

'You sprung a surprise on me. Why didn't you ask me first?'

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

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

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

'I don't know.'

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

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

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

She gave him a weak smile. 'Okay.'

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

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

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

Elene had to agree. A flight of swifts rising from the

opposite bank drew her eye upward, and she saw that the evening clouds were already edged in pink. A young girl was walking away from the river with a huge water-jug on her head. A lone felucca sailed upstream, propelled by the light breeze.

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

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

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

'Did you enjoy it?'

He hesitated. 'I never really enjoyed anything with my mother. She was always interrupting the fun. She used to say: "You're so selfish, just like your father." At that age I preferred my Arab family. My stepbrothers were wicked, and nobody tried to control them. We used to steal oranges from other people's gardens, throw stones at horses to make them bolt, puncture people's bicycle tyres ... Only my mother minded, and all she could do was warn us that we'd get punished eventually. She was always saying that - "They'll catch you one day, Hansi!" I was called Hansi - my parents were Dutch.'

He had made a little slip, Elene realised. She herself had been relaxing. She wondered whether he was carrying the knife he had used in Assyut, and that made her tense again. The situation was so normal - a charming man taking a girl on a picnic beside the

river - that she had forgotten she wanted something from him.

She said: 'Where do you live now?'

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

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Vandam felt very low. His face hurt, and so did his pride. The great arrest had been a fiasco. Vandam had underestimated John Wolff.

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

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

What was Elene doing now? Perhaps she was sitting with Wolff in a candlelit restaurant, drinking wine and laughing at his jokes. He pictured her, in that cream-coloured dress, holding a glass, smiling her special, impish smile, the one that promised you anything you wanted. Vandam checked his watch. Perhaps they had finished dinner by now. What would they do then? It was traditional to go and look at the Pyramids by moonlight: the black sky, the stars, the endless flat desert, and the clean triangular planes of the Pharaohs'

tombs. The area would be deserted, except perhaps for another pair of lovers. They might climb a few levels, he springing up ahead and then reaching down to lift her; but soon she would be exhausted, her hair and her dress a little awry, and she would say that these shoes were not designed for mountaineering; so they would sit on the great stones, still warm from the sun, and breathe the mild night air while they watched the stars. Walking back to the taxi, she would shiver in her sleeveless evening gown, and he might put an arm around her shoulders to keep her warm. Would he kiss her in the taxi? No, he was too old for that. When he made his pass, it would be in some sophisticated manner. Would he suggest going back to his place, or hers? Vandam did not know which to hope for. If they went to his place, Elene would report in the morning, and Vandam would be able to arrest Wolff at home, with his radio, his code book, and perhaps even his back traffic. Professionally, that would be better - but it would also mean that Elene would spend a night with Wolff. At her place, Jakes was waiting with ten men and three cars to jump on Wolff the moment he showed his face.

Vandam got up and paced the room. Idly, he picked up the book Rebecca, the one he thought Wolff was using as the basis of a code. He read the first line: 'Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again.' He put the book down, then opened it again and read on. The story of the vulnerable, bullied girl was a welcome distraction from his own worries. When he realised that the girl would marry the glamorous, older widower, and that the marriage would be blighted by the ghostly presence of the man's first wife, he closed the book and put it down again. What was the age difference between himself and Elene? How long would the first Mrs Vandam haunt him? She, too, had been coldly perfect; Elene, too, was young, impulsive, and in need of rescue from the life she was living. The parallels

irritated him, for he was not going to marry Elene. He lit a cigarette. Why did the time pass so slowly? Why did the phone not ring? How could he have let Wolff slip through his fingers twice in two days? Where was Elene?

Where was Elene?

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

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Elene thought: I will not go to bed with John Wolff.

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

the way she always made decisions - to stop giving herself in trade, and so she would not give herself to Wolff.

They had finished the meal, emptied the bottle of champagne and the flask of coffee, picked clean the chicken and the bunch of grapes. This was the end: any second now Wolff would touch her. Without speaking she turned from the view and walked back toward the car.

From the back seat she watched Wolff. He stayed a moment longer on the edge of the bluff, then walked toward her, calling to the driver. He had the confident grace that height often seemed to give to men. He was an attractive man, much more glamorous than any of her sugar-daddies had been, but she was afraid of him, and her fear came not just from what she knew about him, his history and his secrets and his knife, but from an instinctive understanding of his nature. Somehow she knew that his charm was not spontaneous but manipulative, and that if he was kind it was because he wanted to use her.

She was through with being used.

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

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

The car pulled away. Either he would invite her to his place, or he would take her ~~home~~ to her flat and ask for a nightcap. She would have to find an encouraging way to refuse him. This struck her as faintly ridiculous: she was behaving like a frightened virgin. For the last ten years she had been, to say the least, a woman of easy virtue. She thought: What do you think you're doing - saving yourself for Mr Right?

She realised that it was, oddly enough, something like that.

The trouble was that Mr Right wanted her to seduce John Wolff.

They reached the outskirts of the city. It was after midnight,

and the suburbs were quiet, although downtown would still be buzzing. Wolff said: 'Where do you live?' She told him.

So it was to be her place.

Wolff said: 'We must do this again.'

'I'd like that.'

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

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

She thought: What do you make of that?

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

She puzzled over the whole thing as the taxi took her home. Perhaps it was Wolff's technique to try to intrigue a woman. Perhaps he was just eccentric.

The taxi drew up outside her building. Suddenly, from nowhere, three cars roared up. One stopped right in front of the taxi, one right behind, and one alongside. Men materialised out of the shadows. All four doors of the taxi were flung open, and four guns pointed in. Elene was momentarily stunned, then she realised what was happening.

She got out of the car, pushing past a rifle barrel. 'It's all right, boys,' she said. 'It's only me.'

She saw Vandam. He said: 'Gone?'

'Gone.'

'Where did you leave him?'

'Sharia Abbas.'

'How long ago?'

'Five or ten minutes. Why don't you send your men home and come and talk inside?'

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

'Very good, sir.'

Elene led the way inside. She felt a surge of relief as she entered her own apartment, slumped on the sofa, and kicked off her shoes. The trial was over, Wolff had gone, and Vandam was here. She said: 'Help yourself to a drink.'

'No, thanks.'

'What went wrong, anyway?'

Vandam sat down opposite her and took out his cigarettes. 'We expected him to walk into the trap all unawares - but he was suspicious, or at least cautious, and we missed him. What happened then?'

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

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

'We almost caught Wolff last night.'

'Oh.' No wonder he was in a bad mood.

He gave her a drink. He had made one for himself after all. He said: 'How did Wolff strike you?'

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

'His appearance?'

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

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

He was very distant. ^Elene wanted him to come and sit beside her, and tell her she was beautiful and brave and she had done well; but she knew it would be no use asking. All the same she said: 'How did I do?'

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

'You know what I did.'

'Yes. I'm most grateful.'

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

'He said he would call you?' Vandam asked.

'Yes.'

'I hope he does.' Vandam was sitting on the edge of a chair, his chin on his hands, his face strained with tension. Wisps of smoke rose from his cigarette. 'Christ, I hope he does. ~~It's our only chance.~~'

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

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

'Something like that.'

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

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

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

'Shut up.' She closed her eyes. So that was it. He was disgusted because he thought she had had sex with John Wolff. She did not know whether it was a classic piece of masculine logic or a typical piece of British hypocrisy. She felt very tired, and demoralised, and sad. Without opening her eyes she said: 'I'm going to bed. You can see yourself out.'

A few seconds later the front door slammed, and she began to cry.

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By the time Major Smith made his third lunchtime visit to the houseboat, Wolff and Sonja had got into a slick routine. Wolff hid in the cupboard when the Major approached. Sonja met him in the living room with a drink in her hand ready for him. She made him sit down there, ensuring that his briefcase was put down before they went into the bedroom. After a minute or two she began kissing him. He was always helpless with desire: she could do what she

liked with him. She contrived to get his shorts off, then soon afterward took him into the bedroom.

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

Smith's second visit had been disappointing, but this time Wolff again found gold.

General Sir Claude Auchinleck, the Commander-in-Chief, Middle East, had taken over direct control of the Eighth Army from General Neil Ritchie. As a sign of Allied panic, that alone would be welcome news to Rommel.

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

Tenth Corps was at the coastal village of Matruh itself, with two divisions - the 50th British and the 10th Indian. A big minefield stretched south of Matruh, into the desert, for a distance of fifteen miles. For the next ten miles, as far as the Sidi Hamza escarpment, there was a much lighter minefield, and the Allied forces consisted only of two columns, called Gleecol and Leathercol. Then, just south of the escarpment, there was 13th Corps, consisting of the 1st Armoured Division and the 2nd New Zealand Division. The summary noted, helpfully, that the New Zealanders were freshly arrived from Syria.

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

Rommel's likeliest move, according to Allied thinking, was a dash around the southernmost end of the line, a classic Rommel outflanking manoeuvre, made all the more feasible by his capture of

an estimated 500 tons of fuel at Tobruk. Such an advance could be repelled by the strong 1st Armoured and the fresh New Zealanders.

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

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

In the bedroom, a cork popped.

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

He put the papers back in the case, locked it, and put the key back in the shorts pocket. He no longer spent the whole of the afternoon cramped in the cupboard - once had been enough. He put his notebook and pencil in the cupboard, took out his shoes and put them in his trousers pockets, and tiptoed, soundlessly in his socks, up the ladder, across the deck, and down the gangplank to the towpath. Then he put his shoes on and went to lunch.

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

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

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

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

Sonja had come home - presumably from the Cha-Cha Club - at eleven o'clock the previous night. She had been alone. She had surfaced at around ten the following morning, and had been seen on deck in a robe. The postman had come at one. Nothing else had happened until six o'clock, when the watcher was relieved by another detective.

Yesterday Vandam had received by messenger a similar report from Kemel covering the first twelve hours of the surveillance. For two days, therefore, Sonja's behaviour had been routine and wholly innocent. Vandam was bitterly disappointed.

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

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

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

Vandam sat, brooding. He read Kemel's report again, as if there might have been clues between the lines. If Sonja was connected with Wolff - and Vandam still believed she was, somehow - clearly the association was not a close one. If she was meeting anyone, the meetings must be taking place at the club.

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

'Sir!'

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

'Very good, sir.'

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

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

If Sonja was not going to lead him to Wolff, only Elene could. Vandam regretted his contretemps with Elene. He had no right to judge her, especially as she had been doing what he asked. He had been angry about his own failure, and the thought of her with Wolff had inexplicably maddened him. Now he was ashamed. In general he did not feel good about himself at the moment.

Wolff had promised to get in touch with Elene again. Vandam hoped it would be soon. He hoped Elene would agree to a date and pass on the details. He stared at the phone, willing it to ring.

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Elene went shopping in the late afternoon. Her apartment had come to seem claustrophobic after she had spent most of the day pacing around, unable to concentrate on anything, composing indignant, mortifying speeches to Vandam ~~which she would never deliver. She~~ in which she explained why she was no longer willing to co-operate with him. So she put on a cheerful striped dress and went out into the sunshine.

She liked the fruit-and-vegetable market. It was a lively place, especially at this end of the day when the tradesmen were trying to get rid of the last of their produce. She stopped to buy tomatoes. The man who served her picked up one with a slight bruise, and threw it ^{away} dramatically before filling a paper bag with undamaged specimens. Elene laughed, for she knew that the bruised tomato would be retrieved, as soon as she was out of sight, and put back on the display so that the whole pantomime could be performed again for the

next customer. She haggled briefly over the price, but the vendor could tell that her heart was not in it, and she ended up paying almost what he had originally asked.

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

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

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

~~She felt less angry toward him now. It occurred to her that she might take comfort from his irrational behaviour: was it not a sign that he cared? Could it even be possible that he was jealous?~~

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

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

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

'Abigail.'

She made herself turn around. A figure came out of the

shadows: an old Jew, shabbily dressed, with a matted beard, veined feet in rubber-tyre sandals ...

Elene said: 'Father.'

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

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

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

She took his arm and led him up the stairs.

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

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

Esme was an acquaintance, rather than a friend, but Elene had run into her every so often throughout the last ten years. She had never let on that she was writing home. Elene said: 'I was afraid you would come and take me back.'

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

She sliced tomatoes into the omelet. 'You would have said it was better to starve than live by dancing naked on a stage.'

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

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

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

'Perhaps it is.'

Her surprise must have shown on her face, for he explained:

'I am not as certain of these things as I used to be. I'm getting

old.'

Elene halved the omelet and slid it on to two plates. She put bread on the table. Her father washed his hands, then blessed the bread. 'Blessed art thou o Lord our God, King of the Universe ...' Elene had understood, ~~that~~ as a young girl, that these prayers were the most important part of life for her father; and that, enraged by what he saw as heretical modernism in the synagogue, he had cut himself off from the people who would have helped him fight his way out of poverty. She had cursed him for that - like any child she had no mercy - but she would not mention it now, for it seemed he had his own regrets.

They began to eat. ~~It seemed~~ He had been very hungry. She wondered why he had come. Was it just to tell her of the death of her grandfather? No. That was part of it, perhaps, but there would be more.

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

He had stopped eating. 'Are you afraid?'

'He's very dangerous. He killed a soldier with a knife. Last night ... I was to meet him in a restaurant and the British were to arrest him there, but something went wrong and I spent the whole evening with him, I was so frightened, and when it was over, all the Englishman could think about was whether I had sex with the spy.' She sniffed.

Her father continued eating. 'Do you love this Englishman?'

'Yes, I do, and he isn't Jewish either.' She thought: Why am I being defensive? I'm all grown up!

He noticed her defiant tone, and said: 'I've given up judging

everyone.'

They finished their meal. Elene got up to make tea. Her father said: 'The Germans are coming. It will be very bad for Jews. I'm getting out.'

She frowned. 'Where will you go?'

'Jerusalem.'

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

'I am going to walk.'

She stared at him, not believing he could be serious. 'Walk?'

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

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

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

'It's crazy!'

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

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

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

She tried to persuade him to stay with her, for one night at least, but he would not. He was set on leaving today. She gave him a sweater, and a scarf, and all the cash she had. She cried, and dried her tears, and cried again. When he left she looked out of her window and saw him walking along the street, an old man going up out of Egypt and into the wilderness, following in the footsteps of the Children of Israel. His orthodoxy had mellowed, but he still

had a will of iron. He disappeared into the crowds, and she left the window. When she thought of his courage, she knew she could not run out on Vandam.

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'She's an intriguing girl,' Wolff said. 'I can't quite figure her out.' He was sitting on the bed, watching Sonja get dressed.

'She's a little jumpy. When I told her we were going on a picnic she acted quite scared, said she hardly knew me, as if she needed a chaperone.'

'With you, she did,' Sonja said.

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

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

'It bothers me.' Wolff frowned: he was thinking aloud.

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

'A beggar.'

'No, he was a European.'

'Well, this is Cairo, taxis are hard to find.' Sonja stopped brushing her hair to look at Wolff in the mirror. 'If you have second thoughts, just picture her writhing on that bed with you and me either side of her.'

Wolff grinned. It was a very appealing picture. There was something quite irresistible about Elene. But still ...

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

'Call him tonight from the club. I'm not in a rush for this meeting, but we have to keep him sweet.'

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

She was getting above herself, Wolff thought. The trouble was, he was dependent on her now. She was crazy enough to betray him if

he offended her badly. Nevertheless he might have taken that risk, were it not that he, too, wanted Elene. When it came to the crunch, he always put pleasure before business. Life was too short.

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

- 17 -

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

She had been thinking about him all day. Yesterday she had despised ~~hated~~ him; today she was not sure. She kept asking herself: Why did he care whether or not she had had sex with Wolff? Clearly he had not asked merely out of prurience. Clearly, too, the question was an emotive one for him, for it had made him by turns cold, angry, and irrational. She was driven to the conclusion that he cared for her. She even toyed with the idea that he had been jealous of Wolff, but that was too much to hope for.

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

She wanted to patch up their quarrel, and she wanted to see

where he lived. She had an excuse to contact him now, but instead of telephoning she would go to his home.

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

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

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

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

She felt gay and reckless. What a good idea it had been to go to his house - so much better than sitting alone at home. She had been alone too much over the past few years. For her men, she had existed only when they had time to visit her; and she had made their attitudes her own, so that when they were not there she did nothing.

She had broken with all that now. By doing this, by going to see him uninvited, she felt she was being herself instead of a person in someone else's dream. It made her almost giddy.

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

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

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

'The Major has not yet returned home, Madam.'

The servant hesitated. Elene said: 'Perhaps I could wait.'

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

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

'Thankyou, Gaafar.'

The servant went out. The drawing-room had a large marble fireplace and a lot of very English furniture: somehow Elene felt Vandam had not furnished it himself. Everything was clean and tidy and not very lived-in. What did this say about his character? Nothing, perhaps.

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

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

Elene stared at him in horror. A son - Vandam had a son! She knew why he seemed familiar: he resembled his father. Why had

it never occurred to her that he might be married? A man like that - charming, kind, handsome, clever - was unlikely to have reached his late thirties without getting hooked. What a fool she had been to think that she might have been the first to desire him! She felt so stupid that she blushed.

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

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

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

'Would you like a drink, or anything?'

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

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

'No, no ... '

'If you need anything, just call Gaafar.'

'Thankyou.'

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

beauty with a superior air.

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

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

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

She wandered around the room, wondering if it held any more shocks in store. The room had been furnished by Mrs Vandam, of course, in perfect, bloodless taste. The decorous print of the curtains toned with the restrained hue of the upholstery and the elegant striped wallpaper. Elene wondered what their bedroom would be like. It too would be coolly tasteful. Perhaps the main colour

would be blue-green, the shade they called eau de Nil although it was not a bit like the water of the muddy Nile. Would they have twin beds? She hoped so. She would never know.

Against one wall was a small upright piano. She wondered who played. Perhaps Mrs Vandam sat here sometimes, in the evenings, filling the air with Chopin while Vandam sat in the armchair, over there, watching her fondly. Perhaps Vandam accompanied himself as he sang romantic ballads to her in a strong tenor. Perhaps Billy had a tutor, and fingered hesitant scales every afternoon when he came home from school. She looked through the pile of sheet music in the seat of the piano stool. She had been right about the Chopin: they had all the waltzes here in a book.

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

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

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

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

'What do you like to read?'

'I like tecs best.'

'Tecs?'

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

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

'Oh! Who's your favourite tec?'

Elene considered. 'Maigret.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Oh!' Elene stared at him. So Vandam was not married! She immediately felt ashamed that that had been her first thought, and sympathy for the child her second. She said: 'Billy, how awful for you. I'm so sorry.' Real death had suddenly intruded into their

light-hearted talk of murders, and she felt embarrassed.

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

And now he was like his father again. For a while, talking about books, he had been full of boyish enthusiasm, but now the mask was up, and it was a smaller version of the mask used by his father: courtesy, formality, the attitude of the considerate host. It's the war, you ^{see} ~~know~~: he had heard someone else say that, and had adopted it as his own defence. She wondered whether his preference for 'true-to-life' murders, as opposed to implausible country-house killings, dated from the death of his mother. Now he he was looking around him, searching for something, inspirationperhaps. In a moment he would offer her cigarettes, whisky, tea. It was hard enough to know what to say to a bereaved adult: with Billy she felt helpless. She decided to talk of something else.

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

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

'You want to fight?'

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

She murmured: 'I don't suppose you are.'

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

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

He gave her a sceptical look: she should have known better than

to soft-soap him. He said: 'They'd only do to us what we've been doing to the Egyptians for fifty years.'

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

Billy said: 'But then it would all have been for nothing.'

He bit his nail again, and this time he did not stop himself.

Elene wondered what ^{would have been for nothing} ~~he meant by 'all' there~~ the death of his mother?

His own personal struggle to be brave? The two-year see-saw of the desert war? European civilisation?

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

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

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

'Yes.' He stood up.

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

'If you like.' He went out.

What kind of life did they lead in this house? Elene thought. The man, the boy and the old servant lived here together, each with his own concerns. Was there laughter, and kindness, and affection? Did they have time to play games and sing songs and go on picnics? She feared it might be a terribly adult household for a ^{child} ~~boy~~ to grow up in. Billy's young-old wisdom was charming, but he seemed like a boy who did not have much fun. She experienced a rush of compassion for him, a motherless child in an alien country besieged by foreign armies. She left the drawing-room and went upstairs.

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

It did not look much like a small boy's bedroom. Elene did not know a lot about small boys - she had had five sisters - but she was expecting to see model aeroplanes, jigsaw puzzles, a train set, sports

gear and perhaps an old, neglected teddy bear. She would not have been surprised to see clothes on the floor, a construction set on the bed and a pair of muddy football boots on the polished surface of a desk. But the place might almost have been the room of an adult. The clothes were folded neatly on a chair, the top of the chest of drawers was clear, school books were piled tidily on the desk, and the only toy in evidence was a cardboard model of a tank. Billy was in bed, his striped pyjama jacket buttoned to the neck, a book on the blanket beside him.

'I like your room,' Elene said deceitfully.

Billy said: 'It's fine.'

'What are you reading?'

'The Greek Coffin Mystery.'

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

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

She leaned forward suddenly and kissed his cheek.

At that moment the door opened and Vandam walked in.

*

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

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

'Hello, Elene.'

'Goodnight, Billy.'

'Goodnight, Elene.'

She went past Vandam and left the room. Vandam sat on the edge of the bed, in the dip in the covers which she had vacated. He

said: 'Been entertaining our guest?'

'Yes.'

'Good man.'

'I like her - she reads detective stories. We're going to do swaps.'

'That's grand. Done your prep?'

'Yes - French vocab.'

'Want me to test you?'

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

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

'My lips are sealed.'

Vandam smiled. 'That's the stuff.'

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

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

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

Vandam shook his head silently.

Billy said: 'Gosh!'

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

'Right-ho. Goodnight.'

'Goodnight, Billy.' Vandam went out and closed the door behind him.

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

Elene said: 'Busy day?'

Vandam's whole section had been working on the new wireless security procedures that were being introduced following the capture

of one of Rommel's listening posts, but Vandam was not going to tell Elene that. Also, he felt she was play-acting the role of the housewife, and she had no right to do that. He said: 'What made you come here?'

'I've got a date with Wolff.'

'Good, good! When?'

'Wednesday.' She showed him the message.

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

'A boy brought it to my door.'

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

She shook her head. 'I never thought to do that.'

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

'What will we do?' Elene asked.

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

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

'Why?'

'He frightens me.'

Vandam frowned. 'But last time he didn't harm you.'

'He didn't try to seduce me, so I didn't have to say No. But

he will, and I'm afraid he won't take No for an answer.'

'We've learned our lesson,' Vandam said. 'There'll be no mistakes this time.' So she had not had sex with Wolff! He saw how arrogant had been his assumption that because she was unchaste she was also indiscriminate. He had wronged her, if only in his mind. Her evening with Wolff had taken more courage than he had imagined. It was his duty to be honest with her. 'I should rephrase that,' he said. 'I'll do everything in my power to make sure that there are no mistakes this time.'

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

Vandam said to Elene: 'Have you eaten?'

'No.'

'What have we got, Gaafar?'

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

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

'No, it's because of this.' He touched the dressing on his cheek. He stood up.

They went into the dining-room. Elene said: 'Does it still hurt?'

'Only when I laugh. It's true - I can't stretch the muscles on that side. I've got into the habit of smiling with one side of my face.' They sat down, and Gaafar served the soup.

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

'So do I,' Vandam said.

'He's old beyond his years.'

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

She shrugged. 'Who knows? I was only two years older than he

when I left home.'

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

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

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

'Billy told me it happened in Crete.'

'Yes. We were posted here, to Cairo, before the war. Early last year we were sent to Crete. It was a coincidence that we both went - she worked on cryptanalysis for the Air Force. At the time we thought it was a piece of luck. Fortunately, Billy stayed here - in those days he still had a nanny. Anyway, May 28 was the day we realised ~~decided~~ we had lost the battle and decided to get out. I didn't see what happened - I was miles away - but apparently she was hit by a stray shell and killed instantly. Of course, we were trying to get live people away then, not bodies, so ... There's no grave, you see. No memorial. Nothing left.'

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

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

'Were you very happy?'

'No. Ours wasn't an idyllic marriage. It was I who was devoted ... Angela was fond of me.'

'Do you think you will marry again?'

'Well. The English in Cairo keep thrusting replicas of Angela at me.' He shrugged, not wanting to answer the question because he did not know. Elene seemed to understand his evasion, for she asked no more questions and began to eat her dessert.

Afterward Gaafar brought them coffee in the drawing-room.

It was at this time of day that Vandam usually began to hit the bottle seriously, but tonight he did not want a drink. He sent Gaafar to bed, and they drank their coffee in silence. Vandam smoked a cigarette.

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

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

*

They whisper.

She says, 'I like your ears.'

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

'Do you like it?'

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

'It has buttons - here - that's right - aah.'

'I'll put out the light.'

'No, I want to see you - '

'There's a moon - there - see? The moonlight is enough.'

'Come back here quickly - '

'I'm here.'

'Kiss me again, William.'

They do not speak for a while. Then:

'Can I take that off?' he says.

'Let me ... there.'

'Oh! Oh, they're ~~xx~~ pretty.'

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

And a little later she says:

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

'The hell with that.'

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

'What?'

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

'Yes.'

'Touch me, stroke me, squeeze, pinch, explore, I want to feel
your hands all over me, everywhere, your hands, there, yes, especially
there, oh, you know, you know exactly where, oh!'

'You're so soft inside.'

'This is a dream.'

'No, it's real.'

'I never want to wake up.'

'So soft ... '

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

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

'William?'

'Yes?'

'Now?'

'Oh, yes.'

' ... Take them off.'

'Silk.'

'Yes. Be quick.'

'Yes.'

'I've wanted this for so long - '

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

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

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

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

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

'That's exactly what I was thinking.'

Then they both laugh, and he says:

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

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

- 18 -

'Dearest Lu,' Rommel wrote to his wife, 'Only 100 more miles to Alexandria!'

He put down his pen and sat back to reflect. It was 30 June. Nine days earlier, after Tobruk, he had been made Field-Marshal. He was being diffident about it: he still had not had the new badge sewn on to his uniform, and he had written to Lu: 'I would have

preferred a division.' But in truth he was proud. And he had already used, to great effect, the principal privilege of his new rank, which was direct access to the Fuehrer.

The old men had wanted him to stop at Tobruk. The Italian Supreme Command had actually given him a direct order to halt, whereupon Rommel had said he would not accept the 'advice' and had invited Bastico to have dinner with him in Cairo. Kesselring had flown in from Sicily to insist upon the original plan, agreed between Hitler and Mussolini in April, which was for Rommel to dig in at the Egyptian frontier while his air and sea support was diverted for the attack on Malta. Then, Kesselring had argued, with their communications secure they could advance on Cairo. Rommel knew this would be a mistake. The old men had learned nothing! While they were digging in the enemy, too, would be digging in, and the advance would become more difficult with the passage of time. Rommel had not got this far by playing the old game of advance, consolidate, then advance again. When the enemy attacked he had dodged; when the enemy defended he had gone around their positions; and when the enemy retreated he had chased them. The British were running now, and now was the time to take Egypt.

The discussions with Kesselring had become acrimonious. It was at that point that Rommel had used his new privilege of access to the Fuehrer. He had sent a personal liaison officer to put his arguments to Hitler, and he had cabled Mussolini: 'The state and morale of the troops, the present supply position owing to captured dumps, and the present weakness of the enemy, permit our pursuing him into the depths of the Egyptian area.' It had worked. Hitler had said: 'It is only once in a lifetime that the Goddess of Victory smiles,' and the Malta plan was abandoned. Rommel was pleased to discover that he was as good at winning political battles as he was

at the military kind.

What he had told Mussolini about supplies was only half true. Rommel had sixty tanks and 2,500 men. The Italians, for what they were worth, had 6,000 men and fourteen tanks. According to Rommel's intelligence the Allied forces facing them were approximately three times as numerous.

However, Tobruk had been a treasure trove. The German and Italian supply officers thought Santa Claus had come: there were whole warehouses full of flour, great pyramids of canned beer, cigarettes, whisky, and jam, and tons of the khaki clothing which the Axis troops envied. Eighty percent of Rommel's lorries and armoured cars now consisted of captured British vehicles. The men were in terrific spirits. Rommel was turning a blind eye to their latest sport: dressed in captured khaki and driving British armoured cars they would mingle with the retreating, confused Allies, go with them a mile or so, then suddenly open fire on their unsuspecting fellow-travellers.

On 23 June Rommel had crossed the Egyptian border, and on 26 June he had attacked Mersa Matruh. And here, for the second time in a month, Intelligence had made a decisive contribution. The spy in Cairo had said that the British line was weak in the middle, and weak it had proved to be. (They had wondered what was meant by the new military term column, until a captured officer, disillusioned and bitter, had explained with cynical humour: 'A column is a brigade group which has been twice overrun by tanks.') The Germans had attacked the middle, poured through the gap, then swung north and south to encircle and mop up the remaining Allied forces. The 13th Corps in the south had retreated in a panic, while in the north the fortress of Mersa Matruh had been besieged. Despite a partly-successful night-time breakout by the

defenders of the fortress, Rommel had taken 6,000 prisoners - almost as many men as he had in his entire infantry force.

Yesterday he had entered the fortress, and today he would push on farther. One hundred miles to Alexandria! Mussolini had flown to Derna with, so Rommel was told, a white horse following in another aircraft. The Duce was already planning his triumphant, Napoleonic entry into Cairo. And the British fleet at Alexandria had put to sea. They were on the run!

It was just a little too soon to open the champagne. The situation looked wonderful only because Rommel was so good at camouflaging his weaknesses. So far, as his tanks and men became fewer so his tactics had become more brilliant; but nobody could fight with nothing. The British had fallen back to their last line of defence, a thirty-mile gap between the sea and the impassable Qattara Depression, a line identified by a railway halt called El Alamein at its northern end. They had their backs to the wall, now; perhaps they would fight more enthusiastically for that. There was nothing Rommel could do but continue to be cleverer, more decisive, and more fast-moving than his enemy. He hoped the spy would continue to get such marvellous information. It would be a terrible blow if the man stopped now. But if he continued ...

If he continues, Rommel thought, I will take Cairo.

He picked up his pen and resumed his letter to Lu.

- 19 -

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

The news was not enough to dampen his elation. It was more than twenty-four hours since he had awakened at dawn, on the sofa in

his drawing-room, with Elene in his arms. Since then he had been suffused with a kind of adolescent glee. He kept remembering little details: how small and brown her nipples were, the taste of her skin, her sharp fingernails digging in to his thighs. He knew he had been behaving a little out of character. He had given back a letter to his typist saying: 'There are seven errors in this, you'd better do it again,' and smiled at her sunnily. She had nearly fallen off her chair. He kept thinking: 'Why not? Why the hell not?' and there was no reply.

He was visited early by an officer from the Special Liaison Unit. Anybody with his ear to the ground in GHQ now knew that the SLUs had a very special, ultra-secret source of intelligence. Opinions differed as to how good the intelligence was, and evaluation was always difficult because they would never tell you the source. Brown, who held the rank of Captain but was quite plainly not a military type, leaned on the edge of a table and spoke around the stem of his pipe. 'Got a little snippet for you, Vandam. Rommel is very pleased with the intelligence he's getting from the "friend", as he puts it, who helped them so much in Crete.'

'Good Lord.'

'Thought you'd be interested. Are you being evacuated, by the way?'

'What? Evacuated? Why?'

'Our lot's off to Jerusalem. So's everyone who knows too much. Keep us out of enemy hands, you know. Obviously you're not included.'

'No, obviously.'

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

'You said, "The friend who helped them in Crete," didn't you?'

'That's it.'

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

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

'You always say that.'

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

'Thanks.'

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

Vandam was not interested in the evacuation of officers who knew too much to be allowed to fall into enemy hands. The friend who helped us in Crete. Was it possible that Wolff was the spy Vandam had hunted, and failed to catch, in Crete? Had Wolff played a role in the devastating German invasion of that island? Could Wolff have been ultimately responsible for the death of Angela?

The thought confused him. He had thought that at last the ghost of Angela would leave him alone, but Brown with his pipe and his secret source of intelligence had brought her back. Toodle-oo, Vandam thought with disgust. Who said toodle-oo any more? What am I supposed to do? he thought. How am I supposed to feel? Do I hate Wolff for killing my wife? They were evacuating personnel from Cairo. Trains would be commandeered. Vandam was to stay. He put his fingers to his temples, thinking: Who do I love? Who do I hate? What am I afraid of? He had not taken a drink all day yesterday, but now, at ten o'clock in the morning, he needed one. Ridiculous. Pull yourself together. Have a cigarette.

A corporal came in with an order. Vandam read it with mounting disbelief. All departments were to extract from their files those papers which might be dangerous in enemy hands, and burn them. Just about anything in the files of an intelligence section might be dangerous in enemy hands. We might as well burn the whole damn lot, Vandam thought. And how would departments operate afterwards? Clearly

the brass thought the departments would not be operating at all for very much longer. Of course it was a precaution, but it was a very drastic one: they would not destroy the accumulated results of years of work unless they thought there was a very strong chance indeed of the Germans taking Egypt. It was all falling apart.

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

'It's rather like what's been happening in the desert, sir,' Jakes replied. 'As they retreat, they blow up huge supply dumps that have been established at enormous cost.'

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

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

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

'What about your own files?'

'I'll go through them now.'

'Very good, sir.' Jakes went out.

Vandam opened his file drawer and began to sort through his papers. He had been here, in this office, for three years. Countless times he had thought: I don't need to remember that, I can always look it up. There were names and addresses, security reports on individuals, details of codes, systems of communication of orders, case notes, and a little file of ^{jottings} ~~notes~~ about John Wolff. Jakes brought in a big cardboard box with 'Lipton's Tea' printed on its side, and Vandam began to dump papers into it.

While he was working a signal came through from the Secret

Intelligence Service in London. The SIS Head of Station in Portugal had followed up Vandam's inquiry about the novel Rebecca. One of his men had visited all the English-language bookshops in the country. In the holiday area of the Estoril he had found a bookseller who recalled selling his entire stock - six copies - of Rebecca to one woman. On further investigation the woman had turned out to be the wife of the German military attache in Lisbon.

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

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

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

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

He wanted to think, so he decided to walk. He left GHQ and headed ~~xxx~~ downtown. His face was hurting. Perhaps that was why he had felt confused and helpless earlier. But he should welcome the

ache, for was it not a sign of healing? And if he considered his problems one by one, without getting panicked, he might come up with some solutions.

The news that had thrown him was that Wolff had been in Crete. Forget Elene for a moment, he told himself; How do I feel about Crete? When he thought about it he felt a boiling rage, and put his hands in his pockets and clenched his fists. His anger was irrational, spurious; Wolff had not tried to kill Angela, she had merely been another ~~man~~ casualty in a war in which Wolff was on the enemy side. Wolff had outwitted Vandam in Crete, but that was no more sensible a reason to hate him. Vandam realised that it was when he thought of Billy that he lost his equanimity. What Wolff had done was to deprive Billy of a mother. Vandam hated Wolff for that and he did not care whether the hatred was rational or not.

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

Looking around him, he realised that there was a festive feeling in the air. He passed a hairdresser's salon and noticed that it was

packed out, with women standing waiting. The dress shops seemed to be doing good business. A woman came out of a grocer's with a basket full of canned food, and Vandam saw that there was a queue stretching out of the shop and along the pavement. A sign in the window of the next shop said, in hasty scribble: 'Sorry no mækup.' Vandam realised that the Egyptians were preparing to be liberated, and looking foward^r to it.

The sun went in. It was such an unusual occurrence, in the middle of a July day in Cairo, that everyone stopped and looked up. At first Vandam could not understand what was darkening the sky: it seemed like low, swirling mist, dotted with particles. Then he realised it was smoke mixed with charred ~~ap~~ paper. All over the city the British were burning their files, and the sooty smoke had blotted out the sun.

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

He turned around and walked back toward Garden City, where GHQ was billeted in commandeered villas. He envisioned the map of the El Alamein line, where the Allies would make their last stand. Rommel would try to penetrate the line - this was one he could not circumvent. What then? He would have to take the Alam Halfa ridge, which stood astride his route to Alexandria. No, there was no 'have to' where Rommel was concerned - it was possible that he might ignore Alam Halfa, forget about Alexandria, and dash straight for Cairo.

That was one possibility. Another was that, having broken

through the line at its southern end, Rommel would wheel north and attack Alam Halfa. The idea might appeal to him, for he liked to break a line then attack it from behind. If he succeeded in this he would be fighting at Alam Halfa while most of the Eighth Army defended the El Alamein line against an enemy who was elsewhere. There was a snag, for Rommel, this time, though: between Qattara and Alam Halfa there was a lot of treacherous soft sand. Vandam wondered whether Rommel knew about the quicksand. It was unlikely, for he had never penetrated this far before - only the Allies had good maps of the Western Desert, and Vandam had at one point been involved in devising measures to prevent those maps getting into German hands.

Then there was a third possibility: an attack at the northern end of the El Alamein line, followed by either a dash to ~~El~~ Alexandria or a sharp turn south and, again, a battle at Alam Halfa.

So, Vandam thought, what we want is for him to attack the Alam Halfa ridge, preferably from the south.

The ridge was strongly defended. If Wolff were to discover that, he would tell Rommel; and if Rommel knew he would go around the ridge and dash east. Vandam had to stop Wolff giving that information to Rommel.

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

Then it hit him.

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

Then I could persuade Rommel to attack Alam Halfa from the south.

The idea blossomed rapidly in his mind. By now Rommel was convinced, quite rightly, that Wolff's information was good. The disaster could be turned to advantage. Rommel could be told that the southerly minefields were thin, even while they were being reinforced; he could be told that the route between Qattara and Alam Halfa was hard going - a lie that air reconnaissance could not expose, since quicksand looked the same as gravel from the air; and he could be told that the Eighth Army's strength was concentrated in the El Alamein line, leaving Alam Halfa weakly defended. It would be an ambush. The front-line forces could turn back and, instead of fleeing in confusion as they usually did, could squeeze the Afrika Korps in a nutcracker while its Panzers floundered in the soft sand.

Vandam murmured aloud: 'Jesus Christ, what a good idea.'

They bust through the southern end of the line, and are weakened by unexpectedly dense minefields. They swing north, anticipating that an easy battle will give them the Alam Halfa ridge and a dominating position. They hit the quicksand. We open up at that moment. They stand and fight. We bring in more tanks from the line. Rommel loses the elements of surprise, mobility and initiative which have so far given him victories. Not only do we win: if the ambush works well, we practically destroy the Afrika Korps. It could even be their last battle.

He tried to find holes in the plan, and could not.

He thought: So, I'll put it up to the brass.

He got up from the bench and headed for his office. Suddenly the future looked different. Perhaps the jackboot would not ring out on the ~~mxxx~~ tiled floors of the mosques. Perhaps the treasures

of the Egyptian Museum would not be shipped to Berlin. Perhaps Billy would not have to join the Hitler Youth. Perhaps Elene would not be sent to Dachau.

Then he suddenly stopped still, in the middle of the road, for he had thought of the biggest snag of all.

He had first to catch John Wolff.

Part Three: Alam Halfa

- 20 -

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

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

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

'Now look here, Vandam, your job is personnel security - strategy is for the generals.'

'Yes, sir.'

Bogge picked up Vandam's memo. Vandam had written out his deception plan and formally submitted it to Bogge, with a copy to the Brigadier. 'For one thing, this is full of holes,' Bogge said.

Vandam said nothing.

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

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

'Yes. Now, you see? This is the kind of thing I mean. Now.' He coughed. 'You want to encourage him to attack the line at its weakest point - giving him a better chance of getting through! You see?'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Yes, sir.'

'And, after all, everything depends on catching the damn spy,

something at which you have not so far been entirely successful, am I right?'

'Yes, sir.'

'I'll be taking charge of tonight's operation myself. Let me have your proposals this afternoon, and we'll go over them together - '

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

Bogge said: 'Good morning, sir.'

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

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

'Yes, I saw the memo.'

'Ah,' Bogge said. 'Vandam sent you a copy.'

Vandam did not look at Bogge's face.

'Yes, indeed,' said the Brigadier. He turned to Vandam. 'Absolutely splendid idea, Major. I want you to come with me and sell it to Auchinleck. You can spare him, Bogge, can't you?'

'Of course, sir.'

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

Vandam followed the Brigadier out.

*

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

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

Wolff and Sonja went through their now-familiar routine. Wolff felt like an actor in a French farce, who has to hide in the same stage wardrobe night after night. Sonja and Smith, following

the script, began on the couch and moved on to the bedroom. When Wolff emerged from the cupboard the curtains were closed, and there on the floor were Smith's briefcase, his shoes, and his shorts with the key ring poking out of the pocket.

Wolff opened the briefcase and began to read.

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

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

Smith's briefcase also contained a strategic appreciation. The Allied planners thought Rommel would try to break through the line, probably at its southern end but possibly at its northern end. The northern approach was thought less likely because there was a relatively narrow gap between the El Alamein perimeter wire and the edge of Ruweisat Ridge. The appreciation noted that, having broken through, Rommel would have to choose between dashing for the Nile, on the one hand, and attacking Alam Halfa on the other. The dash for the Nile was considered the more dangerous option for the Allies.

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

'Auk' was Auchinleck, no doubt. What a discovery this was!

Not only did Wolff hold in his hand the Allied plans. He also knew what they expected Rommel to do, and their deception plan.

And the deception plan was Vandam's!

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

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

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

Smith roared: 'Who the devil are you?'

Wolff realised he had not been paying attention to the noises from the bedroom. Something had gone wrong, the script had not been followed, there had been no champagne-cork warning. Wolff had been totally absorbed in the strategic appreciation. The endless names of divisions and brigades, the numbers of men and tanks, the quantities of fuel and supplies, the ridges and depressions and quicksands had absorbed his attention to the exclusion of local ~~noise~~ sounds. He had been counting his chickens, in the words of the English proverb, before they hatched.

Wolff stared back at Smith for a fraction of a second.

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

He took a step forward.

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

Sonja screamed.

Wolff and Smith both scrambled to their feet.

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

the shelf, picked it up and hurled it at Wolff.

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

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

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

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

Sonja came out and stared at him.

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

'What?'

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

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

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

Smith groaned and stirred.

Wolff wondered whether it might be possible to let him go. After all, if Smith were to reveal what had been going on ~~in~~ in the houseboat, he would implicate himself. Not only would it ruin his career, he might well be thrown in jail. He did not look like the kind of man to sacrifice himself for a higher cause.

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

Smith had his eyes open. 'You ... ' he said. 'You're Slavenburg ... ' He looked at Sonja, then back at Wolff. 'It was

you who introduced ... in the Cha-Cha ... this was all planned ... '

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

'You're damned spies!' Smith said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sonja said: 'Postman!'

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

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

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

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

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

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

the postman's outstretched hand.

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

She went farther up the ladder toward him, so that he had to back away. 'Thankyou,' she simpered. She reached for the hatch and pulled it down.

Wolff listened to the postman's footsteps crossing the deck and descending the gangplank.

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

She unwrapped herself and stood naked again.

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

Wolff went up the ladder and on to the deck. The level of the deck went up a foot at the forward end, and the locker was in the riser of the step. Wolff opened it. Inside was a coil of slender rope. It had perhaps been used to tie up the boat in the days before she became a houseboat. Wolff took the rope out. It was strong, but not too thick for tying someone's hands and feet.

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

Wolff dropped the rope and whirled around.

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

Wolff dashed toward the gangplank to head him off.

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

Wolff said: 'Shit!'

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

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

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

He landed on Smith's head.

For several seconds all was confusion. Wolff went underwater in a tangle of arms and legs - his and Smith's - and struggled to reach the surface at the same time as pushing Smith down. When he could hold his breath no longer he wriggled away from Smith and came up.

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

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

Smith gave a convulsive jerk and freed himself. His head came up and he heaved a great lungful of air. Wolff tried to punch him. The blow landed, but it had no force. Smith was coughing and retching between shuddering gasps. Wolff himself had taken in water. Wolff reached for Smith again. This time he got behind Smith, and

got one arm crooked around the man's throat while he used the other to push down on the top of his head.

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

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

Drown, you bastard. Drown!

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

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

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

Wolff said: 'Did anybody see?'

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

'Yes.'

Wolff thought: What the hell do I do now?

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

Suddenly Smith jerked and spewed water.

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

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

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

The body was drifting away. Wolff pulled it back. He realised, too late, that a drowned Major might simply have fallen in the river by accident, but a Major with his throat cut had unquestionably been murdered. Now he had to hide the body.

He looked up. 'Sonja!'

'I feel ill.'

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

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

'Listen to me! We need something heavy. Get ... Get that rope. Go on!'

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

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

'What?'

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

'Why?'

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

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

Hurry, you fat bitch, hurry!

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

Come on.

She took out a champagne bottle. She stood with the bottle in one hand and the briefcase in the other, and she frowned, as if she was puzzled about ~~how~~ what she was doing with them. At last her expression cleared and she put the bottle in the case, laying it flat. She took another bottle out.

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

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

Brilliant, Wolff thought.

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

'What now?' she said.

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

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

'Tie it very tight,' Wolff said.

'Okay.'

'Is there anyone around?'

She glanced to left and right. 'No.'

'Hurry.'

She finished the knot.

'Throw me the rope,' Wolff said.

She threw him the other end of the rope and he caught it.

He was tiring with the effort of keeping himself afloat and holding on to the corpse at the same time. He had to let Smith go for a moment because he needed both hands for the rope, which meant he had to tread water furiously to stay up. He threaded the rope under Smith's armpits and pulled it through. He wound it around the torso twice, then tied a knot. Several times during the operation he found himself sinking, and once he took a revolting mouthful of bloody water.

At last the job was done.

'Test your knot,' he told Sonja.

'It's tight.'

'Throw the briefcase into the water.'

She dropped the case over the side. It hit the water and went down. Slowly the rope followed the case. The length of rope between the case and Smith became taut, then the body went under. Wolff watch the surface of the water. The knots were holding. He swam across to where the body had disappeared, and kicked his legs under water. The did not connect with anything. The body had sunk deep.

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

A voice said: 'Good morning!'

Wolff and Sonja whirled around to face the towpath.

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

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

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

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

'He's a puppy, a gift.'

'What kind?'

'Poodle.'

'I'd love to see him.'

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

'Poor thing.'

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

Sonja said to the neighbour: 'Until tomorrow.'

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

Wolff and Sonja went below.

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

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

'You'll survive,' Wolff said.

'At least it was an Englishman.'

'Yes. You should be jumping for joy.'

'I will when my stomach settles.'

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

'Yes.' Wolff pointed to the military papers which were still on the floor, where he had been reading them. 'That stuff is red-hot - the best he's ever brought us. With that, Rommel can win the war.'

'When will you send it?'

'Tonight, at midnight.'

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

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

'Murder is sexy.'

'My God.'

She opened her eyes and looked at him. 'You will bring her home tonight. You owe it to me.'

'Sure.'

'Thankyou.'

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

Sonja called from the bedroom: 'But now Smith won't be able to bring you any more secrets.'

'We won't need them,' Wolff replied. 'He's served his purpose.'

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

- 21 -

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

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

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

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

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

tonight.'

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

'Sure.'

'Help yourself.'

He stared at her. 'Is something wrong?'

'Nothing. Help yourself to a drink, then brief me.'

Vandam frowned. 'What is this?'

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

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

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

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

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

'Here, I suppose.'

'Exactly!'

He did not understand what that meant. It crossed his mind that he had fallen in love with a woman he hardly knew. He said: 'I've been working, and you've been here, and so you're mad at me.'

She shouted: 'Yes!'

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

'No!'

with his back to her

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

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

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

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

'Oh, my God.'

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

'Oh, really?'

'What do you want me to say?'

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

'Don't be silly - '

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

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

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

'What for?'

'I'm a loose woman, right? I give myself to a man the way I take a drink of water. An hour later I've forgotten - is that what you think? Because that's how it seems to me! Damn you, William Vandam, you make me feel cheap!'

It made no more sense than it had at the start, but now he could hear the pain in her voice. He turned to face her. 'Elene, my love, I am most dreadfully sorry. The last thing I want to do is hurt you. You are the most wonderful thing that has happened to me for a long time, perhaps ever. Please forgive me. I'm a fool.' He took her hand in his own.

She looked toward the window, biting her lip, fighting back

tears. 'Yes, you are,' she said. She looked down at him and touched his hair. 'You bloody, bloody fool,' she whispered, stroking his head. Her eyes spilled tears.

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

'And I about you.'

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

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

'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 using her the way all men had used her, the way he used 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}~~make a difference~~ 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 it a try.'

And all the time, in the back of his mind, he thought: 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 may I kiss you Hello, first of all?'

'Yes, please.'

He knelt beside the arm of her chair, 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 ~~her~~, 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 Planning 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. He trusted her all the way, but he also had security instincts. He said: 'A rundown of our defences which was so complete that we think it could alter the result of the next battle. So, we'd better catch Wolff tonight.'

'But it might be too late already!'

'I don't think so. We found the decrypt of one of Wolff's signals. It was timed at midnight. Spies usually have a set time for reporting, and it's 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 will send this information tonight - unless I catch him.' He hesitated, then decided to tell her the rest of the story. '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 him over the radio and send false information to Rommel. We've devised a plan to lure Rommel into an ambush. It could turn the tables completely. 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. I'll have two other men in the restaurant. There will be six men on the pavement outside, 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.'

(Go to p265A)

'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: 'John!'

Vandam whispered: 'Christ!'

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

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

'I know. May I come in?'

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

(Go to p266)

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.'

'Well. 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 dressing on his cheek. He thought: What can I do? If he jumped Wolff now, he would have the advantage of surprise. They were about the same weight, and evenly matched. But they had been evenly matched in the alley - except for the knife. It seemed that if Wolff took the knife with him ^{when} ~~went~~ he went out to dinner with Sonja, he would take it with him to go out with Elene. Still, Vandam was at first tempted to take the risk. Then he realised that the fight would endanger Elene - first, because she might get hurt in the struggle, and second, because if Wolff were the victor he would want

Elene to explain what Vandam had been doing in her apartment.

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.

That was no use, it was a long shot, he could not rely on that. To attack Wolff or not? Vandam could not decide.

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: Thank God Elene didn't have a drink too. 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 had bargained for.

Vandam decided that to jump Wolff now would be an act of vainglory, brave but ill-advised.

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 whit 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. To be 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} ~~am~~ I think of something else to do.'

So they're not going to the restaurant, 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: Do I go for him now? Do I?

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 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 the car. 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 they stopped ~~xx~~ 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 be unlikely to realise 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 potholes, bumps 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 very 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 the 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 mouth full 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 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 it.

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; in 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, then 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 started it. At first the engine would not kick over, and he was terrified he might have got sand in the carburettor; but on the second attempt 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. He wondered where Wolff would go now. Would he take Elene home? If so, where would he go afterwards? He might lead Vandam to his base.

Vandam thought: I wish I had a gun.

Would Wolff take Elene to his base? 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, with a knife. Seduction might be the least of the dangers Elene faced. Vandam thought: What wouldn't I give for a phone!

A long column of army lorries came in the opposite direction, and Wolff had to pull over and stop to let them pass. Vandam pulled up too, fifty or sixty yards behind, and wheeled the bike out of the range of the lorries' lights. He could not see the faces of the drivers, and the trucks seemed like monstrous machines going to fight other machines in the inhuman desert.

At last they had all passed, and Wolff moved off again. Vandam followed him into the city. 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 afraid 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 padlocked 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. He followed her 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.

Then he remembered the police surveillance.

'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, contact 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 - 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 alternative: 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 a British officer. It always meant trouble. The switchboard at GHQ would refuse to put through the call, or they would leave the message until the morning, or they would tell him to call back later. And if anything went wrong there would be hell to pay. How did he know that the man on the towpath was genuine? He did not know Major Vandam from Adam, and anyone could put on the uniform shirt of a major. Suppose it was a hoax?

He ^{had a standard response to} ~~He knew what to do in~~ 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 and from there, he decided, he would call Superintendent Kemel at home.

Kemel would know what to do.

*

Elene stepped off the ladder and looked nervously around the interior of the houseboat. She had expected the decor to be sparse and rather nautical. In fact it was luxurious, if not sensual. There were thick rugs, low divans, a couple of elegant occasional tables, and rich velvet floor-to-ceiling curtains which separated 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. 'Do sit down.'

Elene felt trapped. Where the hell was William? 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, ~~and~~ 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, irrationally so. She had had many liaisons with men, some of them casual, but - she realised now for the first time - 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 ... to be 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 ~~xxx~~ 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. Was she the 'friend' of Wolff's who owned the houseboat?

Wolff stood up and said: 'Hello, Sonja.' He kissed her cheek.

Sonja said: 'You must be Elene. John has told me all about you.' She smiled.

Elene
~~Sonja~~ smiled back and said: 'Hello.' She was thinking: What's going on? Is Wolff living with her? Did he not expect her back so early? Why is neither of them angry, or puzzled, or embarrassed?

Sonja took off her gloves and put down her handbag. 'Pour me some champagne, John,' she said.

Elene asked her: 'Have you just come from the ~~Kik~~ Cha-Cha Club?'

'Yes.' She sat down beside Elene.

'How was it?'

'As always - exhausting, thrilling, successful.'

No false modesty here, Elene thought.

Wolff handed Sonja a glass. She took it without looking at him, and said to Elene: 'So you work in Mikis' shop?'

'No, I don't,' Elene said. 'I helped him for a few days, that's all. We're related.'

'So you're Greek?'

'That's right.' This 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. William 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. If William could not stop him Elene would have to. But how? Where was the radio? 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?

Wolff sat down again 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. 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.

She looked furtively at her wristwatch. It was a quarter to midnight. Too late, now, to rely on William. She, Elene, would have to stop Wolff using the radio. There was only one way to do that.

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.

Elene took a deep breath and then, suppressing a shudder, she put a hand under the skirt of Sonja's dress and slid it upward.

*

'All right, Nesbah,' 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 voice over the phone. 'Goodnight.'

'Goodnight.' Kemel hung up. This was a catastrophe. The British had followed John 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 absolutely 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. Now Kemel regretted that he had not

pushed Sonja harder, forced ~~he~~ 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 left the house quietly. He got in his car and started the engine, then 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 hit anyone. And how was he to cover up his involvement in all this? It might be days now before the Germans reached Cairo ^{indeed} -/it was ~~xxxx~~ possible, even at this stage, that they might still 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 could be shot.

'Courage,' he said aloud. He was 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 his truncheon and a ^glength of rope. He stuffed the rope into the ^ocket of his jacket, and carried the truncheon in his right hand.

He tapped the truncheon against his palm as he walked, feeling its weight. How long since he had used this? Six years, he thought.

It was a wooden one. Some policemen preferred the rubber type. A rubber truncheon / was more likely to incapacitate the victim with one blow, but it was also more likely to kill him.

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.

*

Vandam looked at his wristwatch in the glow of his cigarette. It was ten minutes to twelve. 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.

*

Kemel dropped the truncheon and knelt beside Vandam's prone figure. First he ^{touched} ~~felt~~ Vandam's chest, and was relieved to feel a strong heartbeat. Working quickly, he took off one of Vandam's sandals, then removed the sock and stuffed it into Vandam's mouth. That would stop the Englishman 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 tied 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 goings here to frighten them all 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 not 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 noticed that one of the curtains at the forward end did not completely cover the porthole. He crept forward and tried to look in. He could see nothing. He lay down on the towpath and eased himself forward, nearer to the boat, until he could put a hand on its side for balance, then he looked again.

At first he could not understand what he was looking at. There was a bed, and a lot of movement. He saw Wolff's face, then Sonja's:

it rather looked as if they were screwing, except that Wolff lay face down and Sonja was on top of him. Then he realised with astonishment that they were not alone. There was a third woman in the bed, underneath Wolff. Kemel looked away, embarrassed. European^{men}~~s~~ were very strange indeed.

Anyway, it/^{seemed}~~looked as if~~ they would be occupied for a while. Kemel looked at his watch. It was exactly midnight. He turned around and headed back toward his car.

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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 everywhichway over the sheets, fast asleep, snoring. Sonja's right hand rested limply on Elene's thigh. 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 stroking stopped, and she glanced sideways at Wolff's face. His eyes were closed. He was falling asleep.

Elene was miserable. She was a little sore, but otherwise the weird threesome had not hurt her. Most of the time she had felt numb and, oddly enough, bored. She had done what they asked, and from time to time she had mustered the energy to pretend it was giving her pleasure. 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 lived for the last ten years: all that time she had been on the slippery slope that ended in

prostitution, and now she felt she had arrived there. She had seen where she was headed, and she had tried her best to change direction, without success.

She knew men, and she was sure that as soon as Vandam discovered what had happened her tonight, he would be filled with revulsion for her. It was not fair, it was not even rational, but it was how men felt.

She wondered what had happened to him.

She was on her own now. Something had gone wrong, he had lost sight of Wolff's car in Cairo, or he had had an accident in the traffic; whatever the reason, he was no longer watching over her. 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. If it was here, if this was his base, he would not be so likely to disappear.

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 ... ' Perhaps Elene could find the key.

She had to search the boat.

Wolff's breathing was now slow and even: he too was fast asleep. Elene reached down, gently picked up Sonja's limp hand, and moved it from her thigh on to the bed. Now neither of them

was touching her. 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 ~~was~~ 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, 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 ~~mxk~~ for kitchen waste. Elene looked in the icebox. It was full 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. Beneath it was a small suitcase. Elene picked up the suitcase and opened it, and 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, its knobs and dials on top. Also inside was a book. Its board

covers had been torn off, presumably to make it fit into the case on top of the radio. Elene picked up the book and looked inside. She read the first line: 'Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again.' It was Rebecca.

Elene flicked the pages of the book. There was something between the pages, in the middle. 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 had 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 ~~xxxx~~ suspect their authenticity and also worry that the Allies have overheard them ... Without this, Wolff is useless. With this, Vandam is able to win the war. She had to run away, now, taking the key.

Suddenly she realised 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 unmistakeable sound of someone getting up, someone heavy, it had to be him. Elene stood ~~xxx~~ 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 radio opened on the floor. Elene looked away from him to the hatch. It was bolted on the inside. 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, lifted the heavy wooden hatch, and slammed it down with all her might just as Wolff's right hand grasped the rim of the opening. There was a muffled roar of pain from below. 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 turned to run, then stopped and looked back at him.

He came across the deck at a run, and jumped over the rail toward the bank. Elene thought he would not make it, then she realised he would. She dashed forward. Wolff landed on the very edge of the river bank, his arms windmilling for balance. Elene ran into him full-tilt, before he had chance to steady himself, and pushed him backward. He fell into the water.

Elene 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 gulps. She saw Wolff, dripping wet and naked, climbing out of the water up the muddy river bank. He would run after her. It was getting light: there was a limit to how far he could chase her, naked as he was. She spun

around to head for the street, ran forward one pace, 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. The man turned her around, grasped her arms, and marched her 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. He wrapped his other arm around her waist and picked her up.

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 carried Elene across the plank, over the deck and down the ladder.

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

Kemel dumped Elene, not ungently, and stood back.

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 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-complected 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 uneasy with such talk, apparently, 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.'

'Where's Vandam now?' Wolff said, suddenly concerned.

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

Elene's heart sank. That meant nobody had any idea where she was. It had all been for nothing.

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.'

'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 tonight.'

'So 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 made a decision. 'I have another set.'

'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 wavelenth. All you have to do is broadcast at midnight, any night.'

Kemel went over to theradio 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.

'A widower. His wife was killed in Crete last year.'

'Crete!' Wolff seemed taken aback. 'I wonder if he knows ... Never mind. 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 the book 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 ~~Vandam~~ Wolff give it to him, and maybe then Vandam will ^{get it from} ~~realize that~~ Kemel -

Kemel said: 'What - '

Wolff came back, carrying his clothes, and began to dress.

Kemel said to him: 'What was that book?'

'A code,' Vandam replied.

'Then we need it.'

'I can't give it to you,' Vandam said. 'You'll have to take

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your chances, 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 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, 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 in it.

'Where are you going?' Elene said.

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

'Oh, no,' Elene breathed.

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 knickers, and her half-slip, 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 knickers. 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 resumed dressing.

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

Elene followed him up on to the deck. 'What about Sonja?' she said.

Wolff grinned. 'I hate to disturb her beauty sleep,' he said. 'Get moving.'

They walked along the towpath. 'Why was he leaving Sonja behind?' ^{Elene} ~~Sonja~~ wondered. She could not figure it out, but she knew it was callous. Wolff was a completely unscrupulous man, she decided.

She thought: I wonder if I 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 driver's door 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. 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