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UNDISCLOSED LOCATION 1100 HOURS

JD had been waiting nearly one hour as instructed after being dropped exactly at the coordinates received. He'd spent far too much time touching his bracelet, checking his watch, and reassuring himself that Claymore had seen that Kate was safely escorted back to the mission hospital.

He *had* to get his mind off that boat with Kate. If he wanted to see her again he had to keep himself safe until this last job was over. For now he was completely alone and surrounded by miles and miles of dense, highland bush, no sign of civilization beyond the newly created landing zone where a black chopper was descending.

It had no ID and dropped into the LZ on powerful rotors that were more silent than any JD knew to exist. JD took his cue and greeted the man who emerged from the craft.

"J. D. Mikel, is it?" The voice had a sandpaper quality. Thin and scratchy, it suited the rest of him.

"Yes and a pleasure to meet you, sir." JD bowed slightly.

The Pale Man nodded. His self-ordained title was apt. He was pale as a porcelain plate and wore all white: a long-sleeved, tropical linen shirt and matching trousers, with a protective straw hat to shield as much of his face as possible, with dark sunglasses hiding his eyes. He seemed nearly an albino but not quite.

The Pale Man smiled now and his yellowed teeth were like the old ivory of an aged tiger.

He signaled and four guards spilled from the chopper. Two were armed with short, ugly, powerful German auto-matics and had the look of South Africans. Behind them were two Asians that JD identified as Cambodian Hmong by their traditional clothing and the accents he picked up in a quick, conspiratorial exchange. They were much smaller than the South Africans but contained a lithe, smooth strength that would serve them better in this environment than the brutally strong build of the others, that would endure only so long in this kind of jungle.

Both Cambodian guards' faces were intricately tattooed with snakes; one matched the picture of the man from the intelligence files.

His host had come highly insured. JD's body tensed and a premonition moved through his psyche like something with dark wings as the strange Pale Man led the way.

JD fell in step slightly behind him, the formidable group of guards so close he could smell their collective muscle, differentiate their individual scents. Eventually they emerged from the dense double canopy and crossed a small, arched bridge over a swift-flowing stream and moved past a large, black stone. It was a sculpture, JD realized, with a cobra carved inside. It stood sentry beside an iron gate which opened into a garden.

The guards hung back and did not impose their presence on the garden's perfection. A small wonder stood in its center—a carved teak palace of perfect proportions. JD ascended the highly polished stairs with The Pale Man and paused on the landing, where a pair of carved jade doors fronted two large, porcelain vases filled with flowering ginger.

The Pale Man swung open the double doors, revealing a cool, dark interior space. They both stepped out of their sandals and left them at the door. As JD's eyes adjusted he could see the fine rugs, the carvings and furnishings, all museum quality antiquities. An enormous gong and a breathtakingly beautiful Go board were set up near a lotus pond.

By way of invitation The Pale Man gestured to the pond's other side where a gathering of batik-cushioned chairs invited contemplation. Indeed, JD was caught by the vision of several extraordinary carp swimming amongst the floating, bright-pink lotus blossoms and verdant green leaves. The carp were large, very old and exquisitely colored in shining, iridescent deep blues and whites and pale gold.

He bowed toward them. "They are remarkable," he said.

Aged tiger teeth glistened past an approving smile. "Ah yes, they are, aren't they? I had been told you have a fine consideration and appreciation of the Oriental." There was a pause and then abruptly, "I would gift you one. Which would you have?"

JD hesitated. This was a swift and ruthless player. The offered gift would be nearly impossible for even a very wealthy man to repay. It would also be extraordinarily rude to refuse and, under the circumstances, dangerous; yet to accept imposed a heavy debt.

"I would take the pale gold one," JD carefully responded, "but given she is only a component of the entire piece, I would have to take all of them. Taking her alone would flaw the composition and make it common—still lovely, of course, but common, as Wu Tao-Tzu would have said." Such a reference to Wu, JD knew, would place his adversary in an awkward position if he was a true student of the Asian arts, for how could he possibly contradict anything the great Tang Dynasty master painter would have said? When The Pale Man responded with an unguarded expression of surprise, JD seized the advantage. "Therefore, I can only assume you have something of more value you want to speak to me about?"

"Well spoken." The thin, papery voice reminded JD of a snake's warning hiss. This one was particularly cunning, hiding behind the veil of politeness. "Wu Tao-Tzu would have certainly complimented you. A drink?"

"Tea, please."

“Also well spoken.” The Pale Man nodded to a servant who disappeared into the dark hallway as silently as he had appeared. Again The Pale Man gestured to the batik cushion. “You have had fine teachers I see.”

JD did as he was bid and made the appropriate response to the compliment. “I have been fortunate in my teachers, but of course am still not worthy of them.”

As they sat in silence while waiting for the tea, The Pale Man removed his sunglasses. His nearly colorless eyes appeared like glassy, pink halos around the black marble of his pupils.

JD noticed The Pale Man staring at the tribal bracelet on his wrist and felt strangely violated. There was no other word for it, nor any rationale for the kind of gut reaction that had kept him alive more than once. He discreetly covered his wrist. The Pale Man nodded slightly, indicating the action had been noted.

The tea arrived, the ceremony flawlessly performed. The teapot and small jade cups were of the finest quality and the tea, exceptional. JD knew he could not say the same of his maneuver with the bracelet and sought to reestablish the balance of their lunge and parry.

“You honor me with this,” said JD, “and your tea is worthy of its cup.”

The older man nodded. “It comes from one of my own plantations.”

“From Lamdong I would say, south slope. A very fine Iron Buddha, *tie guan yin*.” JD took another small sip of the extraordinary tea he knew was worth a staggering sum, as would be a rare, vintage wine. “I myself grow a Longjing, the Dragon Well, near there on a north-facing slope.”

“Again I say your teachers were very fine.” The Pale Man smiled his tiger smile again. “Perhaps you would someday sell me your Longjing plantation . . . or perhaps trade it for something of value?”

“Perhaps.” JD smiled back.

“I am now expanding my farming interests into other lucrative crops.”

“The war provides many opportunities.”

“Yes,” agreed The Pale Man. “And I will be establishing my operations from north down to the south with our friends in Air America, and then to Europe through the usual family channels in Marseille, and the USA. In order to ensure this—and I always like to ensure things—I would appreciate your and your Ambassador’s cooperation.” He turned the full ferocity of his smile on JD and clapped his hands.

The servant with the tea service appeared again, this time with a domed silver tray. JD’s earlier premonition barreled full force into his psyche, the dark wings converging into an ominous black mass.

“Usually, I would offer perhaps one of her lovely ears or a finger to show my sincerity,” explained The Pale Man, “but in her case, as you said of the golden carp, it would ruin the overall beauty of the composition to mar her. And I certainly would not want to do that, especially if I have to keep her. Now, please allow me to offer some proof that she is already mine.”

The servant removed the domed lid.

JD’s breath stopped.

Centered on the tray was the severed head of the sampan’s boat pilot. Between his teeth was the silver bracelet JD had given Kate.