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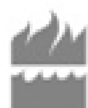
The Last Frontier



Alistair MacLean

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The Last Frontier

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An undercover mission beyond the Iron Curtain to recover a defected scientist goes disastrously wrong – a classic early Cold War thriller from the acclaimed master of action and suspense.Michael Reynolds was going insane … slowly but inevitably insane. And the most terrible part of it was that he knew it. Since the last forced injection, there had been nothing he could do about the relentless onset of this madness. The more he struggled to ignore the symptoms, the more acutely he became aware of them, the deeper into his mind dug those fiendish chemical claws that were tearing his mind apart…

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ALISTAIR MACLEAN
The Last Frontier

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Copyright

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Dedication

To Gilleasburg

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ONE

The wind blew steadily out of the north and the night air was bitterly chill. Nothing moved across the snow. Under the high cold stars the frozen plain empty, desolate, stretched endlessly away on every side until it vanished into the blurred distance of an empty horizon. Over everything lay the silence of death.

But the emptiness, Reynolds knew, was illusion. So was the desolation and the silence. Only the snow was real, the snow and that bone-deep, sub-zero cold that shrouded him from head to toe in a blanket of ice and continuously shook his entire body in violent, uncontrollable spasms of shivering, like a man suffering from ague. Perhaps that feeling of drowsiness that was beginning to creep over him was only an illusion also, but he was aware that it, too, was no illusion, it was real and he knew only too well the meaning it carried with it. Resolutely, desperately almost, he crushed down all thought of the cold, the snow and sleep, and concentrated on the problem of survival.

Slowly, painstakingly, careful to make not the slightest unnecessary sound or movement, he slid one frozen hand under the lapels of his trench-coat, fumbled his handkerchief out of his breast pocket, rolled it into a crushed ball and stuffed it into his mouth: betrayal of his position could come only by sight or sound, and the folds of the handkerchief would break up the heavy condensation of his breath in the frosty air and muffle the chattering of his teeth. Then he twisted round cautiously in the deep, snow-filled ditch by the roadside into which he had fallen, reached out an exploratory hand – now curiously mottled blue and white by the cold – for the trilby hat that had been knocked from his head when he had tumbled off the overhanging branch of the tree above him, found it and inched it slowly towards him. As thoroughly as his numbed, now almost useless fingers would permit, he covered crown and brim with a thick layer of snow, crammed the trilby deep over the giveaway black thatch of his head and lifted head and shoulders in almost grotesque slow motion until first the hat brim and then the eyes cleared the level of the ditch.

In spite of its violent shivering, his whole body was as taut as a bow-string as he waited, in tense, sickening expectation, for the shout that betokened discovery, or the shot or the numbing crash that carried oblivion with it as a bullet found the exposed target of his head. But there was no sound, no shot and his awareness only heightened with the passing of every moment. His first quick scanning of the circuit of the horizon was now complete, and there could be no doubt about it: there was no one there, at least close at hand, either to see or to be seen.

Moving just as carefully, just as slowly, but with a long drawn-out easing of his pent-up breath, Reynolds straightened until he was kneeling upright in the ditch. He was cold and shivering still, but was no longer aware of it, and the sleepiness had vanished as if it had been a dream. Once again his gaze travelled in a full circle around the horizon, but slowly, probingly, this time, the keen brown eyes missing nothing, and once more the answer was the same. There was nobody to be seen. There was nothing to be seen, nothing at all but the icy twinkle of the stars in the dark velvet of the sky, the level white plain, a few small isolated groves of trees and the curving ribbon of road beside him, its surface hard-packed by the snow-treads of heavy trucks.

Reynolds lowered himself back down into the deep trench which the impact of his falling body had carved out in the drifted snow in the ditch. He had to have time. He had to have time to recover his breath, to ease his still gasping lungs' demands for air and more air: a scant ten minutes had passed since the truck in which he had stolen a lift had been stopped by the police block, and the brief, fierce scuffle, clubbed automatic in hand, with the two unsuspecting policemen who had investigated the rear of the truck, the sprint round the providential bend in the road and then the mile-long, grinding run till he had reached the grove of trees beside which he now lay had brought him to the point of exhausted collapse. He had to have time to figure out why the police had given up the pursuit so easily – they must have known that he would be bound to keep to the road: leaving the road for the deep,

virgin snow on either side of it would not only have slowed him to a trudging walk but also, by virtue of the fresh tracks so easily visible on that starlit night, would have instantly given him away. And, above all, he had to have time to think, to plan out what he must do next.

It was typical of Michael Reynolds that he spent no time in self-recrimination or in wondering what might have happened had he chosen some other course of action. He had been trained in a hard and bitter school, where such idle luxuries as self-blame for what was irrevocably past and done with, useless post-mortems, crying over spilt milk and all negative speculations and emotions which might possibly contribute to a lessening of overall efficiency, were rigidly proscribed. He spent perhaps five seconds considering the past twelve hours, then dismissed the matter completely from his mind. He would have done the same thing over again. He had had every reason to believe his informant in Vienna that air travel to Budapest was temporarily out – airport security precautions during the fortnight of the forthcoming International Scientific Conference were reported to be the most stringent ever. The same applied to all the main railway stations, and all long-distance passenger trains were reported to be heavily patrolled by Security Police. That left only the road: first an illegal crossing of the frontier – no great feat if one had expert help and Reynolds had had the best there was – and then a stolen ride on some eastward bound truck. A road-block, the same Viennese informant had warned him, would almost certainly be in operation on the outskirts of Budapest, and Reynolds had been prepared for this: what he hadn't been prepared for, and what none of his informants had known of, was the block east of Komarom, some forty miles outside the capital. Just one of those things – it could have happened to anyone and it just so chanced that it had happened to him. Reynolds gave the mental equivalent of a philosophic shrug and the past ceased to exist for him.

It was equally typical of him – more precisely, perhaps, it was typical of the rigorous mental conditioning he had undergone in his long training – that his thoughts about the future were rigidly canalized, channelled along one all-exclusive, particular line of thought, towards the achievement of one specific objective. Again, the emotional colourings which would normally accompany the thought of the potentialities of a successful mission or the tragic consequences of failure had no part in his racing mind as he lay there in the freezing snow, thinking, calculating, planning, assessing chances with a cold and remote detachment. 'The job, the job, always the job on hand,' the colonel had repeated once, twice, a thousand times. 'Success or failure in what you do may be desperately important to others, but it must never matter a damn to you. For you, Reynolds, consequences do not exist and must never be allowed to exist, and for two reasons: thinking about them upsets your balance and impairs your judgment – and every second you give up to thinking along these negative lines is always a second that should and must be used to working out how you're going to achieve the job on hand.'

The job on hand. Always the job on hand. In spite of himself, Reynolds grimaced as he lay there waiting for his breathing to return to normal. There never had been more than one chance in a hundred, and now the odds had lengthened astronomically. But the job was still there, Jennings and all his priceless knowledge must be reached and brought out and that was all that mattered. But if he, Reynolds, failed in this, then he had failed and that was all there was to it. He might even fail to-night, on his first day of the assignment after eighteen months of the most rigorous and ruthless specialist training aimed at the accomplishment of this task alone, but that made no difference whatsoever.

Reynolds was superbly fit – he had to be, all the colonel's specialist handful of men had to be – and his breathing was again as near normal as made no difference. As for the police mounting the road-block – there must be half a dozen of them, he had caught a glimpse of several others emerging from the hut just as he had rounded the bend – he would have to take a chance on them: there was nothing else he could do. Possibly they had only been stopping and searching eastbound trucks for contraband, and had no interest in panic-stricken passengers who fled away into the night – although it seemed likely enough that the two policemen he had left groaning in the snow might take a rather

more personal interest in him. As for the immediate future he couldn't lie there indefinitely to freeze in the snow or risk discovery by the sharp-eyed drivers of passing cars or trucks.

He would have to make for Budapest on foot – for the first part of the journey, at least. Three or four miles' heavy trudging through the fields and then regain the road – that, at least, he would need to take him well clear of the road-block before he dared try a lift. The road to the east curved left before the block, and it would be easier for him to go to the left also, to short-circuit the bend of the road across the base of the triangle. But to the left, the north, that was, lay the Danube at no great distance, and he baulked from finding himself trapped in a narrow strip of land between river and road. There was nothing for it but to strike off to the south and round the apex of the triangle at a discreet distance – and on a clear night like that, a discreet distance meant a very considerable distance indeed. The detour would take hours to complete.

Teeth again chattering violently – he had removed the handkerchief to draw in the great, gasping breaths of air his lungs had demanded – chilled to the bone and with his hands and feet useless and empty of all feeling, Reynolds pushed himself shakily to his feet and began to brush the frozen snow off his clothes, glancing down the road in the direction of the police road-block. A second later he was once more flat on his face in the snow-filled ditch, his heart thumping heavily in his chest, his right hand struggling desperately to free his gun from the pocket in his coat where he had stuck it after his fight with the police.

He could understand now why the police had taken their time in looking for him – they could afford to. What he could not understand was his own folly in supposing that discovery could result only from some betraying movement or incautious sound made by himself. He had forgotten that there was such a thing as a sense of smell – he had forgotten all about the dogs. And there had been no mistaking the identity of the leading dog as it nosed eagerly along the road, not even in the semi-darkness: a bloodhound was unmistakable where there was any light at all.

With the sudden shout from one of the approaching men and the excited jabber of voices, he was on his feet again, reaching the grove of trees behind him in three short steps: it had been too much to hope that he hadn't been spotted against that vast backcloth of white. He himself, in turn, had seen in that last quick glimpse that there were four men, each with a dog on leash: the other three dogs weren't bloodhounds, he was sure of that.

He drew in behind the bole of the tree whose branches had lately given him such brief and treacherous refuge, freed the gun from his pocket and looked down at it. A specially made, beautifully machined version of a Belgian 6.35 automatic, it was a precise and deadly little gun and with it he could hit a target smaller than a man's hand, at twenty paces, ten times out of ten. To-night, he knew, he would have difficulty even in hitting a man at half that distance, so unresponsive to the mind's demands had his numbed and shaking hands become. Then some instinct made him lift the gun up before his eyes, and his mouth tightened: even in the faint starlight he could see that the barrel of the gun was blocked with frozen slush and snow.

He took off his hat, held it by the brim, and about shoulder height, jutting out from one side of the tree, waited a couple of seconds, then stooped as low as he could and risked a quick glance round the others. Fifty paces away now, if that, the four men were walking along in line abreast, the dogs still straining on their leashes. Reynolds straightened, dug out a Biro pen from his inside pocket and quickly, but without haste, began to free the barrel of the automatic of the frozen slush. But his numbed hands betrayed him, and when the Biro slipped from his fumbling fingers and disappeared point downwards in the deep snow, he knew it was useless to search for it, too late for anything more.

He could hear the brittle-soft crunch of steel-shod boots on the hard-packed snow of the road. Thirty paces, perhaps even less. He slid a white, pinched forefinger through the trigger guard, placed the inside of his wrist against the hard rough bark of the tree, ready to slide it round the trunk – he would have to press hard against the bole to keep his shaking hand even reasonably steady – and with his left hand fumbled at his belt to release the knife with its spring-loaded blade. The gun was for the

men, the knife for the dogs, the chances about even, for the policemen were advancing towards him shoulder to shoulder across the width of the road, rifles dangling loose in the crooks of their arms, unskilled amateurs who knew what neither war nor death was. Or, rather, the chances would have been about even, but for the gun in his hand: the first shot might clear the blocked barrel, it might equally well blow his hand off. On balance, then, the chances were heavily against him, but then, on a mission such as this, the chances would always be against him: the job on hand was still on hand, and its accomplishment justified all risks short of the suicidal.

The knife spring clicked loudly and released the blade, a five-inch sliver of double-edged blued steel that gleamed evilly in the starlight as Reynolds edged round the bole of the tree and lined up his automatic on the nearest of the advancing policemen. His trigger finger tightened, held, slackened and a moment later he was back behind the tree trunk. Another and fresh tremor had seized his hand, and his mouth had gone suddenly dry: for the first time he had recognized the other three dogs for what they were.

Untrained country policemen, however armed, he could deal with: bloodhounds, too, he could handle, and with a fair chance of success: but only a madman would try conclusions with three trained Dobermann pinschers, the most vicious and terrible fighting dogs in the world. Fast as a wolf, powerful as an Alsatian and a ruthless killer utterly without fear, only death could stop a Dobermann. Reynolds didn't even hesitate. The chance he had been about to take was no longer a chance but a certain way to suicide. The job on hand was still all that mattered. Alive, though a prisoner, there was always hope: with his throat torn out by a Dobermann pinscher, neither Jennings nor all the old man's secrets would ever come home again.

Reynolds placed the point of his knife against a tree, pushed the spring-loaded blade home into its leather scabbard, placed it on the crown of his head and crammed his trilby on top of it. Then he tossed his automatic at the feet of the startled policemen and stepped out into the road and the starlight, both hands held high above his head.

Twenty minutes later they arrived at the police block hut. Both the arrest and the long cold walk back had been completely uneventful. Reynolds had expected, at the least, a rough handling, at the most a severe beating-up from rifle butts and steel-shod boots. But they had been perfunctory, almost polite in their behaviour, and had shown no ill-will or animosity of any kind, not even the man with his jaw blue and red and already badly swelling from the earlier impact of Reynold's clubbed automatic. Beyond a token search of his clothing for further arms, they had molested him in no way at all, had neither asked any questions nor demanded to see and inspect his papers. The restraint, the punctiliousness, made Reynolds feel uneasy; this was not what one expected in a police state.

The truck in which he had stolen a lift was still there, its driver vehemently arguing and gesticulating with both hands as he sought to convince two policemen of his innocence – almost certainly, Reynolds guessed, he was suspected of having some knowledge of Reynolds' presence in the back of the truck. Reynolds stopped, made to speak and if possible clear the driver, but had no chance: two of the policemen, all brisk officiousness now that they were once more in the presence of headquarters and immediate authority, caught his arms and hustled him in through the doors of the hut.

The hut was small, square and ill-made, the chinks in its walls closed up with wadded wet newspaper, and sparsely furnished: a portable wood stove with its chimney sticking through the roof, a telephone, two chairs and a battered little desk. Behind the desk sat the officer in charge, a small fat man, middle-aged, red-faced and insignificant. He would have liked his porcine little eyes to have had a cold, penetrating stare, but it didn't quite come off: his air of spurious authority he wore like a threadbare cloak. A nonentity, Reynolds judged, possibly even, in given circumstances – such as the present – a dangerous little nonentity, but ready for all that to collapse like a pricked balloon at the first contact with real authority. A little bluster could do no harm.

Reynolds broke away from the hands of the men holding him, reached the desk in two paces and smashed down his fist so heavily that the telephone on the rickety little desk jumped and gave a tiny, chime-like ring.

'Are you the officer in charge here?' he demanded harshly.

The man behind the desk blinked in alarm, hurriedly sat back in his chair and had just begun to raise his hands in instinctive self-defence when he recovered himself and checked the movement. But he knew his men had seen it, and the red neck and cheeks turned an even darker hue.

'Of course I'm in charge!' His voice started off as a high squeak, dropped an octave as he came on balance again. 'What do you think?'

'Then what the devil do you mean by this outrage?' Reynolds cut him short in mid-sentence, drew his pass and identification papers from his wallet and flung them on the table. 'Go on, examine these! Check the photograph and thumb-print, and be quick about it. I'm late already, and I haven't all night to argue with you. Go on! Hurry up!'

If he had failed to be impressed by the display of confidence and righteous indignation, the little man behind the desk would have been less than human – and he was very human indeed. Slowly, reluctantly, he drew the papers towards him and picked them up.

'Johann Buhl,' he read out. 'Born Linz 1923, now resident Vienna, businessman, Import-Export dealer machine parts.'

'And here by the express invitation of your Economic Ministry,' Reynolds added softly. The letter he now threw on the table was written on the Ministry's official notepaper, the envelope date-stamped Budapest four days previously. Negligently, Reynolds reached out a leg, hooked a chair towards him, sat and lit a cigarette – cigarette, case, lighter all made in Austria: the easy self-confidence could not be other than genuine. 'I wonder what your superiors in Budapest will think of this night's work?' he murmured. 'It will hardly increase your chances of promotion, I should think.'

'Zeal, even misplaced zeal, is not a punishable offence in our country.' The officer's voice was controlled enough, but the pudgy white hands trembled slightly as he returned the letter to its envelope and pushed the papers back to Reynolds. He clasped his hands on the desk before him, stared at them, then looked up at Reynolds, his forehead creased. 'Why did you run away?'

'Oh, my God!' Reynolds shook his head in despair: the obvious question had been a long time coming, and he'd had plenty of time to prepare. 'What would you do if a couple of thugs, waving their guns around, set on you in the darkness? Lie down and let them butcher you?'

'They were police officers. You could –'

'Certainly they're police officers,' Reynolds interrupted acidly. 'I can see that now – but it was as black as night inside the back of the truck.' He was stretched out at his ease now, calm and relaxed, his mind racing. He had to end this interview quickly. The little man behind the desk was, after all, a lieutenant in the police or its equivalent. He couldn't possibly be as stupid as he looked, he might stumble across an awkward question at any moment. Quickly Reynolds decided that his best hope lay in audacity: the hostility was gone from his manner, and his voice was friendly as he went on.

'Look, let's forget about this. I don't think it's your fault. You were just doing your duty – unfortunate though the consequences of your zeal might be for you. Let's make a deal: you provide me with transport to Budapest, and I'll forget it all. No reason why this should ever reach the ears of your superiors.'

'Thank you. You are very kind.' The police officer's reception of the proposal was less enthusiastic than Reynolds had expected, one might even have imagined a hint of dryness in the tone. 'Tell me, Buhl, why were you in that truck? Hardly a normal method of transport for businessmen as important as yourself. And you didn't even let the driver know.'

'He would probably have refused me – he had a notice forbidding unauthorized passengers.' Far back in Reynolds' mind a tiny little warning bell was ringing. 'My appointment is urgent.'

'But why –'

'The truck?' Reynolds smiled ruefully. 'Your roads are treacherous. A skid on ice, a deep ditch and there you were – my Borgward with a broken front axle.'

'You came by car? But for businessmen in a hurry –'

'I know, I know!' Reynolds let a little testiness, a little impatience, creep into his voice. 'They come by plane. But I had 250 kilos of machine samples in the boot and back of my car: you can't lug a damned great weight like that aboard a plane.' Angrily, now, he stubbed out his cigarette. 'This questioning is ridiculous. I've established my bona-fides and I'm in a great hurry. What about that transport?'

'Two more little questions, and then you shall go,' the officer promised. He was leaning back comfortably in his chair now, fingers steepled across his chest, and Reynolds felt his uneasiness deepen. 'You came direct from Vienna? The main road?'

'Of course! How else would I come?'

'This morning?'

'Don't be silly.' Vienna was less than 120 miles from where they were. 'This afternoon.'

'Four o'clock? Five o'clock?'

'Later. Ten past six exactly. I remember looking at my watch as I passed through your customs post.'

'You could swear to that?'

'If necessary, yes.'

The police officer's nod, the quick shifting of his eyes, took Reynolds by surprise, and, before he could move, three pairs of hands had pinioned his from behind, dragged him to his feet, twisted his arms in front of him and snapped on a pair of shiny steel handcuffs.

'What the devil does this mean?' In spite of the shock, the cold fury in Reynolds' tone could hardly have been bettered.

'It just means that a successful liar can never afford to be unsure of his facts.' The policeman tried to speak equably, but the triumph in his voice and eyes were unmistakable. 'I have news for you, Buhl – if that is your name, which I don't for a moment believe. The Austrian frontier has been closed to all traffic for twenty-four hours – a normal security check, I believe – as from three o'clock this afternoon. Ten past six by your watch indeed!' Grinning openly, now, he stretched out a hand for the telephone. 'You'll get your transport to Budapest, all right, you insolent imposter – in the back of a guarded police car. We haven't had a Western spy on our hands for a long time now: I'm sure they'll be delighted to send transport for you, just especially for you, all the way from Budapest.'

He broke off suddenly, frowned, jiggled the receiver up and down, listened again, muttered something under his breath and replaced the receiver with an angry gesture.

'Out of order again! That damned thing is always out of order.' He was unable to conceal his disappointment, to have made the important announcement personally would have been one of the highlights of his life. He beckoned the nearest of the men.

'Where is the nearest telephone?'

'In the village. Three kilometres.'

'Go there as fast as you can.' He scribbled furiously on a sheet of paper. 'Here is the number and the message. Don't forget to say it comes from me. Hurry, now.'

The man folded the message, stuffed it into his pocket, buttoned his coat to the neck and left. Through the momentarily opened door, Reynolds could see that, even in the short time that had elapsed since his capture, clouds had moved across the stars and slow, heavy snowflakes were beginning to swirl across the silhouetted oblong of darkening sky. He shivered involuntarily, then looked back at the police officer.

'I'm afraid that you'll pay heavily for this,' he said quietly. 'You're making a very grave mistake.'

'Persistence is an admirable thing in itself, but the wise man knows when to stop trying.' The little fat man was enjoying himself. 'The only mistake I made was ever to believe a word you said.'

He glanced at his watch. 'An hour and a half, perhaps two, on these snowy roads, before your – ah – transport arrives. We can fill in that time very profitably. Information, if you please. We'll start off with your name – your real one this time, if you don't mind.'

'You've already had it. You've seen my papers.' Unasked, Reynolds resumed his seat, unobtrusively testing his handcuffs: strong, close-fitting over the wrist and no hope there. Even so, even with bound hands, he could have disposed of the little man – the spring-knife was still under his trilby – but it was hopeless to think of it, not with three armed policemen behind him. 'That information, those papers, are accurate and true. I can tell lies to oblige you.'

'No one is asking you to tell lies, just to, shall we say, refresh your memory? Alas, it probably needs some jogging.' He pushed back from the desk, levered himself heavily to his feet – he was even shorter and fatter standing upright than he had seemed sitting down – and walked round his desk. 'Your name, if you please?'

'I told you –' Reynolds broke off with a grunt of pain as a heavily ringed hand caught him twice across the face, back-handed and forehanded. He shook his head to clear it, lifted his bound arms and wiped some blood from the corner of his mouth with the back of his hand. His face was expressionless.

'Second thoughts are always wiser thoughts,' the little man beamed. 'I think I detect the beginning of wisdom. Come now, let us have no more of this disagreeable foolishness.'

Reynolds called him an unprintable name. The heavily-jowled face darkened with blood almost as if at the touch of a switch, he stepped forward, ringed hand clubbing down viciously, then collapsed backwards across his desk, gasping and retching with agony, propelled by the scythe-like sweep of Reynolds' upward swinging leg. For seconds the police officer remained where he had fallen, moaning and fighting for breath, half-lying, half-kneeling across his own desk, while his own men still stood motionless, the suddenness, the unbelievable shock of it holding them in thrall. It was just at this moment that the door crashed open and a gust of icy air swept into the hut.

Reynolds twisted round in his chair. The man who had flung open the door stood framed in the opening, his intensely cold blue eyes – a very pale blue indeed – taking in every detail of the scene. A lean, broad-shouldered man so tall that the uncovered thick brown hair almost touched the lintel of the doorway, he was dressed in a military, high-collared trench-coat, belted and epauleted, vaguely greenish under a dusting of snow, so long-skirted that it hid the top of his high, gleaming jackboots. The face matched the eyes: the bushy eyebrows, the flaring nostrils above the clipped moustache, the thin chiselled mouth all lent to the hard, handsome face that indefinable air of cold authority of one long accustomed to immediate and unquestioning obedience.

Two seconds were enough to complete his survey – two seconds would always be enough for this man, Reynolds guessed: no astonished looks, no 'What's going on here?' or 'What the devil does all this mean?' He strode into the room, unhooked one of his thumbs from the leather belt that secured his revolver, butt forward, to his left waist, bent down and hauled the police officer to his feet, indifferent to his white face, his whooping gasps of pain as he fought for breath.

'Idiot!' The voice was in keeping with the appearance, cold, dispassionate, all but devoid of inflection. 'Next time you – ah – interrogate a man, stand clear of his feet.' He nodded curtly in Reynolds' direction. 'Who is this man, what were you asking him and why?'

The police officer glared malevolently at Reynolds, sucked some air down into his tortured lungs and whimpered huskily through a strangled throat.

'His name is Johann Buhl, a Viennese businessman – but I don't believe it. He's a spy, a filthy Fascist spy,' he spat out viciously. 'A filthy Fascist spy!'

'Naturally.' The tall man smiled coldly. 'All spies are filthy Fascists. But I don't want your opinions, I want facts. First, how did you find out his name?'

'He said so, and he had papers. Forgeries, of course.'

'Give them to me.'

The police officer gestured towards the table. He could stand almost upright now. 'There they are.'

'Give them to me.' The request, in tone, inflection, in every way, was a carbon copy of the first. The policeman reached out hastily, wincing with the pain of the sudden movement and handed him the paper.

'Excellent. Yes, excellent.' The newcomer rifled expertly through the pages. 'Might even be genuine – but they're not. He's our man all right.'

Reynolds had to make a conscious effort to relax his clenching fists. This man was infinitely dangerous, more dangerous than a division of stupid bunglers like the little policeman. Even trying to fool this man would be a waste of time.

'Your man? Your man?' The policeman was groping, completely out of his depth. 'What do you mean?'

'I ask the questions, little man. You say he is a spy. Why?'

'He says he crossed the frontier this evening.' The little man was learning lessons in brevity. 'The frontier was closed.'

'It was indeed.' The stranger leaned against the wall, selected a Russian cigarette from a thin gold case – no brass or chromium for the top boys, Reynolds thought bleakly – lit a cigarette and looked thoughtfully at Reynolds. It was the policeman who finally broke the silence. Twenty or thirty seconds had given him time to recover his thoughts and a shred of his courage.

'Why should I take orders from you?' he blustered. 'I've never seen you in my life before. I am in charge here. Who the devil are you?'

Perhaps ten seconds, ten seconds spent minutely examining Reynolds' clothes and face, elapsed before the newcomer turned lazily away and looked down at the little policeman. The eyes were glacial, dispassionate, but the expression on the face showed no change: the policeman seemed to shrink curiously inside his clothes and he pressed back hard against the edge of the desk.

'I have my rare moments of generosity. We will forget, for the present, what you said and how you said it.' He nodded towards Reynolds, and his tone hardened almost imperceptibly. 'This man is bleeding from the mouth. He tried, perhaps, to resist arrest?'

'He wouldn't answer my questions and …'

'Who gave you authority either to question or injure prisoners?' The tone of the voice cut like a whip. 'You stupid bungling idiot, you might have done irreparable harm! Overstep your authority once again and I personally will see to it that you have a rest from your exacting duties. The seaside, perhaps – Constanta, for a start?'

The policeman tried to lick his dry lips and his eyes were sick with fear. Constanta, the area of the Danube-Black Sea Canal slave labour camps, was notorious throughout Central Europe: many had gone there but no one ever returned.

'I – I only thought –'

'Leave thinking to those capable of such difficult feats.' He jerked a thumb at Reynolds. 'Have this man taken out to my car. He has been searched, of course?'

'But of course!' The policeman was almost trembling in his eagerness. 'Thoroughly, I assure you.'

'That statement coming from such as you makes a further search imperative,' the tall man said dryly. He looked at Reynolds, one heavy eyebrow lifting slightly. 'Must we be reduced to this mutual indignity – my having to search you personally, I mean.'

'There's a knife under my hat.'

'Thank you.' The tall man lifted the hat, removed the knife, courteously replaced the hat, pressed the release catch, thoughtfully inspected the blade, closed the knife, slid it into his coat pocket and looked at the white-faced policeman.

‘There is no conceivable reason why you should not rise to the topmost heights of your profession.’ He glanced at his watch – as unmistakably gold as the cigarette case. ‘Come, I must be on my way. I see you have the telephone here. Get me the Andrassy Ut, and be quick about it!’

The Andrassy Ut! Even though he had been becoming surer of the identity of the man with the passing of every moment, confirmation of his suspicions still came to Reynolds with a sense of shock and he could feel his face tightening in spite of himself under the speculative gaze of the tall stranger. Headquarters of the dreaded AVO, the Hungarian Secret Police currently reckoned the most ruthless and implacably efficient behind the iron curtain, the Andressy Ut was the one place on earth he wanted at all costs to avoid.

‘Ah! I see the name is not new to you.’ The stranger smiled. ‘That bodes no good for you, Mr Buhl, or for your bona-fides: the Andrassy Ut is hardly a name on every western businessman’s lips.’ He turned to the policeman. ‘Well, what are you stuttering about now?’

‘The – the telephone.’ The voice was high and squeaking again and faltering badly: he was afraid now to the point of terror. ‘It’s out of action.’

‘Inevitably. Matchless efficiency on every hand. May the gods help our unfortunate country.’ He produced a wallet from his pocket, opened it briefly for inspection. ‘Sufficiently good authority for the removal of your prisoner?’

‘Of course, Colonel, of course.’ The words tripped over one another. ‘Whatever you say, Colonel.’

‘Good.’ The wallet snapped shut, and the stranger turned to Reynolds and bowed with ironic courtesy.

‘Colonel Szendrô, Headquarters, Hungarian Political Police. I am at your service, Mr Buhl, and my car at your disposal. We leave for Budapest, immediately. My colleagues and I have been expecting you for some weeks now, and are most anxious to discuss certain matters with you.’

TWO

It was pitch dark outside now, but light streaming from the open door and uncovered window of the hut gave them enough visibility to see by. Colonel Szendrô's car was parked on the other side of the road – a black, left-hand drive Mercedes saloon already covered with a deep layer of snow, all except the front part of the bonnet where the engine heat melted the snow as it fell. There was a minute's delay while the colonel told them to release the truck driver and search the inside of the truck for any personal luggage Buhl might have been forced to abandon there – they found his overnight bag almost immediately and stuffed his gun into it – then Szendrô opened the front right-hand door of the car and gestured Reynolds to his seat.

Reynolds would have sworn that no one man driving a car could have held him captive for fifty miles, only to find out how wrong he was even before the car started. While a soldier with a rifle covered Reynolds from the left-hand side, Szendrô stooped inside the other door, opened the glove compartment in front of Reynolds, fetched out two lengths of thin chain and left the glove box open.

'A somewhat unusual car, my dear Buhl,' the colonel said apologetically. 'But you understand. From time to time I feel that I must give certain of my passengers a feeling of – ah – security.' Rapidly he unlocked one of the handcuffs, passed the end link of one of the chains through it, locked it, passed the chain through a ring or eye bolt in the back of the glove box and secured it to the other handcuff. Then he looped the second chain round Reynolds' legs, just above the knees and, closing the door and leaning in through the opened window, secured it with a small padlock to the arm-rest. He stood back to survey his work.

'Satisfactory, I think. You should be perfectly comfortable and have ample freedom of movement – but not enough, I assure you, to reach me. At the same time you will find it difficult to throw yourself out of the door, which you would find far from easy to push open anyway: you will observe that the pull-out handle is missing from your door.' The tone was light, even bantering, but Reynolds knew better than to be deceived. 'Also, kindly refrain from damaging yourself by surreptitiously testing the strength of the chains and their anchors: the chains have a breaking load of just over a ton, the arm-rest is specially reinforced and that ring in the glove box bolted through on to the chassis … Well, what on earth do you want now?'

'I forgot to tell you, Colonel.' The policeman's voice was quick, nervous. 'I sent a message to our Budapest Office asking to send a car for this man.'

'You did?' Szendrô's voice was sharp. 'When?'

'Ten, perhaps fifteen minutes ago.'

'Fool! You should have told me immediately. However, it's too late now. No harm done, possibly some good. If they are as thick in the head as you are, a circumstance of which it is admittedly difficult to conceive, a long drive in the cold night air should clear their minds admirably.'

Colonel Szendrô banged the door shut, switched on the roof light above the windscreen so that he should have no difficulty in seeing his prisoner, and drove off for Budapest. The Mercedes was equipped with snow tyres on all four wheels, and, in spite of the hard-packed snow on the road, Szendrô made good time. He drove with the casual, easy precision of an expert, his cold blue eyes for ever shifting to his right, very frequently and at varying intervals.

Reynolds sat very still, staring right ahead. He had already, in spite of the colonel's admonitions, tested the chains; the colonel hadn't exaggerated. Now he was forcing his mind to think coldly, clearly and as constructively as possible. His position was almost hopeless – it would be completely so when they reached Budapest. Miracles happened, but only a certain kind of miracle: no one had ever escaped from the AVO Headquarters, from the torture chambers in Stalin Street. Once there he was lost: if he was ever to escape it would have to be from this car, inside the next hour.

There was no window winding handle on the door – the colonel had thoughtfully removed all such temptations: even if the window had been open he couldn't have reached the handle on the outside. His hands couldn't reach the wheel; he had already measured the arc of radius of the chain and his straining fingers would have been at least two inches away. He could move his legs to a certain extent, but couldn't raise them high enough to kick in the windscreen, shatter the toughened glass throughout its length and perhaps cause a crash at fairly high speed. He could have placed his feet against the dashboard, and he knew of some cars where he could have heaved the front seat backwards off the rails. But everything in this car spelt solidity, and if he tried and failed, as he almost certainly would, all he'd probably get for his pains would be a tap on the head that would keep him quiet till they got to the Andrassy Ut. All the time he deliberately compelled himself to keep his mind off what was going to happen to him when he got there: that way lay only weakness and ultimate destruction.

His pockets – had he anything in his pockets he could use? Anything solid enough to throw at Szendrô's head, shock him for a length of time necessary to lose control and crash the car: Reynolds was aware that he himself might be hurt as seriously as the colonel, even though he had the advantage of preparation: but a fifty-fifty chance was better than the one in a million he had without it. He knew exactly where Szendrô had put the key to the handcuffs.

But a rapid mental inventory dismissed that hope: he had nothing heavier in his pocket than a handful of forints. His shoes, then – could he remove a shoe and get Szendrô in the face with it before the colonel knew what he was doing? But that thought came only a second ahead of the realization of its futility; with his wrists handcuffed, the only way he could reach his shoes in any way unobtrusively was between his legs – and his knees were lashed tightly together … Another idea, desperate but with a chance of success, had just occurred to him when the colonel spoke for the first time in the fifteen minutes since they had left the police block.

'You are a dangerous man, Mr Buhl,' he remarked conversationally. 'You think too much – Cassius – you know your Shakespeare, of course.'

Reynolds said nothing. Every word this man said was a potential trap.

'The most dangerous man I've ever had in this car, I should say, and a few desperate characters have sat from time to time where you're sitting now,' Szendrô went on ruminatively. 'You know where you're going, and you don't appear to care. But you must, of course.'

Again Reynolds kept silent. The plan might work – the chance of success was enough to justify the risk.

'The silence is uncompanionable, to say the least,' Colonel Szendrô observed. He lit a cigarette, sent the match spinning through the ventilation window. Reynolds stiffened slightly – the very opening he wanted. Szendrô went on: 'You are quite comfortable, I trust?'

'Quite.' Reynolds' conversational tone matched Szendrô's own. 'But I'd appreciate a cigarette too, if you don't mind.'

'By all means.' Szendrô was hospitality itself. 'One must cater for one's guests – you'll find half a dozen lying loose inside the glove compartment. A cheap and undistinguished brand, I fear, but I've always found that people in your – ah – position do not tend to be over-critical about these things. A cigarette – any cigarette – is a great help in times of stress.'

'Thank you.' Reynolds nodded at the projection on top of the dashboard at his own side. 'Cigar lighter, is it not?'

'It is. Use it by all means.'

Reynolds stretched forward with his handcuffed wrists, pressed it down for a few seconds then lifted it out, its spiral tip glowing red in the faint light from above. Then, just as it cleared the fascia, his hands fumbled and he dropped it on the floor. He reached down to get it, but the chain brought his hands up with a sharp jerk inches from the floor. He swore softly to himself.

Szendrô laughed, and Reynolds, straightening, looked at him. There was no malice in the colonel's face, just a mixture of amusement and admiration, the admiration predominating.

'Very, very clever, Mr Buhl. I said you were a dangerous man, and now I'm surer than ever.' He drew deeply on his cigarette. 'We are now presented with a choice of three possible lines of action, are we not? None of them, I may say, has any marked appeal for me.'

'I don't know what you are talking about.'

'Magnificent again!' Szendrô was smiling broadly. 'The puzzlement in your voice couldn't be improved upon. Three courses are open, I say. First, I could courteously bend over and down to retrieve it, whereupon you would do your best to crush in the back of my head with your handcuffs. You would certainly knock me senseless – and you observed very keenly, without in any way appearing to do so, exactly where I put the key to these handcuffs.' Reynolds looked at him uncomprehendingly, but already he could taste defeat in his mouth.

'Secondly I could toss you a box of matches. You would strike one, ignite the heads of all the other matches in the box, throw it in my face, crash the car and who knows what might happen then? Or you could just hope that I'd give you a light, either from the lighter or cigarette; then the finger judo lock, a couple of broken fingers, a transfer to a wrist lock and then the key at your leisure. Mr Buhl, you will bear watching.'

'You're talking nonsense,' Reynolds said roughly.

'Perhaps, perhaps. I have a suspicious mind, but I survive.' He tossed something on to the lap of Reynolds' coat. 'Herewith one single match. You can light it on the metal hinge of the glove box.'

Reynolds sat and smoked in silence. He couldn't give up, he wouldn't give up, although he knew in his heart that the man at the wheel knew all the answers – and the answers to many questions which he, Reynolds, probably didn't know ever existed. Half a dozen separate plans occurred to him, each one more fantastic and with less chance of success than the previous one, and he was just coming to the end of his second cigarette – he had lit it off the butt end of the first – when the colonel changed down into third gear, peered at the near side of the road, braked suddenly and swung off into a small lane. Half a minute later, on a stretch of the lane parallel to and barely twenty yards from the highway, but almost entirely screened from it by thick, snow-covered bushes, Szendrô stopped the car and switched off the ignition. Then he turned off his head and side lights, wound his window right down in spite of the bitter cold and turned to face Reynolds. The roof light above the windscreen still burned in the darkness.

Here it comes, Reynolds thought bleakly. Thirty miles yet to Budapest, but Szendrô just can't bear to wait any longer. Reynolds had no illusions, no hope. He had had access to secret files concerning the activities of the Hungarian Political Police in the year that had elapsed since the bloody October rising of 1956, and they had made ghastly reading: it was difficult to think of the AVO – the AVH, as they were more lately known – as people belonging to the human race. Wherever they went they carried with them terror and destruction, a living death and death itself, the slow death of the aged in deportee camps and the young in the slave labour camps, the quick death of the summary executions and the ghastly, insane screaming deaths of those who succumbed to the most abominable tortures ever conceived of the evil that lay buried deep in the hearts of the satanic perverts who find their way into the political police of dictatorships the world over. And no secret police in modern times excelled or even matched Hungary's AVO in the nameless barbarities, the inhuman cruelties and all-pervading terror with which they held hopeless people in fear-ridden thrall: they had learnt much from Hitler's Gestapo during the Second World War, and had that knowledge refined by their current nominal masters, the NKVD of Russia. But now the pupils had outdistanced their mentors, and they had developed fleshcrawling refinements and more terribly effective methods of terrorization such as the others had not dreamed of.

But Colonel Szendrô was still at the talking stage. He turned round in his seat, lifted Reynolds' bag from the back, set it on his lap and tried to open it. It was locked.

'The key,' Szendrô said. 'And don't tell me there isn't one, or that it's lost. Both you and I, I suspect, Mr Buhl, are long past that kindergarten stage.'

They were indeed, Reynolds thought grimly. 'Inside ticket pocket of my jacket.'

'Get it. And your papers at the same time.'

'I can't get at these.'

'Allow me.' Reynolds winced as Szendrô's pistol barrel pushed hard against lips and teeth, felt the colonel slip the papers from his breast pocket with a professional ease that would have done credit to a skilled pickpocket. And then Szendrô was back on his own side of the car, the bag open: almost, it seemed, without pausing to think, he had slit open the canvas lining and extracted a slim fold of papers, and was now comparing them with those he had taken from Reynolds' pockets.

'Well, well, well, Mr Buhl. Interesting, most interesting. Chameleon-like, you change your identity in a moment of time. Name, birthplace, occupation, even your nationality all altered in an instant. A remarkable transformation.' He studied the two sets of documents, one in either hand. 'Which, if any, are we to believe?'

'The Austrian papers are fakes,' Reynolds growled. For the first time he stopped speaking in German and switched to fluent idiomatic Hungarian. 'I had word that my mother, who has lived in Vienna for many years, was dying. I had to have them.'

'Ah, of course. And your mother?'

'No more.' Reynolds crossed himself. 'You can find her obituary in Tuesday's paper. Maria Rakosi.'

'I'm at the stage now where I would be astonished if I didn't.' Szendrô spoke also in Hungarian, but his accent was not that of Budapest, Reynolds was sure of that – he had spent too many agonizing months learning every last Budapest inflection and idiom from an ex-Professor of Central European languages of Budapest University. Szendrô was speaking again. 'A tragic interlude, I am sure. I bare my head in silent sympathy – metaphorically, you understand. So you claim your real name is Lajos Rakosi? A very well-known name indeed.'

'And a common one. And genuine. You'll find my name, date of birth, address, date of marriage all in the records. Also my –'

'Spare me.' Szendrô held up a protesting hand. 'I don't doubt it. I don't doubt you could show me the very school desk on which your initials are carved and produce the once-little girl whose books you once carried home from school. None of which would impress me in the slightest. What does impress me is the extraordinary thoroughness and care of not only yourself but the superiors who have so magnificently trained you for whatever purpose they have in mind. I do not think I have ever met anything quite like it.'

'You talk in riddles, Colonel Szendrô. I'm just an ordinary Budapest citizen. I can prove it. All right, I did have fake Austrian papers. But my mother was dying, and I was prepared to risk indiscretion. But I've committed no crime against our country. Surely you can see that. If I wished, I could have gone over to the west. But I did not so wish. My country is my country, and Budapest is my home. So I came back.'

'A slight correction,' Szendrô murmured. 'You're not *coming* back to Budapest – you're going, and probably for the first time in your life.' He was looking Reynolds straight in the eyes when his expression changed. 'Behind you!'

Reynolds twisted round, a split second before he realized Szendrô had shouted in English – and there had been nothing in Szendrô 's eyes or tone to betray his meaning. Reynold's turned back slowly, an expression almost of boredom on his face.

'A schoolboyish trick. I speak English' – he was using English now – 'why should I deny it? My dear Colonel, if you belonged to Budapest, which you don't, you would know that there are at least fifty thousand of us who speak English. Why should so common an accomplishment be regarded with suspicion?'

'By all the gods!' Szendrô slapped his hand on his thigh. It's magnificent, it's really magnificent. My professional jealousy is aroused. To have a Britisher or an American – British, I think, the

American intonation is almost impossible to conceal – talk Hungarian with a Budapest accent as perfectly as you do is no small feat. But to have an Englishman talk English with a Budapest accent – that is superb!'

'For heaven's sake, there's nothing superb about it.' Reynolds almost shouted in exasperation. 'I *am* Hungarian.'

'I fear not.' Szendrô shook his head. 'Your masters taught you, and taught you magnificently – you, Mr Buhl, are worth a fortune to any espionage system in the world. But one thing they didn't teach you, one thing they couldn't teach you – because they don't know what it is – is the mentality of the people. I think we may speak openly, as two intelligent men, and dispense with the fancy patriotic phrases employed for the benefit of the – ah – proletariat. It is, in brief, the mentality of the vanquished, of the fear-ridden, the cowed shoulder that never knows when the long hand of death is going to reach out and touch it.' Reynolds was looking at him in astonishment – this man must be tremendously sure of himself – but Szendrô ignored him. 'I have seen too many of our countrymen, Mr Buhl, going as you are, to excruciating torture and death. Most of them are just paralysed: some of them are plainly terror-stricken and weeping; and a handful are consumed by fury. You could not possibly fit in any of these categories – you should, but, as I say, there are things your masters cannot know. You are cold and without emotion, planning, calculating all the time, supremely confident of your own ability to extract the maximum advantage from the slightest opportunity that arises, and never tired of watching for that opportunity to come. Had you been a lesser man, Mr Buhl, self-betrayal would not have come so easily …'

He broke off suddenly, reached and switched off the roof light, just as Reynolds' ears caught the hum of an approaching car engine, wound up his window, deftly removed a cigarette from Reynolds' hand and crushed it beneath his shoe. He said nothing and made no move until the approaching car, a barely perceptible blur behind the sweep of its blazing headlights, its tyres silent on the snow-packed road, had passed by and vanished to the west. As soon as it was lost to sight and sound Szendrô had reversed out on the highway again and was on his way, pushing the big car almost to the limit of safety along the treacherous road and through the gently falling snow.

Over an hour and a half elapsed before they reached Budapest – a long, slow journey that could normally have been done in half the time. But the snow, a curtain of great feathery flakes that swirled whitely, suddenly, into the flat-topped beams of the headlights, had become steadily heavier and slowed them up, at times almost to walking pace as the labouring wipers, pushing the clogging snow into corrugated ridges on the middle and at the sides of the windscreen, swept through narrower and narrower arcs until finally they had stopped altogether; a dozen times, at least, Szendrô had had to stop to clear the mass of snow off the screen.

And then, a few miles short of the city limits, Szendrô had left the highway again, and plunged into a mass of narrow, twisting roads: on many stretches where the snow lay smooth and deep and treacherously masking the border between road and ditch, theirs was obviously the first car that had passed since the snow had begun to fall, but despite the care and concentrated attention Szendrô gave the roads, his flickering eyes found Reynolds every few seconds; the man's unflagging vigilance was almost inhuman.

Why the colonel had left the main road Reynolds couldn't guess, any more than he could guess why he had stopped and drawn off the road earlier on. That he wanted, in the earlier instance, to avoid the big police car racing west to Komarom and now to bypass the police block on the city limits of which Reynolds had been warned at Vienna, was obvious enough: but the reason for these actions was a different thing altogether. Reynolds wasted no time on the problem: he had problems enough of his own. He had perhaps ten minutes left.

They were passing now through the winding, villa-lined streets and steeply-cobbled residential avenues of Buda, the western half of the city, and dropping down to the Danube. The snow was easing again, and, twisting round in his seat, Reynolds could just vaguely see the rock-bound promontory of

the Gellert Hill, its grey, sharp granite jutting through the windblown snow, the vast bulk of the St Gellert Hotel and, as they approached the Ferenc Jozsef Bridge, the St Gellert Mount where some old-time bishop, who had incurred the wrath of his fellowman, had been shoved into a spiked barrel and heaved into the Danube. Bungling amateurs in those days, Reynolds thought grimly, the old bishop couldn't have lasted a couple of minutes: down in the Andrassy Ut things would doubtless be much better arranged.

Already they were across the Danube and turning left into the Corso, the one-time fashionable embankment of open-air cafés on the Pest side of the river. But it was black and desolate now, as deserted as were nearly all the streets, and it seemed dated, anachronistic, a nostalgic and pathetic survival from an earlier and happier age. It was difficult, it was impossible to conjure up the ghosts of those who had promenaded there only two decades ago, carefree and gay and knowing that another to-morrow would never come, that all the other to-morrows could only be the same as today. It was impossible to visualize, however dimly, the Budapest of yesterday, the loveliest and happiest of cities, all that Vienna never was, the city to which so many westerners, of so many nations, came to visit briefly, for a day, for two days, and never went home again. But all that was gone, even the memory was almost gone.

Reynolds had never been in the city before, but he knew it as few of the citizens of Budapest would ever know it. Over beyond the west bank of the Danube, the Royal Palace, the Gothic-Moorish Fisher's Bastion, and the Coronation Church were half-imagined blurs in the snow-filled darkness, but he knew where they were and what they were as if he had lived in the city all his life. And now, on their right, was the magnificent Parliament of the Magyars, the Parliament and its tragic, blood-stained square where a thousand Hungarians had been massacred in the October Rising, mown down by tanks and the murderous fire of the heavy AVO machine-guns mounted on the roof of the Parliament itself.

Everything was real, every building, every street was exactly where it should be, precisely where he had been told it would be, but Reynolds could not shake off the growing feeling of unreality, of illusion, as if he were spectator of a play and all this was happening to someone else. A normally unimaginative man, ruthlessly trained to be abnormally so, to subject all emotion and feeling to the demands of reason and the intellect, he was aware of the strangeness in his mind and at a loss to account for it. Perhaps it was the certain foreknowledge of defeat, the knowledge that old Jennings would never come home again. Or it could have been the cold or tiredness or hopelessness or the ghostly veil of drifting snow that hung over everything, but he knew it was none of these things, it was something else again.

And now they had left the Embankment and were turning into the long, broad, tree-lined Boulevard of the Andrassy Ut itself: the Andrassy Ut, that street of well-loved memories leading past the Royal Opera House to the Zoo, the Fun Fair and the City Park, had been an inseparable part of a thousand days and nights of pleasure and enjoyment, of freedom and escape, to tens of thousands of citizens in days gone by and no place on earth had lain nearer to the hearts of the Hungarians: and now all that was gone, it could never be the same again, no matter what befell, not even if peace and independence and freedom were to come again. For now the Andrassy Ut meant only repression and terror, the hammering on the door in the middle of the night and the brown lorries that came to take you away, the prison camps and deportation, the torture chambers and the benison of death: Andrassy Ut meant only the headquarters of the AVO.

And still the feeling of remoteness, of detached unreality remained with Michael Reynolds. He knew where he was, he knew his time had run out, he was beginning to know what Szendrô had meant by the mentality of a people who had lived too long with terror and the ever-present spectre of death, and he knew too that no one who ever made a journey such as he was making now could feel exactly the same again. Indifferently, almost, with a kind of detached academic interest, he wondered

how long he would last in the torture chambers, what latest diabolical variations of destroying a man lay in wait for him.

And then the Mercedes was slowing down, its heavy tyres crunching through the frozen slush of the street, and Reynolds, in spite of himself, in spite of the unemotional stoicism of years and the shell of protective indifference in which he had armoured himself, felt fear touch him for the first time, a fear that touched his mouth and left it parched and dry, his heart and left it pounding heavily, painfully in his chest and his stomach as if something heavy and solid and sharp lay there, constricting it upon itself; but no trace of any of this touched the expression on his face. He knew Colonel Szendrô was watching him closely, he knew that if he were what he claimed to be, an innocent citizen of Budapest, he should be afraid and fear should show in his face, but he could not bring himself to it: not because he was unable to do so, but because he knew of the reciprocal relationship between facial expression and the mind: to show fear did not necessarily mean that one was afraid: but to show fear when one was afraid and fighting desperately not to be afraid, would be fatal … It was as if Colonel Szendrô had been reading his mind.

'I have no suspicion left, Mr Buhl: only certainties. You know where you are, of course?'

'Naturally.' Reynolds' voice was steady. 'I've walked along here a thousand times.'

'You've never walked here in your life, but I doubt whether even the City Surveyor could draw as accurate a map of Budapest as you could,' Szendrô said equably. He stopped the car. 'Recognize any place?'

'Your H.Q.' Reynolds nodded at a building fifty yards away on the other side of the street.

'Exactly. Mr Buhl, this is where you should faint, go into hysterics or just sit there moaning with terror. All the others do. But you don't. Perhaps you are completely devoid of fear – an enviable if not admirable characteristic, but one which, I assure you, no longer exists in this country: or perhaps – an enviable *and* admirable characteristic – you *are* afraid, but ruthless training has eliminated all its outward manifestations. In either case, my friend, you are condemned. You don't belong. Perhaps not, as our police friend said, a filthy Fascist spy, but assuredly a spy.' He glanced at his watch, then stared at Reynolds with a peculiar intentness. 'Just after midnight – the time we operate best. And for you, the best treatment and the best quarters – a little soundproof room deep below the streets of Budapest; only three AVO officers in all Hungary know of its existence.'

He stared at Reynolds for several seconds longer, then started the car. Instead of stopping at the AVO building, he swung the car sharp left off the Andrassy Ut, drove a hundred yards down an unlighted street and stopped again long enough to tie a silk handkerchief securely over Reynolds' eyes. Ten minutes later, after much turning and twisting which completely lost Reynolds, as he knew it was designed to do, all sense of place and direction, the car bumped heavily once or twice, dropped steeply down a long ramp and drew up inside an enclosed space – Reynolds could hear the deep exhaust note of the car beating back off the walls. And then, as the motor died, he heard heavy iron doors clanging shut behind them.

Seconds later the door on Reynolds' side of the car opened and a pair of hands busied themselves with freeing him of the restraining chains and then re-securing the handcuffs. Then the same hands were urging him out of the car and removing the blindfold.

Reynolds screwed up his eyes and blinked. They were in a big, windowless garage with heavy doors already locked behind them, and the brightness of the overhead light reflecting off whitewashed walls and ceiling was momentarily dazzling after the darkness of the blindfold and the night. At the other end of the garage, close to him, was another door, half-open, leading into a brightly-lit whitewashed corridor: whitewash, he reflected grimly, appeared to be an inseparable concomitant of all modern torture chambers.

Between Reynolds and the door, still holding him by the arm, was the man who had removed the chains. Reynolds looked at him for a long moment. With this man available, the AVO had no need to rely on instruments of torture – those enormous hands could just tear prisoners apart, slowly,

piece for piece. About Reynolds' own height, the man looked squat, almost deformed in comparison, and the shoulders above that great barrel of chest were the widest Reynolds had ever seen: he must have weighed at least 250 lbs. The face was broken-nosed and ugly, but curiously innocent of any trace of depravity or bestiality, just pleasantly ugly. Reynolds wasn't deceived. In his line of business, faces meant nothing: the most ruthless man he had ever known, a German espionage agent who had lost count of the number of men he had killed, had the face of a choirboy.

Colonel Szendrô slammed the car door and walked round to where Reynolds was standing. He looked at the other man and nodded at Reynolds.

'A guest, Sandor. A little canary who is going to sing us a song before the night is through. Has the Chief gone to bed?'

'He is waiting for you in the office.' The man's voice was what one would have expected, a low, deep rumble in the throat. 'Excellent. I'll be back in a few minutes. Watch our friend here, watch him closely. I suspect he's very dangerous.'

'I'll watch him,' Sandor promised comfortably. He waited till Szendrô, with Reynolds' bag and papers in his hand, had gone, then propped himself lazily against a whitewashed wall, massive arms folded across his chest. Hardly had he done so when he had pushed himself off the wall and taken a step towards Reynolds. 'You do not look well.'

'I'm all right.' Reynolds' voice was husky, his breathing quick and shallow, and he was swaying slightly on his feet. He lifted his shackled hands over his right shoulder, and massaged the back of his neck, wincing. 'It's my head, the back of my head.'

Sandor took another step forward, then moved swiftly as he saw Reynolds' eyes turning up till only the whites showed, beginning to topple forward, his body twisting slightly to the left as he fell. He could injure himself badly, even kill himself if his unprotected head struck the concrete floor, and Sandor had to reach forward quickly, arms outstretched to cushion the fall.

Reynolds hit Sandor harder than he had ever hit anyone in his life. Thrusting forward off the ball of his foot and pivoting his body with whiplash speed from left to right, he brought his manacled hands scything down in a violent, vicious, chopping blow that carried with it every last ounce of power of his sinewy arms and shoulders. The flat edges of his two hands, pressed hard together, caught Sandor across the exposed neck, just below the line of jawbone and ear. It was like striking the trunk of a tree, and Reynolds gasped with pain: it felt as if both his little fingers were broken.

It was a judo blow, a killing judo blow, and it would have killed many men: all others it would have paralysed, left unconscious for hours; all others, that is, that Reynolds had ever known: Sandor just grunted, momentarily shook his head to clear it, and kept on coming, turning sideways to neutralize any attempt Reynolds might make to use feet or knees, pressing him back remorselessly against the side of the Mercedes.

Reynolds was powerless. He couldn't have resisted even had he been of a mind to, and his utter astonishment that any man could not only survive such a blow but virtually ignore it left no room for any thought of resistance. Sandor leaned against him with all his great weight, crushing him against the car, reached down with both hands, caught Reynolds by the forearms and squeezed. There was no animosity, no expression at all in the giant's eyes as they stared unblinkingly into Reynolds' from a distance of three or four inches. He just stood there and squeezed.

Reynolds clenched teeth and lips together till his jaws ached, forcing back the scream of agony. It seemed as if his forearms had been caught in two giant, inexorably tightening vices. He could feel the blood draining from his face, the cold sweat starting on his forehead, and the bones and sinews of his arms felt as if they were being mangled and crushed beyond recovery. The blood was pounding in his head, the garage walls were becoming dim and swimming before his eyes, when Sandor released his grip and stepped back, gently massaging the left-hand side of his neck.

'Next time I squeeze it will be a little higher up,' he said mildly. 'Just where you hit me. Please stop this foolishness. Both of us have been hurt and for nothing.'

Five minutes passed, five minutes during which the sharp agony in Reynolds' arms faded to a dull, pounding ache, five minutes in which Sandor's unblinking eyes never strayed from him. Then the door opened wide, and a young man – he was hardly more than a boy – stood there, looking at Reynolds. He was thin and sallow, with an unruly mop of black hair and quick, nervous darting eyes, almost as dark as his hair. He jerked a thumb over his shoulder.

'The Chief wants to see him, Sandor. Bring him along, will you?'

Sandor escorted Reynolds along the narrow corridor, down a shallow flight of stairs at the end into another corridor, then pushed him through the first of several doors that lined both sides of the second passageway. Reynolds stumbled, recovered, then looked around him.

It was a large room, wood panelled, the worn linoleum on the floor relieved only by a stretch of threadbare carpet in front of the desk at the far end of the room. The room was brightly lit, with a lamp of moderate power in the ceiling and a powerful wall-light on a flexible extension arm behind the desk: at the moment the latter was pointing downward on to the surface of the desk, harshly highlighting his gun, the jumble of clothes and the other articles that had recently been so neatly folded in Reynolds' bag: beside the clothes were the torn remnants of the bag itself: the lining was in tatters, the zip had been torn off, the leather handle had been slit open and even the four studs of the base of the bag had been torn out by the pair of pliers lying beside them. Reynolds silently acknowledged the handiwork of an expert.

Colonel Szendrô was standing beside the table, leaning over towards the man seated behind it. The face of the latter was hidden in deep shadow, but both hands, holding some of Reynolds' papers, were exposed to the pitiless glare of the lamp. They were terrible hands, Reynolds had never seen anything remotely like them, had never imagined that any human being's hands could be so scarred, crushed and savagely mutilated and still serve as hands. Both thumbs were crushed and flattened and twisted, fingertips and nails were blurred into a shapeless mass, the little finger and half of the fourth finger of the left hand were missing, and the backs of both hands were covered with ugly scars surrounding bluish-purple weals in the middle, between the tendons of the middle and fourth fingers. Reynolds stared at these weals, fascinated, and shivered involuntarily, he had seen these marks once before, on a dead man: the marks of crucifixion. Had these been his hands, Reynolds thought in revulsion, he would have had them amputated. He wondered what manner of man could bear to live with these hands, not only live with them but have them uncovered. He was suddenly possessed of an almost obsessive desire to see the face of the man behind these hands, but Sandor had halted several paces from the desk and the blackness of the shadow by the lamp defeated him.

The hands moved, gesturing with Reynolds' papers, and the man at the desk spoke. The voice was quiet, controlled, almost friendly. 'These papers are interesting enough in their own way – masterpiece of the forger's art. You will be good enough to tell us your real name.' He broke off and looked at Sandor who was still tenderly massaging his neck. 'What is wrong, Sandor?'

'He hit me,' Sandor explained apologetically. 'He knows how to hit and where to hit – and he hits hard.'

'A dangerous man,' Szendrô said. 'I warned you, you know.'

'Yes, but he's a cunning devil,' Sandor complained. 'He pretended to faint.'

'A major achievement to hurt you, an act of desperation to hit you at all,' the man behind the desk said dryly. 'But you mustn't complain, Sandor. He who expects that death comes with the next breath but one is not given to counting the cost … Well, Mr Buhl, your name, please.'

'I've already told Colonel Szendrô,' Reynolds replied. 'Rakosi, Lajos Rakosi. I could invent a dozen names, all different, in the hope of saving myself unnecessary suffering, but I couldn't prove my right to any of them. I *can* prove my right to my own name, Rakosi.'

'You are a brave man, Mr Buhl.' The seated man shook his head. 'But in this house you will find courage a useless prop: lean on it and it will only crumble to dust under your weight. The truth alone will serve. Your name, please?'

Reynolds paused before replying. He was fascinated and puzzled and hardly afraid any more. The hands fascinated him, he could scarcely take his eyes off them, and he could see now some tattooing on the inside of the man's wrist – at that distance it looked like a figure 2, but he couldn't be certain. He was puzzled because there were too many off-beat angles to all that was happening to him, too much that didn't fit in with his conception of the AVO and all that he had been told about them: there was a curious restraint, almost a cold courtesy in their attitude to him, but he was aware that the cat could just be playing with the mouse, perhaps they were just subtly sapping his determination to resist, conditioning him to be least prepared for the impact of the blow when it came. And why his fear was lessening he would have found it impossible to say, it must have arisen from some subtle promptings of his subconscious mind for he was at a conscious loss to account for it.

'We are waiting, Mr Buhl.' Reynolds couldn't detect the slightest trace of an edge through the studied patience of the voice.

'I can only tell you the truth. I've already done that.'

'Very well. Take your clothes off – all of them.'

'No!' Reynolds glanced swiftly round, but Sandor stood between him and the door. He looked back, and Colonel Szendrô had his pistol out. 'I'll be damned if I do it!'

'Don't be silly.' Szendrô's voice was weary. 'I have a gun in my hand and Sandor will do it by force, if necessary. Sandor has a spectacular if untidy method of undressing people – he rips coats and shirts in half down the back. You'll find it far easier to do the job yourself.'

Reynolds did it himself. The handcuffs were unlocked and inside a minute all his clothes were crumpled heaps about his feet, and he was standing there shivering, his forearms angry masses of red and blue weals where Sandor's vice-like fingers had dug into his flesh.

'Bring the clothes over here, Sandor,' the man at the desk ordered. He looked at Reynolds. 'There's a blanket on the bench behind you.'

Reynolds looked at him in sudden wonder. That it was his clothes they wanted – looking for giveaway tags, probably – instead of himself was surprising enough, that the courtesy – and on that cold night, the kindness – of a covering blanket should be offered was astonishing. And then he caught his breath and utterly forgot about both of those things, because the man behind the desk had risen and walked round with a peculiarly stiff-legged gait to examine the clothes.

Reynolds was a trained judge, very highly trained, of faces and expressions and character. He made mistakes and made them often, but he never made major mistakes and he knew that it was impossible that he was making a major one now. The face was fully in the light now, and it was a face that made these terrible hands a blasphemous contradiction, an act of impiety in themselves. A lined tired face, a middle-aged face that belied the thick, snow-white hair above, a face deeply, splendidly etched by experience, by a sorrowing and suffering such as Reynolds could not even begin to imagine, it held more goodness, more wisdom and tolerance and understanding than Reynolds had ever seen in the face of any man before. It was the face of a man who had seen everything, known everything and experienced everything and still had the heart of a child.

Reynolds sank slowly down on to the bench, mechanically wrapping the faded blanket around him. Desperately, almost, forcing himself to think with detachment and clarity, he tried to reduce to order the kaleidoscopic whirling of confused and contradictory thoughts that raced through his mind. But he had got no farther than the first insoluble problem, the presence of a man like that in a diabolical organization like the AVO, when he received his fourth and final shock and almost immediately afterwards, the answer to all his problems.

The door beside Reynolds swung open towards him, and a girl walked into the room. The AVO, Reynolds knew, not only had its complement of females but ranked among them skilled exponents of the most fiendish tortures imaginable: but not even by the wildest leap of the imagination could Reynolds include her in that category. A little below middle height, with one hand tightly clasping the wrap about her slender waist, her face was young and fresh and innocent, untouched by any depravity.

The yellow hair the colour of ripening corn, was awry about her shoulders and with the knuckles of one hand she was still rubbing the sleep from eyes of a deep cornflower blue. When she spoke, her voice was still a little blurred from sleep, but soft and musical if perhaps touched with a little asperity.

‘Why are you still up and talking? It’s one o’clock in the morning – it’s after one, and I’d like to get some sleep.’ Suddenly her eyes caught sight of the pile of clothing on the table, and she swung round to catch sight of Reynolds, sitting on the bench and clad only in the old blanket. Her eyes widened, and she took an involuntary step backwards, clutching her wrap even more tightly around her. ‘Who – who on earth is this, Jansci?’

THREE

'Jansci!' Michael Reynolds was on his feet without any volition on his own part. For the first time since he had fallen into Hungarian hands the studied calmness, the mask of emotional indifference vanished and his eyes were alight with excitement and a hope that he had thought had vanished for ever. He took two quick steps towards the girl, grabbing at his blanket as it slipped and almost fell to the floor. 'Did you say, "Jansci"?' he demanded.

'What's wrong? What do you want?' The girl had retreated as Reynolds had advanced, then stopped as she bumped into the reassuring bulk of Sandor and clutched his arm. The apprehension in her face faded, and she looked at Reynolds thoughtfully and nodded. 'Yes, I said that. Jansci.'

'Jansci.' Reynolds repeated the word slowly, incredulously, like a man savouring each syllable to the full, wanting desperately to believe in the truth of something but unable to bring himself to that belief. He walked across the room, the hope and the conflicting doubt still mirrored in his eyes, and stopped before the man with the scarred hands.

'Your name is Jansci?' Reynolds spoke slowly, the unbelief, the inability to believe, still registering in his eyes.

'I am called Jansci.' The older man nodded, his eyes speculative and quiet.

'One four one four one eight two.' Reynolds looked unblinkingly at the other, searching for the faintest trace of response, of admission. 'Is that it?'

'Is that what, Mr Buhl?'

'If you are Jansci, the number is one four one four one eight two,' Reynolds repeated. Gently, meeting no resistance, he reached out for the scarred left hand, pushed the cuff back from the wrist and stared down at the violet tattoo. 1414182 – the number was as clear, as unblemished as if it had been made only that day.

Reynolds sat down on the edge of the desk, caught sight of a packet of cigarettes and shook one loose. Szendrô struck and held a match for him, and Reynolds nodded gratefully: he doubted whether he could have done it for himself, his hands were trembling uncontrollably. The fizzling of the igniting match seemed strangely loud in the sudden silence of the room. Jansci it was who finally broke the silence.

'You seem to know something about me?' he prompted gently.

'I know a lot more.' The tremor was dying out of Reynolds' hands and he was coming back on balance again, outwardly, at least. He looked round the room, at Szendrô, Sandor, the girl and the youth with the quick nervous eyes, all with expressions of bewilderment or anticipation on their faces. 'These are your friends? You can trust them absolutely – they all know who you are? Who you really are, I mean?'

'They do. You may speak freely.'

'Jansci is a pseudonym for Illyurin.' Reynolds might have been repeating something by rote, something he knew off by heart, as indeed he did. 'Major-General Alexis Illyurin. Born Kalinovka, Ukraine, October 18th, 1904. Married June 18th, 1931. Wife's name Catherine, daughter's name Julia'. Reynolds glanced at the girl. 'This must be Julia, she seems about the right age. Colonel Mackintosh says he'd like to have his boots back: I don't know what he means.'

'Just an old joke.' Jansci walked round the desk to his seat and leant back, smiling. 'Well, well, my old friend Peter Mackintosh still lives. Indestructible, he always was indestructible. You must work for him, of course, Mr – ah –'

'Reynolds. Michael Reynolds. I work for him.'

'Describe him.' The subtle change could hardly be called a hardening, but it was unmistakable. 'Face, physique, clothes, history, family – everything.'

'Reynolds did so. He talked for five minutes without stopping, them Jansci held up his hand.

'Enough. You must know him, must work for him and be the person you claim to be. But he took a risk, a great risk. It is not like my old friend.'

'I might be caught and made to talk, and you, too, would be lost?'

'You are very quick, young man.'

'Colonel Mackintosh took no chance,' Reynolds said quietly. 'Your name and number – that was all I knew. Where you lived, what you looked like – I had no idea. He didn't even tell me about the scars on your hands, these would have given me instant identification.'

'And how then did you hope to contact me?'

'I had the address of a café.' Reynolds named it. 'The haunt, Colonel Mackintosh said, of disaffected elements. I was to be there every night, same seat, same table, till I was picked up.'

'No identification?' Szendrô's query lay more in the lift of an eyebrow than the inflection of the voice.

'Naturally. My tie.'

Colonel Szendrô looked at the vivid magenta of the tie lying on the table, winced, nodded and looked away without speaking. Reynolds felt the first faint stirrings of anger.

'Why ask if you already know?' The edged voice betrayed the irritation in his mind.

'No offence.' Jansci answered for Szendrô. 'Endless suspicion, Mr Reynolds, is our sole guarantee of survival. We suspect everyone. Everyone who lives, everyone who moves – we suspect them every minute of every hour. But, as you see, we survive. We had been asked to contact you in that café – Imre has practically lived there for the past three days – but the request had come from an anonymous source in Vienna. There was no mention of Colonel Mackintosh – he is an old fox, that one … And when you had been met in the café?'

'I was told that I would be led to you – or to one of two others: Hridas and the White Mouse.'

'This has been a happy short-cut,' Jansci murmured. 'But I am afraid you would have found neither Hridas nor the White Mouse.'

'They are no longer in Budapest?'

'The White Mouse is in Siberia. We shall never see him again. Hridas died three weeks ago, not two kilometres from here, in the torture chambers of the AVO. They were careless for a moment, and he snatched a gun. He put it in his mouth. He was glad to die.'

'How – but how do you know these things?'

'Colonel Szendrô – the man you know as Colonel Szendrô – was there. He saw him die. It was Szendrô's gun he took.'

Reynolds carefully crushed his cigarette stub in an ashtray. He looked up at Jansci, across to Szendrô and back at Jansci again: his face was empty of all expression.

'Szendrô has been a member of the AVO for eighteen months,' Jansci said quietly. 'One of their most efficient and respected officers, and when things mysteriously go wrong and wanted men escape at the last moment, there is no one more terrible in his anger than Szendrô, no one who drives his men so cruelly till they literally collapse with exhaustion. The speeches he makes to newly indoctrinated recruits and cadets to the AVO have already been compiled in book form. He is known as The Scourge. His chief, Furmint, is at a loss to understand Szendrô's pathological hatred for his own countrymen, but declares he is the only indispensable member of the Political Police in Budapest … A hundred, two hundred Hungarians alive to-day, still here or in the west, owe their lives to Colonel Szendrô.'

Reynolds stared at Szendrô, examining every line of that face as if he were seeing it for the first time, wondering what manner of man might pass his life in such incredibly difficult and dangerous circumstances, never knowing whether he was being watched or suspected or betrayed, never knowing whether or not the next shoulder for the tap of the executioner might be his own, and all at once, without at all knowing why, Reynolds knew that this was indeed such a man as Jansci claimed. All

other considerations apart, he had to be or he, Reynolds, might even then have been screaming on the torture racks, deep down below the basement of Stalin Street …

'It must indeed be as you say, General Illyurin,' Reynolds murmured. 'He runs incredible risks.'

'Jansci, if you please. Always Jansci. Major-General Illyurin is dead.'

'I'm sorry … And to-night, how about tonight?'

'Your – ah – arrest by our friend here?'

'Yes.'

'It is simple. He has access to all but a few secret master files. Also he is privy to all proposed plans and operations in Budapest and Western Hungary. He knew of the road-block, the closing of the frontier … And he knew you were on the way.'

'But surely – surely they weren't after me? How could –'

'Don't flatter yourself, my dear Reynolds.' Szendrô carefully fitted another brown and black Russian cigarette into his holder – Reynolds was to discover that he chain-smoked a hundred of these every day – and struck a match. 'The arm of coincidence is not all that long. They weren't looking for you, they weren't looking for anyone. They were stopping only trucks, searching for large quantities of ferro-wolfram that are being smuggled into the country.'

'I should have thought they would have been damned glad to get all the ferro-wolfram they could lay their hands on,' Reynolds murmured.

'And so they are, my dear boy, and so they are. However, there are proper channels to be gone through, certain customs to be observed. Not to put too fine a point on it, several of our top party officials and highly-respected members of the government were being deprived of their usual cut. An intolerable state of affairs.'

'Unthinkable,' Reynolds agreed. 'Action was imperative.'

'Exactly!' Szendrô grinned, the first time Reynolds had seen him smile, and the sudden flash of white, even teeth and the crinkling of the eyes quite transformed the cold aloofness of the man. 'Unfortunately, on such occasions as these some fish other than the ones we are trawling for get caught in the net.'

'Such as myself?'

'Such as yourself. So I have made it my practice to be in the vicinity of certain police blocks at such times: a fruitless vigil, I fear, on all but very few occasions: you are only the fifth person I've taken away from the police inside a year. Unfortunately, you will also be the last. On the previous occasions I warned the country bumpkins who man these posts that they were to forget that I or the prisoner I had taken from them ever existed. To-night, as you know, their headquarters had been informed and the word will be out to all block posts to beware of a man posing as an AVO officer.'

Reynolds stared at him.

'But good God, man, they saw you! Five of them, at least. Your description will be in Budapest before –'

'Pah!' Szendrô flicked off some ash with a careless forefinger. 'Much good it will do the fools! Besides, I'm no imposter – I *am* an AVO officer. Did *you* doubt it?'

'I did not,' Reynolds said feelingly. Szendrô hitched an immaculately trousered leg and sat on the desk, smiling.

'There you are, then. Incidentally, Mr Reynolds, my apologies for my rather intimidating conduct on the way here to-night. As far as Budapest, I was concerned only with finding out whether you really were a foreign agent and the man we were looking for or whether I should throw you out at a street corner and tell you to lose yourself. But by the time I had reached the middle of the town another and most disquieting possibility had struck me.'

'When you stopped in the Andrassy Ut?' Reynolds nodded. 'You looked at me in a rather peculiar fashion, to say the least.'

‘I know. The thought had just occurred that you might have been an AVO member deliberately planted on me and therefore had no cause to fear a visit to the Andrassy Ut: I confess I should have thought of it earlier. However, when I said I was going to take you to a secret cellar, you would have known at once what I suspected, known I could not now afford to let you live and screamed your head off. But you said nothing, so I knew you were at least no plant … Jansci, could I be excused for a few minutes? You know why.’

‘Certainly, but be quick. Mr Reynolds hasn’t come all the way from England just to lean over the Margit Bridge and drop pebbles into the Danube. He has much to tell us.’

‘It is for your ear alone,’ Reynolds said. ‘Colonel Mackintosh said so.’

‘Colonel Szendrô is my right hand, Mr Reynolds.’

‘Very well. But only the two of you.’

Szendrô bowed and walked out of the room. Jansci turned to his daughter.

‘A bottle of wine, Julia. We have some *Villányi Furmint* left?’

‘I’ll go and see.’ She turned to leave, but Jansci called her. ‘One moment, my dear. Mr Reynolds, when did you eat last?’

‘Ten o’clock this morning.’

‘So. You must be starving. Julia?’

‘I’ll see what I can get, Jansci.’

‘Thank you – but first the wine. Imre’ – he addressed the youngster who was pacing restlessly up and down – ‘the roof. A walk around. See if everything is clear. Sandor, the car number plates. Burn them, and fix new ones.’

‘Burn them?’ Reynolds asked as the man left the room. ‘How is that possible?’

‘We have a large supply of number plates.’ Jansci smiled. ‘All of three-ply wood. They burn magnificently … Ah, you found some *Villányi*?’

‘The last bottle.’ Her hair was combed now, and she was smiling, appraisal and frank curiosity in her blue eyes as she looked at Reynolds. ‘You can wait twenty minutes, Mr Reynolds?’

‘If I have to.’ He smiled. ‘It will be difficult.’

‘I’ll be as quick as I can,’ she promised.

As the door closed behind her Jansci broke open the seal of the bottle and poured the cool white wine into a couple of glasses.

‘Your health, Mr Reynolds. And to success.’

‘Thank you.’ Reynolds drank slowly, deeply, gratefully of the wine – he could not recall when his throat and mouth had been so parched before – and nodded at the one ornament in that rather bleak and forbidding room, a silver-framed photograph on Jansci’s desk. ‘An extraordinarily fine likeness of your daughter. You have skilled photographers in Hungary.’

‘I took it myself,’ Jansci smiled. ‘It does her justice, you think? Come, your honest opinion: I am always interested in the extent and depth of a man’s percipience.’

Reynolds glanced at him in faint surprise then sipped his wine and studied the picture in silence, studied the fair, waving hair, the broad smooth brow above the long-lashed eyes, the rather high Slavonic cheekbones curving down to a wide, laughing mouth, the rounded chin above the slender column of the throat. A remarkable face, he thought, a face full of character, of eagerness and gaiety and a splendid zest for living. A face to remember …

‘Well, Mr Reynolds?’ Jansci prompted him gently.

‘It does her justice,’ Reynolds admitted. He hesitated, fearing presumption, looked at Jansci, knew instinctively how hopeless it would be to try to deceive the wisdom in these tired eyes, then went on: ‘You might almost say it does her more than justice.’

‘Yes?’

‘Yes, the bone structure, the shape of all the features, even the smile is exactly the same. But this picture has something more – something more of wisdom, of maturity. In two years perhaps, in three

then it will be your daughter, really your daughter: here, somehow you have caught a foreshadowing of these things. I don't know how it is done.'

'It's quite simple. That photograph is not of Julia but of my wife.'

'Your wife! Good lord, what a quite extraordinary resemblance.' Reynolds broke off, hurriedly searched his past sentences for any unfortunate gaffes, decided he had made none. 'She is here just now?'

'No, not here.' Jansci put his glass down and turned it round and round between his fingers. 'I'm afraid we do not know where she is.'

'I'm sorry.' It was all Reynolds could think of to say.

'Do not misunderstand me,' Jansci said gently. 'We know what happened to her, I'm afraid. The brown lorries – you know what I mean?'

'The Secret Police.'

'Yes.' Jansci nodded heavily. 'The same lorries that took away a million in Poland, the same in Roumania and half a million in Bulgaria, all to slavery and death. The same lorries that wiped out the middle classes of the Baltic States, that have taken a hundred thousand Hungarians, they came also for Catherine. What is one person among so many million who have suffered and died?'

'That was in the summer of '51?' It was all Reynolds could think to say: it was then, he knew, that the mass deportations from Budapest had taken place.

'We were not living here then, it was just two and a half years ago, less than a month after we had come. Julia, thank God, was staying with friends in the country. I was away that night, I had left about midnight, and when she went to make herself coffee after I had gone, the gas had been turned off and she did not know what that meant. So they took her away.'

'The gas? I'm afraid –'

'You don't understand? A chink in your armour the AVO would soon have prised open, Mr Reynolds. Everybody else in Budapest understands. It is the practice of the AVO to turn off the gas supply to a block of houses or flats before serving deportation notices there: a pillow on the bottom shelf of a gas oven is comfortable enough, and there is no pain. They stopped the sale of poisons in all chemists, they even tried to ban the sale of razor blades. They found it difficult, however, to prevent people from jumping from top storey flats …'

'She had no warning?'

'No warning. A blue slip of paper thrust in her hand, a small suitcase, the brown lorry and then the locked cattle trucks of the railway.'

'But she may yet be alive. You have heard nothing?'

'Nothing, nothing at all. We can only hope she lives. But so many died in these trucks, stifling or freezing to death, and the work in the fields, the factories or mines is brutal, killing, even for one fit and well: she had just been discharged from hospital after a serious operation. Chest-surgery – she had tuberculosis: her convalescence had not even begun.'

Reynolds swore softly. How often one read, one heard about this sort of thing, how easily, how casually, almost callously, one dismissed it – and how different when one was confronted with reality.

'You have looked for her – for your wife?' Reynolds asked harshly. He hadn't meant to speak that way, it was just the way the words came out.

'I have looked for her. I cannot find her.'

Reynolds felt the stirring of anger. Jansci seemed to take it all so easily, he was too calm, too unaffected.

'The AVO must know where she is,' Reynolds persisted. 'They have lists, files. Colonel Szendrô –'

'He has no access to top secret files,' Jansci interrupted. He smiled. 'And his rank is only equivalent to that of major. The promotion was self-awarded and for to-night only. So was the name … I think I heard him coming now.'

But it was the youngster with the dark hair who entered – or partially entered. He poked his head round the door, reported that everything was clear and vanished. But even in that brief moment Reynolds had had time to notice the pronounced nervous tic on the left cheek, just below the darting black eyes. Jansci must have seen the expression on Reynolds' face, and when he spoke his voice was apologetic.

'Poor Imre! He was not always like this, Mr Reynolds, not always so restless, so disturbed.'

'Restless! I shouldn't say it, but because my safety and plans are involved too, I must: he's a neurotic of the first order.' Reynolds looked hard at Jansci, but Jansci was his usual mild and gentle self. 'A man like that in a set-up like this! To say he's a potential danger is the understatement of the month.'

'I know, don't think I don't know.' Jansci sighed. 'You should have seen him just over two years ago, Mr Reynolds, fighting the Russian tanks on Castle Hill, just north of Gellert. He hadn't a nerve in his entire body. When it came to spreading liquid soap at the corners – and the steep, dangerous slopes of the Hill saw to the rest as far as the tanks were concerned – or prising up loose cobbles, filling the holes with petrol and touching it off as a tank passed across, Imre had no equal. But he became too rash, and one night one of the big T-54 tanks, slipping backwards down a hill with all the crew dead inside, pinned him, kneeling on all fours, against the wall of a house. He was there for thirty-six hours before anyone noticed him – and twice during that time the tank had been hit by high-explosive rockets from Russian fighter planes – they didn't want their own tanks used against them.'

'Thirty-six hours!' Reynolds stared at Jansci. 'And he lived?'

'He hadn't a mark on him, he still hasn't. It was Sandor who got him out – that was how they met for the first time. He got a crowbar and broke down the wall of the house from the inside – I saw him do it, and he was flinging 200-pound blocks of masonry around as if they were pebbles. We took him into a nearby house, left him, and when we returned the house was a huge pile of rubble: some resistance fighters had taken up position there and a Mongolian tank commander had pulverized the bottom storey until the whole house fell down. But we got him out again, still without a scratch. He was very ill for a long time – for months – but he's much better now.'

'Sandor and yourself both fought in the rising?'

'Sandor did. He was foreman electrician in the Dunapentele steel works, and he put his knowledge to good use. To see him handling high-tension wires with nothing but a couple of wooden battens held in his bare hands would make your blood freeze, Mr Reynolds.'

'Against the tanks?'

'Electrocution,' Jansci nodded. 'The crews of three tanks. And I've been told he destroyed even more down in Csepel. He killed an infantryman, stole his flame-thrower, sprayed through the driver's visor then dropped a Molotov cocktail – just bottles of ordinary petrol with bits of burning cotton stuffed into the necks – through the hatch when they opened it to get some air. Then he would shut the hatch, and when Sandor shuts a hatch and sits on it, the hatch stays shut.'

'I can imagine,' Reynolds said dryly. Unconsciously, almost, he rubbed his still aching arms, then a sudden thought occurred to him. 'Sandor took part, you said. And yourself?'

'Nothing.' Jansci spread his scarred, misshapen hands, palms upwards, and now Reynolds could see that the crucifixion marks indeed went right through. 'I took no part in it. I tried all I could to stop it.'

Reynolds looked at him in silence, trying to read the expression of the faded grey eyes enmeshed in those spider webs of wrinkles. Finally he said, 'I'm afraid I don't believe you.'

'I'm afraid you must.'

Silence fell on the room, a long, cold silence: Reynolds could hear the far-off tinkle of dishes in a distant kitchen as the girl prepared the meal. Finally, he looked directly at Jansci.

'You let the others fight, fight for you?' He made no attempt to conceal his disappointment, the near-hostility in his tone. 'But why? Why did you not help, not do *something*?'

‘Why? I’ll tell you why.’ Jansci smiled faintly and reached up and touched his white hair. ‘I am not as old as the snow on my head would have you think, my boy, but I am still far too old for the suicidal, the futile act of the grand but empty gesture. I leave that for the children of this world, the reckless and the unthinking, the romanticists who do not stop to count the cost; I leave it to the righteous indignation that cannot see beyond the justice of its cause, to the splendid anger that is blinded by its own shining splendour. I leave it to the poets and the dreamers, to those who look back to the glorious gallantry, the imperishable chivalry of the bygone world, to those whose vision carries them forward to the golden age that lies beyond tomorrow. But I can only see to-day.’ He shrugged. ‘The charge of the Light Brigade – my father’s father fought in that – you remember the charge of the Light Brigade and the famous commentary on that charge? “It’s magnificent, but it’s not war.” So it was with our October Revolution.’

‘Fine words,’ Reynolds said coldly. ‘These are fine words. I’m sure a Hungarian boy with a Russian bayonet in his stomach would have taken great comfort from them.’

‘I am also too old to take offence,’ Jansci said sadly. ‘I am also too old to believe in violence, except as a last resort, the final fling of desperation when every hope is gone, and even then it is only a resort to hopelessness: besides, Mr Reynolds, besides the uselessness of violence, of killing, what right have I to take the life of any man? We are all our Father’s children, and I cannot but think that fratricide must be repugnant to our God.’

‘You talk like a pacifist,’ Reynolds said roughly. ‘Like a pacifist before he lies down and lets the jackboot tramp him into the mud, him and his wife and his children.’

‘Not quite, Mr Reynolds, not quite,’ Jansci said softly. ‘I am not what I would like to be, not at all. The man who lays a finger on my Julia dies even as he does it.’

For a moment Reynolds caught a glimpse that might almost have been imagination, of the fire smouldering in the depths of those faded eyes, remembered all that Colonel Mackintosh had told of this fantastic man before him and felt more confused than ever.

‘But you said – you told me that –’

‘I was only telling you why I didn’t take part in the rising.’ Jansci was his gentle self again. ‘I don’t believe in violence if any other way will serve. Again, the time could not have been more badly chosen. And I do not hate the Russians, I even like them. Do not forget, Mr Reynolds, that I am a Russian myself. A Ukranian, but still a Russian, despite what many of my countrymen would say.’

‘You like the Russians. Even the Russian in your brother?’ Mask it as he tried with politeness, Reynolds could not quite conceal the incredulity in his question. ‘After what they have done to you and your family?’

‘A monster, and I stand condemned. Love for your enemies should be confined to where it belongs – between the covers of the Bible – and only the insane would have the courage, or the arrogance or the stupidity, to open the pages and turn the principles into practice. Madmen, only madmen would do it – but without these madmen our Armageddon will surely come.’ Jansci’s tone changed. ‘I like the Russian people, Mr Reynolds. They’re likeable, cheerful and gay when you get to know them, and there are no more friendly people on earth. But they are young, they are very young, like children. And like children they are full of whims, they’re arbitrary and primitive and a little cruel, as are all little children, forgetful and not greatly moved by suffering. But for all their youth, do not forget that they have a great love of poetry, of music and dancing, and singing and folk-tales, of ballet and the opera that would make the average westerner, in comparison, seem culturally dead.’

‘They’re also brutal and barbarous and human life doesn’t matter a damn to them,’ Reynolds interjected.

‘Who can deny it? But do not forget, so also was the western world when it was politically as young as the peoples of Russia are now. They’re backward, primitive and easily swayed. They hate and fear the west because they’re told to hate and fear the west. But your democracies, too, can act the same way.’

'For heaven's sake!' Reynolds crushed out his cigarette in a gesture of irritation. 'Are you trying to say –'

'Don't be so naïve, young man, and listen to me.' Jansci's smile robbed his words of any offence. 'All I'm trying to say is that unreasoning, emotionally-conditioned attitudes are as possible in the west as in the east. Look, for instance, at your country's attitude to Russia in the past twenty years. At the beginning of the last war Russia's popularity ran high. Then came the Moscow-Berlin pact, and you were actually ready, remember, to send an army of 50,000 to fight the Russians in Finland. Then came Hitler's assault in the east, your national press full of paeans of praise for "Good old Joe" and all the world loved a moujik. Now the wheel has come full circle again and the holocaust only awaits the one rash or panic-stricken move. Who knows, in five years' time, all will be smiles again. You are weathercocks, just as the Russians are weathercocks, but I blame neither people; it is not the weathercock that turns, it is the wind that turns the weathercock.'

'Our governments?'

'Your governments,' Jansci nodded. 'And, of course, the national press that always conditions the thinking of a people. But primarily the governments.'

'We in the west have bad governments, often very bad governments,' Reynolds said slowly. 'They stumble, they miscalculate, they make foolish decisions, they even have their quota of opportunists, careerists and plain downright power-seekers. But all these things are only because they are human. They mean well, they try hard for the good and not even a child fears them.' He looked speculatively at the older man. 'You yourself said recently that the Russian leaders have sent literally millions in the past few years to imprisonment and slavery and death. If, as you say, the peoples are the same, why are the governments so utterly different? Communism is the only answer.'

Jansci shook his head. 'Communism is gone, and gone for ever. To-day it remains only as a myth, an empty lip-service catchword in the name of which the cynical, ruthless realists of the Kremlin find sufficient excuse and justification for whatever barbarities their policies demand. A few of the old guard still in power may cherish the dream of world communism, but just a few: only a global war could now achieve their aims, and these same hard-headed realists in the Kremlin can see no point or sense or future in pursuing a policy that carries with it the seed of their own destruction. They are essentially businessmen, Mr Reynolds, and letting off a time-bomb under your own factory is no way to run a business.'

'Their barbarities, their enslavements and their massacres don't stem from world conquest?' The fractional lift of Reynolds' eyebrows was its own sceptical comment. 'You tell me that?'

'I do.'

'Then from what in the world –?'

'From fear, Mr Reynolds,' Jansci interrupted. 'From an almost terror-stricken fear that has no parallel among governments of modern times.

'They are afraid because the ground lost in leadership is almost irrecoverable: Malenkov's concessions of 1953, Kruschev's famous de-Stalinization speech of 1956 and his forced decentralization of all industry were contrary to all the cherished ideas of Communist infallibility and centralized control, but they had to be done, in the interest of efficiency and production – and the people have smelled Freedom. And they are afraid because their Secret Police has slipped and slipped badly: Beria is dead, the NKVD in Russia are not nearly so feared as the AVO in this country, so the belief in the power of authority, of the inevitability of punishment, has slipped also.

'These fears are of their own people. But these fears are nothing compared to their fears of the outside world. Just before he died, Stalin said, "What will happen without me? You are blind, as young kittens are blind, and Russia will be destroyed because you do not know how to recognize her enemies". Even Stalin couldn't have known how true his words would prove to be. They cannot recognize enemies, and they can only be safe, only feel safe, if all the peoples of the outside world

are regarded as enemies. Especially the west. They fear the west and, from their own point of view, they fear with every reason.

'They are afraid of a western world that, they think, is unfriendly and hostile and just waiting its chance. How terrified would you be, Mr Reynolds if you were ringed, as Russia is ringed, with nuclear bomb bases in England and Europe and North Africa and the Middle East and Japan? How much more terrified would you be if, every time the world tensions increase, fleets of foreign bombers appear mysteriously on the far edge of your long-distance radar screens, if you know, beyond any reasonable doubt, that whenever such tensions arise there are, at any given moment of the day or night anywhere between 500 and 1,000 bombers of the American Strategic Air Command each with its hydrogen bomb, cruising high in the stratosphere, just waiting the signal to converge on Russia and destroy it. You have to have an awful lot of missiles, Mr Reynolds, and an almost supernatural confidence in them to forget those thousand hydrogen bombers already airborne – and it only requires five per cent of them to get through, as they inevitably would. Or how would you, in Britain, feel if Russia were pouring arms into Southern Ireland, or the Americans if a Russian aircraft carrier fleet armed with hydrogen bombs cruised indefinitely in the Gulf of Mexico? Try to imagine all that, Mr Reynolds, and you can perhaps begin to imagine – only begin, for the imagination can be only a shadow of the reality – how the Russians feel.

'Nor does their fear stop there. They are afraid of people who try to interpret everything in the limited light of their own particular culture, who believe that all people, the world over, are basically the same. A common assumption, and a stupid and dangerous one. The cleavage between western and Slavonic minds and ways of thinking, the differences between their culture patterns are immense, and alas, unrealized.

'Finally, but perhaps above all, they are afraid of the penetration of western ideas into their own country. And that is why the satellite countries are so invaluable to them as a *cordon sanitaire*, an insulation against dangerous capitalist influences. And that's why revolt in one of their satellites, as in this country two years last October, brings out all that is worst in the Russian leaders. They reacted with such incredible violence because they saw in this Budapest rising the culmination, the fulfilment at one and the same time of their three nightmare fears – that their entire satellite empire might go up in smoke and the *cordon sanitaire* vanish for ever, that even a degree of success could have touched off a similar revolt in Russia and, most terrible of all, that a large-scale conflagration from the Baltic to the Black Sea would have given the Americans all the excuse or reason they ever needed to give the green light to the Strategic Air Command and the carriers of the Sixth Fleet. I know, you know, that idea's fantastic, but we are not dealing with facts, only with what the Russian leaders believe to be facts.'

Jansci drained his glass and looked quizzically at Reynolds. 'You begin to see now, I hope, why I was neither advocate of nor participant in the October rising. You begin to see, perhaps, why the revolt just had to be crushed, and the bigger and more serious the revolt the more terrible would have to be the repression, to preserve the *cordon*, to discourage other satellites or any of their own people who might be having similar ideas. You begin to see the hopelessness – the fore-doomed hopelessness – of it, the disastrously ill-judged futility of it all. The only effect it had was to strengthen Russia's position among the other satellites, kill and maim countless thousands of Hungarians, destroy and damage over 20,000 houses, bring inflation, a serious shortage of food and an almost mortal blow to the country's economy. It should never have happened. Only, as I say, the anger of despair is always blind: noble anger can be a magnificent thing, but annihilation has its – ah – drawbacks.'

Reynolds said nothing: for the moment he could think of nothing to say. A long silence fell on the room, long but not cold any more: the only sound was the scuffling of Reynolds' shoes as he tied his laces – he had been dressing as Jansci talked. Finally Jansci rose, switched out the light, drew back the curtain of the solitary window, peered out, then switched on the light again. It meant nothing, Reynolds could see, it was purely an automatic gesture, the routine precaution of a man who

had lived as long as he had by never neglecting the slightest precaution. Reynolds replaced his papers in his wallet and the gun in its shoulder holster.

A tap came on the door, and Julia came in. Her face was flushed from the warmth of a stove, and she carried a tray holding a bowl of soup, a steaming plate of diced meat and diced vegetables and a bottle of wine. She laid this on the desk.

'Here you are, Mr Reynolds. Two of our national dishes – *Gulyás* soup and *tokány*. I'm afraid there may be too much paprika in the soup and garlic in the *tokány* for your taste, but that's how we like it.' She smiled apologetically. 'Left-overs – all I could produce in a hurry at this time of night.'

'Smells wonderful,' Reynolds assured her. 'I'm only sorry to be such a bother to you in the middle of the night.'

'I'm used to it,' she said dryly. 'Usually there's half a dozen to be fed, generally about four o'clock in the morning. Father's guests keep irregular hours.'

'They do indeed,' Jansci smiled. 'Now off to bed with you, my dear: it's very late.'

'I'd like to stay a little, Jansci.'

'I don't doubt it.' Jansci's faded grey eyes twinkled. 'Compared to our average guest, Mr Reynolds is positively handsome. With a wash, brush-up and shave he might be almost presentable.'

'You know that's not fair, Father.' She stood her ground well, Reynolds thought, but the colour had deepened in her cheeks. 'You shouldn't say that.'

'It's not fair, and I shouldn't,' Jansci said. He looked at Reynolds. 'Julia's dream world lies west of the Austrian frontier, and she'd listen for hours to anyone talking about it. But there are some things she must not know, things that it would be dangerous for her even to guess about. Off you go, my dear.'

'Very well.' She rose obediently, if reluctantly, kissed Jansci on the cheek, smiled at Reynolds and left. Reynolds looked over at Jansci as the older man reached for the second bottle of wine and broke open the seal.

'Aren't you worried to death about her all the time?'

'God knows it,' Jansci said simply. 'This is no life for her, or for any girl, and if I get caught she goes too, almost for a certainty.'

'Can't you get her away?'

'You want to try it! I could get her across the frontier to-morrow without the slightest difficulty or danger – you know that that is my speciality – but she won't go. An obedient, respectful daughter as you have seen – but only up to a self-drawn line. After that, she is as stubborn as a mule. She knows the risks, but she stays. She says she'll never leave till we find her mother and they go together. But even then –'

He broke off suddenly as the door opened and a stranger walked in. Reynolds, twisting round and out of his seat like a cat, had his automatic out and lined up on the man before he had taken a step into the room, the snick of the safety catch plain above the scraping of the chair legs on the linoleum. He stared at the man unwinkingly, taking in every detail of the face, the smooth, dark hair brushed straight back, the lean eagle face, with the thin pinched nostrils and high forehead of a type he knew well – the unmistakable Polish aristocrat. Then he started as Jansci reached out gently and pressed down the barrel of the automatic.

'Szendrô was right about you,' he murmured thoughtfully. 'Dangerous, very dangerous – you move like a snake when it strikes. But this man is a friend, a good friend. Mr Reynolds, meet the Count.'

Reynolds put the gun away, crossed the room and extended his hand. 'Delighted,' he murmured. 'Count who?'

'Just the Count,' the newcomer said, and Reynolds stared at him again. The voice was unmistakable. 'Colonel Szendrô!'

'No other,' the Count admitted, and with these words his voice had changed as subtly, but as completely, as his appearance. 'I say modestly, but with truth, I have few equals in the matter of disguise and mimicry. What you now see before you, Mr Reynolds, is me – more or less. Then a scar here, a scar there, and that is how the AVO see me. You will understand, perhaps, why I was not unduly worried about being recognized to-night?'

Reynolds nodded slowly. 'I do indeed. And – and you live here – with Jansci? Isn't that rather dangerous?'

'I live in the second best hotel in all Budapest,' the Count assured him. 'As befits a man of my rank, naturally. But as a bachelor, I must, of course, have my – ah – diversions, shall we say. My occasional absences call for no comment … Sorry to have been so long, Jansci.'

'Not at all,' Jansci, assured him. 'Mr Reynolds and I have had the most interesting discussion.'

'About the Russians, inevitably?'

'Inevitably.'

'And Mr Reynolds was all for conversion by annihilation?'

'More or less.' Jansci smiled. 'It's not so long since you felt the same way yourself.'

'Age comes to us all.' The Count crossed to a wall-cabinet, drew out a dark bottle, poured himself a half-tumblerful of liquid and looked at Reynolds. '*Barack* – apricot brandy, you would call it. Deadly. Avoid it like the plague. Home-made.' As Reynolds watched in astonishment, he drank the contents without stopping, then refilled the glass. 'You have not yet come to the business of the day?'

'I'm coming to it now.' Reynolds pushed back his plate, drank some more wine. 'You gentlemen have heard, perhaps, of Dr Harold Jennings?'

Jansci's eyes narrowed. 'We have indeed. Who hasn't?'

'Exactly. Then you know what he's like – an elderly dodderer well over seventy, short-sighted, amiable, a typically absent-minded professor in every respect but one. He has a brain like an electronic computer and is the world's greatest expert and authority on the higher mathematics of ballistics and ballistic missiles.'

'Which was why he was induced to defect to the Russians,' the Count murmured.

'He didn't,' Reynolds said flatly. 'The world thinks he did, but the world is wrong.'

'You are sure of this?' Jansci was leaning far forward in his seat.

'Certainly. Listen. At the time of the defection of other British scientists, old Jennings spoke out strongly, if unwisely, in their defence. He bitterly condemned what he called out-worn nationalism, and said that any man had the right to act according to the dictates of his mind, conscience and ideals. Almost immediately, as we expected, he was contacted by the Russians. He rebuffed them, told them to get the hell back to Moscow and said he fancied their brand of nationalism a damn' sight less than his own: he had only been talking generally, he said.'

'How can you be sure of this?'

'We are sure – we had a tape recording of the entire conversation – we had the whole house wired. But we never made public the recording, and, after he had gone over to the Russians, it would have been too late – nobody would have believed us.'

'Obviously,' Jansci murmured. 'And then, also obviously, you called off the watchdogs?'

'We did,' Reynolds admitted. 'It would have made no difference anyway – we were watching the wrong party. Less than two months after the old boy's interview with the Russian agents, Mrs Jennings and her sixteen-year-old schoolboy son, Brian – the professor married late in life – went to Switzerland for a holiday. Jennings was to have gone with them, but was held up by some important business at the last minute, so he let them go on alone, intending to rejoin them in two or three days in their Zurich hotel. He found his wife and son gone.'

'Abducted, of course,' Jansci said slowly. 'And the Swiss-Austrian frontier is no barrier to determined men; but more likely, perhaps, by boat, at night.'

‘That’s what we thought,’ Reynolds nodded. ‘Lake Constance. Anyway, what’s certain is that Jennings was contacted within minutes of arriving at the hotel, told what had happened, and left in no doubt as to what lay in store for his wife and son if he didn’t immediately follow them behind the iron curtain. Jennings may be an old dodderer, but he’s not an old fool: he knew these people weren’t kidding, so he went at once.’

‘And now, of course, you want him back?’

‘We want him back. That’s why I’m here.’

Jansci smiled faintly. ‘It will be interesting to learn just how you propose to rescue him, Mr Reynolds, and, of course, his wife and son, for without them you achieve nothing. Three people, Mr Reynolds, an old man, a woman and a boy, a thousand miles to Moscow, and the snow lies deep upon the steppes.’

‘Not three people, Jansci: just one – the professor. And I don’t have to go to Moscow for him. He’s not two miles from where we’re sitting now, right here in Budapest.’

Jansci made no effort to conceal his astonishment.

‘Here? You’re sure of that, Mr Reynolds?’

‘Colonel Mackintosh was.’

‘Then Jennings must be here, he must be.’ Jansci twisted in his seat and looked at the Count. ‘Had you heard of this?’

‘Not a word. Nobody in our office knows of it, I’ll swear to that.’

‘All the world will know next week.’ Reynolds’ voice was quiet but positive. ‘When the International Scientific Conference opens here on Monday, the first paper will be read by Professor Jennings. He is being groomed to be the star of the show. It will be the Communists’ biggest propaganda triumph for years.’

‘I see, I see.’ Jansci drummed his fingers thoughtfully on the table, then looked up sharply. ‘Professor Jennings, you said you only wanted the professor?’

Reynolds nodded.

‘Only the professor!’ Jansci stared at him. ‘God above, man, aren’t you aware what will happen to his wife and son? I assure you, Mr Reynolds, if you expect our assistance –’

‘Mrs Jennings is already in London.’ Reynolds held up his hand to forestall the questions. ‘She fell seriously ill about ten weeks ago, and Jennings insisted that she go to the London Clinic for treatment, and he forced the Communists to accede to his demands – you can’t coerce, torture or brainwash a man of the professor’s calibre without destroying his capacity for work, and he flatly refused to carry on working till they had granted his demands.’

‘He must be quite a man.’ The Count shook his head in admiration.

‘He’s a holy terror when something gets his back up,’ Reynolds smiled. ‘But it wasn’t all that much of an achievement. The Russians had everything to gain – the continued services of the greatest ballistic expert alive to-day – and nothing to lose. They held the two trump cards – Jennings and his son – in Russia and knew that Mrs Jennings would return: and they insisted that everything be done in the utmost secrecy. Not half a dozen people in Britain know that Mrs Jennings is in Britain; not even the surgeon who carried out the two major operations on her.’

‘She recovered?’

‘It was touch and go, but she recovered and she’s recuperating very well.’

‘The old man will be pleased,’ Jansci murmured. ‘His wife returns to Russia soon?’

‘His wife will never return to Russia again,’ Reynolds said bluntly. ‘And Jennings has no reason to be pleased. He thinks his wife is critically ill, and that what little hope there is is going fast. He thinks that, because that is what we have told him.’

‘What! What’s that?’ Jansci was on his feet now, the faded grey eyes cold and hard as tone. ‘God in heaven, Reynolds, what kind of inhuman conduct is that? You actually told the old man his wife was dying?’

‘Our people at home need him, and need him desperately: our scientists have been held up, completely blocked, on their latest project for ten weeks now, and they’re convinced that Jennings is the only man that can give them the breakthrough they must have.’

‘So they would use this despicable trick –’

‘It’s life or death, Jansci,’ Reynolds interrupted flatly. ‘It may literally be life or death for millions. Jennings must be moved and we will use every lever we can to that end.’

‘You think this is ethical, Reynolds? You think anything can justify –’

‘Whether I think these things or not doesn’t matter a damn,’ Reynolds said indifferently. ‘The pros and cons are not for me to decide. The only things that concern me are that I’ve been given a job to do: if it is possible in any way at all, I’ll get that job done.’

‘A ruthless and dangerous man,’ the Count murmured. ‘I told you. A killer, but he happens to be on the side of the law.’

‘Yes.’ Reynolds was unmoved. ‘And there’s another point. Like many other brilliant men, Jennings is rather naïve and short-sighted when it comes to matters outside his own speciality. Mrs Jennings tells us that the Russians have assured her husband that the project he is working on will be used for exclusively peaceful purposes. Jennings believes this. He’s a pacifist at heart, and so –’

‘All the best scientists are pacifists at heart.’ Jansci was sitting down now, but his eyes were still hostile. ‘All the best men everywhere are pacifists at heart.’

‘I’m not arguing. All I’m saying is that Jennings is now at the stage where he would sooner work for the Russians, if he thinks he is working for peace, than for his own people, if he knows he is working for war. Which makes him all the more difficult to move – and which – in turn, makes necessary the use of every lever that comes to hand.’

‘The fate of his young son is, of course, a matter of indifference.’ The Count waved an airy hand. ‘Where such tremendous stakes are at issue –’

‘Brian, his son, was in Poznan all day yesterday,’ Reynolds interrupted. ‘Some exposition or other, mainly for youth organizations. Two men shadowed him from the moment he got up. By noon to-morrow – to-day, that is – he’ll be in Stettin. Twenty-four hours later he’ll be in Sweden.’

‘Ah, so. But you are too confident, Reynolds, you underestimate Russian vigilance.’ The Count was regarding him thoughtfully over the rim of his brandy glass. ‘Agents have been known to fail.’

‘These two agents have never failed. They are the best in Europe. Brian Jennings will be in Sweden tomorrow. The call-sign comes from London on a regular European transmission. Then, and not till then, we approach Jennings.’

‘So.’ The Count nodded. ‘Perhaps you have some humanity after all.’

‘Humanity!’ Jansci’s voice was cold still, almost contemptuous. ‘Just another lever to use against the poor old man – and Reynolds’ people know very well that if they left the boy to die in Russia Jennings would never work for them again.’

The Count lit another of his interminable chain of brown cigarettes.

‘Perhaps we are being too harsh. Perhaps, here, self-interest and humanity go hand in hand. “Perhaps,” I said … And what if Jennings still refuses to go?’

‘Then he’ll just have to go whether he wants to or not.’

‘Wonderful! Just wonderful!’ The Count smiled wryly. ‘What a picture for *Pravda*. Our friends here lugging Jennings by the heels across the border and the caption “British Secret Agent Liberates Western Scientist.” Can’t you just see it, Mr Reynolds?’

Reynolds shrugged and said nothing. He was only too keenly aware of the change of atmosphere in the past five minutes, the undercurrent of hostility that now ran strongly towards himself. But he had had to tell Jansci everything – Colonel Mackintosh had been insistent on that point, and it had been inevitable if they were to have Jansci’s help. The offer of help, if it were to be made at all, now hung in the balance – and without it, Reynolds knew, he might as well have saved himself the trouble

of coming at all … Two minutes passed in silence, then Jansci and the Count looked at one another and exchanged an almost imperceptible nod. Jansci looked squarely at Reynolds.

'If all your countrymen were like you, Mr Reynolds, I wouldn't lift a finger to help you: cold-blooded, emotionless people to whom right and wrong, justice and injustice, and suffering are matters of academic disinterest are as guilty, by silence of consent, as the barbarous murderers of whom you so recently spoke: but I know they are not all like you: neither would I help if it were only to enable your scientists to make machines of war. But Colonel Mackintosh was – is – my friend and I think it inhuman, no matter what the cause, that an old man should die in a foreign land, among uncaring strangers, far from his family and those he loves. If it lies in our power, in any way at all, we will see to it, with God's help, that the old man comes safely home again.'

FOUR

The inevitable cigarette holder clipped between his teeth, the inevitable Russian cigarette well alight, the Count leaned a heavy elbow on the buzzer and kept on leaning until a shirt-sleeved little man, unshaven and still rubbing the sleep from his eyes, came scurrying out from the little cubicle behind the hotel's reception desk. The Count eyed him with disfavour.

'Night-porters should sleep in the daytime,' he said coldly. 'The manager, little man, and at once.'

'The manager? At this hour of the night?' The night-porter stared with ill-concealed insolence at the clock above his head, transferred his stare to the Count, now innocuously dressed in a grey suit and grey raglan raincoat, and made no effort at all to conceal the truculence in his voice. 'The manager is asleep. Come back in the morning.'

There came a sudden sound of ripping linen, a gasp of pain, and the Count, his right hand gripping the bunched folds of the porter's shirt, had him halfway across the desk: the blood-shot, sleep-filmed eyes, widened first with surprise and then with fear, were only inches away from the wallet that had magically appeared in the Count's free hand. A moment of stillness, a contemptuous shove and the porter was scrabbling frantically at the pigeon-holed mail racks behind him in an attempt to keep his balance.

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