

Summer Snow

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For Daniela Rommel

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Cholpon sang as she hoed the earth by the honeydew melons, chopping the soil and heaping it up around the vines. The Sufi women working with her sang too; their voices swelled in unison, creating a vibrant hum that filled the space between them. “*Apavitrah*,” the altos led. “*Pavitro-va*,” the sopranos answered. Their chant echoed off the rocky cliffs and returned to spill over them like the overlapping rounds of a canon, suffusing the valley with music. As they sang the ancient verses, mantras whose vibrations cleared their minds of thoughts, they merged with the life around them: translucent green leaves, curling tendrils, floppy yellow blossoms, melon globes swelling from the calyxes of withered flowers. They became the singer and the song, the hoe and the earth, the bug and the leaf, all moving to the rhythm of the hymns. The August sun fed them with its radiance. They knew they were this sun too and its million sister stars, all working together.

A man walked down the path leading from the adjoining farm; Cholpon saw he wasn’t their neighbor but a stranger. As he came closer, she could tell from his long face, full beard, and cloth headdress that he was a refugee from nearby Afghanistan. Thousands had fled the fighting and bombing, and some of the more shell shocked had then fled the refugee camps and were now wandering the countryside of Kyrgyzstan. He carried an ax over his shoulder and a bow saw in his hand and wore a pack frame to which were strapped a few dead tree branches. He’s probably trying to make a few *soms* selling firewood. He walked with a bit of a lurch. Was he injured? No, it looked more like alcohol.

He stopped and regarded the women, puzzled. His eyes traveled back and forth searching for something that wasn’t there. Oh, of course, Cholpon realized, he’s looking for a man—the boss, no doubt. He snickered then threw back his shoulders and stood straighter. Ah, she thought, it just occurred to him that as the only man, HE was the boss. Middle-aged, he was dressed in a torn Pashtun tunic whose once colorful geometric design was now

soiled and stained.

“We have no dead wood here,” Cholpon told him in Kyrgyz, “but farther up the canyon you can find some.” She didn’t know if he understood the language, but she spoke no Pashto. She could try Russian or English, but that might trigger hostility.

He turned to Cholpon’s voice, juttied one hand on his hip, and surveyed her as if she were an upstart rival to his new-found authority. He pointed his ax at a nearby walnut tree and narrowed his eyes.

“Our trees here have no dead limbs,” Cholpon said. “We use them ourselves for firewood.”

When he started toward the tree, Cholpon knew there would be trouble. Her Sufi sisters stared at the intruder, clutching their hoes. Cholpon thought her mantra while gazing around his head, to read his aura. The light coming from him was mostly muddy brown, but the green flares showed he wasn’t totally vicious. Overloaded by stress—nothing but chaos to return to in Afghanistan and no future here. His surly stride told her this made him mad, made him want to bully someone, someone weaker than himself.

He whacked the tree with the ax, lopping off a green limb.

“That’s not firewood,” said Cholpon. “That’s a living tree.” Her indignation was mixed with fear: if he was crazy enough to hack a green tree, he might hack them.

The man leaned on his ax, mouthed a kiss at Cholpon, then thrust his hips at her.

She stood about ten meters from him—that felt a safe distance, on the fringe of his dark field. The women stood where they’d been working, watching in fright and repulsion, and she motioned them to draw together. As they moved, the man hefted his ax, not yet brandishing it but gripping it to show his power.

“We will not harm you,” Cholpon told him.

He snorted, then suddenly pivoted back to the tree and brought the blade down on another limb, severing it.

“We know how to handle this,” Cholpon said to her sisters. She named the more experienced Sufis standing in the melon field around her and told them to meditate; the others would chant the peace prayer. Although she’d been at the Circle of Friends from its beginning, she joined with the singers: she needed to keep her eyes open in case he attacked. “*Aum Shantih, Shantih, Shantih*,” they sang

from the heart *chakra* at the center of their chests. The droning waves of sound surrounded them, held them suspended in soothing reverberations, and penetrated even into their bones.

The meditators sat cross-legged on the ground in lotus position, eyes closed, silently thinking their mantras. Cholpon could feel the effect in her mind as theirs settled towards the transcendent. Her thoughts became fewer but clearer. Her fear dissolved, replaced by compassion for this ignorant man with an ax who thought he could get rid of his own suffering by forcing it on others. If they could reach him with their mental coherence, build up a strong enough field of transcendental energy to get through to his sputtering, miss-firing brain, he might wake up to what he was doing. Fortunately the human mind, even his, responded like a tuning fork to thought vibrations around it. If the sisters could generate a higher frequency, it would make him change his tune and hear the song of his own inner silence. Even a moment of that could snap him out of his stupor and let him know that any harm he does to others just bounces back on himself. This little shift in consciousness—a stroke with a feather of peace—had been enough to pacify other belligerents, at least temporarily. It had worked last year with a burglar and the year before with two drunken shepherders intent on carnal conquest. Ax man didn't seem any worse than them.

He howled in mockery of their chanting, spat, then swung at the tree again. Thrap, went the ax into the trunk. The tree shuddered; chips flew; walnuts showered to the ground. From the grace and power of his stroke, Cholpon could see that swinging an ax was probably what he did best in life. Unfortunately no one needed ax swingers anymore, especially the tree.

The women continued chanting, the man continued chopping. Cholpon visualized Djamila in her mind and questioned her. Their teacher's aged face shone calm and beatific as ever. *No danger*, came the answer. *More meditators.*

Cholpon told the chanters to stop and meditate, and she continued the song alone. He tried to ignore them. Cholpon could feel her level of inner silence deepen as the new group settled in. Her voice became more resonant.

The man whacked again, then let go of the ax, leaving it quivering in the wood. Head nodding a bit, he looked up at the

tree for a long moment. He wiped off his hands and widened his stance for another blow. He blinked and shook his head, then seized the ax and gave two quick chops, cutting deeper into the trunk. Frowning, he pulled the ax out and stared back up at the tree. His face softened a bit and he shrugged. He looked at the ax, then tapped the trunk with the handle, wood on wood. The man put the ax back over his shoulder, started to walk away, then whirled and swung the ax in a savage arc at the women. All but Cholpon had their eyes closed. She met his tormented stare with as much calm as she could muster. He roared to make the others open their eyes and look at him, then laughed as if he'd pulled a practical joke on them. He slapped his thigh, stamped his foot, and strode away with a swagger.

The women sighed with relief. "Meditate a little longer," Cholpon told them. "This time for us."

Afterwards they made a paste of chitilani root to heal the walnut tree, then returned to tending the melons.

A woman approached on horseback. Cholpon was glad to see Acel, a carpenter who'd been repairing the main house, mounted on Talas, their roan stallion. The workers paused to rest, leaning on their hoes and drinking from water jugs. Acel reined the horse in and called in Kyrgyz, "Cholpon, Djamila wants to see you."

Cholpon wiped her forehead with the sleeve of her cotton shift. Maybe she wanted a report on what happened. Djamila could usually sense an overall situation from a distance but not the details.

"Come." Acel extended her hand to help Cholpon onto the horse. "You can ride behind."

Cholpon gave her hoe to a sister who had been working with just a trowel. She reached up for Acel's hand, felt the woman's strength as she hoisted her, gave a springing leap, and vaulted up onto Talas's broad, bare back. The horse whinnied and pranced his hooves on the flinty path. Cholpon's wide-brimmed straw hat fell off, and another sister handed it up to her. She snuggled in close behind Acel, wrapped her arms around her waist, and gripped Talas's ribs with her knees. Like most rural Kyrgyz, Acel had been raised on horses, but Cholpon was a city girl. Although she loved the rocking sway of the animal beneath her, its warmth and smell, and the wordless communication of their

minds, Cholpon didn't feel quite steady perched up here, especially without a saddle. She clung tighter. The breeze of their trot dried the sweat on her skin, bare beneath her long dress, and she luxuriated in the coolness.

Cholpon's ebony hair was twisted and pinned in a spiral to fill the crown of her hat. Her eyes—pools of gleaming darkness, slightly slanted, almond-shaped—shone from an oval face with high, broad cheekbones, a short, straight nose, and full lips around a small mouth. Her pale-gold skin glowed from her labors.

From horseback Cholpon could see how much they'd accomplished in planting this hectare of melons. Since the spring thaw she'd helped to dig out rocks, cut down bushes, and plow the earth behind the bay mare to turn this hardpan canyon into a field. She'd hauled sand from the lake shore to build proper soil for a melon patch, scooping it up from the beach in two earthenware jugs and carrying them on both ends of a wooden pole that pinched her shoulders all the steep way up, shuffling with a straight back and bent knees. Then she'd shoveled dung—cow flops, sheep splats, horse apples—from the corrals and mixed it with compost—webbed with mold, steaming with the reek and heat of fertile decay—and pitchforked load after fragrant load of it onto the donkey cart. She'd led little patient Noumi clip-clopping with the full cart up the stony path. Cholpon had spaded the humus into the field, turning it over and over, making a loamy soil. She'd dug a channel to divert water from the stream and built gates to control the flow. She'd planted seeds from last season's melons, thrusting them deep into hillocks of dirt, watering and tending them, rejoicing at the first sprouts. She'd weeded and thinned and hoed, plucked bugs and shooed rabbits, and she'd done it all side by side with the other women, her Sufi sisters, singing together, joined with each other and all of nature.

Cholpon knew, though, that work was secondary to *sadhana*—their spiritual practice of meditation, yoga, chanting, and dervish dancing. That expanded their awareness. It showed them they were living in and around their bodies, each a teeming microcosmic universe in itself, on this farm at the shore of Lake Issyk-Kul in Kyrgyzstan, north of Afghanistan, west of China, on the round blue earth in this solar system of the Milky Way galaxy of the teeming macrocosmic universe. It let them know they were

little cells of the great body of God, each with a job to do.

The rewards of their physical labor would soon arrive. Some of the honeydews had grown to their full round glory and rang under Cholpon's knuckles with the right hollow thunk. She looked forward to her favorite breakfast of melon and tea, and to the new beds the Circle could buy with the sale of the crop.

Cholpon and Acel rode out of the canyon, its granite walls rising steeply on both sides and the stream coursing down the middle. In August the flow was a trickle that seemed incapable of having cut this sheer notch into the mountain, but each spring the snow melt swelled it to a roily torrent that flooded the narrow canyon, leaving no doubt of its force. Last summer Cholpon had hiked up the stream for two days to its source beneath a glacier high in the Tien Shan range, using its burbling splash as a mantra to wash her mind of grief from her father's death. She had done *puja* at the foot of the glacier, offering wild raspberries, lupin, and thirty-five years of memories up to *Parvati*, the mountain Goddess. She had stared at the blue-white wall of the glacier until it glowed amethyst in star light, then fell asleep wrapped in felt blankets and awoke covered with snow and finished with mourning.

"How did Djamila seem?" she asked Acel.

Acel didn't turn her head. "Not so good."

Cholpon brooded. Djamila was almost always fine. Maybe there was some other problem. The teacher rarely summoned someone from work. The day's events, even an event like ax man, would usually be reported after evening meditation. What else could it be? Cholpon mulled over things she could have done wrong. Perhaps a food wholesaler in Bishkek had complained about the quality of their produce. When she wasn't working on the farm, she handled the sale of their crops in the capital. Hagging with the businessmen was her least favorite activity; they were always griping about something, nothing was ever good enough. In contrast to her sisters here, they seemed empty pits of unmeetable needs, always grabbing for advantage and stuffing their ravenous senses. Maybe they'd convinced Djamila that Cholpon had made a mistake.

She glanced around for something to take her mind off the meeting. Her eyes rested on the silver shimmer of birch leaves along the stream and the deep needle green of pines at the edge of the canyon, and she drank in the sight. But wasn't that similar to

what the men in Bishkek were doing: craving sense stimuli as an escape from themselves? What would the teacher say about that? Probably that we should enjoy the senses but not be dependent on them. Djamila taught that our sensory perceptions and thoughts form a screen that separates us from the transcendent, the source of all this manifestation.

Cholpon and Acel dismounted in front of the main house, which stood near the shore of the lake with a craggy horizon of mountains behind it. To Cholpon the house embodied the past century of Kyrgyz history, from outpost of the Russian empire to independent nation. It had once belonged to a family of Russian *kulaks*, peasants who had grown wealthy under the Czar. After executing the family, the Bolsheviks had collectivized the farm, then added annexes to the graceful frame building, turning it into a rambling hodgepodge. The new additions were boxy and merely functional, some of unpainted plywood with tin roofs. Now the women were gradually renovating the place.

Talas saw two fellow horses at the water trough in the corral. As he headed toward them, it became Acel's turn to trot to keep up with him.

Cholpon walked between the two carved wooden columns which gave the entrance of the house pretensions of grandeur, which she rather enjoyed as a trace of frivolous luxury. The porch and its roof, though, slanted with age.

Most of the large rooms had been subdivided to make a dormitory for the farm workers. The salon, however, had been kept as their dining hall. Stalinists had purged its chandeliers and cornices as bourgeois ornament, but its high, coffered ceiling remained. Filled with cushions and prayer mats, it was now the Circle of Friends' meeting room, where Djamila led *dhikr*—meditation and discussion, and *sama*—singing and dervish dancing. The walls were painted an ancient proletarian gray, which the Sufi women had covered with colorful textiles: Kyrgyz felt, Indian cotton prints, Uzbek silk.

Djamila's group had bought the property during the first wave of privatization in the early 1990s. Before that, they'd been an underground circle of Sufi sisters, banned by the communist government and scorned by Muslim fundamentalists. They'd met secretly in small cells around Kyrgyzstan, with Djamila traveling

among them teaching. The suppression had welded them into a tight congregation, and now since the collapse of communism they'd been thriving under the new religious freedom.

Djamila's office contained a table draped with white cloth and a desk that held a scattering of papers, a vase of roses, and a bowl of fruit. A purple-and-gold Bukhara carpet, worn but still vivid, covered most of the creaky wooden floor.

Djamila sat near the open window on a couch decked with multicolored pillows. To Cholpon she seemed like an ancient baby: her plump body was small in proportion to her head, white hair fine and flossy as a new-born's crowned her round face, her clear, luminous skin was unwrinkled except around her mouth, and her eyes projected outward in a big open dazzle on the world and inward as deep as Lake Issyk-Kul. Most of her teeth were gone, but she said she preferred her food soft and mushy anyway, so it didn't matter. The skin of her mouth was gathered in puckers, but they disappeared when she smiled, which was most of the time. She wore the same unbleached cotton shift as the others, and her only jewelry was a necklace of coral beads. She held a rose in her hand, waving it about while talking to her secretary in Kyrgyz.

On the wall above her hung pictures of her two teachers, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi of India and Shayk Rais Yasavi of Kyrgyzstan. With the same deep eyes and blissful smile, she looked like them without the beards.

In college Djamila had won a scholarship to study physics at the University of Allahabad. While in India she'd met Maharishi, who had a degree in physics and who showed her that what she really wanted to learn was *metaphysics*, going beyond the physical to reach the source of the universe. She'd become a *chela*, an aspiring yogi, and studied at his ashram in the Himalayas. He'd taught her transcendental meditation and *sidhis*, higher mental powers, and then, once she'd mastered them, how to teach them to others. He encouraged her to return to Kyrgyzstan, remain a Muslim, and use these Vedic techniques of consciousness to re-enliven the mystical spirit of Sufism.

Back home, she had apprenticed to Shayk Yasavi at the Sufi center in Osh and immersed herself in Islam. When she finally felt ready, she founded the Circle of Friends and devoted herself to teaching.

Ranging from the Koran to the poems of Rumi to quantum

physics, her lessons integrated spirituality and science. She taught ancient meditation methods but used an electroencephalograph to study their effects on the mind. The scientific aspects of her teachings appealed to the many educated, nontraditional women who had come of age in Soviet times and were now seeking something deeper than the materialism of either communism or capitalism.

Cholpon waited hesitantly at the door until the secretary, a severe, efficient woman in her mid fifties, a former school administrator, noticed her and motioned her in.

“Ah, Cholpon! Yes, come,” said Djamila in her birdlike chirp, her face suddenly tinged with worry.

Cholpon brought her right palm up to her forehead and made a sweeping bow onto the carpet, saying, “*Assalam alaikum*”—Peace to you.

“And to you, my dear. And to that sad creature who caused such a disturbance. Were there any more problems with him?”

“No. We re-synchronized his brain waves,” Cholpon said with an ironic smile. “He didn’t exactly thank us, but he left.”

“Good. That’s the only way to handle people like that. Opposing them on their level is useless. Now sit here”—Djamila plumped the cushion of the easy chair beside her—“for we must have a proper chat.”

Relieved by her friendly tone, Cholpon began to relax. If the purpose of the meeting was a reprimand, it wouldn’t have started this way.

But as Djamila looked at her, the sparkle in her eyes faded and her mouth tightened like a drawstring purse. Cholpon’s stomach did the same. “But peace for you may have to be postponed for a while.” The teacher’s voice dropped. She gestured with the rose to her secretary, who left the room and closed the door. “I must tell you what I saw in trance this morning.” Djamila frowned and gummed her lips. “It is not good. The astral channels are now very dark...so the vision was dim. But these troubles in Afghanistan and Iraq seem to be flowing over to us. We may all end up wandering around like that man out there. There is danger approaching. I could see it like a black fire...with flames that did not burn but crumbled all they touched into gray ash.” She leaned closer, her forehead knitted. “And you were in the middle of the

fire, dancing the dervish rings, around and round, and a wind came up from you, fanning the flames so they covered you. But you did not turn to ash. Then your wind blew the flames smaller...into flickers. And they disappeared under your feet as you danced them away. Then you disappeared. And the evil was gone.”

The vision scorched Cholpon, made her cringe inside; she wasn’t ready yet to disappear. “I am evil?” was all she could ask.

Djamila shook her head with loving patience. “No, my dear. You are quite good. Of all our Friends here, you are closest to enlightenment. With you, the knowledge is not just in your mind...it is in your breath. But this fact is just for you and me, nothing to tell the others. We must have no favorites here...since Allah has none. But you have special abilities...and that is why you have been given extra duties.”

Cholpon thought of all her trips to Bishkek: driving the produce van the five hours, paying the militia their bribes at the highway checkpoints, hassling with the merchants at the market, enduring the men leering at her breasts, spending a lonely night in her apartment there, then shopping for supplies for the Circle and driving back, all the while feeling she was wading through mud out in the world, yearning never again to leave the sacred atmosphere their *sadhana* had created in this valley. She had grown up in Bishkek, in that same apartment, but now after being with Djamila for eighteen years she felt alien in the capital, her weekly trips a burden.

“I know it has been difficult,” Djamila responded to her thoughts, “but it has been necessary...for us and for your own growth. We all need activity...we can’t always be turned inward. Remember when we dye cloth, first we soak it in the color. That’s our meditation, merging our mind with Allah.”

Cholpon settled into the cushions and prepared herself to be talked to.

“It’s most important, but there’s another part too. We must take the cloth out and spread it in the sun...to fade the color. That’s like our work...in the fields, the city, wherever. Then dip it again into the dye...in and out...some of both every day...until finally the color is fast. After that you can wash it, wear it in the sun, doesn’t matter. It won’t fade. So we go back and forth between the inner and outer worlds...until we can be anywhere and it’s all the same to us. Then we’re free. Nothing can overshadow us.”

Cholpon nodded and tried to conceal a flash of irritation. She'd heard the analogy a hundred times, and each time Djamila spoke as if she'd just invented it. There was probably some lesson in this, one Cholpon wasn't yet ready for. Maybe something about every moment being new...or the enlightening effects of boredom.

Djamila ignored the irritation. "But with you there is still some dipping in and out to be done. And so...we must lay you out now in the hot fiery sun. And we hope it doesn't burn you up." She gave one of her mirthless cackles to remind Cholpon of the stark impersonality that went hand-in-hand with her tenderness. "But if it does, so be it. Just remember, you are eternal."

Cholpon's fears rose again, but she asked, "What must I do?"

"Go back to Bishkek."

"I was just there."

"You must go again."

Heart sinking, Cholpon bowed her head. "How long?"

"A while. You will know...it will become clear."

"If danger is approaching, I want to stay here...to defend you."

"The danger is not here. It's in Bishkek." Djamila swung the rose with perplexity. "I'm sending you into the danger."

Cholpon's black eyebrows arched up into her creased forehead, and a knot formed in her chest. Djamila seemed to be foretelling her doom, and cavalierly at that. "Why?"

Her teacher's eyes rested on her in a way that left no doubt as to how much she cared about her. "It is your *dharma*. That which cannot be avoided is better met head on."

Cholpon bowed again.

"You are a fine ancient soul...we have been together in many lifetimes...and I love you very much." Djamila let the flower drop to her lap. "See, the rose falls, but it lands somewhere else. There is no loss. Our bond is so strong it goes beyond physical space. It goes beyond even this life. You don't have to be close to me...to be close to me."

Thinking of the dozens of times the teacher had been right in the past, Cholpon mustered her courage. "Yes. I will go."

Djamila bowed to her. "*Allah-aum*." She took Cholpon's hand. Although the *Shayka's* face was mostly unlined, her hands

were wizened and wrinkled. Their touch, though, gave Cholpon a surge of energy that flooded her brain with light and her heart with calm. Just being in Djamila's presence, or even looking at her picture, had a powerful effect, but her touch was concentrated *Shakti* force. "Something else was in the vision," Djamila continued, "something about a man."

Cholpon winced. More trouble.

"It is not clear...but there is some tie between you, some karma to be met."

"What sort of a man?"

Djamila gave one of her cosmic shrugs. "Just the man you will meet. I wish I knew more. The times are very bad right now. I could not see clearly." She dropped Cholpon's hand and stretched her short, plump arms. "Or maybe I am just getting old."

Leaving this sacred valley to plunge into some unknown danger with a strange man—that was as appealing as eating ashes. What had Cholpon done in a past life to bring this on her? No way to tell. As Djamila often said, "The ways of karma are unfathomable to the unenlightened...and irrelevant to the enlightened." All she could do was meet it—head on. Or maybe head off.

Cholpon pushed her fear aside: Djamila had steered her through enough problems to have earned her trust. Last year she had foreseen Cholpon's father's unexpected death, and once his symptoms manifested the *Shayka* visited him on the astral plane to help him prepare for the great transition. Her father, a lifelong atheist, had told Cholpon his wonderful dreams of an aged angel floating above him, caressing him and relieving his dread. He died peacefully.

"When should I go?"

Djamila smiled in approval of her student's obedience. "Today...after lunch. Now we will pack the van with what crops we have ready." She paused, ruminating. "Cholpon, I love you. But the Circle of Friends comes first. There is danger where you are going. I don't know what, I don't know why, but it is coming." She searched for a tactful way to say it. "The money from the merchants...make sure you put it in the bank as soon as you get it. We don't know what might happen."

Cholpon shuddered inside and nodded. Djamila, the ever practical. For the *Shayka*, individual desires, even individual

existence, always came second to preserving the knowledge she had to give, to building the community that would continue her teaching after she was gone. This attitude—detached, hard, yet loving—was the only way she had been able to sustain her group here over the opposition of the communists and the Muslim *mullahs*. The communists had recognized her as a threat to their materialist creed and tried to get rid of her as a religious agitator, a fomentor of counter-revolutionary superstitions. Djamila had used subterfuge, bureaucratic delays, and diplomatic influence to fend them off and eventually outlast them.

During that time Cholpon had been able to persuade her father, a Party official, to block several efforts to jail the *Shayka*. He had thought the old woman ridiculous, but he'd been one of those fathers who couldn't resist giving his daughter what she wanted. Cholpon had pleaded and wheedled with him, and he had intervened.

Lately the *mullahs* had become a problem. To them, Djamila was a heretic. Her first teacher had been an Indian yogi. She blended the Koran and the Veda into her own version of Sufism, and this eclectic approach was anathema to orthodox Muslims. Sufis were the wild, mystical, rebel fringe of Islam, open to techniques and beliefs from other religions, so they had often been persecuted for their nonconformity. Djamila was on the liberal side even among them. She revered Krishna, Christ, Mary, and Buddha as well as Muhammad, so the Muslim establishment, under pressure from fundamentalists, was trying to purge her. Her being a woman, and a successful one, was a particular thorn in their patriarchal hides.

Cholpon agreed that the needs of the Circle had to be first priority. She'd seen too much of the aggressive, greedy, ego world for it to have any value to her. Basically the same under communism or capitalism, that world ran in mad circles of insatiable, ever-multiplying desires, getting nowhere. Through Djamila she'd experienced the other realm, the transcendental source of all this diversity, the unmanifest unity from which the relative differences emerge. Thanks to meditation, her mind had been saturated with the energy and bliss of this underlying consciousness. The feeble charade of what people smugly called the real world—just matter and its abstraction, money—couldn't

compare to the unified field, the wellspring of creation, the infinite mind of God. Djamila lived there all the time and was showing her followers how to reach it too. Their Circle and the *sadhana* they practiced were a structure necessary for the journey, like sandals needed to walk the rocky path out of ignorance, and a lamp to light the way. These had to be maintained, or the darkness of materialism would reign everywhere.

"Yes," Cholpon said, "I'll deposit the receipts first thing. Then we'll see...what else will happen." She swallowed.

"I want to give you some inner reinforcement...for what lies ahead," Djamila said. "We've been working on your upper *chakras*, but now we must strengthen your lower centers. It's a lower energy that is coming towards you...and you need to be able to repel it." She unfolded her legs from the lotus position, massaged her arthritic knee, and stood up stiffly, steadying herself on Cholpon's chair. "First we will do *puja*." The sparkle returned to her eyes.

Djamila shuffled to a shelf of pictures in gilded frames and picked one out. "For this sort of business you need Durga's help...the slayer of demons." She held up a picture of a naked brown-skinned Goddess with red eyes, long matted black hair, curving white fangs, brandishing a bloody crescent sword, dancing on the chest of a huge, bearded, very male, very dead demon. Rather than triumph or malice, her face showed only peaceful joy. "Durga knows how to handle the dark forces. With her, your soul will be protected. Your body, though...well, we'll have to see." Her expression held a savage drollery that said death and other shifts in physical reality weren't worth worrying about.

Cholpon's heart beat faster.

Djamila set the picture on the white-draped *puja* table near a cluster of brass ceremonial implements: a candlestick, camphor lamp, incense holder, offering tray, bowls for rice and water. She pulled six red roses from the vase on the desk and a sprig of cherries from the bowl. "Stand beside me," she told Cholpon and gave her a flower.

They faced the *puja* table, and Cholpon followed the *Shayka's* lead in bowing before the picture. Djamila dipped a rose into the water bowl and began chanting the 108 names of the Goddess as she waved the flower and sprayed water drops over them in ritual purification. Standing crookedly to take the weight off her painful knee, roses clasped in front of her, she sang the

Vedic verses in her little bird voice while staring at the picture.

The words filled Cholpon's mind in a way that ordinary sound didn't, permeating it completely, dissolving her thoughts, leaving her empty and immense. Her heartbeat slowed; her breath quieted, then almost stopped; she felt her outer self fading, and she clung to the chant to keep from disappearing. The picture began to vibrate and glow as if alive. Durga's eyes became beacons, and as Cholpon gazed into them, this fierce deity seemed to devour her, but with kindness instead of cruelty.

Cholpon's surface personality fell away, revealing her inner being that enlivened her body but was independent of it. Energy poured from the Goddess into her. As the chanting continued and Djamila offered rice, water, fruit, and flowers to Durga, a current of vitality spread through Cholpon, overrode her fears, let her know she was beyond all harm.

The *Shayka* stopped singing, took Cholpon's flower, and offered it with hers in front of the animate picture. They both knelt into a vast inner space, freed from thoughts and filled with the Goddess's reverberant presence.

Djamila spoke softly. "Now we learn how to use this *Shakti*. First we straighten the back." Cholpon sat up on her heels. "Then close your eyes and breathe out...all the way." Cholpon tightened her diaphragm to press the air out. "Into that hollow...pour a sound." Djamila paused, then whispered: "*Meera-ma*." The mantra rang through Cholpon as a tap on a gong fills the huge dome of a mosque, faint but everywhere. The *Shakti* force became livelier, a glowing field within her. "Now draw this fire in from the different parts of your body...gather it all at the base of your spine, where you sit." Cholpon's mind brought the impulses together, collected them, concentrated them into an inner sun. "Good." Her tailbone grew warm and she squirmed with discomfort. "Now bring it quickly up your spine...but only as far as your ribs." She could feel it rising, but it stopped after a few inches and spread into her pubis, exciting it. "Don't let it stay there," Djamila said. "Gather it back and draw it up. It belongs higher, between your ribs and your stomach." Embarrassed, Cholpon collected the energy together, moved it up, and released it. It flowed across her torso like molten steel that did not burn but radiated vigor. "That's its home, your power *chakra*. From there you can project it out. Now raise your

arms.” Cholpon did so. “Higher...and extend your fingers. Let half the energy flow down into your legs and half up into your arms...all the way to your fingers.” A kinetic wave surged through her limbs and sprayed from her fingertips. She felt she could lift the world.

“Am I this strong?” she asked in amazement.

“*You* are...but your muscles aren’t. This is your heart shield. If dark spirits attack, it will repulse them. You can sense when evil is approaching and avoid it. But its effects are more on the astral than the physical. No, you can’t lift the world.”

Cholpon nodded in disappointment.

“Each morning and evening you meditate with this new sound. Afterwards, you sit straight in lotus and collect this energy into your power *chakra*. Draw it all in there. Then go out and meet the world...unafraid. The *Shakti* will flow wherever it’s needed. Your inner self is protected.”

Cholpon pressed her tingling palms together and bowed to Djamila, fearless now, resonant with force. “How will I find this evil?”

Djamila blew out the candle on the puja table. “It will find you.” She gave Cholpon one of Durga’s flowers. “You are ready for it. Go...meet the flames of your *dharm*a...then come back to us.”

Cholpon bowed again, this time in farewell. “*Allah-aum.*”

She packed her suitcase, helped load the old Moskvich van with cabbages and a few ripe honeydews, and set out on the 250-mile drive around Lake Issyk-Kul, over the Bistrovka Pass, and down into the Chu Valley where the city of Bishkek waited in the shadow of the Ala-Too peaks.



Late that night in Bishkek a man and a woman lay sleeping. The bed was small, and their sighs and dreams and murmured rollings intertwined.

The sound of a gunshot woke the man. Groping for consciousness, he didn't know where he was or who the warm, softly breathing woman snuggled next to him was. Maybe he'd dreamed the shot. He closed his eyes and spooned in closer to her, hoping it had been a dream and she was real. A short burst of gunfire. Not a dream: the unforgettable hammering of an AK-47. A scream from outside. That was no dream either; it was death, as familiar as the AK. A kill shot sounds different from a wound, more abrupt; the cry doesn't come out of pain but the shock of farewell.

Where were they? Where was his rifle?

Light filled the room, searing his eyes. The Oriental woman looked lovely but death-pale in the shadowless flash. Concussion fell on them in a smothering slap, then fled, taking the light. The room wobbled. Satchel charge. Sappers must've broken through.

In the darkness the woman wailed.

It was one thing for the bastards to try to kill him; those were fair rules of the hard game: he was the foreign invader. But they'd better leave her out of it. As he sat up, she clutched his waist; her long black hair flowed over small breasts. She babbled a language he didn't understand but knew said, Protect me.

Where was his rifle?

Machine gun bursts, long and ripping. Brass casings plinged onto pavement. She clung tighter. But these shots were outgoing: maybe the machine gun was friendly.

Shouts from down in the street—Russian. Soviet advisors with the North Vietnamese? Penetrating downtown Nha Trang, Tet Offensive. How many? Had to be at least a battalion to have Russians with them. Then his odds were low. If now was his time to die, he was ready; his bags stayed packed. But until then...he'd see what he could do.

What were they blowing? Something down the block.

Jeff Madsen rolled out of bed, naked, vulnerable, groping for his M-16. Not there...nothing. Now he couldn't protect her.

Trucks revved. Metal screeched, pushed over concrete. More shouts. The machine gun tore holes in the night.

The sounds weren't close, though, and no rounds were coming in their direction. The danger wasn't critical, unless the VC started a house-to-house search. In that case she'd be better off without him.

He held her to him, stroked her shoulder, and kissed the corners of her liquid eyes. The dark delta between her legs caught his sight.

The memory of a few hours ago brought back a flood of others. There's nothing like the primal act of mating to put reality into perspective. A third of a century returned in a flash, jamming the pieces of his life back into place. This wasn't Vietnam, it was Kyrgyzstan. He didn't meet her in a Special Forces bar but at the embassy...Ainoura. And he wasn't in his twenties anymore but in his fifties. Instead of an infantry advisor, he was now a State Department foreign aid official. But somebody out there was turning Bishkek into a combat zone.

Jeff picked his slacks and polo shirt off a chair and put them on. They were civilian, felt flimsy. He stepped to the window to pull back an edge of curtain; she hissed no, but he did it anyway. It was her curtain, but he had to see how close they were.

He looked out over the sprawling Central Asian capital and the Kyrgyz Air Force base across the street. At the corner a metal gate had been blown open. It had been part of a walled perimeter, had blocked a road leading into the base. Next to the guard house lay a soldier, chest dark with blood, a stubby rifle strapped across it. Two trucks—a pickup and a semi—were driving over the runway. A machine gun was sandbagged atop the cab of the pickup, and the men behind it wore ski masks and long robes in the eighty-degree heat. He moved toward the door. To defend her, he had to get the rifle.

"Don't go," said Ainoura, her English returning. She folded her arms over her breasts.

"I'll keep them away from here." The force of ancient reflexes was propelling him out. His brain knew he was in Kyrgyzstan, but that didn't matter, part of him was still back in Vietnam, had always been there, and that part was in charge now. Combat again. No choice.

"I'll be back." He waved, but it was half a salute; then he was out the door, running on automatic pilot.

A full moon filled the hot, deserted street with silvery light.

Rows of ramshackle three-story apartment buildings stopped at the wall of the air base. Wisps of cordite smoke floated and swayed; the acrid incense of death, its odor brought back airstrikes in rain forests, mortar barrages in rice paddies. The war of his youth seized him and dragged him back into battle.

The Kyrgyz soldier at the gate was dead, staring upward with eyes dull and distant. Thirty-five years ago, John Randall had lain like that in a rice paddy while Jeff held his hand and apologized to his corpse. A wave of remorse, still fresh, swept over him.

Most of the sentry's tan uniform was stained ruddy brown, and without blood his skin was pale. About eighteen, he'd been trying to grow a mustache. Even in death his expression held the hopeful curiosity of youth. The boy would have wished other than a chest full of holes for himself. So would his family.

Jeff could see human figures behind the curtains of dark apartments, but no one came out. He peered through the twisted gate. Across the runway the raiding trucks halted in front of a building. Toward them, down the airstrip, drove two Kyrgyz police jeeps, sirens shrilling.

From the back of the pickup a raider leveled a recoilless rifle, a long tube for firing rockets, at the police jeeps. Fire spewed from both ends. The round skipped off the runway and exploded in the air, a brief yellow blossom in front of the jeeps.

The defenders swerved and turned. They fired pistol shots, their little pops puny compared to the recoilless rifle.

On the invading pickup, the RR loader slid another rocket into the tube; the gunner corrected his lead and shot. This round hit a police jeep broadside, knocked it over, swallowed it in fire. Bodies tumbled through the blaze and black smoke. Flames danced on the concrete; in their orange light a man writhed and screamed, the sound high and airless.

Jeff wished he could snuff out the fire, cup the dying man in his hands, and blow life back into him. Take him home, God. Take us all home.

The other jeep turned 180. As it fled, machine gun tracers chased it, ricocheting off the runway like shooting stars. The gunner found his range, and lines of light plunged into the jeep. It drove faster, trailing wails, until the driver slumped over the wheel.

As it veered and slowed, a policeman leaped out, fell, staggered to his feet, and ran. Lights sparked toward him, seeking him; he whirled, arms waving, a dervish in the stars. Jeff thought he would be hit, but he kept running and finally disappeared in shadows.

Jeff nodded his congratulations after the running man.

Machine gun tracers skipped back to the jeep, silencing the cries. The Kyrgyz Air Force troops shot up a mortar flare, which burst open in the purple sky and cast a stark, swaying glare onto the land.

A dozen raiders in gas masks leaped from the back of the semi. One of them threw something against the door of the building; the others flattened against its wall.

The door blew in. Two of the raiders ran to the hole, tossed in grenades. Instead of an explosion, gray smoke curled out: tear gas. Coughing soldiers emerged from inside the building. A machine gun burst dropped the first three in the doorway; the other two raised their arms in surrender. They paused, gagging, until their need for air pushed them forward. They stepped over their piled comrades and raised their arms higher. The machine gun crumpled them over onto the others.

The raiders ran across the bodies and into the building. Jeff was starting to dislike them.

Air force troops peered around the corners of barracks, shouted back to those hiding, all of them confused and frightened. One hoisted his automatic rifle around a corner, sprayed a full magazine wildly at the trucks, then ducked back. More sirens...the chuffing of a helicopter.

Jeff checked the civilian streets and saw they were quiet; there was no assault outside the base. Ainoura was safe.

The raiders emerged from the building carrying a heavy object on a wooden pallet. Straining, they lifted it into the semi, then climbed in after it.

A Kyrgyz Air Force helicopter, louder now, flew around a hangar and passed low over the trucks. The thieves on the pickup swiveled their machine gun skyward. The chopper hooked back, leveled out, and opened fire on the pickup. Phosphorescent streaks met in both directions as they dueled. The rising tracers from the truck fell behind the chopper: the pickup gunner's lead was off. He corrected, sparks flew as he hit the fuselage, but he was too late. He jerked as the chopper riddled him, then slid limply down. The

chopper widened its fire to the rest of the pickup. The recoilless gunner and loader crouched and covered their heads before they died. A spatter of dark holes appeared on the roof of the cab.

A raider leaped from the back of the semi and lifted a long cylinder from the bed of the truck. He adjusted the firing tube over his shoulder and aimed its missile at the chopper; a flash illumined his masked face. A blazing dart reached the aircraft, which exploded into a furious sun, silhouetting its frame and four humans in fire, and fell to earth, crashing with a whomp of aluminum on concrete. The chopper bounced once, rotor still whirling, tail breaking loose and dangling, then crunched down into a flaming hulk. A door gunner freed himself, stumbled out, and hobbled a few steps before fire covered him and brought him to the ground. The blaze filled the cockpit; strapped in, the pilot flailed his head and arms. Jets of light sprayed from the wreck with loud cracks as rockets and cartridges cooked off in the inferno. A rocket spurted along the runway and exploded against a hangar. The pilot sat still, turning black.

Another dad who won't come home, thought Jeff. What happens to the kids? His father—killed in Korea after the peace talks started. He saw again his mother's face that never lost its grief. Here he was, still at war, caught in the grip of the fever again. That's what happens to the kids: they grow up to be soldiers.

Aviation fuel flames washed over the runway, spread toward the trucks. The pickup burst ablaze from its own leaking gasoline. A wounded raider tried to limp away, but his robes caught fire. He stumbled and fell, then crawled frantically before being engulfed. Chanting aloud, he raised his hands beseechingly, then prostrated himself in a final bow of prayer.

Al-Qaeda? Could be. Or maybe Taliban, Jeff thought. The *jihad* comes to Kyrgyzstan...spreading like those flames.

Whatever they were stealing, he didn't want them to have it. Especially terrorists. He had to try to stop them, even if they killed him. Death might be an improvement. Lots of things were worse than dying, and he'd been through some of them lately.

The chopper burned next to the pickup, the two enemy crews side by side. Gouts of flame burst from the hangar as a plane inside ignited.

The tide of fire on the runway reached the semi; the truck

was rolling, its wheels blazing circles. As it raced beyond the fire's edge, the SAM man ran and leaped onto the back; comrades' arms pulled him in. The truck turned and drove towards Jeff.

Stop them. No matter what it takes. Jeff looked down at the young sentry; flies had found his drying eyes, and he smelled of the decay we all carry inside us.

Since you won't need this, maybe I can settle a score for you...and for lots of other people, Jeff told him as he pulled off the submachine gun, still warm and wet from his gushed-out life. He unbuckled and took the web belt holding the ammunition pouches; it was too small, so he hooked it over his shoulder.

The submachine gun looked like an Uzi, but its rough metal work showed it to be the Czech prototype the Israelis had adapted. Jeff had fired the Israeli improvement at Bragg...a long time ago. He couldn't remember where the safety was. He found a switch and flicked it. The barrel was too short to be accurate at distance; he'd have to wait till they were close. A dark exaltation surged through him as his combat instincts took over. Death was no big deal. Not theirs. Not his own.

In the sky the flare sputtered and went out, leaving them in moonlight. The troops lofted another, a soaring stem of sparks that burst into a radiant blossom. Jeff glanced toward the air force barracks, hoping for signs of a counterattack, but saw only soldiers huddled in shadows. *Guys, it's good you can see, but it takes more than looking. Fight back, dammit!*

Jeff darted into the street and tried to push the blasted metal gate shut. Still hot, it burned his hand. He pushed it with the gun butt; it closed but swung back open when he released it.

He returned to the sentry: *Need your help.* He dragged his limp body to the gate and laid it against the metal to prop it shut. The boy didn't mind. From their side it might look barricaded; they'd at least slow down.

The wooden guard house had been scorched and half blown down by the initial explosion at the gate. He took a chair from it, leaned it against the concrete wall, and stood on it. It wobbled but held his 190.

Stop them.

At sixty meters, the semi was close enough for him to see a masked face behind the wheel. He aimed at it, squeezed off a burst, and punched holes in the hood. Either the battle sight was

off or he'd lost the skill. He aimed the next burst at the roof. It shattered the windshield and the face behind it. Must be the battle sight.

As the truck swerved, the man next to the slumping driver grabbed the wheel. Jeff tried to give him three across the chest to match the sentry's. He missed. The man lowered his head to a crescent above the hood and kept steering. From the back a guy hung out and fired a rifle at Jeff, but his aim was shaky. Jeff emptied the magazine at the cab, bracing into the satisfying jolts of the recoil. The crescent disappeared; the truck slowed and stalled.

A dozen raiders jumped from the back. With their ski masks and AK-47s, they looked to Jeff like hooded priests of a religion of death. As he reloaded, his adrenalin rush overrode the fear. He was back in action. All that mattered was the mission: Stop them.

Several thieves leaned against the truck to steady their aim as they fired their AKs; Jeff ducked as chips of concrete stung his face. They were good. He didn't want to look back over the wall, but he had to. When he did, a man in rippling robes and black mask was running towards him holding a grenade. He stopped and pulled the pin, but as he raised his arm, Jeff sent him a burst. The raider fell, the grenade rolled away, and he crawled for it as Jeff traded fire with his comrades by the truck. Although the man's wound was interfering with his crawling, he was trying very hard to reach the grenade. As he seized it, it went off, taking his arm and half his head away.

The others redoubled their fire at Jeff, but now their bursts were too long to be accurate. His proto-Uzi wasn't as good as their AKs at this distance, but their truck offered worse cover than his wall. He could see one thief's knees as he knelt by the corner of the semi. When he hit them, the guy toppled away from the truck. The man's legs just flopped when he tried to move them, so he pulled himself toward cover with his forearms. Jeff hesitated. This crawling creature was a human being, like him, like the sentry. But his side had started the killing. Jeff raised his submachine gun and held the man in his sights. A voice inside said, *Don't kill him*. But another voice yelled, *They're trying to kill you!* He forced his finger against the trigger and hit the raider again.

A comrade darted out to rescue the man. He bent down, grabbed his hand, and dragged him to the truck, then his body

twitched from Jeff's bullets. He fell on top of the other, and the two lay humped together.

Instead of Enemy, Jeff saw them now as pathetic humans. Ex-humans, thanks to him. He wished he hadn't shot them—too much death in the world. A feeling of dank foulness crept over him, but he shook it off.

The others pulled men out of the cab, one screaming, one still. They tried to start the truck.

Jeff shot at the tires. Sparks flew from the hubs, but the rubber stayed firm. He fired at the grille to puncture the radiator, but no water ran out. Battle equipped.

Troops from the base, dark figures in firelight, gathered at the building and began shooting at the semi.

Another raider ran towards Jeff, his shawl flapping like a cape, and threw a grenade. Jeff glimpsed its trajectory, jumped down, and dived into the remains of the guard house, hoping the plywood would at least slow the shrapnel. He lay head covered, afraid to die. The grenade thunked to the ground. Just as he thought it was a dud, it exploded.

A blast of white heat singed his body; concussion lifted him into the air, slammed him against the wall, jabbed his eardrums. The roar battered them and popped his eyes open. A wall was falling on top of him, the floor heaving. He closed his eyes and saw a spray of light as a plywood slab crashed into his head.

He crawled out of the splintered guard house. He could hear nothing. The smoke smelled like a thousand Fourth of Julys. Running men could be almost on him. Expecting a grenade, he glanced around the gate. The semi was rolling towards him; those thieves who could move were jumping into the back.

Seared and bleeding from shrapnel punctures, Jeff limped across the street and hid behind a building. The semi slowed at the gate, then pushed through, its Mercedes emblem gleaming like a peace symbol. The gate nudged the sentry's body and scraped past, leaving it in the road. The wheels of the truck rolled over it, compressing it so that each tire bounced less than the one before. The limbs jerked under the wheels.

Jeff ran, too afraid to shoot. As he fled, he remembered a saying of General Giap, the North Vietnamese commander who had outsmarted the Pentagon: "Knowing when to quit is half the battle."



“Go away,” Ainoura said through the door when he knocked.

“I’m hit. Let me in.” He pushed the submachine gun around to his back so she wouldn’t see it.

“No. Men find you here...kill both us.” Her voice was choked with fear. “I no want die.”

Jeff knew the feeling, but he was in need. He was bleeding from helping her country’s air force, and she didn’t want to get involved. An old story. “They’re gone. They got what they wanted. They won’t be back.”

“Then police come. Lose my job, maybe jail.”

“I’m on the police side.”

“No...go away please quick.” Her voice had become a hiss.

OK...she could have it her way. It was her place. He’d already left a dribble of blood at her door.

“My watch.” His voice showed his resentment.

“What?”

“My watch...I left it.”

She padded away. He waited, listening to sirens from the base wailing uselessly. The door opened a crack, chain on; fingers extended his ancient Rolex, bought on R&R from Nam. He took it; the door closed, dead bolt clicked in.

Jeff’s jaw clamped shut and his chest burned. He hadn’t expected a ticker-tape parade, but he’d hoped at least for a place to wash off the blood...a gentle hand to soothe the brow, maybe even thanks for trying to stop them from stealing it...whatever it was. Had to be something major for that kind of operation. But he hadn’t stopped them: they’d got away with it, they’d won. He’d failed, and now she was through with him. He raised the edge of his hand in a kiss-off salute and started down the steps, woozy from shock. His ears throbbed and ached and rang with sadistic electronic music.

The door across the hall opened a sliver; a woman’s voice, Kyrgyz accent softening the edges of her English, asked, “Are you hurt?”

He nodded. He didn't want to go back out on the street.

Cholpon opened the door wider; her eyes took in his singed and wounded body. Who was this tall, bleeding man? His coarse, glowering expression repelled her but something else about him drew her. Underlying the violent red flaring from his aura were the blue and gold of spiritual potential. He gave off none of the dense, opaque murk that had surrounded the men he'd been fighting. He was very much in need of help that she could give. She gestured him in.

Grateful for sanctuary, Jeff stepped into her hall. Her lustrous dark eyes enveloped him with attention. The gaze was too intense for him, so he looked away, then stole a glance back at her and, despite his pain, was pleased by what he saw. Her face held a delicate symmetry of Oriental eyes, high cheekbones, a little nose, and a small, shut mouth. Straight black hair spilled over the shoulders of her silk robe. The robe curved generously over her breasts, in at the waist, and out again at the hips, alternations of abundance and leanness. She stood erect with her arms down and her hands cupped in front of her. A little over five feet tall, average for Kyrgyz women, she came up to his shoulder.

Seeing the submachine gun on his back, Cholpon's lips pursed into a frown; her hand moved trembling to the collar of her robe. The man's a killer. You saw him kill.

Jeff needed to reassure her. "*Spasibo*, thank you...for helping me," he said in his lame Russian.

"You are welcome," she said in her much better English. She stared intently into his face, then widened her focus to take him all in. Pondering, Cholpon pressed her palms. He was violent but not cruel...not hateful. He had much light shining beneath much pain. He was the one Djamila meant. It had begun—meet it head on. "Come," she said and walked down the hall.

Jeff followed her, appreciating her shelter, intrigued by her gaze, wondering why she was helping him. They stood awkwardly in her living room. He dropped his arms to his side to look less threatening, but when she saw the shredded, blood-soaked sleeve of his shirt, she winced and clutched her arms. She gave him that appraising stare again, first focusing deep into his eyes, then out to see him whole. As he met her gaze, Jeff could see that stronger than any fear in her was a quiet self-composure. He had the eerie feeling she was examining his thoughts. She motioned him into the

bathroom.

He unstrapped the submachine gun and ammo and set them near the door. She chose not to look there.

In the bathroom he took off his shirt and was greeted by the battle-stink of his armpits and the torn flesh of his triceps. Bits of plywood stuck out of the gash. The arm had shielded his head; its hair was burnt away, skin reddened. He thanked it for its fealty.

She wouldn't touch the splinters, so he jerked out a bunch, then yelled and gripped the sink. As pain chased away shock, his fear returned, rushing up in waves. Again he heard the thunk of the grenade, saw the flash, felt the blast, his helplessness as the shack blew apart. Back then, it had been too fast and vivid to be frightening, an existential instant. Now was the time for terror, swelling out of the belly, making him shake and cringe.

Seeing his desperation, Cholpon overcame her squeamishness and began to rub his neck and shoulders. Her small firm hands soothed the tremors. Her murmurs salved the spasms away and calmed him. She held his hand. The dread was still there, but it no longer ruled him.

The prospect of more pain decided him against washing the wound. He'd have to get pumped full of antibiotics and tetanus serum tomorrow anyway. The US embassy doc was on leave, so he'd need to find a local *vrač*.

As Cholpon wrapped the gauze bandage around his shoulder, he appreciated the shapeliness beneath her floral robe, the brush of her breast on his arm, her hip against his leg. Her woman's fragrance wafted a promise of stronger scents and tastes below. He was suddenly glad he'd lived...although lately he hadn't much cared to.

Cholpon tried not to brush against him. He stinks of sex and he's already sniffing me, the randy old dog.

"From the window I saw you." She forced her nervousness away and spoke in her business voice. "You were the only man who went out there. Everybody else stayed inside and hid. I thought, maybe you are Russian soldier and work on the base. But you are American. Why did you fight? You have friends there?"

"No," Jeff said. "Terrorists...I didn't want them to get away with it." His voice turned rueful: "But they did."

She pulled out a strip of tape and began fastening the

bandage. "Don't care about yourself?"

He started to say, Not much, but changed it to: "Some things are more important."

"Oh?" She stepped back and beaded him with a look he translated as, Cut the crap.

Jeff mulled over the jumble of reasons that had sent him out there. "I did it...just to do it."

"You do these things before?"

"Not for a long time."

Cholpon returned to taping the gauze. "I am glad they did not hurt you more." She glanced up at him wryly. "We have not so many bandages."

"I'm glad too," he said. "What do you think they took?"

"Maybe...money?" she replied.

"Always a good bet. Could be a safe with the air force payroll...couple of million *soms*. That'd be worth it for lots of people."

She cut a final strip of tape and finished the bandage. "How long you been in Kyrgyzstan?"

"Oh, about eight months."

"Such things like this...they usually don't happen here, even now with the changes." Her voice flowed with musical cadences and the lilt of her accent. She put the medical supplies back into the tin cabinet.

"Good news," Jeff said. "Actually they don't usually happen in the US either. But we put them all on TV. Everybody sees them and thinks they happen all the time." His voice rumbled with bass notes and long Wyoming diphthongs.

The klaxons of emergency vehicles grew louder as they approached from several directions, medleying with the sirens from the base. A police car screeched to a halt out on the street by the gate, its radio blaring frantic dispatches.

He told her he'd like to take a bath. She was embarrassed, flustered, then maybe relieved. Only death reeks worse than fear. She started the tub. With medical authority, she warned him against getting the bandage wet, then left quickly.

Jeff stepped out of his slacks for the second time that night. Aside from the worst headache of his life, the damage wasn't too bad, since the plywood had stopped most of the grenade. He had more shrapnel punctures down his left side, but they weren't

bleeding much, already puffing closed, but red and stinging inside. The thought of probing tweezers tomorrow made him clench his teeth. He remembered mortar fragments being plucked from his pulpy arm at an aid station near Ban Me Thuot.

A knock on the door was followed by her hand holding a towel and sheet: his winding cloth, perhaps. Or the closest thing she had to a man's robe.

Soapy water smarted as he washed off blood, stench, and her neighbor's perfume. He wondered if they were friends and if Ainoura knew she'd asked him in.

He came out of the bathroom wearing the sheet like a toga; now it was his turn to be embarrassed. The separation had made them strangers again. Cholpon had brushed her hair and set out cookies, tea, and aspirin. She held up a bottle. "I have some of my father's old brandy. You need it?"

He hadn't wanted a drink this badly in the nine months since he'd quit. Fighting back a thirst that was centered in his throat but scourged his whole body, he resisted the urge to grab the brandy and down it. The liquor would put his ragged nerves to rest, chase away the fright, but after that he knew what it would do to him. Been there...much too often. He'd spent only one year in the bottle, but it'd been enough to break his life wide open. He shook his head. "No, thanks."

She nodded in approval.

They sat in sagging chairs in her living room and sipped the tea, weak and sweetened with raspberry syrup, from white porcelain bowls. His fingers shook so much the tea sloshed out, so he gripped the bowl with both hands. He ate a cookie. It was a local brand from the bazaar, usually bland, but now it tasted fine. He munched several, then swallowed four aspirin. When they hit his stomach, nausea seethed up. He gripped the chair arms and resisted the urge to retch as his mouth filled with salty saliva. Gradually the queasiness passed, and he was able to swallow. Vomiting on her rug was the last thing he wanted to do.

His head swirled with clangor and pain, and he wanted to cry. *Don't do that either.* Trying to grope out of it, he pulled his chair closer to hers and ventured a glance into her eyes again. Their depth and softness drew him; he seemed to fall through her wide-dilated pupils into a shining black mystery. He saw his own tiny

image splashing and playing there. It was too much, so he shifted his gaze to her irises, which were rings of dark brown not as deep as the pupils. He felt dizzy, so he looked out to her face, nestled like a bud in its sheath of black hair. He liked the contrast of her short straight nose to the curving lips below it. She was smiling slightly, and he could feel himself smile back. Her smooth, fine-pored skin was the light yellow of almonds, except for a reddish-brown mole on her cheek.

Nervous and self-conscious, Jeff looked around the apartment. Although clean, it had been cheaply built, probably in the 1950s, and then not maintained: water stains blotched the ceiling, cracks ran down the walls, gray linoleum surrounded a thick rug, its blue-and-red beauty out of place amid the drabness. The furniture was old but could never be called antique: mass-produced functionality in the Soviet style. A *stenka*, a dark wooden mass of cabinets and shelves, covered one wall.

On a table next to a lamp sat a gold-framed photo of an old woman with mountains behind her, wind fluttering her shawl. Her eyes were like Cholpon's, and looking at her calmed him.

"Your mother?" he asked.

Cholpon glanced at the picture and smiled. "My *Shayka*. But in a way my mother too."

He looked at her puzzled.

"I'm a Sufi Muslim," she explained. "She is my spiritual teacher."

Jeff thought about the rippling robes running at him and the prostrating prayer of death on the airstrip. He imagined the teacher to be a female *ayatollah*. He fought back a giddy wave of panic. Wanting to change the subject, he asked Cholpon where she worked.

She hesitated, then said, "On a farm." He made the mistake of telling her about a USAID program he worked on that gave insecticide and nitrogen fertilizer to farmers. She looked at him as if he'd turned into a monster. "*Nyet!*" She sat straighter, chin out, ebony hair cascading back, eyes now blazing, arms open, square hands with short, ringless fingers reaching at him. "No good." She gave him an impassioned mini-lecture about the virtues of manure and natural bug chasers. The chemical way was poison, genetic engineered seeds a fraud. Organic farming made better sense, especially with so many people unemployed.

As Cholpon got more worked up, she slipped into Russian and Kyrgyz, so he understood only part of what she said, but he enjoyed watching her. People always look their best when they're talking about something they believe in. She could well be right. But all he believed in now was his yearning for her, for the refuge she offered from the death outside. Her womanliness was the opposite of the killing out there, and she brimmed with a balm that could wash it away and restore him.

But his attraction to her was more than that. She had an intriguing quality, a fascination he'd never encountered before. Jeff stood up, took her hand, and said, "Let's talk about it on the couch."

They sat together on lumpy springs, and he told her he'd like to discuss it sometime when he could focus on it more. He tried to hold the sheet closed without much success. It was stippled with blood. Seeking solace, he bent to kiss the full lips of her little mouth, more out of neediness than lust. Just to hold her and feel her affection would be enough.

Cholpon flinched and turned away. Part of her wanted his embrace, but not now, not yet. Djamila was right—there was a tie between them...something unfinished. Despite the differences...a deep pull towards this strange man. She'd known him before—another life. But what had he become since then?

As she stroked his hand, a charge of *Shakti* energy flowed from her into him; too much for him now, it shattered his defenses. The tremors seized him again, but worse. He shuddered and gasped, inner sirens wailing louder than any outside. He closed his eyes to block the tears.

The battle returned in instant replay. Every muzzle flash, each hurtling grenade was aimed at him. A horde of hooded men strove with all their skill to kill him—and he them. They were all death's devotees, serving it worshipfully, eager for their turn to partake of the sacrament. This time there was no high, just the certainty of annihilation.

Out there, part of him had been craving that. Now, touching her, it seemed insane. Wasn't this human creature beside him enough? Didn't her caring make up for the dreck?

His lack of answers made him clutch her like the spinning earth. His sheet fell away, and he was just a naked man, sick of life

yet afraid of death.

Pushing her fear aside to tend to his, Cholpon rolled him on his stomach and knelt beside him. She ran her fingers through his heat-crisped, gray-brown hair, and his scalp tingled as it relaxed. Avoiding his puncture-speckled left side, her hands stroked his body in long sweeps, then sought out old horrors knotted in his flesh, thrust into them, kneaded them away. But as they loosened, they spilled long lurking memories. Nam again. Gray men rushed from the bamboo, fleeing the globe of napalm his side had sent them, firing their AKs. As they charged his patrol, he made the same stupid mistake all over again, and John Randall bled to death in the rice paddy because of him.

That brought another, deeper wave of anguish. It was always after him, usually just the grip of withered fingers, now a full-blown strangle. She rode this one too, rubbing his quivering body, purring ancient sounds of comfort, turning off the lamp. Her voice became a song, part lullaby, part chant, its clarity penetrating and soothing—a song he'd needed to hear all his life.

He reached for her. She gazed at him for a long moment, his face glowing in the revolving red and blue lights of the police car outside. Moved by his need and their reawakening bonds of long ago, she gathered him in her arms and held him to her, draining his trauma away.

He sought her ravenously, one hand clutching her, the other parting her floral robe to reveal a nightgown covering her breasts. He touched them, caressed their softness, and finally felt safe: they could erase the memories and heal the wounds. As his lips moved eagerly towards them, Cholpon pulled away and touched her fingertips to his temples with a pulsing motion. She placed one hand on the crown of his head and the other on his forehead and massaged in hard circles, then pressed sharply between his eyes.

Jeff's brain flooded with a rush of clear white light. He shuddered, sighed, and fell asleep smiling at her breasts.



He could tell she had doubts about how this was going to turn out. She was trying to be optimistic, but her face showed her qualms. As Jeff broke an egg into the saucer of milk, poked the yolk, and mushed it all into a yellow glop, her expression approached revulsion. She'd never had French toast before. She looked interested as he sprinkled cinnamon on the bread, then glanced away with puffed cheeks when he dunked it.

Jeff felt tentative around her, unsure how last night had ended. He hurt worse today, the gash in his arm burning, shrapnel punctures along his left side red and swollen. His body was a sack of aches, and his torn, bloody shirt stank. He'd had to cut off fused-together clumps of singed hair.

Cholpon seemed calm but a little distant; her face was tranquil except for darts around her pursed lips and oblique eyes. "The police pounding on the door last night...wake you up?" she asked him.

Jeff shook his head. "I was out."

"They ask what I saw...what I knew. I said nothing."

"Good."

Cholpon made the tea while thinking about her guest. How strange...he just lurched back into her life. After who knows how much lost wandering. So far apart, so different...and now together again. Brought an old closeness back with him...not really memories...traces from a farther past. But who was he now? A warrior this time...took a dark turn...foolish game. So naturally he was like a hurt child. But still a good heart. She could handle him.

Jeff plopped two slabs into the hot butter; the sizzle and aroma revived her interest. After he flipped them, her expression said they didn't look too bad.

When one was on her plate, covered with rose petal jam, she was willing to give it a try. She bit a piece with small white teeth, smiled.

They ran out of bread before she ran out of appetite.

In her tiny kitchen they sat on wobbly stools, too short for comfort. The pans were battered aluminum, and the oven door was held shut by a bent coat hanger. The place was definitely Soviet, but she'd managed a few gracious touches. They ate with silver forks from plates of antique porcelain with a design of flying cranes. An embroidered cloth covered the rickety table. Violets

bloomed by the open window. Another photo of her teacher, standing by a lake, smiling serenely, was propped near the table with a fresh rose beside it.

Cholpon noticed his glance and set the picture in front of him. The old woman stared up at him as if there, tiny but powerful. When Cholpon fixed him in the full gaze of her dark-brown eyes, pupils large even in morning light, he was caught in the crossfire of their attention.

“Her name is Djamila.”

Reverberating into him, the name expanded a huge, hollow cavern inside. He felt the floor drop out from under him, and he swung suspended but safe in another kind of gravity. Although he liked the feeling, he had to glance away from both women. Must still be in shock.

His chest began to ache, and a tangle of images flowed into his empty mind. A woman transplanting rice in Vietnam, the graceful dip and sway of her body as she thrust the new shoots into the paddy, wading knee deep in brown water, pants rolled to her thighs, a bag of shoots hanging from her shoulder, a conical hat of rice straw shielding her from the sun, her work becoming a dance but without flourishes, just simple beauty of motion. A young boy, probably her son, crouching on the earthen dike, hunting crabs with a dip net. Jeff led his patrol of Vietnamese and Montagnard soldiers, all of them tired and scraggly, past them. One of their troops had been killed in ambush, and they carried his body wrapped in his poncho, suspended like a sagging hammock from a bamboo pole. The woman met Jeff's eyes with a mixture of curiosity and fear, then looked away and continued planting. The little boy stood up and saluted as they marched by. At the bend of the trail Jeff glanced back at them silhouetted in late afternoon shadows against the sun-silvered paddy water.

He hadn't thought of the incident since, but the woman and boy were suddenly here in Cholpon's kitchen, filling him with loss. He wanted to hold them, to apologize to them, but for what?

He tried to find a reason for his sorrow, to put his rational mind back in control. He hadn't harmed them or any civilians. His battles had been against other soldiers, and he respected them as fellow warriors, recognized their prowess. But maybe he felt guilty for losing the war, for leaving the mother and boy to be taken over by a communist dictatorship.

Thinking in these abstractions was comforting, let him draw away from the pain. He stole a glance at Cholpon, who was staring at him in silence; her glistening dark eyes spurred other thoughts: He hadn't harmed them directly, but he'd been part of a death factory that had turned millions Vietnamese into corpses...and no mention of them on the Wall in Washington.

Now hundreds of thousands of Iraqis and Afghans killed.

He had to force his breath, and his chest seemed to cave in. Trapped, he glanced again at Cholpon, whose face had turned ancient and sad, whose eyes were dark and slanted like the woman's in the rice paddy, and whose mouth broke in a slight smile of great comfort to him.

As he looked at her, though, the ache increased. His face contorted, and he bent over, gasping. Suddenly the little boy was him and the woman was his mother. Instead of on the dike, he was playing on a couch at home. Hearing a cry, he looked up to see his mother reading a slip of yellow paper. A yellow telegram envelope lay on the rug. With a wail she let the paper fall and clutched him in her arms. He could feel her tears and tremors, and he became very afraid.

Wrapped in a poncho, his father floated by. His father used to call him Champ. Jeff hardly remembered him.

That is why you hurt, an inner voice told him, and why you hurt others.

Jeff screamed and jerked his body rigid. Cholpon shuddered but kept her eyes fixed on him.

Don't overload him with trauma, she thought. Enough for now.

Cholpon's face soothed him, unlike his mother's then, which had spread her terror into him. Jeff trembled and broke out in a sweat. He could see his father's Purple Heart in its velvet case, the medal's enamel worn away from Jeff having touched it so often. His father had started World War II as a private, fought his way across the Pacific, and mustanged up into the officer ranks. He had returned to Wyoming after the war, then got drafted again for Korea. He wrote letters home about the bridgehead at Pusan and human-wave attacks at the Yalu River, which Jeff's mother read to him. She told and retold him stories about his father, then made them up when he demanded more. After cease-fire

negotiations began, he wrote that he'd be home soon, but in one of the many flare-ups, he was shot in the throat by a sniper near Panmunjon.

Jeff wailed as his mother had, then caught himself. No! Shut it off. Don't go crazy in front of Cholpon. That was half a century ago, no point in wallowing in it. If you get stuck in all that, you'll always be a weak little kid. He dragged his mind away from the feelings, as if pulling himself out of quicksand. He tried to hold himself tight, to make a shell out of his skin, so he didn't turn into a jellyfish. Think about something else. Look at something else.

Out her window he could see the remnants of last night's destruction on the base. The chopper and pickup truck lay on the runway, blackened hulks surrounded by guards. He'd killed five men out there last night. They'd been human beings just like him and his father, little packets of woes and joys. Jeff chewed on his lip. In his mind five accusing faces confronted him. He saw a veiled widow in a black robe wailing over a casket in a hot stony village while another little boy watched. And would later become a soldier.

Jeff moaned but choked it down. He brushed tears from his eyes. Don't slide back into that muck. Life is hard, you have to be hard. Stay rational, stay in charge.

Sorry, he told the widows, but next time keep your tough guys at home. They came here to kill, left other wives and kids crying.

Jeff closed his eyes and prayed: God, Allah, whatever they call you there, please comfort them. Was I wrong to kill the killers? I don't know. If I was, I'm sorry. There must be some better way than this. Please help us all to find it.

He blinked his eyes open. Near the twisted gate, now chained shut, he saw the stain of the young sentry's blood and a chalked outline where his body had lain. *Peace, lad, they never gave you a chance.*

Jeff imagined his own silhouette there. How did he feel today about being alive? Confused. Death might have brought relief, an early out from a life turned sour. But then he never would've met Cholpon.

She was standing quietly beside him, looking away so as not to make him self-conscious.

Policemen were measuring distances and taking notes. The

security van from the US Embassy was parked off to the side, and next to it several men in suits were conferring.

The sting of the shrapnel was now anguishing, and his punctures oozed. His face was flushed with a low fever from the beginnings of infection. The grenade was still doing its job, festering its fragments into his flesh. No wonder his thoughts were weird. He'd get over it. Switch channels.

Back at Bragg he'd seen a dismantled grenade; wrapped around a core of white plastic explosive was a wire coil segmented to explode into thousands of jagged bits. Once in an assault near Cung Hoa he'd hurled one at a VC foxhole, seen a helmet loft up in the blast, and later found a mangled body. 'This time he'd been on the receiving end...but luckier.

A bird flying in front of the window drew his sight. It landed at a feeder attached to the casement. The chickadee, head as black as Cholpon's, clung upside down to pluck a sunflower seed, then flew to a nearby branch, held the seed between its feet, and pecked at its breakfast, chattering all the while.

Cholpon stole a glance at him. What stress, she thought. This man has a load of karma. All that suffering stored up inside him. Let him draw back. Better that he gradually open up.

Her trim but shapely form moved next to his lanky height. "You like birds?" she asked, her accent gliding the words together into a purr.

He thought of all the pheasants he had blown out of the sky and then eaten and said guiltily, "Sure."

"Let's see if birds like you." She picked up a jar that sat near the window. "Hand." He held it out, and she poured a few peanuts into his palm. "Put it out there, don't move." He rested his hand on the concrete sill. She whistled two high, piping notes. "Peanuts are their favorite," she said. They waited but no bird came. She looked at him dubiously and whistled again. From above a chickadee circled and fluttered, landed on the sill, then hopped on his hand with a brush of feathers and tiny feet. Avian toenails gripped Jeff's finger like a twig. The pert little bird cocked its head to examine the choices, knocked them about with its beak, picked out the one it wanted, then sprang back into the air and flew away with a chirp.

Jeff gazed after it, delighted. "I could feel it push

away...powerful little thing. So light...but still strong.”

Cholpon nodded at him as if he had passed a test. “Different kinds of strong,” she said.

Jeff sprinkled the seeds on the sill and looked back at her, avoiding her eyes. As he took in the feminine fullness under her coral blouse and tan skirt, she turned away, but then lowered her eyes and allowed him to look at her. He yearned to trace the geography of her curves, the swell of breasts and hips, the plunge of her waist. He tried to recall the press of her limbs, the smoothness of her skin last night. Her face held a peacefulness that drew him. He wanted to stroke her ebony hair, pinned up in a chignon. He liked it better down, but with temperature in the mid eighties it was probably cooler this way.

You shouldn't be making love to any woman besides your wife, a voice inside him insisted. But Valerie wasn't his wife anymore, he countered; she'd filed for divorce. *It's not final yet*, said the part that still loved her; *they could get back together*. Dream on.

Jeff and Cholpon talked awkwardly, trying to ease the tension. He told her Wyoming was a lot like Kyrgyzstan—high mountains, dry plains, extremes of hot and cold—but didn't have a city as big as Bishkek.

She sneaked a glance at her watch. She had to leave; he had to go to the doctor. He wanted to stay, but it was time to say goodbye. She didn't have a phone, so he gave her his number.

He stepped closer to her. She's not the kind you just grab, he told himself, struggling with desire. He leaned his face into hers, brushed his lips against hers. It was a morning kiss, light and dry. He wanted to kiss the space between her wide-set eyes, but held back. She touched him carefully, knowing that he hurt. She smelled of gardenias and garlic. They pulled apart. Her hand, small with closely-trimmed unpainted nails, stroked his unshaven cheek.

“Can I come back and see you?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said.

A smile crinkled the corners of his hazel eyes.

“But you must leave your gun at home.”

He folded his hand, scarred from a VC mortar barrage, around hers and pressed it to his chest, then kissed the top of her sleek, dark head.

The farewell door loomed. He turned and picked the submachine gun off the floor; she frowned. Trying to look

peaceable, he pointed at it and at the street. She got him a plastic shopping bag, and he put it inside.

Cholpon wouldn't kiss him with the gun, but she waved and so did Jeff. "Thanks...for everything," he said.

What am I getting into? she wondered.

What a woman! he thought.



Jeff yelled as the Kyrgyz doctor probed in his arm for shrapnel. The doc must have been of the Marxist medical school that disdained local anesthetic as bourgeois luxury. “More Novocain” topped the list of all the things Jeff wished he could say in Russian.

He hadn’t realized pain came in so many colors: pink splashes, crimson blossoms, lavender washes. The worst, though, was clear white light, the same he’d seen last night when Cholpon had touched his forehead. Then it had been delight, now it was agony, sharing the same tint. He tried to divert himself with thoughts of all the colors emerging from white.

The doctor pushed the pincers deeper into the meat of his shoulder; Jeff cursed him and gripped the table. Shoved to the depths, his mind reached for Cholpon. The image of her face formed, then her body. Her hands seemed to cup his head. At her touch, he knew that everything, not just the colors but the universe itself, comes out of this light.

He got some comfort from this insight but would have traded it for more Novocain.

The old Russian woman, blue eyes clouded by cataracts, smiled when Jeff handed her a blanket. The old man behind her, square chin stubbled with gray, just took his and glanced away. Both of their lined, stolid faces showed eighty years of endurance. All the old plans of workers’ paradise and the new plans of consumer paradise had left them with nothing but resignation and a stubborn strength.

Jeff looked down the line of elders waiting for blankets and felt better: giving things away to people who needed them was the best part of his job. And the painkillers he’d bought at a sidewalk pharmacy were starting to take effect. Today his team was working at a senior citizens’ center. A faint rectangle above the door marked where the portrait of Marx used to hang. Some of the old timers missed him.

Jeff ruminated on what the Kyrgyz were going through. For the retired, the change to capitalism had brought disaster. “Difficulties of redundant sectors in transitioning to a market economy.” That’s how the PricewaterhouseCoopers business consultants from the US labeled their ordeal. Jeff avoided them whenever he could. The people themselves called it *bednost*—impoverishment. Before, they’d had very little, but at least their

basic needs had been met. Since the scrapping of the old system, their pensions had stayed low while prices soared, so now they were destitute. Compared to that lost security, freedom was irrelevant, just a word. Like the hordes of unemployed, they were paying a high price for free enterprise. They were too old now to become capitalists; all they knew about supply and demand was that their supplies were gone and their demands ignored. But although their material lives were grim, they were used to tough times; with grit and savvy they survived.

Foreign aid helped too. The US had spearheaded the drive to bring down communism, and now, since chaos in Central Asia wasn't in its interest, it was trying to patch up some of the problems caused by the collapse. The aid programs were mostly loans for the purchase of US-made equipment, a subsidy to our corporations. Jeff worked in the small humanitarian assistance program; he saw himself as a foreign aid Band-Aid stuck on a gaping wound. He could do only a little, but it was better than nothing.

He needed the job, too. It had been a lifeline that hauled him out of his deepest pit of self-loathing after the divorce. It still held him together, gave him a purpose, kept him from slipping back onto the sauce.

He handed a blanket to a frail Kyrgyz lady who chattered at him happily. Even with it, he knew she'd still be sleeping in her coat and cap.

August was early to give blankets away, but winter could sneak in fast here. Icy winds blew south from Siberia and north from the Pamir Mountains, catching Kyrgyzstan in the middle. Heat was a luxury most of the retired couldn't afford anymore. When he'd arrived last January, old folks, the more hardy ones, had been out with sledge hammers and wedges, breaking up tree stumps for firewood. Fortunately, Bishkek had lots of trees. The less hardy seniors sat on doorsteps with hats outstretched. Fortunately again, small change trickled into those hats, often from people in need themselves.

The blankets would help. They were US Army issue, and he might have slept under one of them, many long years ago.

"Hear anything about the shooting last night?" he asked Lance, his assistant.

“Shooting?” Lance perked up, switching from boredom to interest. “What was it?” In his mid twenties, Lance had blond hair, blue eyes, and a constant smile. He was almost great looking, which made his few flaws more noticeable. His face was square and rugged with broad cheeks, a low forehead, wide jaw, and small, upturned nose. His hair—too long for a crew cut but too short to comb into anything else—was strawy and tousled. His teeth, like those of many blonds, had a faint yellow tinge, but they were straight and even, set between lips stretched thin by his smile.

“I’m asking you.” Jeff looked at him deadpan. “I heard there was some gunfire out around the airfield.”

Lance’s face showed a blank. “Oh that. No, that was just Erkin farting. Hey, Erkin.” He didn’t want to admit to not knowing. Lance was just out of the navy, which he’d joined after dropping out—Jeff guessed flunking out—of college. He’d enlisted on a four-year hitch for language school, where he’d learned Russian. That skill plus his veteran’s bonus points got him this civil service job with USAID, but his plans were to angle his way into a big company expanding over here. The former Soviet Union, he said often, was the new frontier for business opportunities.

Erkin, their thirty-year-old Kyrgyz counterpart, glanced up from his client roster and shook his head in the obligatory it-wasn’t-me look. A shock of straight black hair dominated his slim face and overhung his keen narrow eyes. Five-feet-six and wiry, he wore the traditional Kyrgyz black pants and gray-and-white striped shirt. His skin was the color of wheat, and his features were a blend of Middle-Eastern and Oriental: nose long, broad, and aquiline; eyes canted slightly upwards. The only person in his extended family lucky enough to have a job, he supported a network of relatives, everyone eking by. “Somebody shot chopper down, blew up whole place. Killed twenty. Nobody know why.” His Kyrgyz accent, thicker than Cholpon’s, blurred his English.

“No shit?” Lance was enthused. “Who was it...the Muslims?”

Since he was Muslim himself, the question embarrassed Erkin. “Nobody know,” he said, spreading the fingers of his slender hand.

“Must be some reason,” Jeff said and gave away another blanket. It was patched and spotted with cigarette burns, but it’d

keep a body warm. He wondered how the Pentagon decided whether to fix a torn blanket or surplus it. Somewhere in the books must be a regulation, researched by a committee of captains, that spelled out how many patches it could have and how big a rip was worth mending. They needed to balance out repair vs. replacement costs, the morale of the soldiers vs. the morale of the congressional budget subcommittee.

Jeff was glad the blankets were light. If they'd been sacks of rice like last week, he would've been in trouble.

Usually they didn't hand out the stuff themselves but just gave it to social agencies to distribute. The local officials stole a certain amount and sold it; that was inevitable. But when USAID figured that over a quarter was getting ripped off, they cracked down and put the thieves out of business for a while by giving it to the people directly. USAID didn't have enough staff to do that for very long, and the local officials would make their lives miserable by finding all sorts of reasons to complain to the US Embassy, so after a few weeks things slipped back to the old routine. Jeff preferred handing it out personally.

When he had come to work this morning, he'd decided not to mention his involvement last night; he was ashamed of his failure and also wanted to avoid hours of bureaucratic reports. To explain his damage, Jeff told his two assistants his camping stove had exploded while he was trying it out. Since the injuries entitled him to a bit of help, he asked Lance to carry over a fresh box of blankets.

"Getting old and weak?" Lance jibed, always aware that thirty years but only two pay grades separated them. Lance matched Jeff's six feet but was heavier. His muscular wedge of a body tapered from broad shoulders and chest to narrow hips and legs that were a bit short in proportion to the rest of him.

"Could be." Jeff was weary this aching morning, but he was also ready for whatever it brought. He hadn't been so ready, though, for Cholpon last night. He hoped to get another chance. The echoes of her presence were still ringing through him. Already he missed the serenity that dwelt in the symmetry of her face. She was a shower of welcome rain in his desert.

Fred Garcia walked into the building. Usually the boss was too busy at the office to show up on site. He was wearing a suit—

unheard of. Brown eyes peered out of a round, soft-featured face that was disrupted by a jutting nose. The droop of his walrus mustache was countered by the smile of broad lips around uneven teeth. "We gotta shut it down for the day." He was using his boss voice, its gruffness countering the smile. "Got a briefing at the embassy."

They drove through Bishkek, which looked a bit like Washington: wide tree-lined streets, plazas with white public buildings, green parks. But the streets were potholed and clogged with cars burning gas that turned the air to acid, and the buildings were dilapidated. The government couldn't pay the garbage men, so mounds of uncollected trash were growing in the parks. Despite more poverty, though, Bishkek didn't have as many vagrants and thieves as DC.

For Jeff, the best thing about Bishkek was the mountains. South of the city soared a range, the Kyrgyz Ala-Too, that made the Tetons look like hills. Sheer granite peaks white with snow even in summer loomed above the capital and thrust their ragged silhouette into a sky of deep blue. At the foot of these mountains lay the steppe, an immense arid prairie sprawling down from Siberia.

Kyrgyzstan seemed to Jeff like Wyoming at the opposite side of the world, and not just in the raw power of its landscape. The people were as blunt and laconic as those back home. They had a passion for horses, riding them with great skill and panache, eating them with zest. They drove their cars faster but with less skill than they raced their horses. Some of them were still nomads, herding cattle and sheep and hunting with eagles. They were Central Asians who'd had a Turkic language and Muslim religion imposed on them in the seventh century by invaders from the Levant. Much later, Russian colonizers forced their Cyrillic alphabet on the language and tried to replace Islam with their state religion of communism. Now the Americans were here, bringing free enterprise, English, and Christian missionaries. The Kyrgyz adapted and endured.

Jeff felt both at home and totally strange here. Since he and Kyrgyzstan were making new starts, it seemed the right place to be. And he liked the challenge of getting along in a culture of which he hardly knew the language.

Jeff shared the back seat of the small Lada with Fred, who

was bulky. The boss's yellow foulard tie dangled short of his belt on his generous middle, its other end tucked into his blue oxford button-down shirt. His graying black hair curled thickly despite his fifty years, and his bronze cheeks showed the blue-black sheen of whiskers on the rise. The driver was dodging potholes, which kept bumping the boss against Jeff's arm. It hurt. Fred was an old Soviet hand, had been stationed in most of the republics and visited the rest. Kyrgyzstan was his favorite, but he didn't think it was much of a league. A new BMW zipped past them, ignoring the lanes and honking, its horn playing the tune to "Oh, Susanna." Fred scowled at it; sweat beaded his salt-and-pepper mustache. "In some ways it was better in the old days." He loosened his tie, knocking Jeff's arm. "First they'd lecture you on the virtues of communism, then they'd try to buy your jeans. Now they just try to sell you Herbalife."

Fred could stand to lose a few pounds, but Jeff couldn't see him drinking a diet shake. The USAID honcho gauged his moving up in the world by his switch from Jim Beam to Jack Daniels. Starting as a dirt-poor, whip-smart Texan from a tangled lineage of Mexicans, Indians, and cowboys, he'd gone on scholarship to the university at Austin. After a Ph.D. in political science and a brief, unhappy stint of college teaching, he'd ended up in the State Department. USAID wasn't the fast career track at State, but Fred had burned himself out striving in his youth and was now comfortable at a plateau.

The embassy was a small, but to Jeff a pompous, building with concrete columns painted to look like marble. It had formerly been a health clinic for the Party elite. Oak trees rose above it, dappling the sunlight in a way that camouflaged the crumbling walls and giving the building a pleasant, secluded look, despite the guards and heavy traffic on the street.

The briefing room was packed; all the USGs and half the expats in town seemed to be there. Hating crowds, Jeff found a place at the edge against the wall. He stood straight, hands at his side, with something of the military unconsciously ingrained in his bearing. Lance fell in next to him.

Creigh Townsend, the civilian defense attaché, stood up front beneath the flag, a tall, tailored blade of tension. His blue-and-gray pinstriped suit and white shirt seemed to Jeff to have

same expensive blandness as his rep tie. Beneath sparse black hair, his high forehead—smooth, bare, and pale as a reflecting shield—beetled over and dwarfed the lower triangle of his face. He drummed the podium with his long fingers and cleared his throat. “So, uh...we’ll start.” Over the drone of an overworked air conditioner, he spoke in the clipped style of the Chesapeake Bay gentry. “There’s no point in beating about the bush, so I’ll get right to the point. One of State’s worst-case scenarios just happened. Gentlemen...ladies and gentlemen, that is....” He flicked his sharp blue eyes over to his boss, Ambassador Sarah Ettinger. “We’re looking at a whole new ball game. We’ve got a loose nuke. Last night somebody stole one of the nastiest pumpkins ever. Broke into the air base...left twenty-three dead.” He paused, sweat gleaming on his expansive forehead. His late-thirties hairline was receded toward vertical. “If this thing goes off, it’ll take everybody in Bishkek.”

As a murmur of alarm spread through the room, Townsend stood with jutting chin and tight lips. Jeff could tell he liked his power. “What they got was a Gagarin-9, a Soviet IRBM warhead. Back in the bad old days it was targeted on China. It’s actually rather modest megatonage...but a real dirty blaster. The main kill operant is contamination, more than the fireball. Everyone—everything—within thirty miles contracts radiation sickness. Most of them will be fatals, but slow. As you can imagine, it totally overloads the medical infrastructure. Renders the area uninhabitable for about 40,000 years...unless you’re a mutated cockroach.” He looked around the room as if expecting a few wry chuckles, but this wasn’t the MI audience he was used to. They were stunned into frightened whispers.

Jeff crumbled inside. He could have saved it. He should have stayed there, shot the driver as they came through the gate—stopped them. They would have killed him, but it would have been worth it, it would have meant something. The bomb would be safe, and he’d be out of this crap. Instead he ran to save his sorry ass. If he’d known what it was.... Ach, he’d probably still have run.

“What’s your intel on who took it?” Bruce Watson asked. Half standing and hunching forward, the portly embassy logistics officer looked ready to grab whomever it was.

Townsend glanced at his notes. “We’ve got eleven bodies at the airfield, Arab dress, prayer beads, a couple of blood-soaked

Korans, no IDs.”

“That’s ID enough.” Watson sat down heavily. He wore a white short-sleeved shirt and a red tie; the slightly frayed collar wouldn’t button because of his expanded neck. A silver flat-top crowned his pink, jowly face, and meandering blue veins lined his round cheeks and nose. As people nodded at him, a friendly and confident smile lit his face and he hiked his pant legs up a bit.

Townsend’s hand jiggled in his pants pocket. “Al-Qaeda and Taliban would love to have a firecracker like this. They’ve got active units in Kyrgyzstan, but we don’t know for sure it’s them. Could be what’s left of Saddam’s Amn al-Has...Iran...the Chechens. The Russian mafia could’ve stolen it...sell it to the highest bidder.

“This thing would be high on the wish list of lots of terrorists. If they didn’t take it themselves, they’d pay major money for it. It’s not too big, you could bring it anywhere: New York, DC, Tel Aviv. Use it for blackmail or just set it off. Get another revenge on the great Satan.”

Lance nudged Jeff, who winced. “That’s you and me, buddy.”

Spare me, Jeff thought.

“Important thing is not to panic. We’ve got a good chance to get it back. The borders are sealed, every road out has troops on it. Delta Force is flying in. We’re offering a ten million dollar reward. Somebody out there has seen something and knows where it is. Since Kyrgyzstan’s Islamic, there’ll be some sympathy for the perpetrators. But ten million dollars speaks pretty loud.”

“I’d take it for that,” Lance whispered.

“The Muslim element here may account for the good intel these guys had. Somebody told them the when, where, and how.” Townsend grimaced. “This nuke was the last one in country...waiting to get shipped out and dismantled. Next week it would’ve been scrap.”

“Instead, we all may be scrap,” Ambassador Ettinger said over tented fingers. She spoke in the flat, regular tones of the Midwest. Her green silk suit and gold brooch contrasted with a plain white blouse. The lines of worry etching her forehead and mouth and the dark blotches of fatigue under her eyes made her look older than her forty-five years. Her nostrils dilated as she

breathed under the pressure. Jeff got the impression that the lives of at least everyone in Bishkek were weighing on her. She was a large-boned, strong-framed woman, and the suit had padded shoulders, but not for that kind of load.

“Possible but not likely.” A smirk showed Townsend enjoyed contradicting her. The word was he was CIA, so she didn’t have much leverage over him.

“What if they’re cornered, Mr. Townsend?” she asked acidly, peering above her brindle reading glasses. “If they’re fanatics, they’d rather set it off than lose it.” Her hair was less neat than usual this morning, and she pushed a light-brown strand out of her eyes to stare at him.

Townsend tapped the podium impatiently. “Probably won’t set it off in a Muslim country. Allah wouldn’t approve.”

“You hope.” She kept her large blue-green eyes fixed on him.

He looked away, enough of a diplomat to let her have the last word. She frowned, uncapped her fountain pen, and began writing on a yellow legal pad.

“What about that chopper?” someone asked.

“Yeah. The Kyrgyz fought pretty well.” Back in his element, Townsend grew more lively and leaned his lanky frame over the podium. “They almost won. Their chopper shot up the lead truck, killed six...till it got taken out with one of those sharp new little SAMs. The bad guys were equipped and they were pros.

“The gate sentry damn near stopped them. They wounded him going in, but he stood up to them coming out...killed five before they got him. They had to run him over. He’s being put in for the Kyrgyz Medal of Honor.” Townsend’s eyes, raptor sharp under thick black brows, surveyed the audience as if to inspire them. He buttoned his suit jacket before stepping away from the podium.

“This briefing is non-classified, ladies and gentlemen. The cat’s already out of the bag. At this point, better the truth than a lot of crazy rumors.”

The group broke into anxious, talking clusters, and Jeff split, too down to want to see anyone. Finally he’d had another chance to do something right, but he’d blown it. He could picture fallout descending like snow on this hot summer day, flakes of death sticking to everyone, shrouding the city in lethal isotopes.

This damned world gave us few ways to make a difference in it and few ways to die well. To have stopped them would've been both. Now what did he have ahead of him? Thirty more years of this shit. Or, if the men in the ski masks got uptight, six months of radiation sickness. Either way, better to have stayed and fallen.

Out on the sidewalk people streamed by him, bound on missions urgent to them, trivial to the others. Jeff joined the throng, wanting urgently to go home and sleep. Taller than most of the crowd, he walked leaning forward, leading with his shoulders, the posture a holdover from the days when he'd been eager to get wherever he was going. Now the eagerness was less but the habits of body remained. He kept his left arm against his side, sweating in the green corduroy shirt he'd worn to keep the bandages from showing. His curly brown hair—frosted with gray, thinner than it had once been—ruffled in the breeze. He wore it longer now, trying to cover the increasing bareness of his temples, an attempt that was vain in both senses of the word. Slightly crooked from being broken, his large nose gave a raffish, off-center cant to his long face. His hazel eyes, set deep under ginger brows, scanned ahead, alert to avoid collisions with his arm. He still hurt under the blur of painkillers, so his wide mouth was clamped shut, lips disappeared into a resisting grimace. The antibiotic shot was starting to take effect, so he felt less feverish.

Then he saw her, and his skin flushed warm. His hopes soared, denying the miles and misery that separated them, until a closer look sent them into a dive of disappointment. No, it wasn't Valerie; but the tall blonde Russian looked so much like her that he couldn't catch his breath. He felt like he'd swallowed a rock. She had the same sensuous stride and raised chin, avid blue eyes taking in the scene, face open to it all. As she passed him without a glance, he could see the differences, but he stared after her, mouth sagging with yearning and regret. Maybe someday his wife might take him back...if she ever got over what he'd done to her. He forced himself to look away, then stubbed his toe on a sidewalk slab that had been buckled by swelling tree roots.

The faces were a mix of the world. The pure Kyrgyz were northern Orientals of a stock similar to Native-Americans. Both groups had long ago gotten fed up with Siberian winters. The original Americans had crossed the Bering Strait, and the Kyrgyz

had migrated southwest till they reached the mountain spine of Asia. They'd prowled the valleys as nomads for centuries, enduring the newcomers who kept charging through: Mongols, Muslims, Europeans, from Genghis Khan to Tamerlane to Stalin. When the invaders weren't slaughtering the locals, they were fucking them, and these faces showed the blend.

Bishkek had been on the ancient Silk Road. Westbound cloth-and-spice caravans weary after trekking the mountains from China, eastbound gold-and-fruit caravans thirsty after weeks on the steppe, they all pulled in. Drivers and camels and horses rested here by the river; sometimes a driver liked this valley at the foot of the mountains and stayed.

Later the Russians came, first the Czar, then his killers. They'd moved into Kyrgyzstan in force, making it a colony then a Soviet Republic. For generations they'd dominated the Kyrgyz, but since independence the natives had turned the tables, discriminating against the ethnic Russians. The more things change....

Jeff grabbed a bus for home. A rattletrap made in Hungary, it was named Ikarus, after the Greek boy whose journey had ended in death. It was jammed, as usual. The great-grandmothers of the world, wrinkled babushkas wrapped in scarves and long, dark dresses even in this heat, were muttering into their whiskers. Next to them chattered kids in T-shirts made in Singapore with odd bits of English on them: "Racing Ahead, Eternal Image, Mr. Cowboy." An old Russian man hung on the rail, wearing canvas boots and his medals from the Great Patriotic War pinned to what looked like torn pajamas. A busty middle-aged Kyrgyz woman swayed back and forth; she'd indulged her new consumer freedom by dying her hair a punk shade of purple but still wore it in a bun. Bathing wasn't a priority here, so the air was a bit ripe.

Jeff gazed at his fellow travelers with a pained tenderness; he saw them all, this whole little jalousy of a world, covered with the gray, bleeding sores of radiation sickness.

Passengers paid as they left, and the driver was busy making change at each stop. A pile of bills, most worth about a dime, filled the open glove compartment, and above it sat a little lamp with a shade made from a Coke can. The dashboard was covered with pictures of fast cars—formula-one racers, Jaguars, Corvettes—and the sun visor with a photo of a naked blonde straddling a

motorcycle. The windshield was a spider web of shatter marks.

Last night's semi, its windshield shattering under his bullets...where was it now?

The driver sat in broiling sun, shirt unbuttoned to his waist, and swabbed his ochre face and chest with a cloth he'd dipped into a pan of water. He lurched the bus through the traffic in search of open lanes and pavement without potholes.

Jeff didn't care for the way he was driving, but there was nothing he could do about it. He was like the guy who was driving his life. For the past two years Jeff had been a backseat driver in his own life, trying to be in charge, but something else had been at the wheel, sending him down dark streets, along freeways to nowhere.

But up until a couple of years ago things had gone pretty well for him. After the army he'd attended the University of Colorado on the GI Bill and taken a B.A. in history. His studies led him to the conclusion that with such a past, humanity can't expect too much from the present, so he tended to accept things other protested. He was too rebellious to be a conservative but not optimistic enough to be a liberal.

The war was a helpless sadness gradually fading. He tolled the names of dead friends in a litany of remembrance.

The harsh solace of the land drew him back to Wyoming, and he worked at various jobs to be able to keep living in Jackson Hole. He became a ski instructor in the winters and a back-country guide in the summers and ended up managing an outdoor equipment store. But a couple of years ago the booze took over and before he knew it he'd lost Valerie, the kids, the job.

And last night he'd lost the chance to save the nuke. But at least now he had one hand on the wheel of his life: he'd been sober for nine months...and some days.

An Oriental man, wearing sunglasses with the label still stuck on one lens, brushed by him to get off, hurting his arm. Instead of paying, the man elbowed the driver aside, snatched the bills from the glove compartment, and jumped out the door.

The driver screamed after him in Kyrgyz.

The guy was fast, but a big Russian waiting to get on grabbed him by the collar. The thief tried to jerk loose, then shoved the bills into his jacket pocket and raised his fists. The

Russian chopped the edge of his hand across the sunglasses, breaking them. As the thief grabbed for his eyes, the Russian jabbed him in the belly.

The Oriental doubled over but came out of it in a karate pose. Yelling, he made a few feints with his hands; the Russian backed away. The Kyrgyz moved like he'd had some training a few years ago and was trying to get his reflexes back. He kicked threateningly. People on the bus and street gaped at the entertainment.

The Russian sized him up—he stood a head taller than the thief—and snorted with contempt. He moved in, looping a roundhouse punch; the Kyrgyz ducked and kicked at him. It was clear what he was aiming for, but since he was kicking from a crouch, his shoe landed below the crotch.

He ran, but the long-legged Russian caught up. The big man gripped the smaller one around the head and rammed his knee into his side. The Kyrgyz yelped and tried to twist away, but the Russian lifted him by the neck and whammed him into the bus. Jeff felt it rock, and a few women cried out in protest. He shoved him to the ground, spat on him, and raised his boot. To protect his groin, the Kyrgyz rolled over; the Russian kicked him in the kidney. Snarling, he jumped on him with knees driving into his back, then lifted the smaller man's head and smashed it into the sidewalk.

The Kyrgyz groaned, tried to push him off but couldn't. Face blanched, he babbled a surrender; people watching seconded it. He was bleeding out of one eye.

Jeff hadn't been fond of the thief from the moment he'd knocked into his arm, but this was too much.

Instead of stopping, the big man turned the Kyrgyz over and hammered his fist again and again into the cringing face, like he was pounding a nail. He cursed him and lifted his hand for another blow. The Kyrgyz shrieked. His twisted nose was spewing blood.

The Russian had no skill, just size; he fought like the ranch hands Jeff used to bounce out of the bar in Jackson. But that had been twenty years ago. Jeff's bad arm gave the guy another advantage, but he didn't know it. If Jeff came on threateningly enough but left him space to get away, he might take off. "Stop it!" Jeff bellowed and jumped out the door. "Enough!"

People backed away. The Russian probably didn't understand English, but he saw someone his own size coming at him. He clamped one hand on the thief's quivering chest, reached the other into the jacket pocket, pulled out the money, leaped up with a sneer, and ran away with bills balled in his fist. The crowd watched him go and so did Jeff.

The driver muttered something, closed the door of the bus, and pulled away. The crowd switched its stare to the first thief, who was holding his hands to his face and jerking spasmodically.

Jeff walked the six blocks home, his long, doleful but determined face bobbing above the stream of his fellow pedestrians. He hadn't gotten the driver his cash back, hadn't even paid his fare. But he'd done what he could, and he could stand himself a little more.



Jeff stood among the thirty people waiting outside the Kyrgyz Air Force terminal. A US military cargo jet, hugely sleek, taxied past them. The American flag was emblazoned on its lofty tail, and as it passed by, Bruce Watson saluted. The others just stood in the heat. The C-141 Starlifter, silver wings sagging now without wind to support them, pivoted away from the green cinderblock building and stopped, gushing torrents of exhaust back over the reception party. Its turbines slowed from a roar to a high, hollow whistle.

Clothes flapping, eyes squinched, Jeff was reminded of the first instant of parachuting, the leap into the windy blast that blew everything, even fear, from his mind. It'd been a long time since he'd jumped, and he missed it. After the army, it had reminded him too much of the military, so he'd let it go and gone back to mountain climbing. Now he wished he'd kept it up: his mind could use some free-fall ventilation. A few years ago a friend had combined the two sports by climbing the Grand Teton and base-jumping off. Before his chute could open, winds drove him back against the granite, smashing his spine. Jeff and three others had climbed up and recovered the body, lodged in a spur. Hanging there, his face wore a faraway smile, as if he had seen something very beautiful just beyond his grasp.

The Central Asian heat shimmered on the concrete. Jeff looked at the burnt-out hangar filled with blackened skeletons of airplanes and at the blown-open armory from where the bomb had been stolen. Kyrgyz soldiers, laden with guns and grenades, sweating in flak jackets and steel helmets, guarded all the buildings, which now held nothing worth stealing.

Jeff thought of their comrades who'd been guarding the bomb. They should've come out the door shooting, not just coughing from the tear gas. They would've still died...but it would've been a better way to go.

Stray rounds had blown out a glass door on the terminal, leaving a gaping hole rimmed by shards. The guards now stepped through it rather than opening the door, ducking their heads under a guillotine-like slab of glass.

Jeff felt better today after sleeping for twelve hours. The fever was gone and the pain had subsided into a bearable ache. He glanced around at the embassy staff, a dozen Kyrgyz civilian and military officials, and a few diplomatic guests, hoping none of them would bump into his shoulder.

The Starlifter's clamshell rear doors opened with hydraulic smoothness, revealing a cavernous cargo bay filled with men and equipment. Ambassador Ettinger, wearing a dark-blue suit and an orange scarf, hair churning in the turbine wind, walked toward the plane. A trim black man with an eagle on each epaulette strode down the ramp and saluted her. She nodded formally and shook his hand. They stepped to the side, and the Delta Force company double-timed in two columns down the ramp.

The troops wore desert camos, helmets, and full rucksacks. They carried submachine guns at port arms, and each turned his stubby weapon upright in a rifle salute as he passed his commander and the ambassador. The fifty men jogged into a rectangular formation, a bit uneven by strict military standards. Jeff smiled, thinking back to the similarly lax formations in Special Forces compared to the tightness of regular infantry divisions. Commandos had to be given more slack than conventional troops, they weren't as moldable. They were more willing to die, but it had to be on their own terms, not blind discipline. Jeff could see, though, that the Delta Force's jungle boots were spit shined and their fatigues starched. He shook his head in weary memory. The army was still cranking out violent guys and then forcing them to be obsessed with their clothes. He could handle the violence OK, that was the point of the whole thing, but the prissiness drove him up the wall.

In a dress shirt without a tie, linen slacks, and running shoes, Jeff stood in the shade of the terminal building, glad not to be in the army, yearning to be in the army. Part of him tried to hold on to the peaceful afterglow from Cholpon from yesterday morning, but the sight of soldiers ready for battle pulled him back into his military past. He had hated the pointless make-work of stateside duty—painting jeeps, polishing barracks floors—but had liked the extremity of combat patrols, the heightened pitch of life on the brink.

His thoughts wandered back through a maze of might-have-beens. If he had stayed in, he could've switched over to SOG and done recons into Laos and North Vietnam. He could've spent a couple of tours in El Salvador with a little cross-border action into Nicaragua. Jumped into Grenada and Panama, done a few clandestines into East Berlin, sky dived into Iraq to spot Scuds,

called in air strikes in Kosovo, torn up the al-Qaeda and Taliban in Afghanistan, then back to Iraq to dethrone Saddam. Now he could be here, one of these mean dogs on a short leash, on his last mission before retirement. Or—anywhere along the line he could've bought it, gone out in a quick flame. Either way might've been better. At least it seemed that way now, looking down roads not taken.

The ambassador and colonel walked slowly through the ranks for the ritual inspection of the troops. Each soldier snapped to attention as they approached, saluted, then snapped to parade rest when they had passed. We who are about to die salute you, Jeff thought.

The chief of staff of the Kyrgyz Army, General Osmonaliev, a short burly man whom Jeff had met once at an embassy reception, welcomed the troops and thanked them for their assistance. With their help, he said, Kyrgyzstan would continue to enjoy enduring freedom.

Delta Force began unloading equipment. They carried off M-60 machine guns, 60 mm. mortars, crates of rations and supplies, and a bundle of stretchers. Next they drove the vehicles down the ramp: two jeeps, four camouflage-painted dirt bikes with almost silent engines, a two-and-a-half ton truck, and a Fast Attack Vehicle—a stripped-down jeep frame mounted with a machine gun and recoilless rifle.

The soldiers stood at parade rest around the equipment to cordon it off on the runway. All these great toys, Jeff thought, fighting back another wave of nostalgia and regret. But now maybe he could have them and still have his freedom, a civilian warrior, his own free ragged self, the best of both worlds. He pulled himself together, stood with as military a bearing as he could muster after all these years, and walked over to the colonel, who was standing by the plane talking to the pilot. *Whatever you do, don't say Sir*, he told himself.

When the pilot left, Jeff stepped in. He quickly read the name on the starched fatigues. "Colonel Hobbs, I'm Jeff Madsen, your USAID liaison." He didn't mention that his position was entirely self appointed. He'd learned that in times of confusion it's better to assert authority even if you don't actually have it.

Hobbs was a small man with intense dark eyes set deep between high cheekbones and a ridged forehead. His nose had

been flattened, in contrast to Jeff's, which had been bent. He wore a green beret with a colonel's silver eagle on it, a Delta Force patch on his left shoulder, and a Special Forces patch on his right, indicating he currently commanded Delta Force and had seen combat in Special Forces, Delta's parent organization. The colonel extended his hand; his grip was solid but not the exaggerated crush some soldiers affected. "What'd you say your name was again?"

"Madsen, Jeff Madsen. I'm ex-Special Forces, spent a year on an A-team in the Central Highlands."

Hobbs' interest switched from casual to keen. "Which camp?"

"Cung Hoa...up near Ban Me Thuot."

"I know the place. Beautiful country up there. You had Montagnard troops?"

"Sure did."

Hobbs smiled, a sudden flash out of a dusky face. "Best damn people I ever met...and we left them there for the NVA to grind down. Worst thing about the whole sorry mess was what happened to the Yards afterwards."

Jeff nodded, thinking about Lo-ee and M'noc, his friends and fellow warriors, hoping they'd survived the "re-education" camps.

"When were you there?" Hobbs asked.

"Sixty-seven to sixty-eight."

"Tet, huh?"

Jeff held up his scarred hand. "You got it."

As they talked, Kyrgyzstan slipped away, and it seemed as if they were standing on a runway in Vietnam, ready to be helicoptered into the jungle.

"I was a lieutenant with the Mike Force then," the colonel said. "What a time."

Jeff thought back to the Tet Offensive, when his A-team had been pounded by North Vietnamese cannons and nearly overrun by their infantry. His captain, gut-shot with artillery shrapnel, had radioed a request that the Mike Force, the elite Montagnard unit commanded by Special Forces, be air-dropped into the camp. The reply came back negative, they were already committed to battle. His team had fought off the NVA at Cung Hoa but lost a third of their men. Jeff asked the colonel: "You guys

were fighting up around Pleiku then, weren't you?"

Hobbs winced at the memory. "Yeah...with no air support. We couldn't even get medevacs. Not enough choppers to haul all the wounded...no room in the hospitals even if we could get them there." The colonel gave him a probing look, to test if they were on the same wavelength. He smiled slightly and said, "I'd do it again in a minute."

"Know what you mean. Nothing quite like it," Jeff said. Their eyes met across a third of a century. "I thought you might need another hand here."

"You're with USAID?"

Jeff nodded. "I know the country and the people...how to get around and deal with the hassles."

"Might could use you, Madsen. You coming to the briefing this afternoon?"

Jeff smiled. "Yes, sir." It was the first he'd heard of the briefing, but he'd definitely be there.

"See you then." The colonel turned to Sarah Ettinger, who was waiting to introduce him to the Russian ambassador.

Jeff walked away kicking himself for letting the word of subservience slip out. Those reflexes were pounded in so deep. At least he hadn't saluted.

Jeff noticed a man on the edge of the group. The thin Oriental stood facing Jeff but staring beyond him at the Delta Force equipment. Rigid in a blue blazer with a crest on the chest pocket, he tightened his elbow into his side, then relaxed and glanced casually around. He shifted a bit to the left, stood still, and again pressed his elbow into his side. The movements were hardly noticeable but nonetheless strange. Jeff looked behind himself and saw a dipole antenna mounted on a mast. He looked back at the man, who was now facing other electronic gear.

Maybe the guy was snooping the new equipment...a hidden camera. His blazer swelled a bit beneath the crest, but it could be just a wallet and pack of cigarettes. Jeff watched him repeat the procedure several times, covering it with other motions. If Jeff grabbed him and turned out to be wrong, it wouldn't go well. Plus his arm wasn't up for much grabbing. But he couldn't just let him spy.

Jeff walked over to a Delta trooper standing nearby. "Sarge, we got a problem..." He explained the situation to the tall, black

soldier. They looked at the guy together for a minute, and the sergeant thought it over, scratching his closely trimmed mustache with his thumbnail and appraising Jeff with oxblood eyes. He gave a quick nod and the trace of a smile.

They circled around and came up behind the man as he stood facing a cluster of satellite dishes. Jeff felt like a hawk swooping down on its prey. The thin man sensed their presence and stiffened.

As he passed him, Jeff pretended to stumble and lurched into his side. "Sorry," he said, groping at the guy to steady himself and clutching the crest of the blazer. Underneath was something hard and rectangular, too firm for a wallet or cigarettes. He pulled the blazer open and saw a wire at the inside pocket.

"Grab him," he called to the sergeant.

The man tried to pull away, but the sergeant pinned his arms. "Diplomat!" the man screamed. While the trooper held him fast, Jeff yanked the blazer down over his shoulders and reached into the pocket. With a slice of pain Jeff felt a stitch tear out of his wound.

Jeff pulled out a camera and wire. The spy acted the victim, shouting, "Let me go! Police, help!" He strained against the blazer, trying to snatch the camera back, but couldn't move his arms enough. His skin flushed caroty. As he held his fury in tight control, it seemed to spray from him. "You attack an embassy officer," he hissed.

A group of staring, murmuring onlookers formed. Jeff called to them, "Get the ambassador...the US ambassador."

The sergeant followed the wire down the man's side to the shutter release. He yanked it out along with a piece of his shirt that it had been fastened to.

"You thieves!" The spy's eyes flared.

"Pat him down for weapons, sarge," Jeff said.

While the guy squirmed and more people gathered, the trooper searched him, finding no weapons but a diplomatic passport from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Ambassador Ettinger arrived, followed by Colonel Hobbs and Creigh Townsend.

The man spoke immediately to the ambassador. "This is an insult to my government. Your men attack me, steal from me."

"What happened here?" Sarah Ettinger gave Jeff a look that said, You'd better not have messed up. Her emerald earrings brought out the green in her large aqua eyes, but her light-brown hair stuck out in tufts from the turbine wind.

Jeff explained the situation, over interruptions from the spy.

The ambassador looked through the passport. "Mr. Roh works at the North Korean embassy here," she said. "Let him go."

I could get burned for this, thought Jeff as he and the trooper released him.

The man straightened his blazer in self-righteous dudgeon. "My property," he demanded.

The sergeant, holding the camera, stared questioningly at the ambassador. "Give it to me," she said, and the sergeant obeyed. She asked, "Is this yours, Mr. Roh?"

The man thrust out his hand. "Your men steal it."

She held it beyond his grasp. "And what's inside?"

He remained silent, mouth a tight line.

"Maybe they stole something from inside," she explained. "We want to make sure you get everything back that was stolen...so we should check inside." She turned the small, black camera over and began pressing and twisting things, trying to find the latch.

"Give camera now...or I protest to Kyrgyzstan government."

"These things are hard to open, you know. Not as user-friendly as an Instamatic," she said, fiddling with the camera and ignoring him. He lunged for the camera. The sergeant grabbed for him but got the blazer instead; its blue silk ripped up the middle but stopped him. The trooper wrenched the man's arms behind his back, loomed over him, and asked, "Where you goin'?"

"Now, now, Mr. Roh. Be patient. I'll just be a minute," the ambassador said, unperturbed. "Mr. Townsend, take his name down in case we need to get in touch with him."

The CIA chief's venatic blue eyes fixed on the slender Korean. "I already have a file on Mr. Roh. We know he's with UFD."

She glanced up at the spy, said, "You see, we do care," and returned to working on the camera. "Ah...there we go." The back popped open. "Good! The film is still there. They didn't steal that." She held it up to show it to him. "Let's make sure the pictures are OK." She pulled the film out of its case in a long curl

and held it up to the sun to look at it. "Hmm...I can't tell." She turned to Colonel Hobbs. "What do you think?"

Hobbs peered at the gray strip and shook his head. "Doesn't look like they came out. Maybe they're over exposed. You ought to have your camera checked," he told Mr. Roh.

"Good idea," said the ambassador. She held the camera out to the spy, then pulled it back. "Did he have any more film?" she asked Jeff.

"No," he replied, "and no weapons."

"Good, Mr. Roh. Here's your camera. Let him go, sergeant."

The trooper released him. He shook himself, glowered at the gawking crowd, and took the camera with trembling hands.

"Give my greetings to your ambassador, Mr. Roh...and tell him I'll be in touch." Sarah Ettinger turned and walked away, followed by Hobbs and Townsend. Roh stalked off.

"Good work," Jeff said, extending his hand to the sergeant. "Thanks for your help." They shook. "I'm Madsen."

"Blake," said the trooper. He gestured to the equipment the man had been photographing. "The North Koreans would love to know more about that stuff."

"Can't blame them," Jeff said. "They want to know what to expect...when we go after their nukes."

"I'll be there." With a wave, Blake walked off to rejoin the Delta Force.

Jeff headed across the runway. Stroll away and disappear like the Iraqi Republican Guard, he thought. The sun cast an iridescent sheen over the fuel stains where the chopper and pickup truck had burned. Death by fire—probably the worst. But maybe you just lose your air and the shock blocks the pain and it's over quickly. For the sake of the chopper crew—and the hundreds of thousands who'd died under US napalm and the dozens of Buddhists who'd died protesting it—he hoped so.

Jeff pulled bits of singed skin from his burnt arm. It was starting to itch as the skin sloughed off.

Farther on, fading chalk marks outlined the bodies he'd killed, and their blood stains formed Rorschach blots. What does that shape remind you of? An nuclear bomb exploding. And that one? A fatherless child. Jeff's chest tightened, but he fought off the

remorse that was starting to swamp him. Hell, he'd just moved those guys one step ahead of the rest of us. Better a few of them than all of Bishkek. We can't have fanatics running around with nuclear bombs.

The ceaseless wind from the Asian steppe was already erasing the chalk outlines of their bodies. It had also blown drifts of trash against the concrete wall at the far side of the base. Newspapers, plastic bags, aluminum cans, Styrofoam—Kyrgyzstan was getting modern.

The metal gate the raiders had blasted open was unrepaired but now chained shut and guarded by a squad of soldiers in full battle dress. Typical military response. The bomb was already gone, it was the only one. Were these guys out looking for it? No, they were standing around making a show of force. As Jeff approached, they closed ranks. The majority were Kyrgyz but a few were ethnic Russian. Most looked like the sentry who'd been killed here: young and full of potential that would never be realized. The sentry was probably their friend...now a martyred hero.

A stocky Kyrgyz sergeant strode toward Jeff waving his arms rejectingly and speaking loud Russian. Any Caucasian was assumed to be Russian. Jeff understood enough to know the gate was closed and he'd have to go around. That would mean a forty-five minute walk.

Jeff said, "*Amerikanski*" and pulled his ID card from his wallet. "*Kartochka*." He handed it to the sergeant, who perused it, his bristly mustache twitching on the broad disk of his face. The Kyrgyz government issued all foreign officials a card that was supposed to cut through bureaucratic hassles. Usually the minor authorities were intimidated enough not to harass anybody carrying one. They didn't want complaints that would cause the foreign ministry to jump on their boss, who would in turn jump on them. But the sergeant was a brave and greedy man. He was paying more attention to Jeff's wallet than the card.

In his fumbling Russian Jeff tried to explain that he needed to see someone on the other side of the gate.

"*Nyet*," the heavyset sergeant said. Short arms akimbo, he strode back and forth ranting about how foreigners had broken into the base, killed Kyrgyz soldiers, stolen Kyrgyz property. He stared at Jeff accusingly, then at his wallet.

Jeff kept a sheaf of one-dollar bills there for minor

extortions like this. A successful bribe called for delicate diplomatic skill; it needed to be offered discreetly or it would give grounds for insult, which would lead to demands for more cash. The briber had to make a pretense of concealment in order to acknowledge the higher position of the bribee; otherwise it might seem like tipping a lackey. Jeff lowered the wallet to his side, pulled out a couple of bills, and palmed them in his hand. He stepped next to the sergeant and pressed them into his waiting fingers. The sergeant glanced down at the bills and shook his head curtly, mustache wiggling. Jeff sighed, took out two more dollars, handed them over, and slipped the wallet back into his pocket.

Two corporals walked up to stand on either side of Jeff. The privates then also moved toward them, but when the sergeant barked a command, the privates fell back in line. Rank hath its privileges, Jeff remembered. The bottom troops needed to be reminded of their lowly status, to give them incentive to servile their way into promotions so they too could share in the booty. With a scowl that was mostly ritual, Jeff took his wallet back out and gave each corporal a dollar. He didn't enjoy giving them the money, but they needed it a lot more than he did. They all had families, and inflation had made their wages barely enough for one person to live on. Most people were poorer now than they had been under communism, and he was here as part of the victor's foreign aid program.

The corporals exchanged glances with the sergeant, then held out their hands for more. Jeff shook his head. The sergeant folded his arms across his chest and shook his. Jeff thought about walking all the way around the base. Definitely worth a few more dollars to get to her place now. He gave the corporals each another bill. They nodded contentedly, having just made more than their day's pay, but the sergeant blustered in, demanding more to show his superiority to his subordinates. Jeff forked over another George, but the sergeant, eyes gleaming under thick lids, gestured for more. He stared at the wallet, mouth open. "Nope," Jeff said, shoved it back in his pocket, and walked toward the gate, avoiding eye contact with the sergeant so as not to seem to be defying his authority. As he approached the troops, they parted and let him pass.

A Russian private caught his eye in Caucasian camaraderie.

He was older than the Kyrgyz, with a Sad Sack look that said he knew he'd never get promoted now but just had to stick it out until he got his pitiful pension.

When Kyrgyzstan had been part of the Soviet Union, the ethnic Russians here were on top, holding more than their share of power. Like all privileged groups, they thought they deserved it, and many looked down on the Kyrgyz, calling them *chorniye*—blacks. Now after independence the Russians were at the bottom of the list for hiring and promotions. Some were philosophical about it, but most thought it unjust—they'd never personally done anything to harm the Kyrgyz, so why should they suffer. Jeff had heard it before, from whites in the US who didn't think they should have to sacrifice anything in reparation for centuries of slavery.

He stepped over the chain that held the twisted gate closed, wondering what these troops had been doing during the attack. Probably lying low, waiting for orders, hoping someone else would die and not them. And someone else had. The sentry's bloodstain still darkened the macadam. His corpse was probably lying next to his killers' in the government morgue. Rigor mortis was gone and they were all settling in for a nice relaxing rot. And the boy would get a hero's funeral, Kyrgyz Medal of Honor around his neck, for not firing a shot. Jeff felt jealous and resentful, then ashamed of it.

The rubble of the guardhouse where he'd dived away from the grenade had been carted off. The blast had torn a larger-than-average pothole in the pavement. Near the wall lay brass casings from the shells he'd fired.

Twenty-three dead. But people are dying all the time, he told himself. They probably haul that many stiff's out of the hospital every night. We're all getting blown away by all different kinds of wind, so what does it matter?

But while we're still here.... Which apartment was Cholpon's? He scanned her building, one of a row of three-story stacks of gray concrete whose drabness was only accentuated by red-painted bas-relief figures of factory workers, farmers, and soldiers. He found her balcony; geraniums bloomed on the balustrade and potted bamboo grew in the corner. The curtains were closed. He hoped she was home. But what if she was with another guy?

Climbing the stairs, he saw that his blood drops had been

scrubbed away. He rang her bell, imagining her face and eyes. No answer. He knocked on the heavy wooden door. After a minute his spirits sank. He wrote her a note: "Sorry I missed you. Thanks again for your help. Give me a call—89792. Jeff." He had an urge to kiss the note, then felt foolish and just slid it under the door.

A door across the hall opened. Jeff turned to see Ainoura standing in it, and he flushed with awkward embarrassment. She must have recognized him through the peephole. She managed a strained smile and said, "Wrong door...I over here. I glad you come back." In the heat she was wearing next to nothing: a yellow T-shirt barely covered her underpants. One long leg protruded, the other hid timidly behind the door. He thought of how they had wrapped around his back. Her expression was both apologetic and inviting. "Sorry I so mean. You forgive me? I so scared." The yellow silk of her shirt emphasized her cascading jet-black hair and the points of her small breasts. She gestured him with a tilt of her head, her lips a pale rose invitation on her ivory skin, her eyes a dark allurement. "We talk inside."

She had flirted with him when he had met her at the embassy where she was applying for a visa. Jeff knew it had more to do with his nationality than with any irresistible qualities he might have. She was looking for a ticket West. And he'd asked her out more for her pretty face and sleek body than her personality. Such shallowness had to end sometime, he thought, and their half a night together was probably the best they had to offer each other.

"Actually...." Jeff faltered. "I came to see Cholpon."

Ainoura's expression changed from coquettish to quizzical to crushed. "Her?" She pointed towards Cholpon's door.

"Yes."

"But...she's...." Her features condensed into anger as she stood speechless. Finally she shouted, "You go to the devil!" and slammed her door.

Jeff gave her another salute and started down the stairs, smiling this time. *Ainoura, I guess we're just not meant for each other.*



“This man! Why am I supposed to be with him? I don’t want him,” Cholpon said in Kyrgyz to Djamila. “He’s...well...he tried to....”

Djamila gave her an indulgent, even encouraging smile. “And did you enjoy this?”

“Enjoy? I didn’t let him!”

They sat together on a bench shielded from the sun under a wooden pergola covered with morning-glory vines. The heart-shaped leaves and curling, twining tendrils shone translucent green in the strong light, and the funnel-shaped flowers held the same clear blue as the sky.

“But did you enjoy his trying?” Djamila asked.

Cholpon blushed and turned away, wanting to dissolve into the cool shadows and splashes of green light filtering through the leaves. She’d never heard Djamila speak this way before. Jeff’s opening her gown, the touch of his hand on her breasts, his eager expression had been with her ever since. In dreams, driving back to the Circle, even while meditating she had played out the possible next steps, unable to stop herself.

But unable to yield to it either. For years she’d struggled to free herself from that need, and now she didn’t want to get dragged back into it. During her apprenticeship in the Circle she’d fought a long battle with lust and thought she’d won, but now it was flaming up again, stronger than ever.

In her late teens and early twenties, before becoming a Sufi, she’d gone along with the orthodox communist view of sex: the glass of water theory. The Party, to hasten the eradication of bourgeois puritanism, had declared that sex was just another bodily urge, like thirst. If you want a glass of water, just drink it. Sex is no different. If you want it, just do it.

As a student at the Kyrgyz National University and as a young teacher of music and English, she’d downed quite a few glasses. The more she drank, though, the thirstier she became, ending up miserable and unsatisfied. She kept expecting there to be something more to it than a quick slug.

Eventually she saw a pattern in her relationships: At the beginning he wants her but she doesn’t want him, but gradually his desire excites hers and she lets him. Then she starts wanting him, but at that point he stops wanting her and looks around for somebody new. After repeating this cycle, she’d come to the bitter

conclusion that most men didn't want to *have* a woman, they wanted to have *had* her, another drink, another name on the list.

But in fairness not all men were like that. There's also the kind who just flops over on his back, throws his arms and legs up in the air, goes goo-goo, and expects you to take care of him forever.

When she realized she was addicted to something she didn't enjoy, she'd met Djamila, who'd lifted her out of those cravings. Meditating put the brief joys of girls and boys into perspective. Within the deep pool of her being lay depths of divine bliss, a fulfillment that didn't evaporate.

During her first years as a Sufi she had a few more unsatisfying affairs. After deciding for chastity, she was beset by lurid dreams and fantasies that became increasingly depraved as she ignored them. This just strengthened her resolve, though, and she became scathingly antisexual to defend against them. Eventually she won and they faded. Somewhere along the line her prudery must have faded too, because for years she'd been at peace about the whole topic. Now Djamila seemed to be urging her to plunge back into it all.

Not again. She couldn't bear to be dependent on a man, to worry about how he's thinking about her, when will he stop wanting her.

But a Westerner, an American...maybe they're different. Maybe really able to communicate and share as equals, to see you for who you are, not just assume the whole universe revolves around their needs.

Somehow she doubted it.

She looked at the lush vines and made herself think about them instead. Morning-glories thrived in this sunny, arid climate, spreading in rampant profusion. The astral being who dwelt in them and drew power from their psychedelic seeds effused a wizard-like presence around the plants, a vapor of enchantment Cholpon respected but avoided. Some Sufis chewed the seeds for the visions they produced, but Djamila recommended against this, saying they, like other drugs, use up your energy and leave you weak and dependent.

Come to think of it, she said the same about sex, so why was she now telling Cholpon to go ahead? So much for the

distraction of the flowers. "I thought we were supposed to be celibate."

Djamila waved a frail arm dismissively.

"Supposed...supposed,' that's a word people fall down over. This celibacy here is just to build up your inner power. It's useful for that. But in itself it has no importance."

The *Shayka's* expression was half a grimace, half a smile. "Sex is not something bad...it's like going back to being an infant, it can be fun but a lower level. And it reinforces duality, makes you think there's something outside yourself...that you need...in yourself." She sat drifting on distant memories. "If the desire is mild, we can let it go, but if it is too strong, if it takes over your mind, better to go ahead with it. Fighting against it makes people crazy." She laughed like one relieved to be beyond the struggle. "Doing it makes them crazy too, but at least they enjoy life a little more."

Cholpon raised her bare feet on the bench and wrapped her arms around her knees, black hair falling thick and straight around her face. Jeff...her objections were just thoughts. Her yearning was a feeling. According to the Veda, feelings were a better guide than thoughts; the emotions, when not confused by stress, were a more refined tool than the intellect. "So...I should...be with him?"

"Should"—that's another one like 'supposed.'" The teacher flapped her wizened hands in scorn. "Useless words." Her eyes locked fiercely on Cholpon's. "Who are you? What do you want? That's all that matters. You *are* with him, right now. He is always in your mind. You want him. There is a reason for that. It is too strong just to let go. So enjoy it...if you can."

"But what is the reason?"

"Just some karma." Djamila wrinkled her lips.

"Somewhere...sometime in the past you two built up deep desires for each other. So strong you couldn't finish in one life. Now you have come back together...to fulfill them. Just that."

"Will it be good or bad?"

Djamila shrugged. "Both, probably."

"Do you know what we had between us before?"

The *Shayka* shook her wispy white head. "Better not to know those past-life things. They just distract us. If the memories were helpful, we would have them. But they're just a muddle. It's a blessing to forget the past...a less evolved state than the present."

Better to focus on who you are now and what you want now.”

Cholpon’s mind leaped toward Jeff, then recoiled at the thought of leaving Djamila. “I am your *chela*”—her voice turned pleading—and I want to become enlightened.”

Djamila wrapped her in an all-encompassing look. “That you are...and that you will become.”

“But I’m afraid he’ll pull me away. He’s not like us.”

“You are not so easily pulled. Maybe you will pull him. We shall see. Now you have a chance to finish what you started...long ago.”

“Being with a man....” Cholpon closed her eyes with a frown. “Especially in that way...after all these years...it seems so strange.”

“It *is* strange, all this business of bodies...but apparently you need it. Some desires have to be acted out before they can be left behind. No harm in that. It generates a little more karma and slows you down, but you’re not in any hurry.”

“He is in a hurry...but not to get enlightened.”

Djamila laughed, then her expression turned probing. “One reason I can tell there are such strong ties between you is that you keep speaking of him. He is not the main thing. This horrible weapon...that may kill so many people. You have quite forgotten about it.”

Cholpon lowered her head in shame. It was true. She was like a teenager who can’t think of anything except her crush. That bomb could kill everyone in Bishkek...poison the land and rivers...and she was day-dreaming about a man.

“Would you like to keep that from happening?”

She met the *Shayka*’s eyes. “Very much so.”

“Then I will teach you a few extra things...to help with that. Come.” Slowly and stiffly Djamila stood up. “First we meditate together. Out in the sun.” She hobbled a few painful steps, while Cholpon restrained her urge to offer a steadying arm, knowing how adamantly self-sufficient the old woman was. As her joints limbered, Djamila strode out to the yard, her coral necklace swaying.

Even in the morning, the sun glared down, filling the sky and glinting off the sand that surrounded the pergola behind the main house. This was the ramshackle side, an annex of unpainted

plywood and tin roofs. Their budget wouldn't yet allow the improvements they had planned. The older section still had ornate carvings on the eaves that reminded her of her grandparent's home. She liked this gingerbread charm, which was prevalent before the revolution but died out as utility replaced ornament in the socialist building crafts.

From here they couldn't see the lake but could hear its lapping, a sound that saturated them, waking and sleeping. The mountains, vastly blue with white peaks, soared above them.

Djamila prodded the sand with her gnarled feet until she found a soft area and said, "Sit here, face *Surya*."

Cholpon squinted at the sun. Strange, she thought, the only times they meditated in the sun was at dawn on festival days. The sand was warm through her cotton shift but cooler as she wriggled deeper. She pulled her heels onto her thighs in lotus position. The teacher sat beside her, lowering herself more quickly than she had risen, and scooted in close so their knees touched.

Strange again: they always kept to their own space when meditating.

The barn and stable were nearby, and the breeze brought them scents of hay and dung. Cholpon inhaled the blend, that crisp, herby odor of dry alfalfa and the dank heaviness of digested alfalfa. Good smells. It was only meat waste that reeked.

The breeze also brought them the mingled songs of women working the fields, the rising and falling cadences of the ancient hymns that joined them with each other, the earth, and Allah. When would she sing with her sisters again? Maybe never. She was getting swept away...by a dark wind.

Acel walked by, her carpenter's tool belt swinging from her hips. She stared at them, met Cholpon's eyes with a look of envy, then glanced away. More jealousies, Cholpon thought. All this special attention was bound to create them. Cholpon would talk to her later.

Djamila waited until they were alone before speaking. "This is a *sidhi* to develop your inner light...so you can see objects hidden from view. You don't close your eyes all the way. Leave them a little open, but let them roll back like you're looking into your head. Let the sun shine right in."

Cholpon's eyes fluttered uncomfortably at first, then relaxed.

“Within you is your own little sun, a connection to *Surya*,” the teacher continued. “You are a microcosm of the universe, so everything is within you, including the sun. It’s there on the subtle level, your astral body. That’s what the scriptures mean when they say we’re made in the image of God. The universe is God’s body, so each of us has the universe inside us. This is God’s great gift to humans...once we find it. The astrology works through there, but we want it now for its light.” Her eyes shone from deep within.

“We will wake it up,” the *Shayka* continued. “For this you use a special mantra. Let me know when you are free of thoughts.”

Cholpon exhaled, allowed her mind to sink toward the silence of the transcendent, then nodded. Djamila leaned close and whispered: “*Agni melei*.” As the sounds plunged into her quietness, washes of orange and yellow flowed across Cholpon’s vision. Flames roiled at the edge, and her brain seemed to blaze. She sat as if inside the sun, engulfed in hydrogen fusion.

Until now, Cholpon had experienced the inner world of meditation as a silent glow. This fire was glorious but dreadful in its devouring power. “Just be with the sound and the light,” the teacher said, sensing her fears. “This is the astral *Surya*. Here only ignorance is burned.” Through the linkage of their knees, Cholpon could feel an energy current running from Djamila into her, calming her yet supercharging her awareness, expanding her mental space out towards infinity. The mantra quieted to a hum, and the light diffused into a soft gold. Her empty mind glistened.

After what could have been minutes or hours, the *Shayka* spoke: “Now we will work on the body. Some asanas. First the cobra, the *kundalini* animal.”

Cholpon pulled her mind reluctantly out of the ethereal light. She unfolded from the lotus, stretched out on her stomach and raised her upper body off the sand, then tilted her head back until the whites of her eyes met the sun. Its radiance poured into her. As she held the pose, her spine extended tautly, then each vertebra relaxed, sending starbursts across her vision.

“We’re working with the second highest level of *kundalini* here. Its seat is in the forehead.

I know that already, thought Cholpon.

“Now the shoulder stand, to put some pressure on the upper *chakras*.”

Cholpon rolled on her back and raised her legs into the air until she was almost vertical. Her long shift fell to her thighs. She wiggled her toes at the sun, and the breeze tickled the soles of her feet.

“Drop down into the plow.”

Cholpon bent her legs over her head until her toes reached the sand, her body taking the shape of a plowshare. The blood pooling down into her head made it feel larger. The teacher leaned over her, touched one hand to the crown of her head and the other to the base of her throat, and began to massage. The pressure on her throat made her want to cough, but as she tensed, Djamila said, “Relax into it. Open up.”

Light flowed between the *Shayka*’s hands, pulsating in waves that built in power. The tension eased and Cholpon’s face seemed to burn. The more she surrendered to the light, the stronger it became. As it approached overwhelming, Djamila licked her thumb and rubbed it on the center of Cholpon’s forehead. Cholpon felt a coolness that drew the light toward it. As Djamila pressed down, it concentrated there in a small circle that flashed light and dark, on and off. When dark, it was ringed by a corona like an eclipsed sun; when light, it was a brilliant beam surrounded by darkness. The flashing seemed to go with her heartbeat, then it slowed and seemed to go with her breath; finally the dark phase stopped, and her miniature sun shone steadily.

Djamila took her hands away. “This is *Bindu Surya*, your inner light. It has always been there, but now you are awake to it. Would you like to see things with it?”

Cholpon nodded, mute.

“Then you will dance,” the *Shayka* said, “in the dark room.” Although tiny, she bristled with a force field; her flossy white hair stood out from her head and her dilated eyes were beacons.

With a long exhalation Cholpon lowered her knees and uncurled her body onto the sand. She lay for a few swirly moments in the corpse pose, then got up woozily. They walked back to the house, this time Cholpon the unsteady one.

They entered the plywood annex and went down a narrow corridor that separated two rows of dormitory rooms. The hallway was hung with *shyrdaks*, lengths of felt appliquéd with velvet and satin into colorful swirling patterns. They brightened and insulated the dim interior, as they did in the Kyrgyz yurts they were

originally made for.

The two women passed through a curtain of glass beads into the main house with its drably painted, high ceilinged rooms. Here the walls were also hung with fabric, but since insulation wasn't necessary, cotton and silk were used, in colors and forms that seemed to chase each other into intricate symmetries. The kitchen sisters were bustling with lunch preparations, and the aromas of baking bread and boiling cabbage filled the air.

In the center of the house, encased within its own set of interior walls, was a windowless room, its walls and door covered outside and in with thick brown felt to block noise and light. They entered it into a darkness so total Cholpon felt she'd disappeared.

Like all the Friends, she came to the dark room alone twice a week for trance dancing, a half hour of solitary whirling that took her beyond the senses. The absence of light, sound, and companions turned her perceptions inward, where she saw visions, heard silent music, and for ecstatic moments merged with the Divine. To Cholpon this room was a vortex, a cyclotron, a chute into another dimension. This was her first time here, though, in the dazzle of her inner light.

The *Shayka's* disembodied voice was thin but musical: "Now think your new mantra and dance the dervish rings. At the end, when your arms are raised and you are whirling with the planets, that is the time. Then the inner and outer *Suryas* will be conjunct. You can look into the astral channels...and see."

"What will I see?"

"Whatever you want. Come tell me afterwards." Djamila abruptly left the room, sending a flash of light over the felt-covered walls and hardwood floor. As the door closed, blackness gobbled up the intruding rays.

Cholpon could feel her identity disappearing. Snuffed...like a little candle flame. Now just some smoky thoughts. Am I here? Is here here? Where is down? And up? She rubbed her bare feet across the wood for assurance. That's down. Up is here, where I'm thinking. Where who is thinking? There must be somebody in here. She raised her hand, then dropped it before touching her head. Leave the senses. Let the physical fall away. Don't resist...dissolve....

She saw Djamila's face, then her parents', but as she tried to

focus on them, they vanished.

Let it all go.

Cholpon—she clung to her name. Forget that...don't hold on.

But what's left?

Just this. She replaced her name with her new mantra and began to turn with regal slowness in the dark. Yes...unwrap me, uncoil me like a too-tight spring and spiral me out into what I really am. Out of my thoughts...out of my ego. Into...what?

Unity...with the cosmic Self.

But I'll never get there if I keep thinking. Back to the mantra.

Giving herself up to its sound, she orbited, first in a ring around the floor, then like a planet around the sun, and finally like the universe around its still center, the *Brahmasthan*, the channel to the source. As she spun faster, centrifugal force furled her dress up around her, lofted her hair, and lifted her arms above her head, light as wings.

Her temples tingled as her brain waves synchronized and reinforced each other into coherent pulsations. The mantra faded away, leaving her alert with no thoughts. Since the ego was just a construct of thoughts, it dropped away along with them, freeing her from the small self.

In the silence beyond her shell, she became her soul, an eternal being attached but not confined to her body. This divine essence, God within her, both loved her and was her. She knew it had led her through countless incarnations and was now guiding her home to enlightenment.

With a rush of bliss, the boundary between subject and object disappeared and she expanded into unity with all creation. Beneath a billion disguises, everything was a single soul encompassing the universe, oneness aware of itself.

Gliding and pivoting on the balls of her feet, breathing in a thin stream that seemed to flow directly from her nostrils to her brain, stretching upwards, twirling in her own breeze, she ascended the dark in a luminous helix.

As her breath stopped, her last boundary dissolved and she merged into a still, deep ocean of being, the unified field. Rather than impersonal and distant, this too was her soul, God and Cholpon united in a joy so complete that any possibility of

suffering was left behind with the hull of her ego.

From this oneness she knew all dualities were superficial. Male and female, pain and pleasure, life and death, good and bad, electrons and quarks, galaxies and black holes, Creator and creature were just polarities seeking, mating, and fleeing their opposite. That turmoil was the thin exterior of an unchanging sea of consciousness.

As she took a breath, her inner light intensified until she seemed to be spinning inside a diamond. She could see into its facets as if they were screens. She thought of Jeff, and desire leaped up. This clouded the gem, though, and she had to wait until it lessened and the diamond grew clear again. From one facet flashed a faint image, like a slide projected in a lit room. Jeff was sitting in the front seat of a truck with a black man, a white man, and a Kyrgyz. He looked worried. She wished she were with him, but this erased the vision.

She tried to calm herself so it would return, but thoughts and emotions poured in. As the diamond dimmed, she became aware of her body, the skip of her feet and weight of her arms, and she slowed to a stop. The room kept whirling.

She stood gulping air and sobbing, wanting to be with him. To be able to see but do nothing about it seemed a cruel gift.

She felt the felt walls, she felt her wet face. She was back in her small self. She left the room, shielding her eyes from the harsh light, walked dizzily to Djamila's office, and told her what she had seen.

"And the bomb?" the *Shayka* asked.

Cholpon put her hand to her forehead. "I forgot."

Djamila's tiny frame rocked with rueful chuckles. "It is him that you want. You must go to him. That is your heart's desire. Together you may be able to find it."

Feeling both ashamed and happy, Cholpon bowed her head in obedience.

"And the dancing in the light?" the teacher asked. "How was that?"

Cholpon looked up, her face bright. "The best dervish rings ever. So clear...and huge. I was one with God. Why does it have to end?"

Djamila looked at her reassuringly. "When you're

enlightened, it doesn't end. Then there's only one reality. But until then, reality is different in different states of consciousness."

Cholpon tried to focus her churning mind on the *Shayka's* words.

"The dance put you into unity consciousness, just a taste of it. Now you're back in duality consciousness. Very different worlds. Each has its own rules...and needs to be respected for what it is. Here everything is split apart." Djamila's hand severed the air. "There's you and me and a gap between us. We're bound by the senses, locked into matter and time.

"But this relativity has its basis in unity. It manifests out of that." The teacher swept her arm around the room, pointing here and there. "All these different things are just one thing, God's awareness taking on forms. What you experienced in the dance is the ultimate truth. And that is what awaits you...permanently."

Cholpon bowed at the blessing of the *Shayka's* knowledge. "*Allah-aum*," she said and left the room.

Before she could drive to Bishkek she had another duty, a job she loved. It was her day to be *muezziina* and sing *adhan zuhur*, the call to midday prayer. She climbed up the rusty iron ladder to the wooden platform they had built atop the water tower, their highest structure. They couldn't afford a minaret, so this was their substitute. Unfortunately it had caused them trouble with the Muslim establishment.

Last year Djamila had applied to get the Circle accredited as a *Zawiya*, a Sufi training center. This would have brought some funding, given them official recognition, and allowed their sisters to compete for the few laical positions open to women. A team of *mullahs* had come to inspect. Judging from the amount they ate, they seemed to like the food, but little else met with their approval. In their report they derided the wooden platform and cited the lack of a minaret as the most visible sign of a pervasive lack of respect for Islamic tradition. They also condemned the yogic meditation techniques, although these are widespread among the Sufis of India. Before they arrived, Djamila had hidden the pictures of Goddesses.

In her defense, she responded that the *mullahs'* attachment to minarets had more to do with their shape than with spirituality. The patriarchs' conviction, she told them, was, "No phallus, no Islam."

This did not go over well. The religious fathers took offense and denounced her as a heretic, ordering all the sisters to leave the Circle and return to orthodoxy. A few obeyed but most stayed.

Afterwards, Djamila said the incident had purged and strengthened their community and taught them again the value of the Sufi saying, Love the pitcher less and the water more—The outer form of faith is less important than its inner content.

Since then, these rough planks she was standing on had taken on a new beauty for Cholpon. The Circle had paid a price for them. She reminded herself, though, that this platform too was just another outer form.

From up here she could see the wholeness of this place she loved: The immense blue span of Lake Issyk-Kul, second largest mountain lake in the world, so huge its horizon showed the curve of earth and so deep the Soviets used to test submarines in it. Its fathomless waters were warmed by thermal flow from the earth's core, keeping it from freezing even in the coldest winter. Across it to the north rose the mountains of Kazakhstan, their jagged blue silhouette faded over the watery miles. Behind her to the south, close and clear through the dry air, towered the peaks of Kyrgyzstan, colossi of rock and snow.

A road ran along the shore toward the town of Kara-Kol, a few of whose roofs she could see to the east. Around her spread their farm, its fields quilted onto the alluvial fan left by the stream that flowed from the mountains into the lake. Terraced into the slopes of the narrow canyon were orchards of fruit trees, and beneath them were beehives and grape arbors heavy with clusters of muscat. The canyon floor held plots of vegetables and pastures of their animals: cows for their milk, sheep for their wool, horses for their carriage.

Tending them were the Sufi sisters, working and singing, their voices reaching her in a weave of music. Despite the inevitable spats, she knew and loved all the women, the thirty in the fields and the ten around the house. They were her family. Now so much darkness was rushing at them. Would they be together? Even alive?

Closer in stood the barn, corrals, tool sheds, and racks for drying raisins and apricots. Beneath her stretched the roof of the house, where she noticed a few more missing shingles. Her mind

returned to practicality. Budget or no budget, these had to be replaced before the first snow, which could come next month.

But now it was time to call the faithful to prayer. “*Allahu Akbar*”—God is most great—she began the Arabic invocation. Singing in her strong alto, she could sense her voice gliding over the lake, echoing off the mountains, permeating the universe, telling all who could hear that now was the time to stop laboring, face west toward Mecca, bow to the earth, and offer praise to Allah. Then come eat lunch.

Her voice soared into the coda, “*La ilaha illa Allah*”—There is no God but God. The verse was used by fundamentalists to exclude other religions, so Cholpon hadn’t cared for it. But it became her favorite when Djamila had explained that it meant, Everything is God, nothing but God exists; God is the universe in synergy, the Whole that is more than the sum of Its parts. God is All-ah.

She was one of those parts, so nothing permanently bad could happen to her. Bring it on! Now she was ready.



Jeff listened to the gray-robed *muezzin* chanting the call to midday prayer from the minaret of the Bishkek mosque. The man's bass voice resonated from his stocky chest and carried over the city in plaintive ululations. The drawn-out, quavering sounds filled Jeff with an unfamiliar longing for the unearthly and made him think of Cholpon singing to him three nights ago. He could almost see her face as she leaned toward him, feel her hand as she stroked him.

Resisting the urge to float away on waves of song, he brought himself back to the front seat of the US Army two-and-a-half ton truck. Crammed in with him were Sergeant Blake at the wheel, Erkin as their translator, and Captain Justin Holmes riding shotgun. The GIs wore desert camos and jungle boots and Jeff a striped polo shirt, cotton pants, and running shoes. He was glad to be in civis rather than the camos. The uniforms were part polyester, so patches of sweat were already breaking up the chocolate-chip pattern.

"The worst time to come here," said Jeff. "The place'll be filling up now, and they don't like infidels around the mosque."

Cars were wheeling into the parking lot and men were strolling into the plain, unornamented building. With a minaret instead of a steeple, it reminded Jeff of fundamentalist churches back in Wyoming, a functional place of worship rather than an architectural monument. A gift from Saudi Arabia, the mosque had been built after the collapse of communism, when the restrictions on religion had been lifted. The simple sanctuary of cream-colored ceramic tiles was dominated by its fifty-foot hexagonal tower of polished tin that swelled out into a cupola at the top, where the *muezzin* was chanting.

This was the main mosque, and one of the few in the capital. Most Kyrgyz weren't very religious; they didn't let faith interfere with fun. They boozed and went to mosque mainly for social occasions. In Bishkek almost no women wore veils, but in the more traditional towns in the south, a few did.

Being in the minority, though, made the fundamentalists all the more devout. Most of the men arriving now for prayers would be militant defenders of Islam.

"How about if we stay outside the grounds?" Jeff asked Holmes. "Can we do it from the street?"

The captain gauged the distance and shook his head.

“Negative. We need to be within thirty meters.”

“Maybe we could come back later,” Jeff suggested.

“Negatory. They might’ve noticed us already. Then they’ll move it as soon as we go. Drive on in, Blake.” Holmes’s large body was solid muscle, the kind that would turn to fat if he stopped lifting weights. About thirty, he was prematurely balding and what hair he had was buzz-cut and blond almost to invisibility, so his head was a dome. The pink of his skin accentuated the gray of his eyes. His small, smiling mouth and plump, unlined face made him look to Jeff like a gigantic boy.

“Yes, sir,” said the lanky sergeant, his dark skin, short brambly hair, and closely trimmed mustache glistening in the swelter.

“Get as close as you can to those outbuildings. If it’s here, they’re not going to put in on the altar.” Holmes twisted around and spoke into the rear of the deuce-and-a-half. “Start the sweep now.”

Jeff watched through the rear-view mirror as an electronics specialist put on a headset and switched on the ionizing radiation detector, a green metal box three feet high. The specialist adjusted its dials, glancing back and forth between wavering meters and a CRT screen.

It couldn’t find anything in Iraq, thought Jeff, but maybe it’ll do better here.

Around the detector sat a dozen sergeants mostly in their late twenties. Their manner blended eagerness, a quiet hardness, and a dash of fear. They held black submachine guns with silencers. Their helmets and flak vests lay in a pile on the floor, too uncomfortable to wear in this heat. For shade and concealment, a canvas top covered the back of the truck.

From the driver’s seat Blake stared with yellow-tinged bloodshot eyes at the minaret, and his face broke into a sparkling grin. “Great spot to mount a fifty caliber. Man could bring pee on half the town from up there.”

“If he’s got a fifty up there,” said Holmes, “it’ll be your job to go get it.”

“Nothing to it.” The sergeant made a fist. “I’d just tell him I’m a Black Muslim come to join them. Climb up there with him and say, ‘Brother, let’s close our eyes for a moment of prayer.’ Then I’d heave him over the side.”

“Blake,” the captain said, “if anyone could pull that off, you could.”

“What if the nuke is here? What then?” Jeff asked.

“Depends,” replied Holmes. “When we find it, we’re supposed to, you know, just blockade it and call in the Kyrgyz Army, let them get it. That’s the SOP.” His scowl showed his opinion of diplomatic procedure. “But if the bad guys try to take it out before that, we can...Stop Them!” His large pink face and small gray eyes brightened at the possibility. “But if it’s in an embassy...a whole other can of worms. Might even need the UN. And you know what good they are.”

The men around the mosque were staring and gesturing at the truck and talking animatedly. A thin, elderly cleric detached himself from the group and approached the intruders; the others followed. The *mullah* walked with slow stiffness, and the laymen stayed several paces behind. The old man wore a brown robe woven with stripes of red, black, and gold and a skullcap of the same material atop his gray head. Below large dark eyes his cheeks were grizzled and sunken. His lips moved in prayer.

“Tell him we just want to admire his beautiful building...we won’t get out of the truck.” Holmes said to Erkin. “We’ll only be a minute.”

Erkin nodded, pressure showing in his slim tawny face and narrow eyes. Before he could translate, the *mullah* gazed up at Holmes and asked in accented English, “From where you come?”

Holmes patted Erkin and smiled, playing the naive, friendly American. “Well, this man here’s from right here in Kyrgyzstan. He’s been showing us the sights. I’m from Indiana and Blake here is from New Jersey. Where you from, Madsen?”

“Wyoming,” said Jeff.

“So we’re kinda from all over,” Holmes continued. “How about yourself?”

The cleric folded his frail arms across his chest. “If you are not Muslims, must go.”

Holmes raised his beefy hands in innocent bafflement. “We’re just out seeing the sights. We didn’t know about the rules.”

“You not belong here.”

“OK, have it your way,” Holmes said. He turned to Blake and whispered, “You can’t start the truck,” then said louder,

“Sergeant, let’s get out of here.”

Blake ground the starter several times.

“What’s the trouble?” Holmes asked him.

Blake ground the starter again. “Maybe it’s flooded, sir.”

Holmes shrugged helplessly at the old man. “Seem to be having a little problem with the truck. We’ll go just as soon as we get it started.” He forced a small-mouthed smile that made his pink cheeks even plumper. “Shouldn’t be more than a minute.”

The men behind the *mullab* were muttering and scowling at the profanation. Erkin was trying to placate them in Kyrgyz, a rapid, sibilant language that sounded to Jeff like a machete cutting tall grass. More onlookers began to cluster around the deuce-and-a-half. Bold curious boys were bounding up in the air to see in the windows. Most of the laymen wore black pants, gray-and-white shirts, and colorfully embroidered skullcaps. Jeff imagined a wife stitching a cap for her husband, setting it proudly on his head, and saying the Kyrgyz equivalent of, “No reason it can’t be pretty.”

Valerie...once she’d made him a bag for his climbing iron from the leg of an old pair of jeans, embroidering the denim with flowers and birds. Jeff had cherished it, liking the contrast of the sentimental decoration with the practicality of the pitons and karabiners inside. Where was it now? Where was she now? That wind kept blowing.

“Got it...clear,” said the technician at the detector.

Holmes told Blake, “Try it again.”

This time the engine started; Blake revved it.

“OK! Sorry to bother you folks,” the captain said. “We’ll be on our way.”

Blake ground the gears into reverse, and they pulled out of the parking lot. The boys waved to them. “Next stop?” Blake asked.

Holmes glanced at the list on his clipboard. “The Iranian Embassy.”

“It’s not far,” said Jeff. He directed them down busy thoroughfares and shady side streets to a two-story cube of polished marble that reminded him of a mausoleum. The new, almost windowless building was set amid a block of pre-communist-revolutionary mansions that were now run-down after eighty years of neglect. Two guards of the Islamic revolution stood at the embassy gate, and a large photo of a hard-eyed, black-

bearded cleric with head wrapped in cloth adorned the entrance. So much for revolutions improving things, thought Jeff.

He wondered if one of the guards had thrown a grenade at him the other night. Both looked like they would've enjoyed it, and they carried AK-47s just like the raiders. Their glowering leader would probably love to revenge their sacred grievances by killing a million Americans with a nuclear bomb.

Jeff noticed three Kyrgyz soldiers ambling along the block. "You know, one thing we should check out," he told Holmes. "The militia patrol around the embassies...mainly to keep down street crime. It's embarrassing when an ambassador gets mugged. We can ask if any of them saw a truck like that...or something delivered, anything unusual going on that night."

"Can you take care of that?" Holmes asked.

"I'll do it," Jeff said.

Holmes spoke to Blake: "You can probably get closer from the back. Try the alley."

They turned at the corner and again at a narrow alley lined with overflowing trash cans, then stopped behind the embassy where a nine-foot concrete wall flanked a gated driveway. Inside stood two more guards. Tin storage sheds and garages rimmed the inner courtyard at the rear of the main building.

"Leave it running," said Holmes, "in case we have to get hat." He turned around to the technician. "Roll it."

"Roger," came the reply. The machine hummed as it scanned the air for decaying isotopes.

The guards, officious but bored, stared at the truck. One nudged the other and gestured at the US Army insignia on the side. "Americans?" came a hostile bellow.

"Tell them you're Kyrgyz," said Holmes.

After an interchange, Erkin relayed, "The others...are they Americans?"

The captain leaned out the window and grinned at the guards. "How you guys doing?"

One hurled a Farsi curse and jerked his AK-47 up to his chest but didn't point it. The other took a radio handset from his belt and spoke into it, then shouted at Erkin in Russian.

Erkin said, "He ask what we want."

"Tell them we're tourists," said Holmes. "Just driving

around.”

Erkin and the guards yelled back and forth. “Cannot stop here,” he interpreted.

“Won’t be long,” said Holmes.

The guards from the front ran around the side of the embassy. The rear door of the building opened, and two men in dark suits walked out.

“We got movers on the right,” Blake said.

“Call the air force,” said Holmes.

The older of the two men, distinguished looking with graying black hair, an aquiline nose, and thick mustache, approached the truck, followed by his assistant carrying a briefcase.

“Why are you here?” the ambassador asked. “This is property of Iran.”

“We’re in the alley,” the captain said. “You don’t own the alley.”

“What do you want?”

“We’re checking the place out,” Holmes said. “Thinking of buying it.”

“You must go!” The man drew himself to his full but modest height.

“We’ll go when we want to. This is a public street. We’re not on the embassy.”

“Now!” the ambassador insisted, then spoke to the guards. All four pointed their AKs at the truck, but kept their fingers off the triggers.

Steady there, Jeff thought. He could feel Erkin trembling next to him. Maybe the bomb is here. Otherwise this guy’s risking a diplomatic disaster.

“Makes me nervous, somebody pointing a weapon at me,” the captain said to the ambassador. “Could you tell them to put them down?”

“Get out!” the Iranian replied.

“We’ll just be another minute.”

“No! Now!”

One guard began cursing the Americans in rhythmic Farsi. The ambassador spoke to his assistant, who opened his briefcase, took out a cell phone, pressed a button, and gave it to him.

From the rear of the truck, the technician said, “Done. Place is clear.”

“Out of here,” said Holmes to Blake and waved to the ambassador as the truck pulled away. “Say hi to the *ayatollah*.”

Blake stuck his head out the window and called, “Yo’ mama sucks Osama!”

The Iranians raised their weapons in the air and shouted with triumph at having chased off the great Satan.

When they turned the corner, Jeff patted Erkin on the knee and told him, “You see, nothing to it. But you’re definitely earning your pay.”

The troops blew off their tension with calls of, “Like to waste those ragheads” and “Fuckin’ send ‘em to Allah.”

Jeff wondered how Erkin, as a Muslim, was reacting to the GIs’ comments. Erkin’s expression showed only relief at being alive.

Holmes exhaled heavily and laughed from stress. “Guess our ambassador will be getting a pissed-off phone call.”

“She can handle it,” said Jeff. “But I thought the Kyrgyz gave us a permission paper, like a search warrant, so we could check anyplace out.”

“Yeah, I got something like that here.” The captain tapped the papers on his clipboard. “But who needs it?” He gave Jeff a friendly whack on the shoulder; Jeff winced. “I thought you said you were Special Forces. You’ve been a civilian too long.”

“Hey, I thought it was just fine. Most fun I’ve had all day,” Jeff said, blanching.

“Where to now?” Blake asked.

“Some Arab-owned warehouses on the edge of town,” Holmes said and gave the list to Jeff for directions.

“Turn left at the corner,” said Jeff. “It’s a ways.”

They drove on a bustling, potholed avenue amid a menagerie of vehicles: small three-wheeled delivery wagons, battered Soviet coupes, spiffy German sedans of the new elite, tractors driven by farmers coming to town in their only vehicle, buses ranging from little jitneys painted with magic charms to long omnis jointed in the middle to go around corners, trucks from pickups to vans to diesels like the one used to steal the bomb. A few brave bicyclists rode hugging the shoulder, glancing anxiously to the left for turning cars. The rule of the road was the weaker yielded to the stronger, and some drivers wouldn’t brake for a bike.

Men and cars, Jeff thought, egos on parade wherever you go. Pedal to the metal...with a tank full of testosterone. Look out, world. Here they drove with avid aggression, passing others and terrorizing pedestrians at every chance. Many of the pedestrians were equally bold jaywalkers, affecting the cool hauteur of matadors as they dodged the hurtling cars. It was sport, often blood sport. Jeff wondered if it was because communism had given them so few outlets for competition, for the macho assertion of me-first. Driving here was like business in the US. Just having a car set them apart.

The Delta Force truck rumbled on through downtown Bishkek. Jeff was glad the city had few skyscrapers, so the Ala-Too peaks—blue-and-white miles of snowy granite that filled the southern horizon—were unrivaled as they floated above the city, distant deities aloof in their own bliss.

The population of the capital was burgeoning towards a million, but it was spread out, so the city didn't feel crowded. Trees and parks kept it green. Modern office buildings, many with white marble facades that from a distance looked elegant but close up were thin and crumbling, fronted the main streets. Apartment buildings, most of them solidly built of brick and stone during the 1930s, lined the side streets. The business streets were bustling, the residential streets quiet, and people could walk to work—a good blend, Jeff thought, for a downtown.

They drove toward the outskirts, which were less pleasant, dominated by clusters of concrete high-rises that were just as ugly but not as dangerous as housing projects in the US. They also passed stretches of hovels, crowded shacks of wood and tin jammed together around meandering dirt paths. Jeff had walked through these slums with Erkin as his guide. There, running water meant you ran down to the communal faucet with your bucket, and plumbing was an outhouse in back. He'd been impressed, though, by the grace of the life going on. Children played, neighbors talked while sweeping their shared porches, somehow something got cooked for dinner. Kyrgyz and Russian alike, they were strong people, too stoic to slump into chaos and hostility.

A Kyrgyz in a shiny black Mercedes whizzed around their truck to pass against oncoming traffic, then darted back in to avoid a head-on. He switched his theft alarm on and off like a siren. A chicken foot dangled from his rearview mirror.

When they stopped at a light, a motorcycle behind them swung out between lanes and passed. The cycle with two men aboard pulled in front of them and stopped. The men wore black helmets and leathers. The one in the rear hopped off, pulled a pistol from his jacket, and aimed with both hands at the truck.

Jeff saw a squinting dark eye above a perforated silencer as he dived and crushed Erkin toward the floor. With a sting another stitch tore out of his wound. The windshield shattered; slugs shrieked in and struck with sharp thunks. Lying against Holmes's side, he could feel the captain jerk once, then again. Blake grunted and his leg kicked Jeff's. The motorcycle roared off. Jeff rose up covered with glass as the bike rounded the corner like a black hornet.

Holmes had a hole in his chest and another in his cheek; the back of his skull was spread over the ceiling of the truck. Blood pumped from the stump of his head and spurted from his chest, spraying warm over Jeff and Erkin. Spasms shook the captain's body, which was sopping and reeking with its crimson sap.

Impatient drivers blew their horns. The GIs in the back were shouting and grabbing their weapons.

Heart jackhammering and breath surging, Jeff rode a wave of adrenalin. Any others out there? Where are they? He looked out the windows but saw no enemies.

Erkin lay on the floor screaming, hands to his head. Blake slumped over the wheel, a red hole in his wet, twitching back. The truck rolled into a parked car. Jeff checked himself for holes—no new ones. He looked at the captain—nothing could be done: the pink had left his face and his eyes were wide and blind, their gray dulling.

Farewell, Justin Holmes, good soldier. Jeff sensed the great hawk of death, wings rising in undulant waves—slow, black, beautiful—carrying the perished away to feed to its young in their mountain nest.

He pulled Erkin, quivering and weeping, up from the floor and checked him for wounds—none. He released him and Erkin slid to back the floor. Jeff turned to Blake, saw an exit wound the size of a fist on his shoulder, pulled him upright and saw an entrance the size of a nickel on his chest. Must be a .45 or a magnum. At least it missed the heart. Sweat dripped from the

sergeant's chin and blood trickled from his fluttering lips. He wheezed through his mouth. His face held an expression of deep puzzlement.

Jeff looked around again for foes. He felt like a boiling pot about to blow its lid off, wanting to shoot back to release hysteria.

A Delta trooper stuck his head in from the rear of the truck. Jeff asked, "Medic?" The soldier nodded, trembling. "Get Blake," Jeff told him. "He's got a chance."

Blake had slumped back over the wheel. Another GI hopped on the running board and opened the door. Jeff eased Blake over on his side and into his comrade's arms. "Well...son of a bitch," Blake whispered, blowing bubbles of red froth, gazing up at Jeff pleadingly but with a lack of register. He gasped for breath but couldn't inflate his lungs; with a sighing whistle he sucked air into the cavity as his blood bubbled out. While the troops blocked traffic and held back a gawking crowd, the medic laid him on the pavement, ripped open his camouflage shirt, sealed the entrance wound with tape, and gave him mouth-to-mouth.

"Goddamned Iranians," a trooper said. "Must've followed us."

Two sergeants tried to get Holmes out of the truck. The door was jammed against the parked car, and he was too big to fit through the window. The bleeding from his chest, cheek, and cratered head had slowed; his uniform was drenched and ruddy, skin gray. The vibrations of his body had stilled, and his small mouth was open round.

"No use," Jeff told them. "Get Blake in the back. We'll get to base."

A traffic cop approached through the crowd, looking stern and in charge. He saw Blake sprawled in the street and shook his head with a manner that said accident victims were just part of his job. Speaking a stream of Kyrgyz, he walked around the truck and gestured at the damage it had done to the parked car.

Jeff darted into the cab and pulled Erkin up from the floor. "Come here. We need you." Erkin gazed at him quavering; Jeff shook him by the shoulders; Erkin's straight black hair fell into his eyes like bangs. "Get yourself together. You're not hurt." Jeff led him out of the cab. "Ask the cop if he saw the motorcycle."

Panting, Erkin clenched his slender fingers into fists and spoke to the man, then relayed back, "He say he need see your

papers.”

Jeff cursed in exasperation. “The motorcycle...did he see it?”

“No,” came the translated reply. “Who belongs to truck?”

Jeff pointed to the crowd. “Ask the people here if anyone saw the motorcycle.”

Erkin shouted to them, and they responded with mutters and head shakes. “No one see.”

Sure, Jeff thought. He heard a siren approaching—more cops. It couldn’t be an ambulance—only a patrol car could order one. More cops would just ensnare them and waste time Blake didn’t have. They had to get him out now.

Jeff bent over the medic, who was tying a second compress around the exit wound on Blake’s shoulder. “Can we move him?”

“Have to,” the medic said, his mouth red with Blake’s blood.

Jeff and three troopers lifted him up, keeping him as level as possible. “*Nyet?*” the policeman said, waving his arms and continuing a torrent of protest.

Erkin translated: “Man must stay here until police can look.”

“He’ll be dead by then,” Jeff said.

They carried him toward the deuce-and-a-half, but the cop blocked their way, furious at having his authority ignored. A huge GI hoisted the policeman under the arms and set him aside as he yelled in outrage. They slid Blake—head lolling, eyes closed, mouth ajar—onto the floor of the truck.

With a look that said, *You’ve pushed me too far*, the cop put his hand on his holster and shouted at them. Erkin relayed: “Everyone arrested. No can go.”

Jeff threw his hands down in disgust, then pointed in at Blake. “This man will die.”

The siren grew louder. The policeman shook his head with righteous firmness and spoke to Erkin, who started to interpret, but Jeff cut him off. “We’re taking him.” He told the troopers: “I’ll drive. I know the way. I want a shooter up front.” He turned to Erkin. “You get in back...and stay down.”

The sergeants exchanged glances, then nodded among themselves. Jeff could sense their thoughts: Holmes had been the only officer. According to chain of command, the highest-ranking sergeant would now lead. But Jeff was older and knew this strange

place.

Jeff figured he was their best chance to get them out. Plus, better to be the leader than the led.

He and a young sergeant walked towards the cab, the others towards the back. Livid at this defiance, the cop rushed forward shouting commands. He started to pull his pistol out, but then looked around at the troopers. They weren't pointing their submachine guns at him...not yet. Stymied, he stood, face orange.

"Send me the ticket, chief," said Jeff as he swung up into the cab.

The captain was where they had left him, sprawled against the door, head and one arm out the window, inert. The seat was slick with blood, and Jeff could feel it warm and wet underneath him as he started the engine. In the rear of the truck the medic was rigging an IV for Blake, and the commo sergeant was radioing to Delta headquarters to have a surgical team ready.

Jeff backed away from the parked car, tearing off its door in the process, and drove away from the siren. A bystander cocked his arm back and threw something at the truck. Grenade, thought Jeff, getting ready to lift his legs away from the floor. A rock bounced off the hood.

As they rounded the corner, Holmes's body flopped over on the young sergeant, embracing him with a limp arm. The sergeant cried out and pushed him away with a shudder; the corpse slid heavily to the floor. Obviously a rookie, the trooper gazed appalled at his hands, now covered with blood. He moved them toward his pant legs as if to wipe them, then stopped. Although he was sitting in blood and the undersides of his fatigues were soggy with it, the topsides were still crisply starched, so he couldn't get them dirty. Finally he leaned forward and wiped his hands on the dashboard, but when he saw the gray-and-red lumps inside the captain's blown-away skull, he threw up over the top of his fatigues.

"You'll get used to it," Jeff said, and thought: Or die first. He imagined Holmes and Blake as they had been fifteen minutes ago, their energy and bantering humor. He liked them. Wished he'd known them longer.

An inner voice accused at him: You blocked off Holmes when you dived for cover. Holmes had to just sit there. You took the space and he took the bullet. Just like Randall in Nam...if you hadn't jumped up, he'd still be alive. You killed him...your

stupidity.

Jeff writhed as his old tormentor lashed him. The wind through the gaping glass blew away a few tears but not the feelings.

Drop it, he told himself. You've got a job to do. Back to base. Now he knew how those guys in the semi must've felt when he shot out their windshield.

Leaning on the horn, Jeff plowed through the traffic and his thoughts. Every car, truck, and cycle held a potential killer. Anyone could shoot at them. Did the guy with the chicken foot have anything to do with it? A scout? Why a chicken foot? Voodoo?

Covered with a fetid stickiness now beginning to crust, hair glinting with glass nuggets, cheek twitching, Jeff bulled his way through to the Kyrgyz Air Force base hospital, where Blake, still unconscious, was wheeled into surgery and Holmes into the morgue.



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complete copy

Author's Afterword

A juggernaut of aggression continues to roll through our world, crushing multitudes of soft, breathing human beings, creating more counter-violence at every turn, lumbering towards annihilation. The brutal men who rule us are too ignorant for the power they wield, and we can't let them keep killing. Now none of us in any country is safe.

The transcendental meditation peace techniques described in *Summer Snow* can prevent terrorism and war. Scientific research has shown when large groups practice these techniques together, violence is reduced both in the local environment and internationally. Forty studies have demonstrated a field effect extending out from the groups of meditators into the surrounding society, neutralizing hostility and fostering calm, positive behavior. The techniques heal fear and aggressive stresses in the collective consciousness, where all humans are connected. Their peaceful influence can end this senseless cycle of wars and create global harmony.

Human nature is not essentially violent. God did not create us to kill each other. The violence comes from an overload of anxiety and stress, and that can be healed.

Peace is possible, but obviously not through force or diplomacy. Those means have failed, and now we must try a more fundamental method that solves this problem at its source in the collective consciousness that joins us all.

Although *Summer Snow* is fiction, the meditation and its effects are reality. To find out more about the scientific research on them, visit www.tm.org and www.invincibility.org.

About the Author

William T. Hathaway won a Rinehart Foundation Award for his



first novel, *A World of Hurt*, which was based on his experiences in the US Special Forces in Panama and Vietnam. An anti-war activist, Hathaway is a member of Veterans Call to Conscience, which encourages soldiers to refuse to kill, and of a group of European peace workers that has established a sanctuary network sheltering US soldiers who have refused to be sent to Iraq and Afghanistan. He was interviewed for *Military Service and Christian Conscience*, a video

production of the Episcopal Church.

Hathaway was born in Mississippi, raised in the Rocky Mountains, and educated at Columbia University and the University of Washington. He spent a year and a half in Central Asia researching and writing *Summer Snow*.

His fiction, poetry, journalism, and literary criticism appear in over 40 periodicals, and he wrote the introduction to *America Speaks Out: Collected Essays from Dissident Writers*. His third novel, *The Road Back*, will be published in 2006. He teaches college English and was a Fulbright professor of creative writing at universities in Germany, where he's currently living.