

HONG KONG (I)

The air flight to Hong Kong was a boring trip for Dave and Duke who had travelled to Asia often in their military days so they slept most of the time when not reading, until they neared Hong Kong. The 'plane wasn't busy, and Duke was in the seat behind Dave on his own, his huge frame angled uncomfortably across the seats from window to aisle.

"We're almost there," Dave said over the back of the seat to Duke, "The best 'plane arrival experience in the world."

Duke heaved himself upright and looked out of the window. It was late afternoon, and the sky was beginning to lose its tropical intensity for the muted colours of approaching sunset. The ocean beneath was a rippled carpet of blue-green, and the dark smudges on the horizon were either clouds or outlying islands surrounding Hong Kong Island.

As the 'plane descended in its approach, the dark smudge on the horizon came alive with a million coloured lights, and the 'plane made a wide sweep over the many small darkening islands and zeroed in on the world-famous harbour lying between two small mountains. Hong Kong Island reared out of the ocean in a glittering forest of towering skyscrapers. The airport was an extended projection into the South China Sea on the Kowloon peninsula on the northern side of Hong Kong Island, and the 'plane descended between the two sections and then tilted in its breath-taking,

dramatic approach over the canyons of skyscraper offices and high-rise residential areas of Kowloon on to the airport tarmac.

Dave took a deep breath and his eyes narrowed in pleasure as he contemplated the return to Hong Kong. He loved the place, but the memories of its many pleasures were tempered on this visit with grief as he remembered that it was here he had met his journalist wife, Helen, brutally murdered in the criminal Janus Club's drug-and-money-laundering confrontation over a year ago.

The trip from the airport to the hotel took them through the mind-bewildering streets of Kowloon, with their blazing variety of neon advertising lights and multitudinous goods, hiding the refugee squalor of its "walled city" which they had set ablaze in their epic vengeance against the triads.

Their hotel—the small and inconspicuous Ambassador Hotel—was in downtown Kowloon, near where the car-crowded Nathan Road met the ship-crowded harbour. All around were soaring thirty-storey concrete canyons of air-conditioned offices, glittering shopping arcades, hotels, restaurants and apartments, ocean liners and luxurious yachts and Chinese junks. Over six million people—98 percent of them Chinese - lived in less than twenty square miles of downtown Kowloon and Hong Kong Island.

Behind the two glittering harbour-front cities were the farmlands and villages of the New Territories reaching the borders of mainland China thirty miles away. Intermingled with all the pulsating sophisticated economic miracle that had made Hong Kong the famed "Fragrant Harbour of the Orient", there was the sinister presence of the deadly Chinese secret society "triads", with their octopus-like criminal tentacles reaching into everything, from top official circles, through banks and businesses, to drugs and vice and extortion of all kinds.

The refugee population from mainland China were either penniless, or they brought their wealth with them; but together they committed themselves to creating a new life as quickly as possible. The sense of impatient drive was almost palpable as the inhabitants poured out of the high-rise tenements, or refugee areas, into shops, factories and offices. Streets, lanes, and alleys were crowded with kiosks, food

stalls, trolleys, tables, or simply cloths on sidewalks, with goods of every description displayed. Foods from all regions of mainland China were available in the multitude of restaurants and food hand-carts lining the streets. The roads were crowded with a variety of automobiles, taxis, gleaming limousines and clanging tram-cars.

The vibrant impact of Hong Kong was due mostly to the predominance of its young people. Sixty percent of the population was under 25 years of age, and it was evident in the smartly-dressed, jostling crowds. A more sinister statistic, however, was that over 70 per cent of all crimes were committed by youths of 25 and under, and over 70 percent of them were drug addicts. Behind the sophisticated facade of Hong Kong there lurked the ubiquitous menace and corruption of the secret societies who had controlled its activities ever since it was founded over a century before.

The rise of the powerful secret societies in China was difficult to trace—for obvious reasons. But what was known was that they emerged from a surprising source—“religious” societies. They were China’s equivalent to the Freemasons in the West, only more sinister, more criminal, and more murderous. The “White Lotus Society”, was founded in the eleventh century, split into several sects, and gave rise eventually, in the seventeenth century, to the infamous “Triad Society” in South China—with which name all later groups were often mistakenly denominated. From the “Triad Society” sprang the “Elders Society” in Central China, to which many of the current Chinese Communist leaders belonged.

From the eighteenth century most of the secret societies were involved in protests and revolutions against colonialist foreign invaders, beginning with the Manchus. One of the most remarkable of the revolutionary societies was the “God-Worshipping Society”, which was founded by two itinerant Christian preachers, who denounced idolatry, taught worship of the only true God, and belief in Jesus Christ. But, in the famines and unrest of the nineteenth century, they joined up with the “Triad Society” and became, what The Times of London reported as “one of the most important and remarkable movements of mass protest in modern history, the Taiping Rebellion.”

The “father of Chinese republicanism”, Sun Yat Sen, fled from China to Hong Kong, and to Hawaii, where he formed a “National Stability Society” – which eventually became the Kuomintang, or Nationalist Party. The new republican government of Sun Yat Sen, which came to power in China in 1912, was indebted to the Triads and he appointed their leaders to influential political positions to influence all decisions which suited their various personal and financial interests. They were given monopolies in civic, military and commercial spheres and, by extension, they exerted a stranglehold on vice, corruption and opium-growing; from being importers of British opium in the nineteenth century they rapidly became exporters of opium, morphine and heroin in the twentieth century. This vast network of social and political evil stretched from Hong Kong to the highest and innermost circles of the Communist Government in Peking, and from there across the world through Overseas Chinese with centuries-old loyalties and traditions as well as modern forms of indebtedness to use ruthlessly in corrupting individuals and nations.

Hong Kong, with suppliers in the “Golden Triangle” of Burma, Thailand and Cambodia, were linked in the international drug trafficking network which was generating more illicit profits than most countries’ national budgets, and was threatening to upset the economic, political and social equilibrium of the West. Since Dave and Duke lived there the British Government had agreed to hand over Hong Kong to the Chinese Communist Government in Peking. There were many people in Hong Kong – and in China – with a lot of money and power to lose if Hong Kong became unstable for any reason. There were a lot of wealthy and powerful vested interests using unscrupulous means to attain their respective questionable ends in the Chinese Communist takeover.

Dave’s thoughts were abruptly terminated as they drew up at the Ambassador Hotel. It had been arranged with Li Chi’en that he would reserve accommodation for them in the names of “Robert Wilson” for Dave, and “Daniel Miller” for Duke. As soon as they were alone in the room Dave telephoned to the number given to him by Li to say that they had arrived. They had agreed to keep their

identities and all telephone communication to a minimum for the sake of security, because the triads had their people in the telephone exchanges as they had everywhere. Even if the Chinese triads in Hong Kong had not been informed by the international criminal Jason Club, the triads had their own network of informers in embassies, airports, travel agencies and hotels to alert them about the arrival of their targets.

Dave and Duke went out of the hotel to have a light meal at a nearby Chinese restaurant, and returned quickly so that they would be there when Li arrived. Again, for security reasons Li would not ask for them at the reception desk, but come straight to their room.

Li Chi'en had been a top Chinese intelligence agent with a key position in the Hong Kong triads and local business when Dave had first come into contact with him. This had happened through Li's daughter becoming tragically and fatally drug-addicted, dying of malnutrition, venereal disease and septicaemia when Dave found her and sought to save her life. He had found out too late about her father but, in her final few days, Li had become so impressed with Dave and Duke's drug treatment project that he had first supported their work financially, later joining with them personally when they were threatened and attacked by the triads. He had been an important liaison with the Chinese Government in Peking because of his close association with China's Director of Intelligence, Feng Pen-fei, when Dave and Duke were hunting down the notorious criminal, Moonflower. When Dave and Duke were "requested" to leave Hong Kong, following on their dramatic destruction of the triads' headquarters in the walled city of Kowloon, Li had carried on their drug treatment project until it was taken over by other professionals. He never said, nor had they enquired, whether he was still operating for China's intelligence service, but Dave assumed he would at least have a watching brief on behalf of China's former Director of Intelligence, Feng Pen-fei, now a very influential elder statesman among China's leaders.

When Li appeared eventually they had a warm reunion. In appearance Li was unremarkable, his stocky figure dressed in plain white open-necked shirt and dark trousers. He could have been a

young-looking sixty, or an old-looking forty years of age; a small-time businessman or a modest rich businessman out for an evening stroll and meal. Dave and Duke knew him for a skilled fighter with knife, gun and hands in martial arts. He had trained hundreds of the recovering drug addicts in combat techniques to confront the triad-trained enforcers, and the former addicts highly respected him.

They quickly exchanged personal news of what had happened since they last met, then Li said, "I understand you have been told only a little about the situation, just enough to obtain your cooperation?" Dave nodded his agreement.

"It is complicated and very dangerous," Li said seriously. "You do not need to know all the details now, so I will just give you what is necessary to know for the project. First, the background: you know from your previous involvement with Moonflower that there has always been an unstable element inside China since the Communist Party took power?" Dave and Duke nodded their agreement. "There was Chairman Mao's Cultural Revolution, the Wuhan rebellion, Lin Piao's aborted revolt, among others less known. For example, when Deng Hsiao-ping was last purged from the Communist leadership in 1976, one of China's senior military marshals helped smuggle him to southern China in a covered horse-cart, and he was protected by several high-ranking military colleagues so that he was able later to return as paramount leader.

"Now that the early leaders of the Communist Party and Liberation Army are all in their nineties or late-eighties there are power-struggles among them to keep their favourites in power to safeguard their own family interests and their names in history. Right now, two top military leaders—a 78-year-old Admiral and an 80-year-old General—are manoeuvring to influence China's political succession following Deng's death. The President and his General half-brother were removed by Deng in 1992 because of their grasp for power. Now the present President is lined up with the Admiral and General I mentioned to safeguard his succession.

"So much for Beijing politics, a more dangerous situation has emerged with another General, Ma Wen-huie, a Chinese Muslim in

charge of the North-West Regional Command, or 'Third Line of Defence'. I digress here to remind you what you probably know that, in China's long history, when there is no strong emperor in Peking, power is always taken by regional warlords. So, with Deng now gone, the key regional Generals are positioning themselves to take over. What makes General Ma's move the most dangerous is that he not only is conspiring in national politics but with very sinister international groups. It appears his ambition is not only to become the next ruler of China, but to place himself in a position to influence world events by seizing control of sufficient nuclear capability to threaten the world.

"Again, let me digress for a moment. You may or may not know that China's nuclear installations are located in the north-west region, specifically the Koko Nor area between Qinghai Province, Xigang and Sinkiang Autonomous Region. This is a remote but very strategic territory lying between Russia, the Central Asian Independent States, Tibet, India and Pakistan, known historically as 'the saddle of Asia'. I think it was Lenin who said, 'Whoever controls the heartland controls the world'. And certainly Chairman Mao said, 'The way to Paris lies through Lhasa and Calcutta.'"

"So, to return to General Ma and his ambitions, we have definite information that he is conspiring with international groups like the Janus Club of criminals known to you, in their ambitions to rule the world financially and politically by means of nuclear power. He is also conspiring with the Muslim fundamentalist revolutionary, Tariq Muhammad Azir, who just happens to be a Chinese—and American—educated Tibetan with no love for the Chinese Communists because of their oppression of Tibet".

"Wait a minute!" Dave interjected. "How much do you know of this mysterious Tariq Azir? We have only recently heard of him and most of that was through a journalist friend who basically described him as a brilliant academic with an obsessive interest in religion."

"Our theoretical proposition," Li said slowly, "without concrete evidence, is that the key element uniting all the principals' ambitions that I mentioned, in their respective single conspiracies is the two-fold goal of controlling the world's most advanced nuclear

facility in or near Koko Nor; and the annihilation of Israel. This keeps the Middle East Muslims willing to help pay for and work with the Chinese and Central Asian Muslim involvement, which is headed up by Tariq Azir as far as we are aware at this stage.

"The last we heard of Azir, "Dave added, "was that he was 'meditating' in the Himalayan state of Sikkim. It must have been after that he developed into such a potential threat for some reason, right?"

Li nodded affirmatively. "There are a few curious rumours about him having some supernatural powers. It seems from our own reports that he had already been studying Tibetan supernaturalism before he left for China, and then he was a close companion of the Panchen Lama during his time in Beijing and was reported to have been especially interested in the so-called tantric, or para-psychological, aspects of Tibetan Buddhism. This might have been what his 'meditation' in Sikkim was about.

Anyway, we followed up on what had happened when we had reports from our intelligence contacts with Israel's Mossad of him appearing, of all places, in Israel".

"Israel?" Dave exclaimed in surprise. "What was a devout Muslim doing in Israel—unless it was something to do with the Palestinians?"

Li nodded. "That's what we thought at first. But when we contacted our sources in Mossad intelligence we discovered that it was more complicated than that; in fact, it becomes even more bizarre, baffling even the Israeli Mossad top people. He spent the first few weeks of his arrival visiting the Biblical historical places mentioned in the Gospels associated with Jesus."

"A cover of some kind?" Dave suggested, intrigued.

"That's what we thought at first" Li agreed. "But it becomes even more curious. After the visits to Jesus places he went openly to talk with some of the Palestinian leaders, never trying to hide his activities. He was even prepared to talk openly with Israeli leaders about his meetings with the Palestinians—at least the Israelis seemed to think he was open with them from their own inside reports at the time. From their inside reports the Israelis were informed that the

Palestinians themselves were unimpressed by his theories in their discussions—that is, until something happened that apparently is still not understood in both camps in Israel, and of which there are confused reports which, in our view, are too incredible to be believed in any form.”

“Come on, Li” Duke interrupted impatiently. “Confucius says, ‘Man who goes to well too often has trouble with water’. Give us it straight as you heard it”.

Li shrugged morosely. “Here is what happened almost verbatim after we sifted the various reports. As he travelled across Israel Azir saw a secular Zionist Israel government supported by Western capitalist Jews seeking to create a modern socialist State while claiming ancient Biblical authority. He also saw Palestinian Arabs living in indescribable conditions of hopeless squalor in refugee situations in their own land, in bondage to a variety of Muslim revolutionary leaders whose corruptly imposed authority over them was a travesty of Islam. The reasonable Muslims were not given any of the money that was being poured into the pockets of any loud-mouthed terrorist demagogue, who used it to purchase arms and status and travel tickets to posture in interminable sloganeering conferences. He was no admirer of Arafat, it was clear.

“He declared that his sympathies were closer to the most conservative right-wing rabbis in their denunciations of Israel’s ‘unrepresentative’ government, and their expectations of a true Messiah who would establish a real and righteous Israel. He had no similar identification with any of the many schools of Palestinian extremism. Their allegiance to Islam was a bad joke—with the posturing Arafat the bitterest joke of all.

“As for the Christians in Israel, the evangelicals were like those he had known in the United States, and among missionaries in India. They were enthusiastic about ‘preaching the gospel’, which meant getting numbers of converts ‘saved’ to attend services to listen to pastors expound ‘the signs of the times’, ‘the Millennium’, and ‘the Second Coming’ of Jesus. The gospel that Jesus taught concerning ‘Spirit power’, was only practiced by a few isolated individual—of

no statistical importance except ritualistic superstition, sanctimonious church attendance, liturgical repetition or mindless institutional allegiance.

"It is said he was beginning to wonder if he had made a mistake in visiting Israel when, what he called 'the voice of the Spirit', spoke to him as had happened to him in Sikkim when sending him to Israel. He had been meeting with a group of fanatical Palestinian terrorists at their request, because he had publicly challenged one or two of their representatives about their claims to represent "Islam fundamentalism". When Azir arrived at the meeting he found one of their much-feared but admired Palestinian colleagues there who had slipped back into Israel secretly from a course of terrorist training in Libya.

"The 'discussion' that afternoon and evening revolved around the two of them, with Abdul Hanif holding them spellbound with his descriptions of training and demonstrations of gun-handling skills and terrorist strategies, while Azir was listened to politely but impatiently as an 'Islamic specialist'. It is said Azir was about to excuse himself and leave when he claimed 'the Voice' said to him clearly, "'The kingdom of God is not in words, but in power'. Show them.'"

"Azir was said to have hesitated at this point as if uncertain what particular power he had. He had not demonstrated supernatural power since he was in Tibet being initiated as an adept. But then, as he watched Abdul Hanif handle the arms with smooth expertise, studied by the admiring audience, the 'Voice' possibility came to him! But could he do it? It would be interesting to find out.

"You realize there is a power greater than the gun, don't you?" he broke into the discussion and demonstration.

"They looked at him in puzzlement. From the time in their childhood when they had picked up stones to use against Israeli soldiers they had believed in and practiced violence as a solution, and they had the limited successes of the intafada to prove it. Their sole ambition was to get hold of a gun and ammunition, and then learn about other more advanced weapons. To be told that there was a greater power than the gun was like saying that there was a warmer power than the sun.

"Spirit power is greater than gun power, or any other power," Azir had continued. Their puzzlement gave way to incredulity and amusement, until he added, 'I want to show you something, and then I will tell you how I know personally that Chairman Mao of China was wrong when he said, 'Power comes out of the barrel of a gun'. I want you to sit quietly while I compose myself and then, when you see that I am in a meditative state, I want Abdul to shoot me."

"There were reported to be gasps of astonishment and wide-eyed disbelief.

"You can shoot me anywhere you like," Azir said to Abdul, who was scowling at him sceptically. "If you have doubts or problems about it, use a revolver and fire at my arm. I promise you, you will do no damage. I have seen it done many times in Tibet. My spirit power is greater than your gun power. And that is very important."

"There was absolute silence as Azir settled himself comfortably, and composed his mind. It is said that even in Tibet he had not done this before in a group of sceptics, and usually there was a guide or fellow-initiate present. But these were minor details, he said. When he passed through the mental gate into 'one-ness with the Infinite' he was beyond the influence of others anyway.

"He emerged from his contemplative state to an atmosphere disturbed only by awed whispers. The group was transfixed with rapt expressions as they looked at him with awe, and Abdul still held the used revolver loosely in his hand. Abdul leaned forward to pick up the spent bullet from the floor, and gazed in total disbelief from it to Azir's bare arm, where there was only a small round red mark where the bullet had struck.

"Azir smiled at them and said conversationally, "There is no black magic. The lesson to be remembered is that the spiritual power is always greater than any form of physical power. The spirit will remain when the body is dissolved. The spirit comes from God who gave it, and it returns to God. The body is temporal and will return to dust, the spirit is eternal. Once the spirit is under proper control anything can be accomplished."

"For the next hour and more the interest and discussion changed

dramatically from guns and terrorist strategies to spirit and spiritual possibilities in practical situations. When the meeting broke up Abdul drew Azir aside and said that he was on a recruiting mission, looking for promising people to take back to Libya for training. Would Azir like to return to Libya with him? He was sure that both trainers and recruits there would be interested to learn more about Azir's theories and experiences.

"In the days that remained in Israel before departing for Libya the news of Azir's 'performance' spread quickly and widely through all kinds of groups. He was even visited by Israeli government officials, whom he suspected were Mossad intelligence agents, asking if the rumours were true. Azir had pointed to the Bible descriptions of all kinds of miracles and asked them why they were surprised. Even the Muslim mullahs were impressed, and he was called to meet with several religious leaders to discuss how his unusual powers could be used to further the cause of Islamic fundamentalism. Azir had explained that his present visit was only a journey of exploration to learn from other people, and that he had no personal viewpoint to present at this time. However, he hoped to be in touch with them when his tour of the Middle East was completed and he had arrived at some decisions."

Li shrugged expressively as he finished the account. "Make what you can of that."

Dave and Duke were silent as they battled to absorb what they had just heard and fit it into their growing information and current assignment, and then Dave asked, "Why were you able to get all this information about Azir when our journalist friend in the States, Nelson McCabe, missed it?"

Li shrugged. "One possibility is that he was just looking up information about Tariq Azir, and at this time Azir was travelling under his Tibetan name of 'Lobsang Sherab' after his return from America. We think he probably obtained another new name and passport after his visit to Libya for we lost sight of him again after that."

Dave nodded his head slowly in agreement then asked, "Why did you, or Feng, or both, think and suggest to the US President that

Duke and I were the people to do something about it? Apart from knowing something about former leaders and activities of the Janus Club - and Duke's expertise with explosives, of course," he added with a grin. — "the CIA hasn't got much going for it these days, after the recent mess over their mole Aldrich Ames. But, still, I would think there must be individuals with better qualifications than Duke or me - alright Duke, I'll speak for myself!"

"There were several reasons," Li said. "First, there was the key importance of Tariq Azir, and his extreme religious views which we think have made him the leading figure in the Muslim world domination conspiracy. In China, the Communist Party has eliminated all religious figures over the past fifty years, so a genuine religion-fuelled conspiracy is outside our comprehension. At some point someone has to get close to Tariq Azir to understand him and what he is really after, and be able to meet him on his own ground. I persuaded Director Feng that you were the men to do this because of your own extreme religious beliefs." He smiled apologetically to modify his words. "Secondly, there is the matter of our limitations as Chinese in gaining access to that north-west region. There are over fifty million Chinese Muslims in north-west China, and there are about three million hostile Tibetans in over sixty tribes known as Khambas. A large group of Chinese Communist Party loyalists entering the region would be easily detected and restricted, and a small group would never survive. One Chinese official, such as myself, travelling inconspicuously with, say, a small group of European academics, would not attract suspicion. Thirdly, there are the military expertise and survival skills of you and Duke, especially Duke's knowledge of explosives for any required destruction of the nuclear facility. When it was all added up it was not difficult for Director Feng to recommend to the President an approach to the US President for your participation. Since your agreement was confirmed I have been given full authority to appropriate whatever supplies are necessary for the project. Some of them I knew from experience, but I need to obtain your requirements urgently so that I can have them sent ahead of our arrival on the Tibetan border. That is the outline; I will fill in the details as we talk and you ask

questions." He spread his hands in an acknowledgment that he had finished.

"Where is your delivery and pick-up point?" Dave asked interestedly. "I assume it is somewhere in West China to the south of the Chinese Muslim region?"

"Yes," Li replied. "I worked this out with our military intelligence experts, and it was agreed that Kangding, a Chinese-Tibetan border town to the west of Chengdu, in Sichuan Province, is the most suitable for our purposes of material assembly and inconspicuous departure. It is the end of the cross-Tibet trading route between India and China and caravans are always arriving and departing from there. Chengdu has the advantage of being a stage on the normal China-Tibet air route, too, and many foreign tourists use this. The road journey from Chengdu to Kangding is less used by foreigners, but it is on the main military highway from Chengdu to Lhasa.

"From Kangding we will be travelling due north, bisecting the regularly routes into Tibet, where there are no recorded routes. If you can imagine the letter 'T' of the English alphabet we travel up the 'leg' of the 'T' to the top 'of the 'T'. We will also be crossing a mixture of mountains and deserts, with snow and ice blizzards, in temperatures of 40 degrees centigrade. The nuclear facility is located in the high-levels deserts and highest mountain ranges in the world along the top-level of the 'T'. Travellers there in the past rarely if ever counted the miles; instead they calculated distances in days and months – six months from east to west of the 'T', and one or two months south to north of the 'T'."

"Once we leave Kangding we are on this vast territory of mountains and plateaus of Tibet, with few resident Chinese or foreigners of any kind. I have arranged for a small fleet of four by four-wheel Jeep-type vehicles, and two flat-bed trucks; but we will have stages, especially near the Koko Nor and Pamirs to the north which lie behind the Kunlun mountain range, where vehicles cannot go and we will have to transfer to caravans of yaks, mules or camels like Tibetan traders. I also have arranged for tents for sleeping and cooking, and for arctic clothing."

"Have you thought of a cover to explain our presence in the

area?" Duke asked quizzically. "A white man, black man, and yellow non-Muslim non-Tibetan man, are not easy to explain—especially to Genghiz Khan warrior descendants."

"Yes," Li smiled broadly at Duke's remark. "We are an environmental study group from a small but reputable American university, permitted by the Peking authorities to visit the vast Chang Tang to chronicle the region's rare animals in cooperation with the Tibet Plateau Institute of Biology in Lhasa. I am your official liaison. It is not widely known that the virtually unexplored Chang Tang National Reserve is the second largest nature reserve in the world, exceeded only by Greenland National Park. The permission allows us to range widely over an area of some 120,000 square miles.

"Do we know where our nuclear objective is located in this huge region?" Duke asked curiously.

"Broadly speaking, yes," Li conceded. "As I said, at some point we will have to cross the Kunlun mountain range where it meets the Altyn Tagh range to approach the Koko Nor. There we are in totally enemy country—in the sense of it being Chinese Muslim in the control of General Ma. We have no definite information that Tariq Azir is actually resident in any single place, but we have satellite photographs which we think indicate that the so-called Shambhala nuclear facility lies in a remote area between three places known as O-ling, Cho-ling and Po-ling."

"Immortalized by Gilbert, Sullivan and Kip-ling," Duke said satirically.

"What is that?" Li asked, puzzled.

"Forget it," Dave said. "Duke's perverted sense of humour. Is this possibly Tariq Azir's Shambhala?"

Li looked at Dave blankly. "Sham- what?"

"Shambhala," Dave repeated: "a mysterious Tibetan Buddhist paradise. Never mind it now. I'll tell you about it later, and its possible significance. Any idea how long it will take us to get to the first Koko Nor region?"

Li shook his head despondently. "Too difficult to say with any confidence; at a rough guess, and projecting from theoretical data, it

could take anything from one week to four weeks; but climate, blizzards, road conditions, local hostility—not to mention troops of General Ma—could make nonsense of that estimate.”

“What about the size of the nuclear facility?” Duke asked. “I only blew up the triad headquarters in Kowloon, and a warehouse in Miami. This could be a gigantic industrial complex.”

“I don’t know how accurate the aerial photographs are,” Li replied, smiling at Duke’s exaggeration. “By that I mean, for their own reasons, the conspirators may have decided to falsely construct the place larger or smaller to suit their secretive plans. Remember, they’re not starting from nothing. Through General Ma they have access to all the existing nuclear facilities in north-west China, as well as the back-up expertise and supplies from Central Asian and Middle East nuclear countries. When China was expecting nuclear attacks from either the United States or the Soviet Union in the 1960s, the Government moved the bulk of its strategic industries to north-west China in the greatest industrial relocation in history—called the ‘Third Line of Defence’, after the ‘First Line’ on the China coast and the ‘Second Line’ on the Central China plains. It was estimated that we spent fifty percent of our national investment resources to make the move, and used millions of workers; willingly—as ‘human wave’ construction brigades—or unwillingly—as ‘reform through labour’ press-gangs, to construct bridges and railways and dams as well as buildings in these remote areas. So photographs can be deceptive when they show huge facilities and stock-piles—some of them are empty decoys to mislead satellite photography. That is one of the reasons why we decided an expedition was necessary to make certain that the proposed launching site was accurately located and destroyed.

“What we do know from photographs and intelligence reports is that one canyon holds a nuclear reactor for making plutonium for nuclear weapons; a second, an electrical accelerator for high-energy physics experiments; and a third for a large radar works. Nearby is a rocket body factory and the complete spectrum of electronics industries. Somewhere among them is the Israel-directed missile launching system with the primed nuclear war-head—but it could

be underground with a hydraulically-removable roof to enable it to emerge for launching. That is the target we have to find and destroy —and, of course, Tariq Muhammad Azir. If we simply destroy the nuclear bomb on the ground, and he survives, he can just build another. With the nuclear threat removed, we can deal with General Ma Wen-huie and his ambitions—but Azir has to be terminated.”

“Why do you think Tariq is so essential to the project?” Dave asked. “That’s what puzzles me. Why not, say, Gadaffi, or Saddam or Turabi, or any other Muslim leader—even your General Ma?”

“That’s for you to find out—if you can,” Li said. “One theory is because, historically, the Middle East Muslims never fully trust each other and, as it has been said, ‘they snatch defeat from the jaws of victory’ for personal advantage. Arafat of the PLO has made a career out of it! Saudi Arabia even shoots Iran Muslims in Mecca on pilgrimage. The Middle East Muslims suspect Turkey’s ambitions, and all of them suspect Central Asian Muslims of being corrupted by Marxist secularism. So, to suggest one answer to your question: maybe Tariq Azir was acceptable to all the Muslim factions because he is a Tibetan and Buddhist educated in Chinese Marxism and Indian Sanskrit, as well as being a Muslim revolutionary. Also, of course, he was the hand-picked choice of the international finance people of the Janus Club who make the whole plan possible with their billions of dollars.”

They were silent for a few moments, assimilating what Li had said, and finally Dave nodded his head slowly in thoughtful agreement. Duke spoke first: “OK. Let’s assume we get there in one-to-four weeks, and the world doesn’t end with a nuclear bang in the meantime. Have you worked out how we get into the facility? I presume we don’t just knock on the door and as concerned environmentalists ask the people there to discuss the adverse effects of nuclear pollution on Chang Tang wildlife?”

Li spread his hands and shook his head negatively. “If we get that far alive I am hoping that between us we will come up with something. Maybe we just push Duke over the wire and he blows it up like the warehouse in Miami?” He laughed immoderately at his own joke.

Duke raised his hand with a pointing fore-finger aimed at Li, and dropped the top knuckle of his thumb forward, simulating shooting a pistol. "I guess by that time I'll be wishing I was in Miami for the heat—if nothing else," he said dryly. "Speaking of which: when do we discuss equipment?"

Li looked at his watch. "Why don't we leave that until tomorrow? It's late, and you should get a decent sleep to get over your jet lag. Unless you have some important business in Hong Kong I propose we plan to leave here in, say, two days—three at the most. I'll come here at one o'clock tomorrow, and you and I, Duke, can go over the list of explosive equipment needed, while Dave can get on with other things. We should keep from being seeing together as much as we can. The triads have eyes and ears everywhere, as you know."

"What do we do about onward travel arrangements?" Dave asked "Do we do that separately for security reasons as well?"

"No," Li said. "With the cover as China-approved academics, and I as your official liaison, it was OK for me to make them. I have reserved your tickets in the same names as we have here—Doctors Robert Wilson and Daniel Miller. I also have false, but officially approved, documentation showing your expertise in environmental and animal studies, your position and work in Hunter University in Dakota, USA, and the Chinese and Tibetan official permits. Have you any idea of what your plans are here, and how long they will take?"

"We want to talk with a couple of journalists," Dave told him. "One of them you know—Foxy Reynard—and the other is an Indian journalist, Yosef Ibrahim of the Indian Express who, we hear, is a good friend of Tariq Azir—or was while they were in India at the same time some years ago. I just want to do everything I can to get a clear picture of Tariq Azir, to see how his mind operates before I meet him. Whatever else he is, he's a fascinating character."

"I told you that you had something in common," Li laughed. "You can convert each other. I must go and let you get to bed. Remember the Chinese proverb I told you one time: 'Distant water does not put out nearby fire'. Tsai chen."

"Tsai chen," they responded together, and Dave added with a

grin: "I give you the Chinese toast: 'May you live in interesting times.'"

"Hsieh-hsieh ni (Thank you)," Li said, bowing formally at the door.

"Pu-keh-chi (Don't mention it)," Dave replied, bowing too.

"I like him," Duke said, as he closed the door. "He's dry and droll, but if we have to go up against the Muslim Antichrist, Khamba warriors, and half the Chinese Army, I'm glad he's the one making the arrangements and going with us."

"I agree," Dave said; "which reminds me. I forgot to ask him what arrangements he made about our former drug treatment centre. We must ask him sometime."

HONG KONG (II)

The following morning, after a lazy breakfast, Dave and Duke left their hotel and crossed Nathan Road to the rear lobby of the Peninsula Hotel opposite their own, to find a public telephone away from possible surveillance. They knew from their previous residence in Hong Kong that there was an underground corridor of telephones for the use of hotel residents.

Foxy Reynard was still asleep, and grumbled about being wakened with a hang-over, but he agreed to meet at the Foreign Correspondents Club at four o'clock. He gave Yosef Ibrahim's up-to-date home telephone number to Dave and, when Dave 'phoned, he found the Indian journalist at home. He agreed to meet with Dave and suggested a meeting at Maxim's Star Ferry restaurant on the island side of the harbour at eleven o'clock that morning.

They didn't want to go back and just sit in their hotel suite until their scheduled meeting with Ibrahim, so they walked up the commercially vibrant Nathan Road to indulge their nostalgia. They thought they might drop into their old drug treatment centre in Mohan Road, but then decided it wasn't a good idea to declare their presence in that way. So they cut through the busy streets of the Tsim Tsa Sui shopping district to the crowded Ocean Terminal shopping centre on the harbour, where they window-shopped leisurely before exiting on the outside pedestrian

Promenade. There were a few strollers, and for a time they stood watching the variety of shipping passing through the harbour anchorage—ocean liners, Chinese junks, yachts, power-boats and sampans.

“Don’t look round but a half-dozen men have just split into three pairs,” Duke said casually, still looking over the water-front activity in front of them. “I noticed them earlier, and they just came out of the shopping-centre together behind us, heading this way “. He put his foot on the low wall and, on the pretext of tying the laces of his sneakers, he extracted a miniature gun and clip of bullets from a recessed cavity in the soles. Both he and Dave had been given them by the ex-New York cop friend, Joe MacGinnis, who had copied the idea from a genius-convict.

Meanwhile, Dave had casually unfastened a thin chain-mail belt he used to support his jeans, winding it loosely around his fist. Neither of them paid attention to the approaching group of Chinese men, angling towards them, until they stopped in a loose semi-circle behind them. Then both Dave and Duke turned to face them, positioned obliquely so that they each faced three men.

The Chinese were all in their twenties or thirties, dressed in loose shirts and jeans or dark trousers—the loose shirts probably concealing guns or knives. They were a tough-looking lot, cocky as they tried to intimidate Dave and Duke with the ferocity of their appearance.

Duke pursed his lips in a kiss, and said pleasantly, “Make your move, girls.”

They scowled at him uncertainly, not sure they had heard him correctly. They shifted their confused glances to Dave as he began to ease the chain on his hand into a loop, smiling at them innocently as he did so. He swung the looped chain gently.

One of the men said something in Chinese, and their hands went to their belts under the shirts for their weapons. Dave whipped up his chain and it snaked over the neck of the first man in the group. He gave a strangled gasp as Dave jerked him against the others and pulled him off his feet. Dave kicked him savagely in the face as he fell, and jerked the chain loose in a swift and practiced movement,

then whirled it into a bunch on his hand. He hit the next man, still off balance from the unexpected stagger from his friend, a brutal blow on the nose. The man screamed as his face exploded in blood and crushed bone. The third man on Dave's side hesitated with the knife in his hand, and Dave scissor-kicked it out of his hand and hit him in the throat with his metal enclosed fist. The man choked and dropped to the ground, writhing in agony. Dave shook out a short length of the chain and stepped behind the last of the men attacking Duke.

As Dave had exploded into action Duke had taken a step forward to the first man in the line in front of him who had given the command, his miniature gun hidden in his huge hand, and shot him from close-up in his still open mouth. "Too quick with words; too slow with action," Duke rebuked him. His hand was still moving as he spoke, and the gun pointed between the eyes of the second man, who had a gun his hand but it was pointing to the ground in his shock at the reversal of odds.

"Amateurs," Duke said disgustedly. "Drop it." The man started to turn away and Duke shot him, a tiny hole appearing above his nose. Duke's gun moved to the transfixed third man, whose empty hands were moving away from his sides in surrender as he felt Dave's chain around his neck and Duke's gun coming up in front of him.

A number of shocked pedestrians had slowed in their walk, a few stopped altogether, as they tried to comprehend what their eyes were seeing in front of them on a public plaza in broad daylight.

"You explain," Duke said to the man still standing bemused beside his five wounded or dead companions. "We have a pressing appointment."

Dave and Duke turned and, putting away their weapons, walked into the crowds of people pushing forward to get on to the nearby cross-harbour ferry. There were no policemen around, and the pedestrians on the Promenade were slowly picking up courage to draw near to the six shattered Chinese men.

"So, who sent them?" said Dave, when they were on board the ferry. "And how did the senders know?"

"The Janus Club or the triads," Duke said mildly; "or maybe the

dudes just recognized us from the past and wanted a chance at immortality.”

“I hate to disturb your equanimity,” Dave said sardonically, “but our recognition factor here is fairly high as an intelligent white man and a violent black one.”

“We’ll get Li to fix it,” Duke said confidently. “Not the intelligence or violence. He can tell the folks here that we’re on a mission to save the world—for democracy or freedom or whatever.”

“One more day, two at the most, to get out of here,” Dave said musingly. “Maybe they’ll be glad to see us go.”

“They don’t know what they’re missing,” Duke grinned.

Maxim’s restaurant was right beside the Star Ferry anchorage, on the Hong Kong Island side of the harbour, and after they got off the cross-harbour ferry it only took a few minutes for them to reach the restaurant.

“How will we know this guy, or he us?” Duke asked.

“You jokin’?” Dave asked him. “He’s a brown man meeting a black man and a white man in a city of six million yellow people.”

“You gotta point,” Duke agreed amiably.

They saw Yosef Ibrahim as soon as they entered the restaurant, a solitary Indian reading from a pile of newspapers on a table. After introductions and ordering coffee and buns, they talked for a time about Nelson McCabe whom Yosef had known in the past. Then Dave brought up the subject of Tariq.

“Why would you want to know about Tariq Azir?” Yosef asked with a journalist’s frank curiosity.

“His name came up in a discussion about religion we were having, and Nelson said you could tell us more,” Dave said with deceptive frankness in reply.

“So you came all the way to Hong Kong to find out about religion?” Yosef said with mild disbelief.

“Heavens, no!” Dave laughed. “We were on our way to China and it seemed a good idea at the time.”

Yosef’s dark eyes gleamed with quiet satire but he was too orientally polite to push it further.

“I don’t really know a great deal of recent news about Tariq,” he

said. "Most of what I know came from my friendship with him some years ago, when he was an editor of the Tibet Journal in India, before he went off to America. He had just come out of Tibet as a refugee after having spent some years in China, so he was news. Also, he was a fiery revolutionary, a brilliant student of languages, religion and politics, and a pungent writing style, so he made news as well as being news himself. When he came back from America with a doctorate in political science what was surprising was that he had dropped his journalism and all interest in writing, and his active participation in politics. He retired to a monastery in Sikkim—a spiritual retreat of some kind, it was said—and then nothing more was heard of him until news began to emerge that he had gone off to the Middle East to study Islam and revolution there. I never saw him again."

"Do you know what he wanted from revolution in Tibet?" Dave asked. "You say he was a radical activist in India after he came out of Tibet."

"It was an idealistic vision," Yosef said. "He was bitterly opposed to the priesthood, and the feudal aristocracy. He respected the Dalai Lama, but wanted him to be a sort of pope only and not a 'god king'. The parasite priests were to be officially dissolved by a new government decree, and only those with true spiritual, medical or educational qualifications were to be retained. The monasteries were to be deprived of their land-owning and tax-collecting privileges, and become teaching institutions. You could say it was a kind of Buddhist-Democratic vision."

"But after studying in America he dropped it," Dave said musingly. "Interesting. The reports and rumours that we have heard about him, emanating from the Middle East, seemed as if he was seeking some kind of synthesis of religious-political vision."

"One thing I haven't mentioned which might interest you," Yosef said slowly. "Tariq has a sister—"

"Really!" Dave interrupted with surprise. "I never heard that."

"And she's here in Hong Kong," Yosef added.

"What!" Dave exclaimed, his thoughts racing ahead.

"Wait a bit," Yosef continued. "You need to know something

about her before you jump the gun. She and Tariq arrived together in India as refugees from Tibet, and their parents were either dead or left behind in Lhasa. I never knew. But they were very fond of each other, and both were brilliant students. She had also been educated in China, speaks Chinese fluently like Tariq, and both learned Hindi—as well as Sanskrit! But when Tariq went to America to study she went to Europe, sponsored by a wealthy childless Swiss family who adopted her, and she studied there and in France and England. She is fluent in English, French and German as well as Chinese, and she has two doctorates. I don't know how much contact she maintains with Tariq because I only see her when she passes through Hong Kong in her frequent visits to China, where, as far as I know, she keeps in touch with former friends. She lets me know when she is coming here both to and from China, and asks me to reserve accommodation for her, or do some shopping, and we have occasional meals together or do a show during her stay here, depending on what time she has. As I said, she is here now. Will she see you? I don't know, but I'm happy to ask her, if you wish."

"Of course, I wish," said Dave promptly.

"I don't know what her plans are," Yosef said, "so I'll have to 'phone you about when and where—or if!" He laughed. "Give me your number again."

"We're going to be moving around," Dave said smoothly, unwilling to give away their hotel or false identities to a journalist, no matter how friendly. "Why don't I just give you a ring? When would be convenient?"

"If she's in for lunch, then give me a call at the FCC—you know the number there? OK—about one today, and I'll let you know her reaction and where and when to meet."

"Great," Dave said, looking at his watch. "We must get going. We appreciate your help."

When Dave telephoned Yosef at one o'clock as agreed, Yosef informed him that Tariq's sister would meet him in the Mandarin Hotel's "Chelsea Lounge" for tea at four o'clock.

"How will I recognize her?" Dave asked.

Yosef laughed. "She said not to say, nor to tell her how to

recognize you. She wants to see if you recognize each other from what you know. I would guess it's a procedure for her to check you out from how you look and react. She's a very clever woman. I gave her a brief outline of what I know about you, just as I gave you about her, so you start off equal. She said that if you were destined to meet you'd find each other. Inshallah!"

"The will of God," Dave interpreted. "Interesting woman, anyway. Thanks for the introduction."

"My pleasure. Let me know if there's anything else I can do for you - and if you get any news about Tariq."

"Will do," Dave promised.

"Is it OK with you to go on your own to talk with Foxy?" Dave asked Duke. "Or would you rather I 'phone him and arrange another time for us to talk?"

"No, I can talk with him," Duke said. "I'm well-programmed. Just wind me up and point me at him. The point is: will he be able to talk with me?"

"It's the afternoon, so he'll be reasonably sober," Dave laughed. "What we need from him is what he knows about Tibet, or any contacts there that might be useful. He might know about Tariq, but be cautious on that subject. Foxy is sharp—that's how he got the name—and he will pick up the slightest clue. He'll be pumping you anyway, to find out the reason for our visit here. You should have a fun time."

"Thanks," Duke said dryly. "I didn't know you cared. I'm more in danger of having a hangover."

"A headache, maybe; not a hangover," Dave laughed. "You should be back here in a couple of hours. My meeting with Tariq's sister is not 'til four, so I'll be later. We can compare notes then with Li and see what we've got."

*

Duke walked from Maxims to the FCC, as the Foreign Correspondents Club was known to its regulars. Hong Kong was one of his favourite places and he enjoyed mixing with the cosmopolitan crowds in the fabulous downtown Central District. It

was an exciting architectural and ethnic mixture of East and West. The roads, buildings and traffic were western, but the shops, advertising and junks in the harbour were all eastern, The FCC had its customary complement of unusual people—established and aspiring journalists wining and dining government officials, international diplomats and Chinese business taipans, and western and eastern women journalists, wives and girl-friends—only a scattered few now at the tables and bar in post-lunch and mid-afternoon relaxation.

Duke was met at the reception desk by Foxy and, after greetings were exchanged, Foxy asked, “Bar or table?”

“No food,” Duke replied. “Beer’s fine.”

“I wasn’t thinking of eating,” Foxy said humorously, “but will our conversation be innocuous or investigatory? A careless word dropped here can end up on prime-time news.”

“Then make it a table,” Duke said.

“Any special kind of beer?” Foxy asked as they approached the wide semi-circular sweep of the heavily-stocked bar, with white-jacketed Chinese bartenders in attendance. “We have beers for all tastes here.”

“Not warm English beer,” Duke said, with a grimace. “So long as it’s chilled I like it light or dark, lager to Guinness.”

“Where did you pick up a taste for Guinness?” Foxy asked with interest.

“A New York Irish cop I know,” Duke replied.

“Oh, Joe MacGinnis,” Foxy nodded his head.

“How d’you know Joe?” Duke asked him, surprised.

“I’ve followed you fellows’ careers with interest after leaving Hong Kong,” Foxy said cheerfully. “You’re the kind of people who’ll always be into something of interest to a reporter. Which brings me nicely to the question: what are you doing in Hong Kong? The last I knew was that you had been officially ‘requested’ to leave after blowing up half of Kowloon.”

Duke laughed, and nodded his thanks to the Chinese waiter who placed their drinks on the table. “Is that reporter’s license?” he asked lightly. “Just because Dave and I were present in the walled city

when it went up in smoke didn't mean we were responsible."

"No," Foxy riposted sardonically, "but the fact that you happened to be there to conduct a Press Conference, with prepared Press releases, and a hundred or so ex-addicts with musical instruments to play Dixieland jazz, did not indicate an innocent coincidence. Anyway, it was fun while it lasted. And you must have been forgiven by the authorities, because here you are again. Enlighten me. What's so important?"

"Tibet," said Duke, grinning.

"Tibet!" Foxy repeated incredulously, frowning, then looked around to see if he had been overheard. There was no one near or listening, and he relaxed. "Why come to Hong Kong to get to Tibet?"

"Via China," Duke said reasonably. "Chinese planes fly there all the time in case you hadn't noticed."

Foxy looked at him sceptically. "And you expect me to believe that you got special permission from the authorities here so you could fly tourist to Tibet to see the Potala palace?"

"We're harmless," Duke said with false modesty.

"Huh!" grunted Foxy sceptically, "as Stalin said in disbelief to Churchill. You going to lead a revolution in Lhasa?"

"Maybe set up a drug treatment centre?" Duke suggested with a smile.

"Drugs," Foxy said thoughtfully, nodding his head. "Hong Kong to Chengdu. Accessible to Yunnan, Sichuan, the Golden Triangle. Now there's a possibility. Not treatment, of course. But that could be a good cover for some other interesting caper. Do the triads know you're here? Uh-oh! Hold it!" Foxy held up his hand as a thought struck him. "A story has just come through on the wire a few hours ago of a mysterious incident on the Promenade in Kowloon. A half-dozen people shot or wounded by two unknown foreigners—who then disappeared. I bet I could identify those two foreigners." He looked at Duke challengingly.

"I bet you couldn't prove it," Duke said lightly, smiling. "And I know you wouldn't accuse innocent individuals, would you?"

Foxy gazed at Duke thoughtfully. "Would I get anywhere if I pushed the envelope on this?"

"If you mean by that, would a little judicious blackmail get you any more information on that subject from me, the answer is 'No'", Duke said bluntly.

"Your heart is pure", suggested Foxy mockingly.

"My lips are sealed," Duke said blandly. "I'm just hurt to think you would suspect us of being involved in a public disturbance within a day or two of our arrival".

"The official explanation is that it was a triad confrontation of some kind," Foxy said slowly. "The triads are the people who would know of your arrival as soon as you got off the 'plane here. The question is: was it revenge for the past, or is it an indication of a new caper in the present?"

"I don't know," Duke said. "Should I worry about it?"

Foxy contemplated Duke in silence for a few moments then seemed to make up his mind. "O.K." he said, signalling to a waiter. "Same again. What do you want from me? Information on Tibet is not my strong suit. My folks were missionaries in the east coast of China. But I do know someone who can give you information. You know Van Franklin of the Times? No?" Foxy laughed knowingly. "You're in for a surprise - and a treat. Don't go away. Drink up."

He rose from the table and disappeared round the curve of the bar shutting off the view of the far side of the room. When he re-appeared he was accompanied by a very tall, striking-looking black woman. Foxy smiled and introduced her to Duke. "Van— for Evangeline—Franklin of the New York Times. Duke Buckingham of the Kowloon walled city. Van's folks, like mine, were missionaries in China—hence the Evangeline—but in West China on the borders with East Tibet. Van learned Tibetan as a kid there and she has kept up some of her contacts and all of her interests since. Right, Van?"

"Phew! Should I bow or what?" Van laughed. "Duke, I'm not just pleased to meet you, I'm glad that you are one of the very few men I can look up to." She tilted her six-foot figure backwards to exaggerate her size compared with Duke. "You like the ambiguity of that remark? There's more where it came from, bro'. So, you're the mad bomber?" She nodded approvingly

Duke had got to his feet as they approached, and he was still

adjusting to his surprise at Foxy's journalist contact being a woman —and gloriously-shaped, sharp-witted and good-looking black woman at that. "Modesty forbids me to respond to that," he said. "Have you time to talk?" He pulled out a chair and held it for her while she sat down. "A black woman journalist with missionary parents and speaking Tibetan is unusual - even for Foxy," he said.

"Foxy has all kinds of contacts - mostly disreputable like himself, but occasionally reputable. So, what is your interest in Tibet— or does your modesty forbid you answering that, too? Taking on the Chinese army instead of Chinese triads or Colombian drug cartels?"

"How did you learn—" Duke began, and was cut off by her rich laugh.

"Hey, you and your fellow-dude were all over the media a year or two back, remember—blowing up money-laundering warehouses and international criminals. You're really too modest! So, again, what's a modest dude like you going to do in Tibet?"

"I'm here looking for information, not providing it!" Duke protested, grinning at her.

"So, give a little to get a little—or give a lot to get a lot," she replied and waited.

Duke was beginning to wish he had waited for Dave to handle the interview, and then he was glad that he hadn't as he prepared to do battle with this gorgeous black journalist. Settle down and enjoy yourself, he admonished himself.

"Casing it for a possible drug treatment centre," he said lightly.

"Pass. Try again," she said promptly. "I'm cute; not stupid."

"Investigating reports of huge increases of drugs passing through Tibet from Burma, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Russia to various unspecified destinations," Duke said briskly, as if he had made up his mind to be frank. "That's as much as I can tell you at this stage. If we come back this way we should have more."

Van and Foxy looked at him thoughtfully then seemed to accept it as a possibility. Duke schooled himself to remain relaxed and sincere. "Now tell me about Tibet," he said to Van.

"What I can tell you is not much use in any drug distribution jig," she said. "Where my folks were was north of Sichuan, in Qinghai Province. Tibet to us was the eastern region of the great Chang Tang,

or northern plains. It was an awesome and dramatically beautiful territory, totally mind-blowing in height and distances and climate. You never saw such empty vastness, savage landscapes and colourful tribes.”

Her eyes were unfocussed on Duke as her mind ranged backwards to recall her childhood. “There were herds of thousands of antelope, wild yaks and wild asses foraging for food and water or on migratory journeys. The northern part of the Chang Tang—that is north of 32 degrees latitude, like San Francisco and Madrid, you won’t believe—is mostly uninhabited and covers about 200,000 square miles, larger than California or Germany; few people, no roads; altitude average 15,000 feet, blizzards raging, temperatures 40 degrees below and more; rainfall between 2-5 inches a year, with incredible plateaus of deserts or tundra or snow. No great rivers except for the sources of the Yangtze, Yellow and Brahmaputra, but many magnificent lake basins without outlets, separated by savage snow-covered ranges of mountains of 20,000 feet and more. In a word: ‘awesome’. In two words: ‘awesome grandeur.’”

Duke gazed at her animated face in admiration. “It must be something to have left such an impression on you as a child.”

She shrugged. “It’s not all memory, of course. It’s a combination of that and later reading—and wishing to return someday. Give me a story-line for my editor and I’ll join you. But, as I said, you’re not likely to be in that area for drug-trafficking.”

“What about clothing?” Duke asked, ignoring her jibe.

“Lots of woollies, thermals, skins, furs, anything to keep out the killing Siberian chill and icy winds; your exposed skin can split like a tomato, your breath freezes in icicles around your face, your ears and toes and fingers drop off with frostbite, you can go blind with snow-glare. You can go for days without a sign of water, and when you do find it is locked in ice, or too brackish with mineral deposits or saline to drink. But the lakes are breath-taking in their size and beauty. Not many drug-traffickers hanging around,” she repeated the variation provocatively.

“Well, we’ll just have to see when we get there,” Duke said blandly. “What can you tell me about the government set-up there?”

You know, what can we expect from police, customs, bureaucrats—are they bullying, corrupt, obstructive, or what?”

Van’s laughter was unrestrained, drawing attention from other diners, and when she stopped, she said only: “Non-existent.”

Duke looked at her blankly. “What d’you mean, non-existent? Every country has them—like fleas, flags and fornication.”

Van laughed and shook her head negatively. “Yeah, they’ve got these alright, but no police, customs or bureaucrats. To understand Tibet you have to go back a thousand years. You now know something of the size, configuration and climate of the country, but the demographic structure is different from anything you have ever known. Until the recent Chinese occupation of the country Tibet was ruled in much the same way as it had been since the time of Genghiz Khan in the thirteenth century. It was he and his Mongol descendants who gave to Tibet its three provinces of the central and western U-Tsang, and the two eastern, Kham and Amdo, introduced Islam and shamanism, gave the Dalai Lama his name, and the sixty or more Kham and Amdo tribes their warrior heredity.

“The western province of U-Tsang remained a naturally peaceful people, developed the three main streams of Tibet’s Lamaistic Buddhism—the indigenous Sakya occult form, the polyglot ‘Red Hats’, and the reformed ‘Yellow Hats’. The government of Tibet was a loose and ruling theocratic mixture of these three elements, plus the leading families of aristocrats—except in the two eastern provinces of Kham and Amdo. There the sixty-plus tribes, like the Scottish and Irish clans, loosely accepted the domination of the monasteries but rejected the rule of the feudal central government aristocrats—again much the same as the Scots and Irish did with England. They fought under their own clan chieftains, and then on occasions joined together to fight against the central Lhasa government, when they weren’t fighting against the Chinese.

“That was the situation, literally, until the Chinese Liberation Army occupied the country in the 1950s. The nearest the Lhasa government could get to ‘governing’ the Kham and Amdo tribes was Chamdo, on the edge of the Kham and Amdo provinces, with no influence at all among the tribes. Strictly speaking, the Lhasa feudal

families only ruled in the western U-Tsang province. That is what the Chinese now designate as the "Tibet autonomous region" — and they just annexed the whole Kham and Amdo regions and tribes within their Sichuan and Xinghai provinces to include in their version of China's empire. They are still trying to impose their authority on that region and the tribes, with no great success, so you will find neither Tibetan nor Chinese officials throughout that region—or, at least, none with any influence on the local peoples. So, no police, no customs, no bureaucrats; you make your own law —if you survive! That's why I doubt your story about drug-traffickers being there. The Tibetans take drugs, but have never traded in them."

Duke shook his head in amazement, letting Van's crack about his drug story pass. What had he and Dave let themselves in for in travelling through this territory looking for a legendary "Shambhala?"

There were no more awkward moments as they discussed travel in China to reach Tibet, personal experiences and journalistic gossip. When Duke looked at his watch eventually and said he would have to be going, Van asked him how long he was going to be in Hong Kong.

"A couple of days or so," Duke replied vaguely. "It depends. If I've got any more questions can I get in touch with you?"

"Sure," Van said promptly. "Here at the FCC always finds me. Or I can give you my home number." She pulled out her address book. "Can I have your number?" Duke was momentarily flummoxed. He couldn't give her the hotel number because he was registered there under a false name. "Why don't I just ring you?" he tried to recover as he noted her sceptical smile. "We're out a lot chasing around, and the hotel people are not good at taking messages. But I really would like to get together with you. No business—just a getting-to-know-you date."

"I'd like that," Van said. Rising to her feet, she shook hands with Duke and said, "I really hope to see you again." Turning to Foxy she added, "See you, Foxy."

"Take care, Van."

“Nice lady,” Duke said to Foxy, as they walked to the exit of the FCC.

“One of the best,” Foxy agreed; “tops at her job, too. Half the guys in here would wed or bed her in a minute, but she’s not interested—married to her job, to coin a phrase. I warn you.”

“If they’re journalists I guess they’d rather bed than wed her,” Duke laughed. “You aren’t known for your fidelity to spouses.”

“At least I haven’t been requested to leave Hong Kong—yet”, Foxy retorted, punching Duke in the shoulder. “Keep in touch.”

“Yeah, will do. See you.”

*

Dave sat in one of the padded leather bench seats of the Chelsea Lounge of the Mandarin Hotel’s mezzanine floor, watching the ebb and flow of the cosmopolitan men and women in the reception area beneath while listening to the tea-time music being played by the excellent Philippine musicians. He had decided, after discussing it with Duke and Li, to see Tariq’s sister on his own—he remembered now that he had forgotten to ask her name. It was going to be a difficult meeting, because of what he could not say—he was on a mission that could involve the killing of her brother! How was he going to explain his interest in her brother without revealing details of that mission?

As he mentally sifted through the options his eyes casually ranged over the women standing or circling in the foyer beneath, or climbing the wide sweep of stairway to the Chelsea Lounge. How would he recognize her—a Tibetan Buddhist-Muslim with Chinese Communist education, Indian further education and European finishing? There were several groups with Western, Asian and Eurasian women in a variety of clothing styles meeting, chatting and circling in the main foyer below him.

Then his eye followed the movements and glances of the women as they stopped talking and centred on a new arrival coming through the swing doors into the foyer. A startlingly beautiful Asian woman had entered and walked towards the stairway leading to the

mezzanine floor. She was taller than the average Chinese woman, dressed in a simple but form-fitting pale-green Chinese mandarin-style cheongsam with high Chinese collar, dark-green jade drop ear-rings, and a single dark-green, intricately-carved jade brooch above her full breasts. The effect of both the simplicity and artistic excellence directed the eye inevitably to the classic oriental beauty of her face. Perfectly heart-shaped, with pale ivory skin, her slanted eyes were emphasized by the intense black arching eyebrows and luxurious, black, centre-parted, fall of hair, fringed on her forehead, and cascading glossily to her shoulders. Her mouth, lightly lipped-red, was small, slightly parted in a smile and dimpled at the corners as she acknowledged individuals who moved to let her through. As she climbed the stairway the cheongsam split at the sides to half-way up her thigh, revealing slim, well-formed legs moving with the flowing elegance of one schooled to walk and pose in front of people and cameras.

She must have known she was the cynosure of all eyes, but she moved slowly through the couches and tables after the stairway, past the musicians, casually turning her head from left to right as if looking for an empty seat or an acquaintance. She was still some distance away from Dave when her eyes fell on him, lingered briefly —and moved on. He felt a sudden lurch of disappointment. He had been certain that this was Tariq's sister. Then, as she came closer, her glance returned to Dave, held his gaze, and she moved purposefully towards him.

"Mr DeMoss?" she asked, her voice a sultry and husky mixture of faint accent and musical timbre.

Dave stood to his feet, and found himself looking straight into her eyes. His mind ridiculously registered that she had been wearing high heels, making her as tall as himself, while he smiled and said apologetically, "I forgot to ask Yosef for your name."

"I have several names," she laughed; a full, unself-conscious response to Dave's discomfiture. "I have a Tibetan name, a Muslim name, a Chinese name, and a Swiss name. Which one would you like to know?"

"Please sit down," Dave indicated the leather bench-seat opposite his own, and she slid into it gracefully, placing an

exotically ornamented purse on the low table between them. "Tell me them all," Dave said, "and I'll choose one."

"My Tibetan name is Deki Tering," she responded, her remarkable dark-brown and yellow-flecked cat's-eyes gleaming with secret delight. "My Muslim name is Fatima Azir. My Chinese name is Fa Teh-ma—fairly obvious why. My Swiss name is Fleur Girard. My Swiss family-by-adoption thought I looked like a flower," she explained with a small smile.

"I like either Deki Tering or Fleur Girard," Dave said slowly. "They suit your exotic mix of oriental and occidental characteristics."

"It may not be necessary to call me either," she said calmly. "Our meeting may be short, or unmemorable, or even unpleasant, enough so that we would prefer not to remember."

The arrival of the waiter to take their order saved Dave from making an immediate rejoinder to the challenging statement. When they had given their orders for a pot of Darjeeling tea and a plate of cakes, Dave had time to recover from his surprise at her frankness.

"Why do you want to know about my brother, Mr DeMoss?" she asked, her attractive voice neutral but her remarkable cat-like eyes reflecting an intensity of interest and suspicion.

Dave was again caught off-guard by her abrupt question. He stalled. "I thought Chinese custom was to approach a topic slowly and obliquely," he smiled.

"I am not Chinese," she stated coolly. "I am a Tibetan who has been educated in China and several other countries, including the West, and who has two doctorates in European and Islamic law. I do not need to cultivate or practice prevarication unless professionally desirable. Why are you having difficulty answering my question?"

Dave took his time, aware that her unembarrassed gaze never left his face. This was a remarkably intelligent woman. He had forgotten her two law degrees. "Forgive me," he said finally, "for both the prevarication and implied but unintended disparagement. It was thoughtless. May we start again?"

She nodded slightly, but did not smile or reflect concession in any other way.

“The full story would take a long time to tell,” Dave said, picking his words carefully, “but a brief version is that, during the war in Vietnam, I had a unique life-changing experience which resulted in my making a fairly committed study of religion, primarily the teachings of Jesus. This led me to devote myself to the treatment of drug addictions and other forms of socially disadvantaged conditions. It also led me into”—he hesitated, then continued—“confrontational experiences through which I was led into even greater investigations of the nature and purposes of God.”

He stopped to let the waiter lay out the tea and cakes and withdraw before continuing, as Tariq’s sister poured tea into the cups in front of them. “It was against this background that I learned of your brother, and some of his experiences. It intrigued me that apparently he was also caught up in political and military situations as I had been, and also that he seemed to be searching in revolutionary processes for religious solutions or, more specifically, spiritual answers. I decided I wanted to meet him to discuss mutual experiences.”

Was it his imagination, or had she relaxed somewhat? Dave thought. He had spoken truthfully, but had left out what he could not reveal.

“You travelled half-way round the world,” she said neutrally, “and, I understand from Yosef, you are about to travel across ‘the roof of the world’ in Tibet, seeking to meet my brother to discuss spiritual values? Do I understand you correctly?”

“If that is an attempt to reduce my explanation to absurdity for the sake of argument then it is less than worthy of you,” Dave said sharply. “You may or may not know that Jesus taught a parable in which he said a wise man would give all he possessed to buy a field in which was a priceless pearl. The Queen of Sheba travelled across Africa to Israel to hear King Solomon’s words of wisdom. Do I really need to labour the point that spiritual values are worth any amount of physical commitment?”

“I apologize,” she said immediately. “It was the lawyer in me, scoring points. But, having said that, and accepting for the moment—with some reservations—your explanation, I still feel it lacks, not

truthfulness necessarily, but depth; certainly significance—if not importance. There is some essential element lacking. Tell me, are you married?”

Again Dave was confused by her thinking and approach. He thought of his decision to be as truthful as possible, and said, “No. I was married—I met my wife here in Hong Kong—but over a year ago she and my five-year-old son were murdered. It was one of the traumatic experiences I had in mind, which I mentioned earlier.”

“I’m sorry to cause you any distress,” she offered sincerely. “I wasn’t prying or being mischievous. I was trying to gauge the measure of your commitment to this spiritual odyssey you describe. In other words, if you had been married, and had children, if you had left them behind to find your spiritual answers.”

“As it happened, I was free to come,” Dave said quietly.

She picked up her cup and took a swallow, and a bite of cake, thinking as she chewed, but her gaze never left Dave. Now that Dave had established a rapport with her he was more comfortable to sit contemplating her stunning combination of loveliness and formidable intelligence.

“I love my brother very dearly,” she said at last. “We shared many experiences together, many of them unpleasant as well as pleasant, in Tibet and China and India. After he left for the United States, and I left for Europe, I never saw him for more than five years when he returned to India and we met there. He was different—and here it gets difficult to explain. While he was in America he was befriended by a devoutly Christian family, and for the first time he began a serious study of Christianity. He did not become a Christian in any formal sense, but what he learned definitely changed his focus in some way difficult to explain. It altered the emphasis of his previously held religious-political views: instead of these being primarily politically and socially revolutionary they were a mixture of spiritual, political and social revolution as if he was pursuing a synthesis of some kind.

“What you have to understand about Tariq is that, while he was always extreme in his revolutionary theories, he was never fanatical—which always implies some blinkered bias. He was against all

forms of priesthood—whether Buddhist, Islamic, Hindu or Christian—because he believed they were always parasitic, oppressive, and ultimately institutionally self-centred and not God-centred. He believed in individual accountability to God, as did all ancient prophets—including Jesus and Muhammad. Do you know my brother has no possessions? If they begin to accumulate for any reason, he gives them away. He seeks only to have the clothes he wears and whatever Scriptures he is studying at the time.”

She stopped talking as consciousness caught up with memory, and she took a deep breath and smiled apologetically, her cheeks dimpling deeply and her smile revealing her perfect teeth. “I was lost in recollection there.”

Dave noted that the beautiful features had subtly changed expressively from early pleasure to later sadness like a cloud moving across the sun. Her remarkably flecked and slanted eyes had become intent again. “I asked myself what you are probably asking yourself, Mr DeMoss,” she said. “Why should someone so spiritually motivated involve himself with dubious international financiers, political leaders and nuclear scientists such as reports indicate?”

The incisive edge to her slightly-accented voice, which was apparent when she was being “lawyerly”, was now modulated by a tinge of questioning sadness. Dave had been so caught with the study of her features and responses that it took a few moments for the significance of what she had just said to dawn on him. She was more or less indicating that she knew—or was guessing?—Tariq was investigating the nuclear threat! Should he admit that he knew of Tariq’s involvement in nuclear politics as well as science? Or should he attempt to pretend ignorance with this perceptive woman? He decided on frankness, but first to get rid of formality.

“Have you decided what I should call you?” he asked, and he saw a gleam of amusement—or was it appreciation—in her eyes.

“Since you have been reasonably truthful with me, and are American”, she smiled, “you may call me Fleur. Only Tibetans call me Deki.”

“My name is Dave,” he said, “if we are going to be truthful with each other and expect an extended acquaintance. You are right: I did,

and do, ask myself that question about your brother's involvement with the dubious kind of people with whom he associates from time to time. What does he say when you ask him?"

"I have rarely seen him over the past few years," she replied quietly, her face clouding. "When we meet he is as friendly and loving a brother as ever, but he does not discuss the reasons for his activities. To be fair to him, he seemed to be more reticent than secretive; as if he was uncertain rather than feeling guilty. Tariq was always fairly transparent, not because he was naive but because he was supremely confident in his beliefs and practices."

"I gather he is a very charismatic personality?" Dave inquired.

"Yes," she laughed, the shadow lifting from her face. "I think it's because he is essentially a humble person, intellectually gifted and deeply spiritual without cant—qualities not often found in one person. He is also very handsome, always dressed simply in white clothing whatever the occasion, as part of his beliefs. Are you a spy for your government, Dave?"

The rapid switch of subject did not disconcert Dave so much this time, as he was becoming aware of her lawyerly tactics, but he took time to reply. "No," he said, "but I am personally responding to an official request to find out what your brother is doing." There! That was as close as he could go to honesty if he wanted to retain this clever woman's confidence. One lie, he was convinced, and she would be up and gone.

"How do you expect to do this?" she asked interestedly. "Fly to Tibet, travel for weeks to a rumoured hideout that nobody knows, knock on the doors of a nuclear factory or laboratory and ask to see Tariq Azir?"

"Simplified," Dave agreed, "but that about describes it. Except that you left God out of it."

"What has God to do with it?" she asked, puzzled, not sarcastic.

"Everything, in the final analysis," Dave answered her. "It appears it's your brother's belief and motivation, as it is mine. I believe my meeting with your brother is as inevitable as my meeting here today with you, because God has ordained it. Yet this morning I did not even know you existed."

"True," she admitted, with a slow smile of approval; "nor I you. Is that how destiny works?"

"I don't know about destiny," Dave replied, "but I'm constantly surprised by the ways in which God works. Destiny usually implies some kind of inevitability, whereas with God there is always a purpose that can be understood."

"Will your God want you to kill Tariq?" she asked in the same conversational tone of voice, without missing a beat. Only her expressive eyes reflected her sharpened interest.

This time Dave was rendered speechless. It was a possibility discussed fleetingly with Duke and Li, but how did you discuss it with the man's sister? He groaned inwardly as he struggled to evade it. "That is my problem," he found himself admitting.

He thought at first she had not heard him, because she gave no sign, only the lovely face still and pale and cold as a sculpture as she waited for his evasion or admission. Then, while he paused to sort out his reply, she said simply, "Take me with you."

"What?" Dave asked, stunned.

"Take me with you to Tibet," she repeated, her face coming alive. She leaned across the low table, her hand out in entreaty. "Please?"

"But how -" he began, and then stopped as the confused thoughts sorted themselves into a growing conviction.

"Listen," she said urgently. "It's a reasonable proposal. You will need a Tibetan guide and interpreter with you. You will need someone who knows the country and customs and people. You will need, finally, someone who will get you to Tariq. I can do all of these."

"But why?" Dave struggled to sort out the implications as the suggestion increasingly appealed to him. He was aware, however, that it was his instinct rather than his intelligence that was persuading him. The most confusing element was Fleur's loveliness and the attraction that he felt: was it due to her tactics or his libido? Yet the idea had its possibilities.

She was still looking at him, as if reading the tumult of his thoughts, giving him time. So it wasn't seduction, Dave thought; otherwise she would have pressed her advantage while he was uncertain.

"Because," she said at last, slowly spacing the words, "I do not want Tariq killed. Perhaps I can persuade him to stop whatever it is that is causing you to consider killing him. If the journey to confront him is so important to you, then it is equally important to me to be there."

"But you said yourself that the conditions in Tibet are difficult," he reminded her; "and it has been a long time since you were there." He hesitated to say that but, sitting there in front of him, she looked like the delicate flower after which she had been named—groomed for the sophistication of salons, and not for the icy rigors in the search for Shambhala.

She did not try to deny the impression she knew she conveyed, but admitted, "I will only be uncomfortable for a little while. I know what is ahead, and I will adjust more quickly than you will. I lived at that altitude and in those conditions for many years, remember. And it is a small price to pay to fight for my brother's life. What is the alternative? For me to sit and wait, watching newspapers, listening to radio and television, day after day for weeks or months?"

Dave felt his resolve weakening in the face of her rising impassioned plea. "We are about to leave any day now," he said, aware that he was indicating his agreement "A couple of days, three at the most. You have no gear."

"I can get all I need in China and Tibet," she declared confidently, her eyes gleaming with her building excitement as she sensed his approval. "How do you think I managed when I was studying in China and returning each year to Tibet? You must agree. Please again?"

"I have two friends who must also agree," Dave told her warningly. "One American, one Chinese."

"I know," she said, surprising him again. "Yosef told me about them, and a little about your adventures. But tell them I'm not asking a favour. I'm making a sensible proposition which is in all our interests. I can make an important contribution, and not be an extra burden. Telephone them now."

Dave shook his head emphatically. "No. I need to talk it over with them face-to-face; not hit them with a 'phone-call. They'll think I'm mad as it is."

"Then how about this," she said. "I have two tickets for a music performance tonight. I was going to ask Yosef to go with me, when he sprung this meeting with you on me. See your friends now, then come to the concert and have dinner with me. You can tell me your decision then, and we can discuss final arrangements."

Dave had to smile at her electrifying vivacity. She had swung from lawyerly incisiveness to sisterly concern to travel excitement with roller-coasting change of pace. "You seem very certain that they will agree," he said quizzically.

"It's a matter of destiny," she laughed. "You said it earlier. No, you said God, didn't you? I will accept either or, better still, both together. You know what Shakespeare said in Julius Caesar:

'There is a tide in the affairs of men,
Which, taken at its flood, leads on to fortune;
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and in miseries:
And we must take the current when it serves,
Or lose the ventures.'

She took his hesitation to mean continuing reluctance. "Are you embarrassed or upset because I take the initiative in inviting you to dinner and a concert?" she asked disbelievingly. "I thought you Americans approved of women's liberation? Or are you just a macho male defending your territory? If so, just ask me out tonight and I'll accept." She gave an uninhibited musical laugh, which caused a few people to look over at her curiously.

"I'm neither upset nor embarrassed," Dave protested, smiling. "I'm just sitting here thinking that you're a mystifying mixture of oriental and occidental, one minute all aggressive questioning, the next all womanly concern, then proposing dangerous adventure, and topping it off with an invitation to a concert and dinner." He refrained from mentioning the additional disconcerting fact of her startling beauty.

"I did my doctorate in Islamic law, the sharia, so that I could take up the issue of woman's rights," she said seriously, "which the

Muslim fundamentalist clerics are illegally abrogating for their own vested religious interests. I am not a professional feminist. I am a virgin by personal choice, and not by social or religious persuasion. I will be happy to hand my body over to a man in submission, according to the Koran, a man who will be prepared to hand his body over to me in love. That is, love as your Christian Paul of Tarsus, describes it in his wonderful prose-poem."

What would Duke make of this woman was Dave's sudden thought? It had taken Duke a little while to get used to the vivacious Claudia Rossi, but now he thought the sun rose and set on her. Perhaps there was a chance he'd agree.

"What time is the concert?" he asked.

"Seven-thirty".

"I will meet you at the concert hall at seven-fifteen. We can decide after the concert where to eat. All right?"

She gave him her unrestrained brilliant smile, and slid out of the bench-seat to stand beside him. She leaned over and brushed his cheek with a light kiss.

"When I arrived here I thought it possible I would only remain a few minutes," she said quietly. "Now, we may spend the next few weeks together, and I like the thought. Inshallah, Dave."

"Go with God, Fleur," he responded smilingly.

*

Dave returned quickly to the hotel hoping to catch Li with Duke so they could talk over the remarkable developments of the past couple of hours. They were just completing the list of Duke's recommended requirements when Dave walked in on them and told them of his meeting.

"This paragon of oriental beauty and occidental education wants to go with us on an impossible mission to an impossible country to do an impossible job," Duke said sardonically, after listening silently throughout. "Now I've heard everything." He lifted his eyes heavenwards, and said, "Take me home, God."

Dave laughed at his reaction. "Hey, chill it, Duke. It's not as bad

as that. She is a Tibetan, she has travelled as a refugee across Tibet being chased by the Chinese army. And, don't forget, she is Tariq's sister. She gives us an edge."

"Why don't we just take a film team and do another 'Lost Horizon'—beautiful women who are ageless in a remote Tibetan Shangri-la valley?" Duke grumbled. "It can't lose. It's just not serious, man."

Dave turned to Li. "What do you think, Li? Duke is too macho to think clearly about this. Give him time."

Li was not to be hurried. He thought for a few moments then said, "My first reaction was the same as Duke's. But I am having second thoughts. May I ask you a very personal—and very un-Chinese—question?"

Dave guessed what it might be. He had thought it himself. "Certainly," he agreed.

"Do you have a personal attachment to the lady?" Li said slowly, choosing his words carefully.

"If you mean, was I aware of a physical attraction and response, the answer is 'Yes'," Dave replied carefully. "If you mean, was I aware that she might be using this as a means of infiltrating our group for her own purposes, the answer is also 'Yes'. If you mean, have I allowed it to affect my judgment, the answer is 'No'."

"Thank you," Li said politely. "I presumed on our friendship, and I apologize. But it was necessary for me to know to arrive at my own judgment. I agree that she may join us. The advantages,"—he turned and explained to Duke—"outweigh any disadvantages. We do need a guide and interpreter. Tibetan women travel in their caravans all over Tibet with their men. And the clinching argument in my view is that she is Tariq's sister. That is the first link we have with him and Shambhala."

"Like the Trojan horse in Greece," Duke said satirically. "What if she takes her brother's side in this proposed family confrontation?"

"That's a good point, Duke," Dave agreed. "All I can say at this stage is that she is as baffled as we are by Tariq's apparent contradictions. No question she loves her brother but she doesn't see him launching a nuclear missile and a chance of destroying the world. The brother she knows is not one who would be party to a criminal enterprise let alone a world destroying plot."

"Did you discuss the project with her?" Duke asked incredulously.

"No," Dave said emphatically. "She is a very intelligent woman and I reckon she just added up our involvement, our presence here in Hong Kong, and our interest in Tariq, to mean that we are likely to be investigating the rumours about his nuclear and Central Asian involvement. I seriously doubt whether she knows anything about the Janus Club or Chinese Muslim involvement. She gave no hint of that. Nor in my opinion does she know definitely about the specific threat to Israel or possibility of world destruction."

"Well, on condition that she's your protégé and your problem," Duke grinned as he capitulated, "I agree to her coming with us."

Li nodded. "Then I will arrange her papers. First problem for you, Dave: how is she to be designated? In Kangding on the Tibetan border she could be registered as a Tibetan guide, but not here in Hong Kong on Chinese official papers that could be open to scrutiny and discovery."

Duke laughed. "How about 'Mrs Miller'—or is it 'Mrs Wilson'? What is your cover name, Dave? I never remember which is which for us."

Dave was about to brush away Duke's jesting comment when Li nodded and said. "That's very good. An American who is married to a Tibetan refugee in the United States is not unusual. It won't attract suspicion. Is that OK, Dave?"

"What choice do I have?" he asked ruefully. "It makes sense, I agree, but it might be embarrassing for her." He grinned at a sudden thought. "But she hasn't much choice either, has she?"

"Problems, problems," Duke wagged his finger accusingly at Dave. "I told you. You know what the Frenchies say—*cherchay la fem*, or something? 'Look for the dame'. Tell me, is she really good-looking?"

"Stunning," Dave conceded.

"There you go," said Duke, laughing. "Remember the words: 'It's hard to fight an enemy who is locked into your head'. Have fun, dude."

Dave, dressed in the single dark suit, white shirt and striped tie he had brought with him, was reading the concert program in Hong Kong's concert hall venue when he became conscious of a stir among the gathered people, and a drop in the volume of talk noise. He looked up and saw the people parting to let through a vision of loveliness in white knee-length, figure-hugging off-the-shoulder, plunging décolletage that was Fleur. Her lustrous black hair was different from the afternoon, now swept up into a loose coil on top of her head and held in place with a jewelled circle-clasp that was matched in a jewelled collar around her neck and bracelet around her wrist, all sparkling iridescently. She held a sequined white evening dress clasp-bag in one white-gloved hand; the gloves were of the same material as the dress and reached from hand to elbow. Her pale ivory skin was high-lighted with light black pencilling of eyebrows, kohl eye-lids and red lipstick.

She had eyes only for Dave. "Tell me," she said, as she reached him.

"You are beautiful beyond words," he said sincerely

"Thank you, but not that; about Tibet."

"They agreed," he told her.

She kissed him lightly on the lips. "That's for being a knight in my cause. I don't do that all the time," she said, "so you can now relax and enjoy the music."

The first half of the concert was a performance of Liszt's Piano Concerto No.2 in A major by a renowned visiting international pianist. Dave had not been to a concert in years, much as he loved music, the reason being partly because the Adullam treatment centre was located in the Vermont mountains, and partly because he was satisfied with the magnificent sound-system that Duke had installed to play discs and cassettes. But he acknowledged that there was really nothing to compare with a live performance, an appreciative audience—and a beautiful companion.

Fleur was absorbed in the music from the first note. As the opening movement of adagio sostenuto assai with its contrapuntal cadenza merged into the second allegro agitato assai movement, with its hauntingly beautiful theme, Dave could feel Fleur's interest

and appreciation in the rise and fall of her breathing next to him, and the slight movements of her arm against his. As the main theme was introduced by the piano he saw her fingers clench on her knee, and he wished he could see the expression on her face, the light of appreciation in her cat-like eyes.

When the piano was joined by the viola in a heart-tugging duet, Fleur held out her hand to grasp Dave's, her fingers intertwined with his as the music dialogued between piano and orchestra around the repeated haunting theme. When the concerto moved towards its climax, with piano and strings and flute, and, finally, the whole orchestra in a glorious crescendo of *allegro animato*, his fingers were almost numb with the intensity of her grip.

Fleur was unexpectedly quiet as they made their way at the interval through the chattering groups of people crowding the passage-ways and bar. "May we go outside to a veranda or concourse?" she asked Dave, and he agreed.

When they had passed through the swing-doors on to the deserted moonlit concourse overlooking the coloured neon-blazing harbour before them, Fleur took his hand and said quietly, "Would you mind missing the second half?"

"No," Dave agreed, mildly surprised after her intense reaction to the first-half performance. "Are you ready to eat?"

She shook her head. "No, I have something important to tell you." She turned to face him, her face so close to his he could see the reflected lights of the harbour in her almond eyes. "I want—no, I must watch the imperative—I would like you to return to the hotel with me. No, wait!" she said, as Dave started to speak. "It is important I say it all, and you listen closely, because I will not be able to say it again.

"During the concert, when I took your hand at the theme duet, I gave myself to you in the presence of God. Wait, please," she urged, as she saw him about to speak again. "Let me finish first. It was as much a surprise to me as it is now to you, totally unexpected. I came here tonight anticipating just a pleasant social evening with you. I have never had a spiritual experience like that. When I linked my fingers with yours I was in the presence of God accepting you as my

husband before Him in an indissoluble marriage. So, I would like to offer myself to you as wife tonight in a union before God. I am not just proposing a night of sex, or a romantic commitment to a mutually exciting and interesting relationship. I am proposing nothing less than a permanent union in the presence of God, for better or worse, in sickness or health, as long as we both live.”

Her musically husky voice was solemn, her lovely gaze serene as her gaze locked with his, her earlier regal demeanour now both entreating and humble. She was neither embarrassed nor apologetic, only deeply concerned to be understood.

Dave was conscious of something momentous happening inside himself. Ever since he had discovered the bodies of his murdered wife and son he had taken refuge from the frightening urge to commit violence against the perpetrators by erecting a restraining barrier to his surging emotions. He had been able to survive the funeral and its aftermath of loneliness and grief by silently acknowledging the condolences of friends, the sympathies of acquaintances and neighbours. But the price had been an insatiable ache, an unappeasable void, a permanent blunting of all feeling, in the presence of others. Only Duke had been aware that he was only a hardened shell of the man he had been.

Now he felt a splintering of that emotional wall internally, a great surge of pent-up emotion demanding to be unleashed, like the waters behind the sluice-gates of a dam. He trembled with the intensity of urge to respond, but could find no words. He could only lean towards Fleur, drawing her into an embrace, and placing his lips on hers in a long tender kiss. She seemed to understand his reflective and undemonstrative silence as she placed a finger on his lips, then took his arm as they walked downstairs and out of the concert hall.

They called a cab and drove to her hotel without speaking, content to sit holding hands. In the room, when she had closed the door, Fleur said to Dave, “I would like you to understand that, although I am taking initiatives tonight, it is not on the basis of gender equality, or sexual lasciviousness, or undue nervousness. When I agreed before God tonight to give myself to you, it was with

the consciousness that the union he required demanded that you know me as I am, in the short time that may be available to us. I am under no illusions about the dangers of the journey we take. When you feel free to talk I will give way to you, for I understand that both Islam and Christianity command submission of wives to husbands, and I have no problem with that. They also command love and respect from us both, and I expect that.

"In order that there may be no misunderstandings between us, and so that we both understand our responsibilities as man and wife before God in this unique situation, I suggest we read about those from the Bible and the Koran. If you have no objection or alternative, I would like you to read the words of Paul of Tarsus about love. I will read from the Koran. Then I would like to pledge myself to you before God for ever, and you do the same to me.

"Oh, Dave, Dave," she suddenly cried out. "It sounds so stiff and formal and I am just aching to throw myself at you in total unspeaking abandonment. It appears as if I am a highly shameless virgin who has waited until I am past thirty years of age for a God-destined lover. But it's just that I want to remember tonight as I will remember every note of that Liszt Concerto for as long—or as short—as I live. Talk to me, my love. I am talked dry. I weep, not with sadness but with happiness." She held out her hands to him in mute appeal, tears dropping down her cheeks.

Dave held her in his arms until her sobs subsided, and when she lifted her face from his shoulder he wiped away her tears.

"It's not that I have nothing to say," he said, stroking her hair." It's because the words are so inadequate. Snatches of poems, or verses of Scriptures, come to mind, but they would be another man's expression, and artificial. I am overwhelmed by the immensity of your love and the intensity of my own feelings in such a short time. I did not know of your personal transaction with God, obviously, but I was acutely aware of your responses. The consciousness of the music, and your hand in mine, lifted me up to a plane of experience I have never known. But "—his voice rasped with pain—"you are the sister of Tariq, a man I had assumed a dangerous enemy until I met you.

“Do I want to marry you tonight? Yes. Do I have reservations? Regarding you, none. In relation to Tariq, yes. Can I promise you undying love in the presence of God? Yes. But can I assure you of no grief? No. I was on a mission for God before I met you, and I must complete it whatever it costs. That is the kind of man I am. It is that journey you have asked to share with me—a journey that may last only days, perhaps weeks, at the most a few months. I will guard you with my life. I will love you till I die. I will respect and cherish you always. All of that I will gladly declare in the presence of God in the words you propose.”

She pushed him away, to look up at him. “Enough of words between us. There is a Gideon Bible in the drawer. Find Paul’s words and read them. I will get my copy of the Koran and read the passage there. Then we make our pledges.”

Dave got the Bible and turned to First Corinthians, chapter thirteen, and Paul’s relevant verses, while Fleur found her passage in the Koran. They sat down on the bed together, and Dave began to read the glorious words:

“I may speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but if I am without love, I am a sounding gong or a clanging cymbal. I may have the gift of prophecy, and know every hidden truth; I may have faith strong enough to move mountains; but if I have no love, I am nothing. I may dole out all I possess, or even give my body to be burnt, but if I have no love, I am none the better.

‘Love is patient; love is kind and envies no one. Love is never boastful, nor conceited, nor rude; never selfish, not quick to take offence. Love keeps no score of wrongs; does not gloat over other men’s sins, but delights in the truth. There is nothing that love cannot face; there is no limit to its faith, its hope, and its endurance.

‘Love will never come to an end. Are there prophets? their work will be over. Are their tongues of ecstasy? they will cease. Is there knowledge? it will vanish away; for our knowledge and our prophecy alike are partial, and the partial vanishes when wholeness comes . . . Now we see only puzzling reflections in a mirror but then we shall see face to face. My knowledge now is partial; then it will be whole, like God’s knowledge of me. In a word, there are three

things that last for ever: faith, hope and love; but the greatest of these is love.”

“Inshallah,” Fleur said reverently.

“Amen,” Dave responded.

Fleur opened the Koran in her hands, and, as she turned the pages, she said to Dave, “As a Muslim, to bear witness that God is One, is to affirm one’s self also as a unity. In prayer the Muslim presents himself or herself alone before God, apart and yet in communion. In the privileged moments of prayer, of invocation, it is always the one person before the One Divinity, two infinities. One is not over against God trying to persuade Him against His will, but yielding in relation to Him. It is the crossroads between transcendence and immanence, the cusp between the finite and the Infinite. What I am about to read is considered by all Muslims to be the very essence of the Koran, the Opening Surah, Surat al-Fatihah:

“In the Name of God, the merciful Lord of mercy.
Praise be to God, the Lord of all being,
The merciful Lord of mercy, Master of the day of judgment.
You alone we serve and to You alone we come for aid.
Guide us in the straight path,
The path of those whom You have blessed,
Not of those against whom there is displeasure,
Nor of those who go astray.’

“Shall we kneel to make our pledges?” Fleur looked at Dave questioningly. “Muslims are more accustomed to kneeling for prayer than Christians.”

They both knelt beside the bed together, and Dave said, “Almighty God and heavenly Father, in your presence I take Deki Tering, also known as Fleur Girard, as my lawfully wedded wife, to love and honor, cherish and respect, for better or worse, in sickness and health, so long as we both shall live. Amen. Inshallah”

“Inshallah,” murmured Fleur, then continued. “Allah-el-Allah, whom all must worship and obey, I take Dave DeMoss as my lawfully wedded husband, to love and cherish, honor and obey, for

better or worse, in sickness and in health, so long as we both shall live. Amen. Allahu Akbar.”

“Inshallah,” said Dave.

Still kneeling, they kissed as a seal of their pledges before God.

“You turn down the bed-clothes and get ready for me,” Fleur said happily, “and I will get ready for you. The hotel provides tooth-brushes, razors and things in the bathroom cabinet. But I want —no, I would like, I must watch that!—to have us take off our clothes together, and not slink under the bedclothes in embarrassment. I like my body, and I want to show it to you. And I would like—there, I remembered!—to take time to see yours, too. So we wait for each other. We have all night.”

When they had completed their toilets they returned to the bedroom. Fleur had turned off the overhead light, but left on the bed-side lights and standing lamps. She unpinned the clasp in her hair, and it fell in a flowing wave over her shoulders to her waist. She turned with a smile for Dave to unzip her dress. Stepping out of it, she draped it over a chair, then turned to face Dave in brief panties and a garter-belt holding the sheer white stockings. She removed these, then her shoes, and she waited while Dave’s eyes took in her body slowly, lingering over the full breasts and moving downwards, until he lifted his eyes and smiled at her in approval. When she was naked, she took a deep breath to raise her breasts as Dave watched.

Dave removed his jacket, shirt and tie, undid his belt, and slipped off his trousers, shoes and socks, and then stood under her gaze. He was already aroused, and her eyes noted it. They both stood naked and slowly took note of each other’s body, without shame or embarrassment. They moved spontaneously towards each other, their gazes locked, and gently embraced each other, skin to skin, savouring the waves of pleasure. Their hands moved from shoulders to hips and back again, slowly at first then more quickly as they explored the sensations engulfing them. Their hips strained against each other in sexual demand, moving with increasing hunger.

Fleur lifted her face to be kissed, and Dave placed his lips on hers, lightly at first, then, as passion increased, with greater intensity until

her lips opened and she accepted his tongue. She breathed rapidly, and her thrusting hips increased their pressure against Dave's, moving and rotating against his inflamed organ. Dave's breathing also increased, and his hands under her hips lifted her so he could enter her.

She pulled away. "Wait," she murmured tremulously, her breathing rapid and irregular. She pulled him to the turned-down bed and lay down, her legs spread and her breasts heaving. "Come into me, Dave, my husband. Come into me. Make me yours. Now, Dave," she urged him. "Now—now—now."

"I love you, Dave. I love you. I love you," she said sultrily as they both lay still in after-climax exhaustion, her hands moving over his head and shoulders. "You took me into heaven."

"I love you, too, Fleur." Dave's breathing was still shallow and tremulous from expended effort. "One flesh in the presence of God."

"True marriage," she whispered. "Union and communion. Flesh and mind and spirit. Don't move. I love your weight on me. I love you in me."

"Le petit mort," Dave said, kissing her on the cheek; "the little death. You are crying?"

"For happiness," she said, "tears are the ultimate joy, the overflow of a perfect surrender and perfect gift. The mystery of the Magdalene's gift of tears to Jesus that he said would live for ever. I died—and then I lived."

Whatever tomorrow or the days ahead would hold, she thought when thinking was possible again, this unforgettable night was theirs for ever.

Chapter 6

will be available on this site on the 1st September 2010