

Seventh Scroll

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SEVENTH SCROLL

Wilber Smith

The dusk crept in from the desert, and shaded the dunes with purple. Like a thick velvet cloak it muted all sounds, so that the evening was tranquil and hushed.

From where they stood on the crest of the dune they looked out over the oasis and the complex of small villages that surrounded it. The buildings were white with flat roofs and the date palms stood higher than any of them except the Islamic mosque and the Coptic Christian church.

These bastions of faith opposed each other across the lake.

The waters of the lake were sparkling. A flight of duck slanted down on quick wings to land with a small splash of white close in against the reed banks.

The man and the woman made a disparate couple. He was tall, though slightly bowed, his silvering hair catching the last of the sunlight. She was young, in her early thirties, slim, alert and vibrant. Her hair was thick and curling, restrained now by a thong at the nape of her neck.

"Time to go down now. Alia will be waiting." He smiled down at her fondly. She was his second wife. When his first wife died he thought that she had taken the sunlight with her. He had not expected this last period of happiness in his life. Now he had her and his work. He was a man happy and contented.

Suddenly she broke away from him, and pulled the thong from her hair. She shook it out, dense and dark, and she laughed. It was a pretty sound. Then she plunged down the steep slip-face of the dune, her long skirts billowing around her flying legs. They were shapely and brown. She kept her balance until halfway down, when gravity overwhelmed her and she tumbled.

From the top he smiled down on her indulgently.

Sometimes she was still a child. At others she was a grave and dignified woman. He was not certain which he preferred, but he loved her in both moods. She rolled to a halt at the bottom of the dune and sat up, still laughing, shaking the sand out of her hair. "Your turn!" she called up at him. He followed her down sedately, moving with the slight stiffness of advancing age, keeping his balance until he reached the bottom.

He lifted her to her feet. He did not kiss her, although the temptation to do so was strong. It was not the Arab way to show public affection, even to a beloved wife.

She "straightened her clothing and retied her hair before they set off towards the village. They skirted the reed beds of the oasis, crossing the rickety bridges over the irrigation canals. As they passed, the peasants returning from the fields greeted him with deep respect.

"Salaam aleikum, Doktari! Peace be with you, doctor." They honoured all men of learning, but him especially for his kindness to them and their families over the years.

Many of them had worked for his father before him. It mattered little that most of them were Moslem, while he was a Christian.

When they reached the villa, Alia, the old housekeeper, greeted them with mumbles and scowls. "You are late. You are always late. Why do you not keep

regular hours, like decent folk? We have a position to maintain."

"Old mother, you are always right," he teased her gently. "What would we do without you to care for us?" He sent her away, still scowling to cover her love and concern for him.

They ate the simple meat on the terrace together, dates and olives and unleavened bread and goat's milk cheese. It was dark when they finished, but the desert stars were bright as candles.

"Royan, -my flower." He reached across the table and touched her hand. "It is time to begin work." He stood up from the table and led the way to his study that opened out on to the terrace.

Royan Al Simma went directly to the tall steel safe against the far wall and tumbled the combination. The safe was out of place in this room, amongst the old books and scrolls, amongst the ancient statues and artefacts and grave goods that were the collection of his lifetime.

When the heavy steel door swung open, Royan stood back for a moment. She always felt this prickle of awe whenever she first looked upon this relic of the ages, even after an interval of only a few short hours. "The seventh scroll," she whispered, and steeled herself to touch it. It was nearly four thousand years old, written by a genius out of time with history, a man who had been dust for all these millennia, but whom she had come to know and respect as she did her own husband. His words were eternal, and they spoke to her clearly from beyond the grave, from the fields of paradise, from the presence of the great trinity, Osiris and Isis and Horus, in whom he had believed so devoutly. As devoutly as she believed in another more recent Trinity.

She carried the scroll to the long table at which Duraïd, her husband, was already at work. He looked up as she laid it on the tabletop before him, and for a moment she saw the same mystical mood in his eyes that had affected her. He always wanted the scroll there on the table, even when there was no real call for it. He had the photographs and the microfilm to work with. It was as though he needed the unseen presence of the ancient author close to him as he studied the texts.

Then he threw off the mood and was the dispassionate scientist once more. "Your eyes are better than mine, my flower," he said. "What do you make of this character?"

She leaned over his shoulder and studied the hieroglyph on the photograph of the scroll that he pointed out to her. She puzzled over the character for a moment before she took the magnifying glass from Duraïd's hand and peered through it again.

"It looks as though Taita has thrown in another cryptogram of his own creation just to bedevil us." She spoke of the ancient author as though he were a dear, but sometimes exasperating, friend who still lived and breathed, and played tricks upon them.

"We'll just have to puzzle it out, then," Duraïd declared with obvious relish. He loved the ancient game. It was his life's work.

The two of them laboured on into the cool of the night. This was when they did their best work. Sometimes they spoke Arabic and sometimes English; for them the two languages were as one. Less often they used French, which was their third common language. They had both received their education at universities in England and the United States, so far from this very Egypt of theirs.

Royan loved the expression "This very Egypt" that Taita used so often in the scrolls.

She felt a peculiar affinity in so many ways with this ancient Egyptian. After all, she was his direct descendant.

She was a Coptic Christian, not of the Arab line that had so recently conquered Egypt, less than fourteen centuries ago. The Arabs were newcomers in this very Egypt of hers, while her own blood line ran back to the time of the pharaohs and the great pyramids.

At ten 'clock Royan made coffee for them, heating it on the charcoal stove that Alia had prepared for them before she went off to her own family in the villa. They drank the 9 sweet, strong brew from thin cups that were half-filled with the heavy grounds. While they sipped, they talked as old friends.

.. For Royan that was their relationship, old friends. She had known Duraid ever since she had returned from England with her doctorate in archaeology and won her job with the Department of Antiquities, of which he was the director.

She had been his assistant when he had opened the tomb in the Valley of the Nobles, the tomb of Queen Lostris, the tomb that dated from about 1780 BC.

She had shared his disappointment when they had discovered that the tomb had been robbed in ancient times and all its treasures plundered. All that remained were the marvelous murals that covered the walls and the ceilings of the tomb.

It was Royan herself who had been working at the wall behind the plinth on which the sarcophagus had once stood, photographing the murals, when a section of the plaster had fallen away to reveal in their niche the ten alabaster jars. Each of the jars had contained a papyrus scroll. Every one of them had been written and placed there by Taita, the slave of the queen.

Since then their lives, Duraid's and her own, seemed to have revolved around those scraps of papyrus. Although there was some damage and deterioration, in the main they had survived nearly four thousand years remarkably intact.

What a fascinating story they contained, of a nation attacked by a superior enemy, armed with horse and chariot that were still alien to the Egyptians of that time. Crushed by the Hyksos hordes, the people of the Nile were forced to flee. Led by their queen, Lostris of the tomb, they followed the great river southwards almost to its source amongst the brutal mountains of the Ethiopian highlands.

Here amongst those forbidding mountains, Lostris had entombed the mummified body of her husband, the Pharaoh Mamose, who had been slain in battle against the Hyksos.

Long afterwards Queen Lostris had led her people back northwards to this very Egypt. Armed now with their own horses and chariots, forged into hard warriors in the African wilderness, they had come storming back down the cataracts of the great river to challenge once more the Hyksos invader, and in the end to triumph over him and wrest the double crown of upper and lower Egypt from his grasp.

It was a story that appealed to every fibre of her being, and that had fascinated her as they had unravelled each hieroglyph that the old slave had penned on the papyrus'

It had taken them all these years, working at night here in the villa on the oasis after their daily routine work at the museum in Cairo was done, but at last the ten scrolls had been deciphered - all except the seventh scroll. This was the one that was the enigma, the one which the author had cloaked in layers of esoteric shorthand and allusions so obscure that they were unfathomable at this remove of time. Some of the symbols he used had never figured before in all the thousands of texts that they had studied in their combined working lives. It was obvious to them both that Taita had not intended that the scrolls should be read by any eyes other than those of his beloved queen. These were his last gift for her to take with her beyond the grave.

It had taken all their combined skills, all their imagination and ingenuity, but at last they were approaching the conclusion of the task. There were still many gaps in the translation and many areas where they were uncertain whether or not they had captured the true meaning, but they had laid out the bones of the manuscript in such order that they were able to discern the outline of the creature it represented.

Now Duraid sipped his coffee and shook his head as he had done so often before. "It frightens me," he said. "The responsibility. What to do with this knowledge we have gleaned. If it should fall into the wrong hands He sipped and sighed before he spoke again. "Even if we take it to the right people, will they believe this material that is nearly four thousand years old?"

"Why must we bring in others?" Royan asked with an edge of exasperation in her voice. "Why can we not do alone what has to be done?" At times like these the differences between them were most apparent. His was the caution of age, while hers was the impetuosity of youth.

"You do not understand," he said. It always annoyed her when he said that, when he treated her as the Arabs treated their women in a totally masculine world. She had known the other world where women demanded and received the right to be treated as equals. She was a creature caught between those worlds, the Western world and the Arab world.

Royan's mother was an English woman who had worked at the British Embassy in Cairo in the troubled times after World War II. She had met and married Royan's father, who had been a young Egyptian officer on the staff of Colonel Nasser. It was an unlikely union and had not persisted into Royan's adolescence.

Her mother had insisted upon returning to England, to her home town of York, for Royan's birth. She wanted her child to have British citizenship. After her parents had separated, Royan, again at her mother's insistence, had been sent back to England for her schooling, but all her holidays had been spent with her father in Cairo. Her father's career had prospered exceedingly, and in the end he had attained ministerial rank in the Mubarak government. Through her love for him she came to look upon herself as more Egyptian than English.

It was her father who had arranged her marriage to Duraid Al Simma. It was the last thing that he had done for her before his death. She had known he was dying at the time, and she had not found it in her heart to defy him. All her modern training made her want to resist the old-fashioned Coptic tradition of the arranged marriage, but her breeding and her family and her Church were against her. She had acquiesced.

Her marriage to Duraid had not proved as insufferable as she had dreaded it

might be. It might even have been entirely comfortable and satisfying if she had never been introduced to romantic love. However, there had been her liaison with David while she was up at university. He had swept her up in the hurly-burly, in the heady delirium, and, in the end, the heartache, when he had left her to marry a blonde English rose approved of by his parents.

She respected and liked Duraid, but sometimes in the night she still burned for the feel of a body as firm and young as her own on top of hers.

Duraid was still speaking and she had not been listening to him. She gave him her full attention once more. "I have spoken to the minister again, but I do not think he believes in me. I think that Nahoot has convinced him that I am a little mad." He smiled sadly. Nahoot Guddabi was his ambitious and well-connected deputy. "At any rate the minister says that there are no government funds available, and that I will have to seek outside finance.

So, I have been over the list of possible sponsors again, and have narrowed it down to four. There is the Getty Museum of course, but I never like to work with a big impersonal institution. I prefer to have a single man to answer to.

Decisions are always easier to reach."None of this was new to her, but she listened dutifully.

"Then there is Herr von Schiller. He has the money and the interest in the subject, but I do not know him well enough to trust him entirely." He paused, and Royan had listened to these musings so often before that she could anticipate him.

"What about the American? He is a famous collector," she forestalled him.

"Peter Walsh is a difficult man to work with. His passion to accumulate makes him unscrupulous. He frightens me a little."

"So who does that leave?" she asked.

He did not reply, for they both knew the answer to her question. Instead, he turned his attention back to the material that littered the work table.

"It looks so innocent, so mundane. An old papyrus scroll, a few photographs and notebooks, a computer printout. It is difficult to believe how dangerous these might be in the wrong hands." He sighed again. "You might almost say that they are deadly dangerous."

Then he laughed. "I am being fanciful. Perhaps it is the late hour. Shall we get back to work? We can worry about these other matters once we have worked out all the conundrums set for us by this old rogue, Taita, and completed the translation."

He picked up the top photograph from the pile in front of him. It was an extract from the central section of the scroll. "It is the worst luck that the damaged piece of papyrus falls where it does." He picked up his reading glasses and placed them on his nose before he read aloud.

"There are many steps to ascend on the staircase to the abode of Hapi. With much hardship and endeavour we reached the second step and proceeded no further, for it was here that the prince received a divine revelation. In a dream his father, the dead god pharaoh, visited him and commanded him, 'I have travelled far and I am grown weary. It is here that I will rest for all eternity.'" Duraid removed his glasses and looked across at Royan, "The second step". It is a very precise description for once. Taita is not being his usual devious self."

"Let's go back to the satellite. photographs," Royan suggested, and drew

the glossy sheet towards her. Duraid came around the table to stand behind her.

"To me it seems most logical that the natural feature that would obstruct them in the gorge would be something like a set of rapids or a waterfall. If it were the second waterfall, that would put them here-' Royan placed her finger on a spot on the satellite photograph where the narrow snake of the river threaded itself through the dark massifs of the mountains on either hand.

At that moment she was distracted and she lifted her head. "Listen!" Her voice changed, sharpening with alarm.

"What is it?" Duraid looked up also.

"The dog," she answered.

"That damn mongrel," he agreed. "It is always making the night hideous with its yapping. I have promised myself to get rid of him."

At that moment the lights went out.

They froze with surprise in the darkness. The soft thudding of the decrepit diesel generator in its shed at the back of the palm grove had ceased. It was so much a part of the oasis night that they noticed it only when it was silent.

Their eyes adjusted to the faint starlight that came in through the terrace doors. Duraid crossed the room and took the oil lamp down from the shelf beside the door where it waited for just such a contingency. He lit it, and looked across at Royan with an expression of comical resignation.

"I will have to go down-"

Duraid," she interrupted him, "the dog!"

He listened for a moment, and his expression changed to mild concern. The dog was silent out there in the night.

"I am sure it is nothing to be alarmed about." He went to the door, and for no good reason she suddenly called after him.

"Duraid, be careful!" He shrugged dismissively and stepped out on to the terrace.

She thought for an instant that it was the shadow of the vine over the trellis moving in the night breeze off the desert, but the night was still. Then she realized that it was a human figure crossing the flagstones silently and swiftly, coming in behind Duraid as he skirted the fishpond in the centre of the paved terrace.

"Duraid!" She screamed a warning and he spun round, lifting the lamp high.

"Who are you?" he shouted. "What do you want here?" The intruder closed with him silently. The traditional full-length dishdasha robe swirled around his legs, and the white ghutra headcloth covered his head. In the light of the lamp Duraid saw that he had drawn the corner of the headcloth over his face to mask his features.

The intruder's back was turned towards her so Royan did not see the knife in his right hand, but she could not mistake the upward stabbing motion that he aimed at Duraid's stomach. Duraid grunted with pain and doubled up at the blow, and his attacker drew the blade free and stabbed again, but this time Duraid dropped the lamp and seized the knife arm.

The flame of the fallen oil lamp was guttering and flaring. The two men struggled in the gloom, but Royan saw a dark stain spreading over her husband's white shirt front.

"Run!" he bellowed at her. "Go! Fetch help! I cannot hold him!" The Duraid

she knew was a gentle person, a soft man of books and learning. She could see that he was outmatched by his assailant.

"Go! Please! Save yourself, my flower!" She could hear by his tone that he was weakening, but he still clung desperately to his attacker's knife arm.

She had been paralysed with shock and indecision these few fatal seconds, but now she broke free of the spell and ran to the door. Spurred by her terror and her need to bring help to Duraid she crossed the terrace, swift as a cat, and he held the intruder from blocking her way.

She vaulted over the low stone wall into the grove, and almost into the arms of the second man. She screamed and twisted away from him as his outstretched fingers raked across her face, and almost broke free, but his fingers hooked in the thin cotton stuff of her blouse.

This time she saw the knife in his hand, a long silvery flash in the starlight, and it goaded her to fresh effort. The cotton tore in his grip and she was free, but not quickly enough to escape the blade. She felt the sting of it across her upper arm, and she kicked out at him with all the strength of panic and her hard young body behind it. She felt her foot slam into the softness of his lower body with a shock that jarred her knee and ankle, and her attacker cried out and fell to his knees.

Then she was away and running through the palm grove. At first she ran without purpose or direction. She ran simply to get as far from them as her flying legs would carry her. Then gradually she brought her panic under control. She glanced back, but saw nobody following her.

As she reached the edge of the lake she slowed her run to conserve her strength, and she became aware of the warm trickle of her own blood down her arm and then dripping from her finger-tips.

She stopped and rested her back against the rough hole of one of the palms while she tore a strip of cloth from her ripped blouse and hurriedly bound up her arm. She was shaking so much from shock and exertion that even her uninjured hand was fumbling and clumsy. She knotted the crude bandage with her teeth and left hand, and the bleeding slowed.

She was uncertain of which way to run, and then she saw the dim lamplight in the window of Alia's shack across the nearest irrigation canal. She pushed herself away from the palm trunk and started towards it. She had covered less than a hundred paces when a voice called from the grove behind her, speaking in Arabic, "Yusuf, has the woman come your way?"

immediately an electric torch flashed from the darkness ahead of her and another voice called back, "No, I have not seen her."

Another few seconds and Royan would have run full into him. She crouched down and looked around her desperately. There was another torch coming through the grove behind her, following the path she had taken. It must be the man she had kicked, but she could tell by the motion of the torch beam that he had recovered and was moving swiftly and easily again.

She was blocked on two sides, so she turned back along the edge of the trail. The road lay that way. She might be able to meet a late vehicle travelling on it. She lost her footing on the rough ground and went down, bruising and scraping her knees, but she jumped up again and hurried on. The second time she stumbled, her outthrust left hand landed on a round, smooth stone the size of an orange. When she went on she carried the stone with her; as a weapon it

gave her a glimmer of comfort.

Her wounded arm was beginning to hurt, and she was driven by worry for Duraid. She knew he was badly wounded, for she had seen the direction and force of the knife thrust. She had to find help for him. Behind her the two men with torches were sweeping the grove and she could not keep her lead ahead of them. They were gaining on her - she could hear them calling to each other.

She reached the road at last, and with a small whimper of relief climbed out of the drainage ditch on to the pale gravel surface. Her legs were shaking under her so that they could hardly carry her weight, but she turned in the direction of the village.

She had not reached the first bend before she saw a set of headlights coming slowly towards her, flickering through the palm trees. She broke into a run down the centre of the road.

"Help me!" she screamed in Arabic. "Please help me!"

The car came through the bend and before the headlights dazzled her she saw that it was a small, darkcoloured Fiat. She stood in the centre of the road waving her arms to halt the driver, lit by the headlights as though she were on a theatre stage. The Fiat stopped in front of her, and she ran round to the driver's door and tugged at the handle. "Please, you must help me."

The door was opened from within, and then was thrown back with such force that she staggered off-balance.

The driver leapt out into the roadway and caught her by the wrist of the injured arm. He dragged her to the Fiat and pulled open the back door.

"Yusuf! Bacheed" he shouted into the dark grove. "I have her." And she heard the answering cries and saw the torches turn in their direction. The driver was forcing her head down and trying to push her into the back seat, but she realized then that she still had the stone in her good hand. She turned slightly and braced herself, and then swung her fist with the stone still clenched in it against the side of his head. It caught him squarely on the temple.

Without another sound he dropped to the gravel surface and lay motionless.

Royan dropped the stone and pelted away down the road, but she found that she was running straight down the path of the headlights, and they lit her every movement.

The two men in the grove shouted again and came up on to the gravel roadway behind her, almost shoulder to shoulder.

Glancing back, she saw them gaining on her swiftly, and she realized that her only chance was to get off the road and back into the darkness. She turned and plunged down the bank. Immediately she found herself waist-deep in the waters of the lake.

In the darkness and the confusion she had become disorientated. She had not realized that she had reached the point where the road skirted the embankment at the water's edge. She knew that she did not have time to climb back on to the road, and she knew also that there were thick clumps of papyrus and reeds ahead of her, that might give her shelter.

She waded out until the bottom sloped away steeply under her feet, and she found herself forced to swim. She broke into an awkward breast-stroke, hampered by her skirts and her injured arm. However, her slow and stealthy movements created almost no disturbance on the surface, and before the men on the road had reached the point where she had descended the bank, she

reached a dense stand of reeds.

. She eased her way into the thick of them and let herself sink. Before the water covered her nostrils she felt her toes touch the soft ooze of the lake bottom. She stood there quietly, with just the top of her head above the surface and her face turned away from the bank. She knew her dark hair would not reflect the light of a probing torch.

Though the water covered her ears, she could make out the excited voices of the men on the road. They had turned their torches down towards the water and were shining them into the reeds, searching for her. For a moment one of the beams played full on her head, and she drew a deep breath ready to submerge, but the beam moved on and she realized that they had not picked her out.

The fact that she had not been seen even in the direct torchlight emboldened her to raise her head slightly until one ear was clear and she could make out their voices.

They were speaking Arabic, and she recognized the voice of the one named Bacheet. He appeared to be the leader, for he was giving the orders.

"Go in there, Yusuf, and bring the whore out."

She heard Yusuf slipping and sliding down the bank and the splash as he hit the water.

"Further out," Bacheet ordered him. "In those reeds there, where I am shining the torch."

"It is too deep. You know well I cannot swim. It will be over my head."

"There! Right in front of you. In those reeds. I can see her head." Bacheet encouraged him, and Royan dreaded that they had spotted her. She sank down as far as she could below the surface.

Yusuf splashed around heavily, moving towards where she cowered in the reeds, when suddenly there was a thunderous commotion that startled even Yusuf, so that he shouted aloud, "Djinns! God protect me! As the flock of roosting duck exploded from the water and launched into the dark sky on noisy wings.

Yusuf started back to the bank and not any of Bacheet's threats could persuade him to continue the hunt.

"The woman is not as important as the scroll," he protested, as he climbed back on to the roadway. "Without the scroll there will be no money. We always know where to find her later."

Turning her head slightly, Royan saw the torches move back down the road towards the parked Fiat whose headlights still burned. She heard the doors of the car slam, and then the engine revved and pulled away towards the villa.

She was too shaken and terrified to make any attempt to leave her hiding-place. She feared that they had left one of their number on the road to wait for her to show herself.

She stood on tiptoe with the water lapping her lips, shivering more with shock than with cold, determined to wait for the safety of the sunrise before she moved.

It was only much later when she saw the glow of the fire lighting the sky, and the flames flickering through the trunks of the palm trees, that she forgot her own safety and dragged herself back to the bank.

She knelt in the mud at the water's edge, shuddering and shaking and

gasping, weak with loss of blood and shock and the reaction from fear, and peered at the flames through the veil of her wet hair -and the lake water that streamed into her eyes.

"The villa! she whispered. "Duraid! Oh please God, no! No!

She pushed herself to her feet and began to stagger towards her burning home.

Bacheet switched off both the headlights and the engine of the Fiat before they reached the turning into the driveway of the villa and let the car coast down and stop below the terrace.

All three of them left the Fiat and climbed the stone steps to the flagged terrace. Duraid's body still lay where Bacheet had left it beside the fishpond. They passed him without a glance and went into the dark study.

Bacheet placed the cheap nylon tote bag he carried on the tabletop.

"We have wasted too much time already. We must work quickly now."

"It is Yusuf's fault," protested the driver of the Fiat. "He let the woman escape."

"You had a chance on the road," Yusuf snarled at him, "and you did no better."

"Enough!" Bacheet told them both. "If you want to get paid, then there had better be no more mistakes."

With the torch beam Bacheet picked out the scroll that still lay on the tabletop. "That is the one." He was certain, for he had been shown a photograph of it so that there would be no mistake. "They want everything - the maps and photographs. Also the books and papers, everything on the table that they were using in their work.

Leave nothing."

Quickly they bundled everything into the tote bag and Bacheet zipped it closed.

"Now the Doktari. Bring him in here."

The other two went out on to the terrace and stooped over the body. Each of them seized an ankle and dragged Duraid back across the terrace and into the study. The back of Duraid's head bounced loosely on the stone step at the threshold and his blood painted a long wet skid mark across the tiles that glistened in the torchlight.

"Get the lamp!" Bacheet ordered, and Yusuf went back to the terrace and fetched the oil lamp from where Duraid had dropped it. The flame was extinguished. Bacheet held the lamp to his ear and shook it.

"Full," he said with satisfaction, and unscrewed the filler cap. "All right," he told the other two, take the bag out to the car."

As they hurried out Bacheet sprinkled paraffin from the lamp over Duraid's shirt and trousers, and then he went to the shelves and splashed the remainder of the fuel over the books and manuscripts that crowded them.

He dropped the empty lamp and reached under the skirts of his dishdasha for a box of matches. He struck one of them and held it to the wet run of paraffin oil down the bookcase. It caught immediately, and flames spread upwards and curled and blackened the edges of the manuscripts. He turned away and went back to where Duraid lay. He struck another match and dropped it on to his blood- and paraffindrenched shirt.

A mantle of blue flames danced over Duraid's chest.

The flames changed colour as they burned into the cotton material and the flesh beneath it. They turned orange, and sooty smoke spiralled up from their flickering crests.

Bacheet ran to the door, across the terrace and down the steps. As he clambered into the rear seat of the Fiat, the driver gunned the engine and pulled away down the driveway.

Durid drifted. He groaned. The first thing he was aware of as he regained consciousness was the smell of his own flesh burning, and then the agony struck him with full force. A violent tremor shook his whole body and he opened his eyes and looked down at himself.

His clothing was blackening and smouldering, and the pain was as nothing he had ever experienced in his entire life. He realized in a vague way that the room was on fire all around him. Smoke and waves of heat washed over him so that he could barely make out the shape of the doorway through them.

The pain was so terrible that he wanted it to end. He wanted to die then and not to have to endure it further.

Then he remembered Royan. He tried to say her name through his scorched and blackened lips, but no sound came. Only the thought of her gave him the strength to move. He rolled over once, and the heat attacked his back that up until that moment had been shielded. He groaned aloud and rolled again, just a little nearer to the doorway.

Each movement was a mighty effort and evoked fresh paroxysms of agony, but when he rolled on to his back again he realized that a gale of fresh air was being sucked through the open doorway to feed the flames. A lungful of the sweet desert air revived him and gave him just sufficient strength to lunge down the step on to the cool stones of the terrace.

His clothes and his body were still on fire. He beat feebly at his chest to try to extinguish the flames, but his hands were black burning claws.

Then he remembered the fishpond. The thought of plunging his tortured body into that cold water spurred him. The pain roused Duraid. It had to be that intense to bring him back from that far place on the very edge of life to which he had to one last effort, and he wriggled and wormed his way across the flags like a snake with a crushed spine.

The pungent smoke from his still cremating flesh choked him and he coughed weakly, but kept doggedly on.

He left slabs of his own grilled skin on the stone coping as he rolled across it and flopped into the pond. There was a hiss of steam, and a pale cloud of it obscured his vision so that for a moment he thought he was blinded. The agony of cold water on his raw burned flesh was so intense that he slid back over the edge of consciousness.

When he came back to reality through the dark clouds he raised his dripping head and saw a figure staggering up the steps at the far end of the terrace, coming from the garden.

For a moment he thought it was a phantom of his agony, but when the light of the burning villa fell full upon her, he recognized Royan. Her wet hair hung in tangled disarray over her face, and her clothing was torn and running with lake water and stained with mud and green algae. Her right arm was wrapped in muddy rags and her blood oozed through, diluted pink by the dirty water.

She did not see him. She stopped in the centre of the terrace and stared in

horror into the burning room. Was Duraid in there? She started forward, but the heat was like a solid wall and it stopped her dead. At that moment the roof collapsed, sending a roaring column of sparks and flames high into the night sky. She backed away from it, shielding her face with a raised arm.

Duraid tried to call to her, but no sound issued from his smoke-scorched throat. Royan turned away and started down the steps. He realized that she must be going to call for help. Duraid made a supreme effort and a crow-like croak came out between his black and blistered lips.

Royan spun round and stared at him, and then she screamed. His head was not human. His hair was gone, frizzled away, and his skin hung in tatters from his cheeks and chin. Patches of raw meat showed through the black crusted mask. She backed away from him as though he were some hideous monster.

"Royan," he croaked, and his voice was just recognizable. He lifted one hand towards her in appeal, and she ran to the pond and seized the outstretched hand.

"In the name of the Virgin, what have they done to you?" she sobbed, but when she tried to pull him from the pond the skin of his hand came away in hers in a single piece, like some horrible surgical rubber glove, leaving the bleeding claw naked and raw.

Royan fell on her knees beside the coping and leaned over the pond to take him in her arms. She knew that she did not have the strength to lift him out without doing him further dreadful injury. All she could do was hold him and try to comfort him. She realized that he was dying no man could survive such fearsome injury.

"They will come soon to help us," she whispered to him in Arabic. "Someone must see the flames. Be brave, my husband, help will come very soon."

He was twitching and convulsing in her arms, tortured by his mortal injuries and racked by the effort to speak.

"The scroll?" His voice was barely intelligible. Royan looked up at the holocaust that enveloped their home, and she shook her head.

"It's gone," she said. "Burned or stolen."

"Don't give it up," he mumbled. "All our work-"

"It's gone," she repeated. "No one will believe us without-"

"No!" His voice was faint but fierce. "For me, my last—2 "Don't say that," she pleaded. "You will be all right."

"Promise," he demanded. "Promise me!"

"We have no sponsor. I am alone. I cannot do it alone."

"Harper!" he said. Royan leaned closer so that her ear touched his fire-ravaged lips. "Harper," he repeated. "Strong hard - clever man-" and she understood then. Harper, Of course, was the fourth and last name on the list of sponsors that he had drawn up. Although he was the last on the list, somehow she had always known that Duraid's order of preference was inverted. Nicholas Quenton Harper was his first choice. He had spoken so often of this man with respect and warmth, and sometimes even with awe.

"But what do I tell him? He does not know me. How will I convince him? The seventh scroll is gone."

"Trust him," he whispered. "Good man. Trust him-" There was a terrible appeal in his "Promise me!"

Then she remembered the notebook in their flat at Giza in the Cairo suburbs,

and the Taita material on the hard drive on her PC. Not everything was gone. "Yes," she agreed, "I promise you, my husband, I promise you."

Though those mutilated features could show no human expression there was a faint echo of satisfaction in his voice as he whispered, "My flower!" Then his head dropped forward, and he died in her arms.

The peasants from the village found Royan still kneeling beside the pond, holding him, whispering to him. By that time the flames were abating, and the faint light of dawn was stronger than their fading glow.

The staff from the museum and the Antiquities were at the funeral the church of the oasis. Even Atalan Abou Sin, the Minister of Culture and Tourism and Duraid's superior, had come out from Cairo in his official black air-conditioned Mercedes.

He stood behind Royan and, though he was a Moslem, joined in the responses. Nahoot Guddabi stood beside his uncle. Nahoot's mother was the minister's youngest sister, which, as Duraid had sarcastically pointed out, fully made up for the nephew's lack of qualifications and experience in archaeology and for his ineptitude as an administrator.

The day was sweltering. Outside, the temperature stood at over thirty degrees, and even in the dim cloisters of the Coptic church it was oppressive. In the thick clouds of incense smoke and the drone of the black-clad priest intoning the ancient order of service Royan felt herself suffocating. The stitches in her right arm pulled and burned, and every time she looked at the long black coffin that stood in front of the ornate and gilded altar, the dreadful vision of Duraid's bald and scorched head rose before her eyes and she swayed in her seat and had to catch herself before she fell.

At last it was over and she could escape into the open air and the desert sunlight. Even then her duties were not at an end. As principal mourner, her place was directly behind the coffin as they walked in procession to the cemetery amongst the palm groves, where Duraid's relatives awaited him in the family mausoleum.

Before he returned to Cairo, Atalan Abou Sin came to shake her hand and offer her a few words of condolence.

"What a terrible business, Royan. I have personally spoken to the Minister of the Interior. They will catch the animals responsible for this outrage, believe me. Please take as long as you need before you return to the museum," he told her.

"I will be in my office again on Monday," she replied, and he drew a pocket diary from inside the jacket of his dark double-breasted suit. He consulted it and made a note, before he looked up at her again.

"Then come to see me at the Ministry in the afternoon.

Four 'clock," he told her. He went to the waiting Mercedes, while Nahoot Guddabi came forward to shake hands. Though his skin was sallow and there were coffeocoloured stains beneath his dark eyes, he was tall and elegant with thick wavy hair and very white teeth. His suit was impeccably tailored and he smelt faintly of an expensive cologne. His expression was grave and sad.

"He was a good man. I held Duraid in the highest esteem," he told Royan, and she nodded without replying to this blatant untruth. There had been little affection between Duraid and his deputy. He had never allowed Nahoot to work on the Taita scrolls; in particular he had never given him access to the seventh scroll, and this had been a point of bitter antagonism between them.

"I hope you will be applying for the post of director, Royan," he told her. "You are well qualified for the job."

"Thank you, Nahoot, you are very kind. I haven't had a chance to think about the future yet, but won't you be applying?"

"Of course," he nodded. "But that doesn't mean that no one else should. Perhaps you will take the job out from in front of my nose." His smile was complacent. She was a woman in an Arab world, and he was the nephew of the minister. Nahoot knew just how heavily the odds favoured him. "Friendly rivals?" he asked.

Royan smiled sadly. "Friends, at least. I will need all of those I can find in the future."

"You know you have many friends. Everyone in the department likes you, Royan." That at least was true, she supposed. He went on smoothly, "May I offer you a lift back to Cairo? I am certain my uncle will not object."

"Thank you, Nahoot, but I have my own car here, and I must stay over at the oasis tonight to see to some of Duraid's affairs." This was not true. Royan planned to travel back to the flat in Giza that evening but, for reasons that she was not very sure of herself, she did not want Nahoot to know of her plans.

"Then we shall see you at the museum on Monday." Royan left the oasis as soon as she was able to escape from the relations and family friends and peasants, so many of whom had worked for Duraid's family most of their lives.

She felt numbed and isolated, so that all their condolences and exhortations were meaningless and without comfort.

Even at this late hour the tarmac road back through the desert was busy, with files of vehicles moving steadily in both directions, for tomorrow was Friday and the sabbath. She slipped her injured right arm out of the sling, and it did not hamper her driving too much. She was able to make reasonably good time. Nevertheless, it was after five in the afternoon when she made out the green line against the tawny desolation of the desert that marked the start of the narrow strip of irrigated and cultivated land along the Nile which was the great artery of Egypt.

As always the traffic became denser the nearer she came to the capital, and it was almost fully dark by the time she reached the apartment block in Giza that overlooked both the river and those great monuments of stone which stood so tall and massive against the evening sky, and which for her epitomized the heart and history of her land.

She left Duraid's old green Renault in the underground garage of the building and rode up in the elevator to the top floor.

She let herself into the flat and then froze in the doorway. The sitting room had been ransacked - even the rugs had been pulled up and the paintings ripped from the walls. In a daze she picked her way through the litter of broken furniture and smashed ornaments. She glanced into the bedroom as she went down the passage, and saw that it had not escaped. Her clothes and those of Duraid were strewn over the floor, and the doors of the cupboards stood ajar. One of these was smashed off its hinges. The bed was overturned, and the sheets and bolsters had been flung about.

She could smell the reek of broken cosmetic and perfume bottles from the bathroom, but she could not yet bring herself to go in there. She knew what she would find.

Instead she continued down the passage to the large room that they had used as a study and workshop.

In the chaos the first thing that she noticed and mourned was the antique chess set that Duraid had given her as a wedding present. The board of jet and ivory squares was broken in half and the pieces had been thrown about the room with vindictive and unnecessary violence. She stooped and picked up the white queen. Her head had been snapped off.

Holding the queen in her good hand she moved like a sleepwalker to her desk below the window. Her PC was wrecked. They had shattered the screen and hacked the mainframe with what must have been an axe. She could tell at a glance that there was no information left on the hard drive; it was beyond repair.

She glanced down at the drawer in which she kept her floppy disks. That and all the other drawers had been pulled out and thrown on the floor. They were empty, of course; along with the disks, all her notebooks and photographs were missing. Her last connections with the seventh scroll were lost. After three years of work, gone was the proof that it had ever existed.

She slumped down on the floor, feeling beaten and exhausted. Her arm started to ache again, and she was alone and vulnerable as she had never been in her life before. She had never thought that she would miss Duraid so desperately. Her shoulders began to shake and she felt the tears welling up from deep within her. She tried to hold them back, but they scalded her eyelids and she let them flow. She sat amongst the wreckage of her life and wept until there was nothing more left within her, and then she curled up on the littered carpet and fell, into the sleep of exhaustion and despair.

The Monday morning she had managed to restore some order into her life. The police had come to the flat and taken her statement, and she had tidied up most of the disarray. She had even glued the head back on her white queen. When she left the flat and climbed into the green Renault her arm was feeling easier, and, if not cheerful, she was at least a great deal more optimistic, and sure of what she had to do.

When she reached the museum she went first to Duraid's office and was annoyed to find that Nahoot was there before her. He was supervising two of the security guards as they cleared out all Duraid's personal effects.

"You might have had the consideration to let me do that," she told him coldly, and he gave her his most winning smile.

"I am sorry, Royan. I thought I would help." He was smoking one of his fat Turkish cigarettes. She loathed the heavy, musky odour.

She crossed to Duraid's desk, and opened the top right hand drawer. "My husband's day book was in here. It's gone now. Have you seen it?"

"No, there was nothing in that drawer." Nahoot looked at the two guards for confirmation, and they shuffled their feet and shook their heads. It did not really matter, she thought. The book had not contained much of vital interest. Duraid had always relied on her to record and store all data of importance, and most of it had been on her PC.

"Thank you, Nahoot," she dismissed him. "I will do whatever remains to be done. I don't want to keep you from your work."

"Any help you need, Royan, please let me know." He bowed slightly as he left her.

It did not take her long to finish in Duraid's office. She had the guards take the boxes of his possessions down the corridor to her own office and pile them against the wall.

She worked through the lunch-hour tidying up all her own affairs, and when she had finished there was still an hour until her appointment with Atalan Abou Sin.

If she was to make good her promise to Duraid, then she was going to be absent for some time. Wanting to take leave of all her favourite treasures, she went down into the public section of the huge building.

Monday was a busy day, and the exhibition halls of the museum were thronged with groups of tourists. They flocked behind their guides, sheep following the shepherd.

They crowded around the most famous of the displays.

They listened to the guides reciting their well-rehearsed spiels in all the tongues of Babel.

Those rooms on the second floor that contained the treasures of Tutankhamen were so crowded that she spent little time there. She managed to reach the display cabinet that contained the great golden death-mask of the child pharaoh. As always, the splendour and the romance of it quickened her breathing and made her heart beat faster.

Yet as she stood before it, jostled by a pair of big-busted and sweaty middle-aged female tourists, she pondered, as she had so often before, that if an insignificant weakling king could have gone to his tomb with such a miraculous creation covering his mummified features, in what state must the great Ramessids have lain in their funeral temples.

Ramesses II, the greatest of them all, had reigned sixty-seven years and had spent those decades accumulating his funerary treasure from all the vast territories that he had conquered.

Royan went next to pay her respects to the old king.

After thirty centuries Ramesses II slept on with a rapt and serene expression on his gaunt features. His skin had a light, marble-like sheen to it. The sparse strands of his hair were blond and dyed with henna. His hands, dyed with the same stuff, were long and thin and elegant. However, he was clad only in a rag of linen. The grave robbers had even unwrapped his mummy to reach the amulets and scarabs beneath the linen bandages, so that his body was almost naked. When these remains had been discovered in 1881 in the cache of royal mummies in the cliff cave at Deir El Bahari, only a scrap of papyrus parchment attached to his breast had proclaimed his lineage.

There was a moral in that, she supposed, but as she stood before these pathetic remains she wondered again, as she and Duraid had done so often before, whether Taita the scribe had told the truth, whether somewhere in the far-off, savage mountains of Africa another great pharaoh slept on undisturbed with all his treasures intact about him.

The very thought of it made her shiver with excitement, and goose pimples prickled her skin and raised the fine dark hair at the nape of her neck.

"I have given you my promise, my husband," she whispered in Arabic. "This will be for you and your memory, for it was you who led the way."

She glanced at her wrist-watch as she went down the main staircase. She had fifteen minutes before she must leave for her appointment with the minister,

and she knew, exactly how she would spend that time. What she was going to visit was in one of the less-frequented side halls.

Seventh Scroll

The tour guides very seldom led their charges this way, except as a short-cut to see the statue of Amenhotep.

Royan stopped in front of the glass-fronted display case that reached from floor to ceiling of the narrow room. It was packed with small artefacts, tools and weapons, amulets and vessels and utensils, the latest of them dating from the twentieth dynasty of the New Kingdom, 1100 BC, whilst the oldest survived from the dim ages of the Old Kingdom almost five thousand years ago. The cataloguing of this accumulation was only rudimentary. Many of the items were not described.

At the furthest end, on the bottom shelf, was a display of jewellery and finger rings and seals. Beside each of the seals was a wax impression made from it.

Royan went down on her knees to examine one of these artefacts more closely. The tiny blue seal of lapis lazuli in the centre of the display was beautifully carved.

Lapis was a rare and precious material for the ancients, as it had not occurred naturally in the Egyptian Empire. The wax imprint cut from it depicted a hawk with a broken wing, and the simple legend beneath it was clear for Royan to read: "TAITA, THE SCRIBE OF THE GREAT QUEEN".

She knew it was the same man, for he had used the maimed hawk as his autograph in the scrolls. She wondered who had found this trifle and where. Perhaps some peasant had plundered it from the lost tomb of the old slave and scribe, but she would never know.

"Are you teasing me, Taita? Is it all some elaborate hoax? Are you laughing at me even now from your tomb, wherever it may be?" She leaned even closer, until her forehead touched the cool glass. "Are you my friend, Taita, or are you my implacable adversary?" She stood up and dusted off the front of her skirt. "We shall see. I will-play the game with you, and we shall see who outwits whom," she promised.

The minister kept her waiting only a few minutes before his male secretary ushered her into his presence. Atalan Abou Sin wore a dark, shiny silk suit and sat at his desk, although Royan knew that he preferred a more comfortable robe and a cushion on the rugs of the floor. He noticed her glance and smiled deprecatingly. "I have a meeting with some Americans this afternoon." .. She liked him. He had always been kind to her, and she owed him her job at the museum. Most other men in his position would have refused. Duraid's request for a female assistant, especially his own wife.

He asked after her health and she showed him her bandaged arm. "The stitches will come out in ten days."

They chatted for a while in a polite manner. Only Westerners would have the *gaucherie* to come -directly to the main business to be discussed. However, to save him embarrassment Royan took the first opportunity he gave her to tell him, "I feel that I need some time to myself. I need to recover from my loss and to decide what I am to do with the rest of my life, now that I am a widow. I would be grateful if you would consider my request for at least six months' unpaid leave of absence. I want to go to stay with my mother in England."

Atalan showed real concern and urged her, "Please do not leave us for too

long. The work you have done has been invaluable. We need you to help carry on from where Duraid left off." But he could not entirely conceal his relief. She knew that he had expected her to put before him her application for the directorship. He must have discussed it with his nephew. However, he was too kind a man to relish having to tell her that she would not be selected for the job. Things in Egypt were changing, women were emerging from their traditional roles, but not that much or that swiftly. They both knew that the directorship must go to Nahoot Ouddabi.

Atalan walked with her to the door of his office and shook her hand in parting, and as she rode down in the lift she felt a sense of release and freedom.

She had left the Renault standing in the sun in the Ministry car park. When she opened the door the interior was hot enough to bake bread. She opened all the windows and fanned the driver's door to force out the heated air, but still the surface of the driver's seat burned the backs of her thighs when she slid in behind the wheel.

As soon as she drove through the gates she was engulfed in the swarm of Cairo traffic. She crawled along behind an overloaded bus that belched a steady blue cloud of diesel fumes over the Renault. The traffic problem was one that seemed to have no solution. There was so little parking available that vehicles lined the verge of the road three and four deep," choking the flow in the centre to a trickle.

As the bus in front of her braked and forced her to a halt, Royan smiled as she recalled the old joke that some drivers who had parked at the kerb had to abandon their cars there, for they were never able to extricate them from the tangle. Perhaps there was a little truth in this, for some of those vehicles she could see had not been moved for weeks. Their windscreens were completely obscured with dust and many of them had flat tyres.

She glanced in the rear-view mirror. There was a taxi stopped only inches from her back bumper, and behind that the traffic was backed up solidly. Only the motorcyclists had freedom of movement. As she watched in the mirror, one of these came weaving through the congestion with suicidal abandon. It was a battered red 200 cc Honda so covered with dust that the colour was hardly recognizable. There was a passenger perched on the pillion, and both he and the driver had covered the lower half of their faces with the corners of their white headcloths as protection against the exhaust fumes and dust.

Passing on the wrong side, the Honda skimmed through the narrow gap between the taxi and the cars parked at the kerb with nothing to spare on either side.

The taxi-driver made an obscene gesture with thumb and forefinger, and called on Allah to witness that the driver was both mad and stupid.

The Honda slowed slightly as it drew level with Royan's Renault, and the pillion passenger leaned out and dropped something through the open window on to the passenger seat beside her. Immediately the driver accelerated so abruptly that for a moment the front wheel was lifted off the ground. He put the motorcycle over into a tight turn and sped away down the narrow alleyway that opened off the main thoroughfare, narrowly avoiding hitting an old woman in his path.

As the pillion passenger looked back at her the wind blew the fold of cloth she recognized the man she had last seen in the headlights of the Fiat on the road

beside the oasis.

"Yusuf!" As the Honda disappeared she looked down at the object that he had dropped on to the seat beside her.

It was egg-shaped and the segmented metallic surface was painted military green. She had seen the same thing so often on old TV war movies that she recognized it instantly as a fragmentation grenade, and at the same moment she realized that the priming handle had flown off and the weapon was set to explode within seconds.

Without thinking, she grabbed the door handle beside her and flung all her weight against the door. It burst open and she tumbled out in the road. Her foot slipped off the clutch and the Renault bounded forward and crashed into the back of the stationary bus.

As Royan sprawled in the road under the wheels of the following taxi, the grenade exploded. Through the open driver's door blew a sheet of flame and smoke and debris. The back window burst outwards and sprayed her with diamond chips of glass, and the detonation drove painfully into her eardrums.

A stunned silence followed the shock of the explosion, broken only by the tinkle of falling glass shards, and then immediately there was a hubbub of groans and screams.

Royan sat up and clasped her injured arm to her chest. She had fallen heavily upon it and the stitches were agony.

The Renault was wrecked, but she saw that her leather sling bag had been blown out of the door and lay in the street close at hand. She pushed herself unsteadily to her feet and hobbled over to pick it up. All around her was confusion. A few of the passengers in the bus had been injured, and a piece of shrapnel or wreckage had wounded a little girl on the sidewalk. Her mother was screaming and mopping at the child's bloody face with her scarf. The girl struggled in her mother's grip, wailing pitifully.

Nobody was taking any notice of Royan, but she knew the police would arrive within minutes. They were geared up to respond swiftly to fundamentalist terror attacks. She knew that if they found her here she would be tied up in days of interrogation. She slung the bag over her shoulder and walked as swiftly as her bruised leg would allow her to the alleyway down which the Honda had disappeared.

At the end of the street was a public lavatory. She locked herself in one of the cubicles and leaned against the door with her eyes closed, trying to recover from the shock and to get her confused thoughts in order.

In the horror and desolation of Duraid's murder she had not until now considered her own safety. The realization of danger had been forced upon her in the most savage manner. She remembered the words of one of the assassins spoken in the darkness beside the oasis "We always know where to find her later!"

The attempt on her life had failed only narrowly. She had to believe that there would be another.

I can't go back to the flat," she realized. "The villa is gone, and anyway they would look for me there."

Despite the unsavoury atmosphere she remained locked in the cubicle for over an hour while she thought out her next movements. At last she left the toilet and went to the row of stained and cracked washbasins. She splashed her face

under the tap. Then in the mirror she combed her hair, touched up her make-up, and straightened and tidied her clothing as best she was able.

She walked a few blocks, doubling back on her tracks and watching behind her to make sure she -was not being followed, before she hailed a taxi in the street.

She made the driver drop her in the street behind her bank, and walked the rest of the way. It was only minutes before closing time when she was "shown into the cubicle office of one of the sub-accountants. She withdrew what money was in her account, which amounted to less than five thousand Egyptian pounds. It was not a great sum, but she had a little more in her Lloyds Bank account in York, and then she had her Mastercard.

"You should have given us notice to withdraw an article from safe deposit," the bank official told her severely.

She apologized meekly and played the helpless little-girl lost so convincingly that he relented. He handed over to her the package that contained her British passport and her Lloyds banking papers.

Duraid had numerous relatives and friends who would have been pleased to have her to stay with them, but she wanted to remain out of sight, away from her usual haunts.

She chose one of the two-star tourist hotels away from the river where she hoped she could remain anonymous amongst the multitudes of the tour groups. At this type of hotel there was a high turnover of guests, for most of them stayed only for a few nights before moving on up to Luxor and Aswan to view the monuments.

As soon as she was alone in her single room she phoned British Airways reservations. There was a flight to Heathrow the following morning at ten 'clock. She booked a one-way economy seat and gave them the number of her Mastercard.

It was after six 'clock by then, but the time difference between Egypt and the UK meant that it would still be office hours there. She looked up the number in her notebook. Leeds University was where she had completed her studies. Her call was answered on the third ring.

"Archaeology Department. Professor Dixon's office," said a prim English schoolmarm voice.

:Is that you, Miss Higgins?"

Yes, it is. To whom am I speaking?"

"It's Royan. Royan Al Simma, who used to be Royan Said :, Royan! We haven't heard from you for an absolute age. How are you? They chatted for a short while, but Royan was aware of the cost of the call. "Is the Prof in?" she cut it short.

Professor Percival Dixon was over seventy and should have retired years ago. "Royan, is it really you? My favourite student." She smiled. Even at his age he was still the randy old goat. All the pretty ones were his favourite students.

"This is an international call, Prof. I just want to know if the offer is still open."

"My goodness, I thought you said that you couldn't fit us in, what?"

"Change of circumstances. I'll tell you about it when I see you, if I see you."

"Of course, we' love to have you come and talk to us.

When can you manage to get away?

"I'll be in England tomorrow."

'my goodness, that's a bit sudden. Don't know if we can arrange it that quickly.'

"I will be staying with my mother near York. Put me back to Miss Higgins and I will give her the telephone number." He was one of the most brilliant men she knew, but she didn't trust him to write down a telephone number correctly. "I'll call you in a few days' time."

She hung up and lay back on the bed. She was exhausted and her arm was still hurting, but she tried to lay her plans to cover all eventualities.

Two months ago Prof Dixon had invited her to lecture on the discovery and excavation of the tomb of Queen Lostris, and the discovery of the scrolls. It was that book, of course, and more especially the footnote at the end of it, that had alerted him. Its publication had caused a great deal of interest. They had received enquiries from Egyptologists, both amateur and professional, all around the world, some from as far afield as Tokyo and Nairobi, all of them questioning the authenticity of the novel and the factual basis behind it.

At the time she had opposed letting a writer of fiction have access to the transcriptions, especially as they had not been completed. She felt that the whole thing had reduced what should have been an important and serious academic subject to the level of popular entertainment, rather like what Spielberg had done to palaeontology with his park full of dinosaurs.

In the end her voice had been over-ruled. Even Duraïd had sided against her. It had been the money, of course. The department was always short of funds to conduct its less spectacular work. When it came to some grandiose scheme like moving the entire Temple of Abu Simbel to a new site above the flood waters of the Aswan High Dam, then the nations of the world had poured in tens of millions of dollars. However, the day-to-day operational expenses of the department attracted no such support.

Their half share of the royalties from *River God*, for that was the book's title, had financed almost a year of research and exploration, but that was not enough to allay Royan's personal misgivings. The author had taken too many liberties with the facts contained in the scrolls, and had embroidered historical characters with personalities and foibles for which there was not the least evidence. In particular she felt he had portrayed Taita, the ancient scribe, as a braggart and a vainglorious poseur. She resented that.

In fairness she was forced to concede that the author's brief had been to make the facts as palatable and readable as possible to a wide lay public, and she reluctantly agreed that he had succeeded in doing so. However, all her scientific training revolted against such a popularization of something so unique and wonderful.

But she sighed and put these thoughts out of her head.

The damage was done, and thinking about it only served to irritate her.

She turned her thoughts to more pressing problems. If she was to do the lecture that the Prof had invited her to deliver, then she would need her slides and these were still at her office in the museum. While she was still working out the best way to get hold of them without fetching them in Person, exhaustion overtook her and she fell asleep, still fully clothed, on top of the bed.

In the end the solution to her problem was simplicity itself. She merely phoned the administration office and arranged for them to collect the box of slides from her office and send it out to the airport in a taxi with one of the secretaries.

When the secretary handed them over to her at the British Airways check'in desk, he told her, "The police were at the Museum when we opened this morning. They wanted to speak to you, Doctor."

Obviously they had traced the registration of the wrecked Renault. She was pleased that she had her British Passport. If she had tried to leave the country with her Egyptian papers she might have run into delays: the police would probably have placed a restriction order on all passport control points. As it was, she passed through the checkpoint with no difficulty and, once she was in the final departure lounge, she went to the news-stand and studied the array of newspapers.

All the local newspapers carried the story of the bombing of her car, and most of them had resurrected the story of Duraid's murder and linked the two events. One of them hinted at fundamentalist religious involvement. El Arab had a front-page photograph of herself and Duraid, which had been taken the previous month at a reception for a group of visiting French tour operators.

It gave her a pang to see the photograph of her husband looking so handsome and distinguished, with herself on his arm smiling up at him. She purchased copies of all the papers and took them on board the British Airways flight.

During the flight she passed the time by writing down in her notebook everything she could remember from what Duraid had told her of the man that she was going to find..

She headed the page: "Sir Nicholas Quenton-Harper (Bart)." Duraid had told her that Nicholas's great-grand, father had been awarded the title of baronet for his work as a career officer in the British colonial service. For three generations the family had maintained the strongest of ties with Africa, and especially with the British colonies and spheres of influence in North Africa: Egypt and the Sudan, Uganda and Kenya.

According to Duraid, Sir Nicholas himself had served in Africa and the Gulf States with the British army. He was a fluent Arabic and Swahili speaker and a noted amateur archaeologist and zoologist. Like his father, grandfather and great-grandfather before him, he had made numerous expeditions to North Africa to collect specimens and to explore the more remote regions. He had written a number of articles for various scientific journals and had even lectured at the Royal Geographical Society.

When his elder brother died childless, Sir Nicholas had inherited the title and the family estate at Quenton Park. He had resigned from the army to run the estate, but more especially to supervise the family museum that had been started in 1885 by his great-grandfather, the first baronet. It housed one of the largest collections of African fauna in private hands, and its ancient Egyptian and Middle Eastern collection of artefacts was equally famous.

However, from Duraid's accounts she concluded that there must be a wild, and even lawless, streak in Sir Nicholas's nature. It was obvious that he was not afraid to take some extraordinary risks to add to the collection at Quenton Park.

Duraid had first met him a number of years previously, when Sir Nicholas had recruited him to act as an intelligence officer for an illicit expedition to "liberate" a number of Punic bronze castings from Gadaffi's Libya. Sir Nicholas had sold some of these to defray the expenses of the expedition, but had kept the best of them for his private collection.

More recently there had been another expedition, this time involving an illegal crossing of the Iraqi border to bring out a pair of stone has-relief friezes from under Saddam Hussein's nose. Duraïd had told her that Sir Nicholas had sold one of the pair for a huge amount of money; he had mentioned the sum of five million US dollars. Duraïd said that he had used the money for the running of the museum, but that the second frieze, the finest of the pair, was still in Sir Nicholas's possession.

Both these expeditions had taken place years before Royan had met Duraïd, and she wondered idly at Duraïd's readiness to commit himself to the Englishman in this way.

Sir Nicholas must have had unique powers of persuasion, for if they had been apprehended in the act there was no doubt that it would have meant summary execution for both of them.

As Duraïd had explained to her, on each occasion it was only Nicholas's resourcefulness and his network of friends and admirers across the Middle East and North Africa, which he had been able to call on for help, that had seen them through.

"He is a bit of a devil," Duraïd had shaken his head with evident nostalgia at the memory, "but the man to have with you when things are tough. Those days were all very exciting, but when I look back on it now I shudder at the risks we took."

She had often pondered on the risks that a true in-the-blood collector was prepared to take to slake his passion. The risk seemed to be out of proportion to the reward, when it came to adding to his accumulations; and then she smiled at her own pious sentiments. The venture that she hoped to lead Sir Nicholas into was not exactly without risk, and she supposed that a circumlocution of lawyers might debate the legality of it endlessly.

Still smiling, she fell asleep, for the strain of these last few days had taken their toll. The air hostess woke her with an admonition to fasten her seat-belt for the landing at Heathrow.

She phoned her mother from the airport.

"Hello, Mummy. It's me."

"Yes, I know that. Where are you, love?" Her mother sounded as unflappable as ever. "At Heathrow. I am coming up to stay with you for a while. Is that all right?"

"Lumley's and I," her mother chuckled. "I'll go and make your bed. What train will you be coming up on?"

"I had a look at the timetable. There is one from King's Cross that will get me into York at seven this evening."

"I'll meet you at the station. What happened? Did you and Duraïd have a tiff? Old enough to be your father. I said it wouldn't work."

Royan was silent for a moment. This was hardly the time for explanations. "I'll tell you all about it when I see you this evening."

Georgina Lumley, her mother, was waiting on the platform in the gloom and cold of the November evening, bulky and solid in her old green Barbour coat with Magic, her cocker spaniel, sitting obediently at her feet. The two of them made an inseparable pair, even when they were not winning field trials cups. For Royan they painted a comforting and familiar picture of the English side of her lineage.

Georgina kissed Royan's cheek in a perfunctory manner. "Never was one for all that sentimental fiddle, faddle," she often said with satisfaction, and she took one of Royan's bags and led the way to the old mud-splattered Land Rover in the car park.

Magic sniffed Royan's hand and wagged his tail in recognition. Then in a dignified and condescending manner he allowed her to pat his head, but like his mistress he was no great sentimentalist either.

. They drove in silence for a while and Georgina lit a cigarette. "So what happened to Duraid, then?"

For a minute Royan could not reply, and then the floodgates within her burst and she let it all come pouring out. It was a twenty-minute drive north of York to the little village of Brandsbury, and Royan talked all the way.

Her mother made only small sounds of encouragement and comfort, and when Royan wept as she related the details of Duraid's death and funeral, Georgina reached across and patted her daughter's hand.

It was all over by the time they reached her mother's cottage in the village. Royan had cried it out and was dryeyed and rational again as they ate the dinner that her mother had prepared and left in the oven for them. Royan could not remember when last she had tasted steak and kidney pie.

"So what are you going to do now?" Georgina asked as she poured what remained in the black bottle of Guinness into her own glass.

"To tell the truth, I don't know." As she said it, Royan wondered ruefully why so many people used that particular phrase to introduce a lie. "I have six months' leave from the museum, and Prof Dixon has arranged for me to give a lecture at the university. That is as far as it goes for the moment."

"Well," said Georgina as she stood up, "there is a hotwater bottle in your bed and your room is there for as long as you wish to stay." From her that was as good as a passionate declaration of maternal love.

Over the next few days Royan arranged her slides and notes for the lectures, and each afternoon she accompanied Georgina and Magic on their long walks over the surrounding countryside.

"Do you know Quenton Park?" she asked her mother during one of these rambles.

"Rather," Georgina replied enthusiastically. "Magic and I pick up there four or five times a season. First-class shoot. Some of the best pheasant and woodcock in Yorkshire. One drive there called the High Larches which is notorious. Birds so high they baffle the best shots in England."

"Do you know the owner, Sir Nicholas Quenton Harper?" Royan asked.

"Seen him at the shoots. Don't know him. Good shot, though," Georgina replied. "Knew his papa in the old days before I married your father." She smiled in a suggestive way that startled Royan. "Good dancer. We danced a few jigs together, not only on the dance floor."

"Mummy, you are outrageous!" Royan laughed.

"Used to be," Georgina agreed readily. "Don't get many opportunities these days."

"When are you and Magic going to Quenton Park again?"

"Two weeks' time."

"May I come with you?"

"Of course - the keeper is always looking for beaters."

Twenty quid and lunch with a bottle of beer for the day." She stopped and looked at her daughter quizzically. "What is all this about, then?"

"I hear there is a private museum on the estate. They have a world-renowned Egyptian collection. I wanted to get a look at it."

"Not open to the public any more. Invitation only. Sir Nicholas is an odd chap, secretive and all that."

"Couldn't you get an invitation for me?" Royan asked, but Georgina shook her head.

"Why don't you ask Prof Dixon? He is often one of the guns at Quenton Park. Great chum of Quenton-Harper."

It was ten days before Prof Dixon was ready for her. She borrowed her mother's Land Rover and drove to Leeds. The Prof folded her in a bear hug and then took her through to his office for tea.

It was nostalgic of her days as a student to be back in the cluttered room filled with books and papers and ancient artefacts. Royan told him about Duraid's murder, and Dixon was shocked and distressed, but she quickly changed the subject to the slides that she had prepared for the lecture. He was fascinated by everything she had to show him.

It was almost time for her to leave before she had an opportunity to broach the subject of the Quenton Park museum, but he responded immediately.

"I am amazed that you never visited it while you were a student here. It's a very impressive collection. The family has been at it for over a hundred years. As a matter of fact, I am shooting on the estate next Thursday. I'll have a word with Nicholas. However, the poor chap isn't up to much at the moment. Last year he suffered a terrible "personal tragedy. Lost his wife and two little girls in a motor accident on the MU He shook his head. "Awful business. Nicholas was driving. I think he blames himself" He walked her out to the Land Rover.

"So we will see you on the twenty-third," he told Royan as they parted. "I expect that you will have an audience of at least a hundred, and I have even had a reporter from the Yorkshire Post on to me. They have heard about your lectures and they want to do an interview with you. jolly good publicity for the department. You'll do it, of course. Could you come a couple of hours early to speak to them?"

"Actually I will probably see you before the twenty-third," she told him. "Mummy and her dog are picking up at Quenton Park on Thursday, and she has got me a job as a beater for the day."

"I'll keep an eye open for you," he promised, and waved to her as she pulled away in a cloud of exhaust smoke.

The wind was searing cold out of the north.

The clouds tumbled over each other, heavy 6- and blue and grey, so close to earth that they brushed the crests of the hills as they hurried ahead of the gale.

Royan wore three layers of clothing under the old green Barbour jacket that Georgina had lent her, but still she shivered as they came up over the brow of the hills in the line of beaters. Her blood had thinned in the heat of the Nile valley. Two pairs of fisherman's socks were not enough to save her toes from turning numb.

For this drive, the last of the day, the head keeper had moved Georgina from her usual position behind the line of guns, where she and Magic were expected to pick up the crippled birds that came through to them, into the line of beaters.

Keeping the best for last, they were beating the High Larches. The keeper needed every man and woman he could get into the line to bring in the pheasant from the huge piece of ground on top of the hills and to push them off the brow, out over the valley where the guns waited at their pegs far below.

It seemed to Royan a supreme piece of illogical behaviour to rear and nurture the pheasants from chicks and then, when they were mature, go to such lengths to make them as difficult to shoot as the keeper could devise.

However, Georgina had explained to her that the higher and harder to hit the birds passed over the guns, the more pleased the Sportsmen were, and the more they were willing to pay for the privilege of firing at them.

"You cannot believe what they will pay for a day's shooting,, Georgina had told her. "Today will bring in almost 14,000 to the estate. They will shoot twenty days this season. Work that out and you will see that the shoot is a major part of the estate's income. Quite apart from the fun of working the dogs and beating, it gives a lot of us local people a very useful bit of extra money."

At this stage of the day, Royan was not too certain just how much fun there was to be had from the job of beating. The walking was difficult in the thick brambles, and Royan had slipped more than once. There was mud on her knees and elbows. The ditch ahead of her was half filled with water and there was a thin skin of ice across the surface. She approached it gingerly, using her walking-stick to balance herself. She was tired, for there had already been five drives, all as onerous as this one. She glanced across at her mother and marvelled at how she seemed to be enjoying this torture. Georgina strode along happily, controlling Magic with her whistle and hand signals.

She grinned at Royan now, "Last lap, over." Royan was humiliated that her distress had been so obvious, and she used her stick to help her vault the muddy ditch. However, she miscalculated the width and fell short of the far bank. She landed knee-deep in the frozen water and it poured in over the top of her Wellington boots.

Georgina laughed at her and offered her the end of her Own stick to pull her out of the glutinous mud. Royan could not hold up the line by stopping to empty her flooded boots, so she went on, squelching loudly with each pace.

"Steady on the left! the order from the head keeper was relayed over the walkie-talkie radio, and the line halted obediently.

The art and skill of the keeper was to flush the birds from the tangled undergrowth, not in one massed covey, but in a steady trickle that would pass over the waiting guns in singles and pairs, giving them the chance, after they had fired two barrels, to take their second gun from the loader and be ready for the next bird to appear in the sky high above them. The size of the keeper's tip and his reputation depended on the way he "showed" the birds to the waiting guns.

During this respite Royan was able to regain her breath, and to look around her. Through a break in the branches that gave the drive its name, she could see down into the valley.

There was an open meadow at the foot of the hills, the expanse of smooth green grass broken up by patches of dirty grey snow from the previous week's fall. Down this meadow the keeper had set a line of numbered pegs. At the beginning of the day's sport the guns had drawn lots to decide the peg number from which each of them would shoot.

Now each man stood "at his allotted peg, with his loader holding his second gun ready behind him, ready to pass it over when the first gun was empty. They were all looking up expectantly to the high ground from which the pheasant would appear.

"Which is Sir Nicholas?" Royan called to her mother, and Georgina pointed to the far end of the line of guns.

"The tall one," she said, and at that moment the keeper's voice on the radio ordered, "Gently on the left.

Start tapping again." Obediently the beaters tapped their sticks. There was no shouting or hallooing in this delicate and strictly controlled operation.

"Forward slowly. Halt to the flush of birds."

A step at a time the line moved ahead, and in the brambles and bracken in front of her Royan could hear the stealthy scuffle of a number of pheasants moving forward, reluctant to take to the air until they were forced to do so.

There was another ditch in their path, this one choked with an almost impenetrable, thicket of brambles. Some of the larger dogs, like the Labradors, balked at entering such a thorny barrier. Georgina whistled sharply and Magic's ears went up. He was soaked and his coat was a matted mess of mud and buffs and thorns. His pink tongue lolled from the corner of his grinning mouth and the sodden stump of his tail was wagging merrily. At that moment he was the happiest dog in England. He was doing the work that he had been bred for.

"Come on, Magic," Georgina ordered. "Get in there.

Get them out."

Magic dived into the thickest and thorniest patch, and disappeared completely from view. There was a minute of snuffling and rooting around in the depths of the ditch, and then a fierce cackle and flurry of wings.

A pair of birds exploded out of the bushes. The hen led the way. She was a drab, nondescript creature the size of a domestic fowl, but the cock bird that followed her closely was magnificent. His head was capped with iridescent green and his cheeks and wattles were scarlet. His tail, barred in cinnamon and black, was almost as long again as his body and the rest of his plumage was a riot of gorgeous colour.

As he climbed he sparkled against the lowering grey sky like a priceless jewel thrown from an emperor's hand.

Royan gasped with the beauty of the sight.

"Just look at them go!" Georgina's voice was thick with excitement. "What a pair of crackerjacks. The best pair today. My bet is that not one of the guns will touch a feather on either of them."

Up, and then on up, the two birds climbed, the hen drawing the cock after her, until suddenly the wind boiling over the hills like overheated milk caught them both and flung them away, out over the valley.

The line of beaters enjoyed the moment. They had worked hard for it. Their voices were tiny and faint on the wind as they urged the birds on. They loved to see a pheasant so high and fast that it could beat the guns.

"Forward!" they exulted. "over! and this time the line came involuntarily to a halt as they followed the flight of the pair that were twisting away on the wind.

In the valley bottom the faces of the guns were turned upwards, pale specks against the green background. Their trepidation was almost palpable as they watched the pheasant reach their maximum speed, so that they could no

longer beat their wings, but locked them into a back-swept profile as they began to drop down into the valley.

This was the most difficult shot that any gun would face. A high pair of pheasant with a half gale quartering from behind, dropping into the shot at their terminal rate of flight, set to pass over the line at the extreme effective range of a twelve-bore shotgun. For the men below it was a calculation of speed "and lead in all three dimensions of space. The best of shots might hope to take one of them, but who would dare to think of both?

"A pound on it!" Georgina called. "A pound that they both get through." But none of the beaters who heard her accepted the wager.

The wind was pushing the birds gently sideways. They started off aimed at the centre of the line, but they were drifting towards the far end. As the angle changed, Royan could see the men at the pegs below her brace themselves in turn as the birds appeared to be heading straight for them, and then relax as the wind moved them on. Their relief was evident as, one after the other, each of them was absolved from the challenge of having to make such an impossible shot with all eyes fastened upon him.

In the end only the tall figure at the extreme end of the line stood in their flight path.

"Your bird, sir," one of the other guns called mockingly, and Royan found that instinctively she was holding her breath with anticipation.

Nicholas Quenton-Harper seemed unaware of the approach of the pair of pheasant. He stood completely relaxed, his tall frame slouching slightly, his shotgun tucked under his right arm with the muzzles pointing at the ground.

At the moment that the leading hen bird reached a point in the sky sixty degrees up ahead of him he moved for the first time. With casual grace he swung the shotgun up in a sweeping arc. At the instant that the butt touched his cheek and shoulder he fired, but the gun never stopped moving and went on to describe the rest of the arc.

The distance delayed the sound of the shot reaching Royan. She saw the barrels kick with the recoil, and a pale spurt of blue smoke from the muzzle. Then Nicholas lowered the gun as the hen suddenly threw back her head and closed her wings. There was no burst of feathers from her body, for she had been hit cleanly in the head and killed instantly. As she began the long plummet to earth Royan heard the thud of the shot.

By then the cock was high over Nicholas's head. This time as he mounted the gun in that casual sweeping gesture he arched his back to point upwards, his long frame bending from the waist like a drawn bow. Once again at the apex of the swing the weapon kicked in his grasp.

"He has missed!" Royan thought with a mixture of satisfaction and disappointment, as the cock sailed on seemingly unscathed. Part of her wanted the beautiful bird to escape, while part of her wanted the man to succeed.

Gradually the profile of the high cock altered as the wings folded back and it rolled over in flight. Royan had no way of knowing that his heart had been struck through, until seconds later he died in mid-air and the locked wings lost their rigid set.

As the cock tumbled to earth, a spontaneous chorus of cheers ran down the line of beaters, faint but enthusiastic on the icy north wind. Even the other guns added their voices with cries of, "Oh, good shot, sir!"

Royan did not join in the cheering, but for the moment her fatigue and cold were forgotten. She could only vaguely appreciate the skill that those two shots had called for, but she was impressed, even a little awed. Her very first glimpse of the man had fulfilled all the expectations that Duraid's stories about him had raised in her.

By the time the last drive ended it was almost dark.

An old army truck came mbling down the track through ru the forest along which the tired beaters and their dogs waited. As it slowed they scrambled up into the back.

Georgina gave Royan a boost from behind before she and Magic followed her up. They settled thankfully on one of the long hard benches, and Georgina lit a cigarette as she joined, in the chat and banter of the under-keepers and beaters around her.

Royan sat silently at the end of the bench, enjoying the sense of achievement at having come through such a strenuous day. She felt tired and relaxed, and strangely contented. For one whole day she had not thought either of the theft of the scroll or of Duraid's murder and the unknown and unseen enemy who threatened her with aviolent death.

The truck ground down the hill and slowed as it reached the bottom, pulling in to the verge to let a green Range Rover pass. As the two vehicles drew level, Royan turned her head and looked down into the open driver's window of the expensive estate car, and into the eyes of Nicholas Quenton Harper at the wheel.

This was the first time she had been close enough to him to see his features. She was surprised at how young he was. She had expected him to be a man of Duraid's age.

She saw now that he was no older than forty, for there were only the first strands of silver in the wings of his thick, rumpled hair. His features were tanned and weatherbeaten, those of an outdoors man. His eyes were green and penetrating under dark, beetling brows. His mouth was wide and expressive, and he was smiling now at some witticism that the driver of the truck called to him in a thick Yorkshire accent, but there was a sense of sadness and tragedy in the eyes. Royan remembered what the Prof had told her of his recent bereavement, and she felt her heart go out to him. She was not alone in her loss and her mourning.

He looked directly into her eyes and she saw his expression change. She was an attractive woman, and she could tell when a man recognized that. She had made an impression on him, but she did not enjoy the fact. Her sorrow for Duraid was still too raw and painful. She looked away and the Range Rover drove on.

Her lecture at the university went off extremely well. Royan was a good speaker and she knew her subject intimately. She held them fascinated with her account of the opening of the tomb_of Queen Lostris and of the subsequent discovery of the scrolls. Many of her audience had read the book, and during question time they pestered her to know how much of it was the truth. She had to tread very carefully here, so as not to deal too harshly with the author.

Afterwards Prof Dixon took Royan and Georgina to dinner. He was delighted with her success, and ordered the most expensive bottle of claret on the wine list to celebrate.

He was only mildly disconcerted when she refused a glass of it.

"Oh, dear me, I forgot that you were a Moslem," he apologized.

"A Copt," she corrected him, "and it's not on religious grounds. I just don't like the taste."

"Don't worry," Georgina counselled him, "I don't have the same odd compulsion to masochism as my daughter.

She must get it from her father's side. I'll give you a hand to finish the good stuff."

Under the benign influence of the claret the Prof became expansive, and entertained them with the accounts of the archaeological digs he had been on over the decades.

It was only over the coffee that he turned to Royan.

"Goodness me, I almost forgot to tell you. I have arranged for you to visit the museum at Quenton Park any afternoon this week. just ring Mrs. Street the day before, and she will be waiting to let you in. She is Nicholas's PA."

Ryan remembered the way to Quenton Park when Georgina had driven them to the shoot, but now she was alone in the Land Rover. The massive main gates to the estate were made of ornate cast iron. A little further on, the road divided and a cluster of road signs pointed the way to the various destinations: "Quenton Hall, Private", "Estate Office" and "Museum".

The road to the museum curved through the deer park where herds of fallow deer grazed under the winter-bare oaks. Through the misty landscape she had glimpses of the big house. According to the guidebook that the Prof had given her, Sir Christopher Wren had designed the house in 1693, and the master landscapist, Capability Brown, had created the gardens sixty years later. The results were perfection.

The museum was set in a grove of copper beech trees half a mile beyond the house. It was a sprawling building that had obviously been added to more than once over the years. Mrs. Street was waiting for her at the side door, and introduced herself as she let Royan in. She was middle aged, grey-haired and self-assured. "I was at your lecture on Monday evening. Fascinating! I have a guidebook for you, but you will find the exhibits well catalogued and described.

I have spent almost twenty years at the job. There are no other visitors today. You will have the place to yourself.

You must just wander around and please yourself. I shall not leave until five this evening, so you have all afternoon.

If I can help you in any way my office is at the end of the passage. Please don't hesitate."

From the first moment that Royan walked into the display of African mammals she was enthralled. The primate room housed a complete collection of every single species of ape and monkey from that continent: from the great silver-backed male gorilla to the delicate colobus in his long flowing mantle of black and white fur, they were all represented.

Although some of the exhibits were over a hundred years old, they were beautifully preserved and presented, set in painted dioramas of their natural habitat. It was obvious that the museum must employ a staff of skilled artists and taxidermists. She could guess what this must have cost. Wryly she decided that the five million dollars from the sale of the plundered treasure had been well spent.

She went through to the antelope room and stared around her in wonder at

the magnificent beasts preserved here. She stopped before a diorama of a family group of the giant sable antelope of the now extinct Angolan variety, *Hippotragus niger* variant. While she admired the jet black and snowy-chested bull with his long, back-swept horns, she mourned his death at the hand of one of the Quenton, Harper family. Then she checked herself. Without the strange dedication and passion of the hunter-collector who had killed him, future generations might never have been able to look upon this regal presence.

She passed on into the next hall which was given over to displays of the African elephant, and paused in the centre of the room before a pair of ivory tusks so large that she could not believe they had ever been carried by a living animal. They seemed more like the marble columns of some Hellenic temple to Diana, the goddess of the chase.

She stooped to read the printed catalogue card:

Tusks of the African Elephant, *Loxodonta africana*.

Shot in the Lado Enclave in 1899 by Sir Jonathan Quenton-Harper. Left tusk 289 lb. Right tusk 301 lb. Length of larger tusk 11' 4'. Girth 32". The largest pair of tusks ever taken by a European hunter.

They stood twice as high as she was tall, and they were half as thick again as her waist. As she passed on into the Egyptian room she marvelled at the size and strength of the creature that had carried them.

She came up short as her eyes fell upon the figure in the centre of the room. It was a fifteen-foot-high figure of Ramesses II, depicted as the god Osiris in polished red granite. The god-emperor strode out on muscular legs, wearing only sandals on his feet and a short kilt. In his left hand he carried the remains of a warbow, with both the upper and lower limbs of the weapon broken off. This was the only damage that the statue had suffered in all those thousands of years. The rest of it was perfect - the plinth even bore the marks of the mason's chisel. In his right fist Pharaoh carried a seal embossed with his royal cartouche.

Upon his majestic head he wore the tall double crown of the upper and lower kingdoms. His expression was calm and enigmatic.

Royan recognized the statue instantly, for its twin stood in the grand hall of the Cairo museum. She passed it every day on her way to her office.

She felt anger rising in her. This was one of the major treasures of her very Egypt. It had been plundered and stolen from one of her country's sacred sites. It did not belong here. It belonged on the banks of the great river Nile. She felt herself shaking with the strength of her emotion as she went forward to examine the statue more closely and to read the hieroglyphic inscription on the base.

The royal cartouche stood out in the centre of the arrogant warning: "I am the divine Ramesses, master of ten thousand chariots - Fear me, of ye enemies of Egypt."

Royan had not read the translation aloud; it was a soft, deep voice close behind her that spoke, startling her. She had not heard anyone approaching. She spun round to find him standing close enough to touch.

His hands were thrust into the pockets of a shapeless blue cardigan. There was a hole in one elbow. He wore faded denim jeans over well-worn but monogrammed velvet carpet slippers - the type of genteel shabbiness that certain Englishmen often cultivate, for it would never do to seem too concerned with one's appearance.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to startle you," He smiled easy.

'le of apology, and his teeth were very white but slightly "t smi crooked. Suddenly his expression changed as he recognized her.

"Oh, it's you." She should have been flattered that he remembered her from so fleeting a contact, but there was that flash of something in his eyes again that offended her.

Nevertheless, she could not refuse the hand he offered her.

"Nick Quenton-Harper," he introduced himself. "You must be Percival Dixon's old student. I think I saw you at the shoot last Thursday. Weren't you beating for us?"

His manner was friendly and forthright, so she felt her hackles subsiding as she responded, "Yes. I am Royan Al Simma. I think you knew my husband, Duraid Al Simma."

"Duraid! Of course, I know him. Grand old fellow. We spent a lot of time in the desert together. One of the very best. How is he?"

"He's dead." She had not meant it to sound so bald and heartless, but then there was no other reply she could think of.

"I am so terribly sorry. I didn't know. When and how did it happen?"

"Very recently, three weeks ago. He was murdered.

"Oh, my God." She saw the sympathy in his eyes, and she remembered that he also had suffered. "I telephoned him in Cairo not more than four months ago. He was his old charming self Have they found the person who did it?"

She shook her head and looked around the hall to avoid having to -face him and let him see that her eyes were wet. "You have an extraordinary collection here."

He accepted the change of subject at once. Thanks mostly to my grandfather. He was on the staff of Evelyn Baring - Over Bearing, as his numerous enemies called him. He was the British man in . Cairo during-

She cut him short. "Yes, I have heard of Evelyn Baring, the first Earl of Cromer, British Consul-General of Egypt from 1883 to 1907. With his plenipotentiary powers he was the unchallenged dictator of my country for all that period. Numerous enemies, as you say."

Nicholas's eyes narrowed slightly. "Percival warned me you were one of his best students. He didn't, however, warn me of your strong nationalistic feelings. It is clear that you didn't need me to translate the Ramesses inscription for you."

"My own father was on the staff of Gama! Abdel Nasser," she murmured. Nasser was the man who had toppled the puppet King Farouk and finally broken the British power in Egypt. As president he had nationalized the Suez Canal in the face of British outrage.

Seventh Scroll

"HaV he chuckled. "Different sides of the track. But things have changed. I hope we don't have to be enemies?"

"Not at all," she agreed. "Duraid held you in the highest esteem."

"As I did him." He changed the subject again. "We are very proud of our collection of royal ushabd Examples from the tomb of every pharaoh from the old Kingdom onwards, right up to the last of the Ptolemys. Please let me show it to you." She followed him to the huge display case that occupied one complete wall of the hall. It was lined with shelf after shelf of the doll-like figures which had been placed in the tombs to act as servants and slaves for the dead kings in the shadow world.

With his own key Nicholas opened the glazed doors of the case and reached up to bring down the most interesting of the exhibits. "This is the ushabd of Maya who served under three pharaohs, Tutankhamen, Ay and Horemheb.

It is from the -tomb of Ay who died in 1343 Bc."

He handed the doll to her and she read aloud the three thousand-year-old hieroglyphics as easily as though they had been the headlines of that morning's newspaper.

"I am Maya, Treasurer of the two Kingdoms. I will answer for the divine Pharaoh Ay. May he live for ever!" She spoke in Arabic to test him, and his reply in the same language was fluent and colloquial, "It seems that Percival Dixon told me the truth. You must have been an exceptional student."

Engrossed now in their common interest, speaking alternately Arabic and English, the initial sharp prickles of antagonism between them were dulled. They moved slowly round the hall, lingering before each display case to handle and examine minutely each object that it contained.

It was as though they were transported back over the millennia. Hours and days seemed of no consequence in the face of such antiquity, and so it startled both of them when Mrs. Street returned to interrupt them, "I am off now, Sir Nicholas. Can I leave it to you to lock up and set the alarm? The security guards are on duty already."

"What time is it?" Nicholas answered his own question by glancing at the stainless steel Rolex Submariner on his wrist. "Five-forty already, what on earth happened to the day?" He sighed theatrically. "Off you go, Mrs. Street. Sorry we kept you so long."

"Don't forget to set the alarm," she warned him, and then to Royan, "He can be so absent-minded when he is off on one of his hobby-horses." Her fondness towards her employer was obviously that of an indulgent aunt.

"You've given me enough orders for one day. Off you go," Nicholas grinned, as he turned back to Royan. "Can't let you go without showing you something that Duraid." was in on with me. Can you stay for a few minutes longer?" She nodded and he reached out as if to take her arm, and then dropped his hand. In the Arab world it is insulting to touch a woman, even in such a casual manner. She was aware of the courtesy, and she warmed to his good manners and easy style a little more.

He led her out of the exhibition halls through a door marked "Private. Staff Only", and down a long corridor to the room at the end.

The inner sanctum." He ushered her in. "Excuse the mess'. I must really get around to tidying up in here one of these years. My wife used to-' He broke off abruptly, and he glanced at the silver-framed photograph of a family group on his desk. Nicholas and a beautiful dark-haired woman sat on a picnic rug under the spreading branches of an oak. There were two little girls with them and the family resemblance to the mother was strong in both of them. The youngest child sat on Nicholas's lap while the elder girl stood behind them, holding the reins of her Shetland pony. Royan glanced sideways at him and saw the devastating sorrow in his eyes.

So as not to embarrass him she looked around the rest of the room, which was obviously his study and workshop.

It was spacious and comfortable, a man's room, but it illustrated the contradictions of his character - the bookish scholar set against the man of action. Amongst the muddle of books and museum specimens lay fishing reels and a Hardy split cane salmon rod. On a row of wall hooks hung a Barbour jacket, a canvas shotgun slip and a leather cartridge bag embossed with the initials ..-.

She recognized some of the framed pictures on the walls. They were original nineteenth-century watercolours by the Scottish traveller David Roberts, and others by Vivant Denon who had accompanied Napoleon's L'armie de l'Orient to Egypt. They were fascinating views of the monuments drawn before the excavations and restorations of more modern times.

Nicholas went to the fireplace and threw a log on the fading coals. He kicked it until it flared up brightly and then beckoned her to stand in front of the floor-to-ceiling curtains that covered half of one wall. With a conjuror's flourish he pulled the tasselled cord that opened the curtains and exclaimed with satisfaction, "

"What do you make of that, then?"

She studied the magnificent has-relief frieze that was mounted on the wall. The detail was beautiful and the rendition magnificent, but she did not let her admiration show. Instead she gave her opinion in offhand tones.

"Sixth King of the Amorite dynasty, Hammurabi, about 1780 Bc," she said, pretending to study the finely chiselled features of the ancient monarch before she went on, "Yes, probably from his palace site south-west of the ziggurat at Ashur. There should have been a pair of these friezes. They are worth in the region of five million US dollars each. My guess is that they were stolen from the saintly ruler of modern Mesopotamia, Saddam Hussein, by two unprincipled rogues. I hear that the other one of the pair is at present in the collection of a certain Mr Peter Walsh in Texas."

He stared at her in astonishment, and then burst out laughing. "Damn it! I swore'Duraïd to secrecy but he must have told you about our naughty little escapade." It was the first time she had heard him laugh. It seemed to come naturally to his lips and she -liked the sound of it, hearty and unaffected.

"You are right about the present owner of the second frieze," he told her, still laughing. "But the price was six million, not five."

"Duraïd also told me about your visit to the Tibesti Massif in Chad and southern Libya," she remarked, and he shook his head in mock contrition.

'it seems I have no secrets from you." He went to a tall armoire against the opposite wall. It was a magnificent piece of marquetry furniture, probably

seventeenth-century French. He opened the double doors and said, "This is what Duraïd and I brought back from Libya, without the consent of Colonel Muammar al Gadaffi." He took down one of the exquisite little bronzes and handed it to her. It was the figure of a mother nursing her infant, and it had a green patina of age.

"Hannibal, son of Hamilcar Barca," he said, "about 203 BC. These were found by a band of Tuareg at one of his old camps on the Bagradas river in North Africa.

Hannibal must have cached them there before his defeat by the Roman general Scipio. There were over two hundred bronzes in the hoard, and I still have fifty of the best of them."

"You sold the rest of them?" she asked, as she admired the statuette. There was disapproval in her tone as she went on, "How could you bear to part with something so beautiful?"

He sighed unhappily, "Had to, I am afraid. Very sad, but the expedition to retrieve them cost me a fortune. Had to cover expenses by selling some of the booty."

He went to his desk and brought out a bottle of Laphroaig malt whisky from the bottom drawer. He placed the bottle on the desk top and set two glasses beside it.

"Can I tempt you?" he asked, but she shook her head.

"Don't blame you. Even the Scots themselves admit that this brew should only be drunk in sub-zero weather on The Hill, in a forty-knot gale, after stalking and shooting a ten-point stag. May I offer you something a little more ladylike?"

Do you have a Coke?" she suggested.

Yes, but that is really bad for you, even worse than Laphroaig. It's all that sugar. Absolute poison."

She took the glass he brought to her and returned his toast with it.

"To life!" she agreed, and then she went on, "You are right. Duraïd did tell me about these." She replaced the Punic bronze in the armoire, then came to face him at the desk. "It was also Duraïd who sent me to see you. It was his dying instruction to me."

"Aha! So none of this is coincidence then. It seems I am the unwitting pawn in some deep and nefarious plot." He pointed to the chair facing his desk. "Sit!" he ordered "Tell!"

He perched above her on the corner of the desk, with the whisky glass in his right hand and with one long, denim-clad leg swinging lazily as the tail of a resting leopard. Though he was smiling quizzically, he watched her face with a penetrating green gaze. She thought that it would be difficult to lie to this man.

She took a deep breath, "Have you heard of an ancient Egyptian queen called Lostris, of the second intermediate period, coexistent with the first Hyksos invasions?"

He laughed a little derisively and stood up, "Oh! Now we are talking about the book River God, are we?" He went to the bookcase and brought down a copy. Although well thumbed, it was still in its dust-jacket, and the cover illustration was a dreamy surrealistic view in pastel shades of green and rose purple of the pyramids seen over water.

He dropped it on the desk in front of her.

"Have you read it?" she asked.

"Yes," he nodded. "I read most of Wilbur Smith's stuff.

He amuses me. He has shot here at Quenton Park a couple of times."

"You like lots of sex and violence in your reading, obviously?" She pulled a face. "What did you think of this particular book?"

"I must admit that he had me fooled. Whilst I was reading it, I sort of wished that it might be based on fact.

That was why I phoned Duraid." Nicholas picked up the book again and flipped to the end of it. "The author's note was convincing, but what I couldn't get out of my mind was the last sentence." He read it aloud. "'Sanwwhere in the Abyssinian mountains near the source of the Blue Nile, the mummy of Tenus still lies in the unviolated tomb of Pharaoh Mamose.

Almost angrily Nicholas threw the book down on the desk. "My God! You will never know how much I wanted it to be true. You will never know how much I wanted a shot at Pharaoh Mamose's tomb. I had to speak to Duraid.

When he assured me it was all a load of bunkum, I felt cheated. I had built up my expectations so high that I was bitterly disappointed."

"It's not bunkum," she contradicted him, and then corrected herself quickly, "well, at least not all of it."

"I see. Duraid was lying to me, was he?"

"Not lying," she defended him hotly. "Just delaying the truth a little. He wasn't ready to tell you the whole story then. He didn't have the answers to all the questions that he knew you would ask. He was going to come to you when he was ready. Your name was at the top of the list of potential sponsors that he had drawn up."

"Duraid did not have the answers, but I suppose you do?" He was smiling sceptically. "I was caught once. I am not likely to fall for the same cock and bull a second time."

"The scrolls exist. Nine of them are still in the vaults at the Cairo museum. I was the one who discovered them in the tomb of Queen Lostris." Royan opened her leather sling bag and rummaged around in it until she brought out a thin sheaf of glossy 6 4 colour photographs. She selected one and passed it to him. That is a shot of the rear wall of the tomb. You can just make out the alabaster jars in the niche. That was taken before we removed them."

"Nice picture, but it could have been taken anywhere." She ignored the remark and passed him another photograph. The ten scrolls in Duraid's workroom at the museum. You recognize the two men standing behind the bench?"

He nodded. "Duraid and Wilbur Smith." His sceptical expression had turned to one of doubt and bemusement.

"What the hell are you trying to tell me?"

"What the hell I am trying to tell you is that, apart from a wide poetic licence that the author took unto himself, all that he- wrote in the book has at least some foundation in the truth. However, the scroll that most concerns us is the seventh, the one that was stolen by the men who murdered my husband."

Nicholas stood up and went to the fireplace. He threw on another log and bashed it viciously with the poker, as if to give release to his emotions. He spoke without "turning "What was the significance of that particular scroll around, as opposed to the other nine?"

"It was the one that contained the account of Pharaoh Mamose's burial

and, we believe, directions that might enable us to find the site of the tomb."

"You believe, but you aren't certain?" He swung around to face her with the poker gripped like a weapon. In this mood he was frightening. His mouth was set in a tight hard line and his eyes glittered.

"Large parts of the seventh scroll are written in some sort of code, a series of cryptic verses. Duraïd and I were in the process of deciphering these when-' she broke off and drew a long breath, "when he was murdered."

"You must have a copy of something so valuable?" He glared at her, so that she felt intimidated. She shook her head.

"All the microfilm, all our notes, all of it was stolen along with the original scroll. Then whoever killed Duraïd went back to our flat in Cairo and destroyed my PC on to which I had transposed all our research."

He threw the poker into the coal scuttle with a clatter, and came back to the desk. "So you have no evidence at all? Nothing to prove that any of this is true?"

"Nothing," she agreed, "except what I have here." With a long slim forefinger she tapped her forehead. "I have a good memory."

He frowned and ran his fingers through his thick curling hair. "And so why did you come to me?"

"I have come to give you a shot at the tomb of Pharaoh Mamose, she told him simply. "Do you want it?"

Suddenly his mood changed. He grinned like a naughty schoolboy. "At this moment I cannot think of anything I want more."

Then you and I will have to draw up some sort of working agreement," she told him, and she leaned forward in a businesslike manner. "First, let me tell you what I want, and then you can do the same."

It was hard bargaining, and it was one in the morning when Royan admitted her exhaustion. "I can't think straight any more. Can we start again tomorrow morning?" They still had not reached an agreement.

"It's tomorrow morning already," he told her. "But you are right. Thoughtless of me. You can sleep here. After all, we do have twenty-seven bedrooms here."

"No, thanks." She stood up. "I'll go on home."

"The road will be icy," he warned her. Then he saw her determined expression and held up his hands in capitulation. "All right, I won't insist. What time tomorrow? I have a meeting with my lawyers at ten, but we should be finished by noon. Why don't you and I have a working lunch here? I was supposed to be shooting at Ganton in the afternoon, but I will cancel that. That way I will have the afternoon and evening clear for you."

Nicholas's meeting with the lawyers took place the next morning in the library of Quenton Park. It was not an easy nor a pleasant session, but then he never expected it to be. This had been the year in which his world began to fall to pieces around his head. He gritted his teeth as he remembered how the year had opened with that fatal moment of fatigue and inattention at midnight on the icy motorway, and the blinding headlights of the truck bearing down on them.

He had not recovered from that before the next brutal blow had fallen. This was the financial report of the Lloyd's insurance syndicate on which Nicholas, like his father and grandfather before him, was a "Name". For half a century the family had enjoyed a regular and substantial income from their share of the

syndicate profits. Of course, Nicholas had been aware that liability for his share of any losses that the syndicate suffered was unlimited. The enormity of that responsibility had weighed lightly; for there had never been serious losses to account for, not for fifty years, not until this year.

With the California earthquake and environmental pollution claims awarded against one of the multinational chemical companies, the syndicate's losses had amounted to over twenty-six million pounds sterling. Nicholas's share of that loss was two and a half million pounds - some of which had been settled, but the rest was due for payment in a little over eight months' time - together with whatever nasty surprises next year might hold.

Almost immediately after that the Quenton Park estate's crop of sugar beet, almost a thousand acres in total, had been hit by rhizomania, the mad root disease. They had lost the lot.

"We will need to find at least two and a half million," said one of the lawyers. "That should be no problem - the Hall is filled with valuable items, and what about the museum? What could we reasonably expect from the sale of some of the exhibits?"

Nicholas winced at the thought of selling the Ramesses statue, the bronzes, the Hammurabi frieze or any item of his cherished collection at the Hall or the museum. He acknowledged that their sale would cover his debts, but he doubted that he could live without them. Almost anything was preferable to parting with them.

"Hell, no," Nicholas cut in, and the lawyer looked across at him coldly.

"Well, let's see what else we've got," he continued remorselessly. "There's the dairy herd."

"That will bring in a hundred thousand, if we are lucky," Nicholas grunted. "Leaves only two point four million to find."

"And your racing stud," the accountant came into the conversation.

"I have only six horses in training. Another two hundred grand." Nicholas smiled without humour, "Brings us down to two point two. We are getting there slowly."

"The yacht," suggested the youngest lawyer.

"It's older than I am," Nicholas shook his head, "belonged to my father, for heaven's sake. You probably wouldn't be able to give it away. Sentimental is the only value it has. My shotguns would be worth more."

Both lawyers bent their heads over their lists, "Ah, yes!

We have those. A pair of Purdey sidelock ejectors in good condition. Estimate forty thousand."

"I also have some secondhand socks and underpants," Nicholas admitted. "Why don't you list those also?"

They ignored the jibe. "men there is the London house," the elder lawyer went on unperturbed, inured to human suffering. "Good address. Value one point five million."

"Not in this financial climate, Nicholas contradicted him. "A million is more realistic." The lawyer made a note in the margin of his document before going on, "Of course we want to avoid, if at all possible, putting the entire estate up for sale."

It was a hard and difficult meeting which ended with nothing definitely decided, and Nicholas feeling angry and frustrated.

He saw the lawyers off, and then went up to the family quarters to take a quick shower and change his shirt. As an afterthought, and for no good reason, he shaved and splashed aftershave on his cheeks.

He drove across the park and left the Range Rover in the museum car park. The snow had turned to sleet, and his bare head was sprinkled with cold droplets by the time he had crossed the car park.

Royan was waiting in Mrs. Street's office. The two of them seemed to be getting along well together. He stopped outside the door to listen to her laughter. It made him feel a little better.

The cook had sent across a hot lunch from the main house. She seemed to believe that a substantial meal would keep this foul weather at bay. There was a tureen of thick, rich minestrone and a Lancashire hotpot, with a half bottle of red Burgundy for him and a jug of freshly squeezed orange juice for her. They ate in front of the fire, while the rain whipped against the windowpanes.

While they ate he asked her to give him the details of Duraid's murder. She left out nothing, including her own injuries and drew back her sleeve to show him the dressing over the knife wound. He listened intently as she told him of the second attempt on her life in the streets of Cairo.

"Any suspicions?" he asked, when she had finished.

"Anybody you can think of who might be responsible?" But she shook her head.

"There was no warning of any kind, she said.

They finished the meal in silence, each of them thinking their own thoughts. Over the coffee he suggested, "All right, then. -What about our agreement?"

They argued back and forth for nearly an hour.

"It's difficult to agree on your share of the booty, until I know just what your contribution is going to be," Nicholas protested as he topped up their coffee cups. "After all, I am going to be called on to finance and conduct the expedition-"

"You will just have to trust that my contribution will be worthwhile, otherwise there will simply be no booty, as you call it. Anyway you can be certain I am not going to tell you one thing more until we have -an agreement, and have shaken hands on it."

"A bit harsh?" he asked, and she gave him a wicked smile.

"If you don't like my terms, there are three other names on Duraid's list of possible sponsors," she threatened.

"All right," he cut in with a contrived look of martyrdom, "I agree to your proposal, But how do we calculate equal shares?"

"I shall choose the first item of any archaeological artefacts we are able to retrieve, and you the next, and so on, turn about."

"How about I choose first?" He raised an eyebrow at her.

"Let's spin for it," she suggested, and he fished a pound coin from his pocket.

"Call!" He flipped the coin, and while it was in the air she called, "Heads."

"Damn!" he exclaimed, as he retrieved the coin and shoved it back into his pocket. "So, you get first choice of the booty, if there ever is any." He held out his hand across the lunch table. "It will be yours to do exactly what you want to do with it. You can even donate it to the Cairo museum, if that is still your particular aberration. Deal?" he asked, and she took his hand.

"Deal," she agreed, and then added, Partner."

"Now let's get down to it. No more secrets between us Tell me every detail that you have been holding back."

"Bring that book," she pointed to the copy of River God, and while he fetched it she pushed the dirty dishes aside. "The first thing we should go over is the sections of the book that Duraid edited." She turned to the last pages.

"Here. This is where Duraid's obfuscation begins."

"Good word," Nicholas smiled, "but let's keep it simple.

You have obfuscated me enough already."

She did not even smile. "You know the story to this point. Queen Lostris and her people are driven out of Egypt by the Hyksos and their superior chariots. They journey south up the Nile until they reach the confluence of the White and Blue Niles. In other words, present-day Khartoum. All this is reasonably faithful to the scrolls."

"I recall. Go on."

"In the holds of their river galleys they are carrying the mummified body of Queen Lostris's husband, Pharaoh Mamose the Eighth. Twelve years previously she has sworn to him as he lay dying of a Hyksos arrow through his lung that she would find a secure burial site for him, and that she would lay him in it with all his vast treasure. When they reach Khartoum she determines that the time has at last come for her to make good her promise to him. She sends out her son, the fourteen-year-old Prince Memnon, with a squadron of chariots to find the burial site. Memnon is accompanied by his mentor, the narrator of the history, the indefatigable Taita."

"Okay, I remember this section. Memnon and Taita consult the black Shilluk slaves they have captured, and on their advice decide to follow the left-hand fork of the river, or what we know as the Blue Nile."

Royan nodded and continued the story. "They travelled eastwards and were confronted by formidable mountains, so high that they were described as a blue rampart.

So far what you read in the book is a fairly faithful rendition of the scrolls, but at this point," she tapped the open page, we come to Duraid's red herring. In his description of the foothills-

Before she could continue, Nicholas interjected, "I remember thinking when I originally read it that it didn't accurately describe the area where the Blue Nile emerges from the Ethiopian highlands. There are no foothills. There is only the sheer western escarpment of the massif. The river comes out of it like a snake out of its hole. Whoever wrote that description doesn't know the course of the Blue Nile."

"Do you know the area?" Royan asked, and he laughed and nodded.

"Alhen I was younger and even more stupid than I am now, I conceived the grandiose plan of boating the Abbay gorge from Lake Tana down to the dam at Roseires in the Sudan. The Abbay is the Ethiopian name for the Blue Nile., "Why did you want to do that?"

"Because it had never been done before. Major Cheesman, the British consul, had a shot at it in 1932, and nearly drowned himself. I thought I could make a film, and write a book about the voyage and earn myself a fortune , from the royalties. I talked my father into financing the expedition. It was the kind of mad escapade that appealed to him. He even wanted to join the expedition. I studied the whole course of the Abbay river, not only on maps. I

also bought myself an old Cessna 180 and flew down the gorge, five hundred miles from Lake Tana to the dam. As I said, I was twenty-one years old and crazy."

"What happened?" She was fascinated. Duraïd had never told her about this, but it was the type of adventure that she would have expected this man to launch into.

"I recruited eight of my friends from Sandhurst, and we devoted our Christmas holidays to the attempt. It was a fiasco. We lasted two days on those wild waters. The gorge is the most hellish corner of this earth that I know of. It's almost twice as deep and as rugged as the Grand Canyon of the Colorado river in Arizona. It smashed up our kayaks before we had covered twenty miles out of the five hundred.

We had to abandon all our equipment and climb the walls of the gorge to reach civilization again."

He looked serious for a moment, "I lost two members of our party. Bobby Palmer was drowned, and Tim Marshall fell on the cliffs. We were not even able to recover their bodies. They are still down there somewhere. I had to tell their parents-' he broke off as he remembered the agony of it.

"Has anybody ever succeeded in navigating the Blue Nile gorge?"-she asked, to distract him.

"Yes. I went back a few years later. This time not as leader, but as a very junior member of the official British Armed Forces Expedition. It took the army, the navy and the air force to beat that river."

She stared at him with a feeling of awe. He had actually rafted the Abbay. It was as though she had been led to him by some strange fate. Duraïd was right. There probably no man in the world better qualified for the work in hand.

"So you know as much as anybody about the real the gorge. I will try to give you a general nature of indication of what Taita actually set down in the seventh scroll. Unfortunately this section of the scroll had suffered some damage and Duraïd and I were obliged to extrapolate from parts of the text. You will have to tell me how this agrees with your own knowledge of the terrain."

"Go ahead, he invited her.

"Taita described the escarpment very much the way you did, as a sheer wall from which the river emerged.

They were forced to leave their chariots, which were unable to cover the steep and rugged terrain of the canyon. They were forced to go forward on foot, leading the pack horses.

Soon the gorge grew so steep and dangerous that they lost, which fell from the wild goat tracks some of these animals they were following and plunged into the river far below.

This did not deter them and they pressed on at the orders of Prince Memnon."

"I can see it exactly as he describes it. It's a fearsome bit of countryside."

"Taita then describes coming to a series of obstacles, which he describes as 'steps'. Duraïd and I could not decide with certainty what these were. But our best guess was that they were waterfalls."

"No shortage of those in the Abbay gorge, either," Nicholas nodded.

"This is the important part of his testimony. Taita tells us that after twenty days' travel up the gorge they came upon the 'second step'. It was here that the

prince received a fortuitous message from his dead father, in the form of a dream, in which he chose this as the site of his own tomb.

Taita tells us that they travelled no further. If we are able to determine what it was that stopped them, that would give us an accurate measurement of just how far into the gorge they penetrated."

"Before we can go any further we will need maps and satellite photographs of the mountains, and I will have to go over my expedition notes and diary," Nicholas decided "I try to keep my reference library up-to-date, and so we should have satellite photographs and the most recent maps on file here in the museum. If they are Mrs. Street is the one to find them."

He stood up and stretched, "I will dig out my diaries this evening and read over them. My great-grandfather also hunted and collected in Ethiopia in the last century. I know he crossed the Blue Nile near Debra Markos in 1890something. I'll get out his notes as well. They are preserved in our archives. The old boy may have written something there that could help us."

He walked with her to the old green Land Rover in the car park, and as she started the engine he told her through the open window, "I still think that you should stay over here at the Hall. It must be an hour-and-a-half's drive across to Brandsbury - each way that's three hours a day. We are going to have a lot of work to do before we can even think of leaving for Africa."

"What would people think?" she asked, as she let out the clutch.

"I have never given a damn about people," he called after her. "What time will I see you tomorrow?"

I have to stop off to see the doctor in York. He is going to take the stitches out of my arm. I won't be here before eleven," she stuck her head out of the window to yell back at him.

The wind tossed her dark hair around her face. His fancy had always run towards dark-haired women. Rosalind had had that mysterious Eastern look. He felt guilty and disloyal making the comparison, but the memory of Royan was hard to shake off.

She was the first woman who had interested him since Rosalind had gone. The admixture of her blood drew him.

She was exotic enough to pique his taste for the oriental, but English enough to speak his language and understand his sense of humour. She was educated and knowledgeable about those things that interested him, and he admired her spirit. Usually Eastern women were trained from birth to be self-effacing and compliant. This one was different.

Georgina had phoned her doctor in York to make an appointment to have the stitches removed from Royan's arm. They left after breakfast from the cottage in Brandsbury. Georgina was driving and Magic sat between them on the bench seat.

As they turned into the village street, Royan noticed a large MAN truck parked down near the post office, but she thought no more about it.

Once they were out in the countryside they found there were patches of heavy fog that in places reduced visibility to thirty yards, but Georgina made no concessions to the weather, and sent the Land Rover rattling and whining through it at the top of its speed, which Royan reflected thankfully was on the right side of sixty miles an hour.

She glanced over her shoulder to check the road behind them, and saw that

the MAN truck was following them, Only the cab rose above the sea of low mist that surrounded it like the conning tower of a submarine. Even as she watched it, a bank of fog intervened and swallowed it up. She turned back to listen to her mother.

"This government is a troop of incompetent nincompoops." Georgina squinted her eyes against the smoke from the cigarette that dangled from her lips. She drove singlehanded, stroking Magic's flowing silken ear with her free hand, "I don't mind ministers boiling themselves into a stupor, but when they start fiddling around with my pension I get really mad." Her mother's pension from the foreign service was her sole source of income, and it wasn't much.

"You don't truly want a Labour government, now tell the truth, Mummy," Royan teased her. Her mother had always been the arch Conservative.

Georgina wavered, and then avoided the choice, "All I say is, bring back Maggie."

Royan turned slightly in her seat and glanced through the dirty rear window again. The truck was still behind them, looming out of the fog and the trail of blue exhaust smoke that Georgina was laying behind her like the vapour trail of a jet aircraft. Up until now it had hung back, but suddenly it accelerated up behind them.

"I think he wants to pass you," Royan told Georgina mildly.

The massive bonnet of the truck was only twenty feet from their rear bumper. The radiator was emblazoned with the chrome logo "MAN" and stood taller than the cab of the Land Rover, so that she could not see the face of the driver from where she sat.

"Everybody wants to pass me," lamented Georgina.

"Story of my life." She held the centre of the narrow road doggedly.

Royan glanced back again, and saw that the truck was creeping still closer. It filled the rear window completely.

The driver declutched and revved the gigantic engine menacingly.

"You' better give over. I think he means business."

"Let him wait," Georgina grunted around her cigarette butt. "Patience is a virtue. Anyway, can't let him through here. There is a narrow stone bridge ahead of us. Know this stretch of road like the way to my own bathroom."

At that moment the truck-driver sounded his klaxon so close that it was deafening. Magic jumped up on the rear seat and barked in outrage.

"Stupid bastard," Georgina swore bitterly. "What does he think he is playing at? Write down his number plate. I am going to report him to the York police."

"His plates are covered with mud. Can't make it out, but it looks like a continental registration. German, I think."

As if the driver had heard her protest he slowed slightly and fell back until a gap of twenty yards opened between the two vehicles. Royan had swivelled right round in the seat to watch him.

"That's better," Georgina said smugly. "Ruddy Hun learning some manners." She peered ahead through the fog, "There is the bridge For the first time Royan was able to see up into the driver's cab of the truck. The driver wore a balactava helmet that covered all but his eyes and nose with dark blue wool. It gave him a sinister and evil aspect.

"Look outV Royan screamed suddenly. "He is coming straight at us!" The engine beat of the great truck rose to a bellow that engulfed them like the

sound of a gale-driven sea. For a moment Royan saw nothing but glittering steel and then the front of the truck smashed into them from behind.

She was thrown half over the back of her seat by the impact. She dragged herself up and saw that the truck had picked them up like a fox with a bird in its jaws. It carried the Land Rover forward on the steel bull bars that protected the shining chromed radiator.

Georgina wrestled with the wheel, trying to maintain control, but the effort was futile. "Can't hold her. The bridge! Try and get clear-"

Royan hit the quick-release buckle on her safety-belt and reached for the door handle. The stone walls of the bridge were racing towards them at a terrifying pace. The Land Rover was slewing across the road, completely out of control.

The door burst open in Royan's grip, but she could not push it all the way before the Land Rover was flung into the solid stonework columns that guarded the approaches to the bridge. The two women screamed in unison as the vehicle crumpled, and the impact hurled them forward. The windscreen shattered as they bounced off the stone columns, and the body of the Land Rover flipped over as it went down the embankment and began to roll.

Royan was catapulted through the open door and flung clear. The slope of the bank broke her fall, but it knocked the wind out of her. She bounced and rolled down the incline and then dropped into the icy waters of the stream below the bridge.

Just before her head went under, she found herself looking up at the sky and the bridge above her. She caught one last glimpse of the truck before it roared away. It was towing two huge cargo trailers. The tall bodywork of the trailers stood higher than the guard rail of the bridge.

Both of the trailers were covered by a heavy green nylon tarpaulin roped down to the lugs on the body. She had only a subliminal glimpse of a large red trademark and company name painted on the side of the nearest trailer, but before she could register the name she was plunged below the surface of the stream and the cold and the force of her fall drove the air from her lungs.

She fought her way to the surface of the river, and found she had been washed some way downstream.

Impeded by her sodden clothing, she floundered to the bank and used the branch of a tree to haul herself out.

She knelt in the mud, coughing up the water she had swallowed and trying to assess what injury she had suffered in the collision. Then her own plight was forgotten as she heard the terrible sounds of her mother's agony from the overturned wreck of the Land Rover.

In frantic haste she clawed herself to her feet and stumbled through the wet and frosted grass to where the Land Rover lay on its back at the foot of the embankment.

The bodywork was crumpled and torn, and the bright silver aluminium metal shone through where the dark green paint had been stripped away. The engine had stalled, and the front wheels were still spinning aimlessly as she reached it.

"Mummy! Where are you?" she cried, and the terrible sounds never checked. She used the metal body of the vehicle to steady herself as she dragged herself towards the sound, dreading what she might find.

Georgina sat on the wet earth with her back against the side of the car. Her

legs were thrust out straight ahead of her. The left one was twisted so that the toe of the booted foot was pointed down into the mud at an unnatural angle. The leg was obviously broken at the knee or very close to it.

This was not the cause of Georgina's distress. She held Magic in her lap, and was bowed over him in an attitude of abandoned grief; the sound of it bubbled up unchecked from deep inside her. The spaniel's chest had been crushed between metal and earth. His tongue lolled from the corner of his mouth in his last smile, but the blood dripped steadily from the pink tip and Georgina was using her scarf to wipe it away.

Royan sank down beside her mother and placed one arm around her shoulders. She had never before seen her mother weep. She hugged her hard and tried by main strength to quell the sound of her sorrow, but it went on and on. , She never knew how long they sat together like that.

But at last the sight of her mother's maimed leg, and an awakening fear that the driver of the truck might return to finish the job, roused her. She crawled up the bank and tottered into the centre of the road to stop the next car that arrived on the scene.

Not until Royan was two hours late for their meeting did Nicholas become sufficiently worried to phone the police in York. Fortunately he had noticed the licence plate of the Land Rover.

It was an easy one for him to remember. The registration number was his mother's initials combined with an unlucky 13.

There was a delay while the woman constable checked her computer, and then she came back. "I am sorry to have to tell you, sir, that Land Rover was involved in an accident this morning."

"What happened to the driver? Nicholas demanded brusquely.

"The driver and one passenger have been taken to the York Minster Hospital."

"Are they all right?"

"I am sorry, sir. I don't have that information." It took Nicholas forty minutes to reach the hospital and almost as long again to trace Royan. She was in the women's surgical ward, sitting beside her mother's bed. Her mother had not yet come round from the anaesthetic.

She looked up when Nicholas stood over her. "Are you all right? What the hell happened?"

"My mother - her leg is badly smashed up. The surgeon had to put a pin in her thigh - the femur.

"How are you?"

"A few bruises and scrapes. Nothing serious., "How did it happen?"

"A truck - it pushed us off the road."

"Not deliberate?" Nicholas felt something inside him quail as he remembered another truck on another road on another night.

I think so. The driver wore a mask, a balaclava. He crashed into us from behind. It must have been deliberate."

"Did you tell the police?"

She nodded. "Apparently the truck was reported stolen early this morning, long before the accident, while the driver was stopped at one of those Little Chef cafes. He is German. Speaks no English."

"That is the third time they have tried to kill you," Nicholas told her grimly. "So I

am taking over now."

He went out into the hospital waiting room and used the telephone there. The chief constable of the county was a personal friend, as was the hospital administrator.

By the time he returned, Georgina had come round from the anaesthetic. Although still woozy she was comfortable as they wheeled her off to the private ward that Nicholas, had arranged. The - orthopaedic surgeon arrived a few minutes later.

"Hello, Nick, what are you doing here?" he greeted Nicholas. Royan was surprised how many people knew him.

Then he turned his attention to Georgina. "How are you feeling? We have got ourselves a nice little compound fracture. Looks like confetti in there. We've managed to put it all together again, but you're going to be with us for ten days at the very least."

"Right you are, young lady," Nicholas told Royan as they left Georgina sleeping. "What more do you need to convince you? My housekeeper has made up a room for you at the Hall. I am not letting you wander around on your own any more. Otherwise, next time they try to cull you they may have a little more luck."

She was still too shaken and upset to argue, and she climbed meekly into the front seat of the Range Rover and let him drive her first to have her stitches removed and then back to Quenton Park. As soon as they arrived, he sent her up to her bedroom.

"The cook will send dinner up to you. Make sure you take the sleeping pill that the doc gave you. Somebody will fetch your gear from 's cottage to Mrs. Street. In the meantime my housekeeper has set out some nightclothes and a toothbrush in your room for you. I don't want to hear from you again before tomorrow morning."

It was good to have him take control of her life. For the first time since that terrible night at the oasis she felt secure and safe. Still, she made one last gesture of independence and self-reliance; she flushed the Mogadon sleeping tablet down the toilet.

The nightdress that was laid on her pillow was full, length sheer silk with finest Cambrai lace at the cuffs and It. . A robe. She had never worn anything so luxurious and sensual against her skin before. She realized that it must have belonged to his wife, and the knowledge stirred mixed emotions in her. She climbed up into the four-poster bed, but even that lonely expanse of over'soft mattress and her unfamiliar surroundings did not keep her too long from sleep.

ù the morning a young housemaid woke her with aù copy of The Times and a pot of Earl Grey tea, then returned a few minutes later with her holdall.

"Sir Nicholas would like you to take breakfast with him in the dining room at eight-thirty., While she showered Royan inspected her naked body in the full-length mirror that covered one wall of -the bathroom. Apart from the knife wound on her -arm, which was still livid and only partially healed, there was a dark bruise on her thigh and another down her left flank and buttock, legacies of the car crash. Her shin was scraped raw, and gingerly she pulled a pair of socks over the injury.

She limped a little as she went down the main staircase to find the dining room.

"Please help yourself." Nicholas looked up from his newspaper to greet her as she hesitated in the doorway. He waved at the display of breakfast dishes on the sideboard.

As she spooned scrambled eggs on to her plate, she recognized the landscape on the wall in front of her as a Constable.

"Did you sleep well?" He didn't wait for an answer, but went on, "I have heard from the police. They found the MAN truck abandoned in a lay-by near Harrogate. They are going over it now but they don't expect to find much.

We seem to be dealing with someone who knows what he is doing."

"I must phone the hospital," she said.

"I have already done so. Your mother had an easy night. I left a message that you would visit her this evening."

"This evening?" She looked around sharply. "Why so late?"

"I intend to keep you busy until then. I want to get my money's worth out of you."

He stood as she came to the table, and drew back her chair to seat her. She found the courtesy made her feel slightly uncomfortable, but she made no comment.

"The first attack on you and Duraïd at your villa in the oasis - we can draw no conclusions from that" apart from the fact that the assassins knew exactly what they were after, and where to look for it." She found the abrupt change of subject disconcerting. "However, let's give some thought to the second attempt in Cairo. The hand grenade.

Who knew you were going to the Ministry that afternoon, apart from the minister himself?"

She reflected as she chewed and swallowed a mouthful of egg. "I am not sure. I think I told Duraïd's secretary, maybe one of the other research assistants."

He frowned and shook his head. "So half the museum staff knew about your appointment?"

"That is about it, yes. Sorry."

He pondered a moment, "All right. Who knew you were leaving Cairo? Who knew you were staying at your mother's cottage?"

"One of the clerks from administration brought my slides out to the airport."

"Did you tell him what flight you were leaving on?"

"No, definitely not."

"Did you tell anybody at all?"

"No. That is.-" she hesitated.

"Yes?"

"I told the minister himself during our interview, when I asked for leave of absence. Not him surely not?" her expression reflected her horror at the thought.

Nicholas shrugged, "Some funny things happen. Of course, the minister knew all about the work that you and Duraïd were doing on the seventh scroll?"

"Not all the details, but - yes - in general terms he knew what we were up to.

"All right. Next question, tea or coffee?" He poured coffee into her cup, and then went on, "You said that Duraïd had a list of possible sponsors for an expedition.

Might give us some ideas as to a short-list of suspects?"

"The Getty Museum," she said, and he' smiled.

"Cross one from the list. They don't go around tossing grenades in the streets of Cairo. Who else was there on the list?, "Gotthold Ernst von Schiller."

"Hamburg. Heavy industry. Metal and alloy refineries.

Base mineral production." Nicholas nodded. "Who was the third name on the list?"

"Peter Walsh," she said. "The Texan."

"That's the one," he nodded. "Lives in Fort Worth.

Fast-food'franchising. Mail order retail." There were very few collectors with the substance to compete with the major institutions when it came to making significant of antiquities or to financing archaeological acquisitions exploration. Nicholas knew them all, for it was a mutually antagonistic circle of no more than a couple of dozen men.

He had competed with each of them at one time or ano& on the auction floors of Sotheby's and Christie's, not to mention other less salubrious venues where "fresh' antiquities were sold. The adjective "fresh' was used in the context of "fresh out of the ground'.

"Those are two beady-eyed bandits. They would probably eat their own children if they felt peckish. What would they do if they thought you stood in their way to the tomb of Mamose? Do you know if either of them contacted Duraid after the book was published, the way I did?"

"I don't know. They may have."

"I cannot imagine that either of those beauties would have missed such an easy trick. We must believe that they both know that Duraid had something going on. We will put their names on our list of suspects." Then he inspected her plate. "Enough? Another spoonful of egg? No? Very well, let's go down to the museum and see what Mrs. Street has found for us to work on."

When they walked into his study, she was impressed by the amount of organization that he had accomplished in such a short time. He must have been busy at it all last night, turning the room into a military-type headquarters.

In the centre of the room stood a large easel and blackboard which were pinned a set of overlapping satellite photographs. She went across to study them, and then glanced at the other material pinned on the board.

Along with a large-scale map covering the same area of southwestern Ethiopia as the satellite photographs there were lists of names and addresses, lists of equipment and stores which he had obviously used on previous African expeditions, sheets of calculations of distance and what looked like a preliminary financial budget. At the top of the board was a schedule headed "Ethiopia - General Information'. There were five closely typed sheets, so she did not read through the entire schedule, but she was impressed by his thoroughness in preparation.

Royan determined to study all this material at the earliest opportunity, but now she crossed to one of the two chairs he had set up at a table facing the board. He stood at the board and picked up a silver-topped swagger stick from the table, brandishing it like a schoolmaster's pointer.

"Class will come to order." He rapped on the board.

"The first thing you have to do is convince me that we will be able to pick up the spoor of Taita again after it has had several thousand years to cool. Let us first consider the geographical features of the Abbay gorge."

Nicholas described the course of the river on the satellite photograph with his pointer. "Along this section the river has cut its way through the flood basalt plateaux.

In places the cliff of the sub-gorge are sheer, as high as four or five hundred feet on each side. Where there are intrusive strata of harder igneous schists the river has not been able to erode them. They form a series of gigantic steps in the course of the river. I think you are correct in your assumption that Taita's "steps" are actually waterp falls."

He came to the table and picked out a photograph from amongst the bundles of papers that covered it. "I took this in the gorge during the Armed Forces Expedition in 1976. It will give you an idea of what some of those falls are like."

He passed her a black and white riverscape of towering cliffs on either hand and a cascade of water that seemed to fall from the heavens to dwarf the tiny figures of half-naked men and boats in the foreground.

"I had no idea it was. like thad' She stared at it in awe.

"Doesn't do justice to the splendid desolation down he told her. "From a photographer's there in the gorge, gra point of view there. is no place to stand from which you can get it all into perspective. But at least you can see how that waterfall would halt a party of Egyptians coming upriver on foot, or at least with pack horses. There is usually some sort of path alongside the cataracts made by elephant and other wild game over the ages. However, there is simply no way to bypass waterfalls such as this one, and to get around those cliffs."

Seventh Scroll

She nodded, and he went on, "Even coming downstream we had to lower the boats and all our equipment down each set of waterfalls on ropes. It wasn't easy."

"Let us agree that it was a waterfall that stopped them going further - the second waterfall from the westerly approaches," she conceded.

Nicholas picked up the swagger stick and on the satellite photograph traced the course of the river up from the dark wedge shape of the Roseires dam in central Sudan.

"The escarpment, rises on the Ethiopian side of the border, that is where the gorge proper begins. No roads or towns in there, and only two bridges far upstream. Nothing for five hundred miles except racing Nile waters and savage black basalt rock." He paused to let that sink in.

"It is one of the last true wildernesses on earth, with an evil reputation as the haunt of wild animals and even wilder men. I have marked the main falls that show in the gut of the gorge here on the satellite photo." With the pointer he picked them out, each circled neatly in red marker pen.

"Here is waterfall number two, about a hundred and twenty miles upstream from the Sudanese border. However, there are a number of factors we have to consider, not least the fact that the river may have altered its course during the last four thousand years since our friend, "Taita, visited it."

"Surely it could not have escaped from such a deep canyon, four thousand feet," she protested. "Even the Nile must be held captive by that?"

"Yes, but it would certainly have altered the existing bed. In the flood season the volume and force of the river exceeds my ability to describe it to you. The river rises twenty metres up the side walls and bores through at speeds 3; of ten knots or more."

"You navigated that?" she asked doubtfully.

"Not in the flood season. Nothing could survive that.

They both stared at the photograph in silence for a minute, imagining the terrors of that mighty stretch of water in its fury.

Then she reminded him, "The second waterfall?"

"Here it is, where one of the tributary rivers enters the main flow of the Abbay. The tributary is the Dandera river and it rises at twelve thousand feet altitude, below the peak of Sancai Mountain in the Choke range, here about a hundred miles north of the gorge."

"Do you remember the spot where it joins the Abbay from when you were there?"

"It was over twenty years ago, and even then we had been almost a month down there in the gorge, so it all seemed to merge into a single nightmare. The memory bluffed with the monotonous surroundings of the cliffs and the dense Jungle of the walls, and our senses were dulled by the heat and the insects and the roar of water and the repetitive, unremitting toil at the oars. But, strangely, I do remember the confluence of the Dandera and the Abbay for two reasons."

"Yes?" She sat forward eagerly, but he shook his head.

"We lost a man there. The only casualty on the second expedition. Rope parted and he fell a hundred feet. Landed on his back across a spur of rock."

i am sorry. But what was the other reason you remember the spot."

"There is a Coptic Christian monastery there, built into the rock face about four hundred feet above the surface of the river."

"Down the re in the depths of the gorge?" She sounded incredulous. "Why would they build a monastery there?"

"Ethiopia is one of the oldest Christian countries on earth. It has over nine thousand churches and monasteries, a great many of them in similarly remote and almost inaccessible places in the mountains. This one at the Dandera river is the reputed burial site of St. Frumentius, the saint who introduced Christianity to Ethiopia from the Byzantine Empire in Constantinople in the early third century. Legend has it that he was shipwrecked on the Red Sea shore and taken to Aksum, where he converted the Emperor Ezana."

"Did you visit the monastery?"

"Hell, no!" he laughed. "We were too busy just surviving, too eager to escape from the hell of the gorge to have any time for sightseeing. We descended the falls and kept on down river. All I remember of the monastery are the excavations in the cliff face high above the pool of the river, and the distant figures of the troglodytic monks in their white robes lining the parapet of the caves to watch impassively as we passed. Some of us waved up to them) and felt quite rebuffed when they made no response."

"How would we ever reach that spot again, without a full-scale river expedition?" she wondered aloud, staring disconsolately at the board.

"Discouraged already?" He grinned at her. "Wait until you meet some of the mosquitoes that live down there.

They pick you up and fly with you to their lairs before they eat you."

"Be serious," she entreated him. "How would we ever get down there?"

"The monks are fed by the villagers who live up on the highlands above the gorge. Apparently, there is a goat track down the wall. They told us that it takes three days to get down that track into the gut of the gorge from the rim."

"Could you find your way down?"

"No, but I have a few ideas on the subject. We will come to that later. Firstly, we must decide what we expect to find down there after four thousand years." He looked at her expectantly. "Your turn now. Convince me." He handed her the silver-headed pointer, dropped into the chair beside her and folded his arms.

"First you have to go back to the book." She exchanged the pointer for the copy of River God. "You remember the character of Tanus from the story?"

"Of course. He was the commander of the Egyptian armies under Queen Lostris, with the title of Great Lion of Egypt. He led the exodus from Egypt, when they were driven out by the Hyksos."

"He was also the Queen's secret lover and, if we are to believe Taita, the father of Prince Memnon, her eldest son," she agreed.

Tanus was killed during a punitive expedition against an Ethiopian chief named Arkoun in the high mountains, and his body was mummified and brought back to the Queen by Taita,'Nicholas expanded the story.

Precisely." She nodded. This leads me on to the other clue that Duraid and I winkled out."

"From the seventh scroll?" He unfolded his arms and sat forward in his seat.

"No, not from the scrolls, but from the inscriptions in the tomb of Queen

Lostris." She reached into her bag and brought out another photograph. This is an enlargement of a section of the murals from the burial chamber, that part of the wall that later fell away and was lost when the alabaster jars were revealed. Duraïd and I believe that the fact that Taita placed this inscription in the place of honour, over the hiding-place of the scrolls, was significant." She passed the photograph to him, and he picked up a magnifying glass from the table to study it.

While he puzzled over the hieroglyphics Royan went on, "You will recall from the book how Taita loved riddles and word games, how he boasts so often that he is the greatest of all *boa* players?"

Nicholas looked up from the magnifying glass, "I remember that. I go along with the theory that *bao* was the forerunner of the game of chess. I have a dozen or so boards in the museum collection, some from Egypt and others from further south in Africa."

"Yes, I would also subscribe to that theory. Both games have many of the same objects and rules, but *bao* is a more rudimentary form of the game. It is played with coloured stones of different rank, instead of chess men. Well, I believe that Taita was not able to resist the temptation to display his riddling skills and his cleverness to posterity. I believe that he was so conceited that he deliberately left clues to the location of the Pharaoh's tomb, both in the scrolls and amongst the murals that he tells us he painted with his own hands in the tomb of his beloved Queen."

"You think that this is one of those clues?" Nicholas tapped the photograph with the glass.

"Read it," she instructed him. "It's in classical hieroglyphics - not too difficult compared to his cryptic codes."

"The father of the prince who is not the father, the giver of the blue that killed him," he translated haltingly, "'guards eternally hand in hand with Hapi the stone testament of the pathway to the father of the prince who is not the father, the giver of blood and ashes.'"

Nicholas shook his head, "No, it doesn't make sense," he protested, "you must have made an error in the translation."

"Don't despair. You are making your first acquaintance with Taita, the champion *bao*, player and consummate riddler. Duraïd and I puzzled over it for weeks," she reassured him. "To work it out, let's go back to the book."

Tanus was not the father of Prince Memnon in name, but, as the Queen's lover, was his biological father. On his deathbed, he gave Memnon the blue sword that had inflicted his own mortal wound during the battle with the native Ethiopian chief There is a full description of the battle in the book."

"Yes, when I first read that section, I remember thinking that the blue sword was probably one of the very earliest iron weapons, and in an age of bronze would have been a marvel of the armourer's art. A gift fit for a prince," Nicholas mused, and went on, "So "the father of the prince who is not the father" is Tanus?" He sighed with resignation.

"For the moment I accept your interpretation."

"Thank you for your trust and confidence in me," she said sarcastically. "But to proceed with Taita's riddle Pharaoh Mamose was Memnon's father in name only, but not his blood father. Again the father who was not the father. Mamose passed down to the prince the double crown of Egypt, the red and white

crowns of Upper and Lower Kingdoms - the blood and the ashes.

"I am able to swallow that more easily. What about the rest of the inscription?" Nicholas was clearly intrigued.

"The expression 'hand in hand' is ambiguous in ancient Egyptian. It could just as well mean very close to, or within sight of, something."

"Go on. At last you have me sitting up and taking notice," Nicholas encouraged her.

"Hapi is the hermaphroditic god or goddess of the Nile, depending on the gender he or she adopts at any particular moment. Throughout the scrolls Taita uses Hapi as an alternative name for the river."

"So if we put the seventh scroll and the 'inscription from the Queen's tomb together, what then is your full interpretation?" he insisted.

"Simply this: Tanus is buried within sight of, or very close to, the river at the second waterfall. There is a stone monument or inscription on, or in, his tomb that points the way to the tomb of Pharaoh."

He exhaled through his teeth. "I am exhausted from all this jumping to conclusions. What other clues have you ferreted out for me?"

"That's it," she said, and he looked at her with disbelief.

"That's it? Nothing else?" he demanded, and she shook her head.

"Just suppose that you are correct so far. Let us suppose that the river is recognizably the same in shape and configuration as it was nearly four thousand years ago. Let us further suppose that Taita was indeed pointing us towards the second waterfall at the Dandera river. Just what do we look for when we get there? If there is a rock inscription, will it still be intact or will it be eroded away by weather and the action of the river?"

"Howard Carter had an equally slender lead to the tomb of Tutankhamen," she pointed out mildly. "A single piece of papyrus, of dubious authenticity."

"Howard Carter had only the area of the Valley of the Kings to search. It still took him ten years," he replied. "You have given me Ethiopia, a country twice the size of France."

How long will that take us, do you think?"

She stood up abruptly, "Excuse me, I think I should go and visit my mother in hospital. It's fairly obvious that I am wasting my time here."

"It is not yet visiting hours," he told her.

"She has a private room." Royan made for the door.

"I will drive you to the hospital," he offered.

"Don't bother. I will call a taxi," she replied in a tone that crackled with ice.

"A taxi will take an hour to get here," he warned, and she relented just enough to let him lead her to the Range Rover. They drove in silence for fifteen minutes, before he spoke.

"I am not very good at apologies. Not much practice, I am afraid, but I am sorry. I was abrupt. I didn't mean to be."

Carried away by the excitement of the moment she did not reply, and after a minute added, "You will have to talk to me, unless we are to correspond only by note. It will be a bit awkward down in the Abbey gorge."

"I had the distinct impression that you were no longer interested in going down there." She stared ahead through the windscreen.

"I am a brute," he agreed and she glanced sideways at him. It was her undoing. His grin was irresistible, and she laughed.

"I Suppose I will just have to come to terms with that fact. You are a brute."

"Still partners?" he asked.

"At the moment you are the only brute I have.
suppose that I am stuck with you."

He dropped her off at the main hospital entrance. "I will pick you up here at three 'clock," he told her and drove on into the centre of York.

From his university days Nicholas had kept a small flat in one of the narrow alleys behind York Minster. The entire building was registered in the name of a Cayman Island company, and the unlisted telephone there did not route through an internal switchboard. No ownership could be traced to him personally. Before he had met Rosalind the flat had played an important part in his social life. But nowadays Nicholas only used it for confidential and clandestine business. Both the Libyan and the Iraqi expeditions had been planned and organized from here.

He hadn't used the flat for months, and it was cold and musty-smelling and uninviting. He put a match to the gas fire in the grate and filled the kettle. With a mug of steaming tea in front of him he placed a call to a bank in Jersey, followed immediately by another to a bank in the Cayman Islands.

"A wise rat has more than one exit from its burrow."

This was a family maxim, passed down through the generations. He was going to need funds for the expedition, and the lawyers had most of those locked up already.

He gave the passwords and account numbers to each of the bank managers, and instructed them to make certain transfers. It always amazed him how easily matters could be ranged, as long as you had money.

He checked his watch. It was still early morning in Florida, but Alison picked up the phone on the second ring. She was the blonde feminine dynamo who ran Global Safaris, a company that arranged hunting and fishing expeditions to remote areas around the world.

"Hello, Nick. We haven't heard from you in over a year. We thought you didn't love us any more."

"I have been out of it for a while," he admitted. How do you tell people that your wife and two little girls had died?

"Ethiopia?" She did not sound at all disconcerted by the request. "When did you want to go?"

"How about next week?"

"You have to be joking. We only work with one hunter there, Nassous Roussos, and he is booked two years in advance."

"Is there nobody else?" he insisted. "I have to be in and out again before the big rains."

"What trophies are you after? she hedged. "Mountain nyala? Menelik's bushbuck?"

"I am planning a collecting trip for the museum, down the Abbay river." It was as much as he was prepared to tell her.

She hedged a little longer and then told him reluctantly, This is without our recommendation, do you understand. There is only one hunter who may take You on at such short notice, but I don't even know if he has a camp on the Blue Nile. He is a Russian, and we have had mixed reports about him. Some people say he is ex-KGB an was one of Mengistu's bunch of thugs."

Mengistu was the "Black Stalin" who had deposed and then murdered the old Emperor Haile Selassie, and in sixteen years of despotic Marxist rule had driven Ethiopia to its knees. When his sponsor, the Soviet Empire, had collapsed, Mengistu had been overthrown and fled the country.

"I am desperate enough to go to bed with the devil," he told her. "I promise I won't come back to you with any complaints."

"Okay, then, no comebacks-" and she gave him a name and a telephone number in Addis Ababa.

"I love you, Alison darling" Nicholas told her.

"I wish," she said, and hung up on him.

He didn't expect that it would be easy to telephone Addis, and he wasn't disappointed in his expectations. But at last he got through. A woman with a sweet lisping of Ethiopian accent answered and switched to fluent English when he asked for Boris Brusilov.

"He is out on safari at present," she told him. "I am Woizero Tessay, his wife." In Ethiopia a wife did not take on her husband's name. Nicholas remembered enough of the language to know that the name meant Lady Sun, a pretty name.

"But if it is in connection with safari business I can help you," said Lady Sun.

Nicholas picked Royan up outside the hospital entrance.

"How is your mother?"

"Her leg is doing well, but she's still distraught about Magic - about her dog."

You will have to get her a puppy. One of my keepers breeds first-class springers. I can arrange it." He paused and then asked delicately, "Will you be able to leave your mother? I mean, if we are going out to Africa?"

"I spoke to her about that. There is a woman from her church group who will stay with her until she is well enough to fend for herself again."

Royan turned fully around in her seat to examine his face. "You have been up to something since I last saw you," she accused him. "I can see it in your face."

He made the Arabic sign against the evil eye, "Allah save me from witches!"

"Come on!" He could make her laugh so readily, she was not sure if that was a good thing or not. "Tell me what you have up your sleeve."

"Wait until we get back to the museum." He would not be moved, and she had to bridle her impatience.

As soon as they entered the building he led her through the Egyptian room to the hall of African mammals, and then stopped her in front of a diorama of mounted antelope. These were some of the smaller and medium-sized varieties - impala, Thompson's and Grant's gazelle, gerenuk and the like.

"*Madoqua harperi*." He pointed to a tiny creature in one corner of the display. "Harper's dik-dik, also known as the striped dik-dik."

It was a nondescript little animal, not much bigger than a large hare. The brown pelt was striped in chocolate over the shoulders and back, and the nose was elongated into a prehensile proboscis.

"A bit tatty," she gave her opinion carefully, unwilling to bend, yet knowing he was inordinately proud of this specimen. "Is there something special about it?", "Special?" he asked with wonder in his voice. The woman asks if it is special." He rolled his eyes heavenward and she had to laugh again at his histrionics. "It is

the only known specimen in existence.

creatures on earth. So rare that It is One of the rarest now. So rare it is probably extinct by that many zoologists believe that apocryphal, that it never really existed. They think it is that my sainted great-grandfather, after whom it is named, actually invented it. One learned reference hinted that he may have taken the skin of the striped mongoose and stretched it over the form of a common dik-dik. Can you imagine a more heinous accusation?)

"I am truly appalled by such injustice," she laughed.

"Darned right, You should be. Because we are going to Africa to hunt for another specimen of Madoqua harpent, to vindicate the honour of the family., "I don't understand."

"Come with me and all will be explained." He led her back to his study, and from the jumble on the tabletop Picked out a notebook bound in red Morocco leather. The cover was faded and stained with water marks and tropical sun light, while the corners and the spine were frayed and battered.

"(Old Sir Jonathan's game book,) he explained, and opened it. Pressed between the pages were faded wild flowers and leaves that must have been there for almost a century. The text was illuminated by line drawings in faded Yellow ink of men and animals and wild landscapes.

Nicholas read the date at the top of one page.

2nd of February 1902.

A In camp on the Abbay river.

11 day following the spoor of two large bull ele Phants- Unable to come up with the . Heat ve, intense- MY Men Played out Abandoned the chase small antelope grazing on the river-bank which I and returned to camp.

On the return march lied a brought down with one shot from the little Rigby "and- On close examination it proved to be a member of the genus Madoqa. However, it was of a species that I had never seen before, larger than the common dik-dik and Possessing a striped body. I believe that this specimen may be new to science.

He looked up from the diary. "Old great-grandpa Jonathan has given us the perfect excuse for going down into the Abbay gorge." He closed the book, and went on, "As you pointed out, to cater for our own expedition would require months of planning and organization, not to mention the expense. It would mean having to obtain approval and permission from the Ethiopian government. In Africa that can take months, if not Years."

"I don't imagine that the Ethiopian government would be too cooperative if they suspected our real intentions," she agreed.

"On the other hand, there are a number of legitimate hunting safari companies operating throughout the country. They have all the necessary permits, governmental contacts, vehicles, camping equipment and logistic back, up necessary to travel and stay in even the remotest areas.

The authorities are quite accustomed to foreign hunters arriving and leaving with these companies, whereas a couple of ferengi nosing around on their own would have the local military and everybody else down on them like a herd of angry buffalo., (So we are going to travel as a pair of dik-dik hunters?"

"I have already made the booking with a safari operator in Addis Ababa, the capital. MY Plan is to look upon the whole of our project in three distinct and separate stages.

The first stage will be this reconnaissance. If we find the lead we are hoping for, then we will go back again with our own men and equipment. That will be stage two. Stage three, of course, will be getting the booty out of Ethiopia, and that I assure you from past experience will not be the easiest part of the operation."

"How will you do that-' she began, but he held up his hands.

"Don't ask, because at this stage I don't have even the vaguest idea how we will do it. One stage at a time."

"When do we leave?"

"Before I tell you when, let me ask you one more question. Your interpretation of the Taita riddle - did you explain that in the notes that were stolen from you at the oasis?"

"Yes, everything was either in those notes or on the microfilm. I am sorry."

So the uglies will have it all neatly laid out for them, just the way you laid it out for me."

"I am afraid they will, yes."

"Then to reply to your question as to when, the answer is tout de suite, and the tooter the sweeter! We must get into the Abbay gorge before the competition beats us to it.

They have had your conclusions and suppositions for almost a month. For all we know they are on their way already!

"When?" she repeated eagerly.

"I have booked two seats on the British Airways flight to Nairobi this Saturday - that is, in two days' time. We will connect there with an Air Kenya flight to Addis that will get us in on Monday at around midday. We will drive down to London this evening and stay over at my digs there. Are your yellow fever and hepatitis shots up to date?"

"Yes, but I have no equipment and hardly any clothing with me., I left Cairo in rather a hurry."

We will. see to that in London. Trouble with Ethiopia is it's cold enough to emasculate a brass monkey in the highlands, and like a sauna bath down in the gorge."

He crossed to the board and began to check off the items on his list. "We will both start malarial prophylactics immediately. We are going into an area of chloroquineresistant . falciparum mosquitoes, so I will put you on Mefloquine "He worked swiftly through the list.

"Of course all your travel documents are in order, or you wouldn't be here. We will both need visas for Ethiopia, but I have a contact who can arrange that in twenty-four hours."

As soon as he completed the list he sent her up to her room to pack the few personal items she had brought with her from Cairo.

By the time they were ready to leave Quenton Hall it was dark outside, but still he stopped for an hour at the York Minster Hospital to allow her to say goodbye to her mother. He waited in the Red Lion pub across the road, and he smelt of Theakston's Old Peculier when she climbed back into the Range Rover beside him. It was a Pleasant, yeasty aroma, and she felt so much at ease in his company that she lay back in the seat and fell asleep.

His London house was in Knightsbridge, but despite the fashionable address it was much less grand than Quenton Hall, and she felt IF more at home there,

even if it was only for two days.

During that time she saw little of Nicholas, for he was busy with all the last-minute arrangements, which included a number of visits to government offices in Whitehall. He returned with wads of letters -of introduction to high officials and British Embassies and High Commissions throughout East Africa.

"Ask any Englishman," she smiled to herself "There is no such thing as upper-class privilege any longer, nor is there an old-boy network that runs the country."

While he was away, she went off with the shopping list he had given her. Even walking the streets of the safest Capital city in the world she found herself looking back over her shoulder, and ducking in and out of ladies' rooms and tube stations to make certain that she was not being followed.

"You are acting like a terrified child without its daddy," she scolded herself.

However, she felt a quite disproportionate sense of relief each evening when she heard his key in the street door of the empty house where she waited, and she had to control herself so as not to rush down the stairs to welcome him.

On Saturday morning, when a taxi cab deposited them at the departures level of Heathrow MNIJ Terminal Four, Nicholas surveyed their combined luggage with approval. She had only a single soft canvas bag, no larger than his, and her sling bag over her shoulder. His hunting rifle was cased in travel-worn leather, with his initials embossed on the lid. A hundred rounds of ammunition was packed in a separate brass'bound magazine and he carried a leather briefcase that looked like a Victorian antique.

"Travelling light is one of the great virtues. Lord save us from women with mountains of luggage,⁵ he told her, refusing the services of a porter and throwing it all on to a trolley, which he pushed himself.

She had to step out to keep up with him as he strode through the crowded departures hall. Miraculously the throng opened before him. He tilted the brim of his panama hat over one eye and grinned at the girl at the check'in counter, so that she came over all girlish and flustered.

It was the same once they were aboard the aircraft.

The two stewardesses giggled at everything he said, plied him with champagne and fussed over him outrageously, to the obvious irritation of the other passengers, including Royan herself. But she ignored him and them and settled back to enjoy the unaccustomed luxury of the reclining first-class seat and her own miniature video screen. She tried to concentrate on the screen images of Richard Gere, but found her attention wandering to other images of wild canyons and ancient stelae.

Only when Nicholas nudged her did she look around at him a little haughtily. He had set up a tiny travelling chessboard on the arm of the seat between them, and now he lifted an eyebrow at her and inclined his head in invitation.

When they landed at Jomo Kenyatta airport in Kenya they were still locked in combat. They were level at two games each, but she was a bishop and two pawns up in the final deciding game. She felt quite pleased with herself.

At the Norfolk Hotel in Nairobi he had booked a pair of garden bungalows, one for each of them. Within ten minutes of her flopping down on the bed, he called her from next door on the house phone.

"We are going to dinner with the British High Commissioner tonight. He is an old chum. Dress informal. Can you be ready at eight?"

One did not have to rough it too onerously when travelling around the world

in this man's company, she thought.

It was a relatively short haul from Nairobi up to Addis Ababa, and the landscape below them unfolded in fascinating sequences that kept her glued to the cabin window of the Air Kenya flight. The hoary summit of Mount Kenya was for once free of cloud, and the snow-clad double peaks glistened in the high sunlight.

The bleak brown deserts of the Northern Frontier District were relieved only by the green hills that surrounded the oasis of Marsabit and, far out on the port side, the dashing waters of Lake Turkana, formerly Lake Rudolf.

The desert finally gave way to the highlands of the great central plateau of the ancient land of Ethiopia.

"In Africa only the Egyptians go back further than this civilization," Nicholas remarked as they watched it together. "They were a cultured race when we peoples of northern climes were still dressing in untanned skins and living in caves. They were Christians when Europeans were still pagans, worshipping the old gods, Pan and Diana."

"They were a civilized people when Taita passed this way nearly four thousand years ago," she agreed. "In his Scrolls he writes of them as almost his cultural equals which was rare for him. He disparaged all the other nations of the old world as his inferiors in every way."

From the air Addis was like so many other African cities, a mixture of the old and the new, of traditional and exotic architectural styles, thatched roofs alongside galvanized iron and baked tiles. The rounded walls of the old tukuls built with mud and wattle contrasted with the rectangular shapes and geometrical planes of the brick built multi-storeyed buildings, the blocks of flats and the villas of the affluent, the government buildings and the grandiose, flag-bedecked headquarters of the Organization of African Unity.

The distinguishing features of the surrounding countryside were the plantations of tall eucalyptus trees, the ubiquitous blue gums that provided firewood. It was the only fuel available to so many in this poor and war-torn land, which over the centuries had been ravaged by marauding armies and, more recently, by alien political doctrines.

After Nairobi the high-altitude air was cool and sweet when Royan and Nicholas left the aircraft and walked across the tarmac to the terminal building. As they entered, before they had even approached the row of waiting immigration officers someone called his name.

"Sir Nicholas!" They both turned to the tall young woman who glided towards them with all the grace of a features lit by a welcoming dancer, her dark and delicate smile. She wore full-length traditional skirts which enhanced her movements.

"Welcome to my country of Ethiopia. I am Woizero Tessay." She looked at Royan with interest, "And you must be Woizero Royan." She held out her hand to her and liked each other Nicholas saw that the two women immediately.

I will see to the "If you will let me have your passports. There is a formalities while you relax in the VIP lounge.

from your British Embassy waiting there to greet you, man Sir Nicholas. I don't know how he knew that you were arriving."

the VIP lounge.

There was only one person waiting i He was dressed in a well-cut tropical suit

and wore the orange, yellow and blue diagonally striped old Sandhurst tie. He stood up and came to greet Nicholas immediately, Nor, ? it's good to see you again Must be all

"Nicky, how are yo of twelve years, isn't it?"

"Hello, Geoffrey. I had no idea they had stuck you out here."

"Military attache. His Excellency sent me down to meet you as soon as he heard that you and I had been at Sandhurst together." Geoffrey looked at Royan with marked interest, and with a resigned air Nicholas introduced them.

"Geoffrey Tennant. Be careful of him. Biggest ram I safe within half a mile of north of the equator. No girl him."

"I say,. steady on,, Geoffrey protested, looking pleased with the reference that Nicholas had given him. "Please don't believe a word the man says, Dr Al Simma. Notorious prevaricator."

Geoffrey drew Nicholas aside and quickly gave him a résumé of conditions in the country, particularly in the outlying areas. "HE is a little worried. He doesn't like the idea of you swarming around out there on your own. Lots of nasty men down there in the Goiam. I told him that you knew how to look after yourself.)

In a remarkably short time Woizero Tessay was back.

"I have cleared all your luggage, including the firearm and ammunition. This is your temporary permit. You must keep it with you at all times whilst you are in Ethiopia. Here are your passports - the visas are stamped and in order. Our flight to Lake Tana leaves in an hour, so we have plenty of time to check in."

"Any time you need a job, come and see me,'Nicholas commended her efficiency.

Geoffrey Tennant walked with them as far as the departures gate, where he shook hands, "Anything I can do, it goes without saying. "Serve to Lead", Nicky."

"Serve to lead" Royan asked, as they walked out to the waiting aircraft.

"Sandhurst's motto the explained.

"How nice, Nicky, she murmured.

"I have always considered Nicholas to be more dignified and appropriate he said.

"Yes, but Nicky is so sweet."

the high, thin air the Twin Otter aircraft that took them on the last, northern, leg pitched and yawed in the updraughts; from the mountains below.

Although they were at fifteen thousand feet above sea level, the ground was close enough for them to make out the, villages and the sparse areas of cultivation around them. Subjected for so many centuries to primitive agricultural methods and to the uncontrolled grazing of domestic herds, the land had a thin, impoverished look, and the bones of rock showed through the thin red fleshing of earth.

Abruptly ahead of them the plateau over which they were flying was rent through by a monstrous chasm. It was as though the earth had received a mighty sword-stroke that struck through to her very bowels.

"The Abbay river!" Tessay leaned forward in her seat to tap Royan's shoulder.

The rim of the gorge was Clear-cut, and then the slope dropped away at an angle of over thirty degrees. The bare plains of the plateau gave way immediately to the heavily forested walls of the gorge. They could make out the candelabra shapes of giant euphorbia rising above the dense jungle. In places the walls had collapsed in scree slopes of loose rock, and in others they were

up-thrust into bluffs and needles that erosion had sculpted with a monstrous artistry into the figures of towering humanoids and other fantastic creatures of stone.

Down and down it plunged, and they winged out over the void until they could look directly down, a mile and more, on to the glittering snake of the river in the depths.

The funnel shape of the upper walls formed a secondary rim as they reached the sheer cliffs of the sub-gorge five hundred feet above the Nile water. Deep down there between its terrible cliffs the river gouged dark pools and long slithering runs through the red sandstone. In places the gorge was forty miles across, in others it narrowed to under ten, but through all its length the grandeur and the desolation were infinite and eternal. Man had made no impression upon it.

"You will soon be down there," Tessay told them in a voice so awed that it was almost a whisper, and they were both silent. Words seemed superfluous in the face of such raw and savage nature.

.. Almost with relief they watched the northern wall rise to meet them, and the high mountains of the Choke range stood up against the tall blue African sky, higher than their fragile little craft was flying.

The aircraft banked into its descent and Tessay pointed over the starboard wingtip.

"Lake Tana," she told them. It was a wide and lovely body of water, over fifty miles long, studded with islands on each of which stood a monastery or an ancient church. As they dropped in over the water on the final approach, they could make out the white-robed priests plying between the islands on their traditional little boats made from bundles of papyrus.

The Otter touched down on the dirt strip beside the lake and rolled out in a long trailing cloud of dust. It swung in -and stopped engines beside the run-down terminal building of thatch and daub.

The sunlight was so bright that Nicholas pulled a pair of sunglasses from the breast pocket of his khaki jacket and placed them on his nose as he stood at the top of the boarding ladder. He took in the pock-marks of bullets and shrapnel on the dirty white walls of the terminal, and the burnt-out hull of a Russian T35 battle tank standing in the grass on the verge of the runway. The barrel of its turret gun pointed earthwards, and grass had grown up between the rusted tracks.

The other passengers pushed forward impatiently behind him, jostling him and jabbering with excitement as they saw friends and relatives waiting to greet them under the eucalyptus trees that shaded the building. There was only one vehicle parked out there, a sand-coloured Toyota Land Cruiser. The roundel on the driver's door had at its centre the painted head of a mountain nyala, with long corkscrew horns, and in a ribbon below it the title "Wild Chase Safaris". A white man lounged behind the wheel.

As Nicholas came down the ladder behind the two women, the driver slipped out of the truck and strode out on to the strip to meet them. He was dressed in a faded khaki bush suit, and he was tall and lean and walked with a spring to his step.

"Fortyish," Nicholas judged his age from the grizzling in his short beard. "One of the hard men," Nicholas thought.

His ginger hair was cropped short, his eyes were pale killer blue. There was a puckered white scar that ran across one cheek and up to twist and deform his nose.

Tessay introduced Royan to him first, and he made a short, choppy bow as he shook her hand. "Enchanté, he told her in an execrable French accent and then looked at Nicholas.

"This is my husband, Alto Boris," Tessay introduced him. "Boris, this is Alto Nicholas."

"My English is bad," Boris said. "My French is better."

"Not much to choose between them," Nicholas thought, but he smiled easily and said, "So we will speak French then. Bonjour, Monsieur Brusilov. I am delighted to make your acquaintance." He offered the Russian his hand.

Boris's grip was hard - too hard. He was making a contest out of the greeting, but Nicholas had expected it. He knew this type of old, and he had taken a deep grip so Boris could not crush his fingers. Nicholas held him without allowing any strain or effort to show on his lazy smile. Boris was the first to break the handshake, and there was just the trace of respect in those pale eyes.

"So you have come for a dikdik?" he asked, just short of a sneer. Most of my clients come for big elephant, or at least for mountain nyala."

"Bit rich for my nerves," Nicholas grinned, "all that big stuff. Dik-dik will suit me fine."

"Have you ever been down in the gorge?" Boris demanded. His Russian accent overpowered the French words and made them difficult to follow.

"Sir Nicholas was one of the leaders of the 1976 river expedition," Royan intervened sweetly, and Nicholas was amused by her unexpected intervention. She had picked up the antagonism between them very quickly, and come to his rescue.

Boris grunted, and turned to his wife. "Have you got all the stores I ordered?" he demanded.

"Yes, Boris," she answered meekly. "They are all on board the aircraft." She is afraid of him, Nicholas decided, probably with good reason.

"Let's get loaded up, then. We have a long journey ahead of us."

The two men rode in the front seats of the Toyota, and the women sat behind them with many of the packages of stores packed in around them. Good African protocol, Nicholas smiled to himself: men first, women fend for themselves.

"You don't want to do the tourist run, do you?" Boris made it sound like a threat.

"The tourist run?"

"The outlet from the lake, and the power station," he explained. "The Portuguese bridge over the gorge and the point where the Blue Nile begins," he added. But before they could accept he warned them, "If you do, we won't get into camp until long -after dark."

"Thanks for the suggestion," Nicholas told him politely, "but I have seen it all before."

"Good." Boris made his approval evident. "Let's get out of here."

The road swung away into the west, below the high mountains. This was the Goiam, the land of the aloof mountaineers. It was well-populated country, and they passed many tall, thin men along the roadside as they strode along behind

their herds of goats and sheep, with their long staffs held crossways over their shoulders. Both men and women wore shammias, woollen shawls, and baggy white jodhpur pants, with their feet in open sandals.

They were people with proud and handsome features, their hair dressed out into thick, bushy halos, and their eyes fierce as those of eagles. Some of the younger women in the villages they passed through were truly beautiful.

Most of the men were heavily armed. They carried twohanded swords in chased silver scabbards, and AK-47 assault rifles.

"Makes them feel like big men," Boris chuckled. "Very brave, very macho."

The huts in the villages were circular walled tukuls, surrounded by plantations of eucalyptus and spiky-headed sisal.

Bruised purple storm clouds boiled over the high peaks of the Choke and swept them with squalls of rain. Like silver coins, the huge drops rattled against the windscreen of the Land Cruiser and turned the road to a running river of mud under their wheels.

The condition of the road surface was appalling; in places it deteriorated into a rocky gully which even the four-wheel drive Toyota could not negotiate, and Boris was forced to make his own track across the rocky hillside.

Often reduced to walking speed, they were nevertheless tossed about in their seats as the wheels bounced over the rough terrain.

"These damn blacks don't even think to repair the roads," Boris grunted. "They are happy to live like animals." None of them replied, but Nicholas glanced up into the rear-view mirror at the faces of the two women. They were closed and neutral, hiding any hurt that either of them might have felt at the remark.

As they went on, the road, bad as it had been originally, became even worse. From here onwards the soft the fire. The two women sat a little to one side, talking quietly, and Boris had his feet propped on the low table as he leaned back in his chair with a glass in one hand.

He indicated the vodka bottle on the table, as Nicholas stepped into the circle of firelight, "Get yourself a drink Ice in the bucket."

"I prefer a beer," Nicholas told him. "Thirsty drive." Boris shrugged and bellowed for his camp butler to bring a brown bottle from the portable gas refrigerator.

"Let me tell you something, a little secret." He grinned at Nicholas as he poured himself another vodka. "There is no such animal as a striped dik-dik these days, even if there ever was one. You are wasting your time and your money."

"Fine," Nicholas agreed mildly. "It's my time and my money."

"Just because some old fart shot one back in the Dark Ages, doesn't mean you are going to find another now. We could go up into the tea plantations for elephant. I saw three bulls there only ten days ago. All with tusks over a hundred pounds a side."

As they argued, the level in Boris's vodka bottle fell like the Nile at the end of the inundation. When Tessay told them that the meal was ready, Boris carried the bottle with him; he stumbled on his way to the table. During the meal his only contribution to the conversation was to snarl at Tessay.

"The lamb is raw. Why don't you see to it that the cook does it properly? Damn monkeys, you have to watch everything they do."

"Is your lamb under-cooked, Alto Nicholas?" Tessay asked without looking at her husband. "I can have them cook it longer."

"It's perfect he assured her. "I like mine pink."

Si By the end of dinner the vodka bottle at Boris elbow was empty, and his face was flushed and swollen. He got up from the table without a word and disappeared into the darkness in the direction of his tent, swaying on his feet and occasionally catching his balance with a two-step jig.

"I apologize," essay told them quietly. "It is only in the evenings. In the day he is fine. It is a Russian tradition, the vodka." She smiled brightly; only her eyes stayed sad.

"It is a lovely night, and too early yet for bed. Would you like to walk up to the church? It is very old and famous.

I will have one of the servants bring a lantern, so that you may admire the murals."

The servant walked ahead of them, lighting their way, and an ancient priest waited to welcome them on the portico of the circular building. He was thin and so very black that only his teeth flashed in the gloom. He carried a magnificent Coptic cross in massive native silver, set with carnelians and other semi-precious stones.

Both Royan and Tessay dropped on their knees in front of him to ask for his blessing. He slapped their cheeks lightly with the cross and genuflected over them, mumbling his benediction in Amharic. Then he ushered them into the interior.

The walls were covered with a magnificent display of paintings in brilliant primary colours. In the lantern light they blazed like gemstones. There was a strong Byzantine flavour to the style: the saints' eyes were huge and slanted, with great golden halos over their heads. Above the altar, with its tinsel and brass furnishing, the Virgin cradled her infant while the three wise men and a host of angels knelt in adoration. Nicholas slipped his Polaroid camera from the pocket of his jacket and adjusted the flash. He wandered around the church photographing these murals, while Tessay and Royan knelt before the altar side by side.

Once he had finished his photography Nicholas found a seat on the hand-hewn wooden pews and sat quietly watching their intent faces which the candlelight touched with golden highlights, and he was moved by the beauty of the moment.

"I wish I had that kind of faith," he thought, as he had so often before. "It must be a comfort in the hard times. I wish I were able to pray like that for Rosalind and the girls." He could not stay longer, and he went out and sat on the church portico where he watched the night sky.

In these high altitudes, in the thin unpolluted air, the stars were such a dazzling blaze that it was difficult to pick out the individual constellations. After a while his sadness abated. It was good to be back in Africa.

When the two women emerged at last from the dark interior, Nicholas gave the old priest a one hundred birr note and a Polaroid photograph of himself which the old man clearly valued above the money. Then the three of them walked back down the hill together in companionable silence.

icky!" Royan shook him awake. When he sat up and switched on his torch, he saw that she had thrown the woollen shawl over a pair of men's striped

pyjamas before she had come into his tent.

"What is it?" he asked, but before she could answer he heard the sound of a hoarse and angry voice shouting invective in the night, and then the unmistakable thud of a clenched fist striking flesh and bone.

"He's beating her." Royan's voice was tight with out-rage. "You have to make him stop."

There was a cry of pain after the blow, and then sobs.

Nicholas hesitated. Only a fool interferes between a man and his wife, and his reward usually is to have them unite and turn savagely upon him.

"You must do something, Nicky, please., Reluctantly he swung his legs out of the cot and stood up. He slept in boxer shorts, and he did not bother to find his shoes. She followed him, also on bare feet, to the end of the grove where Boris's tent stood beyond the dining tent.

There was a lantern still burning within, and it threw magnified shadows on the canvas walls. He saw that Boris had his wife "by the hair and was dragging her across the floor, roaring at her in Russian.

"Boris!" Nicholas had to shout his name three times to get his attention, and then they saw the shadow play on the canvas as he dropped Tessay and flung open the tent flap.

He was dressed only in a pair of underpants. His torso was lean and muscular, the chest flat and hard-looking, covered with coppery curls. On the floor behind him Tessay lay face down, sobbing into her cupped hands. She was naked, and the planes of her body were sleek as those of a panther.

"What the hell is going on here?" Nicholas demanded, his anger only just beginning to stir as he witnessed the gracious, gentle woman's distress and humiliation.

"I am giving this black whore a lesson in good manners," Boris gloated, his face still swollen and flushed with drink and passion. "It's none of your business, English, unless you want to pay some money and have a bit of pork for yourself." He laughed, an ugly sound.

"Are you all right, Woizero Tessay?" Nicholas looked directly into Boris's face, sparing the woman the further humiliation of another man's eyes on her nudity.

Tessay sat up, lifted her knees against her chest, and hugged them with both arms to cover her body.

"It's all right, Alto Nicholas. Please go away before there is real trouble." Blood was trickling from one nostril into her mouth, and dyeing her teeth pink.

"You heard my wife, English bastard. Go away! Mind your own business. Go away, before I give you a little lesson in good manners also."

Boris staggered forward and thrust his open hand against Nicholas's chest. Nicholas moved as smoothly and as effortlessly as a matador avoiding the first wild charge of the bull. He swayed to one side, and used Boris's own momentum to send him on in the direction in which he was already committed. Completely off balance, the Russian reeled across the open ground in front of the tent until he collided with one of the camp chairs and went down in a sprawling heap.

"Royan, take Tessay to your tent!" he ordered softly.

Royan ran into the tent and pulled a sheet from the nearest cot. She spread it over Tessay's shoulders and lifted her to her feet.

"Please, don't do this," Tessay sobbed. "You don't know him when he gets

like this. He will hurt somebody."

Royan dragged her, still protesting and weeping, out of the tent, but by now Boris was on his feet again. He bellowed with rage and picked up the camp chair that had tripped him. With a single jerk he tore off one of the legs and hefted it in his bunched fist.

"You want to play games, English? All right, we play!" He rushed at Nicholas, swinging the chair leg like a Ninja baton, so that it hissed with the force with which he aimed it at his head. As Nicholas ducked under it Boris reversed the swing, going for the side of his chest, under his upraised arm. It would have staved in his ribs if it had landed, but again Nicholas twisted away.

They circled each other warily, and then Boris charged again. If it had not been for the effect of the vodka on the Russian's reflexes Nicholas would never have taken a chance with an adversary of this calibre, but Boris was just loose enough in his control to allow him to duck in under the swinging chair leg. He straightened, with all his weight rolling into the punch, and his fist slogged into the pit Of Boris's belly just under the sternum. The Russian's breath was driven out of him in a great gusty belch.

Seventh Scroll

The chair leg flew from his grip, and he doubled over and collapsed. Claspings his middle, and heaving and wheezing for breath, Boris lay curled in the dust. Nicholas stooped over him and told him softly in English, "This sort of behaviour simply isn't good enough, old chap. We don't bully-girls. Please don't let it happen again."

He straightened up and spoke to Royan, "Get her to your tent and keep her there." He combed his hair back from his face with his fingers. "And now, if you have no serious objections, may we get a little sleep?"

It rained again during the early hours. The heavy drops drummed down on the canvas and the lightning lit the interior of the tents with an eerie brilliance. However, by the time that Nicholas went through to the dining tent for breakfast the next morning, the clouds had cleared and the sunshine was bright and cheering. The sweet mountain air smelt of wet earth and mushrooms.

Boris greeted Nicholas with hearty good fellowship.

"Good morning, English. We had some fun last night. I still laugh to remember it. Very good jokes. One day soon we will have some more vodka, then we will makesome more good jokes." And he bellowed through to the kitchen tent, "Hey! Lady Sun, bring your new boyfriend something to eat. He is hungry from all the sport last night."

Tessay was quiet and withdrawn as she supervised the servants handing round breakfast. One eye was swollen almost closed, and her lip was cut. She did not look at Nicholas once during the meal.

"We will go on ahead," Boris explained jovially as they drank coffee. "My servants will break camp, and follow us in my big truck. With luck, we will be able to camp tonight on the rim above the gorge, and tomorrow we will begin the descent."

As they were climbing into the truck, Tessay was able to speak to him softly for a moment, without danger of Boris overhearing her. "Thank you, Alto Nicholas. But it was not wise. You don't know him. You must be careful now. He does not forget, not does he forgive."

From the village of Debra Maryarn Boris took a branch road that ran alongside the Dandera river directly south, wards. The road they had followed the previous day from Lake Tana was shown on the map as a major highway. It had been bad enough. But this track that they were now on was marked as a secondary road "not passable in all weather". To compound matters, it seemed that most of the heavy traffic that had torn up the main road had followed this same track. They came to a place where some huge vehicle had become bogged down in the rain-saturated earth, and the efforts to free it had left areas of ploughed land and an excavation like a bomb crater that resembled an old photograph of the battlefields of First World War Flanders.

Twice during the day the Toyota too became stuck in this foul ground. Each time this happened, the big truck that was following them came up and all the servants swarmed down from the cargo body to push and heave the Toyota through. Even Nicholas stripped to the waist to work with them in the mud to free it.

"If you had only listened to my advice," Boris grumbled, "we would not be

here. There is no game where you want to go, and there are no roads worth the name either."

In the early afternoon they stopped beside the river for an alfresco lunch. Nicholas went down to the pool beside the road to wash off the mud and filth of the morning's labours. He had been in the forefront of the efforts to keep the truck moving. Royan followed him down the slope and perched on a rock above the pool while he stripped off his shirt and knelt, at the verge to splash himself with the cold mountain water. The river was muddy yellow and swollen from the rainstorms.

"I don't think Boris believes your story about the striped dik-dik," she warned him. "Tessay tells me that he is suspicious of what we are up to." She watched with interest as he sluiced his chest and upper arms. "Here the sun had not touched it, his skin was very white and unblemished.

His chest hair was thick and dark. She decided that his body was good to look at.

"He is the type that would go through our luggage if he gets a chance," Nicholas agreed. "You didn't bring anything with you that has any clues for him? No papers or notes?"

"Only the satellite photograph, and my notebooks are all in my own shorthand. He won't be able to make anything of them."

"Be very careful of what you discuss with Tessay."

"She is a dear. There is nothing underhand about her." Heatedly Royan came to the defence of her new friend.

"She may be all right, but she's married to my chum Boris. Her first allegiance lies there. No matter what your feelings towards her, don't trust either of them." He dried himself on his shirt, slipped it on and then buttoned it over his chest. "Let's go and get something to eat."

Back at the parked truck Boris was pulling the cork from a bottle of South African white wine. He poured a tumbler full for Nicholas. Chilled in the river, it was crisp and fruity. Tessay offered them cold roast chicken and injera bread, the flat, thin sheets of stone-ground unleavened bread of the country. The trials and labours of the morning's travels faded into insignificance as Royan lay beside Nicholas in the grass and they watched a bearded vulture sailing high against the blue. It saw them and drifted overhead curiously, twisting its head to look down at them. Its eyes were masked in black like those of a highwayman, and the distinctive wedge-shaped tail feathers flirted with the wind the way the fingers of a concert pianist would stroke the ivories of the keyboard.

When it was time to go on, Nicholas gave her his hand to lift her to her feet. It was one of their rare moments of physical contact, and she held on to his fingers for just a second or two longer than was strictly necessary.

There was no improvement in the surface of the track as they drew nearer to the rim of the gorge, and the hours passed in this bone-jarring, teeth-rattling progress. The track snaked over a rise and then dog-legged down the far slope. Halfway down Boris swore in Russian as they came round the hairpin bend of a high earthen bank to find a huge diesel truck slewed across the track, almost blocking it.

Even though they had been following the tracks of this convoy of vehicles since the previous day, this was the first of them that they had encountered, and it took Boris by surprise. He hit his brakes so suddenly that his passengers

were almost catapulted from their seats, but on the steep incline in the mud the brakes did not bring them to a complete halt. Boris was forced to change down into his lowest gear and steer for the narrow gap between the bank and the truck.

From the back seat Royan looked out of the window beside her, up the high side of the diesel truck. There was a company name and logo emblazoned in scarlet on the green background.

A strong feeling of *du vu* overcame her as she stared at the image. She had seen this sign recently, but her memory cheated her: she could not recall the time or the place. She only knew that it was of vital importance that she should remember.

The side of the Toyota scraped against the metal of the truck, and then they were past it. Boris leaned out of his window and shook his fist at the driver of the larger vehicle.

He was a local man, probably recruited in Addis by the owner of the truck. Grinning at Boris's antics, he leaned out of his own cab to return the clenched fist salute, adding a nice little touch by jerking a raised forefinger upwards.

"Dungeater!" Boris roared with outrage at being bested in the exchange, but he did not stop. "No use even talking to them. What do they know? Black chimps!"

For the rest of the wearisome journey Royan remained silent and withdrawn, shaken and troubled by the conviction that she had seen the trademark of the winged red horse before, with, set above it in a pennant, the name of the company: "PEGASUS EXPLORATION".

As they approached the end of the day's journey at last they passed a signpost beside the track. The supporting legs of the sign were solidly set in concrete, and the artwork was of such high quality that it could only have been that of a professional signwriter.

Across the top of the board an arrow indicated a newly bulldozed road that headed off to the right, and the directions read:

PEGASUS EXPLORATION
BASE CAMP - ONE KILOMETRE
PRIVATE ROAD
NO ENTRY TO UNAUTHORIZED TRAFFIC

The scarlet horse reared in the centre of the board with its wings spread wide, on the point of flight.

Now she gasped aloud as the elusive memory came upon her with stunning clarity. She remembered where she had last seen the flying red horse. In an instant she was transported back into the icy waters of an English salmon river, flung from the rolling body of the Land Rover, the huge MAN truck roaring over the bridge above her, and, for a subliminal pulse of time, the prancing red horse upon its side.

she almost shouted aloud, but controlled herself. The terror of the moment returned to her with full force, and she found herself breathing hard and her heart racing as though she had run a long way.

"It cannot be a coincidence," she assured herself silently, "and I am not mistaken. It is the same company.

Pegasus Exploration."

She was withdrawn and distracted for the last few miles of the journey, until

the track they were following ended abruptly on the brink of the sheer cliffs of the escarpment, Here Boris pulled on to the grassy verge and stopped the engine.

"This is as far as we ride. We camp here tonight. My big truck is not far behind. They will make camp as so on as they arrive. Tomorrow we will go down into the gorge on foot."

As they dismounted, Royan tugged at Nicholas's arm, "I must speak to you," she whispered urgently, and she followed him as he led her along the bank of the river.

He found a place for them to sit side by side, with their legs dangling over the drop. Beside them the swollen yellow river seemed to sense what lay ahead of it. The cold mountain waters speeded up, swirled amongst the rocks, and gathered themselves for that dizzying leap out into empty space. The cliff below them was a sheer wall of rock almost a thousand feet deep. It was so high that in the evening light the abyss far below was a dark, mysterious place, its bottom hidden from them by shadow and spray from the falls. As Royan looked down into it her sense of balance swirled with vertigo. She cringed back from the edge and found herself instinctively leaning against Nicholas's shoulder to steady herself. Only when they touched did she realize what she was doing, and she pulled away from him self-consciously.

The muddied waters of the Dandera. river leaped from the brink, and were miraculously transformed into curtains of ethereal lacework as they fell. Like the skirts of waltzing bride they shimmered and swirled, and rainbows of light played through them as though from an embroidery of seed pearls. Still falling, the columns of white spray twisted and changed into lovely but ephemeral shapes, until they struck the lower ledges of glistening black rock and exploded outwards into fresh clouds of white that at last screened the dark depths of the abyss with " an opalescent veil.

It was with a conscious effort that Royan pulled her mind away from the awe-inspiring scene and back to the troubled present.

"Nicky, do you remember I told you about the truck that forced my mother and me over the bridge in the Land Rover?"

"Of course." His expression was mystified as he studied her face. "You are upset. "What is it, Royan?"

"The truck had signwriting down the sides of the trailers that it was towing."

"You told me, yes. Green and red. You told me that you didn't get a good enough look to read the sign."

"It was the same as the truck we passed this afternoon.

I saw the sign at the same angle as before and it came back to me. The red Pegasus, the flying horse."

He studied her face for a while, "Are you absolutely certain?"

"Absolutely!" She nodded vehemently.

Nicholas stared out over the magnificent panorama of the gorge spread below them. It was forty miles to the far wall of the canyon, but in the brilliant rain-washed air it seemed so close that he could reach across and touch it.

"A coincidence?"he wondered at last.

"Do you think so? A very strange and wonderful coincidence, then. Pegasus in both Yorkshire and Gojam?

Do you accept that?"

"It doesn't make sense. The truck that hit you was stolen."

"Was it?" she demanded. "Are we sure of that?"

"If it wasn't, then let's hear your ideas."

"If you were planning an assassination, would you rely on stealing a truck conveniently left at a Little Chef for you?"

He shook his head, "Go on."

"Suppose you arranged for your own truck to be placed there for you, and for your driver to report it stolen only after you had a good head start on the police."

"It's possible," he agreed without enthusiasm.

"Whoever murdered Duraïd, and made two further attempts to kill me, obviously has considerable resources at his disposal. He is able to make arrangements in Egypt and England. On top of that, he has the seventh scroll in his possession. He has our notes and all our workings and translations which point him clearly to this spot on the Abbay river. Just suppose that he has control of a company like Pegasus - is there any reason why he can't be here in Ethiopia, just as we are, right at this moment?"

Nicholas was silent for a while. He picked up a stone from the ledge beside him and tossed it out over the cliff.

They both watched it drop away, dwindling in size until it vanished in the veils of spray far below where they sat.

Abruptly Nicholas stood up and reached for her hand to pull her to her feet beside him. "Come on," he said.

"Where are we going?"

"Pegasus base camp. Let's go and have a chat to the site foreman."

Boris protested angrily and hurried to intervene when Nicholas climbed into the Toyota and started the engine, "Where the hell do you think you are going?, "Sight-seeing." Nicholas let in the clutch. "Back in an hour."

"Hey, English, my truck!" He ran to catch up with them, but Nicholas accelerated away.

"Charge me for the hire." He grinned back at Boris in the rear-view mirror. -off and followed the Toyota. They reached the signposted turn side track over the ridge. The Pegasus camp lay on the far side. Nicholas braked to a halt on the crest of the rise and they studied it in silence.

An area of about ten acres had been cleared and levelled. It was surrounded by a barbed-wire security fence, with a single closed gate. Three of the massive diesel trucks in their green and red livery were parked in a rank inside the fence. There were also several smaller vehicles and a tall mobile drilling rig in the line. The rest of the yard was filled with prospecting equipment and stores. There were stacks of drilling rods and steel core boxes, wooden crates of spares, and several hundred forty-four-gallon drums of diesel and oil and drilling mud. The drums and the stores were stacked with a neatness and sense of good order that was startling in this wild and rocky landscape. Just inside the gate stood a small village of a dozen buildings made of corrugated sheet sections, of the Quonset type. They too were set out in a street of military precision.

"A big, well-organized outfit," Nicholas commented.

"Let's go down and see who is in charge."

There were two armed guards on the gate, dressed in the camouflage

uniform of the Ethiopian army. They were clearly surprised by the arrival at the gate of the strange Land Cruiser, and when Nicholas sounded his horn one of them came forward suspiciously with his AK,47 rifle at the ready.

"I want to speak to the manager here," Nicholas told him in Arabic, with enough haughty authority to make the entry uncertain and uneasy.

The soldier grunted, went back and consulted his colleague, then lifted the handset of the two-way radio and spoke earnestly into the mouthpiece. There was a five minute delay after he finished speaking, and then the door of the nearest Quonset building opened and a white man came out.

He was dressed in khaki coveralls and a soft bush cap.

His eyes, covered by mirrored sunglasses, were set in a deeply tanned, leathery face. His physique was short and chunky, and his sleeves were rolled up over hairy, work thickened arms. After speaking a few words to the guards at the gate he came out to the Toyota

"Yeah? What's going down here?" he demanded in Texan drawl, speaking around the stub of an unlit cigar.

"The name is Quenton-Harper." Nicholas dismounted from the truck to greet him, and held out his hand.

"Nicholas Quenton-Harper. How do you do?"

The American hesitated, and then took the hand as though he had been offered an electric eel to squeeze.

"Helm," he said. "Jake Helm, from Abilene, Texas. I am the foreman here." His hand was that of an artisan, with calloused palms and lumpy scar tissue over the knuckles, and half moons of black grease under the fingernails.

"Terribly sorry to worry you. I am having some trouble with my truck. I wondered if you had a mechanic who could have a look at it for me." Nicholas smiled winningly, but received no encouragement from the man.

"Not company policy." He shook his head.

"I am prepared to pay for any-"

"Listen, buddy, I said no." Jake removed the cigar from his mouth and examined it minutely.

"Your company - Pegasus. Can you tell me where your head office is situated? Who is your managing director?"

"I am a busy man. You are wasting my time." Helm „returned the cigar to his mouth and began to turn away.

"I will be hunting in this area over the next few weeks.

I would not like to endanger any of your employees with a stray shot. Can you give me some idea of where you will be working?"

outfit here, mister. I don't

"I am running a prospecting give out news flashes on my movements. Beat id'

He turned and walked to the gate and gave brusque orders to the guards before marching back to his office building.

"Satellite disc on the roof," Nicholas remarked. "I wonder who our lad Jake is speaking to at this very moment."

"Somebody in Texas?" Royan hazarded.

"Doesn't follow, necessarily, Nicholas demurred. Tega, is probably a multinational. Just because Jake is one, doesn't mean his boss is Texan also. Not a very instructive conversation, I am afraid." He started the engine and Uturned

the Toyota. "But if someone at Pegasus is the ugly mixed up in this, he will recognize my name. We have given them notice of our arrival. Let's see what we have flushed out of the bushes."

When they got back to the Dandera river falls, they found that Boris's truck had arrived, the tents had been erected, and the chef had brewed tea for them. Boris was less welcoming than his chef, and maintained a sullen silence while Nicholas tried to placate him for commandeering his truck.

It was only after his first vodka of the evening that he mellowed sufficiently to speak again.

"The mules were supposed to be waiting for us here.

Time means nothing to these people. We cannot start down into the gorge until they arrive."

"Well, at least while we are waiting for them I will have a chance to sight in my rifle," Nicholas remarked with resignation. "In Africa it never pays to be in a hurry. Too wearing on the nerves."

After a leisurely breakfast the next morning, when there was still no sign of the mules, Nicholas fetched his rifle case.

When Nicholas lifted the weapon out of its nest of green baize, Boris took it from him and examined it minutely.

"An old rifle?"

"Made in 1926," Nicholas nodded. "My grandfather had it made for himself."

"They knew how to make them in those days. Not like the mass-produced crap they turn out today." Boris pursed his lips critically. "Short Mauser Oberndorf double square, bridge action, beautiful! But it has been rebarrelled, no?"

The original barrel was shot out. I had it replaced with a Shilen match barrel. It will shoot the wings off a mosquito at a hundred paces."

"Calibre 7 57, is it?" Boris asked.

"275 Rigby, as a matter of fact," Nicholas corrected him, but Boris snorted.

"It is exactly the same cartridge - just your English bloodiness must call it something else." He grinned. "It will push a 150 grain bullet out there at 2800 feet per second.

It is a good rifle, one of the best."

"You will never know, my dear fellow, how much your approval means to me," Nicholas murmured in English, and Boris chuckled as he handed the rifle back to him.

"English jokes! I love your English jokes."

When Nicholas left camp carrying the little rifle in its slip case, Royan followed him down to the river and helped him fill two small canvas bags with white river sand. He laid them on top of a convenient rock and they formed a firm but malleable rest for the rifle as he settled it over them.

Using the open hillside as a safe back'stop, he "stepped out two hundred yards and at that range set up a cardboard carton on which he had taped a Bisley'type target. He came back to where Royan waited and then settled down behind the rock on which the weapon lay.

Royan was unprepared for the report of the first shot from the dainty, almost feminine-looking rifle. She jumped involuntarily, and her ears sang.

"What a horrible, vicious thing!" she exclaimed. "How can you bring yourself to kill lovely animals with a highpowered gun like that?" she demanded.

"Rifle," he corrected her, as he noted the strike of the shot through his

binoculars. "Would it make you feel better if I used a low-powered rifle, or beat them to death with a stick?"

The shot had struck three inches right and two inches low. As he adjusted the telescopic sight he attempted to explain. "An ethical hunter does everything in his power to kill as swiftly and as cleanly as is possible, and that means stalking in as close as he is able to do, using a weapon of adequate power and sighting it the best way he knows how."

His next shot struck exactly on line but only an inch above the bull's-eye. He wanted it to shoot three inches high at that range. He worked on the sight again.

"Gun or rifle, but I don't understand why you would want to deliberately kill any of God's creatures," she protested.

"That I can never explain to you." He aimed deliberately and fired once. Even through the lower magnification of the sight lens he could see that the bullet had struck exactly three inches high.

"It is something to do with an atavistic urge that few men, no matter how Cultured and civilized they deem themselves, can deny completely." He fired a second time.

"Some of them work it out in the board room, others on the golf course or the tennis court, and some of us on a salmon river, in the ocean deeps or in the hunting field."

He fired a third shot, merely to confirm the previous two, and then went on, "As for God's creatures, he gave them to us. You are the believer. Quote me Acts 10, verses 12 and 13."

"Sorry." She shook her head. "You tell me.

... all manner Of fourfooted beasts of the earth, and wild beasts, and creeping things, and fowl of the air,""

Nicholas obliged her. "'And there came a voice to him, Rise, Peter; kill, and eat., "You should have been a lawyer," she moaned in mock despair.

"Or a priest," he suggested, and went forward to retrieve the target. He found that his last three shots had punched a tiny symmetrical rosette three inches above the bull, all three bullet holes just touching each other.

He patted the butt stock of the little rifle, "That's my lovely darling, Lucrezia Borgia." He had named the rifle for her beauty and for her murderous potential.

He slid the rifle back into its leather slip case and they walked back together. As they came in sight of the camp, Nicholas pulled up short.

"Visitors," he said, and raised his binoculars. "Aha! We have flushed something out of the undergrowth. That is a Pegasus truck parked there and, unless I am much mistaken, one of our visitors is the charming laddie from Abilene.

Let's go down and find out what is going on."

As they drew closer to camp, they realized that there were a dozen or more heavily armed, uniformed soldiers clustered around the red and green Pegasus truck, and that Jake Helm and an Ethiopian army officer were seated under the awning of the dining tent in serious and intent conversation with Boris, A

s soon as Nicholas entered the tent, Boris introduced him to the bespectacled Ethiopian officer. "This is Colonel Tuma Nogo, the military commander of the southern Goiam region."

"How do you do?" Nicholas greeted him, but the colonel ignored the

pleasantry.

"I want to see your passport, and your firearms licence, he ordered arrogantly, while Jake Helm chewed complacently on the evil-smelling butt of an extinguished cigar.

"Yes, of course," Nicholas agreed, and went to his own tent to fetch his briefcase. He opened it on the dining table, and smiled at the officer. "I am sure you will also want to see my letter of introduction from the British Foreign Secretary in London, and this one from the British Ambassador in Addis Ababa. Here is another from the Ethiopian Ambassador to the Court of St. James, and this is from your own Minister of Defence, General Abraha."

The colonel stared in consternation at this fruit salad of ornate official letterheads and scarlet beribboned seals.

Behind the gold-rimmed glasses his eyes were bemused and confused.

"Sir!" He jumped to his feet and saluted. "You are a friend of General Abraha? I did not know. Nobody informed me. I beg your pardon for this intrusion."

He saluted again, and his embarrassment made him awkward and ungainly. "I came to warn you only that the Pegasus Company is conducting drilling and blasting operations. There may be some danger. Please be alert. Also there are many bandits and outlaws, shufta, operating in this area." Colonel Nogo was flustered and barely coherent.

He stopped and drew a deep breath to steady himself. "You see, I have been ordered to provide an escort for the employees of the Pegasus Company. If you yourself experience any trouble while you are here, or if you need assistance for any reason you have only to call on me, sir."

"That is extremely civil of you, colonel."

"I will detain you no longer, sir." He saluted a third time and backed off towards the Pegasus truck, taking the Texan foreman along with him. Jake Helm had not uttered a word since their arrival, and now he left without a farewell.

Colonel Nogo gave Nicholas his fourth and final salute through the cab window as the truck pulled away.

Deuce!" Nicholas told Royan, as he acknowledged the salute with a nonchalant wave. "I think that point was definitely ours. Now at least we know that, for whatever reason, Mr Pegasus definitely does not want us in his hair. I think we can expect his next service fairly promptly., They walked back to where Boris sat in the dining tent and Nicholas told him, "All we need now are your mules."

"I have sent three of my men to the village to find them. They should have been here yesterday." The mules arrived early the next morning, six big sturdy animals, each accompanied by a driver dressed in the ubiquitous-jodhpurs and shawl. By midmorning they were loaded and ready to begin the descent into the gorge.

Boris paused at the head of the pathway, and looked out over that valley. For once even he seemed to be subdued and awed by the immensity of the drop and the rugged splendour of the gorge.

"You will be Passing into another land in another age," he warned them in an uncharacteristically philosophical mood. "They say that this trail is two thousand years old, as old as Christ." He spread his hands in a deprecating gesture.

"The old black priest in the church at Debra Maryam will tell you that the Virgin Mary passed this way when she fled from Israel after the crucifixion." He shook his head. "But then these people will believe anything." And he "stepped out on to the pathway.

It clung to the cliff, descending at such an angle that each pace was down a rock step so deep that it stretched the tendons and the sinews in their groins and knees, and jarred their spines. They were forced to use their hands to scramble the rougher and steeper sections, where it was almost as though they were descending a ladder.

It seemed impossible that the mules under their heavy packs could follow them down. The plucky beasts lunged down each of the rock steps, landing heavily on their forelegs, then gathered themselves for the next drop. The trail was so narrow that the bulky packs scraped against the rock wall on one hand, while on the other hand the drop sucked at them giddily.

When the path dog-legged and changed direction, the mules could not make the turn in one attempt. They were forced to back and fill, edging their way round the narrow trail, sweating with terror and their eyes rolling until the whites flashed. The drivers urged them on with wild cries and busy whips.

At places the pathway entered the body of the mountain, passing behind butts and needles of rock that time and erosion had prised away from the cliff face. These rocky gateways were so narrow that the mules had to be unloaded and the packs carried through by the drivers, and then the mules were reloaded on the far side.

Look!" Royan cried in astonishment and pointed out into the void. A black vulture rose up out of the depths on widespread pinions and floated past them almost within arm's length, turning its gruesome naked head of pink lapped skin to stare at them with inscrutable black eyes before sailing away.

"He is using the thermals of heated air from the valley for lift," Nicholas explained to her. He pointed out along the cliff to an overhanging buttress on the same level as themselves. "There is one of their nests." It was a shaggy mound of sticks piled on an inaccessible ledge. The excrement of the birds that had inhabited it over the ages had painted the cliff face below with streaks of brilliant white, and even at this distance they could catch whiffs of rotting offal and decaying flesh.

All that day they clung to the precipitous track as they eased their way down that terrible wall. It was late afternoon, and they were only halfway down, when the trail turned back upon itself once more and they heard the rumble of the falls ahead. The sound grew louder and became a thunderous roar as they moved around the corner of another buttress and came in full sight of the falls.

The wind created by the torrent tugged at them and forced them to clutch for handholds. The spray blew around them and wetted their upturned faces, but the i: Ethiopian guide led them straight on until it seemed that they must be washed away into the valley still hundreds of feet below.

Then, miraculously, the waters parted and they stepped behind the great translucent curtain into a deep recess of moss-covered and gleaming wet rock, carved from the cliff by the force of water over the aeons. The only light in this gloomy place was filtered through the waterfall, green and mysterious like some undersea cavern.

"This is where we sleep tonight," Boris announced, obviously enjoying their

astonishment. He pointed to bundles of firewood piled at the rear of the cave, and the smoke-blackened wall above the stone hearth. The muleteers carrying food and supplies down to the priests in the monastery have used this place for centuries."

As they moved deeper into the cavern, the sound of falling water became muted to a dull background rumble and the rock underfoot was dry. Once the servants had lit the fire, it became -a warm and comfortable, not to say romantic, lodging.

With an old soldier's eye for the most comfortable spot, Nicholas laid out his sleeping bag in a corner at the back of the cave, and quite naturally Royan unrolled hers beside his. They were both tired out by the unusual exertion of climbing down the cliff wall, and after supper they stretched out in their sleeping bags in companionable silence and watched the firelight playing on the roof of the cave.

"Just think!" Royan whispered. "Tomorrow we will be retracing the footsteps of old Taita himself."

"To say nothing of the Virgin Mary," Nicholas smiled.

"You are a horrid old cynic," she sighed. "And what is more, you probably snore."

"You are about to find out the hard way," he told her, but she was asleep before him. Her breathing was gentle and even, and he could just hear it above the sound of the water. It was a long time since he had had a lovely woman lying at his side. When he was sure she was deeply under, he reached across and touched her cheek gently.

"Pleasant dreams, little one," he whispered tenderly.

"You have had a busy day." That was the way he had often bid his younger daughter sleep.

The muleteers were stirring long before the dawn, and the whole party was on the path, way again as soon as the light was strong enough to reveal their footing. When the early sun struck the upper walls of the cliff face, they were still high enough above the valley floor to have an aerial view of the terrain.

Nicholas drew Royan aside and they let the rest of the caravan go on down ahead of them.

He found a place to sit and unrolled the satellite photograph between them. Picking out the major peaks and features of the scene, they orientated themselves and began to make some order out of the cataclysmic landscape that rioted below them.

"We can't see the Abbay river from here," Nicholas pointed out. "It's still deep in the sub-gorge. We will probably only get our first glimpse of it from almost directly above."

"If we have identified our present position accurately, then the river will make two ox'bow bends around that bluff over there."

"Yes, and the confluence of the Dandera river with the Abbay is over there, below those cliffs." He used his thumb knuckle as a rough scale measure. "About fifteen miles from here."

"It looks as though the Dandera has changed its course many times over the centuries.-I can see at least two gullies that look like ancient river beds." She pointed down: "Mere, and there. They are all choked with jungle now." She looked crestfallen, "Oh, Nicholas, it is such a huge and confused area. How are

we ever going to find the single entrance to a tomb hidden in all that?"

"Tomb? What tomb is this?" Boris demanded with interest. He had come back up the trail to find them. They had not heard his approach, and now he stood over them.

"What tomb are you talking about?, "Why, the tomb of St. Frumentius, of course," Nicholas told him smoothly, showing no concern at having been overheard.

"Isn't the monastery dedicated to the saint?" Royan asked as smoothly, as she rolled up the photograph.

"Da." He nodded, looking disappointed, as though he expected something of more interest. "Yes, St. Frumentius.

But they will not let you visit the tomb. They will not let you into the inner part of the monastery. Only the priests are allowed in there."

He removed his cap and scratched the short, stiff bristles that covered his scalp. They rasped like wire under his fingernails. "This week is the ceremony of Timkat, the Blessing of the Tabot. There will be a great deal of excitement down there. You will find it very interesting, but you will not be able to enter the Holy of Holies, nor will you be able to see the actual tomb. I have never met any white man who has seen it."

He squinted up at the sun. "We must get on. It looks close, but it will take us two more days to reach the Abbay.

It is bad ground down there. A long march, even for a famous dik-dik hunter." He laughed delightedly at his own joke, and turned away down the path.

As they approached the bottom of the cliff, the gradient of the trail smoothed out and the steps became shallower and further apart. The going became easier and their progress swifter, but the air had changed in quality and taste. It was no longer cool, bracing mountain air but the languid, enervating air of the equator, with the smell and taste of the encroaching jungle.

"Hod' said Royan, shrugging out of the woollen shawl.

"Ten degrees hotter, at least," Nicholas agreed. He pulled his old army jersey over his head, leaving his hair in curly disarray. "And we can expect it to get hotter before we reach the Abbay. We still have to descend another three thousand feet."

Now the path followed the Dandera river for a while.

Sometimes they were several hundred feet above it, and shortly afterwards they splashed waist-deep through a ford, hanging on to the panniers of the mules to keep themselves from being swept away on the flood.

Then the gorge of the Dandera river was too deep and steep to follow any longer, as sheer cliffs dropped into dark pools. So they left the river and followed the track that squirmed like a dying snake amongst eroded hills and tall red stone bluffs.

A mile or two further downstream they rejoined the river in a different mood as it rippled through dense forest.

The dangling lianas swept the surface and tree moss brushed their heads as they passed, straggling and unkempt as the beard of the old priest at Debra Maryam. Vervet monkeys chattered at them from the treetops and ducked their heads in wide-eyed outrage at the human intrusion into these secret

places. Once a large animal crashed away through the undergrowth, and Nicholas glanced across at Boris.

The Russian shook his head, laughing. "No, English, not dik-dik. Only kudu."

On the hillside above them the kudu paused to look back. He was a large bull with full twists to his wide corkscrew horns, a magnificent beast with a maned dewlap and pricked ears shaped like trumpets. He stared at them with huge, startled eyes. Boris whistled softly and his attitude changed abruptly.

"Those horns are over fifty inches. They would get a place right at the top of Rowland Ward." He was referring to the register of big game which was the Bible of the trophy hunter. "Don't you want to take him, English?" He ran to the nearest mule and pulled the Rigby rifle from its slip case, then ran back and offered it to Nicholas.

"Let him go." Nicholas shook his head. "Only dik-dik for me."

With a flit of his white powder-puff tail, the bull was gone over the ridge. Boris shook his head disgustedly and spat into the river.

"Why did he try to insist that you kill it?" Royan demanded as they went on.

"A photograph of a record pair of horns like that would look good on his advertising brochure. Suck in them clients."

All day they followed the winding trail, and in the late afternoon they camped in a clearing above the river where it was evident that other caravans had camped many times before them. It seemed obvious that this road was divided into time-honoured stages: every traveller took three full days from the top of the falls to reach the monastery, and they all camped at the same sites.

"Sorry. No shower here," Boris told his clients. "If you want to wash, there is a safe pool around the first bend upstream."

Royan looked appealingly at Nicholas, "I am so tired and sweaty. Please won't you stand guard for me, where you can hear me call if I need you?"

So he lay on the mossy bank just below the bend, out of sight but close enough to hear her splash and squeal at the cold embrace of the water. Once when he turned his head he realized that the current must have drifted her downstream, for through the trees he caught a flash of a naked back, and the curve of a buttock, creamy and glistening wet with water. He looked away again guiltily, but he was startled by the intensity of his physical arousal brought on by that brief glimpse of lambent skin dappled with the late sunlight through the trees.

When she came downstream along the bank, singing softly, towelling her wet hair, she called to him, "Your turn."

"Do you want me to stand guard for you?"

"I am a big boy now." He shook his head, but as she passed him he noticed the saucy glint in her eye, and he lay if she had been fully aware of just how wondered sudden far downstream she had swum, and how much he had seen.

He was titillated by the thought.

He went upstream to the pool alone, and as he stripped he looked down at himself and felt guilty when he saw how she had moved him- Since Rosalind, no other woman had had this effect on him.

"A nice cold plunge won't do you any harm, my lad." He threw his jeans over a bush, and dived into the pool.

sat at the campfire after the evening meal, olas looked up suddenly and cocked his

"Am I hearing things?" he wondered.

"No," Tessay laughed. "That is singing you hear. The priests from the monastery are coming to welcome us."

They saw the torches then, winding up the hillside in procession, flickering through the trees as they approached the camp. The muleteers and the servants crowded forward, singing and clapping rhythmically to greet the deputation from the monastery.

The deep male voices soared and then dropped away, almost to a whisper, then rose again in descant, haunting and beautiful, the sound of Africa in the night. It drove icy thrills down Nicholas's spine, so that he shivered involuntarily.

Then they saw the white robes of the priests, flitting like moths in the torchlight as they wound along the trail. The camp servants fell on their knees as the first of the holy men entered the perimeter of the camp. They were young acolytes, bare-headed and barefooted. They were followed by the monks, wearing long robes and tall turbans.

Their ranks wheeled aside and opened up, an honour guard for the phalanx of deacons and fully ordained priests in their gaudy embroidered robes and vestments.

Each of them carried a heavy Coptic cross, set on a tall staff and intricately chased and worked in native silver.

They in turn opened into two ranks, still chanting, and allowed the canopied palanquin to be carried forward by four hefty young acolytes and placed in the centre of the camp. The crimson and yellow silk curtains shimmered in the light of the camp lanterns and the torches of the procession.

"We must go forward to welcome the abbot," Boris told Nicholas in a stage whisper. "His name is Jali Hora." As they stepped up to the litter, the curtains were drawn dramatically aside and a tall figure stepped down to earth.

Both Tessay and Royan sank to their knees respectfully, and clasped their hands at the breast. However, Nicholas and Boris remained on their feet, and Nicholas inspected the abbot with interest.

Jali Hora was skeletally thin. Beneath the skirts of his robe his legs were like sticks of cured tobacco, tar-black and twisted, with desiccated sinew and stringy muscle. His robe was green and gold, worked with gold thread that glittered in the firelight. On his head he wore a tall hat with a flat top embroidered with a pattern of crosses and stars.

The abbot's face was dead sooty black, the skin wrinkled and riven with the deep etchings of age. There were few teeth behind his puckered lips, and even those were yellowed and askew. His beard was startling silver white, breaking like storm surf on the old bones of his jaw.

One eye was opaque blue and blinded with tropical ophthalmia, but the other eye glistened like that of a hunting leopard.

He began to speak in a high, quavering voice. "A blessing," Boris warned Nicholas, and they both bowed their heads respectfully. The assembled priests came in with the chanted response each time the old man paused.

When at last he had finished giving his blessing Jali Hora made the sign of the cross in four directions, rotating slowly towards each point of the compass, while two altar boys swung their silver censers vigorously, deluging the night with pungent clouds of incense smoke.

After the blessing the two women came forward to kneel before the abbot.

He stooped over them and struck them lightly on each cheek with his silver cross, chanting a falsetto blessing over them.

"They say the old man is over a hundred years old," Boris whispered to Nicholas.

Two white-robed debteras brought forward a stool of African ebony, so beautifully carved that Nicholas eyed it acquisitively. He guessed that it was probably centuries old, and would have made a handsome addition to the museum collection. The two debteras took Jah Hora's elbows and gently seated him on the stool. Then the rest of the company sank to the earth in a congregation around him, their black faces lifted towards him attentively.

Tessay sat at his feet, and when her husband spoke she translated quietly for him into Amharic. "It is a great pleasure and an honour for me to greet you again, Holy Father."

The old man nodded, and Boris went on, "I have brought an English nobleman of royal blood to, visit the monastery of St. Frumentius."

"I say, steady on, old boy!, Nicholas protested, but all the congregation studied him with expectant interest.

"What do I do now?" he asked Boris out of the corner of his mouth.

"What do You think he came all this way for?" Boris grinned maliciously. "He wants a gift. Money,"

"Maria Theresa dollars?" he enquired, referring to the centuries-old traditional currency of Ethiopia, "Not necessarily. Times have changed. jali Hora will be happy to take Yankee green-backs."

"How much?"

"You are a nobleman of royal blood. You will be hunting in his valley. Five hundred dollars at least."

Nicholas winced and went to fetch his bag from one of the mule panniers. When he came back he bowed to the abbot and placed the sheaf of currency in his outstretched, pink-palmed claw. The abbot smiled, exposing the yellow stumps of his teeth, and spoke briefly.

Tessay translated for him, "He says, "Welcome to the monastery of St. Frumentius and the season of Timkat." He wishes you good hunting on the banks of the Abbay river."

Immediately the solemn mood of the devout company changed. They broke out in smiles and laughter, and the abbot looked expectantly at Boris.

"The holy abbot says it has been a thirsty journey," Tessay translated.

"The old devil loves his brandy," Boris explained, and shouted to the camp butler. With some ceremony a bottle of brandy was brought and placed on the camp table in front of the abbot, shoulder to shoulder with the bottle of vodka in front of Boris. They toasted each other, and the abbot tossed back a dram that made his good eye weep with tears, and his voice husky as he directed a question at Royan.

"He asks you, Woizero Royan, where do you come from, daughter, that you follow the true path of Christ the Saviour of man?"

"I am an Egyptian, of the old religion," Royan replied.

The abbot and all his priests nodded and beamed with approval.

"We are all brothers and sisters in Christ, the Egyptians and the Ethiopians," the abbot told her. "Even the word Coptic derives from the Greek for Egyptian. For over sixteen hundred years the Abuna, the bishop, of Ethiopia was always

appointed by the Patriarch in Cairo. Only the Emperor Haile Selassie changed that in 1959, but we still follow the true road to Christ. You are welcome, my daughter."

His debtera poured another dram of brandy and the old man swallowed it at a gulp. Even Boris looked impressed, "Where does the skinny old black tortoise put it?" he wondered aloud. Tessay did not translate, but she lowered her eyes and the hurt she felt for the insult to the holy man showed on her madonna features.

Jah Hora turned to Nicholas. "He wants to know what animals you have come to hunt here in his valley," Tessay told him.

Nicholas steeled himself and then replied carefully.

There was a long moment of disbelief, then the abbot cackled happily and the assembled priests shouted with incredulous mirth.

"A dik-dik! You have come to hunt a dikdik! But there is no meat on an animal that size."

Nicholas let them get over the first shock, and then produced a photograph of the mounted specimen of *Moquoda harPerU* from the museum. He placed it on the table in front of Jah Hora.

"This is no ordinary dik-dik. It is a holy dik-dik," he told them in portentous tones, nodding at Tessay for the translation. "Let me recount the legend." They were silenced by the prospect of a good story with religious overtones. Even the abbot arrested the glass on its way to his lips and replaced it on the table. His one eye swivelled from the photograph to Nicholas's face.

"When John the Baptist was dying of starvation in the desert," Nicholas began, and a few of the priests crossed themselves at the mention of the saint's name, "he had been thirty days and thirty nights without a morsel passing his lips-" Nicholas spun out the yarn for a while, dwellin on the extremities of hunger endured by the saint, details savoured by his audience who liked their holy men to suffer in the name of righteousness.

"In the end the Lord took mercy on his servant and placed a small antelope in a thicket of acacia, held fast by the thorns. He said unto the saint: "I have prepared a meal for you that you shall not die. Take of this meat and eat."

Where John the Baptist touched the small creature, the marks of his thumb and fingers were imprinted upon its back for all time, and all generations to come." They were silent and impressed.

Nicholas passed the photograph to the abbot. "See the prints of the saint's fingers upon it."

The old man studied the print avidly, holding it up to his single eye, and at last he exclaimed, "It is true. The marks of the saint's fingers are clear to see."

He passed it to his deacons. Encouraged by the abbot's endorsement, they exclaimed and wondered over the picture of the insignificant creature in its coat of striped fur'.

"Have any of your men ever laid eyes upon one of these animals?" Nicholas demanded, and one after the other they shook their heads. The photograph completed the circle and was passed to the rank of squatting acolytes.

Suddenly one of them leaped to his feet prancing, brandishing the photograph and gibbering with excitement.

"I have seen this holy creature! With my very own eyes, I have seen it." He was a young boy, barely adolescent.

There were cries of derision and disbelief from the others. One of them snatched the print from the boy's grasp and waved it out of his reach, taunting him with it.

"The child is soft in the head, and often possessed by demons and fits," Jali Hora explained sorrowfully. "Take no notice of him, poor Tamre!"

Tamre's eyes were wild as he ran down the rank of acolytes, trying desperately to recapture the photograph.

But they passed it back and forth, keeping it just out of his reach, teasing him and jeering at his antics.

Nicholas rose to his feet to intervene. He found this taunting of a weak-minded lad offensive, but at that moment something tripped in the boy's mind, and he fell to the ground as though struck down by a club. His back arched and his limbs twitched and jerked uncontrollably, his eyes rolled back into his skull until only the whites showed, and white froth creamed on his lips that were drawn back in a grinning rictus.

Before Nicholas could go to him, four of his peers picked him up bodily and carried him away. Their laughter dwindled into the night. The others acted as though this was nothing out of the ordinary, and Jali Hora nodded to his debtera to refill his glass.

It was late when at last Jah Hora took his leave and was helped into the palanquin by his deacons. He took the remains of the brandy with him, clutching the half-empty bottle in one clawed hand and tossing out benedictions with the other.

"You made a good impression, Milord English," Boris told him. "He liked your story of John the Baptist, but he liked your money even more."

Seventh Scroll

When they set out the next morning, the path followed the river for a while. But within a mile the waters quickened their pace, and then raced through the narrow opening between high red cliffs and plunged over another waterfall.

Nicholas left the welltrodden trail and went down to the brink of the falls. He looked down two hundred feet into a deep cleft in the rock, only just wide enough to allow the angry river to squeeze through. He could have thrown a stone across the gap. There was no path nor foothold in that chasm, and he turned back and rejoined the rest of the caravan as it detoured away from the river and into another thickly wooded valley.

"This was probably once the course of the Dandera river, before it cut a fresh bed for itself through the chasm." Royan pointed to the high ground on each side of the path, and then to the water-worn boulders that littered the trail.

"I think you are right," Nicholas agreed. These cliffs seem to be an intrusion of limestone through the basalt and sandstone. The whole area has been severely faulted and cut up by erosion and the ever-changing river. You can be certain that those limestone cliffs are riddled with caves and springs."

Now the trail descended rapidly towards the Blue Nile, falling away almost fifteen hundred feet in altitude' in the last few miles. The sides of the valley were heavily covered with vegetation and at many places small springs of water oozed from the limestone and trickled down the old river bed.

The heat built up steadily as they went down, and soon even Royan's khaki shirt was stained with dark patches of sweat between her shoulder blades.

At one stage a freshet of clear water gushed from an area of dense bush high up the hillside and swelled the stream into a small river. Then they turned a corner of the valley and found that they and the stream had rejoined the main flow of the Dandera river. Looking back up the gorge, they could see where the river had emerged from the chasm through a narrow archway in the cliff. The rock surrounding the cleft was a peculiar pink in colour, smooth and polished, folded back upon itself, so that it resembled the mucous membrane on the inside of a pair of human lips.

The rock -was of such an unusual colour and texture that they were both struck by it. They turned aside to study it while the mules went on downwards, the clatter of their receding hoofbeats and the voices of the men echoing and reverberating weirdly in this confined and unearthly place.

"It looks like some monstrous gargoyle, gushing water through its mouth," Royan whispered, looking up at the cleft and at those strange rock formations. "I can imagine how the ancient Egyptians, led by Taita and Prince Memnon, would have been moved if they had ever reached this place. &at mystical connotations would they have attributed to such a natural phenomenon!"

Nicholas was silent, studying her face. Her eyes were dark with awe, and her expression solemn. In this setting she reminded him strongly of a portrait that he had in his collection at Quenton Park, It was a fragment of a fresco from the Valley of the Kings, depicting a Ramessidian princess.

"Why should that surprise you?" he asked himself. "The very same blood runs in her veins."

She turned to face him, "Give me hope, Nicky. Tell me that I have not

dreamed all this. Tell me that we are going to find what we are looking for, and that we are going to vindicate Duraid's death."

Her face was upturned to his, and it seemed to glow under the light dew of perspiration and the strength of her commitment. He was seized by an almost overwhelming urge to take her up in his arms and kiss those moistly parted lips, but instead he turned away and started down the trail.

He dared not look back at her until he had himself fully under control. After a while he heard her quick, light tread on the rock behind him. They went on down in silence, and he was so preoccupied that he was unprepared for the sudden stunning vista that opened abruptly before them.

They stood high on a ledge above the sub-gorge of the Nile. Below them was a mighty cauldron of red rock five hundred feet deep. The main flow of the legendary river plunged in a green torrent into the shadowy abyss. It was so deep that the sunlight did not reach down into it. Beside them the sparser waters of the Dandera river took the same leap, falling white as an egret's feather, twisting and blowing in the false wind of the gorge. In the depths the waters mingled, churning and roiling together in a welter of foam, turning upon themselves like a great wheel, weighty and viscous as oil, until at last they found the exit gorge and tore away down it with irresistible force and power.

"You sailed through that in a boat?" Royan asked, with awe in her voice.

"We were young and foolish, then," Nicholas said with a sad little smile that was haunted by old memories.

They were silent for a long while. Then RQyan said softly, "One can see how this would have stopped Taita and his prince as they came upstream." She looked about her, and then pointed down the gorge towards the west.

"They certainly could never have come up the sub-gorge itself. They must have followed the line of the top of the cliffs, right along here where we are standing." Her voice took on an edge of excitement at the thought.

"Unless they came up the other side of the river," Nicholas suggested to tease her, and her face fell.

"I hadn't thought of that. Of course it's possible. How would we ever cross over, if we find no evidence on this side?"

"Let's consider that only when it's forced upon us. We have enough to contend with as it is, without looking for more hardships."

Again they were silent, both of them considering the magnitude and uncertainty of the task that they had taken on. Then Royan roused herself.

"Where is the monastery? I can see no sign of it."

"It's in the cliff right under our feet."

"Will we camp down there?"

"I doubt it. Let's catch up with Boris and find out what he intends to do."

They followed the trail along the edge of the cauldron, and came up with the mule caravan at a spot where the track forked. One branch turned away from the river into a wooded depression, while the other still hugged the rimrock.

Boris was waiting for them, and he indicated the track that led away from the river. "There is a good campsite up there in the trees where I stayed last time I hunted down here."

There were several tall wild fig trees throwing shade across this glade, and a spring of fresh water at the head.

To minimize the loads, Boris had not carried tents down into the gorge. So as

soon as the mules were unloaded he set his men to building three small thatched huts for their accommodation, and to digging a pit latrine well away from the spring.

While this work was going on, Nicholas beckoned to Royan and Tessay, and the three of them set off to explore the monastery. Where the trail forked, Tessay led them along the path that skirted the cliff top, and soon they came to a broad rock staircase that descended the cliff face.

There was a party of white-robed monks coming UP the stone stairway, and Tessay stopped briefly to chat to them. As they went on she told Nicholas and Royan, "Today is Katera, the eve of the festival of Timkat, which begins tomorrow. They are very excited. It is one of the major events of the religious year."

"What does the festival celebrate?" Royan asked. "It is not part of the Church calendar in Egypt."

"It's the Ethiopian Epiphany, celebrating the baptis of Christ," Tessay explained. "During the ceremony the tabot will be taken down to the river to be rededicated and revitalized, and the acolytes will receive baptism, as did Jesus Christ at the hand of the Baptist."

They followed the staircase down the sheer cliff face.

The treads of the steps had been dished by the passage of bare feet over the centuries. Down they went, with the great cauldron of the Nile boiling and hissing and steaming with spray hundreds of feet below them.

Suddenly they came out on to a wide terrace that had been hewn by man's hand from the living rock. The red rock overhung it, forming a roof to the cloister with arches of stone left in place by the ancient builders to support it.

The interior wall of the long covered terrace was riddled with the entrances to the catacombs beyond. Over the ages the cliff face had been mined and burrowed to form the halls and cells, the vestibules, churches and shrines of the monastic community which had inhabited them for well over a thousand years.

There were groups of monks seated along the length of the terrace. Some of them were listening to one of the deacons reading aloud from an illuminated copy of the scriptures.

"So many of them are illiterate," Tessay sighed. "The Bible must be read and explained to even the monks, for most of them are unable to read it for themselves."

"This was what the Church of Constantine was like, the Church of Byzantium," Nicholas pointed out quietly.

"It remains the Church of cross and book, of elaborate and sumptuous ritual in a predominantly illiterate world today." As they wandered slowly down the cloister they passed other seated groups who, under the direction of a precentor, were chanting and singing the Amharic psalms and hymns.

>From the interior of the cells and caves there came the IC hum of voices raised in prayer or supplication, and the air was thick with the smell of human occupation that had taken place over hundreds of years.

It was the smell of wood smoke and incense, of stale food and excrement, of sweat and piety, of suffering and of sickness. Amongst the groups of monks were the pilgrims who had made the journey, or been carried by their relatives, down into the gorge to make petition to the saint, or to seek from him a cure for their disease and suffering.

There were blind children weeping in their mothers' arms, and lepers with the flesh rotting and falling from their bones, and still others in the coma of sleeping sickness or some other terrible tropical affliction. Their whines and moans of agony blended with the chanting of the monks, and with the distant clamour of the Nile as it cascaded into the cauldron.

They came at last to the entrance to the cavern cathedral of St. Frumentius. It was a circular opening like the mouth of a fish, but the surrounds of the portals were painted with a dense border of stars and crosses, and of saintly heads. The portraits were primitive, and rendered in ochre and soft earthy tones that were all the more appealing for their childlike simplicity. The eyes of the saints were huge and outlined in charcoal, their expressions tranquil and benign.

A deacon in a grubby green velvet robe guarded the entrance, but when Tessay spoke to him he smiled and nodded and gestured for them to enter. The lintel was low and Nicholas had to duck his head to pass under it, but on the far side he raised it again to look about him in amazement.

The roof of the cavern was so high that it was lost in the gloom. The rock walls -were covered with murals, a celestial host of angels and archangels who flickered and wavered in the light of the candles and oil lamps. They were partially obscured by the long tapestry banners that hung down the walls, grimy with incense soot, their fringes frayed and tattered. On one of these St. Michael rode a prancing white horse, on another the Virgin knelt at the foot of the cross, while above her the pale body of Christ bled from the wound of the Roman spear in his side.

This was the outer nave of the church. In the far wall "the doorway to the middle chamber was guarded by a massive pair of wooden doors that stood open. The three of them crossed the stone floor, picking their way between the kneeling petitioners and pilgrims in their rags and tatters, in their misery and their religious ecstasy. In the feeble light of the lamps and the blue haze of incense smoke they seemed lost souls languishing eternally in the outer darkness of purgatory.

The visitors reached the set of three stone steps that led up to the inner doors, but their way was blocked at the threshold by two robed deacons in tall, flat-topped hats.

One of these addressed Tessay sternly.

"They will not even let us enter the qiddist, the middle chamber," Tessay told them regretfully. "Beyond that lies the maqdas, the Holy of Holies." A

They peered past the guards, and in the gloom of the qiddist could just make out the door to the inner sanctum.

"Only the ordained priests are allowed to enter the maqdas, for it contains the tabot and the entrance to the tomb of the saint."

Disappointed and frustrated, they made their way out of the cavern and back along the terrace. They ate their dinner under a sky full of stars.

The air was still stiflingly hot, and clouds of mosquitoes hovered just out of range of the repellents with which they had all smeared their exposed skin.

"And so, English, I have got you where you wanted to be. Now, how are you going to find this animal that you have come so far to hunt?" The vodka was making Boris belligerent again.

"At first light I want you to send out your trackers to work the country downstream from here," Nicholas told him. "Dik-dik are usually active in the

early morning, and again late in the afternoon."

"You are teaching your grandpapa to skin a cat," said Boris, angling the metaphor. He poured himself another vodka.

"Tell them to check for spoor." Nicholas deliberately laboured his point. "I imagine that the tracks of the striped variety will look very similar to those of the common dikdik. If they find indications, then they must sit quietly along the edge of the thickest patches of bush and watch for any movement of the animals. Dik-dik are very territorial. They won't stray far from their own turf."

"Da! Da! I will tell them. But what will you do? Will you spend the day in camp with the ladies, English?" He grinned slyly. "If you are lucky, you may soon not need separate huts?" He guffawed at his own wit, and Tessay, looked distressed and stood up with the excuse that she was going to the kitchen hut to supervise the chef.

Nicholas ignored the boorish pleasantry. "Royan and I will work the river in bush along the banks of the Dandera river. It looked very promising habitat for dik-dik. Warn your people to keep clear of the river. I don't want the game disturbed."

They left camp the next morning in the glimmer of the dawn. Nicholas carried the Rigby rifle and a light day pack, and led Royan along the bank of the Dandera. They moved slowly, stopping every dozen paces to look and listen. The thickets were alive with the sounds and movements of the small mammals and birds.

"The Ethiopians do not have a hunting tradition, and I imagine the monks never disturb the wildlife here in the gorge." He pointed to the tracks of a small antelope in the moist earth of the bank. "Bushbuck," he told her. "Menelik's bushbuck. Unique to this part of the world. A much sought-after trophy."

"Do you really expect to find your great-grandfather's dik-dik?" she asked. "You seemed so determined when you discussed it with Boris."

"Of course not," he grinned. "I think the old man made it up. It should rather have been named Harper's chimera.

It probably was the skin of a striped mongoose that he used after all. We Harpers didn't get on in the world by always sticking to the literal truth."

They paused to watch a Tacazze suribird fluttering over a bunch of yellow blossoms high above them in the canopy of the river in forest. The tiny bird's plumage sparkled like a tiara of emeralds.

"Still, it gives us a wonderful excuse to fossick about in the bushes." He glanced back to make certain that they were well clear of the camp, and then gestured for her to sit beside him on a fallen tree trunk. "So, let's get it clear in our minds what we are looking for. You tell me."

"We are looking for the remains of a funerary temple, or the ruins of the necropolis where the workers lived while they were excavating Pharaoh Mamose's tomb."

"Any sort of masonry or stonework," he agreed, especially "some sort of column or monument."

Taita's stone testament," she said. "It's engraved or chiselled with hieroglyphics. Probably badly weathered, fallen over, covered with vegetation - I don't know. Anything at all. We are fishing blind in dark waters."

"Well, why are we still sitting here? Let's start fishing." In the middle of the morning Nicholas found the tracks of a dik-dik along the river bank. They took up

a position against the hole of one of the big trees and sat quietly for a while in the shadows of the forest, until at last they were rewarded by a glimpse of one of the tiny creatures. It passed close to where they sat, wriggling its trunklike proboscis, stepping daintily on its fill hooves, nipping a leaf from a low-hanging branch, and munching it busily. However, its coat was a uniform drab grey, unrelieved by stripes of any kind.

When it disappeared into the undergrowth, Nicholas stood up. "No luck. Common variety," he whispered. "Let's get on."

A little after noon they reached the spot where the river issued from between the pink flesh-coloured cliffs of the chasm. They explored these as far as they were able before their way was blocked by the cliffs. The rock fell straight into the flood, and there was no foothold at the water's edge that would allow them to penetrate further.

They retreated downstream, and crossed to the far bank over a primitive suspension bridge of lianas and hairy flax rope that Nicholas guessed had been built by the monks from the monastery. Once again they tried to push on into the chasm. Nicholas even attempted to wade around of pink rock that barred the way, around the first bus but the current was too strong and threatened to sweep him off his feet. He was forced to abandon the attempt.

"If we can't get through there, then it's highly unlikely that Taita and his workmen would have done so."

They went back as far as the hanging bridge and found a shady place close to the water to eat the lunch that Tessay had packed for them. The heat in the middle of the day was stupefying. Royan wet her cotton neckerchief in the river and dabbed at her face as she lay beside him.

Nicholas lay on his back and studied every inch of the pink cliffs through his binoculars. He was looking for any cleft or opening in their smooth polished surfaces.

He spoke without lowering the binoculars. "Reading River God, it looks as if Taita actually enlisted help to switch the bodies of Tanus, Great Lion of Egypt, and the Pharaoh himself." He lowered the glasses and looked at Royan. "I find that puzzling, for it would have been an outrageous thing to do in terms of his period and belief Is that a fair translation of the scrolls? Did Taita truly switch the bodies?"

She laughed and rolled over to face him. "Your old chum Wilbur has an overheated imagination. The only basis for that whole bit of story-telling is a single line in the scrolls. "To me he was more a king than ever Pharaoh been."" She rolled on to her back again. "That is a good example of my objection to the book. He mixes fact and fantasy into an inextricable stew. As far as I know and believe, Tanus rests in his own tomb and the Pharaoh in his., "Pity!" Nicholas sighed and stuffed the book back in his pack. "It was a romantic little touch that I enjoyed." He glanced at his wrist-watch and stood up. "Come on, I want to do a recon down the other spur of the valley. I spotted some interesting ground up there whilst we were on the approach march yesterday."

It was late afternoon when they arrived back at the camp, and Tessay hurried out of her kitchen hut to greet them.

"I have been waiting for you to return. We have had an interesting invitation from Jali Hora, the abbot. He has invited us to a banquet in the monastery to celebrate Kateral the eve of Timkat. The servants have set up your, shower, and

the water is hot. There is just time for you to change before we go down to the monastery."

The abbot sent a party of young acolytes to escort them to the banqueting hall. These IMC_ , young men arrived in the short African twilight, carrying torches to light the way.

Royan recognized one of these as Tamre, the epileptic boy. When she singled him out for her warmest smile, he came forward shyly and offered her a bouquet of wild flowers that he had picked from beside the river. She was unprepared for this courtesy, and without thinking she thanked him in Arabic.

"Shukran."

"Taffa", the boy replied immediately, using the correct gender of the response, and in an accent that told her instantly that he was fluent in her language.

"How do you speak Arabic so well?" she asked, intrigued.

The boy hung his head with embarrassment and mumbled, "My mother is from Massawa, on the Red Sea. It is the language of my childhood., When they set off for the monastery, the boy monk followed Royan like a puppy.

Once more they descended the stairway down the cliff and came out on to the torchlit terrace. The narrow cloisters were packed with humanity, and as they made their way through the press, with the honour guard of acolytes clearing a way for them, black faces called Amharic greetings and black hands reached out to touch them.

They stooped through the low entrance to the outer nave of the cathedral. The chamber was lit with oil lamps and torches, so that the murals of saints and angels danced in the uncertain light. The stone floor was covered with a carpet of freshly cut reeds and rushes, their sweet herbal perfume leavening the heavy, smoky air. It seemed that the entire brotherhood of monks were seated cross-legged on this spongy carpet. They greeted the entrance of the little party of ferengi with cries of welcome and shouts of benediction. Beside each seated figure stood a flask of tej, the honey mead of the country. It was clear from the happy, sweaty faces that the flasks had already done good service.

The visitors were led forward to a spot that had been left clear for them directly in front of the wooden doors to the qkUst, the middle chamber. Their escort urged them to sit and make themselves comfortable in this space. As soon as they were settled, another party of acolytes came in from the terrace bearing flasks of tej, and knelt to place a separate pottery flask in front of each of them.

Tessay leaned across to whisper, "Better you let me sample this tej before you try it. The strength and colour and taste vary in every place that it is served, and some of it is ferocious." She raised her flask and drank directly from the elongated neck. When she lowered the flask she smiled, "This is a good brew. If you are careful, you will be all right with it., The monks seated around them were urging them to drink, and Nicholas raised his flask. The monks clapped and laughed as he tasted the liquor. It was light and pleasant, with a strong bouquet of wild honey. "Not bad!" he gave his opinion, but Tessay warned him, "Later they will almost certainly offer you katikala. Be very careful of that! It is distilled from fermented grain and it will take your head off at the shoulders."

The monks were concentrating their hospitality on Royan now. The fact that she was a Coptic Christian, a true believer, had impressed them. It was obvious

also that her beauty had not gone entirely unremarked by this company of holy and celibate men.

Nicholas leaned close to her, and whispered, "You will have to fake it for their benefit. Hold it up to your lips and pretend to swallow, or they will not leave you in peace."

As she lifted the flask the monks hooted with delight and saluted her with their own upraised flasks. She lowered the flask again, and whispered to Nicholas.

"It's delicious. It tastes of honey."

"You broke your vow of abstinence!" he chided her laughing. "Did you?"

"Just a drop," she admitted, "and anyway I never made any vows."

The acolytes knelt in turn in front of each guest, offering them a bowl of hot water in which to wash their right hands in preparation for the feast.

Suddenly there was the sound of music and drums, and a band of musicians filed through the open doors of the qiddist. They took up their positions along the side walls of the chamber, while the congregation craned expectantly to peer into its dim interior.

At last Jali Hora, the ancient abbot, appeared at the head of the steps. He wore a full-length robe of crimson satin, with a gold thread-embroidered stole around his shoulders. On his head was a massive crown. Though it glittered like gold, Nicholas knew that it was gilt brass, and the multi-coloured stones with which it was set were just as certainly glass and paste.

JahbHora raised his crook, which was surmounted by an ornate silver cross, and a weighty silence fell upon the company.

"Now he will say the grace," Tessay told them, and bowed her head.

JahHora's grace was fervent and lengthy, his reedy falsetto punctuated by devout responses from the monks.

When at last he came to the end, two splendidly robed debteras helped Jali Hora down the stairs and seated him on his carved jimmera stool at the head of the circle of senior deacons and priests.

The religious mood of the monks changed to one of festive bonhomie as a procession of acolytes entered from the terrace, each of them bearing upon his head a flat woven reed basket the size of a wagon wheel. They placed one of these in the centre of each circle of guests.

Then at a signal from JahHora, acting in unison they whipped the lid off each basket. A jovial cheer went up from the monks, for each basket contained a shallow brass bowl that was filled from rim to rim with round sheets of the flat grey unleavened injera bread.

Two acolytes staggered in from the terrace, barely able to carry between them a steaming brass pot filled with gallons of wat, a spicy stew of fat mutton. Over each of the bowls of injera bread they tipped the great pot and slopped gouts of the runny red-brown wat, the surface glistening with hot grease.

The assembly fell on the food voraciously. They tore off wads of injera and scooped up the mess of wat with it, and then stuffed the parcel into their open mouths, which remained open as they chewed. They washed it down with long swallows from the flasks, before wrapping themselves another parcel of running wat. Soon every one of them was greasy to the elbow and their chins were smeared thickly, as they chewed and drank and shouted with laughter.

The serving acolytes dumped thick cakes of another type of injera beside

each guest. These were stiffer and less yeasty in taste, friable and crumbling, unlike the latex rubber consistency of the thin grey sheets of the first kind.

Nicholas and Royan tried to show their appreciation of the food without coating themselves with layers of it as the others were doing. Despite its appearance the wat was really rather tasty, and the dry yellow injera helped to cut the grease.

The communal brass bowls were emptied in remarkably short order. Only the churned up mess of bread and grease remained when the acolytes came tottering in under the weight of another set of pots, this time filled to overflowing with curried chicken wat. This was splashed into the bowls on top of the remains of the mutton, and again the monks had at it.

While they gobbled up the chicken, the tej flasks were replenished and the monks became more raucous.

"I don't think I can take much more of this," Royan told Nicholas queasily.

"Close your eyes and think of England," he advised her.

"You are the star of the evening. They aren't going to let you escape."

As soon as the chicken was eaten, the servers were back with fresh pots, this time brimming with fiery beef wat. They dumped this on the remnants of both the mutton and the chicken.

The monk in the circle opposite Royan emptied his flask, and when an acolyte tried to refill it, he waved the lad away with a shout of, "Katikala!"

The cry was taken up by the other monks. "Katikala!"

Katikalar The acolytes hurried out and returned with dozens of bottles of the gin-clear liquor and brass bowls the size of tea cups.

"This is the stuff to be careful of," Tessay told them.

Surreptitiously both Nicholas and Royan were able to dribble the contents of their bowls into the mat of reeds on which they were sitting, but the monks guzzled theirs down greedily.

"Boris is getting his share," Nicholas remarked to Royan. The Russian was red-faced and sweating, grinning like an idiot as he downed another bowlful.

Enlivened by the katikala the monks started playing a game. One of them would wrap a packet of beef wat with a sheet of injera, and then, as it dripped fat from his poised right hand, he would turn to the monk beside. The victim would open his mouth until his jaws were at full stretch, and the packet would be stuffed into it by his considerate neighbour. The morsel was, of course, as large as a human gape could possibly accommodate, and in order to engulf it the victim had to risk death by asphyxiation.

The rules of the game seemed to be that he was not allowed to use his hands to get it into his own mouth, neither should he dribble down the front of his robe, nor splutter gravy over those seated near to him. His contortions, together with his gulping and choking and gasping for air, were the source of uncontrollable hilarity. When at last he succeeded in getting it down, a brass bowl of katikala was held to his lips as a reward. He was expected to send the contents in the same direction as the parcel of injera.

Jali Hora, by now warmed with tej and kadkala, lurched to his feet. In his right hand he held aloft a streaming parcel of injera. As he began an unsteady progress across the chamber, with his shiny crown awry, they did not at first realize his intentions. The entire company watched him with interest.

Then suddenly Royan stiffened and whispered with horror, "No! Please, no."

Save me, Nicky. Don't let this happen to me."

"This is the price you pay for being the leading lady," he told her. Jali Hora was making his rather erratic way towards where she sat. The gravy from the morsel he carried for her was trickling down his forearm and dripping from his elbow.

The band standing along the side wall struck up a lively air. As the abbot came to a halt in front of Royan, rocking on his suspension like an ancien " carriage, they fiddled and fided and the drummers broke out in a frenzy.

The abbot presented his gift, and with one last despairing glance at Nicholas Royan faced the inevitable. She closed her eyes and opened her mouth.

To roars of encouragement and the urgings of LIFE and drum, she struggled and chewed. Her face turned rosy and her eyes watered. At one point Nicholas thought she would admit defeat and spit it out on to the reed-covered have to floor. But slowly and courageously, a bit at a time, she forced it down and then fell back exhausted.

Her audience, clapping and hooting loved every moment of it. The abbot sank stiffly to his knees in front of her and embraced her, almost losing his crown in the ess. Then without relinquishing his embrace proc he made himself a place beside her.

"It looks as though you have made another conquest," Nicholas told her dryly. "I think he will be on your lap at moment, if you don't duck and run." any Royan reacted swiftly. She reached across and grabbed a bottle of kadhala, and a bowl which she filled to the brim.

"Drink it up, Pops!" she told him, and held the bowl to his lips. Jab Hora accepted the challenge, but he had to release her to drink from her hand.

Suddenly Royan started so violently that she spilled what was left in the bowl down the old man's robe. The blood drained from her face and she began to tremble as though in a high fever as she stared at Jab Hora's crown, which had slipped forward over his eyes.

What is it?" Nicholas demanded quietly but urgently, and he reached across to steady her with a hand on her arm. Nobody else in the chamber had noticed her distress, but he was fully attuned to her moods by now.

Still staring ashen-faced at the crown, she dropped the bowl and reached down and grasped his wrist. He was startled by her strength. Her grip was painful, and he saw that she had driven her nails into his flesh so hard that she had broken the skin.

"Look at his crown! The jewel! The blue jewel!" she gasped.

He saw it then, amongst the gaudy shards of glass and pebbles of semi-precious garnets and rock crystal. The size of a silver dollar, it was a seal of blue ceramic, perfectly round, and baked to a hard, impervious finish. In the centre of the disc was an etching of an Egyptian war chariot, and above it the distinctive and unmistakable outline of the hawk with the broken wing. Around the circumference was a legend engraved in hieroglyphics. It took him only a few moments to read it to himself:

I COMMAND TEN THOUSAND CHARIOTS.

I AM TAITA, MASTER OF THE ROYAL HORSE.

Royan desperately wanted to escape from the oppressive atmosphere of the cavern. The parcel of wat that the abbot had forced upon her had mixed heavily with the few mouthfuls of tej she had swallowed, and this feeling in Turn

was aggravated by the smell of the dirty food bowls thick with congealing grease and the fumes of raw katikala.

if Already some of the monks were puking drunk, and the smell of vomit added to the cloying miasma of incense smoke within the chamber.

However, she was still the centre of the abbot's attention. He sat beside her stroking her bare arm and reciting garbled extracts from the Amharic scriptures; Tessay had long ago given up translating for her. Royan looked hopefully at Nicholas but he was withdrawn and silent, seeming oblivious of his surroundings. She knew that he was thinking about the ceramic seal in the abbot's crown, for his eyes kept returning thoughtfully to it.

She wanted to be alone with him to discuss this extraordinary discovery. Her excitement outweighed the distress of her overloaded stomach. She felt her cheeks flushed with it. Every time she looked up at the old man's crown her heart fluttered, and she had to make an effort to stop herself reaching up, seizing the shiny blue seal and ripping it from its setting to examine it more closely.

She knew how unwise it was to draw attention to the scrap of ceramic, but when she glanced across the circle she saw that Boris was far past noticing anything other than the bowl of kadhala in his hand. In the end it was who gave her the excuse for which she had been Boris seeking. He tried to get to his feet, but his legs collapsed under him. He sagged forward quite gracefully, and his face dropped into the bowl of grease-sodden injera bread.

He lay there snoring noisily, and Tessay appealed to Nicholas.

"Alto Nicholas, what am I to do?"

Nicholas considered the unlovely spectacle of the rate hunter. There were scraps of bread and beef stew prost sticking like confetti in his cropped ginger hair.

"I rather suspect Prince Charming has had enough for one night the murmured.

stood up, stooped over Boris and gripped one wrist.

He With a sudden jerk he lifted him into a sitting position, nd then heaved him upright and over his shoulder in a a fireman's lift.

"Good night, all!" he told the assembled monks, very few of whom were in any condition to respond. Then he carried Boris away, draped over his shoulders with head and feet dangling. The two women had to hurry to keep up with Nicholas as he strode down the terrace and then up the stone stairway without a pause.

"I did not realize Alto Nicholas was so strong," Tessay panted, for the stairs were steep and the pace was hard.

didn't either," Royan admitted. She experienced a ridiculous proprietary pride in his feat, and smiled at herself in the darkness as they approached the camp.

"Don't be silly," she admonished herself. "He isn't yours to boast about." Nicholas threw his burden down on Boris's own bed in thatched hut and stood back panting heavily, the sweat trickling down his cheeks.

"That's a pretty good recipe for a heart attack," he gasped.

Boris groaned, rolled over and vomited copiously over his pillows and bedlinen.

"On that pleasant note I will bid you all goodnight and sweet dreams,"

Nicholas told Tessay, stepping out of the hut into the warm African night.

He breathed in the smell of the forest and the river with relief, and then turned to Royan as she gripped his arm.

"Did you see-" she burst out excitedly, but he laid his fingers on her lips to silence her, and with a cautionary frown in the direction of Boris's hut led her away to her own hut.

"Did you see it?" she demanded, unable to contain herself longer. "Could you read it?"

"I command ten thousand chariots," he recited.

"I am Taita, master of the royal horse," she completed it for him. "He was here. Oh, Nicky! He was here. Taita was here. That's the proof we wanted. Now we know that we are not wasting our time."

She flopped down on her camp bed and hugged herself ecstatically. "Do you think the abbot will let us examine the seal?"

He shook his head, "My guess is no. The crown is one of the monastery treasures. Even for you, his favourite lady, I don't think he would do it. Anyway, it would not be wise to show any great interest in it. Jali Hora obviously does not have any idea of its significance. Apart from that, we don't want to alert Boris."

"suppose you are right." She moved over on the bed to make room for him. "Sit down."

He sat down beside her, and she asked, "Where do you suppose the seal came from? Who found it? Where, and when?"

"Steady on, dear girl. That's four questions in one, and I don't have an answer to any of them."

"Guess!" she invited him. "Speculate! Throw some ideas around!"

"Very well," he agreed. "The seal was manufactured in Hong Kong. There is a little factory there that turns them out by the thousands. Jali Hora bought it from a souvenir store in Luxor when he was on holiday in Egypt last month."

She punched his arm, hard. "Be serious," she ordered.

"can do better," he invited her, rubbing

"Let's hear if yo his arm.

"Okay, here I go. Taita dropped the seal here in the gorge while he was working on the construction of Pharaoh's tomb. Three thousand years later an old monk, one of the very first to live here at the monastery, picked it up. Of course, he could not read the hieroglyphics. He took it to the abbot, who declared it to be a relic of St. Frumentius, and had it set in the crown."

"And they all lived happily ever after," Nicholas agreed.

"Not a bad shot."

"ny holes?" she demanded, and he shook his head. "Can you find a head. "Then you agree that this proves that Taita really was here, and that it proves our theories are correct?" -Proves" is too strong a word. Let's just say that it points in that direction," he demurred.

She wriggled around on the bed to face him squarely.

"Oh, Nicky, I am so excited. I swear I will not be able to sleep a wink tonight. I just can't wait for tomorrow, to get out there and start searching again."

Her eyes were bright, and her cheeks flushed a warm rosy brown. Her lips were parted, and he could see the pink tip of her tongue between them. This time he could not stop himself. He leaned very slowly towards her, treating her gently, giving her every opportunity to pull away if she wished to avoid him. She

did not move, but her shining expression turned slowly to one of apprehension. She stared into his eyes, as if seeking something, some reassurance.

When their lips were an inch apart, Nicholas stopped, and it was she who made the last movement. She brought their mouths together.

At first it was soft, just a light mingling of their breath, and then it became harsher, more urgent. For a long, heartstopping moment they devoured each other, and her mouth tasted soft and sweet as ripe fruit. Then suddenly she whimpered, and with a huge effort of will tore herself out of his arms. They stared at each other, both of them shaken and confused.

"No," she whispered. "Please, Nicky, not yet. I am not ready yet."

He picked up her hand and turned it between his palms. Then lightly he kissed the tips of her fingers, savouring the smell and the taste of her skin.

"I'll see you in the morning." He dropped her hand and stood up. "Early. Be ready!" he said, and stooped out through the doorway of the hut.

When he was dressing the next morning he heard her moving about in her hut, and when he whistled softly at her door she stepped out to meet him, dressed and eager to start.

"Boris is not awake yet," Tessy told them as she served their breakfast.

"Now that is a great surprise to me," Nicholas said, without looking up from his plate. He and Royan were still slightly awkward in each other's presence, remembering the circumstances in which they had parted the previous evening. However, as Nicholas slung the rifle and the pack over his shoulder and they set off up the valley, their mood changed to one of anticipation.

They had been going for an hour when Nicholas glanced over his shoulder and then cautioned her with a frown. "We are being followed."

Taking her wrist, he drew her behind a slab of sandstone. He flattened himself against the rock and stared at her to do the same. Then he poised himself, and suddenly leaped forward to seize the lanky figure in a dirty white shawl who was sneaking up the valley behind them. With a howl the creature fell to his knees, and began gibbering with terror.

Nicholas hauled him to his feet. "Tamre! What are you doing following us? Who sent you?" he demanded in Arabic.

The boy rolled his eyes towards Royan. "No, please, effendi, do not hurt me. I meant no harm."

"Leave the child, Nicky. You will precipitate another fit," Royan intervened. Tamre scurried behind her and clung to her hand for protection, peering out around her shoulder at Nicholas as though his life were in danger.

"Peace, Tamre," Nicholas soothed him. "I will not hurt you, unless you lie to me. If you do, then I will thrash you until there is no skin on your back. Who sent you to follow us?"

"I came alone. Nobody sent me," blubbered the boy. "I came to show you where I saw the holy animal with the fingermarks -of the Baptist on his skin."

Nicholas stared at him for a moment, before he began to laugh softly. "I'll be damned if the boy doesn't really believe he saw great-grandfather's dik-dik." Then he scowled ferociously. "Remember what will happen to you, if you are lying."

"It is true, effendi," Tamre sobbed, and Royan came to his defence.

Don't badger him. He is harmless. Leave the poor child."

"All right, Tamre. I will give you a chance. Take us to where you saw the holy

animal."

Tamre would not relinquish his grip on Royan's hand.

He clung to it as he danced beside her, leading her along, and within a hundred yards his terror had faded and he was smiling and giggling at her shyly.

For an hour he led them away from the Dandera river and up over the high ground above the valley, into an area of thick scrub and up-thrust ridges of weathered limestone.

The thorny branches of the bush were densely intertwined, and grew so close to the ground that there seemed to be no way through them. However, Tamre led them on to a narrow twisting path, just wide enough for them to avoid the red-tipped hook thorns on each side of them. Then abruptly he stopped and pulled Royan to a halt beside him.

He pointed down, almost at his own toes.

"The riverPhe announced importantly. Nicholas came up beside them and whistled softly with surprise. Tamre had led them around in a wide circle to the west, and then brought them back to the Dandera river at a point where it still ran in the bed of the deep ravine.

Now they stood on the very edge of the chasm. He saw at once that, although the top of the rocky ravine was less than a hundred feet wide, the chasm opened out below the rim. From the surface of the water far below, the rock wall belled out in the shape of one of the pottery tej flasks.

It narrowed again as it neared the top where they stood.

saw the holy thing over there."Tamre pointed to the far side of the chasm where a small feeder spring meandered out of the thorny bush. Streamers of bright green moss, nourished by the spring, hung from the lip of the concave rock wall, and the water trickled down them and dripped from the tips into the river two hundred feet below.

"If you saw it there, why did you bring us to this side of the river?"Nicholas demanded.

Tamre looked as though he were on the point of tears.

This side is easier. There is no path through the bush on the other side. The thorns would hurt Woizero Royan."

"Don't be a bully," Royan told him, and put her arm around the boy's shoulder.

Nicholas shrugged, "It looks like the two of you are ganging up on me. Well, seeing that we are here, we might as well sit a while and see if great-grandpa's dik-dik puts in an appearance."

He picked out a spot in the shade of one of the stunted trees that hung on the lip of the chasm, and with his hat swept the ground clear of fallen thorns until there was a place for them to sit. He placed his back against the trunk of the thorn tree and laid the Rigby rifle across his lap.

By this time it was past noon, and the heat was stifling.

He passed the water bottle to Royan and, while she drank, glanced at Tamre and suggested to her in English, "This might be a good time to find out what, if anything, the lad knows about the Taita ceramic in the crown. He is besotted with you. He will tell you anything you want to know.

Question him."

She began gently, chatting softly to the boy. Occasionally she stroked his head and petted him as though he were a puppy- She spoke to him of the

previous night's banquet, the beauty of the underground church, and the antiquity of the murals and the tapestries, and then at last mentioned the abbot's crown.

"Yes. Yes. That is the stone of the saint," he agreed readily. "The blue stone of St. Frumentius."

"Where did it come from?" she asked. "Do you know?" The boy looked embarrassed, "I do not know. It is very old, perhaps as old as Christ the Saviour. That is what the priests say."

"You do not know where it was found?"

He shook his head, but then, eager to please her, he suggested, "Perhaps it fell from heaven."

"Perhaps." Royan glanced at Nicholas, who rolled his eyes upwards and then pushed his hat forward to cover his face.

"Perhaps St.. Frumentius gave it to the first abbot when he died." Tamre warmed to the subject. "Or perhaps it was in his coffin with him when he was placed in his tomb."

"All these things are possible, Tamre," Royan agreed.

"Have you seen the tomb of St. Frumentius?"

He looked around him guiltily. "Only the ordained priests are allowed into the tnaqdas, the Holy of Holies," he hung his head and whispered.

"You have seen it, Tamre," she accused him gently, stroking his head. She was intrigued by the boy's guilt. "You can tell me. I will not tell the priests."

"Only once," he admitted. "The other boys. They sent me to touch the tabot stone. They would have beaten me if I had not. All the new acolytes are made to do this." He began to babble with the horror of the memory of his initiation ordeal. "I was alone. I was very afraid. It was after midnight when the priests were asleep. Dark. The maqdas is haunted by the ghost of the saint. They told me that if I was unworthy the saint would strike me down with lightning."

Nicholas removed the hat from his face and straightened up slowly. "My word, the child is telling the truth," he said softly. "He has been into the Holy of Holies-'Then he looked across at Royan, "Keep questioning him. He may just give us something useful. Ask him about the tomb of St. Frumentius."

"Did you see the tomb of the saint?" she asked, and the boy nodded vigorously. "Did you go into the tomb?" This time he shook his head.

"No. There are bars across the entrance. Only the abbot is allowed into the tomb, on the birthday of the saint."

"Did you look through the bars?"

"Yes, but it is very dark. I saw the coffin of the saint. It is wood and there is painting on it, the face of the saint."

"Is he a black man?"

"No - a white man with a red beard. The painting is very old. The picture is faded, and the wood of the coffin is rotting and crumbling."

"Is it lying on the floor of the tomb?" Tamre screwed up his face in thought, then after careful consideration shook his head. "No, it is on a shelf of stone in the wall."

"Is there anything else you remember about the tomb of the saint?" Royan tried to prod his memory, but Tamre shook his head.

"It was very dark, and the opening in the bars is small, he apologized.

"It does not matter. Is the tomb in the back wall of the rrtmdu?"

. "Yes, it is behind the altar and the tabot stone."

"What is the altar made of - stone?"

"No. It is wood, cedarwood. There are candles, and a big cross, and the many crowns of the abbot, and the chalice and staff."

"Is it painted?"

"No, it is carved with pictures. But they are different from the pictures inside the tomb of the saint."

"What is different? Tell me, Tamre."

"I don't know. The faces are funny. They wear different clothes. There are horses." He looked puzzled. "They are different."

Royan tried for a while to get a clearer description from him, but he became more and more confused and contradictory when she pushed him, so she changed tack.

"Tell me about the tabot," she suggested, but Nicholas forestalled her.

"No, you tell me about the tabot," he demanded of her.

"Is it similar to the Jewish Tabernacle?"

"Yes, at least in the Egypti She turned to him, an Church it is. It is usually kept in a jewelled box and wrapped in an embroidered cloth of gold. The only difference is that the Jewish Tabernacle is carved with the ten commandments, but in our Church it is carved with the words of dedication of the particular church that houses it.

It is the living heart of the Church."

"What is the tabot stone?" Nicholas frowned with concentration.

"I don't know," she admitted. "Our Church does not have a tabot stone."

"Ask him!"

"Tell me about the tabot stone, Tamre."

"It is so high, and so square." He indicated a height of a little above his own shoulder, and the width of his spread hands.

"And the tabot stands on top of this stone?" Royan guessed.

Tamre nodded.

"Why did they send you to touch the stone and not the tabot itself?" Nicholas demanded, but Royan shook her head to silence him.

"Let me do the talking. You are too harsh with him. She turned back to the boy. "Why the stone, rather than the Ark of the tabot that stands on top of it?"

Tamre shrugged helplessly. "I don't know. They just did."

"What does the stone look like? Are there paintings on it also?"

"I don't know." He looked distraught at not being able to satisfy her. He wanted desperately to please her. don't know. The stone is wrapped with cloth."

Nicholas and Royan exchanged startled glances, and then Royan turned back to the boy.

"Covered?" Royan leaned closer to him. "The stone is covered?, "They say that it is only uncovered by the abbot on the birthday of St.. Frumentius."

Again Nicholas and Royan stared at each other, and then he smiled thoughtfully. "I would rather like to have a look at the tomb of the saint, and the tabot stone - in its uncovered state."

"You' have to wait for the saint's birthday," she said, she broke and have yourself ordained. Only the priests off and stared at him again. "You aren't thinking of - no, you wouldn't, would you?"

“Who, me?” he grinned. “Perish the thought.”

Seventh Scroll

"If they caught you in the maqdas, they would tear you to little pieces."

"The answer, then, would be not to let them catch me."

"If you go, I am going with you. How are we going to manage it?"

"Throttle back, dear girl. The thought only occurred to me ten seconds ago. Even on my good days, I need at least ten minutes to come up with a brilliant plan of action."

They both stared out across the chasm in silence, until Royan whispered softly, "The covered stone. Taita's stone testament?"

"Don't say it aloud," he pleaded, and made the sign against the evil eye. "Don't even think it aloud. The Devil is listening."

They were silent again, both of them thinking furiously. Then Royan started, "Nicky, what if-" she broke off. "No, that won't work." She relapsed into frowning silence again.

Tamre broke the quiet with a sudden squeak of excitement, "There it is. Look!"

They were both startled by the interruption. "What is it?" Royan turned to him.

Tamre seized her arm and shook it. He was trembling with emotion. "There it is. I told you." With his other hand he was pointing out across the river, "There at the edge of the thorn bushes. Can't you see it?"

"What is it? What can you see?"

"The animal of John the Baptist. The holy marked creature."

Following the direction of his outflung arm, she picked out a soft, brownish blur of movement at the edge of the thicket on the far bank. "I don't know. It is too far-"

Nicholas scrabbled in his pack and brought out his binoculars. He lifted and focused them, and then he began to chuckle.

"Hallelujah! Great-grandpa's reputation is safe at last." He passed the binoculars to Royan. She focused them and found the little creature in the field. It was three hundred yards away, but through the ten-power lens she could make it out in detail.

It was almost half as large again as the common dikdik that they had seen the previous day, and instead of drab grey its coat was a rich red brown. Its most striking feature, however, was the distinct dark bars of chocolate colour across its shoulders and back - five evenly spaced markings that did indeed look like the imprint of fingers and thumb.

"Madoqua harperii, no less," Nicholas whispered to her.

"Sorry, great-grandfather, for doubting you."

The dik-dik stood half in shadow, wriggling its nose as it snuffled the air. Its head was held high, suspicious and alert. The soft breeze was quartering between them and the animal, but every so often a wayward eddy gave it the faint whiff of humanity that had alarmed it.

Royan heard the snick of the rifle action as Nicholas worked the bolt and chambered a round. Hurriedly she lowered the glasses, and glanced at him. "You aren't going to shoot it?" she demanded.

"No, not at that range. Over three hundred yards, and a small target. I'll wait for it to get closer."

"How can you bring yourself to do it?"

"How can I not? That's what I came here to do, amongst other things."

"But it's so beautiful."

"I take it, then, that it would be perfectly all right to whack it if it were ugly?"

She said nothing, but raised the binoculars again. The eddy of the wind must have changed, for the dik-dik lowered its head to nibble at a tuft of coarse brown grass.

Then lifted its head again and came on down the clearing in the Thorn scrub, stepping daintily, pausing every few paces to feed again.

"Go back. She tried to will it into safety, but it kept on coming, meandering towards the edge of the chasm.

Nicholas rolled on to his stomach and settled himself behind the trunk of the tree. He screwed up his hat into a soft pad on which to rest the rifle.

"Two hundred yards," he muttered to himself "That's a fair shot. No further." Resting the cushioned rifle on the twisted root, he aimed through the telescopic sight. Then he lifted his head, waiting to let it come within certain range.

Abruptly the dik-dik lifted its head again and came to a halt, quivering with tension.

"Something he doesn't like. Dammit all, wind must have changed again," Nicholas growled. At that moment the little antelope bolted. It streaked across the clearing, back the way it had come, and disappeared into the thorn scrub.

"Go, dik-dik, go!" said Royan smugly, and Nicholas sat up and grunted with disgust.

"I can't make out what frightened him." Then his expression changed and he cocked his head. There was an alien sound on the air growing each second - a harsh, rising clatter and a shrill, whining whistle.

"Chopper! What the hell!" Nicholas recognized the sound immediately. He took the binoculars from Royan's hand and turned them to the sky, sweeping the cloudless blue emptiness above the tops of the escarpment.

"There it is," he said grimly, adding, "Bell Jet Ranger," as he recognized the profile. "Coming this way, by the looks of it. No point in drawing attention to ourselves. Let's get under cover."

He shepherded Royan and the boy under the spread branches of the thorn tree. "Sit tight," he told her. "No chance they will spot us under here."

He watched the approaching helicopter through the binoculars. "Probably Ethiopian air force," he said softly.

"Anti-shufta patrol, most likely. Both Boris and Colonel Nogo warned us that there are a lot of rebels and bandits operating down here in the gorge-" he broke off abruptly.

"No. Hold on. That's not military. Green and red fuselage, and the red horse emblem. None other than your old friends from Pegasus Exploration."

The sound of the rotors crescendoed, and now with her naked eye Royan could make out the flying horse on the fuselage of the helicopter as it flew low across their front, half a mile out, headed down towards the Nile.

Neither of them paid any attention to Tamre as he crouched behind Royan, trying to hide behind her body.

His teeth were chattering with terror and his eyes rolled until the whites showed.

"It looks as if our friend Jake Helm has got himself some fancy transport. If Pegasus is in any way connected with Duraid's murder and the other attempts

on your life, then we can expect them to be breathing heavily down our necks from now on. They are now in a position to overlook us at will." Nicholas was still watching the aircraft through the binoculars.

"When your enemy is up in the air, it gives you a helpless feeling." Royan edged instinctively closer to him, staring up.

The green and scarlet machine disappeared over the hump of the subgorge, down towards the monastery.

"Unless he's just on a joy-ride, he's probably looking for our camp," Nicholas guessed. "Under orders from the main man to keep tabs on us."

"He will have no trouble finding it. Boris made no attempt to conceal the huts," Royan said uneasily. "Let's get out of here, then." She stood up.

"Good plan." Nicholas was about to follow her, when suddenly he caught her hand and drew her down again.

"Hold it. They are coming back this way."

The engine beat was rising again. Then they caught a glimpse of the helicopter through the canopy of leaves and thorn branches overhead.

"Now he is following the river. Still searching for something, by the looks of it."

"Us?" Royan asked nervously.

"If they are under orders from the head man, could be," Nicholas agreed. The machine was very close now, and the shrill whine of the engine was deafening.

At that moment Tamre's nerve broke. He let out a wail of terror, "It is the Devil, come to take me; Save me, Jesus Christ the Saviour, save me!"

Nicholas put out a hand to restrain him, but he was not quick enough. Tamre broke free and leaped to his feet.

Still howling with fear of the pit and the flames of hell, he darted away down the path into the Thorn scrub, the skirts of his shamma swirling about his skinny legs and his shiny black face swivelled back over his shoulder to watch the approaching machine.

The pilot spotted him immediately, and the nose of the helicopter sank in their direction. It came directly towards them, slowing as it approached the lip of the chasm. They could make out the heads of the two occupants behind the windscreen of the forward cabin. Still decelerating, the aircraft hung suspended over the river, pivoting on the spinning disc of its rotor, while Royan and Nicholas crouched down in the scrub, trying to avoid detection.

"That's the American from the prospecting camp." Royan recognized Jake Helm, despite the bulky radio earphones and the mirrored dark glasses. He and the black pilot were craning their necks to search the river banks.

"They haven't spotted us-" But even as Nicholas said it, Jake Helm looked directly at them across the open void.

Although his expression did not change, he tapped the pilot's shoulder and pointed down at them.

The pilot let the helicopter sink lower until it hovered in the opening of the chasm, almost on the same level as they were. Only a hundred feet separated them now. No longer making any attempt at concealment, Nicholas leaned back against the hole of the Thorn tree. He tipped his Panama hat forward over one eye and gave Jake Helm a laconic wave.

The foreman made no response to the greeting. He regarded Nicholas with a flat, baleful stare, then struck a match and held the flame to the tip of the half-

smoked cigar between his lips. He flipped the dead match away and blew a feather of smoke in Nicholas's direction. Still without change of expression, he said something to the pilot out of the corner of his mouth.

Immediately the helicopter rose vertically and banked away to the north, heading back directly towards the wall of the escarpment and the base camp on its summit.

"Mission accomplished. He found what he was looking for." Royan sat up. "Us!"

"And he must have spotted the camp. He knows where to find us again," Nicholas agreed.

Royan shivered and hugged herself briefly. "He gives me the creeps, that one. He looks like a toad."

"Oh, come on!" Nicholas chided her. "What have you got against toads?" He stood up. "I don't think we are going to see great-grandfather's dik-dik again today. He has been thoroughly shaken up by the chopper. I'll come back for another try tomorrow."

"We should go and look for Tamre. He has probably had another fit, the poor little fellow."

She was wrong. They found the boy beside the path.

He was still shivering and weeping, but had not suffered another seizure. He calmed down quickly when Royan soothed him, and followed them back towards the camp.

However, when they neared the grove he slipped away in the direction of the monastery.

That evening, while it was still light, Nicholas took Royan back to the monastery.

"I believe that the criminal fraternity refer to a reconnaissance of this nature as 'casing the joint'," he remarked, as they stooped through the entrance of the rock cathedral and joined the throng of worshippers in the outer chamber.

"From what Tamre says, it sounds as though the novices wait until they know that the priests on duty are ones that will nod off during their watch," Royan told him softly, as they paused to gaze through the doors into the middle chamber.

"We don't have that sort of insider knowledge," Nicholas pointed out.

There were priests passing backwards and forwards through the doors as they watched.

"There doesn't seem to be any sort of procedure," Nicholas noted. "No password or ritual to allow them through."

"On the other hand, they greeted the guards at the door by name. It's a small community. They must all know each other intimately."

"There doesn't seem any chance at all that I could dress up like a monk and brazen my way through," Nicholas agreed—A wonder what they do to intruders in the sacred areas?"

"Throw them off the terrace to the crocodiles in the cauldron of the Nile?" she suggested maliciously. "Anyway, you are not going in there without me."

This was not the time to argue, he decided, and instead he tried to see as much as possible through the open doors of the qiddist. The middle chamber seemed much smaller than the outer chamber in which they stood. He could just make out the shadowy murals that covered the portions of the inner walls that he could see. In the facing wall was another doorway. From Tamre's

description, he realized that this must be the entrance to the maqdas. The opening was barred by a heavy grille gate of dark wooden beams, the joints of the cross-pieces reinforced with gussets of hand hammered native iron.

On each side of the doorway, from rock ceiling to floor, hung long embroidered tapestries depicting scenes from the life of St. Frumentius. In one he was preaching to a kneeling congregation, with the Bible in one hand and his right hand raised in benediction. In the other tapestry he was baptizing an emperor. The king wore a high golden crown like that of Jali Hora, and the saint's head was surrounded by a halo. The saint's face was white, while the emperor's was black.

"Politically correct?" Nicholas asked himself, with a smile.

"What is amusing you?" Royan asked. "Have you thought of a way of getting in there?"

"No, I was thinking of dinner. Let's go!

At dinner Boris showed no ill effects from the previous night's debauch. During the day he had taken out his shotgun and shot a bunch of green pigeons. Tessay had marinated these and barbecued them over the coals.

"Tell me, English, how was the hunting today? Did you get attacked by the deadly striped dik-dik? Hey? Hey?" He bellowed with laughter.

"Did your trackers have any success?" Nicholas asked mildly.

."Da! Da! They found kudu and hushbuck and buffalo.

They even found dik-dik, but no stripes. Sorry, no stripes."

Royan leaned forward and opened her mouth to intervene, but Nicholas cautioned her with a shake of the head. She shut her mouth again and looked down at her plate, slicing a morsel from the breast of a pigeon.

"We don't really need company tomorrow," Nicholas explained mildly in Arabic. "If he knew, he would insist on coming with us."

"Did your Mummy never teach you no manners, English? It's rude to talk in a language that others can't understand. Have a vodka."

"You have my share," Nicholas invited him. "I know when I am outclassed."

During the rest of the meal Tessay replied only in low monosyllables when Royan tried to draw her into the conversation. She looked tragic and defeated. She never looked at her husband, even when he was at his loudest and most overbearing. When the meal ended, they left her sitting with Boris at the fire. Boris had a fresh bottle of vodka on the table beside him.

"The way he is pumping the liquor, it looks as if I might be called out on another midnight rescue mission," Nicholas remarked as they made their way to their own huts.

"Tessay has been in camp all day with him. There has been more trouble between them. She told me that as soon as they get back to Addis Ababa she is going to leave him.

She can't take any more of this."

"The only thing I find surprising is that she ever got mixed up with an animal like Boris in the first place. She is a lovely woman. She could pick and choose."

"Some women are drawn to animals," Royan shrugged.

"I suppose it must be the thrill of danger. Anyway, Tessay has asked me if she can come with us tomorrow. She cannot stand another day in camp with Boris on her own.

I think she is really afraid of him now. She says that she has never seen him

drink like this before."

"Tell her to come along, Nicholas said resignedly. "The more of us the merrier. Perhaps we will be able to frighten the dik-dik to death by sheer weight of numbers. Save me wasting ammunition."

It was still dark when the three of them left camp the next morning. There was no sign of Boris and, when Nicholas asked about him, Tessay said simply, "After you went to bed last night he finished the bottle. He won't be out of his hut before noon. He won't miss me."

Carrying the Rigby, Nicholas led them tip into the weathered limestone hills, retracing the path along which Tamre had taken them the previous day. As they walked, Nicholas heard the two women talking behind him. Royan was explaining to Tessay how they had sighted the striped dik-dik, and what they planned.

The sun was well up by the time they again reached the spot under the thorn tree on the lip of the chasm, and settled down to wait in ambush.

"How will you retrieve the carcass, if you do manage to shoot the poor little creature?" Royan asked.

"I made certain of that before we left camp," he explained. "I spoke to the head tracker. If he hears a shot he will bring up the ropes and help me get across to the other side."

"I wouldn't like to make the journey across there." Tessay eyed the drop below them.

"They teach you some useful things in the army, along with all the rubbish," Nicholas replied. He made himself comfortable against the thorn tree, the rifle ready in his lap.

The women lay close by him, talking together softly.

It was unlikely that the sound of their low voices would carry across the ravine, Nicholas decided, so he did not try to hush them.

He expected that if it came at all, the dik-dik would show itself early. But he was wrong. By noon there was still no sign of it. The valley sweltered in the midday sun. The distant wall of the escarpment, veiled in the blue heat haze, looked like jagged blue glass, and the mirage danced across the rocky ridges and shimmered like the waters of a silver lake above the tops of the thorn thickets.

The women had long ago given up talking, and they lay somnolent in the heat. The whole world was silent and heat-struck. Only a bush dove broke the silence with its mournful lament, "My wife is dead, my children are dead, Oh, me! Oh, my! Oh, me!" Nicholas found his own eyelids becoming leaden. His head nodded involuntarily, and he jerked it up only to have it flop forward again. On the very edge of sleep he heard a sound, close by in the thorn scrub behind him.

It was a tiny sound, but one that he knew so well. A sound that whiplashed across his nerve endings and jerked him back to full consciousness, with his pulse racing and the coppery taste of fear in the back of his throat. It was the metallic sound of the safety-catch on an AK-47 assault rifle being slipped forward into the "Fire" position.

In one fluid movement he lifted the rifle out of his lap and rolled twice, twisting his body to cover the two women who lay beside him. At the same time he brought the Rigby into his shoulder, aimed into the scrub behind him from

where the sound had come.

"Down!" he hissed at his companions. "Keep your heads down!"

His finger was on the trigger and, even though it was a puny weapon with which to take on a Kalashnikov, he was ready to return fire. He picked up his target immediately, and swung on to it.

There was a man crouched twenty paces away, the assault rifle he carried aimed into Nicholas's face. He was black, dressed in worn and tattered camouflage fatigues and a soft cap of the same material. His webbing held a bush-knife and grenades, water bottle and all the other accoutrements of a guerrilla fighter.

"Shufta!" thought Nicholas. "A real pro. Don't take chances with this one." Yet at the same time he realized that if the intention had been to kill him, then he would be dead already.

He aimed the Rigby an inch over the muzzle of the assault rifle, into the bloodshot right eye of the shufta behind it. The man acknowledged the stand-off with a narrowing of his eyes, and then gave an order in Arabic.

"Salim, cover the women. Shoot them if he moves.

Nicholas heard movement on his flank and glanced in that direction, still keeping the shufta in his peripheral vision.

Another guerrilla stepped out of the scrub. He was all: similarly dressed, but he carried a Soviet RPD light machine gun on his hip. The barrel was sawn off short to make the weapon more handy for bush fighting, and there was a loop of ammunition belt draped around his neck. He came forward carefully, the RPD aimed point-blank at the two women. Nicholas knew that, with a touch on the trigger, he could chop them both to mincemeat.

There were other stealthy rustling sounds in the bush all around them. These two were not the only ones, Nicholas realized. This was a large war party. He might be able to get off one shot with the Rigby, but by then Royan and Tessay would be dead. And he would not be far behind them.

Very slowly and deliberately he lowered the muzzle of the rifle until it was pointing at the ground. Then he laid the weapon down and raised his hands.

"Get your hands up," he told the women. "Do exactly what they tell you."

The guerrilla leader acknowledged his surrender by coming to his full height and speaking rapidly to his men, still in Arabic.

"Get the rifle and his pack."

"We are British subjects," Nicholas told him loudly, and the guerrilla looked surprised by his use of Arabic. "We are simple tourists. We are not military. We are not government people."

"Be quiet. Shut your face!" he ordered, as the rest of the guerrilla patrol emerged from cover. Nicholas counted five of them all told, though he knew there were probably others who had not come forward. They were very professional as they rounded up their prisoners. They never blocked each other's field of fire, nor offered an opportunity of escape. Quickly they searched them for weapons, then closed in around them and hustled them on to the path.

"Where are you taking us?" Nicholas demanded.

"No questions!" The butt of an AK-47 smashed between his shoulder blades and almost knocked him off his feet.

"Steady on, chaps," he murmured mildly in English.

"That wasn't really called for."

They were forced to keep marching through the heat of the afternoon. Nicholas kept a check on the position of the sun and the distant glimpses of the escarpment wall.

He realized that they were heading westwards, following the course of the Nile towards the Sudanese border. It was late afternoon, and Nicholas estimated that they had covered some ten miles, before they came upon a side shoot of the main valley. The slopes were heavily wooded, and the three prisoners were herded into a patch of this forest.

They were actually within the perimeter of the guerrilla camp before they were aware of its existence. Cunningly camouflaged, it consisted merely of a few crude lean, to shelters and a ring of weapons emplacements. The sentries were well placed, and all the light machine guns in the foxholes were manned.

They were led to one of the shelters in the centre of the camp, where three men were squatting around a map spread on a low camp table. These were obviously officers, and there was no mistaking which of the three was the commander. The leader of the patrol which had captured them went to this man, saluted him deferentially and then spoke to him urgently, pointing at his captives.

The guerrilla commander straightened up from the table, and came out into the sunlight. He was of medium height, but was imbued with such an air of authority that he seemed taller. His shoulders were broad and his body square and chunky, with the beginning of a dignified spread around the waist. He wore a short curly beard which contained a few strands of grey, and his features were refined and handsome. His skin tones were amber and copper. His dark eyes were intelligent, his gaze quick and restless.

"My men tell me that you speak Arabic," he said to -Nicholas.

"Better than you do, Mek Nimmur," Nicholas told him.

"So now you are the leader of a bunch of bandits and kidnappers? I always told you that you would never get to heaven, you old reprobate."

Mek Nimmur stared at him in astonishment, and then began to smile. "Nicholas! I did not recognize you. You are older. Look at the grey on your head!"

He opened his arms wide and folded Nicholas into a bear hug.

"Nicholas! Nicholas!" He kissed him once on each cheek. Then he held him at arm's length and looked at the two women, who were standing amazed.

"He saved my life," he explained to them.

"You make me blush, Mek." Mek kissed him again. "He saved my life twice."

"Once," Nicholas contradicted him. "The second time was a mistake. I should have let them shoot you."

Mek laughed delightedly. "How long ago was it, Nicholas?"

"It doesn't bear thinking about."

"Fifteen years ago at least," Mek said. "Are you still in the British army? What is your rank? You must be a general by now!"

"Reserves only," Nicholas shook his head. "I have been back in civvy street a long time now."

Still hugging Nicholas, Mek Nimmur looked at the women with interest. "Nicholas taught me most of what I know about soldiering," he told them. His eyes flicked from Royan to Tessay, and then stayed on the Ethiopian girl's dark and lovely face.

"I know you," he said. "I saw you in Addis, years ago.

You were a young girl then. Your father was Alto Zemen, a great and good man. He was murdered by the tyrant Mengistu."

"I know you also, Alto Mek. My father held you in high esteem. There are many of us who believe that you should be the president of this Ethiopia of ours, in place of that other one." She dropped him a graceful little curtsy, hanging her head in a shy but appealing gesture of respect.

"I am flattered by your opinion of me." He took her hand and lifted her to her full height. Then he turned back to Nicholas, "I am sorry for the rough welcome. Some of my men are over-enthusiastic. I knew that there were ferengi asking questions at the monastery. But enough, you are with friends here. I bid you welcome."

Mek Nimmur led them to his shelter, where one of his men brought a soot-blackened kettle from the fire and poured viscous black coffee into mugs for them.

He and Nicholas plunged into reminiscences of the days prior to the Falklands war when they had fought side by side, Nicholas as a covert military adviser, and Mek as a young freedom fighter opposing the tyranny of Mengistu.

"But the war is over now, Mek, Nicholas remonstrated at last. "The battle is won. Why are you still out in the bush with your men? Why aren't you getting rich and fat in Addis, like all the others?"

"In the interim government in Addis there are enemies Of mine, men like Mengistu. When we have got rid of them, then I will come out of the bush."

He and Nicholas embarked into a spirited discussion of African politics, so deep and complicated that Royan knew very few of the personalities whom they were discussing. Nor could she follow the nuances and the subtlety of religious and tribal prejudices and intolerance that had persisted for a thousand years. She was, however, impressed by Nicholas's knowledge and understanding of the situation, and the way in which a man like Mek Nimmur asked his opinion and listened to his advice.

In the end Nicholas asked him, "So now you have carried the war beyond the borders of Ethiopia itself? You are operating in Sudan, as well?"

"The war in the Sudan has been raging for twenty years," Mek confirmed. "The Christians in the south fighting against the persecution of the Moslem nor the-

"I am well aware of that, Mek. But that is not Ethiopia.

It's not your war."

"They are Christians, and they suffer injustice. I am a soldier and a Christian. Of course it is my war." Tessay had ty to every word that Mek spoke, and been listening avid now she nodded her head in agreement, her eyes dark and solemn with hero worship.

"Alto Mek is a crusader for Christ and the rights of the common man,'Tessa told Nicholas in awed tones.

"And he dearly loves a good fight," Nicholas laughed, punching his shoulder affectionately. It was a familiar gesture which could easily have given offence, but Mek accepted it readily and laughed back at him.

"What are you doing here yourself, Nicholas, if you are no longer a soldier? There was a time when you also loved a good fight."

"I am completely reformed. No more fighting. I have come to the Abbay

gorge to hunt dik-dik."

"Dik-dik? I Mek Nimmur stared at him with disbelief, and then he roared with laughter. "I don't believe it. Not you. Not dik-dik. You are up to something."

"It is the truth."

"You are lying, Nicholas. You never could lie to me. I know you too well. You are up to something. You will tell me about it when you need my help."

"And you will still give me your help?"

"Of course. You saved my life twice."

"Once," said Nicholas.

"Even once is enough," said Mek Nimmur.

while they talked, the sun slanted down the sky.

"You are my guests for tonight," Mek Nimmur told them formally. "In the morning I will escort you back to your camp at the monastery of St.. Frumentius.

That is also my destination. My men and I are going to the monastery to celebrate the festival of Timkat- The abbot, Jali Hora, is a friend and an ally."

"And the monastery is probably your deep cover base.

You use it and the monks for resupply and intelligence.

Am I right?"

"You know me too well, Nicholas." Mek Nimmur shook his head ruefully. "You taught me much of what I know, so why should you not be able to guess my strategy? The monastery makes a perfect base of operations. It's close enough to the border-" he broke off, smiling. "But there is no need to explain it to you, of all people."

Mek had his men build a night shelter for Nicholas and Royan, and cut a mattress of grass to cushion their sleep. They lay close together under the flimsy roof. The night was sultry, and they did not miss their blankets.

Nicholas had a tube of insect repellent in his pack to keep the mosquitoes at bay After they had settled down on the grass mattress, their heads were close enough together to allow them to converse in quiet tones. When he turned his head Nicholas could see the dark silhouettes of Mek Nimmur and Tessay still sitting close together by the fire.

"Ethiopian girls are different from the Arabs, and from most other African women." Royan too was watching the other couple. "No Arab girl would dare be alone with a man like that. Especially if she were a married woman."

"Any way you cut it, they make a damned fine pair," he gave his opinion. "Good luck to them. Tessay hasn't had much of that lately - she is overdue."

He turned his head and looked into her face, "What about you, Royan, what are you? Are you a decorous, submissive Arab, or an independent, assertive Western girl?"

"It's both a little early and much too late for intimate questions of that nature," she told him, and turned over, presenting him with her back.

"Ah, we are standing on ceremony this evening!

Goodnight, Woizero Royan."

"Goodnight, Alto Nicholas," she replied, keeping her face turned away from him so that he could not see her smile.

The gorilla column moved out before dawn the next morning. They marched in full battle order, with scouts moving ahead and flankers covering each side of the path.

"The army come down here into the gorge very seldom, but we are always

ready for them when they do come," Mek Nimmur explained. "We try to give them a hearty welcome."

Tessay was watching Mek Nimmur as he spoke; indeed, she had seldom taken her eyes off him that morning. Now she murmured to Royan, "He is a truly great man, a man who could unite our land, perhaps for the first time in a thousand years. I feel humble in his presence, and yet I also feel like a young girl again, filled with joy and hope."

The march back to the monastery took the entire morning. When they came in sight of the Dandera river, Mek Nimmur drew his men back off the path into thick bush, while sending only one scout forward. After an hour's wait, a party of acolytes came up from the monastery, each carrying a large bundle balanced upon his head.

They greeted Mek with deep reverence, and handed over their bundles to his men before returning down the pathway into the gorge of the Abbey.

The bundles contained priestly shammis, headcloths and sandals. Mek's men changed out of their camouflage fatigues into these garments, all of which were well worn and unwashed for the sake of authenticity. They wore only their sidearms under the robes. All their other weapons and equipment they cached in one of the caves in the limestone Cliffs, and left a detachment to guard them.

Now as a party of monks they covered the last few miles to the monastery, to be welcomed joyously by the community there. Here Nicholas and the women left Mek, and climbed the steep path up into the grove of wild fig trees. Boris was waiting for them, pacing about the camp, angry and frustrated.

"Where the hell have you been, woman?" he snarled at Tessay. "Been whoring around all night, have you?"

"We lost our way yesterday evening." Nicholas fed him the cover story that they had agreed with Mek Nimmur, to maintain his security. Boris was hardly the man to trust.

"And we were picked up by a party of monks from the monastery this morning. They brought us back."

"You are the big hunter and tracker, are you?" Boris sneered at him. "You didn't need me to guide you, hey? You got yourself lost, did you, English? I see now why you want only to shoot dik-dik." He guffawed without humour, and looked at Tessay with those pale dead eyes. "I will talk to you later, woman. Go and see to the food."

Despite the heat, both Nicholas and Royan were hungry. In short order, Tessay was able to serve a tasty cold lunch under the shady branches of the fig trees. Nicholas refused the wine that Boris offered him.

want to go out hunting again this afternoon. I have lost almost a whole day."

"You want me to hold your hand this time, English?"

Make sure you don't lose yourself again?"

"Thanks, old chap, but I think I can manage without you."

While they ate Nicholas nudged Royan and told her, "Your admirer has arrived."

He jerked his head at the lanky, ungainly figure of Tamre, who had sneaked up quietly and was now sitting near the kitchen hut, As soon as Royan looked at him his face split into a doting idiotic grin, and he bobbed his head and squirmed with ecstatic shyness.

"I will not come with you this afternoon," Royan told Nicholas quietly, when Boris was not listening. "I think there is going to be trouble between him and Tessay. I want to stay here with her. Take Tamre with you."

"My word, what an attractive alternative. All my life I have waited for this moment." But when he had picked up his rifle and pack, he beckoned the boy to follow him.

Tamre looked around eagerly for Royan, but she was in her hut. At last, dragging his feet, he followed Nicholas up the valley.

"Take me to the other side of the river," he told the boy. "Show me how to reach the side where the holy creature lives." Tamre perked up at the prospect, and broke into a shambling trot as he led Nicholas over the suspension bridge below the pink cliffs.

For an hour they followed the path, but gradually it petered out until it ended in bad and broken ground amongst the erosion-carved hills. Undeterred, Tamre plunged into the thorny scrub, and for another two hours they scrambled over rocky ridges and through thorn-choked valleys.

"I can see why you didn't want to bring Royan this way here. You will not move. You will not speak. You will even breathe very, very quietly, until I come back to fetch you.

If you utter even one little prayer before I return, I will personally start you on your journey to meet St.. Peter at the gates of heaven. Do you understand me?"

He went forward alone, but the little antelope was thoroughly alarmed by now Nicholas saw it twice more, but he only had fleeting glimpses of ruddy brown movement almost entirely screened by bush. He stood directing bitter imprecations towards the boy monk and listening to the tick of small hooves on dry earth as it raced away, deeper into the thickets. In the end he was forced to give up the hunt for that day.

It was after dark when he and Tamre got back to camp.

As soon as Nicholas stepped into the circle of firelight, Royan came to meet him.

"What happened?" she asked. "Did you see the dik-dik again?"

"Don't ask me. Ask your accomplice. He scared it off.

It is probably still running."

"Tamre, you are a fine young man, and I am very proud of you," she told him. The boy wriggled like a puppy, giggling and hugging himself with the joy of her approval as he scurried away down the path to the monastery.

Royan was so pleased with the outcome of the hunt that she poured Nicholas a whisky with her own hand and brought it to him as he sagged wearily by the fire.

He tasted it and shuddered, "Never let a teetotaller pour for you. With a heavy hand like that you should take UP tossing the caber or blacksmithing." Despite the complaint, he took another tentative sip.

She sat close to him, fidgeting with excitement, but it was a while before he became aware of her agitation.

"What is it? Something is eating you alive."

She threw a cautionary glance in the direction of where Boris sat on the opposite side of the fire, and then dropped her voice, leaned close to him and spoke in Arabic.

"Tessay and I went down to the monastery this afternoon to see Mek Nimmur.

Tessay asked me to go with her, just in case Boris - well, you know what I mean."

"I have a vague idea. You were playing chaperone." Nicholas took another sip of the whisky and gasped. He exhaled sharply and his voice was husky. "Go on," he invited her.

"At one stage, before I left them alone together, we were discussing the festival of Timkat. On the fifth day the abbot takes the tabot down to the Abbay. Mek tells us there is a path down the cliff to the water's edge."

"Yes, we know that."

"This is the interesting part - this you didn't know."

Everybody joins the procession down to the river. Everybody. The abbot, all the priests, the acolytes, every true believer, even Mek and all his men, they all go down to the river and stay there overnight. For one whole day and night the monastery is deserted. Empty. Nobody there at all."

He stared at her over the rim of his glass, and then slowly he began to smile, "Now that is very interesting indeed," he admitted.

"Don't forget, I am coming with you," she told him severely. "Don't you dare to even think of leaving me behind."

Nicholas went to her hut again that evening after dinner. This was the only place in camp where they could be sure of privacy, and where they were safe from eavesdropping. However, this time he did not make the mistake of sitting on her bed.

While she perched on the end of it, he took the stool opposite her.

"Before we start planning this thing, let me ask you one question. Have you considered the possible consequences?"

"You mean, what happens if the monks catch us at it?" Royan asked.

"At the very least we can expect them to run us out of the valley. The abbot has a tremendous amount of power."

At the worst we can be physically attacked," Nicholas told her. "This is one of the most sacred sites in their religion, and don't underestimate that fact. There is a great deal of danger involved. It could go as far as a knife between the ribs, or something nasty in our food."

"We would also alienate Tessay. She is a deeply religious woman," Royan added.

"Even more importantly, we would probably outrage Mek Nimmur as well." Nicholas looked distressed at the thought. "I don't know what he would do, but I don't think our friendship would stand the test."

They were both quiet for a while, considering the cost that they might have to pay. Nicholas broke the silence.

"Then again, have you considered your own position?"

After all, it is your own Church that we will be desecrating.

You are a committed Christian. Can you justify this to yourself?"

"I have thought about it, she admitted. "And I am not altogether happy about it, but it isn't really my Church. It's a different branch of the Coptic Church."

"Splitting hairs, aren't we?"

"The Egyptian Church does not deny anyone access to even the most sacred precincts of its church building. I do not feel myself bound by the abbot's prohibition. I feel that as a believing Christian I have the right to enter any part of the cathedral that I wish."

He whistled softly, "And you are the one who once said that I should have been a lawyer."

"Please don't, Nicky. It's not something you should joke about. All I know is that, no matter what, I have to go in there. Even if I die to do it."

"You could let me do it for you," he suggested. "After all, I am an old heathen. It would not spoil my chances of salvation. I don't have any."

"No." She shook her head firmly. "If there is an inscription or something of that nature, I need to see it."

You read hieroglyphics quite well, but not as well as I do, and you don't know the hieratic script. I am the expert you are just a gifted amateur. You need me. I am going in there with you."

"All right. That is settled, then," he said with finality.

"Let's start planning. We had better draw up a list of equipment that we may need. Flashlight, knife, Polaroid camera, spare film-"

"Art paper and soft pencils to lift an impression of any inscriptions," she added to the list.

"Hell!" He snapped his fingers with chagrin. "I didn't think to bring any."

"See what I mean? Amateur. I did."

They talked on until late, and at last Nicholas glanced at his wrist-watch and stood up.

"Long after midnight. I am scheduled to turn into a pumpkin at any moment. Goodnight."

"There are still two days of the festival before the tabot is taken down to the river. Nothing we can do until then."

What are your plans

"Tomorrow I am going back after that damned little Bambi. It has made a fool of me twice already."

"I am coming with you," she said firmly, and that simple declaration gave him a disproportionate amount of pleasure.

"Just as long as you leave Tamre at home," he warned her as he stooped out through the door.

The tiny antelope stepped out from the deep shadow of the thorn thicket, and the early morning sunlight gleamed on the silky pelt, It kept walking steadily across the narrow clearing.

Nicholas's breathing quickened with excitement as he followed it with the telescopic sight. It was ridiculous that he should feel so wrought up with the hunting of such a humble little animal, but his previous failures had sharpened his anticipation. Added to that was the peculiar passion that drives the true collector. Since he had lost Rosalind and the girls, he had thrown all his energy into the building up of the collection at Quenton Park. Now, suddenly, procuring this specimen for it had become a matter of supreme importance to him.

His forefinger rested lightly on the side of the trigger guard. He would not fire until the dik-dik came to a standstill. Even that walking pace would make the shot uncertain. He had to place his bullet precisely, to kill swiftly but at the same time to inflict the least possible damage to the skin.

To this end he had loaded the Rigby with full metal jacket bullets - ones that would not expand on impact and open a wide wound channel, nor rip out a gaping hole in the coat as they exited. These solid bullets would punch a tiny hole the size of a pencil that the taxidermist at the museum would be able to

repair invisibly.

He felt his nerves screwing up as he realized that the dik-dik was not going to stop in the open. It made steadily for the thick scrub on the far side of the clearing. This might be his last chance. He fought the temptation to take the shot at the moving target, and it required an effort of will to lift his finger off the trigger again.

The antelope reached the wall of thorn scrub -and, the moment before it disappeared, stopped abruptly and thrust its tiny head into the depths of one of the low bushes.

Standing broadside to Nicholas, it began to nibble at the pale green tufts of new leaves. The head was screened, so he had to abandon his intention of going for that shot.

However, the shoulder was exposed. He could make out the clear outline of the blade beneath the glossy red-brown skin. The dik-dik was angled slightly away from him, in the perfect position for the heart shot, tucked in low behind the shoulder.

Unhurriedly he settled the reticle of the scope on the precise spot, and squeezed the trigger.

The shot whip-cracked in the heavy heated air and the tiny antelope bounded high, coming down to touch the earth already at a full run. Like a rapier rather than a cutlass, the solid bullet had not struck with sufficient shock to knock the dik-dik over. Head down, the dik-dik dashed away in the typical frantic reaction to a bullet through the heart. It was dead already, running only on the last dregs of oxygen in its bloodstream.

"Oh, no! Not that way," Nicholas cried as he jumped to his feet. The tiny creature was racing straight towards the lip of the cliff. Blindly leaped out into empty space and flipped into a somersault as it fell, dropping from their sight, down almost two hundred feet into the chasm of the Dandera river.

"That was a filthy bit of luck." Nicholas jumped over the bush that had hidden them and ran to the rim of the chasm. Royan followed him and the two of them stood peering down into the giddy void.

"There it is!" She pointed, and he nodded. "Yes, I can see it."

The carcass lay directly below them, caught on an islet of rock in the middle of the stream.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"I'll have to go down and get it." He straightened up and stepped back from the brink. "Fortunately it's still early.

We have plenty of time to get the job done before dark.

I'll have to go back to camp to fetch the rope and to get some help."

It was afternoon before they returned,panied by Boris, both his trackers and two of the skimmers. They brought with them four coils of nylon rope.

Nicholas leaned out over the cliff and grunted with relief "Well, the carcass is still down there. I had visions of it being washed away." He supervised the trackers as they uncoiled the rope and laid it out down the length of the clearing.

"We will need two coils of it to get down to the bottom he estimated and joined them, painstakingly tying and checking the knot himself. Then he plumbed the drop, lowering the end of the rope down the cliff until it touch the surface of the water, and then hauling it back and measuring it between the

spread of his arms.

"Thirty fathoms. One hundred and eighty feet. I won't be able to climb back that high," he told Boris. "You and your gang will have to haul me back up."

He anchored the rope end with a bowline to the hole of one of the wiry thorn trees. Then he again tested it meticulously, getting all four of the trackers and skimmers to heave on it with their combined weight.

"That should do it," he gave his opinion as he stripped to his shirt and khaki shorts and pulled off his chukka boots. On the tip of the cliff he leaned out backwards with the rope draped over his shoulder and the tail brought back between his legs in the classic absed style.

"Coming in on a wing and a prayer" he said, and jumped out backwards into the chasm. He controlled his fall by allowing the rope to pay out over his shoulder, braking with the turn over his thigh, swinging like a pendulum and kicking himself off the rock wall with both feet. He went down swiftly until his feet dangled into the rush of water, and the current pushed him into a spin on the end of the rope. He was a few yards short of the spur of rock on which the dead dik-dik lay, and he, was forced to let himself drop into the river. With the end of the rope held between his teeth he swam the last short distance with a furious overarm crawl, just beating the current's attempt to sweep him away downstream.

He dragged himself up on to the island and took a few moments to catch his breath, before he could admire the beautiful little creature he had killed. He felt the familiar melancholy and guilt as he stroked the glossy hide and examined the perfect head with the extraordinary proboscis. However, there was no time now for regrets, nor for the searching of his hunter's conscience.

He trussed up the dik-dik, tying all four of its legs together securely, then he stepped back and looked up. He could see Boris's face peering down at him.

"Haul it up!" he shouted, and gave three yanks on the rope as the agreed signal. The trackers were hidden from his view, but the slack in the rope was taken up and then the dik-dik lifted clear of the island and rose jerkily up the wall of the chasm. Nicholas watched it anxiously. There was a moment when the rope seemed to snag when the carcass was two-thirds of the way to the top, but then it freed itself and snaked on up the cliff.

Eventually the dik-dik disappeared from his sight, and there was a long delay until the rope end dropped back over the tip. Boris had been sensible enough to weight it with a round stone the size of a man's head, and he was hanging over the top of the cliff, watching its progress and signalling to his men to control the descent.

When the end of the weighted line touched the surface of the water it was just out of Nicholas's reach. From the top of the cliff Boris began to swing the line until the end of it pendulumed close enough for Nicholas to grab it.

With a bowline knot Nicholas tied a loop in the end of the line and slipped it under his armpits. Then he looked up at Boris.

"Heave away!" he yelled, and tugged the dangling rope three times. The slack tightened and then he was lifted off his feet. He began to ascend in a series of spiralling jerks and heaves. As he rose, the belled wall of the chasm arched in to meet him, until he could fend off from the rock with his bare feet and stop himself spiralling at the end of the rope. He was fifty feet from the top of the cliff when suddenly he stopped abruptly, dangling helplessly against the

rock face.

"What's going on?" he shouted up at Boris.

"Bloody rope has jammed," Boris yelled back. "Can you see where it is stuck?"

Nicholas peered up and realized that the rope had rolled into a vertical crack in the face, probably the same one that had almost stopped the dik-dik reaching the top.

However, his own weight was almost five times that of the little antelope, and had forced the rope much more deeply into the crack.

He was suspended high in the air, with a drop of almost a hundred feet under him.

"Try and swing yourself loose! Boris shouted down at him. Obediently, Nicholas kicked himself back and twisted on the rope to try and roll it clear. He worked until the sweat streamed down into his eyes and the rope had rubbed him raw under the arms.

"No use," he shouted back at Boris. "Try to haul it out with brute force!

There was a pause, and then he saw the rope above the crack tighten like a bar of iron as five strong men hauled on the top end with all their strength. He could hear the trackers chanting their working chorus as they threw all their combined weight on the line.

His end of the line did not budge. It was a solid jam, and he knew then that they were not going to clear it. He looked down. The surface of the water seemed much further than a hundred feet below.

"The terminal velocity of the human body is one hundred and fifty miles an hour," he reminded himself. At that speed the water would be like concrete. "I won't be going that fast when I hit, will I?" he tried to reassure himself.

He looked up again. The men on the top of the cliff were still hauling with all their weight and strength. At that moment one of the strands of the nylon rope sheared against the cutting edge of the rock crack, and began to uncurl like a long green worm.

"Stop pulling!" Nicholas screamed. "Vast heaving!" But Boris was no longer in sight. He was helping his trackers, adding his weight to the pull.

The second strand of the rope parted and unravelled.

There was only a single strand holding him now.

It was going to go at any moment, he realized. "Boris, you ham-fisted bastard, stop pulling!" But his voice never reached the Russian, and with a pop like a champagne cork the third and final strand of the rope parted.

Seventh Scroll

He plunged downwards, with the loose end of the severed rope fluttering above his head. Flinging both arms straight upwards over his head to stabilize his flight, he straightened his legs, arrowing his body to hit feet first.

He thought about the island under him. Would he miss its red rock fangs or would he smash into it and shatter every bone in his lower body? He dared not look down to judge it in case he destabilized - his fall and tumbled in midair. If he hit the water flat it would crush his ribs or snap his spine.

His guts seemed to be forced into his throat by the speed of his fall, and he drew one last breath as he hit the surface feet first. The force of it was stunning. It was transmitted up his spine into the back of his skull, so that his teeth cracked against each other and bright lights starred his vision. The river swallowed him under. He went down deep, but he was still moving so fast when he hit the rocky bottom that his legs were jarred to the hips. He felt his knees buckle under the strain, and he thought that both his legs had been broken.

The impact drove the air out of his lungs, and it was only when he kicked off the bottom, desperate for air, that he realized with a rush of relief that both his legs were still intact. He broke out through the surface, wheezing and coughing, and realized that he must have missed the island by only the length of his body. However, by now the current had carried him well clear of it.

He trod water on the racing stream, shook the water from his eyes and looked around him swiftly. The walls of the chasm were streaming past him, and he estimated his speed at around ten knots - fast enough to break bone if he hit a rock. As he thought it, another small island flashed past him almost close enough to touch. He rolled on to his back and thrust both feet out ahead of him, ready to fend off should he be thrown on to another outcrop.

"You are in for the whole ride, he told himself grimly.

"There is only one way out, and that is to ride it to the bottom."

He was trying to calculate how far he was above the point where the river debauched from the chasm through the pink stone archway, how far he still had to swim.

"Three or four miles, at the least, and the river falls almost a thousand feet. There are bound to be rapids and probably waterfalls ahead," he decided. "From here it does not look good. I say the betting is three to one against getting through without leaving some skin and meat on the rocks behind you."

He looked up. The walls canted in from each side, so that at places they almost met directly over his head. There was only a narrow strip of blue sky showing, and the depths were gloomy and dank. Over the ages the river had scoured the rock as it cut its way through.

"Damned lucky this is the dry season. What is it like down in here in the rainy season?" he wondered. He looked up at the high-water mark etched on the rock fifteen or twenty feet above his head.

Shuddering at the image he looked down again, concentrating on the river ahead. He had his breath back by now, and he checked his body for any damage. With relief he decided that, apart from some bruising and what felt like a sprained knee, he was unhurt. All his limbs were responding, and when he swam a few strokes to one side to avoid another spur of rock, even the sore

knee worked well enough to get him out of trouble.

Gradually he became aware of a new sound in the canyon. It was a dull roar, growing stronger as he sped onward down. The walls of the chasm converged upon each other, the gut of rock narrowed and the flood seemed to accelerate as it was squeezed in and confined. The sound of water built up rapidly into a thunder that reverberated in the canyon.

Nicholas rolled over and swam with all his strength across the current until he reached the nearest rock wall.

He tried to find a handhold, a place where he could anchor himself, but the rock was polished smooth by the river. It slipped past under his desperately grasping hands, and the river bellowed in his head. He saw the surface around him flatten out and smooth like solid glass. Like a horse laying back its ears as it gathers itself for a jump, the river had sensed what lay ahead.

Nicholas pushed himself away from the rock wall to try and give himself room in which to manoeuvre, and pointed his feet once more down river. Abruptly the air opened under him and he was launched out into space. All around him white spurning water filled the air, and he was swirled off balance and tossed like a leaf in the torrent. The drop seemed to last for ever, and his stomach swooped against his ribs. Then once more he struck with all his weight and was driven far below the surface.

He fought his way up and abruptly burst out through the surface with his breathing whistling up his throat.

Through streaming eyes he saw that he was caught up in the bowl of swirling water below the falls. The waters revolved and eddied, turning in a stately minuet upon themselves.

As he turned, he saw first the high sheet of white water of the falls down which he had tumbled, and then still turning, the narrow exit from the basin through which the river resumed its mad career downstream. But for the moment he was safe and quiet here in the back-eddy below the falls. The current pushed him against the side of the basin, close in beneath the chute of the falls. He reached out and found a handhold on a clump of mossy fern growing out of a crack in the wall.

Here, at last, he had a chance to rest and consider his position. It did not take him long, however, to realize that his only way out of the chasm was to follow the course of the river and to take his chances with whatever lay downstream. He could expect rapids, if not another set of falls like this one that thundered away close beside him.

If only there were some way up the wall! He looked up, but his spirits quailed as he considered the overhang that formed a cathedral roof high above him.

While he still stared upwards, something caught his eye. Something too regular and regimented to be natural.

There was a double row of dark marks running vertically up the wall of rock, beginning at the surface of the water and climbing up the wall to the rim almost two hundred feet overhead. He relinquished his hold on the clump of fern and dog-paddled slowly down to where these marks reached the water.

As he reached them he realized that they were niches, cut about four inches square into the wall. The two rows were twice the spread of his arms apart, and the niche in one row lined up in the horizontal plane exactly with its neighbour in the second row.

Thrusting his hand into the nearest opening, he found that it was deep enough to accommodate his arm to the elbow. This opening, being below the flood level of the waters, was smoothed and worn, but when he looked to those higher up the wall, above the water mark, he saw that they had retained their shape much more clearly. The edges were sharp and square.

"My word, how old are they to have been worn like that?" he marvelled. "And how the hell did anybody get down here to cut them?"

He hung on to the niche nearest him and studied the pattern in the cliff face. "Why would anybody go to all that amount of trouble?" He could think of no reason nor purpose. "Who did this work? What would they want down here?" It was an intriguing mystery.

Then suddenly something else caught his eye. It was a circular indentation in the rock, precisely between the two rows of niches and above the high-water mark. From so far below it looked to be perfectly round - another shape that was not natural.

He paddled further around, trying to reach a position from which he would have a clearer view of it. It seemed to be some sort of rock engraving, a plaque that reminded him strongly of those marks in the black boulders that flank the Nile below the first cataract at Aswan, placed there in antiquity to measure the flood levels of the river waters. But the light was too poor and the angle too acute for him to be certain that it was man-made, let alone to recognize or read any script or lettering that might have been incorporated in the design.

Hoping to devise some way of climbing closer, he tried to use the stone niches as aids. With a great deal of effort, using them as foot- and hand-holds, he managed to lift himself out of the water. But the distances between holds were too great and he fell back with a splash, swallowing more water.

"Take it easy, my lad - you still have to swim out of here. No profit in exhausting yourself. You will just have to come back another day to get a closer look at whatever it is up there."

Only then did he realize how close he was to total exhaustion. This water coming down from the Choke mountains was still cold with the memories of the high snows. He was shivering until his teeth chattered.

"Not far from hypothermia. Have to get out of here now, while you still have the strength."

Reluctantly he pushed himself away from the wall of rock and paddled towards the narrow opening through which the Dandera river resumed the headlong rush to join her mother Nile. He felt the current pick him up and bear him forward, and he stopped swimming and let it take him.

"The Devil's roller-coaster!" he told himself. "Down and down she goes, and where she stops nobody knows."

The first set of rapids battered him. They seemed endless, but at last he was spewed out into the run of slower water below them. He floated on his back, taking full advantage of this respite, and looked upwards. There was very little light showing above him, for the rock almost met overhead. The air was dank and dark and stank of bats. However, there was little time to examine his surroundings, for once again the river began to roar ahead of him. He braced himself silently for the assault of turbulent waters, and went cascading down the next steep slide.

After a while he lost track of how far he had been carried, and how many

cataracts he had survived. It was a constant battle against the cold and the pain of sodden lungs and strained muscle and overtaxed sinew. The river mauled him.

Suddenly the light changed. After the gloom at the bottom of the high cliffs it was as though a searchlight had been shone directly into his eyes, and he felt the force and ferocity of the river abating. He squinted up into bright sunlight, and then looked back and saw that he had passed out below the archway of pink rock into that familiar part of the river which he had explored with Royan. Coming up ahead of him was the rope suspension bridge, and he had just sufficient strength remaining to paddle feebly towards the small beach of white sand below it.

One of the hairy tattered ropes dangled to the surface of the water, and he managed to catch hold of it as he drifted past and swing himself in towards the beach. He tried to crawl fully ashore, but he collapsed with his face in the sand and vomited out the water he had swallowed. It felt so good just to be able to lie without effort and rest.

His lower body still hung into the river, but he had neither the strength nor the inclination to drag himself fully ashore.

"I am alive," he marvelled, and fell into a state halfway between sleep and unconsciousness.

He never knew how long he had been lying like that, but when he felt a hand shaking his shoulder, and a voice calling softly to him, he was annoyed that his rest had been disturbed.

"Effendi, wake up! They seek you. The beautiful Woizero seeks you."

With a huge effort Nicholas roused himself and sat up slowly. Tamre knelt over him, grinning and wagging his head.

(Please, effendi, come with me. The Woizero is searching the river bank on the far side. She is weeping and calling your name,' Tamre told him. He was the only person Nicholas had ever met who contrived to look worried and to grin at the same time. Nicholas looked beyond him and saw that it must be late afternoon, for the sun sat fat and red on the lip of the escarpment.

While still sitting in the sand Nicholas checked his body, making an inventory of his injuries. He ached in every muscle, and his legs and arms were scraped and bruised, but he could detect no broken bones. And although there was a tender lump on the side of his head where he had glanced off a rock, his mind was clear.

"Help me up," he ordered Tamre. The boy put his shoulder under Nicholas's armpit, where the rope had burnt him, and hoisted him to his feet. The two of them struggled up to the bank and on to the path, and then hobbled slowly across the swinging bridge.

He had hardly reached the other bank when there was a joyous shout from close at hand.

"Nicky! Oh, dear God! You are safe." Royan ran down the path and threw her arms around him. "I have been frantic. I thought that—" she broke off, and held him at arms length to look at him. "Are you all right? I was expecting to find your broken body—"

"You know me," he grinned at her and tried not to limp. "Ten feet tall and bullet-proof. You don't get rid of me that easily. I only did it just to get a hug from you."

She released him hurriedly. "Don't read anything into that. I am kind to all beaten puppies, and other dumb animals." But her smile belied the words. "Nevertheless, it's good to have you back in one piece, Nicky."

"Where is Boris?" he asked.

"He and the trackers are searching the banks lower down the river. I think he is looking forward to finding your corpse."

"What has he done with my dik-dik?"

ainly nothing too much the matter with

"There is cert you if you can worry about that. The skimmers have taken it down to the camp."

"Damn it to hell! I must supervise the skinning and tion of the trophy myself. They will ruin id' He put prepara his arm around Tamre's shoulder. "Come on, my lad! Let's see if I can break into a trot."

las knew that in this heat the carcass of icho the little antelope would decompose swiftly, and the hair would slough from the hide if it were not treated immediately. It was imperative to skin it out immediately. Already it had been left too long, and the preparation of a hide for a full body mount was a skilled and painstaking procedure.

it was already dark as they limped into the camp.

Nicholas shouted for the skimmers in Arabic.

"Ya, Kif! Ya, SalinP and when they came running from living huts he asked anxiously, "Have you begun?" their

"Not yet, effendi. We were having our dinner first."

"For once gluttony is a virtue. Do not touch the creature until I come. While you are waiting for me, fetch one of the gas lights!" He limped to his own hut as fast as his aches would allow. There he stripped and anointed all his visible scrapes and abrasions with Mercurochrome, flung on fresh dry clothes, rummaged in his bag until he found the canvas roll which contained his knives, and hurried down to the skinning hut.

By the brilliant white glare of the butane gas lantern he had only just completed the initial skin incisions down the inside of the dik-dik's legs and belly when Boris pushed open the door of the hut.

"Did you have a good swim, English?"

"Bracing, thank you." Nicholas smiled. "I don't expect you want to eat your words about my striped dik-dik, do you?" he asked mildly. "No such bloody animal, I think you said., "It is like a rat. A true hunter would not bother himself with such rubbish," Boris replied haughtily. "Now that you have your rat, perhaps we can go back to Addis, English?"

"I paid you for three weeks. It is my safari. We go when I say so," Nicholas told him. Boris grunted and backed out of the hut.

Nicholas worked swiftly. His knives were of a special design to facilitate the fine work, and he stropped them at regular intervals on a ceramic sharpening rod until he could shave the hairs from his forearm with just the lightest touch.

The legs had to be skinned out with the tiny hooves still attached. Before he had completed this part of the work, another figure stooped into the hut. He was dressed in a priest's shamma and headcloth, and until he spoke Nicholas did not recognize Mek Nimmur.

"I hear that you have been looking for trouble again, Nicholas. I came to make sure that you were still alive.

There was a rumour at the monastery that you had drowned yourself, though I knew it was not possible. You will not die so easily."

"I hope you are right, Mek," Nicholas laughed at him.

Mek squatted opposite him. "Give me one of your knives and I will finish the hooves. It will go quicker if I help you."

Without comment Nicholas passed him one of the knives. He knew that Mek could skin out the hooves, for years before he had taught him the art. With two of them working on the pelt, it would go that much faster. The sooner the skin was off, the less chance there would be of deterioration.

He turned his attention to the head. This was the most delicate part of the process. The skin had to be peeled off like a glove, and the eyelids and lips and nostrils must be worked from the inside. The ears were perhaps the most difficult to lift away from the gristle in one piece. They worked in companionable silence for a while, which Mek broke at last.

"How well do you know your Russian, Boris Brusilov?" he asked.

"I met him for the first time when I stepped off the plane. He was recommended by a friend."

"Not a very good friend." Mek looked up at him and his expression was grim. "I came to warn you about him, Nicholas."

"I am listening," said Nicholas quietly.

"In '85 I was captured by Mengistu's thugs. They kept me in the Karl Marx prison camp near Addis. Brusilov was one of the interrogators there. He was KGB in those days.

His favourite trick was to stick the pressure hose from a compressor up the anus of the man or woman he was questioning and turn on the tap. They blew up like a balloon, until the gut burst." He stopped speaking while he moved around to work on the other hoof of the antelope.

"I escaped before he got around to questioning me. He retired when Mengistu fled, and went hunting. I don't know how he persuaded Tessay to marry him, but knowing what I do of the man, I expect she did not have much choice in the matter."

"Of course, I had my suspicions about him," Nicholas admitted.

They were quiet after that until Mek whispered, "I came to tell you that I may have to kill him."

Neither of them spoke again until Mek had finished working on all four hooves. Then he stood up. "These days, life is uncertain, Nicholas. If I have to leave here in a hurry, and I do not have a chance to say goodbye to you, then there is somebody in Addis who will pass a message to me if you ever need me. His name is Colonel Maryam Kidane in the Ministry of Defence. He is a friend. My code name is the Swallow. He will know who you are talking about."

They embraced briefly. "Go with God," said Mek, and left the hut quietly. The night swallowed his robed figure and Nicholas stood for a long time at the door, until at last he turned back to finish the work.

It was late by the time he had rubbed every inch of the skin with a mixture of rock salt and Kabra dip to cure it and protect it from the ravages of the bacon beetle and other insects and bacteria. At last he laid it out on the floor of the hut with the wet side uppermost and packed more rock salt on the raw areas.

The walls of the hut were reinforced with mesh netting to keep out hyenas. One of these foul creatures could gobble down the pelt in a few seconds. He

made certain the door was wired shut before he carried the lantern up to the dining hut. The others had all eaten and gone to bed hours earlier, but Tessay had left his dinner in the charge of the Ethiopian chef. He had not realized how hungry he was until he smelt it.

The next morning Nicholas was so stiff that he hobbled down to the skinning hut like an old man. First he checked the pelt and poured fresh salt over it, then he ordered Kif and Satin to bury the skull of the dik-dik in an ant heap to allow the insects to remove the surplus flesh and scour the brain pan. He preferred this method to boiling the skull.

Satisfied that the trophy was in good condition, he went on down to the dining hut, where Boris greeted him jovially.

"And so, English. We leave for Addis now, da? "thing more to do here."

"We will stay to photograph the ceremony of Timkat at the monastery," Nicholas told him. "And after that I may want to hunt a Menelik's bushbuck. Who knows? I've told you before. We go when I say so."

Boris looked disgruntled. "You are crazy, English. Why do you want to stay in this heat to watch these people and their mumbo'jumbo?"

"Today I will go fishing, and tomorrow we will watch Timkat."

"You do not have a fishing rod," Boris protested, but pene the small canvas roll no larger than a Nicholas woman's handbag and showed him the four-piece Hardy Smuggler rod nestling in it.

He looked across the table at Royan, "Are you coming along to ghillie for me?" he asked.

They went upstream to the suspension bridge where Nicholas set up the rod and tied a fly on to his leader.

"Royal Coachman" He held it up for her appraisal.
an.

"Fish love them anywhere in the world, from Patagonia to Alaska. We shall soon find out if they are as popular here in Ethiopia, as well."

She watched from the top of the bank as he shot out line, rolling it upon itself in flight, sailing the weightless fly out to midstream, and then laying it gently on the surface of the water so that it floated lightly on the ripples. On his second cast there was a swirl under the fly. The rod tip arced over sharply, the reel whined and Nicholas let out a whoop.

"Gotcha, my beauty!"

watched him indulgently from the top of the bank.

Sh In his excitement and enthusiasm he was like a small boy.

She smiled when she noticed how his injuries had miraculously healed themselves, and how he no longer limped as he ran back and forth along the water's edge, playing the fish. Ten minutes later he slid it, gleaming like a bar of freshly minted gold as long as his arm, sopping and flapping up on to the beach.

"Yellow fish," he told her triumphantly. "Scrumptious.

Breakfast for tomorrow morning."

He came up the bank and dropped down in the grass beside her. "The fishing was really just an excuse to get away from Boris. I brought you here to tell you about what I found up there yesterday." He pointed up through the archway of pink stone above the bridge. She came up on her elbow and watched him with her full attention.

"Of course, I have no way of telling if it has anything to do with our search, but somebody has been working in there." He described the niches that he had found carved into the canyon wall. "They reach from the lip right down to the water's edge. Those below the high-water mark have been severely eroded by the floods. I could not reach those higher up, but from what I could see they have been protected from wind and rain by the dished shape of the Cliff., it has formed a veranda roof over them. They appear to be in pristine condition, very much in contrast to those lower down."

"What do we deduce from that?" she asked.

"That they are very old," he answered. "Certainly the basalt is pretty hard. It has taken a long, long time for water to wear it down the way it has."

"What do you think was the purpose of those holes?"

am not sure he admitted.

"Could it be that they were the anchor points for some sort of scaffolding?" she asked, and he looked impressed.

"Good thinking. They could be, he agreed.

"What other ideas occur to you?"

"Ritual designs," he suggested. "A religious motif." He smiled as he saw her expression of doubt. "Not very convincing, I agree."

"All right, let's consider the idea of scaffolding. Why would anybody want to erect scaffolding in a place like that?" She lay back in the grass and picked a straw which she nibbled reflectively.

He shrugged. "To anchor a ladder or a gantry, to gain access to the bottom of the chasm?"

"What other reason?"

"I can't think of any other."

After a while she shook her head. "Nor can She spat out the piece of grass. "If that is the motive, then they were fairly committed to the project. From your description it must have been a substantial structure, designed to support the weight of a, lot of men or heavy material."

"In North America the Red Indians built fishing platforms over waterfalls like that from which they netted the salmon."

"Have there ever been great runs of fish through these waters?" she asked, and he shrugged again.

"Nobody can answer that. Perhaps long ago who knows."

"Was that all you saw down there?"

"High up the wall, aligned with mathematical precision between the two lines of stone niches, there was something that looked like a has-relief carving."

She sat up with a jerk and stared at him avidly. "Could it clearly? Was it script, or was it a design? What you see was the style of the carving?"

"No such luck. It was too high, and the light is very poor down there. I am not even certain that it wasn't a natural flaw in the rock."

Her disappointment was palpable, but after a pause she asked,

"Was there anything else?"

"Yes," he grinned. "Lots and lots of water moving very very fast."

"What are we going to do about this putative has-relief of yours?" she asked.

"I don't like the idea in the least, but I will have to go back in there and have another look."

"When?"

"tomorrow. Our one chance to get into the maqdas of the cathedral. After that we will make a plan to explore the gorge."

"We are running out of time, Nicky, just when things are getting really interesting."

"You can say that again!'. he murmured. She felt his breath on her lips, for their faces were as close together as those of conspirators or of lovers, and she realized the double meaning of her own words. She jumped to her feet and slapped the dust and loose straw from her jodhpurs.

"You only have one fish to feed the multitude. Either you have a very high opinion of yourself, or you had better get fishing."

Two debteras who had been detailed by the bishop to escort them tried to force a way for them through the crowds. However, they had not reached the foot of the staircase before the escort itself was swallowed up and lost. Nicholas and Royan became separated from the other couple.

"Keep close," Nicholas told Royan, and maintained a firm grip on her upper arm as he used his shoulder to open a path for them. He drew her along with him. Naturally, he had deliberately contrived to lose Boris and Tessay in the crush, and it had worked out nicely the way he had planned it.

At last they reached a position where Nicholas could set his back firmly against one of the stone columns of the terrace, to prevent the crowd jostling him. He also had a good view of the entrance to the cavern cathedral. Royan was not tall enough to see over the heads of the men in front of her, so Nicholas lifted her up on to the balustrade of the staircase and anchored her firmly against the column.

She clung to his shoulder for support, for the drop into the Nile opened behind her. The worshippers kept up a low monotonous chant, while a dozen separate bands of musicians tapped their drums and rattled their sistrums. Each band surrounded its own patron, a chieftain in splendid robes, sheltering under a huge gaudy umbrella.

There was an air of excitement and expectation almost as fierce as the heat and the stink. It built up steadily and, as the reared in pitch and volume, the crowd singing inc began to sway and undulate like a single organism, some grotesque amoeba, pulsing with life.

Suddenly from within the precincts of the cathedral there came the chiming of brass bells, and immediately a hundred horns and trumpets answered. From the head of the stairway there was a fusillade of gunfire as the bodyguards of the chieftains fired their weapons in the air.

Some of them were armed with automatic rifles, and the clatter of AK-47 fire blended with the thunder of ancient black powder muzzle-loaders. Clouds of blue gunsmoke blew over the congregation, and bullets ricocheted from the cliff and sang away over the gorge. Women shrieked and utulated, an eerie, blood-chilling sound. The men's faces were alight with the fires of religious fervour.

They fell to their knees and lifted their hands high in adoration, chanting and crying out to God for blessing.

The women held their infants aloft, and tears of religious frenzy streaked their dark cheeks.

From the gateway of the underground church emerged a procession of priests and monks. First came the debteras in long white robes, and then the

acolytes who were to be baptized at the riverside. Royan recognized Tamre, his long gangling frame standing a head above the boys around him.

She waved over the crowd and he saw her and grinned shyly before he followed the debteras on to the pathway to the river.

By this time night was falling. The depths of the cauldron were obscured by shadows, and hanging over it the sky was a purple canopy pricked by the first bright stars.

At the head of the pathway burned a brass brazier. As each of the priests passed it he thrust his unlit torch into the flames and, as soon as it flared, he held it aloft.

Like a stream of molten lava the torchlit procession began to uncoil down the cliff face, the priests chanting dolefully and the drums booming and echoing from the cliffs across the river.

Following the baptism candidates through the stone gateway came the ordained priests in their tawdry robes, bearing the processional crosses of silver and glittering brass, and the banners of embroidered silk, with their depictions of the saints in the agony of martyrdom and the ecstasy of adoration. They clanged their bells and blew their fifes, and sweated and chanted until their eyes rolled white in dark faces.

Behind them, home by two priests in the most sumptuous robes and tall, jewel-encrusted head-dresses, came the tabot. The Ark of the Tabernacle was covered with a crimson cloth that hung to the ground, for it was too holy to be desecrated by the gaze of the profane.

The worshippers threw themselves down upon the ground in fresh paroxysms of adoration. Even the chiefs prostrated themselves upon the soiled pavement of the terrace, and some of them wept with the fervour of their belief.

Last in the procession came Jali Hora, wearing not the crown with the blue stone, but another even more splendid creation, the Epiphany crown, a mass of gleaming metal and flashing faux jewels which seemed too heavy for his ancient scrawny neck to support. Two debteras held his elbows and guided his uncertain footsteps on to the stairway that led down to the Nile.

As the procession descended, so those worshippers nearest to the head of the stairs rose to their feet, lit their torches at the brazier and followed the abbot down. There was a general movement along the terrace to join the flow, and as it began to empty, Nicholas lifted Royan down from her perch on the balustrade.

"We must get into the church while "there are still enough people around to cover us," he whispered. Leading her by the hand, with his other hand hanging on to the strap of his camera bag, he joined the movement down the terrace. He allowed them to be carried forward, but all the time he was edging across the stream of humanity towards the entrance to the church. He saw Boris and Tessay in the crush ahead of him, but they had not seen him, and he crouched lower so as to screen himself from them.

As he and Royan reached the gateway to the outer the eased them out of the throng of chamber of the church, humanity and drew her gently through the low entrance into the dim, deserted interior. With a quick glance he made certain that they were alone, and that the guards were no longer at their stations beside the inner gates.

Then he moved quickly along the side wall, to where one of the soot'grimed

tapestries hung from the ceiling to the stone floor. He lifted the folds of heavy woven wool and drew Royan behind them, letting them fall back into place, concealing them both.

They were only just in time, for hardly had they flattened their backs against the wall and let the tapestry settle when they heard footsteps approaching from the qiddist. Nicholas peeked around the corner of the tapestry and saw four white-robed priests cross the outer chamber and swing the main doors closed as they left the church.

There was a weighty thud from outside as they dropped the locking beam into place, and then a profound silence pervaded the cavern.

"I didn't reckon on that," Nicholas whispered. "They have locked us in for the night."

"At least it means that we won't be disturbed," Royan replied briskly. "We can get to work right away."

Stealthily they emerged from their hiding-place, and moved across the outer chamber to the doorway of the qiddist. Here Nicholas paused and cautioned her with a hand on her arm. "From here on we are in forbidden territory. Better let me go ahead and scout the lie of the land."

She shook her head firmly. "You are not leaving me here. I am coming with you all the way." He knew better than to argue.

"Come on, then." He led her up the steps and into the middle chamber.

It was smaller and lower than the room they had left.

The wall hangings were richer and in a better state of repair. The floor was bare, except for a pyramid-shaped framework of hand-hewn native timber upon which stood rows of brass lamps, each with the wick floating in a puddle of melted oil. The meagre light they provided was all that there was, and it left the ceiling and the recesses of the chamber in shadow.

As they crossed the floor towards the gates that closed off the maqdas, Nicholas took two electric torches from his camera bag and handed one to her. "New batteries," he told her, "but don't waste them. We may be here all night."

They stopped in front of the doors to the Holy Of Holies. Quickly Nicholas examined them. There were A, engravings of St.. Frumentius on each panel, his head enclosed in a nimbus of celestial radiance and his right hand lifted in the act of benediction.

"Primitive lock," he murmured, "must be hundreds of years old. You could throw your hat through the gap between the hasp and the tongue." He slipped his hand into the bag and brought out a Leatherman tool.

"Clever little job, this is. With it you do anything from digging the stones out of a horse's hoof, to opening the lock on a chastity belt."

He knelt in front of the massive iron lock and unfolded one of the multiple blades of the tool. She watched anxiously as he worked, and then gave a little start as with satisfying clunk the tongue of the lock slid back.

a Mis-spent youth?" she asked. "Burglary amongst your many talents?"

"You don't really want to know." He stood up and put his shoulder to one leaf of the door. It gave with a groan of unlubricated hinges, and he pushed it open only just wide enough for them to squeeze through, then immediately shut it behind them.

They stood side by side on the threshold of the maqdas and gazed about them in silent awe.

The Holy of Holies was a small chamber, much smaller than either of them had expected. Nicholas could have crossed it in a dozen strides. The vaulted roof was so low that by standing on tiptoe he could have touched it with his outstretched fingertips.

or upwards the walls were lined with From the floor shelves upon which stood the gifts and offerings of the faithful, icons of the Trinity and the Virgin rendered in Byzantine style, framed in ornate silver. There were ranks of statuettes of saints and emperors, medallions and wreaths made of polished metal, pots and bowls and jewelled boxes, candelabra with many branches, on each of which the votive candles burned providing an uncertain wavering light. It was an extraordinary collection of junk and treasures, of objects of virtue and garish bric-A-brac, offered as articles of faith by the emperors and chieftains of Ethiopia over the centuries.

In the centre of the floor stood the altar of cedarwood, the panels carved with visionary scenes of revelation and creation, of the temptation and the fall from Eden, and of the Last judgement. The altar cloth was crocheted raw silk, and the cross and the chalice were in massive worked silver. The abbot's crown gleamed in the candlelight, with the blue ceramic seal of Taita in the centre of its brow.

Royan crossed the floor and knelt in front of the altar.

She bowed her head in prayer. Nicholas waited respectfully at the threshold until she rose to her feet again, and then he went to join her.

"The tabot stoneV He pointed beyond the altar, and they went forward side by side. At the back of the maqdas stood an object covered with a heavy damask cloth encrusted with embroidered thread of silver and gold. From the outline beneath the covering they could see that it was of elegant and pleasing proportions, as tall as a man, but slender with a pedestal topping.

They both circled it, studying the cloaked shape avidly, but reluctant to touch it or to uncover it, fearful that their expectations might prove unwarranted, and that their hopes would be dashed like the turbulent river waters plunging into the cauldron of the Nile. Nicholas broke the tension that gripped them by turning away from the tabot stone to the barred gate in the back wall of the sanctuary.

"The tomb of St. Frumentius!" he said, and went to the grille. She came to his side, and together they peered through the square openings in the woodwork that was black with age. The interior was in darkness. Nicholas prodded his torch through one of the openings and pressed the switch.

The tomb lit up in a rainbow of colour so bright in the beam of the torch that their eyes took a few moments to adjust and then Royan gasped aloud.

"Oh, sweet heaven!" She began to tremble as if in high fever, and her face went creamy pale as all the blood drained from it.

The coffin was set into a stone shelf in the rear wall of the cell-like tomb. On the exterior was painted the likeness of the man within. Although it was badly faded and most of the paint had flaked away, the pale face and reddish beard of the dead man were still discernible.

This was not the only reason for Royan's amazement.

She was staring at the walls above and on either side of the shelf on which the coffin lay. They were a riot of colour, every inch of them covered with the most intricate and elaborate paintings that had miraculously weathered the

passage of the millennia.

Nicholas played his torch beam over them in awestruck silence, and Royan clung to his arm as if to save herself from falling. She dug her sharp nails into his flesh, but he was heedless of the pain.

There were scenes of great battles, fighting galleys locked in terrible combat upon the blue eternal waters of the river. There were scenes of the hunt, the pursuit of the river horse and of great elephants with long tusks of gleaming ivory. There were battle scenes of regiments plumed and armoured, raging in their fury and blood lust.

Squadrons of chariots wheeled and charged each other across these narrow walls, half obscured by the dust of their own mad career.

The foreground of each mural was dominated by the same tall heroic figure. In one scene he drew the bow to full stretch, in another he swung high the blade of bronze.

His enemies quailed before him, he trod them underfoot or gathered together their severed heads like a bouquet of flowers.

Nicholas played the beam over all this splendid array of art, and brought it to a stop upon the central panel that covered the entire main wall above the shelf on which the rotting coffin lay. Here the same godlike figure rode the footplate of his chariot. In one hand he held the bow and in the other a bundle of javelins. His head was bare of any helmet, and his hair flowed out behind him in the wind of his passage, a thick golden braid like the tail of a lion. His features were noble and proud, his gaze direct and indomitable.

Below him was a legen in classical Egyptian hieroglyphics. In a sepulchral whisper Royan translated them aloud:

Great Lion of Egypt.

Best of One Hundred Thousand Holder of the Gold of Valour Pharaoh's Sole Companion Warrior of all the Gods May you live for ever!

Her hand shook upon his arm, and her voice choked and died away, stifled with emotion. She gave a little sob, and then shook herself as she brought herself back under control.

"I know this artist," she said softly. "I have spent five years studying his work. I would know it anywhere." She drew a breath. "I know with utter certainty that nearly four thousand years ago Taita the slave decorated these walls and designed this tomb."

She pointed to the name of the dead man carved into the stone above the shelf on which his coffin lay.

"This is not the tomb of a Christian saint. Centuries ago some old priest must have stumbled upon it and, in his ignorance, usurped it for his own religion." She drew another shaky breath. "Look there! That is the seal of Tanus, Lord Harreb, the commander of all the armies of Egypt, lover of Queen Lostris and the natural father of Prince Memnon, who became the Pharaoh Tamose."

They were both silent then, lost in the wonder of their discovery. Nicholas broke the silence at last.

"It's all true, then. The secrets of the seventh scroll are all here for us, if we can find the key to them."

"Yes," she said softly. "The key. Taita's stone testament." She turned back towards the tabot stone and approached it slowly, almost fearfully.

"I can't bring myself to look, Nicky. I am terrified that it's not what we hope it

is. You do itV

He went directly to the column, and with a magician's flourish jerked away the damask cloth that covered it. They stared at the pillar of pink mottled granite that he had revealed. It was about six feet high and a foot square at the base, tapering up to half that width at the flat pedestal of the summit. The granite had been polished, and then engraved.

Royan stepped forward and touched the cold stone, running her fingers lingeringly over the hieroglyphic'script in the way a blind man reads Braille.

"Taita's letter to us," she whispered, picking out the symbol of the hawk with a broken wing from the mass of close-chiselled script, tracing the outline with a long, slim forefinger that trembled softly. "Written almost four thousand years ago, waiting all these ages for us to read and understand it. See how he has signed it." Slowly she circled the granite pillar, studying each of the four sides in turn, smiling and nodding, frowning and shaking her head, then smiling again as if it were a love letter.

"Read it to me," Nicholas invited. "It's too complicated for me - I understand the characters, but I cannot follow the sense or the meaning. Explain it to me."

"It's pure Taita." She laughed, her awe and wonder at last giving way to excitement. "He is being his usual obscure and capricious self." It was as though she were talking of a beloved but infuriating old friend. "It's all in verse and is probably some esoteric code of his own." She picked out a line of hieroglyphics, and followed them with her finger as she read aloud, "The vulture rises on mighty pinions to greet the sun. The jackal howls and turns upon his tail. The river flows towards the earth. Beware, you violators of the sacred places, lest the wrath of all the gods descend upon you!"

"It's nonsense jargon. It does not make sense," he pretested.

"Oh, yes, it makes sense all right. Taita always makes sense, once you follow the way his oblique mind is working." She turned to face him squarely. "Don't look so glum, Nicky. You can't expect to read Taita like an editorial in The Times. He has set us a riddle that may take weeks and months of work to unravel."

"Well, one thing is certain. We can't stay here in the maqdas for weeks and months while, we puzzle it out. Let's get to work."

"Photographs first." She became brisk and businesslike.

"Then we can lift impressions from the stone."

He set down the camera bag and knelt over it to open the flap. "I will shoot two rolls of colour first, and then use the Polaroid. That will give us something to work on until we can have the colour developed."

She stood out of his way as he circled the pillar on his knees, keeping the angle correct so as not to distort the perspective. He took a series of shots of each of the four sides, using different shutter speeds and exposures.

"Don't use up all your film," she warned him. "We need some shots of the walls of the tomb itself."

Obediently he went to the grille gates and studied the locking system. "This is a bit more complicated than the outer gate. If I try to get in here, I might do some damage.

I don't think it will be worth the risk of being discovered."

"All right," she agreed. "Work through the openings in the grille."

He filmed as best he was able, extending the camera through the openings at the full stretch of his arms, and estimating his focus.

"That's the lot," he told her at last. "Now for the Polaroids."

"He changed cameras and repeated the entire process, but this time Royan held a small tape measure against the pillar to give the scale.

As he exposed each plate he handed it to her to check the development. Once or twice when the flash setting on the camera had either overexposed or rendered the subject too dull, or for some other reason she was not satisfied, she asked him to repeat the shot.

After almost two hours' work they had a complete set Of Polaroids, and Nicholas packed his cameras away and brought out the roll of art paper. Working together, they stretched it over one face of the pillar and secured it in place with masking tape. Then he started at the top and she at the bottom. Each with a black art crayon, they rubbed the precise shape and form of the engravings on to the sheet of blank paper.

"I have learned how important this is when dealing with Taita. If you are not able to work with the original, then you must have an exact copy. Sometimes the most minute detail of the engraving may change the entire sense and meaning of the script. He layers everything with hidden depths. You have read in *River God* how he cons' ers himself to be the riddler and punster par excellence id and the greatest exponent of the game of bao that ever lived. Well, that much of the book is accurate. Wherever he is now, he knows the game is on and he is revelling in every move we make. I can just imagine him giggling and gether with glee." rubbing his hands to

"Bit fanciful, dear girl." He settled back to work. "But I know what you mean."

The task of transferring the outline of the designs on to the blank sheets of art paper was painstaking and monotonous, and the hours passed as they laboured on hands and knees or crouched over the granite pillar. At last Nicholas stepped back and massaged his aching back.

"That does it, then. All finished."

a She stood up beside him. "What time is it?" she asked, and he checked his wristwatch.

"Four in the morning. We had better tidy up in here.

Make certain we leave no sign of our visit."

"One last thing," Royan said, tearing a corner off one of the sheets of art paper. With it she went to the altar where the abbot's crown lay. Quickly she taped the scrap of paper over the blue ceramic seal in the centre of the crown, and filled it with a rubbing of the design of the hawk with a broken wing.

Just for luck," she explained to him, as she came back to help him fold the long sheets of paper and pack them back in the bag. Then they gathered up the shreds of discarded masking tape and the empty film wrappers that he had strewn on the stone slabs.

Before they covered the granite stele with the damask cloth, Royan caressed the stone panels of script as if to take leave of them for ever. Then she nodded at Nicholas.

He spread the cloth over the pillar and they adjusted the folds to hang as they had found them. From the threshold of the brass-bound door they surveyed the maqdas for the last time, then he opened the door a rack "Let's go!" She squeezed through and he followed her out into the qiddist of the church. It took him only a few minutes to slide the tongue of the lock back into place.

"How will we get out through the main doors?" she asked.

"I don't think that will be necessary. The priests obviously have another entrance from their quarters directly into the qiddist. You very seldom see them using the main gates." He stood in the centre of the floor, and looked around carefully. "It must be on this side if it leads directly into the monks' living quarters-" he broke off with a grunt of satisfaction. "Aha! You can see where all their feet have actually worn a pathway over the centuries." He pointed out a smooth area of dished and worn stone near the side wall. "And look at the marks of grubby fingers on the tapestry over there." He crossed quickly to the hanging and drew a fold aside. "I thought as much." There was a narrow doorway concealed behind the hanging.

"Follow me."

They found themselves in a dark passageway through the living rock. Nicholas flashed his torch down its length, ? A

but he masked the bulb with his hand to show only as much light as they needed. "This way."

The passage turned at right-angles and ahead they could make out a dull illumination. Nicholas switched off the torch and led her on.

Now there was the smell of stale food and humanity, and they passed the doorless entrance to a monk's rock cell. Nicholas flashed his torch into it. It was deserted and bare. A wooden cross hung on the wall with a truckle bed below it. There were no other furnishings. They went on past a dozen others which were almost identical.

At the next turning of the passage Nicholas paused.

He felt a tiny draught on his cheek, and the taste of fresh air on his tongue. "This way he whispered.

They hurried on, until suddenly Royan grabbed his shoulder from behind and forced him to stop.

"What-" he began, but she squeezed his shoulder to silence him. He heard it then, the sound of a human voice, echoing eerily through the labyrinth of passageways.

Then came a weird haunting cry, that of a soul in agony, wailing and sobbing. They crept forward, trying to make their escape before they were discovered, but the sounds grew stronger as they went on.

"Dead ahead," Nicholas warned her in a whisper. "We are going to have to sneak past."

Now they saw soft yellow lamplight spilling from the doorway of one of the cells into the passage. There came another heart-rending female cry that echoed down the passage and froze them in their tracks.

"That's a woman's voice. What is happening?" Royan breathed, ut he shook his head for silence and led her on.

They had to pass the open door of the lit cell. Nicholas edged towards it with his back flattened to the opposite wall. She followed him, keeping close and clinging to his arm for comfort.

As they looked into the cell the woman cried out again, but this time her voice blended with that of a man.

It was a duet without words, but racked with all the feral agony of a passion too fierce to be borne in silence.

In their full view a couple lay naked upon the truckle bed. The woman lay spread-eagled, holding the man's hips between her uplifted knees. Her arms

wound hard around his back, upon which each separate muscle stood out proudly and gleamed with sweat. He thrust down into her savagely, his buttocks bunching and pounding with the force of a great black battering ram.

She rolled her head from side to side as another incoherent cry was torn from her straining throat. It seemed too much for the man above her to bear, and he reared back like a flaring cobra, his pelvis still locked to hers, but his back arched like a war bow. Spasm after spasm gripped him. The sinews in the back of his legs were stretched to snapping point, and the muscles in his back fluttered and jumped like separate living creatures.

Seventh Scroll

The woman opened her eyes and looked directly at them as they stood transfixed in the doorway, but she was blinded with the strength of her passion. Her eyes were sightless, as she cried aloud to the man above her.

Nicholas drew Royan away, and they slipped down the passageway and out on to the deserted terrace. They stopped at the foot of the staircase, and breathed the sweet cool night air that was perfumed by the waters of the Nile.

"Tessay has gone to him," Royan whispered softly.

"For tonight at least," Nicholas agreed.

"No," Royan denied. "You saw her face, Nicky. She belongs to Mek Nimmur now."

The dawn was flushing the serrated crests of the escarpment to the colours; of port wine and roses when they reached camp and separated at the door to Royan's hut.

"I am bushed," she told Nicholas. The excitement has been too much for me. You won't see me again before noon."

"Good thinking! Sleep as long as you wish. I want you scintillating and perceptive when we start going over the material which we gathered last night."

It was long before noon, however, when Nicholas was woken from a deep sleep by the harsh and intrusive bellows of Boris as he stormed into the hut.

"English, wake up! I must talk to you. Wake up, man, wake up."

Nicholas rolled over and thrust one arm out from under the mosquito net as he groped for his wrist-watch.

"Damn you, Brusilov! What the hell do you want?"

"My wife! Have you seen my wife?"

"Now what has your wife got to do with me?"

"She has gone! I have not seen her since last night."

"The way you treat her, that comes as no stunning surprise. Now go away and leave me to sleep."

"The whore has run off with that black bastard, Mek Nimmur. I know all about them. Don't try and protect her, English. I know everything that goes on around here. You are trying to cover for her - admit it!"

"Get out of here, Boris. Don't try and involve me in your sordid private life." saw you and that shufta bastard talking in the skinning hut the other night. Don't try to deny it, English.

You are in this thing with them."

Nicholas flung back the mosquito net and jumped out of his bed. "Kindly moderate your language when you talk to me, you great oaf"

Boris backed off towards the door. "I know that she has run away with him. I searched for them all last night at the river. They have gone, and most of his men with them."

"Good for Tessay.- She is showing some taste in men for a change."

"You think I will let the whore get away with this? You are wrong, very wrong. I am going to follow them and kill them both. I know which way they are headed. You think I am a fool. I know all about Mek Nimmur. I was head of intelligence-" He broke off as he realized what he had said. "I will shoot him in

the belly and let that whore Tessay watch him die."

"If you are going after Mek Nimmur, then my bet is that you won't be coming back."

"You don't know me, English. You beat me up one night when I had a bottle of vodka in my belly, so you think I am easy, da? Well, Mek Nimmur will see now how easy I am."

Boris dung out of the hut. Nicholas pulled on a shirt over his shorts and followed him.

Back in his own hut, Boris had flung a few essential items into a light pack. Now he was stuffing cartridges into the magazine of his 30/06 hunting rifle.

"Let them go, Boris," Nicholas advised him in a more reasonable tone of voice "Mek is a tough lad - they don't come tougher - and he has a war party of fifty men with him. You are old enough to know that you can never hold on to a woman by force. Let her go!

"I do not want to hold on to her. I want to kill her.

The safari is over, English." He flung a pair of keys on a leather tag on the floor at Nicholas's feet. "There are the keys of the Land Cruiser. You can make your own way back to Addis from here. I will leave four of my best men to look after you, and hold your hand. Leave the big truck for me to use. When you get to Addis, leave the keys of the Land Cruiser with my tracker, Aly. I will know where to find him later. I will send you the money I owe you for cancellation. Don't worry - I am a man of principles."

"How could I ever doubt it?" Nicholas smiled. "Good bye, old chum. I wish you luck. You'll need plenty of that if you are going up against Mek Nimmur."

Boris was several hours behind his quarry, and as soon as he had left the camp he broke into a jog trot that carried him down the pathway to join the main track to the west, towards the Sudanese border. He ran like a scout, with an easy swinging gait that ate up the ground.

"Looks as though he is still in good shape, even with the vodka." Despite himself Nicholas was impressed as he watched him go. "But I wonder how long he will be able to keep up that pace?"

He turned back to his own quarters to get a little more sleep, but as he passed her hut Royan popped her head out.

"What was all the shouting about? I thought that you and Boris were having another little difference of opinion."

"Tessay has done a bunk. Boris has guessed that she has gone off with Mek, and he is chasing after them."

"Oh, icky! Can't we warn them?"

"No chance of that, but unless Mek has gone soft he will be expecting Boris to come after him. In fact, now that I come to think of it, he is probably hoping for just that chance to even the score. No, Mek doesn't need any more help from us. Go back to sleep!

"I can't possibly sleep now. I am so worked up. I have been looking at the Polaroids that we took last night. Taita has given us an overflowing cup. Come and have a look at this."

"Just one hour's sleep more! He made a mock plea.

"Immediately, if not sooner." She laughed at him.

In her hut she had the Polaroids and the rubbings spread out on the camp table, and she beckoned him to take the seat beside her.

"While you were snoring your head off, I made some progress." She laid four Polaroids side by side, and placed her large magnifying glass over them. It was a professional land surveyor's model on folding legs, and under it every detail of the photographs was revealed. "Taita has headed each of the sides of the stele with the name of one of the seasons of the year - spring, summer, autumn and winter.

What do you think he was getting at?"

"Page numbers?"

"Exactly my own thought," she agreed. "The Egyptians considered spring as the beginning of all new life. He is telling us in which order to read the panels. This one is spring." She selected one of the photographs.

"It starts with four standard quotations from the Book of the Dead." She quoted the first few lines of the opening section: "'I am the first breeze blowing softly over the dark ocean of eternity. I am the first sunrise. The first glimmer of light. A white feather blowing in the dawn wind. I am Ra. I am the beginning of all things. I will live for ever. I shall never perish.'" Still holding the glass poised, she looked up at him. "As far as I can see, they do not differ substantially from the original. My instinct is to set these aside for the time being. We can always come back to them later."

"Let's go with your instinct," he suggested. "Read the next section."

She held the glass to the Polaroid. "I am not going to look at you while I read this. Taita. can be as earthy as Rabelais when he is in the mood. Anyway, here goes. "The daughter of the goddess pines for her dam. She roars like a lioness as she hurries to meet her. She leaps from the mountain, and her fangs are white. She is the harlot of all the world. Her vagina pisseth out great torrents. Her vagina has swallowed an army of men. Her sex eateth up the masons and the workers of stone. Her vagina is an octopus that has swallowed up a king.""

"Whoa there!" Nicholas chuckled. "Pretty fruity stuff, don't you think?" He leaned forward to study her face, for it was still turned away from him. "Och, lassie, you have roses in your bonny cheeks. Not a blush, surely not?"

"Your Scots accent is not in the least convincing," she told him coldly, still not looking at him. "When you have finished being clever at my expense, what do you think of what I have just read?"

"Apart from the obvious, I have't any idea."

"I want to show you something." She stood up and packed the photographs and the rolls of art paper back into the haversack. "You'll need to get your boots on. I am taking you on a little walk."

An hour later they stood in the centre of the suspension bridge, swaying gently high above the swift waters of the Dandera river.

"Hapi is the goddess of the Nile. Is this river not then her daughter, pining to meet her, leaping from the mountain top, roaring like a lioness, her fangs white with spume?" she asked him.

They stared in silence at the archway of pink stone through which the river poured, and suddenly Nicholas grinned lasciviously. "I think that I know what you are going to say next. That's what I first thought of when I looked at that cleft. You said it was like a gargoyle's mouth, but I had another image."

"All I can say is that you must have some extraordinary lady friends," she said, and then covered her mouth. "Ooops!

I didn't mean to say that. I am being as disgusting as either you or Taita."

"The workmen swallowed up in there!" His voice became more excited. "The masons and the workers in stone!"

"Pharaoh Mamose was a god. The river has swallowed up a god with her - with her stone archway." She was equally excited. "I must admit that I would not have made the association if you hadn't explored the interior of the cavern, and found those niches in the wall." She shook his arm. "Nicky, we have to get in there again. We have to get a clearer look at that has-relief you found on the cavern wall."

"It will take some preparation," he said dubiously. "I will have to splice the ropes and make some sort of pulley system, and I will have to drill Aly and the other men to avoid a repetition of my last little fiasco. We won't be ready to make the attempt until tomorrow morning at the very earliest."

"You get on with it. I will have plenty to keep me occupied with the translation of the stele." Then she stopped and looked up at the sky. "Listen!" she whispered.

He cocked his head and above the sound of the river, heard the whining flutter of rotors in the air.

"Dammit!" he snapped. "I thought we had lost the Pegasus presence. Come on!" He grabbed her arm and hustled her off the bridge. When they reached the land he jumped down on to the beach, and she followed him. The two of them crept under the hanging eaves of the bridge.

They sat quietly on the white sandy beach and listened to the Jet Ranger helicopter approaching swiftly, and then circling back over the hills beyond the pink cliffs. This time the pilot had not spotted them, for he turned away and began to patrol up and down the line of the chasm.

Suddenly the engine-beat changed dramatically as the pitch altered and the pilot pulled up the collective.

"Sounds as if he is going in for a landing up there in the hills," Nicholas said as he crawled out from under the bridge. "I would feel a lot easier without them snooping around."

"I don't think we have too much to worry about," Royan disagreed. "Even if they are connected with Duraid's killers, we are still way out ahead of them. Obviously they have not tumbled to the importance of the monastery, and the stele."

"I hope you are right. Let's get back to camp. We must not let them see us in the vicinity of the chasm again. It will be too much of a coincidence for them to find us hanging around here every time they come this way."

while Royan went to her hut and pored over her photographs and etchings, Nicholas worked with the trackers and skinners. He spliced the unravelled end of the nylon rope to the second Thank, to make a single length five hundred feet long. Then he cannibalized the canvas fly of the cooking hut, cutting it up and whipping the raw edges to make a sling seat. He fashioned the ends of the rope into a harness which he spliced into the four corners of the canvas seat.

He had no block and tackle, so he put together a crude gantry of poles which could be extended out over the cliff edge to keep the rope clear of the rock. The rope would run through the groove that he drilled in the end of the central beam with a red-hot iron. He lubricated it with cooking lard.

It was the middle of the afternoon by the time he had completed his preparations. Then, leaving Royan in camp, he led his men, burdened with the

coils of rope and the pole sections of the gantry, back up the pathway to the spot where he had abseiled down into the ravine to retrieve the carcass of the dik-dik. From there they worked their way downstream, following the rim of the cliff. It was heavy going for Thorn scrub grew right up to the edge, and in many places they were forced to use their machetes to hack their way through.

The sound of the waterfall guided him. As they moved down river it grew louder, until the rock seemed to quiver under his feet with the roar of falling waters. Finally, by leaning out over the edge and peering downwards, Nicholas could make out the flash of spray in the depths below.

This is the spot." He grunted with satisfaction, and explained to Aly in Arabic what he wanted done.

In order to determine the exact position in which to set up the gantry, Nicholas climbed into the canvas sling seat and had them lower him twenty feet down the cliff face, just as far as the beginning of the overhang. Up to that point he was able to keep the nylon rope from abrading on the rock, but he was also able to see around the bulge of the face.

Hanging backwards over the falls and the rocky bowl of the river one hundred and fifty feet below him, he was able at last to see the double row of niches in the rock face.

However, the has-relief engraving was still hidden from view by the tumblehome of the cliff. He gave Aly the signal and they hauled him up.

"We must set up the gantry a little further down," he told him, and directed them as they hacked away the dense shrubbery that choked the rim. Then suddenly he exclaimed, "I'll be damned!" He went down on one knee to examine the rim rock that the thorns had concealed.

"There are more excavations here."

Exposed to the elements, unlike those works further down that had been protected by the overhang, these were badly eroded. There were just vague traces remaining in the rim rock, but he was certain that these indentations were the upper anchor points for the ancient scaffoldin 9They set up their own gantry on the same levelled area, and extended the long pole out over the drop. Then they rigged and secured it with a crude cantilever system of ropes and lighter poles.

When they were finished, Nicholas crawled out to the end to test the structure and to run the end of the rope through the slot he had prepared for it. The whole structure seemed solid and firm. Nevertheless, it was with relief that he crawled back to solid ground.

He stood up and looked over the tops of the thorn scrub to where the lowering sun was fuming red and angry on the horizon.

"Enough for one day," he decided. "The rest can wait for-tomorrow."

The next morning Nicholas and Royan were both up and drinking coffee at the campfire while it was still dark. Aly and his men were squatting at their own fire near by, talking quietly and coughing over the first cigarettes of the day. The project seemed to have caught their imagination. They had no inkling of the reason for this second descent into the chasm, but the enthusiasm of the two ferengi was infectious.

As soon as it was light enough to see the path, Nicholas led them back up into the hills. The men chatted cheerfully amongst themselves in Amharic as they hurried through the thorn scrub, and they came out on the rim rock just as the

sun broke out over the eastern escarpment of the valley. Nicholas had drilled the men the previous day, and he and Royan had sat half the night going over the plans, so each of them knew their part and they lost little time in setting themselves up for the descent.

Nicholas had stripped to shorts and tennis shoes, but this time he had brought along an old Barbarians rugby jersey for warmth. While he pulled this over his head he pointed out to Royan the platform that had been dug out from the solid rock.

She examined it carefully. "It's very hard to be sure, but I think you are right. This probably is man-made."

"When you get further down you will have no doubts."

There is very little weathering of the face under the overhang, and the niches are almost perfectly preserved until they reach the high-water mark, that is," he told her, as he took his seat in the sling and swung out over the cliff.

Dangling from the end of the gantry he gave Aly the sign, and the men lowered him down into the gorge. The rope ran smoothly through the lubricated slot.

He saw at once that he had judged it correctly, and that he was descending in line with the double row of niches. He came level with the enigmatic circle on the cliff face, but it was fifty feet from him, and a growth of gaudy Coloured lichens had streaked and discoloured the rock, partially obscuring the details, so that he still could not be certain that it was not a natural flaw. He passed it and went on down as Aly and his team paid out the rope from above.

When he reached the surface of the water he slipped out of the sling and dropped in. The water was very cold.

He trod water, gasping, until his body became acclimatized.

Then he gave Aly three tugs on the signal rope. While the canvas seat was hauled up he swam to the side of the pool and held on to one of the carved stone niches for support.

He had forgotten how gloomy and cold and lonely it was here in the bottom of the chasm.

After a long delay he craned his head backwards and watched Royan come into sight around the bulge of the overhang, dangling in the sling seat and revolving slowly at the end of the nylon rope. She looked down and waved at him cheerfully.

"Full marks to that girl," he grinned. "Not much puts the wind up her." He wanted to shout encouragement, but he knew it was futile because the thunder of the falls smothered all other sound. So he contented himself with returning her wave.

Halfway down he saw her tugging frantically on the signal rope. Aly had been warned to expect this, and her descent was halted immediately. Then she leaned back in the sling, hanging on with only her left hand, as she groped for Nicholas's binoculars which hung from their strap on to her chest. She was twisted at an awkward angle as she held the glasses to her eyes and tried to manipulate the focus wheel with one hand. He saw that she was obviously having difficulty picking up the round mark on the wall and keeping it in the field of the lens, for the sling was swinging from side to side and at the same time revolving slowly.

She struggled at the end of the rope for what seemed to Nicholas a very

long time, but probably was no more than a few minutes. Then abruptly she dropped the binoculars on to her chest, threw back her head and let out a scream that, despite the roar of falling water, carried clearly to Nicholas a hundred feet beneath her. She was kicking her legs joyfully and waving her free hand at him, wild with excitement, as Aly began paying out the rope once more. Still screaming incoherently, she was looking down at him with a face that seemed to light up the cathedral gloom of the gorge.

"I can't hear you," he yelled back, but the falls defeated both their efforts to communicate.

Royan was wriggling about in her seat, shouting and gesticulating wildly, and now she let go the harness with her other hand and leaned further out to keep him in sight as the sling revolved. She was still twenty feet above the water when she almost lost her balance entirely, and very nearly toppled backwards out of the sling.

"Careful there," he yelled up at her. "Those glasses are Zeiss. Two thousand quid at the Zurich duty-free!"

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This time his vo' must have carried, for she stuck her tongue out at him in a schoolgirlish gesture. But her movements became more circumspect. When her feet were almost touching the water she signalled on the rope to stop her descent and hung there, fifty feet across the pool from him.

"What did you find?" he shouted across.

"You were right, you wonderful man!"

"Is it man-made? Is it an inscription? Could you read it?", "Yes, yes and yes to all three of your questions! She grinned triumphantly as she teased him.

"Don't be infuriating. Tell me."

"Taita's ego got the better of him once again. He couldn't resist signing his work." She laughed. "He has left us his autograph - the hawk with a broken wing!"

"Marvellous! Plain bloody marvelous!the exalted.

"Proof that Taita was here, Nicky. To carve that cartouche, he must have been standing on a scaffolding.

Our first guess was right. That niche you are holding on to is part of his ladder to the bottom of the gorge."

"Yes, but why, Royan?" he yelled back at her. "Why was Taita down here? There is no evidence of any excavation or building work."

They both looked around the gloomy cavern. Apart from the tiny rows of niches, the walls were unbroken, smooth and inscrutable until they plunged into the dark water.

Under the falls?" she shouted across. "Is there a cutback in the rock? Can you get across there?"

He pushed off from the cliff, and swam towards the thundering chute of water. Halfway across, the current caught him and he had to swim with all his strength to make any headway against it. Thrashing the water with flailing arms and kicking out strongly, he managed to reach a spur of polished, algae-stick rock at the nearest end of the falls.

The water crashed over his head, but he edged his way along under the rock step into the heart of the cascade.

Halfway across, the water overwhelmed him. It tore him off his precarious

perch, hurled him back into the basin below and swirled him end over end. He surfaced in the middle of the pool, and once again had to swim with all his strength to break free of the grip of the current and to reach the slack water below the wall again. He clung to his handhold in the stone niche, and panted like a bellows.

"Nothing?" she called.

He shook his head, unable to answer until he had finally regained his breath. Finally he managed: "Nothing."

"It's a solid rock wall behind the falls." He gasped another breath, and then invited sarcastically, "Next bright idea, madam?"

She was silent and he was glad of the respite. Then she called again, "Nicky, how far do those niches go down?"

"You can see," he told her, "right to the one I am holding on to."

"What about below the surface?"

"Don't be silly, woman." He was getting cold and irritable. "How the hell could there be cuttings below the surface?"

"Try!" she yelled almost as if itably. He shook his head pityingly, and drew a deep breath. Still clinging to his handhold, he extended his limbs and body to their full stretch. Then his head went under the dark surface as he groped down as far as he could reach with his toes.

Suddenly he shot back, snorting for air with a startled look on his face. "By Jove!" he shouted. "You are right!"

There is another niche down there!

"I hate to say I told you so." Even at that range he could see the smug expression on her face.

"What are you? Some kind of witch?" Then he broke off and rolled his eyes heavenward in despair. "I know what you are going to ask me to do next."

"How far do the niches go down?" she called in honeyed tones. "Will you dive down for me, dear Nicky?"

"That's it," he said. "I knew it. I am going to speak to my shop steward. This is slave labour. From now onwards I am on strike."

"Please, Nicky!"

He hung in the water, pumping air in and out of his lungs, hyperventilating, flushing his bloodstream with oxygen to increase his underwater endurance to its limits.

In the end he expelled the contents of his lungs completely, squeezing out the last breath until his chest ached with the effort, and then he sucked in again, filling his lungs to their capacity with fresh air. Finally, with his chest fully expanded, he duck-dived, standing on his head with his legs high out of the water and letting their weight drive him under.

Sliding head-first down the submerged wall, he reached down, groping for the next niche below the surface. He found it, and used it to accelerate his dive, pulling himself on downwards.

He found the second niche below that, and pulled himself on downwards. The niches were about six feet apart - a nautical fathom. Using them as a measure, he was able to calculate his progress accurately.

Swimming on downwards, he found another niche, then another. Four rows of niches, twenty-four feet below the surface. His ears were popping and squeaking as the pressure squeezed the air out of his Eustachian tubes.

He kept on downwards and found the fifth row of niches. Now the air in his lungs was compressing to almost half its surface volume, and as his buoyancy decreased so his descent became easier and more rapid.

His eyes were wide open, but the waters below him were dark and turbid. He could make out only the surface of the wall directly in front of his face. He saw the sixth niche appear ahead of him and he grasped it, then hesitated.

"Thirty-six feet of depth already, and no sign yet of bottom he thought. There had been a time, when he was spearfishing competitively with the army team, that he could free-dive to sixty feet and stay at that depth for a full minute. But he had been younger then and in peak physical condition.

"Just one more niche," he promised himself, "and then back up to the surface." His chest was beginning to throb and burn with the need to breathe, but he pulled hard on his handhold and shot down. He saw the vague shape of the seventh niche appear out of the murk below him'

"They go right to the bottom," he realized with amazement. "How on earth did Taita do it? They had no diving equipment." He grasped the niche and hovered there for a moment, undecided if he should risk going further. He knew he was almost at his physical limit. Already he was hunting for air, his chest beginning to convulse involuntarily.

"What about one more for the hell of it!" He was beginning to feel light-headed, and a strange glow of euphoria came over him. He recognized the danger signs, and looked down at his own body. Through the murk he saw that his skin was wrinkled and folded by the pressure of water. There were over two atmospheres' weight bearing down upon him, crushing in his chest. His brain was becoming starved of oxygen, and he felt reckless and invulnerable.

"Once more into the breach, dear friends," he thought drunkenly, and went on down.

"Number eight, and the doctor's at the gate." He felt the eighth niche under his fingers. He was thinking in gibberish now: "Number eight, and I'll have her on a plate." He turned to go up again, and his feet touched bottom. "Fifty feet deep," he realized even through his fuddled state.

"I have left it too late. Got to get back. Got to breathe." He was bracing himself to push off from the bottom when something grabbed his legs and dragged him hard against the rock wall.

"Octopus!" he thought, remembering the line from Taita's stele, "Her vagina is an octopus that has swallowed up a king."

He tried to kick out, but his legs were bound as if by the arms of a sea monster; some cold, insidious embrace held him captive. "Taita's octopus. My oath! He meant it literally. It's got me."

He was pinned against the wall, crushed, helpless.

Terror seized him, and the rush of it through his blood flushed away the hallucinations of his oxygen-impooverished brain. He realized what had happened to him.

"No octopus. This is water pressure." He had experienced the same phenomenon once before. On an army training exercise, while diving near the inlet to the turbines of the generators in Loch Arran, his buddy diver who was roped to him had drifted into their terrible suction. His companion had been sucked against the grille of the intake and his body had been crushed so that the splinters of his ribs had been driven through the flesh of his chest and had

come out through the black neoprene rubber of his suit like daggers.

Nicholas had narrowly escaped the same fate. The fact that he was a few feet to one side of his buddy had meant that he escaped the full brunt of the rush of water into the turbine intake. Nevertheless, one of his legs was broken, and it had taken the strength of two other army divers to prise him out of the grip of the current.

This time he was at the limit of his air, and there was no other diver to assist him. He was being sucked into a narrow opening in the rock, the mouth of an underwater tunnel, a subaqueous shaft that bored into the rock wall.

His upper body was free of the baleful influence of the rushing flood, but his legs were being drawn inexorably into it. He was aware that the surrounds of the opening were sharply demarcated, as straight and as square as a lintel hewn by a mason. He was being dragged over and around this lintel. Spreading out his arms, he resisted with all his strength, but his hooked fingers slid over the polished, slimy surface of the rock.

"This is the big one," he thought. "This is the one punch that you can't duck." He hooked his fingers, and felt his nails tear and break as they rasped against the rock.

Then suddenly they locked into the last niche in the wall above the sink-hole which was sucking him under.

Now at least he had an anchor point. With both hands he clung to the niche, and fought the pull of the water. He fought it with all his remaining strength and all his heart, but he was near the end of his store of both. He strained until he felt the muscles in both arms popping, until the sinews in his neck stood out in steely cords and he felt something in his head must burst. But he had halted the insidious slide of his body into the sink-hole.

"One more," he thought. "Just one more try." And he knew that was all he had left within him. His air was all used up, and so were his courage and his resolve. His mind swirled, and dark shapes clouded his vision.

From somewhere deep inside himself he drew out the last reserves, and pulled until the darkness in his head exploded in sheets of bright colours, shooting stars and Catherine wheels that dazzled him. But he kept on pulling.

He felt his legs coming out of it, the grip of the waters weakening, and he pulled once more with strength that he had never realized he possessed.

Then suddenly he was free and shooting towards the surface, but it was too late. The darkness filled his head and in his ears was a sound like the roaring of the waterfall in the abyss. He was drowning. He was all used up. He had no knowledge of where he was, how much further he had to go to the surface, but he knew only that he was not going to make it. He was finished.

When he came out through the surface, he did not know that he had done so, and he did not have enough strength left to lift his face out of the water and to breathe.

He wallowed there like a waterlogged carcass, face down and dying. Then he felt Royan's fingers lock into the hair in the back of his head, and the cold air on his face as she lifted it clear.

"Nicky!" she screamed at him. "Breathe, 'Nicky, breathe!"

He opened his mouth and let out a spray of water and saliva and stale air, and then gagged and gasped.

"You're still alive! Oh, thank God. You were down for so long. I thought you

had drowned."

As he coughed and fought for air and his senses returned, he realized in a vague way that she must have dropped out of the sling seat and come to his aid.

"You were under for so long. I could not believe it." She held his head up, clinging with her free hand to the niche in the wall. "You are going to be all right now. I have got you. just take it easy for a while. It's going to be all right." It was amazing how much her voice encouraged him.

The air tasted good and sweet and he felt his strength slowly returning.

"We have to get you up," she told him. "A few minutes more to get yourself together, and then I will help you into the sling."

She swam with him across to the dangling sling and signalled to the men at the top of the cliff to lower it into the water. Then she held the folds of canvas open so that he could slip his legs into them.

"Are you all right, Nicky?" she demanded anxiously.

"Hang on until you get to the top." She placed his hands on the side ropes of the harness. "Hold tight!"

"Can't leave you down here," he blurted groggily.

"I'll be fine," she assured him. "Just have Aly send the seat down again for me."

When he was halfway up he looked down and saw her head bobbing in the dark waters. She looked very small and lonely, and her face pale and pathetic.

"Guts!" His voice was so weak and hoarse that he did not recognize it. "You've got real guts." But already he was too high for the words to carry down to her.

When they had got Royan safely up out of the ravine, Nicholas ordered Aly to dismantle the gantry and hide the sections in the thorn scrub. From the helicopter it would be highly visible and he did not wish to stir Jake Helm's curiosity.

He was in no shape to give the men a hand, but lay in the shade of one of the Thorn trees with Royan tending to him. He was dismayed to find how much his near-drowning had taken out of him. He had a blinding headache, caused by oxygen starvation. His chest was very painful and stabbed him every time he breathed: in his struggles he must have torn or sprained something.

He was impressed with Royan's forbearance. She made no attempt to question him about his discoveries in the bottom of the gorge, and seemed genuinely more concerned with his well being than with the progress of their exploration.

When she helped him to his feet and they started back towards camp, he moved like an old man, lame and stiff. Every muscle and sinew in his body ached. He knew that the lactic acid and nitrogen that had built up in his tissues would take some time to be reabsorbed and dispersed.

Once they reached camp Royan led him to his hut and fussed over him as she settled him under the mosquito net.

By this time he was feeling a lot better, but he neglected to inform her of this fact. It was pleasant to have a woman caring for him again. She brought him a couple of aspirin tablets and a steaming mug of tea, stiff with sugar. He was putting it on a little when he asked weakly for a second mugful.

Sitting beside his bed, she solicitously watched him drink it. "Better?" she

asked, when he had finished.

"The odds are two to one that I Will survive," he told her, and she smiled.

"I can see that you are better. Your cheek is showing again. You gave me an awful scare, you know."

"Anything to get your attention."

"Now that we have decided that you will live, tell me what happened. What sort of trouble did you run into down there in the pool?"

"What you really want to know is what I found down there. Am I correct?"

"That too, she admitted.

Then he told her everything that he had discovered and how he had been caught in the inflow of the underwater sink-hole. She listened without interruption, and even when he had finished speaking she said nothing for a while, but frowned with concentrated thought.

At last she looked up at him. "You mean that Taita was able to take those stone niches right down to the very bottom of the pool, fifty feet below the surface? and when he nodded, she was silent again. Then she said, "How on earth did he accomplish that? What are your thoughts on the subject?" -Four thousand years ago the water level may have been lower. There may have been a drought year when the river dried up, and enabled him to get in there. How am I doing?"

"Not a bad try," she admitted, "but then why go to all the trouble of building a scaffold? Why not just use the dry river bed as an access? Then again, surely the attraction of the spot for Taita was the river. If it was dry, then it would be just like a thousand other places in this gorge.

No, I have a feeling that the fact that it was so inaccessible was the main, if not the only, reason he chose to go there."

"I suspect that you are correct," he agreed.

"So if the river was running, even at its lowest level as it is now, how on earth did he manage to carve those niches below the surface? And what would be the point in having scaffolding under water?"

"Beats me. I have no idea he admitted.

"All right, let's leave that for the moment. Now let's go over your description of the sink-hole that almost sucked you in. Did you form any estimate of the size of the opening?"

He shook his head. "It is almost totally dark down there. I could not see more than two or three feet in front of me."

"Was the entrance directly between the two rows of niches?"

"No, not directly," he said thoughtfully. "It was slightly to one side. I hit the bottom of the pool with my feet, and was just about to push off when it grabbed me."

"So it must be at the very bottom of the pool, and slightly downstream from the scaffolding. You say that the entrance seemed to have a square coping?"

"I am not absolutely sure of that - remember that I could see very little. But that was the impression I received."

"It may have been another man-made structure, then perhaps some type of adit shaft driven into the side of the pool?"

"It's possible," he agreed reluctantly. "But on the other hand it could just as easily be a natural fault in the strata that the river is draining into."

She stood up to leave, and he demanded, "Where are you going?"

"I won't be long. I am going to my hut to fetch my notes, and the material from the stele. Back in a moment."

When she returned she sat on the floor beside his bed, with her legs drawn up under her in that double-jointed feminine fashion. As she spread her papers around her, he pulled up the edge of the mosquito net and looked down at what she was doing.

"Yesterday, while you were busy building the gantry, I was able to decipher most of the rest of the "spring" face of the stele." She moved her notebook so that he was able to overlook the pages she had opened. "These are my preliminary notes. You will see where I have inserted a number of question marks - here and here, for instance. That is where I am uncertain of the translation, or where Taita has used a new and strange symbol. I will have to give more time and consideration to those later."

"I follow you," he said, and she went on.

"These sections that I have highlighted with green are quotations from the standard version of the Book of the Dead. Take this one here: "The universe is drawn in circles, the disc of the sun- god, Ra. The life of man is a circle that begins in the womb and ends in the tomb. The circle of the chariot wheel foreshadows the death of the serpent that it crushes beneath its rim. "Yes, I recognize the quotation," he said.

"On the other hand, these parts of the text that I have highlighted in yellow are original Taita writings, or at least are not quotations from the Book of the Dead or any other source that I am aware of. This paragraph here in particular is the one that I wanted to bring to your attention."

She traced a section with her forefinger as she read it aloud, "'The daughter of the goddess has conceived. She has been impregnated by the one who is without seed. She has begotten her own twin sister. The fetus lies forever -coiled in her own womb. Her twin shall never be born. She will never see the light of day. She will live for ever in the darkness. In the womb of the sister her bridegroom claims her in eternal marriage.

The unborn twin becomes the bride of the god, who was a man. Their destinies are intertwined. They shall live for ever. They shall not perish.'"

She looked up from the notebook. "When I first read it, I was satisfied that the daughter of the goddess was the Dandera river, as we had already agreed. I was also pretty sure that the god that was once a man must be Pharaoh.

Mamose was only deified on his ascension to the throne of Egypt. Before that he was a man."

Nicholas nodded. "The seedless one is obviously Taita himself. He makes repeated references to the fact that he was a eunuch. But now," he suggested, "if you have some new ideas about the mysterious twin sister, let's hear them."

The twin of the river would most likely be a branch, or a fork of the stream, wouldn't it?"

"Ah, I see what you are driving at, You are suggesting that the sink-hole is the twin. Down there in the gorge it will never see the light of day. Taita, the seedless one, claims paternity. So he is telling us that he is the architect."

"Exactly, and he has married the twin of the river to Pharaoh Mamose for all eternity. Putting that all together, I have come to the conclusion that we will never find the location of Pharaoh Mamose's tomb until we explore thoroughly that sink-hole that nearly drowned you."

"How do you suggest we do that?" he asked, and she shrugged.

"I am not the engineer, Nicky. I leave that to you to arrange. All I know is that Taita devised some way of doing it - not only of getting there but of working down there. If our interpretation of the stele is correct, then he carried out extensive mining operations at the bottom of the pool.

If he could do it, then there is no reason why you can't do it also."

"Ah!" he demurred. "Taita was a genius. He says so repeatedly. I am just an old plodder."

"I have got all my bets on you, Nicky. You won't let me down, will you?"

There was no call for intensive bushcraft to follow this spoor. His quarry had taken very few anti-tracking precautions. Quite openly they were following the main trail down the Abbey gorge, heading directly westwards towards the Sudanese border.

Mek Nimmur was on his way back to his own stronghold.

Boris estimated that he had between fifteen and twenty men with him. It was difficult to be certain, for the tracks on the pathway overlapped each other, and of course he would have scouts on the point ahead of him and sweeping his flanks. There would also be a rear guard dragging the trail behind him.

They were making good time, but such a large party would not be able to outpace a single pursuer. He was sure he was gaining on them. He reckoned that he had started four hours behind them, but judging by recent signs he was now less than two hours adrift.

Without breaking his trot, he stooped to pick thing up from the path. As he ran on he examined it. It was a twig, the soft tip shoot of a kusagga-sagga plant that grew beside the track. One of the men ahead of him had brushed against it as he passed, and snapped it off the main branch. It gave Boris a fairly accurate gauge of how far he was behind. Even in the heat of the gorge, the tender shoot had barely begun to wilt. He was even closer than he had estimated.

He slowed down., a little as he considered his next move. He knew this part of the valley fairly well. The previous year he had hunted over much of this terrain with an American client, who had been looking for a trophy Walia ibex. They had spent almost a month combing these same gullies and wooded ravines before they had brought down a huge old ram, black with age and carrying a pair of curled, back-sweeping horns that ranked as the tenth largest ever in the Rowland Ward record book.

He knew that two or three miles ahead the Nile began another oxbow loop out to the south, and that it then doubled back upon itself. The main trail followed the river, because a series of sheer and formidable cliffs guarded the high ground in the centre of the loop of the river. It was, however, possible to cut the corner. Boris had done it before, while following the wounded ibex.

The American hunter had not killed cleanly his bullet had struck the ram too far back, missing the heartlung cavity and piercing the gut. The stricken wild goat had taken to the high ground, following one of its secret paths up amongst the crags. Boris and the American had followed it up and over the mountain. Boris remembered how dangerous and treacherous the path had been, but when it descended the far side of the mountain it had cut off nearly ten miles.

If he could find the beginning of the goat path again, there was every chance that he would be able to get ahead of Mek Nimmur and be lying in

wait for him on the far side. That would give him an enormous advantage. The guerrilla leader would be expecting pursuit, not ambush.

He would be covering his back trail, and it was highly unlikely that Boris would be able to slip past the rear guard without alerting his intended victims. On the other hand, once he was ahead of them he would be in control. Then he could choose his own killing ground.

As the trail and the main flow of the Nile started to turn away towards the south, he kept watching the high ground above it, seeking a familiar landmark. He had not gone another half-mile before he found it. Here there was a break in the line of dark cliffs, a heavily forested reentrant, that cut into the wall of basalt.

He stopped and mopped the sweat from his face and neck. "Too much vodka," he grunted, "you are getting soft." His shirt was as sodden as though he had plunged in the river.

He changed the sling of the rifle to his other shoulder, lifted his binoculars and swept the sides of the wooded gully. They appeared sheer and unscalable, but then he picked out the stunted shape of a small tree that grew out of a narrow crack in the face. It looked like a Japanese bonsai, with a twisted, malformed trunk and tortured branches.

The Walia ibex had been standing on the ledge just above that tree when the American had fired. In his mind's eye Boris could still see the way in which the wild goat had hunched its back as the bullet struck, and then spun around and raced away up the cliff. He panned the glasses upwards gently, and could just make out the inclination of the narrow ledge as it angled up the face.

"Da, da. This is the spot." He was thinking in his mother tongue again. It was a relief after these last days of having to struggle in French and English.

Before he began the climb, he left the trail and scrambled down the boulder-strewn slope to the river. He knelt at the edge of the Nile and splashed double handfuls over himself, soaking his cropped head and sluicing the sweat from his face and neck. He drained and refilled his water bottle, then drank until his belly was painfully full.

Then he rinsed out the bottle and refilled it. There was no water on the mountain. Finally he dipped his bush hat in the river and placed it back on his head, sodden and streaming water down his neck and face.

He climbed back to the main trail and followed it for another hundred paces, moving slowly and studying the "ground. At one place there was a rock boulder almost blocking the path. The men ahead of him had been forced to step over this obstruction, on to a patch of talcum-fine dust beyond it. They had left perfect impressions of their footprints for him to read.

Most of the men were wearing Israeli-style para boots with a zigzag-patterned sole, and those coming up from behind had overtrodden the spoor of the leaders. He had to go down on one knee to examine the signs minutely before he could pick out the imprint of a much smaller and more delicately formed foot, a lighter, unmistakably feminine tread. It was partially obliterated by other larger masculine footprints, but the outline of the toe was clear, and the pattern was that of a smooth rubber-soled Bata tennis shoe. He would have recognized it from ten thousand others.

He was relieved to find that Tessay was still with the group, and that she and her lover had not left and taken another path. Mek Nimmur was a sly one, and cunning.

He had escaped from Boris's clutches once before. But not this time! The Russian shook his head vehemently: not this time.

He gave his full attention to the female footprint once again. It gave him a pang to look at it. His anger returned in full force. He did not consider his feelings for the woman. Love and desire did not enter into the equation.

She was his chattel, and she had been stolen from him. It was only the insult that had significance for him. She had rejected and humiliated him, and for that she was going to die.

He felt the old thrill run through his blood at the thought of the kill. Killing had always been his trade and his vocation, but no matter how often he exercised his craft the thrill was never blunted, the pleasure never satiated. Perhaps it was the only true pleasure left to him, pure and unjaded - not even the vodka could weaken and dilute it as it had the physical act of copulation. He would enjoy killing her even more than he had once enjoyed coupling with her.

These past few years he had hunted only the lower animals, but he had never forgotten what it was like to hunt down and to kill a human being, more especially a woman. He wanted Mek Nimmur, but he wanted the woman more.

In the days of President Mengistu, when he had been the head of counter-intelligence, his men had known his tastes and had picked the pretty ones for him. He had only one regret now, and that was that this time he would have to do it swiftly. There could be no question of drawing it out and savouring the pleasure. Not like some of the other experiences, which had lasted for hours, sometimes for days.

"Bitch," he mouthed, and kicked at the dust, stamping on the faint outline of her footprint, obliterating it just as he would do to her. "Black fomicating bitch."

He ran now with fresh strength and determination as he left the trail and climbed up towards the deformed tree and the beginning of the goat track up, the cliff.

Exactly where he expected it, he found the start of the track and followed it upwards. The higher he climbed, the steeper it became. Often he had to use both hands to haul himself up a gradient, or to work his way along a narrow traverse.

The first time he had climbed this mountain he had been following the blood spoor of the wounded ibex, but now he did not have those splattered droplets to guide him, and twice he missed the path and found himself in a dead end on the cliff face. He was forced to edge back from the drop and retrace his footsteps until he found the correct turning. Each time he did so he was aware that he was losing time, and that Mek Nimmur might pass before he was able to intercept him.

Once he startled a small troop of wild goats which were lying on a ledge halfway up the cliff. They went bounding away up the rock face, more like birds than animals bound by the laws of gravity. They were led by a huge male with a streaming beard and long spiral horns, which in its flight showed Boris a direct route to the top of the cliff.

He tore the skin off his fingertips dragging himself up the last steep pitch, but finally he reached the top and wormed his way over the skyline, never lifting his head. A human form silhouetted against the clear, eggshell-blue sky would be visible from miles around. He moved along behind the crest until he found a small clump of sanseveria to give him cover, and used the erect, spiny leaves to

break up the outline of his head as he surveyed the valley a thousand feet below through the binoculars.

From this height the Nile was a broad, glittering serpent uncoiling into the first bend of the oxbow, its surface ruffled by rapids and rocky reefs. The high ground on either bank formed standing waves of up-thrust basalt, turbulent and chopped into confusion like a storm sea in a tropical typhoon. The whole danced and shimmered in the heat and the sun beat down with the blows of an executioner's axe, pounding this universe of red rock into heat exhausted submission.

Seventh Scroll

Though the air danced and trembled with the mirage in the tenses of his binoculars, Boris traced out the rough trail beside the river, and followed it down the valley to the point where it was hidden by the bend. It was deserted, with no sign of human presence, and he knew that his quarry had moved on out of sight. He had no way of telling how far down the trail they had travelled - he knew only that he must hurry on if he were to cut them off on the far side of the mountain.

For the first time since he had left the river, he drank sparingly from the water bottle. He realized how the heat and the exertion of the climb had dehydrated him. In these conditions a man without water might be dead in hours. It was not in the least surprising that there was so little permanent human habitation down here in the gorge.

When he backed off the skyline he felt rejuvenated, and set out to cross the saddle of the mountain. It was less than a mile across, and without warning he came out on the top of the cliffs on the far side. One more unwary pace and he would have stepped off into space and plunged down a thousand feet. Once again he moved along the crest until he found a concealed vantage point from which to spy the terrain below.

The river was the same - a wide and confused expanse of white-ruffled rapids, running back towards him as it turned through the leg of the oxbow. The trail followed the near bank, except where it was forced to detour inland by the rugged bluffs and stone needles which rose out of the Nile waters.

In the great desolation of the gorge he could pick out no movement other than the run of wild waters and the ceaseless dance of the heat mirage. He knew it was not possible that Mek Nimmur had moved fast enough to have passed completely ahead of him; therefore he must still be coming around the bend of the oxbow.

He drank again, and rested for almost half an hour.

At the end of that time he felt strong and fully recovered.

He debated with himself whether to descend immediately and stake out an ambush on the trail, but in the end decided to keep to the high ground until he had his quarry in sight.

He checked his rifle carefully, making sure that the telescopic sight had not been bumped out of alignment during the climb, and then emptied the magazine and examined the five cartridges. The brass case of one of them was dented and discoloured, so he discarded it and reloaded with another from his belt. He chambered a round and set the safety-catch.

He set the weapon aside while he changed his sweat, dampened socks with a fresh dry pair from his pack and retied his bootlaces with care. Only a novice would risk blistered feet in these conditions, for within hours they would be infected and festering.

He drank once more, and then stood up and slung the 30/06 on his shoulder. Ready now for anything that the goddess of the chase could send his way, he moved off along the crest to intercept the war party.

From every vantage point along the rim he glassed the valley below, each time without spying his quarry, and the afternoon passed "swiftly. He was just

beginning to worry that Mek Nimmur had somehow managed to slip past him unseen, that he had crossed the river at some secret ford or taken another path through a hidden valley, when there came a plaintive and querulous cry on the heat-hushed air.

He looked up. A pair of kites were circling over one particular clump of Thorn scrub on the river bank.

The yellow-billed kite is one of the most ubiquitous scavengers in Africa. It exists in close symbiotic association with man, feeding off his rubbish, picking up his leavings, soaring and circling over his villages or his temporary campsites, watching for his scraps or waiting patiently for him to squat in the bushes and then dropping down immediately he has finished his private business, acting as a universal sewage disposal agent.

Boris studied this pair of birds through his binoculars as they sailed idly in the heated air, always circling directly over that same patch of river in bush. They had a distinctive manner of steering with their long bifurcated tails, twisting them from side to side as they flirted with the breeze. Their bright yellow beaks showed clearly as they turned their heads to look down at something in the scrub.

He smiled coldly to himself. "Da! Nimmur has gone into camp early. Perhaps the heat and the pace are too fierce for his new woman, or perhaps he has stopped to play with her a little."

He moved on along the rim until he could look down directly into the patch of bush. He studied it through the binoculars, but without picking out any signs of human presence. After almost two hours he was becoming uncertain of his original assumption. The only thing that retained his attention was the pair of kites, which had settled in a treetop overlooking the patch of scrub. He had to trust that they were watching the men hidden in the scrub.

He glanced at the sun anxiously. It was sliding down towards the horizon at last and losing its furious heat. Then he looked down into the valley again.

Directly below the patch of bush was an indentation in the river bank that formed a backwater, almost a small lagoon. When the river was in flood it would be inundated, but now there was a small strip of gravel bank exposed. On this bank stood a number of boulders that had tumbled down from the cliff above. Some of them were lying on the beach, while others had rolled into the river and were half, submerged. The largest was the size of a cottage, a great round mass of dark rock.

As he watched, a man emerged unexpectedly from the scrub. Boris's pulse quickened as he watched him scramble down on to one of the smaller boulders and jump from there on to the gravel bank. He knelt at the water's edge and filled a canvas bucket with water, then climbed back and disappeared into the bush again.

"Ah! The heat is too much even for them. They must drink, and that gives them away. If it had not been for the birds I would never have known that they were there." He clucked softly with reluctant admiration. "Nimmur is a careful man. No wonder he has survived so long. He keeps tight control. But even he must have water."

Boris kept watching through the glasses as he tried to guess what Mek Nimmur would do next. "He has lost much time here by sheltering from the heat. He will march again as soon as it is cooler. He will make a night march," he decided, as he looked at the sun again. "Three hours until dark. I must make my

move before then. Once it is dark it will be difficult to pick my targets."

Before he stood up he wriggled back from the skyline.

He retraced his steps back along the Mountainside until a bluff shielded him from the eyes of Mek Nimmur's sentries.

Then he started down. There was no goat track here and he had to make his own going, but after a few false starts he discovered an inclined rock shelf that afforded him a fairly easy path down the face. When he reached the bottom of the gorge, he took careful stock of the lie and run of the stratum so as to be able to find it again in an emergency. It was a good escape route, and he knew that he might soon be under pursuit and duress.

It had taken him over an hour to negotiate the descent, and he knew that he was running out of time. He reached the trail at the water's edge, and started back along it towards Mek Nimmur's camp. He was in a hurry now, but even then he was careful to take anti-tracking precautions. He walked on the edge of the trail, stepping only on the stony ground, careful to leave no sign of his passing.

But despite his caution, he nearly walked right into them.

He had not covered the first two hundred metres when in the back of his mind he registered the low, mournful whistle of a pale-winged starting, and almost ignored it until alarm bells sounded in his mind. The timing was all wrong. The starling only gave that particular call at dawn when it left its nesting site high up in the cliffs. This was late afternoon down in the heated depths of the gorge. He guessed that it was a signal from one of the scouts coming up the trail towards him. Mek Nimmur's party was on the move.

Boris reacted instantly. He slipped off the trail, and ran back the way he had come until he reached the beginning of the pathway along which he had descended the cliff. He climbed just high enough to be able to overlook the trail. However, he realized that he had lost much of the advantage that he had built up by cutting across the mountain. This was not the ideal ambush position, and his escape route was exposed to enemy fire from below - he would be lucky to make it to the top. But the idea of abandoning his vengeance never occurred to him. As soon as his targets were in his sights, he would shoot from this stance.

However, he acknowledged to himself that Mek Nimmur had taken him by surprise. Boris had not anticipated that he would move before the sun had set. He had expected to be able to take up a position above the camp in the thorn patch and to be able to get off two careful, well-aimed shots before he was forced to run.

It was also part of his calculations that, once he had dropped Mek Nimmur, his men would not be eager to follow up with too much despatch. Boris planned to make a running retreat, stopping at every defensible strong point to fire a few shots, knock down one or two of them, and keep the pursuit circumspect and cautious until they eventually lost their taste for the game and let him go.

However, all that had now changed. He would have to take the first opportunity that presented itself - almost certainly a moving target - and as soon as he had fired he would be exposed on the path up the cliff face. His one advantage here was that his hunting rifle was a superbly accurate piece, whereas Mek Nimmur's men were all armed with AK-47 assault rifles, rapid-firing but notoriously wild at longer range, and more especially in the hands of these

shufta. With proper training, the fighting tribesmen of Africa made some of the finest troops in the world. They possessed all the necessary skills, with one exception - they were notoriously poor marksmen.

He lay flat on the ledge, and the rock under him was so hot from the direct sunlight that it burned painfully even through his clothin - He pulled the pack from his 9 back and set it up in front of him, settling the forestock of the, rifle over it to give himself a dead rest. He peered through the telescope, wriggling into a comfortable position, sighting on a small rock beside the main trail and then swinging the barrel from side to side to make certain that he had a clear arc of fire.

Satisfied that this was the best stance he could find in the short time left to him, -he set the rifle aside and picked up a handful of dirt. He rubbed this gently into his face, and the sweat turned it to mud that coated his pate skin and dulled the shine that an alert scout might pick out at long range. His last concern was to check the angle of the sun, and to satisfy himself that it was not reflecting off the lens of his scope or off any of the metal parts of the rifle.

He reached over and pulled at the branch of the shrub beside him so that it cast its shadow over the weapon.

At last he settled down behind the rifle and cuddled the butt into his shoulder, regulating his breathing to a deep slow rhythm, dropping his pulse rate and steadying his hands. He did not have long to wait. He heard the bird-call again, but this time much nearer at hand. It was answered immediately from the far side of the trail, down closer to the river bank.

"The flankers will be having difficulty maintaining station over this terrain." He grinned without hurriour, a death's-head grimace. They will be bunching and straggling." As he thought it, a man came into view around the bend of the trail, about five hundred metres, dead ahead.

Boris picked him up in the magni of ens.

He was a typical African guerrilla, a shufta dressed in a tattered and faded motley of camouflage and civilian clothing, festooned with pack and water bottle, ammunition and grenades, carrying his AK at high port. He hatted the moment he came through the turn, and crouched into cover behind a boulder at the side of the trail.

For a long minute he surveyed the lie of the land ahead of him, his head turning slowly from side to side. At one point he seemed to be staring directly at Boris, who held his breath and lay as still as the rock beside him. But finally the shufta straightened up and gave a hand signal to those out of sight behind him. Then he came on down the trail at a trot. When he had covered fifty metres the rest of the party began to appear, keeping their intervals as precisely as beads on a string. It would not be possible to enfilade this line even with an RPD from a prepared position.

"Good!" Boris approved. "These are crack troops. Mek must have hand-picked them." He watched them through the lens, examining the features of each man as he came into view, searching for Mek Nimmur. There were seven of them spread out down the trail now, but still no sign of their leader. The man on the point drew level with Boris's position and then went on past him. A pair of flankers passed directly beneath where he lay, rustling softly by in the scrub not more than a dozen paces from him. He lay like a stone and let them go. The rest of them passed his position, well spaced and moving swiftly. For some minutes

after the last of them had gone, the gorge seemed deserted and devoid of all human presence. Then there was another stealthy movement out there.

"The rear guard," Boris grunted softly. "Mek is keeping the woman at the rear. His new plaything." He is taking great care of her."

He slipped the safety-catch on the rifle gently, making certain that no alien metallic sound fell on the heated and hushed air.

"Now let them come," he breathed. "I will take Mek first. Nothing fancy, no head shots. Squarely in the centre of the chest. The woman will freeze when he goes down.

She does not have the reflexes of a warrior. She will give me a second unhurried shot. At this range there will be no question of a miss. Right between those pretty little black tits of hers." He became sexually charged by the image of blood and violent death set opposite Tessay's loveliness and grace. "I might even have a chance to get one of the others. But I can't bank on that. These men are good.

More likely that they will dive into cover before I have even had time to kill the woman."

He watched the faces of the rear guard as, one at a time, carefully spaced, they came into view. Each time he felt his heart trip with disappointment. In the end there were three of them on the path, moving past him at a steady, businesslike jog-trot. But no sign of Mek and the woman. The rear guard disappeared down the path, and the small sounds of their progress dwindled into silence. Boris lay alone on the ledge, his heart thumping and the sour taste of disappointment in the back of his throat.

"Where are they?" he thought bitterly. "Where the hell is Mek? And the obvious answer to his own question occurred to him immediately. They had taken a different trail. Mek had used this patrol as a decoy to lure him away.

He lay quietly for a measured five minutes by his wristwatch, just in case there might be more men coming up the trail. His mind was racing. His last definite placin of 9 Tessay had been the glimpse of her footprint on the trail at the far bend of the oxbow.

That was several hours ago, and if she and Mek had given him the slip they could be anywhere by now. Mek might have won himself a start of a full day or more - it might take Boris that long to work the spoor through.

Feeling waves of anger overwhelm him, he had to close his eyes and fight it off in order to keep his sense of reason from being swamped. He had to think clearly now, not go rushing at the problem like a wounded buffalo. He knew that this was one of his weaknesses: he had to keep tight control of himself.

When he opened his eyes again, his anger had become cold and functional. He knew precisely what he had to do and the order in which he must do it. The very first task was to sweep and check the back trail. He had to establish the point at which Mek had left the main detachment of shufta.

He slipped down off the ledge and through the scrub to the open trail. Still anti-tracking, but moving swiftly, he made his way upstream, back towards the patch of Thorn scrub where the party of shufta had lain up in the heat of the day. The first thing he noticed was that the pair of kites had gone. But he did not take this as proof that the bush was deserted! and began to circle it carefully. First he worked the incoming trail on the far side of the patch of bush. Although several hours old now, it was still clear enough to read.

Suddenly he stopped in the centre of the trail and felt the hair rise on his forearms and down the back of his neck as he stared at the sign in the dust of the path. He realized that he had walked into Mek's trap. There lay the distinctive imprint of a Bata tennis shoe.

Mek and the woman had gone into the patch of scrub and had not come out again. They were still in there, and Boris was seized by the strong premonition that Mek was watching him even at that moment, over the open sights of his AK. While he was out in the open like this, stooped over the spoor, Boris was completely vulnerable.

Hurling himself sideways off the path, he landed like a cat in the wire grass beside it, with the rifle at the ready. It took many minutes for his heartbeats to return to normal, and then he rose again into a stealthy crouch and began circling the patch of scrub very cautiously. His nerves were as taut as guitar strings, and his pale eyes darted from side to side. His finger lay upon the trigger of the 30/06 and he kept the muzzle weaving slowly, like the head of a cobra ready to strike in any direction.

He moved down towards the bank of the river, where the noise of the rapids would mask any sound he might make. But when he had almost reached the shelter of the house-sized boulder that he had noticed from the mountain crest he froze again. He had heard a sound that carried over the sound of Nile waters - a sound so incongruous in this place and at this time that for a moment he doubted his own hearing. It was the sound of a woman's laughter, sweet and clear as the tinkle of a crystal chandelier swinging in the breeze.

The sound came from below him, from the river bank beyond the tumbled boulder. He crept towards the boulder, determined to use it for cover and as a vantage point from which he could cover the bank beyond it. But before he reached it he heard the splash of some heavy object striking the surface of the river, and an excited female squeal, both playful and provocative.

Reaching the side of the boulder, and keeping close in under its protective bulk, he stole towards the corner, from which he could overlook the gravel bank beyond. Then, peeping cautiously around the angle of the boulder, he stared in amazement. He could barely believe what he was seeing. He could not credit this kind of stupidity from a man like Mek Nimmur. This was the hard man, the seasoned warrior and survivor of twenty years of bloody bush war acting like a love-sick teenage booby.

Mek Nimmur had sent his men away so that he could be alone to frolic with his new paramour. Boris took time to make absolutely certain that this was not some elaborate trap that had been set for him. It seemed too fortuitous, too heaven-sent to be really true. He searched every inch of the bank in both directions for hidden gunmen before he smiled his cold little smile.

"Of course they are alone. Mek would never let one of his men see Tessay naked like this." His smile grew broader as he recognized the full extent of his luck. "He must have gone crazy. Did he not realize that I would follow him? Did he think he was far enough ahead to be able to indulge in himself like this? Is there anything in this world as stupid and as shortsighted as a standing prick?" Boris was gloating delightedly now.

They had stripped off their clothes and left them piled on the beach of grey basalt gravel in the shade of the

tall boulder. They were splashing together in the slack water of the river

at the edge of the main current. Both Of them were stark mother-naked. Mek Nimmur was broadshouldered, with a heavily muscled back and hard, tight buttocks. Beside him Tessay was slim as a river reed, her waist tiny and her hips narrow. Her skin was the colour of wild honey. They were completely absorbed in each other, without eyes or ears for anything else in this world.

"He must have left men guarding his back trail." Boris gave Mek the benefit of some sense. "He never expected me to be ahead of him on the trail. He thinks they are completely secure. Look at the fool," he gloated, as Mek chased the girl and she let herself be caught. They fell into the shallow water locked in each other's embrace, mouths seeking each other as they surfaced again, laughing as the water streamed down their darkly beautiful faces, the epitome of handsome masculinity and lovely womanhood, the image of an African Adam and Eve captured for a moment in their own little carefree paradise.

Boris tore his eyes from them, and looked to where their clothing had been abandoned on the gravel bar.

Mek's AK rifle lay carelessly on top of his camouflage jacket, within a few paces of where Boris stood. He crossed the open gravel bar with a few quick strides, picked up the AK, unclipped the curved magazine and dropped it into his pocket, ejected the round from the chamber and let it fly away into the gravel, replaced the unloaded rifle on the jacket, and rapidly returned to the tee of the boulder. Both Mek and Tessay remained utterly oblivious to what had happened.

Boris stood there quietly in the shadow of the rock, watching them at play in the river. They were almost childlike in their love and their complete preoccupation with each other.

Tessay at last broke from Mek's embrace and left the water. She came up the gravel bar, running long-legged and coltish, her wet silken breasts swinging and jostling each other at each stride as she looked back at him over her shoulder in open invitation. Mek followed her out, the water glistening in the dense curls of his barrel chest, his genitals weighty and puissant.

He caught her before she could reach her clothing and she struggled playfully for a while in his arms, until his mouth clamped down over hers. Then she gave herself up to him completely. While he kissed her his hands ran down her back and over her wet glistening buttocks. Pressing herself against him she moved her feet apart and spread her thighs, inviting him to explore the secrets of her body. She groaned with desire as his hand cupped her sex gently.

Boris felt his anger mingle with the perverse voyeuristic thrill of watching his own wife being taken by another man. A devil's brew of emotions bubbled up inside him.

He felt his loins engorging and stiffening almost painfully with excitement, but at the same time his rage shook him like the branch of a tree in a gale of wind.

The lovers sank down on to their knees. Still locked together, Tessay fell backwards and pulled him over on top of herself.

Boris called out loudly, "By God, Mek Nimmur, you will never know how ridiculous you look with your bare backside in the air like that."

Mek reacted as swiftly as a leopard surprised on his kill. With a blur of movement he flipped over and reached for the AK-47. Although Boris was ready for him, covering him with the 30/06, aiming at the back of his neck when he shouted to him, Mek was so quick that he had swept up the AK from where it lay

and had it pointed at Boris's belly before he could move. Mek pressed the trigger in the same instant as the muzzle came to bear.

The firing-pin fell on the empty chamber with a futile click, and the two men stared at each other across the gravel beach, both with their weapons levelled. Tessay was curled naked where Mek had left her, her dark eyes liquid with pain and horror as she watched her husband and realized that Mek was about to die.

Boris chuckled softly, throatily. "Where do you want it, Mek? How about I shoot the head off that filthy black tool of yours, while it is still standing up in the air like that?"

Mek Nimmur's eyes darted away from his adversary's face, back towards the mountain, and Boris realized that his guess had been correct. Mek had some of his men up there, but they were keeping out of view of the beach while their commander indulged himself.

"Don't worry about them. You will both be dead long before your chimps can get down here to save you." Boris chuckled again. "I am enjoying this. You and I had an appointment once before, but you broke it. Never mind this is going to be even more fun." He knew that it was not wise to delay with a man like this. Mek had made one mistake, and it was highly unlikely that he would make another. He should blow his head off now, and that would give him a few minutes more to deal with Tessay. But the temptation to gloat over him was too strong.

"I have good news for you, Mek. You will live a few seconds longer. I am going to kill the whore first, and I am going to let you watch. I hope you enjoy it as much as I am going to." He sidled away from the shelter of the boulder, edging towards where Tessay lay curled on the gravel beach. She was turned half away from him, trying to cover her breasts and her pubic area with hands too small and delicate for the job. Even as he approached the woman, Boris was watching Mek with his full attention. Mek was the danger, and he never took his eyes off him. It was a mistake. He had underestimated the woman.

While pretending to turn away from him modestly, Tessay had reached down between her thighs and found a round, water-worn stone that fitted neatly into her small fist. Suddenly she uncoiled her lithe body and used all the strength of it to hurl the stone at his head. Boris caught the movement from the corner of his eye and flung up his arm to shield his head.

The stone, flying with surprising force at close range, never struck its target. Instead it caught the point of Boris's upraised elbow. His sleeves were rolled up high around his biceps, and there was no padding to cushion the impact of the stone; his arm was bent and flexed, the thin covering of skin drawn tightly over the bone of the joint. The head of the ulna cracked like glass, and Boris howled at the excruciating agony. His hand opened involuntarily, and his forefinger jerked away from the trigger without the strength to fire the shot he was aiming at Mek's belly.

Mek rolled to his feet, and before Boris could change the rifle to his other hand he disappeared behind the angle of the giant boulder.

With his left hand Boris swung the butt of the rifle at Tessay's head, knocking her backwards into the sand. Then he thrust the muzzle into her throat, pinning her there while he shouted angrily. "I am going to kill her, you black bastard! If you want your whore, you' better come fetch her!" The pain of the shattered

elbow rendered his voice hoarse and brutish.

From somewhere behind the boulder Mek Nimmur's voice fang out strongly and clearly, calling a single word in Amharic that echoed along the cliffs. Then he spoke in English, "My men will be here in a moment. Leave the woman and I will spare you. Harm her and I will make you plead for death."

Boris stooped over Tessay and dragged her to her feet with his good arm locked around her throat. He held the rifle in the same hand, pointing it over her shoulder. The hand of his injured arm had recovered sufficiently from the first shock to be able to hold the pistol grip and to manipulate the trigger.

"She will be dead long before your men get here," he shouted back as he started to drag her away from the boulder. "Come and get her yourself, Mek. She is here if you want her."

He tightened his lock around her throat, choking her until she struggled and gasped, tearing at his arm with her nails and leaving long red welts across the tanned skin.

"Listen to her! I am crushing this pretty neck. Listen to her choking." He tightened his grip, forcing the sounds of distress out of her.

Boris was watching the corner of the boulder where Mek had disappeared. At the same time he was backing away from it, giving himself space in which to work. His mind was racing, for he knew that he could not escape. His right arm was barely usable, and there were too many of Mek's shufta companions. He had the woman, but he wanted the man as well. That was the best trade that he could hope for - both of them, he had to have both of them.

He heard a shout, a strange voice from higher up the slope. Mek's men were on their way. He was desperate now. Mek was not going to be drawn; he had not heard him speak or move for almost two minutes. He had lost him - by this time he could be anywhere.

"Too late," Boris realized. "I am not going to get him.

Only the woman. But I must do it now." He forced her to her knees and stooped over her, shifting the lock of his arm around her throat.

"Goodbye, Tessay," he grated in her ear. He tightened his arm muscles and felt the vertebrae in her neck arched to breaking point. It needed only an ounce more pressure.

"It's all over for you," he whispered, and began the final pressure. He knew from long experience the sound, that the vertebrae would make as they gave, and he tensed himself for it, poised for that crackle like the breaking of a green branch, and the stack weight of her corpse in his grip.

Then something crashed into his back with a force that seemed to drive in his backbone and crush his ribs.

Both the strength and the direction were entirely unexpected. It did not seem possible that Mek Nimmur could have moved so far and so swiftly. He must have left the shelter of the boulder and circled out through the scrub.

Now he had come at Boris from behind.

His attack was so savage that the arm that Boris had wound around Tessay's neck opened.- She drew in a wheezing, strangled breath and twisted out of his grip. Boris tried to turn and swing the rifle around, but Mek was on him again, seizing the rifle and trying to wrest it from Boris's hands.

The Russian's finger was still on the trigger, and a shot went off white the muzzle was level with Mek's face. The detonation stunned him for an instant,

and he released the rifle and staggered backwards with his ears ringing.

Boris backed away from him, struggling with the weapon, trying to open the bolt and crank another cartridge into the chamber, but his crippled right arm made his movements clumsy and awkward. Mek gathered himself and charged head down across the gravel beach. He drove into Boris with all his weight, and the rifle flew out of the Russian's hands. Locked chest to chest the two of them spun around in a macabre waltz, trying to throw each other, wrestling for the advantage, until they tripped and went over backwards into the river.

They came to the surface still grappling and rolling over each other, first one on top and then the other, a fearful parody of the lovemaking which Boris had watched a few minutes earlier. Punching and straining and tripping each other, they struggled in the shallows. But every time they fell back into the water the slope of the bank beneath their feet forced them further out, until, when they were waist-deep, the main current of the Nile suddenly picked them up and swept them away downstream. They were still locked together, their heads bobbing in the tumble of waters, their arms thrashing the water white around them, bellowing at each other in primeval rage.

Tessay heard the men that Mek had called coming down through the scrub at the run. She snatched up her shamnw and pulled it over her head as she ran to meet them. As the first of them burst on to the gravel bar with his AK cocked, she shouted to him in Amharic.

"There! Mek is in the water. He is fighting the Russian.

Help him!" She ran with them along the bank. As they drew level with the two men in midstream one of the men stopped and levelled his AK, but Tessay rushed at him and struck up the barrel.

"You fool!" she shouted angrily. "You will hit Mek." Jumping to the top of one of the riverside boulders, she shaded her eyes against the dazzling reflection of the low sun off the water. With a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach she saw that Boris had managed to get behind Mek and had a half nelson hold around his throat. He was forcing Mek's head under the surface. Mek was struggling like a hooked salmon in his grip as they were swept into a long chute of white water.

Tessay jumped down from the rock and ran on down the bank to the next point, from which she could only watch helplessly.

Boris was still holding Mek's head under water as they were borne together into the head of the chute. Fangs of black rock flashed by them on each side as they gathered speed. Mek was a powerful man and Boris had to exert every last ounce of his own strength to hold him, and he knew he could not do so much longer. Suddenly Mek reared back, and for a moment his head came out. He sucked a quick breath of air before Boris could force him under again, but that breath seemed to have renewed his strength.

Desperately Boris looked ahead to the tail of the chute as they sped towards it. There were more rocks there. Boris picked out one great black slab over which the waters poured in a standing wave three feet high. He steered for it, kicking and hauling Mek's body around with the last of his strength.

They flew down the slope of racing water with the rock slab waiting for them at the end like a lurking seamonster. Boris continued to wrestle with Mek, until he had turned him into a position ahead of him. He planned to steer him into a head-on collision with the rock and use Mek's body to cushion his own impact.

At the very last moment before they struck Mek dragged his head out from the surface, and as he grabbed a precious lungful of air he saw the rock and realized the danger. With a single violent effort he ducked forward below the surface again and rolled over head-first. It was so powerful and unexpected that Boris was unable to resist.

Instinctively he maintained his lock around Mek's neck and was carried forward over his back until their positions were reversed. Now Mek had managed to interpose Boris between himself and the rock, so that when they slammed into it it was the Russian who bore the full brunt of the impact.

Boris's right shoulder crunched like a walnut in the jaws of a steel cracker. Although his head was still under water he screamed at the brutal agony of it, and his lungs filled with water. He relinquished his grip and was flung clear of Mek. When he came to the surface he was floundering like a drowned insect, his right arm shattered in two places, his good arm flailing weakly, and his sodden lungs wheezing and pumping.

Mek exploded through the surface only a few yards behind him. Looking around quickly as he strained for air, he spotted Boris's bobbing head almost immediately and with a few powerful overarm strokes came up behind him.

Boris was so far gone that he was not aware of Mek's intentions until he seized his shirt collar from behind and twisted it like a strangler's garotte. With his other hand, below the surface, Mek secured a grip on the back of Boris's wide leather belt and used it like the helm of a rudder to steer him towards the next reef of rocks that was boiling the water ahead of them.

Through his waterlogged lungs Boris was trying to shout invective at him. "Bastard! Black swine! Filthy-" But his voice was barely audible above the rush of the waters and the growl of the rocky spur that lay across their path. Mek rode him head-first into the rock and he felt the impact transferred through Boris's skull to jolt the straining muscles of his forearms. Instantly Boris went slack in his grip, his head lolled and his limbs became as limp and soft as strands of kelp washing in the surf.

As they tumbled into the next run of open water, Mek used his grip on the back of Boris's collar to lift the Russian's face above the surface. For a moment even he was struck with horror at the injury that he had inflicted.

Boris's forehead was staved in. The skin was unbroken, but there was a deep indentation in his skull into which Mek could have thrust his thumb. And Boris's eyes bulged, pushed out of their sockets like those of a battered doll.

Mek swung the inert carcass around in the water, and stared at the broken head from a distance of only a few inches. He reached up and touched the depressed area of the skull with his fingertips, and felt the shards of splintered bone grate and give beneath the skin.

Once again he thrust the shattered head below the surface and held it there, while he crabbed sideways across the current towards the bank. There was no resistance from Boris, but Mek kept his head submerged for the rest of that long tortuous swim across the Nile.

"How do you kill a monster?" he thought grimly. "I should bury him at a crossroads with a stake through his heart." But instead he drowned him fifty times over, and at the next bend of the river they were washed into the bank.

Mek's men were waiting for him there. They supported him when his legs sagged under him, and they helped him up the bank. When they started to

drag Boris's corpse out of the river, Mek stopped them abruptly.

him for the crocodiles. After what he has done

"Leave to our country and our people, he deserves nothing better." But even in his anger and his hatred he did not want Tessay to have to look at that mutilated head. She had been unable to keep pace with the men, but she was coming along the bank towards him now.

One of his men pushed Boris's corpse back into the current, and as it floated away he unstung his AK rifle from his shoulder and let off a burst of automatic fire. The bullets chopped up the surface around Boris's head, and socked heavily into his back. They tore holes in his wet shirt and kicked out lumps of raw flesh. The other men on the bank shouted with laughter and joined in the fusillade, emptying their magazines into the lifeless body. Mek did them. Some of their close relatives not attempt to prevent had died most horribly under the Russian's care. The corpse rolled over in a pink cloud of its own blood, and for a moment Boris's pate bulging eyes stared at the sky. Then he sank away beneath the surface.

Mek stood up slowly and went to meet Tessay. He took her in his arms, and as he held her to his chest he whispered to her softly.

"It's all right. He won't ever hurt you again. It's all over. You are my woman now - for ever!"

Since -Boris and Tessay had left the camp there was no longer any reason to maintain security, and Nicholas -and Royan were no longer obliged to skulk in Royan's hut when they discussed their search for the tomb.

Nicholas transferred their headquarters into the dining hut, and had the camp staff build another large table on which they could spread the satellite photographs and all the other maps and material that they had accumulated.

The chef sent a steady supply of coffee from the kitchen, while they pored over the papers and discussed their discoveries in Taita's pool and every theory that either of them dreamed up, no matter how far-fetched.

"We will never be certain if that shaft was made by Taita, or whether it was a natural sink-hole, until we can get back in there with the right equipment."

"What type of equipment are you talking about?" she wanted to know.

"Scuba, not oxygen rebreathers. Although the navy rebreathing outfits are much lighter and more compact, you cannot use them below a depth of thirty-three feet, the equivalent of one atmosphere of water. After that pure oxygen becomes lethal. Have you ever used an aqualung?"

She nodded. "When Dutaid and I were on honeymoon at a resort on the Red Sea. I had a few lessons and made three or four open-water dives, but let me hasten to add that I am no expert."

"I promise not to send you down there," he smiled, "but I think we can safely say that we have found enough evidence both in Tanus's tomb and Taita's pool to make it imperative that we mount the second phase of this operation."

She nodded agreement. "We will have to return with a much more extensive range of equipment, and some expert help. But you are not going to be able to pose as a tourist Sportsman next time around. What possible excuse are we going to find for returning that will not set off all the alarm bells in the minds of Ethiopian bureaucracy?"

"You are speaking to the man who has paid unofficial and uninvited visits to both those charming lads Gadaffi and Saddam. Ethiopia should be a Sunday-

school picnic in comparison."

"When do the big rains start up in the mountains?" she asked suddenly.

"Yes!" His expression became serious. That is the jackpot question. You only have to look at the high-water mark on the walls of Taita's pool to have some idea what it must be like in there when the river is in full flood." He flipped over the pages of his pocket diary. "Luckily, we still have a bit of time - not a great deal, but enough. We will need to move pretty smartly. We have to get back home before I can start work on planning phase two."

"We should pack up right away, then."

"Yes, we should. But it seems a damned shame not to take full advantage of every moment we are here, having come all this way. I think we can spare just a few more days to sound out some ideas that I have about Taita's pool and the sink-hole, to try to arrive at some sort of informed guess about what we will need when we return."

"You are the boss."

"My word, how pleasant to hear a lady say that." She smiled sweetly. "Enjoy the moment," she counselled him, "it may never happen again." And then she became serious again. "What are these ideas that you have? "What goes up must come down, what goes in must come out," he said mysteriously. "The water going into the sink'hole under such pressure must be going somewhere.

Unless it joins a subterranean water system and makes its way into the Nile that way, then it should come to the surface where we can find it."

"Go on," she invited.

40The thing is certain. Nobody is going to get into the sink-hole from the pool. The pressure is lethal. But if we can find the outlet, we may be able to explore it from the other end."

"That's a fascinating possibility." She looked impressed, and turned to the satellite photograph. Nicholas had identified the monastery and ringed it on the photograph.

He had marked in the approximate course of the river through the chasm, although the gorge itself was too narrow and covered with bush to show up on the smallscale picture, even under the high-powered magnifying lens.

"Here is the point where the river enters the chasm." She pointed it out to him. "And here is the side valley down which the trail detours. Okay?"

"Okay," he nodded. "What are you driving at?"

"On our approach march, we remarked that this valley might at one time have been the original course of the Dandera river, and that it seemed to have cut a new bed for itself through the chasm."

"That's right," Nicholas agreed. "I am still listening."

"The fall of the land towards the Nile is very steep at this point, isn't it? Well, do you recall we crossed another smaller, but still pretty substantial, stream on our way down the dry valley? That stream seemed to emerge from somewhere on the eastern side of the valley."

All right, I am with you now. You are suggesting that this may be the overflow from the sinkholes Clever little devil, aren't you?"

"Just capitalizing on your genius." She cast down her eyes modestly, and looked up at him from under her lashes.

She was clowning, but her lashes were long and dense and curling, and her eyes were the colour of burnt honey with tiny golden highlights in their depths.

At this close range he found them disturbing.

He stood up and suggested, "Why don't we go and take a look?"

Nicholas went to fetch his camera bag and the light day'pack from his hut, and when he returned he found Royan ready to go. But she was not alone.

I see that you are bringing your chaperon with you," he remarked with resignation.

"Unless you are tough enough to send him away." Royan smiled encouragement at Tamre who stood at her side, grinning and bobbing and hugging his shoulders in the ecstasy of being in the presence of his idol.

"Oh, very well." Nicholas gave in without a struggle.

"Let the little devil come along."

Tamre lolloped away up the path ahead of them, his grubby shamma flapping around his long skinny legs, chanting the repetitive chorus of an Amharic psalm, and every few minutes looking back to make certain that Royan was still following him. It was a hard pull up the valley, and the noonday heat was debilitating. Although Tamre seemed totally unaffected, the other two were both sweating in dark patches through their shirts by the time they reached the point where the stream debauched into the valley. Gratefully, they sought the shade of a patch of acacia trees, and while they rested Nicholas glassed the side of the valley through his binoculars.

"How are they after the dunking I gave them?" she asked.

"Waterproof," he grunted, "full marks to Herr Zeiss."

"What do you see up there?"

"Not much. The bush is too thick. We will have to foot'slog up the side. Sorry."

They left the shade and made their way up the side of the valley in the direct burning sunlight. The stream tumbled down a series of cascades, each with a pool at its foot. The bush crowded the banks, lush and green where the roots had been able to reach the water. Clouds of black and yellow butterflies danced over the Pools, and a black and white wagtail patrolled the moss-green rocks along the edge, its long tail gyrating back and forth like the needle of a metronome.

Halfway up the slope they paused beside one of the pools to rest, and Nicholas used his hat like a fly-swatter to stun a brown and yellow grasshopper. He tossed the insect on to the surface of the pool, and as it kicked weakly and floated towards the exit a long dark shadow rose from the bottom. There was a swirl and a mirrorlike flash of a scaly silver belly, and the grasshopper disappeared.

"Ten'pounder," Nicholas lamented. "Why didn't I bring my rod?"

Tamre was crouched near Nicholas on the pool bank, and suddenly he lifted his hand and held it out. Almost at once one of the circling butterflies settled upon his finger.

It perched there with its velvety black and yellow wings fanning gently. They stared at him in astonishment, for it was as though the insect had come to his bidding. Tamre giggled and offered the butterfly to Royan. When she held out her hand, he gently transferred the gorgeous insect to her palm.

"Thank you, Tamre. That is a wonderful gift. Now my gift to you is to set it free again." She pursed her lips and blew it softly into flight. They watched the butterfly climb high above the pool, and Tamre clapped his hands and laughed with delight.

"Strange," Nicholas murmured. "He seems to have a special empathy with all the creatures of the wilderness. I think that Jali Hora, the abbot, does not try to control him, but lets him do very much as his simple fancy dictates.

Special treatment for a fey soul, one that hears a different tune and dances to it. I must admit that, despite myself, I am becoming quite fond of the lad."

It was only another fifty feet higher that they came to the source. There was a low cliff of red sandstone, from a grotto at whose foot the stream gushed. The entrance was screened by a heavy growth of ferns, and Nicholas went down on his knees to pull them aside and peer into the low opening.

"What can you see?" Royan demanded behind him.

"Not much. It's dark in there, but it seems to go in for quite some way."

"You are too big to get in there. You had better let me go in."

"Good place for water cobra," he remarked. "Lots of frogs for them to eat. Are you sure you want to go?"

"I never said that I wanted to." She sat on the bank while she unlaced her shoes, then lowered herself into the stream. It came halfway up her thighs, and she waded forward against the flow with difficulty.

She was forced to bend almost double to creep under the overhanging roof of the grotto. As she moved deeper in, her voice came back to him.

"The roof gets lower."

"Be careful, dear girl. Don't take any chances."

"I do wish you wouldn't call me "dear girl". Her voice resonated strangely from the cave entrance.

"Well, you are both those things, a girl and dear. How about if I call you "young lady?"

"Not that either. My name is Royan." There was silence for a while, then she called again. "This is as far as I can go. It all narrows down into a shaft of some sort."

"A shaft?" he demanded.

"Well, at least a roughly rectangular opening."

"Do you think it is the work of humans?"

"Impossible to tell. The water is coming out of it like the spout of a bath tap. A solid jet."

"No evidence of any excavation? No marks of tools on the rock?"

"Nothing. It's slick and water-worn, covered with moss and algae."

"Could a man get into the opening, I mean if it were not for the water pressure?"

"If he was a pygmy or a dwarf."

"Or a child?" he suggested.

"Or a child," she agreed. "But who would send a child in there?"

"The ancients often used child-slaves. Taita might have done the same."

"Don't suggest it. You are destroying my high opinion of Taita," she told him as she backed out of the entrance of the grotto. There were pieces of fern and moss in her hair, and she was soaked from the waist downwards. He gave her a hand and boosted her back on to the bank. The curve of her bottom was clearly visible through her wet trousers. He forced himself not to dwell upon the view.

"So we have to conclude that the shaft is a natural flaw in the limestone, and not a man-made tunnel?"

"I didn't say that. No. I said that I couldn't be sure.

You might be correct. Children might have been used to dig it. After all, they were used in the coalmines during the industrial revolution."

"But there is no way that we would be able to explore the tunnel from this end?"

"Impossible." She was vehement. "The water is pouring out under enormous pressure. I tried to push my arm up the shaft, but I did not have the strength."

"Pity! I was hoping for some more irrefutable evidence, or at least another lead." He sat down beside her on the bank, and ferreted in his pack. She looked at him quizzically when he brought out a small black anodized instrument and opened the lid.

"Aneroid barometer," he explained. "Every good navigator should have one." He studied it for a moment and then made a note of the reading.

"Explain," she invited.

"I want to know if this spring is below the level of the entrance to the sink-hole in Taita's pool. If it is not, then we can cross it off our list of possibilities."

He stood up. "If you are ready, we can move on."

"Where to?"

"Why, Taita's pool, of course. We need a reading up there to establish the difference in altitude between the two points."

Once Tamre knew where they were headed he showed them a shortcuts so it took them just under two hours from the fountain head to the top of the cliff face above Taita's pool.

Seventh Scroll

While they rested, Royan remarked, "Tamre seems to spend most of his days wandering around in the bush. He knows every path and game trail. He is an excellent guide."

"Better than Boris, at least," Nicholas agreed, as he fished out his barometer and took another reading.

"You look particularly pleased with yourself." Royan watched his face as he studied the instrument.

"Every reason to be," he told her. "Allowing one hundred and eighty feet for the height of the cliff below us, and another fifty feet for the depth of the pool, the entrance to the sink-hole is still over a hundred feet higher than your outlet through the fern grotto on the other side of the ridge."

"Which means?"

"Which means that there is a distinct possibility that the streams are one and the same. The inflow is here in Taita's pool and the outflow is from your grotto."

"How on earth did Taita do it?" she puzzled. "How did he get to the bottom of the pool? You are the engineering marvel. Tell me how you would do it."

He shrugged, but she persisted. "I mean, there must be some established way of doing things like that, of working under water. How do they build the piers of a bridge, or the foundations of a dam, or - or - or how did Taita himself build the shaft below the level of the Nile to measure the flow of the river? You remember the description that he gives of his hydrograph in River God?"

"The accepted technique is to build a coffer dam " Nicholas said casually, and then broke off and stared at her. "My oath, you really are a corker. A dam! What if that old ruffian, Taita, dammed the whole flipping river!"

"Would that have been possible?"

"I am beginning to believe that with Taita anything is possible. He certainly had unlimited manpower at his disposal, and if he could build the hydrograph on the Nile at Aswan, then he understood very clearly the principles of hydrodynamics. After all, the old Egyptians' lives were completely bound up with the seasonal inundations of the river and the management of the floods. From what we have gathered about the old man, it certainly seems Possible."

"How could we prove it?"

"By finding the remains of his dam. It had to be a hell of a work to hold the Dandera river. There is a good chance that some evidence of it remains."

"Where would he have built the dam?" she asked excitedly. "Or let me put it another way, where would you site the dam if you had to do it?, "There is one natural place for it," he answered promptly. "The spot where the trail leaves the river and detours down the valley, and the river falls into the chasm."

They both turned their heads in unison and looked upstream.

"What are we waiting for?" she asked, and sprang to her feet. "Let's go look-see!"

Their excitement was infectious, and Tamre giggled and danced ahead of them along the trail through the thorns and then up the valley to the point where it rejoined the river. The sun had lost the worst of its heat by the time they stood once again above the falls where the Dandera river plunged into the mouth of the chasm, and began its last lap in the race to join the Nile.

"If Taita. had thrown a dam across here - " Nicholas made a sweep of his arms across the mouth of the gorge, he could have diverted the river down the side valley here."

"It looks possible," she laughed. Tamre giggled in sympathy, not understanding a word of what they were saying, but enjoying himself immensely.

"I would need a dumpy level to take some shots of the actual fall of the land. It can be very deceptive, but with the naked eye it does look possible, as you say." He shaded his eyes and looked up the bluffs on each side of the waterfall. They formed two craggy portals of limestone, between which the river roared as it plunged over the lip.

"I would like to climb up there to get a clearer picture of the layout of the terrain. Are you game?"

"Try and stop me," she challenged him, and led the climb. It was a heavy scramble, and in some places the limestone was rotten and crumbling dangerously. However, when they came out on the summit of the eastern portal they were rewarded with a splendid overall view of the ground below.

Directly to the north, the escarpment rose like a sheer wall with its battlements crenellated and serrated. Above and beyond it there was a dream of further mountains, the high peaks of the Choke, blue as a heron's plumage against the clearer distant blue of the African sky.

All around them were the badlands of the gorge, a vast confusion of ridges and spines and reefs of rock of fifty different hues, some ash-grey and white, others black as the hide of a bull buffalo, or red as his heart blood. The river in bush was green, the poisonous vivid green of the mamba in the treetop, while further from the water the scrub was grey and sear, and along the spines of the broken kopjes stood the stark outlines of ancient drought-struck trees, their tortured limbs twisted and black against the sky.

"The picture of devastation," Royan whispered as she looked around her, 'untamed and untamable. No wonder Taita chose this place. It repels all intruders."

They were both silent for a while, awed by the wild grandeur of the scene, but as soon as they had recovered from the exertion of the climb their enthusiasm resurfaced.

"Now you can get a good picture of it." Nicholas pointed down into the valley below them. "There is a clear divide at the fork of the valley. You can see the natural fall of the ground. There, from that side of the gorge to that point below us, is the narrowest part. It is a neck where the river squeezes through - the natural site for a dam." He swivelled and pointed down to the left of where they sat.

'it would not take much to spill the river into the valley.

Once he had finished whatever he was up to in the chasm, it would taken even less to break down the wall of the dam and let the river resume its natural course again."

Tamre watched their faces eagerly, turning his head to each speaker in turn, uncomprehending, but aping Royan's expression like a mirror. If she nodded he nodded, when she frowned he did the same, and when she smiled he giggled happily.

"It's a big river." Royan shook her head, while Tamre wagged his from side to

side in sympathy and looked wise.

"What method would he have used? An earthen dam?

Surely not?" i "The Egyptians used earthen canals and dams for a great many of their irrigation works,'Nicholas mused. "On the other hand, when they had rock available to work with ..", they used it extensively. They were expert masons. You have stood in the quarries at Aswan."

"Not much topsoil here in the gorge," she pointed out.

"But on the other hand, there is plenty of rock. It's like a geological museum. Every type of rock that you could wish for."

"I agree," he said. "Rather than an earthen wall, Taita would most probably have used a masonry and rock fill.

That is the type of dam the ancients built in Egypt, long before his time. If that is the case, there is a chance that traces of it have survived."

"Okay. Let's work on that hypothesis. Taita built a dam of rock stabs, and then he breached it again. Where would we find the remains of it?"

"We would have to start searching on the actual site," he answered. "There at the neck of the gorge. Then we would have to search downstream from there."

They scrambled down the slope again, with Tamre picking out the easiest route for Royan, stopping to beckon her whenever she faltered or paused for breath. They came out in the neck of the valley and stood on the rocky bank of the river, looking about them.

"How high would the wall have been?" Royan asked.

"Not too high. Again, I can't give you a precise answer until I have shot the levels." He climbed a little way up the side of the wall. There he squatted and turned his head back and forth, looking first down the length of the valley and then towards the lip of the waterfall that dropped into the mouth of the chasm.

Three times he changed his position, on each occasion moving a few paces higher up the slope. The cliff became steeper the higher he climbed. In the end he was clinging precariously to the side of it, but he seemed satisfied. Then he called down to her.

"I would say this is about it, where I am now. This would be the height of the dam wall. It looks about fifteen feet high to me."

Royan was still standing on the bank, and now she turned and stared across at the far bank of the river, estimating the distance to the limestone cliff rising above it.

"Roughly a hundred feet across," she shouted up to him.

"About that," he agreed. "A lot of work, but not impossible."

"Taita. was never one to be daunted by size or difficulty." She cupped her hands around her mouth to shout up to him. "While you are up there, can you see any sign of works? Taita would have had to pin the dam wall into the cliff."

He scrambled along the cliff, keeping to the same level, until he was almost directly above the falls and could go no further. Then he slid down to where Royan and Tamre waited.

"Nothing?" she anticipated, and he shook his head.

"No, but you can't really expect that there would be anything left after nearly four thousand years. These cliffs have been exposed to wind and weather for all that time. I think our best bet will be to look for any surviving blocks from the dam wall that might have been carried away when Taita.

breached it to flood the chasm again."

They started down the valley, where Royan came upon a chunk of stone that seemed to be of a different type from the surrounding country rock. It was the size of an old-fashioned cabin trunk. Although it was half-covered by undergrowth, the uppermost end - the one that was exposed - had a definite right-angled corner to it. She called Nicholas across to her.

"Look at that." Royan patted it proudly. "What do you think of that?"

He climbed down beside her and ran his hands over the exposed surface of the slab. "Possible," he repeated. "But to be certain we would have to find the chisel marks where the 'old masons started the fracture. As you know, they chiselled a hole into the stone, and then wedged it open until it split."

Both of them went over the exposed surface carefully, and although Royan found an indentation that she declared was a weathered chisel mark, Nicholas gave her only four out of ten on the scale of probability.

"We are running out of time," he said, enticing her away from her find, 'and we still have a lot of ground to cover."

They searched the valley floor for half a kilometer further, and then Nicholas called it off. "Even in the heaviest flood it is unlikely that any blocks would have been carried down this far. Let's go back and -see if anything was washed over the falls into the mouth of the chasm."

They returned to the bank of the Dandera and worked their way down as far as the falls. Nicholas peered over.

"It's not as deep here as it is further down," he estimated. "I would guess that it is less than a hundred feet."

"Do you think you could get down there?" she asked dubiously. Spray blew back out of the depths into their faces, and they had to shout at each other to make themselves heard over the thunder of the waters.

"Not without a rope, and some muscle men to haul me back out of there." He perched himself on the brink and focused the binoculars down into the bowl. There was a jumble of loose rock down the - small, rounded boulders, and one or two very much larger. Some of them were angular, and some with a little imagination could be called rectangular. However, their surfaces had been smoothed by the rushing waters, and were gleaming wet. All of them seemed partially submerged or obscured by spray.

"I don't think we can decide anything from up here, and to tell the truth I don't fancy going down there - not this evening anyway."

Royan sat down beside him and hugged her knees to her chest. She was dispirited. "So there is nothing we can be certain about. Did Taita dam the river, or didn't he?" Quite naturally he placed his arm around her shoulders to console her, and after a moment she relaxed and leaned against him. They stared down into the chasm in silence.

At last she drew back from him gently, and stood up.

"I suppose we should start back to camp. How long will it take us?"

"At least three hours." He stood up beside her. "You are right. It will be dark before we get back, and there is no moon tonight."

"Funny how tired you feel after a disappointment," she said, and stretched. "I could lie down and sleep right here on one of Taita's stone blocks." She broke off and stared at him. "Nicky, where did he get them?"

"Where did he get what?" He looked puzzled.

"Don't you see! We are going at it from the wrong end.

We have been trying to find out what happened to the blocks. This morning you mentioned the quarries at Aswan. Shouldn't we consider where Taita found the blocks for his dam, rather than what happened to them afterwards?"

"The quarry!" Nicholas exclaimed. "My word, you are right. The beginning, not the end. We should be looking for the quarry, not the remnants of the dam wall."

"Where do we start?"

"I hoped you were going to tell me." He laughed out loud, and immediately Tamre bubbled with sympathetic laughter. They both looked at the boy.

"I think we should start with Tamre, our faithful guide," she said, and took his hand. "Listen to me, Tamre. Listen very carefully!" Obediently he cocked his head and stared at her face, summoning all his errant concentration.

"We are looking for a place where the square stones come from." He looked mystified, so she tried again. "Long ago there were men who cut the rock from the mountains.

Somewhere near here, they left a big hole. Perhaps there are still square blocks of stone lying in the hole?"

Suddenly the boy's face cleared and split into a beatific smile. "The Jesus stone! the cried happily.

He sprang to his feet without relinquishing his grip on her hand. "I show you my Jesus stone." He dragged her after him as he bounded away down the valley.

"Wait, Tamre! she pleaded. "Not so fast." But in vain.

Tamre kept up the pace and burst into an Amharic hymn as he ran. Nicholas followed at a more sedate pace, and caught up with them a quarter of a mile down the valley.

There he found Tamre on his knees, pressing his forehead against the rock wall of the valley, his eyes shut tightly as he prayed. He had dragged Royan down beside him.

"What on earth are you doing?" Nicholas demanded, as he came up.

"We are praying," she told him primly. "Tamre's instructions. We have to pray before we can go to the Jesus stone." She turned away from Nicholas, closed her eyes and clasped her hands in front of her eyes, then began to pray softly.

Nicholas found a seat on a boulder a little way from them. "I don't suppose it can do any harm," he consoled himself, as he settled down to wait.

Abruptly Tamre sprang to his feet and performed a giddy little dance, flapping his arms and whirling around until he raised the dust. Then he stopped and chanted. "It is done. We can go in to the Jesus stone."

Once again he seized Royan's hand and led her to the rock wall. In front of Nicholas's eyes the two of them seemed to vanish, and he stood up in mild alarm.

"Royan!" he called. "Where are you? What's going on?"

"This way, Nicky. Come this way!"

He went to the wall and exclaimed with astonishment, "My oath! We would never have found this in a year of searching."

The cliff face was folded back upon itself, forming a concealed entrance. He walked through the opening, gazing up the vertical sides, and within thirty paces came out into an open amphitheatre that was at least a hundred yards

across and open to the sky. The walls were of solid rock, and he could see at a glance that it was the same micaceous schist as the block which Royan had found lying on the floor of the valley.

It was apparent that the bowl had been quarried out of the living rock, leaving tiers rising up to the top of the walls. The recesses from which the blocks had been hacked were still plain to see and had left deep steps with rightangled profiles. Some scrub and undergrowth had found a precarious foothold in the cracks, but the open quarry was not choked with this growth and Nicholas could see that a stockpile of finished granite blocks remained scattered about the bottom of the excavation. He was so awed by the discovery that he could find no words to express himself. He stood just inside the entrance, his head slowly turning from side to side as he tried to take it all in.

Tamre had led Royan to the centre of the quarry where one large slab lay on its own. It was obvious that the ancients had been on the point -of removing it and transporting it up the valley, for it was finished and dressed into a perfect rectangle.

"The Jesus stone!" Tamre chanted, kneeling before the slab and pulling Royan down beside him. "Jesus led me here. The first time I came here I saw him standing on the stone. He had a long white beard and eyes that were kind and sad." He crossed himself and began to recite one of the psalms, swaying and bobbing to the rhythm.

As Nicholas moved up quietly behind them he saw the evidence that Tamre had visited this sacred place of his regularly. The Jesus stone was his own private altar, and his pathetic little offerings were lying where he had laid them. There were old tej flasks and baked clay pots, most of them cracked and broken. In them stood bunches of wild flowers that had long ago wilted and dried out. There were other treasures that he had gathered and placed upon his altar - tortoise shells and porcupine quills, a cross that had been hand-carved from wood and decorated with scraps of coloured cloth, necklaces of lucky beans, and models of animals and birds moulded from blue river clay.

Nicholas stood and watched the two of them kneeling and praying together in front of the primitive altar. He felt deeply moved by this evidence of the boy's faith, and by his childlike trust in bringing them to this place.

At last Royan stood up and came to join him. Together she and Nicholas began to make a slow circuit of the quarry floor. They spoke little, and then only in whispers as though they were in a cathedral or some holy place. She touched his arm and pointed. A number of the square blocks still lay in their original positions in the quarry walls. They had not been completely freed from the mother rock, like a foetus attached by an umbilical cord which had never been severed by the ancient masons.

It was a perfect illustration of the quarrying methods used by the ancients. Work could be seen in progress in all the various stages, from the marking out of the blocks by the master craftsman, the drilling of the tap holes, the wedging of the cleavage lines, right up to the finished product lifted out of the wall and ready for transport to the dam site.

The sun had set and it was almost dark by the time they came round to the entrance of the quarry again. They sat together on one of the finished blocks, with Tamre sitting at their feet like a puppy, looking up at Royan's face.

"If he had a tail he would wag it," Nicholas smiled.

"We can never betray his trust, and desecrate this place in any way. He has made it his own temple. I don't think he has ever brought another living soul here. Will you promise me that we will always respect it, no matter what?"

"That is the very least I can do," he agreed. Then, turning to Tamre, he said, "You have done a very good thing by bringing us here to your Jesus stone. I am very pleased with you. The lady is very pleased with you."

"We should start back to camp now," Royan suggested, looking up at the patch of sky above them. Already it was purple and indigo, shot through with the last rays of the sunset.

"I don't think that would be very wise," he disagreed.

"Because it is a moonless night one of us could very easily break a leg in the dark. That is something not to be recommended out here. It might take a week to get back to any adequate medical attention."

"You plan to sleep here?" she asked, with surprise.

"Why not? I can whip up a fire in no time and I also have a pack of survival rations for dinner - I have done this kind of thing before, you know! And you have your chaperon with you, so your honour is safe. So why not?"

"Why not, indeed?" she laughed. "We will be able to make a more detailed inspection of the quarry tomorrow early."

He stood up to start gathering firewood, but then stopped and looked up at the sky. She heard it too, that now familiar fluttering whistle in the air.

"The Pegasus helicopter once again," he said unnecessarily. "I wonder what the hell they are up to at this time of day?"

They both stared up into the gathering darkness and watched the navigational lights of the aircraft pass a thousand feet overhead, flashing red and green and white as it headed southwards in the direction of the monastery.

Nicholas built a small fire in the corner of the quarry nearest the entrance, and as they sat around it he divided the pack of dry survival rations into three parts. They nibbled them, and washed down the sweet and sticky concentrated tablets with water from his bottle.

The fire threw ghostly reflections up the side of the ed the moving shadows. When a quarry wall, and enhanc.

nightjar uttered it warbling cry from a niche high up the wall, it was so eerie and evocative that Royan shivered and moved a little closer to Nicholas.

"I wonder if somewhere on the other side Taita is aware of our progress," she said. "I get the feeling that we have him a little worried by now. We have untangled the first part of the conundrum that he set for us, and I'll bet he never expected anybody to do that well."

"The next step will be to get to the bottom of his pool.

That will be really one up on the old devil. What do you hope we might find down there?"

"I hesitate to put it into words," she replied. "I might talk it away, and put a jinx on us."

"I am not superstitious. Well, not much anyway. Shall I say it for you?" he offered, and she laughed and nodded.

He went on, "We hope to find the entrance to the tomb of Pharaoh Mamose. No more hints and riddles and red herrings. The veritable tomb."

She crossed her fingers. "From your lips to God's ear!" Then she grew serious. "What do you think of our chances?"

I mean of finding the tomb intact?"

He shrugged. "I will answer that once we get to the bottom of the pool."

"How are we going to do that? You have ruled out the use of an aqualung."

"I don't know," he confessed. "At this stage I just don't know. Perhaps we might be able to get in there with fullhelmeted diving suits."

She was silent as she considered the seeming impossibility of the task ahead.

"Cheer up!" He put his arm around her shoulders, and she made no move to pull away from him. "There is one consolation. If Taita has made it so tough for us, he has also made it tough for anyone else to have got in there ahead of us. I think that if the tomb is really down there, no other grave robbers have beaten us to it."

"If the entrance to the tomb is at the bottom of the pool, then his descriptions in the scrolls are deliberately misleading. The information that has come down to us has been garbled by Taita, then by Duraid, and finally by Wilbur Smith. We are faced with the task of finding our way through this labyrinth of deliberate misinformation."

They were silent again for a while and then Royan smiled in the firelight, her face lighting up with anticipation.

"Oh, icky! It is such an exciting challenge." Then her voice descended an octave. "But is there a way? Is it possible to get in there?"

"We will find out."

"When?"

"In due course. I haven't thought it out fully as yet. All I am certain of is that it is going to take a prodigious amount of planning and hard work."

"You are still committed, then?" She wanted his assurance. She knew that she could never do it alone. "You aren't daunted by the project?"

Nicholas chuckled. "I will admit that I never expected Taita to lead us on such a merry chase. I imagined simply breaking open a stone gateway and finding it all waiting for us there, like Howard Carter walking into the tomb of Tutankhamen. However, to answer your question, yes, I am daunted by what it's going to involve - but hell nothing could stop me now! I have the smell of glory in my nostrils and the gleam of gold in my eye."

While they talked, Tamre curled up in the dust on the other side of the fire, and pulled his shaninut over his head. His rest must have been interrupted by dreams and fantasies, for he burbled and squeaked and giggled in his sleep.

"I wonder what goes on in that poor demented head, and what visions he sees," Royan whispered. "He says he saw Jesus here in the quarry, and I am sure that he really believes that he did."

Their voices became softer and drowsier as the fire burned down and Royan murmured, just before she fell asleep on Nicholas's shoulder, "If the tomb of Pharaoh Mamose is below the level of the river, then surely the contents will be water-damaged?"

"I can't believe that Taita would have built his dam and spent fifteen years working on the tomb, as he says that he did in the scrolls, only to flood it deliberately and despoil the mummy of his king and ruin his treasure," Nicholas murmured, with her hair tickling his cheek. "No, it would have precluded Pharaoh's resurrection in other world, and brought all his work to nothing. I think Taita has taken all that into his calculations."

She snuggled closer, and sighed with satisfaction.

A little while later he said softly, "Goodnight, Royan," but she did not reply and her breathing was deep and even. He smiled to himself, and gently kissed the top of her head.

Nicholas was not certain what had woken him.

He took a few moments to place himself, and then he realized that he was still in the quarry. There was no moon but the stars hung down close to the earth, as big and fat as bunches of ripe grapes. By their light he saw that Royan had slipped down and was lying flat on the ground beside him.

He stood up carefully, so as not to disturb her, and moved well away from the dead fire to empty his bladder.

The night was deathly quiet. No night bird called, nor was there the sound of any of the other nocturnal creatures.

The rocks around him still radiated the heat of the previous day's sunlight.

Suddenly the sound that had woken him was repeated.

It was a faint and distant susurrations that echoed along the cliffs, so that he could form no judgement as to the direction from which it came. But he was in no doubt what the sound was. He had heard it so often before. It was the sound of faraway automatic gunfire, almost certainly an AK-47 assault rifle firing, not long ragged bursts, but short taps of three rounds, an art that took expertise and practice.

He was sure that the person doing the shooting was a trained professional.

He tilted his wrist so that the luminescent dial of his watch caught the starlight, and he saw that it was a few minutes after three 'clock in the morning.

He stood listening for a long time, but the firing was not repeated. At last he returned to where Royan lay and settled down beside her again. However, he slept only shallowly and intermittently, and kept starting awake listening for more gunfire in the night.

Royan began to stir at the first lemon and orange flush of dawn in the eastern sky, and while they ate the remains of the survival rations for their breakfast he told her about the noise that had woken him during the night.

"Do you think it could have been Boris?" she asked.

"He May have caught up with Mek and Tessay."

"I doubt that very much. Boris has already been gone several days. He should be well out of earshot by now, even beyond the sound range of the heaviest weapons."

"Who do you suppose it was, then?"

"I have no idea. But I don't like it. We should start back to camp as soon as we have had another look around the quarry. After that there is nothing further that we can do at this stage. We should make tracks for home and mother."

As soon as the light was strong enough, Nicholas shot a spool of film to make a record of the quarry. For ison of scale, Royan posed beside compar the wall in which the embryonic blocks still lay. As she warmed to her role as a model she started to clown for him. She climbed on to the biggest of the slabs and hammed it up for the camera, pouting with one hand behind her head in the style of Marilyn Monroe.

When, finally, they went off down the valley towards the monastery they were both exultant and garrulous after their success. Their discussion was animated as they bounced ideas back and forth, and laid their plans for the

further exploitation of these wonderful discoveries.

By the time they reached the pink cliffs at the lower end of the chasm it was late morning. There they met a small party of monks from the monastery coming up the trail.

Even from a distance it was obvious that something dreadful had happened during their absence: the sorrowful ululations of the monks sent chills down Royan's spine.

It was the universal African sound of mourning, the harbinger of death and disaster. As they approached they saw that the monks were picking up handfuls of dust from the track and pouring it over their heads as they wailed and lamented.

"What is it, Tamre?" Royan asked the boy. "Go and find out for usP Tamre ran ahead to meet his brother monks.

They stopped in the middle of the path and fell into a high-pitched discussion, weeping and gesticulating. Then Tamre ran back to them.

"Your people at the camp. Something terrible has happened. Bad men came in the night. Many of the servants are dead," he screamed.

Nicholas grabbed Royan's hand. "Come on!" he snapped, "let's find out what is going on here."

They ran the last mile to the camp, and arrived to find another circle of monks gathered around something in front of the kitchen hut.

Nicholas pushed them aside and elbowed his way to the front. There he stopped and stared with a sinking feeling in his gut, and the sweat on his face turned cold with horror. Under a buzzing blue pall of flies lay the bloodsplattered corpse of the cook and three other camp servants. Their hands had been bound behind their backs, and then they had been forced to kneel before being shot in the back of the head at close range.

"Don't lookV Nicholas warned Royan as she came up.

"It's not very pretty."

But she ignored his advice and came to stand beside him. "Oh, sweet heavens. They have been slaughtered like cattle in an abattoir," She gagged.

"This explains the sound of gunfire that I heard last night," he answered grimly. He went forward to identify the dead men. "Aly and Kif are not here. Where are they?" He raised his voice and called in Arabic, turning to face the crowd. "Aly, where are you?"

The tracker pushed his way forward. "I am here, effendi." His voice was shaky and his face was haggard. "Mere was blood on the front of his shirt.

"How did this happen?" Nicholas seized his arm and steadied him.

"Men came in the night with the guns. Shufta. They shot into the huts where we were sleeping. They gave us no warning. They just started shooting.

"How many of them? Who were they?" Nicholas demanded.

"I do not know how many of them there were. It was dark. I was asleep. I ran away when the shooting began.

They were shufta, bandits, killers. They were hyenas and jackals - there was no reason for what they have done.

These men were my brothers, my friends." He began to sob, and the tears streamed down his face.

Royan turned away, sickened and horrified. She went to her hut and stopped in the doorway. It had been ransacked. Her bags had been turned out on to

the floor.

Her bedding had been stripped, and the mattress thrown into the corner. As though she were a sleepwalker in a nightmare, she crossed the floor and picked up the canvas folder in which she kept her papers. She turned it upside down and shook it. It was empty. The satellite photo graphs and the maps, all her rubbings of the stele, the Polaroids that Nicholas had taken in Tanus's tomb - everything was gone.

Royan picked up the bed and set it the right way up.

She sat down on it, and tried to gather her thoughts. She felt confused and shaken. The image of those bloody, bullet-ripped corpses laid out in front of the kitchen haunted her, and she found it difficult to concentrate and to think clearly.

Nicholas burst into her hut and looked around quickly.

"They did the same thing to me. Ransacked the place. My rifle has gone, and all my papers. But at least I had the passports and travellers' cheques in my day-pack-' He broke off as he saw the empty canvas folder lying at her feet. "Have they taken the-"

"Yes!" she forestalled his question. "They have cleaned out all our research material, even the Polaroids. Thank God you had the undeveloped rolls of film with you. It's the same as happened to Duraïd and me all over again. We aren't safe from them, even here,'even out in the remotest part of the bush." There was the edge of hysteria in her voice. She jumped up from the bed and ran to him.

"Oh, Nicky, what would have happened if we had been in camp last night?" She threw her arms around him, and clung to him. "We would be lying out there in the sun now, all bloody and covered with flies."

"Steady on, my dear. Let's not jump to any conclusions.

This could just be a chance raid by bandits."

"Then why did they steal our papers? What value would ordinary shufti place on rubbings and Polaroids?

Where was the Pegasus helicopter heading just before the raid? They were after us, Nicky. I feel it so strongly. They wanted to kill us just as they did Duraïd. They could return at any time, and now we are unarmed and helpless."

"All right, I agree with you that we are pretty vulnerable here. It would be wise to get out as soon as possible.

There isn't any point in staying on here anyway. There's nothing more we can do at this stage." He hugged her and shook her gently. "Brace up! We will salvage what we can from this mess, and then get moving back to the vehicles right away."

"What about the dead men?" She stood back, and with an effort forced back her tears and brought herself under control. "How many of our people survived?"

"Aly, Salin and Kif escaped. They dived out of their huts and ran off into the darkness as soon as the shooting started. I have told them to get ready to leave right away. I have spoken to one of the senior priests. They will take care of the burial of the dead, and will report to the authorities as soon as they are able. But they agree that the attack was aimed at us, and that we are still in danger, and that we should get away as soon as possible."

Within the hour they were ready to start. Nicholas had decided to leave all

the camping equipment and Boris's personal gear in the charge of Jali Hora. The mules were lightly loaded, and he planned to make a forced march out of the gorge.

The abbot had given them an escort of monks to accompany them to the top of the escarpment. "Only a truly Godless man would attack you while you are under the protection of the cross" he explained.

Nicholas found the dried hide and head of the striped dik-dik still in the skinning shed. He rolled it into a bundle and strapped it on to the load atop one of the mules, and then gave the order for the attenuated caravan to move out.

Tamre had insinuated himself into the group of monks who were escorting the party. He kept close behind Royan as they set off up the trail, with the lamentations and farewells of the monastic community following them for the first mile.

It was hot in this brutal midday. There was no movement of air to bring relief, and the stone walls of the valley sucked up the heat of that awful sun and spewed it back over them as they toiled up the steep gradients. It dried their sweat even as it oozed through their pores, leaving patterns of white salt crystals on their skins and clothing. The muleteers, spurred on by fear, set a killing pace, trotting behind their beasts and prodding their testicles with a sharpened stick to keep them moving at their best pace.

By midafternoon they had retraced the morning's travel and once more reached the putative site of Taita's dam wall. Nicholas and Royan took a few minutes' breather to dip their heads in the river and sluice the salt and sweat from their faces and necks. Then they stood together above the falls and took a brief farewell of the chasm in which lay all their hopes and dreams.

"How long until we return?" she asked.

"We cannot afford to leave it too long," he told her.

"Big rains are due soon, and the hyenas have got the scent and are crowding in. From now on every day will be precious, and every hour we lose may be crucial."

She stared down into the chasm and said softly, "You haven't won yet, Taita. The game is still afoot."

They turned away together and followed the mules up the trail towards the escarpment wall. That evening they did not stop at the traditional campsite beside the river, but pressed on several miles further until darkness forced a halt. There was no attempt to build a comfortable camp.

They dined on cakes of injera bread dipped in the wat pot that the monks had carried with them. Then Nicholas and Royan spread their bedrolls side by side on the stony earth and, using the mule packs as pillows, fell into exhausted, dreamless sleep.

The next morning, while the mules were being loaded in the pre-dawn darkness, they drank a bowl of strong bitter black Ethiopian coffee.

Then they started out along the trail again.

As the rising sun lit the sheer walls of the escarpment ahead of them they seemed close enough to touch, and Nicholas remarked to Royan, as she swung along longlegged beside him, "At this pace we should reach the foot of the escarpment this afternoon, and there is a good chance that we might sleep tonight in the cavern behind the waterfall."

"That means we could cut a couple of days off the journey and reach the

trucks some time tomorrow."

"Possibly," he said. "I'll be glad to get out of here."

"It feels like a trap," Royan agreed, looking at the rocky, broken ground that rose on either hand, hemming them into the narrow bottom of the Dandera river. "I have been doing a bit of thinking, Nicky."

"Let's hear your conclusions."

"No conclusions, only some disturbing thoughts. Suppose somebody at Pegasus who can understand them is now in possession of our rubbings and Polaroids. What will their reaction be if they know how much progress we have made in the search?"

"Not -very happy thoughts," he agreed. "But on the other hand there is not much we can do about any of that until we get back to civilization, except keep our eyes wide.

open and our wits about us. Hell, I haven't even got the little Rigby rifle. We are a flock of sitting ducks."

Aly, the muleteers and the monks seemed to be of the same opinion, for they never slackened the pace. It was midday before they called the first brief halt to brew coffee and to water the mules. While the men lit fires, Nicholas took his binoculars from the mule pack and began to climb the rock slope. He had not covered much ground before he glanced back and saw Royan climbing after him. He waited for her to catch up.

"You should have taken the chance to rest," he told her severely. "Heat exhaustion is a real danger."

I don't trust you going off on your own. I want to know what you are up to."

"Just a little recce. We should have scouts out ahead, not just go charging blindly along the trail like this. If I remember correctly from the inward march, some of the ound lies just ahead of us. Lord knows what we worst gr may run into."

They went on upwards, but it was not possible to reach the crest for a sheet of unscalable vertical cliff barred their way. Nicholas chose the best vantage point below this barrier, and glassed both slopes of the valley ahead of them.

The terrain was as he had remembered it. They were approaching the foot of the escarpment wall and the ground was becoming more rugged and severe, like the swell of the open ocean sensing the land and rising up in alarm before breaking in confusion upon the shore. The trail followed the river closely. The cliffs hung over the narrow aisle of ound that made up the bank, sculpted by wind and gr weather into strange, menacing shapes, like the battlements of a wicked witch's castle in an old Disney cartoon.

At one point a buttress of red sandstone overhung the trail, forcing the river to detour around it, and the trail was reduced so much that it would be difficult for a laden mule to negotiate without being pushed off the bank into the river.

Nicholas studied the bottom of the valley carefully through the lens. He could pick out nothing that seemed suspicious or untoward, so he raised his head and swept the Cliffs and their tops.

At that moment Aly's voice came up from the valley below, echoing along the slope as he shouted, "Hurry, effendi! The mules are ready to go on!"

Nicholas waved down to him, but then lifted the binoculars for one more sweep of the ground ahead. A wink of bright light caught his eye - a brief ephemeral stab of brilliance like the signal of a heliograph. He switched his

whole attention to the spot on the cliff from which it had emanated.

"What is it? What have you seen?" Royan demanded.

"I am not sure. Probably nothing," he replied, without lowering the binoculars. It may have been a reflection from a polished metal surface, or from the lens of another pair of binoculars, or from the barrel of a sniper's rifle, he thought. On the other hand, a chip of mica or a pebble of rock crystal could reflect sunlight the same way, and even some of the aloes and other succulent plants have shiny leaves. He watched the spot carefully for a few more minutes, and then Aly's voice floated up to them again.

"Hurry, effendi. The mule-drivers will not wait!"

He stood up. "All right. Nothing. Let's go." He took Royan's arm to help her over the rough footing, and they started down. At that moment he heard the rattle of stones from further up the slope, and he stopped her and held her arm to keep her quiet. They waited, watching the skyline.

Abruptly a pair of long curling horns appeared over the crest, and under them the head of an old kudu bull, his trumpet-shaped ears pricked forward and the fringe of his dewlap blowing in the hot, light breeze. He stopped on the edge of the cliff just above where they crouched, but he had not seen them. The kudu turned his head and stared back in the direction from which he had come. The sunlight glinted in his nearest eye, and the set of his head and the alert, tense stance made it clear that something had disturbed him.

For a long moment he stood poised like that, and then, still without being aware of the presence of Nicholas and Royan, he snorted and abruptly leaped away in full flight.

He vanished from their sight behind the ridge and the sound of his run dwindled into silence.

"Something scared the living daylights out of him."

"What?" enquired Royan.

"Could have been anything - a leopard, perhaps," he replied, and he hesitated as he looked down the slope. The caravan of mules and monks had set off already and was following the trail up along the river bank.

"What should we do?" Royan asked.

"We should reconnoitre the ground ahead - that is if we had the time, which we haven't." The caravan was pulling away swiftly. Unless they went down immediately they would be left behind alone, unarmed. He had nothing concrete to act upon, and yet he had to make an immediate decision.

"Come on!" He took her hand again, and they slid and scrambled down the slope. Once they reached the trail they had to break into a run to catch up with the tail of the caravan.

Now that they were again part of the column, Nicholas could turn his attention to searching the skyline above them more thoroughly. The cliffs loomed over them, blocking out half the sky. The river on their left hand washed out any other sounds with its noisy, burbling current.

Nicholas was not really alarmed. He prided himself on being able to sense trouble in advance, a sixth sense that had saved his life more than once before. He thought of it as his early-warning system, but now it was sending no messages. There were any number of possible explanations for the reflection he had picked up from the crest of the cliff, and for the behaviour of the bull kudu.

However, he was still a little on edge, and he was giving the high ground

above them all his attention. He saw a speck flick over the top of the cliff, twisting and falling - a dead leaf - on the warm, wayward breeze. It was too small and insignificant to be of any danger, but nevertheless he followed the movement with his eye, his interest idle.

The brown leaf spiralled and looped, and finally touched lightly against his cheek. He lifted his hand as a reflex, and caught it. He rubbed the brown scrap between his fingers, expecting it to crackle and crumble. Instead it was soft and supple, with a fine, almost greasy texture.

He opened his hand and studied it more closely. It was no leaf, he saw at once, but a torn scrap of greased paper, brown and translucent. Suddenly all his early warning bells jangled. It was not just the incongruity of manufactured paper suddenly materializing in this remote setting. He recognized the quality and texture of that particular type of paper. He lifted it to his nose and sniffed it. The sharp, nitrous odour prickled the back of his throat.

"Gelly!" he exclaimed aloud. He knew the smell instantly.

Blasting gelignite was seldom employed for military purposes in this age of Semtex and plastic explosives, but was still widely used in the mining industry and in mineral exploration. Usually the sticks of nitrogelatin in a wood Pulp and sodium nitrate base was wrapped in that distinct five brown greased paper. Before the detonator was placed in the head of the stick, it was common practice to tear off the corner of the paper wrapper to expose the treacle brown explosive beneath. He had used it often enough in the old days never to forget the odour of it.

His mind was racing now. If somebody was expecting them and had mined the cliff with gelignite, then the reflection he had picked up could have been from the coils of copper wiring strung between the explosive in the rock, or it could have been from some other item of equipment.

If that was so, then the operator might even at this moment be lying concealed up there, ready to press the plunger on the circuit box. The kudu bull might have been fleeing from the concealed human presence.

"Aly!" he bellowed down to the head of the caravan, "Stop them! Turn them back!"

He started to run forward towards the head of the caravan, but in his heart he knew it was already too late. If there was somebody up there on the cliff, he was watching every move that Nicholas made. Nicholas could never hope to reach the head of the column and turn the mules around on the narrow trail, and get them back to safety before ... He came up short and looked back at Royan.

Her safety was his main concern. He turned and ran back to grab her arm.

"Come on! We have to get off the track."

"What is it, Nicky? What are you doing?" She was resisting him, pulling back against his grip on her arm.

"I'll explain later," he snapped at her brusquely. "Just trust me now." He dragged her a couple of paces before she gave in and began to run with him, back in the direction from which they had come.

They had not covered fifty yards before the cliff face blew. A vast disruption of air swept over them with a force that made them stagger. It clapped painfully in their skulls and threatened to implode the delicate membranes of their eardrums. Then the main force of the blast swept over them, not a single

blast but a long, rolling detonation like thunder breaking directly overhead. It stunned and battered them so that they reeled into each other and lost the direction of their flight.

Nicholas seized her in a steadying embrace, and looked back. He saw a series of explosions leap from the crest of the cliff. Tall, dancing fountains of dirt and dust and rubble, pirouetting one after the other in strict choreography, like a chorus-line of hellish ballerinas.

Even in the terror of the moment he could appreciate the expertise with which the gelignite had been laid. This was a master bomber at work. The leaping columns of rubble subsided upon themselves, leaving the fine, tawny mist of dust drifting and spiralling against the clear blue of the sky, and for a moment longer it seemed that the destruction was complete. Then the silhouette of the cliff began to alter.

Slowly at first the wall of rock started to lean outwards.

He saw great cracks appear in the face, opening like leering mouths. Sheets of rock collapsed and in slow motion slithered down upon themselves like the silken skirts of a curtsying giantess. The rock groaned and crackled and rumbled as the entire cliff began to fall into the river far below.

Nicholas was mesmerized by the awful sight, and his brain seemed to have been numbed by the explosion. It took a huge effort to force himself to think and to act. He saw that the centre of the explosion had occurred further down the trail, near the head of the mule caravan. Tamre was up there, beside Aly. He and Royan were at the tail of the caravan. The bomber up on the cliff had obviously been waiting for them to come directly into the epicentre of his explosive trap, but had been forced to trigger it when he saw them running back down the trail and realized that they had been alerted and were about to escape.

Yet they were not clear - they were about to catch the peripheral force of the landslide that was developing above them. Still holding Royan, Nicholas stared up the falling cliff face and made a desperate calculation.

He watched in petrified fascination as the vast tide of falling rock swept over the trail ahead of him, picking up men and mules and carrying them with it over the edge and down into the river bed. It swallowed them, lapping them up like the tongue of some fearsome monster and chewing them to pulp with razor fangs of red rock. Even above the rumbling roar of the rock tide he heard the terrified screams of men and animals as they were ploughed under.

The wave of destruction spread towards where he and Royan stood upon the trail. If they had been directly under the explosion they would have stood as little chance as those others, but as it ran down the cliff its destructive momentum was dissipating. On the other hand, Nicholas realized that there was no hope that they would be able to outrun it, and what was about to fall upon them would still be devastating.

There was no time to explain to Royan what they had to do - he had only seconds left in which to act. Sweeping her up in his arms, he leaped over the bank towards the river. He lost his footing almost immediately and they went down together, rolling end over end, but thirty feet down there was a spur of rock the size of a house. As they came up against the upper side of it, it broke their fall.

They were half-stunned, but Nicholas dragged Royan to her feet and guided

her into the lee of the rock wall.

"Mere was a cut-back here, and they crept into it and crouched flat. Pressing themselves hard against the wall, they both held their breath as the first chunk of cliff came bounding and bouncing down towards them like a gigantic rubber ball, picking up speed with gravity, until it smashed in to their shelter with a force that made the solid rock against which they were cringing vibrate and resound like a cathedral bell, and the hurtling missile leaped high over their heads, spinning massively in flight before it dropped into the river. It raised a tidal wave from the surface that broke like storm surf on both banks.

Seventh Scroll

This was merely the forerunner of the maelstrom that now poured over them. It seemed that half the mountain was falling upon them. As each slab crashed into their shelter daggers and splinters burst from its leading edges, filling the air they breathed with fine white dust and the sulphurous stink of sparking flint. This immense cascade flew over their heads or piled up in front of their shelter, and loose chips and pebbles rained down upon them.

Nicholas crawled over the top of Royan, and covered her with his body. A stone struck the side of his head a lancing blow that made his ears ring, but he gritted his teeth and fought the impulse to lift his head and look up.

He felt something warm and ticklish snaking through the short hairs behind his right ear. It crept down his cheek like a living thing, and it was only when it reached the corner of his mouth and he tasted the metallic salt that he realized it was a trickle of blood.

The fine talcum dust powdered them and irritated their throats, so that they coughed and choked in the uproar.

The dust seeped into their eyes, and they were forced to clench their lids and keep them tightly shut.

One mass of rock the size of a wagon sprang high in the air and then fell back close beside where they lay. The impact made the earth jump so violently that Royan, with Nicholas's weight on top of her, was struck in the belly and diaphragm with a force that drove the wind from her lungs, and she thought that her ribs had been crushed.

Then gradually the downpouring of earth and rock began to subside. The breath-stopping impact of great boulders into their shelter became less frequent: The fine dust they were breathing began to settle. The rumbling and roaring let up gradually, until the only sound was the slip and slide of settling earth and rock and the burble of the river below them.

Warily, Nicholas at last lifted his head and tried to blink the dust off his eyelashes. Royan stiffed under him, and he crawled back to let her sit up. They stared at each other. Their faces were caked into kabuki masks with the antimony-white dust, and their hair was powdered like the wigs of eighteenth-century French aristocrats.

"You are bleeding," Royan whispered, her voice husky with dust and terror.

Nicholas lifted his hand to his face and it came away covered with a paste of dust and blood. "It's just a nick," he said. "How are you?"

"I think I may have twisted my knee. I felt something give when we fell. I don't think it's serious. There is very little pain."

"Men we have both been ridiculously lucky," he told her. "Nobody deserved to survive that."

She made an effort to stand, but he restrained her with a hand on her shoulder. "Wait! The entire slope above us is broken and unstable. Give it time. There will be loose rocks coming down for a while yet." He untied the Paisley bandana from around his throat and handed it to her.

"Besides which, we don't want-" But he changed his mind and did not finish his sentence. While she wiped her face she asked shakily, "You were going to say, besides which-?"

don't want to give those bastards

"Besides which, we up there any idea that we have survived their little party.

Otherwise we will have them down here finishing the job, cutting throats. Much better they believe that we snuffed it, as intended."

"Do you think- they are still up there, watching us?"

"Count on it," he answered grimly. "They must be pretty chuffed with the fact that they have at last succeeded in getting rid of you. We don't want to pop our heads up right now and spoil it for them."

"How did you know what was going to happen?" she asked. "If you hadn't grabbed me-" Her voice petered out.

In a few words he explained about the scrap of gelignite wrapping. "Simplest thing in the world to pick one of the narrowest sections of the trail and mine the cliff-" He broke off as, faintly but unmistakably, there came the sound of an aircraft engine and the flutter of rotors in fully fine pitch for takeoffs

"Quickly," he snapped at her. "Get in as close as you can to the overhang." He pushed her back against the sheltering boulder. "Lie flat" When she obeyed without question, he lay beside her and piled loose rubble over them both.

"Lie still. Don't move, whatever you do."

They lay and listened to the sound of the helicopter approaching, and circling overhead. It moved up and down the valley, flying a few feet above the surface of the river.

At one point it was directly above the ledge on which they lay, and they were buffeted by the down-draught of the rotors.

"Looking for survivors," said Nicholas grimly. "Don't move. They haven't spotted us yet."

"If they were watching us before the blast, they should have been able to come directly to where we are," she whispered. They seem confused."

"They must have lost us in the dust of the avalanche and the break-up of the cliff face. They aren't sure where we are lying." The sound of the helicopter moved off slowly along the river, and Nicholas told her, "I am going to risk a peep, to make sure it's the Pegasus job - not that there can be many other choppers in this area. Keep your head down!"

He lifted his head slowly and cautiously, and one glance was sufficient to confirm all his speculations. Half a mile upstream, the Pegasus jet Ranger hovered over the river. It was moving slowly away from him, so that from this angle Nicholas was unable to see through the windscreen into the cockpit. But at that moment the engine beat changed as the pilot changed pitch and pulled on the collective.

As the aircraft rose vertically and turned northwards, Nicholas caught a glimpse of the passengers. Jake Helm sat in the front seat beside the pilot, and Colonel Nogo was in the seat behind him. They were both staring down into the river valley, but in seconds the helicopter lifted them away and the machine disappeared beyond the ridge, flying in the direction of the escarpment, and the sound of its engines dwindled into silence. Nicholas crawled out from beneath the boulder and pulled Royan to her feet.

"No more doubts. We know who we are dealing with now. That was Helm and Nogo in the chopper. Helm 9 almost certainly laid the gelly, and Nogo probably led the men who hit our camp last night. Each of them doing the job