

STRIKE ZERO

Duke watched Dave and Li disappear with Colonel Fu inside the nuclear facility. He was sitting on a folding-chair just inside the flap entrance of the tent idly playing on his mouth-organ while thinking. Van was sitting on the down sleeping-bag on her camp-bed, writing up her notes of the journey.

"What was that all about?" she asked, still writing without lifting her head.

"The Chinese colonel of security came to take Dave and Li to meet with General Ma," Duke answered.

"Will he try to hold them?" she asked, stopping writing and looking at Duke anxiously.

"A toss up. If Ma has already taken over it means that he has removed Tariq—detention or death. In which case, he is likely to hold on to Dave and Li - at least, until his plans here are completed."

"Presumably you're not going to be sitting here making music while Israel burns?"

"No, I have other plans."

"I hope they include me."

"This, my dear Van, is where the clapper hits the bell; the fifteenth round. The referee fixed. Only a knock-out counts now."

"Great. I love your evocative analogy, and will use it sometime. But, as I was saying a la Sam Goldwyn, don't include me out just

because you have a relevant metaphor. Let's change it to good ole American football. It's the final two minutes of the fourth quarter, and we're on fourth and goal. You're the quarterback with the ball—but you need a wide receiver for the pass and touchdown, or a running back for the first and down. I'm the catcher, ace."

"You just wiped out a few options with your brilliant riposte," Duke grumbled.

"For better or worse, dude, remember? Also, I'm all you've got."

"No, you're not. Let's see how you like it. The best—the only—way inside is through that gate, the same way as the others. The only people left here who can get inside that gate are the Tibetans with their passes. Conclusion: I—we—have to become Tibetans with passes. With me so far?"

"Yes. Theoretically."

"Hold your practical objections until I finish. The Tibetans are all about six feet in height, and Bundi and I are about the same height. Yes, I know about our complexions, but I figure it's no big deal because they are burned pretty brown and they're well greased. Also, I bet they're not inspected too closely because they're known—and they smell. We can help the confusion by bringing your braids forward from under your fur hat on to your face. Me? I cut the tail-hair of a yak and have it hanging around my face. For clothes, Bundi gets me the use of a nomad's yak-skin gown, etcetera. How'm Ah doin', doll?"

"Cool. But how are you going to explain all that to Bundi?"

"I'm not. You are."

"Oh. So you were going to have my help—but stay at home when you had finished with me?"

"You want a platform or participation?"

"Yes, massa. Both, massa. You do know that I've spoken more with my hands to the Tibetans than with my tongue?"

"Lucky Tibetans. Whoops! Forget it. Necessity is the mother of invention. Prepare yourself. I'm going to fetch Bundi."

When Duke returned with Bundi, Duke set up a chair for him, but the giant Tibetan refused it and squatted on the ground between them, looking from one to the other curiously. Van's mind was in a

whirl at the thought of all that Duke would want her to say, but he saw her panic and said placatingly, "Take it easy, doll; a sentence at a time."

He began speaking to Bundi slowly. "We want to go inside and help our friends. They may be—no, just that first sentence."

Van pointed to the nuclear facility, remembered the word for "friends" and "help", and breathed a sigh of relief when Bundi nodded his understanding.

Duke went on. "We need to go in with you and your passes."

Van went into the tent and came back with a plastic card in her hand. She held it up, pointed to herself and Duke, and then made a circular gesture with her hand to include Bundi and the other Tibetans with Duke and herself, pointed to the facility, and with signs said in Tibetan, "Nga-tso drogi-yin" (We go with you)."

Bundi looked doubtful, and pointed to their foreign clothes and faces. With her panic subsiding, Van was finding words coming more easily, and she said with hand gestures, "You give clothes. We get yak hair and yak butter for faces."

Bundi grinned and nodded, then spoke rapidly.

Van held up her hand for him to slow down and when he did she understood him to say, "You go inside. What do?"

She interpreted it for Duke and looked at him questioningly. What would Duke say to this?

Duke grinned. "Tell him, 'Shoot Chinese.' He pointed his two fore-fingers in a line from his eye, and dropped the top knuckle of his thumbs in a firing gesture. Van didn't need to interpret it.

Bundi was already grinning and nodding his head enthusiastically. He pointed his finger at himself and nodded, saying something.

"I think he's saying, 'Me too'," Van said. "Didn't somebody say they'd rather fight than trade? You got yourself professional backup, ace."

"Ask him if he can take guns inside?" Duke said interestedly.

Van looked round for a gun and couldn't see one, so she thought hard and recalled the word. "Can you take guns?" and she made hand gestures showing a rifle firing and pointed to the building.

Bundi grinned and got to his feet. He lifted his hand to indicate they should wait until he returned. He came back with a side of yak meat on his shoulder and a rifle. Putting the side of meat on the ground he folded it over and hid the rifle. He gestured toward it proudly.

"Edgar Allen Poe would love it," Duke muttered.

"I know the reference, but not the Tibetan," Van told him. "So obvious it's missed is the theory." She smiled and nodded their agreement to Bundi.

"God help us! Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings cometh wisdom," Duke declared resignedly. "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em. OK. Tell him I have some—hell, you can't say 'explosives', can you? Just cup your hands like this, and throw them outwards quickly like this, and see if he gets the idea of a bomb going off."

Van made the gesture, and Bundi responded by grabbing a handful of soil and throwing it into the air.

Duke gazed in puzzlement, and then got it. "No," he said. "Not grenade. Just leave it. Do it again and say 'bang-bang' or something. What I need is to take in a bundle that'll hide the explosive. Wait a minute!"

Duke went into the storage tent and came out carrying a large square box. He opened the lid and showed the coils of cable, electronic switches, mechanical boxes and cardboard containers. "Tell him I want to take these in with us."

Bundi looked doubtful and again spoke rapidly until he saw Van waving at him to slow down. He began again. "I think he's asking if we have to take the box," Van said.

Duke shook his head and raised his shoulders and eyebrows, spreading his hands in a questioning gesture.

Again Bundi signed to them to wait. He returned with two yak-hides, one open with strips for tying into a bundle, and the other a water-carrier. He held them up for Duke's inspection.

Duke grinned and slapped Bundi on the shoulder. "A couple of water-carriers would be ideal," he agreed. "If they don't rattle, the Chinese won't suspect them." He held up two fingers to Bundi questioningly. Bundi grinned in acknowledgment, and went off to find another one.

"Alright, lover," Duke said to Van. "That's the easy part. I need time to prepare everything I'm going to use inside the facility, because I'll have little time when we get there. Can you round up Tibetan clothes and make-up? And tell Bundi to get his delivery caravan ready. While you're doing that, get as much information as you can of the SOP - that's 'Standard Operating Procedure', doll! — which they use once they're inside the gate. We won't have time or opportunity to stand around making faces and waving hands during Point Zero. From the minute I say, 'Go', we hit the ground running. Oh, that reminds me, we'll stuff some white coats and coveralls into the water-carrier, plus Li's passes. The coats will keep the metal from rattling, and inside with the passes could be useful. Got it?"

"Yeah" Van nodded, and added sardonically, "This time next year, when I'm complaining about kids and kitchen, just remind me of this, will you?"

"Beats workin'" Duke grinned.

Duke took the box of explosives into the tent, and for the next hour he concentrated on preparing the materials into the pattern he had worked out in his mind. Sleepless nights and clever plans were fine, but in the final analysis, there was the old army Anglo-Saxon maxim: "When all else fails—eff them." He had no possibility of further information or guidance on what was likely to happen with a little or a lot of explosives, so they'd have to take what he gave them.

When he was finished, Van had changed into Tibetan clothing, but not like the fancy stuff she had worn in Kangding. Now she was dressed in nomad woman's clothing of dirty yak-skin robe, braids and beads draped each side of her face under a scruffy fur hat, face grimy, and greased. Even Duke had difficulty in recognizing her.

Bundi had the small caravan of animals loaded with sides of beef, some exposed, some wrapped loosely in hides, among which there was no sign of rifles, and the water-carriers were inconspicuous among the loads.

Bundi grinned as Duke was outfitted in the nomad yak-skin robe, and laughed uproariously at the yak's hair sticking out from under his fur hat and framing his yak-battered and muddied face.

"The Chinese guard is going to think he's got double vision," Van said as she looked at the two huge men together. "I might even get mixed up as to whose wife I am."

"Don't put that into Tibetan," Duke warned, "it might give him ideas."

"Spoilsport," she mocked. "This is Tibet, remember. All for one, and one for all."

On his own Bundi had included another couple of nomad women among the four extra men with the caravan of some fifty animals, and they moved along the line of animals as they kept them in single file towards the entrance of the facility. At the gate Bundi had all the passes in his hand, and the gate-guard merely checked the number of passes with the number of Tibetans without comment.

Once inside, Bundi led the way to a building attached to the nuclear launching silo. He went inside the building to arrange for the storage of the meat, while the others unloaded the animals and stacked the meat beside the door of the building. On his return he allocated the duties of carrying the loads inside, including Van as a counter of bundles and Duke as a load-carrier, while a couple watched the unloaded animals. After initially curious glances, none of the soldiers or passing white-coated workers paid them any special attention.

Bundi kept looking at Duke for a signal and, when about half the bundles were stacked in the storage room—including the two water-carriers—Duke nodded that he was ready. When Bundi bent down to pick up one of the water-carriers Duke shook his head negatively. Bundi looked at him questioningly.

"Tell him he's not in the next act," Duke said to Van urgently.

She had only said a couple of words when Bundi interrupted fiercely.

"I guess he's saying either he goes or no cigar," Van said, struggling to get out of the yak-skin robe and into a white coat the same as Duke.

"Tell him we've no more white coats his size," Duke said irritably.

"I think he said, 'Eff white coats; I've got a gun.'" Van said, laughing. "Sorry."

"I think you want him along," Duke said in annoyance.

"Three is better than two," Van said sweetly, pinning on her badge. "How do I look?"

"A damn sight better than you in the nomad outfit—but you need some perfume. Did you bring your camera as well as a recorder?"

"Of course, I never leave home without it. Whatever happens, you don't talk to the media. A girl's got to look after her future around you."

Duke threw up his hands in pretended resignation, but he was grinning at both of them. He quickly assembled a Kalashnikov automatic weapon taken from the water-carrier, and then handed Bundi a spare magazine. "Tell him I'll hand him this gun when I switch to setting explosives. Now I'll show him how to load and use it."

Van started to speak to Bundi then stopped when he interrupted her with some words. "I think he's saying he knows what to do with that weapon. Maybe you should ask him to help set the explosives."

Duke looked at the grinning Bundi, who was obviously enjoying himself, and handed him the weapon. Without hesitation Bundi unloaded, then re-loaded, it.

"The sign of a misspent youth," Duke said, then added admiringly. "The man's a natural. Sign him up. Tell him to follow us, and cover us, back and right side. He can tell his own lies to any guards. I'll watch front and left."

Van did her hand-signals and Bundi nodded that he understood, and they were ready.

Duke looked at Van, then leaned forward awkwardly because of the gun and explosives inside the hide water-carrier slung over his shoulder, and kissed her. "I love you, Van. I'm glad you're here. If we don't survive, I'm glad to have known you—and not just Biblically speaking."

Van shook her head at his incorrigible sense of humour, but her eyes were wet and there was a lump in her throat. "I love you, too, Duke. Do your thing, ace. I'll be waiting."

With a quick nod to Bundi to follow, Duke said, "Let's go," and Point Zero had begun. He led the way at a quick walk from the

storage room to the corridor entrance of the launching silo area. There were a few people around in the corridors, but, when they looked at all, it was at the Tibetan Bundi—who had a pass pinned prominently to his robe. Nobody seemed to notice or worry about the gun because of the presence of the two white-coated individuals with the Tibetan.

A quick glance at the elevators showed Duke that they were card-operated so he made for the stairs to the lower levels. He was now running, the various metals in the water-carrier clinking against each other, eyes moving in an arc from left to right. It was immaterial now whether they were seen, for they were committed. Point Zero was running. They were in the zone.

Duke felt the driving surge of adrenalin as always at this stage. His eyes gleamed in secret delight and his lips were drawn back in a deadly smile. Van only saw his face in snatched glances, but she saw why he was so feared. Yet she was oddly glad that she had seen him unconsciously revealed like this, as only Dave had seen him. It gave her a new appreciation of the bond between them.

Apparently few people used the stairs and they reached the last level without difficulty, but there they ran into a small group of white-coated staff waiting at the elevators. The group's casual glance sharpened into surprise and fear as they took in the strangers with guns.

"Open the door on my right," Dave said to Van and, as she did so, Duke waved at the group to get into the room. They were more confused than stubborn, and they hesitated. Duke jumped forward and grabbed the front man in the group, pushing him through the open door. "In," Duke ordered him. The others almost ran inside. The people working in the room gasped in disbelief when they saw the Bundi and the gun.

"Tear all telephones from the wall or handsets," Duke ordered Van, suiting the action to his words, Bundi's weapon swinging to cover the people as he stood at the door with his rifle pointing into the room.

"Bundi, smash the chair." Duke pointed to a chair and made a smashing gesture.

Bundi picked up a chair with one hand and smashed it against a desk into several pieces. Duke picked a couple of pieces as they left the room, and, with the door closed behind them, he jammed them under the door to keep those from inside getting out.

“Onward, Christian soldiers,” he urged, running for the end of the corridor. He didn’t know it when he reached it, but in front of him was the same command centre visited earlier by Duke and Li for their appointment with General Ma. Now there were several people working at consoles, or talking together in front of the giant display screen, which was scrolling with blinking coloured lights and cursors.

Some of the people turned casually to see who had entered the raised balcony above them, and then froze into silence and immobility at the sight of Duke, Bundi and Van and the pointing guns.

Duke handed the Kalshnikov to Bundi, and said to Van, “Tell him to cover them, not shoot them—unless they move. Then you or Bundi tell these people not to move in Chinese.”

Van was about to give a smart retort regarding this sudden requirement, but Duke, after a quick wink, was already running away from them towards the battle-station console and she was left to explain to Bundi in a mixture of Chinese, Tibetan and hand-movements as the people below them watched in restless silence. She could only hope she had got it right as she looked with fascination at the giant Tibetan, with two fingers inside the respective trigger-guards of his rifle and Dave’s Kalashnikov, and a smile of anticipation. He was having a ball!

One of the men in front of the giant display screen moved, and Duke shouted to him, “One more step and you’re dead.” The man stopped where he was, and the others became quieter too.

Duke dropped the water-carrier on to the console and emptied its electronic contents on to the surface. Rapidly, with occasional glances at the people gathered below and at Bundi and Van, he assembled the prepared items. When he was satisfied, he examined the lay-out of the console in front of him, then began laying the explosives, cable and linked detonators. Van watched his absorbed

face as he expertly handled the deadly material, all the while whistling or humming one gospel hymn after another. She was especially amused at “God’s Eye is on the Sparrow”! The man’s unreal, she thought, then added gratefully – and he’s mine.

A burst of gunfire exploded, causing the kneeling Duke to leap to his feet. Soldiers were pouring from the corridor into the lower display area beneath the balcony, and Bundi had his rifle pointed at a fallen officer who had entered and had presumably tried to get out his gun. It was lying beside his unmoving body.

The soldiers were fanning out along both walls on either side of the corridor entrance, and Bundi was calmly working his rifle, picking them off singly. The white-coated workers had all dropped to the floor, or were scrambling for somewhere to hide behind desks and cabinets.

“Kalashnikov, Bundi,” Duke yelled, seeing Bundi was absorbed with the weapon he was accustomed to using. Bundi looked across at Duke questioningly, as Van also screamed at him. Duke used a left-to-right, gun-swinging gesture to indicate the action of the Kalashnikov, ducking his head instinctively at the sound of bullets whistling past his head. “Get down on the floor, Van,” he shouted as she stood uncertainly between him and Bundi. She lay on the ground away from the open banister.

Bundi had grinned understanding, and dropped his rifle. Straddling his legs he began firing in an arc at the spreading line of soldiers seeking cover on the floor beneath him. He ignored those who had found cover, and who were firing upwards at them, until he had stopped the flow of soldiers entering the area beneath and he had cleared the walls. Then he turned his attention and weapon on those under cover, his fusillade of bullets splintering wooden desks and ricocheting off metal cabinets.

He suddenly staggered as he was hit, a spreading stain on his shirt showing where. He stepped backwards, moving his shoulders to assess the damage, and then ejected the emptied magazine and re-loaded. He leaned forward, his elbows on the metal banister, and continued his deadly left-to-right, right-to-left, fusillade until all firing stopped from the floor beneath.

He looked across the balcony to where Duke had continued his task at the battle-station. At the silence Duke looked up and held up his thumb in approval to Bundi. "Tell him I'm just about ready," he shouted to Van.

It was count-down to Strike Zero time. Not much more to do; just the timing to set. What he had done was set it to destroy the control mechanisms. It would leave the rest of the room and the facility with the launching system intact, but it would render the control systems of the nuclear weapon useless until they were repaired—at least six months, he guessed. That is, if the war-head didn't go off first because of a miscalculation! Ah, well, Duke thought, the best laid schemes o' mice and men—!

Fifteen minutes. The digital read-out on the timer was ticking off the seconds. 1459 -1458 -1457 -

Now to find Dave and Li, and, of course, Tariq and Ma; the gunfire should have alerted security everywhere.

"What next, ace?" Van asked him.

"Find Dave and Li," Duke said cheerfully. "We have—" he looked at the digital read-out—"1406 minutes, time enough to get them, and Tariq and Ma, too. Dave would never let me forget it if we let the ungodly go."

"How—" she began, and stopped when she saw Duke pull out his mouth-organ from an inside pocket. She gazed at him incredulously.

He winked at her, and ran the mouth-organ from right-to-left in a burst of notes. Then he began playing the gospel hymn, "Nearer, my God, to Thee."

Van laughed hysterically. If I die now, she thought, I don't care. I've seen everything! Nobody's going to believe this when I write it. Here we go into madness. She began singing along with Duke's playing:

"Nearer, my God, to Thee, nearer to Thee!
E'en though it be a cross that raises me;
Still all my song shall be,
Nearer, my God, to Thee!"

Bundi shouted, and Dave looked over at him. Bundi's Kalashnikov was pointed at the figure of Colonel Fu, who had stepped from the corridor on to the raised balcony beside Bundi.

"I wouldn't try for your gun, colonel," Duke said. "My friend is nervous and trigger-happy as you can see."

Van gave an explosive burst of laughter, as she looked from Duke with a mouth-organ to the unperturbed Bundi. Nervous! What must Fu be thinking? He was probably more worried about their minds than their guns.

"I know what you're thinking," Dave said conversationally. "You're thinking, 'They'll never get away with it.' What we have here is known in America as a 'Mexican stand-off.' You've got the authority and the people. We've got the explosives and a running timer at—let me see—0923 minutes to Strike Zero."

Dave and Tariq Azir stepped out on to the raised balcony beside Colonel Fu and Dave said sardonically—as Bundi lifted his rifle to cover them—"Is it your intention to take us all nearer to God together when we go? Less than ten minutes I think I heard you saying - time for coffee, donuts and a chat in the company canteen?" He looked from Duke to Tariq and Colonel Fu. "Where is General Ma?"

Colonel Fu was looking confused and, as he looked from Dave to the battle-station where Duke's timer was visible, he said hesitatingly, "I was told by Special Agent Li to release Mr DeMoss and Director Azir. Does Agent Li know that there will be an explosion here in about five minutes?"

"I doubt it," Duke said cheerfully. "We better tell him PDQ—that's the army 'Pretty Damn Quick'" he explained to Van. To the colonel he said sharply, "These people better get out immediately." He pointed to the still bemused and hiding staff and wounded soldiers in the lower level.

Colonel Fu gave a sharp command to evacuate the building, and for someone to press the alarm to alert others, while Dave, Duke, Van, Tariq Azir and Bundi hurried to the Director's office.

Li Chi'en had watched Dave's departure with Colonel Fu thoughtfully. Dave would now have time with Tariq Azir, although in different circumstances from anything they had considered. He would just have to make the best of the situation. Everything was now moving to what Duke had called Point Zero. Dave would deal with Tariq Azir. Duke would deal with the nuclear device. He would now deal with General Ma. He turned to face the General.

"What did you have in mind?" he asked the General.

"We are alone here," General Ma replied, "so I can tell you that today is the first day of a new era for China and the world. Today the world will know once more that when China speaks, China acts. Tomorrow China will know that she has a new helmsman greater than Chairman Mao. Then the world will know that there is a new world order arisen in the East and not the West."

"It sounds impressive," Li admitted. "Is it part of your prepared Presidential address?"

"If you wish to live to see the new China you had better guard your tongue," the General said harshly.

Li just looked at him without speaking.

"Who is Feng Pen-fai supporting in the struggle for power?" Ma demanded. "He hides his inclinations well. You have worked closely with him for many years and you were his choice as special agent for this—this—enterprise. But this time both you and he have been out-witted in his schemes. If you do not get on the 'bus now, it will leave without you - or perhaps run over you."

"You are confident that nothing can go wrong?" Li asked with interest.

"What can go wrong?" the General demanded, with a bark of laughter. "All obstacles to success have been removed."

"The ancient proverb says: 'Let not him that puts his armour on boast like him who puts it off'", Li said.

The General picked up the telephone and asked to be connected to Colonel Fu's office. "Report to me immediately with an armed detail to put this official under arrest," he said curtly, and slammed down the receiver.

He picked up a pen and began writing, and so did not see Li

silently get off the chair beside the desk and step up to him until it was too late. Li had his left arm around his neck in a choke-hold, and, tilting the chair backward, with his right hand he grabbed the General's wildly waving arm behind his back to render him helpless.

As the General's face reddened under the increasing pressure on his throat, Li removed his gun from its holster. With a quick look to see that it was loaded, he released the safety and spun the chamber to firing position, placed the gun behind the General's head, and pulled the trigger. The General's body convulsed as his head exploded into a pulpy mass, and Li eased him forward on to the desk in a spreading pool of blood.

Li grimaced at the splashes of blood on his hand and jacket and shrugged away their importance. He picked up the telephone and dialed a number in Beijing. When he had been connected to the Director of Intelligence he reported what had happened, and that he was about to initiate the final phase of the operation. When he had discussions regarding options and possibilities with the others, who were still involved in their own tasks, he would report back again.

The door burst open, and Colonel Fu entered, gun loosely in hand. He found Li's gun trained on him and he stopped, looking from Li to General Ma's slumped body on the desk.

"Put your gun away, Colonel Fu," Li ordered. "I am now in control of this facility by the authority of the President and Director of Intelligence. You may wish to verify this at some point, and you have my approval to do so. For your report, you may say that I told you General Ma was shot by Special Agent Li Chi'en because of evidence that General Ma was involved in traitorous activities against government and country. Understood?"

"Yes, sir," the Colonel said. "Do I make arrangements to remove the General's body?"

"Leave it for the present," Li replied. "I will discuss the matter with Beijing for their orders. What you can do is release Mr DeMoss — Dr Wilson — and Director Tariq Azir with him."

"Yes, sir," the Colonel said, and left the room.

Li walked to the desk to pick up the telephone, but then decided

to first see where the door behind the desk led. He opened it, and found Deki sitting at the solitary table in what were presumably the Director's spartan living quarters.

After a first apprehensive glance at the blood-stained figure on entering the office Deki smiled at Li with relief, then asked anxiously, "What were the gunshots? Is Tariq alright?"

"Yes," Li assured her. "The single gunshot you heard was me shooting General Ma. He's dead. I suggest you stay here until we move the body. Ma had Tariq arrested and took over power. I have sent the colonel of security to fetch Dave and Tariq here, and I have assumed power until there is some arrangement made. When Dave and the others get here we'll decide on what's to be done."

When Dave and the others arrived at the Director's office they found Li talking with Deki. She ran to Dave and threw herself into his arms. He kissed her, and then, after she had kissed Tariq, he said, "We must run. Duke has set the fuses and Strike Zero is ready to blow in a few minutes. We either have to get out right away, or Duke has to race to stop the timer. Li?"

"Limited damage?" Li asked Duke quickly.

"Command console only," Duke replied crisply.

"Then let it blow," Li decided. "Let's get out of here and go somewhere to talk."

They left the office running, and had only reached the door when there was a dull thud and sounds of splintering metal.

"Strike Zero ended. Over," Duke said with a grin. "The world's safe for democratic stupidities again. Bundi, where are you going with that Kalashnikov? Give. Van, what's he saying?"

"Ask Deki. I resign," Van said.

Deki laughed. "He said a Tibetan proverb which loosely interpreted means, 'Good fortune favours the brave' – the West uses an f-word vulgar expression".

Duke laughed. "I told you, the man's a natural. Dave, sign him up for Adullam. Hey, I forgot! He got hit in the gun-battle. How is he?"

Deki said, "He says it's only a scratch. The gods were kind to him. But I told him we'd get a dressing for him."

Li interrupted them. "Look, I have things to do here. Shut

yourselves into a room quickly. You, too, Director Azir. Colonel Fu, you come with me. I'll join you all shortly once I give some orders and get the situation here under control. We need to draft urgently what will be the eventual official version of events here, and the less you're all seen the easier it will be."

"Right," Dave agreed. "Tariq, find us a quiet room where we won't be interrupted."

"And where we can have some coffee and donuts," Duke interposed. "I need some caffeine."

"And sugar," Van said, smiling sweetly at him.

By mutual consent they refrained from discussing the events since they were separated until Li returned. Tariq Azir was introduced to Duke and Van, and Li had sent a nurse to look and dress Bundi's wound. They discussed personal experiences of being wounded in the past.

Li appeared about thirty minutes later, and they all found seats around a table, looking to Li to take the lead.

"I apologize for that abrupt assumption of command without explanation," he said quietly, "but the fewer people who work here seeing who was present, doing what, makes it easier for me to present an incontestable report of events. For the present, most workers here only know that there has been an unexplained explosion in the command centre building following a shooting confrontation. Colonel Fu is isolating the people who saw Duke and his party, with the explanation that he wants their personal accounts. They will be warned about spreading rumours. So we have the situation in hand for official purposes.

"As I see it, we first have to decide about Director Azir. To put it bluntly: does he—disappear? If not, do I arrest him for collusion with General Ma in activities prejudicial to the security of China? Or, is he to be exonerated and reinstated, and on what grounds? If the latter, will the Shambhala Project continue when the present damage is repaired in—how long do you think, Duke?"

"Six months possibly."

"So, to repeat, a reinstated Director could still launch the nuclear missile before there is a stable government in Beijing. I apologize,

Director, for discussing such matters in your presence, but these are unusual circumstances, and I assumed you would prefer to be present and participate rather than be isolated with only a report afterwards.”

“Thank you,” Tariq said quietly. “I prefer to be here. I will participate where necessary.”

“I will tell you what I have done,” Li continued. “I chose to kill Ma because a trial—whether military or political—in China’s present circumstances would have been complicated and even disastrous. I informed my Director of this, and he has left it to me to present the facts here to fit the final report. The same procedure will be followed with regard to Director Azir. The explosion in the facility will be declared to be of unknown origin, with little damage. The conclusions we decide here, therefore, will be the official version for China and the world. Dave?”

Dave nodded that he was ready. “Tariq and I had some time to talk things over. I don’t know that we had reached any substantive conclusions when we heard the gunfire and Duke on his mouth-organ. I took that as a signal that Duke was ready, and Tariq and I broke out of our cell. I suggest that Tariq lay his proposals before us for consideration—or, better still, since we are either friends or family here, or both, that he opens his heart, and lets our hearts as well as our minds decide what has to be done.”

Tariq gazed at Dave thoughtfully, his expression indicating little. “Could you still kill me?” he asked, as if they had just picked up where they had left off talking in the cell.

“Could Li kill Ma?” Dave answered enigmatically.

Tariq nodded, as if Dave’s unequivocal answer had confirmed some of his own thoughts. He took a deep breath and began speaking.

“I could not ask for a better jury of my peers. I have already spoken at some length with Deki and Dave, so what I am about to say are conclusions arrived at in the past twenty-four hours rather than a hurried explanation or attempted justification of my presence and position here in Shambhala. I have had no divine illumination, no visio Dei, but your arrival here, and the manner and

consequences of that arrival, I accept as a form of divine intervention.

“This is not the introduction to a sermon, or even a subtle attempt to score spiritual points. As Dave said, it is the expression of my heart for your consideration, because I know that ultimately your judgment will be determined by your own spiritual values. So, what was there in the past twenty-four hours that was unique? I would suggest two things: one old, that I had mostly overlooked; and one totally new, that I had never considered.

“The first emerged from the arrival of Deki. In the course of our conversation I was reminded of a personal experience, which I recounted to her, of the profound impact that love made on me, personally and professionally. It launched me on the journey that ended here. But, along the way, while the personal impact was never forgotten—and the details are as sharp now as I talk to you as they were when first experienced—the professional impact diminished from inspiration to intellectualizing to compartmentalizing. Only those who have made the journey know the experience.”

He stopped, remembering, his eyes shadowed with thought and suffering. Then a slow smile spread from his lips to his eyes, and he looked from Deki to Dave.

Deki’s eyes filled with tears, and they rolled slowly down her cheeks as she gazed at the absorbed face of her brother. Dave was thoughtful, chin on hand, elbow on the table. Duke was in his usual lounging position, arm draped over the chair, face expressionless. Van was writing in her notebook. Li was as inscrutable as ever.

Tariq continued, “In that journey from there to here the flame of personal love—both for a woman and for God—was kept burning; but it became corrupted in its expression. I was faithful— but only in my fashion. Deki drove home the point that I had two compartments to my life, using the analogy of my office and my room—a division of which I was aware—but there was only one exit, and that exit was always to where power ruled and not love.

“Then Dave brought up the second point—among many! I could rationalize the use of power in a spirit of love. I even had several Scriptures to support my arguments! That, after all, was what the

revolutionaries of the liberation theology had practiced. But the shattering realization that has dawned on me today is, that unless power is subordinated to love, as Jesus taught and demonstrated, you do not end up on the cross as the beloved son of God for the salvation of the world; for Judas, who was misled by power over love, it meant hanging at the end of a rope. For me, it was in Shambhala nuclear facility with power to destroy the world; I would not end as a follower of the Christ; I would end as a disciple of the Antichrist.

"It was that revelation that caused Judas to commit suicide. I don't think Judas wanted to be the Messiah, any more than I wanted to be the Maitreya. He ended up as history's betrayer of the Messiah because of a process of misconception. And that's it! Thank you for your patience. May I just add—"he turned to smile at the tearful Deki—"that this time I do not walk out of my personal room into my professional office; I walk out of both. I choose love, not power. I am not available as Director, Mr Li, whatever your decision may be."

There was a profound silence in the room, in which Van's pen on paper, with her voice recorder open beside her, could be clearly heard.

"Thank you, Director," Li said briskly. "We will come back to you later. Dave, what thoughts, if any, do you have about what you are going to say and do regarding your involvement here?"

"Good question, Li," Dave said ruefully. "As you can guess, Duke and I would prefer to fade away quietly, but we have certain commitments." He pointed, with a smile, to where Van was writing. "Not only Van. The President of the US has promised to give an exclusive interview to a journalist friend who helped in the early stages of this assignment. So it's going to come out, anyway. Have you any suggestions?"

Li nodded affirmatively. "Before we left Hong Kong—before I left China—in anticipation of a possible successful conclusion, and thinking that you might not wish to return through China and Hong Kong, I prepared authorizations for you to leave China either into Thailand or Nepal or India. You would keep your present identifications, if you wanted to be anonymous for a period. You can

have one or two vehicles, with drivers, to take you to the borders of whatever country you decide to go to. Send them back when you're finished. Let me know what and where you decide, and I'll have the necessary clearances waiting on the Chinese side of the border, with the appropriate visas for the country you choose. That would give you a holiday in Tibet if you like—and keep you out of the media and political circus.

"Van," Li smiled at her, "I see you're worried about your story. Give me a few hours with my report to Beijing, with recommendations that they inform your President immediately for official release of what he wants; and then you can radio or telephone your story from here—'Shambhala' will make a great lead, or heading, or whatever-you-call-it, won't it? That should give you sufficient edge over your American colleague mentioned by Dave. The two Presidents will decide between them what to announce to the world, but it will give them time to absorb your personal involvement, and the story implications. That covers everything I can think of for the present."

"Copacetic!" Dave said, and then explained with a grin to the staring Duke: "Unknown origin for 'Very satisfactory'. I've been saving that for you. Li, you've got all the bases covered. We just need to get a photograph of Duke in a nomad's yak-skin, complete with yak-hair wig."

Duke gave him a grimaced smile, and Dave threw him a pursed-mouthed kiss.

"Now, Mr Director" Li said slowly; "in view of what you have told us I assume from what I know of Dave that he won't want to kill you, so I have a suggestion in the light of your remarks. To give you more time to decide what you will do, I can prepare travel documents for you, too. You are a Tibetan national, educated in China, so there will be no difficulty. Decide with the others where you want to go, if you want a different identity or cover or country, and I'll arrange it. Is that everything?"

When everybody nodded, Li got to his feet. "Why not arrange to eat here tonight?" he suggested. "I'm going to be busy here, anyway, so we can use the facilities."

"Chinese food?" asked Duke, smacking his lips.

Li looked towards Tariq Azir questioningly.

"Mostly," Tariq replied. "The cooks can do foreign food when wanted."

"Chinese for me," Dave repeated, and the others agreed.

"I will see you later" Li said. "I'll send in your coffee and donuts, Duke."

When Li had left the others sat smiling, relaxed and content after the physical and emotional tensions.

"Thailand, Nepal or India," Duke said dreamily. "I like it."

"We have a request to set up a drug treatment centre in Chiang Mai in Thailand," Dave said.

"Don't talk to me of work," Duke said. "I'm on holiday."

"You mean, you're on honeymoon," Van told him. "When I get this story off, I have plans for us—including a full-church, white-gowned, 'I do', Duke-trumpeting wedding in Noo Awlins, US of A."

"I hope your plans include looking at lots of lovely ceilings," Duke said. "You seem to have got the procedure reversed."

"Ceilings?" Van asked; and then it dawned.

"You said we were on a honeymoon," Duke reminded her, "and I'm tired of sleeping-bags. They're too restrictive for my plans."

"How long does it take to get to Nepal or India?" Dave enquired.

"A few days by car to Lhasa," Deki said. "Three days at the most from Lhasa to Nepal. but you will want to spend some time sight-seeing in Lhasa, say, and Shigatse and Gyangtse. Dave will want to go to Sakya Monastery, the centre of tantric Buddhism, on the way to Nepal. You can get directly into India from the Sikkim border through Kalimpong or Darjeeling. Or you can go to Kathmandu in Nepal, and from there to India."

"Decisions, decisions," Duke said, with mock reproof. "You want to lie back and enjoy life."

"Did you say 'wife'?" Van asked.

"That, too," Duke grinned.

"First, we have to get back to Chomo-lungma, remember," Deki said. "That's where the vehicles are."

“You could always take the vehicles from here,” Tariq suggested. “It would be easy for Li to authorize it. Then you could drive to Lhasa by the western route, avoiding the return to Chomo-lungma.”

“What western route?” Deki asked.

“You came in over the eastern route with no motor road; but there is a motor road between here and Lhasa. There is also a telephone connection, if you need to use it to make reservations.”

“Ah, civilization,” Duke said, stretching himself luxuriously, “here we come.

What re your plans, Tariq? Or is it too soon?”

Tariq smiled and looked at Deki. “I want to spend the next few days with Deki, and then when you all leave Tibet for the wide world beyond, I will say ‘Good.bye’ to you all. I think it is better for me to ‘disappear’ for a while from everybody while I reflect and decide on my future. Meanwhile, Duke, may I ask a favour?”

“Sure, so long as I don’t have to move or work,” Duke agreed.

“Play something on that musical instrument,” Tariq requested.

“You mean my mouth-organ?” Duke said, taking it from his pocket. “Never leave home without it. You never know when it might come in useful.”

He blew into it while thinking what to play. “How about this? It’s an old nineteenth century gospel hymn that Mahalia Jackson made memorable, called, ‘It Is Well With My Soul’.”

Duke played a simple straight-forward melody, then began to extemporize, transforming the hymn of simple belief into a soaring song of joy, cascading up and down octaves, tonguing and cupping the instrument, and all the while turning the basic simple melody into a throbbing and magical kaleidoscope of inspiration.

Lost in the emotion of the music, it slowly dawned on the others that Tariq was singing softly the words of the hymn:

*“When peace like a river attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say,
‘It is well, it is well, with my soul’.”*

In response to their astonished looks, Tariq said quietly, “I

learned the words during my stay in America. The words were written by a man who lost his wife and children in the sinking of the Titanic. Keep playing Duke. It's a promise for the future."

E N D

George's next book
TEN MEN WHO CHANGED THE WORLD
will be available on this site
1 February 2011