

All in honour, part 1

Farewells

“At least we have each other.”

It was a standing joke between them, but in fact, they never intruded unasked, or without good reason, on each other's privacy; their preferred social lives were different, and for the most part separate; their love lives were - at least on K's part - discreet. His partner's, of course, was inclined to extend beyond the private - K's, never. The girls in his life were artists, musicians; Village people, streetwise and capable of dealing with his lack of commitment. The women in his partner's life were quite different – Fifth Avenue, sophisticated, expensive; sometimes dangerous, and equally uninterested in commitment.

The jokey phrase, however, mattered very deeply to their professional partnership. They knew each other's thought patterns, likely choices of action, preferred operational style. They had saved each other many times from total disaster, though not always from injury. They were like brothers; mostly fond and forgiving, sometimes hating and furious, but always *there*. So, the day his partner left, it was a profound and humiliating shock.

He had come in as usual; had been closeted with the Old Man for a while; had returned to the office and said, “I'm off, now. Goodbye old friend – I'm sorry.” He had shaken his hand, tapped his cheek, and left him standing alone, stunned.

“You didn't know?” asked his colleagues.

“Didn't he say anything before...?” asked the support staff.

“Why?” “Where?” “Who with?” The questions were ceaseless. K buried himself in the lab, where his research colleagues protected him from the onslaught – though they too were puzzled, and longed to know more.

He contemplated asking the people in Medical, but in the end didn't. He thought about asking the Old Man, and then decided against it. All he had said was that his partner had decided to leave for personal reasons. Had he not known beforehand? “No,” had been his mortified answer.

He went home exhausted that evening and fell asleep in a chair, forgetting about his date, who, because it had happened before, telephoned to see if he was actually there and not out on some mysterious mission. He was so contrite that she agreed to wait while he showered and changed, and quite good-temperedly met him at a restaurant. She was even reasonably forgiving about his performance in her bed later. In the morning, he made it up to her and they parted on friendly terms. She made no demands, knew not to ask questions, just kissed him goodbye, caressed his cheek and, as they left, promised to see him soon. She was nice. He was slightly comforted.

This trying pattern at work continued for some time as other agents returned from operational duty and heard the news. He tried to apply for missions that could be carried out partnerless, in order to keep away from headquarters. When, as occasionally happened, he was allocated a partner, it was difficult to say who found it more intolerable. There were no disasters, as such, but success wasn't total. He began to spend more time in the research lab, where his loyalties were not put to the test, but after a while it attracted unwelcome criticism – his skills as a top agent were not being properly utilised.

A year passed. One morning, arriving a little later than usual, he was called to the Chief's office. The Old Man was waiting more-or-less impatiently, and was a little curt. K sat down, resigned to whatever criticism was about to be levelled at him. Instead, he was informed of a new mission and that his partner would be a woman agent, newly arrived on secondment from London. He raised his eyebrows – partnership with a woman was an unknown and probably unwelcome development – but he remained silent.

“She will share your office, of course. Should be there now. She has the details of the mission.” There was an angry flash in the blue eyes, but K made no other response. “You can introduce yourselves, of course,” his Chief added.

“Yes, sir.” He rose and walked out, his shoulders rigid. The Old Man smiled slightly.

The woman was standing looking out of the window waiting for him. She had read his file and seen photographs of him, so knew (and was relieved to know) not to expect this particular top agent to be a strong, masculine tough. She turned and saw a young man, slim, with longish fair hair, of average height – even a little on the short side – almost like a boy. He was good looking, though not particularly her type. At this moment, he was also stiff with tension and antagonism.

For his part, K appraised her resentfully with, at best, tepid interest. A young woman with Celtic colouring, short dark hair, green eyes, a clear, flawless complexion. She was about his own height, compact, neat, and poised; dressed for action in slacks, turtle-neck sweater, a high-collared Nehru jacket, and flat shoes (which surprised him). She wore no makeup (which surprised him even more). More like a boy, really.

“I gather we have to introduce ourselves,” he said. His voice was light, with a deep, warm timbre; his accent clipped and precise, more English than Russian: the speech patterns of Cambridge, presumably.

“Sally Meredith,” she said, stressing the second syllable of her surname. “I know yours of course. I've heard a lot about you.” There was a slight lilt in her voice – Welsh perhaps?

“Indeed?” he said. “I, on the other hand, know nothing at all about you, and yet you, as junior partner, have been given the details of a job we have to carry out.”

This wasn't a great start. She came forward to her desk, picked up the file and handed it to him. “I'm afraid I don't know why that is, unless it was simply that I was asked to arrive very early. This was handed to me before I was shown to this room.”

“Have you read it?”

“Of course.”

He sat down and began to read. “How's your Greek?” He said, after a moment.

“Fairly fluent. I worked for the British Council in Athens for a year after university. I'm not familiar with Cretan dialects.”

“Mm.” There was silence for a while till he came to end of the file. He was frowning.

“Anything wrong?” She asked.

“Are you familiar with the post-war history of the island?”

“Yes.” She replied.

“When can you be ready to leave?”

“I'm ready when you are.” She said, responding now to his conversational style.

He almost approved; she wasted as few words as he did. “We’ll catch up on the way.”

He stood up and marched out of the room; she followed close behind him. She seemed to have passed that test, anyway.

The moral ambiguities of the Organisation never ceased to baffle him. They were ordered to travel as a married couple – and complied somewhat reluctantly. As supposedly university archaeologists on vacation, they were dressed casually and carried minimal baggage. After arriving in Athens, they spent the night in a small, slightly grubby pension near Syntagma Square. Having tacitly established that they had little physical interest in each other, and having verbally agreed some ground rules about behaviour, it troubled neither of them to share a room, or even a bed (much), though they were mostly careful to turn their backs when the other was dressing or undressing.

They were booked, the following day, on an overnight ferry to Heraklion from Piraeus, which gave them a whole day free in Athens before taking the little train down to the port. K had been to the city before, but Sally, having lived there relatively recently, knew it well. She raced him up Likavittos (it was a tie), and, panting over the terrace wall in front of the chapel, they looked down at the view over Athens, with Piraeus and the sea beyond. Later, they explored the scrub on the hillside under the Acropolis and disturbed several cats, and a wild tortoise, which hissed angrily and ran away (surprisingly fast) when they attempted to pick it up; they walked the little lanes of Plaka; shared a copper pot of a very crisp retsina over dinner in Monastiraki, and enjoyed the day. K learned something of Sally’s life and background in North Wales; she, of course, learned very little more about him than she had already seen in his file. He was spiky and taciturn, but occasionally made drily witty remarks, which she matched with her own, and by the time they got to Piraeus they were almost comfortable in each other’s company.

As the ferry left, a herb-scented wind came blowing from the sun-warmed hillsides around the bay. Sally turned to her partner, took an exaggerated breath and laughed with the delight of it. He smiled slightly, and nodded agreement. Curled up together, they slept on their bags on deck in the warm night air, and, in the morning, as the island grew closer, they watched its famous profile emerge from the haze – the face of a supine god lying in the sea.

A feeling of profound doubt had been growing in him about the mission. It seemed that they were being asked to interfere in a wrong-headed political venture – a misguided American attempt to maintain its Cold War anti-communist agenda, and work with right-wing activists to disrupt Cretan opposition to the military junta in power in Greece. Unwillingly aware that his own past allegiances were aroused, all his instincts were against this mission and he wondered why he had been picked. Surely his background precluded it. Was he still being tested, even now?

A dark idea had begun to form in his mind, and he needed to share it with someone – the someone, his partner of so many years, who was no longer there. And once again the old painful, unanswered, questions tormented him. Why had he left? Had he too begun to question his allegiance to the Organisation? Why hadn’t he said something? Why hadn’t he told him how he felt? And, and *and*... why hadn’t he, K, noticed...?

It then occurred to him suddenly that his former partner, a patriotic American, might not have seen anything amiss with the plan. He might have led the mission without a qualm. Maybe. K's already gloomy thoughts clouded further.

He could scarcely talk to the girl about it – someone so young and untried; someone he hardly knew. He walked off the ferry, head down, miserably aware of anger mixing with his sense of humiliation. Conscious of his withdrawal and renewed antagonism, Sally kept a pace behind to observe him. Not knowing him well enough, she didn't know how to break into his mood, but it seemed important to try. Tentatively wife-like, she tucked a hand under his arm, and squeezed gently. "What's up?" It was no surprise when he merely muttered, "Nothing. I'm fine." But he permitted her to continue holding his arm.

A letter of introduction took them to a big house in Heraklion. The owner, Aristotelis Sakellarios, a large florid man, took them to his study. His unwinking stare, if it was intended to scare them, had little effect on either agent. They simply sat and waited for him to speak. He ranted a little, and told them that he was determined to get rid of the opposition groups on the island. A particular hotbed was in the Amari Valley, which he told them to find and deal with.

"How do you want them dealt with?" asked K.

"Neutralise them. Kill them."

"Impossible. There are only two of us. We'd never get out alive, ourselves, if we tried that. There must be a better way."

"Afraid, little man?"

"I'd prefer to be effective rather than merely violent."

"Bah! Then bring me names. We shall deal with them." And there was nothing more useful to be got from him despite their questions.

He had offered no traditional forms of hospitality, and now showed them out and shut the door.

"You just can't get the servants," Sally commented, looking back over her shoulder as they walked out into the road. She laughed at K's mystified expression, and explained: "He didn't think much of us, did he?"

It was too late for the bus, so they looked for cheap accommodation for the night near the western gate of the city, from which the buses departed every morning. After a sticky night on the boat they were both anxious for a shower, so a small white-painted, clean-looking pension, with a decent bathroom, was a great find. While Sally was showering, K contacted New York to inform them of their progress. The Chief wasn't impressed by the amount of time they were having to waste waiting for transport, but hiring a car wasn't part of the image. He signed off, rather irritated and increasingly disturbed.

It was a relief to have twin beds – the hotel proprietor had been very apologetic, but his guests hadn't seemed particularly concerned. He observed that they were both on the small side, and shrugged: of course it wouldn't be a problem.

Both slept well.

They took the bus to Rethymnon in the morning, and, because the whole exercise took a substantial amount of the day, and didn't link with the country bus into the Amari Valley, they had to find yet another pension for the night.

It was a quiet little town. A small hotel overlooking the sea took their fancy and the room (with double bed) was suitably cheap for the indigent academics they appeared to be. A nearby taverna provided a filling evening meal of bean stew, and a rather rough local red wine. Afterwards they walked by the sea, not speaking much, but untroubled by any silences. By the time they turned to come back, K had decided to take a chance on the girl's opinion.

"You said you knew something of Crete's post-war history," he began. His tone was strangely diffident, and she turned to look at him. "Yes?" she said.

He stopped and took a breath. "I've got a bad feeling about this operation."

"You and me both, then, bach," she replied.

"Ah," he expelled the breath. "Why?"

"Is this just between ourselves?"

"Of course."

It seemed he wasn't the only one who had been thinking black thoughts. She had been bottling up a growing anger. It broke out in a flood. "It was that dreadful man, Sakellarios! The junta imprisons and tortures people just for disagreeing with it. We shouldn't be part of that. We're on the wrong side. Both of us, you and I." She paused for breath, and went on more calmly, "We shouldn't have agreed to do this. Political interference isn't what we signed up for when we joined the Organisation. This isn't our business, even if America – or your boss and mine – think it is. We should be *helping* opposition to the colonels, not trying to eliminate it." She stopped and glared at him, challengingly.

"Oh, Sally," he said.

"Am I treading on your loyalties? Sorry, if you don't agree," she said curtly, but he put his hands on her shoulders, and shook her gently. "You are, of course – but nevertheless I do agree."

She looked him in the face. "Then let's tell them that we can't do it."

"Disobey orders?"

"Yes."

"You wouldn't like to try something else – as we're here?"

"Like what – Oh, help the other side, you mean?" She was quick to pick up his train of thought.

"Ye-es..."

"Double agents?"

"You're on my wavelength, partner," he replied.

She grinned, and said practically, "Do you think New York might have some information about the people we want to help?"

"Let's go and sit on the beach, while we find out. It'll be safer there."

In the end, it was quite easy to get the information. The need to know a name to look for made it apparently a reasonable request. It was provided surprisingly quickly, too. They

stayed out on the beach, where they were reasonably sure of being unheard, to consider a plan of action. They would pursue the original one of taking the bus to Thronos in the Amari Valley – it not only had ancient ruins (unexcavated and of minor interest to archaeologists), but was famous for its wartime resistance. There they would try to find and talk to the two or three people named by New York who lived in the area.

K was very conscious of how dangerous a tightrope they would be walking. The possibility of betrayal, capture, torture – even summary execution – before any kind of help could be invoked, was very real.

“Are you certain you want to do this?” He asked at one point. “We could end up either being caught and tortured by the police or the military, or shot by the opposition.”

“The opposition would probably torture us too,” she replied. He could only agree, ruefully aware of her inexperience of what that would involve. She continued, “the difficulty is getting them to believe us.”

So, that was settled. Another brick in the wall of the partnership.

This promising relationship suffered a slight setback next morning when Sally woke to find her partner curled tight against her back, still asleep but apparently aroused. She wasn't particularly shocked, but they weren't lovers – far from it – so the situation needed some careful management. She attempted to slide away, but his arm was firm about her body, and gripped tighter as she moved. She stretched and yawned, and that seemed to work. He woke abruptly and immediately turned away. She was amused and waited to see how he would deal with it. They would have to go on sharing a bed all trip; it might happen again. Did one say something, or was it better to ignore it and pretend she hadn't noticed?

“Sorry,” he said a little thickly. “I was dreaming.”

She suppressed a little snort of laughter then, and turned towards him. “So I gathered. Nice dream?”

He looked flushed. She grinned and said, “Pax, boyo. The bathroom's all yours.”

The bathroom, which was shared with other guests, was along the corridor – an obstacle to be negotiated. “Sorry,” he said again; and sitting up carefully, swung his legs out of the bed, and snatching up his washbag and towel went out. The room was very small, the door to the corridor very close to his side of the bed so his discomfort in front of her was brief and, thankfully, the corridor and the bathroom were both empty.

She saw his back as he escaped – he wore only pyjama trousers in bed – and caught another glimpse of the scars that had shocked her their first night together. This top agent seemed to have led a pretty unhealthy life. She could forgive a small lapse.

He was cool and distant on his return – and now, seeing the scars on his chest too, she winced again. He dressed quickly while she was in the bathroom and was silently looking out of the window when she returned, and continued to do so while she dressed. He remained rather quiet over breakfast, not looking at her. This is absurd, she thought, and touched his hand across the table. “What's up?” she said, “are you bothered about what happened this morning? Don't be. I wasn't laughing *at* you, just the situation.”

“No, not really – well, it's a bit embarrassing. You have been very nice about it. I won't let it happen again.”

“If you have that much control over your dreams, bachgen, I shall be impressed. Actually, it’s more important to worry about this job, don’t you think?”

She had successfully cracked his shell, it seemed, because he relaxed and looked at her properly, straight in the eye.

“My, what big blue eyes you have, Grandma,” she remarked.

“What?”

“Little Red Riding Hood,” she said. “Joke. Never mind.”

“And *what* is it you keep calling me?”

“Bach, bachgen? – it’s Welsh, same as boy or boyo.”

The blue eyes were cast up; he shook his head.

The bus into the valley was an important local service, as they discovered. The ancient battered vehicle stopped everywhere, and they found themselves pressed tight against each other as enormous sacks and chicken crates were loaded on top and also inside, parked on the floor around them and, somewhat alarmingly, in the rack above.

The smell of grain, dust, and fumes was bad enough; the smell of their fellow passengers and the chickens, overwhelming; it was a relief to get off. The bus stopped outside the village taverna. As always in Greek villages, there were men (but no women) sitting at the tables outside, talking, or playing dominos and cards. They walked onto the terrace and received the country greeting “Chairete.” Their polite response in Greek produced gestures of welcome directing them to one of the empty tables and a lot of questions.

There was beer, thankfully, which helped to relieve their throats of the effects of bus travel. They explained their (spurious) interest in the ancient ruins nearby, and asked how to find them. One of the men, who introduced himself as Michali Michalakis, offered to show them. Recognising this name, K glanced at Sally. “Thank you,” he said, “you’re very kind.”

Over a snack of bread, hard boiled eggs, and a local soft cheese (and more beer), they sat talking. The men were intrigued by K’s fair complexion and blond hair, though not his eyes, apparently – many Cretans were blue-eyed. But his name and nationality were matters of great interest, Sally’s hardly less so. Memories of the British during the war were still vivid and proud, but a Ukrainian with a Greek-sounding name was a source of much interest – even though there were a number of people of Russian origin living on the island. His given name, amused them because it sounded like a Greek girl’s name, but when he said it was the equivalent of the Greek saint of the mountains, the prophet Elijah – Ilias in Greek, they started to refer to him jokingly as “o profitis”.

“He was celibate, you know,” they spluttered into their raki, and, wickedly glancing at Sally, guffawed “not any longer!” She kept a straight face.

K seemed to take it in very good part, or was putting on a good act, Sally thought, and was quite surprised when they asked him if he could sing and he said yes. Someone brought out a couple of stringed instruments and handed one to K, who took it and after testing and tuning the strings picked out a tune from somewhere in his past. The men listened in silence as he sang a gypsy lament, full of dissonance and grief. “My friend,” said Michali, “with that hair, and that voice, you might be Apollo Ilios. That is a beautiful song – you must teach us.” K smiled. “Later, maybe,” he said.

During the exploration of the ancient site on the hill, K talked with Michali about wartime Crete, and the attempts to fight off the invading German army. Michali's memories were of the British liaison officers who had done so much, to so little avail. "Filedem," he said, "Billy, Xan. Brave heroes – palikari – all of them." The fact that keeping the German army tied down in Crete had been a useful diversion for the British to maintain, to enable more strategic battles to be won, was not raised and K didn't mention it. Sally kept quiet; this was a man's world whether she liked it or not; there was little she could do but tag along, listening. She was as impressed by K's diplomacy as by his musicianship. He was gradually working round to the current political situation via the land, the crops, the transport system, even tourism, at which point he remarked, "– and someone told me there is even a hippy colony at Matala, and no-one minds."

Michali grunted. "Hippies, bah. Nobody troubles them. They are free to do as they like. Sometimes they come here..."

He stopped and looked under his fierce eyebrows at K, taking him suddenly by the arm. He felt solid muscle. This was no flabby academic. "My friend, you are not interested in these ruins. What is this? All these questions – why are you here? Speak!"

K pulled free. "You are very acute, my friend," he said. "It is a matter of life and death for us all. Can I trust you?"

"It is for me to ask you that."

"You may not wish to trust me, whatever I tell you."

"That depends. Who are you?" Michali stood facing him, his hands on his hips.

"I – We," he corrected himself, glancing at Sally, "work for an international law enforcement agency which fights for peace, for freedom – not evil and oppression."

Michali raised a sceptical eyebrow. "Whose side is it on here, answer me that!"

"This time, I believe it is on the wrong side – the side of the junta – not your side. My orders were to betray the people who oppose the government. And I am not prepared to do it. Now that I'm here, I want to help you instead." After a moment, he added pointedly, "I don't choose to 'just obey orders' when they are wrong, my friend."

"Why should I believe you?"

"Tell me what will convince you."

Sally watched the stand-off between the two men, in some consternation. She approached them and spoke.

"Kirie, I am British, my country is democratic. He," she said, indicating her partner, "was born in the Soviet Union – his country is not democratic but we both believe people should be free from state oppression. Our organisation usually does too, but its weakness is that it doesn't support left-wing opposition, and it doesn't see your government, the junta, as a terrible yoke that no-one should suffer under. But we do, and we want to help."

She stopped. Michali barely glanced at her as he said, "You sound like the hippies."

He looked instead at K, who said, "We have the names of government supporters on the island. Our orders were to make contact with them and assist them to disrupt opposition on the island – to betray people like you. Maybe you know these people already." He took a breath, "I will not betray honourable men. Perhaps there is, instead, something we can do together with you and your friends..."

“What do you know about me and my friends?” Michali demanded.

“The people of this valley are famous for resistance. You couldn’t be other than opposed to the present government,” he said calmly. Michali grunted.

“Come,” he said. “You will stay in my house tonight and you will talk with my friends and we will decide what to do with you.” He turned and led the way back into the village. K took Sally’s hand and squeezed it. They smiled at each other a little nervously.

Michali’s house was sparsely furnished. It consisted of a main room with a cooking range, and two very small bedrooms. Washing and other facilities were outside in a small outhouse. There was a well, and also a spring nearby, which provided water. Michali’s wife, Eleni, wore the black clothes and headscarf of the countrywoman and, though she could only have been about 45, looked twenty years older. She greeted the visitors shyly, and led Sally into the little room where she and K were to sleep. “Have you many children?” she asked.

“We have only been married a short time,” said Sally.

“God willing, you will be blessed while you are here.”

God willing, I really hope not, Sally thought, though she smiled and made a suitable reply.

Michali, perfectly correct in his belief that they were concealing something from him, remained suspicious. After the evening meal, he went to bring his friends to the house. When they returned, there were five of them, fierce-looking men with bristling beards, wearing the traditional garb of Cretan men: baggy pants, headband, and high boots.

The two women were relegated to a corner of the room while the men talked. The voices rose and fell, initially quite quietly. Sally turned to the other woman and said, “We mean you no harm, Kiria. Please believe that.”

“I don’t know. It is strange to me that you should come here and try to do something none of us has been able to do.”

“The law enforcement organisation we work for sends its agents out all over the world, to try to prevent bad things from happening.” Aware that this was much too simplistic, as well as not entirely true, Sally felt uncomfortable.

“But you are a girl. This is men’s work.”

“A woman can sometimes succeed where a man cannot.”

Eleni nodded. “That is so, of course. But here?”

Sally crossed her fingers, not liking to lie to this woman. “We’re a couple; We look harmless. A man on his own might look suspicious.”

The woman laughed. “Your man looks very harmless, he is so small and fair – like a girl, not a palikari.”

Sally was affronted, and showed it. Surprisingly, this convinced the other woman of their story more than anything Sally could say about how strong and capable he was. The only response was: “Let him make you a baby soon, child. Then I’ll believe it.” Sally gave up.

There was now altercation and raised voices. Sally came to her feet; Eleni restrained her, “No, no. This is men’s business!”

“No, it isn’t, kiria! It’s mine too.”

K stood before them, two of them now holding his arms behind his back as one slapped him. They were accusing him of planning their betrayal, and were about to attack him. Eleni rushed forward suddenly, her instincts aroused. “Stop this! It is not proper to treat a guest thus in my house!”

“Be silent, woman,” they growled, “this is men’s business. He is a traitor. We shall beat him to get the truth,” and they stripped off his shirt, revealing the muscular frame that it had concealed. There was a sudden silence as the light revealed all the scars of torture and abuse he had suffered over the years. Eleni put her hands to her mouth. She turned to stare at Sally. “Po po po, o levendis! Alithos ena palikari einai! My! The brave, handsome one! Truly, a warrior!” she whispered. Sally nodded but she was afraid for him. The scars distressed her, and now he seemed destined to gain some more. Michali looked impassively at the evidence of beatings, the scars of lash, burn, knife and bullet wounds, the marks of chain and rope round his wrists, and said finally, “Endaxi. You have known more than some here. You know what it means to fear. Who did this to you?”

“I have known pain and fear – of course I have – but now I am afraid for *you*.” K gestured down at himself, “This has been my job. I agreed to fight for what is right, and accept such injuries when necessary – and also when it wasn’t,” he added, almost to himself. “You may beat me but there is no other truth than what I have already told you.”

No-one spoke; they were all staring at the man they had thought a skinny, effeminate, treacherous weakling, no better than a hippy, whose muscular, scarred body bore incontrovertible proof of his strength and ability to withstand injury.

“Sit, little prophet,” said Michali.

Sally let go the breath she had been holding, and picked up K’s shirt. She helped him into it and sat beside him while the men questioned him again about his life, his philosophy, his knowledge of Greek politics, his job, the mission. He replied perfectly truthfully – there was no reason to lie. They did not question his supposed marriage, but they did ask about Sally, and K simply said she was also a trained agent. Did she have scars, too? Not so far. And they stared at her, as at a freak.

At length, they seemed prepared to accept that he had chosen to disobey an order he disagreed with, and were therefore willing to make use of the information he had brought. Much of it was redundant, as it happened, but one name stood out; that of a man they feared would bring disaster upon them, Stylianos Pattakos, originally a man of Crete. But at this point, Michali raised a hand; they stopped and looked at him.

Michali addressed his wife: “Eleni, bring wine.”

There was a pause in the questioning. Sharing the wine was a way of renewing the *philoxenia*, the welcome given to a guest, that had almost failed. Michali then brought out a lute-like instrument, and offered it to K, asking him for the song he had sung earlier in the day. Then the men sang – a livelier song – and, with fellow-feeling somewhat restored, they returned to the discussion where they had left off: a possible means of publicly discrediting, rather than disabling Pattakos. “Violence will bring more violence on you and your people. It won’t get rid of the junta,” K argued. “Shaming him will be more effective in the long run.”

“He’ll come from Athens on a visit, soon. Let’s capture him, like Kreipe, hold him hostage till we get what we want,” said one.

“It’s been done. It was a propaganda gesture – what did it achieve? Nothing. And it won’t now.”

They disagreed. “Are you afraid, little prophet?”

K lifted his chin. “I repeat, only for you, my friends. You have to play a waiting game. The junta is very strong. Pattakos is corrupt. I have evidence that you can use against him, and against his friends. People like Aristotelis Sakellarios.”

“We should kill him.”

“That’s crazy. He’s not the only one. You know what will happen – the same as under the Nazis. Captivity, torture, your villages razed, your women violated.”

“And I say you are afraid! You could not kill a man.”

“I *have* killed,” he snapped, “– many men – I am trained to kill. And I have been in fear of my life since I was a child in the war. You have seen the results on my body. But violence is not the only way.”

There they stuck. Impasse.

The other men went home at last, and the two agents prepared for bed, aware of thin walls and the intense quiet of the countryside. It was a narrow bed; they lay face to face, talking quietly.

“I feel a fool striking these attitudes,” he whispered, “but I think they believe me. I must convince them not to get involved in violence. Should *we* eliminate Sakellarios?”

“Too inflammatory, oh trained killer,” she replied. “It might be counterproductive. But yes – they believe you. And Eleni believes us, I know. She thinks you’re a real palikari, too.” She paused, and added, “And, while we’re on the subject, she’s expecting you to make a baby while we’re here. To prove your masculinity, and all that. You needn’t prove anything to me, of course.”

“Then they’re probably listening. What do we do?”

They stared at each other in the lamplight. This was ludicrous. “We could jump about a bit,” he suggested. “Can you pretend to moan quietly?”

She gave her characteristic snort of amusement, and made a little crowing noise, which she stifled in the bedclothes. K shook with silent laughter. “It would be easier to make love,” he whispered, and, when she stiffened, hurriedly said, “It’s OK, I’m not going to. Relax – I mean, don’t relax – do that again.” After an absurd interlude, slightly disturbing in the restricted space, K managed a satisfied groan and Sally sighed. Their muffled laughter was probably convincing.

K turned out the lamp and lay back thinking about how his former partner would almost certainly have behaved in similar circumstances, and wondered at his own restraint. Sally, not entirely unmoved herself, was too tired to think; it had been an exhausting evening. They fell asleep, at last, side by side.

Having to share a bed with a woman, whose body he could feel next to him but whom he couldn’t touch, took its toll. K woke early in a similar state to the previous morning, but this time with his back to Sally which gave him an opportunity to give their supposed love-making an element of verisimilitude. Sally became aware of his movements and turned over. “Just a minute,” he gasped into the pillow. He turned on his back, breathing heavily. “Adding some evidence,” he said by way of explanation.

“Such fun for you,” she whispered. “What about me?”

“That’s up to you,” he said gravely, “but if I can be of any assistance...?”

“Don’t even think about it,” she giggled. “Nice of you to offer, of course.”

The morning produced a plan, to take a list of government sympathisers to Sakellarios, describing them as insurgents – thereby somewhat cynically detaching themselves from the resulting violence. They might achieve a double success: elimination of regime supporters, and potential humiliation for Sakellarios. Michali said he knew of several men who hid their allegiance to the colonels’ regime for fear of local reprisal.

“But do you have proof?” asked K.

Michali slapped his knee. “Hah!” he exclaimed. “They are the families of police. The police are trained as torturers, and they also train boys to do it. Animals! Some of my friends have suffered under them. I know them. They and their families were never threatened during the war, and those families were on the other side in the civil war. They grew rich; their property was left intact. Proof enough,” he said.

Michali’s partisan anger might be merely vengeful; K was reluctant to reintroduce the divisions of the civil war into an already bad situation. He was willing to put the names on his list if they were police, who were notoriously pro-government, but he wanted to see for himself. When he said so it roused Michali’s suspicions again. “You must see,” K said, “I don’t want to behave like *them*. Tell me how I can get proof.”

“I will take you to meet the family of a boy who was caught up in this. Come.”

The family lived in a small stone house up a steep climb. Michali asked them to tell their story to his foreign friends. The boy’s mother left the room weeping as the father told them what had been done. Their son had been caught and tortured by the local police, so badly that when they found him he was already dying of dreadful injuries. Even K, who had himself suffered torture, was appalled. Sally was almost sick.

They accepted the family’s hospitality of glasses of mastic and spring water, and a plate of nuts, and sat rather quiet and subdued. When they left, the mother blessed them, somewhat to their embarrassment, and they started up the mountain to a family of shepherds to hear the same story repeated, this time about the man’s cousin. The beauty of the landscape, the smell of herbs and hot rock, the sound of birds, goat bells and cicadas, were a treacherously idyllic backdrop to the horrors unfolded by the people living there. They returned to the village, shocked and distressed, even Michali, who had heard the stories before. But they had a list, and K was prepared to give it to Sakellarios.

The bus service being what it was, they had to stay another night. They offered to move into a room in the taverna but Michali insisted they stay with him again (probably to keep an eye on them). No-one wanted to sing, and they all retired to bed early. Neither K nor Sally could sleep for some time, and when they did it was with uneasy dreams. Several times in the night, each of them woke, aware of the other’s disturbed sleep.

In the morning, they thanked their hosts, who spurned any kind of payment, waved goodbye and went for the bus. More dust, more sweat, more chickens – and, this time, also a goat. Back in Rethymnon they stayed another night in the little hotel. Once again, they went to the beach where they could talk to New York without being overheard. K confessed that he wasn’t prepared to betray their hosts, but instead had a list of torturers, which he intended to hand over instead of a list of insurgents. The Old Man seemed angry, but when K described what they had heard about the junta officials’ activities, he sounded more thoughtful. “I suggest you leave as soon as possible. Post the list to Sakellarios from Athens – don’t take it

to him,” he said. “And don’t get the ferry. There is a fisherman, Manoli Dragasaki, whom you will find in the old harbour at Heraklion. He will take you to Santorini. It will be safer to get a ferry to Athens from there.” It was another of the many mysteries of the Organisation; they couldn’t imagine how such a man had been recruited. K fervently hoped for another calm sea; he was unwilling to confess his tendency to seasickness.

On the bus to Heraklion, next morning, K became uneasy. He felt himself observed. Sally too had her suspicions about a man a few rows behind them on the other side of the bus.

“When we get there, we’ll walk towards the old harbour,” he said to her quietly. We’ll have to make contact with this fisherman – somehow – without being seen.

Aware of being followed, they wandered along the sea front at Heraklion looking idly for a taverna. There was one by the harbour, opposite the Venetian fort, where they sat down at a table out of the sun, took their hats off, and ordered beer and something to eat. There were several fishermen on the quayside, sitting mending their nets next to their boats. They cast mostly uninterested glances at the young couple, but one got up and, walking past them, appeared to drop his netting shuttle. K bent to pick it up and rising to go after him, found the fisherman in front of him.

“I am Manoli,” he muttered. “Come to my boat – the Eirene, there – tonight at seven,” and taking the shuttle walked away without a backward glance.

“How did he know?” said Sally, then realised. “It must be your hair.”

“Yes; it’s also a bit of a liability in these parts,” he replied, replacing his hat.

They had several hours to kill, and spent them largely in the museum where it was cool and where they could leave their bags while they looked round. Whoever was following had a tedious wait. In the late afternoon, they returned to the harbour by a roundabout route, successfully losing the tail. It was still hot so it made sense to sit anonymously among a few other tourists and the fishermen in the shade of the fort, and wait for sunset. Shortly before seven, they joined the groups of people who had started to stroll back towards the town. As they approached the Eirene, a group of fishermen, still apparently untangling and repairing a net, parted as if to let them through and closed round them to cover their descent into the boat. They quickly ducked inside the cabin and sat down out of sight of the windows.

So quick, and so easy? K didn’t believe it until the engine started and the boat set off in convoy with others. Manoli joined them a few minutes later, leaving his crew to manage the steering. “It seems we shall be followed,” he said. “We shall stay with the fishing fleet until it’s quite dark – there is no moon tonight – then we shall turn off the lights and head for Santorini, while the fleet goes on.”

The Eirene stayed in the middle of the little fleet, in a flat calm sea, until black darkness fell. Then someone whistled, and Manoli turned off the port and starboard lights, and also the engine. He allowed the boat to drift as the fleet pattered on past them. K and Sally joined him on deck, and watched for a while. At last the lights of a small caique appeared, following the fishing boats at a distance. As it disappeared into the mist, Manoli restarted the engine and they began to sail north. He kept the lights off a little longer till it became too dangerous to be without them.

He took them to the flatter eastern side of Santorini, rather than into the dramatic caldera of the ancient volcano. One of the crew rowed them in the tender to the beach and dropped them

off. The fishing boat then set off, intending to intercept the fleet, maybe catch some fish, and return to Heraklion as normal.

It was pitch dark; they scrambled hand in hand over the black volcanic sand of the beach guided only by the sea's phosphorescence and the bright starlight.

"I guess it makes sense to find somewhere to wait till first light, then walk to Fira," said K.

"There'll be a farm building somewhere, perhaps."

Their eyes were becoming accustomed to the darkness, so it was less difficult than might have been expected to spot the deeper darkness of a building against the stars. It was a barn of some sort; there was hay to lie on. "We'll have to hope there aren't fleas," Sally remarked, as she sat down. "Do we know what the time is?"

"Must be after midnight," grunted K from the darkness beside her. "It'll be five or six hours till dawn."

As a faint light began to illuminate the hillside beyond the open side of the barn, they stirred and woke.

"Worst night yet," groaned Sally. "God, I'm stiff. And wouldn't I like a hot bath!"

"At least there were no fleas." K stood up and they helped each other to brush off the hay and dust. Tidy, combed, and reasonably clean, they started to walk.

Fira wasn't all that far, but it nevertheless took them some time. There was no shade and they were very hot, hungry and thirsty by the time they arrived. Food and drink needs satisfied, they found a booking office for the ferry and, with time in hand, looked round the town and sat with a beer looking at the extraordinary view of the volcanic caldera below, before apprehensively climbing on donkeys to make the steep descent to the port.

Sally remarked as they boarded the ferry, "I don't think I'll ever forget this week."

"No?"

"Well, apart from the obvious," she grinned at him wickedly, "there were those chickens, and the goat, and now those dreadful donkeys."

"There was the tortoise, too," K reminded her. "But it's not over yet. We've still got to get home."

"Home?"

"New York, anyway." He looked over the rail. "I guess we'll need another night in Athens," he smiled at her, "if you can bear it."

They posted the list of torturers at the main post office in Syntagma Square, and found a comfortable hotel for the night round the corner in Odos Ermou. "A bath and a good mattress!" said Sally ecstatically.

"And an early start," K said.

They were far from confident that they might not pick up a tail again, but because they went to bed early, after a meal and a bath, it was unlikely they had been spotted.

Somewhat to their surprise, they had no trouble at any point the next day, except that it was a long flight, and daylight all the way. Even K had trouble sleeping, so they were both extremely tired by the time they got to New York. K went home to his own apartment to sleep, while Sally went to the temporary accommodation in HQ. Tired or not, they rather missed each other's company.

The following day, they met in their shared office to write up a report on the operation, the delicate wording of which took some time. The Old Man reading it later smiled to himself. He called them in the next day, observing with interest how completely relaxed they looked together, a shared demeanour, almost but not quite smiling at each other. Very promising.

"You disobeyed my orders," he began abruptly, noting out of the corner of his eye how they glanced at each other, seeking unspoken reassurance. They looked stony-faced at him, however, and said nothing. There was nothing they could say. Then he smiled.

"But that is what I hoped you would do – that is why I sent you, of all people," he pronounced, looking at K. "And why I partnered you with Miss Meredith."

The two agents stared at him.

"You mean you set us up." It wasn't a question. K was frowning. "You didn't trust us with the truth."

"I wanted you to believe the order, just as I knew you could not obey it – either of you." He sat down. "I didn't want you to. And that is just between you," he looked at them both, "and me. It is to go no further."

K leaned forward. "What do you mean?"

"Just that. I have disobeyed what was a misguided majority decision of my colleagues. Involvement in international politics isn't something the Organisation should engage in. The diplomatic consequences are too damaging."

"But I sent that list. Should I not even have done that?"

"It remains to be seen. I shall take responsibility for your actions. But your friends in Crete will know that you did, and that may be a good thing – diplomatically speaking – whatever comes of it." He looked up. "All right, dismissed."

In the weeks that followed, they worked together on routine operations that came up – stakeouts, pick-ups, cipher deliveries, evenings protecting VIPs, and several missions that were more risky. They shared the report-writing, had meals together, and often spent evenings together. The relationship intrigued everyone; it never appeared to be other than professional, but they seemed very close.

It was a charmed interlude, however. The Old Man called Sally to his office one morning, and said without preamble, "Miss Meredith, I have received a request for your recall to London."

She flushed suddenly. "But, I thought this was to be a long secondment."

"So did I. I fear that it may be because you fulfilled the mission in Crete only too well for me, rather than doing what was required by the Organisation. I took steps to prevent any blame falling on you, of course, but regrettably that may not have been enough."

She looked downcast. "When do I have to go?"

“Quite soon,” he said, adding, “I had every hope that your partnership would continue. I shall be very sorry to lose you.” He continued, after a moment, “To have penetrated the defences of that very reserved, and, I think, unhappy man has been your greatest success. I have seen the change in him, and I’m grateful to you.”

“Thank you, sir. I like him very much. He’s good to work with.”

“Not many people have ever said that,” he remarked. “You are almost unique.”

She looked up. “Can I ask, sir, what was his other partner like, the one that he worked with for so long? He never mentions him.”

“Couldn’t have been more different, my dear. Urbane, extrovert, well-dressed, a womaniser ... I have his photograph here.” He went to the filing cabinet and pulled out a folder. The photograph showed a dark, good looking man, with a cleft in his chin; he was smiling into the camera, very relaxed; suave. “Strangely, for two such different men, they were like brothers,” he commented. “Here’s one of them together.” He smiled down at the image.

“Loved each other – and hated each other, too, sometimes,” he continued. “But you couldn’t part them – at least I never would have thought so. I certainly didn’t try. It was a shock when his partner left ...” he looked at her piercingly for a moment, then said, “He wasn’t the same for a long time afterwards.”

“Why did he leave?”

“Pleaded personal reasons. Left without a word to anyone.”

“I see. That expl...” She didn’t finish.

She found K in their office. He was reading, but looked up when she came in and smiled, then seeing her face asked, “Everything OK?”

“Um, not quite. I’ve got to go back to London.”

“How long for?”

“For good, I think. I’ve been recalled... I’m sorry.”

He jumped up in surprise, and came round the desk. “You’re *leaving!* ... after all that we...? Sally...” he stopped. “When?”

“Monday.”

“Three days... So soon.” He swallowed. “I thought this was ... I’ll miss you.”

“We’ve worked well together, haven’t we? I’ll miss you too, cariad.”

His eyebrows lifted, “Cariad?”

“It’s Welsh,” she said gently. “Just an endearment.”

“Just an endearment? ... It’s a nice word.”

She smiled and said, “It’s a nice thing.” Then she took both his hands in hers. “He’s given us the time off. Would you like to do something together before we have to say goodbye?”

“Oh, yes,” he said.

Three days was too short, far too short, to take in, let alone deal with the shock of an unexpected and unwanted separation. There was so much lost time to be made up.

On Monday, after breakfast, which neither felt able to eat, K drove her to the airport and, although they had already shared one kind of final farewell, he accompanied her into the departure hall to wait till her flight was called. She checked in her bags and then they went to find a coffee.

So many travellers! All very fascinating to watch – businessmen; families on vacation with small children; middle-aged couples escaping dull routine; elderly couples visiting grandchildren; young couples going who knows where. One such, an attractive-looking pair, came into view walking through the departure hall, light and dark heads together, talking quietly. The man looking down at the crowd from the balcony above stiffened suddenly, and his gaze grew intent. He followed their progress and watched as they went into a coffee bar. The young woman wore a coat and had travel documents tucked into her bag; the young man was obviously seeing her off. They didn't quite touch each other or hold hands, but there seemed to be a magnetic current between them holding them together. The way they looked at each other, oblivious to everyone around them, they looked so much at one. And plainly so troubled to be parting. The air between them contained such longing. What could have happened?

It was while they were sitting in the café that K felt a prickling unease. He felt sure he was being watched. He sat up, rigid; Sally looked at him. "What is it?"

"I don't know; just a feeling of being observed. Can you see anyone?"

"I can see hundreds of people." She dropped her bag, scattering its contents. She squatted down to pick up the various items, and glanced round as if looking for anything missed. There was a man standing very still, looking down from above, though not at this moment directly at them. But when Sally tried to point him out, he had moved away.

"What did he look like?"

"Short dark hair, with a sort of quiff; very smart suit, silk tie. Quite nice-looking, cleft in the chin, mid-thirties. Suave," she said, trained to take in detail at a glance.

He went white suddenly, and hunched over, as if in pain. Alarmed, she put an arm round him, "What is it?"

He shook his head. "Nothing. I'm all right," though he clearly wasn't.

"Cariad, what is it? Are you ill?" she said, more urgently. And then she realised why the face above had seemed familiar. "You know him," she breathed.

He lifted his head again, flushed now. "I thought I did, once," he said.

The watching man, now further back in a more discreet position, saw the girl brush her lips fleetingly against her partner's bright hair and then, as fleetingly, kiss his cheek. The young man turned towards her, his expression for a moment so unguarded that, seeing it, the watcher caught his breath and looked away.

Then he cleared his throat and turned to listen as, over the tannoy, he heard his flight being called. He looked back once more, catching the eye of the young woman as he headed for the departure gate. He raised his hand in rueful salute.

Sally watched as he walked away. "He's gone," she said.

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Notes

The interval between the end of the series and the Fifteen Years Later Affair.

Original characters except K and other individuals in the Organisation

Late 1960s Crete, then a quiet place, still influenced by the events of World War II. In power in Athens, 1967-74, a right-wing military junta of army colonels.

Pax – Latin for peace. Old-fashioned British schoolboy slang for calling a truce.

Apollo Ilios – Apollo became associated with the sun, Helios, in later Greek mythology.

General Kreipe, newly arrived commandant of the German garrison was kidnapped in April 1944 by British officers, Patrick Leigh Fermor (Filedem), Bill Stanley Moss, and a gang of Cretans, and taken to Cairo. A big propaganda coup. Other SOE officers included Xan Fielding. The General, the British officers and Stylianos Pattakos were real people.

Eirene – Greek for peace.

[Series title “For nought I did in hate, but all in honour.” Othello: Act 5 sc. 2]