



The Dalai Sanction

by Dennis Callegari

Being the resident black sheep in the Police Special Branch has its benefits as well as its drawbacks. My benefits up till now had included a three-year diplomatic posting to the West—where I picked up bad habits, a disrespectful attitude, a love of old movies, and a devotion to 20th century guitar heroes. As for the drawbacks...

Chief Inspector Li from the Police Special *Special* Branch threw a file marked TOP SECRET on my desk.

“What the hell is this?” I asked.

“Likely your last assignment,” he said. “Ever.”

“Now that’s a big call,” I said. In the last few months I’d been an exemplary investigator. I’d dealt with the murders on the Shanghai bullet train *and* stopped unauthorised withdrawals from the Beijing organ bank. I’d even solved the puzzle of the poisoned-pen letters in the Politburo. (Yeah, I know; tell Danny Kaye to sue me.)

I reminded Li of these successes, in detail and at length.

“Enough, Chen.” he said. “We all know what you’ve done. This is bigger. And the Party needs you.”

I gave him a look. He must have peeked in my own TOP SECRET file, the one that mentions my family’s ceaseless devotion to the Party and the Revolution ever since my barely pubescent great-grandfather took the Long March with Mao.

“I’m not my revered ancestor,” I told Li.

“You’re not. But you’re the guy we need. Let me explain.”

He sat opposite me and opened the file. “The fifteenth Dalai Lama,” he said. “He’s dead.”

I whistled. “Who killed him? A Buddhist splinter group? Disaffected animists? The Americans?”

“He died of old age.”

“Last time I heard, that wasn’t a crime.”

“His death is not the crime. The crime is that he’s not coming back.”

“Come again?”

“What do you know about what happens when a Dalai Lama dies?”

“The same as everybody; reincarnation, so they say. When he dies, the Lama’s mind transfers somewhere to a newborn. The other High Lamas begin a big search; it lasts a few years until they find the kid and get him to take up the crown or throne or mantle, or whatever the hell they’ve got.”

“Not bad, but you have it just a little wrong. By rights, the ultimate choice belongs to the People’s Republic of China.”

“I dunno, Li—I’m pretty sure that it’s High Lamas all the way.”

“You’ve put your finger on the problem, Chen. See? You’re the man we need.” He tapped his finger on the desk. “The problem began way back when the previous Lama told everyone he wasn’t coming back. Ultimately we reached a compromise with him and, when he died, the High Lamas and the Party agreed on who and where the next Dalai Lama was going to be.”

“A miracle,” I said dryly. “Look, Li, I thought we were over this kind of thing. Religion is the opium of the people and all that. I don’t believe in mixing politics and religion; I also don’t believe in reincarnation.”

“That’s the top secret part of this assignment. It turns out that this reincarnation business is genuine.” He placed his hand on the TOP SECRET folder. “It’s all here. Documented case studies, official government research. This stuff goes back decades.”

“R-ight. I’ll humour you. Where do I come in?”

“This Dalai Lama, before he died, began doing exactly what the last Dalai Lama did—saying he was *not* coming back. And this time we couldn’t get him to change his mind before he croaked.”

“And what exactly am *I* supposed to do about it?”

“You’re going after him. You must make him change his mind. Just like in one of those decadent old *Godfather* movies you love so much—just when the Dalai Lama thinks he’s out, you’re supposed to pull him back in.”



Now you’re going to ask me how the *hell* you chase a guy into the afterlife and force him to abandon heaven for a return ticket to the real world. I’m going to tell you.

Sometime in the 1950s, the Party realised that, despite the accepted wisdom, the old-time religion wasn’t going to wither away by itself. The man they put in charge of finding out why was my great-grandfather.

I never met the guy, but everything my parents and grandparents told me about him made it clear he was the right man for the job. A keen Party man, but not inflexible; there was too much evidence to discount *everything* about the religious impulse. He collected details on hundreds of near-death experiences, and personally interviewed dozens of people who claimed to remember all or part of their previous lives.

Before he died, he started up experimental studies in the afterlife.

The studies reminded me of the old movie *Flatliners*, in which a bunch of college kids take turns stopping their hearts to experience death for a minute or three before being revived by their comrades.

I didn’t know they got the idea from my ancestor.

For his grand experiment, he recruited people with special talents. Fit, young, loyal guinea pigs likely to survive multiple near-death experiences, and doctors whose ethics were flexible enough to send those young men and women into death and drag them back out. There was also a corps of psychics and mediums to contact the temporarily dead—and the unlucky who didn’t make it back; and a team of dedicated Party officials to record it all but not spread the news around.

When his own doctors told him he had the disease that would ultimately kill him, Chen Senior kicked his research to a higher gear.

He would be a pioneer. A volunteer to enter the Great Beyond *without* the expectation of coming back.

By then, Chen Senior and his team knew quite a bit about how the Beyond actually works.

The first square on the game board is what they called the *Heavenly Pavilion*—an open-plan structure staffed by white-robed *Goddesses of Peaceful Rest* who induct new arrivals into the customs and rituals of the afterlife.

When the newly dead have been properly briefed, they are allowed outside into a stretch of countryside that adapts its appearance to suit the new kid's nature. Some people experience a restful glade where they can meditate on their previous life and try to shape their next one. Others find a kind of obstacle course—whose end-result is the same. Some lose themselves in partying—same result.

Whatever the new soul chooses to do determines what happens to the person; eventually, they set up a pattern of behaviour. When that happens, *bam!* They disappear back to the land of the living to restart the merry-go-round.



Chen Senior didn't wait for nature to force him into the afterlife.

He prepared for it by personally memorising all the information his project had gained. He devoted part of every day to meditation, yoga, prayer, and even to something called *auditing*. He engaged in dialectic with all the philosophers available to him. He spent time with his pet psychics and mediums to work out the set of experiments he intended to perform and report on.

When he couldn't think of anything else he could do to prepare, he gave his doctors the word. His final exit was the most documented death there has ever been.

His first psychic report returned within minutes.

The big surprise was his discovery that he had a heavenly office. Apparently, the things you're really attached to in this life accompany you into the next. For a trained warrior, it might be guns

or bombs. For Chen Senior, it was the four walls, the desk and the old manual typewriter he'd used for forty years. He was back at work.

For several months, our time—there was no way of calculating how long that was in Celestial time—old man Chen reported back ... religiously ... and his regular bulletins were interspersed with expeditions during which he was out of touch. Gradually, the expeditions became longer and the reports shorter. Eventually, the reports stopped altogether.

When that happened, the new project director made the judgment that Chen Senior had finally succumbed to the ever-present lure of reincarnation. All the clerks and all the psychics on his case were reassigned to new duties.

For decades, nothing much happened. Some dedicated bureaucrats kept the project ticking, and the boundaries of the afterlife were mapped and populated. Every now and again, another dying volunteer followed my great-grandfather's example. Usually, each volunteer lapsed into silence after a few days. Nobody lasted as long as my ancestor had.

Then came the death of the fifteenth Dalai Lama and his refusal to toe the Party line. They hadn't been able to track the Lama's progress in the afterlife, but I was assured he was still there.



“Are you seriously suggesting that I kill myself so I can persuade some religious bigwig to drag himself back down from heaven?” I asked Li. “Because if you are, fuck off.”

“Chances are you won't stay dead,” he said. “We'll put your body into suspension. Once you persuade the Dalai Lama of his duty and he accepts his next incarnation, we'll restart you and you'll be back as good as new. With a promotion, and maybe even that posting to Europe or America that you keep hinting at.”

“What if it takes too long to persuade him? How long can you keep me on ice? And what if I *can't* persuade him to come back?”

Li had trouble meeting my eyes. “While it’s something we don’t want to do, we don’t actually *need* your permission to send you over. Of course, in that case, there’d be no promotion and no cushy posting. Plus there would be ... repercussions ... for your extended family. The People’s Republic still hates traitors, Chen.”



They assigned four of us to Operation *Godfather*.

One guy I instantly dubbed Man Mountain Ma—a special-forces dude two meters tall who was built like, well, a mountain. It figured that he was also the strong, silent type. If he was going to bring the Dalai Lama back, he’d probably do it by beating him up.

There was a young political officer named Wu. She was petite, feminine, drop-dead gorgeous, and I didn’t think there was much happening behind those lovely light-brown eyes. She was the honey trap; there to ensnare the Lama with her womanly wiles.

The third person in our group was another woman, Peng, a special operative usually tasked with diplomatic assignments. She spoke three languages, had a black belt in every discipline except paper-folding, and would be able to engage the Lama in the kind of philosophical discussion that might persuade his rebirth on free will.

And there was me. If it was up to me to get the Dalai Lama to come back, it would probably be by annoying the crap out of him.



The guy responsible for preparing us for our trip into the great Beyond was a skinny intense military man who introduced himself as Colonel Sun. His idea of team-bonding was to make us train (run, swim, bike, lift weights...) until we dropped.

“Isn’t—this—a—little—extreme?” I asked Colonel Sun, as we ran through a series of fencing exercises.

“It’s my job to prepare you for anything.”

“Just give us some guns,” I said.

“We will,” he said. “But I can’t guarantee if any of them will even work *over there*. Your best weapon is teamwork.”

“Have you ever gone over?”

“Once,” he said. “To experience it. Only for about 24 hours my time; in reality, it was less than an hour.”

“And...?”

He shrugged. “It was peaceful. I walked around the Heavenly Pavilion and talked to a couple of our people who had gone over permanently. The psychics and mediums on this side had me under constant observation and told the doctors it was time to drag me back. And that was just a trial run; they’ll be watching you more closely, of course.”

A woman who called herself Doctor Song was the Project’s chief medium. “We will *try* to keep you under constant surveillance,” she said, “but there are blind spots in the afterlife. The biggest blind spot will be the Dalai Lama himself; we can’t see him or anybody near him. If you meet the Lama and need to report, you’ll have to put some distance between you and him.”

“How much of a distance?” asked Peng.

“I don’t know.”

“You said ‘blind spots’, plural,” Peng continued. “How do we identify the other blind spots?”

“We can’t tell you with any certainty,” Doctor Song admitted. “Just avoid holy people and the places used for meditation. Also crossroads. And running water.”

“There’s water and roads?” I asked.

“In many ways, the other side is just like here, but more pleasant. They have day and night, wind, sun and rain. For some people, there is even *wine, women and song*; but the people who go that way don’t last long before reincarnating. I’d avoid that sort of thing if I were you.”

“What a shame,” said Ma, flexing a muscle and giving Doctor Song a look.

Peng in turn gave Ma a look. He stopped flexing.



We learned everything there was to know about the Dalai Lama: his ancestors, his childhood, the tests he had to pass to prove he was the real deal—everything, really, down to his shoe size. We did more team-building exercises. Making a bridge with two planks and a length of rope; falling backwards into each other's arms; sitting around sharing childhood embarrassments. They even gave us a club house—Chen Senior's office.

“We keep it as a kind of historical relic,” Chief Inspector Li said, “and every now and then we park one of the mediums here to keep them attuned to—the other side. We haven't changed anything.”

It was pretty much as originally described in Old Chen's dossier. Four plain walls, one window, a desk, a chair and a wastepaper basket. There was an old Olympia manual typewriter on the desk, and a framed black and white photograph of a young man, a young woman and two small children.

I sat behind the desk, trying to channel Chen Senior's spirit. I found some paper in a drawer and rolled a page into the typewriter. The typewriter had an English keyboard. I typed.

The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog.

“What does that say?” Ma asked.

“An old American proverb about being active and getting ahead,” I said. “They're big into proverbs in America.”

Wu looked out the window, which faced a brick wall. “They're not big into *views* right here,” she observed. “Do you think we stand a chance of making the Dalai Lama change his mind?”

“Don't let them hear you say that,” Peng said. “If they get the idea that you're not totally committed to the operation, they'll be less committed to bringing you back if we fail.”

“It's probably too late,” said Ma. “I bet they have the room bugged already.”

“They do,” Peng said. “In the lightbulb and behind the photograph. But I know where the recordings are stored, and I'm going to erase them as soon as we leave this room.”

She parked herself on a corner of the desk. “Besides, I think we actually *do* have a chance of success. Chen’s ancestor set up the Project well—even if he didn’t know how it would be used—and it’s still one of the best-run operations I’ve seen. We’re all good at what we do, and we know everything that we *can* know about what we have to do.”

I ripped the sheet out of the typewriter, crumpled it and tossed it into the wastepaper basket. “Well, let’s be active and get ahead, boys and girls. Anybody for a game of table tennis?”



The evening before our appointment with death, I indulged in Western decadence with some 20th century American music on my sound system. Alice Cooper’s *Welcome to My Nightmare*.

I had just poured myself what might be my last beer of this lifetime when the door chimed. It was Peng. She stepped through the doorway and gave the apartment and its furnishings a quick glance. She was wearing a skin-tight gym costume that did not hide much; tomorrow she might be leaving behind a Grade A corpse.

“Drink?”

She accepted a beer. “I want to talk to you about our assignment,” she said. She perched herself on the edge of the couch. I sat in the armchair opposite.

“What haven’t we already talked about? We’ve been training and prepping for weeks; I’ve got contingency plans leaking out of my ears.”

“I’m not talking about plans,” she told me. “I’m talking about us: you and me and Ma and Wu. We’re the ones risking our lives. We’re flesh and blood: we owe it to ourselves to live like that.”

“Strange talk from a dedicated officer,” I said.

“I am also a woman.”

She stood up. I stood up. We were about a meter apart.

“While I can live, I want to live.” She closed the distance between us.

I took her in my arms and we kissed. Pretty soon Peng was not wearing the gym costume. On the sound system, Alice Cooper began singing a song about a woman called *Cold Ethyl*. He clearly wasn't talking about Peng.



The next morning, Peng tipped me a conspiratorial wink, but it was business as usual. What happened was not going to influence our conduct in the assignment.

Doctor Song gave us one last motivational speech and guided us to the operating theatre where we were to die and then—hopefully—revive.

The operating theatre swarmed with medical professionals. There were four operating tables and, behind them, four suspension booths. In one corner of the room, Doctor Song and one of her psychics sat at a table on which there were three crystal balls of various sizes.

Chief Inspector Li was one of the people behind a mask. “Is there anything you'd like to say before we begin?”

“Yes,” I said. “If you don't bring us back, I promise my ghost will come back to haunt your nightmares.”



When you wake up in the afterlife, I'm guessing the first thing you should do is *not* find yourself staring down the blouse of a Goddess of Peaceful Rest.

I looked at the others.

The rest of the commando squad was sitting in couches in the Heavenly Pavilion. Peng was looking outside, searching for our target. Wu was looking at Peng. Man Mountain Ma was flexing his muscles. Li had been right; our spirit bodies were exactly the same as the physical ones we left behind.

I swung my feet onto the marble floor of the pavilion. “So far so good.”

The rest of the team followed my example. We went outside, leaving the Goddess behind.

A man was waiting for us outside the pavilion, just as Li told us.

“I’m Wang,” he said, and handed us packages: clothes, equipment and weapons just like the ones we’d used in our intensive training. As expected, they looked and felt just like their earthly equivalents.

According to Doctor Song, Wang had been dead for about a month. He had been one of the Project’s accountants until he was diagnosed with incurable cancer.

“How do you get this stuff?” I asked Wang as I hung a pair of binoculars around my neck.

“It appears on top of a pillar outside the temple,” he said. “The trick is to grab it before somebody else does.”

“What’s the news about the Dalai Lama?”

“He hasn’t reincarnated yet, if that’s what you want to know. When he does, everybody here will know. He’s staying in a place they call the Palace of Reflection. I’ll show you how to find it, but it will prove difficult to get to.”

“Why?”

“Because *they* don’t want you to.” Wang didn’t elaborate. “He’s meant to be reflecting on his past life, but when he arrived every wannabe holy man was queuing up to sit at the Lama’s feet or get in his ear. *They’ve* hidden him away to keep the wannabes from getting to him.”

Wang led us along a pretty cobblestoned path to the top of a small hill, where he pointed at a distant structure. “That’s the Palace of Reflection over there,” he said.

The Palace was white, with highlights in blue and silver. Its shape was ... indeterminate: it seemed to morph from a dome to a Greek temple and back. It stood on top of a hill dotted with trees and shrubs, and was surrounded by a maze of concentric walls that stretched about half-way to where we stood. Each circle further

divided into separate spaces. Through the binoculars, I saw that the separate spaces—gardens mostly—were connected by tall gates.

“You said it was going to be difficult to get to.” I said.

“Every area in the maze is an obstacle in the path to the Palace. Fail at one of them and you’ll find yourself either back where you started—or maybe even gone.”

“Gone where?” asked Wu.

“Reincarnated, I suppose.”

“We won’t fail,” said Ma, hefting what looked like a large-calibre cannon. “Let’s go pay this Dalai Lama a visit. I don’t mind giving my all for the People’s Republic, but I’d still rather not do it on a permanent basis.”

“They’ll keep our bodies on ice for as long as they can,” Peng said, “but there’s no certainty.”

“All the more reason for us to succeed quickly,” said Wu, who looked a knockout even in army fatigues.

While the others stared at the Dalai Lama’s palace, I caught sight of a woman sitting and chanting in a shaded arbour some distance off the path. “What’s her story?”

Wang lowered his voice. “I believe we’re about to see a reincarnation.”

We all watched.

She was sitting in the full lotus position. Her eyes were closed and her chanting became fainter and fainter. *She* was becoming fainter and fainter, until I could see the outlines of the arbour *through* her.

“Does it always happen this way?”

“They *do* tend to fade away just before reincarnation, but it’s not always like this. You’ve heard Doctor Song’s lecture about *wine, women and song*? If you’re *that* kind of guy, you’ll probably vanish halfway through a rowdy party. Sometimes it happens when nothing special is happening at all. But when you’ve gone—”

The woman faded away to nothing. At the same time, there was a loud sound like the ringing of a gong. People within earshot gave the harbour a passing glance.

“When you’ve reincarnated, *that* happens. That’s how we’re sure the Dalai Lama hasn’t left us yet. *Everybody* will know about it the instant he does.”



After a short hike, we arrived at the first gate on the road to the Palace of Reflection. On the way, we saw dozens of people, all of whom seemed uninterested in us, despite the fact that we were carrying enough military equipment to support a small army.

We stood in front of the metal-framed double gate hinged into the high stone wall. Through the bars of the gate we saw a space that was green with shrubbery and blue with water. The gate was shut, but it did not seem to be locked.

“Well,” I said. “What do we do now, Wang?”

But Wang was beetling away at top speed. “Good luck,” he yelled—and never looked back.

“That figures,” said Wu.

“*You’re wrong about that,*” said a disembodied voice.

“Doctor Song,” said Peng. “I was wondering when you’d turn up.”

“*I said we would try to keep an eye on you. I also said there are blind spots. From what I can gather, a holy person just reincarnated in your vicinity; the static was hard to get through.*”

Her visible presence floated above us like Alice’s Cheshire Cat, just the ghostly outline of her head.

“And you’re here to guide us through the maze?” I asked.

“*We would if we could, but I’m afraid any help we mediums can give is limited. I covered that in our briefing.*”

In the briefing, she had assured us that a cadre of mediums and psychics would be watching us 24/7 during the assignment. They would warn us when they could; provide advice when they could;

and, most important, if we were in danger of reincarnating, tell the doctors to drag us back to our own proper bodies in the land of the living—if they could. But there was no guarantee.

“All right,” said Peng. “What’s inside this first gate.”

“I don’t know.”

“We won’t do anything by standing here,” said Peng. “Let’s go.”

Man Mountain Ma led the way to the double gate and pushed it open. The two gates swung back silently on their hinges. We walked in, the ghostly presence of Doctor Song hovering behind us.

The first space in the maze was an ornamental water garden, complete with ponds, bridges, water lilies and weeping willows. We left the shelter of the gate and began walking towards the nearest bridge.

“I can’t tell you what to expect here,” ghost-Song said, *“but you will have to cross several of those bridges to reach the next set of gates.”*

Ma reached the first bridge. “Do we cross this one?”

There was no response. Peng pointed at the brook below the bridge. “Running water,” she said. “I don’t think we’ll see Song again before we get to the other side. We’ll just have to find our own way across.” She strode past Ma and set foot on the bridge. “It seems solid enough. Let’s go.”

We were all on the bridge when the droning started.

“I hate insects,” said Wu. A cloud of wasp-sized things rose up out of the water under the bridge and came at us. “We can outrun them.”

We pounded across the bridge as fast as our equipment allowed us. The critters swarmed over us and kept swarming even as we left the bridge. “Keep running,” I yelled. “Maybe that will—”

The first of the bugs stung me. And the second. And the third. It was like being stuck with red-hot needles. “Ow! *Fuck!* Shit.”

I flapped my arms and slapped at my exposed surfaces, and forgot all about running for the next set of gates. I fell more than once, then felt an arm on my wrist.

“This way,” said Peng. She clipped a strap to my backpack and hauled me off. She dragged me over a second bridge, and then a third, where Ma and Wu were waiting for us. The bug attack began to falter after the third bridge.

I swatted one bug and it fell to the ground. It had wings like a dragonfly, but was shaped like a tiny human being and its minute right hand held a sword the size of a needle. It shook its head and slowly climbed to its feet. It looked me up and down, decided not to renew its attack and flew back to its pond along with a hundred or so of its friends.

I had no injuries, save for faint red marks that were rapidly fading. Wu and Ma also looked as if they were recovering from a case of instant measles. Peng, naturally, was cool, calm and seemingly untouched.

“I thought heaven was meant to be a happy place,” I said. “Nobody told me about homicidal Tinkerbells.”

“I don’t think that’s how it works,” Peng said. “This is a place of preparation for your next life. You might hope it would be happy, but nobody actually said it *had* to be happy.”

She shrugged. “I suspect your preparation for the next life depends on how you choose to go back. In this part of the labyrinth, I suppose the bugs are so intolerable that you’ll reincarnate just to get away from them. But that’s just a guess.”

“We’re clear of them for now,” said Wu. “Where do we get out of this place?”

“Doctor Song said we had to cross several bridges first,” said Peng. “We’ve done that. We should look around.”

“I really don’t want to meet any more of those bugs,” said Ma.

“The gate has to be in a wall, right?” I said. “Let’s find a wall and follow it.”

The nearest wall was concealed behind a trellis to our left. It was twice our height.

“Here’s a thought,” said Wu. “If we don’t want to risk life and limb in this maze, why don’t we climb up and walk along the top of the wall? We’ll be able to see where we’re going, too.”

“I checked the thickness of the wall when we came through the first gate,” I said, and used my fingers to measure ten centimetres. “It’s only about *this* wide; even if we manage to get up there, we’re not tightrope walkers.”

“There are barriers at regular intervals, too,” added Peng. “And have you noticed the birds?”

One was circling overhead, a big iridescent thing. “What is it?” I asked.

“*Feng*,” she said. “A phoenix. Keeping an eye on us. I’m guessing that if we tried to climb up on the wall, it might start interfering.”

“What can they do?” asked Ma.

“I don’t really want to find out,” said Peng.



We followed the wall for a couple of minutes. “*There you are!*” said the voice of Doctor Song. “*I was afraid we’d lost you.*”

“Welcome back,” I said. “You nearly did. We were attacked by bugs with tiny swords.”

“How do we get out of here, Song?” asked Peng.

“*It’s not far*,” said the ghost. “*Follow me.*” This far inside the labyrinth, Song’s visible presence had faded—now she was only a ring of light—but her voice was loud and clear. “*The medical people tell me that there’s nothing to worry about back home. Your bodies have adapted well to the suspension booths and are still in excellent condition.*”

“How long have we been here?” I asked.

“*Four hours. You still have plenty of time to complete the assignment; the suspension record is over a week.*”

“You’ll appreciate that we have no desire to try for a new record,” said Peng.

“Understood.”

We walked in silence. Light leaked out of the sky, and I remembered what Doctor Song had told us before we crossed over. We were about to experience our first night as dead people.

“Here’s the next gate.”



Night fell. Beyond the gate was a high-walled alley and, in the alley, a queue.

The people standing in the queue were just like the retro rock and roll fans I’d met in the United States during my diplomatic posting. I could even smell the waft of cigarettes that likely didn’t contain tobacco.

“Who are these people, Doctor Song?” asked Wu.

No response.

“She’s gone again,” I said. “Goddammit. There’s no running water and there are no crossroads.”

“Maybe it’s a holy place,” said Ma. “Let’s just push through and get to the next gate.”

“Those guys over there might object if we try queue-jumping,” I said, nodding at bouncers.

Right on cue, the mean-looking guys pounced on a scrawny kid who had tried to sneak past. Despite the kid’s complaints, one bouncer chucked him out.

“At least the queue is moving,” I said. We shuffled towards a couple of darkened doorways. A second kid in front of me held a poster written in English.

It was a playbill. *Nirvana City Limits*, the poster said. “It’s a ... music show.”

“What kind of music?” asked Peng.

Oh wow. I was physically unable to answer. *Stevie Ray Vaughan*, I tried to tell her. *Albert Collins. Gary Moore. Joe Walsh. Eric Clapton.*

The queue reached the two doorways. One led to a gate, the other opened into an auditorium, where the support act was running his sound check. *Jimi Fucking Hendrix.*

I made a break for the second door, and somebody hit me from behind.



The good thing about being hurt in the afterlife is it isn't permanent. By the time I regained consciousness—on the other side of the third gate—I could still feel the lump on the back of my head but there was no headache, no nausea and no double vision.

“Sorry,” Ma told me. “But you went all funny and tried to run away. I had to stop you.”

“Don't worry about it.” I sat up and looked around. Already it was daylight again.

“Where are we?”

“It's an archaeology dig,” Peng said. “A big one.”

“There's something familiar about it,” said Wu. “Like I've been here before. But the only dig I've ever been to is the one we visited at Xi'an when I was a kid.”

“Of course,” said Peng. “Yes. The *terra cotta* warriors. I've been there too.”

I hadn't, but I knew what they were talking about. They've been a regular attraction on the global museum circuit for nearly a hundred years. The *terra cotta* army was discovered sometime in the 20th century. Hundreds of sculptures two thousand years old, the army's purpose being to escort the buried emperor into the afterlife.

The warriors of Qin Shi Huang? Fascinating!” said Doctor Song's voice as her ghost rejoined us. “*What did I miss in the last gate?*”

“Nothing worth mentioning,” said Peng. “Are you going to stick around this time?”

“I told you about the limitations we have when tracking you. But you can rely on us to keep trying for as long as it takes. We won't give up.”

“Yeah, well, let’s check out these warriors,” said Ma. He slung his gun across his shoulder. “And if they object, we’ll show them what modern warfare is like.”

There was a path into the dig and at the bottom of the pit we found the army. Hundreds—maybe thousands—of foot-soldiers in *terra cotta* armour, together with chariots and horses. Subtly different from each other, they all stood stiffly at attention.

Wu, Ma and the halo that was Doctor Song went all touristy, as Peng watched the warriors with suspicion.

Yeah, it was interesting, but I was worried about finding the next gate. Finally, I saw it, up a steep and narrow slope at the opposite end of the pit. “I think we need to head *that* way.”

“Let’s do it,” agreed Peng. We got the others moving, albeit reluctantly.

Ma was slow to join us, and his explanation made me uneasy. “They’re not made of pottery, Chen. The armour is *terra cotta* but one of the guys looked at me. Keep an eye on them.”

“Let’s walk a little faster.”

With every rank of pottery-wearing warriors we passed, I felt more and more apprehensive. Two-thirds of the way, one warrior dropped his pike across our path.

Everybody stopped. Ma and the warrior both bent over to pick up the pike.

All the warriors aimed their pikes at us.

“*Run!*” said Doctor Song.

We ran. The warriors moved faster than us. We made it to the foot of the ramp just ahead of the first wave.

“I’ll hold them back!” yelled Ma. He unshouldered his gun and began firing. Ma’s bullets shattered the first rank of warriors even as it reached him. He was wrong about the warriors of Qin Shi Huang. They *were* made of *terra cotta*, just like their armour.

The gun worked for about five seconds then seized up. Ma backed up the ramp, using the gun as a club.

“We have to help him,” said Wu, pausing halfway up the slope.

“We have to get out of here,” said Peng. “Move!”

“...*safety...gate...*” buzzed the voice of Doctor Song. “...*static...hear you...*”

Ma stood squarely in his element in the middle of the ramp, singing the *March of the Volunteers* even as he beat the warriors surging all around him. All at once I knew what was happening, even as he fought and sang. I could see him ever so slightly beginning to *fade*.

Peng saw it too. “Song!” she yelled at the ring of light. “Ma’s in trouble! Tell the doctors to revive him *now!*”

I ran up the ramp after Wu and Peng. Ma was beyond my help now. I reached the top, turned. He was still there, a few paces up the ramp, singing and fighting—and then he vanished.

No gong sounded when he disappeared, but the warriors of Qin Shi Huang were making so much noise I might have missed it.

We ran through the gate and slammed it shut behind us.

The warriors lost interest soon as the gate closed. They turned and marched back down into the pit. Wu was sobbing, and I wasn’t feeling too great myself. Peng led us away from the gate.



There was a woodland on this side of the gate, a green canopy of trees—mostly fruit trees, by the look of them—and a series of shallow pools, and we were not alone.

There were people—a lot of them, all quiet, sitting or standing alone. Occasionally, someone would pluck and eat fruit from a tree.

Such serenity here. Peng plucked a peach off a tree. The halo that was Doctor Song was quiet—and a thought came to me.

“Something’s been worrying me ever since we entered this maze,” I said. “Remember what Wang said? *‘Ever since the Dalai Lama*

arrived every wannabe holy man here has been queuing up to sit at the Lama's feet or get in his ear?"

Peng looked puzzled.

"They've hidden him away to keep the wannabes from getting to him," Wang told us. Where did those wannabes go?" I nodded at the lotus-eaters around us. "They're right here. This is just another trap, and if we don't make tracks we'll be sitting around here forever, just like them."

"Until we reincarnate," said Peng said. "Let's get out of here."

She rounded up Wu and led us farther into the woods. There were more trees, more pools and more people—and everywhere the trees were bigger, the pools deeper and the people more listless. The halo of Doctor Song lit our way through the wood in silence. This close to the Palace of Reflection, the medium couldn't talk to us.

Every now and again, the distant ringing of a gong heralded a reincarnating soul. Less frequently, there was a whirring of phoenix wings as a *Feng* flew overhead, keeping an eye on us.

Eventually, we reached where there were no people and, then no more woodland. Instead there was a meadow and, beyond it, the next gate.

I stopped.

"What?" asked Peng.

"The meadow," I said. "It's covered with flowers."

"Red flowers, very pretty."

"There's an old movie called *The Wizard of Oz*."

"Yes, I've heard of it, but haven't seen it."

"I have," said Wu. "The field of poppies, the one before Dorothy gets to the Emerald City."

"Yeah. And whoever starts to cross the meadow smells the flowers, falls asleep, and doesn't wake up."

"So how does this Dorothy cross the meadow?" Peng wanted to know.

“A good witch makes it snow,” I said. “And unless you have a good witch on tap...”

“All right, we’ll find a way around.”

We kept to the edges of the forest. The halo that was Doctor Song hovered for a moment and then followed. The field of poppies petered out meters from a wall of the enclosure.

“Where’s Wu?” I asked.

She was kneeling at the edge of a pool, looking into its depths. I went close and looked over her shoulder. She was looking at her reflection—but whose reflection was that behind her?

A man with movie-star good looks returned my gaze; he was vaguely familiar. I scratched my head in puzzlement, and the guy in the pool did the same.

“That’s not me,” I said, and the mouth of the guy in the pool said the same.

“...not me...” Wu agreed, still gazing into the pool.

I stepped back from the pool’s edge and broke its spell. I tried to drag Wu back from the edge, but she resisted with uncommon strength, knocking me backwards without a glance. Her skin had taken on a translucent shimmer I had come to recognise.

“Song! Get them to revive Wu. Do it now!”

Wu, who had thrown herself back at the edge of the pool, abruptly disappeared.

“Was there a gong?” I demanded. “Did you hear a gong?”

“I couldn’t tell,” said Peng. “You were shouting.”

“Damn it!”



Peng pushed the gate at the far end of the meadow. It was the last gate. She walked through into the grounds of the Palace. I followed her into something that looked like a human-scale Garden of Versailles. There was one gardener in that garden ... if he was a gardener.

Peng and I looked at each other—Doctor Song’s ghost had gone missing again—and approached the old guy in the conical hat pulling weeds. There were two odd things: first, he was the first *old* person I had seen in the afterlife—everybody else seemed to wear a more youthful appearance. Second, why would gardens in the afterlife have weeds?

He looked up as our shadows fell across him.

“Congratulations,” he said. “You’re the first ones to get through. I bet it was tough.”

“You’re not—?”

“His Holiness? No, I’m just the gardener. The Lama himself will be along presently. Between us, he’s been looking forward to seeing some new faces. I don’t think he finds my company particularly stimulating. Maybe he should take up gardening too.”

“You’re pulling weeds,” I observed sagely.

“Yes. Weeds in paradise. I think they exist to give me something to do apart from pruning roses—well, before His Holiness turned up, that is.”

“You were here when the Dalai Lama arrived?” asked Peng.

“Oh, yes. The Palace of Reflection wasn’t built specially for the Lama; in my time many others have taken up residence here to meditate on their lives. It is unusual for the resident to have visitors. I can’t really remember the last time more than one person lived here.”

“Apart from you,” I said.

“I don’t live here. I have a shed round the back. It’s small and full of tools.” He climbed to his feet and dusted off his pants. “I’ll tell His Holiness you’ve arrived.”

“No need, my friend,” said a voice behind us. “I saw them open the gate.”

I recognised the newcomer as the Dalai Lama himself. His Holiness appeared to be in middle age; what I hadn’t expected was his attire. He wasn’t clothed in the maroon and saffron robes I had presumed. Instead, he sported an elegant suit of European design.

“Yes, it’s by Ermenegildo Zegna,” the Lama said. “I never could wear this kind of clothing when I was alive, but I always wanted to know how it felt. I like it.” He waved a hand towards the Palace. “Please, come in for some tea.”

As we approached the Palace of Reflection, I noticed it was slowly rotating. In fact, it seemed to be floating in the middle of a circular lake big enough to contain it. A ramp eventually swung round and allowed us to enter.

Three pots of tea sat on a long table in an equally long dining room: jasmine tea for me, red tea for Peng, and some foul concoction made with rancid salty butter for the Lama. We sat.

“I presume your journey was not an easy one,” the Lama said.

“No,” said Peng. “We lost two companions getting here, but they knew the dangers, and faced them bravely. They believed in the importance of our assignment.”

“An assignment? So you haven’t come to consult me on your rebirth? Why, then, have you come to see me?”

“We’re here to speak to you about *your* next life, Holiness,” I explained.

“Goodness, you’re not the Mormons, are you? Because if you are, you’ve landed yourselves a hard sell. No offence.”

“No, sir.” Peng replied. “This is Inspector Chen of the Police Special Branch, and I’m Inspector Peng. We’ve been sent by the Politburo to persuade you to change your mind about not returning to Earth. Failing that, we’ve been instructed to use whatever means at our disposal to ensure you *do* return.”

The Dalai Lama laughed. “The Chinese government has sent a commando squad to kidnap me? From the afterlife? How absurd. I suppose they’ve given you a code name?”

“Operation *Godfather*,” I said. “Our own bodies are being kept on ice back home to ensure we succeed. Look, I know it sounds crazy, Your Holiness, but if we don’t get you to return....”

“I understand, Inspector Chen,” the Lama said calmly, “but it was precisely to avoid being a government puppet that I made the decision *not* to be reborn. So I am afraid that I must disappoint you. Goodbye.” The Lama stood.

I stood, and tried to grab his arm. Something hit me in the head for the second time in two days.



I came to, and was sitting tied and bound to a pillar somewhere in the Palace of Reflection.

Peng was bending over me.

“What the *fuck* happened?” I demanded.

“I hit you,” she said.

“Why did you do that?”

“You were about to start a confrontation that would end badly. Violence leads to reincarnation; wouldn’t you rather go back to your old life rather than start a new one?”

“Did you ever think that maybe the *Lama* would have got violent and that he’d trigger his *own* reincarnation?”

“That’s not likely, is it?” she said, and checked the knots that bound me. Secure. “I don’t want *anybody* reincarnating before I’ve worked everything out.”

“What’s to work out? Don’t we *want* the Lama to go back?”

At this point, the Lama made an appearance. This time he was dressed in robes. “I must apologise, Inspector Chen, for my earlier abruptness. I’ve been in the Palace of Reflection too long, perhaps, and have forgotten that others may not agree with me on what I find important. You’re feeling better, I hope?”

“I’ve been worse.”

“And has Inspector Peng explained her plan?”

“Not yet,” said Peng. “That’s why he’s still tied up.”

“Which he doesn’t appreciate, by the way,” I said. “What’s the story?”

“I suppose I should explain,” said Peng, “because I haven’t been completely honest with you, Chen. You may think of me only as a dedicated police officer and member of the Party, but I’m a Buddhist. My parents gave their traditions away when they moved to the city. They died when I was very young, and I went to live with my mother’s parents in their old village. My grandparents were strong on the traditional values, and they raised me to follow the Way. I’ve never mentioned it to my superiors—it’s not the kind of thing that gets you promoted in the force—but I’ve never abandoned the practice.”

She coloured slightly. “So when I was told about Operation *Godfather*—as crazy as it was—I knew I had to volunteer to sabotage it and make sure it failed.”

“That can’t be right. You saved *me*—twice—and there’s no way we could have made it this far without you.”

“Things are not always as they seem,” she said. “I couldn’t leave you to the pixies in the first garden, and it was Ma who saved you in the queue. Besides, by then, I had already worked out what I really needed to do if we managed to get this far.”

“Which is...?”

“Inspector Peng’s plan is an ingenious one,” the Dalai Lama said. “She knew that, if I were to be reborn, events would unfold just as they have already. Our only hope of changing that is to ensure that the Dalai Lama that goes back to Earth is *not* the Lama that has just left it.”

“...And the only way to do that is for me to be reborn in his place,” Peng said.

“That sounds crazy,” I said.

“Is it any crazier than sending a commando squad into the afterlife to chase down the Dalai Lama?”

“But if you’re reborn in the Dalai Lama’s place you’ll die. They won’t be able to revive you.”

“Sometimes there has to be a sacrifice.”

“...And you’re a woman. The Dalai Lama’s not a woman.”

“I don’t have to be reborn as a woman.”

The Lama interrupted her. “However, if the Dalai Lama *were* to be reborn as a woman, it would mark a break with tradition, showing even more clearly that the Lama is not amenable to government interference. A female Dalai Lama. Yes, definitely something to consider.”

“It’s still crazy,” I said. “How do you plan to do it?”

The Lama shrugged. “Many hours of meditation, and much instruction on how Peng can prove she *is* the Dalai Lama.” He turned to face her. “Among other things, I will have to teach you how to recognise important people and places from my previous life, Peng, and to defend the philosophies I hold.”

“I am an excellent student, Holiness. I will learn what I need to know quickly. As for the meditation, where could I possibly find a better instructor than you?”

The Lama smiled. “I don’t doubt your abilities, Peng. Once you have mastered those, the real work will start. To convince the Party and, more importantly, the Buddhist leaders to accept you, we will have to prepare all of them spiritually with the requisite number of visions, presentiments and omens.”

“From beyond the grave?” asked Peng. “How can we do that?”

“I’m the Dalai Lama, Peng. It’s part of the job description. You’ll have to learn it.”

I cleared my throat. “And how long will all this take? Days? Weeks?”

“As long as it needs to take, Inspector Chen. You’re worried that you will be unable to reconnect with your existing body back on Earth.”

“Yeah, sure, that,” I said. “But if it’s going to take you guys that long, how about untying me before you begin?”



While Peng and the Lama hid somewhere in the Palace of Reflection to plot the downfall of traditional Buddhism, my job was to maintain

contact with Godfather HQ to keep them from shutting down the operation.

I was unable to maintain contact inside the palace because of its proximity to the Dalai Lama, but I figured that the gardens around the palace might be far enough away. I befriended the gardener and we pulled weeds together, pruned roses, spread compost and manure, dug holes and filled them in again.

We did it all under the watchful eyes of the *Feng*.



Peng sought me out.

“We’re nearly ready,” she said. “I’ve learned all the tests I have to pass. We’ve prepared all the revelations and omens that will convince everybody that I’m the real thing. And we’ve meditated until our legs have gone numb. So, I guess this is ... goodbye.”

“You’re still determined to... die? For real?”

“Yes, Chen. It’s what I was meant to do.”

“And the next Dalai Lama—”

“Will be a woman, yes.”

“I really would like to be in the room when all those guys find *that* out,” I said. “And I’ll go back to being a cop ... provided I can contact Doctor Song and convince her to drag me back.”

“I hope it works out for you,” she said.

“Yeah, well, when you’ve settled into the new job, don’t be surprised if an old policeman turns up at the lamasery looking for an audience.”

“I look forward to it,” she said and kissed me on the lips before leaving the room.



A few minutes later, two gongs rang out, loud enough to scare the *Feng* off their perches. Loud enough for Wang to hear it back at the Heavenly Pavilion. Loud enough, I hoped, for the guys back at Godfather HQ to hear it too, if it wasn’t too late.

I checked every room in the palace—I was alone. Peng had, presumably, been reborn and the old Dalai Lama had gone ... well ... somewhere else.

I went outside but couldn't find the gardener anywhere. I knocked on his shed door. No response. The door handle turned easily and swung outwards. There were no garden tools in the shed. There was, in fact, no shed; it was an office—four walls, a chair, a desk and an old manual typewriter.

Old Man Chen's office.

There was even the old photograph I'd noticed back on Earth. In my defence, the gardener had looked so much older than Chen Senior in the photo, and the two didn't really look very much like the same guy. There was a new ream of paper next to the typewriter. I rolled a sheet into the typewriter and hit a few keys at random. It gave me an idea.



I've been sitting here in Old Chen's celestial office typing the official report on Operation *Godfather*, hoping that somebody is watching. Sometimes, out of the corner of my eye, I see a glint of light that *may* be the presence of Doctor Song or one of her psychics.

If anybody back at Death Central is still paying attention, that is.

Like all official reports, my typewritten report contains as much of the truth as it needs, nothing more. I don't *know* that Ma and Wu made it back to their original bodies, but I've painted them as heroes.

Naturally I've keep Peng's high-minded treason out of my report and, by the time the Party realises something is wrong when the next Dalai Lama turns out to be female, I hope to be on that diplomatic assignment they promised me ... if they get me back into my own body in time.

If not, I guess I'll find my way through the labyrinth to *Nirvana City Limits* and listen to Stevie Ray Vaughan until I reincarnate as a blues guitarist. After all, anything is possible.

