

Kolony

Vincent had long since lost track of Handforth's bubbles in the light chop now wrinkling the face of the ocean. For a while he had leaned over the side of the Bertram and watched as the diver's outline gradually became distorted during the descent before melting away altogether. Now the Irishman's boat-boy had other things on his mind.

From its outset, Handforth had been mighty tight-lipped about everything to do with this expedition and that had begun to intrigue Vincent. The questions burning in his mind were simple: what *exactly* had Handforth stumbled on out here in this forlorn part of the Indian Ocean and what was the reason for all the secrecy?

The obvious was staring him in the face in the form of the sheets of paper now being fanned by the gentlest of winds on their nylon wires. However, they were only a part of the puzzle and begged more questions than they answered, such as where did they come from and how had Handforth found them? He had not dared to show too much curiosity in front of that crazy, son-of-a-bitch Irishman - until now.

He stared intently at the sheets until he could just make out their faint scrawl, even though for the most part it had been rendered illegible by the thick, yellow stain from the oilskin pouch.

He touched them reverently because he had seen the Irishman do the same, at least, for most of the time. With Handforth, fingering them lovingly over successive glasses of whisky had been almost a nightly ritual, holding them this way and that

and tracing what little he found onto the lined pages of a notebook similar to the ones used by the police with an elastic fastening at the bottom.

Sometimes, those evenings had ended in another one of Handforth's blind tempers, brought on by frustration, or boredom, Vincent supposed. Those were the evenings when Vincent retired to his bunk where that deadly temper could not find him and make him the scapegoat. One thing in all this was for certain; the Irishman was not to be taken lightly because he was mentally sharp and as for physically, well, that spoke for itself.

He released one paper gently from the jaws of the plastic peg and studied it. It was about eight inches wide and slightly longer than its width and he immediately saw why it had brought his boss into a succession of tempers. It consisted of a series of lines, broken in places, and more closely resembling one of those graphs he had tried to learn about at school than it did someone's handwriting.

The problem was that some thick coating from the oilskin seemed to have reacted with it, transforming it into something like greaseproof paper. Whatever was written there was now just a blurred line of script trapped inside a waxy cocoon which he had seen Handforth scrape away at with a scalpel blade, only to have the paper disintegrate to powder in his hands; enough to drive anyone mad, Vincent decided.

Half an hour later, he was none the wiser for studying the papers. In that time, he had inspected ten of the twenty-three sheets and had glanced quickly through the rest. In some places, there were recognisable names and he could make out '*Alice Fur(-something)*', as well as '*fortifications for the camp.*' In one place the stain had retreated to expose the most complete text, two lines long:

"Furlough has been arguing with the captain concerning the charting of the course, causing many violent disputes to disturb the company." On another page there was

a drawing, almost child-like in its simplicity, of a group of people inside what looked like a stockade. On the outside stood an object, but the damned yellow stain ran right through it, distorting its dimensions. He wondered about it for a moment because it looked strangely familiar but, at the same time, completely out of place.

He was still busy when, from outside the cabin, he heard a distinct shuffling sound. Hastily, he returned the page to its position on the line, glanced around for anything else that might be found to be out of place, and went outside.

The weather had changed - *really* changed. A sea-mist had floated in from God knows where and now billowed around the Bertram in a swirling veil. He walked over to the side of the boat and peered over the edge, expecting to see Handforth removing his equipment but saw nothing except the anonymous face of the waters steaming in the mist and concealing everything from view. He turned and went to the other side of the boat, then quickly to the rear, trying to recall exactly what it was he had heard. It had been the unmistakable sound of someone leaving the sea; the patter of wet feet on deck then the sound of water shooting onto a hard surface. Yet there was still no indication Handforth had returned.

Vincent checked his watch. He knew Handforth must have air left and, knowing him, the Irishman would surely be using that to the maximum.

Then it struck him that the Irishman may have wanted to play a trick and lull him into a false sense of security, perhaps trying to catch him red-handed at something that might fuel his temper and provide him with some sport during the coming evenings.

Strangely, that thought gave Vincent a moment's comfort but if that were the case, he guessed the tanks must be somewhere nearby, probably floating on the water in their inflatable jacket. He leaned over the portside gunwale but the only sight which

greeted him was the steady lapping of the waves, stronger now, as the wind picked up.

He had rarely seen a mist like this, except on the odd occasion high up in the mist forest on Mahé where the clouds sometimes floated in amongst the trees and obscured everything. It carried small droplets of salt water, caught by the wind from the offshore swell and Vincent noticed there was now a different rhythm to the sea which was causing 'Bells' to jerk at the anchor chain as the sea-mist clung to the water's surface in a vaporous shawl.

That noise again...

This time it seemed to come from the front end of the boat, but instead of rushing to inspect as he might normally have done, Vincent's natural curiosity suddenly cringed before an encroaching sense of fear and he moved instinctively backwards into the galley. The papers fluttered wildly in the breeze which followed the closing of the door while the mist began to enter through the open windows like a phantom.

"Mr. Handforth, is that you?" Vincent cried shrilly but there was no reply, just an instinct rising from some place deep inside, screaming at him.

"Leave the boat!"

Quickly, he began to gather up Handforth's precious papers, snatching at them roughly and clutching them to his chest in a hasty attempt to make a manageable bundle from them. As he made his way up the cabin, he plucked them from their lines, passed the console and vaulted down the stairs into his room.

On his way down, he caught his forehead on a protruding section of the stairwell and fell heavily onto the cabin floor. The papers scattered in a shower and seemed to turn red as a jagged cut, just to the side of his temple, pumped blood across one eye. He stemmed the flow with the back of one hand, hardly registering the pain of

the wound at all until his nail caught a corner of up-turned flesh. He winced at that, but with his bloodied hand began to stuff the papers and Handforth's notebook untidily into a rucksack on his bed, leaving behind a trail of blood to mix with the yellow stain already there.

Pulling himself off the cabin floor, Vincent headed for the drawer beneath the one which contained the medical supplies and Handforth's supply of whisky. He reached deep into the back of it, groping wildly. The gun was not there! Handforth must have removed it, and Vincent cursed him to hell and back. There was something there though, and he pulled it towards him and saw it was a plastic, watertight medical box which normally contained an 'Aspivenin' kit for extracting the venom from poison fish stings. It seemed unusually heavy and Vincent's heart raced as he clawed at the fastening. Thank God from Heaven! There it was, on top of the syringes - the lithe black form of the Steyr 9mm pistol.

He checked the clip, feeling the reassuring weight of the handgun nestle comfortably in the palm of his hand and, closing the mouth of the bag, he clambered to the top of the narrow stairs and peered through the front window towards the bow. The mist was not thick but it still managed to conceal the deck in a succession of wispy, wind-driven shrouds and Vincent peered into it; surely there was movement there, movement within movement.

Close to panic and fumbling wildly, he threw the safety on the weapon as Handforth had showed him to do during his one and only practice session. Considering he had handled a gun only that once, the sensation of holding a semi-automatic pistol felt reassuringly familiar to him as he opened the cabin door to feel the clammy embrace of the sea-mist lick greedily at his cold sweat.

There was noise now, too; noise within noise and similar to the scraping of a lone drumstick, barely audible against the background of the beating of other drums. Here, it was scarcely camouflaged by the resonant rippling of the waves - at one moment a part of it; at another, distinctly separate.

Vincent lined himself up with the Avon inflatable dinghy which always floated behind 'Bells' when she was at anchor. He could just make out the blue nylon rope attaching it to a cleat on the port gunwale and the sight of that line gave rise to an inexplicable rush of emotion and feeling of gratitude even though the Avon itself was still hidden in the mist.

Hooking the rucksack under his arm and keeping a death grip on the butt of the Steyr, Vincent covered the open space of the rear deck in one single bound, his heart leaping at the walls of his ribcage like a trapped animal as he turned to face the boat and whatever menace it now harboured.

Amorphous images appeared to swim in the haze which had now claimed 'Bells' as its own and he could hear whispering and feel the slight vibrations of furtive movement through the decking. Once more, there came the drumming of falling water droplets and the wind-borne, rancid smell of something unclean. Vincent's hand groped for the lead-rope of the dinghy, feeling the reassurance of its weight as it responded and slid towards him.

Without looking at it, he opened the knot and sprang into the inflatable and, with his eyes riveted on 'Bells' hull, Vincent cranked the engine in one powerful tug and fled into the windswept folds of the fog.