



Forgotten Dragons
McGillveray, David

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About McGillveray:

David McGillveray was born in Edinburgh in 1972 but now lives and works in London. Aside from Futurismic, his short fiction has appeared in Neo-Opsis, Fictitious Force, Read by Dawn, Coyote Wild and many others. Sam's Dot Publishing published his first collection, Celeraine early in 2008.

Also available on Feedbooks for McGillveray:

- *The Plastic Elf of Extrusion Valley* (2008)

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Forgotten Dragons

Chongqing Municipality, People's Republic of China, Spring 2026

The night air was wet with mist, the ground cold beneath their bellies.

"What the hell are we doing out here, man?" grumbled Cope. He spoke Mandarin out of custom, even though they were alone. "I thought the plan was to hit the fuel convoy and get out fast like last time."

Janssen shook his head and returned the night-vision binos to his eyes. "Won't work."

He scanned the complex of buildings constituting the Chongqing Secondary Nuclear Facility that nestled at the foot of the ridge where they lay. What he had first taken to be the housings for the four reactors lay towards the centre, much smaller than others he had seen. Around it were larger buildings holding the turbine generators together with storage silos, offices and a long accommodation block. The huge bulk of the steam cracker and four attendant water towers that used the reactors' excess heat to manufacture hydrogen were lost in the mist to the rear, illuminated by the occasional sweeps of searchlights. Military police smoked cigarettes outside a glass-enclosed guardhouse that blocked the only road leading inside the facility's barbed wire battlements.

"Why not?" Cope demanded. He turned to look at his companion, broad nose dripping with dew. "It worked well enough in Guangdong."

"This plant isn't like Daya Bay," Janssen replied. "These are pebble bed nuclear reactors. They're fuelled by thousands of little balls of graphite the size of your fist, flecked with uranium, and refuelling is continuous — no shutting down for weeks while they replace the fuel rods. The Chinese manufacture the pebbles off production lines, so even if we hit the convoy, they'd be able to get replacements here in days. No disruption and no point." Janssen handed the binos to Cope and wiped black hair back from his forehead. "We need to come up with something else."

"Well you're the fucking techno-geek. Ideas are your department. I just blow stuff up."

Janssen pointed towards the whitewashed walls of the nuclear reactor buildings. "You notice anything about the reactors?"

Cope squinted into the lenses "Should I?"

"Yeah. They're smaller than the others we've, uh, worked with. That's another benefit of the pebble bed design — they're meant to be

meltdown proof. The core temperature is capped below the melting point of the pebbles. There's no possibility of any runaway chain reactions because of low fuel density, so even if the cooling system fails you don't get any meltdown. It just sits there until you switch it off."

"So you're saying it's tough to break?"

"No, it's easier because it's safer," said Janssen.

Cope sighed impatiently. He thinned his lips and waited.

"Look at the reactor housings again," Janssen said. "That's why I wanted to come up here and see for myself. Because the Chinese are so sure of the safety record of their systems, there's no containment building, just like I thought. No pressure dome, no metres of poured concrete. So what does that say to you?"

Cope stared down at the facility. "No containment building," he said. His mouth kinked in a half-smile. "Well, well, well. I'm impressed. We can be real naughty here."

"This isn't a game, Cope."

"No?"

"No."

"The stakes are high, but it's still all a game. It's better if you see it like that."

Janssen snorted. "I'm done now. Let's go."

"Delighted to."

They picked their way back down the other side of the ridge, bent low in the pitiful moonlight that leaked through the clouds. Their mopeds were as they had left them, hidden beneath a tarpaulin by the dirt road that led between the rice paddies. The night swallowed the low hum of the fuel cells as their exhausts coughed out water vapour to join the mist. Janssen and Cope began the long drive back towards the city, just two ordinary comrades on a night errand.

The Serene Jade Garden T-House failed to live up to its name with such a single-minded lack of care that it was almost impressive. Two tacky hologramatic lions flickered by the automatic doors, rearing and roaring in an endless loop. Inside was an ugly vista of plastic furniture and overbright menus that smelled of overcooked noodles and fresh disinfectant. It looked like one of the old McDonald's, before they went rustic.

Janssen and Cope stopped just inside the entrance and regarded the clientele from beneath the peaks of their NYC baseball caps. A young mother struggled with a twin pushchair and associated kids while complaining to a uniformed attendant about the strength of her tea. Old men sat alone or in silent groups, returning stares with frank disinterest. A group of kids skipping school sat together, each talking to someone else on their Handies or throat mics.

“Nice spot,” said Cope.

“Yeah. That the mark?” Janssen nodded at a man in a low brimmed flat cap and matching donkey jacket pretending not to look at them from behind a pair of fake Police shades.

Cope glanced at the mugshot on his Handy and over at the man. “That’s him. So much for his disguise. Come on, let’s get some tea before we go over, make him sweat a bit longer. You can do the talking.”

They were served with a plastic teapot and two matching tea bowls on a dirty tray where dancing teeth advertised mouthwash. They carried it over to their contact’s table and slid into the plastic bench opposite him. The Formica table was scattered with open sachets of soy sauce and loose sugar grains.

“You’re Mr. Dou?” Janssen said.

The man nodded.

Janssen cleared his throat. “I’m Mr Cheech,” — he saw Cope’s mouth twitch from the corner of his eye — “and this is Mr. Chong.”

Dou’s gaze danced between the two of them. “I don’t care what your names are. I just want to get this done.” He slurped at his tiny tea-bowl with hands that shook, just a little. Janssen noticed the long fingernails, an affectation that had become a fashion. If a man could grow his fingernails long, it said to the world that he was a career man, a man who no longer had to work in the fields like a peasant. Janssen fervently wished these so-called career men actually remembered to clean their claws once in a while. Dou could have grown cress under his nails.

“You’ve brought what we want?” asked Janssen.

“You brought what *I* want?” countered Dou.

Cope patted the satchel in his lap. “All here. We’ll even throw in the bag, won’t we, Mr. Cheech?”

Janssen put his Handy on the table. "We'll make the transfer when we're all happy, OK? Now, I don't want to stay in this dump any longer than I have to, so shall we get on with it?"

Dou produced his own device from a pocket and stabbed at it with a tiny light-pen. He turned the tiny screen towards Janssen. "Full schematics of the facility with personnel stats, output projections and accounts in separate files. It's all there, like I told the other guy in Shapingba. Now give me my money. I've been waiting for weeks."

"And the passkeys?"

Dou sighed impatiently. "I said it's all there, didn't I?" Janssen took the Handy from him and began opening files.

The Agency's trawl team had found Dou four months ago mouthing off in a bar in the Shapingba District about his senior position at the shiny new facility he was working at and how shit the wages were. A few more cups of rice wine and they also discovered Dou's unwholesome democratic leanings. When the unfortunate rumours of Dou's active involvement in Shapingba's democratic underground scene and somewhat more spurious evidence regarding his interest in young boys reached his communist superiors, it had been easy enough to harness Dou's disaffection with his now former employers. The deal had been cut over a month ago now but it had taken time for Janssen and Cope to complete their previous assignment and extricate themselves from the ensuing government crackdown. Dou and his family had been without an income for the intervening time and must be getting desperate. Janssen could see it in his eyes and had to shut down the unprofessional stirrings of sympathy.

He scanned through the data on Dou's Handy for several minutes while the argument between the young mother and the attendant escalated in the background.

"I'm on her side," Cope said, putting his own tea aside.

"Fine," Janssen said at last. He returned Dou's Handy and pulled a connecting lead from the breast pocket of his jacket. "Let's do this the old-fashioned way. I don't like my business travelling through the air, know what I mean?"

Dou nodded and they attached their handhelds together.

"The bag," said Dou. The man's nerves were jangling as the deal neared fruition. Janssen bet he was picturing himself returning home triumphant to his wife and kids, probably after a bellyful in the nearest bar.

“No problem. Mr. Chong?”

Cope pushed the satchel under the table and Dou grabbed it between his knees.

“Now make the transfer,” said Janssen.

Dou pressed ‘send’ and the data began to chug into Janssen’s Handy. When it was done, Janssen disconnected the two devices and sat back. Dou was walking towards the door clutching the satchel like a newborn before either of them could speak.

“Not very friendly,” Janssen said.

“It’s this modern life style. People are too busy to remember manners these days,” Cope said. “You want to watch that accent of yours, though. It slipped a couple of times.”

Janssen looked stricken for a moment. “Really?”

Cope stood and stretched. “I wouldn’t worry about it. He probably thought you were from Taiwan or something, come to spy on the motherland.” He gave one of his thin smiles. His eyes searched Janssen’s face. “Anyway, our friend Dou won’t be talking to anyone. Why don’t you hole up in your hotel and do your homework a while? And get a shave.”

Janssen put one self-conscious hand to his jaw. “And what will you be doing?”

“I got stuff to do. There’s always stuff to do.”

Their eyes met for a moment. Janssen was the first to look away. “Stay in touch,” he said.

“Sure.” Cope exited the T-House whistling along to the pop tune chattering from the restaurant’s tinny speakers. Janssen zipped his Handy into an inside pocket and made his way out and through the steep streets of Chongqing. He did not whistle. He kept his head down.

Stephen Janssen, born in Madison, Wisconsin on the 28th of July 1995 to white-picket-fence, white-bread parents, drew the razor down one cheek and tried to outstare the oriental features that looked back at him. Sometimes, he couldn’t read his own expression.

The Agency had selected him for the programme because of his build, his height and his previous extended involvement with Sino-US trade. Why he had selected the Agency was something he could provide no clear answers to. Duty? Patriotism? These things seemed old and irrelevant now, even slightly embarrassing, like a crush on a high school

teacher. Money? Well there was plenty of that, if he ever got the chance to enjoy it, routed through the Caymans and Mauritius and god-knows where else, resting in Switzerland and as inaccessible as his old life. Janssen's folks had always known he'd worked for the government, but all he could ever tell them was state-sanctioned lies. It had been easier to drift out of their lives than maintain the deception. Maybe he could make a money transfer.

Janssen dipped the razor in the sink and began to work on the contours of his chin, obsessively scratching it across his skin a millimetre at a time, to exorcise every follicle, to hide the evidence. They had restructured his face, reshaped his nose, his eyes, his lips. They had moved his cheekbones and tinted his skin. They had surgically removed every hair from his head and replaced it with the dark, straight stuff that had been culture grown from another's DNA and now fell across his forehead. His eyes were not his own.

They had done all of this and still had found time for mistakes. Despite all the surgery and the depilatory treatments, Janssen's beard always grew out blond as Marilyn Monroe. And so he shaved. He carried an electric razor wherever he went. It meant he spent too much time in front of mirrors. Even after two years he had not lost that sense of displacement he had felt when he first was changed. He constantly searched for himself somewhere beneath the new features. Both he (and Cope) had had so many names in that time that identity had become a porous commodity. He saw his old face in dreams sometimes, but it always played a third-person role.

He wiped the dregs of foam from his face and ran his fingertips over where he had shaved, checking for any rogue blond stubble. Finally satisfied, he put his shirt back on and returned to the bed. He began to go over the schematics of the target again, to see if he had missed anything over the last couple of days, but felt his mind wander.

He could have been anywhere in the world — CNN, room service, a damned trouser press that nobody ever used. He spent weeks in these places, always moving, waiting, moving again. Aliases and cover stories and obscure meetings. But he and Cope were close to something now, and he felt that sense of fear and elation that reminded him why he was still in China. It drowned out the doubts.

Restless, Janssen went out on the balcony and smoked a cigarette. He looked out over the neon and hologramatic sky-art, the vast sprawl of the Chongqing conurbation with its endless thirst for brands and cars

and electricity. The air smelled of brick dust and industry. Even after a quarter century of breakneck development, there was no let up. The sounds of drills and engines, distant shouts and car stereos filtered upwards. Dark forests of tower blocks swaddled in bamboo scaffolding filled the skyline.

He flicked his cigarette butt over the rail and watched it tumble, shedding tiny meteor storms of sparks. His Handy vibrated.

“Yeah? You coming here? Right.”

Cope. Other than sending the prearranged check-in codes every eight hours, his partner had done one of his disappearing acts for the past two days. Not unusual, just irritating. They had plans to make.

Janssen let Cope in when he arrived five minutes later, and glared at him in disbelief. “What the *fuck* is that?”

Cope put a finger to his lips. “You scanned?”

“Of course I’ve fucking scanned!” Janssen spun away from him and faced the window, fingers pinched over the bridge of his nose. “I don’t believe this. Not again.”

Cope threw the satchel on to the bed, the satchel they had given to Dou. “I thought we could use the money, and I knew you liked the bag. Cash is all there, give or take a few thousand. Some of these city girls are pricey, but I always say it’s value for money that counts.”

“You’re a psycho, you know that?” Janssen snapped. He turned round and stared at the bag. “You said that this wouldn’t happen again.”

“Oh, give it a rest. How many times? That little shit in Hong Kong was half way up the steps of the Party Offices when I caught up with him.”

“So you say.”

Cope shrugged. “Listen, I got nervous, OK? Actually, no, screw that. I got *smart*. If our people found Dou shooting his mouth off in some bar, what’s he gonna do with a fat stack of yuan, huh?”

Janssen sat on the edge of the bed, away from the bag, and stared between his feet. “It was an acceptable risk. We agreed.”

“There’s no such thing, Janssen,” Cope said, his voice rising. He stabbed at his chest with a finger. “I have to do what I think’s best to cover our backs. *You* won’t do it. You’ve not got the stomach for it. If it wasn’t for me, we’d be in some Chinese dungeon right now finding out what bamboo feels like when it’s hammered under our fingernails,

because if we get caught that's the only way things will go. We're on our own here. Total deniability, remember. Total deniability."

Cope said the last words in English. It startled Janssen so much to hear it that he snapped his head up. "For fuck's sake, be quiet! Why do you have to use that as a justification for every completely unacceptable action you take?"

"Uh, because it's true?" Cope went over to the minibar under the TV and took out a tiny bottle of Russian vodka. He tipped it down his throat.

Janssen looked through the balcony window from where he sat, at the glow of the city. Cope was right, of course. A lunatic, but he was right. This was a dirty, covert little war, attempted murder by asphyxiation. As far as the international facades went, all the USA and China had between them was good-natured rivalry. They had their disagreements of course, about human rights and trade restrictions and the US annexation of the Arabian oil fields, but they needed each other as mutual market and supplier, like two lovers who were bad for each other but couldn't stay away.

Two decades making war on terror had proved distracting. All that effort to secure America's economic viability and the safety of her borders had come with a cost, soaking up intelligence resources and strategic planners. There had been undesirable side effects: China had been allowed to grow unmolested, to expand into the economic and political vacuum left by a failing Europe and a fragmented Russia. The Chinese press half-joked about annexing Japan as 'war reparation.' There were Chinese flags on the moon. So much wealth had been created, in fact, that the Communists had actually held on. And on.

Brakes had to be applied. It sounded melodramatic, but at the end of it all, this was a fight for the Earth. While presidents smiled and gifts were exchanged, cells were operating all over the world working against Chinese ambitions. The irony was bitter and the need for discretion absolute. Janssen looked at his hands, at his fingertips scrubbed of prints. He had no connections to the Agency or his government. There would be no negotiations for his release in the event of a miscalculation. Cope was right; they were on their own.

"You got one for me?" Janssen said. Cope was poking around inside the minibar again.

"Sure." Cope turned and threw him a gin. Janssen hated gin. He opened it anyway. "I got that super-special modem you wanted," Cope said. "It's in the bag."

Janssen looked at the satchel with renewed distaste but made an effort to put it out of his mind. "You *have* been busy."

Cope smiled. "Always busy, my friend, always busy. Now, how about we get some dinner and talk nuclear reactors?"

Three days later, a cheap cafe in the back streets of Yuzhong District. "The woman who runs it is a big old mama from Xian and she really knows her dumplings," Cope had said.

Janssen sat at the back of the restaurant facing the wall while opposite Janssen swilled the soft, fleshy morsels in a bath of vinegar and soy before shovelling them into his mouth with a pair of plastic chopsticks. The place was popular with an older crowd, men in blue overalls with filthy hands who smoked while they ate and spat freely on the concrete floor. Places like this were the safest places to talk.

Cope was on a roll. "It's like walking over a rotten bridge above a gaping chasm, this country. The Communists have paid off the people with new TVs and new cars, fucking Nike Super-glitter-air-megastar bullshit sneakers. They've got work and food and three square metres of linoleum to call home. What more could they ask for, right?" He drank some tea and speared another dumpling with a chopstick. He waved it between them. "That's what the Party thinks. Lucky to have it. Look what *we've* given up, they say to anyone outside. But they've not given up a damn thing!"

"And the rotting bridge?" prompted Janssen, straining to hear Cope over the shouted conversations of the post-work crowd, not that he hadn't heard it a hundred times before. He was eating his dumpling soup without much enthusiasm. He had a sudden longing for steak, a nice slab of pink meat that he had to cut up himself.

"Yeah, the last twenty-five years have been nothing but a big bribe," Cope announced like it was some great cognitive breakthrough. There were flecks of soy on his chin. "The Party are still everywhere, in every tiny decision made by any tiny representative body. Quotas, production targets, 'ideological guidance.' And what happens to the voice of dissent? Same as always. Silenced in a basement somewhere, no comebacks, no questions and the UN is scared shitless to rock the boat, as usual. The

government's bought off the people and it's worked, but you've seen what it's like. The Chinese are moneymakers to the core. It's in their genes. But oil's at \$280 a barrel, man. The lights went out in Shanghai for twelve hours last week. The stock market's in the fucking toilet because profit growth can't keep up with energy costs. Fragile, man, very fragile." Cope sat back and looked over Janssen's shoulder, out into the street.

Janssen stirred his soup. This was part of Cope's self-justification act. He liked to pretend he was working for a cause, although at other times was happy to explain any of their actions with the line, 'There's no right or wrong in this situation, just economics.' Janssen found the safest way was to just get on with the job. Morality was too fluid to grab a hold of. And it bit.

"I'm done with Chongqing. I've done what I need to do," said Janssen.

"Fine." Cole was still looking away through the smoke of the restaurant.

"I think maybe you're getting too comfortable here. You're starting to sound like some armchair dissident. It's time we ... what are you staring at?" Janssen made to turn round.

"Don't. Just keep slurping your soup."

"What is it?" Janssen hissed.

"There's a man outside. I've seen him before."

Janssen felt alarm stir in his belly. It was too easy to forget the danger, but it was always there. "Where? Do you know him?"

Cole put down his chopsticks and leaned forward. "No. I saw him that night, the night with Dou. Afterwards." He spoke in a strained whisper, his gaze flicking between Janssen's face and the exterior of the restaurant.

"Police? They better not be Ministry of State Security, or we're fucked."

"I don't know. Are you armed?"

"Yes, but —"

Cope motioned with his head. "Go out the back. Mrs. Huang will show you. She's good like that."

This last comment had all sorts of implications that Janssen did not even want to think about. "We'll meet as agreed, yes?" He stood, feeling for the pistol taped below his left armpit. He picked up the briefcase he

had left under his chair. It held his laptop, the modem, his programs. Everything. He had scrubbed the hotel room as a matter of course so there was no need to go back if something happened. Like now.

Cope nodded. "Go on. And be careful. There are probably others."

Janssen walked swiftly through the stained curtain that led to a tiny kitchen, hot and thick with steam. A large woman with died red hair and huge earrings worked there with two young boys. Mrs. Huang. She said something that he did not catch, but she was smiling. He indicated the door and she let him out.

Washing hung on a dozen lines. The smell of trash and rotten vegetables. Janssen eased the pistol from its hiding place and into a pocket.

He didn't know this part of town well, but he headed away from the thoroughfares and into a maze of narrow hutong where countless families lived on top of each other, opening their doors on to tiny shops and obscure merchandise. There were few people in the street. It made him nervous and he began to walk quickly. He shrank into an alley as a train hummed overhead. He was near one of the new maglev lines.

Let the training take over, Janssen. You know how to do this.

He ran through the shadows between streetlights shaped like magnolia blossoms, fingers tight on the grip of the gun. Faces that normally went by in a blur of millions each stood out to him, eyes searching. Did they know his face? He ran on, took a right, another right.

A car blocked the narrow street, its wing mirrors scraping the concrete on either side. He stood a moment with chest heaving, frantically scanning the area for threats or observers. Nothing.

He jumped on to the bonnet and over the roof, boots splashing in a puddle of oily water as he landed. There was a shout from a window hidden by washing lines above him, but nothing further, no sound of running feet, no sirens. Maybe Cope had been mistaken. His palms were sweaty. Maybe it was nothing. Paranoia, that's all.

And then, in a sudden stilling in the heartbeat of the city, there came the sound of gunshots in the distance. One, two, three.

Janssen ran on.

Janssen shaved by torchlight under the decaying roof of an abandoned pagoda. His hands moved in quick, agitated movements, fingertips feeling for imaginary blond bristles. His skin was tender under the blade,

which was blunt from overuse. He'd left his spares at the hotel in the city and he'd been holed up here for two days, as arranged. Cope should have been here by now.

The pagoda was ideal for their needs. It was one of many that dotted the countryside, but no one ever visited them. They weren't a part of people's lives any more. The cities had sucked too many people away from the countryside, and automated tractors and harvesters didn't have time for history. Besides, the Chinese had new pagodas now, made of steel and concrete and glass, the thrusting totems of their own unique brand of capitalism. Everything remained as they had left it six months before, other than the remains of a campfire and a few discarded drug patches some local kids must have left behind. The cache was untouched beneath the basement floor.

Janssen went to the window again. Mist clung to the fields like silver foil over a crash victim, muffling the distant sounds of the freeway to the east. His boots scraped amongst the trash on the floor. He lit a cigarette, hiding the glow with his hand.

"Come on, Cope," he said to himself, and meant it. But at the same time, something whispered in his inner ear: If the partnership was dissolved, if Cope was dead or captured, Janssen was in danger. The action was a no go. He would ask for extraction, bring an end to all of it. If —

Janssen pulled savagely at the cigarette's filter and banished the fantasy. It did no good to think that way. Cope still had time. He may have been a hired gun masquerading as an idealist; he may have been the last person in the world Janssen would have wanted to share a beer with in another life. He might have inspired ulcers and sleeplessness and a profound need to question the parameters of human morality, but Janssen knew he was dependable when it came to the crunch. In any case, this last was hypocrisy. In Daya Bay and Hong Kong, in other places, they had both done what had to be done. In China, amongst the multitudes, they were alone together. The last forty-eight hours of silence had made him acutely aware of that. Cope still had time.

Bats fluttered unseen outside in the darkness. Janssen grew still as he listened. There was definitely the sound of an engine coming from somewhere across the fields, and it was getting closer. Janssen fumbled for his binos and peered into the night, panning left and right. There! A faint glow in the infrared. Janssen gradually made out the heat of a moped engine, an indistinct form bent forward over the handlebars. He lifted the sniper rifle he had propped by the window and followed the

approaching figure through its scope. The new arrival was alone, but that could be a ruse. There were motion sensors placed around the perimeter of the pagoda that should warn him of attack from the rear, but Janssen felt vulnerable without someone covering his back. The trigger felt cold against his fingertip.

Then the Handy vibrated in Janssen's pocket.

"Yes?" he whispered. In answer, the tinny parp of the scooter's horn sounded twice outside. Relief and irritation flooded through him like alcohol. "For fuck's sake."

Cope's appearance did not match his method of approach. There were heavy bags under his eyes and his clothes were filthy. He stank of his own sweat and farmyard shit.

"I've been hiding in ditches for the last two days," he said as he flopped down on one of the sleeping bags Janssen had retrieved from the cache. "Got any cigarettes?"

Janssen threw him the pack. "What the hell happened in Chongqing? I heard shots."

Cope grinned. "Mine. That dumb fucker outside the restaurant thought *he* was chasing *me*."

"And was he MSS?"

"Janssen, I didn't stick around to go through his wallet, all right?" Cope snapped, fumbling for a lighter. "There was another one along the street. I think they were just ordinary boys."

"You sure?"

Cope nodded. "Pretty sure."

"You need to do better than that, Cope. If the Ministry have us down, we need to abort."

"MSS wouldn't be as amateurish as those guys were. Trust me, it's fine." Cope finally lit his cigarette and put the pack into the breast pocket of his jacket. He ran his spare hand through his greasy hair and looked at his partner. "Look, we're doing it tomorrow night like we always planned. We've put too much into this. This is the big one, man. Right?"

Janssen paced the room with hands clasped behind his head. He blew out his cheeks and stared at Cope for a very long time. "Give me my cigarettes back," he said.

Cope smiled.

They watched the lights of the fuel convoy approach from the same vantage point where they had lain before. The clouds hung low overhead but the night air was clear of mist. Eight armoured cars accompanied four huge, low-slung articulated trucks down the strip of purpose-built tarmac that wound along the foot of the hills. The area around the facility's glass guardhouse buzzed with activity as they waited to receive the uranium pebble shipment. There must have been thirty soldiers by the gate and as many with the convoy.

"I reckon we've got another ten minutes before the trucks arrive," Cope said from behind his binos. "It wouldn't be so hard to take them out from here."

"Let's stick to the plan, eh?" Janssen frowned at the antireflective screen of the laptop before him as his fingers raced over the keys. Dou's passkeys were good, and he was deep inside the facility's security system, manipulating protocols, tiptoeing past digital watchdogs while they slept. He entered the final instructions with a thrill of anticipation. This night was all they had worked for, the final test of their commitment and resolve. "It's done. The security systems will go down for two minutes as the convoy arrives. Hopefully, they'll assume it's a glitch connected to the powering down of the gate defences."

"They'd better do."

"Let's go."

They shouldered their equipment and drew up the hoods of their ghost-mesh overshirts, becoming elusive spectres as they activated the charge packs. They ran down the hillside, two indistinct blurs all but invisible to the naked eye, heading for their chosen entry point in the shadows cast by the huge steam cracker. It was on the far side of the facility and they had to run around the lights and other safeguards that marked the perimeter of the Chongqing Secondary Nuclear Facility. Finally, they came to rest in an enclave of darkness untouched by the sweep of the searchlight patterns. The electrified wires of the double fence loomed four metres high before them.

"How long?" Cope breathed, drawing the wire cutters from his pack.

"Eighty seconds til the current goes down."

They counted down the time until the mark and then skulked forward. The ghost-mesh was covered with hundreds of semi-intelligent sensors that formed a composite of the terrain beyond its wearer from every

angle and strove to match it. In the darkness, they appeared as black wraiths drawn from a hundred childhood nightmares.

Janssen grimaced and then relaxed as Cope touched the wire cutters to the metal fence. "We're on. Make the gaps big enough to get through without touching on the way out."

They were through in seconds and across the metres of no man's land to the second barrier. Through again. In a curious aesthetic decision, the facility's designers had carpeted the ground in Astroturf so that the whole place was like a bizarre sports field. They made no sound as they flitted towards the bulk of the cracker.

Janssen was not here to cause another Chernobyl. Even his employers did not want that. This war was about disruption, delay and embarrassment, not irradiating large parts of China. Some parts at least of Cope's ill-conceived economic analysis were not so wide of the mark. Economic growth had indeed bought the Chinese government not only currency in the world markets, but a means to pacify a population all too aware of the lives others enjoyed. They saw it in every neon advertisement and on every web page. It was only promises that kept the regime in power, gifts of brands and Starbucks and fuel-cell mopeds.

But as the likes of Dou and millions like him in every town in every province showed, this was an uneasy truce. The MSS had become even more brutal in the last ten years in stifling the voice of dissent, and their brutality had touched many lives. It wouldn't take much, so the reasoning went, to tip the balance. And a few dark nights in Chongqing was just another chip away at the foundations.

They placed a combination of incendiaries and military plastique around the support struts of the cracker and flanking towers. Janssen planned for them to be well away before they detonated the charges — the cracker would make an almighty candle. They met in the shadow of the huge metal cylinder just as a foot patrol passed along the perimeter fence. Janssen readied his silenced pistol and waited for the moment the guards spotted the gap they had cut, but the moment never came. The two soldiers were sharing a cigarette. One told the other how much he was looking forward to noodles when they went off duty. With spicy sauce.

Cope stowed his weapon. "Split?" he whispered.

"Yeah." Janssen watched as the Cope-shaped ghost sprinted across open ground before heading north along the high walls of one of the two turbine generator buildings, huge sheds half the size of football fields.

He followed and then headed south, his pack heavy beneath the mesh overshirt.

He pressed his back against the concrete of the generator building and paused while his breathing steadied. The clouds parted and soft moonlight lit up the facility. He noticed the uncanny way with which the ghost-mesh adjusted to the new light. The silver sheen on the Astroturf gave the facility an almost toy-like appearance, despite the huge scale of the steam cracker. It was like being inside one of those scale models that architects used to demonstrate their new developments.

The plan was for both Cope and Janssen to set charges within one of the generator buildings before moving on to the reactors. Janssen followed the path that was seared into his mind after hours of preparation. Dou's blueprints lived in his mind; he could walk this place blind.

South along the long wall of the turbine building. The main entrances faced east, towards the four reactors, but there was an emergency exit situated in the southerly wall. He rounded the corner of the building, crouching low despite his practical invisibility. A storage building lay on his right, but no lights shone inside. This area was well lit by what looked remarkably like the ubiquitous magnolia-shaped street lamps so familiar in the city, but was free of activity. Janssen kept to the shadows at the foot of the building.

The emergency exit was a steel door at the top of a metal staircase that clung to the side wall. A single guard stood on the platform outside the door, a machine gun slung over his belly. His boots rang on the metal as he shifted from foot to foot. Janssen shot him in the head from fifteen meters, the pistol making almost no noise as it fired. The man did not cry out as he was flung sideways. He came to rest flopped forward across the rail like a sack of rice, gun dangling from his neck. Janssen ran up the stairs without pausing and pulled the body back on to the platform.

The door had a code lock.

"Damn," Janssen muttered. He had been expecting a card lock and the guard to be carrying the card. Any codes taken from Dou would be old by now.

Working quickly, he pulled the guard's body from where it hung over the rail like a drunk and propped it against the wall. Not good enough for anyone up close, but enough to give him a few seconds from a casual observer. Then he pulled a small device from his utility belt and fixed it to the side of the combination lock while he crouched down on the platform. Small red numbers whirred in a blur on the device's tiny LED

screen. It took less than ninety seconds with Janssen anxiously scanning the area between the generator shed and the storage building for the lock to click. He moved inside while the broken soldier remained on guard.

The vast space inside was filled with the noise of the generators, which sat like four sphinxes on their concrete foundations. Janssen could feel the deep vibrations through the rubber soles of his boots. The air above the huge, European designed ABB-Alstom turbines was criss-crossed by a rectilinear web of service walkways and observation gantries. It was these that Janssen used to climb towards the eaves, the sound of his footsteps lost in the background roar.

High on the west wall, on the opposite side of the shed from where Janssen moved, was a lighted office. He could see two technicians in white coats drinking tea and spinning round on their chairs, but otherwise the place was deserted. Modern nuclear power generation was not a labour intensive business.

Janssen drew a briefcase-sized box from his pack and opened it. In twelve hemispherical indentations lay twelve off-white lumps of what looked like dough. He hefted the first in his hand and then threw it down from the high walkway where he stood on to the top of one of the turbines. He repeated this and then ran the full length of the building, tossing the doughballs, two to each generator. Then he returned, launching the remaining smart grenades towards the ceiling. Here they would cling like parasites until they received their instructions. Then they would detonate, configuring themselves to ensure the blast direction was optimised for maximum destruction.

Janssen was out of the building in less than six minutes and headed towards the reactors. All clear. Lucky.

Despite the delay at the door, Janssen was within their specified timetable. As soon as he and Cope had made it through the perimeter fence, he had worked almost on autopilot, following the schematics in his head and the procedures they had worked on together. There was a sense of divorce from the everyday concerns of their survival, or perhaps a heightened sense of this new reality, the one where the training ruled every movement, every decision. Janssen found it curiously exhilarating, but not just from the adrenalin of finally activating after all the weeks of inactivity. He could switch off higher thought, all his questions and dilemmas, and give himself to the action of movement, the split-second stop motion of stealth and attack. It was a release.

He continued down the long flank of the turbine shed in a fast, low run, the ghost mesh blurring his progress in the visible spectrum, the overshirt closed tight over his pack and hood pulled forward to hide his face. All that was visible was his boots and flashes of his darkened face in the occasional moonlight. He ran in the reverie of the action, in the heightened focus of the operation. He was aware of every second passing, every step on his projected route, the feel of his pistol grip, every identified danger, potential and real. This was why the Agency had chosen him for this.

And this was what made the comedown bite so hard when he rounded the corner of the turbine shed.

“Shit. Shit!”

Soldiers were everywhere. They formed a barrier around the bulk of the reactor buildings and the entire area was drenched in white light from spotlights that circled like predators. The men did not look like regular Chinese army, either. This was a Special Forces unit, not some bunch of spotty teenagers drawn from the provinces. Their faces were impassive, their posture alert, their machine guns glinted in the artificial glare.

A wave of paranoia stormed Janssen’s brain. Were they waiting for him? Had Cope been taken? But there hadn’t been any firing. Had the MSS known all along? Could it just be a coincidence? Perhaps it was standard procedure during a fuel pellet delivery?

No answers made themselves available. He’d probably never know. Janssen threw himself flat against the wall of the turbine shed. Their plan had been to lay shaped charges along the base of the reactor housings and get out, enough to put the reactors out of commission for weeks but not enough to cause any widespread radiation leakage — the pebble bed set up held too many safeguards for that in any case. But there was no way Janssen could see of fulfilling their objective now. Even with the ghost-mesh, there was too much light. He’d be seen, even if they didn’t have heat-sensitive eyeware.

The risks were unacceptable, both personally if he was captured and to the entire US operations in the People’s Republic. There would be no medals for heroism here, even if the word could be applied to an operation like this. Janssen made his decision quickly and hoped Cope would do the same. They would meet at the rendezvous point by the steam cracker and bow out gracefully.

Janssen adjusted the pack on his shoulders and turned to go.

Three explosions rocked the night air. They burst in quick succession, a rat-a-tat-tat that sent the Chinese soldiers scattering and threw up balls of orange flame inside the guarded perimeter. It took a second for Janssen to feel the heat of the detonations on the back of his head where he had thrown himself to the ground.

Cope! It had to be him, the idiot. He obviously had made a less prudent assessment of the situation. Janssen registered the familiar sound of their own high-impact grenades just as the shooting started. He jumped to his feet and watched. The area in front of the reactors was in chaos. Soldiers were firing, but he couldn't see where or what at. Flames and smoke poured from one of the reactor buildings, but he couldn't make out the extent of any damage. Sirens started wailing all across the facility, drowning out the shouts as the Special Forces troops regrouped.

Janssen peered into the smoke and the frantic searchlights, but it was useless. For a moment, he considered throwing his own grenades into the melee, but he couldn't hit the reactors from here. He would only cause a slaughter. Again, he made his decision quickly and jogged away from the scene, back the way he had come.

He was startled to find four Chinese soldiers running right at him. He dived to his left, readying his weapon as he rolled, but they raced right past him, unseeing. He watched them go, heart hammering, blood rushing in his head.

Two more explosions lit up the area behind him.

You total psycho, Cope, he thought as he ran, a strange cocktail of disgust, stunned admiration for his partner's single-mindedness and guilt of several different flavours feverish in his mind.

The staccato chatter of automatic weapons fire continued. Sirens screamed. Men screamed.

Then a stream of bullets tore chunks of concrete out of the wall above him just as he neared the end of the turbine shed, showering him in dust and chunks of hard rain. Janssen rolled, came up and pivoted to return fire.

"Janssen, it's me, you fucker! It's me!"

The words were in English. Janssen squinted and saw a blur heading towards him out of the noise and chaos of the reactor buildings. The shape was clearer on one side where the ghost-mesh tunic had been torn away. The figure waved a machine gun. It had a pair of night-sight

goggles pulled over its face that made it look like a gigantic locust and it was grinning. It was definitely grinning.

Even as Janssen watched, more running figures appeared behind the first, silhouettes against flames. He couldn't get a clear shot without hitting Cope. Janssen crouched frozen as Cope flinched, stumbled and continued running. Bullets fizzed in the air.

"Get down, they can see us! They can fucking see us!"

Cope stumbled again, only twenty metres away. His gun spun away and his left hand flew up to his neck. His momentum carried him a few more steps before he fell.

Without thinking, Janssen ran towards him, stowing his handgun and using his own machine pistol to force Cope's pursuers back. He reached his partner and began frantically trying to lift him up. Cope cried out, the hood of the ghost-mesh overshirt falling away. Janssen saw dark red blood covering Cope's flack jacket, more blood pumping between the fingers clamped over his neck. He ducked as bullets tore up the Astro-turf to their right.

"Don't worry, Mr. Cheech, I left a few surprises," Cope wheezed. His right arm moved and immediately several explosions detonated in a line that followed Cope's path from the direction of the reactors. His pursuers were eclipsed in a wave of smoke and fire and noise.

"What the hell were you doing?" demanded Janssen. He could see Cope was bad, but he couldn't stop the words.

"Not a good time for recriminations, pal." The words came in a thin impersonation of Cope's old petulance.

"We'll get out."

Cope's face twisted in sudden agony. A horrible gargling sound came from his throat. His chest heaved. "No." He spat on the ground, a thick, dark paste. "I'm finished. You go before they can lock the place up too tight."

Janssen looked down at his partner. His face was pale, the skin clammy and cold. Blood pulsed between the clenched fingers at Cope's neck and he dare not pull them away. Secondary explosions fired somewhere in the compound.

"My detonator's on my belt," Cope whispered. "Blow everything and you might make it. I'm not coming."

"I want you to," Janssen said. He felt like he hung over an abyss and his fingers were slipping. What did he have left in China without Cope? What did he have left anywhere? He gripped the other man's shoulder. There was nothing of America in his face, his carefully constructed features.

Cope whispered something so low Janssen couldn't hear. He leaned closer. "What?"

"Total deniability," Cope said. "You can't leave me breathing. They might fix me. Total deniability, remember."

Janssen stared down in horror, unable to speak. His own hands were slick with blood. He knew he had only seconds.

"Anyone else, I wouldn't have a problem. Even you. But I can't do myself." Cope tried to smile but it turned to a gasping cough. Blood was red on his lips.

Janssen made the decision. When it came to necessary deaths, Cope always made the hard call. He was right again, there was no room for chance.

Janssen took the detonator remote from Cope's belt and readied his pistol. He pulled the trigger twice.

As if through a hotel wall, he heard firing again. Bullets thudded into the ground close by. Too close. His attackers could see him. Thermal imaging.

Janssen lurched into movement, sprinting as fast as he could towards the steam cracker. He triggered the smart grenades he had left in the turbine shed. There came a rumbling at his back, like a giant's pursuit. He left the following Chinese soldiers reeling in the wake of the fresh explosions. He shot down a lone patrol of regular soldiers avoiding the action by one of the water towers. He ran along the inner perimeter fence, panic setting in as he looked for the exit they had cut. Just as he was about to turn and retrace his steps, he found it. Careful not to touch the electrified wire, he ducked through and ran across the no-man's land between the two fences, the flesh of his back crawling, all the time waiting for a bullet or the glare of a searchlight pinning him to the ground.

It never came.

Behind him, flames and smoke rose up from the shattered roofs of the turbine buildings, mingling with the smoke from where Cope had made his one-man assault on the reactors. The sirens wailed in the night and searchlights bobbed erratically. Janssen took the remaining detonators

from his utility belt and looked at the cracker, the water towers, the destruction.

“Enough.”

He left the detonators on the ground and turned away.

He kept running, a ghost among the paddy fields. He had a razor in his pocket. He needed to shave. Then he could lose himself among the billions.

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