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ATOM

English sample translation by Katy Derbyshire

[pp. 26–35]

CHAPTER 3

Late November 1939; Dr Batley was just expunging all trace of that afternoon's physics lesson. He'd demonstrated the Bernoulli effect to a class of fifth formers, using methylated spirits to conjure up a blue genie in a test tube. The still darkened lab had an acrid smell of fuel, suddenly overlaid by the exquisite scent of a cologne created exclusively for its wearer. A great deal of vetiver. Batley instantly knew who was behind him. Edmond 'Scully' Hamilton, Marquess of Dufferin and Ava. Scully claimed his ancestors had enjoyed life so fully over the centuries that there was nothing left for him to try. No vices, practices or forms of relationship remained that could have harboured any interest, meaning the only option for a little fun and surprise in life was the secret service. Despite dressing with genteel understatement, he had always liked to overdo the cologne.

The three years in which Simon hadn't seen him had barely changed him. As wiry as a mountaineer. His neatly shaped moustache still lent his face an expression of jollity. Perhaps he had a few more wrinkles, but they only served to strengthen the impression of a fighting-fit gentleman in his early fifties.

'What do you want?' Simon didn't need to put much effort into sounding unfriendly.

'To talk to you, Batley,' said Scully, putting on a cheerful face, as if surprised there was something to tell. Trench coat draped over one arm, he wore a grey Savile Row suit displaying that precise mixture of elegance and slight shabbiness impossible to purchase from a tailor; it could only be achieved by wearing extremely good fabric for a very long time.

'I don't know what you and I could possibly have to talk about.'

'Not yet, you don't. And how should you? Our conversational topics aren't usually printed in the Times. Or what is it you read out here? The Surrey Advertiser?'

Simon threw the blackboard sponge into the sink so hard it sent splashes up the whitewashed wall.

‘Stop it, Hamilton. The headlines are bad enough already. War in Europe. That’s more than enough of a disaster for me. I’m sure you have even more negative dimensions to add – but I’ve no need to hear them.’

‘Batley,’ Scully said, now without the slightest irony, ‘this thing has only just begun.’

‘I know. We’ve declared war on Germany, and I won’t run away when the time comes. I know where the army enlistment offices are.’

‘That’s terribly honourable of you. But you’re far too important to stick in a uniform and send across the channel.’

‘I want nothing more to do with you, or with Broadway. That disaster you dragged me into is more than enough for me.’

‘What you call a disaster was one of our service’s most outstanding performances. Unusual planning and implementation, I’ll give you that, but with phenomenal results. It was an experiment – even we didn’t know what might come out of it. You ought to understand that, of all people. We were only doing our duty.’

‘Of course, your duty. And you used me to get it done. Was that part of your duty?’

‘All I can say, Batley, is that you were one of my best agents. With all due respect to your personal losses in Berlin ... and I’m very sorry about that ... but you do have to see the bigger picture! It was a matter of our survival, just like now. The most significant, best and most peaceful empire ever created in all of mankind. Who was it that abolished slavery? Us.’ Simon raised his eyebrows again, but then only shook his head. Aside from all England’s disgraceful deeds in India and other parts of the colonies, the empire as such had never been peaceful, not from the very beginning. And slavery had been outlawed for economic reasons. What a farce; Simon couldn’t believe it.

Scully was gradually losing patience with himself, unable to get this stubborn Batley to even listen to him. Yet he had to get him back, he had to. He needed his excellent liaison officer from the world of science; physics, to be precise. No matter how Batley saw it, he'd made a grand show of it the first time. That empire remark had been a bit of a faux pas, admittedly. Scully had sat down with Batley's personnel file in advance and learned that he was considered a critic of colonial rule. Not exactly radical Labour, but a progressive. An annoying mistake.

Meanwhile, Simon had wiped down the work surface, tidied up and was now soaping his hands in the small washbasin; he dried off, rolled down his sleeves, buttoned them and removed his jacket from the back of his chair. When Scully mentioned the threat to the globe-spanning empire, he gave a short laugh. Scully ignored it.

'Come on, Simon, let's go outside. What I have to tell you is best said in the open air.'

Simon sighed, let him go ahead, switched off the electricity and locked up his precious physics lab. He didn't know he would never set foot in there again.

On the gravel path framing the sacred lawn at St. John's, however, it was certainly not newly dawning sympathy for the Marquess of Dufferin and Ava that prompted Simon to get into Hamilton's Bentley shortly afterwards, taking a seat behind the athletic-looking chauffeur. Instead, it was to do with a document that would soon come to be known to the secret service as the 'Oslo Report'. A few weeks previously, the British embassy in Oslo had received a seven-page typewritten letter, signed by 'a German scientist well-disposed to your country'.

This well-disposed individual warned the British that the Germans were working on a new weapons system, partly at the planning stage, partly already being tested. Seven dense pages of lists: Luftwaffe and navy research stations, the use of the Junkers 88 as a new type of dive-bomber, guided torpedoes and anti-aircraft systems. The well-disposed scientist had also explained precisely why the first air raid on Wilhelmshaven that September had been such a disaster: newly developed radar had alerted the Germans to the British bomber formations when they were still 120 km off the coast. Whoever the sender was, they knew exactly what they were writing about.

‘This well-disposed German explained the precise functioning of their radar system; we hope we’ll soon be able to do something about it,’ Scully commented. ‘And by we, I mean the new department we’re currently setting up.’

‘What kind of department?’

‘You see, Simon, we should have done everything to keep you on board back then, after our spectacular success in Berlin. But we thought the job was done. That was a mistake, as we’ve now learned. And the Abwehr has dealt us a few blows recently that caught us on the hop, to be perfectly frank. We’re not in the best of shape. The Oslo Report showed us we’ve been neglecting the science side of things as well. Whereupon C. went to confer with Downing Street. From now on, scientific analysis of the Germans’ secret weapons research is at the top of the agenda.’

‘That makes sense. But I know nothing about radar.’

‘Batley, the Oslo Report mentions the Germans are also working on new projectiles – on a grand scale. The author refers to research stations on the Baltic. We don’t know any details yet, but imagine the possibility of weapons targeting London directly ... Think of St. John’s and your pupils. Do you want to see this beautiful place reduced to rubble?’

That evening, Simon set foot inside number 54 Broadway for the first time in his life. That had been out of the question in his earlier work; he was employed informally, with no access to the building back then. Shortly before nine in the evening, the atmosphere at 'Minimax Fire Extinguishers' – the official company name – was bizarrely normal. An older lady and two telephonists sat behind a counter in the lobby, fending off or putting through callers and registering precisely who came and went. And there were plenty of comers and goers.

On seeing Scully, the head receptionist – Simon would soon know her as Mrs Turner, obviously not her real name – looked as though she'd forgotten who visited the premises, and then suddenly realised again.

'Will this gentleman be working here?' she asked the marquess in a disapproving tone, winking at Simon in parallel.

'He's urgently expected,' Scully responded unmoved, and promptly manoeuvred Simon into the lift up to the third floor, where the new Scientific Intelligence department had been set up. So far, it consisted of a single individual: a tall slim man in his late twenties with an impressive quiff of hair teetering to one side. He was a good deal younger than Simon, who spotted at first sight that he was an utter science fanatic. The fellow was leaning over a stack of documents: lists, dates and names. As they entered, he leapt up from his chair, jammed his pencil behind the right ear beneath his unlikely hairstyle, and rushed to grip Simon by the hand, beaming.

'I'm R. V. Jones. Arvie will do. Welcome, Dr Batley, it's a pleasure. I know your doctoral thesis under Professor Kutzbach.'

'Really?'

'The Rocket Engine as Electric Machine, right? We discussed your work at Oxford. Before I joined the RAF as a scientific officer, I was at the Clarendon lab, radio waves and radio engineering. We're not that well-staffed here in the rocket arena. But now we've got you, thank goodness.'

Simon looked at Scully, who was staring at the floor. It would come as no surprise to anyone who knew Scully that he'd apparently already announced Simon would be working for them. The candidate himself was still hesitant, but Arvie didn't let that bother him.

'Let's take a look at the material I've gathered over the past few weeks, maybe you'll have an idea or two.'

He walked them to his desk. The work had only just begun, he explained, and there was no blueprint for their task: gaining an insight into German military research relevant to the war. They could only start with what they had. In the case of rocket technology, Arvie said, they didn't yet have any drawings, maps or construction plans, but he'd compiled an impressive list of people, scientists and technicians who might be working on rocket science in Germany. Including their research interests.

'There are various groups. All supposition. I have to admit I do have a problem with ... the thing is, I did French, not German. But it's clear the Heereswaffenamt plays a major role.'

'The Army Ordnance Office. That makes sense. They were already trying to get everything under their roof when I was in Berlin.'

Simon went through the names; many of the scientists were working in Berlin or Munich, and he'd heard of some of them. Freiherr von Braun was among them, of course, already dazzling back then, and also his similarly important counterpart Rolf Engel. Then there were researchers at the technical university in Dresden. Simon had studied in Berlin and had always lived there during that time, but his PhD was from Dresden. The college was known to be very good at propulsion engineering. Next came Göttingen, the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute of Flow Research. Simon flinched. One name among the Göttingen researchers felt like it was lit up in flaming letters: 'Dr. rer. nat. Hedwig von Treyden', he read.

It was like an electric shock; Scully instantly saw Simon's reaction. He looked at Jones.

‘What’s the matter?’ Arvie asked. ‘Someone you know?’

Simon nodded. So that’s where she was: Hedi. Her mathematics PhD in Berlin had been on A Generalisation of the Regularised Gamma Function, so it was only logical that she’d gone to Professor Busemann in Göttingen, what with his work on high-speed aerodynamics. Connections to rocket construction made perfect sense.

So there Simon was, on the third floor of Broadway of all places, having spent years avoiding anything that might remind him of Hedi; one reason why he’d given up reading German journals like *Naturwissenschaften*.

He lowered the sheet of paper. Looked around Jones’s office. Rows of desks, only one in use and another apparently commandeered for short-term storage; telephones, a teleprinter, a large blackboard, shelves a quarter-filled with books and journals. A well-equipped but featureless space that had just become a communications hub for his deepest desires.

He thought back, saw Hedi’s beautiful, charmingly intelligent smile, her blue eyes full of joie de vivre and the thirst for knowledge for which he’d so adored her. The clear feeling that she was capable of overriding the laws of universal gravity when he was with her. Never had he been so happy with someone, had he felt so at one with anyone as with her; it had been inconceivable not to be with her. Until that day suddenly came and he ruined everything. Since then, he’d thought of her every morning, every night when he went to bed. She was like a musical theme that played uninterrupted. Perhaps the time had come for his chance to make it up to her.

‘I’m in,’ he said.

‘Wonderful, Dr Batley, I hoped you would be! This would be your desk from now on then!’

‘Now that we’ve cleared up the necessary but nonetheless delightful basics,’ Scully noted, ‘and it’s grown rather late – as expected – C. himself has tasked me with bringing the two of you to the Strand right away. There’s a lonely widow waiting for us.’

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C., as Simon was soon to learn, was the head of the entire service. C. because he allegedly had everything under control. In fact, often enough the organisation looked like the precise opposite, like pulverised entropy, causing Simon to wonder in dark moments whether the ominous green-inked C. usually signed under every document circulation sheet didn't actually stand for something else: chaos. Like the chaos back then in Berlin.

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CHAPTER 5

Portela Airport languished in the dull grey midday light. Any passenger just landed on the plane from London assuming they'd find better weather here on the Atlantic than on the Thames had another think coming. The day was breezy and rainy. A damp chill instantly soaked through every item of clothing.

Stepping onto the gangway and feeling the rain, Simon turned up the collar of his trench coat and followed the other travellers across the airfield towards the airport terminal, a construction of unwavering symmetry. Its left side was overlooked by a tower bristling with antennae, reminiscent of a prison surveillance point. Frowning soldiers accompanied them, armed with machine guns.

Most of the arrivals were waved through the checks, including many Portuguese and visibly wealthy visitors, but not Simon. The customs officer, a gaunt man with a slightly yellowed face and an expression as if he blamed Simon himself for the disagreeable circumstances under which they were meeting, swivelled his gaze between Simon's passport and its holder several times and then instructed him with a sigh to step aside and open his suitcase.

Simon looked on disconcerted as he took out every item of clothing, patted it, shook it or turned it over, and lay everything on his table. With a deliberation that was painful to watch. His fingers spider-like, he unfolded the shirts, stroked the length of the socks, one of which had a small hole, extracted the underpants. And everything else. Once Simon's case was empty, the officer felt its seams and lid, then turned to his small washbag.

Naturally, he found nothing suspicious in there either; Simon had boarded the plane in London 'naked', with nothing to indicate he was secret service other than a good camera and a hollow fountain pen for stowing messages, empty. Once his luggage had been inspected, he had to endure a physical search. That too, very thorough.

‘What is the purpose of your stay in Portugal, Senhor Batley?’ the officer asked eventually, in drawling, extended English.

‘I’m an art-lover and collector, I’ve come to visit exhibitions and museums,’ Simon replied, smiling at the officer and holding out an art travel guide and an invitation to an exhibition opening at an important Lisbon gallery, as if to prove his point. The customs man took one last look at him, repeating ‘art collector’ in a doubting tone, but then finally stamped Simon’s passport and waved him on with the bored expression of a man shooing flies.

Simon walked into the long airport concourse tiled in pale stone; it looked sober and impeccably neat. Right-angles wherever the eye fell, everything in perfect harmony. An impressive modern airport that met every ideal of fascist construction principles. And was very well guarded.

By this point, nobody from the noon flight was left in the concourse. He would soon spot the man collecting him. They’d shown him photos at the meeting with Philby. 035. Jona von Ustinov. They’d stressed the fact that he wore a coat with a conspicuous Persian collar and was as delicate as a flea, earning him the nickname ‘Klop’: bug. MI6’s best man on the River Tejo.

But there was no one waiting for him. He’d been held up at customs for about an hour, but Ustinov must surely have expected that. He looked around a few times. Nobody but armed soldiers and customs officers. Indignant, he headed for the exit to call a taxi, pushed the well-oiled swinging door open and looked out at the airport, a genuine surprise in the early afternoon light despite the rain. They didn’t have such lavish new buildings in Britain. Such unscathed civility. Freshly tarred runways, neatly kept greens between them, but all as austere as cave drawings. For a man dwelling in the midst of London’s ruins and stopgap solutions, it was a dream. All the ash back there ...

‘Batley?’

A pleasantly young voice from behind him, though with an audible note of smoke. Simon turned.

‘Yes. That’s me.’

‘035 couldn’t make it, I’m afraid. He asked me to pick you up. I’m Captain Fleming, Ian Fleming. Naval intelligence. How do you do.’ They shook hands. Now this was a surprise! Almost everyone at Broadway had heard a few of the legends and true stories surrounding Captain Fleming. He materialised at opportune moments to help out, like a good spirit. It was all down to his position as direct adjutant to the chief of the naval intelligence service.

‘Fleming! Very pleased to meet you. But what happened to Klo...’ he started and then thought better of it, ‘to 035?’

‘I’ll explain in the car, I’m parked right here.’ There was indeed a rather new Jaguar outside the exit, polished to a shine. Fleming stowed Simon’s luggage in the boot and off they sped along the ‘street between the two airports’.

‘The airports are less than a decade old. Portela here is for European flights, and then there’s another for transatlantic traffic, to North and South America. For seaplanes. The airport’s built on a bay, on the sea.’

‘Very clever. How on earth can they afford to build something like that here?’

‘It’s the Estado Nuevo. Its architect Salazar, the dictator, began his political career as finance minister. Portugal has paid off all its debts with him. Of course, most Portuguese live in dire poverty. But the state loves building monumental constructions and bridges, and airport motorways, of course.’

Fleming steered the car along a virtually ramrod-straight highway largely devoid of other traffic. When the sun pierced the stormy sky for a moment, the cloud cover gave way to a fantastic blue of the kind only the Atlantic produces.

‘So what’s the matter?’ Simon asked in the end, still overwhelmed by the beautiful sight.

‘Oh, Klop just had a very stubborn tail on him from the state security police, as usual. He asked me to help him out.’

‘They’re keeping him under surveillance?’

‘Yes, they’re experts at it. The Salazar system is a moderate form of fascism. As long as no one steps out of line, there’s no problem. Everything here is subdued, withdrawn. But the surveillance is universal. Lisbon is one giant rumour mill. If your barber’s not spying for the government, he’s working for us. Or the Americans. Even the Czechs have a branch office here.’

‘The exiled Czech intelligence service ...?’

‘Exactly. They’re all here, except the Russians; Salazar won’t tolerate them. Communists get put in a camp or wiped out right away. Welcome to Portugal, a perfectly normal right-wing dictatorship. They have no problem with the other side; two General Electric engineers have just arrived from New York. One of them, the boss, is called Richard Porter. So don’t waste time worrying about Klop, he’s fine. I’d be more concerned about this evening, in fact.’

Lined with bare winter trees, the dead-straight road led them past gleaming-white residential blocks in equally right-angled arrangements, stretches of unbuilt land between them. Fleming had a couple of opportunities to put his foot on the accelerator, making it up to 100 or 120. Simon had never driven on such a new, almost empty motorway.

Then the buildings grew lower and more crowded, the road a lane narrower, and Simon noticed they were gradually descending to the coast. They turned off onto a square with a fountain, in its middle a huge bronze statue on a pedestal. Then they came to an even larger square, the ground decorated with granite mosaics. Elegant restaurants and elaborate churches. Now came a four-lane boulevard, more fountains, water features and squares, and then Simon realised to his amazement that they’d arrived in a flash in the midst of a baroque royal capital. In Europe’s westernmost capital city, that of the third still-existing empire, the gateway to the Americas. Portugal.

‘Klop booked you into a junior suite at the Avenida Palace. Our fortress, if you like. We’re bribing more than a third of the management staff. All of Lisbon, our Lisbon is at your service; you’re our star guest! And we know more or less what it’s all about. This evening’s show will be a riot.’

He was greeted at reception like an old regular. His suite was on the third floor, he was told. A dapper young concierge took him up in the lift and showed him his rooms. Simon asked him to pull the curtains back all the way. He wanted as much light in the room as possible.

Once he was alone a moment later, the clouds parted above the city once more and he discovered the suite had a small balcony. He stepped outside, looked down at the expansive square crowded with people, holding onto the railing with both hands, closed his eyes and savoured the sunshine on his face. When he opened his eyes again, he saw the gleam of Lisbon’s Christmas sun, the whole square glinting and sparkling, the cobbles glowing white. And at the very end of the boulevard, he thought he saw a strip of shimmering ocean.

He freshened up in the luxurious marble bathroom, complete with bathtub, an amenity he’d never had to himself in all his almost forty years. Now was not the time for a long soak, however. He made do with a shave in the huge mirror, which steamed up from the scalding-hot tap water.

Then he thought for a moment, sighing, of taking a siesta on the improbably comfortable-looking double bed, especially in comparison to his own back in London ... and grabbed his coat instead to take a look around the city, at least briefly. It was bound to start raining again any minute; he’d just stretch his legs.

The hotel lobby was as broad as a church nave, but significantly more inviting. The elegant but comfortable-looking furnishings were upholstered in red fabric threaded with gold. Beside the wide staircase stood a Christmas tree, its decorated branches reaching almost up to the first floor. Discreet piano music wafted over from the bar. Simon heard laughter, glasses clinking. A cocktail shaker.

A top-hatted porter held the door open for him, bowing slightly. It was almost four already; dusk was descending. Simon headed towards the setting sun, which was carving the gradually clouding sky into ever-darker refractions of blue. Jagged gleams along the cloud edges, then they converged once again. Evening fell.

An astounded Simon walked around the city as it radiated light like a miracle of lumination – not only was almost every window of his own hotel lit up; he saw chandeliers and lamps glinting through the glass in all the other buildings, too. Even the large fountains were illuminated. He hadn't seen such a thing for years now, and the sight of the sparkling hotels, restaurants and bars, the shop windows decorated for Christmas, yet still – like everything here on the Tejo – modest in style, filled him with a deep amazement that was also recollection. How beautiful a city could be in the evening, if it wasn't subject to strict blackout rules! And what a different, perfectly harmless and thus all the more moving melody of life held sway here on these magnificent streets he had the privilege of walking. People were sauntering, striving, lingering.

There were strollers enjoying the evening, but also an impressive woman, a mother surrounded by four children. She and her eldest daughter were laden down with parcels – they'd been shopping in a delicatessen. One son was struggling with a backpack while the littlest two circled the others, running to the fountain and back and calling out comments, jokes and ideas to their mother in the harshly melodious, utterly incomprehensible singsong that Portuguese sounded like to Simon; he presumed they were excited about the Christmas festivities to come.

Caught up in his observations of the many busy, cautiously happy people in this city sheer flooded with light, he had soon almost reached the sea. He was now in the last large square, the 'commercial plaza'. An impressive Roman-style gateway formed its end.

Beyond it – the Atlantic.

As he walked through the arch towards the foaming ocean some two hundred metres away, he thought he noticed a strange, shadowy motion behind him, but it might also have been the effect of all the light. In London and Rugby, people had long been using torches to light their way along the city streets. What an incredible, different world this was!

That thought prompted him to seek out one of the kiosks he spotted in a side road a little way from the edge of the water. As he'd hoped, they had not only newspapers and cigarettes, but also plenty of picture postcards of Lisbon. He wanted to, he absolutely had to send a card to his father.

He was inspecting a beautiful aerial photo of Lisbon with the Moorish castle on one of its seven hills, when he suddenly found a dark-skinned woman dressed in inconspicuous good taste standing next to him; she leaned over and tapped him with a finger clothed in a tight black glove.

'You're not intending to send a secret missive, are you, Dr Batley?'

The woman spoke excellent English, but a South American lilt was unmistakeable. She might have been 35, dark eyes in a slim face with flawless skin.

'There must be some misunderstanding', Simon smiled back at her, 'my name is Norris.'

'Here, for you.' She handed him a note.

In tiny, precise handwriting, it read: 'Have you taken leave of your senses, walking around like this? Luana will accompany you back to the hotel. I'll collect you both there at 1700 hours. She'll help you prepare. Regards, Fleming'

'Well, my little outing was worth it, if it's you who's come to rein me in.'

'You've never seen me before, you've known me no longer than a minute and you're already flirting with me?'

‘You never know these days if there’ll be a second opportunity.’

‘So says the man from London. Here in Lisbon, you always see people more than once, I promise you that. I’m Luana.’ She held out her hand.

‘Simon.’

‘Come on, I’ll show you another route back to your hotel.’

Simon liked the way she took him by the arm, as if they’d known each other for years. She was slightly taller than him, as slim as a rake, and she moved with the greatest elegance along the narrow uphill streets crowded with passers-by. Once or twice, the soft fur brim of her black hat brushed against him. They passed deliciously scented stalls selling roasted chestnuts. The city’s bright bustle almost dazzled him. Patisseries, tiny shops with tempting display counters stuffed with cream-filled treats, children on their mothers’ hands pressing their noses against the glass.

‘Come along now, quickly,’ his cicerona called, ‘there’s an electrico up ahead.’

The street they turned onto now, where a tram was indeed approaching, was barely wider than the tiny one they’d just hastened up. Simon couldn’t believe how closely the tram scraped past the houses in places, and uphill at that.

Simon could barely have found his own way back, for once again they took the smallest of streets, even narrow staircases. But then all of a sudden, he recognised a fountain, and they turned the corner onto the Avenida Palace. A smile beneath his top hat, the porter opened the door for them into the brightly lit palace. Inside, a lively evening atmosphere. The piano music from the bar floated lightly above it all.

They sat down in a quiet corner of the foyer. ‘Let’s hear what news you’ve got for me then.’

From her bag, Luana extracted an envelope containing photos so freshly printed they could still smell the developing fluid.

Simon instantly recognised one of the men depicted. It was the ‘Waterman’.

‘That must be Donald Richardson. Who’s this other man?’

‘A Belgian living in Lisbon. Via his Portuguese wife’s family, he holds various mining licences in the country, including in Urgeiriça. We’ve long suspected him of supplying the Germans ...’

‘With?’

‘Wolfram. And possibly uranium.’

Simon thought for a moment.

‘The Americans have been sourcing their uranium from the Congo, which is Belgian too of course, and from Canada. Is Richardson here to find a new supplier in Portugal?’

‘Possibly. There are more than fifty mines here. The two of them headed inland this morning, towards the Spanish border. Two of our people are trying to shadow them.’

Simon returned the photos to the envelope. He wasn’t quite comfortable with the idea that the Lisbon mission had now split up. His job was the opening at the Buchholz Gallery, while Richardson, perhaps the key piece in the game, was off with the Belgian uranium producer, somewhere inland.

‘The GE engineers are still here, though?’

‘I’ve heard nothing to the contrary.’

‘Alright, we’ll see. Fleming will be here soon. Tell me a bit about life here. In all the years, I’ve only ever been in London, and I spend more time at the office than anywhere else. This city here, life here, is fascinating.’

‘Oh, what can I say? Lisbon – it’s always been a meeting place for the homeless and unhappy, and now for the Europeans uprooted by Hitler’s new regime. Lots of them end up here on the way to America. And along with them, of course, those who make a profit on the back of their misery; selling passports and visas is very lucrative. Then there’s smuggling diamonds, gold, silver, platinum – all that has always thrived here.

There are constant murders, despite the heavy police and state surveillance. And then our enemies everywhere. It's no easy town. But I still love it here. The winters aren't quite as pleasant as in Rio, but in the spring ...' She paused.

In walked Fleming.

The gallery was in Lapa, an exclusive residential area once favoured by the city's British aristocracy, as Fleming explained en passant. He dropped Simon and Luana off a little way from their destination. He would stay nearby but not come to the gallery with them.

'Klop should be there too; he probably already is. We've got a car with a radio, we can contact the embassy at any time. Luana is always behind you. Best of luck.'

They crossed the cobbles to the Buchholz Gallery. From the street, it looked like an enormous bookshop, its window filled with tomes of all kind, obviously including many art catalogues and magnificent photo books. The front door opened onto the sales space, accessing a courtyard with a row of inviting lights leading to the door of the gallery itself. It was glazed all the way across the courtyard, and Simon saw that a large crowd of visitors had already gathered, men and women all expensively and well dressed. Most of them were holding long-stemmed glasses, standing together, chatting and laughing. Simon had the impression it was staged, so bizarre did this cheerful conviviality seem to him; the art played a mere supporting role, as usual on such occasions.

He entered nervously, instantly convinced that curious eyes were following him. He looked around rather shyly, helped himself to a glass of cava to keep his hands occupied, and inspected the works of art new and old on show. There were a lot of graphic works among them, a joyful mix of German, Swiss, Portuguese and Spanish artists, all of them figurative but far from the simple realism of fascist hero representation. There were gouaches on cardboard, wild and colourful with pencil drawings on top, a scene in a factory yard with the German title *Menschenfresser*, by a German artist called Greta Overbeck, as he read on a small sign. A curious title: Cannibals.

Another wall, though, displayed old masters, or at least high-quality reproductions. An engraving caught his eye, related to a work by Peter Paul Rubens, Mercury and Argus. The messenger of the gods, in a round hat, is about to carry out a beheading, his sword raised towards an old man resting on a crook as he sleeps. Beside them is a shocked but genuinely beautiful white cow, part of the old man's herd that Mercury presumably intends to abduct. That was often the case when Mercury came into it; he was also the god of thieves, after all. A strange coincidence to come across this ancient prankster here, knowing the Americans were calling their rocket programme Hermes. Simon's pulse accelerated. He felt caught in the act and looked around in shock. But no one was paying him the slightest attention, nor had they noticed his confusion.

The gallery had filled up in the meantime; Portuguese was naturally the dominant language, but he heard occasional English and German conversations. A slim, rather short man of around fifty was entertaining a group of people with anecdotes.

'I was born prematurely in Jaffa, a worm of a child,' he said with disarming openness. The ladies tittered and the significantly taller men looked politely amused, quite taken with this type of slightly embarrassing story; they always enjoyed hearing about others' weaknesses. He went on: 'And seeing as I was there much too early, my father had the glorious idea of feeding me up with a Waterman fountain pen. He filled the tank with milk and then sprayed it into my mouth.'

The fountain-pen-fed man from the Holy Land arranged his features into a grin, closed his eyes and licked his face, as if wanting to clean it of the shock of that memory. Everyone around him laughed, and even Simon couldn't subdue a chuckle, despite his tension. The man was funny. When he cast a razor-sharp glance at Simon, mid-laughter, and winked at him, Simon knew who he must be. He nodded back, and Klop von Ustinov gave him another wink to indicate that he too had recognised him.

Now he finally spotted Luana, deep in conversation with a couple; she looked at him inconspicuously and yet with a question in her eyes: Have they noticed anything yet? Simon gave a miniscule shake of his head.

He went on looking at the artwork, joining the various small groups as if by coincidence. Most were married couples from Lisbon, art appreciators he couldn't understand. Then he suddenly heard American accents.

Was it the GE engineers? He listened in but was disappointed to find the speakers were businessmen at odds with the embassy's legal department over some kind of customs formalities.

'Woven baskets,' one of the two said, 'simple woven baskets. Is that too much to ask?'

Simon couldn't grasp what they were talking about, but he did at least establish they had a completely different accent to Bill Sharp, and so probably weren't from Wyoming.

A rattle sounded: an instrument from a rainforest, Simon was convinced. The lively multilingual conversations died down as the gallery owner stepped up to say a few words. The man was in his mid-forties, clean shaven, stocky, and wore a perfectly tailored three-piece suit. There was something very alive about his eyes.

'Meu nome é Karl Buchholz.' He bowed, and then he exclaimed: 'Bem-Vindu, willkommen, welcome et bienvenu!' It was clear the host felt very comfortable in his own skin. Then he read a few lines of Portuguese from a sheet of paper. Most of the visitors laughed several times, a sense of joy rippling through the crowd.

And then Simon suddenly recognised the man. He was sitting on a white-upholstered bench, and Simon was certain he'd seen him before. He just couldn't remember where. Compared to that, the fact that the man's clothing – a black suit with a white dog collar – indicated he was a man of the cloth was less important to Simon. Probably a disguise. A robust briefcase was resting on his lap. That was presumably what was at stake, or rather its contents. The supposed priest looked slightly nervous.

But where did Simon know the man from? He must be a couple of years younger than himself. That combed-back blond hair, the high forehead, bushy eyebrows and that rather forceful square chin, jutting forward. Where on earth had he seen him before?

Now the man had noticed Simon taxing him, which made him visibly more nervous. Simon might send him running, which of course was to be avoided at all cost. So he nodded over and laughed as if they were old acquaintances. The man gave a hesitant nod, ran his hand over his hair and smiled, a little embarrassed. It was beginning to dawn on Simon. His memory came to heel like a scattered pack of dogs. Second-by-second, the image came together that must contain this man somewhere.

It was in Berlin. Early thirties. Snow on the ground. The old rocket-launching grounds in Tegel with their makeshift buildings and test stations cobbled together out of odds and ends, that's where it had been. The young whizzkid from the Astronautics Association was celebrating his ...Simon counted up and worked out it must have been Wernher von Braun's 19th birthday. March 1931, then. A fortnight previously, a researcher who'd left the association over a conflict had launched the first successful liquid-propelled rocket in Dessau. At the birthday party, everyone had gathered in one of the larger sheds heated by a cast-iron stove, and the big issue on their minds was how to hold public presentations in Tegel to raise money for the association. Suddenly, the door had opened and in came a large cake with nineteen little candles, and the cake had been carried by ... Sigismund! Wernher's brother, only a year older and very similar in appearance, the same hair, eyes, the same distinctive chin – but a little more friendly, not quite as dark and deep. Now Simon was absolutely sure of it. Sigismund von Braun had studied law and had later, Simon thought he recalled, gone into the diplomatic service, not an unusual career for the son of an arch-conservative former Reich minister.

If telepathy existed, then it took place that very nanosecond, but not only between the diplomatic secretary to the German embassy in the Holy See in Rome – Sigismund Maximilian Wernher Freiherr von Braun, who realised that Simon had reacted to him – but also between all the other players in the scene.

Even before the two of them had noticed it themselves, Luana had seen it: First Simon had almost frozen on the spot, staring at the priest, then the padre had apparently felt recognised with his conspicuous briefcase, an unusual item to bring to an exhibition opening, and broken out in a sweat. That was their man, Luana assumed. Wonderful, and even before the gallery owner had finished his speech! That was a stroke of luck, given the chaos about to ensue when he declared the Christmas buffet open. But Jona von Ustinov had spotted it too. He had simply kept an eye on Luana; she was like a bright star whose alert face gave away her thoughts.

The priest, then. Catholic clergymen were part of Lisbon society, nothing out of the ordinary as such. Nothing special in any situation. The dictator Salazar was a strict Catholic, awarded a church grant to attend university, a real man of Rome. But this Vatican emissary – Karl Buchholz himself had whispered it to Ustinov, a ‘diplomat to the Holy See’ – simply looked too reichsdeutsch. Too rakishly blond and not at all priestly. Klop had attended a Catholic grammar school in Düsseldorf, and everything he’d learned in that time told him this man was probably here solely because of the briefcase balanced so demurely on his lap.

Subtly, then with a little pressure, Klop ensured that his jaunty group drifted over to the supposed priest, until the man was eventually, now standing, surrounded by Madame Curzhens, Mrs von Plotten – the wife of the Dutch consul – her husband and various hangers-on.

‘I was so pleased to hear you’re in Lisbon,’ Klop went on the offensive, greeting the perplexed Sigismund von Braun in perfect German and with a firm handshake, as if they were old acquaintances. Touché.

At the same time, Captain Fleming arrived in the gallery courtyard and tried to gain an overview of where they stood. He was bringing an urgent message. Fritz Cramer, the head of the Abwehr in Lisbon, was on his way over to accompany the courier to the actual handover.

‘I suggest,’ he whispered to Luana, who had spotted him and come outside, ‘we do what we have to do. We take the case from him, then Batley has to look at the documents and get photos. All in the next fifteen minutes.’

‘Not much time.’

‘Cramer will be here in half an hour at the latest. I can hold him up for a little. I know him quite well. I might get five minutes out of him. We have to be fast. No one must ever find out this operation took place.’

Luana hurried back inside the gallery, spoke briefly to Simon and then signalled to Klop. He took the monsignore aside confidentially, gripping his arm like an old friend while chatting away in German, and walked him in the direction of the third room, which had a rear exit. There were fewer people there, and while the fake priest was still processing his surprise, Luana made a sudden motion between them, a Capoeira move. The dance-like martial art invented by enslaved workers on Brazil’s plantations looked smoother than smooth, and her intervention came completely unexpectedly – she took the priest’s left arm in a gentle but unbreakable lock, holding a knife to his throat at the same time. It looked like they were caught in a passionate embrace.

‘Stay calm and come with me. Not a word, or else.’

The dog-collared diplomat, helpless, submitted instantly. Outside in the rear courtyard, beneath an awning dully lit from behind by a lantern, Simon was waiting. He stayed in the shadows so that Sigismund wouldn’t recognise him after all. Yet he could see the man’s face all too well.

‘Herr von Braun?’

Whatever identity he’d assumed for his arrival, Sigismund was shocked to be addressed by his real name. Luana noticed his knees beginning to tremble.