

ALISTAIR MACLEAN

THE GUNS OF NAVARONE

**THE CLASSIC WORLD WAR II THRILLER FROM THE ACCLAIMED
MASTER OF ACTION AND SUSPENSE**



Alistair MacLean
The Guns of Navarone

«HarperCollins»

MacLean A.

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The classic World War II thriller from the acclaimed master of action and suspense. Now issued for the first time as an e-book. Twelve hundred British soldiers isolated on the small island of Kheros off the Turkish coast, waiting to die. Twelve hundred lives in jeopardy, lives that could be saved if only the guns could be silenced. The guns of Navarone, vigilant, savage and catastrophically accurate. Navarone itself, grim bastion of narrow straits manned by a mixed garrison of Germans and Italians, an apparently impregnable iron fortress. To Captain Keith Mallory, skilled saboteur, trained mountaineer, fell the task of leading the small party detailed to scale the vast, impossible precipice of Navarone and to blow up the guns. The Guns of Navarone is the story of that mission, the tale of a calculated risk taken in the time of war...

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The Guns of Navarone
Alistair MacLean

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Introduction

I wanted to write a war story – with the accent on the story. Only a fool would pretend that there is anything noble or splendid about modern warfare but there is no denying that it provides a great abundance of material for a writer, provided no attempt is made either to glorify it or exploit its worst aspects. I think war is a perfectly legitimate territory for a story-teller. Personal experience, I suppose, helped to play some part in the location of this story. I spent some wartime months in and around Greece and the Aegean islands, although at no time, I must add, did I run the risk of anything worse than a severe case of sunburn, far less find myself exposed to circumstances such as those in which the book's characters find themselves.

But I did come across and hear about, both in the Aegean and in Egypt, men to whom danger and the ever-present possibility of capture and death were the very stuff of existence: these were the highly trained specialists of Earl Jellicoe's Special Boat Service and the men of the Long Range Desert Group, who had turned their attention to the Aegean islands after the fall of North Africa. Regularly these men were parachuted into enemy-held islands or came there by sea in the stormy darkness of a wind- and rain-filled night and operated, sometimes for months on end, as spies, saboteurs and liaison officers with local resistance groups. Some even had their own boats, based on German islands, and operated throughout the Aegean with conspicuous success and an almost miraculous immunity to capture and sinking.

Here, obviously, was excellent material for a story and it had the added advantage for the writer that it was set in an archipelago: I had the best of both worlds, the land and the sea, always ready to hand. But the determining factor in the choice of location and plot was neither material nor the islands themselves: that lay in the highly complicated political situation that existed in the islands at the time, and in the nature of Navarone itself.

There is no such island as Navarone – but there were one or two islands remarkably like it, inasmuch as they were (a) German-held, (b) had large guns that dominated important channels and (c) had these guns so located as to be almost immune to destruction by the enemy. Again the situation in the Dodecanese islands was dangerous and perplexing in the extreme, as it was difficult to know from one month to another whether Germans, Greeks, British or Italians were in power there – an excellent setting for a story. So I moved a Navarone-type island from the middle of the Aegean to the Dodecanese, close in to the coast of Turkey, placed another island, filled with trapped and apparently doomed British soldiers, just to the north of it, and took as much advantage as I could of what I had seen, what I had heard, the fictitious geographical situation I had arranged for my own benefit, and the very real political and military state of affairs that existed in the Dodecanese at that time.

ALISTAIR MACLEAN

Glasgow, 1958

To my mother

ONE Prelude: Sunday 0100–0900

The match scratched noisily across the rusted metal of the corrugated iron shed, fizzled, then burst into a sputtering pool of light, the harsh sound and sudden brilliance alike strangely alien in the stillness of the desert night. Mechanically, Mallory's eyes followed the cupped sweep of the flaring match to the cigarette jutting out beneath the Group-Captain's clipped moustache, saw the light stop inches away from the face, saw too the sudden stillness of that face, the unfocused vacancy of the eyes of a man lost in listening. Then the match was gone, ground into the sand of the airfield perimeter.

'I can hear them,' the Group-Captain said softly. 'I can hear them coming in. Five minutes, no more. No wind tonight – they'll be coming in on Number Two. Come on, let's meet them in the interrogation room.' He paused, looked quizzically at Mallory and seemed to smile. But the darkness deceived, for there was no humour in his voice. 'Just curb your impatience, young man – just for a little longer. Things haven't gone too well tonight. You're going to have all your answers, I'm afraid, and have them all too soon.' He turned abruptly, strode off towards the squat buildings that loomed vaguely against the pale darkness that topped the level horizon.

Mallory shrugged, then followed on more slowly, step for step with the third member of the group, a broad, stocky figure with a very pronounced roll in his gait. Mallory wondered sourly just how much practice Jensen had required to achieve that sailorly effect. Thirty years at sea, of course – and Jensen had done exactly that – were sufficient warrant for a man to dance a hornpipe as he walked; but that wasn't the point. As the brilliantly successful Chief of Operations of the Subversive Operation Executive in Cairo, intrigue, deception, imitation and disguise were the breath of life to Captain James Jensen, DSO, RN. As a Levantine stevedore agitator, he had won the awed respect of the dock-labourers from Alexandretta to Alexandria: as a camel-driver, he had blasphemously out-camel-driven all available Bedouin competition: and no more pathetic beggar had ever exhibited such realistic sores in the bazaars and market-places of the East. Tonight, however, he was just the bluff and simple sailor. He was dressed in white from cap-cover to canvas shoes, the starlight glinted softly on the golden braid on epaulettes and cap peak.

Their footsteps crunched in companionable unison over the hard-packed sand, rang sharply as they moved on to the concrete of the runway. The hurrying figure of the Group-Captain was already almost lost to sight. Mallory took a deep breath and turned suddenly towards Jensen.

'Look, sir, just what *is* all this? What's all the flap, all the secrecy about? And why am *I* involved in it? Good lord, sir, it was only yesterday that I was pulled out of Crete, relieved at eight hours' notice. A month's leave, I was told. And what happens?'

'Well,' Jensen murmured, 'what did happen?'

'No leave,' Mallory said bitterly. 'Not even a night's sleep. Just hours and hours in the SOE Headquarters, answering a lot of silly, damnfool questions about climbing in the Southern Alps. Then hauled out of bed at midnight, told I was to meet you, and then driven for hours across the blasted desert by a mad Scotsman who sang drunken songs and asked hundreds of even more silly, damnfool questions!'

'One of my more effective disguises, I've always thought,' Jensen said smugly. 'Personally, I found the journey most entertaining!'

'One of your –' Mallory broke off, appalled at the memory of things he had said to the elderly bewhiskered Scots captain who had driven the command vehicle. 'I – I'm terribly sorry, sir. I never realised –'

'Of course you didn't!' Jensen cut in briskly. 'You weren't supposed to. Just wanted to find out if you were the man for the job. I'm sure you are – I was pretty sure you were before I pulled you out of Crete. But where you got the idea about leave I don't know. The sanity of the SOE has often been

questioned, but even we aren't given to sending a flying-boat for the sole purpose of enabling junior officers to spend a month wasting their substance among the flesh-pots of Cairo,' he finished dryly.

'I still don't know –'

'Patience, laddie, patience – as our worthy Group-Captain has just advocated. Time is endless. To wait, and to keep on waiting – that is to be of the East.'

'To total four hours' sleep in three days is not,' Mallory said feelingly. 'And that's all I've had... Here they come!'

Both men screwed up their eyes in automatic reflex as the fierce glare of the landing lights struck at them, the flare path arrowing off into the outer darkness. In less than a minute the first bomber was down, heavily, awkwardly, taxiing to a standstill just beside them. The grey camouflage paint of the after fuselage and tail-planes was riddled with bullet and cannon shells, an aileron was shredded and the port outer engine out of commission, saturated in oil. The cabin Perspex was shattered and starred in a dozen places.

For a long time Jensen stared at the holes and scars of the damaged machine, then shook his head and looked away.

'Four hours' sleep, Captain Mallory,' he said quietly. 'Four hours. I'm beginning to think that you can count yourself damn lucky to have had even that much.'

The interrogation room, harshly lit by two powerful, unshaded lights, was uncomfortable and airless. The furniture consisted of some battered wall-maps and charts, a score or so of equally scuffed chairs and an unvarnished deal table. The Group-Captain, flanked by Jensen and Mallory, was sitting behind this when the door opened abruptly and the first of the flying crews entered, blinking rapidly in the fierceness of the unaccustomed light. They were led by a dark-haired, thick-set pilot, trailing helmet and flying-suit in his left hand. He had an Anzac bush helmet crushed on the back of his head, and the word 'Australia' emblazoned in white across each khaki shoulder. Scowling, wordlessly and without permission, he sat down in front of them, produced a pack of cigarettes and rasped a match across the surface of the table. Mallory looked furtively at the Group-Captain. The Group-Captain just looked resigned. He even sounded resigned.

'Gentlemen, this is Squadron Leader Torrance. Squadron Leader Torrance,' he added unnecessarily, 'is an Australian.' Mallory had the impression that the Group-Captain rather hoped this would explain some things, Squadron Leader Torrance among them. 'He led tonight's attack on Navarone. Bill, these gentlemen here – Captain Jensen of the Royal Navy, Captain Mallory of the Long Range Desert Group – have a very special interest in Navarone. How did things go tonight?'

Navarone! So that's why I'm here tonight, Mallory thought. Navarone. He knew it well, rather, knew of it. So did everyone who had served any time at all in the Eastern Mediterranean: a grim, impregnable iron fortress off the coast of Turkey, heavily defended by – it was thought – a mixed garrison of Germans and Italians, one of the few Aegean islands on which the Allies had been unable to establish a mission, far less recapture, at some period of the war... He realised that Torrance was speaking, the slow drawl heavy with controlled anger.

'Bloody awful, sir. A fair cow, it was, a real suicide do.' He broke off abruptly, stared moodily with compressed lips through his own drifting tobacco smoke. 'But we'd like to go back again,' he went on. 'Me and the boys here. Just once. We were talking about it on the way home.' Mallory caught the deep murmur of voices in the background, a growl of agreement. 'We'd like to take with us the joker who thought this one up and shove him out at ten thousand over Navarone, without benefit of a parachute.'

'As bad as that, Bill?'

'As bad as that, sir. We hadn't a chance. Straight up, we really hadn't. First off, the weather was against us – the jokers in the Met. Office were about as right as they usually are.'

'They gave you clear weather?'

‘Yeah. Clear weather. It was ten-tenths over the target,’ Torrance said bitterly. ‘We had to go down to fifteen hundred. Not that it made any difference. We would have to have gone down lower than that anyway – about three thousand feet below sea-level then fly up the way: that cliff overhang shuts the target clean off. Might as well have dropped a shower of leaflets asking them to spike their own bloody guns... Then they’ve got every second AA gun in the south of Europe concentrated along this narrow 50-degree vector – the only way you can approach the target, or anywhere near the target. Russ and Conroy were belted good and proper on the way in. Didn’t even get half-way towards the harbour... They never had a chance.’

‘I know, I know.’ The Group-Captain nodded heavily. ‘We heard. W/T reception was good... And McIlveen ditched just north of Alex?’

‘Yeah. But he’ll be all right. The old crate was still awash when we passed over, the big dinghy was out and it was as smooth as a millpond. He’ll be all right,’ Torrance repeated.

The Group-Captain nodded again, and Jensen touched his sleeve.

‘May I have a word with the Squadron Leader?’

‘Of course, Captain. You don’t have to ask.’

‘Thanks.’ Jensen looked across at the burly Australian and smiled faintly.

‘Just one little question, Squadron Leader. You don’t fancy going back there again?’

‘Too bloody right, I don’t!’ Torrance growled.

‘Because?’

‘Because I don’t believe in suicide. Because I don’t believe in sacrificing good blokes for nothing. Because I’m not God and I can’t do the impossible.’ There was a flat finality in Torrance’s voice that carried conviction, that brooked no argument.

‘It is impossible, you say?’ Jensen persisted. ‘This is terribly important.’

‘So’s my life. So are the lives of all these jokers.’ Torrance jerked a big thumb over his shoulder. ‘It’s impossible, sir. At least, it’s impossible for us.’ He drew a weary hand down his face. ‘Maybe a Dornier flying-boat with one of these new-fangled radio-controlled glider-bombs might do it and get off with it. I don’t know. But I do know that nothing we’ve got has a snowball’s chance in hell. Not,’ he added bitterly, ‘unless you cram a Mosquito full of TNT and order one of us to crash-dive it at four hundred into the mouth of the gun cave. That way there’s always a chance.’

‘Thank you, Squadron Leader – and all of you.’ Jensen was on his feet. ‘I know you’ve done your very best, no one could have done more. And I’m sorry... Group-Captain?’

‘Right with you, gentlemen.’ He nodded to the bespectacled Intelligence officer who had been sitting behind them to take his place, led the way out through a side door and into his own quarters.

‘Well, that is that, I suppose.’ He broke the seal of a bottle of Talisker, brought out some glasses. ‘You’ll have to accept it as final, Jensen. Bill Torrance’s is the senior, most experienced squadron left in Africa today. Used to pound the Ploesti oil well and think it a helluva skylark. If anyone could have done tonight’s job it was Bill Torrance, and if he says, it’s impossible, believe me, Captain Jensen, it can’t be done.’

‘Yes.’ Jensen looked down sombrely at the golden amber of the glass in his hand. ‘Yes, I know now. I *almost* knew before, but I couldn’t be sure, and I couldn’t take the chance of being wrong... A terrible pity that it took the lives of a dozen men to prove me right... There’s just the one way left, now.’

‘There’s just the one,’ the Group-Captain echoed. He lifted his glass, shook his head. ‘Here’s luck to Kheros!’

‘Here’s luck to Kheros!’ Jensen echoed in turn. His face was grim.

‘Look!’ Mallory begged. ‘I’m completely lost. Would somebody please tell me –’

‘Kheros,’ Jensen interrupted. ‘That was your cue call, young man. All the world’s a stage, laddie, etc., and this is where you tread the boards in this particular little comedy.’ Jensen’s smile was quite mirthless. ‘Sorry you’ve missed the first two acts, but don’t lose any sleep over that. This is no bit

part: you're going to be the star, whether you like it or not. This is it. Kheros, Act 3, Scene 1. Enter Captain Keith Mallory.'

Neither of them had spoken in the last ten minutes. Jensen drove the big Humber command car with the same sureness, the same relaxed efficiency that hall-marked everything he did: Mallory still sat hunched over the map on his knees, a large-scale Admiralty chart of the Southern Aegean illuminated by the hooded dashboard light, studying an area of the Sporades and Northern Dodecanese heavily squared off in red pencil. Finally he straightened up and shivered. Even in Egypt these late November nights could be far too cold for comfort. He looked across at Jensen.

'I think I've got it now, sir.'

'Good!' Jensen gazed straight ahead along the winding grey ribbon of dusty road, along the white glare of the headlights that cleaved through the darkness of the desert. The beams lifted and dipped, constantly, hypnotically, to the cushioning of the springs on the rutted road. 'Good!' he repeated. 'Now, have another look at it and imagine yourself standing in the town of Navarone – that's on that almost circular bay on the north of the island. Tell me, what would you see from there?'

Mallory smiled.

'I don't have to look again, sir. Four miles or so away to the east I'd see the Turkish coast curving up north and west to a point almost due north of Navarone – a very sharp promontory, that, for the coastline above curves back almost due east. Then, about sixteen miles away, due north beyond this promontory – Cape Demirci, isn't it? – and practically in a line with it I'd see the island of Kheros. Finally, six miles to the west is the island of Maidos, the first of the Lerades group. They stretch away in a north-westerly direction, maybe fifty miles.'

'Sixty.' Jensen nodded. 'You have the eye, my boy. You've got the guts and the experience – a man doesn't survive eighteen months in Crete without both. You've got one or two special qualifications I'll mention by and by.' He paused for a moment, shook his head slowly. 'I only hope you have the luck – all the luck. God alone knows you're going to need it.'

Mallory waited expectantly, but Jensen had sunk into some private reverie. Three minutes passed, perhaps five, and there was only the swish of the tyres, the subdued hum of the powerful engine. Presently Jensen stirred and spoke again, quietly, still without taking his eyes off the road.

'This is Saturday – rather, it's Sunday morning now. There are one thousand two hundred men on the island of Kheros – one thousand two hundred British soldiers – who will be dead, wounded or prisoner by next Saturday. Mostly they'll be dead.' For the first time he looked at Mallory and smiled, a brief smile, a crooked smile, and then it was gone. 'How does it feel to hold a thousand lives in your hands, Captain Mallory?'

For long seconds Mallory looked at the impassive face beside him, then looked away again. He stared down at the chart. Twelve hundred men on Kheros, twelve hundred men waiting to die. Kheros and Navarone, Kheros and Navarone. What was that poem again, that little jingle that he'd learnt all these long years ago in that little upland village in the sheeplands outside Queenstown? Chimborazo – that was it. 'Chimborazo and Cotopaxi, you have stolen my heart away.' Kheros and Navarone – they had the same ring, the same indefinable glamour, the same wonder of romance that took hold of a man and stayed with him. Kheros and – angrily, almost he shook his head, tried to concentrate. The pieces of the jigsaw were beginning to click into place, but slowly.

Jensen broke the silence.

'Eighteen months ago, you remember, after the fall of Greece, the Germans had taken over nearly all the islands of the Sporades: the Italians, of course, already held most of the Dodecanese. Then, gradually, we began to establish missions on these islands, usually spear-headed by your people, the Long Range Desert Group or the Special Boat Service. By last September we had retaken nearly all the larger islands except Navarone – it was too damned hard a nut, so we just by-passed it – and brought some of the garrisons up to, and beyond, battalion strength.' He grinned at Mallory. 'You

were lurking in your cave somewhere in the White Mountains at the time, but you'll remember how the Germans reacted?

'Violently?'

Jensen nodded.

'Exactly. Very violently indeed. The political importance of Turkey in this part of the world is impossible to over-estimate – and she's always been a potential partner for either Axis or Allies. Most of these islands are only a few miles off the Turkish coast. The question of prestige, of restoring confidence in Germany, was urgent.'

'So?'

'So they flung in everything – paratroopers, airborne troops, crack mountain brigades, hordes of Stukas – I'm told they stripped the Italian front of dive-bombers for these operations. Anyway, they flung everything in – the lot. In a few weeks we'd lost over ten thousand troops and every island we'd ever recaptured – except Kheros.'

'And now it's the turn of Kheros?'

'Yes.' Jensen shook out a pair of cigarettes, sat silently until Mallory had lit them and sent the match spinning through the window towards the pale gleam of the Mediterranean lying north below the coast road. 'Yes, Kheros is for the hammer. Nothing that we can do can save it. The Germans have absolute air superiority in the Aegean...'

'But – but how can you be so sure that it's this week?'

Jensen sighed.

'Laddie, Greece is fairly hotching with Allied agents. We have over two hundred in the Athens-Piraeus area alone and –'

'Two hundred!' Mallory interrupted incredulously. 'Did you say –'

'I did.' Jensen grinned. 'A mere bagatelle, I assure you, compared to the vast hordes of spies that circulate freely among our noble hosts in Cairo and Alexandria.' He was suddenly serious again. 'Anyway, our information is accurate. An armada of caiques will sail from the Piraeus on Thursday at dawn and island-hop across the Cyclades, holing up in the islands at night.' He smiled. 'An intriguing situation, don't you think? We daren't move in the Aegean in the daytime or we'd be bombed out of the water. The Germans don't dare move at night. Drove of our destroyers and MTBs and gun-boats move into the Aegean at dusk: the destroyers retire to the south before dawn, the small boats usually lie up in isolated island creeks. But we can't stop them from getting across. They'll be there Saturday or Sunday – and synchronise their landings with the first of the airborne troops: they've scores of Junkers 52s waiting just outside Athens. Kheros won't last a couple of days.' No one could have listened to Jensen's carefully casual voice, his abnormal matter-of-factness and not have believed him.

Mallory believed him. For almost a minute he stared down at the sheen of the sea, at the faerie tracery of the stars shimmering across its darkly placid surface. Suddenly he swung round on Jensen.

'But the Navy, sir! Evacuation! Surely the Navy –'

'The Navy,' Jensen interrupted heavily, 'is not keen. The Navy is sick and tired of the Eastern Med and the Aegean, sick and tired of sticking out its long-suffering neck and having it regularly chopped off – and all for sweet damn all. We've had two battleships wrecked, eight cruisers out of commission – four of them sunk – and over a dozen destroyers gone... I couldn't even start to count the number of smaller vessels we've lost. And for what? I've told you – for sweet damn all! Just so's our High Command can play round-and-round-the-rugged-rocks and who's-the-king-of-the-castle with their opposite numbers in Berlin. Great fun for all concerned – except, of course, for the thousand or so sailors who've been drowned in the course of the game, the ten thousand or so Tommies and Anzacs and Indians who suffered and died on these same islands – and died without knowing why.'

Jensen's hands were white-knuckled on the wheel, his mouth tight-drawn and bitter. Mallory was surprised, shocked almost, by the vehemence, the depth of feeling; it was so completely out of

character...Or perhaps it was in character, perhaps Jensen knew a very great deal indeed about what went on on the inside...

'Twelve hundred men, you said, sir?' Mallory asked quietly. 'You said there were twelve hundred men on Kheros?'

Jensen flickered a glance at him, looked away again.

'Yes. Twelve hundred men.' Jensen sighed. 'You're right, laddie, of course you're right. I'm just talking off the top of my head. Of course we can't leave them there. The Navy will do its damndest. What's two or three more destroyers – sorry, boy, sorry, there I go again...Now listen, and listen carefully.'

'Taking 'em off will have to be a night operation. There isn't a ghost of a chance in the daytime – not with two-three hundred Stukas just begging for a glimpse of a Royal Naval destroyer. It'll have to be destroyers – transports and tenders are too slow by half. And they can't possibly go north about the northern tip of the Lerades – they'd never get back to safety before daylight. It's too long a trip by hours.'

'But the Lerades is a pretty long string of islands,' Mallory ventured. 'Couldn't the destroyers go through –'

'Between a couple of them? Impossible.' Jensen shook his head. 'Mined to hell and back again. Every single channel. You couldn't take a dinghy through.'

'And the Maidos-Navarone channel. Stiff with mines also, I suppose?'

'No, that's a clear channel. Deep water – you can't moor mines in deep water.'

'So that's the route you've got to take, isn't it, sir? I mean, they're Turkish territorial waters on the other side and we –'

'We'd go through Turkish territorial waters tomorrow, and in broad daylight, if it would do any good,' Jensen said flatly. 'The Turks know it and so do the Germans. But all other things being equal, the Western channel is the one we're taking. It's a clearer channel, a shorter route – and it doesn't involve any unnecessary international complications.'

'All other things being equal?'

The guns of Navarone.' Jensen paused for a long time, then repeated the words, slowly, expressionlessly, as one would repeat the name of some feared and ancient enemy. 'The guns of Navarone. They make everything equal. They cover the Northern entrances to both channels. We could take the twelve hundred men off Kheros tonight – if we could silence the guns of Navarone.'

Mallory sat silent, said nothing. He's coming to it now, he thought.

'These guns are no ordinary guns,' Jensen went on quietly. 'Our naval experts say they're about nine-inch rifle barrels. I think myself they're more likely a version of the 210 mm "crunch" guns that the Germans are using in Italy – our soldiers up there hate and fear those guns more than anything on earth. A dreadful weapon – shell extremely slow in flight and damnably accurate. Anyway,' he went on grimly, 'whatever they were they were good enough to dispose of the *Sybaris* in five minutes flat.'

Mallory nodded slowly.

'The *Sybaris*? I think I heard –'

'An eight-inch cruiser we sent up there about four months ago to try conclusions with the Hun. Just a formality, a routine exercise, we thought. The *Sybaris* was blasted out of the water. There were seventeen survivors.'

'Good God!' Mallory was shocked. 'I didn't know –'

'Two months ago we mounted a large-scale amphibious attack on Navarone.' Jensen hadn't even heard the interruption. 'Commandos, Royal Marine Commandos and Jellicoe's Special Boat Service. Less than an even chance, we knew – Navarone's practically solid cliff all the way round. But then these were very special men, probably the finest assault troops in the world today.' Jensen paused for almost a minute, then went on very quietly. 'They were cut to ribbons. They were massacred almost to a man.'

‘Finally, twice in the past ten days – we’ve seen this attack on Kheros coming for a long time now – we sent in parachute saboteurs: Special Boat Service men.’ He shrugged his shoulders helplessly. ‘They just vanished.’

‘Just like that?’

‘Just like that. And then tonight – the last desperate fling of the gambler and what have you.’ Jensen laughed, briefly and without humour. ‘That interrogation hut – I kept pretty quiet in there tonight, I tell you. I was the “joker” that Torrance and his boys wanted to heave out over Navarone. I don’t blame them. But I had to do it, I just had to do it. I knew it was hopeless – but it had to be done.’

The big Humber was beginning to slow down now, running silently between the tumble-down shacks and hovels that line the Western approach to Alexandria. The sky ahead was already beginning to streak in the first tenuous greys of the false dawn.

‘I don’t think I’d be much good with a parachute,’ Mallory said doubtfully. ‘In fact, quite frankly, I’ve never even *seen* a parachute.’

‘Don’t worry,’ Jensen said briefly. ‘You won’t have to use one. You’re going into Navarone the hard way.’

Mallory waited for more, but Jensen had fallen silent, intent on avoiding the large potholes that were beginning to pock the roadway. After a time Mallory asked:

‘Why me, Captain Jensen?’

Jensen’s smile was barely visible in the greying darkness. He swerved violently to avoid a gaping hole and straightened up again.

‘Scared?’

‘Certainly I’m scared. No offence intended, sir, but the way you talk you’d scare anyone... But that wasn’t what I meant.’

‘I know it wasn’t. Just my twisted humour... Why you? Special qualifications, laddie, just like I told you. You speak Greek like a Greek. You speak German like a German. Skilled saboteur, first-class organiser and eighteen unscathed months in the White Mountains of Crete – a convincing demonstration of your ability to survive in enemy-held territory.’ Jensen chuckled. ‘You’d be surprised to know just how complete a dossier I have on you!’

‘No, I wouldn’t.’ Mallory spoke with some feeling. ‘And,’ he added, ‘I know of at least three other officers with the same qualifications.’

‘There are others,’ Jensen agreed. ‘But there are no other Keith Mallorys. Keith Mallory,’ Jensen repeated rhetorically. ‘Who hadn’t heard of Keith Mallory in the palmy, balmy days before the war? The finest mountaineer, the greatest rock climber New Zealand has ever produced – and by that, of course, New Zealanders mean the world. The human fly, the climber of the unclimbable, the scaler of vertical cliffs and impossible precipices. The entire south coast of Navarone,’ said Jensen cheerfully, ‘consists of one vast, impossible precipice. Nary a hand- or foot-hold in sight.’

‘I see,’ Mallory murmured. ‘I see indeed. “Into Navarone the hard way.” That was what you said.’

‘That was,’ Jensen acknowledged. ‘You and your gang – just four others. Mallory’s Merry Mountaineers. Hand-picked. Every man a specialist. You’ll meet them all tomorrow – this afternoon, rather.’

They travelled in silence for the next ten minutes, turned up right from the dock area, jounced their uncomfortable way over the massive cobbles of the Rue Soeurs, slewed round into Mohammed Ali square, passed in front of the Bourse and turned right down the Sherif Pasha.

Mallory looked at the man behind the wheel. He could see his face quite clearly now in the gathering light.

‘Where to, sir?’

‘To see the only man in the Middle East who can give you any help now. Monsieur Eugene Vlachos of Navarone.’

‘You are a brave man, Captain Mallory.’ Nervously Eugene Vlachos twisted the long, pointed ends of his black moustache. ‘A brave man and a foolish one, I would say – but I suppose we cannot call a man a fool when he only obeys his orders.’ His eyes left the large drawing lying before him on the table and sought Jensen’s impassive face.

‘Is there no other way, Captain?’ he pleaded.

Jensen shook his head slowly:

‘There are. We’ve tried them all, sir. They all failed. This is the last.’

‘He must go, then?’

‘There are over a thousand men on Kheros, sir.’

Vlachos bowed his head in silent acceptance, then smiled faintly at Mallory.

‘He calls me “sir”. Me, a poor Greek hotel-keeper and Captain Jensen of the Royal Navy calls me “sir”. It makes an old man feel good.’ He stopped, gazed off vacantly into space, the faded eyes and tired, lined face soft with memory. ‘An old man, Captain Mallory, an old man now, a poor man and a sad one. But I wasn’t always, not always. Once I was just middle-aged, and rich and well content. Once I owned a lovely land, a hundred square miles of the most beautiful country God ever sent to delight the eyes of His creatures here below, and how well I loved that land!’

He laughed self-consciously and ran a hand through his thick, greying hair. ‘Ah, well, as you people say, I suppose it’s all in the eye of the beholder. “A lovely land,” I say. “That blasted rock,” as Captain Jensen has been heard to describe it out of my hearing.’ He smiled at Jensen’s sudden discomfiture. ‘But we both give it the same name – Navarone.’

Startled, Mallory looked at Jensen. Jensen nodded.

‘The Vlachos family has owned Navarone for generations. We had to remove Monsieur Vlachos in a great hurry eighteen months ago. The Germans didn’t care overmuch for his kind of collaboration.’

‘It was – how do you say – touch and go.’ Vlachos nodded. ‘They had reserved three very special places for my two sons and myself in the dungeons in Navarone... But enough of the Vlachos family. I just wanted you to know, young man, that I spent forty years on Navarone and almost four days’ – he gestured to the table – ‘on that map. My information and that map you can trust absolutely. Many things will have changed, of course, but some things never change. The mountains, the bays, the passes, the caves, the roads, the houses and, above all, the fortress itself – these have remained unchanged for centuries, Captain Mallory.’

‘I understand, sir.’ Mallory folded the map carefully, stowed it away in his tunic. ‘With this, there’s always a chance. Thank you very much.’

‘It is little enough, God knows.’ Vlachos’s fingers drummed on the table for a moment, then he looked up at Mallory. ‘Captain Jensen informs me that most of you speak Greek fluently, that you will be dressed as Greek peasants and will carry forged papers. That is well. You will be – what is the word? – self-contained, will operate on your own.’ He paused, then went on very earnestly.

‘Please do not try to enlist the help of the people of Navarone. At all costs you must avoid that. The Germans are ruthless. I know. If a man helps you and is found out, they will destroy not only that man but his entire village – men, women and children. It has happened before. It will happen again.’

‘It happened in Crete,’ Mallory agreed quietly. ‘I’ve seen it for myself.’

‘Exactly.’ Vlachos nodded. ‘And the people of Navarone have neither the skill nor the experience for successful guerrilla operations. They have not had the chance – German surveillance has been especially severe in our island.’

‘I promise you, sir –’ Mallory began.

Vlachos held up his hand.

‘Just a moment. If your need is desperate, really desperate, there are two men to whom you may turn. Under the first plane tree in the village square of Margaritha – at the mouth of the valley about three miles south of the fortress – you will find a man called Louki. He has been the steward of our

family for many years. Louki has been of help to the British before – Captain Jensen will confirm that – and you can trust him with your life. He has a friend, Panayis: he, too, has been useful in the past.’

‘Thank you, sir. I’ll remember. Louki and Panayis and Margaritha – the first plane tree in the square.’

‘And you will refuse all other aid, Captain?’ Vlachos asked anxiously. ‘Louki and Panayis – only these two,’ he pleaded.

‘You have my word, sir. Besides, the fewer the safer for us as well as your people.’ Mallory was surprised at the old man’s intensity.

‘I hope so, I hope so.’ Vlachos sighed heavily.

Mallory stood up, stretched out his hand to take his leave.

‘You’re worrying about nothing, sir. They’ll never see us,’ he promised confidently. ‘Nobody will see us – and we’ll see nobody. We’re after only one thing – the guns.’

‘Ay, the guns – those terrible guns.’ Vlachos shook his head. ‘But just suppose –’

‘Please. It will be all right,’ Mallory insisted quietly. ‘We will bring harm to none – and least of all to your islanders.’

‘God go with you tonight,’ the old man whispered. ‘God go with you tonight. I only wish that I could go too.’

TWO Sunday Night 1900–0200

‘Coffee, sir?’

Mallory stirred and groaned and fought his way up from the depths of exhausted sleep. Painfully he eased himself back on the metal-framed bucket-seat, wondering peevishly when the Air Force was going to get round to upholstering these fiendish contraptions. Then he was fully awake, tired, heavy eyes automatically focusing on the luminous dial of his wrist-watch. Seven o’clock. Just seven o’clock – he’d been asleep barely a couple of hours. Why hadn’t they let him sleep on?

‘Coffee, sir?’ The young air-gunner was still standing patiently by his side, the inverted lid of an ammunition box serving as a tray for the cups he was carrying.

‘Sorry, boy, sorry.’ Mallory struggled upright in his seat, reached up for a cup of the steaming liquid, sniffed it appreciatively. ‘Thank you. You know, this smells just like real coffee.’

‘It is, sir.’ The young gunner smiled proudly. ‘We have a percolator in the galley.’

‘He has a percolator in the galley.’ Mallory shook his head in disbelief. ‘Ye gods, the rigours of war in the Royal Air Force!’ He leaned back, sipped the coffee luxuriously and sighed in contentment. Next moment he was on his feet, the hot coffee splashing unheeded on his bare knees as he stared out the window beside him. He looked at the gunner, gestured in disbelief at the mountainous landscape unrolling darkly beneath them.

‘What the hell goes on here? We’re not due till two hours after dark – and it’s barely gone sunset! Has the pilot –?’

‘That’s Cyprus, sir.’ The gunner grinned. ‘You can just see Mount Olympus on the horizon. Nearly always, going to Castelrosso, we fly a big dog-leg over Cyprus. It’s to escape observation, sir; and it takes us well clear of Rhodes.’

‘To escape observation, he says!’ The heavy transatlantic drawl came from the bucket-seat diagonally across the passage: the speaker was lying collapsed – there was no other word for it – in his seat, the bony knees topping the level of the chin by several inches. ‘My Gawd! To escape observation!’ he repeated in awed wonder. ‘Dog-legs over Cyprus. Twenty miles out from Alex by launch so that nobody ashore can see us takin’ off by plane. And then what?’ He raised himself painfully in his seat, eased an eyebrow over the bottom of the window, then fell back again, visibly exhausted by the effort. ‘And then what? Then they pack us into an old crate that’s painted the whitest white you ever saw guaranteed visible to a blind man at a hundred miles – ‘specially now that it’s gettin’ dark.’

‘It keeps the heat out,’ the young gunner said defensively.

‘The heat doesn’t worry me, son.’ The drawl was tireder, more lugubrious than ever. ‘I like the heat. What I don’t like are them nasty cannon shells and bullets that can ventilate a man in all the wrong places.’ He slid his spine another impossible inch down the seat, closed his eyes wearily and seemed asleep in a moment.

The young gunner shook his head admiringly and smiled at Mallory.

‘Worried to hell, isn’t he, sir?’

Mallory laughed and watched the boy disappear for’ard into the control cabin. He sipped his coffee slowly, looked again at the sleeping figure across the passage. The blissful unconcern was magnificent: Corporal Dusty Miller of the United States, and more recently of the Long Range Desert Force, would be a good man to have around.

He looked round at the others and nodded to himself in satisfaction. They would all be good men to have around. Eighteen months in Crete had developed in him an unerring sense for assessing a man’s capacity for survival in the peculiar kind of irregular warfare in which he himself had been so long engaged. Offhand he’d have taken long odds on the capacity of these four to survive. In the matter of picking an outstanding team Captain Jensen, he reckoned, had done him proud. He didn’t

know them all yet – not personally. But he was intimately acquainted with the exhaustive dossier that Jensen held on each one of them. These were reassuring, to say the least.

Or was there perhaps a slight question mark against Stevens? Mallory wondered, looking across the passage at the fair-haired, boyish figure gazing out eagerly beneath the gleaming white wing of the Sunderland. Lieutenant Andy Stevens, RNVR, had been chosen for this assignment for three reasons. He would navigate the craft that was to take them to Navarone: he was a first-class Alpinist, with several outstanding climbs to his record: and, the product of the classical side of a red-brick university, he was an almost fanatical philhellene, fluent in both Ancient and Modern Greek, and had spent his last two long vacations before the war as a tourist courier in Athens. But he was young, absurdly young, Mallory thought as he looked at him, and youth could be dangerous. Too often, in that island guerrilla warfare, it had been fatal. The enthusiasm, the fire, the zeal of youth was not enough: rather, it was too much, a positive handicap. This was not a war of bugle calls and roaring engines and magnificent defiance in the clamour of battle: this was a war of patience and endurance and stability, of cunning and craft and stealth, and these were not commonly the attributes of youth... But he looked as if he might learn fast.

Mallory stole another glance at Miller. Dusty Miller, he decided, had learnt it all a long, long time ago. Dusty Miller on a white charger, the bugle to his lips – no, his mind just refused to encompass the incongruity of it. He just didn't look like Sir Lancelot. He just looked as if he had been around for a long, long time and had no illusions left.

Corporal Miller had, in fact, been around for exactly forty years. By birth a Californian, by descent three parts Irish and one part Central European, he had lived and fought and adventured more in the previous quarter of a century than most men would in a dozen lifetimes. Silver-miner in Nevada, tunneller in Canada and oil-fire shooter all over the globe, he had been in Saudi Arabia when Hitler attacked Poland. One of his more remote maternal ancestors, some time around the turn of the century, had lived in Warsaw, but that had been affront enough for Miller's Irish blood. He had taken the first available plane to Britain and lied his way into the Air Force, where, to his immense disgust, and because of his age, he was relegated to the rear turret of a Wellington.

His first operational flight had been his last. Within ten minutes of taking off from the Menidi airfield outside Athens on a January night in 1941, engine failure had brought them to an ignominious though well-cushioned end in a paddy field some miles north-west of the city. The rest of the winter he had spent seething with rage in a cookhouse back in Menidi. At the beginning of April he resigned from the Air Force without telling anyone and was making his way north towards the fighting and the Albanian frontier when he met the Germans coming south. As Miller afterwards told it, he reached Nauplion two blocks ahead of the nearest panzer division, was evacuated by the transport *Slamat*, sunk, picked up by the destroyer *Wryneck*, sunk, and finally arrived in Alexandria in an ancient Greek caique, with nothing left him in the world but a fixed determination never again to venture in the air or on the sea. Some months later he was operating with a long-range striking force behind the enemy lines in Libya.

He was, Mallory mused, the complete antithesis to Lieutenant Stevens. Stevens, young, fresh, enthusiastic, correct and immaculately dressed, and Miller, dried-up, lean, stringy, immensely tough and with an almost pathological aversion to spit and polish. How well the nickname 'Dusty' suited him: there could hardly have been a greater contrast. Again, unlike Stevens, Miller had never climbed a mountain in his life and the only Greek words he knew were invariably omitted from the dictionaries. And both these facts were of no importance at all. Miller had been picked for one reason only. A genius with explosives, resourceful and cool, precise and deadly in action, he was regarded by Middle East Intelligence in Cairo as the finest saboteur in southern Europe.

Behind Miller sat Casey Brown. Short, dark and compact, Petty Officer Telegraphist Brown was a Clydesider, in peace-time an installation and testing engineer in a famous yacht-builder's yard on the Gareloch. The fact that he was a born and ready-made engine-room artificer had been so blindingly

obvious that the Navy had missed it altogether and stuck him in the Communications Branch. Brown's ill luck was Mallory's good fortune. Brown would act as the engineer of the boat taking them to Navarone and would maintain radio contact with base. He had also the further recommendation of being a first-class guerrilla fighter: a veteran of the Special Boat Service, he held the DCM and DSM for his exploits in the Aegean and off the coast of Libya.

The fifth and last member of the party sat directly behind Mallory. Mallory did not have to turn round to look at him. He already knew him, knew him better than he knew anyone else in the world, better even than he knew his own mother. Andrea, who had been his lieutenant for all these eighteen interminable months in Crete. Andrea of the vast bulk, the continual rumbling laughter and tragic past, with whom he had eaten, lived and slept in caves, rock-shelters and abandoned shepherd's huts while constantly harried by German patrols and aircraft – that Andrea had become his *alter ego*, his *doppelgänger*: to look at Andrea was to look in a mirror to remind himself what he was like... There was no question as to why Andrea had come along. He wasn't there primarily because he was a Greek himself, with an intimate knowledge of the islanders' language, thought and customs, nor even because of his perfect understanding with Mallory, although all these things helped. He was, instead, there exclusively for the protection and safety he afforded. Endlessly patient, quiet and deadly, tremendously fast in spite of his bulk, and with a feline stealth that exploded into berserker action, Andrea was the complete fighting machine. Andrea was their insurance policy against failure.

Mallory turned back to look out the window again, then nodded to himself in imperceptible satisfaction. Jensen probably couldn't have picked a better team if he'd scoured the whole Mediterranean theatre. It suddenly occurred to Mallory that Jensen probably had done just that. Miller and Brown had been recalled to Alexandria almost a month ago. It was almost as long since Stevens's relief had arrived aboard his cruiser in Malta. And if their battery-charging engine hadn't slipped down that ravine in the White Mountains, and if the sorely harassed runner from the nearest listening post hadn't taken a week to cover fifty miles of snowbound, enemy-patrolled mountains and another five days to find them, he and Andrea would have been in Alexandria almost a fortnight earlier. Mallory's opinion of Jensen, already high, rose another notch. A far-seeing man who planned accordingly, Jensen must have had all his preparations for this made even before the first of the two abortive parachute landings on Navarone.

It was eight o'clock and almost totally dark inside the plane when Mallory rose and made his way for'ard to the control cabin. The captain, face wreathed in tobacco smoke, was drinking coffee: the co-pilot waved a languid hand at his approach and resumed a bored scanning of the scene ahead.

'Good evening.' Mallory smiled. 'Mind if I come in?'

'Welcome in my office any time,' the pilot assured him. 'No need to ask.'

'I only thought you might be busy...' Mallory stopped and looked again at the scene of masterly inactivity. 'Just who is flying this plane?' he asked.

'George. The automatic pilot.' He waved a coffee-cup in the direction of a black, squat box, its blurred outlines just visible in the near darkness. 'An industrious character, and makes a damn sight fewer mistakes than that idle hound who's supposed to be on watch... Anything on your mind, Captain?'

'Yes. What were your instructions for tonight?'

'Just to set you blokes down in Castelrosso when it was good and dark.' The pilot paused, then said frankly, 'I don't get it. A ship this size for only five men and a couple of hundred odd pounds of equipment. Especially to Castelrosso. Especially after dark. Last plane that came down here after dark just kept on going down. Underwater obstruction – dunno what it was. Two survivors.'

'I know. I heard. I'm sorry, but I'm under orders too. As for the rest, forget it – and I mean forget. Impress on your crew that they mustn't talk. They've never seen us.'

The pilot nodded glumly. 'We've all been threatened with court-martial already. You'd think there was a ruddy war on.'

‘There is... We’ll be leaving a couple of cases behind. We’re going ashore in different clothes. Somebody will be waiting for our old stuff when you get back.’

‘Roger. And the best of luck, Captain. Official secrets, or no official secrets, I’ve got a hunch you’re going to need it.’

‘If we are, you can give us a good send-off.’ Mallory grinned. ‘Just set us down in one piece will you?’

‘Reassure yourself, brother,’ the pilot said firmly. ‘Just set your mind at ease. Don’t forget – I’m in this ruddy plane too.’

The clamour of the Sunderland’s great engines was still echoing in their ears when the stubby little motor-boat chugged softly out of the darkness and nosed alongside the gleaming hull of the flying-boat. There was no time lost: there were no words spoken; within a minute the five men and all their gear had been embarked, within another the little boat was rubbing to a stop against the rough stone Navy jetty of Castelrosso. Two ropes were spinning up into the darkness, were caught and quickly secured by practised hands. Amidships, the rust-scaled iron ladder, recessed deep into the stone, stretched up into the star-dusted darkness above: as Mallory reached the top a figure stepped forward out of the gloom.

‘Captain Mallory?’

‘Yes.’

‘Captain Briggs, Army. Have your men wait here, will you? The colonel would like to see you.’ The nasal voice, peremptory in its clipped affectation, was far from cordial. Mallory stirred in slow anger, but said nothing. Briggs sounded like a man who might like his bed or his gin, and maybe their late visitation was keeping him from either or both. War was hell.

They were back in ten minutes, a third figure following behind them. Mallory peered at the three men standing on the edge of the jetty, identified them, then peered around again.

‘Where’s Miller got to?’ he asked.

‘Here, boss, here.’ Miller groaned, eased his back off a big, wooden bollard, climbed wearily to his feet. ‘Just restin’, boss. Recuperatin’, as you might say, from the nerve-rackin’ rigours of the trip.’

‘When you’re all *quite* ready,’ Briggs said acidly, ‘Matthews here will take you to your quarters. You are to remain on call for the Captain, Matthews. Colonel’s orders.’ Briggs’s tone left no doubt that he thought the colonel’s orders a piece of arrant nonsense. ‘And don’t forget, Captain – two hours, the colonel said.’

‘I know, I know,’ Mallory said wearily. ‘I was there when he said it. It was to me he was talking. Remember? All right, boys, if you’re ready.’

‘Our gear, sir?’ Stevens ventured.

‘Just leave it there. Right, Matthews, lead the way, will you?’

Matthews led the way along the jetty and up interminable flights of steep, worn steps, the others followed in Indian file, rubber soles noiseless on the stone. He turned sharply right at the top, went down a narrow, winding alley, into a passage, climbed a flight of creaking, wooden stairs, opened the first door in the corridor above.

‘Here you are, sir. I’ll just wait in the corridor outside.’

‘Better wait downstairs,’ Mallory advised. ‘No offence, Matthews, but the less you know of this the better.’

He followed the others into the room, closing the door behind him. It was a small, bleak room, heavily curtained. A table and half a dozen chairs took up most of the space. Over in the far corner the springs of the single bed creaked as Corporal Miller stretched himself out luxuriously, hands clasped behind his head.

‘Gee!’ he murmured admiringly. ‘A hotel room. Just like home. Kinda bare, though.’ A thought occurred to him. ‘Where are all you other guys gonna sleep?’

‘We aren’t,’ Mallory said briefly. ‘Neither are you. We’re pulling out in less than two hours.’ Miller groaned. ‘Come on, soldier,’ Mallory went on relentlessly. ‘On your feet.’

Miller groaned again, swung his legs over the edge of the bed and looked curiously at Andrea. The big Greek was quartering the room methodically, pulling out lockers, turning pictures, peering behind curtains and under the bed.

‘What’s he doin’?’ Miller asked. ‘Lookin’ for dust?’

‘Testing for listening devices,’ Mallory said curtly. ‘One of the reasons why Andrea and I have lasted so long.’ He dug into the inside pocket of his tunic, a dark naval battledress with neither badge nor insignia, pulled out a chart and the map Vlachos had given him, unfolded and spread them out. ‘Round the table, all of you. I know you’ve been bursting with curiosity for the past couple of weeks, asking yourselves a hundred questions. Well, here are all the answers. I hope you like them... Let me introduce you to the island of Navarone.’

Mallory’s watch showed exactly eleven o’clock when he finally sat back, folded away the map and chart. He looked quizzically at the four thoughtful faces round the table.

‘Well, gentlemen, there you have it. A lovely set-up, isn’t it?’ He smiled wryly. ‘If this was a film, my next line should be, “Any questions, men?” But we’ll dispense with that because I just wouldn’t have any of the answers. You all know as much as I do.’

‘A quarter of a mile of sheer cliff, four hundred feet high, and he calls it the only break in the defences.’ Miller, his head bent moodily over his tobacco tin, rolled a long, thin cigarette with one expert hand. This is just crazy, boss. Me, I can’t even climb a bloody ladder without falling off.’ He puffed strong, acrid clouds of smoke into the air. ‘Suicidal. That’s the word I was lookin’ for. Suicidal. One buck gets a thousand we never get within five miles of them gawddamned guns!’

‘One in a thousand, eh?’ Mallory looked at him for a long time without speaking. ‘Tell me, Miller, what odds are you offering on the boys on Kheros?’

‘Yeah.’ Miller nodded heavily. ‘Yeah, the boys on Kheros. I’d forgotten about them. I just keep thinkin’ about me and that damned cliff.’ He looked hopefully across the table at the vast bulk of Andrea. ‘Or maybe Andrea there would carry me up. He’s big enough, anyway.’

Andrea made no reply. His eyes were half-closed, his thoughts could have been a thousand miles away.

‘We’ll tie you hand and foot and haul you up on the end of a rope,’ Stevens said unkindly. ‘We’ll try to pick a fairly sound rope,’ he added carelessly. The words, the tone, were jocular enough, but the worry on his face belied them. Mallory apart, only Stevens appreciated the almost insuperable technical difficulties of climbing a sheer, unknown cliff in the darkness. He looked at Mallory questioningly. ‘Going up alone, sir, or –’

‘Excuse me, please.’ Andrea suddenly sat forward, his deep rumble of a voice rapid in the clear, idiomatic English he had learnt during his long association with Mallory. He was scribbling quickly on a piece of paper. ‘I have a plan for climbing this cliff. Here is a diagram. Does the Captain think this is possible?’

He passed the paper across to Mallory. Mallory looked at it, checked, recovered, all in one instant. There was no diagram on it. There were only two large, printed words: ‘Keep talking.’

‘I see,’ Mallory said thoughtfully. ‘Very good indeed, Andrea. This has distinct possibilities.’ He reversed the paper, held it up before him so that they could all see the words. Andrea had already risen to his feet, was padding cat-footed towards the door. ‘Ingenious, isn’t it, Corporal Miller,’ he went on conversationally. ‘Might solve quite a lot of our difficulties.’

‘Yeah.’ The expression on Miller’s face hadn’t altered a fraction, the eyes were still half-closed against the smoke drifting up from the cigarette dangling between his lips. ‘Reckon that might solve the problem, Andrea – and get me up in one piece, too.’ He laughed easily, concentrated on screwing a curiously-shaped cylinder on the barrel of an automatic that had magically appeared in his left hand. ‘But I don’t quite get that funny line and the dot at –’

It was all over in two seconds – literally. With a deceptive ease and nonchalance Andrea opened the door with one hand, reached out with the other, plucked a wildly-struggling figure through the gap, set him on the ground again and closed the door, all in one concerted movement. It had been as soundless as it had been swift. For a second the eavesdropper, a hatchet-faced, swarthy Levantine in badly-fitting white shirt and blue trousers, stood there in shocked immobility, blinking rapidly in the unaccustomed light. Then his hand dived in under his shirt.

‘Look out!’ Miller’s voice was sharp, the automatic lining up as Mallory’s hand closed over his. ‘Watch!’ Mallory said softly.

The men at the table caught only a flicker of blued steel as the knife arm jerked convulsively back and plunged down with vicious speed. And then, incredibly, hand and knife were stopped dead in mid-air, the gleaming point only two inches from Andrea’s chest. There was a sudden scream of agony, the ominous cracking of wrist bones as the giant Greek tightened his grip, and then Andrea had the blade between finger and thumb, had removed the knife with the tender, reproving care of a parent saving a well-loved but irresponsible child from himself. Then the knife was reversed, the point was at the Levantine’s throat and Andrea was smiling down pleasantly into the dark and terror-stricken eyes.

Miller let out a long breath, half-sigh, half-whistle.

‘Well, now,’ he murmured, ‘I guess mebbe Andrea has done that sort of thing before?’

‘I guess maybe he has,’ Mallory mimicked. ‘Let’s have a closer look at exhibit A, Andrea.’

Andrea brought his prisoner close up to the table, well within the circle of light. He stood there sullenly before them, a thin, ferret-faced man, black eyes dulled in pain and fear, left hand cradling his crushed wrist.

‘How long do you reckon this fellow’s been outside, Andrea?’ Mallory asked.

Andrea ran a massive hand through his thick, dark, curling hair, heavily streaked with grey above the temples.

‘I cannot be sure, Captain. I imagined I heard a noise – a kind of shuffle – about ten minutes ago, but I thought my ears were playing tricks. Then I heard the same sound a minute ago. So I am afraid –’

‘Ten minutes, eh?’ Mallory nodded thoughtfully, then looked at the prisoner. ‘What’s your name?’ he asked sharply. ‘What are you doing here?’

There was no reply. There were only the sullen eyes, the sullen silence – a silence that gave way to a sudden yelp of pain as Andrea cuffed the side of his head.

‘The Captain is asking you a question,’ Andrea said reproachfully. He cuffed him again, harder this time. ‘Answer the Captain.’

The stranger broke into rapid, excitable speech, gesticulating wildly with both hands. The words were quite unintelligible. Andrea sighed, shut off the torrent by the simple expedient of almost encircling the scrawny throat with his left hand.

Mallory looked questioningly at Andrea. The giant shook his head.

‘Kurdistan or Armenian, Captain, I think. But I don’t understand it.’

‘I certainly don’t,’ Mallory admitted. ‘Do you speak English?’ he asked suddenly.

Black, hate-filled eyes glared back at him in silence. Andrea cuffed him again.

‘Do you speak English?’ Mallory repeated relentlessly.

‘Eenglish? Eenglish?’ Shoulders and upturned palms lifted in the age-old gesture of incomprehension. ‘Ka Eenglish!’

‘He says he don’t speak English,’ Miller drawled.

‘Maybe he doesn’t and maybe he does,’ Mallory said evenly. ‘All we know is that he *has* been listening and that we can’t take any chances. There are far too many lives at stake.’ His voice suddenly hardened, the eyes were grim and pitiless. ‘Andrea!’

‘Captain?’

‘You have the knife. Make it clean and quick. Between the shoulder blades!’

Stevens cried out in horror, sent his chair crashing back as he leapt to his feet.

‘Good God, sir, you can’t –’

He broke off and stared in amazement at the sight of the prisoner catapulting himself bodily across the room to crash into a distant corner, one arm up-curved in rigid defence, stark, unreasoning panic lined in every feature of his face. Slowly Stevens looked away, saw the triumphant grin on Andrea’s face, the dawning comprehension in Brown’s and Miller’s. Suddenly he felt a complete fool. Characteristically, Miller was the first to speak.

‘Waal, waal, whaddya know! Mebbe he *does* speaka da Eenglish after all.’

‘Maybe he does,’ Mallory admitted. ‘A man doesn’t spend ten minutes with his ear glued to a keyhole if he doesn’t understand a word that’s being said... Give Matthews a call, will you, Brown?’

The sentry appeared in the doorway a few seconds later.

‘Get Captain Briggs here, will you, Matthews?’ he asked. ‘At once please.’

The soldier hesitated.

‘Captain Briggs has gone to bed, sir. He left strict orders that he wasn’t to be disturbed.’

‘My heart bleeds for Captain Briggs and his broken slumbers,’ Mallory said acidly. ‘He’s had more sleep in a day than I’ve had in the past week.’ He glanced at his watch and the heavy brows came down in a straight line over the tired, brown eyes. ‘We’ve no time to waste. Get him here at once. Understand? At once!’

Matthews saluted and hurried away. Miller cleared his throat and clucked his tongue sadly.

‘These hotels are all the same. The goin’s-on – you’d never believe your eyes. Remember once I was at a convention in Cincinnati –’

Mallory shook his head wearily.

‘You have a fixation about hotels, Corporal. This is a military establishment and these are army officers’ billets.’

Miller made to speak but changed his mind. The American was a shrewd judge of people. There were those who could be ribbed and those who could not be ribbed. An almost hopeless mission, Miller was quietly aware, and as vital as it was, in his opinion, suicidal, but he was beginning to understand why they’d picked this tough, sunburnt New Zealander to lead it.

They sat in silence for the next five minutes, then looked up as the door opened. Captain Briggs was hatless and wore a white silk muffler round his throat in place of the usual collar and tie. The white contrasted oddly with the puffed red of the heavy neck and face above. These had been red enough when Mallory had first seen them in the colonel’s office – high blood pressure and even higher living, Mallory had supposed: the extra deep shades of red and purple now present probably sprang from a misplaced sense of righteous indignation. A glance at the choleric eyes, gleaming light-blue prawns afloat in a sea of vermilion, was quite enough to confirm the obvious.

‘I think this is a bit much, Captain Mallory!’ The voice was high pitched in anger, more nasal than ever. ‘I’m not the duty errand-boy, you know. I’ve had a damned hard day and –’

‘Save it for your biography,’ Mallory said curtly, ‘and take a gander at this character in the corner.’

Briggs’s face turned an even deeper hue. He stepped into the room, fists balled in anger, then stopped in his tracks as his eye lit on the crumpled, dishevelled figure still crouched in the corner of the room.

‘Good God!’ he ejaculated. ‘Nicolai!’

‘You know him.’ It was a statement, not a question.

‘Of course I know him!’ Briggs snorted. ‘Everybody knows him. Nicolai. Our laundry-boy.’

‘Your laundry-boy! Do his duties entail snooping around the corridors at night, listening at keyholes?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘What I say.’ Mallory was very patient. ‘We caught him listening outside the door.’

‘Nicolai? I don’t believe it!’

‘Watch it, mister,’ Miller growled. ‘Careful who you call a liar. We all saw him.’

Briggs stared in fascination at the black muzzle of the automatic waving negligently in his direction, gulped, looked hastily away.

‘Well, what if you did?’ He forced a smile. ‘Nicolai can’t speak a word of English.’

‘Maybe not,’ Mallory agreed dryly. ‘But he understands it well enough.’ He raised his hand. ‘I’ve no desire to argue all night and I certainly haven’t the time. Will you please have this man placed under arrest, kept in solitary confinement and incommunicado for the next week at least. It’s vital. Whether he’s a spy or just too damned nosy, he knows far too much. After that, do what you like. My advice is to kick him out of Castelrosso.’

‘*Your advice*, indeed!’ Briggs’s colour returned, and with it his courage. ‘Who the hell are you to give me advice or to give me orders, Captain Mallory?’ There was a heavy emphasis on the word ‘captain’.

‘Then I’m asking it as a favour,’ Mallory pleaded wearily. ‘I can’t explain, but it’s terribly important. There are hundreds of lives –’

‘Hundreds of lives!’ Briggs sneered. ‘Melodramatic stuff and nonsense!’ He smiled unpleasantly. ‘I suggest you keep that for *your* cloak-and-dagger biography, Captain Mallory.’

Mallory rose, walked round the table, stopped a foot away from Briggs. The brown eyes were still and very cold.

‘I could go and see your colonel, I suppose. But I’m tired of arguing. You’ll do exactly as I say or I’ll go straight to Naval HQ and get on the radio-telephone to Cairo. And if I do,’ Mallory went on, ‘I swear to you that you’ll be on the next ship home to England – and on the troop-deck, at that.’

His last words seemed to echo in the little room for an interminable time: the stillness was intense. And then, as suddenly as it had arisen, the tension was gone and Briggs’s face, a now curiously mottled white and red, was slack and sullen in defeat.

‘All right, all right,’ he said. ‘No need for all these damned stupid threats – not if it means all that much to you.’ The attempt to bluster, to patch up the shredded rags of his dignity, was pathetic in its transparency. ‘Matthews – call out the guard.’

The torpedo-boat, great aero engines throttled back half speed, pitched and lifted, pitched and lifted with monotonous regularity as it thrust its way into the long, gentle swell from the WNW. For the hundredth time that night Mallory looked at his watch.

‘Running behind time, sir?’ Stevens suggested.

Mallory nodded.

‘We should have stepped straight into this thing from the Sunderland – there was a hold-up.’

Brown grunted. ‘Engine trouble, for a fiver.’ The Clydeside accent was very heavy.

‘Yes, that’s right.’ Mallory looked up, surprised. ‘How did you know?’

‘Always the same with these blasted MTB engines,’ Brown growled. ‘Temperamental as a film star.’

There was silence for a time in the tiny blacked-out cabin, a silence broken only by the occasional clink of a glass. The Navy was living up to its traditional hospitality.

‘If we’re late,’ Miller observed at last, ‘why doesn’t the skipper open her up? They tell me these crates can do forty to fifty knots.’

‘You look green enough already,’ Stevens said tactlessly. ‘Obviously, you’ve never been in an MTB full out in a heavy sea.’

Miller fell silent a moment. Clearly, he was trying to take his mind off his internal troubles. ‘Captain?’

‘Yes, what is it?’ Mallory answered sleepily. He was stretched full length on a narrow settee, an almost empty glass in his fingers.

‘None of my business, I know, boss, but – would you have carried out that threat you made to Captain Briggs?’

Mallory laughed.

‘It *is* none of your business, but – well, no, Corporal, I wouldn’t. I wouldn’t because I couldn’t. I haven’t all that much authority invested in me – and I didn’t even know whether there was a radio-telephone in Castelrosso.’

‘Yeah. Yeah, do you know, I kinda suspected that.’ Corporal Miller rubbed a stubbled chin. ‘If he’d called your bluff, what would you have done, boss?’

‘I’d have shot Nicolai,’ Mallory said quietly. ‘If the colonel had failed me. I’d have had no choice left.’

‘I knew that too. I really believe you would. For the first time I’m beginning to believe we’ve got a chance... But I kinda wish you *had* shot him – *and* little Lord Fauntleroy. I didn’t like the expression on old Briggs’s face when you went out that door. Mean wasn’t the word. He coulda killed you then. You trampled right over his pride, boss – and to a phony like that nothin’ else in the world matters.’

Mallory made no reply. He was already sound asleep, his empty glass fallen from his hand. Not even the banshee clamour of the great engines opening full out as they entered the sheltered calm of the Rhodes channel could plumb his bottomless abyss of sleep.

THREE Monday 0700–1700

‘My dear fellow, you make me feel dreadfully embarrassed.’ Moodily the officer switched his ivory-handled flyswat against an immaculately trousered leg, pointed a contemptuous but gleaming toe-cap at the ancient caique, broad-beamed and two-masted, moored stern on to the even older and more dilapidated wooden pier on which they were standing. ‘I am positively ashamed. The clients of Rutledge and Company, I assure you, are accustomed only to the best.’

Mallory smothered a smile. Major Rutledge of the Buffs, Eton and Sandhurst as to intonation, millimetrically tooth-brushed as to moustache, Savile Row as to the quite dazzling sartorial perfection of his khaki drill, was so magnificently out of place in the wild beauty of the rocky, tree-lined bluffs of that winding creek that his presence there seemed inevitable. Such was the major’s casual assurance, so dominating his majestic unconcern, that it was the creek, if anything, that seemed slightly out of place.

‘It *does* look as if it has seen better days,’ Mallory admitted. ‘Nevertheless, sir, it’s exactly what we want.’

‘Can’t understand it, I really can’t understand it.’ With an irritable but well-timed swipe the major brought down a harmless passing fly. ‘I’ve been providing chaps with everything during the past eight or nine months – caiques, launches, yachts, fishing boats, everything – but no one has ever yet specified the oldest, most dilapidated derelict I could lay hands on. Quite a job laying hands on it, too, I tell you.’ A pained expression crossed his face. ‘The chaps know I don’t usually deal in this line of stuff.’

‘What chaps?’ Mallory asked curiously.

‘Oh, up the islands; you know.’ Rutledge gestured vaguely to the north and west.

‘But – but those are enemy held –’

‘So’s this one. Chap’s got to have his HQ somewhere,’ Rutledge explained patiently. Suddenly his expression brightened. ‘I say, old boy, I know just the thing for you. A boat to escape observation and investigation – that was what Cairo insisted I get. How about a German E-boat, absolutely perfect condition, one careful owner. Could get ten thou. for her at home. Thirty-six hours. Pal of mine over in Bodrum –’

‘Bodrum?’ Mallory questioned. ‘Bodrum? But – but that’s in Turkey, isn’t it?’

‘Turkey? Well, yes, actually, I believe it is,’ Rutledge admitted. ‘Chap has to get his supplies from somewhere, you know,’ he added defensively.

‘Thanks all the same’ – Mallory smiled – ‘but this is exactly what we want. We can’t wait, anyway.’

‘On your own heads be it!’ Rutledge threw up his hands in admission of defeat. ‘I’ll have a couple of my men shove your stuff aboard.’

‘I’d rather we did it ourselves, sir. It’s – well, it’s a very special cargo.’

‘Right you are,’ the major acknowledged. ‘No questions Rutledge, they call me. Leaving soon?’ Mallory looked at his watch.

‘Half an hour, sir.’

‘Bacon, eggs and coffee in ten minutes?’

‘Thanks very much.’ Mallory grinned. ‘That’s one offer we’ll be very glad to accept.’

He turned away, walked slowly down to the end of the pier. He breathed deeply, savouring the heady, herb-scented air of an Aegean dawn. The salt tang of the sea, the drowsily sweet perfume of honeysuckle, the more delicate, sharper fragrance of mint all subtly merged into an intoxicating whole, indefinable, unforgettable. On either side, the steep slopes, still brilliantly green with pine and walnut and holly, stretched far up to the moorland pastures above, and from these, faintly borne on

the perfumed breeze, came the distant melodic tinkling of goats' bells, a haunting, a nostalgic music, true symbol of the leisured peace the Aegean no longer knew.

Unconsciously almost, Mallory shook his head and walked more quickly to the end of the pier. The others were still sitting where the torpedo boat had landed them just before dawn. Miller, inevitably, was stretched his full length, hat tilted against the golden, level rays of the rising sun.

'Sorry to disturb you and all that, but we're leaving in half an hour; breakfast in ten minutes. Let's get the stuff aboard.' He turned to Brown. 'Maybe you'd like to have a look at the engine?' he suggested.

Brown heaved himself to his feet, looked down unenthusiastically at the weather-beaten, paint-peeled caique.

'Right you are, sir. But if the engine is on a par with this bloody wreck...' He shook his head in prophetic gloom and swung nimbly over the side of the pier.

Mallory and Andrea followed him, reaching up for the equipment as the other two passed it down. First they stowed away a sackful of old clothes, then the food, pressure stove and fuel, the heavy boots, spikes, mallets, rock axes and coils of wire-centred rope to be used for climbing, then, more carefully, the combined radio receiver and transmitter and the firing generator fitted with the old-fashioned plunge handle. Next came the guns – two Schmeissers, two Brens, a Mauser and a Colt – then a case containing a weird but carefully selected hodge-podge of torches, mirrors, two sets of identity papers and, incredibly, bottles of Hock, Moselle, ouzo and retsina.

Finally, and with exaggerated care, they stowed away for'ard in the forepeak two wooden boxes, one green in colour, medium sized and bound in brass, the other small and black. The green box held high explosive – TNT., amatol and a few standard sticks of dynamite, together with grenades, gun-cotton primers and canvas hosing; in one corner of the box was a bag of emery dust, another of ground glass, and a sealed jar of potassium, these last three items having been included against the possibility of Dusty Miller's finding an opportunity to exercise his unique talents as a saboteur. The black box held only detonators, percussion and electrical, detonators with fulminates so unstable that their exposed powder could be triggered off by the impact of a falling feather.

The last box had been stowed away when Casey Brown's head appeared above the engine hatch. Slowly he examined the mainmast reaching up above his head, as slowly turned for'ard to look at the foremast. His face carefully expressionless, he looked at Mallory.

'Have we got sails for these things, sir?'

'I suppose so. Why?'

'Because God only knows we're going to need them!' Brown said bitterly. 'Have a look at the engine-room, you said. This isn't an engine-room. It's a bloody scrap-yard. And the biggest, most rusted bit of scrap down there is attached to the propeller shaft. And what do you think it is? An old Kelvin two-cylinder job built more or less on my own doorstep – about thirty years ago.' Brown shook his head in despair, his face as stricken as only a Clydeside engineer's can be at the abuse of a beloved machine. 'And it's been falling to bits for years, sir. Place is littered with discarded bits and spares. I've seen junk heaps off the Gallowgate that were palaces compared to this.'

'Major Rutledge said it was running only yesterday,' Mallory said mildly. 'Anyway, come on ashore. Breakfast. Remind me we're to pick up a few heavy stones on the way back, will you?'

'Stones!' Miller looked at him in horror. 'Aboard that thing?'

Mallory nodded, smiling.

'But that gawddamned ship is sinkin' already!' Miller protested. 'What do you want stones for?'

'Wait and see.'

Three hours later Miller saw. The caique was chugging steadily north over a glassy, windless sea, less than a mile off the coast of Turkey, when he mournfully finished lashing his blue battledress into a tight ball and heaved it regretfully over the side. Weighted by the heavy stone he had carried aboard, it was gone from sight in a second.

Morosely he surveyed himself in the mirror propped up against the for'ard end of the wheelhouse. Apart from a deep violet sash wrapped round his lean middle and a fancifully embroidered waistcoat with its former glory mercifully faded, he was dressed entirely in black. Black lacing jackboots, black baggy trousers, black shirt and black jacket: even his sandy hair had been dyed to the same colour.

He shuddered and turned away.

'Thank Gawd the boys back home can't see me now!' he said feelingly. He looked critically at the others, dressed, with some minor variations, like himself. 'Waal, mebbe I ain't quite so bad after all...Just what is all this quick-change business for, boss?'

'They tell me you've been behind the German lines twice, once as a peasant, once as a mechanic.' Mallory heaved his own ballasted uniform over the side. 'Well, now you see what the well-dressed Navaronian wears.'

'The double change, I meant. Once in the plane, and now.'

'Oh, I see. Army khaki and naval whites in Alex, blue battledress in Castelrosso and now Greek clothes? Could have been – almost certainly were – snoopers in Alex or Castelrosso or Major Rutledge's island. And we've changed from launch to plane to MTB to caique. Covering our tracks, Corporal. We just can't take any chances.'

Miller nodded, looked down at the clothes sack at his feet, wrinkled his brows in puzzlement, stooped and dragged out the white clothing that had caught his eye. He held up the long, voluminous clothes for inspection.

'To be used when passing through the local cemeteries, I suppose.' He was heavily ironic. 'Disguised as ghosts.'

'Camouflage,' Mallory explained succinctly. 'Snow-smocks.'

'What!'

'Snow. That white stuff. There are some pretty high mountains in Navarone, and we may have to take them. So – snow-smocks.'

Miller looked stunned. Wordlessly he stretched his length on the deck, pillowed his head and closed his eyes. Mallory grinned at Andrea.

'Picture of a man getting his full quota of sunshine before battling with the Arctic wastes...Not a bad idea. Maybe you should get some sleep, too. I'll keep watch for a couple of hours.'

For five hours the caique continued on its course parallel to the Turkish coast, slightly west of north and rarely more than two miles off-shore. Relaxed and warm in the still kindly November sun, Mallory sat wedged between the bulwarks of the blunt bows, his eyes ceaselessly quartering sky and horizon. Amidships, Andrea and Miller lay asleep. Casey Brown still defied all attempts to remove him from the engine-room. Occasionally – very occasionally – he came up for a breath of fresh air, but the intervals between his appearances steadily lengthened as he concentrated more and more on the aged Kelvin engine, regulating the erratic drip-fed lubrication, constantly adjusting the air intake: an engineer to his fingertips, he was unhappy about that engine: he was drowsy, too, and headachy – the narrow hatchway gave hardly any ventilation at all.

Alone in the wheelhouse – an unusual feature in so tiny a caique – Lieutenant Andy Stevens watched the Turkish coast slide slowly by. Like Mallory's, his eyes moved ceaselessly, but not with the same controlled wandering. They shifted from the coast to the chart: from the chart to the islands up ahead off the port bow, islands whose position and relation to each other changed continually and deceptively, islands gradually lifting from the sea and hardening in definition through the haze of blue refraction: from the islands to the old alcohol compass swinging almost imperceptibly on corroded gimbals, and from the compass back to the coast again. Occasionally, he peered up into the sky, or swung a quick glance through a 180-degree sweep of the horizon. But one thing his eyes avoided all the time. The chipped, fly-blown mirror had been hung up in the wheelhouse again, but it was as if his eyes and the mirror were of opposite magnetic poles: he could not bring himself to look at it.

His forearms ached. He had been spelled at the wheel twice, but still they ached, abominably: his lean, tanned hands were ivory-knuckled on the cracked wheel. Repeatedly, consciously, he tried to relax, to ease the tension that was bunching up the muscles of his arms; but always, as if possessed of independent volition, his hands tightened their grip again. There was a funny taste in his mouth, too, a sour and salty taste in a dry, parched mouth, and no matter how often he swallowed, or drank from the sun-warmed pitcher at his side, the taste and the dryness remained. He could no more exorcise them than he could that twisting, cramping ball that was knotting up his insides, just above the solar plexus, or the queer, uncontrollable tremor that gripped his right leg from time to time.

Lieutenant Andy Stevens was afraid. He had never been in action before, but it wasn't that. This wasn't the first time he had been afraid. He had been afraid all his life, ever since he could remember: and he could remember a long way back, even to his early prep-school days when his famous father, Sir Cedric Stevens, the most celebrated explorer and mountaineer of his time, had thrown him bodily into the swimming pool at home, telling him that this was the only way he could learn to swim. He could remember still how he had fought and spluttered his way to the side of the pool, panic-stricken and desperate, his nose and mouth blocked with water, the pit of his stomach knotted and constricted in that nameless, terrifying ache he was to come to know so well: how his father and two elder brothers, big and jovial and nerveless like Sir Cedric himself, had wiped the tears of mirth from their eyes and pushed him in again...

His father and brothers... It had been like that all through his schooldays. Together, the three of them had made his life thoroughly miserable. Tough, hearty, open-air types who worshipped at the shrine of athleticism and physical fitness, they could not understand how anyone could fail to revel in diving from a five-metre springboard or setting a hunter at a five-barred gate or climbing the crags of the Peak district or sailing a boat in a storm. All these things they had made him do and often he had failed in the doing, and neither his father nor his brothers could ever have understood how he had come to dread those violent sports in which they excelled, for they were not cruel men, nor even unkind, but simply stupid. And so to the simple physical fear he sometimes and naturally felt was added the fear of failure, the fear that he was bound to fail in whatever he had to do next, the fear of the inevitable mockery and ridicule: and because he had been a sensitive boy and feared the ridicule above all else, he had come to fear these things that provoked the ridicule. Finally, he had come to fear fear itself, and it was in a desperate attempt to overcome this double fear that he had devoted himself – this in his late teens – to crag and mountain climbing: in this he had ultimately become so proficient, developed such a reputation, that father and brothers had come to treat him with respect and as an equal, and the ridicule had ceased. But the fear had not ceased, rather it had grown by what it fed on, and often, on a particularly difficult climb, he had all but fallen to his death, powerless in the grip of sheer, unreasoning terror. But this terror he had always sought, successfully so far, to conceal. As now. He was trying to overcome, to conceal that fear now. He was afraid of failing – in what he wasn't quite sure – of not measuring up to expectation: he was afraid of being afraid: and he was desperately afraid, above all things, of being seen, of being known to be afraid...

The startling, incredible blue of the Aegean; the soft, hazy silhouette of the Anatolian mountains against the washed-out cerulean of the sky; the heart-catching, magical blending of the blues and violets and purples and indigoes of the sun-soaked islands drifting lazily by, almost on the beam now; the iridescent rippling of the water tanned by the gentle, scent-laden breeze newly sprung from the south-east; the peaceful scene on deck, the reassuring, interminable thump-thump thump-thump of the old Kelvin engine... All was peace and quiet and contentment and warmth and languor, and it seemed impossible that anyone could be afraid. The world and the war were very far away that afternoon.

Or perhaps, after all, the war wasn't so far away. There were occasional pin-pricks – and constant reminders. Twice a German Arado seaplane had circled curiously overhead, and a Savoia and Fiat, flying in company, had altered course, dipped to have a look at them and flown off, apparently

satisfied: Italian planes, these, and probably based on Rhodes, they were almost certainly piloted by Germans who had rounded up their erstwhile Rhodian allies and put them in prison camps after the surrender of the Italian Government. In the morning they had passed within half a mile of a big German caique – it flew a German flag and bristled with mounted machine-guns and a two-pounder far up in the bows; and in the early afternoon a high-speed German launch had roared by so closely that their caique had rolled wickedly in the wash of its passing: Mallory and Andrea had shaken their fists and cursed loudly and fluently at the grinning sailors on deck. But there had been no attempts to molest or detain them: neither British nor German hesitated at any time to violate the neutrality of Turkish territorial waters, but by the strange quixotry of a tacit gentlemen's agreement hostilities between passing vessels and planes were almost unknown. Like the envoys of warring countries in a neutral capital, their behaviour ranged from the impeccably and frigidly polite to a very pointed unawareness of one another's existence.

These, then, were the pin-pricks – the visitation and by-goings, harmless though they were, of the ships and planes of the enemy. The other reminders that this was no peace but an illusion, an ephemeral and a frangible thing, were more permanent. Slowly the minute hands of their watches circled, and every tick took them nearer to that great wall of cliff, barely eight hours away, that had to be climbed somehow: and almost dead ahead now, and less than fifty miles distant, they could see the grim, jagged peaks of Navarone topping the shimmering horizon and reaching up darkly against the sapphired sky, desolate and remote and strangely threatening.

At half-past two in the afternoon the engine stopped. There had been no warning coughs or splutters or missed strokes. One moment the regular, reassuring thump-thump: the next, sudden, completely unexpected silence, oppressive and foreboding in its absoluteness.

Mallory was the first to reach the engine hatch.

'What's up, Brown?' His voice was sharp with anxiety. 'Engine broken down?'

'Not quite, sir.' Brown was still bent over the engine, his voice muffled. 'I shut it off just now.' He straightened his back, hoisted himself wearily through the hatchway, sat on deck with his feet dangling, sucking in great draughts of fresh air. Beneath the heavy tan his face was very pale.

Mallory looked at him closely.

'You look as if you had the fright of your life.'

'Not that.' Brown shook his head. 'For the past two-three hours I've been slowly poisoned down that ruddy hole. Only now I realise it.' He passed a hand across his brow and groaned. 'Top of my blinkin' head just about lifting off, sir. Carbon monoxide ain't a very healthy thing.'

'Exhaust leak?'

'Aye. But it's more than a leak now.' He pointed down at the engine. 'See that stand-pipe supporting that big iron ball above the engine – the water-cooler? That pipe's as thin as paper, must have been leaking above the bottom flange for hours. Blew out a bloody great hole a minute ago. Sparks, smoke and flames six inches long. Had to shut the damned thing off at once, sir.'

Mallory nodded in slow understanding.

'And now what? Can you repair it, Brown?'

'Not a chance, sir.' The shake of the head was very definite. 'Would have to be brazed or welded. But there's a spare down there among the scrap. Rusted to hell and about as shaky as the one that's on...I'll have a go, sir.'

'I'll give him a hand,' Miller volunteered.

'Thanks, Corporal. How long, Brown, do you think?'

'Lord only knows, sir. Two hours, maybe four. Most of the nuts and bolts are locked solid with rust: have to shear or saw 'em – and then hunt for others.'

Mallory said nothing. He turned away heavily, brought up beside Stevens who had abandoned the wheelhouse and was now bent over the sail locker. He looked up questioningly as Mallory approached.

Mallory nodded. 'Just get them out and up. Maybe four hours, Brown says. Andrea and I will do our landlubbery best to help.'

Two hours later, with the engine still out of commission, they were well outside territorial waters, closing on a big island some eight miles away to the WNW. The wind, warm and oppressive now, had backed to a darkening and thundery east, and with only a lug and a jib – all the sails they had found – bent to the foremast, they could make no way at all into it. Mallory had decided to make for the island – the chances of being observed there were far less than in the open sea. Anxiously he looked at his watch then stared back moodily at the receding safety of the Turkish shore. Then he stiffened, peered closely at the dark line of sea, land and sky that lay to the east.

'Andrea! Do you see –'

'I see it, Captain.' Andrea was at his shoulder. 'Caique. Three miles. Coming straight towards us,' he added softly.

'Coming straight towards us,' Mallory acquiesced. 'Tell Miller and Brown. Have them come here.'

Mallory wasted no time when they were all assembled.

'We're going to be stopped and investigated,' he said quickly. 'Unless I'm much mistaken, it's that big caique that passed us this morning. Heaven only knows how, but they've been tipped off and they're going to be as suspicious as hell. This'll be no kid-glove, hands-in-the-pockets inspection. They'll be armed to the teeth and hunting trouble. There's going to be no half-measures. Let's be quite clear about that. Either they go under or we do: we can't possibly survive an inspection – not with all the gear *we've* got aboard. And,' he added softly, 'we're not going to dump that gear.' Rapidly he explained his plans. Stevens, leaning out from the wheelhouse window, felt the old sick ache in his stomach, felt the blood leaving his face. He was glad of the protection of the wheelhouse that hid the lower part of his body: that old familiar tremor in his leg was back again. Even his voice was unsteady.

'But, sir – sir –'

'Yes, yes, what is it, Stevens?' Even in his hurry Mallory paused at the sight of the pale, set face, the bloodless nails clenched over the sill of the window.

'You – you can't do *that*, sir!' The voice burred harshly under the sharp edge of strain. For a moment his mouth worked soundlessly, then he rushed on. 'It's massacre, sir, it's – it's just murder!'

'Shut up, kid!' Miller growled.

'That'll do, Corporal!' Mallory said sharply. He looked at the American for a long moment then turned to Stevens, his eyes cold. 'Lieutenant, the whole concept of directing a successful war is aimed at placing your enemy at a disadvantage, at *not* giving him an even chance. We kill them or they kill us. They go under or we do – and a thousand men on Kheros. It's just as simple as that, Lieutenant. It's not even a question of conscience.'

For several seconds Stevens stared at Mallory in complete silence. He was vaguely aware that everyone was looking at him. In that instant he hated Mallory, could have killed him. He hated him because – suddenly he was aware that he hated him only for the remorseless logic of what he said. He stared down at his clenched hands. Mallory, the idol of every young mountaineer and cragsman in pre-war England, whose fantastic climbing exploits had made world headlines, in '38 and '39: Mallory, who had twice been baulked by the most atrocious ill-fortune from surprising Rommel in his desert headquarters: Mallory, who had three times refused promotion in order to stay with his beloved Cretans who worshipped him the other side of idolatry. Confusedly these thoughts tumbled through his mind and he looked up slowly, looked at the lean, sunburnt face, the sensitive, chiselled mouth, the heavy, dark eyebrows bar-straight over the lined brown eyes that could be so cold or so compassionate, and suddenly he felt ashamed, knew that Captain Mallory lay beyond both his understanding and his judgment.

‘I am very sorry, sir.’ He smiled faintly. ‘As Corporal Miller would say, I was talking out of turn.’ He looked aft at the caique arrowing up from the south-east. Again he felt the sick fear, but his voice was steady enough as he spoke. ‘I won’t let you down, sir.’

‘Good enough. I never thought you would.’ Mallory smiled in turn, looked at Miller and Brown. ‘Get the stuff ready and lay it out, will you? Casual, easy and keep it hidden. They’ll have the glasses on you.’

He turned away, walked for’ard. Andrea followed him.

‘You were very hard on the young man.’ It was neither criticism nor reproach – merely statement of fact.

‘I know.’ Mallory shrugged. ‘I didn’t like it either...I had to do it.’

‘I think you had,’ Andrea said slowly. ‘Yes, I think you had. But it was hard...Do you think they’ll use the big guns in the bows to stop us?’

‘Might – they haven’t turned back after us unless they’re pretty sure we’re up to something fishy. But the warning shot across the bows – they don’t go in for that Captain Teach stuff normally.’

Andrea wrinkled his brows.

‘Captain Teach?’

‘Never mind.’ Mallory smiled. ‘Time we were taking up position now. Remember, wait for me. You won’t have any trouble in hearing my signal,’ he finished dryly.

The creaming bow-wave died away to a gentle ripple, the throb of the heavy diesel muted to a distant murmur as the German boat slid alongside, barely six feet away. From where he sat on a fish-box on the port of the fo’c’sle, industriously sewing a button on to the old coat lying on the deck between his legs, Mallory could see six men, all dressed in the uniform of the regular Germany Navy – one crouched behind a belted Spandau mounted on its tripod just aft of the two-pounder, three others bunched amidships each armed with an automatic machine carbine – Schmeissers, he thought – the captain, a hard, cold-faced young lieutenant with the Iron Cross on his tunic, looking out the open door of the wheelhouse and, finally, a curious head peering over the edge of the engine-room hatch. From where he sat, Mallory couldn’t see the poop-deck – the intermittent ballooning of the lug-sail in the uncertain wind blocked his vision; but from the restricted fore-and-aft lateral sweep of the Spandau, hungrily traversing only the for’ard half of their one caique, he was reasonably sure that there was another machine-gunner similarly engaged on the German’s poop.

The hard-faced young lieutenant – a real product of the Hitler Jugend that one, Mallory thought – leaned out of the wheelhouse, cupped his hand to his mouth.

‘Lower your sails!’ he shouted.

Mallory stiffened, froze to immobility. The needle had jammed hard into the palm of his hand, but he didn’t even notice it. The lieutenant had spoken in English! Stevens was so young, so inexperienced. He’d fall for it, Mallory thought with a sudden sick certainty, he’s bound to fall for it.

But Stevens didn’t fall for it. He opened the door, leaned out, cupped his hand to his ear and gazed vacantly up to the sky, his mouth wide open. It was so perfect an imitation of dull-witted failure to catch or comprehend a shouted message that it was almost a caricature. Mallory could have hugged him. Not in his actions alone, but in his dark, shabby clothes and hair as blackly counterfeit as Miller’s, Stevens was the slow, suspicious island fisherman to the life.

‘Eh?’ he bawled.

‘Lower your sails! We are coming aboard!’ English again, Mallory noted; a persistent fellow this.

Stevens stared at him blankly, looked round helplessly at Andrea and Mallory: their faces registered a lack of comprehension as convincing as his own. He shrugged his shoulders in despair.

‘I am sorry, I do not understand German,’ he shouted. ‘Can you not speak my language?’ Stevens’s Greek was perfect, fluent and idiomatic. It was also, the Greek of Attica, not of the islands; but Mallory felt sure that the lieutenant wouldn’t know the difference.

He didn't. He shook his head in exasperation, called in slow, halting Greek: 'Stop your boat at once. We are coming aboard.'

'Stop my boat!' The indignation was so genuine, the accompanying flood of furious oaths so authentic, that even the lieutenant was momentarily taken aback. 'And why should I stop my boat for you, you – you –'

'You have ten seconds,' the lieutenant interrupted. He was on balance again, cold, precise. 'Then we will shoot.'

Stevens gestured in admission of defeat and turned to Andrea and Mallory.

'Our conquerors have spoken,' he said bitterly. 'Lower the sails.'

Quickly they loosened the sheets from the cleats at the foot of the mast. Mallory pulled the jib down, gathered the sail in his arms and squatted sullenly on the deck – he knew a dozen hostile eyes were watching him – close by the fish-box. The sail covering his knees and the old coat, his forearms on his thighs, he sat with head bowed and hands dangling between his knees, the picture of heart-struck dejection. The lug-sail, weighted by the boom at the top, came down with a rush. Andrea stepped over it, walked a couple of uncertain paces aft, then stopped, huge hands hanging emptily by his sides.

A sudden deepening of the muted throbbing of the diesel, a spin of the wheel and the big German caique was rubbing alongside. Quickly, but carefully enough to keep out of the line of fire of the mounted Spandaus – there was a second clearly visible now on the poop – the three men armed with the Schmeissers leapt aboard. Immediately one ran forward, whirled round level with the foremast, his automatic carbine circling gently to cover all of the crew. All except Mallory – and he was leaving Mallory in the safe hands of the Spandau gunner in the bows. Detachedly, Mallory admired the precision, the timing, the clockwork inevitability of an old routine.

He raised his head, looked around him with a slow, peasant indifference. Casey Brown was squatting on the deck abreast the engine-room, working on the big ball-silencer on top of the hatch-cover. Dusty Miller, two paces farther for'ard and with his brows furrowed in concentration, was laboriously cutting a section of metal from a little tin box, presumably to help in the engine repairs. He was holding the wire-cutting pliers in his left hand – and Miller, Mallory knew, was right-handed. Neither Stevens nor Andrea had moved. The man beside the foremast still stood there, eyes unwinking. The other two were walking slowly aft, had just passed Andrea, their carriage relaxed and easy, the bearing of men who know they have everything so completely under control that even the idea of trouble is ridiculous.

Carefully, coldly and precisely, at point-blank range and through the folds of both coat and sail, Mallory shot the Spandau machine-gunner through the heart, swung the still chattering Bren round and saw the guard by the mast crumple and die, half his chest torn away by the tearing slugs of the machine-gun. But the dead man was still on his feet, still had not hit the deck, when four things happened simultaneously. Casey Brown had had his hand on Miller's silenced automatic, lying concealed beneath the ball-silencer, for over a minute. Now he squeezed the trigger four times, for he wanted to mak' siccar; the after machine-gunner leaned forward tiredly over his tripod, lifeless fingers locked on the firing-guard. Miller crimped the three-second chemical fuse with the pliers, lobbed the tin box into the enemy engine-room, Stevens spun the armed stick-grenade into the opposite wheelhouse and Andrea, his great arms reaching out with all the speed and precision of striking cobras, swept the Schmeisser gunners' heads together with sickening force. And then all five men had hurled themselves to the deck and the German caique was erupting in a roar of flame and smoke and flying débris: gradually the echoes faded away over the sea and there was left only the whining stammer of the Spandau, emptying itself uselessly skyward; and then the belt jammed and the Aegean was as silent as ever, more silent than it had ever been.

Slowly, painfully, dazed by the sheer physical shock and the ear-shattering proximity of the twin explosions, Mallory pushed himself off the wooden deck and stood shakily on his feet. His first

conscious reaction was that of surprise, incredulity almost: the concussive blast of a grenade and a couple of lashed blocks of TNT, even at such close range, was far beyond anything he had expected.

The German boat was sinking, sinking fast. Miller's homemade bomb must have torn the bottom out of the engine-room. She was heavily on fire amidships, and for one dismayed instant Mallory had an apprehensive vision of towering black columns of smoke and enemy reconnaissance planes. But only for an instant: timbers and planking, tinder-dry and resinous, were burning furiously with hardly a trace of smoke, and the flaming, crumpling deck was already canted over sharply to port: she would be gone in seconds.

His eyes wandered to the shattered skeleton of the wheelhouse, and he caught his breath suddenly when he saw the lieutenant impaled on the splintered wreck of the wheel, a ghastly, mangled caricature of what had once been a human being, decapitated and wholly horrible: vaguely, some part of Mallory's mind registered the harsh sound of retching, violent and convulsive, coming from the wheelhouse, and he knew Stevens must have seen it too. From deep within the sinking caique came the muffled roar of rupturing fuel tanks: a flame-veined gout of oily black smoke erupted from the engine-room and the caique miraculously struggled back on even keel, her gunwales almost awash, and then the hissing waters had overflowed and overcome the decks and the twisting flames, and the caique was gone, her slender masts sliding vertically down and vanishing in a turbulent welter of creaming foam and oil-filmed bubbles. And now the Aegean was calm and peaceful again, as placid as if the caique had never been, and almost as empty: a few charred planks and an inverted helmet drifted lazily on the surface of the shimmering sea.

With a conscious effort of will, Mallory turned slowly to look to his own ship and his own men. Brown and Miller were on their feet, staring down in fascination at where the caique had been. Stevens was standing at the wheelhouse door. He, too, was unhurt, but his face was ashen: during the brief action he had been a man above himself, but the aftermath, the brief glimpse he'd had of the dead lieutenant had hit him badly. Andrea, bleeding from a gash on the cheek, was looking down at the two Schmeisser gunners lying at his feet. His face was expressionless. For a long moment Mallory looked at him, looked in slow understanding.

'Dead?' he asked quietly.

Andrea inclined his head.

'Yes.' His voice was heavy. 'I hit them too hard.'

Mallory turned away. Of all the men he had ever known, Andrea, he thought, had the most call to hate and to kill his enemies. And kill them he did, with a ruthless efficiency appalling in its single-mindedness and thoroughness of execution. But he rarely killed without regret, without the most bitter self-condemnation, for he did not believe that the lives of his fellow-men were his to take. A destroyer of his fellow-man, he loved his fellow-man above all things. A simple man, a good man, a killer with a kindly heart, he was for ever troubled by his conscience, ill at ease with his inner self. But over and above the wonderings and the reproaches, he was informed by an honesty of thought, by a clear-sighted wisdom which sprang from and transcended his innate simplicity. Andrea killed neither for revenge, nor from hate, nor nationalism, nor for the sake of any of the other 'isms' which self-seekers and fools and knaves employ as beguilement to the battlefield and justification for the slaughter of millions too young and too unknowing to comprehend the dreadful futility of it all. Andrea killed simply that better men might live.

'Anybody else hurt?' Mallory's voice was deliberately brisk, cheerful. 'Nobody? Good! Right, let's get under way as fast as possible. The farther and the faster we leave this place behind, the better for all of us.' He looked at his watch. 'Almost four o'clock – time for our routine check with Cairo. Just leave that scrap-yard of yours for a couple of minutes, Chief. See if you can pick them up.' He looked at the sky to the east, a sky now purple livid and threatening, and shook his head. 'Could be that the weather forecast might be worth hearing.'

It was. Reception was very poor – Brown blamed the violent static on the dark, convoluted thunderheads steadily creeping up astern, now overspreading almost half the sky – but adequate. Adequate enough to hear information they had never expected to hear, information that left them silenced, eyes stilled in troubled speculation. The tiny loud-speaker boomed and faded, boomed and faded, against the scratchy background of static.

‘Rhubarb calling Pimpernel! Rhubarb calling Pimpernel!’ These were the respective code names for Cairo and Mallory. ‘Are you receiving me?’

Brown tapped an acknowledgment. The speaker boomed again.

‘Rhubarb calling Pimpernel. Now X minus one. Repeat, X minus one.’ Mallory drew in his breath sharply. X – dawn on Saturday – had been the assumed date for the German attack on Kheros. It must have been advanced by one day – and Jensen was not the man to speak without certain knowledge. Friday, dawn – just over three days.

‘Send “X minus one understood”,’ Mallory said quietly.

‘Forecast, East Anglia,’ the impersonal voice went on: the Northern Sporades, Mallory knew. ‘Severe electrical storms probable this evening, with heavy rainfall. Visibility poor. Temperature falling, continuing to fall next twenty-four hours. Winds east to south-east, force six, locally eight, moderating early tomorrow.’

Mallory turned away, ducked under the billowing lugsail, walked slowly aft. What a set-up, he thought, what a bloody mess. Three days to go, engine u.s. and a first-class storm building up. He thought briefly, hopefully, of Squadron Leader Torrance’s low opinion of the backroom boys of the Met. Office, but the hope was never really born. It couldn’t be, not unless he was blind. The steep-piled buttresses of the thunderheads towered up darkly terrifying, now almost directly above.

‘Looks pretty bad, huh?’ The slow nasal drawl came from immediately behind him. There was something oddly reassuring about that measured voice, about the steadiness of the washed-out blue of the eyes enmeshed in a spider’s web of fine wrinkles.

‘It’s not so good,’ Mallory admitted.

‘What’s all this force eight business, boss?’

‘A wind scale,’ Mallory explained. ‘If you’re in a boat this size and you’re good and tired of life, you can’t beat a force eight wind.’

Miller nodded dolefully.

‘I knew it. I might have known. And me swearing they’d never get me on a gawddamned boat again.’ He brooded a while, sighed, slid his legs over the engine-room hatchway, jerked his thumb in the direction of the nearest island, now less than three miles away. ‘That doesn’t look so hot, either.’

‘Not from here,’ Mallory agreed. ‘But the chart shows a creek with a right-angle bend. It’ll break the sea and the wind.’

‘Inhabited?’

‘Probably.’

‘Germans?’

‘Probably.’

Miller shook his head in despair and descended to help Brown. Forty minutes later, in the semi-darkness of the overcast evening and in torrential rain, lance-straight and strangely chill, the anchor of the caique rattled down between the green walls of the forest, a dank and dripping forest, hostile in its silent indifference.

FOUR Monday Evening 1700–2330

‘Brilliant!’ said Mallory bitterly. ‘Ruddy well brilliant! “Come into my parlour said the spider to the fly.”’ He swore in chagrin and exasperated disgust, eased aside the edge of the tarpaulin that covered the forward hatchway, peered out through the slackening curtain of rain and took a second and longer look at the rocky bluff that elbowed out into the bend of the creek, shutting them off from the sea. There was no difficulty in seeing now, none at all: the drenching cloudburst had yielded to a gentle drizzle, and grey and white cloud streamers, shredding in the lifting wind, had already pursued the blackly towering cumulonimbus over the far horizon. In a clear band of sky far to the west, the sinking, flame-red sun was balanced on the rim of the sea. From the shadowed waters of the creek it was invisible, but its presence unmistakable from the gold-shot gauze of the falling rain, high above their heads.

The same golden rays highlighted the crumbling old watch-tower on the very point of the cliff, a hundred feet above the river. They burnished its fine-grained white Parian marble, mellowed it to a delicate rose: they gleamed on the glittering steel, the evil mouths of the Spandau machine-guns reaching out from the slotted embrasures in the massive walls, illumined the hooked cross of the swastika on the flag that streamed out stiffly from the staff above the parapet. Solid even in its decay, impregnable in its position, commanding in its lofty outlook, the tower completely dominated both waterborne approaches, from the sea and, upriver, down the narrow, winding channel that lay between the moored caique and the foot of the cliff.

Slowly, reluctantly almost, Mallory turned away and gently lowered the tarpaulin. His face was grim as he turned round to Andrea and Stevens, ill-defined shadows in the twilight gloom of the cabin.

‘Brilliant!’ he repeated. ‘Sheer genius. Mastermind Mallory. Probably the only bloody creek within a hundred miles – and in a hundred islands – with a German guard post on it. And of course I had to go and pick it. Let’s have another look at that chart, will you, Stevens?’

Stevens passed it across, watched Mallory study it in the pale light filtering in under the tarpaulin, leaned back against the bulkhead and drew heavily on his cigarette. It tasted foul, stale and acrid, but the tobacco was fresh enough, he knew. The old, sick fear was back again, as strongly as ever. He looked at the great bulk of Andrea across from him, felt an illogical resentment towards him for having spotted the emplacement a few minutes ago. They’ll have cannon up there, he thought dully, they’re bound to have cannon – couldn’t control the creek otherwise. He gripped his thigh fiercely, just above the knee, but the tremor lay too deep to be controlled: he blessed the merciful darkness of the tiny cabin. But his voice was casual enough as he spoke.

‘You’re wasting your time, sir, looking at that chart and blaming yourself. This is the only possible anchorage within hours of sailing time from here. With that wind there was nowhere else we could have gone.’

‘Exactly. That’s just it.’ Mallory folded the chart, handed it back. ‘There was nowhere else we could have gone. There was nowhere else anyone could have gone. Must be a very popular port in a storm, this – a fact which must have become apparent to the Germans a long, long time ago. That’s why I should have known they were almost bound to have a post here. However, spilt milk, as you say.’ He raised his voice. ‘Chief?’

‘Hallo!’ Brown’s muffled voice carried faintly from the depths of the engine-room.

‘How’s it going?’

‘Not too bad, sir. Assembling it now.’

Mallory nodded in relief.

‘How long?’ he called. ‘An hour?’

‘Aye, easy, sir.’

‘An hour.’ Again Mallory glanced through the tarpaulin, looked back at Andrea and Stevens. ‘Just about right. We’ll leave in an hour. Dark enough to give us some protection from our friends up top, but enough light left to navigate our way out of this damned corkscrew of a channel.’

‘Do you think they’ll try to stop us, sir?’ Stevens’s voice was just too casual, too matter of fact. He was pretty sure Mallory would notice.

‘It’s unlikely they’ll line the banks and give us three hearty cheers,’ Mallory said dryly. ‘How many men do you reckon they’ll have up there, Andrea?’

‘I’ve seen two moving around,’ Andrea said thoughtfully. ‘Maybe three or four altogether, Captain. A small post. The Germans don’t waste men on these.’

‘I think you’re about right,’ Mallory agreed. ‘Most of them’ll be in the garrison in the village – about seven miles from here, according to the chart, and due west. It’s not likely –’

He broke off sharply, stiffened in rigid attention. Again the call came, louder this time, imperative in its tone. Cursing himself for his negligence in not posting a guard – such carelessness would have cost him his life in Crete – Mallory pulled the tarpaulin aside, clambered slowly on to the deck. He carried no arms, but a half-empty bottle of Moselle dangled from his left hand; as part of a plan prepared before they had left Alexandria, he’d snatched it from a locker at the foot of the tiny companionway.

He lurched convincingly across the deck, grabbed at a stay in time to save himself from falling overboard. Insolently he stared down at the figure on the bank, less than ten yards away – it hadn’t mattered about a guard, Mallory realised, for the soldier carried his automatic carbine slung over his shoulder – insolently he tilted the wine to his mouth and swallowed deeply before condescending to talk to him.

He could see the mounting anger in the lean, tanned face of the young German below him. Mallory ignored it. Slowly, an inherent contempt in the gesture, he dragged the frayed sleeve of his black jacket across his lips, looked the soldier even more slowly up and down in a minutely provocative inspection as disdainful as it was prolonged.

‘Well?’ he asked truculently in the slow speech of the islands. ‘What the hell do you want?’

Even in the deepening dusk he could see the knuckles whitening on the stock of the carbine, and for an instant Mallory thought he had gone too far. He knew he was in no danger – all noise in the engine-room had ceased, and Dusty Miller’s hand was never far from his silenced automatic – but he didn’t want trouble. Not just yet. Not while there were a couple of manned Spandaus in that watch-tower.

With an almost visible effort the young soldier regained his control. It needed little help from the imagination to see the draining anger, the first tentative stirrings of hesitation and bewilderment. It was the reaction Mallory had hoped for. Greeks – even half-drunk Greeks – didn’t talk to their over-lords like that – not unless they had an overpoweringly good reason.

‘What vessel is this?’ The Greek was slow and halting but passable. ‘Where are you bound for?’

Mallory tilted the bottle again, smacked his lips in noisy satisfaction. He held the bottle at arm’s length, regarded it with a loving respect.

‘One thing about you Germans,’ he confided loudly. ‘You do know how to make a fine wine. I’ll wager *you* can’t lay your hands on this stuff, eh? And the swill they’re making up above’ – the island term for the mainland – ‘is so full of resin that it’s only good for lighting fires.’ He thought for a moment. ‘Of course, if you know the right people in the islands, they *might* let you have some ouzo. But some of us can get ouzo *and* the best Hocks *and* the best Moselles.’

The soldier wrinkled his face in disgust. Like almost every fighting man he despised Quislings, even when they were on his side: in Greece they were very few indeed.

‘I asked you a question,’ he said coldly. ‘What vessel, and where bound?’

‘The caique *Aigion*,’ Mallory replied loftily. ‘In ballast, for Samos. Under orders,’ he said significantly.

‘Whose orders?’ the soldier demanded. Shrewdly Mallory judged the confidence as superficial only. The guard was impressed in spite of himself.

‘Herr Commandant in Vathy. General Graebel,’ Mallory said softly. ‘You will have heard of the Herr General before, yes?’ He was on safe ground here, Mallory knew. The reputation of Graebel, both as a paratroop commander and an iron disciplinarian, had spread far beyond these islands.

Even in the half-light Mallory could have sworn that the guard’s complexion turned paler. But he was dogged enough.

‘You have papers? Letters of authority?’

Mallory sighed wearily, looked over his shoulder.

‘Andrea!’ he bawled.

‘What do you want?’ Andrea’s great bulk loomed through the hatchway. He had heard every word that passed, had taken his cue from Mallory: a newly-opened wine bottle was almost engulfed in one vast hand and he was scowling hugely. ‘Can’t you see I’m busy?’ he asked surlily. He stopped short at the sight of the German and scowled again, irritably. ‘And what does this halfling want?’

‘Our passes and letters of authority from Herr General. They’re down below.’

Andrea disappeared, grumbling deep in his throat. A rope was thrown ashore, the stern pulled in against the sluggish current and the papers passed over. The papers – a set different from those to be used if emergency arose in Navarone – proved to be satisfactory, eminently so. Mallory would have been surprised had they been anything else. The preparation of these, even down to the photostatic facsimile of General Graebel’s signature, was all in the day’s work for Jensen’s bureau in Cairo.

The soldier folded the papers, handed them back with a muttered word of thanks. He was only a kid, Mallory could see now – if he was more than nineteen his looks belied him. A pleasant, open-faced kid – of a different stamp altogether from the young fanatics of the SS Panzer Division – and far too thin. Mallory’s chief reaction was one of relief: he would have hated to have to kill a boy like this. But he had to find out all he could. He signalled to Stevens to hand him up the almost empty crate of Moselle. Jensen, he mused, had been very thorough indeed: the man had literally thought of everything... Mallory gestured in the direction of the watch-tower.

‘How many of you are up there?’ he asked.

The boy was instantly suspicious. His face had tightened up, stilled in hostile surmise.

‘Why do you want to know?’ he asked stiffly.

Mallory groaned, lifted his hands in despair, turned sadly to Andrea.

‘You see what it is to be one of them?’ he asked in mournful complaint. ‘Trust nobody. Think everyone is as twisted as...’ He broke off hurriedly, turned to the soldier again. ‘It’s just that we don’t want to have the same trouble every time we come in here,’ he explained. ‘We’ll be back in Samos in a couple of days, and we’ve still another case of Moselle to work through. General Graebel keeps his – ah – special envoys well supplied... It must be thirsty work up there in the sun. Come on, now, a bottle each. How many bottles?’

The reassuring mention that they would be back again, the equally reassuring mention of Graebel’s name, plus, probably, the attraction of the offer and his comrades’ reaction if he told them he had refused it, tipped the balance, overcame scruples and suspicions.

‘There are only three of us,’ he said grudgingly.

‘Three it is,’ Mallory said cheerfully. ‘We’ll bring you some Hock next time we return.’ He tilted his own bottle. ‘*Prosit!*’ he said, an islander proud of airing his German, and then, more proudly still, ‘*Auf Wiedersehen!*’

The boy murmured something in return. He stood hesitating for a moment, slightly shame-faced, then wheeled abruptly, walked off slowly along the river bank, clutching his bottles of Moselle.

‘So!’ Mallory said thoughtfully. ‘There are only three of them. That should make things easier –’

‘Well done, sir!’ It was Stevens who interrupted, his voice warm, his face alive with admiration. ‘Jolly good show!’

‘Jolly good show!’ Miller mimicked. He heaved his lanky length over the coaming of the engine hatchway, “‘Good” be damned! I couldn’t understand a gawddamned word, but for my money that rates an Oscar. That was terrific, boss!’

‘Thank you, one and all,’ Mallory murmured. ‘But I’m afraid the congratulations are a bit premature.’ The sudden chill in his voice struck at them, so that their eyes aligned along his pointing finger even before he went on. ‘Take a look,’ he said quietly.

The young soldier had halted suddenly about two hundred yards along the bank, looked into the forest on his left in startled surprise, then dived in among the trees. For a moment the watchers on the boat could see another soldier, talking excitedly to the boy and gesticulating in the direction of their boat, and then both were gone, lost in the gloom of the forest.

‘That’s torn it!’ Mallory said softly. He turned away. ‘Right, that’s enough. Back to where you were. It would look fishy if we ignored that incident altogether, but it would look a damned sight fishier if we paid too much attention to it. Don’t let’s appear to be holding a conference.’

Miller slipped down into the engine-room with Brown, and Stevens went back to the little for’ard cabin. Mallory and Andrea remained on deck, bottles in their hands. The rain had stopped now, completely, but the wind was still rising, climbing the scale with imperceptible steadiness, beginning to bend the tops of the tallest of the pines. Temporarily the bluff was affording them almost complete protection. Mallory deliberately shut his mind to what it must be like outside. They had to put out to sea – Spandaus permitting – and that was that.

‘What do you think has happened, sir?’ Stevens’s voice carried up from the gloom of the cabin.

‘Pretty obvious, isn’t it?’ Mallory asked. He spoke loudly enough for all to hear. ‘They’ve been tipped off. Don’t ask me how. This is the second time – and their suspicions are going to be considerably reinforced by the absence of a report from the caique that was sent to investigate us. She was carrying a wireless aerial, remember?’

‘But why should they get so damned suspicious all of a sudden?’ Miller asked. ‘It doesn’t make sense to me, boss.’

‘Must be in radio contact with their HQ. Or a telephone – probably a telephone. They’ve just been given the old tic-tac. Consternation on all sides.’

‘So mebbe they’ll be sending a small army over from their HQ to deal with us,’ Miller said lugubriously.

Mallory shook his head definitely. His mind was working quickly and well, and he felt oddly certain, confident of himself.

‘No, not a chance. Seven miles as the crow flies. Ten, maybe twelve miles over rough hill and forest tracks – and in pitch darkness. They wouldn’t think of it.’ He waved his bottle in the direction of the watch-tower. ‘Tonight’s their big night.’

‘So we can expect the Spandaus to open up any minute?’ Again the abnormal matter-of-factness of Stevens’s voice.

Mallory shook his head a second time.

‘They won’t. I’m positive of that. No matter how suspicious they may be, how certain they are that we’re the big bad wolf, they are going to be shaken to the core when that kid tells them we’re carrying papers and letters of authority signed by General Graebel himself. For all they know, curtains for us may be the firing squad for them. Unlikely, but you get the general idea. So they’re going to contact HQ, and the commandant on a small island like this isn’t going to take a chance on rubbing out a bunch of characters who may be the special envoys of the Herr General himself. So what? So he codes a message and radios it to Vathy in Samos and bites his nails off to the elbow till a message comes back saying Graebel has never heard of us and why the hell haven’t we all been shot dead?’ Mallory looked at the luminous dial of his watch. ‘I’d say we have at least half an hour.’

‘And meantime we all sit around with our little bits of paper and pencil and write out our last wills and testaments.’ Miller scowled. ‘No percentage in that, boss. We gotta *do* somethin’.’

Mallory grinned.

‘Don’t worry, Corporal, we are going to do something. We’re going to hold a nice little bottle party, right here on the poop.’

The last words of their song – a shockingly corrupted Grecian version of ‘Lilli Marlene’, and their third song in the past few minutes – died away in the evening air. Mallory doubted whether more than faint snatches of the singing would be carried to the watch-tower against the wind, but the rhythmical stamping of feet and waving of bottles were in themselves sufficient evidence of drunken musical hilarity to all but the totally blind and deaf. Mallory grinned to himself as he thought of the complete confusion and uncertainty the Germans in the tower must have been feeling then. This was not the behaviour of enemy spies, especially enemy spies who know that suspicions had been aroused and that their time was running out.

Mallory tilted the bottle to his mouth, held it there for several seconds, then set it down again, the wine untasted. He looked round slowly at the three men squatting there with him on the poop, Miller, Stevens and Brown. Andrea was not there, but he didn’t have to turn his head to look for him. Andrea, he knew, was crouched in the shelter of the wheelhouse, a waterproof bag with grenades and a revolver strapped to his back.

‘Right!’ Mallory said crisply. ‘Now’s your big chance for *your* Oscar. Let’s make this as convincing as we can.’ He bent forward, jabbed his finger into Miller’s chest and shouted angrily at him.

Miller shouted back. For a few moments they sat there, gesticulating angrily and, to all appearances, quarrelling furiously with each other. Then Miller was on his feet, swaying in drunken imbalance as he leaned threateningly over Mallory, clenched fists ready to strike. He stood back as Mallory struggled to his feet, and in a moment they were fighting fiercely, raining apparently heavy blows on each other. Then a haymaker from the American sent Mallory reeling back to crash convincingly against the wheelhouse.

‘Right, Andrea.’ He spoke quietly, without looking round. ‘This is it. Five seconds. Good luck.’ He scrambled to his feet, picked up a bottle by the neck and rushed at Miller, upraised arm and bludgeon swinging fiercely down. Miller dodged, swung a vicious foot, and Mallory roared in pain as his shins caught on the edge of the bulwarks. Silhouetted against the pale gleam of the creek, he stood poised for a second, arms flailing wildly, then plunged heavily, with a loud splash, into the waters of the creek.

For the next half-minute – it would take about that time for Andrea to swim underwater round the next upstream corner of the creek – everything was a confusion and a bedlam of noise. Mallory trod water as he tried to pull himself aboard: Miller had seized a boathook and was trying to smash it down on his head: and the others, on their feet now, had flung their arms round Miller, trying to restrain him: finally they managed to knock him off his feet, pin him to the deck and help the dripping Mallory aboard. A minute later, after the immemorial fashion of drunken men, the two combatants had shaken hands with one another and were sitting on the engine-room hatch, arms round each other’s shoulders and drinking in perfect amity from the same freshly-opened bottle of wine.

‘Very nicely done,’ Mallory said approvingly. ‘Very nicely indeed. An Oscar, definitely, for Corporal Miller.’

Dusty Miller said nothing. Taciturn and depressed, he looked moodily at the bottle in his hand. At last he stirred.

‘I don’t like it, boss,’ he muttered unhappily. ‘I don’t like the set-up one little bit. You shoulda let me go with Andrea. It’s three to one up there, and they’re waiting and ready.’ He looked accusingly at Mallory. ‘Dammit to hell, boss, you’re always telling us how desperately important this mission is!’

‘I know,’ Mallory said quietly. ‘That’s why I didn’t send you with him. That’s why none of us has gone with him. We’d only be a liability to him, get in his way.’ Mallory shook his head. ‘You don’t know Andrea, Dusty.’ It was the first time Mallory had called him that: Miller was warmed by

the unexpected familiarity, secretly pleased. 'None of you know him. But I know him.' He gestured towards the watch-tower, its square-cut lines in sharp silhouette against the darkening sky. 'Just a big, fat, good-natured chap, always laughing and joking.' Mallory paused, shook his head again, went on slowly. 'He's up there now, padding through that forest like a cat, the biggest and most dangerous cat you'll ever see. Unless they offer no resistance – Andrea never kills unnecessarily – when I send him up there after these three poor bastards I'm executing them just as surely as if they were in the electric chair and I was pulling the switch.'

In spite of himself Miller was impressed, profoundly so.

'Known him a long time, boss, huh?' It was half question, half statement.

'A long time. Andrea was in the Albanian war – he was in the regular army. They tell me the Italians went in terror of him – his long-range patrols against the Iulia division, the Wolves of Tuscany, did more to wreck the Italian morale in Albania than any other single factor. I've heard a good many stories about them – not from Andrea – and they're all incredible. And they're all true. But it was afterwards I met him, when we were trying to hold the Servia Pass. I was a very junior liaison lieutenant in the Anzac brigade at the time. Andrea' – he paused deliberately for effect – 'Andrea was a lieutenant-colonel in the 19th Greek Motorised Division.'

'A *what?*' Miller demanded in astonishment. Stevens and Brown were equally incredulous.

'You heard me. Lieutenant-colonel. Outranks me by a fairish bit, you might say.' He smiled at them quizzically. 'Puts Andrea in rather a different light, doesn't it?'

They nodded silently but said nothing. The genial, hail-fellow Andrea – a good-natured, almost simpleminded buffoon – a senior army officer. The idea had come too suddenly, was too incongruous for easy assimilation and immediate comprehension. But, gradually, it began to make sense to them. It explained many things about Andrea to them – his repose, his confidence, the unerring sureness of his lightning reactions, and, above all, the implicit faith Mallory had in him, the respect he showed for Andrea's opinions whenever he consulted him, which was frequently. Without surprise now, Miller slowly recalled that he'd never yet heard Mallory give Andrea a direct order. And Mallory never hesitated to pull his rank, when necessary.

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