

Jimmy Guang's House of Gladmech

by Alex Irvine

Jimmy Guang Hamid smoked tobacco cigars until he found out that vat-grown lungs were still prone to immune-rejection problems and that the vat wranglers hadn't made much headway on what they called amongst themselves the Larynx Problem. Then he went over to herb-and-marijuana panatelas, anxious to maintain his image as a Golden Age wheeler-dealer, but not so anxious for a long convalescence or opportunistic infection following a double pulmonary.

But he was in Kyrgyzstan, anyway, a long way from organ vats, and the only people there who cared about his image were the Russians. The Russians were the only people who cared about lots of things in the brutalized city of Osh, a still-proud prominence in the tank-tracked, cluster-bombed, spider-mined, cruise-missiled ruins of what had once, a hundred years or so before, been the southern part of the Soviet Empire. Now Kyrgyzstan was a member of the Islamist Federation, a loose group of non-Arab Muslim states, and the Russians fought with the IF out of concern over concentration of power in Central Asia but mostly out of sheer terror of what would happen if their soldiers were ever allowed to come home.

Jimmy Guang was not a deeply religious man, although he'd been raised a Muslim and inhabited the belief the way he inhabited his tastes in food or music. He took no sides between the IF and the Russians and the Chinese, who hovered in storm waiting to break from the East. He had come to these wars thinking he could make money.

He came to the city of Osh, on the flanks of the Ferghana Valley, a sliver of warm green pointing up into the windswept expanse of the Tien Shan ranges. Once Osh had been a major stop along the Silk Road. Alexander the Great had slept there, Mohammed had prayed there. Now there wasn't much left after sixty years of sporadic war, but it was close to Tashkent without being too close, and the last thing a foreign entrepreneur wanted was to be too close to Tashkent. Or, for that matter, Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan, which was still alive with bad, bad bugs the Russians had left during their previous visit.

Osh was no longer a major part of anything. It still had its legendary bazaar, and it was still warmer than just about anywhere else in K-stan, but even for war profiteering it didn't offer the potential of Karachi or Almaty or Yerevan. Still, Jimmy Guang came there with his cigars and his pinstriped suits and his silk ties, a good hundred years out of fashion, and started making deals. He knew people in Singapore, his father was still living in Jaipur and an uncle in Xian, he'd gladhanded his way over the Khyber Pass and through the Karakoram, sneaking through the Muslim hinterlands of China on the strength of his gap-toothed grin and fragmentary bits of half a dozen languages he'd picked up around the house when he was a child. Jimmy Guang Hamid could get things.

He set up quietly, in a bombed-out storefront on Lenin Street, not far from the bazaar but not too close either. Jimmy Guang was always careful about distance. For the first week he swept and cleaned and arranged, covered over holes in the walls and made himself a pallet behind a curtain. He would take his meals at restaurants, the better to be seen, but not at expensive restaurants because behind his façade of leisure and comfort Jimmy Guang Hamid was desperately poor. He washed in the restrooms of the restaurants he patronized; he burned incense under his shirts so he could save the expense of cleaning them; he scavenged in the burned-out university campus for flaps of furniture vinyl to stitch onto his shoes. If he did not succeed here in Osh, there was a good chance that he would starve to death on his way back to India or China.

He was as piratical and polyglot a stereotype as had ever been encountered in those parts, and that's exactly how he wanted it. Let them think him a buffoon. Let them insult the many strains of his ethnicity, and the many colors of his ties. Let them consider bargains.

It only took a few days for him to get to know people, and a few days after that to broker his first deal, between a Russian quartermaster suffering from an excess of toothpaste and an Uzbek merchant who had found himself awash in vodka straight from Kiev. The Uzbek traded mostly among the more fundamentalist IF brigades, who wouldn't drink the vodka anyway, and the Russian would make a killing from his alcoholic and lonely compatriots.

"Amazing thing, war," Jimmy Guang said in his creolized Russian to the quartermaster, whose name was Yevgeny. The

clinked glasses. "Even in the midst of all this misery and misunderstanding, still there is commerce. Still we find ways to get what we need. Something grand about it."

Allahu akbar, thought Jimmy Guang, even though he wasn't particularly religious.

Yevgeny muttered a toast and drank. Jimmy Guang knew in that moment, early on a Thursday morning in May of 2006, with a fine sharp breeze shuddering down out of the Pamir range, that he would survive. He had been right to come to G

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The man who sold Jimmy Guang his first gladmechs reminded him of his father, and for that reason Jimmy Guang walked away from the deal certain that he had gotten the worse of it. No man could bargain with his father.

"I have no use for these," the old German trader said.

"Nor do I," Jimmy Guang said. He thought it odd that a German should remind him of his father Reza, a proud glower, a Persian who claimed ancestry among the Mughal conquerors of India. He had already decided to buy the robots, six creaking Izmit general-services models. He knew he could put them to use, and he was beginning to have financial reserves sufficient to quiet his anxieties about the return voyage to India, should that become necessary.

"Put them in a pit, have them fight each other," said the Russian who had inspected the truck and pocketed three of Jimmy Guang's cigars to ignore its doubtful papers. "That's what they do everywhere else."

"Is that so," said Jimmy Guang, and just like that his course was set.

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On the edge of the university campus was a long row of corrugated-tin sheds. One, which judging from the deep oil stains on its concrete floor had once held heavy equipment, was still intact. It measured forty meters long by some twenty-five wide, which Jimmy Guang figured was big enough to cordon off an arena and still pack in something like a thousand spectators. He placed a call to the robots, and was surprised to see them all arrive in a Russian army truck driven by the beneficiary of Jimmy Guang's smoky baksheesh the day before.

"I was waiting for you to tell them where to go," the soldier said as he got down from the truck's cab. He was tall and heavy and blond. Jimmy Guang could not imagine what it would be like to fight him when he was fully suited and armed. "Monitoring you. My name is Slava. You want these robots to fight, you're going to need them fixed up a little. I'll do it."

"There's no money for a mechanic," said Jimmy Guang, thinking that brushing Slava away would cost him more cigars. He resolved to get better encryption for his personal commlink.

"I'll do it free. Just to see them fight." A toothy grin split Slava's blunt face.

This was a deal Jimmy Guang could not refuse. He and Slava got the six Izmits off the truck and into the hangar, where they spent the rest of the day cleaning and cordoning off the arena space. Then Jimmy Guang gathered the mechs together

"What we're going to do here is you're going to fight each other," he said.

"This is outside our parameters," one of the mechs said.

"We are not adaptive intelligences," added another.

Jimmy Guang had anticipated this. "The instructions are simple. A waste-management task. Each of you is to render others fit for a standard industrial recyc. This requires separation of extremities from the trunk. Are you familiar with this protocol?"

"I am," each of the robots said.

After that, it was a matter of hanging posters, making sure there were enough pretty girls to run concession stands, and letting it be known that the house would take forty percent of all wagers. A few days later the six Izmits, painted different colors on Jimmy Guang's theory that this would promote audience identification and therefore wagering, banged and jostled each other to sparking pieces before an raucous and intensely partisan crowd of locals. By the end, the last surviving robot careened around the arena to thunderous cheers, missing one arm and trailing glittery strings of fiber-optic from holes punched in its trunk.

Jimmy Guang made enough on the evening that he didn't have to worry about hunger for two weeks. With some of what was left over he had his trousers hemmed and splurged on a box of tobacco cigars from Ankara, vat problems or no. That night he sat in his office listening to Russian rockets exploding in the hills, and he thought to himself: You can take your mind off anything. You can even take your mind off love. But you cannot take your mind off being hungry.

Of course the next day he fell in love.

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Marta was her name. Jimmy Guang met her while trying to sell her uncle Gregor razor blades and Sri Lankan pornography. She looked curiously at the porn disks, then crinkled around the eyes and looked at her feet when she saw him watching. This combination of humor and modesty caught his attention, as did the fall of her hair across her eyes. She had his mother's eyes, thought Jimmy Guang, that sharp black gaze that missed nothing. "Marta is ruined," her uncle said. "The Russians ruined her. At least she fought."

She had three missing teeth, Gregor went on, where a Russian soldier had hit her with a rifle butt to stop her fighting. Gregor told the story like it had happened in a video. Jimmy Guang listened to it with growing embarrassment that made him look more closely at Marta. A crease of scar split her upper lip on the left side, and he thought about her missing teeth. He himself was missing a tooth, although he had no dramatic story other than gingivitis and an unsympathetic dentist.

And he had been ruined himself a time or two. He waited until Gregor was preoccupied with the finest filth Colombo could produce, and then he sidled up next to Marta and asked if she would like to take a trip to the Toktogul Reservoir.

No, she said. It was too heavily guarded.

Jimmy Guang knew a way in.

He smiled at her, made sure that the gap was visible between bicuspid and incisor on the upper right side of his mouth.

Marta glanced at him, then looked away. Her left hand rested at the corner of her mouth. It has been a long time since I went swimming, she said.

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He didn't see her for nearly a week after their first meeting, but she was never far from his mind. The thought of her disturbed him as he dickered with Yevgeny over another truckload of robots. When he'd paid too much for the robots and even more for the truck, he absently agreed to take the stolen truck off Yevgeny's hands, he went back to his office and thought about how much he wanted to watch Marta swim. She would remove her vest and shoes, perhaps her top skirt. Maybe she even would appear in a bathing suit, or he could present her with one. That was it. Yes. She would strip down to her bathing suit, every line of her motion clean and wary as a cat's, and he would sit on the bank with a cigar while she stepped into the black water, disturbed by the reflections of mountains, and swam, eyes closed and corners of her mouth relaxed into a faint smile. It struck him that he very badly wanted to see her happy, and he could not understand why.

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Jimmy Guang's second evening as gladiatorial impresario teetered on the edge of debacle from the moment the grim clatter of Russian soldiers entered the arena. What had been a raucous crowd of several hundred fell nearly silent. Jimmy Guang muttered profanities in Kirghiz, Russian, Arabic.

The lone officer in the group of Russians approached Jimmy Guang. "You are fighting robots here," he said.

Jimmy Guang saw no way to plausibly deny this, so he nodded.

The officer nodded back. "How much to watch?"

A delicate situation, this. The officer might be leading Jimmy Guang into an admission of war privateering. He might expect Jimmy Guang to announce that he and his men could watch for free, which would of course remind everyone present of the inequities that had provoked the Islamic Federation's war in the first place.

Or, thought Jimmy Guang, he might be willing to pay.

"Rubles, dollars, or yen?" he said.

The Russian officer paid for himself and his men—in American dollars—and they moved in a loose group toward one corner of the arena. Slava Butsayev was already there, and he came across the arena floor to join the other Russians. Jimmy Guang continued his introductory patter—he had already begun flamboyantly naming each of the robots and claiming an illustrious heritage of victory for most—until he was interrupted by a teenage Kirghiz boy who leaned forward as one of the Russian soldiers walked by and spat on the man's boots.

Jimmy Guang knew for the rest of his life that many people might have died in those next few seconds, and that he might have been one of them. But in the endless moment that stretched out after the boy's expectoration, he thought of only one thing: walking across the Khyber Pass to India, penniless and hungry with hundreds of kilometers of empty mountains between him and the nearest human who cared.

"No!" he shouted, and rushed to put himself between the soldier and the defiant boy. "No!" The soldier took a step, but Jimmy Guang, to his everlasting surprise, put a hand in the man's chest and nudged him back. "Not in here! Everyone pays the same here, everyone watches the same here. The war is outside! The war stops at the door!"

A long moment passed, and then the Russian officer touched him on the shoulder. Jimmy Guang shut his mouth and

himself ready to die.

"Tell the boy to clean up his mess," the officer said.

Jimmy Guang looked at the boy. He grew more acutely aware that had saved a life. Perhaps more than one.

His bravado began to melt away, and as it did Jimmy Guang felt the enormity of what he was doing begin to impress on him. He drew his handkerchief from his breast pocket and passed it to the soldier, who wiped his boot and handed it back. Jimmy Guang, already regretting the loss of his only good silk handkerchief, held it out for the boy to take. A small voice in the back of his mind said, *Now you've done it. Now you'll always be stuck in between them.* At the edge of his field of vision he saw Slava Butsayev looking intently at him, as though he were one of the robots with unclear prospects in the ring.

When the cloth had disappeared into the boy's pocket, Jimmy Guang stepped back into the center of the arena and said, "In Jimmy Guang's House of Gladmech, everybody gets along."

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He didn't find out until the next day that Marta had been in the audience that night. They were swimming, or at least she was. He, as he had in his fantasy, sat a little away from the water, hat low over his eyes against the glare and a fine macanudo between his fingers. She swam, sleek as a dolphin, out into the reservoir. Jimmy Guang saw a gleam from the dam: sold binoculars. Anger swelled in his chest as he thought of Marta's missing teeth, what she had suffered. The marvelous strength of her. He was beginning to love that strength.

Later, as they ate supper back in Osh, she was distant, preoccupied, a bit cold. For twenty minutes he pried gently, until at last she came open.

"All the Russians in your audience."

"Russians, Kirghiz, Uzbeks," said Jimmy Guang. "They all pay the same, and they don't kill each other in the stands."

"They didn't this time," she said. "But if you keep doing this, it will happen. You can bet on it. And then you can bet on anything else."

"What's that?"

Her face was to the window, her reflection a woman-shaped vacancy against a field of stars. "That the Russians will come after you, and I'll be alone again."

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The next Tuesday, the Russian captain found Jimmy Guang drinking coffee on the patio of a restaurant called Fez that faced a broad square in one of the older parts of Osh. He introduced himself as Vasily Butsayev, and shook Jimmy Guang's hand. Jimmy Guang offered him a cigar, and Captain Butsayev politely declined.

He had come alone, which piqued Jimmy Guang's interest. Solitary Russian officers had a tendency to disappear in Osh.

reappearing piece by piece in family mailboxes back in Petersburg or Komsomolsk. Either Captain Butsayev was more courageous than the average Russian, or he knew the right people in Osh and therefore had no reason to be afraid. It was this second possibility that had provoked Jimmy Guang's offer of a cigar.

"Is Slava Butsayev a relation of yours?"

A strange look passed across the captain's face. "He is my younger brother. I understand he is spending his spare time working on your robots."

"He is an energetic and knowledgeable young man," said Jimmy Guang. It was the truth. He had come to enjoy the blond Russian's company around the hangar, and without a doubt Slava kept the mechs in better condition than Jimmy would have been able to. "I am fortunate that he agreed to work for free."

"Better than some other things he could be doing," Butsayev said with a thin smile. The waiter appeared, and he ordered coffee. "A good show you put on last night," he said when it had arrived.

Jimmy Guang shrugged modestly. "Considering what I had to work with."

"This is why I am here. You are known to us as a broker of deals."

Those words opened up a huge pit in Jimmy Guang's stomach. He swallowed and said with great delicacy, "I seek to make things a little more bearable for those who must spend much of their time amid the horrors of war."

Captain Butsayev smiled. He had good teeth. "Do not be afraid, Mr. Hamid. I'm not here to arrest anyone for profiteering and if I were," he glanced at Jimmy Guang's threadbare suit, "there are others I would visit before you."

The pit closed, and Jimmy Guang breathed a little easier. Butsayev wanted to deal.

"If I can get you more robots," the captain went on, the tone of his voice lightening, "can you set up more matches?"

"If you get me more robots," said Jimmy Guang, "there would of course be more matches. But I am not certain that my finances are up to purchasing quantities of robots. These are hard times."

"They are," agreed Captain Butsayev. "But let us be clear about something. We know, and the Islamic Federation knows, and the Kirghiz militias up in the mountains know that this war solves nothing. The IF continues because fighting us keeps their donations flowing from the rich fundamentalists in Saudi Arabia and Indonesia. The Kirghiz fight us because they are always fighting someone. And we Russians, why are we here?" Butsayev looked pained. "I fear that the civilian government of Mother Russia is uneasy at the prospect of half a million discharged soldiers returning home at once."

Jimmy Guang thought of Marta. He tried not to let it show. Captain Butsayev studied him for a moment. The Russian's hard blue eyes and heavy bones in his face. It was the face of a man who knew that the war would leave him with bad dreams and loneliness in his old age.

"When I said you put on a good show last night," Butsayev said at last, "I didn't mean the robots."

Jimmy Guang's shoulders twitched. Even after a week, he could still feel the Russian soldier's gaze boring through him. The thin teenager with eyes hardened by privation. People walking through the square did not notice him, did not know how difficult and frightening it was to be talking to a Russian captain without knowing what the Russian captain wanted him to do. The collar of his shirt pinched under his chin when he opened his mouth.

Captain Vasily Butsayev held up a hand, and Jimmy Guang's mouth shut. "I am not a peacenik, Mr. Hamid. And I am not a soft man. But I do not love war for its own sake." He stood. "I believe you know Master Sergeant Yevgeny?"

Since there was no way to deny this, Jimmy Guang nodded.

"Good. Speak to him." With that, Captain Butsayev touched the brim of his cap and left Jimmy Guang trying not to hyperventilate at his sidewalk table that was suddenly not nearly far enough away from the war.

The next day, though, he talked to Yevgeny, and four days after that he staged another round of matches with Indian-made salvage mechs whose cutting torches glowed in the eyes of eight hundred Kirghiz and two hundred Russian spectators, none of whom killed or tortured or assaulted any of the others while within earshot of the old heavy-equipment shed. And the week after that was the same, only with two Chinese riveters pitted against a walking scrapheap of domestic-service units. This was such a success that Jimmy Guang went looking for a larger venue, and found a hangar outside the Russian security perimeter at Osh's airport. It was three or four times the size of the university shed, and Jimmy Guang made sure that his gladiator fans knew that there was now room to bring their friends, and he painted large signs hang on all four of the hangar's walls. JIMMY GUANG'S HOUSE OF GLADMECH, the signs proclaimed, "gladmech" being Jimmy Guang's zippy coinage for the mayhem that occurred inside. And beneath that, NO VIOLENCE EXCEPT BETWEEN MECHS. Jimmy Guang had made it clear to Captain Butsayev, and to the local IF commander he knew of Fouad, that the first killing or serious maiming that occurred at one of his matches would be the last. All agreed that the airport hangar should be a war-free zone.

And thus it was that Jimmy Guang's House of Gladmech became the only place in Kyrgyzstan where Russians and locals could meet without violence.

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Things were going well for Jimmy Guang. He was making enough money to have his suit mended and take Marta for dinner at Fez and the odd German-Chinese restaurant near the destroyed municipal building, the Russians and the Kirghiz and the Chinese would all do business with him, and he was discovering that it in fact felt good to be doing a little good in the midst of so much misery. He imagined that somewhere, someday, militant robot-rights types would hear of his activities and pillory him as the worst kind of murderous slaver; but it seemed to him that if he could carve out a space wherein enemies could meet without killing, it was worth the loss of a bunch of mechs who would soon have been rusting in a boneyard anyway.

And he was falling deeply in love with Marta.

Wartime romances are odd things, Jimmy Guang considered one day after Marta had left his office in a smoldering fire. Lovers are hard to each other, as if angry words and bitter actions can test one's ability to weather war. As if one must worry not just about stray bullets or microorganisms, but about one's lover being emptied of humanity by the proximity of war.

Marta had been testing him, he thought. It was unclear whether he had passed.

Yevgeny had stopped into his office while she was visiting, and a long look had passed between him and Marta before she disappeared behind the curtain into his small personal space. "I've found some real prizes for you," Yevgeny said. "American seafloor mining mechs, complete with cutting torches and shaped charges."

"In the name of the Prophet," said Jimmy Guang, "I can't let shaped charges into my arena. What happens if one isn't aimed exactly at the opponent and I lose a whole section of spectators? I'd be ruined."

Yevgeny shrugged. "Okay, if you don't want them."

"No, I do want them. But take out anything explosive. Cutting torches, okay. Those aren't going to hurt anyone. But no bombs."

"Whatever you say. You Muslim?"

Jimmy Guang hesitated. Religion was not a topic he wanted to broach with Russian soldiers, even one he'd done business with. "My father," he said slowly.

Yevgeny looked more closely at him. "Right," he said, nodding. "Thought you were just Chinese, but I can see the American in you now." Another long look, then the Russian scratched his nose. "I'm surprised the captain does business with you."

Jimmy Guang waited. If Yevgeny couldn't tell Persian from Arab, Jimmy Guang wasn't going to give him a lesson.

"Not that Butsayev has anything against Muslims, but he's got a brother who," Yevgeny clicked his tongue, "isn't reasonable on the topic." Yevgeny grinned as if he was about to let Jimmy Guang in on a great private joke. "Captain's brother Slava, he collects the teeth of the women he catches alone on the street at night. He practically rattles, all the teeth in his pockets."

"When can I pick up these American robots, Yevgeny?" asked Jimmy Guang. Tomorrow, answered Yevgeny, and then he left the shop.

Jimmy Guang felt as if invisible tar had been poured over him. Blood roared in his ears, and every sound that came from the street—voices, the grinding of ancient transmissions, the coo of the pigeons that roosted under his eaves—was subtly deformed. When Marta touched his shoulder, he was too thickly entangled to move.

"I know what you're thinking," she said softly. "But don't."

With great effort he turned his head. Marta's eyes spitted him, and he felt crushed between her terrible anger and the ferocity of his own hate for this Russian who collected women's teeth.

Slava Butsayev, he thought. Who fixes my robots. Who drinks my vodka and shares my cigars. Slava Butsayev who is the company I have grown to enjoy.

"Don't," Marta said again.

He could not answer.

"Jimmy," Marta said. "Too many people are dying."

"Or perhaps the wrong people," he said, his voice barely above a whisper.

She held his gaze for another long moment, then looked away from him. "Do you ever think about what your gladiator robots really are?"

The change of topic threw him off balance. "They're robots," he said.

"They're stand-ins, Jimmy. The Russians look at them and see my brothers. The Kirghiz look at them and see Russians. The whole thing makes a sport of killing, makes it something to wager on."

Jimmy Guang checked his temper. He went to the window and spoke to it since he was for the moment too angry to speak to her. "Two men run into each other in the bush, up in the mountains. One is Russian, one Kirghiz, or Afghan, or Pakistani. Nobody else around. They sight down the barrels of their rifles at each other, and then they recognize each other. From where? From Jimmy Guang's House of Gladmech. And they lower their guns and walk on and they forget it ever happened, and when their superiors ask for a report, they lie." He turned to Marta. "If that happens just once, what do robots matter?"

"But you're just substituting death for death," she said, her voice rising. "You create this false oasis for people. It doesn't stop anyone wanting to kill, it just makes them want to kill for sport. The men in the hangar, don't you think that each of them imagines that it's his enemy dismembered and leaking into the sand?"

"What if they do?" he shouted. "What if they do? They're not killing each other right then, at that exact moment, and all. That exact moment."

Marta had withdrawn from him when he raised his voice. "Some of them don't deserve that, Jimmy," she said, shrunk deep into her coat. The cold fury in her voice frightened him because he could not tell whether he was its object. "They're about nothing but killing, and they deserve nothing but killing themselves."

She stormed out onto Lenin Street. Jimmy Guang straightened his tie and stood staring at the wall for a long time trying to pick apart Marta's knotty contradictions. His shop smelled like dust blown in from the street. Late that night he still hadn't decided whether she had left him with permission or a command, or which command.

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The Russians' electronic surveillance was generally several generations more sophisticated than what most of the IF rebels in Kyrgyzstan had, but there were exceptions, and one of them was a thin, pigeon-toed young Afghan named Pavel, who had studied at Moscow University before becoming radicalized by the news that the Russians had exterminated his family in the city during the Centennial Offensive, a bulldozing push through Kandahar in 2079. Like all large cities, Moscow had a carefully-disguised IF presence, and before long Pavel and his excellent education were on their way to the Tien Shan, where every night guerrillas set up remote rocket launchers and every morning the Russians came to destroy them. Picking through the rubble of launchers, automated Russian hunter-killers, and the occasional aircraft, Pavel put together an information-gathering apparatus that was without peer in the Ferghana Valley.

Jimmy Guang found Pavel in the city, deep in the sub-basement of the university's administration building. The building itself had long since collapsed, but the sub-basement was intact and the underground campus data network largely intact. From the sub-basement, Pavel could receive information safely from a number of remote sensing stations he had arranged on the foothills surrounding Osh. He could not broadcast for fear of detection, but he could transmit via the university network, which had surviving cable strung as far as the airport and an observatory some twenty kilometers to the east.

What a strange war this is, thought Jimmy Guang as he patiently endured the search inflicted by Pavel's guards. The Russians have satellites, infrared detection, missiles beyond counting, automated helicopters. The IF rebels have, by and large, weapons out of the twentieth century, except when their benefactors in Riyadh or Kuala Lumpur or Tripoli manage to sneak newer equipment through the Kashmir and over the Tien Shan. Still no one is going to win any time soon.

"Jimmy Guang," Pavel said. They had traded on several occasions, and Jimmy Guang had come to like this pallid fanatic who fought not because he believed that he could redress the wrongs done him, but because he did not know what else to do with his grief.

"Pavel." Next to Pavel's voice, Jimmy Guang's sounded like the croak of a crow. Pavel had a beautiful voice, rich and liquid. In another time, he would have been in a university sub-basement broadcasting on the college radio station. "I need you to track a Russian for me, Pavel. And I need a gun."

Pavel looked at him with new interest.

"An old gun. A Colt .45 automatic, or perhaps a Smith and Wesson. From before World War Two."

"I thought you were the man who could get things," said Pavel.

Jimmy Guang took off his belt, unzipped its interior pocket, and counted out three thousand American dollars in twenties and fifties. "I cannot be seen inquiring after this item," he said. "Already I have put my life in your hands finding you things for your little electronic cerebellum here. You have done the same for me, and we Chinese have a saying: when you save a

life, you become responsible for him. So we are responsible for each other."

"You are Chinese at your convenience," Pavel said. "Is your Islam so convenient?"

Jimmy Guang's hands began to tremble. But when he spoke, his voice did not. "They scheme and scheme: and I, too, scheme and scheme. Therefore bear with the unbelievers, and let them be a while."

The verse was from the *surah* of the Koran called *The Nightly Visitant*. Jimmy Guang had read it when he was a school boy, and been horrified by it, by the way its patient hatred spoke to him across centuries. Quickly he turned to other, more comfortable passages, and he asked his father about the verse. "The Koran was written by men," Reza Hamid had said, "it contains them at their worst as well as at their best. It is a human book that aspires toward God."

A small part of Reza Hamid's son was saddened that the verse no longer seemed so horrible to him.

Pavel looked at the money for as long as it took Jimmy Guang to get his heart rate under control. Then he picked up the bills, tapped them even like a deck of cards, and slipped them into his pocket.

"Why an old gun?" he asked.

"Pavel," said Jimmy Guang with grim humor. "Please. I do not ask you why you need to track satellites."

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By the time he left the university campus, Jimmy Guang knew that after his patrol shift and time spent puttering among robots at the House of Gladmech, Slava Butsayev drank in a nameless bar near the bazaar, and that some nights he set out from there looking for solitary Kirghiz women. This last activity was said to be less and less frequent over the recent months, which that gave Jimmy Guang momentary pause.

That night, Jimmy Guang watched as the excellent American mining robots destroyed each other for the enjoyment of perhaps eighteen hundred windburned and war-hardened Russians, Kirghiz, Uzbeks, Afghans, and miscellaneous others, including a wary knot of sharply dressed Russians who could only be government observers. Captain Butsayev sat with them. These new mining mechs were sophisticated enough to improvise, and early in the evening one of them began taunting its opponents. Quickly it became the crowd favorite, and when it had survived the destruction of its fellows, Jimmy Guang realized he had his first returning champion.

This is like a license to print money, he thought. He spoke to this robot after the matches.

The conversation left him obscurely disappointed. Afterward, he supposed he had wanted the robot to demonstrate a kind of fire one expected of great athletes.

"You fought well," said Jimmy Guang. "Much better than any other mech we've had so far. And the crowds particularly appreciate the way you taunt the opposition."

Slava arrived and began spot-welding a patch onto the mech's back. Jimmy Guang congratulated himself for maintaining a cool exterior.

The robot's voice was a smooth baritone, its inflections nearly human. "I assumed they would, and as a strategy I had nothing to lose by it. If my opponents devote CPU time to analyzing my taunts and formulating retorts, that increases my chances of winning. Also, if the crowd begins to support me, I anticipate that you will be more forthcoming with necessary repairs and maintenance."

"You are a clever machine," said Jimmy Guang. "You use all tools to stay alive."

"No. I am programmed to maintain optimal functionality. Whatever action I take is directed to that end."

Jimmy Guang was storing this up as evidence against his imagined future robot-rights persecutors. "You don't care about staying alive?"

"My programming imbues a preference for awareness over oblivion," said the robot, "but I neither enjoy the first nor the second. You put me out on the arena floor to destroy the others. That is what I will do."

While these words were still rolling in his head, Jimmy Guang tried to avoid remembering the conversation he'd had with Marta the day before, but in his sleep that night he saw the surviving gladiator taunting Russian soldiers who surrounded him with railguns and rocket launchers, and in his sleep he was oppressed by a hope that it would survive.

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The next morning, a ten-year-old boy staggered into his shop, bent under the weight of a bag of coffee beans. With a great relief, he dropped the bag to the floor and stood expectantly until Jimmy Guang fished in his pocket for whatever coins he had handy.

Once the boy had gone, Jimmy Guang took the bag into the curtained-off portion of the office. He slit it open, and his heart fluttered in his throat. He took a deep breath, smelling the coffee, and plunged his hands into the beans. At the bottom of the bag he found a canvas bundle. Inside the canvas bundle was a Colt .45 automatic that could have come from the pocket of John Dillinger. It was cleaned, oiled, and loaded.

And here I am, thought Jimmy Guang. I have decided to kill a man, and here is the weapon I will use to do it.

Was he falling into the war? Had he lost his ability to stay apart from it, to keep it in its proper perspective? Surely there were IF soldiers who raped women, who committed atrocities.

Surely. But none of them had broken Marta.

He heard his door open. Stowing the gun in his desk, Jimmy Guang went out front, arranging the knot of his tie as he went. Captain Butsayev was waiting for him.

"Jimmy Guang," he said. "I fear there is going to be trouble. You noticed the delegation that sat with me last night."

Jimmy Guang nodded.

"They commented on the superlative show put on by the robots," said Captain Butsayev, "which is to your credit. But they also gave me to understand that they were gravely unsettled by the intermingling of Russian soldiers and locals. The lack of animosity disturbed them. They consider it inappropriate for a time of war, and they demanded that the performances be ended." Incredibly, Butsayev smiled. "But I stood up for you. I noted the effect of the House of Gladmech on morale, and I argued—strenuously, I might add—that this benefit outweighed any possible detrimental effect of fraternization." The captain clapped Jimmy Guang on the shoulder. "Not to mention the fact that working on your robots helps to keep young Slavs out of trouble. I believe that the delegation was swayed by my arguments. Your shows can go on."

All of this washed over Jimmy Guang like a surprise rainstorm. "Thank you," he said. The gun in his desk drawer loomed hugely in his mind, and he tried without success to inject some warmth into his tone of voice. "I believe that you are right about the benefit of the House of Gladmech, and I thank you for your courage in supporting me at what must have been a difficult time."

some risk to your career."

"You're certainly welcome," Butsayev said. "I meant what I said." After a pause, he furrowed his brow and said, "Are you all right?"

Jimmy Guang was saved from having to answer by the entrance of Marta. She saw him before Butsayev, and she smiled at him. Out of the corner of his eye, Jimmy Guang saw Butsayev notice her missing teeth. The Russian's gaze flicked over Jimmy Guang, who gave no sign that he had noticed.

So you know, he thought. You know about your brother, or at least you've heard rumors. But you protect him, of course. He's your brother. And after all, these aren't Russian girls.

"Captain Butsayev, this is my companion Marta Chu," he said, with what he thought was the right admixture of formality and warmth. "Marta, Captain Vasily Butsayev."

Butsayev snapped a shallow bow. "Miss Chu," he said.

Marta's hand darted to her mouth before she could stop it. Self-conscious, she returned it to her side and nodded at Butsayev. "Captain."

"Captain Butsayev has just informed me that my gladmech operation has ruffled the feathers of Russian bureaucrats," Jimmy Guang said with a too-broad smile. "He says that we should continue to ruffle, and not worry about their squawking."

Marta's answering smile looked tired and forced. "A little fortune," she said.

Butsayev, sensing the tension in the room, nodded to Jimmy Guang. "In the midst of war, one does what one can," he said, and shut the door softly behind him.

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They went to Fez for lunch on the patio, and as the waiter was clearing away their soup bowls the top three floors of a building at the other end of the square blew away in a tremendous explosion. The concussion of the blast felt like a giant thumb jabbed into each of Jimmy Guang's ears. He leaped out of his chair to grasp Marta, but she was faster than he was and had already ducked into the restaurant. From there they watched as six Russians in full suits approached the burning building. As its surviving occupants emerged, the Russians rounded them up, directing them to a waiting flatbed truck.

With a flash one of the suited Russians blew apart. The sound, a flat crack compared to the deep boom of whatever destroyed the building, nevertheless made Jimmy Guang flinch. The other five Russians turned as one and raked the doorway with railgun fire. The people coming out were obliterated, and part of the doorway caved in.

They stand there, thought Jimmy Guang, inside their shiny suits. Like robots themselves, Uplinked and shunted so they can move faster than I can think. It was difficult to imagine that a human being inhabited those suits.

Another Russian detonated, the shining green fragments of his suit clanging down on the stones of the square, and the remaining four abruptly changed their tactics. Backing away in an expanding arc, they poured railgun fire into the building. Twenty seconds later another rocket destroyed it completely. Smoke hung in the square, and as the echoes died away the sounds of panicked voices formed a background to the creak and groan of shifting rubble.

He had seen it all before, but something in the horror of the moment provoked Jimmy Guang. "If you could get out of here," he asked Marta, "where would you go?"

"Today there is no out of here," she said. "Some days there is, but not today."

He was thinking about this as they walked in the square the next morning on their way to the bazaar in search of apples. The fires in the destroyed building were out, and shirtless laborers under the direction of Russian soldiers worked to clear the rubble. Fresh pockmarks pitted the pavement, and blood had sunk into the stones of the square like dirt in the creases of a hand. The workers called out and began digging a body free of the wreckage.

It's not working, Jimmy Guang thought. What if they do watch the matches without killing each other? What does it mean if later this happens?

"Marta," he said to distract her. She was looking at the body and the workmen and the soldiers too, and he wanted her to think of something else. He wanted her to think about him, to understand that he asked her questions to find out if his interests were the same as hers.

"I've never been to India. You grew up in India, didn't you?" she said.

"Also Hong Kong and Bangladesh. My father was an engineer. He met my mother in Shanghai while building a bridge and married her before its span was complete. I am named for the nickname of an ancestor of hers who worked on railroads in the United States." Two hundred years ago, that had been. Jimmy Guang supposed he still had relatives in America, in San Francisco or New York maybe. For a fleeting moment he thought of asking Marta if she would go to America with him. He thought he had enough money to do it.

Marta smiled at him. "You with your American name," she said, "and your old-fashioned American clothes. I love you, Jimmy Guang Hamid. If I could ever get out of here I would go with you to Hong Kong or Bangladesh or Shanghai or anywhere."

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His American mining-robot champion somehow acquired the name John Wayne. It continued to dispose of any opponent and Jimmy Guang grew afraid that the monotony of its victories would cut into audience interest.

About a week after Marta's promise, though—which Jimmy Guang carried with him like a charm—a Russian army truck pulled up in front of the House of Gladmech. Jimmy Guang was there overseeing welders who were patching one of the hangar's walls, which had been partially shredded by a rocket attack from the mountains the night before. Slava Butsayev was elsewhere, which was good. Jimmy Guang hadn't worked up the nerve to kill him yet, and he didn't trust himself to keep up his friendly façade when other things were aggravating him.

Maniacs, he was thinking as the truck ground to a halt. Don't they know not to target this building by now?

A beefy and florid soldier hopped out of the truck's cab and came directly to Jimmy Guang. "You Jimmy Guang?" he asked, pointing at the sign on the hangar.

"Yes," said Jimmy Guang.

"I have a robot in my truck there that will take your John Wayne apart," the Russian said.

Possibilities unfolded in Jimmy Guang's head. "I assume you're willing to wager on that," he said.

The big match took place the next night: John Wayne, the American seafloor miner, against Lokomotiv Lev, liberated from an abandoned factory in Bishkek and retooled by bored Russian combat engineers. Jimmy Guang had a feeling that John

Wayne was about to meet an Indian he couldn't kill or outsmart.

The House of Gladmech was packed and sweaty. It had been a hot day, and even with the hangar doors open, a faint fog of perspiration hung in the cones of light from ceiling lamps. Lokomotiv Lev's partisans, a group of Russian perimeter guards from Bishkek, sat near the normal crowd of Butsayev's men from the Osh garrison. They formed an olive-green cluster in the riot of Uzbek weaves and kaffiyeh worn by the locals. Jimmy Guang himself was wearing his suit, but he had gone to the only Western clothing store in Osh to buy a new tie for the occasion, and his shoes were polished to a quiet shine. The automatic rested heavily in the small of his back. He wasn't sure why he'd brought it, but the night was fraught with uncertainty, and he hadn't wanted to feel unprepared.

He had a tremendous amount of money riding on the match. Fully three-quarters of the evening's receipts were at stake. If John Wayne suffered a defeat, Jimmy Guang would be without enough liquid cash to complete the purchase of tobacco and foot powder he had been negotiating with a Pakistani trader who would not return to Osh until spring. Without those goods, his income potential—and with it his dream of running to Shanghai or Delhi with Marta—would be severely injured.

If he won, though . . . and if the Russians paid up . . . he would have enough money to get them both anywhere. Berlin, perhaps. Sydney. San Francisco; he could look up relatives. Jimmy Guang's stomach fluttered.

Marta entered the hangar and took a place on a raised bench against one wall. He was glad to see her. She caught his eye and waved. Big night for her too, he thought. She knows what's at stake.

Then Slava Butsayev walked in, worked his way through the crowd, and sat next to his brother. Marta's face turned to stone. Jimmy Guang watched Captain Butsayev closely for the next few minutes. The officer greeted his brother, touched him on the shoulder, made space for him on the bench; but no pleasantries, no exchange of affection, took place. He knows, Jimmy Guang thought, just as he had thought days before in his office. He knows, and he despises his brother, but blood is blood.

Slava Butsayev never sat in the stands with the other Russians. Did he have friends among Lokomotiv Lev's crew? That seemed most likely. Jimmy Guang had a paranoid spasm; had Slava sabotaged John Wayne? Did he have some arrangement with the Lev's builders? The idea passed as quickly as it had arisen. Slava takes pride in his work on the mech, Jimmy Guang thought. He wouldn't throw a match.

Whatever the reason for Slava's action, his visibility gave the evening an entirely different flavor. Jimmy Guang looked back to where Marta sat near the wall.

She was getting up. She did not look in his direction as she left.

Angry and fearful, Jimmy Guang raced through his prematch patter, leaning heavily on the crowd to bet local, to show some pride in Osh. He played shamelessly on whatever regional animosities he could think of and channeled them into a ferocious wagering. By the time the mechs themselves appeared, the floor was thrumming with the stomping of feet and dust was sifting down from the rafters.

John Wayne destroyed Lokomotiv Lev in less than ten minutes. The Russian robot lumbered to the center of the ring, looking purely invincible: squat, barely human in shape, with customized steel plating welded around its sensing apparatus at most joints. It looked as if Lev's crew had scavenged the armor from a tank. They had also, it appeared, amped up the grasping power of the pincers that served Lev for hands and provided the robot with epoxy sprayers and other nozzles whose function Jimmy Guang couldn't begin to fathom. Still, John Wayne was quicker, and more importantly, he had attached himself to the idea that he was fighting for his life—or, as he preferred it, optimal functionality. Lokomotiv Lev had been programmed to destroy John Wayne; John Wayne to survive. So Lev managed to glue shut John Wayne's primary torso, encouraged by the hoarse shouts of the Bishkek Russian contingent (and some of the more fundamentalist IF guerrillas, who hated modernity and blamed it on America). Then Lev caught and tore away a significant amount of John Wayne's external plating, and for a brief moment it looked as if the Bishkek mech would get its pincers into John Wayne's internals. The voice of the crowd grew constricted, frenzied. John Wayne's escape brought them back into a full-throated roar, and the moment

of the match seemed to shift. Lev couldn't keep the American in one place for long enough to bring its full strength to bear. And while it tried, John Wayne danced to the side and slashed at Lev's joints with his remaining torch until, as a thunderous cheer rose from the weave-and-kaffiyeh side of the arena, Lev's left leg failed entirely and it toppled to that side. Within a minute, John Wayne had disabled both of Lev's pincers, and shortly after that Lokomotiv Lev was fit only for Pavel to scavenge gyros and CPU space.

The room of the old hangar rattled with the fierce roars of the winning side. The uproar was deafening, and grew a sharp edge as the Russians from Bishkek got up and left, leaving their champion to leak hydraulic fluid into the sand. What an stew of rivalries here, thought Jimmy Guang: Russians and Kirghiz, different divisions of Russians, even a strange flavor of old Russian-American Cold War. Money changed hands in thick handfuls, and parts of the crowd broke into spontaneous chants that reminded Jimmy Guang of the fenced-off portions of European soccer stadia. Look what I've done, he thought. John Wayne clanked and whirred toward him. He snapped the robot a mock salute, and John Wayne saluted back. Over the robot's shoulder Jimmy Guang saw Slava Butsayev get up and follow the Bishkek group, and he knew at that moment that he could wait no longer.

Butsayev and the Bishkek Russians found their way to his favorite bar, and there they drank until the sky was beginning to lighten. Meeting out on the street in front of the bar, they began shouting at each other. Jimmy Guang's Russian wasn't good enough to determine the source of the disagreement, but it grew heated, and after a sudden flurry of punches, the Bishkek group began walking in the direction of the airport. Slava Butsayev watched them go. After a moment, he called something after them, some Russian colloquialism Jimmy Guang had never heard before. Then Butsayev set off down a side street, wending his way toward the area of the bazaar.

Jimmy Guang was stiff and chilly from his vigil, which he had kept from the vantage of a second-floor balcony in an apartment house opposite the bar. He resisted the impulse to shoot Butsayev right then and there: apart from the difficulty of hitting someone with a pistol shot from that distance, there was the question of propriety. Jimmy Guang Hamid was a man who did things a certain way, as his mother had plotted graphs a certain way in her classrooms or his father held the pen a certain way when drafting. He had never killed a man, had never fired a gun, and if he was to do it now it would have to be done in a certain way. So he followed Slava Butsayev through the twisting ancient streets near the bazaar, and it was not until Butsayev came upon a teenage girl sweeping a crooked concrete porch in front of a building honeycombed with darker windows that Jimmy Guang removed the gun from the waistband of his trousers. The trousers immediately sunk onto his feet and he hoped that they did not sink any further to trip him up in what might follow.

Butsayev acted with the speed and decisiveness of a hunter, rather than the swagger of the torturer. He made as if to pass the girl, who had stopped sweeping and dropped her eyes toward the street as he approached. He said something to her and reached out to curl her hair around his fingers. She flinched, and his hand clenched.

Now, thought Jimmy Guang. Before he can do anything.

"Corporal Butsayev," he said, and Butsayev froze.

When he saw who had addressed him, though, a sly grin split his face, which was like his brother's only in coloration. "Robot Guy," he said. "Want in on the fun?"

Jimmy Guang brought the gun up and pointed it at Butsayev's nose. "You are a despicable man," he said, "and you do despicable things."

He pulled the trigger, and the Colt went off with a tremendous bang. Jimmy Guang's arm leaped up, and his hand, numb by the recoil, let go of the gun. The muzzle flash faded from his eyes, and he saw Slava Butsayev lying on his left side in the street. There was a hole punched in Butsayev's face, just to the left of his nose and below his eye. The eye was rolled back, showing only white.

His fall had pulled the girl to the ground beside him. She was streaked with blood. As if picking lice off herself, she removed the dead man's hand from her hair finger by finger. "You should go home," Jimmy Guang said, and she ran into

building whose porch she had been sweeping.

The sky in the east was pale blue. Jimmy Guang dropped the gun near Butsayev's head and squatted next to the corner. He rummaged through Butsayev's pockets until he found a small drawstring bag. When he pulled it from Butsayev's coat, the seam split, and teeth fell to the stones of the street. He cupped the bag in his palm and replaced the teeth carefully, one by one. Pinching the seam between his fingers, Jimmy Guang walked back toward Lenin Street as the first curious faces began to appear in the windows around him.

The angel said to Mohammed: *God has knowledge of all the good you do.* Jimmy Guang's father had often reminded him of this. The verse comforted Jimmy Guang, made him feel as if he was important, noticed, his actions weighed fairly with sympathy. That was a God he could believe in, take solace in. But as he walked slowly back to his office, the knowledge that God watched him filled Jimmy Guang with deep sadness and shame. He had killed a man. He had become part of the war, and something of him had been lost.

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He went directly through the bazaar to Osh's ancient old quarter, the surviving Osh of Alexander the Great and Mohammed, and, if you believed local traditions, King Solomon as well. And now Marta, who lived in a dusty stone building with her parents and sisters. All of her brothers were up in the mountains fighting the Russians.

Jimmy Guang stopped in the street before her house to straighten his tie and tighten his belt, which he had let out a meter to accommodate the gun. He ran his handkerchief quickly over his shoes, patted at his hair, and only then knocked on the front door of the Chu house.

Marta herself answered. Over her shoulder Jimmy Guang could see her parents. They were smaller than she was, and both beginning to be a bit hunchbacked. She was tall, taller than Jimmy Guang, with strong hands.

"It's early, Jimmy," she said.

He took her arm and led her out, shutting the door behind her and waving quickly at her parents. "I have something to show you," he said when they were outside. Traffic was just beginning to appear on the narrow street, bicycles and an occasional car or two. It struck Jimmy Guang that the year could be 1930 instead of 2083. Somewhere the Russians had satellites that could tell the color of your eyes, and somewhere there were aircraft guided by robots smarter than the recently-departed Lokomotiv Lev, and in the mountains Uplinked Russian soldiers patrolled with inhuman precision; but here on this street was as Osh had always been. There was something quietly defiant about it.

Jimmy Guang removed the bag of teeth from his pocket and held it out to Marta. She took it, and teeth spilled from the open seam. Jimmy Guang had a moment of irrational fear that Russian soldiers would rise from the teeth, as in a story his father had read to him once. Instead, Marta let out a scream and flung the bag to the ground. She covered her face and began to sob. The teeth rattled like dice on the street.

"Marta," he said, wanting to touch her but afraid.

"It took you after all," Marta said through her hands. "The war, it took you."

For a long while he didn't know what to say. It was true.

"I thought that's what you wanted," he said at last.

She rubbed at her eyes, then closed the distance between them with a step. "We have to get out of here," she said. "

Come with me."

"Where are we going?" he asked.

"It doesn't matter where we go. The war is here. It's claiming you, Jimmy." She looked at him. Saw him hesitating, and she knew why.

An impulse seized Jimmy Guang. He took all of the evening's winnings from his inside coat pocket. "Here," he said, and he closed one of Marta's hands around the thick wad of dollars and rubles and euros and rupees and God only knew what else. "Take this and go to Pavel. Wait for me."

Her face grew still.

"Just until sundown," Jimmy Guang pleaded. "Just wait until sundown."

When he got back to the office, Russian soldiers were waiting for him.

.....

"What do you expect of me?" Captain Vasily Butsayev asked Jimmy Guang Hamid.

They were standing in a field southwest of Osh. Distant thunder rolled down on them from a jet passing far overhead. Jimmy Guang listened, and he listened to the wind, and he watched the dry grass bend, and he smelled the mountains. Captain Butsayev was going to kill him, he was sure, and Jimmy Guang was saddened by this because it meant he had overestimated the captain from their first meeting.

About five hundred yards away stood the House of Gladmech. The wall facing them was patched with rusting rectangles of corrugated tin scavenged from other hangars destroyed in various assaults. One of the patches covered part of the sign on that wall, and Jimmy Guang pursed his lips in annoyance. If he survived the afternoon he would have that fixed.

Jimmy Guang realized that although he did not want to, he would have to speak. So he decided to speak truthfully.

"Your brother was an evil man who preyed on women," he said, looking Butsayev in the eye. "I am in love with one of those women, and because I love her I had to kill your brother. I had to try to heal her, and your brother's life was like an infection in her spirit. She could not live while he did, and I need her, Captain Butsayev. I need her very badly to live."

Butsayev looked toward the mountains. "You heal a woman by killing a man. You create an illusionary peace among them by making a spectacle of destroying robots. If I were close to you, Mr. Hamid, I would fear your impulses to do good deeds." Still speaking softly, Butsayev quoted: "'Do not walk proudly on the earth. You cannot cleave the earth, nor can you rival the mountains in stature.'"

A Russian officer quoting from the Koran. Jimmy Guang could not decide whether this was a good omen or bad.

"My actions were not meant to be prideful," he said, and almost said more, but stopped himself. "Captain Butsayev. I no longer defend myself. I have done what I have done, and you shall do what you shall do. Given the same situation again and again a thousand times, I would kill your brother a thousand times."

Butsayev waved an arm over his head, a gesture of some sort to someone Jimmy Guang couldn't see. A rocket tore through the air, and Jimmy Guang's House of Gladmech exploded in an expanding cloud of dirty smoke. Large pieces of metal walls flew up into the air and came slanting crazily back down to embed themselves in the earth.

John Wayne was in there, Jimmy Guang thought.

"Nor do I do that out of pride, Mr. Hamid," said Butsayev. "Leave now. Go with your woman, go back where you came from. Leave war to those of us who have made it our profession. And remember: I am not a butcher like my brother. But neither am I a weak man. Go now."

Butsayev walked toward his waiting jeep, leaving Jimmy Guang alone in the field. A wave of sorrow overcame him. He thought of the House of Gladmech, yes, but mostly for Vasily Butsayev, whose respect Jimmy Guang realized he had treasured.

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When he got to Pavel's, Marta was no longer there. "She said she was going to find her brothers," Pavel said. "You will follow her."

"Where are her brothers?"

Pavel looked at Jimmy Guang, a small quirk at the corner of his mouth. "Do you understand what I am telling you? She is going to the mountains. If she is going to the mountains, it is not up to me to tell you where to find her."

Another test, thought Jimmy Guang. He did not think she was leaving him, no. Pavel might smirk, but Jimmy Guang had been smirked at before. He knew what he knew. She feared the war in him, the way it had crept into the corners of his mind and when he had followed her through the rocks and the snow and the privations of the Tien Shan, he would be purified again. She would see him and know that this was true, that what had drawn him to the war was gone in the blast of a rocket and that she herself had drawn him away from it again. Perhaps he would find her in the mountains, among the militias and the mujahideen. Perhaps she would have gone ahead of him to Shanghai, or Delhi, and he would find her waiting for him at his father's house with a cup of tea in her hand.

The End