

L. D. Alford
1704 N. Cypress
Wichita, Kansas 67206
(316) 636-9514
pilotlion@aol.com

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Children of Light and Darkness

by

L. D. Alford

Kathrin McClellan tugged at her soggy blouse. She was already soaked, and the sun had barely crested the hills or the jungle treetops. The rain forest was heavy and green, bursting with vitality. Insects, birds, and larger animals already lifted up their repetitious calls with the rising sun. The aroma of the jungle was pervasive, and to Kathrin's nose, everything, seemed thick and cloying. It was only made worse by the constant heat. Kathrin was not immune to the smells yet either—the fragrance and the heat. The air was so full of moisture each breath seemed to strangle her. She was reminded of the steam baths in Finland, but here, there was no opportunity to run out into the cold and dive into a freezing pool of water. There wasn't any air conditioning here to escape for a little while from the oppressive grip of the heat, and the nighttime didn't offer any relief either. Then, the place was dark and hot. Ugh, she hated it. It was so different from her native Scotland, and from her adopted land of England. Kathrin liked some of the food and the people. She liked to travel, and she enjoyed the experience, but she was just not used to the heat. James encouraged her and told her to keep at it. If they weren't here on a job, she

would have left a week ago. But it was a job. See the world, the recruiting posters said—well she had seen a lot of it, and this was about the only piece she didn't like much at all.

James stepped out on the veranda, "Heat still bothering you, Kathrin?"

Kathrin didn't say a word. She pursed her lips and clenched her jaw.

James turned around at the rail and leaned against it. He was tall and handsome, clean shaven. His hair was slightly tousled—always slightly tousled. It was brown and nondescript. His face, though handsome, was still nondescript. MI, Military Intelligence, liked their agents to look good, but not to draw too much attention. It was easier that way. James was strong and well trained. He always treated her like a lady, even when he didn't have to and when she didn't deserve it.

Kathrin knew she was pretty—perhaps bordering on beautiful. Her face was freckled and sported blazing green eyes. She had heart shaped lips in a heart shaped face. Her hair was red, and she was thin, perhaps too thin. She wasn't very tall either. None of those characteristics ever seemed to affect her negatively. She spoke with a thick but improving Scottish brogue that made her a little difficult to understand at times. She knew she always showed a slightly harried look, and that was backed by an overly brisk personality. And true to the Gallic stereotype, she did possess a raging temper. It was a prideful secret that she kept it in check almost all of the time. When she let it out, it scared her. She didn't let it out often, not at all since she had been working for the organization.

"The organization." Now there was an enigma. It had been MI19, Military Intelligence section nineteen, during the big war, World War Two, but MI19 was officially defunct. It was just called "the organization" now. MI19 had originally been the language and interrogation services for British Military Intelligence. There was a big stink after the war about interrogation

techniques, and to calm the public and foreign sensibilities, MI19 closed for a day and reopened the next as “the organization.” The focus of the organization today was language agents and operatives. It provided agents who could blend into the cultures and societies from which the British needed to gather information and intelligence. The organization now rarely conducted enemy agent interrogations—it did handle all defector and special intelligence interrogations. Sometimes it still accomplished enemy agent interrogations. All right, to be truthful, MI19 still did all the work it had during the big war, it just focused mainly on languages now—there weren’t that many enemies to interrogate. Kathrin ought to know, she was the head of the organization’s interrogation department. She was an operative and not an agent. She didn’t usually carry out field work, but her special skill and subtlety were supposed to be necessary here. During the big war, well before her time, her department included over half of the employees in the organization. She had just hired and trained a new interrogator so her department was now three strong. That’s the only reason they would think of sending her out to Burma on a mission with James Calloway.

James was an organizational share out to MI6: Military Intelligence section six was the British Secret Intelligence Service. James was a real agent. When he was a child, his family had lived in Burma as missionaries, and he had a fantastic ear for the language and the culture. Like so many of the agents who worked for the organization, he learned to speak his language in the streets as a child. He spoke the Burmese languages perfectly and knew almost every dialect in the nation. He also knew Mandarin Chinese, but he had not told Kathrin any of the other languages he spoke—she had no official “need to know,” and his language knowledge was somewhat classified.

Bruce Lyons was the director of the organization—Kathrin and James’ boss. For a long time, Mr. Lyons and the members of the organization thought he would be transferred and the organization subsumed under some other MI. Instead, as the British government scaled down their intelligence services, the organization had taken over many of the defunct MI groups. The organization supplied all the language trained agents to the rest of the MI system. That’s why James was a share.

For some reason, Bruce Lyons himself briefed them on their mission. The director usually didn’t do that, and the mission seemed simple. It had turned painful for more than one reason.

James checked his sidearm, “You still mad at me about last night?”

Kathrin’s eyes flashed at him. James tucked away his weapon and raised his hands.

All the fight drained out of her. She gazed out on the jungle, “It was my fault.”

“Then come on. It will only get hotter the longer we delay.”

Kathrin bared her teeth. She pulled her large hat around her ears and grimaced. She was slightly sunburned, and her ears and nose received the brunt—her ears, just where her hat rested on them. She followed James down the veranda and into the bursting sunlight. She sped up a little and caught up with him, “Where to today?”

“We tried the main sites all around the region.” He took a cautious glance around, “The reports and our leak said they were last seen in this general area. It mentioned a tomb and a temple—their usual modus operandi. We tried the obvious ones. I think we will get the lay of the land and seek locally for a while.”

“Then what?”

“I haven’t thought that far. We’re way off our original plans, and we still have time, orders, and funding.”

Kathrin folded her arms across her chest and paced at his side.

They entered the jungle on a thin trail that led from the back of the hotel veranda. This was the easiest way into the small village of Panghkam that supplied most of the hotel employees. The village backed up against the city of Namhkam, which was the official base for their investigation. The jungle wasn't a bit cooler than the open sunlight. Kathrin already felt the sweat trickling down her back and between her breasts.

The trail exited behind a hut near an old junk yard. The smells of the trash collided with the normal stinks of the jungle and the village. Kathrin wrinkled her nose.

A panoply of sound came around the hut to them. They heard bells and drums that accompanied a mixed chorus of human voices. They intoned a hymn in a strong minor key. Feet slapped the ground in dance to the song. It was vaguely repetitious to Kathrin's ears. She put her hand on James' arm, "What is it?"

"No idea. It's too early in the year for most of the festivals."

"What are they singing?"

"It sounds like a yin-yang hymn of praise to some deity."

"What's that mean exactly?"

"A yin-yang hymn is one that is sung by both men and women. It is a contrasting hymn usually to a mixed deity."

"Which deity?"

"No clue. They have thousands in this land. Each village worships many of their own. This deity has to be a mixed female-male, yin-yang. Come on." They slipped around the side of the building and came up near the front of a procession that snaked through the narrow streets of the village. At the front, an atypical priestess led a very typical offering table. The table was

carried by four men and was laden with food, drink, and cheap gifts. Right behind the offering table walked the village headman. He was very old and paced with great dignity, but slowly behind the table.

When James and Kathrin stepped from between the buildings at the side of the street, he gestured to them. James didn't pause a moment. He moved beside the old man and matched step with him. Kathrin wasn't quite as quick, but with a slight jog, she caught up. The old man didn't speak, but he smiled proudly at them. To Kathrin, his look stated with certainty that the participation of the English guests would please their village god.

Kathrin marched reverently beside James and the headman. She noted James kept his eyes moving around the crowd and along their path. That was his job and his training. She held her attention closer and, at first, observed the priestess ahead. Kathrin knew a woman leading such a procession in this country was odd. The yin-yang hymn was odd, or James wouldn't have remarked about it to such a degree. The woman was not young. She looked like a matron, at least middle-aged. She kept her face toward the ground and danced in the same step as the men who carried the table. Just behind the headman came the musicians. Their jingling bells and drums created a driving sound that was primitive and savage. The beat was forceful, but subtle and Kathrin felt her own feet want to take it up. She wanted it to take away the heat, and at this moment it did distract her. For a few minutes, she forgot how uncomfortable she was. She gave a great sigh. This was fun. It would be a lot more fun if it all wasn't such a deadly business.

She glanced up at the offering table—toys! That really surprised her. There were cheap toys still in their packaging. The bright colors were evident. She saw a jump rope, a doll, a top. They were the inexpensive things you could find all over Burma, but not in the village markets here. These things came from the city, and they were very dear to the people and children who

lived here. She hadn't seen a child anywhere they visited with any of these kinds of toys. Sticks and carved things, but nothing made of shiny new plastic.

The food was interesting too. Kathrin noted the best delicacies from the village piled on the table. That, in itself was not unusual, what was unusual was the meat. She could see meat on top of the pile. It wasn't very much, but it was meat. She could smell it and the heavy spices that seasoned it even through the oppressive heat.

The parade wound through the village and back into the jungle. It took an entirely different direction, to the northwest, than she and James had traveled before. They had not investigated all the local area yet, but they were now headed in a new direction and obviously toward a new place—a place they had not explored yet. The sense of excitement began to build in her. This was what made their investigation so sweet, the hope of success, the hope of finding what they were sent to find. It was a one in a million shot, but in some new place, there was at least a chance.

The track through the jungle here was wide and well traveled. Kathrin was surprised she and James had missed it before. She stared at James, but he was too busy trying to decipher the song and the chanted words while keeping an eye on the crowd. The priestess mumbled under her breath the whole trip. Kathrin knew, from the look on his face, that James attempted to understand her words. He was very sensitive to these people's culture.

They journeyed quite a ways along the jungle track. Kathrin observed the trail branch many times. The path led uphill most of the way. She was getting tired, but noted no flagging of the villagers or the men who carried the heavy table. The priestess danced with frenzied grace the entire time. Kathrin was almost ashamed of her lack of stamina. The heat was truly oppressive.

Almost without warning, the jungle opened around them, and they stepped out at the edges of a wide stone bowl. A slanting trail led down into and around the bowl. It descended in a spiral from level to level. The bowl was perhaps a hundred meters across. Its sides were like a large amphitheater with wide levels where people could sit or stand. At the back was a flat area like a theater with a small opening, but here was no theater, it was obviously an ancient temple. The sides of the opening were adorned with beautiful and fantastic stone carvings. Kathrin could make them out from the top of the bowl, and she wanted to see the carvings up close to examine them.

At the bottom of the bowl lay a wide flat courtyard. That area was at least twenty meters in diameter and in the center lay a raised platform. The sides of the platform were carved similarly to the lintels of the temple door. The platform itself was covered with a large square of heavy silk. Kathrin could detect its soft sheen in the bright play of sunlight. The square was ringed with flowers and on it, near the center, sat two children.

The parade snaked around the amphitheater that circled the platform. The tenor of the music changed. It became more and more joyous although the words and the tones themselves did not seem to vary.

As they moved closer to platform and the children, Kathrin could identify they were both girls. They wore only chains of gold, bronze, and silver. They were naked, but each adorned like an oriental empress or goddess. The chains formed their only clothing; they depended from their waists and covered the front of their thighs. Their upper bodies were draped with necklaces, armlets, and bracelets. Although the chains and jewels they wore were completely different, there was a sameness about them that was disconcerting, except for one very peculiar

thing, the girl on the left had a piece of heavy silk tied about her eyes, and the one of the right had a similar piece of silk tied around her ears.

Neither girl moved or changed position as the large group made its way around the bowl and to the courtyard. Finally, they reached the bottom. The priestess made very slow progress across the courtyard to the platform. She bowed and genuflected at each step. The men with the table knelt in time with her movements.

Kathrin was impatient to proceed. She wanted to see these two children better. Slowly, the procession moved nearer. Kathrin could see they were both thin, about eight or perhaps older. They were brown, but not as brown as the villagers. Their skin was like cappuccino and showed a strange glow as though the sun ignited it. Their faces seemed slightly oriental, but at second glance, not oriental at all. They looked like faces out of an Egyptian tomb painting. Kathrin caught her breath. They were beautiful. Although they were yet children, the seeds of fantastic beauty rested in their faces and their bodies. They displayed unearthly beauty. Their hair was deep glossy black. It was long and straight but the ends curled.

Their faces were the same. Their bodies were the same. They were like two beings cut from exactly the same mold. They sat in the woman's stork position with one leg extended to the side and the other folded underneath them. The priestess approached the girl on the right and spoke. James leaned toward Kathrin and whispered the translation, "Oh great Guāng. We beg to approach you with our offerings."

Guāng did not speak. Instead, the girl with the silk covering her eyes opened her mouth. A sound like bells filled the amphitheater. The sound was musical but not harmonic, like chimes. The girl's voice was clear and strangely melodic. It pierced the sound of the villager's instruments—it stopped, and she pronounced something in the local Burmese dialect. James

continued translating for Kathrin, “She said. Peace be to you, people of Panghkam. Welcome again to the temple of Hēi'àn and Guāng.”

Kathrin asked, “What are Hēi'àn and Guāng?”

“It is Chinese for dark and light.”

“Why Chinese?”

James shushed her.

The priestess spoke again, and James translated quietly, “Dear Hēi'àn and Guāng, we bring you gifts and food on your special day.”

Kathrin plucked at James' sleeve, “What's so special about today?”

James shushed her again.

Guāng, her ears covered with silk, nodded her head, and the priestess motioned the men with the table forward. They set it down directly between Hēi'àn and Guāng. The top of the table came level with the platform. Neither girl moved. The priestess began to chant again. The musicians began to play. Still, neither girl moved. Kathrin was amazed at how still and silent they sat. Finally, the priestess stepped to the table and picked up the doll and the plastic top. She placed the doll right in front of Guāng. Kathrin thought she saw a trace of a break, the little girl, Guāng, gave the priestess such a look of thanks and so great a smile, Kathrin's own heart melted. The priestess placed the toy top in front of Hēi'àn. The girl moved her head as though she could see the gift and the giver. Although she could see nothing of the girl's eyes, Kathrin thought the silk must have a wide enough weave to peer through.

The priestess moved away and gave a signal. The headman stepped forward and took something from the top of the table. It was another toy, a couple of jump ropes. He placed one in front of Hēi'àn and one in front of Guāng. The girls acknowledged the gift and the old man

stepped to the side. The four men who carried the table then approached the girls. Each of the men took an item from the table and alternately presented their gifts to Guāng and then to Hēi'àn. Then the people of the village came forward. Many didn't say a word. Some asked a petition out loud. Some whispered their requests to the girls. That is when Kathrin was first struck with amazement. As the children of the village stepped forward with their parents to present gifts to Hēi'àn and Guāng, before they stepped back, Guāng handed a small item to the girls and Hēi'àn a small item to the boys.

Kathrin noticed it first when a small girl stepped up with her mother and father. The mother presented Hēi'àn and Guāng each with a small cooked package of rice. Before they stepped back, Guāng reached behind her and came up with something in her hand. She placed this at the lip of the platform directly in front of the girl. It looked to Kathrin like a marble or a small translucent stone. She had no idea where it could have come from. She could see a little behind the small thin girl on the platform. The stones Guāng gave could not be under or behind her. They would have been evident on the platform.

Likewise, Hēi'àn presented the boys with a small gift, usually a coin from the space behind her. Kathrin knew there had to be a trick. These two girls didn't wear enough to hide anything. There must be a concavity or a hidden hole on the platform from which the gifts appeared. She pursed her lips and scrutinized everything very carefully. After all the villagers had passed and presented their gifts, everyone waited, at first patiently and then with growing impatience. Finally, the headman pointed toward the table, a few small fruits and other morsels of food rested there. He pointed surreptitiously to the remaining gifts and then at James and Kathrin. With a slight blush, James stepped forward and took a couple of pieces from the table. He presented one to Hēi'àn and the other to Guāng. Kathrin then embarrassingly found herself the center of

everyone's attention. She knew what they all expected from her, but something else tugged at her thoughts and mind. She went to the table and glanced over the last of the offerings, but instead of taking an item from there, she reached into her pocket. She presented a pocket book novel she had been reading to Guāng and a small plastic comb to Hēi'àn.

Guāng cocked her head at this and a slight murmur ran through the crowd. When Kathrin presented Hēi'àn with the comb, Hēi'àn's face lit up with great joy, and the people all let out a unbidden sigh. Kathrin stepped back beside James.

Hēi'àn spoke for both of them. She spoke of things few young girls would ever think about, much less understand, "Oh, people of Panghkam, we thank you for the bounteous gifts you have bestowed upon us. The harvest will be fine this year. The jobs will increase. You will know sickness, but your children will flourish. Do not transgress what you understand is right and your marriages, your comings and goings, your love and lovemaking, your peace and community will be blessed." She paused for a long moment, and everyone waited in expectation. "Guāng will bless you."

That is when Kathrin saw the first miracle. Guāng reached into the air around her. The sunlight seemed to become malleable in her hands. She gathered it like thick rich honey and held it. It was bright and pulsing and beautiful. A brilliant smile filled Guāng's features, and the villagers, though they acted as if they had seen such displays before, were filled with awe. After holding and gathering and molding this fantastic material, Guāng lifted it up in her small hands and released it. The light was a blaze. It washed over them truly like a blessing. It was warm and seemed to Kathrin for a moment to drive away all the humidity and the sweat from her body. At once, she was dried. Her clothing was completely dry; it felt as though it came directly out of

a warm drier. The people all around her released a great sound of awe, but that was not the end. They stood expectantly—they expected more.

Hēi'àn sat up straight, “I will bless you also.” She put out her hands and the shadows gathered from the crooks of the stones. She gathered in her hands a piece of darkness. It was not threatening. It did not build fear in Kathrin. It was as beautiful as the sunlight in its own way. It was like a bit of cool shadow in the midst of a hot day. It was like the clouds that covered the face of the sun when the heat was unbearable. It was like the night and the beauty of the night filled with loving and sleep and gentleness. Hēi'àn held this in her hands for a while. She raised it up and let it free. A darkness washed over them all. It was cool like a blast of cold air. It was tingling and raised the hairs on the back of Kathrin's neck. Kathrin felt a comfortable chill and a stroke of passion that she quickly subdued.

Hēi'àn placed her hands on her knees and made a meditation symbol. The audience was at an end. The people began to back out of the bowl shaped temple. The headman gestured Kathrin and James back. The priestess was the last to depart. She bowed very low and venerated the two girls. The others bowed as well. They didn't play any music, at first. When everyone stood on the top edge of the bowl, the priestess gave a signal. The music rose intensely, joyous. It was bright and quick. The people backed until the girls were out of sight, then they all turned and danced along the path through the jungle. They were filled with joy. Many men kissed their wives and children kissed their parents. The fathers took their children on their necks, and they danced all the way back to the village.

At the edge of the village, when all the villagers began to disperse, the headman was about to leave, but James stopped him, “Myat Thet, we thank you for inviting us to your festival today. Could you tell us more about these two, Hēi'àn and Guāng?”

The headman didn't say a word. He gestured and led Kathrin and James to his house near the center of the village. He sat them in front on the handmade mats on his veranda and instructed his wife to make tea. After the tea was served, and they sat for the proper length of time, the old man began, "Almost five years ago, Hēi'àn and Guāng and came to our village." The old man glanced up from his tea, "They didn't come here, of course. They appeared at the village shrine, the temple where you venerated them today. They were sitting right where you saw them. They are Chinese goddesses."

"How do you know they are Chinese?"

"They spoke only Chinese when they first came to the shrine. Their names, Hēi'àn and Guāng, mean dark and light in Chinese. The one, Hēi'àn controls yin, she is dark, and the other, Guāng controls yang, she is light."

The headman spoke some English, Kathrin asked, "Who are their parents? Where did they come from?"

The old man smiled, "You saw today and still ask such questions? They are not human beings. They are goddesses. They have no father or mother, and they came to us from China. Everyone knows the Chinese don't believe in gods and goddesses anymore. They believe in Marx and Mao. Hēi'àn and Guāng came to us because the Chinese did not want their blessings anymore."

Kathrin continued, "How old were they when they came here?"

"They are goddesses, so who knows their true age, but when they first came, they appeared much younger, perhaps four or five. But you cannot let that fool you. They spoke, even then, like grown women. They are eternal and will bless our village as long as we serve them."

"But they are just little girls."

The headman stared at Kathrin. James made a warning signal behind his hand.

She stammered, "You could tell they loved the toys. They wanted those things."

The headman smiled, "Yes, they were pleased. Their minds are not like ours, but you see, our gifts did please them. They have much more than any of the children in our village. And you saw, they gave back gifts to our children."

"What kinds of gifts did they give?"

"Their gifts are usually coins for the boys and stones for the girls. Would you like to see one?"

"Yes, please."

The headman called for his granddaughter. The small girl came running. She was about six and was missing some front teeth. She smiled shyly and stood behind her grandfather. He made a motion with his head and she came a little around him, "Kyine Nyunt, would you show our friends the gift you received from Guāng?"

The little girl nodded vigorously. She pulled a small bauble from the bag tied around her neck. She slowly and carefully opened her hand for Kathrin and James to see. The stone was translucent with a deep green color. It was about the size of a large pea.

Kathrin started and sucked in her breath. After a moment she could speak, "That is very beautiful. It is a wonderful gift."

The headman translated Kathrin's words. With reverence, the child closed her fist around the stone and put it carefully back into her pouch. She said something to her grandfather and he nodded. The little girl ran off to play.

The headman leaned toward Kathrin and James, “You see, Hēi'àn and Guāng give gifts that bless. Kyine Nyunt will never let such a gift out of her possession. It was bestowed by the gods.”

James bowed, and he and Kathrin stood carefully not to let their feet face the headman. The headman stood too. James bowed again, “We thank you for your hospitality and inclusion in this most important day for your village.”

The headman bowed. Kathrin and James headed back to the hotel. It was already too late for lunch, and the headman's tea wouldn't hold them until dinner. The hotel was surrounded by jungle. Its main entrance fronted a slip of a well kept gravel road that went from the main asphalt to the circular drive. The building was stoutly made of mostly local materials. It had electricity and all the main features of a very nice hotel, but unfortunately no air conditioning.

Kathrin and James entered the bar off the main lobby of the hotel and found a seat near the back. Overhead, large electric powered fans whirled trying to move the stagnant air and keep the room a few degrees cooler than the outside. The humidity was still oppressive. Kathrin wiped her neck with an already damp handkerchief and made a face. They ordered cold drinks and the waiter brought snacks. They both recognized him as one of the men who carried the table for the procession. The drinks contained ice and in spite of the chance of disease, parasites, or traveler's sickness, they still ordered them that way. They hoped the alcohol killed any germs. Without the ice, Kathrin thought she would have just given up. She rubbed a small cube against her forehead and cheeks while she sipped on the drink. They waited until no one was close enough to hear them before they discussed the subject of the day.

Kathrin took a deep breath, “Did I see what I thought I saw?”

“Tell me what you thought you saw.”

“I saw two little girls who made miracles.”

“Miracles? Why call them miracles? Why not say trick or illusion?”

“Because, James, a trick or illusion has an explanation. Illusions can be poo-pooed.

Illusions are a trick. I don’t believe I saw any tricks today.”

“Surely it wasn’t real.”

Kathrin snorted, “James, when Guāng did that trick with the light didn’t you feel the power in it...?”

“There, you said trick.”

“It was only a manner of speaking. I’m saying, how could a nearly naked child in the middle of the Burmese jungle with only cheap plastic toys as playthings make such a phenomenon happen.”

James smiled, “Hēi'àn’s air conditioning was very pleasant too.”

“The baubles and coins they bought out of thin air were peculiar as well.”

James smirked, “Ha, that had to be a trick.”

“A trick that produced an emerald.”

“What do you mean?”

“The stone the headman’s granddaughter showed us was an emerald. It was uncut, but it looked pretty perfect to me. That single stone would probably feed her family for a year.”

James eyes glowed, “You think these children have access to real jewels?”

Kathrin shook her head, “That’s not what I meant at all. I just wanted to point out that conjuring those jewels was as inexplicable as the sunlight and the shadows.”

“How does any of this help us find the Diakonovs?”

Kathrin shrugged her shoulders, “No idea. This was a fool’s errand to begin with. Our chances of finding Lumière and Aleksandr are almost zero.”

“Fool’s errand or not, Bruce Lyons expects some sort of definitive conclusion. We either need confirmation of their deaths or some indication that they were taken captive by the Chinese.”

“All we have to go on is that Chinese report...”

“And the CIA contact...the leak.”

“They were both so old,” Kathrin complained.

“That’s because they both came from the Americans, and they finally got around to declassifying them to the NATO top secret level. We would have never seen them if they hadn’t done that.”

“They really hated her, didn’t they?”

“Hate has nothing to do with it—it’s just the way the Americans operate. Wait, you speak like you knew her...did you know this woman, Mrs. Diakonov?”

“I interviewed her when she tried to join the organization.”

“You never told me that.”

“James, you could have guessed it. I interview everyone. I interviewed Aleksandr when he joined. He was a jerk. I never knew what she saw in him. She was the toughest woman I ever met. She was unbelievable—beautiful and personable. The only problem was she had ties to the communists. I knew they would never hire her even though she did defect.”

“If they didn’t hire her, why is the organization so interested in her?” James sipped his drink.

“I thought that was because of Aleksandr, and her position at the British Foreign Office. She was the top diplomat for China, and he was “the organization’s” best Chinese translator. I heard

that the Chinese communists in London and overseas always wanted to meet with her, especially after that big stink in China. She was even more popular after that. It was all hush-hush. They didn't let anything out about it at all."

James took another sip, "That China thing was an enormous problem. They kept it really quiet. The Americans didn't let out a squeak. There were some newscasts of the event. I've heard they were something to see, but they are restricted even now."

"How can you restrict a newscast?"

"You have to know how to speak Chinese, and the BBC controls all that kind of thing in Britain. The Americans held their copies from the media. I'd like to see it. Might help us with our little problem. It would be good to know why the Chinese are so interested in the Diakonovs."

"We know why the KGB is interested." Kathrin shuddered, "Any word from our contacts?"

"No, we are safe for now—at least as safe as we can be under the circumstances. The Soviets have no idea what or who we are looking for. As far as we can tell, they don't have any operatives or agents around here at all."

"You always keep your gun close...?"

"Of course—habit and good training."

They were silent for a long time. Both contemplated what they observed that day. When the dining room opened, Kathrin and James went right in. There were few guests at the hotel—it was the off season, mostly due to the summer heat. They ordered completely different meals. Kathrin tried to find the coolest and mildest things she could. In Burma that was difficult. She wanted everything tepid or cold. In this heat, she couldn't stand to eat anything hot or spicy. That was just impossible for her. The first time she ate in the country, she didn't hold on to it

until breakfast, and now she was especially careful. Breakfast seemed particularly difficult for her.

James was used to the climate and to the food. He grew up here. He ate the spiciest and hottest meals he could get. Kathrin had to sigh and keep her eyes off him. He ate with great decorum and consummate manners, but she couldn't stand to observe the heat or smell the spice. It completely put her off. He tried to accommodate her for a few days when they first arrived, but quickly gave that up. James liked the food, and he liked Burma. Kathrin wasn't so sure about any of it.

After dinner, they took a nightcap with them to their room. James made a short foray to the veranda and smoked a cigar. Kathrin rearranged the fresh flowers in an old silver pot on her nightstand. For a while, through their window, she watched James as he scouted out the edge of the jungle. Kathrin undressed in the small bathroom. She wore as little as possible to bed. If she were by herself, she would have gone to bed naked. She hadn't done that with James for weeks—well, except last night. He wore his briefs. That wasn't an accommodation for her, it was service policy. Funny, the rules that governed spies. She hadn't let him touch her for a long time—she tried to forget about last night. He hadn't tried for a long time. She was a little ashamed at herself for getting involved with him that way. They weren't married, and she almost felt like an old married woman.

She lay on her side of the bed under the mosquito net. He lay on his side. His service automatic hid under his pillow, and he kept one in a holster in his shorts. She chuckled softly, that was just a bad and old joke. Without looking at him she asked, "What is the plan for tomorrow?"

James was wide awake, "I thought I would let you decide that. I saw already today what you want to do."

"I'm not that transparent, James Calloway."

He stated, "I know what you want to do."

Kathrin answered quietly, "I want to speak to those little girls, Hēi'àn and Guāng."

"Do you know what...? I do too."

"Do you think it will have any bearing on our, you know, mission?"

"No. I don't think it has anything to do with our mission, but I think we need to speak to them. I admit I am as intrigued as you."

"How will we do it?"

James spoke slowly, "There is the difficulty. We don't want to upset the cultural apple cart, so to speak. These village people are not as unsophisticated as they might seem. We must be very cautious when we approach our two young friends. The gods are always appeased in these cultures in the morning right after the sun rises and in the evening before the sun sets. The girls' keepers or that priestess will arrive in the morning to give them food and prepare them for the day. They will come in the evening to feed them and prepare them for the evening. They may be guarded, but I doubt it. Gods and goddesses protect themselves. The main issue we will have with the villagers is if they perceive we are interfering with or disturbing their goddesses. Then things might get messy."

"What's the plan then?"

"We get up before the sun. Scamper over to the path out of the village and wait for the priestess. We follow her and watch how she calls and appeases the girls. Then we can approach them and see if they will talk with us."

“Good.” Kathrin closed her eyes. She put out her hand and touched James’ fingers. She squeezed them, “Thanks.” She pulled her hand back quickly so he wouldn’t get the wrong idea.

