RED MASK MYSTERY

# SILENT PARTNER

by Leigh Brackett

# Silent Partner

*By the same author*

FOLLOW THE FREE WIND

AN EYE FOR AN EYE

THE TIGER AMONG US

THE STARMEN

THE LONG TOMORROW

NO GOOD FROM A CORPSE

LEIGH BRACKETT

# Silent Partner


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*FOR RICHARD*

# Silent Partner

# 1

HE stood in blueness as in the midst of heaven. There was blue tile beneath his feet. The cloisters and prayer halls of the mosque were blue, picked out with gleams of yellow like sunbeams. Out in the vast courtyard an oblong pool flung back the flawless color of the sky, and when he looked upward, the soaring domes and minarets pierced his eyes with blueness even as they uplifted his soul. Unreligious as he was, Harvey Martin could almost envy the dark-haired man who crouched devoutly at the edge of the tiled floor, busy with his prayers.

He said to Karim Hassani, "I may even become a Moslem."

"Sunni or Shia?"

"Shia, of course. The Partisans of Ali."

"Good. You remembered." He looked at his watch. "Let's cut the sight-seeing short, huh?" His speech was slightly accented but otherwise colloquial American, and his tropical suit had been tailored in Beverly Hills. "It's almost time to meet Ahmad."

"Of course," said Harvey. "There'll be years for sightseeing." They walked across a corner of the courtyard. The sunlight fell harshly on Karim's dark handsome face, and Harvey was suddenly concerned. "Are you feeling ill?"

"The flight down," said Karim. "I always get airsick."

Harvey smiled. "I think the truth is you're afraid of flying and ashamed to admit it."

They passed under the magnificent honeycomb arch of the portal, out onto the Maidan-i-Shah. Karim pointed.

"The bazaar's down there, at the other end."

They walked down the long street. The buildings were identical on both sides of the maidan: two stories high with pointed arches up and down, a single façade broken midway by the Sheikh Lutfullah Mosque on one side and the little Ali Qapu Palace on the other. The shops on the ground floor featured Isfahani metalwork. Upstairs the arches were shuttered. There, Harvey knew, the fashionable folk of Isfahan had sat and watched the polo games in the time of Shah Abbas. He had studied his history well.

He smiled contentedly and put on his sunglasses. His fair English skin had crisped and reddened in the Iranian sun. It had begun to peel across the forehead and the bridge of the nose, just as it had done in the days when he and Karim Hassani and Tony Wales had been students together, going to UCLA and spending their free days on the Southern California beaches.

"I was a bit doubtful at first," he said. "I'll admit that. Too settled in my familiar groove, much as I didn't like it. Now I know it's going to work, and I'm damned grateful to you and Tony for taking me in."

"It was Tony's idea," said Karim. "I wouldn't have thought you'd be interested." He had put on his sunglasses too, and so his eyes were hidden; but there was a drawn look about his mouth as though he still felt ill. "Shall we move a little faster? I don't like to keep Ahmad waiting."

They walked faster down the long, bright street. Traffic whirled noisily around the central gardens of the maidan. Harvey looked at the girls they passed as much as he dared, yet not nearly as much as he would have liked to; they were draped but not veiled, and their faces were delicious, both shy and merry as they shot sidelong glances at the tall stranger. *Ellen,* he thought, *had better make haste.*

He saw, but did not particularly notice, an old man who sat on a bench in front of a coffeehouse, smoking a hubble-

bubble. He did not see at all that the old man rose and fell in behind them.

Karim walked faster still, with his head bent and his gaze fixed on the ground.

They reached the gateway of the bazaar. Karim motioned Harvey ahead of him, toward one of the cavernous doorways. "This way."

They moved through a thickening crowd of people. The old man came on steadily behind them. A second man, much younger, detached himself from the miscellany of shoppers and street vendors and joined him. Both men wore suits of coarse dark cloth and shirts that had been washed but not ironed. The second man had the fierce eye of a Kashgai. Just once Karim looked back over his shoulder and saw them, and his mouth opened as in a silent cry of pain.

Harsh, haunting, and musical, the noonday call to prayer echoed across the maidan from the great mosque. Harvey Martin went with Karim into the bazaar.

It was dim and cool inside. Harvey removed his sunglasses, blinking. He was in a wide, roofed passage resembling a tunnel, with stalls on each side. Holes pierced in the stones above let in slanting rays of dusty sunlight. There was an indescribable and fascinating odor, compounded of spices and dung, wool, leather, and endless humanity.

"There are seven miles of this," Karim said. "Don't get lost."

He took Harvey's arm and hurried him on, protesting, and the two men in the shabby suits followed, patient shadows in the gloom.

Beyond the street of the coppersmiths was an older part of the bazaar, a maze of narrow tunnels and unexpected courtyards masked by sagging gates.

At one of these Karim stopped and said, "In here."

The gate was ajar. Harvey stepped through it.

"Up that stairway," Karim said. "The fifth door. Go ahead and practice your Persian on Ahmad. There's a fellow I've got to see."

"But—" said Harvey.

"I'll join you in a minute," Karim said, and was gone.

It was quiet in the courtyard. Pigeons flew overhead. Blinking again in the abrupt change of light, Harvey noticed that the pale-brown color of the mud roofs was very pleasing against the sky. The buildings were of two low stories, with a balcony running all the way around the court. The ground-floor rooms appeared to be used only for storage, and that was why it was so quiet.

It seemed an odd place for a prosperous merchant to have an office. But Harvey, in five weeks, had begun to understand the curious *non sequiturs* of the East. He shrugged and climbed the stair.

The stair was rickety, and the wooden balcony gave under him, creaking, when he stepped on it. Probably it was sounder than it looked, but it made him shake his head. Faith in the mercy of Allah was all very well, but he felt it could be overdone.

Treading gently, he approached the fifth door.

The fourth door opened behind him. He heard the dry screaking sound and then the quick rush of footsteps, and he started to turn around, still not afraid but merely startled. He did not quite see the man. He only felt that he was large, measuring perhaps by the height of the breathing sound above his ear. The blow fell so swiftly and surely that he hardly felt it. There was a snapping somewhere within his flesh, as though someone had stepped on a dry stick. He plunged against the balcony rail, and it broke, splintering. The pieces fell with him, out and down.

He was already dying, and the impact of his body on the hard-packed earth was remote and of little interest to him. He lay staring up at the sky and the pigeons and the mounded pale-brown roof line. A black-and-gray crow cawed harshly, and the balcony was empty with its shattered rail. He was not really conscious of any of this, only of dim surprise and confusion. Then the face of Karim appeared above him, and there was that in it which pierced momentarily to his fading self.

"You?"

Tears gathered in Karim's eyes. "I had to do this, Harvey. I had to."

Harvey's lips formed the one all-important question.

*"Why?"*

If there was an answer, he did not hear it.

# 2

In Santa Monica, California, it was two o'clock in the morning, and Tony Wales was dancing in a place called The Third Illusion. There was a girl with him, a short but very limber girl with long dark hair that snapped to and fro behind her head. Her name was Sandra Chaney. They danced far apart, never touching, their eyes fixed in a mutual hypnotic stare that bound them more firmly together than any physical contact. The five-man combo made powerful driving rhythms, and sixty-two couples danced all in the same way, sweating, spastic, in a state of conditioned ecstasy that had nothing to do with joy.

They all danced here in The Third Illusion on the edge of desperation. There were no teen-agers and no hippies. All were washed and shaved, and their clothes were fashionable. All had sufficient funds to provide the necessities, the drugs and liquors and distractions that made life endurable. They were well-off, and they were doomed, and they knew it, and so they danced to forget that they would soon be thirty.

This fear weighed perhaps more heavily on Tony Wales than on most of the others. He had been orphaned at age six because his father liked to drive sports cars very fast on difficult roads, and he was already older than his parents had been when they died. In this age-conscious world he felt always that time was running by him and would soon run out.

The music stopped. The dancers stopped. Tony and the

girl stood still for a moment, letting the pounding beat ease out of them. Tony's chest heaved, and his face was dewed. He was a big young man and almost psychopathically fit. He exercised furiously between carouses, ate no starches, did not smoke, and drank only vodka because it was pure. He had tried acid twice, and the second time frightened the wits out of him. He had tried pot and some other things, but he preferred to stick almost exclusively to pep pills. They made him feel good. They kept him going. And that was the thing about life, Tony felt; you had to keep going.

Gradually his eyes refocused, and he could see Sandra's damp, flushed face as a face rather than a symbolic blur. She smiled and said, "I'm thirsty."

"Me too." The other couples were beginning to leave the floor. The vacuum left when the music stopped was filling up with the babble of voices, laughter, the clink of glasses. Tony took Sandra's arm and ushered her back to the table. They had drinks working there, and they gulped them while Tony ordered more. Sandra lighted a cigarette and blew smoke high in the smoky air, leaning back against the padded booth.

"That was great. I love this place, Tony. Let's come here a lot."

"Sure," said Tony. "Any time you want."

"Whenever I can catch you, you mean. When are you running off again?"

"Whenever I have to," said Tony largely. "Paris, Rome . . . I never know."

Sandra sighed. "I wish I had a trust fund."

"It's easy. Get yourself a rich grandfather. And anyway, the trust fund has nothing to do with it. I'm in business."

"Sure," said Sandra sardonically. "You told me. Import-export, whatever that is, and if you get paid for all the work I see you doing, you're robbing somebody."

Tony grinned. "That's the whole idea."

Somebody shouted, "Hey, Tony!" Two young men approached, carrying pitchers of beer. "Hi, Sandra."

"Hi, Bill. Hi, George. Sit down. Where's Sammy boy?"

Bill and George made shrugging motions. "Not tonight, Tony. We're having a swim-in at our house."

Bill, George, and Sam were unattached, nonhomosexual, share-the-renters. One could live more cheaply that way, leaving more money over for the necessities.

Sandra said, "What do you mean, a swim-in? There's no pool."

"Can't tell Sammy that. Roy Krafft and Jim Davis came over with some stuff. Jim kind of curled up in a corner with his thumb in his mouth, but Roy and Sammy think they're fish. They're swimming around on the living-room floor."

George grinned and made two opposing circles in the air. "In opposite directions. They bow and wave their fins every time they meet."

*"Ich,"* said Sandra. "Creepy."

"Yuh," said Bill. "Hey, Tony, there's a couple of new nurses at St. E's. Real swingers, and they've got good connections at the dispensary. Any time you want anything—"

"Thanks."

George said dreamily, "We got a bundle of jimsonweed the other day. Grows wild right out in the fields. Crazy."

"We've got it in the refrigerator," Bill said. "Every time you open the door to get a beer there's fluff all over the place. Christ, what a mess. Come on over sometime, and we'll have a party."

The combo climbed back onto the platform and made premonitory noises. Bill and George arose, holding their pitchers. "See you," they said, and drifted away—nice, clean-cut young fellows, only slightly glassy about the eyes. Tony popped another pill, washed it down with vodka and orange juice, and took Sandra out on the floor again, prancing high.

Some time later they emerged into the cool, fog-smelling air and the deserted streets and drove to Tony's pad, an apartment overlooking the beach. They stripped and piled into bed and wrestled with each other in much the same way they had danced, and outside, the long Pacific rollers curled and broke ghostly white against the black water, to slide up hissing over the sand and suck away again. Tony heard this

even in the midst of his endeavors, and it was an old and comforting sound. He had been born along this beach, played along it, grown up along it, with that sound always in his ears. It was like the world breathing. Like your mother breathing, when you were very small and she held you with your head against her breast. It made him feel good.

Sandra made him feel good, too. She was a lively little bunny. He mouthed at her. Their lips clung, and their bodies clung; but nothing else did, and that was the way they wanted it. No tears, no pain, no involvement, no bull about love. Just good, cool fun. Too many things to do, too many places to go, and life was too short. Too short. Too short—

As though on cue, just at the most inopportune moment, the phone rang. Tony growled and let it ring. Presently it stopped, and after a while Tony stopped, and they lay panting in the hot bed, beginning to think of ice cubes and more vodka.

"Who do you suppose that was," asked Sandra, "at this hour of the morning?"

"Some damn drunk," said Tony, "with the wrong number."

Sandra was in the shower and Tony was mixing drinks when the phone rang again. Angrily Tony picked it up and shouted, "What the hell!"

"Tony. Tony, this is Jake Zacharian."

Tony stared at the phone. "Jake? You out of your tree or something? Who needs the rug business at—"

"Tony." The voice was insistent. "Listen to me. I have a message for you, from Karim Hassani. He tried to call you but you—"

"Karim? Calling me? From Teheran?"

"He isn't in Teheran; he's in Isfahan. He couldn't get you so he called me. Now listen. Harvey Martin is dead."

Tony stood still and felt the cold shock hit him like the first wave.

Sandra came out of the bathroom scrubbing her flanks with a towel and yawning. "Are the drinks ready? I think I'm going to have an entire collapse."

"Shut up," said Tony, and she turned and looked at him with her mouth open. He said into the phone, "Jake. Did I hear you right? Harvey Martin—"

"Yes."

"Oh, hell," said Tony. "Oh, Christ." Harvey Martin, dead. The crash of finality, the end of a world. It hurt him, a physical pain in his gut. "How did it happen?"

"An accident. Look, come around and have breakfast with me. You know the place on the corner? Good, I'll meet you there at eight. Okay?"

"Okay," said Tony. "Eight."

He put the phone down and continued to stand with his hand on it.

Sandra said, "What is it?"

Tony seemed to have forgotten she was there. "The same age as me," he muttered. "The same damned age."

"Tony! What is all this? What's going on?"

Now he remembered her. "Don't you have to go somewhere?"

"You know I don't. I just have to sleep."

"Not here, baby. Out."

He started toward the bathroom, and she began to wail. "I can't. I'm tired. And I don't have my car."

Tony stopped at the night table and took a small bottle from the drawer. He tossed it to her.

"Have a benny. And call yourself a taxi."

He went into the bathroom and took a hot shower, lathering himself in a kind of ritual ablution to cleanse away the mention of death. Then he turned the cold water on full. The tingling shock cleared some of the gummy fog out of his brain. He heard Sandra bang the door behind her as she left. He dried himself and shaved and opened the windows to air the girl smell out. He dressed, and it was still too early to start for Beverly Hills.

He made himself several cups of instant coffee and drank them, staring with a leaden gaze at the sea as it emerged from the vague uncertainty of dawn into the clear daylight. The water was as smooth as stretched silk, and a white fishing boat

moved across it like something in a mirage, close in, trawling for bait.

After a while it was time to go.

The Beverly Hills restaurant was quiet at this hour. They sat in a corner booth at the back, and Tony drank more coffee. His stomach was uneasy, and it made him sick to watch Zacharian plowing steadily through his bacon and eggs. Zacharian was fortyish, swarthy, suave, immaculate, and one of the best customers of the firm of Hassani, Wales & Martin, now reverted so cruelly to the original Hassani-Wales. He kept watching Tony.

"You'd feel much better if you'd eat something."

"Believe me, I wouldn't."

Zacharian shrugged. "I didn't think this would hit you so hard, Tony. In fact, I'll be honest. I didn't think anything would hit you so hard."

"If I'd known this was going to happen, I'd have arranged things a little differently this last week." He was wearing dark glasses so Zacharian would not see his eyes, which shocked even him.

"There's more to it than that," said Zacharian shrewdly. "I'm sorry, this wasn't a good idea. Let's go."

He paid the check, and they went out. Beverly Drive was stirring, preparing for the day. Tony moved beside Zacharian, a suntanned muscular sham. The sun hurt his head, and the first faint edge of the day's smog sawed at his nostrils. He was thankful when they turned into Zacharian's shop.

It was air-conditioned, and the light was muted, a rich and gorgeous reflection of jewel-toned reds, blues, greens, yellows. Zacharian dealt in Oriental carpets, and nothing but the best. The decor of the shop was deliberately neutral, so that there should be no clash or distraction. His carpets were gems and were displayed as such, sufficient unto themselves. Clerks and maintenance people were attending to the preopening chores. Zacharian ushered Tony into his private office at the back and closed the door. Tony sank gratefully into a chair and shook.

"You said it was an accident. What kind of accident?"

"Karim said he had taken Martin down to Isfahan, to meet some of the people he deals with there. I gather he was sort of teaching him the business—"

Tony nodded.

"He was showing Martin the bazaar. I believe you've been there?"

"Once."

"Then you know how it could happen. Martin got separated from Karim. It seems he wandered into a courtyard that isn't used anymore because the balcony's unsafe. Apparently he climbed onto it, and it gave way." Zacharian made an expressive gesture. "Broke his neck. He was dead when Karim found him."

"Poor old Harvey." After a minute Tony added softly, "Damn. Oh, damn."

"You really were fond of Martin, weren't you?" Zacharian still sounded genuinely surprised.

"He and Karim have always been like my family, like brothers. I've been an orphan since I was six, with nobody." Tony was not totally void of self-pity. "We went through college together—"

"I know."

"They were foreign students, a long way from home. They didn't have anybody either, and we sort of stuck together. That's why it came naturally for me to go into business with Karim." Tony paused. "You know why I really feel so rotten? I got Harvey into this."

"Oh?" said Zacharian. "You offered him the partnership?"

"Sure. Harvey never had any fun. He was snowed under with family, had to run his father's business and all that jazz. When he finally got loose and had some cash, I told him he ought to come in with us, and he jumped at it. He wanted to travel, see the world, do something exciting. You know, live a little. So he died." Tony put his head in his hands. "Jesus. He'd only been in Iran five weeks."

"You can hardly blame yourself. It was his choice."

"Yeah, but— See, Karim didn't want a third partner.

Nothing personal. It was just he couldn't see what Harvey was going to add to the business outside of his money, which we didn't really need. I had to talk kind of fast and loud. If I hadn't, Harvey'd still be sitting safe in London."

"I see," said Zacharian. "Well, and suppose he had stayed in London and been knocked over by a taxi on Piccadilly Circus. Then you'd be blaming yourself the other way."

"I suppose so. Did Karim say what he was going to do with—"

"He will fly the body back to England as soon as arrangements can be made. He'll cable you."

Looking through his dark lenses at the paneled wall, Tony seemed to be looking down a narrow alley that stretched ahead of him with no way out except at the other end. He loathed the prospect.

"What time is it in London now?"

Zacharian looked at his watch. "Getting on for six. Why?"

Tony said bleakly, "I ought to call Ellen."

"Ellen?"

"Harvey's girl. He was going to marry her. He was that kind." Tony reached out for the phone on Zacharian's desk, then drew his hand back. He was not quite ready. "No, I'll wait till I see her."

Zacharian's eyes widened. "Are you planning to go to the funeral?"

"I have to," said Tony hollowly.

Zacharian said, "Well, I'll be damned."

"I think," said Tony, "I ought to be insulted, but I'm too tired. See you, Jake."

"So long," said Zacharian, and looked after him with surprise and something else. A bright, hard spark of speculation.

Tony went out through the faint fragrance of incense that almost covered the mingled scent of mothballs and carpet wool. He drove in the hot sun back to his apartment, where he pulled the blinds and fell onto the rumpled bed.

He was asleep almost at once. But for a long time dark shapes stalked him in his dreams, crying out with familiar

voices, *"Have fun, Harvey! Live!"* All the voices were his, but all the dark shapes had Harvey's face. He ran and ran to get away from them, and the place where he was running was the main thoroughfare of the UCLA campus; only when he came to Sunset Boulevard, it wasn't there, and he found himself instead in the great bazaar of Isfahan, running down the tunneled ways among the shadows and the strange smells and the alien faces. And he could feel the tears running down his cheeks.

Sleep turned eventually into a semicoma far too deep for dreams, and he had forgotten them when he waked again. The sun was drowning itself in the Pacific, and the Malibus were turning dark against the sky.

There was an envelope shoved under his door. It was a long cable from Karim. Harvey's body would be flown to England on Thursday, and Karim would go with it, and there was no need for Tony to come to the funeral.

"What the hell does he think I am?" said Tony angrily, and flung the crumpled paper down. But he knew what Karim thought he was, and he knew he was right. He didn't want to go. Given enough encouragement, he wouldn't.

He needed food now as badly as he had needed rest. After he had had it, he began to drive aimlessly, wondering what to do. He hated being alone, but somehow he could not face Sandra or The Third Illusion or any of their several counterparts, not just yet. He thought perhaps a movie. There were a couple of them in Westwood. He drove up through the village and parked, and then he knew that he had not come there to see a movie at all.

The campus drew him like a magnet. He passed the gate that separates the university from the town, walking slowly, looking at the buildings, a mixture of mellow Italianate stone and glaring modern. Lights showed here and there where someone was working late. The place had grown since he had been here. Always large, it had now become stupendous. It had changed enough to make him feel old but not enough to be unfamiliar. He had walked here with Karim and Harvey, attended classes in this or that building. He could

even remember the particular rooms. There had not been anything in the least unusual about a student from England and a student from Iran being there. UCLA had them from all over, north, south, east, and west, everywhere but the Iron Curtain countries.

Karim and Harvey.

He leaned against a tree, staring up at the campanile, black against the milky sky. He thought how stupid a man is to get involved even with a friend, if he is the kind of man who hates pain and all unpleasantness.

But Harvey was young. He was not supposed to die.

He hated Harvey for doing this to him.

Nevertheless, in twenty-four hours he was on a plane heading for London.

# 3

It was a tiny village tucked away in a green fold high on the edge of Dartmoor. A handful of neat white cottages set at random around a green shaded by old trees, a little stone pub called The Ring of Bells, a little stone church that went back beyond the first Elizabeth. This was Harvey Martin's birthplace. His parents had moved to London when he was a child; but Martins had been buried here for three centuries, and so even the ones who wandered came home when they died. Harvey was the last of them. There would not be any more.

It was cold in the churchyard. The wind plucked at coats and uncovered heads, snatched away the words from the parson's mouth. Great clouds drove across the sky so that sometimes there was sunshine and sometimes a mist of rain. Tony Wales stood beside Karim Hassani and Ellen Lofting, his eyes straying from the open pit of the grave to the leaning, sunken stones patched with lichen and the grassy

mounds outlined with cobbles, neat beds for sleeping away eternity, and then to the whaleback ridge of moorland rising beyond, getting little comfort from any of it. He hated all these symbols of time and continuity. They reminded him that they had been here long before he came and would be here long after he was gone; his existence meant nothing to them. Tony liked the cheap, bright gimcracky things that were only for the moment. He used them and threw them away, and they were gone; but he remained.

Ellen's parents were in Sicily and had not felt obliged to return for the funeral. Harvey's small circle of friends in London had found it too difficult to get away from their jobs; they had sent flowers and regrets. The village people, though, had come to bid farewell to one of their own. They stood as solid as the moorland stones, in thick tweeds and solemn faces, and when the service at last was mercifully over, they came to speak to Ellen, whom they knew because Harvey had brought her here a time or two, and then to Karim and Tony, whom they did not know. Both looked sufficiently exotic in this place, Tony with his too-short haircut and heavy tan, Karim black-haired, black-browed, Iranian and handsome with his strong, straight features and flashing eyes. But the villagers were warm in their handshakes and condolences; these strangers had been Harvey's friends, and they had come a long way to be at his burying. Tony, who had a lazy ear, found their soft Devonshire speech difficult to understand, and it made him remember how Harvey had used to lapse into it on occasion. He shook hands and mumbled and envied Karim his gracefulness.

Ellen moved through the whole affair with her head up and her shoulders back, too proud to break, bend, or cry. Tony felt awkward with her, remembering the last time he had seen her, not so long ago, miniskirted and laughing, all long legs and good humor and eager intelligence. Harvey had loved her because she was excited by life and the world and so was herself exciting. Now she looked remote and bloodless, her tall body moving with an almost mechanical stiffness. She wore a dark coat that covered her knees and a

blue scarf over her head. Her hair, long and straight and rich brown, hung down over her shoulders at the back, and the wind played with the ends of it. She spoke gently to all the people and thanked the parson and walked away to the hired car that had brought them up from Exeter, and she did not once look back.

The driver set off, retracing a narrow road that looped across the vast gray-green emptiness. Tony had a bottle in the car, whiskey this time and damn the additives. He offered it around. Both Ellen and Karim refused it, so he drank gratefully and sat with the bottle in his hands, looking out at the wide sky, with some kind of a hawk in it sweeping broad-winged down the wind, and the miles of rough country rolling up to granite ridges, and the stark tors standing above it all like broken watchtowers. It might as well have been Arizona except that it was the wrong color. After a while he said, "I didn't know there was anything this big in England."

Ellen said sharply, "You Americans never get out of London."

"What for?" said Tony. "I never get out of New York or LA either. Or Rome, or whatever. There's nothing in the country but country."

It was the first time anyone had spoken since leaving the village, and it was not very successful. So again they were silent. A band of the little wild Dartmoor ponies came scampering toward the road, and the driver slowed down; but they stopped at the verge and watched the car with bright button eyes, their forelocks blowing. They seemed almost to be laughing, as though this was a thing they did to drivers just to see them flinch.

Abruptly Ellen said, "I'm sorry, Tony, that was snappish. Forgive me."

"Oh, hell. Forget it."

Karim made a sudden impatient gesture. "If nobody else is going to say it, I will. If I hadn't let him wander off in the bazaar—"

"He wasn't a child," said Tony. "What were you supposed to do, hold his hand?"

"Still and all—"

"It was an accident. Just the same as if he'd been hit by a taxi. It wasn't anybody's fault."

Karim looked at Ellen. He seemed to expect her to say something, and she shook her head.

"I'm still too angry to think clearly."

"Angry with me?"

She shrugged. "With God. With fate. Perhaps now I've got this bit of medieval torture done with, I can begin to function properly again."

There was a pause, and then she said rapidly, "I suppose I ought to tell you. Harvey had no family left, and we were to be married. He willed everything to me, including his share of your business."

Karim nodded. "I expected that. We can talk about it later."

He settled back in the corner of the seat, a dark and quiet man watching the countryside roll by, a man at peace with his sorrow.

# 4

In midafternoon of the second day after the funeral Ellen drove Karim to Heathrow, and Tony went along.

He was in a restless mood. "I think maybe I'll go over to Paris, kick around a little, see what's doing."

"Last night it was Rome," said Karim. "This morning it was Stockholm."

"Well, you tell me. Is there someplace you want me to go?"

"Not at the moment. But when you do light somewhere, send me a cable, huh?"

"You know me," said Tony. "Old Reliable."

At the airport they said good-bye, and Karim was especially charming to Ellen. She did look better, Tony thought, more normal and relaxed. But there was still a certain stiffness in her manner toward Karim, and he was obviously aware of it. He told her not to worry about anything connected with the business and to call on him if there was anything she wanted. Then he turned to Tony and gave his hand a hard grip.

"I may be on the coast this fall. I'll let you know. Take it easy. And don't forget to cable."

He smiled at them and went beyond the barrier, where they could not follow.

Ellen and Tony returned to the car and began the drive back into London.

Ellen was silent for a time. Tony sat hunched up, frowning to himself and wondering how he could decently get out of asking her to dinner. He had had enough of the funeral atmosphere. He needed something now to get the taste out of his mouth.

Ellen said, "You don't go to Iran at all, do you?"

Surprised, Tony said, "I was there once. I was all over the Middle East. It's a drag. Those Moslem chicks, you not only don't touch, you don't even look—unless you want to go the professional route, and man, I'm scared. The boys only go out with boys there, and it makes the night life kind of boring. Anyway, that's Karim's end of it."

The little Morris scuttled expertly around a slow-moving bus, dodged a truck, found a clear space, and went like hell.

"Nervous?" asked Ellen.

"No," he lied.

"Well, do stop slamming on the brakes. You make *me* nervous."

He hadn't realized he was doing it. He forced himself to relax, stopped looking ahead, and watched her profile instead.

Not his type, of course. Not a real swinger. He couldn't imagine jumping on her the way he did on the Sandra types,

just casually for the exercise. She wasn't a girl in the sense that they were; she was a person. She was the kind you got involved with, and he wanted no part of that. But he had to admit she was something special.

"By Karim's end of it," she said, "you mean the working end."

Her voice was like a ringing slap across the face, and Tony forgot all about admiring her.

"Well, hell, yes," he said, "and why not? I'm the rich bitch, remember? I put up the coins."

"Ah, yes. All those lovely trust funds and things."

"What's the matter with them? And while we're on the subject, I haven't seen you swinging any picks and shovels."

"I make a living," she said, and let it pass, without giving him the usual lecture he got from hopeful young actresses about how tough it all was. He was grateful for that.

But not grateful enough to be polite. "If it hadn't been for me, Karim wouldn't have a business, and we both know it. So he does the work, and I skate, and we're both happy."

"Skate?"

"Glide. Like easy. Been doing it all my life. It's the only way."

She didn't seem to notice, or at least to care, that he was angry.

"In other words, you don't really know anything at all about the business."

"I know all I need to know. Like how much it pays—thirty thou a year. I'm the highest-priced errand boy in the world. I travel, and I take it off my income tax, and I have myself a ball. Karim's not complaining, and neither did Harvey, so why should you?"

"Oh, yes, he did," she said softly. "In a nice way, because he was fond of you. But he said if he was going to be a partner, he was going to pull his weight. Harvey wasn't a skater."

"He never had the chance to be. Look," Tony said, "don't start pushing. You may be technically a partner, but—"

She cut him short. "You don't know anything about the business, and you don't know much about Karim either."

"What do you mean by that?"

"You only know what he tells you. He could be doing anything—trading opium for white slaves. You wouldn't know the difference."

Tony sat up rigidly. "Honey," he said, "you're making an unfriend real fast."

"That's not important. It's true, isn't it?"

He did not answer, and she spun the wheel over hard, making the Morris jump like a startled rabbit.

"I must talk to you, Tony."

"I don't—"

"That isn't important either."

He thought: *Christ, she doesn't have that long English jaw for nothing.* He tried again.

"Look, I don't—"

"Oh, stop being such a bloody baby."

It was obvious that he was not going to get away, short of throwing himself out of the car. "I think," he said, "I liked you better when you were crushed." He sat quietly while the Morris burrowed its blunt nose deeper into the wilds of Bayswater. Presently it stopped, midway in a long row of stone fronts with nearly identical porticoes. He recognized it. He had been here once with Harvey to pick her up.

She marched into the building, and he followed behind her up two flights of stairs, admiring in spite of himself the shape of her long, thrusting legs. Her apartment was furnished sparsely but in excellent taste, if you liked things arty and modern, and Tony did. There were a lot of books around, and records, mostly longhair stuff. Harvey had gone for that, too. There was a photograph of Harvey on a small table. He looked young and fit and happy.

A coal fire burned in the grate. Ellen motioned to a large chair beside it. "Sit down." She took off her coat. "Would you like a drink?"

"No," said Tony rudely. "All right, I'm here. What do you want with me?"

He lay back in the chair like a sulky child, frowning up at her. She stood in front of him, tall, her legs apart, her hands

clasped behind her back. She had dark lashes and dark, arching brows, and her gaze pierced him, made him squirm inwardly as though he were trying to cover up the hollows and the blank spaces so she couldn't see them, and that only made him more angry.

"How did this import-export business start?" she asked him. "Hassani-Wales and Company. I know you put up the money, but whose idea was it?"

"Karim's, of course. Who else? I don't know a Baluchi from a Royal Kashan, and I couldn't care less. Karim does, and there's all the other things, too—silks and metalwork and antiques, all kinds of stuff. He had a lot of contacts, and he thought he could make a go of it. So I took a chance. Okay? And what's this all about anyway?"

"*Mm*," she said. "It did pay off well, didn't it? Thirty thou a year for doing nothing."

"Call it return on an investment."

"It's possible. Or it might be that you're worth the money just because you exist."

He scowled at her.

"A front, Tony. A nice respectable front. Iran's a progressive country. They want foreign investments and trade. Harvey said Teheran was swarming with businessmen from all over the world. Your record is clean, and what could be more natural than two old school chums going into business together? And what could be more above suspicion than a rich American"—she fumbled for a word and then used his own—"skater?"

"You sound as though you've been thinking," Tony said. "I don't like women who think. They make a lot of trouble. And anyway, you're out of your skull. Do you know anything about trusts? They don't hand out big chunks of money to just anybody, and they don't take my word for anything. My family lawyer went over Karim and the whole deal like the fate of the world depended on it, and the trust officers did their bit. Karim was clean right back to the day he was born, and so was the deal."

"Of course," she said. "They had to be. But that was almost

five years ago. How did Karim feel about taking Harvey in? Was he keen on it?" Tony did not answer immediately, and she caught the hesitation. "He wasn't, was he?"

"He gave me some static at first. So what?" This was a sore point with him, and he was angry with her for bringing it up.

"He didn't want Harvey, but you forced him in. Is that right?"

"That's a pretty actressy way of putting it. Who's writing your dialogue?" He stood up in order to regain the superior position. "And what the hell are you trying to get me to say?"

She turned from him and went to a desk in the corner by the tall front window. She opened a drawer and took out a packet of letters, touching them tenderly with her fingers.

"Harvey wrote to me often. Told me what he was doing, how much he liked the country and the people. He wanted me to come out. I wish now I had."

"Yeah, blame yourself a little, why not? You're busy blaming everybody else." He took a step toward her. "I hope I don't know exactly what's in your mind, doll, but I can clear up one thing for you. Karim was used to running the show all by himself. He wasn't happy about changing that, and it was going to make him a lot of trouble breaking Harvey in, especially when he didn't know the language."

"He was learning it."

Tony ignored her. "I'd have felt the same way. Sure Karim growled a little. But then he realized that Harvey could do as much for us as he did for his old man, and he got used to the idea."

Ellen had extracted the top letter from the bundle. She kept that one and fired the others at him.

"Read them."

"Christ," said Tony, "I don't want to read them."

"Neither did I. Not again. But I did—and I got something out of them, something I hadn't noticed until Harvey was dead. Perhaps I am actressy, or losing my mind just a little, I'm not sure. Please read them, Tony."

For the first time he heard the shrill edge of strain in her

voice and realized with a shock that all her cool was on the surface and that underneath it she was about ready to crack open. The idea was so horrifying that it took his mind off being furious with her, at least for the moment. He sat down again.

"All right," he said. "Okay, I'll read them. Get me that drink now, huh? And you look as though you could use one yourself."

She nodded and went into the small kitchen. Tony untied the bundle of letters and began to read. After a while Ellen came back and handed him a glass. She sat down with one of her own, just beyond the fire where she could watch his face. She lighted a cigarette and drank her drink and waited quietly until he was through.

Puzzled, he looked at her. "All I get out of it is that Harvey was working his head off and having a ball."

"But without Karim. He went away right after Harvey got there."

"Sure," said Tony. "I know that. He often goes on scouting trips. Wouldn't be any use taking Harvey with him until he learned the language."

"Still, it did leave Harvey alone in Teheran with no one to talk to but the bookkeeper, Saad. And Saad doesn't speak any English."

"What's that suppose to prove?"

"It kept Harvey from asking any questions, didn't it? And he was very keen to learn. He said so often how frustrating it was not to be able to find out things." She picked up the final letter. "He wrote this one just the day before. It didn't reach me until after—" She shook her head savagely. "Take it."

He took it and read:

DEAREST ELLEN:

Karim has returned at last, thank heaven, and things are looking much cheerier. We will fly down to Isfahan tomorrow, where Karim will introduce me to the people he—we!—deal with there, and after that we go to Shiraz. Magic names! It's good to have someone to talk to again.

I'm making progress with my Persian and getting quite handy at writing backward, even though the squiggles don't always mean what they're supposed to when I'm finished. But I'm hardly fluent as yet, and I must say that Saad hasn't been one bit helpful. I had a real run-in with him just recently, when I unwisely made a stab at trying to puzzle out the company records—a lot prematurely, as I found out. Saad was terribly surly about it. Practically threw me out of the office. Karim says it's all a misunderstanding—Tony never bothered with the books and all that, and Saad doesn't see why I want to unless I don't trust him. Which is ridiculous, of course. I only want to understand. Ah, well. It will sort itself out in due time. Karim says I'm too impatient, and I suppose he's right. I'm impatient about you as well. Do come soon. Must close now and get to my packing. With all my love.

Tony put the letter down. "Again I have to ask—so what?"

"It doesn't strike you as the least bit odd?"

"You'll have to spell it out. I'm not reading you at all."

She sighed and leaned her head back. "Harvey became a partner in your business—over Karim's objections. Karim left him, as it were, in a vacuum, so that he learned absolutely nothing about it. But he was making progress with the language, and he began trying to study the records. Saad was angry, Karim came back, and almost immediately Harvey was dead—an accident. If there was something Karim couldn't afford to let him find out, isn't that what he would have had to do? Arrange an accident?"

Tony stood up. The dull flush was back, and he was shaking with outrage.

"Don't say a thing like that again, not where I can hear you." He picked up his coat and started ramming it on. "You never liked me, you never liked Karim, and you didn't like Harvey leaving England because it made you a lot of problems. Now you're dreaming all this up out of nothing because you're hurt and you want someone to blame."

"Perhaps," she said. "If so, I'll apologize. But aren't you curious? Not at all? Harvey was your friend. Karim is your friend. There's not much to you, Tony, but you are loyal to your friends. I thought you might want to help me, if only to prove that I'm wrong."

"Help you," said Tony, "do what?"

"Find out if it really was an accident."

He stared at her, speechless with astonishment, anger boiling up in him so that when he did try to speak, he came close to choking on it.

"Just how do you think you're going to do that?"

"I'm going to Isfahan. I want to see where it happened. I want to talk to the authorities. And after that . . . I have a partnership in the business now, a full one-third share, whether I keep it or sell it back when the red tape is cleared away. That gives me some leverage. I can have the company investigated, the records checked—"

"Oh, Jesus," said Tony. "Why don't you just stick to your acting?"

She shook her head. "I'm giving you the chance to go along. Think it over."

Tony said, "Oh, Jesus Jumping Christ!" He went out, slamming the door so hard he could hear the windows rattle.

# 5

But he thought it over, just as she had told him to. He could not help thinking it over. He thought in the taxi going back to his hotel, and after he got there, he stamped up and down the room, thinking.

It wasn't bad enough that your friend had to die. You had to have a hysterical female coming up with idiotic ideas.

And she was going to Isfahan.

Well, let her go. She'd have a long trip for nothing.

Arrange an accident, for Christ's sake!

*Karim?*

He was sweating with fury.

He stripped and started for the bath, and the phone stopped him. He picked it up, thinking that it was Ellen, ready to admit how ridiculous she had been. But it was not Ellen. It was a masculine voice, deep and hearty.

"Tony Wales? Bronson here."

"Oh," said Tony. "Hello, Bronson."

"Are you terribly busy at the moment?"

"No."

"Then why not pop round here to the shop and have a drink? Karim said you'd be leaving London shortly, and I'd very much like to see you before you go."

Tony hesitated. Bronson was something of a bore, but he was their biggest English customer.

Bronson settled it. "I can guarantee you a really cold martini."

Tony said, "Be there in fifteen minutes."

He hung up and immediately regretted his decision. He was in no good mood to talk to anybody. Then he thought perhaps that was what he needed to get his mind off Ellen—martinis and chatter. At least he would not have to do any business. Karim had taken care of that.

Bronson's shop was only a few squares away, just off Albemarle Street. Washed and freshly clad, Tony walked to it in the gathering dusk, thinking that the exercise and fresh air would cool him down. The shop had a narrow front, with a modest sign and a window display of Oriental *objets d'art* in impeccable taste. Tony entered, his feet sinking into a splendid carpet. It came from a mud-walled village forty miles from Isfahan, where a family of women and girls had spent a whole year making it, squatting before a huge loom, skillfully knotting and cutting each separate thread by hand. Karim had sold it to Bronson, and it was as good as anything Zacharian had. Tony closed the door behind him, and the little bell that was mounted on it tinkled pleasantly.

Bronson came out to greet him.

"Good to see you, Wales. You're looking fit." He was a little more than comfortably well fleshed himself, his face broad and pink and aggressively British, his eyes mild and innocent, his thick gray hair cut with just the proper hint of carelessness. "Come along to the office. I'm just doing the martinis."

He led the way to the rear of the shop, through a doorway into a narrow hall. They passed a small cubby where a girl sat at a desk busily typing. She looked up and smiled, and Bronson paused.

"Mr. Wales, Miss Thompson. I believe Miss Thompson is new since you were last here."

Miss Thompson said hello. She was a Sandra type, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. Even sitting as she was at the desk, she managed to show him an astonishing amount of leg, in net stockings and bared almost to the buttocks in a disappearing skirt. "She's new," said Tony, giving her a certain appreciative look. "And she's an improvement. The last one looked like Queen Victoria's horse."

Bronson coughed slightly and they went on into the office. It was comfortable but old-fashioned and rather shabby, not at all like Zacharian's expensive sanctum in Beverly Hills. One fine Persian miniature, a hunting scene, hung over the desk. On the opposite wall was an antique prayer rug in faded reds and blues. A door led into an inner room, and there was a mirror on the wall beside it. Tony glanced at himself while Bronson carried on with the martinis. He adjusted his tie and thought about Miss Thompson. He felt better already.

Bronson handed him a glass and said, "Cheers." The martini was as promised, cold and strong.

"I had a very useful visit with Karim this morning." Bronson settled himself in the worn swivel chair behind his desk. "Delightful chap. Seemed rather badly cut up about the accident, poor fellow. Well, and I suppose you'll be off to Southern California and all that sunlight?"

Tony said, "I haven't made up my mind." *If Ellen had her*

*way,* he thought, *I'd go to Iran, ask a lot of questions, shake out the business, make a lot of trouble.*

His face got red and ugly again, and he gulped the rest of his martini.

"Something wrong?" asked Bronson.

"No."

Bronson waved at the shaker. "Please, help yourself." He watched Tony mildly as he rose from the chair he had taken and poured himself another drink. "I expect this visit has been a strain." He shook his head. "Shocking business, that. You brought young Martin around here to meet me, I recall."

"Yes," said Tony, feeling worse.

"Karim said Martin's fiancée was taking it quite hard, and small wonder. I understand she now has Martin's share of the firm—"

"She won't keep it long," said Tony.

Bronson's brows went up. "Oh? Surely not friction already?"

"She's got some funny ideas. Damn funny." The second martini went splashing after the first. He knew that he was not drinking like a gentleman, but at this point he didn't care.

"Well, well," said Bronson gently, "the young lady has had a blow. Give her time to sort things out."

"She can have," said Tony, "from now till—" Then he shut his jaw tight, remembering that this was not Muscle Beach and that the code of acceptable behavior was somewhat stiffer. "Look, Mr. Bronson, I'm sorry. I'm just not in a very good mood tonight. Thanks for the martinis."

He was starting to retrieve his coat. Bronson rose and, very fatherly and understanding, took his arm and sat him down again.

"Can't let the rest of them go to waste, you know." He filled both glasses again, gave Tony his, and went back to his desk. "We've all had our bad times, Wales. Doesn't do to brood. Doesn't do at all."

Tony sipped more restrainedly at his drink. There was a

good strong fire burning in his middle now, coming on like an explosion. "I know that," he said. "I was sort of planning on turning loose a little tonight."

"Excellent," said Bronson. "Do you a world of good. You like dancing, I suppose? Or what passes for it these days. Dear me, when I think how painfully I learned to waltz! You mark my words, though. One day the waltz will come back, and it will be so new and strange that the young ones will think it terribly daring and naughty. Oh, Miss Thompson—"

He must have pressed a button on his desk because all of a sudden Miss Thompson was in the doorway, looking expectant.

"Yes, Mr. Bronson?"

"I seem to have heard rumors, Miss Thompson, that there is a new pleasure palace on the borders of Soho, reputed by the young to be the farthest out yet?"

Miss Thompson grinned. Her body quivered involuntarily, and her eyes were impish.

"Yes, sir."

"Do you think a visiting American might be impressed by it?

She glanced at Tony. "I'd bet a week's wages."

"Then you might give Mr. Wales the address."

"I'll write it down, sir."

"Whoa," said Tony, feeling much improved. "Can't we do better than that?"

She looked at him over her shoulder, questioning.

"I mean, how about taking me there in person?"

"Well!" she said. "I've always heard you Yanks were impulsive."

"Of course, if you already have a date—"

"As a matter of fact, I don't, really." Her tone said that he was lucky to catch her on an off night, and he thought probably he was. "But," she said, and turned to Bronson, "the inventory—"

"This is an emergency, Miss Thompson. Good Samaritan and all that. The inventory will keep until tomorrow."

"Well," she said, "in that case, I can't very well refuse, can I?" She smiled at Tony and then made the inevitable statement: "I will have to change."

He took her home in a taxi, which delighted her because she always took the tube, and he waited for her in a kind of parlor strewn with cushions and overflowing ashtrays and stray bits of feminine apparel. Miss Thompson, whose other name was Robin, shared the apartment with several girls, and apparently they had not decided on who was to do the housekeeping. He could hear voices and gigglings in the background. At first he sat, and then he prowled. The inner fire was dying, leaving a sour aftertaste. He began to get angry again, because of the waiting; the empty time inexorably filled itself with brooding about Ellen.

*She is going to make all kinds of trouble,* he thought. *Suppose it gets around that she's gone chasing halfway across the world to see if Karim didn't murder Harvey because there's something wrong with the business. What would that stuffy old ass Bronson think if he heard it? Christ, she could kill us with that kind of talk.*

Question the authorities, she said. Have the company investigated. That was not going to help Karim at home either. Nor the business. You started splashing tar around, and it never did wash off completely. People had long memories for accusations, but they couldn't remember for two days that the accused had been found innocent. Or at least they never quite believed it.

*I ought to stop her,* he thought. *Only there isn't any way to do that. So maybe I ought to go with her, at that. To keep her mouth shut, keep her steered away from the authorities. I could shake out the company for her, prove to her that there's nothing wrong, without making a big stink about it. Karim would go along with me—*

A small voice said, "Tony?"

He turned around. Robin had come in and was watching him doubtfully.

"Did I keep you waiting too long?"

"Why?"

"You're looking rather purple."

He laughed. "Not about you." She had, he saw, been dressed quite conservatively for the office. Now her skirt had vanished almost entirely, and the rest of the little whatnot she wore was some kind of lace with a weave large enough to put your hand through. Not a bad idea either. He must remember it. "Do you drink, Robin?"

"I do."

"Then let's not just stand around here."

"I eat, too."

"What dame doesn't? But first we drink."

He helped her on with her coat and led her out.

The pleasure palace on the borders of Soho was much like The Third Illusion in Santa Monica, except that it had psychedelic lighting. And of course, the accents were different, the liquor was seventy proof and the beer warm, and the young men had long hair. But it was good. It was very good. He danced with Robin, and she was good and a lot of fun. He danced hotly, furiously, in the shifting light, purging himself of funerals and problems, forgetting Ellen, forgetting Harvey, forgetting Karim.

The on-and-off lights were hypnotic, flaring, gold, green, red, blue, purple. He danced and felt gloriously, pleasantly drunk.

Then presently the lights seemed to have steadied down to a dim glow, and there was no more dancing, and he felt a lot more than pleasantly drunk. His head bulged, and his brain swam inside it, aimless as a fish. He looked around for Robin. There was a young man sitting beside him on the right. He wore a velvet jacket, and his beautiful blond hair curled on his shoulders. He smiled at Tony. Tony looked the other way and saw a second young man, dressed elegantly in bottle green, with a large flowing tie and beautiful dark hair waved over his forehead. He also smiled at Tony. Robin was nowhere in sight.

"Where's the girl?" asked Tony.

"She left you," said the blond young man. "She's gone."

"Gone? Why?"

"Don't you remember, Yank?" said the dark young man.

"God," said Tony. "I don't even remember coming here." There was a drink in front of him. Beyond the drink he could see an unsteady vista of tables and chairs and people sitting around in a haze of smoke. There was music, pounding, thumping, rocking. "I need a pill," said Tony, and fumbled for his pocket.

The young men leaned in closer. The blond one had delicate features. His skin was transparent, with a faint rosy flush over the cheekbones. His eyes were enormous and long-lashed. The dark one was coarser, with protruding lips and a large nose. Their Cockney accents were rich and ripe; an expert might have said too rich, too carefully studied. Tony was no expert. All he wanted was a pill, a nice benny to clear away the fog. Get his heart beating again. He didn't have any heartbeat. "I'm a zombie," he muttered. "Look at me, a goddam zombie."

"Zombie, 'e says. What do you think of that?"

"Don't look like a zombie to me. Looks like a Yank. Cropped hair and all, and that jaw—"

"Brutal, ain't it?"

"A baby killer's jaw."

"Ah." The one with the dark hair and the big nose gathered Tony's shirt into his hand and shook him gently. "A baby-killin' Yank. All them poor little nippers in Vietnam. Ain't you ashamed?"

Tony said distinctly, "Frig you," and shoved. The dark-haired man moved back, but it was Tony who fell across the table.

The blond one giggled. "That's why she left you, darling. You were trying to pinch her bottom, and you fell." He leaned over and inspected Tony. "Oh, he don't look well at all." He pulled Tony's head around by the ear, and Tony sat up again, squealing with the pain. The dark-haired one peered at him.

"I think he's going to be sick."

"Ah. Then he ought to go to the men's."

They picked him up, one on each side, pinning his arms,

holding him. He kept telling himself to fight, but his legs would not do anything except stagger along between the two pairs of jaunty pipestems with their pointed feet, and his body remained sluggishly uninterested. He could not understand why until he remembered that he was a zombie and had no heartbeat.

A door opened and closed. The voices and the music became dim. He was in a corridor, gray and cold, with a stale, bad smell. He could see another door at the end of it, an evil sort of door with leprous paint. He balked.

"Look," he said. "I'm not sick. I'm not sick at all."

"No?" said the blond-haired one. "Well, we must see to that, mustn't we, darling?"

He let go of Tony's arm. Moving like a dancer, he stepped in front of him and, giggling, kicked him in the genitals.

# 6

It seemed to go on forever. Sometimes he would go to sleep and forget about it; but then he would wake again, and there they were, capering and prancing on their long, thin legs and hurting him terribly, and the blond one never stopped giggling. "These goddam fairies," he cried, "don't they ever get tired?" Voices answered him, telling him it was all right now, but he knew well and good it wasn't all right, not while those sharp toes were spearing him and those malicious white hands were busy with torment. He could see with ridiculous clarity how beautifully manicured the nails were.

Then there was the door, the nasty-looking door with the bleared paint. Every once in a while they would stop their murderous dancing and fling open that door and drag him through it, and afterward for a while it would be nice and dark and quiet, with rain-wet cobbles cold under his

cheek, and the pain would go away. But it always came back, and he would find himself in the corridor again, looking up at them as they spun about with their long hair and their coattails flying. He wished they would just leave him in the dark out there. It was so silly to keep on dragging him back in. Only they didn't, really, they only dragged him *out,* and he wondered how they got him in again. These fairies were smart—you had to give them that. Smart and talented. He decided craftily that he would stay alert next time and see how they did it.

And he was sure he had. He was quite triumphant about it. "I caught you," he said, and laughed, and pointed his finger at them. "You carried me on a stretcher."

"Of course," said the blond-haired one, bending over him. "Mr. Wales. Mr. Wales?"

He had changed his clothing. He was dressed all in white now, and his voice had changed. Tony was admiring.

"You do make a hell of a woman," he said. "You could almost fool me."

"Thank *you,* Mr. Wales!" said the blond one, and began to take his pulse.

Tony whimpered. "Tell me," he said, "when it's time to wake up."

The time came, and then there were the visitors.

First it was the police, two quiet, courteous young men, who were very regretful about what had happened and almost apologetic about questioning him. They noted down carefully and in detail his description of the two men. By now Tony understood that he had been robbed as well as beaten; money, wristwatch, cuff links. He could describe the watch and cuff links. As for the money, he had had something like forty pounds in his pocket when he had begun the evening, but he had no idea how much he had spent along the way. They told him they could form an estimate from Miss Thompson's statement, and they added that it was a pity he had not taken her advice and left that place. It was a known trouble spot, and of course, the management had neither seen nor heard any of it. They would, of course, continue the

investigation and would inform him directly they had any information.

They left, and Tony was perfectly well aware that underneath the quiet courtesy they were both thinking the same thing: The bloody fool had got just what he deserved. Next time he might stay sober enough to know what he was doing.

Bronson came later, bringing fruit and magazines and Robin Thompson.

They both looked as uncomfortable as Tony felt. "Shocking business," said Bronson. "Disgraceful. We don't like to think that these things can happen in London. Pride ourselves, and all that. But we do have our plague spots, I'm afraid."

Tony looked at Robin and said, "Damn right you do. How did we get into that hole anyhow?"

She bristled but seemed to be forcing herself to patience, out of respect for the hideous condition of his face. "Don't you remember at all?"

"I don't remember anything after we left the place that had the lights."

Bronson said, "I gather you were . . . ah . . . a trifle under the weather."

"I must," said Tony brutally, "have been slopped right over my eyeballs."

"You were," said Robin. "And I'm sorry, Mr. Wales, but I must say you were behaving very badly. You would go wandering about the worst streets in Soho, and I kept trying to tell you—"

"Okay, okay," said Tony. "So how did we get there?"

"You insisted on going in for a drink. I knew it wasn't a good place, and I asked you to come away, and you were quite insulting—"

"So you left."

"Yes, I did. Of course, if I had known what was going to happen to you, I would have tried harder. But really, you were impossible."

"I think," said Bronson, "you can hardly blame Miss Thompson."

"No," said Tony. "Hardly."

Bronson sighed. "And I thought that a night on the town would do you good. Makes one afraid, doesn't it? I mean, how is one to know what may come of the simplest suggestion."

"Oh, hell," said Tony. "I got drunk, and I took a beating. Nobody's fault but my own."

"I'm sorry about it anyway," said Robin.

"That'll teach you," he told her, "not to go out with visiting Americans."

She left, and Bronson said, "By the way, I cabled Karim about this. It seemed that someone ought to."

"Thanks."

"Get a good rest," said Bronson. "I'll pop in again in a day or two."

He went out, and Tony lay in the austere white room all alone with his shame and his hurt. He closed his eyes, and immediately the nightmare came back. It was a part of the city, the great, gray, powerful city that enveloped him, ancient, proud, full of history he did not know, and ringing with names that meant nothing to him; a wise old city that made him feel like an ignorant child. He tried to be defiant with it. What did he care whose heads had rolled on Tower Green or what moldy old king had done what a thousand years ago? They all were dead and gone now, and what did they matter? *Hell,* he thought, *I don't even know my own history. But that wasn't any reason to hurt me so. I didn't mean any harm.*

He was acutely conscious of the city. Vast and ponderous, weighing on him, closing him in, and at the same time ignoring him. It was busy with its own affairs. Busy with spring, adorning its window ledges with flowers to burn bright against the gray stone. On fine afternoons the parks were crowded with people sitting in sixpenny chairs and drinking up the sun. A beautiful city. Only deep down in its heart were the dark places where the evil children walked among the mean bars and the flaring blaring lights of the strip

joints and the little bookstalls that sold nothing but pornography, and that was where the nightmare was and where it continued. There the evil children tortured Tony Wales. They were lithe and blithe and vicious, and they did not care at all that he was a coward and hated pain.

In the midst of the nightmare and the torture he kept saying something over and over, but he could not hear what it was.

When he woke up again sometime later, Ellen was waiting to see him.

He had hoped she wouldn't come. He had hoped she had gone to Isfahan and forgotten about him. But there she was, tall and handsome, with her hair falling over her shoulders and her eyes as blue as the sea and so damned direct.

"I'm sorry, Tony," she said. "Is it very bad?"

"You bet it is. And what have you got to be sorry about? You didn't get me drunk."

"No need to be waspish, Tony. And you do look a fright. But the doctor says you'll be fit to travel in three weeks or so. Tony—"

"What?"

"If you'll come with me, I'll wait for you."

"Come with you?" He stared at her, out of his misery, out of his shattering trauma. Now all at once he knew what he had been saying in his dream. "No. I want to go home! *I want to go home!*"

"Poor Tony," she said. "You've never been really hurt before, and you're terrified. I am sorry." Somehow he felt that she was truly sorry for him, though not because of the beating. "Very well, then. Good-bye."

And he knew she meant it.

He was alone again. He curled himself into the pillows and thought of home, of gaudy plaster buildings cheerful in the sunshine, of bright beaches and tanned bodies, of Hollywood and the Sunset Strip and The Third Illusion. That was his city. He belonged to it. He would be safe there. He had always been safe there.

The vision comforted him. When the nightmare came again, it had lost something of its power.

Waking, he remembered that he had been thinking before the catastrophe that perhaps he ought to go with Ellen to Iran, not for her sake but for Karim's. Well, the decision had been made for him. He couldn't go now. Karim would understand; he wouldn't expect him to come. And after all, there probably wasn't any real need. Karim could certainly handle any trouble Ellen might make.

By the time he left England three weeks later he had had two cables from Karim, one urging him to take care of himself, the second concerning Ellen.

SAW OUR PARTNER IN TEHERAN STOP ABLE TO CONVINCE HER ALL WELL STOP ON WAY TO SICILY INSTEAD OF ISFAHAN STOP BEST KARIM

That was good news at any rate.

He climbed aboard the big jet at Heathrow, fairly well healed in his body but still deeply wounded in his soul. The police had not yet found his watch or his cuff links or any trace of the two men.

When he landed at Los Angeles International Airport, Jake Zacharian was there to pick him up.

# 7

The sun and the sea welcomed Tony. They embraced him and soothed his hurts, and in the nighttime the surf talked gently to him. Normalcy became almost total again, with Sandra to dance with and share his bed, with the other familiar faces to fill in the familiar rounds. Unexpectedly, Za-

charian turned out to be a tremendous help, providing him with a patient and sympathetic audience for the necessary oral catharsis until Tony himself got bored with talking about it.

He danced with Sandra all one Friday night, then took her to his apartment, where they danced some more between the sheets, and when they were through, they drank vodka and fell asleep, and Tony felt really good, really with it, ten feet high and happy.

The telephone dragged him relentlessly out of the depths of his peaceful slumber to blink at the noonday sun and curse. The thing wouldn't stop ringing, so he picked it up.

"Tony?"

It was Zacharian's voice, and Tony groaned. Sandra was stirring poutily in the bed. "What are you trying to do, Jake, ruin my sex life?"

"Tony," said the voice, hard and crackling with urgency, "would you recognize the two men who beat you up in London?"

"What?" said Tony. *"What?"*

"I said, would you—"

"Yes. Anywhere, any time. But—"

"I'll send my van down. Don't bother shaving; just get your pants on. George will pick you up in the alley."

He hung up. Tony stood with his mouth open and the questions freezing in it, with the sick terror twisting at his guts as strongly as though he still lay in that gray corridor with the sharp boots savaging him.

Zacharian must have seen them.

But then Zacharian couldn't *know*. He had only heard about them from Tony, and God knew there were enough homegrown fairies around, with long hair and tight pants.

"What's the matter?" asked Sandra, sounding very cross.

"Ah, Zacharian's jumped out of his tree," said Tony.

"Zacharian again? Why does that man hate us?"

"Go back to sleep." He started pulling his clothes on.

"You going out?"

"Have to."

"Well, that's just fine! What am I supposed to do?"

"Go back to sleep," he repeated, snarling slightly, and went out.

The van came in a few moments, a neat brown panel truck with the name ZACHARIAN on it in arrogantly plain gold letters. Tony wondered why the alley instead of the street. He found out when George waved him away from the cab and got out. He opened the back door.

"The boss said you're to ride in here, out of sight."

He was brisk and matter-of-fact about it. Tony shrugged and got in, hunkering down beside a burlap-covered bale of carpets that smelled of dust and spices. It seemed like a very good idea to him, just in case.

He sat and gnawed his knuckles, riding blind, and was glad when the van finally did some quick backing and turning and then stopped. He heard George get out of the cab, but it was a minute or two before the door was opened for him. Then Zacharian was standing there, looking not at him but up and down on both sides. They were in the service bay in the alley behind Zacharian's shop.

"All right," he said. "Inside."

His tone said hurry, and Tony hurried. The driver had already gone in. Zacharian pushed Tony at him. "Get him into the office." He shut the back door and locked it and shot the heavy bolt.

George led Tony toward the office.

Tony balked and turned to Zacharian. "What is this, anyway? What makes you think—"

"Just playing a hunch, Tony." There was something unfamiliar about Zacharian. "If I'm wrong, you'll have a dull hour, and that's all."

"Listen, damn it, you've got to tell me—"

Zacharian said very softly, "Tony, will you please go into my office?" Light from the barred back window fell across him, and Tony saw what was different about him. The glossy Beverly Hills rug merchant was still there on the surface, three-hundred-dollar mohair suit and all, but his eyes were a

tiger's eyes, yellow and smoky, and he moved like a tiger on the tips of his paws, and he was smiling a very odd smile.

Tony went obediently into the office, unaware that his mouth was hanging open. George went with him, and Zacharian followed. The shop was closed, empty and quiet. It was Saturday afternoon.

Zacharian looked at his watch. "In fifteen minutes two men are coming here. I want you to watch. If you recognize them, George will let me know. But you must be very, very sure. Do you understand?"

"I understand what you're saying, all right, but—"

"Stick to that, and don't worry about anything else." Zacharian went over to a mirror on the wall and did something, and suddenly the mirror was a window overlooking the shop. "Watch from here, and do as George tells you, no matter what happens. Oh—and keep your mouth shut."

He turned to go, and Tony caught his arm. "Wait a minute, Jake. What the hell!" He looked at George, in his driver's suntans. "What kind of—"

Zacharian shook his hand away. "Sweat it through, boy. If there's anything to explain, I'll do it later." He nodded to George, switched off the lights, and went out, closing the door.

Tony said plaintively to George, a dim khaki shape in the gloom, "What's going on here?"

George put a hand on his shoulder and pointed him at the mirror. "Watch," he said.

There wasn't much to see. Zacharian was engaged in moving a rug, which he took from a shelf and unfolded and then draped over a rod close to the other side of the two-way mirror. Tony could see his face very clearly, even the darker shading of the beard line. The carpet glowed under the lights like a fabric of crushed rubies. At the front of the shop the windows showed the street, the traffic choking and halting along Beverly Drive, the Saturday crowd walking up and down.

Zacharian finished with the carpet and sat down at a table against the wall. It had a lamp on it, and a telephone, and

some order books. He began to make notes on a pad, from time to time consulting one of the books.

Tony shifted nervously from one foot to the other. "This is silly. Why—"

George's hand found his shoulder again and tightened on it. "Look!"

Two men had appeared beyond a front window. And Tony's heart jolted to a stop.

Then it rattled on again, leaving him weak in the knees and grateful. For a moment he had thought— He watched the men come to the door and peer through the glass, try the latch, knock. It was like watching a silent film. Zacharian heard the knock and rose, and Tony felt George doing something beside him, taking something out of his pocket. He could just see what it was, and he said, "For Christ's sake—"

George's hand clamped down, and he whispered savagely, "Shut up. If you recognize them, don't speak. Just step back away from the mirror. *Quietly*."

The gun in his hand gleamed very faintly. Sweat had broken out on Tony, hot pin flecks that chilled swiftly on his skin.

Zacharian opened the door, and the men came in smiling and shook his hand. They both were brown-haired, and the haircuts were not extreme. One wore a conservative sport jacket and slacks, cut slim but not tight. The other wore a tan corduroy suit and a yellow waistcoat. There was a moment or two of conventional conversation, during which Zacharian reclosed the front door and locked it. Then he gestured to the rug, and they all moved toward it. And again Tony's heart jolted him.

He was gripped by a terrible indecision. There was something about the way they moved, the long, slender legs, the ballet dancer's precision. "I don't know," he whispered. "I can't see their faces well enough."

George shook him to silence, and he leaned forward, squinting. He could hear their voices now, but only as a

murmur with no words. Zacharian spread out the folds of the carpet, and they came up and took it in their hands, well-manicured hands that gloated over the lovely ruby softness. Now Tony could see their faces clearly, very clearly, and one of them looked up squarely into the mirror as though he were looking straight into Tony's eyes.

Tony recoiled convulsively, his breath whimpering in his throat. George caught him before he collided with the desk. Then he reached down and pressed a button somewhere under the edge. Outside in the shop the phone began to ring.

Zacharian excused himself and went to answer it. George again put his free hand on Tony, holding him steady. Tony stared fascinated at the two men, his eyes round and bulging—a rabbit staring at a brace of weasels. They continued to examine the carpet and talk, but there was a subtle change now in their bearing. He was not clever enough to identify it. They did not again look directly at the mirror. The one with the large nose and the prominent lips smiled brightly and said something that looked like, "We simply must have it!" and the pretty one nodded. Zacharian talked into the dead phone, facing them, watching with his tiger eyes half closed.

He finished the one-sided conversation and put the phone down. The two men turned and moved back toward him. Tony could feel the nervous quiver of George's hand on his shoulder, the small movement as he shifted his weight. Tony's heart pounded, swelling the veins in his neck, blurring his vision.

And nothing happened.

The large-nosed one wrote out a check. Zacharian took it and gave a receipt. They shook hands all around, and he let them out and locked the door after them, and they walked away into the innocent Saturday crowd and were gone.

Tony collapsed into a chair. George remained where he was, watching as Zacharian went around methodically turning off lights and engaging the alarm systems. In a few min-

utes he came into the office. He turned the lights on and stood in front of Tony.

"Are you absolutely sure?"

"Jesus," said Tony, trembling. "Do you think I could ever be mistaken about them?"

Zacharian let out a long, harsh breath. *"Inshallah!"* he said. He looked at George, excited, and George put his gun away.

"No hit," he said.

"Just a check for thirty-five hundred. What do you think? Were they on the level?"

George grunted. "I think they picked up a slight smell of trap. One of them took a hard look at the mirror, and after that they seemed to shift gears. Hey, what are you doing?"

Tony had jumped up and grabbed the telephone. George pulled him away. Tony said, "I'm going to call the police. They—"

"No," said Zacharian. "Not the police." Thoughtfully, he put the check away in a desk drawer. "Too bad. We won't have them in such a neat box again. *If*. I dislike not knowing."

"Not knowing what?" demanded Tony. "And why not the police?"

"In reverse order, because they couldn't do any good, and not knowing whether somebody's out to kill me."

"Kill you?" said Tony. His face was blank with astonishment. "Why would they want to kill you?"

Zacharian grinned. "I am in a dirty profession, son. I sell rugs only as a cover for my degradation. I am a secret agent or, if you want to get nasty about it, a spy. And spies get killed now and again, particularly if they've been a little bit good at their job. It makes the other side very annoyed. Shut your mouth, Tony; you look like a fish."

He picked up the phone and dialed a number. "Mr. Corbett? Zacharian here. That red Baluchi did come in. I can deliver it now if you wish." He listened briefly. "Right away. Good." He hung up and turned to Tony. "All right," he said. "Come on."

"Oh, no," said Tony. "Not on your life. I don't want to get—"

They stood on each side of him, firmly, and Zacharian said, "It's too late for that, Tony. You already are. Involved."

# 8

Tony had no idea where he was. They had brought him in the back of the van, riding blind again. When they let him out, he was in an underground garage that might have been anywhere. The self-service elevator that took them up was just an elevator, and the corridor on the seventh floor along which they walked was only a corridor with some doors, all closed and unmarked. There were sounds behind them as of people being busy, typewriters going, phones ringing, voices, the clatter of some kind of a card-sorting machine, all faint and faraway as though the soundproofing were pretty good. They stopped and knocked at one of the doors.

The legend on the panel was a simple one. PRIVATE. It didn't say what firm it was private for. A lock buzzer sounded, and they went in, to a small office with a lot of filing cabinets and no window. There was a door at each side, and one of them was open, and a man was standing in it. He said, "Come in," and they followed him into another office, larger, impersonal, furnished with a desk, a couch, some chairs. There was a window here, but the venetian blinds were closed and the curtains drawn. Tony knew that he was somewhere in the Los Angeles-Hollywood-Beverly Hills area, and that was all he knew. He was not in a good mood.

"Look," he said, "I'd like to know what's going on, if somebody wouldn't mind telling me. My old buddy here wakes me out of a sound sleep, and all of a sudden I'm in the third act of *I Spy*. Who the—"

Zacharian said, "Mr. Wales, Mr. Corbett."

Corbett nodded. "Sit down, Mr. Wales." He was middle-

aged, with a stiff gray crew cut and hard gray eyes. His shoulders filled his coat to the straining point, and the sinews of his neck stood out over his collar. He looked like an ex-captain of Marines, and he looked tired, as if he should have quit whatever he was doing a long time ago. Only he was not the type to quit on anything. Tony hated him on sight. The hard eyes had begun digging into him, sorting him out, the moment he walked in the door, and it made all his guard hairs bristle. People only looked at you that way when they meant to make trouble. He did not sit down.

"Who are you, anyway? FBI? CIA?"

"CIA," said Corbett, "but we don't advertise it. We're shy. We like a quiet little hole where Fulbright can't find us." He showed Tony a card. "Satisfied?"

George had closed the door and was leaning against it. Tony looked at him and then at Zacharian, who stretched himself out in a chair, as relaxed as a cat that is resting for the next spring.

"You too?"

Zacharian nodded.

"I'll be damned," said Tony, and sat down.

Corbett said, "We don't like to do things this way, Mr. Wales. Unfortunately, we don't always have a choice." He turned to Zacharian. "He did identify those two as the same men who attacked him in Soho?"

Zacharian said, "Yes."

And Tony said bitterly, "I thought I was talking to a friend."

"Believe it or not, you were. I wanted the information, you wanted a shoulder to cry on, so it worked out for both of us. But I'd have given you the shoulder anyway."

For some odd reason Tony believed him. It helped, a little.

Corbett spoke again. "Mr. Wales, this is vitally important. At the time you were beaten up you were not at your clearest mentally. Now you say you recognize the men in Zacharian's shop as the same men, although the descriptions don't match at all. Are you positive you couldn't be mistaken?"

"Listen," said Tony heatedly, "when somebody kicks your balls off, you remember him, no matter what color his hair is."

Corbett did not quite smile. "I'll accept that as a fair statement," he said, and leaned back. "All right, Jake."

Zacharian shifted around to face Tony. "Those two came into my shop last Saturday morning. They introduced themselves as Byron and Cornellis, interior decorators, St. George Street, Hanover Square, here from London on a buying trip, staying at the Beverly Hills Hotel. I checked this all out when I verified their bank references, and they couldn't be more legitimate. They were after one-of-a-kind items, antiques. I had a particularly nice blue Bokhara, and they bought that on the spot. Then they looked at the Shiraz, the one you saw today. The Bokhara was for a client, a job they were doing, but the Shiraz they wanted for themselves. They weren't sure the budget would run to it since they still had a lot of buying to do, so they asked me if I'd hold it for them until the next Saturday, today, and they'd let me know. Of course, I said I would. They were nice, affable chaps, a little light on their feet, but you expect that. I didn't connect them with your Soho friends. The descriptions didn't match, and the accents were strictly Mayfair.

"I saw them around once or twice during the week. They were doing the shops all right. But I began to get a funny feeling, as though there were something I ought to know about them. Nothing would surface, and that bothered me. I don't like things I can't place; they're dangerous. At half-past eleven this morning Byron rang me up. He's the girlish one; Cornellis is the one with the nose. Byron said they wanted the rug; but they couldn't possibly get there before one o'clock, and they knew I close at noon. Would I do them a great favor and wait, because they were flying back to London tomorrow and wouldn't have another chance? For thirty-five hundred dollars I will do anybody a favor, and said so, and Byron giggled. And all of a sudden it clicked. Forget the obvious things—the hairdos and the clothing. Remember the features, the giggle, the way they moved.

You have an accurate eye, Tony, when you bother to use it. I was pretty sure. And if they were setting me up for the kill, they had done a beautiful job of it. I called Corbett, and we decided it was imperative to have definite identification. That's when I sent for you."

Byron and Cornellis. Tony shivered. Nightmares ought not to have names; it makes them too real. "You wouldn't let me call the cops. I don't understand. You know them. Why don't you have them arrested?"

"For beating you? These lads are the darlings of the jet set. They've done some of the most divine flats in the West End. Who's going to believe they were the Cockney mods who beat you up in a Soho dive? These are professionals. You don't bag them that easily."

"Do they just get away with it then?"

"For a while," said Corbett. "Not forever. I'm sure your bruises were painful, but they are among the least of the sins these two have committed, if my guess is right."

In desperation Tony said, "But who *are* they?"

"We can't be certain yet, so let's just say we know they're dangerous. At least to you." He looked thoughtfully at Zacharian, who shrugged.

"They didn't try for a hit. George thinks they sensed something wrong. I had to maneuver them right up to the two-way so Tony could get a good look at them, and they may have caught that. On the other hand, they are interior decorators, and I do sell carpets. It might be sheer coincidence."

"Let's not trust it," said Corbett. He spoke into an intercom, giving instructions on Byron and Cornellis. "Twenty-four-hour surveillance, check the airport to see what, if any, London flight they're on tomorrow, and made damned sure whether they actually make it. And call Gardiner in. Tell him he's to cover Zacharian until further notice. Yes, I know, but that's not paying off anyway." He glanced at Zacharian. "At his apartment. Okay." He closed the switch and sat back. "Just in case they pass the ball to another team for a sneak play. Mr. Wales, I hope you understand the danger of discussing any of this with anyone, including your bed-

mates. Word does get around, and if the wrong people found out that you fingered Byron and Cornellis for us, you could be in very bad trouble."

The sweat broke out on Tony's skin again, hot and prickling. "God damn you, Jake," he said. "I'll never answer the phone again."

Zacharian said evenly, "You're a fool, Tony. A stupid ostrich with your head under the pillow and your ass in the air. Which is a very good place to get it broken."

He stood up, and Tony stared at him, as shocked as though Zacharian had struck him. The hard, even voice went on.

"I can understand your going through the world with blinders on, drinking and fornicating and stuffing your face, having nothing else but fun. Probably we all would if we could. What I cannot understand is how you can live with the possibility that you may have got your best friend murdered just because you couldn't be bothered to know what you were doing."

Tony's face got red. "We're back to that, are we?" He got up and shouted at Zacharian. "Karim did not kill Harvey Martin! I told you that. Ellen Lofting went all the way to Iran about it, remember? And she found out she was wrong."

"Did she?" said Zacharian. "I wonder. She's disappeared, Tony. Right off the face of the earth."

# 9

Tony sat down again. "Oh, Christ," he said. "Isn't there any end to this?"

"We hope so," Corbett said. "We hope you may have done what we haven't been able to do—put a crack in the façade."

"What façade? What are you talking about?" And oh, Jesus, is she dead, too? With those long legs and that brown

hair and the way she could look at you . . . What had happened to the world?

Corbett said, "You forced a third partner into the firm of Hassani-Wales. Just spare the protests for a moment while I give you some background."

His attitude brooked no argument, and Tony said dismally, "All right, look, I'm quiet."

"Good. And pay attention, because this is important to you. For some time now, items from America, Britain, and the Continent have been turning up where they have no business to be. Items like grenades and plastic explosives, communications devices, the latest in portable weaponry and small arms, turning up in the hands of terrorist groups operating against the governments of Middle Eastern nations friendly to, and sometimes allied with, the country of origin. It got beyond the point of possible theft or sale on the black market, and it began to appear that these elite groups were being funded and supplied from the West. In other words, we were cutting our own throats and the throats of our friends and allies and paying for the privilege." Corbett shook his head. "I wish I knew what genius in Moscow thought that one up. I'd like to have him on my side.

"We came into it, of course, working with our opposite numbers in Britain, Europe, and the Middle East. This was when regular security measures had failed. Our objectives were to locate the fountainheads and find out how the contraband was moving. All the obvious targets had already been shaken out, and most of the secondary list, the suspect but not proved. We went on to the impossible and ridiculous—and still came up with nothing. We began to realize that there was a whole new concept here, a whole new organization, carefully separated from any Iron Curtain contacts and from the local activist and phony-front groups. A hidden network made up of perfectly ordinary, respectable merchants who could move the supplies anywhere over half the world with only a minimal risk. Not a large network. It wouldn't have to be, shouldn't be, large. There wouldn't need to be more than one or two centers in each Western

country and one or two outlets in each Middle Eastern country. An elite organization, very painstakingly recruited and used to supply only the most important subversive operations."

Corbett's large hands were spread out on the desk. He folded them into fists, and they lay there like stranded ice-breakers.

"So there was no place to begin. You can't shake out all the businesses in the world. You can't inspect every piece of every shipment that moves. We had two things we could do. We could try to infiltrate the organization, a million to one shot, or we could sit patiently and wait. We did both. Zacharian was the ideal choice—a legitimate merchant, a top agent, and an expert on the Middle East."

"Oh?" said Tony.

"Rug merchants," said Zacharian, "get around. I had a head start. I was born in Julfa."

Tony frowned. "Julfa—"

"Oh, for God's sake, Tony! You've been there. The Armenian quarter across the river from Isfahan. I learned the business from my father, traveled with him, grew up speaking eight languages. It didn't help me this time. I've been through the Middle East four times, before and after the June war, traveling on an Iranian passport where the U.S. one won't take me anymore. I've prowled in palaces and scratched fleas in goat-hair tents, drunk gallons of Turkish coffee, and smoked myself blue on hubble-bubbles, and so far the only concrete thing I've come up with is you.

"The first ray of light was when you told me Karim Hassani had not wanted Martin as a partner. Only a possibility, there could have been a dozen reasons. Then there was all that business in London, and the possibility looked much brighter. Now with Ellen Lofting gone off the map and Byron and Cornellis come onto it, the possibility looks so good that it scares me."

"You goddamned Judas," said Tony. "Getting me to talk and using everything I said against my friend. Well, you're wrong. Karim's no Commie. I know him. His family used to

own a bunch of villages down in Fars. They were rich. I've met the old man, and he wouldn't even spit on me, let alone a Commie. And anyway, Karim did not kill Harvey Martin." He was pounding his fists on his knees. "Ellen found that out. I don't know what's happened to her since, but she said she'd been wrong."

"Correction, Tony. Karim said. In a cable. You never heard a word from Ellen." He turned to Corbett. "Let's have the photograph."

Corbett opened a folder on the desk and took out a photograph. He watched Tony's face while Zacharian put the four-by-five black-and-white glossy into Tony's hands.

"Recognize them?"

The shot had been taken in poor light, with very fast film and a telephoto lens. It showed Karim walking across the main concourse of the Teheran airport. There was a girl with him, a tall, long-legged girl with dark hair.

"It's Karim," said Tony, "and . . . Ellen."

"You're quite sure it's Ellen."

Tony said irritably, "Who else would it be?"

"That's an interesting question. But are you sure?"

"It looks like her."

"I know it looks like her. But is it?"

"It's a lousy photograph."

Corbett said, "We went to a lot of trouble to get it. That's the girl Karim put on the plane for Rome. Her passport said she was Ellen Lofting."

"Then why ask me?"

"Because you know her."

Tony scowled at the photograph. It was grainy, the fine detail obscured. He tried to call into his mind the exact replica of Ellen's face and compare it with the flat blob in the photograph. He couldn't tell, really; but his reason said that it had to be Ellen, and he was going to say yes. Then he remembered, far more vividly than her face, the beautiful shape of her legs going up the stairs in front of him.

The girl in the picture had long legs. But—

Corbett said, "What strikes you as wrong?"

"I didn't say anything did."

"Look, Mr. Wales, I've interrogated experts. And what are you afraid of? You can't incriminate Karim if he isn't guilty. If he is, remember that Harvey Martin was also your friend. Now, what bothers you about the photograph?"

"Her legs. They're too thin, and the ankles aren't right. And Ellen's got a way when she walks, a swing— But it *has* to be Ellen. How could it be anybody else?"

"It's not difficult at all, Mr. Wales, given the kind of well-equipped operation our friends run. Just bring in a ringer. This girl arrived in Rome. She went through immigration and customs, confirmed her onward reservation to Sicily, which was for the next day, and took a taxi into Rome. She was trailed to a hotel, where she signed the register and went to her room. Nobody ever saw her again. That's a pretty difficult trick to do, unless you can do it simply by going back to being who you really are. Could you be a little more certain?"

"No. Why don't you ask her parents, her friends? I didn't know her that well."

"Her parents aren't sure. They're emotionally upset and not reliable. The others are divided—yes, no, and undecided."

"It's a lousy photograph," Tony said again. "People do disappear; they do it all the time. Maybe she wanted to run away. Or maybe—maybe something happened to her. Anyway, why would Karim want to pretend some other girl was really Ellen? I don't see—'

But he did see. And Corbett lined it out for him.

"He could hardly afford to lose another partner so soon, even by accident. If he had to shut Ellen up, to stop her making trouble for him, he could have picked this way to clear his skirts. As far as the authorities are concerned, Ellen Lofting left Iran whole and happy. If she went missing in Rome, that's her own affair. No reason to look around Teheran."

Tony rose and threw the photograph down on the desk. "You don't really know anything. If you did, Karim would be behind so many bars you couldn't see him. You're just talking, trying to make up a case any way you can, against anybody."

"Of course we are," said Corbett. "Do you know any other way to do it?"

"Well, you're not going to use me anymore."

He started for the door. George was still leaning against it. He did not move, and Zacharian said, "Cool it, Tony. Just a little longer. There's still Byron and Cornellis."

Tony stopped, breathing hard, looking from one to the other, hating them, feeling trapped and sold and foolish—and afraid.

"I suppose," he said, "you're going to tell me Karim put those two on to me in London."

"Give it some thought," said Corbett.

"He wasn't even there."

"Bronson was, and Karim had talked to him that morning. Bronson called you, got you over there. He fixed you up with Miss Thompson—"

"That was my idea."

"One you could hardly avoid, wasn't it? Do you normally get that drunk, Mr. Wales? On—what was it?" He referred to the folder. "Four drinks?"

"I said four was all I remembered. No, I don't. I've got a cast-iron gut, especially when I'm taking uppers. But—"

"How did you feel when you came to?"

"I was paralyzed. But—"

"And then Byron and Cornellis beat you right into a hospital bed."

"Yes, but what's that got to do with Karim?" Tony was shouting again.

"Suppose he did kill Harvey Martin. Suppose Bronson is part of the organization, working with him. It would be vital for them to know whether any suspicion attached to Martin's death, on your part or Ellen's. They couldn't have known,

for instance, what Martin might have said in his letters that could add up to trouble. So Bronson sent you out on a date. You were drugged. Miss Thompson got all the essential information out of you, relayed it to Bronson, and then on his instructions turned you over to the butchers. So you didn't go to Iran at all, and Ellen went alone. And they were ready for her." He watched Tony steadily. "It does all fit together, doesn't it?"

Tony moved, turning this way and that. "I don't believe it. Anyway, they robbed me."

"They wanted to make it look right. We know they didn't need the money."

"Maybe they did it just for fun. Maybe they get their jollies that way."

"Possible. Quite possible. But it's a little bit of a coincidence, isn't it, that you just happened to walk in off the street at exactly the right time and place to be the victim?"

Tony turned his back on them, avoiding the hard stare of Corbett's eyes, the sight of Zacharian's face.

"You're trying to get me all mixed up. Trying to make me think—"

"I don't give a damn what you think," said Corbett. "We're trying to build a workable premise, that's all. At the moment Karim Hassani is the brightest prospect. If he doesn't shape up, we have to look for another."

"Well, go ahead," said Tony. "See where it gets you.

"We hoped, Mr. Wales, that you might be willing to help us."

Tony swung around. "You mean . . . work with you?"

"Yes."

He looked from one to the other. He began to laugh. "You fellows must be desperate."

He stopped laughing because it really wasn't funny at all.

And Corbett said, "We are."

# 10

Work with them. That was it. That was the reason they had brought him here and told him all this stuff. They were trying to surround him, close him in.

"No," he said. "Oh, no! Zacharian told you what a blabbermouth I am, and you've both been telling me what a damn fool I am, so you know what kind of secret agent I'd make. And besides that, go take a long running jump. I'm not going to start spying on my friends. I'll leave that to Jake."

He turned toward the door again, passionate to leave the place. George shifted his weight forward onto the balls of his feet and let his hands swing free. He smiled at Tony and shook his head.

Zacharian caught Tony's elbow. "Will you stop going off half-cocked? Calm down and listen."

Tony shook his hand away. "Why should I?"

Zacharian fixed him with that tigerish gaze he found so disconcerting. "Because," he said quietly, "you're not going to get out of here until you do, and don't start squawking about your civil rights, or I'll ram them right down your throat."

On a note of incredulity Tony said, "You really mean that."

Zacharian nodded.

Tony humped his shoulders and set his jaw. "All right, I'll listen. But you're wasting your time." He went back and sat down.

Corbett said, "We're not asking you to become a secret agent, God forbid, and we're not asking you to spy on your friend. Not in the sense you mean." He took a sheet of yellow flimsy from the folder. "This came through yesterday. We've been discussing the wisest way to handle it—or, I should say,

you. Then the Byron and Cornellis business broke, and we had to throw the whole thing open."

He passed the flimsy to Tony, who glanced at it and turned cold.

"Hanookh Maktabi, Iranian—"

"Security. They've been in close touch since the beginning. They realize that the evidence against Karim Hassani is, so far, a lot of guesswork. But they're even more desperate than we are, and they're acting on it."

Tony said to Zacharian, "You really did a job, didn't you?"

"I wish I knew."

"What are they going to do to him?"

"Nothing, directly. With so little to go on, it wouldn't be wise. They're going to do what Harvey Martin tried to do—check the company records. They're doing it under cover of the tax division, questioning Hassani's returns for the past three years and demanding a complete audit. That way they can shake him out in a perfectly routine manner, without letting him or anyone else know that it's a security matter."

"Well," said Tony, "okay. But what do they want with me?"

"They would like you to go over the records with them."

"What for? I'm no accountant."

"Oh, God in heaven," said Corbett. "Is he always this dense, Jake?"

"He's not dense at all. Just congenitally lazy. They're not worried about accountants, Tony. They have those. What they need is someone to pick up discrepancies, little things that don't quite jibe. The kind of thing Martin might have noticed. Otherwise they may come up with a perfect tax audit and nothing else. They're willing to believe that Karim is smart enough to keep his arithmetic straight."

Tony put the flimsy on the desk as though the physical possession of it were dangerous. "Jake," he said, pleading, "you know I don't work. I don't know beans about the business."

"You've run a lot of errands for Karim. Mostly busywork, I imagine, though he may have used you for a courier now and then. So you do know something about who he deals with on this side of the world. It may not be much, but it might be enough. They'll pay your expenses."

"You wouldn't appear openly," said Corbett. "Hassani wouldn't know you were there. There'd be no danger of your going the way of Martin and Ellen Lofting—though, of course, you wouldn't worry about that. I can't see any real reason for you to refuse, except that it would take a few days of your time." He indicated the flimsy. "As you see, Mr. Maktabi considers that since you are a partner, you're a little bit responsible."

"I don't know," said Tony. "I don't like it. It's—it's dirty pool somehow."

"How? You are a partner. They're your records, too. Haven't you got a right to see them? Or are you afraid of what you might find out?" Corbett was leaning over the desk now, fairly harpooning him. "Apparently your single virtue is a strong sense of loyalty to your friends, and I'm certainly not suggesting that you throw it away. I'm only reminding you that you once had two friends."

Tony remembered how Ellen had looked at him in the room at the nursing home when she said good-bye. A number of times in his life people had looked at him like that, but he had always managed to squirm away. He thought of the live fish in the wells of the mackerel boats at Santa Monica, how they jumped and dashed and threw themselves against the sides.

"Oh, Christ," he said. "I don't know."

He got up, and Zacharian blocked his way. "Don't you think you owe it to Harvey Martin? Don't you think you ought to find out where that thirty thousand a year comes from, before you get a nasty surprise? And if Karim is innocent, don't you owe it to him to help clear him?"

Tony stood still. "What happened to the day?" he said. "I was all happy and sleeping like a baby, and then the phone rang, and it's all too much; I can't take it all in. You're too

sudden; you push too hard. I've got to think. I've got to get out of here and think."

There was a brief silence, and then Corbett said, "All right." He spoke into the intercom again. "Agnelli, will you come in, please?" He closed the key. "When you want to get in touch with me, Mr. Wales, Agnelli will do it. How long do you think it will take you to make up your mind?"

"I don't know," said Tony, thinking blindly of escape.

"Then I'll give you a limit. Twenty-four hours."

There was a knock on the door. George opened it, and a young man came in, a junior-executive type in a neat dark suit. He nodded to George and Zacharian, glanced at Tony, and stood waiting.

Corbett said, "Agnelli, this is Mr. Wales." He gave him Tony's address. "I want him taken home, and I want him watched over like your sister's virtue. I'll arrange your relief."

Agnelli said, "I hope there is some. Otherwise it'll be a long night. Are you ready, Mr. Wales?"

Tony was not listening. "Jake," he said. "I know Karim is not a Commie."

"No. That's just the point. He's pure as the driven snow, and he's got you fronting for him."

"But," said Tony, "if he isn't a Commie, why would he work with them?"

"Sometimes it's money. Sometimes it's fear, if they have a pressure point. Generally it's hate, and I'll gamble on that one. Old Hassani was a rich man and proud. The shah's land reforms took away his serfs and his villages and made him poor. He wouldn't be the first man in Iran to hate the government for that, and hate makes more men brothers than love or religion."

"But he's with the mullahs and the fat-cat landowners. Why would the Commies help him? And how could *he* work with them?"

"Our little Red brothers are in the business of selling trouble, and they don't care who buys it. What they like best is a man with a cause. Doesn't matter what the cause is—free

contraceptives for kindergartens, peace, racism, nationalism, universal love and brotherhood—anything at all that leads to somebody kicking another hole in the existing fabric. They probably contribute to the KKK and the neo-Nazis, if you could dig deep enough. And a man with a cause doesn't much care who contributes to it. The end always justifies everything along the way."

"But—"

"Whoever is mixed up in this, Hassani or somebody else, it has to be some kind of plot against the government, doesn't it?"

"Well, yes, but—"

"Have you paid any attention at all to what's been happening in the Middle East?"

Tony looked uneasy.

"Don't feel too ashamed," said Zacharian bitterly. "The boys in Washington haven't done much better. The Commies have been able to parlay Arab nationalism into a massive Russian presence in the Socialist countries of Egypt, Iraq, and Syria. The Mediterranean is becoming a Russian lake, and they're looking hard at the Persian Gulf, thinking big thoughts. They support Jordan against Israel, while at the same time they try to bring down Hussein and his moderate, pro-Western regime. They support the militant Arab minority in Lebanon against the pro-Western Christian majority. They're having a field day. But up north they've got two big problems, Turkey and Iran, Moslem but non-Arab, democratic, strongly pro-Western, uninvolved in the Arab-Israeli bitterness and therefore a powerful force for stability. They're a barrier and a balance wheel, and they're our allies. Anything that hurts either country hurts us, hurts the whole free world, could play hell all along the line eastward clear into India . . . and we're providing the guns. We can't have this, Tony. If we don't stop it— Oh hell, why am I giving you a lecture! You don't care what happens in the Middle East or the Middle West, either, as long as it doesn't bother you personally. But this does." He gave Tony a shove toward the door. "So go on home and get thinking."

"Oh, Mr. Wales," said Corbett, "I'd appreciate it if you'd spend a quiet evening indoors. Makes it much easier for us to keep an eye on you."

The full implication of Agnelli's assignment finally got through the clutter in Tony's head. "But," he said, "hey, wait a minute. You said you were going to watch Byron and . . . them, and they don't know I was— Who would—"

"I don't know that anybody would, Mr. Wales, but I'm not going to take any risks as long as there's a possibility that you'll cooperate with us."

"Meaning that if I don't—"

"What do you expect me to do, guard you for the rest of your life?"

"Oh, God," said Tony. "I'm going. And I may just not stop."

Behind his back Corbett nodded to Agnelli, meaning, "See he doesn't try it."

The four of them went out and down the unidentifiable corridor to the elevators. Tony moved glumly, staring at his own feet.

"Why would they give you their right names?"

"Byron and Cornellis? You mean if they really were out to get me?" Zacharian shrugged. "They'd have to be legitimate to set me up. They'd know I wouldn't buy a phony. And anyway, why not? Either I don't live to tell about it, or they haven't given a thing away. That's why there's been no attempt at bugging and why they didn't try to follow the van. I'm good, Tony, and they know I'm good. I'd spot a bug or a wiretap, and I'd spot a tail, and I'd know. I'd be on my guard. They played it the smart way, clean. They just didn't count on my making the tie-up with you."

"If they really were out to get you."

"Right. If they just came in to buy a rug—what the hell."

Tony shook his head. "What a business. I never realized people really did it. I thought it was just something you sneered at on TV or laughed at with James Bond."

Agnelli said bitterly, "That's the whole bloody trouble. Nobody believes in us."

The elevator took them down. George and Zacharian got back into the van and drove away. Agnelli put Tony into the back of another van, an unmarked one with nothing in it. Tony rode blind again for fifteen or twenty minutes. Then the van stopped, and Agnelli let him out. They were in a driveway behind a house, somewhere in Hollywood.

Tony said pleasantly, "Do you do this kind of crap all the time?"

"No," said Agnelli. "You're unusually privileged. They don't often bring people to the office."

There was a Chevy sedan in the drive, and Agnelli motioned Tony into it. He drove out onto a quiet street with old palm trees, got onto Santa Monica Boulevard, and began fighting his way toward the beach.

"We try to keep our operational headquarters a secret," he explained. "It's a pain having to move everything and find another cover. Sooner or later, of course, somebody or something slips, and we're off again."

Tony said, "Tough."

"Usually it is," said Agnelli. "They'd like to have our files. So far they've killed four of our men trying to get them." He smiled. "So you see, you're all right, Mr. Wales. If they ever ask you where we live, you won't have anything to tell them."

They did not talk after that. Tony sat sullen and ugly, scowling at nothing. Agnelli drove, breasting traffic, heat, smog, carbon monoxide, and municipal buses with stoical fortitude. They came eventually to the cooler, cleaner air and the blue glitter of the Pacific under the sun. Agnelli turned onto Ocean Avenue, beside Palisades Park.

He stopped for a traffic light, and Tony got out.

Agnelli shouted, "Hey!" and grabbed for the swinging door.

"I've got to walk," said Tony. "I've got to think."

He walked. Agnelli swore and slammed the door shut and followed him, but he paid no attention to that. What he really wanted to do was run, but there were too many people

about, sitting on benches in the sun or strolling or lying on the green grass. Eventually he came to the end of the park at the pier bridge. He turned onto it. Below him the beach was still crowded, though the exodus was beginning as the sun got lower and the breeze fresher. Children dabbled in the thin edges of the sea. Farther out surfers bobbed on the swells. Tony walked straight out to the end of the pier and stood there gripping the rail, letting the sunlight drench him, cramming his lungs with the salt air and the stink of fish.

Standing that way, he could almost make himself believe that the whole day since Zacharian's call had been a bad trip, something that had not really happened.

Except that it was a very bad trip. It would not go away.

Presently Agnelli came up behind him on foot and stood smoking a dozen feet away, leaning against the fence of the launching area. Tony did not see him. He was looking out beyond the breakwater and the rocking boats, at the wide free open nothing that went straight on over the edge of the world. He yearned to lose himself in it.

But he couldn't. There were things dragging at him, holding him back. Byron and Cornellis. Ellen Lofting. Harvey Martin, asleep in his narrow bed on Dartmoor. Zacharian. Corbett.

And Karim Hassani.

And himself, saying, "Look, Harvey's our friend and he gets in, or there won't be any more Hassani-Wales. I'll break it up."

Suddenly to his horror he was crying, right there in public for everyone to see. He couldn't help it. If Karim had done this to him—

Agnelli spoke close to him. "Mr. Wales, are you all right?"

After a minute he could see and talk again. "I should never have had any friends."

Agnelli said nothing.

"Go call Corbett," Tony said. "Tell him I'll go to Iran, just as fast as he can get me there."

Agnelli looked surprised.

"I have to know," Tony said.

"I've got a radiophone in the car," Agnelli said. "Have you had your cholera shots? Well, under the circumstances they'll probably waive them."

They walked back to the public parking lot where Agnelli had left the Chevy. Tony saw the people streaming by—wind-blown, sunburned, brown boys walking with their arms around brown girls in bikinis. They looked strange to him; they seemed to be on the other side of a glass wall. He sat watching the waves roll in on Muscle Beach while Agnelli made the call. He used to drink beer and play volleyball there with Harvey and Karim. He felt a hundred years old.

"You've brightened Corbett's whole day," Agnelli said when he finished. "Get yourself packed." He took the Chevy screeching out of the lot.

They parked in the tenants' garage underneath Tony's building and went up to the apartment—Agnelli alert and careful, Tony in a daze. He had almost forgotten about Sandra, but when he opened the door, she was sitting there on the sofa with a glass in one hand and a cigarette in the other, her eyes bright in her little hard face like shiny marbles. Fortunately she had her clothes on. She looked at Agnelli and smiled and shook her head.

"This just doesn't seem to be my day. More business, Tony?"

"Yeah." He made the introductions. Sandra finished the rest of her vodka.

"What about tonight?"

"I'm sorry," Tony said.

"Well." Sandra rose, still smiling, and picked up her handbag. "Good-bye."

"I'm sorry," Tony said again. "I have to take a trip, Sandra. I'll see you when I get back."

"Maybe." She went to the door. "Don't hurry. Enjoy yourself. Oh, by the way—did you get your call?"

"What do you mean? What call?"

"At Zacharian's. Some man was trying to get hold of you. I told him you'd gone there. Fine thing. I've been stood up be-

fore but never for an Armenian rug peddler. So long, Tony, and thanks for a lovely day."

She was halfway into the hall when Tony grabbed her and pulled her back.

# 11

Angry, just beginning to be alarmed, she stared at them. Agnelli shut the door.

Tony said, "Who called? When?"

She pulled against his grip. "What's the matter with you? Let go."

"Who was it? What man?"

"I don't know; he didn't leave his name." Her eyes narrowed, became wary. "You're in trouble, aren't you? You and Zacharian, up to something. I should have—"

"Oh, shut up." He shook her. "When did the man call? What time?"

"About . . . I don't know, one thirty, I guess."

"What did he say?"

"Nothing. Just asked if you were here, and I said no, and he asked where—"

"And you told him."

"Sure. Why not?" She looked from Tony to Agnelli and then at the door and back again.

In a tight voice Tony asked, "How did he talk? Did he have an accent?"

"He sure did. He sounded like a refugee from the *Beverly Hillbillies—sugah.* Now you let me out of here, or I'm going to start yelling. I don't want any part of your problems, and—"

Tony opened the door and pushed her out.

Agnelli said, "What was all that about?"

"I have to talk to Jake," said Tony. He sat down at the

small desk where the phone was and began to fumble in his book for Zacharian's home number, which he had not used very often and could not possibly remember. His hands shook so that he could hardly turn the pages.

Agnelli picked up the phone. He listened carefully, breaking the dial tone several times to hear it come on again. Then he dialed a number.

"Your boy is in a flap," he said. "Want to talk to him?" He listened a moment, then handed the phone to Tony. "Go ahead."

Stricken by a sudden thought, Tony said, "How do you know—"

"That your apartment isn't bugged or your line tapped? How do you think we earn our money?"

"You mean you—"

"Ever since Jake first got curious about you. We wished somebody would bug you because then we'd have been sure, but they refused to make it that easy for us. Want to complain about invasion of privacy?"

"Oh, hell," said Tony, and spoke into the phone. "Jake?"

"What's your trouble now?"

Tony told him. Zacharian's voice became alert and sharp.

"Do you know anyone who sounds like that?"

"No. It could be somebody I don't know. I mean, maybe he got my name from somewhere and wanted to talk to me . . . but at one thirty, somebody calling up to find out where I was—"

"*Mm.* It might just have occurred to the boys to check. And they seem to be pretty good at using one accent to cover another."

"But how?" said Tony. "How?"

"You mean how would they connect you with the business at the shop? Assuming that they came to eliminate me and then got a whiff of trap, they'd wonder what had made me suspicious. Right?"

"Yes, but—"

"Well, Tony, why would you think they might want to eliminate me in the first place?"

"Because you're a spy."

"That isn't reason enough in itself. We know a lot of them; they know a lot of us. It's only when one of us becomes a danger that they decide to take us out—or vice versa. So if your friends were there to kill me, it was because I was getting too close to pay dirt, and that would have to be through you."

"You mean . . . somebody's been watching me?"

"Probably. And that would lead them to me, because I've taken an unusual interest in you since London. They'd start checking on me; then if they were sufficiently alarmed, they'd do something. Which would mean we are close, awfully close—*if*. But we can't be sure."

"No," said Tony. "Christ, no, we can't be sure about anything. But I'm going to Iran and get sure, and when I do, I'm either going to kill Karim or come back here and kill you."

"Fair enough," said Zacharian. "Let me talk to Agnelli."

Tony gave Agnelli the phone and went to the kitchen, where the vodka was. He tipped the bottle, gulping. He heard Agnelli explaining arrangements to Zacharian. The vodka slammed into his middle like a piledriver. He felt hollow all the way down. Agnelli said, "Okay, I'll wait." He hung up and came to the door.

"He's going to call Corbett. There may be a shift in the plan. Why don't you go ahead and get packed?"

"If that was one of them, and they know," said Tony, "they'll try to kill me, won't they?"

Agnelli said, "Who knows? That's why we're here. Don't worry, Mr. Wales."

"Worry?" said Tony. "Me? What's the use? I'm just the football. I don't call the plays; they do." He banged the bottle down and shoved past Agnelli, went into the bedroom, and began to pack.

The phone rang, and Agnelli answered it. "Okay," he said presently. "Right." He hung up and came to Tony. "We're going to wait till eight o'clock. It's dark then, and the rush hour traffic has cleared out." He looked at his watch. "Plenty of time. You got any food in this place?"

"Some," said Tony. "But who wants food?"

"I do," said Agnelli, and went to the kitchen.

Tony finished his packing, showered, shaved, dressed, dug out his passport, arranged his topcoat and hat over his locked suitcase. *"I travel, and I take it off my income tax, and I have myself a ball."* Agnelli was in the kitchen, munching on whatever he could find there. Tony took the vodka bottle and sat by himself. When eight o'clock came, he was smashed—and pliant as a doll.

Zacharian came. Together he and Agnelli got Tony and his bag downstairs, Tony reasonably steady but stepping high, looking straight ahead, and saying nothing. The garage was dark, and Tony wondered vaguely what had happened to the lights.

"Come on," said Zacharian. "Get into the van."

He could see the shape of it, parked beside Agnelli's car. George had the back door open. They pushed him toward it, and he planted his feet.

"No," he said, and turned toward the shadowy form beside him. "My old buddy Jake. He's going to get me killed."

He got one arm free. Zacharian hit him a sharp blow with his open hand, and Tony went instantly to sleep.

When he woke up, he was not in the van at all. He was in the back of Agnelli's car, on the floor, covered with a blanket. Agnelli was shaking him and telling him to get out. He stumbled up into cold night air. They were on a dark road somewhere in the middle of nothing. Another car was pulled up beside them, and another man helped Agnelli get him into it. He wanted to ask them what it was all about, but it was too much trouble. He went back to sleep again.

He was awake, red-eyed and fidgety, when the car turned into the entrance of a private airfield outside Palm Springs. It was still dark. The air was icy, dry, piercingly clean. The stars burned close to the ground. The car stopped in front of the small administration building. Tony got out and followed the driver in.

Corbett was there with a third man, looking old and cruel and tired.

"I'm glad you made it safely, Mr. Wales."

Tony shook his head. "I thought they put me in the van."

"Be glad they didn't. A truck sideswiped it on the freeway. It went into the fence and then was rammed by another car that couldn't stop in time. The truck didn't stop, of course. The van was demolished. Zacharian managed to walk away from it; George and the driver of the car weren't that lucky. If you'd been in the van, you wouldn't have been that lucky either. Am I getting through to you, Mr. Wales? George and Zacharian went out as decoys, so you are alive and George is dead and an innocent bystander is in the hospital. I hope you appreciate that."

Tony tried to speak, but he seemed to have run out of things to say. All he could manage was a sick expression and two names.

"Byron and Cornellis?"

"Oh, no. They were safe and sound at the hotel."

"Then it—it could have been an accident?"

"If you believe in miracles, yes, it could have been. Either way it works out about the same for you, doesn't it? George was a good man. I hope you're worth him." He nodded to the man beside him. "He's all yours, Markey." He went off.

Markey, who looked like any ordinary businessman with a porkpie hat and attaché case, led Tony out to where a small jet of the company-executive type was warming up. Tony climbed in. The runway lights went up. The plane taxied out, and he was on his way to Iran, feeling like the wrath of God and wondering how you got to be worth another man's life.

Wondering how all this could happen to someone who had never wanted anything except to stay out of trouble, to let and be let alone. The perfect pacifist.

Wondering if he could stay drunk all the way to Teheran. Because it seemed certain that somebody had tried to kill him, and it was a new feeling, one that was going to take a lot of getting used to.

# 12

He couldn't stay drunk. There was no booze and no way to get any. The small jet whistled them eastward to land at the crack of a sultry, thundering dawn at a military airfield, where Markey hurried him out and across the Tarmac and into a huge bomber, and after that he did not see the ground again for what seemed like weeks. The plane landed twice to refuel and change crews, but Markey would not permit him to get out.

"Why?" asked Tony. "What harm will it do if I walk around? I'm not going to run away."

"I gather," said Markey, "that you're a VVIP—a very, very important person. Anyway, those are my orders. You stay inside."

Tony stayed and worried about the size of his importance. Markey was no help. He had not been briefed in depth; that was not his business. He was a delivery boy with a package, and he sat most of the time in stolid silence, doing his job. Tony managed to sleep now and then, and this was not much of a relief because he only dreamed of all the things he had been thinking about consciously. When the plane landed for the third time and Markey told him to get up and go, he was delighted, thinking it was the end of the line. But Markey said no, it was Ankara, and once again he was hurried across a strip of Tarmac to a waiting plane. This one bore the insignia of the Iranian Air Force. The crew were brisk, able, polite, and uncommunicative. They tucked him and Markey aboard and leaped screaming into the sky, and he thought: *They never did this much for James Bond. Look at me.*

He was a slow study, but even he could realize that all this was the measure of their desperation.

He had begun to wonder what they were desperate about.

It was during the Ankara-Teheran leg of the journey that he became aware of something new. Something he had never had in his life before. He had a temper and was accustomed to getting mad and flaring up whenever he was annoyed or made uncomfortable. This was a different kind of anger, slow-growing and cold. The kind with staying power. He didn't like it. It cast an ominous foreshadow of change, as though the Tony Wales he had lived with and enjoyed for twenty-eight years were dissolving like an image on film and he could not yet see what was going to replace him.

He was sure of one thing. Whatever the new Tony Wales might be, he would not be young. Youth had gone forever.

At long last the lights of Teheran came sliding under the wing. In a few more minutes they were down, accompanied by Markey and a couple of men who had come out to meet the plane, and he was clumping on wooden feet toward a low building. The air was cold, the stars were bright, and the clock inside the building said a quarter to three. Tony wondered if the cloak-and-dagger crowd ever did anything by daylight.

There were several men in the room, which was dominated on one wall by a huge photograph of the shah, handsome and smiling, and on another by a gilt image of the national lion with the sword in its upraised forepaw and the sun rising over its back. Tony guessed it was a pilots' briefing room. His escort paused while Markey went to speak to one of the men, who came forward immediately. He was middle-aged, with a smooth, high-nosed face and very dark eyes and one of those pleasant mouths that can convert so quickly to steel-trap sternness. He held out his hand.

"I am grateful that you are here, Mr. Wales. I am Hanookh Maktabi."

Tony shook his hand. "Salaam."

"Ah, you speak Persian?"

"I'm afraid that's all of it."

"Then it is not much," said Maktabi, "because it is bor-

rowed from the Arabic." He smiled and bowed. "Salaam aleikum. Thank you, Mr. Markey. This gentleman will see that you are taken care of."

Markey thanked him and nodded to Tony. "So long."

Tony said, "Aren't you going to get a receipt for me?"

Markey looked at him rather blankly and went out with one of the Iranians. *Tomorrow,* Tony thought, *or rather today, he will board a flight for home, just one more businessman with his little hat and his attaché case.* He hated to see Markey go. He was a link anyway, and when the door closed behind him, Tony was alone in a strange land.

"Come, please," said Maktabi, and took his elbow.

They sorted themselves into three cars outside. Tony sat with Maktabi in the middle one. They started off, keeping the intervals between the cars long enough so that they did not look like a caravan, short enough so that they could close up quickly at need. The streets were as quiet as the grave at this hour. The lights were out in the buildings, the pavements deserted. The air was chill, blowing down from the snow peaks of the Elburz above the city.

Maktabi said. "It is a long journey, Mr. Wales. You must be tired."

"I want to get this over with," said Tony savagely. "Fast."

"We too are in haste." Maktabi spoke clear, scholarly English, a little overprecise, slightly accented. "We will begin as soon as you have slept."

"I don't care about sleep."

"I do. Your head must be clear and your eye sharp. I am in sympathy, Mr. Wales. It is not pleasant to doubt a friend." He paused. "It is not pleasant to doubt a countryman."

"Have you found anything yet?"

"No. The audit has begun. It is being done by a firm of business accountants, who are allowing our men to work with them. But it takes time, especially when we do not know exactly what we are looking for. Mr. Hassani has been fully cooperative; he does not seem to be worried, which worries us that perhaps we are wrong. Although the possible attempts

to eliminate Mr. Zacharian and yourself are hopeful, very hopeful."

"I'm so glad," said Tony.

"We must work with what we have. We wish particularly that you will go over the shipping records, as your friend Mr. Martin attempted to do. You will have our Mr. Sherifian to help you. He speaks several languages and will be able to translate for you where it is necessary."

"All right," said Tony. "Let's just get it over with." After a minute he said, "Is there anything more on Ellen Lofting?"

"No. Officially she left Teheran. Unofficially we have not been able to detect any trace of her. If Karim Hassani has done something with her, he has done it well."

*At least,* Tony thought, *they haven't found a body. Yet.*

The lead car halted beside a high blank wall pierced by a heavy wooden gate. The men got out and opened the gate. The car in which Tony and Maktabi were riding turned through it, into a stone-paved area behind a two-story villa of the old style, built of mud brick, stuccoed and painted, with thick walls and tall shuttered windows. The third car remained outside.

Tony and Maktabi got out and followed a graveled path through another gateway and around the building to the front. Here there was a garden, completely enclosed by the wall. A pool of water glimmered in the starlight; flower beds and roses in crammed profusion made a cold, faint fragrance. The front door opened, spilling light across a blue-tiled portico. A thick-shouldered, black-browed young man, who looked like an amateur boxer, came out and spoke to Maktabi, who said to Tony, "This is Ali. He will see that you have everything you need. He is extremely capable."

"He looks it," Tony said. "Salaam, Ali."

"Good morning, Mr. Wales."

They went inside, into a small room with a tiled niche for a fireplace and the inevitable carpets on the floor. The ceiling was adobe laid over poplar poles, the whole enameled a reddish brown and decorated with many-colored designs so

that it too resembled a carpet. The furniture was sparse—an inlaid table and some chairs, a few pieces of fine metalwork, some antique tiles.

"Your bag will be brought in," said Maktabi. "The villa and garden are yours, but please, I must ask you not to go beyond the inner gate. It is not advisable that you should walk in the streets. For your own safety, you understand. We will keep a guard on the gate."

Tony nodded assent. It was the first time in his life that he was a prisoner.

"I hope you will sleep well." Maktabi extended his hand, preparatory to taking himself off, but Tony shook his head.

"Stay a minute. I want to talk. Can I have a drink?"

Ali fetched glasses and a bottle of Queen Elizabeth I, Irani Scotch. Maktabi politely declined, and so Tony drank alone, gratefully, and found it good.

"All of a sudden," he said, "I'm a very, very important person. People at one end are trying to kill me, and people at the other end are flying me halfway around the world at government expense just so I can go over some shipping manifests. Only I don't really know anything, so it seems as though you're going to an awful lot of trouble for not much. I mean, what's all the hurry? Even if Karim is mixed up with these bastards and smuggling stuff in, it's not new. It must have been going on for three, four years. But the minute there's a faint idea that it might be Karim, everybody jumps off the cliff as if they can't wait to get to the bottom. What's pushing you?"

Maktabi's face lost all its smooth politeness and settled into lines of iron.

"Does the name Lion mean anything to you, Mr. Wales?"

"Nothing but a big cat."

"To us it has other meanings. The lion is, of course, the symbol of our country, and from ancient times it has been associated with sovereignty and power. At Persepolis the lion of the Achaemenids still conquers its prey. This is interesting because Lion is also a code name, which we heard for the first time only a few months ago. Three men tried to burn the

adult education center and the medical dispensary at a village north of Shiraz. They were caught in time, but the leader was a defiant man. He said, 'I have heard it in the wind, that a lion will come from the desert and eat you up.' This was all he knew, but he took great pleasure in it. The Lion, he thought, would set him free. A tribesman, an ignorant man, a fanatic—but he had heard something. Perhaps. We began to listen in the coffeehouses, the bazaars, the villages, the camps of the nomads, and we also heard of this *Shir*, this Lion who prowls in the desert growing strong, waiting his time to spring. We still had nothing except rumor. Then a cache of arms was found hidden in a cave, and we knew the Lion was real.

"The Lion intends, we believe, to rouse up a rebellion in Fars."

# 13

There was no fire in the tiled niche, and the room was cold. The air had an unfamiliar taste, compounded of many things—dusts, smokes, spices, time, the subliminal traces that are the sum total of a city and the way it lives and eats and performs its myriad small actions. Tony found that he was shivering.

He said, "Rebellion?" He did not know why he was surprised. After all, what else would you use all those guns for? Perhaps it was not surprise, really, but the shock of being associated personally with such a thing, and in a foreign country where they were likely to take a dim view of idiot outsiders who helped it along. If he had.

Maktabi said somberly, "We are an old country, an old people. Within two generations under the Pahlavis we have become a modern country, a progressive people. Such changes are not made without pain. Rich men are made

poor; mullahs cry sacrilege. The powerful tribes who once looted whole provinces resent that they have been made peaceful and forced to obey the law. Some men do not like it that our women are free now to go to school, learning even to be doctors and scientists. They say this is against the will of Allah and the law of Islam, and for the same reason they burn the education centers, believing that the people should have only the teaching of the mullahs and the Koran. It is not easy to change these things. Much, very much, has been accomplished, but resistance in some quarters has been bitter and still remains."

"Okay," said Tony, "but where do the Commies come in? I thought you people were friendly with Russia. I mean, they're building that steel mill at Isfahan—"

Maktabi showed his teeth briefly in what might have been a smile. "We have lived with Russia for a very long time. We know her well. Czarist or Soviet, she does not change. Her methods alter with the times, her aims never. Do you know anything of the Tudeh Party? A strong arm of Soviet intervention. They set up an autonomous government in Azerbaijan in nineteen forty-five, at a time when Soviet troops were still stationed in our northern provinces and barring our own forces from our own lands. The Tudeh stirred up the Kurds to revolt—never a difficult task!—and in nineteen forty-six they formed a coalition of the strong and turbulent southern tribes that took over most of the province of Fars, also demanding autonomy. That was twenty-two years ago, and the Tudeh Party has been illegal and disbanded for nineteen. Still it seems that the idea has not been forgotten, and Fars is again the locus of the trouble.

"At this time Russia would not dream of involving herself openly in such an action. No. It is for actions of this sort that she has gone to the trouble of setting up the network of which Mr. Corbett has told you. It is like this, Mr. Wales: If Iranians wish to make mischief in their own country, that is no affair of Russia's. If arms and money are supplied to dissidents from some Western country, that is certainly no affair of Russia's. If the plot should succeed, she would at once recognize

the rebel government in the name of self-determination and raise a great clamor at any attempt we might make to regain the province. Egypt and Iraq would immediately join in, ready to support the rebels in exchange for concessions; Fars has a long coastline, for instance, on the Persian Gulf, and our great refinery and oil center at Abadan would be pinched between Iraq and the rebels. It would make an extremely dangerous and difficult situation, with the Middle East already in an explosive state and the Soviet presence now so powerful. It would also be a terrible blow to our pro-Western and democratic nation.

"Meanwhile, win or lose, Russia takes no risks. The blame for the initial revolt would lie with our own people and the countries of the West, including your own, whence the arms were supplied."

Maktabi rose and stood looking down at Tony. The Iranian was a slender man with delicate hands and the abiding strength of a people who have maintained their national identity over more than two millennia of foreign conquest, slaughter, and tyranny, ending each time by civilizing their conquerors and making good Persians out of them.

"You will see, Mr. Wales, that we cannot permit this thing to happen. That is why you are suddenly so important, why we are in so great haste. We must discover the leaders and the details of this conspiracy before it becomes necessary to shed blood."

"Yes," said Tony. "I see." *My God,* he thought, *when I get myself in a mess, I really go all the way.* He added, feeling like an utter fool, "I'll do everything I can."

"Thank you," said Maktabi. "Good night, Mr. Wales. Mr. Sherifian will come in the morning."

He left. Still stunned, Tony took the bottle with him and followed Ali up some narrow stairs to an upper room, where he went to bed. Tired as he was, he was too restless to sleep, and the barking of the *jube* dogs disturbed him. They had neither the ferocity nor the lung power of the dogs he had heard in Baghdad, but they were doing pretty well, running the dark streets that belonged to them by night. Presently

he got up and went to the window. The shutters were open. He could see out across the garden and over the wall. Beyond the wall, side by side in their ruined gardens, were the wrecks of two villas much like this one, ravished, disemboweled, awaiting final entombment in the foundations of some new office block. The pale tile of the fireplace was still visible in one of the roofless rooms. Away and above, the peaks of the Elburz hung in the sky like clouds. Somewhere off to his left, at the northwestern terminus of the range, was Alamut, the Valley of the Assassins, stronghold of the Old Man of the Mountain, Hasan-ibn-al-Sabbah. He knew about Hasan the Assassin because Karim had told him. It was not a happy thought.

Unbidden, the memory of Ellen Lofting returned to him, so powerfully that he could see her in every detail, hear her voice, smell the clean fragrance of her hair. He wondered if she were still alive.

Mr. Sherifian was waiting for him when he came downstairs at half-past ten. He was a middle-aged man, sharp-featured and businesslike. He had brought with him several boxes bulging with bundles of manifests, invoices, and receipts. He greeted Tony courteously and accepted coffee, waiting patiently while Tony breakfasted on fruit and goat cheese and flat strips of Iranian bread. Then Ali cleared the table, and Sherifian transshipped his bundles.

"These are for the year nineteen sixty-five," Sherifian said. "We will begin with January."

By nightfall they had worked their way through to the end of June, and Tony knew more about the affairs of Hassani-Wales and Company than he had learned in the previous four years.

It all seemed innocent enough. Hassani-Wales exported carpets; Isfahani metalwork in brass, silver, and gold; various handcrafted articles; and a small specialized assortment of silks, jewelry, antiquities, art objects, and the like to specialized customers at extremely high prices. Hassani-Wales then purchased manufactured goods, chiefly radios and household

appliances for which there was a booming demand, shipped them in, and sold them at a profit to local dealers.

"I don't know," said Tony. "It looks to me as though Karim's just the hell of a good businessman."

"One must agree," said Sherifian. "Very good indeed."

"How do you mean?"

"From the first he was successful. Markets all over the world opened to him as though by magic."

"You mean as though he'd joined the club. Yes. Maybe. Damn it, if there were only something solid to get hold of! Everything seems to slide off around a corner."

"What about these?" Sherifian held up two sheets he had set aside from the main lot.

Tony shook his head. "You asked me for anything at all, so I'm giving it to you, but I don't know that it means anything." He took the sheets from Sherifian and scowled at them. "Alvarez and Slate, Alameda Street, Los Angeles, California. Large and Small Appliances, Manufacturer's Surplus Stocks. I never heard of 'em, and I thought I knew everybody Karim did business with in LA. Maybe he only got this one consignment from them and never made another deal, or maybe they went out of business and there wasn't any reason to mention them to me. I wasn't really a working partner, you know." It was odd that he did not feel like boasting about that anymore. He even felt ashamed.

"I know," said Sherifian, his carefully toneless voice making no comment.

"Well," said Tony, "this other one, the Marlowe Foundation, Sunset Boulevard, Pacific Palisades, forty thousand dollars' worth of carpets and art objects, special order. That's a name from the past. It's a foundation for the study of comparative religion and pretty damned well endowed. Anyway, Karim took a lecture course there when we were at UCLA. He was raised as a strict Shia, but he was curious about the rest of the world. There's nothing strange about them giving him an order; only he never mentioned that one either, and it seems as though he would have. I mean, he was out on

the coast in September that year, and I remember driving right past the place. I said something about it was still going, and Karim just said yes and never mentioned that we had just sold them forty grand worth of stuff."

"Ah," said Sherifian, "that is most interesting." He made notes in the swift, graceful Arabic characters on a separate slip of paper, clipped it to the two invoices, and set them aside. "Mr. Maktabi shall have these—he will come here at about eight. Do you wish to continue working, Mr. Wales?"

"Sure," said Tony. "Just give me some food and a little time to get the kinks out of my back."

Sherifian nodded and went out to talk to Ali about dinner. Tony rose and stretched. He was stiff with sitting, and his head was clogged with the pungent smell of Sherifian's Turkish cigarettes. He went to the door and opened it and stepped out into the blue-tiled portico, into cool fresh air.

Swift, silent, sudden as the flash of a dream, the shapes of men came springing at him from out of the dark garden.

He cried out in sheer astonishment. A great hand crashed the sound back into his throat and choked him with it. He was buffeted, shaken, dazed, all in a clutch of seconds, his attempt at defending himself smashed before it started. His arm was wrenched up behind his back, and he was held pinioned while a face appeared in the lamplight and looked at him.

And there was no further doubt.

"Hello, Tony," Karim said, and motioned his men on into the room.

# 14

There were two of them beside Karim and the huge iron creature that was holding Tony. They had guns with snouty baffles on them. Sherifian came in from the back of the house with his eyes startled and his right hand under his coat, and

when they shot him, the guns sounded like champagne corks popping in another room. Beyond Sherifian as he fell there was a cry cut short in the middle, and then two more men appeared, stepping in over Sherifian. Tony was half lifted, half thrown into the room, his shoulder cracking, his mouth gaping with pain. Everyone stood quietly now. The air smelled of gunshots and Turkish tobacco. Karim was looking at the papers on the table, the neatly stacked records of Hassani-Wales.

Light footsteps clacked over the tiles of the portico, and a seventh man came in. He was small and thin, with hollow temples and cheekbones that showed sharp under his sallow skin. He was a bookkeeper, shoulders slightly stooped, eyes remote behind steel-rimmed spectacles, a nothing man, the sort you have to remind yourself to say hello to. He paused and looked at Tony, and the cold malevolence in this wisp of a man was more frightening to him than the brute force of the giant who was crushing his wrist to powder.

"Saad."

Saad drew his long thin lip back from his teeth. "Mr. Wales." He added something brief and harsh in Persian and then turned to Karim, who had picked up the two sheets Sherifian had laid aside with his notes. He showed them to Saad, and they both glanced at Tony. Then Saad spoke to the two men who had come in through the back, and they went out again, hurrying. The others began tearing the bundled papers apart and piling them in a loose pile on the floor. Tony tried twice to speak, and each time he was silenced. When they had the papers heaped in a good way to burn, they poured a strong-smelling fluid around the edges and over the top and set fire to it. Flame burst up with a rush and a crackle. The room began to fill with smoke. They all went out, taking Tony with them. Tony began to struggle and protest. Almost at once he was on his knees in the gravel and Karim was bending over him, speaking softly.

"Yadollah broke Harvey's neck with one blow. He can do the same for you." He struck Tony, forehand, backhand, twice across the mouth. "Get up and do as you're told."

Tony got up, tasting blood in his mouth and black bitterness in his soul, and he went where Yadollah guided him, moving with the jerky swiftness of a puppet, half running. As he passed through the inner gate, he saw a man lying on his face in a bed of petunias and knew it was the guard.

There was a car parked beside Sherifian's in the paved area at the rear. Karim held the door open, and Yadollah put Tony through it, then followed him in. One of the men got behind the wheel. Karim and Saad hurried around the car and in the other side. The remaining man opened the wooden gate for them, closed it behind them, then crowded into the back seat beside Tony.

The car moved through the streets of Teheran, a city as modern as Pittsburgh, thronged with traffic, lights glaring from the movie houses, shopwindows filled with the latest imports. There were many women among the street crowds, and quite a few of them had renounced the chador. There were policemen on duty and traffic lights, and Tony watched it all go by, watched in silence, motionless as a clam. Yadollah had relinquished his grip on Tony's arm, but the man on the other side had the baffled muzzle of his gun pressed into Tony's liver so firmly that it hurt him every time the car hit a rough spot. Tony did not know the city well enough to follow the route the driver was taking. Evidently it was the shortest one out of town, for in a matter of minutes they were passing through industrial suburbs, quiet and shuttered at this hour, and then there were dark fields and walled gardens and villages that became more and more scattered as they went.

Tony sat wedged between the man with the gun and the iron bulk of Yadollah, who was so far, apart from his size and strength, no more than a jut-jawed, hawk-nosed profile under a felt hat. In front, Karim's head was silhouetted against the faint glow of the dashboard lights. Tony stared at it, feeling very strange. He searched himself for emotions and could not find any, not even fear. It was as though everything inside him had simply crawled away into hiding.

Oddly, the first and only question he asked was, "Where is Ellen Lofting?"

"She's alive," Karim said, and went on talking intently with Saad in Persian. It sounded as though they were quarreling.

So Ellen was alive. That was something.

Tony did not know what difference it was going to make to him. Even so, he was surprised at how glad he was.

They drove for what seemed a very long time, going fast, first on the paved road and then on a rough track that rocked and heaved across open desert, making the springs cry out in protest. Naked spurs of rock and bald ridges showed against the stars. The car wound between them until all sense of direction was lost and all civilization vanished behind them in dust and darkness. Then there came a smell of water into the dry air. Tony caught a glimpse of trees as the headlights swung, poplars growing thick as grass behind a tall mud fence, and in a few minutes a walled village appeared ahead, barred and sleeping, a small fortress in the night. The driver stopped at the gate and sounded his horn impatiently. Dogs began to bark. The wooden valves, black with age and use, swung open under the arch. Men came out and spoke to them, lighting their way in with an acetylene lantern. Yadollah yanked at Tony, and everyone except the driver got out.

Tony saw an open space of hard-packed earth enclosed by the wall and a straggling semicircle of adobe buildings, their flat roofs cubed sharply against the stars. Dogs ran about, big, sturdy curs barking their heads off. Sheep were complaining somewhere nearby; goats bleated; an aroused donkey brayed. There was a comfortable smell of smoke and animals. The car moved away, presumably into hiding. The men began shutting the gates. Yadollah reached for Tony, and Tony said to Karim, "Tell your ape to keep his paws off. I'll walk."

Karim spoke to Yadollah, who shrugged and fell into step beside Tony but did not touch him. The semicircle of buildings was broken by narrow openings, and they walked into

one of these, a dusty street straying between houses that pretended to be sleeping even if they were not. Karim carried a flashlight from the car. He guided them into a very narrow alley that branched off the street, and they went into it two abreast, their shoulders rubbing the buildings on each side. The alley curved and wound and ended at a doorway in a blank wall. Karim opened it. They passed through a shed with big iron pots looming between wooden bins that gave off strange herbal odors mingled with the smell of wood ashes. Beyond this was an open court and then a long room with a loom and a weaver's bench at one end. The tall loom had a carpet in it, half-finished, brilliant flowers patterned on white. Somebody lighted a lamp, and the other end of the room sprang out of obscurity, a psychedelic scream of color where the yarn hanks hung crisscross in an ordered tangle between the dun-brown walls.

It was a large room, with plenty of space for everyone. They all came in, and the last one shut the door behind them, and Tony thought he knew why they had brought him here. He looked at Karim and said, "My friend. My murdering brother."

Emotion returned to him in a kind of red wave that flung him straight at Karim's throat.

For one glorious moment he felt flesh, sinew, and the surging pulse between his hands, and he tried his best to kill, amazed even in that moment at his own savagery. Then something struck him from behind, and he fell. Yadollah caught him and laid him out on the weaver's bench.

When he came to, Karim was standing over him, tall and dark, the white glare of the lamp slashed across his face so that it was all hard highlight and deep shadow.

"You fool," he said. "You idiot." His voice was low, and his eyes shone as bright as a butcher-bird's. "Why couldn't you be content to count your money and play with your dolls?"

Yadollah stood hugely at Karim's right, and Saad drooped on the other side, a gray little wisp of evil, immensely competent. The man with the gun stood leaning against the door.

Tony was afraid, terribly afraid, but there was a difference between now and that other time in Soho. Now he could endure being afraid. He did not yet know for how long.

He said, "How did you find me? Everybody was so careful." All the long flights and furtive scurryings, such a waste of time.

"Did anyone think we would accept that tax audit without checking into it?" Karim was scornful. "We had the accountants watched; we saw Sherifian in contact with them and knew it was a blind, followed Sherifian to the villa. Obviously somebody was there, and who else would it be but you?"

Tony nodded. "I guess so, after that ride I didn't take on the freeway." He sat up on the high, broad bench. His head and neck hurt, and he rubbed them, looking at Karim, puzzled. "Why did you bring me all the way out here to kill me?"

Almost impatiently Karim said, "The time for that was California, and they bungled it. You've already done all the harm you can do, forcing us out in the open. Killing you now would get me nothing but the pleasure of doing it, and besides, I have another use for you. Now I want to know how you got to that villa, from the beginning."

Tony hesitated. He didn't know whether to believe Karim or not, about keeping him alive; but it was a cheering thought, and he clung to it. It was extremely difficult to gather his mind together, to think of what he ought to say.

Karim pointed with his chin at Yadollah. "I don't think you have an endless amount of hero in you, Tony. I'd advise you to hoard what there is for a better time."

Yadollah bared broad yellow teeth and swung his hands, smiling.

Tony decided that Karim was right. In any case he couldn't think of anything he could tell them that they wouldn't know or be able to guess. So he talked.

Karim translated for Saad. They asked questions, coming back over and over to Maktabi, making Tony repeat every word that had passed between them.

Wearily, for the tenth time, Tony said, "All he knows

about the Lion is that it exists. He wanted one clear sign that you were connected with it, and you gave him that yourself tonight."

"I wouldn't take the glory from you," Karim said grimly. "You're a real heller when you do get going. Saad had to protect the network—he's the comrade, my watching conscience—and I had to protect my people at this end, so we had to destroy the records. And of course, to do that—"

"You had to kill Sherifian and Ali and the guard. Sure. That's crystal clear. But what about all the rest of the records? There was only one year of them at the villa, and even without me Maktabi and Corbett can make a lot of time, now that they know."

"We hadn't finished collecting the rest for the audit. They were still at the office. I have a bit of news for you, Tony. Hassani-Wales doesn't exist anymore."

"You burned out the office, too?"

"That's where the other men went. We're in touch here, of course, by radio, and word was waiting. Not a cinder left."

Saad spoke, and Karim smiled grimly at Tony. "Saad has just asked me if I'd give him five minutes alone with you. His operation here is scrubbed, and he's got to run for it, and he hates to go without saying good-bye to the one responsible. I'm tempted, but I can't stand the little bastard."

"Then why are you working with him?" Tony said. "And what's so noble about you? Murdering people, trying to tear your country apart—"

Something came into Karim's face, a fleeting gleam of that pure and lofty faith that transcends all human matters—love, friendship, loyalty, compassion, honor, even common decency. And Tony understood how Karim had been able to kill Harvey Martin and why he would be able to do anything that was required in order to gain his end. He shivered as though a cold and sudden wind had blown through him.

Karim said, "You have a hard trip ahead, so I would advise some sleep. Yadollah will take you."

"They'll pick up your father," Tony said. "They'll pick up everyone you've ever spoken to."

"They'll have to find my father. As for the others, they don't know any more than you do. You're a little bit late, Tony—you and Maktabi. Harvey came at a critical moment. He could have blown it. But we have everything we need now, so the network closing off doesn't bother us. And even if they did manage to take my father, or me, it wouldn't affect the plan. As long as one of us is alive and able to function, we're all right. I've taken care of that. American efficiency, Tony."

"Good old UCLA." Tony stood looking at him, trying to match together the several faces of Karim, and something came back to him from the old days. He laughed, without humor. "You told us a story once about the three students, Omar Khayyám and Nizam something and the third one who grew up to be Hasan the Assassin and a kind of bad friend. Makes you something like the Young Man of the Mountain, doesn't it? Did you know this even then, Karim? When we were, oh, Christ, eating hamburgers and drinking beer at Muscle Beach?"

"Yes," he said. "All of it." He turned away abruptly. "Yadollah!"

Yadollah shoved Tony out through the door into the courtyard and up a narrow flight of steps to the roof of the weaving room, which served as a porch for the upper rooms. There was a light pole canopy covered with reeds and, underneath it, a doorway. The door, Tony noticed, was extremely solid and had a massive bar across it. Yadollah lifted the bar and pushed him into a room with carpets on the earthen floor, a brightly decorated chest, and a lamp burning in a niche in the wall.

The door banged shut behind him, and the bar thumped down, and Ellen Lofting looked up from where she was sitting on the carpet under the niche, reading a book by the light of the lamp.

She dropped the book and stared, then sprang up and took the lamp in her hand and brought it to him, to light his face clearly so that there should be no mistake.

"Well," she said, and took two steps backward, shaking her head. "I will be damned."

Hesitant and unsure, he said her name.

She put the lamp back in the niche, and her hand trembled, and then her whole body. She turned and came tightly against him, her arms holding him fiercely as if he were a rock in a current that was trying to sweep her away, and she made no sound at all but only clung to him and shuddered. And he stroked her awkwardly, not knowing what to say or do.

# 15

She moved away from him at last.

"I'm sorry. Seeing you like that, without warning, someone from my own world—something snapped. I'm all right now." She sat down and shook a cigarette from a red packet and lighted it, her hands still unsteady, then looked up at him with a curious mingling of interest, doubt, and simple hostility. "I don't know whether I'm glad or sorry. How did you get here? I mean, did you do it deliberately, or was it just another typical Tony Wales operation?"

"Both," he said. She was thinner, the fine, long bones of her face more distinct. Her hair was longer, but otherwise as he remembered it, and her eyes had not changed. They were still blue, direct, and devastating. He joined her on the floor because there weren't any chairs, and it dawned on him that he was very tired and very hungry. "Is there anything to eat? We—"

After a minute she said, "We what?"

"We never got our dinner. Sherifian and Ali . . . Christ, they're both dead, and I'm hungry."

She looked at him intently, and her expression changed. Wisely asking no questions, she rose and fetched him a bot-

tle and glass from another wall niche, then went into an adjoining room. Tony ignored the glass and had a long pull at the bottle. Elizabeth I, Irani Scotch. The thick book Ellen had dropped was Sykes' *History of Persia,* Volume II. She came back in, and he said, "You do yourself pretty well at that."

"Karim sees that I'm comfortable." She handed him a bowl of yogurt and some bread. "I'm sorry there isn't more."

"That's fine. Thanks." He ate ravenously. When he was finished, Ellen took the bowl away and then sat down again and waited for him to speak. Tony listened to the oil lamp hissing in the niche and searched for words. It was a futile effort.

"I don't have any excuses," he said helplessly. "I don't have any explanations. It's all been said. So what's the use?"

"I'd still like to know how you got here."

He told her, sketching it short and hard, right down to the moment. She listened, making no comment. He was painfully aware that he did not come out of it too well, but he told it as it was. Then he said, "You were going straight on to Isfahan. How did Karim get hold of you?"

"He was very well informed, and of course, now I see how. I was in Teheran only two hours, between planes, and I never left the airport. It didn't occur to me that he could know. When I arrived at Isfahan, there was a man at the airport holding up a card with my name on it—you know how they do—and the name of the hotel I had booked into. He had a car, with the hotel name on it, to drive me in. So naturally I went with him, and here I am. I understand another girl was sent off to Rome with my passport."

"Yes. I was afraid you were dead."

Her brows went up. "You sound as thought it might really have mattered to you."

"It was bad enough thinking I might have got Harvey killed. When I heard about you, it was just too much."

She offered him no vast amount of comfort. "They had a sound enough reason not to kill me. I inherited Harvey's share, you remember. If I had really disappeared, there would

have been years of folderol about getting me declared legally dead, during which time the company would be hopelessly tied up. I think the idea was to keep the body alive until they were ready to produce it somewhere, properly identified, at their convenience. Meanwhile, I've been careful not to sign any papers."

"Thank God, anyway."

She shook her head. "Careful, Tony. You're beginning to sound involved."

"Involved," he said. His face flushed, and he fought down a furious impulse to cuff her. "I'm involved, all right. And I can't help what's already happened, so get off my back. I'm through saying I'm sorry."

He got up and began to prowl the room. There was no window, only a small opening under the roof for ventilation. He tried the door and found it immovable, then went on to peer into the two adjoining rooms. Ellen watched him, her eyes narrowed and thoughtful.

"Did Karim say what happens next?"

"Only that he had a use for me, and I'm about to take a long trip."

"*Mm.* This village is too close to Teheran to be safe for very long. They'll be beating the bushes, turning over every stone. Besides, it's only a way station, part of the chain. Karim will want to get back to his own headquarters. I'd guess that he's taking you along as a hostage in case he runs into trouble."

"Possible." The lamplight did not go far into the other rooms. Only far enough to show that they both were small and lacked windows. "This is a hell of a way to build a house. What do they do for light and air?"

"Leave the door open. In this sort of climate the object is to keep cool when it's hot and warm when it's cold. And did you think it would be as easy as climbing out a window?" He looked at her, and she said, "Well, you are thinking of getting away."

"Damn right I am." He returned to the door and scowled at it, testing it again with his weight.

"You'd wake the whole village battering at it," she said, "and you'd still be inside the wall. And the dogs here don't like strangers. Did Karim mention me at all?"

"No." He turned from the door, knowing she was right, feeling desperate, wishing Zacharian were here to tell him what to do. He thought of Zacharian's tiger-eyed delight in the game for its own sake. He didn't think he would ever be like that even if he managed to live long enough. "There's got to be *some* way. You've been here awhile; you must have some ideas."

"I have, most of them negative. What's the object, Tony?"

"What do you mean, what's the object?"

"Are you running just to be running? And what about me? Karim can hardly leave me here alive now, you know. He'll either take me for a hostage as well, or—" She made an expressive gesture. "Obviously, my usefulness to the company no longer exists."

He went and squatted down in front of her. "Let's get this understood. I am going to nail that bastard to the cross if it's the last thing I ever do. I—"

"Why?"

"*Why?* Look, I'll admit I've been a bum—all right, I'm sorry, make it a no-good—all my life, but I've been one on my own time. And I'll admit I never did anything for my country, but I never did anything against it either. Now he's made me responsible for a lot of things I don't want to be responsible for, and if he pulls off this revolt or secession or whatever you call it, he'll make my country responsible, too. It's like inviting somebody into your house and treating them well and liking them and thinking they like you, and then finding out—"

He ran out of breath. When he got it again, he said, "I want to get out and back to the main road, where I can get help. I want to stop him right here. Or at least stop him from getting very far away. Is there any chance of doing that?"

"There might be. I still want to know—"

"Could you keep up with me?"

She laughed. "I'll give you three furlongs and beat you

handily." She studied his face, probing him as she had done once before. This time he bore it steadily, and she nodded. "You have changed. It'll be interesting to see how much. What time is it?"

He checked his watch. "A little after midnight."

"We have to make it before daylight or wait until tomorrow night."

"That'll be too late."

"Well, we can try." She rose and took the lamp. "How are you at working, Tony? Nasty, mean, hard work." She led the way into one of the small rooms, a tiny cubicle with storage niches and a couple of chests, reed matting on the floor, a ventilation hole high up on the outside wall.

Tony looked around. "So what?"

She pointed to a spot above his head and behind him. He craned his neck while she held the lamp higher. In the low ceiling just at the angle of the wall where it was least likely to be noticed by anyone glancing into the room, there was the gnawed beginning of a hole.

He reached up and touched the haggled poplar poles. Two of them had been cut through and the sections removed. "My God," he said, "what did you do, chew them out with your teeth like a beaver?"

From a hiding place under the mat she produced a curious little knife with a wooden handle and a short, curved blade. "I only managed to get this two days ago. It's a weaver's knife. The yarn is knotted, and then the ends are cut, so." She made a sharp downward stroke. "Makes the nap of the carpet. I'm something of an expert now."

"How come?"

"I told Karim he'd have to give me something to do if he didn't want me going straight around the bend. He's not an evil man, Tony. He's a true believer. He doesn't do anything for pleasure, for gain, or for meanness, but only for the cause. In between times he's quite decent. He was actually very badly cut up about Harvey."

"My heart bleeds."

"In any case he let me go down and work in the weaving

room. If I manage to get out of this alive, I'm going to buy that carpet. I must have made a good quarter of it myself. The girls were delighted to teach me. Do you know, the littlest one is only seven?" She handed him the knife. "I hid that in a hank of yarn and waited for them to search these rooms. Yadollah tore through everything like a whirlwind, then made some of the women strip me and search my clothes. They finally decided I didn't have it, so I was able to smuggle it up. They blamed the little one for losing it, poor child. I couldn't help that." She produced two strips of cloth, much the worse for wear. "You can wrap your hands in these. I was reckoning on another two nights, if nobody caught me. It ought to go better with two of us, especially if we don't have to bother cleaning up."

"So we do make it through to the roof," said Tony. "What then?"

"We jump to the top of the wall. It's only about three feet. The wall is, oh, eighteen feet high, I would judge. We hang by our hands and drop. Then we run like hell. Don't break that blade, or we will be doing it with our teeth."

Tony looked at her in awed admiration. "You had this all worked out, and you were going to do it all by yourself?"

"It comes of watching *The Avengers*," she said. "Would Emma Peel have sat meekly awaiting her fate? Unfortunately —" She cocked an eyebrow at Tony.

"I know," he said sourly, picking up the unspoken comment. "I wouldn't look good in a bowler."

They laughed. Then Ellen went abruptly quiet. "All the same," she said, "I'm glad you're here."

She went to watch the door, and he went to work, wishing he had her kind of guts.

Well, who knew? Perhaps he did have, buried away down at the bottom underneath all the rubbish. He had always taken such good care never to find out. He had even managed to skate around his Army duty, petering out a hitch in the Reserves with the aid of college deferments and the careful nurturing of some useful allergies, so that he had been able to spend most of his camp time in sick bay admiring his

own cleverness. It wasn't that he had any particular bias against the Vietnam War. He simply disapproved of anything that interfered with the disorderly existence of Tony Wales.

Sir Johnny-Jump-Up, gentle knight, never did learn how to fight . . . Now he was in a mess he couldn't skate around, and he could have used some survival techniques.

It was difficult working overhead, and he was amazed that she had done as much as she had. The little knife curved the wrong way, and the edge was rapidly losing its keenness against the poplar wood. Clay dust sifted down over him, gritting in his mouth and eyes and ears, caking with the sweat on his face. His shoulders ached, screamed, became numb. When he could no longer lift his arms, he stumbled out for air and let Ellen take over while he listened at the door.

Time pressed, suffocatingly. He was afraid to look at his watch. They took turns in spells that became shorter as they tired, and Tony bitterly regretted the loss of the pep pills he had brought from home, which had gone to invigorate the air above the burning villa. After they had hacked away another section of pole to make an opening, the work went faster. The thin layer of stucco came away easily. Above that were reed matting and peeled branches and a layer of thorn to hold the clay roof. The floor became a shambles. Choking in dust, blinded by things falling in his face, Tony pulled and tore, snapping dry branches by sheer weight, using the cut sections of pole to break out chunks of mingled clay and thorn.

Eventually, suitably, it was Ellen who punched through to the cold night air and the stars.

# 16

They stood on the sturdier of the two chests, widening the hole, exhaustion forgotten in hope and the overriding fear that someone would hear or happen in, catching them at the very edge of freedom.

Ellen said, "I think I can make it now."

He gave her a leg up, and she squirmed through, as mud-colored as the roof she lay on. In a moment her face appeared.

"It's all right, but we must hurry. They don't lie late abed here."

They were not worried now what they did to their hands, and with her working from the top, the edges of the hole crumbled swiftly to a size that Tony thought might fit him. He handed her his jacket and went up, ripping his shirt and the hide underneath, and for one awful moment he thought he was stuck. Ellen braced her feet and heaved without mercy, popping him out like a cork onto the roof. They crouched there panting, shivering as the cold air touched their inelegantly sweated bodies. The village still slept in the starlight, a companionable huddle of small buildings all leaning together for comfort. Beyond the wall was a vast, empty quiet.

As Ellen had said, the top of the wall was close by and a little below them. An easy jump by daylight, less easy by night. Nevertheless, they made it. The hanging-by-the-hands bit was well and good except that there was nothing to hang to but a rounded crumbling edge. Tony decided to jump free. He came down on all fours, knocking his wind out with his own knees. Ellen was more graceful. They picked themselves up and ran over stony wind-scoured ground toward the gardens where the poplars grew, roof poles for future generations. When they had the wall of the nearest garden between themselves and the village, they halted and listened, standing

close together, and all Tony could hear was Ellen's hard breathing and the hammering of his own heart.

"I think we made it."

Her hand found his, held it tightly. "Now what? The track lies over there—"

"If we stay on it, they'll have us back in nothing flat. No. We'll go the other way and try to circle around."

"We may get lost."

"It's that or get caught." Tony was inexperienced, but even to him it was obvious that the clear way to the main road would be the first place they would look. "How long do we have before they find out we're gone?"

She looked at the sky and considered. "They open my cage and feed me as soon as the morning bread is baked. Perhaps an hour, perhaps less."

Tony said, "I wish I had a gun."

They started off into the wilderness.

The village stood in a flat, open space surrounded by low hills, an oasis held painfully against the desert. There were plowed fields straggling along the line of an ancient *qanat* with its humped wells. Then the dry land began, barren valleys laid between bare rock ridges. The air was cold and pure, the sky a clear glory of stars that faded as the hills began to grow and take on color, barely hinted at at first, pale tans and grays, a darker chocolate, the eastern ridges black against pearl flushing gently to rose-pink. The valleys gleamed. The hills seemed suddenly to leap forward in the crystal air, colors shifting now to amethyst and rose, very tender and beautiful. Then with incredible swiftness the sun had bounded up; the sky was a hard bright blue; the desert was stripped of all but its naked bones and the old wounds of erosion.

Tony and Ellen came out on a brow of rock, whence they could see the village. They lay resting and watching, grateful for the first of the day's heat. The smoke of cooking fires rose above the houses, bending to the west. Men were going to the fields. Flocks were on their way to pasture, black goats

and gray-white sheep herded by little boys. A man passed through the gate riding a loaded donkey and driving five more ahead. The sound of their harness bells did not carry, but Tony could hear the faint barking of dogs. The scene had a timeless and enduring peacefulness that was almost hypnotic.

"It looks as though they've been living that way forever."

"Give or take a year," said Ellen, "they have."

"What do they do?"

"They work."

"I know, but what do they do for fun?"

"Depends on what you mean by fun. The women laugh and chatter whatever they're doing. The children play games when they're done working. The men smoke and talk. Every once in a while there's a festival or a wedding. They survive."

"Are they happy?"

"Amazingly enough, you know, they seem to be."

"No need for sarcasm," Tony said, and groaned. "I wish I had a benny. Or at least a cup of coffee. I'm beat. How are you?"

"Got my second wind. I'll do."

"There are times," said Tony, "when I hate the British."

A battered farm truck with several men crouching in it came bolting through the village gate and off down the track, missing the donkeys which went plunging into a field while the drover shook both fists in the air after the truck. A plume of dust soared skyward, continuing to mark the progress of the vehicle even after it went out of sight behind a spur. A moment later little groups of men appeared, some mounted on donkeys, others afoot. They milled about in confusion for a time while the men in the fields came back to join them, and then apparently someone began issuing decisive orders. The groups separated and moved off in various directions.

"I hope," said Tony, "they're not too good at tracking."

He took a last sighting on the pale-brown finger of dust that smeared across the blue sky, trying to orient it with the

sun. They slid back off the rock so as not to show on the skyline and set off in the direction the truck had taken, which should lead them to the main road.

By midmorning they were hopelessly lost. It was all very well to use the sun as a guidepost, but the sun moved. The twisted gullies and tumbled ridges kept them moving as well, going this way and that until they were utterly confused. They took bearings frequently, using their own shadows as indicators, and Ellen was better at the business by far than Tony, having done much climbing on holidays in the Lake Country. Even so, the detours forced on them by the rough terrain left them uncertain of how much progress they were actually making in the direction they thought was right.

Second wind ran out. Neither had slept nor eaten, and both were tired from the night's strain. Now heat and thirst began to torment them. The rocks became scorching to the touch; the valleys were like ovens. The sun was a great gold burning sponge in the dry sky, sucking the moisture out of their bodies until even their eyeballs felt like pebbles sunk in sand. A wind rose and blew the dust along under the hills, whistling through the gorges with a cruel eagerness. From time to time, mockingly in the far distance, they could glimpse the high white head of the Elburz, cool with snow.

It became necessary to rest more and more often. Ellen did not complain, but Tony could see for himself what she was too proud to say. She was already clay-smeared and draggled from the night's work, and now her beautiful hair was blown in dusty tangles, her fair skin reddening under the fierce sun, her features pinched with thirst and weariness. A California child, he was much more used to sun and heat than she and took them better. He was glad there was one field in which he could excel.

At noon they found a cave in a rock cliff above a slope. Shepherds used it as a shelter, and they had piled a low wall of stones across the opening. Inside, the cave roof was blackened by the smoke of many fires. It was cool in there out of the sun. They sat down and Tony said, "Get some rest. I'll watch."

Ellen muttered something, and her eyes closed. Tony shifted to where he could see out over the wall. Some kind of bird, a kite or vulture, rode the high air on motionless wings, the ragged flange tips sharply outlined. Otherwise the world was empty. Tufts of low gray-green scrub grew scantily on the slope between crumbled drifts of stone. Ridges—one high and dark with a saw-toothed crest and a face all torn and rotten with erosion, the other low and smooth and chocolate brown—enclosed the landscape on each side. In front, stretching from the foot of the slope, was a barren plain across which dust devils raced and whirled. The line of a *qanat,* almost obliterated, was traceable by the broken wells, and where there had once been a village, only the shell was left, abandoned and forlorn. Beyond the village other ridges rose. And there was no sign of a road.

There had been no sign of pursuers either. Tony hoped they had given up and gone home for lunch, but he didn't think it likely, not with Karim urging them on.

Anyway, he and Ellen had got loose from the village. They had made it this far. With luck they might get through. And then—

He was trying to make up his mind whether it would be wiser to stay here until sundown and cross the plain by night, when the darkness would hide them, or to push on again as soon as the midday heat had lessened, and he closed his eyes only for a moment to rest them from the piercing light and monotonous circlings of the ominous bird. He did not realize that he had gone to sleep until he started up in a spasm of alarm and saw that the shadows had stretched themselves out from the ridges, down the slope and onto the plain. The air was cooler. It was past three in the afternoon, and a truck was moving across the plain. It was the sound of the motor that had wakened him.

He stared down. The truck had a canvas-covered body and an official look, augmented by insignia and some lettering on the door panel. Tony let out a cry and shook Ellen awake.

"Look," he said. "Look!"

She did, rubbing sand and sleep from her eyes. The

canvas tilt swayed, trundling across the dry land, the motor grunting and churning, wheels grabbing, throwing clots of dust.

Obviously an official truck. "Water conservation, land survey—who cares? It's government." Tony took Ellen's arm, and they ran out of the cave and down the slope, waving, shouting at the oncoming truck.

Somebody else shouted. Tony turned his head. On the crest of the low chocolate ridge the figures of five men showed clearly against the sky. They plunged downward, running, agile as goats, their dark-blue trousers flapping.

Meanwhile, the truck had altered course and was coming toward the foot of the slope. Tony measured the distance and laughed. He bounded down, spurning rocks and tufts of scrub, Ellen fairly skimming beside him, her face alight with triumph. They were going to make it. They were going to make it with furlongs to spare.

The truck stopped. They rushed up to it, and the door opened and a man in khaki uniform looked out at them, smiling. He held a nice new Colt .45 revolver in his hand, pointing straight at Tony's middle. In quite good English he said, "I think you wait."

Tony said, "You don't understand. We need help, the police—"

The smile widened. "I understand, Mr. Wales. You wait."

They waited, and the men from the village came up, not even hurrying.

# 17

The truck did in a trifle more than an hour what it had taken Ellen and Tony half an agonizing day to accomplish, winding expertly on an unmarked and intricate track that

kept to the level most of the way, resorting to four-wheel drive and steep ascents only occasionally. It was all in knowing what you were doing, Tony thought.

He sat in the back of the truck under the canvas, on a low bench, with the five men from the village. His hands and feet were tied. Ellen was in the cab beside the man in uniform. Through the rear window Tony could just see her head, leaning forward as though in total dejection. He knew how she felt. He watched the landscape unreel behind them with a kind of blank and sullen despair, and the villagers watched him with interest and talked among themselves. They had strong faces, brown and tough as old leather, with wide, gap-toothed smiles and alert dark eyes. They were dressed in coarse dark-blue cloth and homespun shirts. Their hair stuck out black and curling around felt caps, and they all needed shaves. They looked like good men. Tony thought he would have liked them under other circumstances. At the moment he was filled with unlove.

The damned driver with his uniform and his emblems of officialdom. Whom could you trust?

Whom indeed, if not your friend?

They struck the main track below the village and sped along at a good clip. Tony saw the fields and the poplar gardens, and then they were through the gate, and Yadollah in homespun blue was looking in through the back of the tilt. Home again, home again, jiggety jig.

The entire village seemed to be on hand to witness their return. Little boys in ragged shirts and striped trousers. Little girls in short frocks and long leggings. Women in chadors, with long trousers under their full skirts. Men in blue pants and round jackets. Dogs, goats, donkeys, chickens, pigeons. It was like a triumphal tour, walking the dusty streets. They passed a water channel, where women and girls washing clothes stopped their work and peered sidelong. One of them was bathing a naked infant. It stood squalling in the cold water, its belly protruding like a cantaloupe, while she turned to look. She had a lovely face, slender-featured and

delicate, with sparkling eyes. It seemed to Tony that the eyes held kindness and pity along with the curiosity. Then she busied herself with the child again.

They passed through into the courtyard with the dye shed and the weaving room and the upper floor, whence they had fled with such labor. They were not allowed to go up there but were thrust into a small storage cell at one side of the court. It had a door of saplings, sufficient to keep stray animals out and people in, as long as Yadollah stayed beside it.

Ellen sat on the earthen floor, her legs stretched out, her back against the wall. Tony stood, his head thrust forward. He made a few tentative motions, like a tethered animal, and then he shouted at Yadollah to bring water, full of an impotent fury against the forces that were making them slaves and prisoners and would presently make them dead. He felt like hurling himself against the door, clawing and screaming. Yadollah regarded him through the saplings with maddening detachment.

"He doesn't understand you," Ellen said. *"Ab. Ab,* Yadollah. *Lotfan—"*

Yadollah seemed to find this tremendously amusing. He repeated the words, mocking her accent, laughing. Across the court the women had come out of the weaving room. They ranged from a handsome mature woman with a babe in arms down to the seven-year-old, a beautiful bright-eyed charmer in a cut-down chador, her native impishness subdued by shocked astonishment. She came suddenly running across the court, the chador slipping away from her to trail in the dust. "Khanum! Khanum!" she cried, and clutched the saplings.

Ellen smiled and said, "Zhale. It's all right, love."

Yadollah growled at the child and thrust her away. The woman with the baby, evidently Zhale's mother, caught her hand and attacked Yadollah in furious Persian, her eyes ablaze. The others—two teen-age girls and a young woman—joined her. Yadollah flung up his hands and cursed the lot, then turned his back on them. The girls ran away and presently returned with water jars and bowls of food. Zhale's mother opened the door for them, and Yadollah did not try

to prevent it. The girls spoke to Ellen, smiling, glanced shyly at Tony, and hurried out as soon as they had set their burdens down. Zhale watched, the unaccustomed chador pulled askew over her black curls.

Tony wished he knew the Persian for "Thank you," but made the English do. Ellen evidently did know it. At any rate they got the message. Giving Yadollah a scornful look, they went back to the loom. Tony picked up one of the water jars and drank—and thought of Sandra who had wanted no part of his problems.

When they had fed and used the last of the water to clean themselves up a bit, Tony sat beside Ellen, and she said, "I don't suppose I ever really believed I'd get away. It was just that I had to do something. I wonder what Karim will do with us now."

"I don't know," Tony said. He took her hand and held it.

The shadows stretched across the court. Through the wide open door of the weaving room Tony could see the women crouching comfortably on the bench in an attitude that made his legs ache to see it, fingers flying as they knotted and cut, knotted and cut the many-colored threads, following a pattern drawn on paper and tacked to the headpiece of the loom. Zhale's mother nursed the fat baby under her chador while she worked. When the light was too far gone to show color, they left the loom and went away, looking toward the sapling door as they passed. Doubtfully, Zhale waved.

"Won't all these people talk?" asked Tony. "Somebody's bound to come asking."

"They know better," Ellen said. "This isn't a free village yet. I don't know who owns it, but whoever it is must be working with Karim, or at least willing to help him. Otherwise, of course, he wouldn't dare do this. You can depend on it that the people have had their orders."

"Convenient."

"Yes, very."

"Efficiency," said Tony. "The good old American know-how. There's nothing like it."

The line of shadow slid high up the eastern wall. In the

dusk someone came to speak to Yadollah, and the sapling door was opened. The someone was Karim, though Tony did not recognize him at once. He was dressed like a villager, and his jaw was shadowed by a dark stubble.

"What are you going to do with us?" Tony asked. He stood close to Ellen so that their shoulders touched.

"That," said Karim, "is in the hands of God."

They moved through the village streets in the smoke of the evening fires. The government truck and the man in uniform were waiting beside the gate. Saad was with him. Ellen and Tony were put into the back amid a litter of folded sleeping rugs and bundles tied up in cloth. Karim, Yadollah, and several men from the village got in and sat on the benches. Saad got into the front seat with the driver. The truck rolled away in a fury of barking, the village curs running after.

Karim spoke.

"We are village men going to work on a government irrigation project. If the truck is stopped, you will lie quietly under those rugs. If we should be forced to make a break for it, your bodies will be between us and their guns. It's just possible they might hold their fire. At least for a few moments."

Tony said, "That's fine. And what happens if we get through to wherever we're going? Do you pat us on the head and tell us to go and sin no more?"

"You wonder about that, Tony. It'll keep you better occupied than tearing holes in roofs." With a touch of completely human viciousness he added, "If it's any consolation to you, you didn't even come close to making it."

"It's no consolation," Tony said, "but it's no surprise either."

The truck churned on, apparently retracing the path it had taken earlier in the day. The clear dusk deepened into clear night. The village men dozed and swayed on the benches. Karim and Yadollah, one on each side, remained awake and alert, each in his own fashion—Yadollah with the unquestioning patience of an animal, Karim taut and still as a wait-

ing bowstring. Ellen and Tony rolled with the rolling of the truck, and Tony did as Karim bade him and wondered. He was distracted by the fact of Ellen's body packed close to him, a strong but very female body jolting in unison with his. It was the first time he had thought about her that way. He seemed to have a genius for the inopportune.

They reached the plain where the dead village was and trundled across it, then climbed what appeared to be a short stretch of road, rough and narrow as a goat track, over a ridge. The driver seemed to know his way so well that he was almost lighthearted about it, running at speeds that made Tony think all their problems were likely to be solved at once in a single grand crash.

The truck halted abruptly in a place of rock and sand beneath a line of ragged cliffs. There were voices, and men appeared in the darkness, leading donkeys. Tony heard Saad get out of the truck. It started on again, leaving behind the small group of shadows. One of the donkeys brayed, a harsh sob that sounded like the very voice of loneliness. Then again the night was empty and still, except for the grinding and snorting of the truck.

They ran on for another two hours or so, and then Tony realized that they were on a road, a stony track rutted with use. Karim had shifted his position on the bench, and there was a new feeling of tension. Presently the driver rapped on the window and Karim said, "We're coming out on the main road now. Yadollah—"

Yadollah began roughly to bury Ellen and Tony beneath the rugs and bundles.

"There'll be roadblocks," Tony said, fighting to keep his face free.

Yadollah kicked him for his pains, and Ellen said, "Get off me, you great lout." He felt her struggling away on the hard metal floor of the bed. Eventually they settled without choice, side by side, embedded in the heap of dunnage that stank of smoke and sweaty wool and goats.

Karim said, "We've bypassed one block. If there are others—" He shrugged and left the sentence hanging.

Tony's arm lay across Ellen's body. He could feel her breathing. The rhythm of it broke, became uneven. He moved his head, and his cheek came against hers. It was wet. She was crying, not making any sound. He pulled her closer to him, if that were possible, with a totally unfamiliar desire to guard and comfort her. She whispered, "I'm frightened, Tony."

"So am I," he whispered back, and kissed her, tasting bitter salt, and her mouth was hungry, tremulous, with a fierce need for . . . what? Tony felt it himself, and he wasn't sure. Something more than physical contact, more than sex, although sex was part of it. The need, perhaps, to feel that one was not completely alone beneath the falling ax. And there was another of his defenses down. He was not at all sure that he liked it.

He held her, in their ludicrous and smelly bed, as gently as he could, and she clung to him and ceased gradually to weep. The truck clambered up onto a hard, smooth surface and swung about, clashing its gears. The motor settled to a steady whine as they went south, gathering speed.

Tony drifted into an uneasy doze, a physical necessity from which his mind kept rousing him with promptings of alarm, only to succumb again to weariness and the hypnotic motion of the truck. He had no idea how long they had been on the road when the motion broke in a long, sliding squeal of brakes and Karim shook him, saying harshly, "Roadblock. Lie very still. And pray."

# 18

Tony's mind began furiously to work. The truck had halted, and he could hear voices outside. If he shouted, called for help, fought, yelled Karim's name—

Ellen was motionless beside him, as though she were holding her breath.

Yadollah had pulled another rug over their heads so that they were completely hidden and completely blind. Tony sweated, almost crying with indecision. Help was so close. He could hear it moving about, hear it talking with the driver. He stirred convulsively, and a great weight descended on him, crushing the dusty rug into his face. Ellen's fingers tightened on him, and he remembered Karim's voice saying, "Your bodies will be between us and their guns."

Not a good place to be. The chances of getting shot by the Iranian soldiery were about 100 percent. The chances of getting shot by Karim and Yadollah were even better.

He was still a coward, and he was afraid for Ellen. He decided to wait.

The conversation continued. The driver and the men on the roadblock seemed to know one another. The voices were easy, and there was laughter. A gleam of light showed through a chink in the rug, as though someone had beamed a torch in over the tailgate. It was gone again almost at once. An official truck, a government conservation officer, a handful of sleepy villagers on their way to a job—who would suspect?

Apparently no one. There were some final words, and the truck started on again. Tony felt weak with relief and disappointment.

When they were moving at full speed, the rug was pulled aside, and Karim said, "So far God is good. Now you have a chance."

"We do?"

"I think I told you, Tony. There's no reason for me to kill you now except as a personal act, to get back at you, and that's Saad's style, not mine. He wanted me to kill you both, just as a sensible precaution. He wasn't at all happy when I said no. Owing to your blundering goodwill, Tony, I owe you both a life. I'll try to see that you get it."

Ellen said, "You're going to let us go?" She sounded as incredulous as Tony felt.

"Of course I can't do that, not yet. But if we reach Isfahan safely, I can arrange to have you looked after until—" He paused. "Until what will happen has happened. After that

you can go, because after that, either way, it won't make any difference."

They were silent, considering this.

Tony's first reaction was an inner cry of joy. They were not going to die. All they had to do was play it safe and quiet and wait the game out.

And why not? It wasn't up to him to try to be a hero. Karim and Maktabi could fight it out between them. This was their country. It was nothing to Tony Wales what happened to it.

All he had to do now was sit and be safe. It was a lovely feeling.

Ellen drew one deep, shuddering breath and let it out again. Her fingers trembled, clutching his so tightly that they hurt.

The truck roared southward. The village men snored on the benches. In the darkness under the tilt Tony could see Karim as a man-shaped featureless bulk against the paler canvas, the pose of the head suggesting remoteness and strength, as though it were contemplating a destiny above the understanding of most men, something grand and dreadful and unstoppable as earthquake or flood. *He has given us our lives,* Tony thought. *I ought to be grateful. And I don't care what he's planning to do.*

The sun rose and showed him Karim's face, hollowed, drawn, tired, the face of a man who has lived a long time with death as a companion. For a moment it seemed to Tony that Karim was the prisoner and not he. For a moment he was touched with pity.

Only for a moment. *No,* Tony thought, *I don't care a damn what he's planning to do. I only care about what he's already done. And I am not that grateful.*

The truck crossed over a desert plain with barren mountains set about it. Presently there was a village and patches of cultivation, and a while later Tony saw one big saddle-backed peak like the one that hulks over Monterrey in Mexico, and he remembered it from the time he had been here before. They were approaching Isfahan.

The village men were awake now. So were Karim and Yadollah. Once more Tony felt the heartstrings pull tight, saw the predatory brilliance in Karim's eye. This was the last hurdle.

They crossed the Zayenda Rud on one of the old bridges. Tony could hear that there was water still running in the channel. They passed into the streets of Isfahan, thronged with people and traffic, and the truck was not stopped. Apparently authority was depending on the roadblocks, and Tony could see why. If you stopped all this and checked it out piece by piece, you would only have one large hell of a mess which your quarry could see miles away and avoid. Since the river runs right through the city, you could not even tie up the bridges without causing chaos.

So they were through. As the truck swung, Tony caught a glimpse of domes and minarets. These vanished as the driver turned into a tangle of narrow streets, and they went with the horn sounding constantly and the brakes jarring, avoiding donkeys, sheep, goats, barrows, and people. Eventually they made a sharp turn and jolted in through some narrow place that set the echoes banging. The truck stopped. Tony saw a deep arched gateway like a tunnel, high enough to accommodate a loaded camel and wide enough, just, for a loaded truck. The great plank doors, with huge iron bosses as black as the wood, were being pushed shut by two men. The massive bar dropped into place. Karim drew the rug away and said, "God is still good to you. Get out."

Stiff and cramped, Tony shifted to let everyone else go ahead of him while he helped Ellen, who needed help as badly but no worse than he did. He put his head close to hers and whispered, "I'm going to run for it if I can."

She gave him a clear, hard look. "Not going to play it safe?"

"No. Stay out of it, and you'll be all right."

"The hell with that," she answered, unladylike. "I'll go with you."

They stumbled out of the truck into a large square paved with stone and closed on four sides by low buildings with rows of alcoved chambers up and down—one of the old

caravanserais of the bazaar. Caravans were long gone, and it was now used for storage. The buildings were pierced by two gates—the outer one through which they had entered and an inner one on the opposite side of the square.

"I don't have to tell you," said Karim, "what happens if you do anything stupid."

"I know," said Tony, and looked at Yadollah. "I get it the same way Harvey got it. Was it here?"

"No. In another part of the bazaar. Keep together and walk slowly."

They walked, with Karim and Yadollah and the conservation officer ringed around like sheepdogs. The village men were clustered by the outer gate, and Tony saw that they were leaving one by one through a small postern door set in the big one. He glanced toward the inner gate. It too had a postern, so that the heavy doors did not have to be wrestled with every time someone wished to pass through. It looked like the only other way out of the serai. There might be rear entrances to the buildings; but he couldn't count on that, and anyway, they would take too long to find. The postern door was closed, and there was a bar across it.

He didn't know. He was not used to this sort of game, and he didn't know how to play it, how to preguess the moves. If he and Ellen made the try, how much chance would they have? He knew that the conservation man had a gun. Would he use it? Gunshots were noisy—but maybe he had a silencer. He didn't know if Karim was armed. Yadollah didn't have to be; his weapons were built in.

What would he, Tony, do exactly? Just rush the door and try to get the bar up and climb through before the men killed him? Or would it be wiser to wait and try the break later? They might have a better chance. Or they might have none at all. And they might be separated. Probably would be, after their joint effort at the village.

He was going to have to make up his mind pretty soon. The group was moving on an angle across the court, and they would pass the nearest approach to the gate in a matter of seconds.

The sun beat down in the windless court, dry and stinging. Pigeons winged overhead, perched cooing on the roof. Black-and-gray crows eyed the intruders wickedly and screamed at them. The buildings slept, remembering old days, the broken lattice doors of the chambers closed like the eyes of the dead. Even in decay the pointed arches of the alcoves were graceful, the symmetry of line and proportion unchanged. There was something curiously satisfying about mud brick and stucco as building materials. They sat the earth well.

There was a slash of shadow under the arch of the gate, which was just opposite. *Oh, hell,* thought Tony, and leaned his weight against Ellen's shoulder. "The gate, now."

She ran, her long legs swinging. She didn't run like a girl, all knock-kneed and kicking her feet out at the sides. She ran like a boy or a goddamned deer. He couldn't keep up with her. "The bar," he shouted. "Get the bar up." He heard noises behind him and looked over his shoulder, the skin crawling tight across his back. The conservation officer was fitting a baffle onto his .45. Karim was standing still, every feature sharp in the pitiless sunlight—a statue, colored deadly.

Yadollah was thundering up on Tony's heels, his arm upraised like the beam of a trip-hammer.

Tony stumbled on the old uneven stones. He saw the blow start downward, the neck breaker that had finished Harvey, and he flung himself desperately against it, catching Yadollah's arm in both his hands. He had some idea of throwing Yadollah the way he saw people thrown on TV, judo style, using the forward impetus. It was like trying to throw an oak tree by grabbing one of its branches. While he hung struggling, Yadollah's left hand fetched him a buffet in the side that drove the breath out of him and put him gurgling on his knees. He discovered some more of the uses of anger. Instead of sobbing or vomiting or both, he pushed himself off the ground and butted Yadollah as hard as he could in the lower gut.

Astonishingly, Yadollah fell. Fell in a great awkward bone-

less heap, splashing blood over the dusty stones. *My God,* thought Tony, his head ringing, *did I do that? How?* Ellen was calling his name, screaming it. He saw Karim doubled over, running, dodging, toward the nearest shelter. The conservation man was standing irresolute, staring with his mouth open at some men who had appeared among the alcoves of the building in the area toward which they had been going when Tony had interrupted.

The strangers were busy shooting, their silenced guns making popping sounds that were barely audible over the cawing of the crows.

# 19

Karim jinked abruptly in flight, fell, rolled, scrambled up, and ran again. He flung himself into one of the ground-floor alcoves and hit the door. It let him through in a frail dry crackling of wood as the ancient lattice split apart. The conservation man was now sitting down, his head sunk forward in an attitude of profound thought. Something snarled past Tony's ear, rasping his nerves like a naked file. He had never been shot at before, but instinct got the message through to him, loud and clear. He stopped goggling and ran.

Lead hit twice on the stones close beside him, making a peculiarly vicious, angry whine as it ricocheted. Ellen had already climbed through the postern and was standing on the other side looking back at him, her arm outstretched. He noticed that there were holes in the wood around the postern; they had been shooting at Ellen, too. A bullet burned across his hip and went *thunk!* into the gate ahead of him. Ellen grabbed his hand, and he forged through the postern, stumbling on the high sill, landing on all fours on earth packed as hard as brick by the passing feet of centuries. Ellen

banged the postern shut; but it wouldn't stay, and there was no fastening on this side.

"They're coming," she said as the door swung open again. "Are you all right?"

"I think so." He picked himself up. "What the hell? Who —" Blinking in the dim light that seemed like no light at all after the blaze of the open court, he became aware of people all about, amazed and staring at this sudden eruption. They were in one of the covered streets of the bazaar, with shops chiefly occupied by sellers of cloth. A group of women directly opposite were frozen in the act of fingering a length of the gauzy speckled stuff that seemed to be the "in" thing for chadors, their mouths open on unspoken words. The merchant was looking over Tony's shoulder with dawning alarm. All up and down the street, in the shafts of sunlight from the roof openings, people were stopping, turning their heads.

And the men in the courtyard, at least a couple of them, were coming fast. The others, presumably, were hunting Karim.

Tony caught Ellen's hand, and they hurried away, moving in among the crowd.

"What was all that about?" demanded Tony, his voice rising to a pubescent squeak with shock and indignation. He fingered his hip gingerly. It was smarting, and his fingers came away red.

"I don't know," Ellen answered. She kept looking over her shoulder. "They were after all of us, including Karim. I think they hit him. What's the matter?"

"I've been shot," said Tony, and held up his hand with the stained fingers.

"Badly?"

The line came automatically; he had heard it so many times. The headshake, the gallant little smile. "Just a scratch." A real scratch, with real blood, his. He wanted to throw up. And those were real men behind him, with real guns.

"Are they still coming?"

They were. Two men in store suits, conspicuous in the

midst of reach-me-down poverty, shouldering roughly through the throng. Their hands were empty now, but there was a purposefulness in the way they moved that made Tony shiver.

He hurried on with Ellen, and it was like running down a long, dim corridor into time. These were the oldest streets of the bazaar, where the people lived and worked exactly as they had when Shah Abbas had thrown his fantastic parties at the Ali Qapu for the emissaries of Good Queen Bess. The women covered their faces. There were fakirs with strings of greasy hair, chanting beggars, bearded mullahs in robes and turbans. Ragged men strained under heavy burdens. A loaded donkey, trotting fast, knocked Tony aside, and the small fierce-faced man who drove it went by shouting his monotonous warning cry without ever glancing at the Feringi. They were not used to foreigners here and did not welcome them. Tony spoke to several men at random, asking for help and the police; but they only turned away, and the two men came closer. Tony and Ellen ran in the sour-smelling, smoky gloom, with the hostile faces staring at them, and the street seemed to go on forever.

At last there was daylight ahead, an opening. "Look," said Tony, "we're all right. We're out of it." Ellen gave a sob of relief. They plunged into the light.

And stopped, dismayed. They were still in the bazaar, in the street of the blacksmiths. Forge fires burned in open stalls, and sweating men swung hammers. The way was blocked on the right by a wall that seemed to have no gate in it. Tony turned to the left, and Ellen followed close behind him. There was no place to hide, nowhere to go but straight ahead. They took temporary cover behind a parked truck, and an old woman who sat on the step of a coffee stall smoking the public pipe watched them as curiously as though they were Martians.

Looking back, Tony said, "I think we lost them." Then he saw the men come out, still determinedly on the trail, and he groaned and took Ellen's hand again. They fled down the clangorous street under the bright Persian sky, and all at once

Tony saw two men ahead of them, coming their way. They too wore store suits, and they seemed to be looking for something. When they sighted Ellen and Tony, it was apparent that they had found it.

"Oh, lord," said Ellen. "What now?"

"There," said Tony, seeing a dark opening ahead and to their left. They raced the oncoming pair to it and beat them and dived back into the maze of covered streets.

The second set of men came in after them, running.

The slow-moving crowd hampered them all. Tony twisted and turned, trying to avoid knocking anybody down. The others were more ruthless, and Tony could judge their progress by the explosions of furious Persian. They were making much too good time. Tony looked desperately for some straw to grasp at, no matter how frail. At an intersection of two streets there was a shop selling samovars. He put on a burst of speed, swung Ellen around the corner, and then swept the whole display of samovars into the street. Instant bedlam broke loose. Some people tripped and fell. The shopkeeper sprang at Tony, shouting, and Tony pushed him into the crowd. Then he ran with Ellen into the transverse street.

It turned out to be a poor choice. It was wide and empty, and it went for a quarter of a mile without an exit. There were no busy shops here, only the little forges of the coppersmiths. The emptiness made for good running, but the crowd, Tony realized, had been a protection, as well as a nuisance.

The two men appeared again behind them, and now there was nothing at all to stop them shooting.

Nevertheless, they did not. Ellen and Tony reached the end of the street intact and turned into another. It was populous and lined with shops, and Tony's heart leaped up.

"I think I know where I am," he said, panting like a dog. "This is the touristy part; somebody will speak English."

Ellen gripped his shoulder and pointed. Three more men in suits had appeared from among the crowd and were rapidly closing.

Now Tony understood why the other two had not fired. They had simply let them run ahead into the trap.

Without giving it any thought at all, Tony charged the foremost of the men, the one who chiefly barred the way. "Run, Ellen!" he yelled. "Get help!" He went in low, and the man sidestepped gracefully, bent his knee, and picked an uppercut neatly off the floor. Tony went down with the feeling that his head had flown off and was bouncing on along the street all by itself. It was a giddy sensation, and when it stopped, he saw that two of the men had caught Ellen and were holding her between them. It took two of them. The men from the street of the blacksmiths had come up and joined the group, looking sweated and cross. No one in the general crowd was making any move to help; they all had drawn well back out of range. Tony sat on the hard earth and looked at Ellen, and then he began yelling, "Help! Police!" at the top of his voice.

The fifth man, the one he had tackled, came around from behind him where he had been talking to the others, apparently giving instructions. He stood over Tony in the shadowy half-light and said, "You damn fool, we are the police. I'm sorry I had to belt you, but you have to admit you had one coming."

"Oh, for Christ's sake," Tony said. He felt like crying. "You Armenian son of a bitch."

He grasped Zacharian's outstretched hand as one grasping a lifeline in a deadly sea. "What are you doing here anyway?"

Zacharian pulled him up. "Looking for Karim. Maktabi was sure he'd make for Isfahan. He's got a dozen teams in the *souk,* fifty men, and it's a drop in the bucket. You—"

"He's here," Tony said. "He's here."

"I guessed that," said Zacharian patiently, "when I saw you. What I want to know is where."

# 20

One of the men identified the particular caravanserai and led them to it quickly. But when they got there, the street looked unfamiliar to Tony. It was all deserted now, the people gone, the shops shut. He was going to say it was the wrong place, and then he saw the postern door still swinging open, and he knew it was the right one. They went through into the courtyard—Tony, Zacharian, and three Iranian security men. The fourth one had taken Ellen Lofting out of the bazaar.

The truck, Yadollah, and the conservation officer were still there in the quiet sunlight. Crows hopped and pecked around the bodies, finding them fascinating but rather daunting carrion. Everybody else had gone. The crows went, too, as the men came in. Tony pointed out the broken door, and the Iranians rushed to search the building. Zacharian talked rapid Persian with a small and very busy communicator. Other men were already appearing as Maktabi's teams began to converge on this quarter of the bazaar.

Tony stood looking down at Yadollah. "He killed Harvey Martin. With one blow." He shook his head and turned to where the armed men had appeared so suddenly. "I don't get it, Jake. They were waiting for us right over there. They didn't say anything, just started shooting. They were after all of us, Karim, me, Ellen. My God, I don't know how they missed any of us."

Zacharian switched off the communicator. "They were using silencers, weren't they?" He turned aside to answer some of the Iranian security men who were coming in. The serai and the streets around it were becoming as busy as a beehive in spring.

Tony said yes, they were.

"A baffle cuts down the noise, but it also cuts the accuracy. They were waiting for you to come within point-blank range; only you and Ellen broke up the party a little too soon."

Tony touched his hip. "They got close enough. They hit Karim, too. I think they went in there after him." He moved restlessly, shifting his feet on the stones. He could hear men crashing about through the buildings, calling to one another. "Who were they, Jake?"

"Some of Saad's boys. Who else?"

"I can see why he'd want to kill me," said Tony. "I know he did, and Ellen, too. But why would he want to kill Karim? They were working together."

"Not exactly. They were using each other. Now Saad's job is to protect the network. It's taken years and a lot of painstaking effort to build it, and they don't want it blown. It's vastly more important than Karim to them, whereas Karim couldn't care less. If he's caught, he can use that knowledge as a bargaining point, and they know he wouldn't hesitate to do it. So instead of an asset, he is now a dangerous liability. I don't know about Yadollah and him." He prodded the conservation man's body gently with his foot. "Chances are they just got in the way . . . and clean sweeps are generally best." He looked from the body to the truck. "The bastard. No wonder you got past the roadblocks."

Tony started to say something, and Zacharian said, "Save it for Maktabi." The men were beginning to come out of the buildings now. They had not found Karim, dead or alive. Zacharian conferred with them while Tony stood impatiently, glaring at the walls as though he would pierce them with X-ray vision and see where Karim had gone to. The pigeons flew about in dismay, their wings flashing in the sun.

"Come on," Zacharian said. "There's nothing more we can do here, and Maktabi wants to talk to you."

Tony hesitated, reluctant to leave.

"They know their business, Tony. You can't help them."

Tony shrugged and went with him.

"You still haven't told me what you're doing here, Jake. You personally, I mean."

"I'd run out of things to do at the other end. I left about the same time you did. Maktabi thought I might be useful here."

Tony walked beside him in silence. Then he said, "I'm not proud of that night, Jake."

"You might have stayed sober. Other than that, it was our job."

"I'm sorry about George."

"Not as sorry as I am. Were you able to learn anything from Karim's records?"

"I got two possibles."

"Tell me."

He did, and Zacharian whistled. "The Marlowe Foundation. That's very interesting."

"I guess there's no doubt about Bronson anymore. Or Byron and Cornellis."

"Our British friends are working on them now. I'd say your time hasn't been entirely wasted."

They emerged into the open sunlight of the maidan. Zacharian guided Tony toward a car, one of many parked along the curb.

"By the way," he said, "I'm glad to see you alive. None of us ever thought we would."

"That was Karim's doing."

"Why?"

"He's too proud to kill for spite. That would have put him on Saad's level. And he said he owed us a life."

"Ah," said Zacharian. "A touch of scruple. Does it make a difference?"

"No," said Tony. "Not one damn bit."

Zacharian gave him a peculiar look. Then he fitted the car deftly into the swirl of traffic around the maidan. Tony watched the entrance to the bazaar as long as he could see it. Its tunnel mouths were alien, cryptic, full of shadows. The bazaar had been gathering secrets for hundreds of years; it could hold one more. Tony had the feeling it was going to.

He spent four hours in a large room in a large official building with Hanookh Maktabi. Ellen Lofting was already there. Zacharian and some other men sat in, and when they were through, they had everything out of Ellen and Tony but their last drop of blood and all the official wires were humming.

Saad was one important topic of conversation.

"We have not been able to identify him," Maktabi said. "He has not been connected with any of our subversives. We think it probable that he is a Lur, educated in Baghdad, where he would have been able easily to join the party. Later, you see, he could have returned to Iran with no black mark on his record. The chances are that he will try now to get back across the Iraqi border." Maktabi indicated a section of a wall map that looked to Tony like nothing but a tangle of mountains. "Wild and lonely country, and if he is a Lur, he will have the help of his tribesmen. Still, we shall do our best."

Zacharian interrupted. "May I say something?"

"Of course, Yakoub."

"If I were Saad, I'd make all the motions of going for the border so that everyone would be looking for me there, and then I'd go the other way. Remember, there's still Karim. The job got messed up this morning. He has to answer for that to his superiors, and they're not very patient with people who make mistakes. Saad might have to forgo Ellen and Tony, but I can't see him forgoing Karim with the knowledge of the whole Western network in his head. If I were he, I'd stay around and be sure the job was properly done. Remember, he probably knows where to look."

*"Mm,"* said Maktabi. "Yes. That is possible. We will keep it in our minds. Now. We must identify that village. When we know who the owner is, we may be a step nearer." A tired man, the lines drawn deep around his mouth, he looked from Ellen to Tony. He reminded Tony of someone. Corbett. The tough men, the unquitters. "You are sure that you can remember nothing more that may have been said about the

Lion? Anything that might suggest when this rebellion will start or how?"

Ellen shook her head. "He was very careful when he talked to me. Never dropped a clue. He wouldn't even discuss his motives."

Maktabi lighted another of the cigarettes he had been chain smoking. His hands were so steady that Tony realized how much effort it was taking to hold them that way.

"He told Mr. Wales that they had everything in hand. That would indicate that they were ready to strike."

The men agreed.

"Then why is it," demanded Maktabi, "that our agents among the tribes have seen not the slightest sign of unrest or preparation, no unusual movements, nothing? The military are very impatient, gentlemen. They must have some hint in order to strike effectively themselves, if it comes to that." He added grimly, "I would prefer that it does not come to that."

One of the men said, "There may be signs now that the leaders are known and being hunted. They must move quickly or not at all."

"You sound," said Tony, "as though you're all sure Karim got away."

"Obviously he had a strong cell here. That is why he could plan Martin's death so easily. Probably some part of the arms shipments came down through the village to the bazaar here and then were dispersed southward. Karim must have had all arrangements made for his own journey, and he may have been able to slip through immediately after the shooting, while you two were still running from Saad's men. We are combing the bazaar and watching all that moves out of the city. But—" Maktabi shrugged.

"He may be dead," Tony said. "He was hit—"

"It is possible, but we can hardly count on it."

"What about his father?"

"Gone. We are questioning all friends and known contacts. So far, nothing. We most urgently wish to have both Hassanis in custody, but until we do, we must continue to follow every possibility. Mr. Wales—"

Tony sighed. "Okay," he said. "What do you want me to do?"

"We would be most grateful if you would help us locate the village. You would recognize it again? Yes. We shall do the search by helicopter, as well as by car. If you would accompany—"

Ellen said, "With me, you could cover twice as much ground."

"But," said Maktabi, "you have already been through so much."

Ellen stood up, looking tall and British. Tony's heart turned over with a peculiar qualm.

"Then I ought not to mind going through a bit more." She smiled. "Besides, I want to buy that carpet."

Maktabi bowed. "Then I accept most gratefully. Mr. Wales?"

"When do we start?"

"In the morning. I would recommend you both to go now to the hotel, where all will be provided. Ah . . . Miss Lofting, one thing I regret. I cannot allow you to talk to your parents—"

"I was afraid of that," Ellen said.

"Please understand. So many ears listen, and one chance word could be disastrous. We wish to have no panic here at home and no headlines in the international press. I think you can imagine what effect this news would have on holdings and investments."

"I understand. But they must be out of their minds with worry. Isn't there some way—"

"Yes. I will have them notified that you are safe and well. This can be done through our own channels. For the rest, they must wait."

"Well," said Ellen, "that at least is an act of mercy. Thank you. Now about that hotel—" She looked down at herself, brushing at the grime and tatters. "Do you think they'll let me in?"

Zacharian laughed. "Tony's a worse mess than you are." A police surgeon had patched up the flesh wound neatly

enough, but there had been no help for the trousers. "Come on, we'll do some shopping."

They said good-bye and went out. Tony noticed that when they drove away from the building, a second car followed them, with two men in it.

"What's that for?"

"Personal escort. You do understand the risk you're taking, working with us?"

"Of course," said Ellen.

Zacharian glanced at Tony, waiting for him to say something.

"I was just thinking," Tony said, "that when you do get shot at, it's nice to know that the guns, silencers, and ammo are all courtesy of your own firm. How did he do it, Jake? Or do you know? You were talking Persian a lot of the time."

"The assumption is that some of those major appliances were dummies, with innards that were never designed to make ice cubes or roast meat. They may have been passed on intact to dealers and then to individuals—Maktabi's boys are checking on that—or they may have been broken up in Karim's warehouse and sent down the line by other means. Probably a combination of the two methods, depending on the ultimate destination. This may have been one of the things Karim was afraid of Harvey's finding out if he began checking inventories."

"Fine," said Tony. "What came inside the radios? Bombs?"

Zacharian said, "You really are mad, aren't you?"

"He really is," Ellen said. "At the moment. I'm waiting to see if it's permanent."

Tony smiled with the hard edges of his teeth. "You know what you both can do?"

Zacharian swung into the Chahar Bagh, leaning hard on the horn. A shoal of bicycles swerved like minnows.

"I can guess," he said. "If you're still with us at the end of this, I might even do it."

# 21

Sometime later, bathed, shaved, and freshly dressed, Tony sat on the balcony of his room at the Shah Abbas and drank a vodka and tonic, watching the dusk fill the quadrangle while the lamps came on and the stars took fire overhead and the everlasting crows went finally to rest. This too had been a caravanserai, and the transformation into a luxury hotel had been achieved with no sacrifice of the original architecture. The whole effect was stunningly beautiful, except that the immemorial pattern of arched alcoves and deep gates was too reminiscent of that other ruinous serai in the bazaar.

There were further items to remind him. A man was posted in the lobby and another in the corridor, a third on the roof where he could overlook the quadrangle. Tony wondered how the hotel management felt about the possibility of having some of its six-million-pound investment shot up.

He drank his vodka and tonic. The sky darkened; the stars grew brighter. He felt restless and excited, curiously happy; he felt as if he had been popping pills, but of course he hadn't. He went inside and picked up the phone and asked for Ellen's room.

She answered on the first ring. "Yes? Oh, hello, Tony."

"Can I come see you?"

"Please do."

He went out into the corridor, and the guard immediately sprang alert, watching him, hawk-eyed, while he knocked on Ellen's door. She let him in, grinning.

"Do you have the feeling you're being watched?"

"Maybe we ought to leave the door open. Or call for a chaperon."

"I don't think they're worried about that."

"Are you?"

"At this late date?"

She shut the door. She was wearing a rose-colored sort of shift that set off the long, slim lines of her body and stopped well short of the knees. Tony whistled.

"Don't tell me the Persian gals are going in for these things."

"You'd be surprised what some of them wear under their chadors. Latest import from Rome." She smelled beautifully of cleanliness and shampoo. Her hair was still damp. "Do come in," she said.

He did. The original large rectangle of the room had had one rear corner partitioned off for a modern bath, with closets opposite. The remainder of the room contained a double bed, a couch, coffee table, desk, and chair. At the front a glass door looked out onto the balcony and the gardens below. The glass door was new, backing up the original one, a latticework of carved wood like the one Karim had crashed through this morning.

"I thought we might have a drink together."

"Lovely."

"And perhaps dinner?"

"Why so formal? Haven't we shared our yogurt stew?"

He laughed. "All right then. Do you feel like facing the dining room?"

"Not especially. Do you?"

"No."

"Good."

She handed him the menu from the desk, and they sat down on the couch to study it.

"Good God," Tony said. "Cheeseburgers with onions and french fries. That's chips to you. In Isfahan?"

"You people are corrupting the entire world."

"All this and Coca-Cola, too. The hell with that. Caviar?"

"Why not? It's the best in the world."

"And champagne? I think we're entitled to a celebration."

"Yes," said Ellen. "Rather. We are alive."

Tony rang room service. While they waited, they talked rather stiffly as though they were holding back from something

pending interruption. Tony explained that he was wearing one of Zacharian's suits, not one of the three-hundred-dollar mohair jobs but a less expensive model suitable for spy work, and that it did not fit him as well as it did Zacharian. They chatted about the hotel and the long, fascinating, and exceedingly bloody history of the city; Karim had provided her with books, and Ellen had become something of an expert on Persia. Tony listened to her rattle on about Tamerlane and Shah Abbas and the Afghans, not really absorbing much of it but fascinated by her.

"You could sit and read that stuff, not knowing whether you were going to live long enough to finish the book?"

"Of course I did. For the same reason I began chopping that silly hole in the roof. What would you have done?"

"That's a good question, and I'm glad I don't have to answer it." He let the waiter in.

Things went much more smoothly after that. They sat together on the couch, touching lightly at shoulder and hip and knee. The caviar was delicious, but they seemed not to be very hungry. The champagne was cold going down, warm and exhilarating inside. Tony thought, *How corny can you get? This is the kind of seduction scene you see on the late late show and laugh at.* But he was not laughing, and he did not feel like a seducer. There was a new element here, something he had never dreamed he could feel for a woman. It was comradeship. He was absolutely astounded. He turned and stared at her, and she smiled.

"What is it, Tony?"

"I like you," he said.

"You sound astonished."

"I am. I mean . . . I like you just as a person."

"Thank you."

He thought she was mocking him, but he did not care. "Apart from being a woman. I mean—Oh, hell. Ellen—"

She sat watching him, close to him, so close that he could see the texture of her lips, parted just a little, and he leaned toward them, and then he stopped.

"What's the matter, Tony? Afraid?"

"I don't know. I suddenly had the feeling that I ought to ask permission or something. The girls I'm used to—you feed 'em; you jump on 'em; you say good-bye. I know where I am. But you . . . Maybe I am afraid." He shook his head. "Besides, there's Harvey. I guess he'd always be between us."

She finished her champagne and got up, pulled the drawcord on the heavy curtains and put the chain on the door. The shift came off easily, and there was little underneath. She had a beautiful body, slender and long-thighed, small-breasted, firm, the skin like white silk. She watched him, poised and grave-eyed, smiling, while he struggled out of his borrowed suit, and she was still smiling when he caught the smooth warmth of her to him and held her, stroking her back with his fingertips to make it arch and quiver. They kissed as they had done before, hungrily, deeply; only this time there were no tears. He bore her down to the bed.

This seemed to be his season for learning, and he discovered two things. One of them was no surprise; she was strong as an otter, with muscles he hadn't known existed in the female. The second was a revelation; there really was more to it than just bouncing up and down. That one added dimension made all the difference.

All the difference in the world.

Holding her in his arms, holding all that would have been Harvey's, he felt the full extent of his guilt.

And as though she knew exactly what he was thinking, Ellen said, "I've had a lot of time to brood, and I faced up to something that I didn't care much for. Because Harvey loved me so much, I made myself believe that I loved him more than I really did, and of course, that's why— I mean, if I had *really* loved him, I wouldn't have hesitated a moment about coming with him. So there's my handful of guilt to match yours."

"It isn't a whole lot, is it?"

"Tony, we have to close the book and go on. It's no use to keep thinking if only— Karim betrayed you both, and he's the one to settle with, not the past."

"Settle I will," said Tony, "but not you. I want you to go home. Tomorrow."

"Whatever for?"

"Because if anything happened to you—" He broke off, choking with indignation. "God damn it," he said, "I must be in love with you."

"Tony," she whispered. "Oh, Tony!" She tightened up against him, her belly contracting in rhythmic paroxysms, and he realized that she was laughing. It struck him as funny, and he began to laugh as well. They lay in each other's arms laughing like fools, and the world was a wonderful place to live in, and the phone rang, and Tony said, "It's Zacharian."

"How do you know?"

"Instinct," Tony said. "Masculine intuition. Want to bet?"

"What if I lose?"

He kissed her. "Guess."

"Ah, well," she said and got up, glistening white in the lamplight, and answered the phone. "Yes, he's right here." She held the instrument out to Tony, her shoulders lifted in a small shrug. Tony took it and slid his other arm around her waist.

"Hello, Jake."

"I hope I'm not interrupting your dinner."

"No, no," said Tony

"Word just in from London and LA. I thought you might be interested."

"I am."

"Alvarez and Slate were caught putting the torch to their office and warehouse, which are all in the same building. Damage was held to a minimum, and most of the records seem to be intact. Corbett is now tearing apart shipping cases to see what's inside them besides stoves and refrigerators. So far they've found grenades, handguns, rifles, and enough ammo to stock a medium-size revolution, all consigned to a dealer in Beirut—presumably for the benefit of Arab activists. Alvarez and Slate are being questioned. One for our side."

"Good."

"The Marlowe Foundation is a more delicate matter. It has an impeccable façade and an odor of sanctity. The Reverend Dr. Walters, who heads it, is a pure and pious pillar of the community. Probably the best we can hope for there, unless we get very lucky, is to limit the foundation's usefulness as a recruiting and training center. That's LA. In London—"

"Just a moment," Tony said. "The champagne's going flat."

Ellen had been filling the glasses, bending out of the circle of his arm to do so. He took the one she handed him.

"Okay," he said. "Shoot."

Zacharian sighed. "I will say for you, Tony, you're adaptable. Bronson must have had ample warning from Teheran. He destroyed his records and cleared out. He is presumed to be safely behind the Iron Curtain, but the search continues. MI5 is of the opinion that he was one of their top operatives and probably an illegal."

"A what?"

"A Russian using a borrowed identity. Chances are the real Bronson has been dead for years, old school tie and all. The sexy Miss Thompson is being sought for questioning. Byron and Cornellis—"

*Here it comes,* thought Tony, with that familiar knotting of the gut.

"Were laid by the heels at London Airport—for once, their disguises failed them. Preliminary inquiry seems to indicate that they have no political convictions. They simply enjoy murder as a fine art, same as they do Shiraz carpets. They never cared why they killed a man. The pay was good, and the fun was better, and they're terribly unhappy that it's all over. Well, that's it. And I've left calls for five o'clock, so it might be a good idea to turn in early. Will you pass that on to Miss Lofting?"

"I'll be glad to," said Tony, and hung up, feeling great. Dutifully he passed the message on. They never did get around to ordering the rest of their dinner.

# 22

The landscape lay beneath them, a bewilderment of dark, eroded ridges, dry valleys, dun-colored plains laced with the marching lines of *qanats*. Here and there a village with fields and gardens, here and there an unexpected patch of green on the hillslopes where a spring brought life in the midst of barrenness. Northward was the wall of the Elburz with the great pyramid of Demavand rising high and blinding white against the blue. A cruel, clean, beautiful country. Tony's eyes ached with staring at it, and his eardrums vibrated to the steady, churning beat of the chopper blades.

They had been working over a broad area beginning northwest of Qum and swinging gradually south and east, following the line of the Isfahan road. Tony was only sure of one thing about their escape from Teheran, and that was that they had not passed through any town the size of Qum. Ellen, who had come the other way, up from Isfahan, was sure that she had not done so either. That seemed to eliminate the Teheran-Qum-Isfahan roads, and they had turned their attention to the western route, checking out every village within a sensible radius.

Unfortunately both Ellen and Tony had been brought in at night, when it had been difficult to judge distance and direction. Because of local jogs and twists in the road, they could not even be sure of which way they had gone when they left it, and the subsequent windings of the track left them totally confused.

Tony would not have believed that there could be so many villages tucked away in this seemingly unpopulated land. This was the second day, and they still had not found the right one.

Their batting average was as good as the rest of Maktabi's

team. Karim had not been found, nor his father, nor Saad.

At least, Tony thought, he had it better than Ellen. He was up here in the nice cool air with Zacharian and an ordnance map and a cheerful young IAF pilot. Ellen was down on the hot dusty ground in a car with some of Maktabi's men, bucketing over goat tracks. As a matter of fact, she was doing most of the work. Ground car and chopper kept in close contact by radio. The chopper did the preliminary swings, always one jump ahead, saving time by eliminating those places that definitely did not fit the topography. Zacharian was talking with the car now, planning the next section of the sweep. Presently he went over the map with the pilot, who nodded and put the chopper into a long, rising ellipse.

It buzzed up over the spine of a ridge and went sidling down toward a barren plain where dust devils spun and the half-obliterated line of a *qanat* led to a ruined village. Tony sat up straight, squinting against the glare.

"Jake," he said. "I think— Tell him to go over there. I want to see closer."

The chopper skimmed across the plain. The two ridges ahead opened out, one high with an eroded face, the other rounded, low, and smooth. Between them was a slope dotted with scrub and scarred at the top by a dark aperture partially walled with stones.

It was even possible, from this height, to make out the dim line of the trail the conservation truck had followed.

After that it was only a matter of prowling until they saw the village. They circled it while people came out to turn their faces up and stare, and the men stopped working in the fields. Then they landed at a short distance down the road and waited until the car joined them.

For the third time Ellen and Tony entered the village, and no one seemed very happy to see them. Only Zhale ran out smiling and caught Ellen by the hand.

The chief of Maktabi's men questioned the village headman. The others searched. They found no arms. They did find the radio, hidden but not well enough. The man who operated it was gone. Meanwhile, there was a flurry of ac-

tivity over their own shortwave equipment, attempting to track down the owner of the village.

Zacharian translated for Tony and Ellen. "Mottaqi is his name. He's one of the big holdouts, has managed to keep most of his property, and he's on the list of Hassani's known friends. He has an estate outside Rei. They're checking on him now, and his overseer. The headman says the overseer, one Saidian, came here with Karim and a letter from Mottaqi requiring him to obey Karim in all matters. The headman couldn't read the letter himself, being a dropout from the local literacy center, but Saidian read it to him and vouched for Karim. He did keep the letter, which may or may not help us. It says what he said it did, but I'll lay you a signed Imperial Isfahan to a yard of linoleum that Mottaqi never wrote it."

"Karim?"

"Maybe." He glanced around. The headman, exhibiting extreme misery, was being led toward the car. "I guess we're ready to go now. Would you like to come with us, Miss Lofting? The car's going to be a little crowded."

"I'd love to," said Ellen. "And don't forget to tell somebody that I want that carpet."

She kissed Zhale and said good-bye to the weavers and climbed into the helicopter. As they trundled up into the sky, Tony could see a patch of fresh clay on a certain roof. It dwindled rapidly. The village, the poplar gardens, the green fields fell away into remote tranquillity. He put his hand on Ellen's shoulder and said, "Now you can go home."

"Are you going?"

"Not until this is finished. But—"

"Then I stay."

"But there's nothing more you can do! And—"

"No, Tony."

"Hush," said Zacharian. "Both of you. It's up to Maktabi, of course, but I wouldn't count on anybody going home just now."

"Why not?" Tony demanded truculently.

"Same reason he wouldn't let Miss Lofting call her parents. Security."

"She wouldn't—"

"She could hardly avoid it, could she? Like where has she been all this time and why. It's too big a risk."

"Look," said Tony, "I want to stay. But she's a British subject. He can't—'

Ellen said sharply, "Oh, shut up, Tony."

He subsided, grumbling.

They all were quiet the rest of the way to Teheran, feeling the inevitable letdown. Ellen stared ahead at the approaching peaks of the Elburz, and Tony studied her profile, remembering another time he had done that and wondering with childlike astonishment how people and affairs could change so much so quickly.

From the airfield they went to Maktabi's office and gave statements and signed them. Mottaqi's overseer had already been brought in for questioning.

"Mottaqi himself is traveling in Europe," said Maktabi. "He has been away for several months. He could know nothing of Miss Lofting's imprisonment in his village."

"Do you believe that?" asked Zacharian.

"At the moment I do not know what to believe. We shall see what Saidian has to say. Now—" He looked at Ellen and Tony. "It is necessary to make arrangements. I know, Miss Lofting, how anxious you must be to return home, but I am afraid—"

"That's quite all right, Mr. Maktabi," Ellen said firmly. "I prefer to stay."

"But she's in danger here," said Tony. "Look at what's already happened. They—"

"She will be quite safe here in Teheran. I guarantee it. You may stay with her if you wish. Then you too will be safe. Or—"

"Or what?"

"There is another possible service you might perform."

Tony opened his mouth, and Zacharian spoke quickly.

"Think twice, boy. You've already been a hero. Are you sure you don't want to leave the rest of it to the pros?"

"The pros don't know my dear friend and brother as well as I do, and I guess that's what you're counting on, so the answer is no."

"All right," said Zacharian. "I just wanted you to have your chance now because there won't be any later."

"What do you want me—"

"Not now," said Maktabi. "Will you go to the hotel, or will you wait here for a while? There is a chance that Saidian will talk."

"I'll wait," said Tony, and Ellen nodded. Maktabi went out with Zacharian.

"What did he mean, Tony—about no chance for you to back out later?"

"He's got something dreamed up for me. And if I know Jake, I won't like it."

Ellen looked at him for a long moment. "Well," she said, "I can't honestly complain, can I? Not after all the things I've said."

"Jake'll take care of me. He's good." Tony wished that he felt as confident as he sounded. Dimly, and not so very dimly at that, the old familiar instinct stirred in him. Run, get clear. Sit safe in Teheran with Ellen and let the pros do it.

He found the strength to conquer the impulse. Or at least he found the weakness; he was afraid to let Ellen know what he was thinking. Afraid she would get that cold, penetrating expression again, wondering if his reform was only temporary.

In a surprisingly short time Zacharian rang through. "You might as well go on to the hotel. This is going to take awhile."

"Won't he talk?"

"Sure. He's talking a blue streak, and what he's saying is so silly I believe it. But—"

"What's he saying?"

"That he didn't know a damned thing about arms smuggling or captive Feringi ladies. He says Karim led him to understand that he was doing a little light sideline in the for-

bidden poppy and paid him so much for his collusion that he couldn't resist. And he thought Ellen Lofting was—well, he considered that a private matter. He says that's what Karim told him."

Tony swore. "I see. All that work for nothing, in other words." He felt too tired even to get angry about it. Maybe after a while you got so used to banging into brick walls you didn't notice it anymore.

"Yeah," said Zacharian sourly, "I know how you feel. Well, they're doing peripheral research on him, and the questioning continues. Maybe he'll trip himself up. The lab is working on the letter. So go get drunk."

"Might as well," said Tony.

"Not too drunk. It looks now like an early flight to Shiraz."

"Right," said Tony, and hung up.

He did not get drunk at all. This was good-bye night, and he did not want to waste a minute of it or dull the beautiful edge of pain.

For once, Zacharian did not call.

He came early in the morning, while they were finishing breakfast on the balcony overlooking the hotel gardens. He was as immaculate as ever, freshly shaved; but there were dark rings under his eyes, and he was smoking too much.

"Maktabi will meet us at the airport," he said. "The only other news I have is that the letter was definitely written by Karim Hassani, and Saidian never shook on a single word of his story. Mottaqi apparently doesn't know a thing about the Lion. And there is still not the smallest growl out of Fars." He shook his head. "It's a funny kind of revolt, all right. Shy and quiet. The other time it was anything but. The Communists were calling general strikes and whipping up the tribes, screaming slogans from every housetop. The Lion just lies there. I'd give a lot to know what it's waiting for."

"You'll find out," Ellen said. "You'll do it."

"Lady," said Zacharian, "I hope you are a true prophet. And I have never needed a word of encouragement as much as I do this morning."

Ellen studied Zacharian's face in a manner that gave Tony

a sharp twinge of jealousy, which he instantly smothered. Her "You'll do it" had referred to the whole team. This was personal.

"I like you," she said. "You're not one of these dismal secret agents who constantly wring their hands and wonder what it's all about."

"Hell, no," said Zacharian. "I was born and raised here, with the shadow of Mother Russia always in the northern sky. I know what it's all about. Only people who live a long way off can afford to wonder. Ready, Tony?"

He was, as ready as he ever would be. Ellen stood up.

"Can you tell me what you're going to do?"

"Look for Karim. I'm hoping Tony can act as bird dog. Wish us luck."

"I do." She kissed Tony lightly on the lips. "Take care."

He went away, pondering another discovery. It was those little light tender kisses that really tore the heart out of you.

Zacharian said, "That's quite a girl you've got there."

"Have I got her, though? Really? Maybe it's just the way she feels now, because of what's happened. Maybe when she does get home, and starts thinking—"

"Love is like the measles; the older you are when it hits you, the harder it takes. Cheer up, you won't die of it."

"Good old Jake, the sympathetic son of a bitch."

"Think how she's feeling."

"I know. She's lost one man here. What do you think, Jake? Is it just too corny to have it happen twice?"

Zacharian said, "I'm not writing the script."

"You," said Tony, "are a great comfort. Don't ever let me go."

Maktabi was waiting at the airport, and a military jet took them roaring south to Shiraz and the province of Fars. Or Pars. Tony had never been able to keep straight in his mind the reason for the difference in spelling. It was something to do with the imposition of the Arabic alphabet on the Persian language. Anyway, Pars or Fars, it was Karim's country and the end of the line.

It was a smooth flight. The tawny land slid by beneath them, empty and serene.

"It looks peaceful, does it not?" said Maktabi. "And yet those deserts have always been a breeder of whirlwinds. In nineteen sixteen our country was so torn and weakened under the bad government of the Kajars that the Kashgai tribesmen could come and attack Shiraz in force. The Bakhtiaris and the Arabs plundered where they wished. It has taken long and hard and painful work, Mr. Wales—to unify, to pacify, to make a strong and healthy nation. Now your friend wishes to begin the sad old story all over again."

His voice was so harsh and cold with anger that it made Tony cringe even though he was guilty only by default.

"Mahmud Hassani, perhaps, lives too much in the past, is too much under the hands of the mullahs. Too much of anything is bad, Mr. Wales, even piety. But Karim Hassani is young; he lives in the modern world. He is educated. He has traveled. I do not understand him. Is it that he wishes power for himself?"

"I don't know," said Tony. "He was always proud of being from Fars. The true Persia, he called it. Cradle of the empire—as if he were personally descended from Cyrus and Darius. He used to talk a lot about how Persia kind of conquered the world a second time just by having to teach the Arabs everything after they got hold of an empire and didn't know what to do with it. But I never thought— I don't know. Maybe he's just plain out of his tree."

"What?"

"Mad," said Zacharian. "Crazy."

"I'll give him one thing," said Tony. "Whatever it is, he's sincere. He believes it all the way."

"Oh, Christ," said Zacharian. "You too? Somebody's burning the house down; but you just say he's sincere and that's supposed to make a difference. Sure he's sincere. So was Hitler. So what?"

Tony said meekly, "So I'm sorry I said it."

The plane circled over Shiraz, a green and lovely jewel

cupped between sandstone ridges that shone pink and pale gold in the sunlight. It landed, and a car took them speeding down a long double avenue glorious with roses, past fields and flocks and outlying villages, under a kind of archway into the city.

It was very bright and gay after the gray modernity of Teheran and the rather somber splendor of Isfahan. All along the way men were busy making it brighter and gayer with truckloads of flags and bunting. Others struggled with huge pictures of antique kings and warriors carved on stone.

"Hey," said Tony. "Those are from the Persepolis friezes. What's the occasion?"

"A salute to the twenty-five hundred years of Fars—the cradle of the empire, as you said. A round number, dating approximately from the unification of the Medes and the Persians under Cyrus the Great." He added grimly, "Let us hope that the province lasts out another nine days."

There was a building off the Avenue Zand, close under the walls of the old fortress prison, a cheerful building painted a clean yellow. They went in and were enveloped in officialdom operating at fever pitch. They entered a room and shut the door, and Zacharian said, "I gave you your chance, Tony, and you didn't take it, so now you're stuck. Sit down."

Tony sat. "I was here once," he said, "for five or six days. I can show you Karim's house, but I guess you know where that is already. I met a few of the Hassanis' friends, but you probably know them, too. For the rest of it, any guide from the local travel agencies could do as well or better. So how do you think I can bird-dog you to Karim?"

He looked up at them, and they looked down at him, and he said, "Just a minute, while I get braced."

# 23

The poet says that even the stranger forgets his home in Shiraz in the spring. Zacharian had told him that, and Tony wished it were true. For him, at least. Unfortunately, he remembered his home all too clearly and wanted to be there.

Of course, few strangers ever saw Shiraz the way he was seeing it, regardless of the season.

"There are tourists here, quite a lot of them," Zacharian had said. "But not so many that they aren't noticed, especially the blue-eyed types. They stand out. And Shiraz is not the largest city in the world. So if you were to wear your feet out walking around the streets and up and down the alleys, as though you're looking for somebody, somebody might notice you."

"*Um,*" said Tony. "I knew I wasn't going to like it. Who do you think might notice me?"

"We're not choosy at this point. We'll take anybody, even henchmen. Look, there're a lot of good men working on this, but nobody has the particular relationship to Karim that you have. The sight of you nosing around might get people worried or at least curious. They might think you know something. And there's a chance you might see someone or something that would jog a buried memory or two. It's a long gamble, but it doesn't cost anything to try."

"Except maybe me. And what makes you think the Hassanis are still here—either one of them? Wouldn't they be pretty silly?"

"That would depend on their arrangements. Of course, they could be anywhere, holed up in a cave or a remote village, or traveling with a band of nomads, or disguised as shepherds. But it's hard to run a conspiracy from a remote village or a nomad camp. An isolated place can be awfully

damned isolated even with a radio transmitter, which is a menace in itself because it can be tracked down. Also, everybody notices a stranger. A city is much better as both a nerve center and a place to hide, and Shiraz is ideal because it's a great place for the tribes. They come in and out like migratory birds, and no one pays any attention. And it is Hassani's city."

"Let me ask you a question," Tony said. "Do you think they'll really go ahead with it now? I mean, they know you're all braced and waiting; it isn't a surprise anymore. Would they be that—"

He was searching for a word, and Maktabi supplied it.

"Reckless? Yes, I think they would. Consider that the Hassanis cannot remain in hiding forever. They must leave the country or be caught, and either way they are finished. Also, if they wait, their followers may desert them. Tribesmen are not the most patient, Mr. Wales. They have been patient already for some time. It may be that the Hassanis must strike now or not at all."

"There still isn't any sign of it, though, is there?"

"No. As Yakoub says, a very strange revolt. Even the known troublemakers, the firebrands, are as docile as mice." Maktabi shrugged. Light from the window caught his face, and Tony thought that he had aged ten years since they first met. "Perhaps they have given up, and that is the reason for the quiet—though if I know my tribesmen, they would not accept the blow so gracefully. But we cannot depend on that, can we, Mr. Wales?"

"No," said Tony. "I guess not."

"And we do not know how much time we may have, do we, before there is fighting in these streets?" Once more his voice had the sound that made Tony cringe. "The Hassanis must be found, and I will try anything, even Yakoub's unorthodox plan, since orthodoxy has not produced them. I cannot force you—"

"Okay," said Tony. "Okay, we'll do Yakoub's plan. And where will Yakoub be?"

"Right behind you," Zacharian said. "I can melt into the

landscape." He grinned. "I'm the one who has to worry, you know."

"Oh?"

"Well, if somebody jumps you, you've got me to depend on. But if somebody jumps me—"

"This was your idea, friend, so don't cry if you're a little bit stuck yourself."

Maktabi said irritably, "Do not take it so lightly, Yakoub. Remember that the executioners were sent all the way from London—"

"I haven't forgotten that."

"Then consider how much it would be worth to Saad's people to take you alive—knowing what you know of the counterespionage apparatus here and throughout the Middle East. To say nothing of the States. They must want you as badly as you want Karim."

"Hanookh," said Zacharian gently, "I am aware of that."

"Then be careful. And God go with you."

So here they were seeing Shiraz, the city of the rose and the nightingale, Siamese twins joined by an invisible and ever-shifting bond. Tony learned not to keep looking over his shoulder to make sure Zacharian was really there, though he could not stop wanting to. The other thing he couldn't get used to was the weight and hardness of the snub-nosed .38 under his left arm.

"You load it like this," Zacharian had said. "You hold it like this. This is the safety, and this curved thing is the trigger. This little hole in the front is the business end, and for God's sake, watch where you point it. Remember I'm behind you."

Tony would have preferred a rifle. He had fired a rifle. They were nice and long, and the business end could be kept much more easily away from one's own tender flesh. The nasty little brute under his armpit frightened him. Still, he thought the time might come when he would be glad he had it.

In the beginning there was no definite pattern to his wanderings. Zacharian had told him to go wherever his fancy took

him, and so he had set out without aim or purpose, just looking. But he had been here before. He had walked these streets with Karim as his host and guide. Inevitably he gravitated toward the places Karim had taken him because he knew them and they acted as focal points.

He saw no reason to revisit the tombs of the poets, and the new suburbs did not attract. But there was the bazaar, the museum, the lord mayor's palace, with the mirrored hall and the Currier & Ives prints faithfully reproduced on an upstairs ceiling. There were the market streets and the roundabout where the statue of Saadi stands looking toward the Koran Gate. Around and between these places was where Tony did most of his prowling.

He studied faces, peered through doorways and into courtyards. At first he envied the people he saw because they didn't know what was going on. Then he began to have a strong feeling of kinship because he and they were going through this together. After that came a sense of responsibility because he was partly to blame for the storm that was about to break over their unsuspecting heads. The enormity of what the Hassanis planned to do became more and more apparent to him as he saw the actual individuals whose continuity was about to be destroyed. For the first time the murder of Harvey Martin seemed relatively unimportant.

By the third day a pattern had emerged. No matter where he went, he always came eventually to the statue of Saadi and the streets that went off from the circle. This was a market area, full of activity but of no particular interest, and he could not understand why it attracted him.

It was also on the third day that he became aware of someone eyeing the bait.

He did not know quite how he became aware. The sensation crept on him by degrees: a tightening of the surrounding air, a quiver of the tactile nerves as though a feather had brushed across his skin. *Perhaps,* he thought, *the bait gets hypersensitive simply because it is the bait.* He tried several times without being obvious about it, for obviousness was against the rules, to see if anyone was following him. But they

were not being obvious either, and he could see no one. Yet by the end of the day he felt the gathered and aimed attention like a spear in his back.

He could not see Zacharian either. He was used to that. Nevertheless, he worried.

He walked back to the Avenue Zand, the wide main axis of the town, and all the way he felt as though he were walking under water, anoxemic and oppressed. The hotel where he and Zacharian were quartered was just off the avenue. He turned into the side street and almost collided with a donkey, which brayed at him and brought the sweat streaming on his skin. When he reached the hotel, he went into the garden and sat under the plane trees, shaking. Presently, to his immense relief, Zacharian came in from another way and joined him.

"There's somebody after me," he said.

Zacharian nodded and ordered beer from a waiter. "They've been with us since yesterday afternoon."

"They?"

"Two."

"And you didn't tell me?"

"Didn't want to distract you. They're not doing anything. Just watching."

"Who are they?"

"At a guess, Saad's men. If they were Hassani's, they'd have tried to stop us. Saad must have lost Karim, too. Not surprising. After what happened at Isfahan, Karim would have picked some hiding place that Saad didn't know about. Maybe they're hoping you can lead them to where he is."

"But I don't know. I've been peering and poking and staring until I'm cross-eyed, and I haven't seen a familiar face, and nobody's seen me."

"Are you sure?" Zacharian was stretched out long and dark in the lawn chair, eyes half closed, blowing smoke, sipping the good cold beer. He had a local haircut and the suit he wore had been made by a local tailor. Even the shoes were Bata. Tony studied him. Above them, half a mile away, a sandstone ridge flared hot pink against the deepening sky.

"How the hell can I be sure? Why?'

"There was a Kashgai who took quite an interest in you this afternoon. Male, swarthy, gray trousers and tunic, brown girdle, felt cap with the turned-up ears. Carried his worldly goods on his back, canvas knapsack embroidered in red. Didn't you see him?"

"Man, that's every Kashgai I ever saw. It sounds as if he just hit town and was gawking at the sights. Probably never saw a foreigner before. A lot of people stare at me. When I said nobody had seen me, I didn't mean they didn't look at me."

"I know what you meant." Zacharian poured more beer. There was a pleasant smell of grass and moist earth. Water gurgled gently in a small fountain. Zacharian drank thirstily and sighed and asked, "Why do you keep going back to the Saadi square?"

"You noticed that too."

"It's getting pretty obvious."

Tony frowned. "I don't know why."

"Karim took you there?"

"Yes. One of the most interesting parts of the city, he said. Great place for the tribes to come and trade. See all kinds of people. I told you that."

"You don't remember anything else he said about it?"

"No. I've told you every—"

"Everything you could remember, yes. This may be something you don't remember. That's why I told you to pick your own random itinerary, in the hope that something might be stimulated to come to the surface. Maybe it has."

"But—"

"Don't poke at it, or you'll drive it away." He finished his beer and stood up. "I'll check in with Maktabi, and we'd better have some food. Then we'll go back and look around." He paused. "That's where the Kashgai was."

"Old Hassani had a Kashgai watchdog," Tony said. "But he wore a suit like anybody else."

"Sure," said Zacharian. "Just the same, we'll look. Unless you have something better to do."

"As if I had a choice." Tony kicked his chair back. "Just the two of us? Suppose we do run into trouble."

"Maktabi will handle that end. You're supposed to be alone, and I'm supposed to be invisible. It doesn't do to go with an army."

"Okay," said Tony dubiously, "but what about your two friends? Have they spotted you?"

"I don't know," said Zacharian, and grinned in the dusk. "That's what makes this job so continuously interesting."

# 24

The section around the statue of Saadi seemed to be as busy by night as it was by day, and the busiest part of it was a sort of open-air bazaar, a broad street with shops and food stalls and vendors' barrows. Tony went there first because Zacharian said this was where he had seen the Kashgai. He went unhappily, and the state of his nerves was not the best.

He doodled around, getting curious glances from the people but nothing more, neither hostility nor interest. There were plenty of tribesmen; but none of them wore the Kashgai garb, and none of them looked familiar. He moved gradually toward the end of the street, where the buildings met so that the whole thing formed a *u* with the corners squared. He had some idea of doing a full circuit, up one side and down the other, so that Zacharian would have plenty of time to see whether he was followed. Meanwhile, he continued to look for Kashgais, male.

He didn't see any. The crowd shifted and flowed, clotting here, leaving a wide gap there. A radio gave forth sweet, quavering song. The air smelled of cooking meat and decaying vegetables. Tony reached the apparent cul-de-sac at the end. He turned along the line of the building, and a passageway opened up, narrow and poorly lighted. He knew the passage-

way was there. He had seen it before and passed it by without particular notice. He started past it again, and this time something twanged like a harp string at the back of his mind. He stopped in his tracks, and all at once he knew why this particular area had drawn him like a magnet.

He wanted to shout it out. Instead, he took a cigarette and lighted it, a signal to Zacharian that something was afoot—if Zacharian was still with him and still watching. The unaccustomed smoke made him cough. He felt the .38 under his arm, choked down a wave of panic, and went into the passageway, dropping the cigarette as he went.

The light faded quickly into an indeterminate gloom, a grayish nothing, and it was there that he found the Kashgai. He did not see him until he was almost touching him because the grayish nothing was just the color of the Kashgai's clothing and the man was standing very still in the niche of a doorway in the right-hand wall. When he moved, he moved swiftly, and there was a long, curved knife in his hand, and it was much too late for running.

Tony managed by sheer luck and good reflexes to dodge that first thrust. Even so the sharp steel slit his jacket, ripping through the cloth with hideous efficiency. He did not know anything about knife fighting. He grabbed for the man's wrist and tried to hold it, pounding his other fist into the dim blur of a face. Yadollah had been an oak. This was a panther, all spring steel. It fought furiously, without waste motion. Tony lost the wrist, managed to catch it again at the last possible moment, hung to it, this time with both hands, and threw his weight to batter the man up against the wall. He hit with a solid crash and dropped, and Tony thought he had him. Then his own legs were kicked out from under him, and he fell onto the broad of his back, grunting, his head ringing bells against the paving, and there was the goddamn knife in the air above him, coming down.

He rolled wildly. The steel went snicking past his ear, and he saw something big and dark go by him, moving fast. There was a sound of impact, a clatter, a harsh, angry cry. Tony scrabbled his feet under him and turned around.

Zacharian's voice was saying something in Persian that sounded like a command to halt. The Kashgai ran. He vanished around the corner at the other end of the passage. Tony could see the shape of the gun in Zacharian's hand. He ran after the Kashgai and Tony followed him.

"Why didn't you shoot?"

"Want him alive. You okay?"

"Just. Look, I remembered what it was that I couldn't remember. Karim said he had a very interesting friend who lived in here. Only he was in the fortress then, so I couldn't meet him."

"The fortress is a prison."

"I know. I don't think they know each other socially."

They had reached the end of the passage and stopped. Zacharian's arm swept him against the wall and held him there. He thought this might be as good a time as any to get his own gun out, and so he did. The bazaar noises, the voices, and the music were muted and far away to his right. To his left there was a courtyard and an aching quiet.

"What about your two friends?" asked Tony.

"Lost them somewhere. Can you cover me?"

"I'll try."

He clicked the safety off, and Zacharian said dubiously, "You'd better aim high."

Zacharian went into the courtyard in a dive and roll that took him away from the passage and into the cover of a stack of soft-drink crates. And there was noise, the heavy slam of shots. Glass tinkled as some of the empties broke.

Tony fired toward the flashes. Something darted away in the shadows, and he heard a door open and bang shut again.

"Jake?"

"Okay. Keep behind me."

Tony followed him around the court, sticking tight against the wall, to where the door was. Everything was still again. Tony pulled his breath in deeply. He was scared, but the fear was tinged with excitement. Instinctively he shifted his weight forward, moving with bent knees, calf muscles quivering.

The doorway was sunk deep in the mud-brick wall. The door was plank, old and weathered. There was no light behind it. Without exposing his body, Zacharian reached around and pushed. The door swung a little, invitingly.

"Oh, no," said Zacharian under his breath. "Not on your sweet life." He looked up and around, then motioned Tony to go back, pointing.

There was a narrow balcony overhead. In the corner a flight of rickety steps led up to it. They climbed as carefully as possible to minimize the creaking of the dry wood, but to Tony it sounded like elephants trampling piano boxes. Zacharian did not seem to mind. When they reached the balcony, Tony looked back, and he thought he saw a flicker of movement across the court. He could not be sure, and he did not see it again. Zacharian was beckoning to him impatiently, so he went along, and after that he had no chance to mention it.

There was a door and a shuttered window. Light showed dimly from both of them through the cracks. Zacharian listened with his head close to the shutter. Tony could hear nothing, but whatever Zacharian was hearing seemed to satisfy him. He turned and put his mouth close to Tony's ear and told him what to do—to stand where he was and keep anyone from coming out. Then Zacharian swung over the balcony rail, hung by his hands for a moment, and dropped. Tony leaned over and saw him straighten up and charge the lower door. He disappeared, and Tony did not hear anything more.

He waited. The sounds from the bazaar street came here only as the faintest echo, and he thought the sound of the shots must have been soaked up by the thick walls of the court. At least no one had come to investigate.

He waited.

He hated waiting.

Abruptly there was a noise from inside the room. Startled cries. Two quick shots. Silence.

Tony hunched up, holding his gun forward. Gently and without haste the door opened.

"Zacharian?"

Zacharian's unmistakable voice answered in a warning shout that was cut off abruptly, becoming a grunt of pain.

*Oh, God,* thought Tony, *it's gone wrong, and here I am.* The gun in his hand looked unfamiliar and slightly ludicrous. It also looked small and inadequate. He edged closer to the door, peered one-eyed around the jamb.

It was a large room, comfortably furnished. Karim did not seem to be in it. Zacharian was down on one knee, his head hanging, dripping blood from a cut over the temple. Two men were beside him, with guns. The Kashgai was dead on the floor almost at Tony's feet, killed apparently in the act of turning to fire at someone behind him. Tony recognized him now as Hassani's watchdog, Achmet. A second man, a stranger with a seamed, hard face gone flaccid, lay on his back staring foolishly at the ceiling. Presumably this was the interesting friend of the fortress.

Two shots. Two men.

Mahmud Hassani, Karim's father, sat in a chair, his eyes fixed on the Kashgai.

Saad stood behind him, with a gun. Saad's steel-rimmed spectacles glittered in the light, and his shoulders still stooped.

"Mr. Wales," he said.

Tony poked his .38 around the doorjamb. "I've got you covered. Drop your—"

Beautiful line. But he never finished it. Two men were bounding up the steps behind him, never mind how the old wood creaked. They both had bigger guns than his. And it was he who dropped it.

They swept him into the room. "What happened?" Tony said. "What happened?"

Zacharian muttered, "They were waiting . . . in back."

The men had hauled him to his feet again. He seemed barely able to stand, head lolling, blood running over his eye. Tony was herded over toward him while one of the men pushed the front door shut and stood by it where he could watch the courtyard through the crack.

Saad came around and stood in front of Hassani. He asked Hassani a question in which Tony caught the name Karim.

Hassani looked up at Saad, an old proud man gone far beyond any fear of human cruelty, and there was such contempt and hatred in that look that it seemed to Tony he saw Saad flinch in spite of his gun. Hassani answered the question in three or four brief sentences.

The reaction was startling. Saad let out a harsh ejaculation of surprise and delight. And Zacharian lifted up his bloody head and stared at old Hassani.

Saad began to talk. He was apparently trying to make some point. Hassani at first refused to listen; but then Saad drew his attention to Tony and Zacharian, and Hassani frowned. His face was stricken but by no means stunned. His mind was clear and working hard. He looked at Saad, the hatred and contempt no whit abated, and he gave his assent to something. He gave it as though it sickened him, but he gave it. Saad let the gun drop to his side. He smiled and said something to Hassani that turned the old man white around the lips, and then he turned and spoke to his men. The whole affair had not taken more than three or four minutes.

They all moved swiftly out the back door, and Hassani went with them of his own free will.

They passed along a rear balcony, shoving the two captives almost into a run. There was a flight of steps, and they hurried down. Zacharian stumbled and staggered on the steep treads. Saad spoke impatiently, and the men roughed him.

"Stop that," Tony said, "God damn you."

The man who was behind him prodding him in the spine with a .45 said in broken but serviceable English, "He makes time."

Tony understood that he meant delay. "The hell with that, he's hurt. Let him alone." He started forward, and Saad turned and laid the barrel of his gun across the side of Tony's head above the ear. Tony went blind for a moment. A hand was clamped over his mouth. He half fell down the rest of the stairs, and when he could see again, they were at the bottom,

and Hassani was looking at him as though he wished Saad had killed him.

They rushed on along an alley, a narrow way between the backs of buildings, full of nooks and crannies and black as the pit. It could have hidden an army, let alone Saad and two men.

*So that's where they were, Tony thought. They stopped following and went ahead. They must have spotted the Kashgai this afternoon, located the hideout, and then waited for us to come back. So now they've got us.*

*Why me? I know about Zacharian, but why me? Revenge? A little present for Hassani? Or does Saad think he can persuade Zacharian to talk by sticking hot irons in my fair white body to make me scream?*

None of them was a pleasant prospect. The alley was like a cattle chute, and he felt like a steer already half poleaxed and on his way. And ahead of him Zacharian, the strong, the wise, the able, the white hope of Tony Wales, sagged and tottered with two men holding him up.

Tony wondered what Hassani had said about Karim. He wondered where Maktabi was—obviously, not around here where he was needed.

He refused to think of Ellen at all.

The alley led to another courtyard. It was not well lighted, but it was possible to see the van that was parked there. Tony had never realized how many uses a closed van could have other than just hauling stuff around. A man who stood nervously beside it saw them coming and ran to open the back doors.

As they reached the van, Zacharian fell, dead weight pulling loose from the men who held him. He landed heavily on his shoulder and rolled, sprawling, partly underneath the rear of the van.

The men pawed at him. Saad ordered them aside and motioned Hassani to get into the van. Tony was shoved in after him. He stayed by the door, acutely aware of Hassani close by in the dark interior. He almost wished for Saad to

protect him. On their first meeting Hassani's manners had been formal and correct, but it was obvious even to Tony that Hassani belonged to another world and had no wish to fraternize. Karim had explained that his father did not take to foreigners and unbelievers, and it had seemed odd that he had sent Karim to a Western university; Tony remembered that Karim had been rather evasive about that, and no wonder. The kind of special education Karim had been sent for is not openly discussed. Now the old man's dislike for Tony was highly personal, and with good reason. Tony could feel the hatred heavy in the air.

Outside, the men had returned to their task of hauling Zacharian's inert weight out from under the bumper. Saad was urging them on, in great haste.

Looking past them, Tony saw movement on the flat roofs of the buildings. And it came to him as a revelation that Zacharian was faking. He had pulled his faint in order to get himself, Tony, and the old man out of the line of fire.

Hassani must have seen the men on the roof almost as soon as Tony because suddenly he made a rush to get away. Tony did not like the idea of hitting an old man, but there seemed to be no alternative, so he did it. And he might have saved his scruples. Hassani was amazingly strong and filled with a savagery that was close to maniacal. Tony struggled with him on the dusty floor of the van, while outside the air rang with shouts, orders, cries, and gunshots. He worried about Zacharian. Then he forgot Zacharian and worried about himself because the old man had him by the throat and was trying to kill him, and hot tears were dropping into Tony's face, and the old man was cursing or praying or both in a terrible, husky voice, all broken and wild with pain.

Men appeared in the open door. They got in and pulled Hassani away. There was a great deal of confusion, people running about and shouting at one another. The shooting had stopped. Somebody helped Tony up, and he got out of the van rubbing his throat and gulping air, all shaken up. Maktabi was kneeling beside Zacharian, and another man was examining Zacharian's head. Saad lay nearby, a small heap

of bird bones and wire tossed on the ground for junk. Maktabi glanced up and asked Tony how he was.

"All right," he said, "thanks to Jake. That was smart, falling under the van like that. That was a stroke of genius."

Maktabi looked at him oddly, and Tony bent closer. "Stroke of genius, hell," he said. "He's out like a light."

The doctor said something reassuring, and Maktabi rose. "We had you in sight, but we could do nothing as long as you were all together. I think Yakoub knew what he was doing." He stirred Saad's body with his foot. "This little carrion badly upset our plans. Well, and so we lost him, but we have Hassani."

"And I'm damned glad you do," said Tony, croaking.

Maktabi went over to where Hassani was standing surrounded by police, his hands manacled, his head rigidly erect. Tony knelt beside Zacharian, who was groaning and muttering in the throes of coming to. He opened his eyes and tried to sit up, and at about the same moment Maktabi came back and looked at Tony.

"Hassani had more reason to hate you than you knew."

Zacharian sat up all the way this time, impelled by some overriding necessity.

"Karim," he said. "Karim—"

"Yes," said Maktabi. "He has just told me. Karim is dead."

# 25

Inside the fortress Tony Wales sat in the corner of a large room, probably the commandant's office, while they questioned Mahmud Hassani. There was a great lot of high brass present, in uniform and out of it. Zacharian looked strange and barbaric among them, with his battered head and the bloodstains dried on his dusty clothing. Their voices rang hollow against the walls and the vaulted roof, all thick

stone, old and dry and cool. Tony sat and listened to the alien speech. He watched Hassani and pitied him in a grim, unpitying way. And he tried to get used to the idea that Karim was dead.

Dead.

And this was the end of it.

He felt cheated. Unsatisfied. It was not fair of Karim to evade him.

Well, and that was an unworthy thought. He should be thankful that it was over and the people of Fars were free to go their ways in peace. And he was thankful. But he would have liked—

Zacharian came to sit beside him. He looked as though he had to sit down or fall down. He lighted a cigarette with difficulty, fumbling the lighter.

"Can you tell me now?" Tony said. "How did it happen?"

"He died of the wound he got at Isfahan. He was coming south across the desert, and he died on the way." Zacharian spoke in an odd, clipped, toneless way so that each word stood clearly by itself. "The men he was with buried him, according to his own instructions, and told no one but the Kashgai. Karim was afraid that if word of his death got to the tribes, they might do something ill-considered. The Kashgai brought the news to Hassani."

He stopped, and Tony got the idea that he was studying the words he had just spoken, feeling the weight and the shape of them.

"Where is the grave?"

"In the desert. Anywhere between here and Isfahan. The men who buried him know, of course, but I doubt if they'll volunteer themselves as guides. Even the Kashgai didn't know. They were just going to leave Karim safely where he was until afterward. If they won, they could give him a martyr's funeral. If they lost, we would never be able to give him one suitable for a traitor."

They sat in silence for a moment. The tempo of the questioning seemed to be slowing down. A male stenographer

continued to write furiously. Another man watched over a tape recorder.

Zacharian let the cigarette burn between his fingers. He seemed to have forgotten it.

"What's the matter, Jake?"

"What the hell do you think is the matter? My head hurts."

Tony said, "What about the Lion?"

"Karim's dead, and we have the old man. That takes care of the Lion, doesn't it? Cut off the head, and the rest of the beast stops functioning."

"Yeah, but what was the plan? What were they going to do? And when?"

"The old man doesn't know."

Tony sat up straight. "What?"

"I said he doesn't know. Karim was the architect. Only he knew the whole plan. No one else could betray it by accident or design, because no one had more than his own necessary piece of it. When the right moment came, all the pieces would automatically fit together. There wasn't any reason for Hassani to know about the military angle. He was head of the political wing, the administrative leader. It was up to him to organize the new government, of which he would have been president. They were going to set up some kind of Islamic state, going back to the Sharia instead of civil law codes, throwing out the foreign ideas—a return to the old simple purity for the good of the people in general and the Hassanis in particular."

Tony did not bother to ask him what he meant by the Sharia. He did not greatly care about that side of it.

"Karim," he said. "He was the real head then? The real brain?"

"That's what he was trained for. All the time he was at UCLA he was taking lecture courses on the side that you never knew about, courses in the structuring and techniques of revolution. He obviously had good teachers."

"The Marlowe Foundation?"

"I hope I live long enough to nail them," Zacharian said

bitterly. "Karim was the active leader as well, keeping the military wing completely under his control. If anything happened to him or to his father, a second team would take over that wing, and the plan could still go through. But if both of them were put out of operation—well, two second teams don't add up to one leader. The rebel party might with luck survive the attack phase but would inevitably come to grief over the organizational one that follows. A lot of people would get hurt for nothing. So there was a built-in-destruct. The men in charge of the hidden arms caches were to seal them up or destroy them, and the whole thing was to be called off. This arrangement had another purpose, of course—it kept anybody else from getting too ambitious and trying to take over. It was to be an Hassani operation or nothing."

"What it comes out at is, you really don't know much more than you did," said Tony, astonished and somewhat dashed.

"Did you expect to have it all neatly tied up with a little pink bow?" Zacharian ground out the cigarette as though he hated it. "It's too bad the Kashgai got himself killed. He was chief liaison man with the tribes, but he probably wouldn't have talked anyway. The old man refuses to name any of his associates. Loyalty is an admirable trait, and the Kashgai had plenty of it. He was trying to defend Hassani against Saad— Well, there's plenty of time now. Maktabi's boys will dig everything out eventually."

The group around Hassani began to break up. The old man was taken out, surrounded on all sides by guards.

"I still don't understand what went on in that room, Jake. Between him and Saad, I mean. Why did he come with us?"

"Saad offered to get him safely away so the Lion could still go forward. Hassani saw the sense of that, even though Saad had had his son murdered, and Saad pointed out that there really wasn't so much difference between them that Hassani could afford to sneer."

Maktabi came over, looking exhausted but thankful. "Why don't you get some rest, Yakoub? It is over now except for the details. We are very grateful to you both, but the speeches and handshakings can wait until tomorrow."

Zacharian heaved himself up. "Those are good words, Hanookh. Salaam. Come on, Tony."

The hotel was deep in slumber, and the bar was closed. Zacharian had a bottle in the room, and they cracked it, Zacharian drinking gingerly because of his head and some dope the doctor had given him. He seemed morose and silent, and Tony conquered a feverish desire to talk. Presently Zacharian went to bed, and Tony took the bottle with him and sat alone in the dark garden under the plane trees. A nightingale sang gloriously, and the scent of roses was sweet on the night air. The stars flamed in the blue-black sky, and somewhere beneath them, in a shallow trough in the sand, was Karim Hassani with all his ambition and his killings and his faith behind him.

"You goddamned fool," said Tony. "You goddamned stupid idiot. *Why?*"

Why? Why? Why?

You were supposed to believe in causes, to care passionately, to get involved. People scorned you if you didn't. But maybe some were better off with apathy—the ones who didn't know when to quit, the ones who were too steel-armored in their own righteousness.

He drank, and the whiskey went down like water, and he couldn't get drunk. At least not drunk enough to sleep the way he wanted to sleep. His body relaxed gladly enough when he put it into bed, but his mind ran on like a berserk film projector. He was relieved when he woke up, very early in the morning. He went out onto the balcony and found Zacharian already there, wearing dark glasses and sipping at a cup of coffee.

Tony said, "I thought you'd sleep till noon."

"Too much headache," said Zacharian. "What's your trouble? Guilt feelings because you helped to get your old buddy killed? Or just mad because you didn't get a chance to gloat?"

Tony did not bother to get angry. "Your head isn't that bad, Jake. You've got a bitch on about something; you had it last night. What?"

Zacharian said, "Have some coffee."

He signaled the waiter for another cup. Tony had some, glad to drown the leftover taste of Scotch.

Zacharian brooded. "I don't know, Tony. Maybe it's only that I've been on this thing so long I can't stop running. Maybe it's the knock on the head, or the pain pills. Forget it. Why don't you go up to Teheran?"

Tony said, "I think I will."

He called the airport and booked a seat on the afternoon flight. He called Ellen and told her he was coming, and she asked if it was all over, and he told her yes. Packing didn't take long. Then he had nothing to do, so he went with Zacharian back to the pleasant yellow building and Maktabi's office. Along the streets men were still hanging flags and bunting, still erecting pictures of Achaemenid kings in long robes and immortals in two kinds of hats, one for the Medes and one for the Persians. When they did a decorating job here, they really did one. The Avenue Zand looked good enough for four holidays. But then you didn't have a twenty-five-hundred-year one very often. Tony looked at the people walking by, and he felt like embracing them and crying out, "We've done it!"

Maktabi had been in his office since daybreak. Apparently nobody had really slept much. There was no report of trouble among the tribes. No arms had appeared. Hassani had refused again to say any more. An effort was being made to find Karim's grave. All routine steps were being taken.

"We are letting it be known among Hassani's friends that he is arrested, without saying why. Some of the conspirators may become alarmed and betray themselves. We are also searching for Hassani's papers. He must have had some sort of working constitution for the new government, a list of the men who would hold office—men already in the conspiracy, others who could be counted on for support."

"He may have destroyed all that when he first went into hiding," Zacharian said.

"No. Remember, the second team would require the in-

formation if he were caught. Probably the papers are in a bank vault, deposited under an assumed name. Well, there is much work to be done, but at least we have the time to do it."

"Sure," said Zacharian. "You have the time."

Maktabi picked up something in the tone and looked at him sharply. "Doubts, Yakoub?"

Zacharian hesitated and then said irritably, "I get nervous when arms and tribesmen are mentioned in the same breath. Suppose the guardians of the caches decide not to waste all those nice things in spite of orders."

"Suppose you let the military handle its own affairs," said Maktabi. "Relax. Rest. The provincial government has things it wishes to say to you. There will be a private audience in Teheran. You must be well. Go along and see the doctor."

Zacharian went, and Maktabi shook hands with Tony; but it was not Tony he was thinking about and his friendly smile was no more than a surface reflex. His whole bearing had changed in a moment. Tony left him and walked in the sunny streets and wondered what was the matter with everybody. Including himself. He went back to the hotel and slept until it was time to catch the plane. Once aboard, he fidgeted all the way to Teheran.

He thought that when he was with Ellen, everything would look right again. And it did. He was able to satisfy his need to talk; she wanted to know everything that had happened, everything that was happening now or was expected to happen. Tony got it all off his chest and went on to other things, and it was all fine.

But . . .

Along about midnight Ellen sat up in bed and said, "You're still upset. Let's have a drink and talk some more."

He thought that was a good idea. They got up and had the drink, and after all, Tony found that he did not have anything more to say. He looked at her and loved her and wanted her, and still he was not content.

"I don't know," he said. "Jake is probably right—we just

haven't stopped running yet. You get into a habit, and it's hard to convince yourself that it really is all over and you really can stop."

Ellen was thoughtful for a long time. Finally she said, "It seems to me that you have everything in hand except a body."

"How do you mean that?"

"If you had Karim's body, you'd be sure he was dead, sure it was all over. But you don't have it, and so you're not."

"And you think that's Jake's trouble? Oh, hell," said Tony. "Wait a minute." He got up and stamped around the room. "I mean, it might cross your mind but not seriously. That's his father, doll. He might lie, but he wouldn't— And anyway, he didn't, so it just isn't possible."

"You're not making yourself crystal clear, love."

"I mean," said Tony, grappling for the line of reasoning, "Karim would only pretend to be dead to make us believe it was all over with the Lion. But it wouldn't do any good unless we knew about it, and how did he know we were going to find his old man? He'd have had to lie to his father and then arrange to have him caught so we'd get the message, and he didn't."

"I didn't say he did, love. I only said the thought was in your minds."

"Anyway, he wouldn't throw his own father to the wolves."

"Wouldn't he?" said Ellen in a hard, cold voice. "Nothing else has stopped him."

"Damn it," said Tony furiously, "you and your helpful talks! I'm telling you, it does not make any sense."

"Then why are you so disturbed about it?"

"I don't know," said Tony. "I just don't know."

The rest of the night was good for very little, and there wasn't much of it anyway because he caught the early flight back to Shiraz. And as she kissed him good-bye, Ellen said, "I respect Mr. Zacharian enormously, and I like him very much; but I am also beginning to hate him."

Tony said, "Welcome to the club."

# 26

Maktabi was standing by the window, where he could see on the one hand the dark wall of the fortress and on the other the roundabout on the Avenue Zand where the central island was a blaze of flowers and traffic rushed and the bright bunting flapped in the wind.

"You have had this in your mind since the beginning, Yakoub?"

"Yes." Zacharian had got most of his energy back, though the marks on his head were still colorful. He was sitting as he usually did when things were touchy, on his shoulder blades with his legs stretched out long and crossed at the ankles. Tony was unable to pretend that he was that relaxed.

"Why?" asked Maktabi.

"I can't tell you. A tendency of the hackles to rise, a feeling that it was all too neat and convenient. I thought the feeling would go away, but it hasn't."

"Do you believe Hassani is lying?"

"Emphatically not."

"I can show you the reports from the field. Not the smallest sign of trouble. It is true that we have not found Karim's grave, but whole caravans have been lost in those deserts, let alone one man carefully hidden. Last night we arrested two of Hassani's friends who decided suddenly to travel abroad. We are beginning to draw the threads firmly into our hands. Everyone else is happy. But not you."

"I'm sorry."

Maktabi sighed. "I think you are seeking trouble where there is none. Nevertheless, because it is you, I will listen."

He turned from the window and sat down at the desk, his eyes dark and hard, fixed unmercifully on Zacharian.

"Let us think then. Let us say that Karim is alive. He sent false word of his death to the Kashgai, who told Hassani. What has he gained? Nothing, unless Hassani should pass on the word to us, which means that we must take Hassani. But Karim could not depend on it that we would find him."

*Just what I said,* thought Tony. And waited for the answer.

"Not as a short-term thing, no," said Zacharian. "In the long run, yes, but this has to be a short-term thing, an act of desperation. Would he have had to depend on it? Couldn't he have arranged to have us tipped off in time if we didn't find Hassani on our own?"

"This is a hard thing to believe, that he would betray his own father."

Zacharian answered that one, too. "I think he would do anything for the cause. And I think the old man would expect him to. Look at it this way. If he brings the thing off, he gets his father back safe and sound. If he doesn't, what has he really lost? Hassani was already a fugitive, certain to be caught sooner or later. The end would be the same. This way, at least he has a chance."

"Very good, Yakoub. Now explain to me why Karim had to make this decision at all. Assuming that he did not die on the way from Isfahan, why did he wait? Everything was ready, he said. Why not strike swiftly while we were less well prepared?"

"I wonder," said Zacharian, "if the Lion was ever intended to be a full-scale armed revolt. Things were different when the Tudeh Party tried it before. That was a big operation—general strikes, professional agitators, the whole bit. Reza Shah had done a lot for the country, but a hundred and fifty years of the Kajars couldn't be undone so quickly. There were still unstable elements to be used. Now the people know where they are; they know where they're going. They're happy with it. They worship Mohammed Reza Shah, and well they should. They don't need the Hassanis to wrench them away from all this and tell them what to do. There's

no popular basis for a revolt, and as far as I know, the Hassanis haven't even tried to agitate one. In fact, this whole thing has been kept so quiet that it scares me."

"We did not expect that the revolt could succeed without outside help," said Maktabi sharply. "That was one great reason for stopping it before it began."

"It takes more than some tribesmen skirmishing about on camels to bring in the outside help. These people don't lay their precious necks on the line when the odds are that shaky. Besides, it's sloppy, and there's nothing sloppy about the Lion. Karim built and programmed it like a computer, neat, hard, stainless-steel American efficiency. Push the right button, and every relay clicks over right down the line. Even the tribes have been reduced to order—they get no arms and no instructions until the right moment. The right moment, Hanookh. It comes down to that. Karim waited because he had to wait, because there is only one particular time suitable to his needs."

He paused. The room seemed hot and silent to Tony, the traffic sounds very loud. A string of donkeys went by in the street below with a pattering of small hooves. Maktabi frowned, considering. Tony could almost hear him tapping the links of Zacharian's reasoning to see if they rang true.

"It might even be," said Zacharian, "that the tribesmen are only useful after the event."

Maktabi shook his head. "You go too fast. Let us get back to Karim. He waited because he had to wait for what particular time?"

"Christ," said Zacharian, "if I knew that, I wouldn't be sitting here."

"Your whole case rests on it, Yakoub, and it rests uneasily. It is much simpler to believe that he waited because he was dead and could do nothing else."

"I know, I know. All right, let me ask you. What will happen now that wouldn't have happened if we hadn't had word of Karim's death?"

"One, we stopped looking for Karim."

"Good, but not good enough."

"Two, we believe that the plot is scotched, and so we relax our vigilance."

"That's not enough either. The tribes will be watched for some time to come, and remember, this is an act of desperation, a short-term thing."

"The tribes will be watched, yes. But now we feel sufficiently assured to reduce the standby forces. Many soldiers are being brought in for duty on the Twenty-Five-Hundred-Year Day. That leaves much less opposition in the field."

"Still not enough. It doesn't affect the air force, which is your main tactical arm in a situation like this."

Tony said, "Where are all these tribes anyway?"

"Chiefly at their summer pastures," said Maktabi. "In the high places where it is cooler and there is good grass. They are spread out over a vast area of very difficult terrain, and because of this, they are capable of doing much mischief to isolated police stations, small garrisons, unprotected villages. However, since there are a number of subtribes, each with its own differing customs and degree of settlement, your question is not that simple to answer. Some are here; some are there. And of course, as yet we are not sure which ones are involved or how many."

"I see the problem."

"Large numbers of them are already here or are moving in for the celebration."

"Is that why you're bringing the soldiers back?"

"Not exactly, no. There seems to be nothing threatening here. But the crowds will be very heavy here and all along the road to Persepolis. The soldiers are needed to manage them and to assist the local authorities in maintaining normal security."

"The celebration," said Zacharian slowly. "I haven't been very holiday-minded lately. I'm afraid I haven't kept up. What exactly happens on the Twenty-Five-Hundred-Year Day?"

"Parades. Bands playing. Local festivities of all kinds. A day of feeling proud. The chief event will be the ceremony at Persepolis, to be attended by the governor and other

high-ranking officials of the province, military and police officers, members of the Majlis, many other dignitaries. The shah will send a representative. There is to be a historical pageant and a formal ceremony in which items recovered from foreign museums will be returned to their proper place."

"Ah," said Zacharian. "And all this glittering brass will go from Shiraz on a line of march twenty miles long to Persepolis, make speeches while the cameras grind, and then come back again."

"Yes."

"Would you have canceled it?"

Maktabi's eyes became suddenly harder and sharper than they had been before, though Tony would not have believed that possible.

"What?"

"If you had not had word of Karim's death, if you did not have Mahmud Hassani under arrest, would you have canceled the Persepolis ceremony? Could you have taken the responsibility of not canceling it, with the Lion still alive and threatening?"

"The subject was very much under discussion. It would have been a painful decision to make—this has all been planned and looked forward to for a long time now—but under those circumstances the Persepolis ceremony would probably have been canceled. Certainly, at the very least, it would have been drastically altered as to the attendance."

*"Mm,"* said Zacharian. "Perhaps now we're getting somewhere."

Maktabi rose abruptly, almost slamming his chair back from the desk. Tony could not tell whether he was alarmed or angry or both. When he spoke, his voice was quite level.

"Very well, let us say that the Twenty-Five-Hundred-Year Day is the moment Karim is waiting for, the key to his whole plot. How does he intend to use it? You rule out military confrontation, and in any case he has no army unless it springs suddenly from the ground. What does that leave? Assassination? Whose? And what could he gain by it except a wave of

outrage? Nothing would be changed politically." He swung around. "Well?"

"I don't know," said Zacharian. "We still have a couple of days. If we don't find out, you might start thinking about cancellation again."

"You will have to give me something better to take to my superiors than a prickling between your shoulder blades. And there is another explanation that perhaps you have not thought of. If he is alive, Karim may have done this simply to achieve the number one result, that we stop looking for him, in order to make his escape from the country possible."

"No," said Tony. "He wouldn't do that. Not just for himself."

"You never know what a man may do if he's really desperate," said Zacharian. "But I agree with Tony. I'd be much happier if I didn't."

"Proof," said Maktabi. "You must bring me proof. Otherwise I must continue to believe what is reasonable and logical. Mr. Wales himself saw that Karim was wounded in the shooting at Isfahan, and men do die of wounds. Furthermore, regardless of what I do or do not believe, there could be no cancellation or change of plans now without the most definite evidence."

"I understand that," Zacharian said, and got up. "May I have anything I want?"

"Within reason." Maktabi scribbled two notes and stamped them. "An open requisition and a top-clearance pass. *I* can do no more."

Zacharian nodded. He shoved the notes in his pocket and went out with Tony.

Tony said, "What now?"

"Go kick your heels, boy. I've got to talk to some people."

Tony was about to protest, but something in Zacharian's abstracted eyes decided him not to. He walked the sunny streets of Shiraz again and looked at the people and thought: *Oh, God, do we really have to do it all over again?*

He walked down the broad, beautiful Avenue Zand, and the

ghost of Karim walked beside him speaking with love and pride of this his city, the city of Hafiz and Saadi, the city of saints, the city of gardens where the bulbul sang. Was it possible to love a thing too much? He watched the people going about their daily business secure in their ignorance of what was planned for them, and he found himself cursing all self-appointed saviors. He was getting more passionate all the time, he noticed. He had better be careful, or he might develop into one of the goddamned dedicated. Only at the moment he had nothing to crusade about except Karim.

And he could not do anything about that but wait.

He waited twenty-four hours, hanging around the hotel, drinking enough beer to float him in an effort to calm the nerves that threatened to leap out through his skin. And then Zacharian came back, looking twenty-four years older and red-eyed with lack of sleep.

"Nothing," he said.

They sat beneath the plane trees, listening to the small gurgling fountain, smelling the roses. The pink sandstone ridge was beautiful against the clear blue sky.

"I've gone through the reports from the field, trying to find something that would give a clue. I've spent hours in a helicopter looking over the whole route and the country to both sides and on beyond to Pasargadae. And there is nothing. Not one thing that looks organized or unusual. Small groups moving in with women and kids and the family flock, and that's it."

"You'd better get some sleep," Tony said.

"Later. I just stopped by for a clean shirt. I want to go along and have a look at the security plans."

And he was gone again.

It was nighttime and the sandstone ridge was purple-black when he returned. He was driving a slightly battered sedan with the word PERSEPOLIS decaled on its rear window.

"Want to be a tourist again?" he asked

"What are you going to do?"

"The quick way hasn't paid off, so I'll try it again on the

ground. And nobody pays any attention to a Persepolis taxi."

"Okay," said Tony. "When?"

"As soon as I wake up," said Zacharian, and went to bed.

# 27

They left the hotel early in the morning. Zacharian drove. He wore a shabby striped suit and no hat. Tony sat in the back, clad in drip dries, sunglasses, and the indispensable camera.

"Do you think some of Karim's lot might be watching us?" Tony asked.

"No. He doesn't dare. It would be a dead giveaway if we caught on. Besides, I've made sure of it personally."

"Then why the masquerade?"

"I don't see any reason to go around waving a sign, and there's no way of telling who's watching what out along the road."

They went through the Koran Gate, into the hills and the winding passes. Zacharian drove slowly, to the intense exasperation of every other driver on the road. The heat grew. Tony put the window down and let the dry wind batter him.

"You still don't have any idea what he might be going to do?"

"No."

"You really do believe he's alive?"

"Do you?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's just that since you put the idea into words, I can't quite believe he isn't." He frowned out the window. "It's creepy, you know? The last time I came this way Karim was driving."

The tawny desert shimmered in the sunlight. Black tents dotted it on each side, strung out at haphazard or clumped

together in fair-sized encampments. Sometimes in the distance there was a walled village, and sometimes a line of men on camels appeared, half afloat on the mirage. The villages they passed through were gay with bunting and triumphal arches.

At length the lion-colored bulk of Kuh-i-Rahmat was ahead of them. And it was as though the mountain knelt to hold Persepolis in its hands.

Zacharian pulled off and stopped. From here it was possible to see the structure entire. The terrace of massive stone blocks seemed to grow almost naturally out of the mountain. At its back the cliff rose sharply to the ridge. The outer sides stood strong and square above the valley floor, crowned with ruins. Above all rose the columns of the Apadana, grand and lonely.

The two men sat and stared until Tony's eyes hurt with the glare and he could sit no longer.

"What is it you're looking for?"

Zacharian said, "How the hell do I know?" He started the car, drove through the village and into the white dust at the foot of the terrace. Tony got out, prepared to play tourist to Zacharian's guide.

There was some chat in Persian while Zacharian bought tickets. Tony supposed that the custodians here knew all the boys on the Persepolis run and were curious about the new one. Apparently he satisfied them. He led Tony through the iron gate and up the wide, shallow steps of the double staircase, pitched so that the Great King might ride them on horseback. They reached the top and stood where Darius had once stood with the desert wind stirring his robes and the valley spread out below. There was a stillness here that had not been in Darius' time. The wind made the only sound, blowing around beast-headed capitals, through roofless palace rooms and empty doorways where the stone-eyed kings pause forever in the act of going forth. Tony shivered slightly and followed Zacharian past Xerxes' Gate to the Apadana.

They climbed the northern stair, joining as it were the procession that marched on either side upward to the Audience Hall, paying tribute to the Great King at the New Year festival. The stunning height of the columns became apparent. They dwarfed the speaker's stand which had been built between them. The weathered stone made the bunting on the stand look cheap and garish. A non-Achaemenid mobile generator unit squatted off to one side, forerunner of more equipment to come; the ceremonies would be broadcast live and filmed for later showing. Speakers of the PA system had already sprouted in unlikely places. Eastward, high on the flank of the mountain, the rock-cut tombs of Artaxerxes II and III caught the sun in their deep niches.

Zacharian wandered, his gaze roving constantly from point to point; he was seeing the platform, Tony guessed, as it would be two days hence, with the bands and the flags and the VIP's. Tony tagged along, getting increasingly hot, thirsty, and cross, and bored with ruins.

They scrambled up steep tracks and had a look at both the tombs. The niches were cut deep and rose sheer on three sides to the top. Tony had never been wildly interested in tombs—the Valley of the Kings had depressed him unspeakably—but he made the pretense, peering at the carved fronts and then at the monolithic sarcophagi inside, his nose quivering at the smell of dust that never felt the sun. When they came out of the southern tomb, Zacharian said, "I'm going up top."

"Oh, Christ," said Tony, but he followed.

They climbed again. There had been a mud-brick wall to guard this eastern approach, and the ruins of a guard tower still stood. Eventually they stood on the ridge, breathing hard in the hot wind. The strategic essentials were easily grasped from here, with the platform shrunk to a manageable size. Access to it was strictly limited: the grand staircase at the front, a chariot road at the southeastern corner that now served the station wagons of the archeological staff, the track they had just climbed, and a place at the northeast

corner where an active man might make it up but certainly not unseen.

Tony said, "They'll have guards on all these places, to keep the crowds out. I don't see how anybody could crash the gate . . . and nobody's going to get there any other way without an official invitation."

Zacharian did not answer. He turned and examined the eastern slope of Rahmat, which came up like the back curve of a wave done roughly in stone.

"Sure," said Tony. "Anybody could climb that. But he'd still have to get down. And supposing he did—what's he going to do when he gets there?"

Zacharian was looking down at the terrace again. "Something he doesn't have to get away from, that's certain. The place is a trap. Let's go."

They slipped and skidded down again and got back into the car. Tony was thinking of the hotel garden and cold beer, but Zacharian turned the other way.

"Where are we going?"

"To Pasargadae."

"Nothing's going to happen out there. Why—"

"I wish to see the country. I do not yet know what I'm looking for, and until I do, I am going to continue to look. I'm sorry if you're tired because you're going to be a lot more tired before you're through."

"I don't mind you biting your words, but you don't have to take my head with them," said Tony. "I was only asking."

It was a long, lonely road. The black tents were much more sparse than along the Shiraz-Persepolis stretch, where all the excitement would be. Zacharian drove faster because there was less to see, but he stopped several times to talk to people: villagers; shepherds; the custodian at Pasargadae, where there was nothing but a desert valley with the pure, hard sky stretched across it and a palace floor with a single standing pillar. A stork had built her nest on it, and aside from the custodian, she was all that moved in the landscape. Tony had a sudden hunger for the freeways at rush hour.

They started back at last. The sun was low, and the colors it had leached from the rock began to appear again in shades of tan and ash-rose. The outlines of the hills were softened by a luminous haze, and the sky had lost its hardness.

"Did you learn anything?" Tony asked.

"Not yet."

All the way between Persepolis and Shiraz the population seemed to have doubled since the morning. The rare river bottoms swarmed with camels, donkeys, goats, and sheep. Tents were still going up as families continued to move in from the desert. The villages in the dusk were full of lights and music and unwonted crowds. Zacharian studied it all with a yellow predatory eye grown slightly haggard.

There was nothing new from Maktabi. Zacharian sighed.

"Rest up, boy," he said. "We'll do it again tomorrow."

# 28

The only thing Tony saw to enliven the morning was a young gypsy woman riding a donkey. There was nothing unusual about that except that she was nursing a baby at the same time. The donkey trotted, the baby clung like a monkey to the long bare breast with the nipple firmly jammed into its mouth, and the entire assembly went up and down together at a slapping rhythm. Tony hoped the child had a taste for butter.

Otherwise it was much the same as the day before. The traffic was heavier, mixed with military vehicles, and the roadside population was still growing; but there seemed to be no new element to interest Zacharian. When he reached Persepolis, he did not stop, and Tony thought for a few horrible moments that they were going to Pasargadae again. However, about three miles down the road he took the turn-

off to Naksh-i-Rustum, where the Sassanids carved their fat horses and opulent kings on the cliff below the tombs of Darius and Xerxes.

He stopped short of that. Between Naksh-i-Rustum and the main road were a village and a stream and a lot of empty land. Overnight a populous town had grown up here. Vendors had set up stalls; women washed clothes in the pools; children herded the family flocks. Zacharian halted on the bridge and sat studying the settlement.

At last he said, "I just don't see it. Too many women and children, not enough men at any one place to make an attack force. Even if they all were armed, they're too strung out, and their families are too vulnerable. And the feeling isn't right. There's no tension, nothing hiding underneath. Just a lot of people on holiday."

"Maybe," said Tony, "you're wrong about Karim."

"Maybe I am," said Zacharian, and drove back to Persepolis.

The custodians regarded them with interest, and Tony wondered if they wouldn't think it was funny that he had come back so soon.

"I've told them you're a teacher of ancient history," said Zacharian, "visiting the shrines. So look worshipful."

They toiled up the double stair again, Tony wishing he had a horse like the Great King. Things were going forward. Sometime during the night a mobile crane had been trundled up beside the terrace, and it was now engaged in hoisting huge hooded cameras and sound equipment to the Apadana. The stillness was abraded by the cries of men and the clanking of the crane.

They did the whole bit over again, the palaces, the great halls with their stumps of columns and broken floors, the carvings and the tombs. Zacharian moved like a sleepwalker, never speaking. It was as though he were forcing his mind to see what his physical eyes could not. They sat for a very long while on the ledge of Artaxerxes III's tomb, staring out over the terrace. Then all at once Zacharian rose and went away, taking the path to the crest.

He went so fast that Tony could not possibly keep up with him. When he did reach the ridge, Zacharian was standing in the wind like a triumphant bird of prey. His eyes blazed.

"I see how it could be done," he said. "Without an army. With no more than a hundred men. With less. I see why he had to wait. Look down there." He pointed to the terrace. "A trap, I said, and it is. A great magnificent goddamned trap."

Tony shook his head, uncomprehending.

"What must you do in order to take over a province, a state, a country? What's the essential?"

Tony thought. There'd been enough of it done all over the world so the answer was not hard to find.

"Get control of the government. And then—"

"Never mind about then. Where will the government of Fars, or at least most of it, be tomorrow?"

Tony looked down at the bright blot of the speaker's stand on the ash-gray stone. His mouth gradually formed a round, astounded emptiness that tried to fill itself with words and could not.

"Why not?" said Zacharian. "Look. The governor, the provincial officials, the top-ranking military brass, the police commissioner, the members of the Majlis, the representative of the shah, all there in one neat clutch like eggs in the nest." His hand made a nervous circling motion. "Around them a crowd of lesser VIP's, soldiers, an honor guard for the stand." He spread his arms wide. "Suddenly along this ridge a line of men appears, armed with high-powered rifles. They have everything down there completely at their mercy. Other parties of armed men take over the staircase and the access road. Meanwhile—"

His finger stabbed at the speaker's stand. "Everything is controlled from there. Someone on the stand is giving orders through the mouth of the governor, over the radio to the whole country. He may have a gun in the governor's back, but he will not kill, unless he's forced to. Killing is not the object. It is only the threat of it that makes people obey—if not for their own lives, then for the lives of all that crowd of people

who are at the mercy of the guns. The soldiers and police are ordered to surrender, and they do.

"Then the man on the stand speaks for himself. He makes it clear that he has literally, bodily, taken over the government. He has hostages with which he hopes to buy a province. He asks for a peaceful parley with Teheran, warns of what will happen if he doesn't get it. He arranges to clear the terrace and remove his captives to wherever he has planned to take them. Nobody is going to try shooting or dropping bombs on him as long as he has the physical possession of these people, and they are going to cooperate with him lest worse befall. Because now the tribesmen have their guns. Not enough to take the province by force, but enough to kill a lot of unarmed villagers.

"And all it takes is a little time. The propaganda mills start churning, making it appear that this is a popular uprising. Interested governments recognize the new state and promise support. In the world's capitals ten thousand spontaneous students march, chanting slogans and throwing things at embassies. A battleship of a certain color cruises up the Persian Gulf and Iraqi troops poise on the borders of Kurdistan. In Teheran, the government debates whether or not to slaughter these eminent men in cold blood, and each minute they wait makes the decision that much harder. What would you do if you had to make it?"

"Jesus," said Tony. "Christ." The wind shook him, and he felt giddy. "Listen. Listen, Jake, how do they get up here, all those men with rifles?"

"They come up the backslope. There'll be a lot of people coming that way, to watch the ceremony from here. And they won't have the guns at first. There'll be a cache somewhere on Rahmat. They'll get them on the way."

"And the ones down there, that take over the stairs and so on?"

"Out of the crowds. Their guns will be hidden in carts and vendors' barrows, in packsaddles, among household goods. It will all happen very quickly at a prearranged signal —perhaps the beginning of the pageant."

"And who'll be on the stand giving the orders? Karim?"

"Certainly Karim, if he's alive. If he isn't, the second team will try. Why not? If they brought it off, they could get Mahmud Hassani back alive and be in business."

"I don't know," said Tony. "I'm no judge of anything." The plan as Zacharian told it certainly had a diabolical simplicity, plus the fact that nobody would be expecting it. "Would it work, Jake? Would it really?"

"It would sure as hell," said Zacharian, "do for a start."

"You think Maktabi will listen?"

"I don't know. It's all in my head. There's no proof."

"Wait." Tony gestured down the tumbled backslope of Rahmat. "If we could find the cache—"

"Not us, Tony."

"Why?"

"Assuming it's there, it would take a regiment of men to find it in time. And someone will almost certainly be watching, making sure it isn't disturbed. If people start scouring around, it's a clear statement that we know what they're planning. That would stop them trying it, of course, but we wouldn't have a hope of catching anybody involved. So that will have to be Maktabi's decision."

He looked at his watch and then led off along the ridge and down the steep path. Before they left the terrace, Tony looked back once and thought: *He's right. A great magnificent goddamned trap.*

They drove back into Shiraz, and now Zacharian was overtaking everything in sight while Tony cowered.

They had to wait half an hour for Maktabi. When he came, he listened, scowled, and listened again. Then he sat, obviously mastering an urge to throw Zacharian out of the office because he could not quite disbelieve.

"I can see the logic, if a man had the courage to force it through. I do not say I believe, yet I cannot take the risk of ignoring the possibility. Of course, we must search for the cache, and there must be a strong guard on the ridge. My first duty is security."

"I was pretty sure of that," said Zacharian. "But wait a minute."

Maktabi stayed his hand from the intercom switch.

"If Karim's alive, I want him. So do you. Failing him, you want the next man in line. Perhaps we can have it both ways."

"How?"

"There's one problem. How does Karim or anyone get onto the terrace? Only those with official invitations and the proper credentials will be admitted, and there's no chance of sneaking past the guards unseen."

Impatiently, Maktabi said, "There are such things as forged credentials."

"Very well, let's let our man get onto the terrace. How does he get up to the Apadana and onto the speaker's stand? Remember he's armed. He must go undetected until the very last minute, right past all the soldiers and police, the honor guard, the sentries on the steps. How does he do that?"

"I am waiting for you to tell me."

"No civilian could make it. He'd be stopped and questioned, searched. But a soldier, Hanookh—a soldier can carry a rifle and move about unnoticed because his uniform is a badge of safety. A soldier can approach a general with a message even when he's on a speaker's stand. Even if he were not permitted to mount those final steps, he'd be in a position to shoot his way on if he had to."

Maktabi said irritably, "You are not thinking clearly. All the soldiers on duty tomorrow are picked men. Any substitution would be impossible. Also, each one has his assigned post which he may not leave."

"Right. But suppose this is just a soldier, an orderly. He's already on the terrace, so he must belong there. Each officer would assume that he was from some other unit—"

"And how did this soldier get onto the terrace? He would have to come with the assigned units, and I have just explained—"

"Oh, no, he wouldn't." Zacharian rose, his body taut with

nervous energy. "Remember the security plans. This afternoon the terrace was closed, cleared of everyone but the indispensable personnel, who will be checked off when they leave. Routinely, all possible hiding places, such as the tombs and the museum building, will be gone over. Guards will be posted at all entrances to the terrace, including the old post on the mountain which covers the only path down from the crest. This is to prevent unauthorized persons of any sort coming in for any purpose whatever."

"So?"

"So having been done once, the search will not be repeated. Listen, Hanookh, it's already late; you'll only lose a little bit of daylight. Give me tonight. If I'm wrong, you've still got all of tomorrow morning."

Maktabi was silent, considering. At last he said, "Exactly what do you intend?"

Zacharian told him.

# 29

They sat in the dust, leaning against the base of the eastern stair of the Apadana. Dust and stone both still held some warmth from the day. Overhead the sky was a pellucid blackness holding a blaze of stars.

Tony's eyes had become used to the starlight. He could see the carvings to his left and, to his right, the tall immortals with their spears in their hands. They wore long robes and sandals with buttoned thongs. Their beards were curled, and their eyes were proud and calm. They were not very good company. Neither was Zacharian, who rested against the skirts of a Mede and appeared to sleep. Tony wanted desperately to talk, but talking was forbidden.

Up on the cliff of Rahmat the southern tomb was hardly visible. It was too close to the guard tower for what Zacharian

had in mind. The northern tomb was almost directly opposite. The deep niche showed as an area of darkness against the paler rock. Tony would have liked a moon. That would not come until later, and meantime, there was nothing to do but sit and wait and wonder.

Nervous tremors set his thigh muscles jumping. He put his hands on them and clamped them tight, and the posture made him aware of the gun under his arm, the same gun he had lost on the night they took Hassani. From time to time he could hear one of the soldiers on guard duty cough or scuff his boot against the stone. Otherwise the night was very quiet.

The dim light began to bother his eyes. He closed them. High above him the kneeling bulls of a double-headed capital rubbed their fronts against the stars and dreamed of other days. A small dry wind came in from the desert, stirring Tony's hair, making whispering noises. The long lines of the embassies marched—men of Egypt and India, Bactria and Babylon, Sogdiana and Thrace, Phoenicia and Punt, bearing gifts to the Great King. Tony had a confused idea that they were really moving, and he snapped to with a violent start to find that it was Zacharian who had moved, gathering himself forward with a faint, soft scuffing in the dust.

His hand came over Tony's mouth. Tony nodded to signify that he was awake, and the hand moved away, pointing.

Behind the mountain the sky had turned milky, and now the western-facing cliff was all in darkness. The niche of the tomb was lost, and Tony had trouble finding it again. When he did, it took him even longer to see what Zacharian was pointing at.

A tiny blob of darkness more solid than the shadow crept down the face of the sheer cut above the tomb.

The great ganglion at Tony's middle contracted in a stinging flare of heat. He made to rise, and Zacharian whispered, "Wait. Let him get all the way down."

The dark blob crept and crawled, infinitely patient. Nothing thumped or rang against the rock. Somewhere up above there would be men paying out the rope. They were

too far away from the guard tower to be seen, and they would take care not to be heard.

The figure slid lower and came finally to rest on the tomb ledge.

"Wait," said Zacharian. "Give them time to take the rope up."

They waited, hearing nothing, seeing nothing. The figure was now hidden. Probably, Tony thought, he had already gone into the cold chamber of the tomb, to wait there until tomorrow, when the terrace would be thronged with people and he could take his place among them unnoticed.

Zacharian said, "Now."

He sprang up, shouting to the soldiers. The sergeant in charge had been briefed when they had returned to Persepolis after dark. Somebody let off a rifle twice as a signal to the men in the tower and at the gate below—two at each place, two more at each end of the terrace. There were sounds of men running.

Tony and Zacharian were far ahead, going between the Hall of a Hundred Columns and the Treasury. As they came into the open at the foot of the cliff, something large and furious rushed down the steep path from the tomb, sliding, leaping, scattering pebbles. It fired at them in mid-leap. They dropped behind a fragment of wall and heard the bone-jarring finish of the descent. Then silence. The man had taken shelter beyond a row of cubicles that once housed part of the Great King's soldiery. No one had shot at him. They wanted him alive.

Tony shouted, "Karim!" The name rang off the cliff. "Karim!"

There was no answer. Tony trembled with impatience. Up on the ridge there were cries and an outburst of firing. A man came tumbling down the cliff, shrieking. About midway he stopped that. He struck bottom with a noise like someone slapping a pillow, and a few rocks fell after him. The cries and shots receded over the eastern slope of the mountain. The four soldiers on the terrace called to one another. From the placement of their voices they were fanning out

across the Hall of a Hundred Columns and the court beyond, forming a line that would pin the quarry against the cliff and hold him there.

Zacharian spoke in Persian; whether or not he was Karim, the man behind the wall would understand that. Tony knew that he was being told to surrender. Once again there was no answer. A thin old moon climbed over the ridge and washed Persepolis in a vague light more baffling than the steady, shadowless gleaming of the stars. The shattered columns and stark doorways seemed to float between reality and dream.

The soldiers began to call again, closing in.

Tony said, "Where is he?"

Suddenly, at the far end of the barrack row, one of the soldiers yelled and waved his arms.

"Hell," said Zacharian, "he's slipped around them somehow.'

They ran across the hundred-columned hall. When they reached the doorway on the other side, they could see that all the soldiers were heading toward the northern end of the terrace, where an active man might escape. Zacharian stopped abruptly.

"How many soldiers do you see?"

Tony strained his eyes against the swimming light.

"Five."

Zacharian grunted. "So the one that yelled wasn't one of ours. It was him, and who's to tell the difference?"

In that light, with the men separated from one another in the tangle of ruins, no one had.

Zacharian climbed onto the low wall, then up on a higher block of stone. Tony followed to the top of the wall, where he could see better. One of the soldiers had dropped far behind the other four and was coming back this way.

Zacharian shouted and fired a warning shot.

There was a second shot, almost overlapping Zacharian's. Tony heard the impact of the bullet. He tried to catch Zacharian as he fell but only succeeded in falling with him onto the pavement behind the wall. Zacharian lay partly on top of

him; he was still alive because Tony could feel the labored agony of every breath he drew. Tony disengaged himself. His hands were covered in blood. He stood up and wiped them, not knowing what to do.

Karim came over the wall twenty feet away and told him. "Stand there, Tony. Right there."

He came closer, trim and soldierly in khakis and beret. He had a pistol in his hand, and Tony stood, holding his hands wide, knowing it was no use to try for his own gun.

"You should have kept going," he said. "You could have got away." In the distance he could hear the voices of the soldiers. The shots had turned them. "They'll be here in a minute—"

Karim said, "They can have me. I wasn't trying to get away."

Tony stared at him, uncomprehending, remembering Karim's face, remembering love. And he cried out, "Why? Why have you done these things?"

"Harvey asked me the same question before he died. Because I wanted to save my people. I don't want them changed, Westernized, made over in somebody else's image. I don't want the girls turning into little fornicating Sandras and the young men into fat spoiled children like you. Reza Shah began it, taking the veils from the women, making the men wear brimmed hats so they couldn't pray . . . I might have stopped it, but you—you and that Armenian pig—"

The soldiers were still a long way off. Tony stood alone, looking into the black, round eye of Karim's gun.

"So you're going to kill us."

"I spared your life once, Tony. You should have been more grateful. You know what's going to happen. I'll make the best bargain I can for my father, and then I'll be tried, convicted, and shot. You've got what you wanted, but I'm damned if I'll leave you to enjoy it."

Tony said, "Karim, please—"

And Karim waited one moment too long, saying, "Go ahead and cry, Tony. You've always been good at that."

Tony cried, and at the same time he charged forward, his hands high, above the gun. There was no conscious thought about it. The nerves and the muscles, the glands and the beating heart, did it all by themselves out of a compulsion as old as life, because there was no help and nothing to be lost. His fists crashed down on Karim's arm. The gun went off, and he heard the bullet snarl away, chipping the paving stones. In a blind rage of fear he held Karim's wrist and bore him backward, ground him with his heavier weight against the wall, beat his hand against the hard clay until it let the weapon fall. He kicked it out of reach and stepped back, drawing his own gun, shaking so that he could hardly hold it.

Karim leaned against the wall, groping for his injured hand and staring at Tony in shocked amazement.

"I never thought you had the guts."

"Neither did I." He heard the soldiers coming toward the door and smiled. "Cheer up," he said to Karim. "There may be hope for your people yet."

# 30

And this, after all, was how it ended. Not among the stones of Persepolis, or at the hospital in Shiraz where Zacharian was recovering from the bullet that had cracked his heart rib; where Karim, under heavy guard, was being treated for a broken hand and the aftereffects of the minor wound he had taken at Isfahan, telling all he knew of the Western network, the Marlowe Foundation, and the Lion, in exchange for leniency to his father.

It ended here, in a green churchyard high up on the edge of Dartmoor, with the clouds rolling overhead and a smell of rain on the wind. The grass had grown thick on Harvey

Martin's grave, so that only the newness of the headstone was out of place, and that was already beginning to weather down. Tony noticed that a small patch of lichen had appeared.

He and Ellen had both felt that somehow this last visit was necessary, a kind of explanation and farewell. They had brought flowers. They stood on opposite sides of the grave, quite silently, for some time, while the sun broke out from between the clouds and then was gone again. A few drops of rain began to fall. Ellen laid the bright flowers on the grass and looked at Tony and he nodded. He came around and took her hand, and they went together to the car and got in and drove away across the moor.

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