

Budspy

BY

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Therfor bihoveth him a ful long spoon

That schal ete with a feend.

— Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Squire's Tale*

One

Chic's briefcase was already open on the desk, edges lined up neatly with the edges of the desktop. There was nothing in it but a small manual of government employee guidelines ("Roughhousing or practical joking in the office is strictly forbidden"; "Attendance at weekly voluntary patriotism meetings is mandatory") primly tucked into one corner. Chic looked around the dreary little office quickly, more to settle a sudden irrational qualm than because he genuinely feared someone else might be there and watching him. Oh, yes, he was alone. He picked up the stack of papers, thumped it end-on against the desk to line up the edges of the sheets even more precisely, and placed it carefully in the briefcase next to the policy manual. The desk was clear except for the ashtray, which Chic emptied into his trash can. This was the way he left his desk every evening.

The stack of papers had hidden a deep gouge in the hard, brown wood; the gouge was clearly meant to represent a naked woman. It must have taken hours of boredom and frustration, days of diligent work, to complete that piece of artistic vandalism. Willful destruction of government property; one thousand dollars or one year in prison or both. Chic imagined himself arresting someone for it and smiled. The small stack of papers he had just put in his case was destined to fry much bigger fish than that.

The case was of black, supple leather. The leather was American, of course. The discreet *hackenkreuz* on the lock showed where the raw materials had been worked into this fine result. Chic ran his fingers gently over the leather, loving the feel and the smell. He locked the case, deriving an almost sensual pleasure as he felt and heard the hard metal of the locks *snick* precisely into place. *Budmen shouldn't get attached to things, either.*

During his first two weeks on the job, now more than two years in the past, Chic had identified each of those in the building who habitually worked late, and today, his last day on the job, he had carefully outwaited all of them. Now he walked quickly down the corridor toward the front door with his senses less than fully alert, not anticipating meeting anyone on the way, his attention idly upon the unevenness of the floor, the scratches and scuff marks, the chips in walls and doors from decades of hard use, and the empty echoing of his own footsteps. He snapped to alert when he saw Kremmling bending over the water fountain.

Kremmling, of all people! He normally left at 4:30 on the dot and was thus one of the last people Chic had even thought he might possibly run into. What made the fat man so potentially dangerous was that he liked everyone. From the first, he had tried everything he could think of to establish some sort of friendship with Chic.

For a moment, with Kremmling's large, soft backside pointed toward him as its owner slurped water greedily, Chic thought he might be able to get back to his office

undetected. However, it didn't happen that way. Kremmling straightened at the wrong time and boomed out happily, "Jim! Working late again? *And* taking work home? You must be bucking for that new section chief slot in your group."

Chic forced a grin in response to Kremmling's. "Yeah. It's either me or Blanting, and you know how he'll screw things up."

Kremmling nodded. "Always thinking of the good of the agency, aren't you?"

"And the good of the taxpayer." *A stupid thing to say*, Chic told himself. *I need a vacation. I need a cigarette. I need a drink.* "Oh, listen, I've got to hurry." He held up his briefcase. "It's going to be a long night."

"Yeah, sure." There was hurt in Kremmling's voice and on his face, but Chic shrugged it off and hurried from the building. Chubby, sweet-natured Kremmling, who always took slights to heart. He'd get over it. At least he didn't seem to be involved and would almost certainly survive the coming shakeup. Chic's problem now was to make sure that he survived it, too.

Chic took the usual route home. The essential thing, as always, was not to call attention to himself, not to become conspicuous. His apartment had come to seem like home, now that he'd lived in it for two years. It would be a wrench to leave it. And it was air conditioned, which the monorail wasn't—not adequately, anyway—and that made his apartment all the more a welcome refuge on a muggy spring night like this one. The heat had come early this year. It seemed to Chic that the weather had been strange for much of the last year. Heavy dampness had come with the early heat. It had been raining almost daily, and the city smelled foul. *It's rotting*, he told himself, and grinned then chuckled aloud. His monorail neighbors studiously ignored him: an urban survival trait.

Chic practiced an urban survival trait, too. Unconsciously, he turned a blind eye to the scene outside the window. The monorail, a gleaming snake of German manufacture, slid past squalor and filth. It ascended on its rising rail and flew above packed ghettos and *barrios*. The poor—mostly Negroes and Mexicans—looked up as it passed overhead, but Chic Western was absorbed in his thoughts and never looked down. The air inside the cabin was thick with smoke, and Chic was adding his share to it, puffing inattentively at his cigarette.

Once inside his apartment, once he had locked the doors, opaqued the windows, and checked the small monitor station for any signs that the rooms had been entered or observed during his absence, Chic set about methodically eliminating all hints of his ever having lived there. It was a procedure he had gone through before, of course, never enjoying it (except at the beginning, when it was all still romantic), and it was becoming a mechanical task.

Extra clothing, extra supplies of all kinds, flashed into nothing in his small disposal unit. Not for him the standard slot in the wall: it was far too easy to divert what was put into it to some exit other than the one that gave into the furnace. Chic didn't really believe that those he'd been working with for the last two years were the type to use violence (Kremmling? Unimaginable!) or could have guessed so soon what Jim North really was, but their careers, their freedom, conceivably even their lives would be endangered by what he was doing, and he knew how that could make even the mildest of men react unpredictably. Besides all that, there were others involved in what he had uncovered, not just those he had come to know. He had survived for a decade; he intended to survive for decades to come, and caution, excessive caution—even

cowardice—was the key. Budmen take no chances. Budmen aren't heroes.

Budmen travel light. Chic had been told that right at the beginning, and his years on the job had made the motto ingrained. Even before he had started disposing of possessions, the apartment had lacked the imprint of his personality. What he had in it was functional because he limited himself to the functional. The carefully selected prints and a few original paintings Chic had inherited from his parents were in storage and would have to stay there indefinitely. He had grown up surrounded by artwork hanging on the walls, and he missed that, but he had schooled himself to live a life very different from that of his youth.

All he had left to take care of now was the papers themselves. He made some careful adjustments to the faucet in the kitchen sink and then took the papers from the briefcase and passed them one by one under the lens of the scanner hidden in the faucet. As he did so, a slender thread of silver-gray tape unwound itself from beneath the handle of the faucet.

When he was done, he tore the tape off neatly against the sharp bottom edge of the handle, coiled it quickly and tightly, and dropped it into his pocket, where it joined three others just like it. He pushed the lens of the scanner inwards and twisted the spout of the faucet sharply to one side, then stepped back hastily. The faucet gave off a sudden glare of light and flash of heat and fused into an unidentifiable lump. This he unscrewed, replacing it with the original, unmodified faucet, which he had been keeping in a closet for two years. The papers he had taken from work now went into the small disposal unit and disappeared.

Finally, and with much regret, he placed the disposal unit itself inside his briefcase, set it for self-destruction, and placed the case inside the sink. *It's also replaceable*, he told himself. *Everything is replaceable*. A few seconds later, the case burst into intense flame and shriveled quickly into ash. The fireproof synthetics of the sink and counters showed no marks. Germany had virtually created the synthetics industry decades earlier; theirs were still the best.

Chic's memory was of course near perfect, and if necessary a budman's testimony could be used in these cases instead of original documents. But there were a few legal limits, and nothing was as certain to obtain convictions as good photographs of the documents themselves. Besides that, if he were caught, his survival with intact mind was unlikely, but these small balls of tape might conceivably get where they were supposed to even if he didn't. (He would never *be* caught; that determination overrode all others.)

He left his apartment casually, just a typical single male office worker heading out for supper or an evening's entertainment.

The subway took him downtown, and he wandered about in the restaurant and theater districts for more than an hour, as if he were having difficulty deciding where to eat and how to spend the evening. Bright lights and busy crowds, and Chic Western was but another atom in the mix. The air was heavy with humidity, breezeless, and the sidewalks and streets were wet from a shower earlier in the evening; the city still stank, and so did he. He had had no time—or thought—to change his clothes for something fresher and cleaner, and he walked about in a miasma of his own smell, wondering idly how much of it was due to the temperature and humidity and how much to his tension over the last few hours. *Or maybe it's rubbed off from the last few years of work*, he told himself, and smiled at the thought.

There was a main entrance to the headquarters building of the Ombudsman Commission, and total safety was guaranteed for any government employee within a thousand yards of that entrance. No agency had even tried to transgress that safety zone in at least ten years. But of course it was common knowledge that every agency in the District kept that entrance under constant surveillance. Bad enough that Chic had to risk breaking his cover; it would be unforgivable if Jim North were seen to be entering the Commission building and as a result, forewarned, major wrongdoers fled the country.

Chic roamed with apparent aimlessness along the sidewalks, letting himself be carried along by the movements of the pedestrian current. His glance passed over the blinking, blaring advertisements on the building walls facing the crowds as if he found none of them either completely uninteresting or particularly absorbing. Loose pages from newspapers lay soggy on the sidewalks or blown against the walls of facing buildings. Printed on flimsy paper, they fell apart quickly, and those on the sidewalk, trampled underfoot by the busy crowds, quickly became unidentifiable, muddy pulp. Rows of stands along the curb, automatic dispensers with the current issues of the newspapers within displayed behind plastic fronts, caught his eye for a moment or two. The standard ones were there, from the classiest, *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, to the tabloids, *Weekly Peek* and *Stormer*, to the foreign language—a great variety here, with almost every script and curlicue known to man represented, including (incongruously side by side) the familiar Yiddish papers, *Forward* and *Day*, and the two most popular German papers, both named *Beobachter*, but one the original import in cluttered Gothic and the other the Bund's domestic version, printed in Latin letters to increase its appeal to the American eye. The *Stormer* dispenser was already empty.

The *New York Times*, in letters scarcely larger than the type of the story beneath the header, announced that NEGRO DISTRICTS IN ATLANTA REMAIN CALM, while the *Peek* screamed in giant letters BRITS CRUSH MADRAS RIOT! Further down the page, a red border outlined a story headed MASSACRE ON SKIN RESERVATION! In slightly smaller print below that, the paper averred that WHITE MEN ARE STILL UNSAFE IN PARTS OF OKLAHOMA! Chic gathered that this was a scandal that the government should do something about. *We could send in a budman*, he thought. *Do him up with warpaint and feathers, or whatever.*

Occasionally, Chic cast a seemingly casual glance at the street.

A steady stream of cars and trucks moved in both directions—huge and small, from twenty-wheelers and Chryslers down to the ubiquitous Volkswagens. The drivers were unable to make rapid headway, but they were unwilling to stop for anything. Taxis moved among them, the red and the yellow, the checkered and the not. The empty taxis cruised slowly in the lanes nearest the sidewalks, despite the yells and hornblowing of the other drivers forced to slow down behind them.

An expression of annoyed resignation crossed Chic's face, and he shrugged his shoulders and signaled to a taxi that had been sliding along next to the sidewalk at no more than a walking pace. Clearly, this was a young man who had given up in disgust his attempt to find something pleasant to do with his evening and was now going back home.

The taxi stopped and its door slid open. Chic climbed in, giving his apartment building's address in a loud voice. The taxi moved back into the stream of traffic, its driver utterly oblivious to yelled curses coming from inside a car he had just cut off. Inside the cab, the clamminess of the outside air had been airconditioned to a chill

dampness; nonetheless, it was a welcome relief.

As they moved away from the central district, Chic said, in as casual a voice as he could manage, “Know of any interesting places in this city, bud?” As always, he wondered who had chosen such a password combination. Men probably hadn’t called each other “bud” for fifty years or more. Still, this sort of seemingly childish undercover game was essential, and Chic knew it. The taxi had the right combination of digits in its license plate, but that could happen by coincidence, and in that case, the driver would never know he had been prompted.

“There’s the government district,” the driver said. His voice was as calm and neutral as Chic had tried to make his own, but then for the driver, this sort of pickup was far more common, ordinary, perhaps a regular part of his daily routine. “Like the Ombudsman Building,” the driver added.

“You’ve got it. Take me in.”

The driver nodded and turned from the highway he was on to the narrow streets of an unlighted residential area. He cruised for a few blocks, his lights off, looking for a place he considered suitable, and then pulled to a stop. He fiddled with the dashboard, manipulating something Chic couldn’t see, and then finally grunted in satisfaction. Chic had been through this often enough to know that the outside of the car now had no taxicab markings and was old, faded, scratched—utterly indistinguishable from a hundred thousand other cars in the greater Washington area. A development of holography the television networks would have paid billions for, were it for sale—and had they known it existed. The Germans might have invented holography, but this at least was an American addition to it.

The vehicle moved along the street for a block or two before the driver turned on his headlights again. Chic could never relax throughout this phase of the operation. He was sure he was typical—that other budmen also found it difficult to relinquish control. Only when he was fully in charge did Chic feel confident: a budman trusts only himself.

This stage was the weakest link, the one during which he was most likely to be compromised or exposed or worse. Despite the driver’s care, some innocent passerby might see the cab’s transformation. More chilling was the possibility that the Federal Police might have had him or the car or both under surveillance: the Federal Police had powerful reasons for fearing the Ombudsman Commission, and they had the training and the equipment and the manpower to track him down and kill him.

However, while Chic worried about these possibilities and smoked rapidly and nervously, the driver calmly and routinely drove about the city on a prearranged route, *his* mind, to all outward appearances, utterly free from all doubt and hesitation.

Among the office buildings and suburban houses the cab passed were some which were fronts for Commission observation posts. As the cab passed each one, the descriptions and license plate numbers of the cars following the cab were recorded. From one such post to the next, a predictable few of those following cars would repeat, would still be behind the cab, but as the cab’s complex pattern extended through the city, this number should diminish to nothing; if it didn’t the cab was being followed deliberately. Ultraviolet lasers in each outpost fired microsecond bursts at the rear hubcaps of the cab as it passed by, transmitting to its dashboard display the number of repeat followers.

The large, glowing green digits in front of the driver dwindled steadily: 32 ... 24 ... 10 ... 4 ... 1 ... 0. When the zero at last appeared, the driver nodded—to himself,

presumably, for he hadn't said a word to Chic since their initial conversation—and swung his car off the Beltway.

They were now in the Washington Heights area, driving down dark streets, stopping at one stop sign after another. Chic could still remember the fuss raised when Negroes had tried to move into this part of Washington about twenty years earlier. Chic had been in his mid-teens. He and his family had been living in Ohio in those days, but the scandal had reached everywhere. His parents had been obviously upset at the violent reactions of Washingtonians, but they had said nothing to Chic.

The cab rolled up a steep driveway. The spray from a nearby sprinkler, invisible in the darkness, pattered briefly against the rolled-up windows, and then the garage door in front of them slid up, hoisted out of their way by the garage-door opener the driver had activated, and the cab came to a stop inside the garage and the garage door closed behind them. They were about five or six miles from the Ombudsman Building, Chic estimated.

Chic was sure he had been brought in *via* this very entrance once before, and that gave rise to a disturbing thought. *What if a budman deserted us?* What if one of his colleagues had gone over to one of the innumerable other sides, or had been captured and tortured into telling where some of the entrances were? He'd been told not to worry about this possibility. *Easier said than done.*

And what about the Federal Police? They had helicopters, spy planes—even, rumor said, satellites of their own. Could the Ombudsman Commission spy posts and the cab's dashboard display take any of those into account? Chic had his doubts.

They sat in darkness for some moments, the silence broken only by the soft rumble of the car's engine and the low-pitched roar of the exhaust fans in the garage. Chic felt through his feet a subtle *click*, and the car began to sink.

More long moments in the dark, dropping slowly all the time. The movement stopped and the car was sitting in a brightly lighted tunnel. The floor of the tunnel was a black-topped, two-lane highway. It stretched straight and level ahead of them, diminishing to a point of light in the distance. The cab began to move, accelerating as it raced along the smooth roadway.

Chic thought about passing under houses and shopping centers and highways, under the Anacostia River, under the Library of Congress and the Capitol building. How did the Commission prevent these tunnels from being discovered by all the multitude of contractors and workmen who were forever digging and burrowing in and around the city? Perhaps at this very moment, explosives some enemy had planted within the gray walls blurring past his window were about to be set off, burying him under fifty feet of earth and millions of gallons of water. He breathed deeply and regularly to try to bring his heartbeat under control.

The driver began to whistle cheerfully.

Then the portal at the end became visible, the entrance to the Ombudsman Building's underground garage for agents and staff, and Chic began to relax for the first time in two years.

The dehydrated air, kept dry to ensure optimum functioning by agents and staff, began to leak in, replacing the chill damp of the airconditioned air trapped within the cab's interior, and Chic felt dry and comfortable at last. They passed the portal and cruised to an assigned parking slot. Chic Western grinned with pleasure; he was home again.

Two

But even at home, there are rules.

Chic ascended by elevator to the basement level: Records and Evidence. What a relief, he thought, after two years of enduring the noisy, vibrating, frequently frightening elevators of the more public government office buildings, to ride smoothly in this stainless steel paradigm of German engineering.

Records and Evidence was a vast storehouse, the safest place for the sort of data Chic had stored on tape in his apartment. Here, copies would be made of the tapes and routed to the appropriate departments for further action. The originals would stay in R&E: agents might get themselves caught, even killed, the evidence they were carrying destroyed by the opposition, but the original copies of tapes the agents had delivered to R&E earlier would rest inviolably in this basement forever. For some reason, it disturbed Chic to think of that.

Chic turned his tapes over to Harold, an ancient who had been in sole charge of storing evidence for as long as Chic had been a budman and who seemed not to have changed in all that time. Chic had never learned Harold's last name. Even though Chic saw him for only minutes at a time at intervals of months or years, Harold always remembered his name instantly; it made Chic wonder just how many—or how few—budmen there really were. He signed a few forms and took in return the receipt Harold handed over. "And don't forget—"

"A copy to Nickerson," Harold said testily. "Of course. You said the same thing last time, two years ago."

Chic shrugged and returned to the elevator.

How many budmen were there? The Commissioner and his immediate aides might know, but Chic certainly did not, and surely no one outside the agency did. Various precautions were taken to prevent socializing between budmen: that "budmen have no friends" was ultimately true. Thus if one budman were compromised, he would be unable to reveal his colleagues' identities. The wisdom of this policy was clear; budmen observed it willingly. And it suited their personalities to do so, or so Chic assumed, judging by his own nature.

All of this contributed to the air of mystery surrounding the work of the Commission. Its charter—to uncover and punish, and to prevent, corruption and subversion within the federal government—was well known to the public, which enthusiastically supported it; and its primary method—the use of budmen, popularly called "budspies," in such undercover missions as the one Chic had just completed—was also well publicized. This method had caught the public's imagination. The Commission

had been glamorized and romanticized ever since its founding thirty-one years earlier under President McCarthy. There had been two hugely successful movies about budspies, wildly fictional, and the consistently number one weekly television show was called “Budspy” and followed in the same artistic tradition. Each episode was ninety minutes long; Chic never missed it.

The mystery contributed to the mission, and so did the glamor. There might in reality be no more than a dozen or two budmen in the whole country, very thinly spread among the almost four million white collar federal civil servants, or there might be thousands or even tens of thousands of them. Congress certainly didn’t press for details: the Commission had left Congress alone after the terrible scandals of the mid-seventies, and Congress preferred to keep things that way. As it was—or so the theory went—a government worker contemplating wrongdoing or treason would hesitate to play the odds, because he couldn’t be sure what those odds were. Were the chances good that he had never yet in his civil service career worked with a budspy and never would? Or was it an even better bet that at least one of his present coworkers was a budspy, watching him surreptitiously and waiting for a slipup? This fear of the Commission’s faceless agents exerted a far greater preventive force than the agents themselves.

When Chic entered Nickerson’s office, he found his boss already flipping through hardcopies made from the tapes. Chic estimated that at most ten minutes had passed since he’d given the tapes to Harold. In that time, hardcopies had been generated by some hidden machine in the basement and then whisked through pneumatic tubes of whose existence Chic knew only by inference to Nickerson’s desk. Nickerson waved Chic to a seat without looking up and continued glancing through the copies. He interrupted his reading to say, “Hey, Chic, great job.” Chic smiled and sat down. As always, it was as if he’d only been away for a couple of days.

The office hadn’t changed at all. The walls were still an intense yellow, they still needed paint (even more than two years ago) , and they still closed in on a visitor after the first few minutes. The only decoration on the walls was a decade-old picture of Nickerson, his wife, and their two sons, the boys in their late teens at the time. Nickerson didn’t look much older now than in the photograph.

The boys would have looked very different in a newer picture, of course, except that they had both been killed in Uruguay, defending the oil fields against rebels, two years after the photograph on the wall was taken. The brushfire wars burning all over Latin America in those days had required the suspension of many rules, including the one barring sending siblings into combat at the same time.

Nickerson himself was a small, slender, intense man with an intellect that intimidated Chic and a casual style of dress and speech that seemed at variance with that intellect and which Chic suspected was an attempt to disguise it and to disarm others. His teeth seemed too large for his small face, and they were almost brown from the huge quantities of coffee the man drank. He had small, nervous hands with nimble fingers stained yellow by nicotine. He coughed frequently; Chic always expected to find his company disgusting but never did. After all those years, Nickerson still occupied the same post. Promotion was apparently very slow in the Commission, or so Chic had deduced from Nickerson’s example. But this suited Chic well: he was sure he preferred field to desk work.

At last Nickerson finished with the documents. “Great job,” he repeated. He put

the papers down in a sloppy pile whose disorder grated on Chic's nerves, laced his fingers together and propped his elbows on the table, and said, "Such a great job, in fact, that I intend to assign you to a new project that's just come in, a very big one, very important."

"Great," Chic said. Already he had been feeling the first touch, the first hint, of discomfort at the idea of having to spend some days or weeks with no definite daily work to do, empty hours frittered away inside the building under his own name. He was as eager as always for a new assignment and a new identity.

"Okay. I think you'll really like this one. After ten years, you deserve a plum. Here it is. Someone's passing German military secrets to the Soviets. Troop movements and supplies and strategic plans on the eastern front—that sort of thing. The Germans have covered all the possibilities, plugged all the possible leaks, and, um, eliminated the weak links, but none of that stopped it. They've pretty much narrowed it down to our Embassy."

"Come on, Fred!"

Nickerson shrugged. "I'm not asking you to approve of their methods, but you know as well as I do that it's impossible to argue with their conclusions. It always has been. If they say it's so, then you can bet your pension it *is* so."

"So they have a diplomatic problem about arresting the culprit."

"It's a bit stickier than that," Nickerson said. "The Gesipo's traced the leak to the U.S. Embassy in Berlin, but they have no idea *who* in the Embassy is the source of the leak. Obviously, the Gesipo doesn't want to start mass arrests and interrogations of our Embassy employees, not even those who're German. Ambassador Hencken would be obligated to lodge a formal protest so as not to lose face before the diplomatic community in Berlin, even though in fact he's fully sympathetic with the Gesipo and eager to help them out in this. Also, the Germans don't want a public stink. They'd rather take care of this *unter der Hand*, as quietly as possible. They've told us they'd prefer it if we could wrap it all up ourselves. But if we can't, they'll have no choice but to step in."

"What?" Chic scoffed. "Invade the Embassy?"

"Of course not. But infiltrate it—that's another matter. The State Department has approached us for help. They saw it was up our alley."

"You want me to train some State Department investigators so they can go to Berlin and make like budmen?" Chic guessed. He added reluctantly, "Okay, I guess, but I'd rather be doing field work."

Nickerson laughed. "Hell, Chic, I wouldn't waste an agent of your caliber training people to play budman! Couldn't be done in time, anyway. You of all people know how long it takes even to become minimally competent in your job, let alone reach *your* level of ability. And this job is much too important to give it to anyone but the best. State's getting pressure from the White House. Apparently, Nebel himself is concerned about the situation."

Chic stiffened, suddenly guessing what was coming.

"State asked us to put one of our own people directly into the Embassy, and of course we picked you right away." Nickerson grinned at him. "What do you think about that?"

"No."

"What?"

“No. I’m rejecting the assignment. I’ve got that right.”

Nickerson stared at him with open mouth for some seconds. Then he leaned back in his chair and said, “Sure, you’ve got that right. Just as I’ve got the right to go down the hall and jump out the window and kill myself. But I’m not crazy enough to do it. Forget what the manual says, Chic: you’re talking professional suicide. You’ve never refused an assignment before.”

“That’s true. I’ve also never taken a vacation before, so I’ve got a lot saved up, and I need a break.”

Nickerson shook his head. “But this is preposterous!” He gestured helplessly. “This is a choice assignment, a career-maker. Or breaker. For both of us. You’re the man for it, the perfect man.”

“Look, Fred. First of all, my German isn’t fluent enough for an undercover assignment in Germany, and second, we’ve got all kinds of spy agencies who’ve got much more experience with this sort of thing.”

“German? You’ll be an American, an employee of the State Department, working in the American Embassy. What German? Everyone’ll be speaking English. Your German’s probably better than that of most of the legitimate Embassy employees, anyway. And as for the other agencies—well, the choice of us came from the top, *versteh’*? You know, you’ve had a pretty easy time of it over the years.”

“Oh, right.”

“I’m not joking. You’ve been in danger, sure, like all budmen, but you’ve never yet had to use any of the street-fighting you’ve been taught, have you?”

Chic admitted the truth of that reluctantly. So far, his skills had never been used outside the gym.

“And you’re one of the very few men in this agency who’ve never had to have plastic surgery, right?”

Chic agreed again. “But it could become necessary at any time.”

“Sure. Admittedly. Maybe on your very next assignment, right after Berlin,” Nickerson smiled pleasantly, “there’ll be someone there you’ve worked with before, and so we’ll have to give you a new face. But it hasn’t happened yet, whereas some of the guys have had their faces changed as much as half a dozen times. So the agency’s done pretty well by you. With luck, you won’t have to have surgery until you retire on a nice pension, twenty, twenty-five years from now.”

“I could retire right now.”

“Hah! And live on what you’d get after only ten years of service?”

“Almost eleven.”

“Okay, eleven: another buck a week. Bah! What the Hell’s wrong with you? You’ve never acted like this before. What’s the real problem?”

Chic hesitated, exploring avenues, but he knew Nickerson would see through any new excuses as easily as he had already seen through and dismantled the ones Chic had offered so far. “All right. The truth.” He paused again, needing extra courage to continue. “Fred, this is the real reason. My parents’ name wasn’t originally Western. They changed it years before I was born. Protective coloration, just like the first name they gave me.” He drew a couple of deep breaths, then said in a rush, “Their name was Weintraub, they were both Polish Jews, and they were among the very few Jews to get out of the death camps alive at the end of the war.”

But Nickerson did not draw back in horror at this revelation, as Chic had expected. Instead, he laughed and said, “Boy, you of all people should give your own agency more credit! Don’t you realize that your whole dark secret has been tucked away in the back of your personnel folder since before the day you were hired? We always know everything about the people we bring onboard. Hell, I even know about your great-grandfather who changed his name from Lipschitz to Weintraub to fool the Czar’s men and stay out of the Russian army. Bet even you didn’t know that.” Chic hadn’t. “So what’s this got to do with this assignment?”

“Everything. I was brought up to hate and fear Germany and the Germans. You can imagine what kind of memories my parents had of the Reich! To myself, I’m Chic Western, an agnostic, and I have been all my life. To the Germans ... well, to them, I’ll be a Jew, and you know what they did to the Jews. There were maybe ten or twelve million Jews in Europe before National Socialism. About half a million got out alive when the war ended. Like my parents, more dead than alive.”

Nickerson reacted with astonishment. “Christ, man, what’re you talking about? That’s history! This isn’t the old days any more. This is 1988. The war’s been over since 1943. That’s forty-five years! Germany has changed, just like the rest of the world.”

Three

“The world has changed, boy,” Nickerson repeated. “Nowadays in Germany the Jews are treated just like anyone else.

“Sure,” Chic said. “And if you can manage to find a Jew in Germany, just ask him.”

“Oh, come on, there are lots of ’em over there. It’s not the way your folks probably remembered it, not at all, *kakfif*.” He heaved himself out of his chair, paused to light a cigarette, and then paced nervously about the small office, distractedly fiddling with a clear cubical glass paperweight he had picked up from his desk. He passed it from hand to hand and then laid it absentmindedly on the credenza, freeing his hands to loosen his tie and undo his collar and to flick cigarette ash in the direction of his trashcan, which he missed. “Christ, Chic, I hate being cooped up in here in the spring. I’ve got all kinds of work I’d like to be doing around the house.” He stopped in front of Chic. “Anyway, you sure don’t look or act like a Jew. I wouldn’t even have known you’re one if I hadn’t read it in your folder.”

“That’s the protective coloration again. You know, the it-could-happen-here syndrome. I learned that from my parents. They were paranoid.”

“I can understand that. But *you* shouldn’t be paranoid. Hell, you work for the Ombudsman Commission, and you know that between us and the Federal Police, nothing like what happened in Germany could happen here.”

“Unless it started inside the Federal Police itself,” Chic said.

Nickerson waved his hand dismissively. “Nah. They may be a bunch of heartless bastards, but they’re a bunch of heartless bastards with integrity. Forget about that.”

“Inside *this* agency, then.”

Nickerson smiled. “Who shall watch the watchers, eh? Well, you can forget that, too. We *are* watched, I can tell you that much.” He had drifted back to the chair behind his desk. “Now, let’s get back to cases. *Your* cases. About this Berlin assignment ... Don’t you see that you don’t have a real choice? I mean, you know, there’s a kind of *quid pro quo* in a thing like this. You’ve got a great opportunity here to advance your career. I mean, a really terrific opportunity. But you turn it down, and by the same token, you’ve got *that* in your personnel folder instead. *Versteh’?*”

“*Versteh’.*” The feeling of being safely at home was less strong and comforting. “I’m ready any time, I guess.”

Nickerson grinned at him, displaying his brown teeth. He stood up and leaned over the desk and squeezed Chic’s arm. “Essjee, man, essjee. Get on downstairs and get your identity, and I’ll phone up the Gesipo right now.”

Absorbing a new identity to the deep level necessary for safety got easier for Chic each time. After spending the rest of the night with this one—Jesse Bourne, eight-year veteran of the Foreign Service—he felt ready to go. A good thing, too: relying on his well-known speed, the Commission had scheduled him to leave for Berlin only eighteen hours after his conversation with Nickerson. This also indicated the agency's confidence that Chic would accept the assignment when it was offered to him.

The tight schedule allowed Chic a total of three or four hours for bathing, eating and sleeping, but he didn't complain: budmen don't question rules; budmen don't question orders.

Now he faced a twenty-eight-hour, two-stage flight to Berlin. German planes would have got him there in less than a fifth that time, but he would be flying American instead. National pride, as ever, was hard at work.

Does Nickerson ever leave the building? Chic wondered. He had sometimes wondered at the lack of any distinction between day and night within the place, and at the lack of fixed, distinct shifts. He was by now too groggy to think about such things clearly; at other times, he was usually too preoccupied. It probably didn't help that he hadn't had a vacation in ten years. Perhaps, he thought, there ought to be another aphorism: budmen don't think too much about anything.

Chic was taken to the airport by the reverse of the procedure whereby he'd been brought in. A battered old car took him from the underground parking lot, through a different tunnel, out through the garage of an anonymous suburban house in Falls Church, and then, after a circuitous trip to make sure the car wasn't being followed, to the airport.

It was bright sunlight, early afternoon, with the weather turning back to the damp chill more normal for late March, but Chic noticed little of that, for he slept in the back seat throughout the drive to the airport. During the long, droning trip across the Atlantic, trapped in a four-propellor-engined sardine can with thirty other unhappy human beings, he dozed uneasily, read a novel, ate, smoked, and stared out the window at waves and passenger ships.

Why are they always in such a damned hurry? If the Commission had been more patient about this, he could have had a far more pleasant trip aboard one of the great ocean liners the plane passed over. *And if they are in such a hurry, why didn't they break down and let me fly Volksluft?* On the other hand, he could smoke on American planes, whereas Volksluft did not permit smoking. Following the standards laid down by the Führer long ago, the Reich national airline was none too cooperative about providing coffee, tea, or alcohol, either. Practically speaking, he would be unable to smoke while he was in Germany, so the trip by American airliners gave him a chance to saturate his bloodstream with nicotine before he arrived in the Reich.

Still groggy, Chic stumbled about the airport in London, which looked just like the one in Washington. He was too tired to do much more than stare blankly at the huge Volksluft passenger jets that were constantly landing on and taking off from a pair of reserved runways, shaking the building with the roar of their engines and rattling the windows with their exhausts. It was early evening and a Friday, but Chic lacked time, inclination, and money to explore the famed decadence of London nightlife.

It was three a.m. local time on Saturday, 19th March, 1988 when he arrived in

Berlin. A taxi—a real one, this time—whipped him from the airport through a confusing blur of city lights, highways, and rushing, roaring traffic to his hotel. He sank gratefully into bed and drifted off, thinking thankfully that he had most of the weekend to recover from the trip before reporting to work at the Embassy on Monday.

*

Chic was awakened by the telephone. Disoriented, he thought the rings sounded odd. The heavily accented English of the voice on the other end reminded him where he was.

“Mr. Bourne, sorry to disturb you.” The other man pronounced the name as though the “ou” were the German double-O. “Have you slept enough?”

“Oh, ah, yes.” Chic took his watch from the bedside table. It was twelve noon, Berlin time. *Seven hours. Christ, why can't I wake up?* “Sure.” He slipped into German. “Who is this please?”

“Oh, this is Horst-Dieter Gettner.”

Chic knew the name immediately. This was a high-ranking Gesipo official, his liaison on the German side. Gettner was one of the very few men here who knew what Chic was, although even he didn't know Chic's real name. “You're in the lobby?” Chic asked. “*Essgay*. I mean, *sehr gut*, very good. I'll be right down. Let's see, I'm about average height, slender, blond.”

Gettner cut in. “Yes, Herr Bourne. I know what you look like. I'll recognize you. Take your time. I'm not in any hurry.”

Feeling slightly nonplussed, Chic stumbled about the suite. He yanked fresh clothing from his still unpacked suitcase, shaved, brushed his teeth, and had a quick shower. He was in the lobby twenty minutes after Gettner's call, feeling awake at last.

Chic hadn't been alert enough to notice the lobby on his way in during the small hours. Now he looked around with interest, intrigued by the elegance, the spotlessness, the excellent repair. It gave him the impression of a great gallery of marble, mirrors, reddish-brown wood paneling, and enormous chandeliers hanging from a high, arching ceiling. Busy, well dressed people passed in front of him, crossing the lobby with purposeful gait.

Chic's examination of the lobby and the crowd was interrupted by the sound of polite throat-clearing beside him. He turned to find himself facing a smiling, sandy-haired man of about Chic's height, heavier, and a couple of years younger. In clothing and general appearance, he fit in perfectly with the men and women Chic had just been watching. He held his hand out to Chic. “Herr Bourne?”

Chic found he was smiling in response. He shook the other man's hand. “Herr Gettner.”

“Good, very good. I have a car waiting, and some friends who want to eat with us, to meet you. The Metropol is a beautiful hotel in most respects, but the restaurant here is terrible.”

Chic hung back. “I don't know if I should—”

Gettner smiled. “Come, these people are all safe. All Gesipo.”

Chic followed, still feeling dubious. His budman-trained instincts all warned him against this risk of compromise.

Behind the hotel, in a visitor parking slot, Gettner unlocked the doors of a Volkswagen Ultra and both climbed inside. “We have Mercedes saloon cars available, with chauffeurs,” he said apologetically while he backed from the slot, looking over his shoulder, then shifted into Drive and waited for a gap in the traffic flowing past the lot, “but they *look* Gesipo, while this one doesn’t.”

Gettner waited until they were moving down a broad, elm-lined boulevard before he spoke again. “Now, you mustn’t worry about these people. None of *them* will give you away. Also, no one outside the Gesipo knows who any of them are or who I am, so you won’t be exposed even if someone from the American Embassy sees us all together. I understand that your cover includes something about an earlier tour of duty in the Reich, so we could all be just friends of yours from before, welcoming you back.”

Chic nodded and began to relax.

The sky was absolutely clear of clouds, and the air was cool and crisp. Chic watched the soaring glass-and-steel office buildings they passed, glinting in the sunlight, and the crowds hurrying along the sidewalks. He marveled at the cleanliness of the streets and sidewalks, the beauty of the buildings, and the energy and handsomeness of the people.

Gettner must be unusually short for his generation of Germans, Chic realized. The men he saw were impressive, the women striking, and it seemed to him—surely an incorrect first impression—that the vast majority were tall, blond, and blue eyed. Were all 300 million Germans like this? *They look like walking advertisements for the Herrenvolk.* Chic smiled at the thought

But then he remembered his parents and the stories they had told him about the death camps: that was how the Master Race had become so purified. When he turned from the window, his smile had disappeared and he was aware that his expression and his tone were hostile. “You seem to have thought of every conceivable detail, Herr Gettner.”

Gettner grinned at him. “How else do you think a man as young as I can rise above desk clerk in the Gesipo? The upper levels are almost all graybeards. Clean-shaven graybeards, I should say! By the way, let me compliment you on your German. It’s quite excellent. Your accent is better than that of the people from the East, the General Government, and they’re Reich citizens!”

Chic felt himself blushing. “Thank you, Herr Gettner. I know what you say is untrue, but thank you anyway.”

Twice the boulevard had divided, following traffic circles around enormous triumphal arches looming over the traffic and draped with oversized flags—black *hackenkreuz* in white circle surrounded by red, a striking contrast to the gray concrete of the arches. As with citizens of every city at every time in history, to Horst-Dieter Gettner these monuments to national glory were important only as impediments to traffic, and he grumbled constantly as he slowly made his way around the circles to rejoin the boulevard beyond. Often he blew his horn and said aloud, “Come on! Come on!”

Now they were trapped in slow-moving traffic in yet another such circle, but this one was taking them around a monument that wasn’t quite a triumphal arch. It was a squat, wide structure consisting of four rectangular towers at the corners of a square, with arches joining them. Through the arches, Chic could see a larger something, a spare, angular, abstract structure, rather like a giant’s chair without arms. “What is it?” he asked.

“Ah!” It was a sound of disgust. “One of the *Totenourgen*. Castles of the Dead,” Horst-Dieter explained. “They’re all over the damned place, getting in the way. To commemorate the war dead. Fallen heroes, you know.” He chuckled. “Does all the poor bastards a fat lot of good now that they’re dead, doesn’t it?”

Shortly thereafter, following signs for the Speerbahn, the car left the boulevard *via* a long, ascending ramp. This led them into a river of cars and trucks flowing at high speed along a divided highway, elevated to carry them above the city streets and traffic. Ingress and egress were only by means of such ramps, and high fences on either side ensured that traffic could use only the ramps, while a deep ditch separated the traffic flowing in their direction from that on the other side of the highway.

There were roads in America that were modeled after these famous autobahns; Chic had been on them, but now he could see that there was simply no comparison—that the American highways were only a poor, scaled-down imitation of the original. He was fascinated by the combined volume, speed, and orderliness of the traffic flow, and perhaps even more by the newness of the cars: he saw very few of the battered, smoking, aged vehicles that formed the bulk of the traffic in any American city. And all of this, he reminded himself reluctantly, was commonly said to be the Führer’s doing: the prosperity which resulted in so few worn-out old cars, and the innovative design of these great highways.

Gettner reverted to an earlier topic. “What I said earlier about your accent wasn’t flattery at all, Herr Bourne. *Kakfif*. I meant every word. You must have learned German while young, not true? Your parents, perhaps?”

Chic said coolly, “My parents were from Poland. What they *did* speak at home, though, was Yiddish.” *Let’s see how friendly you are now.*

Gettner frowned. “Yiddish?” Then his face cleared. “Oh yes, I remember. Well, of course, that explains it. It’s very much like German, isn’t it?”

“Uh, yes. It is.” Gettner’s lack of any reaction, his ease at Chic’s impulsive disclosure of his Jewish ancestry, left Chic flustered and deflated, and ashamed of his attempt at embarrassing the German.

“Listen,” Gettner said, and suddenly he *did* seem embarrassed, “for a German, this would be much too soon, but I know how informal you Americans are.” He laughed. “Well, *everyone’s* informal compared to us, except maybe the Japanese. Anyway, I would be honored if you’d call me Horst-Dieter and allow me to call you Jesse, and if we could use *du* instead of *Sie*.”

“Why, yes. Sure. Of course.” Chic was surprised, but he felt suddenly much more at ease.

“*Essgay*,” Gettner said happily. “*Essgay*, Jesse.”