

The Death and Life of Nicholas Linnear

Ninja Cycle

by Eric van Lustbader, 1946–

Published: 2014

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, events, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.



It is better to travel hopefully, than to arrive.
—*Virginibus Puerisque*, 1881, by Robert Louis Stevenson

Shanghai, China

The sound inside the coffin was akin to that of a vault door closing. The acoustics were eerie, as if the interior was a miniature theater, its unseen audience hushed and waiting for the curtain to rise and the lights to snap on.

There were no lights, but the sound reverberated in the confined space, doubling and redoubling like pinballs crisscrossing each other.

Nicholas Linnear lay, hands crossed over his chest, as he returned to consciousness. He was dressed in the midnight-blue tuxedo he had been wearing earlier, when he had been drinking Champagne, snacking on caviar, watching the diamond lights along the Bund.

Sound was the first sense that returned to him, sight was the last. In the absolute darkness, there was nothing to see. He heard the functions of his body: his breathing, the blood pulsing through him. Then, moving outward, the sound and the smell of the coffin: the soft creak of wood so aromatic the scent caused his nostrils to flare. They had buried him in a raw pine box. Cheapskates. Then the shifting of the soil around the coffin, softer even than the pine.

All of this gave him heart. Nevertheless, sweat crawled down the back of his neck, the indented center of his spine. The reptile brain that ruled his body's autonomic nervous system knew it was in dire straits. The amount of oxygen he had to breathe was severely limited. He went into chi-breath, slowing his pulse, his metabolism, needing only minimal oxygen now.

He could smell the life in the earth around him—and the death. It was as if he had found himself in a place where the two were equal, where what lay between hung in a delicate balance. He could live or he could die.

Ever so slowly, his right hand moved to his trouser leg, to the ribbon of satin that ran vertically down the side. His fingertips found the small section of loose stitches, picked them open one by one. In the cramped space, in the darkness, this took some time, and all the while he was aware of the air inexorably draining away, however slowly he used it up.

Finally, he felt the metal, warm from being against his skin. An old friend. The six-inch blade slithered out from its satin sheath. With his left hand, he probed the lid of the coffin until he found a seam between the boards. Inserting the point of the blade into the seam, he twisted it. The blade was made of Damascus steel, ten thousand layers, divided equally between pure steel for hardness and iron-rich steel for flexibility. Light and dark; yin and yang. It was a blade akin to those used by Japanese samurai to commit *seppuku*, ritual suicide, but more special. It had been a graduation gift from Ang, forged by his own hand. There was no other like it.

Nicholas worked the blade back and forth until the soft pine splintered. A dusting of earth drifted down like snow. He repeated this process in two other spots along the same board. Then he turned on his side, jammed his shoulder against the board. It gave way.

Pale earth poured in. Nicholas was ready for it. Deflecting the cascade with one hand, he worked on the second board. Now that he could sit up, he had better leverage with the boards on either side. The onrush of earth almost choked him. Grabbing a large piece of the first splintered board, he raised it vertically over his

head, pushing through the loosely packed dirt, wriggling his way upward behind it.

His lungs were near to bursting as he breached the surface, and he sucked in the humid night air. It had never felt so sweet to him. Four feet. The grave was shallow. They must have been in a hurry.

Several hundred yards away, large ships were tied up to loading docks. The largest one—an LNG tanker the size of five city blocks, carrying 260,000 cubic meters of liquid natural gas—rose above the rest. The JUSTINE—its name emblazoned in the arc lights.

His ship.

They had been waiting for him on the wide balcony off the crowded ballroom, densely packed with business tycoons and their mistresses, political notables and their mistresses, and even a smattering of Hollywood stars, who were in Shanghai making films or ads—he'd been introduced to Harrison Ford and Scarlett Johansson.

He had been drinking Champagne—more than he should have. But this was his night—the celebration of the first of a fleet of American LNG tankers doing business with the Chinese. More than eighteen months of excruciating negotiations finally had led to this moment. Of course there was talk—there was always talk!—of the Tomkin family background having played a major part in the success of the deal. Nicholas had taken over Tomkin Industries after the old man had died. Since that time, Nicholas had quadrupled the company's size while increasing its bottom line tenfold. Of course, when it came to him there were always rumors. Being mixed race had led him into perilous currents during his childhood in Japan. This night he could not have cared less about rumors. The prize was his and his alone. He only wished Justine had lived to share in his victory.

He had opened the curtained doors to the balcony in response to an urgent coded text message from Joji, his vice president. His mobile couldn't connect to calls or to voicemail in the ballroom—indeed, anywhere inside the hotel, he had found. Texts barely squeaked through. This was typical of hotels that deliberately suppressed cell signals, forcing their guests to use the landlines in their rooms.

The people waiting for him must have known that. They had stationed themselves behind the clattering palms on either side of the balcony. He was just dialing the number from the text when they came for him. Even then, he should have been prepared. He should have heard them despite the hubbub spilling out from the ballroom, but he was thinking of the LNG fleet and the repayment of the debt it had incurred. And in the heady release of his triumph he had allowed the surfeit of Champagne to turn his mind a bit muzzy. Surely after hammering out so long and difficult a bargain he had a right to relax.

That's what they had been counting on.

By the time he had become aware of them, the Propofol had been injected into his vein. He went out instantly. They had used Propofol deliberately. They hadn't wanted to kill him on the spot. Where would be the fun in that? They wanted him to awaken in the coffin and know that he had been buried alive.

That was how these people worked.

Now, brushing the last of the sticky dirt from his tux, he looked at his watch. Twenty-nine minutes to midnight. His gaze rose to the JUSTINE. It was preparing to get under weigh.

His heart skipped a beat and he felt the first onrush of adrenalin that would push him forward. He knew why they had been in such a hurry.

The three men who had been lying in wait for Nicholas, who had dropped him into the pine coffin and hurriedly dug the grave, now joined their two comrades aboard the JUSTINE. Their I.D.s, meticulously manufactured by Section Six of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, gained them access to the ship as officials of customs and immigration. The captain, informed of their presence, anxious to weigh anchor on time, was disinclined to cause a delay by querying them.

„Just tell them they have to be off the ship in fifteen minutes,” he told his mate, and was immediately absorbed in the charts the local harbor pilot had put in front of him.

The five men scurried belowdecks, swift as rats. They each had a mission to perform, and they knew they had little time to complete it. Between the engine room and the massive LNG tanks was a corridor interrupted by a series of thick metal doors specifically designed to prevent any fire that broke out in the engines from coming anywhere near the highly flammable liquid natural gas. Other safeguards were in place: the corridor could be flooded with the flip of a switch; all electrical circuits could be shut down as quickly and efficiently; there were heavily armed layers of electronic surveillance.

The mission of the five men was to override all these precautions, then lay packets of C4 in the engine room, the connecting corridor, and along the side of the LNG tank at the far end of the corridor.

They worked with an almost telepathic concentration. Not a word passed between them; none was needed. The electronics expert bypassed one security system after another. He was quick but methodically careful not to make a mistake. When he was through, he lifted a thumb, and the others got to work. One man entered the engine room. He officiously presented his bogus I.D. to any legitimate crew members he encountered, and saw them turn away, their faces pale, tight as a fist. They were frightened of his power to keep them from leaving China, of throwing them into a Shanghai prison on whatever charges he chose to level. He was given a wide berth, and so was able to secrete the block of C4 in the shadows without the slightest difficulty.

Every thirty seconds or so, one man, who was taller than the others and thin as a pipe, raised his pinched face from his work disabling the auto-locks on the doors in the corridor. His nostrils dilated as he turned his head this way and that, sniffing the air for any smell or vibration that might be out of place. Each time, satisfying himself, he returned to his job, concentrating with the ferocious energy of a rodent.

As soon as he reached the ship, Nicholas was informed by the bursar of the five men from customs and immigration who had come aboard. Nicholas's face betrayed none of the inner turmoil he felt. Three things were immediately clear to him: these were the men who had interred him, they were not from customs and

immigration, and they were here to make certain the JUSTINE never made it out of Shanghai's harbor. His best guess was that the disruption would occur before the harbor pilot left the ship—that would implicate the company in the death of a Chinese national.

Below deck, he found a shadowed spot behind a gangway. He took off his shoes and socks. Shrugging off his dinner jacket, he folded it fastidiously, then removed his starched white formal shirt and placed it on top of the jacket. Without a second look, he left the pile of clothes behind, silently descended to the lower deck. He not only owned this ship, but he had helped design it, periodically traveling to Sweden to watch over it as it was built. It was enormously expensive, and he was determined to ensure nothing went wrong.

Nothing had, until now.

There were six holding tanks set along the spine of the ship. Interspersed between were ballast tanks, cofferdams, and voids, effectively giving the ship a double-hull structure in the cargo area. Everything had been done to keep the liquid natural gas safe, but he knew full well that human ingenuity could always find a method to steal or destroy the best-guarded treasure.

The Damascus steel blade extended from his left hand. His right hand hung at his side, the fingers pressed together, slightly curled. His breathing was slow—deep, even. Like a child asleep, he was perfectly calm, his mind flooded with the silver moonlight that revealed everything, even the men working in deep shadow. He heard them, smelled them, sensed precisely what they were doing and why.

Hand-to-hand combat was no different than being on a battlefield of thousands or going to war with millions. As Ang had taught him, there were only three paths to victory and they all began and ended the same way: in no-mind. Assumptions, anticipation, reaction all took time away from no-mind. In no-mind you did not anticipate, you did not react; you simply were. And it was this almost mystical state of being that would gain you victory—no matter the odds.

Nicholas was deep in no-mind as he came up behind the man affixing the C4 between sections of the engine housing. He was completely silent, caused no stir of air. He bent down, and in a tenth of a second had run the edge of his blade across the man's throat. Nicholas caught him as he fell, laid him on the concrete floor as gently as a baby. Then he disengaged the ignition device, rendering the packet of C4 inoperative.

In the corridor that led to the LNG tanks, he encountered two more men. The first saw him and, turning full on to him, received the Damascus blade in the soft spot just above the bridge of the nose. He murmured, as if he were talking to himself, his eyes trying to fix on Nicholas, but crossing instead as his life was snuffed out.

The second man heard the murmur and turned toward his comrade, but by that time Nicholas was upon him, leaping onto him as a panther would, with his entire body, the weight combined with Nicholas's momentum taking the man down so hard that the back of his skull was split open by the edge of the thick steel door.

As Nicholas rose, the fourth man came running toward him. He held a pistol affixed with a silencer. The eyes of a shooter will narrow infinitesimally just as he is about to squeeze the trigger, as the autonomous nervous system seeks to protect itself from the percussion it knows is coming.

Nicholas had been staring into the fourth man's eyes, and was therefore already rolling on the deck, his body curled into a ball as the bullet sped past two feet above him. Then he was up, slashing out with a simple but devastating flick of his left wrist. The Damascus blade scored a line of blood and viscera diagonally across the man's abdomen. He dropped his pistol, using both hands in an effort to keep his guts from falling out.

Knocking him on the back of the head as he strode past, Nicholas went down the corridor. Behind him, the would-be gunman was kneeling like a penitent, his forehead pressed against the cold, bare deck.

There was one man left. If he was the one closest to the LNG tanks he must be the leader; he would have given himself the most important and difficult job.

The door directly in front of Nicholas was half closed. He bent down so as not to be seen through the thick glass portal at head's height. Turning sideways, he slithered through the gap without the door moving even a fraction.

He could see nothing moving, sensed no one in his field of vision. But was someone behind the door, lying in wait for him? Bracing his shoulder to the door, he slammed it open, so that it banged back against the corridor bulkhead. No one was there.

He took a step farther into the next section of the corridor. He headed for the second door, beyond which rose the aftmost LNG container and the area of most danger. The fifth man, who had been hiding between two horizontal pipes and the ceiling, dropped down onto him, clinging to his back. He was tall, thin, wiry, and incredibly strong. He snaked his left forearm around Nicholas's neck, drew it tight, while the heel of his right hand dug into the part of Nicholas's neck below and just behind the jawbone.

Nicholas knew the hold well—it was taught by a number of clandestine agencies, most prominently the Mossad, as the most efficient method of killing a man: snapping his neck. It had the added advantage that once the hold was fully in place it could not be broken. The man's grip on him was almost at that point.

He could feel the energy coiling in the man, coming up from his lower abdomen; he could smell the fish sauce on his breath. Once again, he found himself in the place between life and death where will and determination, not physical strength, would reveal the path to victory. He felt the wave coming, bringing with it the dreadful, deafening silence. He stopped struggling, stepped into the inevitability of the wave.

The instant he did so, he became aware of the Quilin tattooed on the left side of the man's neck. Though small, the mystical beast—one of the four sacred animals revered by the Chinese—was rendered in incredible detail, colored in black, blue, and red. Then Nicholas forgot all about the Quilin. His awareness registered the fact that his attacker's breathing wasn't deep and clear; rather it was being affected by his fast-approaching moment of triumph. He was panting a bit, with each breath leaving behind a small piece of himself. Nicholas used this, played on it, stretching his neck back, in tiny increments, giving the impression that he was losing the fight. An instant later, he slammed the back of his head against the man's nose. Blood gushed, the man grunted in a combination of surprise and shock. His hold loosened enough for Nicholas to turn sideways. His intention was to slip the Damascus blade between the third and fourth ribs. Quilin's lithe body

somehow reeled away, and the tip brushed along the skin above his ribs instead of it finding the heart. The maneuver provided an instantaneous gap in Nicholas's defense, but that was all Quilin needed. He raked his nails down the left side of Nicholas's face, drawing blood. He went for Nicholas's blade, but finding he could not wrest it away, he settled for slamming Nicholas against the bulkhead.

The inside of Nicholas's head exploded into shards of black and white. He recovered in a moment, but the brief lapse in consciousness was enough to allow Quilin to vanish into the shadows.

Now, back on dry land, Nicholas watched as Shanghainese detectives poured out of two unmarked cars and began swarming all over his ship. Lieutenant Liu, a longtime friend, came up to him.

„You need first aid for your cheek.”

Nicholas waved away his words. „It's nothing.”

Liu shrugged. „This is bad shit, Nick. Very bad.”

„I gave my statement,” Nicholas said. „You can check on the grave.” He pointed. „It's over there.”

„I know what you're thinking, Nick, but it's an ongoing investigation. What with the pack of C4 you led us to, your ship won't be able to leave port for a while.”

„That will kill my LNG business. I have deadlines.”

„Don't we all. Sorry. *Force majeure*.”

Nicholas stood looking at Liu: his long, sad, Shanghainese face—the flat nose, planar cheekbones. „Liu,” he said with quiet force, „we both know that I'm going to make my deadline, no matter the length of this investigation.”

Liu studied Nicholas for a moment, then gave off a sly smile. „I wouldn't be me if I didn't make the attempt.”

„Face must be preserved.”

„At all costs.” Liu nodded. „You need anything, you know how to reach me.”

„Always.”

Nicholas watched him walk away. He looked down at his mobile, once again checked the short text message that had led him out onto the balcony and into the ambush. It had come from Joji, or so it had seemed at the time. But his head had been muzzy with Champagne. He punched in a local number, read off the time of the text and the number to the man who answered. He disconnected without uttering a word.

Nicholas returned to the hotel, quickly washed up, and began the delicate process of covering the parallel wounds on his cheek, changing his appearance with a prosthetic nose and theatrical makeup. His mobile buzzed.

„The trace was more involved than expected,” the laconic voice at the other end of the line said.

„Still, you managed it in record time.”

„Advanced years are good for something.” A low chuckle came down the line, then abruptly cut off. „The number isn't listed. In fact, it doesn't exist—officially.”

„But you found out who it belongs to.”

„Of course.”

There was a pause, which made Nicholas slightly uneasy.

„Encrypted line.”

Uh-oh, Nicholas thought. „Government?”

„That would have been less... involved.”

„Do you have a name?”

„I do, but you’re not going to like it.”

„Like it or not,” he said, „I’m going to have to deal with it.”

„Baron Po,” the voice said, and disconnected as if to absolve itself of the crime of delivering a name that could cause such disastrous consequences.

For several minutes Nicholas stared at his half-finished face in the mirror. It was a symbol of his status as an Outsider, from being the mixed-race son of a British colonel and an Asian mother of uncertain origin growing up in Tokyo, to his marriage to Justine Tomkin, which had royally pissed off her bigoted father, until he saw for himself Nicholas’s extraordinary business acumen.

Completing his transformation, Nicholas returned to the ballroom, where he found the party had moved into high gear. The band had been replaced by a DJ; the space in front of him jam-packed with bouncing dancers, their hair swinging, arms held high. The scents of perfume, sweat, and liquor punctuated the air like fists thrust through the nighttime fug. It seemed no one had left in his absence. If anything, there were more partygoers than before.

He made a slow circuit of the room, picking up a flute of Champagne for appearances’ sake; he was no longer in the mood for drinking—or even celebrating. Baron Po was out to sabotage his new life, and he was determined to find out why before Po had a chance to take another swing at him. The fact that he was not exactly on enemy territory—that he had many friends here in Shanghai, as well as elsewhere on the Mainland—had already proved useful. Not the least of those friends was Anna Song, head of the so-called Shanghai Clique, whose members also served on China’s Central Committee. How large a role Anna Song had played in his astronomical success was open for debate, but what was incontestable was their long history together.

Speaking of Commissioner Song, he finally spotted her across the room. She was talking with three Chinese men in uniform. All were drinking Champagne; the men were smiling along with Anna. She was tall and willowy, with porcelain skin, wide-apart eyes, and a heavy, sensual mouth; she seemed to be pouting even when she smiled. Nicholas had never seen her laugh; he wondered whether she was capable. She wore a midnight blue Mandarin-style gown that looked as if it had been lacquered onto her sleek body. Like most Chinese, she stood very still, moving very little, never gesturing, never turning her head or revealing an expression that could give the watcher a clue as to her inner thoughts.

He kept moving in and out of clots of people like the sun scudding behind clouds, all the while keeping his eyes on Anna. Another man glided up, this one dressed in a stylish but flashy suit of Shantung silk. Anna did not turn her head, but Nicholas saw a certain stiffness come into her spine. She did not introduce the newcomer to the military cadre; she didn’t have time. The newcomer brushed her right elbow with his fingertips, so briefly and lightly that anyone other than Nicholas would surely have missed it. She immediately placed her half-full flute on a tray held by a passing waiter, then with a curt bow took her leave of the uniformed men. Nicholas crossed the room diagonally as Anna and Shantung Suit exited the room via the terrace from which he had been abducted earlier.

It was strange to see her moving swiftly and stiffly, as if with a military cadence, the stranger oddly close by her side. Chinese did not normally invade each other's personal space in that manner.

He followed them at a distance, watching as they descended a stone staircase hemmed in by thick, sculpted balustrades.

Picking his way through the deep shadows, he kept her in sight as she moved down a gravel path that bisected lines of rose bushes, at the end of which a long, low limousine was waiting, engine purring like a drowsing tiger.

There was just enough time to see another man, in an almost identical silk suit, pop out of the shotgun seat. Nicholas was running as soon as he saw the flash of a handgun, and was at his own car as the two suits guided Anna Song into the backseat. Shantung Suit climbed in beside her, while the other man returned to his shotgun position. The doors slammed shut and the limo glided forward.

„Wake up, Ko,“ Nicholas said.

His driver's head snapped up, his eyes fixed on the rearview mirror. „What's up, boss? In need of an early morning snack?“

„Just follow that limo in front of you,“ Nicholas said.

Ko fired the ignition, put the car in gear, and headed out. They were on the highway, heading for the bridge into the old section of Shanghai when Ko said, „Boss, I have to tell you I don't like this.“

„Liking it isn't required of you,“ Nicholas said distractedly. He was focused on the vehicle ahead, wondering who would be stupid enough to abduct Anna Song.

„Well, but there's a reason.“ Ko pointed. „See the license plate?“

Ko could be quite a joker; right now Nicholas was in no mood for him. „What about it?“

„See the sigil in the space after the last number?“

Nicholas directed his gaze lower. „What is that?“

„A stylized poppy,“ Ko said. „This limousine we're following belongs to Baron Po.“

„The warlord who controls almost all of the Golden Triangle.“

Ko nodded. „The same.“

They were in the Yan'an East Road Tunnel. Behind them was the crescent glitter of the modern-day Bund. Ahead of them were the twisting lanes and shadowy *hongs* and *godowns* of Pudong. They were crossing over from one world to another.

„Rumor has it Baron Po is half-Hmong.“

The Hmong were one of the mountain tribes indigenous to the Golden Triangle that spanned Vietnam, Thailand, and Burma, Nicholas thought. They were a fierce people; the U.S. Army had recruited many of them to fight against the North Vietnamese during the Vietnam War.

„Bad people, dangerous people, enlisted in the poppy trade. They've caused some shitstorms in their day,“ Ko muttered. „Baron Po is the worst of all. Very smart, very powerful.“

And what, Nicholas wondered, does he want with Anna Song? Holding her for ransom is tantamount to suicide. There must be another reason.

He was still gnawing on this question when the limo emerged from the tunnel, glided into Pudong. Beyond Binjiang Park, beyond the Super Brand Mall, the wide

ultra-modern thoroughfares petered out, the roads became warrens as the old *hutongs* asserted themselves.

„This is going to get interesting,” Ko said. „The streets dead ahead are so narrow neither of these cars will be of any use.”

Just then, they passed a bicycle rack. It was empty, but it gave Nicholas an idea. He kept his eye out for a bike, and when he found one, he told Ko to pull into the curb.

„Wait here for me. If I don’t call you in an hour, drive back to the hotel and wait there.”

Ko turned around in his seat. „What are you going to do?”

But Nicholas was already out the door, crossing the pavement to where the bike was chained to a pole. Thirty seconds later, he was pedaling away in pursuit of the limo, which was now moving as slowly as a shark along a reef.

The restaurant was one of those places that stayed open late for special customers. Through the flyblown window, semi-fogged with steam from the huge rice cookers, Nicholas saw the place was empty—not a single customer. Only a lone waiter, loitering and smoking, no doubt thinking about the end of his long shift.

Baron Po’s limo was nowhere to be seen, but then, like his own car, it couldn’t bull its way down this street. However, he’d seen the three figures, Anna sandwiched between the two Shantung suits, enter the restaurant moments ago.

Nicholas stepped in, ordered soup off the hand-written Chinese menu on the wall, and went straight back past the tables, small as Chiclets. Between the toilets and the narrow kitchen, where a cook and his assistant stared morosely at their idle woks, was a steep set of stairs down to the basement. He went past, checked the rear door, then returned to the stairs and silently descended.

Halfway down he could hear voices—male, harsh, on the verge of anger: Baron Po’s suits. He crouched down, listening. They wanted information from Anna Song, but he did not hear her answering voice. When he heard the slap of flesh on flesh, he rose and, reaching up, grabbed onto one of the thick, wooden foundation beams. Swinging his body up, he grabbed the beam between his ankles. Now he inched forward, moving from the stairwell into the basement proper.

With the vantage point of a bat, he stared down at the scene below. Anna was bound to a straight-backed wooden chair, arms behind her, wrists tied. Her ankles were tied to the chair’s front legs. Shantung Suit—the one who had steered her out of the hotel—was bent at the waist. His jacket was off, his sleeves rolled up. The second man stood several paces away; the other’s suit jacket folded carefully over one forearm.

He hit Anna again, a strong blow across the cheek. Nicholas saw it coming and was dropping down even as Shantung Suit’s open hand turned Anna’s head. He struck with his elbow, taking the man by surprise. As he staggered, Nicholas grabbed his leading wrist, spun him around and down, using the man’s own momentum against him. With the man flat on his back, Nicholas used a nerve strike to render him unconscious.

„Stand up!” The order came from the second suit.

Nicholas turned. The man was holding a snub-nosed .38, aimed at his belly. In the midst of his turn, Nicholas moved forward, his torso a blur. The gunshot passed close by his left side, but by that time the second man had been disarmed and had joined his compatriot deep in slumberland.

Anna Song watched him with her long, unrevealing eyes, her expression never changing as he untied her. She would not accept his hand; instead she rose to her feet on her own and, brushing past him, climbed the stairs. Shaking his head, Nicholas followed her. In the restaurant, he paid for the soup without eating it. The waiter didn't utter a word; his eyes were averted from Anna's passing.

Out in the street, with the smell of food mingling with the stench of garbage and raw sewage, she said, „You have been following me. Why?”

„I saw you being led out of the party.”

She peered at him as they began to walk. He was directing her back to where his car was waiting.

„Do I know you?”

He pulled out a rough-textured glove, pulled away the bulk of his makeup.

„Nicholas! This is a surprise.”

She didn't look surprised, but then she never did. Ever. Her Chinese mask was set firmly in place, as were her impeccable manners. Could nothing faze her, even being abducted by the most powerful warlord in the Golden Triangle?

„What does Baron Po want with you?”

„Is this your vehicle?” she asked, deflecting his question.

„It is.” Nicholas opened the rear door, and without another word she slid in.

He joined her in the backseat. „The Bund,” he told Ko, who was savvy enough not to peek at them in the rearview mirror. „And let me know at once if you spy the limo we followed here.”

Neither of them said a word until they were in the tunnel under the Huangpu River. Then she turned to him and—as if he had just picked her up to take her to the party—said, in her soft, fluid contralto, deep for a Chinese woman, „No one trusts you, Nicholas, the Americans least of all.”

„And you Chinese think of me as a mongrel.”

„Are the Japanese any better? I'd say not at all.”

„They respected my father.”

„He was a U.S. Army colonel. He helped shape their future. Their respect was brittle, thin as a Qing vase. It was forced on them.”

„My father had many Japanese friends, and so do I.”

„*Ke bu shi ma*,” she said. Isn't it so. „And yet you are despised in the country where you were born and raised. Even after all these years, you are an Outsider.”

Nicholas turned away, stared out the smoked glass window where there was nothing to see but the slightly curved wall of the tunnel. „Why are you telling me this, Anna?”

Anna Song settled herself more comfortably against the seatback. „You enjoy a special relationship here in Shanghai, Nicholas. A special relationship with me and the people of power in Beijing I represent. This is not something you should forget.”

Nicholas, sensing a slight but unmistakable ripple of tension, turned back to look at her. „Have I given you cause to suspect that I have?”

„Not you, *per se*, Nicholas. But one has to wonder at the sudden interest Baron Po has shown in you since you began your expansion into liquid natural gas.”

„Baron Po?” Nicholas felt a tightening in his lower belly. „I don’t understand.”

„Those two men down in the restaurant basement abducted me on the orders of Baron Po. They were asking me about my relationship with you when you intervened.” She paused, moistening her lips, which, with her, was a deeply erotic gesture. „What have you done to piss him off?”

It was odd and unsettling to hear this phrase spoken in English amid their conversation in Mandarin. „Nothing,” Nicholas said. „I’ve never met him, let alone had any dealings with him.”

„Then why,” Anna Song said, “did he try to have you buried alive tonight?”

At that moment, they emerged from the tunnel into the dazzling lights of the Bund.

„You see, Nicholas, the trouble is, I don’t believe you.”

Anna Song’s eyes sparkled in the early morning sunlight blazing through the colossal east-facing windows in the dining room of the First Sun, the hotel favored by high-level Communist Party officials and PLA officers. Outside, the Bund was already filling up with people in business attire scurrying to and fro. A group of flight attendants fresh off a trans-continental shift entered the restaurant and requisitioned one of the large circular tables. The noise they collectively made was like a church choir out of sync and out of tune.

Nicholas, stripped of his facial disguise, ate his Chinese breakfast and listened, which was more often than not more useful than speaking.

„First,” Anna said, ticking her points off on her fingers, „you have that LNG tanker at dock. It’s like a floating city, so huge that smuggling contraband—opium, for example—would hardly be difficult. Second, you spent several weeks in the Golden Triangle.”

„That was some time ago,” Nicholas felt compelled to say.

„And during that time you never met with Baron Po.”

„I was rather busy,” Nicholas said dryly.

Anna Song’s gaze was penetrating. „I’ll bet you were.”

There was a burst of raucous laughter from the flight attendants as they lifted glasses in unison and sang *Happy Birthday* to one of their own.

Anna used the noise as cover as she returned to ticking off points on her fingers. „Third, I not only know who you are but what you are.”

„And that automatically makes me suspect.”

„In this case, yes.”

Nicholas continued to eat at a slow, steady pace. It was essential, he knew, to keep his poise and composure during this interrogation, just as a Chinese would. „Why in this case?”

„Because only an exceedingly lucrative opportunity would compel a man such as Baron Po—ever so powerful, but ever so careful—to abduct a member of the Shanghai Clique, potentially incurring the wrath of the CCCP.” She cocked her head, in other women a coquettish pose, but in her another erotic one. „Why would he undertake such a grave risk?”

„I’m afraid you’re going to have to ask him yourself,” Nicholas said, not missing a beat or a bite.

Anna waited until he had finished his breakfast. Then, without a word, she rose, led him across the dining room, past the flock of celebrating flight attendants.

„Zúgòu,” she said to them. Enough. And immediately they settled down.

She pushed through the swinging door into the kitchen. At once, all activity came to a standstill. The kitchen staff stood at attention in their respective stations, their eyes cast downward. Scarcely anyone dared to breathe.

Anna Song took him to a shadowed corner of the kitchen, where an enormous stainless-steel refrigerator stood by itself, as if on an island. She opened the door and removed what appeared to be a silk hatbox, tied with a pink ribbon. Turning, she set it on a counter.

„Open the box, Nicholas, if you please.”

Nicholas untied the bow, let the ends fall away. He lifted the lid off the hatbox and peered inside at the decapitated head of a man. The dead eyes stared straight up at him.

„This is the operative we sent to find Baron Po. We received the hatbox forty-eight hours ago.”

She took the lid from Nicholas, put it back over the head, and returned the hatbox to the refrigerator. Then she addressed him: „As for Baron Po, I would not know where to find him. But in any event, this is between you and him. My relationship with you has put me in an embarrassing position. Because of you I have lost face.”

Anna Song said this so gravely that he felt again that clenching in his lower belly. The subtle flirting had abruptly ceased.

She leaned in. „It is you who must ask him, Nicholas. That is, if you ever hope to have your ship’s exit permits approved.”

The Golden Lotus Club & Sauna lay in the Jing’an District. It was one of those places that thrive at night in any city the world over. Shanghai was no different. Nicholas entered at about midnight, after having missed the entire afternoon and evening in a dead sleep.

He had been followed here, just as he had been followed from the moment he had stepped out of the First Sun Hotel into the hazy, late morning sunshine. The Bund had been crowded with tourists: singly, in pairs, and in groups. The ex-pats, leaning against the railings, taking their ease, watched them with expressions ranging from bemusement to vague contempt. He hadn’t caught a glimpse of the shadow, but the crawling at the nape of his neck told him in no uncertain terms. Thus he had made plans.

The club was composed of the three traditional Chinese colors: gold, crimson, and gaudy. There was a surface stab at being a massage/sauna, but once past the lion-like security and the dragon-like madam, the fragrant clouds of half-dressed girls shattered all pretense. All nationalities and races had their place here, it seemed, draping themselves over leather chairs and velvet sofas in the semi-circular arena.

Taking his time to make his choice, Nicholas spent a moment considering his conversation with Anna Song from an observer’s position. What struck him first was the CCCP’s hands-off policy toward Baron Po. No matter how powerful he

was, the Mainland government could bring him to heel with the Army any time they felt the need. Clearly, they did not feel the need. Why? Just as clearly, Baron Po must have protected status. Someone very high up on the Central Committee was making a fortune by keeping Baron Po safe, his drug business thriving.

Nicholas, surrounded by women both doe-eyed and nubile, allowed his gaze to roam over the shining flesh and then, further afield, to the newcomers entering the inner sanctum after him. He had come here for one reason only: to find his shadow and fix him in his memory. He usually looked to lose a shadow, but sometimes—and this was one of them—he wanted to identify the shadow in order to reverse things: to follow the shadow back to his base of operations.

Currently, there were three candidates: two male, one female. The female was soon crossed off his list: she never so much as glanced at him, choosing a partner almost immediately and disappearing through one of seven golden doors to *Heaven and Earth*, as the more intimate quarters were known. Of the two men, one was obese, the other too old. That eliminated the lot.

Patience, as both Sun Tzu and Confucius wrote, is often its own reward. Now was no exception. Another man entered the arena. He was neither tall nor short. He wore a sharkskin suit like the men who had abducted Anna Song. He did not look at Nicholas; neither did he seem interested in choosing a partner. Rather, he stood back, rejecting one girl after another. His head was now aligned perfectly to allow him to watch Nicholas out of the corner of his eye without seeming to be interested. No one else arrived; Nicholas was now certain that this man was his shadow. He memorized the face, the stance, and the stony expression. All within a split second he sucked the man's essence into himself. From this moment on, he would know him even if the man did his best to change his appearance.

Time to make things happen. Nicholas nodded to a young Chinese woman, tall and slender as a reed, and, smiling seductively, she took him by the hand. They went through one of the golden doors, up a steep flight of shockingly worn wooden stairs onto a second floor. A long corridor with closed doors on either side stretched away from them.

When one of those doors closed behind them, he crossed to the window on the opposite wall. It looked out on a narrow alley, filthy with garbage. A dog, so thin its ribs were its most prominent feature, rooted around in the filth. It wasn't the only occupant of the alley. Another sharkskin suit stood at the opening to the street, watching, waiting for him. Nicholas got a good look at him, then turned back into the room where the girl stood at rest, waiting for him.

„Other than this window,” he said to her, „how do I get out of here unnoticed?”

The girl smiled seductively.

„Is there a way?” he asked with infinite patience.

She came toward him on bare feet. They were very small and very white, the nails lacquered vermillion. „There is always a way.”

She was close enough for him to smell the cinnamon and clove on her breath. She was very beautiful and, to his way of thinking, very sad.

He brought out three hundred dollars, and she looked at it, saying, „It's not enough.” Breathing it into him.

„What do you want?” Asking her *How much do you want?* was a Western mistake he would not make.

„A kiss.” She tilted her head up to him. „A real kiss.”

These girls did not kiss. Ever. This was a request of the highest honor and magnitude. In that instant, he knew she would find a way out for him. He drew her to him and they kissed for a very long time, until their tongues had explored every inch of their mouths.

She broke it off, as was right and correct. Nevertheless, he felt her reluctance, as well as her sorrow, and wished he could do more for her.

Opening the door, she looked down the hallway both ways before signaling to him. They ran, silently but swiftly, until they came to another staircase, this one even narrower and steeper than the first. They ascended, past a third story, climbing a vertical metal ladder from there. A metal fire door opened onto the tiled roof. Beyond, adjacent tiled roofs stretched away in every direction. The night air felt fresh and cool. It wove her night-black hair in tendrils around her cheeks.

It was only then, when he was safely outside, that she took the money he offered, leaving him without a backward glance. The fire door closed behind her and he found himself alone on the steeply slanted rooftop.

When the watched becomes the watcher the stakes are raised significantly. On the other hand, vital information stood to be gained. This was the situation in which Nicholas now found himself.

He had come off of the tiled roof of a building down the block from The Golden Lotus Club & Sauna. Working his way down the wall using fingertips and toeholds was no problem for him. He went at once in sight of the back alley, where the two sharkskin suits were conferring. It was clear from their demeanor that they had lost him. The one who had come in the front pulled out a mobile, made a call. It was short and sweet. He indicated to his compatriot to follow him, and they went to a sleek black SUV and climbed in.

Ducking into the car he had rented earlier, he followed them. Again, they went through the tunnel into Pudong, arriving at the edge of the old *hutong* he'd been to last night. Now he knew their destination. He parked his car while the SUV up ahead was still slowing and installed himself at a convenient observation post, amid deep shadows, across from the restaurant from which he had rescued Anna Song.

The two sharkskins arrived soon enough, looking both disgruntled and fearful, which meant that it was more than likely they were about to confront Baron Po with their failure. It would not go well for them.

They went into the restaurant's front door. Nicholas got a partial view of the waiter he had seen last night, only now he was dressed as the others were. He nodded to the newcomers, and the door closed behind them, a blackout screen pulled down over the glass panel.

Nicholas was about to move out of the shadows when he saw a light flick on at ground floor level in the building just to the left of the restaurant. It contained what appeared to be a pearl merchant's storefront, but the windows were oddly high up off of the ground so that passersby could not see in. Shadows of the two men passed across the ceiling, then vanished. Clearly, there must be a hidden passageway between the two buildings. Lights came on upstairs.

Moving to the end of the block, Nicholas headed down a side street so narrow that two people abreast would be rubbing shoulders. To his right was the alley behind the buildings—an even narrower space. He found the rear of the building that the two men had gone into.

He grasped the end of the iron fire escape, lifted himself off of the ground until he was level with the ground floor windows. The nearest one was, like its brothers, banded with a wire that must surely be attached to a security system. It took Nicholas only minutes to detach the wire from two sides of the window, whose lock was so old he had it open within seconds.

He slid feet first into the ground floor room. He found himself in a compact workroom of modest size, only half-painted, as if the painter had changed his mind midstream. Brushes, pans, metal rods, cans of paint and thinner were neatly stacked in one corner, patiently waiting for the painter to return to his original purpose.

But this wasn't the shop of a jeweler. Canvas vests hung from a dowel running from wall to wall, like humble washing on a line. Directly below the vests a wide wooden trough containing open compartments filled with nails, ball bearings, screws, and the like hunkered on sturdy wooden legs. To one side was a countertop where the timing mechanisms were assembled. Though there were no explosives evident, this was most certainly a bomb-maker's lab.

Selecting one of the metal poles, he crept cautiously out of the lab, into a large open area that appeared to take up all the remaining ground floor space. There was nothing in it—no furniture, no fixtures: rug, painting, or photograph. Apart from a single floor lamp throwing a pool of light onto the walls, floor, and ceiling, it was completely empty.

He stood in the center, turning slowly. Then he heard the voice: electronic, disembodied, emotionless: „Why have you invaded my territory?”

Baron Po.

„You know why,” Nicholas said.

There came a harsh sound, like the bark of a dog. Perhaps it was laughter. „What have you become after all these years since you left the Golden Triangle? Are you a businessman? If you are nothing more than a bureaucrat, that would be shameful enough. But you have become something far, far worse. You have strayed so very far from *kokoro*—the heart of the universe. Do you even still know what *kokoro* is? Perhaps not. Well, we will find out.”

At that, four men in sharkskin suits appeared at the four corners of the room. Each was armed with a SIG-Sauer handgun. Combat power, *shi*, in Sun Tzu's estimation, was synonymous with the setting of a crossbow. Without thought, without intent, Nicholas emptied his mind, allowing his *shi* to rise. Setting himself, he swung the metal rod in a horizontal arc that smashed the light bulb and caused the lamp to crash to the floor.

Darkness and chaos: this was the terrain of the ninja, the locus within which he operated at peak efficiency. And, as every ninja is taught, in darkness there is death.

Gunshots—bullets crossing the spot where Nicholas had been standing; he was no longer there. He was already executing *tai-sabaki*—the sweeping circular movements, the serene gliding pivots that imbue the attack with the *bokken* or the

katana—polished wood or ten thousand layers of steel, it didn't matter which—with an inexorable power.

The *tai-sabaki* sweeps slammed the guns from two of the men, then the third, causing fractured hands or wrists. Nicholas felt the presence of the fourth man advancing toward him through the darkness; he could scent him as if they were predator and prey amid a confusing tangle of tree limbs and thorny underbrush. Nicholas deepened his stance and, as he did so, he descended into *kokoro*. He felt the universe all around him as if it were a series of concentric spheres, the forces and vectors within them reaching out to him like old friends.

The key to either offense or defense, Sun Tzu wrote, is designing them for impenetrability. Nicholas stood his ground as the fourth man came on. He had thrown his gun away; it was useless in the dark, with his three compatriots in possible lines of fire. In its stead, Nicholas scented oiled steel—a knife of some kind, possibly a *wakizashi*.

Now he had scented Nicholas as well, for he came rushing headlong at him. Nicholas allowed this, pivoting at the last possible second so that the man brushed past his right side. Continuing his pivot, Nicholas smashed the pole against the man's spine and, as he arched backward, Nicholas relieved him of his weapon: it was indeed a samurai's short sword.

The man, recovering, swung backward, making contact with Nicholas's side, but reaching out, almost leisurely, Nicholas slipped the *wakizashi* between two of his ribs. Then he went after the other three men. One of them managed to whip a wire around Nicholas's neck, jerking him backward, drawing a crescent of blood across his throat. Reversing the *wakizashi*, Nicholas stabbed him in the abdomen. As he fell away, the final two came at Nicholas from either side. The pole dispatched one, the hilt of the sword broke the other's nose, then cracked his skull.

Nicholas heard the pounding of shoes down a staircase. He counted six, seven, eight pairs. Racing back to the bomb-maker's lab, he upended the trough, sending the ball bearings, nails, and screws skittering into the larger space. Prying open the cans of paint and thinner, he set them alight. Then he exited the building through the same rear window by which he had entered.

The fire raged, the wooden structure, abetted by the accelerants, igniting like a bonfire of kiln-dried wood. Nicholas stood across the street watching the front door. Already, thick black smoke billowed out the windows in the upper stories that had been thrust open. One man, panicked and blinded, launched himself out of one of the windows, only to crack open his skull on the cement sidewalk.

He waited for Baron Po to appear, but the building was engulfed so quickly, the fire so fierce, no one had a prayer of escaping the inferno. He left while the fire engines were still maneuvering down the adjacent streets large enough to accommodate their size and bulk.

Sun Tzu had something important to say about handling an ally: First, to make him acquiesce to your desires by making him yield through disadvantages. Second, to urge him to act quickly through advantages.

Nicholas had cause to think about this as he lay in the fragrant tangle of Anna Song's silk sheets. It was well past daybreak, but the wooden blinds in her enormous bedroom were still closed against the sunlight. He had come into her

apartment in the Shanghai sky on the last tendrils of darkness. No one had seen him enter the building and he had made certain that he encountered no one in the hallways.

As he watched her emerge from the bathroom, slim, tall, naked, he considered that she had made every move correctly in accordance with Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*. Baron Po may not have been her enemy, but his patron in the Central Committee certainly was. How else to explain how Baron Po had suffered no consequences in ordering her abduction? Anna had an enemy in the Central Committee who was more powerful than she was. Now she had quite cleverly cut off her enemy's main source of income. What would that do to his power? Only Anna could answer that question, but Nicholas suspected it would all but neuter him.

As she came toward him, her flawless skin streaked with the tiger stripes of sunlight coming through the slats, she lifted her arms, ran her fingers through her thick, lustrous hair. Her small, firm breasts were thrust into prominence, their nipples hard and quivering as she approached him.

Climbing onto the bed, she straddled him. „What a conflagration you set off,“ she said softly. „I have confirmation that Baron Po and his cadre all perished in the blaze.“ She ran a fingertip across his throat. „Still, he hurt you.“

„Not him. I never saw him.“

„And yet you managed to destroy him utterly.“ She bent down, her nipples scoring his chest. „How you managed it I don't know.“ Her lips covered his as a way of telling him she didn't care how he'd done it, just that he had.

There was no expression on her face, but her eyes were alight with lust. Nicholas suspected the word „passion“ did not exist for her, except in the sphere of business, just as „love“ did not exist for her at all.

Nevertheless, she was as adept a tactician in bed as she was behind a desk. That's all that counted for her; sex wasn't about anything other than power. For Nicholas, it was refreshing to make love to a woman who had no pretexts about what they were doing and why. Coming together, coupling, then drawing apart were a series of maneuvers that brought her pleasure rather than money and respect—though there was another form of pleasure in those things, as well.

He liked to hear her cry out at the end. It was the only time he ever heard her raise her voice. And, too, it was a different voice—hoarse, throaty, emanating from deep in her belly as her *chi* rose up for a moment to overwhelm her. In that instant, she was vulnerable, but only he possessed the insight to recognize it. Then, in the blink of an eye, it was snuffed out, like a candle in a wind rising before a storm.

„Cha,“ she said, afterward. Tea. It was not a question, but the beginning of a complex ritual that followed sex. It was her way to physically restore the rigid order that had been shredded by animal chaos.

„Not yet,“ Nicholas said as he rolled out of bed. „I'm taking a shower.“

„Shall I join you before or after you soap up?“ she asked, intuiting his intent.

This was the only time she allowed herself to be playful. After the first sip of tea, that part of her would vanish as if it had never existed.

„I'll leave it up to you.“

„How much time do you need to recover?“ She said, with the last remnant of the throaty yell that presaged her orgasm. It was a question to which she already knew the answer.

He turned on the hot water, stepped into the shower. He had kept the bathroom door open. Through the shower’s translucent pebbled glass, he could see a slightly distorted image of her bounce out of bed, pad across the room, open the slatted blinds. Sunlight streamed into the room, blotting out her form.

He started to wash the accumulated sweat and grime off of his body. Halfway through, he saw her shadow come through the open doorway into the bathroom. Only it wasn’t Anna Song he was confronting, but Quilin, the man on the tanker.

In Quilin’s hands two daggers glistened with refracted light through the shower’s downpour. He was grinning at Nicholas as he thrust first one dagger, then the other into the space where Nicholas had been standing. That Nicholas had little room to maneuver meant little to him. As applied to martial arts, *haragei*—the invisible technique—meant he needed almost no space for defense or offense. The instant of *becoming*, when thought morphs into action, was intuitive and seamless.

As the knife blades flashed past on either side of him, as Quilin leaned forward, weight on his right foot, Nicholas struck him with the edge of his hand. Quilin scarcely winced. The tip of one of the knives scored a red line across Nicholas’s thigh. The second knife was flashing in toward the side of his neck.

Quilin expected him to either advance or retreat against the rear tiles, but he did neither. Instead, he shoved the bar of soap into Quilin’s mouth and thrust it down his throat. Quilin, choking, backed off, but his heels struck the rim of the shower stall. As he rocked back, Nicholas punched him over the heart with such force the percussion interrupted the electrical pulses, and his heart ceased to beat. Quilin collapsed, his breath stilled.

Nicholas stared at him for long moments, seeing him, seeing into him, and seeing through him. He bent down. Stepping over him, he wrapped a towel around his waist; more to sop up the blood leaking from his wound than for modesty. The shower was still on full, the spray coming through the open shower door in tiny patters, forming a puddle on the tile floor.

Anna Song, half-dressed, sitting on the corner of the bed, leaning on one hand, could not keep the surprise off of her face. For a split instant Nicholas was given access to her true emotions, then she locked them down again.

„Baron Po didn’t try to have me buried alive,“ he said. „That was you, Commissioner Song.“

His switch to formal address was not lost on her. Her eyes hardened infinitesimally, becoming opaque.

„Quilin didn’t work for Baron Po, he worked for you.“

„Worked?“ She had picked up on his use of the past tense.

„You know me so well, Commissioner Song. You knew I wouldn’t die, even though you ordered me buried alive.“

„If I had wanted you dead then,“ she said evenly, „I would have put you in a steel coffin, not a pine box.“

„It wouldn’t have mattered.“

Her eyes hardened further but she held her head perfectly still. „I don't believe you.”

„It doesn't matter,” he said.

Her fingers had crawled beneath the bed sheets until her hand was no longer visible.

„You wanted me to live, to seek revenge against the man who supposedly sought my death. You wanted me to do what you yourself could not: find Baron Po and kill him.” He glanced around the room, as if unmindful of the position of her hidden hand and what it most surely held. „You have an enemy you needed to weaken. You used me—an ally—to do it for you.”

„Did you mind? No, you did not.” She cocked her head. „I think you had fun—more fun than you've had in a long while.” She pursed her lips. „You saved me; I brought you amusement. Now we're even.”

Hardly, he thought. Anna Song never played on an even field. The odds always had to be tipped in her favor.

„Did Baron Po really abduct you or were they your men disguised as his?”

„I won't tell,” she said, and brought the gun out from beneath the sheets. It was aimed at his chest. „And now you'll never know.”

He'd been right about her. She had been using the principles outlined by Sun Tzu, he just hadn't taken her strategy far enough: she had been near when she pretended to be far away. Classic Sun Tzu.

„I want your LNG business. I need it; I've been losing ground on the Committee. I had to do something major, something significant to make the others sit up and notice, to give me back my footing.” She waggled the gun slightly. „I know what you're thinking, but I can handle Joji; he'll work with me. You wouldn't. I knew that going in.”

Her finger curled around the trigger. „Goodbye, Nicholas.” She began to squeeze it. „Our relationship has outlasted its usefulness.”

But Nicholas was already on the move, inside her defenses before she could fire. Wrenching her wrist, he forced her to drop the gun.

„That's enough,” he said.

Her empty gun hand rose up, grabbed him by the throat in a death grip.

„Anna, don't make me do this.”

A gleam of triumph lightened her eyes, as he reverted to the intimate address. Then her knee slammed into the spot where blood from his knife wound had stained the towel.

„Hurt? Does it hurt, Nicholas?” she whispered.

They were locked together, body-to-body, eye-to-eye. Anyone observing them would be hard put to say whether they were making war or making love. Sometimes, there is no demarcation. The known morphs into the unknown. The becoming arises like a creature of terrible substance, but without form. She kept firm hold of his windpipe. Her knee struck his wound again and again, a battering ram at the imagined weak point in his defenses.

He saw into her now—saw the animus for the men who had tirelessly sought to minimize her influence, to diminish her, to punish her for her unforgiveable rudeness in penetrating their inner sanctum of power. He saw the loneliness of her

life, the desperation. He saw her love for him. And he saw the end—the only end for her life.

„Stop,” he whispered. „Stop.”

But she wouldn't. He knew she wouldn't. Staring into his eyes, she tightened her hold on his throat, completely cutting off his ability to breath.

„Anna,” he gasped.

Her lips were so close to his they almost touched. He saw it in her eyes: what she wanted, what she needed him to do. What she was forcing him to do.

„*Jiu Ming*.” Her whisper was like a reed stirred by a summer breeze. Save me.

He took her head in his hands and as swiftly as a cheetah lunges at its prey, broke her neck.

He carried her into the bathroom, arranging everything so the forensic team would believe that she and Quilin had killed each other. He sanitized the apartment of both his fingerprints and his DNA. He'd have to take the sheets and pillowcases with him when he left. There was no helping it; sometimes in life things worked out in a distasteful manner. This was one of them.

Later, he would make the time to contemplate what had happened here, and why. He would also have to figure out what to do with Joji. Death was not always the most useful consequence of betrayal.

Dressed, with his silk bundle over one shoulder, he opened the slider and stepped out onto the terrace. Peering over the side, he saw Ko standing by his car, meditating as he waited. Seemingly endless ripples of terraces were below him; an easy descent. It was a long way down, but not nearly as far as Anna Song had fallen.

