

A Fawcett Gold Medal Book

d1849

50c

Her name was Tanya and she had returned from the moon to become the most sought after girl in the world.... So Sam Durell was assigned to find her

ASSIGNMENT-
MOON
GIRL

EDWARD S. AARONS



THE CHINESE GIRL WAS
EXTRAORDINARILY BEAUTIFUL . . .

"Let me make you warm," she said, sliding to the floor beside him. She was shivering, too. But in a moment Durell felt the heat of her and decided she either enjoyed her work thoroughly or was sincere.

"Help me get away," he whispered,

"I will."

"Now."

"No, not now."

"Lotus, you're a bit too much."

She laughed. "You feel helpless because your hands are tied?"

"I'm missing so much," he said. "Why not untie me?"

"Tell me where to find the Moon Girl," she demanded.

"To hell with the Moon Girl!"

Her body trembled over him. She put her face to his, and he was amazed to feel the warm slide of tears. Then she pushed herself up and he saw the raw glitter of a knife. It looked very sharp. A clutch of cold fear grabbed at his groin.

She didn't smile as she asked, "You know what Madame Hung suggests I do?"

Other Fawcett Gold Medal Books by Edward S. Aarons:

ASSIGNMENT—ANGELINA
ASSIGNMENT—ANKARA
ASSIGNMENT—BLACK VIKING
ASSIGNMENT—BUDAPEST
ASSIGNMENT—BURMA GIRL
ASSIGNMENT—THE CAIRO DANCERS
ASSIGNMENT—CARLOTTA CORTEZ
ASSIGNMENT—CONG HAI KILL
ASSIGNMENT—THE GIRL IN THE GONDOLA
ASSIGNMENT—HELENE
ASSIGNMENT—KARACHI
ASSIGNMENT—LILI LAMARIS
ASSIGNMENT—LOWLANDS
ASSIGNMENT—MADELEINE
ASSIGNMENT—MANCHURIAN DOLL
ASSIGNMENT—MARA TIRANA
ASSIGNMENT—PALERMO
ASSIGNMENT—SCHOOL FOR SPIES
ASSIGNMENT—SORRENTO SIREN
ASSIGNMENT—STELLA MARNI
ASSIGNMENT—SUICIDE
ASSIGNMENT—SULU SEA
ASSIGNMENT—TREASON
ASSIGNMENT TO DISASTER
ASSIGNMENT—ZORAYA

CATSPAW ORDEAL
COME BACK, MY LOVE
THE DECOY
DON'T CRY, BELOVED
ESCAPE TO LOVE
GIRL ON THE RUN
PASSAGE TO TERROR
THE SINNERS

Assignment

MOON GIRL

EDWARD S. AARONS

A FAWCETT GOLD MEDAL BOOK

Fawcett Publications, Inc., Greenwich, Conn.
Member of American Book Publishers Council, Inc.

CONDITIONS OF SALE: This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent, and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

All characters in this book are fictional and any resemblance to any person living or dead is purely coincidental.

Copyright © 1967 by Fawcett Publications, Inc.

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book or any portions thereof.

Printed in the United States of America

Chapter One

SHE smelled the tiger before she saw him. His male-cat odor filled the darkened cave. She scrambled alongside the rough sandstone walls that scratched her thighs and flanks, and then saw the cub's eyes, glowing a phosphorescent green as he padded from his den. The cat grumbled, warning her away from his cool retreat. But she could not remain in the pit, now that the sun was up. Not for another day. She had to find relief, or die.

"Please," she whispered to the beast. "I beg of you. Let me be."

The cub was half-grown, but almost as heavy as she, with the distinctive stripes of the rare Hyrcanian tigers once hunted by the Sassanids of ancient times. He was not hungry. Food had been thrown into the pit for both of them. But he would not leave her in peace. He was like some strange watchdog, trained to observe her every move, ready to leap upon her in half-anger, half-sexual play, whenever she tried to penetrate the shadows of the cave. He paused and watched her with eyes like living emeralds.

"Please," she whispered again. "Just let me get out of the sun."

She shrank back, and this satisfied him, although his musky tomcat smell was stronger as he watched her. Fortunately, the blood had dried on her thigh where he had clawed her yesterday. Or was it the day before? She did not know. She had lost all sense of time here.

She did not know where she was, or how she had gotten here, or why she was kept a prisoner.

Her thoughts had been broiled by the sun, shattered like crystals in the cold nights, numbed by the incomprehensible situation in which she found herself. At first, she had tried to apply rational, scientific thought to the problem. But there was no beginning or end to it. She thought she might be mad, and clung only to the fact that she was undoubtedly alive, somehow, and had survived some completely impossible phenomenon that had deposited her in this place.

She clung to a phrase that rolled over and over in her mind.

"MynameistanyaouspanayaandIhavebeenonthemoon. MynameistanyaouspanayaandIhavebeenonthemoon."

The cat growled and padded toward her, head swinging from right to left, left to right. She backed out of the cave that was his jealously guarded domain.

And found herself in the pit again.

It was ten paces in diameter, with smoothly bored walls rising thirty feet overhead to a circle of harsh white sky in which nothing moved, nothing lived. She had never seen a sky of such venom before. Toward noon of each day, when the sun was at its height, the heat struck down like the blow of an axe, incredible, choking the breath from her struggling lungs, boiling the blood in her veins, flaying the skin from her naked body.

Already a long, obscene pseudopod of white light dipped into the shaft along one wall, reaching for her. The girl whimpered and cowered back, hugging her bruised knees in a foetal position and staring at the cave entrance through the straggled screen of her white-blond hair.

How long had she been naked like this, living an animal existence worse than the cat's? There was no beginning and no end. Only visions and fragments of nightmare madness drifted in her mind. She bit absently at her knee with strong white teeth, tasted the salt of her blood, and began to weep.

She was a tall girl, when she stood erect; but lately she had begun to crawl about on hands and knees, reverting inevitably to a savagery equal to the animal she lived with. Her skin was the color of ivory, her eyes were very faintly almond-shaped, betraying her Chinese mother, and her face was a fortuitous blend of Siberian beauty and the delicacy of her mother's features. She had blue eyes, an athletic body, with proud breasts and flat stomach and full flanks and hips. Dimly, she remembered how her exotic beauty had been an irritant in early years, when men troubled her and distracted her from her dedication to her work. She had been bred and trained and used for but one goal. Nothing else had mattered. She was like an exquisite tool, machined to the ultimate micro-millimeter of perfection. And she had been successful. This much she knew.

"My name is tanya ouspanaya and I have been on the moon."

And a mocking voice answered from above:

"Have you now, my pomegranate?"

She lifted her eyes slowly. The voice always inspired fear in her. It had a mad hilarity, a giggling of perverted amusement.

"Mahmoud?" she whispered.

"It is I."

"I am thirsty."

"My poor little beast!"

"And hungry."

"You will be fed, my darling."

"And so very warm!"

"Naturally."

"Let me out of here. Please. I will do anything you say!"

"Truly?"

"I promise."

"Then tell me something," said the voice.

"Whatever you ask."

"Have you truly been on the moon?"

"Yes, yes!"

"Ah, you are mad."

"I am going mad, yes."

"On the moon? Truly? What was it like there?"

She hesitated. "Different."

"How, different?"

"Hot and cold, light and dark."

"All these things are here."

"But different," she said.

"How long were you there?"

"I don't know, Mahmoud."

"When did you get back?"

"I don't know."

"How did you manage it?"

"I cannot remember."

"You see? You are not willing to tell all. The master is still annoyed. It is too bad."

A head like a round melon swathed in a dirty rag appeared above the edge of the pit. The face was blackened by the sun, the open mouth gaped toothlessly, there was an ulcer on one cheek, and one eye was almost shut by a disease whose name she should have remembered, but could not. A skeletal hand began to lower a rope holding a covered bucket in which water splashed.

"Mahmoud, what is up there?" she moaned.

"The world."

"What else?"

"Life, my lovely beast."

"When will your master speak to me?"

"When you come to your senses."

"But I am going mad here!" she cried.

Mahmoud's giggle spiraled down to her in thin, venomous echoes. She clapped her hands over her ears. Something rubbed against her naked side, and she saw it was the cat. His breath was foul. The male odor that enveloped him stirred her in curious ways. She found it repulsive, but she was growing used to it. The cat growled and moved to the water bucket that Mahmoud manipulated down and tipped into a small

concrete depression on the floor of the pit. The tiger drank first, with a huge delicacy, his glowing eyes always on her. He was always first. Later, there would be raw meat for him, rice for her. The cat allowed her the rice. Sometimes, when she ate, sitting on her haunches, he would be playful, and yesterday he had tried to mount her, his vast weight thrusting her down under his iron body. He would try again, she knew. And Mahmoud would watch it happen and giggle. . . .

Hatred was a good thing. It scoured the mind like a clean fire. And she hated Mahmoud. She concentrated on this now, huddled against the wall, making herself look patient while the cat drank his fill of the brackish water. The rope still dangled from the top of the pit.

The rope . . .

The cat, the cave, and the rope. Somehow she must put them together, and escape. But how? She had no real plan in mind when she suddenly summoned her strength and leaped for the rope that Mahmoud dangled so tantalizingly from high above.

There came a howl of alarm and outrage from the man above. For an instant, as her weight pulled on the line, Mahmoud's head and shoulders surged over the edge of the pit. She got her naked feet against the wall and clambered rapidly up—five, eight, ten feet, a third of the way to the dazzling disc of blinding sunlight. Then Mahmoud screamed and gave up trying to pull the rope from her. He let it go, to save himself. She fell back with a thud onto the pit floor. The shock of her fall almost knocked her senseless. She heard Mahmoud's hissing curses, and a darkness washed over her. But she was given no respite. Her sudden effort had alarmed and angered the tiger. Growling, he leaped upon her, claws unsheathed.

The pain that slashed her back revived her. Mahmoud had run away. The big cub continued to cuff and maul her. She rolled into a ball to shield her stom-

ach and lay still. The cat's fetid breath choked her. His sleek, lethal muscularity slid over her flanks and buttocks, and his rough tongue seemed to cauterize the cuts he had inflicted on her back. Finally his growling subsided into uncertain rumbles.

Cautiously, filled with a feral cunning, she tightened her fingers on the rough rope. The tiger was doubtful about her, pacing about, his tail twitching. His great whiskered head lifted to stare up the walls of the pit. All at once, she seized the rope and whipped it about his massive neck, took quick loops about both her wrists, and hauled it tight in a strangling noose.

The beast screamed. His great body convulsed into a thousand steel springs as he tried to bound into his cave. She did not let go. But his strength was something satanic as he dragged her with him across the pit. *"MynameistanyaouspanayaandIhavebeenonthemoon."*

She struck her head on the floor and her grip relaxed for a moment. The tiger cub halted, bared huge fangs. She twisted and slid onto his back. He rolled over, and his enormous, stinking weight crushed her breasts and belly. His tail whipped in a frenzy as he began to wheeze. She dared not let go. He would kill her now, if he escaped the noose. But her strength was ebbing fast. The cat dragged her into the cave. Desperate, she managed another loop of rope about her wrist and tightened the noose even more. The tiger fell, and one claw raked her leg.

It was a living nightmare, a recurring dream she had suffered as a child in Peking. She had felt strange there, knowing she looked far more Russian than Chinese. Sometimes, at night, she dreamed of a tiger prowling the barren, concrete apartment house, padding closer and closer to her room. Always, as the beast burst in to devour her, she awoke screaming, to find Papa at her side, cradling her, soothing her with lullabies.

But now the nightmare was real.

She could not kill the cat. It was useless. Her hatred

ebbed into despair, and she slackened her grip on the rope she'd wound about the beast's neck. She started to run.

Out of nowhere, it seemed, a man's hands touched her. A boot grated on the floor of the cave. The man spoke gently in a language she did not understand. Then he said in Russian: "Tanya? Tanya Ouspanaya?"

She whimpered and kept her eyes closed.

"Can you hear me, Tanya? It's all right. The cat can't hurt you now. You knocked him out. I'll get you away from here."

She felt his hands on her naked, bloodied body, lifting her. She opened her eyes. They were inside the cave. The man was tall, his head outlined against the outer light.

"How—how did you get in?"

"There is a back gate, into these caves," he said. "I came looking for you, to help you."

"You speak Russian—with an accent—"

"I'm not Russian," the man said.

"I don't know where I am," she moaned. "I don't know how I got here. My name is Tanya Ouspanaya and I have been on the moon."

"So I've heard. Can you walk a bit?"

"I think so."

He set her down gently, and took a canteen of water hooked to his leather belt and gave her a sip. Somehow, she trusted him. He was very tall, with a solid, comforting muscularity. The cat lay on its side, flanks heaving. The man had strange, dark blue eyes. His face was badly burned by the sun, and he wore desert clothes and a gun belted next to his water canteen. He would have seemed cruel, and terribly dangerous, except for the way he smiled at her. His revolver was an American make. She recognized that much, from her past training, and suspicion flooded her all at once.

"Who are you?" she whispered. "What do you want with me?"

"I've come to get you out of this place."

"But who are you?"

"My name is Sam Durell," the man said.

Chapter Two

DURELL had flown from Geneva Central to Teheran four days earlier. He'd had thirty minutes' notice, and a promise of briefing in Istanbul en route, before he caught his Pan Am flight. It did not trouble him. He was accustomed to emergency procedure. His work as sub-chief in field operations for K Section of the Central Intelligence Agency did not allow for the normal amenities. He phoned Deirdre Padgett, who was on rest period at St. Moritz, packed a single grip, took the passport and diplomatic pouch that described him as an attaché in State's legal department—he had a qualifying degree from Yale—and caught the designated flight with ten minutes to spare.

It was high summer, and he did not look forward to the smothering heat in Teheran. He spoke enough Farsi to get by in Iran, and some Arabic and Kurdish, which might also help. He gave the other passengers a careful scanning when he got aboard—he was always a careful man—and decided there was no one to worry about. Some American tourists, two pompous West German industrialists, five intense Swiss, a murmuring family of Indians, a smug Hong Kong merchant, a nervous Frenchman and his wife, an equally nervous Englishwoman traveling alone, and no Turks. Just the same, he did not sleep.

Durell had been in the business a long time. He could no longer conceive of any other way of life. The norms by which most men lived were not for him. In-

deed, they had grown alien and uncomfortable. When General Dickinson McFee, that gray, unpredictable man back at No. 20 Annapolis Street, suggested a desk job, Durell had refused, and renewed his standard annual contract, ignoring the fact that Analysis and Synthesis had noted in his dossier that his survival factor had just about run out.

He was not a man for the gimmickry thought up by the lab boys, and his Cajun temperament, derived from his boyhood in the Louisiana bayous, leaned more toward the informed gamble than to the plodding teamwork that seemed to reduce everything to a lowest common denominator. He spoke a score of languages and dialects fluently, and knew intimately an amazing number of the world's dark and crooked alleys. He could make himself at home anywhere—in a Mayfair flat in London, a Paris existentialist's salon, the Libyan desert, a Hong Kong sampan, the Thai jungles. He was big, with a heavy musculature, but he walked with a lithe agility that sometimes betrayed him. He could kill with his fingers, a needle, a rolled newspaper—and he had done so, more often than he cared to think about. There was a red tab on his file at KGB headquarters at No. 2 Dzerzhinsky Square in Moscow, and another in Ta-Po's security office in Peking. Chang Hung Ta-Po, head of Mr. Mao's intelligence service, had personally sworn to dismember his dead body. This did not trouble Durell, either, except to increase the care he took in so many small, vital things. He never turned a corner with ease, or opened a door without proper procedure. He had seen good men die because of a moment's hesitation. It had put gray in his thick black hair and darkened his blue eyes and added cruel lines to his mouth. He was different. He walked apart from others. But there could never be another kind of life for him.

Avram Yigit met him in Istanbul.

"Come with me, Cajun," Yigit said, gripping his right arm with iron fingers.

Durell disengaged his arm from the Turk's hand. "Won't you ever learn, Avram?"

The man who ran Istanbul Central for K Section smiled apologetically. "Sorry, Sam. It is a habit, to touch, to grasp people. I am a little excited, I think."

"You have something for me?"

"Over coffee. There is time. We're clean here. And I have four men within call."

"You never know," Durell said.

The coffee in its tiny cup could have walked across the table by itself. Durell lit one of his rare cigarettes and watched the crowd in the airport café over Avram Yigit's thick shoulders. The Turk had smooth cheeks, small shoe-button eyes, thick hands. He had operated Istanbul Central for six years. The things against him were his wife and five children, and an occasional yen for an opium pipe. He was the best that could be had.

"You're supposed to brief me," Durell said.

"I only have partial information, Sam. But you are to find Tanya Ouspanaya."

"The Soviet cosmonaut? The one who could win a beauty contest without half trying?" Durell paused. "I know her father. Met him in Brussels once, at a science conference. I covered as a clerk there. Fine man."

"Brilliant. A Chinese wife, you know?"

"She's still in China," Durell said.

"But Tanya, their daughter, has been on the moon," Yigit said quietly. "And returned." The words were spoken without stress, almost with weariness. Durell looked at the Turk. Yigit smiled sadly. "It opens—how do you say it?—a can of worms."

"It's not possible," Durell said flatly.

"How, not?"

"We'd know it. Our monitors would show it."

"It was done. They were up there."

Durell put his hand flat on the small café table. "With no propaganda release?"

"A campaign was planned. Moscow was all ready for it, when she returned. But then—nothing."

"What do you mean, nothing?"

"Not a word. They do not have her."

"Where is she, then?"

"That is for you to find out," Yigit said. "Urgently. With top priority."

"Is she alive?"

"We don't know."

"Do the Russians know?"

"They are looking. Desperately. Others, too. Your friend, Chang Hung Ta-Po, is in Teheran. The People's Republic of China claims Tanya Ouspanaya as a citizen, since her mother opted for Peking."

Durell's eyes went dark. "Pandora's box, indeed. Why in Teheran?"

"That is where Tanya was last seen."

It had been reported by an embassy employee, not as an official account, but as amusing coffee-shop gossip. The Soviet people had tried to suppress it, but it appeared as a squib in the English-language newsletter. Her name was given. Her description fit. Her Sino-Siberian beauty couldn't have been anyone else's. Everything about it, however, was like a dream recounted by a hashish-eater.

She had been seen running down Ferdowsi Street, then near the Golestan Palace. Her hair was wild and unkempt, her face dirty and burned by the sun, her clothing—the remnants of an astronaut's suit, if the gossip were true—torn and disheveled. She had babbled wildly in Russian and Arabic. She seemed drunk, or hysterical, and completely disoriented. Her words to the policeman who stopped her made no sense at all.

"Which way was she running?" Durell asked Yigit sharply.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Which way? To or from her embassy?"

"I see. It was away." The Turk spread thick hands. "But my account is fourth- or fifth-hand, Cajun."

"Was she arrested? Taken into custody?"

"She got away from the policeman. She acted wild. Insane. He was a bit afraid of her, it seems."

Durell was skeptical. "Was she moon-struck?"

Yigit ignored his smile. "Who knows? But it was Tanya Ouspanaya. The Russians are in a quiet uproar. Making urgent demands for her return. Claim violation of international rights. Piracy. Kidnapping. You name it, the Soviets have called it."

Durell finished his coffee. He had five minutes until flight-time to Teheran. "What happened after she got away from the local cop?"

"She was reported twice after that. Once again in Teheran, the same night. Four days later, in Isfahan. The first time, still alone. In a café. She burst in, giving her name, saying she had been on the moon. Some English were there. They tried to give her a drink and calm her down. She almost killed one of them, hitting him with a chair. That tore it. The cops were called, but she got away, down an alley. They think she climbed over a wall into Ishmael Har-Buri's former private palace. You know about Har-Buri?"

"Political anathema in Iran, yes." Durell nodded. "I thought he was ordered imprisoned by the Shah."

"He escaped. He's in hiding."

"Then Har-Buri has the girl?"

"We don't know." Yigit sighed. "As for the sighting in Isfahan, it was vague, indefinite. An American with an archeological team working out of Persepolis, 'way into the Dasht-i-Kavir—horrible desert—says he saw her on a camel."

"On a *camel*?"

"In a caravan, heading north into the sands."

"It sounds like Alice in Wonderland," Durell said.

"They'll have more for you in Teheran," Yigit said. "She's a lovely girl. You'll enjoy finding her."

Teheran, under the loom of Demavend's high peak, enjoyed one of its rare summertime rains when Durell landed. The taxi was temperamental, as always; the multi-colored streetcars gleamed and sprayed water under the iron wheels; the debonair policeman on duty at Yusefabad Square ignored the drizzle with elegant nonchalance, although his prideful moustache drooped and dripped. The rain did not relieve the insufferable heat. But it fell democratically on the bicycle traffic, the white caps of military police, the costumed scholars from the Military Academy, the corrugated iron roofs, and the neo-Achaemenian sculptures of ancient archers at the National Bank, where Durell changed Swiss gold francs into Iranian currency. It was four in the afternoon when Hannigan appeared through the crowds of schoolboys with shaved heads and schoolgirls with braids and gray pinafores. Teheran, which had been founded by the Qajar dynasty as its capital in 1796, still looked raw and unfinished in many districts. Hannigan, who was the K Section man at the embassy, looked equally disheveled and discontent.

"Welcome to our Persian garden, Cajun."

Rafe Hannigan had pale, brilliant green eyes and a swarm of orange freckles across a homely face. His rumpled seersucker revealed thick shoulders. His elfin eyes never left the passersby on the sidewalk of the café not far from the Park Hotel, where Durell had checked in. Traffic on the wide Shah-Reza and Ferdowsi Boulevards seemed heavier than he had remembered it. Near the old Tup-Khune Square, the picturesque shops were still jumbled with Italian accordions, American hair-creams, German typewriters, Parisian perfumes, and bookshops displaying medical sex books next to Persian pamphlets on dialectical materialism. Hannigan watched two men greet each other with kisses, and sighed heavily.

"I was followed here, Cajun. Couldn't help it. Do you see him?"

"I see him," Durell said. "The third table to the right. Chang Hung Ta-Po, the old Buddha with the Stalinist line. I understand he's interested in the situation."

"He put a watch on us. Brace yourself, laddy. He's coming over, and that takes a hell of a gall."

Hung Ta-Po was a mountain of smiling yellow flesh who glided between the tables with the grace of a swan in a country pool. He wore the old Russian-style double-breasted suit, which bulged with his enormous girth. His thick black hair was as stiff and grizzled as the spines on a hog's back. He walked lightly on the balls of his toes, like a Japanese sumo wrestler, and there was a strange elegance in his massive nod to Hannigan and the way he turned his head with slow solemnity to regard Durell.

"Where the prey has fallen, there the vultures gather," he said, in impeccable English.

"If that's Confucius—which I doubt," said Durell quietly, "he's not in good odor these days in your country."

"True. It was my own phrase. One is not surprised to note your arrival here, Mr. Durell." Ta-Po smiled. "Nor are you surprised to see me, sir. We know you quite well and have marked a day of reckoning for the various injuries you have done us."

"You could get thrown out of the country for that remark." Durell's smile was carved in stone.

"We are all *persona non grata* very quickly, if this strange matter of my countrywoman is not cleared up."

"Your countrywoman?"

"I will be frank with you," said Hung Ta-Po. His black eyes glittered, then became opaque. "We consider Tanya Ouspanaya as belonging to China, whatever the Soviets may claim her to be."

"She made her own choice," Durell said.

"Ah, but the poor girl is not in her right mind. We

agree on this. She needs help, her mother's tender care—"

"I can imagine its tenderness, Chang."

"So I warn you, Durell. We know where to look. We will find her. Our men are already in Isfahan. You see, I hide nothing. Ishmael Har-Buri, the Iranian patriot, cooperates with us."

"Har-Buri is your puppet," Hannigan snapped angrily. "An agitator for Peking, using your help to bid for power against the Shah."

Hung Ta-Po's eyes rolled briefly to Hannigan, then dismissed him and returned to Durell. "Your fellow imperialist spy here will direct you to Isfahan, sir, to cooperate with the English M.6 agent there, Mr. Adam Beele. One would suggest you accept discretion as the better part of valor, and take the next plane back to Geneva. This affair does not concern you. If you interfere, you will suffer grievously. And on your way home, by the way, you may give my felicitations to your Turkish agent, Mr. Yigit. I understand he is the proud father of yet another daughter."

The Chinese stood up massively and bowed his grizzled head. He seemed amused, but Durell wasn't sure. He didn't like the opacity in Ta-Po's stare. And for just an instant, the hatred that gleamed there struck him like a physical blow.

"Good day, sir. You have been warned."

Durell sat silently, hands flat on the café table, and watched Ta-Po amble away. Hannigan sighed, shook his head. His freckles stood out brightly across his face, and his bright green eyes were dulled.

"I suppose time is of the essence, to coin another non-Confucian phrase," he said. "I'd better brief you."

Durell smiled without mirth. "Not necessary now. Hung Ta-Po just told me all I need to know."

Isfahan, pearl of the south, was a city of beautiful tombs, minarets, mosques, palaces, and gardens, built by the great Shah Abbas upon a foundation of Par-

thians, Sassanids, and Arabs, and since then in deep and lovely slumber, after the Qajars moved the capital to Teheran. Durell arrived by private plane, provided by Hannigan and flown by a young and reckless Farsi named Isaac Sepah.

"Call me Ike." Sepah's English was casual, and his moustache a brilliant, luxuriant black. He was thin and handsome, and Durell was sure he worked for Iranian Security. Everyone was after Tanya Ouspanaya. "I'll show you the sights," Ike said. "The Maiden-e-Shah was once a polo ground, you know? I play polo, too. Beautiful. You know the Masjid-e-Shah—the blue marble mosque, all mosaics? Blue and gold. Like a soft dream. Peaceful. Then there's the Ali-Qepa, the royal banquet hall, and the oldest mosque, Jum'a. I can get you in. And the Chehel-Sotoon, hall of forty columns—only there's just twenty real ones, and their twenty reflections in the pool. That makes forty, eh? Pretty girls, too. But very religious city. Even some Zoroastrians at Nafjabad, nearby. Everything is poetry, like at Shiraz, where Saadi lived and wrote the *Gulistan*. The Nightingale of Shiraz. We Persians are still very romantic. Hafiz wrote some nice poetry, too, in the fourteenth century. You know any of it?"

"Some," said Durell.

"You don't talk much," Sepah complained.

"You make up for it, Ike."

"I went to a religious school—a *medersa*—when I was a kid. Papa was a member of the Majlis—the House of Parliament. I was kicked out when they caught me in one of those flashy, wicked nightclubs. They chased me all the way down the Lalezar, but I wasn't quick enough. I was trying for the Bazar—that's a real Persian word, you know—but didn't make it. So I joined the army. Cavalry. I always liked horses. I'm not sorry."

"Watch the way you fly this plane," Durell said.

"You nervous, Shemouel? That's Farsi for 'Sam.'"

"Just cautious."

Sepah laughed. He had strong, white teeth. "Here we are. In case you don't know it, I'm your guide, secretary, and general man Friday. Orders from upstairs."

"I guessed as much."

In Isfahan, crushed by the August heat that reflected a stony glimmer of the deserts, they were met by a Land Rover driven by a man named Hanookh Ghatan. Hanookh and Ike looked enough alike to be twins. They didn't go into town. There were rifles, grenades, and what looked like a small rocket-launcher in the heavy car, incongruous attachments under a striped and fringed canopy that sheltered them from the stinging rays of the sun.

"We go to the Englishman," Hanookh announced.

Ike Sepah laughed. "You see, it is all arranged. Very easy, very efficient."

It was too easy, Durell thought, and therefore worrisome. There were too many people involved, and it needed sorting out. He felt a nagging concern that Tanya, whether she had been on the moon or not—and that would be the most dumbfounding Soviet space coup yet—was not rightfully K Section's business. He had seen no sign of the KGB's activity. They were around, he knew. He never underestimated them. Meanwhile, he apparently had Chinese, English, and Iranians to contend with. There was a smell of internal Iranian politics, too. He shook his head and sat back in the jouncing Land Rover, behind the two boyish Farsis, and watched the landscape go by.

Long ago, in what seemed another time and another world, he had hunted in the bayous with his old Grandpa Jonathan, and the old man had taught him some basic principles of life and survival. He remembered the green and black shadows of the bayous, the stately shimmer of a heron's wings, the mysterious angles of a *chênière* under live oak and Spanish moss, and the slow rock of the pirogue as he poled the old man forward. Grandpa Jonathan was the last of the old Mississippi riverboat gamblers, who had won on a

single throw of the dice the hulk of the old sidewheeler, the *Trois Belles*, that Durell remembered as his boyhood home.

Once there had been a choice of game under their guns—and he had hesitated, watching the deer and fox escape in that moment. The old man, however, made his selection at once, and his gun cracked once, dropping the deer.

"You suffered an embarrassment of riches, Samuel," old Jonathan had said. "You must learn to concentrate on one goal at a time. Don't be distracted."

Durell seemed to hear the old gentleman's words over the creak and roar of the Land Rover as they headed out into the desert from Isfahan. This land was far from Bayou Peche Rouge, where he had been born. Older in civilization, wise and weary, and as dangerous as a viper coiled on a desert rock, blending its color with the granitic stone.

"There he is, sir," said Hanookh.

Durell looked back instead of forward. A plume of gray dust lifted like a feather against the hot sky.

"We're being followed."

"Yes, sir," said Sepah. "I've noticed, too."

"Who is it?"

"I thought we might double back after picking up your Englishman."

"He's not my Englishman."

"Mr. Hannigan says you're to work with him." Ike grinned. "You think I know too much? But you and I are friends and partners, like a grape on the vine, eh?"

"We'll see," said Durell.

The Rover came to a rocking halt, and dust boiled up around them. They were in a canyon where shadows were black, nothing grew, and the sun was a blinding glitter on the rim above. A man stood on the top, waving his arms. He looked like a painfully thin scarecrow, with a ragged turban wrapped around his head. He wore tattered walking shorts, sneakers, a

striped shirt. A rifle struck sun-sparks from the barrel as he waved it in his left hand.

"Mr. Adam Beele," said Sepah complacently, "is a bit mad. He always looks for Iskander's Garden."

"I've heard of the fable."

"No, sir. It exists. But the archeologists' team, to which Mr. Beele belongs as a cover for his British M.6 mission in my country, has not found it yet."

"You know he's M.6 and don't do anything about it?"

"Why should we?" Hanookh put in. "He's harmless."

Adam Beele came scrambling down the rocky canyon wall to meet them. As he approached, Hanookh took a rifle and two grenades from the Rover's arms rack and walked back to the canyon mouth. The dust plume of the car that had followed them had now disappeared. Durell touched his own .38 in its holster under his cotton coat, pushed up his sunglasses, and got out of the Rover, careful not to touch any of the car's hot metal.

"Durell?" The voice was pure Oxonian, an educated drawl that did not conceal a shortness of breath and the painful rasp of lungs in the canyon's furnace heat. "I'm Adam Beele. What's left of me, Yank. Welcome to hell."

"You've been hurt."

"I believe I have a broken rib," said the Englishman. He was trying to ignore the pain, which was engraved on his lean face. "Perhaps two ribs. I fell, while running."

"Why were you running?"

"Some people from the camp tried to tag along. Workers, I thought. Then I saw their weapons." Beele looked at Ike Sepah. "Your people, laddy?"

"Don't know." Sepah looked serious. "How many?"

"Four. Very determined chaps."

"Get in," Durell said. "We're followed, too."

Hanookh ran back from the canyon mouth and dropped to a seat in front with Sepah. "All clear," he said. But he kept his rifle in his lap.

"Head north by northeast, Ike," said Beele. He extended a thin hand to Durell. "Sepah is in the same profession, old man. We have an understanding. Glad you're with us. We'll get along. Object is to find that girl. Can't keep the silly child, of course. But it would do a spot of good to recover her, have a brief chat, and then give her back where she belongs."

"Are those your orders?"

"Yours, too, old chap. Are you annoyed?"

"We have too many cooks," Durell said.

Sepah drove, guided by the compass on the dashboard. An apparently trackless waste stretched northward. This part of the desert was known as the Dasht-i-Lût. It was rimmed by unsurveyed, barren hills, crossed by only one caravan trail from Podanu across a string of sparse oases to Darreh Bab. Its most distinguished landmark was a distant glare of sunlight on the towering peak of Kûh-e-Jamâl, some sixty miles northeast. The floor of the desert was thin sand blown over rock, gravel, or tumbled stone. Nothing green grew to relieve the eye. The westering sun glared a baleful white and tried to fry their brains as the Rover rocked ahead. Sepah's foot floored the pedal dangerously. The canvas top flapped and snapped and threatened to tear loose at any moment.

"Allah's garden for the damned," Beele murmured.

"Let me look at your rib."

"I'm all right."

But Durell took a first-aid kit from its straps and taped the Englishman's side as best he could in the rocking vehicle. He noted that the Rover had cans of water, fuel, and food in addition to the weapons. They were reasonably self-sufficient in this desert of stone. Now and then he glanced back. But he saw nothing of their vague pursuers. In the mirror, he met Sepah's

dark, liquid eyes. The Farsi grinned, his teeth flashing white under his moustache.

"They are there. We go *tond*, fast, and they keep up. I see the sunlight now and then, on both of them."

"Both?"

"Do. Two."

"Can you lose them?"

"*Farda*. Tomorrow."

Adam Beele smiled thinly. "Ike knows where I've been hunting for the girl. It's a long trek. We turn west soon, head for the Chasmeh-e-Shotorān. I call it Satan's Throat. It's a sandy plain between two thrusts of higher land. Some old Achaemenid ruins there. Then we go across twenty miles of gravel, to Howz-e-Mirza. More ruins. After that, the really bad lands begin, the great salt desert of Kavir. Hope you can stand the heat."

After another hour, Sepah, guided by some mysterious sign in the changeless desert, abruptly veered west. The lowering sun was a blinding red ball before them. Durell appreciated his sunglasses. Beele sank down into a quiet abyss of pain. He was about fifty, with thinning sandy hair and a small yellowish beard, gaunt cheeks, and the bone structure of the British upper classes. His gray eyes, when not clouded by the pain of his broken rib, were smoothly intelligent.

"The girl was seen in Isfahan," he said quietly. "No mistake. After all, her face has been on the front pages of newspapers all over the globe. She was first spotted in Kashan—a center of the Shi'ites, you know, fervently religious. The famous Mullah Kashani was born there. But the locals are known as cowards and thieves. Tanya was spotted with a camel caravan going north."

"How could that be?"

Beele only shrugged. "Next sighting, Isfahan. '*Esfahan, nesf-e jahan*. Isfahan is half the world,' they say. She was with some tourists doing the Tchahar Baq—the Four Gardens—shopping district. She didn't

belong. But she had that exalted look the locals get there. The city has its magic. Secret, ornamented, heavy with history, old man."

"Stay with the girl," Durell suggested.

"She was picked up by Mahmoud Lakh."

"Who is he?"

"They say he's one of Har-Buri's *hashishim*. An assassin. The constables spotted them, but they got away. Trail is clear enough, however."

"How long ago was this?"

"Four days."

"She wasn't spotted since?"

"Hanookh saw her. Couldn't take her from Mahmoud. Not there. It was near the tomb of Baba Qasem. Hanookh tried, but Mahmoud was quicker and slicker."

Hanookh spoke from the front seat. "Am I to commit suicide? They went into Bakran's house. Behind the wall, Bakran had twenty men. I went for the police, but they were too late. The girl was gone when we raided. So now we have only Mr. Beele's guess as to where she is. *Nazdik*—somewhere near. But our curious followers are gaining on us, gentlemen."

Ike Sepah complained. "I'm doing the best I can, Hanookh."

"You should drive like you make love. *Tond* and *garm*. Fast and hot."

"What would you know about my private life?"

Hanookh laughed. "I hear tales about you."

Beele sighed. "Tanya is not a myth, Durell. She's here and she's been on the moon. What happened to her can be of vast importance to your space program, if you can get a few answers from her."

"We wouldn't kidnap her," Durell said.

"Naturally. But an hour's questioning, skillfully done—well, her data would be invaluable. And you'd gain goodwill in Moscow when you returned her."

"It doesn't add," Durell said. "No space probes were reported or traced. She just appears running wildly

down a street in Teheran saying she's been on the moon."

"Mysterious, I admit," Beele said. "But there will be some explanation, I'm sure."

"But not what we expect," Durell said.

They went on for two more hours, over a vast and featureless gravel plain. The hot wind whined, lusting for their lives. Presently a range of hills appeared, with a flat tongue of sand dunes between, interspersed with stony hills like the mesas of the Southwest. Beele ordered Sepah to bear closer to the left-hand ridge. The sun went behind the rise, and long shadows engulfed them. It would soon be dark. Durell looked backward again.

"They are still there?" Hanookh asked quietly.

"Both parties. Separated, but coming on."

Durell took field glasses and scanned the desert behind their rocking car. It was difficult to see through the dust that boiled up behind them. But then he glimpsed a flash of light on glass, to the southeast. Sweeping more to the north, he spotted another glimmer, about six miles apart from the first. As the sun set, the air turned cold and Hanookh broke out sweaters for them all.

"We have to shake them," Durell said.

"I don't see how," Beele murmured.

"Duck out of their way. Let them collide with each other. You say there are ruins ahead?"

"Another five miles, at the foot of that ridge."

"That's out of our way," Hanookh objected.

"We have to try something, or they'll cream us tonight."

The ruins were like vague dreams rising from a sandstone cliff that thrust up like the prow of a ship from the soft sand of Satan's Mouth. There was a wall or two, still with a few blue tiles, some broken columns, a tumbled monument in the shape of a faceless, winged bull eroded by two millennia of wind and sand.

The shadows were sharp and deep when Sepah turned the car into the tangled ramps and broken walls of the site.

"The Henderson-Smith group had a dig here," Beele explained. "Some years ago, they hoped to strike it big. But they gave up. Too dangerous, and the government was quite hostile to the whole project."

Sepah said: "You were stealing our national heritage, Mr. Beele."

Durell interrupted. "Stop here, Ike."

"But they can see our tracks."

"I want them to. Everybody out. Take your rifles, grenades, everything we've got—food and water, too. Beele, can you do some climbing?" The Englishman nodded. "Good, let's go," Durell went on. "We've only got a few minutes. They're coming on like homing pigeons now."

It was almost dark. Durell led them up a broken wall of ancient brick and tile, moving away from the parked Rover. The wind mourned in the ancient ruins. Here and there were signs that caravans had halted in this place; but no living thing was in evidence as they climbed onto a ridge of rocky ledges. In the east, a huge pale moon began to sail over the bleak sky of the Dasht-i-Lūt. Two plumes of dust, like tiny dervishes, converged toward them.

"You make a good hunter, Shemouel," Ike said approvingly.

"Don't fire unless necessary. Wait for me."

The Farsi's eyes gleamed mockingly. "We have laws in our country against gunfighting. This is not your wild West."

"The West you see in our movies never existed," Durell said shortly. "Take it easy."

The nearer car had turned on headlights. The wind blew bitterly, cold and rough against his cheek. Durell pumped a cartridge into the chamber of his rifle and settled down. Their car was still visible in the gloom of the ruins below. The first vehicle came on with reck-

less speed, the men in it apparently worried because they had disappeared. But the second car had vanished in the swiftly dropping curtains of night, and he felt a little worried about that.

"Beele?"

"Yes, old chap."

"This Har-Buri, and his Garden of Alexander. Tell me more about it."

"I can only give you directions. Never been there, myself. Half a day's drive tomorrow morning—"

"We'll make it tonight." Durell sounded hard. "And I'm not counting on our two Iranians to take our side." He paused and looked at the Englishman. "I don't even count on you."

Beele smiled. "Right you are." He reached into his shirt pocket. "Here, I made a map of what I think is Har-Buri's private hideout. Don't give it to Sepah. His I.S. would like to have it, but we see no point in doing work for them gratuitously, eh?"

Durell pocketed the folded paper. "Here they come."

The first vehicle looked like a U.S. Army surplus half-track. Its engine threw rough echoes back and forth among the proud columns in the moonlight. It nosed cautiously around a shattered wall like a suspicious, antediluvian animal, treads clacking and squealing. Durell tried to count the men aboard, but the light was bad. Eight, he thought. And all armed with automatic weapons. Moonlight gleamed on pajama-striped clothing as they jumped out, voices guttural in Arabic and some Persian. They scattered with efficiency to close in on the abandoned Land Rover.

"I hope they don't wreck the buggy," Ike Sepah whispered. "It's a long walk home, Shemouel."

"Whose men are they?"

"I don't know."

"Let's have an intelligent guess."

Sepah was reluctant. "Har-Buri's, I think."

"Or working for the Chinese?"

Sepah shrugged and said angrily, "Or maybe the Russians have hired the natives to do the dirty work."

Durell looked at the young man. "Are you neurotic about such terms as colonialism?"

"I am from an old and proud people, Durell. My country was civilized and trading with China when you lived in the swamps and forests of western Europe."

"Does that prove anything now?"

"We were singing Hafiz' love songs when you were organizing barbaric crusades. We ruled the world and fought the Greeks and absorbed Alexander's men while you fought wolves in the forest." Sepah shook his head; he looked young no longer. "The world is strange. Loyalty is confused, these days."

"But you obey the Shah?"

"The people need land reform, medicine, schools. We must keep up with the modern world. You offer help, and so do our traditional enemies, the English and the Russians, who fight over a way to the Persian Gulf and our oil. Ah, but now is no time for politics. I think we must now fight for our lives in this place."

Sepah lifted his rifle, but Durell pushed it down again. "Wait. The other party is coming."

From the north, closing in with suspicion equal to the first group, came another vehicle. No headlights. Durell had already made up his mind what to do. Hancock and Sepah were engrossed in the oncoming clash below. When he looked at Beele, however, he found the Englishman's pale eyes bright with curiosity upon him.

"Cajun, old man, you didn't return my map."

"I don't intend to."

"Very good. Shall I cover for you?"

"If you will."

"Which vehicle will you take?"

"The fastest. That first one."

"Good-o. It's Russian-built, you know."

"No matter."

"Bear away north-by-northwest until you come to more sand hills. They shift a bit each year. Careful you don't bog down." Beele spoke softly. "It's gravel up to that point. Don't go into Shekarab. You'll see the lights. Couldn't vouch for the friendliness of the caravan people there. From then on, it's unsurveyed. Keep Shekarab to starboard for fourteen miles, then bear due west. Thirty-two more miles, and you'll be there."

"Thank you, Beele."

"The Iranians will be grateful if you nail Har-Buri."

"That's what I was thinking," said Durell.

Down below, a rifle cracked, and then another, as the two pursuing parties clashed in the darkness over the abandoned Rover.

Chapter Three

IT WAS simple enough to slip away in the dark, covered by the bitter fire-fight between the unknowns below. Durell scrambled down with care, circled, took the half-track, and was relieved to find the ignition keys there. He was off and running before anyone could organize pursuit. And from the ridge where Beele and the two Iranians were hidden came a sudden burst of rifle fire and grenades to distract the enemy long enough for him to vanish into the desert gloom.

He felt better, once he was alone. It was easy to maintain the compass courses Beele had indicated. He checked the fuel gauge, his .38, and the rifle, and shrugged into an evil-smelling sheepskin coat he found on the driver's seat. He turned the car north over a wasteland as empty as any moonscape that might be imagined.

It was like playing poker in the dark, he thought,

with an unknown number of players at the table. Even the stakes were invisible. Old Grandpa Jonathan would have enjoyed it. But this wasn't the warm comfort of the Louisiana bayous. This was the Dasht-i-Kavir, a dreaded desert that had been killing men since ancient times. And although the modern world of swingers and H-bombs was just over the horizon, he might truly have been on the moon. . . .

He wondered why he had so many reservations about Tanya Ouspanaya. Had she really been the first to cross forbidding space and exist there for any length of time? If so, how had she returned, and why was she so far from her own country? Nowhere had he heard a whisper about the crash of a space capsule. He could see her face clearly in his memory—he had seen enough pictures of her, and even studied her file dossier routinely, back in Washington. A girl of strange beauty, dedicated and stern, a scientist with a luscious mouth and entrancing Oriental eyes. The few press interviews she had given had been grim and hostile. He pictured her running in wild panic, lost as a moonbeam in the alleys of Teheran. It didn't add up to much. But there were some hard facts to consider.

First, there was no doubt that the Russians and Chinese believed she was here, that she had been on the moon, and that she was immensely valuable. Others thought so, too. Iranian politics being what it was, a rebel like Har-Buri could make capital out of seizing her for secret ransom. Peking would pay heavily for her, in terms of political and military aid for a coup against the Shah. Perhaps the Soviets would do the same. Somewhere in this *mélange* of cross-purposes, there had to be a key to unlock the riddle. Har-Buri and his desert hideout might be that key. And there was only one way to find out.

He was not followed. He drove for an hour, while the crescent moon sailed over a gravel desert filled with black and silver shadows. The wind was cold. He hoped Beele and the two Iranians had made it safely

away. Then the sand hills Beele had mentioned loomed ahead, and he had to concentrate all efforts on maneuvering the lumbering truck over the grinding, dusty slopes.

Twice he bogged down, and spent long, bitter minutes struggling to get the vehicle free. He had never known such emptiness before. He might have been the last man alive in a scourged and desolate world. It was long past midnight when the half-track slid down the last dune onto a rocky terrain that reached endlessly northward before him. He rested then, checked fuel and vehicle tracks, and his gun, and slept for twenty minutes. The cold made his teeth chatter. And he knew that when the day dawned again, the Dasht-i-Kavir would become an inferno once more.

There were lights ahead. He crossed a well-marked caravan track while keeping the dim flicker of campfires to his right. That would be Shekarab, a lonely outpost for travelers in this wilderness. He hoped the sound of the truck's laboring engine wouldn't carry that far.

In time, he turned due west. The moon now rode ahead of him. There was a loom of higher land about five miles away, and far ahead, where a single massive thrust of rock stood like a sentinel in the flat desert, was his goal. He was paralleling the caravan trail now. And this was hopeful, since they marked the routes traveled since antiquity. If there were ruins ahead that had become Har-Buri's secret fortress for rebellion, it was as good a place as any, and not too far from Teheran.

By dawn he found it. The high pinnacle was just where Beele had said it would be, massive, immense, with a rubble base that stopped even the half-track. Durell hid the vehicle between high boulders on the west side, where the rising sun would cast concealing shadow; he took his sunglasses and belted on his revolver and a full canteen of water. Then he unfolded Beele's map and studied it for an intent minute. By the

end of that time, he had committed to memory every wiggly line and dot on the paper. Satisfied, he struck a match and burned it to ashes before he started to walk.

A natural trail led up from the base, but it was too obvious and dangerous. On foot, the water canteen banging irritatingly against his hip, he rounded the northern side before he found the first ancient artifact, a tumbled column with fragments of Corinthian carving. A gateway, once. A third of the way to the summit, the trail ended. If anyone lived here, there was no sign of it. Then he discovered a little valley cupped in a fold of the pinnacle. Invisible from below, shadowed from above, it defied discovery except by chance, and he wondered how Beele had learned of the place.

Then he heard the tiger roar.

It was full daylight now. The sun was like a branding iron across the back of his neck. The sound of the tiger, incredible and unexpected, came as if from under the rocks where he stood. Then he heard the animal again. He turned his head from the glaring sunlight and the valley took on definition. He saw more ruined columns, a few date palms and tamarisks leaning over a brackish brown pool, a gateway that looked new, opening into the face of the cliff. A well-beaten track led from the pool to the gate. The greenery in the valley looked like a mirage in this wilderness of stone and sand. He reflected that without Beele's map, he might have spent days finding his way here. It would have been impossible, without the Englishman's previous work.

The tiger grumbled somewhere, and the hair prickled on the nape of Durell's neck. Nothing moved. Then a man howled in sudden fright. The sound ululated in the ochre sky. He turned and climbed toward the sound. A dim track led deeper into the depression, but the sun was behind him and he remained in deep shadow. He felt as if unseen eyes were watching him. His sense of danger shrilled sharp warnings in his mind.

He came to the steel-barred gate in the face of the

cliff. The trail ended here. From the darkness beyond came an animal stench that checked him. There were outer bolts and bars on the gate. Within, only darkness loomed.

Then he heard the girl scream.

The gate hadn't been on Beele's map, but he waited no longer. The bars were oiled and slid easily aside, and he stepped into the abrupt coolness of the cave. Dim light flickered ahead, sunlight that seemed around a further bend in the passage. He moved forward, gun in hand, through several chambers filled with chests and furniture, at which he gave only a cursory glance. Then he heard the girl's running footsteps, and saw her fly toward him, long hair streaming, her face a mask of terror.

Behind her, the cat lay twitching with a rope around its neck, sprawled on the sand floor of a pit that was flooded with hot sunlight.

The running girl checked herself, crouched warily.

"Who are you?"

"My name is Sam Durell," he said.

Chapter Four

DURELL was conscious of her nakedness and of the rich perfection of her body under the grime and bloody scratches that marked her. Her pale hair tumbled heavily about her shoulders. Her full breasts lifted and fell rapidly, her hips quivered with muscular tension. She shrank from him. Her eyes were as wild as any jungle beast's, he thought, devoid of all human rationality. Small wonder, if she had been in this stinking place for long. The girl's mouth opened as if to speak, closed, then opened again.

"You are with Mahmoud?" she whispered.

"No, I've come to take you home, Tanya."

"Home? But I don't know where I am."

"I do." He spoke in Russian. "Come with me."

She shrank from his extended hand. "No. My name is Tanya Ouspanaya and I have been on the moon."

"I know that. You can trust me."

"How did—how did you get in here?"

"There is a gate. I opened it. We'd better use it before your Mahmoud shuts us both in." He took her hand before she could withdraw again. "We can't stay here."

"That is true," she said.

He had one good look at the pit before returning to the cave. He was revolted by what the girl must have endured as a prisoner here. The great tiger cub was twitching, about to revive. He stepped to it, retrieved the rope she had twisted about its sleek neck, and coiled it in his left hand. Everything had suddenly gone silent. The cave was cool and shadowed, smelling of the cat's lair. In the gloom, he made out strange and antique carvings on the wall, reliefs that depicted bowmen and spearmen marching endlessly through time. He'd had no chance to look about when he first plunged in to answer the girl's screams. Now he saw the small chambers that opened on either side. The first contained open chests of carved fruitwood, heaped with jewels that glimmered with ruby and emerald facets. Pearls glowed in heaps and strings, and rings and bracelets of gold shone in abandonment.

"What is this place?" he whispered to Tanya.

"I do not know."

"Ali Baba's Cave of the Forty Thieves?"

"Perhaps. It is—confusing. You are American, are you not? Your accent—you speak Russian well, but there *is* an accent—"

"No matter." He paused at a chest, reached for thin silks and striped robes, tossed them to the naked girl.

"Here. The sun will kill you, without these. What happened to your own outfit?"

"I do not remember."

"You had a spacesuit, didn't you?"

"Part of the time. But we did not need it, on the moon. The dome, you see, provided a life-environment, without suits."

He stared curiously, watched her shrug into a gold-embroidered silken sheath of ancient design. He regretted it, a little. Her body was magnificent. Then he took her hand again.

"Come along. We haven't any time to spare."

The gate at the far end of the cave was still open. He shoved the steel bars back into place, locking it from the outside as he had found it. Whoever operated this strange place might be briefly puzzled. He put on his sunglasses again as they stepped warily into the glare of daylight. Something thudded with a flat mechanical rhythm, echoing back and forth in the little valley. But he saw nothing astir. The sound came from a diesel engine. A generator, he reflected. That meant oil, fuel for the motor, which in turn meant deliveries, access by truck across the desert. There would be a road of some kind. But he didn't think it would be safe to take it.

He headed back down the pinnacle to where he had hidden the half-track. The girl had found some pearl-embroidered sandals in the treasure chests, which helped her across the hot, pebbly slopes they scaled. In her thin robe, she looked like a princess from a tale of Scheherazade. Durell shook his head and concentrated on the task at hand.

"How did you get into that tiger pit?" he asked.

"It is—confused. Everyone was chasing me. I ran. There were roads, and towns, and strange men who took me with them. I was afraid of everyone." She turned her lovely eyes toward him. "And I am afraid of you, too."

"No need to be. Did these men put you in the pit?"

"It was a punishment, because I refused to answer their questions. So many questions! I told them nothing, so they thought to frighten me with the tiger."

"But if you're valuable to these people who captured you, and if you'd told them nothing yet, why did they risk your life with that animal?"

"I told you, it was only to frighten me. And it was not such a risk, as long as the beast was well fed. He got accustomed to me quickly. I gave him some of my food, too. I think they knew the tiger wouldn't trouble me as long as he was fed, but they hoped I'd be terrified into telling them all they wanted to know." She smiled wanly. "I do not think I could have stood it much longer. That's why I tried to strangle the cat. And then you showed up—like a miracle."

He helped her climb the walls of the little valley. The silence was ominous. There should have been an alarm, noise, and pursuit. But he had seen nothing but the cave, the pit, the tiger, and the girl. He pushed her back with a strong but gentle hand as they reached the outer rim of the little green valley. Far down the pinnacle's slope was the desert, the boulders, and his half-track. He raised his head carefully to peer over the edge—

Something stung his face, and dust clouded his sunglasses as gravel was kicked up by a whining bullet. The vicious crack of the gun came an instant later.

There came a wild howl, and a giant, flapping shadow launched itself at him. A long knife gleamed. Durell rolled aside, hooked out a leg, felt and heard the hiss as the blade went through his shirt-sleeve. The other's face was burned almost black from the desert sun. The eyes glared wildly. The mouth was an open hole, shrieking triumph to unseen allies. Durell smashed his gun at the face, and the yells bubbled away. His shoulder knocked the girl aside as he rolled down the slope with his assailant. The man kicked and clawed in a frenzy. Durell drove stiff fingers into his throat. He felt the smelly body jerk under him, and let

it go, flapping and floundering down toward the gate of the cave.

"Durell?" the girl called.

He looked up at her. The blind look in her eyes was temporarily gone. She looked cool and competent.

"Others are coming. They have your vehicle."

"Damn."

He caught her wrist and pulled her away from the lip of the precipice. Stumbling and sliding, they worked toward the north end of the hollow cup of stone held in the intolerable glare of the morning sun. Dim shouts came up after them. He looked to right and left, wiped dust from his glasses. A narrow cleft in the precipice rim offered brief hope. A shoulder of the mountain hid them from the desert floor below. He could see the car, however, surrounded by a dozen men in a kind of robed, paramilitary uniform. They were all armed with what seemed like automatic weapons. A single figure waved commanding arms at them, urging them up the slope.

"Where can we go?" the girl gasped.

"Any place but here."

"It is useless. They will put us in the pit."

"We'll see."

He helped her up through the cleft. Long ago, goats had made a narrow path along the steep slope of the mountain. He held the girl's hand as they clambered down. Shots rang out behind them. Men yelled. They passed into the shadow of the mountain's shoulder. The trail led downward. Once the girl stumbled and fell, her long legs flashing. Durell caught her, helped her up. For the first time, her mouth quivered in a faint smile.

"You could go faster without me."

"What would be the use?"

"I don't understand—"

"I came here for you. I'll get out with you."

To the west, the desert was shaped by rock ledges, with here and there a long comber of sand. Far beyond

was higher ground, barren and ochrous, but with a faint glimmer and flash of something. Maybe a village. But it was a long, long way off.

"What can we do without the car?" Tanya asked.

"We'll walk," he said.

"In the sun?"

"We'll wait for night."

"How can we hide?"

"We'll manage."

"I do not know why you are so confident."

"I have to be," he said.

Pursuit was some hundred yards behind them. But they were hidden from the men who slipped and stumbled in their flapping robes, guns uplifted, shooting wildly. Durell led the girl downhill, moving sidewise to keep his balance. Dust spurted from under his desert shoes. Too fast. He had to slow their pace to keep from marking their position. They were almost to the desert floor now. He wondered if he could circle back and retrieve the half-track. But it would be guarded now. He heard a strange whooping sound, like a ship's general-quarters siren. It was loud enough to start up vultures from a cleft in the rock. Their wings flapped, they stretched their long red necks and watched them with angry yellow eyes. He turned to where the birds had risen. A tumble of ancient, carved stones barred their way. He scrambled over them, pulling the girl with him. Her robe had torn, and she was almost as naked again as when he first saw her. Sweat and dust stained her face.

He laughed softly. "In here, Tanya."

"It is useless."

"No. We'll wait them out."

The place smelled of the carrion birds, but it was deep and shadowed, sheltered from the pitiless sun. He settled the girl, then turned and heaved against the carved pediments that pictured the glories of kings long dust. It did not take long to block up the entrance to the cleft where they were hidden. A dozen men

shrieked and yelled along the path they had taken, running out on the empty desert below.

Durell watched for long minutes. Not one had spotted their foul hiding place. A few pointed to the vultures in the blinding sky. But it misled them, drew them farther away in search of what they thought was the birds' potential prey.

After an hour, silence returned. And he felt the heat, thick and suffocating and merciless.

With the heat came their first desperate thirst. Durell shook his water canteen, glad he had thought to take it when he left his vehicle. The canteen was almost full. He allowed the girl a few small sips, took one himself, and they settled down to wait, side by side, panting in the shadows of the long, tortured afternoon.

The girl watched him with unblinking eyes. He thought she still looked like a Persian princess straight out of a tale of the *Arabian Nights*. Sleep weighted his mind. He'd been gone a long time—was it two days now?—since he'd left the civilized streets of Geneva. It was a world away, beyond reach. Durell sighed. His business was often like this. He wished he could rest. But the unblinking stare of the girl made him uneasy. He was not sure she had all of her senses.

She spoke suddenly, with quiet vehemence.

"You are my enemy, Mr. Durell."

He smiled at her. "How so?"

"You are American, you said?"

"Yes."

"Then you are an imperialist agent and spy."

"You know better than to mouth stupidities like that. The time for such political invective is past. The world must change. Your government and mine—"

"You are not here to save me for my government."

"But perhaps I am."

She leaned forward, her full breasts straining against her thin, tattered robe. "I will tell you nothing."

"Tanya, we could both be dead by nightfall."

"Perhaps *you* will be. Not I. I understand a little better what has happened. Not all of it—there are strange gaps. I have always prided myself—I know I am intelligent, capable. Otherwise I would not have been chosen for the moon expedition." She grinned maliciously. "Your people knew nothing of it, eh? We managed to keep that a secret from you."

"If you've been on the moon," he said quietly.

She flared angrily. "Do you doubt it?"

"There is no proof."

"I am the proof!" she said sharply. "I came back, did I not?"

"How did you manage it?" he asked simply.

She started to reply, then closed her mouth tightly and looked away. "Everyone wants me. Those Chinese in—in Teheran, I think it was. The British. The Iranians. And now—you. Why is that? I—I have been ill, I think. But I know what I know! I have been on the moon!"

"For how long?"

"Two weeks. In the dome."

"Alone?"

"No, there was Papa—and Georgi—" She paused, as if a totally new idea had just come to her. "Where are they? What happened to them?"

"Your co-astronauts? No one has heard from them."

"They cannot be dead! Not Papa—"

"Maybe they are. When you crashed—"

"But there was no—no crash! I—I don't remember one, anyway."

"You might have been hurt, gotten temporary amnesia, Tanya." He spoke gently. "Your government has maintained total silence about you. Why? You need help. Doctors, a hospital, rest. You've been like a nomad woman, wandering without sense or reason, for more than a week, through this country. Fortunately, you babbled enough so that official word came to us

about you. But you moved too quickly for us to find you. I was lucky to get here at all."

She covered her face with her hands. Her shoulders convulsed, then she conquered her emotions and sat still, huddled against the dark rock in the vultures' nest. Her fingers dug into the loose shale. Durell glanced at the sky. The birds still circled patiently up there. But there was no sign of those who hunted them in the area. He looked down at the desert below. The sun was going down. But a miasma of heat made the horizon dance before his eyes. He chose landmarks by which to guide himself in the night hours to come. After a time he turned his head to look at the girl. Her eyes were unnaturally wide, watching him. But they did not seem to be as hostile as before.

"What was it like on the moon, Tanya?" he asked casually.

"Like this, mostly." She waved a negligent hand.

"Desert? Rocks? No artifacts?"

"Barren. Hideous." She shuddered. "It was very—very difficult to endure."

"It's strange no one monitored your radio signals. Surely you sent back tapes and television records—"

"Oh, yes. That was routine. But some of our equipment was smashed by the landing. Papa—Papa tried very hard to fix it."

"I knew your father, Tanya. Professor Alexei Ospanaya? We met once, at a technical convention."

"You know him?" Her eyes widened even more. "But you are not a physicist or astro-engineer."

"No."

"You are a spy. You mean only trouble for me."

"All I want is to see you safely home. Maybe a few interviews before that, so that international cooperation in these matters can be proved to work. But there's trouble in the way. Some others want to use you for private ends. Local politics being what it is, you're a tidy object for ransom and blackmail. When did you last see your father?"

"I—I can't remember."

"Or your mother?"

"Oh, she is in Peking. But I'm a Soviet citizen, of course."

"And Peking wants you back. A local troublemaker named Har-Buri would like to trade you to them for arms and aid in getting power over the Shah. And there are others. It's involved. My only goal is to get you to the American embassy in Teheran."

"Why not the Soviet embassy?" she challenged.

He shrugged. "Those are my orders."

"Then you would kidnap me, too," she snapped.

"It's not like that. We only want to help you."

"I need no help," she said. "I promise nothing."

When it was dark, before the moon rose, he led the girl out of their hiding place and climbed down to the desert plain. They moved with care, but now and then a stone rattled underfoot with abominable noise. They froze then, listening and watching. Once, they heard voices, carried clearly on the cold air. The girl shivered in her thin robe, and Durell gave her his khaki shirt. She returned a mechanical smile and shrugged into it. He left her then, to scout for the car, but it was gone. It had been moved during the long afternoon while they had been forced to hide.

"All right," he said. "We'll walk out."

She looked at him curiously. "Either you are a stubborn fool, or a brave man."

"Maybe a bit of both," he suggested.

They walked side by side, in silence, as quickly as they could before the moon rose. It was like crawling on an endless belt and getting nowhere. The dark pinnacle seemed to get no further behind them. His first landmark, a ridge of gravelly dunes, seemed far ahead. A cold wind came up. The stars reeled overhead. He had not eaten since breakfast of the day before. He was thirsty, too, but did not want to use the water in his canteen too soon. From Beele's chart of the Dasht-

i-Kavir, he estimated they had to walk about twenty miles before striking any settlement. It was a tight gamble.

They stumbled on more sand-blown ruins, buried in the barren ridge they suddenly reached. He ordered the girl to rest. She sat down obediently, knees hunched under her chin, and stared at him. He talked idly of the ruins, the carved friezes, the legends on stone tablets, the carefully sculptured beasts and staircases and graceful columns of which only traces now remained. The moon shone on an empty desert. There had been no pursuit, but he felt uneasy. It had been too simple. The girl's captors wouldn't give up so readily.

"Persepolis was completed half a century before the Acropolis in Athens, did you know that?" he said. "Cyrus the Great started it, designing the shrines and palaces and his tomb nearby, at Pasargadae. But Darius did most of the building, and Xerxes and others added to it. Have you ever been to Persepolis?"

"No," she said.

"You should see the Grand Staircase at Apidana. Its carved façade is a history of the ancient world."

"We of a socialized state are trained to look forward, not back into the cruel and bloody past."

"But humanity can learn from the past."

"Only evil things. We must make the world bright and new, as it has never been before."

"People haven't changed enough, unfortunately."

"That is a negativistic attitude, typical of your bourgeois capitalistic mentality."

He laughed softly. "All right, Tanya, we won't argue dialectics."

"No, you are blind, and it is too late for you."

"Are we so different? You're a woman, you must think and feel like a woman; and I'm a man who—"

"If you touch me, I will kill you," she said.

"I wasn't going to."

"I can see the lust in your eyes."

"I simply admire your beauty."

"It is not for you. I am not ungrateful for what you have done. But I despise your motives, Durell."

He stood up. "Time to push on."

They walked through a moon-drenched landscape devoid of growth, animal life, or any trace of man. Now and then the girl stared over her shoulder. She was watching the moon. She seemed entranced by its pale light, like a girl under some strange, medieval spell.

"There is an old Korean proverb," Durell said, "that a man who remains in his tent cannot see the full moon rise."

"You are so strange," she murmured. "You have kindness in you. Strength. And compassion. Thank you for it, but—" She said no more.

They walked on. The moon soared above them, and the wind died. The quiet cold seemed worse than before. The girl's teeth chattered, although she panted with the effort to keep up with him. She was limping, too, and he saw that her slippers had come apart on the stony ground. He said nothing about it, but ordered another rest when his watch told him it was past midnight. The girl sank down at once, her dry tongue touching her lips.

"May I have some water?" she whispered.

"Later."

"The sun will dehydrate us when it rises."

"We'll lie up in the shade somewhere."

"But there is no shade."

"We'll find some."

"I do not think I can go on. I begin to think we will die out here."

His voice was harsh. "Do you really care?"

"I—I don't know. Something I do not understand has happened to me. Part of my life—seems as if in a dream."

"This is no dream. Or it's a nightmare, if you will. We've gone at least a third of the way."

"Strange they do not follow us."

"I think they're waiting for dawn. They might use a plane. Or come out in vehicles."

"Why do they pursue me?" she whispered.

"I told you. You're the most valuable girl on earth, at this moment. Everyone wants to use you."

"You, too, Durell?"

"Yes," he admitted.

Her teeth chattered. "Oh, I am so c-cold."

"Come here."

He took her in his arms. She stiffened, then did not resist. He talked of the Caspian coast, not far to the north of Teheran. There was a thousand miles of green forest, beaches, pleasant resort hotels and casinos at Ramsar, fishing boats loaded with sturgeon caviar, the town of Hamadan which was ancient when Cyrus captured it from the Medes, Tabriz with its exquisite mosques, Meshed, the holiest of Iranian cities. The sun there was warm, the mountain valleys green with flowered meadows. As he spoke, the girl closed her eyes and settled close to him. He was at once aware of the ripe firmness of her body through the tattered robe. He swore inwardly at himself. She nestled closer, her soft hip and thigh against his stomach and legs. Now and then a shiver went through her body, but he didn't think now that it was from the desert cold.

"Durell, you have seen all these green places?" When he nodded, she went on, "If things were different, I—I would like to go to some of them with you."

"It's not impossible, some day."

She shook her head. "Do you have a girl?"

He thought of Deirdre Padgett, back in the sanity of Switzerland. "Yes, a girl."

"Do you love her?"

"Very much."

"Is she—like you—in your profession?"

"Yes, she's in the business. I wish she weren't." He stood up, and she shivered as she lost the warmth of

his body. He said, "We'll have a drink now, and go on."

She smiled strangely. "Yes. You are angry with yourself now. That is good. It is best."

Their water canteen was almost empty.

Toward dawn, they heard the thrum of a motor vehicle in the bleak desert to the north. They had passed the second of Durell's landmarks. Ahead, a low range of hills marked the end of the desert, hovering tantalizingly in the starlight. It seemed as if they would never reach it. They would not reach shelter before the sun came up. With its heat, their last strength would ebb rapidly away.

"I must rest," the girl gasped.

"No."

"I must." She staggered and fell.

"Get up, Tanya."

"Let me rest!" Her voice echoed in high agony over the bleak dawn of the desert. "I must sleep. I was in the pit so long—I am not strong, as I used to be. . . ."

He stumbled, and realized that the ground had begun to slope upward. He looked over his shoulder. The sky was pale. He looked ahead. A star shone with unnatural brightness on the horizon. He watched it carefully. It was not a star. It was a light. A campfire or beacon of some kind. He staggered against a small clump of brush. It was the first vegetation they had met, all through the night.

"Fine. We'll rest, Tanya."

"Thank you," she whispered.

There was a loom of trees, a clump of thorny bushes up ahead. He pulled her that way, fell on his hands and knees, and forced her under the bushes. It was not perfect concealment. But it would have to do. He went back then, in the half light, and saw that they had left no footprints in the gravelly soil. That was good. He crawled under the brush after her and heard her

breathing and knew that she was asleep. In less than a minute, he slept, too.

Chapter Five

SHE was gone when Durell awoke.

He swore softly. Through the sunlight that filtered through a canopy of yellow leaves, he saw the depression where she had slept, and put his palm flat on it. It was not cool, but it was not warm, either. She had been gone for some time.

He sat up slowly, aware of thirst and fatigue and an empty belly. His face was scratchy with beard. He tried to wet his lips, but his tongue was too dry. His fingers shook slightly as he reached for his sunglasses and put them on. His head ached.

He started to call Tanya's name, then thought better of it and lifted himself silently in the scraggly brush. The sun was in the west. He had slept much longer than he had expected. But where was the girl?

She had left nothing except the shirt he had lent her last night. His blue eyes darkened almost to black. He put on the shirt and walked up the slope through the waist-high brush. The sun struck hammer-blows against his head. The top of the ridge seemed an endless distance away. His feet dragged in the sandy soil. He thought he saw the girl's trail for a moment, but then it became confused with other footprints and he halted abruptly.

The sound of men arguing, of a sudden burst of laughter, came incredibly from over the ridge. He paused, then moved on with care. The shrubs gave out before he reached the top. He felt exposed under the merciless sky. Then he saw the tops of date palms,

which had been invisible in the dark when they had paused to rest. He went down on his hands and knees, then crawled until he could see over the ridge.

They had come within fifty yards of the end of the desert. A small clay village, a few date trees, oleanders, and tamarisks were grouped around a small pond. The grass seemed an incredible green. Two camels were hobbled near the water. The smell of charcoal fires and roasting lamb made saliva fill his mouth. The water in the pond was brackish and green. But it looked as good as the clearest mountain spring in New Hampshire.

Besides the two camels, there was a battered Renault truck and a motorcycle. He looked beyond the trees and saw the wet glimmer of an asphalt road that ribboned away to the north. It held no traffic. Two men came out of one of the clay houses and walked to the pond. A fat woman followed them. One of the men wore a striped silk shirt and baggy trousers. The other wore a tattered pajama-like costume and a ragged turban. Their voices lifted up to him in guttural syllables. The woman attended to the charcoal fire. The men sat down and began playing with a deck of cards.

There was no sign of Tanya Ouspanaya.

Durell took out his gun. He checked the cylinder, then inched forward to listen. The men were speaking Farsi. He understood most of it. They were halted to get water for the truck, before going on to Sar-e-Godar and then driving across the salt swamp to the trans-Iranian railway and highway junction to Teheran at Semnan. Their voices were languid, unhurried. One of the men paused to curse at the woman and tell her to hurry the meal. No one mentioned the girl.

Durell stood up and walked slowly down toward the pond where the men sat. One of the camels smelled him and grunted. Both men looked up and saw him. The one in the ragged Western-style clothes stood up slowly, whispered something to his companion, who only lit a cigarette and watched Durell approach.

"I greet you in the name of Allah," Durell said. He had put his gun away. "I would like food and water and transportation to Teheran."

The stouter man had only one eye. His other eye made up for its loss by its concentration of evil and avarice. "You are English?"

"American."

"Where do you come from?"

"I was lost in the desert. My car broke down. It was very careless of me."

"You have money?"

"A little."

"Then you are welcome."

He said nothing about Tanya yet. He took water sparingly from a beautifully etched copper bowl, and then sipped strong coffee from the tiny enameled cup the woman filled. The two men simply sat and watched him. He looked at the village huts, and saw that most were tumbled-down and abandoned, the tiny windows grilled, the doors sagging. He could not see inside. He saw no sign of the girl. The Iranians did not mention her.

"They are your camels?" he asked quietly.

"They were here."

"Without owners?"

The stout man shrugged. His eye glittered. "The beasts are valuable. We do not know where the owners are. It is very strange. We have asked at the inn, but no one says they know of it."

"The camels will slow your truck, will they not?"

"We go with God. He makes his own time."

Durell nodded. He knew it was useless to ask them to hurry. He ate pieces of greasy lamb and a bowl of rice. It tasted like ambrosia. The men watched him as he ate and the fat one said: "You are one of the diggers for the old things?"

Durell nodded. "I was separated from the other learned men."

"You are fortunate to find us. Allah blessed you. Few men come this way."

When he had eaten and had three more cups of the Arab coffee, he dug in his sweaty shirt pocket and found the last of his cigarettes. Four of them. He offered them around and extended the last to the woman who cooked. She wore a veil and a black robe and was not, obviously, among the emancipated women who danced in the nightclubs of Teheran. She shied away in embarrassment and the fat man took the cigarette with a grin.

"How much money do you have, American?"

"Enough to reward you reasonably."

"American dollars?"

"A few."

"And your watch?"

"If you insist."

"We are not greedy. Your money and your watch. I would like them now."

Durell moved so that the Arabs could see the gun in his belt. Something shimmered in the fat one's face. The thin Arab looked angry. Then the other said: "Yes, we will be reasonable, sir."

"Then let's get started."

He walked toward the huts. They were all empty. A small inn yielded only an inarticulate old man who told him nothing and knew less. No sign of the girl. He walked back to the two men and the woman.

"I was not alone," he said casually. "Where is the girl who traveled with me?"

"We see no one but you, sir."

"But there was a girl here."

"No, sir. No one."

"In Teheran, you will be rewarded richly for her. Tell me where she is."

"We did not see a girl."

After some hours, they were ready to move. He could not hurry them. The truck was loaded with second-hand car parts that looked like the castoffs from a

ten-year-old junk yard. The man in the Arab robe tied the camels to the tailgate of the truck. It was obvious that the beasts had been stolen from somewhere. The water-cans were filled, and the stout man indicated Durell's seat in the truck cab, between the two Iranians. He shook his head.

"I'll sit with your cargo."

"We travel at night. It will be cold."

"I've been cold before."

He was not sure he should leave this area without the girl. But she was gone without a trace. There was no sign of violence here, and he felt sure she had slipped away from him on her own account. He wondered what Hannigan would say about that. Teheran Central would be furious. But it couldn't be helped. He watched the thin Arab range through the junk-piles of the oasis, shouting in a high, angry voice. The stout one picked his teeth and waited and talked to the woman. Presently the Arab came back, his thin, crooked face dark with fury. They spoke together in a dialect that Durell could not understand.

"What is it?" he asked in Farsi.

"The third camel is gone."

"There were three?"

"Your friend—the woman—must have taken it." The fat man laid a pudgy finger against his nose. "The beast was the best of the three, a fine runner. Most valuable, sir. She stole it—your woman friend. We must be paid."

"Very well." Durell felt much better suddenly. "You'll be rewarded in Teheran."

"We would like something now, sir."

"In Teheran," he insisted.

"In the city of men, we will be cheated and ignored and perhaps beaten and accused of crimes of which we are innocent. We want the money now."

"All right. Here is all I have."

Durell gave the man his last fifty in American currency. The single eye lit up greedily in the dusk.

The money was snatched from him. The woman cried out something in protest, and the Arab began to argue, but the fat man suddenly started beating the woman and the Arab moved away in fear and finally got behind the wheel of the Renault truck.

A few moments later, the ride began.

It was strange, Durell thought, that Har-Buri's hunters hadn't come this way after him.

They traveled all night under the light of the moon, along a thin and treacherous trail that threaded its way through odorous salt swamps. Durell kept checking their direction, but it remained correctly westward, toward the railroad and highway that would take him back to Teheran. Seated on some greasy crates of car engines, he scanned the wasteland that undulated and shimmered under the night sky. Their pace was tedious, limited to the heavy, clopping steps of the camels tied to the tailboard. The truck engine labored and whined most of the way in low gear. They passed through another oasis, then began climbing to higher ground and took a trail that wandered more to the north. By dawn there was the loom of barren hills to the left, a clay ridge to the right. A clump of tamarisks marked a walled village that might have existed unchanged since the days of Assyrians.

The Arab and the fat man got out of the truck when they stopped. The woman waddled away between dark mud huts. The air felt coldest now, just before dawn.

"Sir, we must stop to rest ourselves and the camels, as God orders."

"I'll pay you double to go on."

"Impossible, sir. We must stay for the day."

"What are you afraid of?" Durell asked.

The man rolled his one good eye. "We are men of peace. We fear no honest people."

They walked into the clay village. Durell got down and walked around to the truck cab. The ignition key was gone; but it would be simple to jump the wires.

He listened to the skinny rooster's crow at the rising sun. The smell of cookfires and smoke filled the desert air. How far was it to the main highway? Thirty, forty miles, he guessed. He saw there was a caravanserai in the center of the huddled mud huts, a three-sided building with a central courtyard filled with sleeping people, camels, goats, and donkeys. He walked that way and halted at the entrance. One or two of the women who were cooking looked at him over their veils, dark eyes aglow, and then looked quickly away. Among the animals in the low-walled courtyard, a modern Iranian Army truck stood out incongruously. There was no driver or crew in sight—no doubt they occupied the best rooms in the place. He stepped back out of sight and saw the fat Farsi running with remarkable speed back to the truck. The Arab was ahead of him, and the woman had already cut the camels loose. They must be mortally afraid to give up the camels, he thought. Then he ran back through the village gate.

He almost didn't make it. The one-eyed Farsi had started the motor, the Arab and the woman had piled onto the heaped crates of old auto parts in the truck body. Durell jumped for the driver's side and reached in and cut the switch. The engine died. The stout man made a hissing sound and drew a knife. His face was the color of mud.

"Are you abandoning me?" Durell asked quietly.

"We must go."

"Because the Army is here?"

"We must hurry."

"What do you carry under that junk in the back?"

"Nothing! Scrap iron, that is all, sir!"

"We'll see."

He jingled the ignition key in his hand and walked around to the back. The Arab and the woman had gotten out of the truck. Durell began to heave at the rusted machine parts on the splintery boards. The woman started to yell and wail, and the Arab flashed a knife

in his hands. But the fat one smiled and spread his pudgy hands wide.

"You must understand us, sir. We are poor, we have no land, we are like serfs to the rich, and an opportunity to earn a little extra does not come often."

Durell glimpsed a pale blue color, tugged a crate aside, let it crash to the dust. He yanked the cloth free. It had been tightly balled, and was covered with gun grease. Under it were a half-dozen new U.S. M-3 Army rifles, obviously stolen, illicit, smuggler's goods. But the guns did not interest him as much as the pale blue silk he held in his hand. He felt as if someone had kicked him in the belly.

It was the robe Tanya had worn when he last saw her. His voice became dangerous.

"Where did you get this? Where is the girl?"

The fat Farsi's cheeks quivered. The woman wailed and loosed a torrent of quick abuse at her two men. The Arab stepped forward with a curious mincing gait. The rising sun was enormous behind him, glowing through the tamarisks that stood about the village well.

"Where is she?" Durell asked again, climbing out.

"We know nothing, sir! Please give me the key to my truck."

"Are you running from the Army?"

"The soldiers are cruel men—they will not let us live—"

"Neither will I," said Durell grimly.

Turning, he started for the village gate. The Arab made a guttural sound and jumped at him with the knife. Durell twisted, broke the stabbing blow with his left forearm, drove a fist under the thin man's ear. Something struck him heavily on the back of the head, and he staggered, turning. The fat man had a stone in his hand and began beating at him with it. Durell kned him, heard him squeal like a stuck pig, felt the woman claw at him with dirty fingernails. The Arab circled, knife glittering. The struggle was silent. No one in the village seemed to hear a thing. Reddish sunlight

flooded through the tamarisk trees. Dust boiled up under their scuffling feet. Durell did not want to use his gun. It would mean too many questions from the local authorities, delays, news stories, impossible complications. His opponents sensed his reluctance. They rushed him together, the two men and the woman, and forced him back into the shadow under the village wall. They all had knives ready now. He felt chagrined. How many good men had he known, who met death in ugly, dirty ways like this? The files of K Section recorded the end for too many, in dark alleys and far-off corners remote from everything they had known. Something warm ran down his cheek. He was bleeding from the stone the fat man had used. He drew a deep breath—and suddenly jumped for the thin Arab.

The man gave a stifled screech, tried to squirm aside, his blade flashing. Durell hit him in the throat, didn't wait to see him go down, and whirled for the fat man. The other's blade point hissed before his eyes. Durell drove hard into the bulging belly, heard the air go out of the man with a grunt, and ducked as the woman leaped for him. Stones slid out from under his feet. His shoulder hit the mud wall near the gate and he thought he heard the insane cackling of a rooster in his ear. His head exploded with pain and he rocked down to his knees, smothered under a smelly, oily body, bulbous but muscular. He tried to slide away, but the weight pinned him down. Darkness swooped over him. He heard a scream, a yammering, the explosive slam of a gun. It wasn't his own. He couldn't reach the .38 in his belt now. There was a wriggling heap of bodies all over him. He cursed, heaved upward, and hurled the weight away from him. Then there was a bright flash of light and it all ended, fading away in quick waves of silent motion. . . .

"Durell?" someone said.

And: "Can you hear me, sir?"

He looked up into an anxious young face, a dark moustache, gleaming teeth that showed in a sudden smile. He sat up. He was still in the dust at the foot of the village wall. He felt for his gun. He still had it. He drew it, not caring what happened now. He had been too cautious before. He was lucky to be alive. It could have killed him.

His vision cleared.

"Hello, Hanookh," he said.

"Are you all right, sir?" asked the Iranian.

"I think so."

"There's a nasty gash on your arm. And someone used your head as a corn grinder. Otherwise, no damage."

"Thank you," Durell said. "Where did you come from?"

"Over the wall. The rascals are gone. I had hoped you might come this way, across the Dasht-i-Kavir. My guess was right. But in another moment or two—"

Durell nodded. "Where is Ike Sepah and Beele?"

The young man's face grew dark and sorrowed.

"They are dead, sir."

Durell stared into Hanookh's dark, liquid eyes. He saw the truth in them. He sat still for a moment, then climbed laboriously to his feet.

"Let's get out of here."

Chapter Six

THE sun made blinding patterns of white light and inky shade under the mud walls of the village. Hanookh knelt beside him and deftly uncapped a tube of antiseptic ointment and daubed the stuff on his injured arm, then snapped open a clean handkerchief and tied

it quickly and efficiently over the wound. Suddenly his hands began to shake and Durell finished the job, studying the young Iranian, who bit his lip and muttered apologies.

"Ike was my best friend," Hanookh said. "He was fortunate. When Har-Buri's assassins caught him, his death was quick. But Adam Beele was not so lucky. They wanted something from him, and they took a long time to ask their questions."

"How do you know about it?" Durell asked.

"I watched. I was hiding. They outwitted us, after you left the ruins. One group was driven off—Chinese, they were—and we remained hidden. I went off to scout, and while I was gone, they took Ike and Mr. Beele. I could not help them. There were too many of them. Ike fought, and they shot him at once. But Beele was tortured."

"What do you suppose they wanted from him?"

"The map that he gave you, sir."

"You noticed it, did you?"

"Yes, sir. They will do anything to get it back, anything to stop you from taking it to Teheran and revealing Har-Buri's headquarters. Last night I came across the desert, hoping to catch up with you. I stole the truck from Har-Buri's men, after Beele died." Hanookh tightened his mouth. "You must give me that map, Durell."

"I'll think about it," Durell said.

"Sir, don't you trust me?"

"I don't trust anyone, lately."

"I understand that, but I assure you—"

"Let's go, Hanookh. We should be on our way."

Hanookh's dark eyes hardened for a moment, then he straightened and looked toward the village gate. Two women in black robes and veils, leading donkeys, came out. The women did not look their way. It was as if they did not exist, or were invisible. Charcoal smoke drifted on the hot air, and the smell of excrement and urine seemed strong enough to support

the clay village walls. More women gathered about the well. If anyone in the caravanserai was aware of the Arabs and their truck, or the struggle outside the gate, they gave no sign of it.

The Renault was gone. So was its fat owner and load of contraband rifles. Hanookh and Durell walked through the narrow alleys to the three-sided inn. No one tried to stop them. There was a dusty Coca-Cola sign hanging askew over the main entrance, and a gasoline pump. The Army truck was parked there, incongruous among the camels, goats, and donkeys in the courtyard. It looked as out of place as Hanookh, in his military uniform.

A clot of Kurds squatting around a cookfire looked up with mysterious eyes as Hanookh forged through them to the truck.

Hanookh halted. "We are in new trouble."

Durell saw the problem, too. "Did you leave the engine hood up?"

"No, certainly not." The Iranian swore softly in Farsi and jumped into the cab. The Kurds clustered about their fire and went on eating. There came some dead clicks from the motor as Hanookh tried the ignition and starter. Nothing else happened. Durell went around to the front and looked at the engine. Hanookh's face was dim behind the dusty windshield.

"Your distributor cap is gone," Durell said.

Hanookh jumped out again. His dark face was flushed with anger. He searched the nearby ground, then spoke rapidly to the Kurds in their language. Durell saw that all the travelers in the caravanserai were watching. Their eyes were secretive, amused. Most were hostile.

"They say they know nothing and saw nothing," Hanookh said grimly.

"Offer them some money."

"It is against bureau principles—"

"How far is it to the main Teheran highway?"

"If we try to walk, we'll be easily ambushed."

"Exactly. Pay them."

The Kurd leader was a tall, bearded man who wore his robes with dignity. He took Hanookh's money in a great, sandy paw and nodded, speaking to his fellow-tribesmen in measured tones that held a questioning note. At last he shrugged and turned back to Hanookh, who listened angrily.

"He says the Arab took the distributor cap. When this man questioned him for tampering with government property, the Arab said I had sent him. It's hopeless. He's thrown it away in the desert by now, miles from here. And there isn't another part like it within reach. So we must walk."

"Not necessarily." Durell eyed the tall Kurd. "Ask him for transportation. We'll pay."

"Can you ride a camel or a donkey?"

"Easier than I can walk."

"Yes. And your wound needs tending. You look pale, Mr. Durell." Hanookh hesitated. "You do not share your information with me, but—well, we are allies, eh?"

The deal was quickly made. The Kurds would not leave until evening, because of the heat. Hanookh arranged for a room at the caravanserai. It was no use fretting about the Arabs and the Renault, or the riddle of Tanya's torn robe that Durell had found in the truck.

The Army vehicle had been stripped of everything detachable, and it was no use, either, trying to recover anything from the silent people in the courtyard. A hot wind began to moan and blow sand through the village, and Durell was glad to go up to the room Hanookh got for them. The first-aid kit from the truck was untouched, and Hanookh made a better bandage for Durell. He felt tired, and frustrated. His eyelids were gritty and his head ached. Hanookh promised to stand guard during the hours they had to wait. There was nothing else to be done. Tanya was long gone. He stretched out on the straw mattress that teemed with a

life all its own. He was beyond caring. After a time, he slept.

He awoke to gloom and a thumping, scuffling noise outside the cell-like room. He was bathed in sticky sweat. Someone yelled, and he rolled instinctively off the narrow pallet to the dirt floor and reached for his gun in his waistband. The old plank door burst inward and a knot of struggling, cursing men tumbled in. There were three of them, against a desperate Hanookh. A knife flashed in the semi-darkness. Glass crunched. He rolled aside and something thudded into the cot where he had slept. A man's trousered legs loomed above him and he kicked upward and the man screeched and grabbed himself and staggered away. Hanookh yelled and Durell got to his feet in a corner, gun in hand. Hanookh stumbled his way. Durell shoved the slim lad aside and smashed his gun into a snaggle-toothed, bearded face. Blood splattered. He felt someone grab for his gun and he squeezed the trigger.

The report was enormous. It roared, echoed, and bounced back and forth in the little room.

The three men stumbled away. Hanookh was on hands and knees, shaking his head. His nose was bleeding and his glossy moustache was saturated with it. His eyes were apologetic.

"I am sorry. They came so fast—"

"Who were they?"

"Har-Buri's assassins. The first strike."

"They struck out, then."

"Ah, they will try again. They will not let us leave this place."

"Where are the Kurds?"

"Gone, without us. Probably they were paid more. I told you that money was useless."

Durell went to the door and looked down the arched corridor to the entrance of the caravanserai. It was strangely empty. Where the courtyard had teemed with life, it now stretched desolately in the evening dusk.

He yelled for the proprietor, but no one answered. The attackers had vanished, and he wondered if there were more of them about. Plainly, Har-Buri's power stretched like the tentacles of an octopus, groping everywhere for him. He wiped sweat and dirt from his face and suddenly longed for a cool, fresh shower.

"We can't stay here as sitting ducks," he said to Hanookh, "so we walk, after all. All the way to Teheran, if we must."

He crossed the courtyard to the abandoned Army truck. It now looked as if locusts had devoured it. The tires were gone, the canvas top of the stake body had vanished, the cab seats, sun visor, canvas water-bottles, wooden racks, instrument panel and wiring—all was stripped away. He kicked at the ashes where the Kurds had camped. A few coals still glowed. He looked at the sky. The moon was rising. A dog howled in one of the alleys nearby.

"Food and water," he said to Hanookh.

"We can try the kitchen here."

They found some cold rice, a few pieces of lamb, a hand-pump that yielded brackish water when Hanookh tried it. Durell took a clay pot and made a sling and carrying band for it. The place was silent and empty. Hanookh was pale. He washed the blood from his nose and moustache.

"We are trapped here, Durell, sir."

"People come and go all the time, don't they?"

"Just traders, caravan folks."

"Well, let's look."

The alleys were quiet. The clay houses leaned toward each other, darkening the way. He walked to the village gate and saw no one. A last light glimmered over the desert in the west. The hills were rugged, barren. A faint track made by caravans, an occasional truck, and donkey and camel droppings showed him the way home. The air was turning cold again. He shivered and turned to Hanookh.

"I wonder where the three who jumped us went."

"The villagers will hide them. Har-Buri has many sympathizers. The others obey him, out of fear."

"But the assassins got here, didn't they?"

"I don't know what you mean—"

"They were sent in to stop us. They haven't left. So they must have the means to leave, right?"

Hanookh's eyes glistened. "True. A car or a jeep—"

"Let's look. I prefer to be the hunter."

Durell led the way back to the caravanserai. It was still deserted. There was an oil lamp in the vaulted corridor, and he took it down and lit it with one of his remaining matches, and searched the floor for blood. He knew he had hit one of the men with his gunshot. He found a few spatters almost underfoot, and followed them to the rear of the inn, skirting the kitchen. They came to a blank door. There was a bloody hand-print on it, above the iron latch. He listened, but heard no sound from beyond. His gun was ready when he shoved quickly at the panel and jumped through. A flight of dark, earthen steps yawned before him. He went down fast, with Hanookh at his heels, the lamp in one hand, extended far out from his body.

A woman screamed, and he recognized the owner's frightened voice. They were in a storage cellar, and the innkeeper and his wife were the only people in sight.

"The *hashishim*," Hanookh said angrily. "Where are they?"

The man was a Hindu. He shook with his fear. "Sahib, I am poor but honest, and have only my wife and no children, alone in the world, struggling to exist—"

"Shut up." -

The cellar was empty. Another door led them up an adjacent flight of dirt steps. They found themselves in the next village house. A single, circular room, with a smoke-hole in the antiquated beehive roof, was deserted. Durell spotted more blood on the floor.

"Hanookh, I smell gasoline."

"I don't, sir."

"Come along."

They found the jeep behind the house, under a shed thatched with palm fronds. A dog barked furiously at them, and Hanookh chased it away. There was no further trace of their attackers. Perhaps the one he'd shot was in a bad way, Durell thought, and the others had taken him somewhere else in the village for help. He checked the jeep rapidly, found the open gas can that had given away its presence, and set to work to jump the ignition wires. In a few moments, the engine roared into life.

Hanookh grinned broadly. "All Americans are good auto mechanics," he said.

"It's our way of life," Durell told him.

The jeep was old and rusty, and its second gear didn't work, but it took them through the village gate with a roar. In minutes, the oasis was out of sight behind the barren, rolling hills. The moonlight was bright. The track was easy to follow, leading north and west toward the desert's edge and the highway to Teheran.

Durell drove, fighting the balky gearshift. He did not dare use the headlights, and trusted to the moon to guide his way. The nature of the land began to change after the first few miles. Scrubby brush appeared, and the hills lifted higher on either hand. Hanookh kept looking backward, but there was no pursuit.

"They will wait up ahead," the Iranian said.

"How can they know we've escaped from the village?"

"They will know," Hanookh promised grimly.

"When you talked to the villagers and the caravan people—did anyone mention Tanya?"

"No."

"No one saw her?"

"No one admitted it. Do you think they have her again?"

"No, I don't think so," Durell decided.

"It is a marvel," Hanookh said, "that a human being has at last been on the moon."

"A miracle," said Durell. "Is this Har-Buri as dangerous a politician as everyone seems to think?"

"More so. He is our number-one priority at intelligence headquarters, according to my superior, Colonel Saajadi. He uses everyone as his tool. He preys upon the greed of the poor and the fears of the rich. We have hunted him for a long time. And only you know where he can be found."

Durell said nothing.

"Give me the map, please," said Hanookh.

"I destroyed it."

"Then tell me where he can be found."

"Yes. But when we get to Teheran. No sooner."

"We may never reach the city."

"Then it wouldn't do you much good to know, would it?" Durell said.

"Why do you not trust me?" Hanookh complained.

"It's an occupational hazard."

The trail lifted into rugged, stony hills. Now and then they skirted the edge of sheer drops into dry ravines. The sound of the laboring jeep was enormous in the chilly night. Anyone waiting for them could hear them coming for miles. But it couldn't be helped, Durell decided.

They had gone perhaps half the distance to the highway, according to his estimate, when he suddenly slammed on the brakes. They were faulty, and the jeep slid on the gravel and checked itself dangerously close to the edge of the drop-off. Hanookh started to exclaim, then saw the tire tracks going over the lip of the cliff. Durell unhooked the ignition wires and the engine coughed itself into silence.

"Be careful," Hanookh whispered.

In the quiet of the hills, they heard the sigh of the wind in the brush, a distant plane motor that reminded them they were near civilization. Durell smelled

woodsmoke. He got out and walked to the edge of the road and looked down into the narrow valley. Water gleamed down there, surprisingly. And the moonlight outlined the wreckage of a truck.

It was the Farsi's Renault.

Hanookh was uncertain. "I think it is a trap."

"But I have a few questions to ask—if anybody is still alive down there."

He slid over the edge of the road and down the steep gully, following the deep gouges cut by the Renault truck when it went down. The smell of woodsmoke was stronger. The gurgling of the stream was strangely alien after the dry wind of the desert. Some of the cargo of used auto parts was strewn about in the stream. Of the rifle boxes, there was no trace. Then he heard the thin voice of the Farsi and the weeping of his woman. He wondered where the Arab had gone, and then he saw him, sprawled dead, nearby. His companion hadn't bothered to bury him. It looked as if the Arab had been killed when the truck went over.

There was a small fire on the bank of the stream, and the Farsi and his woman huddled beside it. The woman squatted, rocking back and forth, holding what seemed to be a broken arm. Her husband was digging with a shovel in the stony soil. The rifle crates were here. The Farsi kept up a stream of complaint directed at the injured woman.

"Hold it," Durell said, rising.

The Farsi whirled, his hand streaking for a gun at his side. Then he saw Durell and Hanookh and froze. The woman began to screech, and then was silent as if throttled.

"Ah, my Amerikani friend!" The Farsi smiled. He spread his fat hands placatingly. "Allah has seen fit to punish me. Would you do more, dear sir?"

Hanookh kicked the man's gun away. Durell saw that he had been trying to bury his smuggled rifles. "What happened to you?" he asked.

"Bandits! Assassins! Foreigners!" the woman screamed.

"Be quiet, my love," said the Farsi. "Would you call them back?"

Durell realized that the woman's invective was not aimed at him. "Who were these foreigners?"

"Only Allah knows. They were waiting on the road, many, many of them, as Allah is my witness. I am only a poor trader, struggling to survive."

"They didn't rob you," Hanookh pointed out.

"Only because my wretched driver panicked and went off the road. Allah punished him. The bandits did not bother to follow us down here. We have been here a night and a day." The man smiled. "I was worried about you, sir."

"I'll bet," Durell said. "Were the bandits Chinese, by any chance?"

"Yes, yes! How did you know?" The Farsi's one eye widened. "Oh, you Americans are all so clever!"

"Ta-Po?" Hanookh asked.

"Possibly."

"And the girl? Miss Tanya?"

The man suddenly lost his tongue. He knew nothing. He had seen nothing. He swore it by all his hopes for Paradise.

"But her robe was in his truck." Hanookh was nervous. "It is dangerous here, Durell. We must move on. Allow me to make him talk."

Durell nodded. "I owe him something, anyway, for the clout on the head that he gave me."

The Farsi wriggled back on his haunches until he was half in the stream. The woman laughed at him. Hanookh dragged him back toward the glowing fire and forced the man's fat fingers toward the flames. "You will tell us all about the girl, and how she came to be in your vehicle and what happened to her. Did you sell her to the Chinese, perhaps?"

"No, no, she was gone by then!"

"Ah, so you did know of her?"

"Yes. Please. I am sensitive to pain."

"I have not begun to hurt you."

"She was a strange girl, sir. Another foreigner. What are all you foreigners doing in my country?"

Hanookh said: "Am I a foreigner?"

"No, sir, I didn't mean you, but—"

Durell said: "Tell us more about the girl. Where is she?"

"I don't know, I swear! She ran away from me. The woman here helped her. She was jealous. She was a most beautiful girl, but very strange. Not in her right mind. But my woman hated her. May Allah punish her for helping her to go free! If she was with me now, you gentlemen would have been satisfied."

"Where did she go?"

"I don't know. She simply—vanished. I heard in the village that she had been seen with some Kurds, traders from the north. I think she hid herself among them."

Durell looked at Hanookh, who said, "The Kurds are still ahead of us. But I think he lies."

"Maybe. But she's certainly not here."

"Then Ta-Po got her."

Durell sighed. "I hope not."

They left the Farsi and his woman and climbed back up the gorge to the jeep. Durell jumped the ignition wires again, and the motor came to life at once.

"I think," said Hanookh, "that this road is absolutely unsafe for us now."

"I agree," Durell said. "We'll ditch it soon."

The way ahead dipped down out of the range of hills and crossed a flat, scrubby plain toward more crags ahead. There were low mesas to the left and a high mountain to the north. The wind blew from there. The smell of salt marshes came to them, and Hanookh signaled a bearing more to the north. Far ahead, a dim light flickered in the moonlight. "It may be Hajiabad," said Hanookh. "It's on the railway."

The trail climbed again. Durell felt a growing tension. The lights vanished. They were still many miles away, and the jeep only crawled. It would take three hours, at least, if the jeep could climb those high ridges. He felt as if they were being watched. But nothing was in sight in this desolate landscape. He thought of Ta-Po, hunting the girl. Ta-Po and the rebel, Har-Buri, must be working together. He began to wonder just how helpless Tanya was. She showed a remarkable facility for survival in this primitive land.

"Go north now, sir," said Hanookh. "The nearest railway station is at Ab-e-Garm. A spur goes part of the way toward the highway, but we should stick to the Trans-Iranian Railroad. It's our best chance."

"How far is it to Ab-e-Garm?"

"Maybe twenty—thirty miles."

"And no trails?"

"No, sir."

"The jeep might make it, but it's like flying a flag, driving this thing."

He began to worry about their gas supply now. The gauge didn't operate, and he stopped to dip a twig into the tank. It came out almost dry. There couldn't be more than a gallon left. He rummaged on the rear seat for spare cans. There were none. He yanked up the worn and greasy seat pad. Two flat fuel cans lay there. He wondered how they had escaped from thieves. When he lifted them, they gurgled satisfactorily. For a moment, he thought they might be filled with water. Then he uncapped one and smelled it. His relief made his arms quiver. He emptied the gas into the tank quickly, and got back behind the wheel.

Ten minutes later, he slammed on the brakes again and said, "We'd better hold it right here."

The trail had twisted up, and their elevation must have been over 6,000 feet. The night was bitterly cold. Hanookh shivered violently beside him. Ahead, two lofty hills made a gateway through which the trail proceeded. The coughing of the jeep engine bounced

painfully off the rocky crags. The shadows in the defile were black and ominous. Durell looked to right and left. On the right, the way was impassable, leading almost vertically up the cliff. To the left, the land dropped away into salt flats that stretched to the moonlit horizon. The setting moon looked red.

"Up there, Hanookh. Do you see them?"

"No, sir."

"Moonlight on glass. A windshield."

Hanookh sucked in his breath. "Yes, sir. It looks like a scout car, of sorts. Perhaps Har-Buri?"

"Or Ta-Po. Tweedledum or Tweedledee. Either would be happy to kill us and keep me from Teheran."

"Here they come," Hanookh said tightly. "They've seen us."

The enemy car nosed out of the shadowed defile like an ugly beetle. It was crowded with men. Rifles stuck up like nasty nettles. Durell slammed the gear into reverse. The jeep screeched in complaint, then lurched backward.

"Is there a way around them?" he asked.

"We cannot escape by going back."

"I didn't ask that. Around them?"

Hanookh chewed his moustache. "We could try the salt flats. We'd have to go fast." He smiled wanly. "It's a chance. But we might bog down."

"They're heavier than we are. They'd get stuck first."

"It's very dangerous, Durell, sir."

"No more dangerous than those people coming at us."

A bullet whined overhead as they rolled down the slope into the salt marsh. The land looked solid enough, but Hanookh shouted that it was only a crust over a vicious quagmire. Durell tramped harder on the gas pedal. The jeep clashed into third gear and bounced ahead, rocking and grinding. Another bullet hit the back of the vehicle with a loud *spang!* Hanookh ducked. The wheel was alive, resisting Durell's grip.

He held on with all his strength. They tore away down the slope from the defile and onto the flats. Brush tore at their sides. On this lower elevation, the edge of the moon was just visible over the hills. In a few minutes, it would be totally dark. Durell tramped harder on the gas.

The scout car was gaining. Hanookh shouted instructions. "Left, sir! Now right! Quickly!"

The salt swamp engulfed them, seemed to swallow them. The left rear wheel suddenly sank, spun, whined, threw a spray behind them. They came free with a jolt and rocked on. Hanookh stood up, careless of the shots being fired at them, and clung to the windshield to see their way better. He was familiar with these salt swamps. His lips were skinned back in a tight grin.

"A little to the left now. That's it. Hold it, hold it. Now to the right again. Sharp! Ninety-degree turn!"

The scout car was still gaining. It had entered the swamp, too, following their deeply scoured tracks. Again the jeep's weight broke through the crust. They almost stopped. Hanookh jolted forward over the hood and Durell grabbed the slack of his trousers and hauled him back again. The jeep groaned and pulled free.

"That open space," Hanookh gasped. "Try it. It's our last chance."

The area looked deceptively hard and smooth. Durell headed for it. Abruptly, the moon was hidden by the mountains to the west. The darkness was absolute. He could do nothing but keep the jeep blindly on the course he'd set.

The sound of the tires changed as they crossed the open crust. The scout car was close behind. Evidently their orders had changed. They had stopped firing. They wanted him alive.

The front wheels went down, breaking through with a lurch. For a heart-wrenching moment, they plowed through the sand as if through a sea. Hanookh groaned. Then something under the surface bounced the front

wheels up and they slid onto harder soil again. Durell gunned the engine. A twisted shrub slapped at the windshield, and another. He looked back. Hanookh did the same and gave a great shout.

"It worked!"

The heavier scout car had proved too much for the thin crust to support. It was over on its side, buried in a great slew of sand and brackish water that broke through to the surface. It was sinking fast, and the men in it scrambled out for safety.

A single frustrated shot followed them. It whined harmlessly overhead. Then a fold of land lifted them up and away from the swamp and they were free.

Hanookh fell back on his seat and covered his face with shaking hands.

Shortly before they reached the railway station at Ab-e-Garm, Hanookh pointed out a series of low, craterlike depressions near a mound of old ruins.

"It is a disgrace. People live in those old cisterns. It is cooler by day, a bit warmer by night. But it is so primitive, the government must modernize this sort of thing."

Durell stopped the jeep. One or two black tents flapped in the cold night wind. The stars danced in a bitterly black sky.

"Are people living in those holes right now?"

"Assuredly. But why do you stop?"

"I think we ought to swap clothes with them."

He got out of the jeep and found some coins in his pocket and went to the nearest cistern hole and leaned over it. Carefully, one by one, he dropped the coins into the blackness. There was a long pause. Then a rough ladder came swaying up and, after another pause, a bearded, sleepy-eyed nomad climbed painfully up.

"Tell him we want to buy his clothes," Durell suggested. "It will help us get through on the railroad, if Ta-Po and Har-Buri are watching it for us."

"It will be watched, certainly."

"So we'll be nomads, third-class, on the way to Teheran."

"He will not sell his clothes to us, sir."

"Coins brought him up. Some folding money will get his clothing."

He was right. There was a long dicker in an obscure dialect that gave Hanookh some trouble, but not too much. After a time, the nomad elder leaned over the edge of the cistern and shouted to someone below. A scrawny hand and arm presently appeared above the ladder and threw a bundle of what seemed like old rags onto the sandy ledge. The nomad took Durell's money and climbed down out of sight.

Hanookh groaned. "It will take ten baths to free ourselves of the lice, after this."

"Better to be lousy than dead," said Durell.

Far off in the distance, echoing over the bleak landscape, came the mournful hoot of a diesel locomotive and the clatter of iron wheels on rails.

Chapter Seven

TEHERAN looked shockingly normal, noisy, and bright, when they arrived at mid-morning. The air was brisk, since the day's heat hadn't gathered yet. Floating high in the sky was snow-capped Demavend. Durell took Hanookh to a food stall and bought round Iranian bread, a melon, and two fragrant cups of coffee. Hanookh scratched himself with impatience. No one paid attention to their ragged figures as they joined the surging crowds on the sidewalk a short distance from the rail terminal.

"You will go to your embassy now, sir?" asked Hanookh.

"If I can. We're not safe here. In fact, the danger might be greatest right at the moment."

He was proved right. He telephoned from a bazaar on Ferdowsi, a shop filled with miniature ivories, the inevitable Persian rugs, *khatan* boxes made of wood and mosaic, linens, papier-mâché boxes, brasswork, hand illuminated scrolls and Korans, and American picture magazines. Hanookh watched the busy street doubtfully from the door as he tried to reach Hannigan. An Iranair jet screamed over the city, heading for Mehrabad Airport. Upper-class women, unveiled in their homes and emancipated in Western style, still went swaying mysteriously behind ankle-length shawls that failed to cover their bouffant hair-dos, make-up, and nylon stockings. Now and then a *mullah* went by, frowning contempt for modern innovations.

Rafe Hannigan was not in the security office he occupied as K Section's Central for Teheran. Durell asked the clerk to ring his private number. The phone rang and rang, and was not answered.

"I am sorry, sir. He is not available."

"Then I want to leave a message. All material for Durell is to be sent by confidential messenger to the Royal Teheran Hotel in one hour. Confidential. Understood?"

"Yes, sir. There *are* some dispatches for you, but it's rather unusual—"

"Keep trying for Hannigan, please."

He hung up. Hanookh was restless. He wanted to report to his own office. Durell got an unmetered cab and Hanookh, grumbling and scratching, got in with him. They looked like a couple of desert beggars, and the driver glared at them as if about to refuse their fares, until Durell borrowed some money from Hanookh. The usual in-town fare was fifteen rials, and Durell gave him twenty. He decided he had enough cash left until he reached Hannigan.

They drove by the sumptuous American embassy. U.S. Marine guards stood distantly within the gates. The streets seemed unusually busy. There were many loiterers, and parked cars with men idling in them.

"Why can we not drive right in?" Hanookh asked.

"We'd probably get a belly full of machine gun slugs before we reached those gates."

"You think the enemy has a barricade here?"

"I'm sure of it. Let's try the Soviet embassy."

Hanookh was shocked, "The Soviets? Has the desert sun affected your senses?"

"I have some thoughts about Tanya Ouspanaya, and only the Russians can verify them."

"I cannot permit this, sir. Begging your pardon, but I insist you come with me to Colonel Saajadi. I must report to him at once. After all, Beele is dead, and also my friend, Sepah. You have information we have hunted for a long time, about Har-Buri. As a guest of my government and a visitor to my country, you must cooperate."

Durell looked at the young Iranian. Hanookh seemed grim and earnest, suddenly. His face was angry under the cowled hood of his nomad robe.

"After I see Hannigan. All right?"

"No, we must go immediately."

"Just let me pick up my dispatches first. Maybe Hannigan will get to the Royal Teheran, too. Things will be simpler, then. At least, let's drive by the Soviet embassy and see if we're being cordoned off from them, too."

Hanookh's hand was under his robe. Durell knew he had a gun there. For a moment, the taxi, halted by traffic, filled with tension. Then Hanookh nodded reluctantly.

"I will give you your hour, Durell. After that, I must do my duty."

Traffic outside the Soviet embassy was less crowded than at the American. Durell ordered the driver to pass the entrance slowly. Men loitered here and there

nearby. Two ice-cream vendors' carts were posted strategically to cover the way in. They looked innocent; but Durell shook his head. "Keep going. Royal Teheran Hotel."

"What would scum like you do there?" the driver snarled. "Do you plan to throw a few bombs?"

"Shut your mouth and do as you're told," Hanookh said harshly.

His voice carried obvious command, startling the driver. He subsided and headed for the modern, travertine towers of the hotel, which was accented with glass, tile, and perforated teak panels. Durell knew that in their nomad robes they would not be admitted into the extravagant lobby, and he signaled the driver to halt at a small café nearby, where he could watch the entrance for the embassy messenger. Hanookh was still hungry, and he ordered a *dook*, a yogurt drink diluted with club soda. Durell turned it down.

"You understand," Hanookh said agreeably, "that as of this moment, I must place you under arrest? It is my duty."

"I understand."

"It will do no good to resist, even if Hannigan shows up personally at this place."

"You've made your point, Hanookh."

"I admire you, Mr. Durell. I could learn much from you. I trust there are no hard feelings?"

"The lice bite me as much as they bite you, friend."

Hanookh grinned and smoothed his glossy moustache. "I am glad you are so understanding."

They waited.

The embassy might as well have sent a brass band, Durell thought, when he saw the big limousine arrive. For a moment, he hoped it was Hannigan, who might talk some sense into Hanookh. But a girl got out of the car. She wore a smart linen suit the color of fresh lemons, and her heavy black hair was done in a chignon. She carried a manila envelope tucked under her arm.

She looked dubious, behind her sunglasses, as she searched the hotel entrance.

"That's Hannigan's secretary," Durell said.

Hanookh smiled. "I know her."

Durell looked at him sharply. "Yes, I suppose you do. Do you know most of the Iranian employees at our embassy?"

"All of them," Hanookh admitted. He spread his hands. "It is our business. Would you not do the same thing?"

Durell walked toward the girl. She glanced at him and looked away, not recognizing him in his native robe. But Hanookh, still smiling, pushed back his cowl and said, "Miss Saajadi, do you remember me?"

The girl's ripe mouth opened; her olive face was a study in surprise. "Oh, but you do look like—"

"I'm Hanookh. We went dancing two weeks ago at the Sha-er Restaurant. With Ike Sepah. Do you remember?"

"What are you doing dressed like that?"

"It's a long story." Hanookh touched Durell's arm. "This is Sam Durell. He is expecting the dispatches you carry from Mr. Hannigan's office."

Miss Saajadi looked flustered. "Oh, but I'm not supposed to know—"

Durell sighed. "I'll take them now."

Hanookh ordered another yogurt and soda while Durell sat at the café table, inwardly cursing Hannigan's absence. There were a few memos for him from Washington, but nothing from Hannigan. Miss Saajadi had obligingly sent all the dispatches down to the decoding room, and they were in clear.

"Have I time to read these?" he asked Hanookh.

"Yes, but afterward, you must give them to me."

"They're confidential."

"And you are under arrest, for withholding political information required by my government."

Durell wondered if he should make a break for it. Hanookh would give him some trouble, but not too

much. He decided to read his mail before committing himself.

There were two dossiers in excerpt, a critique from State, an evaluation from a White House aide, a cryptic note from General Dickinson McFee, who commanded K Section:

Summary, K Section File Lambda 51/C.22

Subject: Chang Hung Ta-Po

Age: 49

Birth: Believed born Hunan Province, peasant stock, family of eight, sole surviving child, parents died famine 1928, relatives unknown.

Education: Fr. Nolan of Hzu-Tai Mission (see appended correspondence), adopted brilliant child, prodigious memory, sent to Shanghai, missionary funds, British tutor, Sister Marie-Celeste (see attached photo.) M.S. degree, London University. Interpreter in French, German, English. Married Jane Trayne, typist, London; abandoned wife and child 1936, returned China, government post Nationalist foreign office to 1938. Vanished. Believed underground with Mao Tse-Tung. Member of the Long March. Communist Party membership 1946, see File Zeta 56/A/51. See attached photos. See S.D. Analysis Sheet 569-72.

Present Situation: Head of Blue Department, Western Intelligence Division. HQ Peking. A Maoist, leader of Red Guard Banner Group. Devoted to Cultural Revolution 1966-67. Accused of deviationism, reinstated Mao's personal directive. Believed most powerful intelligence officer Peking this date. Subject most dangerous. Believed cause of destruction Danton Force Taipeh 1961. (See File Lambda 51/C.14-Johnson, George, deceased). Subject is author of volume of poetry Flowers of Truth, advocating atomic war and Red Chinese world hegemony. Art collector, Tang specialist.

Description: Six feet, three inches, weight 265,

North Chinese features, history t.b., eyes brown, black hair cut en brosse, scar lower lip to chin. No recent photographs.

Analysis: Subject married divorced wife Prof. Alexei Ouspanaya, signed legal adoption papers for daughter Madame Hung Ta-Po, Maria Tanya Ouspanaya, 1963. Daughter remained Soviet Union with father. (See File Zeta 54/A/32.9.) Subject has no known criminal a/o political record in West. Can travel freely. Meet with caution. Priority 4A.

Durell put the typed flimsy aside on the café table. Hanookh was drinking coffee and studying the crowded sidewalk. He seemed supremely uninterested in Durell's material. Durell sighed again. The second dossier covered Tanya Ouspanaya. There was no mention in it of the Peking adoption by Hung Ta-Po. The attached photo emphasized her striking and unusual beauty. Durell considered it for a long minute. Her eyes were cool and haughty, with an objective intellect evident even in the news reproduction. The Tanya he had met was disoriented, confused, emotional. He wondered for a moment if it was the same girl. But it had to be. There was no mistake, no chance for an impostor.

He turned reluctantly to the State Department critique. It was a commentary and evaluation of Har-Buri as a national force in Iran. He was familiar with the analyst.

Precis, Har-Buri, Revolutionary Movement, Iran, SEA-5 Division, Group Chief Henry Talbot-Smyth:

The socio-economic reform and development promised under the present government has failed to achieve breakup of landholder and industrial complexes to the satisfaction of disadvantaged peasantry, and must be considered a failure leading to unrest among underprivileged segments of urban, peasant, and alienated tribal groups. According to Policy

Charles paper, Har-Buri's efforts to gain land reform and egalitarianism of democratic processes should be encouraged with material, political, and economic aid in any manner suitable without upsetting balance of relations with current entrenched Iranian bureaucracy. The demand for liberty and a share in national agro-economic wealth must not be denied. As leader of this movement, Har-Buri seems stable and should be encouraged delicately, to aid in legitimate Iranian aspirations toward their free destiny.

Durell was so annoyed that he got up and bought a pack of cigarettes with his last few remaining rials and lit one. Hanookh hadn't touched the flimsies on the café table when he came back. Durell picked up the note from McFee.

Cajun—all gobbledegook aside, watch your step. It's tricky waters. Ta-Po will kill you if he can. Get the girl. Turn her over to Soviet embassy. Her father, Professor Ouspanaya, is there. Don't know a thing about her moon trip. It's a tight Moscow secret. But the pot boils, under the lid. Get Har-Buri. Turn him over to Iranian Security. Cooperate with Colonel Saajadi in all aspects above. Luck, D.McF.

Durell began to laugh quietly, and Hanookh looked at him with thick, raised eyebrows. Durell pushed the papers across the table. The sun was warm. The breeze flicked up the flimsies and he put an ashtray on them.

"Do you want to read these, Hanookh?"

"It is not necessary."

"Because of Miss Saajadi, who works for the American embassy?"

"My friend, I do not apologize for that. You would do the same. Your instructions here are already on my desk, waiting for my attention."

"And Miss Saajadi is your colonel's daughter?"

Hanookh began to smile. "Yes."

"And the colonel is your boss?"

"Yes."

"Did you know that Hung Ta-Po adopted Tanya and considers her as *his* daughter?"

"The world is full of strange things."

"And I'm full of the spirit of brotherly love and cooperation. I'll go see your Colonel Saajadi."

"Good. He will be waiting for us."

Chapter Eight

"GO home and bathe and rest, my dear boy," said Colonel Saajadi. He spoke in French to Hanookh. "You've done very well. I'm desolated about Sepah. A fine lad. The British will be annoyed about Beele. Terrible thing. But I shall write a fine recommendation for you, Hanookh."

"Thank you, sir."

"Then that will be all."

Hanookh hesitated and looked at Durell. "The American needs a rest, too. Without him, neither of us would have survived."

"He will be given every courtesy. Do not worry."

"Sir, I would beg permission to remain—"

"You are dismissed," said Colonel Saajadi.

Hanookh's liquid eyes regarded Durell for a brief and curious moment. His reluctance was obvious, and Durell wasn't sure what it meant. Then the young Iranian nodded and backed from the room and closed the door behind him with exaggerated care.

Durell was alone with the Iranian Security Chief.

"Come with me, sir," said Saajadi.

"I like this office," Durell said. He crossed his legs.

He felt a louse crawl across his chest and under his armpit, but he didn't scratch. "Can't we talk here, Colonel?"

"There are too many ears listening. You know such problems, eh? You are shocked that my daughter works in your embassy?"

"Standard operating procedure."

"Eh? Ah. Yes. Amusing." Colonel Saajadi did not look amused. "Now we will go where we can talk privately."

"Must we?"

"Please, sir. Your orders are explicit."

"Yes. Cooperate. All right."

Saajadi was as slim and sharp as a finely honed saber. His gray hair was thick and his moustache neatly trimmed. His forehead was flat and leonine, his nose prominent, and in profile he looked precisely like a carving on an ancient Assyrian frieze. His mouth was sensual. He stood up quickly, touched Durell's arm, and led him through a back door in his paneled, modern office, and down a flight of echoing concrete steps to the rear of the building, where a Jaguar sedan was parked conveniently nearby. It occurred to Durell that in this manner no one had seen either of them leave the building.

There was no driver for the Jaguar. Saajadi took the wheel himself.

"My home," he said, smiling. "Rest, refreshment, and a long chat, and the making of plans to nab Har-Buri, eh?"

"As you say," Durell agreed. The louse had found a brother under his other armpit, and perhaps some sisters were crawling across his belly. "A bath will be welcome."

"Of course. You will be made comfortable."

Saajadi drove inpetuously but with precise skill. Durell wondered if by now Hannigan was looking for him. He hoped so. But he didn't have too much faith left in Hannigan, any more than he trusted anyone in

this world of myth, glazed over with modernity, and quaking with Moslem conservatism.

The center of Teheran lies at 4500 feet above sea level. The residential areas are on hillsides at 6000 feet. Saajadi drove quickly by the new Senate Building, the Sepasalar Mosque, and headed as if toward Darband, a quiet mountain village with a good hotel, hot springs, and bathhouses. But after a time he turned the Jaguar into a side road, passing walled villas secluded behind ornate cypress trees. He took a left turn, then another. They went through a piney woods, and skirted a deep ravine. Durell thought they were going much too far out of the city. Then Saajadi tapped the horn, and gates opened for them, and they passed onto a fine shell driveway between ornamental shrubbery, skirted a lush garden, and then a glimmering, mosaic, convoluted villa appeared.

"My residence," Saajadi said.

Roses bloomed in an orgy of profusion along a stone terrace. Arched doorways, espaliered fruit trees, fretted walls, and antique carvings were everywhere. Durell wondered what sort of salary Colonel Saajadi drew as chief of security in his particular department.

"Ah, my daughter," said Saajadi. "Home for lunch, my dear?"

The same girl who had delivered the dossiers from the embassy stood just inside the main entrance. She smiled meaninglessly at Durell, all her concern concentrated on the colonel. "Did all go well?"

"Perfectly, my dear. You may go back now."

Her linen skirt was tight across her wiggling bottom as she stepped down the walk and took the Jaguar away. Durell didn't like her, he decided.

"Come," said Colonel Saajadi.

Again, Durell was impressed by the curious emptiness and lack of witnesses. A villa this size should have swarmed with servants, obsequious and visible. But he saw no one. The colonel's boots made sharp clackings on the mosaic floor. He glimpsed inner courtyards

where fountains played and more roses bloomed. Galleries and balconies right out of the *Arabian Nights* ran endlessly overhead. They should have been packed with peeping, veiled beauties, he reflected. But there was only empty sunlight and shadow.

And then deeper shadow. The colonel led him down a flight of steps, along a gloomy corridor, and opened a heavy plank door fitted with elaborately forged hinges. His slim brown hand gestured.

"In here, Mr. Durell."

"You go to extremes for privacy."

"I do my best work here, sir."

"Would you have one of your servants draw me a bath, get my clothes from the hotel, and bring some food?" Durell spoke blandly. "I'd like some caviar, chello-kebab, and lots of coffee."

"It will all be arranged."

He went in ahead of Colonel Saajadi. It was against all the rules of procedure to do so. But he had been ordered to cooperate, after all, by General McFee himself.

The room was almost entirely bare. It had solid stone walls, a desk, a single chair, a tin-shaded lamp. He had time only to think of all the barren back rooms in all the crummy police stations in all the corners of the world, and then he turned to Colonel Saajadi.

The colonel hit him with a metal object in his hand. He couldn't see what it was. But he felt a tooth break as he fell, and he tried to grab at his gun, and suddenly he was hit in the face again, by someone he couldn't even see through the mists and roaring red darkness that surged up at him. He struck back at Saajadi, tried to make it to the desk in the center of the room, hoping to get around it for a respite. Blood gushed into his mouth. He heard Saajadi call out in a sharp, military manner. Other men rushed into the room. He was carried back by their weight and his hip slammed into a corner of the desk. He was bent double, and managed to drive his knee into someone's groin, and was re-

warded by a sibilant hiss of agony. Then he went down under a pounding, pushing, pummeling weight.

He let himself go limp.

After a time, the ceiling stopped its carousel revolutions. The light glared in his eyes. An elegantly booted toe prodded his ribs.

"Mr. Durell?"

"So much for orders," Durell said.

Chapter Nine

"NOW we understand each other," said Colonel Saajadi.

"Was Hanookh in on this?"

"No. His life, too, is in great peril."

"He doesn't know anything of value."

"You did not tell him how to find Har-Buri's headquarters?" Saajadi was angry. "He says you had a map."

"Yes, I had. It's gone now."

"You did not show it to Hanookh?"

"No."

"Or tell him precisely where you found Tanya?"

"No. Let Hanookh be."

"I may. I may not. It depends on you."

Durell felt with his tongue for his broken tooth. He spit it out, along with a gobbet of blood. Oddly enough, he felt the lice as an irresistible itching now, and he gave in and scratched at himself. "May I sit up, Colonel?"

"Yes. Be careful. We know all about you. We respect you. We know how competent you are."

"I made a great showing just now—I think not."

Saajadi laughed. "Ah, well, it was merely to put

things into perspective, right at the start. You are in my country now, Mr. Durell. In my house. In my private jail, if you like. So you will be cooperative, obedient, and amiable. If not—who will miss you? No one knows you are here. Hanookh will be lucky to live through the night. For the record, you could still be wandering in the Dasht-i-Kavir."

"No. I phoned my embassy."

"Ah, that could have been a—how do you say it?—a ploy by other agents. Hannigan will be perplexed, nothing more."

"Cheers for Rafe Hannigan."

"You are in good spirits, and that is fine. It makes me happy. A cheerful man is talkative."

"I don't have the map anymore."

"What did you do with it?"

"I destroyed it two days ago."

"Did Beele have another, do you think?"

"I think not."

"Could you draw another one for me?"

"I doubt it."

"Try. Sit at the desk. There are pencils and paper in the top drawer. Don't look for a weapon in there. I am not that foolish, you see. Draw me a copy of Beele's map."

"You're awfully anxious," Durell said.

"Har-Buri is an enemy of the state."

"And you want to get at him, do you?"

"Naturally."

"By bashing out my teeth?"

"Forgive my methods. I have no sympathy for foreign agents who operate in my country."

Durell walked slowly around the desk and sat down. The tin-shaded lamp shone in his eyes. Saajadi was in the shadows. He opened the drawer and took out a sheet of fine bond paper and sharpened pencils. There was nothing else in the desk. Saajadi was a tall and elegant shadow just beyond the pool of yellow light. Durell scratched. The filthy robe itched. He felt a bit fool-

ish in the costume. It had served its purpose, but it seemed out of place here. He wished he had his gun. It had been taken from him before he entered Saajadi's office in Teheran, and he hadn't objected then. He sighed, thinking of McFee, and said,

"Your daughter is very clever, Colonel."

"Yes, she is. Draw the map."

"She changed McFee's memo to me, didn't she?"

"Your chief had a few details about me that might have seemed alarming, had you read them before coming to me."

"Such as the fact that you really work for Har-Buri?"

Saajadi laughed softly. It sounded like breaking glass. "Ah, you are such a clever man."

Durell turned the sharpened pencil over and over in his fingers. "Am I right?"

"Perhaps."

"I'm right. And poor Hanookh has no idea."

"None at all. The map, please."

"No idea that his boss is the real traitor." Durell idly tested the point of the pencil. It was very sharp. "Why don't you ask me about the girl? Aren't you interested in Tanya Ouspanaya?"

"I will come to that subject, afterward."

"What will you use? LSD? Pentothal? And if you get her, what of it? How do you plan to use her?"

"I grow impatient, Durell."

"And I'm itchy. It makes me nervous. Cantankerous. That's an American backwoods word. I wonder why you insist on speaking French, Colonel?"

"I like its elegance. You are quite good at it, too. A touch of Provençe accent, perhaps. Otherwise, quite good."

"I had a teacher from Provençe, at the Maryland Farm. That's where we bad guys, agents, saboteurs, imperialist reactionaries, and so forth, get briefed at how to do you in."

"You are playing for time, Durell. It will do no good. Do you wish to die right now?"

"I'd hate to die lousy," Durell said. "And since you like French so much, *saute qu'il peut*."

He pulled the desk drawer off its runners with a swift, smooth gesture and threw it at Saajadi, and then came over the desk with the sharp pencil in his hand. A corner of the lightweight desk drawer caught Saajadi on the forehead and he ducked backward, gun raised high in his hand. Durell aimed the sharpened pencil at the man's exposed throat. The gun went off in reflex action as the pencil pierced Saajadi's carotid artery. He used his thumb to drive it in all the way. The report of the gun was deafening in the stone-walled room. Saajadi's scream was drowned in it. He went down with blood gouting from his neck. His eyes opened unnaturally wide and glittered for an instant. He tried to get the gun to bear on Durell. Durell snapped it from his fingers and quickly searched Saajadi's pockets. He found a ring of keys and took them, and a wallet stuffed with rial notes, and he took the money, too, since he was short now, and didn't know when he might reach Hannigan again. By the time he finished, Saajadi was dead.

The room was quiet. There was no alarm. He unlocked the heavy, plank-paneled door to the cellar room. The corridor and stairs beyond were empty. He kept Saajadi's gun ready. Somewhere in the place were Saajadi's three *hashishim* who had helped to put him down here. He tried to remember if the colonel had given them any instructions. But the attack had come too fast and furiously. The villa felt empty.

The warm sunlight threw showers of diamonds from the fountain in the courtyard. He could see no eyes peeping at him from the carved stone balconies over the garden. The smell of roses was overpowering. Bees buzzed there, in almost as many numbers as the questions in the back of his mind. He drifted silently up the

wide, elegant staircase. His robe smelled of rancid lamb fat, sweat, and charcoal smoke.

Upstairs, the corridors were sunlit and perfumed. He found Colonel Saajadi's private apartment without difficulty. The windows gave him a splendid view of the mountainside and distant Teheran. Rococo cupids leered at him with gilt faces from the corners of the plush bedroom. He opened another door and saw a bath the size of the Taj Mahal pool. The taps were solid gold. He turned on the hot, and was rewarded with a quick gush of steaming water in the green marble tub. He left his nomad's robe on the tiled floor as he walked back into the bedroom, locked the big double-leafed door, and picked up the green telephone beside the colonel's round bed.

He waited, finally got a few clicks, an operator, and gave the embassy number and then Hannigan's extension. The phone rang four times.

"Economics," a girl said.

The voice was familiar. "Miss Saajadi?"

"Yes, sir. Who—"

"Get me Hannigan, please."

"Not here, sir. Who—"

"Where is he?"

"I don't know, sir. Wh—"

"Durell. Remember me?"

There was a long silence. She was pretty good. Finally she said coolly: "Mr. Hannigan is looking for you, Mr. Durell. Where shall I tell him you can be found, when he comes in?"

"You know where," Durell said, and hung up.

He estimated he had fifteen or twenty minutes before visitors arrived. He still wondered why the three goons had vanished. Perhaps Saajadi liked privacy when he played his games with private prisoners. No matter. He needed answers, and the cost would be high. If he were right, he'd find out just where his private threshold of pain might be. He grimaced, put it

from his mind, and settled into the tub of gloriously hot water.

There were alternatives to staying here in Saajadi's private palace. He could return to Teheran somehow, taking the lice with him. He could find Hannigan, contact the Soviets, even through the net of Har-Buri's assassins spread around the place. But he didn't think that would buy him too much. Tanya was always first priority. She had to be found—and quickly. The Russians did not know where their girl was. It was up to him to return her to them, compliments of the U.S.A. Considering what he had done to Saajadi, and the difficulty of proving that the dead man was a traitor, he also had to do something to make Iranian Security consider extenuating circumstances. He didn't relish the idea of spending the next twenty years in a Teheran jail. Tanya was the key to everything—Tanya, and the elimination of Har-Buri from Iranian politics.

The key was not at the Soviet embassy, as he had thought. But someone might bring it to him right here, if his guess was correct.

But the price would be painful.

Birds trilled in the courtyard, singing as if in accompaniment to one of Omar Khayyám's love songs. He got out of the tub, dried thoroughly, examined every inch of his body for surviving lice. Satisfied, he checked Colonel Saajadi's luxurious wardrobe. The shirts were a bit tight in the chest, but the elegant fawn-colored English slacks were perfect. Durell never let his hand wander more than a few inches from Saajadi's gun as he dressed. He found an electric razor and labored at the stubble he'd acquired in the desert. When he considered his reflection, he thought he had a hungry look.

They came as he finished shaving.

He heard them cross the garden court on quick, sliding feet. A man called a soft order. A door slammed. He chose a necktie from a vast selection in

Saajadi's closet as they came up the stairs with a feral rush. He put the gun in his pocket and unlocked the door.

Miss Saajadi, her thick black hair a bit unkempt, was ahead of the others. Close behind her was a slim, very pretty Chinese girl with a round face and big brown eyes and a rich figure in an afternoon frock. The Chinese girl stood to one side to permit an older Chinese woman to come by. It was a very feminine vanguard.

And behind them came Hung Ta-Po, smiling like the pleased lord of a private harem.

Chapter Ten

MISS Saajadi trembled. She looked as if she wanted to tear Durell to shreds. "You killed the colonel!"

"I don't apologize."

"But it's monstrous—!"

"Please, my dear," said Ta-Po. "You've gotten carried away with your role. Saajadi was not in truth your father, but simply a cover for your agency work. Please stand aside."

"He has a gun. He's not a fool. He's been waiting for us. It's a trap—"

Hung Ta-Po flicked a hand at the distraught girl. "Take her away."

Like twin hounds, two Chinese jumped forward and caught the girl before she launched herself at Durell. She started to struggle. Hung Ta-Po made a small click of annoyance and one of the men hit her in the side of the neck and she went down with a small choking sound. She didn't look dead, but she might be, Durell thought. He waited.

"We are moving in," said Ta-Po genially, "in the event you are wondering why I have brought my womenfolk. This place has been arranged for our strictest privacy. We will not be disturbed here. I am happy to see that you are willing to join me in conference. Do you want money? You shall have it. Safety? That, too. Any arrangement you wish to make. Or is this truly a trap, after all?"

"No trap," Durell said.

"I am pleased now that we did not catch up with you in the desert. This is much better. Oh, certainly, much better."

"I'm glad you're pleased."

Ta-Po snapped his fingers. "Lotus?"

The young Chinese girl slipped past Durell and checked the bedroom and the bath and the windows, looked out at the garden, called down to someone there, came back and bowed her sleek, dark head to the huge Chinese.

"Everything is in order."

"Go, then."

The older woman had said nothing, done nothing. But Durell was aware of her as he would have been aware of a deadly snake slithering into the room. Something about her made the flesh tingle at the nape of his neck. She looked at him with utter impersonality, as if he might be a rabbit impaled on a stake, waiting for her to dine on him. She had been beautiful once, and there was something in that shadow of past beauty that was faintly familiar.

"Madame Hung," he said.

"Yes." The sound was sibilant.

"The former-Madame Ouspanaya?"

"Yes."

"Mother of Tanya?"

"You belabor the obvious, Mr. Durell. I am puzzled." She did not look in the least puzzled. "Are you here to make a deal, as Ta-Po thinks? Or do you have something else in mind?"

Durell irritated her by turning to Ta-Po. The Chinese looked even bigger, fatter, and more bland than before. He wore his Russian-style blue serge double-breasted suit as if it were a tent, and even then his enormous belly strained at the girth of his trousers. His round head looked absurdly small on those fat shoulders.

"I am willing to make a trade," Durell said.

"So. What do you have to bargain with?"

"Your life."

Ta-Po laughed softly. "But I am in no danger."

"If you are declared *persona non grata* here in Iran and a great deal of publicity is published in the local newspapers about how you disagree with the Maoist Cultural Revolution, will you be happy to go back to Peking?"

"Ah. And how will you do that?"

"The process is in the works," Durell said.

"You are bluffing."

"Are you sure?"

"You had no time to set it up. But it is clever of you to suggest that it might be so. Let us assume you have such cards. What do you want from me?"

"Tanya Ouspanaya."

The woman hissed. Ta-Po quieted her with a lifted finger. His smile was gone. "But this is precisely what we want from you. My adopted daughter, my wife's dearest child, long an exile and prisoner of the reactionary Soviet imperialist technology. We long to have her back with us again. And you know where she is. You see how honest I am with you? We do not have her. We look everywhere for her. It is so difficult, I admit, since so many others search, too. But you have injected yourself gratuitously into this affair. It does not concern the U.S.A. None of the principals involved are citizens of your decadent society. Iran is not your country or your concern. You seek to build credit for yourself, I suppose, with the Iranians and the Russians. It would seem to betray a weakness, a need for

such credit, if I did not know as much about you as I do, Cajun. I understand your true motives. Information of any kind, piled grain upon grain, assumes impressive proportions, after a time. Nothing is too minor to be ignored. The dear child has been on the moon. *Ergo*, she has inestimably valuable information to give to your NASA space program. So you want her long enough to dehydrate the poor child's mind and soul of anything useful to your power-seeking monopoly. Well, you shall not have her. And you do not fool me for a moment. You know where she is."

"We have no basis for bargaining, if you think so," Durell said quietly. "But I have another objective."

"So?"

"Har-Buri."

"Ah, yes."

Lotus came back and whispered something to Madame Hung. The young Chinese girl's eyes regarded Durell with singular interest as she cupped her hand over her mouth to deliver her message. Durell smiled at her. She was a very pretty girl. Her glossy black hair was done in straight bangs over lovely eyes that shone with vitality. She smiled fleetingly in return. Her luscious lower lip was very red.

"Har-Buri," Ta-Po said, "is a close and precious friend of the Chinese People's Republic. You may wonder how this relationship involves my dear, adopted daughter. Har-Buri seeks to rectify social injustice and capitalist crimes against his countrymen. We would aid him in these goals, naturally. It is not a secret. In return for our aid, he promises us Tanya. Our prior bargain must be kept, Mr. Durell. I would not betray him."

"Unless I delivered Tanya to you?"

Madame Hung said thinly: "You waste time, my husband. I know you enjoy such games with this man. You admire Durell professionally. Such emotions of feudal chivalry do not belong in the heart of a right-

thinking communist man. I think you should begin the questioning at once."

"I have a gun," Durell pointed out.

"And we have men behind you. Lotus just informed me. Very adept and silent, don't you think? They climbed the wall from the garden and came in through the bathroom window. It is not a trick. I would not stoop to such a childish ruse. Look for yourself."

Durell did not need to. He felt the cold muzzle of a gun at the nape of his neck and smelled the fishy breath of a man who had dined on shrimp and caviar.

Very carefully, he took Saajadi's gun from his pocket and placed it on the floor.

"I give up," he said. . . .

Ta-Po was puzzled. He was irritated, impatient, annoyed, and angry. But most of all, he was puzzled.

It was some time later. Durell did not know how many hours had passed. It could still be daylight outside, but there was no way to determine this. But he guessed it was probably night, by now. He was back in the cellar room, with its tin-shaded lamp and silence. They had taken Colonel Saajadi's body away, but there had been a lot of blood pumped from the dead man's severed artery, and only a token of it had been cleaned up.

His hands were bound with leather straps, and his fingers felt numb from loss of circulation. The cellar room was cold. His bath had done little good. He tasted the dust of the floor in his mouth, and there was grit between his teeth, together with clotted blood in his mouth. He thought one of his ribs might be cracked. Pain was something you learned to live with, somehow. You endured, or you died. You died physically, or in other ways. The other ways were the worst. Pain was not a stranger to Durell.

Ta-Po loomed over him, breathing heavily.

"Why did you do it?"

"Do what, comrade?"

"Why did you give yourself to me?"

"Maybe it was out of brotherly love."

"Your spirits are still high?"

"Why not?"

"What did you hope to gain from me?"

"I've already got it," Durell said.

"I see. It is the question of Tanya?"

Durell nodded. His neck creaked. "Yes, poor Tanya. You don't have her, and I don't have her, and—"

"But you know where she is."

"No."

"Yes. You do."

"No."

"Very well."

Ta-Po went away. Durell was thirsty and hungry again. The temperature kept dropping. After all, the villa was quite high up in the mountains. He decided it was time to go. He thought about it, and made his mind obsessed with the thought of escape, but nothing happened. No ideas came to him. He knew now that Ta-Po wanted Tanya for what she might know about the moon trip. It couldn't be that the Chinese People's Republic was technologically prepared for a similar venture. Eventually, but not now. The eventuality fascinated him for a time. He tried to imagine the moon as an adjunct, a province, of Peking. It might come to that, some day. But Tanya today was a propaganda device, a prop for the confused, violent power-struggle going on between the factions of command in Peking. Whoever had her would gain leverage. The price Ta-Po was willing to pay for Tanya was Chinese aid to Har-Buri. If Har-Buri upset the apple-cart in Iran, that would merely be an added bonus drawn from the troubled pot of Middle Asia.

He began to shiver. The light glared in his eyes. He began to imagine all kinds of shapes between the brightness. Faces loomed up, eyes shifted, floated about, watched him. The silence went on. Sooner or

later, he knew, they would come back with the needle and drug him. He hated the thought. He could blow too many items of top security for K Section. He touched his broken tooth with his tongue. If it had been the next molar, he might have died in ten seconds. That was where the K Section dentist had installed the poison pill. He hated the thought of the pill. Hunger, pain, filth, and cold were better than eternity.

"Mr. Sam?"

He thought the whisper was in his imagination. He kept working at the leather thongs that held his wrists. Perhaps if he could hump over to the desk and abrade them on a convenient edge of metal . . .

"Mr. Sam?"

The glaring light moved, danced, creaked a little at the end of its chain. He saw a lovely, glowing, peaches-and-cream face lower toward him. The almond eyes smiled with complete compassion.

"Can you hear me?" she asked.

"Lotus?"

"It is I."

"Flower of a Chinese Garden, I love you."

She smiled sadly. "I wish I could help you."

"Did Ta-Po send you?"

"Naturally. I was happy he thought of it."

"Are you supposed to soften me up?"

She giggled. "Perhaps the opposite."

"Yes, you're very desirable."

"I love you, Mr. Sam."

"That's convenient."

"From the moment I first saw you, I loved you."

"I'm cold," he said.

"I'll warm you."

"And whisper questions in my ear?"

"You really should tell him where that awful cold stick of a Tanya is. Really, you should. Why suffer?"

"Why not?"

"I do not understand you, Mr. Sam."

"Once I speak, he'll kill me, right?"

"I think not."

"Then he'll smuggle me secretly to Peking for a long and leisurely agony in L-5's dungeons. You work for L-5?"

"I am only Madame Hung's assistant."

"I'll bet."

"I am *not* Ta-Po's concubine. That's old-fashioned and bourgeois and stupid. In socialist societies, women have equal freedom to work, study, and love."

"You're a dear," Durell said.

"Let me make you warm."

She slid to the floor beside him. Her robe was very thin. She was shivering, too. She smelled of flower petals and lemon. Her breath was delicately spiced with an elusive fragrance. Her soft underlip crushed itself against his mouth. Her body was deliciously curved and rounded. He felt the heat of her through his borrowed slacks and decided she either enjoyed her work thoroughly or was sincere.

"Help me get away," he whispered.

"I will."

"Now."

"It is not the right time, I cannot. Later, tonight. Near dawn."

"Lotus, you're a bit too much."

She giggled. "You like me, a little?"

"Obviously, more than a little."

She giggled again. "Always, I dream of a man like you. I hear such tales of American men. You are brave. You are like a tiger. I know your dossier complete, from memory. And I hate Ta-Po, oh, so much! And I'm afraid of her."

"Madame Hūng?"

"She is a monster. Oh, I am afraid of what she will do to you when she loses patience! . . . Do you like that?"

"Very much."

"Have you had many lovely women?"

"None like you, Lotus. None like this."

She laughed. "You feel helpless, because your hands are tied?"

"I'm missing so much," he said. "Why not take off the straps?"

"Tell me where to find Tanya."

"To hell with Tanya. That cold stick can take care of herself."

"But I must have something to tell Ta-Po. Otherwise, he will be very angry with me."

"All this was his idea?"

"It amuses him to think so."

"You suggested it?"

"I am too modest to say."

"I like your modesty. Keep it that way."

Her body trembled above him. She put her face to his and he was amazed to feel the warm slide of tears on her young cheeks. Then she pushed herself up and reached with one hand for something she had placed on the floor nearby, and he saw the glitter of a knife. It looked very sharp. A clutch of cold fear grabbed at his groin.

"You know what Madame Hung suggested I do?"

"Don't tell me what that bitch thinks of doing."

"She said when I have you like this, I should unman you. Ssst! One quick slice with this blade—"

"Lotus—"

"It frightens you?"

"Yes."

"Then tell me about Tanya."

"She's on the moon," he said quickly.

Lotus looked blank. Her thick, scented hair made a screen beside her face, brushing his brow. "The moon?"

"She went back."

"Oh, that's not so."

"It is. That's why she can't be found." Durell spoke with quiet care. "Now, put away that knife. You've lost your chance. Fear does that to men."

"I'm sorry. I wouldn't have done it, anyway."

She rolled aside and sat up. Her robe was gathered

about her waist. She looked at him thoughtfully, then stood and shook the robe down demurely, not smiling. Without a word, she left the stone room. The door bolts shot home with solid thuds.

He did not have long to wait. It was Madame Hung's turn. He did not even hear her come in, until he caught the faint hiss of her pearl-embroidered slippers on the hard floor. Then there came a sudden gasp, and the quick stumble of footsteps, and Lotus was thrown down beside him. She lay there with her glossy hair loose and tangled. There was blood on her right hand, and one finger looked broken. She breathed in and out with her pain and would not look at him. Durell lifted his head and tried to sit up, but the leather thongs made it difficult.

"Such a fool," Madame Hung whispered.

Durell said nothing. He was afraid, again. She was a woman who could inspire fear in anyone.

"Lotus is a romantic," Madame Hung said. "I always suspected it. Her training has been futile. But until now, she was useful, although one cannot always predict human behavior. One day, it will be perfected. The stupidity of the human race will make it possible. The masses will be controlled and conditioned into docility. For their own good, of course. For the greater glory of the communist state."

"Cheers," said Durell.

"Your morale remains high?"

"Not really."

"Lotus really should have mutilated you."

He said nothing. His fear deepened. It was a primitive, atavistic emotion that he couldn't help.

"Now tell me where to find my beloved daughter."

"Tanya?"

"Tanya is my daughter. I want her back."

"She returned to the moon."

The woman seemed to dissolve into a writhing fury. Durell didn't even see what she hit him with. There

was metal in it, a whip with a score of biting, slashing, agonizing tips. His shirt was torn to ribbons in seconds. His chest, belly and groin became one vast, incredible pain. Through the whistle and thump, he heard Madame Hung's breath hiss in and out with the effort. Her face came and went, shadowed by the lamp. He had never believed such malignancy could exist in human features.

She paused at last, and gasped, "Well?"

"It would be easy for you to join her," he whispered.

"How? Tell me, quickly!"

"Just get on your broom and take off for the sky."

More pain. He blacked out, mercifully, for a time. He awoke, shuddering. His body was a mass of agony. Even if he were free of the straps, he didn't think he could move. He knew he was going to die if it kept up. He cursed Madame Hung feebly. He didn't even have much strength for that.

She was still there. But Lotus had moved. He wondered if Lotus still had the knife.

"American spy, imperialist agent, I will ask only once more. Do not tell me that my poor, deluded daughter has gone back to the moon. I am in no mood for your Western humor. I am never amused. You made stupid Lotus believe it, and she paid for her foolishness. I am not stupid. I am not weak. Do you understand?"

"I'm afraid so," he said quietly.

"Then tell me where Tanya is. For the last time."

"I don't know," he sighed.

"So."

There was a finality about the word. He tried to see beyond the glare of light in his eyes. She was a gaunt shadow, a shadow of death, impossible to avoid, inexorable. She would enjoy killing him. She might do it slowly, but he hoped, dimly, through his pain, that it might come fast. . . .

The shadows blurred and flashed, and there came a

clang of tin from the lampshade, a wild scintillation of light and shadow, flashes of impossible color. There was a scream. There was a sudden gush of vituperation and Chinese oaths. It came from Madame Hung, but rage and fear pitched her voice beyond her normal sibilant range. The scuffling went on. Durell tried to wriggle aside. Someone stepped on his belly. He rolled again, found himself face down, hands strapped across his kidneys, legs and thighs rigid with more straps. He smelled concrete dust in his nostrils. He smelled death. The light-shade clanged again. Dazzling blindness came, then swooping angles of black.

The lamp rocked on its wire tether.

Everything was silent.

His back crawled. He heard footsteps.

"M-Mr. Sam?"

"Lotus?"

"Are you all right?"

"No."

"Can you walk?"

"I'll try."

"We will escape together. I told you, she is a monster."

"Did you kill her?"

"No. She is only unconscious."

"I wish you'd killed her. Cut me loose."

"Will you help me later, Mr. Sam?"

"Anything you say. Hurry."

The leather was slashed through. She was nervous, and nicked his wrists with the point of the knife. It didn't matter. His arms came loose, but he couldn't move them. Then his legs. They were a little better. Lotus rolled him over. She was weeping. Her eyes were dark pools of terror.

"Oh, what is the matter with you, Mr. Sam?"

"I've had too much exercise."

He made a great effort, and found he could move his arms, after all, although his shoulders cracked and creaked. He sat up, and wished he hadn't. His stomach

didn't want to bend any more. Lotus put her arms around him. She had changed her clothes, but they were a bit the worse for wear from having been thrown to the floor beside him. The blood had clotted on her hand. Her little finger still looked broken. He managed to take her injured hand and kissed it.

"Thank you, Lotus."

"Oh, hurry, please!"

"As fast as I can."

He stood up. After that, it came easier.

Chapter Eleven

HANNIGAN said, "For God's sake!"

He pursed his lips, made clucking sounds, brushed his thick Iranian-type moustache. His homely face puckered with astonishment. His green eyes reflected amazement. Durell thought he looked beautiful.

"Why did you do it, Cajun?"

"I wanted to learn something. They think Tanya really was on the moon."

"But of course she was!"

"And they want her very, very badly."

"Who doesn't?"

"The Russians," Durell said.

"But they're raising hell—"

"Quietly. Diplomatically. Politely. Why aren't they banging shoes on their desks at the U.N.?"

"Things are different in Moscow now."

"I wonder. Not that different."

"So you went through it just to learn this?"

"Every ickle makes a mickle," Durell said.

"You're delirious, man," said Hannigan.

He was in his room at the Royal Teheran. It oc-

curred to him that he'd only been in it long enough to drop his bag when he first arrived from Istanbul. How long ago had that been? He wasn't sure anymore.

Hannigan had gotten a doctor from the embassy. The doctor was serious and discreet and told Durell he had to go to a hospital for at least two weeks. Durell asked him to tape up his ribs and prod his stomach.

"Your spleen may be ruptured," the doctor said.

"I'll vent it on her," said Durell.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Madame Hung. I'm going to kill her."

Hannigan ordered the doctor out. All through the examination, Lotus sat beside the bed, shivering. It was almost dawn. Hannigan had people out in the corridor, down in the lobby, and out on the street. The room was secure. Durell felt as if he were wrapped in cotton-wool and stowed away in a vault. He wondered what had been done with Colonel Saajadi's body, and what would happen when Iranian Security missed one of their top officers. He might soon face a choice of deportation, jail, or a firing squad.

"I wish you hadn't killed him," Hannigan said worriedly. "Even if he was a traitor, you can't prove a bit of it. Neither can you prove that Ta-Po is openly backing Har-Buri. Maybe I'd better signal for somebody to take your place, Cajun. You should be in a hospital, anyway."

"No, I'll stick with it. It's personal, now." Durell looked at Lotus, who sat with her hands folded in her lap, eyes downcast. "What I have to do now is find Professor Ouspanaya. He's in Teheran, you say?"

"He *was*, yes. Not now. The Soviets moved him to their resort house on the Caspian. One of my people saw them hustle him away, early last night."

"Can you give me directions to this place?"

"Sure, Sam, but what good will it do? They won't let you talk to Ousparraya."

"I think they will. I have some pointed questions to ask about Tanya."

Hannigan pulled at his moustache. "Where is she, by the way?"

"I wish I knew, but I don't."

"That's the truth? Then what about Har-Buri's hide-out? Can you draw *me* a map to the place? It shouldn't be kept just in your head, Cajun."

"All right," Durell agreed. "But use it only if I don't come back. Then you can turn it over to Iranian I.S., if you know anybody there you can trust."

Hannigan looked at Lotus. "What about this child? What can we do about her? We owe her something for helping you out of Saajadi's house. But the C.P.R. people will raise hell about her, knowing she's come over to us."

"Lotus?" Durell said. She looked up, and her dark lashes made lovely black fans against her peach-tinted cheek. "Do you want to come with me?"

"I don't know what to do," she whispered.

"Can you drive a car?"

"Yes, I am very good operator. I drive Madame Hung, as part of my job."

Durell considered his bandages. "Then you can do some driving for me," he said.

The Chinese girl began to weep.

Hannigan got him his own car from the embassy garage. It was a small, blue Triumph with an extra petrol tank under the luggage rack. He was very dubious when Durell levered himself out of bed.

"You'll never make it. I should send someone else. That woman made mincemeat out of you, Cajun."

"I'll manage."

The room began a slow gyration as Durell dressed. It was broad daylight now. Lotus helped him on with his socks and shoes. It was good to get back into his own clothing again. He had lost his sunglasses somewhere, and he asked Hannigan for his pair. Hannigan made out an expense chit for it. "They cost me six bucks."

"And I'll want another gun."

"We don't have the S&W's you prefer."

"I'll take anything except a Colt .45. That's military issue, and there's too much red tape going with it."

Hannigan produced a Browning for him. Breakfast was sent up, and Durell ate hungrily. After his third cup of coffee, he felt better. He took three aspirins to ease his aches and pains and made his last request.

"Money, Rafe. All you can spare."

Hannigan looked agonized. "I don't know if the budget can take it, Sam."

"Bend a little. How much do you have on you?"

"Couple hundred, I think. I'm not sure."

"Count it. It's a sign of the affluent society when a man no longer can tell exactly how much cash he's got in his wallet. You should be ashamed of your prosperity, Rafe."

"It's my own money," Hannigan mourned.

He counted it out reluctantly.

It was after lunch before they left the Royal Teheran. Hannigan arranged it efficiently. They used the back stairs, going through the kitchens to a loading area. The blue Triumph was parked there. Lotus slipped quickly behind the wheel, frowned for a moment, and Durell eased into the cramped little bucket seat beside her.

"I'm a little nervous," the girl said. "I don't know what came over me, with you. I feel—lost."

"How is your hand?"

"It only hurts a little now."

The doctor had put a splint on her broken finger. She handled the wheel a little awkwardly, but once she adjusted to the Triumph's power, she drove quite well. No one stopped them. No policeman flagged them down as they worked out of Teheran's wide boulevards and took the road to the north. Durell slumped in his seat and kept on his sunglasses, hoping there were no barricades on the highway. They were in luck. If there

was an alarm out for him, because of Colonel Saajadi, it wasn't evident.

The highway bent east and then north to cross the Elburz Mountains. The distance to Babul on the Caspian coast was under two hundred miles. Lotus found a scarf in the map compartment and tied it around her thick hair. It streamed behind her like a gay pennant as she drove. Her young face was serious.

"What will happen to me, Mr. Sam?"

"Nothing, I hope."

"I mean, when this is all over."

"Hannigan will make arrangements for you."

Her slanted eyes regarded him mournfully. "But it is for you that I have left everything I've ever known." She paused. "I know you do not love me, or even care much for me, and I understand this, for I was too impetuous with you, and I don't know how to care for myself in such matters of emotion." She spoke English with a schoolgirl precision. "Nevertheless, I do not want you to worry about me now. I will help all I can. I am only happy to be free of that woman."

"Tell me about Madame Hung," he suggested.

Her words filled important gaps in the dossiers he had seen at No. 20 Annapolis Street, in Washington. Ta-Po was not merely a chief of intelligence in Peking's hierarchy of power. Ta-Po was interested in rocketry and the use of atomic ballistic missiles in outer space. Madame Hung really ran his intelligence department. More and more, lately, Lotus explained, Ta-Po was away on secret missions dealing with the rising power of the Red Chinese nuclear development program.

"And your own job?" he asked finally.

"I told you, I was little more than a feudal handmaiden to Madame Hung."

"In a socialist society?"

She bit her lip. "What is done privately is often at odds with the ideals of our social system. Officially, I was her secretary. But she enjoyed having me perform

many menial tasks, degrading things. She gave me to Ta-Po himself once, and watched all evening."

Durell adjusted his sunglasses. "Sounds like par for the course, for that lovely couple."

"I am so happy to be free at last. But I am also afraid. It feels so strange."

He directed her to the eastern road, by way of Firuz-Kuh and Shahi. They began to run into showers as they descended the mountains into tropical Iran. The land turned lush and verdant, a kaleidoscope of jungle, swamp, rice fields, tobacco and sugar plantations, fruit trees. Lotus recognized a tea farm on the slopes of a rugged mountain from which they caught their first glimpse of the Caspian Sea.

"But it is lovely here! So different!"

"The Old King knew it," Durell said. "That's why he built his Riviera down there."

"Look! Mulberry trees! They breed silkworms?"

Durell nodded. "The *gilaki* peasants aren't much thought of, though. The sophisticates of Teheran poke fun at their dialect and call them *kalle-mahi khor*—eaters of fish heads."

She laughed. "It is good to be with you, Mr. Sam."

"Farther on toward Gorgan, you run into Turkoman territory. Horses, sheep, camels, and cattle. Good hunting in there. They've got wild boar, even wolves and tigers." He paused, suddenly remembering Tanya in the pit with the tiger. They went through another rain shower. "Slow down a bit, Lotus. There's time, it seems."

They passed Babul-Sar, with its pines and palm trees, at four in the afternoon, glimpsing the fine Swiss-managed hotel there. The Caspian looked gray-green. In a rice paddy, women in red gowns were dipping and bending, planting new shoots. The men followed longhorn buffalos behind swing plows. Then the houses, with their twin-sloped roofs and high-galleried porticos—some stenciled with D.D.T. decontamination dates—gave way to thicker forests, a smell

of sulphur springs, and an architectural horror of a German-Rumanian resort hotel.

Durell told the girl to go on a short way toward Bandar Shah and Asterabad. They passed fishing ports, and heavy clots of truck traffic from the caviar-producing canneries. Here and there a gleaming beach shone against the green of the Caspian. The air was mild and smelled of citrus fruit and melons. It was difficult to realize they were in the same country that held the grim Dasht-i-Kavir desert to the south.

"It is not far now to the Russian border and the Turkoman S.S.R.," Lotus suddenly said. "Is it not dangerous, what you seek to do? You have enemies on all sides."

"Occupational risks," he said absently. He was looking for the road that Hannigan had described, the one on which the Teheran Soviet embassy had built a resort villa for their diplomats. "Turn left here, Lotus."

There were some fishing piers, boats, a bumpy boulevard lined with stunted palm trees. High walls hid a number of villas from view. Here and there, the canvas of a beach cabana flapped in the warm sea wind. The water was grayer. Farther out, there were faint white-caps. Lotus shifted the Triumph down to a crawl. The road curved between high iron fences and tennis courts. Durell heard the Russian scorekeeper before he saw the place.

"Stop here, Lotus."

Ahead was a striped barrier that blocked their way. A sentry-box stood beside it, but no one was inside. Masonry posts flanked the driveway. Durell got out stiffly. The air was cool down here by the beach, heavy with the odor of salt and fish. Electronic warning beams were set into the masonry posts. He passed a hand over them and was rewarded by a distant clamor. He walked back to Lotus, seated rigidly behind the wheel, and spoke quietly.

"In the village we passed, about a mile up the shore, is a hotel. Go in and ask for Amir. Tell him I sent

you, and give him my name. Amir is a friendly fellow, even if he looks like a Cossack. It's been four years since I came this way, but he'll remember me. Ask for a room—or two rooms, if you wish—and take a bath and a nice nap." He peeled off some of Hannigan's currency and gave it to her. "Buy yourself some clothes. Believe it or not, there's a French couturière with a very swank shop in the resort pavilion. Have a good time, Lotus."

She looked blank. "But what about you, Mr. Sam?"

"If I'm not back for dinner, call Hannigan to bail me out."

Chapter Twelve

A SECURITY guard in a loose-fitting uniform took his name at the gate with only a slight flickering of his eyes. He was curtly told to wait. Durell listened to birds singing, watched a squirrel bounce down the road, tried to catch the count of the tennis match going on behind the wall. After a moment or two, the game abruptly ended. Professor Ouspanaya had enjoyed tennis at Brussels, Durell recalled, when they had met before.

The guard came back. "This way, sir."

A water sprinkler threw diamonds into the late afternoon sunlight on the green lawn. Two chunky men in gray suits came toward him, unsmiling. Beyond, the villa loomed through dense shrubbery, in solemn and secretive isolation.

"Your pardon, *gospodin*. We must search you."

"I have a gun, but I want it back when I leave."

"Yes, sir."

Their courtesy worried him. Their eyes were hard

with curiosity as they studied him. Probably they had seen his dossier at No. 2 Dzerzhinsky Square, in Moscow, Durell reflected. He hoped they would remember that this was neutral ground.

"This way."

He was not allowed into the villa. That was routine security. He walked between them, feeling somewhat like a prisoner, into an arbor above the tennis court. Butterflies looped over a mass of blossoms. The strains of a Soviet Army march tune came from the villa.

"Professor Ouspanaya?"

The man seated on the bench, tennis racket in hand, stood up and smiled and extended a hard, lean hand.

"Mr. Durell. The Cajun, am I correct?"

"I'm happy that you remember me."

"Oh, these men would never let me forget. It seems I outraged their security by befriending you, when we met, long ago. How many hours I spent with them afterward, recalling every word of our brief conversations! And we merely talked of the weather, eh? Such nonsense!"

"Could we speak in English now?" Durell asked.

Ouspanaya laughed. "The watchdogs would not permit it. It will be easier for me, later, this way."

The two men in gray suits stood stolidly by, their eyes never leaving Durell as he sat on the stone bench beside the Russian. Ouspanaya was a fine-looking man, about fifty, with a handsome head and thick gray hair, a tanned and healthy complexion. A brilliant man, Durell thought. He wondered about Tanya. There was a resemblance, of course. He could see the fine Siberian bone structure in the father. But then he thought of Madame Hung and wondered how Ouspanaya could ever have married the witch woman. Perhaps Madame Hung had looked like Lotus at that time.

Ouspanaya took a towel and wiped sweat from his face and asked one of the guards if he could have

some vodka sent out from the villa. "Five sets makes me thirsty."

One of the guards left, looking back over his shoulder until the shrubbery hid him. He was back with remarkable speed, carrying a tray of bottles and glasses.

"We will drink to our reunion. But we must keep matters on a relatively inane social level, Mr. Durell. These people know why you are here."

"And do you?"

"Naturally. We knew when you left Geneva, and when you left Istanbul, and when you came to Teheran."

"For a scientist, you make a good intelligence man."

"I only repeat what I have been told."

"Then you know I'm looking for Tanya. But I don't know why you *haven't* been looking for her."

"My daughter will be saved."

"Saved? From whom?"

Ouspanaya looked uncomfortable, and smiled sadly. "I cannot speak of her. Is that understood? It is forbidden."

"Then we don't have much else to talk about. Don't you want to know how she was? I had her with me, for a short time. I should think, as her father, you'd want to know how she looked, about her health, her state of mind—"

Ouspanaya shook his head. "You did not see her."

"But I did. And she's lost again, wandering somewhere in the desert, half out of her mind."

Ouspanaya looked pale. "The watchdogs did not tell me any of this. Do you mean you found Tanya, and then you lost her? But how—?"

One of the guards uttered a sullen warning. Ouspanaya answered angrily. "But I must know about my daughter, Sergei." He turned back to Durell. "You really did see her?"

"She was in Har-Buri's hands. Not comfortably." He described the pit and the tiger and the manner in which they had escaped and had been pursued. He

spoke tonelessly, giving facts uncolored by emotion. He told of the Farsi and the Renault truck and the discovery of Tanya's robe and how she had vanished again. "She was in an extraordinary state of mind. I was with her long enough to determine that. I spent the night with her."

Ouspanaya coughed. "She told you of her experiences?"

"She says she was on the moon," Durell said flatly. He watched the Russian's face. Nothing changed there. "I didn't believe her then. I believe it even less now."

"Why not? Why don't you believe her?"

"You know better. You were supposed to be with her on that space flight. There's no monitor record of such a flight. Not a peep out of any of Moscow's propaganda offices. Nothing in the newspapers. Not a gnat, not a hint of a suggestion. Have *you* been on the moon, Professor Ouspanaya?"

"This Har-Buri." Ouspanaya shifted his weight on the arbor bench. "He wants Tanya as a prisoner?"

"You haven't answered my question."

"It is not permitted. It is classified."

"Your daughter's life is at stake, Professor."

"Yes, I am aware of that."

"Don't you love her?"

"She is the most precious thing in the world to me. My life and work would be meaningless without her."

"But you're pretty calm about it all."

Ouspanaya looked at the guards. "Not really."

"If Har-Buri gets her back, he'll exchange her to the Chinese for support in his political aims—for weapons, money, everything he can chivvy out of them."

"Yes, I suppose so."

"You don't mind Tanya going back to Peking with her mother?"

Ouspanaya sighed. "It would be dreadful."

"Then help me to find her."

"How can I help?"

"Tell me about the moon."

"Impossible."

"Tell the truth to the world. Then she won't be as valuable to Har-Buri. She won't be worth anything to him, then. And not to Madame Hung, either."

Ouspanaya said sharply: "But then they would kill her! If she is useless to them, they would only get rid of her and write it all off as a mistake and a loss."

The guards stirred restlessly. Sergei looked pointedly at his watch on his hairy wrist. "You have given the American time enough, Professor."

Ouspanaya said regretfully, "Yes, I think so."

"One more moment," Durell said. "You understand that Tanya may die, anyway?"

"No, they would not kill her. But they might take her to Peking, which I consider the equivalent." The man grimaced, his fine face reflecting agony. "But our own people are working on this, of course. We want her back for more reasons than you can imagine."

"Oh, I have a good imagination." Durell smiled and looked into the Russian's eyes. There was a private torment there, worse than most he had ever seen. "Maybe Madame Hung won't kill her until Peking has gotten every scientific morsel out of her remarkable mind. But I didn't say she would be killed. I said she might die."

Ouspanaya stiffened. "She has been injured so gravely?"

"She could use a doctor, yes."

"Surely they would attend to her wounds!"

"From what I saw, they couldn't care less. But her injuries aren't easily visible. You know what I'm talking about, Professor. She's dying mentally. She's half gone, right now. She really believes she was on the moon. Unless you have an antidote, she'll go on thinking so, until everything snaps in her brain."

"Antidote? What—?"

"She needs to be debriefed," Durell said.

Ouspanaya swallowed hard. "Ah, you are clever." Sergei looked at them in a puzzled way and said an-

grily, "That is enough. I do not understand what you are saying to each other, and I do not like it. Enough, *da?* You will go at once into the house, Professor Ouspanaya."

"Yes, Sergei." He stood up. "I am sorry, Durell. I can do nothing. There are orders from Moscow—and often those who are dearest to us are expendable."

"You'll lose Tanya," Durell warned.

Sergei made a curt gesture. Ouspanaya turned and walked away, then looked back at Durell. Something in his eyes appealed to him—a call for help, a plea that he let the matter drop? Durell wasn't sure. The other guard touched his arm. "This way out, *gospodin*. You are lucky. It is not often we entertain a visitor such as you."

"Times are changing," Durell said.

He followed the guard down to the barrier gate on the road.

Chapter Thirteen

DURELL walked a little way down the road and saw Hannigan's car shining in dappled shade under a tall hedge. Apparently Lotus had not obeyed his instructions to go to the resort hotel. A speedboat went by on the water nearby, with a man and three girls in it. Lotus sat rigidly behind the wheel of the Triumph. Durell walked all the way around the bend and then saw the police van, parked in deeper shadow just beyond. He checked his stride. Lotus started to stand up in the sports car, then sat down again with a thump. Durell looked back. The barrier gate across the entrance to Ouspanaya's villa was down again. To his right was a high wall barring access to the beach. He shrugged and

started walking again. At least the guard had returned his gun when he checked out past the sentry box.

"Mr. Sam, the police—!" Lotus shrilled.

"I see them, honey."

They came tumbling out of the patrol van as if enacting the Charge of the Light Brigade. They were all young, tough, and thoroughly armed. The van had Teheran license plates. When he saw Hanookh jump out of the van, too, he made up his mind. Hanookh wore a police uniform now, and he held his gun as if he meant to use it. He looked hard and murderous. Hanookh yelled to his men and waved his arms and a shotgun went off with a thunderous blast. Durell leaped to the right, toward a narrow lane between the shrubs that bordered the road. A low stone wall barred his way. He went over it with a leap that wrenched at his muscles and bandages and made him gasp with pain. Beyond was a small garden, oleanders, lemon trees, a glimpse of the wide beach and the placid sea. He heard Lotus scream, dimly. He kept running. There was a row of striped canvas cabanas on the beach, and two boys were kicking at a soccer ball close to the surf. They looked up at him as he ran by the cabanas. The sand dragged malignantly at his feet. There was a square house with rococo terraces and two giant, ugly sculptures of warriors armed with maces and swords, frowning at the sea. A man and two women in summer shorts sat under an awning between the two giant statues, sipping pink drinks. All wore large sunglasses. Durell turned left, toward the house. The man stood up and shouted angrily at him. Behind him, the police tumbled onto the beach. The shotgun went off again, but the blast came nowhere near.

He went through the house, crashed through the kitchen occupied by four startled servants, and out through the back door and up a flight of steps toward another garden area and a fence, heading for the road again. His legs felt like lead. His chest was tight with

pain. The people on the beach called to the police, and he ran for the gate in the fence. A Citroën was parked there, and he swung for it, started to fall behind the wheel, and saw there were no ignition keys. There wasn't time to jump the wiring. He slid out, ran for the gate, and opened it just enough to peer out at the road again.

He had circled behind the police van and Lotus. Hanookh stood beside the car, gun in hand, talking to the Chinese girl. His face was dark and angry. Durell looked back to the villa. The other police were not in sight yet. He took the Browning from his pocket and stepped out from behind the shrubs and ran along the weedy edge of the road, coming up at the back of the Triumph. Hanookh heard him at the last moment and started to turn, his face a mask of surprise. Durell hit him and bowled him over, and Hanookh rolled away into a shallow ditch, trying to get his weapon up. Lotus shrilled and started the engine with a roar. But Durell didn't jump in beside her. He knew he couldn't get far against Hanookh and the police patrols that would be set up against him.

He pointed his gun at Hanookh, knelt, and thrust its muzzle under the Iranian's chin.

"Will you shoot?" Hanookh gasped.

"If I have to."

"Like you killed Colonel Saajadi?"

"You have a lot to learn," Durell said. He felt a brief wave of dizziness and knew he had pushed himself too far, considering Madame Hung's recent treatments. He nudged the gun muzzle under Hanookh's chin again. The Iranian showed no fear. There was only anger, a look of betrayal in his dark eyes. "Get up, friend."

"You are not a friend. You killed Saajadi—"

"He needed it. Listen carefully. Your boys will be here any minute. I don't want to run from them—"

"You would not get far."

"I know that. I respect you, Hanookh. Will you make a deal?"

"You are under arrest for murder, sabotage, espionage—"

"All right. But your noble colonel was a traitor and a crook and a plotter against your government. Did you know that? He turned me over to Ta-Po and the Chinese."

"That is not possible—"

"Give me a chance to prove it."

"Yes. In court."

"No, it won't work that way. Give me a little time with you. If you cool me, my cover is blown, I'm no good for anything else, and I'm out of the business and might as well be dead."

"You will hang for murder, Sam Durell."

But Hanookh didn't sound quite as certain as at first. Puzzlement flickered in his eyes. He licked his lips, started to speak, and looked down the road. His cops were tumbling out of the back gate of the villa, looking this way and that.

"Saajadi?" Hanookh whispered. "With Ta-Po?"

"Look at my bandages. Little souvenirs. Give me time to convince you," Durell said urgently.

"How can I do that?"

"I'll go back to Teheran with you. In Hannigan's car. Lotus can squeeze in the back. Your van follows close behind us. What more can you want? I couldn't get away. But don't make any moves you couldn't retract, that's all."

Hanookh said abruptly: "Ike Sepah's father wants to see you."

"About Ike's death in the desert?"

"And other things."

"Do you think it's important?"

"Ramsur Sepah is an important man, a member of the Majlis, our Parliament. He is very rich, very influential."

"Should I see him?"

"It would be a good thing, I think." Some of Hanookh's bitter fury had ebbed, and he looked uncertain now. He waved back his running policemen, gave them sharp orders. Durell kept his back to them, and they couldn't see the gun he held on Hanookh. He eased it from Hanookh's throat. "Am I officially under arrest?"

"No. Not if you agree to see Ramsur Sepah."

"Would it be about Tanya, and Har-Buri?"

"I don't know. I am only a simple man, Durell. I obey orders. Your charges against Saajadi are—shocking. It turns my world upside down, if they are true."

"You can believe me. It's true."

"May I step away from you now?"

Durell slid his gun into his belt and covered it with his coat. He pushed his sunglasses up a bit and turned, smiling to the policemen who now surrounded him. "Tell them you're taking me back to Teheran, as ordered."

Hanookh nodded and spoke in quick Farsi, and sent his men back to the van. "You do the driving, Durell. I don't understand about this Chinese girl. Can she understand French?"

"Can you, Lotus?" Durell asked in French.

She looked blank.

"It's all right," Durell said. "She's on our side, anyway. I'll tell you about her on the way back."

He told Hanookh everything while he drove. They were in the mountains, heading south, when darkness fell, and they stopped once for Lotus, who whimpered with discomfort, and again for food at a small mountain village hotel. Hanookh sent his sergeant into the kitchen for dinner plates. The hotel looked empty. The men ate in the van, and Durell, Lotus, and Hanookh sat on the edge of the road, while they finished the plates of rice and lamb. It was cold in the mountains, and Lotus shivered as she sat close by his side. Durell told Hanookh about Saajadi's defection to Har-Buri's

cause, about Ta-Po and Madame Hung, and how Lotus had helped him to escape.

"I can't prove any of it. How did you happen to find Saajadi's body?"

"There was a telephone call. Miss Saajadi—the one who works in your embassy, for Hannigan—was quite hysterical. I'm afraid she will be of no further use to us."

"She never was of much use, anyway, since she was a plotter with the rebels."

Hanookh sighed. He looked very young in the evening shadows. He could not understand the motives of rich, powerful men playing on the needs and hopes of the poor. He admitted to Durell that there had been sudden unrest in a number of southern villages and towns that afternoon. There had been a brief riot in a Teheran bazaar, too, and a mob of people carrying Har-Buri banners had been arrested. Two men were shot, a woman injured, in the street-fighting.

"It seems as if you triggered a response from Har-Buri," Hanookh said. "Let us hope it is premature and can be crushed. These are difficult times for me. All the solid ground I've walked on has turned to quicksand. If what you say about Saajadi is true, then who can be trusted? I only want to do my job and do what is best for my country. I think that all movements that seek change by violence are suspect from the start. Perhaps it is sometimes necessary, but today in my country, such leaders all have personal motives of ambition."

"You're lucky you weren't killed last night," Durell pointed out. "Saajadi had just about decided to eliminate you, for being too honest. It's the one reason I'm trusting you with all this. If you were dangerous to Saajadi, then you must be straight with your government."

"I did not go home last night," Hanookh admitted. "I went to see Ike Sepah's father—Ramsur Sepah, a fine gentleman of the old school, you might say. I went

to extend my sympathy and explain what had happened to us in the Dasht-i-Kavir. It was very difficult. But he was very understanding. I felt guilty, being alive and telling him that his son had been killed by enemies of the state." Hanookh looked at his watch. "It is time we went on to Teheran."

"I'll want to call Hannigan there," Durell said.

"After you tell me about Har-Buri's headquarters."

Durell sighed. "You, too?"

"Otherwise, you will be under official arrest."

"And again turned over to one of Har-Buri's people in your agency?"

Hanookh bit his lip. "Well, we shall ask Ramsur Sepah what to do. At least, I think we can trust him."

"Don't count on it," Durell said.

It was midnight when they reached Teheran. Lotus was curled up on the narrow luggage area behind the two front bucket seats. She seemed to be asleep. Durell wondered what he could do with her. The best thing would be to turn her over to Hannigan for political asylum in the embassy; but he doubted if she would leave him until this was all over. There was something touching in the trustful way she slept. She was a waif lost in a stormy, alien world, driven only by the simplest of motives. Her dependence on him, now that she had broken her servitude to Madame Hung, was disturbing. But he could settle that later, in the future—if he had any future at all, he thought grimly. If Har-Buri had put his revolutionary mobs into action, anything could happen now.

And there was always Tanya Ouspanaya to consider, wandering in the darkness of the night, lost and confused and hunted by self-seeking men who only wanted to use her for their own purposes. Her father's words had been less than satisfactory. But certain items had been confirmed in his mind, just the same. There were too many cross-currents to figure them all out. First, he had to find Tanya. It seemed an impossi-

ble task. Find her, take her to the embassy, and negotiate with the Soviets for her safe return. There would be bureaucrats at home who would throw roadblocks up to that, anxious to pick her mind clean, regardless of the diplomatic consequences. Nobody was in the clear, these days. He knew that only after he found Tanya again could he give Hanookh his information about Har-Buri. If the Iranians moved too soon, Tanya would be lost forever.

But he couldn't find her without Hanookh's help. Time was running out, and if Har-Buri made his revolutionary move too soon, then his own trump might prove useless.

The lights of Teheran's boulevards slid by. Hanookh gave him directions to Ramsur Sepah's house. "He is holding a diplomatic reception there tonight," Hanookh said. "We could be inconspicuous in the crowd. I have been thinking, Durell, that it would be easy, with planes and tanks, to go back into the desert and take Har-Buri. Then his rebels would be crushed at once, the head lopped off and the body useless."

"And Tanya Ouspanaya?"

Hanookh shrugged. "She is of no concern to my government."

"But my job is to save her."

"That is secondary now."

"Not to me. If you use the military—provided you can find officers who can be trusted, and I don't think at this moment that you can—then Tanya, if she's back in Har-Buri's hands, will die."

Hanookh was annoyed. "Then what do you suggest?"

"I think I have to go back to the Dasht-i-Kavir and do it myself."

"You got her onē, and lost her. Now it must be done the way I propose." Hanookh was uncompromising. "I cannot bargain on this. Har-Buri's rebellion is urgent. The highest authorities must be consulted to-

night. And if you tell them what you know, the strike can be swift and sure."

"You said I could call Hannigan."

"Yes. After we speak to Ramsur Sepah."

Lotus suddenly became very feminine and insisted she could not to go a diplomatic reception dressed as she was. She had been docile until they turned the car through the gates of the Sepah house. But when she saw the bright garden lanterns and heard a French orchestra, she breathed more quickly, and a tiny worry frown appeared between her eyes.

"I have been here before," she said dubiously.

"When?"

"Oh, perhaps a week ago. I was in attendance to Madame Hung, of course. It was a reception for most of the major embassies."

Durell thought it didn't have to mean anything. "Did you meet Ramsur Sepah, Lotus?"

"Oh, no. I had to wait in the servants' quarters." Her smile was uncertain. "It used to be the segregated women's apartments—the former harem."

"Then you don't know if Ta-Po and Sepah had any private conversation during that evening?" Durell asked.

She shook her head. Hanookh said, "Truly, you are the most suspicious of men, Durell."

"We'll leave Lotus where she remained before, then. All right with you, Lotus?"

She nodded, and when they parked their dusty car before the brilliantly lighted entrance to the square, sandstone house, Durell walked with her to a side door. He took her arm and made her pay close attention as he told her what he wanted her to do. She listened while her eyes searched his face.

"Will they arrest you here, Mr. Sam?"

"Quite possibly. So you must get to Hannigan on the telephone and do the other things, if possible."

She nodded. "I will do all you say."

The garden party was set against a background of quiet wealth and splendor, a gloss of Western culture like a thin sheen of oil over the richer and more ancient Persian motifs. There were flaming torches set in rose beds, fountains, music, a quiet and efficient scurrying of waiters moving back and forth from a separate building that housed the kitchens. A high wall effectively surrounded the estate and cut off all sounds from the street beyond. Everything was cultivated to the final millimeter. The majordomo at the door looked uncertainly at Durell and Hanookh until Hanookh flashed a card and spoke curtly to the huge, moustached man, and then they were admitted, but not announced. Music, wine, perfume seemed to spill about them as if from a giant cornucopia. There were walks and mosaic walls and antique sculptures. It was a formal party, a remarkable collection of dazzling women and men from every country of the globe, it seemed. When one compared the poverty of the desert to this sumptuous home of Ramsur Sepah, one of the last of the feudal squires, Durell wondered if Har-Buri's cause might not have a few small points in its favor. He searched the faces moving in the torchlight between the long refreshment tables, but he didn't spot Ta-Po or any members of the Soviet delegation who looked familiar. But there seemed to be a preponderance of high-ranking Iranian military officers in formal uniform, with their lieutenants in stiff attendance.

"Which one is Ramsur Sepah?" he asked Hanookh.

"I do not see him yet. I don't understand—"

"What bothers you, Hanookh?"

"Nothing. Come this way, please."

Durell followed him down a flight of steps, across a corner of the garden, smiling and apologizing to the guests they had to squeeze by, and then through a Moorish arched doorway into a wing of the big reddish-stone house. He had hoped to catch the eye of some American officials at the far side of the garden, but he had no luck. Neither did any of the British peo-

ple recognize him. Hanookh was never more than a step behind him.

"Does Ramsur Sepah expect you?" he asked.

"I think so."

"With me?"

"He specifically asked for a prior interview with you, if I found you, and if it proved feasible. He was most urgent about it. As a member of the Majlis and as the father of my dead friend, I promised to do what I could to accommodate him."

They came to an ornately carved door at the end of a corridor, and Hanookh straightened his ruffled jacket, brushed his moustache nervously, and then knocked with military precision. There was a brief wait. Then a man's voice asked them to enter.

If the rest of the house and garden promised Persian delights from olden times, the study that opened before them was all modern efficiency, top-executive-suite styling, the latest word from Madison Avenue. There were some fine French Impressionist paintings, and they looked like originals. The desk was enormous, with a leather top and inlaid boxes gleaming with mother-of-pearl and polished fruitwood. The heavy draperies were tightly drawn, and even the sound of the dance orchestra did not intrude into the privacy of Ramsur Sepah's office.

"Welcome, Mr. Durell."

Ramsur Sepah was tall and dapper, a man who had known wealth and position all his life, and who had the indefinable air of command that such fortunate people acquire like a second skin. His face was grave; he had a strong nose, thick gray hair and a seamed brown face; his powerful hands rested lightly on the leather-topped desk. Under heavy hawk's brows, turning upward at the ends in twists of bushy hair, his dark brown eyes smiled solemnly.

"Yes, welcome. Hanookh, my dear boy, you have done very well."

"I am glad you are pleased, sir. It is a difficult situa-

tion. Mr. Durell has submitted to technical arrest. Since Colonel Saajadi is—is no longer with us—I am uncertain as to who my immediate superior may be. I understand that your committee in the Majlis was in direct control of our operations, commanded by Saajadi, and so I assume it is proper to bring Durell to you. But the reports from the southern towns are very grave, and the military must be put on alert. It is all beyond my power, I confess. I don't know friend from foe, at the moment."

"I am most pleased with you, my boy."

"Ike and I were the best of friends, sir," said Hanookh. "This American was with us for part of the time we were in the desert, along with the Englishman, Beele, looking for the Russian girl and Har-Buri's headquarters."

"The matter is now out of your hands," Ramsur Sepah said gently. "I will take care of everything. You will receive a commendation, you can be sure."

"Durell says that Colonel Saajadi was a traitor," Hanookh blurted out. "I am sure this is as great a shock to you as it was to me—assuming it is true. But Mr. Durell has no reason to lie about something that could be proved."

"It is not a shock." Ramsur Sepah's rich voice conveyed paternal sympathy toward the young man. "We have known about Saajadi's leanings for some time."

"But then—"

"Yes. A calculated risk was taken. I lost my personal stake in the matter, when my only son was killed." A quiver touched the Iranian's harsh face. "Perhaps I should have warned Ike. And you, too, Hanookh. But it was decided in committee that it was best to have known enemies than to grope in the dark, as you put it. It was not an error. There are forces at work tonight that will clarify the situation nicely, you can be sure. I'd advise you to go home and go to bed. You look tired, you have been through an ordeal."

"Sir, I must stay with Durell."

"He is out of your hands." Sepah's voice crackled with sudden authority. "Mr. Durell is now my responsibility."

Durell had the sudden feeling that he had been this way before. He said nothing as Hanookh asked for permission to wait for him in the garden.

"If you insist," Sepah agreed. "But it will be pointless. Mr. Durell will cooperate with us when everything is explained."

Hanookh hesitated a moment more, then reluctantly backed out of the room. There was a small silence while Ramsur Sepah moved boxes about on his big desk, opened a drawer and stared into it for a moment, then sighed and stood up.

"I mourn my son," he said quietly.

"Ike was a fine young man."

"Yes. My only son. He was important to me. I did not think he would be killed in the Dasht-i-Kavir." The bushy hawk's brows swooped up, then down. "Could you tell me just where it happened?"

Durell said, "I wasn't with him at the time."

"Ah, yes. So young Hanookh told me. Where were you then, my dear sir?"

"I think you know," said Durell. "Have you, too, brought me here to learn how to find Har-Buri?"

"It is important to know that."

"But if I tell you, I'll be put on the next plane out of Teheran, with deportation orders in my hand."

"True. On the other side of the coin, one begins to suspect you of collusion with the rebel Har-Buri, since you are determined to protect him. Your intelligence organization has been known to play rather peculiar pranks in other national territories."

"You know better than that, Mr. Sepah."

"Do you want the girl so desperately, then?"

"I want her, yes."

"And do you judge your value to us in terms of an exchange of information about this Russian cosmonaut?"

"It's a big factor."

"Very well. Come with me."

Ramsur Sepah moved with the grace of a hunting animal out from behind his desk and opened another door to his office and stepped through. Durell tried to stay close behind his tall, rapier figure. The room beyond was dark. Sepah murmured something about the light and stepped ahead. Durell felt a tingling at the nape of his neck. The door closed behind him with a sudden swoop and rush of air. The darkness became absolute. He stood very still for a moment, then put his back against the panel.

"Mr. Sepah—"

The silence was thicker than the darkness. Durell was not surprised by what was happening; he had half expected it. On the other hand, he was not quite prepared for the efficiency with which the man operated.

A light came on overhead.

He was in a blank-walled filing room. Cabinets filled the area from floor to ceiling. The opposite door was closed. Ramsur Sepah was not in the room with him. Then his voice came from a speaker in the ceiling.

"You see how fortunate we are, Mr. Durell. We have the girl. Yes, Tanya Ouspanaya is in our hands."

Durell spoke to the ceiling. "Let me see her."

"Oh, you shall! And so many of your questions will be answered, very soon." The voice from the loud-speaker laughed softly. "How foolish of you not to have guessed by now, Mr. Durell. Your reputation led me to believe you were more clever than this. You could call me by another name, you see. No one has seen my photograph, I have little or no dossier in poor young Hanookh's files."

Durell spoke abruptly. "Then you are Har-Buri?"

"Yes. And now, good night, for a time."

Durell swung about and tried the door by which he had entered the file room. It was locked. His hands slid rapidly along the edges of the doorway. No hold was available. The knob slipped round and around in

his hand. He tried to tear it off. Nothing gave way. It was all solid steel. He crossed the room to the opposite door by which Ramsur Sepah—or Har-Buri—had vanished. He met the same problem. There was no way out.

Then he heard the hissing of gas from the speaker vent in the ceiling. And the light went out again.

He smelled nothing. Panic touched him for a moment. He stood very still. He didn't want to breathe. The hissing grew louder. He felt along the top of the filing cabinet to his left, tested its strength and weight. It seemed to be bolted solidly to the floor and wall. Using the steel drawer handles, he lifted himself up until he could touch the invisible ceiling above, and then stretched as far as he could toward the opening he had spotted there. It was just beyond reach, but his fingertips felt a sudden, moist coolness from the gas pouring into the chamber. He did not know if it was lethal or not. He couldn't reach it. He turned his head and drew a breath, swinging out with one hand, and shrugged out of his coat. He lost his grip and dropped to the floor, got out of the jacket altogether, and climbed up again. Suddenly he felt nauseated and he swallowed hard. He balled up his coat and reached out in the darkness with the heavy cloth and tried to stuff it over the opening. The hissing was momentarily muted. But he couldn't hold his stretched position for long. His arm began to tremble; his scars from Madame Hung's treatment suddenly screamed in protest. Again nausea racked him. This time he fell harder to the floor, and a stomach cramp doubled him up. He lay prone, face against the cool concrete. The room was literally a vault. He couldn't get out. It was airtight. He climbed up on the filing cabinet once more. He felt cold, bathed in icy perspiration. He reached out awkwardly for the ceiling vent one last time. He couldn't make it. When he fell, he did not feel the floor. He seemed to drop forever, into a bottomless black pit.

Chapter Fourteen

HE AWOKE and heard voices, but they seemed to come through an echo chamber and the words were garbled; he could not understand them. He was sick, and he shouted into the darkness, but he made no sound. He gathered his trembling muscles and tried to stand up, but there was a void around him and he could not tell which direction was up or down or side-wise, and dizziness took him and spun him around and around. He tried to extend his arms and seemed to fly, with nothing under his feet, soaring and swooping and dipping and diving. All at once he felt a lurching sensation and dropped gratefully into nothing at all.

Time passed. He slept and awoke. He tried to read the luminous dial of his wristwatch. The figures mocked him. He felt that at least the night had passed, but it was still dark. He no sooner thought of this than he was bathed in an agonizing light that seemed to prick every pore of his body with intense pain. He writhed and tried to roll away from it, and now instead of the soaring freedom he had felt before, he felt bound in iron, unable to move at all.

More time went by.

He did not know if it was day or night. It was a long, long time. He awoke to softness under him, a smell of antiseptic, the sting of a needle in his arm. A form loomed over him and he swung feebly at the vague face. He heard Ramsur Sepah-Har-Buri laugh. Or was it Ta-Po? He heard another laugh. He knew that one, and it made his blood grow chill. Madame Hung, no less. They had him properly, he thought. Where was Hannigan? And Lotus? Everything he had arranged so

carefully had blown up in his face. He wanted to yell for Hannigan, but he bit off the name before it came out. He felt cunning and secretive, doing this. Never let your right hand know what the left is doing. *Honi soit qui mal y pense.*

"How do you feel, Mr. Durell?"

The voice came from a long distance. "I feel great," he whispered. "Out of this world."

There was a chuckle, "Ah, yes. We are sorry for the delay. Arrangements must be made. Transport must be laid on, you see. It will be soon."

"What will be 'soon'?"

"Oh, it will be most remarkable."

And there was no further voice to talk to.

He was aware of cold and heat, light and dark, and always the flow of time going by, sometimes in quick spurts, other times in slow torment. He was carried somewhere and put in a bed. He was walked somewhere else and put in a car or a truck. He felt wind against his face and felt the sting of another needle and felt nothing.

He knew that more than one day had already gone by. Perhaps two or three. It was taking too long for them to make their "arrangements," whatever they were. In the moments when he was reasonably lucid, he tried to pinpoint concrete evidence of what was happening to him. But everything was distorted, as if in a nightmare. He wondered what they were pumping into him with their syringes. He wondered at the callous depravity that would permit a man like Ramsur Sepah to see his only son to his death.

He chewed sand between his teeth. The desert? A cold, mocking sky reeled over him. He heard the hum of a truck motor. Yes, the desert. He lay on his back, watching the moon sail in the heavens. Big, round, luminous old moon, symbol for lovers, eternal mystery, sign of lunacy. He tried to sit up, but he was tied hand and foot, and he couldn't move. Two figures loomed on benches built lengthwise along the body of the open

truck. Their rifles glinted like silver in the moonlight. Their faces were black angles against the sky. They said nothing, did nothing, their bodies swaying only to the movement of the truck.

He wondered why he was not more surprised to have learned that Ramsur Sepah was the legendary Har-Buri. He could not have suspected this, but somehow he felt as if he had made a mistake, a fatal one, and this was one situation from which he could see no way out. No one was perfect. The assignment had been complicated by national cross-currents and interests that should have warned him, from the first. But he didn't know what else he could have done. He had counted on Hannigan, and he knew he should never depend on anyone else in his business. Your survival was in your own hands.

Not that he blamed Hannigan. Maybe Hannigan was working on it right now. Maybe Lotus had gotten to him, after all. But Hannigan didn't know about Ramsur Sepah and the plot for rebellion that came from high places in Teheran. Hannigan didn't know what Durell knew about Tanya and her father. You play things too close to your chest sometimes, Samuel, he told himself.

The truck stopped. He heard voices, and smelled charcoal smoke, and the debris and ordure of a desert village. Surprisingly, he was hungry. And suddenly he was tortured by thirst.

"Hey," he said to one of the faceless guards.

The man looked at him with glittering eyes and got up and vanished from the truck. The other just sat and waited, faceless and anonymous. Durell heard the clank of a camel bell, and presently he saw a woman's figure loom over him. It was Madame Hung. Her face was a witch's face, blotting out the full moon. He shuddered.

"How do you feel?" she asked in a whisper.

"Fine."

"Oh, that's very good."

"I'm hungry."

"Good."

"Do you have any water, Madame Hung?"

"Oh, plenty of water. But you will not need any, American spy, American killer. You are going on a long, long journey." She laughed.

"Listen," he said. "No more needles."

"Just one more."

"We can make a deal," he said.

"Ah. Now you crawl?"

"I'm a bourgeois, middle-class, capitalistic businessman. I like to make deals, that's all."

"You have nothing to bargain with. Bon voyage, American."

She plunged a syringe into his arm. He could not avoid it. He tried, but his bonds were too tight, and she had no trouble handling him. His last thought was that somehow, in some way, he would kill her.

If it was the last thing he ever did.

He was disoriented. His mind was detached from his body, with a floating freedom that was delightful, making him happy and carefree. There was nothing solid about him—no earth, no floor, no walls, no ceiling or sky. He was alone in ecstasy, a revelation of utter detachment. His body did not exist. He felt no pain, no hunger, no thirst, no lust. And no heartbeat.

But he couldn't be dead, he told himself. He could not be in eternity, because he knew that time was passing, a lot of time, hours and days, perhaps a week, maybe more. He wondered about this, and sometimes, when he was permitted to return to his body, he was fed, although he was not hungry, and given water, although he was not thirsty. He was always in darkness, except that now and then he saw many colored lights that twinkled and often looked like stars. Often, too, the moon sailed across his vision, enormous, pitted, and hostile. More and more, it seemed to him that the moon was an enemy waiting for him, an entity that

was aware of him and even welcoming him to the incredible emptiness of outer space. He thought a lot about the moon, and he thought now and then of Tanya, who said she had been there. He had known something about this once, and he tried to remember what it was; but he could not remember. He tried. He told himself it was important. His life depended on it. He did not know how he knew this, but he knew.

Time went by. Too much time. He should not have been floating in this emptiness so long. Somebody should have come for him by now. Everything was wrong and out of focus. Yet he felt serene.

At last a voice came to him.

"You are going to the moon, Durell," it said.

"Am I?"

"Oh, yes. It is all arranged, at last."

"I don't believe it," he said.

"You shall see."

He was called back from wherever he had been. His euphoria was gone. He was afraid, and did not want to come back. Little by little, he knew his body again. His heart beat. He breathed. He felt pain in his limbs. He was sorry it was happening. Who needed it? Shadows talked to him. Light came and went. He sat in a chair. The chair enveloped him from all directions, with straps that kept him secure. A helmet was put on his head, and he wore an awkward bulkiness of clothing. The hiss of oxygen made him dizzy for a moment. He could turn his head and he saw the night sky through a tiny, oval port. The moon leered at him and then slowly slid aside, as in a time-lapse motion picture film. Someone sat in a similar seat beside him.

"Hello, my friend."

"Hello, Professor Ouspanaya," Durell said.

"We go on a journey."

"So I've been told."

"It will be perfectly safe. Nothing to fear."

"I'd rather not, though."

"It is necessary. You are not surprised to see me? I

shall be beside you all the time. The trip may take two weeks. You are in fine physical condition for it now. And I shall manage everything. You need only accompany me and observe all there is to see."

"Where are we?"

Ouspanaya smiled. His pale blue Siberian eyes regarded him with scientific detachment. Durell wondered if this was part of the dream he had enjoyed for so long. For days? Was it weeks? He was sure of nothing. He looked through the porthole again. Things vibrated. Computers clicked. He couldn't believe it. Yet he had to. Everything was solid and tangible. It was not part of the drugged hours he had spent, thanks to Madame Hung's needles. He was out of it. He was in full possession of his faculties. He was in a spacesuit, he was in a space capsule sitting on top of a booster rocket. Voices in Russian came eerily through the headphones built into his helmet. He drew a deep breath. Oxygen. He felt good. He looked through the port. The stars laughed at him. No, no. It couldn't be. He looked at Ouspanaya.

The Russian nodded. "Here we go."

He had read classified accounts of astronaut launchings. Everything was according to schedule. He wanted to yell to somebody, anybody, that he didn't belong here, he didn't know what to do, he couldn't save himself, and who wanted to go to the moon, anyway? Tanya had been on the moon, and look what it had done to her. If this was fact and not fancy, then everything he had worked on since his arrival in Teheran was based on a false premise.

It couldn't be real.

But it was.

He felt the trembling of enormous power under his back, a vibration like a malevolent monster waking and stretching, a pressure in his chest and lungs that for long seconds seemed beyond endurance. The straps bit into his arms and legs and held him flat. All through the ordeal, the laconic voices of Russian tech-

nicians called out numbers, coordinates, computerized sums, a space jargon that went beyond his competent command of the language. Ouspanaya replied just as laconically. All of his attention was on the computer flickering and clickings, the maze of dials and needles, tubes and wires, that confronted him.

Suddenly they were free of the pressure and floating, weightless. The sky swung as the booster tipped into the escape slot in space that would let them leave the world's gravity. He leaned forward as much as he could and stared through the port. Yes, earth was down there, incredibly beautiful, incredibly far down, beyond reach, torn from him forever, half daylight and half night. Then the sun swung into sight and Ouspanaya murmured an apology and there was shade from its blinding menace. Durell felt as if there was something wrong with him. He should have been screaming objections; but he felt curiously complacent about it all.

He spoke into the mike strapped to his throat.

"You are an illusion, Professor Ouspanaya."

The man smiled. "Touch me. I am real."

Durell did so. There was solid flesh under the silver spacesuit. "Why are you doing this to me?"

"To prove something to you," Ouspanaya said.

"About Tanya?"

"Naturally."

"Listen, where was the space port? I know we were in the desert—"

"That was last week."

"Last week?"

"Do not worry about it. You will be returned safely to earth. Otherwise—" Professor Ouspanaya smiled wryly through his plastic helmet visor. "Otherwise, I would hardly have agreed to go along, would I?"

"But things just don't happen like this in space programs—"

"Ah, you have much to learn about Soviet science."

"Then you were with Tanya on her trip? She said you were with her."

"I was beside her, just as I am with you. Now I must ask you not to interfere with my work, for a time. I have much to do."

Durell counted the rivets in the capsule's plates. He counted the dials, he read the Russian printing on their faces, he considered the food packages in their slots, the oxygen bottles, the air scrubber, the waste disposers. Ouspanaya kept muttering reports into his microphone and listening to the dry, matter-of-fact figure that came back to him from earth. All at once, Durell began unbuckling the belts that kept him strapped to his seat.

"What are you doing?" Ouspanaya asked.

"I'm getting out of here."

"Are you mad? We are weightless—"

"It's an illusion," Durell said.

"Weightless!" Ouspanaya shouted. "Be careful—"

Durell drifted from his padded seat, crashed into the instrument panel, caromed floating upside down, caught his chair again, and tried to pull his feet back where they belonged. He was stunned. He was completely astonished.

"Here, take one of these," Ouspanaya said.

"What is it?"

"A pill, what does it look like? It will help."

He swallowed it and managed to buckle himself back into his seat. For a long time afterward, he stared in dismay at the slowly changing dials, at the receding ball of earth. He could not doubt the evidence of his senses.

He slept, awoke, ate liquid food squeezed into his mouth as if he were a helpless infant. Ouspanaya spoke a technical jargon of their duties which was difficult to comprehend. The Russian seemed to know what he was doing. Durell sweated. His heart pounded. He took no comfort from the technical gobbledegook that came over the space radio. Well, he thought

dreamily, it's progress. You could get into space, beyond the atmosphere, in less time than it took to go by taxi crosstown in Manhattan. Progress brought you cars that poisoned the air, humiliation in crowded buses, a barrage of kitchen soaps and insulting commercials, nerve-shattering sonic booms and airports where you missed your jets because you were hung up in traffic half a mile away, breathing poison. Maybe it was better up here, after all. He went to sleep again, thinking about it.

Smog, slums, sewage, supermarkets, supersonics; suburban sprawl and slurbs; computers, concrete, and consensus; obsolescence and excrescence; pot, population, proliferation, and LSD.

Yankee-go-home. He wished he could.

In his dream, he was in a small, tight plastic dome, surrounded by machinery that whined, whirred, blinked, and buzzed. Ouspanaya was manipulating handles and staring intently at dials. Durell sat up. He looked out of the dome and saw a moonscape.

It was a vast, pale vista of nightmare rocks and pinnacles that stretched to a jagged horizon. The sky was the blackest black he had ever seen, with stars as brilliant as headlights and as big as his fist. Sailing above the volcanic horizon was the most beautiful sight of all, the great blue-green orb of earth, misty, edged with gold, soft and effulgent. He drew in a long, deep breath.

"How did I get here?" he whispered.

"I had to give you medication. You were in a dangerous state of mind."

"I still am. How did you handle me?"

"You obeyed my orders. Don't trouble yourself about it. Are you hungry? We have everything we need for a stay of one week, if necessary."

"Is this the same dome you and Tanya used on your first trip?"

"Yes. In some respects, it is like the scientific bases the various nations have set up on the Antarctic ice

cap. We ran tests on this down there. We have everything necessary for life-support systems, as you see. We are perfectly safe. There is a routine of experiments I must conduct, and which you may observe. Our vehicle is parked in orbit. Over there"—the Russian pointed outward through the dome—"is our 'commuter module.' "

Just over a slight rise in the dusty plain was a small capsule resembling a fat spider, with sprawling, articulated legs. Durell stared at it for a long time. His gaze then swept as much of the horizon as he could see, while Ouspanaya returned to his technical tasks. He could not doubt the evidence he saw. He checked the oxygen cylinders and air scrubbers, rapped on the plastic dome wall—the gesture made Ouspanaya give him a quick, condescending smile—and then he said, "What is there for me to do?"

"Routine tasks. I'll brief you presently. Relax. We're friends. You don't scoff about it anymore?"

"It doesn't make sense. Where was the spaceport? How did I get here? I last saw you on the Caspian shore."

"It will all be explained."

"Why not start now?"

"There are important tasks to be done. Can you operate a simple computer? Yes? Here is the data that must be fed into it to relay home. At 1700 hours we must attempt a television transmission to Moscow. There is much to be done. True, we are safe, but our safety depends on hard work. There will be little time for me to rest or sleep."

Durell gestured to the moonscape. "Can I go out there?"

"No. Although we have suits, our supplies are naturally limited. Unfortunate. But until the moon base is enlarged and permanently staffed, there is no time for casual sightseeing." Ouspanaya regarded him stiffly. "Why do you stare at me like that, Sam?"

"Why did you bring me along on this trip?"

"To convince you about Tanya. I told them there were easier ways, but it was decided that this is best."

"What's to stop me from slugging you and taking command here?" Durell asked.

Ouspanaya laughed. "It would be suicide. Would you know how to survive, what to do?"

"No." Durell was stubborn. "But I don't believe any of this is really happening."

"Pinch yourself. It is real enough."

Time moved in sudden starts and stops. He wondered if there was a drug in the food Ouspanaya rationed out to him. But the Russian ate from the same tubes, drank the same water. Sometimes it seemed as if he had slept far less than the chronometer indicated. At other times, after staring for what seemed a day in hypnotic fascination at the view outside—it changed slowly, growing shadows as inky as night, which moved inexorably down the volcano's sides and slid along the boulders that strewed the plain—at such times he checked the chronometer and found that only minutes had passed. He could not understand himself. Nothing felt right. Once, a mad cunning possessed him and he studied the air-lock on the tiny dome—it seemed to get smaller as the "days" passed—and wondered if he could open it with a sudden rush that would take Ouspanaya by surprise. The more he thought about it, the more attractive it seemed. He had to get out of the dome. He had to step out onto that sterile, hostile plain that reached to the inky horizon. It was important. He did not know why it was important, but he had to quit the endless, mindless chores Ouspanaya gave him, the eternal chatter of the earth-to-moon radio, the drone of the computers. They collected specimens of soil, samples of rock, with long metal tongs, shovels, snippers, and tweezers extruded from the dome. They observed the stars, studied the earth, measured the light intensity on various planes of the surface, measured the shadows that crept toward them, mapped, charted, drew plots and diagrams, took

endless photographs, analyzed surface dust, ate, drank, and slept.

He had to get out.

It did not occur to him that it would be suicide to open the air-lock, despite Ouspanaya's warning. He waited until Ouspanaya might be off-guard, madness in him, a lunatic gift from Luna herself. At last he decided to do it.

But the moment he jumped for the controls, Ouspanaya looked up and gave a great shout. "No, Sam!"

He had his fingers on the lugs that fastened the metal frame to the plastic dome. Ouspanaya threw something at him, shouted again, and then there was a hissing, a sudden tingling in his nostrils and throat, a searing pain in his lungs. He seemed to go blind. Everything faded away, rushing from him in a choking nothingness.

With the last of his strength, he opened the air-lock and fell through it.

When he opened his eyes, he knew he had traveled far and fast. Sunlight blinded him. He ached as if he had been bruised without mercy. He was aware of hard earth under him, of a familiar, fetid odor that clogged his nostrils. He turned his head slowly to keep the burning sun from his eyes. It shone high above, visible through a circle like the end of a huge telescope. At first he thought he was still with Ouspanaya, perhaps in the spacecraft. Then he knew this could not be. There was sand under him and sand between his teeth, a coagulated blood on his gums. He was bathed in sweat.

And he was naked.

His hand explored his chest, belly, legs. After a long time, listening to the erratic thump of his heart, hating the raw thirst in him, he raised himself to one elbow.

He knew the place at once.

He was in the pit, at Har-Buri's place in the desert of Dasht-i-Kavir.

The tiger cub stared at him from where it sprawled, panting in the heat, in the shade of its cave entrance.

Tanya sat opposite him, her eyes as steadily fixed as the tiger's, watching. It was as if nothing had changed from that moment so many days—or was it weeks ago?—when he first found her in this place. Everything had come full circle again, except for one thing.

He spoke to the girl with an effort.

"MynameisSamDurellandI'vebeenonthemoon," he said.

Chapter Fifteen

SHE tossed her head, and her pale hair swung like a lazy fall of honey about her sun-browned oval face. Only the tilt of her eyes betrayed her mother's Oriental ancestry. She regarded him with scientific detachment. This time she wore a ragged-edged pair of shorts, a halter bra, leather sandals. Incongruously enough, she had adorned herself with the jewels he had glimpsed during his previous visit here, from the chests far back in the tiger's cave. Heavy strands of gold and bangles hung about her neck, and there were heavy bracelets on her arms and rings on her fingers. She looked like a child who had raided a costume-jewelry shop and loaded herself without discrimination.

"Come here," she said in Russian. "Sit by me. You must get out of the sun, or it will kill you."

"How long have I been here?"

She smiled. She did not part her lips when she did so. It was a stretching of the mouth, a dimpling of chin. "Since you got back from the moon," she then said.

"Oh."

"Do you know this place?"

"I remember it."

"You did not kill the tiger."

"So I see."

He looked at the beast. Its great green eyes were baleful, unwinking. The long tongue came out in a yawn and the cub licked his chops. It lay in a favored spot where a faint current of air moved the thick fur on its neck. That would be from the entrance far back on the other side of the mountain, the gateway by which he had rescued Tanya long ago. Durell drew a sighing breath. The sun, shining down through the mouth of the pit above him, was like a great weight upon his sprawled body. He didn't think he could move. Tanya called him again, warning of the sun, and he rolled over on his stomach and pushed himself up with his arms and crawled across the sand toward her. She moved slightly, to make room for him in the tiny arc of shade she possessed.

"Are you hungry?" she asked.

"Yes. Thirsty, too."

"Mahmoud will be here before sundown."

"Good old Mahmoud."

"He is careful now, how he feeds the animals in his zoo."

"Who is he, anyway?"

"A servant of Har-Buri's, I suppose."

"Have you seen your father? Do you know that he's here, somewhere, too?"

"I have not seen him," Tanya said.

The effort to talk, even to think of questions, was too great. He rested, conscious of his aches and pains, of the strange dullness in his body and his mind. He wondered what kind of drugs had been used on him. The whole process of what he had endured was neither magical nor miraculous. He told himself there had to be logical explanations for everything.

"Do not move," Tanya said quietly. "Let the tiger smell you."

The big cub stood, stretched, and came padding toward them across the pit, his powerful head swinging low, his glowing eyes suspicious. He smelled even worse than before. He stood over Durell for a long minute, so close that he could count each whisker on the great muzzle. Durell looked around the pit for a weapon. But there was nothing, not even a stone or pebble. The animal grunted, swung his massive head to regard Tanya, and then padded back to his lair.

"You learn quickly," Tanya said wryly.

"A question of Pavlov's dog?"

"Something like that."

"But you're too valuable to be put in danger like this," Durell said. "Why do they treat you this way?"

"I think it is to teach me to cooperate."

"Is Har-Buri so desperate for you to talk?"

"He wants me to cooperate," she said again.

"At the risk of your life, here with this beast?"

"I have survived," she said simply. "I think the danger would always be averted at the last moment."

He pointed to the top of the pit. "What's up there?"

"I don't know. I've never been up there."

"How did they get you back?"

"Ah, you are so curious. You must be very strong, in body and mind." She studied his physique clinically. And then she gave him her close-mouthed smile again. There was nothing friendly in it. "I did the best I could. I know you followed me, when I hid in the Farsi's truck. It had guns in it. Then I got out at an oasis village and stole a nomad woman's clothes and was taken by a Kurdish caravan to the north. I knew you and the others were chasing me. I thought I was safe, for a time. But yesterday, they sold me. As a slave. In a socialist society, such primitive savagery would be unthinkable. They sold me back to Har-Buri—and here I am. It was all quite a useless effort, as you see. But my father will come for me. I am sure the Soviet embassy will find me and rescue me."

"You don't want to go to Peking?"

She shook her head. "No. They are our enemies."

"Including your mother, Madame Hung?"

She gave a small shudder, despite the heat. "I would rather die than return to her."

"You seem different," he said, after a moment.

"How do you mean?"

"Quite calm and rational."

"Was I not that way before?"

"You seemed to be out of your mind, actually."

"Because I insisted I had been on the moon?"

"Yes."

"But now you, too, know the truth."

"*My name is Sam Durell and I have been on the moon,*" he said.

Tanya smiled. "Ah, that's very good."

She did not speak to him anymore. The heat drained their energy until it took all their strength simply to breathe and exist. He lay with his back to the curved wall of the pit and regarded the slice of dazzling sunlight that cut arcs of black shadow on the circular floor of the pit. He could remember nothing of what had happened after his struggle with Ouspanaya in the moon dome. He was pleased with this, because it confirmed what he thought of it. But it left a curious vacuum within him, as if something had been stolen from his essence and he was not complete anymore. He mourned this more than anything else. When he tried to think rationally of the space flight, the moon dome, and all of it, he felt a peculiar lethargy, a desire to accept it without question. He made several efforts to restore to his memory the images that must be there, striving for detail, item by item, of equipment and technique. He wished Tanya would compare notes with him, but she had removed herself from him, even though she sat close by him in the shade at the bottom of the pit. In every gesture and posture, she let him know she still regarded him as an enemy.

He thought of Lotus, the little Chinese handmaiden to Madame Hung. Quite a difference, there. Had she

managed to find Hannigan? That diplomatic party at Ramsur Sepah's villa was a long way in the past. He tried to estimate how much time had actually gone by since then. At least a week, he decided. More likely two. Hannigan should have found him by now. But then he had a thought that turned him cold. How could Hannigan have found him, if he'd been on the moon?

Toward evening, when he thought he could endure his thirst no more, the tiger came out of the cave and paced restlessly in a circle around the walls of the pit. Tanya, who had been asleep, also awoke and began to move about. They were conditioned to a fine point, Durell thought. At this moment, watching the handsome girl and the satiny tiger, he felt there was little difference in their behavior.

"Tanya," he said.

She looked at him reluctantly. "Yes?"

"Who brought me here?"

"Mahmoud, of course."

"How did he manage it?"

"I don't understand."

"Did he carry me through the cave? Or did he lower me from the top of the pit?"

She hesitated. "Through the cave."

"That's good," he said.

"But the animal will not let you in there."

Durell regarded the pacing tiger. "Thank you."

"It is almost time to eat," Tanya said.

"So I notice. Is Mahmoud late?"

"No. I—the tiger and I—we're only impatient."

When the shadow of the setting sun was halfway up the curved wall, a head appeared over the top edge. The tiger growled. The girl stopped and sat down dutifully to one side. Durell did not move. The head up there did not move, either. All he could see was the circle of darkening sky and the round, rag-swaddled head peering down at him.

Then there came a giggling laugh.

"Hey, Amerikani."

"Hello, Mahmoud."

"Are you hungry?"

"A bit."

"You want some water, too?"

"That would be very hospitable."

"Ho ho. Very funny Amerikani. So polite."

"Feed us or fake out," Durell said.

"Ah, you are of strong morale, eh?"

"And tell Ramsur Sepah I want to see him."

"Hey?"

"Har-Buri, then."

"In good time, in good time."

"I will tell him all he wants to know."

"He knows all, he is next to Allah, he is godly and beneficent. But you would not understand."

"Just tell him."

"Ho ho."

Durell watched to see how Mahmoud would lower the food and water. The tiger growled, pacing faster now. It was no time to annoy him. He judged the depth of the pit, or cistern, to be at least forty feet. Now that the blazing sunlight was gone, he could see that it had been cunningly made by ancient artisans, built of curved and fitted blocks of sandstone worn smooth by time. There came the clatter of a chain, and then a bucket came down, lowered hand over hand by Mahmoud. The tiger stopped in the middle of the pit and looked up, eyes blazing. The chain was solid and substantial. Durell did not expect that he could jump for it, as Tanya had taken the rope on their first escape. But it seemed as if Mahmoud had not learned his lesson. The bucket came lower, swinging erratically. Now and then it struck the sides of the cistern and the soft stone crumbled a bit, letting down a small shower of sand and dust to the bottom. Durell tried to show no interest. He had only his hands, and no hope of a tool. . . .

Suddenly he saw all the tools he needed as Tanya stood up. He began to relax, then.

At a height of ten feet above the pit floor, Mahmoud suddenly yanked his chain and the bucket tipped and spilled the food without ceremony to the sand. The tiger moved to it, rumbling, and began to eat the lumps of meat there. The bucket rose swiftly. There came a long pause. Tanya stood, dazzling in her ropes of pearls, jewels, and bangles. Presently Mahmoud's hands appeared again, and two small goatskin bags came hurtling down. They landed with a thud near the tiger, who seemed used to the process, and did not pause in his feeding.

"That is for us," Tanya said. "Water in one bag. Meat and meal in the other."

"After you," Durell said.

The tiger went off, dragging his gray meat with him, looking back at Durell for a challenging moment before he disappeared into the cave. Durell watched the girl open the leather bags and arrange two bowls in them and pour a kind of gruel equally into each. The smaller bag contained water, brackish and warm. He drank sparingly, washing out his mouth, and swallowed in small amounts.

"How long have I been here, Tanya?" he asked.

She did not look at him. "I don't know. I was asleep. When I awoke, you were here."

"This morning?"

"I think it was yesterday."

"Was I feverish, or babbling?"

She shook her head. Her thick hair swung and caught on the necklaces she wore, and she untangled it impatiently, concentrating too much attention on this detail, he thought. "You said what you said. You, too, have been on the moon."

"Did you see your father, Tanya?"

"No."

"But he *is* here, you know."

"How can you be so sure?"

"He's a prisoner, too. We were together for a long time." He scrubbed knuckles across his beard and tried to estimate how long it had been since he had shaved. Maybe two weeks. "Don't you want to help your father? Don't you want to get out of here?"

"It is hopeless."

"It's never hopeless."

"Ah, you optimistic Americans."

"What does the tiger do after he eats?"

"He sleeps, just as we shall sleep."

"In the cave?"

"Yes, he stays in the cave."

"Good," Durell said. "Let me have one of those bracelets on your arm."

She drew back quickly, like a miserly child. "No, I like them. They amuse me."

"They're the only excuse for tools that we have, Tanya. You've had scientific training. You know how to tackle problems logically. Now use the sense you were born with, and help me."

She clutched her necklaces with tight hands under her chin. "How can we escape?"

"This pit we're in was once a cistern, in ancient times. The nomads of the desert often use them to live in, and some are interconnected underground. There may be another opening, back in the caves, that could prove a way out."

"That's only a guess," she said.

"It's all I've got."

"Why do you want my jewels?"

"To help dig and scratch. These walls are soft stone. We might scrape away enough to dislodge one or two of the blocks. It can't be done with our fingernails."

Her chin came up. "You need not sound so patient with me. I am not a fool. I can be as rational as you."

"Then try. Can you befriend the tiger?"

"No, I—I stay away from him."

"Well, I'll make him my buddy."

"He'll kill you."

"We're dead if we stay here, anyway," Durell said.

The animal sprawled across the cave entrance, blocking the way into the interior. He had finished his raw meat, and lay with his great head on one paw, watching Durell. Durell began to walk around the pit casually, studying the walls. He took a bowl and filled it with water and moved toward the cat. Instantly, the beast lifted its head and growled. Durell spoke soothingly to it, put down the water, and retreated. The cat watched him with glowing eyes, then got up and drank noisily.

"Now give me your necklaces," he said. Tanya unhooked them, and he added, "Try to fasten them to make the longest length you can. Choose the strongest. Add your bracelets, anything at all."

"I've never had jewelry before," she said oddly.

"They belong to Ali Baba, not you," he told her.

The sun went down while he worked closer to the cat. Finally he was able to sit not more than four feet away from it. Before the darkness of night filled the pit, he could see beyond the beast into the tunnel. The gateway by which he had entered and escaped last time would be securely guarded now. But he remembered the small side caves and tunnels, only glimpsed in his previous flight. His optimism was not as high as he pretended to Tanya. But it was all he had.

Dusk filled the pit like a rising tide in a pool. Tanya said, "Here is the rope I made," and handed him a three-foot length of jeweled chain. He tested it, and doubted if the linked bracelets and necklaces would hold his weight. The gold was soft, the wires thin. But they might serve the purpose. He spoke to the cat quietly. Its tail twitched and thumped heavily on the hard sand. He took more water from the goatskin bag and filled the bowl again, and this time placed the bowl on the opposite side of the pit. The tiger did not stir. It didn't seem thirsty anymore. Durell felt the growing chill of approaching night, aware of his

nakedness and of a hundred aches and bruises in his body.

"He will not let us go by," Tanya said.

"You give up too easily."

"I have been through too much, and I am tired."

"I've been to the same places as you," he said, and grinned. "But you don't want to discuss that, do you? Do you know what really happened to you, Tanya?"

"I think so."

"But you don't trust me to talk about it?"

"You are an American spy. I cannot trust you."

He had never met a more adamant, suspicious woman, he thought. He started to turn from her, and suddenly the tiger got up from the cave entrance and crossed the pit and drank again from the bowl he had put on the other side.

"Move quietly, but quickly," Durell said.

He took Tanya's hand and crossed the place where the tiger had sprawled, and entered the cave. Tanya shivered. He pulled her after him. The smell of the cat's lair was overpowering. The tiger growled and immediately bounded after them.

"Stop," Durell said to Tanya.

The gloom and the fetid smell cloaked them. Durell felt defenseless in his nakedness. He did not move except to make the jewelry chain swing back and forth from his fingers. The cat's eyes followed the movement, and he paused. They had stepped over his usual resting place, and now the tiger stood between them and the pit. A rumbling came from his throat. Tanya drew a shuddering breath.

"He will spring at us."

"No."

"He has been trained as a kind of watchdog—?"

"But he's gotten accustomed to us. He's used to being close to us." The cat suddenly sank down on its belly, head on the sand, watching them. Durell relaxed a bit. "It's all right now."

"C-can we move?" Tanya whispered.

"Nothing to do but try."

They stepped backward into the dark cave. The tiger grumbled once more, licked its chops, yawned, and remained where he was. So much, Durell thought, for animal-conditioning.

He considered Tanya as he thought it.

Chapter Sixteen

DURELL wished he had Aladdin's lamp. Ahead, the evening light failed to penetrate the gloom of the cave. The cave was a natural one, hollowed out by ages of dripping water that had helped make their prison cistern useful to ancient man. There was no sound except the soft slide of their feet as they edged into the tunnel. There was a curve to the right, then a length of about forty feet to the iron gateway by which he had entered before. When he passed the curve, he saw a glimmer of evening dusk through the bars.

"Open sesame," he whispered wryly.

But he had no magical powers. He approached the gate with care, expecting a guard there. But new bolts and padlocks secured the old barrier tightly. He stood for a moment, breathing cool desert air that swept in from the tiny valley beyond. It seemed a long time since he had come here to Iskander's Garden to get Tanya out the first time. He didn't think it would be as easy or lucky as then.

"You see, it is hopeless," Tanya whispered. "We got past the cat, but to what purpose?"

"Maybe just to find a pair of pants for myself."

For the first time, her smile was genuine. He turned away from the gate barrier and rounded the curve until he could see the cat again at the opposite end. At this

point, the side chambers were just visible. The first to his left contained the chests of jewels and clothing. Probably, Durell thought, this was Har-Buri's political treasury for rebellion, the scrapings and donations of a thousand sympathizers who had been cajoled and browbeaten into giving up their pitiful items of value. But he wondered why Har-Buri had chosen to keep it all down here, in this prison pit. Perhaps it was the best place to hide it from the greed of his lieutenants. Thieves were always ready to fall out, he thought, for a quick and easy profit.

The chests were of solid wood, with iron straps on the lids. He ignored the jewelry that Tanya hadn't used and turned to the clothing. There were embroidered, silken women's robes, which he ignored with a grin at Tanya. In another, however, he found real treasure. He chose a shirt and trousers that fitted reasonably well, and felt much more secure beside Tanya. He wished he could find an arsenal of weapons, but that was too much to hope for. There was none.

"Why are these uniforms stored here?" Tanya asked.

Durell pinned on a colonel's pips. "Har-Buri's real name is Ramsur Sepah. He's planning a military coup. He'll dress his stooges as Army officers, infiltrate them into Teheran, and take command of strongpoints before anyone suspects the officers are phony."

"But where would he get arms, then?"

"From Ta-Po and Madame Hung."

"Yes. It forms a logical pattern."

"You fit into it, too. When you were first heard of, wandering around and announcing your identity, Har-Buri figured you could bring a high price from Ta-Po in the form of military and revolutionary aid. That's why he wanted you so badly. That's why he kept you here."

"But I am of no real value to the Chinese."

In the darkness, he tried to read the puzzled look on her face. She bit her lips. He said, "We both know that,

and your father knows it, too. But no one else seems to know it." He paused. "You're coming out of it, aren't you?"

"My mind is filled with conflicting memories," she admitted. "I wonder why the experience did not affect you for as long as it did me?"

"Because I guessed the truth before it began. Come along. We have work to do, and only tonight to do it."

"Durell—"

He halted, turned back to her. Her pale hair gathered what little light was left in the cave and shone about her lovely face.

"Durell, I need help . . ."

"I know you do."

"Only my father can help me."

"And he's here. We'll find him."

He was not as optimistic as he pretended. There was no way out of the cave containing the chests of uniforms and jewels. He returned to the main corridor. At once, the waiting tiger growled and walked toward them from the cave mouth. Durell ignored the beast. It stood rumbling, tail stiff and twitching. Then it decided there was no harm in what its fellow-prisoners were doing, and went back to its accustomed place.

The second cave was rougher, empty and dark. Durell felt along the floor and found a small stone and tossed it up against the invisible wall. He could not see a ceiling. The stone went far up, hit the wall, and bounced down again, dislodging a small shower of sandy gravel.

"We're in another cistern," he said.

"But the top is sealed."

"All we have to do is get up there. Have you explored this place?"

"No. I was afraid of the cat."

He felt along the sides of this cave with painstaking care. Very little light penetrated here, and it faded before he was halfway around. The walls were circular, smaller in diameter than the big pit where he had

awakened. The sandstone was soft and crumbly under his fingertips, and when he used the chain of hard jewels against it, he found he could scratch it away fairly easily. But he did not come to what he wanted until he had almost completed the first circumference. Then his groping fingers found a deep irregularity, a kind of recess in the wall. He made a soft sound of satisfaction.

"What is it?" Tanya whispered.

"What I hoped for. Steps, I think. The nomads either used ladders or the old steps the ancients cut to get down to where the water-level might be. The women came down to fill their pitchers and water jars."

"But there are no steps—"

"They've been walled up, down here. But if we can remove some of these blocks . . ."

She became all efficiency and cool mechanical ability, once she understood the task. He divided the jewels with her, and they set to work in the darkness, using only their sense of touch, to enlarge the small cavity he had found. He worked first at the joints between the stones, and the old mortar crumbled out easily. But when he had removed as much as he could from the first block, he could not budge it. He knelt on the sandy floor and pushed and pulled and twisted. Tanya tried to help. Nothing happened. He couldn't pull the stone free. He began to sweat, and he heard the tiger getting restless in the corridor outside. It was full night now. He fell back, panting, for another effort.

"Wait," Tanya said. "We must remove or loosen the block above first."

"I don't see how."

"The chest of uniforms. It had iron straps. If we could break one off and use it as a lever . . ."

It took a precious hour, and a dangerous hour because of the prowling cat, before he succeeded in wrenching the lid of the chest apart. The splintering of wood seemed abnormally loud over their labored breathing. He used his weight to snap the small boards

free of the bolted iron strap-hinge, and then he returned to where Tanya had continued to labor at the wall, scraping diligently at the joints. In a few moments, by touch alone, he wedged the small strap of leather between the blocks and heaved. There came a distant grinding sound, higher up in the wall. Sand and pebbles showered down upon them. Tanya groaned.

"We will raise an alarm."

"Can't be helped."

He gave another heave, and the first and most difficult block of stone came free of the wall. Quickly, he shoved it toward the cave entrance, intending to build a kind of barricade with them. Then he returned to help Tanya clear away the debris.

"You were right," she whispered. "It feels like a step."

They lost all track of time as they labored, after that. Some of the stones came away easily, loosened by age-long water erosion. Others were stubborn and deadly. Their hands began to bleed as they struggled against the adamant objects. But they made progress, step by step. The old stone stairway curved with the walls of the cistern, rising steadily. As they worked their way up, the stones became easier to dislodge. Fortunately, none was too heavy to manage, although twice a block slipped from his grip and thudded down into the darkness below. He tried to get Tanya to rest at times, but she refused. She was obsessed with the need to escape now, once she accepted his reasoning behind the effort. He did not mention the problems that waited for them when they got to the top. There was a stone or wooden cap above that might prove impossible to remove. And even if they got that open, they might find—anything.

He did not know how many hours of the night passed before he could reach up and touch the "ceiling" of the cistern. For the first few groping moments, his heart sank. He touched only smooth stone. When he pressed up with all his strength, nothing happened.

He had to remove one more pile of rubble on the next curved step before he could stretch farther.

He touched a wooden plank.

The steps they had uncovered were too narrow to permit Tanya to work beside him. He judged they had climbed over twenty feet above the bottom of the cave. A slip and a fall now could end everything. His perch was precarious as he stretched again for the plank. Yes, there were several of them, bound by a cross-beam that felt dry and brittle. He could not judge how big the lid was, or how heavy.

"We'll rest a bit," he whispered to Tanya.

She sank down on the step below and leaned her head against his knee. It was the first sign of weakness she had allowed herself. He felt his muscles tremble with fatigue. He wished he could see her, but the darkness was complete, even though they touched one another. When she spoke, her voice was tight, as if it took all her effort to keep from sobbing.

"I am so tired, Durell."

"You've been wonderful," he said, and he touched her long, silken hair.

"No, I have been a cold, inhuman bitch. Perhaps I deserve this whole nightmare that has happened to me. And yet, why did my father, and all the others, do this to me, Durell? All the drills and tests and exercises, to get to the moon. It was so hard, so hard! I told myself I was a scientist, and could not afford to be a woman. But I—I want to be a woman, Durell. But now it is too late for me."

"Let's not give up now," he said gently.

"To what purpose do we struggle? Let them have me. Let them know the truth. Why do you fight on?"

"I don't know. I must, that's all."

"You are not a bad man, for an American."

He laughed softly. "No better or worse than most."

"I want to cry," she said after a moment, "but I cannot. I have never wept, that I can remember. Always, Papa said I must be adult and use my mind to

serve the state. I thought this was the greatest happiness one could achieve. But now the tears come."

"It won't hurt to cry," he said.

She shivered suddenly. "Oh, I feel so cold."

He felt it, too. He had been aware of the cold air current that swept his neck and down his back. Tanya lifted her head from his knee as he suddenly straightened on their precarious perch. He looked down into the black pit. He could not see the floor, but he thought he could see two glowing green emeralds down there, very faint, luminescent, balefully staring up at them. It was the tiger's eyes. He told Tanya to sit still, then crouched on the narrow step and wet his fingers and moved them in the darkness. Yes, there was a cold current of night air coming in. Hope lifted in him again. He took the iron bar and shoved it against the planked cap of the cistern. Nothing happened, for a moment. He used his strength until his body screamed in protest and he almost lost his balance. He paused, rested.

"What is it?" Tanya said, below him.

"I think we can get out."

He tried again. There came a faint creak and a pop as a nail gave way in the dry wood. Cold air suddenly struck his begrimed face. Dust made him cough, then he made a last effort. This time Tanya reached past his shoulders to help with the prize against the planking. There came a long screech and a breaking sound and one of the planks came loose and tumbled down into the darkness where the cat stood, watching them.

At once, he reached out, gained a grip on the edge of the opening, and pulled himself forward and up. His legs swung free over the black emptiness below. A rush of icy air washed over him. His body swung, he gathered himself up, and pulled himself up and over and out of the pit, rolling over twice before he could check himself.

He lay for another moment after that, staring up at the night sky. A crescent moon sailed over him.

Chapter Seventeen

IT TOOK a few moments to regain his strength. He did not move. He watched the sky turn over him. When he turned his head, he saw a grayish pallor on the horizon. It was almost dawn. They had worked all night to clear the ancient steps and get out of the cistern.

A cold wind blew dust over him and mourned among the leaning columns of ancient ruins all about. He turned back to the cistern cap and peered through the hole, lying on his stomach.

"Tanya?" he called softly.

"I am here. But I cannot do as you did. I am not strong enough." Her voice came as if from an infinite depth, although she was only a few feet from him. "It might be best if you leave me. I will wait."

"No. Reach out your arm as far as you can."

Her pale hand appeared in the dark hole. He stretched, could not reach her fingers, stretched again, and locked his hand about her wrist.

"When I pull," he whispered, "let go of the step and swing out."

"I'll fall!" she gasped.

"Use your other hand for a grip on the edge of the wood. Try to make one movement of it. Understand?"

"Let me stay here."

"You can't give up now. Here we go."

He pulled hard at her wrist before her fears took complete command of her. She gave a small cry, and her weight suddenly wrenched at his arms and pulled him partly into the pit again. Then her free hand flailed up and he caught it and hauled back hard. Her

body scraped painfully against the splintery edges of the broken planks. Then her head and shoulders appeared. He pulled back until he was on his knees and she came up and out of the pit and fell on the sand before him, sobbing.

They were free.

But from below came a sudden roar of loud, frustrated fury as the tiger realized they had escaped.

The sound bellowed up in waves that seemed to reverberate against the paling sky. Durell cursed and helped the girl to her feet. She leaned heavily against him, shuddering in the cold wind that swept the mountainside.

They were on a natural terrace above the little valley in the peak's shoulder that he had explored on his first venture here. The terrace formed an area that jutted out above the desert floor like the prow of an enormous ship. It had been smoothed over long ago, and some of the great slabs of flooring stone were still visible through the drifting sand that had tumbled down from the summit above. Here and there, the ruins of temple colonnades leaned against the night sky. The columns were massive, but eroded, their pediments tumbled in great chunks of carved stone that were strewn all about. An alley of columnar bases led Durell to the left, and he drew the girl that way. About fifty yards from where they had climbed from the cave, they came to the circular hole of the first pit in which they had been imprisoned. The girl shuddered and drew back.

"Where are we?" she whispered.

"Iskander's Garden. A palace and fortress built by Alexander, according to legend. But it looks more like the work of the ancient Persians."

"Why has no one discovered it before?"

"Most of the Dasht-i-Kavir has never been surveyed. I suppose in time, and soon enough, they'll map

it aerially and discover this spot. But they haven't yet. It makes an ideal rebel headquarters."

"But I see no one."

"Let's hope we don't, for the time being."

He had kept the iron bar used as a prize for the cistern cap, and he weighed it in his hands tentatively. It was a poor weapon against what he expected to meet. The frustrated roars of the tiger in the caves below sounded muted for a moment, then came up louder than before. The beast had followed them to the first pit, and now paced and ran in circles far below them.

There was a blush of true dawn in the east. The wind blew cold, mourning about the ruined temples where they stood. In the pale light, Durell saw a footpath that Mahmoud must have beaten on his regular rounds to feed and water the tiger and themselves. The trail dipped out of sight behind the ruin of a low wall. In the dawning light, he surveyed the soaring cliff that rose from the widest base of the triangular terrace on which they stood. Tanya took his hand. Her fingers felt cold.

"How can we climb down from here?"

"We can't. Not yet, anyway."

He led her along the path that twisted away from the pit. The tiger's roars followed, growing dimmer. The beast sounded lonely. Where the trail went around the end of the wall, Durell halted.

An ancient gateway had been cut into the rock face of the cliff, adorned with winged bulls whose outlines had been softened by wind erosion through the ages. It could have been a tomb, once, when there was a way up to this plateau. Perhaps it had been through the valley and gate into the caves he had entered before. But it did not seem to be enough, if this mountain had been a fortress supporting thousands of men-at-arms, priests, captains, and nobles.

He was about to step from behind the sheltering wall when he heard dragging footsteps come up the path from the cliff gate. He warned Tanya back with a

wave of his hand. It was only one man. There came a mumbling of Farsi, a protest against the chilly dawn. A moment later, a man came into sight around the ruins, heading for the pit.

"Mahmoud!" Durell called softly.

The man paused, startled. He did not see Durell and the girl, at first. His head turned this way and that. He wore a whitish shirt and old trousers and a pair of fine military boots. Durell liked the boots. He was still bare-footed, and except for the boots, he had the complete costume he needed. Mahmoud would have to provide the rest, he decided.

"Mahmoud!" Durell called again.

And then he hit him.

The man went over backward and then tried to scramble away like a wriggling snake. Durell jumped for him, saw the open mouth and snaggle-toothed grimace, spitting and ready to screech an alarm. He took the iron bar and jammed it across Mahmoud's throat and pressed hard on it, not with all his weight, because he wanted Mahmoud to talk; but the pressure was enough to make Mahmoud leap in convulsion. For a moment, he almost escaped. Then Durell returned his weight to the bar and flattened on top of the writhing body. The man's breath wheezed and rasped, and he began to retch. Durell let up a bit.

"Do you want to die?" he whispered.

The man's eyes bulged, pleading.

"Then be silent," Durell said.

He eased up a bit more. Mahmoud sucked in a great lungful of air. He smelled of sweat, rancid fat, and onions. He had a thin, scarred face with flaring nostrils.

"How did you—escape again?" the man gasped.

Durell's command of the language was just good enough to make himself understood. "Allah helps those who fight for justice. Where are the soldiers?"

"Soldiers?"

"There are troops and arms and trucks here, ready for the revolution."

Mahmoud sighed. "Yes."

"Where are they?"

"Inside the mountain."

"Through that gate?"

"Yes."

"And Har-Buri?"

"I do not know."

"Are the Chinese here? Ta-Po and his woman?"

"I do not know."

"And the Russian professor?"

"I do not—"

Durell put the bar across Mahmoud's throat again. The dawn light was brighter now, touched at the eastern horizon with flaming color. In the sky, a vulture began to float in circles high above the mountaintop.

"I hate to send you to Paradise in such ignorance," Durell said quietly. "You have only one more chance to speak the truth."

He pressed down again on the man's throat. Mahmoud made only one more effort to resist. His body flung this way and that, his arms flapping in the cold morning air. His legs spasmed. Tanya made a murmuring sound, but Durell did not relent. When Mahmoud's eyes bulged and his tongue protruded, he let up briefly. Mahmoud seemed unable to breathe, clawing at his throat. Durell drew back a bit and waited.

"General—Har-Buri—will execute me," the man gasped.

"So he's a general now?"

"He leads the National Freedom Army—"

"He is here?"

"Yes."

"That's better. And the others?"

"Yes, yes!"

"Tell me the way."

Mahmoud made a spitting sound. He could recover quickly. "They will slice you into little pieces and feed you to the vultures. Both of you. There is no way, for you."

"Yes, there is. Take off your boots, Mahmoud. I need them. Then get up."

Mahmoud did as he was told, and Durell squeezed his bare feet into the military boots with some misgivings. When Mahmoud struggled to his feet, Durell shoved him toward the gateway. "Lead on. If we're stopped or challenged, I am Colonel Awazi, sent by General Har-Buri to bring the girl to him."

Mahmoud's face wrinkled with terror. "But that will not be accepted! They will know it is a trick!"

"That's up to you. If you're not convincing, we're all dead. You had better try very hard, Mahmoud."

Durell patted the man's filthy clothing for weapons, and found a long-bladed knife. The sun was up now, red and baleful on the desert horizon. The wind died. Long morning shadows were cast by the columns that stood on the plateau. The vulture in the sky was joined by several others.

The gateway in the cliff proved bigger than Durell had thought, as they approached. New iron doors had been fitted into the massive masonry. A single exit door stood open. Durell gave Mahmoud a cautionary warning as they drew near, and the man licked his lips and nodded his scabby head.

They stepped into a great, vaulted chamber, illuminated by crude strings of electric lights dangling from improvised wiring in the stone ceiling. Whatever archeological treasures may have once been here had long been removed. The place was a barracks, filled with soldiers.

Mahmoud halted, and Durell and Tanya flanked him. Durell kept the point of the knife hidden, pricking Mahmoud's left kidney. Most of the soldiers were asleep on tiers of bunks built against the rock walls. They wore uniforms, and against the wall were racks of rifles, anti-tank rocket launchers, machine guns, and mortars. A man with big sergeant's stripes on his short shirtsleeves yawned sleepily at a desk at the far end of the big room.

"Keep going," Durell murmured in Farsi.

"I—I am afraid."

"Walk!"

They crossed the room under the curious gaze of those soldiers who were awake in their bunks. The sergeant scrubbed his eyes, rubbed flattened hands over his mouth, and gave Durell's colonel's pips a sloppy salute. His interest was centered on Tanya.

"Good morning, Colonel. . . . Mahmoud, you idiot, what are you doing with the woman?"

"G-general Har-Buri sent for her, Sergeant."

Durell said easily: "I am Colonel Awazi, Sergeant, of the Egyptian Army, in liaison with the general."

"The girl is dangerous. She should have a guard."

Durell hoped he had explained his accent. He smiled. "Where could she go? Off the cliff?"

The sergeant laughed. He had bad teeth. "I hear she was a prisoner, with an American spy. Both of them are spies."

"Times have changed, Sergeant," Durell said easily. "It makes things difficult in our part of the world. Not so easy to play one off against the other, eh? But the general is impatient to see us. There must be no delay."

"I don't know. I haven't seen you before, Colonel." The sergeant picked a pistol off his desk and handled it with apparent carelessness. "What is the matter with Mahmoud? Granted, he is nothing but an idiot dog we found here, but he shakes like a frightened cur."

For a moment, Durell thought that Mahmoud would blow everything. He nudged the point of his hidden knife against the man's kidneys. Mahmoud jumped slightly.

"It is nothing, sir," Mahmoud said hastily. "I had a bad night. The general is in an evil mood, and he frightens me."

"But we move out tonight. An evil humor is not a good sign."

"He is anxious to talk to this girl, Sergeant."

"Very well," the soldier said abruptly. "Go ahead."

Mahmoud hurried forward out of the barracks room, with Durell and Tanya following close behind. The sergeant yawned and settled back in his chair. But it was plain that Mahmoud had used the last of his resources to get by the sergeant. Cowardice claimed his last strength. Beyond the barracks room was a long, tunneled corridor that sloped into the heart of the mountain. Once it had been part of ancient fortifications, or tombs; but modern machinery had secretly drilled and widened the honeycombed mountain, and the walls were now reinforced with concrete, and lit by more strings of electric bulbs that drew their power source from a generator deep in the bowels of the rock. Ten steps into the tunnel, and Mahmoud clutched at his chest and gagged and leaned against the wall. His color was gray, and his breathing ragged.

"I cannot go—go on."

"You must," Durell said adamantly.

"You can kill me here. Cut my throat. Thrust into my heart. No matter. I cannot go on."

"You were brave enough when you guarded the pit."

"I did only what I was told," Mahmoud gasped.

"All right. How do we get to the general?"

"Down this tunnel. Up the steps. His private apartment. Headquarters. Many maps. Many officers there."

A small door stood partly open down the shaft. Durell shoved Mahmoud ahead and opened the door to reveal a treasure-trove. It was an arms locker. Neatly stacked on shelves and in crates were grenades, machine pistols, a few heavy machine guns. He pushed Mahmoud inside, took rope from the crates, and swiftly bound and gagged the terrified man. Then he chose two grenades and a machine pistol and offered another gun to Tanya. She shook her head.

"No, I will kill no one."

"They will tear us to pieces, if we're caught."

"To escape quietly is acceptable. To shoot and kill and bomb is not for me."

She had changed back to her cool, detached self. Durell swore softly. Her long, pale hair fell around her face. In her ragged shorts, she showed lovely legs, a fine figure. She was a walking invitation to any irresponsible officer they met.

He did not like to abandon Mahmoud, but they might be better off without him now. He shoved the two grenades inside his shirt and closed and bolted the arms-locker door. The last he saw of Mahmoud was the man's gleaming, ratty eyes. He wondered if it was triumph and malicious humor that shone there. He couldn't be sure. But in a few moments, it wouldn't matter.

"Let's go," he told Tanya.

"But where are we going?"

"First, to find your father."

"You still insist he is in this place?"

"I'm sure of it."

"A prisoner, like ourselves?"

"Yes."

"Give me one of your grenades, then."

They moved on down the tunnel toward the stairs Mahmoud had described. Daylight shone ahead. Two soldiers clattered down the iron steps, which rose in a spiral up through the mountain rock. They saluted Durell's colonel insignia and stared at Tanya with open curiosity. One looked as if he were about to challenge them, but the other tugged at his arm and they trotted off toward the barracks room.

"Rank hath its privileges," Durell murmured. "Even if it's stolen."

The daylight came from an irregular gash in the rock wall, opening onto a cunningly concealed viewpoint like a balcony built into the mountainside. Heat and light struck at them from the morning sun that blazed over the desert, spread below them like the panorama of a map. Far down the slope, under cam-

ouflage nets, was a transport park filled with trucks, jeeps, half-tracks, even three medium tanks. Ramsur Sepah, in his role as General Har-Buri, had planned well. With his troops disguised as regular Iranian Army units, he would be in command of the capital's strongpoints before an alarm was raised. There were even some 88's visible on wheeled mounts down there. Durell lifted his head as he heard the thudding chop of a helicopter. The machine flew high, a glint of metal and bubble canopy, crossing the brazen sky. It did not hover or come down. He watched it until it vanished on the other side of the mountain, and then he touched Tanya's arm.

She did not move. "How can you fight an army, all by yourself?"

"Perhaps we're not as alone as I thought."

She frowned. "It is not scientific, what you try to do. It is against all logic. What can you hope to accomplish, against this garrison?"

"Find your father, for one thing."

"I think we are both going to die, and soon."

"Yes, if we give up now. Somebody will find Mahmoud. It's only a matter of time, and not much of that."

They went back into the mountain. The steps led them up to another level that was not much changed from what it had been in olden times. There was a huge, natural chamber, decorated with mosaics that glinted in anachronistic splendor against a drably modern table and chairs near one wall. Giant maps of Teheran, Isfahan, and other major cities had been posted on the carvings in the rock. Only a few dim lights glowed here. Nobody was in sight. But from somewhere came the jangling of a telephone, quickly answered. The antiquities had been damaged. Some of the faded paintings and columns had been chipped and battered away to fasten electric cables.

Tanya halted in the door. "Wait. I am not sure—my

mind has been confused for so long—but I remember this room.”

“From when?”

“I do not know. Perhaps when I was first brought here. There is an apartment near, and I was treated well, that first day. A man questioned me. Several, I think. They wanted to know about my moon flight. I refused to tell them anything.” She arched her fine brows. “After all, it is a matter of state security for my country.”

“They didn’t like what you told them?”

“I felt they did not believe me.”

Durell briefly described Ramsur Sepah. “Was he one of the men who questioned you?”

“Yes. Yes, I think so.”

“And when you refused them the technical details?”

“They put me in the pit, for punishment. If I persisted in behaving like an animal, he said, I would be treated as one. I was not afraid. He considered me a very valuable property.” She gave her close-mouthed smile again, dimpling her chin. “Even when I saw the tiger in the pit, I was not afraid. I thought this—this Sepah?—would not allow me to come to harm. He simply wanted me to talk about the moon flight, my training, and about—about my father.”

“But you didn’t.”

She touched her forehead. “I was very confused.”

“But you’re not confused now?”

“I think not.”

“Can you remember where that apartment was, where they first imprisoned you?”

“It is this way.”

She walked ahead with sudden assurance, but her face was pale, as if some inner apprehension had taken command of her. From other rooms nearby came more ringing telephones, the murmur of men’s voices. Durell caught snatches of the phrases spoken into the phones. “Company D at 1600 hours, course 280°—Lieutenant Ahwad to report to Colonel Mezhabi with duty list—

Checkpoint Baker no report—Checkpoint Zed, no report—1500 rounds on the double to Major Harran . . .”

The girl walked faster. She turned left from the map room, down a dim corridor, and up a flight of iron stairs that looked newly installed. Durell guessed that some emergency had taken place in the rebel command headquarters. He thought he heard the dim crackle of rifle fire, but he couldn't be sure. At the top of the stairway, the girl paused and bit her lip.

“I am not sure now.”

“Where are we?”

“They took me to a very fine apartment, at first. It must have been General Har-Buri's personal quarters. Down that way.”

There should have been sentries on duty here, Durell thought. He heard booted feet running in a cross-corridor and drew the girl back into a shadowed niche. A squad of men trotted across the intersecting corridor. He smelled cigarette smoke and coffee, and heard the distant crash of a tray of crockery being dropped. Somewhere a bell began to ring with an alarming, brazen note.

“Here. This door,” Tanya said.

It was a wooden door, and it, too, looked freshly installed. It was locked. The rock wall nearby had been newly tunneled, too, or widened from the chambers of the old fortress made two thousand years ago. Durell tried the knob carefully, then stepped back and hit it with controlled strength. It gave way all at once, and he tumbled forward, with Tanya close behind him.

The girl began to scream.

They were back on the moon again.

Chapter Eighteen

IT WAS as if they had fallen through some strange doorway in space, from one world into another. They were in the lunar dome. An eerie effulgence came through the plastic windows of the bubble, reflecting on the familiar computers and technical equipment. Durell sucked in a sharp breath. The shock was too great, the transition too sudden. There was Earth, sailing in pale, blue-green beauty, just above the black horizon of outer space. The jagged lunar peaks and craters, the long familiar plain he had studied so hard when he had been here with Professor Ouspanaya, the harness-chairs, suits, helmets, banks of dials and counters—it was all here, untouched, just as it had been at that moment when, seized by madness, he had broken through the airlock and tumbled back—

To earth.

Tanya screamed again. She stood with her arms rigid at her sides, her eyes wide and showing white all around the pale irises. Durell jumped for the door and pulled it shut, and managed to drop a lock-bar across the broken knob. It might gain them a few seconds against an assault. Then he spun to Tanya's paralyzed figure and clapped a hand over her mouth to shut off another scream. Her face reflected pure agony of mind and soul. Her eyes were blinded by the storms sweeping her mind. She struggled with him. Her body was strong with her madness, and he had a hard time holding her. They reeled across the floor of the lunar bubble, crashed into one of the harness chairs, ricocheted off the bank of computer dials. The control board collapsed with a splintering of flimsy wood and card-

board. Tanya bit him and clawed at the plastic, curved wall of the dome. Her fingernails ripped at it and it came down in a billowing sheet of Pliofilm and lattice-work, entangling them in its folds. They fell out onto what had looked like the surface of the moon. The "horizon" was only twelve feet away.

"Tanya!"

He slapped her hard and she bit at his hand, her eyes utterly wild, and he hit her again, not wanting to knock her out, but desperate to shock her back into control of herself again.

"Tanya, look around you!"

"Let me go!"

"I will. I want to. But please—"

He pinned her to the dusty, pebbly floor outside the shattered dome. She twisted under him, and he kept his hand over her mouth; her nostrils flared and the wildness that showed in her eyes went farther beyond reason.

"Tanya, it was all a fake! Don't you see? Don't you understand?"

She spat at him. He did not know what to do with her. He said quickly, "It's a cardboard moon, a plastic dome, a training device that used hypnotic drugs and a few props to convince you that the program was real. . . ."

He paused. A bell rang loudly somewhere.

"Tanya, they'll come in after us soon."

As she stared up at him then, the lunatic glare slowly faded from her eyes. She began to shiver under him. And then, astonishingly, great tears suddenly welled up and spilled down her cheeks. She went limp under him.

"Do you understand what I just said?"

"Yes . . . it was all false."

"Didn't you suspect it?"

"Lately. The second time, in the pit, before they brought you, I did some thinking. I tried to apply—"

scientific principles to what I could recall—of my experience. You can let me up now.”

“Are you sure?”

“I am all right now. I apologize. It was not rational of me.”

“You couldn’t help it. I was shocked, too.”

“But you were prepared for it?”

“More or less.”

“You suspected this—this stage business, from the start?”

“I thought it *had* to be something like this.”

“Then—then I was never on the moon?”

“Never.”

“Nor you?”

“I was here, in this place, with your father.”

She frowned. “But I couldn’t have been.” She stood up slowly and hugged herself, shivering, and stared at the wreckage caused by their brief struggle. “I was at the Lunar Space Base, in the Turkoman Republic—”

“I know. This is just a hasty replica, thrown up for my benefit, to put me through the same experience and destroy my ability to cope with what I was learning. Also, to demonstrate the whole thing to Har-Buri.”

Her voice hardened. “Then I was used as a laboratory animal? A guinea pig? Heartlessly deceived, driven half mad? To what purpose?”

“To train you for a trip to the moon, originally.”

“But this—this stage set—would fool no one.”

“Not without the hypnotic syringes they pumped into both of us.”

The alarm bell clamored more loudly now through the labyrinth of the mountain fortress. Durell heard the muffled crunch and thud of a mortar shell striking nearby. Dust trickled down from the ceiling where they stood, and even the floor vibrated. Several pieces of lath and plastic slid from the fake control board they had smashed.

Looking at it now, he saw how cleverly, if hastily, the illusion had been created. The whole effect had

been achieved in an area less than a couple of hundred square feet. The cyclorama of the moonscape, as seen from the "lunar dome," was an effective deception in perspective, helped with hidden lights that caused sharp shadow and brilliance on the "set." The dome itself, except for the solid padded chairs, was flimsy and unreal as he stared at it. Tanya walked across the chamber to the horizon wall and touched the blue-green orb painted there to represent earth, which she had thought once was shimmering at a quarter of a million miles away through space.

She turned back with cold anger in her eyes. "But why was I so deceived?"

"I suppose it was necessary. Maybe it was a short cut to train you for a lunar landing. Probably no one, not even your father, who designed this, expected it to have the traumatic effect that it had. Maybe it was the drugs they used on us. You had no idea that it was all a fake?"

"None at all. I was a dedicated worker in the program . . ." Her voice started to rise in anger. She felt humiliated. "I think I can remember more of it, now. I recall I—thought something had gone wrong in the dome. I suppose it was to study my reaction to an alien environment. I—I'm afraid I was the victim of simple panic."

"Not so simple. I did the same, and broke out. But they were ready for me, after their experience with you, and clobbered me and put me in the pit, afterward."

"Yes, it must have been so." She paused. He could have explained it in more detail, but he wanted her to work it out for herself. Tanya walked back to the dome and kicked at its wreckage, and grimaced bitterly. "I truly went out of my mind. I escaped from the base and wandered like a madwoman, going anywhere. I can't remember those details. I ran and hid and lived in the fields, stealing food where I found it. I could not understand anything. I suppose I wandered across the

border that way. Perhaps strangers picked me up, gave me lifts here and there. Somehow, I got to Teheran. And the rest you know."

"Yes."

"Naturally, my government and the space-program managers did not want to release the truth about me to the world press."

"They should have. But security becomes a blind-fold to bureaucrats," Durell said.

"Which made me valuable to others, like Ta-Po and General Har-Buri, who saw me as a commodity to sell to Peking in exchange for aid in this—this rebellion he plans."

"It's started already," Durell said.

"Do you hear gunfire?"

He nodded. "The mountain is under attack."

She said calmly, "And we are trapped here?"

"We'll find a way out, with luck."

"No," Tanya murmured. "I think we are going to die in this place. We'll never get out now."

Chapter Nineteen

DURELL unbolted the door. He did not open it at once, but stood listening for several moments. Boots clattered on the spiral stairway. A guttural command rapped against the rock wall. He dried his hands and picked up the machine pistol and made certain he still had the grenade tucked inside his shirt. He looked at Tanya.

"You still have your grenade?" When she nodded, he said, "I think our best weapon is my colonel's uniform. Walk out ahead of me, as if you're my prisoner. I'll have the gun pointed at you."

"And if we are stopped?"

"We're going to see General Har-Buri."

Another explosion shook dust from the ceiling. It was followed by the muffled whistle and thump of a more distant bomb. Everything went quiet outside the door. Durell opened it. The tunnel and stairs were deserted. He urged Tanya ahead, closed the door behind him, and walked to the steps. There was a smell of dust and explosives in the air.

"Which way was Har-Buri's apartment?" he asked Tanya. "Can you remember?"

"I was taken up, from the map room, the first time."

They climbed the steps quickly. There was a confusion of distant shouts, firing, the jangling of phones in the mountain fortress. A white-eyed lieutenant ran toward them at the top of the stairs. He had a bad gash over one eye and blood covered his face.

"Where is General Har-Buri?" Durell snapped.

The wounded man jerked his weapon backward. "That way, Colonel."

"Good. How big is the assault?"

"Two battalions, and tanks. Some bombers. We've been betrayed, Colonel." The man looked anguished. "In another hour, we would have moved out."

"Then we'd have been caught in the open desert," Durell said. "They can't beat us here."

"We are all dead men, sir." The lieutenant looked at Tanya, then back to Durell. "You have a strange accent."

"I'm liaison, from Cairo," Durell said. "Carry on."

As the lieutenant went down the stairs, the whole mountain shuddered as heavy shells struck its outer bastions. The lights flickered, went out, then came on again. The corridor sloped upward to a glimmer of light from another gallery opening in the rock. Soldiers with machine guns were posted there, and the guns hammered frantically, firing at invisible targets out in the daylight. Acrid smoke drifted back through the tunnel.

"The other way," Tanya murmured.

He would have liked to look out at the desert to see what was happening, but there was no time. A group of officers came down the tunnel, talking angrily. They saluted Durell's uniform and went on. There was another corridor here, where more telephones rang. The smell of cigarette smoke and coffee touched him. They went through an anteroom and found themselves in what looked like a large living room. This would be Har-Buri's private apartment. Durell closed the door, crossed the fine carpet, and opened the next door. A man jumped up, spat a cigarette from his mouth, and started to raise his gun. Durell slammed his machine pistol into the alarmed face, and the guard fell away, arms flailing. Durell jumped over the man to the next door. It was locked. Turning, he saw Tanya kneel beside the unconscious man. She held out a ring of keys.

"You can be very brutal," she whispered.

He didn't bother to reply. The key worked. He edged ahead, and daylight greeted him. It was a small cave chamber, like a prison cell, with a simple cot, a chair, a bucket of water in a corner. The sunlight came from a very narrow slit in the rock.

A man on the cot looked at them with haggard eyes. "Hello, Professor Ouspanaya," Durell said.

Tanya cried out and fell on her knees before the man on the cot. Her words of greeting to her father were half strangled by her sobs. Durell hadn't thought her capable of such emotion. He turned to the sunlit, narrow opening. The glaring sun on the desert far below blinded him for a moment. Explosions mushroomed on the barren plain down there. Through it, he saw the glint of armored cars and tanks deploying around the mountain. As he watched, a shell from the fortress made a direct hit on one of the old Shermans. It blew up with a blast that shook the air and then began to burn with a black, oily smoke. He saw that the tanks were trying to reach the base of the mountain, where the fortress guns would be unable to bear

down on them. He didn't think they'd make it. From what he could see, he judged that this cell was halfway around the mountain face from the little valley that led to the prison pit and the cisterns. It was the only escape route he knew. Any tunnels or elevators to the vehicle park he had seen before would be too crowded with rebel soldiery.

"Durell?"

Ouspanaya stood with his arm around his daughter. Tanya was grave. Her father still was handsome, a big man battered around the edges by recent events, but filled with an angry strength.

"Tanya says you know what they made me do to you. They are devils, efficient and ruthless. I tried to say it could not be done in this place. But they provided equipment and workmen. I could not help myself. They wanted to see how I had managed the lunar training with Tanya. I warned them of the danger, by reminding them of the effects on Tanya's mind. It did not matter to them."

Durell said curiously, "How did they get you?"

"It was Ramsur Sepah. Who could suspect that dignified parliamentarian? He came to the Caspian villa to call on me, a gentlemanly, courteous visit. Even Sergei, my KGB guard, was not suspicious. It was done simply and quickly. They got me to Sepah's car, suddenly forced me in at gunpoint." Ouspanaya paused grimly. "They killed Sergei."

"And they took you here?"

"You were already a prisoner. Before we left the villa, they got my medical kit and drugs—the same used on my poor daughter in our unfortunate attempt to speed up our space program. I had to put you through the same routine. You see, they showed me Tanya in that pit, with the tiger. They made her danger very clear. So I obeyed." The Russian spread his hands helplessly. "Can you understand?"

"You don't have to apologize," Durell said thinly. "All we have to do is to get out of this place."

"But the mountain is under attack. How did the government finally learn of it all?"

Durell went to the cell door. The shocks of shell blasts came more frequently now. He heard an angry quarrel between some officers nearby, and decided to wait a moment and turned back to Ouspanaya.

"It was a long shot, but I backed the right filly. A little Chinese girl who'd been mistreated by Madame Hung. She came over to my side. I gave her instructions to contact my young Iranian friend, Hanookh, and Hannigan, at my embassy. I also told her enough then, so that if she called in Hanookh, he'd know where to find this place. It was all contingent on whether she saw me leave Ramsur Sepah's garden party."

"You suspected Sepah then?"

"No, but it had to be someone in an important government office who backed Har-Buri. I didn't know Sepah and Har-Buri were the same man. But treason was brewing in high places, and Sepah stood high enough to be the big one."

Tanya spoke to her father. "Durell seems like a monster, sometimes, but he is kind, and thoughtful—"

"A real Boy Scout." Durell opened the cell door. "Let's go."

He had no idea how to make their way safely back through the tunnels. But they had to get out quickly. Once the regular Army broke in, there would be no quarter for anyone found here. The fighting would be savage, the killing bloody and indiscriminate.

Durell walked a step or two behind Tanya and her father, as if he were escorting them. He halted a panting, running soldier. "Where is General Har-Buri?"

"Headquarters," the man gasped. "Up there, Colonel. But you better hurry. They've hit the vehicle park."

At the next turn in the tunnel, Tanya said, "Why do we come this way? It is not the way out."

"I have some debts to call," Durell said grimly. "Give me your grenade."

"You're not—"

"Don't worry. I'm not really a monster."

She gave him the weapon reluctantly. It was a Chinese Mark IV, fresh from its crate. Ahead, he could see a lighted anteroom, the corner of a desk, the shadow of a soldier speaking urgently into a phone. A sudden series of shell blasts made the lamp cord jangle and dust boil around them. Durell drew a deep breath, signaled to Tanya and her father to take cover, and pulled the pin on the Mark IV. Tanya gasped. Durell threw the grenade as far down the corridor as he could, then stepped quickly into the anteroom. The soldier at the desk was a major. His gray face was haggard.

Durell pushed Tanya ahead of him and spoke quickly. "The general wants these people, Major."

Suspicion suddenly flooded the rebel's yellowed eyes. He lurched across his desk for a pistol there, and Durell's grenade finally exploded down the corridor. The blast was thunderous. The lights went out as a cable was severed. In the darkness and smoke, the rebel major cursed and ran out to inspect the damage.

Durell pushed quietly into the next room.

It was the darkness that betrayed him. Something struck his head, and a ponderous weight threw him staggering against an invisible wall. Another blow, like a fist on the back of his neck, drove him to his knees. He lost his gun. He thought dimly that, somehow, he had been expected. He heard Tanya gasp, and there was a scuffling struggle, a muffled thud, as if a body had fallen. The darkness was absolute. He did not move for a moment. Someone took a long, slow breath. The distant bursting of shells compressed the air in the tunnels and hurt his eardrums. But he ached all over, anyway. He thought the crackle of small-arms fire was closer now, inside the mountain itself.

His head gradually cleared. He knew his gun had fallen nearby. Very carefully, he extended a hand to find it. Immediately, someone stepped on his fingers with crushing weight.

Then the lights came on dimly, at low voltage.

He looked up at the massive image of Ta-Po.

The fat Chinese smiled benignly. He removed his foot from Durell's hand and toed the machine pistol aside. He had another, his own, pointed at Durell's head. Professor Ouspanaya was sprawled on the floor. The worst of it was Tanya, standing white-faced beside Madame Hung, who held yet another machine pistol at Tanya's head.

"Be very, very careful, Durell," Ta-Po said softly.

"You have my word."

"And—welcome to Iskander's Garden."

"Where the flowers of evil grow," Durell returned.

"Where is your puppet, the self-appointed General Har-Buri?"

"He is directing the defense of this wretched place. Are you the one who betrayed us? How clever of you!"

"Not quite. You know you've lost the game, Ta-Po? Listen to the gunfire. It's coming nearer."

"It was Lotus then." Ta-Po nodded his massive head. "You used the misguided child to inform Teheran of our little rebellion, I suppose."

"You never expected it to succeed, did you?"

Ta-Po shrugged. He wore his incongruous blue serge suit like a tent over his enormous fat. Madame Hung stood like a carving of utterly malicious evil, wearing an embroidered chongsam. Her face was like old ivory, the epitome of every human wickedness ever conceived.

"We have Tanya," she said thinly.

"Not for long. You can't get away from here."

"If I must die, Durell, the whole world must die with me. It is a promise I have made to myself." Her

hatred was like a foul presence about her. "And I shall see you dead first, Durell."

Ta-Po spoke harshly. "But our puppet, Har-Buri, is a coward, my dear. He has deserted us and his men, seeking escape only for himself."

Durell did not move. "Har-Buri is getting out?"

"We believe so."

"How?"

"We only know we have been abandoned here."

"After all we did for him, too," Madame Hung hissed. "It is typical of his backward, feudal morality."

Durell laughed. His head still hurt. "Yes, you did a lot for him. You took a fine gentleman named Ramsur Sepah, worked on his ambition, killed his son, promised him the world if only he'd turn Tanya over to you. You subverted him and destroyed him."

"A stupid fool, eroded by greed," Madame Hung snapped. She moved her gun to cover Durell. "Ramsur Sepah is too puffed up with his own petty importance to know how we used him. Like putty, we molded him to our suggestions. He even deludes himself by denying the fact that we killed his son."

"Not any longer," came a new voice. "Please make no moves, anyone. Professor Ouspanaya, stand beside Durell. Do nothing else."

It was Ramsur Sepah. He had a bloody bandage on his head, and his khaki uniform was torn in a dozen places. He had been wounded in the leg, but he stood straight and proud, his large hawk's nose jutting angrily, his bushy, upturned brows bristling.

"True, I was a fool, Ta-Po, used for your personal aims. But my goals were my own, and I still believe in them. If I have been wrong—" He paused, drew a long breath. "I believe in the old virtues, but the world changes, and rejects them. If I have killed, and caused men to die, as they die at this moment, it has been for what I believed to be the better of two worlds." His voice hardened. "But I did not know, truly, Madame Hung, that you killed my only, cherished son."

She made the mistake of laughing at him.

And everything seemed to happen at once.

With a deliberation that was swift, but devoid of passionate anger, Ramsur Sepah swung his gun and fired twice at Madame Hung. At the same moment, the outer wall burst open upon them with a tremendous, ear-splitting blast of rock and debris. The lights went out for the last time. Durell felt the shell-burst like the flat of a board across his chest. Dimly, he was aware of sunlight suddenly shining through the thick dust that boiled about him. A shell had struck the outer wall of the mountain fortress only a few yards away. There was a weight across his legs, and for a moment he knew panic, fearing paralysis. He pushed and shoved and struggled free, coughing and blinded. It was Ta-Po's body. He didn't know if the Chinese was alive or dead. He didn't care. A rage of frustration stormed in him.

"Madame Hung!" he yelled.

She was his, he told himself, and Ramsur Sepah must not cheat him. He knew he was not thinking rationally. But he couldn't help himself. Rubble filled one end of the room. In the dim, dusty sunlight that sifted through the chinks of rock, he looked for the Chinese woman. She was gone.

"Tanya?"

"I am here. Safe enough."

"Your father?"

Professor Ouspanaya replied. "Also safe. But Sepah is gone. He staggered out through the door." Ouspanaya bent over, retching. The fumes from the explosion strangled his next few words. Then he spoke more clearly. "You must follow him, Durell. He must not escape."

"I want Madame Hung." Durell stood up. "Where is she?"

"Buried in the debris, I think. But Sepah—"

"All right."

You can't always keep promises to yourself, Durell

thought regretfully. The hope of settling his personal score with the woman had to be put aside. She might be dead. She might not. But time had run out. He pushed Ouspanaya and his daughter out of the wrecked room. The high-explosive shell that had cracked the mountain's face had done more damage in the next bunker-like cave. The bodies of several rebel soldiers were sprawled in the rubble. The way to the right was blocked, choked with debris. Sepah couldn't have gone in that direction.

They ran the other way, climbing over wreckage. Gunfire echoed and clamored above and below them. A wounded man screamed somewhere. Tanya tripped and fell. Durell picked her up and urged her on. A sloping ramp led them downward. The mountain shuddered continuously under a barrage of shells. A trail of bloodstains showed them the way Ramsur Sepah had gone, but he was out of sight. Wreckage, abandoned weapons, and the bodies of dead and wounded hampered their speed. To a wounded soldier seated with his back to the wall, Durell snapped a question. The man pointed to a nearby embrasure.

"General Har-Buri just went in there, Colonel."

It was a small chamber hewn out of solid rock, with a single door opposite. Durell opened it. It was a cargo elevator, designed to raise munitions to this upper level. The platform was far down and out of sight. Durell pushed a button. Nothing happened. The power was off. He reached into the shaft for the cables, and Tanya helped him haul the platform up. It seemed to take forever, but at last it appeared, and they stepped in. There was blood on the platform.

"He used this way to get down," Ouspanaya murmured. "But why do you insist on following him?"

"It's a paper chase," said Durell. "He's trying to escape. I don't think he plans to make the gesture of dying with his men. To Sepah, that would be foolish. Better to live and fight another day. He'll show us the way out."

The cage lowered them two levels before he spotted more blood on the floor of the passage outside the shaft. They got out and ran that way. Ouspanaya was unable to move fast, but Tanya helped him. The passage seemed remote from the fighting going on around and inside the mountain. The sound of gunfire was dim. Daylight shone ahead, and Durell slowed his pace, waved Tanya behind him, and approached the opening.

He looked out at the triangular plateau where the tiger's pit was located. The hot sun was dazzling. They were to the left of the big tomb entrance he had used with Mahmoud, and there was no sign of fighting here. The old columns and walls stood peacefully, as they had been for thousands of years. He heard the drone and scream of a jet bombing the other side of the mountain, but nothing was happening here.

"There he is," Tanya said suddenly.

"I see him."

Ramsur Sepah had fallen to his knees just a short distance from the pit. He was struggling to lower a ladder that Mahmoud must have used occasionally to get down into the caves. Durell remembered the gateway that led out into the valley to freedom, on the other side. It was Sepah's only hope for escape, and he obviously had a key to unlock the bars there.

"Sepah!" Durell called.

The man turned his head and looked back at them across the plateau. Then he seemed to make a supreme effort and lifted the ladder and began to lower it into the cistern. Durell broke into a run, leaving Tanya behind.

"Sepah!"

Perhaps fifty yards separated them. Durell felt his own strength ebb as he ran. He stumbled, caught himself against the base of a broken column, and went on. A dip and a low wall cut Sepah off from sight. When he rounded the wall, he saw that Sepah had managed to lower the ladder and was about to descend. From

deep down in the lower caves came the sudden roar of the tiger.

Tanya caught up to Durell. "The animal has not been fed today."

"I know."

"He was harmless, as long as he was gluttoned with food, but—"

Durell fired a warning shot in the air, to get Sepah to halt. But then Sepah fumbled in his pockets, took something out, and threw it at them. It was a grenade. But the effort threw him off balance as he took his first step down the ladder. Even as the grenade winked through the air, Durell saw him fling out one arm wildly as the ladder slipped from the edge of the pit. Durell threw Tanya to the ground and fell on top of her. Behind them, Ouspanaya dropped, too. The grenade arched through the sunlit air and Durell ducked his head. When the blast came, it was near the wall that sheltered them. Gravel and sand spouted in the air and then showered harmlessly down.

Through the sound of the explosion, like an echo, came Sepah's scream and the roar of the tiger in the pit.

Durell got up slowly. Tanya's face was white. They walked to the pit and found the ladder still available, leaning within reach on the other side of the cistern. Neither Sepah nor the tiger could be seen.

"You cannot go down there now," Tanya whispered.

"I must. Follow me, after a minute or so."

He climbed carefully into the pit that held so many harsh memories for him. Scuffling and dragging sounds came from inside the cave. There was a moment's silence. He looked up and signaled to Tanya and her father to follow, then took his last grenade in one hand and the machine pistol in the other and walked into the cave, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the gloom. The animal had gone into the chamber where the jewel chests were stored, dragging Sepah's body with him.

Durell paused in the entrance. The beast was crouched over what looked like a mass of bloody rags. The great green eyes glowed balefully as he raised his gun. The tiger knew him. Durell aimed between the emerald eyes and fired once. . . .

There were keys in Ramsur Sepah's pockets. He took them and walked to the opposite end of the tunnel, where he could see the open valley beyond the steel gateway. One of the keys unlocked the bars. He stepped out into freedom.

A long file of uniformed men was crossing the shoulder of the mountain toward him. Durell made Tanya and Ouspanaya sit down. He stood beside them and waited.

A familiar young figure broke into a run from the deploying soldiers and came on ahead. Durell put down his gun and kept his hands in plain sight.

"Hello, Hanookh," he said. "What took you so long?"

Chapter Twenty

THE doctor shook his head, disapproving of Durell in every bristle of his lifted eyebrows. "I told you two weeks ago, at your hotel, that you belonged in a hospital."

"I had to go somewhere," Durell said. "Duty called."

"Lunacy," the doctor snapped.

"That's right. I went to the moon."

Rafe Hannigan laughed softly from a corner of the room. "Don't mind him, Denis," he told the doctor. "The Cajun just had a few bad dreams."

"He also has two cracked ribs, broken teeth, a sus-

pected fracture of the fourth vertebra in his neck, perhaps a concussion, and some rather odd injection marks as well as more contusions and abrasions than I care to count. Luckily, his spleen wasn't ruptured, after all."

"He's tough," Hannigan said. "He can take anything."

Durell sighed. "I wish you'd been with me, Rafe."

"I led the cavalry charge, didn't I?"

"Yes, about five hundred yards behind Hanookh, and in an armored car."

They were in a pleasant, sunlit, air-conditioned guest room in the back of the Teheran embassy. The temperature outside stood at 110°, but it was cool and comfortable around Durell's bed. He had slept around the clock and then dictated reports to General McFee for encoding to Washington, then a report to Iranian Security, and a pleasant personal letter to Professor Ouspanaya. Then he'd ordered flowers sent to Tanya, at the USSR embassy. The secretary who took this flood of work lifted her eyebrows at this last. She was not Miss Saajadi. She was a plump redhead from Brooklyn.

"I'm not sure we're allowed to send roses to the Russians," she said primly.

"Would you prefer a bomb?"

"Really, Mr. Durell, I know I'm new at this job, but the briefings I got from No. 20 Annapolis Street—"

Rafe Hannigan had intervened. "They didn't brief you about the Cajun, Miss Moriarity. Better do as Sam says."

"It's very irregular."

"Do it," Hannigan said quietly.

She flounced away. Hannigan brushed his Iranian-type moustache with a lecherous gesture as he watched her walk. Afterward, Durell slept again and then was awakened for the doctor's probing, prodding, and clucking remonstrances. There was a note from Tanya in Russian, on USSR embassy stationery.

"Thank you for the roses and all you have done. Papa will keep the bargain he made."

Rafe Hannigan took the note and frowned. "What bargain, Cajun?"

"Never mind."

"You didn't get involved with that chunk of Siberian ice, did you? She's beautiful, but she's got a computer for a heart."

"That's what you think."

"Cajun, you're in enough trouble back home. The assignment was a bust. You were supposed to bring the girl here first, for questioning—"

"So you could pick her brains, too? She had enough of that. In this way," Durrell said, "they think we got her back to them as a gratuitous gesture. It's humiliating to the KGB, and a burden that will make them very unhappy. They'll owe me reciprocity, some day."

"That's not enough. Your job was to get the dope from her on their lunar program."

Durrell sighed. "I'm a sick man. I need some consolation. Where is Lotus?"

"I am here," she said.

The Chinese girl had been sitting gravely just beyond his line of vision near the bed. Her hands were folded demurely in her lap, but her lovely eyes were eloquent as she looked at Durrell—and a little afraid.

"What will happen to me, Mr. Sam?" she asked.

"I'm not buying you roses," he said. "You're coming to the States with me, when they let me out of here. Under my personal escort."

"Will it be a quick trip?"

"We'll go the long way around. Did I thank you for getting Hanookh and Hannigan for me, when I didn't come out of Ramsur Sepah's garden party?"

"You owe me no thanks."

"We'll see. You're very beautiful, Lotus."

"It is you who are beautiful, Mr. Sam."

Hanookh came in and remained a few minutes, long enough to announce that he was now in charge of his

security department, replacing the former Colonel Saajadi. They shook hands in mutual esteem, and Hanookh left some newspapers that announced, in a brief, noncommittal item, that a nomad revolt in a desert settlement in the Dasht-i-Kavir had been quieted by prompt military and police action. An obituary item on Ramsur Sepah deplored his untimely death due to a heart attack.

Ten minutes after Hanookh left, Miss Moriarity returned with a fat envelope carrying the state seal of the USSR embassy. "A messenger brought this for you," she said in disapproval. "It's quite irregular."

"To be fraternizing with the enemy?" Durell grinned.

Hannigan said: "Whatever it is, Cajun, give it to me."

"It's from Professor Ouspanaya. It's what Washington hoped to get by grabbing Tanya and holding her for interrogation."

"What are you talking about?"

"When we escaped from Har-Buri's mountain, Ouspanaya said he'd give me this. I didn't ask for it, but I didn't refuse, either. It's the full documentation of the Special Training Program for Lunar Landing Experiments conducted by the professor's special team. The works. The good and the bad; where it was useful, and where it failed. It will save our NASA people a lot of trial-and-error headaches."

"But that's what McFee was praying for!" Hannigan exploded.

Durell sighed and closed his eyes. Hannigan rushed from the room with the envelope. There was a small silence. Then a frightened voice said, "Mr. Sam?"

"Yes, Lotus."

"Is Madame Hung really dead?"

"I don't know. But you won't have to be afraid of her ever again."

"I have never seen the Western world. Will I like it?"

"You will like what I'll show you."

"Istanbul?"

"And Rome."

"Paris?"

"And London."

"It will take so many days to show me these wonderful places, Mr. Sam."

"We've got time," Durell said. "We'll make the most of it."

THE GIRL FROM THE MOON

The Russians claimed her because she was half-Russian.
The Chinese claimed her because she was half-Chinese.
The Iranians claimed her because she was in their country.
The British said she didn't exist...

and if she did she was a liar,
a psychotic, or both.

And Har-Buri?

He posed a deadly riddle
With both the Lady and the Tiger

This is the baffling and dangerous game
Sam Durell is assigned to play,
Where the sky is literally the limit
And the prize is the lovely girl
Who lived on the moon
And returned to tell about it....

