

Silver Rivers

A Red McKenna Novel

C.G. Masi

Silver Rivers

Copyright © 2012, C.G. Masi, all rights reserved

ISBN:

For Ruth

“Not collecting treasures prevents stealing.”
– *Lau Tsu, Tao Te Ching, Chapter 3, Stanza 2, ca. 500 BCE*
translation by Gia Fu Feng and Jane English

Author's Foreword

This volume is a work of fiction. Qin Shi Huang's mausoleum does exist, is located about forty kilometers outside Xi'an, China, and historical records show the man himself was a paranoid, mass-murdering, psychopathic megalomaniac of Biblical proportions. You can find lots of nifty info online by searching on Qin Shi Huang, the terracotta army, or First Emperor of China. It's best to check all three.

Any satellite-map website can show you an aerial view of the mausoleum's exterior, which still looks like a low pyramid. I'm amazed at how crisp the form is, even after twenty-two centuries of erosion. It's just a dirt pile, after all.

Descriptions of the mausoleum's inside, however, are speculative at best. The site's interior has never been explored, and no plans for exploring it are in place. All we really know for sure is that the thing's there; it's hollow; and there's a lot of mercury around. I picked up some details available online from historical sources, but that's about it.

I made all the rest up in the interest of having a good story to tell.

The systems I describe for exploring the interior are technically feasible, but not necessarily developed. Some items, such as the wireless repeaters, are available as products, today. Especially, the mapping system described is based on an actual system available from Urban Robotics, Inc. of Portland, Oregon. Some liberties have been taken with the 3-D display technology, but nothing that is beyond current technology.

Bertha, the twin-hull airship used for exploring the mausoleum, is loosely based on the AirHelo design by Dan Parmely of Teeco International in Phoenix, Arizona. The method of turning the fans is my own addition based on helicopter-rotor technology.

The characters, of course, are entirely fictional and do not represent any actual persons, living or dead. Well,

Qin Shi Huang is based on a dead guy, but I've covered him above. Okay, I mention Adolf Hitler and a few other historical (or hysterical) figures as well.

Let's not get picky.

1

Greed had been their downfall. Greed and fascination with Western ideas. Hsiu Mei knew that now, but now it was too late. Everything was gone, and none of it could ever be recovered.

Growing up in a small town in rural China, she and her husband, Benny, had loved each other since before they knew what love was. That was very common in rural Chinese communities. Another thing that was very common was that she barely knew how to read. The government, of course, tried to promote good education for everyone, but in rural Chinese villages, the government could not always enforce its wishes.

Benny was not the name her husband's parents had given him. His Chinese name did sound a little like "Benny," so when he got old enough that people asked *him* what his name was, he told them "Benny" to sound more Western. He'd heard it was a common name in America, and he was fascinated with America.

Hsiu Mei's name loosely meant "sophisticated eyes." She wanted people to think of her as a young lady wise in the ways of the world, and ready to meet the future on her own terms. Even as a little girl, she'd shared her future husband's fascination with all things Western, and especially American.

Benny was better educated than she was. He was a boy, and boys were traditionally better educated than girls. Benny could read well, and do arithmetic. He knew how to keep business accounts, and wanted to become an entrepreneur.

It was Benny who had taught her to be less traditional. He gave her magazines showing all the latest fashions and lifestyle products available from those who sold Western goods, and often read the articles to her. As time went on, she learned to read better by poring over those magazines, herself, and asking Benny what different characters meant.

By the end, she could read well at the level of those fashion magazines, and could read and understand

numbers. She was never much good at arithmetic, though. She had Benny for that.

In the West, the magazines told her, they had beautiful fashions, magical technology, and freedom to enjoy those things. She had known of their existence even before reading the magazines, and believed that it was the rich bureaucrats in Beijing who kept poor Chinese people from having them.

It was her parents who had taught her about the rich bureaucrats in Beijing keeping the Chinese people from advancing. They had realized this after Mao Tse Tung's so-called "Cultural Revolution" of the nineteen-sixties. What was supposed to be a great leap forward had actually set people back generations. People had forgotten the wisdom of the past, substituting instead stupid slogans and plans that never worked out.

In the West, they had none of that. People did what they wanted, and what they wanted was to become rich. That's what everyone really wanted, anyway. At least, that was what Hsiu Mei had thought.

That, Hsiu Mei now realized, was where she and Benny had gone wrong. By following the Western pursuit of greed, they had destroyed their lives.

Now, everything was gone: their health was gone; their sanity was gone; even their beautiful baby boy was gone – stillborn as a punishment for their greed and pursuit of Western ideas.

When they'd been married just a few short years ago, everything had been wonderful. Their future was full of promise. He was handsome and intelligent. She was beautiful and sophisticated, just as her name implied.

She knew when she married Benny that his goal was to become rich any way he could, even if it meant bending or breaking the law. The laws, their parents had taught them, were made by powerful people in Beijing for their own benefit, not to help poor people wanting to become rich.

She felt that, together, she and Benny couldn't lose. They would be bold and aggressive. They would achieve their dreams through courage and resourcefulness, and by being very, very clever.

At first, they had been poor. Benny worked hard to find a business that would make them rich. He'd finally connected with some people who were selling antiquities to rich foreigners on the black market. Those people had set him up with a legitimate antiques shop in the nearest big city, Xi'an, but his real business was to receive artifacts from black-market suppliers – no questions asked – and to pass them along to his partners in Beijing, who would dispose of them at an enormous profit.

At first, Benny's suppliers were mostly peasants, like himself. He had grown up with many of them, in fact.

They knew the secret abandoned places where people used to live, but had gone away. They would scour those places for anything the people might have lost or left behind when they went away. Those things belonged to nobody, the peasants felt, so they were fair game for anyone who could find them and knew where to sell them for the best price. Benny's partners supplied him with cash money to make Benny's shop the best place for his suppliers to sell their found objects. They quickly learned that fact, and Benny's black market business grew rapidly, although his legitimate shop remained small.

It was better to remain small. Otherwise, government officials might take too much notice.

As time went on, Benny learned to tell genuine ancient artifacts from fake ones, and even learned to date them just by looking at them. Different styles were made at different times in the past, so it wasn't hard once you learned to recognize the differences. Benny's partners supplied him with catalogs and books he could use to date objects the like of which he'd never seen before.

Benny also learned to clean the artifacts, and get them ready to show to his partners' customers, who would buy them for many times what Benny paid to the peasants who "found" them. Hsiu Mei learned to help with cleaning the artifacts and storing them out of sight of nosy officials. That meant Benny didn't have to hire helpers, who might not be trusted to keep his secrets.

Hsiu Mei knew that Benny's business was illegal. The government officials wanted to keep these things for themselves and their friends, and made laws regulating whom they could deal with and whom they could not.

Benny's black-market suppliers were not on the list of legitimate suppliers, and Benny knew he could get better prices by selling to private collectors, who were not on the list, either, than by selling to government officials who were.

Essentially, he and his partners bought from whoever had good stuff to sell, and sold to the highest bidder. That was Capitalism – the American way.

As Benny got better at this trade, and made better contacts, people started bringing in better stuff. His suppliers gradually changed from poor peasants bringing in chance finds of mostly old junk, to professional treasure hunters who sought out the most valuable pieces that their former owners hadn't wanted to part with, even in death. Sometimes they were the same suppliers as before, who had grown in sophistication, themselves. Sometimes they were outsiders who came in to exploit the rich pickings in and around Xi'an.

Xi'an was, after all, the first capital of a unified China. It's name was pronounced "Chin," and gave the Chinese Empire its name.

As time went on, both the value and frequency of Benny's deals grew, until he and Hsiu Mei were able to get a nice apartment in Xi'an, and start thinking about a family.

Around a year ago, Benny had come to her all excited. A new supplier had come in with some spectacular first-dynasty gold and jade pieces. Benny had immediately seen that they were priceless, and negotiated what he thought was a really good deal for himself.

The supplier wouldn't say anything about where he got the pieces. Benny wasn't surprised. In his shoes, Benny wouldn't have told, either, and neither would any of the other suppliers. If you told, the people you told would just go get the stuff for themselves, and cut you out of the deal.

His supplier's reticence did, however, tell Benny that the man thought there was more where that came from. The man confirmed that when he brought in an even bigger collection a few weeks later.

That was good news for Benny and Hsiu Mei. These pieces were extremely old, extremely rare, and extremely valuable. They felt they were now on their way to becoming *really* rich.

Benny would have thought the man was selling off material from a private collection, except that all the pieces were caked with reddish dirt. That meant they were fresh from the ground. Benny and Hsiu Mei cleaned off the dirt in a little storeroom in the back of their apartment. There was room to do it in the back of the antiques shop, but it was safer to do it in their apartment building. Government officials watched antiques shops like Benny's carefully for signs of illegal activity. It was better to keep these extremely rare and valuable pieces out of sight.

The reddish dirt dried quickly, and fell to a fine powder that got all over the place. Hsiu Mei complained that it made keeping the apartment clean impossible, but there wasn't much they could do. The red powder also irritated their throats, and they began coughing a lot. They talked about finding a small warehouse or storage space to clean and store the artifacts when the baby came, but that never happened.

As time went on, more artifacts kept coming. They were all from the same, very early period, so wherever the man was getting them, it was all from the same trove. Benny figured that the man had found a big grave site, and was systematically looting it. That would make what he was doing highly illegal. If the government officials found out, not only would the supplier go to prison, but so would Benny, his partners, his customers, and even, perhaps, Hsiu Mei, who was now pregnant.

He talked with Hsiu Mei about it, pointing out the danger. She didn't care. She was seeing money coming in at a faster rate than ever before, and wanted it to continue. *That* was how they were going to finally become rich! The danger just made the prices for everything go up. She figured that would help them get richer faster.

Weeks later, however, they started having marital problems. Hsiu Mei thought it might be the stress from knowing how much trouble they could get into.

They were also going through a lot of changes. They had a lot more money to spend, and argued about how to spend it. She would find herself weeping uncontrollably over even minor arguments, while Benny would laugh

at her emotionalism.

The move to Xi'an had not improved matters. Benny was trying to impress his partners in an effort to move up in the business. Instead, they became concerned about his growing emotionalism, and strange reactions to events. For example, he might start laughing when a deal went bad, then fly into a fit of rage for no apparent reason. Both he and Hsiu Mei had trouble sleeping, and Benny started having memory lapses, which his partners noticed as well.

Benny complained that Hsiu Mei kept their apartment too hot. He was sweating all the time. He said it was affecting his skin. He began to have rashes, and even peeling skin.

He complained that she put on too much makeup, which made her look like a cheap tart. He said that it embarrassed him. She countered that it looked better than the unnatural redness her cheeks and nose had started showing. And, her hair started falling out, so she began wearing elaborate wigs.

Neither one was getting enough sleep. They had to make at least one trip per week back to the village to pick up more pieces – often many pieces that would take a couple of days to clean and prepare before they could pass them on to Benny's partners. But, even when they got to bed, exhausted, they still had trouble sleeping.

Disaster truly struck when Hsiu Mei had her miscarriage. Her beautiful baby boy, whom they'd waited so long for, died in her belly! She was heartbroken. He was furious.

Benny blamed her for losing her baby – killing his son! He became abusive. Finally, they had a screaming argument one night at dinner over nothing. Benny was just looking for an excuse to fight. They both were.

He grabbed the empty wine bottle and began beating her with it. He smashed her beautiful little potato chip of a nose to pulp, knocked out three of her teeth, and crushed the bones of her cheek. They found out later he'd also broken her jaw.

He hit her so hard that the bottle shattered, slicing great gashes in her face. That left scars that no amount of

makeup could hide.

She would never be beautiful again.

She knew it was her greed that had caused this. Her greed and her wanton lusting after the material possessions she associated with a Western lifestyle. She was sorry she'd ever started on this course. She was sorry she'd encouraged Benny to turn to crime to get what they wanted.

She knew her troubles were a punishment from Heaven for being greedy. She longed to tell Heaven she was sorry, but with no religion to guide her, she couldn't. She longed to say she would give it all up if only she could make it stop. If only she could turn back time, she'd never do it again. If only she could go back to their little village, and live a quiet life bringing up a quiet family as her mother had done.

But, she couldn't do that. It was too late.

There was nobody who could help, either. There was nobody who even cared to try.

One night, when Benny called to say he would be working late again – she knew he wasn't really working, but trying to forget his troubles in the arms of his new girlfriend – she sat at her makeup table trying to reverse the results of her mistakes. She put on a blond wig to hide her patchy, thinning hair. She loaded on makeup to cover the red rashes on her cheeks and forehead. But, none of that could hide the ruined lump of her now shapeless nose, or the streaks of the scars on her face, or her crushed cheek, or the crookedness where her jaw hadn't set right. Worst of all, she was now having trouble focusing her eyes, and tremors shaking her hands made it impossible to put her makeup on right.

The result was a hideous mess that looked more like a mask than a face. No wonder Benny had a girlfriend.

Sobbing, she put on her best dress, and tottered out to the balcony of their twenty-third-floor apartment. Taking a long, tearful look at the glittering lights of Xi'an far below, she mourned for her baby, for herself, and for the life she had thought to have.

She'd achieved all she thought she wanted, but at a cost she couldn't bear.

She climbed over the railing and let herself fall.

2

Dr. Chen Ju Long was exhausted and depressed. He'd just spent fourteen hours on airplanes, and was right back when he started. It was still mid-afternoon Monday. In fact, the plane, which was, unbelievably, exactly on time, landed five minutes earlier (by local time) than it departed! The only other difference was that it was now Monday afternoon in Phoenix, Arizona, USA, instead of in Beijing, China. He'd been traveling for a long day that had vanished like the ghost of a cloud.

While he'd done an awful lot of sleeping on the flight, it was sleep that did him very little good, being broken up by a two-hour stop in San Francisco to change planes, as well as meal service, and snack service, and people moving about the cabin. He was still tired, and depressed, and a long, long way from home.

Ms. Thompson wasn't any help, either, and he wasn't sure why. She was stunningly beautiful by anyone's standards, with a full figure, long blond hair cascading over her shoulders and down her back, and a smile that could make a man cheerfully walk barefoot across broken glass to be near her.

She, however, made him feel the opposite of the powerful, gigantic dragon implied by his name. She, in fact, made him feel short and puny.

It wasn't entirely her fault. At 178 cm (five feet, ten inches), she towered over him. Even more intimidating, she was broad-shouldered and muscular.

That last part *was* entirely her doing, of course. She kept a professional athlete's exercise regimen. It was a habit she said she'd picked up from her best friend in America, who had been an Olympic athlete. In the few weeks he'd known her, she'd spent more time pumping iron and beating up punching bags than he'd done in his entire life.

He'd seen her easily pick up things that weighed more than he did.

Then, she was frustratingly smart. She always seemed to figure things out easily, and a little bit before he did.

For example, Ju Long still couldn't figure out how he could arrive at almost the same time of day on the same day after crossing the international dateline. He seemed to be getting it wrong by twelve hours. But, to her, it made perfect sense: "We're traveling for roughly fourteen hours," she said, "and crossing ten time zones going East. That adds up to plus twenty-four hours. Then, we crossed the international date line moving East, which gives us a minus twenty-four hours. We end up when we started."

For her it was easy. For him, impossible.

Her personality didn't help any, either. It's not that she was unpleasant. Just the opposite. She was generally happy and friendly to everyone she met.

That's what it was! She was just so damned *happy*! Nothing seemed to bother her.

When an old woman had grunted disapproval over the vertical cuddling she was doing with her husband, archaeologist Glen Trudeau, at the Beijing airport before getting on the flight, she greeted it by tossing her head dismissively, and hissing "Pffst!" Then, she went back to the vertical cuddling.

If the old lady didn't want to be nice, she was beneath Ms. Thompson's contempt.

When everyone was upset that the airplane was delayed at the ramp, she just shrugged, and said: "We don't have a bus to catch. We've already caught it."

He assumed she was referring to the airplane that was now delaying them. Instead of being cross, like everyone else, she just sat quietly with a complacent smile, waiting as if time meant nothing.

Everyone else, including him, was pushing and shoving to get through their lives, while she just strolled. She seemed to always do exactly as she pleased, and get away with it easily. The seas of life seemed to simply part for

her without even being asked.

After fourteen hours, it was starting to get on his nerves.

During the first part of their flight, before boredom and bedtime by their internal clocks – still operating on Beijing time – had put them to sleep, she'd chattered about her work using remotely operated vehicles to map sunken treasure ships in the United States. Then, she'd quizzed him about his work at the People's Committee for Cultural Education, and laws governing the conduct of archeology in China. Finally, she'd wanted to know all about home life in modern China.

He knew, of course, that she was an archeology graduate student at a prestigious American university, who had come to China with her husband, who was on sabbatical collaborating with researchers at Beijing University. That's how Ju Long had first come to meet her.

Mercifully, about the time he could take no more of her conversation, and was falling asleep in his seat, she decided she wanted to meditate for a while. Then, she seemed to fade into the background, intruding on Ju Long's consciousness no more than the empty seat next to her. She became as furniture.

She still had a quiet, blissful expression on her face when the clatter of breakfast(?) service awoke him some four hours later.

After breakfast, she'd disappeared for a while. When he walked back to use the lavatory, he saw her standing in avid conversation with a pretty flight attendant. He wasn't close enough to overhear what they were talking about, but it involved a lot of eye contact, leaning close, whispering and giggling.

Later, she came back to her seat, and pulled out what looked like a novel printed in a strange alphabet.

"It's Sanskrit," she replied to his query. "I haven't read the *Bhagavad Gita* in a long time. It's a beautiful poem, and makes great reading on a long flight."

“You read Sanskrit,” he observed.

“Yes,” she replied guardedly, as if unsure why he would think she didn’t. “I read many languages. Sanskrit’s the key language in an important part of the world, and one that is important to me, personally.”

“So, you’re a Hindu?” he guessed, not quite knowing what to expect from her.

“No, I’m a Zen Buddhist,” she replied, “but it’s part of the same tradition.”

“You realize,” he pointed out, “that Zen was developed in China as a fusion between Indian Buddhism and Chinese Taoism.”

“Yes. That’s one reason I wanted to take time from my research to come here when I had the chance. I’ve been learning as much about Taoism as I can from people in China who still practice it.”

That got them into a long conversation about religion in modern China, and how ordinary Chinese people dealt with living in a country where the official state religion was Communist atheism. How much did ordinary Chinese know about their own cultural history? She had been studying with monks in centers of Taoist faith, not talking to ordinary people. She wanted his opinion as a representative of the dominant Communist authority as well as someone who had grown up among ordinary Chinese people.

During their short layover in San Francisco, she started looking forward to getting home to Arizona.

“I can’t wait to see my Baby,” she blurted out, enthusiastically, practically bouncing with excitement in her seat on the automated tram carrying them between terminals.

Did that mean she had an infant in Arizona, while her husband was in China? Ju Long didn’t think his wife would approve of that. Women were supposed to devote their lives to their babies, not abandon them to visit monasteries on the other side of the world.

Ju Long knew that Dr. Trudeau was Ms. Thompson’s second husband. She had talked about her adventurous

life that evening he'd first met her, and in the weeks since, when she'd been coming in and out of his office looking for leads to people she could talk to about early Chinese history and culture.

That first evening, she had accompanied Dr. Trudeau and a group of visiting foreign archaeologists to a social dinner at Ju Long's home. It was a dinner party to welcome them when they'd first arrived in China. There were several visiting foreign archaeologists, as well as the entire faculty from Beijing University's Archeology Department and their wives. Ms. Thompson, however, had been the only wife accompanying one of the foreign archaeologists, so she'd been a center of attention.

Ju Long's wife had not approved of Ms. Thompson. His wife didn't think Ms. Thompson's behavior was appropriate for a young woman, no matter how intelligent or well educated she was. She was just too forward, and not very moral according to his wife's traditional views.

Of course, "traditional" in modern Chinese society means "Maoist."

Later that evening, after everyone had left, Ju Long's wife had complained about her. Ms. Thompson had admitted to, and even seemed proud of, having appeared in pornographic videos on the Internet. Something about a "*Kama Sutra*" website she'd created with her first husband. She'd said she'd battled Cuban pirates, and drug smugglers in Mexico. She'd even had an affair with a Colonel in the Mexican Army! She'd talked about her friends in the United States who'd made a fortune supplying high-tech weapons to secret agents.

When Ju Long had told his wife that Ms. Thompson would be accompanying him to Arizona to introduce him to those same friends, his wife had been furious. It was only when he explained that there was a crisis at the People's Committee, which only Ms. Thompson's friends were equipped to help resolve, that his wife grudgingly gave permission for him to make the trip.

Of course, she didn't really have any say in the matter. Ju Long didn't have a choice. He had to make the trip as part of his job. He had to meet with Ms. Thompson's friends to ask for their help, and he had to travel with Ms. Thompson to do it. He was just happy that it wasn't going to cause problems for his marriage. His marriage had

problems enough, already.

“I miss her so much!” Ms. Thompson kept chattering excitedly about her Baby. “I haven’t seen her since I came here with Glen. She wrote the software I use to interpret the debris fields I’m mapping, and figure out how artifacts get scattered during shipwrecks.”

So, it wasn’t an infant whom she’d somehow left behind, but a female co-worker with whom Ms. Thompson was extremely close – close enough to call her “Baby.” That made a difference, but he wasn’t sure it was any better.

“Is that who we’ll be meeting with at Scottsdale Systems Technology?” he asked.

“Not exactly. Her husband founded SST, and still runs it. *He’s* the one we’re here to see, although she’ll probably be involved, too. He designs the hardware, while she writes a lot of the software. She also makes a lot of important decisions for the company. They’ll probably work together on your project. It’ll be a high-profile project for the company, and she manages most of their high-profile projects.”

3

“Baby!” Ms. Thompson squealed loudly when they passed through the gate in Phoenix Sky Harbor airport. Slinging her knapsack over her shoulder, she ran to an enormously tall redheaded woman excitedly waving to her over the heads of the other deplaning passengers. As tall as Ms. Thompson was, the redhead was even taller. Ju Long was in for a vertically challenging visit.

“Oh, Bud,” the redhead cooed, “I love you. I’ve missed you. You’ve got to come home right now! Sam’s planning a barbecue by the pool.”

Ju Long was surprised to see Bud repeat the scene that had raised eyebrows in Beijing, but this time with the redhead, who lifted her off the ground to plant an open-mouthed kiss on her lips, then set her down, again.

When back on her feet, Bud said: “Hi, Jeremy,” to a large, blond, crew-cut man wearing a chauffeur’s uniform, and standing next to the redhead.

“Good to see you again, Ma’am,” Jeremy replied, touching his cap in what was half a chauffeur’s cap tip, and half British Army salute. “If you’ll give me your claim ticket, I’ll go find your bags and load them in the car.”

Handing Jeremy her travel documents, Bud reached for Ju Long’s papers to hand them to Jeremy as well.

“Thank you, ma’am,” Jeremy said, and turned to hand Ju Long’s papers to a second large young man standing behind the redhead. Then, both disappeared quickly through the crowd.

“*¡Hola, Manuelito!*” Bud called to a third large, crew-cut man in the group, who acknowledged the greeting with a smile and a nod. Instead of being blond and Nordic looking, like the other two, he was slightly (though not much) shorter, perhaps even more heavily muscled, and darkly Hispanic looking.

“Let’s go get a cup of coffee,” the redhead suggested, “while the boys collect your luggage.”

“Baby, you’ve put on weight again,” Bud said, suspiciously patting the redhead’s belly as they reached their table in the private club. Ju Long was surprised. He’d been thinking that the redhead was as thin and fit as Ms. Thompson.

“The doctor told me to add weight because I’m pregnant again!” the redhead responded proudly. “You remember when the Ol’ Kinkster hired that porn star as a surprise for me on my birthday, just before you left?”

“Yeah, you thanked him for it by punching out his lights! Broke a tooth, as I remember. Not the most successful birthday present, ever.”

“I also made him do the job, himself. I like him better than some porn star I don’t know, and probably wouldn’t talk to if I did.”

Ju Long decided his wife would not approve of the redhead, either.

“It’s too early for the tests to tell, but *I* think she’s a girl,” the redhead announced patting her still-flat belly. “I’m going to call her ‘Elise.’”

“Don’t try to tell me she was an accident,” Bud warned. “I know of only one time you ever made a birth-control mistake, and you got away with that one by luck. No way I’d believe you to screw up, again.”

“It seemed like a good idea at the time,” the redhead explained, wickedly. “Thinking about doing it with a stranger made me want to have another one of *his* babies, so I made him do it barebacked. I figured it served him right.”

“*My* Baby loves having babies,” Bud confided to Ju Long.

“Oh, I haven’t introduced you,” she added. “Baby, this is Dr. Chen Ju Long of the People’s Committee for Cultural Education. Ju Long, this is my Baby, ‘Red’ McKenna. You’ll meet her husband, ‘Doc’ Manchek this afternoon.”

“Actually, no,” Red corrected. “Doc had to meet with some brass in Mexico. He won’t be back until late tonight. That’ll give us a chance for a welcome-home cuddle before he gets here!”

Ju Long’s wife would definitely not approve. He didn’t think he approved, himself. He was, in fact, wondering what he’d gotten himself into. This sounded like behavior an official for the People’s Republic of China should not be caught anywhere near. Bad for one’s career!

Seeing his discomfiture, Red said, laughingly: “Don’t worry, Ju Long. We’ll make everybody wear clothes while you’re here.”

She smiled slyly to Bud, and winked. Bud chuckled.

“In the meantime,” Red continued, softening her tone and expression, “we’ve booked a suite at the Sheraton Crescent, so you don’t have to bunk in among strangers.”

“If you’d prefer, though,” her expression went back to being arch, “there’s plenty of room at our place. Bud, you’re staying with us, aren’t you? Or, do you want to go home?”

“Hmm,” Bud pondered, “eating microwave dinners alone in a house that’s been closed up for two months *versus* rolling around on the floor with your kids while waiting for Sam to serve his fabulous cooking? I think I’ll borrow your babies for a while, if you don’t mind.”

“Sam has your old suite all ready for you,” Red reported. Red’s ranch house was big enough that guest bedrooms came with private sitting rooms and full bathrooms. Turning to Ju Long, she added: “There’s another suite available for you, if you’re interested. Or, Manny can drive you to your hotel after dinner. I don’t recommend waiting up for Doc. He avoids scheduled airlines, and flies his little hot rod everywhere he can. Who knows when he’ll show up? We’re planning to give you the cook’s tour of SST tomorrow at nine. You can meet him then. After that, you can go back to your hotel to sleep off your jet lag. We’ll get serious about business Wednesday. I’ve assigned Manny, here, as your driver while you’re in town. Okay?”

“Thank you very much,” Ju Long said. “While I appreciate the offer of your hospitality, I have work to do. I’d prefer to go to my hotel.”

He’d begun imagining a lot of wickedness going on at that ranch house, and was glad to avoid the need to be anywhere near it.

“That would be my choice, too, if I were in your shoes,” Red agreed. “Manny has your schedule, so just follow his lead. Charge everything to your room, and SST will take care of it. Now, I see our shadows have arrived, which means all your luggage is in the car. Are we all ready to go?”

Getting nods from Bud and Ju Long, she stood up and led them to the door.

It was a thirty-minute drive in the white stretch limousine to Red’s ranch in the mountains East of Scottsdale. All the way, Bud curled up next to Red, feet tucked under her on the seat, hugging Red’s arm, and resting her cheek contentedly on her shoulder.

Red kept Ju Long’s mind occupied and off the image of Bud Thompson cuddling up to another woman by quizzing him.

4

“What’s all this about?” Red asked. “All Doc’s told me is that you’ve got a toxic-waste dump to clean up, but there’s something about an archaeological site mixed up with it, which I assume accounts for my girlfriend’s very-welcome presence.”

“It all started,” Ju Long explained, “when our health services noticed a cluster of unexplained illness in a group of villages in Central China. The pattern of symptoms indicated poisoning by heavy metals. When blood tests were run on the affected villagers, they were found to have elevated levels of mercury. That’s unusual because the number one source for mercury poisoning is seafood, and the villages are hundreds of miles inland.”

“The villages are, however, not too far from the tomb of Qin Shi Huang – the first emperor of China,” he continued. “Supposedly, the tomb contained vast quantities of elemental mercury used to simulate the important waterways surrounding and binding the country together at the time. The soil in the area has mercury levels elevated over a hundred times normal.”

“By itself,” he concluded, “that’s not enough to produce clinical symptoms in the population. If, however, there is some mechanism for concentrating mercury, it could account for the problem.”

“Nobody will admit to anything, but we suspect that someone has found a way to circumvent security at Qin Shi Huang’s mausoleum, and has been hiring these villagers to go in and loot it. Spending a lot of time in close proximity to the mercury could account for the poisoning.”

“Was it just men?” Red asked.

“No,” Ju Long reported. “There were men, women and children. But, any of them could have been used to go into the site.”

“China doesn’t have the same traditions we have about excluding women and children from dangerous and

manual labor,” Bud pointed out, “and modern labor laws mean nothing to grave robbers. Any of them could be hired to go into the site. Nobody would have told them it was a toxic environment.”

“And, we fear,” Ju Long added, “whoever has been going in has been bringing contamination out. It could be an environmental disaster as well as an archaeological one.”

“It sounds a lot like what Scott Arnold was doing to the *Castillo* wreck,” Red said to Bud, “but with an added Love Canal twist.”

“That’s why we came to Tuco, Baby,” Bud stated.

Seeing a perplexed look on Ju Long’s face, Red began an explanation: “*Castillo* is one of the wrecks Bud’s been excavating off the Florida coast. For years, it remained undisturbed mainly because the dive was so dangerous. It’s under a hundred sixty feet of water.”

“About three years ago,” she continued, “we found that a bent salvage operator named Scott Arnold had started looting it.”

“The bastard killed my brother in the process!” Bud put in, angrily. Then, she gave Red an odd look.

Seeing Ju Long noticing the look, Red explained: “I’d started an affair with the guy before we knew about any of that, and kept it up afterward. He’s extremely attractive, physically, and charming to boot. When we found out he was also a paranoid homicidal psychopath, I went undercover as his lover to get evidence against him. The whole thing turned out to be more emotionally difficult than I’d counted on, and eventually kinda put me ‘round the bend for a while. It’s an experience I don’t care to repeat!”

“It took Doc and me months to get her head straight, again,” Bud added.

“I’ve sworn off undercover assignments since then,” Red concluded. “My family’s too important.”

“Yeah,” Bud scoffed, “now you just send in your army of mercenaries. Like when you had Gwen Petersen

running around the world posing as a madam so you could buy Cara out of slavery!”

Red ignored the comment, preferring not to get into explaining explanations of her explanations. Rather, she just returned to her narrative: “Arnold looting the site meant the wreck was no longer safe, so Bud’s team had to excavate it before looters wrecked its scientific value. You’ve got a similar situation with the added problem that the mercury makes it a toxic waste dump.”

“What’s the ‘Love Canal’ twist you’re talking about?” Ju Long wanted to know.

“ ‘Love Canal’ is the name of a housing development in Niagara Falls, New York,” Red explained. “In the late Nineteenth Century, there was a canal project that was started, then abandoned. The hole was used as a dump site for various entities, including the City of Niagara Falls, from the nineteen-twenties through about nineteen-fifty. One of those entities was Hooker Chemical Company, which bought it and dumped tens of thousands of tons of chemical waste there. In the early nineteen-fifties Hooker closed down the dump, filled in the hole, and, using the best technology available at the time, capped and sealed the place.”

“Then, they donated the property to the Niagara Falls School District with specific instructions about acceptable uses that would protect the cap, and keep the guck sealed in. I think they hoped to wash their hands of the whole ugly mess, but that was not to be.”

“A generation later, some politicians got greedy, as politicians often do – I think it’s a job requirement that politicians have to be greedy slimeballs – and sold the property to a developer *without* the stipulations about not damaging the toxic-waste seal. The developer brought in bulldozers, and ripped up the cap to dig cellar holes for residential houses. That breached the seal. When heavy rains showed up later, the water flushed toxic waste out of the dump and into the groundwater. Nobody noticed until people started getting sick. It was a horrible mess.”

“The only one who caught blame for it, however, was an innocent little oil conglomerate named Occidental Petroleum, who’d bought the entire Hooker Chemical empire just a few years before disaster struck. They were the only ones who hadn’t really done anything wrong, but they got hung out to dry for it, anyway.”

“I’ve never heard of Occidental Petroleum,” Bud pointed out. She’d heard, of course, of Love Canal, but, like most people, had never heard the whole story, just sketchy accounts that had passed into urban legend.

“See what I mean?” Red responded. “It started out as Standard Oil – the world’s first oil megacompany. It used to be my stepfather’s father’s biggest competitor, but it’s not no more! The Occidental execs thought of Love Canal like it was a hair on a pimple on the rear end of a dog hunting rabbits in the woods behind a cute old farmhouse they’d bought as a vacation retreat. That is: they gave it no thought at all. It turned out to be a time bomb that blew up their whole company. It’s now a scary bedtime story corporate CEOs, like my step dad, tell their children to teach them to be careful what they buy.”

“And, who is Tuco?” Ju Long asked.

“It’s the name of a character in an old Western movie entitled *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly*,” Red explained. “Tuco was a dangerous gunfighter who was surprised that another, even more dangerous, gunfighter invited him in on a treasure hunt. He was distrustful until the second gunfighter mentioned: ‘There are five of them,’ meaning members of a rival gang. Tuco’s response was: ‘So, *that’s* why you came to Tuco!’ I used the line on Bud when she first came to me for help interpreting debris patterns in shipwrecks. She just paid me back.”

“And payback is a bitch!” Bud laughed.

5

Ju Long was suitably impressed by Red's eight-thousand-square-foot hacienda-style ranch house backed up against the foothills of the Superstition Mountains outside Scottsdale, which she'd personally designed and built using her stepfather's money. Ju Long had, by then, developed the floaty feeling of one who has become disconnected from the time zone they used to inhabit, but has not yet connected with a new one. He had no internal feel for what time it was, so he simply accepted the evidence of his senses, which told him it was early evening after a wickedly hot day.

Heat radiated from the patio flagstones, and Ju Long could smell the dry dust of the surrounding desert. He was sitting in the relatively cool shade on a chaise lounge enjoying a beer while watching Red, Bud, and Maryanne (the governess) teaching Red's two children to swim in the pool. The boy, Mike, almost three years old, was actually quite good, paddling around at will. The little girl, Judy, who had just outgrown the it's-easier-to-run-than-walk stage, mostly splashed around while clinging to one or another of the adults, who were trying to school her big brother in the fine points of the Australian crawl. She watched the lessons intently, obviously taking mental notes for future reference.

Sam, the houseman, had set up a big table under the roof's wide overhang, and piled it with a smorgasbord of barbecue-related food items. Diners included Red, Mike and Judy, Bud, Maryanne, Jeremy and the two bodyguards, Sam, and, of course, Ju Long. Various other people belonging to the household wandered in and out from time to time, as well.

To support a variety of appetites, Sam had included an assortment of the usual fare that goes with a barbecue by the pool: hamburgers, hot dogs, chicken, cole slaw, potato salad, and so forth. It was Ju Long's first taste of cold Mexican beer, and he decided it was every bit as good as the Tsing Tao he usually drank at home.

At one point, two heavily armed cowboys clopped their horses up to the fence surrounding the pool, tied

them to the fence, and climbed over to score cheeseburgers for themselves, and corn on the cob for their horses. After they left, Ju Long asked Sam: “Why would cowboys need so many guns? I thought all the Western movies depicted life a hundred years ago, and cowboys didn’t need to carry guns, anymore.”

“On ordinary ranches, you’re right,” Sam confirmed. “But this isn’t an ordinary ranch. It’s the worldwide headquarters for Mrs. Manchek’s security service: Gulf States Security. Those two are armed guards, as are the chauffeurs, and a lot of other people around here. Dr. and Mrs. Manchek have enemies. Last year, those two cowboys helped rout a home invasion by a drug gang. They killed seven of eighteen attackers, and held the rest at gunpoint until the Sheriff’s department arrived.”

“Was anyone hurt?” Ju Long asked, concerned that he might get caught in a similar incident.

“Nobody we care about,” Sam smiled, knowing why Ju Long was concerned. “Up here, we just heard pops of gunfire, and a loud bang when they blew up one of the gangsters’ cars. By the time we knew what was going on, it was over.”

“Besides,” Sam continued, “Dr. Manchek apparently knew it was coming, and had sent everyone but the security people elsewhere. I stayed here to take care of the house, but most of the staff were gone. The children were three thousand miles away in New England.”

“How did he know?”

“I don’t know, but he has his ways. I’ve been with him nearly ten years, and have seen that sort of thing happen many times.”

“Home invasions?” Ju Long asked in shock.

“No,” Sam replied, seeing the source of Ju Long’s confusion, “Dr. Manchek’s clairvoyance. He often seems to know things ahead of time, or at a distance. He says there’s nothing magical or difficult about it, that anyone can do it, but nobody seems to know how *he* does it.”

“Except, perhaps, for Mrs. Manchek,” he added as an afterthought. “Sometimes she seems to do it, too. I asked her once after he wouldn’t tell me any more about it, and she just shrugged and said: ‘What *he* said.’ Since he hadn’t said much of anything”

Then Sam shrugged to indicate he had no more information, either.

Ju Long found he got along famously with Sam, who, after dinner, took him on a tour of Red’s private art collection, which included an eclectic mix of abstract and realistic works in two and three dimensions spread throughout the enormous house. Ju Long blushed when he recognized a spectacular life-size red-ocher drawing in the living room of a nude woman as the mistress of the house, herself.

Noticing this, Sam said: “Mrs. Manchek likes posing. She also likes looking at nude forms, especially women.”

He emphasized this by waving around to a number of other nude paintings and sculptures. Ju Long noticed more than one that looked like Red, and a couple that looked like Bud. There were also male nudes, but they were vastly outnumbered by the female forms.

“And Mr. Manchek?” Ju Long asked.

Smiling, Sam said, ironically: “He doesn’t mind, either.”

“Actually,” he added, “they usually choose art together. They spend a lot of time snooping around artists’ studios and galleries wherever they go. I don’t think either would give house room to something that the other despised. As you can see, they find plenty to agree on.”

Realizing that all the work, and most of the furnishings, were original museum-quality works of art – nary a print or copy among them – Ju Long estimated that the collection was worth millions.

After again politely refusing to stay overnight, Ju Long was ready to go to his hotel. Sam conducted him

back to the living room, where Ju Long found Bud doing what she'd threatened earlier: rolling around on the floor with Mike and Judy under Maryanne's watchful eye. Red sat nearby in a wing-backed leather reading chair ignoring the book open on her lap.

Ju Long was captivated by the scene, with the beautiful red-headed woman sitting comfortably in the black-leather chair, with a life-size bronze statue of a robust nude man holding a lamp for her to read by, while leaning over her shoulder to peer at the book. She was happily watching her friend play with her children, with a contented "all's right with the world" expression on her face.

"Thank you for your hospitality," Ju Long said to her. "I look forward to meeting your husband tomorrow, and seeing your operation at SST."

With that polite farewell, he followed Sam out through the front foyer to the circular driveway outside, where Manny was waiting for him. His bags were already in the trunk of the black Lincoln Town Car that would be his transportation while in the U.S.

Later that evening, Doc found Red and Bud curled up together in the big bed in the master bedroom watching baseball.

"What's the score?" he asked.

"Five-to-two, bottom of the eighth," Bud responded. "Interleague play. We're beating the crap out of the hated Yankees!"

Both she and Doc had grown up in the Boston area, rooting for the Red Sox against the rival New York team, and Red had spent her college years there, too. When the Arizona Diamondbacks inflicted a heartbreaking defeat on the Yankees in the Arizona team's first-ever World Series, just after New York had suffered the 9/11 World Trade Center attack in 2001, the rivalry had expanded to the West. So, when Doc, Red, and Bud gravitated to the Phoenix area, they found their sports enemies practically the same as at home. The home team was now the

Diamondbacks, but the rivals were the same.

“How was Mexico?” Red wanted to know, while Doc pulled off his jeans, boots, underwear and tee-shirt, and piled them on a nearby chair.

“Fine,” he reported while sliding into the bed next to his wife. “Cara has everything under control. *El Presidente* just needed a little assurance that we’re still behind him in his drug war. As usual, he’d like more help for less money. In other words, business as usual.”

“Sam said our Chinese friend got here okay, and that you put him up at the Sheraton,” he added, opening a new topic of conversation.

“Yeah, but that’s for tomorrow,” Red said. She didn’t want to respond any more to his conversation because her body was responding to his presence. She rolled toward him for a kiss and a hug, while reaching for his penis to stroke into life. She wanted it to do what penises do best.

While all this was going on, Bud tried to concentrate on the ballgame. She knew Red was willing to share a lot of things with her, including unconditional love and certain bodily fluids, but Doc’s penis was not among them. With regard to *her* Doc, Red was downright selfish.

Bud had always been the wild child of the pair, firmly believing that casual sex was a great participatory sport. Glen had agreed with her, and the ground rules in their marriage had been – shall we say, “relaxed.”

Knowing that her first husband’s roving eye had caused the breakup of her first marriage, Bud was careful about who was having sex with whom and why. She wanted relaxed rules, but made sure any casual sex really was, and remained, casual.

Red, however, had never really gotten the idea of “casual” sex. To her, sex was serious business tied directly to building and maintaining her family, which was the single most important thing in her life. There were lots of other things that were important, too, but that was always top of the list. She wasn’t going to put up with Doc

fooling around with other women and she wasn't going to be fooling around with other men, and she made sure everyone around her knew it.

The one exception was her ongoing relationship with Bud. By the same token, however, that was serious business, too. Except for a couple of years when they'd drifted apart in college, they'd been practically joined at the hip throughout the seven years they'd known each other. Both Doc and Glen had known about it before their marriages, and accepted it as part of the package.

So, everyone knew the ground rules, and was willing to abide by them.

Except maybe Doc, who didn't give a shit about rules, in general. He'd do exactly as he pleased at any time, without any concern for any rules of any altitude, from the ground to the exosphere.

Luckily, what he pleased to do most was to make Red happy. As long as he was convinced it wouldn't cause her serious permanent damage, anything she wanted was okay. On that basis, not messing around with other women was no trouble at all for him.

In general, helping his friends get what they wanted was what he wanted, too. If what they wanted was to live by some ground rules, he wouldn't encourage them to break their rules any more than he'd encourage a teenager to shoplift.

He might be a loose cannon, but he was a kindly and thoughtful loose cannon.

Having her side pressed against Red while Red made love to Doc was interfering with Bud's concentration on the ballgame, however. When Red pulled Doc on top of her for sex in the missionary position, Bud found Red's leg laying across her belly, knee flexed and foot distractingly placed between her thighs. Very high between her thighs, in fact! Bud began having trouble remembering what was causing that background noise from the direction of the television.

Being pregnant made Red want to surrender her body. Nature was now in control, and she liked it.

Normally, she liked to have control over things, including sex. Usually, except when Doc was around, she found herself to be the smartest one in the room, and knew it. So, she habitually took control.

In the missionary position, she was basically helpless while Doc did things to her. She liked the things that he did, but the position all but doomed her to being submissive.

Being submissive was not usually to Red's taste, but was exactly what she wanted right now.

With Red in a passive mood, Bud hugged the leg against her body, pulling the knee up so the thigh lay on top of her breasts, and stabilizing Red's body while Doc pounded into her. All Red could do was relax and enjoy it.

So, she did.

Holding Red's leg with one hand, while the rhythmically moving thigh stimulated her breasts, Bud began masturbating by digging Red's heel into her crotch.

After at least two orgasms (she had no interest in getting an accurate count), Bud turned half way to reach Red's nearest nipple with her mouth. Suckling, she got a hint of a milky taste. That, more than anything else, told her that Red really was pregnant. Her body was gearing up to make a baby.

After Doc had a long, drawn-out orgasm inside Red's vagina, he rolled off to lay at her side with his head on her other breast. The tip of his penis, laying across her hip joint, leaked a little puddle of semen onto her belly next to her mound of Venus.

Thinking of the baby growing in Red's uterus, Bud slid her face down to nuzzle her cheek on Red's belly. Seeing the little pool of semen, she lapped it up, and dried the wet spot with her cheek.

Giving Red's belly a kiss, she said: "Hello, Elise. I'm your Auntie Cheryl. We're going to be great friends!"

6

Ju Long was ready to get to work. He'd been in Phoenix for over thirty-six hours, and was well and truly over his jet lag. He'd spent the morning yesterday (Tuesday) feeling like a zombie being led through the non-top-secret portions of SST's building. That was mostly offices and conference rooms, and a cavernous hangar containing various bits of demonstration hardware.

He could remember almost none of it. It seemed that Mrs. Manchek (McKenna? He was still unsure what to call her because everyone but Sam just called her "Red," or "Ma'am.") was just trying to keep him active and his mind off his jet lag. As long as he was actively conscious, she didn't seem to care if he was productive in any way, or remembered a thing he was told or that he experienced. She was trying to ensure that his body got locked onto Mountain Standard Time as rapidly as possible.

The high point of the morning was the demonstration by a spectacularly sexy little blond woman, who seemed to know everything there was to know about robots. She demonstrated making a giant-centipede-looking robot do all kinds of tricks by just talking to it. It was one of the "Worm" class robots SST was developing.

Dr. Manchek, who turned out to be monstrously huge to match his wife, with dark brown hair and full beard surrounding a glittering gold tooth showing where his wife had knocked out the original, had suggested that a Worm robot was likely what they'd need for working in Qin Shi Huang's mausoleum, but they couldn't be sure until they got a lot more information. Red opined that this was going to be a lot more complicated a project than anyone yet knew. She said she'd decided to manage it, herself, with Bud – Ms. Thompson – as technical coordinator, whatever that meant. Doc had mostly sat back and listened while other people talked. Unlike most managers, he seemed content to let his subordinates make the decisions, while he sat back monitoring progress.

He only spoke up when things seemed to be getting bogged down, or his subordinates were unsure what to say or do. Then, with just a few words, he'd get things moving again in an unexpected direction.

After the Worm demonstration, they'd all taken Ju Long out to lunch at a very nice Italian restaurant, where they'd stuffed him full of fettuccine alfredo, then sent him on his way back to his hotel to sleep it off. Manny escorted him up to his suite, where he fell asleep in the easy chair in his sitting room almost as soon as he opened the book he'd bought in the gift shop Monday evening.

The book was a mystery novel that Manny had recommended, written by someone named Hillerman. It was set in Arizona on an immense Indian reservation not far from where Ju Long was sitting. The main characters were Navajo tribal policemen.

Manny was right. The novel fascinated him. Manny had bought him maps of Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, and Utah, so Ju Long could follow the movements of the characters in the novel as they criss-crossed the reservation, which spread over portions of all four states.

From the novel, he learned much about these Indians, who were struggling to hold onto a traditional culture while being surrounded by an alien – in this case American – civilization. Ju Long could see parallels with what was happening in China as it emerged from its insular Communist past to take its place as a major player on the worldwide stage. Like many of Ju Long's people, these modern American Indians often didn't feel ready to deal with the changes that were being thrust upon them.

When reading the book, Ju Long found himself losing track of time, until exhaustion closed his eyes for him.

Yesterday, he'd slept six hours in his chair, and four in his bed. In between, he'd found time to pore over the literature the pretty blond at SST had loaded him down with. He now felt he knew what SST could do for the People's Republic of China to help secure Qin Shi Huang's mausoleum, and clean up the toxic mess that surrounded it.

Manny had awakened him early this morning, and suggested they stop for a hearty breakfast on the way to Scottsdale. "You're going to need it," he'd said. "You'll be in meetings all day, with people quizzing you about things you didn't know you knew."

Ju Long's first stop was Doc Manchek's office, where he was invited to sit anywhere on a U-shaped couch that opened toward an enormous wall-mounted TV screen. Doc was already there, feet up on the white marble coffee table, watching a business-news channel with the sound muted. Several bands of words and symbols streamed across the bottom of the screen at different speeds. One band, moving slowly, gave headlines of different news stories. Another band gave stock quotes from one exchange, a third gave quotes from another.

Ju Long noticed that Doc always seemed to be sitting calmly, surrounded by frenetic activity, but not actually doing anything, himself. Yet, there was always a sense that things were getting done, anyway.

Soon after Ju Long seated himself, Red McKenna came in, followed by another woman, who carried a tray bearing several yellow ceramic cups emblazoned with the red SST logo, and an insulated pot full of strong coffee. The second woman was of medium height – for an American woman – and had medium-brown hair in curly ringlets cut above her shoulders, and friendly, intelligent eyes. She poured cups for Ju Long, Red, Doc, and herself, then sat down on the couch along with them.

“Ju Long,” Red began, “this is Bonnie Wells, my assistant. She knows more about what goes on here at SST than I ever will, and she can help you with anything you need.”

Ju Long nodded to Bonnie, affably, and Bonnie returned the greeting, handing Ju Long her business card. He handed her one of his business cards, with his contact information in Chinese on the front, and in English on the back.

“In about fifteen minutes,” Doc explained, “we’ll be in the conference room next door with a team of people we figure we’ll need for your project. It’s not everybody who’ll be involved, but the core group representing the disciplines we’ll need. ... Bonnie?”

“I’ve put together a packet of information that will help you keep track of what’s going on at the meeting,” Bonnie said, handing Ju Long a yellow presentation folder, again bearing the SST logo. “There’s a list of participants with a little information about each, and a tentative agenda for the meeting. Red will conduct the

meeting, and she tends to shuffle things around, so don't be surprised if she modifies the agenda on the fly. There isn't much for you to do, except field questions as they come up."

"Doc will kick things off," Red said, "with a *precis* of what your government has asked us to do. Then, I'll take over as ringmaster to call on the various speakers, who will explain the information we now have from the points of view of different disciplines they represent. Bud, for example, will explain the historical perspective of what's going on, and what we know about the mausoleum. Dr. Timmons, who's an epidemiologist, will talk about health effects of mercury poisoning, and ways the stuff has of traveling, and getting into people's bodies, and so forth. We have others talking about other aspects of the situation as well."

"What do you need me to do?" Ju Long asked. He hadn't been told to prepare a presentation.

"You are what we like to call the 'project principal,'" Red replied. "You represent the client – the People's Republic of China – and basically we're all working for you. Just listen carefully to make sure we've got our facts straight, and are planning to do what you want us to do. As we go through, different people will have questions for you as well."

"We usually start every project with a kickoff meeting like this one," Doc interjected, "The purpose is threefold: we want to introduce all the team members to each other; we want to get everyone up to speed on all available information; and we want to get everyone on the same page as far as what needs to be done. We'll have regular meetings going forward to make sure everyone stays focused on the common goals, and keeps working together, but this is the most critical meeting, and usually the longest."

7

“Baby, are you going to tell me what’s going on, or not?” Bud rounded on Red as soon as she got her alone in Red’s office after the meeting. “I can’t believe we’re going to help these guys set up an archaeological dig in a hazardous waste site, and let it stop there!”

“Why not?” Red replied. “It’s what the Chinese government hired us to do. It’s what we know how to do. It’s a Hell of a big project, the like of which nobody’s really pulled off before. It’ll put you and Glen on the map as being at the top of your field. What’s your problem?”

“My problem is that *somebody* started pot hunting in probably the most important archaeological site on the planet. This isn’t just another pre-Columbian Seminole village in the Everglades, Baby. This is Qin Shi Huang’s mausoleum, for chrissake! The place has been off limits for decades! *Nothing* of scientific value’s been taken out of there at all! Nobody’s allowed in. Nothing’s allowed out. Nobody’s even taken any pictures. The place’s world famous, and nobody’s ever been allowed to even shove a camera probe into it. Now, some bozos have been rooting around in there, pulling out God knows what, and ripping the place up in who knows what ways, and all you want to do is some salvage archeology?”

“That’s all the People’s Republic of China has hired us to do,” Red countered. “It’s *their* site. It’s *their* history. It’s *their* country. So, it’s *their* call! What do you want us to do?”

“I want us to chase down the bastards who’ve done it, and lock ‘em in jail! Then, I want to find out where all the stuff they’ve looted went to, and get it back. Then, I want to find out who paid these jokers to loot the site, and put *them* in jail! You know how I feel about this sort of thing. I thought you felt the same.”

Bud finally concluded by shouting: “You’re just going to let them get away with it! Baby, that doesn’t sound like you.”

“Catching the bad guys is not our job,” Red pointed out. “It’s the job of the Chinese government, and, specifically, their federal cops. If they need any help, they have Interpol, not the Manchek family. Stay the fuck out of it!”

“The last time we had a conversation like this, you were lying to me,” Bud accused. “You jumped the reservation, went under cover, and nearly got yourself killed before Doc and I got you out. Are you doing it again? What about Elise? What about my new niece? What about Doc’s new baby? What are you dragging *her* into? You know, you can’t just drop her off with your step dad this time. She has to go everywhere you go for the next nine months. Okay, seven months, now, but I can’t let you do it. You’re scaring me, again.”

Red stood with her fists balled up on her hips, staring at the floor as if it had been misbehaving, badly. She stood that way in silence for several minutes while Bud stared at her face, accusingly. Bud was giving her space to decide what to do next, but was ready to hit the roof if she didn’t come to a decision Bud liked.

What Red finally decided to do was whip out her cellphone and speed dial Doc’s number.

“ ... Doc! Get in here! Bud’s threatening to go ballistic. I don’t know what to say to her. I need your help.”

It took Doc all of forty-five seconds to teleport himself directly from his desk to the middle of Red’s office, with the door closed.

“Well?” Bud asked him defiantly. “Are *you* going to explain to me what’s going on? Obviously, you two are in cahoots about something, and were planning to leave *me* out.”

“That’s not fair!” she pouted.

“I thought you loved me!” she added in a hurt tone, tears starting to well up in her eyes.

“Oh, Bud,” he said, reaching for her, “We *do* love you. Don’t ever think we don’t.”

He folded her into a warm embrace, wiping away the tears.

“This time, however,” he continued, “you’re going to have to trust us. We *can’t* tell you everything, or it wouldn’t work. We need you to do your part without knowing the whole story.”

“What about Glen?” Bud asked. “Does he know?”

“No more than you do. You’re both going to have to trust us. Things are going to get weird. We’ll probably ask you to do a lot of things that don’t seem right, and ignore things that look very bad. We’re trying to protect you, and Glen, and everyone else. If you do as we ask, things will work out okay in the end.”

“That’s what Red tried to tell me about Scott Arnold, and things *didn’t* work out okay. She got into a lot of trouble, and it would have been worse if I hadn’t called you for help.”

“And, this time it’s me telling you not to worry. Don’t worry about Red. I’ve already got her back.”

“What about Elise?”

“Nobody’s going to hurt Elise. Red would never let anything bad happen to her baby. You know that. And, I’m not going to let anything bad happen to Red.”

“What about me and Glen?” Bud asked, “Do you have our backs, too?”

“Yes. You have to believe that. Actually, as long as you do what I ask, you won’t need anybody covering your backs. You have my cell number. When things look bad, or when you get scared for any reason, you just call me, okay?” He took her chin gently between his thumb and forefinger, and held it up so he could look directly into her eyes. “Okay?”

“Okay,” she said, and dropped her eyes. Then, she pulled him into a desperate hug before letting go, and walking introspectively out of Red’s office.

“Is she going to be okay?” Red asked with a worried expression.

“I think so,” Doc assured her. “I told you she wouldn’t like being kept out of the loop, and it wouldn’t take many milliseconds for her to figure out it was happening. You can’t finesse that girl. She’s way too smart! All you can do is tell her what she needs to know, and explain that you can’t tell her the rest.”

“I still don’t think there’s any other way to play this,” Red stated, flatly.

“As Jim Morrison once said: ‘Everything must be this way,’” Doc agreed, “but I don’t have to like it.”

“As a good Buddhist, however, you must accept it with equanimity,” Red reminded him.

“As a good Taoist, I have to express my feelings.”

“And, so does Bud. And, that’s just what she did.”

“Touchy-feely time is over,” Doc insisted, “and we should get back to work. Give Bud a few minutes to settle down, then go make sure she connects up well with her team. They need to get their heads down to secure that site.”

8

Ju Long enjoyed his ride back to Beijing even less than he'd liked the ride out. It was just as long and monotonous, but he found that he actually missed Bud Thompson's company. That surprised him. Her happy, Devil-may-care attitude had gotten on his nerves on the earlier flight, but now he missed it.

He also missed her constant chatter. Their conversations had actually been very interesting. She knew a lot that she was eager to share, and seemed genuinely interested in what he had to say.

All he had for company this time was another Tony Hillerman novel. He'd finished the first one before leaving Phoenix, and bought a second at the gift shop on the way out of his hotel. It, too, was interesting, but no substitute for the company of a happy, friendly companion, who was also very easy on the eyes.

Once he'd gotten over being upset by her personality, he came to realize how much he liked her. The problem he'd had with her personality, he now saw, was really a problem with *his* personality: he let things get to him too much.

Her attitude cast his attitude in high relief. It became obvious that the difficulties he had were of his own making. All he had to do to make them go away was to let go of them, and they would go away on their own. Once he did, and they did, he could look at her much more objectively. He could see *her*, not just some grotesque caricature of his own neuroses projected onto her. With his new clarity of vision, he'd realized how attractive she was, and how much he wanted to spend time with her.

That was bad. His wife would not be at all happy if he came home with a crush on Bud Thompson. He wouldn't be happy, either. He was too old, too incompatible, and too married for her. She was too young, too wild, too free, and also too married, for him. She'd also shown absolutely no romantic interest in him, whatsoever. On top of all that, he would have to work closely with her and her husband during the coming months. If he came down with a case of puppy love, he'd look like an idiot.

He had other, much more important, things to think about, anyway. The Mancheks were a potential problem. Doc had assured him that Scottsdale Systems Technology would stick to their assigned mandate, and not go interfering with his dealing with the people behind the break-ins at Qin Shi Huang's mausoleum. Ju Long couldn't afford having those two brains, in particular, getting in his way. They *seemed* under control, but he'd concluded that both were loose cannons, and he couldn't afford loose cannons right now. He'd have to watch them closely.

The transition would be difficult enough without them. Some low-level flunkies would have to be sacrificed. He already had some ideas as to who. They wouldn't like it, but he also had ideas about how to isolate the damage they could cause in retaliation. It was basically politics as usual within the Peoples Republic bureaucracy, and Ju Long was a master of *that* game.

He figured that Bud Thompson might be a problem, as well. She was very perceptive. Keeping her in the dark while he cleaned up the old mess, and made new arrangements, would be difficult and risky. Apparently, Doc Manchek had given her a talking to about sticking to the straight and narrow, but she didn't strike Ju Long as a straight-and-narrow kind of gal. Doc had put her in a powerful position providing technical leadership of the on-site effort, and that would put her in the way of too much information that could wreck things for Ju Long. Doc seemed to give his subordinates a lot of latitude, and Ju Long wasn't sure how much control he would exert over the independent-minded Ms. Thompson.

Mrs. Manchek – Red – seemed to share her husband's attitude about the project, and Ju Long believed she had great influence over her girlfriend, as Ju Long accepted their relationship to be. Ju Long wasn't entirely sure what Red's role in the project really was to be. It seemed to Ju Long that she and Bud were to form some kind of Janus-like entity. Bud would be the side facing inward toward operations in the mausoleum, while Red faced toward SST, and the technical support they would provide.

Doc's role was even harder to understand. He seemed like some godlike mystical overlord. He appeared to do very little, yet was omnipresent. He seemed to act by influence, rather than direct action. Everyone seemed to know what he wanted, and did their utmost to comply. But, it was not clear how he exerted his influence. How did

he maintain control?

It was not a management style that filled Ju Long with trust. Subordinates who were encouraged to think for themselves were dangerous.

It was not the way things were done in the People's Republic of China. He didn't know how he could explain it to his superiors at the Committee for Cultural Education – or to the others.

Meanwhile, back in Scottsdale, Bud had her own issues to deal with. Her friends, Doc and Red, had told her plainly that they weren't letting her in on everything the team was doing.

Red told her to keep her nose completely out of any questions regarding who had breached Mausoleum security, which was what had precipitated the whole mess. She'd been very definite that Bud's job was to clean up the mess, and get to work on a legitimate archaeological excavation of Qin Shi Huang's tomb.

It was basically a job for a janitor. Even the janitor at a frat house, however, when confronted with a pool of vomit in the front hall, would want to know who'd barfed, and why. Red was essentially asking her – no, telling her – to clean it up *without* asking those questions.

It didn't sound like Red.

Bud didn't think Red could leave a mystery alone if her life depended on it. In fact, Bud had seen situations where Red's life actually *did* depend on her backing away from a mystery, but Red had never hesitated to dive in head first, anyway. Bud couldn't picture her backing off now.

At the same time, Doc, whom Bud loved as much as she loved breathing, had told her to back off, too. He'd made it plain that something was going on behind Bud's back, and that she should be careful to take no notice of it. That didn't sound like Doc, either.

He hadn't told her to call him *if* things looked bad, he'd said to call him *when* things looked bad. That meant

that Doc's clairvoyance told him that things very definitely were going to look awful, and she would definitely be scared. What in Hell did that mean? What, in Hell, could *scare* her after all she'd been through, already?

And, why wouldn't he forewarn her so she could be prepared? He'd always done so in the past.

She'd always been part of the team, even when they'd pulled things off that were unethical, immoral, or even borderline illegal.

Come to think of it, that time in Freeport, when they'd forced that white slaver into early retirement, they'd crossed well over the borderline into illegal territory. If the victim hadn't been such a scum sucker that the authorities filed the report under D.S.A.F. (Did Society A Favor), they could have all ended up in jail. As it was, to get away with it, they'd had to bury their tracks very deeply and give the cops a convenient fall guy custom framed for the part.

She'd been right there as part of the team every time, helping to plan the operation, being at Red's side to carry it out, and being ready with the Plan B Pack if anything went wrong.

This time, Doc had said she should just trust him ... that he had everybody's back, even hers and Glen's.

Well, yes, she would trust him. While she was very independent minded, and always wanted to have full information with which to make her own decisions, she knew that was not always possible, or advisable. Also, Doc was her go-to guy whenever she was frightened or confused, and right now seemed to qualify on both points. If he said she wasn't *supposed* to know what was going on, but had been given enough information to do her part, she was willing to (grudgingly) accept it.

She wasn't going to like it, but she would go along with it.

She had a similar working relationship with Red. Even back in the dorm when they were freshmen, chasing around Boston looking for adventure, they'd trusted each other on anything they undertook together. As they got older, they'd just gone out on longer limbs with bigger alligators lurking below.

In Mexico, after they'd been there for a few months, Red had suddenly handed Bud responsibility for running the whole Mexican operation of her security company – basically a pack of ex-special-forces mercenaries for hire – in that part of the world. Later, she'd suddenly and summarily *assigned* Bud the task of training Cara to run SST's entire Latin American operation, and walked away. No training. No break-in period. One morning at breakfast, she'd just said: "You do it." Red knew Bud had seen enough to know what to do, and trusted her to do it. She was always just a phone call away, but it had been up to Bud to make the call if she needed help.

And, she hadn't.

In the end, it had been up to Doc to suddenly call her back home so she could get on with her life as an archaeologist – and incidentally marry Glen. Somehow, from thousands of miles away he'd known what she really wanted, and made sure it happened for her.

The only time Red had ever hidden anything from her had been that time she'd hidden from Bud the nature of her relationship with Scott Arnold. The branch well and truly broke off on that one, with Red dumped up to her armpits in very large alligators, indeed!

She'd forbidden Bud from investigating the boat that Bud's brother, Bill, had disappeared from years before. Red suspected Arnold of having murdered Bill, and didn't want Bud inviting retaliation by examining the boat. She hadn't, however, explained it to Bud, but just gave her a summary order to stay away. That had ended so badly that Red never kept anything from her again.

Until now.

Bud just *knew* her friend was going to do something undercover, again, after having sworn she never would. It was only Doc's assurance that he was looking out for Red that assuaged Bud's fears.

But, if they thought she wasn't going to be on the lookout, anyway, they had another think coming. The job Red had assigned to her put her right in the thick of things, and she was going to keep her eyes peeled. If she saw

anything that didn't make sense, or that looked bad to her, Doc was going to get that call. *Then* he'd better be ready with a good explanation!

9

“I’m getting stonewalled,” Glen complained to Bud over the telephone. “I told them we needed to get information from inside the mausoleum to plan our approach, and that the people who’d been in there robbing the place had the information. The cops have to know who was going in, even if they aren’t ready to make arrests. They’ve practically admitted it, but won’t let me near the creeps to get information.”

“These guys,” he continued, “are as bad as the Japanese can be when they don’t want to admit that they don’t want to cooperate! They just promise they’ll set it up, but never do.”

“What about Ju Long?” Bud asked. “He should be able to exert some influence. Can’t he set something up? He *should* be able to get us in. ”

“Yes, he should be able to, but he’s no better than the rest. I’m beginning to feel like a paranoid conspiracy nut.”

“I’m getting a similar runaround here,” Bud complained. “I expected that by now Red and I would be digging into who did what, but she and Doc just keep telling me to stay away from all that. They think I should just concentrate on how we can get in and explore the site without getting toxified in the process.”

“That’s what I’m getting here, too,” Glen said.

He thought for a minute, then changed his approach: “Look, how much can we actually accomplish without knowing what’s in there?”

“If we don’t mind possibly duplicating efforts made by the bad guys,” Bud opined, “and possibly doing things the hard way through ignorance, we can do quite a lot, actually.”

“Maybe we should just do it, then,” Glen said. “It’s what everybody seems to want us to do. I hate to

succumb to pressure, but it would be the easier path to take.”

“Maybe we should look into applying a little pressure, ourselves,” Bud suggested.

“What do you have in mind?”

“Well, do you think Ju Long’s really in a position to do us any good, if he were well motivated?” Bud asked.

“Probably,” Glen replied. “How do you propose to motivate him?”

“Well, I have a ghost of an idea of where we might apply some leverage, but I don’t want to say anything, yet. If it turns out I’m wrong, it would be embarrassing, and I’ve already embarrassed myself enough for one lifetime. Let’s wait until I get over there, and I’ll see what I can arrange. In the meantime, let’s play at being cooperative.”

“How do you propose we do *that*?”

“Look, except for being full of mercury, that mausoleum is just another hollow-barrow burial, right? It’s just really big, and full of nasty stuff.”

“Supposedly,” Glen replied tentatively.

“SST’s involved because of their robotics technology for working in dangerous places.”

“Yes.”

“And yours truly is an expert with that kind of robotics *and* I’m a trained archaeologist to boot, right?”

“Well, I don’t know about robotics,” Glen said, “but I’d call you a *half*-trained archaeologist. You’ve excavated all of one minor shipwreck, and started surveying a couple more. That doesn’t qualify you to excavate a site of this importance. Don’t get ahead of yourself.”

“But, that’s what we have *you* for. You’re qualified.”

“Barely. I’m not the most experienced guy in the world, either. This thing’s going to be done by a team of the world’s greatest experts, and I’m sure they’ll be led by a Chinese scientist – somebody with a reputation, decades of experience, and political connections.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know, yet. Ju Long will have a lot to say about that, and he’ll have orders from superiors going all the way up to the Communist Central Committee. This project is a big deal with a lot of politics involved. *Chinese* politics. Chinese *Communist* politics at that!”

“I’m just a guest,” he pointed out. “In fact, it’s unlikely that I’ll have any official status at all. I *might* be listened to, but only if I’m polite. As a representative of SST, you won’t have any more influence than a bulldozer salesperson. You’ll be able to suggest how many bulldozers to buy of what type, and maybe you’ll be asked to train people to operate ‘em. Not much more than that. Don’t go expecting too much.”

“I still say,” Bud retorted, “what we need to do right now is to start by planning how we’d excavate it manually, then modify the plan using SST’s technology to deal with the mercury. Basically, use Worms to excavate, and whatever else is needed to keep toxic waste from escaping the site. Does that make sense?”

“Well,” Glen allowed, “it makes sense as long as you remember we’re just recommending what we think your customers will need to have in order to do what they need to do. They don’t have to buy any of it.”

“But that’s what they want, right?”

“That’s what they say they want.”

“So, you work up a plan to do a traditional straight excavation of a hollow-barrow burial, and I’ll figure a plan to make it OSHA and EPA safe. That should be good enough for the Chinese authorities, too.”

“It’ll take me a week to come up with a rough plan for a traditional excavation,” Glen predicted.

“I’ll spend that time learning all I can about environmental and health effects of mercury compounds, and how to mitigate them,” Bud responded.

“It was elemental mercury – really pure liquid,” Glen pointed out, “not compounds.”

“After twenty-two centuries,” Bud countered, “it will all have oxidized. There won’t be any elemental mercury left. I think that’s a safe assumption, but I’ll research that, too.”

“Okay, when do you think you’ll be ready to propose to the Chinese?”

“Tentatively, let’s shoot for three weeks from now. I’ll work up a presentation, then come out there. *Then* we can see about getting some grave-robber-sourced information, too.”

10

Just a few days later, Bud thought she was being called on the carpet for something, and she thought she knew what it was. She'd still been plotting ways get information about who was robbing the grave: doing what she'd been told specifically *not* to do. That made her paranoid. Every time she saw Red or Doc, it reminded her that she was disobeying their specific orders.

It made her uncomfortable enough that she'd moved back into Glen's house in Tempe, despite the fact that it meant living alone for the first time in years. It also meant waking up alone in the dark when the ghosts of the pirates she'd snuffed invaded her dreams.

The last time she'd actually lived alone was the period of a couple of months when she was going through the divorce with her first husband, Subramanian. She'd borrowed Doc's old boat, the *Strange Brew*, and was living aboard it in Miami Beach.

"Hiding out" was probably a better description. She just didn't want to be around other people.

That period had ended when pirates decided they'd like to possess *Strange Brew*, themselves. The fact that the boat came equipped with a statuesque blond, whom they could abuse to death, was just a perk to them. Their business was the boat. Gang raping Bud was just sadistic recreation on the side. TV reception in the middle of the Caribbean Sea was nonexistent, and testing Bud's capacity to absorb physical and mental abuse was all the entertainment they had. Fighting back in the only way she could, she'd managed to lead two of the pirates to their deaths, and drown a third with her own hands.

After Red and Doc, with a little help from the Coast Guard, rescued her, she was in no shape for living on her own, so she moved to the ranch in Scottsdale with them. She stayed there until she moved in with Glen.

So, except for a couple of unsatisfactory months on the boat, she hadn't lived alone for years. For her to stay

in her own home alone, with her husband on the other side of the Earth, made for a lonely existence. She missed the happy companionship of her best friend and her family.

What she didn't miss was constantly feeling like a criminal, plotting behind their backs.

When, first thing on a Wednesday morning, she was summoned to Doc's office without being told what it was about, her first thought was that he'd found out about her plotting, and was pissed. She felt miserable that he was going to be mad at her. She also felt miserable because she knew there was no way she would drop the idea of trying to find out who was behind the mausoleum break ins, no matter how many times she would be told to, and so being caught wasn't going to end her agony.

Worst of all, she felt miserable because she was afraid Doc would be mad enough at her to kick her out of her job as an outside consultant for SST. On top of ruining her relationship with her adopted family, that would probably wreck her position as a graduate student with Wheeler's team, too. Who wanted a girl who refused to do what she was told? She'd screwed up badly enough to wreck everything that meant anything in her life.

Well, not quite *everything*. She was still married to Glen, who would still be on her side. He'd be on her side, however, from twelve thousand miles away. If Doc canned her, it would cancel her ticket back to China.

But, she'd probably screwed things up for Glen, too. Guilt by association. She'd have him back when he was sent home in disgrace.

When she found Red and SST VP of Operations, Pat Dacy, sitting on the U-shaped couch in Doc's office, her worst fears seemed to be confirmed. She nearly burst into tears.

Wait a minute! Doc was smiling, not frowning. Red was positively beaming. She motioned for Bud sit next to her on the couch, and gave her an excited hug when she did.

Without preamble, Doc said: "I called you in here to offer you Red's job."

Bud's head snapped around to search Red's face, which showed the expression normally associated with an excited puppy.

"Pat's been talking about retiring for months," Doc explained, "and finally decided to make it official. Red's going to take over as Vice President of Operations. That leaves us short one full-time Research Analyst. We want you to fill the hole."

Bud was stunned. She had no idea what to think.

"That means a number of things," Doc continued, ignoring her lack of response. "It means you would officially be a full time employee of Scottsdale Systems Technology at an executive level. We're offering you the same salary Red started at: a hundred grand a year. That means every month you'll bring home an amount more-or-less equal to what Harvard pays you for the year. It also entitles you to full benefits – healthcare, retirement, *et cetera*. We'll cover all your educational expenses, too. Wheeler will like that because we want you to keep working on your Ph.D. research with his team, but he won't have to pay you."

"The downside," he warned, "is that we'll expect you to work for us, not Wheeler. You should discuss this with him before you accept. It's basically the same deal Red's had with us for the past three years. She is expected to carry a full research load at the University, while multiplexing with whatever work we assign here. Altogether it's considerably more than a full-time load. Life is tough for Ph.D. candidates. Talk to Red about the formalities before you talk to Wheeler. And, when you talk to him, get Red involved as well. You'll work directly for her, just as she's been working for Pat. I think we'll keep you dotted to me for technical supervision, but that's kind of informal. You're more of a hardware jock than Red was when she started, so you'll need less technical supervision. Actually, Gwen Petersen should be your best technical resource on the Qin Shi Huang project, but a major part of your job is to determine what information you need, and go get it, yourself."

"The most important thing," Red interjected, "is for you to provide leadership for your team. So far, you've just been responsible for the technology. The difference now is that you'll be responsible for the technology

developers. You'll also need an assistant. I'm taking Bonnie with me. Is there anybody you particularly trust, or that you've worked well with in the past?"

"You guys don't need me for that stuff," Doc interrupted. "so get out of here. Red, take Bud to your office and make sure she knows what she's getting into. She needs to connect with Wheeler before accepting the job with us. You can't go assigning offices and assistants until you take care of the paperwork. Remember, she's formally a new hire, just as you were. She has to go through the same rigmarole. The only thing she already has that you didn't have is a security clearance."

"She's got a lot more management experience than I had," Red pointed out.

"That's true."

"Are you going to make her learn to fly a plane?" Red added. "She already knows how to pilot everything else, but a space shuttle."

"Probably, but not until she's done in China. Pat, would you go with them to make sure nothing gets missed? Red has a lot to figure out all at once."

11

Red, Bud and Pat adjourned to Red's office for the rest of the morning, where they started with Bud's formal employment application, segued into a job interview, which mostly consisted of Red explaining to Bud the differences between what she'd be doing as a research analyst and what she'd done so far at SST as a part-time consultant.

They'd then contacted Dr. Samuel Wheeler, Bud's academic advisor in Harvard's Archeology Department, to discuss the situation with him. They worked out the formalities that would allow Bud to keep working on her thesis with Wheeler, while becoming a full-time SST employee. Largely, that boiled down to SST guaranteeing that Bud would have a certain amount of company time to spend on her thesis research.

She would also be granted a certain amount of credit for the work she'd be doing on the Qin Shi Huang project, since that would be legitimate archaeological research under the direction of a qualified academic professional – her husband. Wheeler had no problem loaning one of his graduate students to work on what promised to be the most important dig of the decade, and maybe the century.

Red then gave Bud twenty-four hours to decide whether to take the job offer or not.

Pat, however, wanted to talk with Bud privately before she did anything else.

“Over the three years I've known you,” Pat began after dragging Bud into what was still her office until her retirement took effect Friday, “I've watched you grow from a wise-assed punk to a responsible, professional woman. But, something's bothering you, now. Red's noticed it, too, and asked me to see if you need any help. I've already taken off my VP of Operations hat. I'm now closing the door (the door was already closed) for privacy, and offering my services as an independent clinical psychologist, and a friend. Let's just say that if you take the job, it's part of SST's health-benefits package. If not, so what?”

“I’m taking the job,” Bud interrupted.

“Either way, as *your* psychotherapist, I won’t tell anyone anything about what we say here – patient confidentiality and all that.”

“Now,” she turned to what she really wanted to discuss, “tell Auntie Pat what’s wrong.”

Bud’s first impression of Pat had come from Red’s description of her as “that ex-hippie grandma” three years before. Bud had thought it to be an apt description when she got to meet Pat in person. She had long, straight, gray hair, which she usually tied in a ponytail extending down between her shoulder blades, but today let it hang loose over her shoulders. That, combined with her still slim figure, made her look from a distance like an unconventional, pretty woman a third of her probable age. She was short, with the top of her head at Bud’s nose level. Her face had once been beautiful, before ravages of time had turned her skin into soft, seamed leather. Yes, close up she looked like she’d be right at home knitting in a rocking chair by the fire, with an old, lazy gray cat at her feet.

Since first meeting her, Bud had a lot of contact with the woman, who was always there to help “her Baby,” Red, through the tough times. It looked like she was now offering to help Bud through the tough times, too.

That felt nice. Bud was prepared to take what Pat said at face value, and found herself wanting to tell her things she was barely willing to admit to herself. Of course, that was a trust Pat had been trained to inspire, and had spent a lifetime practicing.

“Why do you feel guilty?” Pat asked some twenty minutes later, after the whole story came out about Bud’s planning her surreptitious investigation despite direct orders to the contrary, and how betraying her friends’ trust made her feel.

“Am I wrong to do it?” Bud asked.

“I’m not interested in the right or wrong of what you do, or want to do. I’m just concerned with your mental

health. Guilt is a mechanism we have to motivate us to take certain actions and avoid others. Unfortunately, as an ethical guide, it's not very reliable. But, chronic guilt can be pretty destructive."

"So," Pat continued, "let's find out *why* you feel guilty, and figure out how to keep it from becoming chronic."

"I come back to my question," she reiterated, "which you've been ducking: 'Why do you feel guilty?'"

After a long pause, Bud said: "Because I'm doing, or at least planning to do, what Doc and Red expressly told me not to do."

"If you feel guilty about it, why are you doing it?"

"Because ... Because ... Because I *have* to! *Somebody* has to. They say they aren't going to, but I don't believe them for a minute about that, either."

"Why not?"

"It's not the kind of thing they'd do. They wouldn't let it lie any more than I would."

"Follow that line of reasoning to its conclusion."

"What do you mean?"

"You're thinking from your point of view. Apply the same reasoning from their point of view."

"You mean, they don't expect me to let it lie any more than I expect them to."

Pat just nodded slowly with a sly smile.

"So, why don't they want us to work together? Why're they pushing me away from it?"

"You tell me. Think about the differences."

“Well, they’ve put me in the position of working from the outside – from the direction of the legitimate government authorities. I don’t know what they’re planning on doing, but I’m specifically supposed to start a legitimate, public archaeological dig with Glen. The first thing we’ll want to do is explore the site, especially the interior. Then, we’ll want to catalog everything that’s in there. Along the way, we’ll work to contain the pollution.”

“What will that mean to the looters?”

“It’ll make their activities difficult or impossible because when we have accurate information about what’s in there, we’ll know right away if anything gets moved, or goes out. We’ll also set up security systems – Of course we’ll set up security systems! – that they’d have to defeat in order to do anything in there. I’ve run a security company before. We’ll set it up so that they can’t defeat the system without first revealing themselves.”

“And, what do you think Doc and Red will be doing all this time?”

“Oh! I get it! They’ll be coming in from the other side – where the criminals are. Red’s going undercover! It *felt* like she was going down that rabbit hole, again. This time, she’s taking Doc with her. Good! She’ll need him.”

“They’ll need to work with the criminal-justice types,” Bud continued, thinking out loud, “or they’ll get busted along with the crooks. We’ve been down that road before, too! But, the fewer people who know about it, the better. Specifically, *I* need to stay away to avoid drawing attention to them. When I turn anything up about the looters, I *won’t* be running to Red with the information. That would tip the bad guys off to what she’s doing. *I’m* setting up a diversion to keep the bad guys from noticing what *she’s* doing. Neat!”

“So, by behaving exactly as you’re behaving ...”

“... I’m doing exactly what they need me to do!”

“So, don’t feel guilty about it. You’re doing what they want, not what they said they want. Big difference!”

Bud flashed her a sunny smile. “Thanks. That helped a lot!”

“It’s what I’m here for.”

She meant that helping people deal with such issues was what she’d dedicated her life to. Just hearing Bud say “thank you” gave her validation of her life’s work. That made it all worth while.

“Before you go,” Pat said, changing the subject, “I hear a little rumor that you’re trying to have an open marriage with Glen. Is that true?”

“Well, that makes it sound a little conventional, like we ordered out of a lifestyle catalog: ‘Page 34, Item D, Open Marriage. Complete package with forms and guidelines. \$34.95 plus tax.’ We don’t do conventional. Glen and I just decided to leave off the ‘forsaking all others’ part of the traditional marriage vows. I like having adventures, and so does Glen. We figure if we’re not hurting anyone, so what?”

“Ever wonder why that exclusivity clause is in the marriage tradition of just about every major culture?”

“You’re beginning to sound like Red’s Mom.”

“She’s a smart lady. I’d listen to her. Answer the question.”

“I figured guys put it in to cut down the odds they’d end up paying for somebody else’s kids. And women wanted it to help drive away competition for their meal tickets. I’m taking birth control until Glen and I decide to have kids, so that takes care of the first reason. As for the second, I’m pretty well off from investing Suby’s alimony checks while I was living with Red after the divorce, and I have my own career. In fact, this little promotion gives me as much income as Glen has. I’m not worried about a meal ticket.”

“You’ve forgotten the most important reason, which applies to both of you.”

“What’s that?”

“Remember that tradition is the sum total of all the things our ancestors over the past four million years have found to work.”

Bud smiled, recognizing the saying as something she'd heard multiple times from Doc. She figured she now knew where he got it.

"The big reason the taboo against adultery is so universal," Pat continued, "is that it works. It gives people a warm, safe place to come home to, where they have reason to believe they'll always be welcome. They won't have to shoo some stranger out of their bed when they come home needing a kiss and a cuddle. Knowing that your partner has permission to fool around introduces a big element of doubt. Thinking that eventually your partner will run across somebody who satisfies him or her better than you do – and nobody in their right mind thinks that's impossible – introduces another big element of doubt. How did you feel when you found that Suby wanted to dump you for another girl?"

"I was pretty upset. I made Red cuddle up with me all night. When she went home, I started cruising bars looking for someone else. That's what got me in trouble with the pirates."

"You needed that warm, safe place. It's more important than people seem to know. How do Red and Doc handle it?"

"Red won't let anybody near Doc, even me. She's very territorial."

"And Doc?"

"Well, he'll give Red anything she wants. He knows she wants a 'No Trespassing' sign hung around his neck, so he lets her have it. He'll look, but won't touch. We used to be lovers, but we haven't had sex since Red slapped her brand on him. I know he still loves me, and will hold me, and even let me make out with him a little when I need it, but no sex."

"And, what's his attitude toward Red?"

"That's weird. He's not at all possessive. He encourages her relationship with me."

“He knows you give her things he couldn’t possibly. You have anatomical features he doesn’t, just as he has features you don’t. He knows Red likes to play with both feature sets, so he tries to make sure she has them to play with. Just like he’d give her a train set to play with, or anything else she wanted.”

“Okay, but he paid a porn star to make love to her.”

“And what was her reaction?”

“She was violently pissed off. I’ve seen her punch him hard from time to time, but mostly in the upper arm. Never anyplace it would cause more than a minor bruise. But, that time she cold decked him. She broke his tooth, she was so pissed off.”

“How did he react?”

“That was weird, too. He was pleased! When he came to, he had a big dopey smile on his face.”

“Tell you anything?”

“At the time, I thought he was just dopey from being knocked out, or maybe embarrassed. You’re telling me even he needed validation? It was all a test?”

“Everybody needs to know they have that warm, safe place where they’ll always be welcome.”

“What if she’d fucked the porn star, and liked it?”

“That’s hard to say. It would depend on whether she wanted to go back for seconds, and how often. It might have been the beginning of the end for their marriage. He took an awful chance, which tells you how important it was to him.”

“So, what are you trying to tell me about my relationship with Glen?”

“You need to think very carefully about what you’re doing. Remember you always have Red, but who does

he have?”

“Just me, and I have formal permission to go cruising. Oh, the poor guy!”

“If you really love him, you’ll take care of him.”

12

Bud nearly got them kicked out of the Beijing airport when she tackled Glen after clearing customs.

That was on her second attempt to get to him. She nearly got herself arrested on the first try by leaving her passport in the customs official's hands before he'd stamped it, and running past the barrier to tackle Glen. She wanted him to know how important he was to her.

Ju Long, who'd accompanied Glen to the airport, found himself feeling jealous. He'd been fantasizing about Bud since he'd seen her with Red in Arizona. He'd built up an image of her as someone who liked to sleep around. It was fun to fantasize that she might like to sleep around with *him*.

In the strictest sense, Ju Long's image was accurate. Bud had always liked sleeping around. Since talking with Pat, however, she'd thought long and hard about her life. She'd decided she liked being married to Glen a lot more than she liked sleeping around. She'd decided to make sure Glen knew that, and to keep reminding him so he would never forget it.

Ju Long found himself disappointed. His fantasies were obviously going to stay in the realm of imagination. Bud hadn't even glanced his way.

"I need to get you home," she'd told Glen, clinging to him and trying to ignore the people wearing uniforms, who were trying to drag her back across the barrier.

Pleased with her performance, but concerned for her safety, Glen had said: "You can't come home until you've cleared customs, Baby."

Then, he'd pushed her into the grasping hands of the people wearing uniforms, hoping they'd drag her back to the customs official, and not off to jail.

He was relieved when that's exactly what they did.

Irrationally, Ju Long was a little disappointed. This woman had just burst the balloon of one of his favorite fantasies, so he wouldn't have minded her being punished for it.

On the other hand, he was glad to let go of that particular fantasy. He found it entirely *too* seductive. He hoped he'd been successful at hiding it from everyone, especially his wife. If anyone found out about it, he'd look like a fool. It would *not* be good for his career.

Unbeknownst to him, he'd never been able to hide it from Bud. She probably knew about it before he did.

Bud's radar had always been tuned for detecting anyone finding her attractive. She'd used it to feed *her* fantasies. She liked being attractive, and had always encouraged others to pay attention.

Since her sojourn with the pirates, however, she'd become careful whom she encouraged. That adventure had taught her there were people out there whom she did not want to attract. Afterward, she'd even taken her time about encouraging Glen, getting to know him before letting him get too close.

Since her marriage to Glen, she hadn't much cared about attracting other people, anyway. Unconventional marriage vows be damned, she'd concentrated on *him*.

But, her radar still worked, and had picked up Ju Long's interest. When she saw how he salivated over Gwen Petersen during Gwen's robot demonstration in Scottsdale, Bud decided that Ju Long had a taste for occidental females – at least the blond ones – in general.

That made sense. Bud knew that most of the men she knew had a taste for oriental women. She understood it. She had always appreciated beautiful oriental women, herself. They were exotic. There's no reason to be surprised that occidental women might seem exotic to an oriental man.

As the old saying goes: "Variety is the spice of life." While Bud had changed her mind about just how spicy

she wanted her own life to be, that didn't alter the truth behind the saying.

So, Ju Long still had the hots for her. That could prove useful, later.

Right now, she had other business. She wanted to get Glen home to wherever they were going to be staying, and make him feel warm, safe, and welcome in her arms – forever.

Where they were going to be staying was a quaint little *pensione* catering to foreign visitors in Xi'an. It had a bedroom with a standard-size double bed, a small sitting room, and a full – but somewhat cramped – bathroom.

All were decorated with *ersatz* Chinese antiques from mixed periods by someone who knew little about ancient Chinese art. All were fakes, of course, which both Bud and Glen could spot at a glance. The rice-paper drawings of Buddhist patriarchs meditating by mountain streams, for example, were copied in Taoist style by an artist who was not a Taoist. He or she had been trained in the postery monumental style favored by Communist-party critics, and couldn't quite get the whimsical, free-flowing lines of a true Taoist.

The rooms felt a little kitschy to experts in ancient Chinese art, which both of the suite's occupants were. But, they appreciated the effort the hotel's management had made to provide tourists with a Chinesey experience without breaking the bank. They good-naturedly decided to take it as amusing, rather than cheesy, and got down to the serious business of lovemaking after a few weeks' separation.

“So,” Glen said to her a couple of hours later, as they sat on the tatami mat on the floor next to the bed, with Glen's back braced against the bed's ornate footboard, arms still wrapped around Bud, who sat between his legs, butt pressed against his now flaccid penis. She could feel the wet stickiness of his excess semen smearing across the small of her back every time she moved. She'd stuffed a wad of facial tissues between her labia to absorb the semen now dribbling deliciously from her vagina.

“I'm all atwitter about what you have in mind to motivate Ju Long to help us connect up with people who've been inside the mausoleum,” he finished the thought, while moving his hands across her chest to cup her breasts.

Feeling the points of her still-erect nipples tickling his palms after so long made him feel ... happy!

The image of Glen being “all atwitter” made Bud snicker. He was way too serious minded for that. He had a well-developed sense of humor, and could keep her in stitches at will, but he was a master of the dead-pan. When he got going, he made Buster Keaton look like Harpo Marx. You found yourself laughing without noticing he’d cracked a joke.

Like now.

“I’m not sure you’d like it, and I’m not sure we could make it work,” she replied. “I don’t want to do it unless we really need to.”

“C’mon, Baby. What’re you cooking up?”

“It involves blackmail,” Bud admitted. When she said it, it sounded exciting. “I’ve noticed Ju Long has a yen for blond, big-busted western women. You should have seen him staring at Gwen Petersen! I thought his tongue was going to pick up dirt from the hangar floor.”

“I’m not surprised, you know how sexy she always manages to look.”

“In a very professional way.”

“Yeah, well, she leads with her biggest sex organ – her brain.”

“Mmmm,” Bud agreed. “Followed closely by that fantastic body.”

Thinking about Gwen Petersen’s bustline, and how it had felt modeling with her for that lesbian *Kama Sutra* website, was getting Bud excited again. Glen wouldn’t be ready.

She worked the wad of facial tissues a little deeper into her vagina. That helped, and gave the wad a little more fluid to absorb.

“Anyway, he can’t keep his eyes off my chest, either,” she reported.

“So, you want to have an affair with him, then use it to blackmail him into helping us,” Glen summarized, excited by the naughtiness of the idea, but with a twinge of concern for how much she might like it.

“I don’t think ‘want’ is the right word,” Bud countered, knowing what he was thinking. “It might be amusing in a risky-sex kind of way, but not something I’d do for fun. Besides, it would be a nasty thing to do to Ju Long. Let’s just say I’m willing to do it for the cause, but not unless we really need to.”

“Glen,” she said, getting serious, “I don’t really want to get into the swinger lifestyle. It sounded good at first, but there’s nobody out there I want to fuck more than you. That’s why I’ve never wanted to do anything about it.”

“What about Red?”

“I still love her, and I always will, but it’s different. She’s pregnant again, and she did it on purpose because she wanted to have Doc’s baby. Not any old baby, but specifically Doc’s baby. When I get pregnant, I want it to be *your* baby, not anyone else’s. And, when I come home needing someone, you’re the someone I want. Does any of this make sense?”

“Yes, there’s nobody else I want, either.”

“Just, when you get an itch for someone, let me know,” Bud begged. “It happens to everyone. I might want to hear the details, or I might want to join in. But, no sneaking. Okay?”

“Okay. And, I’d rather you not go after Ju Long. He seems like a nice guy, who doesn’t deserve it.”

“Unless we have to.”

“Unless we have to.”

13

They didn't have time to even think about trying to manipulate Ju Long into an indiscretion, anyway. They had all they could do proposing their plan for excavating Qin Shi Huang's mausoleum as a straight archaeological dig – with toxic waste overtones.

It turned out not to be a difficult sell, after all. Ju Long was titular head of the project, and had been from the beginning. From the beginning, it had been his idea to invite Glen in for day-to-day direction of the excavation, as a China scholar with an international reputation – despite Glen's modest assessment of his qualifications. Bud's description of how she'd been using SST's robot technology on underwater digs had cemented the idea in Ju Long's mind to use semi-automated systems to keep humans out of the danger area, and contain mercury contamination.

Ju Long's superiors were pleasantly surprised when they heard about Bud's experience leading the Gulf-States Security team in Mexico, which she multiplexed for a while with running SST's operation there as well. It was exactly what they wanted to see happening in China. They were concerned, for obviously good reasons, about security at the site, and here was a security expert with just the right kind of experience ready to hand.

Sold!

It made sense to use SST's technology, and to use Bud as the contact person for that technology. Bud's new position at SST made the whole proposition a no-brainer. All Glen and Bud had to do was explain the details of how it all would work.

They were given the go-ahead to order supplies and equipment – including a robotic excavator to open the barrow, and a custom Worm to survey the interior. They would need more equipment later – it was a big site – but this was just the initial exploratory phase. Bud explained her idea for a wireless surveillance system relying on extreme-low-light smart cameras that would key into any movement. The only illumination would be from LEDs

they introduced into the space.

The smart video-surveillance system would be augmented by an automated audio-monitoring system as well. The information would be relayed by an industrial wireless network operating within the underground space, then relayed to a control point outside by a wired-Ethernet cable.

Bud would supervise a Chinese robot operator, who would spend three weeks at Gwen Petersen's Robotics Programming School in Scottsdale learning the trade. He or she would be selected from the graduate students at Beijing University's Archeology Department as soon as possible, and go through the standard Worm-programmer curriculum in Arizona while Bud and Glen made initial preparations to set up the excavation in China.

"Bud," Doc told her privately before she left Scottsdale, "your ultimate goal will be to organize a satellite operation in China to sell Worm and underwater robots throughout the Far East. The Japanese have the franchise for UAVs, but that's all they asked for. Your operation will do the same thing for everything else SST sells, including the measurement and control technology."

It was a harder sell to get the Chinese Government to allow them to make a documentary about the whole project. Anticipating this, Doc had provided Bud with letters of recommendation from agencies who had gained good publicity by cooperating with SST on previous documentaries. Over the nearly four years since SST had first introduced the Worm robots developed by their partner, Robotics Concepts, he'd amassed an impressive list of happy collaborators, including three universities, and agencies of four national governments.

Once again, Doc hired Tamara Jones to produce the thing.

This time, however, Ju Long's superiors insisted that the Communist Central Committee have full censorship privileges. Doc's comment when he broke the news to Tamara was: "What do you expect, *real* freedom of the press? This is the last great Communist superpower we're talking about. Get serious!"

By the time Tamara showed up in Xi'an a week later to begin filming Bud's penetration into Qin Shi

Huang's mausoleum, Bud had arranged with a local production company for a bi-lingual film crew and all the video recording and editing equipment she would need. Tamara began by getting together with Ju Long to arrange for interviews with Communist Party officials who wanted to appear prominently as political driving forces behind the project.

Next, she documented the existing excavation outside the mausoleum itself. She, of course, covered the same ground that previous documentary producers had covered, showing the famous terracotta army of thousands of soldiers, and how each was individually molded to represent an actual soldier of the time. She went further, however, by expanding on the layout of the entire site, and how it represented elements of daily life in a first-dynasty military zone – which would have been effectively the entire country at the time. Its function was to guard the mausoleum for all time, so all the necessary support elements, such as armory and barracks, were also represented.

Tamara's interviews included the people excavating the larger site – the whole mausoleum complex – and operating it as a tourist destination. As with many important archaeological sites around the world, the place was part excavation, part museum, and part theme park.

While all this was going on, Bud caught Ju Long following Tamara with his eyes. It seemed that the amorous Dr. Chen was bound and determined to make a fool of himself with an occidental woman. As senior SST representative on the project, it was Bud's job to monitor this situation closely. It was the sort of thing that could get out of hand. Bud decided that if it was going to get out of hand, she wanted it to fall into *her* hands. If Ju Long *insisted* on setting himself up for a fall, Bud was going to make sure she, through her blackmail scheme, got the benefit of the fall-out.

Thinking about the available assets for her projected blackmail scheme, Bud figured that Tamara was not the person she wanted in the role of Ju-Long bait. Tamara was too forthright and guileless. If she agreed to it, she'd probably balk before the end. She also didn't think Tamara had the dealing-with-suitors skill set she would need.

Not that there was anything wrong with Tamara. She obviously had the looks and personality that would be, and surely was, attractive to men. It's just that she was an amateur. A talented amateur, perhaps, but this was a job for a professional.

On top of it all, Tamara had an important job to do that Bud didn't want her distracted from. In short, there was no way Bud wanted to see Tamara getting involved with Ju Long. She, in fact, wanted Tamara *shielded* from Ju Long.

Even Bud, with her long resume of sexploits, considered herself still an amateur. She pretty much knew what to do to get Ju Long into a compromising position, and felt she could handle the emotional issues it would entail. She wasn't sure she could do it as deftly as a real professional, though.

The only real professional Bud felt she could tap into was Gwen Petersen. Gwen had been, frankly, a successful prostitute before Doc found her performing at a Reno, Nevada strip joint, and somehow discovered her true calling as a salesperson for advanced robotics technology. She'd given up the hooker lifestyle since joining SST, learned robotics engineering, and settled down with her "wife," Phoenix-area news reporter Eve Salazar. On several occasions, however, she'd demonstrated that she still retained, and was willing to use, her talent and experience as a world-class courtesan.

For her, it was just good, clean fun.

Manipulating Ju Long into a blackmailable indiscretion was the sort of thing Gwen could do on instinct alone. She'd done it so many times, she just knew how to do it. It was like broken-field running for a retired star quarterback with a string of Superbowl wins to his credit.

And, she could be made available.

And, Bud knew she already had Ju Long's gonads in her pocket from their meeting in Scottsdale.

This was going to be fun!

She'd need Doc's collusion to make it happen, though. Only he could give the orders that would place Gwen in Xi'an next to Ju Long.

14

“How are you planning to map the site?” Doc asked in an apparent *non-sequitur* when Bud called to ask for help from Gwen to blackmail Ju Long. She hadn’t beat around the bush, or tried to sidle up to what she wanted. She just blurted it out.

She’d long ago given up any thought of ever hiding anything from Doc, or otherwise finessing him in any other way. She’d figured out, after knowing him less than a week, that he generally knew what she was thinking before she thought it, so trying to get cute with him was an exercise in futility. How do you hide your thoughts from someone who can read your mind?

“Unh, I hadn’t fully worked that part out,” Bud responded.

“Well, do so now,” Doc ordered. Then, he continued more helpfully: “How do you do it with an underwater wreck?”

“We start by flying over the thing with a small submersible ROV, and record everything we see. Then, we make a map from the recording. As we do the excavation, all the information goes into a graphical information system. The GIS software uses it to fill details into the map.”

“So, how do you translate that technique into mapping a large, hollow, underground space?”

“Fly over it with a small UAV, but they’re too fast, or would disturb the place too much.”

“Elaborate.”

“Well, a fixed-wing UAV has to keep moving to stay in the air.”

“It uses movement through the air to create lift,” Doc agreed. “If it gets too slow, the wing stalls, and PLOP! It drops like a dead bat.”

“Since we’ve no idea what’s in there, the odds of not crashing into the ceiling or a pillar hidden in the shadows are minuscule. We’re practically guaranteed to lose the thing in the first hour – before we get any practical information.”

“What about rotor craft?”

“A helicopter-rotor downwash would blow everything around. It would do more damage in an hour than an army of looters could do in a week.”

“Not quite,” Doc corrected, “but you’re right that the damage would be unacceptably bad.”

“What’s left?” Bud asked.

“Lighter than air ... a miniature blimp.”

“Do we have one?”

“Give me a couple of days,” Doc said. “Who is most qualified to pilot a lighter-than-air robotic craft?”

“Gwen Petersen?”

“That’s why you need her in Xi’an,” Doc finally explained.

“Why, thank you, sir,” Bud parodied, realizing that his *non sequitur* had been *sequitur* all along. It had been the answer to her request.

“ ‘Swat I’m here for,’ Doc explained. “How much overhead do you think you’ll have? How high’s the ceiling?”

“Written accounts put it pretty high. I’m guessing twenty to thirty feet. I think ten feet’s a minimum. Qin Shi Huang wasn’t one to go half way.”

“That’s what I’m counting on,” Doc replied. “There’s a company that builds terrain-mapping systems that use an array of machine-vision cameras mounted on an aircraft. You fly over the area you want to map, and the system captures terabytes of video through half a dozen cameras mounted in different places on the aircraft to create parallax. You then wash the data through their software running on a cloud-based supercomputer, and out pops a three-dee map that you display with a standard GIS map viewer. It takes a day in the data laundry, but otherwise it’s wash and wear. I’ll get on it, and see if we can shrink it down enough to fly under a blimp small enough to work in your space. Then, we’ll have Gwen practice with it for a day or so. Finally, she’ll bring it over to Xi’an, and teach you and your operator to run the thing without bumping into walls. Then, she can hang around a while to make sure it all goes smoothly.”

“And maneuver Ju Long into a compromising position,” Bud added.

“And maneuver Ju Long into a compromising position,” Doc concluded. “Better be sure you know what you want to get out of him that you can’t get by simply saying, ‘Please.’ Otherwise, you’re generating bad karma for nothing.”

“I think we need the UAV, anyway. It’ll get us information in a day that would take us a month to gather, otherwise.”

“Well, two days. Figure one day for the flight, and twenty-four hours to process the raw data. It’ll actually take multiple flights, so figure many more days. How long will depend on details we don’t know, yet.”

“The plan is good,” Bud concluded, “and would be worthwhile even without blackmailing Ju Long. We’ll give him plenty of opportunities to come to his senses, and back away from the whole scene. I hope he does, but if he *insists* on being an idiot, we’ll take advantage of him. Let *him* generate the bad karma.”

“You know it doesn’t work that way,” Doc warned. “If you do something nasty, you’ve done something nasty. There’s no shifting blame. If you do it, you’ve done it.”

“Yes, *sensei*,” Bud replied submissively, but with a secret smile that she knew Doc couldn’t see over the phone line.

“Don’t smirk, you little vixen,” Doc needled, hearing the smile in her voice.

Bud laughed.

“Alright, lover of my best girlfriend,” she rebutted, trying to needle him back, “You get that gorgeous little hottie out here with my mapping system ASAP, and I’ll work on making a hole for it to fly through. While you’re at it, can you organize it to drop nodes for my *ad hoc* wireless network?”

“Do you need a manipulator to place them carefully, or can you just drop them, like they dropped bombs from aircraft in World War Two?”

“A manipulator would be nice, but it would be heavy and I think you’ll be weight constrained. Is that your assessment?”

“Exactly. A manipulator likely will add at least a kilogram of mass, which will weigh a couple of pounds. It takes a lot of hydrogen to lift that much weight, meaning a bigger blimp. We may have to drop your network nodes on one pass, then go back to fly over the space.”

“You’re going to use hydrogen?” Bud asked. “In an enclosed space? We don’t want to fill the barrow with hydrogen, then have something light it off, and blow the place up!”

“Yeah,” Doc said, “you’re right. Hydrogen has a lot more lift per unit volume than anything else, but it’s dangerous in an enclosed space. It’s impossible to keep from leaking, too. The molecules are too small. The sneaky little guys always find holes big enough to squeeze through, and have an escape.”

“Y’know,” Bud had a thought, “it might be better to just trust the UAV to do the job on its own using its onboard intelligence to navigate for itself, then come back with the data. That way we could skip setting up the

network. We've never done that with a UAV before, but maybe it's about time. I think the system you're talking about could do it. How precise does its flying need to be for the mapping software to work?"

"Not very," Doc replied. "As long as there aren't any gaps in the data, it can autolocate by pilotage and dead reckoning. We'll just put in an ELT – that's an emergency locator transmitter for you non-pilots – in case it runs into trouble and needs a Worm to come rescue it."

"Ooh! I like this plan!" Bud enthused.

"There's no way we could get the thing designed, built and shipped in less than two weeks, and it could easily take six, even if we put a 'rush' order on it. So get into the barrow, and measure the overhead as fast as your little robotic legs can get there. In the meantime, I'll try to keep it small enough to work in a ten-foot-high space. I'll organize the blimp to allow switching gondolas. That way, we can minimize the weight for different missions. We've already got two – carrying the mapping-camera array, and dropping your nodes."

15

It took even longer for SST to design, fabricate, and deliver the blimp-mounted mapping system than Doc initially estimated. Gwen didn't bring it over to China until two months later, and it still wasn't fully programmed to operate autonomously.

To protect her from the lecherous Ju Long, Bud asked Tamara to stop wearing jewelry and makeup, and go overboard to dress modestly. "Dowdy" was the descriptive word.

At the same time, Bud amped up her own appearance, and began showing interest in Ju Long. The idea was to distract his interest from Tamara.

It worked. Ju Long stopped following Tamara with his eyes, and began trying to spend more time near Bud.

She also started priming him for Gwen's arrival. Obviously, Bud explained the new mapping system to Ju Long as soon as the idea was hatched. She pointed out that Gwen had more experience piloting remotely operated aircraft via Verbal Programming than anyone else in the World.

While piloting the lighter-than-air UAV would be more like operating the submersible ROVs Bud was familiar with than the heavier-than-air vehicles Gwen spent so much time developing, it was Gwen who had spent days practicing with the blimp, and developing the software to run it. She was also the one with the pilot's license, not that it would be needed, but the training and experience counted.

Besides, the mission they were sending the blimp on required it to make navigational decisions on its own, with no help from a human handler. Bud had written such software in the past, but Gwen was the expert.

Yes, Gwen was the right person for the job. That's why they needed her in China – in case anyone needed to be convinced.

Sitting in Bud's office a week before Gwen's arrival with the blimp, Bud reminded Ju Long about Gwen's demonstration of Worm technology in Scottsdale – the time Gwen had made such an impression on him. She also started mentioning Gwen's background in the sex trade, which Ju Long didn't know anything about, and how they'd modeled together for the lesbian *Kama Sutra* website Bud had produced with her first husband.

The website was not available in China, having been censored by the Central Committee, so Bud described it to him. She explained that she'd conceived of it as a companion to Suby's conventional *Kama Sutra* website, which adapted the classic Indian sex manual for the Internet, with he and she modeling the positions.

Bud explained that Suby said people needed an authoritative source to help them learn about what she and Suby agreed was a most important aspect of peoples' lives, which Western literature badly neglected. There was all kinds of smut literature out there that offered all kinds of misinformation about heterosexual sex. They'd decided to provide a website to help couples learn about doing things the *right* way.

Bud went on to explain that the situation was even worse for the large minority of homosexual and bisexual women. She had decided to provide a website to help them, too.

Ju Long had noticed that Bud was attracted to women as well as men. That accounted for her interest in the project, and expertise for carrying it out.

“So, did your first husband create a website for men who love other men?”

“No,” Bud explained, “he has no interest in other men, and so no experience, either. So, he'd have no good advice to offer. Obviously, I don't qualify. It's a job for somebody else, who knows something about the subject.”

“So, you and Ms. Petersen have had sex with each other?”

“Oh, yes. We've had sex. And it was quite enjoyable. She's quite expert at giving pleasure!”

“So, you are lovers?”

“No, she’s married to someone else, and likes it that way.”

“Have I met him?”

“I doubt that you know *her*,” Bud corrected. “You might have seen her on TV, though. She’s a feature news reporter on Channel Five.”

“Do you mean that beautiful dark-haired lady?” Ju Long surmised.

“Eve Salazar, yes,” Bud confirmed.

“Oh, so Gwen has no interest in men,” Ju Long looked disappointed.

“That does not seem to be the case. In fact, I have it on good authority that her ability to please a man is every bit as great as her ability to please a woman. In fact, she’s been described as a ‘spectacular fuck.’ Pardon my language, but that’s a direct quote. The guy was drunk at the time he said it.”

“Described by whom?”

“By a man who should know.”

“So, she ... ”

“Goes both ways at the drop of a panty,” Bud finished the thought for him.

“And you, ...”

“Go both ways at the drop of a panty. Look, Ju Long, I like you, and feel we’ve become friends. You’ve obviously noticed that Gwen is one of the most gorgeous creatures walking the Earth. As your friend, I will say that I agree that she’s one of the most gorgeous creatures walking the Earth. I can also confirm that she’s extremely enjoyable to touch, and great deal of fun to be touched by. Does that answer your questions?”

“Well, except for one ...” Ju Long flashed her the most lascivious look he’d ever allowed himself to aim in her direction.

The look Bud gave him in return was entirely different. It said: “Are you out of your mind? This would be the stupidest thing you’ve ever done in your life!”

Ju Long backed off, looking down at his hands. The bulge in his pants told Bud that he still wanted to do the stupidest thing he’d ever done in his life.

“You want me to help you get into her pants,” Bud stated flatly.

When Ju Long looked up, his eyes displayed barely contained lust. That’s exactly what he wanted. He wanted to go all the way, consequences be damned.

“Are you sure about this?” she asked.

“Do you think she’d be willing to?”

“Perhaps. It wouldn’t be the first time,” is what Bud said.

“or the forty-seventh time, either,” she thought to herself.

“What would she want in return,” Ju Long asked, suddenly suspicious.

“Likely nothing,” is what Bud replied out loud. “She might do it for fun.”

“I, on the other hand, will want quite a lot,” is what she thought to herself.

Suddenly, she blurted out: “My friend, don’t do this. You have a wonderful wife who loves you very much. Don’t break her heart. Not like this. Not for a thrill that will soon be over. You have too much to lose.”

Ju Long looked away, refusing to meet her eyes.

“I have to go now,” he said, and left the room.

The following Friday, after she arrived and unpacked the blimp and all its support equipment, Gwen sat in exactly the same chair in exactly the same rented trailer that Bud had set up as a mobile office near Qin Shi Huang’s mausoleum. Glen sat at a second desk nearby.

“What is going on, Bud,” Gwen demanded. “The Boss told me that on top of helping you program Bertha to map your mausoleum, you want me to help you blackmail some senior government official into giving you more help than he’s willing to.”

“Who’s ‘Bertha?’” Glen asked.

“That’s what we named the blimp,” Gwen responded. “So, what is it, exactly, that you want?”

“Doc told you about it?” Bud said in surprise. “And you’re still willing to go through with it?”

“I’m here, aren’t I?” Gwen replied, stating the obvious. “The Boss would never send me into anything like this without giving me all the information he had. Apparently, the last time you talked to him, this was all still pretty sketchy.”

“But, I know you guys,” she added. “If you want to put the screws to some guy, he deserves to be screwed. And, I’m perfectly happy to screw him. He can’t be worse than some of the ugly creeps I’ve had to do before.”

“Actually,” Bud replied, “he’s not bad. He’s clean, polite, intelligent, in decent shape for a pencil pusher. Actually, not a bad catch for any girl fishing – except for being married to a nice lady, who’s actually kinda cute, herself.”

“Why haven’t you just done it yourself, Bud, or do you want to do it together?”

“I’ve never done anything like this before,” Bud admitted.

“And you’re not sure you’re quite up to it,” Gwen observed. “It’s not all that hard. You’ve had sex with people you weren’t in love with before. This is no different.”

“I’ve even had sex with people I didn’t particularly like, but that’s not it,” Bud said.

“Is it because of Glen?” Gwen asked, then she turned to him to ask: “How do you feel about it?”

“Well, I admit I’m not thrilled. I’d rather there was another way. But, I’m not really involved. I’m not doing it, she is.”

“Honey, you’re both involved. She’s your wife. If you don’t want her to do it, she shouldn’t do it.”

“I think I talked him out of it, anyway,” Bud interjected.

“What do you mean?” Glen asked in surprise.

16

“The guy’s Chen Ju Long,” Bud explained to Gwen. “You met him in Scottsdale. You made quite an impression!”

“I remember. He wanted to screw me right there in the hangar,” Gwen recalled. “Of course, he was too polite to say anything, but I could tell he wanted it.”

“Well, as Doc told you, he’s a senior government official here, with power to pull strings that he’s refusing to pull. It would help us immensely if we could interview some of the people who’ve been crawling around in the tomb. Ju Long can tell who it is because they got loaded up with mercury. That made ‘em sick, and the authorities noticed. That’s how they uncovered the whole mess in the first place. But, now they won’t let us talk to them. Ju Long could set it up, but won’t.”

“Other than that, he’s been really nice,” Bud continued. “He made sure we got the go-ahead for everything we wanted to do, except for interviewing the pot hunters. For everything else, he’s been great.”

“Except for having adultery in his heart,” Gwen pointed out.

“He just has a sweet tooth for occidental women, in general. I think he’s just never had an opportunity, and wants to know what it’s like.”

“We’re just bigger and tougher,” Gwen observed, ignoring the fact that she, herself, was just a little slip of a thing no bigger than an average Chinese woman.

“Get back to your discouraging him,” Gwen ordered, demonstrating a toughness that belied her size.

“Well, a couple of days ago, we were in here, just talking. I was building him up for this. I told him about the *Kama Sutra* website we did together, and how much fun it was. Then, I told him how Doc called you a ‘stupendous

fuck' without telling him it was Doc who said it. That got him all excited. When he realized you and I had been intimate, he wanted to know if I'd set something up for him with you. He wanted to know what you'd want for doing it, and I told him you might do it for fun."

"It's better blackmail if he pays," Gwen put in.

"Okay, but he has a wife and a family. If it got out, he'd get in deep trouble. He'd probably get canned, and maybe sent for re-education. The Commies can be rough if you won't play the game by their rules. It'd also wreck his marriage. I know the wife, and she's actually pretty nice, too. Hates me like the dickens, but that's just because she's just the opposite of me. She may also be afraid of my influence on her husband."

"Obviously," Gwen pointed out, "she's right to be afraid of you. Look what you're plotting."

"So far," she summarized, "I see *you* getting discouraged, not him."

"I got cold feet. I pointed out what it would do to his wife, and that it was the stupidest thing he could do for his career. I asked him to back out."

"Did he?"

"Not in so many words."

"Did he or didn't he?"

"Well, I guess not. I wanted him to, but he didn't say anything."

"So," Gwen concluded. "He's still on the hook. The ball's in your court. You can go ahead and truss him up like a Thanksgiving turkey, or you can drive him away. But, you have to decide soon. I'm only here for a couple of weeks. I, too, have a loving wife waiting for me at home, and I have no motivation to disappoint her."

It was only an hour later, just before the end of the work day, that Ju Long called Glen with an invitation to

dinner Saturday night at Ju Long's home. The invitation was for Bud, Glen, and Gwen. Ju Long said he planned cocktails, dinner, and an evening of comradeship to celebrate Gwen's safe arrival with the blimp. What "an evening of comradeship" meant, neither Bud, nor Glen could guess.

"The guy's setting up a swinger's orgy," Gwen explained. "I've seen it before. Lots of times. He wants some fun, and he's talked his wife into going along with it."

"He has too many women," Glen pointed out.

Bud looked up from her hands, which she'd been inspecting carefully. Glen had noticed it was something she did when thinking earnestly about a plan that she wasn't quite sure she wanted to go through with. Subconsciously, the hands represented the actions she had in mind. When she closely inspected them, it meant she was critically evaluating whether the plan's ends justified its means. How dirty did she want those hands to get?

"He has in mind that the odd woman out will act as ringleader," Bud surmised. "That may mean Gwen, or maybe someone else. I don't know that he's thought it through that far. Anyway, the idea would be that the odd woman out would come on to someone else – probably one of the other women. Assuming *passe complétée*, everyone else would get turned on, and the fun would begin."

"That's pretty likely as a male fantasy," Gwen agreed. "They don't have to be realistic, just really far out."

"Oh, God!" Bud exclaimed. "I can't believe we're actually going through with this thing."

"It is pretty nasty," Glen agreed, beginning to inspect his own hands.

"Blackmail is a nasty business," Gwen pointed out.

"Have you done it before," Bud asked her, hoping for something, but not sure what. Advice? Reassurance?

"I had to. Remember I used to work as a hooker for the Mob. I've set more than one sucker up for a fall."

“Such as,” Glen prompted.

“Oh, there was a college football coach they wanted to have throw some games. He ended up in jail a year later for feeding steroids to his team. Then, there was a wife who wanted her husband’s money, but not the nuisance of having him around. That marriage lasted another forty-five seconds! He killed himself after the divorce left him destitute. Those guys got me into some really horrible stuff.”

“Yet, you still do it?” Glen questioned.

“Not quite the same,” Gwen said. “I’d do anything for the Boss, I owe him my life, or at least the current version of it. Besides, he’s different. He always tries to make things turn out for the best in the end. Whenever I work with him on anything – including funny business – I end up feeling good about it in the end.”

“Like when he had me set up that black guy in Freeport, then you beat the crap out of him,” she recalled, raising her eyes to Bud. “I felt horrible about that, until I saw what the creep had done to Cara, and probably lots of other girls. What you did put him out of business, and I ended up feeling good about helping do that. And Mama would never let the Boss get me into anything that wouldn’t wash off, anyway.”

“Mama?” Glen asked. He was having trouble following Gwen’s references. He realized that he didn’t really know this woman very well.

“It’s what she calls Red,” Bud told him.

“Well, she takes better care of me than my own mother ever did,” Gwen pointed out. “She cares more about me than about her reputation, or whether I’ve embarrassed her in front of her pastor, or some ladies’ auxiliary committee.”

Bud had seen this tirade from Gwen before. She was still nursing a lot of hurt from her childhood. It could take a while if left alone to run its course.

“Anyway,” Bud said, putting her managing-executive hat on and interrupting Gwen’s venting. Doc and Red had entrusted her with this project, so she’d better stop acting like a wuss, even if she felt like a wuss right now, “I see we have three things to think about:

1. Is this the kind of party each of us wants to get involved in?
2. Are these people we would be willing to play with at such a party?
3. Do we really want to blackmail these people?”

“They’re all separate issues,” Bud continued, “that we each need to resolve for ourselves. I, personally, have always enjoyed such parties in the past. ... Glen?”

“We talked about it before we got married. It seemed like fun at the time. I’m not going to back out now.”

“This is one of the things I came to China for,” Gwen declared. “ ‘Sup to you what you do.’”

“What about partying with Ju Long and his wife, specifically? Glen, you’ve met her. Would you be willing to fuck her?”

“It’s more a question of whether she’d be willing to fuck me!” he responded. “She looks pretty straight laced. She’s certainly cute in a kewpie-doll sort of way, though. Yeah, she’d be a nice diversion. I just can’t see her being that kinky.”

“Ju Long’s had a couple of months to work on her since all this started to come up,” Bud pointed out. “You might be surprised.”

“I’m *not* going to have sex with Ju Long,” Glen stated, flatly.

“I don’t think you have to worry,” Bud laughed. “That’s going to be Gwen’s job, and probably mine. He would not be my first choice for the last man on Earth, but I’ve made love to a lot worse.”

“Who would you choose for the last man on Earth? Doc?” Glen asked, betraying one of his concerns.

“No, silly, I’d choose you. Doc would be second choice. Remember, I helped Red land him for herself.”

“What about Red?” Glen asked, betraying another concern.

“I had to make that choice long ago,” Bud reported. “She comes after Doc. That makes it you, then Doc second, and Red third. Now, stop it, Baby, you’re my best fuck buddy, ever. Don’t you forget it. If you keep this up, the whole thing’s off. I’ll institute Red’s rules: Nobody Touch!”

Feeling better, Glen nodded sheepishly: “Okay.”

“That leaves us with number three,” Bud finalized: “do we really want to commit blackmail?”

“I don’t know what to say,” Glen admitted. “I’d rather not. Especially if I fuck the guy’s wife. It’s too creepy.”

He took a deep breath.

“No, I don’t want to do it,” he finally decided. “Whatever else happens, I don’t want to be a blackmailer.”

“Me neither,” Bud said. “Thank you, Glen, for making the decision. I’ve felt crappy about this all along, but couldn’t call it quits. I’m sorry, Gwen, for dragging you into this, and making you fly twelve-thousand miles for nothing. I have to apologize to Doc, too.”

“It’s okay. I didn’t fly twelve-thousand miles for nothing. We’re making a big contribution to robot technology, and we’re doing our jobs for the PRC. *That’s* what I really came here for.”

“And, don’t think you have to apologize to the Boss, either,” she continued. “I can tell you this now: he didn’t send me here to help you blackmail Ju Long. He sent me here to help you decide to back out of it. You just had to make the decision for yourself. He’ll be proud of you.”

“I’m proud of you, too,” she added, giving Bud a hug. Then she gave Glen a hug, too.

“So,” Bud concluded, “how do we back out of Ju Long’s little sex party.”

“I don’t think we can,” Glen said. “It’s a legitimate invitation from an official representative of our host government. Just because we suspect an orgy behind it doesn’t give us an excuse to refuse. Not kosher! Makes us look like the dirty-minded scum that we are.”

“Speak for yourself, Buster,” Bud warned.

“Why would we want to?” Gwen asked. “We’ve all said it would be fun. Just don’t blackmail the guy, afterward.”

“You’d still do it?” Bud asked.

“Honey, I haven’t had man meat between my legs in a long time. Ju Long looks pretty cute to me, and I’d love to come all over your husband’s penis, too. I haven’t seen Ju Long’s wife, but I also like kewpie dolls.”

“What about me?” Bud blurted out.

“Honey, I *loved* rubbing clits with you. I’m up for a reprise, anytime. Wanna go now? I’m sure we can make Glen happy about it, too.”

Bud was actually considering it, despite having a list unfinished of things to do before the end of the day. She was robbed of the decision by a knock at the door. Work matters intruded.

17

When Bud answered the knock at the door, it was the man she'd contacted about renting some time in an under-utilized electronics factory. Bertha still wasn't programmed for autonomous mapping, and they'd need a simulated underground space to test and debug her software. A shut-down electronics factory in the middle of the night with the lights off would make a good simulation of the tomb's interior. Since they didn't know what she'd find in the mausoleum, they had to teach her to figure out how to do the job on her own, with no prior knowledge of the space, and no real-time guidance from a human. It was a lot to ask of a robot.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Sang," Bud said in Mandarin. "May I present our technical advisor, Dr. Trudeau, and our robot programmer, Ms. Petersen. She, I'm afraid, speaks no Chinese, so I'll have to translate."

"Gwen," she said in English, "This is Mr. Sang. He manages the factory we'll use for training Bertha."

Turning back to Sang, she also went back to Chinese: "We will need to use the whole building at night, all night. We'll need all the power and all the lights shut off. Will that be possible?"

"Most assuredly," Sang promised. "We have shut production down for two weeks while we wait for parts. Our supplier in Japan was badly damaged in the earthquake, and will be unable to continue production. We have found an alternate supplier in Taiwan, but we cannot get shipments for another two weeks. We used the last of our inventory last week, so Your request to rent our factory floor was most welcome. It will greatly reduce our losses. All we have there now is a watchman."

"Gwen," Bud said in English, "they have a night watchman. What do you want to do about him?"

"Just keep him out of the production area. We'll set up in one of the offices, and he can hang out with us, so he'll know what's going on. I assume you'll take care of security for the rest of the building. Right?"

"Right," Bud answered.

She thought for a minute before turning back to Sang.

“Mr. Sang, please give your security people vacation with pay. We will guard your factory for you while we’re there. Just add the cost onto our bill.”

“What about during the day?” Sang asked. He was actually delighted with the idea. He’d overcharge the Americans, underpay his Chinese, and keep most of the cash for himself.

“We’ll watch it during the day, too,” Bud answered.

She knew what Sang was thinking, but didn’t give a damn what he did with the money as long as she got to do what she had to get done. She never would have gotten the rental of an entire factory in the United States for even several times what Sang would be charging. If he got too greedy, she’d just go to the next shut-down factory down the street. She had enough to deal with without taking responsibility for ethical lapses in somebody else’s country.

To Hell with them. It was where they belonged, anyway.

Corrupt, greedy bastards!

She was getting fed up with business-as-usual in a partially reformed Communist country.

18

When Gwen, Bud and Glen arrived at Ju Long's house, Bud was greeted far more warmly than she'd ever expected. Chen Zhin, Ju Long's wife, acted genuinely glad to see her. Previously, she'd greeted Bud with coldness bordering on disdain. By the end of the evening of her previous visit, Zhin had allowed her disapproval of Bud's lifestyle to become rudely obvious.

This time, however, Zhin greeted Bud as a long-lost sister. She hugged her, and kissed her on the cheek. She did the same with Gwen, and with Glen.

"You are as beautiful as my husband described," she told Gwen, holding her at arm's length to admire her. She started at Gwen's face, then let her gaze travel the length of Gwen's body, and back again. Her face wore an appreciative smile.

Gwen's assessment of the situation seemed accurate. Bud's comment that Ju Long had plenty of time to work on her seemed prescient. Bud wondered at the change.

Chen Zhin was about Gwen's height, and wore her jet-black hair in a page-boy cut whose ends curled inward half way between the bottoms of her ears, and her shoulders. The longish bangs framed a lovely Asian face of indeterminate age. She wore an elegant short-sleeved dress of dark-blue silk with silver brocade. It hung to the floor with slits up each side reaching to her hips, and sported a mandarin collar. A number of bracelets and metal bangles decorated her wrists, and spread down her forearm when she placed the long, red nail of her index finger against the gap of her front teeth while avidly inspecting Bud, as she had Gwen.

Bud wore a long sarong consisting of a rectangle of thin cotton cloth wrapped low around her back, crossed in the front and the corners tied behind her neck, leaving her back bare. A sash cord gathered the waist under her breasts, leaving little need for imagination to fill in the curves of her shape. The thin, yellow cloth with large orange polka dots clung to her body, making it clear she had come out without underwear.

The cool night air had made the long mink swing coat over the light dress a necessity. Nobody in China had a coat like that. It had been a Christmas present last year from Red, who'd spent double Bud's annual Harvard stipend on it. Bud had been aghast at the extravagance, but loved the coat so much she took it with her everywhere, and wore it whenever she could. The fur felt warm and cuddly. She called it her "kitten."

Gwen, on the other hand, had worn what is best described as a "little black dress." It was a simple mid-thigh-length sleeveless scooped-neck shift of black velvet that hugged her body. Bare to the waist in the back, its only function was to call attention to the body of the woman inside.

It was perfect for Gwen.

Gwen didn't have Red's stepfather's unlimited financial resources to tap into, and she'd had less than a year of piling up commission checks from SST for her cut of all the company's UAV sales in the Far East. She had only a floor-length black Persian lamb coat to ward off the chill.

Poor baby!

With no thought of upstaging the women, the men wore ordinary business suits. Ju Long's was white with a white shirt and red tie. It had the baggy, relatively shapeless cut fashionable at the time. Glen, prodded by Bud, had worn a medium-blue tee shirt untucked under the open jacket of his light blue Italian-cut suit.

Bud had put her foot down. There was no way *her* man was going to appear in public wearing anything as conventional as a necktie. The shapeless American-cut suit then in fashion was simply not an option! Glen had a closet full of old suits and sports jackets that were headed for The Salvation Army as soon as she could get him into a new wardrobe.

A significant fraction of Bud's new salary was already budgeted to speed that along.

All she needed now was to get him back to Arizona for fittings.

Screw Arizona! Why not take the long way home, and stop off in Rome for a little shopping?

Yeah, shopping in Rome. That would be delicious. She'd heard about a little shop that custom made ladies sandals. You can never have too many shoes.

Speaking of delicious, poor Chen Zhin was left with the job of serving dinner for herself and four guests after cooking all afternoon. Ju Long was not high enough in government service to make having domestic servants politically correct, and Zhin had sent her two sons to stay with their grandmother for the weekend, so the grunt work was left to her.

Noticing this during the main course, Bud volunteered to help with the dessert. Instead of jumping up as well, Gwen just nodded and winked to Bud. Bud wondered what that meant.

When she reached the kitchen, Bud noticed that no real cooking had gone on in there that day. The meal had come entirely from boxes marked with a caterer's logo. Zhin just laughed, then stepped over to Bud, and reached up to place a lingering kiss on her lips. She allowed her right hand to slide down Bud's bare back and down under the sarong to cup her left buttock. Maybe Zhin wasn't as conventional as Bud had thought. Maybe "conventional" meant something different in upper-middle-class post-Maoist China than it did on the North Shore of Massachusetts, where Bud had grown up.

Apparently, Chen Zhin had changed her attitude toward Bud. Perhaps a big part of Zhin's former disapproval of Bud's lifestyle had stemmed from a suppressed desire for that lifestyle. Bud had no idea. She was just amazed at the difference.

After makeup had been checked for smears (nothing of note: "These American cosmetics are really very good," Zhin pointed out, coquettishly) and dessert served, Bud caught a knowing glance from Gwen.

"You just sit down," Gwen ordered when Bud stood up to help clear away the dishes. "I'll handle this part."

Bud did as she was told, engaging Glen and Ju Long in speculation about what they would find in Qin Shi

Huang's tomb while Gwen and Zhin began clearing the table. Progress was rapid until, with a third of the dishes still on the table, the two busgirls stopped coming back from the kitchen.

By that time, Glen and Bud were bending Ju Long's ear (again) about how useful it would be to interview pot hunters who had been inside the mausoleum. Ju Long admitted that they had some peasants in custody who had been in there, but claimed they could say nothing of value about the mausoleum. Rather than getting into a verbal battle about that, which would ruin the social atmosphere, Glen and Bud dropped that line of conversation, and segued into describing their plans for programming and testing Bertha in the electronics factory.

Ju Long found that very interesting, and asked if he could stop by sometime to see what they were doing. Bud said: "Sure, anytime. It would be better, however, to visit when we aren't doing tests because everything will be dark – nothing to see, and we need to keep people out of the production area when testing. Why not set up an appointment some afternoon next week, and we'll give you a tour. We'll be assembling Bertha Monday, but Tuesday would work, or any other day next week."

After about fifteen minutes, Bud noted the slowdown in service. When the sound of a pan clattering to the floor interrupted the conversation, Bud suggested: "Ju Long, why don't you just go check on what's the holdup in the kitchen. Perhaps they need some help."

Showing concern, Ju Long left the table rapidly, and headed through the kitchen door.

More pan clattering, which brought a smile to Bud's face.

Ju Long did not reappear.

For a long time.

In answer to the question implied by Glen's upraised eyebrow, Bud said: "I expect they're fucking his brains out."

Glen's eyes got a little wider.

"Hey," she said, "he wanted it. It looks like she wanted it, too. I suspect the next development will be for Mrs. Chen to show up asking me to go in and help in the kitchen. Then, it's you and her on the dining-room table, although I'd recommend that sofa over there," she said, pointing through the archway into the living room. "That way, Ju Long gets his three way with a couple of American hotties, while she gets to sample the boniness of your boner."

"Be kind, and don't come in her pussy," Bud added as an afterthought.

"She's probably on birth control," Glen suggested. "It's recommended for all good little Maoists."

"You're right. I guess you'd better ask what she wants, and where she wants it."

It turned out that in her vagina was what she wanted, after all.

Things did not progress as Bud had predicted, however. By the time Zhin exited the kitchen hoping to measure the length of Glen's schlong, she was stark naked. Imagine Betty Boop with almond-shaped eyes, all her cute little outfits erased, and shaved genitalia added in graphic detail. She didn't deliver a message requesting Bud's presence in the kitchen, either. She dove in through the overlap of Bud's sarong instead. She found that she needed to untie the cord to gain full access.

Once all the way in there, she went for Bud's nipples with her mouth, and both of Bud's nether holes with her fingers. Either Gwen had been giving lessons in the kitchen, or Zhin had been practicing elsewhere without telling. Unless Zhin was a unimaginably quick study, Bud decided, she'd been practicing elsewhere. There was just too much expertise on display for it to be amateur night.

Still surprised by Zhin's behavior, Bud rewarded her by ejaculating an amount of fluid almost up to Red's Niagara Falls standards all over Zhin's right hand, which was now four-fingers deep into her vagina. Zhin smeared it all over Bud's crotch, then began pushing wet fingers into Bud's anus. Apparently, someone (no doubt Gwen)

had coached Zhin about Bud's enthusiasm for anal intercourse. Soon it was Zhin's right thumb in Bud's vagina, and her right index finger all the way into Bud's anus.

Zhin pressed her finger to her thumb across Bud's perineum deep inside. Bud liked that, and the repeated multiple orgasms it induced.

Time to induce some Zhin orgasms, Bud thought. Picking her up bodily, while Zhin's fingers endeavored to keep up their work on Bud's perineum, Bud carried her through the door to the couch she'd advised Glen to use. Laying Zhin on her back, Bud broke the perineum hold by moving down to lift and spread Zhin's legs.

She went to work on Zhin's clitoris. She started by sucking it deep into her mouth. Somebody'd been in there before. Zhin's engorged clit stretched easily for Bud to squeeze between the top of her tongue and the roof of her mouth. When Bud felt Zhin's wetness spread over her chin, she moved down a little farther to drink the pool of ejaculate out of her vagina.

Zhin liked that, and came some more.

Suddenly, Bud felt Glen's familiar penis sliding into her anus. He knew what his wife liked.

Consciousness drowning in a sea of erotic sensation, Bud concentrated on lapping Zhin's long clitoris. Her hand least involved in holding Zhin's crotch against her face felt down for her own clitoris. She rubbed it, then began inserting fingers one at a time while Glen's penis pounded deep inside her rectum.

Suddenly, she felt Glen pull out, and press the glans of his penis between his belly and her tail bone. That stopped his impending orgasm, and let him calm down enough to keep his erection a while longer.

With more consciousness now available, Bud went back to work on Zhin's womb, alternating between tongue-fucking her vagina, licking her clitoris, and sucking it into her mouth. About the time she added licking her perineum and anus to the rotation, she felt Glen lifting her away from Zhin, and up to her feet.

She saw that Glen's penis was flagging a little, so she stroked it back to full erection. In answer to Zhin's sparkling eyes, Glen approached her for intercourse in the missionary position. He started by hooking his arms under her legs to lift them until she was rolled up onto her back with her vagina pointing upward. Glen locked lips with her, while Bud guided his erection into Zhin's vagina.

Watching Glen pound Zhin's vagina proved less pleasant than Bud had anticipated, so she went to see how Ju Long and Gwen were doing in the kitchen.

It took Glen many minutes more to reach the point where he could no longer control his orgasm. Bud had been helping him practice taking a long time. Bud liked to take a long time. More orgasms for her.

Approaching his limit, Glen warned Zhin. "Oh, I'm going to come!" he said, and started to pull out.

She replied by tightening her arms around his waist, and pulling him back with her legs wrapped around his hips.

She wasn't letting him pull out.

So, he didn't.

She squealed with pleasure when he exploded inside of her, and kept squealing as he emptied his prostate into her vagina. Meanwhile, he felt her vaginal muscles pulsing as she added her contribution.

In the kitchen, Bud found Ju Long sitting on the floor, back propped against a cabinet, and semen dripping from his flaccid penis onto the tiles.

Gwen was lying on her back, knees up, and legs spread. Bud saw a white glob of semen peeking out of her vagina.

On inspiration, Bud lay atop Gwen in a sixty-nine position, and began feeling between Gwen's labia with her tongue. When she felt Gwen's tongue sliding between her labia, too, she rolled the two of them over to put Gwen

on top.

Gravity went to work, causing Ju Long's semen to ooze out of Gwen's vagina. Bud began hooking it out into her mouth with her tongue. She felt Gwen's vaginal muscles contracting, helping push the semen out. Then, there was a rush as Gwen's orgasm added to the volume, and made it more liquid.

Her mouth full, Bud heard Gwen whisper, "Gimme, please!"

Sliding out from under Gwen, who helped by rolling onto her back, she got up on her hands and knees, and turned to position her mouth over Gwen's. Gwen opened her mouth wide, and Bud poured the semen into it, then pushed some spillage into it with her tongue. Finally, Gwen swallowed, and Bud gave her a long, open-mouthed kiss, their tongue tips sparring playfully.

19

Bud had scheduled their first night of testing in Sang's electronics factory to begin Monday at seven o'clock, just as darkness began to fall. That would give them all day Monday to unload all of their equipment, and assemble the blimp in the factory's shipping and receiving area adjacent to the loading docks.

They decided to divide the factory space into three parts: a control room, where humans could work and communicate with Bertha; a blimp hangar that would be Bertha's assembly/repair/maintenance area; and the test area where Bertha would operate.

The control room was set up in a windowless conference room near the maintenance supervisor's office. It being windowless allowed the humans to work in a lighted area, while Bertha worked in near pitch dark. Its main feature was a large conference table where they'd set up the control console, which consisted of a Bluetooth headset connected to a ruggedized high-end tablet computer communicating wirelessly with an Ethernet router.

The router linked over a Cat 5 cable to a WiFi access point built into Bertha's docking station in the blimp hangar. That would be Bertha's communications link while she was in range. It was where she'd go to receive instructions, recharge batteries, and upload the data she captured.

The factory's shipping/receiving area was turned into the blimp hangar by clearing everything off the floor, and installing Bertha's docking station, which included the WiFi access point, her battery charger, a gigabit Ethernet port for downloading data, and a data-storage server with fifteen terabyte capacity. That was enough to capture a day's worth of video, and pass it along to the analysis computer for processing.

Bertha plugged into the top of the docking station by landing precisely on a multifunction zero-insertion-force (ZIF) plug, which made connections for battery-charging power, data upload and download, and adding or removing helium through a gas-handling system, also built into the docking station.

Bertha had six cameras mounted specifically to observe the mating procedure. Through them, Bertha could visually line up three alignment prongs on the docking station with sockets on her belly, then lower herself to mate with them, and close her clamps to lock onto the docking station mechanically. Inserting the mechanical prongs precisely aligned the service connections, and locking the clamps closed the ZIF-socket contacts to make electrical connections, as well as making the gas connection. The whole procedure was under Bertha's control, and before leaving Scottsdale she'd been programmed to do it flawlessly with a single command.

There were three human brains involved in developing the software: Gwen's, Red's, and Doc's. Gwen and Red let Doc have his way, and name the docking-command "fuck." Actually, they all thought it was a hoot, and added euphemistic variations to make programming more fun.

If you can't have fun, don't do it!

They could always change it later, if and when they made the source code public. Actually, they already had a sanitized version – "initiate docking procedure" – that would be the only one published in the documentation.

Bertha, herself, was classed as a twin-hull, semi-rigid airship. Empty of lifting gas, she weighed approximately nine kilograms (roughly twenty pounds). Helium has a buoyant mass of approximately one kilogram per cubic meter, meaning Bertha needed a gas volume of approximately nine cubic meters to lift the load. Doc designed her with two sausage-shaped gas bags, or hulls, each having a capacity of four-and-a-half cubic meters. They were each five-and-one-half meters long and one meter in diameter.

To minimize weight, the hulls were too thin to be self supporting, so a triangular truss ran along underneath each hull to spread the lifting force, and keep the hull from flexing. A frame between these trusses carried two variable-pitch propulsion fans mounted on gimbals. Each fan had sixteen blades, whose pitches could be individually varied as they rotated.

"That allows us to turn the fans by pitching the blades more on one side than on the other," Doc had explained to Gwen when he first described the system to her. "For a clockwise-rotating fan, increasing the pitch on

the left side relative to that on the right makes the fan turn to face downward.”

“I should think that would make the fan turn to face right,” Gwen had retorted.

“You’re forgetting that its a cyclic system,” he had explained. “In general, the effect in a cyclic system lags the cause by ninety degrees. It’s just like that precession experiment they had you do in Freshman Physics Lab. A force pushing a gyroscope downward makes it precess to the side. It’s basically the same effect. It’s also why Summer starts at the solstice, when the Sun starts down from maximum elevation, rather than at the equinox when it’s rising up. I’ve programmed all the equations into a C++ software module named *Fan*. All you have to do is call the module from your main program, and plug in the final thrust vector and rate of turn you want. It’ll move the blades to make it happen.”

To power the propulsion system, Doc had mounted lithium-ion cells under the trusses. That spread most of the weight along the trusses opposite the hulls’ distributed lifting force, minimizing the bending moments on the trusses. It also kept the weight low down and spread wide to improve stability.

Because the frame held the hulls apart by approximately one fan diameter, vertical airflow was unimpeded. Mounting the fans lower than the battery cells under the trusses gave them unimpeded flow laterally and along Bertha’s main axis. Her payload fit into the frame’s interior space between the hulls, along with her control computers.

With the hull material, trusses, batteries, control computers and frame massing a total of five-and-a-half kilograms, that gave Bertha a total useful load of three-and-a-half kilograms. The six video cameras plus the associated digital video recording system massed less than three kilograms. That left a half kilogram for movable ballast to trim the craft.

Bud imagined that Doc had thought of everything. Gwen, being an experienced engineer, knew that he hadn’t. She didn’t know what he’d missed, but bitter experience told her that there had to be *something*.

But, she allowed, like twenty-thousand lawyers chained to the bottom of the sea, it was a good start.

They'd find out what was wrong, and figure out how to fix it, during the week she'd insisted Bud allow for testing in Sang's electronics factory. Bud was an experienced enough manager to appreciate her test engineer's conservatism. She just hoped Gwen had been conservative *enough!*

To make sure, she'd arranged for Gwen to stay in China a full two weeks, in case the tests ran over.

"There's no way we can get that thing through a doorway to look inside any enclosures we might find in the mausoleum," Glen said when he saw Bertha taking shape in the hangar.

"She won't have to," Bud replied. "Her job is to create an overall map. We'll use Worms to crawl into small spaces to fill in details."

Glen hadn't yet gotten used to his yachtsman-wife's habit of using female pronouns for large vehicles. She did her archeology from ships, boats, and submarines, but he had never accompanied her on a field project, so he hadn't really seen her in action. He was now learning a lot about his wife's capabilities with practical archeology, and the way she approached her job.

He liked what he saw.

"So, what's the plan," he asked, getting his first taste of technology development, too.

Bud deferred to her test-engineer-in-charge: Gwen.

"Once we get Bertha assembled," Gwen said, "we'll have to run through systems checks to make sure we've put her together right, and haven't forgotten anything. Then, we'll run through some navigation exercises under manual control. When we're sure she's okay, and gain a warm, fuzzy feeling that we know what we're doing, we'll start teaching her how to figure out how to explore an unknown space."

"Teaching?" Glen asked. "You keep talking about 'teaching,' but it – she – is just a robot. I thought you

‘programmed’ robots.”

“Ordinarily, that’s what you do,” Gwen agreed. “Verbal Programming, however, is an artificial intelligence system. The robot has to have enough intelligence to expand its own software. Essentially, it codes its own software modules based on what it learns through experience. We have to figure out what strategies Bertha needs to use to figure out where she needs to go and how to get there. Then, we’ll lead her through exercises that will teach her how to apply those strategies. She’s a quick learner, but not too bright. Hopefully, when we get done, she’ll be a lot smarter.”

“It sounds a lot like teaching kids.”

“Well, maybe mentally impaired kids, or idiot-savants. Bertha remembers everything on the first try, and can project into the future with the best of ‘em, but creative thinking to come up with new strategies is not in her tool kit. That’s the next frontier, which we’re approaching, but don’t know how to get there, yet. This project will help a lot.”

20

Early in the afternoon, Glen got a call from Ju Long. He went into the maintenance supervisor's office to take it, so he wouldn't interfere with Bud at the computer working with Gwen in the hangar to test Bertha's systems. He came back just a few minutes later.

"Babe," he addressed Bud, now interrupting her work on the tests, "I have to go interview some pot hunters! Apparently, our bending Ju Long's ear Saturday night about how little we knew about what's in the mausoleum, and how useful first-hand knowledge would be, paid off. He's arranged for us to interview some of the villagers who were brought in to steal artifacts."

"That's fantastic!" Bud exclaimed, "We didn't have to blackmail him after all, just sweet talk him, then fuck him. That changed his whole attitude."

"Thank Gwen. At some point, she told him the same thing, and we forgot how much a man wants to please a woman he's just had sex with. Ju Long specifically mentioned her influence in making him change his mind."

"Gwen," Bud said into her headset, "Glen just got a call from Ju Long setting up interviews with pot hunters. He said it was your influence that turned the tide. Thanks, Baby."

"I'm sure it will take a couple of days to wring them dry of useful information," Glen said when Bud turned back to him, "so for a couple of days, I'll be going off to interview people while you're sleeping, and you'll be working with Bertha while I'm sleeping. Love you, Babe, I'll see you when you get home tomorrow morning."

Then, he leaned over to kiss her passionately to show that he meant it.

"Try to learn as much as you can about how the space is arranged," Bud advised. "How's the roof held up? How big are the holes we have to squeeze Bertha through? What's the ceiling like, and the floor? Are there hills and valleys, or is it pretty much flat? How much of the place have they actually explored?"

“I’d sure like to know how they got in!” Glen added, emphatically. “Maybe we can go in the same way. Or, at least we can make sure their entrance is guarded to keep anyone else from using it.”

“Okay. Sounds good. See you in the morning. I’ll probably cut things short tonight because our bodies are still on a first-shift schedule. I’ll pull the plug when I see people can’t stay awake any longer. There’s no sense in pushing so hard we make mistakes.”

After Glen left, they spent the rest of the afternoon finishing up their assembly tests, then broke for dinner. They had about two hours before dusk, when they planned to start their practice navigation sessions, so Bud took Gwen and the two technicians for a pizza party at a nice Italian bistro they had found nearby. She figured that one or two beers would help them get cranked up for a long night, so she bought a couple of rounds.

Bud had wisely installed an espresso maker in the control room, along with a refrigerator full of soft drinks and pre-made sandwiches. She’d also laid in a supply of candy bars and snack items. It reminded her of the self-service nook Cara had installed in the Gulf States Security cafeteria at their compound in Tampico, Mexico because that had been her model. Bud had seen how popular it had been with the second- and third-shift security guards.

Being full of pizza and beer, nobody was interested in the snacks or sandwiches, but the espresso maker got cranked up right away. Bud gave them a few minutes for the espresso to wake them up before sending everyone out with flashlights to see how dark the factory really was. Except for a few things they’d missed, the power was already off everywhere, and the emergency lighting disabled.

The first thing they noticed was the recessed lights in the control room threw half their output up and into the production-area airspace. Corrugated cardboard sheets salvaged from some discarded boxes, held in place by duct tape, blocked most of that.

Otherwise, the place was dark except for starlight filtering through the skylights. Since those were thirty feet above the floor, Bud decided not to try blocking them.

They'd lucked out, and it was just before New Moon, so the Moon would be setting soon after dark. In about a week, it would set before the Sun, and not rise until early morning. They'd have dark, moonless nights for their tests.

Supposedly, Qin Shi Huang's engineers had found a way to simulate starlight in his tomb, so maybe the amount of light in their factory wouldn't be so unrealistic, after all. Glen would find out from his villagers. Bud hadn't thought to ask him about it, but maybe Glen would think of it on his own, or maybe his interviewees would volunteer the information. If not, she'd ask Glen to find out next time. They both expected there would be at least one more "next time."

The goal for the evening was to practice operating Bertha under manual control, and to learn to use the mapping system. Programming an automated system is always best done by mimicking a functioning manual system. For that, you need to have a functioning manual system. That means training a manual operator, who will then debug the manual system. Only then can you start designing software for the automated system.

Gwen was already thoroughly familiar with operating Bertha manually, and had programmed a number of manual commands, so she would act as operator for the test program. But, she'd been working in SST's lighted hangar, not in the dark. Now, she needed to work in the dark. She also needed to learn to use the mapping system.

Gwen and Bud put on headsets that were connected wirelessly to the control computer.

"Bertha, wake up," Gwen ordered.

"Good evening, Gwen," came a pleasant female voice over the headsets. Bertha had the Southern California accent Gwen had settled on for English-speaking SST robots. She liked it because it is clear and easily understood by Americans from all regions. She felt it was the closest there is to a "standard" American dialect.

A number of lights flashed all over Bertha, and the hulls began to glow.

"We decided to use the hulls to provide a soft illumination," Gwen told Bud, "to fill shadows in as much as

possible. We figured LED point sources would make too many sharp shadows, and might confuse the mapping software. We just mounted a few high-brightness LEDs inside the hulls above the struts to reflect off the fabric. To the cameras, it should look like even illumination. Any shadows should be blocked by whatever is casting the shadows.”

When the lights stopped flashing, a wire-frame visualization of the space around Bertha appeared on the screen. It was split into two parts: the upper portion, identified by the word “FORWARD,” took up the top half; the lower half was marked “AFT.” The display was a view into Bertha’s mind, showing what the space looked like to her.

A band across the bottom gave readouts from a few flight instruments.

“Bertha,” Gwen ordered, “check overhead.”

A laser beam shot out of the top of Bertha’s payload package, and painted a raster pattern on the ceiling, then switched off.

“Gwen, it appears that we have twenty-five feet unobstructed overhead. I suggest a cruise altitude of twenty-one feet.”

“This is the first step in building an envelope for the space she has to work in,” Gwen explained to the spectators, which included Bud and the two techs, who were standing by in the control room in case their help was needed. “She’s making an initial assumption that the whole place has a flat, unobstructed horizontal ceiling plane at twenty five feet above the floor level, which is a horizontal reference plane at the foot of her docking station. “The actual ceiling is higher than that, but she’s checked and determined that the ceiling fixtures do not hang lower than twenty-five feet. So, that’s what she wants to take as *her* ceiling. Her altitude is calculated as the distance from her ultrasonic altitude sensor mounted at the bottom of the payload frame to the horizontal reference plane at floor level.”

“Her altitude sensor is three feet – just under a meter – below the hull tops, which are the highest points on the aircraft. A twenty-one-foot cruise altitude gives her one foot below the fixtures she sees now. As she goes along, we’ll adjust the cruise altitude, if necessary.”

“What about variations in the floor?” Bud asked.

“That’s why we use a reference plane, rather than the actual floor. She has microelectrical mechanical system, or MEMS, gyroscopes built in,” Gwen reported, “as well as sprung-mass accelerometers to track movements and changes in orientation with respect to gravity and her initial position. As she moves, she computes new positions by dead reckoning. So, she should be able to detect variations of the actual floor from her reference plane. The software’s already written and debugged to run those systems, and it worked great in the lab. Now, we just have to make sure she doesn’t get confused in a more chaotic environment.”

“Okay,” Gwen said, “let’s get started. Bertha, start your engines.”

Bertha’s fans spun up to their operating speed, which caused them to emit a humming noise that rose in pitch from bass to baritone. A widget on the computer screen labeled as “FAN SPEED” rose up to “50%,” then stabilized.

“Bertha, climb to cruise altitude,” Gwen said.

The fan noise got louder as Bertha’s propulsion fans rotated to point upward. There was a sharp “klack” as she released her mooring clamps. Then, the buzzing got even louder as her fan blades opened up to bite into the atmosphere, and pull her upward. She rose up to just under the lights suspended from the ceiling, then the fan noise all but died away.

The fans ended pointing upward, and wobbling slightly around that position.

“We trimmed her for about a half kilogram of negative buoyancy, just to preload the propulsion system. When air currents hit her, she needs to make small corrections to the upward force the fans have to apply. That’s

where the wobble comes from: small side thrusts to correct for crosswinds. We noticed that the more load on the system, the steadier she ran. When we tried trimming her for neutral buoyancy, the fans flipped around wildly for every little puff of wind. So, too-little preload and she acts up; too-much preload and she wastes battery power to hold position. Doc told us to experiment until we got her to behave smoothly with the minimum preload. She looks pretty good right now. ... Bertha, turn twenty degrees starboard.”

The forward fan tipped slightly to Bertha’s right, and the aft fan toward the left. That made Bertha rotate slowly to starboard. When she’d turned through almost twenty degrees, both fans tipped the other way briefly, then centered to stop her rotation at the target direction.

“Gwen, I have turned twenty degrees to starboard,” Bertha’s voice came over the headphones.

“Bertha, remember the aisle just to left of center as the main corridor.”

“Gwen, I have memorized the aisle just to left of center as the main corridor.”

“Bertha, position yourself above and parallel to the centerline of the main corridor.”

Bertha rotated five degrees to port, then moved laterally to port to place her center line parallel to, and directly above the center of the aisle.

“Gwen, I have oriented myself above and parallel to the centerline of the main corridor.”

“Bertha, memorize the plane coinciding with your current sagittal plane as the factory’s main vertical reference plane.”

“Gwen, I have memorized the plane coinciding with my current sagittal plane as the factory’s main vertical reference plane.”

And, so it went on, with Gwen giving Bertha simple instructions to establish a three-dimensional Cartesian coordinate system for the factory, then plan a raster pattern she could fly to record video of the entire space with

her six-camera mapping system.

By the time she had flown half the pattern, it was nearly two o'clock in the morning, and heads were beginning to nod.

“Let’s call it quits for tonight,” Bud ordered. “We’ll pick up where we left off tomorrow night. We made great progress, and reached all of our goals for tonight. See you all at seven o’clock tomorrow night – I guess it’s actually tonight – and thanks, everyone.”

Bud was the last one out the door. As she appeared outside, two guards wearing Gulf States Security uniforms appeared from the gloom.

“Good morning, ma’am,” one said with a touch of his right index knuckle to his cap, “I believe that you’re the last one who was inside. We’ll lock up after you.”

“Thanks James,” Bud said. “We’ll be back at seven o’clock tonight.”

Then, she walked to her car, and drove away.

It was three o’clock by the time she stripped down and slid between the sheets next to Glen. He woke up enough to wrap his arms around her, and snuggle up. Then he went back, emphatically, to sleep.

As tired as she was, it took Bud a few minutes to quiet her mind, and descend into sleep. During that time, she noticed that, while she could feel Glen’s stomach against the small of her back, and the fronts of his thighs against the backs of hers, she could feel no hint of his penis. That meant her favorite member was as hard as a wet dishcloth, and shrunk to the size of a walnut. That, in turn, meant he was as horny as a floor tile.

What had he been doing to get himself so relaxed? Since she was *way* too sleepy to fool around, she didn’t care, pushed the thought away, and went to sleep, herself.

21

Glen trying to slip quietly out of bed at six o'clock the next morning woke Bud. She tried not to wake up, but her body was too used to getting up at that time. She decided to give up and join Glen for breakfast.

"Did you see my note?" she asked, squinting against the dazzling light reflecting from the dark gray tatami mat on the floor.

"Yes," he responded. "You want me to find out how dark it is in the mausoleum. I already did. In fact, the two people I talked to yesterday volunteered how surprised they were by how much light there was. It seems there are little bright points of light all over the ceiling during the day, or when the Moon is full. On a moonless night, however, there's nothing. Dark as the proverbial fur of a black cat in a coal bin at midnight."

"Tell me more in a minute," Bud interrupted him, receiving an urgent communique from her bladder dealing with an immediate need to reach the toilet. After peeing, she figured out why she couldn't focus her eyes or her mind: she had a spectacular headache approaching in size the Island of Formosa. She searched out, found, and gulped down two aspirin chased by a mouthful of water she slurped from under the bathroom faucet.

Walking stonily back to the bedroom, she sat on the edge of the bed, hands covering her eyes. "Anything else?" she asked, taking down her hands, and trying to hold up her end of the conversation.

"They said some people tried dark adapting before going in. Those that tried it reported seeing ghosts that swam in and out of view. They said they'd appear in the corner of your eye, but if you tried to look at them, they'd vanish. Scared the bejeezus out of them. They wouldn't go back."

"Sounds like they're seeing things with the rod cells around the periphery of their retinas, and losing them when they try to look directly with the less sensitive cone cells in the center. That means only a few photons at a time reaching their eyes: extreme low light."

“My thoughts, exactly,” Glen agreed.

“The ones I talked to,” he continued, “had been in there during the day, so they had a little more light, but not enough to work by without dark adapting. They found they couldn’t use torches inside, because the torches just flickered out. The ones I talked to thought maybe the ghosts blew them out. Nobody could work in there very long, either, or go in very far, because they’d feel faint. Some actually passed out and had to be rescued.”

“Oxygen starvation,” Bud surmised. “Something has used up the oxygen inside, and there wasn’t any way to replenish it. The place must be hermetically sealed. The air’s probably getting better, now, as oxygen diffuses in through their entrance hole.”

“My thoughts, too,” Glen agreed.

“How’d they get anything out?” Bud asked.

“They took turns. One would go in with a flashlight, grab all they could carry, and skitter on out. Then another, and another. Apparently, there’s treasure everywhere! It was easy at first – just run in, grab some stuff, and run out – but after they got everything close to their entrance hole, they had to go farther in. The air was worse farther from the hole, and they had to get out faster. After a while, they were in trouble by the time they reached the nearest good stuff, so they couldn’t get any more out. Nobody would say so directly, but I think they quit when a couple of them died in there, and nobody could find them to get them out.”

“You look all in,” Glen interrupted himself, suddenly. “This can wait. We’ll talk over dinner tonight. I promise not to be late.”

Bud’s response was to wave, then flop backwards onto the bed, sound asleep.

Glen lifted her legs to the bed, and kissed her on the forehead, then tiptoed out.

Bud slept the sleep of the just until eleven o’clock, and woke up refreshed. Energized, even!

She figured she had just enough time for a quick shower, then a short drive to the trailer-office near the mausoleum to surprise Glen for lunch. The weather had warmed up to comfortable, but not hot, so she put on a pair of jeans, western-style boots, and a tee-shirt. She grabbed her leather jacket just in case she'd overestimated the warmth, and rushed over to the trailer.

When she walked in, she found Chen Zhin sitting across Glen's desk from him, making goo-goo eyes at him. At the sound of the door, she jumped back, looking mortified at having been caught. She'd obviously had the same idea as Bud about lunch with Glen.

From the look of her outfit – high heel pumps, nylon stockings, blue short-shorts, and pink blouse unbuttoned way too far down – she was interested in more than just food. Bud was put in the unusual position of being out sexied with regard to dress.

Glen looked pretty embarrassed, himself, but was better at covering it up than Zhin. Unlike her, he recognized that his marriage agreement included license for him to fool around, so he felt less guilty about being “caught.”

While Bud had rethought her giving him that license after Pat's Dutch Uncle talk in Scottsdale, she'd been in Zhin's crotch, herself, and had enjoyed the experience. The idea gave her a pang, but if Glen wanted another go at Chen Zhin, Bud felt she couldn't in good conscience interfere. She decided to put on a brave front, and politely wait to find out what he wanted to do.

“Oh,” she said, “Hi, Zhin. Sorry to interrupt, Glen, but I thought I'd surprise you with lunch, but if you've already made plans”

“Unh ... Baby ... ,” he stammered. Then, he decided to come clean about everything. He remembered their “no sneaking” agreement, and wanted Bud to know he had meant it.

“Zhin and I enjoyed making love to each other Saturday night. ... She came by last night while you were

working, and we ... did it again. I was going to tell you, but we got talking about other things this morning, and then you fell back asleep. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be sneaking."

"Baby," Bud soothed, "as Gwen once said, 'It's not cheating if you have her permission.' I figured you just hadn't got around to telling me. I don't blame you for wanting some more of Zhin. I wouldn't mind getting some more, myself."

She decided not to lie by telling him she didn't mind his making love to Zhin. She found that it hurt! Under the circumstances, though, she decided to tough it out for now, and decide what to do about it later.

"Zhin," she said, "I'll let you borrow my hubby, but remember it's just a loan. I want him back, and in good condition, not all fucked up and confused. You can get as fucked up and confused as you want, but don't mess with *his* mind. Remember, he's still mine!"

This was not a response Zhin was prepared for. Half the attraction had been playing "the other woman." Sneaking around to clandestine trysts had been turning her on. It wouldn't be as much fun with the wife's permission.

But, maybe a dirty three-way behind her husband's back would be good. Yeah, an interracial three way!

"Please don't tell Ju Long," Zhin begged. "I know we did what you call 'wife swapping' the other night, but this isn't the same."

"Well," Bud allowed, "we don't like lying, and hiding things from people, but we won't volunteer the information. We won't tell him if you don't. Is that okay?" She figured that Glen would go along with her arrangement. It was a lot 'nicer' than the blackmail they'd contemplated before. She looked over to him, and got a blasé shrug of assent.

Perking up, Zhin invited, with a coquettishly arch smile: "Let's all go to lunch together, then."

22

By the time they reached the restaurant Zhin picked out, Bud had decided what to do about Zhin's wanting to have an affair with her husband. Despite any hints, promises, licenses, or resolutions to the contrary, she was going to break it up. And, she thought she knew how to do it. It was a strategy she'd been on the receiving end of whenever Red thought she was getting a little too friendly with Doc. Red called it "cunt blocking."

Walking from Bud's car to the restaurant, Bud positioned herself between Zhin and Glen, and hung onto Glen's arm, flirtatiously.

Hmmm. No wonder Red looked so pleased with herself when doing this. It was a lot like playing with a new boyfriend. Playing up the fact that she was attracted to him actually made him seem more attractive.

Not that she didn't find Glen attractive, anyway. She'd married him because she found him *extremely* attractive, and wanted to have sex with him at every opportunity. For an ex-patriot couple, opportunities came up often. It's just that flirting with him in public made everything seem – hotter.

She figured that operationally it worked just like the fact that putting on a happy smile made you feel happy. The way people are wired up, there seems to be a feedback pathway that makes you feel any emotion that you are acting out. If you make an effort to overtly *show* that you are happy, you generally *feel* happy, or at least happier. Putting on an depressed frown generally makes you feel sad.

Bud found that making a show of overtly flirting with her husband – as it were, *pretending* she couldn't get enough of him – made her feel like she couldn't get enough of him. It turned her on ... *a lot!*

She liked that!

After they were seated, Bud took control of the conversation: "Glen, I'm sorry I fell asleep on you this morning while you were trying to tell me what the pot hunters told you about Qin Shi Huang's Mausoleum. It was

just a long day with very little sleep.”

Apology completed, she launched into quizzing him for more information: “We’d figured out that there was light somehow getting into the tomb – enough to make it seem like a starry night.”

“I don’t know if you’d call it a really starry night. Out in the desert, you can almost read by starlight when your eyes get dark adapted, except that you can’t focus properly because your fovea’s still blind. It doesn’t sound like it’s quite that bright in the tomb, but there is light getting in. I’d say there was enough to make out shapes, but not any details, and it’s nowhere near enough to let your daylight-vision system, with the less-sensitive color-vision cone cells near the fovea at the center of the eye’s retina, work. They didn’t seem able to see anything at all unless they were deeply dark adapted. If they just went straight in from the outside, they had to use artificial light to see anything.”

“Alright, there’s a small amount of light, but not very much,” Bud corrected herself. “It sounds like Bertha’s cameras, which have far more sensitivity than human eyes, have a chance to see even without artificial light. With Bertha’s illumination system switched on, there should be plenty of light to see just about everything.”

“Well, a lot, anyway,” Glen agreed.

“The second thing I remember your talking about was that the air was extremely oxygen poor.”

“Yes, to the point of being deadly.”

“What do you think happened to the oxygen that was in there originally?”

“I don’t yet have any idea. You said you thought the mercury in the canals would have oxidized over time. Maybe that depleted the oxygen in the air. Do you think that’s possible?”

“Obviously, *something* did it. That’s our best candidate so far. I’m sure there’s a lot of other oxidizable material in there as well. It will probably become clear when we learn more. The big surprise is that it’s that well

hermetically sealed.”

Zhin was barely able to follow what they were talking about, especially since Bud had consciously steered their discussion toward technical English. Zhin’s conversational English was quite good, but she’d never been taught any technical terms. Thus, up to a third of the words Bud and Glen used were beyond Zhin’s vocabulary. It was too much for Glen to explain as they went, and way too much for Zhin to follow. She just didn’t know what they were talking about, and it made her feel stupid.

She was not used to feeling stupid, and it annoyed her.

That was all part of Bud’s plan.

“How did they get in?” was Bud’s next question.

“They crawled in through a long tunnel from outside the park.”

“Jeezus!”

“Yeah, talk about ‘nerves of a burglar!’ Those guys had to crawl on their bellies for two hundred yards under a roadway to reach the edge of the mound, then hundreds of yards further to reach the center, all the way in the dark, knowing what was at the other end.”

“Where’s the entrance?”

“In an abandoned building across the road from the compound. I can show you later.”

“I assume the whole thing’s shut down, now.”

“Uh, huh; Police occupying the building; Nobody in or out. The police have the guys who supervised the operation under close arrest.”

“Do you think their tunnel will be of any use to us?”

“Only as a tourist attraction once the dust settles. ‘See where the evil Capitalist pot hunters went in to steal our national heritage.’ They’ll set it up as a propaganda museum, I’m sure.”

“Did they *drag* all that stuff out? All that way?”

“They were starting to build a trolley – like an ore car in a mine – when working in the mausoleum became untenable.”

“So, the looting operation is already stopped.”

“Yes, in order to continue they’d have to upgrade their technology: night vision goggles, SCUBA equipment, finish their trolley, and so forth.”

“SCUBA equipment? As in ‘self-contained underwater breathing apparatus?’”

“Yeah,” Glen said, suppressing just the hint of a smile, “self-contained *underground* breathing apparatus. Actually, the simplest thing would probably be to just run a two-inch hose through the tunnel, and start pumping fresh air in.”

“Omigawd! You know what that would do to everything in there! It would all oxidize in a heartbeat. There’d be no way to conserve it before it all fell to dust. I hope they’ve now blocked the tunnel to exclude oxygen.”

“I don’t know, but I’ll talk to Ju Long about it. Preserving the atmosphere should probably be one of your priorities, too.”

“Good point,” Bud agreed. “I’m glad we stopped when we reached the wall, and didn’t break all the way through. We’ll set up some kind of an airlock, and look into SCUBA rebreathers for whenever we have to go in. We’ll have to do that to assemble Bertha inside.”

“Why *did* you stop? I was never clear on that. You just reached a wall from the outside, and shut the excavation down. You could have pushed through, but refused to and wouldn’t say why.”

“I didn’t say why because I couldn’t. I didn’t know. I just had a feeling that breaking through without knowing what was on the other side would be a mistake. It looks like it was the right thing to do.”

“Are you coming down with Doc’s precognition?”

“Maybe. I *am* a Taoist, and this whole place is steeped in Taoist sorcery. All I know is at the last minute something told me to stop and wait. It wasn’t the right time to break through.”

“Hmmm. That sounds a lot like the way the ancients talked. ‘The signs aren’t propitious now,’ and all that. I married a sorceress! You’re now a Taoist witch?”

“Yeah, well, you go live with Doc and Red for a while, and we’ll see how spooky you get!” Bud suggested. “Have you any idea how the seal got to be so tight?”

“My interviewees said the floor is all tile. If the whole thing is tile, or stone blocks, that would make a pretty good seal, especially since you found they’d packed clay around the outside to exclude groundwater. That would exclude air as well. Oh, yeah, they said the whole place is full of the sound of rushing water.”

“There was supposed to be some kind of turbine system to keep the mercury rivers flowing. Supposedly, it was powered by an underground river channeled into the place,” Bud pointed out. “I doubt if the mechanism is still functional, but the waterworks could easily still be in there, splashing around. We should look for signs of flooding.”

“We sure would want to find that mechanism!” Glen exclaimed. “Think of what we could learn about their technology.”

“We can’t do anything until we have the map,” Bud pointed out. “Then, we can plan priority areas, and so forth. Bertha’s work will be the key. I just wish she were smaller.”

“How much more can you squeeze out of your interviewees?” Bud asked, changing the subject.”

“I don’t think very much, except descriptions of what they pulled out, already,” Glen surmised. “That’s very important information, but won’t help you much with planning for Bertha.”

Glancing at his watch, Glen added: “And, I’m supposed to get back for the next round of interviews pretty soon.”

“One last thing,” Bud said, “while I’m thinking about it. When you’re done with your interviews, why don’t you take over the dig. I’m thinking we could take a cue from the looters, and tunnel under the wall, shoring up as we go, then open a hole up through the floor. Then incorporate the tunnel into our airlock.”

“That’s the way I would have done it, anyway,” Glen said. “Okay, I’ll finish my interviews, then restart the dig. Anything I should know about the mercury? That’s why you were doing it in the first place.”

“Just avoid any powdery red sand,” Bud advised, “and don’t come up in the bottom of a canal. Let’s get together on it when you’re ready to break through.”

“That’ll be a while, now,” Glen estimated. “Now, I’ve gotta run!”

“I’ll take care of the check,” Bud volunteered. Secretly, she congratulated herself on monopolizing so much of Glen’s time, and thereby breaking up Zhin’s plans for a tryst. Bud was pleased that Glen had cooperated so well. Hopefully, that meant he wasn’t all that interested in Zhin.

Neither Bud, nor Zhin, had finished their meals, and neither had a pressing engagement, so they made no move to follow Glen out the door.

Bud was a little surprised that Zhin didn’t express more disappointment. Instead, she seemed to want them to spend time together. After Glen left, she reached over and put her hand on Bud’s, affectionately.

“If you don’t have any other plans,” Zhin suggested, “Maybe we could do some window shopping this afternoon. I just have an empty apartment to go back to, and would like to spend more time with you.”

23

This sounded like a veiled invitation to an impromptu date, which might lead up to a lesbian session, later. Considering that they'd already had sex once before, the veil looked gossamer.

Bud had trouble believing that Zhin had metamorphosed from prude to slut in the time available, but had her own reasons for going along. She figured that an affair with Zhin could still net useful information. Furthermore, playing with her might help reduce the odds that she would continue playing with Glen. If anyone was going to have an affair with Chen Zhin, Bud didn't want it to be Glen. Finally, Bud found Zhin's Betty-Boop-with-an-Asian-twist act to be very seductive. Thinking about that cute little shaved pussy hidden in those short shorts practically had her coming, already.

The idea of fending Zhin's advances off did make a brief guest appearance on the stage of Bud's mind. It was a very brief appearance, which ended with a big hook dragging it offstage due to strong audience disapproval.

Whether she really meant to or not, Zhin had made her bed, and Bud was now very definitely going to sleep in it.

They did actually spend about two hours in department stores, where Zhin said she needed some new underwear.

They were not looking at what Frank Zappa once called "those big ol' ugly cotton jobs." Zhin dragged Bud over to the sexy, sheer postage-stamps-with-string counter, then insisted she needed to try on everything on display. She wanted Bud's opinion of how they looked. Bud thought they looked spectacularly sexy.

Then, Zhin insisted that Bud had to try them all on, too, and model them for *her*.

Then, Zhin insisted that they had to go right to her home, and try them all on again.

You know how that turned out!

Bud ended up teaching Zhin the fine points of tribbing – rubbing their clits together. The biggest surprise at this point was that there was anything left for Bud to teach Zhin. What had that woman been *doing* over the past three months?

Anyway, that all ended when Zhin's two boys got home from school. Zhin had watched the clock, and by the time the boys reached the apartment, they found the two women demurely sipping tea. An hour later, a satiated Bud was at the *pensioné* waiting for Glen to get home so they could go out for dinner.

Dinner conversation centered on results from the afternoon's interviews. They added nothing to what Bud and Glen already knew about conditions in the barrow, just confirmed conclusions from their earlier conversations. Especially, all interviewees reported that the peasants universally believed the barrow was haunted. They all claimed to have seen ghosts in there, themselves.

The looters had tried using children to do the work, but that failed. The children could be talked into going in the first time, but came out frightened half to death, and would never go back. If the kids were forced to go into the tunnel, they never came out the other end. Instead, they'd curl up in a ball part way through, whimpering. They'd be too frightened to go forward or back. Someone would have to go in and drag/carry them back out.

Peasant men weren't a lot better. They were brave enough to go through, but would pick up as little as possible, and scamper right back out. The only thing that worked was paying women on a per-piece basis. The looters would pay the women so much per pound of gold, so much for silver, so much for jade, and so forth. The women would load themselves down, nearly killing themselves to get out as much as possible before exhaustion and anoxia put them on the floor, gasping for air. Greed worked better as a motivator with married women than single women, or any of the men, and it was the only thing that worked at all.

Bud, like a good little supervisor, reached the factory at six-thirty: half an hour early. Not surprisingly, she was greeted by Sgt. James Timms, the same squad leader who had locked up for her that morning – twenty hours

earlier.

Night shifts play havoc with peoples' schedules.

The guards' second shift ran from six in the evening to two in the morning. Bud's crew was scheduled to work from seven to three, so if Bud hadn't sent her guys home early last night (because they were falling asleep on their feet), Timms would have been long gone when Bud left. Instead, she left just before Timms' shift ended.

As it was, Timms had been on duty for half an hour when Bud showed up. He engaged her before she got to the loading-dock door.

"Ma'am," he said with a knuckle salute, "Sargent Evans wanted me to point out that Ms. Petersen was in the blimp hangar for about two hours with Dr. Chen this afternoon."

"That shouldn't be a problem," Bud replied. "She has clearance. She probably was bringing Ju Long up to date on our progress, which is reasonable, and within his rights."

"Yes, that's why Sgt. Evans didn't question it. Since it was outside normal protocol, he thought you should know about it, anyway."

"Of course, thank you James. I appreciate it."

24

Gwen showed up at quarter to seven – still a quarter hour early – grabbed a double espresso, and sat at the control console next to Bud.

“I hear you showed Ju Long around in here this afternoon,” Bud said.

“Is there a problem with that?” Gwen asked, slightly surprised by the comment.

“No,” Bud replied, “David thought it was unusual, so he asked James to point it out to me when I arrived, that’s all. I assume Ju Long wanted to see Bertha.”

“He also wanted to see *me*,” Gwen reported. “We made it right here on this table before I gave him the grand tour.”

“I hope you had fun,” Bud said. “I assume that was the point of the exercise. I can’t see any other.”

“Actually, it seemed that he was trying to use sex to loosen my tongue. Like he was playing at being a spy, or something.”

“That’s weird. He has full access to anything that goes on in here, and at the mausoleum. He doesn’t need to romance you to get information, just ask.”

“I only report what it seemed like he was doing.”

“You must be mistaken. I’m sure he just wanted to play out a fantasy. What kind of nut would go to all that trouble to get something he could have for the asking?”

“A criminal nut. I’ve seen it before. Those guys will go out of their way to do something in a sneaky way, even if it’s easier to get it honestly. It’s part of the psychology of being a criminal.”

“So, you’re telling me Ju Long has a criminal streak?”

“Yeah, about a mile wide! Watch out for that guy.”

“Okay, point noted. Anything else I should know?”

“Not really, except that he seemed to like what he saw.”

“Don’t blame him. I always liked what he saw, too,” Bud quipped.

“I don’t mean my personal naughty bits,” Gwen said, smiling at the joke. “I mean our progress with Bertha.”

“Good, it’s always good to have the client pleased. If fucking you is what it takes to keep him pleased, I vote for letting him do it. Of course, it’s your choice.”

“Oh, I agree with you,” Gwen agreed. “If sex with me keeps him happy, I’m happy to make him happy. It’s not like I’m a blushing virgin. Besides, if I cut him off, we may never find out what’s really going on in his head.”

“It’s funny that I had a similar experience this afternoon with his wife,” Bud reported. “She didn’t ask for any information, however.”

“I wonder if she was just trying to keep you from coming down here, and interrupting whatever her husband was trying to accomplish by depositing semen in my vagina. It wouldn’t be the first time a wife conspired with her husband in something nefarious. Better keep an eye out in case they’re up to something more serious than gathering a little information.”

“Hmm, that makes more sense than his trying to romance information out of you that you’d tell him, anyway. If they’re involved in something criminal, and it’s amateur night, they might have trouble knowing when to be sneaky and when not to bother.”

“*That’s* starting to make sense,” Gwen replied.

“In a bizarre, twisted sort of way,” Bud pointed out.

“Criminals tend to behave in bizarre, twisted ways,” Gwen stated. “I should know, having spent a lot of time with them. Half of what makes them screw up in the first place is that trying to be sneaky makes them do so many things the hard way. Crime’s usually the hard way for them to reach their goals, whatever those may be, but they can’t seem to see it.”

“Still, it seems like an awful lot to go through for very little effect.”

“That’s something I don’t understand,” Gwen added, changing her tone, “and maybe you can shed some light on it. Why, if the odds are stacked so heavily against criminals, do we *all* seem to want to try it? Is it the excitement? Some suicidal impulse? Why?”

Bud thought for a minute. She understood the dynamic, but how to explain it concisely?

“The odds being stacked against criminals,” she began, “is actually a very recent development. Ten thousand years ago, it just wasn’t like that.”

She stopped again for a short while.

“Humans are tribal,” she began again. “They have a strong sense of *us* against *them*. Individuals by themselves are very weak.”

She stopped to think, again.

“If you think of the heroes ten or twelve year olds want to emulate, they’re individuals who are so personally powerful that nobody can defeat them. They can do anything they want because they are somehow invulnerable and invincible, like Superman. We then have to overlay a strong moral sense to make them the good guys. We all want to be good guys, so we imagine our heroes as being good guys out of choice, because they’re supposed to be so powerful nobody can *force* them to be good guys.”

“In primitive societies – ones that are barely organized at all – people who combine being big and tough with being smart become heroes for the rest of the tribe. The others want to emulate them, and follow them when they lead. But, a leader who offends the rest of the tribe too much gets ganged up on, and that’s the end of that. The *really* smart ones understand it, and work hard to keep the tribe happy.”

“That includes settling disputes. If you take what your brother, or cousin, or somebody else in the tribe has, it’s up to the leader to stop you. The group can’t function if they fight among themselves. That’s where we get the idea of crime, and the idea that crime is bad, and that it’s up to the leaders to stop it.”

“Outside of the tribe, however, all bets are off. Tribes compete for resources all the time. Maybe the valley your tribe lives in starts drying out, so you look around for a better valley to live in. The better valley always has someone else living in it, already, so your tribe needs to go in and kick the others out. They won’t share because there’s only room for one tribe in the new valley, and so forth. That’s the origin of warfare.”

“I think the point I’m trying to make is that crime is generally aggressive behavior within your group, and is censured by the group. Warfare is aggressive behavior outside your group, and there’s nobody to complain to.”

“So, when groups band together,” Gwen surmised, “they form a super-group that suppresses inter-group violence, and it gets labeled a crime, too.”

“Right,” Bud agreed. “Whether some act is good or bad depends on a complicated calculus involving who the victim is, how well organized your society is, and how powerful the opposition is. My favorite example is found in Homer’s *Odyssey*. When faced with arriving home from Troy empty handed, the Greeks thought nothing of turning to piracy. They decided to raid a city in Egypt on their way home. Slaughtering innocent Egyptians was a ‘who cares’ to them. They didn’t think of it as a crime. Coming home broke would have been more shameful.”

“But, when Odysseus and his son Telemachus decided to slaughter the gang of suitors camped out in Odysseus’ house, the first thing they thought about was how they were going to justify it to their neighbors. Killing innocent Egyptians in order to take what the Egyptians had was not a crime to them, and needed no justification.

Killing decidedly *not* innocent suitors invading his house and holding his wife hostage *was* a crime for Odysseus, however, which he actually went to trial for at the end of the book.”

“Another good example is Europe after the fall of the Roman Empire,” Bud continued. “Society was so poorly organized that any band of thugs could get away with just about anything. ‘Might makes right’ was a real operational rule, then. What we would consider crime today was the only way to fame and fortune. If you were aggressive, callous, and cruel, you could become an aristocrat. If you were kind, gentle, and meek, you got to be a downtrodden serf. The only alternative was to become a monk or a nun, which effectively took you out of the gene pool.”

“That’s been the condition throughout most of human evolution. So, it makes sense that we’re wired up with a drive to be aggressive, callous, and cruel. We’re also wired up with a competing drive to be kind, gentle, and meek because you need that to get along within the tribe, and most people need to get along within the tribe. To be successful in life, you need to be aggressive, callous, and cruel when necessary, and kind, gentle, and meek at other times. What we call criminals are people who have trouble matching the behavior pattern with the situation. That’s why we talk about them being stupid.”

“Doc and Red, on the other hand, are rugged individualists. They take a walk on the wild side whenever it suits their purposes. But, they always carefully contemplate the results of their actions. I have reason to believe that right now they’re doing something that breaks some law. Doc all but told me they were planning to. But, like Odysseus, they’ve made sure they have a justification that, when it comes out in court, will get them a pat on the back instead of a prison sentence.”

25

The walk on the wild side that Doc and Red were engaged in at the time involved shopping for antiques in London. They'd started by cultivating curators of museums with access to the rarest and most exotic pieces, most of which were simply not available to the general public.

They'd always been patrons of contemporary art, and Red's parents had collected high-end art for years. For example, Red's stepfather had an original Jackson Pollack hanging in the salon on his yacht. All his various residences were stuffed with priceless original masterworks. His family had collected art for generations, and Red hadn't been slow to pick up the hobby.

The difference was that Red and Doc liked hanging out with the artists, themselves, as much as looking at the art. That meant patronizing *living* artists. The dead ones weren't much for conversation, and weren't any fun at parties. They might have been once, but when you're dead, the life just goes out of you.

Anyway, Red was thus a second-generation aficionado. So, nobody raised an eyebrow when she started branching out into collecting rare objects of all kinds. Of course, she wanted only the best, the rarest, the most exotic. She had the money to buy it, and the education to appreciate it.

She and Doc also had a reputation for being mavericks. Everyone knew that in their personal life they did pretty much as they pleased, with no regard for convention. Doc, especially, *knew* the rules, but they were just part of the landscape. He obeyed them when it suited him, just as he opened the throttle on his motorcycle a little wider when going uphill, in obedience to the Law of Gravity. He understood Newton's Law of Universal Gravitation, and followed it, or circumvented it, as was to his best advantage. Red was well known for sharing that same attitude.

It took no time at all for traffickers in antiquities of questionable provenance to notice Red. She fit the profile: tons of disposable income, a taste for the rarest and the best, and a cavalier attitude toward laws governing polite behavior.

Soon, she began meeting and doing business with dealers distributing artifacts looted from ancient burials, which were simply unavailable to anyone but a select few: the select few who could afford the unobtainable, and could be trusted to keep their mouths shut about where it came from.

You couldn't display such stuff too openly. Red decided to keep hers at a remote ranch in Colorado, which was a ten-thousand-acre meat-producing operation owned by a corporation that was owned by a holding company, which was part of a conglomerate, ...

If anyone had time and energy to follow the chain of ownership, they'd finally come around to the whole thing being controlled by Red's unborn daughter, Elise. The ranch was becoming filled up with exquisite ancient artifacts of suspect origin.

At this point, Red had found her way to the office of Corky McInnes, the same felicitator who'd helped Gwen gain an introduction to the Middle Eastern dictator from whom she'd bought Cara out of slavery. Corky had been useful then, and would be useful now. Corky had no idea how he'd been used then, and would have no idea how he'd be used now. Red and Doc, unbeknownst to him, would protect Corky from involvement, though. People like Corky were too useful to sacrifice – unless necessary.

This time, Corky was helping Red add to her collection of first-dynasty Chinese jade. The story was that Red had developed a love for jade. The way the light filtered through the translucent stone was just wonderful. Of course, the best effect came only from the most flawless stone carved by the most painstaking artists. Jade fit for a king. Or, an emperor. Specifically, the First Emperor of China.

Red especially liked the Taoist subjects treated by carvers serving the royal court during the first dynasty. Qin Shi Huang had arguably been the most illustrious Taoist of all time. It was rumored that he was so deeply into Taoist alchemy that he died when an alchemical experiment went sour. He'd been trying to find the elixir of life, but, unfortunately, came across an elixir of death, instead. The historical record said something about mercury poisoning.

Before his accident, however, he'd commissioned incredible works of art in jade.

Corky was used to tough customers sitting menacingly in his office asking him for introductions to the nasty pieces of work he could introduce them to. Somehow, Red and her bodyguard, whom she introduced as her husband, looked even more dangerous.

They didn't menace.

They were polite and friendly.

Like nobody could attack them, anyway.

Like bullets wouldn't bounce off of them because the bullets would be afraid to get that close.

Red smiled at Corky with cold eyes. She was huge, muscular, powerful and, despite obviously being pregnant, moved like a cat. The man she introduced as her husband was even bigger, and looked like she'd been serving him Green Berets for breakfast, toasted and buttered, with his choice of strawberry jam or marmalade. Beside being huge, with muscles bulging his suit jacket, he had shaggy brown hair, a full beard, a scar crossing one eyebrow, and a gold tooth glistening from between his smiling lips. He'd scare shit out of the bullets!

Corky would not want to get cross ways of either of them. Both of them together? Forget it!

"Oh, I just *love* first dynasty Chinese jade," she said, sounding like a teenager talking about collecting Barbie dolls. "Qin Shi Huang commissioned the most wonderful statues made of green jade."

Corky wasn't fooled by the cheerleader act. He thought her green eyes matched the jade she wanted to collect in both color and hardness.

"If you want to look at those pieces, they're all in museum collections. You can go see them, anytime," Corky pointed out.

“Yes, that’s where I learned about them. But they won’t sell any to me. They won’t let me take them home.”

She sounded like a spoiled teenager disappointed when a rock concert was sold out.

“That’s about the only place you’ll find them,” Corky pointed out.

“I heard some stuff has come on the market from Qin Shi Huang’s mausoleum.”

“You heard that where?”

“Different places,” she said defensively.

“I know it’s true,” she said, suddenly serious, and with all the sweetness gone from her voice. “The question is whether you can help me obtain them, or not.”

She’d apparently run out of patience. Corky felt the air temperature in the room drop twenty degrees.

“I came here because I’d been told you could help,” she stated. “Are you wasting my time?”

“No,” Corky hoped to fend off her displeasure, “but you must understand that buying and selling those items is illegal.”

“Not the point. Can you help me?”

“Yes, I can,” he admitted.

Three days later, Red was touring a secret warehouse in Xi’an, China. The warehouse was large, dark, cold, and filled with everything from glazed roofing tiles to silver earrings and necklaces. While the collection was extensive, it was not what Red wanted.

“I was told you had some rare pieces,” Red told the warehouse manager, who introduced himself as “Benny.”

“What are you looking for?” Benny asked.

“Jade,” Red said. “Specifically, first dynasty jade.”

“Only the best,” she added, quickly.

Benny had been told that this woman was rich, eccentric, and not to be disappointed.

“Come with me,” he said.

He led her and her bodyguard/husband to the very back of the warehouse, to a small room blocked off from the rest by corrugated steel walls. It contained rows of shelves containing exquisitely crafted gold, silver, jade, porcelain, and bronze artifacts, all neatly arranged by type of material.

“Here are the jade pieces,” Benny said, pointing out a section of the shelves. “All are beautifully crafted pieces right from Qin Shi Huang’s mausoleum.”

“How did you get them,” Red asked. “I thought the tomb was sealed.”

“We have our ways,” Benny said cryptically. “A few pieces have come out, and we are the only source for you to obtain them.”

Red ignored the jade Benny was pointing to, and began systematically inspecting every piece in the room.

“The jade is over here,” Benny said irascibly. Since his wife died, his health had gone downhill, and he had no patience with people. This woman had asked for jade, and he had shown her jade, but now she was looking at something else. It made him grumpy. Her behavior angered him.

“And she’ll get to it,” the man she’d introduced as her husband said, clapping his big right hand on Benny’s right shoulder. The grip was tight, and made Benny’s shoulder hurt. Benny squirmed to get out from under the hand, but it gripped tighter. Benny squirmed some more, and the other hand gripped his other shoulder so that he

could squirm no more.

Benny had trouble catching his breath.

He became frightened.

When he stopped squirming, the grip loosened slightly so that it hurt less. Feeling that, he tried squirming out of the hold, again. The grip tightened again, and hurt more than before.

Benny stopped squirming, and the pain lessened again.

Benny got the point.

After Red finished her inspection of the entire room, she turned to Benny and said: "I'll take it."

"You'll take what?" Benny said. The right hand left his shoulder, and clamped around the back of his neck. The long fingers wrapped most of the way around it, practically meeting over his larynx.

"All of it," she said.

"I have other customers," Benny whined. "I have distributors waiting for these pieces."

The fingers tightened around his neck.

"Not anymore," she said. "From now on, everything goes through *me*. Your distributors will have to come to me for their supply."

"Aughh!" Benny said as the grip tightened unbearably. "Alright!"

The grip loosened enough for him to breathe.

"When can we have more?" she asked.

“There is no more,” Benny said.

The fingers tightened around his neck again.

“I swear it,” Benny screamed. He was becoming really frightened that the man would simply snap his neck. It felt like he could do it easily. Benny didn’t know how much longer he could take the pain.

“You mean to tell me this is everything Qin Shi Huang, the first emperor of China, took to his grave? I don’t believe that.”

“It’s all that could be gotten out!” Benny shouted desperately. This time the grip did not relax.

“Wait! Help! I think we can get more, soon!”

The grip relaxed.

“Conditions in the tomb are impossible,” Benny explained, then raised his hands in supplication before the grip could tighten again. “The government is bringing new technology in,” he squealed, “that will make everything in the tomb accessible. We will be able to divert the best pieces for our customers.”

“How long will this take?” Red demanded.

“Soon! Weeks! I don’t know!” Benny pleaded.

“Now,” Red said, as Doc sat Benny down in a chair, keeping his hand loosely around Benny’s neck – just in case – “let’s talk about your distributors.”

26

After his interview with the Americans, Benny had to go home and change his pants. He'd been that frightened.

He'd been so frightened that he'd spilled his guts about his distributors in Europe, America, and even the Middle East. He'd wanted to shield his contacts in the Middle East. They were sadistic, vindictive bastards, and would think nothing of killing a little Commie infidel like him, if he displeased them. But, they were five thousand miles away, and Benny was more interested in shielding his partners here in China.

They were powerful officials within the Peoples Committee for Cultural Education, and could make him disappear whenever they wanted. They had already made his suppliers of goods from Qin Shi Huang's tomb disappear. Benny figured those suppliers were probably already stuffed unceremoniously into cramped tombs of their own. He didn't want to join them.

Better to sacrifice those creeps in the Middle East. Let this huge redheaded American deal with them. From the sound of it, she just wanted to insert herself into the distribution chain, anyway. She'd surprised Benny by only demanding half of his profits. He'd expected her to take more, especially with that bearded monster with the gold tooth ready to squeeze the life out of him.

He would have to explain to his Chinese partners what had happened. He had no idea of how to do that, but he'd have to do it, and do it soon. They'd find out fast, anyway, and it would be bad for Benny if they found out from somewhere else first.

The next day, when Benny sheepishly stood before his partners on the People's Committee to tell his side of the story, Dr. Chen laughed.

"This is actually wonderful," he said jovially. "They own the company that is doing the excavation of Qin

Shi Huang's tomb. No wonder they have been so cooperative. They were planning to cut themselves in on the operation all along!"

He laughed again at the turn of events.

"They will make good partners for you," Dr. Chen advised Benny. "Keep us out of everything, but tell them you need help reorganizing the supply chain. Tell them that everyone looting the tomb had been arrested, and that you need help getting more artifacts out. It sounds like they already plan to deal with your customers. All you'll have to do is receive the pieces, clean them, and pass them along. It will now be even safer for us.

Dr. Chen's face became dour. "Make sure it stays that way!" he warned.

Discussions with the Americans took over a week. It was a difficult week for Benny, because they continued to terrify him. He thought that once they were assured they would get what they wanted, they would be easier to deal with.

They weren't.

The big man, whom the woman never really introduced except to say he was her husband, although Benny heard her calling him "Doc," seemed to delight in pushing Benny around. He left new bruises whenever they talked.

The woman, whom Doc simply called "Red," told Benny that he would be contacted by some archaeologists about setting up a warehouse to hold artifacts their expedition team would take out of the tomb. He would be asked to find a warehouse of a certain size, and with certain facilities. He was to follow those instructions scrupulously.

Red explained that the way Benny had been handling artifacts was unacceptable. It was clumsy and dangerous both to the artifacts and to him. The archaeologists who contacted him would explain to him new ways to do it, which he was to follow as well.

She warned that if he did not handle the objects the new way, his health would continue to deteriorate, and soon he'd be useless to her. Her organization, she explained, was run very efficiently. Useless things were eliminated.

He would be receiving all of the material removed from the tomb, and storing most of it. After everything was cleaned, he was to select a small percentage that he would deliver to her. She explained how much he would divert, and how he would select what was to be diverted. She also explained how to fix up the accounts so that it looked like he was delivering the diverted items to the People's Committee to use for propaganda purposes.

Interestingly, it was not the choicest pieces that Benny was to divert. The best pieces Red told him to *really* make available to the People's Committee for propaganda purposes. She said that the archaeologists would be very suspicious, and would be watching to make sure the People's Committee got really good stuff to show off. If Benny did not follow instructions to the letter, he would be caught. Then Benny would be free to start an exciting new career providing food for worms.

It was the worst week of his life.

Finally, it was over, and the awful Americans decided to go home. But, Red said, she had spies, and would be watching every move he made.

"Don't make me come back," she warned him.

Benny had his own spies, which he told to follow Red when she went to the Beijing International Airport to catch her flight back to Arizona.

Not surprisingly, they were not the only Americans at the airport. It seemed that half the tourists in China were Americans, and that they all wanted to meet that particular flight, either to embark on it, or to see friends off.

In particular, Benny's spies noted that one especially tall couple were seeing a short, blond woman off. The man was tall, with an intelligent face, light brown hair, and wire-rimmed glasses. He was with an only slightly

shorter athletic-looking woman with long, blond hair.

The two blonds embraced intimately as they parted, the short one to board the plane, and the tall one to leave the airport with the man.

As she turned, the tall blond saw Red. Who could miss Red, standing head and shoulders above any crowd?

“Baby!” the tall blond squealed, apparently recognizing Red.

Red, however, after a surprised glance at the blond, quickly turned away and walked rapidly toward the boarding gate.

Upset at being snubbed, the blond squealed again, trying to attract Red’s attention. Doc looked up at the commotion, then gave the blond a stern look, and imperceptibly shook his head from side to side, as if to warn her not to make any more commotion.

The blond saw this, and backed away, still looking upset. The bespectacled man gathered her in his arms, and bundled her off toward the terminal exit.

This all happened so fast, and seemed to have so little import, that Benny’s spies never bothered to tell him about it. It looked to them like another case of mistaken identity. Not unusual in an airport full of lonely ex-patriot foreigners.

Outside, Bud broke down in tears.

“She wouldn’t even look at me!” she complained to Glen. “I haven’t seen my Baby in weeks, and she pretended she didn’t know me! What was she doing here, anyway?”

Then the penny dropped.

“Oh,” Bud cried, “she’s undercover, and didn’t want to be seen with me.”

Suddenly putting her hand to her mouth, she exclaimed: “I hope I didn’t blow her cover! Oh, what have I done?”

“I don’t think anyone noticed,” Glen soothed. “It looked like you mistook her for somebody else. I think it was okay.”

“Should I call Doc to make sure?”

“Not today,” Glen advised. “Call him in a couple of days, when they get home, but I don’t think there’s a problem.”

After leaving the airport grounds, they stopped at a small restaurant for an late lunch, then drove back to Xi’an.

27

Bud did not have to call Doc. He called her for a progress report.

“Hi Doc! I’m glad you called!” was her greeting when the call connected.

“Have you thought about why your cellphone works?” Doc asked before she could say anything else.

“No, why?”

“You’re in the middle of a police state talking on a supposedly encrypted cellphone. Either they’ve figured out how to listen in, or they’re letting you get away with it. Can you imagine them letting you get away with it?”

“Oh ... No, I can’t.”

“If they weren’t listening in, they’d block your calls.”

“Uh. Oh. Uh.”

“How’s progress with Bertha? I’ve been out of touch for a while. We’ve been traveling.”

“So I’ve heard. Everything’s hunky dory.”

“I haven’t heard *that* one in a while!”

“Just trying to give our audience a challenge.

“Vixen!”

Bud giggled. She liked playing with Doc, and hadn’t had much chance to do it recently. She wanted to make the most of the opportunity.

“How’s things on your end,” she asked, not able to think of anything else, she’d become microphone shy now that she realized they had an audience.

“I love you. Red loves you. Don’t forget that, despite what you might be thinking right now.”

Bud realized he meant their snubbing her at the airport.

“No nasty fallout?” She figured Doc would know she meant problems stemming from her performance at the airport, but the listeners wouldn’t have a clue.

“None. Skies are clear. Gwen sends her love, too. She’s already given me a full technical report. Looks like things are working out well for you. Keep up the good work.”

“Thanks. We should have the mapping done PDQ. Then, we’ll start planning ground explorations. When will we have our Worm operator?”

“He’s due to arrive here Friday. Then, it will be a week for basic training, and another for programmer training. Gwen figures you can give him the developer course there. Does that suit you?”

“No problem. That makes a lot of sense. We have to program the Worms for independent action, anyway, so why not train him to do it at the same time?”

“Why not, indeed? Any more about the ceiling? Do you know how they made the skylights?”

“Nothing new since Gwen left. The part we’ve explored has thirty feet over head. The roof’s held up by walls of the simulated buildings. The buildings look like they’re all two stories tall, with the outside walls extended all the way up to the roof. There’s no way Bertha can go over them, and she’s too big to get through the doors. We’ll have to explore them with Worms. The rest of the space seems to be accessible. We’re mapping the ceiling at the same time we map the floor.”

“I’m curious about that turbine,” Doc said.

“So aren’t we all”, Bud replied. “Bertha should reach it by Thursday. Maybe late in the day Wednesday.”

“I’ve an idea about those skylights. Let’s try to pinpoint their locations inside, then you or Glen can walk over the top of the mound to find what is outside. I think you’ll find glass globes several inches across.”

“You’re thinking light pipes?”

“Exactly. With hemispherical lenses at the collecting ends.”

“Literary sources claim oil-filled lamps to burn for eternity,” Bud reminded him.

“Yeah,” Doc scoffed, “eternity or a few days, whichever is shorter. Qin Shi Huang and his engineers weren’t that stupid.”

“You think the story’s bullshit?”

“On that particular point. Oil lamps may be in there, but nobody’d believe they were going to light the place for eternity. Qin Shi Huang would have a more permanent solution if he didn’t want to spend eternity in the dark.”

“I never liked the oil-lamp story, myself,” Bud concluded.

“Are the lights inside in a regular pattern or scattered?” Doc asked.

“Glen said the looters reported no regular pattern.”

“If you can still get to them, show them a star chart. See if they recognize constellations.”

“Is it important? Bertha’s picking up the lights’ locations, and we can use Worms to photograph the ceiling during daylight later on. If it’s not urgent, we’ve a lot else to do.”

“Yeah, you’re right. It can wait. It’s waited twenty two centuries, another few weeks won’t make a difference.”

“Speaking of waiting,” Bud digressed, “Now that he’s done with looter interviews, and we’ve gotten into the barrow, Glen wants to start setting up a lab to curate objects we take out. Any suggestions? You always have good suggestions.”

“Thanks, but don’t make a habit of relying on me. I want you to be in the habit of thinking for yourself. But, in this case, I’ve a suggestion for someone local you could work with to set things up. He’s a funny little antiques dealer in Xi’an, who calls himself ‘Benny.’ I’ll have Red email his contact info to you.”

“He should be able to set everything up for you,” Doc continued. “Give him detailed instructions as to what you want, and he’ll set it up for you. He can find a space, set everything up, and curate the stuff under your supervision. He’s a little bit bent, so don’t trust him out of your sight. Actually, he’s bent like a pretzel. He’ll do exactly what you tell him, if he thinks you’re watching him closely. If he catches you trusting him, though, he’ll screw you over, big time. Also, don’t ask too many questions about his other activities. You won’t like the answers.”

This must be the weird stuff Doc warned her he’d ask her to do.

So, that was what he and Red were doing in China. Somehow, it gave her a warm, fuzzy feeling that she was still part of the team with an important role in the overall strategy. Doc really did have her back.

She hadn’t realized how much anxiety she’d been carrying around, thinking that maybe she was on the outs. All along, she’d had her doubts as to how she fit in. Doc had told her what to expect, but she’d always worried that maybe she was really being left out. Now, she could see that she wasn’t, and it felt *awfully* good.

When Glen got home, Bud dragged him off to the park for a picnic. Doc’s comments about people listening in on their cellphones had made her a little paranoid. She figured walking around in the park would be the hardest place for the spooks to listen in, especially since they’d never taken a walk in the park before, so the spooks wouldn’t be prepared for it.

They picked up fried rice at a vendor's stand on the corner near their hotel, and took it to the park to eat out of containers. Bud found the spot she wanted, sitting on a rock eroded out of a hillside surrounded by trees. Trees that were close, but not too close.

This all felt weird in a way she didn't like.

"I talked to Doc today," she reported between mouthfuls of fried rice. "Red's supposed to email me contact information for someone to set up a lab to curate whatever we take out of the mausoleum."

"Local?" Glen asked.

"Yeah. He's supposed to be an antiquities dealer with questionable ethics. Doc says to give him detailed instructions, then watch him to make sure he does what he's told. I have the feeling he's already had his grubby fingers on some of Qin Shi Huang's grave goods, and Doc's setting him up for a fall. Knowing Doc, he's probably got some kind of hold on him, already, to keep him in line. We're to make sure he knows we're watching him."

"It sounds like Doc and Red met him when they were here last week," Bud continued, "and threw a royal scare into him. We're to bully him a bit to make sure he stays scared. I think we want him to think that we're spies for his new masters – Doc and Red – and that if we get displeased, nightmares will catch up with him."

"Doc doesn't seem like a nightmare to me," Glen pointed out.

"That's because you're a good guy," Bud countered. "He can play pretty rough when he wants to. Red's told me stories."

"Such as"

"Such as, one time when Red first met him, he temporarily paralyzed a guy who wanted to slap her around. He just grabbed the guy by the wrist, and that was it. Half a second later, the guy couldn't move his arm for, like, and hour. Then, Doc had Red's shadows follow him out to his bike, and stand over him until he drove away. Red

says that getting crossways of Doc can be traumatic.”

“I’ve heard she can play a little rough, herself,” Glen said.

“Yeah, I’ve seen her put guys in the hospital. The difference is that, where she’s physical, Doc works on their minds. He looks for a character weakness, then exploits it. Turns would-be tough guys into gibbering idiots with a few words.”

“He’s never done anything like that around me!”

“Yeah? I notice you’re awfully patient with my antics. A lot more patient than most guys would be.”

“That’s got nothing to do with Doc,” Glen claimed.

“Oh, yeah?” Bud challenged. “I remember you having a long heart-to-heart with Doc before you asked me to marry you. You came back with a whole new attitude.”

“Well, he just explained about your relationship with Red. It put things in a whole new light. He didn’t scare me, or traumatize me, or anything like that.”

“He didn’t need to,” Bud explained. “That’s not the way to handle you. You’re a reasonable guy, so he reasoned with you. It’s that simple.”

“You make it sound like I’ve been manipulated,” Glen sounded disappointed.

“No, Baby. It’s not like that. You were having trouble with me, remember? Getting jealous and distrustful? Doc just helped you adjust your attitude.”

“What if I didn’t want my attitude adjusted?”

“I’d probably still be looking for my guy. If you hadn’t been the one, you would have walked away. I’d probably be down in Mexico right now, banging muchachas to keep from being lonely. Glen, I’m so glad I have

you, and I'm grateful to Doc for helping make it possible. I never want to make you jealous, or unhappy. Let's get off this subject. I love you, and always will. Enough said!"

28

While Bud continued mapping the mausoleum with Bertha, Glen contacted Benny to set up the conservation lab.

Glen didn't consider himself a scary guy, so he wasn't sure how to make sure Benny stayed scared. He called Doc for advice.

"How should I talk to your antiquities dealer?" Glen asked. "I'm not a bully, or a scary guy. But, I don't want him to think he can walk all over me, either."

"It's just like classroom management," Doc replied. "You don't let your undergraduate students walk all over you, do you? You use psychology to keep them in line."

"Yeah, but they're intelligent adults, and know that if they fail to follow my classroom rules, or get assignments in on time, or study for tests, I'll make them sorry come grade time."

"It's the same thing here. Benny's an intelligent adult. In fact, he's savvy enough to run a business of his own. I think half of his trouble – maybe more than half – is mercury poisoning. Talk to your wife about what symptoms to expect. Red made sure she was thoroughly trained to watch for, and handle, mercury poisoning, so she could take care of the people she's got working around the tomb.

"Benny's been mishandling the stuff, so he's probably loaded with it. His over-emotionalism and mood swings are the first tipoff. He's got rashes and a blotchy complexion, which are tipoff number two. He's probably got more symptoms that aren't so obvious. Your first priority is probably to clean up his act. Over time, his body should clear the stuff out, and he'll return to normal, whatever 'normal' is for him."

"Other than that, he's basically a greedy weasel. As is usual for greedy weasels, he's managed to get himself between a rock and a hard place, and is trying to squirm out of it. He's got his old partners in crime, whoever they

are, trying to keep him under *their* thumbs; he's also got new partners trying to exert control, too. They all want a piece of him."

"Now, *you* show up asking him to set up a legitimate operation, but his partners want him to cheat on the operation he sets up with you. If you don't like what he's doing, he doesn't know whom you'll complain to. It could be the People's Committee funding the whole thing. It could be his old masters, or his new masters, or some combination. He doesn't know, but having any of them pissed off is bad news for him."

"The less he knows, the more his imagination will invent bogeymen to be afraid of. Use that. You be the good guy who can protect him from the bogeymen, but you'll do it only if you want to."

"If you give your students a failing grade in Anthropology 101, it can wreck their academic careers. If you give Benny a failing grade, it can end his life."

"You should handle him just like you do your students. With your students, there are consequences to their incurring your displeasure. They know it. You know it. Most importantly, they know that you know that they know it. When you evaluate their performance, you don't let being a nice guy interfere with giving them a fair grade. If they screw up, they fail, and you don't let personal feelings interfere with it."

"Basically, your attitude needs to be the same with Benny. If his performance pleases you, you'll protect him from the wolves. If it doesn't, you'll feed him to them. You don't have to be mean or nasty as long as Benny believes you won't be a softy come grade time."

"By the way," Doc added, "your wife knows how to do this really well. When she was running Red's security operation in Mexico, some corrupt cops killed one of her operatives trying to get at Cara. Bud tore the police commissioner a new asshole on the spot! She had half of Tampico under martial law before getting around to telling Red about it. Don't be afraid to ask her for help handling Benny. Work on him together."

When Glen related this conversation to Bud, she understood what Doc was suggesting right away.

“You can be your usual sweetheart of a guy,” she said. “Just add a little critical edge. Let him imagine a sadistic monster hidden under a sweetheart act. It’ll scare Hell out of him. And, when you’re ready to inspect what he sets up, let me know. I’ll go in with you to give his arm a little twist.”

And, that’s *almost* the way they worked it.

The first task they gave Benny was to find a warehouse with the right facilities and location to suit their purpose. Glen met with Benny first. Glen towered over Benny, and stood a little too close when he explained what he wanted. That made Benny look up to him at an uncomfortable angle. Other than that, Glen was jovial and friendly. He wanted Benny to do well out of their relationship, and said he was sure Benny would give him exactly what he wanted. Then, he repeated that he was *very* sure Benny would give him *exactly* what he wanted.

A few days later, Bud accompanied Glen to inspect the facility Benny had picked out. Before going to the warehouse, they sat with Benny for a while in his office.

Bud’s sexual-attraction radar picked up appreciative stares from Benny. So, Bud started quizzing him about his home life.

“Are you married, Benny?” she asked, demurely.

Bud detected a tinge of guilt when Benny responded: “My wife, unfortunately, died last year.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. Any children?”

“No,” was all Benny said, but his face betrayed a complex mixture of disappointment, anger, loneliness, and remorse. This was a definite sore spot in his life. Bud decided to probe some more.

“How did your wife die? I hope it was not from a painful illness.”

“No,” Benny admitted, “she fell from the balcony of our apartment.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that. It must have been terrible for you.”

Bud was all concern and sympathy – purposely laid on a little *too* thick.

“Yes,” Benny responded, then turned away. He was trying to be the tough businessman, but somehow couldn’t manage it.

He felt tears welling up in his eyes.

Bud noticed.

By the time they reached the empty warehouse for an inspection tour, Bud thought she knew how to handle Benny.

“Ooh! I like this,” Bud gushed, hugging Benny’s arm coquettishly.

As Benny felt her rubbing her breast against his shoulder, he threw a frightened glance at Glen. Glen was watching with a stony expression. No, Benny corrected himself. Glen’s face wore a barely controlled *vicious* expression. The man would have no mercy for someone whom he caught his wife flirting with.

That made Benny want to pull away from Bud, but he was as much afraid of offending her, as of offending her husband.

He was in a no-win situation. Sexual attraction to Bud was replaced by morbid fear of both of them.

Glen started quizzing Benny about how he would lay the laboratory out in the warehouse space. Bud started tickling the back of Benny’s neck with the tip of her finger while leaning so close, he could feel her warm breath on his earlobe.

When his answer to Glen’s question elicited a hummed “Mmmm” from Bud, Benny began sweating profusely.

By the end of the hour that Benny spent showing Glen and Bud around the warehouse, he was stammering in terror. These were obviously the archaeologists Red had warned him about, and Benny had become convinced that they weren't playing with a full deck. Benny figured the majority of the cards they did have were spades and clubs – weapons of war. He figured their deck to be light on hearts.

He'd never missed Hsiu Mei's comforting presence so much as he did right now. Stoically, he held back tears until he finally got home. There, he lay on their empty bed, buried his face in her pillow, and sobbed for the rest of the night.

Conversely, Glen, who had been just as stoically holding back jealousy pangs until *he* got home, found himself suddenly showered with kisses.

"Ooh! I'm so proud of you!" Bud enthused, as if he were a little boy who'd just put in a sterling performance in the school play. "I was afraid you'd get upset when I started flirting with Benny, but you played your part to perfection."

Then, she planted a big wet one directly on his lips.

"Actually, I was pretty upset," he admitted when she let him up for air.

"But, you didn't show it. You played the part of the kinky husband letting his wife misbehave, so he could have a free hand when *he* misbehaved."

"Actually, I was holding back the urge to misbehave right then and there, and to do it violently."

"Yes, that's exactly how you looked, and it scared shit out of Benny!"

"Are we going to have to go through this every time we deal with Benny?"

"Unfortunately," Bud advised, "I'm afraid so. We could tone it back a touch, but pretty much, yeah."

“I don’t like this game,” Glen informed her.

“You aren’t supposed to like it,” Bud explained. “In fact, it’s better if you don’t. That’s how we keep Benny off balance.”

“What if he wants to call your bluff?”

“You’ll stop him.”

Seeing Glen’s look of dismay at the idea of getting into a fight, Bud added: “It wouldn’t take much. You’ve practically turned him into Jell-O already. An angry word would do it.”

“What if I’m not there?”

“Baby, I’m not going near that creep without you.”

“What if he comes looking for you?”

“I’ll hurt him.”

At Glen’s look of disbelief, she added: “You’ve heard what an angry redheaded karate master can do. Believe me, blond fist fighters can do as much. In fact, Red’s big score only ended up in the hospital. The guy *I* beat up was maimed for life!”

Remembering the story of what Bud had done to the white slaver, and that she’d managed to snuff three pirates in as many days of captivity, Glen sullenly nodded acknowledgement. He always saw his wife’s loving, nurturing side. He tended to forget that she was also a killer with multiple corpses to her credit. Out of necessity and for self preservation, but the corpses were there.

“Don’t worry, Baby,” Bud said, gathering him in her arms, “If push comes to shove, I’ll just turn into Sadista, Mistress of the Torture Rack. Benny will come running to you for protection.”

“What if he *likes* it?”

“I’ll make sure that he doesn’t. Believe me, when blood starts to spurt, flesh starts to shred, and bones start to crack, nobody comes back for more. It’s just a question of being willing to do it. I love you, Glen, and I’m perfectly willing to kill the little bastard for you.”

“And, I’d kill him for you, too,” Glen admitted. “I just don’t know how.”

“It’d come to you, I’m sure,” Bud laughed. “But, we won’t let things go that far. I promise.”

29

Zheng Quon arrived in Xi'an with enough modules and spare parts to for ten Worm robots. Quon was the archeology student selected from the latest graduating class at Beijing University to study Worm programming in the United States, then return to play a central role in using the technology to explore the mausoleum of Qin Shi Huang, First Emperor of China.

He was impressed by the honor afforded him. He knew he'd been selected from hundreds of applicants from universities all over China. He knew he'd been selected based on his academic achievement, interest in robotics, personal recommendations of his instructors, and the notice he received from high Communist Party officials.

He thought he was a rock star!

Gwen was not impressed. She'd fucked rock stars during her years as a hooker in Reno, Nevada. She knew they reached that status five percent through talent, and five percent through being at the right place at the right time, and ninety percent through being willing to jump through hoops for people ready to market their work. She knew (and had fucked) much better musicians who played for chump-change donations on street corners. They were the *real* artists, who cared about nothing, but their art.

Yeah, she felt Zheng Quon had a lot in common with the rock stars. His opinion of himself was based largely on what his supporters said about him, and little on an objective assessment of his ability. He was, to dredge up a hackneyed description, a legend in his own mind.

Gwen, however, didn't care what he thought of himself. She cared about his ability to listen and learn. On that score, he did pretty well. Not as well as she had, but that's because she'd not entered her training with preconceived notions of her own importance. She'd been grateful for the opportunity, and blown away by the idea that she had the ability to learn *anything* about robotics. She'd concentrated on sucking up knowledge like a sponge.

You see, in the field of robotics, she was a real artist, too.

It took Quon a day to realize that this cute little coed, who hadn't yet finished her college degree, was light years ahead of him in the field of mechatronics. He didn't learn it in robotics class, though, where she was the instructor. There, he figured she was just some cute girl who knew something about robots, and was hired to teach the class.

His disabusement started in the parking lot after work on the first day, where he saw her getting into a shiny yellow Ferrari Enzo. He, being the high-tech-archaeologist equivalent of a rock star, knew about high-end sports cars that he hoped one day to own. He recognized her car from pictures he'd seen. He knew it was the top of the line model from the world's top sports car manufacturer, named after the legendary Maestro Enzo Ferrari, himself.

At first, he thought the car was just something Gwen had gotten from rich parents. When he talked to her about it, and offered to show her how to drive it, she responded with: "Honey, *nobody* gets to drive my cars."

Cars, plural.

One of which was an Enzo.

"Where did you get it?"

"The Ferrari dealer on Scottsdale Road."

"I mean, who paid for it?"

"I did, of course."

It was then that he found out she could afford to buy the car because she got a cut of all SST's UAV sales in the Far East. Then, he found out she got that cut because she'd set the whole program up, herself. She was the one who taught the instructors, who taught the instructors, who taught all the pilots. He'd seen those aircraft demonstrated at robotics shows, and dreamed that someday he would fly one.

He'd just offered to teach the top gun of all the top guns in the UAV world how to drive a stick shift.

His ego crashed to the pavement, and splintered into little pieces.

Gwen noticed, and picked it up, dusted it off, then restored it to him.

"Quon, you did very well on your first day of training," she told him, changing the subject to one she could make him feel better about. "I can see why they selected you to work with us. This is an important new technology for archeology, and by the end of the week, you'll be among only a dozen people in the world qualified to use it. In three weeks you'll be working with the top ROV archaeologist in the world on the most important dig in the world. I'm sure you'll make me proud."

After that, he listened intently to every word she said, and did his best to learn everything she taught. He wanted to live up to her prediction that he'd make her proud.

And, he did.

"We'll start you out with an overview of what we're doing here," Glen explained as he drove Quon to their warehouse for orientation. "I'll show you some of the artifacts we've uncovered, how we catalog them, and conserve them. Then, I'll take you to the dig site, where Ms. Thompson will show you how we're using robots to map and explore Qin Shi Huang's tomb, and what we've found there. She's been using an autonomous lighter-than-air UAV to map the site, and we've got a pretty good idea what's in there, and how it's laid out. That's one of the unusual things about this site: we can map the whole thing before turning a shovelful of dirt. At that point, you'll be ready to participate in exploring the tomb."

At the warehouse, Glen introduced Benny to Quon.

Quon did not like Benny. Benny seemed the opposite of the wise, careful academic scientists Quon was used to dealing with at Beijing University, or the intense, focused engineers at SST. Benny seemed more like a hawker selling stolen jewelry hanging from the lining of his trench coat. He made Quon want to back away before he got

dragged into something unsavory.

“Benny seems almost like a criminal,” Quon complained on his ride back from touring the warehouse.

“Benny *is* a criminal,” Glen explained. “It’s a difficult aspect of our work. Crooked antiquities dealers like Benny often have the earliest and best access to the archaeological sites we want to study. So, we have to deal with them often.”

“On the other hand,” Glen continued, “their activities do more damage to archaeological sites than anything else. We need them to bring things to our attention, then we must elbow them out of the way as quickly as possible to minimize the damage. Left unchecked, pot hunters digging stuff up for people like Benny can turn a beautiful archaeological site into a trash heap in no time. We need to get in there before that happens, and save it.”

“Benny,” Glen explained, “also sits in the middle between the pot hunters trashing the site, and the collectors who compete with museums to take the stuff home. Once these artifacts disappear into private collections, they may be lost to Science for good.”

“Is that what is happening here?” Quon asked, obviously afraid for his country’s historical treasures.

“It started that way,” Glen reported. “But the pot hunters didn’t count on the mausoleum being filled with deadly mercury contamination. Conditions in the tomb are so awful that humans cannot work in there, so the grave robbers had to give up before they got very far.”

“Those that went in became sick,” Glen added. “They couldn’t hide their ailments, and the government found out. To protect the site, the PRC called us in. Using superior technology, which you’re learning about, we’re able to carefully explore the site, capture the scientific information, and guard it against looting, all without endangering people.”

“Couldn’t the government just stop the looters? Why do they need to excavate, anyway? After all, Qin Shi Huang just wanted to be left alone in his afterlife. It’s been safe for two thousand years, why disturb him now?”

Quon was starting to question just how different he and his fellow archaeologists were from the pot hunters.

“Aside from our mandate as archaeologists to illuminate the past for those living in the future, if we left, the looters would just come back,” Glen countered. “Once somebody’s gotten in, the site is no longer safe. We’ve seen it many times. Experience in Egypt has taught us that hiding treasure doesn’t make it safe. It just delays the inevitable. There’s a saying: ‘You can’t take it with you.’ Ancient kings who’ve tried have all been disappointed.”

“So, how can one protect a nation’s treasures?”

Surprised by the question, Glen said: “Your people figured that out even before Qin Shi Huang’s time. Lau Tsu gave us the recipe. Loosely paraphrased, it’s: ‘The way to prevent theft is to not have treasures.’ Wealthy people, however, just can’t seem to avoid it. Qin Shi Huang created that huge mausoleum to house his treasures for eternity. My wife has friends in the U.S. who are devout Taoists, and understand Lau Tsu’s advice perfectly. Yet, they are also wealthy, and have a huge, beautiful house full of art treasures, which they have to guard with an army. It’s the age-old dilemma.”

“Can no one escape?”

With a sigh, Glen said: “I don’t think so. Even poor people, who are unable to pile up treasure, find themselves getting robbed all the time. If you have *anything*, you’ll find someone wanting to take it away from you.”

30

When they reached the trailer at the mausoleum, Bud set Quon to work flying through the virtual-reality landscape inside the tomb. He sat before a four-foot by three-foot flat-panel display mounted against the wall at one end of the trailer, with 3-D glasses on, and ear muffs that provided sound.

Bud sat next to him with a similar headset, and showed him how to use the system. Using a joystick, he was able to guide the display's point of view through the three-dimensional simulation of the space Bertha had already mapped. Whenever he came to the edge of what was included in the simulation, he saw only empty blackness.

Similarly, if he looked into windows or doorways of most buildings, he saw only blank blackness. Only one building, one of the closest to his "entry point," had contents inside for him to see. If he entered, however, only what could be seen through the doors and windows was visible. The rest was blackness.

There was one other exception. In one of the rooms, walls and woodwork appeared that couldn't be seen from the doorway.

"Why can we see around in this room, and not the others?" he asked Bud.

"That was an experiment," she explained. "We wrote modules to extrapolate what those walls should look like based on how the rest of the room was decorated. We found that doing so provided little of value, and opened the door to confusion – What is real and what is extrapolated? – so we quit doing it. Similarly, we got little by peeking in through doors and windows, and quit doing that, too. Your Worms are here to fill in those blanks."

"Ahhh!" Quon said.

"What is that roaring sound?" he asked.

"Far from being silent, the tomb is filled with the sound of rushing water. An underground river was

channeled through the space. When we found out about the sound, we added quadraphonic sound pickups to Bertha's sensors. It helped us locate the river, and the water turbine it was intended to power."

"Where is that?" Quon asked.

"Follow the sound," Bud replied. "The quadraphonic system let's you orient on the sound, just as if you were in the space. Imagine yourself as a disembodied consciousness exploring the space."

"Is that how ghosts experience the world?"

Surprised to hear a college graduate asking about ghosts, Bud replied: "Well, it would be if there were such things as ghosts. The conventional picture of a ghost is a separated consciousness located at some point in space. Taoism, on the other hand, teaches that when one dies, what people think of as one's spirit – basically the software and memories associated with that person's consciousness – merges with the Tao. That means it spreads out into the Universe."

"The picture I prefer is that all the things that make up a person live on through their descendants, and the people they've touched. Their DNA patterns, for example, live on through their descendants. Their thoughts and experiences live on through the people to whom they've related what they've learned. So, Albert Einstein's thought experiments live on through millions of people who've learned about them. His 'ghost,' as it were, keeps growing and developing as people use his ideas to develop more ideas. It does not, however, exist as a separate entity. I hope that makes sense."

"Yes, it does," Quon said.

"What's important here," Bud brought the conversation back to the main focus, "is that *you* are able to go into Qin Shi Huang's mausoleum, and explore it almost first hand, without the inconvenience of having a body that requires oxygen, and can't stand the poisonous environment in there. That's why we quit extrapolating anything beyond Bertha's direct observations. We now just go in and observe what's there."

“So,” she continued, “rotate your point of view until the sound seems to be coming from directly in front of you.”

“It’s hard to tell the direction,” Quon reported, playing with the controls to rotate his point of view. “It seems to be coming from everywhere.”

“That’s because of having all those echoes in an enclosed space. Keep trying, and you’ll start to notice a difference between the sound coming directly, and the echoes.”

“I see,” Quon said, delightedly, after a few minutes trying. “There is a slight difference in that direction. The sound is slightly louder, and somehow seems different.”

“The echoes become modified by the things they reflect off of,” Bud explained. “The direct sound is clearer.”

“Ah, yes!”

“Now, go in the direction of that sound. It will become louder and clearer as you approach the river.”

“Oh, I lost it,” Quon said, disappointedly, a few seconds later.

“You moved too fast,” Bud suggested. “Stop, reorient on the sound, then move more slowly, stopping whenever you aren’t sure of direction.”

It took Quon fifteen minutes to reach the apparent source of the sound.

“I can’t get close,” he complained. “If I try, the picture just gets fuzzy, and I can’t see any more detail.”

“The data set is limited by Bertha’s cameras’ resolutions,” Bud explained, “and how close she maneuvered to what you’re looking at when she visited there. Remember, at this stage her purpose is to map the whole space. She just gets enough detail to create a general picture. We’ll come back to fill in additional details later.”

“With the Worms, right?” Quon suggested.

“Your Worms’ first priority is to go into spaces Bertha can’t reach. After we have a complete map, then we can choose places to explore in more detail.”

When Quon reached the source of the rushing-water sound, he found what appeared to be a short section of white-water rapids. The river poured out of a tunnel under a plaza.

People, whom Quon recognized as terracotta statues, appeared to be strolling about the plaza in groups of two or three, or sitting on stone benches enjoying the tranquil environment. Two guards stood sentinel to maintain order, should order need to be maintained.

The guards weren’t, of course, actually needed. Polite terracotta statues hardly ever misbehave, and only polite statues were allowed into Qin Shi Huang’s mausoleum. Statues of criminals and political enemies had been excluded. The China depicted in Qin Shi Huang’s mausoleum was the China of Qin Shi Huang’s fondest dreams.

In fact, Bud had noted no scenes of cruelty, at least so far. Qin Shi Huang was reputed to be a paranoid, and probably a psychopath – most dictators seem to be psychopaths – but was apparently not a sadist. He did not enjoy cruelty. He just didn’t give a shit about anyone besides himself. He certainly performed many cruel acts, including mass murder and torture on a scale that rivaled Vlad the Impaler (the guy who inspired Bram Stoker’s Count Dracula character), but apparently didn’t do it for fun. If he had, he would undoubtedly have included scenes of cruelty in his mausoleum for him to enjoy in the afterlife. Since he didn’t, he probably didn’t.

One side of the plaza ended abruptly in a parapet wall, with a few statues leaning over it to watch the river rush rapidly out of the tunnel directly below. Whatever they saw in the river must have been fascinating, to hold their attention for twenty-two centuries!

Then again, terracotta statues are noted for being extraordinarily patient.

We might imagine that these statues exhibited the patience of Zen masters, except that they predated

Bodhidharma's arrival in China by some seven centuries. Before Bodhidharma brought Buddhism to China, Zen, which is a fusion of Buddhism and Taoism, did not exist.

As the river exited the tunnel, its course became narrower, and the water rushed faster until it crashed into a mass of wreckage, whereupon it sprayed high into the air in a voluminous rushing fountain.

"Notice the water moving," Bud pointed out. "That's an enhancement we developed at SST. We start by having Bertha stare at the river for at least half a minute. Then, the simulation re-runs the motion continuously. Notice that the same eddies appear in the stream over and over, and flow with the current. We do the same thing with the splashes in that fountain created by the wreckage."

"That was *my* idea," she added, proudly.

The fountain spewed water over a wide area of jumbled objects, until it finally settled back down between the walls of a wide canal, which ran off into blackness.

"Where does it go?" Quon asked.

"We haven't mapped down that far," Bud explained. "We only reached this area late last week. It was a high priority for us, so we extended our explorations in this direction until we reached this plaza, then spent some time covering it. Notice that you can see things here more clearly because we had Bertha come in close. Our CEO, Doc Manchek, is a fluid dynamicist and wanted to get a detailed picture of the wreckage to see how the turbine system worked. He's analyzing it now."

"Our current focus," Bud explained, "is to produce a flat map of the mausoleum identifying different areas to be explored. We call this area 'The Water Works,' for obvious reasons. We're also looking for Qin Shi Huang's crypt. We assume that will be at the center of his palace, and will represent his throne room, and the government center of his afterlife empire. But, we can't be sure until we find it."

"I should think it would be at the center of the mausoleum," Quon offered. "Why not just go there first?"

Bud laughed: “Doc’s also an astrophysicist, so little things like government – how one group of animals stuck on a middling planet circling a third-rate star organize their affairs – are of secondary interest to him. He also considers political history to be just a byproduct of the history of technology. Since we all work for him, his priorities are our priorities. So, the mysteries of how the mausoleum was designed to work come first. How Qin Shi Huang, megalomaniac extraordinaire, imagined he’d govern China in the afterlife is far down the list.”

“There also should be a treasury laying around here as well. Since we aren’t treasure hunters, and don’t believe the pot hunters ever found it, it’s of little interest to us. We’ll note its location when we stumble on it. Right now, we have Bertha systematically scanning the space to produce a comprehensive three-dimensional map. While she’s doing that, we’re using her observations to create a flat map and identify things she’s found.”

“What is it you want me to do?”

Smiling, Bud said: “Thank you for thinking like a team member. I know your role is to assemble and operate the Worm robots, but before doing that, it would be best for you to familiarize yourself with the tomb by helping us assemble the flat map. You do that by exploring this virtual space, and noting down everything you see.”

“By the time we have the map done, I think you’ll have a good idea what you need to do, and how to use the Worms to best effect. There may be additional technology we need to bring in, as well. For example, I want to use a submersible to explore that tunnel where the river enters, but the current is too fast and the space too small for the automated ROVs we have. They were designed for open waters, like harbors and deep-ocean operations. This presents us with technical challenges we haven’t needed to face before.”

“So,” Quon asked again, “what is it you need me to do next?”

“Go out to our website on SST’s intranet, and take a look at the current version of the flat map. Then devise a plan for systematically visiting all parts of it. Each day, Bertha extends the database into new regions. She visits those spaces and uploads her raw data to our server over there.” She pointed to another trailer outside.

“The server then automatically washes the data through a virtual supercomputer it assembles from *ad hoc* resources on the World Wide Web. The final result is what is called a point cloud, which is a dense array of points defining a three-dimensional surface. Each point has attribute data, such as *x*, *y*, and *z* coordinates, along with surface-optical information, such as color, transparency, and reflectance. Taken together, the point cloud forms a three-dee map of the surface.”

“That three-dee map is what you’re observing on this station. After you get done using the three-dee point cloud to familiarize yourself with the space represented by the current version of the flat map, I need you to help extend the flat map by adding the new parts Bertha explores each day. When the map is complete, you’ll assemble your Worms, and start exploring the places Bertha can’t get into. By then, you’ll know how to do it.”

31

While Quon was sitting at the console in Bud's office in Xi'an learning to explore Bertha's virtual-reality rendition of the space inside Qin Shi Huang's mausoleum, Doc sat with his feet up on his desk in his office in Scottsdale, Arizona, some six-thousand five-hundred miles away, exploring the same data set through another version of the display.

The version *he* used looked like a thick plastic headband covering his eyes and ears. Two small-format display screens presented images generated by the GIS viewer software to his eyes through twin optical systems that projected virtual images at infinity. Since the images all appeared at infinity focus, rather than at the various distances presented by parallax between his eyes, the effect still wasn't perfect, but it was very, very good. It felt like looking through high-quality binoculars at a scene, rather than directly.

A miniaturized quadraphonic speaker system built into muffs covering his ears provided a three-dimensional acoustic environment as well. The sound system was even more convincing than the visual system.

Doc had three ways to control what he saw. First, the display appeared to cover his entire field of vision, wrapping forty-five degrees up and down from straight ahead, and ninety degrees to either side, so he could look around by simply turning his eyes in their sockets.

Second, he could rotate the space displayed by simply turning his head. MEMS-based sensors tracked his head movements, and rapidly redrew the display to present that part of the space his head orientation indicated. This improved the virtual-reality effect while preventing motion sickness due to dissonance between what his inner ears were telling him, and apparent motions of his virtual head in the simulated space.

The third control was a short baton he held in his right hand. By tilting it forward or back, or to left or right, he was able to move his point of view in the virtual space forward or back, or to turn it left or right. The amount he tipped it controlled the speed of motion. To approach some feature, he had only to tip the baton to the side to rotate

his point of view toward it, then move closer by tipping the baton forward. He could also turn his head to face the new direction, then use the baton to move toward it. As his virtual point of view moved, it would rotate to face the direction of motion, relieving him of the need to keep his head turned in real space. The rotation was timed to mimic a standard-rate turn in an aircraft, so it was easy for him to follow with his eyes and neck.

The effect of turning and moving his virtual point of view was all mediated by MEMS tilt sensors built into the baton. Buttons built into the baton's mushroom-shaped top allowed him to make two dimensional snapshots of what his virtual eyes saw, change scene illumination, and produce other effects.

One effect that he was using a lot right now was the ability to place small spherical dots at points in virtual space, and then move them around. Then, he could measure the dots' positions and the distances between them.

This virtual reality system was running on his office server. The server was a node on SST's intranet, which also included a supercomputer providing computing resources for the entire company, as well as World Wide Web access. His software engineers were developing a GIS-viewer system that would run on his tablet computer, so he could reach the virtual reality simulation from anywhere he had Internet access, but they expected that would run more slowly, and it wasn't ready, yet, anyway.

Right now, Doc was using the system to develop an accurate three-dimensional model of the original Water-Works mechanical system in a computer-aided-design (CAD) program running simultaneously on the tablet. His engineers were still working on software modules to view the tablet display in a window in his virtual-reality headset, but that wasn't ready, yet, either, so he had to electronically save the measurements to a file on the server, then lift the headset off so he could see to use his tablet to retrieve the data and download it to the CAD database. It was a clumsy system, which he hoped to have upgraded soon.

So far, Doc's analysis indicated that descriptions of Qin Shi Huang's mercury-pumping system at the Water Works were accurate. Power came from the underground river emerging from a spring under the plaza. The water's speed was increased by funneling it through a venturi created by narrowing the canal as it approached the turbine.

The narrowed channel formed the water flow into a jet that impinged on the turbine blades.

The turbine itself was a side-shot waterwheel that appeared to be fabricated entirely of bronze. Bronze is more resistant to water corrosion than iron, and so Qin Shi Huang's engineers might have expected a longer service life from a bronze wheel than from one made of iron.

The water wheel lay flat, spinning in a horizontal plane within a circular race formed by the stone walls of the channel. The stones had been carefully laid with practically no gaps between them. The wall faces had been trimmed and finished to form a perfect circular cylinder with only a small gap between the wheel's paddles and the race's inside surface.

It appeared that the entire wheel had been submerged to reduce corrosion from wet metal exposed to air. The paddles had been affixed to a bronze cylinder around the wheel's spokes, which helped confine the water's movement to the space between the paddles and the stone walls of the race.

Inside the wheel's center, within the bronze cylinder, would have been a circular pool rotating with the wheel. The water would have exited from the race into a channel of the same width and depth as the jet. The exit channel then widened out as it flowed off into the blackness marking the end of Bertha's explorations.

The turbine's power takeoff was via a porcelain-covered vertical bronze shaft forming the wheel's axle. There had been bearings at each end of the shaft, but it wasn't yet clear how the bearings were made. Doc suspected a jewel bearing similar to those in a fine mechanical watch. He couldn't be sure, however, since the upper bearing seemed to be missing, and the lower bearing was hidden under the turbulent water. In his CAD model, he put in his best guesses for the missing parts, coloring them bright orange to signal that they were missing from the original.

The vertical shaft turned an iron cog wheel, which formed a right-angle gear set with a second cog wheel on a horizontal shaft leading away from the turbine to a paddle wheel, which apparently was meant to push the mercury through the simulated river system. As Bud had predicted, the mercury had long since oxidized to a red

powder filling the canals meant to simulate China's rivers.

It appeared that the system had failed many centuries ago. Doc would have been surprised if it had lasted even one century without maintenance. A rock, apparently eroded from inside the spring feeding the water channel, was jammed in one of the turbine paddles. Because the upper turbine bearing was missing, the wheel had slipped out of place, and was jammed in its race. The cog wheels no longer meshed.

It was unclear which had happened first: the rock jamming the turbine, the turbine bearings failing, or the cog-wheel mechanism wearing out. It was entirely possible that one had happened, causing the other failures. For example, the rock could have become jammed, stopping the wheel and causing an unsupportable load on the bearings.

In any case, the whole mechanism was badly worn, so it must have operated for a considerable amount of time before failing. Observing the robustness of the construction, and the amount of wear on the cogs, Doc figured it may have operated as designed for decades before breaking down.

32

While Bud and Quon used Bertha to explore the mausoleum space, and Doc analyzed the Water Works machinery, Red was busy taking over Benny's former bosses' stolen-artifact distribution system. At the moment, she was in the Middle East being treated to a private dinner by the ruler of a small emirate, whom she knew to be an antiquities distributor for a large part of the region. She was hoping to force the Emir to help her track down the whereabouts of artifacts stolen from Qin Shi Huang's mausoleum and sold to Middle Eastern collectors.

The situation had turned dangerous.

"Madame McKenna," the Emir said, "I am not stupid. I remember your involvement with my brother's difficulties last year. I do not know what your relationship with Miss Petersen is, but I know she lied to my brother about wanting to buy that slave girl for a brothel in New Jersey. Both she and the girl appeared at Senator Bosley's reception for his Committee on Human Trafficking, which your father hosted in Washington. You were there, too. And, I now see her bodyguard standing behind your shoulder."

While Red had Jeremy, and others outside, for protection, they were seriously outnumbered. She and Elise could not afford to be outmaneuvered as well. She knew that if the worst happened, Doc and her step father would work together to dismantle this entire country to get at her killers, but that wouldn't help her, or Elise. Elise would never be born. Red couldn't let that happen.

"Your brother," Red explained, feigning limited patience to cover her fear, "had difficulties because he was a fool. When we met in Washington, I got the impression that you were wiser. Show me that I was right. Don't follow your brother's example!"

"Jeremy was here last year with Ms. Petersen because she works for me," she continued, knowing the only way out, now, was to play her hand to the end, and win. "Your brother made the mistake of enslaving the wrong woman. Her name, by the way, is Cara. Don't forget it. Her parents are influential people, who were not at all

happy about what was done to their daughter. They are friends and supporters of Senator Bosley. It took them two years to find her. When they did, Senator Bosley came to *me* to get her back, not the international police.”

“Your idiot brother,” she summarized, “tried to use drug addiction to destroy a woman who is worth ten times what he was. She now works for my husband, is married to a major in the Mexican Army, and is on a first-name basis with the President of Mexico. Your brother was too stupid to know with whom he was dealing. You did your country a great service by eliminating him. Death was too good for him!”

“Senator Bosley didn’t come to me for help because I’m such a goody-two-shoes. He knew the international police couldn’t help, but he knew that, with an army of trained mercenaries under my control, I could. I’m not hampered by international law, or anyone else’s law. I use the law when it suits me, and circumvent it when it doesn’t.”

“Right now,” she lied, “I see an opportunity to do very nicely by circumventing the law to help avid collectors obtain examples of the rarest Chinese antiques on the planet. Through my contacts in China, I control the source. You have enjoyed a monopoly on the distribution of these pieces throughout the Middle East. Do you want to continue to do so, or do you want me to supply somebody else? As your brother’s example shows, I can always arrange to have someone else to deal with.”

Meaning: if the Emir did not want to deal with her, she could arrange for there to be a new Emir, who would be more cooperative.

The Emir did not know how she could carry out her threat, but he remembered Gwen Petersen maneuvering *him* into assassinating his brother, and taking over the country. And Gwen was just one of this woman’s underlings!

His brother had not known it could happen until it was too late. He had clearly underestimated the people with whom he was dealing. The Emir had no intention of emulating his brother’s mistake by underestimating *this* woman.

Yet, he was not quite satisfied.

“Yes, there are millions to be made in this trade,” he said, “but you already have tens of millions through your husband, and billions through your father. Why would you bother with such a small operation?”

“There are things more important than mere millions of dollars,” Red pointed out. “The collectors you supply are often powerful, influential people, who would not want their hobbies exposed. Through this trade, I will meet them, and learn of their hobbies. I will be able to influence them to use their power for *my* purposes.”

As, the Emir realized, she was doing to him right now.

It was the old carrot-and-stick routine. The carrot was continued support and supply of these exquisite examples of ancient Chinese art, which were unobtainable otherwise, along with a share in whatever this woman thought was more important than “mere millions of dollars.” The stick was loss of these advantages, and maybe his life.

It was, he decided, a very effective strategy.

“So,” the Emir tried, “all you want is for me to receive additional pieces, and pass them along to my customers, as I have been doing in the past.”

“Oh, no,” Red laughed viciously, “I want much more than that! Before you receive *anything*, I want to know who your customers are, and what you have given them already. Just collecting fees for serving as a middleman is, as you’ve pointed out, of little value to me. I want to know who your customers are, and what they have done that they don’t want others to know about. I will want to meet them, and look them in the eye so they know to cooperate when I make my demands. I will want to have enough evidence to get them into a great deal of trouble.”

“Even I don’t have such evidence,” the Emir complained.

“If you want to be part of my organization, you will get it,” Red warned. “If you don’t want to, I will find

someone who does.”

In the end, Red left the Emir’s country with a list of his customers, what they had purchased in the past, and what they might want to buy next. The list also included any “hobbies” the Emir knew them to have. She also had his assurance that he would be researching their innermost, and most damning, secrets. The Emir seemed to think it was a good plan, that he wanted to be a part of.

Red now had the goods on half the rich and powerful deviants in the Middle East, with enough evidence to get them banned from Paradise for eternity, not to mention destroying their Earthly power. More importantly, she had a pretty good idea where the pieces they had received from Qin Shi Huang’s treasure were housed, and how to get them back.

Then, maybe the emirate would need a second new Emir in as many years.

Maybe not, however. This guy was corrupt, but looting long dead emperors was child's play compared to the rotten stuff his brother had been into. Ruining the lives of living human beings was a lot worse than screwing up the afterlife plans of some megalomaniac who’d been dead for two millennia.

No, on balance this Emir did a lot more good for his country than harm. He was an asshole, but if being an asshole was a capital crime, nobody’d escape execution dock.

Next stop, Europe.

33

The girl screamed pitifully as her terrified twin brother fucked her. He had been through similar sessions before, and knew that resistance was useless. He knew what was coming next, and it would be even worse. As horrible as what he was doing to his sister was, having it done to him would be more unbearable, but it would be inevitable. How could that nun holding the camera stand to let it happen?

Sister Frances wanted to make it stop. She wanted to run to the children, fold them in her arms, wipe away their tears, and promise it would never happen again. She couldn't do that. She had to get it on video, instead, along with what she knew Cardinal Frementi would do to the boy afterward. The Cardinal would wear a hood, but she would identify him, later. She would share his punishment, but that was alright. That it would be her turn after the boy was unimportant as well. God would forgive her, and her pretending to enjoy it, if she could get the Church to end Cardinal Frementi's predations. She prayed that her video would reach the Pope, and he would take action. Only the Pope was in a position to stop it.

The Cardinal, however, wasn't worried. Sister Frances appeared to enjoy their sessions. It had been her idea to video record them, so they could watch them privately, later.

He was disappointed that Sister Frances didn't have orgasms, anymore, despite her enthusiasm for the sport. She was so dry that she had to resort to artificial lubrication. Perhaps it was because of what she knew was happening to her soul. She was, after all, a nun, and had already damned herself many times over. She just couldn't help herself.

Perhaps the children's' screaming put her off as well. The children, however, would get used to it. They always did. Some even learned to like it, or at least tolerate it. You just had to train them, as he had done before. Before Sister Frances became involved.

He knew Sister Frances prayed a lot, and despaired of the absolution he offered her if only she would take

advantage of his confessional. He *used* to be her confessor, before they started acting out the impure thoughts she'd confessed to having. But, she no longer came to him.

What he didn't know was that she had gone to one of his rivals.

The rival would be the one to receive the video recording. He had supplied the camera when Sister Frances tearfully confessed to what she'd been doing with Cardinal Frementi. She had held her guilt in when it was only herself, knowing that only she was to blame, but when the Cardinal found the beautiful fraternal twins at the orphanage, she had to make it stop.

That's when she went to Cardinal Frementi's rival, Cardinal Benetti, and confessed everything, then begged for help. The absolution Benetti offered meant nothing to her. The only way God could actually forgive her was if she atoned by stopping Cardinal Frementi. After that, she would patiently wait until God called her for her final punishment.

After she finished with the Cardinal, she went back to her small cell, where she copied the contents of the recorder's memory chip to a flash drive. The camera's memory chip was a square of plastic much smaller than a postage stamp. The flash drive microchip was even smaller, she understood, but enclosed in a plastic shell big enough for easy handling, yet, it took up practically no space in her pocketbook.

She dressed in fashionable, but not ostentatious, street clothes, and took public transportation to Venice, where she would visit Cardinal Benetti at his *palazzo*. She liked the *palazzo*. It was a beautiful old building that had once belonged to a scion of the Medici family. In it, Cardinal Benetti housed his art collection, which rivaled those of the most famous museums.

Cardinal Benetti's collection had started with original works commissioned from the great masters by the Medicis, and augmented by owners of the *palazzo* in the centuries since. Cardinal Benetti had expanded it with examples of the most exquisite art from all over the world: the Near East, Middle East, Far East, and the Americas. Benetti hadn't just collected pieces with a Christian theme, as had his predecessors, but especially liked exotic

examples of religious art from other faiths. Most recently, he'd been adding beautiful examples of jade, silver, and gold statues with Taoist themes. The Chinese masters had especially liked the translucent quality of jade, which fit the deep, meditative content of their faith much better than the surface shine of gold and silver. Somehow, the wise eyes and humble robes of a Taoist sage made silver and gold appear frivolous, even silly.

Sister Frances knew that Benetti found her physically attractive, and was excited by what she'd confessed to him about her sexual exploits. He had not, however, attempted to seduce her, himself. She believed he was keeping to his vow of chastity.

In order to obtain access to his art collection, Frances had tentatively tried to tempt Benetti. His gentle rebuff had greatly impressed her. She hoped that someday – after they collaborated to bring down Cardinal Frementi – she would have his strength. She longed to repress her own sexual desires, and achieve his purity of spirit.

Out of pity for her plight, Cardinal Benetti had granted her hours to roam freely through his art collection, anyway. He also enjoyed walking with her while explaining the significance of every piece. He loved the way she took the time to study each sculpture, painting, etching, and even the tiny Greco-Roman medallions, in exquisite detail. He had seen her stand for hours caressing every line of a Botticelli painting with her eyes. Their shared love of art had made them more than a shepherd and a troubled member of his flock. They had become friends.

Today, however, Cardinal Benetti could not meet with her. His secretary said that the Cardinal was in a meeting with some people from America, and he didn't know when he would emerge. The secretary looked troubled.

Perhaps she would like to wait in the gallery? The secretary said he would find her when Cardinal Benetti was free. He knew Cardinal Benetti had been waiting for her when the Americans showed up demanding an immediate audience, and would want to meet with her when it became possible.

Sister Frances found her way to the Chinese section, and was studying a new jade figurine when Cardinal Benetti appeared leading an enormously tall, radiantly beautiful, redheaded American woman. The woman was

obviously several months pregnant, although the bulge seemed small on her huge frame. Nobody would have noticed, except that she was otherwise wiry and muscular, with just a thin layer of body fat smoothing out her curves. She wore a long, flowing black-velvet robe with red piping trimming the collar and sleeves over a blue-silk, empire-waist maternity dress that reminded Frances of those featured in paintings from a time when pregnancy was so fashionable in Italy that wealthy young ladies wore padding to simulate it.

The woman chattered like a happy teenager, except that she took note of every piece of sculpture in the room as if to memorize it. What shocked Sister Frances, however, was that, despite the happy chatter, the Cardinal looked absolutely fearful of the woman. A quick glance at the secretary showed that he, too, was terrified.

“And, who is this lovely creature inspecting one of my jades?” the tall woman asked, stepping close and running her fingers familiarly through Sister Frances’ hair, as if trying to make friends with a new dog by scratching its ear.

“Sister Frances has come to me for help,” Cardinal Benetti explained lamely. “A personal matter.”

Seeing how the fright of the two men had upset Sister Frances, the woman cooed: “Don’t be frightened my dear. The Red Witch means you no harm. Cardinal Benetti and I were just discussing these beautiful examples of Chinese art, and what can be done to restore them to the Chinese people, from whom they were stolen – no doubt without the Cardinal’s knowledge. Is there anything I can do to help you?”

Suddenly, the redhead no longer seemed frightening to Sister Frances. Rather, she appeared as a concerned older sister anxious to keep her from harm. The caress no longer seemed predatory, but comforting. Frances longed to ask for her help. Her life had gone so wrong, she was desperate to set it right.

Tongue-tied, Frances found herself bursting into tears and burying her face in the woman’s robe.

Casting a stern look on Benetti, Red asked angrily: “Who has been doing what to this child?”

“It is a personal matter,” Benetti stammered. “Do not concern yourself.”

Lifting Frances' face to look at her, Red asked her: "Tell me all about it. What have these men been doing to you?"

"It's not them," Frances tried to defend her friend Benetti. "I've done horrible things. Cardinal Benetti is helping me make them stop, and atone for my sins."

"I don't care about your sins," Red declared. Using terms she thought the girl would understand, she said: "You have already repented them. That is all God asks: to repent and ask His forgiveness. I see in your eyes that your tears have already washed them away."

Somehow, Frances believed it was true, she buried her face again in the woman's robe and, this time, sobbed grateful tears.

"Now, what do you mean about making them stop?"

"It's the children," Frances pleaded. "We've got to help the children!"

"Who's harming children?!" Red exclaimed, angrily. "I'm a mother. I won't stand for anyone harming children!"

Red waited a count of five, then exploded: "I don't like this! You sons of bitches tell me what this is all about before I make you wish you had!"

"Another cardinal has been abusing children," the secretary said, "Sister Frances was to bring us proof today. Do you have it?" he asked her.

Frances nodded "yes" without taking her face out of the folds of Red's robe.

34

“Waddayathink?” Red asked Doc over the phone after explaining the situation to him.

After reviewing the video, she’d first had a good cry for the children, then pitched a screaming fit, using every filthy name she could think of to describe Cardinal Frementi. Then, not satisfied, she invented some new ones. Then she kissed Frances on the top of her head, and growled at Benetti for not taking action sooner.

Then she called Doc.

“Interpol,” was Doc’s one-word answer.

“Get that recording to Luca Mastrangelo in the Rome office,” he amplified. “I’ll email his contact information. He’s got children of his own about that age, and will make sure the Cardinal burns for it. More importantly, he’ll take about thirty seconds to get those kids out of harm’s way. They’re going to need therapy.”

“Isn’t it a job for the Italian authorities?”

“It’s complicated by the Vatican being a sovereign state. We don’t know our way around that maze, but Luca does. Give him what you’ve got and let him handle it.”

“Benetti wants to keep it quiet for the sake of the Church.”

“Give Benetti the choice of going public with it, himself, or being named as an accomplice. He’ll have to explain why he didn’t go to the authorities before. Tell him we’ll rip him up and down for receiving stolen artifacts as well, and anything else we can pin on him. Once we start it, Interpol will confiscate everything he owns, and go over it with a fine-toothed comb just looking for stuff to hang on him. He’ll end up mumbling chants in a Tibetan monastery because nobody else will have him.”

“And, if he does what he’s told?”

“Help him spin it that the Church rooted out this viper in its midst, and immediately stopped him. Protect everyone who helps, burn everyone who doesn’t.”

“What about Sister Frances? Doc, she doesn’t belong stuck in a convent wrestling with hormones for the rest of her life. It’s unnatural, as well as being a recipe for failure.”

“I know. Talk to Benetti about getting her released from her vows, and returned to society. She’d probably be best off working for the Church in a lay capacity. Maybe Benetti can find her a job on his staff. It sounds like she’d make an ideal curator for his collection. She’ll still need to feel she’s contributing over and above, but don’t let her carry around a load of guilt for having a normal – well, maybe a little hyper – sex drive. She didn’t choose to have hot pants. She was born that way. She needs to know that it’s normal for her. She ought to get married and have a dozen kids to love, instead of hating herself.”

“Did anyone ever tell you that you’re a good man?” Red asked.

“Not to my face,” he retorted, “and don’t say it out loud. Everybody will want one.”

“Besides,” he added, “you’re the one who’s saving the world!”

“Sheesh! Don’t make it sound so grandiose. It’s just a couple of kids out of billions.”

“And, a despairing nun, and the cultural heritage of the Chinese people. When do you think you’ll take a break, and come home? The kids are asking for Mommy.”

“I’ve just one more stop to make: England. Some crime lord who wants to be an aristocrat. It’ll take a day to get there, a day to meet with people there, then another travel day to get home again. I’ll contact Mastrangelo before I leave. Tell the kids I miss them. ... No! I’ll call them when I get off the phone. I assume they’re at home, now.”

“Well, probably for at least an hour,” Doc replied. “Maryanne was planning to take them to the Science

Center in Phoenix this afternoon. They probably won't go 'til after nap time, which is after lunch. If you're going to call, I'd do it soon."

"I'll do it now. Bye, babe. I love you."

"Love you, too. Play nice with the Brits."

"Don't I always play nice with everybody?"

"No," Doc laughed. "See you in three days."

Next, Red called the ranch in Scottsdale.

"Come home, Mommy, I miss you," Judy insisted. Red had managed to set up a high-speed Internet connection through the hotel's server, which gave jumpy, but adequate, video. The screen on her laptop showed Mike and Judy, with the bottom half of Maryanne's head in the background.

"When are you coming home?" Mike wanted to know.

"In three days," Red replied. "Judy, can you count to three?"

"One. Two. Three." Judy counted proudly on her fingers.

"Very good!" Red praised her.

"How late should I keep them up waiting for you?" Maryanne asked.

"I should be home for dinner – maybe a late dinner," Red responded. "I'll try to take a nap on the plane, so I shouldn't be jet lagged *quite* to death."

Then, Red had to hear all about what Mike and Judy expected to see at the Science Museum. Then, Mike and Judy wanted to know what she had been doing.

“Well, you remember that I’m trying to find things that bad people stole from the place Aunt Cheryl is working, right?”

“Yes,” Mike recalled, “a long time ago, a king put a lot of valuable stuff in a cave in China. Aunt Cheryl is exploring the cave so the people of China will know what’s there, and what it was like in ancient China. Why would that king want to hide stuff in a cave, anyway?”

“A long time ago,” Red tried to explain, “people didn’t understand about death very well. That king liked being King of China, and wanted to be King of China forever. He didn’t want to stop even when he died, so he filled that place with all the things he wanted to keep forever. We don’t do that, anymore, because we know it just causes trouble. But, he didn’t know that, then.”

“What kind of trouble, Mommy?”

“The kind of trouble I’m trying to fix, now. Some people found the king’s tomb – the cave where he hid his treasures – and started stealing things. The people who stole those things sold them to other people all around the world. Mommy’s trying to find those things and make the people who have them give them back.”

“When the leaders in China found out somebody had been stealing that king’s treasure,” she continued, “they asked Uncle Glen for help. Do you remember Chen Ju Long, the Chinese man who visited us last Summer?”

“Ju Long!” Judy yelled excitedly, delighted that something being said made sense to her.

“Yes. Ju Long is one of the leaders in China. He was here with Aunt Cheryl to ask Daddy and me to help explore the cave, and protect what the king had put there. While Uncle Glen, Aunt Cheryl, and Daddy are exploring the cave, I’m meeting with the people who have the stolen artifacts, and asking them to give them back.”

“What if they don’t want to give them back?” Mike asked.

“I tell them that if they don’t give them back, we’ll tell the police, and get them into trouble. But, if they say

they're sorry, and give them back, we'll help keep them out of trouble."

"I'm in Italy, now, where they invented pizza, and spaghetti and meatballs. A man here has a lot of beautiful statues that were stolen from the king's cave. He promised to give them back. As we were leaving, we met a lady who was there to ask the man to help some children who were being hurt by a bad man. The children are orphans – they don't have any parents to protect them – and the lady was worried about them."

"What did you do, Mommy?" Judy asked.

"I called Daddy, and he gave me the name of a policeman talk to here in Italy, who will take care of the children and protect them from the bad man."

"Did you talk to him?" Mike asked.

"I wanted to talk to you guys first, before your nap. I'll call the policeman after we're done."

"Then will you come home?" Mike asked.

"No. Then I am going to England. Do you remember England?"

Disappointed, Judy shook her head, no.

"Yes," Mike said. "That's where we saw that church, where all those stone knights are buried." He was referring to the Temple Church, with its stone effigies of Knights Templar.

"Yes, and Daddy's Jaguar was made there," Red agreed. "Do you remember seeing their factory?"

"Yes, it was great!"

"Anyway, there's a man in England, who has been buying things stolen from the Chinese king's cave and selling them to rich people in England. I'm going to ask him where those things went to, and make him help me get them back."

“Is he hurting orphan children, too?”

“I think he hurts a lot of people,” Red admitted.

“Will he try to hurt you, and Elise?” Mike asked, worriedly.

Red and Maryanne had repeatedly explained about Red’s being pregnant. They explained that Mommy was growing them a new sister inside her, and the new sister’s name was Elise. Mike imagined that it was like growing a plant. He’d seen baby spider plants hanging down from the mother plant on long tendrils. He imagined that his mother was doing the same kind of thing with Elise, but was keeping her inside for protection.

The picture wasn’t all that wildly inaccurate. As he grew up, he’d just have to add details to get it right.

“The man in England has no reason to hurt me, or Elise. And, Jeremy is with me to make sure the man knows that. Nobody is going to hurt Elise as long as she’s with me, and Jeremy is here to make sure nobody hurts me.”

That satisfied Mike. Jeremy was almost as big as his father, who Mike thought was the biggest man in the World.

35

“But, Mommy *promised*,” Judy’s image wailed from the wall-mounted computer monitor in Doc’s office. He’d made it a video call because he wanted face time to explain what he had to explain. He found that he wasn’t doing too well, anyway.

“Mommy said she’d be home today,” Mike agreed.

Doc had the awful task of telling his children that Mommy wouldn’t be home on time because Mommy had disappeared. He had trouble explaining it to them, because he had trouble explaining it to himself.

At first, he had thought Red’s assistant, Bonnie, was kidding when she stuck her head through his office door, and told him that “There’s an Inspector Holmes from Scotland Yard on the phone for you.”

The look of concern on Bonnie’s face, however, told him she was dead serious.

When he took the call, Inspector Stephen Holmes said: “I regret to inform you that your wife has disappeared. We found the her bodyguard floating in the Thames this morning. His throat had been slashed.”

“Something happened to stop her,” Doc told the children.

“What happened? Is Elise all right? When is she coming home? Why didn’t she tell us?” Mike couldn’t stop asking questions.

Neither could Doc, but he had nobody to ask them of.

“I don’t know what happened,” he admitted. “Mommy and Elise are alright. They’re still somewhere in England, but I’m not sure exactly where. She didn’t tell you because something bad happened and she can’t talk to us. I’m going to England, myself, to find out what went wrong.”

“Jeremy was supposed to help Mommy make sure nothing bad happened,” Mike declared. He was frightened because he’d thought Red’s big bodyguard was invincible.

“Jeremy can’t help anyone, anymore,” Doc said absently. “He’s dead.”

Maryanne was furious with him for blurting it out. He should have prepared the kids better. He wasn’t handling it well.

Then, she thought about how he must feel, himself, and forgave his slip. She was having trouble dealing with it, too.

Doc’s error, however, really scared Mike, who started wailing. That started Judy wailing, too. Maryanne hugged them to try to calm them down, but it took a while, with a lot of cooing, and promises that “It’ll be alright.”

When the noise level subsided, Doc said: “We know Mommy and Elise are alright. I’m going to England right away to get her. I’ll be able to find her when I get there, and bring her home.”

“How do you know they’re alright,” Maryanne asked, pretty upset, herself. Over the years, Red had become a good friend, as well as a trusted employer. The thought that maybe she wouldn’t come back gave Maryanne a hollow feeling in the pit of her stomach.

“We put a microchip in her shoulder before she went on this snipe hunt,” Doc explained. “It doesn’t do much, but it does report her heart rate, which is still normal for a healthy adult who’s pretty upset. It changes up and down the way it would in someone who’s conscious and active. So, she’s conscious, and probably able to move about. Other than that, and her general location, we’ve no idea what’s going on.”

“If you know where she is, why can’t the police just go get her?”

“Just busting in without knowing the situation can do more harm than good. Be patient. It took us three days to reach Bud when she was kidnapped, and we knew her location, too.”

“And look what happened to her during those three days!”

“Tell me about it!” Doc exclaimed with a sick look on his face. Maryanne saw the look, and regretted her words. Give the guy some space!

“Look,” Doc said more calmly, “She’s awake and alert. She knows we know where she’s located. She’ll keep things under control long enough for us get her out. We have to believe that. Smitty at NSA got me a ride on an F/A-18. It’s in front of the hangar refueling right now. We’ll take off as soon as I change into my pressure suit. I’ll let you know what’s going on as soon as I find out.”

Seven thousand miles away, Red didn’t feel as if she had things under control.

“Are you a *complete* idiot?” she shouted at Mickey Woodward, feigning bluster and bravado she didn’t feel. “Do you know what happened to the last moron who kidnapped me? The evil motherfucker is still getting gang banged every day in a Nevada prison. I know, because I pay the other inmates five thousand a month to keep gang banging him!”

Mickey hadn’t known this. He’d known that some backwards-assed country fuck had nabbed her years ago, and never got away. Finding that this broad had the chutzpah to reach into the U.S. prison system and arrange for an inmate to be tortured regularly really impressed him.

Lying there, handcuffed to a bed with her pregnant belly aimed at the sky, she didn’t look that tough. Except, maybe around the eyes. Yeah, those eyes were cold and hard, and very, very angry. He was going to be out of the room when his men undid those cuffs to let her pee, that was for sure.

He’d heard about her reaction when the last guy didn’t let her pee. It just made her angrier. Angrier was not what he wanted. He’d hoped for docile.

He hadn’t gotten docile!

On the other hand, he wasn't some hillbilly from the Colonies, either. He controlled a big enough piece of the crime in Britain to become very, very wealthy. He wasn't some small-time dope peddler. His organization was diversified, and he was protected through a network of bent cops and politicians. She knew this, and still wasn't afraid of him. That scared him.

He was beginning to regret his choice. She'd come to him with a straight-up proposition for a combined smuggling, blackmail and extortion racket, but he'd gotten greedy. Knowing her carcass was worth tens of millions on the "kidnapped" block, he'd forgotten why nobody'd kidnapped her since that clown in Nevada had tried it, years before.

Mickey now realized the error of his ways. His next problem was figuring out how to correct the error.

That was why he was talking to her in person, instead of having his men cut off her fingers to mail to her stepfather.

She thrashed her chains around some more. She'd already torn the flesh on her wrists and ankles by rattling them, but didn't seem to care. She just kept yanking harder. This broad was *scary*.

"If I let you up, do you promise not to tear off my head and piss down my neck?" he asked, tentatively.

"Say fucking *please!*" she glowered. This sounded like moving in the right direction.

"Fucking please," he laughed, then signaled for one of his men to uncuff her.

She sat up, dropping her feet to the floor and gingerly inspected the torn flesh on her wrists. Then, she checked her ankles.

"Look at that!" She exclaimed angrily, pointing to the ripped up stockings over her bloody ankles. "Those are *silk* stockings. Do you know how hard it is to get real silk stockings these days? Now, they're *ruined*. You owe me for a new pair of silk stockings, shithead! What's the matter with you?"

Jeez! Those wrists and ankles must hurt like Hell, but she was complaining about ruined stockings.

She kicked off her white high-heeled pumps to keep blood from running down into them. She picked one up, and tried using her thumb to wipe off blood that had already run down onto the back. Then, she put her thumb to her mouth to lick the blood off and wet it. She tried using the wet thumb to get off the rest of the blood. When she couldn't get at the blood in the seam at the heel, she growled "Asshole!" directly in his face, and threw the shoe at his head.

"I've made a mistake," he admitted. He didn't dare bluster with this one. She met everything with a vicious counterattack.

"No fucking shit!" she agreed.

The situation was, however, improving. It looked like he would be able to get her talking almost rationally.

He suddenly realized that she was tuning her responses carefully to keep him off balance, but not so far off balance that the situation might escalate out of control. In fact, she was very close to having the situation firmly in *her* control, not his. She must have read her *Art of War* very carefully. Again, he was impressed.

"Look," he tried, "you're worth a lot of money. Kidnapping and blackmail are all part of my business. It sounds like they're part of yours, too."

"I don't kidnap people," she stated, sullenly.

"But, you blackmail the Hell out of them," he noted.

She just shrugged in sullen agreement.

"Can we come to some kind of arrangement?" he begged. He admitted to himself that she now was firmly in control. He was beginning to like her. She played as rough as he wanted to.

“You had Jeremy killed,” she lamented. “He was my friend. Do you know what happened to the last guy who ordered one of my friends to be hurt?”

“No, what?” he figured he was going to find out, anyway.

“His friends roasted him to death – slowly. Nobody ever found the ashes.”

“Look, I’m sorry about your friend,” Mickey apologized. It was something he never did.

“It’s too late for that. Somebody has to pay. It might as well be you,” she threatened.

“It can’t be me,” he sighed, absently.

“Wanna bet?” she fixed him with a malevolent eye.

Realizing she really meant it, Mickey started becoming concerned that there really was no way out of this. He had a feeling that if he just snuffed this bitch, her people would appear from nowhere and eat him. Her husband was rumored to be the tough guy of the pair. If she was like this, what must her husband be like? He didn’t want to find out.

Shrugging his shoulders in capitulation, Mickey pulled out a nine millimeter pistol and shot one of the guards through the heart. The one he shot had actually been the one who had slit Jeremy’s throat before dumping him in the river.

That shocked Red into silence. She’d never watched anyone shot to death, up close and for real, before. It was so sudden! One minute there was a living, breathing human being with a look of surprise on his face. An instant later, there was nothing behind those eyes, and he fell like a sack of potatoes pushed off the back of a truck.

It felt like her heart stopped. The microchip in her shoulder, however, told a different story. It said her heart rate went well over two hundred beats per minute: unsupportable for any length of time.

“He killed your bodyguard. He paid. Okay?” Mickey challenged.

“Okay,” Red mumbled, momentarily cowed. She thought about how the man, whoever he had been, must have had a mother, and a sweetheart, and friends. She looked at the face of the man standing next to him, who was probably one of his friends. In his expression she read a combination of disbelief, anger, and fear that he might be next. Her heart went out to him.

But, she couldn't let down her guard. Elise was depending on her.

“You've still fucked up, big time!” she warned, recovering her poise through sheer force of will. “By now, Jeremy's body has been found.”

The thought reminded her that she'd never get one of Jeremy's SAS salutes again. It almost broke her heart. She needed to wrap this thing up so she could go home to cry on Doc's shoulder. She *needed* to cry on Doc's shoulder so much!

Gulping down her grief, she turned it to anger, and fixed Mickey with a hard look. “Scotland Yard will have called my husband. He'll be madder than Hell, and by now he's on a jet streaking over here to nail your hide to the side of a building. *His* business does not include kidnapping, blackmail, extortion, or anything else like that. For you, and for me, this is just business. For him, it's personal. I've no idea what you could offer him after this, except a guilty plea at your trial.”

“What about your corpse?”

“And that of his unborn daughter? You'd never get to trial. And don't think you can run, because he doesn't give a shit about national borders or international law, and neither does my stepfather. My husband would use my stepfather's money to find you, drag you back here behind a truck, and put what's left of your bloody corpse on trial. Then, he'd go after your organization. Then, he'd go after your family, and then your friends, and then their families. Just don't go there!”

“If it was just me,” Red sighed, “you’d have a chance. I still want to accomplish what I came here to do. But, it’s out of my hands. You have to deal with my husband, now, and I don’t know what to tell you to do.”

36

“Give me my cellphone,” Red suddenly demanded.

“What?” Mickey shot back, surprised.

“Give me my cellphone. You have to deal with Doc, so the sooner you start to deal with Doc, the better. Give me my cellphone, and I’ll call him. Then, you can negotiate with him directly.”

Mickey had her cellphone brought in, and handed it to her. The first thing she did was check her messages. Not surprisingly, there were six from Doc, the last being over five hours ago. That meant he was in the air, probably streaking East at close to Mach one with the Jet Stream at his back. That meant about a thousand miles an hour over the ground. Seven hours total flight time. He should be almost here. He was probably watching Ireland roll over the horizon. Descending from whatever altitude he’d cruised at, he’d supercruise – sustained flight faster than the speed of sound.

She didn’t listen to any of the messages, just returned the last one.

She got a “subscriber unavailable” message, then was bumped to his voice mail.

“Doc, it’s Red,” she said unnecessarily. “I’ve been kidnapped, but I’m okay, and Elise is okay. Jeremy’s dead. Jeremy’s killer is dead. Call me to get me home.”

“I love you,” she added as an afterthought before cutting the connection.

“So, now what?” Mickey asked.

“So, now I try to find him.”

She speed dialed another number.

“Bonnie, it’s Red,” she said when the connection connected.

“We’ve been worried about you,” Bonnie’s voice said. “The London police called. Jeremy’s dead. Doc’s on his way to get you. Smitty at NSA scrambled a long-range fighter for him. He should be there in another hour. Bud’s frantic. She wants to know whether to scramble everyone at Gulf States Security, and airlift them to England. When the Chinese heard about the U.S. giving Doc a fighter jet, they suddenly came up with one of their own for her to ride in. She’ll take longer, though. China’s farther away.”

“Get our guys all on alert,” Red ordered, “but I don’t think we’ll need any warm bodies in England if Scotland Yard is already involved. They know the turf better than we do, and have their own SWAT units. If, for some reason, this moves outside the country, our guys can take over. Better to keep them standing at airfields ready to board until we know where to send them.”

In an aside to Mickey, she said: “See what you’re up against? My army makes yours look like kids in a schoolyard.”

Bonnie heard this, and asked: “Are you alone? Can we talk okay?”

“The walls have ears. Just don’t say anything you don’t want them to know.”

“Okay. Uhh, I guess that’s all I have. Is there anything you want to say?”

“Just that Jeremy’s killer’s dead, but that was just our host acting dumber than the average Park Ranger. Have Doc call me when he lands.”

Almost as soon as it was out of her mouth, Red realized that the crack about Mickey’s killing the guard was the wrong thing to say in front of the other guard. It undermined Mickey’s authority, and set him up for a revenge killing right then and there – while Red was in range of a stray bullet.

Mickey knew it. The guard knew it. Now, she knew it. But, nobody could do anything about it unless the

guard decided to start a shootout on the spot. Luckily, he seemed inclined to 'bide his time.

Red decided that trying to predict what Doc would do when he got there was a waste of time. What she had to do was ensure her and Elise's safety until he made it. The sooner that happened, the better. She didn't want things stretched out until one of these characters decided to do something stupid.

She could see in Mickey's eyes that he was thinking, too. No doubt, he was playing out a chess game in his head with players whose personalities he knew nothing about.

What Red had shown him already, and had told him about Doc, was not designed to inspire confidence. She needed Mickey to believe that she was on his side, and that his best chance was now to have her around to help negotiate with Doc.

That was the way to play it.

"Okay, Mickey," Red began. "The best thing for you is to come to an agreement with me, then I'll try to sell it to Doc when he gets here. So, what do you want?"

"I want to ransom your hide for twenty million pounds."

"Forget that," Red advised. "The last time, the guy asked for fifteen million dollars and safe passage. Doc agreed to everything, then nailed the guy as he walked out the door. And, that time nobody'd gotten hurt. You've got a double homicide to account for."

"But, I killed the guy who killed your guy," Mickey countered.

"That won't cut any ice with Doc," Red explained. "He's a Zen Buddhist, and doesn't think the way you do. That," she said pointing to the still bleeding corpse on the floor, "just adds to your score. The only way you can reduce the score is to bring someone back to life. Can you do that?"

Mickey just looked stubborn.

“No, I thought not,” Red answered for him. “Forget about getting anything out of this fiasco. You screwed up. It’s time to cut your losses. What are you willing to give up? How about your little black book of who you sold those Chinese artifacts to?”

“Some of them are very powerful people you wouldn’t want to tangle with,” Mickey warned.

“That brings us back to blackmail, which is the next item on our ‘what Red wants’ list. It’s what I asked for, already, before you decided to get stupid. Now, you want it, too, so I can use it to protect you.”

“Protect me!” Mickey couldn’t believe it.

“Before you go any farther,” Red explained, “think about this: you can’t get away. Your organization is here. If you go on the lam, you lose everything. Besides, by the time you get out of this building, Doc will know exactly where I am, and where you are. He probably knows, already.”

Mickey looked even more incredulous.

Seeing the look, Red said: “C’mon, remote sensing is what Doc does. He has Ph.D.s in Astrophysics and aerospace engineering, and makes a living supplying sneaky gadgets to the NSA, CIA, FBI, and a whole alphabet soup of slimy spooks. He’s the best in the business, and if he’s looking for you, you can’t get ten feet without being spotted. Get real. If you should get away, it will only be because you convinced Doc to let you go. You can’t do that, yourself, but maybe I can. Now, tell me everything you can about your organization.”

Red had two reasons for wanting to get him bragging about his organization. First, she wanted to burn up as much time as possible while waiting for Doc to get there. Second, she wanted to know who would be left to deal with in the likely event that this bozo didn’t make it through the afternoon. She’d come here to retrieve Chinese artifacts, and didn’t want to leave without them. Her life and Elise’s came first. Then, the artifacts. She’d leave everything else to Scotland Yard.

By the time Doc called, an hour and a quarter later, she had all she thought she’d need. It had taken

considerable threatening and cajoling, but she had the names and cell numbers of Mickey's lieutenants, and the identity of who would have the information she'd need and how to retrieve it. She also had a summary of whatever else Mickey had in his head that might be useful. Especially, a quick list of the major recipients of stuff from Qin Shi Huang's mausoleum.

Mickey, for his part, had made sure she had all she'd need to get into the safety deposit box containing the dirt on some high-ranking Brits who could help save his bacon if this went to court. Red swore up and down that she'd use that information to help him, but mentally had her fingers crossed the whole time.

In the last few minutes before Doc arrived, Red thought about the guard she'd watched Mickey shoot. Bud had confirmed to her the old wives' tale about the people you've killed coming back to visit you in the night. She reported having visits from all three of the pirates she'd been responsible for killing, especially the one she'd pushed over the side of Doc's boat and left to drown, but even the ones who hadn't actually died by her hand came to her. She knew she'd intentionally caused each of their deaths, and they came back to remind her.

Luckily, Bud was able to tell all her victims that they deserved to be in Hell for what they did to her and a whole lot of other people.

Red didn't think she'd have anything to say to that guard that Mickey shot, except "I'm sorry."

37

When Doc's call came through, Red explained what she and Mickey had arranged. She said she was satisfied. She was still unhappy about Jeremy being killed, but she'd learned the hard way that seeking vengeance was an expressway to disaster.

In response to Doc's questioning, she explained the layout of the building's inside – it was basically a small warehouse with a king-size double bed in the middle of the cavernous space. She could imagine what activities normally went on in there, but there was only the one guard with them, now. Mickey hadn't considered her particularly dangerous when all this started.

Then, she put Mickey on the phone.

"I executed the guy that killed your bodyguard," was what Mickey made the mistake of leading with.

"Is that supposed to make me like you?" was Doc's response. "You're going down, boy. The only question now is how far down, and how painful will the slide be."

"I want a ransom for your wife," Mickey started to say.

"How about I let you live for a while," Doc interrupted him with. "That's the best you're gonna get. I'm not playing patty cake with you. If you look outside, you'll see the SWAT team already setting up."

At Mickey's signal, the remaining guard jumped to the nearest window, and confirmed what Doc said.

"You'd better give yourself up to them, because if you slip through their fingers, I'll deliver you to Red's stepfather. He's not as non-violent as I am. He makes people disappear, and nobody ever hears their screams. At least, nobody that doesn't enjoy the sound."

If Doc's words were meant to terrify Mickey, they worked. Red had pushed him into a state where he'd

believe anything.

“Now, you’re going to do exactly as Red tells you to,” Doc explained, patiently. “You, and your buddy there, are going to give up any guns, knives, or whatever. Then, she’ll use the handcuffs to bind your arms behind your backs. Finally, she’ll push you out through the front door. I’ve suggested to these guys out here that I’d be pleased if you somehow became dead.”

“If they don’t shoot you right away,” Doc continued, “you’ll turn completely around once so they can see you have no weapons. Then, get down on your knees facing them with your hands behind your back. Wait there until they come to collect you. They’re policemen, so if you cooperate there is a fair chance they won’t beat you on the way to jail.”

“Is all that clear?” Doc asked, finally.

“Yes,” Mickey said, contritely.

“Good, now put Red on the phone.”

Mickey handed the cellphone to Red.

“Red,” Doc said when she greeted him, “disarm those creeps, then cuff their hands behind their backs. Open the front door wide. Then, one by one, *kick* them out through it. I want to see them stumble and fall. Then, slam the door and lock it behind them. Then stand back in case any of these guns accidentally go off on purpose. After the SWAT guys collect them, I’ll knock on the door. Make sure it’s me before you approach the door. Then, I’ll take you home.”

“I’ve got Chinese artifacts to collect,” Red rebutted.

“Later. My children need to see their Mommy home safe, first. You scared all of us half to death.”

38

“Ohhh, my new niece is getting big!” Bud enthused, caressing Red’s belly when she reached Red at her suite at the Savoy Hotel in London. Bonnie had set Red up in a double-bedroom suite to keep Jeremy close at hand. With Jeremy now sleeping in the morgue, the second bedroom was going spare. Bud could bunk in there, although she didn’t.

“Can you guys let me in on what’s going on, or is it still a big secret from the girlfriend?” she asked, hopefully.

“I guess this is a good time to compare notes,” Doc decided. “You’ve probably figured out that Red’s been taking over the stolen-artifact distribution system.”

“It’s pretty obvious,” Bud advised. “I told you, Baby, that, without me, you’d get yourself in hot water again. Be more careful!”

“Sorry, Bud, I screwed up,” Red admitted. With her eyes tearing up, she added: “I got Jeremy killed!”

Then, she buried her face in her hands for another good cry. Bud and Doc waited until she’d finished before continuing the conversation.

A few minutes later, Red signaled that the deluge was over by reaching for the box of facial tissues, blowing her nose, and smearing the mascara runs across her cheeks. Looking forlorn, she allowed Bud to clean up her face with a tissue Bud dampened with her saliva.

Red didn’t bother to fix the makeup damage. She knew her two lovers cared more about what was inside her, than what was painted on her face. Instead, she pulled herself together, and got down to business.

“I think we’ve located about eighty percent of the stolen artifacts,” Red summarized, “but we’re no closer to

finding out who's been running the operation.”

“Check Ju Long’s fingers for red powder,” Bud advised. “There’s something dirty about him and his wife, and I mean beyond their suddenly becoming kinksters.”

“What?” Red and Doc asked in unison.

“Of course, you didn’t know. How could you? I haven’t had a chance to tell you. Whose idea was this secrecy thing, anyway? It stinks!”

An “I told you so” look grew on Doc’s face. Red looked sheepish.

“It was me,” she admitted. “Doc said it was stupid, but I insisted.”

“I don’t think it hurt the operation materially,” Doc soothed, “and may have actually done some good. It’s served its purpose, though.”

“Let’s not do it no more,” Bud advised.

“Anyway,” she added, getting back to reporting her suspicions, “at first, I thought it was just Ju Long having male fantasies, but when Gwen came over, she said she thought Ju Long was pumping her for information while pumping her full of sperm.”

“She reported that, when she got back,” Doc put in.

“Well, his wife started playing up to me, too. At first, she went after Glen, but I put the kibosh on that. Red, now I know why you won’t let anyone fool around with Doc. Actually, I always knew, but what the heck? Anyway, I’m not letting anyone mess with Glen from now on, especially that little kewpie doll.”

“What about you?” Red asked, pointedly.

“That’s different,” Bud retorted.

“No, it’s not,” Red countered.

Startled, Bud suddenly looked down at her hands with a remorseful look growing on her face.

“I can’t stop,” she said.

“Don’t tell me you’re getting obsessed with hunting trim,” Red said, worriedly.

Doc said nothing, just observed Bud’s face with a steady look.

“No, it’s not that,” Bud claimed, knowing she had a long history of doing just that. “I think Chen Zhin wanting to have an affair is going to be the key to this whole thing. I don’t believe that she’s just a long-repressed homosexual who’s suddenly come out of the closet. I think she’s playing Mata Hari. Glen and I have talked about this, and it was Gwen who suggested it in the first place. We think Zhin and Ju Long are up to their necks in whatever’s going on. Why her and not Ju Long, who started it all, we don’t know.”

“Maybe she doesn’t want Ju Long fucking you any more than you want her fucking Glen,” Red surmised.

“I suppose,” Bud agreed. “That would indicate she has a lot more say in what happens than I gave her credit for. ... Dragon lady?”

“Maybe,” Red agreed. “Doc, you’re being uncharacteristically quiet. No oracular pronouncements? Clairvoyant predictions?”

“You guys are doing fine,” he replied. “I’m more concerned about our girl here getting out-of-control hot pants.”

Bud gave him a shocked look, as if he’d just suggested she might have contracted herpes.

“I’m not,” she insisted.

“What do you think?” Red asked Doc.

“Too soon to tell,” he replied.

“Stop it, you two!” Bud ordered, emphatically. “I’m fine. I just have a job to do, and I’m doing it. Glen and I are fine. I know what I’m doing, who I’m doing it with, and why. Stop being my mother!”

“It’s just that we love you,” Red soothed, “and don’t want you hurt. You’re more important to us than all the rest of this crap. Doc, what do you think?”

“She’s a big girl. ... Bud, you know how to spot the signs of addiction, sexual or otherwise, and how they feel. Don’t let yourself get in trouble.”

“I also know how to break an addiction, so shut it off!” Bud grouched. “Let’s get to thinking about how we’re going to crack this nut. If we’re not going to do something about it, I’m going to go back to China, and make love to my husband – a lot! You guys can go fuck the little minx, yourselves, and leave me out of it. *You* go figure out who’s behind the whole mess. I’ve a barrow to explore.”

“Okay,” Doc closed off the digression. “How are we going to ‘crack this nut,’ as she says?”

“I need to get serious about unraveling Chen Zhin,” Bud answered, assuredly. “You guys need to get back to mapping their distribution network. We’re still too blind. Red, what about the other twenty percent of your artifact hunt?”

“Eighty-twenty rule,” Red announced, using a management concept all three were familiar with. “We’d use up eighty percent of our resources chasing down the last twenty percent of what we want. We’ve reached the point of diminishing returns. Except for some brownstone *bourgeoisie* in North America, the rest are drug killers who make Middle-Eastern terrorists look like a kindergarten class. We’ve dealt with those ... people ... before. There’s no way to squeeze them. They don’t care what anybody thinks of them, and jail’s just a house party with all their old friends. All you can do is shoot ‘em, then go wash your hands. I can’t see bothering with them at all. Let ‘em keep what they’ve got. If they want more, let ‘em go steal it themselves.”

“Just shut down the distribution?” Doc asked to clarify.

“That’s my suggestion. We’ll make some visits in New York, and California, but otherwise, leave ‘em alone.”

“What about ‘Vegas?’” Bud asked.

“There’s nobody in ‘Vegas with enough taste to steal real art,” Red dismissed. “Just Elvis paintings on black velvet. They’d make their own knock-off jades from green plastic”

“We can cover North America from Scottsdale,” Doc suggested, wanting to get Red home. “Bonnie needs your help doing what I pay you for.”

“Humpf!” Red snorted, thinking how pitiful her salary was compared to the income from her trust fund. That wasn’t why she went to work. “More importantly,” she countered, “my babies need their mother.”

Doc nodded agreement.

“How can we get messages to each other?” Bud asked. “I’m sure you’re right, Doc, about our cellphones being compromised. Probably everything else is being monitored as well.”

“We should be able to embed messages in our Bertha communications,” he suggested. “Use the GIS database as a coded message drop.”

“That should work,” Red agreed. “I’ll get on it when we get home. Maybe Bud could embed messages in Bertha’s raw video files, and we could put them in the virtual reality system.”

“How do we send the software to set Bud’s end of it up over to China?” Doc asked.

“You’re going to need to do a surprise on-site inspection at some point, aren’t you, Doc?” Red suggested.

“Yeah, we’ll use executable code modules embedded in regular software on my laptop to update Bud’s

system,” he agreed.

“Okay, sounds like a plan,” Bud summarized. “Where’s dinner? I’m famished.”

39

Three days later, Bud flew back to China, having determined that the crisis involving her longtime girlfriend was over. Red and Doc stayed in London to make themselves available to the police, who were wrapping up their investigation into Red's kidnapping and Jeremy's murder. The kids in Scottsdale complained about the delay in getting their parents home, but they were safe with Maryanne, Sam, and the staff at the ranch. They'd be okay. Mommy and Daddy visited with them every night by video conference.

In return for assurance of a reduced sentence in an extended-stay country club for vacationing crime lords, Mickey Woodward admitted to kidnapping Red for ransom. The twenty-million-pound ransom became the official figure, doubling the market value of Red's hide to over thirty million dollars.

It was academic, since nobody'd ever collected a cent of ransom, and Doc intended that nobody ever would. Red thought having an official ransom value was a hoot, and a lot of other people around the world thought it somehow significant.

Supermarket tabloids featured it on their covers for several issues, along with speculations about whether Doc ever intended to pay it, refused to pay it, whether their marriage was on the verge of a breakup over Doc's refusal to pay it, and an amazing assortment of total fabrication that Red found amusing, and Doc ignored.

Covering up what Red was doing in London to be kidnapped in the first place was both more difficult and more important. Gwen Talbot, SST's official publicist, took care of that nicely by putting out a press release that Red had been kidnapped while in London to visit the British Museum. It said she had embarked on a whirlwind tour of the world's prominent art collections before her impending labor made foreign travel inadvisable. Scotland Yard was not going to suggest publicly that London did not have any art collections important enough to lure a rich, touring art lover.

Red and Doc did spend a day poking around the British Museum with Bud before she left for China. Gwen's

press release about that visit described Bud as a prominent archaeologist taking a break from supervising the excavation of the famous tomb of the First Emperor of China. It made her sound almost stuffy.

The tabloids made up some malarkey about Bud's having an affair with Doc behind Red's back, completely missing the fact that it was Red she'd had an ongoing affair with for nearly a decade. Maybe they didn't want to admit that they'd completely missed reporting something real that could have been more sensational than what they made up. Maybe they just couldn't figure out how to explain the reality to readers who had trouble with words of more than one syllable.

Mickey cooperated with Red by sticking to his story that their only dealings were a straight kidnapping, and that Jeremy had been killed by an overzealous underling during the action.

The killer's death was passed off as Mickey's protecting Red from a murderous attack by that same unhinged underling during an argument among the kidnappers. They made Mickey sound like a contrite criminal trying to minimize the damage when the ill-advised kidnapping scheme went wrong. If somebody didn't know better, Mickey would sound almost like a hero.

While in London cooperating with the police, Red quietly used the information Mickey supplied to recover all of the Qin Shi Huang artifacts that had been sent to England. In the process, no reputations of prominent British subjects were harmed.

Red was disappointed by that. She'd found some scumbags that deserved to be hung, drawn and quartered.

After two weeks, with the British police satisfied, Red's business in England completed, and Doc assured that she was reasonably safe, they tried flying back to Scottsdale on separate commercial flights. They'd experimented with commercial airlines on trips to China because the schedules turned out to be convenient, and the price was much, much lower. They took separate flights to minimize the probability that they'd both be caught in the same airline disaster.

This time, however, Doc was so disgusted by the service that he swore never to enter a commercial airport terminal again.

Bud, back in China, kept Glen cooped up in their tiny hotel room for the entire weekend. She wanted him to know that she wanted *him*, despite her plan to encourage an affair with Chen Zhin. She hoped he'd understand.

In an odd sort of way, he actually enjoyed the idea. He enjoyed it a lot better than if she'd said she was going to have an affair with Ju Long, which had once been on the table. He might have been even happier if she'd suggested they have a threesome, but, then again, maybe not. He liked the idea that she didn't want him playing with the little China doll. He did enjoy thinking about the two women together, and looked forward to watching them flirt.

It would be, at least, entertaining.

Since encouraging an affair with Zhin was a strategy Bud had on the back burner all along, she'd already been allowing Zhin to hang around the office at the dig site. Zhin had expressed an interest in what they were doing, and Bud would have had to shoo her away to get rid of her, anyway. She didn't know whether Zhin was more interested in her work, or her body, but it made very little difference to her, either way.

Monday, when Zhin showed up around ten o'clock, Bud whispered to Glen that he should find an excuse to be busy somewhere else when lunchtime rolled around. Glen regretfully agreed to do so.

He needed to check Benny's preparations for receiving artifacts, anyway. Glen planned to pull Quon off virtual-reality-mapping duty to set up his Worms, and start moving artifacts out of the mausoleum to create a sponsorship-raising road show. They didn't need funds, *per se*. What they needed was political support from sponsoring officials, but the road show would be the same. He needed to demonstrate what important work they were doing, and to show some results.

This was supposed to be a part of Quon's education not covered in undergraduate classes, and the guy *was*

getting graduate credit from Beijing University for working with Glen, so having the boy work on the road show seemed appropriate. What Glen planned to do today was set up a meeting with Quon and Benny at the warehouse to organize the project. He'd move the meeting to lunchtime, and use it as an excuse to leave the ladies on their own.

Usually, people at the office had lunch at a quick-service noodle place nearby. This time, however, Bud said she wanted to try a Japanese steak house about a mile away. Zhin said she'd been there before, and reported that the food was good.

The restaurant was crowded and noisy, which suited Bud's purpose, which was to start sounding Zhin out about her motives for hanging around the dig site. If she knew what Zhin wanted, she could better manipulate her into letting slip the information *she* wanted.

"I'm pleased that you have so much interest in my work," Bud said in English. Bud hoped that using English would make it just a little bit harder for anyone eavesdropping to follow the conversation. "Are you interested in archeology?"

"I was one of Ju Long's students, when he was a young professor," Zhin replied, keeping to English either out of politeness or because she shared Bud's desire not to be overheard. "He taught an Introduction to Archeology course. I was majoring in political science, and took it as an elective. I very much enjoyed the course, as well as the professor. We liked each other, and began dating after I finished the course. We married right after I graduated. By that time, he was going into government service, and we had enough income so I did not need to work. Instead, we worked together to develop his career. That is why he has reached his eminent position at so young an age."

Bud could see how having a wife who was politically astute could help the career of a scientist employed by the government. She didn't see that it would be a full-time job for the wife, though. Maybe that contributed to Zhin's desire to hang around the dig site. She might find it more interesting than the Chinese version of daytime TV.

“Have you visited many dig sites?” Bud asked, hoping to get better information than she got from her first question, instead of just a biographical summary.

“Well, no. Watching people move dirt is not very exciting. You know that most of the work at an archeology site is backbreaking manual labor. Exciting finds are relatively few. For a visitor, there’s not much to see.”

“What’s different about this dig site?”

“Just about everything! You’re using amazing technology. This is the most important site there is from an historical perspective. It’s where our country started. Watching you guys fly through the mausoleum with your airship is like going on an airplane tour. And, there are all those statues standing around, like people frozen in time two thousand years ago.”

“The site is very important for China’s political history,” Zhin continued. “To see a representation of the First Emperor’s court would be fascinating. I can’t wait until Bertha gets there!”

Zhin was not displaying the “Dragon Lady” *persona* Bud suspected. Maybe she really *was* just a long-repressed homosexual with a simultaneous interest in what was going on at the dig site. It *could* still all be innocent, but Bud wasn’t going to fall for that just yet.

“Bertha should reach the government center soon, maybe next week, but we won’t see inside until Quon visits it with his Worms,” Bud informed.

Then, struck by a happy thought, she suggested: “Maybe you could sit in as a technical observer. Get involved in interpreting what Quon finds. That would be more interesting than just sitting in the background.”

“I’d *love* to do that!” Zhin gushed. She really was behaving like an archeology groupie! If it was an act, Zhin was a very good actress.

40

Back at the office, with Quon and Glen off meeting with Benny at the warehouse, Zhin and Bud were still on their own. Bud decided to gauge Zhin's interest in an affair while introducing her to the virtual reality system. Bud sat her down at the console Quon had been using, and kissed the top of her head while fitting the 3D glasses over her eyes.

Zhin responded by turning and smiling to her.

Standing beside the armless swivel chair in which Zhin sat, and a little behind her left shoulder, Bud leaned over to put her arm around Zhin's shoulder, and kissed her on the lips.

Zhin let out a sigh, as if releasing tension when a long-anticipated desire comes to fruition. Bud increased the pressure of the kiss, and Zhin tipped her head to the side to fit their lips together better. Feeling that, Bud tipped her head the other way, and parted her lips a little.

When Zhin allowed her lips to part as well, they felt their teeth touch, and both opened their mouths to press their tongues together.

They stayed that way for what seemed a very long time. Bud hoped Zhin enjoyed it as much as she did. She wanted Zhin to enjoy it even more, because her purpose was to make Zhin fall well and truly in love with her. Sex addiction was what Bud had in mind for Zhin.

Believing that going slowly was the best way to get there, Bud hummed, "Mmmm," into Zhin's mouth, and pulled away as if reluctantly.

Breathing heavily, Bud said: "That's nice. Let's get you started in virtual reality."

Pulling a second swivel chair over, Bud sat down in it to Zhin's right, and put on a second pair of 3D glasses.

Instead of sitting beside Chen Zhin facing the screen, however, Bud pulled the second armless chair close, and turned it so she faced halfway between Zhin and the screen, so she could press her breast to Zhin's body while sitting with her left arm over Zhin's shoulder.

Bud moved Zhin's right hand to the control joystick, and placed her own right hand gently over Zhin's to guide her in controlling the system.

"We always start at Bertha's docking station, to keep from getting lost," Bud said. "We can always reset the VR point of view to that position by typing control-H."

Moving her right hand to the wireless keyboard that had been shoved haphazardly out of the way on the console desktop, Bud held the control key down with her thumb, and tapped the H key with her little finger. The screen immediately jumped to the view when Bertha is secured to her docking station next to the hole where Glen had broken up through the floor.

There was a wooden platform over the hole cemented to the floor tiles, with a large metal trap door in the middle. It looked like a metal hatch cover on a ship's deck. That was the inner door of the air lock, which Bud had a local metal shop fabricate based on a design one of SST's engineers had emailed to her.

It was six feet square, and hinged along one of the edges. Normally, a vacuum pump held a slight negative pressure to hold the door tight against an elastomeric seal around its edge. When they needed to open it, they back filled the air lock with dry nitrogen to a slight positive pressure to break the seal. Then, pneumatic cylinders powered by dry nitrogen pushed the door wide open. A similar door closed the other end of the tunnel under the mausoleum's outside wall.

The tunnel walls were lined with six-foot-diameter concrete sewer pipe coated on the inside with epoxy paint to reduce air infiltration. A platform moved by pneumatic cylinders powering a scissors-jack mechanism sat directly under the hatch. It was there to lift objects from the tunnel floor to the mausoleum-floor level through the open hatch.

The whole airlock system had been prefabricated and tested in Benny's then-empty warehouse before being transported to the dig site. Bud then used her two verbally programmed construction robots to do the final assembly in place. Finally, they'd had the robots bring the disassembled Bertha in through the airlock, and re-assemble her in the mausoleum. The whole operation had taken two weeks.

The docking station next to that airlock was still the starting point for any virtual reality operation. Bud explained that wandering around in the VR simulation was just like wandering around in an unfamiliar city. You wanted to start from a home base, then learn routes to reach the places you wanted to go. Quon's partially completed flat map would make navigating in the mausoleum easier, especially when planning routes to follow for a flight, but always starting from home base made learning the routes, and developing a mental image of the space, easier.

It's the natural way our brains work. In real life, humans like to sleep at their home base, then set out from there for their day's adventures. When exploring Bertha's VR world, they used the same strategy.

Zhin appeared to understand Bud's explanation, so Bud, gently guiding Zhin's hand on the joystick, proceeded to fly Bertha slowly into the mausoleum.

"Why does everything have to be black and white?" Zhin complained. "Wouldn't it be easier to tell what's there if there were colors?"

"Yes," Bud agreed, "it would be easier in color, but each flight would generate four times as much data. Bertha has to carry all that data with her to download when she gets back. That data-storage memory takes up space and adds weight. As it is, we're right at our limits already, doing two flights a day, and returning to home base to download the data after each flight.

If we did this initial survey in color, it would take four times as long. Over time, we'll resurvey the whole place, adding color and other details. For now, what you see is what we get."

As they flew over the streets and lanes in Qin Shi Huang's afterlife capital city, they found throngs of beautifully robed figures enjoying various activities. Some strolled along avenues. Some relaxed in plazas and parks, sitting on benches under delicately rendered fruit trees. The VR visitors assumed all were terracotta figures painted with lifelike colors and dressed in colorful robes. They couldn't see the actual colors, but they could see the shades of patterns on garments, and makeup on faces.

Zhin had seen glimpses of all these scenes while watching Quon working on his mapping project. This was the first time, however, she'd had any control of the simulation, or had felt free to ask questions. She found it even more interesting.

There was a second flat-panel display on the desktop, to the right of the main display, showing the unfinished map with the VR point of view identified by a small red dot with a blue triangular point on one side to indicate the direction the POV faced. Digital display boxes along the screen's bottom gave the POV's coordinates, and altitude above the floor datum. An alt-azimuth display showed the POV's orientation as a compass heading and angle above horizontal. Since the POV was usually looking down from above, the angle usually had a negative value. Another little box gave the POV's velocity vector as three components in spherical polar coordinates: speed in meters per second, and azimuth and altitude in degrees.

Bud kept the speed at a fast walk of two meters per second, and flew the POV at two meters AGL (above ground level) – about ten feet. She demonstrated how there was no need to slow down for corners because there was no physical moving object subject to the laws of physical dynamics, but doing so was more comfortable for the viewer. Not slowing down made it seem like an exciting video game, but slowing down felt more like a leisurely sightseeing tour.

She also demonstrated a feature that airplane pilots Doc and Red liked to use: automatically banking the POV to one side or the other to simulate an aircraft flying through the space. The program calculated the exact bank required to keep turns coordinated at the VR POV's speed and rate of turn.

In a coordinated turn, “down” – the direction of gravity – always appears to be toward the floor of the aircraft, just as “down” on the VR console was always toward the floor of the trailer. Pilots become so used to the banking effect that using it in the simulation seemed natural, and helped eliminate motion sickness. Non-pilots Bud and Zhin found it confusing and disorienting, however, so they disliked using it.

After a while, Bud let Zhin control the stick by herself, sitting back and telling her where to steer the moving POV. Just a comment like “take the next left” was enough to direct her toward the Water Works, which is where Bud wanted her to go.

At first, Zhin kept crashing into virtual buildings. When she slowed the POV’s speed down more, she did better.

Bud didn’t tell her about the system’s collision-avoidance capability because she wanted Zhin to learn to pilot the POV precisely on her own. Having the display flash into blackness when the POV accidentally penetrated a wall taught Zhin to be careful. She began controlling her speed to zip along straight avenues, and slow down at corners where she needed to be more precise. Soon, Zhin was hitting speeds of ten or more meters per second along the straights, and slowing to a slow walk for tight corners.

Zhin thought it was great fun!

Unlike Doc, Zhin found the waterworks endlessly boring. She was also disappointed by the almost total lack of portable artifacts. Bud soon realized that Zhin was on a treasure hunt.

There wasn’t much that could be considered treasure in the middle of the street.

“Where did the looters get what they brought out?” Zhin asked.

“We don’t know, yet,” Bud admitted. “We haven’t found where they came in.”

“Wouldn’t they have tunneled into the center? That’s where I would expect the best artifacts to be. In fact,

I'd expect them to tunnel under the side nearest their shack to have the shortest route, then, when they saw the conditions, dig all the way to the center to get at the good stuff."

Bud thought that was an extremely likely scenario. It was, in fact, exactly what happened according to Glen's interviewees. Thinking of it seemed amazingly prescient on Zhin's part, almost like she'd been there!

41

“Haven’t you found anything of value, yet?” Zhin wondered, again betraying the fact that she was on a treasure hunt, not a search for historical information of scientific value. Perhaps Zhin didn’t understand the relative importance of the glimpse they would get into China’s history compared to just some pretty things, but her comments at lunch had led Bud to think she was more sophisticated than that.

“There are some artifacts in the buildings,” Bud replied. “We partially explored one of the buildings near the air lock by peeking through the windows.”

Bud thought the best way to divine what Zhin was thinking was to pay attention to the questions she asked and how she reacted to the answers. Arguing over the relative importance of scientific information *versus* treasure would get nowhere. Accommodating her requests would lead to more requests, and more information for Bud.

“What did you find there?” Zhin wanted to know. “Can we go see?”

“Sure, do a control-H to jump back to the start.”

Zhin typed control-H on the keyboard as she’d seen Bud do earlier. The POV flashed back to the docking station facing along a narrow street they’d flown down before.

“The building into which we looked is the one directly across the street on the left. We looked at both the ground level and the upper story.”

Zhin, who by now had become fairly competent at flying the simulation’s POV, asked: “How do we get in?”

“Just fly through the wall. It’s all make believe, anyway. Go slowly, so you don’t accidentally overshoot and wind up on the other side of the building.”

Zhin moved the POV forward to the middle of the building’s side facing the street, and turned to face it. The

building had a beautiful, wide porch with ornate trim. It looked like it had been painted a dark color with gold leaf highlighting the trim. Zhin could see through one window that the interior had been decorated like the parlor of a residence for a very wealthy individual.

Moving the joystick slightly forward, Zhin started the POV moving slowly forward toward a mural painted on the blank wall. She held her breath as the POV drove right into the wall. As it approached to within a few inches, the image broke up into grainy blobs, as if you stood too close to a pointillist painting, but in three dimensions. As the POV got closer, the blobs got larger and fuzzed out of focus.

Then, the display suddenly went dark, then flashed again into a brightly illuminated domestic scene in a room that appeared to be some twenty feet wide and thirty feet long. A statue of a beautiful woman stood there, presenting two children – a girl and a boy – to a spectacularly ornamented empty chair.

The room was otherwise filled with ornate furniture beautifully finished with intricately patterned fabrics, and gold leaf highlighting dark wood trim. Every horizontal surface showed its own display of art objects, most of which were figurines of people, animals, and plants. Vases held what appeared to be large displays of silk flowers. Elaborate metal candle holders carried graceful beeswax candles.

“What is this?” Zhin asked.

“We *think* this represents a residence for one of Qin Shi Huang’s concubines,” Bud reported. “If that is correct, the woman is presenting her two children by the Emperor to him. We think he imagined his ghost wandering the mausoleum, visiting these various places, just as he might have done in life. The difference is that in his afterlife, everything would be perfect.”

“Historical sources tell us that the Emperor’s barren concubines were buried with him,” Bud added. “We think this might be the residence of one of them. Apparently, in *her* afterlife, she’s no longer barren. You see her presenting two children to the Emperor’s ghost, who can be imagined sitting in the chair. Perhaps that partially made up for being sacrificed to accompany him. This might seem a happier life than what she had on the surface.”

When Zhin turned the POV to face the outer wall, there were no furnishings. The wall decorations mirrored those of the opposite wall. Draperies framed the windows, but there was a noticeable absence of artifacts.

“Why is this side so empty?” Zhin wanted to know.

“We rendered this room based on what Bertha could see through the window. She’s too large to get into the building, or even closer than outside the porch. From there, what we can see in here is limited.”

“But we can see the wall,” Zhin commented.

“Not really, we rendered the inside of the outside wall, which we couldn’t see, based on the wall we could see. We couldn’t see any of the furnishings, so they aren’t here.”

Seeing a doorway leading to another room, Zhin drove the POV through it. It led into a dining room. The same woman sat at a large dining table set with porcelain dishes from which she was eating a meal of what looked like orange beef on a bed of white rice.

Opposite her was an empty chair with a similar meal set out. A beautiful servant woman was standing next to it carrying a silver ewer ready to refill the metal goblet next to the plate. A pair of carved bamboo chop sticks also lay next to the plate, ready for the king’s ghost to pick up and dig into his meal. Again, the part of the room visible from the outside window was filled with exquisite furnishings tastefully arranged with art objects, vases of flowers, ornate candle holders, and so forth, but that part of the room not visible through the window was, except for wallpaper similar to that on the visible wall, empty.

Driving through the ceiling to the upper floor, Zhin found a large bedroom. Furniture included a dressing table, mirrors, two easy chairs arranged around a round table, and an enormous canopied bed. The woman of the house was again there, dancing seductively with two handmaids. All were partially disrobed. What costumes they still wore left nothing to the imagination. It appeared that the handmaids were helping the woman do a strip for the Emperor’s ghost, who would presumably be on the bed.

It appeared that the Emperor had kinky taste, which he intended to indulge a lot in the afterlife.

Bud thought that looked like a really good time, and settled down to study the dancing figures in great detail.

Soon, realizing that the POV hadn't moved from the figures for a long time, Bud looked over at Zhin, who, she found, had removed her hand from the joystick control to gather the folds of the long white cotton skirt she'd worn that day. That's why the POV hadn't moved. Nobody was moving it.

She could see Zhin's fingers rubbing the front of her panties. Her face showed shining eyes, and an avid smile as she stared at the display.

Zhin noticed Bud watching her, and flashed a momentary look of embarrassment. Realizing that her activity, however, coupled with the erotic scene on the display, was turning Bud on, she smiled seductively, herself, and increased the pressure she was applying to her own clit.

Moving her finger down to press the silky fabric between her labia, Zhin began a masturbation performance of her own. She was pleased when Bud turned her chair to watch. Bud had worn a simple light-blue short-sleeved cotton shift that buttoned down the front, which she now unbuttoned two more buttons. Reaching both hands under the cups of her bra, she began squeezing her breasts.

Bud then took her right hand out from under her bra, and unbuttoned her shift all the way. Reaching down into her own panties, she began stroking her middle finger in and out of her vagina. Then, she added the ring finger, then the little finger, and finally the index finger, stroking her hand in and out of her vagina up to the thumb.

Seeing this, Zhin pulled her skirt all the way up to her waist both in the front and the back, so she was sitting directly on the chair's leather seat. Then, she slid her panties off.

Settling back down, Zhin hooked her heels on the edge of the chair seat, and pushed her four fingers deep into her vagina, too. She felt her long nails gently scratching her cervix.

Watching, Bud slid down on the chair seat, and splayed her legs, bracing her feet on the floor. She kept her fingernails short because her work often demanded she get involved in real manual labor that would instantly destroy any manicure. Her short nails made it possible for her to actually insert the very tip of her middle finger through her cervix into her uterus without risking self-inflicted damage.

That felt spectacularly naughty.

Not to be outdone, Zhin balled her tiny fist up, and pushed it into her vagina up to the wrist, stimulating her G spot with the fleshy heel of her thumb. Seeing this, Bud balled the three fingers not involved in penetrating her cervix up and moved them around inside to stimulate her G spot.

Watching each other masturbate, the two women grew more and more excited until both simultaneously climaxed. They kept it up, inducing multiple orgasms until both were spent and sitting in little pools of their ejaculate.

“Ooh!” said Zhin.

“Mmmm!” said Bud.

They both sat for a long time, enjoying the memory of what they’d just done.

“That was fun,” Bud observed. “What do you want to do now?”

What they decided to do was to reset the simulation’s POV to “home,” and shut it down. Then, they closed up the trailer, took separate cars to Zhin’s home, and curled up together in Zhin’s bed. After making love, they napped until it was time for Zhin’s boys to get home from school.

Bud then went back to the trailer to wipe down the seats of the two chairs. When she got there, she saw that the seats had already dried without leaving any residue at all.

42

While all that was going on, Glen and Quon were at the warehouse bullying Benny. Glen didn't like bullying Benny, and looked forward to a time when Benny could become a trusted member of the team. Quon, however, was still immature enough to think being a bully was fun. He knew they intended Benny no real harm, just meant to keep him too busy being scared to think up ways to scam them.

"When she got back from England," Glen explained Bud's absence in response to Benny's frightened query, "she found a new girlfriend."

"She'll play with her all afternoon, poor thing," Glen chuckled dryly with a sadistic grin, as if talking about a pampered cat tormenting a mouse.

Benny had already bought into Bud's "Sadista, Mistress of the Torture Rack" act. He'd let her convince him she was a seductress who liked to combine a little eroticism with a lot of sadism. The things he imagined she'd do to a girlfriend made him sick.

Interestingly, he felt less frightened and more angry about it than he would have a month ago. Since Red's visit, he somehow had begun to feel less emotionally fragile, and his health had improved. On balance, he was happier than at any time since Hsiu Mei's death.

Remorse over what he'd done to her face had made him cherish female beauty more than before. He now knew how fragile it could be, and felt there just wasn't enough of it in the world. The idea of Bud's damaging a beautiful girl made him feel cold.

As Doc had predicted, he was flushing the mercury poison out of his system, and returning to his old self: the boy who'd loved Hsiu Mei, and would have done anything to make her happy. What Benny still didn't realize was that the improvements to his mental and physical health were due to cutting off the stream of looted artifacts

from the mausoleum. He was no longer getting regular doses of poison.

Before she'd died, Hsiu Mei had told him of her conviction that their problems stemmed from being greedy. He'd been too insane to listen at the time, but he now remembered her words. He was beginning to think maybe she'd been right, and that all of his problems now stemmed from the people he'd surrounded himself with in order to get rich.

If getting rich required spending his life with people who hurt beautiful girls for fun, maybe it wasn't worth it.

Glen noticed Benny's eyes dropping, and the pitying look that grew on his face when Benny heard about Bud's girlfriend. He was beginning to look less like a greedy weasel, and more like a reasonably intelligent person who'd been through a lot, and didn't like the way his life had turned out. Perhaps there was hope for him, yet. He'd have to discuss this with Bud. Maybe they'd be able to alter their approach to Benny.

"A-hem!" he said to cut off the cruel comment Quon appeared ready to make. If Benny was turning over a new leaf, Glen would rather encourage it than stifle it.

"What we want to do is put together a road show to raise public awareness of what we're doing here," he explained. "The idea is to show how important our work is from both a scientific and cultural standpoint. We will need an assortment of artifacts to show people. We should also have a video presentation showing how our mapping system works and giving a glimpse inside our simulation of the mausoleum. Bud can work with Tamara Jones on the presentation."

Benny was aware of Bud's "Fuck Buddy" nickname, bestowed on her by a lesbian lover. It reinforced his impression of Glen and Bud as a couple with dangerously kinky tastes.

"Quon," Glen continued, "I want you to get at least one Worm ready and inside the tomb to collect artifacts to display. We should also look into adding insides of buildings to our database, but that's a separate issue."

“What about things that have already been removed?” Quon asked. He didn’t like disturbing the tomb any more than necessary. It had already been desecrated enough!

“Good idea,” Glen replied. “Benny, what do you still have in your shop?”

“Ms. McKenna bought everything I had, and paid cash for it,” Benny reported. He’d dreaded this question, having resold several pieces locally after selling them to Red. When they checked the inventory, he’d be in trouble. The prospect of facing Red and Doc over the shortages terrified him.

He was still not entirely clear about who was doing what around here. Ju Long had told him that Doc owned the company that the PRC had hired to run the dig, and confirmed Red’s story that she would be skimming artifacts when they started coming out of the tomb again. She’d obviously taken over the distribution network – nobody had come to him looking for more artifacts, and his overseas contacts wouldn’t return his phone calls.

After getting to know Glen and Bud – at least getting to know the *persona* they adopted when around him – he figured they were in on the scam as well. So, he had no compunction about telling Glen about the stuff he’d sold to Red. He figured, however, that if Glen found out about his reselling stuff to somebody else, he’d tell her, and she’d feed him to that monster, her husband.

Seeing this dread appear on Benny’s face, Glen said: “If you’ve been selling stuff you promised to Red out from under her, you’ll burn! How much is left?”

“Nearly all of it,” Benny squealed. “Only a few little items are missing. Thieves got into my storage area. Even I can get robbed!”

“Bullshit!” Glen said, with a disgusted look on his face. “*You’re* the thief!”

Glen whipped out his cellphone and speed dialed Bud’s number.

“Bud, it looks like Benny’s cheated us after all,” he said when the call connected. “It looks like he’s sold

some stuff he'd promised to Red, and kept the cash. Let's grab everything from his shop, and move it here for safekeeping. I *knew* we shouldn't have left Red's stuff with him, but she insisted."

Bud, who had just reached the office after her nap with Zhin, replied: "I'll have my pajama-clad buddies raid his shop this afternoon, before his guys can move anything. Don't let him warn anyone until I call to say we've snagged the stuff."

"Okay, Bud, we'll be here waiting for your call."

After cutting off the connection, Glen explained to Quon and Benny – but mostly to Quon: "Bud's going to send a squad over to the antiques shop, to get Red's stuff. They'll bring it here, where they can guard it. Benny, let's see what you've set up for storage."

"I have to go make a phone call!" he yelled, realizing that the raid would uncover his theft. He wanted to warn the people at his shop to destroy records, and had meant to be nonchalant about it, but was too upset to pull it off.

"No, you don't!" Glen warned. "You aren't going to warn anyone. You're going to sit here until the stuff arrives. Quon, get his cellphone, then watch him."

Without waiting, Glen stepped to the door to call for the nearest guard to come in and help control Benny. It was the wrong thing to do.

As Quon approached Benny with his hand out for the cellphone, Benny reached out to grab Quon's wrist, and pull him into a wrist lock with Quon's body shielding Benny's.

Sgt. Tom Manning, whom Bud had assigned to lead the squad guarding the warehouse, had been hanging around in the corridor outside the meeting room. Bud had explained the relationship with Benny – that he was an outside contractor not to be trusted – and Manning knew Glen and Quon were principals on the project. They were to be protected as long as they were in the facility.

When Glen poked his nose outside the meeting room, followed by sounds of a struggle in the room, Manning instantly realized he was needed. He rushed past Glen, and found Benny simultaneously trying to hold the surprised and struggling Quon in a wrist lock, while fumbling to open a switchblade knife with his left hand. He apparently wanted to threaten Quon with the knife for some reason Manning wasn't privy to. He didn't care about that, he went into "protect the principal no matter what" mode.

Manning grabbed the arm holding the knife with both hands, and broke the ulna over his knee.

As his arm broke with a loud crack, Benny screamed, dropped the knife, and lost his grip on Quon's wrist. Feeling Benny's grip loosen, Quon jumped away, over to the other side of the room.

Hearing the commotion, two more guards came running into the room. Seeing their leader trying to subdue Benny, they piled on to help crush Benny to the floor. Seeing the unopened switchblade knife on the floor, one of the guards kicked it away.

Glen had nearly been bowled over when Manning rushed past him into the room. Regaining his balance, he jumped out of the way as the two additional guards ran past. When he stepped back into the room, Quon was backed up against the far wall, white as a sheet. Manning's two guards were physically restraining Benny, who was crying over his broken arm. Manning was rapidly searching Benny for additional weapons.

"Get his cellphone," Glen called to Manning, who had already located it, and now pulled it out and tossed it onto the table.

Search complete, Manning pulled out one of the chairs, and directed his guards to plant Benny in it.

"Don't be stupid!" Glen shouted at Benny, treating him like a student who'd tried to disrupt one of his classes at ASU, and was now in the clutches of campus police.

ASU students do not normally pitch violent fits, but every college professor knows they must be prepared to deal with such things. They are, after all, dealing with robust, typically highly stressed, specimens of the most

dangerous wild animal on Earth – *homo sapiens sapiens*. Even the meekest professor has mentally prepared himself for dealing with such situations by the time they've spent even one semester in front of a classroom, and Glen was certainly not the least experienced, nor the meekest.

He also lived with a woman who, he knew, had “made her bones” – killed another human being on purpose – before he ever met her. She knew, by first-hand experience, how quickly things could get ugly, and was always on guard against it. That attitude had rubbed off on him.

He didn't like violence, but he knew nobody can avoid it permanently. It could come to get you at any time.

Best to be prepared.

He mentally kicked himself for leaving Quon vulnerable. If he'd just waited until Benny had given up the cellphone, or had isolated him before going to look for a guard, or had sent Quon for the guard while himself watching Benny for signs of trouble, things would have gone a lot smoother.

Benny was in no condition to do anything stupid, anyway. He was turning sick as the broken bone in his arm made an ugly lump where it pressed against the underside of his skin, which was now turning purple from internal bleeding.

Manning pulled out his cellphone to call for an ambulance, while one of the guards pulled Benny's arm to set the bone, and the other ran for a first-aid kit. Glen saw they had the situation under control, so he just shut up and stayed out of the way.

Adrenaline clearing from his blood, Glen pulled out a chair, and sat down in it heavily. Quon did the same. He wanted to say something, but couldn't think of anything to say. He figured it wasn't part of his job, anyway. If anything needed to be said, it would be up to his boss, Glen, to say it.

Glen's cellphone rang.

“Hey, Baby,” came Bud’s enthusiastic greeting when the call connected. “We’re at Benny’s place, packing everything up.”

“Any trouble?” Glen asked.

“Naw,” Bud replied. “Store clerks don’t argue with assault weapons. It’s in their union contract. We can’t be sure what’s Red’s and what’s not, so we’re going to pack everything up and bring it. We can sort it out, later.”

“I’ll check to see what Benny has set up for storage, and meet you by the loading dock. Benny’s out of commission.”

“What happened?”

“He argued about giving up his cellphone. Sergeant Manning broke his arm. He’ll be in a sling for about six weeks. What should we tell the cops?”

“Probably nothing. Let Tom handle it. It’s part of what we pay him for. I mean, ‘it’s part of what Red pays him for.’ I forget that I don’t work for Gulf States Security, anymore.”

“When do you think you’ll get here?”

“It’ll take a couple of hours. I sent a detail off to rent a van before we came here. They should show up any minute, now. Then, it’ll take an hour or so to pack everything up, and drive over there.”

“Don’t forget his records.”

“Dave Price is downloading files from his hard drive, now. Matt’s packing up the file cabinets.”

“Let’s just bring ‘em, cabinets and all, in the van,” Glen heard a male voice shout on the other end of the line.

“Okay!” Bud shouted back. Then, she said into the phone: “We’re going to just bring the whole file

cabinets.”

“I heard. See you in a couple of hours.”

“Probably sooner. Is Benny going to be in any kind of shape to help us sort things out?” Bud wanted to know.

“He’ll be doped up for at least a day, and on pain killers after that. He’ll probably be available tomorrow, but it might be better to let him rest, and drag him in here on Wednesday to help out.”

“Babe?” Glen changed the subject. “I think we should talk about how we’re treating Benny. He seems to be getting his head on straighter. Maybe we can ease off on the intimidation thing.”

“Even after this mess?”

“Even after this mess. Let’s see what you think after you’ve had a chance to talk to him.”

43

After visiting the terrified Benny in the hospital Tuesday morning, Bud couldn't see significant improvements in his character. She allowed, however, that he was not at his best. He was doped up, in pain, and knew his pilfering was about to be exposed. He was understandably frightened, and not firing on all eight cylinders.

She knew Glen was an experienced judge of character, and able to divine a person's mental state. If he said Benny was getting better, she'd believe his assessment, rather than what she could see at the moment in the hospital.

"He still looks like a greedy weasel with his tail in a crack to me," Bud told Glen, "but I can't really tell right now. Why do you think he's getting better?"

"Mostly just a feeling," Glen admitted. "Maybe I'm seeing what I want to see, but he was looking a lot more ... robust? ... until the shit hit the fan yesterday afternoon. When he heard you were going to raid the antiques shop was when he started to go ballistic."

"Before that, he asked why you weren't at the meeting. I think he was relieved, and hoping you weren't coming, and not just late. I told him you'd found a new girl to play with, and made it seem you weren't going to play nice. He looked kinda sad about that, like he pitied her. When we first met him, there wasn't room in his fevered brain to consider anyone but himself."

"Coupled with what else we know about him," Bud said, thinking out loud, "that makes sense for a recovering mercury-poisoning victim. How do you want to handle it?"

"I'd like to back off the slasher-movie act. Tell him we know he's had his hand in the cookie jar, but will help him if he cooperates. When's Doc supposed to show up for his inspection?"

Glen knew that the reason for the inspection trip was to deliver software modules to help them insert coded messages in the mapping-system data files, and decode messages left in the VR simulation. He also knew enough to maintain the cover of a routine inspection for the operation.

Nobody but Bud and Glen was to know about the coded-message system, especially Quon, whose first loyalty would presumably be to the Communist Central Committee, not SST. They didn't let him know anything they didn't want reported directly to Ju Long, the Central Committee, or whoever had originally set up the pot-hunting scheme. They had no idea whom to trust, but operated on the presumption that Quon was a direct pipeline to everybody. The same went for Zhin, but Bud thought Zhin was tight with the bad guys, directly.

Dragon Lady with a lesbian streak that Bud hoped would prove a vulnerability was her assessment.

It remained to determine whose lesbian streak was more vulnerable.

Bud believed hers was in better shape: she'd known she was attracted to women since she could remember, and had never been encouraged to hide it. She thought Zhin was a newbie out of the closet, and thus at a disadvantage.

"Probably the end of next week, or early the week after," Bud replied to Glen's question about Doc's trip.

"Okay, I'll dial back the mean flirting," she added, "and we'll concentrate on helping Benny prepare for Doc's visit. I told him to report for work in the morning, or else."

"I'd like to stop by the hospital later, myself," Glen said, "and tell him we know he's been skimming, but are willing to forgive him if he tells us where the stuff went, and helps us try to get it back before Doc finds out about it. I'll let you know how he reacts, or do you want to come along?"

"I'll come along."

When they reached Benny's bedside in the hospital late in the afternoon, they found him dressed in his street

clothes waiting for a taxi to take him home. He hadn't figured out how he was going to get his car. Maybe he'd send somebody to get it, or maybe he'd leave it in the parking lot at the warehouse until he could drive it. He felt too dreamy-drugged to try driving one handed, now.

Bud couldn't resist flirting with Benny some more, so she sat on the bed next to him, and began tickling his neck. She really enjoyed doing this, especially since she didn't really mean to hurt him. It was all a fun play-acting game for her.

She'd always enjoyed being the wild child, but it had always been in a naughty "smoking in the boys' room" sort of way.

(Yes, Bud had liked to smoke in the *boys'* room in high school. Everybody smoked in the *girls'* room. Her frequenting the boys' room was edgier, and therefore more fun. It broke more rules, which was the whole point of the exercise, anyway. It also scared shit out of high-school boys walking in on a beautiful dyke puffing a Camel in the boys' room, especially when she'd talked a girl into joining her. The looks on their faces led to all kinds of high-pitched laughter after the boys backed timidly out.)

This was the first time, however, she'd played at being really cruel and nasty. Even if it was all pretend, it was fun. Actually, it was only fun *because* it was pretend. She didn't want to really hurt anybody. She'd had enough of that for one lifetime, already.

"Stop it!" Glen ordered her, crossly. She put her hands down in her lap, giving Glen a sheepish grin behind Benny's back.

"Benny's got enough trouble without your going after him," Glen warned.

In answer to the startled expression on Benny's face – he knew he was in trouble, but he didn't expect Glen to take this candid approach – Glen said: "We figure Doc's going to show up next week for a surprise visit. We need to get back as much of what you've stolen as we can, and fix up the books to hide the rest."

These guys were going to *help* him?

“We don’t want to answer any of his questions about what you’ve been doing behind our backs, either,” Glen explained. “So, tomorrow meet us at the warehouse at nine o’clock. We’ll start by separating what’s Red’s from what’s yours. Then, we’ll see what’s missing. Then, we’ll figure out what to do.”

Benny didn’t say a word. Everything had been said in English, so the damaged sots wandering around the Emergency Ward probably hadn’t understood a word. If any government spies overheard, it would be up to these archaeologists to explain, not him.

What Benny didn’t realize was that this whole Spy vs. Spy business had progressed beyond Glen’s ability to keep it straight. He was now just going with the flow. Bud, similarly, was pretty much spooked out. She figured Doc would approve of the way they were handling the situation, and she didn’t give a shit what anyone else thought. If some corrupt Commie bastards wanted to object, she’d tell ‘em to go pound sand.

It was, they both realized, an attitude that could get them into a lot of trouble in the middle of a totalitarian state. They just hoped it wouldn’t do so quite yet.

This was what Red had hoped to shield them from by keeping secrets. It hadn’t worked.

Luckily, the bandaged-up man in the next bed reported directly to Ju Long, and not anyone else. Ju Long knew all about Red’s involvement in Benny’s operation, and thought he understood it, so no proverbial cats escaped from proverbial bags.

The guys listening in through the microphones hidden in the wall sockets were low-level flunkies who hadn’t expected Bud and Glen to show up. They didn’t understand English worth a damn, and hadn’t bothered to turn on their recording equipment. So, the official spooks missed the conversation, too.

Whew!

44

Bud packed Benny up in her car, and Glen drove them to Benny's apartment.

Bud knew that criminals like Benny liked to keep where they lived a secret. They were always afraid of what their criminal friends might do if they knew where to find them. Everything from burglary to violent home invasion was possible.

True to form, Benny tried to keep them from bringing him all the way home, but Bud wasn't having any of that. She wanted Benny as vulnerable as possible, so she insisted on accompanying him all the way up to his apartment.

Once there, she made him sit on the couch opposite where Glen sat in an easy chair, and began puttering around in Benny's kitchen. Searching loudly through Benny's cupboards, drawers, and refrigerator, she collected all she'd need to make a Mexican-theme dinner for the three of them.

Benny didn't have the right spices, nor did he have tortillas or refried beans. Bud did, however, find enough close substitutes to whip up steak and eggs with ranchero sauce, and a credible version of Spanish rice. She pulled together vanilla ice cream sprinkled with chopped peanuts for dessert.

Benny was amazed that she'd been able to find the ingredients in his pantry, delighted with the flavors, and horrified that he'd been forced to let her do it. It was a variation on the frightening seductiveness she'd exhibited to him from the beginning. He felt helpless to resist her domination, which is exactly what she wanted. The difference was that she now seemed less demonic, and more like a domineering mother. He had less fear of her, but was still helplessly under her control. If anything, he was more under her control.

At eight o'clock the next morning, two big, burly, armed men in Gulf States Security uniforms picked the lock on Benny's front door, woke him up, and made sure he got to the warehouse at the dot of nine to help Glen

sort out the material Bud had collected from his antiques shop.

Glen was pleasantly surprised at how little Benny had pilfered from Red's collection. Altogether, Benny had skimmed what Glen estimated was about fifty thousand dollars worth of stuff from a pile that was probably worth a couple of million on the "you shouldn't have this" antiquities market.

That told Glen their intimidation program had been pretty successful. The guy had dared to steal only about two-and-a-half percent, consisting of small items that wouldn't have been missed if Red hadn't made such a careful inventory when she was there.

Dave Price pieced together a list of whom Benny sold the skimmed artifacts to, for how much, and where they could be found. Bud, when she reviewed the list, made an executive decision that it wasn't worth turning a major Chinese city upside down to shake out the stuff. Two-and-a-half percent shrinkage under the conditions was acceptable, and the pieces that were stolen had limited scientific value. If the government wanted to chase them down after this whole thing was over, she'd already pulled together the evidence they'd need.

She had more important things to do right now.

Specifically, she was spending most of her waking hours with Zhin to complete the survey of the barrow, and the accompanying map. Quon had, before Glen pulled him away to work on his dog-and-pony show, mapped all of the space Bertha had explored before he took over, and nearly all of her observations since.

Every day, however, they had to review the previous day's observations, and make sure they got integrated properly into the database. Then, they had to do routine maintenance on the airship's systems. Finally, they had to make sure Bertha had downloaded her action items for the next day.

The last item was made both easier and harder by Bertha having to do her work without human supervision. It was easier because nobody needed to babysit her while she did her work. It was harder because she had to leave the docking station with everything she'd need for a day's work. She returned to the docking station briefly around

mid-day to upload the morning's observations, do a quick systems check, and head off, again.

Most importantly, they had to set priorities for what areas were most important for Bertha to explore on each flight. Their only guide was an account written by Chinese historian Sima Qian a century after the mausoleum's construction, which was long on poetic description, but short on specific details. At Zhin's prompting, they began working in toward the barrow's center, where they presumed the actual burial chamber and the center of the Emperor's afterlife government, to be.

As time went on, Bud's suspicion that Zhin had information that could only come from the leaders of the looters' expedition grew. The only pot hunters Glen had been allowed to interview were low level. The leaders were still unavailable, and he suspected, in no condition to answer questions. Thus, if Bud was right about Zhin's involvement in the pot hunting, she was the only available resource with any idea what was really inside the tomb.

Thus, Bud would be wise to follow her suggestions for where to concentrate Bertha's efforts. So, that's what she did.

While Bertha was off making new observations, Zhin and Bud explored the VR rendering of the previous day's observations. The probability of a software bug causing problems was now pretty low – they'd been using the system for a while, and any bugs would already have been found and corrected. But, it was new technology, so anything was possible. The possibility of a hardware fault, especially, always increases with time as the equipment ages and wears.

Bud had enough experience with prototype-system testing to understand the so-called "bathtub curve" of failure probability. Failures are highly likely in brand-new equipment, as manufacturing defects rear their ugly little heads early; and late in the equipment's useful life, when the accumulated slings and arrows of outrageous fortune begin to take their toll. Bertha was now past the infant-mortality phase, and nowhere near the wear-out period. She was early in her golden mid-life period, where the failure rate was depressed like the flat bottom of a bathtub. It was hard to predict when her systems would begin wearing out, but Bud figured they'd be done mapping long

before then.

Each day, they began by checking the interface between the new material and what had been rendered before. They looked especially for any gaps between the new observations and the old, and any inconsistencies that would signal mistakes in the data.

Then, they toured the periphery to see how far Bertha had actually gotten. That gave them a border to outline the extent of the new observations. That was the information they needed to plan the next day's observations.

The third step was to quickly fly over the whole area included in the new observations at a relatively high altitude. That gave them an overall view, and helped them prioritize different parts of the day's observations. Especially, they mapped the layout of the streets.

Finally, they got down and dirty to explore the new area in detail. They started with any areas they'd flagged as high priority during the overview, then covered every street and alleyway in the new territory.

By the end of the day's mapping, they wanted to have a street map of the new area, an identifying code for each of the buildings – basically an address – and a guess at each building's function in the afterlife China.

They were on the lookout for three things: the throne room; the crypt where the Emperor's body lay; and the place where the grave robbers had emerged into the tomb. Actually, using Zhin's reconstruction of the robbery, they expected there to be two places where the robbers penetrated. The easiest to find would be the second hole, near the barrow's center.

It would be less interesting and harder to find the first penetration, which they expected somewhere near the outer wall. It could be almost anywhere, so they figured they'd just happen on it sometime during the mapping program.

The picture that was beginning to emerge – and they figured they'd explored about one third of the barrow's floor plan by then – was of streets laid out in concentric circles, presumably with the king's crypt at the very center.

Radial streets connected the circles. The only deviation from this plan was an area at the periphery on one side that was set aside for what the archaeologists were calling the Water Works. That was an irregular section laid out as described before.

Because of the target-shaped regularity and radial streets, Bud and Zhin thought they now knew where the city center was. They planned to drive Bertha's explorations in that direction, then spread out to explore the rest of the barrow after reaching it.

They reached it Thursday.

45

Thursday dawned bright and clear, which made no nevermind to Bud and Zhin. They kept the inside of the trailer, especially the back section where they were working at the simulation console, as dark and gloomy as the inside of a movie theater. The dim light made concentrating on the VR display easier.

They were in high spirits, anyway. Wednesday, Bertha should have reached the city center, where they expected Qin Shi Huang's crypt, palace, and government center to be. The cloud-based supercomputer had been masticating the raw video all night, and they expected to see the palace in VR by noon.

As usual, they sat with their chairs so close together that their bodies touched. They'd gone so far as to throw a thick scatter rug on the floor to keep their wheeled chairs from rolling apart.

Ostensibly, it was to keep both of their heads close to the VR display's ideal viewing position. In reality, however, they mostly liked the closeness. Zhin, especially, liked to hook her right arm through Bud's left, and lean her head on the larger woman's shoulder.

Bud had started the habit of resting her heels, typically encased in cowboy boots, on the desk's edge, and leaning her chair back while watching the VR display. She liked to carry the wireless keyboard in her lap to make annotations on the flat-map display while Zhin piloted the POV with the joystick, held in *her* lap.

Zhin's legs were nowhere near long enough to reach the desk edge on which Bud's heels were hooked. So, she generally kicked off her shoes, leaned her chair back, also, and rested her feet on Bud's shins.

They found they could sit for hours like that, and loved every minute. It was as close to making out as they could get while still focusing on the work they were there to do.

Once in a while, if they were alone in the trailer toward the end of the day, they stopped focusing on the simulation, and went all the way to real making out. Bud hoped she was reaching her goal of making Zhin fall in

love with her. She knew she was getting pretty fond of Zhin, herself.

If Zhin was a Dragon Lady, Bud liked Dragon Ladies. They were soft, and cuddly, and had perky little breasts with nice, hard, pointy nipples. Their lips were soft and warm, and just right for kissing.

They found themselves alone in the trailer like that a lot, because Glen and Quon were busy assembling and testing Worms. The Worm crew wouldn't be using the VR simulation because Worms would be piloted by operators in real time, and the VR required a day for rendering by the cloud supercomputer. It was, therefore, decidedly unreal-time. To house the Worm operation, they had brought in another trailer – a *triple-wide* – big enough to house enough control consoles for ten Worms. That's where Glen and Quon were spending their time.

The triple-wide's interior space was laid out as mostly one big, empty room, with Worm-control consoles lined up near the outside walls. There was office space, a conference room and storage in the "back," and a big workshop area in the middle. Each Worm's control console consisted of a desk supporting a large flat-panel display, and a charging station. Operators would sit at the desks with their backs to the outside walls. That allowed the room to have plenty of natural light.

When not at work, Worms would curl up on their charging stations, which were flat tables roughly three feet square, with low-frequency electromagnetic coils built into the tops to couple electrical power directly to the Worms' charging systems. Each charging station was pushed up to the back of the associated Worm's control-console desk, all nice and cozy.

Worm pilots would communicate with their charges through wireless headsets linked through their console's computer to a wireless Ethernet on which the Worms' communication modules were also nodes. They would monitor what their Worms were doing by watching video feeds from the Worms' image sensors. There were also video cameras monitoring the various spaces where Worms were operating, which pilots could monitor on their display screens as separate windows.

It was a major installation that Quon estimated would take at least another week to make operational for

their first Worm. They wouldn't have the whole thing set up, with ten Worms operational by trained pilots, for another six months. Fully exploring the barrow would take years.

About eleven o'clock, the two women's efforts to get caught up with Bertha's Tuesday-morning observations was interrupted by the sound of a melodious gong emanating from the simulation computer's audio system. The gong sound told them that the computer was done downloading the results of Bertha's Wednesday morning observations, and integrating them into the VR point cloud, ready for them to review. And, they hadn't even started on the Tuesday afternoon observations.

Bud realized that they were getting seriously behind in their exploration efforts. There'd been too much hanky panky going on in the darkened trailer, and not enough exploration. Bud realized it was becoming exactly the habit Doc had warned her against in London.

As she'd said at the time, Bud knew how to break that kind of habit. Unfortunately, the first step in breaking an addiction is to *want* to break it. Bud kept coming up with excuses to not want to break it. Her main excuse was that she wanted Zhin so intimately involved with her that she began letting Bud in on her most intimate secrets – like who were the bad guys running the pot hunting ring. To get Zhin that intimate, Bud had to get intimate. The danger was that Bud might get so intimate that she let Zhin in on *her* intimate secrets.

Actually, wanting to break the habit was the second step. Admitting that you had the habit was really the first step, and Bud wasn't quite there, yet. Realizing that they were getting seriously behind in their work was a hint. Bud, however, hadn't quite been willing to make the connection between being behind and spending time fooling around with Zhin.

The proverbial shit, however, was on a clear trajectory directly toward the proverbial fan: Doc was due to show up in less than a week.

“Zhin, let's drive right toward the city center to see if Bertha's found what's really there,” Bud suggested.

Zhin already knew that what she wanted was there: a fabulous treasure trove of grave goods. Since things were going along nicely according to *her* plan, however, there was no reason to say anything about any of that to Bud.

“Okay,” she agreed, enthusiastically, and guided the simulation’s POV along a radial street at high speed toward the center at about six meters off the ground. As the POV moved forward, the density of terracotta statues, and the richness of their dress, increased rapidly.

Soon, they reached a large, ornately decorated building around which the level of frozen activity reached “bustling.” Every walk of life, from servants to high officials was represented. All were caught in poses of purposeful activity. Horse-drawn carriages and wagons vied with pedestrians for space to move along the boulevard surrounding the building. People were poised to move in and out of its numerous doors.

The windows, however, were blank and black. The simulation software included strict instructions not to spend precious computing resources rendering anything inside any building’s walls, and it had no reason to treat this building as different from any other.

They would have to make alternative arrangements for reaching in to unlock its secrets.

In the meantime, Zhin began a reconnaissance sweep around outside the building. About three quarters of the way around, they found the pot hunters’ second entrance hole. It was a roughly circular hole about three feet across torn through the street’s pavement.

The pot hunters had missed the palace by about fifteen feet, surfacing out in the middle of the boulevard. Seeing the terracotta statues so close at hand must have scared them silly. No wonder the children refused to go back through the tunnel after having emerged once. It was amazing that anyone was willing to go in a second time.

The statues nearest the hole had been knocked over and smashed. Their fine robes and jewelry had been removed.

The damage was spread a couple of dozen feet from the hole. The nearest door into the building stood open. The pot hunters had obviously gone in that way after the building had been located, and had cleaned out everything within reach.

Suddenly, Bud and Zhin realized that one of the fallen terracotta statues – a strangely dressed one that wasn't broken at all – lay well away from the hole on the side opposite from the building in an awkward pose unlike that of any standing statue. It was stretched out as if crawling desperately across the floor.

It wasn't a terracotta statue at all. It was the mummified body of a pot hunter who'd become disoriented in the dark, went the wrong way and died of asphyxiation – lost and alone in that horrible place!

46

“We must get into that building,” Zhin insisted. “It will be full of the most fabulous artifacts.”

In her excitement, she’d forgotten all about exploring and mapping. She just wanted into that building and access to the treasures it contained.

Bud noticed.

“We still have serious scientific work to do outside,” she commented. “We now see that the palace is where we thought it would be. We need to go back and check the periphery, then get caught up with Bertha’s observations and plan her next run. We’re horribly behind.”

“The next run should be to check in the windows to see what’s inside, like you did with that building near Bertha’s docking station,” Zhin insisted.

“This isn’t a treasure hunt,” Bud countered. “We have real scientific work to perform. The overall map is nowhere near complete.”

“This is the most important part of the site,” Zhin kept pushing. “Glen needs this information for his sponsorship program. Showing the Emperor’s court will mean more than anything else. We need to get more of those artifacts out!”

“Bertha can’t carry anything out,” Bud explained. She ignored Zhin’s comment about showing the Emperor’s court. She was right, and Glen would want that throne room explored any way they could do it.

“Why not?” Zhin asked, not wanting to wait.

“She has no way to do it. We need to get Worms in there, with their grasping claws. To use Worms in there, we need to extend our communications network all the way in there.”

“So, let’s do it,” Zhin was now on a quest.

“That will mean refitting Bertha with a new gondola for dropping wireless-network nodes. We’ve never done that. That gondola’s never even been unpacked.”

“Glen will want us to do it,” Zhin insisted, playing what she thought would be her trump card.

Bud knew she was right. In the academic world where Glen lived, you couldn’t do anything without your sponsors, and those sponsors didn’t always understand the scientific subtleties, but they all responded to exciting pictures, and recovered treasures.

Bud didn’t live in the academic world, however. She lived in the SST world, where the only one you had to impress was Doc, and he didn’t give a rat’s left butt cheek for treasure. If you wanted to impress Doc, you showed him science.

But, Zhin was right, Bud finally admitted. This time, impressing Glen’s sponsors in the Chinese government was more important than waving exciting science in front of Doc. Bud knew in her heart that Doc would agree.

She didn’t have a clue what Red would say. Red was off on her own tangent with this project, and Bud wasn’t entirely clear what that tangent might be. Probably, however, she’d agree with Doc, and Doc would agree with Zhin. Bud’s science would have to wait.

Sighing at the inevitability, Bud said: “Okay, I’ll make you a deal. We’ll have Bertha look in the windows on the next trip, which is tomorrow morning. But, first, I want to finish the periphery check of Tuesday’s and Wednesday’s observations. Then, we’ll plan tomorrow’s window peeking.”

Zhin reluctantly agreed. “How do we program her to look in the windows?”

“I’ll show you that *after* we’ve finished the survey,” Bud insisted.

Petulantly, Zhin checked the flat-map display for the fastest way to get back to where Tuesday afternoon’s

observations overlapped Tuesday morning's. Deciding on a route, she zoomed toward a radial avenue at maximum speed. Bud was just about to say something about careful driving, when Zhin missed a turn, and clipped the corner of a building.

When she did, of course, nothing was damaged. Everything was a computer simulation. There weren't any material objects subject to the Pauli Exclusion Principle (in non-physicist terms: two objects can't occupy the same space at the same time) to damage.

She suddenly stopped. For a moment, Bud thought Zhin had seen the wisdom of moving carefully, but she was wrong.

Zhin had realized something quite different: when you collide a *simulated* POV with a *simulated* building, nothing happens. The VR screen just goes momentarily dark, then the POV passes on as if nothing had happened.

Zhin sat for a minute contemplating this idea. She'd known about it, but its ramifications for piloting the POV through the VR space hadn't fully sunk in.

When they did, instead of restarting the movement at a lower speed, Zhin carefully looked at the display of the flat map, then turned to a heading that would take them directly to the place where Bertha's observations for Tuesday afternoon started. She then jammed the joystick all the way forward.

The VR display went suddenly black as the POV raced through the body of an unexplored building. When it emerged on the other side, a street scene briefly flashed onto the screen, which then went black again as the POV penetrated the next building. The startling display, with long periods of blackness punctuated by brief flashes of outdoor street scenes continued at a feverish pace.

Whoomp! ... Whoomp! ... Whoomp!

Zhin didn't even look at the flashing VR display. She was totally focused on the flat-map display, which showed the POV moving cross lots toward the target location. In actual fact, the POV was well off the flat map into

“Here There Be Monsters” territory because they hadn’t taken the time to update it while following the simulated streets on the VR display while making a beeline to where they thought the palace would be. There were green lines indicating map coordinates, but nothing to indicate what was there. Zhin was headed toward one corner of the part of the map that showed something. That was where they’d left off their updating with Tuesday morning’s observations. That was Zhin’s target, and she was headed directly for it at warp speed.

As the POV started getting close to her target, Zhin began slowing it down, until she drew it to a stop exactly where she wanted to begin the survey.

Bud sat in stunned silence as Zhin elevated the POV to an altitude above the plazas, fountains, trees, and monuments. Then, Zhin began a high-speed sprint down the boulevard they’d used to delineate where Tuesday afternoon’s observations ended, and where Bertha had picked up again Wednesday morning.

“Slow down!” Bud shouted, as Zhin blew past a small red blob off to the right. “Stop!”

The red blob was a simulated fog patch that indicated a place where the computer detected a difference between the morning’s observation run and the afternoon’s. Since nobody and nothing was supposed to be in the barrow, there should be no changes from one run to the next – at least no detectable differences.

Most red patches arose from variations of shadows cast by Bertha’s lights from one perspective to another. The simulation computer used those variations to figure out what was actually there, but sometimes it couldn’t resolve conflicts. When that happened, the computer got confused, and flagged the place as needing re-observation. It signaled that by marking it in the simulation with a red fog.

Yellow patches indicated there was a gap in the observations that would require Bertha to come back to fill in the missing information. In either case, Bud needed to make a note in her electronic log book to have Bertha reexamine that location.

Bud had yelped because Zhin had flown past so fast, she’d almost missed the patch.

“Look,” she said crossly when Zhin stopped the POV movement, and waited for Bud to tell her what was wrong, “if you’re going to go so fast that I miss Red Flags, we’ll end up having to go over the whole thing again. Don’t be so impatient, and we’ll get the job done sooner, and a whole lot better.”

Chagrined, Zhin waited for Bud to make her annotation by copying the red blob’s coordinates into her electronic log entry, then started off again at a more sedate pace.

In the end, it took them about an hour to check the periphery of Bertha’s latest observation runs at a speed that was a compromise between the balls-to-the-wall pace Zhin wanted, and the careful, sedate pace Bud thought was necessary. Bud figured she’d have to redo much of their work when she came back to update the flat map with a street-by-street exploration.

They no longer sat cuddled up when Bud showed Zhin how to develop a program for Bertha to peek into the Palace’s windows. It was all business with a generous “we’re pissed at each other” undertone.

47

“VR,” Bud said into her headset microphone, “learn command ‘*Peek in the Window.*’”

She was using verbal programming to teach the VR simulation to move its POV as she wished Bertha to move her video camera array during the observing run tomorrow morning. You always start a verbal programming command with the robot’s name, to signal the robot that what follows is a command, and that the command is meant for that particular robot. She was programming the VR simulation now, but would do a global search and replace to change the name “VR” to “Bertha” just before downloading the code to Bertha’s control computer.

Bud had already planned out in her head what she wanted Bertha to do: start at the Palace’s Southeast street corner, approach the corner window near its bottom left side, then move laterally at one-quarter meter per second, and stop when the array reached the window’s bottom right corner. Then, she’d have it move up half a meter, and scan to the left as far as the window’s left edge, then move up another half meter, and so forth until she’d reached, and scanned, as far as the window’s top edge.

“Bud,” came a voice very much like Bertha’s, but noticeably more mechanical, over the headphones, “I’m ready to learn the new command ‘peek in the window.’”

Before running through the motion, however, Bertha would have to turn on her floodlight, which was a small, high-intensity LED array in an optical system that spread light evenly in a cone one hundred twenty degrees wide – sixty degrees from straight ahead in all directions. They needed to use a separate floodlight, instead of the glow from Bertha’s hull, to peek in windows that might be glazed, because the reflection of Bertha’s hull would obscure whatever they were trying to observe on the other side of the window.

The floodlight’s light appeared to emanate from a single, bright point so that glare from a shiny surface, such as window glass, would not dazzle all the cameras in the array at the same time. In fact, the mapping software included a module that would use those reflections to detect glass in the window, and remove the glare from the

simulation along with the image of Bertha's hull.

Bud needed to code a new window-peeking module because she'd manually guided the blimp in real time to look in the windows of the building near Bertha's docking station. There wasn't any re-usable code available on which to base an automated program.

There were a lot of windows in the Palace, and she wanted a generic module she could re-use for each window there.

"VR," Bud commanded, "turn floodlight on and turn hull light off."

The VR simulation added the glow from a simulated floodlight, and removed the simulated hull-light glow. Because the operator could see a difference when the command was obeyed, there was no need for the VR simulation to acknowledge the command. Bud already knew it had.

"VR, set the collision-avoidance distance at five centimeters, and approach the wall."

"Bud, I'm approaching the wall to five centimeters," the simulation's voice replied.

The VR software's collision-avoidance module included an outline of Bertha's outside dimensions. Bud was using that feature to control Bertha's position relative to the real wall to avoid real collisions in real space. Bertha would bring her hull to exactly five centimeters from the wall, and no less than five centimeters from any other object she might encounter.

"VR, start map array recording."

"Bud, I'm now recording video data from the mapping-camera array."

"VR, move horizontally right at zero-point-one-two-five meters per second maintaining five centimeter distance."

Again, there was no need to acknowledge the command, as Bud could see it happening. SST engineers had discovered that having robots acknowledge commands when it was not necessary became very old very fast for the operators. So, they'd modified the verbal-programming operating system to minimize unnecessary chatter.

Under the command Bud had given, Bertha would move horizontally to the right at twelve and a half centimeters – about five inches – per second. Bud had decided to slow her down from the quarter-meter-per-second rate she originally planned in order to make maintaining that five centimeter distance to the wall easier for Bertha's propulsion system. It had to move a big thing very precisely!

Bud continued talking the VR through the entire motion she wanted it to make, turned the floodlight off and the hull light on, then closed the command.

"VR, back up ten meters," she ordered to back the VR POV away from the wall, in preparation for testing the command she'd just written.

The POV backed up by a little over thirty feet.

"VR, locate the bottom left window on the visible wall."

That was a compound command Bud had taught the Bertha simulation previously.

"Bud, I have located the bottom left window on the visible wall," the simulation's voice said. Suddenly, the window was highlighted by a yellow fog.

"VR, peek in the window."

The simulation's POV moved up to the window, turned its simulated floodlight on and its hull light off, and scanned across the window in a raster pattern as Bud had taught it, and switched back to hull lights. Then, it stopped.

"Good," Bud said, absently. "Now, we'll write a program to peek in all the windows going around the

building on the first floor, then the second floor, and so forth to the top. Then we'll be done.”

Zhin had watched Bud verbally programming Bertha's daily observation runs since she'd started helping with the mapping project, but had never seen verbal programming at this level before. Previously, Bud had just needed to invoke a pre-existing code module to self-navigate streets in a given area. Basically, Bud told Bertha to map so many blocks in one direction and so many in another. Since they didn't really know the layout, they couldn't get much more specific than that.

This observation run was going to be much more precise and involved because they knew the space they wanted Bertha to fly through.

48

“That’s because you’re falling in love with her,” Red told Bud, “as Doc warned you that you might. You’re supposed to be a tough old dyke, better get a grip on yourself.”

Bud had called Red to complain that, rather than leading her to the bad guys, Zhin was leading her on a treasure hunt. Bud also complained that Zhin was neglecting their relationship in favor of chasing trinkets. That’s not exactly the way Bud told the story, but Red knew it was what Bud was really feeling. Red correctly surmised that the last was what bothered Bud the most.

“I’m *not* falling in love with her,” Bud denied.

“Are so,” Red insisted.

“No, I am not falling in love with Zhin,” Bud stated levelly. “I’m concerned about our project hitting a roadblock, and you’re getting bitchy about my new lover.”

“Get real. I’ve never been possessive about you, but you’re getting hung up on Zhin. I can hear it in your voice. *That’s* the roadblock *I’m* worried about. And, it’s not really a roadblock, but more of a speed bump. One of the things that makes me think you’re getting too emotional is that you’re blowing it out of proportion. That indicates an unhealthy attachment.”

Red added the last sentence to remind Bud of the second of The Buddha’s four noble truths: suffering is caused by desire, or attachment, as Doc preferred to put it.

The penny dropped. In China, where it was Saturday mid afternoon, Bud’s end of the telephone line grew quiet. In Arizona, where it was the wee hours of the previous night, Red sat up in bed, and waited for her to think this out. It took a long time. Connect charges were piling up, but Red didn’t care. She was happy to invest a few measly dollars in her best friend’s mental health.

Bud thought about all the things that had happened between her and Zhin over the past few days, and how she felt about them. She had to admit, finally, that Red was right. She'd been enjoying playing with Zhin more than was healthy under the circumstances.

"Okay," she breathed with a sigh. "You're right. I let myself get too fond of sex with Zhin. But, what do I do about her treasure hunting?"

"Bud, this is what you wanted," Red reminded her. "She wants to get treasure out. You want to know what she'll do with it. Help her get out her treasure, and watch what she does with it. Use your influence with Benny to track it. We've spent months setting this up. Follow through with it."

"Zhin clearly has her priorities straight," Red pointed out. "She's focused on hunting treasure, which indicates she *may* be pot hunting. I'd say that is pretty likely. You should be focused on finding the link between your pot hunters and my distributors. This affair between you and Zhin has just been a side track. She's gotten back to the main line. You should, too. Enough with this girl-sex crap! You can get all the sex you need – in fact all that's healthy for you – with Glen."

Bud thought about what Red was saying, and its ramifications. Zhin had used her to achieve her goal – she'd found her way to her treasure trove. She didn't need Bud, anymore. Who did she need, now?

Glen.

Glen was the one with the Worms. Glen was the one with the means to get stuff out. Bud had told her that in no uncertain terms, and that's when Zhin lost interest in having an affair with her.

Oooops!

"Oh, no!" she said out loud. "Now, she'll go after Glen. She'll cuddle up with him to try to get him to pull artifacts out so she, and whoever she's working with, can loot them by remote control."

“Where’s Glen, now?” Red asked.

“At the dig site in the Worm-Control building,” Bud answered.

“Better get down there right away, Baby, you’ve got some cunt blocking to do.”

“I’ll call you later,” Bud said quickly, then disconnected without waiting for Red’s good bye.

In Arizona, Red laughed out loud, which roused Doc, who’d gone back to sleep beside her. He’d figured he wasn’t needed for the call, and he needed to sleep. So, that’s what he did.

“What?” he asked, groggily.

“My little fuck buddy just had the tables turned on her, that’s all,” Red laughed. “She got out Mata Haried by the Dragon Lady, who’s now out to fuck her husband for profit, instead of her. Only Bud could get into that kind of scrape!”

49

Back in China, Bud caught Zhin at the Worm building trying to climb onto a confused Glen's lap – while he was standing up.

“Hey!” Bud shouted, peeling Glen out of Zhin's embrace. “Mine!” she claimed, hugging him protectively.

Glen seemed relieved. Not that he didn't enjoy Zhin climbing all over him, but he'd been unsure what Bud would want him to do. *He* wasn't confused about what they were trying to accomplish. He'd also realized what Zhin was trying to accomplish. What he didn't know was whether he should encourage her, or fend her off. Bud resolved that issue, restoring his equilibrium.

Zhin was more frustrated than embarrassed. She, too, knew exactly what she was trying to accomplish, and Bud had broken up her plan for accomplishing it.

“You keep your grubby paws off my man!” Bud warned.

Turning to Glen, she shifted gears: “Baby, the three of us need to talk about getting Quon's Worms into the barrow, and some artifacts out.”

“Okay,” Glen said, falling in with the way Bud wanted to handle the situation. “Let's go into the conference room, where we can all sit down and talk.”

In the conference room, they took up three of the eight folding chairs arranged around a seven-foot-long folding table. Glen sat at one end, with Bud on his right with her back to the door, and Zhin on his left. Glen sat with his elbows on the table, arms and hands tented to form a platform on which he rested his chin. Bud sat leaning forward, forearms on the table, with her left arm affectionately in contact with Glen's right elbow. Zhin sat back in her chair with arms folded and a pouty expression on her face. She didn't like the way things were going.

Bud, the veteran manager, took control of the impromptu meeting: “Zhin thinks we should make an immediate drive to the Palace we found at the city center. At first, I didn’t like taking the focus off mapping the tomb, but she’s convinced me she was right.”

This concession made Zhin feel better. Her strategy was in the crapper, but it looked like her goal would be met, anyway.

“I spoke to Red about it before coming here, and she agrees,” Bud continued. “The idea is to explore the interior, and bring out some fresh artifacts for your dog-and-pony show.”

“What has Red got to do with it?” Zhin didn’t like spreading the decision making around any further than it already was. She was having enough trouble managing these two. Now, Bud was bringing in a fourth party.

“She’s my boss,” Bud explained. “I can’t make a major change to the project program without her approval, and this is a major change.”

Zhin, who had no idea how decisions were made in an American corporation, wasn’t sure about this until Glen nodded his agreement. He understood how it worked, so that gave Zhin confidence that things were progressing the way they needed to.

“Okay,” she said out loud, “let’s do it.”

“Well,” Glen said, circumspectly, “it’s not like hopping in your car and driving to Beijing. Bertha can fly in and out at will, but Worms need more infrastructure. Think of it like a road. An airship, like Bertha, can fly over a dirt track, but trucks for hauling artifacts need pavement.”

“But, the whole mausoleum is paved,” Zhin countered.

“You’re missing my point,” Glen explained. “Pavement is only one kind of infrastructure, which Worms don’t actually need. What they need most is a communications infrastructure so that we can direct them in real

time. Bud, that's your department."

Bud nodded, then stopped to think before answering.

"What we have available," she began slowly, "is a bunch of battery-powered wireless Ethernet routers. The problem is battery life. The units we have are good for only about three hours at full data rate."

"What does that mean?" Glen asked. Zhin hadn't understood what Bud said well enough to formulate a question. This was too technical for both of them.

"There's a tradeoff between data rate and battery life," Bud explained. "The units we have go into a power-saving 'sleep' mode unless they're actively sending signals."

She stopped again to think how she would explain it.

"Ethernet sends data in the form of packets. Each packet takes a certain amount of energy to send. In 'sleep mode' the transmitters are all shut off. When there's a message to send, the router receives a signal, and wakes up long enough to send one or more packets – enough to carry the data that needs to be sent – to the next router along the line, then shuts back down. The batteries are good for days if no data is being sent, but can only accumulate about three hours total transmit time before needing to be recharged."

She stopped to think again.

"I see three issues we have to resolve before we can put Worms to work out there at the Palace," she started again. "One, we need power from end to end of the route. Two, we need high-speed communications the whole way, too. Three, we need a precise navigation system. We may be able to do without the third. In the barrow we can use my version of 'IFR' – 'I Follow Roads.'"

Glen nodded, indicating that he thought he was following her train of thought.

"We don't need them all at once, though," she added after another pause. "For power, we need a high-

voltage, low current system to go the whole length without turning the tomb into a toaster oven.”

“Now, what are you talking about?” Glen asked. Bud had lost him again.

“Current going through resistance is what turns electricity into heat. Power is voltage times current, so high voltage with low current gives you high power with low heating.”

“How do you know this?” Glen knew it wasn’t part of Bud’s archeology curriculum.

“Red explained it to me, once. We’d both seen it in Freshman Physics Class, but that doesn’t really give you an appreciation for how engineers apply it in practice. She learned that from Doc when they were setting up their systems out in the mountains in Nevada. You know, when she was using a Worm to go down into that mine.”

“Oh, yeah,” Glen recalled. It was not the first time he’d been impressed by what Bud had learned hanging around with Doc and Red.

“We have a lot farther to go than they did – eight hundred yards instead of two hundred feet – but the principle’s the same. I’ll talk to Doc on Monday to get the details straight, but we probably will end up with a four-hundred-eighty volt line laid along the ground from our transformer out here to the Palace in there.”

“What do you need that for?” Glen finally realized that he still wasn’t following her reasoning as well as he’d thought.

“I figure you’ll need at least one Worm charging station at the Palace,” she explained. “That will allow you to leave your Worms in there as long as you need them. We can use our little robot wheelbarrow to bring stuff in and out. It can charge out here, but the Worms need a friendly neighborhood gas station. That means power at the Palace.”

“I see what you mean,” Glen said.

“What about using the looters’ tunnel?” Zhin blurted out. “We saw that it ends up at the Palace, right outside

the door. You know where it starts on the outside.”

“What’s the floor made of?” Bud asked. She’d suddenly thought she saw a way to trap Zhin into revealing what she’d been successfully hiding all this time. Zhin seemed off balance because she’d clearly been trying to understand information that was just beyond her grasp. At the same time, she was excited about the prospect of finally reaching her goal of restarting the looting operation, and wanted to push forward, hard. That put her at a disadvantage when mentally sparring with Bud. In aviation, they call it “pilot overload.”

“Packed earth,” Zhin returned quickly, her excitement mounting. She’d been trying to reach this point in her campaign for so long that she’d forgotten Lao Tsu’s advice to be as careful at the end as you are at the beginning. “It’s big enough for your Worms to go through with no trouble.”

“How can you be sure of that?” Bud asked derisively, challenging Zhin’s information.

“It was in Li Peng’s report,” Zhin claimed, trying to show that her information was reliably sourced.

“Who’s Li Peng?” Bud asked Glen.

“Supervisor of the looters’ dig project,” Glen explained with a “we won” smile.

Suddenly, Zhin realized she’d been caught. She couldn’t have received that report without being one of Li Peng’s superiors on the looting project.

“When did you see his report?” Bud asked, wearing a smile identical to Glen’s.

Flustered, Zhin tried to mumble something, but couldn’t figure out what. She wanted to explain having seen the report without admitting being a principal in the looting operation, but couldn’t think of anything believable. Then, she looked from Glen to Bud and back, realizing she had no credible way out.

“Baby,” Bud said to her in a soothing, “tell Mommy all about it,” tone. “You know I love you, and want to help you. You’ve been caught with your hand in the cookie jar.”

Thinking that maybe Zhin wouldn't understand the colloquialism, she added: "We know you were part of the original looting team. We know all about the team taking artifacts out of the mausoleum. We know all about Benny's operation. We know all about the distribution operation, and we know who got the stuff. In fact, we've already gotten most of it back. The only part we don't know is who was behind setting it all up. It looks like that was you."

Bud was using an old cop trick: tell a flunky you're going to pin the whole thing on them to scare them into naming their bosses.

50

“Did Ju Long put you up to this, Baby?” Bud pushed a little more. If he did, it would be obvious from Zhin’s expression. If he didn’t, she’d probably try to protect her husband.

“No,” Zhin admitted. “It was the Russians.”

“Russians?” Bud asked in surprise. This was something she simply hadn’t imagined. It was too far out. “What Russians?”

“My father was an official in the Communist Party,” Zhin gave up and started to come clean about everything. Once she decided to talk, it all came flooding out. “He helped coordinate Chinese foreign policy with the Soviets, so he knew a lot of officials working in the Kremlin. That was long before the Berlin Wall fell. Before Putin. Even before Gorbachev.”

“When the Soviet Union broke up, all those guys became international criminals. You call them the Russian Mafia. Nikolai Baronyev was one of them who knew my father. When he saw the breakup coming, one of the things he thought of to do for his retirement fund was to loot Qin Shi Huang’s tomb. So, he contacted my father. Together, they planned that I would marry Ju Long, and steer his career into a position that would give us access to the tomb site. Then, we’d loot the place right out from under the Chinese government.”

Bud’s jaw dropped. She’d never met a woman cold enough to pull that off.

“They arranged your marriage to Ju Long?” was all she could say.

“Arranged marriages are not uncommon,” Zhin rebutted.

“But, to set up a criminal business!”

“If you are born into a criminal family, your arranged marriage is going to further a criminal business,” Zhin

pointed out.

“Good point,” Bud agreed. “Does Ju Long know about this?”

“Some of it,” Zhin said. “He knew my father was a Party official right from the beginning, but that was all he knew until we started the looting. “

“How’d he feel about that?” Glen asked. He had trouble featuring a senior academic archaeologist being pleased about such an operation. He knew he’d be horrified if it was him.

“He was pretty upset about it at first,” Zhin admitted. “He yelled about going to the Central Committee, getting a divorce, never wanting to see me again, things like that. Then, my father talked to him about it, and he calmed down.”

“What did your father say to him?” Glen asked.

“I don’t know,” Zhin answered. “Whatever it was, Ju Long stopped causing trouble and cooperated.”

“Where’s your father, now?” Bud asked.

“He died about six months ago.”

“About the time Ju Long started contacting us,” Glen pointed out.

“Yes,” Zhin said. “We needed a way to get artifacts out without using those worthless, ignorant peasants to do the work.”

“Don’t blame the peasants,” Bud yelled. “they were in there dying for you!”

Turning to Glen, she added: “We found one of the bodies.”

“We could have solved the problems,” Zhin scoffed, “but they were too ignorant and superstitious to make it

worthwhile. Robots are much better. They don't get scared, or sick, and they don't complain to their friends. Overall, it's a much better solution. My father couldn't seem to understand that, but I did. So, when production started to fall off, I decided to change it."

Bud suddenly realized Zhin was showing no remorse for the people she'd sent to their deaths, the mothers she'd poisoned, or the children she'd traumatized, or the families, like Benny's, that she'd ruined. Zhin didn't seem to care about any of that. It was just an inconvenient production issue. How could she have loved a woman that ... nasty?

Glen noticed the same things, but was trying to understand how Ju Long could go along with it. It didn't fit with Ju Long's reputation, or what he knew about the man's character. He couldn't think of how to broach the subject, however, so he let it lie.

"I heard about your underwater work," Zhin continued, "and thought the same technology could be used here. It was Ju Long, however, who wanted to get SST involved directly. I just thought about buying some robots, but when he started researching it, and especially when he came back from America, he became really enthusiastic."

"I thought you hated me," Bud said, trying to reconcile this woman's behavior initially with what she knew now.

"I did at first," Zhin admitted. "My husband had been seeing other women, and I was sure he wanted you. I saw you as a rival."

"What made you change your mind?" Bud asked.

"Ju Long described your relationship with Mrs. Manchek, and it sounded ... interesting."

Bud wasn't quite sure she believed that. It left too many questions unanswered.

“How long have you been a homosexual?” Bud asked.

“You’re my first,” Zhin claimed.

“I don’t believe that,” Bud blurted out. “You know too much that I didn’t teach you.”

“Well,” Zhin admitted shyly, “after hearing about you and Mrs. Manchek, I started visiting prostitutes.”

That helped fit some of the puzzle pieces, but not all.

“When did Ju Long start cheating on you?” Bud asked.

“After he found out my father wanted to steal artifacts, and I was helping him. He was angry with me, and wanted to hurt me. That was one of the ways he had to do it.”

“And you and your father let him?”

“My father told me not to complain. He said we had much more important things to do, and my fighting with my husband would ruin everything. He told me to come to an arrangement with Ju Long: let him play with other women as long as he was discrete, and did what we told him.”

“Discrete?” Glen asked.

“If he got caught publicly, he’d lose his position. Then, he’d be of no use to any of us, and he knew too much. He’d be a liability. Do you know what the Russians do with liabilities?”

“Pay them off?” Glen speculated, hopefully.

“No, Glen,” Bud answered for her, “more like mortgages. The root of the word ‘mortgage’ is ‘mort,’ as in the French word for ‘death.’”

“Yet, he continued,” Glen said. “Even under that threat.”

“No,” Zhin said. “He still wanted to, but he was afraid. He’s not all that courageous.”

“But, that sex party with Gwen?” he countered.

“I wanted that,” Zhin said. “My father was dead, and I became head of the family. So, if I wanted it, I got it. I told Ju Long I could protect him. I thought maybe we could blackmail you into cooperating. Then, I realized that you wouldn’t care. If we tried blackmail, you’d laugh it off.”

“And now?” Bud asked, suppressing her amusement that Zhin was trying to do to them exactly what they’d thought of doing to her husband. It was absurd, and she was glad they’d changed their minds.

“He’s babysitting the boys – for me,” Zhin said, meaningfully. It was Saturday afternoon, and he’d stayed home watching the boys so she could come here to fuck another man.

That, Bud and Glen knew, is the ultimate in being pussy whipped.

Glen and Bud looked at each other, suddenly realizing that they’d forgotten something very important. They weren’t cops. They had no official status, except as guests of this woman’s pussy-whipped husband.

Ergo, they worked for her. Everything they were doing in China depended on her support.

The silence in the tiny conference room became deafening.

“The reason you are here,” Zhin explained, seeing that they’d figured out what she’d known all along, “is that we allow you to be here. You provide an excellent cover for our activities. We want you to continue, but remember that your activities are supported solely to provide cover for our activities.”

Glen looked like he was getting ready to protest, so Zhin turned to Bud and said: “Your boss is taking over running our operation. The reason we have allowed this is because we like her ideas for how it is to be run. You will continue to provide the cover of a legitimate archaeological expedition. You will thoroughly explore the site, creating a virtual-reality record of everything inside exactly as you find it – before you remove the artifacts. You

will write papers and give lectures based on that virtual-reality record.”

“No living person,” she continued, “will ever be allowed to enter the tomb again. We will tell them that it is much too dangerous for humans to go inside, with the lack of oxygen and the poisonous mercury. It is dangerous to the artifacts to change the air, and impossible to clean up the mercury. So, nobody will ever enter. Besides, there will be no need.

“Anyone who wishes to visit the tomb will do so safely through the People’s Committee for Cultural Education virtual-reality presentations. Any scholars wishing to study the tomb will do so through the virtual reality simulation.”

“You will then remove the artifacts for ‘safekeeping’ in Benny’s warehouse. There will be a permanent exhibit in the mausoleum museum, and reproductions will be available in the gift shop.”

“Nobody will ever know that we have gotten rich selling the artifacts on the black market, or that the tomb stands empty.”

51

Glen was horrified to realize that he'd been put in the position he'd mentally criticized Ju Long for getting into. He looked at his wife, and saw on her face the look of a strong, independent woman given an impossible choice.

"Baby, we're going to cooperate," he warned her.

She sat, stubbornly silent. Both Glen and Zhin knew she was going over in her mind every option she could think of to turn the tables on Zhin. None of them would work. She was trapped.

It pissed her off.

She knew he was right. They were going to have to cooperate.

That pissed her off more.

Her only hope was that Red and Doc would save them.

Then, she recalled that part of Zhin's power was that Red and Doc were on *her* side, not Bud's.

They'd betrayed her. They'd fed her to the wolves. More accurately, they'd fed her to this Dragon Lady.

That broke her heart.

Bursting into tears, she ran from the room.

Knowing she'd want to be alone, Glen let her go.

He looked over at Zhin, only to see a look of smug satisfaction on her face. She believed she'd achieved complete and utter triumph.

Glen began to smile inside. Enough of Bud's Taoism had rubbed off to make him highly encouraged by Zhin's confidence. He knew quite well why the proto-Taoist classic, the *I Ching*, is called "the Book of Changes." When things reach rock bottom, they can only improve. When you achieve complete and utter triumph, you can only lose.

He knew it wasn't over. The fat lady had yet to sing.

Glen was not a great poker player. He wasn't good at hiding his emotions, especially not from the piercing eyes of a Dragon Lady. He had managed to keep the inward smile from showing outwardly, but his face lost the look of utter defeat.

Zhin could see that he'd thought of something which was good for him, and consequently bad for her.

"What do you think you've thought of," she said, sarcastically. She was adept enough to keep the twinge of fear that she might have overlooked something important from showing in her face.

The old idea that orientals are inscrutable originally arose from the fact that oriental faces were sufficiently different from what the early European expansionists were used to seeing that they couldn't recognize the subtle differences written there by emotions. Oriental faces are no harder to read than anyone else's, provided you have enough familiarity with oriental people to read them. The Europeans just hadn't had enough experience, but were too narcissistic to recognize their own ignorance.

Dragon Ladies are a different story from ordinary people, though. If they want you to think they are feeling a certain thing, that's what you'll read in their faces, no matter what they are really feeling.

Glen, while no better at reading oriental faces than anyone else who'd grown up in Arizona, had enough cultural anthropology under his belt to understand his disadvantage, and to recognize that his trying to read Zhin's emotions was an exercise in futility. So, he just noted what he saw, and recognized that it might not be the truth.

What he saw was a woman confident in her mental superiority, her power, and her tactical position, who

thought he'd made a mental mistake and wanted to gloat over it. So, he gave her something plausible to think about: "We can't do it without her."

With a momentary start, Zhin realized he was right. She'd hired Bud in the first place because she was one of the few people on that side of the planet who could do what Zhin wanted to have done. In fact, she was probably the only one who could do it all. If Bud went off in a corner to sulk, Zhin's operation would come to a grinding halt.

And, Zhin knew she had very little bargaining power left with Bud. She'd already squandered all her "girlfriend" chips.

They hadn't been worth that much, anyway. Zhin didn't know about Red's calling Bud a "tough old dyke," but Zhin would have wholeheartedly agreed. While Bud might or might not have been Zhin's first, Zhin was just the latest in Bud's long string of lesbian lovers. Bud had a lot of notches on her gun, and this last one hadn't cut very deep.

Seeing Zhin searching for an answer, Glen came to her aid. He saw the advantage of having the *status* remain *quo* for a while. It would serve everyone's purposes, especially his. His business was to be the first to explore the world's premier archaeological site. He wasn't going to let his wife's throwing a snippy fit interfere with that.

"I'll talk to her," he said, and followed her out.

Zhin found herself feeling grateful to Glen. She knew it was an emotional reaction unbecoming a cold and calculating Dragon Lady, but she was actually still a novice at her job. For most of her long tenure, she hadn't been asked to do anything very dragony.

Yes, they'd told her to seduce that particular archeology professor, but it wasn't very tough duty. Her heart had actually done a little fluttery flip when she'd sat in on her first lecture. She found that the guy they'd told her to

seduce was really cute, and sexy, and smart, and funny By the end of that semester, she really did want to have his babies. And, when she did, she'd loved them just like they'd been her idea all along.

Just because you've been *told* to love someone doesn't mean you wouldn't have loved them, anyway. That phenomenon has been the basis for matchmaking from time immemorial, and is now the basis for a phenomenally successful string of dating Websites.

Zhin hadn't really thought of herself as a Dragon Lady until her father, on his deathbed, made her promise to lead the family business as he had. Why he thought she could do it, she didn't know, but she found he was right. It turned out to be easy and natural for her. She enjoyed it.

Even her changed relationship with Ju Long had compensations. She found she liked power, and having power over her husband – so untraditional a thing – had been exhilarating. She felt liberated, and ready to take on any new challenge, any new idea.

She hadn't been lying about her pushing Ju Long into swinging with Bud, Glen and Gwen. It was an idea she'd never allowed herself to consider before, but it fit with the Dragon Lady *persona* she was exploring. Dragon Ladies were wicked, right? How much more wicked could she be?

Maybe she should let her fingernails grow longer.

Maybe she should try something to do with drugs. She'd heard cocaine made you feel like superwoman.

Bud would know about that stuff. She'd always been a wild child, and would have explored all sorts of wild-child activities. Maybe, Zhin thought, by cultivating Bud she could get some tips.

All in a very Dragon Lady sort of way, you understand.

She really did like touching Bud, and being touched, and she didn't want it to stop. It might now be extracurricular activity, but what's the point of being a Dragon Lady if you just did what you were supposed to do?

52

Glen found Bud sitting on a picnic table they'd set up outside the triple-wide's front door. She sat on the tabletop, elbows on knees, and booted feet on the table's bench seat. She was still wearing her black leather jacket over a black tank top, a wide black belt with an ornate silver buckle, and black denim jeans. With her creamy skin, long blond hair cascading down her back, and a determined expression on her face, she looked every bit the sexy-tough biker chick she really was.

He fell in love with her all over again.

It wasn't necessary, but he did it anyway. It was something he loved doing, and did often.

"Baby?" Bud asked into her cellphone.

"This had better be good!" she heard Doc's voice growl on the other end. He'd been the first to wake up and grab Red's ringing cellphone. It was the second time Bud had woken him out of a sound sleep. Instead of catching Red, whom she'd expected to pick up her cellphone, or Doc's infinitely patient Buddhist side, she'd gotten his Taoist "natural man" side. Natural men growl when wakened for the second time out of a sound sleep by the same inconsiderate friend.

Suddenly smiling, Bud decided some needling would feel good. She loved needling Doc.

"I just wanted to hear your voice, again," she lied. She'd had a very good reason to call Red, and unexpectedly hearing Doc's growly voice had been a bonus. Why it lifted her spirits she didn't bother to analyze. She just felt good about it.

"You've been crying," Doc stated. The needling hadn't worked. Her lie hadn't been good enough to fool him. He'd heard the drying tears in her voice.

“Are we in trouble?” she asked, seriously.

“Probably,” he assured her.

Obviously, he’d grumpily decided to make her explain what the problem was before he’d give her the time of day ... or night.

“We just found out that Zhin really is the Dragon Lady,” she began. “She told us all about it because she figures she’s got us over a barrel. Her father set the whole thing up years ago. He’d been working with the Russian Mafia since they were just corrupt Commie bastards. She’s spent decades manipulating Ju Long into letting them pilfer Qin Shi Huang’s grave goods. She says she has an arrangement with Red to let her keep it going.”

“She has an arrangement with Red. How’d you think we could get as far as we’ve gotten? An undercover sting operation requires *somebody* to work with the bad guys.”

“Are you double crossing me?” Bud was wondering if she should start getting scared, again.

“No, babe,” Doc soothed. “We’re keeping track of everything, but we need something to track. For that, we need you to pull stuff out of the tomb, and get it into circulation. We’ll talk about that next week when I come out there. How far along are you?”

“We found the Palace in Bertha’s observations yesterday, like I told Red this afternoon – morning.”

“It’s still this morning,” Doc reminded her. He was still feeling grumpy. It was too early, and he hadn’t had any coffee, yet. He wanted to get back to sleep, but was losing faith that it would ever happen.

“What’s going on?” Bud heard Red asking on the other end of the line.

“Your girlfriend is having another panic attack,” she heard Doc reply.

“Let me talk to her,” she heard Red demand.

“Hello, Baby,” Red said into the phone, “are you alright?”

“Zhin thinks she’s got us over a barrel,” Bud repeated for Red’s benefit.

“She’s supposed to think that,” Red assured her. “Keep her thinking it, and do what she wants. There’s somebody behind her that set up the international part of the operation, and maybe funded the whole thing. We need to find out who.”

“It’s the Russian Mafia,” Bud reported.

“Oh, goody!” Red responded, sarcastically. “It *couldn’t* have been the Boy Scouts of America. That would have been too much to ask. It just *had* to be *that* bunch of thugs!”

Red hadn’t had any coffee, yet, either.

“What do you want me to do?” Bud asked, feeling like part of the team, again.

“We need names,” Red replied.

“How about Nikolai Baronyev for starters?”

“Wow! You’ve been busy the last couple of hours. I’ve no idea who that’s supposed to be, but I’ll find out.”

“He’s some old corrupt Bolshevik that Zhin says thought the whole scheme up, and put her Dad up to it. Years ago,” Bud explained.

“Baby,” Red said, a smile in her voice, “you’ve done really, really well. I love you. I can’t come out next week because I’m staying home to wait for Elise, but Doc’s going to bring a big kiss for you from me. I can’t wait to get you home, again.”

“Thanks, Red. I feel better. I love you, too. Give my love to Doc, and everyone else. Tell Doc I’ll see him next week, and bring him up to date. Bye.”

“Bye, Baby,” Red signed off on the other end, and the line went dead.

“Feel better?” Glen asked. He’d heard Bud’s end of the conversation, and was pleased with what he heard, especially hearing Bud’s emotions lift along the way. She’d started out upset, and ended on a high note.

“Uh, huh,” Bud said, smiling. “We’re okay. You were right. We need to cooperate with Zhin. It’s all part of the plan.”

“So,” Glen asked to make sure, “we’re all good?”

“Yes,” Bud smiled with that “Happy Girl” smile that Ju Long had thought would make any man cheerfully walk barefoot across broken glass to be near her.

“Have I told you recently how much I love you?” Glen asked.

“Not in the last few minutes,” Bud answered, noticing that he’d climbed up on the picnic table to embrace her. She liked that.

“Well, I do. A lot!”

The Zhin they found still sitting at the conference table was no longer the Dragon Lady Zhin, but the Kewpie Doll Zhin.

“All better,” Glen assured her. Her smile grew even more Kewpie Dollish. The dimples became bottomless pits.

He did not mention the telephone call to Arizona. He figured the Universe would be a better place in which to live if he took credit for the change in Bud’s attitude, himself.

“Baby,” Zhin said to Bud, contritely, “I’m sorry for how I acted, before. I thought you were mad at me, and were going to start trouble. I didn’t know what to do. I guess I did wrong.”

This apology didn't fool Bud for a minute. The Dragon Lady was still there, hiding behind the dimples. But, she liked the Kewpie Doll Zhin, and had missed her. She was glad to have her back for a while, even if it was an act.

She, however, easily suppressed the desire to run around the table and give Zhin a big kiss. Instead, she sat down in the chair she remembered vacating in tears shortly before.

"Glen," she began, with her project manager hat now firmly back in place, "what's the status of the Worm robots?"

"We have one ready to go, and another pretty close."

"Can you put the one in the tomb Monday?"

"Yes. But, we can't go anywhere without Ethernet coverage."

"Okay, have Quon shove it in the hole, and test it with Bertha's wireless link. Then, have him break out half a dozen wireless routers. We'll space them out every, say, two-hundred yards. That should be plenty to keep the system going, with a couple of spares. We'll lay 'em out every morning, and collect them back at the end of the day for recharging overnight."

"How will we lay them out and collect them?" Glen asked, "The Worm can't carry that many at once."

"Put the routers in our little robot wheelbarrow, and have the Worm use the 'follow me' command to lead it along the route, and drop wireless routers by the side of the road every two-hundred meters. Then, we can organize laying a four-hundred-eighty-volt cable out to the Palace, and finally bring out a remote charging station. That will set up the infrastructure you were talking about. We'll use robot wheelbarrows to carry artifacts back."

"Before we can move a single artifact by so much as a millimeter, however," she warned, "we have to complete the VR record in the Palace. Have Quon do that. That's the only way Zhin's scheme will work."

“Why are you suddenly being so cooperative?” Zhin asked, suspiciously. This seemed too convenient.

“For a number of reasons,” Bud replied. “First, because my Baby wants it that way.”

Bud happened to look into Glen’s eyes when she said that. The look, plus the fact that Zhin knew nothing of Bud’s telephone call to Arizona, led her to the erroneous conclusion that it was Glen she was referring to, instead of Red.

“Also,” Bud continued, “because the VR record is the most valuable thing we’ll ever get out of the operation from a scientific standpoint.”

“The only part of your plan I don’t like is selling the stuff into private collections, where it won’t be available to scholars for further study in the future. I hope we can save at least some of it for the Museum.”

“I also think selling off Qin Shi Huang’s grave goods is a rotten trick to play on him, as well as the Chinese people,” Bud concluded, “but, I don’t see any way of stopping you from doing it. We can’t do the science without you, any more than you can get access to the tomb without us. Stalemate! Either everybody wins, or everybody loses. I vote for winning.”

53

“Actually, assuming you keep the same wire gauge, it’s a factor of twenty four,” Doc explained. Bud had called him Monday morning (Arizona time) to discuss plans for the Worm-support infrastructure. Bud had guessed that switching from one-hundred-twenty volts-single-phase service to four-hundred-eighty-volts-three-phase would improve their power-loss problem by a factor of four.

“You’re spreading the current over three wires, instead of two,” Doc explained, “and reducing the power loss by the *square* of the current reduction factor of four-eighty divided by one-twenty. That’s a factor of sixteen, times three divided by two, or twenty four.”

Bud wasn’t going to try to check his arithmetic in her head, and didn’t know the physics involved well enough, so she decided to just take his word for it.

“Why do you want to use so many repeaters?” Doc asked, changing the subject from power infrastructure to communications.

“I don’t know what the range will be in the barrow,” Bud replied.

“In free space, it’s about a mile – more than enough to reach anywhere in your barrow,” Doc suggested.

“Yeah, but with all those buildings?” Bud responded. “I thought the reason we need to use a cable to get into the barrow is because of all that dirt in the way. I figure buildings would be just as bad.”

“It’s not just the dirt, but the water absorbed in the dirt,” Doc explained. “The dry buildings inside shouldn’t pose too much of a problem, but to be safe, use line-of-sight as your limit. Make sure each repeater has a clear sight line to the next. Find a route with the smallest number of turns, and put a repeater at each turn. I’ll bet you can find a route with no more than one turn, or two turns, max.”

“We haven’t explored the street map that well.”

“Explore it,” Doc ordered. “Just do a high-level flyover to get the street layout. The way you’ve described the layout in the area you’ve explored so far, it sounds like you should be able to go from Bertha’s docking station to the nearest radial street in one leg, then straight into the Worms’ receivers at the Palace in a second leg. That will call for only one repeater. Signal strength should be no problem.”

“That will save you a load of time at the start and end of every day. Then, leave the repeater out overnight, and change it for a freshly charged unit in the morning. Use the robot with the manipulator arm instead of the wheelbarrow. It moves as fast, and has roughly the same carrying capacity. It can replace the repeaters when it makes its first run of the day.”

“It also burns power a lot faster than the wheelbarrow,” Bud objected.

“The cost of the power is less than the cost of the time,” Doc countered. “Besides, it’s nothing compared to the cost of running the rest of the operation. I promise we won’t take it out of your salary.”

“Yessir!” Bud liked these suggestions. They’d make everything run faster and more smoothly.

Early morning Monday in Arizona corresponded to after hours Monday evening in China, so Bud couldn’t put her new orders from Doc into effect until Tuesday morning. She couldn’t rest, however, until she’d worked out a new observation program for Bertha’s Tuesday morning run, and recorded a copy in her electronic project notebook.

While Bud still kept a traditional paper research notebook to make Doc happy, there was a lot of stuff, such as verbal-programming code modules, which she could more easily record in the electronic version. She was starting to put extemporaneous thoughts into the electronic record as well by voice recording them in audio files stored in a “Research Log” directory, instead of jotting down notes in the paper notebook. Her paper notebook was starting to get very little attention these days. Eventually, she figured, she’d just stop carrying it around.

The breakthrough had come when she stopped trying to make her electronic notebook look and feel like the paper version. When she started thinking about it as a collection of dated electronic files kept in a separate directory, the process became streamlined, quickly. Finding a really good voice-transcription software program, so she'd have a text version of her extemporaneous verbal notes for quick and easy scanning, was another important piece of the puzzle.

Because she'd written the VP code the night before, she was able to download it to Bertha first thing Tuesday morning, and send her off right away to map the missing roads she might want to use to get into the Palace location. The system had all of Bertha's observations integrated into the VR record by mid-day Wednesday.

There hadn't actually been that much left for Bertha to do on that part of the map. Bud already knew the probable best route from previous flights, but there was some adjacent area to map just to be sure. She managed to fit those observations into a longish run on Tuesday morning. Those observations came back automatically integrated into the VR simulation by mid-day Wednesday, and Bud had used them to update the flat map by the end of the day.

By that time, Quon had put the new Worm – christened “Jeremy” in honor of Red's murdered bodyguard – into the barrow, and run it through its paces using a wireless link to Bertha's docking station. The original thought for Bertha's wireless access point had been to provide just enough channels to support Bertha's communications needs. Doc had suggested upgrading the built-in router to one providing enough channels for all of the Worms and other support equipment they thought they might need, as well. He also recommended finding one with the stoutest transmitter, and hottest receiver available. That gave it enough oomph to reach anywhere in the barrow with a strong signal, and maybe punch through some of the buildings.

The free space radiation field was easy to calculate. The docking station's ability to punch a signal through buildings, however, was an imponderable. They didn't really know what the buildings were made of, and what was in them. That was a question for their research.

Externally, the mound was a pyramid-shaped artificial hill. Internally, it appeared to be an immense square building roughly a kilometer on a side, with smaller structures built inside. Most of the smaller buildings' exterior walls reached to the ceiling to help support it. That meant smaller, single-story buildings on the periphery, and large, towering multi-story structures in the middle. The grandest structure of all was the Palace, which was a square pagoda-like structure five stories tall. It served the same structural purpose as the center pole in a circus tent.

The road system actually reminded Bud a little bit of central Paris. It consisted of a target-shaped network of major thoroughfares superimposed on a rectangular grid of smaller streets. The target consisted of five concentric ring-shaped "boulevards" centered on the Palace, which was located dead-center in the barrow. Four radial "avenues" projected from the central plaza along the four cardinal compass points, with "North Avenue" being noticeably the grandest.

Bud had decided to call the radial thoroughfares "avenues", and the roadways encircling the city center "boulevards." Anything else would be called a "lane," "street," or "road." Streets were those extending in an East/West direction, and roads extended North/South. Lanes were little more than alleyways that might lie at any angle, or even be curled. She'd noticed one that was actually horseshoe shaped.

Bud numbered the boulevards sequentially from the first circular ring beyond the plaza surrounding the Palace, itself aptly named "Palace Square." There were five boulevards laid out as concentric circles spaced one hundred meters apart. Streets in the rectangular grid, which filled the spaces between the boulevards and avenues, were spaced approximately twenty meters apart, which meant five blocks between boulevards when moving along avenues. It made space for an amazing number of buildings. The place truly was a small city.

The ceiling, or "sky," sloped from a height of one story at the periphery to the height of the five-story pagoda at the center. Since the distance from the outside wall to the center varied from a half kilometer to nearly three-quarters of a kilometer, the slope was quite slow, accounting for the large proportion of the buildings reaching all the way up to help support the roof. Flatter roofs require more support than steeply sloped roofs. It was impossible

to span larger distances with the technology of the time.

The team had set up their trailers in a cleared area on the southern skirt of the mound, next to a narrow access road that hugged the mound's perimeter. That put their compound out of sight of the tourist complex North of the mound. By digging their tunnel toward the North, they entered the barrow very close to the intersection of North Avenue and Fifth Boulevard.

After reviewing the updated street map, Bud decided to move Bertha's docking station to that intersection. It entailed extending the Ethernet cable by a mere fifty yards. She would also have to change the location of Bertha's home base in both the VR simulation, and the airship's software. Luckily, she'd prepared for such an event by storing the "home base" location as a single entry in a lookup table in the project database. All she had to do was change that entry, and all the software modules needing it would get the new data when they looked it up.

It took two days for the construction robots to break the docking station down, and reassemble it in the new location.

54

Zhin, under the aegis of her mutual-cooperation pact with Glen and Bud, was willing to answer questions regarding the pot-hunters' activities and experiences. She refused, however, to provide any concrete documentation. Even under Bud's repeated requests for a copy of Li Peng's reports, Zhin balked. Bud had to settle for specific answers to specific questions, which made the whole process of extracting information tedious.

Glen had already found out, from his pot-hunter interviews, that the bad guys had entered through a small outbuilding in a plowed field a bit north of the southwest corner of the mound. They'd driven their tunnel east in an effort to reach the barrow the shortest way possible.

Disastrously, they'd come up in the middle of a canal.

When they'd broken through the canal bottom, they'd been deluged by mercuric oxide powder that poured out of the canal bottom. They'd made the mistake Bud had specifically warned Glen against when he was tunneling into the barrow.

Glen had the advantage of world-class archaeological tools to help him heed his wife's advice. Before deciding where to drive a vertical shaft up from his horizontal stope, he'd used ground-penetrating radar to look where he was going. The canals were several feet deeper than the mausoleum's artificial ground level. Building foundations were deeper, still, and generally pretty solid. The roadways in the mausoleum were only a few inches thick. Thus, the GPR equipment easily differentiated them from other types of submerged features.

The pot hunters had no such technology available. They blundered blindly into the worst possible spot, and that accounted for the sheer quantity of mercuric-oxide contamination they'd had to deal with. The poisonous powder had practically filled their tunnel. Not knowing what the red dirt was, they failed to make the effort to actually take the powder out. They'd just spread it along the tunnel floor part way back to their tunnel entrance, raising the floor level an inch or so.

Unlike typical dirt, the stuff didn't pack down well, either. It just stayed loose and powdery.

Everybody that slogged through that tunnel had to wade through that powder, and breathe in the dust they kicked up into the air. It also accounted for the level of contamination on the artifacts they brought out. The artifacts in the barrow were pretty clean. They just got coated with the stuff on their way out of the barrow.

So much Glen and Bud already knew. What Zhin was able to add was the story about how the gang management – under her leadership – decided to extend the tunnel all the way into the center of the barrow by dead reckoning. They already had a compass bearing and distance from the farmhouse to the first hole, so they could estimate where it was to within a few yards. They then, guessing that the crypt was most likely directly under the pyramidal mound's peak, estimated a new compass bearing – roughly north-by-east-northeast – and distance to the barrow center. They'd hoped to come up in the center of Qin Shi Huang's crypt – with all his grave goods lying around like the junk piled up in King Tut's tomb – but had missed by about twenty-five yards.

All in all, Glen thought that was pretty impressive considering the technical level of the people doing the digging.

To keep the miners alive and conscious as they'd driven their stope further and further, the looters had come to rely on breathing air pumped through a ten-millimeter garden hose by a gasoline-powered generator bought at a farm-equipment store and set up in the outbuilding. When they broke through the street outside of the palace, however, their workers balked at trying to run out of the hole and grab stuff while holding a half-inch plastic air hose in their mouths.

The flow was pitifully weak, and the hose was hard to maneuver. They wanted to move fast to escape the ghosts they believed inhabited the barrow, so they dropped the air hose in the tunnel, climbed out of the hole holding their breath, and ran for the nearest thing that reflected their flashlight beams, grabbed it, and ran back.

Back in the hole, they felt safer, and bundled up their loot while sucking on the air hose. Then, they'd drop the air hose, and drag their bag of loot back through the poison powder to reach the outside. Air from the constantly

running hose had backfilled the tunnel with enough oxygenated air to let people breathe while traversing the tunnel.

It had also picked up enough airborne mercuric oxide powder to dose anyone in the tunnel or the outbuilding.

It was not surprising that the workers got dosed with enough mercuric oxide to have clinical symptoms.

It was amazing that they'd gotten out the amount of loot they'd delivered to Benny.

It was no surprise at all that three women hadn't made it back out. There were still two more bodies in there to locate. Glen guessed that Quon would find them in the Palace.

Bud pried out of Zhin the fact that all three were mothers trying to get money for their families. It was something she was not inclined to forgive Zhin for.

She made a mental note to find out whether the Chinese invoked the death penalty for aggravated multiple murderers. It was very un-Buddhist of her, but she hoped they did. She looked forward to seeing Zhin burn, or hang, or whatever was the preferred mode of capital punishment in modern China.

Giving Zhin the kind of look she'd give a box of live maggots, Bud stood up, and silently left the room.

Surprised, Zhin asked Glen: "What did I do?"

"Killed three innocent women," he replied levelly.

In reply to Zhin's look of incomprehension, he added: "She's killed people, too, but her victims were thieves, rapists, and murderers. And, she's not happy about what she did. But, you ... You lured mothers trying to feed their families to horrible deaths."

"They were stupid, and let themselves get lost. They did it for money."

“That was your bait,” he pointed out. “They shouldn’t have been there in the first place, and wouldn’t have been if your gang hadn’t lured them into it. You murdered them without giving a shit.”

Then he stood up, and walked out.

Zhin sat alone in the conference room with an angry look on her face. What she was angry about was having been snubbed. Like all non-insane bad guys, she’d convinced herself that her behavior was justified, and, therefore, not at all reprehensible. The fact that her associates walked out on her in disgust made her angry.

She had plans for things she wanted to do with these two. Some things were for enhancing her power; some for making money; and some things were just for fun. She’d imagined that these two would be her companions and helpers in all of it. But, they’d walked out on her.

Suddenly, and for the first time, she understood the loneliness expressed by The Who in their song “Behind Blue Eyes.”

She burst into tears.

Outside, Glen found Bud sitting on the same picnic table she’d sat on Saturday afternoon, and in the same position. She was wearing almost the same outfit.

He climbed up on the table to sit next to her.

“I hate her,” Bud complained.

Glen said nothing. He was pretty pissed off with Zhin, himself.

“Shit!” Bud exclaimed after a half minute of thought. “We need her.”

“For what?”

“To finish the mapping.”

“No, we don’t.”

“To explore the buildings with the Worms.”

“Nope.”

“To discover who the Russians are.”

“Already did that. It’s Red’s job, now.”

“What about support from the Chinese authorities? It’s their project. We’re just hired hands.”

“Zhin does not represent the Chinese government.”

“I feel badly for her.”

“Yup.”

“She’s ruined her life.”

“Yup.”

Bud had been sitting with her elbows propped on her knees. Now, she folded her forearms across them, and put her forehead down on the platform they made. She mourned for the woman who’d once been her lover, but had turned out to be a monster.

Ten minutes later, Zhin walked out of the building’s front door with tear-streaked makeup. Seeing Glen and Bud sitting on the table, she climbed up on it, and sat next to Bud on the other side from Glen. She tried to put her head on Bud’s shoulder. She’d figured out what was bothering Bud, and wanted to fix it, but Bud pushed her away, disgustedly.

“I’m sorry,” Zhin moaned. “I know I hurt those people, but my father started it, and I can’t go back to fix it. I

stopped it, and I'm trying to use your technology so it won't happen, again."

"I'm sorry," she repeated, then lapsed into a forlorn silence.

Bud didn't know how real this contrite confession was. She knew the facts were true, but she didn't know if Zhin's remorse was real.

Yet, Zhin's lack of remorse was what had bothered her the most. She hadn't seemed to know she'd done anything wrong. At least now she admitted culpability.

"It was a rotten thing to do," Bud told her.

"I know," Zhin claimed.

"You're a piece of shit!"

"I'm *sorry!*," Zhin wailed. "What can I *do?*"

"For starters, you can help those kids whose mothers you killed, and all the other people you fucked up."

Zhin hung her head in shame, then nodded it up and down.

"You can tell us who's bent in the Chinese government. Who let you get away with this, and helped you cover it up?"

Zhin gave Bud a look of utter terror. This was way more than she'd bargained for. It meant well and truly giving up being a Dragon Lady. She'd be a turncoat stoolie – something she'd been brought up to abhor.

Seeing the look, and understanding what it meant, Bud yelled "Fuck you!" directly into her face.

Zhin dropped her eyes and nodded up and down, again.

"And, you'll help us finish exploring the barrow *without* taking anything out."

Zhin spent the next hour and a half answering Bud's and Glen's questions into a microphone connected to Bud's laptop computer. Bud used up a ton of hard-disk space capturing the audio file. She'd offload it onto a little thumb drive when she got back to her hotel, and figure someplace safe to hide the drive. It wouldn't be in her room. Likely, it wouldn't be in any of the trailers. Maybe in the already-searched mausoleum building? That'd work as long as Quon didn't start emptying it.

Anyway, she'd hide the file somewhere until Doc got here, and then give it to him to bring back to Red. Let her figure out what to do with it.

55

Jimmy sat at the bar outside CJ's restaurant on Marco Island at the southwestern side of the tip of Florida, killing time watching activity around the boats in the slips at the marina. Jimmy didn't know much about boats, but he dreamed of having one, and sitting in a deck chair in the back of one of those big jobs. He'd have a couple of those rich bitches in bikinis schlepping *piña coladas* for him. Like that tall redhead steering that big mahogany yacht slowly sidling up to the far end of the dock.

God, she was fine! Had muscles like she'd been working out a lot. Maybe a little soft in the belly, but not bad. Not bad at all. Big tits.

When the front of the boat reached the end of the dock, the redhead worked a lever, and the boat stopped dead. A couple of big dock hands, who'd been sitting on a stone bench by the seawall, strolled over to the boat.

They'd actually gotten up from the bench as soon as the boat came into sight, and had begun sauntering along the dock as if they knew right where the boat would stop. They were almost there when the boat came to a halt with its side a few inches from the dock.

With a salute to the redhead, one of them reached over to the boat's forward deck, and started pulling on a rope attached to the boat near the front. The rest of the rope started sliding out of a hole covered by a silver cap next to where the rope was tied. The dock hand pulled the rope all the way out, then started throwing loops of it over one of the big wooden poles – as big around as a telephone pole – holding up the dock.

Meanwhile the second dock hand waved familiarly to the big hippie who'd been sleeping in a deck chair – exactly as Jimmy had imagined himself doing – as the boat eased up the canal. The big hippie had suddenly come alive, and grabbed a coiled rope from somewhere in the back. Standing in the rear, the big hippie had tossed the rope to the dock hand, and watched as he threw loops over another pole behind the boat. Then, the big hippie tossed a second, longer rope to the dock hand, who carried his end to a pole near the one the first dock hand had

tied the front rope to, and tied it, there.

After tying the front rope, the first dock hand reached over to undo a latch on the boat's railing, lifted a hinged section that closed a gap in the heavy wooden top rail, and jumped up through it to the boat's deck, roughly eighteen inches higher than the dock. Then, he pulled another long rope out of another hole in the deck closed by another silver metal cap, coiled it in his hands, and wordlessly handed it under the railing to the second dock hand, who by that time was standing on the dock waiting to receive it. Then *he* carried it, dropping loops as he went, to a pole near where the back line was tied, and tied it there.

The redhead and the big hippie had disappeared into the cabin.

Jimmy was disappointed when a door near the front of the boat's deck house opened, and a slim brunette stepped out. It wasn't the brunette that disappointed Jimmy. She was pretty fine, herself, although not as statuesque as the redhead.

What disappointed Jimmy was the two children she led out. She held a little redheaded girl firmly by the hand. The little girl was inclined to dash around, excitedly. A slightly older boy with brown hair walked dutifully behind the brunette, clearly making a game of being on his best behavior. The tall redhead followed behind, carrying a newborn in a blanket.

Being alone on a big yacht with those two women was a big part of Jimmy's fantasy. Carting along three rug rats was not.

The two dock hands stood next to the gap in the railing, waiting for the brunette to reach them. The brunette then lifted the two kids, one at a time, and handed them to the first dockhand, who received them and stood them on the dock. The second dockhand quickly took the little girl's hand to make sure she stayed safely under control, and, patting the little boy on the head, led them both along the dock toward the shore.

The first dockhand had stayed at his post to take the brunette's hand as she hopped over the gap from the

boat's deck down to the dock, a foot-and-a-half lower. Then, she trotted along to catch up with the kids walking toward shore.

The redhead handed the baby over to the first dock hand, who stepped back to let her step gracefully across the gap and down to the dock as if it was a stair step. Then, he handed the baby back to her while the big hippie, who'd come out of the deck house after her, stepped through the railing gap and down to the dock as well.

Together, the hippie and the redhead strolled along the dock toward the shore, with the redhead paying more attention to smiling and cooing to the baby than to looking where she was going. At one point, the big hippie steered her around a fire extinguisher mounted on a piling, which she was about to absentmindedly walk into. Instead of showing any surprise or embarrassment at nearly crashing into an obstacle, she just smiled delightedly up to the hippie.

That show was over. The loud clack as the dock hand by the boat flipped the railing closed barely registered on Jimmy's consciousness. His mind was already back on business.

His business wasn't sitting at bars watching tourists dock their boats in the marina. He was a thief. Specifically, he was a thief specializing in snagging high-end motorcycles.

Actually, this was kind of a working vacation. He'd accompanied his cousin Tony down here from New York. Tony'd been assigned to accompany some out-of-town thugs down here, and play bodyguard, chauffeur, and all-around-schlep for them. When Tony'd heard about the assignment, he invited Jimmy to tag along. They'd be down here at least a couple of weeks. It would give Jimmy a chance to get out of the cold early Spring weather up North, and maybe boost a couple of bikes.

It was Spring Break. Lots of college broads on the make, looking to show off what they were made of. They were looking to get drunk enough to do things that were absolutely stupid, and that would get their pictures on Internet porn sites to embarrass them, their parents, their future husbands, and their children for generations to come. Jimmy would be happy to help them.

Jimmy figured he'd also head up to Daytona for a few days next week to boost a couple of those fine custom Harleys that would be coming into town for Daytona Bike Week.

It looked like he wouldn't have to go that far, though. He'd only arrived yesterday with Tony and his Russians, and already he had a score lined up. Jimmy had spent yesterday trying to scope this place out, and make plans for setting up business.

Boosting bikes wasn't as simple as just walking up, and driving off with them. That's how it started, but then you had to know what you were going to do with them once you got away. Any asshole could ride off with a bike. Any asshole could even get away with it. That was the easy part.

The hard part was finding someone to buy it from you afterward. Otherwise, all you could do was drive it to another state, and leave it in a parking lot. If you tried to drive it around, you'd only last until the next routine traffic stop. Then, the State of Florida would give you free room and board for anywhere from three months to five years, depending on how the Judge felt.

Jimmy wasn't worried, though. He was a professional. He already had the name of a contact in Orlando, who could move any bike Jimmy could liberate. There were all kinds of possibilities when you got your hands on a hot bike worth twenty grand in a lump, and fifty grand in pieces.

This place was starting to look like Paradise. Just this morning, he'd been hanging around the hotel lobby when two bikers had hauled up on a pair of *primo* custom Harleys.

One bike was an insane stretched-nose chopper with a radical red and gold paint job. On closer inspection, Jimmy realized that the gold was real gold leaf, rather than cheap gold paint.

The other was a big dresser that looked like it had been on the receiving end when somebody'd tipped back a dump truck filled with chrome. From the sound when they pulled in, they'd spent more on the engine than on the rest of the bike. An engine like that was probably worth twenty or thirty grand from a fence, and was held in by

only four bolts.

The two bikers had switched the engines off, leaned the bikes on their kickstands, then gone to the registration desk without using their keys to lock the ignitions. Big-frame Harleys had ignition switches that you could turn off without locking them. A lot of veteran Harley riders didn't bother fiddling with keys unless they were leaving their bikes overnight. These guys apparently thought they'd be coming right out to move the bikes, and so didn't lock them.

They, however, had either been delayed or had forgotten. The bikes hadn't moved since ten o'clock. That was five hours ago. Jimmy knew because he'd been watching them all that time. He'd spent the first two hours in the lobby, and nobody went near the bikes.

Starting to feel conspicuous, Jimmy had moved to the bar off the lobby, where he could still see the bikes. He'd spent another two hours there with no more activity around the bikes.

Starting to feel conspicuous, again (he'd had only one beer in the two hours, and the bartender was giving him the hairy eyeball), Jimmy had wandered off to the outside bar, where he'd been ever since. He'd take a few pulls from his beer, then go check on the bikes. Then, he'd go back to the beer, and then check on the bikes.

He figured five hours was long enough for the bikers to settle into their room for the rest of the afternoon. If they'd been going out for lunch, they'd have already done so. Same if they were going to drive to the beach, or anywhere else. He figured they were either crashing in their room, or already walking the beach looking for bunnies.

He wasn't going to wait for them to show up with bikini-clad beach bunnies ready to cruise off for dinner on those two bikes. He decided now was the time. Jimmy figured that if he acted now, he could be half way to Orlando by supper time.

He decided to grab the chopper. The dresser would be worth more, and the parts would be easier to move,

but this was only his first boost since getting into town, and the chopper would be easier to handle while figuring out the way to Orlando. He hadn't even picked up a road map, yet.

He only weighed one-twenty-five. That dresser might weigh almost ten times that, and he wasn't sure his legs would reach the ground from that seat. Better to take that low-slung, light-weight chopper.

Jimmy went back through the hotel lobby before making his way to the bikes. He scanned the lobby, the gift shop, and the bar to make sure the bikers weren't on their way out, themselves. The last thing he wanted was for them to show up while he was sitting on their bike, trying to start it.

Nobody was around that even vaguely resembled the bikers.

He walked nonchalantly out to the chopper, swung his leg over, and switched the ignition on. He was pleased to see the green "neutral" light come on. He wouldn't have to take time putting it into neutral so it would start.

He could see a big dual-throat Mikuni carburetor sticking out to the right, so he needed to work the throttle to squirt some gas in before he'd get any fire.

Three squirts, crack the throttle, flip the kill switch to "run," and press the starter button.

There was no starter button.

There was, however, a black pad depressed into the custom control housing on the right hand grip just where the starter button should be. That was probably a fancy starter button.

He pressed it. It didn't depress, no matter how hard he tried.

He laid his whole thumb right in there, and pushed.

Nothing happened.

Maybe the bike was really in gear, and the neutral light was stuck. He lifted the bike up to vertical position, and rolled it back and forth with the clutch engaged. It rolled easily, so it wasn't in gear.

Maybe they'd moved the starter button and just blocked off the hole where it normally was. He leaned the bike back down onto the kickstand, and started looking around for something else that looked like a starter button. Sometimes custom-bike builders mounted the starter buttons on the frame near the engine, or on the left side below the seat. That made the rider look really cool when reaching down to start the bike up.

Jimmy leaned over to hunt for it.

56

Suddenly, Jimmy felt himself being lifted off the bike.

Looking around, he saw that two guys that looked like the bikers' brothers had him by the arms, and were lifting him from the bike. The one on the right just dragged him off on the high side – away from the kickstand – where he couldn't brace his foot to fight back. Not that he could seriously fight back against these guys, anyway. Together, they probably weighed four times what he did.

The guy on the left raised Jimmy's left arm a little higher to make it easier for him to clear the tall sissy rail behind the seat as he stepped around the back of the bike. Soon, Jimmy found his heels dragging on the cobblestones while these two carried him backwards toward a black van with blacked-out windows like he was an empty beer cooler.

Jimmy heard the van's side door slide open. Then, he was hauled inside, and pushed to the floor, while the two manhandlers sat on the bench seat behind the door with Jimmy on the floor between them. Someone outside slid the door closed, then climbed into the driver's seat.

These guys were not cops. They didn't read him his rights. They didn't say a word.

On the upside, that meant he was unlikely to be a guest of the State of Florida for the next three-months-to-five-years. On the downside, he didn't know where he would be sleeping tonight. He guessed that it wasn't going to be his bed in Tony's suite.

They did not handcuff him. Jimmy, however, decided not to try to run, anyway. His neck still hurt from where the one guy'd grabbed him when he tried to bolt as the door closed. The guy had reached out with his *left* hand, grabbed his neck from behind, lifted him bodily off his feet, and placed him gently back where he'd been sitting on the floor.

The guy had put him down gently to demonstrate to Jimmy that he could. Jimmy got the message.

“Where are you taking me?” Jimmy squealed.

“Out where you can’t cause trouble,” one of his captors replied.

“Not to the cops?”

“Not to the cops.”

“You mean, you’re letting me go?” Jimmy asked hopefully.

“Sort of,” came the reply.

They drove conservatively, keeping pace with the traffic, which on Marco Island moves at a driving speed comfortable for old retirees with no place to go and only a vague perception of where they are. They drove along a winding boulevard for a while, then turned left at a traffic light. From Jimmy’s vantage point on the floor, he could see the upper trunks of huge palm trees, separated by gaps that Jimmy assumed denoted wide lawns around the big stucco haciendas he’d seen while riding with Tony yesterday.

Soon, the gaps filled in, and the palm-tree trunks gave way to the leafy middles of forest trees. Jimmy tried to get up to see where he was, but felt himself crushed back to the floor.

“Where are we?” he asked, hoping for a little conversation.

He was trying to figure out what they were going to do with him. These guys hadn’t actually been mean to him, or threatened him. Nor did they seem particularly angry about his trying to steal that motorcycle. They didn’t seem to care about him at all. They treated him like a bag of trash they were taking to the dump.

As the van left the city streets – Marco Island wasn’t any kind of city by Jimmy’s New York standards, but he didn’t know what else to call it – the road got smoother and their speed got faster. Again, by Jimmy’s standards

the roads on Marco weren't at all rough. He hadn't seen a crack or a pothole since getting there. The roughest it seemed to get was when asphalt gave way to decorative cobblestones. This freakin' city was unbelievably clean, and superbly maintained!

There were enough bounces, however, to make the van's hard floor very uncomfortable to sit upon.

At one point, they climbed what seemed to be a tall hill. Sitting on the floor, all Jimmy could see through the van's windows was sky. When they crested the hill after nary a twist or a turn, Jimmy figured out that they were on an enormous bridge spanning a wide body of water.

When they reached the other side, Jimmy could see they were going through more forest. After a sharp left-hand twist in the road, they ran dead straight for a long time.

Jimmy tried to think of what he'd heard was around here. All he could remember was swamps and alligators. Yeah, there was something about the Everglades, and a road through it called "Alligator Alley."

"Is this Alligator Alley?" Jimmy asked. The prospect excited him, but he wasn't sure whether it was the excitement of anticipating an adventure, or pee-in-your-pants fear. He thought probably the latter.

"No," the man to Jimmy's right said.

"Well," amended the man to his left, "there are alligators here. In the ditch over there," he added pointing, to the side of the road, which Jimmy couldn't see, and didn't dare get up to look for.

"True," the man to Jimmy's right agreed, "but this isn't what they call 'Alligator Alley.' That's out on Route Forty One."

"Right," the man to Jimmy's left conceded.

They rode in silence for another ten minutes, without the slightest deviation of the roadway from dead straight.

Eventually, they came to a stop at an intersection. Jimmy could see the octagonal red “STOP” sign off to the right. After they made the turn to the right, Jimmy saw a billboard over a business where they promised you could have your picture taken holding a live alligator.

Jimmy hoped they’d let him pass up that one!

To his relief, they went on by without hesitation. They also failed to hesitate when passing another sign that told Jimmy they were traveling East on Route forty-one.

Alligator Alley.

Jimmy wanted to get out. They pushed him back to his seat on the floor.

A little farther along, Jimmy noticed a sign flash by informing interested travelers that they could reach Everglades City by taking the next right. They did not take the next right, but continued on, seemingly forever.

After having been traveling for about an hour, the van pulled off to the right, and stopped.

The driver got out, and slid the left-hand side door open. Jimmy could see nothing but a wide stretch of pavement, with a steep embankment on the other side leading down to endless trees standing in black, murky water.

“This is where you get out,” the man on Jimmy’s left said matter-of-factly. Then, he picked Jimmy up by the neck, and propelled him out through the door.

Jimmy stood on the pavement in the middle of the right-hand lane of a two-lane highway from nowhere to nowhere. The van was pulled mostly off the road onto a gravelly strip between the pavement and an embankment dipping steeply down to standing water with more trees growing out of it.

The trees in New York’s Central Park all grew straight out of the ground, like telephone poles. These, however, flared out broadly at the bottom, and Jimmy could see exposed roots reaching down to hold tightly to the

mud under the water. He'd seen pictures of trees like that in sixth grade. The teacher'd said they were called "cypress" trees. He said they grew only in tropical swamps.

Like the Everglades.

Where alligators live.

A car blew by at eighty miles an hour, swerving into the left-hand lane to avoid running Jimmy down.

Looking around, Jimmy saw nothing but those gigantic trees sticking out of endless pools of water. He looked scared.

The man still holding him by the neck escorted Jimmy around the rear of the van to the side of the road, where the bank dropped steeply into standing water of indeterminate depth. It couldn't be too deep, though, Jimmy thought. All those trees stood right up out of it. God knows, however, what lurked under the surface.

"Don't go down on the bank to pee," the man instructed Jimmy. "Stand on the pavement and shoot it over. The 'gators down there know how hard it would be for you to scramble back up. Harder for you than for them."

Jimmy needed to pee, badly.

"Don't forget the pythons," the driver, who'd followed them out of the van, said.

"Yeah, they're starting to have trouble with pythons around here," the man still holding Jimmy by the neck said.

"Pythons?" Jimmy asked.

"Big snakes fifteen feet long. They eat alligators," the man holding his neck explained.

"There's lots around here for them to eat, so there are lots of them, and they grow very big," the driver added.

The driver pointed back the way they had come.

“It’s fifty miles back that way to Marco Island,” he said.

Turning and pointing the way they were going, he said: “Miami is that way, and about ten miles closer.”

“I’d hitchhike to Miami, if I were you,” the man holding his neck advised.

“Stay on the pavement!” he warned as an afterthought.

“That’s important,” he added a few seconds later. “If you go into the swamp, you’ll get lost. The mosquitos will come in the night, and literally drive you insane before sucking you dry. You’ll get so many bites that you’ll have an allergic reaction and blow up like a balloon. By morning, you’ll be dead. Nobody will ever find your body.”

“Except the pythons,” the driver put in.

“Or, the alligators,” the man holding his neck added.

“So, stay on the pavement,” he repeated.

Then, he climbed back into the van, and the driver rolled the side door closed, then climbed back to his seat in the front. The van accelerated sedately along the lane for about fifty yards, then made a U-turn, and headed back along the highway toward Marco.

As the van reached Jimmy’s location, it slowed. The driver rolled his window down, gave a friendly wave and yelled: “Stay on the pavement!”

Then, Jimmy was alone.

57

“Manny,” Red explained to her bodyguard, “Doc and I are going to take our bikes up to Naples for shopping and dinner. I’m not sure what Maryanne has in mind for her and the kids. Have Steve re-route to Naples. We’ll probably pretty much stay around Fifth Avenue. They can catch up with us, there. We should be back here fairly early to pump out my tits.”

For some reason nobody seemed to understand, even her, Red liked shocking people by talking about her lactating breasts. It was another example of how she often liked talking and acting like a rebellious college sophomore. Doc thought it might be a way for her to take her mind off all the responsibility she had to live with. More money, and lives, and careers depended on her every decision than is normal for a young lady in her mid-twenties.

She turned toward Doc, who was holding the door to the hallway open, waiting for her. Picking up her red full-face helmet from the sofa on her way past, she put her left arm through his right, and they stepped through the door into the hall.

Manny pulled out his cellphone to call Steve in the van, which was still probably on Route forty-one, coming back from dropping off the bike thief.

Waiting for the elevator in the empty hall, Red pulled Doc over for a big kiss and a hug. With four layers of leather between them, it wasn’t gratifying body contact, but the kissing made up for that.

When the elevator doors opened, there was a family with two small children inside: Father in Bermuda shorts, sandals, an untucked Hawaiian shirt, and a cheap straw hat covering his bald spot; mother in white Capri pants and light blue tank top; girl dressed like the mother; and boy dressed like the father.

Red giggled like an embarrassed schoolgirl over being caught French kissing Doc in the hallway. She wasn’t

really embarrassed, but it was fun to pretend. The family moved to stage right in the elevator, leaving room for Doc and Red to enter stage left. They stood against the wall while Doc checked to see that the “LOBBY” button was lit, and pressed the “DOOR CLOSE” button.

Red, still playing at being embarrassed, stood with her back to the wall, both arms straight down in front of her, and both hands holding her helmet by the mouth guard. Doc looked down at her, and laughed. She looked up at him and let out her own tinkle of laughter, then relaxed.

“I want to check in with Maryanne at the pool,” she told him, “before we go.”

“Yes, Dear,” he agreed, as if he hadn’t expected it. What would you expect of a new mother being dragged off by her husband to have some time alone together? She’d want to check in with the babysitter.

Doc insisted on taking his wife out on a date at least once a week. He didn’t want them to make the mistake of forgetting why they’d gotten together in the first place. He’d seen too many marriages fall apart unnecessarily for just that reason.

They found Maryanne sitting in the shade thrown by an oversize umbrella stuck through a hole in the center of a round table by the pool. She was multiplexing between playing “peek-a-boo” with Elise, who was propped up in a car seat on the table, and keeping a watchful eye on Judy and Mike.

She wasn’t too worried about Judy and Mike because Mike was uncommonly large for his age and fiercely protective of his little sister, while she was generally more aware of what was going on around her than most of the adults there, anyway. Having year-round daily use of a grown-up swimming pool at home, they both could swim better than half the adults there, too.

Besides, the kids’ bodyguard, Robert, was sitting right there at the table with Maryanne. While Red had been carefully monitoring the budding romance between the two, she believed Robert was way too professional to let Maryanne’s presence interfere with his scanning for potential trouble.

She was doing that monitoring in her capacity as CEO of Gulf States Security, which was the corporate entity that actually employed Robert, and all the other bodyguards protecting her extended family, as well as an army of mercenaries for hire. Between that, her position as VP of Operations at SST, being a mother of three, and a full-time graduate student in Harvard's Math Department, it was enough work to keep four women busy full time. *That's* why she had a bunch of full-time assistants, and everybody forgave her when she needed the release of a crude mouth and salty jokes.

"Nanny," Red said to Maryanne, "we're going up to Naples for a while. We should be back fairly early after dinner. Are you guys all set? Is there anything you need?"

Red felt that teaching the kids to use the customary "Nanny" title for their governess by using it herself in front of them was a really good idea. It would help them understand that Maryanne had a special relationship with them, just as she was "Mommy" and Doc was "Daddy." *Her* kids were going to grow up knowing how to be polite, and show respect for their elders. She had confidence that Doc would teach them to think for themselves, and Auntie Cheryl would teach them how to get away with murder. Hopefully not literally, but you get the idea.

"We're all set," Maryanne replied. "We can have dinner at the steakhouse next door, and work on our 'how to behave in a nice restaurant' skills."

Turning to Robert, she added: "Up for some prime rib?"

"Always," Robert smiled.

But, he looked uncertainly at Red. They all knew Maryanne was inviting him to share a table with the family, which is not what a covert bodyguard is supposed to do. He *should* be stationing himself strategically nearby, but not too nearby. On the other hand, they also knew that Maryanne liked Robert's company, and *vis versa*. From time to time, she would invite him to sit with her when "The Boss" – in this case, Red – wasn't around. This was the first time Red had actually caught them at it.

Catching the look, Red decided it was time to revisit the ground rules. Best to let them know she wasn't going to be anal about it. It's hard to be professional when you feel like your cheating.

"Guys," she said to both of them, "GSS bodyguards are supposed to be inconspicuous to their principals until needed. But, that's to give the principals privacy. Since Maryanne obviously likes your company, Robert, and has invited you to join her, that's fine by me, as long as you don't let down your guard. Have fun!"

Before heading out through the lobby to the bikes, which were supposed to be parked out front, Doc and Red stopped by the edge of the pool. Red's kids swam over to them.

"Daddy and I are going out to dinner tonight," Red told them. "Maryanne is planning to take you guys to a really nice restaurant. You be good for her, now, and we'll see you when we get back."

"Bye," the kids said in unison.

Jeremy's death in the line of duty had been a shock for Mike, but Red had explained that it had been his job to protect her and Elise, and he'd died doing it. It was Robert's job to protect them, and he would do it, too.

It took a while, and a lot of repetitions and variations, but Mike came to see Jeremy's action as proof that their bodyguards would, and could, take care of them.

Thus, he, and by extension Judy (who was still too young to do all the math, so she took her cue from her big brother), still felt secure and protected, even when Mommy and Daddy were away.

58

“Two bikes, or one?” Doc asked.

“I’ll ride with you,” Red replied. “No sense in my trying to thread my dresser through downtown traffic. Besides, it’ll be easier to find parking for one bike than two.”

Doc sat down on the red-and-gold chopper’s seat, and lifted the bike to vertical. He reached down to turn the fuel shutoff to “ON,” twisted the ignition switch to “IGNITION,” checked that the green light glowed brightly, rolled the bike two feet forward to check that the transmission really was in neutral, and pumped three squirts of gasoline into the big, dual-throat carburetor. Pulling in the clutch lever, just to be sure, he laid his thumb lightly over the biosensor mounted where the starter button usually was. It took one-hundred-twenty-five milliseconds to read his thumb print, and energized the starter relay.

The punched-out one-hundred-five-cubic-inch V-twin motor blasted into life.

Knowing that the motor had been run just that morning, when Steve’s crew brought the bike over from Miami, Doc just gave it a few seconds to get oil pumped into the top end, and start warming it up. Then, he nodded to Red, who stepped over the elevated passenger seat, and settled down onto it.

He felt her weight shift as she reached down to flip the passenger foot pegs out, then lifted her feet onto them. The fact that she leaned forward, hugging him close, instead of leaning back against the padded sissy rail, told him that concern over finding a parking space for her dresser wasn’t the only, or even the foremost, reason she wanted to ride with him.

She’d unzipped her red leather jacket before getting on the bike, and now rubbed her milk-swollen breasts behind the red-leather jumpsuit into his back.

Smiling, he checked for traffic in the parking area, and dropped the transmission into first gear. Slowly

letting out the clutch lever, he steered the bike at a walking pace out to the curb.

At the curb, he stopped to check traffic coming from the left along Collier. Before picking out a gap to slip into, he rapped the throttle a couple of times to make sure the motor was warm enough to accelerate smoothly without stalling. The staccato hammering of the unmuffled engine echoed off the surrounding buildings.

Very satisfying.

Picking his slot, he opened the throttle, and dropped the clutch. Already leaned over, the bike turned rapidly around his stationary right foot, and dove into the opening he'd picked between two cars moving along the right-hand lane, then accelerated rapidly to match speed a quarter car length behind the car ahead. Doc let off a little on the throttle to slowly increase the gap, giving the driver behind plenty of time to react.

Some of the tourists around here, filled with self importance over having more money than brains, got annoyed when some biker (or anyone else) pushed their way into traffic ahead of them, so it was good to make sure they knew you weren't giving them any choice but to back off or crash.

It wasn't like in Arizona, where almost all of the drivers had experience riding motorcycles, and the most common message on bumper stickers was "Look Twice – Save a Life! Watch for Motorcycles." More than half the drivers around here at this time of year were vacationers down from big cities in the Northeast, whose perceptions of bikers were based on violent Hollywood exploitation films that cast them as brutal sadists. You never knew how those bozos would react.

Luckily, however, most drivers were really reasonably polite, cautious, and conservative. They were long on experience, and short on testosterone. Thus, it was reasonably safe to take your bike out of the parking lot, provided it was loud (to alert somnambulant drunks to your presence), and you watched carefully for the occasional idiot with a testosterone high.

Doc, with over a decade and half a million miles of motorcycling experience under his belt, had these ideas

tattooed on the *inside* of his skull. He didn't want some psycho drunk or hophead suddenly turning his kids into orphans, and his hundreds of employees into job hunters. For a gear-headed adrenaline junkie, he was a very careful driver.

Doc putt-putted along with traffic, and worked his way over to the left-hand lane. Soon, a gap in the median afforded him the chance to make a U-turn.

Headed back North in the direction of the Jolley Bridge, he followed traffic at a snail's pace until, at the far side of the bridge, the speed limit rose up to forty-five, then fifty-five, and the cars separated more. With a higher speed limit, which by the basic laws of mathematics provided more space between cars, Doc was able to thread around the slowpokes, and get into "clean air." At that point, he was able to maintain a reasonable pace a few miles an hour above the posted speed limit.

It still took half an hour to make the twenty-minute ride to downtown Naples, since traffic got caught at every light. The roads were still crowded with a glut of snowbirds, who flew South from places like New Jersey to Winter over in Southern Florida. That wouldn't clear out until May, or even June. This week, the ranks of visitors was also swelled by Spring Breakers. Naples and Marco weren't big Spring-Break destinations, where college kids went by the hundreds of thousands to get drunk and act stupid, but they got their share.

In downtown Naples, Route forty-one turned sharp right to go up northward along Florida's West Coast. Doc, however, followed the middle lane of traffic straight through the intersection onto Fifth Avenue, with its collection of restaurants, boutiques, and art galleries. And, real estate offices. Can't forget the real estate offices, even if you try.

Doc motored down Fifth Avenue past that Italian place on the North side, with all the big tables set out under a pavilion out front. Red had made reservations there when Doc *insisted* that he *had* to take her out for dinner *tonight*. Doc swung the chopper around in a wide U-turn, and backed it against the curb on the other side in front of a boutique featuring an eclectic mix of art, clothing, and jewelry, most of which was sourced in Southern Mexico.

Pulling off her helmet after getting up off the bike, Red waved to the shop's proprietress. They'd become instant friends on a previous trip because they were both uncommonly tall redheads generously endowed between the ears. The woman even had a son almost the same age as Red's adopted son, David, whom Bud had rescued from the same pirate captain that had captured her.

It had taken Bud months to track down and rescue David, but there was no way she would ever leave *anybody* in the clutches of that [insert your own preferred expletive, here]. The [I'll bet you can come up with another expletive to put here] had murdered David's parents, so Red's over-developed maternal instinct *required* her to adopt him, and bundle him safe and warm into a boarding school near where Doc had grown up in Massachusetts.

Next year, both boys would be down here scoping out babes on the beach during Spring Break. Red hoped to have Auntie Cheryl hanging around, too, to help David recognize the line dividing blow-out good fun from train-wreck stupidity. Auntie Cheryl had spent most of her life exploring that line, and so knew it well.

Red would come back to the shop after dinner to share some wine and swap some stories.

Settled at their outside table under the restaurant's awning, Doc ordered tortellini while Red decided on salmon carbonara. Then, Red called her assistant in Scottsdale.

"Bonnie," Red said into her cellphone, "could you double check on my meeting tomorrow with the Russkies?"

"Already done," Bonnie replied, "they arrived yesterday, and are staying at the same hotel you are. They wanted you to go to their place, but I don't trust those sons of bitches after what happened in London. I booked a small conference room, and insisted there be only one bodyguard on each side. It's room one-oh-four, right by, and in full view of, the pool. You're to meet them there at ten o'clock in the morning."

"There'll be you and Doc with Manny on our side; and Nicolai Baronyev, his lieutenant, Yuri Tsemovich,

and their one bodyguard on the other. We'll have more of our guys standing around outside. You guys go in, and if you don't come out smiling, Baronyev won't make it to the stairs. I assume they'll have some of their guys in the hall, too, so if they want to start a gun battle, they'll have to do it in a hallway full of tourists, with everyone at the pool for an audience."

"Is that the best we can do?" Red asked.

"That's the best we can do," Bonnie assured her. "Interpol guys will be around, also, but they're limited as to what they can do. They're letting us handle surveillance. Manny has a pair of earrings for you to wear, and a really gaudy necklace. Turn your chest toward whomever you want in the picture. We'll turn 'em on remotely after they've swept you for bugs – assuming they sweep you for bugs.

"What if they monitor continuously from outside?" Red asked.

"Then, they'll catch their own guy with the bug," Bonnie laughed. "It's a long story, but you'll like it. You know that bike thief, this afternoon?"

"Yeah, what about him?"

"He's the cousin of one of Yuri's bodyguards – a guy they borrowed up in New York. Interpol says the FBI's had the guy under surveillance for two years. He brought the kid along down there for a lark. Since he's just a pick up, he has more loyalty to his family – in other words, the kid – than he does to the Russkies."

"As soon as we heard that," Bonnie continued, "we had Interpol pick the kid up out on Tamiami Trail, half way to Miami. They used the kid as leverage to get *their* bug planted in the collar of Yuri's suit. So, if anybody complains about a bug, just accuse Yuri of being an Interpol mole. We'll hear about it through your bug, and shut your things off, so the only active bug will be on Yuri. Yours will be better hidden than his, sooo"

"What if they're listening in, now?"

“You aren’t saying anything important that they can overhear in the restaurant. Any leak would have to come through the phone, and with the encryption we’re using, we’ll all be retired by the time they crack the code.”

“Hey,” Red demurred, “these guys aren’t a bunch of towel heads hunched over a fire in a shed outside Mecca. It’s the *Russians*. Not long ago, they were the second greatest superpower in the world.”

“And, we know exactly what they’re capable of,” Bonnie countered. “We’d worry if it were the People’s Republic of China, but it’s not. Now, they’re just third-world thugs. At least, that’s what the NSA tells us.”

“Hopefully, they aren’t just blowing smoke.”

“Again, it’s the best we can do. It should be okay, but keep your eyes open and ears to the ground.”

“Okay, thanks. We should talk tomorrow, and thanks for keeping on top of this.”

59

“So, what’s the story?” Doc asked.

As Bonnie had pointed out, Red hadn’t said anything on her side of the telephone conversation that would give anybody any information at all. That included Doc, sitting next to her at the table.

People kept accusing him of having clairvoyance, but that’s not really how it worked. He was just able to figure out what was *probably* going to happen based on an assortment of inputs. If his ability to do it seemed uncanny, that was just because he was smarter than the average astrophysicist. But, if he wasn’t privy to the one-and-only source of information carrying a message, there wasn’t anything for him to figure out. Red hadn’t provided enough clues to allow him to surmise the other side of her conversation with Bonnie.

“The walls may have ears,” Red pointed out.

“We’re supposed to meet the Russkies tomorrow morning at ten,” she continued, “in room one-oh-four at our hotel. You, me, and Manny inside with Nicolai, Yuri Tsemovich and one of their soldiers. Steve and the Boys will be outside. Likely they’ll have boys outside, too.”

“Who’s Yuri Tsemovich?”

“Nicolai’s Number Two.”

“Baby,” Red added, with a very serious expression, “I know how you feel about violence, but please bring a gun.”

Doc looked at her as if what she’d said was pretty silly.

“You should also know how I feel about being the guy who brought a knife to a gunfight,” he said. “I’m borrowing a forty-five magnum from Robert.”

“That’s a lot of firepower! Be careful who’s on the other side of your target,” Red warned.

“Hollow points,” Doc explained. “The bullet goes in, but all that comes out is a splash of spaghetti sauce – marinara with meat.”

Seeing that the waiter bringing their food had overheard the exchange, and looked shocked by it, Doc told him: “We’re trying out story ideas for a screenplay we’re writing.”

Relieved, the waiter laughed and asked what they were going to call it.

“We don’t know, yet,” Doc replied. Looking at his plate of tortellini, he said the first thing that came into his head: “Maybe, *The Big Cheese*.”

“Speaking of cheese,” Red butted in, pointing to the nearly empty cheese shaker on the table, “we’re going to need more than *that*.”

“Oh!” the waiter exclaimed, “I’m sorry.”

He grabbed a full shaker from an empty table nearby, and placed it in front of her. Then, he picked up the offending item, and brought it with him back to the kitchen to refill.

Thinking about the look on the waiter’s face, Red spluttered with mirth. That, of course, set Doc laughing, too.

“I told you the walls have ears,” Red claimed.

Doc smiled, and nodded acknowledgement.

The incident, however, reminded them that, while they’d become accustomed to dealing with world-class felons on this project, the people around them had their own private lives that did not include thieves, killers, smugglers, and other assorted unsavory characters. Just because what they were saying would not compromise

their plans if overheard, it might ruin somebody else's dinner. It was not conversation fit for airing in public.

Abashed, they dug into their meals, and shelved additional planning for their ten o'clock meeting with slimy scum until later in private. Red was all ready to blow off the rest of their evening, and go back to their hotel, where they could focus on the coming events. Doc, however, insisted that Red put it out of her mind, and focus on spending the evening having a good time mixing with real people in the real world.

In other words, he wanted her to take a break.

The next morning, over ham-and-cheese croissants in their suite, they got serious about the meeting. They'd stayed fairly late in Naples, so they had slept in. Maryanne and the kids had already finished breakfast and left for an early morning walk on the beach before the parents got up to call room service.

"What do you actually want to accomplish?" Doc asked.

"In the short run, I want the Russians to accept us – me – as part of their organization. That will lead to accomplishing our long-term goal of detailing their involvement for the cops."

"Why would the Russians have anything to do with you?"

"Their operation in China is now in shambles. No product is coming out because the looters made such a mess of things that they were all caught, or driven into hiding. Nothing's coming out of the tomb, so what's the point of any of it? I'll show them that I now control the situation."

"I'll explain how we'll use the legitimate archaeological investigation sponsored by the PRC government as a cover, while we empty the tomb," she added, "and deliver the goods to their reconstituted distribution system, run by yours truly."

"That's Chen Zhin's plan," Doc pointed out.

"Yes," Red responded, "and it's a good plan. We'll do all of it, except emptying out the tomb."

“How long before they realize you’re not doing it?”

“Long enough to make some arrests. I want a photo of Baronyev with his hand in the cookie jar, and a surprised look on his face when the flashbulb goes off.”

“Look,” she added, “Bud’s reports have detailed the original operation. We know Chen Zhin’s involvement, and the story behind it. We know Chen Ju Long’s involvement, too, and the names of the people in the People’s Committee for Cultural Education that made it possible. We know how they went in, what they got out, and why they failed. We know Baronyev’s role in setting the whole thing up.

We know enough to make it credible that we know it all. In fact, I think it’s possible that we do. There aren’t any obvious holes. The only thing stopping us from sweeping it all into Interpol’s dustbin is that we have only Chen Zhin’s word for it. We need to corroborate her information to make any arrests stick. That’s why we need Baronyev’s hand in the cookie jar.”

“And, how do you propose to do that?” Doc asked.

“Start up the distribution system again,” Red related. “We’ve enough artifacts laying around in China that we can make it look like we’re pulling more stuff out. We’ll just recycle stuff that’s already had its scientific value compromised. We’ll document what we’re doing and track where the stuff goes. When we figure the pipeline is full, we’ll have the cops bust ‘em all.”

“And if we run out of loot before Interpol’s ready to make arrests?”

“We’ll have to have Bud pull out some more that has limited scientific value, I don’t think it will come to that, but it’s Plan B.”

Red decided to wear a yellow two-piece bathing suit to the meeting, with a matching floor-length pleated wrap-around-skirt cover up. The skirt’s overlap faced right, and laid over her right thigh. Having the same attitude as Doc about being the one who brought a knife to a gunfight, she strapped a .380 Smith and Wesson semi-

automatic to her upper thigh, so that it lay high in her crotch on the right side. The idea was to have the outfit look too revealing to conceal anything, while strategically covering the pistol and the strap holding it in place. To improve the concealment, she had a large, open-topped beach bag, which she hoped her counterparts would assume contained her gun.

Doc, on the other hand, planned to make no bones about the fact that he was armed. He wore a loose-fitting light-blue single-breasted suit over a black tee shirt, and put the forty-five in a shoulder holster under the jacket ready for a cross draw.

60

At ten o'clock, Red, Doc, and Manny filed into the conference room, only to find the Russians already there. The Russians had already closed the heavy draperies, normally used to darken the room when someone was using an overhead projector. The last people to use the conference room had left the screen down on the short wall at the far right end of the long conference table. A tall, lean but well muscled man in a neatly fitted dark-gray suit, with a gray shirt, and gray tie sat in a high-backed desk chair under the screen. Red and Doc presumed that must be Nicolai, and the man sitting to Nicolai's right just around the table's corner, with his back to the solid back wall would be Yuri. The man standing against the screen to Nicolai's left would be the Russians' one allowed bodyguard. He looked to be of Italian extraction rather than Russian. Perhaps he was the bike thief's cousin.

Nicolai appeared to be in his late sixties, with close cropped balding hair of slate gray. From his face, it appeared that he carried very little excess fat. From his shoulders, it appeared that he carried a lot of excess muscle. He sat back in the chair, with his hands folded in his lap.

Yuri was, perhaps, ten years younger, with light brown hair heavily streaked with gray, which he wore in a long crew cut pomaded to stand straight up. It made Red think of the movie *Eraserhead*. A deeply incised scar ran from just below his left temple down to his jawline, nearly to his chin. He wore a dark brown suit, white shirt, and red tie.

He motioned for the Americans to sit at the table opposite him. That would put them in the line of fire from anyone shooting from the hallway into the conference room through the drapery-masked glass wall. Doc and Red would be the first to feel the bite. In fact, nobody could target either Nicolai or Yuri without either Red or Doc being in the way. Their bodyguard screened Nicolai from another angle.

Seeing the situation, Manny walked the long way around the conference table, and stood against the far wall near the table's middle. It was a good place to cover all three of the Russians at once. There was nothing he could

do about anything out in the hall, but he figured Steve and his crew were out there to take care of that.

Doc sat next to Nicolai, with Red to his left, leaving her in a good position to duck under the table or move out of the way, should any lead become airborne.

“Mr. Baronyev would like it if we all placed our guns on the conference table before we start the meeting,” Yuri opened with. “Just to show we’re all friendly.”

He smiled in a friendly way that fooled no one

With his own friendly smile, Doc reached around into the small of his back, and brought out a small, five-shot Smith & Wesson thirty-eight-caliber revolver, and placed it on the table, then nodded to Manny, who used his left hand to remove a nine-millimeter automatic from a shoulder holster under his right armpit. He then placed the pistol on the table within easy reach.

Nicolai grew a supercilious grin when he saw how small was the gun Doc brought to the meeting. Doc just shrugged, flashing a tight smile that said: “Hey, that’s what I’ve got.”

Red made no move at all.

“Ms. McKenna,” Yuri said forcefully, “Please!”

“What?” she asked in feigned surprise. “I don’t carry guns.”

Yuri nodded meaningfully at Red’s beach bag, which she’d placed on the table with its open top easy to reach.

With an exasperated look, Red upended the beach bag so that its contents – a rolled-up towel, a bottle of sunscreen, her cellphone, and, finally, a cosmetics bag and a checkbook/wallet that were both too small to conceal anything larger than what they should contain.

Seeing Yuri eying the towel distrustfully, Red made a show of unrolling it across the table. Unfolding it carefully to spread it one-layer thick across the empty part of the conference table, and patting it down so that it lay completely flat.

“There, satisfied?” she challenged.

Yuri nodded. Then, in a placating tone, he said: “It’s not that we don’t trust you”

“It’s just that we don’t,” Nicolai interrupted quickly to make sure there was no doubt.

With an acid smile, Doc said in a sing-song tone: “We don’t trust you, either.”

Then, he nodded to the empty table in front of Yuri.

All three Russians reached under their suit jackets, produced pistols, and laid them on the table in front of them.

Doc then smiled sarcastically.

“There,” Yuri said brightly, “isn’t that friendly?”

“Ms. McKenna,” Nicolai said quickly, to cut off the pleasantries, “thank you for meeting us here, today. We are in the United States on other business, and have a tight schedule. I wanted to take time to meet with you, though, on a matter of some importance affecting both our businesses.”

“You’re unhappy that I’m muscling in on your business of fencing artifacts stolen from Qin Shi Huang’s royal tomb.” Red finished for him.

“Precisely,” Nicolai agreed, seeming amused by her abruptness.

“You don’t like having your arrangements changed without anyone asking you about it.”

“Yesss,” Nicolai agreed, again, drawing out the word to give himself time to start saying something of his own.

Red didn’t give him the time, but jumped right in again with: “It took me a while to find out who to talk to about this. I had to sort through the shreds of your ruined operation to find you. Your operation in China was shut down, and the principals in jail or in hiding. Many of them seem to be dead. Those who are left didn’t want to talk.”

“Humph, hmm,” Nicolai grunted, not liking being reminded.

“So, when I saw the opportunity, I jumped right in. We knew the man you had running the operation had died, and it was now in the hands of an inexperienced person – his daughter.”

“She was clearly unable to keep it going, Red continued. “You haven’t had product coming out for nearly a year. In view of the situation, there, we made arrangements with the People’s Republic to gain control of the mausoleum. Then, we set up a new operation under cover of a legitimate archaeological dig sponsored by the PRC. Is any of this *not* familiar to you?”

“Li Peng was a close personal friend for many years,” Nicolai countered. “His was a terrible loss that left us devastated.”

“I doubt if you have *any* close personal friends, Nicolai,” Red rounded on him. “You can’t even seem to remember the name of your ‘close personal friend’ Kai Shang. Li Peng just led the digging team for him. Or, is Kai Shang’s daughter, Chen Zhin, as clueless as you seem to think I am?”

“Enough with the stupid games, Nicolai,” she continued, not giving him a chance to answer her question, which was rhetorical, anyway. “You let your good-ol’-boy network take a good idea that you’d spent decades setting up, and flush it down the toilet. I’ve come in and rescued it. Tell me why I still need *you!*”

This is not how Nicolai had planned this meeting to proceed. He was truly pissed off that this woman had

tried to steal his operation out from under him. He'd intended to take it back from her, and then eliminate her, but here she was with a veiled threat to eliminate *him*.

Smiling acidly, Nicolai told Red: "I see you do know something. Alright, I approached Kai Shang to set up the operation two decades ago. He did not run into problems until their tunnel reached inside the mausoleum."

"That's when they found out they didn't know their own history," Red scoffed. "Everybody knows the place is full of poisonous mercury, and your guys dug right into the bottom of it. They made a horrid mess that couldn't be hidden. Whose idea was it to coerce Kai Shang's son-in-law into helping you?"

Bud had asked Red to try to get it on record that Chen Ju Long had been an unwilling participant. She liked Ju Long, and felt he'd gotten a really raw deal that he hadn't deserved. While she still had feelings for Zhin, and would have loved to help her, Bud figured she was probably already a lost cause.

"Kai Shang thought it would be a good idea," Nicolai said. "He wanted to marry his daughter off, and thought it would be a good match. He wanted someone around who knew something about the tomb and the artifacts. Unfortunately, Chen Ju Long proved less than cooperative. Kai Shang had trouble controlling him. In the end, he had to threaten Chen's family."

"His own daughter and grandchildren?" Red was shocked.

"Yes, but he didn't think he would have to actually harm them," Nicolai explained. "He knew Chen would do anything to protect them, and could be manipulated."

"But, then Kai Shang died," Red prompted. She congratulated herself on getting this good at manipulating conversations to get the answers she wanted. She'd done basically the same thing more than once during her adventures, and thought she was getting pretty good at it. Here, she'd managed to get a full confession from an international crime boss in less than fifteen minutes, and gotten it on tape. She felt pretty pleased with herself.

Doc, in his Zen-master role, looked on disapprovingly. He knew the old Greek idea that "when the gods wish

to destroy someone, first they make them proud” was a basic principle governing events in a chaotic universe – like this one. Off the top of his head, he could name several other cultures that included it as a guiding principle as well.

“But, then Kai Shang died,” Nicolai agreed. “By that time, the operation was a mess, anyway. People were getting sick, and they had trouble getting the workers to work. Production was falling off. When Kai Shang died, there was nobody in place to take over the operation, except his daughter. She kept it going for a while, but when workers started dying, she shut everything down.”

Put that way, it sounded like Zhin’s hands were clean as far as the deaths were concerned. She shut the operation down as soon as it turned deadly. One could argue that she should have shut it down sooner, but one could also argue that she had no way of knowing the extent of the danger.

“She said she knew of a way to get it going, again,” Nicolai continued, “but it would take time. We had no choice but to listen to her.”

“Well, it’s good that you did,” Red told him. “She brought *us* in, and we know what we’re doing. She devised the plan we are now following. We’re ready to start bringing artifacts out of the tomb, again. I have the whole system under *my* control, now. My people are running the archaeological dig that provides cover for looting the tomb. They control the movement of artifacts into the distribution system. Your distributors are now *my* distributors. Your customers are now *my* customers. I come back to my original question: ‘Why do I still need *you?*’”

61

This was very definitely not going according to Nicolai's plan, and he didn't like having his plans screwed up. Especially, he didn't like having his plans screwed up by this little girl (well, really a very tall girl, but little, he felt, in age and experience). Even worse, he knew she was right. She'd asked a very pointed question, and he didn't have an answer.

When Nicolai didn't have an answer, he generally fell back on anger to provide one.

Making a furious face, Nicolai nodded to Yuri, and grabbed for his gun on the table.

Yuri grabbed for his gun, too.

Nicolai hadn't wanted to be the first one to touch his gun. Being the first one to touch your gun made you the first target for anyone else reaching for a gun. So, Nicolai hesitated until he saw Yuri's fingers wrap around the grip on his gun before starting to move, himself.

A gun went off, and Yuri's shoulder exploded into a splash of blood.

Surprised, Yuri looked in the direction of the noise, and saw Manny holding a nine-millimeter automatic in his *right* hand. A bit of smoke trailed quietly from the end of its barrel, which was still aimed in Yuri's direction. The gun Manny had placed on the table was still there in plain sight. As a decoy, Manny had given up a pistol he'd put in his right shoulder holster for a left-hand draw, while keeping his preferred weapon hidden.

Nicolai had started looking in the direction of the noise, too, but his attention had been arrested mid-move by the sight of an enormous black hole surrounded by blued steel, staring like a malevolent eye concentrating its malice in his direction. The enormous meat hook wrapped around it extended from the outstretched arm attached to Doc's right shoulder. Doc had placed a decoy on the table, too.

Giving Doc a “you dirty trickster” look, Nicolai eased his hand away from his pistol on the table. Nicolai’s mother hadn’t brought up any children stupid enough to go up against a forty-five magnum that had the drop on them.

The borrowed bodyguard just held his palms out in front of him for anyone to see they were empty, especially, he was interested in showing them to anyone who had itchy trigger fingers. He wasn’t going to die for these ex-Commie assholes!

The tableau in the conference room held static for three beats, with the deafening blast echoing in everyone’s ears while Yuri whimpered about his ruined shoulder. Then, all Hell broke loose.

Three men wearing black nylon windbreakers and black baseball caps with “FBI” emblazoned on the fronts in bold, yellow sans-serif letters burst through the door leading to the hallway. Simultaneously, two similarly attired men and two women burst in through a door in the wall near the foot of the table, opposite the projection screen. A fraction of a second later, the wall behind Manny demonstrated that it could fold out of the way quickly by folding quickly out of the way to reveal a room full of additional FBI agents standing around a folding table covered with electronic surveillance equipment.

All of the agents carried identical nine-millimeter automatics in their hands.

Two of the three agents that came in from the hallway ran to the Russians’ bodyguard, and held him against the wall. He held his suit jacket lapels open to show the empty shoulder holster. The third grabbed Doc’s hand holding the forty five, and pushed it toward the ceiling. Doc used his thumb to lower the gun’s hammer without its discharging, then loosened his grip so that the gun dangled from his index finger, which was still in the trigger guard. He raised his left arm to parallel his right.

The two female agents grabbed Red, pushed her against the wall, and started feeling around for weapons. One reached into her crotch, and pulled out the thirty eight. Upon seeing this, both Nicolai and Yuri glared at Red. She’d outfoxed them, again.

Manny quickly assumed a position identical to Doc's before any agents reached him. Two agents each grabbed Yuri and Nicolai.

Nobody was likely to sleep at home, tonight.

Special Agent Damon Wells strode to the table with a self-satisfied look on his face. Three years ago, he'd gotten a black eye in the Miami office for mis-handling the Scott Arnold arrest. He'd let other agencies, specifically the Coast Guard, talk him into delaying the takedown, and then, worried about saving face, had allowed Red to be arrested along with the rest of the gang. Then, he'd compounded his error further by interrogating her as one of the conspirators. That mess had reverberated all the way to Washington.

Since seeing Red arrive on the scene to meet with the Russians – Wells had no idea what either Red or the Russians were up to, but the Russians had borrowed a bodyguard from the Mafia, so there must be a crime involved, right? – he'd fantasized about catching Red doing something illegal that would make his earlier treatment of her look justified. They'd had Tony under surveillance for two years, and kept it up as a matter of course. When Wells heard what was said in the conference room, he thought he'd received a gift from God.

Thus, he was primed to rush in and arrest Red. When Manny's gun went off, it triggered everything. You know the rest.

"I've been waiting three years to say this to you," Wells said to Red, "Judith McKenna, you are under arrest. You have the right to remain silent ..."

Red recognized him immediately from her humiliating interrogation while chained to a steel table in the wardroom of a Coast Guard cutter. She didn't give him the chance to finish explaining her rights, which she knew perfectly well, anyway.

"Remember what happened the last time you tried to arrest me?" she asked him pointedly. "This time, you'll end up answering questions from Senator Belden in a Congressional inquiry. He owes me a favor."

Surprised, Wells looked to Doc. Wells knew he wouldn't have gotten in trouble the last time if he'd listened to Doc. He also knew Red's penchant for undercover operations, and realized he might have blundered, again.

Red was flabbergasted to see Doc shrug his shoulders, resignedly, while shaking his head, "No." He *wasn't* going to back her up. He was going to let Wells arrest her!

Seeing this, Wells continued explaining her rights, and arrested her along with everyone else in the room.

62

“Are you fucking nuts?” Chen Zhin screamed at Bud.

Those weren’t Zhin’s exact words. Zhin’s command of colloquial English was not good enough to come up with them on the spot. She’d screamed the equivalent expression in Mandarin Chinese.

She was too upset to use English because Bud had just splashed a thousand yuan worth of cocaine powder all over the trailer’s floor by slapping the cosmetics compact containing it out of her hands. While Zhin was decently well off by most people’s standards, a thousand Yuan still wasn’t easy to come by, and finding a supplier to convert it into cocaine was even harder for a good girl just recently gone bad.

Bud had walked in on Zhin scooping the powder out of the compact with the long, hollow, red nail of her right little finger. When Zhin saw Bud come in, she’d given her a wink and a sly smile, then bent down to sniff the powder out of the nail. Zhin imagined Bud as the perfect playmate for a good girl just recently gone bad.

Sticking to Mandarin, Bud shouted back the equivalent of: “You lamebrain, I told you to stay away from that crap! I’ve seen too many of my friends turn themselves from beautiful people into lifeless losers with that shit.”

Bursting into tears, Bud pulled the surprised, and now-empty-handed, Zhin into a tight embrace.

“Please, Baby, please don’t do that. I don’t want to see you die!”

Bud meant it somewhat figuratively. She knew cocaine was not a deadly poison, but she’d seen enough to know that drug addiction was the moral equivalent of suicide. It ended the addicts real life, and left them a hopeless, hollow shell with no future but a slow slide into oblivion.

The thought that she’d lose Zhin in that way left her brokenhearted.

She was resigned to losing Zhin. It was inevitable. For one thing, she wasn’t going to give up her marriage to

Glen for her. In a few months – at the end of the Summer – Glen’s sabbatical year in China would be over, and they would both go back to the United States. They would no doubt be back to continue exploring Qin Shi Huang’s mausoleum the following season, but by then Zhin would have dropped out of Bud’s Universe.

Most likely, Zhin would be in the Chinese equivalent of a Federal Penitentiary for her role in looting the tomb. It wasn’t really Zhin’s fault. Her father had groomed her to be a criminal, but it was unlikely that the Judge would see it that way.

But, if this behavior continued, by the time Bud got back to China, it would surely be all over for Zhin. As an addict, she’d never be able to keep herself out of prison. In less than a year, she would be banging guards and other prisoners to feed her drug habit. That would be too much. Bud would never see her, again.

Fearing the worst, Bud grabbed Zhin’s arm, and pulled up the sleeve. Relieved to see the creamy skin on her forearm unblemished by needle tracks, Bud checked the other forearm. It was clear, too. Zhin hadn’t been at it long enough to descend that far.

No longer despairing completely, Bud wrapped her arms around Zhin, again, and sobbed into her hair.

Getting over her surprise, Zhin scoffed: “I’m not going to die.”

Switching to English, Bud claimed: “If you keep using that stuff, you’ll stop living. It’s the same thing.”

Reminded of the mess she was in, already, Zhin looked abashed. She had already lost her reputation. She was probably going to lose her husband. Likely, she’d lose her children, too. Nobody was going to let a coked-up, lesbian crime lord bring up two boys. Bud was right. Her life was trashed.

“My life is over, anyway,” she moaned.

“Don’t say that!” Bud exclaimed. “You can get it back. It was your father who got you into this mess. Tell them you’re sorry, and that you want to change. Then, prove that you can.”

“How?”

“First, quit snorting *that* crap,” she ordered, waving at the white dust all over the floor.

“I need it to be strong,” Zhin claimed.

“No, you don’t,” Bud insisted. “I know how you feel. I played with the stuff, too. When I saw what was happening to me, I said I didn’t want it, anymore. So, I stopped. You can, too. You just need to want to. I’ve known other people who’ve done it, too. That’s coke, right?”

Bud had gotten enough of a whiff to identify it when she’d knocked it out of Zhin’s hands.

“Is that all you’re doing?” she asked.

Getting a nod from Zhin, she explained: “I’ve known other people addicted longer to worse drugs who’ve walked away. They just needed to want to.”

There had been others, but Bud was thinking specifically of Cara, who’d been a morphine addict for two years, and quit cold turkey. The difference was that Cara had been forced into addiction by white slavers, instead of choosing it for herself. Bud knew it made all the difference in the world, but she wasn’t going to tell Zhin that.

Lifting Zhin’s chin to look into her eyes, she asked: “Why do you want to be an addict, anyway?”

“It makes me feel better,” was Zhin’s excuse.

“Better than what?” Bud scoffed. “Better than being the wife of a respected government official? Better than being the mother of two wonderful boys? I’ve met your sons. I’d give anything to have children of my own like them. You want to throw it all away for what? For *nothing!*”

“It’s already gone!” Zhin wailed.

“No it’s *not*,” Bud promised. “Together, we’ll get it back.”

“You’re going back to America,” Zhin countered.

“Not until September. We’ve still got almost five months. That’s enough time. I’ll help. Glen will help. I know Red and Doc will help. Ju Long will certainly help.”

“Ju Long!” Zhin cried, and burst into tears, herself. She hadn’t slept with her husband in weeks. She was too ashamed.

“Ju Long still loves you,” Bud advised. “Just give him a chance.”

In the end, Bud extracted from Zhin a promise that she’d stop doing drugs, and would work to get her life back on track.

That was the day before Red’s arrest in Florida.

63

By the time Bud heard about Red's arrest, it was all over, but the shouting.

Red, Doc, the Russians, and everybody else were dragged immediately off to the local police station for booking. Still concerned that Red might have been telling the truth, Wells questioned Doc first.

"Why were you meeting with organized crime leaders?" he wanted to know.

"It's part of an international investigation into a ring of thefts from the tomb of the First Emperor of China," Doc explained, patiently. "You really should check with your counterparts at Interpol. I'm surprised you haven't gotten together with them, already. They're around here, someplace."

"What has that got to do with the New York crime family?"

"I've no idea, but I'm sure the Russians are into all kinds of slimy things. Baronyev said something about being down here on other business. It, apparently, also presented a good opportunity to settle things with Red."

Already suspicious of Red, Wells asked: "Who is Baronyev, and what is his connection to Ms. McKenna?"

"Baronyev is the gentleman who was sitting at the head of the table. I'm told he is a retired Soviet official, who got downsized when the Berlin Wall fell. I guess this is kind of a retirement project."

"You guess?"

"My role is mainly to ensure that my wife remains available to breastfeed our new daughter. That reminds me, it should be getting near feeding time at the zoo."

"Can't your daughter have anything else?"

Wells was a bachelor unfamiliar with anything associated with child rearing.

“Oh, our governess will warm up some milk Red stored in the refrigerator, but that won’t help Red.”

“What do you mean?”

“There are two people involved in breastfeeding an infant,” Doc explained. “Beside the infant’s needs, the mother also has needs. Her breasts fill up, and have to be emptied. It’s kinda like having to pee. Better make arrangements for her pretty soon. If you don’t, and it gets out, there are people who would accuse you of torture. You don’t want that.”

“Don’t tell me what I want and don’t want,” Wells warned. “I’ll decide how to run this investigation.”

He tried to look competent and in charge when he called the desk sergeant, and asked him to make arrangements for Ms. McKenna.

“Thank you,” Doc said.

“So, what’s this theft ring all about?” Wells asked, now.

“Do you know anything about Qin Shi Huang?”

“Who’s Qin Shi Huang?”

“Twenty-two centuries ago, Qin Shi Huang was a Chinese warlord during their Warring States Period. He was also a nut case of epic proportions. His main claim to fame was being a megalomaniac bent on uniting all the warring states under one banner – his. And, he managed to do it because he was also a paranoid, psychopathic mass murderer who scared the living shit out of everyone around him. He would have scared the living shit out of Adolf Hitler!”

“Imagine,” Doc continued, “Hitler, Stalin, Caligula, and Timothy Leary all crammed into one body that

illustrations depict as being fat as a house. I mention Timothy Leary because Qin Shi Huang was into recreational drugs like there was no tomorrow. In the end, there *was* no tomorrow for him. Hence, his need for probably the most elaborate tomb known to man. It's bigger than the Great Pyramid with whole cities of human sacrifices buried with him."

"Sounds like a monster," Wells said.

"As I said, he'd have scared the living shit out of Adolf Hitler."

"You say he dealt drugs?"

"No, he *used* drugs," Doc corrected. "He wanted to become immortal, so he bought into every kind of snake oil the ancient world could offer. His favorite was mercury."

"That's poisonous, isn't it?"

"Especially if you have it made into tablets that you pop like they're M&Ms," Doc suggested. "That accounts for a large part of his psychosis."

"As with all such burials, Qin Shi Huang took elaborate precautions to keep people from stealing his stuff after he died. In fact, his precautions worked so well that the tomb was untouched, and the actual location eventually forgotten, until the nineteen-seventies, when some farmers happened on it by accident. Chairman Mao's thugs kept everybody away from it, so it's never been excavated. A lot of the area around has been dug, but not the mausoleum, itself."

"The place's now a tourist attraction. A few parts of the outer area have been excavated – you've heard about the famous terracotta army of full-size individually modeled clay statues of soldiers, haven't you?"

"Yeah," Wells said, now being captivated by the story, "there's hundreds of them."

"Thousands," Doc corrected. "Likely tens of thousands, altogether. Only a fraction of the site's been

explored.”

“Well, when the tomb was found, Baronyev was a corrupt Kremlin official. After he heard about it, he hatched this plot to get his buddies in the PRC to break in, and snag whatever wasn’t nailed down. After the Berlin Wall fell, the Soviet Union collapsed and the PRC started to open up, Baronyev got his Chinese buddies going on the project. They got the daughter of the head of a Chinese crime family to marry a young archeology professor. They then manipulated the poor slob’s career so he’d end up in charge of the mausoleum complex.”

“Convenient,” Wells suggested.

“Yes, very,” Doc agreed, “except that the guy never really had his heart in the project. He wouldn’t cooperate until they threatened his family.”

“This part we haven’t yet corroborated, but it seems to fit,” Doc warned. “This archaeologist, Dr. Chen, seems to have sabotaged the project by leading them into one disaster after another, until they’d made such a mess that it couldn’t be hidden anymore. Then, he got the PRC to hire *us*, my wife and I, through our company, to take control of the mausoleum, conserve the site’s scientific and historical value, and catch the bad guys.”

“We’d just about done that. We’d worked our way up the food chain to Baronyev, and had just gotten him blabbing into a tape recorder when you guys showed up, and blew the whole investigation. That’s why I wanted you to actually arrest us. Maybe our cover isn’t blown, and maybe we can continue the investigation.”

“Oh,” Wells said, looking down at his beautiful arrest form, all filled out and documenting how he’d cowboy’d his way into wrecking an investigation that was way above his pay grade. He was in trouble, again.

Lost and confused, his eyes held a plea for help.

“What we need to do now,” Doc said, seeing that he could now control the situation, “is get Red out of here and back with the kids. I don’t want this doing them harm. Then, we need to strategize with Interpol to see how they want to proceed. I *think* we may have all the evidence we need to corral all the bad guys, and sort out who

goes into what cages and for how long. Let me think out loud for a moment.”

64

Doc sat in meditative silence for half a minute, then continued: “I know of at least five – maybe six – deaths stemming from this little fiasco: two in England, and three in the mausoleum in China. The looters’ straw boss is unaccounted for. The two in England are only peripherally connected to the grave robbery, and are already being handled separately. We’ve got pretty good documentation about the three in the mausoleum through our informant there. All her information checks out, and I think she’ll make a credible witness.”

Doc didn’t know about Bud’s catching Zhin snorting coke. Zhin would make a credible witness only if Bud could get her cleaned up.

“The other crimes involved are theft of government property and receiving stolen goods,” he continued. “I’m not sure how the pollution angle would play out in Chinese law. We’ve documented eighty percent of the stolen artifacts, and can trace their paths from the mausoleum to their final locations. We’ve got confessions from Baronyev and his lieutenant.”

“What about the U.S. mob connection?” Wells wanted to know. That was all that justified his actions in any way. He was an interloper in an international crime investigation.

“I don’t know, or care,” Doc said. “What in Hell were you doing lurking in the next room, anyway?”

“The Russians’ bodyguard,” Wells explained. “We’ve been tailing him for two years. When Baronyev showed up in New York, the Mob assigned Scoletti to take him and his guys around. We’d bugged their phones and their room, and found out about today’s meeting that way. So, we bugged the conference room and set up a takedown team outside. We thought you might be setting up something involving drugs, or human trafficking, or any of a number of other crimes.”

Doc glowered: “So you have no indication that there’s even been a crime committed on U.S. soil. You

crashed an international investigation involving police forces of a half dozen countries that's been going on for nearly a year because you were on a fishing expedition?"

"That's right," Wells allowed, sheepishly. He'd finally learned – too late – to cooperate with Doc, and, more importantly, not get crossways of Red.

Doc sat in silence for half a minute staring at Wells, and evaluating the situation. In the end, he decided the Universe would be a better place in which to live if Wells didn't get hung out to dry. He figured it would be hard to sell the idea to Red, but he'd try. He hoped she wasn't too uncomfortable, yet.

"What we need to do right now," he said, "is get Red in here, and take care of her. Then, we need to figure out how to put the toothpaste back in the tube. With Red's permission, we'll try to save your bacon."

When the matron escorted Red into the interrogation room, she was livid with anger. "My tits hurt!" she seethed. "Is there a ladies room in this hole?"

Wells asked the matron to remove Red's handcuffs and escort her to a ladies' room where she could be alone.

"She's mad," Wells said when Red had left. "What's she going to do?"

"Probably squeeze her breasts out into the toilet," Doc replied. "She doesn't need my help, so I don't ask."

"What should I do?"

"Be nice to her when she gets back," Doc advised. "Lead with an apology."

Wells nodded.

When Red returned without the matron, the crows feet of tension were gone from around her eyes. She was, however, still livid with anger. At both of the men.

"I'm sorry ..." Wells attempted, trying to get his apology in right away.

“You’ve got some explaining to do, buster,” Red rounded on Doc, ignoring Wells. To her, Doc was far more important than any flatfoot. Wells could cause her only temporary inconvenience. Doc was her life.

“Why in Hell did you let this bozo arrest me?” she demanded.

“I didn’t know if we still needed to keep your cover,” Doc placated. “I still don’t. All you’d said up to that point sounded like a criminal trying to bluff her way out of an arrest. I was hoping you would come to your senses and shut up. At least, you shut up.”

That stopped her. She stood a minute with her arms straight down at her sides, with her fists balled up against her thighs. She still looked mad as Hell.

As the seconds ticked by, the look of anger softened, and a look of realization grew.

Suddenly, she jumped to Doc’s arms, buried her face in his neck, and said: “Thank you, Baby.”

The next thing out of her mouth was: “Where are the kids? Are they alright?”

“Should be,” Doc suggested, and turned to Wells. “Have you even called them?”

“I don’t know,” was the response. Wells suddenly recognized a new possible threat to his career.

“Find out!” Doc growled. “No, wait. Get me my cellphone.”

Wells reached for his desk phone, lifted the receiver, and punched a button.

“Please bring in Dr. Manchek’s effects,” he requested, then added, “and those of Ms. McKenna.”

“In the meantime,” Doc interjected, “Red, how do we connect with Interpol?”

“Agent Gammon,” she replied. “His number’s on my speed dial.”

“We’ll get it if and when my phone shows up ... ,” she added with a look to Wells like she was his fifth

grade teacher and he'd tried to blame his missing homework on the dog.

Wells lowered his eyes as if he could hide by not looking at her.

She thought that was cute, and almost forgave him.

But, not quite.

When the effects arrived, Doc fished his cellphone out of the envelope, and speed dialed: "Robert, this is Doc. Is everybody okay? ... We're all okay, but there was an – altercation – and we had to come down to the police station. ... Yes, everybody's fine. Well, one of their guys will need a new shoulder, but everyone we care about is fine. You should collect Maryanne and the kids, and come down to pick us up with the stretch in about twenty minutes. No, wait! That's too public. Tell them we're okay, and we'll be home in an hour or so. Especially, tell Mike that Manny's fine. You can tell him that Manny shot a bad guy in the arm. He'll like that."

"I think some of our guys got busted along with us," he added. "Please *quietly* check to see who's still around. We should be ready to come home in about an hour. We'll need transportation for everyone who's here. But, I don't want to make a big display. Maybe send separate cars five to ten minutes apart. I don't know. That's a good start on a plan. We'll revisit it when we know more. Give me a call when you find something out."

Doc's next call was to Bonnie Wells in Scottsdale.

"Your meeting plan didn't work out too well," he informed her. "It turned into a shootout, then the FBI showed up. ... They were in the next room for no good reason, and came in when the first gun went off. ... Manny shot Yuri in the shoulder. ... Nicolai didn't want to answer one of Red's questions, so he decided to start throwing lead. None of our people got hurt, but everybody's down at the police station. ... We want to try to keep some semblance of our cover until we discuss things with Interpol. Don't say anything to anybody, yet. We still need to concoct a story."

65

The story they concocted when they finally got Interpol Agent Gammon involved, was that the charges against Doc would be dropped because there was no evidence that he'd actually committed a crime. The charges against Red of conspiracy and receiving stolen goods would stand for the time being, but a telephone call got her released on a million dollars bail, which Doc put on his American Express card. Charges were dropped against the six Gulf States Security employees who had been arrested outside the conference room, since they hadn't done anything, either. Since Yuri admitted to having a gun in his hand when he was shot, and everyone else in the room agreed, Manny was covered under Florida's "Stand Your Ground" law – he'd used minimum force to prevent "grievous bodily harm." He'd aimed for a non-vital area to disarm, rather than kill.

The local police said they wished all SYG cases were so clear cut.

The tabloids made up a story that Manny had killed a Russian hit man who was trying to execute his secret lover, Red. Doc refused to listen when Red laughingly tried to read the article to him.

But, that didn't surface for several weeks.

Gammon wanted to keep the investigation open until they determined what to do with their leads in China.

"I think the Chinese authorities won't want to indict any party officials," he opined. "They might go after Chen Ju Long, and Chen Zhin to make an example of them. Benny, of course, is going down."

"Can't we help the Chens?" Red asked. "Ju Long started this investigation, and Zhin provided a lot of the evidence. If she takes the stand, can't she be treated as a police informant?"

She was trying to help them mostly because Bud had asked her to.

"Well," Gammon responded, "a lot depends on the reports Ms. Thompson and Dr. Trudeau file. Mostly, it

depends on the mood of the Chinese investigators.

“What Chinese investigators?” Red asked, sarcastically. “The only one who seemed interested in investigating anything was Chen Ju Long, anyway. *He* hired *us* to gather evidence. As far as I know, nobody else over there gave a shit! Once they made a few creeps with shovels disappear, nobody seemed to want to look further.”

“That may be the case, but *somebody* has to take the blame.”

“Glen and Cheryl are in the clear, aren’t they?” Red worried.

“As far as we’re concerned, yes, but I’d get them out of China as fast as possible. Visiting foreign scientists intimately associated with the project might seem like convenient scapegoats. They’ll be a lot less convenient if they aren’t there.”

That was when Red called Bud and told her about the situation.

In Xi'an, it was three o'clock in the morning when Red's telephone call woke Bud from a sound sleep.

“What?” Bud demanded, groggily. “What time is it? Oh, shit! It’s three o'clock in the morning. Who is this, and whaddaya want?”

Bud hadn't even looked at the caller ID display on her cellphone. She only knew the time because the bright red LED display on her alarm clock was too close to her face to miss.

“It’s Red, Bud,” Red replied. “You’ve got to get out of there.”

“Huh?”

“The shit’s hit the fan over here. It’s a long story, but our meeting with the Russians blew up. Nicolai Baronyev’s been busted. I’ve been busted. We want to get you out of there before *you* get busted.”

“What the fuck?”

“You and Glen need to get out of there before somebody in the PRC’s justice department decides you’ll make good scapegoats. Get on the next flight to Scottsdale.”

“But, I’ve got a hole to explore.”

“Not anymore. You’re being reassigned to the *Diane* project, where you’re to work on submersible robot development. Glen should accompany you home, and start preparing for his Fall classes.”

“Baby, it’s only March! Classes don’t start until September.”

“If he doesn’t get over here now, he may be unavailable to teach classes come September.”

“What about Ju Long and Zhin?”

“We’ll try to help them from here, but our first priority is to take care of *you*.”

“What’s going on?” Glen asked, trying to wipe the sleep out of his eyes.”

“Red wants us to go home, chop-chop! Seems things got hot in Florida, and she’s afraid we’ll get caught in a Chinese dragnet.”

“What about the mausoleum?” Glen asked.

“I don’t know. She doesn’t seem worried about the mausoleum.”

Turning back to the cellphone, Bud said: “Baby, what do we do about the mausoleum.”

“What needs to be done?”

“Well,” Bud hesitated, trying to think about it. “I guess we could shut operations down here, and work with the data we already have. We’re almost done with Bertha’s survey. Hell, we could finish the map from Scottsdale. I

guess Quon could finish the survey. He should be supervised, but I guess Ju Long could do that, if he doesn't get busted, too."

"We're going to try to avoid that," Red said. "From what I'm hearing, all we really need is a security detail to make sure nobody starts rifling through our stuff. If that's safe, the mausoleum's safe. Do you agree?"

"I guess so," Bud allowed.

"We've already got a security detail in place," Red said, "I can supervise that from here. Let me talk to Glen."

"Glen," Bud said, handing him the cellphone, "Red wants to talk to you."

"Yes," Glen said into the instrument."

"I've been arrested, and the Russians have been arrested for smuggling Qin Shi Huang's grave goods," Red explained quickly.

"How'd that happen?" Glen asked, confused.

"Long story, which I'll explain later. What's important right now is that Interpol has advised us to get you and Bud out of China lickety-split. We're concerned how the Chinese will react when they find out. We're keeping a lid on things right now, but that can't last long."

"Shit!"

"My advice is to pick up all your marbles, and shut the project down for the season right now. Can you do that?"

"Well, yeah. I suppose. Everything's on the computer except my research notebook, which is on the table over there. So isn't Bud's. We just have to arrange security for the site, but that's pretty much in place, already."

“I can take care of that from here,” Red told him. “If you got a call that your grandmother had died suddenly, what would you do?”

“Pick up my notes, pack a bag, and get on the next available flight.”

“Okay. Do that. I’ll have Bonnie arrange for airplane tickets. Expect a call from her soon. Please put Bud back on.”

“She wants to talk to you,” Glen told Bud, handing the phone back to her.

“Hey, Baby,” Bud said into the instrument.

“You guys get packed right now, and get ready to come home. Don’t leave anything in your room. Figure you won’t be going back. I’ll have Bonnie contact you with flight information. I’ll alert everyone who needs to know about the arrests when I know you guys are safe.”

“Okay,” Bud agreed.

“See you soon. Bye,” Red signed off and broke the connection.

Her next call was to Bonnie in Scottsdale.

“Bonnie,” Red said when the call connected, “we need to get Bud and Glen back to the states five minutes ago. Please arrange airline tickets to anyplace out of the PRC, thence to Scottsdale. Then, call them with the information. Then, call me. Got it?”

“Get Bud and Glen on a flight out of the PRC, then get them home. Call you when it’s set. Got it!”

66

A week later, Bud and Glen were curled up in bed at their house in Tempe, Arizona trying to sleep off their jet lag. Red had arranged for Sam to open the house up for them, and make sure there were fresh sheets on the bed. They found a welcome-home meal (filet mignon with broccoli and ice cream for dessert) waiting for them. Then, Sam left in the limo that had picked Bud and Glen up at the airport.

They could have made the trip in half the time, but when Bonnie called with flight arrangements from Xi'an airport to Tokyo, thence to Phoenix via San Francisco, Bud wanted to change everything. While waiting for Bonnie to call, Bud had remembered her shopping trip to Rome. Instead of flying out of the PRC to Tokyo, they went to Mumbai, India, thence to Rome to have Glen measured by a maker of custom suits. They were going to try to have two suits made up and shipped to Arizona, but the Italian tailor wouldn't stand for it. Glen had to come back for two fittings before the tailor would let the suits out of his shop. Glen also ended up with three shirts, two ties, and a pair of loafers. Bud didn't really want the ties – too conventional – but Glen looked so good in them that she relented.

In the end, Bud decided it was all worth it.

She bought four pairs of shoes for herself.

Bud convinced Zhin that Ju Long's only hope was for her to convince the Chinese authorities to accept her version of the story. It was her only hope, too, but she'd given up on herself. She still cared about him, however, and about her boys. Bud talked her into cleaning herself up for them, and making a good show for the judge. She quit using drugs and playing at being a dragon lady. She went back to being the dutiful wife, bringing up her two boys and helping Ju Long further his career. She ended up much happier that way.

In the end, the Chinese authorities didn't want to make a big deal by arresting anyone. They already had plenty of low-level bad guys for a propaganda whitewash. The principals who'd set up the original robbery ring

had all disappeared except Benny, who got a suspended sentence. It wasn't worth the government giving him free room and board for umpteen years after parading him around in front of a world-news feed. They had already gotten the publicity they wanted.

Ju Long got a medal.

He then left government service to take a faculty position with Xi'an University, and continue exploring Qin Shi Huang's mausoleum with Quon as his chief assistant. He authored an average of two academic papers a year over the next five years, with Quon, Glen, Bud, Doc, and Red being listed as co-authors.

Samuel Wheeler, Bud's professor at Harvard, got co-author credit on all the Qin Shi Huang Mausoleum papers published before Bud finally got her Ph.D. two years later for her shipwreck work.

The whole looting operation was blamed on the Russians, who were now in a federal prison in the United States. They'd been in the U.S. to set up an arms-smuggling operation, and the Feds had a field day with that until they realized they'd busted them too early. You can't charge somebody with a crime they haven't even planned, yet.

The Feds did, however, manage to take credit for having stopped the crime before it started. That got them lots of brownie points in Congress, which is what they wanted, anyway. Special Agent Damon Wells got a commendation.

After six weeks of this fooling around, Nicolai and Yuri were allowed to make bail, which they promptly tried to jump. They were picked up trying to cross into Canada through Niagara Falls, and brought back to Florida in chains. Several months later, they were sentenced to ten years in Federal prison. The bus transporting them to prison was totaled by a cement truck, and both men escaped.

They were again apprehended trying to cross into Canada through Niagara Falls.

After serving six months of their ten-year sentences, they again escaped during a prison riot.

This time, they'd learned their lesson, and didn't try to escape through Niagara Falls. They drowned when the boat smuggling them to Cuba sank.

Tony Scoletti was released without being charged, since he was unarmed when the FBI arrested him. Nobody bothered to try connecting his empty shoulder holster with the nine millimeter pistol he'd placed on the table before the meeting.

Everyone had bigger fish to fry.

The charges against Red were dropped when it was realized that the Chinese weren't going to try to pursue any indictments beyond Benny. There was no point in trying to maintain her cover.

Red repatriated every piece looted from the mausoleum that she could get her hands on. She, however, ended up with a priceless collection of jade figurines and first-dynasty jewelry, anyway. Ju Long arranged for her to have her pick of the stolen artifacts on permanent loan.

Afterward, Zhin saw Bud only occasionally. Bud went along when Glen made short trips to the mausoleum every Summer. Serious work at the dig was unnecessary for him because Quon built a cadre of professionals to handle the actual exploration under Ju Long's auspices. The Chens and Trudeaus generally had dinner together – at a restaurant and *sans* extracurricular activities – once during their stay.

Without saying it in so many words, Bud made it clear that she wanted Glen all to herself. She wanted a family like Red's for her own. That suited Glen, fine.