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When it was too late Wayland saw that his crime was cradled in those three encounters in Valletta. He arrived crippled with anger. Three strangers held him there. The crime was to straighten out at their expense.

On that first August night his priority was to leave the next day. Take-off at Naples had been delayed by two hours. Frustration had fed his fury at the gall of his oldest friend. Her letter lurked in his pocket. "Give it to Mrs Shaftoe, no one else," Monica Salviati had said. "Especially not Deborah."

"I'm 28 not eight, too old to be your errand-boy," he mouthed as they landed on the island he had sworn to shun.

The cab driver blinked at Wayland's choice of hotel. "I take you to Phoenicia. Is better."

"Just take me to the damned Sultan and—" Wayland's throat closed in. It was hotter than Italy but it was not air he lacked. It was Carol.

Monica knew how it would be, he thought, as the first counterguard of the capital cuffed his attention. Beyond it, the bulk of bastions reared up. Hitting the

horn, the driver charged a tight-fisted gate in Valletta's walls.

Inside, needle streets darted past churches and auberges, some still war-scarred. The careful Knights, Wayland thought, could hardly have foreseen siege from the sky. He grabbed the strap as they swerved to avoid two sailors swaying out of the Empire Bar in Britannia Street, a colonisation equally unforeseen.

The car jerked to a halt. "No drive now," the driver said, removing his peaked cap and scratching his head.

Rubbing the war injury at the base of his spine, Wayland saw they were on the brink of a street of steps lit by a lamp in a shrine. Far below, light slithered on water. The driver took his bag and jogged down ahead of him.

The air was hot and still; it had a drainy odour. Their footsteps echoed on worn, slippery stone. On either side, tall, shuttered houses with wooden balconies and formidable doors formed descending walls. Something streaked away from his feet; he hoped to God it was a small cat.

Muttering to *Santa Marija*, the driver turned into a side street and made for an unassuming door. From the grille in its arch hung the sign Sultan Hotel. The man thumped a brass knocker and a youth with greased hair opened up.

Squinting in the sudden light, Wayland stepped into a narrow high-ceilinged hall. Steep white-painted stairs curved to the left; beside them was a small table and a big sign saying Reception. The passage ahead led to a

lit doorway hung with a screen of beads. From behind it came laughter. It annoyed him.

“Name’s Wayland,” he snapped at the youth.

“I know you Mr Wayland, Sir.” He reached for a key and Wayland’s bag, and sidled towards the stairs.

The taxi driver shuffled. “Is eight shilling and thruppence, Sir, thruppence for wait. You put on bill? I take you Luqa when you go? But you tell them pay me. OK.”

“Oh for ... There—keep the change.”

The man saluted and pocketed the ten bob note. His rage now suppurating, Wayland turned on the porter. “How many floors?”

“Five, Sir.”

“And you mean to say there’s no lift?”

The screen of beads parted. In disbelief, he saw Hugo Prance saunter through, lips positioned in their habitual sneer, the multi-coloured plastic dripping from one stooped shoulder like a carnival *aiguillette*.

“Be grateful, my dear Philip, that it’s the 1950s,” he reproved, “a hundred years ago they’d have slapped you in the Lazzaretto. I’ve just heard John Henry Newman played the violin in there. Just think what you might have done.”

The beads slipped back, shaken. Wayland glimpsed eyes marking him as if through the bars of a cage.

“Amazed to hear you were surfacing here,” Prance went on. “They’re writing your obit in El Vino’s but I was sure you were holed up somewhere.” He laughed. “I’ve been telling Hoyt about you. He’s mugging up on

the Lazzaretto, telling tales of the plague.”

“At the foot of your rotten-runged rat-riddled stairs?” Wayland returned, glaring at the porter.

“Ah, you’re a Browning devotee aren’t you? Such a man of letters, albeit self-made,” Prance added in a murmur.

The owner of the barred eyes edged through the beads saying, “Lazzaretto no place for a man of letters. Guardians fumigated mail. Fearful stink.” He spoke with effort, as if required cordiality had become onerous, but Wayland sensed a pent-up energy in his stance. Prance introduced him as Lieut-Commander Alick Hoyt. Wayland guessed he was, like Prance, in his thirties.

“Damned shame they closed the quarantine station down,” Hoyt said.

Wayland managed a half-laugh. “You’re anticipating an outbreak?”

“No. I was thinking of a different kind of infection.”

He smiled and Wayland felt abused by a dark delight. I know that name, he thought, as he heard his own name called. A small dark-haired man with owl-spectacles rushed through the beads, his hand outstretched.

“My dear Sir, they are telling me you are here. Welcome to the Sultan Hotel, I am Silvio Sultana, always at your service.”

Wayland glared at him.

The proprietor’s lips maintained their smile but the dark eyes behind the lenses betrayed the wound. “If I

may have your passport, please Mr Wayland, if you would be so good, Nazju will show you to your room,” he murmured, thrusting the hand held out in friendship into his trouser pocket.

Wayland’s rage deserted him. “I meant no offence to you,” he said as Hugo and Hoyt left them. “I’ve had a hell of a journey and the combination of your name and the hotel’s was just too much.”

Sultana smiled with polite disbelief and produced a registration form. As Wayland filled it in, he said, “My father, *Santa Marija* save him, named this hotel after the old Sultan’s Gardens. They were beneath the Belvedere that is now Lascaris Battery, you see. The Sultan was the Grand Master, of course, not a Turk.”

Wayland handed him the form. “A felicitous combination?”

“I believe you can say he killed two birds with one sultana stone. Nazju. Take Mr Wayland to his room.”

The staircase twisted up the five floors to a high-roofed passage at the end of which was a panelled double door. This, the boy unlocked, and threw back with a flourish.

Wayland pushed past him, obsessed with the riddle of Prance’s presence, stopped and felt his shoulders loosen.

Beneath a fluted arch, a double bed and mosquito net kept company with a stunted bath and geyser. High above them a fan hung from dark beams. At the foot of the bed, a chaise longue was piled with lurid yellow cushions matching the curtains at the two French

windows. Over the bed was a painting of St Paul being shipwrecked and above a table between the windows, a photograph of the young Queen.

He smiled in obtuse satisfaction and told the boy it was a fine room. He appeared pleased as he slouched away.

Wayland located the tooth mug and sloshed in the Scotch that now always accompanied him. The water from the tap was salty. He pulled back a curtain and shutter and found a latticed wooden balcony, its panes opening upwards and outwards to trap any trace of air. He stepped into it, drew in his breath and the whisky at the same time, and choked on his surprise.

He was, so to speak, in a crow's nest over Grand Harbour with the Mediterranean Fleet at anchor beneath him. And the power and precision of the Royal Navy hauled him back to those nights in a more brutal time and climate when, sick of the wet and cold and the screaming wind, he had longed either for the war to end or the next torpedo to end it for him.

Hoyt's smile came back to him. Had they met in that convoy hell? No. You would not hesitate to remember a face like that. But the name ... he felt it under his skin.

He drank slowly, absorbing the great pool of darkness daubed with silver and gold pathways from the lights of the ships. Beyond them, he could just make out the dark paws of fortified headlands guarding sleek black creeks.

The hotel, he realised, rose from the bastion that

encased Valletta. He remembered Franco Salviati's enigmatic smile: "You'd be comfortable in the Phoenicia but I would go to the Sultan if I were you."

He replenished the tooth mug, sank onto the bed, which sagged and whined, and decided that Prance could not be a Fleet Street spy. No one but Monica and Franco knew he was here.

But, goddamn it. Of all people ... He saw Prance now, at that Christmas do two years ago, his arm around Carol as if to declare their friendship.

He shuddered, remembering how he had thought they bonded over their hypochondria—Prance's insomnia, Carol's colic.

This was too close. This was why he had not wanted to come. His failure to continue with her plan to follow in Evelyn Waugh's footsteps mocked him. He thought bitterly of Prance's slating of his first—and probably last—novel.

"Sod him, anyway," he breathed, lying back on the bed, refilled mug on chest. "A phone call tomorrow, a quick visit, and I'll be out of here."

He woke to a barrage of bells and Tannoyed commands around the Fleet. The sun was a fireball over the breakwater. A tiered fort opposite was crowned with a signalling mast and White Ensign. To its right, across a creek, a pier of land hugged by bastion walls bore tiers of flat-roofed houses capped by the dome of a church.

Ignorant of queuing consequences, he asked for the

Rabat number Monica had pressed on him and pulled the curtain against the Grand Harbour's glare. A Town Class Cruiser was steaming through the anchored Fleet. A woman in a red skirt ran to the bastion below. A voice, small and disconsolate, came on the line.

Wayland asked to speak with Mrs Shaftoe.

"She's not here. Are you the Duty Officer?"

"No. I'm—"

"Are you the Admiral?"

He disabused her firmly. "I'm a friend of a friend."

"Oh, a friend." She sounded surprised.

"I believe I may be speaking to Deborah," he said into the silence.

"My friends call me Debba."

"I'd like to do that but we haven't been introduced."

"Introductions introduce dislike," and, before he could respond, "Mother's playing tennis before it's too hot. At the—"

The Forenoon Watch ringing round the Fleet drowned her words.

"What's that?"

"Sliema Club. You know, where they breathe English air."

Amused in spite of himself he said, "Any idea when she'll be back?"

"Try at lunch."

"I'm obliged to you," he said but she had cut the line. Perhaps you are a child that collides with trouble, he thought, recalling Monica's concern; how old

had she said? 14? Scarcely a child.

He moved warily to the balcony. The sun had flared from blood orange to blistering bullion. The girl in the red skirt was leaning on the bastion, a string bag edgy with books against her right shin. She was gazing at the cruiser as it neared the fort. An old woman in a black dress came slowly down a street of steps with a dog that looked like the HMV trademark. The dog raced to the string bag and cocked its leg.

In a swerve of red skirt and swinging hair the bag became a weapon, the old woman cried *Santa Marija* and the girl, who sounded English, snapped, "Damned dog." The old woman gabbled in Maltese, the dog fled back to her and the English girl soothed, "Not your dog, Madame. He smells another dog."

The old woman cuffed the dog herself and waddled off, praising God and the British.

The girl in the red skirt glanced up, saw Wayland on the balcony and smiled. And desire winded him.

She turned back to the harbour, leaving him caught between liberation and shame. For the past year grief had forbidden that urge. He wanted to keep it that way.

Her eyes on the cruiser, the girl began to run, a skein of long tanned legs and dark hair, keeping pace with the ship as, chivvied by a tug, it made for the harbour mouth.

A church bell sounded deep in the city. Another answered across the harbour. A siren wailed from the dockyard as Hands were piped on deck throughout

the Fleet. A protest in his stomach piped him to breakfast.

The dining room of the Sultan sweltered under an exhausted ceiling fan. Several of the small tables were huddled under it, occupied by servicemen and their families.

Wayland moved to the broad balcony that jutted out over the harbour and stood by a corner table wondering if the awning would protect or roast him.

“You want English breakfast Sir?” A small Maltese waiter in heavy black serge trousers and clumping leather shoes popped up beside him.

Sweating just looking at him, Wayland asked for coffee and toast.

Shouts and laughter billowed in from the adjoining kitchen. The door of the fridge was wide open. Sultana appeared, greeting his guests, dark head bent in deference.

“Good morning, Sir. I hope you have slept well. My guests’ comfort is very concerning to me.”

Slumping into the nearest chair Wayland said, “I suppose the bells provide an alarm clock every day.”

“But of course, every day, Sir, yes, but much more on Sunday.”

“Tell me, where and what is the Sliema Club?”

“That’s the Union Club, Sir. For the British. There is one in Sliema and one in Valletta. You like for me to show you?”

“Thank you, I’ll pass.”

Sultana gazed out at the harbour with an admiring beam. “My God, how good it is to see the Fleet again. They are just back from the first Summer Cruise. You are most fortunate.”

On his second cup of coffee and feeling at peace as the dining-room emptied and the wash of crisp Naval barges and a tubby ferry creamed the harbour water, Wayland leapt to his feet as the hotel shook under an explosion so violent, his ear drums ached.

“‘The isle is full of noises’,” Prance called from the trembling beads. “We’re bang (sorry) in the middle of the *fiesta* season. That was a petard. The Maltese love them.”

Wayland glared at his slopped coffee, thought, “introductions introduce dislike” and chuckled inwardly as Prance joined him.

“Dying to know what brings you here,” Hugo mouthed over a fig.

“The curiosity’s mutual.”

The sneering lips sucked in the fruit. “Research. I’m incubating.”

“A book on Malta?”

He hesitated. “Possibly. It’s the fortress the powers-that-be will never surrender. You?”

“Oh no, I’m passing through. On to Libya—today or tomorrow.”

Hugo grinned. “Care for a walk?”

Wayland sensed the city as they climbed to it. It resounded with bells, horns and exasperated gears. It smelt of nougat, incense and mothballs. In its thronged streets white uniforms and black soutanes mingled with peaked caps and bright dresses under the sentry boxes of balconies.

In Kingsway Hugo pointed out Palace Square. “The Governor’s palace is to your right. The excellent Cordina cafe is on the corner.”

An open car slid through a gateway in the palace and a smudge of colour emerged from a porticoed building opposite that bore the lion and unicorn. The smudge turned into the swinging gait of the girl in the red skirt.

“H.E.” Hugo said with satisfaction as the car passed, affording them a glimpse of a plumed cocked hat. “The official work’s done here but he lives at San Anton—and Verdala, in the summer. Expect he’s off to the March Past. Parade Ground’s in Floriana.”

“What’s that?” Wayland asked as the girl passed the portico.

“Oh that’s the Main Guard. Army domain. The Garrison Library’s on the right—marvellous ceiling painted by an Italian. God, I’m thirsty already. We’ll grab a drink at the Phoenicia.”

To his shame, Wayland caught his eyes stalking the hem of the red skirt as it disappeared into the Cordina cafe.

The Phoenicia Hotel was outside the city walls, its tree-lined drive bathed by the fumes of a sprawling bus terminus. Strains of a military band vied with the buses' klaxons.

In the deference of the hotel bar, all sound and smell was excluded. Its walls were hung with framed photographs of ships, visiting celebrities and cartoons of service life. Over Hopleaf, the local beer, Hugo said, licking his lips, "Now tell me honestly Philip. Why are you here?"

"No, honestly," Wayland said, glancing at a snap of Lord Gort and Noël Coward, the latter looking devoutly military in shorts, "I'm en route to Tripoli."

Hugo put his head to one side, smile priming and questing. "Carol once told me you had the idea of following in Evelyn Waugh's footsteps—his travel book."

Wayland's resentment flared. She had told *him*? The betrayal and her name on Hugo's lips repelled him. Fixing his gaze on a patch of sunlight on Noël Coward's knee he said in an offhand tone, "I'm looking up some friends of the Salviatis."

"Aha, your 'godsister' as I believe you call her."

Wayland swallowed half his beer. Was there anything Carol had not told him?

"Of course, Franco Salviati was Consul here, wasn't he," Hugo was saying. "They're missed by so many friends. Let's see, could it be the Baron Inguanez you're

off to see? No? The Salviatis lived in Mdina where he and most of the aristocracy have their palaces. Hmm. The American Consul perhaps?"

Finishing his beer, Wayland rose saying, "Captain and Mrs Shaftoe. They live at Dar il-Ġnien in Rabat. I believe it's next to Mdina. Perhaps you could point me to the appropriate bus."

"That shouldn't detain you long," Hugo said.

"You know them?"

"Commander Dereham Tolland won't and the Bee would rather not."

"You've lost me."

"*Heard in the Hive*, old chap. The Sunday social column by, wait for it, the Bee. Must get you in ... oh no. You're not staying. How sad," he grinned.

"The bus?"

"The Rabat bus is dark blue. It goes through the oven of Hamrun. Bad luck."

Of all the bruised single-deckers that crammed the terminus, the Rabat bus looked the groggiest. A shrine over the windscreen had a picture of Christ and the legend, *Verbum dei caro factum est*. Screwed to the oil gauge was a horseshoe. The passengers, all Maltese, crossed themselves as they climbed on. A priest got on last. A man in a front seat hastily stood for him.

They ground their way through Hamrun, a town of vicious heat and traffic, selling birds and beds and baskets under the brows of heavy balconies. Wayland

pondered on Prance's dismissal of the Shaftoes. Monica had told him only that she had made things worse for Deborah (worse than what?) and that previous attempts at contact had failed.

On the Rabat road the bus took off, charging potholes and missing by inches the dry-stone walls, klaxon braying. Terraced fields, scorched a pink-yellow brown, were dotted with lopsided farmhouses and distant men behind ploughs drawn by mules.

The road began to rise and the walls gave way to wind-crippled umbrella pines. To his right, Wayland saw a cliff-like ridge, out of which grew, as if by geological fault, rounded walls encasing the domes and spires of an anachronistic citadel. Guessing it was Mdina, he thought, trust Monica to have her head in the clouds. Her marriage, so soon after the war to an Italian diplomat, had seemed to her family, well, undiplomatic.

Beneath the walls, the road zigzagged sharply up into a tree-shaded square. Passengers and driver got down. Gazing at the huddled town to his left Wayland realised that Dar il-Gnien, Wied il-Hemsija, Rabat was unhelpful. He needed a phone.

Through the trees to his right, he glimpsed a stone bridge leading to an escutcheoned gateway in the bastions. Curious to see where Carol and he would have visited Monica, he wandered over.

Inside, his footsteps broke the silence. The streets, empty of people, were bounded by palaces with grilled windows and monumental doors that looked as if they

had not opened for centuries. He started, as a laugh sounded from a house in a narrow alley.

He tried to find Monica's house but Carol's absence squeezed his arm. A clock creaked midday, bells answered it and he came instead to the Xara Palace Hotel, a spare structure rising in disdain above the purple passage of bougainvillaea in its loggia.

The bar was tended by a mournful Maltese man in a white jacket. Behind him, above the optics, was an oil painting of stags fleeing a storm. The thunderclouds—or the grime of ages—obscured all but their yellow jittery eyes with which, downing an iced Hopleaf and asking if he might use the phone, Wayland felt an affinity.

A laugh came on the line, followed by a smart naming of the number in the tone of voice that tells you that life is a jest.

“May I speak with Mrs Shaftoe?” Wayland said.

“This is she.” The laugh again, curling round the voice.

“I have a letter for you from Monica Salviati,” he said, his own voice grim.

A moment of silence followed. Expecting the phone to be slammed down, he had a sudden and surprising sadness that there would be no prospect of meeting Debba.

“And who are you?” The voice had cooled.

Wayland introduced himself in his bleakest tone, saying he had just come from staying with the Salviatis.

This provoked a rather different laugh, holding, he thought, a minimum of misgiving. Its owner appeared to speak to someone else, the voice was fainter. It came back on the line, buoyant and bullying, and he could hear the chink of ice in a glass. "I simply must see you. Where are you?"

"The Xara Palace."

"Oh good. How long are you there?"

"No. I'm at the Sultan but ..."

"The *Sultan*. Impossible. You must stay with us."

"The Sultan is fine and I'm leaving tomorrow."

"Well you'd better come to lunch then. You don't know where ... Oh God, I'll send Deborah."

Ordering another beer, he sat in a chair covered in tough green weave. The bar served four interconnecting rooms with arched ceilings from which wrought-iron candelabra hung on long wires. Shuttered iron-barred windows served no useful purpose. The sole occupants, a middle-aged English couple, sat beneath a gold-framed mirror reading two-week-old copies of *The Times*.

He left the Xara's reverent gloom and went out to meet Deborah whose friends called her Debba.

The square glared in the midday sun. Blinded, he felt hurled back to the white heat of Sinai and grabbed for his sunglasses as the bougainvillea appeared to move and a flash of red broke off from its canonical purple.

It was not Jehovah and it was not the beer. The girl in the red skirt sauntered up to him, small face alert. Her lips slid apart over bevelled teeth and summoned again that inappropriate desire.

To hide his dishevelment he said, "How do you do, Deborah. Now that we've met, may I—"

She stopped him with a demurring laugh, her tongue catching those teeth. "Good gracious, do I look as bad as that?" As he struggled for composure, she extended her hand, "I'm Maddie. Didn't I see you on the Sultan balcony?"

He touched her fingers, felt his senses leap, felled them with a lid of steel.

"Mrs Shaftoe said she would send Deborah," he said, his tone captious.

She raised her brows and, turning from him, said, "My little cousin's in a foul mood as usual. My aunt thought you should have a warmer welcome."

"Is it far?" he grumbled, disguising a jab of shame by glancing up at the sun.

"Well you won't get a taxi in Mdina," she said.

The tartness he had elicited pleased him. He walked slowly, watching, as she crossed the square, her gait strong as a runner, graceful as a dancer.

But as she passed between a palace and a police station complete with blue lamp he came alongside her. "Forgive me," he said, "I got here late last night, was whirled this morning through Valletta by a friend I detest and I've overdone the beer."

She laughed, but guardedly. "A friend you detest?"

How will you feel about strangers?”

“Oh that’s much easier.”

“That’s a relief,” she said, as if she no longer cared. They entered a narrow street beside another palace.

“I thought you lived outside Mdina.”

“Yes. We’re through the Hole in the Wall,” and she laughed again, excluding him.

The street widened into a square broken on the left by an arched and frescoed gate through which he glimpsed Mdina’s ditch. Making for it, relieved to leave the city’s silence and hers, he felt her absence, turned and saw her watching him from a side alley.

“Not there,” she admonished. “That’s Greeks’ Gate for cars.”

He followed her, bridling, turned left after her and stopped. She had paused too and looked back at him with a serious smile. “It’s the sallyport. We call it the Hole in the Wall. I wanted you to see it from here.”

He had the impression of looking through a telescope. At the far end of the narrow street, the bastion wall was pierced by a tunnel and in its black mouth was the white light of a valley.

“*That’s* where we live,” she cried and ran for the light.