

have to try again, she thought wearily. It was all up to her now. Wolff had left the houseboat, so there was nothing Vandam could do even after somebody untied him. Elene, on her own, had to try to stop Wolff contacting Rommel, and if possible steal the key to the code. The idea was ridiculous, shooting for the moon. Still she had to try, for the Nazis were at the gates, and she was Jewish.

She thought again of her father, walking to Jerusalem.

Wolff stopped the car. Elene realised where they were. She said: 'This is Vandam's house!'

'Yes.'

'But he isn't there.'

'No.' Wolff smiled bleakly. 'But Billy is.'

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Anwar el-Sadat was delighted with the radio. 'It's a Hallicrafter/Skychallenger,' he told Kemel. 'American.' He plugged it in to test it, and pronounced it very powerful, but said it needed new switches. Sadat was serving with the Signals Corps at al-Jabal al-Asfar, near Cairo, and he proposed to take the transmitter to the workshop there and fix it up. Kemel explained that he had to broadcast at midnight on the pre-set wavelength. Meanwhile Sadat hid the radio in the oven in the kitchen.

Kemel left Sadat's home in Kubri al-Qubbah and headed back toward the houseboat. He did not know much about radios, and it was no longer his problem. Now he had to cover up his role in the events of the night.

His story would have to tally with Nesbah's, so he would have to admit that Nesbah had called him. He would say that he had gone to Zamalek to investigate, in case 'Major Vandam' was an impostor. He had searched the towpath and the bushes for Vandam, and then he,

too, had been knocked on the head. But he would not have stayed unconscious all these hours: he would have to say he had been tied up. Yes, he would say he had been tied up and had just managed to free himself. Then he and Vandam would board the houseboat - and find it empty.

It would serve.

He parked his car and went cautiously down to the towpath. Looking into the shrubbery, he figured out roughly where he had left Vandam. He went into the bushes thirty or forty yards away from that spot. He lay down on the ground and rolled over, to make his clothes dirty, then he rubbed some of the sandy soil on his face and ran his fingers through his hair. Then, rubbing his wrists to make them look sore, he went in search of Vandam.

He found him exactly where he had left him. The bonds were still tight and the gag still in place. Vandam looked at Kemel with wide, staring eyes.

Kemel said: 'My God, they got you, too!'

He bent down, removed the gag, and began to untie Vandam. 'Nesbah contacted me,' he explained. 'I came down here looking for you, and next thing I knew, I woke up bound and gagged. That was hours ago. I just got free.'

Vandam said nothing.

Kemel threw the rope aside. Vandam stood up stiffly. Kemel said: 'How do you feel?'

'I'm all right.'

'Let's board the houseboat and see what we find,' Kemel said. He turned around.

*

As soon as Kemel turned his back, Vandam stepped forward and hit ~~him~~ him as hard as he possibly could with an edge-of-the-hand

blow to the back of the neck. It might have killed Kemel, but Vandam did not care. Vandam had been bound and gagged, and he had been unable to see the towpath; but he had been able to hear: 'I'm Kemel. You must be Wolff.' and he knew that Kemel had betrayed him. Since then he had been seething, and all his pent-up anger went into the blow. Kemel fell down, stunned.

Vandam rolled him over, searched him, and found the gun. He used the rope that had bound his own hands to tie Kemel's hands behind his back. Then he slapped Kemel's face until the policeman came round.

'Get up,' Vandam said.

Kemel looked blank, then fear came into his eyes. 'What are you doing?'

Vandam kicked him. 'Kicking you,' he said. 'Get up.'

Kemel struggled to his feet.

'Turn around.'

Kemel turned around. Vandam took hold of Kemel's collar with his left hand, keeping the gun in his right.

'Move.'

They walked to the houseboat. Vandam pushed Kemel ahead, up the gangplank and across the deck.

'Open the hatch.'

Kemel put the toe of his shoe into the handle of the hatch and opened it.

'Go down.'

Awkwardly, with his hands tied, Kemel descended the ladder. Vandam bent down to look inside. There was nobody there. He went quickly down the ladder. Pushing Kemel to one side, he pulled back the curtain, covering the space behind with the gun.

He saw Sonja in bed, sleeping.

'Get in there,' he told Kemel.

Kemel went through and stood beside the head of the bed.

'Wake her.'

Kemel grasped Sonja's shoulder and shook her. She turned over, rolling away from him, without opening her eyes. Vandam realised vaguely that she was naked. Kemel reached over and tweaked her nose. She opened her eyes and sat up immediately, looking cross. She recognised Kemel, then she saw Vandam with the gun.

She said: 'What's going on?'

Then she and Vandam said simultaneously: 'Where's Wolff?'

Vandam was quite sure she was not dissembling. It was clear now that Kemel had warned Wolff, and Wolff had fled without waking Sonja. Presumably he had taken Elene with him - although Vandam could not imagine why.

Vandam walked around the bed to stand on the side opposite Kemel. He put the gun to Sonja's chest, just below her left breast. He spoke to Kemel. 'I'm going to ask you a question. If you give the wrong answer, she dies. Understand?'

Kemel nodded.

Vandam said: 'Did Wolff send a radio message at midnight last night?'

'No!' Sonja screamed. 'No, he didn't, he didn't!'

Kemel said gravely: 'I looked through the porthole at exactly midnight. All three of them were in bed.'

'All three?'

'Yes.'

Vandam was disgusted with himself for letting Elene in for this. And he had thought she was safe, because there was another woman around!

He put the thought out of his mind. Were they telling the

truth - had Wolff failed to radio to Rommel last night? He could not think how to check. He could only hope it was true.

'Get dressed,' he told Sonja.

She got off the bed and hurriedly put on a dress. Keeping both of them covered, Vandam went to the prow of the boat and looked through the little doorway. He saw a tiny bathroom with two small portholes.

'Get in there, both of you.'

Kemel and Sonja went into the bathroom. Wolff closed the door on them and began to search the houseboat. He opened all the cupboards and drawers, throwing their contents on the floor. He stripped the bed. He found a sharp knife in the kitchen area and slashed the mattress and the upholstery of the couch. He went through all the papers in the escritoire. He emptied the icebox. He went up on deck and cleared out the lockers. He ^{checked} ~~looked~~ all around the outside of the hull, looking for a ~~hanging~~ rope dangling into the water.

After half an hour he was sure that the houseboat contained no radio, no copy of Rebecca, and no code key.

He got the two prisoners out of the bathroom. In one of the deck lockers he had found some rope. He ~~made~~ ~~Kemel~~ tied Sonja's hands, then roped Sonja and Kemel together.

He marched them off the boat, along the towpath and up to the street. They walked to the bridge, where he hailed a taxi. He put Sonja and Kemel in the back then, keeping the gun pointed at them, he got in the front beside the wide-eyed, frightened Arab driver.

'GHQ,' he told the driver. The two prisoners would have to be interrogated, but really there were only two questions to be asked: Where was Wolff? And: Where was Elene?

*

Sitting in the car, Wolff took hold of Elene's wrist. She tried to pull away but his grip was too strong. He drew out his knife and ran its blade lightly across the back of her hand. The knife was very sharp. Elene stared at her hand in horror. At first there was just a line like a pencil mark. Then blood welled up in the cut, and there was a sharp pain. She gasped.

Wolff said: 'You're to stay close to me and say nothing.

~~Otherwise~~ Suddenly Elene hated him. She looked into his eyes. 'Otherwise you'll cut me?' she said with all the scorn she could muster.

'No,' he said. 'Otherwise I'll cut Billy.'

He released her wrist and got out of the car. Elene sat still, feeling helpless. What could she do against this strong, ruthless man? She took a little handkerchief from her bag and wrapped it around her ^{bleeding} hand.

Impatiently, Wolff came around to her side of the car and pulled open the door. He took hold of her upper arm and made her get out of the car. Then, still holding her, he crossed the road to Vandam's house.

They walked up the short drive and rang the bell. Elene remembered the last time she had stood in this portico waiting for the door to open. It seemed years ago, but it was only days. Since then she had learned that Vandam had been married, and that his wife had died; and she had made love to Vandam; and he had failed to send her flowers - how could she have made such a fuss about that? - and they had found Wolff; and -

The door opened. Elene recognised Gaafar, Vandam's servant. Gaafar remembered her, too, and said: 'Good morning, Madame.'

'Hello, Gaafar.'

Wolff said: 'Good morning, Gaafar. I'm Captain John. The Major asked me to come around. Let us in, would you?'

'Of course, sir.' Gaafar stood aside. Wolff, still gripping Elene's arm, stepped into the house. Gaafar closed the door. Elene remembered this tiled hall. Gaafar said: 'I hope the Major is all right ... '

'Yes, he's fine,' Wolff said. 'But he can't get home this morning, so he asked me to come round, tell you that he's well, and drive Billy to school.'

Elene was aghast. Of course, it had been obvious, since Wolff mentioned Billy's name, that he planned to kidnap the boy; but the idea had not sunk in, Elene had refused to contemplate it. What could she do? She wanted to shout No, Gaafar, he's lying, take Billy and get away, run, run! But Wolff had the knife, and Gaafar was old, and Wolff would get Billy anyway.

Gaafar seemed to hesitate. Wolff said: 'All right, Gaafar, snap it up. We haven't got all day.'

'Yes, sir,' Gaafar said, reacting with the reflex of an Egyptian servant addressed in an authoritative manner by a European. 'Billy is just finishing his breakfast. Would you wait in here for a moment?' He opened the drawing-room door.

Wolff propelled Elene into the room and at last let go of her arm. Elene looked at the upholstery, the wallpaper, the marble fireplace and the Tatler photograph of Angela Vandam: these things had the eerie ~~familiarity~~ look of familiar ~~things~~ objects seen in a nightmare. Angela Vandam would have known what to do, she thought miserably. 'Don't be ridiculous!' she would have said; then, raising an imperious arm, she would have told Wolff to get out of her house. Elene shook her head to dispel the fantasy: Angela would have been as helpless as she.

Wolff sat down at the writing desk. He opened a drawer, took out a writing-pad and a pencil, and began to write.

Elene wondered what Gaafar might do. Was it possible he might call GHQ to check with Billy's father? Egyptians were very reluctant to make phone calls to GHQ, Elene knew: Gaafar would have trouble getting past the switchboard operators and secretaries. She looked around, and saw that anyway the phone was here in this room, so that if Gaafar tried, Wolff would know and stop him.

'Why did you bring me here?' she cried. Frustration and fear made her voice shrill.

Wolff looked up from his writing. 'To keep the boy quiet. We've got a long way to go.'

'Leave Billy here,' she pleaded. 'He's a child.'

'Vandam's child,' Wolff said with a smile.

'You don't need him.'

'Vandam may be able to guess where I'm going,' Wolff said.

'I want to make sure he doesn't come after me.'

'Do you really think he'll sit at home while you have his son?'

Wolff appeared to consider the point. 'I hope so,' he said finally. 'Anyway, what have I got to lose? If I don't take the boy he'll definitely come after me.'

Elene fought back tears. 'Haven't you got any pity?'

'Not really, no.'

'I don't think you're doing this to make Vandam stay home. I think you're doing it out of spite. You're thinking about the anguish you'll cause him, and you love it. You're a crude, twisted, loathsome man.'

'Perhaps you're right.'

'You're sick.'

'That's enough!' Wolff reddened slightly. He appeared to calm

himself with an effort. 'Shut up while I'm writing.'

Elene forced herself to concentrate. They were going on a long journey. He was afraid Vandam would follow them. He had told Kemel he had another wireless set. Vandam might be able to guess where they were going. At the end of the journey, surely, there was the spare radio, with a copy of Rebecca and a copy of the key to the code. Somehow she had to help Vandam follow them, so that he could capture the key. If Vandam could guess their destination, Elene thought, then so could I. Where would Wolff have kept a spare radio? It was a long journey away. He must have hidden one somewhere before he reached Cairo. It might be somewhere in the desert, or somewhere between here and Assyut. Maybe -

Billy came in. 'Hello,' he said to Elene. 'Did you bring me that book?'

She did not know what he was talking about. 'Book?' She stared at him, thinking that he was still very much a child, despite his grown-up ways. He wore grey flannel shorts and ^{a white} ~~XXXXXXXXXXXX~~ shirt, and there was no hair on the smooth skin of his bare forearms. He was carrying a school satchel and wearing a school tie.

'You forgot,' he said, and looked betrayed. 'You were going to lend me a detective story by Simeonon.'

'I did forget. I'm sorry.'

'Will you bring it next time you come?'

'Of course.'

Wolff stood up. 'Hello, Billy,' he said with a smile. 'I'm Captain John.'

Billy shook hands and said: 'How do you do, sir.'

'Your father asked me to tell you he's very busy indeed.'

'He always comes home for breakfast,' Billy said.

'Not today. He's pretty busy coping with old Rommel, you know.'

'Has he been in another fight?'

Wolff hesitated. 'Matter of fact he has, but he's okay. He got a bump on the head.'

Billy seemed more proud than worried, Elene observed.

Gaafar came in and spoke to Wolff. 'You are sure, sir, that the Major said you were to take the boy to school?'

He is suspicious, Elene thought.

'Of course,' Wolff said. 'Is something wrong?'

'No, but I am responsible for Billy, and we don't actually know you ... '

'But you know Elene,' Wolff said. 'She was with me when Major Vandam spoke to me, weren't you, Elene?' Wolff stared at her and touched himself under the left arm, where the sheath was.

'Yes,' Elene said miserably.

Wolff said: 'However, you're quite right to be cautious, Gaafar. Perhaps you should call GHQ and speak to the Major yourself.' He indicated the phone.

Gaafar hesitated, then said: 'I'm sure that won't be necessary, sir. As you say, we do know Madame.'

Elene thought: So now it's all my fault.

Gaafar went out.

Wolff spoke to Elene in rapid Arabic: 'Keep the boy quiet for a minute.' He continued writing.

Elene looked at Billy's satchel, and had the glimmer of an idea. 'Show me your school books,' she said.

Billy looked at her as if she were crazy.

'Come on,' she said. The satchel was open, and an atlas stuck out. She reached for it. 'What are you doing in geography?'

'The Norwegian fjords.'

Elene saw Wolff finish writing and put the sheet of paper in

an envelope. He licked the flap, sealed the envelope, and put it in his pocket.

'Let's find Norway,' Elene said. She flipped the pages of the atlas.

Wolff picked up the telephone and dialled. He looked at Elene, then looked away again.

Elene found the map of Egypt.

Billy said: 'But that's - '

Elene put a finger to her lips. Billy frowned at her. She said: 'Scandinavia, yes, but Norway is in Scandinavia, look.' She unwrapped the handkerchief from around her hand. Billy stared at the cut. With her fingernail Elene opened the cut and made it bleed again. Billy seemed about to speak, so she touched his lips and shook her head.

Elene was sure Wolff was going to Assyut. It was a likely guess, and Wolff had said he was afraid Vandam would correctly guess their destination. As she thought this, she heard Wolff say into the telephone: 'Hello? Give me the time of the train to Assyut.'

Elene dipped her finger in the blood from her hand. With three strokes, she drew an arrow in blood on Billy's map of Egypt, with the point of the arrow on the town of Assyut. She closed the atlas. She used the handkerchief to smear blood on the cover of the book, then pushed the book behind her.

Wolff said: 'Yes - and what time does it arrive?'

Elene said: 'But why are there fjords in Norway and not in Egypt?'

Billy seemed dumbstruck. He was staring at her hand. She had to make him snap out of it before he gave her away. She said: 'Listen, did you ever read an Agatha Christie story called The Clue of the Bloodstained Atlas?'

'No, I never heard - '

'It's very clever, the way the detective is able to figure everything out on the basis of that one clue.'

He frowned at her, but instead of the frown of the utterly amazed, it was the frown of one who is working something out.

Wolff put down the phone and stood up. 'Let's go,' he said. 'You don't want to be late for school, Billy.' He went to the door and opened it.

Billy picked up his satchel and went out. Elene stood up, dreading that Wolff would spot the atlas.

'Come on,' he said impatiently.

She went through the door and he followed her. Billy was on the porch already. There was a little pile of letters on a kidney-shaped table in the hall. Elene saw Wolff drop his envelope on top of the pile.

They went out through the front door.

Wolff asked Elene: 'Can you drive?'

'Yes,' she answered, then cursed herself for thinking slowly - she should have said No.

'You two get in the front,' Wolff instructed. He got in the back.

As she pulled away, Elene saw Wolff lean forward. He said: 'See this?'

She looked down. He was showing the knife to Billy.

'Yes,' Billy said in an unsteady voice.

Wolff said: 'If you make trouble, I'll cut your head off.'

Billy began to cry.

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'Stand to attention!' Vandam barked.

Kemel stood to attention.

The interrogation room was bare but for a table. Vandam was carrying a chair in one hand and a cup of tea in the other. Jakes followed him in with another chair and a notebook. They made themselves comfortable while Kemel stood still.

Vandam said: 'Your name is Kefid Abdul Kemel and you are a Detective Superintendent with the Cairo police.'

'Yes,' Kemel said, relaxing slightly.

'Attention!' Jakes yelled. 'Stand straight boy!'

Kemel came to attention again.

Vandam sipped his tea. He was tired, and the hot, sweet drink gave him energy. 'At my request you posted surveillance on the houseboat Jihan in Zamalek.'

Jakes shouted: 'Answer the Major!'

'Yes,' Kemel said.

'Last night you received a call from the officer on surveillance at about eleven o'clock.'

'Yes.'

'What did he say to you?'

'He said that Major Vandam had come to the towpath and sent him to summon assistance.'

'Sir!' said Jakes. 'To summon assistance, sir!'

'To summon assistance, sir.'

Vandam said: 'And what did you do?'

'I went personally to the towpath to investigate, sir.'

'And then?'

'I was struck on the head and knocked unconscious. When I recovered I was bound hand and foot. It took me several hours to

free myself. Then I freed Major Vandam, whereupon he attacked me.'

Jakes stood up and went close to Kemel. 'You're a bloody lying little bloody wog!' Kemel took a pace back. 'Stand forward!' Jakes shouted. 'You're a lying little wog, what are you?' Kemel said nothing.

Vandam said: 'Listen, Kemel. As things stand you're going to be shot for spying. If you tell us all you know, you could get off with a prison sentence. Be sensible. Now, you came down to the towpath and knocked me out, didn't you?'

'No, sir.'

'If you tell us where Wolff has gone, we'll let you see your wife.'

Kemel said nothing.

Vandam stood up. 'All right, Jakes,' he said. 'Bring in the wife on suspicion of spying.'

Kemel said: 'Typical British justice.'

Vandam went out. He waited outside the door for Jakes. When the captain came out, Vandam said: 'He's a policeman, he knows the techniques. He'll break, but not today.'

'Do you want me to arrest the wife?' Jakes asked.

'Not yet. Maybe later.'

They walked a few yards to another cell. Vandam said: 'Is everything ready here?'

'Yes.'

'Okay.' He opened the door and went in. This room was not so bare. Sonja sat on a hard chair, wearing a coarse grey prison dress. Beside her stood a woman army officer who would have scared Vandam if he had been her prisoner. She was short and stout, with a hard masculine face and short grey hair. There was a cot in one corner and a cold-water basin in the other.

As Vandam walked in the woman officer said: 'Stand up!'

Vandam and Jakes sat down. Vandam said: 'Sit down, Sonja.'

The woman officer pushed Sonja into the chair.

Vandam said: 'You are Sonja el-Aram, a professional dancer, of Houseboat Jihan, Zamalek, Cairo.'

The woman officer said: 'Answer the Major!'

'Yes, I am,' said Sonja.

'How long have you known John Wolff?'

'A few days.'

'Where did you meet him?'

'At the Cha-Cha Club, where I work.'

'And he came to live with you.'

'No.'

'He is a German spy.'

'Ridiculous.'

'Who else did he bring to the houseboat?'

'Nobody.'

'Last night he brought a woman called Elene to the boat.

Shortly after they got there I saw you arrive. It will be worse for you if you tell me lies. Who else did he bring there?'

Sonja said nothing. Vandam studied her face. She was proud, confident, unafraid. Vandam wondered what had happened last night. Surely Wolff had gone off without warning Sonja? Did she not feel betrayed?

'Wolff betrayed you,' Vandam said. 'Kemel, the policeman, warned Wolff of the danger; but Wolff left you sleeping. Are you going to be loyal to him after that?'

She said nothing.

'Wolff kept his radio on your boat. He sent messages to Rommel at midnight. You knew this, so you were an accessory to

espionage. You're going to be shot for spying.'

'All Cairo will riot! You wouldn't dare!'

'You think so? What do we care if Cairo riots now? The Germans are at the gates - let them put down the rebels.'

'You dare not touch me.'

'Where has Wolff gone?'

'I don't know.'

'Can you guess?'

'No.'

'You're not being helpful, Sonja. You'll get into trouble.'

'You can't touch me.'

'I think I'd better ~~xx~~ prove to you that I can.' Vandam nodded to the woman officer.

The woman held Sonja still while Jakes tied her to the chair. Then Vandam and Jakes watched. The woman took a large pair of scissors from a bag. She lifted a hank of Sonja's long, thick hair and cut it off.

'You can't do this!' Sonja shrieked.

Swiftly, the woman cut Sonja's hair. As the heavy locks fell away the woman dropped them in Sonja's lap.

Vandam said: 'You see, we don't care much about legality and justice any more, nordo we care about Egyptian public opinion. We've got our backs to the wall. We may all be killed soon. We're desperate.'

The woman took a smaller pair of scissors and cropped Sonja's hair close to the scalp.

Vandam said: 'Where did Wolff get his information?'

Sonja stared back defiantly.

The woman officer took soap and a shaving-brush and lathered Sonja's head, then began to shave her scalp.

Vandam said: 'Wolff was getting information from someone at GHQ. Who?'

Sonja was silent.

Finally the woman officer took a mirror from her bag and held it in front of Sonja's face. At first Sonja would not look in the mirror, but after a minute she gave way ~~and~~ looked. She gasped when she saw the reflection of her totally bald head. 'No,' she said. 'It's not me.' Then she burst into tears.

Vandam nodded at the woman officer. 'Thankyou, Sergeant.'

The woman's face broke into a smile that was astonishingly pretty. 'Sir,' she said, and went out.

Vandam said: 'Where was Wolff getting his information?'

'From Major Smith,' Sonja replied.

'First name?'

'Sandy Smith.'

Vandam glanced at Jakes. That was the name of the Major who had disappeared. It was as Vandam had feared.

'How did he get the information?'

'Smith came to the houseboat in his lunch break to visit me. While ~~we~~ we were in bed Wolff went through his briefcase.'

As simple as that, Vandam thought. Jesus, I feel tired.

'Where's Smith now?'

'He caught Wolff going through his case. Wolff killed him.'

'Where's the body?'

'In the water.'

Vandam nodded to Jakes, and Jakes went out.

Vandam said: 'Tell me about Kemel.'

'He came to me and said you had asked him to have the houseboat watched. He offered to censor his surveillance reports, if I would arrange a meeting between Wolff and Sadat.'

'Wolff and whom?'

'Anwar el-Sadat. He's a captain in the army.'

'Why did he want to contact Wolff?'

'So the Free Officers Movement could send a message to Rommel.'

'Where does Sadat live?'

'Kubri al-Qubbah.'

'The address?'

'I don't know.'

Vandam went to the door of the cell and called to the corporal jailer. 'Find out the exact address of Captain Anwar el-Sadat.' He came back in. 'Wolff kept his radio on your houseboat.'

'Yes.'

'He used a code for his messages.'

'Yes, he had a novel in English which he used to use to make up the codewords.'

'Rebecca.'

'Yes.'

'And he had a key to the code.'

'A key?'

'A piece of paper telling him which pages of the book to use.'

She nodded slowly. 'That's right.'

'The radio, the book and the key have gone. Do you know where?'

'No.'

'Do you know where Wolff might have gone?'

'He has a house ... Villa les Oliviers.'

'Good idea. Any other suggestions?'

'Abdullah. He might have gone to Abdullah.'

'Yes. Any more?'

'His cousins, in the desert.'

'And where would they be found?'

'No one knows. They're nomads.'

'Might Wolff know their movements?'

'Perhaps.'

Vandam sat looking at her for a little while longer. He had developed a technique for guessing whether someone was telling the truth under interrogation. He had noticed that women were often quicker to recognise a liar, yet they often could not say how they knew: the judgement was intuitive. So, instead of trying to trap people into self-contradiction, as most interrogators did when they suspected they were being lied to, Vandam would deliberately relax his intellectual observation of the subject, and listen to his own intuition. There were signals, he believed, which could be observed only by the subconscious. Now his intuition told him that Sonja was telling the truth.

'I'll see you again,' he said, and went out.

The woman sergeant was in the corridor holding something that looked like a dead cat. 'What's that?' Vandam asked her.

'A wig,' she said.

He looked at ^{her} curiously, then said: 'Okay.'

He hurried to the muster room. Jakes was waiting. 'The Navy is lending us a couple of divers,' Jakes said. 'They'll be here in a few minutes.'

'Good.' Vandam lit a cigarette. 'I want you to raid Abdullah's place. I'm going to arrest this fellow Sadat. Send a small team to the Villa les Oliviers, just in case - I don't suppose they'll find anything. Has everyone been briefed?'

Jakes nodded. 'They know they're looking for a wireless transmitter, a copy of Rebecca, and a set of encoding instructions.'

Vandam looked around, and noticed for the first time that there were Egyptian policemen in the room. 'Why have we got bloody Arabs

on the team?' he asked angrily.

'Protocol, sir,' Jakes replied formally. 'Colonel Bogge's idea.'

Vandam stubbed his cigarette. 'After you've done Abdullah, meet me at the houseboat.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Let's go.'

They went out into the morning sunshine. A dozen or more jeeps were line^d up, their engines idling. Jakes gave instructions to the sergeants in the raiding parties, then nodded to Vandam. The men boarded the jeeps, and the teams pulled out.

Sadat lived in a suburb three miles out of Cairo in the direction of Heliopolis. His home was an ordinary family house in a small garden. Four jeeps roared up outside, and the soldiers immediately surround^{ed} the house and began to search the garden. Vandam rapped on the front door. A dog began to bark loudly. Vandam knocked again. The door was opened.

'Captain Anwar el-Sadat?'

'Yes.'

Sadat was a thin young man of medium height.~~and~~ His curly brown hair was already receding. He wore his captain's uniform and fez, as if he was about to go out.

'You're under arrest,' Vandam said, and pushed past him into the house. Another young man appeared in a doorway. 'Who is he?' Vandam demanded.

'My brother, Tal'at,' said Sadat.

'Which is your room, Captain?'

Sadat pointed. Vandam went into the room. It was a simple bedroom, with a mattress on the floor and a galabiya hanging from a hook. Vandam pointed to two British soldiers and an Egyptian

policeman, and said: 'All right, go ahead.' They began to search the room.

'What is the meaning of this?' Sadat said with an attempt at indignation which Vandam found quite unconvincing.

'You know John Wolff,' Vandam said.

'No.'

'He also calls himself Hussein Rahmha, 'but he's a European.'

'Never heard of him.'

'You've been seen with him,' Vandam lied.

'The only European I've been meeting is ^{Major} ~~Captain~~ Abrahams of the British Army.'

'Why?'

'Pardon?'

'Why were you meeting him?'

'He told me he was in the Signals Corps. It is my duty to co-operate with him. We discussed - '

'Never mind,' Vandam interrupted. It was clear that Sadat already had a well-worked-out cover story, and that the raid was no great shock to him. It seemed likely that he had been forewarned, presumably by someone in the Egyptian police. Vandam pointed across the hall. 'What's that room?'

'My study - '

Vandam went to the door.

Sadat said: 'But the women of the family are in there, you must let me warn them - '

'They know we're here. Open the door.'

Vandam let Sadat enter the room first. There were no women inside, but a back door was open as if someone had just stepped out. There was an army pistol on the desk beside some sheets of paper covered with Arabic script. Vandam saw a shelf of books and began to examine them. Rebecca was not there.

Vandam spoke to his sergeant. 'Take Captain Sadat to GHQ.'

'I protest,' Sadat said. 'The law states that officers in the Egyptian Army may be detained only in the officers' mess and must be guarded by a fellow officer.'

The senior Egyptian policeman was standing nearby. 'This is correct,' he said.

Once again Vandam cursed Bogge ^{for} ~~from~~ bringing the Egyptians into this. 'All right,' he said wearily. He was sure he would learn nothing from Sadat anyway. He spoke to his sergeant again. 'Send out my driver. Finish searching the house. Then have Sadat charged with espionage.'

He left the house and went out to the jeep. A few moments later his driver came running out and jumped into the seat beside him. Vandam said: 'To Zamalek.'

'Yes, sir.' The driver started the jeep and pulled away.

When he reached the houseboat the divers had done their work and were standing on the towpath getting out of their gear. ^{One of them handed him a waterlogged book: it was Rebecca.} Two soldiers were hauling something extremely grisly out of the Nile. The divers had attached ropes to the body they had found on the bottom and then washed their hands of the affair. The soldiers got the body on to the bank then they, too, ^{stepped} ~~stood~~ back as if they wanted nothing more to do with it. Vandam stood over it. The throat had been cut and the head was almost severed from the body. A briefcase was roped to the waist. Vandam bent down and gingerly opened the case. It was full of champagne bottles.

Vandam heard Jakes' voice behind him: 'My God.'

'Ugly, isn't it,' Vandam said. 'Throat cut, then dumped in the river with a case of champagne to weigh him down.'

'Cool bastard.'

'And damn quick with that knife.' Vandam touched the piece

of sticking-plaster on his cheek. 'I gather you haven't found him.'

'I haven't found anything. I've had Abdullah brought in, just on general principles, but there was nothing at his house. And I called in at the villa on the way back - same story.'

'And at Captain Sadat's house.' Suddenly Vandam felt utterly drained. It seemed that Wolff outwitted him at every turn. For the first time he wondered whether ~~hem~~ was competent to catch this sly, evasive spy. 'Perhaps we've lost,' he said. He rubbed his face. He had not slept for more than twenty-four hours. He wondered what he was doing, standing over the hideous corpse of Major Sandy Smith. There was nothing to be learned from it. 'I think I'll go home and take a nap,' he said. Jakes looked surprised. 'We'll interrogate all the prisoners again this afternoon.'

'Very good, sir.'

Vandam walked back to his vehicle. Driving across the bridge from Zamalek to the mainland, he recalled that Sonja had mentioned one other possibility: Wolff's nomad cousins. He looked at the boats on the wide, slow river. The current took them downstream and the wind blew them upstream: a coincidence of enormous importance to Egypt. The boatmen were still using the single triangular sail, a design which had been perfected ... How long ago? Thousands of years, perhaps. So many things in this country were done the way they had been done for thousands of years. Vandam closed his eyes. Wolff, in a felucca, sailing up river, manipulating the ~~tri~~angular sail with one hand while in the other he held his transmitter. The car stopped suddenly and ~~Wm~~ Vandam opened his eyes, realising he had been daydreaming, or dozing. Why would Wolff go upriver? To find his nomad cousins. But who could tell where they would be? Wolff might be able to find them, if they followed some annual pattern in their wanderings.

The jeep had stopped outside Vandam's house. He got out. 'I want you to wait for me,' he told the driver. 'You'd better come in.' He led the way into the house, then directed the driver to the kitchen. 'My servant, Gaafar, will give you something to eat, so long as you don't treat him like a wog.'

'Thankyou very much, sir,' said the driver.

There was a small stack of mail on the hall table. The top envelope had no stamp, and was addressed to Vandam in a vaguely familiar hand. It had 'Urgent' scribbled in the top left-hand corner. Vandam picked it up.

There was more he should do, he realised. Wolff could well be heading south now. Road blocks should be set up at all major towns on the route south. There should be someone at every stop on the railway line, looking for Wolff. And the river itself ... there had to be some way of checking the river, in case Wolff really had gone by boat, as in the daydream. Vandam was finding it hard to concentrate. We could set up riverblocks on the same principle as roadblocks, he thought: why not? None of it would be any good if Wolff had simply gone to ground in Cairo. Suppose he were hiding in the cemeteries? Many Muslims buried their dead in tiny houses, and there were acres of such empty buildings in the city: Vandam would have needed a thousand men to search them all. Perhaps I should do it anyway, he thought. But Wolff might have gone north, toward Alexandria; or east or west into the desert ...

He went into the drawing-room, looking for a letter-opener. Somehow the search had to be narrowed down. Vandam did not have thousands of men at his disposal - they were all in the desert, fighting. He had to decide what was the best bet. He remembered where all this had started: Assyut. Perhaps he should contact Captain Newman in Assyut. That seemed to be where Wolff had come in from the desert, so maybe he would go out that way. Maybe his

cousins were in that vicinity. Vandam looked indecisively at the telephone. Where was that damned letter-opener? He went to the door and called: 'Gaafar!' He came back into the room, and saw Billy's school atlas on the chair. It looked mucky. The boy had dropped it in a puddle, or something. He picked it up. It was sticky. Vandam realised there was blood on it. He felt as if he were in a nightmare. What was going on? No letter-opener, blood on the atlas, nomads at Assyut ... Gaafar came in. Vandam said: 'What's this mess?'

Gaafar looked. 'I'm sorry, sir, I don't know. They were looking at it while Captain John was here - '

'Who's they? Who's Captain John?'

'The officer you sent to take Billy to school, sir. His name was - '

'Stop.' A terrible fear cleared Vandam's brain in an instant. 'A British Army captain came here this morning and took Billy away?'

'Yes, sir, he took him to school. He said you sent him - '

'Gaafar, I sent nobody.'

The servant's brown face turned grey.

Vandam said: 'Didn't you check that he was genuine?'

'But, sir, Madame Elene was with him, so it seemed all right.'

'Oh, my God.' Vandam looked at the envelope in his hand. Now he knew why the handwriting was familiar: it was the same as that on the note that Wolff had sent to Elene. He ripped open the envelope. Inside was a message in the same hand:

Dear Major Vandam,

Billy is with me. Elene is taking care of him. He will be quite all right as long as I am safe. I advise you to stay where you are and do nothing. We do not make war on children, and I have no wish to harm the boy. All the same, the life of one child is as

nothing beside the futures of my two nations, Egypt and Germany; so be assured that ~~I will kill Billy~~ if it suits my purpose I will kill Billy.

Yours truly,

John Wolff.

It was a letter from a madman: the polite salutations, the correct English, the semi-colon, the attempt to justify the kidnapping of an innocent child ... Now Vandam knew that, somewhere deep down inside Wolff was insane.

And he had Billy.

Vandam handed the note to Gaafar, who put on his spectacles with a shaky hand. Wolff had taken Elene with him when he left the houseboat. It would not have been difficult to coerce her into helping him: all he had to do was threaten Billy, and she would have been helpless. But what was the point of the kidnap, really? And where had they gone? And why the blood?

Gaafar was weeping openly. Vandam said: 'Who was hurt? Who was bleeding?'

'There was no violence,' Gaafar said. 'I think Madame Elene had cut her hand ... '

And she had smeared blood on Billy's atlas and left it on the chair. It was a sign, a message of some kind. Vandam held the book in his hands and let it fall open. Immediately he saw the map of Egypt with a blotted red arrow roughly drawn. It pointed to Assyut.

Vandam knew immediately what he had to do.

'Get me two bottles of water,' he told Gaafar. The servant went off. Vandam went into the hall and put on his motorcycle goggles, then found a scarf and wound it around his mouth and neck. Gaafar came from the kitchen with the bottles of water. Vandam left the house and went to his motorcycle. He put the bottles in

the pannier and climbed on the bike. He kicked it into life and revved the engine. The fuel tank was full. Gaafar stood beside him, still weeping. Vandam touched the old man's shoulder. 'I'll bring them back,' he said. He rocked the bike off its stand, drove into the street, and turned south.

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My God, the station was a shambles. I suppose everyone wants to get out of Cairo in case it gets bombed. No first-class seats on trains to Palestine - not even standing room. The wives and children of the British are running like rats. Fortunately southbound trains are less in demand. The booking office still claimed there were no seats, but they always say that; a few piastres here and a few more there always gets a seat, or three. I was afraid I might lose Elene and the boy on the platform, among all the hundreds of peasants, barefoot in their dirty galabiyas, carrying boxes tied with string, chickens in crates, sitting on the platform eating their breakfast, a fat mother in black handing out boiled eggs and pitta bread and caked rice to her husband and sons, cousins and daughters and in-laws; smart idea of mine, to hold the boy's hand - if I keep him close by, Elene will follow; smart idea, I have smart ideas, Christ I'm smart, smarter than Vandam, eat your heart out, Major Vandam, I've got your son. Somebody had a goat on a lead. Fancy taking a goat on a train ride. I never had to travel economy with the peasants and their goats. What a job, to clean the economy coach at the end of the journey, I wonder who does it, some poor fellah. Thank God we got first-class seats, I hate dirt.

Vendors on the platform: cigarettes, newspapers, a man with a huge basket of bread on his head. I like the women when they carry

baskets on their heads, looking so graceful and proud, makes you want to do it to them there and then, standing up, I like women when they like to do it, when they lose their minds with pleasure, when they scream, gesundheit! Look at Elene, sitting there beside the boy, so frightened, so beautiful, I want to do it with her again soon, forget Sonja, I'd like to do it with Elene right now, here on the train, in front of all these people, humiliate her, with Vandam's son watching, terrified, ha!

Look at the mud-brick suburbs, houses leaning against one another for support, cows and sheep in the narrow dusty streets, I always wondered what they ate, these city sheep with their fat tails, where do they graze? No plumbing in those dark little houses beside the railway line. Women in the doorways peeling vegetables, sitting cross-legged on the dusty ground. Cats. So graceful, the cats. European cats are different, slower and much fatter; no wonder cats are sacred here, they are so beautiful, a kitten brings luck. The English like dogs. Disgusting animals, dogs: unclean, undignified, slobbering, fawning, sniffing. A cat is superior, and knows it; like me. I hold my head up, like a cat; I walk about, ignoring the hoi-polloi, intent on my own mysterious tasks, using people the way a cat uses its owner, giving no thanks and accepting no affection, taking what they offer as a right, not a gift. I'm an Egyptian cat, a tom-cat.

How many hours to Assyt, eight, ten? Must move fast. Find Ishmael. He should be at the well, or not far away. Pick up the radio. Broadcast at midnight tonight. Complete British defence, what a coup, they'll give me medals. Germans in charge in Cairo. Oh boy, we'll get the place into shape. What a combination, Germans and Egyptians, efficiency by day and hedonism by night, Teutonic technology and Bedouin savagery, Beethoven and hashish. If I can

survive, make it to Assyut, contact Rommel; then Rommel can cross the last bridge, destroy the last line of defence, dash to Cairo, annihilate the British, what a victory that will be. If I can make it. What a triumph! What a triumph! What a triumph!

*

I will not be sick, I will not be sick, I will not be sick. The train says it for me, rattling on the tracks. I'm too big to throw up on trains now, I used to do that when I was eight. Dad took me to Alexandria, bought me candy and oranges and lemonade, I ate too much, don't think about it, it makes me ill to think about it, Dad said it wasn't my fault it was his, but I ~~was~~ always used to feel sick even if I didn't eat, today Elene bought chocolate but I said No, thanks, I'm pretty grown-up to say No to chocolate, kids never say No to chocolate, look, I can see the pyramids, one, two, and the little one makes three, this must be Giza.

Where are we going? He was supposed to take me to school. Then he got out the knife. It's curved. He'll cut off my head, where's Dad? I should be in school, we have geography in the first period today, a test on the Bushmen of the Kalahari, I learned it all last night, I needn't have bothered, I'll miss the test. They've ~~xxx~~ already finished the test by now, Mr Johnstone collecting up the papers, You call that a map, Higgins? Looks more like a drawing of your ear, boy! Everybody laughs. Smythe can't spell Kalahari. Write it fifty times, lad. Everyone is glad he's not Smythe. Old Johnstone opens the textbook. Next, the African veldt. I wish I was in school. I wish Elene would put her arm around me. I wish the man would stop looking at me, staring at me like that, so pleased with himself, I think he's crazy, where's Dad?

If I don't think about the knife, it will be just as if it wasn't there. I mustn't think about the knife. If I concentrate on not

thinking about the knife, that's the same as thinking about the knife. It's impossible to deliberately not think about something. How does anyone stop thinking of something? Accidentally. Accidental thoughts. All thoughts are accidental. There, I stopped thinking about the knife for a second. If I see a policeman, I'll rush up to him and yell Save me, save me! I'll be so quick that he won't be able to stop me. I can run like the wind, I'm quick. I might see an officer. I might see a General. I'll shout, Good morning, General! He'll look at me, surprised, and say Well, young fellow-me-lad, you're a fine boy! Pardon me, sir, I'll say, I'm Major Vandam's son, and this man is taking me away, and my father doesn't know, I'm sorry to trouble you, but I need help. What? says the general. Look here, sir, you can't do this/^{to}the son of a British officer! Not cricket, you know! Just clear off, do you hear? Who the devil do you think you are? And you needn't flash that little pen-knife at me, I've got a pistol!

You're a brave lad, Billy. I'm a brave lad. All day men get killed in the desert. Bombs fall Back Home. Ships in the Atlantic get sunk by U-boats, men fall into the icy water and drown. RAF chaps shot down over France. Everybody is brave. Chin up! Damn this war. That's what they say: Damn this war. Then they climb into the cockpit, hurry down the air-raid shelter, attack the next dune, fire torpedoes at the U-boats, write letters home.

I used to think it was exciting. Now I know better. It isn't exciting at all.

It makes you feel sick.

*

Billy is so pale. He looks ill. He's trying to be brave. He shouldn't, he should act like a child, he should scream and cry and throw a tantrum, Wolff couldn't cope with that; but he won't, of

course, for he has been taught to be tough, to bite back the cry, to suppress the tears, to have self-control. He knows how his father would be, and what else does a boy do but copy his father?

Look at Egypt. A canal alongside the railway line. A grove of date palms. A man crouching in a field, his galabiya hitched up above his long white undershorts, doing something to the crops; an ass grazing, so much healthier than the miserable specimens you see pulling carts in the city; three women sitting beside the canal, washing clothes, pounding them on stones to get them clean; a man on horseback, galloping, must be the local effendi, only the richest peasants have horses; in the distance, the lush green countryside ends abruptly in a range of dusty tan hills. Egypt is only thirty miles wide, really: the rest is desert.

What am I going to do?

That chill, deep in my chest, every time I look at Wolff. The way he stares at Billy. The gleam in his eye. His restlessness: the way he looks out of the window, then around the carriage, then at Billy, then at me, then at Billy again, always with that gleam in his eye, the look of triumph.

I should comfort Billy. I wish I knew more about boys. What a poor stepmother I should have made. I'd like to touch him, put my arm around him, give him a quick squeeze, or even a cuddle, but I'm not sure that's what he wants, it might make him feel worse. Perhaps I could take his mind off things by playing a game. What a ridiculous idea. Perhaps not so ridiculous. Here is his school satchel. Here is an exercise book. He looks at me curiously. What game? Noughts and crosses. Four lines for the grid; my cross in the centre. The way he looks at me as he takes the pencil, I do believe he's going along with this crazy idea ^{in order} to comfort me! His nought in the corner. Wolff snatches the book, looks at it, shrugs,

and gives it back. My cross, Billy's nought; it will be a drawn game. I should let him win next time.

I can play this game without thinking. More's the pity. Wolff has a spare radio at Assyut. Perhaps I should stay with him, and try to prevent him using the radio. Some hope! I have to get Billy away, then contact Vandam and tell him where I am. I hope Vandam saw the atlas. Perhaps the servant saw it, and called GHQ. Perhaps it will lie on the chair all day, unnoticed. Perhaps Vandam will not go home today. I have to get Billy away from Wolff, away from that knife.

Billy makes a cross in the centre. I make a nought, then scribble hastily: We must escape - be ready.

Billy makes another cross, and: Okay.

My nought.

Billy's cross. When?

My nought. Next station.

Billy's third cross makes a line. He scores through the line of crosses, then smiles up at me jubilantly. He has won.

The train slows down.

*

Vandam knew the train was still ahead of him. He had stopped at the station at Giza, close to the pyramids, to ask how long ago the train had passed through; then he had stopped and asked the same question at ^{three} ~~xxxx~~ subsequent stations. Now, after travelling for an hour, he had no need to stop and ask, for the road and the railway line ran parallel, on either side of a canal, and he would see the train when he caught up with it.

Each time he stopped he had taken a drink of water. With his uniform cap, his goggles and the scarf around his mouth and neck, he was protected from the worst of the dust; but the sun was terribly

hot and he was continually thirsty. Eventually he realised he was running a fever. He thought he must have caught cold, last night, lying on the ground beside the river ^{for hours} ~~all night~~. His breath was hot in his throat, and the muscles of his back ached.

He had to concentrate on the road. It was the only road which ran the length of Egypt, from Cairo to Aswan, so much of it was paved; and in recent months the Army had done some repair work: but he still had to watch for bumps and potholes. Fortunately the road ran straight as an arrow, so he could see, far ahead, the hazards of cattle, wagons, camel trains and flocks of sheep. He drove very fast, except through the villages and towns, where at any moment people might wander out into the road: he would not kill a child to save a child, not even to save his own child.

So far he had passed only two cars: a ponderous Rolls-Royce and a battered old Ford. The Rolls had been driven by a uniformed chauffeur, with an elderly English couple in the back seats; and the Ford had contained at least a dozen Arabs. By now Vandam was fairly sure Wolff was travelling by train.

Suddenly he heard a distant hoot. Looking ahead and to his left he saw, at least a mile away, a rising plume of ~~xxx~~ white smoke which was unmistakably that of a steam engine. Billy! he thought. Elene! He went faster.

Paradoxically, the engine smoke made him think of England, of gentle slopes, endless green fields, a square church tower peeping over the tops of a cluster of oak trees, and a railway line through the valley with a puffing engine disappearing into the distance. For a moment he was in that English valley, tasting the damp air of morning; then the vision passed, and he saw again the steel-blue African sky, the paddy fields, the palm trees and the far brown cliffs.

The train was coming into a town. Vandam did not know the names

of the places any more: his geography was not that good, and he had rather lost track of the distance he had travelled. It was a small town. It would have three or four brick buildings and a market.

The train was going to get there before him. He had made his plans, he knew what he was going to do; but he needed time, it was impossible for him to rush into the station and jump on the train without making preparations. He reached the town and slowed right down. The street was blocked by a small flock of sheep. From a doorway an old man smoking a hookah watched Vandam: a European on a motorcycle would be a rare, but not unknown, sight. An ass tied to a tree snarled at the bike. A water buffalo drinking from a bucket did not even look up. Two filthy children in rags ran alongside, holding imaginary handlebars and saying 'Brrrm, brrrm,' in imitation. Vandam ^{saw} ~~approached~~ the station. He would wait outside until the train left, just in case Wolff should get off; then he would go ahead, and reach the next stop in plenty of time. He brought the motorcycle to a halt and killed the engine.

*

The train rolled slowly over a level crossing. Elene saw the patient faces of the people ~~walking~~ behind the gate, waiting for the train to pass so that they could cross the line: a fat man on a donkey, a very small boy leading a camel, a horse-drawn cab, a group of silent old women. The camel coughed, the boy began to beat it about the face with a stick, and then the scene slid sideways out of view. In a moment the train would be in the station. Elene's courage had deserted her. Not this time, she thought. I haven't had time to think of a plan. The next station, let me leave it until the next station. But she had told Billy they would try to get away at this station. If she did nothing he would not trust her any longer. It had to be this time.

She tried to devise a plan. What was her priority? To get Billy away from Wolff. That was the only thing that counted. Give Billy a chance to run, then try to prevent Wolff from giving chase. She had a sudden, vivid memory of a childhood fight in a filthy slum street in Alexandria: a big boy, a bully, hitting her, and her older sister intervening and struggling with the boy, her sister shouting 'Run, run!' over her shoulder while she, Elene, stood watching the fight, horrified but fascinated. She could not remember how it ended.

She looked around. Think quickly! They were in an open carriage, with fifteen or twenty rows of seats. She and Billy sat side by side, facing forward. Wolff ^{was} ~~sat~~ facing them. Beside him was an empty seat. Behind him was the exit door to the platform. The other passengers were a mixture of Europeans and wealthy Egyptians, all of them in western clothing. Everyone was hot, weary and enervated. Several people were asleep. The trainmaster was serving tea in glasses to a group of Egyptian Army officers at the far end of the carriage.

Through the window she saw a small mosque, then a French courthouse, then the station ~~platform~~. A few trees grew in the dusty soil beside the concrete platform. An old man sat cross-legged beneath a tree, smoking a cigarette. Six boyish-looking/^{Arab} soldiers were crowded on to one small bench. A pregnant woman carried a baby. The train stopped.

Not yet, Elene thought; not yet. The time to move would be when the train was about to pull out again - that would give Wolff less time to catch them. She sat feverishly still. There was a clock on the platform with Roman numerals. It had stopped at five to five. A man came to the window offering fruit drinks, and Wolff waved him away.

A priest in Coptic robes boarded the train and took the seat next to Wolff, saying politely: 'Vous permettez, M'sieur?'

Wolff smiled charmingly and replied: 'Je vous en prie.'

Elene murmured to Billy: 'When the whistle blows, run for the door and get off the train.'

Billy said nothing. Wolff said: 'What was that?' Elene looked away.

The whistle blew.

Billy looked at Elene, hesitating.

Wolff frowned.

Elene threw herself at Wolff, reaching for his face with her hands. She was suddenly possessed by rage and hatred toward him for the humiliation, anxiety and pain he had inflicted on her. He put up his arms protectively, but they did not stop her rush. Her strength astonished her. She raked his face with her fingernails, and saw blood spurt.

The priest gave a shout of surprise.

Over the back of Wolff's seat she saw Billy run to the door and struggle to open it.

She collapsed on Wolff, banging her face against his forehead. She lifted herself again and tried to scratch his eyes.

At last he found his voice, and roared with anger. He pushed himself out of his seat, driving Elene backward. She grabbed at him and caught hold of his shirt front with both hands. Then he hit her. His hand came up from below his waist, bunched into a fist, then struck the side of her jaw. She had never known a punch could hurt so much. For an instant she could not see. She lost her grip on Wolff's shirt, and fell back into her seat. Her vision returned and she saw him heading for the door. She stood up.

Billy had got the door open. She saw him fling it wide and jump on to the platform. Wolff leaped after him. Elene ran to the door.

Billy was racing along the platform, running like the wind. Wolff was charging after him. The few Egyptians standing around were looking on, mildly astonished, doing nothing. Elene stepped down from the train and ran after Wolff. The train began to move. Wolff put on a burst of speed. Elene yelled: 'Run, Billy, run!' Billy looked over his shoulder. He was almost at the exit now. A ticket collector in a raincoat stood there, looking on open-mouthed. Elene thought: They won't let him out, he has no ticket. It did not matter, she realised, for the train was moving, and Wolff had to get back on it. Wolff looked at the slowly-moving train, but did not slow his pace. Then Billy fell.

He had slipped on something, a patch of sand or a leaf. He lost his balance completely, and went flying through the air, carried by the momentum of his running, to hit the ground hard. Wolff was on him in a flash, bending to lift him. Elene caught up with them and jumped on Wolff's back. Wolff stumbled, losing his grip on Billy. Elene clung to him. The train gathered speed gradually. Wolff grabbed Elene's arms, broke her grip, and shook his great shoulders, throwing her to the ground.

For a moment she lay stunned. Looking up, she saw that Wolff had thrown Billy across his shoulder. The boy was yelling and hammering on Wolff's back, without effect. Wolff ran alongside the moving train for a few paces, then jumped in through an open door. Elene wanted to stay where she was, never to see Wolff again; but she could not leave Billy. She struggled to her feet.

She ran, stumbling, alongside the train. Someone reached out a hand to her. She took it, and jumped. She was aboard.

She followed Wolff through the carriages back to their seats. She did not look at the faces of the people she passed. Wolff gave Billy one sharp smack on the bottom and dumped him into his seat. The boy was crying silently.

Wolff turned to Elene. 'You're a silly, crazy girl,' he said loudly, for the benefit of the other passengers. He grabbed her arm and pulled her closer to him. He slapped her face with the palm of his hand, then with the back, then with the palm, again and again. It hurt, but Elene had no energy to resist. At last the priest stood up, touched Wolff's shoulder, and said something.

Wolff let her go and sat down. She looked around. They were all staring at her. None of them would help her, for she was not just an ~~Ara~~ Egyptian, she was an Egyptian woman, and women, like camels, had to be beaten from time to time. As she met the eyes of the other passengers they looked away, embarrassed, and turned to their newspapers, their books, and the view from the windows. No one spoke to her.

She fell into her seat. Useless, impotent rage boiled within her. Almost, they had almost escaped.

She put her arm around the child and pulled him close. She began to stroke his hair. After a while he fell asleep.

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Vandam heard the train puff, pull, and puff again. It gathered speed and moved out of the station. Vandam took another drink of water. The bottle was empty. He put it back into his pannier. He drew on his cigarette and threw away the butt. No one but a few peasants had come out of the station. Vandam kicked the motorcycle into life and drove away.

In a few moments he was out of the little town and back on the straight, narrow road beside the canal. Soon he had left the train behind. It was noon: the sunshine was so hot it seemed tangible. Vandam imagined that if he stuck out his arm the heat would drag on it like a viscous liquid. The road ahead stretched into a shimmering infinity. Vandam thought: If I were to drive straight into the canal, how cool and refreshing it would be!

Somewhere along the road he had made a decision. He had set out from Cairo with no thought in his mind but to rescue Billy. At some point he had realised that that was not his only duty. There was still the war.

Wolff had thrown Rebecca into the ^{river} ~~canal~~, despite the fact that - if Kemel was to be believed - Wolff had been too busy at midnight last night to use his radio. The spy still had to deliver his message, therefore he must have another copy of Rebecca somewhere. It seemed likely he also had another radio and another copy of the key to the code; and the place they were all hidden was Assyut. If the deception plan were to be implemented, Vandam had to have the key to the code - and that meant he had to let Wolff get to Assyut and retrieve his hidden gear.

It ought to have been an agonising decision, but somehow Vandam had taken it with equanimity. He had to rescue Billy, yes; but after Wolff had picked up his spare radio. It would be tough on the boy, savagely tough, but the worst of it - the kidnapping itself - was already in the past and irreversible, and living under German rule, with his father in a concentration camp, would also be savagely tough.

Having made the decision, and hardened his heart, Vandam needed to be certain that Wolff really was on that train. And in figuring out how to check, he had thought of a way to make things a little easier for Billy and ^Elene at the same time.

When he reached the next town he reckoned he was at least fifteen minutes ahead of the train. It was the same kind of place as the last one: same animals, same dusty streets, same slow-moving people, same handful of brick buildings. The police station was in a central square, opposite the railway station, flanked by a large mosque and a small church. Vandam pulled up outside and gave a series of peremptory blasts on his horn.

Two policemen came out of the building: a grey-haired man in a white uniform with a pistol at his belt; and a boy of eighteen or twenty years, unarmed. The older man was buttoning his shirt. Vandam got off the bike and bawled: 'Attention!' Both men stood straight and saluted. Vandam returned the salute, then shook the older man's hand. 'I'm chasing a dangerous criminal, and I need your help,' he said dramatically. The ~~old~~ man's eyes glittered. 'Let's go inside.'

Vandam led the way. He felt he needed to keep the initiative firmly in his own hands. He was by no means sure of his own status here, and if the policemen were to choose to be unco-operative there would be little he could do about it. He entered the building. Through a doorway he saw a table with a telephone. He went into that room, and the policemen followed him.

Vandam said to the older man: 'Call British headquarters in Cairo.' He gave him the number, and the man picked up the phone. Vandam turned to the younger man. 'Did you see the motorcycle?'

'Yes, yes.' He nodded violently.

'Could you ride it?'

The boy was thrilled by the idea. 'I ride it very well.'

'Go out and try it.'

The boy looked ^{doubtfully} at his superior, who was shouting into the telephone.

'Go on,' Vandam said.

The boy went out.

The older man held the phone out to Vandam. 'This is GHQ.'

Vandam spoke into the phone. 'Connect me with Captain Jakes, fast.' He waited.

Jakes voice came on the line after a minute or two. 'Hello, yes?'

'This is Vandam. I'm in the south, following a hunch.'

'Where?'

'Never mind where exactly, I won't be here much longer, and I have to work alone at the moment. In order to assure the maximal support of the indigenous constabulary - ' He spoke like this so that the policeman would not be able to understand - 'I want you to do your Dutch uncle act. Ready?'

'Yes, sir.'

Vandam gave the phone to the grey-haired policeman and stood back. He could guess what Jakes was saying. The policeman unconsciously stood straighter and squared his shoulders as Jakes instructed him, in no uncertain terms, to do everything Vandam wanted and do it fast. 'Yes, sir!' the policeman said, several times. Finally he said: 'Please be assured, sir and gentleman, that we will do all in our power - ' He stopped abruptly. Jakes had hung up. The policeman glanced at Vandam, then said: 'Goodbye,' to the empty wire.

Vandam went to the window and looked out. The young policeman was driving round and round the square on the motorcycle, hooting the horn and over-revving the engine. A small crowd had gathered to watch him, and a bunch of children were running behind the bike. The boy was grinning from ear to ear. He'll do, Vandam thought.

'Listen,' he said. 'I'm going to get on the Assyt train when

it stops here in a few minutes. I'll get off at the next station. I want your boy to drive my bike to the next station and meet me there. Do you understand?'

'Yes, sir,' said the man. 'The train will stop here, then?'

'Doesn't it usually?'

'The Assyut train does not stop here usually.'

'Then go to the station and tell them to stop it!'

'Yes, sir!' The man went out at a run.

Vandam watched him cross the square. He could not hear the train yet. He had time for one more phone call. He picked up the receiver, waited for the operator, then asked for the Army base in Assyut. It would be a miracle if the phone system worked properly twice in a row. It did. Assyut answered, and Vandam asked for Captain Newman. There was a long wait while they found him. At last he came on the line.

'This is Vandam. I think I'm on the trail of your knife man.'

'Jolly good show, sir!' said Newman. 'Anything I can do?'

'Well, now, listen. We have to go very softly. I'll be arriving in Assyut in a couple of hours. I need a taxi, a large galabiya and a small boy. Will you meet me?'

'Of course. No problem. Are you coming by road?'

'Yes.'

'I'll meet you at the citylimits, how's that?'

'Fine.' Vandam heard a distance chuff-chuff-chuff. 'I have to go.'

'I'll be waiting for you.'

Vandam hung up. He put a five-pound note on the table beside the telephone: a little baksheesh never hurt. He went out into the square. Away to the north he could see the approaching smoke of the train. The younger policeman drove up to him on the bike. Vandam said: 'I'm getting on the train. You drive the motorcycle to the

next station and meet me there. Okay?'

'Okay, okay!' He was delighted.

Vandam took out a pound note and tore it in half. The young policeman's eyes widened. Vandam gave him half the note. 'You get the other half when you meet me.'

'Okay!'

The train was almost in the station. Vandam ran across the square. The older policeman met him outside. 'The stationmaster is stopping the train.'

Vandam shook his hand. 'Thankyou. ^{What's} ~~Tell me~~ your name?'

'Sergeant Morgan.'

'I'll tell them about you in Cairo. Goodbye.' Vandam hurried into the station. He ran south along the platform, away from the train, so that he could board it at the front end without any of the passengers seeing him through the windows.

The train came in, billowing smoke. The stationmaster came along the platform to where Vandam was standing. When the train stopped the stationmaster spoke to the engine driver and the footplateman. Vandam ~~xxxx~~ gave all three of them baksheesh and boarded the train.

He found himself in an economy carriage. Wolff would surely travel first class. He began to walk along the train, picking his way over the people sitting on the floor with their boxes and crates and animals. He noticed that it was mainly women and children on the floor: the slatted wooden seats were occupied by the men with their beer bottles and cigarettes. The carriage was unbearably hot and smelly. Some of the women were cooking on makeshift stoves: surely that was dangerous! Vandam almost trod on a tiny baby crawling on the filthy floor - he had a feeling that if he had not stopped himself in the nick of time they would have lynched him.

He passed through two more economy carriages, then he was at the door to a first-class coach. He found a guard just outside, sitting on a little wooden stool, drinking tea from a glass. The guard stood up. 'Some tea, General?'

'No, thankyou.' Vandam had to shout to make himself heard over the noise of the wheels beneath them. 'I have to check the papers of all first-class passengers.'

'All in order, all very good,' said the guard, trying to be helpful.

'How many first-class carriages are there?'

'All in order - '

Vandam bent to shout in the man's ear. 'How many first-class coaches?'

The guard held up two fingers.

Vandam nodded and unbent. He looked at the door. Suddenly he was not sure that he had the nerve to go through with this. There were two things to remember: he had to keep the injured side of his face away from Wolff, and he had to be ready to warn Billy, somehow, to keep quiet and pretend not to recognise Vandam.

He opened the door.

Stepping through, he glanced at the first few seats, and saw nobody recognisable. He turned his back to the carriage as he closed the door, then turned around again. His gaze swept the rows of seats quickly: no Billy.

He spoke to the passengers nearest to him. 'Your papers, please, gentlemen.'

'What's this, Major?' said an Egyptian Army officer, a Colonel.

'Routine check, sir,' Vandam replied.

He moved slowly along the aisle, checking people's papers. By the time he was half way down the carriage he had studied the

passengers well enough to be sure that Wolff, Elene and Billy were not here. He felt he had to go through with the pantomime before going on to the next coach. He began to wonder whether his guesswork had gone wrong. Perhaps they weren't on the train at all; perhaps they weren't even heading for Assyut; perhaps the atlas clue had been a trick ...

He reached the end of the carriage and stepped through the door into the space between the coaches. If Wolff is on the train, I'll see him now, he thought. If Billy is here - if Billy is here -

He opened the door.

He saw Billy immediately. He felt a pang of distress like a wound. The boy was asleep in his seat, his feet only just reaching the floor, his body slumped sideways, his hair falling over his forehead. His mouth was open, and his jaws were moving slightly: Vandam knew, for he had seen this before, that Billy was grinding his teeth in his sleep.

The woman who had her arm around him, and on whose bosom his head rested, was Elene. Vandam had a disorienting sense of *deja vu*: it reminded him of the night he had come upon Elene kissing Billy goodnight ... Elene looked up.

She caught Vandam's eye. He saw her face begin to change expression: her eyes widening, her mouth coming open for a cry of surprise; and, because he was prepared for this, he was very quick to raise a finger to his lips in a hushing sign. She understood immediately, and dropped her eyes; but Wolff had caught her look, and he was turning his head to find out what she had seen.

They were on Vandam's left, and it was his left cheek which had been cut by Wolff's knife. Vandam turned around so that he had his back to the carriage, then he spoke to the people on his left, on the side of the aisle opposite Wolff. 'Your papers, please.'

He had not reckoned on Billy being asleep.

He had been ready to give the boy a quick sign, as he had done with Elene; and he had felt sure Billy was alert enough to mask his surprise rapidly, as Elene had done. But if he were to wake up and see his father standing there he would surely give the game away before he had time to collect his thoughts.

Vandam turned to Wolff and said: 'Papers, please.'

It was the first time he had seen his enemy face to face. Wolff was a handsome bastard. His big face had strong features: a wide forehead, a hooked nose, even white teeth, a broad jaw. Only around the eyes and the corners of the mouth was there a hint of weakness, of self-indulgence, dissolution. He handed over his papers then looked out of the window, bored. The papers identified him as John Wolff, of Villa les Oliviers, Garden City. The man had remarkable nerve.

Vandam said: 'Where are you going, sir?'

'Assyut.'

'On business?'

'To visit relations.' The voice was strong and deep, and Vandam would not have noticed the accent if he had not been listening for it.

Vandam said: 'Are you people together?'

'That's my son and his nanny,' Wolff said.

Vandam took Elene's papers and glanced at them. Suddenly he wanted to take Wolff by the throat and shake him until his bones rattled. That's my son and his nanny. You bastard.

He gave Elene her papers. 'No need to wake the child,' he said. He looked at the priest sitting next to Wolff, and took the proffered wallet.

Wolff said: 'What's this about, Major?'

Vandam replied without looking at him. 'Security, sir.'

The priest said: 'I'm going to Assyut, too.'

'I see,' said Vandam. 'To the convent?'

'Indeed. You've heard of it, then.'

'The place where the Holy Family stayed after their sojourn in the desert.'

'Quite. Have you been there?'

'Not yet - perhaps I'll make it this time.'

'I hope so,' said the priest.

Vandam handed back the papers. 'Thankyou.' He backed away, along the aisle to the next row of seats, and continued to examine papers. When he looked up he ~~xxx~~ met Wolff's eyes. Wolff was watching him expressionlessly. Vandam wondered if he had done something suspicious. Next time he looked up, Wolff was staring out of the window again.

What was Elene thinking? She must be wondering what I'm up to, Vandam thought. She can probably guess my intentions. It must be hard for her all the same, to sit still and see me walk by without a word. At least now she knows she's not alone.

What was Wolff thinking? Perhaps he was impatient, or gloating, or frightened, or eager ... No, he was none of those, Vandam realised; he was bored.

He reached the end of the carriage and examined the last of the papers. He was handing them back, about to retrace his steps along the aisle, when he heard a cry that pierced his heart:

'THAT'S MY DAD!'

He looked up. Billy was running along the aisle toward him, stumbling, swaying from side to side, bumping against the seats, his arms outstretched.

Oh, God.

Beyond Billy, Vandam could see Wolff and Elene standing up,

watching; Wolff with intensity, Elene with fear. Vandam opened the door behind him, pretending to take no notice of Billy, and backed through it. Billy came flying through. Vandam slammed the door. He took Billy in his arms.

'It's all right,' Vandam said. 'It's all right.'

Wolff would be coming to investigate.

'They took me away!' Billy said. 'I missed geography and I was real real scared!'

'Listen,' Vandam said. 'I'm here, and I'm watching over you, but I have to catch that man, and I don't want him to know who I am. He's the German spy I'm after, do you understand?'

'Yes, yes ... '

'Listen. Can you pretend you made a mistake? Can you pretend I'm not your father? Can you go back to him?'

Billy stared, open-mouthed.

Vandam said: 'This is a real-life ~~ant~~ tec story, Billy, and we're in it, you and I. You have to go back to that man, and pretend you made a mistake; but remember, I'll be close by, and together we'll catch the spy. Is that okay? Is it okay?'

Billy said nothing.

The door opened and Wolff came through.

'What's all this?' Wolff said.

Vandam forced a smile. 'He seems to have woken up from a dream and mistaken me for his father. We're the same build, you and I ... You did say you were his father, didn't you?'

Wolff looked at Billy. 'What nonsense!' he said brusquely.

'Come back to your seat at once.'

Billy stood still. Vandam put a hand on his shoulder. 'Come on, young man,' he said. 'Let's go and win the war.'

The old catch-phrase did the trick. Billy gave a brave grin. 'I'm sorry, sir,' he said. 'I must have been dreaming.'

Vandam felt as though his heart would break.

Billy turned away and went back inside the coach. Wolff went after him, and Vandam followed. As they walked along the aisle the train began to slow down. Vandam realised they were already approaching the next station, where his motorcycle would be waiting. Billy reached his seat and sat down. Elene was staring at Vandam. Billy touched her arm and said: 'It's okay, I made a mistake, I must have been dreaming.' She looked at Billy, and then at Vandam, and a strange light came into her eyes: she seemed on the point of tears.

Vandam did not want to walk past them. He wanted to sit down, to talk, to do anything to prolong the time he spent with them. Outside the train windows another dusty little town appeared. Vandam yielded to temptation and paused at the carriage door. 'Have a good trip,' he said to Billy.

'Thankyou, sir.'

Vandam went out.

The train pulled into the station and stopped. Vandam got off and walked forward along the platform a little way. He stood in the shade of an awning and waited. Nobody else got off, but two or three people boarded the economy coaches. There was a whistle, and the train began to move. Vandam's eye was fixed on the window which he knew to be next to Billy's seat. As the window passed him, he saw Billy's face. Billy raised his hand in a little wave. Vandam waved back, then the face was gone.

Vandam watched the train recede into the hazy distance. When it was almost out of sight he left the station. There outside was his motorcycle, with the young policeman from the last town sitting astride it explaining its mysteries to a small crowd of admirers. Vandam gave him the other half of the pound note. The young man saluted.

Vandam climbed on the motorcycle and started it. He did not know how the policeman was going to get home, and he did not care. He drove out of town on the road south. The sun had passed its zenith, but the heat was still terrific.

Soon Vandam passed the train. He would reach Assyut thirty or forty minutes ahead of it, he thought. Captain Newman would be there to meet him. Vandam knew in outline what he was going to do thereafter, but the details would have to be improvised as he went along.

He pulled ahead of the train which carried Billy and Elene. He was sure he was doing the right thing, but he felt dreadfully guilty still.

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The train entered the station and stopped. Elene saw a sign which said, in Arabic and English, Assyut. She realised with a shock that they had arrived.

It had been an enormous relief to see Vandam's kind, worried face on the train. For a while she had been euphoric: surely, she had felt, it was all over. She had watched his pantomime with the ~~idiot~~ papers, expecting him at any moment to pull a gun, reveal his identity, or attack Wolff. Gradually she had realised that it would not be that simple. She had been astonished, and slightly horrified, at the icy nerve with which Vandam had sent his own son back to Wolff; and the courage of Billy himself had seemed incredible. Her spirits had plunged farther when she saw Vandam on the station platform, waving as the train pulled out. What game was he playing?

Of course, the Rebecca code was still on his mind. He must have some scheme to rescue her and Billy and also get the key to the code. She wished she knew how. It was clear that Billy was not

troubled by such thoughts: his father had the situation under control, and it seemed he did not even entertain the idea that his father's schemes could fail. The boy had perked up, taking an interest in the countryside through which the train was passing, and had even asked Wolff where he got his knife. Elene wished she had as much faith in William Vandam.

Wolff was also in good spirits. The incident with Billy had scared him, and he had looked at Vandam with hostility and anxiety; but he seemed reassured when Vandam got off the train. After that his mood had alternated between boredom and nervous excitement, and now, arriving in Assyut, the excitement became dominant. Some kind of change had occurred in Wolff since she had first met him, she thought: his poise, which had once seemed to be a part of his deepest nature, now turned out to be a cracked facade. She guessed this was because his fight with Vandam had become personal. What had begun as a deadly game had turned into a deadly battle. It was curious that Wolff, the ruthless one, was getting desperate while Vandam just got cooler.

Elene thought: Just so long as he doesn't get too damn cool.

Wolff stood up and took his case from the luggage rack. Elene and Billy followed him from the train and on to the platform. This town was bigger and busier than the others they had passed through, and the station was crowded. ~~They were jostled~~ As they stepped down from the train they were jostled by people trying to get on. Wolff, a head higher than most of the people, looked around for the exit, spotted it, and began to carve a path through the throng. Suddenly a dirty boy in bare feet and green striped pyjamas snatched Wolff's case, shouting: 'I get taxi! I get taxi!' Wolff would not let go of the case, but neither would the boy. Wolff gave a good-humoured shrug and let the boy pull him to the gate.

They showed their tickets and went out into the square. It was late afternoon, but here in the south the sun was still very hot. The square was lined with quite tall buildings, one of them the Grand Hotel. Outside the station was a row of horse-drawn cabs. Elene looked around, half-expecting a detachment of soldiery ready to arrest Wolff. There was no sign of Vandam. Wolff told the Arab boy: 'Motor taxi, I want a motor taxi.' There was one such car, an old Morris parked a few yards behind the horse cabs. The boy led them to it.

'Get in the front,' Wolff told Elene. He gave the boy a coin and got into the back of the car with Billy. The driver ~~was~~ wore ^{dark} ~~European~~ ~~with~~ ~~dark~~ sunglasses and an Arab headress to keep off the sun. 'Go south, toward the convent,' Wolff told the driver in Arabic.

'Okay,' the driver said.

Elene's heart skipped a ~~xxx~~ beat. She knew that voice. She stared at the driver. It was Vandam.

*

Vandam drove away from the station, thinking: So far, so good - except for the Arabic. It had not occurred to him that Wolff would speak to a taxi-driver in Arabic. Vandam's knowledge of the language was rudimentary, but he did know how to give - and therefore how to understand - directions. He could reply in monosyllables, or grunts, or even in English, for those Arabs who spoke a little English were always keen to use it, even when addressed by a European in Arabic. He would be all right as long as Wolff did not want to discuss the weather and the crops.

He had understood the words for 'south' and 'convent', and while he waited for the train he had studied Captain Newman's map of Assyut and the surrounding area. Now he drove through the souk, honking his horn more or less continually in the Egyptian fashion,

steering dangerously close to the great wooden wheels of the carts, nudging sheep out of the way with his fenders. From the buildings on either side ~~sixthxxxxxxx~~ shops, ~~in~~ cafes and workshops spilled out into the street. The unpaved road was surfaced with dust, rubbish and dung. Glancing into his rear-view mirror Vandam saw that four or five children were riding his back bumper.

Wolff said something, and this time Vandam did not understand. He pretended not to have heard. Wolff repeated it. Vandam caught the word for 'petrol'. Wolff was pointing to a garage. Vandam tapped the gauge on the dashboard. 'Kifaya,' he said. 'Enough.' Wolff seemed to accept that.

Pretending to adjust his mirror, Vandam stole a glance at Billy, wondering if the boy had recognised his father. Billy was staring at the back of Vandam's head with an expression of delight. Vandam thought: Don't give the game away, for God's sake!

They left the town behind and headed south on a straight desert road. On their left were the irrigated fields and groves of trees; on their right, the wall of granite cliffs, coloured beige by a layer of dusty sand. The atmosphere in the car was peculiar. Vandam could sense Elene's tension, Billy's euphoria and Wolff's impatience. He himself was extremely edgy. How much of all that was getting through to Wolff? The German only needed to take one good look at the taxi driver to realise he was being hoodwinked. Vandam hoped Wolff was preoccupied with thoughts of his radio.

Wolff said: 'Ruh alyaminak.'

Vandam knew this meant 'Turn right.' Up ahead he saw a turn-off which seemed to lead ^{straight} ~~right~~ to the cliff. He slowed the car and took the turn, then saw that he was headed for a pass through the hills.

Vandam was surprised. Farther along the southbound road there

were some villages and the famous convent, according to Jakes' map; but beyond the hills there was nothing but the Western Desert. If Wolff had buried the radio in the sand he would never find it again. Surely he knew better? Vandam hoped so, for if Wolff's plans were to collapse, so would Vandam's.

The road began to climb, and the old car struggled to take the gradient. Vandam changed down once, then again. It made the summit in second gear. Vandam looked out across an apparently endless desert. He wished he had a jeep. He wondered how far Wolff had to go. They had better get back to Assyut before nightfall. He could not ask Wolff questions for fear of revealing his ignorance of Arabic.

The road turned into a track. Vandam drove across the desert, going as fast as he dared, waiting for instructions from Wolff. Directly ahead, the sun rolled down the edge of the sky. After an hour they passed a small flock of sheep grazing on tufty, sparse dune grass, guarded by a man and a boy. Wolff sat up in his seat and began to look about him. Soon afterwards the road intersected with a wadi. Cautiously Vandam let the car roll down the bank of the dried-up river.

Wolff said: 'Ruh ashshimalak.'

Vandam turned left. The going was firm. He was astonished to see groups of people, tents and animals in the wadi. It was like a secret community. A mile farther on they saw the explanation: a well-head.

The mouth of the well was marked by a low circular wall of mud brick. Four roughly dressed tree-trunks leaned together over the hole, supporting a crude winding mechanism. Four or five men hauled water continuously, splashing it into four radiating troughs. Camels and women crowded around the troughs.

Vandam drove close to the well. Wolff said: 'Andak.' Vandam

stopped the car. The desert people were incurious, although it must have been rare for them to see a motor vehicle: perhaps, Vandam thought, their hard lives left no time for them to investigate oddities. Wolff was asking questions of one of the men in rapid Arabic. There was a short exchange. The man pointed ahead. Wolff said to Vandam: 'Dughri.' Vandam drove on.

At last they came to a large encampment where Wolff made Vandam stop. There were several tents in a cluster, some penned sheep, several hobbled camels, and a couple of cooking fires. With a sudden quick movement Wolff reached into the front of the car, ~~pulling~~ ~~switching off the engine~~ switched off the engine, and pulled out the ignition key. Without a word he got out of the car.

*

Ishmael was sitting by the fire, making tea. He looked up and said: 'Peace be with you,' as casually as if Wolff had dropped in from the tent next door.

'And with you be health and God's mercy and blessing,' Wolff replied formally.

'How is thy health?'

'God bless thee; I am well, thank God.' Wolff squatted in the sand.

Ishmael handed him a cup. 'Take it.'

'God increase thy good fortune,' Wolff said.

'And ~~thy~~ good fortune also.'

Wolff drank the tea. It was hot, sweet, and very strong. He remembered how this drink had fortified him during his trek through the desert ... was it only two months ago?

When Wolff had drunk, Ishmael raised a hand to his head and said: 'May it agree with thee, sir.'

'God grant it may agree with thee.'

The formalities were done. Ishmael said: 'What of your friends?' He nodded toward the taxi, parked in the middle of the wadi, incongruous among the tents and camels.

'They are not friends,' Wolff said.

Ishmael nodded. He was incurious. For all the polite inquiries about one's health, Wolff thought, the nomads were not really interested in what city people did: their lives were so different as to be almost incomprehensible.

Wolff said: 'You still have my box?'

'Yes.'

Ishmael would say Yes whether he had it or not, Wolff realised; that was the Arab way. Ishmael made no move to fetch the suitcase. He was incapable of hurrying. 'Quickly' meant 'Within the next few days;' 'Immediately' meant 'Tomorrow.'

Wolff said: 'I must return to the city today.'

'But you will sleep in my tent.'

'Alas, no.'

'Then you will ~~eat~~ join us in eating.'

'Twice alas, no. Already the sun is low, and I must be back in the city before night falls.'

Ishmael shook his head sadly, with the look of one who contemplates a hopeless case. 'You have come for your box.'

'Yes. Please fetch it, my cousin.'

Ishmael spoke to a man standing behind him, who spoke to a younger man, who told a child to fetch the case. Ishmael offered Wolff a cigarette. Wolff took it out of politeness. Ishmael lit the cigarettes with a twig from the fire. The child brought the case and offered it to Ishmael. Ishmael pointed to Wolff.

Wolff took the case and opened it. A great sense of relief flooded over him as he looked at the radio, the book and the key to

the code. On the long and tedious train journey his euphoria had vanished, but now it came back, and he felt intoxicated with ~~the~~ a sense of power and imminent victory. Once again he knew he was going to win the war. He closed the lid of the case. His hands were shaking.

Ishmael was looking at him through narrowed eyes. 'This is very important to you, this ~~is~~ box.'

'It's important to the world.'

Ishmael said: 'The sun rises, and the sun sets. Sometimes it rains. We live, then we die.' He shrugged.

He would never understand, Wolff thought; but others would. He stood up. 'I thank you, my cousin.'

'Go in safety.'

'May God protect thee.'

Wolff turned around and walked toward the taxi.

*

Elene saw Wolff walk away from the fire with a suitcase in his hand. 'He's coming back,' she said. 'What now?'

'He'll want to go back to Assyut,' Vandam said, not looking at her. 'Those radios have no batteries, they have to be plugged in, he has to go somewhere where there's electricity, and that means Assyut.'

Billy said: 'Can I come in the front?'

'No,' Vandam said. 'Quiet, now. Not much longer.'

'I'm scared of him.'

'So am I.'

Elene shuddered. Wolff got into the car. 'Assyut,' he said. Vandam held out his empty hand, and Wolff gave him the key. He started the car and turned it around.

They went along the wadi, past the well, and turned on to the

road. Elene was thinking about the case Wolff held on his knees. It contained the radio, the book, and the key to the Rebecca code: how absurd it was that so much should hang on the question of who held that case in his hands, that she should have risked her life for it, that Vandam should have jeopardised his son for it. But intelligence was vital in war, and codes were central to intelligence, and deception was the most important part of counter-intelligence, and somehow everything depended upon that single sheet of paper ... She felt very tired. The sun was low behind them now, and the smallest objects - boulders, bushes, tufts of grass - cast long shadows. Evening clouds were gathering over the hills ahead.

'Go faster,' Wolff said in Arabic. 'It's getting dark.'

Vandam seemed to understand, for he increased speed. The car bounced and swayed on the unmade road. A couple of minutes later Billy said: 'I feel sick.'

Elene turned to look at him. His face was pale and tense, and he was sitting bolt upright. 'Go slower,' she said to Vandam, then she repeated it in Arabic, as if she had just recalled that he did not speak English.

Vandam slowed down for a moment, but Wolff said: 'Go faster.' He said to Elene: 'Forget about the child.'

Vandam went faster.

Elene looked at Billy again. He was white as a sheet, and seemed to be on the brink of tears. 'You bastard,' she said to Wolff.

'Stop the car,' Billy said.

Wolff ignored him, and Vandam had to pretend not to understand English.

There was a low hump in the road. Breating^s it at speed, the car rose a few inches into the air, and came down again with a bump.

Billy yelled: 'Dad, stop the car! Dad!'

Vandam slammed on the brakes.

Elene braced herself against the dashboard and turned her head to look at Wolff.

For a split-second he was stunned with shock. His eyes went to Vandam, then to Billy, then back to Vandam; and she saw in his expression first incomprehension, then astonishment, then fear. She knew he was thinking about the incident on the train, and the Arab boy at the railway station, and the kaffiyeh that covered the taxi driver's face; and then she saw that he knew, he had understood it all in a flash.

The car was screeching to a halt, throwing the passengers forward. Wolff regained his balance. With a rapid movement he grabbed Billy with his left arm and pulled the boy to him. Elene saw Wolff's hand go inside his shirt, and then he pulled out the knife.

The car stopped.

Vandam looked around.

Wolff held the knife an inch from the soft skin of Billy's throat. Billy was wild-eyed with fear. Vandam looked stricken. At the corners of Wolff's mouth there was the hint of a mad smile.

'Damn it,' Wolff said, 'you almost fooled me.'

They all stared at him in silence.

'Take off that foolish hat,' he said to Vandam.

Vandam removed the kaffiyeh.

'Major Vandam, by all that's holy.' Wolff seemed to be enjoying the moment. 'What a good thing I took your son for insurance.'

'It's finished, Wolff,' said Vandam. 'Half the British Army is on your trail. You can let me take you alive, or let them kill you.'

'I don't believe you're telling the truth,' Wolff said. 'You wouldn't have brought the Army to look for your son. You'd be afraid those cowboys would shoot the wrong people. I don't think your superiors even know where you are.'

Elene felt sure Wolff was right, and she was gripped by despair. She had no idea what Wolff would do now, but she felt sure Vandam had lost the battle. She looked at Vandam, and saw defeat in his eyes.

Wolff said: 'Get out of the car.'

Vandam sat motionless.

'Get out,' Wolff repeated. With a sudden precise movement he nicked the lobe of Billy's ear with the knife. A drop of blood welled out.

Vandam got out of the car.

Wolff said to Elene: 'Get in the driving seat.'

She climbed over the gear stick.

Vandam had left the door open. Wolff said: 'Close the door.' Elene closed the door. Vandam stood beside the car, staring in.

'Drive,' Wolff said.

The car had stalled. Elene turned the key and it jerked forward suddenly.

'It's in gear,' Wolff said. 'Put it in neutral.'

Elene put the gearstick in the neutral position and tried the engine again. It coughed and died. She hoped it would not go. She turned the key again; again the starter failed.

Wolff said: 'Touch the accelerator pedal as you turn the key.'

She did what he said. The engine caught and roared.

'Drive!' Wolff said.

She pulled away.

'Faster!'

She changed up.

Looking in the mirror she saw Wolff put the knife away and release Billy. Behind the car, already fifty yards away, Vandam stood on the desert road, his silhouette black against the sunset. He was quite still.

Elene said: 'He's got no water!'

'No,' Wolff replied.

Then Billy went beserk.

Elene heard him scream: 'You can't leave him behind!' She turned around, forgetting about the road. Billy had leaped on Wolff like an enraged wildcat, punching and scratching and, somehow, kicking; yelling incoherently, his face a mask of childish rage, his body jerking convulsively like one in a fit. Wolff, who had relaxed, thinking the crisis was over, was momentarily powerless to resist. In the confined space, with Billy so close to him, he was unable to strike a proper blow, so he raised his arms to protect himself, and pushed weakly against the boy.

Elene looked back to the road. While she was ^{turning} looking around the car had begun to go off course, and now the left-hand front wheel was ploughing through the sandy scrub beside the road. She stamped on the brake, and the rear of the car began to slide sideways. Too late, she saw a deep rut running across the road immediately in front. The skidding car hit the rut broadside with a bone-jarring impact and seemed to bounce upward. Elene was trying to turn the wheel against the direction of the skid. When the car bumped she accidentally trod on the accelerator pedal, and now the car shot forward and began to skid in the opposite direction. In the back Wolff and Billy were being tossed around helplessly, still fighting. The car went off the road into the soft sand. It slowed abruptly. Elene banged her head on the rim of the steering wheel. The whole of the car tilted sideways and seemed to be flying. She

saw the desert fall away below, and realised the car was in fact rolling. She thought it would go over and over. She fell sideways, grabbing at the wheel and the gearstick. The car did not turn turtle, but perched on its side like a coin dropped edgewise into the sand. The gearstick came off in her hand. She slumped against the door, banging her head again. The car was still.

She scrambled on to her hands and knees, still holding the detached gear stick, and looked into the rear of the car. Wolff and Billy had fallen in a heap, with Wolff on top. As she looked Wolff moved.

She had hoped he was dead.

She had one knee on the car door and the other on the window. On her right the roof of the car stood up vertically. On her left was the seat. She was looking through the gap between the top of the seat-back and the roof.

Wolff got to his feet.

Billy seemed to be unconscious.

Elene felt disoriented and helpless, kneeling on the side window of the car.

Wolff, standing on the rear left-hand door, threw his weight against the floor of the car. The car rocked. He did it again; the car rocked more. On his third try the car tilted over and fell on all four wheels with a crash. Elene was dizzy. She saw Wolff open the door and get out of the car. He stood outside, crouched, and drew his knife. ^{She} ~~Elene~~ saw Vandam approach.

She knelt on the seat, watching. She could not move until her head stopped spinning. She saw Vandam crouch like Wolff, ready to spring, his hands raised protectively. He was red-faced and panting: he had run after the car. They circled. Wolff was limping slightly. The sun was a huge orange globe behind them.

Vandam moved forward, then seemed to hesitate curiously. Wolff lashed out with the knife, but he had been surprised by Vandam's hesitation, and his thrust missed. Vandam's fist lashed out. Wolff jerked back. His nose was bleeding.

They faced each other again, like boxers in a ring.

Vandam jumped forward again. This time Wolff moved back. Vandam's foot lashed out in a kick, but Wolff was out of range. He stabbed with the knife. Elene saw it rip through Vandam's trousers and draw blood. ^{Wolff} ~~Vandam~~ lashed out again, but ~~Wolff~~ Vandam had stepped away. A dark stain appeared on his trouser leg.

Elene looked at Billy. The boy lay limply on the floor of the car, his eyes closed. Elene clambered over into the back and lifted him on to the seat. She could not tell whether he was dead or alive. She touched his face. He did not stir. 'Billy,' she said. 'Oh, Billy.'

She looked outside again. Vandam was down on one knee. His left arm hung limply from a shoulder covered with blood. He held his right arm out in front of him. Wolff approached him.

Elene opened the car door and jumped out. She still had the gear stick in her hand. She saw Wolff bring back his arm, ready to slash at ~~W~~ Vandam once more. She rushed forward, stumbling in the sand. Wolff struck at Vandam. Vandam jerked sideways, dodging the blow. Elene raised the gear lever high in the air and brought it down with all her might on the ~~top~~ back of Wolff's head. He seemed to stand still for a moment.

Elene said: 'Oh, God.'

Then she hit him again.

She hit him a third time.

He fell down.

She hit him again.

Then she dropped the gear lever and knelt beside Vandam.

'Well done,' he said weakly.

'Can you stand up?'

He put a hand on her shoulder and struggled to his feet. 'It's not as bad as it looks,' he said.

'Let me look.'

'In a minute. Help me with this.' Using his good arm, he took hold of Wolff's leg and pulled him toward the car. Elene grabbed the unconscious man's arm and heaved. When Wolff was x lying beside the car, Vandam lifted the limp arm and placed the hand on the running-board palm down. Then he lifted his foot and stamped on the elbow. Wolff's arm snapped. Elene turned white. Vandam said: 'That's to make sure he's no trouble when he comes round.'

He leaned into the back of the car and put a hand on Billy's chest. 'Alive,' he said. 'Thank God.'

Billy's eyes opened.

'It's all over,' Vandam said.

Billy closed his eyes.

Vandam got into the front seat of the car. 'Where's the gear stick?' he said.

'It broke. That's what I hit him with.'

Vandam turned the key. The car jerked. 'Thank God the car is still in gear.' He pressed the clutch and turned the key again. The engine fired. He eased out the clutch and the car moved forward. He switched off. 'We're mobile,' he said. 'What a piece of luck.'

'What will we do with Wolff?' Elene asked.

'Put him in the boot.'

Vandam took another look at Billy. He was conscious now, his

eyes wide open. 'How are you, son?' said Vandam.

'I'm sorry,' Billy said, 'but I couldn't help feeling sick.'

Vandam looked at Elene. 'You'll have to drive,' he said.

There were tears in his eyes.

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There was the sudden, terrifying roar of nearby aircraft. Rommel glanced up and saw the British bombers approaching low from behind the nearest line of hills: the troops called them 'Party Rally' bombers because they flew in the perfect formation of display aircraft at the pre-war Nuremburg parades. 'Take cover!' Rommel yelled. He ran to a ^{slit}/trench and dived in.

The noise was so loud it was like silence. Rommel lay with his eyes closed. He had a pain in his stomach. They had sent him a doctor from Germany, but Rommel knew that the only medicine he needed was victory. He had lost a lot of weight: his uniform hung loosely on him now, and his shirt-collars seemed too large. His hair was receding rapidly and turning white in places.

Today was 1 September, and something had gone terribly wrong. The advance intelligence for this battle had been solid. The spy Wolff, who had by now proved the complete reliability of his information, had said that the southernmost minefields were thin, and that the Alam Halfa ridge was lightly defended. A map taken from a captured British officer had shown the approach to Alam Halfa as 'hard going'. There had been confirming indications. Rommel had received supplies, and although he was still perilously short of gasoline he had almost five hundred tanks - and he had won major victories with a tenth as many.

But something had gone terribly wrong. The southerly minefields

were not thin, they were heavy and complex, and the work of clearing a passage through had taken hours longer than anticipated. While clearing that passage the spearhead forces had been bombed continually and attacked by fire from concealed artillery. Nehring, the commander of the Afrika Korps, had been wounded; and von Bismarck, commander of the 21st Panzer division, had been killed: two important leaders lost almost before the battle had begun.

Still, they had made a corridor through the minefield and swung north-east toward Alam Halfa. Then they hit the quicksand. They slowed right down and used too much fuel. Supplies coming through the corridor were bombed incessantly. Tanks bogged in the soft sand were shelled all day. What had seemed to be the weak point in the Allied line was looking more and more like an ambush.

The bombers passed overhead. Rommel got out of the trench. His aides and officers emerged from cover and gathered around him again. He raised his field glasses and looked out over the desert. Scores of vehicles stood still in the sand, many of them blazing furiously. If the enemy would only charge, Rommel thought, we could fight him. But the Allies sat tight, well dug in, picking off the Panzer tanks like fish in a barrel.

It was no good. His forward units were fifteen miles from Alexandria, but they were stuck. He looked at the officers around him. As always, their expressions reflected his own: he saw in their faces what they saw in his.

It was defeat.

*

He knew it was a nightmare, but he could not wake up.

The cell was six feet long by four feet wide, and half of it was taken up by a bed. Beneath the bed was a chamber pot. The walls were of smooth grey stone. A small light bulb hung from the ceiling

by a cord. In one end of the cell was a door. In the other end was a small square window, set just above eye level: through it he could see the bright blue sky.

In his dream he thought: I'll wake up soon, then it will be all right. I'll wake up, and there will be a beautiful woman lying beside me on a silk sheet, and I will touch her breasts - and as he thought this he was filled with strong lust - and she will wake up and kiss me, and we will drink champagne ... But he could not quite dream that, and the dream of the prison cell came back. Somewhere nearby a bass drum was beating steadily. Soldiers were marching to the rhythm outside. The beat was terrifying, terrifying, boom-boom, boom-boom, tramp-tramp, the drum and the soldiers and the close grey walls of the cell and that distant, tantalising square of blue sky and he was so frightened, so horrified, that he forced his eyes open and he woke up.

He looked around him, not understanding. He was awake, wide awake, no question of it, the dream was over; yet he was still in a prison cell. It was six feet long by four feet wide, and half of it was taken up by a bed. He ~~he~~ raised himself from the bed and looked underneath it. There was a chamber pot.

He stood upright then quietly, calmly, he began to bang his head against the wall.

*

Jerusalem, 24 September 42

My dear Elene,

Today I went to the Western Wall, which is also called the Wailing Wall. I stood before it with many other Jews, and I prayed. I wrote a kvitlach and put it into a crack in the wall. May God grant my petition.

This is the most beautiful place in the world, Jerusalem. Of course I do not live well. I sleep on a mattress on the floor

in a little room with five other men. Sometimes I get a little work, sweeping up in a workshop where one of my room-mates, a young man, carries wood for the carpenters. I am very poor, like always, but now I am poor in Jerusalem, which is better than rich in Egypt.

I crossed the desert in a British Army lorry. They asked me what I would have done if they had not picked me up, and when I said I would have walked, I believe they thought me mad. But this is the sanest thing I ever did.

I must tell you that I am dying. My illness is quite incurable, even if I could afford doctors, and I have only weeks left, perhaps a couple of months. Don't be sad. I have never been happier in my life.

I should tell you what I wrote in my kvitlach. I asked God to grant happiness to my daughter Elene. I believe he will.
Farewell,

Your Father.

*

The smoked ham was sliced as thin as paper and rolled into dainty cylinders. The bread rolls were home-baked, fresh that morning. There was a glass jar of potato salad made with real mayonnaise and crisp chopped onion. There was a bottle of wine, another bottle of soda, and a bag of oranges. And a packet of cigarettes, his brand.

Elene began to pack the food into the picnic basket.

She had just closed the lid when she heard the knock at the door. She took off her apron before going to open it.

Vandam stepped inside, closed the door behind him, and kissed her. He put his arms around her and held her painfully tightly. He always did this, and it always hurt, but she never complained, for they had almost lost each other, and now when they were together they

were just so grateful.

They went into the kitchen. Vandam hefted the picnic basket and said: 'Lord, what have you got in here, the Crown Jewels?'

'What's the news?' Elene asked.

He knew she meant news of the war/ ^{in the desert} He said: 'Axis forces in full retreat, and I quote.' She thought how relaxed he was these days. He even talked differently. A little grey was appearing in his hair, and he laughed a lot.

'I think you're one of those men who gets more good-looking as he gets older,' she said.

'Wait till my teeth drop out.'

They went outside. The sky was curiously black, and Elene said 'Oh!' in astonishment as she stepped into the street.

'End of the world today,' Vandam said.

'I've never seen it like this before,' Elene said.

They got on the motorcycle and headed for Billy's school. The sky became even darker. The first ~~drizzle~~ rain fell as they were passing Shepherd's Hotel. Elene saw an Egyptian drape a handkerchief over his fez. The raindrops were enormous; each one soaked right through her dress to the skin. Vandam turned the bike around and parked in front of the hotel. As they dismounted the clouds burst.

They stood under the hotel canopy and watched the storm. The sheer quantity of water was incredible. Within minutes the gutters overflowed and the pavements were awash. Opposite the hotel the shopkeepers waded through the flood to put up shutters. The cars simply had to stop where they were.

'There's no main drainage in this town,' Vandam remarked.

'The water has nowhere to go but the Nile. Look at it.' The street had turned into a river.

'What about the bike?' Elene said.

'Damn thing will float away,' said Vandam. 'I'll have to bring it under here.' He hesitated, then dashed out on to the pavement, seized the bike by its handlebars, and pushed it through the water to the steps of the hotel. When he regained the shelter of the canopy his clothes were thoroughly soaked and his hair was plastered around his head like a mop coming out of a bucket. Elene laughed at him.

The rain went on a long time. Elene said: 'What about Billy?'

'They'll have to keep the kids at school until the rain stops.'

Eventually they went into the hotel for a drink. Vandam ordered sherry: he had sworn off gin, and claimed he did not miss it.

At last it ended, and they went out again; but they had to wait a little longer for the flood to recede. Finally there was only an inch or so of water, and the sun came out. The motorists began to try to start their cars. The bike was not too wet, and it fired first time.

The sun came out and the roads began to steam as they drove to the school. Billy was waiting outside. 'What a storm!' he said excitedly. He climbed on to the bike, sitting between Elene and Vandam.

They drove out into the desert. Holding on tightly, her eyes half-closed, Elene did not see the miracle until Vandam stopped the bike. The three of them got off and looked around, speechless.

The desert was carpeted with flowers.

'It's the rain, obviously,' said Vandam. 'But ... '

Millions of flying insects had also appeared from nowhere, and now butterflies and bees dashed frantically from bloom to bloom, reaping the sudden harvest.

Billy said: 'The seeds must have been in the sand, waiting.'

'That's it,' Vandam said. 'The seeds have been there for years, just waiting for this.'

The flowers were all tiny, like miniatures, but very brightly coloured. Billy walked a few paces from the road and bent down to examine one. Vandam put his arm around Elene and kissed her. It started as a peck on the cheek, but turned into a long, loving kiss.

Eventually she broke away from him, laughing. 'You'll embarrass Billy,' she said.

'He's going to have to get used to it,' Vandam said.

Elene stopped laughing. 'Is he?' she said. 'Is he, really?' Vandam smiled, and kissed her again.

- The end. -