

Sardinian Silver Book Excerpt

One

A quarter to seven on a fresh, blustery morning in February. I went out on deck thinking it should have been warmer, warmer at least than Genoa, some five hundred kilometres behind to the north. The *m/n Torres* had come to calmer water since passing a long peninsula that jutted out from the Sardinian mainland, now finally in reach after twelve hours of overnight tossing. In the ship's bar, I'd found a few unshaven figures sipping at strong black coffee, but in the world of sea and wind outside the door I was alone, except for those who'd been sick.

I leaned on the rail, staring at the sea and the distant coastline, featureless in this pale morning. I recalled how yesterday evening I'd stood watching the lights of Genoa disappear into the night behind; then, with the still gentle plunging up and down of the black Mediterranean beneath the ship, I'd set about exploring, immersing myself in its atmosphere. A small cabin shared with incomprehensible, rough-looking strangers. Sard handicraft in showcases in the corridors. In the bar, I'd studied a map of the island on one wall and then sat watching television, something novel against the incongruous background. For the first time I realized that another language was being spoken around me besides Italian: Sard, which I, a scholar of languages, hadn't heard of until a month ago. In fact, I'd known nothing about Sardinia at all, except that it was an island below Corsica, shaped almost square, like a distorted shoebox stood on one end. And now I was being taken, impossibly, to a place that didn't exist outside an atlas.

This morning Sardinia existed, stretching in a thin wedge of grey over the horizon. Somewhere ahead was a place that would have people, its own colour. No longer would it be just a black dot on the map labelled *Porto Torres*.

I'd worked in a travel business for two years, not counting my summers as a rep during my university vacations—which meant staying at one of the company's resorts, meeting tourists on their arrival, seeing them into their hotels, and generally being available if they had problems. I immediately thrilled to the idea of Sardinia when my boss in London told me I was to go there, although, at twenty-four, I was too sophisticated to admit it.

He didn't seem worried about my unfamiliarity with the place, or that I didn't speak much Italian. "You've got a degree in languages, haven't you? You can learn Italian when you get there. Sardinia's going to be the fashionable place for tourism in a few years." He was right. I learned Italian well, and Sardinia would later become fashionable.

At the time, of course, my youthful romanticism about exotic countries was inextricably bound up with the idea of involvement with a local woman—the best way of getting to know a place, I told myself. But with my inborn fear of appearing anything other than an English gentleman, this was difficult. Particularly in Sardinia.

The journey there was trying enough. In the 1960s flying was a luxury, and the company sent me by rail, second class, which meant a Channel crossing from Dover to

Ostend, followed by a night of travelling south across Europe, trying to sleep sitting upright in a crowded compartment. A routine trip, until I was jerked awake the next morning at the first stop across the Italian border. Domodossola, I read on the dull brown station signs, a name I knew well from my days of working in the office.

I was about to close my eyes again when I saw a pile of luggage being unloaded onto the platform—and there was my suitcase, which I'd sent through to Genoa. A phlegmatic British Railways official at Victoria had assured me it would travel on the same train as myself, but had said nothing about it being taken off at the border. I jumped to my feet, pushed past the slumbering forms in the compartment, struggled into the corridor, and made for the door.

On the platform I was about to grab my case when a man in a plain grey suit appeared before me, holding up an arm with a red band tied around it. Italian customs, I understood him to say.

I had to open the case while he rummaged through it, taking his time.

I'd just got it closed again when I heard the clanking of wheels behind me. My train was leaving—with my briefcase and coat still on board, en route to Milan, where I had to change to the only train that would get me to Genoa in time to catch the evening ship to Sardinia.

Trying not to panic, I lugged my heavy suitcase into the station to find the departures board. A local train for Milan was due in half an hour, but it would leave me a mere twenty minutes to make my connection. It was late, of course, and by the time it finally pulled into the Milan station I was standing impatiently with my hand on the door, ready to make a run for it, with just six minutes to retrieve my briefcase and coat from some lost luggage office and then find the other train.

Still dragging my heavy suitcase, I plunged along the platform, and to my relief saw the office straightaway. After bursting in, I found the man in charge was talking on the phone. At least my coat and briefcase were on a luggage rack behind the counter.

I hadn't enough Italian to explain. "*Deux minutes!*" I shouted in French, gesturing urgently.

Then I was running desperately across the station, struggling with all my luggage to the platform, where the Genoa train was pulling away. A young man lifted my cases from me as I heaved them aboard, and then seized me by the arms and pulled me inside.

* * *

That was all behind me, I thought, as I stood by the ship's rail in the morning breeze. Now, the same young man joined me.

"Oh, the Englishman, good morning!" He was taller than I, with a rather triangular, intelligent face and an attractive shyness. We'd started to talk on the train—his English wasn't bad except for the stilted intonation—and he'd turned out to be Sardinian, the first I'd ever met.

I asked his name.

"Gavino Palmas." His face was all activity as he explained that his surname was Spanish, since many Sards were of Spanish descent; that Saint Gavino, a martyr in Roman times, was the patron saint of Porto Torres.

"Arthur Fraser," I introduced myself.

He didn't catch it the first time, but laughed loudly to be sociable. "Mister Arthur, then. And you call me just Gavino."

I grasped the hand he'd offered but then, uncertain, partially withdrawn.

He shook mine warmly and smiled, eager that I should be happy at our arrival. His words came falling over themselves. "You have seen Sardinia? The island we have passed, Asinara. It is—how do you say it?—a prison place. You know, bad men, robbers, bandits, murderers. We get them here in Sardinia. Alas. At Alghero it is more beautiful."

"How do you know I'm going to Alghero?"

"All the foreigners go to Alghero. I myself, I go to Sássari."

The second largest town on the island, where I had to change trains yet again. Stressed on the first syllable, not the second: knowledge I'd acquired in my local library.

"And the capital's Cagliari?" I said, careful to stress it on the first syllable too.

"Cagliari. The Sardis say it is the most beautiful city in Italy. Those who've never been there. To Italy, I mean." As though it were a foreign country.

As the ship groaned on toward the land, my companion told me he worked in a lawyer's office. He laughed, making a joke of it. "It's very dull. Life's like that for us Sardis. I ought to have left for the continent before it was too late. There's no future in Sardinia."

He explained that he'd been away on a study tour of the continent—Rome, Florence, Bologna, Milan, but not outside Italy—and his sombre face brightened. He spoke hastily, with the long, drawn-out explanations of a child. "This was my visit first to the continent, imagine. I have often wished that I was born Roman instead of Sard, but only now I know what is wrong. We're really very backward. You'll see for yourself once you've become tired of the easiness and—how do you say it?—superficial pleasantness of life here."

As the coastline became more distinct, Gavino's enthusiasm returned. "But look there, you can see the port! Come to the other side, you'll see more." We pushed through the ship's vestibule, crowded with people and luggage. "That is where the beautiful beaches are, along that coast."

The superficial pleasantness of life. Wide sands against a background of low hills. Sun. Blue sea. Ahead of us was a long harbour wall with a tower and a light on top, and the masts of fishing boats clustering behind it.

"Porto Torres."

The crowd on deck was growing. The tower approached ever closer until the sea carried it past. In the harbour mouth a tiny boat came out to meet us, almost disappearing behind a wave, then reappeared, dangerously close. The *Torres* lowered a thick noose of rope to be seized from under its bow. Engines stopped, the tug made off in the other direction, engines started again, and we were swinging round, toward a quay surmounted by a huge gantry looming up from the side. Down below on the dockside another crowd was shouting and waving, with women in shawls and porters in blue uniforms in front of piles of crates and enormous bottles in wickerwork casings. A surge from the water below, and the gantry was already lifting one of the gangways to place it against the ship. I struggled down it, pushing through the people thronging on the quayside, busy with their own, Sard, lives. Porto Torres.

I followed Gavino to another train. Climbing high steps, finding room for cases, sinking back into soft yet unbearably cramped seats. The ship, the last surviving link with the continent, was now only part of the background, giving pride of place to the stone walls, cacti, and sea through the window.

The doors rattled shut, and the train started to move lazily, stopping again at the town station. When it left again, Gavino started jumping back and forth to point out the Roman ruins on either side of the line. "Look, if you turn back now you will see the Roman bridge, with the sea beyond it."

The barren green countryside, the stony land beside the railway, and the huge cacti made everything seem exotic. I loved it all.

A couple of men passed down the central aisle, and Gavino shouted out to them with the peculiarly Italian "O-ui" sound. A brief exchange of enthusiastic, meaningless words as the men continued down the train.

"*Ciao*," Gavino shouted after them.

He let his shoulders slump and his mouth drop. He was disappointed not to be able to introduce his English friend. Suddenly his mood had changed, and I was embarrassed for him, recognizing perhaps but not yet accepting that Italians had little of the Anglo-Saxon reserve about expressing their feelings.

For a while he was silent, and I, too, said nothing, content to watch out the window and listen to the strange sounds of Sard from the other passengers.

Around the shaking train stretched miles of olive trees. Gavino took a card and a pen from his pocket. "I will give you my address. When you are in Sassari you will come to visit me. And I will show you something of Sardinia. I will take you to Porto Torres properly, to Castelsardo, Tempio, and La Costa Smeralda perhaps. And this is my office address and phone number."

I took his card and he gave me another so I could write down my address in Alghero as well. Gavino put it away with a glow of pleasure. "Oh, but we come to Sassari. Here you change, and I must leave you."

I'd been aware of the town we were approaching and of a skyscraper that stuck out incongruously from its centre, with other buildings clinging onto it. The train drew into a station surprisingly large for an island I hadn't imagined to have railways at all. Gavino led me through a surge of Italians on the platform to another train, chocolate-brown and more bus-like than the first, bearing a large yellow placard "Sassari—Alghero."

Gavino was serious, bowing over my hand. "Mister Arthur, I thank you infinitely for your company. It has been a great pleasure, and please, when you come to Sassari, I shall be delighted to have the honour if you come and call on me."

Two

When I arrived in Alghero, I was surprised to find a young man with a neat little moustache waiting for me on the platform. From his clothes and casual sportsmanlike manner, he was clearly English.

“Arthur Fraser, I presume,” he said, offering his hand. “My name’s Jim Fielding. You probably won’t have heard of me.”

I hadn’t and was a little annoyed that my private excitement at arriving in a strange place had been intruded upon. “Don’t say our firm’s got someone else here I hadn’t bargained on!”

It turned out that he worked for a rival company. “We were ahead of you there, you must admit. Not that I give a damn for it anyway. I’m only doing this to have a year’s break from college. Decided to come out a few weeks early, have some time wandering around by myself. But come along for some coffee. I presume you haven’t had breakfast?”

“What about my cases?”

He strolled over to a taxi, had a few words with the driver, and returned. “He’ll look after them. Your hotel will sort it out.”

I followed behind him to a bar across the street, where we remained standing as he casually ordered two coffees.

“How did you know I was arriving?”

“Hmm? Oh, I had a letter from Maurice.”

“Maurice?”

“Maurice Winter, your Italian manager.” He distractedly filled his coffee with sugar. “You know him surely? A good friend of mine.”

I explained that I’d never actually met him. Taking his time, Jim dug into his pocket, took out a whole pile of things he placed beside him, and finally handed over a grubby typewritten envelope. “Maurice gave it to me when I saw him in Rome. Asked me to come along and meet you. Look after you a bit, like.” He leaned his elbows on the bar and started fiddling with his moustache. “You’ll enjoy it here. Not too many hotels to bother with and ideal for having a good time. But then, I can tell you all you need to know tomorrow.”

“You’re just an amateur in this business, then? Still at university?”

“Hmm? Graduated last year. Just missed a first. Italian language and literature. I’m going back to do a Ph.D., but I wanted some practical experience first. You speak Italian?”

“Sort of.”

“It’s a wonderful language. *Beautiful!*”

It turned out we were both from Cambridge, and I soon decided that his know-it-all manner was only a pose. He was justifiably proud of having got himself a Sard girlfriend in defiance of local custom.

“But we must go. These women, they don’t like to be kept waiting. Marcella in particular.”

We plunged into a maze of narrow streets between houses several storeys high, where tiers of washing hung out over the street excluded most of the light. Jim mentioned casually that this was typical.

“Oh, but I forgot to tell you.” There was another long pause as he sauntered along. Someone perhaps had once told him to create expectancy in his audience and he’d never forgotten the advice. “The Americans are here too. Their rep’s called Isabelle, or Isabella—I can never make out which. She’s quite a character. Everyone in the island knows Isabelle. You’ll meet her soon enough. But this is your hotel, on the corner here.”

After introducing me as though I were his new assistant, Jim quickly departed, leaving the manager to make the more lengthy introductions.

Expressions of good will, enthusiasm over what a wonderful country England was, listening to a long list of the places the manager knew—boring, but important. It was half an hour before I was in my room, pleasantly large, with one tattered carpet on an otherwise bare tile floor.

I sat down on the bed and took out the letter from Maurice Winter, a friendly note to wish me good luck and give some useful background information. Then I looked up and saw the ceiling: a magnificent blue, with yellow and red stars and a number of plump angels floating ponderously across it, with vegetation entwined around the edges. Sitting on my bed, I reflected that all this was at last Sardinia, which had already been populated for me by at least two characters.

It was still only half past eleven. There was a knock at the door and a third character came in. A maid.

“*Scusi*.” She smiled eagerly, speaking loudly and slowly, expecting me not to understand. “You have unpacked? No? Then I will help you.”

I was aware of her physical presence. Were her eyes expressing friendliness or mockery? I wasn’t sure. Her features were coarse and she was badly dressed. Must have been older than myself, nearly thirty. Her hands were dirty, and so was her tattered red cardigan. Evidently she thought I hadn’t understood and came nearer, pointing at herself and then at me: “I ... help ... you.”

With my English timidity I refused, afraid of the impression I might make. Here was just the type of girl I’d like to get into bed with, but all I could do was watch her, cautiously.

She laughed, drawing her mouth wide into her cheeks, her teeth half open, almost jeering. Then ran her hand through her tangled hair and pretended to be indignant. “I ... know ... hang up clothes.” She scowled, still speaking in infinitives.

I made the excuse that I wanted to rest.

She seemed satisfied but added “I ... do ... very well,” drawing herself up proudly. Her bust, I thought, was too large, but her very earthiness—or was it just dirt?—excited me.

She let her mouth open mockingly. “You like me, yes?” She stretched again, her eyes shining. Realizing she’d caught me off guard, she slapped her hands down on her knees, laughed triumphantly, and turned to go out of the door. “Later I help you unpack!”

I recovered sufficiently to call after her. “What’s your name?”

She gave another grin and said, slowly again, “Te-re-sa.” Then she disappeared out of the door, uttering a stream of words I didn’t understand.

Lunch, siesta, strolls around the town, dinner in the hotel restaurant—those first days before the tourists started to arrive soon merged with other memories. Alghero was a typical southern port, with its fishing boats, elegant palm-lined avenue, and the poorer, bare white houses under orange-tiled roofs. Further away were the beaches of white sand and a greenish sea, which, when the sun slipped from behind its filtering clouds, would be transformed into the brightest of ultramarines. It was a lazy life for a while, and establishing professional contacts took little effort. My Italian improved rapidly. Only I felt I didn't quite belong to this country yet and was impatient to do so.

My sense of dignity nearly spoiled things for me. One evening as I went into the hotel dining room, the head waiter announced that I was now to eat with the staff. Insulted and ready to demand my rights, I stalked after him through the kitchen to a large room behind it.

Sitting around an enormous wooden table in a group of shouting, grabbing activity were a number of the younger members of the staff, while a little old woman of about seventy ran around them. I recognized a couple of the porters—and Teresa, whom I hadn't seen since her offer to help me unpack. She laughed tauntingly and shouted out "Oh, the Englishman," letting her spaghetti dangle from her lips.

The waiter was introducing the others before I had a chance to protest. "Carlo and Franco, the porters. Elena, Graziella, Teresa, Maria-Grazia, the maids."

Teresa gave another cackle and placed her hands on her hips, swinging round on her chair ostentatiously.

"And this is the housekeeper, Signora Anna-Maria."

The old woman, smiling up at me respectfully, came forward to shake hands. "I have a fine family, have I not? Beautiful girls, well made, look for yourself."

One of the porters made a remark in Sard, laughing at the old lady, who almost before he'd finished speaking trotted over to him and cuffed him with her arm, but her eyes were smiling. "To teach you good manners. Don't take any notice of them. They're badly bred, the lot of them."

"I'm not badly bred!" Teresa protested.

Franco retorted, "Yes, you are! *Sei mal-educata, mal-educata!*"

He stepped back out of the way as Teresa sprang to her feet, pulling at his hair, laughing wildly, with a stream of words I couldn't understand. Impatient to explain my offended dignity, I still paused to admire her. The side of her forehead was disfigured by what seemed to be a permanent burn mark. In a few years' time she'd be the typical rough peasant woman I'd never look at again, but now I imagined removing her tattered clothes—once I'd established that I should eat in the dining room.

Franco had soon recovered, letting out with his fist and catching Teresa on the arm. Pretending to be afraid, she fled to the other side of the table, flinging chairs in his way as he and the others chased after her. Trapping her in the corner, he pummelled her without mercy while she gave loud, exaggerated cries of pain. But soon she was back at him, clawing in front of her and then skipping out of his reach. Signora Anna-Maria stood laughing, sometimes trying to catch Teresa herself, telling them all to behave. "What will the Englishman think?"

Let me join in, too, my desire whispered, as I imagined how Teresa would fight with me in bed as my hands sought their prize—while my dignity still wanted to make

my little speech. Finally, I asked if it was normal for a tourist representative to eat with the servants.

The old lady took my arm. “You’re the first guest we’ve had. You should eat outside, of course, but you’re going to be one of us, after all. Although if it offends you, of course you can eat outside.”

Dignity relaxed. The old lady clasped her hands together when I said I’d be happy to stay.

Teresa slapped her hands on the table. “Now we can tell him how we decided to invite him.”

“Behave yourselves!” Signora Anna-Maria commanded.

Carlo explained. “We didn’t know, you see. Then Franco was outside your room this morning. ‘He’s one of us,’ he told us. ‘I quite clearly heard him ... in bed.’”

Laughter while the old lady gave a click of disapproval. I was unsure of the verb Carlo had used. “*Scorregiare?*”

Teresa turned her back, bent forward, patted her behind with her hand, blew out her cheeks and emitted a loud rasp through her lips.

Signora Anna-Maria pretended to cuff her once more. “Go away, you filthy girl! *Sei mal-educata!*”

Teresa stuck out her tongue and in a gesture of mock gallantry pulled out a chair for me, half curtsying as she indicated for me to sit down.

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Jim’s moustache looked as if it needed trimming. “Been waiting long?”

“Twenty damn minutes.” I’d been filling in time by seeing how often I could make the attractive girl behind the pastry counter look at me. Twice since I’d arrived. Did that represent my prospects for Sardinia?

“That’s all right then. In Sardinia it’s rare for anyone to be less than half an hour late. Glad you got my note.”

He strolled over to the counter, sticking out his chin inquisitively as he gave the order. Avoiding the other patrons, he brought back a coffee and a pastry, then sat down with me and proceeded to light a very English-looking pipe.

“I thought I’d better give you some gen about this place.”

His use of slang was old-fashioned. “Is there much to tell me?”

“Oh, no. The main stuff you’ll obviously find out for yourself. Sorry, I didn’t want to offend you. OK?”

I listened, looking at the long rows of wine bottles behind the counter, with outline maps of Sardinia decorating their labels. Jim had one interesting idea, namely that the three reps—he, Isabelle, and myself—although working for different companies, should pool resources so that individually we might have more time off, all of us looking after one another’s tourists. It sounded all right to me, as long as our bosses didn’t know.

“What’s the talent like here?” I interrupted him.

He grinned. “Well, the tourists are often daddy’s pampered little daughters without daddy and longing to have a good time. Unfortunately, though, the local men with their flowery manner of speech and dark adoring eyes are often more of an attraction than we are. Not that it concerns me anyway. I’m lucky in having a Sard girlfriend.”

“Yes, you’ve told me. So how is it with the Sard?”

“Hmm? Well Marcella’s modern in outlook, something of a rarity here. You may manage to find someone if you try hard enough, but with a respectable girl it’s almost impossible. I’ve just been lucky.” He made his customary long pause. “All women indoors by nine, and if you go out with a woman more than once—if you manage to go out with one at all—you’re engaged to her. If you object, you’ll have her brother standing behind her in church with a shotgun to make sure of it. Even the few modern ones daren’t offend tradition too much. Marcella’s usually spoken of as ‘that girl with the wicked continental ideas.’ No brother, luckily.”

“It’s that bad?”

Jim puffed away complacently on his pipe. “Marcella told me about a girl who asked her priest if it was wrong to kiss her fiancé. He said it was OK as long as she kept her teeth tightly closed, but if she parted them it was a mortal sin. It was in a small village, admittedly—and the church, thank God, has less influence in the towns. But even there the attitudes are still pretty strict.”

“What do the men do then? Prostitutes?” I asked casually, so as not to show my interest. I’d never had the courage to go with a prostitute, but the idea of it excited me.

“Hmm?” Another long pause. “Yes, if they can’t get hold of some English or German girl. All the men go with prostitutes, I’d say, without exception.” Jim screwed up his eyes and gave expression to an odd fastidiousness. “That’s something I find rather distasteful. A lavatory act, I’d call it. But it’s a recognized profession, though no ‘nice’ girl will admit she knows of its existence.”

I was about to ask about a girl like Teresa, but we were interrupted by a sudden shout from the doorway. “Hi there!”

The whole café stopped to stare as a tall, haggard-looking woman of about forty in an off-white raincoat made a theatrical entry and launched herself toward us. “Now I guess you must be Art Fraser!”

“Arthur his name is.” Jim had evidently remembered that I didn’t like being called Art. “This is Isabelle.”

“Isabella Schwartz,” she said loudly, pronouncing it as ‘sworts’ and grabbing hold of my hand. Then she let go and flung out her arm in what seemed to be intended as a gesture of patriotism. “American to the core, in spite of my name. Great to meet you, Art!”

The others in the café were exchanging glances.

Her pose changed and she looked flustered. “Look, I’m in one hell of a rush. You didn’t see Alberto, did you, Jim? It’s damn rude of me, but I’ll see you this afternoon, OK?” She seized my hand again and released it before making an equally dramatic departure.

“Exit Isabelle,” Jim announced. The audience relaxed. “We’re due to meet her later, to show you something of the countryside. Her boyfriend’s got a Giulietta, which she drives at about a hundred and forty.”

“Sounds fine. Who’s Alberto?”

“No idea. He’s not the one who owns the car. Which reminds me ... ” He waited for several puffs of his pipe before telling me the two of us had a chance to get a secondhand car if I was interested.

“I’ll think about it.”

“The trouble with this place,” Jim said as we wandered back through the narrow streets, “is that most of the inhabitants have never been out of the island. You just can’t tell them that life’s different elsewhere, in England, for example. England’s the same as the continent, and the continent’s ‘immoral.’ ‘We’re more honest than the continent,’ they’ll say, ‘if we go out with a girl we marry her.’ It’s a fantastic place. It depends a little where you are, though. Sassari, for example, is terribly dull. Alghero’s a bit more liberal because it’s ‘contaminated’ by the tourists.”

I returned to the hotel for lunch, but it was quieter since the staff all came in at different times. I didn’t see Teresa at all.

Isabelle turned up screeching in the Giulietta early in the afternoon. I sat next to her, while Jim struggled into the space behind the two seats.

“Where are we going?” She flung the car into gear and drove off, only to come to a violent halt the next moment as she nearly hit a cyclist.

After a stream of ludicrous Italian she set off again. We took the coastal road to the west, and soon we were following a narrow reed-lined isthmus between the sea and an inland lake that shimmered like a watercolour painting. “Fertilia,” Jim’s voice came from the back. “The Roman bridge.”

Halfway across a channel from the lake into the sea stretched a low stone bridge over several arches, but then it stopped short, as if some catastrophe had overcome it, its last column rising in sharp relief from the blue and green below. The typical Roman brick and red of the tiles, the prosaic strangeness of the past—its eternal stillness soon shattered, however, by the American desire to reduce antiquity to a photograph. Three shots with Isabelle standing up in the driver’s seat (a muffled “goddamn it” as she pressed the button on the second of them), and the car jerked forward again.

After passing the main airport, little more than a single runway, we left the highway for a white, chalky road leading among cactus-hedged fields emblazoned with the stumps of vines. Past hamlets with impossible names—Palmadula, Biancareddu, Casteddu—until we reached the northern coast and headed back toward the east. Now Isabelle got into an argument with a farmer, whose cow had the effrontery to stop the car and then, in grand style, relieved itself against the side. Her argument consisted largely of gestures and the words “*Io ... carabinieri,*” pronounced as though they were the name of a Chicago gangster, while her unshaven protagonist defended himself in Sard. Neither understood the other and the conversation ended in another roar of the Giulietta’s exhaust.

“Second Roman bridge,” she yelled.

It was the one I’d seen before, from the train. Soon we were in Porto Torres, driving through streets where shawled women outside their doors warmed themselves over bowls of sand with little piles of glowing charcoal in the middle.

“What you might call an underdeveloped country,” Isabelle pointed out. “You see the DDT painted on the houses? They only stamped out malaria a few years ago—the good old Rockefeller Foundation. Sure glad they did. My arm got lousy with mosquito bites last year.”

“Isabelle came to Sardinia last year, too,” Jim explained. “Beat all the other firms to it. Come to think of it, it’s the one place the Russians didn’t get to first! Pity really. Communism would do a lot of good to this place.”

He started talking about the theoretical advantages of communism. There was something placidly reassuring about Jim: God was in his heaven and all was right with the world, as long as it could be reduced to a formula of words. He was still talking long after we'd left Porto Torres.

Olive trees and stone walls guarded us from the road, then more cacti and open countryside. "You see that?" Isabelle shouted, swerving violently. "A new rag!"

"A what?"

Jim chuckled. "The tower. She means a nuraghe."

It was no more than an unheeded symmetry of stones in a field, like a ruined Martello tower, but mysterious, exciting. I'd read how there were several thousand nuraghi in the island, towers whose purpose remained unclear, the remains of Sardinia's earliest known civilization. As always it was the atmosphere, not the historical details, that appealed to me. I could almost have waited for a nuraghic warrior to appear on horseback from behind it, but Isabelle, the tourist site having been ticked off, accelerated.

Roman remains, exotic scenery, local customs, a prehistoric civilization—I loved everything. To assimilate the strange and belong, in a society different from my own, had always been my desire. For the first time I realized that one day I'd have to leave Sardinia and, irrationally, it made me afraid.

The top of a rise, then down again. Sassari, the single-skyscraper town, was approaching. Past stone houses, then a sudden corner and the station where I'd changed trains. I remembered Gavino.

We drove up a long narrow street, the top end of which had no room for more than a single file of traffic and was alternately one-way, as controlled by traffic lights. On a wall was another sign indicating the pavements at the side were one-way for pedestrians as well. After a fork in the road, we emerged at the foot of the skyscraper. Through a square filled with palm trees, a barracks on the left, a short, colonnaded street leading to a larger open square—and here was a pompous Vittorio Emanuele II guarded by four sentinel palms with their branches drooping to match the stone feathers of his helmet.

"The Piazza d'Italia, inevitably," Jim commented. "Let's have a drink. My legs are cramped."

We left the car and went to a bar on the edge of the square, just under the colonnade.

"I must say I like Sassári," Isabelle said, stressing it on the wrong syllable. "It's got *atmosphere*, not like Alghero, full of foreigners."

I'd been thinking of Gavino and wasn't really surprised when he walked in. He flung up his arms in amazement, let out an "Eh!" of joy, and came rushing over. I introduced him and invited him to sit down.

He was delighted. He explained where his office was, spoke of all the things there were to see in Sassari, said how friendly the people there were, unlike those in Cagliari, the capital. I had to tell him in detail of my impressions. Then at the first pause in the conversation, he was suddenly anxious he might be keeping me from my two charming friends. I slapped him on the back, reassuring him, at which he went red with pleasure and, changing to Italian, suggested we should use the intimate *tu* form of address. "Oh ... but if you will not be offended?" He laughed again when I responded, using the *tu* form myself.

His shyness, his fear of saying something wrong, his self-conscious politeness, reminded me of myself as an undergraduate before I'd learnt to protect myself by a wall of superiority. I felt a vague unease, realizing there was so much I had in common with Gavino, things in myself I wanted to overcome.

"But your friends are getting impatient. I must leave you. But come and call on me whenever you come to Sassari." He left quickly, first paying for all the drinks.

"Nice chap, your friend," Jim said. "The famous Sard hospitality. But would you mind if we made a move? I'm supposed to be meeting Marcella this evening."

