

Not like Elene.

'A pain-killer will send me to sleep,' he told her.

'And a jolly good thing, too,' she said. 'If you sleep we can be sure the stitches will be undisturbed for a few hours.'

'I'd love to, but I have some important work that won't wait.'

'You can't work. You shouldn't really walk around. You should talk as little as possible. You're weak from loss of blood, and a wound like this is mentally as well as physically traumatic - in a few hours you'll feel the backlash, and you'll be dizzy, nauseous, exhausted and confused.'

'I'll be worse if the Germans take Cairo,' he said. He stood up.

Dr Abuthnot looked cross. Vandam thought how well it suited her to be in a position to tell people what to do. She was not sure how to handle outright disobedience. 'You're a silly boy,' she said.

'No doubt. Can I eat?'

'No. Take glucose dissolved in warm water.'

I might try it in warm gin, he thought. He shook her hand. It was cold and dry.

Jakes was waiting outside the hospital with a car. 'I knew they wouldn't be able to keep you long, sir,' he said. 'Shall I drive you home?'

'No.' Vandam's watch had stopped. 'What's the time?'

'Five past two.'

'I presume Wolff wasn't dining alone.'

'No, sir. His companion is under arrest at GHQ.'

'Drive me there.'

'If you're sure ... '

'Yes.'

The car pulled away. Vandam said: 'Have you notified the hierarchy?'

'About this evening's events? No, sir.'

'Good. Tomorrow will be soon enough' Vandam did not say what they both knew: that the department, already under a cloud for ~~mixing~~ letting Wolff gather Intelligence, would be in utter disgrace for letting him slip through their fingers.

Vandam said: 'I presume Wolff's dinner date was a woman.'

'Very much so, if I may say so, sir. A real dish. Name of Sonja.'

'The dancer?'

'No less.'

They drove on in silence. Wolff was a cool customer, Vandam thought, to go out with the most famous belly-dancer in Egypt in between stealing British military secrets. Well, he would not be so cool now. That was unfortunate in a way: having been warned by this incident that the British were on to him, he would be more careful from now on. Never scare them, just catch them.

They arrived at GHQ and got out of the car. Vandam said: 'What's been done with her since she arrived?'

'The no-treatment treatment,' Jakes said. 'A bare cell, no food, no drink, no questions.'

'Good.' It was a pity, all the same, that she had been given time to collect her thoughts. Vandam knew from prisoner-of-war interrogations that the best results were achieved immediately after the capture, when the prisoner was still frightened of being killed. Later on, when he had been herded here and there and given food and drink, he began to think of himself as a prisoner rather than as a soldier, and remembered that he had new rights and duties; and then he was better able to keep his mouth shut. Vandam should

have interviewed Sonja immediately after the fight in the restaurant. As that was not possible, the next best thing was for her to be kept in isolation and given no information until he arrived.

Jakes led the way along a corridor to the interview room. Vandam looked in through the judas. It was a square room, without windows but bright with electric light. There was a table, two upright chairs and an ashtray. To one side was a doorless cubicle with a toilet.

Sonja sat on one of the chairs facing the door. Jakes was right, Vandam thought; she's a dish. However she was by no means pretty. She was something of an Amazon, with her ripe, voluptuous body and strong, well-proportioned features. The young women in Egypt generally had a slender, leggy grace, like downy young deer: Sonja was more like ... Vandam frowned, then thought: a tigress. She wore a long gown of bright yellow which was garish to Vandam but would be quite a la mode in the Cha-Cha Club. He watched her for a minute or two. She was sitting quite still, not fidgeting, not darting nervous glances around the bare cell, not smoking or biting her nails. He thought: She will be a tough nut to crack. Then the expression on her handsome face changed, and she stood up and began pacing up and down, and Vandam thought: Not so tough.

He opened the door and went in.

He sat down at the table without speaking. This left her standing, which was a psychological disadvantage for a woman: score the first point to me, he thought. He heard Jakes come in behind him and close the door. He looked up at Sonja. 'Sit down.'

She stood gazing at him, and a slow smile spread across her face. She pointed at his bandages. 'Did he do that to you?' she said.

Score the second point to her.

'Sit down.'

'Thank you.' She sat.

'Who is "he"?''

'Alex Wolff, the man you tried to beat up tonight.'

'And who is Alex Wolff?'

'A wealthy patron of the Cha-Cha Club.'

'How long have you known him?'

She looked at her watch. 'Five hours.'

'What is your relationship with him?'

She shrugged. 'He was a date.'

'How did you meet?'

'The usual way. After my act, a waiter brought a message inviting me to sit at Mr Wolff's table.'

'Which one?'

'Which table?'

'Which waiter.'

'I don't remember.'

'Go on.'

'Mr Wolff gave me a glass of champagne and asked me to have dinner with him. I accepted, we went to the restaurant, and you know the rest.'

'Do you usually sit with members of the audience after your act?'

'Yes, it's a custom.'

'Do you usually go to dinner with them?'

'Occasionally.'

'Why did you accept this time?'

'Mr Wolff seemed like an unusual sort of man.' She looked at Vandam's bandage again, and grinned. 'He was an unusual sort of man.'

'What is your full name?'

'Sonja el-Aram.'

'Address?'

'Jihan, Zamalek. It's a houseboat.'

'Age?'

'How discourteous.'

'Age?'

'I refuse to answer.'

'You're on dangerous ground - '

'No, you are on dangerous ground.' Suddenly she startled Vandam by letting her feelings show, and he realised that all this time she had been suppressing a fury. She wagged a finger in his face. 'At least ten people saw your uniformed bullies arrest me in the restaurant. By midday tomorrow half Cairo will know that the British have put Sonja in jail. If I don't appear at the Cha-Cha tomorrow night there will be a riot. My people will burn the city. You'll have to bring troops back from the desert to deal with it. And if I leave here with a single bruise or scratch, I'll show it to the world on stage tomorrow night, and the result will be the same. No, mister, it isn't me who's on dangerous ground.'

Vandam looked at her expressionless throughout the tirade, then spoke as if she had said nothing extraordinary. He had to ignore what she said, because she was right, and he could not deny it. 'Let's go over this again,' he said mildly. 'You say you met Wolff at the Cha-Cha - '

'No,' she interrupted. 'I won't go over it again. I'll co-operate with you, and I'll answer questions, but I will not be interrogated.' She stood up, turned her chair around, and sat down with her back to Vandam.

Vandam stared at the back of her head for a moment. She

had well and truly outmanoeuvred him. He was angry with himself for letting it happen, but his anger was mixed with a sneaking admiration for her for the way she had done it. Abruptly, he got up and left the room. Jakes followed.

Out in the corridor Jakes said: 'What do you think?'

'We'll have to let her go.'

Jakes went to give instructions. While he waited, Vandam thought about Sonja. He wondered from what source she had been drawing the strength to defy him. Whether her story was true or false, she should have been frightened, confused, intimidated and ultimately compliant. It was true that her fame gave her some protection; but, in threatening him with her fame, she ought to have been blustering, unsure, and a little desperate, for an isolation cell normally frightened anyone - especially celebrities, because the sudden excommunication from the familiar glittering world made them wonder even more than usually whether that familiar glittering world could possibly be real.

What gave her strength? He ran over the conversation in his mind. The question she had balked at had been the one about her age. Clearly her talent had enabled her to keep going past the age at which run-of-the-mill dancers retired, so perhaps she was living in fear of the passing years. No clues there. Otherwise she had been calm, expressionless, and blank, except when she had smiled at his wound. Then, at the end, she had allowed herself to explode, but even then she had used her fury, she had not been controlled by it. He called to mind her face as she had raged at him. What had he seen there? Not just anger. Not fear.

Then he had it. It had been hatred.

She hated him. But he was nothing to her, nothing but a British officer. Therefore she hated the British. And her hatred had given

her strength.

Suddenly Vandam was tired. He sat down heavily on a bench in the corridor. From where was he to draw strength? It was easy to be strong if you were insane, and in Sonja's hatred there had been a hint of something a little crazy. He had no such refuge. Calmly, rationally, he considered what was at stake. He imagined the Nazis marching in to Cairo; the Gestapo in the streets; the Egyptian Jews herded into concentration camps; the Fascist propaganda on the wireless ...

People like Sonja looked at Egypt under British rule and felt that the Nazis had already arrived. It was not true, but if one tried for a moment to see the British through Sonja's eyes it had a certain plausibility: the Nazis said that Jews were subhuman, and the British said that blacks were like children; there was no freedom of the press in Germany, but there was none in Egypt either; and the British, like the Germans, had their political police. Before the war Vandam had sometimes heard Hitler's politics warmly endorsed in the officers' mess: they disliked him, not because he was a Fascist, but because he had been a corporal in the army and a house-painter in civilian life. There were brutes everywhere, and sometimes they got into power, and then you had to fight them.

It was a more rational philosophy than Sonja's, but it just was not inspirational.

The anaesthetic in his face was wearing off. He could feel a sharp, clear line of pain across his cheek, like a new burn. He realised he also had a head ache. He hoped Jakes would be a long time arranging Sonja's release, so that he could sit on the bench a little while longer.

He thought of Billy. He did not want the boy to miss him at breakfast. Perhaps I'll stay awake until morning, then take him to

school, then go home and sleep, he thought. What would Billy's life be like under the Nazis? They would teach him to despise the Arabs. His present teachers were no great admirers of African culture, but at least Vandam could do a little to make his son realise that people who were different were not necessarily stupid. What would happen in the Nazi classroom when he put up his hand and said: 'Please, sir, my Dad says a dumb Englishman is no smarter than a dumb Arab.'?

He thought of Elene. Now she was a kept woman, but at least she could choose her lovers, and if she didn't like what they wanted to do in bed she could kick them out. In the brothel of a concentration camp she would have no such choice ... He shuddered.

Yes. We're not very admirable, especially in our colonies, but the Nazis are worse, whether the Egyptians know it or not. It is worth fighting. In England decency is making slow progress; in Germany it's taking a big step backward. Think about the people you love, and the issues become clearer.

Draw strength from that. Stay awake a little longer. Stand up.

He stood up.

Jakes came back.

Vandam said: 'She's an Anglophobe.'

'I beg your pardon, sir?'

'Sonja. She hates the British. I don't believe Wolff was a casual pick-up. Let's go.'

They walked out of the building together. Outside it was still dark. Jakes said: 'Sir, you're very tired - '

'Yes. I'm very tired. But I'm still thinking straight, Jakes. Take me to the main police station.'

'Sir.'

They pulled away. Vandam handed his cigarette case and lighter to Jakes, who drove one-handed while he lit Vandam's cigarette. Vandam had trouble sucking: he could hold the cigarette between his lips and breathe the smoke, but he could not draw on it hard enough to light it. Jakes handed him the lit cigarette. Vandam thought: I'd like a martini to go with it.

Jakes stopped the car outside police headquarters. Vandam said: 'We want the cheif of detectives, whatever they call him.'

'I shouldn't think he'll be there at this hour - '

'No. Get his address. We'll wake him up.'

Jakes went into the building. Vandam stared ahead through the windscreen. Dawn was on its way. The stars had winked out, and now the sky was grey rather than black. There were a few people about. He saw a man leading two donkeys loaded with vegetables, presumably going to market. The muezzins had not yet called the first prayer of the day.

Jakes came back. 'Gezira,' he said as he put the car in gear and let in the clutch.

Vandam thought about Jakes. Someone had told Vandam that Jakes had a terrific sense of humour. Vandam had always found him pleasant and cheerful, but he had never seen any evidence of actual humour. Am I such a tyrant, Vandam thought, that my staff are terrified of cracking a joke in my presence? Nobody makes me laugh, he thought.

Except Elene.

'You never tell me jokes, Jakes.'

'Sir?'

'They say you have a terrific sense of humour, but you never tell me jokes.'

'No, sir.'

'Would you care to be candid for a moment and tell me why?'

There was a pause, then Jakes said: 'You don't invite familiarity, sir.'

Vandam nodded. How would they know how much he liked to throw back his head and ~~laugh~~ roar with laughter? He said: 'Very tactfully put, Jakes. The subject is closed.'

The Wolff business is getting to me, he thought. I wonder whether perhaps I've never really been any good at my job, and then I wonder if I'm any good for anything at all. And my face hurts.

They crossed the bridge to the island. The sky turned from slate grey to pearl. Jakes said: 'I'd like to say, sir, that, if you'll pardon me, you're far and away the best superior officer I've ever had.'

'Oh.' Vandam ~~was~~ was quite taken aback. 'Good Lord. Well, thankyou, Jakes. Thankyou.'

'Not at all, sir. We're there.'

He stopped the car outside a small, pretty single-storey house with a well-watered garden. Vandam guessed that the chief of detectives was doing well enough out of his bribes, but not too well. A cautious man, perhaps: it was a good sign.

They walked up the path and hammered on the door. After a couple of minutes a head looked out of a window and spoke in Arabic.

Jakes put on his sergeant-major's voice. 'Military Intelligence - open up the bloody door!'

A minute later a small, handsome Arab opened up, still belting his trousers. He said in English: 'What's going on?'

Vandam took charge. 'An emergency. Let us in, will you?'

'Of course.' The detective stood aside and they entered. He led them into a small living-room. 'What has happened?' He seemed frightened, and Vandam thought: Who wouldn't be? The knock

on the door in the middle of the night ...

Vandam said: 'There's nothing to panic about, but we want you to set up a surveillance and we need it right away.'

'Of course. Please sit down.' The detective found a notebook and pencil. 'Who is the subject?'

'Sonja el-Aram.'

'The dancer?'

'Yes. I want you to put a twenty-four hour watch on her home, which is a houseboat called Jihan in Zamalek.'

The detective wrote down the details. 'And what is the nature of the crime?'

I'm not telling you, Vandam thought. He said: 'We think she may be an associate of whoever is passing counterfeit sterling in Cairo.'

'So you want to know who comes and goes, whether they carry anything, whether meetings are held aboard the boat ... '

'Yes. And there is a particular man that we're interested in. He is Alex Wolff, the man suspected of the Assyut knife murder - you should have his description already.'

'Of course. Daily reports?'

'Yes, except that if Wolff is seen I want to know immediately. You can reach Captain Jakes or me at GHQ in the day. Give him our home phone numbers, Jakes.'

'I know these houseboats,' the detective said. 'The towpath is a popular evening walk, I think, especially for sweethearts.'

Jakes said: 'That's right.'

Vandam raised an eyebrow at Jakes.

The detective went on: 'A good place, perhaps, for a beggar to sit. Nobody ever sees a beggar. At night ... well, there are bushes. Also popular with sweethearts.'

Vandam said: 'Is that right, Jakes?'

'I wouldn't know, sir.' He realised he was being ribbed, and he smiled. He gave the detective a piece of paper with the phone numbers written on it.

A little boy in pyjamas walked into the room, rubbing his eyes. He was about five or six years old. He looked around the room sleepily, then went to the detective.

'My son,' the detective said proudly.

'I think we can leave you now,' Vandam said. 'Unless you want us to drap you in the city?'

'No, thankyou, I have a car, and I should like to put on my jacket and tie and comb my hair.'

'Very well, but make it fast.' Vandam stood up. Suddenly he could not see straight. It was as if his eyelids were closing involuntarily, yet he knew he had his eyes wide open. He felt himself losing his balance. Then Jakes was beside him, holding his arm.

'All right, sir?'

His vision returned slowly. 'All right now,' he said.

'You've had a nasty injury,' the detective said sympathetically.

They went to the door. The detective said: 'Gentlemen, be assured that I will handle this surveillance personally. They won't get a mouse aboard that houseboat without your knowing it.' He was still holding the little boy, and now he shifted him on to his left hip and held out his right hand.

'Goodbye,' Vandam said. He shook hands. 'By the way, I'm Major Vandam.'

The detective gave a little bow. 'Superintendent Kemel, at your service, sir.'

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Sonja brooded. She had half-expected Wolff to be at the houseboat when she returned toward dawn, but she had found the place cold and empty. She was not sure how she felt about that. At first, when they had arrested her, she had felt nothing but rage toward Wolff for running away and leaving her at the mercy of the British thugs. Being alone, being a woman, and being an accomplice of sorts in Wolff's spying, she was terrified of what they might do to her. She thought Wolff should have stayed to look after her. Then she had realised that that would not have been smart. By abandoning her he had diverted suspicion away from her. It was hard to take, but it was for the best. Sitting alone in the bare little room at GHQ, she had turned her anger away from Wolff and toward the British.

She had defied them, and they had backed down.

At the time she had not been sure that the man who interrogated her had been Major Vandam, but later, when she was being released, the clerk had let the name slip. The confirmation had delighted her. She smiled again when she thought of the grotesque bandage on Vandam's face. Wolff must have cut him with the knife. He should have killed him. But all the same, what a night, what a glorious night!

She wondered where Wolff was now. He would have gone to ground somewhere in the city. He would emerge when he thought the coast was clear. There was nothing she could do. She would have liked him here, though, to share the triumph.

She put on her nightdress. She knew she ought to go to bed, but she did not feel sleepy. Perhaps a drink would help. She found a bottle of Scotch whisky, poured some into a glass, and added water. As she was tasting it she heard footsteps on the gangplank.

Without thinking she called: 'Achmed ... ?' Then she realised the step was not his, it was too light and quick. She stood at the foot of the ladder in her nightdress, with the drink in her hand. The hatch was lifted and an Arab face looked in.

'Sonja?'

'Yes - '

'You were expecting someone else, I think.' The man climbed down the ladder. Sonja watched him, thinking: What now? He stepped off the ladder and stood in front of her. He was a small man with a handsome face and quick, neat movements. He wore European clothes: dark trousers, polished black shoes, and a short-sleeved white shirt. 'I am Detective-Superintendent Kemel, and I am honoured to meet you.' He held out his hand.

Sonja turned away, walked across to the divan, and sat down. She thought she had dealt with the police. Now the Egyptians wanted to get in on the act. It would probably come down to a bribe in the end, she reassured herself. She sipped her drink, staring at Kemel. Finally she said: 'What do you want?'

Kemel sat down uninvited. 'I am interest^ed in your friend, Alex Wolff.'

'He's not my friend.'

Kemel ignored that. 'The British have told me two things about Mr Wolff: one, that he knifed a soldier in Assyut; two, that he tried to pass counterfeit English banknotes in a restaurant in Cairo. Already the story is a little curious. Why was he in Assyut? Why did he kill the soldier? And where did he get the forged money?'

'I don't know anything about the man,' said Sonja, hoping he would not come home right now.

'I do, thought,' said Kemel. 'I have other information that the British may or may not possess. I know who Alex Wolff is. His

stepfather was a lawyer, here in Cairo. His mother was German. I know, too, that Wolff is a nationalist. I know that he used to be your lover. And I know that you are a nationalist.'

Sonja had gone cold. She sat still, her drink untouched, watching the sly detective unreel the evidence against her. She said nothing.

Kemel went on: 'Where did he get the forged money? Not in Egypt. I don't think there is a printer in Egypt capable of doing the work; and if there were, I think he would make Egyptian currency. Therefore the money came from Europe. Now Wolff, also known as Achmed Rahmha, quietly disappeared a couple of years ago. Where did he go? Europe? He came back - via Assyut. Why? Did he want to sneak into the country unnoticed? Perhaps he teamed up with an English counterfeiting gang, and has now returned with his share of the profits; but I don't think so, for he is not a poor man, nor is he a criminal. So, there is a mystery.'

He knows, Sonja thought. Dear God, he knows.

'Now the British have asked me to put a watch on this houseboat, and tell them of everyone who comes and goes here. Wolff will come here, they hope; and then they will arrest him; and then they will have the answers. Unless I solve the puzzle first.'

A watch on the boat! He could never come back. But - but why, she thought, is Kemel telling me?

'The key, I think, lies in Wolff's nature: he is both a German and an Egyptian.' Kemel stood up, and crossed the floor to sit beside Sonja and look into her face. 'I think he is fighting in this war. I think he is fighting for Germany and for Egypt. I think the forged money comes from the Germans. I think Wolff is a spy.'

Sonja thought: But you don't know where to find him. That's

why you're here. Kemel was staring at her. She looked away, afraid that he might read her thoughts in her face.

Kemel said: 'If he is a spy, I can catch him. Or I can save him.'

Sonja jerked her ^{head}/around to look at him. 'What does that mean?'

'I want to meet him. Secretly.'

'But why?'

Kemel smiled his sly, knowing smile. 'Sonja, you are not the only one who wants Egypt to be free. There are many of us. We want to see the British defeated, and we are not going to be fastidious about who does the defeating. We want to work with the Germans. We want to contact them. We want to talk to Rommel.'

'And you think Achmed ~~xxxxxx~~ can help you?'

'If he is a spy, he must have a way of getting messages to the Germans.'

Sonja's mind was in a turmoil. From being her accuser, Kemel had turned into a co-conspirator - unless this was a trap. She did not know whether to trust him or not. She did not have enough time to think about it. She did not know what to say, so she said nothing.

Kemel persisted gently. 'Can you arrange a meeting?'

She could not possibly make such a decision on the spur of the moment. 'No,' she said.

'Remember the watch on the houseboat,' he said. 'The surveillanne reports will come to me before being passed on to Major Vandam. If there is a chance, just a chance, that you might be able to arrange a meeting, I in turn can make sure that the reports ~~xx~~ which go to Vandam are carefully edited so as to contain nothing ... embarrassing.'

Sonja had forgotten the surveillance. When Wolff came back - and he would, sooner or later - the watchers would report it, and

Vandam would know, unless Kemel fixed it. This changed everything. She had no choice. 'I'll arrange a meeting,' she said.

'Good.' He stood up. 'Call the main police station and leave a message saying that Sirhan wants to see me. When I get that message I'll contact you to arrange date and time.'

'Very well.'

He went to the ladder, then came back. 'By the way.' He took a wallet from his trousers pocket and extracted a small photograph. He handed it to Sonja. It was a picture of her. 'Would you sign this for my wife? She's a great fan of yours.' He handed her a pen. 'Her name is Hesther.'

Sonja wrote: 'To Hesther, with all good wishes, Sonja.' She gave him the photograph, thinking: This is incredible.

'Thankyou so much. She will be overjoyed.'

Incredible.

Sonja said: 'I'll get in touch just as soon as I can.'

'Thankyou.' He held out his hand. This time she shook it. He went up the ladder and out, closing the hatch behind him.

Sonja relaxed. Somehow she had handled it right. She was still not completely convinced of Kemel's sincerity; but if there was a trap she could not see it.

She felt tired. She finished the whisky in the glass, then went through the curtains into the bedroom. She still had her nightdress on, and she was quite cold. She went to the bed and pulled back the covers. She heard a tapping sound. Her heart missed a beat. She whirled around to face the porthole on the far side of the boat, the side that faced across the river. There was a face behind the glass.

She screamed.

The face disappeared.

She realised it had been Wolff.

She ran up the ladder and out on to the deck. Looking over the side, she saw him in the water. He appeared to be naked. He clambered up the side of the little boat, using the portholes for handholds. She reached for his arm and pulled him on to the deck. He knelt there on all fours for a moment, glancing up and down the river bank like an ~~xxx~~ alert water rat; then he scampered down the hatch. She followed him.

He stood on the carpet, dripping and shivering. He was naked. She said: 'What happened?'

'Run me a bath,' he said.

She went through the bedroom into the bathroom. There was a small tub with an electric water-heater. She turned the taps on and threw a handful of scented crystals into the water. Wolff got in and let the water rise around him.

'What happened?' Sonja repeated.

He controlled his shivering. 'I didn't want to risk coming down the towpath, so I took off my clothes on the opposite bank and swam across. I looked in, and saw that man with you - I suppose he was another policeman.'

'Yes.'

'So I had to wait in the water until he went away.'

She laughed. 'You poor thing.'

'It's not funny. My God, I'm cold. The fucking Abwehr gave me dud money. Somebody will be strangled for that, next time I'm in Germany.'

'Why did they do it?'

'I don't know whether it's incompetence or disloyalty. Canaris has always been lukewarm on Hitler. Turn off the water, will you?' He began to wash the river mud off his legs.

'You'll have to use your own money,' she said.

'I can't get at it. You can be sure the bank has instructions to call the police the moment I show my face. I could pay the occasional bill by cheque, but even that might help them get a line on me. I could sell some of my stocks and shares, or even the villa, but there again the money has to come through a bank ... '

So you will have to use my money, Sonja thought. You won't ask, though: you'll just take it. She filed the thought for further consideration. 'That detective is putting a watch on the boat - on Vandam's instructions.'

Wolff grinned. 'So it was Vandam.'

'Did you cut him?'

'Yes, but I wasn't sure where. It was dark.'

'The face. He had a huge bandage.'

Wolff laughed aloud. 'I wish I could see him.' He became sober, and asked: 'Did he question you?'

'Yes.'

'What did you tell him?'

'That I hardly knew you.'

'Good girl.' He looked at her appraisingly, and she knew that he was pleased, and a little surprised, that she had kept her head. He said: 'Did he believe you?'

'Presumably not, since he ordered this surveillance.'

Wolff frowned. 'That's going to be awkward. I can't swim the river every time I want to come home ... '

'Don't worry,' Sonja said. 'I've fixed it.'

'You fixed it?'

It wasn't quite so, Sonja knew, but it sounded good. 'The detective is one of us,' she explained.

'A nationalist?'

'Yes. He wants to use your radio.'

'How does he know I've got one?' There was a threatening note in Wolff's voice.

'He doesn't,' Sonja said calmly. 'From what the British have told him he deduces that you're a spy; and he presumes a spy has a means of communicating with the Germans. The nationalists want to send a message to Rommel.'

Wolff shook his head. 'I'd rather not get involved.'

She would not have him go back on a bargain she had made. 'You've got to get involved,' she said sharply.

'I suppose I have,' he said wearily.

She felt an odd sense of power. It was as if she were taking control. She found it exhilarating.

Wolff said: 'They're closing in. I don't want any more surprises like last night. I'd like to leave this boat, but I don't know where to go. Abdullah knows my money's no good - he'd like to turn me over to the British. Damn.'

'You'll be safe here, while you strong the detective along.'

'I haven't any choice.'

She sat on the edge of the bathtub, looking at his naked body. He seemed ... not defeated, but at least cornered. His face was lined with tension, and there was in his voice a faint note of panic. She guessed that for the first time he was wondering whether he could hold out until Rommel arrived. And, also for the first time, he was dependent on her. He needed her money, he needed her home, last night he had depended on her silence under interrogation, and - he now believed - he had been saved by her deal with the nationalist detective. He was slipping into her power. The thought intrigued her. She felt a little horny.

Wolff said: 'I wonder if I should keep my date with that girl,

Elene, tonight.'

'Why not? She's nothing to do with the British. You picked her up in a shop!'

'Maybe. I just feel it might be safer to lie low. I don't know.'

'No,' said Sonja firmly. 'I want her.'

He looked up at her through narrowed eyes. She wondered whether he was considering the issue or thinking about her new-found strength of will. 'All right,' he said finally. 'I'll just have to take precautions.'

He had given in. She had tested her strength against his, and she had won. It gave her a kind of thrill. She shivered.

'I'm still cold,' Wolff said. 'Put some more hot water in.'

'No.' Without removing her nightdress, Sonja got into the bath. She knelt astride him, facing him, her knees jammed against the sides of the narrow tub. She lifted the wet hem of the nightdress to the level of her waist. She said: 'Eat me.'

He did.

*

Vandam was in high spirits as he sat in the Oasis Restaurant, sipping a cold martini, with Jakes beside him. He had slept all day and had woken up feeling battered but ready to fight back. He had gone to the hospital, where Dr Abuthnot had told him he was a fool, to be up and about, but a lucky fool, for his wound was mending. ~~She~~ ^{He} had changed his dressing for a smaller, neater one that did not have to be secured by a yard of bandage around his head. Now it was a quarter past seven, and in a few minutes he would catch Alex Wolff.

Vandam and Jakes were at the back of the restaurant, in a position from which they could see the whole place. The table

nearest to the entrance was occupied by two hefty sergeants eating ~~fitted~~ chicken paid for by Intelligence. Outside, in an unmarked car parked across the road, were two MPs in civilian clothes with their handguns in their jacket pockets. The trap was set: all that was missing was the bait. Elene would arrive at any minute.

Billy had been shocked by the bandage at breakfast that morning. Vandam had sworn the boy to secrecy, then told him the truth. 'I had a fight with a German spy. He had a knife. He got away, but I think I may catch him tonight.' It was a breach of security, but what the hell, the boy needed to know why his father was wounded. After hearing the story Billy had not been worried any more, but thrilled. ~~THEXXXXXXXXX~~ Gaafar had been awestruck, and inclined to move around softly and talk in whispers, as if there had been a death in the family.

With Jakes, he found that last night's impulsive intimacy had left no overt trace. Their formal relationship had returned: Jakes took orders, called him Sir, and did not offer opinions without being asked. It was just as well, Vandam thought: they were a good team as things were, so why make changes?

He looked at his wristwatch. It was seven-thirty. He lit another cigarette. At any moment now Alex Wolff would walk through the door. Vandam felt sure he would recognise Wolff - a tall, hawk-nosed European with brown hair and brown eyes, a strong, fit man - but he would make no move until Elene came in and sat by Wolff. Then Vandam and Jakes would move in. If Wolff fled the two sergeants would block the door, and in the unlikely even that he got past them, the MPs outside would shoot at him.

Seven thirty-five. Vandam was looking forward to interrogating Wolff. What a battle of wills that would be. But Vandam would win it, for he would have all the advantages. He would feel Wolff out, find the weak points, and then apply pressure until the prisoner

cracked.

Seven thirty-nine. Wolff was late. Of course it was possible that he would not come at all. God forbid. Vandam shuddered when he recalled how superciliously he had said to Bogge: 'I expect to arrest him tomorrow night.' Vandam's section was in very bad odour at the moment, and only the prompt arrest of Wolff would enable them to come up smelling of roses. But suppose that, after last night's scare, Wolff had decided to lie low for a while, wherever it was that he was lying? Somehow Vandam felt that lying low was not Wolff's style. He hoped not.

At seven-forty the restaurant door opened and Elene walked in. Vandam heard Jakes whistle under his breath. She looked stunning. She wore a silk dress the colour of clotted cream. Its simple lines drew attention to her slender figure, and its colour and texture flattered her smooth tan skin: Vandam felt a sudden urge to stroke her.

She looked around the restaurant, obviously searching for Wolff and not finding him. He eyes met Vandam's and moved on without hesitating. The head waiter approached, and she spoke to him. He seated her at a table for two close to the door.

Vandam caught the eye of one of the sergeants and inclined his head in Elene's direction. The sergeant gave a little nod of acknowledgement and checked his watch.

Where was Wolff?

Vandam lit a cigarette and began to worry. He had assumed that Wolff, being a gentleman, would arrive a little early; and Elene would arrive a little late. According to that scenario the arrest would have taken place the moment she sat down. It's going wrong, he thought, it's going bloody wrong.

A waiter brought Elene a drink. It was seven forty-five.

~~XXXXXXXXXX~~

She looked in Vandam's direction and gave a small, dainty shrug of her slight shoulders.

The door of the restaurant opened. Vandam froze with a cigarette half way to his lips, then relaxed again, disappointed: it was only a small boy. The boy handed a piece of paper to a waiter then went out again.

Vandam decided to order another drink.

He saw the waiter go to Elene's table and hand her the piece of paper.

Vandam frowned. What was this? An apology from Wolff, saying he could not keep the date? Elene's face took on an expression of faint puzzlement. She looked at Vandam and gave that little shrug again.

Vandam considered whether to go over and ask her what was going on - but that would have spoiled the ambush, for what if Wolff should walk in while Elene was talking to Vandam? Wolff could turn around at the door and run, and he would have only the MPs to get past, two people instead of six.

Vandam murmured to Jakes: 'Wait.'

Elene picked up her clutch bag from the chair beside her and stood up. She looked at Vandam again, then turned around. Vandam thought she was going to the ladies' room. Instead she went to the door and opened it.

Vandam and Jakes got to their feet together. One of the sergeants half-rose, looking at Vandam, and Vandam waved him down: no point in arresting Elene. Vandam and Jakes hurried across the restaurant to the door.

As they passed the sergeants Vandam said: 'Follow me.'

They went through the door into the street. Vandam looked around. There was a blind beggar sitting against the wall, holding

out a cracked dish with a few piastres in it. Three soldiers in uniform staggered along the pavement, already drunk, arms around each other's shoulders, singing a vulgar song. A group of Egyptians had met just outside the restaurant and were vigorously shaking hands. A street vendor offered Vandam cheap razor blades. A few yards away Elene was getting into a taxi.

Vandam broke into a run.

The door of the taxi slammed and it pulled away.

Across the street, the MPs' car roared, shot forward, and collided with a bus.

Vandam caught up with the taxi and leaped on to the running-board. The car swerved suddenly. Vandam lost his grip, hit the road running, and fell down.

He got to his feet. His face blazed with pain: his wound was bleeding again, and he could feel the sticky warmth under the dressing. Jams and the two sergeants gathered around him. Across the road the MPs were arguing with the bus driver.

The taxi had disappeared.

- 15 -

Elene was terrified. It had all gone wrong. Wolff was supposed to have been arrested in the restaurant, and now he was here, in a taxi with her, smiling a feral smile. She sat still, her mind a blank.

'Who was he?' Wolff said, still smiling.

Elene could not think. She looked at Wolff, looked away again, and said: 'What?'

'That man who ran after us. He jumped on the running-board. I couldn't see him properly, but I thought he was a European. Who was he?'

Elene fought down her fear. He's William Vandam, and he was supposed to arrest you. She had to make up a story. Why would someone follow her out of a restaurant and try to get into her taxi? 'He ... I don't know him. He was in the restaurant.' Suddenly she was inspired. 'He was bothering me. I was alone. It's your fault, you were late.'

'I'm so sorry,' he said quickly.

Elene had an access of confidence after he swallowed her story so readily. 'And why are we in a taxi?' she demanded. 'What's it all about? Why aren't we having dinner?' She heard a whining note in her voice, and hated it.

'I had a wonderful idea.' He smiled again, and Elene suppressed a shudder. 'We're going to have a picnic. There's a basket in the trunk.'

She did not know whether to believe him. Why had he pulled that stunt at the restaurant, sending a boy in with a message, unless he suspected a trap? What would he do now, take her into the desert and knife her? ^She had a sudden urge to leap out of the

1
speeding car. She closed her eyes and forced herself to think calmly. If he suspected a trap, why did he come at all? No, it had to be more complex than that. He seemed to have believed her about the man on the running-board - but she could not be sure what was going on behind his smile.

She said: 'Where are we going?'

'A few miles out of town, to a little spot on the river bank from where we can watch the sun go down. It's going to be a lovely evening.'

'I don't want to go.'

'What's the matter?'

'I hardly know you.'

'Don't be silly. The driver will be with us all the time - and I'm a gentleman.'

'I should get out of the car.'

'Please don't.' He touched her arm lightly. 'I have some smoked salmon, and a cold chicken, and a bottle of champagne. I get so bored with restaurants.'

Elene considered. She could leave him now, and she would be safe - she would never see him again. That was what she wanted, to get away from the man forever. She thought: But I'm Vandam's only hope. What do I care for Vandam? I'd be happy never to see him again, and go back to the old peaceful life -

The old life.

She did care for Vandam, she realised; at least enough ~~to hate~~ for her to hate the thought of letting him down. She had to stay with Wolff, cultivate him, angle for another date, try to find out where he lived.

Impulsively she said: 'Let's go to your place.'

He raised his eyebrows. 'That's a sudden change of heart.'

She realised she had made a mistake. 'I'm confused,' she said. 'You sprung a surprise on me. Why didn't you ask me first?'

'I only thought of the idea an hour ago. It didn't occur to me that it might scare you.'

Elene realised that she was, unintentionally, fulfilling her role as a dizzy girl. She decided not to overplay her hand. 'All right,' she said. She tried to relax.

Wolff was studying her. He said: 'You're not quite as vulnerable as you seem, are you?'

'I don't know.'

'I remember what you said to Aristopoulos, that first day I saw you in the shop.'

Elene remembered: she had threatened to cut off Mikis' cock if he touched her again. She should have blushed, but she could not do so voluntarily. 'I was so angry,' she said.

Wolff chuckled. 'You sounded it,' he said. 'Try to bear in mind that I am not Aristopoulos.'

She gave him a weak smile. 'Okay.'

He turned his attention to the driver. They were out of the city, and Wolff began to give directions. Elene wondered where he had found this taxi: by Egyptian standards it was luxurious. It was some kind of American car, with big soft seats and lots of room, and it seemed only a few years old.

They passed through a series of villages then turned on to an unmade road. The car followed the winding track up a small hill and emerged on a little plateau atop a bluff. The river was immediately below them, and on its far side Elene could see the neat patchwork of cultivated fields stretching into the distance until they met the sharp tan-coloured line of the edge of the desert.

Wolff said: 'Isn't this a lovely spot?'

Elene had to agree. A flight of swifts rising from the far bank of the river drew her eye upward, and she saw that the evening clouds were already edged in pink. A young girl was walking away from the river with a huge water-jug on her head. A lone felucca sailed upsteam, propelled by a light breeze.

The driver got out of the car and walked fifty yards away. He sat down, pointedly turning his back on them, lit a cigarette and unfolded a newspaper.

Wolff got a picnic hamper out of the trunk and set it on the floor of the car between them. As he began to unpack the food, Elene asked him: 'How did you discover this place?'

'My mother brought me here when I was a boy.' He handed her a glass of wine. 'After my father died, my mother married an Egyptian. From time to time she would find the Muslim household oppressive, so she would bring me here in a gharry and tell me about ... Europe, and so on.'

'Did you enjoy it?'

He hesitated. 'My mother had a way of spoiling things like that. She was always interrupting the fun. She used to say: "You're so selfish, just like your father." At that age I preferred my Arab family. My stepbrothers were wicked, and nobody tried to control them. We used to steal oranges from other people's gardens, throw stones at horses to make them bolt, puncture bicycle tyres ... Only my mother minded, and all she could do was warn us that we'd get punished eventually. She was always saying that - "They'll catch you one day, Alex!"'

The mother was right, Elene thought: they would catch Alex one day.

She was relaxing. She wondered whether Wolff was carrying the knife he had used in Assyut, and that made her tense again. The

situation was so normal - a charming man taking a girl on a picnic beside the river - that for a moment she had forgotten she wanted something from him.

She said: 'Where do you live now?'

'My house has been ... commandeered by the British. I'm living with friends.' He handed her a slice of smoked-salmon on a china plate, then sliced a lemon in half with a kitchen knife. Elene watched his deft hands. She wondered what he wanted from her, that he should work so hard to please her.

*

Vandam felt very low. His face hurt, and so did his pride. The great arrest had been a fiasco. He had failed professionally, he had been outwitted by Alex Wolff, and he had sent Elene into danger.

He sat at home, his cheek newly bandaged, drinking gin to ease the pain. Wolff had evaded him so damn easily. Vandam was sure the spy had not really known about the ambush - otherwise he would not have turned up at all. No, he had just been taking precautions; and the precautions had worked beautifully.

They had a good description of the taxi. It had been a distinctive car, quite new, and Jakes had read the number plate. Every policeman and MP in the city was looking out for it, and had orders to stop it on sight and arrest all the occupants. They would find it, sooner or later, and Vandam felt sure it would be too late. Nevertheless he was sitting by the phone.

~~He had sent a woman into danger once before. It had been after his other great fiasco, when Rashid Ali had slipped out of Turkey under Vandam's nose. Vandam had sent a woman agent to pick up the man who had changed clothes with Ali and enabled him to escape. He had hoped to salvage something from the shambles by finding out all about the ~~man~~ ~~man~~ ~~man~~. But next day the woman agent had been found~~

~~dead in a hotel bed. It was a chilling parallel.~~

What was Elene doing now? Perhaps she was in a candlelit restaurant, drinking wine and laughing at Wolff's jokes. Vandam pictured her, in the cream-coloured dress, holding a glass, smiling her special, impish smile, the one that promised you anything you wanted. Vandam checked his watch. Perhaps they had finished dinner by now. What would they do then? It was traditional to go and look at the Pyramids by moonlight: the black sky, the stars, the endless flat desert, and the clean triangular planes of the Pharaohs' tombs. The area would be deserted, except perhaps for another pair of lovers. They might climb a few levels, he springing up ahead and then reaching down to lift her; but soon she would be exhausted, her hair and her dress a little awry, and she would say that these shoes were not designed for mountaineering; so they would sit on the great stones, still warm from the sun, and breathe the mild night air while they watched the stars. Walking back to the taxi, she would shiver in her sleeveless evening gown, and he might put an arm around her shoulders to keep her warm. Would he kiss her in the taxi? No, he was too old for that. When he made his pass, it would be in some sophisticated manner. Would he suggest going back to his place, or hers? Vandam did not know which to hope for. If they went to his place, Elene would report in the morning, and Vandam would be able to arrest Wolff at home, with his radio, his code book, and perhaps even his back traffic. Professionally, that would be better - but it would also mean that Elene would spend a night with Wolff, and that thought made Vandam more angry than it should have done. Alternatively, if they went to her place, where Jakes was waiting with ten men and three cars, Wolff would be grabbed before he got a chance to -

Vandam got up and paced the room. Idly, he picked up the book

Rebecca, the one he thought Wolff was using as the basis of his code. He read the first line: 'Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again.' He put the book down, then opened it again and read on. The story of the vulnerable, bullied girl was a welcome distraction from his own worries. When he realised that the girl would marry the glamorous, older widower, and that the marriage would be blighted by the ghostly presence of the man's first wife, he closed the book and put it down again. What was the age difference between himself and Elene? How long would he be haunted by Angela? She, too, had been coldly perfect; Elene, too, was young, impulsive, and in need of rescue from the life she was living. These thoughts irritated him, for he was not going to marry Elene. He lit a cigarette. Why did the time pass so slowly? Why did the phone not ring? How could he have let Wolff slip through his fingers twice in two days? Where was Elene?

Where was Elene?

He had sent a woman into danger once before. It had happened after his other great fiasco, when Rashid Ali had slipped out of Turkey under Vandam's nose. Vandam had sent a woman agent to pick up the man who had changed clothes with Ali and enabled him to escape. He had hoped to salvage something from the shambles by finding out all about the man. But next day the woman agent had been found dead in a hotel bed. It was a chilling parallel.

There was no point in staying in the house. He could not possibly sleep, and there was nothing else he could do there. He would go and join Jakes and the others, despite Dr Abuthnot's orders. ~~xxxxxxx~~ He put on a coat and his uniform cap, went outside, and wheeled his motorcycle out of the garage.

*

Elene and Wolff stood together, close to the edge of the bluff, looking at the distant lights of Cairo and the nearer, flickering

glt

glimmers of peasant fires in dark villages. Elene was thinking of an imaginary peasant - hard-working, poverty-stricken, superstitious - laying a straw mattress on the earth floor, pulling a rough blanket around him, and finding consolation in the arms of his wife. Elene had left poverty behind, she hoped forever, but sometimes it seemed to her that she had left something else behind with it, something she could not do without. In Alexandria when she was a child people would put blue palm-prints on the red mud walls, hand-shapes to ward off evil. Elene did not believe in the efficacy of the palm-prints; but despite the rats, despite the nightly screams as the moneylender beat both of his wives, despite the ticks that infested everyone, despite the early death of many babies, she believed there had been something there that warded off evil. She had been looking for that something when she took men home, took them into her bed, accepted their gifts and their caresses and their money; but she had never found it.

She did not want to do that any more. She had spent too much of her life looking for love in the wrong places. In particular, she did not want to do it with Alex Wolff. Several times she had said to herself: 'Why not do it just once more?' That was Vandam's coldly reasonable point of view. But, each time she contemplated making love with Wolff, she saw again the daydream that had plagued her for the last few weeks, the daydream of seducing William Vandam. She knew just how he would be: he would look at her with innocent wonder, and touch her with wide-eyed delight; thinking of it, she felt momentarily helpless with desire. She knew how Wolff would be, too. He would be knowing, selfish, skilful and unshockable.

Without speaking she turned from the view and walked back toward the car. It was time for him to make his pass. They had finished the meal, emptied the champagne bottle and the flask of

coffee, picked clean the chicken and the bunch of grapes. Now he would expect his just reward. From the back seat of the car she watched him. He stayed a moment longer on the edge of the bluff, then walked toward her, calling to the driver. He had the confident grace that height often seemed to give to men. He was an attractive man, much more ~~satisfying~~ glamorous than any of Elene's lovers had been, but she was afraid of him, and her fear came not just from what she knew about him, his history and his secrets and his knife, but from an intuitive understanding of his nature: somehow she knew that his charm was not spontaneous but manipulative, and that if he was kind it was because he wanted to use her.

She had been used enough.

Wolff got in beside her. 'Did you enjoy the picnic?'

She made an effort to be bright. 'Yes, it was lovely.

Thankyou.'

The car pulled away. Either he would invite her to his place, or he would take her to her flat and ask for a nightcap. She would have to find an encouraging way to refuse him. This struck her as ridiculous: she was behaving like a frightened virgin. She thought: What am I doing - saving myself for Mr Right?

She had been silent for too long. She was supposed to be witty and engaging. She should talk to him. 'Have you heard the war news?' she asked, and realised at once it was not the most light-hearted of topics.

'The Germans are still winning,' he said. 'Of course.'

'Why of course?'

He smiled condescendingly at her. 'The world is divided into masters and slaves, Elene.' He spoke as if he were explaining simple facts to a schoolboy. 'The British have been masters too long. They've gone soft, and now it will be someone else's turn.'

'And the Egyptians - are they masters, or slaves?' She knew she should shut up, she was walking on thin ice, but his complacency infuriated her.

'The Bedouin are masters,' he said. 'But the average Egyptian is a born slave.'

She thought: He means every word of it. She shuddered.

They reached the outskirts of the city. It was after midnight, and the suburbs were quiet, although downtown would still be buzzing. Wolff said: 'Where do you live?'

She told him. So it was to be her place.

Wolff said: 'We must do this again.'

'I'd like that.'

They reached the Sharia Abbas, and he told the driver to stop. Elene wondered what was going to happen now. Wolff turned to her and said: 'Thankyou for a lovely evening. I'll see you soon.' He got out of the car.

She stared in astonishment. He bent down by the driver's window, gave the man some money, and told him Elene's address. The driver nodded. Wolff banged on the roof of the car, and the driver pulled away. Elene looked back and saw Wolff waving. As the car began to ~~xxx~~ turn a corner, Wolff started walking toward the river.

She thought: What do you make of that?

No pass, no invitation to his place, no nightcap, not even a goodnight kiss - what game was he playing, hard-to-get?

She puzzled over the whole things as the taxi took her home. Perhaps it was ~~jxxx~~ Wolff's technique to try to intrigue a woman. Perhaps he was just eccentric. Whatever the reason, she was very grateful. She sat back and relaxed. She was not obliged to choose between fighting him off and going to bed with him. Thank God.

The taxi drew up outside her building. Suddenly, from nowhere,

three cars roared up. One stopped right in front of the taxi, one close ~~right~~ behind, and one alongside. Men materialised out of the shadows. All four doors of the taxi were flung open, and four guns pointed in. Elene screamed.

Then a head was poked into the car, and Elene recognised Vandam.

'Gone?' Vandam said.

Elene realised what was happening. 'I thought you were going to shoot me,' she said.

'Where did you leave him?'

'Sharia Abbass'

'How long ago?'

'Five or ten minutes. May I get out of the car?'

He gave her a hand, and she stepped on to the pavement. He said: 'I'm sorry we scared you.'

'This is called slamming the stable door after the horse has bolted.'

'Quite.' He looked utterly defeated.

She felt a surge of affection for him. She touched his arm. 'You've no idea how happy I am to see your face,' she said.

He gave her an odd look, as if he was not sure whether to believe her.

She said: 'Why don't you send your men home and come and talk inside?'

He hesitated. 'All right.' He turned to one of his men, a captain. 'Jakes, I want you to interrogate the taxi driver, see what you can get out of him. Let the men go. I'll see you at GHQ in an hour or so.'

'Very good, sir.'

Elene led the way inside. It was so good to enter her own

apartment, slump on the sofa, and kick off her shoes. The trial was over, Wolff had gone, and Vandam was here. She said: 'Help yourself to a drink.'

'No, thanks.'

'What went wrong, anyway?'

Vandam sat down opposite her and took out his cigarettes.

'We expected him to walk into the trap all unawares - but he was suspicious, or at least cautious, and we missed him. What happened then?'

She rested her head against the back of the sofa, closed her eyes, and told him in a few words ^b about the picnic. She left out her thoughts about going to bed with Wolff, and she did not tell Vandam that Wolff had hardly touched her all evening. She spoke abruptly: she wanted to forget, not remember. When she had told him the story she said: 'Make me a drink, even if you won't have one.'

He went to the cupboard. Elene could see that he was angry. She looked at the bandage on his face. She had seen it in the restaurant, and again a few minutes ago when she arrived, but now she had time to wonder what it was. She said: 'What happened to your face?'

'We almost caught Wolff last night.'

'Oh, no.' So he had failed twice in twenty-four hours: no wonder he looked defeated. She wanted to console him, to put her arms around him, to lay his head in her lap and stroke his hair; the longing was like an ache. She decided - impulsively, the way she always decided things - that she would take him to her bed tonight.

He gave her a drink. He had made one for himself after all. As he stooped to hand her the glass she reached up, touched his chin with her fingertips, and turned his head so that she could look at

his cheek. He let her look, just for a second, then moved his head away.

She had not seen him as tense as this before. He crossed the room and sat opposite her, holding himself upright on the edge of the chair. He was full of a suppressed emotion, something like rage, but when she looked into his eyes she saw not anger but pain.

He said: 'How did Wolff strike you?'

She was not sure what he was getting at. 'Charming. Intelligent. Dangerous.'

'His appearance?'

'Clean hands, a silk shirt, a moustache that doesn't suit him. What are you fishing for?'

He shook his head irritably. 'Nothing. Everything.' He lit another cigarette.

She could not reach him in this mood. She wanted him to come and sit beside her, and tell her she was beautiful and brave and she had done well; but she knew it was no use asking. All the same she said: 'How did I do?'

'I don't know,' he said. 'What did you do?'

'You know what I did.'

'Yes. I'm most grateful.'

He smiled, and she knew the smile was insincere. What was the matter with him? There was something familiar in his anger, something she would understand as soon as she put her finger on it. It was not just that he felt he had failed. It was his attitude to her, the way he spoke to her, the way he sat across from her, and especially the way he looked at her. His expression was one of ... it was almost one of disgust.

'He said he would see you again?' Vandam asked.

'Yes.'

'I hope he does.' He put his chin in his hands. His face was strained with tension. Wisps of smoke rose from his cigarette. 'Christ, I hope he does.'

'He also said: "We must do this again," or something like that,' Elene told him.

'I see. "We must do this again," eh?'

'Something like that.'

'What do you think he had in mind, exactly?'

She shrugged. 'Another picnic, another date - damn it, William, what has got into you?'

'I'm just curious,' he said. His face wore a twisted grin, one she had never seen on him before. 'I'd like to know what the two of you did, other than eat and drink, in the back of that big taxi, and on the river bank; you know, all that time together, in the dark, a man and a woman - '

'Shut up.' She closed her eyes. Now she understood; now she knew. Without opening her eyes she said: 'I'm going to bed. You can see yourself out.'

A few seconds later the front door slammed.

She went to the window and looked down to the street. She saw him leave the building, and get on his motorcycle. He kicked the engine into life and roared off down the road at a breakneck speed and took the corner at the end as if he were in a race. Elene was very tired, and a little sad that she would be spending the night alone after all, but she was not unhappy, for she had understood his anger, she knew the cause of it, and that gave her hope. As he disappeared from sight she smiled faintly and said softly: 'William Vandam, I do believe you're jealous.'

- 16 -

By the time Major Smith made his third lunchtime visit to the houseboat, Wolff and Sonja had got into a slick routine. Wolff hid in the cupboard when the Major approached. Sonja met him in the living-room with a drink in her hand ready for him. She made him sit down there, ensuring that his briefcase was put down before they went into the bedroom. After a minute or two she began kissing him. By this time she could do what she liked with him, for he was paralysed by lust. She contrived to get his shorts off, then soon afterward took him into the bedroom.

It was clear to Wolff ~~like~~ that nothing like this had ever happened to the major before - he was Sonja's slave as long as she allowed him to make love to her. Wolff was grateful: things would not have been quite so easy with a more stong^r-minded man.

As soon as Wolff heard the bed creak he came out of the cupboard. He took the key out of the shorts pocket and opened the case. His notebook and pencil were beside him, ready.

Smith's second visit had been disappointing, leading Wolff to wonder whether perhaps it was only occasionally that Smith saw battle plans. However, this time he struck gold again.

General Sir Claude Auchinleck, the C-in-C Middle East, had taken over direct control of the Eighth Army from General Neil Ritchie. As a sign of Allied panic, that alone would be welcome news to Rommel. It might also help Wolff, for it meant that battles were now being planned in Cairo rather than in the desert, in which case Smith was more likely to get copies.

The Allies had retreated to a new defence line at Mersa Matruh, and the most important paper in Smith's briefcase was a summary of the new dispositions.

The new line began at the coastal village of Matruh and stretched

south into the desert as far as an escarpment called Sidi Hamza. Tenth Corps was at Matruh; then there was a heavy minefield fifteen miles long; then a lighter minefield for ten miles; then the escarpment; then, south of the escarpment, the 13th Corps.

With half an ear on the noises from the bedroom, Wolff considered the position. The picture was fairly clear: the Allied line was strong at either end and weak in the middle.

Rommel's likeliest move, according to Allied thinking, was a dash around the southern end of the line, a classic Rommel outflanking manoeuvre, made more feasible by his capture of an estimated 500 tons of fuel at Tobruk. Such an advance would be repelled by the 13th Corps, which consisted of the strong 1st Armoured Division and the 2nd New Zealand Division, the latter - the summary noted helpfully - ~~was~~ freshly arrived from Syria.

However, armed with Wolff's information, Rommel could instead hit the soft centre of the line and pour his forces through the gap like a stream bursting a dam at its weakest point.

Wolff smiled to himself. He felt he was playing a major role in the struggle for German domination of North Africa: he found it enormously satisfying.

In the bedroom, a cork popped.

Smith always surprised Wolff by the rapidity of his lovemaking. The cork popping was the sign that it was all over, and Wolff had a few minutes in which to tidy up before Smith came in search of his shorts.

He put the papers back in the case, locked it, and put the key back in the shorts pocket. He no longer got back into the cupboard afterwards - once had been enough. He put his shoes in his trousers pockets and tiptoed, soundlessly in his socks, up the ladder, across the deck, and down the gangplank to the towpath. Then he put his shoes on and went to lunch.

*

Kemel shook hands politely and said: 'I hope your injury is healing rapidly, Major.'

'Sit down,' Vandam said. 'The bandage is more damh nuisance than the wound. What have you got?'

Kemel sat down and crossed his legs, adjusting the crease of his black cotton trousers. 'I thought I would bring the surveillance report myself, although I'm afraid there's nothing of interest in it.'

Vandam took the proferred envelope and opened it. It contained a single typewritten sheet. He began to read.

Sonja had come home - presumably from the Cha-Cha Club - at eleven o'clock the previous night. She had been alone. She had surfaced at around ten the following morning, and had been seen on deck in a robe. The postman had come at one. Sonja had gone out at four and returned at six carrying a bag bearing the name of one of the more expensive dress shops in Cairo. At that hour the watcher had been relieved by the night man.

Yesterday Vandam had received by messenger a similar report from Kemel covering the first twelve hours of the surveillance. For two days, therefore, Sonja's behaviour had been routine and wholly innocent, and neither Wolff nor anyone else had visited her on the houseboat.

Vandam was bitterly disappointed.

Kemel said: 'The men I am using are completely reliable, and they are reporting directly to me.'

Vandam grunted, then roused himself to be courteous. 'Yes, I'm sure,' he said. 'Thankyou for coming in.'

Kemel stood up. 'No trouble,' he said. 'Goodbye.' He went out.

Vandam sat brooding. He read Kemel's report again, as if

there might have been clues between the lines. If Sonja was connected with Wolff - and Vandam still believed she was, somehow - clearly the association was not a close one. If she was meeting anyone, the meetings must be taking place ~~sixthexxix~~ away from the houseboat.

Vandam went to the door and called: 'Jakes!'

'Sir!'

Vandam sat down again and Jakes came in. Vandam said: 'From now on I want you to spend your evenings at the Cha-Cha Club. Watch Sonja, and observe whom she sits with after the show. Also, bribe a waiter to tell you whether anyone goes to her dressing-room.'

'Very good, sir.'

Vandam nodded dismissal, and added with a smile: 'Permission to enjoy yourself is granted.'

The smile was a mistake: it hurt. At least he was no longer trying to live on glucose dissolved in warm water - Gaafar was giving him mashed potato and gravy, which he could eat from a spoon and swallow without chewing. He was existing on that and gin. Dr Abuthnot had also told him he drank too much and smoked too much, and he had promised to cut down - after the war. Privately he thought: After I've caught Wolff.

If Sonja was not going to lead him to Wolff, only Elene could. Vandam was ashamed of his outburst at Elene's apartment. He had been angry at his own failure, and the thought of her with Wolff had maddened him. His behaviour could be described only as a fit of bad temper. Elene was a lovely girl who was risking her neck to help him, and courtesy was the least he owed her.

Wolff had said he would see Elene again. Vandam hoped he would contact her soon. He still felt irrationally angry at the thought of the two of them together; but now that the houseboat angle had

turned out to be a dead end, Elene was his only hope. He sat at his desk, waiting for the phone to ring, dreading the very thing he wanted most.

*

Elene went shopping in the late afternoon. Her apartment had come to seem claustrophobic after she had spent most of the day pacing around, unable to concentrate on anything, alternately miserable and happy; so she put on a cheerful striped dress and went out into the sunshine.

She liked the fruit-and-vegetable market. It was a lively place, especially at this end of the day when the tradesmen were trying to get rid of the last of their produce. She stopped to buy tomatoes. The man who served her picked up one with a slight bruise, and threw it away dramatically before filling a paper bag with undamaged specimens. Elene laughed, for she knew that the bruised tomato would be retrieved, as soon as she was out of sight, and put back on the display so that the whole pantomime could be performed again for the next customer. She haggled briefly over the price, but the vendor could tell that her heart was not in it, and she ended up paying almost what he had asked originally.

She bought eggs, too, having decided to make an omelet for supper. It was good, to be carrying a basket of food, more food than she could eat at one meal: it made her feel safe. She could remember days when there had been no supper.

She left the market and went window-shopping for dresses. She bought most of her clothes on impulse: she had firm ideas about what she liked, and if she planned a trip to buy something specific, she could never find it. She wanted one day to have her own dressmaker.

She thought: I wonder if William Vandam could afford that for his wife?

When she thought of Vandam she was happy, until she thought of Wolff.

She knew she could escape, if she wished, simply by refusing to see Wolff, refusing to make a date with him, refusing to answer his message. She was under no obligation to act as the bait in a trap ~~of~~ for a knife-murderer. She kept returning to this idea, worrying at it like a loose tooth: I don't have to.

She suddenly lost interest in dresses, and headed for home. She wished she could make omelet for two, but omelet for one was something to be thankful for. There was a certain unforgettable pain in the stomach which came when, having gone to bed with no supper, you woke up in the morning to no breakfast. The ten-year-old Elene had wondered, ~~quietly~~ secretly, how long people took to starve to death. She was sure Vandam's childhood had not suffered such worries.

When she turned into the entrance to her apartment block, a voice said: 'Abigail.'

She froze with shock. It was the voice of a ghost. She did not dare to look. The voice came again.

'Abigail.'

She made herself turn around. A figure came out of the shadows: an old Jew, shabbily dressed, with a matted beard, veined feet in rubber-tyre sandals ...

Elene said: 'Father.'

He stood in front of her, as if afraid to touch her, just looking. He said: 'So beautiful still, and not poor ... '

Impulsively, she stepped forward, kissed his cheek, then stepped back again. She did not know what to say.

He said: 'Your grandfather, my father, has died.'

She took his arm and led him up the stairs. It was all unreal,

irrational, like a dream.

Inside the apartment she said: 'You should eat,' and took him into the kitchen. She put a pan on to heat and began to beat the eggs. With her back to her father she said: 'How did you find me?'

'I've always known where you were,' he said. 'Your friend Esme writes to her father, who sometimes I see.'

Esme was an acquaintance, rather than a friend, but Elene ran into her every two or three months. She had never let on that she was writing home. Elene said: 'I didn't want you to ask me to come back.'

'And what would I have said to you? "Come home, it is your duty to starve with your family." No. But I knew where you were.'

She sliced tomatoes into the omelet. 'You would have said it was better to starve than to live immorally.'

'Yes, I would have said that. And would I have been wrong?'

She turned to look at him. The glaucoma which had taken the sight of his left eye years ago was now spreading to the right.

He was fifty-five, she calculated: he looked seventy.

'Yes, you would have been wrong,' she said. 'It is always better to live.'

'Perhaps it is.'

Her surprise must have shown on her face, for he explained: 'I'm not as certain of these things as I used to be. I'm getting old.'

Elene halved the omelet and slid it on to two plates. She put bread on the table. Her father washed his hands, then blessed the bread. 'Blessed art thou o Lord our God, King of the Universe ...' Elene was surprised that the prayer did not drive her into a fury. In the blackest moments of her lonely life she had cursed and raged at her father and his religion for what it had driven her to. She

had tried to cultivate an attitude of indifference, perhaps mild contempt; but she had not quite succeeded. Now, watching him pray, she thought: And what do I do, when this man whom I hate turns up on the doorstep? I kiss his cheek, and I bring him inside, and I give him supper.

They began to eat. Her father had been very hungry, and wolfed his food. Elene wondered why he had come. Was it just to tell her of the death of her grandfather? No. That was part of it, perhaps, but there would be more.

She asked about her sisters. ^{After the death of their mother all four of them.} In their different ways, ~~all~~ ~~four of them~~ had broken with their father. Two had gone to America, one had married the son of her father's greatest enemy, and the youngest, Naomi, had chosen the surest escape, and died. It dawned on Elene that her father was destroyed.

He asked her what she was doing. She decided to tell him the truth. 'The British are trying to catch a man, a German, they think is a spy. It's my job to befriend him ... I'm the bait in a snare. But ... I think I may not help them any more.'

He had stopped eating. 'Are you afraid?'

She nodded. 'He's very dangerous. He killed a soldier with a knife. Last night ... I was to meet him in a restaurant and the British were to arrest him there, but something went wrong and I spent the whole evening with him, I was so frightened, and when it was over, the Englishman ...' She stopped, and took a deep breath. 'Anyway, I may not help them any more.'

Her father went on eating. 'Do you love this Englishman?'

'He isn't Jewish,' she said defiantly.

'I've given up judging everyone,' he said.

Elene could not take it all in. Was there nothing of the old man left?

They finished their meal, and Elene got up to make him a glass

of tea. He said: 'The Germans are coming. It will be very bad for Jews. I'm getting out.'

She frowned. 'Where will you go?'

'Jerusalem.'

'How will you get there? The trains are full, there's a quota for Jews - '

'I am going to walk.'

She stared at him, not believing he could be serious, not believing he would joke about such a thing. 'Walk?'

He smiled. 'It's been done before.'

She saw that he meant it, and she was angry with him. 'As I recall, Moses never made it.'

'Perhaps I will be able to hitch a ride.'

'It's crazy!'

'Haven't I always been a little crazy?'

'Yes!' she shouted. Suddenly her anger collapsed. 'Yes, you've always been a little crazy, and I should know better than to try to change your mind.'

'I will pray to God to preserve you. You will have⁷ a chance here - you're young and beautiful, and maybe they won't know you're Jewish. But me, a useless old man muttering Hebrew prayers ... me they would send to a camp where I would surely die. It is always better to live. You said that.'

She tried to persuade him to stay with her, for one night at least, but he would not. She gave him a sweater, and a scarf, and all the cash she had in the house, and told him that if he waited a day she could get more money from the bank, and buy him a good coat; but he was in a hurry. She cried, and dried her eyes, and cried again. When he left she looked out of her window and saw him walking along the street, an old man going up out of Egypt and into the wilderness,

following in the footsteps of the Children of Israel. There was something of the old man left: his orthodoxy had mellowed, but he still had a will of iron. He disappeared into the crowd, and she left the window. When she thought of his courage, she knew she could not run out on Vandam.

*

'She's an intriguing girl,' Wolff said. 'I can't quite figure her out.' He was sitting on the bed, watching Sonja get dressed. 'She's a little jumpy. When I told her we were going on a picnic she acted quite scared, said she hardly knew me, as if she needed a chaperone.'

'With you, she did,' Sonja said.

'And yet she can be very earthy and direct.'

'Just bring her home to me. I'll figure her out.'

'It bothers me.' Wolff frowned. He was thinking aloud.

'Somebody tried to jump into the taxi with us.'

'A beggar.'

'No, he was a European.'

'A European beggar.' Sonja stopped brushing her hair to look at Wolff in the mirror. 'This town is full of crazy people, you know that. Listen, if you have second thoughts, just picture her writing on that bed with you and me either side of her.'

Wolff grinned. It was an appealing picture, but not an irresistible one: it was Sonja's fantasy, not his. His instinct told him to lay low now, and not to make dates with anyone. But Sonja was going to insist - and he still needed her.

Sonja said: 'And when am I going to contact Kemel? He must know by now that you're living here.'

Wolff sighed. Another date; another claim on him; another danger; also, another person whose protection he needed. 'Call him tonight from the club. I'm not in a rush for this meeting, but

we've got to keep him sweet.'

'Okay.' She was ready, and her taxi was waiting. 'Make a date with Elene.' She went out.

She was not in his power the way she had once been, Wolff realised. The walls you build to protect you also close you in. Could he afford to defy her? If there had been a clear and immediate danger, yes. But all he had was a vague nervousness, an intuitive inclination to keep his head down. And Sonja might be crazy enough to betray him if she really got angry. He was obliged to choose the lesser danger.

He got up from the bed, found paper and a pen, and sat down to write a note to Elene.

- 17 -

The message came the day after Elene's father left for Jerusalem. A small boy came to the door with an envelope. Elene tipped him and read the letter. It was short. 'My dear Elene, let us meet at the Oasis restaurant at eight o'clock next Thursday. I eagerly look forward to it. Fondly, Alex Wolff.' Unlike his speech, his writing had a stiffness which seemed German - but perhaps it was her imagination. Thursday - that was the day after tomorrow. She did not know whether to be elated or scared. Her first thought was to telephone Vandam; then she hesitated.

She had become intensely curious about Vandam. She knew so little about him. What did he do when he was not catching spies? Did he listen to music, collect stamps, shoot duck? Was he interested in poetry or architecture or antique rugs? What was his home like? With whom did he live? What colour were his pyjamas?

She wanted to patch up their quarrel, and she wanted to see where he lived. She had an excuse to contact him now, but instead of telephoning she would go to his home.

She decided to change her dress, then she decided to take a bath first, then she decided to wash her hair as well. Sitting in the bath she thought about which dress to wear. She recalled the occasions she had seen Vandam, and tried to remember which clothes she had worn. He had never seen the pale pink one with puffed shoulders and buttons all down the front: that was very pretty.

She put on a little perfume, then the silk underwear Johnnie had given her, which always made her feel so feminine. Her short hair was dry already, and she sat in front of the mirror to comb it. The dark, fine locks gleamed after washing. I look ravishing, she thought, and she smiled at herself seductively.

She left the apartment, taking Wolff's note with her. Vandam would be interested to see his handwriting. He was interested in every little detail where Wolff was concerned, perhaps because they had never met face to face, except in the dark or at a distance. The handwriting was very neat, easily legible, almost like an artist's lettering: Vandam would draw some conclusion from that.

She headed for Garden City. It was seven o'clock, and Vandam worked until late, so she had time to spare. The sun was still strong, and she enjoyed the heat on her arms and legs as she walked. A bunch of soldiers whistled at her, and in her sunny mood she smiled at them, so they followed her for a few blocks before they got diverted into a bar.

She felt gay and reckless. What a good idea it was to go to his house - so much better than sitting alone at home. She had been alone too much. For her men, she had existed only when they had time to visit her; and she had made their attitudes her own, so that when they were not there she felt she had nothing to do, no role to play, no one to be. Now she had broken with all that. By doing this, by going to see him uninvited, she felt she was being herself instead of a person in someone else's dream. It made her almost giddy.

She found the house easily. It was a small French-colonial villa, all pillars and high windows, its white stone reflecting the evening sun with painful brilliance. She walked up the short drive, rang the bell, and waited in the shadow of the portico.

An elderly, bald Egyptian came to the door. 'Good evening, Madam,' he said, speaking like an English butler.

Elene said: 'I'd like to see Major Vandam. My name is Elene Fontana.'

'The major has not yet returned home, Madam.' The servant

hesitated.

'Perhaps I could wait,' Elene said.

'Of course, Madam.' He stepped aside to admit her.

She crossed the threshold. She looked around with nervous eagerness. She was in a cool tiled hall with a high ceiling. Before she could take it all in the servant said: 'This way, Madam.' He led her into a drawing-room. 'My name is Gaafar. Please call me if there is anything you require.'

'Thankyou, Gaafar.'

The servant went out. Elene was thrilled to be in Vandam's house and left alone to look around. The drawing-room had a large marble fireplace and a lot of very English furniture: somehow she thought he had not furnished it himself. Everything was clean and tidy and not very lived-in. What did this say about his character? Perhaps nothing.

The door opened and a young boy walked in. He was very good-looking, with curly brown hair and smooth, pre-adolescent skin. He seemed about ten years old. He looked vaguely familiar.

He said: 'Hello, I'm Billy Vandam.'

Elene stared at him in horror. A son - Vandam had a son! She knew now why he seemed familiar: he resembled his father. Why had it never occurred to her that Vandam might be married? A man like that - charming, kind, handsome, clever - was unlikely to have reached his late thirties without getting hooked. What a fool she had been to think that she might have been the first to desire him! She felt so stupid that she blushed.

She shook Billy's hand. 'How do you do,' she said. 'I'm Elene Fontana.'

'We never know what time Dad's coming home,' Billy said. 'I hope you won't have to wait too long.'

She had not yet recovered her composure. 'Don't worry, I don't mind, it doesn't matter a bit ... '

'Would you like a drink, or anything?'

He was very polite, like his father, with a formality that was somehow disarming. Elene said: 'No, thankyou.'

'Well, I've got to have my supper. Sorry to leave you alone.'

'No, no ... '

'If you need anything, just call Gaafar.'

'Thankyou.'

The boy went out, and Elene sat down heavily. She was disoriented, as if in her own home she had found a door to a room she had not known was there. She noticed a photograph on the marble mantelpiece, and got up to look at it. It was a picture of a beautiful woman in her early twenties, a cool, aristocratic-looking woman with a faintly supercilious smile. Elene admired the dress she was wearing, something silky and flowing, hanging in elegant folds from her slender figure. The woman's hair and make-up were perfect. The eyes were startlingly familiar, clear and perceptive and light in colour: Elene realised that Billy had eyes like that. This, then, was Billy's mother - Vandam's wife. She was, of course, exactly the kind of woman who would be his wife, a classic English beauty with a superior air.

Elene felt she had been a fool. Women like that were queuing up to marry men like Vandam. As if he would have bypassed all of them only to fall for an Egyptian courtesan! She rehearsed the things that divided her from him: he was respectable and she was disreputable; he was British and she was Egyptian; he was Christian - presumably - and she was Jewish; he was well-bred and she came out of the slums of Alexandria; he was almost forty and she was twenty-three ... The list was long.

Tucked into the back of the photograph frame was a page torn from a magazine. The paper was old and yellowing. The page bore the same photograph. Elene saw that it had come from a magazine called The Tatler. She had heard of it: it was much read by the wives of colonels in Cairo, for it reported all the trivial events of London society - parties, balls, charity lunches, gallery openings, and the activities of English royalty. The picture of Mrs Vandam took up most of this page, and a paragraph of type beneath the picture reported that Angela, daughter of Sir Peter and Lady Beresford, was engaged to be married to Lieutenant William Vandam, son of Mr and Mrs John Vandam of Gately, Dorset. Elene re-folded the cutting and put it back.

The family picture was complete. Attractive British officer, cool, self-assured English wife, intelligent charming son, beautiful home, money, class, and happiness. Everything else was a dream.

She wandered around the room, wondering if it held any more shocks in store. The room had been furnished by Mrs Vandam, of course, in perfect, bloodless taste. The decorous print of the curtains toned with the restrained hue of the upholstery and the elegant striped wallpaper. Elene wondered what their bedroom would be like. It too would be coolly tasteful, she guessed. Perhaps the main colour would be blue-green, the shade they called eau de Nil although it was not a bit like the muddy water of the Nile. Would they have twin beds? She hoped so. She would never know.

Against one wall was a small upright piano. She wondered who played. Perhaps Mrs Vandam sat here sometimes, in the evenings, filling the air with Chopin while Vandam sat in the armchair, over there, watching her fondly. Perhaps Vandam accompanied himself as he sang romantic ballads to her in a strong tenor. Perhaps Billy had a tutor, and fingered hesitant scales every afternoon when he

came home from school. She looked through the pile of sheet music in the seat of the piano stool. She had been right about the Chopin: they had all the waltzes here in a book.

She picked up a novel from the top of the piano and opened it. She read the first line: 'Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again.' The opening sentences intrigued her, and she wondered whether Vandam was reading the book. Perhaps she could borrow it: it would be good to have something of his. On the other hand, she had the feeling he was not a great reader of fiction. She did not want to borrow it from his wife.

Billy came in. Elene put the book down suddenly, feeling irrationally guilty, as if she had been prying. Billy saw the gesture. 'That one's no good,' he said. 'It's about some silly girl who's afraid of her husband's housekeeper. There's no action.'

Elene sat down, and Billy sat opposite her. Obviously he was going to entertain her. He was a miniature of his father, except for those clear grey eyes. She said: 'You've read it, then?'

'Rebecca? Yes. But I didn't like it much. I always finish them, though.'

'What do you like to read?'

'I like tecs best.'

'Tecs?'

'Detectives. I've read all of Agatha Christie's and Dorothy Sayers'. But I like the American ones most of all - S.S. Van Dine and Raymond Chandler.'

'Really?' Elene smiled. 'I like detective stories too - I read them all the time.'

'Oh! Who's your favourite tec?'

Elene considered. 'Maigret.'

'I've never heard of him. What's the author's name?'

'Georges Simenon. He writes in French, but now some of the books have been translated into English. They're set in Paris, mostly. They're very ... complex.'

'Would you lend me one? It's so hard to get new books, I've read all the ones in this house, and in the school library. And I swap with my friends but they like, you know, stories about children having adventures in the school holidays.'

'All right,' Elene said. 'Let's swap. What have you got to lend me? I don't think I've read any American ones.'

'I'll lend you a Chandler. The American ones are much more true to life, you know. I've gone off those stories about English country houses and people who probably couldn't murder a fly.'

It was odd, Elene thought, that a boy for whom the English country house was probably part of everyday life should find stories about American private eyes more 'true to life'. She hesitated, then asked: 'Does your mother read detective stories?'

Billy said briskly: 'My mother died last year in Crete.'

'Oh!' Elene put her hand to her mouth; she felt the blood drain from her face. So Vandam was not married!

A moment later she felt ashamed that that had been her first thought, and sympathy for the child her second. She said: 'Billy, how awful for you. I'm so sorry.' Real death had suddenly intruded into their light-hearted talk of murder stories, and she felt embarrassed.

'It's all right,' Billy said. 'It's the war, you see.'

And now he was like his father again. For a while, talking about books, he had been full of boyish enthusiasm, but now the mask was on, and it was a smaller version of the mask used by his father: courtesy, formality, the attitude of the considerate host. It's the war, you see: he had heard someone else say that, and had

adopted it as his own defence. She wondered whether his preference for 'true-to-life' murders, as opposed to implausible country-house killings, dated from the death of his mother. Now he was looking around him, searching for something, inspiration perhaps. In a moment he would offer her cigarettes, whisky, tea. It was hard enough to know what to say to a bereaved adult: with Billy she felt helpless. She decided to talk of something else.

She said awkwardly: 'I suppose, with your father working at GHQ, you get more news of the war than the rest of us.'

'I suppose I do, but usually I don't really understand it. When he comes home in a bad mood I know we've lost another battle.' He started to bite a fingernail, then stuffed his hands into his shorts pockets. 'I wish I was older.'

'You want to fight?'

He looked at her fiercely, as if he thought she was mocking him. 'I'm not one of those kids who thinks it's all jolly good fun, like the cowboy films.'

She murmured: 'I'm sure you're not.'

'It's just that I'm afraid the Germans will win.'

Elene thought: Oh, Billy, if you were ten years older I'd fall in love with you, too. 'It might not be so bad,' she said. 'They're not monsters.'

He gave her a sceptical look: she should have known better than to soft-soap him. He said: 'They'd only do to us what we've been doing to the Egyptians for fifty years.'

It was another of his father's lines, she was sure.

Billy said: 'But then it would all have been for nothing.' He bit his nail again, and this time he did not stop himself. Elene wondered what would have been for nothing: the death of his mother? His own personal struggle to be brave? The two-year see-saw of the desert war? European civilization?

'Well, it hasn't happened yet,' she said feebly.

Billy looked at the clock on the mantelpiece. 'I'm supposed to go to bed at nine.' Suddenly he was a child again.

'I suppose you'd better go, then.'

'Yes.' He stood up.

'May I come and say goodnight to you, in a few minutes?'

'If you like.' He went out.

What kind of life did they lead in this house? Elene wondered. The man, the boy and the old servant lived here together, each with his own concerns. Was there laughter, and kindness, and affection? Did they have time to play games and sing songs and go on picnics? By comparison with her own childhood Billy's was enormously privileged; nevertheless she feared this might be a terribly adult household for a boy to grow up in. His young-old wisdom was charming, but he seemed like a child who did not have much fun. She experienced a rush of compassion for him, a motherless child in an alien country besieged by foreign armies.

She left the drawing-room and went upstairs. There seemed to be three or four bedrooms on the first floor, with a narrow staircase leading up to a second floor where, presumably, Gaafar slept. One of the bedroom doors was open, and she went in.

It did not look much like a small boy's bedroom. Elene did not know a lot about small boys - she had had four sisters - but she was expecting to see model aeroplanes, jigsaw puzzles, a train set, sports gear and perhaps an old, neglected teddy bear. She would not have been surprised to see clothes on the floor, a construction set on the bed and a pair of muddy football boots on the polished surface of a desk. But the place might almost have been the bedroom of an adult. The clothes were folded neatly on

*In USA, change first floor to second floor and second floor to third.

a chair, the top of the chest of drawers was clear, school books were stacked tidily on the desk, and the only toy in evidence was a cardboard model of a tank. Billy was in bed, his striped pyjama jacket buttoned to the neck, a book on the blanket beside him.

'I like your room,' Elene said dectetfully.

Billy said: 'It's fine.'

'What are you reading?'

'The Greek Coffin Mystery.'

She sat on the edge of the bed. 'Well, don't stay awake too late.'

'I've to put out the light at nine-thirty.'

She leaned forward suddenly and kissed his cheek.

At that moment the door opened and Vandam walked in.

*

It was the familiarity of the scene that was so shocking: the boy in bed with his book, the light from the bedside lamp falling just so, the woman leaning forward to kiss the boy goodnight. Vandam stood and stared, feeling like one who knows he is in a dream but still cannot wake up.

Elene stood up and said: 'Hello, William.'

'Hello, Elene.'

'Goodnight, Billy.'

'Goodnight, Miss Fontana.'

She went past Vandam and left the room. Vandam sat on the edge of the bed, in the dip in the covers which she had vacated. He said: 'Been entertaining our guest?'

'Yes.'

'Good man.'

'I like her - she reads detective stories. We're going to swap books.'

'That's grand. Have you done your prep?'

'Yes - French vocab.'

'Want me to test you?'

'It's all right, Gaafar tested me. I say, she's ever so pretty, isn't she.'

'Yes. She's working on something for me - it's a bit hush-hush, so ... '

'My lips are sealed.'

Vandam smiled. 'That's the stuff.'

Billy lowered his voice. 'Is she, you know, a secret agent?'

Vandam put a finger to his lips. 'Walls have ears.'

The boy looked suspicious. 'You're having me on.'

Vandam shook his head silently.

Billy said: 'Gosh!'

Vandam stood up. 'Lights out at nine-thirty.'

'Right-ho. Goodnight.'

'Goodnight, Billy.' Vandam went out. As he closed the door it occurred to him that Elene's goodnight kiss had probably done Billy a lot more good than his father's man-to-man chat.

He found Elene in the drawing-room, shaking martinis. He felt he should have resented more than he did the way she had made herself at home in his house, but he was too tired to strike attitudes. He sank gratefully into a chair and accepted a drink.

Elene said: 'Busy day?'

Vandam's whole section had been working on the new wireless security procedures that were being introduced following the capture of the German listening unit at the Hill of Jesus, but Vandam was not going to tell Elene that. Also, he felt she was play-acting the role of housewife, and she had no right to do that. He said: 'What made you come here?'

'I've got a date with Wolff.'

'Wonderful!' Vandam immediately forgot all lesser concerns.

'When?'

'Thursday.' She handed him a sheet of paper.

He studied the message. It was a peremptory summons written in a clear, stylish script. 'How did this come?'

'A boy brought it to my door.'

'Did you question the boy? Where he was given the message and by whom, and so on?'

She was crestfallen. 'I never thought to do that.'

'Never mind.' Wolff would have taken precautions, anyway; the boy would have known nothing of value.

'What will we do?' Elene asked.

'The same as last time, only better.' Vandam tried to sound more confident than he felt. It should have been simple. The man makes a date with a girl, so you go to the meeting-place and arrest the man when he turns up. But Wolff was unpredictable. He would not get away with the taxi trick again: Vandam would have the restaurant surrounded, twenty or thirty men and several cars, road blocks in readiness, and so on. But he might try a different trick. Vandam could not imagine what - and that was the problem.

'As if she were reading his mind Elene said: 'I don't want to spend another evening with him.'

'Why?'

'He frightens me.'

Vandam felt guilty - remember Istanbul - and suppressed his sympathy. 'But last time he did you no harm.'

'He didn't try to seduce me, so I didn't have to say No. But he will, and I'm afraid he won't take No for an answer.'

'We've learned our lesson,' Vandam said with false assurance.

'There'll be no mistakes this time.' Secretly he was surprised by her simple determination not to go to bed with Wolff. He had assumed that such things did not matter much, one way or the other, to her. He had misjudged her, then. Seeing her in this new light somehow made him very cheerful. He decided he must be honest with her. 'I should rephrase that,' he said. 'I'll do everything in my power to make sure that there are no mistakes this time.'

Gaafar came in and said: 'Dinner is served, sir.' Vandam smiled: Gaafar was doing his English-butler act in honour of the feminine company.

Vandam said to Elene: 'Have you eaten?'

'No.'

'What have we got, Gaafar?'

'For you, sir, clear soup, scrambled eggs, and yoghurt. But I took the liberty of grilling a chop for Miss Fontana.'

Elene said to Vandam: 'Do you always eat like that?'

'No, it's because of my cheek, I can't chew.' He stood up.

As they went into the dining-room Elene said: 'Does it still hurt?'

'Only when I laugh. It's true - I can't stretch the muscles on that side. I've got into the habit of smiling with one side of my face.'

They sat down, and Gaafar served the soup.

Elene said: 'I like your son very much.'

'So do I,' Vandam said.

'He's old beyond his years.'

'Do you think that's a bad thing?'

She shrugged. 'Who knows?'

'He's been through a couple of things that ought to be reserved for adults.'

'Yes.' Elene hesitated. 'When did your wife die?'

'May the twenty-eighth, nineteen-forty-one, in the evening.'

'Billy told me it happened in Crete.'

'Yes. She worked on cryptanalysis for the air force. She was on a temporary posting to Crete at the time the Germans invaded the island. May 28 was the day the British realised they had lost the battle and decided to get out. Apparently she was hit by a stray shell and killed instantly. Of course, we were trying to get live people away then, not bodies, so ... There's no grave, you see. No memorial. Nothing left.'

Elene said quietly: 'Do you still love her?'

'I think I'll always be in love with her. I believe it's like that with people you really love. If they go away, or die, it makes no difference. If ever I were to marry again, I would still love Angela.'

'Were you very happy?'

'We ... ' He hesitated, unwilling to answer, then he realised that the hesitation was an answer in itself. 'Ours wasn't an idyllic marriage. It was I who was devoted ... Angela was fond of me.'

'Do you think you will marry again?'

'Well. The English in Cairo keep thrusting replicas of Angela at me.' He shrugged. He did not know the answer to the question. Elene seemed to understand, for she fell silent and began to eat her dessert.

Afterward Gaafar brought them coffee in the drawing-room. It was at this time of day that Vandam usually began to hit the bottle seriously, but tonight he did not want to drink. He sent Gaafar to

bed, and they drank their coffee. Vandam smoked a cigarette.

He felt the desire for music. He had loved music, at one time, although lately it had gone out of his life. Now, with the mild night air coming in through the open windows and the smoke curling up from his cigarette, he wanted to hear clear, delightful notes, and sweet harmonies, and subtle rhythms. He went to the piano and looked at the music. Elene watched him in silence. He began to play Fur Elise. The first few notes sounded, with Beethoven's characteristic, devastating simplicity; then the hesitation; then the rolling tune. The ability to play came back to him instantly, almost as if he had never stopped. His hands knew what to do in a way he always felt was miraculous.

When the song was over he went back to Elene, sat next to her, and kissed her cheek. Her face was wet with tears. She said: 'William, I love you with all my heart.'

*

They whisper.

She says, 'I like your ears.'

He says, 'Nobody has ever licked them before.'

She giggles. 'Do you like it?'

'Yes, yes.' He sighs. 'Can I ... ?'

'Undo the buttons - here - that's right - aah.'

'I'll put out the light.'

'No, I want to see you - '

'There's a moon.' Click. 'There, see? The moonlight is enough.'

'Come back here quickly - '

'I'm here.'

'Kiss me again, William.'

They do not speak for a while. Then:

'Can I take this thing off?' he says.

'Let me help ... there.'

'Oh! Oh, they're so pretty.'

'I'm so glad you like them ... would you do that harder ...
suck a little ... aah, God - '

And a little later she says:

'Let me feel your chest. Damn buttons - I've ripped your
shirt - '

'The hell with that.'

'Ah, I knew it would be like this ... Look.'

'What?'

'Our skins in the moonlight - you're so pale and I'm nearly
black, look - '

'Yes.'

'Touch me. Stroke me. Squeeze, and pinch, and explore, I
want to feel your hands all over me - '

'Yes - '

' - everywhere, your hands, there, yes, especially there, oh,
you know, you know exactly where, oh!'

'You're so soft inside.'

'This ~~is~~ a dream.'

'No, it's real.'

'I never want to wake up.'

'So soft ... '

'And you're so hard ... Can I kiss it?'

'Yes, please ... Ah ... Jesus it feels good - Jesus - '

'William?'

'Yes?'

'Now, William?'

'Oh, yes.'

' ... Take them off.'

'Silk.'

'Yes. Be quick.'

'Yes.'

'I've wanted this for so long - '

She gasps, and he makes a sound like a sob, and then there is only their breathing for many minutes, until finally he begins to shout aloud, and she smothers his cries with her kisses and then she, too, feels it, and she turns her face into the cushion and opens her mouth and screams into the cushion, and he not being used to this thinks something is wrong and says:

'It's all right, it's all right, it's all right - '

- and finally she goes limp, and lies with her eyes closed for a while, perspiring, until her breathing returns to normal, then she looks up at him and says:

'So that's how it's supposed to be!'

And he laughs, and she looks quizzically at him, so he explains:

'That's exactly what I was thinking.'

Then they both laugh, and he says:

'I've done a lot of things after ... you know, afterwards ... but I don't think I've ever laughed.'

'I'm so glad,' she says. 'Oh, William, I'm so glad.'

- 18 -

Rommel could smell the sea. At Tobruk the heat and the dust and the flies were as bad as they had been in the desert, but it was all made bearable by that occasional whiff of salty dampness in the faint breeze.

Von Mellenthin came into the Command Vehicle with his intelligence report. 'Good evening, Field-Marshal.'

Rommel smiled. He had been promoted after the victory at Tobruk, and he had not yet got used to the new title. 'Anything new?'

'A signal from the spy in Cairo. He says the Mersa Matruh Line is weak in the middle.'

Rommel took the report and began to glance over it. He smiled when he read that the Allies anticipated he would try a dash around the southern end of the Line: it seemed they were beginning to understand his thinking. He said: 'So the minefield gets thinner at this point ... but there the line is defended by two columns. What is a column?'

'It's a new term they're using. According to one of our prisoners-of-war, a column is a brigade group that has been twice overrun by Panzers.'

'A weak force, then.'

'Yes.'

Rommel tapped the report with his forefinger. 'If this is correct, we can burst through the Mersa Matruh Line as soon as we get there.'

'I'll be doing my best to check the spy's report over the next day or two, of course,' said von Mellenthin. 'But he was right last time.'

The door to the Vehicle flew open and Kesselring came in.

Rommel was startled. 'Field Marshal!' he said. 'I thought you were in Sicily.'

'I was,' Kesselring said. He stamped the dust off his hand-made boots. 'I've just flown here to see you. Damn it, Rommel, this has got to stop. Your orders are quite clear: you were to advance to Tobruk and no farther.'

Rommel sat back in his canvas chair. He had hoped to keep Kesselring out of this argument. 'The circumstances have changed,' he said.

'But your original orders have been confirmed by ~~Maxime~~ the Italian Supreme Command,' said Kesselring. 'And what was your reaction? You declined the "advice" and invited Bastico to lunch with you in Cairo!'

Nothing infuriated Rommel more than orders from ~~Italians~~. 'The Italians have done nothing in this war,' he said angrily.

'That is irrelevant. Your air and sea support is now needed for the attack on Malta. After we have taken Malta your communications will be secure for the advance to Egypt.'

'You people have learned nothing!' Rommel said. He made an effort to lower his voice. 'While we are digging in the enemy, too, will be digging in. I did not get this far by playing the old game of advance, consolidate, then advance again. When they attack, I dodge; when they defend a position I go around that position; and when they retreat I chase them. They are running now, and now is the time to take Egypt.'

Kesselring remained calm. 'I have a copy of your cable to Mussolini.' He took a piece of paper from his pocket and read: 'The state and morale of the troops, the present supply position owing to captured dumps, and the present weakness of the enemy, permit our pursuing him into the depths of the Egyptian area.' He folded the sheet of paper and turned to von Mellenthin. 'How many German tanks

and men do we have?'

Rommel suppressed the urge to tell von Mellenthin not to answer: he knew this was a weak point.

'Sixty tanks, Field-Marshal, and two thousand five hundred men.'

'And the Italians?'

'Six thousand men and fourteen tanks.'

Kesselring turned back to Rommel. 'And you're going to take Egypt with a total of seventy-four tanks? Von Mellenthin, what is our estimate of the enemy's strenght?'

'The Allied forces are approximately three times as numerous as ours, but - '

'They~~ex~~ you are.'

Von Mellenthin went on: ' - but we are very well supplied with food, clothing, trucks and armoured cars, and fuel; and the men are in tremendous spirits.'

Rommel said: 'Von Mellenthin, go to the communications truck and see what has arrived.'

Von Mellenthin frowned, but Rommel did not explain, so he went out.

Rommel said: 'The Allies are regrouping at Mersa Matruh. They expect us to move around the southern end of their line. Instead we will hit the middle, where they are weakest - '

'How do you know all this?' Kesselring interrupted.

'Our intelligence assessment - '

'On what is the assemsment based?'

'Primarily on a spy report - '

'My God!' For the first time Kesselring raised his voice.

'You've no tanks, but you have your spy!'

'He was right last time.'

Von Mellenthin came back in.

Kesselring said: 'All this makes no difference. I am here to confirm the Fuehrer's orders: you are to advance no farther.'

Rommel smiled. 'I have sent a personal envoy to the Fuehrer.'

'You ... ?'

'I am a Field-Marshal now, I have direct access to Hitler.'

'Of course.'

'I think ~~Kesselring~~ von Mellenthin may have the Fuehrer's reply.'

'Yes,' said von Mellenthin. He read from a sheet of paper.

'It is only once in a lifetime that the Goddess of Victory smiles. Onward to Cairo. Adolf Hitler.'

There was a silence.

Kesselring walked out.

- 19 -

When Vandam got to his office he learned that, the previous evening, Rommel had advanced to within sixty miles of Alexandria.

Rommel seemed unstoppable. The Mersa Matruh Line had broken in half like a matchstick. In the south, the 13th Corps had retreated in a panic, and in the north the fortress of Mersa Matruh had capitulated. The Allies had fallen back once again - but this would be the last time. The new line of defence stretched across a thirty-mile gap between the sea and the impassable Qattara Depression, and if that line fell there would be no more defences, Egypt would be Rommel's.

The news was not enough to dampen Vandam's elation. It was more than twenty-four hours since he had awakened at dawn, on the sofa in his drawing-room, with Elene in his arms. Since then he had been suffused with a kind of adolescent glee. He kept remembering little details: how small and brown her nipples were, the taste of her skin, her sharp fingernails digging in to his thighs. In the office he had been behaving a little out of character, he knew. He had given back a letter to his typist, saying: 'There are seven errors in this, you'd better do it again,' and smiled at her sunnily. She had nearly fallen off her chair. He thought of Elene, and he thought: 'Why not? Why the hell not?' and there was no reply.

He was visited early by an officer from the Special Liaison Unit. Anybody with his ear to the ground in GHQ now knew that the SLUs had a very special, ultra-secret source of intelligence. Opinions differed as to how good the intelligence was, and evaluation was always difficult because they would never tell you the source. Brown, who held the rank of Captain but was quite plainly not a military man, leaned on the edge of the table and spoke around the stem of his pipe. 'Are you being evacuated, Vandam?'

These chaps lived in a world of their own, and there was no point in telling them that a captain had to call a major 'Sir'.

Vandam said: 'What? Evacuated? Why?'

'Our lot's off to Jerusalem. So's everyone who knows too much. Keep people out of enemy hands, you know.'

'The brass is getting nervous, then.' It was logical, really: Rommel could cover sixty miles in a day.

'There'll be riots at the station, you'll see - half Cairo's trying to get out and the other half is preening itself ready for the liberation. Ha!'

'You won't tell too many people that you're going ... '

'No, no, no. Now, then, I've got a little snippet for you. We all know Rommel's got a spy in Cairo.'

'How did you know?' Vandam said.

'Stuff comes through from London, old boy. Anyhow, the chap has been identified as, and I quote, "the hero of the Rashid Ali affair". Mean anything to you?'

Vandam was thunderstruck. 'It does!' he said.

'Well, that's it.' Brown got off the table.

'Just a minute,' Vandam said. 'Is that all?'

'I'm afraid so.'

'What is this, a decrypt or an agent report?'

'Suffice it to say that the source is reliable.'

'You always say that.'

'Yes. Well, I may not see you for a while. Good luck.'

'Thanks,' Vandam muttered distractedly.

'Toodle-oo!' Brown went out, puffing smoke.

The hero of the Rashid Ali affair. It was incredible that Wolff should have been the man who outwitted Vandam in Istanbul. Yet it made sense: Vandam recalled the odd feeling he had had about Wolff's style, as if it were familiar. The girl whom Vandam had sent

to pick up the mystery man had had her throat cut.

And now Vandam was sending Elene in against the same man.

A corporal came in with an order. Vandam read it with mounting disbelief. All departments were to extract from their files those papers which might be dangerous in enemy hands, and burn them. Just about anything in the files of an intelligence section might be dangerous in enemy hands. We might as well burn the whole damn lot, Vandam thought. And how would departments operate afterwards? Clearly the brass thought the departments would not be operating at all for very much longer. Of course it was a precaution, but it was a very drastic one: they would not destroy the accumulated results of years of work unless they thought there was a very strong chance indeed of the Germans taking Egypt.

It's going to pieces, he thought; it's falling apart.

It was unthinkable. Vandam had given three years of his life to the defence of Egypt. Thousands of men had died in the desert. After all that, was it possible that we could lose? Actually give up, and turn and run away? It did not bear contemplating.

He called Jakes in and watched him read the order. Jakes just nodded, as if he had been expecting it. Vandam said: 'Bit drastic, isn't it?'

'It's rather like what's been happening in the desert, sir,' Jakes replied. 'We establish huge supply dumps at enormous cost, then as we retreat we blow them up to keep them out of enemy hands.'

Vandam nodded. 'All right, you'd better get on with it. Try and pāay it down a bit, for the sake of morale - you know, brass getting the wind up unnecessarily, that sort of thing.'

'Yes, sir. We'll have the bonfire in the yard at the back, shall we?'

'Yes. Find an old dustbin and poke holes in its bottom. Make sure the stuff burns up properly.'

'What about your own files?'

'I'll go through them now.'

'Very good, sir.' Jakes went out.

Vandam opened his file drawer and began to sort through his papers. Countless times over the last three years he had thought: I don't need to remember that, I can always look it up. There were names and addressses, security reports on individuals, details of codes, systems of communication of orders, case notes, and a little file of jottings about ~~XXXXXX~~ Alex Wolff. James brought in a big cardboard box with 'Lipton's Tea' printed on its side, and Vandam began to dump papers into it, thinking: This is what it is like to be the losers.

The box was half full when Vandam's corporal opened the door and said: 'Major Smith to see you, sir.'

'Send him in.' Vandam did not know a Major Smith.

The major was a small, thin man in his forties with bulbous blue eyes and an air of being rather pleased with himself. He shook hands and said: 'Sandy Smith, S.I.S.'

Vandam said: 'What can I do for the Secret Intelligence Service?'

'I'm sort of the liaison man between S.I.S. and the General Staff,' Smith explained. 'You made an inquiry about a book called Rebecca ... '

'Yes.'

'The answer got routed through us.' Smith produced a piece of paper with a flourish.

Vandam read the message. The S.I.S. Head of Station in Portugal had followed up the query about Rebecca by sending one of his men to visit all the English-language bookshops in the country. In the holiday area of Estoril he had found a bookseller who recalled selling his entire stock - six copies - of Rebecca to one woman.

On further investigation the woman had turned out to be the wife of the German military attache in Lisbon.

Vandam said: 'This confirms something I suspected. Thankyou for taking the trouble to bring it over.'

'No trouble,' Smith said. 'I'm over here every morning anyway. Glad to be able to help.' He went out.

Vandam reflected on the news while he went on with his work. There was only one plausible explanation of the fact that the book had found its way from Estoril to the Sahara. Undoubtedly it was the basis of a code - and, unless there were two successful German spies in Cairo, it was Alex Wolff who was using that code.

The information would be useful, sooner or later. It was a pity the key to the code had not been captured along with the book and the decrypt. That thought reminded him of the importance of burning his secret papers, and he determined to be more ruthless about what he destroyed.

At the end he considered his files on pay and promotion of subordinates, and decided to burn those too since they might help enemy interrogation teams fix their priorities. The cardboard box was full. He hefted it on to his shoulder and went outside.

Jakes had the fire going in a rusty steel water-tank propped up on bricks. A corporal was feeding papers to the flames. Vandam dumped his box and watched the blaze for a while. It reminded him of Guy Fawkes Night in England, fireworks and baked potatoes and the burning effigy of a seventeenth-century traitor. Charred scraps of paper floated up on a pillar of hot air. Vandam turned away.

He wanted to think, so he decided to walk. He left GHQ and headed downtown. His cheek was hurting. He thought he should welcome the pain, for it was supposed to be a sign of healing. He

was growing a beard to cover the wound so that he would look a little less unsightly when the dressing came off. Every day he enjoyed not having to shave in the morning.

He thought of Elene, and remembered her with her back arched and perspiration glistening on her naked breasts. He had been shocked by what had happened after he had kissed her - shocked, but thrilled. It had been a night of firsts for him: first time he had made love anywhere other than on a bed, first time he had seen a woman have a climax like a man's, first time sex had been a mutual indulgence rather than the imposition of his will on a more or less reluctant woman. It was, of course, a disaster that he and Elene had fallen so joyfully in love. His parents, his friends and the Army would be aghast at the idea of his marrying a wog. His mother would also feel bound to explain why the Jews were wrong to reject Jesus. Vandam decided not to worry over all that. He and Elene might be dead within a few days. We'll bask in the sunshine while it lasts, he thought, and to hell with the future.

His thoughts kept returning to the girl whose throat had been cut, apparently by Wolff, in Istanbul. He was terrified that something might go wrong on Thursday and Elene might find herself alone with Wolff again.

Looking around him, he realised that there was a festive feeling in the air. ~~He~~ He passed a hairdresser's salon and noticed that it was packed out, with women standing waiting. The dress shops seemed to be doing good business. A woman came out of a grocer's with a basket full of canned food, and Vandam saw that there was a queue stretching out of the shop and along the pavement. A sign in the window of the next shop said, in hasty scribble: 'Sorry, no ~~makeup~~ makeup.' Vandam realised that the Egyptians were preparing to be liberated, and looking forward to it.

He could not escape a sense of impending doom. Even the sky seemed dark. He looked up: the sky was dark. There seemed to be a grey swirling mist, dotted with particles, over the city. He realised that it was smoke mixed with charred paper. All across Cairo the British were burning their files, and the sooty smoke had blotted out the sun.

Vandam was suddenly furious with himself and the rest of the Allied armies for preparing so equably for defeat. Where was the spirit of the Battle of Britain? What had happened to that famous mixture of obstinacy, ingenuity and courage which was supposed to characterise the nation? What, Vandam asked himself, are you planning to do about it?

He turned around and walked back toward Garden City, where GHQ was billeted in commandeered villas. He visualised the map of the El Alamein Line, where the Allies would make their last stand. This was one line Rommel could not circumvent, for at its southern end was the vast impassable Qattara Depression. So Rommel would have to break the line.

Where would he try to break through? If he came through the northern end, he would then have to choose between dashing straight for Alexandria or wheeling around and attacking the Allied forces from behind. If he came through the southern end he must either dash for Cairo or, again, wheel around and destroy the remains of the Allied forces.

Immediately behind the line was the Alam Halfa ridge, which Vandam knew was heavily fortified. Clearly it would be better for the Allies if Rommel wheeled around after breaking through the line, for then he might well spend his strength attacking Alam Halfa.

There was one more factor. The southern approach to Alam Halfa was through treacherous soft sand. It was unlikely that Rommel

knew about the quicksand, for he had never penetrated this far east before, and only the Allies had good maps of the desert.

So, Vandam thought, my duty is to prevent Alex Wolff telling Rommel that Alam Halfa is well defended and cannot be attacked from the south.

It was a depressingly negative plan.

Vandam had come, without consciously intending it, to the Villa les Oliviers, Wolff's house. He sat in the little park opposite it, under the olive trees, and stared at the building as if it might tell him where Wolff was. He thought idly: If only Wolff would make a mistake, and encourage Rommel to attack Alam Halfa from the south.

Then it hit him.

Suppose I capture Wolff. Suppose I get his radio. Suppose I find the key to his code.

Then I could impersonate Wolff, get on the radio to Rommel, and tell him to attack Alam Halfa from the south.

The idea blossomed rapidly in his mind, and he began to feel elated. By now Rommel was convinced, quite rightly, that Wolff's information was good. Suppose he got a message from Wolff saying the El Alamein Line was weak at the southern end, that the southern approach to Alam Halfa was hard going, and that Alam Halfa itself was weakly defended.

The temptation would be too much for Rommel to resist.

He would break through the line at the southern end and then swing northward, expecting to take Alam Halfa without much trouble. Then he would hit the quicksand. While he was struggling through it, our artillery would decimate his forces. When he reached Alam Halfa he would find it heavily defended. At that point we would bring in more forces from the front line and squeeze the enemy like

a nutcracker.

If the ambush worked well, it might not only save Egypt but annihilate the Afrika Korps.

He thought: I've got to put this idea up to the brass.

It would not be easy. His standing was not very high just now - in fact his professional reputation was in ruins on account of Alex Wolff. But surely they would see the merit of the idea.

He got up from the bench and headed for his office. Suddenly the future looked different. Perhaps the jackboot would not ring out on the tiled floors of the mosques. Perhaps the treasures of the Egyptian Museum would not be shipped to Berlin. Perhaps Billy would not have to join the Hitler Youth. Perhaps Elene would not be sent to Dachau.

We could all be saved, he thought.

If I catch Wolff.

Part Three: Alam Halfa

- 20 -

One of these days, Vandam thought, I'm going to punch Bogge on the nose.

Today Lieutenant-Colonel Bogge was at his worst: indecisive, sarcastic and touchy. He had a nervous cough which he used when he was afraid to speak, and he was coughing a lot now. He was also fidgeting: tidying piles of papers on his desk, crossing and uncrossing his legs, and polishing his wretched cricket ball.

Vandam sat still and quiet, waiting for him to tie himself up in knots.

'Now look here, Vandam, strategy is for Auchinleck. Your job is personnel security - and you're not doing ~~the~~ very well.'

'Nor is Auchinleck,' Vandam said.

Bogge pretended not to hear. He picked up Vandam's memo. Vandam had written out his deception plan and formally submitted it to Bogge, with a copy to the Brigadier. 'For one thing, this is full of holes,' Bogge said.

Vandam said nothing.

'Full of holes.' Bogge coughed. 'For one thing, it involves letting old Rommel through the line, doesn't it?'

Vandam said: 'Perhaps the plan could be made contingent on his getting through.'

'Yes. Now, you see? This is the kind of thing I mean. If you put up a plan that's full of holes like that, given that your reputation is at a pretty damn low point around here at the moment, well, you'll be laughed out of Cairo. Now.' He coughed. 'You want to encourage Rommel to attack the line at its weakest point - giving him a better chance of getting through! You see?'

'Yes. Some parts of the line are weaker than others, and since Rommel has air reconnaissance there's a chance he'll know

which parts.'

'And you want to turn a chance into a certainty.'

'For the sake of the subsequent ambush, yes.'

'Now, it seems to me that we want old Rommel to attack the strongest part of the line, so that he won't get through at all.'

'But if we repel him, he'll just regroup and hit us again. Whereas if we trap him we could finish him off finally.'

'No, no, no. Risky. Risky. This is our last line of defence, laddie.' Bogge laughed. 'After this, there's nothing but one little canal between him and Cairo. You don't seem to realise - '

'I realise very well, sir. Let me put it this way. One: if Rommel gets through the line he must be diverted to Alam Halfa by the false prospect of an easy victory. Two: it is preferable that he attack Alam Halfa from the south, because of the quicksand. Three: either we must wait and see which end of the line he attacks, and take the risk that he will go north; or we must encourage him to go south, and take the risk that we will thereby increase his chances of breaking through the line in the first place.'

'Well,' said Bogge, 'now that we've rephrased it, the plan is beginning to make a bit more sense. Now look here: you're going to have to leave it with me for a while. When I've got a moment I'll go through the thing with a fine-toothed comb, and see if I can knock it into shape. Then perhaps we'll put it up to the brass.'

I see, Vandam thought: the object of the exercise is to make it Bogge's plan. Well, what the hell? If Bogge can be bothered to play politics at this stage, good luck to him. It's winning that matters, not getting the credit.

Vandam said: 'Very good, sir. If I might just emphasize the time-factor ... If the plan is to be put into operation, it must be done quickly.'

'I think I'm the best judge of its urgency, Major, don't you?'

'Yes, sir.'

'And, after all, everything depends on catching the damn spy, something at which you have not so far been entirely successful, am I right?'

'Yes, sir.'

'I'll be taking charge of tonight's operation myself, to ensure that there are no further foul-ups. Let me have your proposals this afternoon, and we'll go over them together - '

There was a knock at the door and the Brigadier walked in. Vandam and Bogge stood up.

Bogge said: 'Good morning, sir.'

'At ease, gentlemen,' the Brigadier said. 'I've been looking for you, Vandam.'

Bogge said: 'We were just working on an idea we had for a deception plan - '

'Yes, I saw the memo.'

'Ah, Vandam sent you a copy,' Bogge said. Vandam did not look at Bogge, but he knew the Lieutenant-Colonel was furious with him.

'Yes, indeed,' said the Brigadier. He turned to Vandam. 'You're supposed to be catching spies, Major, not advising generals on strategy. Perhaps if you spent less time telling us how to win the war you might be a better security officer.'

Vandam's heart sank.

Bogge said: 'I was just saying - '

The Brigadier interrupted him. 'However, since you have done this, and since it's such a splendid plan, I want you to come with me and sell it to Auchinleck. You can spare him, Bogge, can't you?'

'Of course, sir,' Bogge said through clenched teeth.

'All right, Vandam. The conference will be starting any minute. Let's go.'

Vandam followed the Brigadier out and shut the door very softly on Bogge.

*

On the day that Wolff was to see Elene again, Major Smith came to the houseboat at lunchtime.

The information he brought with him was the most valuable yet.

Wolff and Sonja went through their now-familiar routine. Wolff felt like an actor in a French farce, who has to hide in the same stage wardrobe night after night. Sonja and Smith, following the script, began on the couch and moved into the bedroom. When Wolff emerged from the cupboard the curtains were closed, and there on the floor were Smith's briefcase, his shoes, and his shorts with the key ring poking out of the pocket.

Wolff opened the briefcase and began to read.

Once again Smith had come to the houseboat straight from the morning conference at GHQ, at which Auchinleck and his staff discussed Allied strategy and decided what to do.

After a few minutes' reading Wolff realised that what he held in his hand was a complete rundown of the Allies' last-ditch defence on the El Alamein Line.

The line consisted of artillery on the ridges, tanks on the level ground, and minefields all along. The Alam Halfa ridge, five miles behind the centre of the line, was also heavily fortified. Wolff noted that the southern end of the line was weaker, both in troops and mines.

Smith's briefcase also contained an enemy-position paper. Allied Intelligence thought Rommel would probably try to break through the line at the southern end, but noted that the northern end was

possible.

Beneath this, written in pencil in what was presumably Smith's handwriting, was a note which Wolff found more exciting than all the rest of the stuff put together. It read: 'Major Vandam proposes deception plan. Encourage Rommel to break through at southern end, lure him toward Alam Halfa, catch him in quicksand, then nutcracker. Plan accepted by Auk.'

'Auk' was Auchinleck, no doubt. What a discovery. This was! No only did Wolff hold in his hand the details of the Allied defence line - he also knew what they expected Rommel to do, and he knew their deception plan.

And the deception plan was Vandam's!

This would be remembered as the greatest espionage coup of the century. Wolff himself would be responsible for assuring Rommel's victory in North Africa.

They should make me King of Egypt for this, he thought, and he smiled.

He looked up and saw Smith standing between the curtains, staring down at him.

Smith roared: 'Who the devil are you?'

Wolff realised angrily that he had not been paying attention to the noises from the bedroom. Something had gone wrong, the script had not been followed, there had been no champagne-cork ~~warning~~. He had been totally absorbed in the strategic appreciation. The endless names of divisions and brigades, the numbers of men and tanks, the quantities of fuel and supplies, the ridges and depressions and quicksands had monopolised his attention to the exclusion of local sounds. He was suddenly terribly afraid that he might ~~have~~ ~~be~~ ~~been~~ ~~thwarted~~ in his moment of triumph.

Smith said: 'That's my bloody briefcase!'

He took a step forward.

Wolff reached out, caught Smith's foot, and heaved sideways. The major toppled over and hit the floor with a heavy thud.

Sonja screamed.

Wolff and Smith both scrambled to their feet.

Smith was a small, thin man, ten years older than Wolff and in poor shape. He stepped backward, fear showing in his face. He bumped into a shelf, glanced sideways, saw a cut-glass fruit bowl on the shelf, picked it up and hurled it at Wolff.

It missed, fell into the kitchen sink, and shattered loudly.

The noise, Wolff thought: if he makes any more noise people will come to investigate. He moved toward Smith.

Smith, with his back to the wall, yelled: 'Help!'

Wolff hit him once, on the point of the jaw and he collapsed, sliding down the wall to sit, unconscious, on the floor.

Sonja came out and stared at him.

Wolff rubbed his knuckles. 'It's the first time I've ever done that,' he said.

'What?'

'Hit somebody on the chin and knocked him out. I thought only boxers could do that.'

'Never mind that, what are we going to do about him?'

'I don't know.' Wolff considered the possibilities. To kill Smith would be dangerous, for the death of an officer - and the disappearance of his briefcase - would now cause a terrific rumpus throughout the city. There would be the problem of what to do with the body. And Smith would bring home no more secrets.

Smith groaned and stirred.

Wolff wondered whether it might be possible to let him go. After all, if Smith were to reveal what had been going on in the

houseboat he would implicate himself. Not only would it ruin his career, he would probably be thrown in jail. He did not look like the kind of man to sacrifice himself for a higher cause..

Let him go free? No, the chance was too much to take. To know that there was a British officer in the city who possessed all of Wolff's secrets ... Impossible.

Smith had his eyes open. 'You ... ' he said. 'You're Slavenburg ... ' He looked at Sonja, then back at Wolff. 'It was you who introduced ... in the Cha-Cha ... this was all planned ... '

'Shut up,' Wolff said mildly. Kill him or let him go: what other options were there? Only one: to keep him here, bound and gagged, until Rommel reached Cairo.

'You're damned spies,' Smith said. His face was white.

Sonja said nastily: 'And you thought I was crazy for your miserable body.'

'Yes.' Smith was recovering. 'I should have known better than to trust a wog bitch.'

Sonja stepped forward and kicked his face with her bare foot.

'Stop it!' Wolff said. 'We've got to think what to do with him. Have we got any rope to tie him with?'

Sonja thought for a moment. 'Up on deck, in that locker at the forward end.'

Wolff took from the kitchen drawer the heavy steel he used for sharpening the carving knife. He gave the steel to Sonja. 'If he moves, hit him with that,' he said. He did not think Smith would move.

He was about to go up the ladder to the deck when he heard footsteps on the gangplank.

Sonja said: 'Postman!'

Wolff knelt in front of Smith and drew his knife. 'Open your

mouth.'

Smith began to say something, and Wolff slid the knife between Smith's teeth.

Wolff said: 'Now, if you move or speak, I'll cut out your tongue.'

Smith sat dead still, staring at Wolff with a horrified look.

Wolff realised that Sonja was stark naked. 'Put something on, quickly!'

She pulled a sheet off the bed and wrapped it around her as she went to the foot of the ladder. The hatch was opening. Wolff knew that he and Smith could be seen from the hatch. Sonja let the sheet slide down a little as she reached up to take the letter from the postman's outstretched hand.

'Good morning!' the postman said. His eyes were riveted on Sonja's half-exposed breasts.

She went farther up the ladder toward him, so that he had to back away, and let the sheet slip even more. 'Thankyou,' she simpered. She reached for the hatch and pulled it shut.

Wolff breathed again.

The postman's footsteps crossed the deck and descended the gangplank.

Wolff said to Sonja: 'Give me that sheet.'

She unwrapped herself and stood naked again.

Wolff withdrew the knife from Smith's mouth and used it to cut off a foot or two of the sheet. He crumpled the cotton into a ball and stuffed it into Smith's mouth. Smith did not resist. Wolff slid the knife into its underarm sheath. He stood up. Smith closed his eyes. He seemed limp, defeated.

Sonja picked up the sharpening-steel and stood ready to hit Smith while Wolff went up the ladder and on to the deck. The locker Sonja had mentioned was in the riser of a step in the prow.

Wolff opened it. Inside was a coil of slender rope. It had perhaps been used to tie up the vessel in the days before she became a houseboat. Wolff took the rope out. It was strong, but not too thick: ideal for tying someone's hands and feet.

He heard Sonja's voice, from below, raised in a shout. There was a clatter of feet on the ladder.

Wolff dropped the rope and whirled around.

Smith, wearing only his underpants, came up through the hatch at a run.

He had not been as defeated as he looked - and Sonja must have missed him with the steel.

Wolff dashed across the deck to the gangplank to head him off.

Smith turned, ran to the other side of the boat, and jumped into the water.

Wolff said: 'Shit!'

He looked all around quickly. There was no one on the decks of the other houseboats - it was the hour of the siesta. The towpath was deserted except for the 'beggar' - Kemel would have to deal with him - and one man in the distance walking away. On the river there were a couple of feluccas, at least a quarter of a mile away, and a slow-moving steam barge beyond them.

Wolff ran to the edge. Smith surfaced, gasping for air. He wiped his eyes and looked around to get his bearings. He was clumsy in the water, splashing a lot. He began to swim, inexpertly, away from the houseboat.

Wolff stepped back several paces and took a running jump into the river.

He landed, feet-first, on Smith's head.

For several seconds all was confusion. Wolff went under water in a tangle of arms and legs - his and Smith's - and struggled

to reach the surface and push Smith down at the same time. When he could hold his breath no longer he wriggled away from Smith and came up.

He sucked air and wiped his eyes. Smith's head bobbed up in front of him, coughing and spluttering. Wolff reached forward with both hands, grabbed Smith's head, and pulled it toward himself and down. Smith wriggled like a fish. Wolff got him around the neck and pushed down. Wolff himself went under the water, then came up again a moment later. Smith was still under, still struggling.

Wolff thought: How long does it take a man to drown?

Smith gave a convulsive jerk and freed himself. His head came up and he heaved a great lungful of air. Wolff tried to punch him. The blow landed, but it had no force. ~~AXI~~ Smith was coughing and retching between shuddering gasps. Wolff himself had taken in water. Wolff reached for Smith again. This time he got behind the major and crooked one arm around the man's throat while he used the other to push down on the top of his head.

He thought: Christ, I hope no one is watching.

Smith went under. He was face down in the water now, with Wolff's knees in his back, and his head held in a firm grip. He continued to thrash around under water, turning, jerking, flailing his arms, kicking his legs, and trying to twist his body. Wolff tightened his grip and held him under.

Drown, you bastard, drown!

He felt Smith's jaws open and knew the man was at last breathing water. The convulsions grew more frantic. Wolff felt he was going to have to let go. Smith's struggle pulled Wolff under. Wolff squeezed his eyes shut and held his breath. It seemed Smith was weakening. By now his lungs must be half-full of water, Wolff thought. After a few seconds Wolff himself began to need air.

Smith's movements became feeble. Holding the major less tightly, Wolff kicked himself upward and found air. For a minute he just breathed. Smith became a dead weight. Wolff used his legs to swim toward the houseboat, pulling Smith with him. Smith's head came up out of the water, but there was no sign of life.

Wolff reached the side of the boat. Sonja was up on deck, wearing a robe, staring over the side.

Wolff said: 'Did anybody see?'

'I don't think so. Is he dead?'

'Yes.'

Wolff thought: What the hell do I do now?

He held Smith against the side of the boat. If I let him go, he'll just float, he thought. The body will be found near here and there will be a house-to-house search. But I can't carry a body half across Cairo to get rid of it.

Suddenly Smith jerked and spewed water.

'Jesus Christ, he's alive!' Wolff said.

He pushed Smith under again. This was no good, it took too long. He let Smith go, pulled out his knife, and lunged. Smith was under water, moving feebly. Wolff could not direct the knife. He slashed wildly. The water hampered him. Smith thrashed about. The foaming water turned pink. At last Wolff was able to grab Smith by the hair and hold his head still while he cut his throat.

Now he was dead.

Wolff let Smith go while he sheathed the knife again. The river water turned muddy red all around him. I'm swimming in blood, he thought, and he was suddenly filled with disgust.

The body was drifting away. Wolff pulled it back. He realised, too late, that a drowned major might simply have fallen in the river, but a major with his throat cut had unquestionably

been murdered. Now he had to hide the body.

He looked up. 'Sonja!'

'I feel ill.'

'Never mind that. We have to make the body sink to the bottom.'

'Oh, God, the water's all bloody.'

'Listen to me!' He wanted to yell at her, to make her snap out of it, but he had to keep his voice low. 'Get ... get that rope. Go on!'

She disappeared from view for a moment, and returned with the rope. She was helpless, Wolff decided: he would have to tell her exactly what to do.

'Now - get Smith's briefcase and put something heavy in it.'

'Something heavy ... but what?'

'Jesus Christ ... What have we got that's heavy? What's heavy? Um ... books, books are heavy, no, that might not be enough ... I know, bottles. Full bottles - champagne bottles. Fill his briefcase with full bottles of champagne.'

'Why?'

'My God, stop dithering, do what I tell you!'

She went away again. Through the porthole he could see her coming down the ladder and into the living-room. She was moving very slowly, like a sleepwalker.

Hurry, you fat bitch, hurry!

She looked around her dazedly. Still moving in slow-motion, she picked up the briefcase from the floor. She took it to the kitchen area and opened the icebox. She looked in, as if she were deciding what to have for dinner.

Come on.

She took out a champagne bottle. She stood with the bottle

in one hand and the briefcase in the other, and she frowned, as if she could not remember what she was supposed to be doing with them. At last her expression cleared and she put the bottle in the case, laying it flat. She took another bottle out.

Wolff thought: Lay them head-to-toe, idiot, so you get more in.

She put the second bottle in, looked at it, then took it out and turned it the other way.

Brilliant, Wolff thought.

She managed to get four bottles in. She closed the icebox and looked around for something else to add to the weight. She picked up the sharpening steel and a glass paperweight. She put those into the briefcase and fastened it. Then she came up on deck.

'What now?' she said.

'Tie the end of the rope around the handle of the briefcase.'

She was coming out of her daze. Her fingers moved more quickly.

'Tie it very tight,' Wolff said.

'Okay.'

'Is there anyone around?'

She glanced to left and right. 'No.'

'Hurry.'

She finished the knot.

'Throw me the rope,' Wolff said.

She threw down the other end of the rope and he caught it. He was tiring with the effort of keeping himself afloat and holding on to the corpse at the same time. He had to let Smith go for a moment because he needed both hands for the rope, which meant he had to tread water furiously to stay up. He threaded the rope under the dead man's armpits and pulled it through. He wound it around the

torso twice, then tied a knot. Several times during the operation he found himself sinking, and once he took a revolting mouthful of bloody water.

At last the job was done.

'Test your knot,' he told Sonja.

'It's tight.'

'Throw the briefcase into the water - throw it as far out as you can.'

She heaved the briefcase over the side. It splashed a couple of yards away from the houseboat - it had been too heavy for her to throw far - and went down. Slowly the rope followed the case. The length of rope between Smith and the case became taut, then the body went under. Wolff watched the surface. The knots were holding. He kicked his legs, under water where the body had gone down: they did not contact ~~with~~ anything. The body had sunk deep.

Wolff muttered: 'Liebe Gott, what a shambles.'

He climbed on deck. Looking back down, he saw that the pink tinge was rapidly disappearing from the water.

A voice said: 'Good morning!'

Wolff and Sonja whirled around to face the towpath.

'Good morning!' Sonja replied. She muttered to Wolff in an undertone: 'A neighbour.'

The neighbour was a half-caste woman of middle age, carrying a shopping basket. She said: 'I heard a lot of splashing - is there anything wrong?'

'Um ... no,' Sonja said. 'My little dog fell in the water, and Mr Robinson here had to rescue him.'

'How gallant!' the woman said. 'I didn't know you had a dog.'

'He's a puppy, a gift.'

'What kind?'

Wolff wanted to scream: Go away, you stupid old woman!

'A poodle,' Sonja replied.

'I'd love to see him.'

'Tomorrow, perhaps - he's been locked up as a punishment now.'

'Door thing.'

Wolff said: 'I'd better change my wet clothes.'

Sonja said to the neighbour: 'Until tomorrow.'

'Lovely to meet you, Mr Robinson,' the neighbour said.

Wolff and Sonja went below.

Sonja slumped on the couch and closed her eyes. Wolff stripped off his wet clothes.

Sonja said: 'It's the worst thing that's ever happened to me.'

'You'll survive,' Wolff said.

'At least it was an Englishman.'

'Yes. You should be jumping for joy.'

'I will when my stomach settled.'

Wolff went into the bathroom and turned on the taps of the tub. When he came back Sonja said: 'Was it worth it?'

'Yes.' Wolff pointed to the military papers which were still on the floor, where he had dropped them when Smith surprised him.

'That stuff is red-hot - the best he's ever brought us. With that, Rommel can win the war.'

'When will you send it?'

'Tonight, at midnight.'

'Tonight you're going to bring Elene here.'

He stared at her. 'How can you think of that when we've just killed a man and sunk his body?'

She stared at him defiantly. 'I don't know, I just know it makes me feel very sexy.'

'My God.'

'You will bring her home tonight. You owe it to me.'

Wolff hesitated. 'I'd have to make the broadcast while she's here.'

'I'll keep her busy while you're on the radio.'

'I don't know - '

'Damn it, Alex, you owe me!'

'All right.'

'Thankyou.'

Wolff went into the bathroom. Sonja was unbelievable, he thought. She took depravity to new heights of sophistication. He got into the hot water.

She called from the bedroom: 'But now Smith won't be bringing you any more secrets.'

'I don't think we'll need them, after the next battle,' Wolff replied. 'He's served his purpose.'

He picked up the soap and began to wash off the blood.

- 21 -

Vandam knocked at the door of Elene's flat an hour before she was due to meet Alex Wolff.

She came to the door wearing a black cocktail dress and high-heeled black shoes with silk stockings. Around her neck was a slender gold chain. Her face was made up, and her hair gleamed. She had been expecting Vandam.

He smiled at her, seeing someone familiar yet at the same time astonishingly beautiful. 'Hello.'

'Come in.' She led him into the living-room. 'Sit down.'

He had wanted to kiss her, but she had not given him the chance. He sat on the couch. 'I wanted to tell you the details for tonight.'

'Okay.' She sat on a chair opposite him. 'Do you want a drink?'

'Sure.'

'Help yourself.'

He stared at her. 'Is something wrong?'

'Nothing. Give yourself a drink, then brief me.'

Vandam frowned. 'What is this?'

'Nothing. We've got work to do, so let's do it.'

He stood up, went across to her, and knelt in front of her chair. 'Elene. What are you doing?'

She glared at him. She seemed close to tears. She said loudly: 'Where have you been for the last two days?'

He looked away from her, thinking. 'I've been at work.'

'And where do you think I've been?'

'Here, I suppose.'

'Exactly!'

He did not understand what that meant. It crossed his mind

that he had fallen in love with a woman he hardly knew. He said:
'I've been working, and you've been here, and so you're mad at me?'

She shouted: 'Yes!'

Vandam said: 'Calm down. I don't understand why you're so cross, and I want you to explain it to me.'

'No!'

'Then I don't know what to say.' Vandam sat on the floor with his back to her and lit a cigarette. He truly did not know what had upset her, but there was an element of wilfulness in his attitude: he was ready to be humble, to apologise for whatever he had done, and to make amends - but he was not willing to play guessing games.

They sat in silence for a minute, not looking at one another.

Elene sniffed. Vandam could not see her, but he knew the kind of sniff that came from weeping. She said: 'You could have sent me a note, or even a bunch of bloody flowers!'

'A note? What for? You knew we were to meet tonight.'

'Oh, my God.'

'Flowers? What do you want with flowers? We don't need to play that game any more.'

'Oh, really?'

'What do you want me to say?'

'Listen. We made love the night before last, in case you've forgotten - '

'Don't be silly - '

'You brought me home and kissed me goodbye. Then - nothing.'

He drew on his cigarette. 'In case you have forgotten, a certain Erwin Rommel is knocking at the gates with a bunch of Nazis in tow, and I'm one of the people who's trying to keep him out.'

'Five minutes, that's all it would have taken to send me

a note.'

'What for?'

'Well, exactly, what for? I'm a loose woman, am I not? I give myself to a man the way I take a drink of water. An hour later I've forgotten - is that what you think? Because that's how it seems to me! Damn you, William Vandam, you make me feel cheap!'

It made no more sense than it had at the start, but now he could hear the pain in her voice. He turned to face her. 'You're the most wonderful thing that's happened to me for a long time, perhaps ever. Please forgive me for being a fool.' He took her hand in his own.

She looked toward the window, biting her lip, fighting back tears. 'Yes, you are,' she said. She looked down at him and touched his hair. 'You bloody, bloody fool,' she whispered, stroking his head. Her eyes spilled tears.

'I've such a lot to learn about you,' he said.

'And I about you.'

He looked away, thinking aloud. 'People resent my equanimity - always have. Those who work for me don't, they like it. They know that when they feel like panicking, when they feel they can't cope, they can come to me and tell me about the dilemma; and if I can't see a way through it, I'll tell them what is the best thing to do, the lesser evil; and because I say it in a calm voice, because I see that it's a dilemma and I don't panic, they go away reassured and do what they have to do. All I do is clarify the problem and refuse to be frightened by it; but that's just what they need. However ... exactly the same attitude often infuriates other people - my superiors, my friends, Angela, you ... I've never understood why.'

'Because sometimes you should panic, fool,' she said softly.