

秦始皇



Forbidden Army

*Mystery of China's
Terracotta Warriors*

A Novel by Marv Gold

*“To forget one’s ancestors is to
be a brook without a source.”*

— Qin Shi Huangdi
259 BC - 210 BC

Dedicated to Sue

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— I —

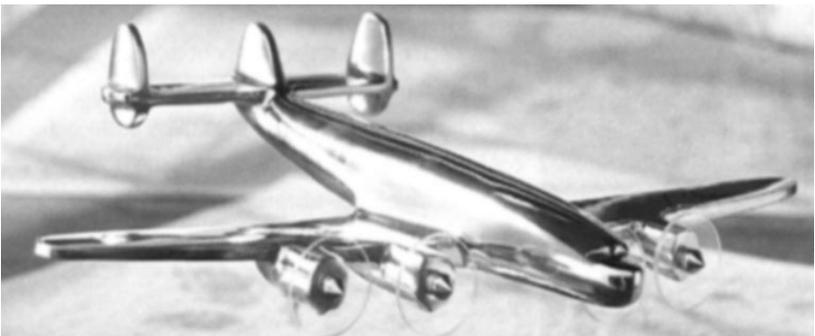
He could feel the plane dipping and banking, the shudder of its wheel carriages dropping as the sleek foil-sheathed passenger ship descended three hours beyond Beijing.

It approached shadowy fields below, then city lights, then strips of landing lights. The plane bumped, rolled smoothly through runway lanes, and drew up to the ramp at Xian Xianyang Airport. With a rush, the motors whined out; all motion stopped, and Bert Kahn blinked awake.

He blessed Pin Hu, the buddha of safe journeys.

Henry's voice came crackling over the P.A.

“Good evening, please. All members of China Discoveries tour will please to deplane and gather at Gate One. Please bring all belongings. Thank you, welcome to Xian and Shaanxi Province.”



Bert unclipped his seat belt and waited. For a national tour guide, Henry had sounded almost reverent, like he was about to bong a gong. What's the big deal? Xian is just another city, another dot on the map to Shanghai.

He waited for the others to stagger up the aisles and shook his head. You're up, you're down. You're on a bus, you're off. Just how different is China from Chicago?

His carry-on bag easily slid down, and slowly, politely he edged toward the exit. A smile and thank you to the pilots and crew and he was on his way. On good old terra firma, the oldest, most populous terra in the world. What madness had brought him here? What the hell was wrong with a vacation in Wisconsin anyhow?

Then he remembered. He'd needed an unreachable getaway.

And what was farther, what was a better palliative than a guided tour to China?

They met at the gate, fifteen bedraggled souls, each wearing a yellow sticker telling all the world they were (ugh) tourists. All led by Henry, a tall, masterful Chinese guide waving a small yellow flag, the mark of a tour from China Discoveries.



— II —

The minibus deposited them at the New Grand Hotel. Its pretentiously westernized lines would bother any architect of Bert's stature. But it would do for a quick shower and fresh clothes.

It gave him a chance to chat with his travel partner, a bubbling little troll named Simon who clutched a large red notebook. He was sweatily complaining that airport surveillance had seized his scissors.

"Can you imagine? A tailor mitout a tzissors? Abtsurd! Unheard of! Might as well confitscate my right arm!"

"Whoa," Bert calmed him. "You said it was a little fingernail scissors. And besides, who's a tailor? You told me you're a sculptor."

"Now, sure. True. But in Russia, in the big war, oh boy, I was some first class tailor. A military tailor!"

"Oh," said Bert, slumping a bit, hoping his grunt might end the conversation. But no. As they headed down to dinner, Simon rambled on, explaining the Napoleonic origins of officers' buttons, cuffs, stripes, epaulets. That settled it; Bert would sit at a different table.

He found a large unoccupied table in a corner, and glancing about, he took a comfortable spot away from server traffic.

No sooner was he seated than several couples joined him. So much for peace and quiet. While a few people were chatting away, another couple took their seats, a young redhead and her doting elderly companion who sat next to Bert. He introduced himself with an open hand.

“Powell here. Major Ivor Powell. Retired from Her Majesty’s Cold Stream Guards.”

Bert extended his hand.

“Albert Kahn, American. Pleased to meet you.”

They shook with a snappy military grip, and then examined the evening’s repast. A large rotating tray offered the visitors an array of crisp, delicate appetizers—carved radishes, celery sticks, water chestnuts, pea pods, hearts of palm, pickled beets, embellished with dips, spreads and sauces. Tasty finger foods, Bert noted. But his eye caught old Powell discreetly drawing a set of silverware from an inside pocket. He was slowly polishing it.



Powell sensed he was being watched.

“Never travel without them. No telling where one dines on what. By the by, Mr. Kahn, this is my daughter. Karen, Mr. Albert Kahn.”

She offered a gloved hand, “Karen Powell. How do you do.”

Bert held her gaze a moment, then spread his napkin. First things first, he decided.

Pouring Major Powell some tea, he had a question. “Um, about these terracotta fellows. Do you suppose they’re authentic, or just another Chinese hoax?”

“Easy, my good man. We are guests here, you know. So temperance and discretion at all times, especially in language.”

“Ah, of course. But really, what do you think of the terracottas?”

“Think of them? Hadn’t really. Why do you ask, Mr. Kahn?”

“Well, they raise all sorts of questions.”

“Not to me, sir. They’re simply statues, empty relics of the past.”

“True, but they are a mystery,”

“Indeed? How so?” The Major looked about restlessly.

“We’re told they were built as an army of guards. An army of ghosts is more like it. If they were intended to protect the Emperor and his tomb, why the devil were they buried? And why buried so far from