

TIME AND THE SOLDIER

by

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One

The center of the huge complex exploded at dawn on February 8, 1945. Two men had arrived in a wing of the complex seconds before. They were the only living beings there.

The explosives had been planted in the cafeteria, directly above the huge repository. The blast tore through the floor and into the repository, breaching the container shell and releasing the energy stored there. A wave of destruction rippled outwards through the building, setting off the explosives the team of saboteurs had placed earlier.

The two men had time to look around in confusion and to realize that they were in the wrong place, and then the destructive wave reached them. The smaller man was obliterated. The bigger man was obliterated from the waist down. His consciousness persisted for a moment more, and then he ceased to exist.

Secondary blasts followed. Smoke billowed out through empty window frames. The metal door of the main building began to melt within minutes. Great sections of the roof collapsed. Flames and embers shot high into the dry mountain air.

The fire raged on, consuming the building and the dead. It melted the equipment those people had put together and tested so painstakingly. It ate wood and flesh indiscriminately.

#

Twenty-four hours later, a man and a woman appeared in the smoking rubble.

They stared in bewilderment at the remnants of the machinery they remembered so well. In front of the shattered machinery lay the upper half of a man's body. He had been a large, blond man. His face was undamaged and unfamiliar.

The man who had just arrived brushed his shoe across the ashes beneath his feet,

exposing part of a yellow circle.

"Why is it now?" he asked.

"Come on," the woman said.

They made their way through the ruins, moving clumsily in their heavy coats. The remaining heat kept them out of some areas. The charred floor sagged and creaked under them. Fifty feet away, what was left of a wall collapsed with a thud, sending up dust.

Hours passed. They found bodies, some burned to charcoal but some untouched by the fire. They were all dead -- of slit throats or bullets in the forehead. They saw no sign of the two people they were looking for.

"He wouldn't be here," the woman said. "He left when we did. We know that."

"But what about her?" the man said in despair.

"I don't think she's here." She said that to encourage him, not because she believed it. "Come on."

It was noon now, but bitterly cold, and yet they were sweating inside their coats. For a moment, they stood looking up at the cracked face of the sandstone cliff. Then finally they turned and began to walk. Briefly, the woman stopped and turned around, thinking that she was being watched. But she saw nothing alive, and the two of them continued down the hillside and away.

#

Eight years earlier and two thousand miles away, a black-haired woman and her brown-haired daughter walked carefully along a country road in southern Michigan. The light was fading, catching the tops of the trees and the brilliant colors of autumn. The road in front of them was almost dark. They knew there were patches of ice on the road, but they couldn't see them.

Across the road, invisible in the darkness between the trees, a blond man watched them.

Absorbed in her thoughts, the younger woman drew further ahead of the older one. The watcher frowned. He had expected them to stay close together. This might be a complication.

The mother called out, "Dolores! *Espérame!*"

The girl stopped and turned around. "Sorry, Mama. I was thinking about that job."

"Good. You should be."

The girl laughed. She waited while her mother caught up with her.

Right next to each other, the watcher thought. That's good.

The headlights of a car swept across him. He threw his hand up to shade his eyes and stepped further back among the trees. He couldn't let anyone see him. He couldn't imagine what the boss would do if anything went wrong.

The car roared around a curve, coming from behind the two women. It was upon them before they were aware of the car or the driver of them.

The watcher held his breath. Perfect.

Mother and daughter stood frozen in shock, caught in the lights, as the car rushed toward them.

The driver seemed to be just as frozen. At the last moment, the car swerved toward the middle of the road.

The watcher willed the car toward the mother and daughter. Hit them! Hit them!

The driver almost made it past the two. But the big rear right fender caught the mother on the hip and threw her against her daughter. They fell heavily to the ground and lay still.

The car skidded to a stop. The driver jumped from it and ran up to the two still figures. In the fading light, the watcher could tell that the driver was a well-dressed man. He couldn't see the man's face, but he read shock in the body language.

"Oh, God!" the driver said. "Oh, my God!"

He stood over the two bodies for a long time, hesitating. Then suddenly he turned and ran back to his car and sped off.

"About time," the watcher muttered.

All he had to do now was drag the girl's body into the woods, far enough from the road so that it wouldn't be found for a long time. Nature would do the rest.

He took out his pencil-sized flashlight, aimed the light at the ground, and walked quickly across the road. From close up, he could see that the mother was lying on her side. Her eyes were open and unmoving, and her skull was misshapen. Blood pooled under her.

He turned to the girl. Fortunately, she had landed on her back. He bent down and slid his hands under her back and into her armpits and started to pull her toward the edge of the road. She didn't weigh much. That was good. There didn't seem to be any blood under her, which was also good. Pretty thing, he thought, looking down at her face. Too bad.

She opened her eyes and looked up at him, confused. "Mama?"

"Shit!" He jumped back, letting her shoulders and head fall to the ground.

She struggled to sit up and managed at last. She held her arms wrapped tightly around herself. "Where's my mother? Who're you?"

"She's back there."

"Mama!" She was shouting, trying to get up, looking back at the still, dark figure in the road. "Mama!"

"Listen, Dolores. It's okay. My name's Hank. I'm going to take care of you. It'll be okay."

Except that it wouldn't be. This was a disaster. It wasn't supposed to happen like this at all, and the boss would be furious in that quiet, terrifying way of his.

The girl was dragging herself along the road, trying to crawl to her mother. She was whimpering. She kept one arm tightly against her middle.

Probably has internal injuries, Hank thought. She won't make it, anyway.

But he couldn't bet on that.

He sighed and shook his head. I hate shit like this, he thought. He turned the flashlight off and slid it into his pocket. He would do the rest by feel. He reached inside his shirt and drew the knife from the sheath strapped against his chest. He stepped over to the crying girl and slit her throat.

He waited till she had stopped moving and then, trying to avoid all the fresh blood, grasped the back of her shirt collar and dragged her into the woods, far enough that he was sure she wouldn't be found.

He told himself that the fresh blood was good. It would attract animals all the faster. The boss would never know the details.

I need a drink, he thought. Gotta get my car and go back to town and find a bar or something. No, gotta find one of those primitive telephones first, he corrected himself. Then the drink.

There were tough years ahead. There'd be more work like this. Eventually, in the future, there'd be a reward.

Two

Drifting curtains of rain hid the top of the hill then exposed it. Frank focused intently on the hill's craggy top, oblivious to the rainwater dripping steadily from the back of his helmet onto the back of his neck. At first, he was sure that the shape at the top of the hill was a large rock, but every time he glimpsed it through the rain, it looked more like a man.

He whispered to the soldier lying in the mud beside him. "Which?"

"A man," Sammy said.

That was good enough for Frank. He might doubt his own eyes, but he would never doubt Sammy's. Sammy was ten years younger than Frank, and he had survived those eighteen years by hunting and trapping. His eyes were like an eagle's.

It could be a guard, which could mean a large camp somewhere at the base of the hill. Or it could be a sniper, put up there to cover the German retreat. They had made the Allies fight bitterly for every mile, ever since Sicily.

But whether it was a German camp or a German guard or sniper standing in the way, Frank was under orders to get his men to the top of that hill before nightfall.

"Could you get him from here?"

Sammy grinned. "Which eye you want me to put the bullet through?"

Frank trusted Sammy's marksmanship as much as he trusted his vision, but he couldn't risk alerting the Germans. Frank's lieutenant had stepped on a mine two weeks ago, the platoon was severely diminished in numbers, and the men were exhausted. The Germans were probably also exhausted, but Frank wouldn't risk his own men unnecessarily.

One man had to go ahead -- across the open space and up the hillside, looking for German guards. If he found any, his men would hear the shooting. If he found none, he could climb the hill and silently eliminate the German soldier at the top.

Frank turned and looked his men over.

They stared back at him dully. Their uniforms were soaked by the rain and streaked with mud. They were all younger than Frank, but they had the faces of old men worn out by pain and labor.

The man Frank chose would probably die on this mission. German, Italian, American -- Frank no longer cared. He had shortened too many men's lives already, Germans and Italians by shooting them, Americans by ordering them into deadly situations. It was enough.

He beckoned to a short, stocky man named Bellman. Bellman squelched through the mud to his side, trying to walk quietly but not succeeding. The sound made Frank's already taut nerves jangle. He took a moment to calm himself before muttering, "Sergeant, I'm going up the hill to take care of that guy. You're in charge. If I don't come back in half an hour, or if you hear shooting, get the men out of here and back to base."

He had expected Bellman to object. The sergeant should have pointed out that Frank was the least expendable man there. But Bellman said nothing. He stared at Frank as though the words had meant nothing to him. Then he said, "Kill a couple of the bastards for me, Lieutenant."

Frank rose to a crouch and began to make his way forward into the misty rain. Unlike Bellman, Frank managed to move silently, sliding his feet into the mud and then out again instead of lifting them straight up or splashing them down.

This had once been a packed dirt road. Now it was churned up and dotted with craters from artillery bombardments. Through the mist, Frank could make out the broken stumps of trees, faint silhouettes, ghosts of stately pines that had once lined the road on both sides.

If he could see the silhouettes of the tree stumps, then the Germans could see his silhouette. Frank crouched still lower and moved even more slowly.

He saw nothing moving. He could hear nothing but the rain. The immense Allied artillery pounding and aerial bombardments must have killed everything, even the animals. Now there was nothing left alive here but men, and they were trying to kill each other.

The ground began to slope upward and then rose more sharply. He heard the trickling sound of running water somewhere to his right and shivered. The road he had been following petered out into a trail that twisted up the hillside. Frank slid his bayonet from his belt and held it ready. He would make the German's death as quick and painless as he could.

He smelled the German before he saw him.

Frank knew that sickly sweet smell. He straightened up, put the bayonet back in his belt, and walked along the path.

The German soldier was kneeling. His joints had somehow locked in place, and he

leaned slightly to one side against a boulder, so that he seemed to be looking out over the flatlands below. His arms hung limply by his sides. His helmet tilted rakishly to the left. The right half of his skull had been blown away by the same bullet that had knocked his helmet askew. Here, at last, there was insect life. Despite the cold, flies buzzed about the man's exposed brain.

Frank guessed from the smell that the German soldier had died a couple of days before. The German retreat must be faster than he had been told. They were supposed to be closer.

He wondered how this man had died. Perhaps it had been a lucky shot by some American or British soldier, firing up from the base of the hill during a brief firefight. It might even have been a German bullet -- the result of an argument, or some sort of grim Nazi discipline. It could have been a simple accident with his rifle. Whatever it was, someone's son or husband would not be coming home again.

Maybe I should look for his military ID, Frank thought. Some day, after the killing was over, he could contact the man's survivors in Germany and let them know what had happened to their lost one.

He held his breath and stepped closer. He circled the body warily. Sometimes the Germans booby-trapped their own dead as they retreated. Allied soldiers had lost hands, eyes, even lives to grenades hidden in the clothing of German corpses.

Now Frank could see that the dead man's uniform was unbuttoned and hung open, revealing his sunken chest. So his comrades had taken his identification with them. They had also apparently taken his weapon. And now Frank could see that they had taken his boots as well. Christ, he thought, the poor bastards are in even worse shape than we are.

There was no German camp. Frank was sure of that. There were only exhausted young men, miles north of him by now, trudging back toward the homeland many of them would not reach.

The world never runs out of madmen, Frank thought. And as a result, the world would never run out of dead young men.

Frank faced south toward his own men and held his rifle over his head. When his men reached him, they brought with them the news that he had been ordered to leave them under Bellman's command and report to company HQ, now five miles to the south.

#

Frank ate quickly at the company's mess tent -- wonderful, compared what he had been

used to for the past week -- before reporting to Colonel Snow.

The tent that was Snow's traveling office was Spartan. Wherever the tent was, one constant was the old cavalry sword that hung from the canvas behind the desk. Snow had once told Frank that it was his great-great-grandfather's sword, and that it dated from the Civil War. The stain along its edge, according to Snow, was Union blood.

Frank entered and saluted, trying to keep his eyes from the sword. He wondered what made old blood so damned wonderful. New blood sure as hell wasn't. But the sword gleamed in the electric light, drawing his gaze against his will.

"Lieutenant Anderson," Snow said. He was standing unusually straight and stiff, being even more martial than usual.

There was a third man in the tent, a civilian. He was short and slender. His eyes were bright, and his expression was alert and interested.

"Lieutenant," Snow said, "this is Mr. Lyman Hughes. He's here to offer you a great opportunity. A transfer."

"A transfer?" Frank repeated. "But Mr. Hughes is a civilian."

Hughes took over the conversation. He did it easily, his manner dismissing Colonel Snow. His voice was a pleasant and powerful tenor. "That's right, Lieutenant. I represent an organization called Tempus. We're not part of the government, but we do have government authorization to recruit certain people from the armed services."

Frank was happy to dismiss Snow too. He turned his attention entirely to Hughes. "Recruit for what purpose, Mr. Hughes?"

Hughes said, "Colonel, I wonder if you could let this officer and me have a few minutes alone?"

Snow hid his offended vanity well. "Of course, of course. Will fifteen minutes be enough?"

"That should be plenty, yes." Hughes waited until Snow had gone. Then he said to Frank, "Lieutenant, you have a remarkable record of penetrating enemy lines and killing enemy soldiers."

Frank sighed. For just a moment, he had let himself hope that the transfer would mean escape from killing other men. "Yeah, I guess so."

"You also speak both Russian and German, correct?"

"Not really. I'm very good with Middle English, but that's not the same as German. Russian I have from my grandmother, from when I was a kid and we lived with her. I've forgotten most of it."

Hughes nodded. "It would come back pretty quickly, I imagine. As for the German, given your academic grounding, I'm confident you could pick it up quickly. You were beginning graduate work in history at the time of Pearl Harbor, yes?"

"Yes." A lost world, Frank thought.

"And you never got anything less than an A as an undergraduate."

"If you already know the answers, why are you bothering with the questions?"

"All right," Hughes said. "I like directness. Lieutenant, Tempus is engaged in a project that could put an immediate end to this war and make sure that no other war will ever happen."

"A new weapon, you mean?"

"Not in the sense of a new kind of gun or airplane," Hughes said. "Anyway, innovations like that haven't stopped war yet. They've just changed its nature. No, we're working on something entirely different, something you would never guess at. In fact, I'd rather you didn't try to guess any further. Now, this project will involve sending a small team of people somewhere to eliminate certain enemies of our country. Our innovation lies in our ability to get you where you'll need to be in order to do that job."

"When you say eliminate, you mean kill, right?"

Hughes nodded. "Of course. Something you're particularly good at, as I said."

"With enemy soldiers, yes," Frank said. "But I have the feeling you're talking about civilians."

"If you could kill one mad civilian, one inherently evil man," Hughes said, "and by so doing stop all the other killing, all the young men of his country and ours slaughtering each other, wouldn't you do it?"

"Hitler," Frank said. "Yes, of course I would. Not that I'd have a chance of succeeding." Or of getting back alive if I did succeed, he thought. But it would be a price worth paying. "Killing Hitler wouldn't stop war forever. Maybe it wouldn't even stop this war."

Hughes smiled. "Let us worry about those details. We have experts who know about such matters and who will explain them to you in due time. You're in?"

Frank nodded. "I'm in."

He was in western Colorado a week later.

Three

Tommy was surprised at how beautiful the countryside was. He had expected something different. Men in berets sipping wine at sidewalk cafes. Beautiful women with long cigarette holders. Everything very picturesque.

Instead, this was farm country, rich and fertile. Once they had advanced beyond the coast, he found himself moving through rolling meadowlands covered with dark green grass and healthy young crops and forests and flowers. If you ignored the shattered farmhouses, the columns of smoke on the horizon, and the bodies beside the road, it was lovely. Tommy had the knack of ignoring such distractions.

Something he did not ignore, however, was the possibility that those dark woods on the right-hand side of the road or that high, thick hedge on the left could hide Germans. He kept his eyes moving from side to side and his finger on the trigger. The two men directly behind him, Slocum and Weinberg, did the same.

Tommy heard a whimpering, and a small white dog forced its way out of the hedge and limped toward them. Its tail wagged very slightly, tentatively.

Weinberg put his rifle to his shoulder quickly and fired. The dog was thrown backward. It died instantly, without so much as a yelp.

"Jesus, why'd you do that?" Slocum said.

"That was a Nazi dog," Weinberg said.

Tommy laughed. "Sounded to me like it had a French accent. That dog was an ally, Weinberg."

"Yeah, well, now it's just a dead dog."

"Dumb shit," Slocum said. "Looked like a nice dog."

"Forget the dog and stay alert," Tommy told them. "Keep your voices down, and don't fire without cause. There could be Germans all around us."

"If there are, we're dead men already," Weinberg pointed out.

Tommy sighed. "Let's just follow our orders, okay?"

They moved on, Tommy still in the lead.

They were part of a vast army. It was all around them, moving along the country roads, crashing across the meadows in tanks, roaring overhead. They could hear artillery fire in the distance ahead of them, and bombers growling across the sky above, and now and again rifle shots.

Tommy felt lighter on his feet and more alive than he had ever felt as a civilian. Normandy in June was the beginning of the war for him, his first taste of the real thing, and he was already in love with it. This is the life, he thought. As long as you don't get shot.

Sunlight reflected off something in the woods ahead. Tommy dove into the minimal shelter of the hedge. Weinberg and Slocum did the same without hesitation. "What?" they said simultaneously.

Tommy ignored them. He kept his eyes fixed on the spot where he'd seen the flash of light, while he slowly raised his rifle to his shoulder. He sighted along it at the spot and waited. He breathed regularly and shallowly, and he was pleased to note that his heart was already slowing down to normal.

There were no more reflected gleams, but he knew he had not imagined the one he had seen. Slowly, the pattern of light and shadow at the very edge of the woods, where the trees abutted the road, where he had seen that flash, began to resolve themselves into a human face watching him.

Tommy's finger tightened on the trigger. The weapon jumped against his shoulder, and a man screamed in the woods.

The face had disappeared. He could see a pair of boots projecting onto the road, kicking.

"Come on!" Tommy jumped to his feet and ran. For just a moment, he had a horrible vision of finding, not a German soldier, but some frightened French peasant who had been watching the Allied advance from hiding.

But when they got there, they found a man in a German uniform. He lay on his back. He was no longer kicking, but he was still breathing. Tommy's bullet had caught him in the right chest. His chest was covered with a pink froth, bubbles forming in it as the three Americans stood around him uncertainly. He stared up at them, blinking and trying to speak.

"Oh, Jesus," Slocum said, "he's younger than my kid brother."

"We'll take him back to the field hospital," Tommy said.

The German whispered, "*Ich bin verlobt. Bitte, ich bin verlobt.*"

"You understand that?" Tommy asked the other two.

They shook their heads.

"He's unarmed," Weinberg said.

"Shit," Slocum said. "I bet he's a deserter. I bet he wanted to surrender. We're in trouble."

"Yeah," Tommy said. He raised his rifle, aimed at the wounded man's forehead, and fired. "Now he's just another dead German. Come on." He turned away and resumed the patrol along the road.

Weinberg and Slocum hesitated for a few seconds. Then they shrugged and followed him.

Why did you do that? Tommy asked himself. To save my men, he told himself. That was a sacrifice.

Or maybe I just enjoyed it, he thought. All the other deaths had been at a distance. He'd fired and seen men fall, but he hadn't even seen their blood. He kept seeing the red and white and gray of the German soldier's head exploding as the bullet smashed into it.

He played it over and over again in his mind until there was no feeling associated with it. It's better that way, he told himself.

For the rest of the day, in spite of all the killing that he knew must be going on continually all around them, Tommy and his comrades encountered no one but other American soldiers. A couple of hours after the death of the young German soldier, Tommy, Slocum, and Weinberg rendezvoused with the rest of their platoon. Now, with so many more men moving in a group, their progress became much slower and noisier. By nightfall, the entire company had reformed, and now they were accompanied by tanks. From now on, Tommy suspected, most of the killing would be done at long range by the tanks' guns, by aircraft, and by field artillery.

"Gonna get boring from now on," Tommy said to a man sitting nearby, cleaning his rifle. "Damn shame."

The other G.I. looked at him in astonishment. "You'll be crying for boredom when we reach the Rhine."

"That's a river, isn't it?"

The other man laughed. "A big river. Last stop before the heartland of Germany. They'll be defending it with everything they've got. I'll take boredom."

Yeah, well, you're an idiot, Tommy thought.

Artillery and airplanes and tanks pounded the Germans throughout the night to keep

them retreating. Or, if they tried to hold their ground, to soften them up for the next day's Allied advance. All night long, Normandy was a madhouse of explosions and erupting soil and dying men. The noise made sleep next to impossible for most of the Allied infantrymen who were supposed to be resting in preparation for the next day's combat. Tommy Stillwell, though, slept deeply and well.

#

The men were awake before dawn to prepare for the day's advance. They stumbled about in a daze, adrenaline warring with exhaustion.

Tommy felt well rested and wide awake. Unlike his half-asleep comrades, he heard and understood the call for volunteers for a special mission. Something told him that this was his chance for the kind of excitement and action he would lose out on if he remained part of the huge mass movement of men and machines.

Only Tommy and four other men volunteered -- five idiots, in the eyes of their comrades. The five were ushered into a tent and left alone in there with a civilian.

Outside, he heard the sounds of tank engines being revved up, the clanking of their treads, the shouts and curses as the men began to move out.

He put it all from his mind and concentrated on the civilian in front of him.

The civilian was a short, slight man. He leaned casually against the edge of the desk that constituted the tent's only furniture and said, "My name is Lyman Hughes. I represent a company named Tempus. We're a private concern, but we've made an arrangement with the government that allows us to recruit members of the armed services for a mission. Before I tell you anything about this mission, I'd like to ask you a question or two. First, do any of you speak either German or Russian?"

One of the other men held up his hand. Tommy knew him slightly. His name was Mallory. "German. Almost fluently. No Russian, though."

Tommy watched the other four men, but none of them said anything. He also watched Hughes. The civilian gave Mallory an approving look. "Excellent! That's a very good start. Anyone else?"

"I know enough to say, '*Ich bin verlobt*,'" Tommy said. He knew the accent was right. He had always been good at imitating accents. He was sure he remembered the German soldier's words correctly. He hoped the sentence didn't mean "Sorry, I've just shit in my pants."

Hughes frowned at him. "Which brings me to my second question. What sort of family or

emotional entanglements do you men have at home? I'm not sure an engaged man is suitable for what we have in mind."

Engaged? Tommy thought. That German kid was engaged? Christ! Aloud, he said, "But I just got a Dear John letter from her yesterday, so that's not a problem anymore."

Hughes nodded. "That sounds okay for now. You others?"

Mallory said, "No wife, no fiancée, no girlfriend."

"Family?"

Mallory looked at the ground. "No. Not anymore."

Hughes turned to Tommy. "You?"

"I'm an orphan, and so were my parents." That would come as a surprise to his parents and brothers, he thought.

One of the remaining three men was married but separated, while the other two had girlfriends back home. Hughes looked unhappy with their answers. "Tell you what," he said, "I'm going to have to make a snap decision here."

Watching him, Tommy had the feeling that this man never made snap decisions.

"At this point," Hughes said, "we really only need one more man for our team." He pointed at Mallory and Tommy. "The choice will be between you two. The rest of you, thanks for volunteering. You can go back to your units now."

Tommy watched the three shuffle out. You can go back to the boredom now, he thought. Bye-bye.

Hughes pushed himself away from the desk and came to almost military style attention. "Names?" The voice had a snap to it.

Both men stiffened unconsciously in response.

"Jeffrey Mallory."

"Thomas Stillwell." Tommy hated the note of subservience he noticed in his own voice. It had been in Mallory's voice, too, though.

"All right. Get your stuff together and be back here in -- " he checked his watch " -- ten minutes. Mallory, go on. Stillwell, stay for a moment."

After Mallory had left, Hughes stepped in front of Tommy and stared at him for a moment. Tommy was startled to realize that their eyes were at the same level. Hughes said, "Stillwell, I like a man with a native quality of opportunism and the ability to think fast on his feet. That's why I decided to give you a chance at the remaining slot in spite of your lie about knowing German and being an orphan. Just don't lie to us again, or your father will receive a telegram about his son dying heroically during the invasion of Normandy."

Tommy might have tried bluster with another man, but he looked back at Hughes and decided against it. "Yes, sir," he said.

Hughes smiled and stepped back. "You'd better turn out to have a talent for German, Stillwell. And everything else we try to teach you." He waved his hand in dismissal.

When Tommy and Mallory returned with their packs, Hughes was waiting in the driver's seat of a Jeep with the engine running. He started moving as soon as they climbed in.

Four

The ad caught Ellen Maxwell's eye immediately. Relaxing with the newspaper and a Coke after another long day, she noticed a black-bordered box at the bottom of the first page. She read:

YOUNG WOMEN NEEDED TO SERVE THEIR COUNTRY!

If you have both technical and secretarial skills, are physically fit, under thirty years of age, fearless, an American citizen and patriot, then please contact us at the telephone number listed below to begin your involvement in our exciting project. You may become part of a small team of valiant Americans working to preserve our Nation.

Ellen's first reaction was that this all seemed a bit silly and overblown. Her second reaction was that it was bound to be an improvement over the drudgery she endured every day.

The idea of being Rosie the Riveter had once seemed exciting, but it was an idea that suffered in the execution. The reality of hot, sweaty, mindlessly repetitive work in an armaments factory was not Ellen's idea of answering her country's call. On the posters and billboards, Rosie never sweated. Rosie was sexy. Ellen sweated all day long in an airless factory, and by quitting time, she felt exhausted and dirty and completely unsexy.

For that matter, all the valiant, handsome young heroes she might have wanted to take to her bed were off fighting in Europe and the Pacific. The men who remained on the home front were the rejects, and not one of them was her type. They were all too old, too young, too weak, or -- as in a couple of cases she knew -- the most shameful kind of reject, conscientious objectors. All of them were attracted to her -- some to her athletic body, some to the fragile beauty of her face. That made them all the more repellent to her.

Worst of all, she no longer felt that she was really contributing anything. Oh, sure, the bombs she was helping to manufacture were being dropped on the enemy. She had seen the newsreels, and she knew that American and British airmen were bombing Germany around the clock. Bit by bit, her bombs were reducing the Nazis' ability to make war. She could feel proud that she was indirectly saving Allied lives, because her bombs were destroying Nazi factories. Every bomb meant fewer bullets for German soldiers to fire at American and British and French and Russian boys.

All of which she told herself repeatedly, especially during the afternoon, after lunch, when her body was close to collapse but the assembly line kept on moving, when her hand could scarcely grip the screwdriver tightly enough, but the explosive trigger glared up at her from the bomb casing on the moving belt and demanded that she cover it with its protective shield. There were moments, during those endless afternoons, when part of her wanted to jam the point of the screwdriver into the trigger and set it off, set all the bombs on the line off, blow up the entire building and her with it and her coworkers and the bosses and the whole world.

She read the advertisement and chose to believe it. She finished her Coke, dialed the number, and volunteered to help preserve the Nation.

She was told to appear for an interview in the morning.

When Ellen arrived for the interview, she found that the woman interviewing her seemed most interested in her shorthand and typing skills. Whatever it takes, Ellen told herself. Whatever it takes to escape from the factory and do something that counts.

"I must warn you right now," the woman said to Ellen, "that you will be tested rigorously in a number of skill areas, and also as to your physical strength and stamina and knowledge. Only a very small number of those we select through these interviews will make it to the end of the process."

"Is this something involving the government?" Ellen asked. "I want to be absolutely sure I'm working for the good guys, you know."

The woman across the desk, who had been grim faced and uncommunicative until then, smiled suddenly. "I think young women today watch too many motion pictures. It makes them think the country is full of Nazi spies and fifth columnists. Yes, dear, these are the good guys. It's not the government, it's a private company called Tempus, but they're working closely with the government. *Our* government. Now, given what you know, which is all I'm allowed to tell you, do you want to continue with the process?"

Ellen smiled back at her. "I do. And I want you to know that I'm a survivor. I expect to make it all the way through."

"We all do, dear."

#

Ellen and three others -- all young, healthy women -- were selected for the next stage. At the same office where Ellen had been interviewed, the woman who had conducted that interview handed out train tickets for Denver and told them they would be met at the station and driven to their final destination. The train was due to leave at noon the next day. "Any of you have any objections to that?" she asked the three young women. "Any problem being ready that soon?"

"No, ma'am," they all answered together.

No problem at all, Ellen thought. I don't have anyone to say goodbye to.

During the train trip, she struck up conversations with her fellow volunteers and found that none of them had had anyone to say goodbye to, either. The others found the parallel disturbing. It implied that they had let themselves in for something sinister and dangerous. To Ellen, though, it was an exciting discovery. She was sure now that she had done the right thing. This was an adventure, an exhilarating new stage in her life. The future stretched ahead of her, bright, exciting, filled with novelty and wonders.

#

It was early morning when they arrived in Denver. The other girls had spent the night sagging in their seats, trying to sleep, but Ellen had stayed alert. She had spent the night watching the lights of towns and cities pass by, and the ever longer stretches of darkness between them as the train moved steadily west. She had peopled the lighted places with heroes and villains and the dark places with dreams.

Breakfast had been simple and all too light -- in Ellen's opinion, at least, although she noticed that her companions didn't finish what they were given. Outside, the landscape was disappointingly flat and barren. She had expected to see mountains by dawn, and she had always imagined Colorado to be covered with great pine forests.

Union Station in Denver seemed small to her. It was filled with civilians and men and women in uniform. She thought it would be interesting to explore the place, and then perhaps to explore the city lying outside its doors, but she was given no time. As they climbed from the train, the four young women were met by a civilian who identified himself as a representative of

Tempus. He hustled them through the station in a tight group.

Outside the station, he led them to a small buslike vehicle, painted olive green, parked at the curb. He motioned them to climb in.

"Say, Mister," Ellen said, "how about if we stop at that hotel across the street for a bite? I'm pretty hungry."

A couple of the other volunteers spoke up in support, although less boldly than Ellen.

He stepped forward to look more closely at Ellen. He was her height, making him short for a man, and he was quite a bit older than she was. Twenty years older, she guessed. Maybe more.

He looked her up and down, evaluatively, but it was not a sexual evaluation, and there was nothing of invitation or suggestion in it.

"Call me Mr. Hughes," he said finally, "not Mister. We'll eat when we get to the site. It's only about five or six hours away, depending on traffic."

One of Ellen's companions said, "Five or six hours! I'm not going to make it that long, Mr. Hughes. I vote for eating now."

She was a tall girl, as blonde as Ellen, and even more athletic. Her name was Jeanne. Ellen didn't know her last name. Ellen had marked her earlier as one of the likely survivors, which made her a competitor.

Hughes stared up at Jeanne. "You're free to do anything you want to," he said pleasantly. "You all are. You can go across the street and spend all day eating, if you want to. And I'll give you your train tickets back home and say goodbye to you, because you will have said goodbye to me and Tempus and the program, and you will have proved that you're not the kind of women we want working for us."

"I had the impression you wanted strong women," Ellen said, "not spineless ones." Suddenly, she felt almost angry enough to quit and go back to imitating Rosie the Riveter.

"We want strong, capable, independent men and women who understand the importance of following orders," Hughes replied. "Make your choice immediately."

That put an end to the incipient revolt. They all climbed aboard, and the bus started off.

Hughes sat at the front, just behind the driver.

Ellen tried to content herself with what she could see of Denver through the bus windows.

The city itself struck her as small and uninteresting, just another collection of streets, buildings, and traffic. She didn't see any of the tall buildings she was used to in the East. She did, though, see a few men strolling along the sidewalks in boots, jeans, and cowboy hats, and

from the worn look of their clothes and the natural way they wore them, she knew that these were not costumes but normal dress. It was a whiff of romance and the Wild West -- a very small whiff.

The bus left the small downtown and crossed a bridge over a narrow, slow-moving stream. Ellen called out, "Mr. Hughes, do you know the name of this creek?"

"It's not a creek. It's the South Platte River. Please don't talk to me."

Jerk, Ellen thought.

This was a river? Back home, it would scarcely even be a creek. Ellen had always thought the West was filled with mighty, rushing waters, deadly and beautiful, with rocky banks covered with grizzly bears catching salmon.

Within an hour, the bus had left the city behind and was climbing up the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. Hunger forgotten, Ellen and the others pressed their faces to the windows and drank in the mountains, canyons, rushing creeks, and pine forests. This is more like it! she told herself.

Hughes came down the aisle, calling for their attention. He was carrying a cardboard box, from which he handed out sandwiches wrapped in wax paper. Handing Ellen her sandwich, he said, "Don't want you to starve before we get to the site."

She glared up at him. He smiled at her, clearly pleased with himself.

What a bastard, she thought. What have I gotten myself into?

She turned her back on him and returned her attention to the mountain view, chewing her sandwich while she watched. The sandwich was ham and cheese, and to her it was tasteless. She concentrated on the mountains and made herself chew and swallow until she had finished the food. She suspected that she would need all her physical strength when they arrived.

#

Hours later, the bus descended from the mountains onto a dry, rolling plain. It rattled along a dirt road, bouncing its passengers around and raising a cloud of dust that stayed with it.

When it finally came to a stop, Ellen was the first one out. She pushed past the others, desperate to be standing on firm ground again. The dust cloud drifted away in the cold breeze. With the engine turned off, the only sound was the voices of the other girls, moaning and complaining as they stretched their legs. Ellen's eye was caught by a tall cliff cut by a jagged crack that seemed to be leaning over them. Ellen stared at it, smiling without realizing she was

doing so.

"Brr!" It was Jeanne, standing beside her. "It's cold as Hell out here! And look at that mountain. It looks like it's about to split open and fall down on us."

"I think it looks friendly," Ellen said. "Like it's some kind of mountain spirit watching over me."

"Hey, now, I think this is more my kind of mountain spirit," Jeanne said. She nodded toward a young man walking toward them.

Five

Tommy had gone to Europe by sea, in a troop ship, a floating sardine can -- endless days in cramped quarters with too many other men and the stink of unwashed bodies. Now he was taken back to America by air, and although the space on the airplane was limited, he only had to share it with Mallory, Hughes, and the pilot.

They flew to England, where their airplane was refueled. From England, they headed toward Newfoundland, a flight that took twenty hours.

Tommy had never flown before. He was surprised by how quickly the novelty of it wore off. The constant droning of the engines vibrating through his body combined with the effects of the previous days to send him into an on-and-off doze.

Every time he awoke, he looked out the tiny window beside him. During the day, he could see the rippled sea beneath him, dotted with ships headed east: troops, equipment, and supplies heading from Canada and the States, streaming toward England and France to continue the assault on Hitler's empire. At night, the ocean gleamed in the light of an almost full moon. He bent down and looked upward, straining to see the moon itself, but it was out of sight, hidden by the fuselage of the plane and the upper edge of the window.

From Newfoundland, they hopped to Chicago, where they refueled again. When they were in the air again, Hughes turned around in his seat and announced that their next stop would be their final destination, in western Colorado, at what he called "the site."

#

The plane bounced around in the rough air over the Rocky Mountains. It was early morning, and Tommy found himself wide awake and alert. Experiencing rare fear, he looked down at the snow-covered peaks below. They seemed disturbingly close.

He wondered what would happen if the plane went down in them. How could we land in that? he wondered. We'd smash up. Take them months to even find our bodies.

But they passed over the mountains safely and began to descend. From the air, Tommy saw a gently rolling landscape dotted with scrub and cut in places by dry riverbeds. The plane banked and went through a long, slow turn. Tommy glimpsed a tall, red cliff jutting up out of the flat land. The face of the cliff was cut by a jagged crack, a glimpse into the darkness. At the base of the cliff was a sprawling octopus of a building -- a bulbous central section with numerous annexes extending from it. The sun flashed on a metal door in the building's center section. In front of that was a patch of lawn, deep green, a startling contrast to the brown landscape.

Hidden from him were the landing strip the plane was heading toward and the cluster of small buildings associated with it. Nor did he see the ten-foot high fence topped with barbed wire and overshadowed at regular intervals by guard towers.

When the plane had taxied to a stop and they emerged, Tommy was surprised by the chilliness of the air and the bite of the wind. He buttoned his Eisenhower jacket and shoved his hands deep into his pants pockets, cursing the inadequacy of his army cap.

Hughes came up from behind. "Here," he said, holding out a dark, bulky coat.

Gratefully, Tommy pulled it on over his uniform jacket. Hughes seemed to notice everything.

Hughes said to Mallory, "Do you need one, too?"

Mallory shook his head. "No problem."

"It's all civilian clothing here," Hughes told them. "When you get to the rooms we've assigned you, you'll find everything you need. You can put your uniforms away. If you make it through our selection process, you'll never have to take the uniforms out again."

"In that case," Tommy said. "I might as well just burn my uniform as soon as I've changed. Thank God and all his little angels for that."

Mallory looked at him scornfully. "Better hold onto it for a while, kid."

Tommy grinned at him. It always amused him when another man called him "kid" in an attempt to undermine his self-confidence.

Hughes watched the exchange and looked satisfied. He glanced at his watch. "Follow me. I have to get you checked in quickly before I head east to Denver."

Busy, busy, busy, Tommy thought. "Like some company in Denver?" he asked. "I've never been there."

"You'll have other things to occupy your time," Hughes said. Anger colored his tone.

"Concentrate on your new job, Stillwell -- making it through, so you don't have to go back to Normandy."

Don't fret yourself, Tommy thought. I'm just figuring out where the limits lie.

Now that they were on the ground, Tommy noticed the group of small buildings near the airstrip. But his attention was held by the broken red cliff and the huge building he had seen from the air. Hughes began walking up the gentle hill toward the building, and Tommy and Mallory followed him.

Eventually they reached a gravel path that skirted the lawn and led them between two of the building's annexes. They were long structures that seemed, from the outside, to follow the undulating surface of the ground. The number of floors varied, depending on the ground. There were windows, but only on their higher floors. On one upper floor, Tommy saw balconies.

From ground level, Tommy thought the annexes looked even more like the arms of an octopus than they had from the air. Despite the heavy coat Hughes had given him, Tommy shivered.

The path ended at the metal door Tommy had noticed from the air. Hughes spoke quietly into a grille beside the door, and the door swung open. He motioned the two soldiers in ahead of him. Mallory walked in without hesitation. Tommy took one last, quick look around, down at the lawn, up at the looming cliff face, then went in. Hughes followed him. The door closed behind them. Tommy heard a heavy, solid click.

Inside, the air was warmer. Tommy shrugged out of the coat and folded it over his arm.

The place was filled with life. A hallway stretched ahead of them, with doors on either side. People passed in and out of the doors and along the hallway. They were a diverse group, Tommy noticed -- young and old, male and female. He heard accents of every kind and snatches of languages he could not identify.

As he and Mallory followed Hughes down the corridor, Tommy was struck by the respectful way everyone greeted Hughes and how careful the man was to return each greeting and to address each person by name.

Most of the doors they passed were open. The one Hughes stopped at was closed. SECURITY was painted on it. Hughes stood for a moment in front of it, and it opened inward. Again, Hughes motioned for Tommy and Mallory to precede him. This door, too, swung shut behind them without any of the three touching it.

They were in a bustling office. Men and women passed by constantly. Doors led off into other rooms, and there was a hum of conversation and a clattering of typewriters from every direction. The people in the office ignored Tommy and Mallory, but they didn't ignore Hughes.

He earned the same respectful greeting from each one that Tommy had noticed before, and Hughes returned each greeting with the same punctiliousness.

"Wait here," Hughes said. He went to one of the desks lining one wall. The man sitting there stood up as Hughes approached. He towered over Hughes, but he bent forward so as to minimize the height difference. The two men spoke briefly and in voices too low for Tommy to hear their words. The man nodded and then followed Hughes back to the two soldiers. "Carver will take care of you," Hughes told them. "Follow his orders as you would mine." He left the office.

Following orders, Tommy thought. It's what infantrymen do best.

Carver led them into another room, and it was at this point that the strangeness and newness began to evaporate. Tommy was fingerprinted and photographed, weighed and measured, and it was just like being inducted into the army all over again.

At the end of the process, Carver handed Tommy and Mallory small plastic cards with their pictures on them and pins attached to the back and told them to pin these badges to their shirts. Each badge bore a small white dot in the upper left-hand corner.

Carver wore a similar badge, but his had a red dot on it. He noticed Tommy looking at it. "Red means Tempus Security," Carver said. "White means probationary. We have six different colors for the six different divisions here. You'll learn them, if you become permanent. You see anyone without a badge, it means he's not authorized to be in here. If that happens, contact Security right away. We'll take care of it. Don't try to stop the guy yourself. We're trained, and we're tough."

Tommy laughed. "Yeah? So how many Nazis have *you* killed?"

Carver looked at him expressionlessly for a moment. "With bare hands, or with weapons?"

"Got it."

They walked down long hallways and up staircases, all of them crowded and buzzing with conversation. Tommy noticed that everyone wore a badge and that many of them were red. They're everywhere, he thought. It made him feel uneasy.

Tommy tried to guess where they were in the strangely shaped, sprawling building. He tried to correlate their trip with the shape of the building, but he quickly lost track and became disoriented.

These guys must have a bundle, he thought. The building, the airplane, the numbers of people they were passing on their way, all implied a very large and very wealthy organization. Even if this doesn't turn out to be a great adventure, Tommy thought, Tempus looks like a good

outfit to be part of. Much better than the U. S. Army.

His quarters consisted of a suite -- bedroom, small study, bathroom, and a balcony looking out over the prairie.

Christ, he thought, I've never lived this well in my life.

He stepped onto the balcony. Instead of an horizon, he saw snowcapped mountains in the far distance with a bank of clouds above them, startlingly clear in the thin, dry, clear air. The walls to either side of the balcony extended so far that he could only see the view straight ahead, and nothing of the building to either side.

The closet and chest of drawers in his bedroom held more civilian clothing than he had ever owned before and it all fit him perfectly. He showered happily, washing off the grime of his hours of travel, and then began hunting through the new clothing to choose what he wanted to wear.

A telephone began to ring. He found it on a small table beside the bed. After a moment's hesitation, he picked it up. "Hello?"

"Mr. Stillwell, we'll be serving lunch in half an hour." It was a woman's voice. "Please get dressed right away. Then leave your room, turn right, follow the hallway to the stairs at the end, and go down one flight. You will see the door to the cafeteria ahead of you."

"Yeah, okay," Tommy said. He hung up and muttered to himself, "Turn right, stairs, one flight," while he began to pull on the outfit he had selected.

Suddenly, still wearing only underpants, he stopped. "Get dressed," the woman on the phone had said.

He looked around the room. "Like what you see, lady?" he called out.

He half expected the telephone to ring again, but there was no response. He shrugged and finished dressing. He told himself that this was still more privacy than he had had in the Army. Or at home before that, crammed with his family into a Chicago tenement.

Dressed in his new civilian slacks, shirt, and shoes, Tommy left the room. He noticed that the door had no lock and no keyhole.

The cafeteria was crowded when he got there. He saw men and women and could make out the now-familiar variety of languages through the general din. Adding to the noise was music playing in the background. Here, as in the outside world, Vera Lynn seemed to be popular. Tommy saw a sprinkling of uniforms, but most of the people were in civilian clothes. He did see one familiar face: Mallory, sitting alone at a small table.

Tommy found the trays and the beginning of the food line and went through the process of loading his tray. The food looked and smelled better than what the Army had been feeding

him, and there was much more variety. The women behind the counter serving the food were friendly and eager to offer suggestions. This ain't the army, Mr. Jones, he told himself.

Everything looked too good to pass up. Tommy took as much as he could fit on his tray before giving up. Then he looked around the cafeteria for a place to sit. His first choice was next to the most attractive woman in the room. However, all the women he could see were surrounded by men.

There were a few empty seats at womanless tables. And then there was Mallory, still eating, and still seated alone. On a whim, Tommy strolled over to him. "Mind if I sit here?" he said.

Mallory looked up at him in surprise. "Shit, yeah, sit down. These people are treating me like I was a leper."

Tommy put his tray down and sat. "So screw 'em," he said. "How're your quarters, Mallory? Mine are great."

"Call me Jeff, okay?"

"Okay!" Tommy reached out his hand, and the two men shook hands across the table. "And call me Tommy."

They fell easily into conversation about their quarters, their new clothes, the food, the view from their balconies, and how different their current situation was from their recent past.

"It's great to have a real bed," Tommy said.

"And a shower," Mallory said.

"And no one shooting at you."

"Yeah. That's the best part of all."

This guy's okay, Tommy thought. Good to know that he came here to escape the excitement, not because he was looking for more.

As they were finishing their meal, a man approached their table. "Welcome to Tempus," he said. "I'm Frank Anderson. I'm in the same boat you guys are, except that I've been here a few months longer, and I've already been selected."

Tommy looked him up and down quickly. Anderson was tall, lean, and looked strong. He had an intelligent, serious face. "Tommy Stillwell," he said, standing up and shaking hands. Anderson had a powerful grip, which didn't surprise Tommy. It fit with the man's appearance.

Mallory stood up and leaned across the table to shake hands. "Jeff Mallory. So, listen, Frank, what have you been selected for? Tommy and I've been talking about it, and we realized that we really don't know why we're here."

"I'm not really sure myself. I just know that a couple of men who came here at the same

time as I did were told they had washed out and were being sent back."

"Back where?" Mallory asked.

"The Army. The war."

"Crap," Mallory said.

"So while we wait," Tommy asked, "what's there to do around here all day?"

"Mostly I've been learning new ways to kill people. Studying, too."

"Studying what?" Tommy asked.

"Languages. German and Russian. Also German and Russian history. Great War era. World War One, I mean. I thought I knew that material pretty well, but I was wrong. When I first got here, I roamed around and tried to get to know the place. You should probably do that. Don't worry about going in the wrong places. There are signs and guards to make sure you don't go where you're not supposed to. Everywhere else is open. You can also go outside. There's not much to see outside, though, so that won't take you long to explore."

"Maybe we can go into town," Mallory said.

Frank laughed. "There isn't any town. This is the West. Wide open spaces -- really wide, and really open."

"So what is the nearest town?" Tommy asked. "Make that city."

"Denver, I guess. But it's not much of a city. There's not much to do there."

"You've been there?"

"My grandparents lived there. I used to visit them. They died before the war. I haven't been there since."

"We're pretty isolated out here, then," Tommy said. "Maybe I'll go outside and look at the wide open spaces."

"Aren't they worried that we'll wander away and get lost in the desert?" Mallory asked.

Frank shook his head. "There's a fence. This is a secure area. You can only get in and out through one gate, and that's guarded. You can also get out through the airstrip, of course, but you'd have to have your own plane. Oh, and this isn't a desert. This is pretty fertile compared to a real desert."

"Looked grim enough for me," Mallory said. "I think I'll stick to exploring the inside for now."

"All buildings are the same on the inside," Tommy said. "I'm going out."

It took Tommy a while to find the big metal door again. When he finally did, he realized that it had no handle. Hughes had said something into a grille beside the door on the outside, but there didn't seem to be such a grille on the inside, and Tommy had no idea what Hughes had said.

As he stood there wondering, there was a heavy click, and the door swung open toward him.

Tommy looked around, but the walls to either side were blank, and there was no one else around.

Don't look a gift door in the mouth, he told himself. Don't think of the people watching you as policemen. Think of them as your servants.

He stepped through the doorway. As soon as he was outside, the door closed heavily behind him.

After all of that, the outside was boring. The bizarrely out-of-place lawn just in front of the Tempus building provided Tommy with a moment of amusement, but only a moment. The natural landscape beyond was more interesting to him because of its novelty, but there was little variety to it.

He walked along the gravel path, down the slope and then back up it again a few times, more to stretch his still cramped legs than for any other reason. He found himself getting breathless, and the back of his throat hurt from the dry air.

He remembered what Frank had told them about a fence, and decided to look for it. He left the pathway and roamed at random. In one direction, the ground tended upward slowly, and Tommy headed that way. Eventually, he topped a rise and found himself looking down over a parched landscape stretching away toward the snow-capped mountains on the horizon. Dry gullies and small valleys filled the intervening distance. Far away, a whirlwind of dust drifted from left to right. Below him, a few hundred yards away, was the fence.

Tommy couldn't tell how tall it was, but he could see three guard towers, and the fence reached about halfway up to the silhouettes of the men in the towers. There was one gate that he could see in the fence, guarding a road that came in from the prairie. The road ended in a gravel parking lot just inside the fence.

Frank had been right. There wasn't much to see. Tommy turned in a full circle and decided he had probably seen all of it. The split sandstone cliff behind the Tempus building caught his eye. He wondered how far the crack extended into the rock. He stared into it but could see only darkness. It was easy to imagine that something was in there, some kind of troll watching him from its home inside the mountain.

He shivered. Even though the sun was higher than when he had arrived, and he could feel its light on his head almost as a physical pressure, the breeze was still cold enough to be unpleasant.

Well, he told himself, I've already scored whatever points I could by showing my adventurous side. Now I'll go back in and do a bit of exploring there. Assuming they'll let me back in.

He need not have worried. The metal door swung open as he approached and closed behind him when he was inside.

For the next few hours, Tommy wandered around the sprawling complex of interconnected buildings. He strolled down corridors, past unmarked doors that were all locked, and labeled doors that were usually open. He climbed and descended staircases. He came across a gymnasium and swimming pool, an indoor rifle range, what seemed to be classrooms, and a basement containing a furnace and some huge pieces of equipment whose purpose he could not guess. The busy polyglot crowds were ubiquitous. Earlier, he had estimated that the population of the building was in the hundreds. Now he suspected it might be over a thousand.

He also discovered that large sections of the building were off limits. The locked doors barring entry to these areas were sometimes flanked by heavily muscled armed men with Security badges. These guards wore civilian clothes much like Tommy's own, but their bearing was martial and they stood with legs apart and hands clasped behind their backs. As far as Tommy could see, their holsters, the leather belts to which the holsters were attached, and the pistol butts that protruded from the holsters were identical from one man to the next.

When Tommy found himself at the front door again, he stepped outside with a feeling of relief. He walked away from the building as he had the first time and looked down at the fence and the gate.

He was in time to see a vehicle driving in. He thought it looked like a miniaturized bus.

As soon as the bus had driven through the gate, a pair of guards swung the gate shut again and locked it. The bus drove the few hundred feet to the small parking lot and stopped. A figure climbed out. Tommy recognized it as Hughes. Other figures began to climb from the bus. One of them was another man, but the other four were women.

Tommy's interest quickened. He strolled down the hill and onto the parking lot. "Hello there, Mr. Hughes," he called out. "Welcome back to the site. Nice trip?"

Hughes looked him up and down with open annoyance. "Stillwell. Getting used to the place already, I see. That's good. Let me introduce you to some of your fellow volunteers."

Tommy's natural affinity was for blondes. He smiled politely at the two brunettes as

Hughes spoke their names, then forgot both the women and their names. He paid much closer attention to the other two, both blondes, both very much to Tommy's taste. One was named Jeanne Evans. She was taller than Tommy, looked athletic and competent, and had a strong, interesting face. She and Tommy smiled at each other and shook hands, and Tommy felt something more than politeness pass between them.

Hughes introduced the fourth woman as Ellen Maxwell, and Tommy forgot about Jeanne Evans. Ellen was the same height as Tommy and lean and wiry in much the way he was. Her face, though, was fine boned, giving her a delicate prettiness that bordered on beauty. Their hands lingered in each other's and they stared at each other for a long moment. Tommy held his breath without realizing it. Unnoticed by either of them, Jeanne moved away, looking resigned.

Ellen and Tommy became aware of the others watching them and broke the contact. Tommy realized that, while Ellen's three fellow volunteers looked interested in what had happened, Hughes was annoyed. Tommy also realized that he didn't care what Hughes thought. He sensed that what had just begun between him and Ellen Maxwell was more important than anything else in his life.

Then something else struck him. If Ellen was one of the people selected for whatever it was Tempus was planning, then Tommy had to stay in Hughes' good graces in order to stay at Tempus and thus with Ellen. He managed to paste on something approaching his usual breezy grin and said to the Tempus man, "Need help carrying things in, Mr. Hughes?"

Hughes stared at him for a moment and then nodded. "There's not much to carry, Stillwell, but you can help the driver with it while I take the new volunteers inside."

Tommy turned his attention to the small collection of bags and pretended to be unaware of Hughes and the four volunteers walking away toward the building. He was intensely aware of Ellen Maxwell all the time, though. He felt almost physically linked to her.

Six

Training began the next day.

Tommy spent the morning in an elementary German class in which he was the only student. He concentrated intensely and was able to absorb and remember almost all of the material the teacher covered.. Got to catch up with Mallory, he kept telling himself.

He was given a one-hour break for lunch. He saw Ellen at the cafeteria, eating with the three other female volunteers. All of the other seats at their table were occupied by attentive male Tempus personnel, so Tommy gave up and went off to eat by himself.

That afternoon, he was sent to another classroom where Mallory joined him for elementary Russian. Again, Tommy made rapid progress. He felt that he was remembering the two languages as much as learning them. His parents had spoken only English, but he had grown up surrounded by Germans, Russian, Poles, Latvians, and Lithuanians. Often, he had escaped to the polyglot households of his childhood friends. Disorganized and crowded though they were, they were nonetheless havens of calm and rationality compared to his own.

Mallory, though, seemed lost from the moment they were introduced to the Cyrillic alphabet.

Tommy wondered how Ellen was doing in her language classes. He also wondered why she wasn't in the same classes he was in.

The next day, though, the three men and four women were together as students in classes on the history and culture of Germany and Russia -- Germany in the morning, Russia in the afternoon. Unlike what Frank had described, these lectures covered long periods in the histories of both countries.

"They're leaving out a lot," Frank said as they left the Russian history class that evening.

"Well, I didn't know any of that stuff," Tommy said. "It's kind of interesting."

"Yeah, interesting," Mallory said, "but there's so much of it. I hope they aren't going to

test us."

Frank looked at him. "They've been testing me ever since I got here, one way or another."

"Shit," Mallory said.

Tommy glanced over his shoulder and saw Ellen Maxwell come out of the classroom with Jeanne Evans and turn the other way down the corridor. "Yeah, well, one thing at a time. Listen, I'll see you guys in the cafeteria in about half an hour, okay?" He turned and sprinted down the hallway.

The other two men watched him go. Mallory laughed and shook his head.

"Christ, she's beautiful," Frank said.

"The big blonde, you mean?" Mallory said. "Too tall for me. But you're tall, too, so it's okay."

"The other one," Frank said. "Ellen Maxwell." His voice caressed her name.

Tommy had caught up with the two women. Frank and Mallory saw Jeanne nod curtly and leave, and then Tommy and Ellen walked away together and turned a corner.

Mallory looked up at Frank. "Tough luck, pal."

Frank shrugged and forced a smile. "I'll live. Let's go get some dinner."

#

The pattern continued for the next few days. One day would be devoted to languages -- German in the morning for Tommy, Russian in the afternoon for Tommy and Mallory. The following day would be history, with the three men and four women in the class together -- again, German in the morning, Russian in the afternoon.

After a week of this, the language and history lessons were shortened in length and limited to the mornings. Afternoons were now devoted to physical training.

They started with conditioning work: calisthenics, running, climbing over, under, and through obstacles, all done in the building's gymnasium. After lunch, the women were given a rest and the men were put through two hours of exercises with dumbbells and barbells. The instructor for the weight exercises was a huge and powerful man. Tommy decided he had been recruited either from the Marine Corps or the prison guard roster at Alcatraz. The badge pinned to his t-shirt had a red dot. Tommy saw that and decided that it had been Alcatraz, after all, and maybe not from among the guards.

Again, Tommy did well, but Mallory had trouble. Frank, though, kept ahead of both of

them. Tommy soon realized that Frank wasn't really a fellow student in any of this, not the history classes or the exercise classes. He suspected that Frank was the instructor's assistant. Or maybe even, Tommy thought, an instructor himself. He guessed that Frank's role was to help evaluate the four of them.

At the end of the fourth week, Ellen told Tommy that two of the other women had been eliminated from the program. "They were pretty upset, poor girls. Now they've got to go back home to crummy jobs. They were both really hoping for something better."

"So now I guess it's between you and Jeanne Evans, assuming there's just one slot available."

"I guess so," Ellen said. "She's good, too. You should see her doing all the running and stuff. I'd choose her over me, if I was doing the choosing."

"I'd choose you over anybody," Tommy told her. "I already have."

Ellen laughed happily and kissed him. Tommy longed to go to either her room or his and do more than share a quick, furtive kiss. But after he had realized on his first day that those rooms were under constant observation, he didn't dare. There would be later opportunities for them. Assuming, he reminded himself, that both of them made it through the testing Frank had said was constantly underway.

"Say," he asked her, "how are you doing with the languages?"

"Oh, it's pretty simple stuff."

"Simple?" Tommy had feared that she might be having trouble. He was relieved to hear she wasn't, but a bit annoyed as well. "Gee, maybe you're not moving ahead as fast as we are." He held up the German textbook. "What chapter are you guys up to?"

Ellen took the book and flipped through it. "This looks interesting! We're not doing that, though." She handed the book back to him. "All we're doing is letters."

"Letters? A, B, C? The alphabet?"

"No. The kind of letters you write to people. Business letters, basically. And letters of introduction. Formal stuff. We're memorizing a few standard letter formats and using them over and over. We don't even really have to know what the German or Russian means, they say. I asked about that, and the teacher said we'd be told by someone else what to actually put in the letter. We just had to learn to write it out so that it looked nice."

"You mean type it, don't you?"

Ellen shook her head. "No, write it. I'd like to type it, that's for sure! My handwriting isn't too good in English, and in Russian it looks ridiculous."

He gripped her shoulders. "Work on it. Whatever they want you to do, whether it makes

sense or not, be the best at it. I don't want to go back to Normandy now that I've met you, and I don't want you to go back home."

Ellen smiled at him. "Okay, Tommy. It's less boring than the munitions factory, that's for sure."

After they parted, Tommy strolled back toward his room, wondering how to kill the rest of the evening. The door to Mallory's room was open when he passed it, and he heard Frank's voice coming from inside. Tommy turned into the room. "Hi, guys."

Mallory was dressed in his Army fatigues, and he had his duffel bag on his bed and was stuffing things into it carelessly. Frank was sitting in the room's single chair looking glum. He looked up and greeted Tommy.

"Hi, Tommy," Mallory said. "Guess I washed out. Oh, hell, I don't think I was cut out for this, anyway. It's better than having Germans shooting at you, but that's how it goes. I'll look you guys up when the war's over. Right?"

The three men exchanged home addresses and assured each other that they would stay in touch, and Frank and Tommy watched Mallory shoulder his duffel bag and trudge down the hallway toward the front door.

After he had gone, Tommy felt that he should have said more, should at least have said something like, "Keep your head down." I'll tell him that before it's too late, Tommy thought. He headed after Mallory, hoping to catch him before he either climbed into the bus for the trip to Denver or was flown out from the site's airfield.

But when he got outside, the bus was already pulling out of the parking lot. It sped away down the dirt road, leaving a cloud of dust behind it.

Tommy went back inside and back to his room. Damn, he thought. Damn. I really owed him a proper goodbye.

He stepped out on his balcony. He could see a cloud of dust moving across the prairie far away, and he thought it had a greenish tint to it. Maybe it was the bus. He wished he had binoculars so that he could tell for sure.

The cloud moved out of sight behind a small hill. Tommy waited for it to reappear on the far side of the hill, but it never did.

Then, faintly, he heard a sound he had heard often in Normandy: the crackle of a number of rifles firing simultaneously.

Tommy gripped the balcony railing and leaned out over the edge, straining his eyes and his ears. For a long time, there was nothing. Then the bus appeared from behind the hill, heading back toward the Tempus building. It was moving fast, bouncing about, keeping ahead

of the billowing dust.

Tommy's knees buckled. He sagged, barely holding himself up against balcony. "Oh, shit," he said. "Oh, Jeff, I'm sorry."

#

Now the training intensified.

Every day, the four remaining volunteers had total-immersion language training and grueling exercise sessions. The two men were told to spend an hour or two on the rifle range every day and were given as their goal a level of accuracy that Tommy considered absurd. He thought of Mallory, though, and disciplined himself sternly. His marksmanship improved steadily. In addition, Tommy was given training by Frank in one-to-one combat, armed and unarmed.

Ellen told Tommy that she and Jeanne were also being trained to fight.

"That's weird," he said. "Be careful. Don't get hurt."

She laughed. "I'm enjoying it."

One day, fed up with it all, so tired, so filled with aches, so covered with bruises that he no longer cared what had happened to Jeff Mallory, Tommy flopped to the ground in the middle of a session with Frank. "Enough," he said. "I'm not going to attack you again. I just don't give a shit anymore. I can't move."

Frank sat down beside him. He was breathing only slightly more heavily than normal. "Okay. Time for a break."

Tommy forced himself to a sitting position and pulled his T-shirt away from his chest to let the air circulate over his skin. "I still don't even know why we're doing any of this stuff. No one has told me anything yet."

Frank hesitated for a moment, then said, "I suppose I can tell you what they told me at the beginning." He repeated what Hughes had said about the assassination of one man putting an instant end to the war.

"Yeah?" Tommy said. "So that's all this is? We're supposed to go inside Germany and kill Hitler? Hell, why bother? From what I could see, the Germans are finished anyway. With us from one side and the Russians from the other, it's just a matter of time."

"True. But a lot of good men will die in that time. Maybe we could stop it right away and save them."

"I guess," Tommy said unenthusiastically. "But what about the two girls? Ellen and

Jeanne, I mean."

"Maybe they think a woman would have a better chance of getting close to Hitler than a man would."

"Maybe," Tommy said. He thought of Ellen being exposed to such danger. "Jesus. This is bad." Maybe Jeanne would be chosen instead of Ellen, he thought, so Ellen wouldn't have to go through that. But in that case, what would happen to Ellen? Not that you really know what happened to Mallory, he told himself. You're just guessing. "Frank, anyone ever say anything more about Jeff? I mean, how he's doing?"

"I asked Hughes about him the other day. He said he'd check into it."

"And?"

"Nothing yet."

Tommy stood up. "Let's go ask him."

Frank looked up at him and then slowly rose to his feet. "I don't think Hughes is the kind of guy you just walk in on for no reason."

Tommy grinned. "I'm demonstrating initiative and the ability to think on my feet."

#

They found Hughes in his office on the third floor. He was engrossed in a thick document and looked annoyed at the interruption. "Shouldn't you boys be busy?" He glanced at something on his desk. "I see you're scheduled for unarmed combat training at this time."

"We're taking a well-deserved break," Tommy said.

"We were thinking about Jeff Mallory," Frank said. "Wondering if you'd heard anything about him yet."

Hughes frowned. "Who?"

"Jeff Mallory," Tommy said. "Our buddy."

"Oh, yes, your fellow candidate. The one who didn't qualify. As a matter of fact, I did get a response to my inquiries." Hughes searched quickly through a pile of papers on his desk and then drew one out. He held it up facing them for long enough for them to see the eagle-and-shield logo of the Department of War. Then he scanned it quickly, reading parts of it aloud. "Response to your query of fourth instant, etc. Mallory, corporal. Hmm. Yes. Regret to inform you . . ." He looked up at them, his face showing concern. "Yes, I remember now. I'm sorry, boys, but your friend didn't make it. He died in a German artillery bombardment the day after he got back to France. I'm very sorry. I didn't realize you had formed any kind of bond with him."

Perhaps this would be an appropriate time to point out to you both how inadvisable such bonds are in your circumstances."

"An artillery bombardment?" Tommy repeated. Where did the Army bury the pieces, you bastard? Near here, out in the desert? Aloud, he said, "Thank you, Mr. Hughes. We'll remember your advice. Come on, Frank." He turned and walked toward the door.

Frank followed him for a few paces, then turned back toward Hughes. "Pardon me, Mr. Hughes, but would it be possible for me to have that letter? I'd like it as a memento of my -- of Mallory."

Hughes shook his head. "Of course not, Anderson. We need it for our files. I'm surprised at you. I think you should emulate Stillwell's attitude."

"Come along, Anderson," Tommy said from the door. "Let's get back to our training."

Frank followed him docilely, looking dazed. They were back in the gym before he spoke again. "An artillery bombardment! Jesus. If I hadn't tried so hard, maybe he'd have made the cut instead of me, and he'd still be here and alive."

"Yeah, and *you'd* be dead in a German artillery bombardment. Christ, Frank, wake up! Jeff was a nice enough guy, and I'm sorry for him, but now he's just another dead body."

Frank grimaced at that. "A hell of a way to look at it, Tommy."

"You saw a lot dead bodies at the front. Created a lot of them, too, right? There's stuff going on here that we're safer not asking about. Okay, let's forget about poor old Jeff for now and get to work at reducing the number of dead bodies at the front in the future."

"He was your *friend*, Tommy!"

Tommy shook his head. "He was a guy I thought was okay. You only have one friend, and that's yourself. I want to keep my friend alive and healthy."

"Ellen isn't your friend?"

Tommy looked uneasy. "That's different. I can't explain that, not even to myself. Hell, of course I want to keep Ellen alive and healthy. And I want to keep myself alive and healthy for her sake." He spoke those last words wonderingly, as if they were a new thought to him and he was surprised to hear them.

It also surprised him to realize that he didn't want Frank to get hurt either. Hughes was right: emotional bonds were dangerous.

#

That evening, Tommy told Ellen what Hughes had said to him and Frank. He also told

her what he had heard on the day Mallory washed out of the program.

"I don't understand," she said. "You mean there was lightning in the distance, and it reminded you of rifle fire?"

"No, I mean there *was* rifle fire in the distance, not lightning. And not that far in the distance, either. I mean -- " He paused and looked around. They were standing in the middle of the incongruously green lawn in front of the Tempus building, and no one else was in sight, but Tommy's fear of being observed and listened to by invisible spies had been growing ever since his visit to Hughes's office. He lowered his voice. "I mean that they took Mallory out into the desert and shot him. Buried him out there. They don't want any of us leaving this place alive unless we've been accepted into their team."

Ellen gasped. "But why? That doesn't make any sense at all!"

"Maybe it does make sense. I haven't told you about Frank's theory about our mission, have I? The assassination stuff?"

"No, you haven't, but Frank has."

Tommy was surprised. "I didn't realize you spend time talking to Frank when I'm not there."

"Sure. Occasionally." She smiled at his expression. "Don't be jealous, Tommy. Frank's a wonderful man, and I guess I'm honored that he thinks he's in love with me, but -- "

"What?" Tommy's shout echoed off the building and the red cliff behind it. "He actually said that to you? God damn him!"

This time, Ellen laughed aloud. "No, he didn't say anything. He thinks he's keeping his feelings well hidden, but It's pretty easy to tell. I thought you knew all of this."

Tommy sighed, partly in relief, partly in frustration. "I guess I did. I mean, I could tell how he felt about you by the way he speaks about you. The way he says your name. I didn't think you knew, though."

"As I said, you don't have any reason to be jealous. I don't love Frank, I love you. I've told you that already, and I don't say 'I love you' casually. I hope you know that."

"I *do* know that. And I don't say it casually either," he lied. Before Ellen, he had said it casually and often.

"Okay," Ellen said, "so now that that's settled, what about Frank's theory about us going into Germany and assassinating Adolf? What does that have to do with Jeff and the sound you heard?"

"Frank knows about the assassination plan because Hughes pretty much told him when he recruited him. Hughes must have known that Frank would tell the rest of us, since he didn't

tell Frank to keep it to himself. So Tempus assumes that anyone who washes out, like Mallory, could be a source of information for Nazi spies. Tempus doesn't want the Nazis to know what we're planning, because then the Nazis would have traps prepared for us before we even got behind their lines."

"But from what I hear, lots of people have been trying to assassinate Hitler all through the war. Including Germans."

"Yeah, but this way, the Nazis would know exactly who we are and what we look like. Wouldn't that increase their chances of catching us? Probably the minute we show up in Berlin or wherever."

Ellen had grown pale. "I don't think I could kill anyone, Tommy. Not even Hitler."

"From what you've said about your training so far, honey, I don't think that's going to be your role. I think you're support. In fact, I'm probably just a backup man. Frank's probably the point man. He's the guy with the special talent for killing people. I know he's on the team. He was selected before I got here. I also know that Hughes told Mallory and me that there was one slot remaining to be filled, so that means I'm in. Now it's between you and Jeanne. Maybe they'll send both of you with us -- two men, two women. We could pose as married couples. That'd be okay, huh?"

He grinned at Ellen, and she responded as always to his infectious good cheer with a grin of her own.

"And maybe that way Frank would get interested in Jeanne," Tommy continued thoughtfully. "She's more his type than you, anyway. I mean," he said quickly, "they're both tall, strong, and silent. They could have a whole bunch of tall, strong, silent kids. A tall, strong, silent family. Very quiet dinnertimes at the Anderson household."

Ellen laughed, but she said, "I don't think so. They seem to like each other okay, but there's no spark there."

"Like between us?"

"Yes."

They had not so much as touched hands during the entire conversation. Even before Hughes' warning about the danger of bonds between candidates for the team, they had both sensed that Tempus would disapprove of a romantic liaison between them, and that disapproval might mean that one or both of them would be dropped from consideration. And so they stood apart but yearning toward each other. Hughes might warn against a bond, but it was there, almost palpable in the evening air. What had passed between them at that first meeting had grown stronger with each word, each meeting of the eyes, each rare, furtive touch.

"Well," Ellen said, breaking the spell at last. "So. We'd better go in and go to bed. Another heavy day tomorrow." She turned toward the front door.

"Wait." Tommy stepped between her and the building. "Ellen, honey, you've got to survive. I'm sorry about Jeanne, but we've got our lives ahead of us, and I want us to spend them together. You've got to make it. If they are going to choose just one woman, then it's got to be you. For our sake."

Ellen said sadly, "Yes. That's right. For our sake."