

A traditional Korean woodblock print illustration. In the center, a large tiger with bold black and white stripes is depicted in a dynamic, leaping pose. To the left, a bird with a long, patterned tail is perched on a branch, facing the tiger. In the upper right corner, another bird is shown in flight. In the lower right corner, a fish is visible. The entire scene is framed by a thick black border.

Korean Tiger

D BARRACLOUGH

*Book 1 of the
Three Kingdoms Trilogy*

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Korean Tiger

Book One of the Three Kingdoms Trilogy

Chapter ONE

I accelerated hard as I turned off expressway one, onto the twenty-five, and eased the car into the fast lane. I pulled away from the other traffic. As the needle rose past seventy, eighty then settled at ninety, I felt myself forced back into my seat. The speed was exhilarating after the stop-go of Seoul's city traffic, it wasn't often I got the chance to test my skills at speed, and it felt good. As I headed ever southward the traffic soon thinned and my concentration relaxed. It wasn't long before I started to mull over the problem of Park Song-yong once again.

It was over twelve years since I had first met Song-yong when we were mechanical engineering students at Yeungnam University, rushing out at the end of lectures to head into the bars of Daegu. Song-yong always drank single or double whiskies, according to the state of his finances at the time, but always the genuine article, whilst I had to be content with the local beer.

It quickly became obvious that Hyundai Heavy Industries was not a very appropriate setting for the charm and happy-go-lucky nature of Park Song-yong. I was not surprised to hear him announce one evening that he was joining the international ship financing company Dansk Skibskredit, where he hoped to find a bit more excitement travelling the world. He had lasted at Hyundai only a few months.

Song-yong was obviously much more at home in the world of high finance, and I was soon hearing reports of his rapid promotion. In a couple of years he had achieved a junior directorship. So I was a little surprised, a year later, to meet him by chance when walking along Cheonggyecheon stream in the centre of Seoul, and to see him rather casually dressed. Song-yong was the type who enjoyed wearing a smart suit at every opportunity, especially when he was in town.

He seemed highly delighted to see me again and insisted on standing me several drinks at the Blue bar in the Koreana Hotel. It was at least ten minutes before he admitted that he was no longer in finance; it appeared there had been some sort of 'misunderstanding' about the accounts for one of his deals. But he laughed it off quite convincingly, declaring that he was not one for sitting behind a desk staring at a computer screen.

Under the influence of several glasses of Song-yong's favourite Johnnie Walker Black, the drinks, combined with Song-yong's sunny charm, led me foolishly to tell him that I had just inherited the family's small ship repair yard at Incheon following the death of an elderly cousin. His eyes lit up at once, and he seemed full of sympathetic interest. In vain I tried to assure him that the firm was overdrawn to its limit, that the plant was out of date, and the entire staff consisted of eight workmen, two labourers, and a secretary.

There was no deterring Song-yong.

‘You’ve got the potential there’, he kept assuring me. ‘All you have to do is bring the place up to date, get some new equipment, and then branch into some of the more modern boats that require specialist repairs to their plastic hulls. I was talking to a bloke only yesterday, who was looking for somebody to fit-out a two billion won luxury cruiser for a chaebol’.

Song-yong always knew somebody who was looking for something or other. Anyhow, before the bar closed Song-yong had persuaded me to take him into partnership. He was supposed to put in three hundred and fifty million won, but that never materialised, although he airily assured me that he would have no difficulty in raising it.

Strangely enough, the partnership was quite a success for a time. Between us we managed to inject a considerable amount of new life into the old yard. Song-yong saw the bank manager and using his financial expertise persuaded him to extend our overdraft so that we could buy several new machines. It was Song-yong who landed us orders for new jobs that showed a good profit. It was Song-yong who went abroad and explored the field over there, bringing back a couple of orders from Germany that kept us busy for over six months.

Sometimes it was by no means easy to fulfil some of the orders that Song-yong accepted, but that was my headache, and we usually managed to deliver on time. At the end of eighteen months we had doubled our staff and floor space and reduced our overdraft to a mere nine million won. Outwardly, the picture was pretty rosy, but I had already begun to entertain certain qualms on Song-yong’s account.

Unfortunately, Song-yong never seemed to be happy unless he was living beyond his income, and in no time he was playing the part of the business executive, complete with expense account and a Hyundai Genesis Coupe. He began making more trips abroad, and once or twice I discovered that he had been visiting Jeju island when he was supposed to be in Busan. Back in Seoul, he spent far too much time in nightclubs. In one of them he caught Kim Joo-young, the soap actress and former teen idol, on the rebound from her divorce. They had only known each other for a couple of hectic weeks when they announced their engagement.

I did my best to restrict Song-yong’s expense account, but it was by no means easy, and the accounting side of our business was the least efficient. I had too much on my hands in the works to spend much time in the office, and had to leave most of it to an elderly part-time cashier who was terrified of offending Song-yong.

However, as the orders continued to flow into our books I was content to concentrate upon practical matters, and Song-yong went his own sweet way, giving the impression to most of our customers, I learned later, that he was the MD of the yard. It was not until the end of our third year together that the company’s accountant took me aside one morning and showed me half a dozen cheques that had obviously been giving him cause for concern. They were for quite large amounts, and had been cashed by Song-yong at various banks. They bore both his own signature and mine as usual, and were apparently in order, but I had no recollection of signing them. It was not until I examined them closely that I realised my signature had been forged. It was a very good forgery.

Naturally, I had to have a showdown with Park Song-Yong. He began by denying it, as I expected, but when confronted with the question of what goods or value had been received for the cheques he eventually broke down and admitted that he had drawn them to pay off a few urgent debts. I guessed that they were not unconnected with gambling, but he was inclined to treat the whole affair quite airily.

‘It’s purely temporary, Han-sang. I’ll pay it all back in a month or two’.

‘Now look here, Song-yong’, I protested, ‘this isn’t just a question of a few won from the petty cash. It comes to nearly seven million won. What’s more, you’ve never paid the three hundred and fifty million won you promised into the partnership’.

He nodded solemnly. ‘To be fair you’re right’. He looked me square in the eye. ‘Let’s call it a level four hundred million, shall we? Of course, Joo-young would let me have the money this minute, but I’ve got a big private deal on hand that should bring in five hundred million during the next few weeks’

‘Private deal?’ I queried suspiciously.

‘Nothing to do with the business’, he assured me hastily. ‘Just a little side-line I’m putting through for a friend of mine’. Should be enough to clear my debt to you and then some.

He walked out of the office and I did not see him again for three days. Meanwhile, the bank was beginning to agitate about our overdraft, which was now running pretty high, and on top of that two of our biggest creditors began to press for payment. One thing led to another, and at the end of the month we were facing liquidation. Park Song-yong had been no help at all just when I really needed his financial know-how, to mention connections. He had been away for several two and three day spells, offering no explanations for his absences. I spent a lot of time trying to explain matters to creditors, but suppliers won’t wait for money nowadays, and two of our cheques had been bounced by the bank.

The day after our liquidation had been announced I had a note from Song-yong, scrawled on a half sheet of blue notepaper. It read:

Dear Han-sang, Our troubles are over. Meet me at the Dokgo hotel, Sinjang-ri, tomorrow evening. Will explain everything then, Yours Song-yong.

I left the Cheonan-Nonsan Expressway at Gwangju and headed south-west on route twelve. The weather had turned foul, rather matching my mood I thought.

Chapter two

The Sat Nav showed me that Sinjang-Ri sits on one of the tiny islands that can be found off the south-west coast of Korea, to which it is connected by the Mokpo bridge. It boasts no amenities save for a single family owned hotel come bar. I racked my brains trying to think why Song-yong should want to meet me there but found no sort of solution.

Like most Seoulites I knew little about the south-east islands, and was sure that Song-yong knew even less. By-passing Muan I asked myself for the hundredth time why Song-yong should be in Sinjang-Ri, which I imagined to be a remote fishing village. Any fishing that Song-yong had done in the past had been for the fair sex, over a table for two, glass of wine in hand.

I took the Seohaen Expressway to Mokpo and then approached the bridge to Sinjang-Ri. A chilling wind was blowing in from the West Sea, and warning lights flashed as I approached the crossing. A limit of just ten miles an hour had been imposed and I shifted down into second gear to allow the car to creep across the bridge. I was thankful that the car had a heater as the rain lashed at the windows. I switched on the radio for the six o'clock news, just as the announcer was giving out an item about a Cuban ship that had foundered in the West Sea during the previous night, a few miles from Sinjang-Ri. 'Two of the crew are known drowned', said the bulletin, 'but the remainder were picked up and are now being brought ashore'. I pricked up my ears at this; apparently Sinjang-Ri was on the map at last, but I was no nearer to discovering what Park Song-yong was doing there.

I suppose that in the summer months Sinjang-Ri may lay some claim to being picturesque. As far as I could see at first sight it was a permanent target for the West Sea, which was battering at the harbour as if it hated every man, woman and child in the village. The wind was howling in from the sea: the sort of wind that bangs every unsecured door and sets window frames rattling. It was too dark to see any ships in the little harbour, but I imagined that they must be bouncing about like corks.

There only seemed to be one street, a mean and monotonous thoroughfare of unvarying two-storeyed houses. I soon found the Dokgo Hotel: it stands at the top of the street, near the small war memorial commemorating the recapture of the island during the Korean War, and at first sight seems almost too good for Sinjang-Ri. From the look of it outside I should have thought it merited at least a couple of stars in the hotel guide. That, at least, was a pointer to Song-yong; he had always liked his comfort.

I parked my car in the stone courtyard behind the hotel, and staggered towards the front door. The wind almost lifted me off my feet, and I noticed it was tearing at the small bonsai garden set in front of the building as if it were hell bent on wrenching them from the planters.

The restaurant come bar was deserted, but it looked pleasant enough, I had certainly been in worse in Incheon. There was a cosy atmosphere, with a bright fire in an old-fashioned grate. The wooden beams, bench tables and chairs looked both solid and tasteful. I began to feel a little happier about things.

There was a genial, well-built man behind the bar. He looked up as I came in and said cheerfully: 'Good evening, sir'.

I returned his bow: 'Good evening. Are you the landlord?'

'That's me', he said, 'Kwon Oh-young, at your service, sir. What can I do for you?'

'I'm looking for a friend of mine who's here. His name's Park Song-yong'.

'Staying here you mean, sir?'

'I imagine so'.

The landlord looked bewildered. 'There's no one of that name in my register', he said.

I stared at him. 'But there must be. I had a letter from him, saying he was here'.

He shook his head. 'Must be some mistake, sir'.

'Is there any other bar in Sinjang-Ri?' I asked.

Kwon wrinkled his nose disapprovingly. 'There's not, you'd have to drive on to Aphae-Eup to find another bar', he said, 'but they haven't got any letting rooms'.

A sudden weak feeling of rage swept over me. I'd driven for most of the day in answer to a letter from Song-yong, only to find that he wasn't there. To hell with Park Song-yong, I thought.

I parked myself at a table. I said: 'Well, that's damned odd. A friend of mine wrote to me, asking me to meet him here'.

'Best thing you can do is have a drink, sir', suggested Kwon sympathetically.

'You've got a point there', I agreed. 'Get me some soju please'.

I felt a bit better after the drink, ordered another, and picked up the menu, suddenly feeling hungry. 'Can I order some food?'

'Certainly, sir', said Kwon. 'My daughter'll be along in a minute. She'll take your order'.

Outside, the wind continued to howl unabatedly. Hae-jin bent over to clear away my plates, her tight-fitting top pulled taught around her soft breasts as she leant forward. I caught her glance at me. 'You seem to have been having a bit of excitement round here', I remarked. 'I heard about it on my car radio'.

'Ah, you mean the Cuban ship', she said shaking the fringe out of her eyes. 'Shocking affair. As a matter of fact, we've just heard one of the blokes off the ship is on his way here now. They've had to close the bridge due to the high winds, and he's in a pretty bad way'.

I nodded 'Well I'm sure the thought of being nursed by you will soon cheer him up'. I said teasingly.

Her pale-skin slightly reddened. 'Hmm I'm sure I can think of someone else I'd rather nurse', she retorted with a cheeky smile.

I laughed. My stay at the Dokgo hotel seemed to have promise after all.

'Was everything ok?' asked Kwon appearing from the direction of the staircase.

'Yes, thank you, very good'. I replied.

‘I’ve got you booked in, but don’t have a note of how many nights you plan on staying?’

I shrugged. ‘Two nights, possibly three. Will that be all right?’

‘Yes’, said Kwon. ‘Got a lot of luggage?’

I indicated my cabin case. ‘That’s all’.

Kwon glanced over at the small case I’d left at the far side of the table. ‘Do you need a hand taking it upstairs?’

‘No, I’ll be fine’. I replied.

‘In that case you are in room six, up the stairs, and along the corridor. Your room is at the end, on the right. It’s normally nice and quiet there, although I can’t take responsibility for the howling wind tonight’. He handed me a small key on a large bamboo fob, as we both laughed.

At that moment a Hae-jin came back into the bar. I couldn’t help reflect that she was slim and *very* pretty. She carried a basin of water and a towel on her arm.

Kwon said: ‘How is he?’

She shook her head dubiously and emptied the basin into the sink under the bar. She noticed me and turned her reddening face away. ‘Dr Lee doesn’t hold out much hope for him, I’m afraid’, she said.

Kwon turned to me. ‘That’s a Cuban sailor that’s been brought in’, he explained. ‘The *Caballo Negro*, floundered on the rocks, and he was found drowning. He’s in a bad way, with terrible hypothermia. The doctor says he’s lucky to be alive’. Turning to Hae-jin he asked, ‘Is the doctor still with him?’

‘Yes, but he seems to doubt whether he’ll last the night’.

Kwon made a clicking noise with his tongue. ‘As bad as that eh?’ he said to Hae-jin. ‘Poor sod. He should be in hospital, but they had to close the bridge due to the weather and it’s impossible to land a helicopter in this wind’, he said looking at me.

I nodded, ‘Hae-jin was just telling me about it a few minutes ago’, I said giving me an excuse to return her gaze. ‘The Dark Horse’, she looked blank. ‘It’s the translation of the Spanish *Caballo Negro*’. I explained. She nodded approvingly.

‘It’s a black storm, that’s for sure’. Replied Kwon. ‘Hasn’t he come round yet?’

Hae-jin shook her head. ‘Not since he arrived. I think I’d better sit with him tonight, in case he gets any worse’.

I had another drink of soju. Selfishly perhaps, I did not give a great deal of thought to the Cuban sailor; I had enough troubles of my own wondering what had happened to Park. At ten o’clock there was still no sign of him, and so I went up to my room. I suddenly realised that after my lengthy drive I was extraordinarily tired. The problem of Park Song-yong, wherever he might be, would have to wait until the morning. By half past ten I was fast asleep.

It must have been close on midnight when I heard the persistent knocking. I roused myself out of a deep sleep, sat up, and with a jerk realised that the knocking was on my room door. I stumbled across the floorboards and opened it. Outside, Hae-jin, wrapped in a silk dressing-gown, eyed me fearfully.

‘I’m so sorry to disturb you, Mr Moon’, she said making a low bow, ‘but I need your help. Could you come with me for a minute?’

I said blearily: ‘Hae-jin. What’s the problem?’

‘It’s the Cuban sailor. He’s gone down hill and I am worrying about him. He also keeps muttering something in Spanish’.

‘What’s the matter with him?’ my irritation offset by the cute way that Hae-jin’s wide eyes pleaded with me.

‘He seems to be delirious. I thought he was sleeping, but he suddenly opened his eyes and started talking. He got all upset, and I didn’t know what to do. I thought you might be able to help as you seem to understand Spanish, so I knocked you up’.

‘OK Hae-jin’, I said, ‘I’ll come and see if I can help you’.

She led me along the corridor to a room at the other end, near the top of the stairs.

The man in the bed was far-gone. He was writhing in what seemed to be pain, and was mumbling to himself deliriously. He looked quite young, I noticed, and his matted black hair hung over his forehead in a damp mass. His hands clutched at the duvet convulsively and there was a frightening fixed stare in his eyes.

I had picked up a smattering of Spanish in Spain just after school when I had travelled round Europe, and I bent my head to try to catch what he was saying. Most of it sounded absolute gibberish to me, but I caught the words ‘sea’ and ‘captain’. Then suddenly he sat up and very distinctively said: ‘Seung-li! Seung-li!’

‘Easy there’ I said and eased him back on to the pillows and said: ‘What’s that you’re saying?’ He started mumbling again and I didn’t understand one word in ten.

‘He seems to be calling out someone’s name’, said Hae-jin, ‘but I can’t quite make out anything else’.

She leaned over and gently wiped the sweat from his forehead. He seized her hand and shouted out: ‘Seung-li, Seung-li ...’

‘I’m not sure what to make of that’, I added. ‘He’s clearly confused’.

Poor Hae-jin looked terrified as he continued to grip her and shout. I helped free her hand with difficulty, and we got him back on the pillows again. Gradually his muttering stopped and his breathing grew easier. Then, quite suddenly, he slipped into unconsciousness, with a rapidity that seemed far from normal.

I said to Hae-jin: ‘We’d better leave him now, I think. There doesn’t seem to be anything more we can do’.

Hae-jin nodded wearily. ‘Thanks Mr Moon’.

‘No problem, and please call me Han-Sang’. I said looking into her deep eyes ‘You look like you could do with a drink’.

She nodded, and I saw a small tear in the corner of her eye ‘I’m not a nurse, I don’t really know what I should do to help him’. She sobbed.

‘Well, you seem to be doing a great job to me, but now I think the doctor’s orders are that you should have a little something to calm your nerves’.

I put a calming arm round her shoulder and led her to the door. I looked back at the Cuban again; he moaned once and I thought he repeated ‘Seung-li’, but I wasn’t sure. We crept out quietly and headed back toward my room. I opened up my case and drew out a small bottle of whisky, ‘Just a little something I carry, for medicinal reasons’ I winked and she managed a

weak smile. She nursed the drink while I dabbed the tears from her cheek. Her dark mascara had started to run down her ivory skin. I raised my free hand to steady her face and carefully wiped away the streaks of inky black make-up. 'There you go, good-as-new'.

Hae-jin leant over and kissed my on the cheek, 'thank you' she breathed.

I turned my head and kissed her tenderly on the lips, she responded passionately, and our tongues met...

I woke at eight and lay in bed listening to the insistent howling of the gale outside. The space next to me was crumpled but empty. I went down to breakfast hoping to bump in to Hae-jin, but she was nowhere to be seen. Feeling the need for a breath of fresh air I decided to brave the storm and go out. Fortunately the wind had dropped somewhat, although it was still bitterly cold. The lowering black skies told me that the storm had not entirely abated. As I walked down the narrow street towards the harbour I decided to give Song-yong another day, just in case he had met with some accident, and so that I could see some more of Hae-jin.

I was still feeling increasingly grumpy about the way things had gone with Park. If, as seemed highly probable, he didn't turn up, I was faced with half a days hard driving back to Seoul: in all a day of motoring, two nights in a dreary little fishing village in the middle of nowhere, and not a damned thing to show for it – well except that is for my dalliance with Hae-jin. As I turned back from the salt marsh, with the wind whistling round my ears, I cursed Park Song-yong once again.

That evening I sat in the restaurant come bar, deserted except for four fishermen playing cards in the corner. The wind had got up again and was howling with renewed fury. I drained my glass and handed it to Kwon Oh-young for a refill.

'Wind hasn't dropped, then', he remarked.

'It certainly hasn't', I said, 'although it wasn't too bad out this morning. I thought the storm was blowing over'.

'Aha', said Kwon knowingly, 'they don't go over that easy'. A window rattled and the landlord glared at it balefully. 'Bloody thing', he said to no one in particular.

The door of the bar opened, bringing with it a gust of wind. A man came in and stood for a moment, breathing heavily. He did not cut an impressive figure. He was about fifty, with a receding chin and an untidy moustache. Drops of rain dripped from his hat, and his shabby raincoat gave him the appearance of a rather badly tied brown paper parcel. He took off his hat, displaying thinning and wispy hair, the same colour as his moustache but plentifully streaked with grey. His luggage – a battered suitcase and briefcase with one strap broken – completed the bedraggled picture. He looked tired and oddly pathetic.

'God Almighty!' he gasped. 'What weather!' His voice was high-pitched, ultra-refined, and catarrh.

Kwon leaned over the bar, wearing an expression of professional welcome. 'Good evening, sir'.

'Don't know what's good about it', said the man morosely. 'You the landlord?'

'That's right, sir. Kwon's the name. And what can I do for you?'

The man undid the top buttons of his raincoat, revealing a disarranged tie. 'I'd like a room, old man', he said. He peered round the bar. 'That is, if you've got any rooms'.

'Just for one night?' asked Kwon.

'Yes. Possibly two, but I hope not'. He gave a phlegmy cough and extended his hands to the fire. 'Had a bit of a bust-up with the car, y'know'.

‘Reckon we can fix you up, sir’, said Kwon genially.

The man took off his raincoat and advanced on the bar. The warmth of the room had restored some of his self-assurance and his voice was appreciably louder. ‘Now, all I need is a good stiff drink – better give me a bottle of Chun Kook.

Kwon poured the drink. ‘Anything with it, sir?’

‘Not likely’. He picked up the glass and swallowed the Chun Kook in a single gulp. ‘That’s better’. The chrysanthemum wine was working on him already and a slight flush suffused his veined cheeks. I sat watching him without enthusiasm: it was going to be a long evening and in my present somewhat jaundiced mood he did not strike me as being the ideal drinking companion.

He took a sip at his second glass and smacked his lips appreciatively.

‘Nothing like a drop of wine’. He turned to me, pointing at the bottle. ‘Would you care to join me?’

‘Thanks’, I replied rather shortly. ‘I’ll have a small glass’.

He looked at me for a moment, sizing me up. He’s wondering, I thought sourly, if I look the type who’ll sit up half the night to provide an audience.

The man turned to Hae-jin who had quietly slipped into the room: ‘By the way, have you got a phone I could use? I can’t get a signal on mine’, waving his Samsung Galaxy in her direction.

Hae-jin nodded towards the telephone behind the bar. ‘Well, we would have normally, sir, but it’s out of order at the moment. The storm blew the lines down’.

‘Oh, damn!’ said the man. ‘That’s all I need!’ he drank some more wine and tugged at his moustache with a petulant gesture.

Hae-jin walked over towards me, as if to clear the tables. She had curled her hair so that it bounced on her shoulders as she moved.

‘There’s a call box just down the road’, she suggested. ‘But I expect their lines are also down, but it might be worth a try’.

She brushed past me and stood over my shoulder.

‘No, I’ll leave it’, he decided. ‘Not important-it can wait in this weather’. He looked round, obviously enjoying a captive audience, then turned back to Kwon Oh-young. ‘Now, what do I owe you, old man?’

‘A bottle of Chun Kook, twenty-seven thousand won’, said Kwon.

‘My god!’ said the man. ‘Still, never mind-it’s on the firm’. He threw thirty thousand won on the bar and raised his glass. ‘Well, cheers, folks. I must say, you get some pretty rough weather in these parts’.

‘It’s an improvement on last week’, said Kwon.

The man laughed. ‘What did you have last week, a typhoon?’

‘It certainly felt like it’, said Kwon feelingly.

While our new arrival and Kwon were occupied in banter Hae-jin leant over and gathered my empty dinner plates, surreptitiously pressing a tightly folded piece of paper into my hand as she did. As she carried the dishes back to kitchen I dropped my hands beneath the table and unfolded the note: ‘I’ll be at your room at 11, mwah’. I looked up and saw Hae-jin hovering behind the bar, I shot her a smile and nodded. She nodded back and slipped back into the kitchen.

My ears tuned back into the conversation between Kwon and the newcomer. 'Didn't you read about the Cuban's?' he was asking.

The man halted the passage of his glass to his lips. 'Cubans?' he repeated. 'They're always in the headlines. What have they been up to in these parts?'

'One of their ships got wrecked the other night', said Kwon with a note of reproof in his voice.

'Oh, yes, I heard something about it. So that was here, was it?'

'Just outside the harbour', nodded Kwon, 'almost on our doorstep. Those coastguard boys did a wonderful job'. He shook his head portentously. 'Worst storm I remember in thirty years'.

'It's always thirty years', said the man with weighty condescension.

'You ought to have had a basinful of this one, that's all', said Kwon. He sounded almost possessive about the storm.

'Today's little lot will do me', said the man turning to me for support. I nodded in agreement.

'Did they get the men off all right?'

'They rescued most of the crew', said Kwon, 'but two were drowned – swept away'.

'If you ask me, it's a miracle any of 'em were saved', I added.

'Where are the ones that were rescued?' asked the man.

'In Gwangju Hospital', replied Kwon. 'Although we've got one of 'em here'. He pointed towards the stairs.

'Really? How did that happen?'

'They had to bring one of them here as by the time he was rescued the weather had closed in so much that they couldn't fly the helicopter and the bridge had been closed', explained Kwon.

'Then this morning the doctor decided Arsenio was too ill to move. I wasn't very happy to have him here but the doctor wouldn't here of moving him, so here he has stayed. Poor chap, it's touch and go whether he lives'.

'He was in the water for hours', supplied Hae-jin, walking back into the room.

'Poor devil', said the man. 'What a shocking experience'. He passed a hand over his untidy hair and fingered his collar. With drink inside him he suddenly seemed to have increased in physical stature; clearly a bar was his second home. 'Personally, I like to keep both feet on dry land' – he turned to me – 'don't you agree?'

'In this sort of weather, certainly', I said.

The man patted his stomach ruefully. 'Feeling a bit peckish', he announced. 'Haven't eaten anything since lunch. Think you could rustle me up some food, m'dear?' he favoured Hae-jin with his idea of a winning smile.

'Of course, sir', said Hae-jin politely. 'What about bibimbap?'

'Just the job. Make it a large bowl, there's a dear'. He turned to me again. 'My name's Jo Yun-je', he said extending a hand.

'Moon Han-sang', I said, accepting the moist palm.

'I'm from Busan', went on Jo, 'nets and ropes'.

'Nets and ropes?' I enquired.

'Fishing nets and ropes'.

'Oh, I see', I said. 'You are here to see the fishermen?'

The man was obviously determined to make conversation and it seemed unfriendly to discourage him.

Jo made a grimace. 'Yes. But I wouldn't normally stay here five minutes if I could help it' – he looked sorrowfully at Hae-jin – 'all due respect to your village, of course. No, the fact of the

matter is, I had a bit of a prang with the car in this bloody storm. Upset all my plans’.

‘Where did this happen?’ I asked.

‘Few miles back, on the main road. Took the corner too sharp and – whoosh, hit a pond of water and aquaplaned – slap into the side of a wall.

‘You’re lucky to be here at all’, I remarked.

‘You’re telling me, mate. Wrecked the off-side, though. My worry is I don’t know how I’m going to get to get over to Muan tomorrow-got a lot of calls to make there’.

I ordered fresh drinks. ‘Isn’t there a train?’ I asked.

‘No, but there is a bus’, put in Kwon.

Jo shuddered delicately. ‘No, thanks. It’ll stop at every street corner and take all ruddy day, I shouldn’t wonder’. He raised a glass to me. ‘Well, bottoms up. This is a hell of a place to get stuck in, but as long as the wine doesn’t run out I might as well make the best of a bad job’. He leaned forward. ‘What’s your line of business, if you don’t mind my asking?’ he inquired.

‘Marine engineering’, I replied briefly, I really did mind him asking. I didn’t see much point in telling this character that I’d recently gone out of business.

‘Marine engineering, eh?’ said Jo. ‘A lot of work in that line here’. I nodded, but said nothing to encourage any further questions. Fortunately I was saved by Hae-jin who appeared carrying a tray with his steaming Bibimbap. Her tight jeans stretched taught over her bottom as she bent over to place the dish on the table. With obvious enjoyment Jo looked over and ogled Hae-jin, I felt my blood rise in indignation. ‘This bibimbap is a bit of all right’, he announced, tipping me the wink, unaware of my proprietorial interest in Hae-jin.

Not unaware of what was going on she tossed her head. ‘Nothing stingy about me’, she said.

‘I’ll bet’, said Jo.

I reflected that another hour of Jo’s company would be about as much as I could take.

‘As a matter of fact’, I said, because I did not want to discuss engineering, ‘I’m feeling pretty fed up. I drove all the way from Soul to meet a friend of mine here, and he hasn’t turned up’.

‘That’s a bit much’, said Jo with heavy sympathy. ‘You must be really pissed off’.

‘Hmm. Park Song-yong never was considerate’, I said testily.

Jo fastened on the name with glee. You’ve only got to mention someone’s name to this type of man and he thinks he knows him. He mentioned two Park’s, a Pahk, and a Pak in quick succession.

The voice of Hae-jin providentially cut across these reminiscences. ‘Here’s Dr Lee Chung-kyu’, she announced. ‘I wonder how our patient is’.

We all looked up as the doctor came down the stairs. Lee was about fifty, short and baldish; he wore the worried expression peculiar to overworked general practitioners in outlying districts.

The doctor looked at us all in turn, as if fervently hoping that we were all in sound physical condition, and sank wearily into a chair.

‘Any news. Doctor?’ asked Kwon.

‘Nothing new, I’m afraid’, said Lee wearily. ‘It’s only a question of time now; I’ll be surprised if he lasts the night’.

Hae-jin said: ‘Oh, Doctor, isn’t there anything we can do?’

I could see she was genuinely upset.

‘We’ve done all we can’, said Lee in a defeated voice.

‘Hasn’t he come round at all?’ asked Kwon.

‘No. I’ve given him an injection and – well, quite frankly, I hope he doesn’t come round. He’s really better off as he is’.

Kwon nodded understandingly. ‘I expect you could do with a drink, Doctor’, he said.

‘I certainly could’, said Lee. ‘I’d like a Bokbunja ju, please’.

Kwon produced a small bottle and Lee’s glass steadily turned deep with the colour of oxblood as it filled with the blackberry wine. ‘I’m only sorry it had to happen here’, went on Lee. He favoured Hae-jin with an avuncular smile. ‘Although I could scarcely have had a more professional assistant, even at the hospital’.

Hae-jin looked at me quickly. ‘I wasn’t very professional last night’, she said apologetically, ‘I had to knock up Mr Moon here’.

Dr Lee looked at me inquiringly. I said: ‘I’m afraid I couldn’t do very much. Hae-jin woke me up last night and asked me to go and see Arsenio. She was a bit upset about it, I think. Thought he might get violent’.

‘It was silly, really’, said Hae-jin, ‘but I’d been sitting with him all the evening and then suddenly he opened his eyes and started talking’.

‘He can speak Korean?’ queried Lee.

‘No, no, it was Spanish’, said Hae-jin, ‘though it might have been double-dutch for all I know. Anyway, I couldn’t make head nor tail of it, and he was getting sort of frantic, so I knocked up Mr Moon’.

‘I see’, said the doctor. He turned a very shrewd and penetrating pair of eyes on me. ‘Could you make out what he was talking about?’

‘He didn’t say anything intelligible’, I said. ‘He was delirious and not making a lot of sense’.

Lee looked surprised. ‘So you speak Spanish?’

‘Yes, a little anyway’, I said. ‘I can understand it better than I can speak it. The only thing that did make sense was that Arsenio kept on calling out “Seung-li”’.

‘Seung-li?’ said Lee.

‘Yes, someone’s name I presume’.

‘And that’s all?’

‘I’m afraid that’s all I could understand’, I said. ‘The rest was just nonsense – absolute gibberish. Could have been some Spanish dialect, of course’.

‘Well, thank you, Mr Moon’, said Lee. ‘I was anxious to hear your version of it because both the captain and the first mate keep asking me about Arsenio’.

‘How are the sailors in hospital?’ inquired Hae-jin.

‘Well, two of them died, as you know’, said Lee. ‘The rest are doing well – most of them are only suffering from shock. The first mate and some of the others are being discharged tomorrow’.

‘And what happens to them then?’ asked Kwon.

Lee shrugged. ‘They’ll be whisked straight off to Seoul, I imagine. We’ve had the Cuban Embassy on the phone, they are sending people up here as soon as the weather allows. They are already in Gwangju, fussing round them in hospital like sheepdogs and generally making a nuisance of themselves. The men are very friendly enough though – when they’re given the chance!’

Kwon nodded agreement. ‘They struck me as being hardworking and decent. Plenty of guts, too’.

Lee finished his drink and rose to his feet. He turned to me with a courteous bow. 'Thank you for telling me what happened, Mr Moon', he said. 'I'll notify the captain. And now, if you'll excuse me, I'll just take another look at the patient'.

As the doctor left the room the telephone at the end of the bar rang. Kwon answered it, and then turned to Jo. 'There you go, the landlines working at least', he said, 'if you still want to make a call'.

'Good', said Jo, 'I'll get on to the garage and see how they're getting on with my car'.

Jo went to the telephone and I sat in the bar for a while. I had a sudden unaccountable feeling that something strange was afoot in this little village. There and then I made up my mind to give Park Song-yong one more day. I made the necessary arrangements with the landlord, then I saw Jo coming back to the bar and hastily went up to my bedroom, took a shower, and poured two drinks ...

Chapter three

The storm raged all that night, but by the next morning the wind had dropped. It was still bitterly cold, but the sun was struggling to find a way through the lowering grey sky.

There was an atmosphere of gloom about the Dokgo hotel: Arsenio died at eight in the morning. 'A terrible thing', said Kwon Oh-young, sadly shaking his head. 'First time it ever happened in my house to a foreigner'. Hae-jin, near to tears, seemed worried that the Cuban's death was a reflection on her nursing abilities. She had gone into his room early in the morning and found him, in her own words, 'horribly feverish and writhing in agony'. Dr Lee had been called, but there was nothing he could do. Now, accompanied by Officer Shin, Sinjang-Ri's solitary police officer, they carried out the banal formalities that follow death.

For want of something better to do, I checked over Arsenio's belongings with Shin. They seemed pathetically few and were all stained and crumpled by the sea: a wallet, a wrist watch, a comb, a tie pin, a notebook, a cigarette lighter, and a packet of cigarettes. Looking oddly domestic without his uniform, Shin sat opposite me at a table in the saloon.

Breathing heavily and writing laboriously, he was listing the articles in his official notebook as I read them out to him.

'One pair of packet of cigarettes', I announced.

'One pair of cigarettes', intoned Shin, licking his pencil.

I picked up the next article. 'One comb, black; one wallet; one cigarette lighter'.

Shin wrote busily and then closed his notebook. 'That the lot?'

I nodded.

'Not much, is it?'

'What happens to these things?' I asked.

'I dunno, sir', said Shin. 'The captain's coming down later. I suppose we hand'em over to him for this bloke's next of kin'.

Jo Yun-je came down the stairs. He looked pretty rough I thought. Although he was freshly shaved, which I could tell as his chin had a deep razor cut across it, his suit was very crumpled, to the point that I could have sworn he had slept in it. His hair had been combed, but somehow managed to look as if it hadn't.

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