

China, 1921. Jake Greenberg has just delivered guns to Mao-lin. War is imminent and the city has been shaken by the brutal murder of a famous American missionary. Jake must find the murderer as enemy airplanes begin bombing the city.

West of Shanghai

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West of Shanghai

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One

Mao-lin, Central China. October 24, 1921

The Reverend Steven Walder felt well satisfied with the evening. He had had an excellent dinner--roast pork with apples--and a stimulating conversation with the only other intellect in the city, Dr. Schmidt, followed by sex with the inventive Mrs. Elisabeth Ramsey. It was a little after 2 a.m. when Walder tugged the brim of his hat down, turned up his collar, and stepped out into the cold fall night. He closed the Ramsey's door behind him, careful not to make a sound.

Walder looked up. Despite wisps of ground fog, the stars were brilliant, perfectly defined beacons in the black sky. It was one of the few joys of being stuck in rural China, he thought. No big city lights and smoke to blur his view of the sky. He only paused for a moment. "Have to hurry," he said to himself and smiled. He loved intrigue, living on the edge. For him it was an antidote to the boredom of living away from Shanghai. He started to whistle, but caught himself. How to get to this meeting without being noticed? he wondered. Hilltop, the foreign enclave set on a high ridge overlooking Mao-lin, was surrounded by a wall and patrolled by a private police force of Indians, all former soldiers of the British Army.

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He looked at his pocket watch, angling it back and forth until it caught enough moonlight for him to read the dial. It said 2:10. He had twenty minutes to get to the abandoned Buddhist temple in the valley behind Hilltop. For a moment he played with the idea of going over the wall. There was a spot he knew where a tree grew close to the wall. But the wall was ten feet high and topped with broken glass imbedded in the brick. Aside from his bedroom exploits, Walder had done nothing athletic in years. Worse, he couldn't possibly talk his way out if he were caught by a patrol. Not that the police would arrest him. Their job was to keep the Chinese out. There would be a fuss, word would seep out, and in the little world of foreigners in Mao-lin, he would be acutely embarrassed. No, he decided, he would have to use the gate.

Walder walked faster along the wide street lined with sycamore trees laid out to look like an expensive suburb in England. He went past the looming dark hulk of the Socony man's house. Walder blew out a plume of damp air. Averill, the oil man, was a dunce and his wife a bore. He'd never get that promotion to his head office in Shanghai he lusted for, and he'd never learn how to bid a bridge hand.

At the corner, he turned left and walked even faster. Walder was sweating now. Even though he was only 41, he had put on weight in China, giving him a portly profile which he rather liked, feeling it added to his stature and dignity. He was, by far, the best known Baptist missionary along the Yangtze River and, certainly the largest money-raiser. His last series of "Save-the-Godless-Chinese" speeches in America had brought in contributions that broke all records. By next year he was sure he would be sitting at mission headquarters in Shanghai. The thought of Shanghai made him smile.

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He noted that a light was on in Mason's house. He wondered what the scrawny little bachelor was doing up this late. Walder couldn't imagine he had a woman with him. No, not Mason. He seemed to have no interest in life other than his telegraph and telephone lines. Hardly ever came to drinks parties, although one of the wives (he couldn't remember which) had told him she had seen Mason up in Hankow, gambling heavily at the Macao Casino. Perhaps that was his vice. Every man needed at least one.

"Damn," Walder mumbled to himself as he got close to the guardhouse. "Sergeant Kamila." The big black devil was the worst of them. Always just short of being insolent. If he had his way, he'd fire the lot. One day he'd have enough council votes to do it.

At the gate, the big Indian's face showed no expression, as if it was commonplace to have a resident of Hilltop appear in the middle of the night. He clicked his heels and whipped his hand up to his yellow turban in a perfect military salute.

"Good morning, sir. Is there something wrong?"

"If there was," Walder said, eyeing the stripes on Kamila's arm, "you should know without me having to come here and tell you."

"Merely inquiring, sir."

Walder glared at Kamila. He noticed another guard standing in the doorway of the guardhouse, but he ignored him. Kamila was always the bother.

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"Where are you going, sir?"

"It's no business of yours."

"Rules, sir. Midnight to dawn we have to log everyone in or out."

Walder felt cold anger rising in his chest. He glared at Kamila for a moment, then said, "I'm going to my clinic. Do you want to know why?" The clinic, attached to his church in town, was the only hospital for miles around. It was his creation and he was truly proud of it. It also provided him with a wonderful excuse to be out at night.

"No, sir. But you should have an escort, sir. It's dangerous to be out alone at this time of night. Thieves and soldiers, sir. I can--."

"No. No, Sergeant. I don't need one." Walder pulled the brim of his fedora down with a sharp tug and brushed by Kamila.

"Very good, sir," Kamila called after him as Walder walked quickly away from the guardhouse and started down the steep twisting road that led to Mao-lin.

The Chinese city lay beneath him, a sprinkling of light snaking along the Yangtze from the old walled village on his right, where Mao-lin began centuries ago, to the Tortoise Hill pagoda at the eastern edge of town. Walder rarely went into the old Chinese town and then he used a sedan chair. He didn't like the crowds and the squalor of the tightly packed streets. He felt much more comfortable in the river-side offices of the foreign

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companies, the town's one decent hotel, and its two passable restaurants. Everything else was just China.

The road turned to the left so that it ran parallel to the wall surrounding Hilltop. Directly below him now, in the middle of what was called the New Town, was his church and clinic. There was a light burning in the clinic. Dr. Schmidt rarely slept, Walder knew, and drank a lot, but the German had a brilliant mind when it wasn't clouded by brandy. It was a weakness that made Walder feel superior to the German even when he lost to him, as he usually did, at chess.

Walder didn't look back. He knew with a few more steps he would be out of the guard's sight. He could feel Kamila's eyes on him. Did he suspect something? It took all of Walder's self-control not to glance over his shoulder.

Where the road switched back to the right, Walder continued walking straight ahead, through the scrub at the base of the wall. He would have to hurry to get around the wall and down the hill to the ruined temple in time. What was this meeting about? The note delivered by a message coolie didn't say except to promise profit. That was interesting, but it was the faint hint of perfume on the note that aroused his curiosity. Who could it be? He had read the note several times, smelled it, fingered the paper, and finally burned it in his ashtray. No point in taking chances. His office was not safe from either his wife or the servants.

Walder glanced down at the river and stopped short. A large junk was anchored in the middle of the deep water channel near where the Nan River emptied into the Yangtze. Fog swirled around it, giving it the appearance of a mountain

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top surrounded by clouds. When did it arrive? He would have to find out tomorrow. He knew that General Shan, the warlord who controlled Mao-lin and the surrounding mountains, was waiting for something. Rumors of another war had been circulating for weeks. Perhaps there are guns on board. If so, mission headquarters in Shanghai must be told. It could mean another war with General Feng, Shan's rival for the eastern half of the province. With the central government a hopeless joke, all missionary groups kept a close watch on the little wars across China. Warlord soldiers were a nasty bunch, usually hungry and almost never paid. Looting was commonplace, and rape, though never openly talked about, happened often. He felt no alarm about a war. Along the Yangtze, patrolling Western gunboats kept the missionaries safe. It was the fools who had taken posts deep in the interior who were at risk. But it would be a feather in my cap, he thought, to telegraph important news to Shanghai. Show I'm on top of things. With a final glance at the junk, he hurried on, feeling full of energy despite the hour.

"You'll get the boot, if you keep that up," Corporal Singh said.

Sergeant Kamila shrugged and swirled the tea around in his mug. "Don't like the fat bastard. Always looks like he smells something bad when he talks to you. He's one of the nasty ones. I can always get a job in Shanghai. Everybody needs guards."

"Pay's better here."

Kamila shrugged his big shoulders again and settled into a canvas chair across the field table from Singh. "The fat one isn't

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going to the clinic like he said. Didn't see him come out on the lower road. Maybe he has a new dolly." Kamila took a sip of tea and grimaced. It had gone cold. "I have half a mind to follow him. See what he does. Which house did he come out of?"

"Didn't see anything on my last round." Singh filled his pipe with sweet smelling tobacco.

"Ever hear him in his church?"

Singh shook his head.

"I went there once. Just to see what it's like. All against sin, he is, and heathens like us. You'd think he was God's gift. I just may kill the pig some day."

Singh laughed nervously. "Just wait, some husband will do it for you."

Walder picked his way through the undergrowth on the hill, digging his heels into the hard soil to slow his pace. The ruined temple was on a patch of bottom land in a thicket of small trees. It was a good place to meet. Most of the locals, full of superstitions, avoided the place after dark.

Walder paused half way down the hill, lifted his hat, and wiped his face with a large white handkerchief. It would not do to arrive all sweaty and out of breath. Far up the valley he could see the camp fires of General Shan's army. Evil man, Walder said to himself. A false Christian, the worst kind of Chinese. And Shan's soldiers were no better than bandits. He had spoken against men like Shan from pulpits up and down the river when

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he was a guest speaker, but not in Mao-lin. Protection offered by the gunboats would only go so far. Walder had no doubt Shan would like to send him packing or do something nastier to him. For an instant, he thought of Emilie Sorokin. How could she sleep with a Chinaman like Shan? He shook his head as if it would clear the thought of them together from his mind. But he thought of her often.

He stuffed his damp handkerchief into his breast pocket and turned his attention to the ruined temple. He saw no movement in the trees. A kernel of apprehension began to grow. For a moment he considered turning around and going home, then pushed the thought away as a shiver of excitement passed through him. Any diversion, especially a potentially lucrative one, was too good to pass up.

The ruin was a circular stone platform on which three half-destroyed pillars stood like sentries silhouetted in the moonlight. There was no roof, and the remains of several collapsed pillars littered the ground nearby. Walder stopped by the edge of the trees, standing silently, looking to his right and then to his left. He heard nothing, not even the chirping of night creatures. The bits of ground fog and absolute quiet made him nervous. He hesitated, then edged through the trees, and stepped up onto the platform. The only sign that others had been here were a dozen or so cheap Chinese statuettes, some wilted flowers, and a few burnt-down candles. Was this some kind of joke?

"I'm glad you came."

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Walder spun around, feeling a flush of panic shoot up his body into his face. His eyes strained to see, but the voice could have come from anywhere. He paused, took a breath, and said in a voice sounding far calmer than he felt, "Where are you?"

"Come join me by the columns."

Walder could see a dark shape step into the moonlight from behind the center column. He moved forward, close enough to see the person's face. "Well, I must say I'm surprised to see *you*. We are," he hesitated, searching for just the right words, "from different camps."

"Not as different as you may think. I have a proposal for you. Something that just may be good for us both. Come closer. I don't want our voices to carry."

Walder smiled. "Certainly." He stepped close to the dark figure.

"You dislike General Shan. I've heard from friends up river you preach against him all the time."

"I've never used his name," Walder said quickly, wondering where the conversation was going. Without thinking he took a step back. He wanted to look behind him, but knew he would look weak and foolish. Despite the cool night air, he began to sweat heavily.

"Nevertheless, your target was clear."

"What do you want?"

"Would you like to get rid of him?"

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"Why would you want to do that? I might, but you?"

"There is a lot you don't understand. What if there was a large contribution...for you to use anyway you wanted? Would you help us?"

Walder suddenly turned and looked around, not caring what impression he made.

"Don't worry. It's only you and me here. No one else."

"Do I have to decide here and now? I don't know. Shan is a hard man. If it ever came to light that I was involved..."

"I'm involved. And there are others. Important people."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Later. That comes later. Now we need your commitment to our cause. We will work together...closely...and protect each other. We need your influence in Shanghai. Think of what you can gain personally by getting rid of Shan. What do you say?"

Sweat began to prickle Walder's scalp and roll down the side of his face. He ran his finger along his neck and pulled his stiff collar away from his skin. "I don't know. I need time to consider this. The risks. In my wildest dreams...I never considered...thought. I don't know. I'm a man of God, not a politician."

"Everything is politics."

"Who would replace him?" Walder asked. Even to his ears, the question sounded like a hollow play for time.

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The shadowy speaker ignored it. "Let me give you something to show our good faith." From a sack that lay at the base of a column, the speaker began pulling out neatly wrapped bundles of foreign currency, spreading them out on the stone platform.

Walder looked down at the bundles. "How much is there?" His voice was hoarse with tension.

"Count it yourself. It's all American dollars and pound sterling notes. No worthless Chinese money. That's just the start. You can have profit and honor from this. Shanghai will be pleased, won't they?"

Walder went down on one knee and riffled through the first bundle, adding rapidly as the notes flipped by his fingers. Even as he counted, a part of his mind considered the possibilities presented by the money. Except in the area of romance, he was not a risk-taking man, but...

He never completed the thought. As Walder counted, the shadowy speaker slipped a heavy Chinese statuette out of the bag, slowly raised it up, and in a fierce two-handed arc smashed it down on Walder's head. With a grunt, Walder pitched forward on the money. Pain shot through his skull. Bright lights flashed before his eyes. He tried to raise his arm, but it wouldn't work. "Why?" came out as a moan. Then another massive pain ripped through his head and everything went black.

The dark figure looked down at Walder for a moment before taking a wire out of the bag and twisting it around

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Walder's throat, using a knee on the minister's back for leverage. Breathing hard, the dark figure waited a few moments, put a finger to Walder's throat, then shoveled the money back into the sack. The figure stood up, added the statuette to the others on the platform floor, picked up the bag, and hurried off through the dark thicket of trees.

Two

First light. A brisk wind from the west had pushed away the fog leaving the morning cold and raw.

An old sergeant, stumpy, bow-legged, but standing at rigid attention, held open the car door and saluted as General Shan Lu-king stepped down from his Ford touring sedan. Shan felt like an actor in a bad play as he looked over the hundred young and not-so-young men standing awkwardly in the open field. It was a necessary chore of leadership, but work he didn't like. Shan was a northerner, big and broad shouldered. His skin was pale yellow, and his large head was without hair except for a mustache that curled around his mouth. He had a large nose for a Chinese and eyes that were more round than almond. His tan uniform was pressed to a sharp edge and his Sam Brown belt, high-top boots, and holster glowed with polish. Behind his back, he knew his men called him, "The Tartar," and that was alright with him.

"Think you can make soldiers out of them?" Shan spoke without turning to Colonel Po, his field commander and his oldest friend. Po was a short, barrel-chested man with the creased, sun-darkened face of someone who has lived his life outdoors. They had been young banner men, soldiering together in an elite regiment under the old Manchu regime. For a long time they had taken different paths--Shan had gone to a missionary school, a military academy, and become an officer commanding a regiment of infantry. Po had become a bandit.

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Both were successful. Five years ago, when the Westerners were engaged in the Great War and the government in Peking began to disintegrate, they merged their forces and began attracting smaller bandit bands and displaced farmers until they had an independent army.

"I've seen worse," Po said. "They're in their first pair of shoes, most of them. First uniform. Where did you get them?"

"Here and there," Shan said. "Some are bandits, riff-raff, and criminals. Others just walked in. Hungry farmers. There's a drought in the east. I sent some people out to the villages." Shan smiled. "I collect them. You train them."

Po took his pipe out of his mouth and spit. "Are you going to make them Christians?"

"Why not? Until they become real soldiers, it will be the only thing they will have in common. They don't even speak the same dialect." Shan nodded to a young officer and two soldiers manning a small pumper as he walked toward the hundred recruits. He stopped and let his gaze sweep the formation. It was theater, but it was what they understood. "Soldiers," Shan shouted in a baritone that carried across the field. He spoke in the local dialect, assuming that at least some of the new men could understand him.

The recruits fell silent. Whether they understood him or not, Shan knew they respected a commanding figure. "Soldiers," Shan repeated. "This is Colonel Po, your leader." Shan pointed to his friend, who stood to his right. "You will follow his orders immediately...without delay...always. You have joined a modern army. We have rules that must be

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followed. If not, you will be punished or executed...killed. But you have been given shoes and a uniform and you will be given food and be paid regularly." Shan paused as he swung his gaze from right to left. He quietly said to Po, "Do you think they understood any of it?"

"Some of them might. Enough. They'll get it later."

Shan continued, "You are now the second regiment of the honorable Third Division." It was a grand designation for a group that wouldn't be a full strength company in any Western army. The new men looked at him blank-faced, but they would learn. Po was a hard man, but he knew how to mold men into a fighting force. "And you are all going to be Christians."

Shan turned to the young officer by the pumper. The young man ran to Shan dragging a fire hose across the grass. Shan took the nozzle and pointed it at the new men. "You are about to be baptized," he shouted. He nodded to the two men at the pumper. A moment later a stream of water sailed out of the nozzle. Shan played it back and forth over the stunned, soaked recruits. "You are all Christians now."

Colonel Po signaled to three old Chinese men--a trumpeter, a drummer, and trombone player--who had been standing behind the pumper. The three picked up their instruments and began to play a tune that was more or less, "Onward Christian Soldiers."

"Lieutenant," Shan shouted to the young officer. "March these men to camp and get them settled."

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Shan rubbed his stomach as he and Po watched the lieutenant and the old sergeant herd the recruits toward camp. Shan's stomach hurt again this morning. He tried to dismiss it, but today it was very painful.

"Is something wrong?" Po asked.

"No. Nothing." He forced a smile. "Well, this morning's work should make the good Reverend Walder's blood pressure rise."

"It will when he hears. And he surely will. Do you think it's worth it?"

"I do. You may not have time to fully train them."

"Is Feng moving toward us?"

"That's what I've heard."

"How reliable are the reports?" Po asked.

"Second hand information. We've heard nothing from our spies. The good news is that the guns have arrived."

Po's leathery face broke into deep creases when he smiled. "I was afraid something happened to them."

"They arrived late last night. The harbor master sent a runner to me about midnight. I'm headed to the harbor now. Do you have time to come?"

Po spit. "For eighty Maxim guns and three French 75's, I'd go anywhere. Can we pay for them?"

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"Your daughter says we can."

Jake Greenberg jerked awake as the anchor chain rattled against the capstan. Three Chinese sailors straining against their wooden staves were turning it, grunting "he-ho" with each step. He had fallen dead asleep leaning against the main hatch of the old junk called *Morning Calm*. Running a hand over the stubble on his jaw, he wondered how long he had been out. He was weary. No doubt about that. He hadn't had more than a couple of hours sleep a night for a week. The stubble was beginning to itch and the Colt .45 on his hip felt like a ton-weight. He looked around for the captain. The nasty pocked-faced martinet was aft at the wheel, watching his sailors work.

Jake held out his hands. There was only a little tremor. Better than yesterday. Not sleeping much was worse than anyone knew. He was jumpy all the time, trying hard not to show it, and when he did get a chance to shut his eyes, he'd have nasty war dreams and wake up disoriented and short of breath. He thought he was better than last year, but he wondered if he'd ever be the man he was before France.

He could see Mao-lin clearly now that the river mist had drifted away. They were only a hundred yards from their goal, but all he wanted to do was crawl into a bed and close his eyes. He thought about a cigarette. Jake had picked up the habit in the trenches and was trying to kick the monkey, but it was hard. He pulled his fleece-lined jacket close and checked the pocket where he usually kept a pack. Empty. Sighing, he remembered that he had thrown his last pack of Players in the river two nights ago. It had only been a week since they off-loaded the

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guns from a steamer out of Manila and began the run up the Yangtze. It felt like it had gone on forever.

Jake walked to the rail and watched Mao-lin slowly come to life. In the day's first glow he could make out the remains of the great wall that once surrounded the city and the vague shapes of barges, houseboats, sampans, and small junks crowding the wharfs. Just as a morning breeze sprung up carrying a whiff of night soil and the chanting of dock coolies, he heard the cabin door close and a moment later Chen, his partner, joined him at the rail.

"It's not Shanghai, Jake, but Mao-lin isn't bad. In the old days it was called Stopping Place. Not very elegant. Somewhere along the years it was changed. I had some family here. A long time ago, I lived here for a year. Couldn't wait to leave. I was very young." Chen was a middle-aged Chinese who looked older than he was. He was thin, with a long face, a nut-brown complexion, and eyes that were mere slits. He spoke excellent English, which had startled Jake when they first met, and had a surprisingly deep voice for a Chinese of medium height. Jake was 6' 2" and Chen came up to his jaw line. It was his hooded eyes that made him look sinister, Jake thought, but Chen had proved to be an honest man in a hard business.

"I'm just happy it's over," Jake said. It had been their deepest trip into the interior of China and their biggest sale. If all went well, it was his last delivery in the gun-running trade. The nature of the game had changed in the last six months. An arms race had begun. Warlords, desperate for expensive modern weapons and with only enough cash for a down payment, now often paid off gun sellers with a slit throat or a bullet in the back of the head. That is, if you could avoid the increasingly bold

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river pirates. The dice had gone cold. They both felt it was time to walk away from the table.

"It's over when we get paid and get on a river steamer back to Shanghai," Chen said, buttoning his jacket. He wore a lightly padded Chinese coat, dark pants tucked into boots, and a rakish Fedora. Although he looked the part of a seasoned gun-runner, this was actually Chen's first arms delivery. Up to now he had handled the sales and money end. Jake and another man, named Yang, had delivered the guns. But this time Yang had a change of heart and Chen stepped in at the last minute.

"Any question about getting paid?"

Chen struck a match, lit a thin brown cigar, and tossed the match into the muddy river. "I've known Shan since we were at school together." He blew out a plume of smoke. "We'll get our money. Nevertheless, I will feel better when we have been paid and on our way. I don't want to, as you say, hang around."

"War?" Jake said trying to sound relaxed, but the word scared him. He hoped Chen didn't catch it, but the Chinaman was sharp. Not that dying bothered him all that much. He had nobody waiting for him. What shook him was the thought of falling apart. Three years after the war, a car suddenly backfiring gave him the jumps. He had no idea what another war would do to his head. Tough old Sergeant Greenberg of the 48th Highlanders might just end up a mental case in a shell-shock ward. That was worse than dying.

"Shan didn't say when they would be fighting. It will be soon." Chen glanced away from Mao-lin to study Jake for a moment.

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"It could be on already. That plane might belong to Feng." They had been flown over yesterday at dusk by a lone biplane which had circled high above them for the better part of a half hour.

Chen nodded. "Could."

"Are you being an inscrutable Oriental again?"

Chen laughed, his smooth dark face gave way to horizontal lines around his eyes. "I didn't think Feng had an airplane. Shan never mentioned it and we talked a lot about what Feng had." Chen shrugged his shoulders. "But things change quickly. That is Shan's problem. He's good, and his man, Po, is a tough fighter. They will do well. Our job ends right over there at that pier."

The *Morning Calm* slowly began to turn, creaking ominously as it rounded to face the Yangtze's current. Jake glanced back at the captain on the wheel deck, who was playing his engine and rudder against the river. "The old son-of-bitch knows his way around the river."

"It took a while to find him. He used to be a river pirate."

"Turned honest?"

"As honest as he's going to get," Chen said. "I was worried about the river being low this time of year. With our load it could have been a problem. A cousin of mine recommended him. Said he was the best."

Jake turned and watched the pock-face captain for a moment and got an ominous half smile when their eyes met.

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"Not a guy I'd trust behind me." But that part of the business was Chen's call. Jake had enough to do searching Asia for the right weapons at the right price and riding herd on them until they were off-loaded at the mouth of the Yangtze onto their junk. It had worked well for two years--Jake the gun man, Chen the business man. Now it was over, Jake felt a little sad. He had money in the bank, a lot of it, but Chen was his best friend and they would see less of each other in the future. That was inevitable with the end of the partnership. "I'll wake Lin," Jake said turning away from the rail.

Lin, Shan's Aide, was asleep wrapped in a canvas sheet by the side of the main mast. Jake liked the young man, who technically was Shan's eyes and ears, watching over them. That lasted a day or two before Lin became part of the team, standing watch so that both Jake and Chen could catch a few hours sleep.

Jake shook him. No sign of awaking. He shook him harder. The kid could sleep through a typhoon, Jake thought. Great to be young. Finally, Lin stirred.

"You're almost home, young fella," Jake said.

Lin rolled over and jumped to his feet, fully awake in an instant. He threw off his sheet and ran to the rail, gazing at the town with a big grin on his handsome face. Lin had celebrated his 22nd birthday on the trip up river. He was solidly-built, not tall, but deep in the chest with broad shoulders. He had close cut dark hair and intense black eyes.

Jake watched Lin scan the busy waterfront street. "Looking for someone?"

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"No, Mr. Jake. No one. Just looking."

The *Morning Calm* slowly made its way against the current of the Yangtze, heading crab-wise toward the Mao-lin's floating pier, a rusted steel barge connected to a fixed pier by a wooden gangway.

"It's time," Chen said with a smile, "to learn our fate. Come here." Chen picked up a slender leather cylinder and pulled off the top. Jake watched him pull a single stick out and let the remaining sticks fall on the hatch cover.

"Ah. I-Ching," Lin said.

"The round-eye," Chen said, "doesn't believe. What about you, Lin? Would you like a reading? Or are you too educated for such superstitions?"

"I...yes, give me a reading," Lin said. Jake couldn't tell if he was interested or just deferring to an elder.

Chen nodded and began randomly dividing the sticks into two piles, his well-manicured fingers working quickly. Once he divided the sticks, he began separating the pile on his right into groups of four. "Soon, Lin Hong-yee, you will know your fate," Chen said lightly, smiling at the younger man.

In all his time with Chen, Jake never knew how seriously his Chinese partner took I-Ching. Sometimes he thought it was just a pastime, like Westerners playing solitaire. Other times he was not so sure.

"Now--" Chen began.

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"Quiet," Jake said sharply. He thought he had heard the faint buzz of an airplane, but he could see nothing. Then the sound was gone. Jake shook his head. "Sorry. My ears were playing tricks. Not as good as they used to be." While Chen slowly continued to count out sticks, Jake kept scanning the east, shading his eyes from the rising sun. That's what I'd do if I were a pilot, he thought. Come up over the mountains with the sun behind me.

"There it is." Jake spotted the airplane coming in low through a notch in the mountains. Just a speck at first. If it hadn't been moving, it would have been invisible. Its engine noise rose from a faint buzz to a clear-cut beat as it grew larger, diving along the curve of the mountains toward Mao-lin.

"Is it the same airplane?" Chen asked.

"I think so. It was too high yesterday to tell what it was. Sounds the same."

"Is he going to attack the city?" Lin asked.

"Can't tell what he has in mind. Better take the cover off the Maxim," Jake said, not taking his eyes off the biplane.

For several minutes Jake stood mesmerized, watching the plane circle the city. No one spoke. As it came around a second time, Jake whispered, "Go home. Go home. Now!" The biplane seemed to answer him. Suddenly, its engine roared, with a distinctive high-pitched whine.

Jake knew the sound. He had heard it often enough. A Hispano-Suiza at engagement speed. A black trail of exhaust

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smoke shot out of the engine as the biplane rolled into a dive heading toward them. Along the docks, people ran for cover.

"Quick," Jake yelled. "Lin, help me with the Maxim. Chen, the ammo box." Jake brushed Chen's I-Ching sticks away. He and Lin set the machine gun on the hatch cover.

Chen grabbed a metal ammunition box and slammed it down next to the gun. He threw back the lid, and pulled the ammunition belt out of the box. Jake clicked the belt into the side of the Maxim.

Almost at the same time, Jake could see the biplane's two machine guns flashing. A line of water spouts raced toward the junk. "Get down," Jake yelled as he lined up the Maxim and squeezed the trigger. The Maxim clattered and vibrated in his hands as the biplane raked the junk. Machine gun rounds slammed into the side of the ship, then across the deck tearing holes and sending splinters flying. Chen and Lin huddled behind the hatch. Jake hunkered down and kept firing, cursing that he didn't have tracer shells in the belt to see where his rounds were going.

A Spad, Jake said to himself as the biplane thundered over, so low it barely cleared the mast. He could see faded French insignia on its wings.

"Chen, Lin. Okay?"

"We are unhurt," Chen said, his deep voice seemed untroubled. "But one of the sailors has been hit."

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Jake looked over his shoulder. A slim Chinese man was down on his back, not moving, his arms flung out as if a mighty fist had flattened him. He had taken a round in the chest. Jake could see blood color the front of his gray shirt. He shook his head. "He's done for. That was a Spad. Frenchie fighter plane. Unless they changed the guns, it carries twin .30 calibers. A .30 in the chest--."

"There is hospital in the city," Lin said. His face was a pasty color and Jake thought he might throw up. Jake had the first time in combat, all over his boots.

"Even the aid stations couldn't save men with that kind of wound. Better that he goes fast." Jake tried to put the sailor out of his mind. "The Spad had pretty good range for its type, but not many rounds for those twins. Toward the end of the war, some were fitted out to carry bombs."

"Will it come back?" Lin asked, his voice husky and strained.

Jake laughed harshly. "You can bet on it." He felt surprising calm. The war dreams were far worse than the real thing.

"I thought I saw some holes in the wing's fabric," Chen said.

"I did too," Lin added.

"Good." Jake realized that he had a death grip on the handles of the Maxim. He slowly relaxed his hands. No shaking. It might come later, but that was more or less normal.

Howard Turk

The shakes often came after an action when he was on line in France. He was pleased that he held together.

"Jake," Lin interrupted his thoughts, "This what war is like?"

"Sort of. Except bigger and much noisier."

The Spad made a large circle, banking over the city, its slick wings reflecting the sun as it turned toward them.

"Here he comes," Jake said quietly.

This time they were ready. Chen and Lin had their handguns out and Jake had slipped a fresh belt into the Maxim.

Jake began shooting at what he thought was the Maxim's extreme range, trying to allow for droppage and windage, weaving the machine gun back and forth. But without tracers to mark the path of his rounds, hitting the Spad was more luck than skill until it came very close. As the Spad came at them, Lin and Chen began firing. Behind them the captain was firing with an Enfield rifle and screaming curses in Chinese.

This time the pilot stayed higher. Perhaps, Jake thought, he had a little more respect for their marksmanship. Then he saw a black object drop from under one wing. "Bomb," he shouted, not sure he could be heard above the roar of the plane and guns. He kept firing. Used belts curled and wiggled at his feet like snakes. He was scoring some hits, he was sure, but there was no sign of real damage to the Spad. When he couldn't elevate the Maxim any higher, Jake ducked behind the hatch, making himself as small a target as possible.

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The bomb exploded just short of the junk, throwing a gusher of water across the deck.

Jake raised his head, keeping the Spad in sight as worked the lever to pull out the old belt and insert a fresh one. The biplane circled again, gaining height.

"What do you think?" Lin asked. "Is he coming again?"

"That was a pretty big bomb," Jake said, straightening up to ease a cramp in his back. He shaded his eyes. "He might only be able to carry one of those if he came from any distance. If we did some damage, he might call it a day. We threw a lot at him."

Jake watched the plane is gaining altitude. Go away, he said silently as the three of them stood watching the Spad circle in the blue and yellow sky high above them, growing smaller with each turn.

"Pretty high for bombing," Jake said quietly.

Finally it turned away, the sound of its engine fading as it headed into the sun toward the mountains.

Chen turned and signaled the captain, who nodded. The *Morning Calm's* engine revved up and the junk churned toward the city. It took ten minutes of fighting the current before the captain nudged the junk against the thick rope mats that protected the junk from Mao-lin's floating pier. In that time the waterfront had returned to normal as if nothing had happened. The dock coolies were back running up and down wooden planks loading and unloading river craft, chanting *he-ho, he-ho*, merchants and boatmen bargained nosily, touts shouted,

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shoppers argued with peasants selling farm products along the street. Jake marveled how quickly the Chinese could adapt and get on with their lives.

As the crew lashed the *Morning Calm* against the pier, Jake felt an overwhelming sense of release, of weight off his shoulders. He smiled and shook Chen's hand. "Well, we did it, partner. They're General Shan's guns now."

"He's welcome to them. Let's go ashore," Chen said. "I'm sick of this hulk and this whole business."

As he turned to speak to Lin, Jake noticed what at first glance he thought were two black doll's heads on poles beside the stone steps that led up to the street. It took him a moment more to see that they were human, but lacking eyes and other parts. "Good God." A half dozen crows circled overhead and he had no doubt what happened to the heads. There was a wooden sign with large Chinese characters painted in black beneath each head.

Jake could speak enough Shanghai dialect to get along. He had an ear for languages. But he could read only a few characters. "What does the sign say?"

"Death to spies," Lin said slowly. He looked at the heads for a long moment. "Major Kong's justice."

"Who's that?"

"Major Kong is General Shan's security man. Kong likes to make his justice known to the people."

"Is that Shan's justice too?"

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"General Shan does a lot of good," Lin said quickly. "There have been many reforms-- schools have been built. Roads too. The teachers are paid. The press is free to speak its mind. He doesn't even stop foreigners from speaking against him. But he is in a war and busy with many things."

"Shan is a modern man, Jake," Chen added, looking sadly at the heads. "He is educated and he could be the model for the new China. But real China, not Shanghai, is a hard place and sometimes it takes a strong hand."

A small, wrinkled coolie walked into the office of the China Telephone and Cable Company on Mao-lin's street of Western businesses clutching a sealed envelope. He was wearing ragged short pants, an old Western shirt, and a tattered gray blanket around his shoulders. He waited in line, looking down at his straw sandals, making eye contact with no one.

The clerk, Miss Lee, a petite young Chinese woman whose sharp eyes were hidden behind thick glasses, noticed him immediately. Message coolies were commonly used by both Chinese and Westerners, but this one, she thought, was the poorest she had seen in a long time.

When he got to the cashier's cage, he pushed the envelope across to her and mumbled a word Miss Lee couldn't understand. The old man had no teeth.

"Telegraph?" she asked.

The coolie nodded.

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"Have you eaten today?" Miss Lee asked. It was the traditional greeting, but she doubted the old man had.

"Yes, well," the old man brightened slightly as he gave the standard reply. "Have you?"

She smiled at him and turned to cutting open the envelope. Inside were money and a message to be sent by telegraph to Hankow. She read the message carefully counting each letter to calculate the cost. The message was for a Mr. Chow, General Delivery, Hankow. It said: "The weather is fair. The seeds have been delivered despite the rain and your flower has been pruned. Deng."

She read hundreds of messages during a day's work--some in clear text, some in business code--and thought nothing of them. To her they were just letters or numbers to be counted and priced. But this one caught her eye. What a waste, Miss Lee thought. A silly message at such a high cost. Deng, whoever that was, could have sent a letter for a tenth of the price of a telegram. She pushed her heavy glasses back into place on her tiny nose and counted the money. It was exactly the right amount. When she looked up, the old man had gone. Miss Lee shrugged and read the message again. Shaking her head, she put the message in the outgoing box and turned to the next customer in line, but the wastefulness of the message bothered her. Miss Lee was very careful with her money.

Three

Jake had heard the noise for some time, but it seemed to be distant thunder. It was comforting, like a crackling fire in a fireplace on a stormy night. He rolled over and pulled his blanket around him. Suddenly the noise became a furious banging and someone was calling his name. Jake's eyes flew open, but he didn't move for several seconds trying to remember where he was. "All right!" he shouted. It took a long moment more before he recalled being given a room at Shan's guest house and collapsing into sleep.

"This is Lin, Mr. Jake. Please open the door. You must come quick. Very important."

"Okay. Just a minute." Had he been in bed since yesterday? Jake looked at his watch. Ten to six. Sunshine lit the room. Was it morning or afternoon? He untangled himself from his sheet and blanket and limped to the door. His left knee still had bits of shrapnel that the army doctors had missed and some mornings it didn't want to cooperate. He tripped the lock and opened the door. Lin looked frantic. His face was blotched with red and he was breathing hard as if he had sprinted over from Shan's headquarters.

"You must come quick, Mr. Jake. General Shan must talk."

Lin's English was falling apart. "Easy, Lin," Jake said. He picked up his pants from an untidy pile of clothes on the floor

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and pulled them on. "We talked on the waterfront. Colonel Po too. Everything was fine. What's happened? Is Chen okay?"

"What?"

"Is Chen all right? Not sick?"

Lin nodded vigorously. "He is fine. He with General Shan."

"Then what's the problem."

"Minister Walder has been murdered."

Jake paused buttoning his shirt. "Who's that?"

"He is a foreign missionary. The one with the big church and hospital in the city."

"What does that have to do with me? Or Chen?"

"I don't know, but hurry. General Shan say bring you double quick."

Jake grabbed his jacket off a chair and followed Lin down the long hall of the rambling one-story guest house and across a short street to Shan's walled compound. He had been too exhausted to do more than glance at the compound when he and Chen had been brought to the guest house. More alert now, he sized it up from a military point-of-view. It was an old place, fifty, maybe a hundred years old, probably built by some provincial chief. Good enough for its time against bandits. Looks strong, he thought, but wouldn't last long these days. The masonry walls were at least ten feet high and thick, still all right

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against rifle fire. Modern artillery, he knew from experience, would blast it to bits in minutes.

With Lin leading the way, they were saluted by the officer of the guards in front of the compound's entrance, who shouted to his men to open the massive wooden double doors. As soon as the opening was wide enough, Jake and Lin slipped inside and hurried through the shadows of the high arched entranceway to a large dusty square. Surrounding the square was a haphazard collection of stone and wooden buildings.

Jake squinted up at the sun. "Lin. It's afternoon, isn't it?"

Lin slowed his pace and looked at him for a moment. "Yes, Mr. Jake. We arrived at Mao-lin this morning."

"Just checking," Jake said.

"That building is General Shan's headquarters." Lin pointed to the largest structure in the compound. "We must hurry."

Jake noticed a very tall, slender Western woman on the veranda of Shan's headquarters studying him coolly as he and Lin came toward the building. She had long, dark blond hair pulled back from her face and tied back in a complicated twist Jake had never seen before. It emphasized her high cheek bones. Closer, he could see dark blue eyes and that she was not as young as he first thought--middle-thirties perhaps. Probably a Russian. China was full of Russian exiles who had escaped the Bolshevik takeover.

As they came up the stone steps, the woman said, "You are the American?" She spoke English with a heavy Russian accent.

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"I am." It was not exactly true. He had been born in Toronto and served in the British army, but he had lived in Pittsburgh for many years. Long ago he had stopped bothering with the blurred line between Americans and English-speaking Canadians. "Jake Greenberg is the name."

"Madam Sorokin," Lin said quickly as an introduction.

"Emilie Sorokin," she said and extended her hand. "I wanted to meet you."

Jake had the definite feeling he was being judged. "Am I acceptable?"

Emilie laughed. "I think so. But I must not keep you. Perhaps we will speak again."

Jake nodded. "I hope so."

Inside the building, Lin led Jake to a small room, empty except for two soldiers with rifles. "Who is she?" Jake asked.

"Madam Sorokin," Lin answered looking ill at ease.

"You know what I mean, Lin."

"Ah," Lin said slowly, "Madam Sorokin is the general's...special friend."

Lin opened another door and stood aside, letting Jake precede him into Shan's outer office, a windowless square room with two desks and a half dozen battered file cabinets. A

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studious-looking young man in a tan officer's uniform stopped typing for a moment to squint at Jake through thick glasses before going back to pecking at the keys. A large revolver sat on the desk beside the typewriter.

Across from the officer, at a desk piled high with file folders, a Chinese woman in her early twenties was on the telephone. Seeing Jake, she whispered into the speaker, hung up, and hurried to a large, elaborately carved door behind her. She opened it enough to put her head inside for an instant. "Please," she said turning to Jake while opening the door. She smiled shyly. "General," she paused, nibbling on her lower lip as she obviously searched through her limited English vocabulary, "wait...for...you." She grinned at Jake in triumph.

Jake said, "Perfect English. Thank you," and her smile got wider. He turned to Lin, but the young man shook his head.

Jake stepped into a large, sparsely furnished room. The air was electric with tension. Chen was standing with General Shan at the room's window having an intense but private conversation. Shan towered over Chen, his bald head inclined toward the smaller man. Colonel Po, puffing on his curved briar pipe, stood with two others by a plain oak table. They studied him as he came through the door.

At the sound of the door closing, Shan turned and came forward, quickly crossing the room in long strides, his eyes like twin black marbles. Chen trailed behind, walking slowly as if to give Shan center stage.

"Thank you for coming so fast," Shan said as he shook Jake's hand. The general's eyes seemed to soften a little as he

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spoke. "We have a serious problem. I...Sorry, I am forgetting my manners. Let me introduce you. You have met Colonel Po."

"Colonel."

The stocky colonel took the pipe out of his mouth. "Not much rest in Mao-lin, Jake." Colonel Po looked as grim as Shan.

Shan turned to a tall, beefy, prematurely balding young man "This is my son, Jake. Shan Li-lu. He has the rank of captain. He is my intelligence specialist. Li-lu was called Larry Shan at university."

Larry Shan acknowledged Jake with a barely discernable nod and an unpleasant stare.

"Beware, Jake, my son does not care for foreigners." Shan said it in a light tone, but Jake had no doubt that it was true.

"Last," Shan said, "but hardly least, is my indispensable security chief, Major Kong."

Kong stepped around the younger Shan and gave Jake a humorless smile and a little bow. "Welcome, Mr. Greenberg." Kong was a pale, stick-thin man whose hollow cheeks were pitted with smallpox scars. He had cold, suspicious eyes and a stiff manner. Jake could understand Lin's dislike of the man. Major Kong had the aura of a "true believer," a man with few doubts.

"Please call me Jake." Larry Shan and Major Kong nodded formally, but said nothing. He didn't know what was in the wind, but it was clear these two could be trouble.

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Before Jake could ask Shan what was going on, Chen said, "This has nothing to do with our business, Jake. Payment is being prepared. We can leave tomorrow, but there's been a murder and the general needs help. I recommended you as a discrete and trustworthy man. I'll let the general explain the situation. It's your decision, Jake. Whatever you decide is all right with me."

"Okay," Jake said to Shan. "What are we talking about? Lin told me that a missionary was killed. That's all I know. Is this about the missionary?"

"I would like to speak to you in private, Jake," Shan said quietly.

"Anything you have to say, General, you can say in front of Chen."

"It's not so easy, Jake," Chen whispered. "If I stay, others will have to be included."

Damn, Jake said to himself. His hope of leaving Mao-lin on tomorrow's steamer was disappearing fast. With a sinking feeling in his stomach, he turned to Shan. "Okay, General, let's talk."

"I would like to speak to Jake in private," Shan said over his shoulder to Po, his son, and Major Kong.

Looking past the general, Jake saw Shan's son open his mouth to speak, then snap it shut. He glared at Jake as he turned to follow the others out the door.

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Shan's receptionist stuck her head into the room. "No interruptions?"

"Correct," Shan said. "Would you like some tea, Jake?"

"That would be good, General," Jake said. His stomach let him know he needed something to eat too, but food would have to wait.

"*Cha*," Shan said to the girl. She bobbed her head and closed the door. "Please sit." Shan indicated one of the two guest chairs in front of the oak table that served as his desk. Jake thought he saw Shan wince as he sat down in his large leather chair, but it happened so fast that he was not sure he saw it at all.

Shan was silent for a moment, then said, "It is about a missionary being killed, Jake, but I need to go back a step." Shan stood up and came around the desk, giving Jake a chance to look around the room. The walls of the office were bare except for a framed picture of Sun Yat-sen and a map of the province. There was nothing personal--no family pictures or mementos. The only touch of luxury was a shiny black telephone on the table next to a writing tablet. "The missionary," Shan continued, "was not your usual foreigner. He was well known up and the down the river and especially in Shanghai. A great talker, a great hater, a man of much influence. I didn't like him at all. To his credit, the man established a little hospital in Mao-lin, the only hospital with a real doctor in my territory. Unfortunately, I was the man he seemed to hate most."

"Why did he hate you so much?"

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Shan ran his hand over his great bald head as he paced back and forth. "Mr. Walder, the missionary, was an interesting man. I was schooled at a Baptist mission. Good people, who understood China. Walder was also a Baptist, but the most rigid man I have ever known. He allowed no deviation from his view of Christianity. It might have made him popular in Shanghai, but he didn't gain many true converts here. Rice Christians mainly. To him, it was all or nothing. Most Chinese, even some true Christian converts, see nothing wrong with praying to more than one deity. Myself included. I think of myself as a Christian, but I pay respect to my ancestors and, sometimes, to Buddha. So I became a big target for him, a false Christian." Shan walked to the window. "There will be problems in Shanghai over this. You know, of course, that most missionary groups have their headquarters there." He shook his head. "Headquarters men in Shanghai are their mandarins. They have much power among Westerners and little knowledge of China." Shan turned from the window and sat down. "I--" A tap the office door stopped him. "Come."

The receptionist opened the door and peeked in. "*Cha.*"

Shan nodded and she hurried in, carrying a white tea pot and white two mugs on a black lacquer tray.

The faintly sweet aroma of Jasmine tea filled the air as she poured, giving the room the comfortable smell of home. He was settling in, Jake suddenly realized. After two years in China, Shanghai *was* home.

Jake waited until she closed the door behind her. "So you want me to look into this man's death?"

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"I do," Shan said sitting down again. "Chen said you solved a series of murders in Siberia. He said you also saved his life in the process."

"It was not that dramatic. There were some murders during the great retreat of the Whites, the anti-Bolsheviks, from Omsk. The winter of 1919-1920. One of the people killed was my friend. There were no police to do the job, so I did it."

"It is the same here and it's my fault. There are no police worthy of the name in Mao-lin. When Feng ruled this city he executed the police who didn't run away and installed his own men. When I forced him out, his people left with him. One of the things I most wanted to do was establish a modern police force and fair judges. But I've not had the time. There are so many things that need to be done. It's surprising how complicated it is to bring new ideas to even a small piece of China. Major Kong has had the job of policing. But he is also my spymaster. His is rough justice, I know, but..." He left the words hanging in the air and turned up his hands. "I need your help."

"Or do you just need a white face?"

Shan smiled. "Chen said that among other things you were not stupid. Yes. That too. I need a white face. I can't send Kong up to Hilltop. That's where the foreigners live. They wouldn't stand for it. He would be a disaster. And I just can't go out and find a couple of bandits to hang. Walder's death is too big for that. Believe me, I would do it if I thought it would work."

Jake smiled. "I don't doubt that for a second, general."

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"I need a fast investigation that is...creditable...and done by a foreigner. What I hope is that you find evidence that it was done by another foreigner. Walder was not the most pleasant of men. And he liked other men's wives. I am facing a war with that demon Feng and I need Walder's death dealt with quickly. I can't be any plainer than that, Jake. What do you say? Just a few days of your time."

Shan took a sip of tea, then pulled a silver lighter and pack of cigarettes from his side pocket. He offered one. "American."

"Trying to quit, General."

Shan thumbed his lighter on, lit his cigarette, and inhaled deeply. He sat back, never taking his eyes off Jake, and slowly let out a plume of smoke. He held up the lighter. "A gift from Chen."

Jake looked out the window. Did Shan know their history? Damn, he just wanted to get on a river steamer and go away, but he knew he wouldn't. He would stay and do it because that's what Chen wanted.

The Chinaman carried Jake's marker and it was a big debt, the biggest because it was not about money. Jake could remember every detail. They were at the train station at Mysovaya in the middle of Siberia--black night, freezing cold, bits of icy snow stinging his face. Two trains were about to leave the station, one to Vladivostok and a boat for America, the second to China. They had survived the winter march from Omsk, but he was at a low point in his life. It's sometimes that way. He had focused so much on survival and finding the killer of his friend, he now had to face reality and it was bleak. The

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shrapnel in his knee hurt him, he was broke, and he had no place to go in America. Just a beat up ex-soldier. Then Chen changed his life. The Chinaman took him aside and offered him a partnership in a gun business he was starting, equals, and a chance to make a future for himself. So the question was not if he would stay in Mao-lin, but where would it lead? He had learned in Siberia that investigations took on a life of their own.

"Okay, General Shan. I'll do it. I don't know how much I can help you, but I'll try." Jake paused. "What if my investigation leads to places you don't like?"

"We will worry about that when the time comes," Shan said, standing and extending his hand. "Very good. I will order Major Kong to work with you."

"Not Kong, General. How about your aide, Lieutenant Lin?"

"He is young."

"It doesn't matter. I'll take him. He's better than Kong for this job."

"Yes, I can see that. I will assign him to you. Now, what do you want to do, Jake? The body is still at the murder site."

"Well, general, I guess I'll go look at it."

China, 1921. Jake Greenberg has just delivered guns to Mao-lin. War is imminent and the city has been shaken by the brutal murder of a famous American missionary. Jake must find the murderer as enemy airplanes begin bombing the city.

West of Shanghai

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