

'Sometimes you should show that you are frightened, or obsessed or crazy for something. It's human, and it's a sign that you care. When you're so calm all the time we think it's because you don't give a damn.'

Vandam said: 'Well, people should know better. Lovers should know better, and so should friends, and bosses if they're any good.' He said this honestly, but in the back of his mind he realised that there was indeed an element of ruthlessness, of cold-heartedness, in his famous equanimity.

'And if they don't know better ... ?' She had stopped crying now.

'I should be different? No.' He wanted to be honest with her now. He could have told her a lie to make her happy: Yes, you're right, I'll try to be different. But what was the point? If he could not be himself with her, it was all worthless, he would be manipulating her the way all men had manipulated her, the way he manipulated people he did not love. So he told her the truth. 'You see, this is the way I win. I mean, win everything ... the game of life - so to speak.' He gave a wry grin. 'I am detached. I look at everything from a distance. I do care, but I refuse to do pointless things, symbolic gestures, empty fits of rage. Either we love each other or we don't, and all the flowers in the world won't make any difference. But the work I did today could affect whether we live or die. I did think of you, all day; but each time I thought of you, I turned my mind to more urgent things. I work efficiently, I set priorities, and I don't worry about you when I know you're okay. Can you imagine yourself getting used to that?'

She gave him a watery smile. 'I'll ~~give~~ try.'

And all the time, in the back of his mind, he was thinking:

For how long? Do I want this woman forever? What if I don't?

He pushed the thought down. Right now it was low priority. 'What I want to say, after all that, is: Forget about tonight, don't go, we'll manage without you. But I can't. We need you, and it's terribly important.'

'That's okay, I understand.'

'But first of all, may I kiss you Hello?'

'Yes, please.'

Kneeling beside the arm of her chair, he took her face in his big hand, and kissed her lips. Her mouth was soft and yielding, and slightly moist. He savoured the feel and the taste of her. Never had he felt like this, as though he could go on kissing, just so, all night and never get tired.

Eventually she drew back, took a deep breath, and said: 'My, my, I do believe you mean it.'

'You may be sure of that.'

She laughed. 'When you said that, you were the old Major Vandam for a moment - the one I used to know before I knew you.'

'And your "My, my," in that provocative voice was the old Elene.'

'Brief me, Major.'

'I'll have to get out of kissing distance.'

'Sit over there and cross your legs. Anyway, what were you doing today?'

Vandam crossed the room to the drinks cupboard and found the gin. 'A major in Intelligence has disappeared - along with a briefcase full of secrets.'

'Wolff?'

'Could be. It turns out that this major has been disappearing at lunch time, a couple of times a week, and nobody knows where he's

been going. I've a hunch that he might have been meeting Wolff.'

'So why would he disappear?'

Vandam shrugged. 'Something went wrong.'

'What was in his briefcase today?'

Vandam wondered how much to tell her. 'A rundown of our defences which was so complete that we think it could alter the result of the next battle.' Smith had also been in possession of Vandam's proposed deception plan, but Vandam did not tell Elene this: he trusted her all the way, but he also had security instincts. He finished: 'So, we'd better catch Wolff tonight.'

'But it might be too late already!'

'No. We found the decrypt of one of Wolff's signals, a while back. It was timed at midnight. Spies have a set time for reporting, generally the same time every day. At other times their masters won't be listening - at least, not on the right wavelength - so even if they do signal nobody picks it up. Therefore, I think ~~Wolff~~ Wolff will send this information tonight at midnight - unless I catch him first.' He hesitated, then changed his mind about security and decided she ought to know the full importance of what she was doing. 'There's something else. He's using a code based on a novel called Rebecca. I've got a copy of the novel. If I can get the key to the code - '

'What's that?'

'Just a piece of paper telling him how to use the book to encode signals.'

'Go on.'

'If I can get the key to the Rebecca code, I can impersonate Wolff over the radio and send false information to Rommel. It could turn the tables completely - it could save Egypt. But I must have the key.'

'All right. What's tonight's plan?'

'It's the same as before, only more so. I'll be in the restaurant with Jakes, and we'll both have pistols.'

Her eyes widened. 'You've got a gun?'

'I haven't got it now. Jakes is bringing it to the restaurant. Anyway, there will be two other men in the restaurant, and six more outside on the pavement, trying to look inconspicuous. There will also be civilian cars ready to block all exits from the street at the sound of a whistle. No matter what Wolff does tonight, if he wants to see you he's going to be caught.'

There was a knock at the apartment door.

Vandam said: 'What's that?'

'The door - '

'Yes, I know, are you expecting someone? Or something?'

'No, of course not, it's almost time for me to leave.'

Vandam frowned. Alarm bells were sounding. 'I don't like this. Don't answer.'

'All right,' Elene said. Then she changed her mind. 'I have to answer. It might be my father. Or news of him.'

'Okay, answer it.'

Elene went out of the living-room. Vandam sat listening. The knock came again, then she opened the door.

Vandam heard her say: 'Alex!'

Vandam whispered: 'Christ!'

He heard Wolff's voice. 'You're all ready. How delightful.' It was a deep, confident voice, thick drawled English spoken with only the faintest trace of an unidentifiable accent.

Elene said: 'But we were to meet in the restaurant - '

'I know. May I come in?'

Vandam leaped over the back of the sofa and lay on the floor behind it.

Elene said: 'Of course ... '

Wolff's voice came closer. 'My dear, you look exquisite tonight.'

Vandam thought: Smooth bastard.

The front door slammed shut.

Wolff said: 'This way?'

'Um ... yes ... '

Vandam heard the two of them enter the room. Wolff said: 'What a lovely apartment. Mikis Aristopoulos must pay you well.'

'Oh, I don't work there regularly. He's a distant relation, it's family, I help out.'

'Uncle. He must be your uncle.'

'Oh ... great-uncle, second cousin, something. He calls me his niece for simplicity.'

WWell. These are for you.'

'Oh, flowers. Thankyou.'

Vandam thought: Fuck that.

Wolff said: 'May I sit down?'

'Of course.'

Vandam felt the sofa shift as Wolff lowered his weight on to it. Wolff was a big man. Vandam remembered grappling with him in the alley. He also remembered the knife, and his hand went to the wound on his cheek. He thought: What can I do?

He could jump Wolff now. The spy was here, practically in his hands! They were about the same weight, and evenly matched - except for the knife. Wolff had had the knife that night when he had been dining with Sonja, so presumably he took it everywhere with him, and had it now.

If they fought, and Wolff had the advantage of the knife, Wolff would win. It had happened before, in the alley. Vandam

touched his cheek again.

He thought: Why didn't I bring the gun here?

If they fought, and Wolff won, what would happen then? Seeing Vandam in Elene's apartment, Wolff would know she had been trying to trap him. What would he do to her? In Istanbul, in a similar situation, he had slit the girl's throat.

Vandam blinked to shut out the awful image.

Wolff said: 'I see you were having a drink before I arrived. May I join you?'

'Of course,' Elene said again. 'What would you like?'

'What's that?' Wolff sniffed. 'Oh, a little gin would be very nice.'

Vandam thought: That was my drink. Thank God Elene didn't have a drink as well - two glasses would have given the game away. He heard ice clink.

'Cheers!' Wolff said.

'Cheers.'

'You don't seem to like it.'

'The ice has melted.'

Vandam knew why she had made a face when she sipped his drink: it had been straight gin. She was coping so well with the situation, he thought. What did she think he, Vandam, was planning to do? She must have guessed by now where he was hiding. She would be trying desperately not to look in this direction. Poor Elene! Once again she had got more than she bargained for.

Vandam hoped she would be passive, take the line of least resistance, and trust him.

Did Wolff still plan to go to the Oasis restaurant? Perhaps he did. If only I could be sure of that, Vandam thought, I could leave it all to Jakes.

Wolff said: 'You seem nervous, Elene. Did I confuse your plans by coming here? If you want to go and finish getting ready, or something - not that you look a white less than perfect right now - just leave me here with the gin bottle.'

'No, no ... Well, we did say we'd meet at the restaurant ... '

'And here I am, altering everything at the last minute again. Tobbe truthful, I'm bored with restaurants, and yet they are, so to speak, the conventional meeting-place; so I arrange to have dinner with people then when the time comes I can't face it, and I think of something else to do.'

So they're not going to the Oasis, Vandam thought. Damn.

Elene said: 'What do you want to do?'

'May I surprise you again?'

Vandam thought: Make him tell you!

Elene said: 'All right.'

Vandam groaned inwardly. If Wolff would reveal where they were going, Vandam could contact Jakes and have the whole ambush moved to the new venue. Elene was not thinking the right way. It was understandable: she sounded terrified.

Wolff said: 'Shall we go?'

'All right.'

The sofa creaked as Wolff got up. Vandam thought: I could go for him now!

Too risky.

He heard them leave the room. He stayed where he was for a moment. He heard Wolff, in the hallway, say: 'After you.' Then the front door was slammed shut.

Vandam stood up. He would have to follow them, and take the first available opportunity of calling GHQ and contacting Jakes. Elene did not have a telephone, not many people did in Cairo.

Even if she had there was no time now. He went to the front door and listened. He heard nothing. He opened it a fraction: they had gone. He went out, closed the door, and hurried along the corridor and down the stairs.

As he stepped out of the building he saw them on the other side of the road. Wolff was holding open a car door for Elene to get in. It was not a taxi: Wolff must have rented, borrowed or stolen a car for the evening. Wolff closed the door on Elene and walked around to the driver's side. Elene looked out of the window and caught Vandam's eye. She stared at him. He looked away from her, afraid to make any kind of gesture in case Wolff should see it.

Vandam walked to his motorcycle, climbed on, and started the engine.

Wolff's car pulled away, and Vandam followed.

The city traffic was still heavy. Vandam was able to keep five or six cars between himself and Wolff without risking losing Wolff. It was dusk, but few cars had their lights on.

Vandam wondered where Wolff was going. They were sure to stop somewhere, unless the man intended to drive around all night. If only they would stop someplace where there was a telephone ...

They headed out of the city, toward Giza. Darkness fell and Wolff illuminated the lights of the car. Vandam left his motorcycle lights off, so that Wolff would not be able to see that he was being followed.

It was a nightmare ride. Even in daylight, in the city, riding a motorcycle was a little hair-raising: the roads were strewn with bumps, potholes, and treacherous patches of oil, and Vandam found he had to watch the surface as much as the traffic. The desert road was worse, and yet he now had to drive without lights and

keep an eye on the car ahead. Three or four times he almost came off the bike.

He was cold. Not anticipating this ride, he had worn only a short-sleeved uniform shirt, and at speed the wind cut through it. How far was Wolff planning to go?

The pyramids loomed ahead.

Vandam thought: No phone there.

Wolff's car slowed down. They were going to picnic by the pyramids. Vandam cut the motorcycle engine and coasted to a halt. Before Wolff had a chance to get out of the car, Vandam wheeled his bike off the road on to the sand. The desert was not level, except when seen from a distance, and he found a rocky hump behind which to lay down the motorcycle. He lay in the sand beside the hump and watched the car.

Nothing happened.

The car stayed still, its engine off, its interior dark. What were they doing in there? Vandam was seized by jealousy. He told himself not to be stupid - they were eating, that was all. Elene had told him about the last picnic: the smoked salmon, the cold chicken, the champagne. You could not kiss a girl with a mouthful of fish. Still, their fingers would touch as he handed her the wine ...

Shut up.

He decided to risk a cigarette. He moved behind the hump to light it, then cupped it in his hand, army fashion, to hide the glow as he returned to his vantage point.

Five cigarettes later the car doors opened.

The cloud had cleared and the moon was out. The whole landscape was dark-blue and silver, the complex shadow-work of the pyramids rising out of shining sand. Two dark figures got out

of the car and walked toward the nearest of the ancient tombs. Vandam could see that Elene walked with her arms folded across her chest, as if she were cold, or perhaps because she did not want to hold Wolff's hand. Wolff put an arm lightly across her shoulders, and she made no move to resist him.

They stopped at the base of the monument and talked. Wolff pointed upward, and Elene seemed to shake her head; Vandam guessed she did not want to climb. They walked around the base and disappeared behind the pyramid.

Vandam waited for them to emerge on the other side. They seemed to take a very long time. What were they doing behind there? The urge to go and see was almost irresistible.

He could get to the car now. He toyed with the idea of sabotaging it, rushing back to the city, and returning with his team. But Wolff would not be here when Vandam got back; it would be impossible to search the desert at night; by the morning Wolff might be miles away.

It was almost unbearable to watch and wait and do nothing, but Vandam knew it was the best course.

At last Wolff and Elene came back into view. He still had his arm around her. They returned to the car, and stood beside the door. Wolff put his hands on Elene's shoulders, said something, and leaned forward to kiss her.

Vandam stood up.

Elene gave Wolff her cheek, then turned away, slipping out of his grasp, and got into the car.

Vandam lay down on the sand again.

The desert silence was broken by the roar of Wolff's car. Vandam watched it turn in a wide circle and take the road. The headlights came on, and Vandam ducked his head involuntarily, although he was well concealed. The car passed him, heading toward

Cairo.

Vandam jumped up, wheeled his cycle on to the road, and kicked the starter. The engine would not turn over. Vandam cursed: he was terrified he might have got sand in the carburettor. He tried again, and this time it fired. He got on and followed the car.

The moonlight made it easier for him to spot the holes and bumps in the road surface, but it also made him more visible. He stayed well behind Wolff's car, knowing there was nowhere to go but Cairo. He wondered what Wolff planned next. Would he take Elene home? If so, where would he go afterward? He might lead Vandam to his base.

Vandam thought: I wish I had that gun.

Would Wolff take Elene to his home? The man had to be staying somewhere, had to have a bed in a room in a building in the city. Vandam was sure Wolff was planning to seduce Elene. Wolff had been rather patient and gentlemanly with her, but Vandam knew that in reality he was a man who liked to get his way quickly. Seduction might be the least of the dangers Elene faced. Vandam thought: What wouldn't I give for a phone!

~~At this point they had reached the outskirts of the city, and Vandam was obliged to pull up closer to the car, but fortunately there was plenty of traffic about. He contemplated stopping and giving a message to a policeman, or an officer, but Wolff was driving fast, and anyway, what would the message say? Vandam still did not know where Wolff was going.~~^y The reached the outskirts of the city, and Vandam was obliged to pull up closer to the car, but fortunately there was plenty of traffic about. He contemplated stopping and giving a message to a policeman, or an officer, but Wolff was driving fast, and anyway, what would the message say? Vandam still did not know where Wolff was going.

He began to suspect the answer when they crossed the bridge to Zamalek. This was where the dancer, Sonja, had her houseboat. It was surely not possible that Wolff was living there, Vandam thought, for the place had been under surveillance for days. But

perhaps he was reluctant to take Elene to his real home, and so was borrowing the houseboat.

Wolff parked in a street and got out. Vandam stood his motorcycle against a wall and hurriedly chained the wheel to prevent theft - he might need the bike again tonight.

He followed Wolff and Elene from the street to the towpath. From behind a bush he watched as they walked a short distance along the path. He wondered what Elene was thinking. Had she expected to be rescued before this? Would she trust that Vandam was still watching her? Would she now lose hope?

They stopped beside one of the boats - Vandam noted carefully which one - and Wolff helped Elene on to the gangplank. Vandam thought: Has it not occurred to Wolff that the houseboat might be under surveillance? Obviously not. Wolff followed Elene on to the deck, then opened a hatch. The two of them disappeared below.

Vandam thought: What now? This was surely his best chance to fetch help. Wolff must be intending to spend some time on the boat. But supposing that did not happen? Suppose, while Vandam was dashing to a phone, something went wrong - Elene insisted on being taken home, Wolff changed his plans, or they decided to go to a nightclub?

I could still lose the bastard, Vandam thought.

There must be a policeman around here somewhere.

'Hey!' he said in a stage whisper. 'Is anybody there? Police? This is Major Vandam. Hey, where are - '

A dark figure materialised from behind a tree. An Arab voice said: 'Yes?'

'Hello. I'm Major Vandam. Are you the police officer watching the houseboat?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Okay, listen. The man we're chasing is on the boat now. Do

you have a gun?'

'No, sir.'

'Damn.' Vandam considered whether he and the Arab could raid the boat on their own, and decided they could not: the Arab could not be trusted to fight enthusiastically, and in that confined space Wolff's knife could wreak havoc. 'Right, I want you to go to the nearest ^telephone, ring GHQ, and get a message through to Captain Jakes or Colonel Bogge, absolutely top priority: they are to come here in force and raid the houseboat immediately. Is that clear?'

'Captain Jakes or Colonel Bogge, GHQ, they are to raid the houseboat immediately. Yes, sir.'

'All right. Be quick!'

The Arab left at a trot.

Vandam found a position in which he was concealed from view but could still watch the houseboat and the towpath. A few minutes later the figure of a woman came along the path. Vandam thought she looked familiar. She boarded the houseboat, and Vandam realised she was Sonja.

He was relieved: at least Wolff could not molest Elene while there was another woman on the boat.

He settled down to wait.

- 22 -

The Arab was worried. 'Go to the nearest telephone,' the Englishman had said. Well, there were telephones in some of the nearby houses. But houses with phones were occupied by Europeans, who would not take kindly to an Egyptian - even a police officer - banging on their doors at eleven o'clock at night and demanding to use the phone. They would almost certainly refuse, with oaths and curses: it would be a humiliating experience. He was not in uniform, not even wearing his usual plain-clothes outfit of white shirt and black trousers, but was dressed like a fellah. They would not even believe he was a policeman.

There were no public phones on Zamalek that he knew of. That left him only one option: to phone from the station house. He headed that way, still trotting.

He was also worried about calling GHQ. It was an unwritten rule for Egyptian officials in Cairo that no one ever voluntarily contacted the British. It always meant trouble. The switchboard at GHQ would refuse to put through the call, or they would leave the message until morning - then deny they had ever received it - or they would tell him to call back later. And if anything went wrong there would be hell to pay. How, anyway, did he know that the man on the towpath had been genuine? He did ~~know~~ not know Major Vandam from Adam, and anyone could put on the uniform shirt of a major. Suppose it was a hoax? There was a certain type of young English officer who just loved to play practical jokes on well-meaning Egyptians.

He had a standard response to situations like this: pass the buck. Anyway, he had been instructed to report to his superior officer and no one else on this case. He would go to the station

house and from there, he decided, he would call Superintendent Kemel at home.

Kemel would know what to do.

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Elene stepped off the ladder and looked nervously around the interior of the houseboat. She had expected the decor to be sparse and nautical. In fact it was luxurious, if a little over-ripe. There were thick rugs, low divans, a couple of elegant occasional tables, and rich velvet floor-to-ceiling curtains which divided this area from the other half of the boat, which was presumably the bedroom. Opposite the curtains, where the boat narrowed to what had been its stern, was a tiny kitchen with small but modern fittings.

'Is this yours?' she asked Wolff.

'It belongs to a friend,' he said. ~~XXXXXX~~ 'Do sit down.'

Elene felt trapped. Where the hell was William Vandam?

Several times during the evening she had thought there was a motorcycle behind the car, but she had been unable to look carefully for fear of alerting Wolff. Every second, she had been expecting soldiers to surround the car, arrest Wolff, and set her free; and as the seconds turned into hours she had begun to wonder if it was all a dream, if William Vandam existed at all.

Now Wolff was going to the icebox, taking out a bottle of champagne, finding two glasses, unwrapping the silver foil from the top of the bottle, unwinding the wire fastening, pulling the cork with a loud pop, and pouring the champagne into the glasses and where the hell was William?

She was terrified of Wolff. She had had many liaisons with men, some of them casual, but she had always trusted the man, always known he would be kind, or if not kind, at least considerate. It was her body she was frightened for: if she let Wolff play with

her body, what kind of games would he invent? Her skin was sensitive, she was soft inside, so easy to hurt, so vulnerable lying on her back with her legs apart ... Tobbe like that with someone who loved her, someone who would be as gentle with her body as she herself, would be a joy - but with Wolff, who wanted only to use her body ... she shuddered.

'Are you cold?' Wolff said as he handed her a glass.

'No, I wasn't shivering ... '

He raised his glass. 'Your health.'

Her mouth was dry. She sipped the cold wine, then took a gulp. It made her feel a little better.

He sat beside her on the couch and twisted around to look at her. 'What a super evening,' he said. 'I enjoy your company so much. You're an enchantress.'

Here it comes, she thought.

He put his hand on her knee.

She froze.

'You're enigmatic,' he said. 'Desirable, rather aloof, very beautiful, sometimes naive and sometimes so knowing ... will you tell me something?'

'I expect so.' She did not look at him.

With his fingertip he traced the silhouette of her face: forehead, nose, lips, chin. He said: 'Why do you go out with me?'

What did he mean? Was it possible he suspected what she was really doing? Or was this just the next move in the game?

She looked at him and said: 'You're a very attractive man.'

'I'm glad you think so.' He put his hand on her knee again, and leaned forward to kiss her. She offered him her cheek, as she had done once before this evening. His lips brushed her skin, then he whispered: 'Why are you frightened of me?'

There was a noise up on deck - quick. light footsteps - and then the hatch opened.

Elene thought: William!

A high-heeled shoe and a woman's foot appeared. The woman came down, closing the hatch above her, and stepped off the ladder. Elene saw her face and recognised her as Sonja, the belly-dancer.

She thought: What on earth is going on?

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'All right, Sergeant,' Kemel said into the telephone. 'You did exactly the right thing in contacting me. I'll deal with everything myself. In fact, you may go off duty now.'

'Thankyou, sir,' said the sergeant. 'Goodnight.'

'Goodnight.' Kemel hung up. This was a catastrophe. The British had followed Alex Wolff to the houseboat, and Vandam was trying to organise a raid. The consequences would be twofold. First, the prospect of the Free Officers using the German's radio would vanish, and then there would be no possibility of negotiations with the Reich before Rommel conquered Egypt. Second, once the British discovered that the houseboat was a nest of spies, they would quickly figure out that Kemel had been concealing the facts and protecting the agents. Kemel regretted that he had not pushed Sonja harder, forced her to arrange a meeting within hours instead of days; but it was too late for regrets. What was he going to do now?

He went back into the bedroom and dressed quickly. From the bed his wife said softly: 'What is it?'

'Work,' he whispered.

'Oh, no.' She turned over.

He took his pistol from the locked drawer in the desk and put it in his jacket pocket, then he kissed his wife and left the house quietly. He got into his car and started the engine. He sat thinking for a minute. He had to consult Sadat about this, but that would take time. In the meanwhile Vandam might grow impatient, waiting at the houseboat, and do something precipitate. Vandam would have to be dealt with first, quickly; then he could go to Sadat's house.

Kemel pulled away, heading for Zamalek. He wanted time to think, slowly and clearly, but time was what he lacked. Should he kill Vandam? He had never killed a man and did not know whether he would be capable of it. It was years since he had so much as hit a man. And how would he cover up his involvement in all this? It might be days yet before the Germans reached Cairo - indeed it was possible, even at this stage, that they might be repulsed. Then there would be an investigation into what had happened on the towpath tonight, and sooner or later the blame would be laid at Kemel's door. He would probably be shot.

'Courage,' he said aloud, remembering the way Imam's stolen plane had burst into flames as it crash-landed in the desert.

He parked near the towpath. From the trunk of the car he took a length of rope. He stuffed the rope into the pocket of his jacket, and carried the gun in his right hand.

He held the gun reversed, for clubbing. How long since he had used it? Six years, he thought, not counting occasional target practice.

He reached the river bank. He looked at the silver Nile, the black shapes of the houseboats, the dim line of the towpath,

and the darkness of the bushes. Vandam would be in the bushes somewhere. Kemel stepped forward, walking softly.

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Vandam looked at his wristwatch in the glow of his cigarette. It was eleven-thirty. Clearly something had gone wrong. Either the Arab policeman had given the wrong message, or GHQ had been unable to locate Jakes, or Bogge had somehow fouled everything up. Vandam could not take the chance of letting Wolff get on the radio with the information he had now. There was nothing for it but to go aboard the houseboat himself, and risk everything.

He put out his cigarette, then he heard a footstep somewhere in the bushes. 'Who is it?' he hissed. 'Jakes?'

A dark figure emerged and whispered: 'It's me.'

Vandam could not recognise the whispered voice, nor could he see the face. 'Who?'

The figure stepped nearer and raised an arm. Vandam said: 'Who - ' then he realised that the arm was sweeping down in a blow. He jerked sideways, and something hit the side of his head and bounced on his shoulder. Vandam shouted with pain, and his right arm went numb. The arm was lifted again. Vandam stepped forward, reaching clumsily for his assailant with his left hand. The figure stepped back and struck again, and this time the blow landed squarely on top of Vandam's head. There was a moment of intense pain, then Vandam lost consciousness.

pricked

lightened the gun

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Kemel ~~dropped the truncheon~~ and knelt beside Vandam's prone figure. First he touched Vandam's chest, and was relieved to feel a strong heartbeat. Working quickly, he took off Vandam's sandals, removed the socks, rolled them into a ball and stuffed them into the unconscious man's mouth. That should stop him calling out. Next he rolled Vandam over, crossed his wrists behind his back, and

tied them together with the rope. With the other end of the rope he bound Vandam's ankles. Finally he tied the rope to a tree.

Vandam would come round in a few minutes, but he would find it impossible to move. Nor could he cry out. He would remain there until somebody stumbled on him. How soon was that likely to happen? Normally there might have been people in these bushes, young men with their sweethearts and soldiers with their girls, but tonight there had surely been enough comings and going here to frighten them away. There was a chance that a latecoming couple would see Vandam, or perhaps hear him groaning ... Kemel would have to take that chance, there was no point standing around and worrying.

He decided to take a quick look at the houseboat. He walked light-footedly along the towpath to the Jihan. There were lights on inside, but little curtains were drawn across the portholes. He was tempted to go aboard, but he wanted to consult with Sadat first, for he was not sure what should be done.

He turned around and headed back toward his car.

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Sonja said: 'Alex has told me all about you, Elene.' She smiled.

Elene smiled back. Was this the friend of Wolff's who owned the houseboat? Was Wolff living with her? Had he not expected her back so early? Why was neither of them angry, or puzzled, or embarrassed? Just for something to say, Elene asked her: 'Have you just come from the Cha-Cha Club?'

'Yes.'

'How was it?'

'As always - exhausting, thrilling, successful.'

Sonja was not a humble woman, clearly.

Wolff handed Sonja a glass of champagne. She took it without

looking at him, and said to Elene: 'So you work in Mikis' shop?'

'No, I don't,' Elene said, thinking: Are you really interested in this? 'I helped him for a few days, that's all. We're reall~~ed~~ed.'

'So you're Greek?'

'That's right.' The small talk was giving Elene confidence. Her fear receded. Whatever happened, Wolff was not likely to rape her at knife point in front of one of the most famous women in Egypt. Sonja gave her a breathing-space, at least. Willim~~am~~ was determined to capture Wolff before midnight -

Midnight!

She had almost forgotten. At midnight Wolff was to contact the enemy by wireless, and hand over the details of the defence line. But where was the radio? Was it here, on the boat? If it was somewhere else, Wolff would have to leave soon. If it was here, would he send his message in front of Elene and Sonja? What was in his mind?

He sat down beside Elene. She felt vaguely threatened, with the two of them either side of her. Wolff said: 'What a lucky man I am, to be sitting here with the two most beautiful women in Cairo.'

Elene looked straight ahead, not knowing what to say.

Wolff said: 'Isn't she beautiful, Sonja?'

'Oh, yes.' Sonja touched Elene's face, then took her chin and turned her head. 'Do you think I'm beautiful, Elene?'

'Of course.' Elene frowned. This was getting weird. It was almost as if -

'I'm so glad,' Sonja said, and she put her hand on Elene's knee.

And then Elene understood.

Everything fell into place: Wolff's patience, his phoney courtliness, the houseboat, the unexpected appearance of Sonja ... Elene realised she was not safe at all. Her fear of Wolff came back, stronger than before. The pair of them wanted to use her, and she would have no choice, she would have to lie there, mute and unresisting, while they did whatever they wanted, Wolff with the knife in one hand -

Stop it.

I won't be afraid. I can stand being mauled about by a pair of depraved old fools. There's more at stake here. Forget about your precious little body, think about the radio, and how to stop Wolff using it.

This threesome might be turned to advantage.

She looked furtively at her wristwatch. It was a quarter to midnight. Too late, now, to rely on William. She, Elene, was the only one who could stop Wolff.

And she thought she knew how.

A look passed between Sonja and Wolff like a signal. Each with a hand on one of Elene's thighs, they leaned across her and kissed each other in front of her eyes.

She looked at them. It was a long, lascivious kiss. She thought: What do they expect me to do?

They drew apart.

Wolff kissed Elene the same way. Elene was unresistant. Then she felt Sonja's hand on her chin. Sonja turned Elene's face toward her and kissed her lips.

Elene ~~thought~~ closed her eyes, thinking: It won't hurt me, it won't hurt.

It did not hurt, but it was strange, to be kissed so tenderly by a woman's mouth.

Elene thought: Somehow I have to get control of this scene.

Sonja pulled open her own blouse. She had big brown breasts. Wolff bent his head and took a nipple into his mouth. Elene felt Sonja pushing her head down. She realised she was supposed to follow Wolff's example. She did so. Sonja moaned.

All this was for Sonja's benefit: it was clearly her fantasy, her kink; she was the one who was panting and groaning now, not Wolff. Elene was afraid that any minute now Wolff might break away and go to his radio. As she went mechanically through the motions of making love to Sonja, she cast about in her mind for ways to drive Wolff out of his mind with lust.

But the whole scene was so silly, so farcical, that everything she thought of doing seemed merely comical.

I've got to keep Wolff from that radio.

What's the key to all this? What do they really want?

She moved her face away from Sonja and kissed Wolff. He turned his mouth to hers. She found his hand, and pressed it between her thighs. He breathed deeply, and Elene thought: At least he's interested.

Sonja tried to push them apart.

Wolff looked at Sonja, then slapped her face, hard.

Elene gasped with surprise. Was this the key? It must be a game they play, it must be.

Wolff turned his attention back to Elene. Sonja tried to get between them again.

This time Elene slapped her.

Sonja moaned deep in her throat.

Elene thought: I've done it, I've guessed the game, I'm in control.

She saw Wolff look at his wristwatch.

Suddenly she stood up. They both stared at her. She lifted her arms then, slowly, she pulled her dress up over her head, threw it to one side, and stood there in her black underwear and stockings. She raised her left foot, planted a high-heeled shoe between Sonja's breasts, and pushed Sonja backward. Then she grasped Wolff's head and drew it to her belly.

Sonja started kissing Elene's foot.

Wolff buried his face between Elene's thighs.

Elene looked at her watch.

It was midnight.

- 23 -

Elene lay on her back in the bed, naked. She was quite still, rigid, her muscles tense, staring straight up at the blank ceiling. On her right was Sonja, face down, arms and legs spread all ways over the sheets, fast asleep, snoring. Sonja's right hand rested limply on Elene's hip. Wolff was on Elene's left. He lay on his side, facing her, sleepily stroking her body.

Elene was thinking: Well, it didn't kill me.

The game had been all about rejecting and accepting Sonja. The more Elene and Wolff rejected her and abused her, the more passionate she became, until in the denouement Wolff rejected Elene and made love to Sonja. It was a script that Wolff and Sonja obviously knew well: they had played it before.

It had given Elene very little pleasure, but she was not sickened or humiliated or disgusted. What she felt was that she had been betrayed, and betrayed by herself. It was like pawning a jewel given by a lover, or having your long hair cut off to sell for money, or sending a small child to work in a mill. She had abused herself. Worst of all, what she had done was the logical culmination of the life she had been living: in the eight years since she had left home she had been on the slippery slope that ended in prostitution, and now she felt she had arrived there.

The stroking stopped, and she glanced sideways at Wolff's face. His eyes were closed. He was falling asleep.

She wondered what had happened to Vandam.

Something had gone wrong. Perhaps Vandam had lost sight of Wolff's car in Cairo. Maybe he had had an accident in the traffic. Whatever the reason, Vandam was no longer watching over her. She was on her own.

She had succeeded in making Wolff forget his midnight

transmission to Rommel - but what now was to stop him sending the message another night? Elene would have to get to GHQ and tell Jakes where Wolff was to be found. She would have to slip away, right now, find Jakes, get him to pull his team out of bed ...

It would take too long. Wolff might wake, find she was gone, and vanish again.

Was his radio here, on the houseboat, or somewhere else? That might make all the difference.

She remembered something Vandam had said last evening - was it really only a few hours ago? 'If I can get the key to the Rebecca code, I can impersonate him over the radio ... it could turn the tables completely ... '

Elene thought: Perhaps I can find the key.

He had said it was a sheet of paper explaining how to use the book to encode messages.

Elene realised that she now had a chance to locate the radio and the key to the code.

She had to search the houseboat.

She did not move. She was frightened again. If Wolff should discover her searching ... She remembered his theory of human nature: the world is divided into masters and slaves. A slave's life was worth nothing.

No, she thought; I'll leave here in the morning, quite normally, and then I'll tell the British where Wolff is to be found, and they'll raid the houseboat, and -

And what if Wolff had gone by then? What if the radio was not here?

Then it would all have been for nothing.

Wolff's breathing was now slow and even: he was fast asleep. Elene reached down, gently picked up Sonja's limp hand, and moved it

from her thigh on to the sheet. Sonja did not stir.

Now neither of them was touching Elene. It was a great relief.

Slowly, she sat upright.

The shift of weight on the mattress disturbed both of the other two. Sonja grunted, lifted her head, turned it the other way, and fell to snoring again. Wolff rolled over on his back without opening his eyes.

Moving slowly, wincing with every movement of the mattress, Elene turned around so that she was on her hands and knees, facing the head of the bed. She began painfully to crawl backward: right knee, left hand, left knee, right hand. She watched the two sleeping faces. The foot of the bed seemed miles away. The silence rang in her ears like thunder. The houseboat itself rocked from side to side on the wash of a passing barge, and Elene backed off the bed quickly under cover of the disturbance. She stood there, rooted to the spot, watching the other two, until the boat stopped moving. They stayed asleep.

Where should the search start? Elene decided to be methodical, and begin at the front and work backward. In the prow of the boat was the bathroom. Suddenly she realised she had to go there anyway. She tiptoed across the bedroom and went into the tiny bathroom.

Sitting on the toilet, she looked around. Where might a radio be hidden? She did not really know how big it would be: the size of a suitcase? A briefcase? A handbag? Here there was a basin, a small tub, and a cupboard on the wall. She stood up and opened the cupboard. It contained shaving tackle, pills, and a small roll of bandage.

The radio was not in the bathroom.

She did not have the courage to search the bedroom while they slept, not yet. She crossed it and passed through the curtains

into the living-room. She looked quickly all around. She felt the need to hurry, and forced herself to be calm and careful. She began on the starboard side. Here there was a divan couch. She tapped its base gently: it seemed hollow. The radio might be underneath. She tried to lift it, and could not. Looking around its edge, she saw that it was screwed to the floor. The screws were tight. The radio would not be there. Next there was a tall cupboard. She opened it gently. It squeaked a little, and she froze. She heard a grunt from the bedroom. She waited for Wolff to come bounding through the curtains and catch her red-handed. Nothing happened.

She looked in the cupboard. There was a broom, and some dusters, and cleaning materials, and a torch. No radio. She closed the door. It squeaked again.

She moved into the kitchen area. She had to open six smaller cupboards. They contained crockery, tinned food, saucepans, glasses, supplies of coffee and rice and tea, and towels. Under the sink there was a bucket for kitchen waste. Elene looked in the icebox. It contained one bottle of champagne. There were several drawers. Would the radio be small enough to fit in a drawer? She opened one. The rattle of cutlery shredded her nerves. No radio. Another: a massive selection of bottled spices and flavourings,,from vanilla essence to curry powder - somebody liked to cook. Another drawer: kitchen knives.

Next to the kitchen was a small escritoire with a fold-down desk-top. Benath it was a small suitcase. Elene picked up the suitcase. It was heavy. She opened it. There was the radio.

Her heart skipped.

It was an ordinary, plain suitcase, with two catches, a leather handle, and reinforced corners. The radio fitted inside

exactly, as if it had been designed that way. The ^{recessed} ~~raised~~ lid left a little room on top of the radio, and here there was a book. Its board covers had been torn off to make it fit into the space in the lid. Elene picked up the book and looked inside. She read: 'Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again.' It was Rebecca.

She flicked the pages of the book. In the middle there was something between the pages. She let the book fall open and a sheet of paper dropped to the floor. She bent down and picked it up. It was a list of numbers and dates, with some words in German. This was surely the key to the code.

She held in her hand what Vandam needed to turn the tide of the war.

Suddenly the responsibility weighed her down.

Without this, she thought, Wolff cannot send messages to Rommel - or if he sends messages in plain language the Germans will suspect their authenticity and also worry that the Allies have overheard them ... Without this, Wolff is useless. With this, Vandam can win the war.

She had to run away, now, taking the key with her.

She remembered that she was stark naked.

She broke out of her trance. Her dress was on the couch, crumpled and wrinkled. She crossed the boat, put down the book and the key to the code, picked up her dress and slipped it over her head.

The bed creaked.

From behind the curtains came the unmistakable sound of someone getting up, someone heavy, it had to be him. Elene stood still, paralysed. She heard Wolff walk toward the curtains, then away again. She heard the bathroom door.

She stepped into her shoes. There was no time to put her

knickers on. She picked up her bag and the book with the key inside. She heard Wolff come out of the bathroom. She went to the ladder and ran up it, her high-heeled shoes clattering on the wooden steps like gunfire. Glancing down, she saw Wolff appear between the curtains and glance up at her in astonishment. His eyes went to the suitcase opened on the floor. Elene looked away from him to the hatch. It was secured on the inside with two bolts. She slid them both back. From the corner of her eye she saw Wolff dash to the ladder. She pushed up the hatch and scrambled out. As she stood upright on the deck she saw Wolff scrambling up the ladder. She bent swiftly and lifted the heavy wooden hatch. As Wolff's right hand grasped the rim of the opening, Elene slammed the hatch down on his fingers with all her might. There was a roar of pain. Elene ran across the deck and down the gangplank.

It was just that: a plank, leading from the deck to the river bank. She stooped, picked up the end of the plank, and threw it into the river.

Wolff came up through the hatch, his face a mask of pain and fury.

Elene panicked as she saw him come across the deck at a run. She thought: he's naked, he can't chase me! He took a flying jump over the rail of the boat.

He can't make it!

He landed on the very edge of the river-bank, his arms windmilling for balance. With a sudden access of courage Elene ran at him and, while he was still off-balance, pushed him backward into the water.

She turned and ran along the towpath.

When she reached the lower end of the pathway that led to the street, she stopped and looked back. Already her heart was

pounding and she was breathing in long, shuddering gasps. She felt elated when she saw Wolff, dripping wet and naked, climbing out of the water up the muddy river bank. It was getting light: he could not chase her far in that state. She spun around toward the street, broke into a run, and crashed into someone.

Strong arms caught her in a tight grip. She struggled desperately, got free, and was seized again. She slumped in defeat: after all that, she thought; after all that.

She was turned around, grappled by the arms, and marched toward the houseboat. She saw Wolff walking toward her. She struggled again, and the man holding her got an arm around her throat. She opened her mouth to scream for help, but before she could make a sound the man had thrust his fingers down her throat, making her retch.

Wolff came up and said: 'Who are you?'

'I'm Kemel. You must be Wolff.'

'Thank God you were there.'

'You're in trouble, Wolff,' said the man called Kemel.

'You'd better come aboard - oh, shit, she threw away the fucking plank.' Wolff looked down at the river and saw the plank floating beside the houseboat. 'I can't get any wetter,' he said. He slid down the bank and into the water, grabbed the plank, shoved it up on to the bank, and climbed up after it. He picked it up again and laid it across the gap between the houseboat and the bank.

'This way,' he said.

Kemel marched Elene across the plank, over the deck and down the ladder.

'Put her over there,' Wolff said, pointing to the couch.

Kemel pushed Elene over to the couch, not ungently, and made her sit down.

Wolff went through the curtains and came back a moment later with a big towel. He proceeded to rub himself dry with it. He seemed quite unembarrassed by his nakedness.

Elene was ~~quite~~ surprised to see that Kemel was quite a small man. From the way he had grabbed her, she had imagined he was Wolff's build. He was a handsome, dark-skinned Arab. He was looking away from Wolff uneasily.

Wolff wrapped the towel around his waist and sat down. He examined his hand. 'She nearly broke my fingers,' he said. He looked at Elene with a mixture of anger and amusement.

Kemel said: 'Where's Sonja?'

'In bed,' Wolff said, jerking his head toward the curtains. 'She sleeps through earthquakes, especially after a night of lust.'

Kemel was uncomfortable with such talk, Elene observed, and perhaps also impatient with Wolff's levity. 'You're in trouble,' he said again.

'I know,' Wolff said. 'I suppose she's working for Vandam.'

'I don't know about that. I got a call in the middle of the night from my man on the towpath. Vandam had come along and sent my man to fetch help.'

Wolff was shocked. 'We came close!' he said. He looked worried. 'Where's Vandam now?'

'Out there still. I knocked him on the head and tied him up.'

Elene's heart sank. Vandam was out there in the bushes, hurt and incapacitated - and nobody else knew where she was. It had all been for nothing, after all.

Wolff nodded. 'Vandam followed her here. That's two people who know about this place. If I stay here I'll have to kill them both.'

Elene shuddered: he talked of killing people so lightly.

Masters and slaves, she remembered.

'Not good enough,' Kemel said. 'If you kill Vandam the murder will eventually be blamed on me. You can go away, but I have to live in this town.' He paused, watching Wolff with narrowed eyes. 'And if you were to kill me, that would still leave the man who called me last night.'

'So ... ' Wolff frowned and made an agry noise. 'There's no choice. I have to go. Damn.'

Kemel nodded. 'If you disappear, I think I can cover up. But I want something from you. Remember the reason we've been helping you.'

'You want to talk to Rommel.'

'Yes.'

'I'll be sending a message tomorrow night - tonight, I mean, damn, I've hardly slept.- Tell me what you want to say, and I'll - '

'Not good enough,' Kemel interrupted. 'We want to do it ourselves. We want your radio.'

Wolff frowned. Elene realised that Kemel was a nationalist rebel, co-operating or trying to co-operate with the Germans.

Kemel added: 'We could send your message for you ... '

'Not necessary,' Wolff said. He seemed to have reached a decision. 'I have another radio.'

'It's agreed, then.'

'There's the radio.' Wolff pointed to the open case, still on the floor where Elene had left it. 'It's already tuned to the correct wavelength. All you have to do is broadcast at midnight, any night.'

Kemel went over to the radio and examined it. Elene wondered why Wolff had said nothing about the Rebecca code. Wolff did not care whether Kemel got through to Rommel or not, she decided; and

to give him the code would be to risk that he might give it to someone else. Wolff was playing safe again.

Wolff said: 'Where does Vandam live?'

Kemel told him the address.

Elene thought: Now what is he after?

Wolff said: 'He's married, I suppose.'

'No.'

'A bachelor. Damn.'

'Not a bachelor,' Kemel said, still looking at the wireless transmitter. 'A widower. His wife was killed in Crete last year.'

'Any children?'

'Yes,' Kemel said. 'A small boy called Billy, so I'm told. Why?'

Wolff shrugged. 'I'm interested, a little obsessed, with the man who's come so close to catching me.'

Elene was sure he was lying.

Kemel closed the suitcase, apparently satisfied. Wolff said to him: 'Keep an eye on her for a minute, would you?'

'Of course.'

Wolff turned away, then turned back. He had noticed that Elene still had Rebecca in her hand. He reached down and took it from her. He disappeared through the curtains.

Elene thought: If I tell Kemel about the code, then maybe Kemel will make Wolff give it to him, and maybe then Vandam will get it from Wolff - but what will happen to me?

Kemel said to her: 'What - ' He stopped abruptly as Wolff came back, carrying his clothes, and began to dress.

Kemel said to him: 'Do you have a call-sign?'

'Sphinx,' Wolff said shortly.

'A code?'

'No code.'

'What was in that book?'

Wolff looked angry. 'A code,' he said. 'But you oan't have it.'

'We need it.'

Wolff
'I can't give it to you,' ~~Wolff~~ said. 'You'll have to take your chance, and broadcast in clear.'

Kemel nodded.

Suddenly Wolff's knife was in his hand. 'Don't argue,' he said. 'I know you've got a gun in your pocket. Remember, if you shoot, you'll have to explain the bullet to the British. You'd better go now.'

Kemel turned, without speaking, and went up the ladder and through the hatch. Elene heard his footsteps above. Wolff went to the porthole and watched him walk away along the towpath.

Wolff put his knife away and buttoned his shirt over the sheath. He put on his shoes and laced them tightly. He got the book from the next room, extracted from it the sheet of paper bearing the key to the code, crumpled the paper, dropped it into a large glass ashtray, took a box of matches from a kitchen drawer, and set fire to the paper.

He must have another key with the other radio, Elene thought.

Wolff watched the flames to make sure the paper was entirely burned. He looked at the book, as if contemplating burning that too, then he opened a porthole and dropped it into the river.

He took a small suitcase from a cupboard and began to pack a few things into it.

'Where are you going?' Elene said.

'You'll find out - you're coming.'

'Oh, no.' What would he do with her? He had caught her

deceiving him - had he dreamed up some appropriate punishment? She felt very weary and afraid. Nothing she had done had turned out well. At one time she had been afraid merely that she would have to have sex with him. How much more there was to fear now. She thought of trying again to run away - she had almost made it last time - but she no longer had the spirit.

Wolff continued packing his case. Elene saw some of her own clothes on the floor, and remembered that she had not dressed properly. There were her knickess, her stockings and her brassiere. She decided to put them on. She stood up and pulled her dress over her head. She bent down to pick up her underwear. As she stood up Wolff embraced her. He pressed a rough kiss against her lips, not seeming to care that she was completely unresponsive. He reached between her legs and thrust a finger inside her. He withdrew his finger from her vagina and shoved it into her anus. She tensed. He pushed his finger in farther, and she gasped with pain.

He looked into her eyes. 'Do you know, I think I'd take you with me even if I didn't have a use for you.'

She closed her eyes, humiliated. He turned from her abruptly and returned to his packing.

She put on her clothes.

When he was ready, he took a last look around and said: 'Let's go.'

Elene followed him up on to the deck, wondering what he planned to do about Sonja.

As if he knew what she was thinking, he said: 'I hate to disturb Sonja's beauty sleep.' He grinned. 'Get moving.'

They walked along the towpath. Why was he leaving Sonja behind? Elene wondered. She could not figure it out, but she knew

it was callous. Wolff was a completely unscrupulous man, she decided; and the thought made her shudder, for she was in his power.

She wondered whether she could kill him.

He carried his case in his left hand and gripped her arm with his right. They turned on to the footpath, walked to the street, and went to his car. He unlocked the door on the driver's side and made her climb in over the gearstick to the passenger side. He got in beside her and started the car.

It was a miracle the car was still in one piece after being left on the road all night: normally anything detachable would have been stolen, including wheels. He gets all the luck there is, Elene thought.

They drove away. Elene wondered where they were going. Wherever it was, Wolff's second radio was there, along with another copy of Rebecca and another key to the code. When we get there, I'll have to try again, she thought wearily. It was all up to her now. Wolff had left the houseboat, so there was nothing Vandam could do even after somebody untied him. Elene, on her own, had to try to stop Wolff contacting Rommel, and if possible steal the key to the code. The idea was ridiculous, shooting for the moon. All she really wanted ~~km~~ was to get away from this evil, dangerous man, to go home, to forget about spies and codes and war, to feel safe again.

She thought of her father, walking to Jerusalem, and she knew she had to try.

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

'Yes.'

She gazed at Wolff, trying to read the expression on his face. She said: 'But Vandam isn't there.'

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

- 24 -

Anwar el-Sadat was delighted with the radio.

'It's a Hallicrafter/Skychallenger,' he told Kemel.

'American.' He plugged it in to test it, and pronounced it very powerful.

Kemel explained that he had to broadcast at midnight on the pre-set wavelength, and that the call-sign was Sphinx. He said that Wolff had refused to give him the code, and that they would have to take the risk of broadcasting in clear.

They hid the radio in the oven in the kitchen of the little house.

Kemel left Sadat's home and ~~walked~~^{drove} from Kubri al-Qubbah back to Zamalek. On the way he considered how he was to cover up his role in the events of the night.

His story would have to tally with that of the sergeant whom Vandam had sent for help, so he would have to admit that he had received the phone call. Perhaps he would say that, before alerting the British, he had gone to the houseboat himself to investigate, in case 'Major Vandam' was an impostor. What then? He had searched the towpath and the bushes for Vandam, and then he, too, had been knocked on the head. The snag was that he would not have stayed unconscious all these hours. So he would have to say that he had been tied up. Yes, he would say he had been tied up and had just managed to free himself. Then he and Vandam would board the houseboat - and find it empty.

It would serve.

He parked his car and went cautiously down to the towpath. Looking into the shrubbery, he figured out roughly where he had left Vandam. He went into the bushes thirty or forty yards away from that spot. He lay down on the ground and rolled over, to make

his clothes dirty, then he rubbed some of the sandy soil on his face and ran his fingers through his hair. Then, rubbing his wrists to make them look sore, he went in search of Vandam.

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

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

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

Vandam said nothing.

Kemel threw the rope aside. Vandam stood up stiffly.

Kemel said: 'How do you feel?'

'I'm all right.'

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

*

As soon as Kemel turned his back, Vandam stepped forward and hit him as hard as he possibly could with an edge-of-the-hand blow to the back of the neck. It might have killed Kemel, but Vandam did not care. Vandam had been bound and gagged, and he had been unable to see the towpath; but he had been able to hear: 'I'm Kemel. You must be Wolff.' That was how he knew that Kemel had betrayed him. Kemel had not thought of that possibility, obviously. Since overhearing those words, Vandam had been seething, and all his pent-up anger had gone into the blow.

Kemel lay on the ground, stunned. Vandam rolled him over, searched him, and found the gun. He used the rope that had bound his own hands to tie Kemel's hands behind his back. Then he slapped

Kemel's face until he came round.

'Get up,' Vandam said.

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

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

Kemel struggled to his feet.

'Turn around.'

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

'Move.'

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

'Open the hatch.'

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

'Go down.'

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

He saw Sonja in bed, sleeping.

'Get in there,' he told Kemel.

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

'Wake her.'

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

She said: 'What's going on?'

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

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

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

Kemel nodded tensely.

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

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

'What did happen here?' Vandam asked, dreading the answer.

'We went to bed.'

'Who did?'

'Wolff, Elene, and me.'

'Together?'

'Yes.'

So that was it. And Vandam had thought she was safe, because there was another woman around! That explained Wolff's continuing interest in Elene: they had wanted her for their threesome. Vandam was sick with disgust, not because of what they had done, but because he had caused Elene to be forced to be part of it.

He put the thought out of his mind. Was Sonja telling the truth - had Wolff failed to radio Rommel last night? Vandam could not think of a way to check. He could only hope it was true.

'Get dressed,' he told Sonja.

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

with two small portholes.

'Get in there, both of you.'

Kemel and Sonja went into the bathroom. Vandam closed the door on them and began to search the houseboat. He opened all the cupboards and drawers, throwing their contents on to the floor. He stripped the bed. With a sharp knife from the kitchen he slashed the mattress and the upholstery of the couch. He went through all the papers in the escritoire. He found a large glass ashtray full of charred paper and poked through it, but all the paper was completely burned up. He emptied the icebox. He went up on deck and cleared out the lockers. He checked all around the outside of the hull, looking for a rope dangling into the water.

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

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

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

'GHQ,' he told the driver.

The two prisoners would have to be interrogated, but really there were only two questions to be asked:

Where was Wolff?

And where was Elene?

*

Sitting in the car, Wolff took hold of Elene's wrist. She tried to pull away but his grip was too strong. He drew out his knife and ran its blade lightly across the back of her hand. The knife

was very sharp. Elene stared at her hand in horror. At first there was just a line like a pencil mark. Then blood welled up in the cut, and there was a sharp pain. She gasped.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The door opened. Elene recognised Gaafar. The servant remembered her, too, and said: 'Good morning, Miss Fontana.'

'Hello, Gaafar.'

Wolff said: 'Good morning, Gaafar. I'm Captain Alexander. The major asked me to come round. Let us in, would you?'

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

all right ... '

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

Elene was aghast. It was awful - Wolff was going to kidnap Billy. She should have guessed that as soon as Wolff mentioned the boy's name - but it was unthinkable, she must not let it happen! What could she do? She wanted to shout No, Gaafar, he's lying, take Billy and get away, run, run! But Wolff had the knife, and Gaafar was old, and Wolff would get Billy anyway.

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

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

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

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

Elene wondered what Gaafar might do. Was it possible he might call GHQ to check with Billy's father? Egyptians were very reluctant to make phone calls to GHQ, Elene knew: Gaafar would have

trouble getting past the switchboard operators and secretaries. She looked around, and saw that anyway the phone was here in this room, so that if Maafar tried, Wolff would know and stop him.

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

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

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

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

'You don't need him.'

'Vandam may be able to guess where I'm going,' Wolff said. 'I want to make sure he doesn't come after me.'

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

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

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

'Pity is a decadent emotion,' Wolff said with a gleam in his eye. 'Scepticism regarding morality is what is decisive. The end of the moral interpretation of the world, which no longer has any sanction ...' He seemed to be quoting.

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

'Perhaps you're right.'

'You're sick.'

'That's enough!' Wolff reddened slightly. He appeared to calm himself with an effort. 'Shut up while I'm writing.'

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

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

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

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

'I did forget. I'm sorry.'

'Will you bring it next time you come?'

'Of course.'

Wolff had been staring at Billy all this time, like a miser looking into his treasure-chest. Now he stood up. 'Hello, Billy,' he said with a smile. 'I'm Captain Alexander.'

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

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

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

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

'Has he been in another fight?'

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

Billy seemed more proud than worried, Elene observed.

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

He is suspicious, ^Elene thought.

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

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

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

'Yes,' Elene said miserably.

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

Elene thought: No, don't, Gaafar, he'll kill you before you finish dialling.

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

Elene thought: It's all my fault.

Gaafar went out.

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

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

Billy looked at her as if she were crazy.

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

'The Norwegian fjords.'

Elene saw Wolff finish writing and put the sheet of paper in an envelope. He licked the flap, sealed the envelope, and put it in his pocket.

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

Wolff picked up the telephone and dialled. He looked at Elene, then looked away, out of the window.

Elene found the map of Egypt.

Billy said: 'But that's - '

Quickly, Elene touched his lips with her finger. He stopped speaking and frowned at her.

She thought: Please, little boy, be quiet and leave this to me.

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

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

I was right! she thought. She dipped her finger in the blood from her hand. With three strokes, she drew an arrow in blood on the map of Egypt, with the point of the arrow on the town of Assut, three hundred miles south of Cairo. She closed the atlas. She used her handkerchief to smear blood on

the cover of the book, then pushed the book behind her.

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

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

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

'No, there's no such - '

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

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

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

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

'Come on,' he said impatiently.

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

They went out through the front door.

Wolff asked Elene: 'Can you drive?'

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

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

As she pulled away, Elene saw Wolff lean forward. He said:

'See this?'

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

'Yes,' Billy said in an unsteady voice.

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

Billy began to cry.

- 25 -

'Stand to attention!' Jakes barked in his sergeant-major's voice.
Keme Kemel stood to attention.

The interrogation room was bare but for a table. Vandam followed Jakes in, carrying a chair in one hand and a cup of tea in the other. He sat down.

Vandam said: 'Where is Alex Wolff?'

'I don't know,' said Kemel, relaxing slightly.

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

Kemel came to attention again.

Vandam sipped his tea. It was part of the act, a way of saying that he had all the time in the world and was not very concerned about anything, whereas the prisoner was in real trouble. It was the reverse of the truth.

He said: 'Last night you received a call from the officer on surveillance at houseboat Jihan.'

^s
Jakes shouted: 'Answer the major!'

'Yes,' Kemel said.

'What did he say to you?'

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

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

'To summon assistance, sir!'

'To summon assistance, sir.'

Vandam said: 'And what did you do?'

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

'And then?'

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'I was struck on the head and knocked unconscious. When I recovered I was bound hand and foot. It took me several hours to free myself. Then I freed Major Vandam, whereupon he attacked me.'

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

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

'No, sir.'

Vandam sighed. Kemel had his story and he was sticking to it. Even if he knew, or could guess, where Wolff had gone, he would not reveal it while he was pretending innocence.

Vandam said: 'What is your wife's involvement in all this?'

Kemel said nothing, but he looked scared.

Vandam said: 'If you won't answer my questions, I'll have to ask her.'

Kemel's lips were pressed together in a hard line.

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

Kemel said: 'Typical British justice.'

Vandam looked at him. 'Where is Wolff?'

'I don't know.'

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

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

'Not yet. Maybe later.' And where was Elene?

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

'Tes.'

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

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

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

The woman officer pushed Sonja into the chair.

Vandam studied Sonja for a minute. He had interrogated her once before, and she had been stronger than he. It would be different this time: Elene's safety was in the balance, and Vandam had few scruples left.

He said: 'Where is Alex Wolff?'

'I don't know.'

'Where is Elene Fontana?'

'I don't know.'

'Wolff is a German spy, and you have been helping him.'

'Ridiculous.'

'You're ~~going to be in trouble~~ in trouble.'

She said nothing. Vandam watched her face. She was proud, confident, unafraid. Vandam wondered what, exactly, had happened on the houseboat this morning. Surely, Wolff had gone off without warning Sonja. Did she not feel betrayed?

'Wolff betrayed you,' Vandam said. 'Kemel, the policeman, warned Wolff of the danger; but Wolff left you sleeping and went off with another woman. Are you going to protect him after that?'

She said nothing.

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

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

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

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

'You dare not touch me.'

'Where has Wolff gone?'

'I don't know.'

'Can you guess?'

'No.'

'You're not being helpful, Sonja. It will make things worse for you.'

'You can't touch me.'

'I think I'd better *pprove* to you that I can.' Vandam nodded to the woman officer.

The woman held Sonja still while Jakes tied her to the chair. She struggled for a moment, but it was hopeless. She looked at Vandam, and for the first time there was a hint of fear in her eyes. She said: 'What are you doing, you bastards?'

The woman officer took a large pair of scissors from her bag. She lifted a hank of Sonja's long, thick hair and cut it off.

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

Swiftly, the woman cut Sonja's hair. As the heavy locks fell away the woman dropped them in Sonja's lap. Sonja screamed, cursing Vandam and Jakes and the British in language which Vandam had never heard from a woman.

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

Sonja's screams subsided into tears. When he could be heard Vandam said: 'You see, we don't care much about legality and justice

any more, nor do we care about Egyptian public opinion. We've got our backs to the wall. We may all be killed soon. We're desperate.'

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

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

'You're evil,' said Sonja.

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

All the hatred was gone, now; she was completely demoralised. Vandam said softly: 'Where was Wolff getting his information?'

'From Major Smith,' Sonja replied.

Vandam heaved a sigh of relief. She had broken: thank God.

'First name?' he asked.

'Sandy Smith.'

Vandam glanced at Jakes. That was the name of the Major from MI6 who had disappeared - it was as they had feared.

'How did he get the information?'

'Sandy came to the houseboat in his lunch break to visit me. While we were in bed Alex went through his briefcase.

As simple as that, Vandam thought. Jesus, I feel tired. Smith was liaison man between the Secret Intelligence Service - also known as MI6 - and GHQ, and in that role he had been privy to all strategic planning, for MI6 needed to know what the army was doing so that it could tell its spies what information to look for. Smith had been going straight from the morning conferences at GHQ to the houseboat, with a briefcase full of secrets. Vandam

had already learned that Smith had been telling people at GHQ he was lunching at the MI6 office, and telling his superiors at MI6 he was lunching at GHQ, so that nobody would know he was screwing a dancer. Vandam had previously assumed Wolff was bribing or blackmailing someone: it had never occurred to him that Wolff might be getting information from someone without that someone's knowledge.

Vandam said: 'Where is Smith now?'

'He caught Alex going through his briefcase. Alex killed him.'

'Where's the body?'

'In the river by the houseboat.'

Vandam nodded to Jakes, and Jakes went out.

Vandam said to Sonja: 'Tell me about Kemel.'

She was in full flood now, eager to tell all she knew, her resistance quite crushed; she would do anything to make people be nice to her. 'He came and told me you had asked him to have the houseboat watched. He said he would censor his surveillance reports if I would arrange a meeting between ~~Wolff~~ Alex and Sadat.'

'Alex and whom?'

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

'Why did he want to meet Wolff?'

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

~~Wolff~~ Vandam thought: there are elements to this that I never thought of. He said: 'Where does Sadat live?'

'Kubri al-Qubbah.'

'The address?'

'I don't know.'

Vandam said to the woman officer: 'Go and find out the exact
d
address of Captain Anwar el-Sadat.'

'Yes, sir.' The woman's face broke into a smile that was

astonishingly pretty. She went out.

Vandam said: 'Wolff kept his radio on your houseboat.'

'Yes.'

'He used a code for his messages.'

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

'Rebecca.'

'Yes.'

'And he had a key to the code.'

'A key?'

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

She nodded slowly. 'Yes, I think he did.'

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

'No,' she said. She got scared. 'Honestly, no, I don't know, I'm telling the truth - '

'It's all right, I believe you. Do you know where Wolff might have gone?'

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

'Good idea. Any other suggestions?'

'Abdullah. He might have gone to Abdullah.'

'Yes. Any more?'

'His cousins, in the desert.'

'And where would they be found?'

'No one knows. They're nomads.'

'Might Wolff know their movements?'

'I suppose he might.'

Vandam sat looking at her for a little while longer. She was no actress: she could not have faked this. She was totally broken

down, not only willing but eager to betray her friends and tell all her secrets. She was telling the truth.

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

The woman officer handed him a slip of paper with Sadat's address on it, then went into the cell. Vandam hurried to the muster room. Jakes was waiting. 'The Navy is lending us a couple of divers,' Jakes said. 'They'll be here in a few minutes.'

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

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

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

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

Vandam bit back a retort. 'After you've done Abdullah, meet me at the houseboat.'

'Yes, sir.'

Vandam stubbed his cigarette. 'Let's go.'

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

Sadat lived in a suburb three miles out of Cairo in the direction of Heliopolis. His home was an ordinary family house in a small garden. Four jeeps roared up outside, and the soldiers immediately surrounded the house and began to search the garden.

Vandam rapped on the front door. A dog began to bark loudly.

Vandam knocked again. The door was opened.

'Captain Anwar el-Sadat?'

'Yes.'

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

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

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

Vandam looked at Sadat. The Arab was calm and dignified, but he was hiding some tension. He's afraid, Vandam thought; but he's not afraid of me, and he's not afraid of going to prison; he's afraid of something else.

What kind of deal had Kemel done with Wolff this morning? The rebels needed Wolff to help them get in touch with Rommel. Were they hiding Wolff somewhere?

Vandam said: 'Which is your room, Captain?'

Sadat pointed. Vandam went into the room. It was a simple bedroom, with a mattress on the floor and a galabiya hanging from a hook. Vandam pointed to two British soldiers and an Egyptian policeman, and said: 'All right, go ahead.' They began to search the room.

'What is the meaning of this?' Sadat said quietly.

'You know Alex Wolff,' Vandam said.

'No.'

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

'I've never heard of him.'

Clearly Sadat was a fairly tough personality, not the kind

to break down and confess everything just because a few burly soldiers started messing up his house. Vandam pointed across the hall. 'What's that room?'

'My study - '

Vandam went to the door.

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

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

Vandam let Sadat enter the room first. There were no women inside, but a back door was open as if someone had just stepped out. That was okay: the garden was full of soldiers, no one would escape. Vandam saw an army pistol on the desk holding down some sheets of paper covered with Arabic script. He went to the bookshelf and examined the books: Rebecca was not there.

A shout came from another part of the house: 'Major Vandam!'

Vandam followed the sound into the kitchen. A sergeant MP was standing beside the oven, with the house dog yapping at his booted feet. The oven door stood open, and the sergeant lifted out a suitcase-radio.

Vandam looked at Sadat, who had followed him into the kitchen. The Arab's face was twisted with bitterness and disappointment. So this was the deal they had done: they warned Wolff, and in exchange they got his radio. Did that mean he had another? Or had Wolff arranged to come here, to Sadat's house, to broadcast?

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

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

The senior Egyptian policeman was standing nearby. 'This

is correct,' he said.

Once again Vandam cursed Bogge for bringing the Egyptians into this. 'The law also states that spies are to be shot,' he told Sadat. He turned to the sergeant. 'Send out my driver. Finish searching the house. Then have Sadat charged with espionage.'

He looked again at Sadat. The bitterness and disappointment had gone from his face, to be replaced by a calculating look. He's figuring out how to make the most of all this, Vandam thought; he's preparing to play martyr. He's very adaptable - he should be a politician.

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

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

When Vandam reached the houseboat the divers had done their work and were standing on the towpath getting out of their gear. Two soldiers were hauling something extremely grisly out of the Nile. The divers had attached ropes to the body they had found on the bottom and then washed their hands of the affair.

Jakes came over to Vandam. 'Look at this, sir.' He handed him a waterlogged book. The board covers had been torn off. Vandam examined the book: it was Rebecca.

The radio went to Sadat; the code book went into the river. Vandam remembered the ashtray full of charred paper in the houseboat: had Wolff burned the key to the code?

Why had he got rid of the radio, the book and the key, when he had a vital message to send to Rommel? The conclusion was inescapable: he had another radio, book and key hidden away somewhere.

The soldiers got the body on to the bank and then stepped back as if they wanted nothing more to do with it. Vandam stood

over it. The throat had been cut and the head was almost severed from the body. A briefcase was roped to the waist. Vandam bent down and gingerly opened the case. It was full of bottles of champagne.

~~Vandam~~ heard Jakes said: 'My God.'

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

'Coal bastard.'

'And damn quick with that knife.' Vandam touched ~~the~~ his cheek: the dressing had been taken off, now, and several days' growth of beard hid the wound. But not Elene, not with the knife, please. 'I gather you haven't found him.'

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

'And at Captain Sadat's house.' Suddenly Vandam felt utterly drained. It seemed that Wolff outwitted him at every turn. It occurred to him that he might simply not be smart enough to catch this sly, evasive spy. 'Perhaps we've lost,' he said. He rubbed his face. He had not slept for more than twenty-four hours. He wondered what he was doing here, standing over the hideous corpse of Major ~~Sandy~~ Smith. There was no more to be learned from it. 'I think I'll go home and take a nap,' he said. Jakes looked surprised. Vandam added: 'It might help me think more clearly. This afternoon we'll interrogate all the prisoners again.'

'Very good, sir.'

Vandam walked back to his vehicle. Driving across the bridge from Zamalek to the mainland, he recalled that Sonja had mentioned one other possibility: Wolff's nomad cousins. He looked at the

boats on the wide, slow river. The current took them downstream and the wind blew them upstream - a coincidence of enormous importance to Egypt. The boatmen were still using the single triangular sail, a design which had been perfected ... How long ago? Thousands of years, perhaps. So many things in this country were done the way they had been done for thousands of years. Vandam closed his eyes and saw Wolff, in a felucca, sailing up river, manipulating the triangular sail with one hand while with the other he tapped out messages to Rommel on the transmitter. The car stopped suddenly and Vandam opened his eyes, realising he had been daydreaming, or dozing. Why would Wolff go upriver? To find his nomad cousins. But who could tell where they would be? Wolff might be able to find them, if they followed some annual pattern in their wanderings.

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

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

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

There was more he should do, he realised. Wolff could well be heading south now. Road blocks should be set up at all major towns on the route. There should be someone at every stop on the railway line, looking for Wolff. And the river itself ... There had to be some way of checking the river, in case Wolff really had gone by boat, as in the daydream. Vandam was finding it hard to concentrate. We could set up riverblocks on the same principle as

roadblocks, he thought; why not? None of it would be any good if Wolff had simply gone to ground in Cairo. Suppose he were hiding in the cemeteries? Many Muslims buried their dead in tiny houses, and there were acres of such empty buildings in the city: Vandam would have needed a thousand men to search them all. Perhaps I should do it anyway, he thought. But Wolff might have gone north, toward Alexandria; or east or west into the desert ...

He went into the drawing-room, looking for a letter-opener. Somehow the search had to be narrowed down. Vandam did not have thousands of men at his disposal - they were all in the desert, fighting. He had to decide what was the best bet. He remembered where all this had started: Assyut. Perhaps he should contact Captain Newman in Assyut. That seemed to be where Wolff had come in from the desert, so maybe he would go out that way. Maybe his cousins were in that vicinity. Vandam looked indecisively at the telephone. Where was that damned letter-opener? He went to the door and called: 'Gaafar!' He came back into the room, and saw Billy's school atlas on a chair. It looked mucky. The boy had dropped it in a puddle, or something. He picked it up. It was sticky. Vandam realised there was blood on it. He felt as if he were in a nightmare. What was going on? No letter-opener, blood on the atlas, nomads at Assyut ...

Gaafar came in. Vandam said: 'What's this mess?'

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

'Who's they? Who's Captain Alexander?'

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

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

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

'Gaafar, I sent nobody.'

The servant's brown face turned grey.

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

'But, sir, Mass Fontana was with him, so it seemed all right.'

'Oh, my God.' Vandam looked at the envelope in his hand.

Now he knew why the handwriting was familiar: it was the same as that on the note that Wolff had sent to Elene. He ripped open the envelope. Inside was a message in the same hand:

Dear Major Vandam,

Billy is with me. Elene is taking care of him. He will be quite all right as long as I am safe. I advise you to stay where you are and do nothing. We do not make war on children, and I have no wish to harm the boy. All the same, the life of one child is as nothing beside the future of my two nations, Egypt and Germany; so be assured that if it suits my purpose I will kill Billy.

Yours truly,

Alex Wolff.

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

And he had Billy.

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

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

'There was no violence,' Gaafar said. 'I think Miss Fontana had cut her head.'

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

Vandam picked up the phone and dialled GHQ. When the switchboard answered he hung up. He thought: If I report this, what will happen? Bogge will order a squad of light infantry to arrest Wolff at Assyut. There will be a fight. Wolff will know he had lost, know he is to be shot for spying, not to mention kidnapping and murder - and what will he do then?

He is insane, Vandam thought; he will kill my son.

He felt paralysed by fear. Of course that was what Wolff wanted, that was his aim in taking Billy, to paralyse Vandam. That was how kidnapping worked.

If Vandam brought the Army in, there would be a shootout. Wolff might kill Billy out of mad spite. So there was only one option.

Vandam had to go after them alone.

'Get me two bottles of water,' he told Gaafar. The servant went off. Vandam went into the hall and put on his motorcycle goggles, then found a scarf and wound it around his mouth and neck. Gaafar came from the kitchen with the bottles of water. Vandam left the house and went to his motorcycle. He put the bottles in the pannier and climbed on the bike. He kicked it into life and revved the engine. The fuel tank was full. Gaafar stood beside

him, still weeping. Vandam touched the old man's shoulder. 'I'll bring them back,' he said. He rocked the bike off its stand, drove into the street, and turned south.

- 26 -

My God, the station was a shambles. I suppose everyone wants to get out of Cairo in case it gets bombed. No first-class seats on the trains to Palestine - not even standing room. The wives and children of the British are running like rats. Fortunately southbound trains are less in demand. The booking office still claimed there were no seats, but they always say that; a few piastres here and a few more there always gets a seat, or three. I was afraid I might lose Elene and the boy on the platform, among all the hundreds of peasants, barefoot in their dirty galabiyas, carrying boxes tied with string, chickens in crates, sitting on the platform eating their breakfast, a fat mother in black handing out boiled eggs and pitta bread and caked rice to her husband and sons, cousins and daughters and in-laws; smart idea of ~~mine~~ mine, to hold the boy's hand - if I keep him close by, Elene will follow; smart idea, I have smart ideas, Christ I'm smart, smarter than Vandam, eat your heart out, Major Vandam, I've got your son. Somebody had a goat on a lead. Fancy taking a goat on a train ride. I never had to travel economy with the peasants and their goats. What a job, to clean the economy coach at the end of the journey, I wonder who does it, some poor fellah, a different breed, a different race, born slaves, thank God we got first-class seats, I travel first-class through life, I hate dirt, God that station was dirty. Vendors on the platform: cigarettes, newspapers, a man with a huge basket of bread on his head. I like the women when they carry baskets on their heads, looking so graceful and proud, makes you want to do it to them there and then, standing up, I like women when they like to do it, when they lose their minds with pleasure, when they scream, gesundheit! Look at Elene, sitting there beside the boy, so

frightened, so beautiful, I want to do it with her again soon, forget Sonja, I'd like to do it with Elene right now, here on the train, in front of all these people, humiliate her, with Vandam's son watching, terrified, ha! Look at the mud-brick suburbs, houses leaning against one another for support, cows and sheep in the narrow dusty streets, I always wondered what they ate, those city sheep with their fat tails, where do they graze? No plumbing in those dark little houses beside the railway line. Women in the doorways peeling vegetables, sitting cross-legged on the dusty ground. Cats. So graceful, the cats. European cats are different, slower and much fatter; no wonder cats are sacred here, they are so beautiful, a kitten brings luck. The English like dogs. Disgusting animals, dogs: unclean, undignified, slobbering, fawning, sniffing. A cat is superior, and knows it. It is so important to be superior. One is a master or a slave. I hold my head up, like a cat; I walk about, ignoring the hoi-polloi, intent on my own mysterious tasks, using people the way a cat uses its owner, giving no thanks and accepting no affection, taking what they offer as a right, not a ~~big~~ gift. I'm a master, a German Nazi, an Egyptian Bedouin, a born ruler. How many hours to Assyt, eight, ~~ten~~ ten? Must move fast. Find Ishmael. He should be at the wall, or not far away. Pick up the radio. Broadcast at midnight tonight. Complete British defence, what a coup, they'll give me medals. Germans in charge in Cairo. Oh, boy, we'll get the place into shape. What a combination, Germans and Egyptians, efficiency by day and sensuality by night, Teutonic technology and Bedouin savagery, Beethoven and hashish. If I can survive, make it to Assyt, contact Rommel; then Rommel can cross the last bridge, destroy the last line of defence, dash to Cairo, annihilate the British, what a victory that will be. If I can make it. What a triumph! What

a triumph! What a triumph!

✻

I will not be sick, I will not be sick, I will not be sick. The train says it for me, rattling on the tracks. I'm too old to throw up on trains now, I used to do that when I was eight. Dad took me to Alexandria, bought me candy and oranges and lemonade, I ate too much, don't think about it, it makes me ill to think about it, Dad said it wasn't my fault it was his, but I always used to feel sick even if I didn't eat, today Elene bought chocolate but I said No, thanks, I'm pretty grown-up to say No to chocolate, kids never say No to chocolate, look, I can see the pyramids, one, two, and the little one makes three, this must be Giza. Where are we going? He was supposed to take me to school. Then he got out the knife. It's curved. He'll cut off my head, where's Dad? I should be in school, we have geography in the first period today, a test on Norwegian fjords, the ~~hushhush of the hushhush~~, I learned it all last night, I learned it all last night, I needn't have bothered, I've missed the test. They've already finished it by now, Mr Johnstone collecting up the papers, You call that a map, Higgins? Looks more like a drawing of your ear, boy! Everybody laughs. Smythe can't spell Moskenstraumen. Write it fifty times, lad. Everyone is glad he isn't Smythe. Old Johnstone opens the textbook. Next, the Arctic tundra. I wish I was in school. I wish Elene would put her arm round me. I wish the man would stop looking at me, staring at me like that, so pleased with himself, I think he's crazy, where's Dad? If I don't think about the knife, it will be just as if it wasn't there. I mustn't think about the knife. If I concentrate on not thinking about the knife, that's the same as thinking about the knife. It's impossible to deliberately not think about something. How does anyone stop thinking of something? Accidentally. Accidental

thoughts. All thoughts are accidental. There, I stopped thinking about the knife for a second. If I see a policeman, I'll rush up to him and yell Save me, save me! I'll be so quick that he won't be able to stop me. I can run like the wind, I'm quick. I might see an officer. I might see a general. I'll shout, Good morning, General! He'll look at me, surprised, and say Well, young fellow-me-lad, you're a fine boy! Pardon me, sir, I'll say, I'm Major Vandam's son, and this man is taking me away, and my father doesn't know, I'm sorry to trouble you, but I need help. What? says the general. Look here, sir, you can't do this to the son of a British officer! Not cricket, you know! Just clear off, d'you hear? Who the devil d'you think you are? And you needn't flash that little penknife at me, I've got a pistol! You're a brave lad, Billy. I'm a brave lad. All day men get killed in the desert. Bombs fall, Back Home. Ships in the Atlantic get sunk by U-boats, men fall into the icy water and drown. RAF chaps shot down over France. Everybody is brave. Chin up! Damn this war. That's what they say: Damn this war. Then they climb into the cockpit, hurry down the air-raid shelter, attack the next dune, fire torpedoes at the U-boats, write letters home. I used to think it was exciting. Now I know better. It isn't exciting at all. It makes you feel sick.

*

Billy is so pale. He looks ill. He's trying to be brave. He shouldn't, he should act like a child, he should scream and cry and throw a tantrum, Wolff couldn't cope with that; but he won't, of course, for he has been taught to be tough, to bite back the cry, to suppress the tears, to have self-control. He knows how his father would be, what else does a boy do but copy his father? Look at Egypt. A canal alongside the railway line. A grove of

date palms. A man crouching in a field, his galabiya hitched up above his long white undershorts, doing something to the crops; an ass grazing, so ~~much~~ much healthier than the miserable specimens you see pulling carts in the city; three women sitting beside the canal, washing clothes, pounding them on stones to get them clean; a man on horseback, galloping, must be the local effendi, only the richest peasants have horses; in the distance, the lush green countryside ends abruptly in a range of dusty tan hills. Egypt is only thirty miles wide, really: the rest is desert. What am I going to do? That chill, deep in my chest, every time I look at Wolff. The way he stares at Billy. The gleam in his eye. His restlessness: the way he looks out of the window, then around the carriage, then at Billy, then at me, then at Billy again, always with that gleam in his eye, the look of triumph. I should comfort Billy. I wish I knew more about boys, I had four sisters. What a poor stepmother I should be for Billy. I'd like to touch him, put my arm around him, give him a quick squeeze, or even a cuddle, but I'm not sure that's what he wants, it might make him feel worse. Perhaps I could take his mind off things by playing a game. What a ridiculous idea. Perhaps not so ridiculous. Here is his school satchel. Here is an exercise book. He looks at me curiously. What game? Noughts and crosses. Four lines ~~xx~~ for the grid; my cross in the centre. The way he looks at me as he takes the pencil, I do believe he's going along with this crazy idea ^{in order} to comfort me! His nought in the corner. Wolff snatches the book, looks at it, shrugs, and gives it back. My cross, Billy's nought; it will be a drawn game. I should let him win next time. I can play this game without thinking, more's the pity. Wolff has a spare radio at Assyut. Perhaps I should stay with him, and try to prevent him using the radio. Some hope! I have to get Billy away, then contact Vandam and tell him where I am.

I hope Vandam saw the atlas. Perhaps the servant saw it, and called GHQ. Perhaps it will lie on the chair all day, unnoticed. Perhaps Vandam will not go home today. I have to get Billy away from Wolff, away from that knife. Billy makes a cross in the centre of a new grid. I make a nought, then scribble hastily: We must escape - be ready. Billy makes another cross, and: OK. My nought. Billy's cross and When? My nought and Next station. Billy's third cross makes a line. He scores through the line of crosses, then smiles up at me jubilantly. He has won. The train slows down.

*

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

Each time he stopped he had taken a drink of water. With his uniform cap, his goggles and the scarf around his mouth and neck, he was protected from the worst of the dust; but the sun was terribly hot and he was continually thirsty. Eventually he realised he was running a slight fever. He thought he must have caught cold, last night, lying on the ground beside the river for hours. His breath was hot in his throat, and the muscles of his back ached.

He had to concentrate on the road. It was the only road which ran the length of Egypt, from Cairo to Aswan, and consequently much of it was paved; and in recent months the Army had done some repair work: but he still had to watch for bumps and potholes. Fortunately the road ran straight as an arrow, so he could see, far ahead, the hazards of cattle, wagons, camel trains and flocks

of sheep. He drove very fast, except through the villages and towns, where at any moment people might wander out into the road: he would not kill a child to save a child, not even to save his own child.

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

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

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

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

The train was going to get there before him. He had made his plans, he knew what he was going to do; but he needed time, it was impossible for him to rush into the station and jump on the train without making preparations. He reached the town and slowed right down. The street was blocked by a small flock of sheep. From a

doorway an old man smoking an hookah watched Vandam: a European on a motorcycle would be a rare, but not unknown, sight. An ass tied to a tree snarled at the bike. A water-buffalo drinking from a bucket did not even look up. Two filthy children in rags ran alongside, holding imaginary handlebars and saying 'Brrrm, brrrm,' in imitation. Vandam saw the station. He would wait outside until the train left, just in case Wolff got off; then he would go ahead, and reach the next stop in plenty of time. He brought the motorcycle to a halt and killed the engine.

*

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

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

it had ended.

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

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

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

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

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

Elene murmured to Billy: 'When the whistle blows, run for the door and get off the train.' Her heart beat faster: now she was committed.

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

Billy looked at Elene, hesitating.

Wolff frowned.

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

The priest gave a shout of surprise.

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

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

At last he found his voice, and roared with anger. He pushed himself out of his seat, driving Elene backward. She grabbed at him and caught hold of his shirt front with both hands. Then he hit her. His hand came up from below his waist, bunched into a fist, then struck the side of her jaw. She had not known a punch could hurt so much. For an instant she could not see. She lost her grip on Wolff's shirt, and fell back into her seat. Her vision returned and she saw him heading for the door. She stood up.

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

Billy was racing along the platform, running like the wind. Wolff was charging after him. The few Egyptians standing around were looking on, mildly astonished, and doing nothing. Elene stepped down from the train and ran after Wolff. The train shuddered, about to move. Wolff put on a burst of speed. Elene yelled: 'Run, Billy, run!' Billy looked over his shoulder. He was almost at the

exit now. A ticket collector in a raincoat stood there, looking on open-mouthed. Elene thought: They won't let him out, he has no ticket. It did not matter, she realised, for the train was now inching forward, and Wolff had to get back on it. Wolff looked at the train, but did not slow his pace. Elene saw that Wolff was not going to catch Billy, and she thought: We did it! Then Billy fell.

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

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

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

She had failed miserably. She was back where she started. She felt crushed.

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

Wolff turned to Elene. 'You're a silly, crazy girl,' he said loudly, for the benefit of the other passengers. He grabbed

her arm and pulled her closer to him. He slapped her face with the palm of his hand, then with the back, then with the palm, again and again. It hurt, but Elene had no energy to resist. At last the priest stood up, touched Wolff's shoulder, and said something.

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

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

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

- 27 -

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

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

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

Vandam was almost certain that Wolff had been too busy at midnight last night to use his radio. This morning he had given away the radio, thrown the book in the river, and burned the key to the code. It was likely that he had another radio, another copy of Rebecca and another key to the code; and that the place they were all hidden was Assiut. If Vandam's deception plan were to be implemented, he had to have the radio and the key - and that meant he had to let Wolff get to Assiut and retrieve his spare set.

It ought to have been an agonising decision, but somehow Vandam had taken it with equanimity. He had to rescue Billy and Elene, yes; but after Wolff had picked up his spare radio. It would be tough on the boy, savagely tough, but the worst of it - the

kidnapping - was already in the past and irreversibly, and living under Nazi rule, with his father in a concentration camp, would also be savagely tough.

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

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

Arab

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

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

Vandam said to the older man: 'Call British headquarters in Cairo.' He gave him the number, and the man picked up the phone.

Vandam turned to the younger policeman. 'Did you see the motorcycle?'

'Yes, yes.' He nodded violently.

'Could you ride it?'

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

'Go out and try it.'

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

'Go on,' Vandam said.

The boy went out.

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

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

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

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

'There's a right panic on here since the brass heard what happened last night - the Brigadier's having kittens and Bogge is running around like a fart in a colander - where in buggeration are you? sir?'

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

'Yes, sir.'

Vandam gave the phone to the grey-haired policeman and stood back. He could guess what Jakes was saying. The policeman unconsciously stood straighter and squared his shoulders as Jakes instructed him, in no uncertain terms. to do everything Vandam

wanted and do it fast. 'Yes, sir!' the policeman said, several times. Finally he said: 'Please be assured, sir and gentleman, that we will do all in our power - ' He stopped abruptly. Vandam guessed that Jakes had hung up. The policeman glanced at Vandam then said 'Goodbye' to the empty wire.

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

'Listen,' he said. 'I'm going to get on the Assyut train when it stops here in a few minutes. I'll get off at the next station. I want your boy to drive by bike to the next station and meet me there. Do you understand?'

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

'Doesn't it usually?'

'The Assyut train does not stop here usually.'

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

'Yes, sir!' He went out at a run.

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

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

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

'Well, now, listen. We have to go very softly. For all

sorts of reasons which I'll explain to you later, I'm working entirely on my own, and to go after Wolff with a big squad of armed men would be worse than useless.'

'Understood. What do you need from me?'

'I'll be arriving in Assyut in a couple of hours. I need a taxi, a large galabiya and a small boy. Will you meet me?'

'Of course, no problem. Are you coming by road?'

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

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

'I'll be waiting for you.'

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

'Okay, okay!' He was delighted.

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

'Okay!'

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

Vandam shook his hand. 'Thankyou. What's your name?'

'Sergeant Nesbah.'

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

the passengers seeing him through the windows.

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

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

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

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

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

'How many first-class carriages are there?'

'All in order - '

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

The guard held up two fingers.

Vandam nodded and unbent. He looked at the door. Suddenly he was not sure that he had the nerve to go through with this. He thought that Wolff had never got a good look at him - they had fought in the dark, in the alley - but he could not be absolutely sure. The gash on his cheek might have given him away, but it was almost completely covered now by his beard; still he should try too keep that side of his face away from Wolff. Billy was the real problem. Vandam had to warn his son, somehow, to keep quiet and pretend not to recognise his father. There was no way to plan it, that was the trouble. He just had to go in there and think on his feet.

He took a deep breath and opened the door.

Stepping through, he glanced quickly and nervously at the first few seats and did not recognise anyone. He turned his back to the carriage as he closed the door, then turned around again. His gaze swept the rows of seats quickly: no Billy.

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

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

'Routine check, sir,' Vandam replied.

He moved slowly along the aisle, checking people's papers. By the time he was half way down the carriage he had studied the passengers well enough to be sure that Wolff, Elene and Billy were not here. He felt he had to finish the pantomime of checking papers before going on to the next coach. He began to wonder whether his guesswork might have gone wrong. Perhaps they weren't on the train at all; perhaps they weren't even heading for Assyut; perhaps the atlas clue had been a trick ...

He reached the end of the carriage and passed through the

door into the space between the coaches. If Wolff is on the train, I'll see him now, he thought. If Billy is here - if Billy is here -

He opened the door.

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

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

Elene looked up.

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

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

He had not reckoned on Billy being asleep.

He had been ready to give the boy a quick sign, as he had done with Elene, and he had hoped that Billy was alert enough to make his surprise rapidly, as Elene had done. But this was a different situation. If Billy were to wake up and see his father

standing there, he would probably give the game away before he had time to collect his thoughts.

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

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

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

'Assyut.'

'On business?'

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

Vandam said: 'Are you people together?'

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

VandamVandam took Elene's papers and glanced at them. He wanted to take Wolff by the throat and shake him until his bones rattled.

That's my son and his nanny. You bastard.

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

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

Vandam looked at him again, and noticed that he had a fresh scratch on his chin, a long one: perhaps Elene had put up some resistance. 'Security, sir,' Vandam replied.

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

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

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

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

'Quite. Have you been there?'

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

'I hope so,' said the priest.

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

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

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

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

'THAT'S MY DAD!'

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

Oh, God.

Beyond Billy, Vandam could see Wolff and Elene standing up, watching; Wolff with intensity, Elene with fear. Vandam opened the

door behind him, pretending to take no notice of Billy, and backed through it. Billy came flying through. Vandam slammed the door. He took Billy in his arms.

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

Wolff would be coming to investigate.

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

'It's all right now.' Vandam felt he could not leave Billy now; he would have to keep the boy and kill Wolff, he would have to abandon his deception plan and the radio and the key to the code ... No, it had to be done, it had to be done ... He fought down his instincts. 'Listen,' he said. 'I'm here, and I'm watching over you, but I have to catch that man, and I don't want him to know who I am. He's the German spy I'm after, do you understand?'

'Yes, yes ... '

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

Billy stared, open-mouthed. He said nothing, but his whole expression said No, no, no!

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

Billy said nothing.

The door opened and Wolff came through.

'What's all this?' Wolff said.

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

Wolff looked at Billy. 'What nonsense!' he said brusquely. 'Come back to your seat at once.'

Billy stood still.

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

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

Vandam felt as though his heart would break.

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

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

'Thankyou, sir.'

Vandam went out.

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

passed him, he saw Billy's face. Billy raised his hand in a little wave. Vandam waved back, and the face was gone.

Vandam realised he was trembling all over.

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

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

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

He pulled ahead of the train which carried Billy and Elene, the only people he loved. He explained to himself again that he had done the right thing, the best thing for everyone, the best thing for Billy; but in the back of his mind a voice said: Cruel, cruel, cruel.

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

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

Of course, the Rebecca code was still on his mind. He must have some scheme to rescue her and Billy and also get the key to the code. She wished she knew how. Fortunately Billy did not seem to be troubled by such thoughts: his father had the situation under control, and apparently the boy did not even entertain the idea that his father's schemes could fail. He had perked up, taking an interest in the countryside through which the train was passing, and had even asked Wolff where he got his knife. Elene wished she had as much faith in William Vandam.

Wolff was also in good spirits. The incident with Billy had scared him, and he had looked at Vandam with hostility and anxiety; but he seemed reassured when Vandam got off the train. After that his mood had oscillated between boredom and nervous excitement, and now, arriving in Assyut, the excitement became dominant. Some kind of change had occurred in Wolff in the last twenty-four hours, she

thought. When she first met him he had been a very poised, suave man. His face had rarely shown any ~~xxxxx~~ spontaneous emotion other than a faint arrogance, his features had been generally rather still, his movements had been almost languid. Now all that had gone. He fidgeted, he looked about him restlessly, and every few seconds the corner of his mouth twitched almost imperceptibly, as if he were about to grin, or perhaps to grimace, at his thoughts. The poise which had once seemed to be part of his deepest nature now turned out to be a cracked facade. She guessed this was because his fight with Vandam had become vicious. What had begun as a deadly game had turned into a deadly battle. It was curious that Wolff, the ruthless one, was getting desperate while Vandam just got cooler.

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

Wolff stood up and took his case from the luggage rack.

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

They showed their tickets and went out into the square. It was late afternoon, but here in the south the sun was still very hot. The square was lined with quite tall buildings, one of them called The Grand Hotel. Outside the station was a row of horse-drawn cabs. Elene looked around, half-expecting a detachment of soldiery

ready to arrest Wolff. There was no sign of Vandam. Wolff told the Arab boy: 'Motor taxi, I want a motor taxi.' There was one such car, an old Morris parked a few yards behind the horse cabs. The boy led them to it.

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

'Okay,' the driver said.

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

*

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

CaptainnNewman had come through with everything Vandam had asked for, including discretion. He had even loaned Vandam his revolver, a six-shot Engield .380 which was now in the pocket of Vandam's trousers beneath his borrowed galabiya. While waiting for the train Vandam had studied Newman's map of Assyut and the surrounding area, so he had some idea of how to find the southbound road out of the city. He drove through the souk, honking his horn more or less continually in the Egyptian fashion, steering dangerously close to the great wooden wheels of the carts, nudging

sheep out of the way with his fenders. From the buildings on either side shops, cafes, and workshops spilled out into the street. The unpaved road was surfaced with dust, rubbish and dung. Glancing into his rear-view mirror Vandam saw that four or five children were riding his back bumper.

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

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

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

Wolff said: 'Ruh alyaminak.'

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

Vandam was surprised. Farther along the southbound road

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

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

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

Wolff said: 'Ruh ashshimalak.'

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

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

around the troughs.

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

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

*

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

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

'How is thy health?'

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

Ishmael handed him a cup. 'Take it.'

'God increase thy good fortune,' Wolff said.

'And thy good fortune also.'

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

When Wolff had drunk, Ishmael raised his hand to his head

and said: 'May it agree with thee, sir.'

'God grant it may agree with thee.'

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

'They are not friends,' Wolff said.

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

Wolff said: 'You still have my box?'

'Yes.'

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

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

'But you will sleep in my tent.'

'Alas, no.'

'Then you will join us in eating.'

'Twice alas. Already the sun is low, and I must be back in the city before night falls.'

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

'Yes. Please fetch it, my cousin.'

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

it to Ishmael. Ishmael pointed to Wolff.

Wolff took the case and opened it. A great sense of relief flooded over him as he looked at the radio, the book and the key to the code. On the long and tedious train journey his euphoria had vanished, but now it came back, and he felt intoxicated with the sense of power and imminent victory. Once again he knew he was going to win the war. He closed the lid of the case. His hands were unsteady.

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

'It's important to the world.'

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

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

'Go in safety.'

'May God protect thee.'

Wolff turned around and walked toward the taxi.

*

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

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

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

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

'I'm scared of him.'

'So am I.'

Elene shuddered. Wolff got into the car. 'Assyut,' he said.

Vandam held out his hand, palm upward, and Wolff dropped the key in it. Vandam started the car and turned it around.

They went along the wadi, past the well, and turned on to the road. Elene was thinking about the case Wolff held on his knees. It contained the radio, the book, and the key to the Rebecca code: how absurd it was that so much should hang on the question of who held that case in his hands, that she should have risked her life for it, that Vandam should have jeopardised his son for it. She felt very tired. The sun was low behind them now, and the smallest objects - boulders, bushes, tufts of grass - cast long shadows. Evening clouds were gathering over the hills ahead.

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

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

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

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

Vandam went faster.

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

'Stop the car,' Billy said.

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

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

a bump. Billy yelled: 'Dad, stop the car! Dad!'

Vandam slammed on the brakes.

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

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

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

The car stopped.

Vandam looked around. At the same moment, Elene saw, his hand went to the side-slit of his galabiya - and froze there as he looked into the back seat. Elene turned too.

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

'Damn it,' Wolff said. 'You almost had me.'

They all stared at him in silence.

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

Vandam removed the kaffiyeh.

'Let me guess,' said Wolff. 'Major Vandam.' He seemed to be enjoying the moment. 'What a good thing I took your son for insurance.'

'It's finished, Wolff,' said Vandam. 'Half the British Army

is on your trail. You can let me take you alive, or let them kill you.'

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

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

Wolff said: 'Underneath his galabiya, Major Vandam is wearing a pair of khaki trousers. In one of the pockets of the trousers, or possibly in the waistband, you will find a gun. Take it out.'

Elene reached through the side-slit of Vandam's galabiya and found the gun in his pocket. She thought: How did Wolff know? and then: He guessed. She took the gun out.

She looked at Wolff. He could not take the gun from her without releasing Billy, and if he released Billy, even for a moment, Vandam would do something.

But Wolff had thought of that. 'Break the back of the gun, so that the barrel falls forward. Be careful not to pull the trigger by mistake.'

She fiddled with the gun.

Wolff said: 'You'll probably find a catch alongside the cylinder.'

She found the catch and opened the gun.

'Take out the cartridges and drop them outside the car.'

She did so.

'Put the gun on the floor of the car.'

She put it down.

Wolff seemed relieved. Now, once again, the only weapon in the picture was his knife. He spoke to Vandam. 'Get out of the car.'

Vandam sat motionless.

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

Vandam got out of the car.

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

She climbed over the gear stick.

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

'Drive,' Wolff said.

The car had stalled. Elene put the gearshift into neutral and turned the key. The engine coughed and died. She hoped it would not go. She turned the key again; again the starter failed.

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

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

'Drive,' Wolff said.

She pulled away.

'Faster.'

She changed up.

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

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

'No,' Wolff replied.

Then Billy went beserk.

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

Elene looked back to the road. While she was turning around, the car had gone off course, and now the left-hand front wheel was ploughing through the sandy scrub beside the road. She struggled to turn the steering-wheel but it seemed to have a will of its own. She stamped on the brake, and the rear of the car began to slide sideways. Too late, she saw a deep rut running across the road immediately in front. The skidding car hit the rut broadside with an impact that jarred her bones. It seemed to bounce upward. Elene came up off the seat momentarily, and when she came down again she unintentionally trod on the accelerator pedal. The car shot forward and began to skid in the other direction. Out of the corner of her eye she saw that Wolff and Billy were being tossed about helplessly, still fighting. The car went off the road into the soft sand. It slowed abruptly, and Elene banged her forehead on the rim of the steering-wheel. The whole of the car tilted sideways and seemed to be flying. She saw the desert fall away beside her, and realised the car was in fact rolling. She thought it would go over and over. She fell sideways, grabbing at the wheel and the gearstick. The car did not turn turtle, but perched on its side like a coin dropped edgeways into the sand. The gearstick came off in her hand. She slumped against the door,

banging her head again. The car was still.

She got to her hands and knees, still holding the broken-off gearstick, and looked into the rear of the car. Wolff and Billy had fallen in a heap with Wolff on top. As she looked, Wolff moved.

She had hoped he was dead.

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

Wolff got to his feet.

Billy seemed to be unconscious.

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

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

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

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

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

Vandam jumped forward again. This time Wolff dodged back. Vandam kicked out, but Wolff was out of range. Wolff jabbed with the knife. Elene saw it rip through Vandam's trousers and draw blood. Wolff stabbed again, but Vandam had stepped away. A dark stain appeared on his trouser leg.

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

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

Elene jumped out of the car. She still had the broken-off gearstick in her hand. She saw Wolff bring back his arm, ready to slash at Vandam once more. She rushed up behind Wolff, stumbling in the sand. Wolff struck at Vandam. Vandam jerked sideways, dodging the blow. Elene raised the gearstick high in the air and brought it down with all her might on the back of Wolff's head. He seemed to stand still for a moment.

Elene said: 'Oh, God.'

Then she hit him again.

She hit him a third time.

He fell down.

She hit him again.

Then she dropped the gearstick and knelt beside Vandam.

'Well done,' he said weakly.

'Can you stand up?'

He put a hand on her shoulder and struggled to his feet.

'It's not as bad as it looks,' he said.

'Let me see.'

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

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

Billy's eyes opened.

'It's all over,' Vandam said.

Billy closed his eyes.

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

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

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

'What will we do with Wolff?'

'Put him in the boot.'

Vandam took another look at Billy. He was conscious now, his eyes wide open. 'How are you, son?' said Vandam.

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

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

There were tears in his eyes.

- 29 -

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

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

Today was 1 September, and everything had gone terribly wrong. What had seemed to be the weak point in the Allied defence line was looking more and more like an ambush. The minefields were heavy where they should have been light, the ground beneath had been quicksand where hard going was expected, and the Alam Halfa ridge, ~~was~~ which should have been taken easily, was being mightily defended. Rommel's strategy was wrong; his intelligence had been wrong; ~~xxxxxx~~ his spy had been wrong.

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

It was no good. His forward units were fifteen miles from Alexandria, but they ~~were~~ stuck. Fifteen miles, he thought. Another

fifteen miles, and Egypt would have been mine. He looked at the officers around him. As always, their expressions reflected his own: he saw in their faces what they saw in his.

It was defeat.

*

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

The cell was six feet long by four feet wide, and half of it was taken up by a bed. Beneath the bed was a chamber pot. The walls were of smooth grey stone. A small light-bulb hung from the ceiling by a cord. In one end of the cell was a door. In the other end was a small square window, set just above eye level: through it he could see the bright blue sky.

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

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

He stood upright. Then, quietly and calmly, he began to

bang his head against the wall.

*

Jerusalem, 24 September 42

My dear Elene,

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

This is the most beautiful place in the world, Jerusalem. Of course I do not live well. I sleep on a mattress on the floor in a little room with five other men. Sometimes I get a little work, sweeping up in a workshop where one of my room-mates, a young man, carries wood for the carpenters. I am very poor, like always, but now I am poor in Jerusalem, which is better than rich in Egypt.

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

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

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

Farewell,

Your Father.

*

The smoked ham was sliced as thin as paper and rolled into dainty cylinders. The bread rolls were home-baked, fresh that morning. There was a glass jar of potato salad made with real mayonnaise and

crisp chopped onion. There was a bottle of wine, another bottle of soda, and a bag of oranges. And a packet of cigarettes, his brand.

Elene began to pack the food into the picnic basket.

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

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

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

'What's the news?' Elene asked.

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

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

'Wait till my teeth drop out.'

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

'End of the world today,' Vandam said.

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

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

parked in front of the hotel. As they dismounted the clouds burst.

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

'There's no main drainage in this town,' Vandam remarked. 'The water has nowhere to go but the Nile. Look at it.' The street had turned into a river.

'What about the bike?' Elene said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The desert was carpeted with flowers.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Elene stopped laughing. 'Is he?' she said. 'Is he, really?'

Vandam smiled, and kissed her again.

- The end -