

Chapter 1

The Agency had hired me to “retire” Belghazi, not to protect him. So if this didn’t go well, their next candidate for a retirement package would probably be me.

But the way I saw it, saving Belghazi from the guy I now thought of as Karate would be doing Uncle Sam a favor. After all, Karate could fail to make it look natural, or get caught, or do some other sloppy thing, and then there would be misunderstandings, and suspicions, and accusations – exactly the kinds of problems the Agency had hired me to avoid.

Of course, there was also the matter of my getting paid. If Karate got to Belghazi first and I couldn’t claim credit, I might be out of a check, and that wouldn’t be very fair, would it?

I thought of this guy as Karate because my suspicions about him had first jelled when I saw him doing karate *kata*, or forms, in the gym of the Macau Mandarin Oriental Hotel, where we were both staying and where Belghazi was soon to arrive. Avoiding the facility’s tangle of Lifecycles and Cybex machines, he had focused instead on a series of punches, blocks, and kicks to the air that, to the uninitiated, might have looked like some kind of martial dance routine. Actually, his moves were good – smooth, practiced, and powerful. They would have been impressive in any twenty-year old, but this guy looked at least twice that.

I do some similar solo exercises myself, from time to time, although nothing so formal and stylized. And when I do work out this way, I don’t do it in public. It draws too much attention, especially from someone who knows what to look for. Someone like me.

In my line of work, drawing attention is a serious violation of the laws of common sense, and therefore of survival. Because if someone notices you for one thing, he'll be inclined to look more closely, at which point he might notice something else. A pattern, which would have remained quietly hidden, might then begin to emerge, after which your cloak of anonymity will be methodically pulled apart, probably to be rewoven into something more closely resembling a shroud.

Karate also stood out because he was Caucasian – European was my guess, although I couldn't pinpoint the country. He had close-cropped black hair, pale skin, and, when he wasn't busy with Horse Stance To Spinning Back Kick Number Two in the Mandarin Oriental gym, favored exquisitely thin-soled loafers and sport jackets with hand-rolled lapels. Macau's population of about a half million is ninety-five percent Chinese, with only a small Portuguese contingent remaining to remind anyone who cares that the territory, now a Chinese Special Administrative Region like Hong Kong, was not so long ago a Portuguese colony, and even the millions of annual gambling tourists are almost all from nearby Hong Kong, Taiwan, and mainland China, so non-Asians don't exactly blend.

Which is part of the reason the Agency had been so eager for me to take on the Belghazi assignment to begin with. It wasn't just that Belghazi had become a primary supplier to various Southeast Asian fundamentalist groups whom, post-9/11, Uncle Sam had come to view as a serious threat. Nor was it simply my demonstrated knack for the appearance of "natural causes," which in this case would be necessary because it seemed that Belghazi had protectors among certain "allied" governments whom Uncle Sam preferred not to offend. It was also because the likely venue for the job would require

invisibility against an Asian background. And, although my mother had been American, my face is dominated by my father's Japanese features – the consequence of genetic chance, augmented years ago by some judicious plastic surgery, which I had undergone to better blend in Japan.

So between the conspicuous ethnicity and the *kata* moves, Karate had managed to put himself on my radar screen, and it was then that I began to notice more. For one thing, he had a way of hanging around the hotel: the gym, the café, the terrace, the lobby. Wherever this guy was from, he'd come a long way to reach Macau. His failure to get out and see the sights, therefore, didn't make a lot of sense – unless he was waiting for someone.

Of course, I might have suffered from a similar form of conspicuousness. But I had a companion – a young Japanese woman – which made the “hanging around” behavior a little more explainable. Her name was Keiko, or at least that was how she billed herself with the Japanese escort agency through which I had hired her. She was in her mid-twenties, too young for me to take seriously, but she was pretty and surprisingly bright and I was enjoying her company. More important, her presence made me look less like some kind of intelligence operative or lone-wolf killer assessing the area, and more like a forty- or fifty-something Japanese who had taken his mistress to Macau, maybe for a little gambling, maybe for a lot of time alone at a hotel.

One morning, Keiko and I went down to the hotel's Café Girassol to enjoy the breakfast buffet. As the hostess led us to a table, I scanned the area for signs of danger, as I do by habit whenever entering a room. Hot spots first. Back Corner One: table of

four young Caucasians, two male, two female, dressed for a hike. Accents Australian.

Threat probability low. Back Corner Two: *Karate*. Hmm. Threat probability medium.

Keep the eyes moving. Complete the sweep. Wall tables: empty. Window seats: elderly Chinese couple. Next table: three girls, fashionable clothes, confident postures, probably Hong Kong Chinese, young professionals on a quick holiday. Next table: pair of Indian men in business attire, sunny Punjabi accents. Nothing that rubbed me the wrong way.

Back to Karate's vicinity with an oblique glance. He had his back to the wall and an unobstructed view of the restaurant's entrance. His seating position was what I would have expected from a pro; his focus on the room offered further evidence. I noticed that he had a newspaper open in front of him, although he wasn't bothering to read it. He would have been better off without the reading material: then he could have scoped the room as though he was bored and had nothing better to do than people-watch.

Or he should have brought a friend, as I had. I could feel him looking at us at one point, and was glad to have Keiko there, smiling into my eyes like a satisfied lover. The smile was convincing, too. She was good at her job.

Who was he waiting for, though? I might have assumed the answer was me – “only the paranoid survive,” I think some Silicon Valley type once said – but I was pretty sure I wasn't it. Too many chance sightings followed by... nothing. No attempts to follow me, no attempt to recognize my face, no hard-eyed, *that's him* kind of feeling. After over a quarter century in the business and a lot of incidental training before that, I'm sensitive to these things. My gut told me he was after someone else. True, it wasn't impossible that he was only told *where* and *when*, with information on *who* to be

provided subsequently, but I deemed that scenario unlikely. Not many operators would agree to take this kind of job without first knowing who they were going up against. It would be hard to know how to price things otherwise.

If the matter had been local – say, a Triad dispute – it was unlikely that a white guy would have been brought in for the job. The Triads, Chinese “secret societies” with deep roots in Macau and the mainland, tend to settle their affairs themselves. Adding up the available data, therefore, and taking myself off the short list of possible targets, I was left with Belghazi as the most likely recipient of Karate’s attentions.

But who had hired him? If it had been the Agency, it would have been a violation of one of my three rules: no women or children, no acts against non-principals, no B-teams. Maybe my old friends from the government thought that, because they had managed to track me down in Rio, I was vulnerable, and that they could therefore treat my rules as mere guidelines. If this was indeed their assumption, they were mistaken. I had enforced my rules before, and would do so again.

That afternoon, I made a point of strolling past the gym with Keiko, and, sure enough, there was my friend, earnestly kicking the air at the same time as the day before. Some people just need a routine, and refuse to accept the consequences of predictability. In my experience, these people tend to get culled, often sooner, sometimes later. It’s a Darwinian world out there.

Seeing an opportunity, I checked the sign-in sheet. His name was illegible, but he had written his room number clearly enough: 812. Hmmm, a smoking floor. Unhealthy.

I asked Keiko if she wouldn’t mind shopping by herself for a little while. She smiled and told me she’d be delighted, which was probably the truth. She might have

thought I was going off for a taste of the area's sumptuous buffet of prostitutes. No doubt she assumed I was married – the resulting associated paranoia of which would explain any countersurveillance moves she might have noticed – and I doubted that she would have found the notion of additional philandering excessively shocking.

Watching her walk out the front entrance to catch a cab into town, I felt an odd surge of affection. Most people would think of someone in Keiko's line of work as being anything but innocent, but at that moment, to me, innocence practically defined her. Her job was to offer me pleasure – and she was doing very well at it – and for her, our presence on Macau was no more complicated than that. She was as oblivious to the deadly dance playing out around her as a sheep grazing in a field. I told myself that she would go home with that innocence intact.

I called 812 from the lobby phone. There was no answer. A good sign, although not proof-positive: someone might have been in the room and not answering the phone, or Karate might have written down an incorrect room number, which I certainly would have done. Still, it was worth a look.

I stopped in my room to pick up a few items I would need, then took the elevator to the seventh floor. From there, I took the stairs, the less trafficked route, and therefore the one less likely to present problems like witnesses. On my left wrist, concealed under the baggy sleeve of a fleece pullover, was a device that looked like a large PDA, secured with Velcro. The device, which saw its initial deployment in the second Gulf War, is called SoldierVision. It takes a radar "picture" of a room through walls and feeds the resulting image back to the wrist unit. Not exactly something you might pick up at your

local hardware store, and definitely one of the advantages of working with Christians In Action again.

Earlier in my stay I had taken the trouble of securing a master key for just this sort of occasion, although at the time it was Belghazi I had in mind, not Karate. The hotel used punched-hole mechanical key cards, the kind that look like slightly thickened, plain gray credit cards with patterns of two-millimeter holes cut in them. It also used, as part of its campaign to “Protect Our Environment!”, a system whereby the key had to be inserted into a wall slot next to the door for the room lights to become operable. When you withdrew the key in preparation for leaving the room, there was about a one-minute delay before the lights would go out. The maids carried master keys, of course, and it had been easy enough to walk past a room that was being cleaned, pull the maid’s master from the reader, make an impression in a chunk of modeling clay I’d picked up in a local toy store, and replace the key, all in about six seconds. Using the impression as a template, all I had needed to do was punch the appropriate additional holes in my room key, fill in the inappropriate ones with fast-setting epoxy clay, and presto, I had the same access as the hotel staff.

Karate’s room was on the left of the corridor. I used the SoldierVision to confirm that it was empty, then let myself in with my homemade master. I wasn’t unduly concerned about disturbing the room’s contents in a way that might tell Karate someone had entered in his absence – the daily maid service could account for that.

I walked in and sniffed. Whoever he was, he’d been taking full advantage of his stay on the smoking floor. The room was thick with the lees of strong tobacco – Gauloises or Gitane, something like that – which you can smell outside those Tokyo

bistros whose fervently Francophile patrons believe that emissions from a Marlboro or a Mild Seven might ruin the pleasant illusion of an afternoon in a Latin Quarter café.

I pulled on a pair of gloves and did a quick search of the closet and drawers, but found nothing remarkable. The small room safe was closed and locked, probably with his identification and other goodies inside. There was a Dell laptop on the desk, but I didn't have time to wait for its Windows operating system to boot. Besides, if he had enabled the boot log feature, he would see that someone had fired the laptop up in his absence and would get suspicious.

I picked up the room phone and hit the key for room service. Two rings, then a Filipina-accented voice said, "Yes, Mr. Nuchi, how may I help you?"

"Oh, I think I hit the wrong button. Sorry to disturb you."

"Not at all, sir. Have a pleasant day."

I hung up. Mr. Nuchi, then. Who liked French cigarettes.

But no other clues. Nothing even to confirm my suspicion that this guy was a pro, and possibly a rival. Well, there were other ways I might learn more.

I pulled an adhesive-backed transmitter from one of my pockets, peeled off the tape cover, and secured it in a suitably recessed spot along the bottom edge of one of the dressers. The unit was battery-operated and sound-activated. With luck, it would get a good enough feed for me to understand any conversation it picked up. But even short of that, it would help me figure out when Karate was coming and going, and therefore make it easier for me to learn more by following him.

I walked back to the door, used the SoldierVision to confirm that the hallway was clear, and left. The whole thing had taken about four minutes.

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Belghazi arrived early that evening. I was enjoying a cocktail with Keiko in the lobby, where I had a view of the registration desk, and made him in an instant. He was swarthy, the legacy of an Algerian mother, and his hair, which had been long and unruly in the CIA file photo, was now shaved close to the scalp. I put him at about six feet and a hundred and eighty-five pounds. Dense, muscular build. He was wearing an expensive-looking blue suit, from the cut maybe Brioni or Kiton, and a white shirt open at the collar. In his left hand he gripped the handle of what looked like a computer briefcase, something in black leather, and I caught a flash of gold chain encircling his wrist. But despite the clothes, the accessories, the jewelry, there was no element of fussiness about him. On the contrary: his presence was relaxed, and powerful. He looked like the kind of man who wouldn't have to raise his voice when speaking to his subordinates, who would command the attention of strangers with only a look or a gesture. Someone who wouldn't need to threaten violence to get what he wanted, if only because the hint of it would always be there, in the set of his posture, the look in his eyes, the tone of his voice.

Even if I hadn't had access to the file photo, the long distance feel I had developed for this guy from his bio would have been enough for me to make him. Belghazi, first name Achille, had been born of a French army officer stationed in Algeria during France's "pacification" efforts there, and of a young Algerian woman whom the officer brought back to Paris but did not take as his wife. Illegitimate status hadn't seemed to slow Belghazi down, though, and he had excelled in school, both academically and athletically, making a name for himself afterward as a photojournalist. His fluent Arabic had made him a natural for covering conflicts in the Arab world: the Palestinian

refugee camps, the Mujahadeen in Afghanistan, the first Gulf war. Playing on his contacts among the combatants, and on those he developed at the same time among foreign military and intelligence services, Belghazi had become a conduit for small arms deliveries to various Middle Eastern hot spots. His operation had grown organically as his supply-side and customer-side contacts broadened and deepened. His latest efforts were concentrated in Southeast Asia, where various emerging fundamentalist and separatist groups within the region's sizeable Muslim populations provided a growing customer base. He was known to have a taste for the finer things, too, along with a serious gambling habit.

He was with two large men, also in suits and similarly swarthy, whom I made as bodyguards. One of them started a visual security sweep, but Belghazi didn't rely on him. Instead, he did his own evaluation of the room and its occupants. I watched in my peripheral vision and, when I saw that he was finished and had turned his attention to the front desk, I looked over again.

A striking blonde had just come through the front doors. She was wearing a black pants suit and pumps. Practical, but classy. What you'd see on a traveler carrying a first-class ticket. She was tall, too, maybe five-nine, five-ten, with long legs that looked good even in pants, and a ripe, voluptuous body. A porter followed her in, gripping a pair of large Vuitton bags. He paused near her and leaned forward to ask something. She raised a hand to indicate that he should wait, then started her own visual sweep of the room. I hadn't expected that, and quickly returned my attention to Keiko until the blonde's gaze had passed over us. When I glanced over again, she was standing beside Belghazi, her arm linked through his.

Something about her presence was as relaxed and, in its way, as commanding as his. Everything about her seemed natural: her hair, her face, the curves beneath her clothes.

A minute later she, the porter, and one of the bodyguards headed toward the elevators. Belghazi and the other bodyguard remained at the front desk, discussing something with the receptionist.

The front door opened again. I glanced up and saw Karate.

Christ, I thought. The gang's all here. I wondered half-consciously whether he'd been tipped off somehow.

Karate walked slowly through the lobby. I saw his gaze move to Belghazi, saw his eyes harden in a way that would mean nothing to most people but that meant a great deal to me. From this gaze I understood that Karate wasn't looking at a man. No. What I saw instead was a hunter acquiring a target.

And, I knew, but for my long practiced self-control, had anyone been watching me as I confirmed my suspicions about why Karate was here, they would have seen an identical involuntary atavism ripple across my own features.

A few minutes passed. Belghazi and his man finished at the front desk and made their way to the elevator. I gave them four minutes, then told Keiko I needed to use the restroom and would be right back.

I went to a house phone and asked the operator to connect me to the Oriental Suite. There were only two suites in the hotel – the Oriental and the Macau – and, judging from his file, I had a feeling Belghazi would be occupying one of them.

No answer at the Oriental. I tried again, this time asking for the Macau.

“Hello,” a man’s voice answered.

“Hello, this is the front desk,” I said, doing a passable imitation of a local Chinese accent. “Is there anything we can do to make Mr. Belghazi’s stay with us more comfortable?”

“No, we’re fine,” the voice said.

“Very good,” I said. “Please enjoy your stay.”

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That night, while Keiko was out, I sat in the hotel room and used an earpiece to listen in on Karate. He was in his room, from the sound of it watching CNN International Edition. Go to sleep, or go out: I would take my cue from him. I was already dressed in a pair of charcoal worsted pants, navy pullover, and comfortable, rubber-soled walking shoes in case we wound up with the second option, a night on the town.

I looked out at the massive cranes and earth moving equipment that Macau was using to build yet more bridges to China’s Guangdong province, the low mountains of which crouched a few kilometers distant. The machines rose from the harbor like mythological creatures provoked from the seabed, hulking, misshapen, slouching toward land but held fast by the muck below.

The cranes reminded me of Japan, where I’d lived most of my adult life and where reclaiming land from the sea for the construction of redundant bridges and unneeded office parks is a national sport. But where the ubiquitous construction in Japan always felt familiar, almost comforting in its obviousness, here the excess was mysterious, even vaguely menacing. Who made the decisions? Who rigged the

environmental impact statements to ensure that the projects were approved? Who profited from the kickbacks? I didn't know. In many ways, Macau was a mystery.

I had spent the previous three weeks here, moving from hotel to hotel, keeping a low profile, getting a solid feel for the place. Before accepting the Belghazi assignment, I hadn't known much more about the place than what I picked up from reading the *Far Eastern Economic Review*: Portugal's return of the territory to China in 1999 had been amicable, as these things go, and the territory's five percent ethnic Portuguese population was unusually well integrated, speaking Cantonese and mixing with the locals in a way that might make most British-derived Hong Kongers blush; its service economy was staffed largely by Filipinos and Thais; for a territory that until recently had been the ball in a five-hundred-year game of Great Power Ping-Pong, it had an unusually firm sense of its own identity.

At the end of my three-week sojourn, I knew much more: how to dress, walk, and carry myself to look like one of the millions of visitors from, say, Hong Kong; the layout and rhythms of the stores and streets; the codes and mores of the casinos. All of which would confer an important advantage in the job at hand.

I heard the phone ring in Karate's room. The television went quiet.

"Allo," I heard him say. A pause, then, "*Bien.*"

French, then, as I had suspected from the nicotine permeating his room. And with a cultured Parisian accent. My French was mostly left over from highschool, and the receiver reception was muffled and obscured by periodic static. This was going to be tough.

"*Oui, il est arrivé ce soir.*"

That I understood. Yes, he arrived tonight.

Another pause. Then, "*Pas ce soir.*" Not tonight.

Pause. Then, "*Oui, la réunion est ce soir. Ensuite cela.*" Yes, the meeting is tonight. Then after that.

Pause. A thicket of words I couldn't pick apart, followed by, "*Tout va bien.*" Everything is fine. Another impenetrable thicket. Then, "*Je vous ferai savoir quand ce sera fait.*" I'll let you know when it's done.

Click. Back to CNN.

A half hour later, the TV went off again. I heard his door open and close. He was going out.

I grabbed a dark windbreaker and took the stairs to the ground floor. A professional could be expected to use the rear entrance, which would represent the less trafficked, less predictable alternative, and I ducked out through the back doors on the assumption that this was the route Karate would be using. There were three exits back here – one from the hotel, one from the beauty parlor, one from the restaurant – but all of them fed into the same courtyard, which in turn fed onto a single walkway, meaning a single choke point.

There was an open-air parking garage next to the hotel. I walked into it and hugged the wall, obscured by bushes lining the wall's exterior.

He appeared a minute after I'd gotten in position. The streetlights illuminated him and cast shadows into the garage where I stood silently by. I watched him stroll past me down the tree-lined walkway in the direction of the Avenida da Amizade, named, like most of Macau's thoroughfares, by the Portuguese centuries earlier. The soft drape of his

navy sport jacket was too stylish for his surroundings – dress on Macau, I had learned, was almost slacker casual – but I supposed that as a white island in an Asian sea he was going to stand out regardless.

Past the parking garage he turned right into an alley. I glanced back at the hotel exit – all quiet. So far he seemed to be alone, with no countersurveillance to his rear. I moved out to follow him. He reached the Avenida da Amizade and waited for a break in the traffic before crossing. I hung back in the shadows and waited.

On the other side of the street he turned left, looking back over his shoulder, as any pedestrian would, to check for oncoming traffic before crossing. I permitted myself the trace of a smile. His “traffic check” was an unobtrusive bit of countersurveillance. It was nicely done, casual, and I saw from the quality of the move that I was probably going to have a hard time following him solo.

He moved down the wide boulevard in the direction of the Hotel Lisboa, the territory’s biggest casino and best-known trolling ground for prostitutes, and after a moment I crossed the street and trailed after him. The streetlights around us were widely spaced, with ample pools of darkness between them for concealment, and Karate couldn’t have spotted me even had he looked backward to do so.

A few hundred meters farther on, he cut down the steps of an underground passageway. The passageway was H-shaped, its lengths running parallel to the Amizade and its middle running perpendicular beneath it. I moved just a little more quickly to close the gap, and arrived at the entrance in time to see him disappearing into the middle of the tunnel and under the street.

Now I faced a dilemma. If I followed him in and he glanced back, he would make me. If I stayed put and he emerged on the opposite side of the street and hurried on to develop distance, I could easily lose him.

I thought for a moment. Until now, his countersurveillance had been subtle, disguised as ordinary pedestrian behavior. But he was abandoning subtlety now: after all, a pedestrian out for a stroll doesn't typically cross a street one way and then, a short stretch later, cross back. He knew what he was doing. The question was, which way would he play it? Double back, to catch a follower? Or hurry out the other side, to lose him?

If I had been working with a team, or even just a teammate, there wouldn't have been a problem. We would have just tag-teamed him in, knowing that if one of us got spotted, the other would fall into place after. But this time I didn't have that luxury. All I had was instinct and experience, and these were telling me that the tunnel move was a feint, an attempt to draw a follower into the tunnel, weed him out of the crowd, then turn around and catch him. So I moved past the passageway on the right, hiding in the shadows of one of the avenue's stunted palm trees, hoping I was right.

Fifteen seconds went by. Thirty.

If I had been wrong, this was my last chance to try to cross the street. If I waited until he had emerged, he would see me coming.

Just another second, just another second, c'mon, asshole, where are you...

Boom, there he was, moving up the vertical side of the H, still on my side of the street. I let out a long, quiet breath.

He strolled another hundred meters along the Avenida da Amizade, then cut right. I did the same, in time to see him turn left, down a scooter-choked alley walled in by office buildings to either side. I fell in behind him, window unit air conditioners buzzing like insects in the dark around us.

Three minutes later we arrived at the Lisboa. I followed him in, wondering whether he was hoping to use its many entrances and exits as part of a pre-planned surveillance detection route. If so, he'd made a mistake. The Lisboa was too crowded at night; a pursuer could stay close in here without your ever knowing it. Even if he'd had a team positioned for countersurveillance, the nighttime crowds would present insurmountable opportunities for concealment. Maybe he'd designed this route during the day, when the hotel was less crowded? If so, he'd made an amateur mistake. Times of day, days of the week, changes of season, changes of temperature – all can make for an environment dramatically different from the one you originally reconnoitered.

I moved in closer and stayed with him, knowing that if he snaked off into the crowded, multi-level hive of the casino I might easily lose him. But he avoided the gaming area, strolling instead in a slow, clockwise loop around the ground floor's shopping arcade, where clusters of prostitutes from nearby Guangdong province circled like hungry fish in a spherical aquarium. We moved with them, past gamblers flush with fresh winnings, whom the girls eyed with bold invitation, eager to retrieve a few floating scraps from the casino food chain; past middle-aged men from Hong Kong and Taiwan with sagging bodies and febrile eyes, their postures rigid, caught in some grim purgatory between sexual urgency and commercial calculation; past security guards, inured to the

charms of the girls' bare legs and bold décolletage and interested only in keeping them moving, circling, forever swimming through the murk of the endless Lisboa night.

Karate left the building through a secondary exit. I still wasn't sure what he had hoped to accomplish by going inside. The shopping arcade, like the hotel itself, was too crowded for meaningful surveillance detection. Maybe he had planned this part of the route poorly, as I had initially speculated. Or maybe he had simply been window-shopping in anticipation of indulging himself later that night. Not impossible: even professionals occasionally slip, or pause to fulfill some human need.

His subsequent behavior supported the "indulgence" hypothesis: after the Lisboa, I didn't spot him doing anything further to check his back. He must have satisfied himself with the provocative tunnel stunt. It wasn't an ineffective move, actually, and probably would have been enough to flush someone else. Hell, it would have flushed me, if my instincts had been a little less sharp or if I hadn't done my three weeks of homework.

He continued northwest on the Avenida Henrique. The street was straight, dark, and heavily trafficked, and I was able to follow him from far back. My eyes roved constantly, searching the hot spots, the places I would have set up countersurveillance or an ambush. Nothing set off my radar.

At Senado Square, the area's main pedestrian shopping commons, he turned right. The square would be crowded, even at this evening hour, and I increased my pace to ensure that I wouldn't lose him. There he was, moving up the undulating lines of black and white tile, to the left of the illuminated vertical jets of the square's central fountain, along the low, pastel-colored porticos of the Portuguese-style storefronts, incongruous

amid the surrounding Asian sounds and scents. I followed from about ten meters back. Hong Kong pop blared urgently from a storefront. The smells of roasted pork and sticky rice wafted on the air. Thick groups of shoppers drifted back and forth around us, chatting, laughing, enjoying the comfortable closeness of the arcade and the carefree camaraderie of the evening.

We moved off Senado and onto quieter streets. Karate browsed among the street stalls – fruit, lingerie, traditional Thai costumes at three for a Hong Kong dollar – but bought nothing. He seemed to be heading in the direction of St. Paul’s, the site of a once-splendid Portuguese church, over the centuries gutted again and again by fire, and standing now only as a sad façade, a haunted relic, illuminated at night like a bleached skeleton propped at the apex of a long series of steep stairs, where it broods in ruined majesty over the city that has grown like weeds around it.

Gradually our surroundings became more residential. We passed wide, open doorways. These I checked automatically, but they offered no danger, only miscellaneous domestic scenes: four elderly women absorbed in a game of mahjong; a group of boys surrounding a television; a family at the supper table. We passed an old shrine, its red paint peeling in the tropical moisture. Incense from the brazier within pervaded my senses with the recollected emotions of childhood.

Karate reached the corner of the street and turned right. In this warren of dim alcoves and alleyways, I could easily lose him if he developed distance, and I increased my pace to stay with him. I turned the same corner he had gone past a moment earlier – and nearly ran right into him.

He'd turned the corner and stopped – a classic countersurveillance move, and hard to beat if you're working solo. No wonder he'd been taking it easy: the tunnel stunt had been a false finish to the run, and I'd fallen for it. *Shit.*

I felt an adrenaline dump. Audio faded out. Movement slowed down.

Our eyes locked, and for a suspended second we stood totally still. I saw his brow begin to furrow. *I've seen this guy*, I knew he was thinking. *At the hotel.*

His weight shifted back into a defensive stance. His left hand pulled forward the left lapel of his jacket. His right reached toward the gap.

Toward a weapon, no doubt. *Shit.*

I stepped in close and grabbed his right lower sleeve with my left hand, pulling it away from his body to prevent him from deploying whatever he had in his jacket. With my right I took hold of his left lapel and thrust it up under his chin. His reaction was good: he stepped back with his left leg to regain his balance and open up distance, from which he might be able to employ something from his karate arsenal. But I wasn't going to give him that chance. I caught his right heel with my right foot and used my fist in his throat to shove him back in *kouchigari*, a basic judo throw. His balance ruined and his foot trapped, he went straight back, his left arm pinwheeling uselessly. I maintained my tight hold on his right arm and twisted counterclockwise as we fell, keeping my right elbow positioned squarely over his diaphragm, nailing it hard as we hit the pavement.

I scrambled to his right side, raised my right hand high, and shot a hammer-fist toward his nose. His reflexes were good, though, despite the shock of hitting the ground. He turned his head and deflected the blow with his left hand.

Still, he was out of his element on the ground, and quickly made a mistake. Rather than dealing with the immediate threat – my dominant position and freedom to attack – he went for his weapon again. I swam my right arm inside his right and jerked it back into a chicken wing. He sensed an opening and tried to sit up, but I felt that coming. Using the chicken wing to arrest his forward momentum, I swept my left arm around his head counterclockwise, from front to back, locked my hands behind his near shoulder blade, and leaned back, the back of my arm pressing down against his face. The move bent his neck back to the limit of its natural range of motion and took his shoulder half out of its socket, but I went no further. I only wanted to make him comply, not kill him. At least not yet.

“Who are you working for?” I said.

In response, he only struggled. I put some additional pressure on his neck, but quickly relaxed it, lest he conclude that I was trying to finish him, in which case I couldn't reasonably expect him to cooperate.

He got the message and the struggling stopped. Not likely that he practiced any *kata* that involved being held on the ground in a neck crank. “*Je ne comprends pas,*” I heard him say, his body tense in my grip.

Bullshit you don't comprehend, pal, I thought. *I just heard you watching CN fucking N.*

“*Pour... Pour qui travaillez-vous?*” I tried asking.

“*Je ne comprends pas,*” he said again.

All right, the hell with it. I squeezed again, harder than before, holding the pressure a second longer this time before backing off.

“Last time,” I said in English. “Tell me who you work for or you’re done.”

“All... all right,” I heard him say, his voice muffled by my arm across his face. I leaned forward slightly to hear better.

As I did so, he arched into me and jerked sharply upward with his right arm, trying to get clear of the chicken wing, to reach whatever he had in his jacket. I shifted to the left and yanked the arm back hard. But his move had only been a feint, and as I shifted I saw, too late, that his true intention had been to reach for his belt with his other hand. Before I could stop him, in one smooth motion he had popped a button on the leather and yanked free the buckle, which was attached to a double-edged steel blade.

Fuck. Without thinking I arched savagely back, pressing my left forearm hard across the back of his neck and squeezing with the strength of both arms. There was a split instant of raw corporeal resistance, and then his neck snapped and his body spasmed in my arms. The knife clattered to the ground.

I laid him out on the pavement and quickly patted him down. My hands were shaking from the effects of adrenaline. I was suddenly aware of my heart, pounding crazily inside me. Damn, that had been a nice move. He’d nearly gotten away with it.

He was traveling light: no wallet, no ID. Just his hotel key in a pants pocket and there, in a shoulder holster, what he’d been reaching for when he saw me. A Heckler & Koch Mark 23. Attached to it, a Knights Armament suppressor, one of the two models H&K approves for the Mark 23.

A belt knife and a silenced H&K. I doubted that he just waltzed them through airport security on his way to Macau, although I supposed it was possible the security guards were too preoccupied with nail clippers and cuticle scissors to notice. Still, my

guess was that the mysterious Mr. Nuchi had local contacts, and that the weapons had been waiting for him or were otherwise procured after he had arrived. I filed the thought away for later consideration.

There was nothing else that could tell me more about who he was or who had sent him. Or who he had been on his way to meet.

I stood and glanced around me. Left, right. Nothing. The street was graveyard still.

I moved off into the shadows, my head reflexively sweeping right and left as I walked, searching for danger. I left the weapons, having little use for them in the current operation and not wishing to contaminate myself with anything connected to what the police might find at the crime scene. After a while, my pulse began to slow.

Who the hell was he? Who had he been on his way to meet? I hated the feeling of knowing so little about him. A name – Nuchi – which might have been an alias. And a probable nationality. But no more.

But I supposed that, overall, it wasn't a bad outcome. I was nearly certain that, regardless of who had sent him, Karate had been here to take out Belghazi. That was no longer a possibility.

And things certainly could have turned out worse. If he'd had that H&K out when I'd first turned the corner, instead of reaching for it afterward, it might have been me lying back there in the dark.

I stayed on the narrow streets, the dark alleys. My pulse slowed more. My hands settled. The buildings to either side seemed to grow taller, and the weak light dimmer, until I felt as though I was zigzagging along the channel of a steep ravine, a dark urban

gorge cut through the faded concrete façades by a long-vanished river. The rusted fire escapes were escarpments of rock, the hanging laundry tangled vines, a lone sodium-arc roof light a yellowed, gibbous moon.

I made my way back to the hotel. By the time I reached the rear entrance, my heart rate was normal again. I started thinking ahead, thinking about Belghazi.

Right, Belghazi. The main event. No more sideshows. I'd get close, do it right, and get out. After that, a big payday. Big enough so that afterward I would get clear of this shit forever.

Or at least for a reasonably long while.