about children—and a home?"

"It's insecure, I know. But what isn't? Can't you see? It's what's wrong with the world."

He turned away then and said with finality, "Then it is up to someone to do something about it. Somebody has to start, to work against them——"

"You can't be the conquering hero all by yourself, Em."

He snorted. "My father said the same thing not so long ago."

"And he's right!" Her eyes flashed even in the semidarkness. "You're trying to carry the load all by yourself, Em, and no man was made who could do that. You've got to become part of a plan, part of a group."

"You call escorting a bunch of pregnant women across a few counties revolution? What kind of opposition is that?"

"It's a small part of the operation."

"What kind of operation?"

"You have to take a thing like that on faith. You have to trust the others or the whole thing's no good."

"Faith? Trust? What does Johannes do with these women? Has he ever told you that?"

"The less we know the less we can tell."

"How many times have I heard that!"

"Just what are you getting at, Emmett Keyes?"

"Just this: Hasn't it ever seemed peculiar to you, what you're doing? Have you ever wondered what he does with those women, why he wants them? Have you ever thought perhaps Johannes makes money out of it, that he might be working for a large group that somehow capitalizes on such misery?"

She drew back. "You have learned a lot, haven't you, Em," she said coldly. "You've learned so much you've turned cynical. Pretty soon now you'll be just like the rest of the people. You'll shrug your shoulders and not believe them worth saving. And maybe you'll figure out a way to make something out of it yourself!"

They stood, six feet apart, glaring at each other. And suddenly Emmett wondered how this could be, how they could be shouting at each other like this. And then the realization that they *had* been shouting hit him.

A flier hissed above them. It was lower now. It did not move away. And suddenly the night air was blasted with an amplified voice.

"We know you're down there, Keyes," the speaker boomed. "Come out on the road. There is no escape. We have the woods surrounded."

In a moment Ivy was in his arms and he was holding her tight and he was thinking: This is the end. Surely it must be. And he knew with deep pain that there was nothing more he could do now for himself, for Ivy, for his folks, perhaps, or for the people

he had dragged into this thing with him. There'd be no slip this time.

"I'd better go up," he said softly. "You stay here until I get out on the road. Then you can come out. That way you won't get involved." He stroked her hair. She looked up at him. His kiss was gentle, tender.

"You still don't know me, Em," she said. "You still don't understand." She searched his face. "There's nothing without you, can't you get that through your thick head? Come on." She took his arm. "We'll go out together or we don't go out at all."

"This is your last warning, Keyes," the voice boomed. "Come out now or we'll sleep the whole place and come in and carry you out."

He clenched his teeth, dared not look at her as he held her hand tightly in his and they started to walk.

Together they emerged from the woods.

CHAPTER 19

"In here," the soldier said, opening the heavy, paneled door for him.

Emmett walked into a long room. At the end of it sat two men, one a small, bushy-haired, snapping-eyed man, a brief case at his side on the table, the other a larger, stocky man with a bullet head.

He walked to the single table, the eyes of the men never leaving him.

"Sit down," the smaller man said coldly.

Emmett took the only chair on his side of the table.

"I'm Colonel Pushkin," the thickset man said, his voice heavy with accent. His eyes were heavy-lidded but alert, his voice low and steady. "This is Captain Johnson."

The captain arranged papers before them.

"Keyes," the colonel said, "I will put important things first. Your life, the lives of your parents and those of the people who harbored you are at stake. If you co-operate, all will be spared. If you do not, you will be executed and the others will go to labor camps. Is that clear?"

"Yes."

"*Sir!*" Johnson added.

"It's all right, Captain. Mr. Keyes feels he owes us no fealty.

If he proves informative, his lack of use of a title of respect will be forgiven."

Johnson glared.

Emmett glared back.

"Now then," the colonel continued amiably, "we trust your trip here was a comfortable one."

"A little unexpected," Emmett said.

"Of course," Pushkin smiled. "You did not expect to be caught, is that it?" He laughed a little. "But then it is the right attitude not to expect arrest. An agent can hardly operate successfully with a negative outlook, now can he? I presume this is your first trip to New York?" The eyes were sly.

"I've never been out of Illinois before."

The eyebrows arched. "Is that so? That's very interesting, Keyes. Do you find New York to your liking?"

"It's bigger than I imagined."

"Yes, of course. It is bigger than I thought it would be, too. I've been here seven years this August and I've not got used to it myself. Do you think you would like living here in New York?"

"I don't know. I've been whisked from here to there and haven't really had a good look at it yet."

The colonel nodded. "I sympathize. All those perfunctory questionings. It is too bad, but necessary. Try to understand. But it needn't be like that, Keyes. There's a good job waiting for you here, if you wish. It all depends on what you want, you see?"

"You're leading up to something," Emmett said. "Why not get to the point?"

"Ah," Pushkin said, smiling, "you do understand. I shall not waste time then." He coughed lightly. "Now, perhaps we should begin with Point Ultimate."

"Point Ultimate?" Emmett could only stare at him blankly.

The colonel reddened, Johnson darted him a glance, his lip curling ever so slightly.

"Yes," Pushkin said, "Point Ultimate."

Emmett frowned. He had heard the words before, but he could not for the moment remember where or when.

"Don't tell us you never heard of it," the colonel said drily.

"No," he said truthfully, "I can't say that. But I can't remember where."

Johnson snorted.

The colonel's eyes glittered. "Perhaps Mr. Keyes is not aware of the seriousness of his charges, Captain. Will you read them to him, please?"

"Yes, sir." The captain shuffled papers on the table, picked up one. "The People's State of the United States of America versus Emmett Keyes. On this day——"

"All right," Pushkin interrupted, "just the meat of the matter, if you please, Captain. The list of crimes."

The captain's eyes fell to matter lower on the page. "The specific charges are: The murder of Party Member Cadwallader Tisdail, the murder of Party Member Tisdail's wife——"

"His wife!" Emmett was shocked. "I didn't kill his wife!"

"But you did kill Tisdail?"

"Of course I killed Tisdail. I'd do it over again, too."

"There is little likelihood of that, my friend. But you might as well take the blame for the murder of Mrs. Tisdail. What's the difference? One murder more or less, what does it matter?"

"I didn't even know she was dead," Emmett said. Now he realized what she meant when she said she was going to take the blame for Tisdail's murder. She had killed herself to make it appear she had taken her husband's life and then her own. Only somehow it now looked as if he had killed them both.

"The murder of Central Illinois Area Director Alfred Gniessin——"

"That's a lie!" Emmett cried. "Whatever gave you that idea? He died in the steam bath as a result of a heart attack."

"Really?" the colonel said archly. "You should not have made him stay in there so long, Keyes. It was poor planning."

"How could I make him do anything? His robot Jascha kept him from harm every step of the way!"

"Read the next part, Captain."

"The destruction of a Personal Servant Series VII Robot Jascha with a blow on the head."

"Jascha followed him in the steam bath," Emmett explained. "He was overcome by the heat. I'll admit I bashed his head in."

"You bashed it in before you locked Gniessin in the steam bath."

"I did not!"

"Proceed," Pushkin said drily.

"Assisting Dr. Averell Smeltzer, a state prisoner assigned to Area Director Gniessin, to escape from the Area Director's villa."

"I'll admit that."

"It is not a matter of your admitting anything," the colonel said. "These are the facts. They need no corroboration."

"And miscellaneous items," Johnson continued, "all of them crimes against the state, namely, robbing an Area Director, stealing state weapons, the theft and destruction of a model three government flier, the unlawful sleeping of an entire farm family, and flight to avoid arrest."

"Quite a list, isn't it?" the colonel said. "It's no wonder you've been ordered executed—but of course you needn't be, if you'd tell us a few things, such as where Point Ultimate is."

"I don't even know *what* it is."

Pushkin leaned forward, all humor gone from his face. "Mr. Keyes, do you mean to sit there as a member of the Manumit and tell us you don't know where Point Ultimate is?"

"Manumit?" Emmett stared at the man again.

Pushkin threw his arms in the air in resignation. "How stupid can you think we are, Keyes?" he cried. Then, more controlled, he said, "I suppose the next thing you're going to tell us is that you're not immune."

Emmett was silent. The questioning had got out of hand. These men were talking about things he knew nothing about. And his immunity! How did they guess about that?

"A man kills so many people," the colonel said, "he escapes from so many places, knows the right people to contact, and yet he sits here like a schoolboy who has forgotten his lessons. Do

you expect us to believe you're not an agent of the Manumit?"

"I don't give a damn what you believe," Emmett said. "I'm no agent of anything."

"Oh, you're not, eh?" Pushkin glowered. "I suppose you think we ought to be stupid enough to try probing your mind?"

Emmett *had* wondered why they hadn't anesthetized his brain to get information they wanted the way Gniessin had ordered Dr. Smeltzer to do.

"That would have been fine, wouldn't it?" the colonel went on. "A nice, easy way out for you. Poof! And you've become a corpse and we get nothing out of you." He shook his head. "We had thought you'd choose to live, Keyes. Life must look attractive to one as young as you. Why do you lie? Didn't you realize we'd ask you about these things? What did you expect us to do?"

"Frankly, I thought I'd go straight to a labor camp. That's what usually happens, isn't it?"

"For a man in your position, Keyes, you're very funny. It's too bad we can't operate and take out that little gadget you carry around behind your ears. You people are very thorough in that respect. I've seen them melt into globs of metal on the operating table. I don't think we'll waste your time trying to recover yours. It will be melting soon enough, though neither Captain Johnson nor I will care to watch it." He sighed. "Well, for the last time and for the record, Keyes, are you going to tell us about these things or not?"

"I lost you back there a few minutes ago," Emmett said. "I don't know what you're talking about now."

"That's all we wanted to know then," Pushkin said gruffly.

Johnson started shoving papers back into his brief case.

Emmett heard the door far behind him open, the click of hard heels in military unison. His arms were seized.

"This man," Pushkin told the two soldiers at Emmett's sides, "is to be taken to the political prisoner detention cell to await execution."

The soldiers saluted, turned Emmett around and walked

briskly to the door. Once outside, the soldiers relaxed, moved down the long corridor.

A short distance down the hallway, they were approached by two other soldiers who barred their way.

"Is this the prisoner Emmett Keyes?" the taller of the two new soldiers asked.

"Yes. We're taking him to the detention cell," the soldier to his right said.

"We have orders to take him to the execution area," the shorter soldier said. "We just came from the detention cell."

"But you can't have him yet," the soldier to Emmett's left protested. "We haven't signed him in for detention."

"He must be executed at once," Tall said. "He's a dangerous man. It has been so ordered by the general."

Short nodded. "You'll have to answer to him if you delay the transfer."

"Do you have orders?"

"Of course. Here."

The soldier on Emmett's right took the papers, glanced over them.

He never finished reading them.

The action was too fast for Emmett; besides, he had not been expecting anything unusual. But the next moment he felt the pressure on his arms leave and the soldiers at his sides slumped to the floor.

He was standing, openmouthed, looking down at the two soldiers on the floor, when Tall and Short took his arm.

"Here," Tall said, shoving a capsule in his hand. "Break this open and breathe deeply. Hurry! There isn't much time."

"Come on," Short said.

A bell rang somewhere.

The ceiling suddenly blossomed into a row of red lights down the center of it.

"Condition Red! Condition Red!" a voice boomed.

"Now we're in for it!" Short said.

The hallway was filling with soldiers and civilians.

"Halt!" the voice boomed. "Stay where you are everyone!"

The hurrying figures froze, the furore evaporated.

Then the speaker said, "All activity will cease until the emergency on Floor fifty-four is investigated and cleared. No one will leave the building. Entry except for Class four officials is forbidden until the emergency is over. Class three officials may now move on that floor to investigate."

A door clicked open down the hall. Pushkin and Johnson came running down the corridor, stopping at the sight of the two soldiers on the floor. Then Pushkin looked up and saw Emmett and the two soldiers at his sides.

"What is the meaning of this?" he demanded angrily, striding forward.

"Stay where you are," Tall said. He had a sleeper in his hand.

"You're crazy!" Johnson said. "You'll be executed for this!"

"Condition Red," Pushkin cried, "this is Pushkin. There are two imposters—!" He never got any further. There was a click of the sleeper and the two men dropped. A gasp went up from those in the corridor who had been halted by the speaker. They moved toward Tall and Short.

Suddenly everyone slumped to the floor except Emmett and the pair at his side.

"Well!" Short said. "I never thought the brain would get around to sleeping them soon enough."

Emmett stared at the inert forms on the floor. He was lost, confused.

"Here," Tall said, "I brought these along for you, Keyes." He handed him a sleeper and a heater. "You may need them."

"Who are you two?" Emmett asked, taking the weapons.

"Time enough for that later," Short said. "In case you're wondering why you didn't sleep like the rest, it's because that capsule is a sleeper antidote. We took ours a little earlier. Come on."

Picking their way over the reclining figures on the floor, they moved down the corridor.

"Halt!" the speaker kept booming. They paid no attention.

"Can't take the elevator," Tall said. "We'll have to walk up."

They came to a door at the end of the corridor. Tall brought his heater to bear on the lock. It melted, the metal running down the door and jamb like hot wax.

Short kicked the door open.

"Halt!" the speaker cried.

Bells were ringing and lights were flashing everywhere now.

They ran up the stairs. Two flights. Three flights. Then four, five, and six.

Emmett was out of breath, panting, his heart beating wildly, his lungs demanding more air than he could give them. He lost count of the number of stair flights.

Finally they were at another door. Tall melted it completely.

Emmett made a move to dash through.

"Wait!" Tall cried.

Almost at once the doorway and the floor this side of it turned cherry red. Emmett realized if he had dashed through he would have been burned to a crisp.

"We've got to get the tower or the flier will never make it!" Tall cried. The tiny area was getting unsufferably hot.

Short pointed his heater at a small window on the other side of the room. It melted down. Now the wall was melting, cracking, blistering from the force of the heater.

"I'll go out there," Short said. "It's on the protected side."

"We'll all go," Tall said.

They jumped through the smoking hole, leaned against the side of the cupola. Everywhere about them, except where they were, the roof was smoking and melting.

"It's not using full force," Short said. "Otherwise the whole roof would go."

"Maybe we can aim around the corner here," Tall said, turning toward the wall and stepping toward the edge of the cupola. "Come on."

The three moved toward the corner.

Tall moved out his heater to aim at the tower. He drew his hand back quickly, grimacing in pain. The heater clattered to

the roof. "Damn!" he said, holding his burned hand. "We can't do it that way!"

"If we can't hit the tower, we're ruined!" Short said. "The flier won't get down. The tower'll blast it."

"Look out!" Tall crouched, pointing.

A flier with a brilliant red star on its side zoomed close, banked and turned toward them.

"Let him have it!" Short cried, aiming his heater at the approaching flier. Emmett aimed both heater and sleeper, clicked away as the flier zoomed close enough for him to see the face of the pilot. A jagged hole in the roof suddenly appeared before them, running along toward them. They jumped to one side. Part of the cupola collapsed behind them. There was little protection now.

The flier appeared again. This time they aimed and clicked at it again. It wobbled in the air, whooshed past.

There was a tremendous crash, a piercing shriek of rending metal. Flames shot out beyond them.

Tall chanced a look over the ragged edge of bricks. "It's hit the tower!" he cried. Then he was on his feet, retrieving his gun.

They were out of the cupola's protection now, firing their heaters at the tottering tower. It blackened in the heat from the smoldering flier and their heaters. The top of it swayed, guy wires snapping. It wobbled, then fell with a resounding crash to the roof, falling through to the floors below. The whole building trembled with the force of the crash, the dust and smoke blinding them.

"Over here!" Tall shouted, running to a clear part of the roof. There were many fliers in the sky now, but he jumped up and down, waving his arms at his sides and above his head.

Short joined him, Emmett running up behind them.

A long black flier slipped out of the west, made a long arc toward the roof.

"Come on, come on!" Tall cried. "Cut it short, man!"

The flier skidded to a bobbing stop and the door opened.

"Good shooting, boys," the pilot cried.

"It's not over," Tall said, moving in first.

Emmett had hardly got aboard when the flier lifted abruptly.

"We've got the speed," Short said, "let's have it. We'll outrun them easily."

The flier was rising so rapidly Emmett could hardly hold himself up off the floor.

"Look out for that one," Tall shouted, pointing.

"I see it," the pilot said. He pressed a stud.

Emmett lifted his head long enough to see a sudden ball of fire where a flier had been.

The wind was shrieking past the air vents.

"I think we've done it," Short said. "I don't think they'll get us now."

CHAPTER 20

The flier was high now. The pilot leveled off, and Tall and Short relaxed their vigilance at the windows.

"Kick it in the pants," Short said. "Let's go."

"Did you bring along our clothes, Spence?" Tall asked the pilot.

"In the aft compartment."

"Thanks. I was never more miserable in anything. What a monkey suit!" He rose and started to take off the uniform, looked at Emmett as he did so. "You proved pretty handy with those guns, Keyes. But from what Johannes tells us about you, you've had a little experience."

"Johannes? Do you know him?"

He nodded. "And best you get to know us, Keyes. My name's John Gillis, this is Stanley Norton, and the pilot is Spence Givens. We were ordered to rescue you and I guess we did. Pretty good show, don't you think?"

"It was wonderful," Emmett conceded. Gillis was the tall one. He was older than Emmett had at first thought, for there were many gray hairs among the brown at the temples. He was muscular, sun-tanned, his hair short-cropped, his blue eyes frank and friendly. Norton was dark, stocky, had a cleft chin and resolute lips and bright brown eyes. They were donning loose-fitting, light blue shirts and dark blue trousers.

"There's an outfit here for you," Gillis called from the rear of the ship. "I hope it fits." He tossed a shirt and trousers to Emmett. "You'd better take off that outfit you're wearing."

"You're a pretty important man, Keyes," Norton said. "Otherwise we'd never have tried to yank you out from under their noses."

"Important? Why?"

"You're immune," Gillis said. "That's why."

"If you had only told Johannes that when you met him back in Illinois, you wouldn't have had to go through all that agony."

"Stan's right, Keyes. Immune men are almost impossible to find these days. Especially immune men possessing such a hatred for Communist domination."

"Are you immune?"

Gillis nodded. "The three of us." He gathered up the clothing they had taken off, opened a window and tossed it out. "Good riddance, I say."

"Amen."

"Now if we only had a place to wash up and a good meal, we'd be back to normal. How long before we get there, Spence?"

"About thirty-five minutes."

"Where are we going?"

"A little place in Florida." Gillis flopped into a seat and grinned across at Emmett. "I suppose you're wondering what this is all about."

"I've been looking for the resistance movement," Emmett said. "It looks as if I've found it."

"Johannes told us about you. He was going to tell you about us when you met in Marblehill, but you never made it."

"You're quite a guy, Keyes," Norton said, taking a seat in front of Gillis. "You just leave home, knock off a party member, then nearly wreck an area director's villa. You get around quite a bit for a guy who isn't in Manumit."

"Manumit? Pushkin was talking about that back there. What is it?"

"It's the name of our outfit, Keyes. They thought you were a

member of it. We don't often stage open warfare as we did today. It's more of a long-range operation."

"Don't be misled by the name," Norton said. "Nobody knows where it came from."

"It means to free from bondage. It's really a verb. But it's stuck through the years. I was twenty-five before I knew it existed, though I knew I was immune long before that. I was lucky to find it. I was on my way to a slave-labor camp at the time. But that's too long a story to tell here. Norton's been in it ever since he was born."

"I've never known anything else. I don't see how people live going for their booster every month, licking the Enemy boot. It's —well, hideous is about the right word."

"And this ship—does it belong to the Manumit?"

"That's right," Gillis said. "Oh, we're not lacking in resources or ability, Keyes. All we lack is manpower. But we're working in that direction."

The flier seemed a stationary thing high above the clouds, but it moved because the coast line was never the same.

"Won't they intercept this ship?" Emmett asked. "Send up fliers for attack?"

"The commies?" Gillis snorted. "Their air force is practically nonexistent. Who are they supposed to fight? This is the first sortie like this I've been on for a long time."

"Hideous is the word for living under commie domination," Norton said, "and decadent is the word for the commies themselves. We don't want to get them stirred up and start thinking about retaliation."

"Have you ever wondered how it happened you're immune, Keyes?" Gillis asked.

"I don't think a day's gone by I haven't wondered about it."

"It's simple. I don't know how much you know or how much you've figured out for yourself, but the doctor simply failed to inoculate you at birth. The result? You're immune."

"I'm afraid I don't follow you."

"What John means to say is the doctor didn't give you the plague bacillus."

"Plague bacillus?"

Gillis smiled. "I see you don't know. Well, the newborn aren't inoculated *against* the plague as the Enemy would have everyone believe, Keyes. They're inoculated *with* the plague."

"You mean babies are deliberately *given* the plague?"

"That's right," Norton said. "It's one of the commies' most closely guarded secrets."

Gillis nodded. "It's quite a concept. You have to go back to nineteen sixty-nine to understand it. That's when the plague bombs were dropped, you know. Those exposed to it at that time got the plague. The threat of it lasted their entire lifetime. They had to have booster shots once a month to prevent the onset of symptoms. But the threat of the plague for the people born *after* the bombs were dropped lasted only a few months. By nineteen seventy, newborn children were in no danger from it. Nature has a way of destroying even the most virulent strains of bacteria, you know. But the Enemy hadn't counted on that. They thought people would be forever exposed to the contagion.

"So, when the plague lost its potency for the newborn, to insure that they would get it and have to come for their boosters for the rest of their lives, the Enemy decided to transmit the disease to the newborn by inoculation. Each child so inoculated would be theirs to dominate, for it would be dependent upon them for its freedom from the disease."

"I see," Emmett said. So many things suddenly became clearer now, why the Communists insisted on birth permits, why they made it a law that all children must be born in hospitals, why they raised such a hue and cry over unlawful pregnancy and made such an example of those in that unfortunate condition. And then he thought of the mothers. They actually *wanted* their children to be born in hospitals because they thought that was the way to keep them from getting the plague! What irony!

"Johannes is a Manumit agent," Gillis said. "His main job is recruiting women who are unlawfully pregnant by occupation

standards. He says you met him once as he was escorting a group from one point to another."

"I met him, but I didn't know what he was doing until a gypsy girl named Ivy told me he had promised those women their children would be born in peace and security and without fear of reprisal. I see now that the real object must have been to get the immune babies for Manumit. Is that right?"

"That's right," Gillis said, "for they are the immune soldiers-to-be. The army of the immune will some day destroy the Communist grip on the world."

"Men like Johannes," Norton said, "have to recruit small groups, such as that gypsy band you were with. They are told we will help the illegally pregnant and promise a healthy, occupation-free upbringing for their child. That is usually enough to get them to uncover an illegally pregnant woman now and then. There is an appointed time and place where these women go. Men like Johannes lead these groups from point to point until they reach their destination."

"Pregnant women," Gillis added, "don't need booster shots. That's not generally known, either, for most of them report for the boosters anyway and the occupation forces never tell them any different."

"If all your groups are as faithful as that gypsy band I was with, then your program must be working out all right."

"Oh, we have all kinds of people," Gillis said. "Even some daytime collaborators help us out at night. This business about labor camps for those who don't get birth permits isn't a very popular law."

"It's a last resort," Norton said, "but it's better than death in a labor camp. That's their reasoning."

"And if the woman lives to have the child in a labor camp, the child goes commie all down the line, full indoctrination from the beginning."

Norton shook his head. "There are many like that. There will have to be a lot of undoing when the day comes."

"You got anything to eat, Spence?" Gillis asked. "I'm as hungry as a soldier on leave."

"Didn't think about it," Givens said. "Should have brought something along, I guess. Say, there are some candy bars back there somewhere. Look in the supply compartment."

Gillis went back, soon returned with a sack of candy. "Thank God for Givens' sweet tooth." He passed the bag around.

They munched in silence for a while, the only sound the hiss of the flier and the soughing of the wind past the ports and vents.

Then Emmett said, "I don't see how you get away with it. Don't the occupation forces know what you're doing?"

Gillis shrugged. "They know there's something going on, but they're not sure what it is. The official thinking is that they believe we're in some sort of money-making business, taking these women somewhere to have their babies. But though they look for the place they can never find it. And the women never return home and the children are never seen. So they don't know what to think."

"I don't think they're worried about it at all," Norton said. "Oh, they've disrupted a transfer now and then, but we've got most of them through to Point Ultimate."

"Point Ultimate?" Emmett put his bar down. "Now that's what Pushkin was trying to find out about."

"Why shouldn't he?" Gillis said. "He thought you were one of us. He probably still does, if he's awakened from that dose of sleep the brain in the building handed him."

"But what is it?"

"A destination, Keyes. It's apt to be anywhere."

Norton opened a window and threw his candy wrapper out. "Point Ultimate changes all the time. In the United States it's been in the Great Salt Lake Desert, the Mojave Desert, in the Black Hills, a plateau in the Rocky Mountains——"

"You must understand," Gillis interrupted, "that Point Ultimate needn't be in the United States at all. Sometimes it's in Sweden, Australia, or in South Africa—anywhere in the world."

"That's right. It's not a concentrated headquarters. And that's

why the Enemy hasn't raised a fuss about it. Reports from isolated areas don't get much attention if they're infrequent and worldwide. You see, the Manumit is working to free not only the United States but the world as well."

Emmett frowned. "But how can you move all these women and children around all the time?"

"I don't see what you mean."

"Well, how long has this being going on?"

"Roughly about ten years."

"Well, then, how many children have been born during that time?"

"About ten thousand."

"How can you move ten thousand children and mothers around from one Point Ultimate to another?"

"Now I see what you mean."

"It's because," Norton said, "the women and children are not on Earth."

"Not on Earth!"

"That's right," Gillis said, grinning. "They're on Mars."

CHAPTER 21

The surf billowed and roared along the endless stretch of deserted beach, and spindrift moved slowly north high in the sky. It was a lonely place, unsullied by man's hand, a sandy waste of rock and shell.

Out of the haze on the northern horizon far out at sea came the flier, a speck that grew as it moved out of the sky at great speed. Finally it passed over the beach, the hiss of it lost among the trees farther inland and the waves on the shore. It curved low out to sea again, then came in near the breaking waves and floated gently to the sand.

A door opened. Gillis was the first man out, dropping softly to the sand, his eyes searching the woods to the west, then looking out to the sea. Norton was next. He landed a little more heavily, looked out at the sea. Then Emmett jumped down. It was warm and humid.

"Aren't you coming out, Spence?" Gillis asked, squinting up into the flier.

"I'd better stay here," Givens said. "We might have to leave in a hurry."

"Too bad we can't go for a swim," Norton said.

"We can at least wash," Gillis said. "That is, if you can stand the salt water. Come on, Keyes."

They walked to the water and dabbled in it, washing the grime from their hands and faces.

"When's the submarine due?" Emmett asked.

"He's still pretty far out at sea," Gillis said. "It will be a while yet."

"I don't see why you don't use the flier. If you can go anywhere you want in it, why bother with a submarine?"

"Not enough space in the flier. We've got to pick up a contingent of PW's—that's what we call pregnant women—at Caracas and take them to Point Ultimate. It's an island off South America this time. You'll see."

They moved up the beach to the flier again, sat in the shade of it.

"You got any cigarettes up there, Spence?" Norton asked.

"Never use them," Spence said. "You're welcome to my pipe, though. You want it?"

"Any port in a storm," Norton said, rising. He took the pipe and pouch Givens offered him through the window of the flier.

"Why don't you tell Keyes about your father, Stan?" Gillis said. "That will help him understand more about how this thing started."

Norton filled the pipe with tobacco. "It's quite a story, Keyes. Quite a story." He leaned back against a wheel of the flier, smoke from the pipe eddying about his head and being whisked away by the breeze.

"The bombs fell in nineteen sixty-nine and they were all goners, all of them, every one, all who had been working on secret government projects. My father, Lyle Norton, was an officer on one of the atomic submarines like the one we'll be seeing soon out there." He pointed to the sea with the pipe.

"He often told me how he felt, having to come back to Norfolk, knowing his work was through. It was the end of the U.S. Navy. The end of all navies, as a matter of fact. Even the Communist navies. What use were they when there were no more wars to fight? But with his qualifications, my father was placed as an engineer in a reactormotor plant."

Norton shrugged. "There were many men, men far more brilliant than my father, who had been working on government projects like rocket propulsion and space medicine, preparing the way for flight into space, who were left with nothing when the Communists took over. The commies weren't interested in space. Why should they be? The world was suddenly their oyster. They had everything. So, most of them, like my father, were assigned to manufacturing centers.

"But one by one, these specialists disappeared. A man by the name of Dr. Lawrence Brinkham started Manumit in the Rocky Mountains, lured disgruntled scientists to the laboratory he had carved out of solid rock. He and the other few who came worked out a long-range plan there. They had money, buying booster vials from corrupt occupation officers, stealing it when they could not. There were many scrapes, Dad told me. Many deaths. Brinkham even wired the laboratory to blow up if the Enemy ever found it. But they never did.

"Dad was contacted in nineteen seventy-one. He disappeared and managed to make it to a rendezvous from where he was transported blindfolded to the laboratory. While he was there he married a young woman bacteriologist and I was born in nineteen seventy-six. It was quite a place as I remember it—an enormous, brightly lighted cave, honeycombed with work areas. It would probably look smaller to me should I see it now, for it is still there.

"Talk about work! Those people knew how to do it. They had drive, a devotion to principle hardly equaled before or since. They didn't know what sleep was or when to eat or even what they ate. They labored night and day and early in nineteen eighty-four they sent the first space ship up to lay the groundwork for the first space station. They shuttled back and forth for a year completing it. But they didn't stop with that. They built the second the next year.

"I was just a kid, but I remember how they talked about whether the Russians would be able to track the ship by radar. But they worried over nothing. They hadn't realized how far the

commies had retrogressed, for the commies didn't even man radar stations any more. What use were they? There was no enemy to be warned of.

"In nineteen eighty-six they sent the first space ship around the moon, returning to the space station. The next year the ship went to Mars. In nineteen eighty-eight the first settlement was underway on Mars and flights became a regular thing."

Norton studied the bowl of his pipe. "All the time the rest were working on space flight, my mother and other bacteriologists were working their lives away trying to crack the secret of the strain of bacteria the Enemy had developed. But they worked in vain. They were never able to find the answer and booster vials had to be sent along with each ship and it appeared as if they would always have to be provided. And sometimes booster serum was almost impossible to get.

"It was my mother who devised a method of immunization that has finally become standard. She worked out a system of attenuation, a treatment that resembles the tapering off method used in drug addiction, with the assistance of other serums she devised. She found that if less and less booster serum is given each month, with the help of other antibodies, the blood itself is able to oppose the plague unaided and the person becomes immune and never needs another booster shot. It worked fine on experimental animals, but there was tragedy with the first human volunteers. My mother was among the first five. They all died. But others took up the work and the system was improved and of the second group of five, one survived to become immune. It finally worked out that only one person out of five stands a chance of being immunized this way. And that's the way it stands today.

"But money was running out then, sources of booster serum were drying up, and the people in Manumit were tired of being dependent on it. It was decided in nineteen eighty-eight to vote on whether or not all in Manumit should take the treatment, knowing it would be death for four out of five. Everyone wanted to leave Earth, you see, and they wanted to close Brinkham's

laboratories and move everything to the space stations and Mars. This could not be done without their all being immune. The vote was almost unanimous for the treatment. They all took it, those on Earth, on the stations and on Mars. Those who survived buried those who did not. Our numbers shrank from two thousand to a little more than four hundred. My father was among those who survived, but he proved allergic to the dust on Mars and succumbed to it as many others had.

"By mid-nineteen eighty-nine Manumit was on Mars with only a few immune agents left on Earth. They recruited the first contingent of PW's who landed on Mars that year and the first child was born—Mars First, he was called. He is ten years old now. It was a small beginning, the colony was small, the hardships almost unbearable, but the nucleus of the immune grew until now there are ten thousand children there, about two thousand women who are teachers and nurses and cooks and everything else you can think of, and three hundred immune men, all preparing for the day when Earth may again be home to them."

Norton lit his pipe again, puffed it in silence while his brown eyes stared moodily at the sea. Emmett followed his gaze, saw the sweep of beach, the breakers, and thrilled to the magnitude of the ocean and the magnificence of the story Norton had told. He had known that somewhere there would be men who would not be content under domination, that the wisdom of men would work out some way to combat it. And here it was, the Manumit, the thing he had been searching for; the job he must do was clear now. He was no longer a man fleeing one danger and stumbling into the next. He was no longer a single man, a lonely man, searching for the army of the free.

He had found it. He had found his life.

Manumit.

"You may wonder about those two thousand women, Keyes," Gillis said. "There are ten thousand children, you know, and each of them had a mother on Mars. The women are told when they reach their Point Ultimate that they are going to Mars to

have their baby, that they will have treatment for immunization afterward, that only one in five will survive. They are also told that if any wish to return to their homes a flier will take them there. But to this date not one has wanted to turn back. Each wants his child to be born free of domination."

"It's a pity the fathers can't go along and take their chances as well." Emmett said.

"Sometimes they do. It's up to the agent in charge of PW recruitment to screen both men and women."

Givens leaned out of the flier window. "You through with that pipe, Stan?"

"I guess so." Norton stood up, knocked the dottle out of it on his shoes. "Believe me, a pipe will never replace cigarettes. Not that I'm not grateful, Spence." He handed the pipe up.

"Ewing's two miles at sea, Spence," Gillis said.

"I heard."

Emmett looked at Gillis. "I've been sitting here and you haven't moved. How do you know this Ewing is two miles at sea?"

"Because a little metal device behind my ears tells me."

"Pushkin mentioned some metal that melts when you die. Is that it?"

"It's triggered to do just that when any attempt is made to put an agent under hypnotic control, whether it's by drugs, brain anesthetic or high cycle probing."

"Remember my telling you we have *two* space stations, Keyes?" Norton said. "One of them is above you in the sky at all times regardless of the day or night. Whatever I say can be heard on Station One right now. Whatever you say can be heard there, too. The little metal transmitters send it out and pick it up. We're in constant communication with either station and, as a result, with every other agent on Earth. You'll get yours when you get to Mars."

"When I get to Mars?"

"Of course," Gillis said, laughing. "What do you suppose we rescued you for? You're going to Mars, you'll get your earphones

and indoctrination. It will take a year or two, maybe a little more. Then you'll come back and start to work."

Emmett gave him a long look. "You're in contact with every other agent?" He recalled Johannes's question about the serial number of the sleeper and his mumbled questions as he sat on the sawhorse in the implement shed. The reason for that was clear now. He was asking the space station for information!

"Of course. Didn't I just say so? Why?"

"You could contact Johannes *now?*"

"Through the station, yes."

"Well . . ." He tried to control his agitation. "Could you ask about the gypsy band? The one I was with? And—and could you ask about a girl named Ivy?"

Gillis looked away. "There's no need to ask, Keyes. I've got bad news for you."

"Bad news!"

"Some of it bad, anyway." He set his lips together, frowned and looked at the sand. "The gypsy band was wiped out. They tried to escape from their captors. The occupation police wanted them to do just that. It makes things easier for them."

"Ivy—too?" His voice was a whisper, his hands were clenched at his sides, his fingernails knifing his palms.

"That news isn't so bad, Keyes." Gillis looked up and grinned. "She managed to escape, Johannes said."

"Thank God for that," Emmett said, sighing with relief. "Thank God for that. Does Johannes know where she is?"

"Well . . ." Gillis put his tongue in his cheek, cocked an eye at Norton. "Maybe he doesn't right now, but——"

"For heaven's sake, tell him," Norton said. "I can't stand it either."

"She'll be here in about two minutes," Gillis said. "Johannes said she swore she'd kill herself if she couldn't see you again, demanded he take her to you. There was just no controlling her, he said. Quite a woman you've got there, Keyes."

"She's coming *here?*"

"I'd be looking toward those trees, if I were you, Keyes," Gillis

said, getting up and pointing to the woods beyond the beach. "It was supposed to be a surprise."

Emmett jumped up and ran around the flier, shading his eyes with his hand, looking over the treetops.

First there was nothing, then suddenly a flier zoomed over the trees and hissed past them, making a wide sweep of the beach. It turned and settled softly to the sand near them.

The door opened.

Ivy stepped out.

She stood there, a trim figure, slim and dark, her hair blowing in the breeze, her eyes glowing.

"Ivy!" Emmett ran.

Ivy ran.

He held her close and found she was trembling. He kissed her. He felt her cheek, brushed her hair with his hand.

"Oh, Em! I was so afraid you were lost," she said, clinging to him.

And he kissed her again, wanting to hold her to make sure this was reality and this was really the Ivy he knew and loved.

"All right," a voice boomed and Johannes came up to them. "Doesn't an old friend rate? After all, I brought her to you, man."

The blond man was the same. Tall, strong and blue-eyed. He was smiling.

"Thanks," Emmett said, grasping his hand warmly. "Thanks, Johannes, for bringing her to me."

"It's something I'd do for anybody in Manumit, Keyes," he said.

Ivy took his arm. "Johannes has been telling me all about Manumit and why all those women were taken across the country and how they go to Mars. . . . I had no idea! Why, it's going to be thrilling, our going to Mars, of all places! Isn't it wonderful?"

He brought her around to face him. "*Our* going to Mars, Ivy?"

"Of course! You don't think you could leave me behind, do you?"

"But you can't take the treatment, Ivy! Only one out of five makes it. There's no booster serum on Mars, you know."

"I don't care, Em. I'm going with you."

Emmett looked around helplessly. The others looked away.

He turned back to her. "I love you, Ivy. Believe me, I do. But I don't want you dead."

She looked at him steadily. "I'd rather be dead than left behind, Em."

"The sub's there," Spence cried.

They looked toward the sea. It seemed far out to Emmett, that speck on the water. But it was there.

"We'd better get going," Gillis said. "Ewing won't like it if we don't. He doesn't like surfacing for very long, you know."

They climbed aboard the fliers.

In a few moments they were headed out to sea.

PORTALS OF TOMORROW

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Edited by August Derleth

A most discriminating expert here makes his choice of the cream of the current crop of short stories of science-fiction and other fantasy. The result: a sparkling collection stuffed with all the weird and wonderful things fantasy connoisseurs (and a growing army of laymen) love to find.

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