

stronger?'

'A drop of whisky would be very nice.'

'Do sit down.'

She gave him his drink and sat close to him. He touched her shoulder, kissed her cheek, and roughly grabbed her breast. She shuddered. He took that as a sign of passion, and squeezed harder.

She pulled him down on top of her. He was very clumsy: his elbows and knees kept digging into her. He funbled beneath the skirt of her dress.

She said: 'Oh, Sandy, you're so strong.'

She looked over his shoulder and saw Wolff's face. He was on deck, kneeling down and watching through the hatch, laughing soundlessly.

- 8 -

William Vandam was beginning to despair of ever finding John Wolff. The Assyut murder was almost three weeks in the past, and Vandam was no closer to his quarry. As time went by the trail got colder. He almost wished there would be another briefcase snatch, so that at least he would know what Wolff was up to.

He had made no progress, but his growing obsession with Wolff had been slaked by a little information. His staff had at last dug up some records on the man. There had been no trace of him under the name of Wolff, which was why the search had taken so long. The Villa les Oliviers was owned by one Hussein Rahmha, however, and someone had had the bright idea that Hussein and Wolff might be one and the same. It was so.

The Rahmhas were a wealthy Cairo family. The father, Gamal, had been a lawyer. One of Vandam's lieutenants had dug up the record of a marriage between Gamal Rahmha and one Eva Wolff, widow

of Hans Wolff, both German nationals.

Which made John Wolff German, and explained how he got the name Hussein.

There was also a will which divided up Gamal's fortune among four natural sons and Hussein. Hussein got less than the others, but he had kept the villa.

Interviews with all surviving Rahmhas had produced nothing. Wolff, or Hussein as they called him, had disappeared two years ago and had not been heard of since.

Vandam was convinced Wolff had gone to Germany then.

There was another branch of the Rahmha family, but they were nomads, and no one knew where they could be found. No doubt, Vandam thought, they had helped Wolff somehow with his re-entry into Egypt.

Vandam understood that now. Wolff could not have come into Egypt through Alexandria. Security was tight at the port: his entry would have been noted, he would have been investigated, and sooner or later the investigation would have revealed his German antecedents, and he would have been interned. By coming from the south he had hoped to get in unobserved and resume his former status as a born-and-bred Egyptian. It had been a piece of luck for the British that Wolff had run into trouble in Assyut.

It seemed to Vandam that that was the last piece of luck they had had.

He sat in his office, smoking one cigarette after another, worrying about Wolff.

The man was no low-grade collector of gossip and rumour. He was not content to send in reports based on the number of soldiers he saw in the street and the shortage of motor spares. The briefcase theft proved he was after top-level stuff, and he was capable of

devising ingenious ways of getting it. If he stayed at large long enough he would succeed sooner or later.

Wolff paced the room - from the coat-stand to the desk, ^r around the desk for a look out of the window, around the other side of the desk, and back to the coat-stand.

The spy had his problems, too. He had to explain himself to inquisitive neighbours, conceal his radio somewhere, move about the city, ^{and} find informants. He could run out of money, his radio could break down, his informants could betray him, or someone could accidentally discover his secret. One way or another, traces of the spy had to appear.

The cleverer he was, the longer it would take.

Vandam was convinced the man Abdullah was involved with Wolff. Colonel Bogge had refused to have Abdullah arrested, so Vandam had offered him a large sum of money to betray Wolff. Abdullah still claimed to know nothing of anyone called Wolff, but the light of greed had flickered in his eyes.

Abdullah might not know where Wolff could be found - Wolff was surely careful enough to take that precaution - but perhaps Abdullah could find out. Vandam had made it clear that the money was still on offer.

Elene had put him on to Abdullah, but she had learned nothing of value since.

Coat-stand, desk, window, desk, coat-stand.

The phone rang.

He picked it up. 'Major Vandam.'

'Oh, hello, this is Major Calder in the Paymaster's office.'

Vandam tensed. 'Yes?'

'You sent us a note, a couple of weeks ago, to look out for forged sterling. Well, we've found some.'

That was it - that was the trace! 'Good!'

'Rather a lot, actually,' the voice continued.

Vandam said: 'I need to see it as soon as possible.'

'It's on its way. I'm sending a chap round - should be there soon.'

'Do you know who paid it in?'

'There's been more than one lot, actually, but we've got some names for you.'

'Marvellous. I'll ring you back when I've seen the notes. Did you say Calder?'

'Yes.' The man gave his phone number. 'We'll speak later, then.'

Vandam hung up. Forged sterling - it fitted: this could be the breakthrough. Sterling was no longer legal tender in Egypt. Officially Egypt was supposed to be a sovereign country. However, sterling could always be exchanged for Egyptian money at the office of the British Paymaster-General. Consequently people who did a lot of business with foreigners generally accepted pound notes in payment.

Vandam opened his door and shouted along the hall. 'Jakes!'

'Sir!'

'Bring me the file on forged banknotes.'

'Yes, sir!'

Vandam stepped to the next office and spoke to his secretary. 'I'm expecting a package from the Paymaster. Bring it in right away, would you?'

'Yes, sir!'

Vandam went back into his office. Jakes appeared a moment later with a file. Vandam switched on his desk light and said: 'Right, let's have a look at the Nazi-style funny money.'

Jakes put down the file and looked through it. He extracted

a sheaf of glossy photographs and spread them on the desk. Each print showed the front and the back of a banknote, somewhat larger than actual size.

Jakes sorted them out. 'Pound notes, fivers, tenners, and twenties.'

Black lines on the photographs indicated the errors by which the forgeries might be identified.

The source of the information was counterfeit money taken from German spies captured in England. Jakes said: 'You'd think they'd know better than to give their spies funny money.'

Vandam replied without looking up from the pictures. 'Espionage is an expensive business, and most of the money is wasted. Why should they buy English currency in Switzerland when they can make it themselves? A spy has forged papers, he might as well have forged money. Also, it has a slightly damaging effect on the British economy if it gets into circulation. It's inflationary, like the government printing money to pay its debts.'

'Still, you'd think they would have cottoned on by now to the fact that we're catching the buggers.'

'Ah. But when we catch 'em, we make sure the Germans don't know we've caught 'em.'

'All the same, I hope our spies aren't using counterfeit Reichmarks.'

'I shouldn't think so. We take Intelligence rather more seriously than they do, you know. Wish I could say the same about tank tactics.'

Vandam's secretary knocked and came in. He was a bespectacled twenty-year-old corporal. 'Package from the Paymaster, sir.'

'Good show!' Vandam said. He opened the envelope. It contained several hundreds of pound notes.

Jakes said: 'Bugger me!'

'They told me there were a lot,' Vandam said. 'Get a magnifying glass, Corporal, on the double.'

'Yes, sir!'

Vandam put a pound note from the envelope next to one of the photographs and looked for the identifying error.

He did not need the magnifying glass.

'Look, Jakes.'

Jakes looked.

The note bore the same error as the one in the photograph.

'That's it, sir,' said Jakes.

'Nazi money,' said Vandam. 'Now we're on his trail.'

*

Lieutenant-Colonel Reggie Bogge played snooker with the Brigadier that night at the Gezira Sporting Club. The Brigadier broke.

While they played, Bogge said: 'Hope you don't mind talking shop in the Club, sir.'

'Not at all,' said the Brigadier.

'It's just that I don't seem to get a chance to leave m'desk in the day.'

'What's on your mind?' The Brigadier chalked his cue.

Bogge potted a red and lined up the pink. 'I'm pretty sure there's a fairly serious spy at work in Cairo.' He missed the pink.

The Brigadier bent over the table. 'Go on.'

'You remember a corporal was stabbed in Assyut a few weeks ago?'

'Vaguely.'

'I had a hunch about that, and I've been following it up ever since. Last week a General Staff aide had his briefcase pinched during a street brawl. Nothing very remarkable about that, of course, but I put two and two together.'

The Brigadier potted the ~~black~~ white. 'Damn,' he said. 'Your shot.'

'I asked the Paymaster-General to look out for counterfeit English money. Lo and behold, he found some. I had my boys examine it. Turns out to be Nazi money.'

'Aha!'

Bogge potted a red, the blue, and another red, then he missed the pink again.

The Brigadier examined the table through narrowed eyes. 'I think you've left me rather well off. Any chance of tracing the chap through the money?'

'It's a possibility. We're working on that already.'

'Pass me that bridge, will you?'

'Certainly.'

The Brigadier laid the bridge on the baize and line^d up his shot.

Bogge said: 'It's been suggested that we might instruct the Paymaster to continue to accept the forgeries, in case he can bring in any new leads.'

The Brigadier unbent from the table and considered. 'Rather depends how much money is involved, doesn't it?'

'Several hundred pounds so far.'

'It's a lot of money.'

'I feel it's not really necessary, sir.'

'Jolly good.' The Brigadier potted the last red and started on the colours.

Bogge marked the score. The Brigadier was winning.

'Who've you got working on this spy thing?' the Brigadier asked.

'Well, I'm handling it myself, basically - '

'Yes, but which of your majors are you using?'

'Vandam, actually.'

'Ah, Vandam. Not a bad chap.'

'Bit of a soft spot for the wog, unfortunately, but good enough in a plodding sort of fashion.'

'Yes.' The Brigadier was enjoying a long break, potting the colours one after another. 'Went to the same school as I. Twenty years later, of course.'

Bogge did not like the turn the conversation was taking.

'Yes, but he was a scholarship boy, I understand.'

'Yes,' said the Brigadier. 'So was I.' He potted the black.

'You seem to have won, sir,' said Bogge.

*

The manager of the Cha-Cha Club said that more than half his customers settled their bills in sterling, he could not possibly identify who payed in which currency, and even if he could he did not know the names of more than a few regulars.

The chief cashier of ■ Shepheard's Hotel said something similar.

So did two taxi drivers, the proprietor of a soldiers' bar, and the brothel-keeper Madame Fahmy.

Vandam was expecting much the same story from the next location on his list, a shop owned by one Mikis Aristopoulos.

Aristopoulos had changed a large amount of sterling, most of it forged, and Vandam imagined his shop would be a business of considerable size, but it was not so. Aristopoulos had a small grocery store. It smelled of spices and coffee but there was not much on the shelves. Aristopoulos himself was a short Greek of about twenty-five years with a wide, white-toothed smile. He wore a striped apron over his cotton trousers and white shirt.

He said: 'Good morning, sir. ■ How can I help you?'

'You don't seem to have much to sell,' Vandam said.

Aristopoulos smiled. 'If you're looking for something particular, I may have it in the stock room. Have you shopped here before, sir?'

So that was the system: scarce delicacies in the back room for regular customers only. It meant he might know his customers. Also, the amount of counterfeit money he had exchanged probably represented a very large order, which he would remember.

Vandam said: 'I'm not here to buy. Two days ago you took one hundred and forty-seven pounds in English money to the British Paymaster-General and exchanged it for Egyptian currency.'

'Yes.'

'One hundred and twenty-seven pounds of that was counterfeit - forged - no good.'

Aristopoulos smiled and spread his arms in a huge shrug. 'I am sorry for the Paymaster. I take the money from English, I give it back to English ... what can I do?'

'You can go to jail for passing counterfeit notes.'

Aristopoulos stopped smiling. 'Please. This is not justice. How could I know?'

'Was all that money paid to you by one person?'

'I don't know - '

'Think!' Vandam said sharply. 'Did anyone pay you one hundred and twenty-seven pounds?'

'Ah ... yes! Yes!' Suddenly Aristopoulos looked hurt. 'A very respectable customer. One hundred twenty-six pounds ten shillings.'

'His name?' Vandam held his breath.

'Mister Wolff - '

'Ahhh.'

'I am so shocked. Mr Wolff has been a good customer for many years, and no trouble with paying, never.'

'Listen,' Vandam said. 'Did you deliver the groceries?'

'No.'

'Damn.'

'We offered to deliver, as usual, but this time Mr Wolff - '

'You usually deliver to Mr Wolff's home?'

'Yes, but this time - '

'What's the address?'

'Let me see. Villa les Oliviers, Garden City.'

Vandam banged his fist on the counter in frustration.

Aristopoulos looked a little frightened. Vandam said: 'You haven't delivered there recently, though.'

'Not since Mr Wolff came back. Sir, I am very sorry that this bad money has passed through my innocent hands. Perhaps something can be arranged ... ?'

'Perhaps,' Vandam said thoughtfully.

'Let us drink coffee together.'

Vandam nodded. Aristopoulos led him into the back room. The shelves here were well laden with bottles and tins, most of them imported. Vandam noticed Russian caviar, American canned ham, and English jam. Aristopoulos poured thick strong coffee into tiny cups. He was smiling again.

Aristopoulos said: 'These little problems can always be worked out between friends.'

They drank coffee.

Aristopoulos said: 'Perhaps, as a gesture of friendship, I could offer you something from my store. I have a little stock of French wine - '

'No, no - '

'I can usually find some Scotch whisky when everyone else in Cairo has run out - '

'I'm not interested in that kind of arrangement,' Vandam said impatiently. 'I want to find Wolff. I need to know where he is living now. You said he used to be a regular customer?'

'Yes.'

'What sort of stuff does he buy?'

'Much champagne. Also some caviar. Coffee, quite a lot. Foreign liquor. Pickled walnuts, garlic sausage, brandied apricots ... '

'Hm. I was wondering how soon he is likely to come back.'

'As soon as he runs out of champagne.'

'All right. When he does, I must find out where he lives.'

'But, sir, if he again refuses to allow me to deliver ... ?'

'That's what I've been thinking about. I'm going to give you an assistant.'

Aristopoulos did not like that idea. 'I want to help you, sir, but my business is private - '

'You've got no choice,' Vandam said. 'It's help me, or go to jail.'

'But to have an English officer working here in my shop - '

'Oh, it won't be an English officer.' Vandam smiled. 'I think I know the ideal person for the job.'

*

That evening after dinner Vandam went to Elene's apartment, carrying a huge bunch of flowers, feeling foolish.

She lived in a graceful, spacious old apartment house near the Place de l'Opera. A Nubian concierge directed Vandam to the third floor. He climbed the curving marble staircase which occupied the centre of the building and knocked on the door of 3A.

She was not expecting him. ~~She~~ She wondered ~~if~~ whether she might be entertaining a man friend.

He waited impatiently in the corridor, wondering what she would be like in her own home. This was the first time he had been there - they had spoken on the phone when she told him about Abdullah. Perhaps she was out. Surely she had plenty to do in the evenings -

The door opened.

She was wearing a yellow cotton dress with a full skirt, rather simple but almost thin enough to see through. The colour looked very pretty against her light brown skin. She looked at him blankly for a moment, then recognised him and gave her impish smile.

She said: 'Well, hello!'

'Good evening.'

She stepped forward and kissed his cheek. 'Come in.'

He ^{went} ~~stepped~~ inside and she closed the door.

'I wasn't expecting that,' he said.

'All part of the act. Let me relieve you of your props.'

He gave her the flowers. He had the feeling he was being teased.

'Go in there,' she said.

He followed her pointing finger into the living-room and looked around. The room was comfortable to the point of sensuality. It was decorated in pink and gold and furnished with deep soft seats and a table of pale oak. It was a corner room with windows on two sides, and now the evening sun shone in and made everything glow slightly. There was a thick rug of brown fur on the floor that looked like bearskin. Vandam bent down and touched it: it was genuine. A large painting of Elene hung on the wall. In the picture she was naked. Vandam sat down with his back to it. On the couch beside him was a book which she had, presumably, been reading when he knocked. He picked it up. It was called Stamboul Train. It looked like cloak-and-dagger stuff. He put it down again.

She came in with the flowers in a vase, and the smell of wistaria filled the room. 'Would you like a drink?'

'Can you make martinis?'

'Yes. Smoke if you ~~like~~ want to.'

'Thankyou.' Vandam took out his cigarettes. 'I was afraid you'd be out.'

'Not this evening.' There was an odd note in her voice when she said that, but Vandam could not figure it out. He watched her with the cocktail shaker. He had intended to conduct the meeting on a businesslike ~~for~~ level, but he was not conducting it at all: she was. He felt like a clandestine lover.

'Do you like this stuff?' He indicated the book.

'I've been reading thrillers lately.'

'Why?'

'To find out how a spy is supposed to behave.'

'I shouldn't think you - ' He saw her smiling, and realised he was being teased again. 'I never know whether you're serious.'

'Very rarely.' She handed him a drink and sat down at the opposite end of the couch. She looked at him over the rim of her glass. 'To espionage.'

He sipped his martini. It was perfect. So was she. The mellow sunshine burnished her skin. Her arms and legs looked smooth and soft. He thought she would be the same in bed as she was normally: relaxed, amusing, and game for anything. Damn. She had had this effect on him last time, and he had gone on one of his rare binges and ended up in a wretched brothel.

'What are you thinking about?' she said.

'Espionage.'

She laughed. Somehow she ~~must have~~ ^{knew} he was lying.

'You must love it,' she said.

Vandam thought: How does she do this to me? She kept him always off-balance, with her teasing and her perception, her innocent face and her long brown limbs. He said: 'Catching spies can be very satisfying work, but I don't love it.'

'What happens to them when you've caught them?'

'They hang, 'usually.'

'Oh.'

He had managed to throw her off-balance for a change. She shivered. He said: 'Losers generally die in wartime.'

'Is that why you don't love it - because they hang?'

'No. I don't love it because I don't always catch them.'

'Are you proud of being so hard-hearted?'

'I don't think I am/^{hard-hearted} We're trying to kill more of them than they can kill of us.' He thought: How did I come to be defending myself?

She got up to get him another drink. He watched her walk across the room. She moved gracefully - like a cat, he thought, and then he thought: No, like a kitten. He looked at her back as she stooped to pick up the cocktail shaker, and he wondered what she was wearing beneath the yellow dress. He noticed her hands as she poured his drink: they were slender and strong. She did not give herself another martini.

He wondered what background she came from. He said: 'Are your parents alive?'

'No,' she said quickly.

'I'm sorry,' he said. He knew she was lying.

'Why did you ask me that?'

~~He shrugged~~ 'Idle curiosity. Please forgive me.'

She leaned over and touched his arm lightly, brushing his skin with her fingertips, a caress as gentle as a breeze. 'You apologise

too much. I was the ^{sixth} ~~ninth~~ child in a very poor family. My father taught me English and my mother taught me to wear clean clothes, and they encouraged me to leave home as early as possible. I went when I was twelve.'

'Do you resent that?'

'No - they did the best thing for me.'

'Did they?'

She spread her arms to indicate the apartment. 'I think I did rather well.'

'But are you happy?'

She looked at him. Twice she seemed about to speak then said nothing. Finally she looked away. 'What brings you here tonight, Major?'

Vandam collected his thoughts. 'I'm still looking for John Wolff. I haven't found him but I've found his grocer.'

'How did you do that?'

He decided not to tell her. Better that nobody outside Intelligence should know that German spies were betrayed by their forged money. 'That's a long story,' he said. 'The important thing is, I want to put someone into the shop in case he comes back.'

'Me.'

'That's what I had in mind.'

'What would I have to do?'

'Discover where he lives.'

'How?'

'I'm not sure.' Vandam hesitated. 'I thought perhaps you might befriend him. You're a very attractive woman - I imagine it would be easy for you.'

'What do you mean by "befriend"?'

'That's up to you. Just as long as you get his address.'

'I see.' There was bitterness in her voice, and Vandam did not understand why. She said: 'Why don't you just have one of your soldiers follow him home?'

'I may have to do that, if you fail to win his confidence. The trouble is, he might realise he was being followed and shake off the tail - then he would never go back to the grocer's, and we would have lost our advantage. But if you can persuade him, say, to invite you to his house for dinner, we'll get the information we need without tipping our hand. Of course it might not work. But the two alternatives are about equally risky, and I prefer the more subtle approach.'

'I understand that.'

'Will you help me?'

'I suppose it's no worse than what I've been doing all my life.'

That was exactly what Vandam had thought. 'Thankyou,' he said. 'You start tomorrow. The shop belongs to Mikis Aristopoulos.' He gave her a piece of paper with the address written on it. She took it without looking at it.

'How long do you think this will take?' she said.

'I don't know.' He stood up. 'I'll get in touch with you, every few days, to make sure everything's all right - but you'll contact me as soon as he makes an appearance, won't you?'

'Yes.'

Vandam remembered something. 'By the way, the shopkeeper thinks we're after Wolff for forgery. Don't talk to him about espionage.'

'I won't.'

Her light-heartedness had disappeared: perhaps she was bored with his company now. He said: 'I'll leave you to your thriller.'

She stood up. 'I'll see you out.'

They went to the door. As he stepped out, the tenant of the neighbouring flat approached along the corridor. Vandam had been thinking of this moment all evening, and now he did what he was determined not to do. He took Elene's arm, bent down, and kissed her mouth.

Her lips moved briefly in response. He pulled away. The neighbour passed by. Vandam looked at Elene. The neighbour entered his flat. Vandam released her arm.

She said: 'You're a good actor.'

'Yes,' he said. 'Goodbye.' He turned away and strode briskly down the corridor. A moment later he heard the door of her flat bang shut behind him.

*

Elene leaned her back against the closed door and cursed William Vandam.

He had come into her life, full of gentleness and English charm, asking her to do a new kind of work and help win the war; and he had turned out to be as cold and insensitive as all the rest, and he ^{had} asked her to go whoring for him.

Well, it was not quite that bad, but it was a big disappointment.

At first she had not even liked him. When had she first realised that there was another, different man beneath the rigid exterior? She remembered: it had been when he laughed. It had intrigued her, that laugh. From that moment she had suspected that he was a man with a big appetite for life - an appetite which he had under rigid control. It made her want to get under his skin, to make him be himself. That was why she teased him.

That was why she had kissed him, too.

She had really believed he was going to change her life. No

more rich businessmen, no more furtive affairs, no more dancing or waiting on tables. She had a worthwhile job, something she believed in, something that mattered.

Now it had turned out to be the same old game.

Was it the same old game?

Face it. Yes.

For eleven years she had been living off her face and her body, and now she wanted to stop.

She went into the living room to get a drink. His glass was still there on the table, half empty. She put it to her lips. The drink was warm and bitter.

Why was she so bothered by all this? One more ~~act~~ insincere act of seduction would do her no harm.

But in asking for it, Vandam had revealed that he looked upon her as a whore. That, she realised, was what was making her miserable.

She had wanted his respect, even affection. She had wanted his love. When he asked her to befriend Wolff she knew she was never going to get it, and she did not want it any more. Anyway it was foolish: the relationship between a woman such as herself and an English officer was doomed to turn out just like her relationships with her last three sugar-daddies: dependence on one side, manipulation on the other, and love nowhere. Vandam would always see her as a whore. He would never want her. He would never love her.

And if all that was true, why had he kissed her?

*

Vandam was sitting in darkness at his bedroom window in the middle of the night, smoking cigarettes and looking out at the moonlit Nile, when a memory from his childhood sprang, fully formed, into his mind.

He is eleven years old, sexually innocent, physically still a child. He is in the terraced grey brick house where he has always lived. The house has a bathroom, with water heated by the coal fire in the kitchen below: he has been told that this makes his family very fortunate, and he must not boast about it; indeed, when he goes to the new school, the posh school in Bournemouth, he must pretend that he thinks it is perfectly normal to have a bathroom and hot water coming out of the taps. The bathroom has a water closet too. He is going there now to pee. His mother is in there, bathing his sister who is seven years old, but they won't mind him going in to pee, he has done it before, and the other toilet is a long cold walk down the garden. What he has forgotten is that his cousin is also being bathed. She is eight years old. He walks into the bathroom. His sister is sitting in the bath. His cousin is standing, about to come out. His mother holds a towel. He looks at his cousin.

She is naked, of course. It is the first time he has seen any girl other than his sister naked. His cousin's body is slightly plump, and her skin is flushed with the heat of the water. She is quite the loveliest sight he has ever seen. He stands inside the bathroom doorway looking at her with undisguised interest and admiration.

He does not see the slap coming. His mother's large hand seems to come from nowhere. It hits his cheek with a loud clap. She is a good hitter, his mother, and this is one of her best efforts. It hurts like hell, but the shock is even worse than the pain. Worst of all is that the warm sentiment which had engulfed him has been shattered like a glass window.

'Get out!' says his mother, and he leaves, hurt and humiliated.

Vandam remembered this as he sat alone watching the Egyptian night, and he thought, as he had thought at the time it happened: Now why did she do that?

- 9 -

In the early morning the tiled floor of the mosque was cold to John Wolff's bare feet. The handful of ~~xxx~~ dawn worshippers were lost in the vastness of the great hall. There was silence, a sense of peace, and a bleak grey light. A shaft of sunlight pierced one of the high narrow arches in the wall, and at that moment the muezzin began to cry:

'Allahu akbar! Allahu akbar! Allahu akbar! Allahu akbar!'

Wolff turned to face Mecca.

He was wearing a long robe and a turban, and the shoes in his hand were simple Arab sandals. He was never quite sure why he did this. He was a True Believer only in theory. He had been circumcised according to Islamic doctrine, and he had completed the pilgrimage to Mecca; but he drank alcohol and ate pork, he never paid the zakat tax, he never observed the fast of Ramadan, and he did not pray every day, let alone five times a day. But every so often he felt the need to immerse himself, just for a few minutes, in the familiar, mechanical ritual of his stepfather's religion. Then, as he had done today, he would get up while it was still dark, and dress in traditional clothes, and walk through the cold quiet streets of the city to ^{the} a mosque, ^{his father had attended} and perform the ceremonial ablutions in the forecourt, and enter the mosque in time for the first prayers of the new day.

He touched his ears with his hands, then clasped his hands in front of him, the left within the right. He bowed, then knelt down.

Touching his forehead to the floor at appropriate moments, he recited the el-fatha:

'In the name of God, the merciful and compassionate. Praise be to God, the lord of the worlds, the merciful and compassionate, the Prince of the day of judgement; Thee we serve, and to Thee we pray for help; lead us in the right way, the way of those to whom thou hast shown mercy, upon whom no wrath resteth, and who go not astray.'

He looked over his right shoulder, then his left, to greet the two recording angels who wrote down his good and bad acts.

When he looked over his left shoulder, he saw Abdullah.

Without interrupting his prayer the thief smiled broadly, showing his steel tooth.

Wolff got up and went out. He stopped outside to put on his sandals, and Abdullah came waddling after him. They shook hands.

'You are a devout man, like myself,' Abdullah said. 'I knew you would come, sooner or later, to your father's mosque.'

'You've been looking for me?'

'Many people are looking for you.'

Together they walked away from the mosque. Abdullah said: 'Knowing you to be a True Believer, I could not betray you to the British, even for so much money; so I told Major Vandam that I knew nobody by the name of John Wolff, or Hussein Rahmha.'

Wolff stopped abruptly and seized Abdullah by the arm. He stared at him for a moment, saying nothing. They were outside an Arab cafe. Wolff steered Abdullah into the cafe. They sat down.

Wolff said: 'He knows my Arab name.'

'He knows all about you - except where to find you.'

'What is he like?'

Abdullah shrugged. 'An Englishman. No subtlety. No manners.'

Khaki shorts and a face the colour of a tomato.'

'You can do better than that.'

Abdullah nodded. 'This man is patient and determined. If I were you, I should be afraid of him.'

The cafe proprietor brought each of them a dish of mashed fava beans and a flat loaf of hot pitta bread. Wolff broke his bread and dipped it into the beans. Flies began to gather around their bowls. Both men ignored them.

Abdullah spoke through a mouthful of food. 'Vandam is offering one hundred pounds for your address. Ha! As if we would betray one of our own for such a paltry sum.'

Wolff swallowed. 'Even if you knew my address.'

Abdullah shrugged. 'It would be a small thing to find out.'

'I know,' Wolff said. 'So I am going to tell you, as a sign of my faith in your friendship. I am living at Shepheard's Hotel.'

Abdullah looked hurt. 'My friend, I know this is not true. It is the first place the British would look - '

'You misunderstand me.' Wolff smiled. 'I am not a guest there. I work in the kitchens, cleaning pots, and at the end of the day I lie down on the floor with a dozen or so others and sleep there.'

'So cunning!' Abdullah grinned: he was pleased with the idea and delighted to have the information. 'You hide under their very noses!'

'I know you will keep this secret,' Wolff said. 'And, as a sign of my gratitude for your friendship, I hope you will accept from me a gift of ~~the~~ one hundred pounds.'

'But this is not necessary - '

'I insist.'

Abdullah sighed and gave in reluctantly. 'Very well.'

'I will have the money sent to your house.'

Abdullah wiped his empty bowl with the last of his bread.

'I must leave you now,' he said. 'Allow me to pay for your breakfast.'

'Thankyou.'

'Ah! But I have come with no money. A thousand pardons - '

'It's nothing,' Wolff said. 'Alallah - in God's care.'

Abdullah replied conventionally: 'Allah yisallimak - may God protect thee.' He went out.

Wolff called for coffee and thought about Abdullah. He would betray Wolff for a lot less than a hundred pounds, of course. What had stopped him so far was that he did not know Wolff's address. No doubt he was actively trying to discover it.

He would attempt to check on the story about living in the kitchens of Shephard's. This might not be easy, for of course no one would admit that staff slept on the kitchen floor - indeed Wolff was not at all sure it was true - but he had to reckon on Abdullah discovering the truth sooner or later. The lie was a delaying tactic. So was the bribe. However, when at last Abdullah found out about the houseboat he would probably come to Wolff for more money instead of going to Vandam.

The situation was under control for the moment.

He left a few millemes on the table and went out.

The city had come to life. The streets were already jammed with traffic, the pavements crowded with vendors and beggars, the air full of good and bad smells. Vandam made his way to the central post office to use a telephone. He called GHQ and asked for Major Smith.

'We have seventeen of them,' the operator told him. 'Have you got a first name?'

'Sandy.'

'That will be Major Alexander Smith. Hold the line, please.'

Wolff waited. Since Sonja had seduced Smith, the Major had sent her a dozen roses, a box of chocolates, a love letter and two hand-delivered messages asking for another date. Wolff had forbidden her to reply. By now Smith would be wondering whether he would ever see her again. Wolff was quite sure that Sonja was the first beautiful woman Smith had ever slept with. After a couple of days of suspense Smith would be desperately wishing to see her again, and would jump at any chance.

'Major Smith's office.'

let me speak to the Major
'Hello, ~~is the Major there.~~'

He's not here at the moment.

'~~No, he's not.~~ Who's calling?'

'Take a message for him, please. Got a pencil?'

'Yes - '

'The message is: Twelve noon today at Zamalek. Would you sign it: S. Have you got that?'

'Yes, but if I may have your full - '

Wolff hung up. It was a pity he could not speak to Smith, but he was fairly sure the Major would turn up.

He left the post office and headed for Zamalek. On the way he bought a newspaper, but it was full of the usual rubbish. When he got home Sonja was still asleep. He threw the rolled-up paper at her to wake her. She groaned and turned over.

Wolff left her and went through the curtains back into the living room. At the far end, in the prow of the boat, was a tiny open kitchen. It had one quite large cupboard for brooms and cleaning materials. Wolff opened the cupboard door. He could just about get inside if he bent his knees and ducked his head. The catch of the door could be worked only from the outside. He searched through the kitchen drawers and found a knife with a pliable blade. He thought he could probably work the catch from inside the cupboard by sticking the knife through the crack of the door and easing it

against the spring-loaded bolt. He got into the cupboard, closed the door, and tried it. It worked.

However, he could not see through the door jamb.

He took a nail and a flat iron and banged the nail through the thin wood of the door at eye level. He used a kitchen fork to enlarge the hole. He got inside the cupboard again and closed the door. He put his eye to the hole.

He saw the curtains part, and Sonja came into the living room. She looked around, puzzled, expecting to see him. She shrugged, then lifted her nightdress and scratched her belly. Wolff suppressed a laugh. She came across to the kitchen, picked up the kettle, and turned on the tap.

Wolff slipped the knife into the crack of the door and worked the catch. He opened the door, stepped out, and said: 'Good morning.'

Sonja screamed.

Wolff laughed.

She threw the kettle at him, and he dodged. He said: 'Good hiding place, isn't it?'

'You scared me witless, you bastard,' she said.

He picked up the kettle and handed it to her. 'Make the coffee.' He put the knife in the cupboard, closed the door, and went to sit down.

Sonja said: 'What do you need a hiding-place for?'

'To watch you and Major Smith. It's very funny - he looks like a passionate turtle.'

'When is he coming?'

'Twelve noon today.'

'Oh, no! ~~xxxxxxx~~ Why so early in the morning?'

'He'll have to rush here straight from GHQ - which means he'll be carrying his briefcase.'

'I wish I'd never met you.'

Wolff laughed. 'You'd better start getting ready. I want you to look irresistible.'

'I'm always irresistible.' She went through to the bedroom.

He called after her: 'Wash your hair.' There was no reply.

He looked at his watch. Time was running out. He went around the houseboat hiding traces of his own occupation, putting away his shoes, his razor, his toothbrush and his fez. Sonja went up on deck in a robe to dry her hair in the sun. Wolff made coffee and took her a cup. He drank his own, then washed his cup and put it away. He took out a bottle of champagne, put it in a bucket of ice, and placed it beside the bed with two glasses. He thought of changing the sheets, then decided to do it after Smith's visit, not before. Sonja came down from the deck. She dabbed perfume on her thighs and between her breasts. Wolff took a last look around. All was ready. He sat on a divan by a porthole to watch the towpath.

It was a few minutes after noon when Major Smith appeared. He was hurrying, as if afraid to be late. He wore his uniform shirt, khaki shorts, socks and sandals, but he had taken off his officer's cap. He was sweating in the midday sun.

He was carrying his briefcase.

'Here he comes,' Wolff called. 'Are you ready?'

'No.'

Wolff grinned. She would be ready. He got into the cupboard, closed the door, and put his eye to the peephole.

He heard Smith's footsteps on the gangplank and across the deck. The Major called: 'Hello?'

Sonja did not reply.

Looking through the peephole, Wolff saw Smith come down the stairs into the interior of the boat.

'Is anybody there?'

Smith looked at the curtains which divided off the bedroom. His voice was full of the expectation of disappointment. 'Sonja?'

The curtains parted. Sonja stood there, her arms lifted to hold the curtains apart. She had put her hair up in a complex pyramid as she did for her act. She wore thge baggy trousers of filmy gauze, but at this distance her body was visible through the material. From the waist up she was naked except for a jewelled collar around her neck. Her brown breasts were full and round. She had put lipstick on her nipples.

Wolff thought: Good girl!

Major Smith stared at her. He said: 'Oh, dear. Oh, good Lord. Oh, my soul.'

He dropped his briefcase and went to her. As he embraced her, she closed the curtains behind him.

Wolff opened the cupboard and stepped out.

The briefcase lay on the floor just this side of the curtains. Wolff knelt down, hitching up his Arab robe, and turned the case over. He tried the catches. The case was locked.

Wolff whispered: 'Lieber Gott.'

He looked around. He needed a pin, a paper clip, a sewing needle, something with which to pick the locks. Moving quietly, he went to the kitchen area and opened a drawer. Meat skewer, too thick; bristle from a wire brush, too thin; vegetable knife, too broad ... In a little dish beside the sink he found one of Sonja's hair clips.

He went back to the case and poked the end of the clip into the keyhole of one of the locks. He twisted and turned it experimentally, encountered a kind of springy resistance, and pressed harder.

The clip broke.

Again Wolff cursed under his breath.

He glanced reflexively at his wristwatch. Last time, Smith had screwed Sonja in about five minutes. I should have told her to make it last, Wolff thought.

He picked up the flexible knife he had been using to open the cupboard door from the inside. Gently, he slid it into one of the catches on the briefcase. When he pressed, the knife bent.

He could have broken the locks in a few seconds, but he did not want to, for then Smith would know that his case had been opened. Wolff was not afraid of Smith, but he wanted the Major to remain oblivious of the real reason for the seduction: if there was valuable material in the case, Wolff wanted to open it regularly.

But if he could not open the case, then Smith would always be useless.

What would happen if he broke the locks? Smith would finish with Sonja, put on his trousers, pick up his case, and realise it had been opened. He would accuse Sonja. The houseboat would be blown, unless Wolff killed Smith. What then? Another British soldier killed, this time in Cairo. Had Smith told anyone about Sonja? Who had seen them together? Would inquiries lead the British to the houseboat?

It would be risky - but the worst of it was, Wolff would be without a source of information, back to square one.

Wolff stood silent in the middle of the living room, racking his brains. He had thought of something, back there, which gave him his answer, and now it had slipped his mind. On the other side of the curtain, Smith was muttering and groaning. ~~Yawning~~ Wolff wondered if he had his trousers off yet -

His trousers off. That was it.

He would have a key in his pocket.

Wolff peeped between the curtains. Smith and Sonja lay on the bed. She was on her back, eyes closed. He lay beside her, propped up on one elbow, touching her. She was arching her back as if she was enjoying it. As Wolff watched Smith rolled over, half lying on her, and put his face to her breasts.

Smith still had his shorts on.

Wolff put his head through the curtains and waved an arm, trying to attract Sonja's attention. He thought: Look at me, woman! Smith moved his head from one breast to the other. Sonja opened her eyes, glanced at the top of Smith's head, stroked his brilliantined hair, and caught Wolff's eye.

He mouthed: Take off his pants.

She frowned, not understanding.

Wolff stepped through the curtains and mimed removing trousers.

Sonja's face cleared as enlightenment dawned.

Wolff stepped back through the curtains and closed them silently, leaving only a tiny gap.

He saw Sonja's hands go to Smith's shorts and begin to struggle with the buttons of the fly. Smith groaned. Sonja rolled her eyes upward, contemptuous of his credulous passion. Wolff thought: I hope she has the sense to throw the shorts this way.

After a minute Smith, growing impatient with her fumbling, rolled over, sat up, and took them off himself. He dropped them over the end of the bed and turned back to Sonja.

The end of the bed was about five feet away from the curtain.

Wolff lay on the floor, flat on his belly. He parted the curtains with his hands and inched his way through, Indian fashion.

Smith said: 'Oh, God, you're so beautiful.'

Wolff reached the shorts. With one hand, he carefully turned the material over until he saw a pocket. He put his hand in the

pocket and felt for a key.

The pocket was empty.

There was the sound of movement from the bed. Smith grunted. Sonja said: 'No, lie still.'

Wolff thought: 'Good girl.'

He turned the shorts over until he found the other pocket. He felt in it. That, too, was empty.

There might be more pockets. Wolff grew reckless. He felt the garment, searching for hard lumps that might be metal. There were none. He picked up the shorts -

A bunch of keys lay beneath them. They must have slipped out when Smith dropped the garment on the floor. Wolff picked up the keys and the shorts and began to inch backward through the curtains.

He heard footsteps on deck.

Smith said: 'Good God what's that!' in a high-pitched voice.

'Hush!' Sonja said. 'Only the postman. Tell me if you like this.'

'Oh, yes ... '

Wolff made it through the curtains and looked up. The postman was placing a letter on the top step of the stairs, by the hatch. To Wolff's horror the man saw him and called out: 'Sabah el-kheir - good morning!'

Wolff put a finger to his lips for silence, then lay his cheek against his hand to mime sleep, then pointed to the bedroom.

'Your pardon!' the postman whispered.

Wolff waved him away.

There was no sound from the bedroom.

Had the postman's greeting made Smith suspicious? There was no reason why it should, Wolff decided: a postman might well call Good morning even if he could see no one, for the fact that the

hatch was open indicated that someone was at home.

The lovemaking noises in the next room resumed, and Wolff let out his breath in a long, relieved sigh.

He sorted through the keys, found the smallest, and tried it in the lock of the case.

It worked.

He opened the other catch and lifted the lid. Inside was a sheaf of papers in a stiff cardboard folder. Wolff thought: No more menus, please. He opened the folder and looked at the top sheet.

He read:

OPERATION ABERDEEN

1. Allied forces will mount a major counterattack at dawn on 5 June.
2. The attack will be two-pronged ...

Wolff looked up from the papers. 'My God,' he said. 'This is it!'

He listened. The noises from the bedroom were louder now. He could hear the springs of the bed, and he thought the boat itself was beginning to rock slightly. There was not much time.

The report in Smith's possession was detailed. Wolff needed to make notes. He hunted around for pencil and paper, thinking: I should have done this beforehand. He found a writing-pad and a red pencil in a drawer. He sat down by the briefcase and read on.

The main Allied forces were besieged in an area they called The Cauldron. The 5 June counterattack was intended to be a breakout. It would begin at 0250 with the bombardment, by four regiments of artillery, of the Aslagh Ridge, on Rommel's eastern flank. The artillery was to soften-up the opposition in readiness

for the spearhead attack by the infantry of the 10th Indian Brigade. When the Indians had breached the line at Aslagh Ridge, the tanks of the 22nd Armoured Brigade would rush through the gap and capture Sidi Muftah while the 9th Indian Brigade followed through and consolidated.

Meanwhile the 32nd Army Tank Brigade, with infantry support, would attack Rommel's northern flank at Sidra Ridge.

When he came to the end of the report Wolff realised he had been so absorbed that he had heard, but had not taken notice of, the sound of Major Smith reaching his climax. Now the bed creaked and a pair of feet hit the floor.

Wolff tensed.

Sonja said: 'Darling, pour some champagne.'

'Just a minute - '

'I want it now.'

'I feel a bit silly with me ~~xx~~ trousers off, m'dear.'

'I like you undressed. Drink a glass with me before you ~~dressed~~ put your clothes on.'

'Your wish is my command.'

She may bitch about it, Wolff thought, but she does what I want!

He looked quickly through the rest of the papers, determined that he would not be caught now: Smith was a wonderful find, it would be a tragedy to kill the goose the first time she laid a golden egg. He noted that the attack would employ 400 tanks, 330 of them with the eastern prong and only 70 with the northern; that Generals Messervy and Briggs were to establish a combined headquarters; that Auchinleck was demanding - a little peevishly, it seemed - thorough reconnaissance and close co-operation between between infantry and tanks.

A cork popped loudly as he was writing. He licked his lips: he could muse some of that. He wondered how quickly Smith could drink a glass of champagne. He decided to take no chances.

He put the papers back in the folder and the folder back in the case. He closed the lid and keyed the locks. He put the bunch of keys in a pocket of the shorts. He stood up and peeped through the curtain.

Smith was sitting up in bed in his army-issue underwear with a glass in one hand and a cigarette in the other. The cigarettes must have been in his shirt pocket. It would have been awkward if they had been in his pants.

At the moment he was within Smith's field of view. He waited. Sonja drained her glass and said: 'Pour me some more, please.' Smith took her glass and turned away to the bottle. His back was to Wolff. Wolff pushed the shorts through the curtains and put them on the floor. Sonja saw him and raised her eyebrows in alarm. Wolff withdrew his arm. Smith handed Sonja the glass.

Wolff silently opened a drawer and took out the English novel and the key to the code. He got into the cupboard, closed the door, and eased himself to the floor. He might have to stay here a couple of hours: he might as well use the time. By the light of a small torch he began to encode the information he had gained from Major Smith's briefcase.

He was there for hours.

The Cairo lunch break was from noon until five p.m., and Smith left at four-thirty.

Wolff saw him kiss Sonja goodbye and climb the stairs to the hatch. He heard the footsteps cross the deck and go down the gangplank, then Sonja opened the cupboard door.

She watched with malicious glee as Wolff stretched his aching

limbs. 'Sore?' she said with mock sympathy.

Wolff grunted. 'It was worth it.'

He made her massage his legs while he drank some whisky. Later, when she had gone to the Cha-Cha, he made a meal of bread and sausages. Afterwards he drank whisky and read Arab poetry. When midnight approached, he set up the radio.

At exactly 2400 hours, he tapped out the call-sign for Rommel's desert listening-post. A few seconds later the Hörch Company came in. Wolff sent a series of Vs to enable them to tune in exactly, then asked them what his signal strength was. In the middle of the sentence he made a mistake, and sent a series of Es - for 'Error' - before beginning again. They told him his signal was maximum strength and made GA for 'Go Ahead'. He made KA to indicate the beginning of his message, then sent the whole of his report, added AR for the end and K for 'Over'. They replied with a series of Rs, which meant: 'Your message has been received and understood.'

Wolff packed away the radio, the code book and the key, then he poured himself another drink.

All in all, he thought he had done incredibly well.

- 10 -

The signal from the spy was only one of twenty or thirty reports on the desk of Rommel's Ic at seven o'clock on the morning of 4 June. There were several other reports from listening units: infantry had been heard talking to tanks au clair; field headquarters had issued instructions in low-grade codes which had been deciphered overnight; and there was other enemy radio traffic which, although indecipherable, nevertheless yielded hints about enemy intentions simply because of its location and frequency. As well as radio

reconnaissance there were the reports from the Ics in the field, who got information from captured weapons, the uniforms of enemy dead, interrogation of prisoners, and simply from looking across the desert and seeing the people they were fighting. Then there was aerial reconnaissance, a situation report from an order-of-battle expert, and a summary - just about useless - of Berlin's current assessment of Allied intentions and strength.

Like all field intelligence officers, Rommel's Ic despised spy reports. Based on diplomatic gossip, newspaper stories and sheer guesswork, they were wrong at least as often as they were right, which made them effectively useless.

The Ic had to admit that this one looked different.

The run-of-the-mill secret agent might report: '9th~~th~~ Indian Brigade have been told they will be involved in a major battle in the near future,' or: 'Allies planning a breakout from the Cauldron in early June,' or: 'Rumours that Auchinleck will be replaced as Commander-in-Chief.' But there was nothing indefinite about this report. The man gave the date of the attack, the brigades involved and their specific roles, the places they would pounce, and the tactical thinking of the planners.

The Ic was not convinced, but he was interested.

He began his routine round of morning discussions. In person, by field telephone, and - rarely - by radio, he talked to the Divisional Ics, the Luftwaffe liaison officer for aerial reconnaissance, the Horch Company liaison man, and a few of the better Brigade Ics. To all of these men he mentioned the 9th and 10th Indian brigades, the 22nd Armoured Brigade, and the 32nd Army Tank Brigade. He told them to look out for these brigades. He also told them to watch for battle preparations in the areas from which, according to the spy, the counterthrust would come. They would also observe what

the enemy was observing: if the spy was right, there would be increased aerial reconnaissance by the Allies of the positions they planned to attack, namely Aslagh Ridge, Sidra Ridge, and Sidi Muftah. There might be increased bombing of those positions, for the purpose of softening-up, although this was such a giveaway that most commanders would resist the temptation. There might be decreased bombing, as a bluff, and this too could be a giveaway.

These conversations also enabled the men to update their overnight reports. When they were finished the Ic wrote his report for Rommel, and took it to the Command Vehicle. He discussed it with the Chief of Staff, who then presented it to Rommel.

In the middle of the day the Ic liked to visit a front-line unit. It enabled him to get his own picture of the situation, and also to make a personal assessment of the men who were sending in his raw material: some were over cautious, omitting all unconfirmed data, and others exaggerated in order to get more supplies and reinforcements for their units.

In the early evening there were more reports and more conversations. The Ic sifted the mass of detail for information relating to the possible counterattack.

The Ariete Armoured - the Italian Division occupying the Aslagh Ridge - reported increased enemy air activity. The Ic asked them whether this was bombing or reconnaissance, and they said bombing had ceased but there was additional reconnaissance.

The Luftwaffe reported activity in no-man's-land which might, or might not, have been an advance party marking out an assembly point.

There was a garbled radio intercept in a low-grade cipher in which the something Indian Brigade requested urgent clarification of the morning's something (orders?) with particular reference to

the timing of something artillery bombardment. In British tactics, the Ic knew, artillery bombardment generally preceded an attack.

The evidence was building.

The Ic checked his card-index for the 32nd Army Tank Brigade and discovered that they had recently been sighted at Rigel Ridge - a logical position from which to attack Sidra Ridge.

The task of an Ic was an impossible one: to forecast the enemy's moves on the basis of inadequate information. He looked at the signs, he used his intuition, then he gambled.

Rommel's Ic decided to gamble on John Wolff.

At 1830 he presented his report to the Chief of Staff. At 1900 he was summoned to the Command Vehicle.

Rommel was there with his Chief of Staff, Colonel Bayerlein, and his Ia, ^{Major} ~~General~~ von Mellenthin. They stood around a large camp table looking at the operation map. An Oberleutnant sat to one side ready to take notes.

Rommel had taken his cap off, and his large, balding head appeared ~~looked~~ too big for his small body. He looked tired and thin, not surprisingly: he had been up since five a.m., dashing around the desert, driving himself even harder than he drove his men. He suffered recurring stomach trouble, and was often unable to eat for days. His normally pudgy face had lost flesh, and his ears seemed to stick out more than usual. But his slitted dark eyes were bright with enthusiasm and the hope of victory.

He looked up as the Ic entered. 'This counterattack,' he said without preamble. 'How sure are you?'

'It was forecast by the spy Wolff,' the Ic replied. 'Today there have been confirming indications. I'm as sure as I ever am.'

Rommel smiled. 'Good enough,' he said. He returned his attention to the map. The Ic, not having been dismissed, remained

to listen.

Rommel said: 'Let us be ready, then, for a two-pronged attack. Consider first the weaker, northern prong, the assault on Sidra Ridge. Sidra is held by our 21st Panzer Division. They are well armed with anti-tank guns. Here, in the path of the British advance, is a minefield. 21st Panzer will lure the British into the minefield and destroy them with anti-tank fire.' If Intelligence is right, and the British throw only seventy tanks into this assault, 21st Panzer should deal with them quickly and be free for other action later in the day.'

He drew a thick forefinger across the map to Aslagh Ridge. 'Now consider the second prong, the main assault, on our eastern flank at Aslagh Ridge. This is at present held by the Ariete Armoured Division of the Italian Army. The attack is to be led by the 10th Indian Brigade. Knowing those Indians, and knowing our Italians, I assume the attack will succeed. I therefore order a vigorous riposte.

'One: The Italians will counterattack ^{from the west} Two: The 21st Panzers, having repelled the other prong of the attack at Sidra Ridge, will turn about and attack the Indians from the north. Three: Tonight our engineers will clear a gap in the minefield at Bir el Harmat, so that the 15th Panzers can make a swing to the south, emerge through the gap, and attack the British forces from the rear.'

The Ic, listening and watching, nodded appreciation. It was a typical Rommel plan, involving rapid switching of forces to maximise their effect, an encircling movement, and the surprise appearance of a powerful division where it was least expected, in the enemy's rear. If it all worked, the attacking Allied brigades would be surrounded, cut off, and wiped out.

The Ic was invited to dine in Rommel's caravan with the others.

Rommel ate the same canned mush as his troops, but he allowed himself a single glass of wine with dinner. They all complained about the bugs, and Rommel said he had found the answer: his aide had poured petrol over his wire bedstead and set fire to it. They talked for a while about skiing, which was an enthusiasm of Rommel's, but soon the conversation turned to the subject which obsessed them all: Tobruk. Over coffee Bayerlein began to weight the prospects, comparing the present situation with that of the previous November. After a couple of minutes he stopped abruptly in mid-sentence.

The Ic followed Bayerlein's gaze, and saw that Rommel had fallen asleep in his chair.

*

Sixteen days later Rommel stood on the escarpment north-east of El Adem and watched the sun rise over Tobruk.

The Allied counterattack of 5 June had come exactly as forecast by the spy. Rommel's defence had worked so well that it had turned into a counter-counterattack. Three of the four Allied brigades involved had been wiped out, and four regiments of artillery had been captured. Rommel had pressed his advantage remorselessly, taking Bir Hacheim and the Knightsbridge Box, and on 14 June the Gazala Line had broken and the British had turned and fled. The vital coastal garrison of Tobruk was surrounded and today, 20 June, it was to be besieged.

Rommel stood on the escarpment, wearing the goggles he had taken from the captured General O'Connor, the goggles which had become a kind of trademark of his. Von ~~EXM~~ Mellenthin was at his side. They watched the sky.

There was booty in Tobruk. There would be petrol, and dynamite, and tents, and lorries - already more than half Rommel's motorised transport consisted of captured British vehicles - and

food. There might be fresh fish from the sea. There might be fried potatoes, and liver, and hot bread. If things went well, tomorrow night perhaps he would sleep in a real bed, with a feather pillow, in a house with stone walls to keep out the heat and the insects.

Rommel thought it was tougher to fight the desert than the British. At least he knew what the British would do. Their attacks were piecemeal and half-hearted, their defence was solid and unimaginative. When they won they were slow to press the advantage; when they lost they were quick to retreat. The desert was unpredictable. The nights might be intolerably hot or freezing cold. Sometimes one could eat in peace; other times a thousand flies came to dinner. Rommel made light of it all with the men, but he poured his misery into his letters to Lu, his wife. No doubt she was as tired as he was of heat, flies, sand and gastro-enteritis.

Poor Lu. They had begun their married life like this, apart. He had married her in November 1916 and gone straight back to the front. She was used to letters from the battlefield. He thought of Manfred, their son, and wondered how he was. They had been married twelve years before the arrival of their first and only child. At the time Rommel had worried, wondering if he would ever be a father. Now he was glad it had taken so long, for Manfred, not born until 1928, was still only fourteen years old, and they were not conscripting fourteen-year-olds, not yet, thank God.

Manfred and Lu would be proud of him now.

He turned his mind to the battle. Tobruk was a concentric fortress. The garrison itself was within a town, and the town was at the heart of a larger British-held area, surrounded by a thirty-five mile perimeter wire dotted with strongpoints. Rommel's army had to cross the wire, then penetrate the town, then take the

garrison.

At twenty minutes past five the attack began.

A sound like distant thunder swelled to a deafening roar as the Stukas approached. The first formation flew over, dived toward the perimeter, and dropped their bombs. A great cloud of dust and smoke rose from the British positions, and with that Rommel's entire artillery forces opened fire with a simultaneous ear-splitting crash. Another wave of Stukas came over, then another: there were hundreds of bombers.

Von Mellenthin said: 'Fantastic. Kesselring really did it.'

'For once,' Rommel replied shortly.

A little later he saw a cloud of orange smoke, a signal from the assault engineers that the artillery should lengthen its range.

Rommel felt the glow of optimism as he saw the devastating effect of his combined shelling and bombing. Von Mellenthin was right, the Luftwaffe was putting on a good show, but no credit was due to Kesselring: this time the planes were being directed from the Operations ~~XXXXXX~~ Section of Rommel's own headquarters.

At half-past six a runner arrived with a signal. Von Mellenthin took it and read it. 'They've cut the wire at Strongpoint 69,' he announced. 'Group Menny is attacking with the infantry of the Afrika Korps.'

'That's it,' said Rommel. 'We've opened a breach. Let's go.'

*

It was ten-thirty ~~was~~ when Lieutenant-Colonel Reggie Bogge poked his head around the door of Vandam's office and said: 'Tobruk is under siege.'

The news was all bad for the rest of the day. The Germans breached the perimeter wire; they bridged the anti-tank ditch; they crossed the inner minefield; they reached the strategic road junction

of King's Cross.

Vandam went home at seven to have supper with Billy. He could not tell the boy about Tobruk: the news was not to be released. As they ate their lamb chops, Billy said that his English teacher, a young man with a lung condition who could not get into the Army, never stopped talking about how he would love to get out into the desert and have a bash at the Hun. ~~Vandam~~ 'I don't believe him, though,' Billy said. 'Do you?'

'I expect he means it,' Vandam said. 'He just feels guilty.'

Billy was at an argumentative age. 'Guilty? He can't feel guilty - it's not his fault.'

'Unconsciously he can.'

'What's the difference?'

I walked into that one, Vandam thought. He considered for a moment, then said: 'When you've done something wrong, and you know it's wrong, and you feel bad about it, and you know why you feel bad, that's conscious. Mr Simkisson ~~■~~ has done nothing wrong, but he still feels bad about it, and he doesn't know why he feels bad. That's unconscious guilt. It makes him feel better to talk about how much he wants to fight.'

'Oh,' said Billy.

Vandam did not know whether he had understood or not.

Billy went to bed with a new book. He said it was a 'tec', by which he meant a detective story. It was called Death on the Nile.

Vandam went back to GHQ. The news was still bad. The 21st Panzers had entered the town of Tobruk and fired from the quay on to several British ships which were trying, belatedly, to escape to the open sea. A number of vessels had been sunk.

Vandam spent the night in the officers' mess, smoking, drinking

gin, and playing the occasional desultory game of cards. News came down from the Operations Room in bulletins. During the night Ritchie, as Commander of the Eighth Army, decided to abandon the frontier and retreat to Mersa Matruh. It was said that when Auchinleck, the Commander-in-Chief, heard this news he stalked out of the room with a face as black as thunder.

Vandam wondered how his parents were. Some of the ports on the south coast of England had suffered as much as London from the bombing, but his parents were a little way inland, in a village in the Dorset countryside. His father was postmaster at a small sorting office. Vandam looked at his watch: it would be four in the morning in England now, the old man would be putting on his cycle clips, climbing on his bike, and riding to work in the dark. At sixty years of age he had the constitution of a teenage farmboy. Vandam's chapelgoing mother forbade smoking, drinking, and every kind of dissolute behaviour, a term she used to encompass everything from darts matches to listening to the radio. The regime seemed to suit his father, but she herself was always ailing.

Towards dawn booze, fatigue and tedium sent Vandam into a doze. He dreamed that he was ~~stuck~~ in the garrison at Tobruk with Billy and Elene and his mother. He was running around closing all the windows. Outside the Germans, who had turned into firemen, were leaning ladders against the wall and climbing up. Suddenly his mother stopped counting her forged banknotes and opened a window, pointing at Elene and screaming: 'The Scarlet Woman!' Rommel came through the window in a fireman's helmet and turned a hose on Billy. The force of the jet pushed the boy over a parapet and he fell into the sea. Vandam knew he was to blame, but he could not figure out what he had done wrong. He began to weep bitterly. He woke up.

He was relieved to discover he had not really been crying. The

dream left him with an overwhelming sense of despair. He lit a cigarette. It tasted foul.

The sun rose. Vandam went around the mess turning out the lights, just for something to do. A breakfast cook came in with a pot of coffee. As Vandam was drinking his, a captain came down from the Operations Room. He stood in the middle of the mess, waiting for silence.

He said: 'General Kloppe surrendered the garrison of Tobruk to Rommel at dawn today.'

Vandam left the mess and walked through the streets of the city to his house by the Nile. When he got home he went to bed.

Part Two: Mersa Matruh

- 11 -

The Greek was a feeler.

Elene did not like feelers. She did not mind straightforward lust - in fact, she was rather partial to it. What she objected to was furtive, guilty, unsolicited groping.

After two weeks in the shop she hated Mikis Aristopoulos.

The shop itself was fine. She liked the spicy smells and the rows of gaily coloured boxes and cans on the shelves in the back room. The work was not hard, but the time passed quickly enough. She amazed the customers by adding up their bills in her head. From time to time she would take home some strange imported delicacy to try: a jar of liver paste, a Hershey bar, a bottle of Bovril, a can of baked beans. And it was novel to do an ordinary, dull, eight-hours-a-day job.

But the boss was a pain. Every chance he got he would touch her arm, her shoulder, or her hip; each time he passed her, behind the counter or in the back room, he would brush against her breasts or her bottom. At first she had thought it was accidental, because he did not look the type: he was in his twenties, quite good-looking, with a big smile that showed his white teeth. He must have taken her silence for acquiescence. Soon she would have to tread on him a little to set him straight.

She did not need this. Her emotions were too confused already. She thought she was in love with William Vandam, who acted as if he despised her. She was supposed to seduce John Wolff, whom she had never met. And she was being groped by Mikis Aristopoulos, for whom she felt nothing but scorn.

I want them to love me, and all they do is use me, she thought: it's the story of my life.

She wondered what Wolff would be like. It was easy for Vandam

to tell her to befriend him, as if there were a button she could press which made her instantly irresistible. In reality a lot depended on the man. She clicked ~~xxx~~ immediately with some men. With others it was hard work. Sometimes it was impossible. Half of her hoped it would be impossible with Wolff. The other half remembered that he was a spy for the Germans, and Rommel was coming closer to ^{Egypt} ~~xxxx~~ every day, and if the Nazis ever got to Cairo ...

Aristopoulos brought a box of pasta out from the back room. Elene looked at her watch: it was almost time to go home. Aristopoulos dumped the box and opened it. On his way back, as he squeezed past her, he put his hands under her arms and touched her breasts. She moved away. She heard someone come into the shop. She thought: I'll teach the Greek a lesson. As he went into the back room, she called after him loudly, in Arabic: 'If you touch me again I'll cut your cock off!'

There was a burst of laughter from the customer. She turned and looked at him. He was a European, but he must understand Arabic, she thought. She said: 'Good afternoon.'

He called out: 'What have you been doing, Aristopoulos, you old goat?'

Aristopoulos poked his head around the door. 'Good day, sir. This is my niece, Elene.' His face showed embarrassment and something else which Elene could not read. He ducked back into the storeroom.

'Niece!' said the man, looking at Elene. 'A likely tale.'

He was a big man in his thirties with dark hair, dark skin and dark eyes. He had a large hooked nose which might have been typically Arab or typically European-aristocratic. His mouth was thin lipped, and when he smiled he showed small even teeth - like a cat's, Elene thought. She knew the signs of wealth and she saw

them here: a silk shirt, a gold wristwatch, tailored cotton trousers with a crocodile belt, handmade shoes, and a faint masculine cologne.

Elene said: 'How can I help you?'

He looked at her as if he were contemplating several possible answers, then he said: 'Let's start with some English marmalade.'

'Yes.' The marmalade was in the back room. She went there to get a jar.

'It's him!' Aristopoulos hissed.

'What are you talking about?' she asked in a normal voice. She was still mad~~x~~ at him.

'The bad money man - Mister Wolff - that's him!'

'Oh, God!' For a moment she had forgotten why she was here. Aristopoulos' panic infected her, and her mind went blank. 'What shall I say to him? What should I do?'

'I don't know - give him the marmalade - I don't know - '

'Yes, the marmalade, right ... '

/She took a jar of Cooper's Oxford from a shelf and returned to the shop. She forced herself to smile brightly at Wolff as she put the jar down on the counter. 'What else?'

'Two pounds of the dark coffee, ground fine.'

He was watching her while she weighed the coffee and put it through the ^rginder. Suddenly she was afraid of him. He was not like the men who had been her sugar-daddies. They had been soft, easygoing, guilty, pliable men. Wolff seemed poised and confident: it would be hard to deceive him and impossible to thwart him, she guessed.

'Something else?'

'A tin of ham.'

She moved around the shop, finding what he wanted and putting the goods on the counter. His eyes followed her everywhere. She

thought: I must talk to him, I can't keep saying 'Something else?', I'm supposed to befriend him. 'Something else?' she said.

'A half-case of champagne.'

The cardboard box containing six full bottles was heavy. She dragged it out of the back room. 'I expect you'd like us to deliver this order,' she said. She tried to make it sound casual. She was slightly breathless with the effort of bending to drag the case, and she hoped this would cover her nervousness.

He seemed to look through her with his dark eyes. 'Deliver?' he said. 'No, thank you.'

~~XAs you wish xxx Something else?~~

~~XI think that's all X~~

She looked at the heavy box. 'I hope you live nearby.'

'Close enough.'

'You must be very strong.'

'Strong enough.'

'We have a thoroughly reliable delivery man - '

'No delivery,' he said firmly.

She nodded. 'As you wish. Something else?'

'I think that's all.'

She began to add up the bill. Wolff said: 'Aristopoulos must be doing well, to employ an assistant.'

Elene said: 'Five pounds twelve and six, you wouldn't say that if you knew what he paid me, five pounds thirteen and six, six pounds ... '

'Don't you like the job?'

She gave him a direct look. 'I'd do anything to get out of here.'

'What did you have in mind?' He was very quick.

She shrugged, and went back to her addition. Eventually she

said: 'Thirteen pounds ten shillings and fourpence.'

'How did you know I'd pay in sterling?'

'You're a British officer, aren't you?'

He laughed loudly at that. He took out a roll of pound notes and gave her eleven. She gave him his change in Egyptian coins. She was thinking: What else can I do? What else can I do? She began to pack his purchases into a brown-paper shopping bag.

She said: 'Are you having a party? I love parties.'

'What makes you ask?'

'The champagne.'

'Ah. Well, life is one long party.'

She thought: I've failed. He will go away now, and perhaps he won't come back for weeks, perhaps never; I've had him in my sights, I've talked to him, and now I have to let him walk away and disappear into the city.

He lifted the case of champagne on to his left shoulder, and picked up the shopping bag with his right hand. 'Goodbye,' he said.

'Goodbye.'

He turned around at the door. 'Meet me at the Oasis Restaurant ^{on Wednesday} ~~tomorrow~~ night at seven-thirty.'

'All right!' she said. But he was gone.

*

The raid began in silence. There was no artillery barrage to alert the enemy. The AUstralians had tied sacking around their boots, for silence. Surprise was essential.

They moved forward at 0340 hours. There was no moon. They reached the perimeter and waited. Eventually an aircraft dropped a parachute flare. Several square miles of desert were surprised by daylight. The Australians charged.

The Italians holding the perimeter were asleep.

The Australians swept through the camp like a brush fire. Most of the Italians were taken prisoner in their pyjamas. The attackers went on, up the hill.

The Germans at the top were more alert. They formed an inner perimeter, to defend the armoured trucks which contained their precious wireless equipment. The Australians had to capture the listening post intact.

They laid a smokescreen and charged with fixed bayonets. The Germans were not in pyjamas. It was an old-fashioned battle, man against man with small weapons, and they all fought bitterly. When the Germans realised they could not win, they started to destroy their equipment.

But they had left it too late. The Australians overran the post and took the command vehicles undamaged. They looked at the booty: masses of wireless gear, some code books, and several boxes full of back traffic.

Then they called in the experts.

*

It took them most of the morning to get there from Cairo. Jakes sat in the front next to the driver; Vandam and Bogge sat in the back. They took the main road to Alexandria, then the coast road to El Alamein, where they turned on to a barrel track - a route through the desert marked with barrels. Nearly all the traffic was going in the opposite direction, retreating. Nobody knew what was happening. They stopped at a supply dump to fill up with gas, and Bogge had to pull rank on the officer in charge to get a chitty.

Their driver asked for directions to the hill. 'Bottle track,' the officer said brusquely. The desert tracks, created by and for the army, were named Bottle, Boot, Moon, Star, the symbols for which were cut into empty petrol cans along the routes. At night little

lights were placed in the cans to illuminate the symbols.

Bogge asked the officer: 'What's happening out here? Everything seems to be heading back east.'

'Nobody tells me anything,' said the ~~captain~~ officer.

They got a cup of tea and a bully-beef sandwich from the NAAFI truck. When they moved on they went through a recent battlefield, littered with wrecked and burned-out tanks, where a graveyard detail was desultorily collecting corpses. The barrels disappeared, but the driver picked them up again on the far side of the gravel plain.

They found the hill at nidday. There was a battle going on not far away: they could hear the guns and see clouds of dust rising to the east. Vandam realised he had not been this near the fighting since Crete. He had almost forgotten what it was like: dirt, panic and confusion. They reported to the Command Vehicle and were directed to the captured German radio trucks.

Field intelligence men were already at work. Prisoners were being interrogated in a small tent, one at a time, while the others waited in the blazing sun. Enemy ordnance experts were examining weapons and vehicles, noting down manufacturers' serial numbers. The Y Service was there looking for wavelengths and codes. It was the task of Bogge's little squad to investigate how much the Germans had been learning about Allied movements.

They took a truck each. Like most people in intelligence, Vandam had a smattering of German. He knew a couple of hundred words, most of them military terms, so that while he could not have told the difference between a love letter and a laundry list, he could read army orders and reports.

There was a lot of material to be examined: the captured post was a great prize for intelligence. Most of the stuff would have to

boxed, transported to Cairo, and ~~xxxx~~ perused at length by a large team. Today's job was a preliminary overview.

Vandam's truck was a mess. The Germans had begun to destroy their papers. Boxes had been emptied and a small fire started, but the damage had been stopped quickly. There was blood on a cardboard folder: someone had died defending his secrets.

Vandam went to work. They would have tried to destroy the most important papers first, so he began with the half-burned pile. There were many Allied radio signals, intercepted and in some cases decoded. Most of it was routine - most of everything was routine - but as he worked Vandam began to realise that German Intelligence's wireless interception was picking up an awful lot of useful information. They were better than Vandam had imagined - and Allied wireless security was very bad.

At the bottom of the pile was a book, a novel in English. Vandam frowned. He opened the book and read the first line: 'Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again.' The book was called Rebecca, and it was by Daphne du Maurier. The title was vaguely familiar. Vandam thought his wife might have read it. It seemed to be about a young woman living in an English country house.

Vandam scratched his head. It was, to say the least, peculiar reading for the Afrika Korps.

And why was it in English?

It might have been taken from a captured English soldier, but Vandam thought that unlikely: in his experience soldiers read pornography, hard-boiled private eye stories, and the Bible. Somehow he could not imagine the Desert Rats getting interested in the problems of the mistress of Manderley.

No, the book was here for a purpose. What purpose? Vandam could think of only ~~xxx~~ one possibility: it was the basis of a code.

A book code was a variation on the one-time pad. A one-time-pad had letters and numbers randomly printed in five-character groups. Only two copies of each pad were made: one for the sender and one for the recipient of the signals. Each sheet of the pad was used for one message, then torn off and destroyed. Because each sheet was used only once the code could not be broken. A book code used the pages of a book in the same way, except that the sheets were not necessarily destroyed after use.

There was one big advantage which a book had over a pad. A pad was unmistakably for the purpose of encipherment, but a book looked quite innocent. In the battlefield this did not matter. However, it could make a difference to an agent in enemy territory.

This might also explain why the book was in English. German soldiers signalling to one another would use a book in German, if they used a book at all. But a spy behind British lines would need to carry a book in English.

Vandam examined the book more closely. The price had been written in pencil on the end-paper, then rubbed out with an eraser. That might mean the book had been bought second-hand. Vandam held it up to the light, trying to read the impression the pencil had made in the paper. He made out the number 50, followed by some letters. Was it eic? It might be erc, or esc. It was esc, he realised - fifty escudos. The book had been bought in Portugal. Portugal was neutral territory, with both German and British embassies, and it was a hive of low-level espionage.

As soon as he got back to Cairo he would cable the Secret Intelligence Service station in Lisbon. They could check the English-language bookshops in Portugal - there could not be very many - and try to find out where the book had been bought, and if possible by whom.

At least two copies would have been bought, and a bookseller might remember such a sale. The interesting question was, where was the other copy? Vandam was pretty sure it was in Cairo, and he thought he knew who was using it.

He decided he had better show Bogge his find. He picked up the book and stepped out of the truck.

Bogge was coming to find him, wearing a look of righteous indignation. Vandam thought: What's bitten him?

Bogge said: 'What do you do all day, anyway?'

Vandam said nothing. Bogge handed him a sheet of paper. Vandam looked at it. It was a coded message, with the decrypt written between the lines in German. It was timed at midnight on 3 June.

When he was half-way through, Jakes approached with a full [✓]Colonel from the Australian brigade that had taken the hill. Vandam looked up and said abruptly: 'Not now, Jakes.'

'Stay here, Jakes,' Bogge countermanded. 'This concerns you, too.'

Vandam read on to the end, then said: 'Jesus Christ Almighty, this is a disaster.'

'Of course it's a bloody disaster!' Bogge shouted. 'It means Rommel is getting full details of our ~~plans~~ attacks before they bloody begin!'

Vandam was thunderstruck. He looked again at the signal: 'full details' was right. The report named the brigades involved, the timing of various stages of the attack, and the overall strategy. It was no wonder Rommel was winning if he was getting intelligence of this quality.

The information was so good that it had to have originated in GHQ.

The same thought had occurred to Bogge. 'They must be getting this stuff from an English officer,' he said.

'Yes.'

'What do you mean, yes? Your job is personnel security. This is your responsibility.'

'I realise that, sir.'

'Do you also realise that a leak of this magnitude will have to be reported to the Commander-in-Chief?'

The Australian ^cColonel was embarrassed at the sight of an officer getting a public dressing-down. He said: 'Let's save the recriminations for later, Bogge. I doubt the thing is the fault of any one individual. Your first job is to discover the extent of the damage and let the C-in-C have a preliminary report within twenty-four hours.'

Bogge said: 'Right, get on with it, Vandam.' He and the ^cColonel went off in opposite directions.

Vandam sat down on the step of the truck. Now that Bogge was no longer blustering at him, the news was sinking in. Not only had John Wolff penetrated Cairo and evaded Vandam's net, he had gained ^c access to high-level secrets.

Vandam thought: Who is this man?

In just a few days he had selected his target, laid his groundwork, and then bribed, blackmailed or corrupted the target into treachery. Not only was he getting the information, but - as the 5 June battle had shown - Rommel was using it. It was a disaster - and Bogge was right about something else: it was Vandam's responsibility.

One man could not win the war - but one man could lose it; and Vandam did not want to be that man.

Jakes coughed discreetly. Vandam looked up at him: he had

forgotten the ^c Captain was there. Vandam said: 'You heard what the ^c Colonel said, Jakes - get on with it.'

'You're wanted on the field telephone, sir - it's GHQ,' Jakes said. 'Apparently there's an Egyptian woman in your office, asking for you, refusing to leave. She says she has an urgent message and she won't take No for an answer.'

Elene! Vandam jumped up. Maybe she had made contact. She must have made contact - why else would she be desperate to speak to him? He ran to the Command Vehicle with Jakes hard on his heels.

The ^M Major in charge of communications handed him the phone. 'Make it snappy, Vandam, we're using that thing.'

Vandam had had enough. He said: 'I'll use it as long as I need it, and I'll thank you to speak civilly to fellow-officers.' He turned his back on the ^M Major and spoke into the phone. 'Yes?'

'William?'

'Elene. What happened?'

'He came into the shop.'

'Did you get his address?'

'No - but I've got a date with him.'

'Well done! Where and when?'

'Tomorrow night, seven-thirty, at the Oasis Restaurant.'

Vandam picked up a pencil and a scrap of paper. 'Oasis Restaurant, seven-thirty,' he repeated. 'I'll be there.'

'Good.'

'And thankyou!'

'Goodbye.'

Vandam gave the phone back to the ^M Major. Lieutenant-Colonel Bogge was standing behind him. He said: 'Never mind making dates with your girlfriends on the field telephone, Vandam - what are you going to do about this bloody spy?'

Vandam gave him a sunny smile. 'That wasn't a girlfriend, it was an informant,' he said. 'She's made contact with the spy. I expect to arrest him tomorrow night.'

- 12 -

Wolff watched Sonja eat. The liver was underdone, pink and soft, just as she liked it. She ate with relish, as usual. He thought how alike the two of them were. In their work they were competent, professional, and highly successful. They both lived in the shadows of childhood shocks: her father's death, his mother's remarriage. Neither of them had ever come close to ^{marrying} ~~marriage~~, for they were too fond of themselves to love another person. What brought them together was not love, not even affection, but shared lusts. The most important thing in life, for both of them, was the indulgence of their appetites.

She finished her liver and started on an ice-cream desert. She was always very hungry after performing at the Cha-Cha Club. It was not surprising: she used a great deal of energy in her act. But when, finally, she quit dancing, she would grow very fat. Wolff imagined her in twenty years' time: she would have three chins and a vast bosom, her hair would be brittle and greying, she would walk flat-footed and be breathless after climbing the stairs.

'What are you smiling at?' Sonja said.

'I was picturing you as an old woman, wearing a shapeless black dress and a veil.'

'I won't be like that. I shall be very rich, and live in a palace surrounded by naked young men and women eager to gratify my slightest whim. What about you?'

Wolff smiled. 'I think I shall be Hitler's ambassador to

Egypt, and wear an SS uniform to the mosque.'

'You'd have to take off your jackboots.'

'Shall I visit you in your palace?'

'Yes, please - wearing your uniform.'

'Would I have to take off my jackboots in your presence?'

'No. Everything else, but not the boots.'

Wolff laughed. Sonja was in a rare gay mood. He called the waiter and asked for coffee, brandy and the bill. He said to Sonja: 'There's some good news. I've been saving it. I think I've found another Fawzi.'

She was suddenly very still, looking at him intently. 'Who is she?' she said quietly.

'I went to the grocer's yesterday. Aristopoulos has his niece working with him.'

'A shop girl!'

'She's a real beauty. She has a lovely, innocent face, and a slightly wicked smile.'

'How old?'

'Hard to say. Around twenty, I think. She has such a girlish body.'

Sonja licked her lips. 'And you think she will ... ?'

'I think so. She's dying to get away from Aristopoulos, and she practically threw herself at me.'

'When?'

'I'm going to have dinner with her tomorrow night.'

'Will you bring her home?'

'Maybe. I have to feel her out. She's so perfect, I don't want to spoil everything by rushing her.'

'You mean you want to have her first.'

'If necessary.'

'Do you think she's a virgin?'

'It's possible.'

'If she is ... '

'Then I'll save her for you.' Wolff sat back, studying Sonja. Her face was a mask of sexual greed. Wolff sipped his brandy. A warm glow spread in his stomach. He felt good: full of food and wine, his mission going remarkably well, and a new sexual adventure in view.

The bill came, and he paid it with English pound notes.

*

It was a small restaurant, but a successful one. Ibrahim managed it and his brother did the cooking. They had learned the trade in a French hotel in Tunisia, their home; and when their father died they had sold the sheep and come to Cairo to seek their fortune. Ibrahim's philosophy was simple: they knew only French-Arab cuisine, so that was all they offered. They might, perhaps, have attracted more customers if the menu in the window had offered hamburgers, or Yorkshire pudding, or sauerkraut; but those customers would not have returned, and anyhow Ibrahim had his pride.

The formula worked. They were making a good living, more money than their father had ever seen. The war had brought even more business. But wealth had not made Ibrahim careless.

Two days earlier he had taken coffee with a friend who was a cashier at the Metropolitan Hotel. The friend had told him how the British Paymaster-General had refused to exchange four of the English pound notes which had been passed in the hotel bar. The notes were counterfeit, according to the British. What was so unfair was that they had confiscated the money.

This was not going to happen to Ibrahim.

About half his customers were British, and many of them paid

in sterling. Since he heard the news he had been checking carefully every pound note before putting it into the till. His friend from the Metropolitan had told him how to spot the forgeries.

It was typical of the British. They did not make a public announcement to help the businessmen of Cairo to avoid being cheated. They simply sat back and confiscated the dud notes. The businessmen of Cairo were used to this kind of treatment, and they stuck together. The grapevine worked well.

When Ibrahim received the counterfeit notes from the tall European who was dining with the famous belly-dancer, he was not sure what to do next. The notes were all crisp and new, and bore the identical fault. Ibrahim double-checked them against one of the good notes in his till: there was no doubt. Should he, perhaps, explain the matter quietly to the customer? He would take offence, or at least pretend to; and he would probably leave without paying. His bill was a heavy one - he had taken the most expensive French wine and the best brandy - and Ibrahim did not want to risk such a loss.

He would call the police, he decided. They would prevent the customer running off, and might help persuade him to pay by cheque, or at least leave an IOU.

But which police? The Egyptian police would probably argue that it was not their responsibility, take an hour to get here, and then require a bribe. The customer was presumably an Englishman - why else would he have sterling? - and was probably an officer, and it was British money that had been counterfeited. Ibrahim decided he would call the military.

He ~~summoned the waiter~~ went over to their table, carrying the brandy bottle. He gave them a smile. 'Monsieur, Madame, I hope you have enjoyed your meal.'

'It was excellent,' said the man. He talked like a British officer.

Ibrahim turned to the woman. 'It is an honour to serve the greatest dancer in the country.'

She gave a regal nod.

Ibrahim said: 'I hope you will accept a glass of brandy, with the compliments of the house.'

'Very kind,' said the man.

Ibrahim poured them more brandy and bowed away. He left by the back door and went to the house of a neighbour who had a telephone.

*

If I had a restaurant, Wolff thought, I would do things like that. The two glasses of brandy cost the proprietor very little, in relation to Wolff's total bill, but the gesture was very effective in making the customer feel wanted. Wolff had often toyed with the idea of opening a restaurant, but it was a pipedream: he knew there was too much hard work involved.

Sonja also enjoyed the special attention. She was positively glowing under the combined influences of flattery and liquor. Tonight in bed she would snore like a pig.

The proprietor had disappeared for a few minutes then returned. Out of the corner of his eye, Wolff saw the man whispering to a waiter. He guessed ~~th~~ they were talking about Sonja. Wolff felt a pang of jealousy. There were places in Cairo where, because of his good custom and lavish tips, he was known by name and welcomed like royalty; but he had thought it wise not to go to places where he would be recognised, not while the British were hunting him. Now he wondered whether he could afford to relax his vigilance a little more.

Sonja yawned. It was time to put her to bed. Wolff waved to a waiter and said: 'Please fetch Madame's wrap.' The man went off, paused to mutter something to the proprietor, then continued on toward the cloakroom.

An alarm bell sounded, faint and distant, somewhere in the back of Wolff's mind.

He toyed with a spoon as he waited for Sonja's wrap. Sonja ate another petit four. The proprietor walked the length of the restaurant, went out of the front door, and came back in again. He approached their table and said: 'May I get you a taxi?'

Wolff looked at Sonja. She said: 'I don't mind.'

Wolff said: 'I'd like a breath of air. Let's walk a little way, then hail one.'

'Okay.'

Wolff looked at the proprietor. 'No taxi.'

'Very good, sir.'

The waiter brought Sonja's wrap. The proprietor kept looking at the door. Wolff heard another alarm bell, this one louder. He said to the proprietor: 'Is something the matter?'

The man looked very worried. 'I must mention a very delicate problem, sir.'

Wolff began to get irritated. 'Well, what is it, man? We want to go home.'

There was the sound of a vehicle noisily drawing up outside the restaurant.

Wolff took hold of the proprietor's lapels. 'What is going on here?'

'The money with which you have paid your bill, sir, is not good.'

'You don't accept sterling? Then why didn't - '

'It's not that, sir. The money is counterfeit.'

The restaurant door burst open and three military policemen marched in.

Wolff sat down again, his mind racing. Counterfeit money! Those imbeciles in Berlin had given him forged notes. That was why they were so generous - they were printing the money. It was so stupid. His hands twitched with the urge to strangle Canaris. He thought: So much for National-Socialist efficiency!

Damn them to hell.

What had happened? He had been spending money fast. It had got into circulation. The banks had spotted the forgeries - no, not the banks, the British Paymaster-General. Anyway, someone had begun to refuse the dud money, and word had got around Cairo. The proprietor had ^{noticed} ~~spotted~~ the forgeries and called the military. He had even delayed Wolff with free brandy until they arrived - so much for making the customer feel wanted!

The MPs marched up to the table. Two were British and the third was Australian. They wore heavy boots and ^{steel} ~~kin~~ helmets, and each of them had a small gun in a belt holster. One of the British said: 'Is this the man?'

'Just a moment,' Wolff said. 'The proprietor has, this very minute, told me that my money is no good. I don't believe this, but I'm prepared to humour him, and I'm sure we can make some arrangement which will satisfy him.' He gave the proprietor a reproachful look. 'It really was not necessary to call the police.'

The senior MP said: 'It's an offence to pass forged money.'

'Knowingly,' Wolff said. 'It is an offence knowingly to pass forged money. Now, then, what I propose is this. I have her my ^e cheque book and some Egyptian money. I will write a cheque to cover my bill, and use the Egyptian money for the tip. Tomorrow I will

take the allegedly counterfeit notes to Barclay's Bank in the Shari Kasr-el-Nil for examination, and if they really are forgeries I will surrender them.' He smiled at the group surrounding him. 'I imagine that should satisfy everyone.'

The proprietor said: 'I would prefer if you could pay entirely in cash, sir.'

'Even that might be possible,' Wolff said. 'Have you got any Egyptian currency, Sonja?'

She opened her handbag. 'I think so. How much do we need?'

The senior MP interrupted: 'All the same, sir, I'm going to ask you to come with me.'

'Why?'

'We'll need to ask you some questions.'

'Fine. Why don't you call on me tomorrow morning. I live - '

'You'll have to come with me. Those are my orders.'

'From whom?'

'The Assistant Provost Marshal.'

'Very well, then,' said Wolff. He stood up. 'But either you, or the Provost, will be in very deep trouble in the morning.' Then he picked up the table and threw it at the MP.

He had been planning and calculating the move for the past minute or two. It was a small circular table of solid wood. Its edge struck the MP on the bridge of the nose, and as he fell back the table landed on top of him.

Table and MP were on Wolff's left. On his right was the proprietor. Sonja was opposite him, still sitting, and the other two MPs were either side of her and slightly behind her.

Wolff grabbed the proprietor and pushed him at one of the MPs. Then he jumped at the other MP, the Australian, and punched his face. He hoped to get past the two of them and run away. It did not work.

The MPs were chosen for their size, belligerence and brutality, and they were used to dealing with soldiers desert-hardened and fighting drunk. The Australian took the punch and staggered back a pace, but he did not fall over. Wolff kicked him in the knee and punched his face again; then the other MP, the second Englishman, pushed the proprietor out of the way and kicked Wolff's feet from under him.

Wolff landed heavily. His chest and his cheek hit the tiled floor. His face stung, he was momentarily winded, and he saw stars. He was kicked again, in the side, and he rolled over away from the blow. The MP jumped on him, beating him about the head. He struggled to push the man off. The Australian sat on Wolff's feet. Then Wolff saw, above him and behind the English MP, Sonja's face, twisted with rage. The thought flashed through his mind that she was remembering another beating that had been administered by British soldiers. Then he saw that she was raising high in the air the chair she had been sitting on. The MP on Wolff's chest glimpsed her, turned around, looked up, and raised his arms to ward off the blow. She brought the heavy chair down with all her might. A corner of the seat struck the MP's mouth, and he gave a shout of pain and anger ^{as} ~~and~~ blood spurted from his lips.

The Australian got off Wolff's feet and grabbed Sonja from behind, pinning her arms. Wolff flexed his body and threw off the wounded Englishman, then scrambled to his feet.

He reached inside his shirt and whipped out his knife.

The Australian threw Sonja aside, took a pace forward, saw the knife and stopped. He and Wolff stared into each other's eyes for a moment. Wolff saw the other man's eyes flicker to one side then the other, seeing his two partners lying on the floor. The Australian's hand went to his holster.

Wolff turned and ran for the door. He reached it and flung it open. A shot rang out.

*

Vandam drove the motorcycle through the streets at a dangerous speed. He had ripped the blackout mask off the headlight - nobody in Cairo took the blackout seriously anyway - and he drove with his thumb on the horn. The streets were still busy, with taxis, gharries, army trucks, donkeys and camels. The pavements were crowded and the shops were bright with electric lights, oil lamps and candles. Vandam weaved recklessly through the traffic, ignoring the^{outraged} hooting of the cars, the raised fists of the gharry drivers, and the blown whistle of an Egyptian policeman.

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The Assitant Provost Marshal had called him at home. 'Ah, Vandam, wasn't it you who sent up the balloon about this funny money? Because we've just had a call from a restaurant where a European is trying to pass - '

'Where?'

The APM gave him the address, and Vandam ran out of the house.

He skidded around a corner, dragging a heel in the road for traction. It had occurred to him that, with so much counterfeit money in circulation, some must have got into the hands of other Europeans, and the man in the restaurant might well be an innocent victim. He hoped not. He wanted desperately to get his hands on John Wolff. Wolff had outwitted and humiliated him and now, with his access to secrets and his direct line to Rommel, he threatened to bring about the fall of Egypt; but it was not just that. Vandam wanted to see this man ■ and touch him, to find out how he would move and speak. Was he clever, or just lucky? Courageous, or foolhardy? Determined, or stubborn? Did he have a handsome face and a warm smile, or beady eyes and an oily grin? Would he fight or come quietly?

Vandam swerved to avoid a pothole, then opened the throttle and roared down a quiet street. The address was a little out of the city centre, toward the Old Town: Vandam knew the street but not the restaurant. He turned two more corners, and almost hit an old man riding an ass with his wife walking along behind. He found the street he was looking for.

It was narrow and dark, with high buildings on either side. At ground level there were some shop fronts and some house entrances. Vandam pulled up beside two small boys playing in the gutter and said the name of the restaurant. They pointed vaguely along the street.

Vandam cruised along, ^{pausing to} looking ~~any~~ wherever he noticed a lit window. He was half way down the street when he heard the crack! of a small firearm, slightly muffled, and the sound of glass shattering. His head jerked around toward the source of the ~~xxx~~ noise. Light from a broken window glinted off shards of falling glass, and as he looked a tall man ran out of a door into the street.

It had to be Wolff.

He ran in the opposite direction. Vandam twisted the throttle of the motorcycle and roared after him. As he passed the restaurant an MP ran out and fired three shots after the running man. The fugitive's pace did not falter.

Vandam caught him in the beam of the headlight. He was running strongly, steadily, his arms and legs pumping rhythmically. When the light hit him he glanced back over his shoulder without breaking his stride, and Vandam glimpsed a hawk nose and a strong chin, and a mouth open and panting.

Vandam could have shot him, but he had no gun.

The motorcycle gained fast. When they were almost ~~a~~ level Wolff suddenly turned a corner. Vandam braked and went into a

back-wheel skid, leaning the bike against the direction of the skid to keep his balance. He came to a stop, jerked upright, and shot forward again.

He saw the back of Wolff disappear into a narrow alleyway. Without slowing down, Vandam turned the corner and drove into the alley. The bike went into empty space. Vandam's stomach turned over. The white cone of his headlight illuminated nothing. He thought he was falling into a pit. The back wheel hit something. The front wheel went down, down, then hit. The headlight showed a flight of steps leading down. The bike bounced, and ~~came down~~ ^{landed} again. Vandam fought to keep the front wheel straight. The bike ~~went down~~ ^{descended} the steps in a series of spine-jarring bumps. Vandam saw Wolff at the bottom, still running.

Vandam reached the foot of the staircase. He saw Wolff turn another corner, and followed. They were in a maze of alleys. Wolff ran up a short flight of steps. Vandam accelerated, and jerked the handlebars up a moment before hitting the bottom step. The bike bumped crazily up. Vandam thought he would be thrown off. He reached the top.

He found himself in a long passage with high, blank walls on either side. Wolff was still in front of him, still running. Vandam thought he could catch the German before he reached the end of the passage. He shot forward.

Wolff looked over his shoulder, ran on, and looked again. Vandam could see that the man's pace was flagging. His stride was no longer steady and rhythmic: his arms flew out to either side and he ran raggedly. Glimpsing his face, Vandam saw that it was taut with strain.

Wolff put on a burst of speed, but it was not enough. Vandam drew level, eased ahead, then braked sharply and twisted the handlebars.

The back wheel skidded and the front wheel hit the wall. Vandam leaped off. The bike fell to the ground. Vandam landed on his feet, facing Wolff. The smashed headlamp of the bike threw a shaft of light into the darkness of the passage. Wolff leaped over the bike, his body passing through the pillar of light like a knife slicing a flame. He crashed into Vandam. Vandam, still unsteady, stumbled backward and fell. Wolff staggered and took another step forward. Vandam reached out and grabbed his ankle. Wolff crashed to the ground.

The broken headlamp gave a little light to the rest of the alley. The engine of the bike had cut out, and in the silence Vandam could hear Wolff's breathing, ragged and hoarse. He could smell him, too: a smell of booze and perspiration and fear. But he could not see his face.

There was a split-second when the two of them lay on the ground, one exhausted and the other momentarily stunned. Then they both scrambled to their feet. Vandam jumped at the other man, and they grappled.

Wolff was strong. Vandam tried to pin his arms, but he could not hold on to him. Suddenly he let go and threw a punch. It landed somewhere soft, and Wolff said: 'Ooff.' Vandam punched again, this time aiming for the face. Wolff ducked, and Vandam's fist hit empty space. Suddenly something in Vandam's fist glinted in the dim light. Vandam thought: A knife! The blade flashed toward his throat. He jerked back reflexively. There was a searing pain all across his cheek. His hand flew to his face. He felt a gush of hot blood. Suddenly the pain was unbearable. He pressed on the wound and his fingers touched something hard. He realised that he was touching his own teeth, and that ~~h~~ the knife had sliced right through the flesh of his cheek; and then he felt himself falling, and he heard Wolff

running, and everything turned black.

- 13 -

Wolff took a handkerchief from his trousers pocket and wiped the blood from the blade of the knife. He examined the blade in the dim light, then wiped it again. He walked along, polishing the thin steel vigorously. He stopped, and thought: What am I doing? It's clean already. He threw away the handkerchief and replaced the knife in the sheath under his arm. He emerged from the alley into a street, got his bearings, and headed for the Old City.

He imagined a prison cell. It was six feet long by four feet wide, and half of it was taken up by a bed. Beneath the bed was a chamber pot. The walls were of smooth grey stone. A small light bulb hung from the ceiling by a cord. In one end of the cell was a door. In the other end was a small square window, set just above eye level: through it he could see the bright blue sky. He imagined that he woke up in the morning and saw all this, and remembered that he had been here for a year, and he would be here for another nine years. He used the chamber pot, then washed his hands in the tin bowl in the corner. There was no soap. A dish of cold porridge was pushed through the hatch in the door. He picked up the spoon and took a mouthful, but he was unable to swallow, for he was weeping.

He shook his head to clear it of nightmare visions. He thought: I got away, didn't I? I got away. He realised that some of the people on the street were staring at him as they passed. He saw a mirror in a shop window, and examined himself in it. His hair was awry, one side of his face was bruised and swollen, his sleeve was ripped and there was blood on his collar. He was still panting from the exertion of running and fighting. He thought: I look dangerous. He walked on, and turned at the next corner to take an indirect route

which would avoid the main streets.

He thought about the man on the motorcycle. He must be a determined bastard, to ride the bike around those alleys and up and down the steps. He had had no gun, Wolff guessed: if he had, he would surely have used it. Nor had he had a tin hat, so presumably he was not an MP. Someone from Intelligence, perhaps? Major Vandam?

Wolff hoped so.

He thought: I wonder where I cut him.

He turned his mind to his immediate problem. They had Sonja. She would tell them she hardly knew Wolff. They would not be able to hold her for long, for she had done nothing wrong. Under normal circumstances, of course, the fact that she had committed no crime would not have stopped them holding an Arab for just as long as they liked; but Sonja was famous, and to imprison her would cause a great deal of trouble. So they would let her go quite soon. However she would have to give them her address; which meant that Wolff could not go back to the houseboat, not yet. He needed somewhere to clean up and hide for a few hours, maybe all night.

He ducked under an arch, went along a short dark passage, and climbed a stone spiral staircase to Abdullah's home.

Abdullah was sitting on the floor with another man. A nargoleh stood between them, and the air was full of the herbal smell of hashish. Abdullah looked up at Wolff and gave a slow, sleepy smile. He spoke in Arabic. 'Here is my friend Hussein, also called Hans, also called John. Welcome, John-Hans-Hussein.'

Wolff sat on the floor with them and greeted them in Arabic.

Abdullah said: 'My brother Yasef here would like to ask you a riddle, something that has been puzzling him and me for some hours now, ever since we started the hubble-bubble, speaking of which ... ' He passed the pipe across, and Wolff took a lungful.

Yasef said: 'John-Hans-Hussein, friend of my brother, welcome. Tell me this: Why do the British call us wogs?'

Yasef and Abdullah collapsed into giggles. Wolff realised they were heavily under the influence of hashish: they must have been smoking all evening. He drew on the pipe again, and pushed it over to Yasef. It was strong stuff. Abdullah always had the best. Wolff said: 'As it happens, I know the answer. Egyptian men working on the Suez Canal are issued with special shirts. To indicate that they have the right to move around on British property and British ships, their shirts have printed on the backs the English letters W.O.G.S. - for Working On Government Service.'

Yasef and Abdullah giggled all over again. Abdullah said: 'My friend John-Hans-Hussein is clever. He is as clever as an Arab, almost, because he is almost an Arab. He is the only European who has ever got the better of me, Abdullah.'

'I believe this to be untrue,' Wolff said, slipping into their stoned style of speech. 'I would never try to outwit my friend Abdullah, for who can cheat the devil?'

Yasef smiled and nodded his appreciation of this witticism. Abdullah said: 'Listen, my brother, and I will tell you.' He frowned, collecting his doped thoughts. 'John-Hans-Hussein asked me to steal something for him. That way I would take the risk and he would get the reward. Of course, he did not outwit me so simply. I stole the thing - it was a case - and of course my intention was to take its contents for myself, since the thief is entitled to the proceeds of his crime, according to the laws of God. Therefore I should have outwitted him, should I not?'

'Indeed,' said Yasef, 'although I do not recall the passage of Holy Scripture which says that a thief is entitled to the proceeds of his crime. However ... '

'Perhaps not,' said Abdullah. 'Of what was I speaking?'

Wolff, who was still more or less compos mentis, told him:

'You should have outwitted me, because you opened the case yourself.'

'Indeed! But wait. There was nothing of value in the case - so John-Hans-Hussein had outwitted me. But wait! I made him pay me for rendering this service - therefore I got one hundred pounds and he got nothing.'

Yasef frowned. 'You, then, got the better of him.'

'No.' Abdullah shook his head sadly. 'He paid me in forged currency.'

Yasef stared at Abdullah. Abdullah stared back. They both burst out laughing. They slapped each other's shoulders, stamped their feet on the floor, and rolled around on the cushions, laughing until the tears came to their eyes.

Wolff smiled. It was just the kind of funny story that appealed to Arab businessmen, with its chain of double-crosses. Abdullah would be telling it for years to come. But for Wolff it rang alarm bells: Abdullah, too, knew about the counterfeit notes. Who else?

Abdullah seemed to notice Wolff's appearance for the first time. He immediately became very concerned. 'What has happened to you? Have you been robbed?' He picked up a tiny silver bell and rang it. Almost immediately, a sleepy woman came in from the next room. 'Get some hot water,' Abdullah told her. 'Bathe my friend's wounds. Give him my European shirt. Bring a comb. Bring coffee. Quickly!'

In a European house Wolff would have protested at the women being roused, after midnight, to attend to him; but here such a protest would have been very discourteous. The women existed to serve the men, and they would be neither surprised nor annoyed by ~~dist~~ Abdullah's peremptory demands.

Wolff explained: 'The British tried to arrest me, and I was obliged to fight with them before I could get away. Sadly, I think that they may now know where I have been living, and this is a problem.'

'Ah.' Abdullah drew on the nargoleh, and passed it around again. Wolff began to feel the effects of the hashish: he was relaxed, slow-thinking, a little sleepy. Time slowed down. Two of Abdullah's wives began to fuss over him, bathing his face and combing his hair. He found their ministrations very pleasant indeed.

Abdullah seemed to doze for a while, then he opened his eyes and said: 'You must stay here. My house is yours. I will hide you from the British.'

'You are a true friend,' Wolff said. It was odd, he thought. He had planned to offer Abdullah money to hide him. Then Abdullah had revealed that he knew the money was no good, and Wolff had been wondering what else he could do. Now Abdullah was going to hide him for nothing. A true friend. What was odd was that Abdullah was not a true friend. There were no friends in Abdullah's world: there was the family, for whom he would do anything, and the rest, for whom he would do nothing. How have I earned this special treatment? Wolff thought sleepily.

His alarm bell was sounding again. He forced himself to think: it was not easy after the hashish. Take it one step at a time, he told himself. Abdullah asks me to stay here. Why? Because I am in trouble. Because I am his friend. Because I have outwitted him.

Because I have outwitted him. That story was not finished. Abdullah would want to add yet another double-cross to the chain. How? By betraying Wolff to the British. That was it. As soon as Wolff fell asleep, Abdullah would send a message to Major Vandam. Wolff would be picked up. The British would pay Abdullah for the

information, and the story could be told to Abdullah's credit at last.

Damn.

A wife brought a white European shirt. Wolff stood up and took off his torn and bloody shirt. The wife averted her eyes from his bare chest.

Abdullah said: 'He doesn't need it yet. Give it to him in the morning.'

Wolff took the shirt from the woman and put it on. He said: 'The British have a proverb: He who sups with the devil must use a long spoon.'

Abdullah grinned, showing his steel tooth. 'Almost an Arab,' he said.

Wolff realised that Abdullah knew he had been outwitted again. 'Goodbye, my friends,' he said.

'Until the next time,' said Abdullah.

Wolff went out into the cold night, wondering where he could go now.

*

In the hospital Vandam refused point-blank to take a pain-killing drug. They had frozen half his face with a local anaesthetic while they stitched up his cheek, then they put on a protective dressing which was secured by a long strip of bandage tied around his head. He knew he must look like a toothache cartoon. He also knew the doctor wanted him to sleep, so that the stitches would be undisturbed for a few hours. That was why he refused the pain-killer: he was afraid it might be soporific. He could not go to sleep, for he had work to do.

They told him he was weak from loss of blood. They told him he should not even talk, let alone walk around, until the formidable gash in his face had begun to heal. They told him he would hurt like

hell when the local anaesthetic wore off. They told him that a wound like this was mentally as well as physically traumatic, and that in a few hours he would be dizzy, nauseous, exhausted and confused.

He told them he would be worse off if the Germans took Cairo, and he checked out of the hospital.

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

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

'Five past two.'

'I presume Wolff wasn't dining alone.'

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

'Drive me there.'

The car pulled away. Vandam said: 'A woman?'

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

'The dancer?'

'No less.'

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

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

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

'Good.'

It was a pity, all the same, that she had been given time to collect her thoughts. Vandam knew from prisoner-of-war interrogations

that the best results were achieved immediately after the capture, when the prisoner was still frightened of getting killed. Later on, when he had been herded here and there and given food and drink, he began to think of himself as a prisoner rather than as a soldier, and remembered that he had new rights and duties; and then he was better able to keep his mouth shut. Vandam should have interviewed Sonja immediately after the fight in the restaurant. As that was not possible, the next best thing was for her to be kept in isolation and given no information until he arrived.

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

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

He opened the door and went in.

He sat down at the table without speaking. This left her standing, which was a psychological disadvantage for a woman: score

the first point to me, he thought. He heard Jakes come in behind him and close the door. He looked up at Sonja. 'Sit down.'

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

Score the second point to her.

'Sit down.'

'Thankyou.' She sat.

'Who is he?'

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

'And who is John Wolff?'

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

'How long have you known him?'

She looked at her watch. 'Four hours.'

'What is your relationship with him?'

She shrugged. 'He was a date.'

'How did you meet?'

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

'Which one?'

'Which table?'

'Which waiter.'

'I don't remember.'

'Go on.'

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

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

'Yes, it's a custom.'

'Do you usually go to dinner with them?'

'Occasionally.'

'Why did you this time?'

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

'What is your full name?'

'Sonja el-Aram.'

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'Adress?'

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

'Age?'

'How discourteous.'

'Age?'

'I refuse to answer.'

'You're on dangerous ground - '

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

'Calm down,' Vandam said mildly. 'Let's go over this again. You say you met Wolff at the Cha-Cha - '

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

with her back to Vandam.

Vandam stared at the back of her head for a moment, then abruptly got up and left the room. Jakes followed. Outside in the corridor, Jakes said: 'What do you think?'

'I think I've just been well and truly outmanoeuvred,' Vandam said. 'We'll have to let her go.'

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

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

Then he had it. It had been hatred.

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

her strength.

Suddenly Vandam was tired. He sat down heavily on a bench in the corridor. From where was he to draw his strength? It was easy to be strong if you were insane, and in Sonja's hatred there had been a hint of something a little crazy. He had no such refuge. Calmly, rationally, ~~as~~ he considered what was at stake. He imagined the Nazis marching into Cairo; the Gestapo in the streets; the Egyptian Jews herded into concentration camps; the Fascist propaganda on the radio ... The trouble was, many of the people who now ran Egypt would quite agree that blacks, Jews and gypsies were sub-human. The newspapers here were no more free than those in Germany. The British, too, had their political police. Vandam had often heard Hitler's politics warmly endorsed in the officers' mess, at least before the war: they disliked him, not because he was a Fascist but because he had been a corporal in the army and a house-painter in civilian life. There were brutes everywhere, and sometimes they got into power, and then you had to fight them: it was sad, but that was how the world was, and it was nothing to foam at the mouth about.

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

He thought of Billy. He did not want the boy to miss him at breakfast. Perhaps I'll stay awake until morning, then take him to school, then go home and sleep, he thought. What would Billy's life be like under the Nazis? They would teach him to despise the Arabs. His present teachers were not great admirers of African culture, but at least Vandam could do a little to make his son realise that people who were different were not necessarily stupid. What would

happen when he put up his hand and said: 'Please, sir, my Dad says a dumb Englishman is no smarter than a dumb Arab.'?

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

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

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

He stood up.

Jakes came back.

Vandam said: 'She's an Anglophobe.'

'I beg your pardon, sir?'

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

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

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

'Sir.'

They pulled away. Vandam handed his cigarette case and lighter to Jakes, who drove one-handed while he lit Vandam's cigarette. Vandam had trouble sucking: he could hold the cigarette between his lips and breathe the smoke, but he could not draw on it hard enough to light it. They had told him he could not eat either. Glucose

dissolved in lukewarm water, they had prescribed. I might try it in warm gin, he thought.

I could use a martini.

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

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

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

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

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

Vandam thought about Jakes. He was an eager, reliable young man who would follow orders to the letter, as far as they went, then use his initiative. He was also well-connected, which meant he would almost certainly go farther in the Army than Vandam would. Someone had told Vandam that Jakes had a terrific sense of humour. Vandam had found him pleasant and cheerful, but had never seen any evidence of actual humour. Jakes was also very scupulous about his salutes and his Sirs. Am I such a tyrant, Vandam thought, that my staff are terrified of cracking a joke in my presence?

Nobody makes me laugh, he thought; and then: Except Elene.

'You never tell me jokes, Jakes.'

'Sir?'

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

'No, sir.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jakes said: 'Military Intelligence - open up the bloody door!' Vandam ^{suppressed a} smiled. Jakes could drop his refinement when he chose.

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

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

'Of course.' The detective stood aside and they entered. He led them into a small living-room. 'What has happened?' He seemed frightened, and Vandam thought: Who wouldn't be? The knock on the door in the middle of the night was the oldest and still the most effective way to scare people to death.

Vandam said: 'There's nothing to panic about, but we ~~need~~ ^{want} you to

set up a surveillance, and we need it right away.'

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

'Sonja el-Aram.'

'The dancer?'

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

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

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

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

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

'Of course. Daily reports?'

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

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

Jakes said: ~~XX~~ 'That's right.'

Vandam raised an eyebrow at Jakes.

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

Vandam said: 'Is that right, Jakes?'

'I wouldn't know, sir.' He realised he was being ribbed, and

smiled. He gave the detective a piece of paper with the phone numbers written on it.

Vandam said: 'I think that's about it. Can we drive you to police headquarters?'

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

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

'All right, sir?'

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

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

They went to the door. The detective said: 'Gentlemen, be assured that I will handle this surveillance personally. They won't get a mouse aboard that houseboat without your knowing it.'

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

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

- 14 -

Sonja brooded. She had half-expected Wolff to be at the houseboat when she returned toward dawn, but she had found the place cold and empty. She was not sure how she felt about that. At first, when they had arrested her, she had felt nothing but rage toward Wolff for running away and leaving her at the mercy of the British thugs. Being alone, being a woman, and being an accomplice of sorts in Wolff's spying, she was terrified of what they might do to her. She thought Wolff should have stayed to look after her. Then she

had realised that would not have been smart. By abandoning her he had diverted suspicion away from her. It was hard to take, but it was for the best. Sitting alone in the ~~xxxxx~~ bare little room at GHQ, she had turned her anger away from Wolff and toward the British.

She had defied them, and they had backed down.

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

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

She put on her nightdress. She knew she ought to go to bed, but she did not feel sleepy. Perhaps a drink would help. She found a bottle of Scotch whisky, poured some into a glass, and added water. As she was tasting it she heard footsteps on the gangplank. Without thinking she called: 'Hussein ... ?' Then she realised the step was not his, it was too light and quick. She stood at the foot of the ladder in her nightdress, with the drink in her hand. The hatch was lifted and an Arab face looked in.

'Sonja?'

'Yes - '

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

'I am Detective-Superintendent Kemel, and I am honoured to meet you.'
He held out his hand.

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

Kemel sat down uninvited. 'I am interested in your friend, John Wolff.'

'He's not my friend.'

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

'I don't know anything about the man - '

'I do, though. I have other information that the British may or may not possess. I know who John Wolff is. His stepfather was a lawyer, here in Cairo. His mother was German. I know, too, that Wolff is a nationalist. I know that he used to be your lover. And I know that you are a nationalist.'

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

Kemel went on: 'Where did he get the forged money? Not in Egypt. I don't think there is a printer in Egypt capable of doing the work; and if there were, I think he would make Egyptian currency. Therefore the money came from Europe. Now, Wolff, also known as Hussein Rahmha, quietly disappeared a couple of years ago. Where did he go? Europe? He came back - via Assyut. Why? Did he want

to sneak into the country unnoticed? Perhaps he ~~has~~ teamed up with an English counterfeiting gang, and has now returned with his share of the profits; but I don't think so, for he is not a poor man, nor is he a criminal. So, there is a mystery.'

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

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

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

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

Sonja thought: But you don't know where to find him. That's why you're here. ~~He~~ Kemel was staring at her. She looked away, afraid that he might read her thoughts in her face.

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

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

'I want to meet him. Secretly.'

'But why?'

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

'And you think Hussein can help you?'

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

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

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

She could not make such a decision on the spur of the moment.

'No,' she said.

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

Sonja had forgotten the surveillance. When Wolff came back - and he would, sooner or later - the watchers would report it, and Vandam would know, unless Kemel fixed it. This changed everything. She had no choice. 'I'll arrange a meeting,' she said.

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

'Very well.'

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

Sonja wrote: 'To Hesther, with all good wishes, Sonja.' She

gave him the photograph, thinking: This is incredible.

'Thankyou so much. She will be overjoyed.'

Incredible.

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

'Thankyou.' He held out his hand. This time she shook it.

He went up the ladder and out, closing the hatch behind him.

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

She screamed.

The face disappeared.

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

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

'Run me a bath,' he said.

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

'What happened?' Sonja repeated.

He controlled his shivering. 'I didn't want to come down the

towpath, so I took off my clothes on the opposite bank and swam across. I looked in, and saw that man with you - I suppose he was another policeman.'

'Yes.'

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

She laughed. 'You poor thing.'

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

'Why did they do it?'

'Because they're incompetent. Turn off the water, will you?'
He began to wash the river mud off his legs.

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

'I'm not sure I can get at it. The bank probably has instructions to call the police the moment I show my face. I could pay the occasional bill by cheque ... but even that might help ~~me~~ them get a line on me.'

So he would have to use her money, Sonja thought. He would not ask, though: he would just take it. She filed that thought for further consideration. 'That detective is putting a watch on the boat - on Vandam's instructions.'

Wolff grinned. 'So it was Vandam.'

'Did you cut him?'

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

'The face. He had a huge bandage.'

'Did he question you?'

'Yes.'

'What did you tell him?'

'That I hardly knew you.'

'Did he believe you?'

'Presumably not, since he asked for this surveillance.'

Wolff frowned. 'That's going to be awkward.'

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

'You fixed it?'

'The detective is one of us.'

'A nationalist?'

'Yes. He wants to use your radio.'

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

'He just knows you must have some way of contacting the Germans. The nationalists want to send a message to Rommel.'

Wolff shook his head. 'I'd rather not get involved ... but I suppose I've got to.' He looked weary. 'They're closing in. I don't want any more surprises like last night. I'd like to leave this boat, but I don't know where to go. Abdullah knows my money's no good - he'd like to turn me over to the British. Damn.'

'You'll be safe here, ~~xxxxxxx~~ while you string the detective along.'

'I don't think I've got much choice.'

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

Wolff said: 'I wonder whether I should keep my date with that girl, Elene, tonight.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He did.

*

Vandam was in high spirits as he sat in the Oasis restaurant, sipping a cold martini, with Jakes beside him. He had slept all day and had woken up feeling battered but ready to fight back. He had gone to the hospital where they had told him that he was a fool, but a lucky fool, and had changed his dressing for a smaller, neater one that did not have to be secured by a yard of bandage around his head. Now it was a few minutes before seven o'clock, and he was waiting for John Wolff.

Vandam and Jakes were at the back of the restaurant, in a position from which they could see the whole place. The table nearest to the entrance was occupied by two hefty sergeants eating lamb chops paid for by Intelligence. Outside, in an unmarked car parked across

the road, were two MPs in civilian clothes with their handguns in their jacket pockets. The trap was set: all that was missing was the bait. Elene was due to arrive at ten past seven.

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

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

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

Four minutes past seven. Vandam was looking forward to interrogating Wolff. What a battle of wills that would be. But Vandam would win it, for he would have all the advantages. He would feel Wolff out, find the weak points, and then apply pressure until the prisoner cracked. What secrets would Wolff reveal?

Nine minutes past seven. Wolff was late. Of course it was possible that he would not come at all. After last night's scare he might decide to lie low for a while, wherever it was that he was lying.

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

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

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

Where was Wolff?

Vandam lit a cigarette. A waiter brought Elene a drink. It was fifteen minutes past seven. Elene looked in Vandam's direction and gave a small, dainty shrug of her slight shoulders.

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

Vandam decided to order another drink.

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

Vandam frowned. What was this? An apology from Wolff, saying he could not keep the date? Elene's face took on an expression of

faint puzzlement. She looked at Vandam and gave that little shrug again.

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

Vandam murmured to Jakes: 'Wait.'

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

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

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

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

Vandam broke into a run.

The door of the taxi slammed and it pulled away.

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

Vandam caught the taxi and leaped on to the running-board. The

car swerved suddenly. Vandam lost his grip, hit the ~~xxx~~ road running, and fell down.

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

The taxi had disappeared.

- 15 -

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

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

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

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

Elene fought down her fear. He's the British officer who is trying to catch you, and I love him. She had to make up a story. Why would someone follow her out of a restaurant and try to get into her taxi? 'He ... I don't know him. He was in the restaurant. He was ... bothering me. I was alone. It's your fault, you were late.'

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

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

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

trunk.'

She did not know whether to believe him. Why had he pulled that stunt at the restaurant, sending a boy in with a message, unless he suspected a trap? What would he do now, taken her into the desert and knife her? She had a sudden urge to leap out of the speeding car. She thought: If he suspected a trap, why did he come at all? No, it had to be more complex than that. He seemed to have believed her about the man on the running-board - but she could not be sure ~~she really knew~~ what was going on behind his smile.

She said: 'Where are we going?'

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

'I don't want to go.'

'What's the matter?'

'I hardly know you.'

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

'I should get out of the car.'

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

Elene considered. If she left now she would probably never see him again. There was nothing she would like more - but she was Vandam's only contact with Wolff. She had to stay with him, cultivate him, angle for another date, try to find out where he lived.

'Let's go to your place,' she said.

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

She realised she had made a mistake. 'I'm confused,' she said.