

## SHAMBALA

General Ma Wen-huie climbed out of the Chinese military plane after it had taxied to a stop in front of the one-storey building on the single runway of Shambhala valley. He scowled as he braced himself against the perpetual afternoon winds of the region. He hated visiting this god-forsaken region of his command, and he only did so now as a necessary part of his plan to seize power from Tariq Azir. He would not remain here one hour more than was essential to that plan. Forty-eight hours at the most should do it.

He was tall for a Chinese, his broad features making him more Mongolian in appearance than the more aquiline Han. It did not bother him; if anything he secretly approved, for it confirmed his belief that his ancestors came from the earlier Mongol invaders of Genghiz Khan, and that conviction played a large part in his ambitions. What Genghiz Khan could do in the thirteenth century he, General Ma Wen-huie, could do in the twentieth.

He curtly acknowledged the salutes of the colonel of security who was there to meet him, and ignored the soldiers on guard duty at the door of the small administrative building. It was only a functional structure to service the few official users of the remote runway, and he walked straight through to where a military staff-car was waiting for him outside its exit.

He signalled for the colonel to join him in the car, and the colonel

waved to the soldiers not on guard duty, plus the General's 'plane pilot and aides, to follow in other military vehicles. They drove quickly to the Shambhala nuclear installation located several hundred yards away on the far north-western side of the industrial complex. On the way, they passed the Tibetan worker-community mud-built houses and the large encampment of nomads, and hundreds of animals and stacked bundles.

General Ma's narrowed eyes beneath his scowling brows ranged over the scene without interest, until he noted the large number of Tibetans celebrating around a huge fire, and a grouping of four or five foreign—or, at least, not Tibetan—tents.

"What are these?" he asked the colonel.

"The Tibetans who supply us with meat," the colonel replied, not noticing the specific direction of the General's gaze. "They sometimes have a party with the nomads when they arrive."

"I mean those four or five tents away from the Tibetans," the General growled impatiently.

"Oh, these are four foreigners from an American university who are here studying the wildlife of the Chang Tang Reserve," the colonel responded.

"Are you certain about that?" the General demanded suspiciously. "I have a report of two foreign trouble-makers on their way here."

The colonel threw a quick look of surprise at the General. He had heard nothing of this. "I checked them myself," he said confidently, "and their papers are in order. They have a Chinese official as liaison, and also a Tibetan wildlife official from Lhasa."

The General was still not satisfied, glowering at the roistering Tibetans. "If they are interested in wildlife why are they so close to the Tibetan camp and the nuclear facility?" he growled.

"Because I told them to be there so I could keep my eye on them, sir" the colonel assured him.

The reply seemed to satisfy the General for, after a few moments' silence he said, "I would like to see your report tonight—of these people, and any other information you have for me. Also, when I call for you at around 0900 hours tomorrow bring

with you to my office a four-man detail.”

The colonel waited for the General to continue and, when he did not, he gave him a puzzled look: a four-man detail for what, or whom? “Will you be seeing the Director tonight, sir?” he prompted subtly.

The General responded with a glare. “You will get further orders at 0900 hours tomorrow,” he stated icily.

“Yes, sir,” the colonel replied smoothly.

The General was silent for the remainder of the journey.

The Shambhala facility was surrounded by a high wall topped with an electrified grid, and with revolving television scanners at regular intervals. The entrance gate was of heavy metal, electronically controlled, and the guards, alerted by a coded call from the approaching cars, had the gate open for them to sweep inside without stopping.

Inside the gates there was a dramatic change in the surroundings. Outside, there was the vast empty mountain-and-plain, unchanged for centuries; inside, there was a modern industrial complex, incorporating the latest technological marvels. Electronic carts moved white-coated and white jump-suited workers from unit to unit, and as doors glided open and shut there was a pervasive hum of high-powered machinery. The buildings were grouped around a central circular structure with a huge concave roof like a monster baking dish. It had extensions on either side, with elaborate mechanisms indicating that the concave lid was movable to expose a recessed underground hydraulically controlled launching system for a nuclear device.

The two cars stopped outside one of the surrounding buildings near the launching area and, as the General got out of the car, he said to the colonel brusquely, “0900 hours tomorrow. Wait till I call you.” He acknowledged the colonel’s salute briskly, and strode inside the building. Tomorrow, he thought, is my day of destiny.

In the Tibetan encampment the hospitable meal had developed into a full-scale celebration party. As the afternoon stretched into early evening, and the wind sharpened and increased, the water in the no-longer-blue nearby lake was whipped into white-capped

waves two feet high. The merry Tibetans heaped more wood and dried yak-dung chips on to more fires, and the leaping flames reddened their laughing and greased faces, and the singing soon became dancing.

Deki sang along with them and was easily persuaded to join in the dancing, mildly protesting that the Lhasa style was different from Kham. After that Dave, Duke and Van were pulled to their feet and individually taken into the dancing groups to learn the gypsy-like movements.

At one point, when Deki and Bundi were together in a single group, he said to her quietly, "I am going to the foreign building now to collect our glass-paper permits. It will be easier for you to enter unseen by your friends tonight than in the daylight tomorrow." He waited for her response while they circled.

Deki was jolted out of her unthinking enjoyment by the brutal reality of her earlier decision, but she only hesitated for a moment. "I agree," she told Bundi. "When?"

"When the dance ends I will go to my tent," Bundi said. "When I see you leave the fire I will walk from the tent. You join me quickly in the dark beyond the fires. The Chinese will think we're man and wife."

When Deki saw Bundi move towards his tent she excused herself, pursing her lips in a kiss to Dave as she strolled to their tent. From the tent door she quickly checked to see if she was being watched and, satisfied she was not, she slipped behind the tent into the shadows and joined Bundi as he walked away from the tent towards entrance to the nuclear facility.

There was a bell beside the metal gate and when Bundi pressed this, a Chinese soldier appeared. Bundi handed him a piece of paper, which must have been an official document because the Chinese soldier was quickly satisfied and motioned for them to come inside. They entered a guard-house in which several soldiers were sitting, reading or playing cards, while a radio played popular Chinese music. The Chinese soldier gave a rapid explanation to the others, and one of the sitting soldiers got to his feet and approached Bundi and Deki. His broader features indicated he was either Tibetan or

Chinese-Tibetan. He spoke to Bundi: "You are the bringer of meat?"

Bundi nodded agreement, and handed him the official letter. The Tibetan-speaking soldier read it and said, "You are not delivering meat tonight?"

"No, I came for the glass-paper passes for myself and others who will come tomorrow," Bundi explained.

"And the woman" —he indicated Deki—"your wife?"

Bundi looked at Deki, leaving the next move to her. She took a deep breath: decision time!

"I wish to meet my brother who works here," she said.

"Your brother—here?" the Tibetan-speaking soldier asked disbelievingly.

"Yes," Deki said confidently. "I am the sister of Lobsang Sherab, known to you perhaps as Tariq Azir."

The soldier was rendered speechless. Seeing his reaction the gate-guard asked what was wrong. The Tibetan-speaking soldier explained in Chinese, and the other soldiers in the guard-room stopped what they were doing and looked on with interest.

"How do we know you speak the truth?" the Tibetan-speaking soldier asked.

"Ask him and he will tell you," Deki told him.

Her air of confidence must have persuaded him because, after thinking a few moments, he said, "What is your name?"

"My Tibetan name is Deki Tering," she told him, "but you can also say that my foreign name is Fleur Girard. Here, I will write it for you."

He gave her a pen and piece of paper and she wrote the two names. "Only Tariq Azir knows these names are one, and he will know that I am his sister."

Shaking his head he went to the telephone on the wall and dialled a number. He did not know that Deki was fluent in Chinese and knew what he was saying to his superior officer. When she saw he was having difficulty in getting his superior officer to believe him she signalled that she would like to speak. After a hesitation, and then an explanation to the officer, he handed Deki the telephone.

Whatever the Tibetan soldier expected it was not Deki's

command of Chinese and authoritative delivery. The officer at the other end of the phone was also surprised, and his peremptory tone changed as she explained her relationship to Tariq Azir and requested to meet with him. The officer asked her politely to wait at the guard-house while he contacted his superior officer and they would come to meet with her.

While she waited, Bundi received the plastic passes for himself and his group for the next day. They prepared one for Deki without further comment. Ten minutes later there was the sound of a military vehicle and the door opened to admit two officers, a lieutenant and a colonel. From his build and manner Deki guessed he was the colonel who had commanded the troop of soldiers wearing balaclavas who had questioned them earlier in the day. Without the balaclava he was revealed as an intelligent-looking Chinese officer who inspected her curiously, but not impolitely. Looking from her to Bundi he said in Chinese, "This woman was with your party today?"

"Yes," said Bundi.

"I speak Chinese," Deki said to the colonel.

He acknowledged her remark with a courteous nod. "My apologies. Your appearance misled me. You said earlier today that you are the wife of an American?"

"That is correct," she replied. "But I am a Tibetan who studied in Chinese universities in Chengdu and Beijing—the same as my brother, known to you as Tariq Azir, and to me as Lobsang Sherab."

The colonel gave a slight amused smile. "Please forgive me, tai-tai" - he used the polite Chinese honorific for a married woman - "but you will agree the circumstances are most unusual: your appearance here at this time, in this dress, in this place, claiming to be the sister of the director of this top-secret facility. You understand my dilemma?"

Deki laughed in genuine appreciation. "No-one knows better. So you will appreciate my dilemma. Even my brother will have a problem. But it will help your dilemma to know that my brother and I are very fond of each other and, while he might not approve of me turning up here in this way at this time, he would be most upset if

he was not informed of my presence.”

The colonel’s smile became more pronounced. “Tai-tai, you have convinced me. I will approve a visit to your brother. May I add he is fortunate in having you as his sister?”

“Thank you, sir,” Deki acknowledged his gracious compliment. “I appreciate your permission.”

The colonel had a few words with the soldiers, and then invited Deki to come with him in the military vehicle. They entered another building and he escorted Deki to a room, which was obviously his office from the family photographs on the desk. Picking up the telephone he asked to speak to Director Tariq Azir and, after a few sentences of explanation, he replaced the telephone and said, “He will see you now. I will take you to him.”

The colonel’s face was expressionless as he knocked on the door marked “Director”, but his eyes held an amused anticipatory gleam. A voice inside said to come in. The colonel opened the door and said formally, “Sir, Deki Lobsang, also known as Mrs Robert Wilson, to see you.” He gave a slight smile to Deki as he withdrew, closing the door.

Tariq Azir got up from behind the desk and approached his sister, smiling warmly. “Deki, my dear sister, you never cease to surprise me. The previous time we met you were a beautiful woman in an Indian sari; now you are a beautiful woman in a Tibetan chupa. The previous time we met you had a European name, Fleur Girard; now you have an English name, Mrs Robert Wilson. Does that mean you married an Englishman? But wait! Before you tell me your news, or how you are here, how are you? I can’t tell under all that yak butter on your face!” He laughed, and she joined with him, both of them holding hands and enjoying each other’s presence.

He was a few inches taller than Deki, over six feet, and he had the same striking-looking features as his sister; but, where hers was softened into a sensuous feminine loveliness, his were chiselled into an authoritative masculinity that bordered on arrogance. The hint of arrogance was gone now as his dark and slanting eyes, so like his sister’s, gleamed with affection.

“I am well, by the mercy of Allah,” Deki answered him. “And,

yes, I am married, but to an American not an Englishman—and not Robert Wilson, either. I will explain all that later. I have much to discuss with you, and our time may be short.”

She noted the quick response in her brother’s eyes, from unalloyed affection to perceptive probing. This was her brother, she reminded herself, but he was also one of the most intelligent—and dangerous! - men in the world.

“Since time is short,” Tariq Azir said dryly, “why not reverse the usual process and begin at the end instead of the beginning? But first, before you begin, would you like something to eat or drink? I get the feeling that once we start we won’t want to be interrupted.”

“No thanks,” she laughed. “I have been eating and drinking, dancing and singing, for the past few hours. The local nomads threw a spontaneous arrival party for our meat-carrying caravan.”

“That’s as good a point as any to begin,” Tariq said. “You arrive here with a meat-carrying caravan?” He looked at her questioningly.

“I arrived here officially as the wife of an American academic who, with his colleague and wife, are visiting the Chang Tang Wildlife Reserve to study the animals of the region. We came via Hong Kong, Chengdu, and Kangting by ‘plane and road transport as far as Chomo-lungma, then we switched to horse, mule and yak caravan to bring us here. That is the story we gave to your colonel and everybody else en route.”

She met his gaze directly, letting him probe her mind and voice with his well-honed perceptions. If there was to be any successful outcome to her commitment to brother and husband it would only come from being transparently honest with both. Guile was a legitimate weapon in the unique circumstances, but betrayal was not. So she was not afraid to let Tariq see her mind was calculating, but not confused.

“The true story is that I was in Hong Kong on one of my friendly visits to China when Yosef Ibrahim—who is a correspondent there—told me of an American who was anxious to find out all he could about Tariq Azir. I agreed to meet him to find out the cause of his interest, and not knowing what to expect. The consequence was beyond all comprehension. The details I will give you some

other time; it is significant now only to say that my life changed for ever. From that first meeting, over a short few hours of afternoon and evening, I fell in love, gave myself knowingly in marriage to a man who was on a mission to destroy my brother and his work, and from which this man did not expect to return alive."

Tariq took a long deep breath, held up his hand to stop Deki, and rose to his feet. He walked backward and forward across the room a few times, his eyes shadowed under his lowered brows, in deep thought. Finally he said, "Is the man DeMoss or Buckingham?"

"DeMoss," she answered him, "Dave DeMoss." She had guessed that he would know of their movements. He nodded, and told her to continue.

"I chose these words carefully, after many hours thinking," she said. "They are not contrived for effect, they are not said in the heat of passion, they are spoken out of a deep love for the two people who share my heart—you and my husband, Dave. I know you both are honourable men, and I know that in your commitment to an ideal you are both capable of killing each other. I have come to know what motivates and activates my husband, and, until, a few years ago, I thought I knew what motivated and activated you. Next to you, my husband is the most formidable man I have ever met, and from his earlier experiences I know he is capable, with his friend, of destroying this facility, and you with it." She slowed, and said slowly and emphatically: "I-do-not-want-this-to-happen. I mean—let me be clear—I do not care what happens to this facility. I hate everything to do with nuclear development. But I care intensely about what will happen to you. But if your goal is the destruction of Israel, and millions of people, and environmental pollution of the world, then you are no longer the brother I knew, and I will not hold my husband guilty if he destroys you and the nuclear facility. That is why I am here at this time. I must know who and what you are before I can have any true life with my husband."

Her voice which had been steady and forceful wavered and thickened as she spoke the last sentence, and tears trickled slowly down her cheeks. But she refused to remove her gaze from Tariq's to search for a handkerchief. She was here for a purpose, not a performance.

Tariq's own gaze was brooding and inward, and it was a few minutes before he replied. His instinct was to comfort his sister, but she had chosen to enter an area where, in his opinion and experience, family was not the primary factor. His clear analysis, however, was complicated by the fact that it was her husband who was the primary factor. He had called for, and read, everything about this Dave DeMoss and his friend, Duke Buckingham, and had been impressed by what he had read—and right at this moment they were only a few hundred yards away. The fact that they had got this far was a testament to their impressive experience.

Finally he said slowly, "I love and respect you too much to attempt to deliberately misunderstand and mislead you. I know about your husband and his friend, and I do not underestimate them. As I understand you, however, your problem narrows down to the confusion in your mind as to what you thought I was, and what you think I am now. Correct?" Deki nodded mutely. "In which case, we neither need nor want a discussion about the morality of nuclear development, but the integrity of the Tariq you knew as opposed to the seeming opportunism of the Tariq you see now. Correct?" She nodded again. "Before I say more, tell me, is your husband convinced about the morality and integrity of his mission of destruction? That is not a contentious debating point. I am genuinely interested."

"No, he has problems with killing, whether individuals, groups or nations," she said ruefully. "He was a soldier, he has killed many times—and not always as a soldier. I know he has problems about killing you. Even his friends have observed that he would probably rather talk with you than kill you. I suspect he thinks you might have answers that would interest him. It's the bomb that confuses him."

Tariq's smile was without mirth, a sardonic shadow. "To return to your question: the fact that I have not taken action, despite great pressure to do so, is an indication that I am still struggling with the problems of morality and integrity, of righteousness and justice—and, above all, of the nature of God, which, to me, is the most important issue of all. In other words, only God knows if I still retain my integrity by His standards. As a youth, the answers were clear,

the pursuit of them noble, the goal illustrious. As I got older, the circumstances became more complex, the confusions multiplied, the confidence eroded, the goal distant and questionable. The only assurance for you at this point is that I have not yet pressed the nuclear button. But my faith right now, like my integrity, is very tenuous, and it could disappear in a sudden moment of decision precipitated by events beyond my control."

"I notice that you speak of God, not Allah," Deki said. "Is that significant?"

Tariq did not answer immediately and, when he did, he seemed to be avoiding her question. "I have let it be understood that my decision is dependent on a conjunction of geo-political developments across the world; but, actually, it really depends on a personal matter between me and God. You ask about God or Allah?" He paused, thought for a few moments, shook his head at some inward decision, and continued:

"This may be the last time we will talk together so I will tell you something that I have never told anybody. You remember I went to Berkeley in the United States? Yes, I went to the university there very certain in my religious and political convictions. All I needed, I thought, was a key to open the door to an acceptable synthesis of both for world conquest. So I majored in political science, and minored in comparative religions.

"But I was very lonely in America. As you know, we were often homesick in China and India, but then we had each other, or other Tibetans, for company at these times. At Berkeley I had nobody, and the loneliness shook my confidence. Then I met up with a group of Christians at the university who met together every week for Bible study, and what they called 'fellowship'—relevant social and political issues in the light of Bible teaching, with singing and food. They were friendly and welcoming, and didn't seem to mind my often opposing views. I began going with them to football and basketball games, and to church on Sundays, and after church to one or other of their families' homes. I hadn't enjoyed myself so much in years. Then two things happened—like you!—which changed my life for ever.

“One was that I was given what was called a ‘one-year Bible’, which meant that the Bible was divided into 365 sections of consecutive selections of books and chapters so that the whole Bible could be read in one year. Each day’s section only took about twenty to thirty minutes to read, and I began reading this every morning before breakfast. In five years I read the whole Bible five times.

“The other important development was that I, too—like you again!—fell in love. Yes, that surprises you, doesn’t it? I’m considered either an emotionless eunuch or a closet homosexual! The girl was a member of the Bible study group, and her family befriended me. It was they who gave me the one-year Bible. As I read I asked questions, discussed and debated, with her and with her family and with the group. Then one day the realization hit me that I was thinking more of marriage than I was of world conquest; and that I was thinking more of God than of Allah.” He smiled at Deki whimsically.

“Did she love you?” Deki asked him, fascinated with the account.

“Oh, yes,” he replied, “no doubt about that. However, there was a problem. There are always problems, aren’t there? While my being in love with her meant that I was prepared to give up everything I had been pursuing in order to be married to her, she was not prepared to give up her church affiliation and attachment to career, locality, family and friends. I don’t mean that it was just a theoretical difference over gender equality, or feminist liberation, or pop religiosity, or whatever. I mean, my reading of the Bible indicated that surrender to God meant unqualified obedience, and not just stipulated submission. As Muslims we know about Islamic ‘submission’; but God and Jesus are even more insistent on unconditional obedience.

“She had problems with that—and I was faced with a choice between her and a new understanding of a majestic God who, in my mind, was unquestionably greater than Islamic Allah. My vision of God enabled me to give up the woman I loved—but never to forget her.”

“And that was why you disappeared into obscurity after your return to India from America?” Deki said.

“Yes,” Tariq said quietly. “I had to re-think my life in the light of my new understanding of God. My previous certainties had been destroyed by love! Not just the mysteries of the love of a woman, but of the even greater mysteries of the love of God. It made me see the world in a totally different way. Instead of the self-centred hatreds of class conflicts, political theories, economic oppressions, or religious hypocrisies, I was seeing the world through God-directed concern for what people might be through love. In America I had been reading about the liberation theology of Latin America, with its emphasis on sacrificial love for the poor and sick and oppressed, and of people like Camillo Torres who said: ‘I took off my cassock to be more truly a priest. The duty of every Catholic is to be a revolutionary, is to make revolution. The Catholic who is not making revolution is living in mortal sin.’ There was Paulo Freire, a Brazilian revolutionary, who wrote in one of his books: ‘I am more and more convinced that true revolutionaries must perceive the revolution, because of its creative and liberating nature, as an act of love.’ And Che Guevara -”

“Che Guevara?” Deki interjected incredulously. “The Cuban revolutionary? Castro’s friend? ”

“Yes, Che Guevara,” Tariq stated emphatically. “He said: ‘Let me say, with the risk of appearing ridiculous, that the true revolutionary is guided by strong feelings of love. It is impossible to think of an authentic revolutionary without this quality.’ I was trying to sort out all of this in my retreat in Sikkim when a strange thing happened. I had a vision—a mystical experience—in which I was conscious of being in the presence of God as Spirit. There was no bearded figure sitting on a throne, just a central focus of great intensity of light and holiness different from any meditative ecstasy, out of which a Voice spoke to me: ‘I called you from birth to be my servant. Do not fear to go into all the world to know and serve me.’ I did not, and still do not, think the words were all that important. What I was most conscious was the unique quality of the Voice.

“It was like the distinctive voice of some people you hear on the radio or television—Hitler, Stalin, Nehru, the Dalai Lama. You may only hear them once, but for ever afterwards you know when they

are speaking—even if you are in a different room, or shop or ‘bus. From the day I heard that voice I have known when God is speaking to me—without the necessity of vision or mystical experience by meditation or contemplation or whatever.”

He smiled his unrestrained smile at Deki that she remembered from their childhood. “That is my secret—and only you know it! From the time I left Sikkim and India I went where God’s Voice told me to go, I said what I believed God wanted me to say to the people I met, I had no plan or program or party. I was just a God-intoxicated man, while everybody attributed to me a variety of explanations from revolutionary to religious messiah.”

“You and Dave must meet and talk,” Deki said emphatically.

“Even if one has to kill the other?” Tariq asked obliquely.

“How can you say that after all you said about love?” she cried out.

“The mystery of God restoring a rebellious creation from Genesis to Revelation is a record of inexplicable death in unfathomable circumstances,” he said quietly, “until explicated by God Himself. God and the Flood, Moses in Egypt, Joshua in Canaan, David in Israel, God through Assyria and Babylon—millions killed in the Dispersion purgation of rebellious individuals and nations who were ignoring God and His commands.”

“You and Dave must meet to talk,” Deki repeated again emphatically. “He, too, is on a visionary mission, more limited than yours, but one he feels is no less God-directed. That must be what he senses in you. When you meet, he will want to know about your God and not about your politics or nuclear facility. He and his friend Duke act as if the destruction of the nuclear facility here is almost an irrelevance, that it’s just one of the many combat targets they have destroyed in the past. From the very beginning Dave has seen you as his chief target.”

Tariq was lost in his thoughts for a few moments, then he took a deep breath and said, “I assume you, with your intelligence, understand that even if you were free to leave here now and return to the camp, it is not only my interest but my responsibility to inform the head of security, the colonel who brought you here, of

the threat to the facility?" She nodded her agreement. "Then, unless you also have the intelligence to provide a solution right now, I suggest we sleep on it, and see what the morning brings for both of us. Your husband knows you are here. I hope he assumes no harm will come to you while in my care. If a meeting with him is destined by God it will be apparent to all of us.

"Perhaps this is the solution for which I have been waiting and praying. I certainly feel happier now than I did this morning. Having settled that, now tell me more about your husband and this friend of his. What are their unique qualifications for this mission? It is one thing to read of a man's activities; this does not necessarily reveal the man behind them. Who sent them? What is DeMoss's quality that so draws you to him? If you weren't sitting in the flesh opposite me I would not have believed such a story possible. But before you begin, I want to show you something. Come."

He got out of the chair and went behind his desk and opened a door. Deki followed him into a room that was stark in its simplicity. It contained only a single fold-down couch-bed, a single chair and small table. On the table was a copy of the Koran and a worn one-year Bible.

"This," Tariq said, with a wave of his hand, "is me. You must not let next door and beyond, with all it represents mislead you. Out there I control the world's destiny; in here I own nothing but the words of God."

"But you still live in both rooms," Deki observed quietly.

"That is my problem," Tariq said. "My heart is here; my work is there. The day I press the nuclear button this place and its peace and its assurance ends. That was also the destiny of Moses in Egypt; of Noah and the Flood; of David and the Philistines; of Jesus and the Cross."

"What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul?" Deki quoted, then added, "There is no exit to this room."

"No, my clever observant sister," Tariq said. "In this room there is only God and me and eternity. That is the reason the button has not been pushed."

"You are waiting for the Voice," Deki said softly.

"I am waiting for the Voice," he agreed. "Shall we pray together to be granted wisdom?"

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General Ma looked at his watch. 0900 hours. Destiny time. First Azir, then Israel, then China, then—? He picked up the telephone and asked Azir's secretary if the Director could come to his office immediately to discuss an important matter. He had spent a good part of the previous evening planning each step of the way from this morning on.

A few minutes later there was a knock on the door, and Tariq Azir entered at the General's invitation. The General stood to his feet and shook hands perfunctorily, waving Azir to take a seat in front of the desk. He noted with savage delight the momentary gleam of amusement in Azir's eyes at this arrogant assumption of authority. The Director didn't know it, the General thought with satisfaction, but from this day on he was a nobody—dead or alive.

Azir was dressed as usual in white shirt and trousers, with an open white coat. The General acknowledged to himself that he was an impressive-looking individual, the slanted and hooded eyes giving his otherwise sinister cast of features a sardonic look as if he were being entertained by some thoughts, or was ready to be pleasantly surprised by what was about to be said to him. His eyes also reflected the element of serenity conveyed by the relaxed posture as he sat and waited for the General to speak.

"Have you decided on the date for the launching?" General Ma said abruptly.

"No," Azir replied simply, without inflexion.

"Have you any indication when it might be?" the General asked, not troubling to hide the sarcasm.

Azir took his time in replying, his thoughtful gaze never leaving the General's. "I always have indications," he said finally, in a mild tone. "But I agree with Hannah Arendt when she wrote: 'Real power begins where secrecy begins—the only rule of which

everybody in a totalitarian state may be sure."

Azir was also reminded, although he did not quote them, of the words of H.G.Wells: "The professional military mind is by necessity an inferior and un-imaginative mind; no man of high intellectual quality would willingly imprison his gifts in such a calling." What he did say to the General as he continued was: "The direction of the mind is more important than its progress.

It passed by the General, who hurried on to his prepared response: "I am here to come to a decision," he said brusquely.

Azir gave a slight smile. "Deliberation is the outcome of many factors," he said easily; "action is the result of one."

"We have already wasted too much time on philosophy and politics," the General stated flatly. "The time has come for action."

"On what basis?" Azir asked with genuine interest.

"On the basis of political logic and military necessity," General Ma said harshly.

Azir remained unmoved by the General's intimidating attitude. "Without knowing all the recent facts available to you, General, I surmise that it is more likely to be based on military logic and political necessity," he said pointedly. "That particular combination is a certain prescription for the defeat of any critical operation. Spinoza said that 'the human mind is readily swayed this way or that in times of doubt, especially when hope and fear are struggling for the mastery. No plan is then too futile, too absurd, or too fatuous for adoption.' Personally, I suspect your conclusions are based more on personal ambitions than on any objective military or political considerations. Give me one good reason why we should launch the missile within the next day or two—or whenever you may prefer?"

General Ma glared silently at the relaxed figure of Azir, then leaned forward to pick up the telephone. "Tell Colonel Fu I want him at my office now," he ordered. He sat without saying another word to Azir until there was a knock at the door.

"Come in," he growled.

Colonel Fu stood there, with four soldiers carrying rifles behind him.

"Arrest Director Tariq Azir," the General said to the startled colonel, "and place him under close arrest. I am now in command of the facility."

The colonel saluted, turned and gave orders to the soldiers, who marched in and surrounded Azir.

Azir got to his feet slowly. "General," he said quietly, "let me leave this thought of Edward Gibbon with you: 'The laws of probability while true in general, are fallacious in particular.'"

When Azir had been marched away General Ma stood to his feet and, stretching his arms, he took a deep breath of satisfaction. Step one, he thought, on the way to the goal he had worked toward all his life: one step away from being ruler of China; two steps away from being ruler of the world. The next step was to press the button that would destroy Israel and launch the irrevocable series of events leading to that goal.

The telephone on his desk rang and he picked it up. "Yes?" he growled.

"Colonel Fu here, sir," the colonel of security answered. "The Director is under guard as ordered. But you may not know that his sister is in the Director's quarters. Has she been informed of his detention? Or what are your orders, sir?"

"His sister?" the General snarled. "What the hell is his sister doing here?"

"I don't know, sir," the colonel replied. "She arrived with her American husband as part of the academic research group studying Chang Tang wildlife you saw yesterday. The Director did not expect her, and was surprised to know she was here."

"Get rid of her and the research group right away," the General ordered furiously.

"Sir, that may be difficult," the colonel said firmly. "They are properly authorized from Beijing and Lhasa. The Chinese liaison is a senior official from the Department of Intelligence, and he was insistent that any obstructive action would cause trouble. He even said he was prepared to radio the Director of Intelligence from here."

"Damnation!" the General raged, his fist clenching the telephone. "Keep the woman in the Director's quarters, with a guard outside

the door to see she doesn't move around. Then get her husband and this Chinese official in here right away for me to question them." He banged the telephone down on the receiver.

"Yes, sir," the colonel said to the dead telephone in his hand, with an amused smile. He was glad it had happened on the General's watch with himself, and not the colonel, taking the responsibility.

When he put the soldier on guard outside the door of the Director's living quarters, behind the office, the colonel then knocked on the door. Deki smiled when she saw him and invited him to enter, giving a glance at the armed soldiers with her brother among them.

"Tai-tai, I have some bad news which I hope you will keep to yourself until told officially," he said quietly. "The Director, your brother, has been placed under arrest by General Ma, who arrived here last night. You, too, are to be restricted in your movements to the living quarters here. The General has ordered your husband and the Chinese official with you to be brought here to be questioned by him. That's as much as I can tell you."

"Thank you," Deki said gratefully. "I will respect your confidence. I would appreciate it if you would request the General at some point if I may speak with my brother. Or, ask when I may return to my husband."

"I will do that as soon as possible," the colonel agreed. "Ask for me if there is anything you need."

"I will, and thank you again."

Now what? Deki thought, as the colonel and the escort with her brother marched away. At least it would bring Dave and Li inside the facility.

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When Bundi returned to the camp from the nuclear facility with news of Deki's disappearance there to meet with her brother, Dave was not wholly surprised. He had no idea how she would arrange it, any more than he had of his own plans to get inside to meet with Tariq, but he had anticipated that she would be planning something to reach her brother before Dave did. He was confident that,

whatever she said to Tariq, it would not involve a betrayal of either.

But her departure created a problem for the others of language interpretation with the Tibetans. Van still remembered snatches of her childhood Tibetan, and she had used some of it during the trip in stammered conversations with the Tibetans, but she spoke a different dialect from that of the tribal Goloks, and there were more gestures and guesswork than fluency. From what Bundi was able to communicate, in halting Tibetan through Van, and pidgin Chinese through Li and Bundi, they gathered that Deki's reception in the facility had been respectful and not threatening.

But shortly afterwards Li came out of his tent to tell them that he had radioed Beijing and had been informed that General Ma had left the city suddenly, and was said to be on his way to Xigang. There was reported to be a new surge of activity among his supporters in Beijing, and it looked like they were preparing for some dramatic event—such as an imminent move to declare himself paramount leader of China.

"That was probably his 'plane arriving today," Li said, "with the convoy of military vehicles."

"Do you think he has already taken over from Tariq?" Dave asked him, frowning with the implications of what this move would mean.

"Difficult to say," Li answered. "Ma has a reputation for being impulsive as well as arrogant. But I would guess, if the colonel of security was free to come and interview Deki politely, as Bundi says, it indicates Ma may be waiting until tomorrow."

"Can we get into the facility the same way as Deki?" Duke asked; "if Bundi has passes that might be a possibility."

"They probably would want to double-check if they see two men like you and Bundi in one group," Dave said dryly; "plus the racial and facial differences. Not to mention a white American, and a Chinese official from Beijing."

"You gotta point," Duke admitted, grinning.

"Let's take this a step at a time," Dave proposed. "First, Deki. Either she comes right out after speaking with her brother; or he detains her inside because of the necessity of security. If the latter, then it provides Tariq with a problem: what to do about me. Does he

try to get me inside? Or, does he decide to delay, press the button, and remove our potential threat to him—and then release Deki, because the issue, as well as us, will be dead.”

“And the issue could well be out of his hand, anyway,” Li interrupted. “If Ma takes over, either tonight or tomorrow, he and not Tariq will be making decisions.”

“Can I confuse the situation a bit more for you guys?” Duke asked. “You may not have noticed, but I have been thinking about what I was going to do about blowing up the joint. To put it crudely, if we could not get inside could we just toss grenades or sticks of dynamite over the wall? I know, I know, very crude! That was just to get your attention. The equally crude answer to my simplistic but relevant question is: ‘No, Virginia, you can’t do that, because the nuclear explosive is so unstable the grenade or dynamite explosion would blow up China and us instead of Israel’. To go from crude to serious, I have been puzzling over this problem of selective explosion since we first got the assignment. How do you blow up a nuclear facility without also blowing up ourselves and everybody in the country? We’re talking heavy thinking here, dudes. Kowloon and Miami were fun fireworks compared with Shambhala.”

“So—” Dave interrupted interestedly. “Did your sinful genius provide any answers?”

“I came up with a couple of possibilities,” Duke said slowly. “But, before I mention them, you need to know some of the implications to pass judgment on my conclusions. As you know, I’ve been reading up about the nuclear business on the way here and, without going into a long lecture, I’ll broad-stroke the problem and possible solutions I suggest for your consideration.

“To keep this as focused as possible, I’ll call the target ‘Point Zero’; that is, from the time we—or I—have access to the nuclear device until its destruction, to distinguish it from the ‘Strike Zero’ of actual button-pushing. From all my reading of the nuclear problem this is the key area of nuclear attack and defence in military strategy: namely, how much time is there between enemy decision to press the button to explode, and how to stop, defend, deflect, or minimize that decision. You with me? OK. What this

means in our situation here is: I know that, from the time I get inside that gate, whatever might be the action going on around me, my mind will have to be clicking over the minutes of 'Point Zero' right down to 'Strike Zero' button-pressing time. Like quarter-backing a football game in the last minutes of a rush in the fourth quarter.

"So, back up a bit for another lecture. Billions of dollars have been spent on two key systems: one, satellite warning systems; and, two, nuclear delivery systems. Both of these systems are focused upon thirty minutes between warning and strike in any military action. Right now, as I'm talking with you here in this remote spot in Tibet, twenty-two thousand miles above us, there are early-warning satellites constantly monitoring the Eurasian hemisphere. The main piece of equipment on board is an infra-red telescope designed to pick up the hot flame produced by large rocket engines. The sensors at the focus of the telescope do not detect missiles at the instant they emerge from the silo launch system—such as the target we have a few hundred yards away inside that facility—but about thirty seconds later during the boost phase of the flight. You get the importance of that? It means that too large an explosion by me would automatically trigger a response warning to the satellite early-warning watchers—and perhaps launch World War Three or Armageddon accidentally

by our good deed! The US nuclear defence system is based on the assumption of approximately twenty to thirty minutes from that first Point Zero alert to the final response Strike Zero command. But, there's more.

"The satellite early warning system determines not only the launch itself, but the kind of missile, and where it comes from. However, very little of that is of great significance relating to our target here, except that everything about our assignment is being filmed, recorded and processed—get this!—on the premise that we cannot successfully stop it being launched without first defusing it. Classic Catch 22!"

"You mean we have been set up?" Dave asked disbelievingly, "by our two Presidents?"

"How about if they themselves were set up by let's call them

‘special interests?’” Duke said laconically. “Hey, Li, I’m not blaming you; but I recollect your boss, Feng Pen-fai, as being pretty devious, and we’ve got high stakes here. I’ve had plenty of time to think about all this when I wasn’t thinking about death from snow, wind and a numb backside. But I’m not finished.

“Obviously in such a scenario as I’ve outlined we are not only expendable but already irrelevant - to the military geniuses of the world, and aspiring Kissingers, General Ma and the Janus Club. They’re already preparing for World War Three—or Dave’s ‘Armageddon’.

“Some of this I have talked over with Li as general theoretical possibilities, without going into these details I have just outlined, and Li says, from his knowledge of Feng Pen-fai, essentially our target is the elimination of Tariq and Ma; Tariq, because he represent the threat of world religious domination by the Muslim fundamentalists, and whoever joins them; and Ma, because he represents a threat to the disruption of post-Deng China. The Chinese authorities, in his opinion, will accept whatever destruction of the Shambhala nuclear facility is necessary, but obviously would prefer a solution which preserved their nuclear installations as much as possible—not to mention the Chinese country and population.

“It’s against this background of possible deceit and manipulation by unknown individuals for unknown political and military ends, and including the probability that Li was left out of this scenario so he could recruit Dave and me to do the dirty on Tariq and Ma, that I came to the conclusions I am now about to present to you after all this long-winded digression. Like several times in the past—which I won’t mention out of personal modesty—we are going to stick it to the ungodly in our own questionable Christian way, and leave the so-called powers-that-be with what is politely called eggs-creta on their faces to clean up afterwards. Ready? OK. Back to Point Zero.

“Li has provided me with a number of explosive devices so that I can either blow out a match or blow away Shambhala. Given time and opportunity, and some assistance, I can do this in anything from a few minutes to thirty minutes. Dave and I have blown up hundreds of tunnels and ammunition dumps and villages in

Vietnam, on our own, or with the help of other unskilled soldiers. What I'm saying is that my time-frame for Point Zero to Strike Zero will depend to some extent on whether I'm on my own or have one or more people with me as cover or whatever."

"I should add," Dave interrupted, "that Duke and I have discussed several strategies, and most of these involved a tactic we often used in the past, where one of us caused some form of distraction to split the enemy's concentration. In this case, it involves the possibility that I can try to be with Tariq, while Duke gets on with his Point Zero scenario. Which brings us back to where we started: how do any of us get into the facility to do anything?"

"Unless a miracle happens that is not likely to happen tonight," said Li. "I suggest we sleep on all that Duke has been saying, and see if we can come up with something tomorrow morning. At least, we've clarified the problems, and narrowed down the options. One, get inside: two, Dave to deal with Tariq: three, I deal with Ma: four, Duke to deal with Point Zero to Strike Zero."

"Piece o' cake," Duke said, stretching and yawning. "Van, I hope you got all of that for posterity."

"If I didn't know you were a clown, Duke," Van said facetiously, "I'd believe that you are a very remarkable man."

"You'd better believe it, doll," Duke said, grinning. "Your life depends on it."

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"We have visitors," Duke said to Dave next morning, nodding to where a military vehicle had emerged from the nuclear facility and was heading for their campsite.

The colonel who had confronted them the previous day, this time in military uniform rather than padded clothing and without his woollen balaclava, got out of the vehicle and said crisply, "Mr Li and Dr Wilson?"

"I am Wilson," Dave replied. "Mr Li is in the tent over there. Shall I fetch him?"

"Please," the colonel responded, unsmiling but polite.

Dave noted that he was friendlier than the previous day, less brusque and suspicious, and wondered whether it related to Deki's disappearance inside the facility. When he returned with Li the colonel said formally, "General Ma Wen-huie, the military commander of this region, wishes to see you immediately."

"What about our friend?" Dave indicated the watching Duke.

"General Ma only specified you and Mr Li," the colonel replied. "I suggest you bring your documents of authority."

Li went to fetch the documents and when he returned they climbed into the vehicle. Inside the facility they stopped at the building nearest the nuclear launching silo, and the colonel got out and said to follow him. They went through a large open-space office, where scores of men and women in white coveralls were working at computers, and along corridors lined with private offices from which higher-ranking individuals emerged or entered. They entered an elevator operated by a coded card inserted by the colonel and were dropped to a lower floor.

The elevator exited into a large room, dominated by a giant, presently blank, display screen made familiar by war films. At the opposite side of the room from the screen there was a raised balcony overlooking the whole area, the command centre from which incoming and outgoing situations were directed. The commander's battle-station was a console and desk on which were five telephones, four to the left and one red telephone by itself on the right. As they passed it Dave noticed that the red telephone was labelled, "Secure."

General Ma's office was in a corridor to the right of the console, and was divided into two sections, outer and inner. In the outer section, there were two officers with military insignia and four enlisted men, all sitting in front of computer terminals. On one wall of the room there was a long display panel like a football scoreboard, covered with scrawled formulae.

They passed through this office into the inner section where an unsmiling General Ma was sitting behind a large desk. He did not rise to his feet and, after the first glance, he finished writing before putting down the pen to look at the standing Dave and Li. The

colonel stepped back from Dave and Li, taking a stance at the door and leaving them in front of the General's desk like errant schoolboys. Dave ignored the studied insolence and gazed at the scowling General noncommittally.

"Let me see your authorizations," the General demanded, holding out his hand.

Li handed over the documents without comment.

The General took his time reading them and, when he had finished, he did not return them, placing them on the desk in front of him. His steely gaze fastened on Li.

"You are from the Department of Intelligence?" he barked curtly.

"I am the Department's official liaison with this academic group," Li stated formally.

"Are you satisfied with their credentials?" the General demanded.

"The authorities in Beijing are satisfied," Li replied

"Do you think I am a fool?" the General suddenly erupted. "You were a colleague of this man and his black associate in Hong Kong some years ago, and you know they are not—" he leaned forward to look at the documents - "Doctor Wilson and Doctor Miller. They are DeMoss and Buckingham, CIA agents."

"I am not a CIA agent," Dave objected formally.

"You will speak only when I tell you," the General snarled. "Whatever you all are, you are certainly not an innocent academic group here to study Tibetan wildlife."

He glared at the two men in front of him. "But if you have these official documents, and you"—he looked at Li—"are official liaison, I assume you were sent here with the official approval of the USA and Chinese governments. What were you sent to do that required such secrecy?"

Both Li and Dave remained silent, gazing at the General without expression.

"I won't need torture to find out," the General said contemptuously. "I already have your wife under guard," he said to Dave, "no doubt she could be made to talk with just the threat of torturing you. But that is not necessary. It is simple to assume you were sent here to render this facility harmless. You, and your

superiors, must be stupid people to think that this was even possible. We have known what your plans were since before you left the United States."

"You weren't very successful in stopping us so far,' Dave said easily.

"You couldn't have known I would be here," the General continued, ignoring Dave's remark. "So your target was Tariq Azir. You are too late for that, too. I have had him arrested and placed under guard; so your mission is a total failure. You are too late for—everything." He had hesitated fractionally.

"The President and Director of Intelligence know that you have arrived here," Li said conversationally, and the General straightened in his chair, scowling. "I radioed a report last night," Li added. "They are aware of all possibilities."

"By this time tomorrow it won't matter what they know," the General smiled mirthlessly. "By this time tomorrow I could be President of the country."

"There is an English proverb, "said Dave, "which says: 'There's many a slip twixt the cup and the lip.' Think about it."

"I will give you something to think about," the General snarled. "You can join another individual who quotes proverbs, Tariq Azir. Colonel, take the foreigner to the same cell as the Director—or the former Director—and let them discuss philosophy and their futures. His Chinese colleague will remain with me to see if we can have a meeting of minds."

Well, thought Dave, as he was escorted by the colonel through a few corridors on the same level to a door with an armed soldier outside, at least I am now inside the facility and having a meeting with Tariq Azir! Li was with the General; Duke was free on the outside. All was not yet lost, despite what the General said.

The colonel used a coded card to open the door, and he stood aside to let Dave enter first. It was just a simple room with a single, strongly-barred, small window set high on the wall, a plastic table and chair, and a door-less toilet annex attached. From what Dave could see out of the high-window it looked into the command centre area, and not outside the building.

Sitting on the chair, with his elbow on the table and his hand against his cheek, watching them with interest, was Tariq Azir. He looked from the entering Dave to the following colonel, and a slow smile spread across his handsome face, lighting up his eyes. "Dave DeMoss," he said with genuine pleasure. "Make yourself at home. Another chair, colonel, please?" he asked the colonel courteously, as if he were a host in his own home.

The colonel gave an order to the soldier, who went away. The colonel watched the two men with interest and without comment. Both seemed content to examine each other silently, and the colonel suspected that they were waiting until he was gone before talking.

When the soldier returned with another plastic chair he and the colonel withdrew from the room and locked the door on them. Dave sat down opposite Tariq, whose only movement had been to shift his hand from his cheek to cupping it under his chin while he considered Dave.

Dave was undisturbed by the gaze, and he sat back in his chair while he contemplated the thoughtful Tariq, like two participants in a chess game. He didn't feel under pressure to speak, or to speak first, in some kind of macho intellectual rivalry. If anything, his own mind was initially comparing the man opposite him with Deki and seeing the striking comparisons.

Tariq's first words reminded him of Deki, too, in their unexpected directness. "Do you think you could kill me here?" he asked Dave interestedly.

"If you mean, do I have the physical ability to do it in this cell, the answer to that is 'Yes'" said Dave.

Tariq nodded his head affirmatively, as if confirming his own thoughts. "It's always more difficult to think of killing a man when he is there in front of you than simply thinking about it as a possibility in his absence," he said conversationally. "Deki is concerned that one of us would kill the other."

"Did you get much chance to talk?" Dave asked interestedly.

"Yes, several hours last night," Tariq replied. "She said nothing that would betray you in any way. Her chief concern was what she understood as my invidious professional situation here at

Shambhala; and the apparently irrevocable nature of the confrontation between you and me. She loves both of us very much, and has a painful dilemma.”

“A dilemma of choosing between you and me?” Dave enquired curiously.

“No, a dilemma between us and God,” Tariq replied, with a slight smile. “Or, more specifically, what she understands of our respective positions vis-a-vis the Supreme Being. I use that term because God is usually the term used by Christians in contra-distinction to Allah—although both have the same root, El Elohe, and a similar focus of requiring obedience from their created homo sapiens. So, to get nit-picking theology out of the way, may we use the term ‘God’ as the Supreme Being acknowledged by both of us?”

Dave nodded his agreement, then said dryly, “First, hasn’t the question become academic? We’re both here under arrest, with your decision to press the button, and my decision to stop you, no longer relevant let alone urgent?”

Tariq’s slight smile deepened. “I am reminded of a saying attributed to Confucius but actually it was an Arabian sheikh: ‘I complained that I had no shoes till I met a man who had no feet.’ From what I know of you we both love life, so don’t let us squander time as that is the stuff time is made of. Twenty-four hours ago neither of us would have thought of the circumstances which have brought us to this cell. So, for discussion’s sake, let us assume that our two destinies are linked, and that God has arranged them so that we have to go through our respective circumstances to their pre-destined end—whatever that end may be.”

“Alright,” Dave agreed. “Let me lead off with the question: which is more important to you: the so-called Shambhala Project, or your personal relationship with God?”

“Good question,” Tariq acknowledged. “I don’t know another person in the world who would ask it— maybe Deki. From what she has told me about you I’m going to assume you have a considerable knowledge about both. The crux of the Shambhala Project to me is its religious/political character. It is rooted in history from the time

of Abraham, when God promised the land of Canaan to Abraham and his descendants for ever, and that these Children of Abraham through Isaac and Israel would be God's chosen nations in the world. The seed of its conflict and destruction also began with Abraham in his disobedient liaison with his wife's Egyptian servant, producing the step-son Ishmael, who also was rebellious because he was given a lesser inheritance and ambivalent destiny through and their tribal hereditary hostility to Israel as a rival Arab nation. It is a common error of both Jews and Christians to ignore that in the Christian Bible it is stated that, when Abraham sent all the children of his concubines away out of the country with their inheritances, he kept Ishmael as well as Isaac with him with a promise to make Ishmael 'a great nation' as well as Isaac's offspring, and they were both at Abraham's burial. The later Christian and Muslim developments, with their further ecclesiastical and institutional organizations of Christendom and Islam, increasingly complicated God's purposes in creation and redemption. Are you with me so far?"

"Yes," Dave nodded. "If you mean that creation and subsequent redemption involves God in the politics of the world, the rise and fall of nations in relation to their knowledge of and obedience to God in Church/State policies. The institutionalizing of both these spiritual dynamics of creation and redemption has been responsible for the corrupting of the world's politics and religion. So, politically, you have rulers and governments and armies; and, religiously, you have priesthoods and churches and denominations. Whereas, according to God's words to Abraham and his descendants, it was God's purpose to have a holy and righteous theocratic Israel as His divine channel of spiritual enlightenment for world conduct. Is that what you're saying?"

"With a caveat about God's only promise being to Israel, and not including Ishmael. But put that with nit-picking in our present situation," Tariq agreed. "Let's make what you have said the postulate. So the twentieth century begins with the rise across the world of the secular ideal of a political/religious Communism; and, opposed to this revolutionary movement, a destined-to-lose political

Secular Democracy with institutional and ceremonial religion having no power, no focus and no future. At the close of the twentieth century, with a failed Communism and a failed Secular Democracy, despite empty posturing by their respective adherents, you have two resurgent movements rooted in religious inspiration and defiant of political authoritarianism by whatever label—Christian and Islam fundamentalists—both demanding a say and a future in the political arena. Unfortunately so far, their ambitions have not extended beyond the mistaken political institutionalizing of their respective religious convictions. In the US, this can be seen in the radical right-wing Christian Coalition and its more recent off-shoots; and in the Middle East, the radical revolutionary Taleban and imitators.”

Tariq stopped, and Dave remained silent because he sensed that he wasn't finished. Tariq lifted his inward gaze to look at Dave intensely. “In a sentence “ he said slowly, “what would you say is God's primary governing principle for the world?”.

Dave mentally ran through a number of options, but none of them could be stated in a sentence. “Seek first the kingdom of God,” he suggested tentatively.

Tariq shook his head negatively. “That is an operating principle for God's servants, not a divine governing principle. The divine governing principle, I propose, is the one quoted by King David of Israel: ‘The foundation of God's throne is righteousness and justice.’ Both Moses and Jesus said that love for God and one's neighbours were the totality of all divine law. Therefore, in my opinion, it is imperative for all Jews, Christians and Muslims to seek first the kingdom of God in all their personal activities, with His righteousness and His justice as operating principles, in a spirit of love towards God and towards one's fellow-creatures. Are we still in agreement?”

“We're stretching it, but still in touching distance,” Dave conceded. “You have gone where I've not been, so why don't you go on a bit further before I pick it up?”

“Alright,” Tariq acknowledged. “I'm getting to where I think we both want to go, but it is essential for you to understand how I got

there—and why I can, and yet hesitate to, press the nuclear button. What I've outlined is the point I reached a few years ago, after I returned from studying in the United States; when I decided to go it alone, without predetermined ideas other than the Bible and Koran Scriptures and the new experience of the Voice of God, and see where it led.

"I haven't got time now to go into the details, but it led me into personal associations with people and groups I would never have believed possible. Then I remembered Abraham and the Pharaoh of Egypt and the Canaanite kings; the devious Jacob and the crooked Laban; Joseph and the Egyptian Pharaoh's joint reign; Moses and the medium Balaam; David and the Philistine Achish; Solomon and the king of Tyre; Daniel and the Babylonian Nebuchadnezzar; Jesus with the tax-gatherers and prostitutes; Paul with Gamaliel. I mention only Jews and Christians for your benefit. The point I am making is that none of them were compromised by their associations; they all accomplished God's purposes in their times. Let me remind you what that purpose was for all of them: the establishment of God's rule in Israel and the world, and the punishment of Israel for disobedience. Do you recall God's solemn words to Moses about this:

"I will turn your cities into ruins and lay waste your sanctuaries . . . I will lay waste the land, so that your enemies who live there will be appalled. I will scatter you among the nations and will draw out my sword and pursue you. Your land will be laid waste and your cities will lie in ruins.'

"So, here am I as the twentieth century ends, and the start of the twenty-first century, ahead—the seventh millennium from the Creation, not so incidentally—and God has led me personally into contact with individuals and groups who can influence the destiny of the world. The focus of their combined interest—for a variety of self-serving reasons—is the destruction of a disobedient Zionist Israel. I use that descriptive adjective advisedly. I will assume you have done your homework and know that even among Israelis there are deep doubts about the legitimacy of the present Israel's historic

claims to Palestine. The leaders who established the nation are radical Eastern European socialists of dubious true-Israel antecedents with few genuine religious convictions, who were financed by Western European capitalists with dubious Jewish credentials and no religious convictions. They claimed the land of Palestine because, they said, God gave it to them. But they set up a secular state without acknowledgment of God, and in a demonstrable violation of almost every command of God concerning the righteous treatment of 'the people of the land'—which legitimately include all 'aliens' and, more specifically, the legitimate Palestinian descendents of Ishmael. Their own Jewish Scriptures state categorically that because of these violations God would take away the land from them, and give it to those more worthy. These European Zionists make a great deal of the German holocaust, yet they ignore the fact that their own Diaspora was due to God-directed holocausts through Assyrians and Babylonians. It was God who threw them out of Canaan/Palestine. It was the godless Marx who brought them back."

Tariq took a deep breath. "I am now at the crux of the issue between us—but not yet my personal dilemma. The issue was, and is: is the destruction of twentieth century Israel politically and religiously legitimate in the light of its historical claims. My answer is unhesitatingly, 'Yes'. I have no problem with being the instrument of Israel's destruction, any more than had any of the earlier servants of God I mentioned.

"However, my personal dilemma is one that I have not resolved, and I confess it gives me nightmares." His voice had changed from the controlled delivery of the natural orator and was now edged with pain. His inward gaze was not seeing history and long-considered intellectual positions, but images that were disturbing—even terrifying. Dave got the impression that he was not just speaking to him, but addressing God.

"My dilemma is the dilemma of Judas. Judas was an admiring follower of Jesus for three years. Judas believed Jesus was the Messiah. Judas wanted to serve and rule in the kingdom of God. Judas left everything in pursuit of a divine vision. But his vision was

different from that of Jesus and the other disciples. As I see it, Judas believed that Jesus should rule the world as a Messiah of righteousness and justice and power. He thought Jesus was at least unrealistic, and at worst plain wrong, in his emphasis on righteousness and justice and love. Do you remember his confrontation with Jesus over Mary Magdalene's action? Judas wanted a righteous political world without the complications of spiritual qualities like love and forgiveness.

"That is where I am, Dave," Tariq said with unfeigned anguish in his voice. "I am where Judas was on the night of Jesus' passion. Everything in my heart wants the kind of world Jesus taught; and everything in my mind says it is a mirage. The words beat at me night and day: 'The world does not work in this way.' I do not want to rule the world for personal glory. The English poet Thomas Gray said:

*'The boast of heraldry, the pomp of power,  
And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave,  
Awaits alike th'inevitable hour,  
The paths of glory lead but to the grave.'*

I have learned to live simply. But I do want to rule the world as I see God wants it. So did Judas. That is my problem; now tell me yours, Dave."

Dave had been sitting transfixed as Tariq unburdened himself of his un-bearable dilemma. Whatever he had been anticipating from their possible meeting, it was not this anguished cry from the edge of an indescribable hell. The words of the Russian Marxist—turned—Christian philosopher, Nicolai Berdyaev, that he had memorized, suddenly came to mind and he quoted:

"Those who have known a limitless freedom of spirit cannot efface from their soul this experience or deny its existence. Freedom, with its own interior dialectic, that tragic destiny which it bears within itself, is an experience of a particular order inherent in Christianity itself. A man who has achieved a definite victory over

the seductive temptations of humanism, who has discovered the hollow unreality of the deification of man by man, can never hereafter abandon the liberty which has brought him to know God, nor the definite experience which has freed him from the power of evil . . . Those whose religion is authoritarian and hereditary can never hope to understand those who have come by this way, through the tragedy immanent in their life's experience . . .'

Then he said slowly: "I have no means of evaluating your experience, or of advising a course of action. I would consider it an impertinence to attempt it. The Scriptural examples you quoted I have read, but many of them I confess I have not fully understood. I have only spent a few years in my understanding of God, and this has usually been in the context of, and derived from, my personal experience as a soldier who obeys orders. So I would like you to consider what I am going to say as thinking aloud rather than recommending any course of action, which is how Duke and I operate.

"The deterioration of Judaism and Christianity I can accept from the Scriptures. The condemnation of the twenty or so prophets at the end of the Old Testament history, and the condemnation of the apostles at the end of the New Testament record, all indicate God's displeasure with those who claim to be His people but who insist on doing things in their own way. I accept Armageddon and its locale in the Middle East, with the near-annihilation of the disobedient people of Israel except for a faithful remnant, and the majority of unbelieving non-Israel nations, as a factual and rapidly approaching event—if, for no other reason, than the world-wide individual, family and national breakdown in spiritual values, and the world-wide rapidly increasing ratio and intensity of natural calamities such as earthquakes, fires and floods, etcetera, foretold in the Scriptures in the last days of the world.

"The question I have been asking myself in relation to you is—" Dave paused, not for effect, but because of the enormity of the implication of what he was about to say—"Are you the Antichrist?" Tariq had been leaning forward on the table, and now he sat back

suddenly in his chair, the shocked surprise obvious in his normally schooled face.

Dave looked at him steadily. “You yourself said you felt like Judas at times. The Antichrist is described in Bible in the same words as those of Judas: ‘son of perdition.’ He is also described as ‘the man of lawlessness’, not because he is a law-breaker but because he is a law to himself. The more I heard about you—even from Deki—the more I feared you were as much a tool of Satan as a servant of God. If that seems overly dramatic, remember Satan is always described as most dangerous when he is ‘an angel of light’ than when he is portrayed as evil personified. Your reputation, as far as I have been able to find out, is as flawless as it is possible for a human being in seeking ‘righteousness and truth’—but these are also satanic ‘angel of light’ characteristics when required. Satan wasn’t evil personified and didn’t denounce God when tempting Eve; as the majestic but serpentine angel he just misquoted God to suit Eve’s temptation to disobedience.

“For the sake of our discussion, let me project forward from the time when you press the nuclear button and Israel is destroyed. As I see it, there will be a period of political confusion like after the Soviet Union’s collapse, only more so. General Ma will take over China immediately, and issue a series of ultimatums with a bias in favour of Muslim fundamentalism and against a ruined and disarrayed Israel. Without a coherent leadership, Israel will be easily discredited and powerless, the nations of the world will be panicked and pusillanimous as usual, and, in the meantime the Muslim Conference or Brotherhood or Party of God, whatever name they give to the world body of ecumenical religionists, will call on all political and religious leaders to meet to hear their so-called generous proposals—through you. Correct?”

Tariq nodded thoughtfully. “So much for the politics,” Dave continued. “It’s the religious aspects that interest me. With Zionism defeated you will be free to make approaches to the dominant religions of world Jewry, and to world Christendom in all its forms, plus others, on the basis of mutual religious ‘concerns’ in building a better world of the Scriptural ‘righteousness and justice’. That World Conference and venue would not be in Jerusalem or Rome but, say, in Babylon—where Saddam Hussein was already building the

world's largest mosques. The dominant figure would not be a Jewish rabbi, or Catholic Pope, or Buddhist Dalai Lama, or Russian Patriarch, or even Muslim Turabi of Sudan or Fadzallah of Hezbollah—but you. You will be the passionate advocate of righteousness and justice acceptable to all religious systems and political parties because of your history and contributions. You will wear your white clothes, you will still not own personal wealth, but you unquestionably will be the most powerful man in the world. You will also, it seems to me, be the man opposed to God in the Book of the Revelation, the Antichrist. You will be the ruler from the north and from the east and south in the Apocalypse, who will dominate the world stage until God strikes you down because you represent everything that Christ denounced, and what the Apostle John describes as “Babylon, the Mother of Harlotries”—all institutionalized religions.

“My personal dilemma is that in killing you now I have to live with your sister as my wife, and her knowledge of you, her beloved brother, as the hated Antichrist, instead of the Buddhist Maitreya, “the Loved One.”

“Which brings us back to where we started,” Tariq said sombrely. “Are you quite certain that you can kill me?”

“I have certain abilities and experience in hand-to-hand killing,” Dave said quietly.

“So have I,” said Tariq un-dogmatically. “Do we decide it now or later?”

“My personal preference,” Dave said slowly, “is to persuade you to choose love above power, and even righteousness and truth, and to walk away from Shambhala and all it presently represents. It is a mirage, a myth. After all, the legend was supposed to represent the emergence of the Maitreya to save the world from destruction by love, not power. I would prefer to spend the rest of my life with you as my valued friend and not as my slain enemy.”

“Do you really think you can get out of here alive?” Tariq asked with interest.

“I’m still breathing, aren’t I?” said Dave, grinning. “Getting out of here is the least of my problems. What about you? You are in greater

danger from General Ma than I am. When Ma looks at Duke and me he sees behind us the President of the USA; and when he looks at Li he sees behind him the President of China. These are hefty considerations. But when he looks at you he sees only a defeated Muslim rival for power whose death he can easily explain away."

"True," Tariq acknowledged amiably: "except for one thing." He smiled at Dave.

"What is that?" Dave asked.

"General Ma can't press the nuclear button without me," Tariq stated.

Dave stared at him incredulously. "D'you mean—" he started to ask.

"I mean," Tariq's smile became a laugh, "that apparently General Ma overlooked the fact that it is official procedure for all nuclear buttons to have a two-man safety process."

"And he forgot this?" Dave asked disbelievingly.

"Apparently" Tariq laughed again. "He must be too preoccupied with his coming power, and with the problems of your special agent friend and your wife."

"You are sure about the two-man process?" Dave asked, his mind racing with possibilities.

"I initiated it, practiced it, commanded it and respected it," Tazir said. "Let me explain it to you. Each nuclear war-head, depending on its state of readiness and location, contains safety and control devices, which are to prevent accidental unauthorized use. In some cases these are only a wire seal, a switch and a lock. But in more advanced weapons and situations, such as we have here, they have a series of complementary features, including locked containers and a code-controlled arming and fusing system. On top of that there is the required 'two-man rule' which requires a minimum of two authorized personnel to be present during any occasions where people come in contact with nuclear weapons. Here we have incorporated a coded 'lock' that requires the insertion of a given twelve-digit number—a combination of electronic digits—in order to 'open' or unlock the circuits which activates the weapon. 'Pushing the button' is only shorthand for this complicated process.

“Why can’t General Ma get it from the other man of the ‘two-man rule’?” Dave queried.

“Because he is my appointed deputy, a friend, who will not reveal it to General Ma without me being present,” Tariq smiled. “Also, because I set today’s new combination this morning, and I was arrested by General Ma and removed before my deputy appeared. So only I know today’s combination.”

Dave shook his head in wonderment. “So, as soon as the General is finished with Li, and possibly Deki, and finds out that your deputy will not or cannot activate the weapon, he will send for you to do it.”

“He will try,” Tariq said, “because that is the military mind. Military logic is unique; it is almost always linear, seldom mosaic. If the line of thought, or strategy, is disturbed, it becomes confused, then hectoring. Few, if any, ever admit ignorance, or error.”

“I learned that in Vietnam,” Dave agreed. They grinned at each other as they contemplated the General’s dilemma and the possible consequences.

“Well, well,” Dave said eventually. “So the issue is still between you and me.”

“And God,” Tariq added.

“And God,” Dave agreed.

There was the unmistakable sound of a single gun-shot from outside the window, and the murmur of voices. The window was too small and high to see out of in any significant direction. There was a shout and burst of firing, followed by a steady exchange of gunfire.

“Sounded like a Kalashnikov automatic,” Dave said. “Do your people have those, and why would it be fired in here?”

Tariq shook his head negatively, and they listened in silence for a few minutes, waiting to see if the gunfire would resume.

“What’s that?” Tariq asked at a new sound, some kind of music.

Dave grinned. “That,” he said, “is a well-known Christian hymn being played on a mouth-organ or harmonica”. He hummed, and then sang the words in time with the unseen musician:

“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, nearer to Thee!"

Tariq was looking at Dave in bewilderment. "What does it mean?"

Dave laughed. "It means that my friend, Duke, is inside the nuclear facility, and from the sound of things is in the command centre to destroy it, and is letting me know it with his unique brand of humour. I think he is indicating that he has set the explosives with that second line: 'E'en though it be a cross that raises me,' meaning it could be death that takes us and him nearer to God. Duke, man, I love you, I really do." Dave laughed uproariously.

"Does it mean that he has already captured General Ma?" Tariq asked unbelievably.

Dave shrugged. "I don't know. You can never tell with Duke. Anything's possible when he starts a caper. Let's go and find out."

Tariq looked at Dave in puzzlement as he began to take off his boots.

"Time for action, not words any more," Dave said. "Destiny time. Want to be there?"

He took out the miniature plastic gun and ammunition clip from the boots and laid them on the table. Then he stood up and unfastened his chain-link belt from his trousers. He inserted the single bullet in the gun chamber and handed it and the remaining clip to Tariq. "It's only deadly at close range," he said. "But you can always get the soldier to give you his rifle. I'll stick with this." He waved the looped chain.

"Here's where we yell and hit the door," he said. "They won't suspect anything from us. When the first soldier, or whoever, comes in, put the gun in his face and take his rifle, dead or alive. I'll deal with the second or third. All set?"

Tariq shook his head in open admiration. "As much as I'll ever be," he smiled.

***The final Chapter  
will be available on this site on the 1st January 2011***