

HONG KONG (III)

“So you had a late night last night?” Duke said cheerfully to Dave, as he emerged from the bathroom towelling his hair to greet the already awake Dave. “Lots of difficult problems to discuss with Mrs Wilson?” He dodged the pillow Dave threw at him.

“Sit down, you lunk,” Dave punched the bed beside him. “I have something to tell you.”

Duke looked at him closely, saw that he was serious, and sat down on the bed. Dave told him what had happened the previous evening with Fleur, only leaving out the details of their love-making. When Dave had finished talking Duke continued looking at him, silently. Then he grinned.

“Man, does she have a sister?” he asked. “Sort of keep it in the family, you know.” He held out his hand for Dave to hit it in a low-five. “Hey, it’s cool, man. Be happy: you mightn’t have long to enjoy it. Seriously, I’m glad for you. Between the both of us in this possibly bugged room, you’ve never been the same since Helen and Paulie died. I thought a bit of you had gone for good. This woman seems remarkable and I can’t wait to meet her.”

“Thanks, Duke,” Dave said. “I needed that from you. But, about the bugged room, rest easy. Li had it swept, and he’s got his people in the hotel on watch. About meeting Fleur, I’m sorry to tell you that she doesn’t speak to violent black men—Hey! Watch out,”

he yelled as Duke threw the pillow at him.

"Wash yo' mouth as well as yo' body," Duke said in exaggerated southern drawl, "An' doan forgit to say yo' prayahs." He dropped the drawl. "What did you say her name was?"

"She has several names," Dave said.

"Like Helen of Troy," Duke responded, "not all of them good as I recall."

"A Tibetan name, a Chinese name, a Swiss name—" Dave continued.

"Just give me one for a start.

"Fleur."

"What?"

"Fleur. F-l-e-u-r. Fleur. A French, or Swiss, name, from the Swiss folks who adopted her."

"I warned you, didn't I—cherchez la femme? Many a true word is spoken in jest. Does it mean what it sounds like?"

"Yeah. Flower."

"That's what I thought. A tender plant. Just what we needed.

'Many a rose is born to bloom unseen

And waste its fragrance on the desert air.'"

"OK, you've had your fun. I want to hear how you got on yesterday with Foxy. You and Li were too busy grilling me to get that report."

"You mean you were too busy getting ready for your night of music and madness," Duke riposted. He got up and walked to the window to look out on the street below, and Dave threw him a puzzled look. Duke was uncharacteristically reluctant, even restless. He was usually as still as a lizard on a rock. "Problems?" he asked facetiously.

"No. No." Duke shook his head, and turned back to face Dave. "I don't think Foxy bought my explanation for visiting Hong Kong, or going to China and Tibet on a drug investigation. But he didn't push too hard. He'll probably make some enquiries, and try to fit a story together. But he gave me an interesting introduction to a fellow-journalist."

"And—" Dave prompted him as he pulled a shirt over his head, and Duke paused.

"A Van Franklin of the New York Times; born of missionary parents on the borders of Tibet with north-west China, who grew up speaking Tibetan and Chinese as well as English." He hesitated, and Dave looked over at him curiously. "Black, beautiful—and female," he said tentatively. "The Van is for Evangeline."

Dave missed it. "So you got a bonus," he said casually. Then he had a sudden thought. "Wait a sec! All this hesitation and pacing means you were really impressed with her. Is that it?"

Duke grinned. "What do I say? I don't meet six-foot, black and beautiful, Tibetan-speaking, intelligent journalists every day—or every year for that part. I never met anybody like this."

"You bloody hypocrite!" Dave expostulated, laughing. "You gave me a hard time over Fleur, and all the time you had a secret passion for this woman! Now I see why you weren't anxious to give a report. OK. Confession time. Give."

"She wasn't asking to go to Tibet with us," Duke protested, but without great conviction. "Aw, what the heck," he said, grinning. "I just enjoyed having you on the rack."

"Anyway," Dave prompted. "Now that you have confessed your not-so-hidden temptations, what had this black and beautiful Shunamite to say? Before you tell me, I suggest you get a copy of the Gideon Bible from the drawer and read the Song of Solomon. Solomon was also deeply impressed by a black and beautiful Shunamite with unique physical attributes, and his description of their relationship might help you. So, what did she say?"

"Just more of the difficulties we are likely to face in Tibet," Duke replied, "except she was able to describe the territory nearer to the Koko Nor. She left there as child when her parents were forced out during the Cultural Revolution twenty-thirty years ago. But it left such a deep impression on her she continued to read all she could about it. I made some notes when I got back and gave them to Li to get typed."

"Speaking of Li, did you get everything organized about the explosives?" Dave asked.

"Yeah, no problems," Duke nodded. "He's also taking a battery-operated high-powered satellite transmitter/receiver to keep

in touch with Beijing—which we'll have to keep well-hidden because there's no way it could be made to look innocent for animal studies. But it will be useful—essential if we hit real trouble and need extra supplies."

"Or reinforcements."

"No," Duke disagreed. "I said that to Li, and he said that, by that time, any more Chinese help was out—too obvious, too suspicious and too late. We will be on our own."

"So, we're ready to go," Dave stated rather than asked.

"Yup," said Duke. "Li should have the final details when we meet after lunch. The papers for your lady friend are still to be fixed. Speaking of which, I repeat, when do I meet her?"

"I told her I didn't know the arrangements for today," Dave answered. "I said I'd give her a call when I had definite news. If Li gets everything done today we should be free tonight to leave tomorrow. Why don't we arrange to have a foursome with your Shunamite journalist at the Godown tonight? I'll reserve a table. You don't like the idea?" he asked, surprised, as he saw Duke frown.

"A hot-shot woman journalist who loves Tibet and everything Tibetan," Duke said slowly, "and a Tibetan woman who is a sister of Tariq Azir; you know what they say: 'How you gonna keep 'em down on the farm after they've seen Paree?'" Paris has nothing on Shambala for temptation". He let the threatening possibility hang in the air.

Dave grinned. "Hey, dude, you're too modest. Two beautiful women who have two interesting men as their companions will put Tibet in the shade. Trust me. If the occasion overwhelms you into silence I will tell them about your many adventures and sterling attributes. I bet that will make them forget Tibet. Lighten up, man."

Duke laughed. "What was that dubious Chinese toast? 'May you live in interesting times?'"

"Speaking of Chinese, d'you think the triads are waiting outside for us?"

"If you were a triad, wouldn't you be?" Duke answered dryly. "Nothing we can do about it until they act."

"Except kill 'em off, like yesterday," Dave grinned. "We could

always pick up a few explosives from Li's contacts and toss them into the triads' headquarters," he suggested provocatively.

"You forget we already blew them to hell last time around," Duke laughed. "They've probably got office sky-scrapers there now, or a factory making computers. Confucius he say: 'Even donkey droppings shine on outside.'"

"Mundane," Dave commented. "They don't make people like they used to. Let's go and spit in their eyes by having a Chinese dim sum lunch."

"After I've read the Song of Solomon," Duke reminded him, taking the Gideon Bible out of the drawer.

"Oh-ho," said Dave. "It looks like being an interesting evening: 'A bundle of myrrh is my beloved to me; he shall lie all night between my breasts'—chapter one, verse thirteen," he declaimed, laughing at Duke's expression. "Or you could try chapter four, the first half-dozen verses."

Duke turned the pages over and read:

"Behold, thou art fair, my love; behold thou art fair;

Thou hast dove's eyes within thy locks;

Thy hair is as a flock of goats that appear from Mount
Gilead.

Thy teeth are like a flock of sheep that are even shorn,
which came up from the washing,
whereof every one bear twins,
and none is barren among them.

Thy lips are like a thread of scarlet, and thy speech is comely;
Thy temples are like a piece of a pomegranate within thy
locks.

Thy neck is like the tower of David builded for an armoury,
whereon there hang a thousand bucklers,
all shields of mighty men.

Thy two breasts are like two young roes that are twins,
which feed among the lilies—

"That'll do for now," Duke said, with a laugh. "I don't think I could read any more before I see her or she might suspect

something. I'll show it to her—and then tell her it was your suggestion! That should be interesting. Let's go eat. Caesar, we who are about to die salute you."

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"We leave tomorrow afternoon, at two o'clock," Li told them when they met; "by charter flight from Hong Kong to Chengdu in West China. This is a tourist special charter that I was able to persuade to take us with them, so it will be an excellent cover for us. It's mainly made up of American tourists, with a few Europeans and Japanese, and the remainder of the seats allocated to Chinese with influence—like myself," he smiled. "I have all the documents," he continued, looking at Dave. "There was no problem. I gather your friend is making her own arrangements about clothing?" Dave nodded.

"I suggest I go straight to the airport on my own," Li went on, "to make sure that everything goes smoothly. You should plan to get there for one o'clock, check through quickly with the other travellers on the charter, and go through to the departure lounge. That will limit the time of your exposure. I will hang back to see that all is under control, and I will join you in the departure lounge. The police are unhappy about yesterday's incident at the Promenade, and with the additional pressure from China to do nothing about it, but they will put up with it. They'll probably be glad to see you leave! Any questions?"

"Yeah," Dave said. "How long do we stay in this Chendo?"

"Chengdu," Li corrected. "It is a two-and-half hour flight from Hong Kong, and travelling west means we arrive there early afternoon, allowing for time difference. We leave early the following morning for Kangding on the Tibetan border about two hundred miles away. After the first hundred miles on the last level plains in West China the terrain becomes mountainous and the road difficult. I have arranged for a car and utility vehicle for ourselves and baggage. You will find it very interesting."

"I bet," Duke said morosely. "I have heard that there are no flush

toilets beyond Chengdu; just holes in the floors.”

“Be thankful for small mercies,” Dave told him. “Kangding is almost ten thousand feet above sea-level, and three hours later we cross into real Tibetan territory at 15,000 feet – with no toilets at all. Meditate on that and be thankful.”

“Finally,” Li said, “After yesterday’s open attack on you I have arranged for increased protection and surveillance for you – and for the lady.” He looked at Dave. “They are all in plain-clothes, men and women, good at their jobs, so you shouldn’t see them or be bothered by them.”

“We thought of having an evening out tonight,” Dave said, “at the Godown. You’re welcome to join us.”

“No thanks. I want to keep our joint appearances to a minimum. One more thing: do you know the Godown has moved from its old place in the basement in Park Street, off the Gardens by the Hong Kong Club? A lot of places have moved since you were here. It is now located in the Admiralty Centre to the west, in Tower Block Two. You know the place? OK. I’ll have a few people inside there before you arrive. The triad might be desperate enough to try another public attack. There’s a lot at stake. Just take care. The triads won’t be stopped just because you have women with you. Any questions? No? Then, tsai chen.”

“Tsai chen, Li.”

With Li’s departure Dave and Duke separated to make their final individual purchases and arrangements; Dave to inform Fleur, and Duke to invite Van Franklin to join them at the Godown. Duke made for the Foreign Correspondents’ Club in the Central District, as the most likely place to find or get word of Van, and Dave headed for Fleur’s hotel in Causeway Bay. Duke was the more fortunate, for he found Van at the FCC, while Dave found that Fleur was away from the hotel. Shopping, he thought, and decided to wait in the foyer for her return.

There were a few knowing looks and friendly bantering remarks thrown at Duke and Van as they met for the second time in two days in the FCC, which they smilingly ignored. “Bar, booth or table?” she asked Duke.

"Bar's fine." Duke grinned. "No secrets today."

"Too bad," Van responded, sliding on to a vacant stool beside Duke. "What are you drinking? Beer again?"

"Beer's fine."

"Bar's fine; beer's fine. All's well in your world, then?" she smiled provocatively.

Duke rocked his hand sideways. "No complaints." He picked up the frosted bottle of beer the bartender had placed in front of him and, tilting the glass, he slowly filled it to the top, watching the foaming head form. He held the glass up in a salute: "To a beautiful lady."

She raised her aerated water: "To a handsome gentleman."

They looked at each other in frank appraisal. Duke took in the fashionable hair-style of corn-rows laced with coloured beads, the smooth dark skin, the wide-mouth and perfect teeth of her smile, the prominent breasts filling the white blouse. Van's eyes reflected her approval of Duke's rugged features, the dominating masculinity of his powerful figure stretching tee-shirt and jeans.

"A not-unexpected pleasure," she said to him, smiling faintly.

"Are you free this evening for a double-date?" he asked.

"Must it be double?" she enquired, eyebrows raised.

"I'd like it to be double," Duke said. "It's my last night here, and I'd like you to meet with my friend, Dave, and his girl-friend."

"In that case, I'd love to. Time? Place? Formal or informal?"

"Whoa!" Duke laughed. "Ah'm jist a country boy from Noo Awlins."

"And Ah'm jist a mish kid from Alabama," she mimicked his drawl. "Ah jist wanna know if Ah weah mah Levis or Chanel."

"Oh. I apologize, ma'am. Casual. The Godown. At eight."

"Pleased, Ah'm shuah, sah—and that's enough African-American jabber."

"I'm glad," Duke said. "I'm not African-American. I'm an American who fought for America and not for Africa, proud as I am of my race."

"I agree." She dismissed the subject with a wave of her hand. "You're an interesting man. I've been asking around and heard quite

a bit about you and your friend, Dave. Something bothers me, tho'. You said he has a 'girl-friend' for tonight. But my information is that he is married to a former journalist from Hong Kong. You boys playin' around?"

"She was murdered over a year ago," Duke said quietly. "He was devastated."

"Uh-oh," Van showed instant distress. "I didn't know that. I apologize."

"You're not to know. I thought he'd never get over it," Duke added. "This is the first time he's shown any interest in a woman since his wife's murder."

"What's she like?" Van asked interestedly.

"I don't know," Duke laughed. "Dave raved a bit about her, but I haven't met her. That's what tonight is all about. By the way, she's Tibetan."

"She's what!" Van exclaimed. "You guys move fast".

"Tibetan," Duke repeated and grinned. "So Dave needs you for an interpreter. No!" He held up his hands, palms outward as she clenched her fist at him jokingly. "She speaks English—in fact, I gather she speaks several languages. She was educated in China, India and then in Europe, as an adopted refugee by a wealthy Swiss family."

"Hey-hey! What d' you know." Van said softly. "Is she going to Tibet with you?"

"Whoo-hoo!" Duke held up his hands. "Take it easy, doll. What brought that rush on?"

"Man, all my bells are jangling," Van declared, eyes slit in concentration. "You're up to something in Tibet. You either knew this woman and sent for her; or, you didn't know her, and met her accidentally—then just happened to find her useful enough to invite her with you. Or she found you, and she conned you into believing her usefulness to you. Give me a break, Duke. I'm not stupid. What's the connection—and, more important, what's the story?"

Duke shook his head negatively. He had recovered from his momentary surprise at her barrage of questions. "Hey, doll. I'm here, aren't I? I asked to meet you again, and I'm answering your

questions, so it's cool. OK? You'll meet her—and Dave—tonight. I only hope you'll spare some attention for me! How about another beer?" he added to get her off the subject.

But Van was not to be put off. Her mind obviously was still racing as she gazed reflectively at Duke. "If she can go with you, can I go?" she demanded suddenly. "You are on an assignment of some kind that's blowing my mind," she said slowly and emphatically. "I could go with a lead story right now, based on your arrival here and what I know of your reputations, and this might get me a reaction from the editor in the States to find out what might be your true mission."

"Go easy on the blackmail," Duke warned her quietly.

"See what I mean," she said, unrepentant. "You're hiding something. Come on, Duke: how about some cooperation from a brother?" She smiled enticingly.

"First, blackmail: now, seduction." Duke stalled for time to retreat. "What next, sister?"

She stared at him thoughtfully. "Alright," she said finally, as if making up her mind. "No more pressure on you now—but how about if I put pressure on your friends tonight? I promise not to make myself a nuisance. Just give me a shot at trying to persuade them? Or, wait a minute—" She locked gazes with him as her mind raced, then said slowly, "How about if I join you, too, on the trip to Tibet?"

"We leave tomorrow," Duke in desperation warned her off.

"What time?" she asked immediately, sensing his weakening.

"Mid-day from the hotel; you haven't time to get permission from your paper, and we can't delay longer." He felt a surge of relief.

"Who needs permission?" Van said relentlessly, her eyes alight with excitement. "I'll just inform them that I'm off on a story and I'll be in touch later. Come on, Duke! You had a woman journalist with you on a story before—the one who became Dave's wife, remember? Hey! You never know, love like lightning might strike again!" She smiled tantalizingly at him.

"You would agree to accept Dave's decision?" he demanded reluctantly.

She looked at him provocatively. "Just Dave's—not his woman? What's her name anyway?"

"Fleur," he said.

"Say again," she demanded.

"Fleur. F-l-e-u-r."

"I thought you said she was Tibetan? That's French for flower—you should know that. You're from New Orleans."

"That's the name the Swiss family who adopted her gave her."

"So OK—but no casting vote from Fleur, right? She can sit looking beautiful, but dumb. This is serious business, and I'm always suspicious if there's another woman in the project until I know her better."

"Fair enough," Duke agreed, glad that it would be Dave's problem to cope with this dynamic creature. "Now, how about that beer?"

"Right." She held up her hand to signal to the bartender. "Tell me more about tonight's arrangements."

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When Fleur arrived back at the hotel she had several large packages, and the commissionaire and bell captain helped her to carry them from the taxi to the trolley to take them to her room. She saw Dave rising from the chair in the foyer, and she walked towards him, smiling, kissing him lightly on the lips.

"Don't worry" she said, indicating the parcels. "There's a lot of padding. The big packages are shearlings—wool-lined sweaters and boots—which I need to wear until I get to freezing Kangding. Once I get there I'll use fur-lined Tibetan clothing. The other things are women's necessities, or things not available in Kangding or beyond. Have you time to come to the room, or can we grab a quick cup of tea in the coffee shop?"

"Time for a short visit," Dave agreed. "I wanted to see you about a few things before tonight. I hope you're free for a double-date with Duke and a woman journalist he met here?"

"Of course," she said, taking his hand as they walked to the

elevator. "Where are we going tonight? We didn't get dinner last night!" She laughed, and looked at him mischievously.

"No, we didn't," Dave admitted whimsically. "I had some explaining to do to Duke this morning." He told Fleur about his conversation with Duke, and Duke's with Foxy and Van, as they walked to her room. Inside she removed her jacket.

"I must take a few minutes to wash and change out of these," she said. "Can you order tea and things from room service?"

When she returned she had showered and was in her dressing-gown, and the room service waiter had arrived with a trolley, on which were trays of sandwiches with varied fillings, cakes, floral china tea-pot under a padded cover, and tea-cups.

"English custom." Dave remarked.

"I love it here," Fleur said enthusiastically, pouring tea into the two cups. "English tea and English breakfasts. Tell me about the arrangements for tonight."

Dave told her what Li had organized, including her documents as "Mrs Wilson", and she laughed delightedly. Then he informed her of the arrangements for that night.

"The Godown was one of our favourite places when we lived here," he explained. "It's a great mix of disco and restaurant, with more music than dancing. The owner-host is a lover of food and wine as well as jazz, and a good friend of ours, Bill Standish. The band plays mostly Dixieland jazz, which delights Duke, and is mostly made up of local amateurs who play instruments and love the scene. It's all very relaxed and friendly. Duke used to play there regularly. He is a very good musician. Mostly horn—trumpet, clarinet, trombone—but he can play one or two other instruments as well."

"Is the woman journalist someone you both knew before?"

Dave laughed. "No, she's a bit of a mystery to me. She's a black woman journalist with the Times who recently came to Hong Kong. But apparently she was born on the Tibetan border to missionary parents—yes, I kid you not!—who loves all things Tibetan. Duke met her yesterday at the FCC, while I was with you at the Mandarin, and I gather she left quite an impression on him. He had given me a hard

time over your joining us, and he was a bit awkward at having to admit he would like to double-date with us.”

“I suppose we have to be careful what we say tonight, then—with her being a journalist?” Fleur enquired doubtfully.

“Reasonably,” Dave agreed. “We’ll keep it a low-key affair—old friends, old places, last night nostalgia. Speaking of which, I’ve a couple of things to buy before I return to the hotel to change for tonight. I won’t have time tomorrow morning. May we talk some more about Tariq now? Li told Duke and me something of your brother’s movements after he left his time of meditation in Sikkim. It seems he went to Israel and from there to Libya and then he disappeared again. Have you any information about his activities from that point?”

Fleur took time to pour more tea and then said slowly, “Loshay—or ‘Tariq’ as you know him—never gave me many details of his political activities. We kept in touch often, of course, but it was always about matters that were of personal or religious interest. However, he did tell me about his visits to Libya and Sudan because, although they were political, they also involved his personal religious interests at the time.

“It seems he went to Libya because of some circumstances in Israel in which he demonstrated his Tibetan tantric powers. Again, I don’t know much about that aspect of his spiritual experience other than that he was very impressed by it. Anyway, in Libya he was a kind of spiritual adviser to the radical Islamists in the military training camps. He had no idea of what he was going to do, but he was interested to find out what it was that God had in mind after the recent bizarre circumstances in Israel. He did everything the other recruits did—prayers and Islamic lessons as well as weapons and martial arts training. The news of his demonstration in Israel gradually permeated the system, and he was called into discussions with the instructors.

“Eventually, he was called to a meeting with the official mullahs. The senior cleric was the standard parroting specimen familiar to all religions, whose spiritual capabilities were virtually non-existent. He could quote the Koran mindlessly, delivering the usual mullah

concoctions of devotion to the Prophet, regular prayers, damnation to all infidels, and the sexual joys awaiting martyrs in Paradise. Tariq had listened in silence to his public messages to the recruits, but Tariq saw no reason to tolerate his, and his fellow mullahs', ignorance of true Islamism in private. It was no pleasure to Tariq to make him look the fool he was, but he considered it was better for him to take a verbal thrashing in private from Tariq than for Tariq to wait until the mullah tried to make a fool of Tariq in public.

"The outcome was amusing—for Tariq. I don't know whether it was his personal decision, or an order from above, but Tariq was asked to give instruction in Islam to his fellow-recruits and training staff and he decided his best approach would be to repeat the demonstration he had given in Israel as a foundation for his later teachings on spirit power.

"There was a considerable difference in the audience and circumstances in Libya. There were about three hundred recruits from all over the Middle East, in all stages of terrorist training, and some of the instructors were men and women of international reputation. On the one hand, he was learning from these weapons and martial arts specialists; while, on the other hand, he was teaching them true Islamic spiritual values.

"The experience apparently forced him to think and argue through the realities of spiritual truths in practical circumstances, from the individual to the communal to the national. His derogatory remarks regarding the physical opposed to the spiritual resulted in his having to pay a high price in the daily training programs as the instructors got their own back in pushing him to the limits. Life it seems had been simple until Tariq arrived. Hate the infidel, kill the infidel, plunder the infidel, and reap the rewards of Paradise. Muslim fundamentalists had similar simplicities as Christian and Jewish fundamentalists!

"The challenges to his spiritual contribution had an interesting consequence. At first it was simply the repercussions of his ability to withstand bullets and sword-cuts while in a state of spirit power which had increased his participation and influence. The concentration of the instructors in developing his physical skills, as

punishment for his taunting them and the recruits for their Islamic juvenilia, honed him into a formidably destructive instrument. The pressures and circumstances which this generated forced him to consider the direction, value and significance of his actions and goals. It was one of the most important decisions of his life, he said.

“What had begun to trouble Tariq was the circus-like nature of what he was doing as he repeated the single demonstration of spirit power over physical power of the weapons. When, in his growing concern, he returned to a study of the Christian Bible and the use there of spirit power, he said he was, first, relieved, then astonished to find out how many former leading servants of God had used the practices in their lives.

“Moses, of course, was a prime example, but not really relevant, because his demonstrations of personal power to the Pharaoh of Egypt and, later, to Israel in the desert, were really independent of him. In fact, when he claimed he was personally able to strike the rock and bring forth water he was condemned by God. He felt more comfortable with Joshua, Samson and Gideon. But it was when he came to David, Elijah, Elisha, Daniel, and Ezekiel, that his mind and spirit were finally satisfied. Here were people who were as much at home in the ‘other reality’ of spiritual power as they were in earthly circumstances. All of them had known the experience of meeting with spirit-beings—angelic messengers, and even personifications of God—who were communicators of divine power. David even wrote of individual guardian angels for those who feared God. Daniel had talked with Archangels Gabriel and Michael, and had experience of the heavenly ‘court of judgment’ in his administration of the Babylonian and Medo-Persian empires. Ezekiel was both a seer and oracle in his prophetic career. Gideon, Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah, had all used spirit power to confront kings and defy armies.

“But it was David who fascinated him. David’s confrontation with Goliath was not a demonstration of spirit power in Tariq’s experienced sense of the term; it was a simple demonstration of his everyday shepherding sling-shot skills coupled with a personal daring. He knew he could hit Goliath on his exposed forehead with

a sling-shot at fifty paces because he did it every day in his herding of sheep. Tariq did it in Tibet as a child, when we had competitions with each other to hit the heads of sheep, then the horns of yaks, when we were driving them. But when God called David to be his servant, and to be ruler over Israel, David did it by spirit power. 'By my God,' he said, 'I jump over a wall . . . I use the sword . . . I draw the bow . . . I throw the javelin . . . I drive the chariot and horses . . .' David built the nation of Israel from a small disparate group of quarrelling tribes by spirit power. He was made by God into a consummate guerrilla leader greater than China's Sun Wu, because he did not just write about guerrilla strategy but, after he had consolidated the kingdom of Israel, he expanded it into an empire in the Middle East in his time.

"Yet David had no pleasure in his military skills, or administrative expertise, or literary genius; his delight, he declared, was in following the commands of God, and his preference was to be a servant of God's House rather than a king among nations. David woke up every morning with the excitement of knowing and working with God. He was a servant of the living God. Nothing could be greater than this! No wonder God said he was 'a man after God's own heart', and his epitaph at death was 'after he served the will of God in his own generation he fell asleep.'

"Then there were the Apostles Peter and Paul, whose lives were governed by spirit power—Peter even had a personal angel! Paul only travelled where the Spirit led him, was selective in the use of spirit power, and on one memorable occasion stunned observers by shaking off a poisonous snake from his hand without harm.

"So Tariq began exercising conscious direct spirit power instead of the channelled spirit power of trance-possession; for example, in healings and exorcisms and perceptions, he used a combination of Davidic and Latin American Liberation revolutionary strategies to counter the sloganeering tactics of the instructors. He taught the value of personal communication with God in prayers instead of the supposed merits of sterile repetition. He taught individual accountability to God instead of communal conformity to the mullahs.

“After several months of mounting controversy and responsive excitement he was called to the capital to meet with “the Leader”, Moammar Gadaffi himself. Tariq had read his writings on the Libyan ‘third universal theory’ of revolution—they were a mandatory part of the training program in Libya—and considered most of it rubbish, an exercise in Gadaffi egotism with only a thin gloss of Islam.

“About three-quarters of Libya’s 3.5 million people were under thirty years of age, and what they knew of Islam was Gadaffi’s bizarre concoction. He was only sustained in power by Libya’s oil wealth which, even at its lowest price, still brought in about US\$20 million a day, so that Libyans materially lacked very little and had little disposition to revolt against him. But there were a considerable number of young Libyans who were tired of Gadaffi’s quixotic rule, and there were reports of numbers of them being trained to overthrow him in Sudan and Chad.

“Gadaffi had more reason to fear the growing number of idealistic Islamic revolutionaries than the CIA-trained former Afghanistan mujahadeen. There were at least ten different security services in Libya, in addition to the sinister Revolutionary Committees whose main function was searching for ‘fundamentalist enemies’. Gadaffi publicly denounced the Islamic militants as ‘heretics’ and ‘imperialist lackeys’ who could expect no mercy from him. Tariq expected to be berated by him, and was not surprised when he had to listen to him expand on his theories at length before he questioned Tariq about reports of his ‘miracles’ But once he began listening to Tariq he devoted time to asking questions which indicated his genuine interest.

“As a Bedouin, he spent some time living in a tent even in the city, although it was a lavishly appointed one. Here Tariq and Gadaffi continued to meet and eat together, either with a few close officials or a larger invited group of close friends. Gadaffi was sufficiently impressed from the discussions to offer Tariq an appointment in the Libyan capital, which would enable him to address the country’s leaders on his theories of revolution by spirit power. But Tariq preferred another suggestion he had casually introduced—that Tariq should meet with

other revolutionary leaders in the Middle East.

“Diplomatically, he suggested to Gadaffi that he thought this latter suggestion would be more productive in the wider context, and perhaps he could take up later Gadaffi’s generous offer regarding residence in Libya. He agreed, and even insisted on paying Tariq a regular salary as a ‘retainer’. Tariq was able to make this payable to me through my Trust fund, as he did not want to be regarded by others as a Libyan puppet.

“Gadaffi proposed a visit to Syria first because of his personal influence with various revolutionary leaders living there under Syria’s protection. Through Libyan diplomatic channels he made arrangements for Tariq to be met and introduced to those most likely to be interested. He also gave Tariq Libyan diplomatic travel documents in a different name that I have forgotten as a ‘government consultant’.

“Tariq said he had no personal interest in visiting Libya’s neighbouring country of Egypt to the east, or even Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco to the west, mainly because their Islamic revolutionary movements were more national and ‘inward’ fundamentalist in character than having international potential—except, perhaps, for the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. But he was already planning to talk with Turabi of Sudan’s Muslim Brotherhood as a more significant Muslim revolutionary leader. I think even at this seemingly advanced stage Tariq had no real universal plan of any kind; he was just seeking some spiritual synthesis of his own.

“The fragmented national fundamentalist groups existed in several Middle East countries. There was the self-declared fundamentalist regime of Saudi Arabia, the Wahhabi of the royal House of Saud, now being opposed by several splintered radical groups. There was the Islamic Renaissance Party in Tunisia; the Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria; the Islamic Justice and Welfare Party in Morocco, the Welfare party in Turkey, the Islamic Democratic Alliance in Pakistan, and the Shi’te Dawa in Iraq.

“What most interested Tariq, of course, was the potential single formula which would unify all of the fragmented Islamic groups into a universal and unstoppable force. Knowing the historical

fissiparous tendencies of the Muslim people—the divine prophecy regarding the descendants of Ishmael that ‘Every man’s hand will be against his brother’—the unifying element would have to be imposed on them from above and not by any democratic agreement. He had long before jettisoned the idea of democracy. Even Winston Churchill’s theory of it being ‘the worst form of government there is, except every other that’s been tried’ was not acceptable to him. The idea that a statistical number of people of indeterminate value could determine the destiny of a country was intellectually repugnant. In Tariq’s view, neither numbers nor class were fit principles by which to govern a country. He agreed with Lord Acton: ‘The one pervading evil of democracy is the tyranny of the majority, or rather that of the party . . . that succeeds, by force or fraud, in carrying elections’. To that “force or fraud” Tariq would add “or franchise”. What was needed, in his opinion, was a benevolent dictatorship of some kind based on spiritual values, a recognition of God being the ultimate Ruler.

“Like Archimedes he needed a lever-and-fulcrum principle that would move the world—as he said: ‘A very great weight moved by a very small force. The principle was sound; it was the means to do it that was essential. Archimedes’s “fully loaded ship” of Islamic Revolution had demonstrated its cargo to the world in the 1980s: the 1979 installation in Shi’ite Muslim Iran of the Ayatollah Khomeini; the occupation in the same year of Mecca’s holiest shrine by Islamic revolutionaries; the assassination of the Egyptian President Sadat by the Muslim Brotherhood; Hezbollah’s car-bomb attack on the US Embassy in Beirut; the expansion of the Hamas in Algeria; and the military coup in Sudan by the Muslim Brotherhood to make it the Middle East’s first Sunni Muslim State

“But all of these had negative elements, the greatest incubus being the attempt to equate Islamic Vision with Western Democracy. What they all lacked was a coordinating element, a powerful Islamic factor which would unite them, and others, into a world dominating force. One man hoping to do this was the current President Asad of Syria, and the other was President Saddam Hussein of Iraq—neither of whom Tariq considered a worthy rival to his own ambitions. He

hoped to meet them both and talk with them.”

Dave interrupted Fleur, glancing at his watch and saying, “Look, may we leave this and Sudan to some other time? I really came to see you about having dinner with Duke and me tonight at the Godown Restaurant, and I have to fix that and a few things before then”.

“What time are you coming to collect me tonight?” she asked.

“Eight at the Godown,” he replied and, after he kissed her lingeringly, he added. “See you downstairs at seven-forty-five.”

*

The Godown was never at its busiest at eight o’clock, the pace quickening as the night advanced. Dave and Fleur got there first, and Duke and Van about fifteen minutes later. The two women looked at each other with unconcealed interest. They were a striking contrast in types of beauty: one pale ivory; one smooth brown. Although both were casually dressed—Van in a knee-length red dress, broad-belted at the waist, and Fleur in a mid-thigh length, black-and-white checked dress—there was a dramatic quality to each of them that drew the eyes of everybody in the restaurant. Fleur’s classic model-like elegance contrasted with Van’s dynamic femininity. Both were sufficiently aware of the effect of their distinctive attractions not to be jealous of each other. Dave and Duke were in their cream light-weight suits, Dave with a tie and Duke without.

After the introductions they made their way to their reserved table, and they had just sat down when Bill Standish, the owner-host, came out of the kitchen to greet them. He brought with him two bottles of champagne, and a waiter followed him with an ice-bucket and stand, and another waiter carried a tray with five champagne flutes.

“A toast to happy meetings after long absence,” he said cheerfully, expelling the cork and pouring the foaming pale-gold liquid into the flutes. The waiter gave one to each.

“Happy meetings.”

“Happy meetings.”

They chatted generally about mutual friends, and then Bill

Standish said to them, "I hope you don't mind, ladies, but I've prepared a special meal for you all tonight, without asking what you want. I know what Dave and Duke like, and I think you'll like what I've got for you. You begin with lightly breaded oysters served with spinach and a lemon-tinged butter sauce; the crunchiness of the bread-crumbs and hint of lemon play off the suppleness of the oysters. The second course is shrimp and tomato tartlets, the shrimp sautéed with curry and served on the tartlets with radicchio and green Bibb lettuce. The main course is an excellent poached fillet of beef, with a sauce made of garlic, lemon juice and nuoc mam—you two guys remember it?—a Vietnamese fermented fish sauce which just makes it—mmmmm." He circled his fore-finger and thumb. "For desert I have an exquisite compote of figs and oranges, with Grand Marnier liqueur. How does that sound?"

"Worth travelling all this way to eat," Dave grinned. "What do we drink with this Lucullan banquet?"

"I recommend a French Chablis Bougros '91 with the oysters. The shrimp and tartlets need something with a bit more body so a Californian Chardonnay—also '91. Then Burgundy with beef—a 1990 Hautes-Cotes de Nuits. Veuve Clicquot with the desert.

"But there is a price for all this—and I don't mean money. Duke, you're on tonight. I've arranged a horn for you, and the fellows here who know you are thrilled about it. The other diners have heard about you. So, Gabriel, blow that horn!" He excused himself to get back to the kitchen

"He's well-known for blowing his trumpet," Dave said with mock serious-ness, nodding at Duke.

"Just one of the many talents we oppressed minorities developed to brighten the declining civilization of the oppressors," Duke explained dead-pan. "Trumpets were being played by Hamitic and Semitic civilizations when the Japhetic tribes were still living in tents and looking for a place to pitch them."

"They were trying to get away from the awful noise," Dave suggested.

"Do you have trumpets in Tibet, Fleur?" Duke asked her politely, making conversation.

"Did you say trumpets or strumpets?" Fleur asked with mock innocence, and Dave exploded into laughter.

"She's pulling your leg, Duke," he warned. "The innocence is the key."

"Sorry, Duke," Fleur said contritely. "Dave said you liked joking. I didn't mean to embarrass you. Dave, behave yourself. Duke, they have all kinds of trumpets in Tibet—from small human thigh-bone trumpets used in tantric ceremonies, to huge fifteen-foot trumpets for formal religious occasions."

"You didn't say anything about being a musician," Van said to Duke acc-usingly.

"I'm well-known for my modesty," Duke said seriously.

"Like your beauty, it could be said it's conspicuous by its absence," Van said sardonically. "Since you're interested, and to get your mind away from your own attributes, I did a minor in music at university."

"You play an instrument?" Duke asked her curiously.

"I play piano," she said. "Not with any distinction, but with great elan."

"Jazz?" he enquired.

"Some jazz, some classical, some gospel, gospel every Sunday in church, and week-days choir practice, back in the US of A."

"Maybe we can get together sometime," Duke said.

"I thought you'd never ask," she replied, laughing. "But, joking aside, Dave, may I ask you something serious that I cleared with Duke; so that we can get business out of the way for the remainder of the evening?"

Dave nodded his agreement

"We had a meeting yesterday, as you know, to talk about what I know of Tibet. Foxy and I, being journalists, suspected you two guys of being up to some escapade, but Duke obviously wasn't talking, so we just discussed general information. Then, today, while Duke was arranging this date, he mentioned about Fleur being a Tibetan and going with you to Tibet. My mind starting jumping all over the place—forgive me for being blunt for a moment, please, Fleur. This is me as a journalist talking, and making a desperate pitch for a story."

Fleur smiled and nodded that she understood.

"Dave, I won't labour the point, but I don't believe you accidentally met Fleur, and that you magnanimously suggested that she accompany you on an innocent visit to Tibet. That's for the birds and the women's journals. I confess I don't know why you're going, but I'm a good enough journalist to know a cover-up when I see one, and to be able to put one-and-one together to add up to a winning ten. Something is happening, or is going to happen, in Tibet in the near future. Fleur is linked to this in some way, and her presence with you is part of it. My journalistic instinct is to alert my editor, have him turn the paper's researchers on to it in a big way, and go with the story all the way to the wire."

She paused then added pointedly. "I could not let you go off tomorrow without a shot at the story tonight. But if your trip is as important and secret as I think it is, then my jump of the gun would be disastrous for you, wouldn't it?"

Dave nodded slowly and inscrutably.

"I'm asking—as nicely and unthreateningly as possible—for you to take me with you. Wait! Hear me out. I have agreed with Duke to accept your decision as final, so I only have this one shot. I, too, can think of all sorts of arguments against my going, but I feel this is once-in-a-lifetime chance of a story that no-one else has or can get, and I desperately want the chance to cover it. Now, please, take time to think about it while you hold my journalistic life in your hands!" She sat back, looking at Duke, and he saw the sheen of unshed tears behind the light of excitement in her eyes. He looked at Dave with a slight inclination of his head, silently indicating that it was Dave's decision.

Dave was deep in thought. His first reaction was to dismiss Van's request as ridiculous. Then, as he reflected on what she had said, he was aware of the danger she posed with her knowledge, skills and newspaper contacts. She was not Nelson McCabe delaying publication with the assurance of the President's exclusive inside story afterwards. Dave could hardly ask her to forego the possibility of a scoop as a favour to him—certainly not without explaining the detailed importance of their mission. If he contemplated doing that, she might as well go with them so he could

keep an eye on her and see she didn't send reports. This assignment was getting more complicated by the day!

"Let me explain to you what I'm thinking," he said slowly, "and then we can take the situation by stages before we decide together". He gave Van his edited version of their situation in Hong Kong, keeping to Duke's hints of drug involvement, and Van's eyes were expressionless but focused on Dave.

"Now, about Fleur." he said. "She is an essential part of our trip—but by accident, although not by coincidence." He explained about the introduction he had to Yosef, and Yosef's surprise announcement of her presence in Hong Kong. "Here's where it begins to be difficult. My meeting with Yosef was to get information about someone important to our mission, whom he knew well in India—and this person happened to be Fleur's brother, and Fleur happened to be in Hong Kong on one of her periodic visits to China, and Yosef proposed a meeting with her if she agreed. She did."

He stopped, and thought for a few moments. "This mission we're on has a one-in-a-hundred chance of succeeding, and we have similar odds over coming out of it alive. That figure, by the way, may be wildly optimistic. At this stage we have no chance at all of success, and every chance of death. Only romantic fools, like Roman gladiators in the Circus, would take it on. What you are asking me is to permit you to come and die with us."

They were silent as the waiters removed their plates, and brought the next course to the table, poured the wine, and withdrew. Then Dave continued: "Say you were prepared to accept these conditions to join us, you would just have to disappear without explanation to family, friends, colleagues—and editor. You could only give notice of a lengthy absence, ostensibly in pursuit of a secret story. Any comments before I say more?"

Van took her time before saying, "May I ask two questions? I promise I won't reveal the information, whatever may be decided." Dave nodded agreement.

"The first is regarding Fleur. What is her brother's name?"

Fleur looked at Dave, and he hesitated for a time in thought then nodded his approval. Fleur said quietly, "Tariq Azir."

Van did not seem unduly surprised, and she nodded her head in silent confirmation of some thought she had. "I have a vague idea of what you might truly be doing—and it has nothing to do with drugs! - but I can't really believe it!" she said. "Question two: I know you two guys would die for patriotism and friendship, because it's a matter of record; but why would you, Fleur, want to go with them to die when your brother is the likely target?" She looked directly into Fleur's eyes as she spoke.

Fleur did not try to evade the look but, as she sat silent, thinking over what to say, her brilliant cat-like eyes filled with tears, which rolled slowly down her cheeks. She looked mutely at Dave, and he put his hand on top of hers, and nodded to her encouragingly. When she had regained some composure Fleur said, haltingly at first then with more confidence, "I love my brother very much, although I have rarely seen him in the past few years, and I must meet him to talk with him. I also love Dave very much, and, because I do not expect to live, I gave myself to him as a wife for as long as we live."

"You are married?" Van asked disbelievingly.

"We exchanged marriage vows before God," Fleur said with dignity and without embarrassment. "We accepted each other as husband and wife in my room as solemnly as if we were in church. So I go with my husband, whom I love, to meet my brother, whom I love, and whatever happens I must lose one if not both of them."

Van looked from Fleur's tear-stained face to the sombre Dave, and then to the engrossed Duke. "I would like to propose something for discussion before decision time," she said finally. "If I decide to risk my life, job and reputation with you, and if you agree to take me with you, I would like the agreement to be made in the same manner as you two made your vows. Wait, please. I'm not finished, and this must be said. I've only just met Duke, and I'm trying suddenly to cope with the thought that we may never meet again if you leave here without me on this ultra-secret mission. I find that surprisingly desolating for such a short acquaintance. Having just met him, and been attracted to him, although I had not given a thought to falling in love with him so far—if I were going on a long, intimate and possibly final journey together, I certainly could be

persuaded to give myself to him. In which case, I would love to have it—is ‘solemnized’ the appropriate word?—in the manner which you have described.

“So, decision time! When we began this conversation I thought we were going to decide about a news story. Now it looks as if we are deciding about marriage and possible death. I want to go with you tomorrow. If that is agreed, I want to get ‘married’ to Duke tonight. And the dude hasn’t even been asked!” She looked at him, but she wasn’t smiling, just silently pleading for understanding. “But, if we do come out of this alive, bro’, I warn you, I want a wedding in a church with all the trimmings. You’ll find I’m really a romantic at heart. Think about it.”

Dave looked at Duke. “What do you say, Duke?” he asked him soberly. He didn’t have to say the question.

Duke didn’t ask. He nodded. “Yeah. I’d go along with that. But we’d need to see Li.”

“I’ll phone him from here right now,” Dave said, rising. “It seems the decision is made. Fleur, you ladies may want a visit to the ladies room for a private chat before we go back to Fleur’s room for the ceremony. Duke can fill you in, Van, with what we’re doing when you get back and if I’m not here.”

In the ladies room Van said to Fleur, “Honey, I appreciate your confidence. I’m not a virgin, so it’s no big deal if I get it wrong with Duke sex-wise. But with you, it’s life-or-death for Dave or your brother. Is there something I should know that will be of help to me in this crazy scene?”

“I was a virgin until last night,” Fleur said quietly. “I didn’t have some romantic idea about saving myself for one man. I’m a Tibetan. In Tibet you just roll over and go ahead around the common fires. I am also a Muslim with the expectation of being one of four wives. To be honest whether inside or outside Tibet although a Muslim I just didn’t want to be trapped into enforced domesticity. What I did want was someone like my brother, Tariq. He was humble and sincere, kind and thoughtful, concerned for others. He had a vision and sense of mission that I coveted. It was for that I saved myself. I wanted a man I could give myself to in total surrender to a joint vision.”

‘When—and how—did you know?’ Van asked, absorbed.

‘I didn’t look at my watch,’ Fleur smiled, ‘so I have no idea of the time. But there was a moment at the music concert we attended when, without thinking about Dave, I felt I was in the presence of God; the powerful effect of the Liszt concerto, and the total uniqueness of our meeting, I suddenly knew that that Dave was the man for me, and I willingly surrendered.’

‘You didn’t feel any rush of love for Dave?’ Van asked.

‘I felt love for God, for the music, for Tariq, and then it embraced Dave beside me—but very different from the man on my other side. I wanted to give myself to Dave, and be with him for the rest of my life.’

‘It wasn’t just womanly intuition that he was an unexpected way to meet up with your brother? Do you mind me asking these questions?’

‘Not if it helps you,’ Fleur smiled. ‘At the time that never crossed my mind; the rationalization came shortly afterwards. I asked him to come outside at the interval, and told him frankly how I felt.’

‘Including giving yourself to him?’

‘Especially that; it was important he understood I was not offering a night of sex, or a temporary affair. I was offering—and asking for—complete submission to the other before God for the rest of our lives. You see, by then we both knew that the shadow of Tariq lay between us.’

‘The shadow of Tariq?’ Van asked, puzzled.

‘Yes, if Tariq is a religious megalomaniac, then Dave,—my husband, my beloved Dave—has to kill him. If there is some reasonable explanation, unknown to us yet, I have to keep Dave from killing him.’

‘But how can there be a reasonable explanation for the nuclear destruction of the world?’ Van demanded, revealing that she had at least guessed the mission’s purpose.

‘So you guessed?’ Fleur said sadly. ‘I don’t know. Dave doesn’t know. That is why we must go there and find out. Meanwhile,’ she smiled her brilliant smile, ‘we shall enjoy ourselves together.’

"The thought of what's ahead doesn't come between you?" Van asked, fascinated.

"Nothing comes between us," Fleur said simply.

There was nothing more to be said, and they returned to the table.

Dave had spoken with Li—who at first had thought Dave was joking about taking another woman with them!—but had finally agreed that it was better for Van to go with them than to be left behind as an unknown factor. He would have her documents as "Mrs Miller" in the morning—or at least the travelling papers, and the others could be sent on to Kangding to collect.

"As who?" Van demanded.

"Mrs Miller," Dave grinned. "Duke's wife. You are now the official wife of a Dakota academic specializing in wildlife."

She shook her head unbelievably. "Look," she said to Duke, "let's get down to basics. All this romantic brouhaha is confusing a practical woman like me. Are you Catholic or Protestant?" It took Duke by surprise.

"I'm not joking," Van said. "Tell me the facts of life—like what equipment I'll need, and how long you expect to be away from civilization—and what do I do about a computer?"

"No computer," Duke said matter-of-factly. "No electricity."

"I know that, lunk-head," she said witheringly. "I meant, is taking it with me permitted?"

"No problem," said Dave. "Just keep in mind that we are an academic wildlife study group, and everything that fits in with that is acceptable."

"Expenses?" she asked.

"We'll take care of that from our Adullam sources. If we survive we'll claim them from the US government."

"Times, and arrangements for departure, I'll discuss with Duke later," she said, smiling provocatively at him, "after he's taken his vows. Dave and Fleur, I appreciate your patience and confidence. Let the music begin. Gabriel, go blow your horn" she said to Duke.

Duke got up and walked through the swing-doors to the kitchen. When he returned with a trumpet in his hand there was a burst of applause from the band and diners, many of whom had obviously

been alerted about Duke's participation, which Duke acknowledged with a wave of his trumpet.

He spoke with the band, put the trumpet to his lips, and ran through a few exercises to loosen his lips. There was no dance-floor in the restaurant, but those who felt like dancing just pushed the tables aside and danced in the cleared spaces between tables and band platform.

Duke nodded to the band, and they swung into a foot-stomping version of *Keep on the Firing Line*. Until then, the band had been enthusiastic but not particularly skilled. As Duke picked up the tempo the band followed, speculatively at first, then with growing confidence. The audience, sensing the improved performance, began to clap time to the driving beat. It was obvious to everybody that Duke was an original, an improviser who had developed his own carefully configured virtuosity in an extemporizing style.

Then Duke led off on his own with *This World Is Not My Home*, the trumpet becoming an extension of himself as he leaned into it, twisting and turning and coaxing it, double—and triple-tonguing the melody until it became a living, pulsating thread on which the revitalized band hung their own inspired extemporizing. The audience was now shouting, stamping their feet, some of them on their feet. Duke finished his solo and waved to the band to pick up the song *I Shall Not Be Moved*, and again Duke lifted them out of ordinariness into inspiration as they followed his lead.

Duke's solos were constructed out of a mixture of complex, bouncing, rhythmic figures, chopped riffs, odd melodies and chords, nearly all difficult to anticipate and impossible to forget. He instinctively adjusted his rhythmic relationship with the band, sometimes riding the beat with stop-time sections, and at other times slowing his phrases to create a tugging sensation. In the old-time gospel of Dixieland jazz it touched the heights of head-shaking, hand-raising ecstasy in the listeners, and then had them standing still in breath-held wonder.

There were tears in Van's eyes as she watched fascinated. "Where did he learn to play like that?" she asked Dave.

"In church back home, to the guys in his unit in Vietnam, and in

honky-tonk hell-spots in Saigon,” Dave replied, grinning. “He’s something else, isn’t he?”

From Just A Little While the band segued into Lily Of The Valley, and another foot-stomping rendition of Oh, Didn’t He Ramble, Alexander’s Rag-time Band, finishing with The Battle Hymn of the Republic. Bill Standish and the staff had stopped serving and, with kitchen staff, listened while Duke was playing, and they joined the audience in applauding Duke all the way back to the table.

Van was on her feet to throw her arms around Duke’s neck, and kiss him fiercely on the lips. “Take me to the altar right now, ace,” she said. “I’ll never be nearer to God.”

Chapter 7

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