# THE KEY TO REBECCA

by Ken Follett

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'Our spy in Cairo is the greatest hero of them all.'

- Erwin Rommel, September 1942

(Quoted by Anthony Cave Brown in Bodyguard of Lies.)

# Part One: Tobruk

The last camel collapsed at noon.

It was the five-year-old white bull he had bought in Gialo, the youngest and strongest of the three beasts, and the least ill-tempered: he liked the animal as much as a man could like a camel, which is to say that he hated it only a little.

They climbed the leeward side of a small hill, man and camel planting big clumsy feet in the inconstant sand, and at the top they stopped. They looked ahead, seeing nothing but another hillock to climb, and after that a thousand more, and it was as if the camel despaired at the thought. Its forelegs folded, then its rear went down, and it couched on top of the hill like a monument, staring across the empty desert with the indifference of the dying.

The man hauled on its nose rope. Its head came forward and its neck stretched out, but it would not get up. The man went behind and kicked its hindquarters as hard as he could, three or four times. Finally he took out a razor-sharp curved Bedouin knife with a narrow point and stabbed the camel's rump. Blood flowed from the wound but the camel did not even look around.

The man understood what was happening. The very tissues of the animal's body, starved of nourishment, had simply stopped working like a machine that has run out of fuel. He had seen camels collapse like this on the outskirts of an oasis, surrounded by life-giving foliage which they ignored, lacking the energy to eat.

There were two more tricks he might have tried. One was to pour water into its nostrils until it began to drown; the other to light a fire under its hindquarters. He could not spare the water for one nor the firewood for the other, and besides neither method had a great chance of success.

It was time to stop, anyway. The sun was high and fierce. The long Saharan summer was beginning, and the midday temperature would reach 110 degrees in the shade.

Without unloading the camel, the man opened one of his bags and took out his tent. He looked around again, automatically: there was no shade or shelter in sight - one place was as bad as another. He pitched his tent beside the dying camel, there on top of the hillock.

He sat cross-legged in the open end of the tent to make his tea. He scraped level a small square of sand, arranged a few precious dry twigs in a pyramid, and lit the fire. When the kettle boiled he made tea in the nomad fashion, pouring it from the pot into the cup, adding sugar, then returning it to the pot to infuse again, several times over. The resulting brew, very strong and rather treacly, was the most revivifying drink in the world.

He gnawed at some dates and watched the camel die while he waited for the sun to pass overhead. His tranquillity was practised. He had come a long way in this desert, more than a thousand miles. Two months earlier he had left El Agela, on the Mediterranean coast of Libya, and travelled due south for five hundred miles, via Gialo and Kufra, into the empty heart of the Sahara. There he had turned ~~west~~ east and crossed the border into Egypt unobserved by man or beast. He had traversed the rocky wasteland of the Western Desert and turned north near Kharga; and now he was not far from his destination. He knew the desert, but he was afraid of it - all intelligent men were, even the nomads who lived all their lives here. But he never allowed that fear to take hold of him, to panic him, to use up his nervous energy. There were always catastrophes: mistakes in navigation that made you miss a well by a couple of miles; water-bottles that leaked or burst; apparently healthy camels that

got sick a couple of days out. The only response was to say Inshallah: It is the will of God.

Eventually the sun began to dip toward the west. He looked at the camel's load, wondering how much of it he could carry. There were three small European suitcases, two heavy and one light, all important. There was a little bag of clothes, a sextant, the maps, the food and the water bottle. It was already too much: he would have to abandon the tent, the tea set, the cooking pot, the almanac and the saddle.

He made the three cases into a bundle and tied the clothes, the food and the sextant on top, strapping the lot together with a length of cloth. He could put his arms through the cloth straps and carry the load like a rucksack on his back. He slung the goatskin water bag around his neck and let it dangle in front.

It was a heavy load.

Three months earlier he would have been able to carry it all day then play tennis in the evening, for he was a strong man; but the desert had weakened him. His bowels were water, his skin was a mass of sores, and he had lost twenty or thirty pounds. Without the camel he could not go far.

Holding his compass in his hand, he started walking.

He followed the compass wherever it led, resisting the temptation to divert around the hills, for he was navigating by dead-reckoning over the final miles, and a fractional error could take him a fatal few hundred yards astray. He settled into a slow, long-strided walk. His mind emptied of hopes and fears and he concentrated on the compass and the sand. He managed to forget the pain of his ravaged body and put one foot in front of the other automatically, without thought and therefore without effort.

The day cooled into evening. The water bottle became lighter around his neck as he consumed its contents. He refused to think about how much water was left: he was drinking six pints a day, he had calculated, and he knew there was not enough for another day. A flock of birds flew over his head, whistling noisily. He looked up, shading his eyes with his hand, and recognised them as Lichtenstein's sandgrouse, desert birds like brown pigeons that flocked to water every morning and evening. They were heading the same way as he was, which meant he was on the right track, but he knew they could fly fifty miles to water, so he could take little encouragement from them.

Clouds gathered on the horizon as the desert cooled. Behind him, the sun sank lower and turned into a big yellow balloon. A little later a white moon appeared in a purple sky.

He thought about stopping. Nobody could walk all night. But he had no tent, no blanket, no rice and no tea. And he was sure he was close to the well: by his reckoning he should have been there.

He walked on. His calm was deserting him now. He had set his strength and his expertise against the ruthless desert, and it began to look as if the desert would win. He thought again of the camel he had left behind, and how it had sat on the hillock, with the tranquillity of exhaustion, waiting for death. He would not wait for death, he thought: when it became inevitable he would rush to meet it. Not for him the hours of agony and encroaching madness - that would be undignified. He had his knife.

The thought made him feel desperate, and now he could no longer repress the fear. The moon went down, but the landscape was bright with starlight. He saw his mother in the distance, and she said: 'Don't say I never warned you!' He heard a railway train that chugged along with his heartbeat, slowly. Small rocks moved in his

path like scampering rats. He smelled roast lamb. He breasted a rise and saw, close by, the red glow of the fire over which the meat had been roasted, and a small boy beside it gnawing the bones. There were the tents around the fire, the hobbled camels grazing the scattered thorns, and the well-head beyond. He walked into the hallucination. The people in the dream looked up at him, startled. A tall man stood up and spoke. The traveller pulled at his howli, unwinding the cloth to reveal his face.

The tall man stepped forward, shocked, and said: 'My cousin!'

The traveller understood that this was not, after all, an illusion; and he smiled faintly and collapsed.

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When he awoke he thought for a moment that he was a boy again, and that his adult life had been a dream.

Someone was touching his shoulder and saying 'Wake up, Achmed,' in the tongue of the desert. Nobody had called him Achmed for years. He realised he was wrapped in a coarse blanket and lying on the cold sand, his head swathed in a howli. He opened his eyes to see the gorgeous sunrise like a straight rainbow against the flat black horizon. The icy morning wind blew into his face. In that instant he experienced again all the confusion and anxiety of his fifteenth year.

He had felt utterly lost, that first time he woke up in the desert. He had thought <u>My father is dead</u>, and then <u>I have a new father</u>. Snatches from the Surahs of the Koran had run through his head, mixed with bits of the Creed which his mother still taught him secretly, in German. He remembered the recent sharp pain of his adolescent circumcision, followed by the cheers and rifle-shots of the men as they congratulated him on at last becoming one of them, a true man. Then there had been the long train journey, wondering

what his desert cousins would be like, and whether they would despise his pale body and his city ways. He had walked briskly out of the railway station and seen the two Arabs, sitting beside their camels in the dust of the station yard, wrapped in traditional robes which covered them from head to foot except for the slit in the howli which revealed only their dark, unreadable eyes. They had taken him to the well. It had been terrifying: nobody had spoken to him, except in gestures. In the evening he had realised that these people had no toilets, and he became desperately embarrassed. In the end he had been forced to ask. There was a moment of silence, then they all burst out laughing. It transpired that they had thought he could not speak their language, which was why everyone had tried to communicate with him in signs; and that he had used a baby-word in asking about toilet arrangements, which made it funnier. Someone had explained to him about walking a little way beyond the circle of tents and squatting in the sand, and after that he had not been so frightened, for although these were hard men they were not unkind.

All these thoughts had run through his mind as he looked at his first desert sunrise, and they came back again twenty years later, as fresh and as painful as yesterday's bad memories, with the words 'Wake up, Achmed.'

He sat up abruptly, the old thoughts clearing rapidly like the morning clouds. He had crossed the desert on a vitally important mission. He had found the well, and it had not been an hallucination: his cousins were here, as they always were at this time of the year. He had collapsed with exhaustion, and they had wrapped him in blankets and let him sleep by the fire. He suffered a sudden sharp panic as he thought of his precious baggage - had he still been carrying it when he arrived? - then he saw it, piled neatly at his feet.

Ishmael was squatting beside him. It had always been like this: throughout the year the two boys had spent together in the desert, Ishmael had never failed to wake first in the morning. Now he said: 'Heavy worries, cousin.'

Achmed nodded. 'There is a war.'

Ishmael proferred a tiny jewelled bowl containing water. Achmed dipped his fingers in the water and washed his eyes. Ishmael went away. Achmed stood up.

One of the women, silent and subservient, gave him tea. He took it without thanking her and drank it quickly. He ate some cold boiled rice while the unhurried work of the encampment went on around him. It seemed that this branch of the family was still wealthy: there were several servants, many children, and more than twenty camels. The sheep nearby were only a part of the flock - the rest would be grazing a few miles away. There would be more camels, too. They wandered at night in search of foliage to eat, and although they were hobbled they sometimes went out of sight. The young boys would be rounding them up now, as he and Ishmael had done. The beasts had no names, but Ishmael knew each one individually, and its history. He would say: 'This is the bull my father gave to his brother Abdel in the year many women died, and the bull became lame so my father gave Abdel another and took this one back, and it still limps, see?' Achmed had come to know camels well, but he had never quite adopted the nomad attitude to them: he had not, he remembered, lit a fire underneath his dying white yesterday. Ishmael would have.

Hussein finished his breakfast and went back to his baggage. The cases were not locked. He opened the top one, a small leather suitcase; and when he looked at the switches and dials of the compact radio neatly fitted into the rectangular case he had a sudden vivid

memory like a movie: the bustling frantic city of Berlin; a tree-lined street called the Tirpitzufer; a four-storey sandstone building; a maze of hallways and staircases; an outer office with two secretaries; an inner office, sparsely furnished with desk, sofa, filing cabinet, small bed, and on the wall a Japanese painting of a grinning demon and a signed photograph of Franco; and beyond the office, on a balcony overlooking the Landwehr Canal, a pair of dachsunds and a prematurely white-haired admiral who said: 'Rommel wants me to put an agent into Cairo.'

The case also contained a book, a novel in English. Idly, Achmed read the first line: 'Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again.' A folded sheet of paper fell out from between the leaves of the book. Carefully, Achmed picked it up and put it back. He closed the book, replaced it in the case, and closed the case.

Ishmael was standing at his shoulder. He said: 'Was it a long journey?'

Achmed nodded. 'I came from El Agela, in Libya.' The names meant nothing to his cousin. 'I came from the sea.'

'From the sea!'

'Yes.'

'<u>Alone?</u>'

'I had some camels when I started.'

Ishmael was awestruck: even the nomads did not make such long journeys, and he had never seen the sea. He said: 'But why?'

'It is to do with this war.'

'One gang of Europeans fighting with another over who shall sit in Cairo - what does this matter to the sons of the desert?'

'My mother's people are in the war,' Achmed said.

'A man should follow his father.'

'And if he has two fathers?'

Ishmael shrugged. He understood dilemmas.

Achmed lifted the closed suitcase. 'Will you keep this for me?'

'Yes.' Ishmael took it. 'Who is winning the war?'

'My mother's people. They are like the nomads - they are proud, and cruel, and strong. They are going to rule the world.'

Ishmael smiled. 'Achmed, you always did believe in the desert lion.'

Achmed remembered: he had learned, in school, that there had once been lions in the desert, and that it was possible a few of them remained, hiding in the mountains, living off deer and ~~quarry~~ fennec fox and wild sheep. Ishmael had refused to believe him. The argument had seemed terribly important then, and they had almost quarreled over it. Achmed grinned. 'I still believe in the desert lion,' he said.

The two cousins looked at one another. It was five years since the last time they had met. The world had changed. Achmed thought of the things he could tell: the crucial meeting in Beirut in 1938, his trip to Berlin, his great coup in Istanbul ... None of it would mean anything to his cousin - and Ishmael was probably thinking
/the same about the events of <u>his</u> last five years. Since they had gone together as boys on the pilgrimage to Mecca they had loved each other fiercely, but they never had anything to talk about.

After a moment Ishmael turned away, and took the case to his tent. Achmed fetched a little water in a bowl. He opened another bag, and took out a small piece of soap, a brush, a mirror and a razor. He stuck the mirror in the sand, adjusted it, and began to unwind the howli from around his head.

The sight of his own face in the mirror shocked him.

His strong, normally clear forehead was covered with sores. His eyes were hooded with pain and lined in the corners. The dark

beard grew matted and unkempt on his fine-boned cheeks, and the skin of his large hooked nose was red and split. He parted his blistered lips and saw that his fine, even teeth were filthy and stained.

He brushed the soap on and began to shave.

Gradually his old face emerged. It was strong rather than handsome, and normally wore a look which he recognised, in his more detached moments, to be faintly dissolute; but now it was simply ravaged. He had brought a small phial of scented lotion across hundreds of miles of desert for this moment, but now he did not put it on because he knew it would sting unbearably. He gave it to a girl-child who had been watching him, and she ran away, delighted with her prize.

He carried his bag into Ishmael's tent and shooed out the women. He took off his desert robes and donned a white English shirt, a striped tie, grey socks and a brown checked suit. When he tried to put on the shoes he discovered that his feet had swollen: it was agonising to attempt to force them into the hard new leather. However, he could not wear his European suit with the improvised rubber-tyre sandals of the desert. In the end he slit the shoes with his curved knife and wore them loose.

He wanted more: a hot bath, a haircut, cool soothing cream for his sores, a silk shirt, a gold bracelet, a cold bottle of champagne and a warm soft woman. For those he would have to wait.

When he emerged from the tent the nomads looked at him as if he were a stranger. He picked up his hat and hefted the two remaining cases - one heavy, one light. Ishmael came to him carrying a goatskin water bottle. The two cousins embraced.

Achmed took a wallet from the pocket of his jacket to check his papers. Looking at the identity card, he realised that once

again he was Alexander Wolff, age 34, of Villa les Oliviers, Garden City, Cairo, a businessman, race - European.

He put on his hat, picked up his cases, and set off in the cool of the dawn to walk across the last few miles of desert to the town.

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The great and ancient caravan route, which Wolff had followed from oasis to oasis across the vast empty desert, led through a pass in the mountain range and at last merged with an ordinary modern road. The road was like a line drawn on the map by God, for on one side were the yellow, dusty, barren hills, and on the other were lush fields of cotton squared off with irrigation ditches. The peasants, bent over their crops, wore galabiya, simple shifts of striped cotton, instead of the cumbersome protective robes of the nomads. Walking north on the road, smelling the cool damp breeze off the nearby Nile, observing the increasing signs of urban civilisation, Wolff began to feel human again. The peasants dotted about the fields came to seem less like a crowd. Finally he heard the engine of a car, and he knew he was safe.

The vehicle was approaching him from the direction of Assyut, the town. It came around a bend and into sight, and he recognised it as a military jeep. As it came closer he saw the British Army uniforms of the men in it, and he realised he had left behind one danger only to face another.

Deliberately he made himself calm. I have every right to be here, he thought. I was born in Alexandria. I am Egyptian by nationality. I own a house in Cairo. My papers are all genuine. I am a wealthy man, a European, and a German spy behind enemy lines -

The jeep screeched to a halt in a cloud of dust. One of the men jumped out. He had three cloth pips on each shoulder of his

uniform shirt: a captain. He looked terribly young, and walked with a limp.

The captain said: 'Where the devil have you come from?'

Wolff put down his cases and jerked a thumb back over his shoulder. 'My car broke down on the desert road.'

The captain nodded, accepting the explanation instantly: it would never have occurred to him, or to anyone else, that a European might have walked here from Libya. He said: 'I'd better see your papers, please.'

Wolff handed them over. The captain examined them, then looked up. Wolff thought: There has been a leak from Berlin, and every officer in Egypt is looking for me; or they have changed the papers since last time I was here, and mine are out of date; or -

'You look about all in, Mr Wolff,' the captain said. 'How long have you been walking?'

Wolff realised that his ravaged appearance might get some useful sympathy from another European. 'Since yesterday afternoon,' he said with a weariness that was not entirely faked. 'I got a bit lost.'

'You've been out here all night?' The captain looked more closely at Wolff's face. 'Good Lord, I believe you have. You'd better have a lift with us.' He turned to the jeep. 'Corporal, take the gentleman's cases.'

Wolff opened his mouth to protest, then shut it again abruptly. A man who had been walking all night would be only too glad to have someone take his luggage. To object would not only discredit his story, it would draw attention to the bags. As the corporal hefted them into the back of the jeep, Wolff realised with a sinking feeling that he had not even bothered to lock them. How could I be so stupid? he thought. He knew the answer. He was still

in tune with the desert, where you were lucky to see other people once a week, and the last thing they wanted to steal was a radio transmitter that had to be plugged in to a power outlet. His senses were alert to all the wrong things: he was watching the movement of the sun, smelling the air for water, measuring the distances he was travelling, and scanning the horizon as if searching for a lone tree in whose shade he could rest during the heat of the day. He had to forget all that now, and think instead of policemen and papers and locks and lies.

He resolved to take more care, and climbed into the jeep.

The captain got in beside him and said to the driver: 'Back into town.'

Wolff decided to bolster his story. As the jeep turned in the dusty road he said: 'Have you got any water?'

'Of course.' The captain reached beneath his seat and pulled up a tin bottle covered in felt, like a large whisky flask. He unscrewed the cap and handed it to Wolff.

Wolff drank deeply, swallowing at least a pint. 'Thanks,' he said, and handed it back.

'Quite a thirst you had. Not surprising. Oh, by the way - I'm Captain Newman.' He stuck out his hand.

Wolff shook it and looked more closely at the man. He <u>was</u> young - early twenties, at a guess - and fresh-faced, with a boyish forelock and a ready smile; but there was in his demeanour that weary maturity that comes early to fighting men. Wolff asked him: 'Seen any action?'

'Some.' Captain Newman touched his own knee. 'Did the leg at Cyrenaica, that's why they sent me to this one-horse town.' He grinned. 'I can't honestly say I'm panting to get back into the desert, but I'd like to be doing something a bit more positive than

this, minding the shop hundreds of miles from the war. The only fighting we ever see is between the Christians and the Moslems in the town. Where does your accent come from?'

The sudden question, unconnected with what had gone before, took Wolff by surprise. It had surely been intended to, he thought: Captain Newman was a sharp-witted young man. Fortunately Wolff had a prepared answer. 'My parents were Boers who came from South Africa to Egypt. I grew up speaking Afrikaans and Arabic.' He hesitated, nervous of overplaying his hand by seeming too eager to explain. 'The name Wolff is Dutch, originally; and I was christened Alex after the town where I was born.'

Newman seemed politely interested. 'What brings you here?'

Wolff had prepared for that one, too. 'I have business interests in several towns in Upper Egypt.' He smiled. 'I like to pay them surprise visits.'

They were entering Assyut. By Egyptian standards it was a large town, with factories, hospitals, a Muslim university, a famous convent and some 60,000 inhabitants. Wolff was about to ask to be dropped at the railway station when Newman saved him from that error. 'You need a garage,' the captain said. 'We'll take you to Nasif's - he has a tow truck.'

Wolff forced himself to say: 'Thankyou.' He swallowed drily. He was still not thinking hard enough or fast enough. I wish I could pull myself together, he thought; it's the damn desert, it's slowed me down. He looked at his watch. He had time to go through a charade at the garage and still catch the daily train to Cairo. He considered what he would do. He would have to go into the place, for Newman would watch. Then the soldiers would drive away. Wolff would have to make some inquiries about car parts, or something, then take his leave and walk to the station.

With luck, Nasif and Newman might never compare notes on the subject of Alex Wolff.

The jeep drove through the busy, narrow streets. The familiar sights of an Egyptian town pleased Wolff: the gay cotton clothes, the women carrying bundles on their heads, the officious policemen, the sharp characters in sunglasses, the tiny shops spilling out into the rutted streets, the stalls, the battered cars and the overloaded asses. They stopped in front of a row of low mud-brick buildings. The road was half-blocked by an ancient truck and the remains of a cannibalised Fiat. A small boy was working on a cylinder block with a spanner, sitting on the ground outside the entrance.

Newman said: 'I'll have to leave you here, I'm afraid - duty calls.'

Wolff shook his hand. 'You've been very kind.'

'I don't like to dump you this way,' Newman continued. 'You've had a bad time.' He frowned, then his face cleared. 'Tell you what - I'll leave Corporal Cox to look after you.'

Wolff said: 'It's kind, but really - '

Newman was not listening. 'Get the man's bags, Cox, and look sharp. I want you to take care of him - and don't you leave anything to the wogs, understand?'

'Yes, sir!' said Cox.

Wolff groaned inwardly. Now there would be more delay while he got rid of the corporal. Captain Newman's kindness was becoming a nuisance - could that possibly be intentional?

Wolff and Cox got out, and the jeep pulled away. Wolff walked into Nasif's workshop, and Cox followed, carrying the cases. [Nasif was a smiling young man in a filthy galabiya, working on a car battery by the light of an oil lamp. He spoke to them in English. 'You want to rent a beautiful automobile? My brother have

Bentley - '

Wolff interrupted him in rapid Egyptian Arabic. 'My car has broken down. They say you have a tow truck.'

'Yes. We can leave right away. Where is the car?'

'On the desert road, forty or fifty miles out. It's a Ford. But we're not coming with you.' He took out his wallet and gave Nasif an English pound note. 'You'll find me at the Grand Hotel by the railway station when you return.'

Nasif took the money with alacrity. 'Very good! I leave immediately!'

Wolff nodded curtly and turned around. Walking out of the workshop with Cox in tow, he considered the implications of his short conversation with Nasif. The mechanic would go out into the desert with his tow truck and search the road for the car. Eventually he would return to the Grand Hotel to confess failure. He would learn that Wolff had left. He would consider he had been reasonably paid for his wasted day, but that would not stop him telling all and sundry the story of the disappearing Ford and its disappearing driver. The likelihood was that all this would get back to Captain Newman sooner or later. Newman might not know quite what to make of it all, but he would certainly feel that here was a mystery to be investigated.

Wolff's mood darkened as he realised that his plan of slipping unobserved into Egypt might have failed.

He would just have to make the best of it. He looked at his watch. He still had time to catch the train. He would be able to get rid of Cox in the lobby of the hotel, then get something to eat and drink while he was waiting, if he was quick.

Cox was a short, dark man with some kind of British regional accent which Wolff could not identify. He looked about Wolff's age, and as he was still a corporal he was probably not too bright. Following Wolff across the Midan el-Mahatta, he said: 'You know this

town, sir?'

'I've been here before,' Wolff replied.

They entered the Grand. With twenty-six rooms it was the larger of the town's two hotels. Wolff turned to Cox. 'Thankyou, Corporal - I think you could get back to work now.'

'No hurry, sir,' Cox said cheerfully. 'I'll carry your bags upstairs.'

'I'm sure they have porters here - '

'Wouldn't trust 'em, sir, if I were you.'

The situation was becoming more and more like a nightmare or a farce, in which well-intentioned people pushed him into increasingly senseless behaviour in consequence of one small lie. He wondered again whether this was entirely accidental, and it crossed his mind with terrifying absurdity that perhaps they knew everything and were simply toying with him.

He pushed the thought aside and spoke to Cox with as much grace as he could muster. 'Well, thankyou.'

He turned to the desk and asked for a room. He looked at his watch: he had fifteen minutes left. He filled in the form quickly, giving an invented adress in Cairo - there was a chance Captain Newman would forget the true address on the identity papers, and Wolff did not want to leave a reminder.

A Nubian porter led them upstairs to the room. Wolff tipped him off at the door. Cox put the cases down on the bed.

Wolff took out his wallet: perhaps Cox expected a tip too. 'Well, Corporal,' he began, 'you've been very helpful - '

'Let me unpack for you, sir,' Cox said. 'Captain said not to leave anything to the wogs.'

'No, thankyou,' Wolff said firmly. 'I want to lie down right now.'

'You go ahead and lie down,' Cox persisted generously. 'It won't take me - '

'Don't open that!'

Cox was lifting the lid of the case. Wolff reached inside his jacket, thinking Damn the man and Now I'm blown and I should have locked it and Can I do this quietly? The little corporal stared at the neat stacks of new English pound notes which filled the small case. He said: 'Jesus Christ, you're loaded!' It crossed Wolff's mind, even as he stepped forward, that Cox had never seen so much money in his life. Cox began to turn, saying: 'What do you want with all that - ' Wolff pulled the wicked curved Bedouin knife, and it glinted in his hand as his eyes met Cox's, and Cox flinched and opened his mouth to shout; and then the razor-sharp blade sliced deep into the soft flesh of his throat, and his shout of fear came as a bloody gurgle and he died; and Wolff felt nothing, only disappointment.

It was May, and the khamsin was blowing, a hot dusty wind from the south. Standing under the shower, William Vandam had the depressing thought that this would be the only time he would feel cool all day. He turned off the water and dried himself rapidly. His body was full of small aches. He had played cricket the day before, for the first time in years. General Staff Intelligence had got up a team to play the doctors from the Field Hospital - spies versus quacks, they had called it - and Vandam, fielding on the boundary, had been run ragged as the medics hit the Intelligence Department's bowling all over the park. Now he had to admit he was not in good condition. Gin had sapped his strength and cigarettes had shortened his wind, and he had too many worries to give the game the fierce concentration it merited.

He lit a cigarette, coughed, and started to shave. He always smoked while he was shaving - it was the only way he knew to relieve the boredom of the inevitable daily task. Fifteen years ago he had sworn he would grow a beard as soon as he got out of the Army, but he was still in the Army.

He dressed in the everyday uniform: heavy sandals, socks, bush shirt, and the khaki shorts with the flaps that could be let down and buttoned below the knee for protection against mosquitoes. Nobody ever used the flaps, and the younger officers usually cut them off, they looked so ridiculous.

There was an empty gin bottle on the floor beside the bed. Vandam looked at it, feeling disgusted with himself: it was the first time he had taken the damn bottle to bed with him. He picked it up, replaced the cap, and threw the bottle into the waste basket. Then he went downstairs.

Gaafar was in the kitchen, making tea. Vandam's servant was an elderly Copt with a bald head and a shuffling walk, and pretensions to be an English butler. That he would never be, but he had a little dignity and he was honest, and Vandam had not found those qualities to be common among Egyptian house servants.

Vandam said: 'Is Billy up?'

'Yes, sir, he's coming down directly.'

Vandam nodded. A small pan of water was bubbling on the stove. Vandam put an egg in to boil and set the timer. He cut two slices from an English-type loaf and made toast. He buttered the toast and cut it into fingers, then he took the egg out of the water and decapitated it.

Billy came into the kitchen and said: 'Good morning, Dad.'

Vandam smiled at his ten-year-old son. 'Morning. Breakfast is ready.'

The boy began to eat. Vandam sat opposite him with a cup of tea, watching. Billy often looked tired in the mornings recently. Once upon a time he had been infallibly daisy-fresh at breakfast. Was he sleeping badly? Or was his metabolism simply becoming more like an adult's? Perhaps it was just that he was staying awake late, reading detective stories under the sheet by the light of a torch.

People said Billy was like his father, but Vandam could not see the resemblance. However, he could see traces of Billy's mother: the grey eyes, the delicate skin, and the faintly supercilious expression which came over his face when someone crossed him.

Vandam always prepared his son's breakfast. The servant was perfectly capable of looking after the boy, of course, and most of the time he did; but Vandam liked to keep this little ritual for himself. Often it was the only time he was with Billy all day. They did not talk much - Billy ate and Vandam smoked - but that did

not matter: the important thing was that they were together for a while at the start of each day.

After breakfast Billy brushed his teeth while Gaafar got out Vandam's motorcycle. Billy came back wearing his school cap, and Vandam put on his uniform cap. As they did every day, they saluted each other. Billy said: 'Right, sir - let's go and win the war.'

Then they went out.

*

Major Vandam's office was at Grey Pillars, one of a group of buildings surrounded by barbed-wire fencing which made up GHQ Middle East. There was an incident report on his desk when he arrived. He sat down, lit a cigarette, and began to read.

The report came from Assyut, three hundred miles south, and at first Vandam could not see why it had been marked for Intelligence. A patrol had picked up a hitch-hiking European who had subsequently murdered a corporal with a knife. The body had been discovered last night, almost as soon as the corporal's absence was noted, but several hours after the death. A man answering the hitch-hiker's description had bought a ticket to Cairo at the railway station, but by the time the body was found the train had arrived in Cairo and the killer had melted into the city.

There was no indication of motive.

The Egyptian police force and the British Military Police would be investigating already in Assyut, and their colleagues in Cairo would, like Vandam, be learning the details this morning. What reason was there for Intelligence to get involved?

Vandam frowned and thought again. A European is picked up in the desert. He says his car has broken down. He checks in to an hotel. He leaves a few minutes later and catches a train. His car is not found. The body of a soldier is discovered that night in

the hotel room.

Why?

Vandam got on the phone and called Assyut. It took the Army camp switchboard a while to locate Captain Newman, but eventually they found him in the arsenal and got him to a phone.

Vandam said: 'This knife murder almost looks like a blown cover.'

'That occurred to me, sir,' said Newman. He sounded a young man. 'That's why I marked the report for Intelligence.'

'Good thinking. Tell me, what was your impression of the man?'

'He was a big chap - '

'I've got your description here - six foot, twelve stone, dark hair and eyes - but that doesn't tell me what he was <u>like</u>.'

'I understand,' Newman said. 'Well, to be candid, at first I wasn't in the least suspicious of him. He looked all-in, which fitted with his story of having broken down on the desert road, but apart from that he seemed an upright citizen: a white man, decently dressed, quite well-spoken with an accent he said was Dutch, or rather Afrikaans. His papers were perfect - I'm still quite sure they were genuine.'

'But ... ?'

'He told me he was checking on his business interests in Upper Egypt.'

'Plausible enough.'

'Yes, but he didn't strike me as the kind of man to spend his life investing in a few shops and small factories and cotton farms. He was much more the assured cosmopolitan type - if he had money to invest it would probably be with a London stockbroker or a Swiss bank. He just wasn't a small-timer ... It's very vague, sir, but do you see what I mean?'

'Indeed.' Newman sounded a bright chap, Vandam thought. What was he doing stuck out in Assyut?

Newman went on: 'And then it occurred to me that he had, as it were, just appeared in the desert, and I didn't really know where he might have come from ... so I told poor old Cox to stay with him, on the pretence of helping him, to make sure he didn't do a bunk before we had a chance to check his story. I should have arrested the man, of course, but quite honestly, sir, at the time I had only the slightest most slender suspicion - '

'I don't think anyone's blaming you, Captain,' said Vandam. 'You did well to remember the name and address from the papers. Alex Wolff, Villa les Oliviers, Garden City, right?'

'Yes, sir.'

'All right, keep me in touch with any developments at your end, will you?'

'Yes, sir.'

Vandam hung up. Newman's suspicions chimed with his own instincts about the killing. He decided to speak to his immediate superior. He left his office, carrying the incident report.

General Staff Intelligence was run by a Brigadier with the title of Director of Military Intelligence. The DMI had two Deputies: DDMI(O) - for Operational - and DDMI(I) - for Intelligence. The Deputies were Colonels. Vandam's boss, Lieutenant-Colonel Bogge, came under the DDMI(I). Bogge was responsible for personnel security, and most of his time was spent administering the censorship apparatus. Vandam's concern was security leaks by means other than letters. He and his men had several hundred agents in Cairo and Alexandria; in most clubs and bars there was a waiter who was on his payroll, he had an informant among the domestic staffs of the more important Arab politicans, King Farouk's valet worked for

Vandam, and so did Cairo's wealthiest thief. He was interested in who was talking too much, and who was listening; and among the listeners, Arab nationalists were his main target. However it seemed possible that the mystery man from Assyut might be a different kind of threat.

Vandam's wartime career had so far been distinguished by one spectacular success and one great failure. The failure took place in Turkey. Rashid Ali had escaped there from Iraq. The Germans wanted to get him out and use him for propaganda; the British wanted him kept out of the limelight; and the Turks, jealous of their neutrality, wanted to offend nobody. Vandam's job had been to make sure Ali stayed in Istanbul, but Ali had switched clothes with a German agent and slipped out of the country under Vandam's nose. A few days later he was making propaganda speeches to the Middle East on Nazi radio. Vandam had somewhat redeemed himself in Cairo. London had told him they had reason to believe there was a major security leak there, and after three months of painstaking investigation Vandam had discovered that a senior American diplomat was reporting to Washington in an insecure code. The code had been changed, ~~and~~ the leak stopped up, and Vandam had been promoted to Major.

Had he been a civilian, or even a peacetime soldier, he would have been proud of his triumph and reconciled to his defeat, and he would have said: 'You win some, you lose some.' But in war an officer's mistakes killed people. In the aftermath of the Rashid Ali affair an agent had been murdered, a woman, and Vandam was not able to forgive himself for that.

He knocked on Lieutenant-Colonel Bogge's door and walked in. Reggie Bogge was a short, square man in his fifties, with an immaculate uniform and brilliantined black hair. He had a nervous, throat-clearing cough which he used when he did not know quite what

to say, which was often. He sat behind a huge curved desk - bigger than the DMI's - going through his in-tray. Always willing to talk rather than work, he motioned Vandam to a chair. He picked up a bright red cricket ball and began to toss it from hand to hand. 'You played a good game yesterday,' he said.

'You didn't do badly yourself,' Vandam said. It was true: Bogge had been the only decent bowler on the Intelligence team, and his slow googlies had taken four wickets for forty-two runs. 'But are we winning the war?'

'More bloody bad news, I'm afraid.' The morning briefing had not yet taken place, but Bogge always heard the news by word-of-mouth beforehand. 'We expected Rommel to attack the Gazala Line head-on. Should have known better - fellow never fights fair and square. He went around our southern flank, took the 7th Armoured's headquarters, and captured General Messervy.'

It was a depressingly familiar story, and Vandam suddenly felt weary. 'What a shambles,' he said.

'Fortunately he failed to get through to the coast, so the divisions on the Gazala Line didn't get isolated. Still ... '

'Still, when are we going to <u>stop</u> him?'

'He won't get much farther.' It was an idiotic remark: Bogge simply did not want to get involved in criticism of generals. 'What have you got there?'

Vandam gave him the incident report. 'I propose to follow one this/through myself.'

Bogge read the report and looked up, his face blank. 'I don't seethe point.'

'It looks like a blown cover.'

'Uh?'

'There's no motive for the murder, so we have to speculate,'

Vandam explained. 'Here's one possibility: the hitch-hiker was not what he said he was, and the corporal discovered that fact, and so the hitch-hiker killed the corporal.'

'Not what he said he was - you mean he was a spy?' Bogge laughed. 'How d'you suppose he got to Assyut - by parachute? Or did he walk?'

That was the trouble with explaining things to Bogge, thought Vandam: he had to ridicule the idea, as an excuse for not thinking of it himself. 'It's not impossible for a small plane to sneak through. It's not impossible to cross the desert, either.'

Bogge sailed the report through the air across the vast expanse of his desk. 'Not very likely, in my view,' he said. 'Don't waste any time on that one.'

'Very good, sir.' Vandam picked up the report from the floor, suppressing the familiar frustrated anger. Conversations with Bogge always turned into points-scoring contests, and the smart thing to do was not to play. 'I'll ask the police to keep us informed of their progress - copies of memos, and so on, just for the file.'

'Yes.' Bogge never objected to making people send him copies ~~of things~~ for the file: it enabled him to poke his finger into things without taking any responsibility. 'Listen, how about arranging some ~~xxxxxx~~ cricket practice? I noticed they had nets and a catching boat there yesterday. I'd like to lick our team into shape and get some more matches going.'

'Good idea.'

'See if you can organise something, will you?'

'Yes, sir.' Vandam went out.

On the way back to his own he wondered what was so wrong with the administration of the British Army that it could promote to

Lieutenant-Colonel a man as empty-headed as Reggie Bogge. Vandam's father, who had been a corporal in the first war, had been fond of saying that British soldiers were 'lions led by donkeys'. Sometimes Vandam thought it was still true. But Bogge was not merely dull. Sometimes he made bad decisions because he was not clever enough to make good decisions; but mostly, it seemed to Vandam, Bogge made bad decisions because he was playing some other game, making himself look good or trying to be superior or something, Vandam did not know what.

A woman in a white hospital coat saluted him and he returned the salute absent-mindedly. The woman said: 'Major Vandam, isn't it?'

He stopped and looked at her. She had been a spectator at the cricket match, and now he remembered her name. 'Doctor Abuthnot,' he said. 'Good morning.' She was a tall, cool woman of about his age. He recalled that she was a surgeon - highly unusual for a woman, even in wartime - and that she held the rank of captain.

She said: 'You worked hard yesterday.'

Vandam smiled. 'And I'm suffering for it today. I enjoyed myself, though.'

'So did I.' She had a low, precise voice and a great deal of confidence. 'Shall we see you on Friday?'

'Where?'

'The reception at the Union.'

'Ah.' The Anglo-Egyptian Union, a club for bored Europeans, made occasional attempts to justify its name by holding a reception for Egyptian guests. 'I'd like that. What time?'

'Five o'clock, for tea.'

Vandam was professionally interested: it was an occasion at which Egyptians might pick up service gossip, and service gossip

sometimes included information useful to the enemy. 'I'll come,' he said.

'Splendid. I'll see you there.' She turned away.

'I look forward to it,' Vandam said to her back. He watched her walk away, wondering what she wore under the hospital coat. She was trim, elegant and self-possessed: she reminded him of his wife.

He entered his office. He had no intention of organising a cricket practice, and he had no intention of forgetting about the Assyut murder. Bogge could go to hell. Vandam would go to work.

First he spoke again to Captain Newman, and told him to make sure the description of Alex Wolff got the widest possible circulation.

He called the Egyptian police and confirmed that they would be checking the hotels and flophouses of Cairo today.

He contacted Field Security, an unit of the pre-war Canal Defence Force, and asked them to step up their spot checks on identity papers for a few days.

He told the British Paymaster-General to keep a special watch for forged currency.

He advised the wireless listening service to be alert for a new, local transmitter; and thought briefly how useful it would be if the boffins ever cracked the problem of locating a radio by monitoring its broadcasts.

Finally he detailed a sergeant on his staff to visit every radio shop in Lower Egypt - there were not many - and ask them to report any sales of parts and equipment which might be used to make or repair a transmitter.

Then he went to the Villa les Oliviers.

*

The house got its name from a small public garden across the street

where a grove of olive trees was now in bloom, shedding white petals like dust on to the dry, brown grass.

The house had a high wall broken by a heavy, carved wooden gate. Using the ornamentation for footholds, Vandam climbed over the gate and dropped on the other side to find himself in a large courtyard. Around him the whitewashed walls were smeared and grubby, their windows blinded by closed, peeling shutters. He walked to the centre of the courtyard and looked at the stone fountain. A bright green lizard darted across the dry bowl.

The place had not been lived in for at least a year.

Vandam opened a shutter, broke a pane of glass, reached through to unfasten the window, and climbed over the sill into the house.

It did not look like the home of a European, he thought as he walked through the dark cool rooms. There were no hunting prints on the walls, no neat rows of bright-jacketed novels by Agatha Christie and Dennis Wheatley, no three-piece suite imported from Maples or Harrods. Instead the place was furnished with large cushions and low tables, hand-woven rugs and hanging tapestries.

Upstairs he found a locked door. It took him three or four minutes to kick it open. Behind it there was a study.

The room was clean and tidy, with a few pieces of rather luxurious furniture: a wide, low divan covered in velvet, a hand-carved coffee table, three matching antique lamps, a bearskin rug, a beautifully inlaid desk and a leather chair.

On the desk were a telephone, a clean white blotter, an ivory-handled pen and a dry inkwell. In the desk drawer Vandam found company reports from Switzerland, Germany and the United States. A delicate beaten-copper coffee service gathered dust on the little table. On a shelf behind the desk were books in several languages: nineteenth-century French novels,

the Shorter Oxford Dictionary, a volume of what appeared to Vandam to be Arabic poetry, with erotic illustrations, and the Bible in German.

There were no personal documents.

There were no letters.

There was not a single photograph in the house.

Vandam sat in the soft leather chair behind the desk and looked around the room. It was a masculine room, the home of a cosmopolitan intellectual, a man who was on the one hand careful, precise and tidy and on the other hand sensitive and sensual.

Vandam was intrigued.

A European name, a totally Arabic house. A pamphlet about investing in business machines, a volume of erotic Arab verse. An antique coffee jug and a modern telephone. A wealth of information about a character, but not a single clue which might help find the man.

The room had been carefully cleaned out.

There should have been bank statements, bills from tradesmen, a birth certificate and a will, letters from a lover and photographs of parents or children. The man had collected all those things and taken them away, leaving no trace of his identity, as if he knew that one day someone would come looking for him.

Vandam said aloud: 'Alex Wolff, who are you?'

He got up from the chair and left the study. He walked through the house and across the hot, dusty courtyard. He climbed back over the gate and dropped into the street. Across the road an Arab in a green-striped galabiya sat cross-legged on the ground in the shade of the olive trees, watching Vandam incuriously. Vandam felt no impulse to explain that he had broken into the house on official business: the uniform of a British officer was authority enough for just about anything in this town. He thought of the other

sources from which he could seek information about the owner of this house: municipal records, such as they were; local tradesmen who might have delivered there when the place was occupied; even the neighbours. He would put two of his men on to it, and tell Bogge some story to cover up. He climbed on to his motorcycle and kicked it into life. The engine roared enthusiastically, and Vandam drove away.

Full of anger and despair Wolff sat outside his home and watched the British officer drive away.

He remembered the house as it had been when he was a boy, loud with ~~full of~~ talk and laughter and life. There by the great carved gate there had always been a guard, a black-skinned giant from the south, sitting on the ground, impervious to the heat. Each morning a holy man, old and almost blind, would recite a chapter from the Koran in the courtyard. In the cool of the arcade on three sides the men of the family would sit on low divans and smoke their hubble-bubbles while servant boys brought coffee in long-necked jugs. Another black guard stood at the door to the harem, behind which the women grew bored and fat. The days were long and warm, the family was rich, and the children were indulged.

The British officer, with his shorts and his motorcycle, his arrogant face and his prying eyes hidden in the shadow of the peaked uniform cap, had broken in and violated Wolff's childhood. Wolff wished he could have seen the man's face, for he would like to kill him one day.

He had thought of this place all through his journey. In Berlin and Tripoli and El Agela, in the pain and exhaustion of the desert crossing, in the fear and haste of his flight from Assyut, the villa had represented a safe haven, a place to rest and get clean and whole again at the end of the voyage. He had looked forward to lying in the bath and sipping coffee in the courtyard and bringing women home to the great bed.

Now he would have to go away and stay away.

He had remained outside all morning, ~~wearing the galabiya he had bought in the souk at sunrise,~~ alternately walking the street and sitting under the olive trees, just in case Captain Newman should

have remembered the address and sent somebody to search the house; and he had bought a galabiya in the souk beforehand, knowing that if someone did come they would be looking for a European, not an Arab.

It had been a mistake to show genuine papers. He could see that with hindsight. The trouble was, he mistrusted Abwehr forgeries. Meeting and working with other spies he had heard horror stories about crass and obvious errors in the documents made by German Intelligence: botched printing, inferior quality paper, even mis-spellings of common English words. In the spy school where he had been sent for his Wireless Cipher course the current rumour had been that every policeman in England knew that a certain series of numbers on a ration card identified the holder as a German spy.

Wolff had weighed the alternatives and picked what seemed the least risky. He had been wrong, and now he had no place to go.

He stood, picked up his cases, and began to walk.

He thought of his family. His mother and his stepfather were dead, but he had three stepbrothers and a stepsister in Cairo. It would be hard for them to hide him. They would be questioned as soon as the British realised the identity of the owner of the villa, which might be today; and while they might tell lies for his sake, their servants would surely talk. Furthermore, he could not really trust them, for ~~his~~ when his stepfather had died, Alex as the eldest son had got the house as well as a ~~Lion's~~ share of the inheritance, although he was European and an adopted, rather than natural, son. There had been some bitterness, and meetings with lawyers; Alex had stood firm and the others had never really forgiven him.

He considered checking in to Shepheard's Hotel. Unfortunately

the police were sure to think of that, too: Shepheard's would by now have the description of the Assyut murderer. The other major hotels would have it soon. That left the pensions. Whether they were warned depended on how thorough the police wanted to be. Since the British were involved, the police might feel obliged to be meticulous. Still, the managers of small guest-houses were often too busy to pay a lot of attention to nosey policemen.

He left the Garden City and headed downtown. The streets were even more busy and noisy than when he had left Cairo. There were countless uniforms - not just British but Australian, New Zealand, Polish, Yugoslav, Palestine, Indian and Greek. The slim, pert Egyptian girls in their cotton frocks and heavy jewellery competed successfully with their red-faced, dispirited European counterparts. Among the older women it weemed to Wolff that fewer wore the traditional black robe and veil. The men still greeted one another in the same exuberant fashion, swinging their right arms outward before bringing their hands together with a loud clap, shaking hands for at least a minute or two while grasping the shoulder of the other with the left hand and talking excitedly. The beggars and pedlars were out in force, taking advantage of the influx of naive Europeans. ~~Mixhxhixxxx~~ In his galabiya Wolff was immune, but the foreigners were besieged by cripples, women with fly-encrusted babies, shoeshine boys, and men selling everything from second-hand razor blades to giant fountain pens guaranteed to hold six months' supply of ink.

The traffic was worse. The slow, verminous trams were more crowded than ever, with passengers clinging precariously to the outside from a perch on the running-board, crammed into the cab with the driver, and sitting cross-legged on the roof. The buses and taxis were no better: there seemed to be a shortage of vehicle parts,

for so many of the cars had broken windows, flat tyres, and ailing engines, and were lacking headlights or windscreen wipers. Wolff saw two taxis - an elderly Morris and an even older Packard - which had finally stopped running and were now being drawn by donkeys. The only decent cars were the monstrous American limousines of the wealthy pashas and the occasional pre-war English Austin. Mixing with the motor vehicles in deadly competition were the horse-drawn gharries, the mule carts of the peasants, and the livestock - camels, sheep and goats - which were banned from the city centre by the most unenforceable law on the Egyptian statute book.

And the noise - Wolff had forgotten the noise.

The trams rang their bells continuously. In traffic jams all the cars hooted all the time, and when there was nothing to hoot at they hooted on general principles. Not to be outdone, the drivers of carts and camels yelled at the tops of their voices. Many shops and all cafes blared Arab music from cheap radios turned to full volume. Street vendors called continually and pedestrians told them to go away. Dogs barked and circling kites screamed overhead. From time to time it would all be swamped by the roar of an airplane.

This is my town, Wolff thought; they can't catch me here.

There were a dozen or so well-known pensions catering for tourists of different nationalities: Swiss, Austrian, German, Danish and French. He thought of them and rejected them as too obvious. Finally he remembered a cheap lodging-house run by nuns at Bulaq, the port district. It catered mainly for the sailors who came down the Nile in steam tugs and feluccas laden with cotton, coal, paper and stone. Wolff could be sure he would not get robbed, infected or murdered, and nobody would think to look for him there.

As he headed out of the hotel district the streets became a little less crowded, but not much. He could not see the river itself, but occasionally he glimpsed, through the huddled buildings, the high triangular sail of a felucca.

The hostel was a large, decaying building which had once been the villa of some pasha. There was now a bronze crucifix over the arch of the entrance. A black-robed nun was watering a tiny bed of flowers in front of the building. Through the arch Wolff saw a cool quiet hall. He had walked several miles today, with his heavy cases: he looked forward to a rest.

Two Egyptian policemen came out of the hostel.

Wolff took in the wide leather belts, the inevitable sunglasses, and the military haircust in a swift glance, and his heart sank. He turned his back on the men and spoke in French to the nun in the garden. 'Good day, Sister.'

She unbent from her watering and smiled at him. 'Good day.' She was shockingly young. 'Do you want lodgings?'

'No lodgings. Just your blessing.'

The two policemen approached, and Wolff tensed, preparing his answers in case they should question him, considering which direction he should take if he had to run away; then they went past, arguing about a horse race.

'God bless you,' said the nun.

Wolff thanked her and walked on. It was worse than he had imagined. The police must be checking <u>everywhere</u>. Wolff's feet were sore now, and his arms ached from carrying the luggage. He was disappointed, and also a little indignant, for everything in this town was notoriously haphazard, yet it seemed they were mounting an efficient operation just for him. He doubled back, heading for the city centre again. He was beginning to feel as he had in the

desert, as if he had been walking forever without getting anywhere.

In the distance he saw a familiar tall figure: Hussein Fahmy, an old school friend. Wolff was momentarily paralysed. Hussein would surely take him in, and perhaps he could be trusted; but he had a wife, and three children, and how would one explain to them that Uncle Achmed was coming to stay, but it was a secret, they must not mention his name to their friends ... How, indeed, would Wolff explain it all to Hussein himself? Hussein looked in Wolff's direction, and Wolff turned quickly and crossed the road, darting behind a tram. Once on the opposite pavement he went quickly down an alley without looking back. No, he could not seek shelter with old school friends.

He emerged from the alley into another street, and realised he was close to the German School. He wondered if it were still open: a lot of German nationals in Cairo had been interned. He walked toward it, then saw, outside the building, a Field Security patrol checking papers. He turned about quickly and headed back the way he had come.

He had to get off the streets.

He felt like a rat in a maze - every way he turned he was blocked. He saw a taxi, a big old Ford with steam hissing out from under its bonnet. He hailed it and jumped in. He gave the driver an address and the car jerked away in third gear, apparentlythe only gear that worked. On the way they stopped twice to top up the boiling radiator, and Wolff skulked in the back seat, trying to hide his face.

The taxi took him to Coptic Cairo, the ancient Christian ghetto.

He paid the driver and went down the steps to the entrance. He gave a few piastres to the old woman who held the great wooden

key, and she let him in.

It was an island of darkness and quiet in the stormy sea of Cairo. Wolff walked its narrow passages, hearing faintly the low chanting from the ancient churches. He passed the school and the synagogue and the cellar where Mary was supposed to have brought the baby Jesus. Finally he went into the smallest of the five churches.

The service was about to begin. Wolff put down his precious cases beside a pew. He bowed to the pictures of saints on the wall, then approached the altar, knelt, and kissed the handof the priest. He returned to the pew and sat down.

The choir began to chant a passage of scripture in Arabic. Wolff settled into his seat. He would be safe here until darkness fell. Then he would try his last shot.

*

The Cha-Cha was a large open-air nightclub in a garden beside the river. It was packed, as usual. Wolff waited in the queue of British officers and their girls while the safragis set up extra tables on trestles in every spare inch of space. On the stage a comic was saying: 'Wait till Rommel gets to Shepheard's - that will hold him up.'

Wolff finally got a table and a bottle of champagne. The evening was warm and the stage lights made it worse. The audience was rowdy - they were thirsty, and only champagne was served, so they quickly got drunk. They began to shout for the star of the show, Sonja Fahzi.

First they had to listen to an overweight Greek woman sing I'll See You In My Dreams and I Ain't Got Nobody (which made them laugh). Then Sonja was announced. However, she did not appear for a while. The audience became noisier and more impatient as the minutes ticked by. At last, when they seemed to be on the verge of

rioting, there was a roll of drums, the stage lights went off, and silence descended.

When the spotlight came on Sonja stood still in the centre of the stage with her arms stretched skyward. She wore diaphanous trousers and a sequinned halter, and her body was powdered white. The music began - drums and a pipe - and she started to move.

Wolff sipped champagne and watched, smiling. She was still the best.

She jerked her hips slowly, stamping one foot and then the other. Her arms began to tremble, then her shoulders moved and her breasts shook; and then her famous belly rolled hypnotically. The rhythm quickened. She closed her eyes. Each part of her body seemed to move independently of the rest. Wolff felt, as he always did, as every man in the audience did, that he was alone with her, that her display was just for him, and that this was not an act, not a piece of showbusiness wizardry, but her sensual writhings were compulsive, she did it because she had to, she was driven to a sexual frenzy by her own voluptuous body. The audience was tense, silent, perspiring, mesmerised. She went faster and faster, seeming to be transported. The music climaxed with a bang. In the instant of silence that followed Sonja uttered a short, sharp cry; then she fell backward, her legs folded beneath her, her knees apart, until her head touched the boards of the stage. She held the position for a moment, then the lights went out. The audience rose to their feet with a roar of applause.

The lights came up, and she was gone.

Sonja never took encores.

Wolff got out of his seat. He gave a waiter a pound - three months' wages for most Egyptians - to lead him backstage. The waiter showed him the door to Sonja's dressing-room, then went away.

Wolff knocked on the door.

'Who is it?'

Wolff walked in.

She was sitting on a stool, wearing a silk robe, taking off her make-up. She saw him in the mirror and spun around to face him.

Wolff said: 'Hello, Sonja.'

She stared at him. After a long moment she said: 'You bastard.'

*

She had not changed.

She was a handsome woman. She had glossy black hair, long and thick; large, slightly protruding brown eyes with lush eyelashes; high cheekbones which saved her face from roundness and gave it shape; an arched nose, gracefully arrogant; and a full mouth with even white teeth. Her body was all smooth curves, but because she was a couple of inches taller than average she did not look plump.

Her eyes flashed with anger. 'What are you doing here? Where did you go? What happened to your face?'

Wolff put down his cases and sat on the divan. He looked up at her. She stood with her hands on her hips, her chin thrust forward, her breasts outlined in green silk. 'You're beautiful,' he said.

'Get out of here.'

He studied her carefully. He knew her too well to like or dislike her: she was part of his past, like an old friend who remains a friend, despite his faults, just because he has always been there. Wolff wondered what had happened to Sonja in the years

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since he had left Cairo. Had she got married, bought a house, fallen in love, changed her manager, had a baby? He had given a lot of thought, that afternoon in the cool, dim church, to how he should approach her; but he had reached no conclusions, for he was not sure how she would be with him. He was still not sure. She appeared angry and scornful, but did she mean it? Should he be

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charming and full of fun, or aggressive and bullying, or helpless and pleading?

'I need help,' he said levelly.

Her face did not change.

'The British are after me,' he went on. 'They're watching my house, and all the hotels have my description. I've nowhere to sleep. I want to move in with you.'

'Go to hell,' she said.

'Let me tell you why I walked out on you.'

'After two years no excuse is good enough.'

'Give me a minute to explain. For the sake of ... all that.'

'I owe you nothing.' She glared at him a moment longer, then she opened the door. He thought she was going to throw him out. He watched her face as she looked back at him, holding the door. Then she put her head outside and yelled: 'Somebody get me a drink!'

Wolff relaxed a little.

Sonja came back inside and closed the door. 'A minute,' she said to him.

'Are you going to stand over me like a prison guard? I'm not dangerous.' He smiled.

'Oh, yes you are,' she said, but she went back to her stool and resumed working on her face.

He hesitated. The other problem he had mulled over during that long afternoon in the Coptic church had been how to explain why he had left her without saying Goodbye and never contacted her since. Nothing less than the truth sounded convincing. Reluctant as he was to share his secret, he had to tell her, for he was desperate and she was his only hope.

He said: 'Do you remember I went to Beirut in 1938?'

'No.'

'I brought back a jade bracelet for you.'

Her eyes met his in the mirror. 'I don't have it any more.'

He knew she was lying. He went on: 'I went there to see a German army officer called Heinz. He asked me to work for Germany in the coming war. I agreed.'

She turned from her mirror and faced him, and now he saw in her eyes something like hope.

'They told me to come back to Cairo and wait until I heard from them. Two years ago I heard. They wanted me to go to Berlin. I went. I did a training course, then I worked in the Balkans and the Levant. I went back to Berlin in February for briefing on a new assignment. They sent me here - '

'What are you telling me?' she said incredulously. 'You're a spy?'

'Yes.'

'I don't believe you.'

'Look.' He picked up a suitcase and opened it. 'This is a radio, for sending messages to Rommel.' He closed it again and opened the other. 'This is my financing.'

She stared at the neat stacks of notes. 'My God!' she said. 'It's a fortune.'

There was a knock at the door. Wolff closed the case. A waiter came in with a bottle of champagne in a bucket of ice. Seeing Wolff, he said: 'Shall I bring another glass?'

'No,' Sonja said impatiently. 'Go away.'

The waiter left. Wolff opened the wine, filled the glass, gave it to Sonja, then took a long drink from the bottle.

'Listen,' he said. 'Our army is winning in the desert. We can help them. They need to know about the British strength - numbers of men, which divisions, names of commanders, quality of weapons and equipment, and - if possible - battle plans. We're here, in Cairo - we can find these things out. Then, when the

Germans take over, we will be heroes.'

'We?'

'You can help me. And the first thing you can do is give me a place to live. You hate the British, don't you? You want to see them thrown out?'

'I would do it for anyone but you.' She finished her champagne and refilled her glass.

Wolff took the glass from her hand and drank. 'Sonja. If I had sent you a postcard from Berlin the British would have thrown you in jail. You must not be angry, now that you know the reasons why.' He lowered his voice. 'We can bring those old times back. We'll have good food and the best champagne, new clothes and beautiful parties and an American car. We'll go to Berlin, you've always wanted to dance in Berlin, you'll be a star there. Germany is a new kind of nation - we're going to rule the world, and you can be a princess. We - ' He paused. None of this was getting through to her. ~~xxxxxxxxx~~ It was time to play his last card. 'How is Fawzi?'

Sonja lowered her eyes. 'She left, the bitch.'

Wolff set down the glass, then he put both hands to Sonja's neck. She looked up at him, unmoving. With his thumbs under her chin he forced her to stand. 'I'll find another Fawzi for us,' he said softly. He saw that her eyes were suddenly moist. His hands moved over the silk robe, descending her body, stroking her flanks. 'I'm the only one who understands what you need.' He lowered his mouth to hers, took her lip between his teeth, and bit until he tasted blood.

Sonja closed her eyes. 'I hate you,' she moaned.

*

In the cool of the evening Wolff walked along the towpath beside

the Nile toward the houseboat. The sores had gone from his face and his bowels were back to normal. He wore a new white suit, and he carried two bags full of his favourite groceries.

The island suburb of Zamalek was quiet and peaceful. The raucous noise of central Cairo could be heard only faintly across a wide stretch of water. The calm, muddy river lapped gently against the houseboats lined along the bank. The boats, all shapes and sizes, gaily painted and luxuriously fitted out, looked pretty in the late sunshine.

Sonja's was smaller and more richly furnished than most. A gangplank led from the path to the top deck, which was open to the breeze but shaded from the sun by a green-and-white striped canopy. Wolff boarded the boat and went down the ladder to the interior. It was crowded with furniture: chairs and divans and tables and cabinets full of knick-knacks. There was a tiny kitchen inthe prow. Floor-to-ceiling curtains of maroon velvet divided the space in two, closing off the bedroom. Beyond the bedroom, in the stern, was a bathroom.

Sonja was sitting on a cushion painting her toenails. It was extraordinary how slovenly she could look, Wolff thought. She wore a grubby cotton dress, he face looked drawn, and her hair was uncombed. In half an hour, when she left for the Cha-Cha Club, she would look like a dream.

Wolff put his bags on a table and began to take things out. 'French champagne ... English marmalade ... German sausage ... quail's eggs ... Scotch salmon ... '

Sonja looked up, astonished. 'Nobody can find things like that - there's a war on.'

Wolff smiled. 'There's a little Greek grocer in Qulali who remembers a good customer.'

(→44A)

'Is he safe?'

'He doesn't know where I'm living - and besides, his shop is the only place in North Africa where you can get caviar.'

(go to p45)

She came across and dipped into a bag. 'Caviar!' She took the lid off the jar and began to eat with her fingers. 'I haven't had caviar since ... '

'Since I went away,' Wolff finished. He put a bottle of champagne in the icebox. 'If you wait a few minutes you can have cold champagne with it.'

'I can't wait.'

'You never can.' He took an English-language newspaper out of one of the bags and began to look through it. It was a rotten paper, full of press releases, its war news censored more heavily than the BBC broadcasts which everyone listened to, its local reporting even worse - it was illegal to print speeches by the official Egyptian opposition politicians. 'Still nothing about me in here,' Wolff said. He had told Sonja of the events in Assyut.

'They're always late with the news,' she said through a mouthful of caviar.

'It's not that. If they report the murder they need to say what the motive was - or, if they don't, people will guess. The British don't want people to suspect that the Germans have spies in Egypt. It looks bad.'

She went into the bedroom to change. She called through the curtain: 'Does that mean they've stopped looking for you?'

'No. I saw Abdullah in the souk. He says the Egyptian police aren't really interested, but there's a Major Vandam who's keeping the pressure on.' Wolff put down the newspaper, frowning. He would have liked to know whether Vandam was the officer who had broken into the Villa les Oliviers. He wished he had been able to look more closely at that man, but from across the street the officer's face, shaded by the peaked cap, had been a dark blank.

Sonja said: 'How does Abdullah know?'

'I don't know.' Wolff shrugged. 'He's a thief, he hears things.' He went to the icebox and took out the bottle. It was not really cold enough, but he was thirsty. He poured two glasses. Sonja came out, dressed: as he had anticipated, she was transformed, her hair perfect, her face lightly but cleverly made-up, wearing a sheer cherry-red dress and matching shoes.

A couple of minutes later there were footsteps on the gangplank and a knock at the hatch. Sonja's taxi had arrived. She drained her glass and left. They did not say Hello and Goodbye to one another.

Wolff went to the cupboard where he kept the radio. He took out the English novel and the sheet of paper bearing the key to the code. He studied the key. Today was 28 May. He had to add 42 - the year - to 28 to arrive at the page number in the novel which he must use to encode his message. May was the fifth month, so every fifth letter on the page would be discounted.

He decided to send HAVE ARRIVED. CHECKING IN. ACKNOWLEDGE. Beginning at the top of page 70 of the book, he looked along the line of print for the letter H. It was the tenth character, discounting every fifth letter. In his code it would therefore be represented by the tenth letter of the alphabet, J. Next he needed an A. In the book, the third letter after the H was an A. The A of HAVE would therefore be represented by the third letter of the alphabet, C. There were special ways of dealing with rare letters, like X.

This type of code was a variation on the one-time-pad, the only kind of code which was unbreakable in theory and in practice. To decode the message a listener had to have both the book and the key.

When he had encoded his message he looked at his watch. He

was to transmit at midnight. He had a couple of hours before he needed to warm up the radio. He poured another glass of champagne and decided to finish the caviar. He found a spoon and picked up the pot. It was empty. Sonja had eaten it all.

*

The runway was a strip of desert hastily cleared of camel thorn and large rocks. Rommel looked down as the ground came up to meet him. The Storch, a light aircraft used by German commanders for short trips around the battlefield, came down like a fly, its wheels on the ends of long, spindly front legs. The plane stopped and Rommel jumped out.

The heat hit him first, then the dust. It had been relatively cool, up in the sky; now he felt as if he had stepped into a furnace. He began to perspire immediately. As soon as he breathed in, a thin layer of sand coated his lips and the end of his tongue. A fly settled on his big nose, and he brushed it away.

Von Mellenthin, Rommel's Ic - intelligence officer - ran toward him across the sand, his high boots kicking up dusty clouds. He looked agitated. 'Kesselring's here,' he said.

'Auch, das noch,' said Rommel. 'That's all I need.'

Kesselring, the smiling Field-Marshal, represented everything Rommel disliked in the German armed forces. He was a General Staff officer, and Rommel hated the General Staff; he was a founder of the Luftwaffe, which had let Rommel down so often in the desert war; and he was - worst of all - a snob. Oneof his acid comments had got back to Rommel. Complaining that Rommel was rude to his subordinate officers, Kesselring had said: 'It might be worth speaking to him about it, were it not that he's a Wurtemberger.' Wurtemberg was the provincial state where Rommel was born, and the remark epitomised the prejudice Rommel had been fighting all his career.

He stumped across the sand toward the Command Vehicle, with von Mellenthin in tow. 'General Cruewell has been captured,' von Mellenthin said. 'I had to ask Kesselring to take over. He's spent the afternoon trying to find out where you were.'

'Worse and worse,' Rommel said sourly.

They entered the back of the Command Vehicle, a huge truck. The shade was welcome. Kesselring was bent over a map, brushing away flies with his left hand while tracing a line with his right. He looked up and smiled. 'My dear Rommel, thank Heaven you're back,' he said silkily.

Rommel took off his cap. 'I've been fighting a battle,' he grunted.

'So I gather. What happened?'

Rommel pointed to the map. 'This is the Gazala Line.' It was a string of fortified 'boxes' linked by minefields which ran from the coast at Gazala due south into the desert for fifty miles. 'We made a dog-leg around the southern end of the line and hit them from behind.'

'Good idea. What went wrong?'

'We ran out of gasoline and ammunition.' Rommel sat down heavily, suddenly feeling very tired. 'Again,' he added. Kesselring, as Commander-in-Chief (South), was responsible for Rommel's supplies, but the Field-Marshal seemed not to notice the implied criticism.

An orderly came in with mugs of tea on a tray. Rommel sipped his. There was sand in it.

Kesselring spoke in a conversational tone. 'I've had the unusual experience, this afternoon, of taking the role of one of your subordinate commanders.'

Rommel grunted. There was some piece of sarcasm coming, he

could tell. He did not want to fence with Kesselring now, he wanted to think about the battle.

Kesselring went on: 'I found it enormously difficult, with my hands tied by subordination to a headquarters that issued no orders and could not be reached.'

'I was at the heart of the battle, giving my orders on the spot.'

'Still, you might have stayed in touch.'

'That's the way the British fight,' Rommel snapped. 'The generals/are miles behind the lines, staying in touch. But I'm winning. If I'd had my supplies, I'd be in Cairo now.'

'You're not going to Cairo,' Kesselring said sharply. 'You're going to Tobruk. There you'll stay until I've taken Malta. Such are the Fuehrer's orders.'

'Of course.' Rommel was not going to reopen that argument; not yet. Tobruk was the immediate objective. Once that fortified port was taken, the convoys from Europe - inadequate though they were - could come directly to the front line, cutting out the long journey across the desert which used so much gasoline. 'And to reach Tobruk we have to break the Gazala Line.'

'What's your next step?'

'I'm going to fall back and regroup.' Rommel saw Kesselring raise his eyebrows: the Field Marshal knew how Rommel hated to retreat.

'And what will the enemy do?' Kesselring directed the question to von Mellenthian, who as Ic was responsible for detailed assessment of the enemy position.

'They will chase us, but not immediately,' said von Mellenthin. 'They are always slow to press an advantage, fortunately. But sooner or later they will try a breakout.'

Rommel said: 'The question is, when and where?'

'Indeed,' von Mellenthin agreed. He seemed to hesitate, then said: 'There is a little item in today's summaries which will interest you, sir. The spy checked in.'

'The spy?' Rommel frowned. 'Oh, him!' Now he remembered. He had flown to the Oasis of Gialo, deep in the Libyan desert, to brief the man finally before the spy began a long marathon walk. Wolff, that was his name. Rommel had been impressed by his courage, but pessimistic about his chances. 'Where was he calling from?'

'Cairo.'

'So he got there. If he's capable of that, he's capable of anything. Perhaps he can foretell the breakout.'

Kesselring broke in: 'My God, you're not relying on spies now, are you?'

'I'm not relying on anyone!' Rommel said. 'I'm the one upon whom everyone else relies.'

'Good.' Kesselring was unruffled, as always. 'Intelligence is never much use, as you know; and intelligence from spies is the worst kind.'

'I agree,' Rommel said more calmly. 'But I have a feeling this one could be different.'

'~~Perhaps you're right~~ I doubt it,' said Kesselring.

Elene Fontana looked at her face in the mirror and thought: I'm twenty-three, I must be losing my looks.

She leaned closer to the glass and examined herself carefully, searching for signs of deterioration. Her complexion was perfect. Her round brown eyes were as clear as a mountain pool. There were no wrinkles. It was a childish face, delicately modelled, with a look a waif-like innocence. She was like an art collector checking on his finest piece: she thought of the face as hers, not as her. She smiled, and the face in the mirror smiled back at her. It was a small, intimate smile, with a hint of mischief about it: she knew it could make a man break out into a cold sweat.

She picked up the note and read it again.

Thursday
My dear Elene,

I'm afraid it is all over. My wife has found out. We have patched things up, but I've had to promise never to see you again. Of course you can stay in the flat, but I can't pay the rent any more. I'm so sorry it happened this way - but I suppose we both knew it could not last forever. Good luck -

Your,

Claud.

Just like that, she thought.

She tore up the note and its cheap sentiments. Claud was a fat, half-French and half-Greek businessman who owned three restaurants in Cairo and one in Alexandria. He was cultured and jolly and kind, but when it came to the crunch he cared nothing for Elene.

He was the third in six years.

It had started with Charles, the stockbroker. She had been seventeen years old, penniless, unemployed, and frightened to go home. Charles had set her up in the flat and visited her every Tuesday night. She had thrown himout after he offered her to his brother as if she were a dish of sweetmeats. Then there had been Johnnie, the nicest of the three, who wanted to divorce his wife and marry Elene: she had refused. Now Claud, too, had gone.

She had known from the start there was no future in it.

It was her fault as much as theirs that the affairs broke up. The ostensible reasons - Charles's brother, Johnnie's proposal, Claud's wife - were just excuses, or maybe catalysts. The real cause was always the same: Elene was unhappy.

She contemplated the prospect of another affair. She knew how it would be. For a while she would live on the little nest-egg she had in Barclay's Bank in the Shari Kasr-el-Nil - she always managed to save, when she had a man. Then she would see the balance slowly going down, and she would take a job in a dance troupe, kicking up her legs and wiggling her bottom in some club for a few days. Then ... She looked into the mirror and through it, her eyes unfocussing as she visualised her fourth lover. Perhaps he would be an Italian, with flashing eyes and glossy hair and perfectly manicured hands. She might meet him in the bar of the Metropolitan Hotel, where the reporters drank. He would speak to her, then offer her a drink. She would smile at him, and he would be lost. They would make a date for dinner the next day. She would look stunning as she walked into the restaurant on his arm. All heads would turn, and he would feel proud. They would have more dates. He would give her presents. He would make a pass at her, then another: his third would be successful. She would enjoy making love with him - the intimacy, the touching, the endearments - and she would make him feel like a king. He would leave her at dawn, but he would be back that

evening. They would stop going to restaurants together - 'too risky', he would say - but he would spend more and more time at the flat, and he would begin to pay the rent and the bills. Elene would then have everything she wanted: a home, money and affection. She would begin to wonder why she was so miserable. She would throw a tantrumif he arrived half an hour late. She would go into a black sulk if he so much as mentioned his wife. She would complain that he no longer gave her presents, but accept them nonchalantly when he did. The man would be irritated but he would be unable to leave her, for by this time he would be eager for her grudging kisses, greedy for her perfect body; and she would still make him feel like a king in bed. She would find his conversation boring; she would demand from him more passion than he was able to give; there would be rows. Finally the crisis would come. His wife would get suspicious, or a child would fall ill, or he would have to take a six-month business trip, or he would run short of money. And Elene would be back where she was now: drifting, alone, disreputable - and a year older.

Her eyes focussed, and she saw again her face in the mirror. Her face was the cause of all this. It was because of her face that she lead this pointless life. Had she been ugly, she would always have yearned to live like this, and never discovered its hollowness. You led me astray, she thought; you deceived me, you pretended I was somebody else. You're not my face, you're a mask. You should stop trying to run my life.

I'm not a beautiful Cairo socialite, I'm a slum girl from Alexandria.

I'm not a woman of independent means, I'm the next thing to a whore.

I'm not Egyptian, I'm Jewish.

My name is not Elene Fontana. It's Abigail Asnani.

And I want to go home.

*

The young man behind the desk at the Jewish Agency in Cairo wore a yamulka. Apart from a wisp of beard, his cheeks were smooth. He asked for her name and address. Forgetting her resolution, she called herself Elene Fontana.

The young man seemed confused. She was used to this: most men got a little flustered when she smiled at them. He said: 'Would you ... I mean, do you mind if I ask you why you want to go to Palestine?'

'I'm Jewish,' she said abruptly. She could not explain her life to this boy. 'All my family are dead. I'm wasting my life.' The first part was not true, but the second part was.

'What work would you do in Palestine?'

She had not thought of that. 'Anything.'

'It's mostly agricultural labour.'

'That's fine.'

He smiled gently. He was recovering his composure. 'I mean no offence, but you don't look like a farm hand.'

'If I didn't want to change my life, I wouldn't want to go to Palestine.'

'Yes.' He fiddled with his pen. 'What work do you do now?'

'I sing, and when I can't get singing I dance, and when I can't get dancing I wait at tables.' It was more or less true. She had done all three at one time or another, although dancing was the only one she did successfully, and she was not brilliant at that. 'I told you, I'm wasting my life. Why all the questions? Is Palestine accepting only college graduates now?'

'Nothing like that,' he said. 'But it's very tough to get in.

The British have imposed a quota, and all the places are taken by refugees from the Nazis.'

'Why didn't you tell me that before?' she said angrily.

'Two reasons. One is that we can get people in illegally. The other ... the other takes a little longer to explain. Would you wait a minute? I must telephone someone.'

She was still angry with him for questioning her before he told her there were no places. 'I'm not sure there's any point in my waiting.'

'There is, I promise you. It's quite important. Just a minute or two.'

'Very well.'

He went into a back room to phone. Elene waited impatiently. The day was warming up, and the room was poorly ventilated. She felt a little foolish. She had come here impulsively, without thinking through the idea of emigration. Too many of her decisions were made like that. She might have guessed they would ask her questions; she could have prepared her answers. She could have come dressed in something a little less glamorous.

The young man came back. 'It's so warm,' he said. 'Shall we go across the street for a cold drink?'

So that was the game, she thought. She decided to put him down. She gave him an appraising look, then said: 'No. You're much too young for me.'

He was terribly embarrassed. 'Oh, please don't misunderstand me. There's someone I want you to meet, that's all.'

She wondered whether to believe him. She had nothing to lose, ~~she thought,~~ and she was thirsty. 'All right.'

He held the door for her. They crossed the street, dodging the rickety carts and broken-down taxis, feeling the sudden blazing heat of the sun. They ducked under a striped awning and stepped

into the cool of a cafe. The young man ordered lemon juice; Elene had gin-and-tonic.

She said: 'You can get people in illegally.'

'Sometimes.' He took half his drink in one gulp. 'One reason we do it, is if the person is being persecuted. That's why I asked you some questions.'

'I'm not being persecuted.'

'The other reason is, if people have done a lot for the cause, some way.'

'You mean I have to earn the right to go to Palestine?'

'Look, maybe one day all Jews will have the right to go there to live. But while there are quotas there have to be criteria.'

She was tempted to ask: Who do I have to sleep with? But she had misjudged him that way once already. All the same, she thought he wanted to use her somehow. She said: 'What do I have to do?'

He shook his head. 'I can't make a bargain with you. Egyptian Jews can't get into Palestine, except for special cases, and you're not a special case. That's all there is to it.'

'What are you trying to tell me, then?'

'You can't go to Palestine, but you can still fight for the cause.'

'What, exactly, did you have in mind?'

'The first thing we have to do is defeat the Nazis.'

She laughed. 'Well, I'll do my best!'

He ignored that. 'We don't like the British much, but any enemy of Germany's is a friend of ours, so at the moment - strictly on a temporary basis - we're working with British Intelligence. I think you could help them.'

'For God's sake! How?'

A shadow fell across the table, and the young man looked up. 'Ah!' he said. He looked back at Elene. 'I want you to meet my friend, Major William Vandam.'

*

He was a tall man, and broad: with those wide shoulders and mighty legs he might once have been an athlete, although now, Elene guessed, he was close to forty and just beginning to go a little soft. He had a round, open face topped by wiry brown hair which looked as if it might curl if it were allowed to grow a little beyond the regulation length. He shook her hand, sat down, crossed his legs, lit a cigarette, and ordered gin. He wore a stern expression, as if he thought life was a very serious business and he did not want anybody to start fooling around.

Elene thought he was a typical frigid Englishman.

The young man from the Jewish Agency asked him: 'What's the news?'

'The Gazala Line is holding, but it's getting very fierce out there.'

Vandam's voice was a surprise. English officers usually spoke with the upper-class drawl which had come to symbolise arrogance for ordinary Egyptians. Vandam spoke precisely but softly, with rounded vowels and a slight burr on the r: Elene had a feeling this was the trace of a country accent, although she could not remember how she knew.

She decided to ask him. 'Where do you come from, Major?'

'Dorset. Why do you ask?'

'I was wondering about your accent.'

'South-west of England. You're observant. I thought I had no accent.'

'Just a trace.'

He lit another cigarette. She watched his hands. They were long and slender, rather at odds with the rest of his body; the nails were well manicured and the skin was white except for the deep amber stains where he held his cigarette.

The young man took his leave. 'I'll let Major Vandam explain everything to you. I hope you will work with him - I believe it's very important.'

Vandam shook his hand and thanked him, and the young man went out.

Vandam said to Elene: 'Tell me about yourself.'

'No,' she said. 'You tell me about yourself.'

He raised an eyebrow at her, faintly startled, a little amused, and suddenly not at all frigid. 'All right,' he said after a moment. 'Cairo is full of officers and men who know secrets. They know our strengths, our weaknesses, and our plans. The enemy wants to know those secrets. We can be sure that at any time the Germans have people in Cairo trying to get information. It's my job to stop them.'

'That simple.'

He considered. 'It's simple, but it's not easy.'

He took everything she said seriously, she noticed. She thought it was because he was humourless, but all the same she rather liked it: men generally treated her conversation like background music in a cocktail bar, a pleasant enough but largely meaningless noise.

He was waiting. 'It's your turn,' he said.

Suddenly she wanted to tell him the truth. 'I'm a lousy singer and a mediocre dancer, but sometimes I find a rich man to pay my bills.'

He said nothing,but he looked taken aback.

Elene said: 'Shocked?'

'Shouldn't I be?'

She looked away. She knew what he was thinking. Until now he had treated her politely, as if she were a respectable woman, one of his own class. Now he realised he had been mistaken. His reaction was completely predictable, but all the same she felt bitter. She said: 'Isn't that what most women do, when they get married - find a man to pay the bills?'

'Yes,' he said gravely.

She looked at him. The imp of mischief seized her. 'I just turn them around a little faster than the average housewife.'

Vandam burst out laughing. Suddenly he looked a different man. He threw back his head, his arms and legs spread sideways, and all the tension went out of his body. When the laugh subsided he was relaxed, just briefly. They grinned at one another. The moment passed, and he crossed his legs again. There was a silence. Elene felt like a schoolgirl who has been giggling in class.

Vandam was serious again. 'My problem is information,' he said. 'Nobody tells an Englishman anything. That's where you come in. Because you're Egyptian, you hear the kind of gossip and street talk that never comes my way. And because you're Jewish, you'll pass it to me. I hope.'

'What kind of gossip?'

'I'm interested in anyone who's curious about the British Army.' He paused. He seemed to be wondering how much to tell her. 'In particular ... At the moment I'm looking for a man called Alex Wolff. He used to live in Cairo and he has recently returned. He may be looking for a place to live, and he probably has a lot of money. He is certainly making inquiries about British forces.'

Elene shrugged. 'After all that build-up I was expecting to be asked to do something much more dramatic.'

'Such as?'

'I don't know. Waltz with Rommel and pick his pockets.'

Vandam laughed again. Elene thought: I could get fond of that laugh.

He said: 'Well, mundane though it is, will you do it?'

'I don't know.' But I do know, she thought; I'm just trying to prolong the interview, because I'm enjoying myself.

Vandam leaned forward. 'I need people like you, Miss Fontana.' Her name sounded silly when he said it so politely. 'You're observant, you have a perfect cover, and you're obviously intelligent - please excuse me for being so direct - '

'Don't apologise, I love it,' she said. 'Keep talking.'

'Most of my people are not very reliable. They do it for the money, whereas you have a better motive - '

'Wait a minute,' she interrupted. 'I want money, too. What does the job pay?'

'That depends on the information you bring in.'

'What's the minimum?'

'Nothing.'

'That's a little less than what I was hoping for.'

'How much do you want?'

'You might be a gentleman and pay the rent of my flat.' She bit her lip: it sounded so tarty, put like that.

'How much?'

'Seventy-five a month.'

Vandam's eyebrows rose. 'What have you got, a palace?'

'Prices have gone up. Haven't you heard? It's all these English officers desperate for accommodation.'

'Touche.' He frowned. 'You'd have to be awfully useful to justify seventy-five a month.'

Elene shrugged. 'Why don't we give it a try?'

'You're a good negotiator.' He smiled. 'All right, a month's

trial.'

Elene tried not to look triumphant. 'How do I contact you?'

'Send me a message.' He took a pencil and a scrap of paper from his shirt pocket and began to write. 'I'll give you my address and phone number, at GHQ and at home. As soon as I hear from you I'll come to your place.'

'All right.' She wrote down her address, wondering what the Major would think of her flat. 'What if you're seen?'

'Will it matter?'

'I might be asked who you are.'

'Well, you'd better not tell the truth.'

She grinned. 'I'll say you're my lover.'

He looked away. 'Very well.'

'But you'd better act the part.' She kept a straight face. 'You must bring armfuls of flowers and boxes of chocolates.'

'I don't know ... '

'Don't Englishmen give their mistresses flowers and chocolates?'

He looked at her unblinkingly. She noticed that he had grey eyes. 'I don't know,' he said levelly. 'I've never had a mistress.'

Elene thought: I stand corrected. She said: 'Then you've got a lot to learn.'

'I'm sure. Would you like another drink?'

And now I'm dismissed, she thought. You're a little too much, Major Vandam: there's a certain self-righteousness about you, and you rather like to be in charge of things; you're so masterful. I may take you in hand, puncture your vanity, do you a little damage.

'No, thanks,' she said. 'I must go.'

He stood up. 'I'll look forward to hearing from you.'

She shook his hand and walked away. Somehow she had the

feeling that he was not watching her go.

*

Vandam changed into a civilian suit for the reception at the Anglo-Egyptian Union. He would never have gone to the Union while his wife was alive: she said it was 'plebby'. He told her to say 'plebian' so that she would not sound like a County snob. She said she was a County snob, and would he kindly stop showing off his classical education.

Vandam had loved her then and he did now.

Her father was a fairly wealthy man who became a diplomat because he had nothing better to do. He had not been pleased at the prospect of his daughter marrying a postman's son. He was not much mollified when he was told that Vandam had gone to a minor public school (on a scholarship) and London University, and was considered one of the most promising of his generation of junior Army officers. But the daughter was adamant in this as in all things, and in the end the father had accepted the match with good grace. Oddly enough, on the one occasion when the fathers met they got on rather well. Sadly, the mothers hated each other and there were no more family gatherings.

None of it mattered much to Vandam; nor did the fact that his wife had a short temper, an imperious manner and an ungenerous heart. Angela was graceful, dignified and beautiful. For him she was the epitome of womanhood, and he thought himself a lucky man.

The contrast with Elene Fontana could not have been more striking.

He drove to the Union on his motorcycle. The bike, a BSA 350, was very practical in Cairo. He could use it all the year round, for the weather was almost always good enough; and he could snake through the traffic jams that kept cars and taxis waiting.

But it was a rather quick machine, and it gave him a secret thrill, a throwback to his adolescence when he had coveted such bikes but had not been able to buy one. Angela had loathed it - like the Union, it was plebby - but for once Vandam had resolutely defied her.

The day was cooling when he parked at the union. Passing the club house, he looked through a window and saw a snooker game in full swing. He resisted the temptation and walked on to the lawn.

He accepted a glass of Cyprus sherry and moved into the crowd, nodding and smiling, exchanging pleasantries with people he knew. There was tea for the teetotal Muslim guests, but not many had turned up. Vandam tasted the sherry and wondered whether the barman could be taught to make a martini.

He looked across the grass to the neighbouring Egyptian Officers Club, and wished he could eavesdrop on conversations there. Someone spoke his name, and he turned to see the woman doctor. Once again he had to think before he could remember her name. 'Doctor Abuthnot.'

'We might be informal here,' she said. 'My name is Joan.'

'William. Is your husband here?'

'I'm not married.'

'Pardon me.' Now he saw her in a new light. She was single and he was a widower, and they had been seen talking together in public three times in a week: by now the English colony in Cairo would have them practically engaged. 'You're a surgeon?' he said.

She smiled. 'All I do these days is sew people up and patch them - but yes, before the war I was a surgeon.'

'How did you manage that? It's not easy for a woman.'

'I fought tooth and nail.' She was still smiling, but Vandam detected an undertone of remembered resentment. 'You're a little

unconventional yourself, I'm told.'

Vandam thought himself to be utterly conventional. 'How so?' he said with surprise.

'Bringing up your child yourself.'

'No choice. If I had wanted to send him back to England, I wouldn't have been able to - you can't get a passage unless you're disabled or a general.'

'But you didn't want to.'

'No.'

'That's what I mean.'

'He's my son,' Vandam said. 'I don't want anyone else to bring him up - nor does he.'

'I understand. It's just that some fathers would think it ... unmanly.'

He raised his eyebrows at her, and to his surprise she blushed. He said: 'You're right, I suppose. I'd never thought of it that way.'

'I'm ashamed of myself, I've been prying. Would you like another drink?'

Vandam looked into his glass. 'I think I shall have to go inside in search of a real drink.'

'I wish you luck.' She smiled and turned away.

Vandam walked across the lawn to the club house. She was an attractive woman, courageous and intelligent, and she had made it clear she wanted to know him better. He thought: Why the devil do I feel so indifferent to her? All these people are thinking how well matched we are - and they're right.

He went inside and spoke to the bartender. 'Gin. Ice. One olive. And <u>a few drops</u> of very dry vermouth.'

The martini when it came was quite good, and he had two more. He thought again of the woman Elene. There were a thousand like her

in Cairo - Greek, Jewish, Syrian and Palestinian as well as Egyptian. They were dancers for just as long as it took to catch the eye of some wealthy roue. Most of them probably entertained fantasies of getting married and being taken back to a large house in Alexandria or Paris or Surrey, and they would be disappointed.

They all had delicate brown faces and feline bodies with slender legs and pert breasts, but Vandam was tempted to think that Elene stood out from the crowd. Her smile was devastating. The idea of her going to Palestine to work on a farm was, at first sight, ridiculous; but she had tried, and when that failed she had agreed to work for Vandam. On the other hand, retailing street gossip was easy money, like being a kept woman. She was probably the same as all the other dancers: Vandam was not interested in that kind of woman, either.

The martinis were beginning to take effect, and he was afraid he might not be as polite as he should to the ladies when they came in, so he paid his bill and went out.

He drove to GHQ to get the latest news. It seemed the day had ended in a standoff after heavy casualties on both sides - rather more on the British side. It was just bloody demoralising, Vandam thought: we had a secure base, good supplies, superior weapons and greater numbers; we planned thoughtfully and we fought carefully, and we never damn well won anything. He went home.

Gaafar had prepared lamb and rice. Vandam had another drink with his dinner. Billy talked to him while he ate. Today's geography lesson had been about wheat farming in Canada. Vandam would have liked the school to teach the boy something about the country in which he lived.

After Billy went to bed Vandam sat alone in the drawing-room, smoking, thinking about Joan Abuthnot and Alex Wolff and Erwin Rommel.

In their different ways they all threatened him. As night fell outside, the room came to seem claustrophobic. Vandam filled his cigarette case and went out.

The city was as much alive now as at any time during the day. There were a lot of soldiers on the streets, some of them very drunk. These were hard men who had seen action in the desert, had suffered the sand and the heat and the bombing and the shelling, and they often found the wogs less grateful than they should be. When a shopkeeper gave short change or a restaurant owner overcharged or a barman refused to serve drunks, the soldiers would remember seeing their friends blown up in the defence of Egypt, and they would start fighting and break windows and smash the place up. Vandam understood why the Egyptians were ungrateful - they did not much care whether it was the British or the Germans who oppressed them - but still he had little sympathy for the Cairo shopkeepers, who were making a fortune out of the war.

He walked slowly, cigarette in hand, enjoying the cool night air, looking into the tiny open-fronted shops, refusing to buy a cotton shirt made-to-measure-while-you-wait, a leather handbag for the lady, or a second-hand copy of a magazine called Saucy Snips. He was amused by a street vendor who had filthy pictures in the left-hand side of his jacket and crucifixes in the right. He saw a bunch of soldiers collapse with laughter at the sight of two Egyptian policemen patrolling the street hand in hand.

He went into a bar. Outside of the British clubs it was wise to avoid the gin, so he ordered zibib, the aniseed drink which turned cloudy with water. At ten o'clock the bar closed, by mutual consent of the Muslim Wafd government and the killjoy Provost Marshal. Vandam's vision was a little blurred when he left.

He headed for the Old City. Passing a sign saying OUT OF

BOUNDS TO TROOPS he entered the Birka. In the narrow streets and alleys the women sat on steps and leaned from windows, smoking and waiting for customers, chatting to the military police. Some of them spoke to Vandam, offering their bodies in English, French and Italian. He turned into a little lane, crossed a deserted courtyard, and entered an unmarked open doorway.

He climbed the staircase and knocked at a door on the first floor. A middle-aged Egyptian woman opened it. He paid her five pounds and went in.

In a large, dimly-lit inner room, furnished with faded luxury, he sat on a cushion and unbuttoned his shirt collar. A young woman in baggy trousers passed him the nargileh. He took several deep lungfuls of hashish smoke. Soon a pleasant feeling of lethargy came over him. He leaned back on his elbows and looked around. In the shadows of the room there were four other men. Two were pashas - wealthy Arab landowners - sitting together on a divan and talking in low, desultory tones. A third, who seemed almost to have been sent to sleep by the hashish, looked English and was probably an officer like Vandam. The fourth sat in the corner talking to one of the girls. Vandam heard snatches of conversation and gathered that the man wanted to take the girl home, and they were discussing a price. The man was vaguely familiar, but Vandam, drunk and now doped too, could not get his memory in gear to recall who he was.

One of the girls came over and took Vandam's hand. She led him into an alcove and drew the curtain. She took off her halter. She had small brown breasts. Vandam stroked her cheek. In the candlelight her face changed constantly, seeming old, then very young, then predatory, then loving. At one point she looked like Joan Abuthnot. But finally, as he entered her, she looked like Elene.

Alex Wolff wore a galabiya and a fez and stood thirty yards from the gate of GHQ - British headquarters - selling paper fans which broke after two minutes of use.

The hue and cry had died down. He had not seen the British conducting a spot check on identity papers for a week. This Vandam character could not keep up the pressure indefinitely.

Wolff had gone to GHQ as soon as he felt reasonably safe. Getting into Cairo had been a triumph, but it was useless unless he could exploit the position to get the information Rommel wanted - and quickly. He recalled his brief interview with Rommel in Gialo. The Desert Fox did not look foxy at all. He was a small, tireless man with the face of an aggressive peasant: a big nose, a downturned mouth, a cleft chin, a jagged scar on his left cheek, his hair cut so short that none showed beneath the rim of his cap. He had said: 'Numbers of troops, names of divisions, in the field and in reserve, state of training. Numbers of tanks, in the field and in reserve, state of repair. Supplies of ammunition, food and gasoline. Personalities and attitudes of commanding officers. Strategic and tactical intentions. They say you're good, Wolff. They had better be right.'

It was easier said than done.

There was a certain amount of information Wolff could get just by walking around the city. He could observe the uniforms of the soldiers on leave and listen to their talk, and that told him which troops had been where and when they were going back. Sometimes a sergeant would mention statistics of dead and wounded, or the devastating effect of the 88mm guns - designed as anti-aircraft weapons - which the Germans had fitted to their tanks. He had heard

an Army mechanic complain that thirty-nine of the fifty new tanks which arrived yesterday needed major repairs before going into service. All this was useful information which could be sent to Berlin, where Intelligence analysts would put it together with other snippets in order to form a big picture. But it was not what Rommel wanted.

Somewhere inside GHQ there were pieces of paper which said things like: 'After resting and refitting, Division A, with 100 tanks and full supplies, will leave Cairo tomorrow and join forces with Division B at the C Oasis in preparation for the counterattack west of D next Saturday at dawn.'

It was those pieces of paper Wolff wanted.

That was why he was selling fans outside GHQ.

For their headquarters the British had taken over a number of the large houses - most of them owned by pashas - in the Garden City suburb. (Wolff was grateful that the Villa les Oliviers had escaped the net.) The commandeered homes were surrounded by a barbed-wire fence. People in uniform were passed quickly through the gate, but civilians were stopped and questioned at length while the sentries made phone calls to verify credentials.

There were other headquarters in other buildings around the city - the Semiramis Hotel housed something called British Troops in Egypt, for example - but this was GHQ Middle East, the powerhouse. Wolff had spent a lot of time, back in the Abwehr spy school, learning to recognise uniforms, regimental identification marks, and the faces of literally hundreds of senior British officers. Here, several mornings running, he had observed the large staff cars arriving and had peeked through the windows to see ~~the faces of~~ Colonels, Generals, Admirals, Squadron-Leaders, and the Commander-in-Chief, Sir Claude Auchinleck, himself. They all looked a little

odd, and he was puzzled until he realised that the pictures of them which had he had burned into his brain were in black-and-white, and now he was seeing them for the first time in colour.

The General Staff travelled by car, but their aides walked. Each morning the captains and majors arrived on foot, carrying their little briefcases. Toward noon - after the regular morning conference, Wolff presumed - some of them left, still carrying their briefcases.

Each day Wolff followed one of the aides.

Most of the aides worked at GHQ, and their secret papers would be locked up in the office at the end of the day. But these few were men who had to be at GHQ formthe morning conference, but had their own offices in other parts of the city; and they had to carry their briefing papers with them in between one office and another. One of them went to the Semiramis. Two went to the barracks in the Kasr-el-Nil. A fourth went to an unmarked building in the Shari Suleiman Pasha.

Wolff wanted to get into those briefcases.

Today he would do a dry run.

Waiting under the blazing sun for the aides to come out, he thought about the night before, and a smile curled the corners of his mouth below the newly-grown moustache. He had promised Sonja that he would find her another Fawzi. Last night he had gone to the Birka and picked out a girl at Madame Fahmy's establishment. She was not a Fawzi - <u>thmat</u> girl had been a real enthusiast - but she was a good temporary substitute. They had enjoyed her in turn, then together; then they had played Sonja's weird, exciting games ... It had been a long night.

When the aides came out, Wolff followed the pair that went to the barracks.

A minute later Abdullah emerged from a cafe and fell into step beside him.

'Those two?' Abdullah said.

'Those two.'

Abdullah was a fat man with a steel tooth. He was one of the richest men in Cairo, but unlike most rich Arabs he did not ape the Europeans. He wore sandals, a dirty robe and a fez. His greasy hair curled around his ears and his fingernails were black. His wealth came not from land, like the pashas', nor from trade, like the Greeks'. It came from crime.

Abdullah was a thief.

Wolff liked him. He was sly, deceitful, cruel, generous, and always laughing: for Wolff he embodied the age-old vices and virtues of the Middle East. His army of children, grandchildren, nephews, nieces and second-cousins had been burgling houses and picking pockets in Cairo for thirty years. He had tentacles everywhere: he was a hashish wholesaler, he had influence with politicians, and he owned half the houses in the Birka, including Madame Fahmy's. He lived in a large crumbling house in the Old City with his four wives.

They followed the two officers into the modern city centre. Abdullah said: 'Do you want one briefcase, or both?'

Wolff considered. One was a casual theft; two looked organised. 'One,' he said.

'Which?'

'It doesn't matter.'

Wolff had considered going to Abdullah for help after the discovery that the Villa les Oliviers was no longer safe. He had decided not to. Abdullah could certainly have hidden Wolff away somewhere - probably in a brothel - more or less indefinitely. But as soon as he had Wolff concealed, he would have opened negotiations

to sell him to the British. Abdullah divided the world in two: his family and the rest. He was utterly loyal to his family and trusted them completely; he would cheat everyone else and expect them to try to cheat him. All business was done on the basis of mutual suspicion. Wolff found this worked surprisingly well.

They came to a busy corner. The two officers crossed the road, dodging the traffic. Wolff was about to follow when Abdullah put a hand on his arm to stop him.

'We'll do it here,' Abdullah said.

Wolff looked around, observing the buildings, the pavement, the road junction and the street vendors. He smiled slowly, and nodded. 'It's perfect,' he said.

*

They did it the next day.

Abdullah had indeed chosen the perfect spot for the snatch. It was where a busy side street joined a main road. On the corner was a cafe with tables outside, reducing the pavement to half its width. Outside the cafe, on the side of the main road, was a bus stop. The idea of queueing for the bus had never really caught on in Cairo despite sixty years of British domination, so those waiting simply milled about on the already crowded pavement. On the side street it was a little clearer, for although the cafe had tables out here too, there was no bus stop. Abdullah had observed this little shortcoming, and had put it right by detailing two acrobats to perform on the street there.

Wolff sat at the corner table, from where he could see along both the main road and the side street, and worried about the things that might go wrong.

The officers might not go back to the barracks today.

They might go a different way.

They might not be carrying their briefcases.

The police might arrive too early and arrest everyone on the scene.

The boy might be grabbed by the officers and questioned.

Wolff might be grabbed by the officers and questioned.

Abdullah might decide he could earn his money with less trouble simply by contacting Major Vandam and telling him he could arrest Alex Wolff at the Cafe Nasif at twelve noon today.

Wolff was afraid of going to prison. He was more than afraid, he was terrified. The thought of it brought him out in a cold sweat under the noonday sun. He could live without good food and wine and girls, if he had the vast wild emptiness of the desert to console him; and he could forgo the freedom of the desert to live in a crowded city i f he had the urban luxuries to console him; but he could not lose both. He had never told anyone of this: it was his secret nightmare. The idea of living in a tiny, colourless cell, among the scum of the earth (and all of them men), eating bad food, never seeing the blue sky or the endless Nile or the open plains ... panic touched him glancingly even while he contemplated it. He pushed it out of his mind. It was not going to happen.

At eleven forty-five the large, grubby form of Abdullah waddled past the cafe. His expression was vacant but his small black eyes looked around sharply, checking his arrangements. He crossed the road and disappeared from view.

At five past twelve Wolff spotted two military caps among the massed heads in the distance.

He sat on the edge of his chair.

The officers came nearer. They were carrying their briefcases.

Across the street a parked car revved its idling engine.

A bus drew up to the stop, and Wolff thought: Abdullah can't

possibly have arranged that: it's a piece of luck, a bonus.

The officers were five yards from Wolff.

The car across the street pulled out suddenly. It was a big black Packard with a powerful engine and soft American springing. It came across the road like a charging elephant, motor screaming in low gear, regardless of the main road traffic, heading for the side street, its horn blowing continuously. On the corner, a few feet from where Wolff sat, it ploughed into the front of an old Fiat taxi.

The two officers stood beside Wolff's table and stared at the crash.

The taxi driver, a young Arab in a Western shirt and a fez, leaped out of his car.

A young Greek ina mohair suit jumped out of the Packard.

The Arab said the Greek was the son of a pig.

The Greek said the Arab was the back end of a diseased camel.

The Arab slapped the Greek's face and the Greek punched the Arab on the nose.

The people getting off the bus, and those who had been intending to get on it, came closer.

Around the corner, the acrobat who was standing on his colleague's head turned to look at the fight, seemed to lose his balance, and fell into his audience.

A small boy darted past Wolff's table. Wolff stood up, pointed at the boy, and shouted at the top of his voice: 'Stop, thief!'

The boy dashed off. Wolff went after him, and four people sitting near Wolff jumped up and tried to grab the boy. The child ran between the two officers, who were staring at the fight in the road. Wolff and the people who had jumped up to help him cannonned into the officers, knocking both of them to the ground. Several

people began to shout 'Stop, thief!' although most of them had no idea who the alleged thief was. Some of the newcomers thought it must be one of the fighting drivers. The crowd from the bus stop, the acrobats' audience, and most of the people in the cafe surged forward and began to attack one or other of the drivers - Arabs assuming the Greek was the culprit and everyone else assuming it was the Arab. Several men with sticks - most people carried sticks - began to push into the crowd, beating on heads at random in an attempt to break up the fighting which was entirely counterproductive. Someone picked up a chair from the cafe and hurled it into the crowd. Fortunately it overshot and went through the windscreen of the Packard. However the waiters, the kitchen staff and the proprietor of the cafe now rushed out and began to attack everyone who swayed, stumbled or sat on their furniture. Everyone yelled at everyone else in five languages. Passing cars halted to watch the melee, the traffic backed up in three directions, and every stopped car sounded its horn. A dog struggled free of its leash and started biting people's legs in a frenzy of excitement. Everyone got off the bus. The brawling crowd became bigger by the second. Drivers who had stopped to watch the fun regretted it, for when the fight engulfed their cars they were unable to move away (because everyone else had stopped too) and they had to lock their doors and roll up their windows while men, women and children, Arabs and Greeks and Syrians and Jews and Australians and Scotsmen, jumped on their roofs and fought on their bonnets and fell on their running-boards and bled all over their paintwork. Somebody fell through the window of the tailor's shop next to the cafe, and a frightened goat ran into the souvenir shop which flanked the cafe on the other side and began to knock down all the tables laden with china and pottery and glass. A baboon came from somewhere - it had

probably been riding the goat, in a common form of street entertainment - and ran across the heads in the crowd, nimble-footed, to disappear in the direction of Alexandria. A horse broke free of its harness and bolted along the street between the lines of cars. From a window above the cafe a woman emptied a bucket of dirty water into the melee. Nobody noticed.

At last the police arrived.

When people heard the whistles, suddenly the shoves and pushes and insults which had started their own individual fights seemed a lot less important. There was a scramble to get away before the arrests began. The crowd diminished rapidly. Wolff, who had fallen over early in the proceedings, picked himself up and strolled across the road to watch the denoument. By the time six people had been handcuffed it was all over, and there was no one left fighting except for an old woman in black and a one-legged beggar feebly shoving each other in the gutter. The cafe proprietor, the tailor, and the owner of the souvenir shop were wringing their hands and berating the police for not coming sooner while they mentally doubled and trebled the damamge for insurance purposes.

The bus driver had broken his arm, but all the other injuries were cuts and bruises.

There was only one death: the goat had been bitten by the dog and consequently had to be destroyed.

When the police tried to move the two crashed cars, they discovered that during the fight the street urchins had jacked up the rear ends of both vehicles and stolen the tyres.

Every single light bulb in the bus had also disappeared.

And so had one British Army briefcase.

*

Alex Wolff was feeling pleased with himself as he walked briskly

through the alleys of Old Cairo. A week ago the task of prising secrets out of GHQ had seemed close to impossible. Now it looked as if he had pulled it off. The idea of getting Abdullah to orchestrate a street fight had been brilliant.

He wondered what would be in the briefcase.

Abdullah's house looked like all the other huddled slums. Its cracked and peeling facade was irregularly dotted with small misshapen windows. The entrance was a low doorless arch with a dark passage beyond. Wolff ducked under the arch, went along the passage, and climbed a stone spiral staircase. At the top he pushed through a curtain and entered Abdullah's living-room.

The room was like its owner - dirty, comfortable and rich. Three small children and a puppy chased each other around the expensive sofas and inlaid tables. In an alcove by a window an old woman worked on a tapestry. Another woman was drifting out of the room as Wolff walked in: there was no strict Muslim separation of the sexes here, as there had been in Wolff's boyhood home. In the middle of the floor Abdullah sat cross-legged on an embroidered cushion with a baby in his lap. He looked up at Wolff and smiled broadly. 'My friend, what a success we have had!'

Wolff sat on the floor opposite him. 'It was wonderful,' he said. 'You're a magician.'

'Such a riot! And the bus arriving at just the right moment - and the baboon running away ... '

Wolff looked more closely at what Abdullah was doing. On the floor beside him was a pile of wallets, handbags, purses and watches. As he spoke he picked up a handsome tooled leather wallet. He took from it a wad of Egyptian banknotes, some postage stamps, and a tiny gold pencil, and put them somewhere under his robe. Then he put down the wallet, picked up a handbag, and began to rifle

through that.

Wolff realised where they had come from. 'You old rogue,' he said. 'You had your boys in the crowd picking pockets.'

Abdullah grinned, showing his steel tooth. 'To go to all that trouble and then steal only one briefcase ... '

'But you have got the briefcase.'

'Of course.'

Wolff relaxed. Abdullah made no move to produce the case. Wolff said: 'Why don't you give it to me?'

'Immediately,' Abdullah said. Still he did nothing. After a moment he said: 'You were to pay me another fifty pounds on delivery.'

Wolff counted out the notes and they disappeared beneath the grubby robe. Abdullah leaned forward, holding the baby to his chest with one arm, and with the other reached under the cushion he was sitting on and pulled out the briefcase.

Wolff took it from him and examined it. The lock was broken. He felt cross: surely there should be a limit to duplicity. He made himself speak calmly. 'You've opened it already.'

Abdullah shrugged. He said: 'Maaleesh.' It was a conveniently ambiguous word which meant both 'Sorry' and 'So what?'

Wolff sighed. He had been in Europe too long; he had forgotten how things were done at home.

He lifted the lid of the case. Inside was a sheaf of ten or twelve sheets of paper closely typewritten in English. As he began to read someone put a tiny coffee cup beside him. He glanced up to see a beautiful young girl. He said to Abdullah: 'Your daughter?'

Abdullah laughed. 'My wife.'

Wolff took another look at the girl. She seemed about fourteen years old. He turned his attention back to the papers.

He read the first, then with growing incredulity leafed through the rest.

He put them down. 'Dear God,' he said softly. He started to laugh.

He had stolen a complete set of barracks canteen menus for the month of June.

*

Vandam said to Colonel Bogge: 'I've issued a notice reminding officers that General Staff papers are not to be carried about the town other than in exceptional circumstances.'

Bogge was sitting behind his big curved desk, polishing the red cricket ball with his handkerchief. 'Good idea,' he said. 'Keep chaps on their toes.'

Vandam went on: 'One of my informants, the new girl I told you about - '

'The tart.'

'Yes.' Vandam resisted the impulse to tell Bogge that 'tart' was not the right word for Elene. 'She heard a rumour that the riot had been organised by Abdullah - '

'Who's he?'

'He's a kind of Egyptian Fagin, and he also happens to be an informant, although selling me information is the least of his many enterprises.'

'For what purpose was the riot organised, according to this rumour?'

'Theft.'

'I see.' Bogge looked dubious.

'A lot of stuff was stolen, but we have to consider the possibility that the main object of the exercise was the briefcase.'

'A conspiracy!' Bogge said with a look of amused scepticism.

'But what would this Abdullah want with our canteen menus, eh?' He laughed.

'He wasn't to know what the briefcase contained. He may simply have assumed that they were secret papers.'

'I repeat the question,' Bogge said with the air of a father patiently coaching a child. 'What would he want with secret papers?'

'He may have been put up to it.'

'By whom?'

'Alex Wolff.'

'Who?'

'The Assyut knife man.'

'Oh, now really, Major, I thought we had finished with all that.'

Bogge's phone rang, and he picked it up. Vandam took the opportunity to cool off a little. The truth about Bogge, Vandam reflected, was probably that he had no faith in himself, no trust in his own judgement; and, lacking the confidence to make real decisions, he played one-upmanship, scoring points off people in a smart-alec fashion to give himself the illusion that he <u>was</u> clever after all. Of course Bogge had no idea whether the briefcase theft was significant or not. He might have listened to what Vandam had to say and then made up his own mind; but he was frightened of that. He could not engage in a fruitful discussion with a subordinate, because he spent all his intellectual energy looking for ways to trap you in a contradiction or catch you in an error or pour scorn on your ideas; and by the time he had finished making himself feel superior that way the decision had been taken, for better or worse and more or less by accident, in the heat of the exchange.

Bogge was saying: 'Of course, sir, I'll get on it right away.' Vandam wondered how he coped with superiors. The Colonel hung up.

He said: 'Now, then, where were we?'

'The Assyut murderer is still at large,' Vandam said. 'It may be significant that soon after his arrival in Cairo a General Staff officer is robbed of his briefcase.'

'Containing canteen menus.'

Here we go again, Vandam thought. With as much grace as he could muster he said: 'In Intelligence, we don't believe in coincidence, do we?'

'Don't lecture me, laddie. Even if you were right - and I'm sure you're not - what could we do about it, other than issue the notice you've sent out?'

'Well. I've talked to Abdullah. He denies all knowledge of Alex Wolff, and I think he's lying.'

'If he's a thief, why don't you tip off the Egyptian police about him?'

And what would be the point of that? thought Vandam. He said: 'They know all about him. They can't arrest him because too many senior officers are making too much money from his bribes. But we could pull him in and interrogate him, sweat him a little. He's a man without loyalty, he'll change sides at the drop of a hat - '

'General Staff Intelligence does not pull people in and sweat them, Major - '

'Field Security can, or even the Military Police.'

Bogge smiled. 'If I went to Field Security with this story of an Arab Fagin stealing canteen menus I'd be laughed out of the office.'

'But - '

'We've discussed this long enough, Major - too long, in fact.'

'For Christ's sake - '

Bogge raised his voice. 'I don't believe the riot was

organised, I don't believe Abdullah intended to steal the briefcase, and I don't believe Wolff is a Nazi spy. Is that clear?'

'Look, all I want - '

'Is that clear?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Good. Dismissed.'

Vandam went out.

I am a small boy. My father told me how old I am, but I forgot. I will ask him again next time he comes home. My father is a soldier. The place he goes to is called a Sudan. A Sudan is a long way away.

I go to school. I learn the Koran. The Koran is a holy book. I also learn to read and write. Reading is easy, but it is difficult to write without making a mess. Sometimes I pick cotton or take the beasts to drink.

My mother and my grandmother look after me. My grandmother is a famous person. Practically everyone in the whole world comes to see her when they are sick. She gives them medicines made of herbs.

She gives me treacle. I like it mixed with curdled milk. I lie on top of the oven in my kitchen and she tells me stories. My favourite story is the ballad of Zahran, the hero of Denshway. When she tells it, she always says that Denshway is nearby. She must be getting old and forgetful, because Denshway is a long way away, I walked there once with Abdel and it took us all morning.

Denshway is where the British were shooting pigeons when one of their bullets set fire to a barn. All the men of the village come running to find out who had started the fire. One of the soldiers was frightened by the sight of all the strong men of the village running toward him, so he fired at them. There was a fight between the soldiers and the villagers. Nobody won the fight, but the soldier who had fired on the barn was killed. Soon more soldiers came and arrested all the men in the village.

The soldiers made a thing out of wood called a scaffold. I don't know what a scaffold is but it is used to hang people. I don't know what happens to people when they are hanged. Some of

the villagers were hanged and the others were flogged. I know about flogging. It is the worst thing in the world, even worse than hanging, I should think.

Zahran was the first to be hanged, for he had fought the hardest against the soldiers. He walked to the scaffold with his head high, proud that he had killed the man who set fire to the barn.

I wish I were Zahran.

I have never seen a British soldier, but I know that I hate them.

My name is Anwar el-Sadat, and I am going to be a hero.

*

Sadat fingered his moustache. He was rather pleased with it. He was only twenty-two years old, and in his captain's uniform he looked a bit like a boy soldier: the moustache made him seem older. He needed all the authority he could get, for what he was about to propose was - as usual - faintly ludicrous. At these little meetings he was at pains to talk and act as if the handful of hotheads in the room really were going to throw the British out of Egypt any day now.

He deliberately made his voice a little deeper as he began to speak. 'We have all been hoping that Rommel would defeat the British in the desert and so liberate our country.' He looked around the room: a good trick, that, in large or small meetings, for it made each one think Sadat was talking to him personally. 'Now we have some very bad news. Hitler has agreed to give Egypt to the Italians.'

Sadat was exaggerating: this was not news, it was a rumour. Furthermore most of the audience knew it to be a rumour. However, melodrama was the order of the day, and they responded with angry

murmurs.

Sadat continued: 'I propose that the Free Officers Movement should negotiate a treaty with Germany, under which we would organise an uprising against the British in Cairo, and they would guarantee the independence and sovereignty of Egypt after the defeat of the British.' As he spoke the risibility of the situation struck him afresh: here he was, a peasant boy just off the farm, talking to half a dozen discontented subalterns about negotiations with the German Reich. And yet, who else would represent the Egyptian people? The British were conquerors, the Parliament was a puppet, and the King was a foreigner.

There was another reason for the proposal, one which would not be discussed here, one which Sadat would not admit to himself except in the middle of the night: Abdel Nasser had been posted to the Sudan with his unit, and his absence gave Sadat a chance to win for himself the position of leader of the rebel movement.

He pushed the thought out of his mind, for it was ignoble. He had to get the others to agree to the proposal, then to agree to the means of carrying it out.

It was Kemel who spoke first. 'But will the Germans take us seriously?' he asked. Sadat nodded, as if he too thought that was an important consideration. In fact he and Kemel had agreed beforehand that Kemel should ask this question, for it was a red herring. The real question was whether the Germans could be trusted to keep to any agreement they made with a group of unofficial rebels: Sadat did <u>not</u> want the meeting to discuss that. It was unlikely that the Germans would stick to their part of the bargain; but if the Egyptians did rise up against the British, and if they were then betrayed by the Germans, they would see that nothing but independence was good enough - and perhaps, too, they would turn for leadership

to the man who had organised the uprising. Such hard political realities were not for meetings such as this: they were too sophisticated, too calculating. Kemel was the only person with whom Sadat could discuss tactics. Kemel was a policeman, a detective with the Cairo force, a shrewd, careful man: perhaps police work had made him cynical.

The others began to talk about whether it would work. Sadat made no contribution to the discussion. Let them talk, he thought; it's what they really like to do. When it came to action they usually let him down.

As they argued, Sadat recalled the failed revolution of the previous summer. It had started with the sheik of al-Azhar, who had preached: 'We have nothing to do with the war.' Then the Egyptian parliament, in a rare display of independence, had adopted the policy: 'Save Egypt from the scourge of war.' Until then the Egyptian Army had been fighting side by side with the British Army in the desert, but now the British ordered the Egyptians to lay down their arms and withdraw. The Egyptians were happy to withdraw but did not want to be disarmed. Sadat saw a heaven-sent opportunity to foment strife. He and many other young officers refused to hand in their guns and planned to march on Cairo. To Sadat's great disappointment, the British immediately yielded and let them keep their weapons. Sadat continued to try to fan the spark of rebellion into the flame of revolution, but the British had outmanoeuvred him by giving way. The march on Cairo was a fiasco: Sadat's unit arrived at the assembly point but nobody else came. They washed their vehicles, sat down, waited a while, then went on to their camp.

Six months later Sadat had suffered another failure. This time it centred on Egypt's fat, licentious, Turkish king. The

British gave an ultimatum to King Farouk: either he was to instruct his Premier to form a new, pro-British government, or he was to abdicate. Under pressure the king had summoned Mustafa el-Nahas Pasha and ordered him to form a new government. Sadat was no royalist, but he was an opportunist: he announced that this was a violation of Egyptian sovereignty, and the young officers marched to the palace to salute the king in protest. Once again Sadat tried to push the rebellion farther. His plan was that to surround the palace in token defence of the king. Once again, he was the only one who turned up.

He had been bitterly disappointed on both occasions. He had felt like abandoning the whole rebel cause: let the Egyptians go to hell their own way, he had thought in the moments of blackest despair. Yet those moments passed, for he knew the cause was right and he knew he was smart enough to serve it well.

'But we haven't any means of contacting the Germans.' It was Imam speaking, one of the pilots. Sadat was pleased that they were already discussing how to do it rather than whether to.

Kemel had the answer to the question. 'We might send the message by plane.'

'Yes!' Imam was young and fiery. 'One of us could go up on a routine patrol and then divert from the course and land behind German lines.'

One of the older pilots said: 'On his return he would have to account for his diversion ... '

'He could not come back at all,' Imam said, his expression turning forlorn as swiftly as it had become animated.

Sadat said quietly: 'He could come back with Rommel.'

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Imam's eyes lit up again, and Sadat knew that the young pilot was seeing himself and Rommel marching into Cairo at the head of an army of liberation. Sadat decided that Imam should be the one to take the message.

'Let us agree on the text of the message,' Sadat said democratically. Nobody noticed that such a clear decision had not

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been required on the question of whether a message should be sent at all. 'I think we should make four points. One: We are honest Egyptians who have an organisation within the army. Two: Like you, we are fighting the British. Three: We are able to recruit a rebel army to fight on your side. Four: We will organise an uprising against the British in Cairo, if you will in return guarantee the independence and sovereignty of Egypt after the defeat of the British.' He paused. With a frown, he added: 'I think perhaps we should offer them some token of our good faith.'

There was a silence. Kemel had the answer to this question, too, but it would look better coming from one of the others.

Imam rose to the occasion. 'We could send some useful military information along with the message.'

Kemel now pretended to oppose the idea. 'What sort of information could we get? I can't imagine - '

'Aerial photographs of British positions.'

'How is that possible?'

'We can do it on a routine patrol, with an ordinary camera.'

Kemel looked dubious. 'What about developing the film?'

'Not necessary,' Imam said excitedly. 'We can just send the film.'

'Just one film?'

'As many as we like.'

Sadat said: 'I think Imam is right.' Once again they were discussing the practicalities of an idea instead of its risks. There was only one more hurdle to jump. Sadat knew from bitter experience that these rebels were terribly brave until the moment came when they really had to stick their necks out. He said: 'That leaves only the question of which of us will fly the plane.' As he spoke he looked around the room, letting his eyes rest finally on

Imam.

After a moment's hesitation, Imam stood up.

Sadat's eyes blazed with triumph.

*

Two days later Kemel walked the three miles from central Cairo to the suburb where Sadat lived. As a detective-inspector, Kemel had the use of an official car whenever he wanted it, but he rarely used one to go to rebel meetings, for security reasons. In all probability his police colleagues would be sympathetic to the Free Officers Movement; still, he was not in a hurry to put them to the test.

Kemel was fifteen years older than Sadat, yet his attitude to the younger man was one almost of hero-worship. Kemel shared Sadat's cynicism, his realistic understanding of the levers of political power; but Sadat had something more, and that was a burning idealism which gave him unlimited energy and boundless hope.

Kemel wondered how to tell him the news.

The message to Rommel had been typed out, signed by Sadat and all the leading Free Officers except the absent Nasser, and sealed in a big brown envelope. The aerial photographs of British positions had been taken. Imam had taken off in his Gladiator, with Baghdadi following in a second plane. They had touched down in the desert to pick up Kemel, who had given the brown envelope to Imam and climbed into Baghdadi's plane. Imam's face had been shining with youthful idealism.

Kemel thought: How will I break it to Sadat?

It was the first time Kemel had flown. The desert, so featureless from ground level, had been an endless mosaic of shapes and patterns: the patches of gravel, the dots of vegetation, and

the carved volcanic hills. Baghdadi said: 'You're going to be cold,' and Kemel thought he was joking - the desert was like a furnace - but as the little plane climbed the temperature dropped steadily, and soon he was shivering in his thin cotton shirt.

After a while both planes had turned due east, and Baghdadi spoke into his radio, telling base that Imam had veered off course and was not replying to radio calls. As expected, base told Baghdadi to follow Imam. This little pantomime was necessary so that Baghdadi, who was to return, should not fall under suspicion.

They flew over an army encampment. Kemel saw tanks, lorries, field guns and jeeps. A bunch of soldiers waved: they must be British, Kemel thought. Both planes climbed. Directly ahead they saw signs of battle: great clouds of dust, explosions, and gunfire. They turned ~~xxxxx~~ to pass to the south of the battlefield.

Kemel had thought: We flew over a British base, then a battlefield - next we should come to a German base.

Ahead, Imam's plane lost height. Instead of following, Baghdadi climbed a little more - Kemel had the feeling that the Gladiator was near its ceiling - and peeled off to the south. Looking out of the plane to the right, Kemel saw what the pilots had seen: a small camp with a cleared strip marked as a runway.

Approaching Sadat's house, Kemel recalled how elated he had felt, up there in the sky above the desert, when he realised they were behind German lines, and the treaty was almost in Rommel's hands.

He knocked on the door. He still did not know what to tell Sadat.

It was an ordinary family house, rather poorer than Kemel's home. In a moment Sadat came to the door, wearing a galabiya and smoking a pipe. He looked at Kemel's face, and said immediately:

'It went wrong.'

'Yes.' Kemel stepped inside. They went into the little room Sadat used as a study. There was a desk, a shelf of books, and some ~~xxx~~ cushions on the bare floor. On the desk an army pistol lay on top of a pile of papers.

They sat down. Kemel said: 'We found a German camp with a runway. Imam descended. Then the Germans started to fire on his plane. It was an English plane, you see - we never considered that.'

Sadat said: 'But surely, they could see he was not hostile - he did not fire, did not drop bombs - '

'He just kept on going down,' Kemel went on. 'He waggled his wings, and I suppose he tried to raise them on the radio; anyway they kept firing. The tail of the plane took a hit.'

'Oh, God.'

'He seemed to be going down very fast. The Germans stopped firing. Somehow he managed to land on his wheels. The plane seemed to bounce. I don't think Imam could control it any longer. Certainly he could not slow down. He went off the hard surface and into a patch of sand; the port wing hit the ground and snapped; the nose dipped and ploughed into the sand; then the fuselage fell on the broken wing.'

Sadat was staring at Kemel, blank-faced and quite still, his pipe going cold in his hand. In his mind Kemel saw the plane lying broken on the sand, with a German fire truck and ambulance speeding along the runway toward it, followed by ten or fifteen soldiers. He would never forget how, like a blossom opening its petals, the belly of the plane had burst skyward in a riot of red and yellow flame.

'It blew up,' he told Sadat.

'And Imam?'

'He could not possibly live through such a fire.'

'We must try again,' Sadat said. 'We must find another way to get a message through.'

Kemel stared at him, and realised that his brisk tone of voice was phoney. Sadat tried to light his pipe, but the ~~fing~~ hand holding the match was shaking too much. Kemel looked closely, and saw that Sadat had tears in his eyes.

'The poor boy,' Sadat whispered.

Wolff was back at square one: he knew where the secrets were, but he could not get at them.

He might have stolen another briefcase the way he had taken the first, but that would begin to look, to the British, like a conspiracy. He might have thought of another way to steal a briefcase, but even that might lead to a security clampdown. Besides, one briefcase on one day was not enough for his needs: he had to have regular, unimpeded access to secret papers.

That was why he was shaving Sonja's pubic hair.

Her hair was black and coarse, and it grew very quickly. Because she shaved it regularly she was able to wear her translucent trousers without the usual heavy, sequinned G-string on top. The extra measure of physical freedom - and the persistent and accurate rumour that she had nothing on under the trousers - had helped to make her the leading belly-dancer of the day.

Wolff dipped the brush into the bowl and began to lather her.

She lay on the bed, her back propped up by a pile of pillows, watching him suspiciously. She was not keen on this, his latest perversion. She thought she was not going to like it.

Wolff knew better.

He knew how her mind worked, and he knew her body better than she did, and he wanted something from her.

He stroked her with the soft shaving-brush and said: 'I've thought of another way to get into those briefcases.'

'What?'

He did not answer her immediately. He put down the brush and picked up the razor. He tested its sharp edge with his thumb, then looked at her. She was watching him with horrid fascination. He

leaned closer, spread her legs a little more, put the razor to her skin, and drew it upward with a light, careful stroke.

He said: 'I'm going to befriend a British officer.'

She did not answer: she was only half-listening to him. He wiped the razor on a towel. With one finger of his left hand he touched the shaved patch, pulling down to stretch the skin, then he brought the razor close.

'Then I'll bring the officer here,' he said.

Sonja said: 'Oh, no.'

He touched her with the edge of the razor and gently scraped upward.

She began to breathe harder.

He wiped the razor and stroked again once, twice, three times.

'Somehow I'll get the officer to bring his briefcase.'

He put his finger on her most sensitive spot and shaved around it. She closed her eyes.

He poured hot water from a kettle into a bowl on the floor beside him. He dipped a flannel into the water and wrung it out.

'Then I'll go through the briefcase while the officer is in bed with you.'

He pressed the hot flannel against her shaved skin.

She gave a sharp cry like a cornered animal: 'Ahh, God!'

Wolff slipped out of his bathrobe and stood naked. He picked up a bottle of soothing skin oil, poured some into the palm of his right hand, and knelt on the bed beside Sonja; then he anointed her pubis.

'I won't,' she said as she began to writhe.

He added more oil, massaging it into all the folds and crevices. With his left hand he held her by the throat, pinning her down.

'You will.'