

Chinese Dragon

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Book Two of the Three Kingdoms Trilogy

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chapter ONE

I reached the end of the road and saw the line of traffic, my heart sank as I realised that the rush hour was at its height. Five taxis crawled past, their drivers staring obstinately ahead. My appointment with Mr Na Sang-wha was for six. It meant that precisely. I glanced at my watch, saw that it was barely five-thirty, and decided to walk.

As I weaved my way towards 40 Sejong-daero I wondered what Na had in store for me. He hadn't been any more communicative than usual on the telephone. When I'd asked what my next assignment was he'd replied, somewhat curtly, 'The Chang Chu-chu Affair – if that means anything to you'.

It hadn't, of course, and I'd hung up on a dead line, wondering what kind of a fool I was to have let myself be caught up in the cloak and dagger business of the secret services. I should have gone back to engineering, and had fun and games arguing about health and safety regulations and staff tea breaks.

Searching frantically for Park Song-yong – my ex business partner, whose extravagance had sent our engineering business into freefall and eventual liquidation – I had suddenly come into close contact with Na Sang-wha and his operatives. Na was also looking for my ex-partner and, realising that my knowledge of Park and his association might prove more than useful, he had enlisted my help and put the full resources of his department at my disposal.

I caught up with Park eventually, discovering in the process that I had a hitherto unsuspected streak of ruthlessness in my make-up. To be honest with myself, my conceit was flattered when Na offered me a position on the staff of his undercover department. Perhaps if I'd been married ... But I wasn't. As the clock ticked past six I turned into Sejong-daero.

Chapter two

As I was ushered into the room I thought, as I always had, how improbable a setting it was for the briefing of a mission that could well culminate in violent death. It was high and spacious, with a veined marble floor, and wall-fitted bookcases. Several club leather easy chairs were strategically placed around the modern desk with its businesslike telephones.

Behind the desk sat a man in his early fifties, neatly groomed and wearing an inconspicuous, well fitting dark grey suit. At a first glance he might have been mistaken for a successful businessman; it was not until he started to speak that you realised Na Sang-wha possessed certain qualities, which would have been wasted in the world of commerce.

He rose as I came in, gave me his deceptively benevolent bow, and indicated for me to sit down. As I settled into the chair closest to the door he inclined his head towards a man relaxing in one of the leather chairs by the window.

'I want you to meet Im Sun-taek, Moon Han-sang. He'll be a colleague of yours on this case'. He shot an amused glance at the other man. 'He's not entirely sold that we have a case at all. Or is your cynicism just a cover for laziness, Im?'

Im smiled sardonically. 'Weariness, sir? As Confucius said "roads were made for journeys not destinations". How that woman covered so much ground in stiletto heels will always be a mystery to me'. He stood up and took my hand in a firm grip. 'Do you know how many museums there are in Shanghai, Moon?'

I smiled blankly in the way you do to that sort of question, and he sank back in his chair.

'You will', he assured me.

I gave him an appraising glance. He had an intelligent face, with a long, shrewd nose. His brown eyes had the good-humoured tolerance of having seen

everything and not believing half of it. I had a feeling I was going to get along with my new colleague.

Na said brusquely: 'This is a photograph of the woman you will be having under observation, Moon'. He took a print from his blotter and handed it to me.

It was a photograph of a woman in her early thirties. Shoulder length hair, with wide-spaced dark eyes, a well-shaped nose, and a full, generous mouth. I could have thought of many less pleasant assignments than trailing legs as slender as those below the knee-length pencil skirt.

'Her name is Kim Su-mi, Na was saying. 'She's part owner of an art gallery in Gangnam. She's engaged to a stockbroker. A man named Yun Hyeok'.

I glanced up over the photograph to catch Im Sun-taek' satirical gaze. 'Lucky man, Yun. Eh, Moon?'

Na cut in abruptly. 'She's flying to Shanghai the day after tomorrow. I've arranged for you to travel on the same plane'. He looked at me. 'You've brought your passport?'

I produced the passport. Na gave it a quick glance and pushed it into a drawer.

'It will be returned to you before you leave'.

It seemed high time I asked a leading question, so I said: 'May I ask why you want this woman kept under observation, sir?'

Na took a cigarette from a silver box and pushed the box across to my side of his desk. 'Just over six weeks ago an agent of this department called Chang Chu-chu was killed. He was knocked down by a car driven by Kim Su-mi'.

I helped myself to a cigarette. 'You suspect it wasn't an accident – is that it?'

Im made a steeple of his forefingers and thumbs, gazing through it, one eye screwed up. 'That's the loaded question, Moon'.

Na snapped off his lighter in the direction of Im with a half smile. 'Well, let's put it this way. Chang was one of our best men. There must have been several people who wanted him out of the way'.

I wondered, a trifle uneasily, whether I'd ever achieve that unenviable status in the department. 'But there'd be an inquest. Didn't anything come out in the evidence?'

Na nodded across at Im. 'You take over, Im. You were there'.

'It was a genuine enough accident, according to the witnesses', Im said heavily. 'They said Kim Su-mi did her best to pull up, but just didn't have a chance to avoid Chang. According to their testimony he stepped off the pavement right in front of the car'.

I glanced again at the open, attractive face in the photograph. 'Any idea what Kim Su-mi was doing in Shanghai at the time?'

Na cut in: 'We know she was there on holiday'.

'She's been back there since the accident?' I said.

Na nodded. 'She flew there about six weeks ago and stayed six days. We sent Im over to tail her'.

Im groaned hollowly. 'Six days of museums and art galleries. And nothing more incriminating to report than a sidelong glance at a male nude statue'.

I smiled. 'And yet you still suspect her of not being entirely innocent of causing Chang's death?'

'Not me', Im said emphatically. 'For my part, it was a pure accident. These things happen ... even to us'. He pulled at his long nose. 'Only I can't convince Mr Na that's all it was'.

'All right, Im', Na said soothingly. 'I know you think I've a bee in my bonnet about Miss Kim. But there it is'.

Im laughed embarrassedly. 'I didn't say that, sir'.

'I wouldn't hold it against you if you had'. Na smiled at him paternally, then his face tightened as he turned to me. 'These trips back to China by Miss Kim can't be completely purposeless. I want to know what their significance is. That's your assignment, Moon. I want a report from you on everyone she meets and where she goes'. He rotated his cigarette lightly between finger and thumb. 'I'd particularly like to know whether she visits a café called the *Chinese Dragon*'.

I raised my eyebrows. 'Why the *Chinese Dragon* particularly?'

'Chang used to frequent it'. Na opened a side drawer in his desk and brought out a street map of Shanghai. Spreading it out on the desk he put a manicured finger on a red-encircled area of streets named. 'Tian Zi Fang. The *Chinese Dragon* is just here'. He said tapping his finger on the map.

I made a mental note of it. 'Chang', I said. 'Can you tell me anything about him? What was he doing in China?'

'He lived there. Worked in Shanghai. From time to time he supplied us with information'.

Na's mouth tightened, so I did not press the obvious question about the nature of the information. Instead, I queried: 'Did anyone know about this?'

He shook his head slowly. 'Not that we are aware of. But, of course, certain people must have known we had a contact in China and that information was coming through to us'. He smiled thinly. 'Nothing you need concern yourself about. Just information about things in general'.

You perceptive old devil, I thought. I said, 'What if Im is right? That the accident was genuine and Miss Kim wasn't interested in Chang?'

Na gave me a long, cold-eyed stare. 'I ask the questions, Moon. Your job is to bring me the answers. Your plane ticket to Shanghai will be mailed to you tonight'.

I didn't need cueing to know what my next line was. 'Goodbye, sir'.

As I passed Im's chair he hooded one eye at me. 'I hope you like museums, Moon', he said softly.

I came out of the office into the gathering darkness of the evening. Opposite me, the skyline of Seoul was lit by the bright neon signs of the advertising hoardings. I wished my instructions had been equally well illuminated, at the moment they didn't seem to make a great deal of sense.

Chapter three

The plane ticket arrived the next morning, together with the altered passport. I was relieved to find that I wouldn't be travelling under an assumed name. Na, had simply changed my occupation. It now read 'Journalist' instead of 'Engineer'. A typed note inside the passport said: 'You are commissioned to write articles for a trade paper. Engineering stuff as you know the lingo. Take a video-camera with you. And use it. Destroy this'. It bore no signature. It didn't need to; Na Sang-wha's personality was stamped all over it.

The following morning I was at Incheon airport well ahead of departure time. I hung around the bookstall, keeping an eye on the stairway up to the lounge.

When she did come I drew a quick breath. Her photograph hadn't flattered her. She was hatless, and her raven-black hair was cut short and combed in a fringe round her ears and forehead. It suited her neat-shaped head. She had a fur coat draped across her shoulders, over a dark suit; and her legs looked as though they'd stepped straight out of a stocking advertisement. Even if I hadn't been on an assignment I'd have been watching her every movement with ... well, interest.

As she came beside me at the bookstall a faint perfume I couldn't put a name to accompanied her. I felt like a bloodhound who'd been given a glove to sniff and told to follow that scent. If I'd had a tail I'd have wagged it.

She bought a copy of *Vogue*. She had a quiet, low voice that must have made Yun Hyeok's day when she telephoned him.

I let her board the shuttle ahead of me, then found an empty seat three rows away on the opposite side of the aisle.

Just as we were about to leave, a latecomer came panting towards the shuttle and scrambled aboard. He was obviously an American; he wore a baseball cap, T-shirt, jeans, and a pair of red Converse All Stars. Yet there was nothing brash

about him as he came in favouring all and sundry with a shiny grin. He took the one vacant seat, next to Kim Su-mi.

He seemed to be on easy conversational terms with her before we reached the terminal, and I felt vaguely envious. He was about my own age, I judged, though he was obviously cultivating a more youthful appearance than his years.

When we reached the terminal I was first out of the shuttle and into the passenger lounge. But when it came to board I waited for Kim Su-mi to leave ahead of me, then followed her into the aircraft. As I half hesitated beside her double seat she looked up and smiled at me.

‘Oh ... I’m terribly sorry. Are these in your way?’

She reached out and collected her handbag and magazine from the place beside hers.

As I seated myself and thanked her the doors of the plane closed. From the back the calm, aloof voice of the airhostess reminded us of the safety procedure, and to fasten our safety belts.

When we were airborne and had released our safety belts I produced a packet of mints and, after a momentary hesitation, held it out to her. She took one with a slim-fingered hand, the nails crimson and a trifle too elongated for my liking. Not that I could fault her otherwise. As she engrossed herself in the magazine I mentally scored myself a few points up on Im. From what I’d gathered he’d trailed her the hard way, lurking behind newspapers as he’d trampled after her through museums and art galleries. Then suddenly I felt a moment of misgiving. After all, Im was an old hand; yet he chose to keep out of sight of his quarry. Could there be some flaw in my own tactics? Would I find myself in a situation I couldn’t handle?

A quarter of an hour before we were due to land I felt bound to create an opening that might lead to some clue as to the purpose of her journey.

‘Why anyone comes to China for a holiday defeats me’, I said off-handedly. ‘Only a business trip would drag me here’.

‘That could be Yun, my fiancé, talking’, she said with mild exasperation. ‘Mention holidays to him and he immediately thinks of Jeju Island’.

‘At least you can be sure of the sun there’, I said urbanely. ‘I suppose China has its points. But the weather’s usually foul’.

‘Oh, nonsense! I’ve been to China several times and the weather’s been marvellous’.

‘You’ve been very lucky, that’s all I can say’. I pushed it as far as I dared without arousing her suspicions. ‘What’s the attraction when the cherry trees aren’t in bloom?’

‘Pagodas’. Her eyes mocked me for a moment. ‘Oh, well – just to satisfy your curiosity! It’s the museums and art galleries. Shanghai is the city of museums, you know’. As though to emphasise that the attraction wasn’t male she played with her engagement ring, then quickly changed the subject. ‘So you’re on a business trip?’

I nodded. 'I'm a journalist. I write technical articles. Mostly on engineering subjects. That's the reason I'm going to Shanghai. They've got hold of a new technique in glass curtain walling that my trade paper's interested in'.

'Rather outside my province, I'm afraid', she said, smiling. 'Hello ... I think we're coming in to land'.

Almost immediately the Captain's voice came over the intercom informing us that we were due in at Shanghai Airport in a few minutes' time, and would we fasten our seat belts, please? The weather in Shanghai', he added, 'is fine and sunny'.

Kim Su-mi wrinkled her nose at me. 'There ... you see?' She opened her handbag, brought out a mirror, and began to do unnecessary things to her face. Presently she said, over a lipstick: 'Thanks for helping to pass the time so pleasantly. Perhaps we'll run into one another in Shanghai'.

Smiling, I hoped not too ironically, I said: 'I'll look out for you'.

The plane nosed down towards the flat Chinese coastline. Away to the right the towers of Shanghai were silhouetted against the blue sky of a perfect spring afternoon. Crossing the city, like a sinuous snake, was the Yangtze River.

I let Kim Su-mi precede me through the Passport Control and Customs. Here, instead of having her smart blue and yellow striped suitcase put on the airline bus trolley she picked it up and walked quickly to the main exit. I grabbed my own case from the trolley and hurried after her, arriving at the exit just in time to see a sheer-nylon sheathed leg disappear into a taxi. I signalled the next in the rank but lost it to the American. From his gesticulations with his bag I had the impression he was instructing the driver to follow the other cab.

A moment later I was going through the same performance myself. My driver didn't speak Korean but luckily we both knew enough English for me to get the idea quickly across. With a cheroot wagging from his lips he said, 'Certainly, sir', in a flat, expressionless voice.

In Shanghai we followed the other taxis along a busy street beside the Yangtze. As we approached the most impressive of its many bridges the cabs we were following slowed and drew in to the kerb. Leaning forward, I told my driver to carry on past them. 'Okay, sir', he called back as I ducked down to avoid being recognised by the woman and the man who were now on the pavement, exchanging surprised greetings.

At the next corner I stopped my taxi, and as I paid off the driver I thought some light-hearted comment on the situation was called for. There was always a chance that he might report the incident to the police, and then I'd have a plainclothes man on *my* tail. So I mumbled something about a pretty girl on the plane and wanting to find out where she was staying. I needn't have bothered. All it got me was a shrugged, 'Why not?'

I went down the street that ran at right angles to the canal until I came to a small hotel. It wouldn't rate a single star in a hotel guide. But the tiled floor of reception was freshly polished, and you could see your face in the metal surface of the reception desk.

They gave me a room, austere but spotlessly clean, overlooking the street. After I'd unpacked my shirts and the one other suit I'd brought, I took a quick shower. When I'd dressed I went out and bought a street guide.

In an unpretentious bar I thumbed through the guide, and took my bearings from one of the maps. Eventually I found Tian Zi Fang without much difficulty, and I memorised the route to it from my present position. Then I paid for my beer and went out to give the *Chinese Dragon* a looking over.

It was a typical Chinese restaurant, with low tables. I'd always found the trick is to watch the customers at the outside tables before you decide to enter. If they look like locals, and there are no camera-slung tourists among them, you can be pretty sure the food will be good and the charges reasonable. The *Chinese Dragon* passed the test. However, I did not go inside.

I rambled around for a couple of hours, still getting my bearings. A mist drifted in from the sea and mingled with the pollution to form a yellow smog and, since I badly needed a drink and some food to take the chill out of my bones, I decided to return to Tian Zi Fang. It was splattered with neon-lit bars and restaurants. I was too eager to get into somewhere to be choosy, so I turned into the first door I came to.

What little atmosphere the restaurant possessed was laid on for the tourist trade. Waitresses in fake silk dresses with pigtailed draped over the shoulders; a long bar with a bartender who'd have answered to 'Harry' in any international tourist-haunted bar. Just to be in on the act I flung back a couple of local beers in rapid succession, then, feeling like a refuelled dragon, sat down at a table.

After the beer the menu was overcrowded and elusive, so I settled for the house speciality, a dish of rice and pork, which was rather better than I had expected. By the time I had another beer in front of me and a cigarette alight I felt able to give some thought to my first day's trailing of Kim Su-mi.

So far, I was inclined to agree with Im. She'd discussed herself quite freely on the plane – mentioned her interest in the art and antique business and referred to her fiancé with the naturalness of a girl who had nothing to hide. I thought about Yun Hyeok. A stockbroker seemed an unlikely fiancé for a girl who was mixed up with the kind of people that Na's department was interested in. I sipped my beer. Yun Hyeok was a damned lucky chap!

I returned to the conversation on the plane. She hadn't shown the slightest evasiveness when I'd questioned her about her frequent visits to Shanghai. Or had she? Abruptly, I stubbed out my cigarette, remembering how she'd evaded

the subject when I'd pushed my questioning almost to the point of rudeness. I lit another cigarette and expelled the smoke from my lungs upwards. That was it. She'd turned the conversation to what I was doing in Shanghai as a riposte to my own boorish inquisitiveness.

A man's voice, ordering a round of drinks, suddenly reminded me of the American. Where did he fit into the picture? He could be a lot less the innocent tourist than he looked. In which case, there were two of us trailing Kim Su-mi. Alternatively, there might be no more to it than the usual reason why a man chases an attractive girl. Not relishing either of my half-baked conclusions, and the last one the least, I paid my bill and returned to my hotel.

Chapter four

Four days later I was sitting in the window of a café opposite a museum. By this time I had worked out a method of procedure for keeping Kim Su-mi under observation. After following her at a discreet distance around five museums I decided that my conscience would be satisfied if I simply watched her go into a museum and then consumed two or three beers at a nearby café until she came out. Maybe Im would not have approved, but his more scrupulous method had brought no better result.

Apart from that, I'd discovered that trailing Miss Kim was another word for boredom. I'd compiled a list of where she'd been apart from her visits to places of historic interest. Shops, cinemas, restaurants – the lot. She hadn't been within a quarter mile of the *Chinese Dragon*.

As I watched her stroll out of the museum I gulped down my beer with the decisiveness of a man of action. That afternoon I would contact Kim Su-mi and risk the consequences.

At two o'clock I was outside her hotel, mixing with the crowds and, not to make too obvious my interest in the door of the hotel, occasionally going through the motions of photographing the pleasure craft passing to and fro on the river.

She didn't show up until three. Then she came briskly out of the hotel, crossed the road, went down the steps beside the bridge, and boarded a pleasure craft.

When it had moved off I went down on to the landing stage and checked the timetable there. The boat was due to return at four. That gave me an hour to waste. I put in time over a couple of beers in a nearby café.

On the dot of four I stationed myself at the top of the steps leading to the landing stage, and as her boat drew in I put the video-camera to my eye. This time it was purring quietly. Her plain red dress was a perfect contrast to her dark loveliness.

I dropped the camera on to my chest as she came up the steps. It wasn't until I said, 'Good afternoon', that she noticed me. Her lips parted, then her surprise melted into a warm smile.

'Oh, hello there!' she exclaimed, gesturing a greeting with a black-gloved hand.

'Still alone, I see'.

'And loving every moment of it! No one to please but myself'.

'What are you doing in this part of the town?' I asked innocently. 'Don't tell me you've run out of art galleries?'

She shook her head. 'I thought I'd rest from art galleries and museums this afternoon'.

She came and stood beside me, gazing down at the water. 'It's lovely, isn't it?' she said presently, with a sigh of contentment.

At that moment I couldn't think of anything more perfect. 'You're right about China. It's got something'.

She glanced up at me gratefully. It was with an effort that I forced myself to lead into the object for our seemingly casual meeting. 'By the way, what do you do with yourself in the evenings?'

She shrugged. 'Oh, nothing very exciting. Find somewhere to eat, usually. There are some very nice little restaurants in Shanghai'.

'There certainly are', I said, with a great show of enthusiasm. 'I found a delightful place last night. The *Chinese Dragon*. I glanced at her quickly. 'Do you know it?'

She frowned perplexedly. '*Chinese Dragon*?'

I nodded, without taking my eyes from her face.

'No, I don't', she said slowly. 'I don't think I've heard of it. Where is it, exactly?'

It sounded like the truth. But I decided to maintain my outward enthusiasm, hoping I might still trap her into an involuntary lapse. 'You go into Tian Zi Fang and turn right at the *Cherry Orchard* ... Sorry ... I mean you go into the Tian Zi Fang and turn right at the *Red Cockrell*, then through to the *Happy Shopper* and turn left ...' I swallowed, and started again. 'Look - you turn left at the *Morning Mist*, then when you get to the *Chinese Dragon*...'

'Oh, do stop', she implored laughingly, putting a hand on my arm. 'You obviously haven't the slightest idea where it is'.

I grinned sheepishly. 'We could take a taxi there'. I snapped my fingers. 'I say, that's an idea! Why not let me take you there now, for a drink?'

For a moment she gazed down at a black swan floating along the river. Then she said slowly: 'It's awfully kind of you - but I have to go back to the hotel to change for dinner. I'm going to ...'

I cut in on her. 'That's all right. There's loads of time to fit in a drink. How about meeting me here in an hour?'

'Well', she began hesitantly, then with a quick smile she glanced at her watch. 'Thank you very much. I'll take you up on that. I'll see you back here at five-thirty, if that's all right with you?'

'Splendid!' I exclaimed with unfeigned pleasure. 'Five-thirty it is. 'Bye now'. I cocked an eyebrow at her. 'And don't go wandering off to a museum!'

She turned away, laughing. 'I won't'.

With an odd feeling of light-heartedness I watched her cross the road to her hotel. I was sure now that the name the *Chinese Dragon* had been no more significant to her than if I'd mentioned a restaurant in New York. Na had got his lines crossed where Kim Su-mi was concerned. That was the way I wanted it to be.

Chapter five

There was a lot of warmth still left in the sun when we arrived at the *Chinese Dragon*. The place was crowded at that hour, but a discreetly displayed tip had persuaded a waiter there was room for one more table outside.

After I'd ordered a cinzano for my companion and a soju for myself I went out onto the pavement and started to take some video-camera shots of the colourful scene.

I was focusing the camera on Kim Su-mi when I suddenly realised she was talking to someone. A second later a man's figure came into my viewfinder.

'Hello there!' exclaimed a familiar voice. It was the American, the same disarming grin on his slightly chubby features.

I lowered the camera and managed to wipe the scowl off my face as he embarked upon a detailed account of his day's adventures. Slowly, I went back to the table. He was beaming at Kim Su-mi so agreeably that it was impossible to feel annoyed.

'Have I been around!' he exclaimed. 'I've just about walked my feet to the bone buying things for the folks back home'.

'Of course, you're going back tomorrow'. She nodded. Then, as my shadow fell across the table, she turned to introduce us.

He stuck out a massive hand. 'Glad to know you, sir', he exclaimed, and sounded as if he really meant it. I did my best to reciprocate, but it was an effort.

'Mr Doyle is staying at my hotel', Kim Su-mi told me.

He nodded eagerly. 'And we're always bumping into each other outside the hotel. In boats, buses, elevators ...'

'Museums?' I interrupted, a trifle maliciously.

'No, sir!' Doyle pawed the air contemptuously. 'No museums. Not for me!' His hand dropped to the back of a chair. 'Say, do you mind if I take the weight off my feet ...?'

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