



ANDREW KAPLAN
DRAGONFIRE

A NOVEL



War of the Raven

“In a word, *terrific* ... The pace is blistering, the atmosphere menacing and decadent, and author Andrew Kaplan is in marvelously smashing form.” —*Daily News* (New York)

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Dragonfire

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Hour of the Assassins

“An exciting, original suspense novel.” —*Buffalo Evening News*

Dragonfire

A Novel

Andrew Kaplan



*To those for whom Southeast Asia
was more than a place on a map*

and

to Justin, age 3. I really like you too.

*Because Thou lovest the Burning-ground,
I have made a Burning-ground of my heart—
That Thou, Dark One, haunter of the Burning-ground,
Mayest dance Thy eternal dance.*

—A BENGALI HYMN

In the plain between the hills of Kulen and the giant lake called the Tônlé Sap, the ancient Khmers of Cambodia built a vast complex of temples, of which the most famous is Angkor Wat.

The temples were an attempt to create in stone a kind of map or enormous scale model of the Hindu universe, but after the Hindu deities failed to protect the city from a disastrous Cham invasion in the twelfth century, the pragmatic Khmers dedicated their new temples to Buddha.

But many of the existing temples retained their old pagan and Hindu associations.

One of these, the Phimeanakas (completed circa 1000 A.D.), is located within the Angkor Thom complex, north of the temple of Angkor Wat. The ruin is a single pyramid made of laterite; the tower has not survived. According to legend, the structure was built upon the site where an early Khmer king, acting to protect the kingdom, had nightly congress with a dragon goddess (in some versions, a giant serpent) in the form of a beautiful woman.

The Khmers believed that the goddess could not be destroyed except by her own dragonfire, the one weapon that could harm her.

PROLOGUE

THEY were friends once. The kind of special friends the men of the hill tribes call “death friends” to distinguish them from those with whom one merely shares rice and talk. Nearly two decades later, the fact that they had known each other at all became a critical element of the Dragonfire operation, as the affair came to be called within the National Security Council.

Locked inside the “Black Vault,” the innermost sanctum within the CIA complex in Langley, there actually exists a photograph of all of them together. All except Pranh, who snapped the shot. Of course, no photograph of Pranh himself was ever needed, because there was a time when, under the name Son Lot, you could find his face on posters plastered all over Cambodia.

Still attached to the photo is a yellowing label typed by some long-forgotten Army S-2 intelligence analyst. It reads: “U.S. Special Forces advisers attached to the 11th ARVN Ranger Battalion. Parrot Beak sector, Cambodia. 5 June 1970.”

The photo itself is black and white. It shows four young men sitting in relaxed poses atop an armored personnel carrier. They are wearing camouflage fatigues dappled by the sunlight and are cradling their weapons with the casual ease that comes with long familiarity. One of them, Parker, is caught in the act of flipping his cigarette in the direction of the camera.

He seems tanned, even cocky, wearing the kind of cynical sneer that only the truly innocent are capable of. In the middle is the agent later known only as Sawyer. The photo is the only physical evidence he ever existed, because after Dragonfire, his personnel file and all cross-references to his real identity were purged from the data banks of the CIA’s Cray supercomputer.

In the picture, he is shirtless and so lean you can almost count the ribs. His green beret is draped over the muzzle of a captured AK-47, and he is squinting in the strong sunlight. He still had two good eyes then and, without the eye-patch that was to become his trademark, looks like a young Jack Kennedy. Next to him is Harold Johnson, nicknamed “Brother Rap,” fist clenched in the Black Power salute. He sports a sparse, nineteen-year-old’s mustache, a Black Power shoelace bracelet, love beads, and “Born to Kill” painted in white letters on his helmet liner. And squatting near the machine gun mount is Major Lu, wearing green fatigues and oversized aviator sunglasses that make him look like how the Buddha might look if he had been turned into a frog.

It was an ordinary photo. It captured only their faces, not their souls.

On the day after it was taken, their friendship was torn apart forever.

PART ONE

The dragon lies hidden in the deep.

*The deep yawns above the thunder.
Whoever hunts deer without a guide
Will lose his way in the depths of the forest.
The superior man is aware of the hidden dangers.*

SHE was dressed in silk, red and gold, and atop her head was a gold crown spiraling to a point like a temple chedi. She stood alone in the spotlight, one foot gracefully raised in the classic lakhon dancer's pose. Her left hand gestured downward in a rejection of passion as it will be in the final dance on the last night of the world, when the stars fall from the sky and the mountains are engulfed in flame. Her right hand was upturned, signaling the acceptance of her lover and the primordial thrust of his desire. Her face was exquisite, her dark eyes impassive.

Now the rhythm of the pi-nai and the drum grew more insistent. She began to move her hips swaying to and fro as though summoning an invisible lover. Two slave girls rushed from the wings and began to unwind her sarong. She wriggled out of her clothes in waves, like a snake molting its outer skin, until she stood completely naked. She bowed in a gesture of submission, her slender body glistening with sweat, her budlike breasts heaving, her buttocks moving in an enticing motion old and new.

The stage was wreathed in smoke from the joss sticks, mingled with opium and tobacco smoke. The smoke twisted and swirled in shafts of light like a living thing.

The drumbeat quickened as the slave girls threw off their robes and stood naked, but for big leather phalluses strapped to their loins. A collective male sigh escaped the audience. The drumming mounted to a crescendo as the two slave girls took turns playing the male. Their bodies tangled together in passion rippling through them. The drums went wild as they climaxed with savage cries, their black hair flying as they whipped their heads back and forth, then sank gracefully to the floor, limp and spent.

The crowd of Asian businessmen sprinkled with the occasional serviceman roared its approval. Green twenty-baht notes were tossed onto the stage. Smiling, the dancers came to the edge of the stage to pluck notes from upstretched hands using only the muscles between their legs.

In a dark corner booth, two men who had been engrossed in their conversation glanced over toward the stage. One was a portly graying Asian in a blue silk suit obviously made by a Hong Kong tailor who knew what he was doing. The other was a tall Occidental wearing the safari-style khaki, inevitably affected by American officials and journalists in Indochina.

"There's the true seduction of Asia," Vasonsong said, gesturing at the naked dancers. "The promise that you can do anything ... absolutely anything."

Parker raised his eyebrows.

"Are you talking about sex or power?"

"They are intertwined, like Yin and Yang. True power is ability to indulge every desire, even on your whim, no matter how bizarre. Is that not the ultimate aphrodisiac?" Vasonsong smiled.

"I thought you Buddhists frowned on sex."

"Although like most male Thais I spent time as naga, I am far from being bhikku monk. Besides

Lord Buddha did not teach physical passion bad. Only that to pass beyond suffering, you must also go beyond pleasure. Only then comes profit," Vasnasong replied, his eyes twinkling.

Parker jumped at the conversational opening. Otherwise, they'd be here trading Chinese fortune cookie talk all night.

"Speaking of profit, of this thing with Bhun Sa, can it be arranged?" he asked.

Vasnasong sighed inwardly. Such rudeness was typical of a farang. Americans were the worst. Always in such a hurry that they heard only the words, never the nuances between the words when conversation really takes place. So be it, he thought. With such a one subtlety is meaningless anyway. But first he would exact a tiny revenge.

"Do you desire? It is house specialty," Vasnasong said, indicating the spicy water beetle paste with his chopsticks. He had seen that the farang was disgusted by it from the expression on his face when it was served.

Parker shook his head. Smiling, Vasnasong shoved it insistently toward him and was secretly delighted by Parker's obvious discomfort as he attempted a small polite nibble.

"Delicious," Parker said insincerely.

"Ah yes." Vasnasong smiled.

"Does that mean it can be arranged?" Parker said, looking around anxiously as though he was afraid of being overheard.

"Mai-pen-rai," Vasnasong shrugged. "In Bangkok, Hawkins-khrap, anything can be arranged—for a price."

Hawkins was Parker's cover name.

There was a burst of applause and Parker glanced toward the stage. In the spotlight a voluptuous woman was seated in a hanging bamboo basket, her naked bottom protruding from a hole in the basket. To the accompaniment of raucous cheers from the audience, she was slowly lowered onto the stage by a sailor from the audience who had volunteered.

Parker nodded and leaned forward across the table.

"How soon can I get upcountry to see Bhun Sa?" he whispered. No one but Vasnasong could hear him in all the audience noise. On stage, the sailor slowly twirled the basket. The woman revolved on his erection like a top.

Vasnasong looked curiously at the farang.

"Have you ever been in hill country of Golden Triangle, Hawkins-khrap?"

"No. Why?"

Vasnasong laid his finger alongside his nose in a gesture of warning.

"Hill country is most dangerous place, Hawkins-khrap. Most dangerous. And of all the hill people, Bhun Sa may be most dangerous of all," Vasnasong said uneasily.

"Yeah, well the world is full of tough guys," Parker shrugged. Did the prick think he was dealing with a Boy Scout? he wondered.

Vasnasong smiled politely. What was it his honored father used to say: "To reason with a fool is a waste of time to belch into the breath of a typhoon." He plucked delicately at a morsel of lemon chicken with his chopsticks, then genially raised his glass of Mae Khong whiskey.

"Then may you meet only good and overcome all your enemies, Hawkins-khrap," Vasnasong toasted, and they both drank.

"When can I make contact?" Parker said hoarsely, choking back the whiskey. Mae Khong was guaranteed by the manufacturer to never be more than two weeks old.

"Tonight. Very soon," Vasnasong said, consulting his gold Rolex. "And now, a thousand pardons, but I am old man and my bed calls," he added, delicately faking a yawn.

"Wait a minute," Parker began angrily. He started to grab at Vasnasong's sleeve, but instead found

the torn half of a red hundred-baht note being pressed into his hand as part of a handshake.

"A beautiful girl will have matching half. Follow her and you will find what you seek," Vasanong whispered, and stood.

Vasanong glanced around, as if nervous for the first time, but all eyes were on the stage and the squealing basket girl. Parker surreptitiously touched the .45 automatic in the holster nestled in the small of his back.

"See you soon." Parker grinned, his fingers touching the gun grip.

"Sawat dee khrap," Vasanong said, pressing his palms together in the wai sign.

A burst of applause came from the front, distracting Parker. The basket girl and the sailor were gone, replaced by a pretty girl who looked like she had barely reached her teens. She was trying to do something obscene with a snake.

When he turned back, Parker found himself staring at the most beautiful woman he had ever seen standing where Vasanong had stood just a few seconds before. It was like a conjurer's trick, and for a moment Parker couldn't believe his eyes. He was spellbound. He couldn't take his eyes off her.

She was tall for an Asian, with straight black hair that fell below her shoulders and dark almond eyes luminous with mystery and passion. They reminded him of the eyes of an ancient queen painted on the wall of a four-thousand-year-old tomb he had visited once in Egypt. She wore just a touch of lipstick and eye shadow on that exquisite face and smelled of jasmine. Her sarong was white silk embroidered with gold and somehow tightly molded to her body in an effect that was at once modest and dazzlingly sensual.

She smiled, revealing captivating dimples and perfect white teeth, and like any bargirl, asked him if he wanted a good time, number-one time. But she was no bargirl. He was sure of that. His throat had gone dry and he had to swallow before he could ask her how much.

"Tao rye?"

"Nung roi kha," she replied, asking for the hundred.

As if in a trance, Parker handed her the torn half of the hundred-baht note. She unfolded another half and matched the two pieces. She looked around once to make sure no one was paying too much attention to what was, after all, an everyday transaction. All eyes were on the snake dancer.

"You follow," she whispered in English, and ducked through a bamboo curtain that led to a side exit. Parker tossed a bill on the table to cover the drinks, and by the time he reached the alley outside she had already disappeared.

The alley was dark and strewn with garbage. But just a few feet away, Patpong Road was bright as day from all the neon lights. Parker hesitated. She had vanished as if she were a dream, or maybe one of those spirits the Thais built those little dollhouses for in the corner of every dwelling. Then he thought he caught a faint whiff of jasmine lingering on the hot sticky air characteristic of the night before the southwest monsoon.

It's no dream, he told himself. She's your only link to Bhun Sa, so don't let her get away.

He ran out into the street. Traffic was heavy all along Patpong Road. Three-wheeled samlor cyclos, and motorbikes narrowly weaved between the honking cars, barely scraping through by inches. Asian and European men, civilians and servicemen from half a dozen countries prowled the sidewalks while girls in tight slacks and Western jeans called their siren song from brightly lit entrances to the bars and massage parlors. Rock music in a dozen languages blared from open doorways. Street vendors sold cigarettes and picture postcards from the top tray, pornographic photos, Thai sticks, and black balls of opium and hashish from the bottom tray.

At first Parker thought he had lost her in the crowd. Then he saw men staring after someone near the Silom Road intersection and just caught a glimpse of her white sarong rounding the corner. Ignoring Langley rules about never calling attention to yourself while on a tail, he ran after her. Rounding the

corner, he was in time to see her duck into a side street near the corner of the Bangkok Christian Hospital.

She was very quick and very good, he thought, settling into a normal walking pattern about a hundred yards behind her. Even just walking, she moved with an animal-like grace that was incredibly sensual, and despite all his training, he found he couldn't take his eyes from the teasing sway of her skintight sarong.

She moved nimbly down side streets and darkened alleys, slipping between noodle stalls lit by kerosene lamps, a white figure flitting ahead of him in the darkness like a ghost. He knew he should contact his case officer to let him know he was entering the red zone. They had drilled that into him a hundred times. Always keep control posted. Better to miss an opportunity than to lose communication. But how, without losing her? She has to stop sometime, he thought, reassuring himself. When she did, he would find a phone before he made contact.

At the next corner, she paused to study the posters outside a movie house showing the latest kung fu epic from Hong Kong, glancing out of the corner of her eye to see if he was still with her. He made no effort to close the distance. He was grateful for this time to catch his breath. And he had to make sure they weren't being followed.

He studied the reflection of the street behind him in the darkened window of a closed goldsmith's shop. Traffic was bumper to bumper even at this late hour. Shoppers were filling wicker baskets in the fluorescent glare of a nearby market. At a sidewalk restaurant a prospective diner was sniffing at a cauldron as the owner held up a live crab for his inspection. Everything seemed normal enough except ... Parker suddenly felt a terrible urge to urinate. His mouth had gone dry. *He was being watched.*

A big-muscled Thai in a suit that looked like it had been made for a much smaller man stood patiently waiting at the Number 71 bus stop. He wasn't looking at either Parker or the girl. But the buses in Bangkok didn't run after midnight.

There was another possible bulldog leaning against the noodle stall ahead. Also Thai. It looked like a front and back tail. He and the girl were boxed in.

And was it his nerves or did the passenger in a passing dark blue Nissan sedan take an excessive interest in him? The look had been held just a fraction too long, he decided. That meant they were mobile, as well.

Parker thought about aborting. There was sure to be a public phone back at the hospital on Silom Road. And what about the girl? Had she spotted the tails? He tried to think of a way to signal her, but it was too late.

She had started moving again.

He had no choice. He decided he would have to follow.

If only he knew where she was headed, he could try and flush the tails, he thought. She was heading south toward the Sathan Nua klong. Which way would she go when she reached the canal, left or right?

Then it hit him what she was up to. There was a water-bus dock near the Convent Road intersection. She had seen the tails! She was going to make a run for it on the water.

If he could eliminate at least one of the tails, they could still make the rendezvous. Assuming he was right, that is. If he was, the lead tail would stay with the girl, the second would peel off with him.

There was only one way to find out, he thought as he came abreast of the movie house ticket booth. He acted as if he were going to continue after the girl, then turned, bought a ticket from a sleepy-eyed young clerk and hurried into the darkened theater.

The tail would expect him to go out another exit according to standard flushing procedure. Instead, he took a seat in the last row near the aisle. When his eyes adjusted to the dark, he could see that on a few seats were occupied. Being able to see better than the tail, whose eyes would have less time

adjust, should give him an extra edge, he thought. He slipped the .45 automatic from its holster and clicked off the safety. He watched the curtained entrance while glancing at the movie out of the corner of his eye.

On the screen, the Chinese hero, clad in a black karate outfit, was spinning in the air, kicking off with devastating effect against at least a hundred white-suited adversaries from the karate school of mad scientist. The sound effects man must have gone crazy because every blow sounded like a car crash. The kicks sent the hero's opponents flying like tenpins, despite missing them by at least a foot. All in all, one against a hundred seemed like a pretty fair fight, and Parker was wondering what the hero would do if he were in Parker's spot, when the curtain parted and the second tail burst in.

As he headed down the aisle, glancing left and right, Parker slipped behind him and, grabbing the back of his jacket, jammed the muzzle of the .45 into the Thai's broad back.

"Hold it, buster. Yoot!" Parker hissed.

The big Thai hesitated. Parker felt the Thai's muscles tense in preparation for a move and viciously jabbed the gun into the Thai's kidneys.

"Don't try it," Parker whispered.

The Thai barely flinched. But at least he stopped moving.

Parker prodded the Thai ahead of him back up the aisle and then to the small toilet cubicle off the threadbare lobby. The toilet itself was a foul-smelling hole in the ground where flies buzzed noisily. A single naked yellow bulb barely lit the darkness.

"Take off your belt," Parker demanded. When the Thai's pants were around his ankles, Parker used the leather belt to tie his hands behind him.

"You no understand," the Thai began.

Parker never let him finish the sentence. He coldcocked the Thai with the butt of the Colt, hitting him behind the right ear with all his might. The Thai sank to his knees, and Parker hit him twice more in the head. The big man sprawled unconscious over the filthy hole, his face in the muck. Parker didn't wait to see if he was still breathing. He had more important things to do.

Parker raced out of the movie house and down the street toward the klong, ignoring the astonished glances of passersby. He had to catch her.

There was still a crowd on the Sathan Nua landing, and at first he thought he might still be in time. But it was too late. The sleek white water bus, jammed as tightly as a rush-hour subway car, was already pulling away from the landing. Even if he could get through the crowd, it was too far to jump and the gap of water was widening every second.

He stood there panting, watching the water bus pull away. He searched for her face in the crowd. He caught a glimpse of her looking back at him from the railing. It was a strange look. He tried to read her expression, but it was too dark, too fleeting to really see anything. But it was her all right. There was no mistaking the white sarong or that exquisite face. Further on down the railing, he thought he saw the lead tail.

Parker tried to decide what to do. Then he noticed a cluster of hang-yao, long-tailed water taxis moored to the bank near the landing. Parker motioned to the first driver. He showed him a purple five hundred-baht note and a minute later they were on the klong, bouncing in the wake of the water bus.

As they sped along the klong, getting wet from the spray thrown up by the water bus, Parker tried to figure it out. They had to try to reach the next landing at New Road before the water bus got there. But it was all happening too fast. The girl. The tails. Who sent them? Vasanong? Bhun Sa? Or someone else? It made no sense. The mission had barely started and already it was coming apart. None of it ever made any sense, and he remembered something Jack had told him long ago, back in Da Nang.

They were having rum and cokes on the veranda of the Grand Hotel, looking out at the lights on the fishing junks bobbing on the oily slick that was the Tourane River. Around them grunts from the

Americal Division sat at the tables drinking and openly shooting up skag bought for two bucks a vi just outside the base gate. The street boys and whores swarmed around the grunts like moths around lamp, filling the air with cries of “Cheap Charlie” and “Fi’ dollar” and “You Numbah-Ten Charlie. He had been complaining, Parker remembered. Nothing was working. Not their rules, their strategies their technology. Nothing.

“You have to remember, this is Asia. Things are different here,” Jack had said.

Parker felt a sudden longing for the green Virginia countryside outside Langley. The rolling hills the white picket fences, the *cleanness* of it. How sane it was, especially compared to the squalor, the unending noise and intrigue, the sheer misery of Asia. He’d been out here too long, Parker thought. This, he decided, would be his last mission.

A change in the growl of the hang-yao’s engine brought him out of his thoughts. They were coming into the New Road landing. The water bus had just tied up and begun to unload as the hang-yao bumped against the bank. Parker was already on his feet even before the driver could tie up. There was no time to waste. He had to catch her before she got off the boat.

Teetering like a man on a tightrope, he leaped from the prow onto the wet bank. His foot slipped and he had to scramble up the bank on all fours. By the time he was able to turn around, passengers were already streaming off the water bus, mingling with the crowd on the landing trying to board.

He couldn’t find her in the crowd. He stood there searching until his training suddenly brought him up short. He couldn’t be so damned obvious. Get cover and scan, he told himself.

He stepped over to a noodle stand on the quay and ordered a bowl of kow pat. Leaning against the stand, he casually turned and began a methodical scan of the landing, quartering the crowd in the market area, those heading for New Road, then the landing area and those still on the water bus. She wasn’t in the crowd heading toward the bright lights of the New Road or in the market. He began to panic. He couldn’t find her. But it was impossible. He couldn’t have missed her. She had to be there.

Think, dammit, he told himself. What do you know about her, beyond the fact that she’s beautiful? His mind raced. Her connection to Vasnasong. Bhun Sa, maybe. She’s fast. A pro, spotting the tail like that and making for the water. A pro, under surveillance. What would she do?

She must have changed the image, he thought. Unconsciously, he hadn’t been looking for her, but for the white sarong. He repeated the scan of the landing area, and this time he spotted her quickly. She had thrown a red silk shawl over her shoulders to cover some of the white. She was a pro, all right, he thought.

Parker nibbled idly at the kow pat as he watched her head away from the New Road and toward the market stalls and sampans along the banks of the Chao Phraya River. He got ready to follow her, but something in the back of his mind was sending him a warning signal. There was something wrong. There was ...

She was no longer under surveillance. The lead tail had disappeared.

There were only two possibilities. One: her change of image had worked and she had lost the tail. Or two: the tail had been switched and someone new was now tailing her.

He had to choose one. He decided she had lost the tail for two reasons: because he couldn’t spot any sign of the Opposition now and because he wanted to stay with her. He wanted it!

He followed her as she weaved among the market stalls, moving purposefully as though she were nearing her destination. She paused by a fish stand for a final check. Half hidden under racks of dried squid, hanging like sheets of red parchment, she glanced back to make sure she hadn’t lost him.

Parker took the opportunity for a final check of his own. He could see the lights along the Thonburi side of the river winking like fireflies as the boat lanterns bobbed in the wakes of the river traffic. The silhouettes of tall palms and temple spires could be dimly seen against the electric haze of the city lights. The steamy night smelled of mud and fish piled up on the river quay. There was no sign of the

Opposition.

Why not?

There was no time to come up with an answer. She was moving again.

She made her way along the embankment, where the rice barges and the sampans were tethered. They had left the market area and it was darker here. The only light came from the kerosene boat lanterns. Then she stopped.

Parker waited. It was quiet but for the gentle lapping of the water. The occasional creak of a boat, the distant sound of a radio. And from somewhere nearby, the scent of a burning joss stick.

She had come to two sampans lashed together, tethered by a short rope to a stake on the muddy embankment. They were set apart, away from the other boats closer toward the market area. There was no one on the decks. They floated a few feet offshore, with enough water on all sides so that no one could enter or leave without being seen or heard. From a security aspect, whoever had set this up had chosen well, Parker thought.

She glanced for the briefest second back toward Parker, then with a slight tug on the rope, lightly leaped over the few feet of water onto the deck of one of the sampans. She hopped over the gunnys onto the other sampan and disappeared under the thatched arch that served as a roof.

The sampans floated on the water. They looked deserted and oddly menacing. Nothing ventured, nothing gained, Parker told himself as he pulled the .45 automatic from his holster and cocked it. He took one deep breath, then moved.

In seconds he covered the dozen or so strides to the bank and leaped onto the deck of the sampan where the girl was. The deck bobbed under him as he ducked under the thatched roof, the .45 in the two-hand firing position.

Parker stared at the interior of the sampan, unable to believe his eyes. His gun hand dropped uselessly to his side. Thunderstruck, he looked around in a daze. It wasn't possible, he told himself. But impossible or not, it had happened.

The cabin was empty. The girl had vanished.

But there was no place to hide, he thought as he began to poke around. There were no signs of a struggle. The interior was lit by a Coleman lamp, and he found an American filter-tip cigarette with lipstick on it still burning in an ashtray on a low wicker table.

Parker felt as much as heard someone behind him. He whirled around, his gun ready, but there was no point to it. There were two of them. They carried Chinese-made SKS carbines and had him neatly bracketed between them. Even if he got one, the other would surely get him. They were young and they had that mindless wild-eyed look of trigger-itchy adolescents that in Asia means they might kill you even if ordered not to.

One of them shouted something, and although Parker didn't understand the language he was using, there was no mistaking the meaning.

Parker dropped his gun.

One of them sneered, then kicked him in the stomach. As he doubled over, gasping, they knocked him down with the butts of their rifles. Parker curled into a fetal position as they began a merciless beating, but at a barked command, they stopped as suddenly as they had started.

From his position on the deck, Parker could just make out a figure in the doorway, the face hidden in shadow. Parker struggled painfully to a sitting position. There was a sharp pain when he moved, and he wondered if they'd broken a rib. He started to wince, then stopped himself. Never show weakness to an Asian, ran the Langley credo. Bad face. Instead, always take the initiative.

"What's the meaning of this outrage? I'm an American official and I demand—" Parker began.

With a flick of his finger, the shadowy figure brushed aside his tirade as if it were a fly. The two guards grinned at him like gargoyles.

“Few things are more ridiculous than someone in your position making demands,” the figure said excellent, though accented, English.

“Where’s the girl?”

“She served her purpose. Now you will serve yours,” the figure said.

The voice was oddly familiar. Where had he heard it before? What the hell was going on? Parker wondered. Still, he had to try to establish some kind of control over the situation before it was too late. He licked his lips. They felt like sandpaper. He was suddenly very thirsty.

“Both the American government and General Bhamornprayoon are fully aware—” Parker began again.

“Ah, a general,” the voice mocked. “I too am a general. There is no shortage of generals in Southeast Asia,” the figure said as he stepped into the light.

When Parker saw the general’s face he knew at once, with an overwhelming sense of sadness and certainty, that this truly was his last mission. He would never see the green hills of Virginia again. Because even after all these years, he immediately recognized the man in front of him.

“Hello, Pranh,” Parker said.

*Water tends to move earthward
away from heaven above.
In a situation where there is strife
the man knows how important first steps are.*

SOMETIMES an entire era can be evoked by the name of a local watering hole. The Deux Magots in Paris. Harry's Bar in Venice. The Caravelle in Saigon. And Houlihan's in Bangkok, Sawyer thought.

From the outside, it hadn't changed much since the rowdy days when B-52 crews from bases with names like Udorn, Ta Khli, and U-Tapao had nightly mingled with wild-eyed Marines on R 'n' I, light-fingered bargirls, and Chinese black marketeers who could sell you anything, including the contents of the overnight bag you had left back at your hotel. In those days Houlihan's had been a kind of discount store for used intelligence. Low-grade stuff like the locations of military units and MAC leaks to journalists. Sawyer remembered how Barnes used to say that information was Houlihan's third most popular commodity after sex and dope, in that order.

"What about booze?" Parker had demanded. He was falling-down drunk at the time and pronounced it "boosh." A marine sergeant at the next table, thinking Parker had said, "Buddhists," had yelled out "Fuck the Buddhists!" at which point the girl in his lap with the see-through blouse tried to scratch his eyes out, starting a riot that almost closed the place down.

"Ah, booze, the stuff that takes the suffering away. Whiskey is the Catholic version of Buddhism, you might say. Not even a distant fourth," Barnes had replied, ignoring the mayhem around them and talking in a deep County Cork brogue that lacked nothing despite the fact that he wasn't Irish and had never spoken that way before.

Houlihan's.

Although the *H* in the neon sign was out, which meant that it was safe to approach, Sawyer lingered near the noodle stall on the corner.

He watched the three-wheeled samlors and motor scooters put-putting through the traffic, looking for anyone who spent more time looking at Houlihan's than at the mayhem of traffic around him. There were always a few low-level agents on scooters patrolling the red-light district, the grunts of the intelligence business. He took his time to check the windows and roofs of every building with a view of Houlihan's entrance. Safe was always better than sorry, he thought, remembering with a little inward grin Koenig's famous dictum about how paranoids would make good agents if they weren't so trusting.

The afternoon sun sent ripples of heat through the gasoline haze. The air felt thick and greasy. It lay over the city like a pool of stagnant water, smelling of Prek-kk-noo pepper and burning joss and diesel fumes, the scents that, even if you were blindfolded, would tell you you're in Asia. The neon light from the bars and go-go joints, the cars moving in bumper-to-bumper convoys like schools of fish, the goggle-eyed tourists glancing left and right as they moved slowly through the oppressive heat, made Sawyer think of an aquarium. Soi Cowboy as a living exhibit of man's underside, Sawyer thought, and he wondered why he had been stupid enough to come back to Asia.

What was it the Japanese said? "Every man must climb Mount Fuji at least once; but only a fool h

to climb it twice.” What does that make me? he asked himself as he crossed the street to Houlihan’s, having verified that there was no outside surveillance.

Inside the bar it was dark and cool as a cave. The meeting had been timed for the late afternoon lull and the place was almost empty, except for a couple of bored bargirls plying drinks to a bleary-eyed British sailor, and Barnes himself at his old stand behind the bar, polishing a glass and listening to the kick-boxing returns on the radio.

One of the bargirls got up from the table and started to come toward him, and the Vietnamese word to beat it, “di di mau,” almost popped out of his mouth. The feeling of déjà vu was very powerful, and he had to remind himself that the war had ended a long time ago. He hadn’t thought the memories would be so strong. Sweat began to prickle along his entire body. But he should have expected it, he reminded himself. Memory is stimulated by environment. If you want to remember long-forgotten scenes from your childhood, go back to the old neighborhood. He shook her off and headed for the bar.

Barnes looked up as Sawyer approached, but his face showed no sign of surprise or even recognition. He was still a pro, Sawyer thought as he ordered a beer. He wondered if Barnes had recognized him right away, or had he changed so much? Sawyer stared at his own reflection in the peeling mirror behind the bar. He was wearing civvies now: a short-sleeved shirt and light-colored tropical slacks. That was different. And the black eye-patch of course, which made him look like a cross between a pirate and a shirt ad. But the dark hair and the aquiline looks hadn’t changed. Or the odd green color of his good eye. Perhaps the lines around the mouth, he thought. Older, more cynical. He wondered if the idealistic young soldier he had been would like how he had turned out. Somehow he didn’t think so.

Well, they all had changed.

He watched Barnes draw the beer with those big beefy hands that, according to legend, could squeeze coins into lumps of metal. He noticed that Barnes still wore the same hai-huang amulet on a CIA gold chain around his neck, breakable into separate links for instant currency. But Barnes had aged, he thought. His close-cropped hair had gone completely gray. His skin had also gone elephant gray. His eyes had a disconcerting glaze; the pupils were pin points, and Sawyer wondered what Barnes was smoking these days. Looking at him, it was hard to believe that in his time Barnes had been one of the greats. They’d called him “Mad Max” in those days because he had once charged his jeep into an NLF village—armed only with GVN propaganda leaflets and, as he put it, “a .45 in my jockstrap.”

In those days everyone in Nam with a “Get Out of Jail Free” card knew Barnes, Sawyer remembered. An ex-marine sergeant, Barnes was one of the CIA’s early counterinsurgency agents. He had earned his spurs in the Philippines doing what the Company used to call “agitprop,” which was a euphemism for a campaign of sabotage launched against the Hukbalahaps. That was back in the early fifties when Barnes, working for the already legendary Colonel Ted Lanigan, helped engineer Magsaysay’s election. When Lanigan became CIA station chief in Saigon in ’55, Barnes came with him.

Some of Barnes’ feats in those days became CIA myths, like the time Barnes managed to contaminate the oil supply depot in Hanoi and ruin the engines of almost every truck and bus in North Vietnam. Later, after using massive bribes to subvert the Hoa Hao and Cao Dai sects, Barnes ran a double agent who led the Binh Xuyen, Bay Vien’s bandit army, into an ambush, thereby bringing Ngô Đình Diem to power in Saigon. “After Dien Bien Phu and the Emperor Bao Dai abdicated, Saigon was like a whorehouse without a madam. The Colonel and me, we *invented* South Vietnam, for Chrissakes,” Barnes used to proclaim to skeptical newcomers sucking down gin and tonics at the Caravelle. Whether it was true or not, Sawyer knew for a fact that Barnes was the point man who seven years later launched the CIA-sponsored coup, led by Generals Don and Minh, that finally

toppled that same Diem and the rest of the notorious Ngo family.

By then Lanigan was long gone, replaced by Donaldson and Secretary of Defense McNamara's new style paramilitary CIA teams, whom Barnes used to privately call "McNamara's Ragtime Band," and even Barnes began to lose the faith.

There was a tinny growl from the radio as the crowd cheered. They must be broadcasting live from Lumpini stadium, Sawyer thought.

"May one purchase an Elephant lottery ticket here?" Sawyer asked Barnes, beginning the series.

According to Langley, the sequence was required even between agents who already know each other in order to verify that both are legitimately involved in the operation.

"You get better odds on the sporting wagers," Barnes replied.

"Who is favored in the main event?"

"Samsook, the Tiger of Raiburi, is unbeatable at four to one." Barnes shrugged.

"Yet even the unbeatable can be beaten."

"The will of heaven is inscrutable." Barnes grinned, letting Sawyer know that he recognized him by the twinkle in his eye.

He leaned confidentially across the bar.

"Watch your ass on this one, Brother Jack," he whispered.

"Jai yen yen," Sawyer agreed. Literally translated, the Thai saying meant "heart cool cool." The master one's emotions was more than a virtue in Asia. It was the only way to survive.

But Barnes still looked troubled.

"I mean it, amigo. Asia's not what it was."

"What is?"

Barnes nodded. He looked as if he wanted to say something more, then his face brightened artificially.

"Shit. Here comes the fucking Nippo leather set," he whispered sotto voce, a big shit-eating grin on his face.

"What'll it be, gents?" he called out loudly, moving to serve a pair of Japanese businessmen sporting the ever-present cameras dangling around their necks like a tribal folk emblem.

Sawyer hesitated to make sure no one was paying any attention to him, then went through the beaded curtain and up the stairs to Room 5 as indicated by Barnes (four plus one). Most of the girls hadn't shown up for work yet, and the corridor was empty. The unmistakable scent of opium seemed to permeate the walls, and the sound of a pi-nai came from behind the door. Sawyer knocked four times, then once, and went in.

The room smelled of stale perfume and sex and bamboo, from the matting on the wall, and over the empty bed in the corner was the inevitable calendar picture of the Swiss Alps that for some reason every bargirl in Asia seemed to cherish.

Harris was already waiting.

He glanced ostentatiously at his watch to remind Sawyer that he was late, then seemed to think better of it and gestured for him to sit down. As Sawyer sat at the rattan table, Harris poured them both cold glasses of Singha beer from sweating bottles. As a professional courtesy, Harris let Sawyer see where he could watch the door. But he played it by the book, turning up the pi-nai music on the radio and running the tap in the sink. The plumbing chug-chugged like a boat engine that wouldn't start, then settled down to a slow gush of tobacco-colored water.

Harris mopped his forehead with a soggy handkerchief. There were big sweatstains under his arms, and Sawyer felt a secret delight at his discomfort. They couldn't stand each other, but being American males, they disguised their mutual dislike with elaborate attempts at sincerity.

"How's Rio? They still have those sexy cariocas in those teeny string bikinis?" Harris asked.

putting the kind of leer into his voice men use when they want to prove they're one of the boys.

It was a lie, of course. Rio was for the record. In fact, Harris had yanked Sawyer from the Managua operation. Brazil was the official cover because of congressional resistance to anti-Sandinista operations in Nicaragua.

"Either the girls are getting bigger or the bikinis are getting smaller," Sawyer replied, grinning back at Harris. It was a game anyone could play.

Of any of them, Harris had changed the least, Sawyer thought. He still had the fair hair, tennis-court tan, and the kind of clean-cut features that ad directors identify with a "young American executive" look. A little sleeker, maybe. In his designer-label tropical suit, Harris could have been taken for a diplomat or a successful businessman. In fact, he was the CIA's Deputy Director for Cover Operations, and it was said that he never asked a question to which he didn't already know the answer.

It was also said that he never told the truth unless he thought no one would believe him.

"Do you like 'Sawyer'?" Harris asked.

He was really asking if the cover story was acceptable. It was light cover basically designed for initial entry, not deep penetration. He was supposed to be an American Red Cross representative here to coordinate support for the refugee camps near the Cambodian border. They had supplied him with the usual documents, marked up and smudged work papers and so on. More than adequate for an initial scrutiny or airport check. All genuine; the Company was always good that way. The cover name "Sawyer" had been supplied by the computer back at Langley, and Sawyer suspected that the program was running through a children's literature data base, because his name came from Mark Twain and Harris' code name for this op was "Tin Man."

Sawyer shrugged.

"If it's not okay, give me a day and I can change it," Harris offered.

"It's okay."

"How was the flight?"

This kind of solicitousness was way out of character for Harris, and it irritated Sawyer more than Harris' usual know-it-all smirk. Sawyer suddenly felt like a mischievous kid about to kick over the milk pail. Anything to get Harris out of his "Pass Lady Bracknell the cucumber sandwiches" mode.

"I hope you didn't drag me all the way to Bangkok with a Cherokee just to make small talk," Sawyer snapped.

A Cherokee code in a cable was the highest urgency level for open communications, and because of it, Sawyer had left an operation in pieces and Ricardo would have to scramble on his own. Langley rules and nobody likes it, and during the long flight hours he had entertained himself by thinking up a dozen different ways to nail Harris' balls to the wall unless Harris had a damn good reason for all this.

Harris flushed, although Sawyer couldn't tell whether it was from anger or embarrassment.

"We have a little problem here," Harris admitted.

"First the Cherokee. Now this." Sawyer gestured vaguely at the room, because the fact that they had to use such a known location for the rdv meant they'd had to set things up in a hurry. "You're beginning to worry me, Bob. What happened? Somebody get it caught in the zipper?"

Harris winced. He obviously disapproved of Sawyer's lack of Company style. But he didn't object. That worried Sawyer even more.

He studied Harris carefully. Harris was an actor, he reminded himself. He didn't feel emotion. He used it.

If he was acting now, it was because something had gone wrong.

Even Barnes had warned him on this one. And Harris had flown out from Washington to brief him on himself. That meant they were blown.

Basically, there were three kinds of mission failure. Counter-penetration. Public exposure. And the

blow-up, which was the worst, not only because you also get the first two and more, but because the whole thing has fallen apart and the Opposition will be waiting to pick off anyone coming over the wall.

Salvage operations, as they were called, had almost a 100 percent mortality rate, and the Langley wisdom was that the only surer way to get rid of an agent than a Mafia hit squad was to send him on a salvage mission.

“It’s salvage, isn’t it, Bob?” Sawyer asked quietly.

Harris was good, Sawyer thought. Instead of looking at Sawyer, he lifted his glass and studied it with the calculated intensity of a college Hamlet contemplating Yorick’s skull. When he put it down, Harris was careful to keep both hands in sight. He must’ve gotten that from my file, Sawyer thought with a little inward smile. “Never make any move that might represent a threat to the subject. The agent is dangerous at all times, with or without a weapon.”

“Like I said, Jack. We have a little problem here,” Harris admitted at last.

Understatement was Harris’ style—like the British habit of calling World War II the “last unpleasantness”—and hearing Harris admit to a little problem was the worst sign yet. Sawyer felt a icy shiver slide down his spine. When he was a child, they used to say that when you got that feeling someone had just stepped on your grave.

“I’m listening,” he said.

Harris took his time, as if telling Sawyer wasn’t a foregone conclusion. It was a little like watching a woman who’s already invited you into her bedroom and changed into a sexy negligee debate with herself as to whether she was going to do it or not.

“One of our agents is missing,” Harris said.

Salvage.

“You want me to find him?” Sawyer asked finally.

Harris looked directly into Sawyer’s good eye for the first time. He was keeping it under control, but Sawyer could sense the desperation underneath. Harris hated his guts. He hadn’t called Sawyer because he liked him, but because his career was on the line.

“I want you to replace him,” Harris said.

“Who was it?”

Harris shook his head.

“Need to know,” he remarked primly.

In a way, Harris was within his rights, Sawyer reflected. A case officer was only supposed to give an agent enough data to do his job and not encumber him with information that might distract him or worse, fall into enemy hands.

Except that Sawyer wasn’t having any of it. It was bad enough to walk into a minefield, but he was damned if he was going to do it with his eye closed. He finished his beer and stood up. Over his head the ceiling fan revolved slowly as the world, barely stirring the air.

“This isn’t a briefing for CTP trainees, Bob. You don’t want to tell me who it is, replace him yourself,” Sawyer said.

Harris reddened. Sawyer wondered if he hadn’t gone too far. Then he told himself that with someone like Harris, there was no such thing as too far.

Whatever Harris’ real reaction, he obviously thought better of it. Harris’ smile reminded Sawyer of the kind of smile an attorney whose client has been caught cold on tape might use when he tells the jury it was police entrapment.

“It was Parker. Mike Parker. Running under the cover name ‘Hawkins.’ He seems to have vanished into thin air,” Harris said carefully. He concentrated on pouring the rest of the beer into his glass.

Sawyer felt the sudden urge for a cigarette. He hadn’t touched one in ten years, and all at once the

craving had returned.

~~“I believe you knew him, didn’t you?” Harris asked a shade too casually, as if he hadn’t gone over Sawyer’s file with a fine-tooth comb before setting this up. As if Cambodia had never happened.~~

The sounds of the pi-nai on the radio faded like dying hopes in the hot still air.

“In the Parrot’s Beak. I remember that real well,” Sawyer said.

“Things are different now,” Harris said, disapproval in his tone, as if memories, like warranties were supposed to expire after a certain length of time.

Neither of them said anything. Outside, they could hear a furious street argument in singsong Thai. A woman cried out, and then the arguing was drowned out by the sound of a samlor with a bad muffler roaring by.

Harris waited, like a good salesman who knows that once he’s made his pitch he has to let the customer argue himself into the deal. From somewhere came the tinny wail of a Chinese love song and for no reason it reminded Sawyer of a line from Kipling. Something about “a fool who tried to hustle the East,” and he knew he was hooked and that that son of a bitch Harris had known it all along. Because it was Asia. Because he had left a part of himself here. Maybe the best part. Asia. Like a schoolboy picking at a scab, we just can’t leave it alone, he thought.

“What’s the mission?” Sawyer asked at last.

Harris leaned forward, his forearms on the table. His eyes were very blue and very cold.

“We want you to start a war,” Harris said.

*A fire beneath the open sky.
The superior man distinguishes
things according to their kinds
and classes.*

THE dragon sailed slowly across the sky, its long red tail unfurled like a banner. It was a big male, Chula, although so high up it was hard to tell how big. When it turned back toward them, they could see a smaller female Pakpao caught in its bamboo talons. Far below it, a second female kite, a petite Pakpao with a silvery tail, darted through the air currents like a fish desperately fleeing the inevitable. She flew into and then broadside to the wind, flaring to throw him off, but the Chula was not to be denied. He came around in ever tightening circles until the Pakpao had nowhere to go but up or down, riding the thermals like an elevator. Even then he waited, hovering high above her, unmoving, his paper wings and tail fully outstretched, as she began her last pathetic ascent.

The swoop, when it came, was hard and fast. The Chula dropped nearly a hundred feet in a few seconds, and just when it seemed he might miss the Pakpao altogether, his handlers brought his nose up sharply, snaring her with the bamboo hook. But the Pakpao suddenly somersaulted in the same direction. The tail, its embedded razors glittering in the hot sun, whipped across the Chula's main control string. All at once she was free, soaring high in triumph as the big Chula tumbled out of the sky like a broken thing. It fell for what seemed like a long time before finally smashing itself on the muddy surface of the river.

The elegantly dressed guests assembled on the terrace broke into loud applause, and as the triumphant Pakpao team bowed and scrambled for coins thrown down to the quay, everyone began to move back under the gold-colored awning. Above the murmur of voices and the tinkle of cocktail shakers, Sawyer could hear the god-awful voice of the Swiss chargé d'affaires' wife—the one in yards of rose tulle that made her look like a pink chicken—wondering if it was over and who won.

“Wonderful performance. Wonderful,” the American press attaché gushed. He was a moon-faced little man named Schwartz, with the small feet and odd dancer's grace fat men sometimes have. “It's the Thai national sport. They take their kite fighting very seriously here,” they overheard him explain to the local stringer for an international news magazine, a man whose only previous interest in sports was watching naked women wrestle in mud. Schwartz's round sweating face was beaming as he passed by, oblivious to the look thrown at him by Sir Geoffrey Hemmings, the British consul. They all watched Schwartz two-step over to the press table to make sure their glasses were filled and that they got their handouts.

“Extraordinary kite fight, that. In the end the female does a flip-flop and destroys the male. Almost a metaphor for the battle between the sexes, mightn't one say?” Sir Geoffrey asked, a polite smile failing to mask the wicked gleam in his eye.

“Don't be boring, Geoffrey. You think you're being provocative, but it isn't. It's just boring,” Lady Caroline said, touching her tongue to her lip to check her lipstick.

“It's not boring, dearest. It's small talk. That's my job,” he said wearily, and Sawyer caught in his voice the dead echo of a theme replayed over and over again in a marriage.

“Small men make small talk,” Lady Caroline retorted, turning back toward Sawyer. “I take it you’re a British subject too?” she asked, brushing close enough for her breasts to graze his arm. It was deliberate and she meant for her husband to see it. Not that anyone could have missed it. She was wearing a white silk number cut so low it would have been considered obscene if it hadn’t carried the label of an Italian designer the cost of whose creations could pay off the national debt of a small Third World country.

“No, American actually,” Sawyer replied. He hadn’t meant to say “actually” and just threw it in at the last second to be consistent with the British character she had just bestowed upon him.

“American. Ah, that’s so much cleverer to be these days,” she said.

“For God’s sake, Caroline,” Sir Geoffrey sputtered, and for a moment they were all embarrassed for him.

“Don’t swear, Geoffrey dear. You might be overheard and the Thais take offense so easily,” she said, reddening. It made her look younger, and Sawyer could see how pretty she must have been once. She was still attractive, with the kind of well-used yet sleek blond lines that immediately suggested images of thoroughbred horses and fast white yachts and shuttered afternoons with a tennis instructor. She reminded Sawyer of the few women in his past whom he had known from the first were out of his league. And because he had known it—and maybe they did too—and because he was younger, he had treated them badly, worse than he had ever intended to, and oddly enough, that only made them want him even more. As he watched Lady Caroline bring her admittedly superb breasts to bear on him, he wondered with a touch of sadness if those women in his past had also finally gone sour, like wine kept in a bottle too long.

“You’re looking at one of the great triumphs of modern technology,” Barnes had said, pointing her out when they first arrived. “Lady Caroline Hemmings. Age fifty and not a wrinkle or a stretch mark anywhere. You name it. Eyes, chin, hair, tits, thighs, ass. There isn’t a part of her that hasn’t been redone at least once. There are whole Swiss plastic surgery clinics named after her.”

At the moment, Barnes was leering expectantly at her like a man about to hear the punch line of a dirty joke, but she ignored him entirely to concentrate on Sawyer.

Sir Geoffrey coughed politely as though about to say something, and Sawyer decided that he was the diffident sort who would always do that. Except that his shyness might have been what the Company tacticians called “misdirection,” because Sir Geoffrey was also the local head of MI6 and was rumored to have once worked with Sir Robert Thompson’s tough counterinsurgents in Malaya.

“You, uh, mustn’t mind Caroline,” Sir Geoffrey explained. “And please don’t flatter yourself into thinking she’s flirting with you personally. The only requirement she’s ever had for anyone is that he wear a pair of trousers.”

There was a burst of laughter from a nearby group, and the small Thai orchestra in native silks started up an excruciating rendition of an old Beatles song. For an instant the jangled rhythms and Asian quarter tones took Sawyer back in time to that French cabaret on Tu Do Street in Saigon and he almost missed the look that passed between Lady Caroline and her husband.

“Don’t apologize for me, Geoffrey. Besides, it’s all bloody nonsense. There isn’t a farang man worth having in this whole bloody town.”

“What about slant-eyed men?” Barnes put in crudely.

Lady Caroline smiled the kind of smile the English upper class reserves for members of the lower class who don’t know their place.

“Don’t be silly, darling. Asian men all have such tiny cocks,” she said, nimbly plucking a glass of champagne from a tray carried by a white-coated waiter as she waltzed over to another circle of guests.

The three men were left standing there, each with his own thoughts, or maybe they all shared the

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