

MORTON RAPHAEL

THE NINE DRAGONS SAGA





A young peasant woman from Hong Kong gets an unexpected introduction to the wealth and privilege of high society only to have it violently ripped away from her, along with everything she holds dear. She is forced to go underground among the criminal street gangs that plague the city, and become someone she does not recognize - a fierce warrior with a heart of stone. Seeking revenge against her enemies, she finds love and loyalty.

The Nine Dragons Saga

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Morton Raphael

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Charles Albert Shih Is Born

On a warm day in June, Snow Flake, an attractive sixteen-year-old girl with shoulder length, black hair and large, expressive, dark eyes sat on the side of her grandfather's small outboard motor boat. She wore a rubber suit with flippers and had a snorkel mask perched on her forehead. A seven-foot trident was attached to her right wrist by a long, yellow, nylon rope and a sharp knife was strapped against her left thigh. Satisfied that the ocean was calm enough for a dip, she gently slid into the water.

Her companion was a tall, white-haired man in his seventies with a very lean, wiry build and a face creased by deep wrinkles. His name was Lu Ke Yuan and he was her grandfather. He watched the water around Snow Flake with a critical eye. Wave after wave floated over her body as the girl searched for fish which would be sold to the floating restaurants in Hong Kong harbor. When Snow Flake espied a big fish swimming directly below her, she pulled the diving mask over her head and brought the trident into position. At the right moment, she dove under the water to snare the fish. While she was fighting the hooked fish on the barbed points, Snow Flake used the long shaft to raise the fish's head out of the water. She propelled herself over to the boat where her grandfather was waiting. Using a net, he grabbed the prize and quickly tossed it into a container where fish were held secure by a latched lid.

There were times when Snow Flake missed her mark, but today was a lucky day. She was able to catch more than a dozen large fish. Contented with the day's work, she returned to the boat where she slowly peeled off her rubber suit. She dried her hair with a towel and put on a pair of jeans and a shirt. Lu Ke started the boat's engine and headed for the Hong Kong floating restaurants which might buy their catch. On the way, Lu Ke briefly cast a glance at the girl's adult body. The look of the teenager was already pretty enough to attract many a young male suitor. Her grandparents regretted taking Snow Flake out of school, but without her help they couldn't conceive a way out of hunger. In their hearts, they hoped the girl could have a better life than the one they had endured.

Reading romantic novels was Snow Flake's favorite pastime. She fell into a habit of daydreaming, imagining herself in the place of the heroine of each of the dream stories that she read. This allowed her fancy to interplay within the dramas. Her current book told a story about a poor young woman who left home for a job in a big city department store, where she attracted the wealthy

young son of the store owner. They fell in love, married and had children. Later in the novel, she became a famous author.

A calamity had occurred years ago, when Snow Flake was three. Her mother, Little Mai, was the strong one in the family. She would be working on the sea daily while her husband, Big Rock, tethered Snow Flake to a rail on the vessel so she wouldn't fall overboard. He tried to keep an eye on both of them while his wife was in the water. He felt a need to relieve himself and left the scene. When he returned, Little Mai had disappeared. He became frantic, and searched for her for many hours without any success. Devastated and heartbroken, he eventually brought the boat back to shore and swore never to go to the sea again. Eight months later, Big Rock married another young woman. Wanting to cut his ties to his past life, he abandoned Snow Flake to the care of her grandparents.

On the efforts of her Grandmother Fei Fei, who looked older than her sixty years, Snow Flake was sent to school at the age of six. When she was fifteen, another misfortune overtook the Yuan family. Grandfather Lu Ke's arthritis was getting worse every day until it was impossible for him to fish out at sea alone. In desperation, the elderly couple made the decision to take Snow Flake out of school to help support the family.

The sound of a high-powered engine awoke Snow Flake from her reverie. She noticed a luxury yacht approaching their fishing boat. It wasn't difficult for her to make out the name. She read *The Nine Dragons*. She called to her grandfather, who held onto the rail while watching the yacht approach. When it came closer, the stately vessel cut its engines, sending waves smacking against their small fishing boat.

Tow, the white-uniformed captain of the yacht, was in his early fifties with a middle-sized build and a tanned face. Leaning over the rail, he called out, "Ahoy, do you have fish for sale?"

With a wide grin showing a toothless mouth, Lu Ke replied, "Yes, sir." Quickly he opened the lid of the container and Snow Flake came with a net. Once she brought the fish out, it struggled to escape but she swiftly secured it.

Snow Flake became fascinated by the sun's reflection off the huge diamond ring worn by a man standing next to the captain along the brass railing. The man was in his sixties, dressed in a navy blue jacket and white pants, and he wore a captain's cap embroidered with gold braiding.

Sir Henry Shih, clean shaven, overweight, short and tanned, peered at them from behind tinted sunglasses. The sight of the young woman's face and fine figure caused his heart to pound. Posturing, Sir Henry gave Snow Flake his most charming smile as a sign of friendship. In return she smiled demurely

at him. That jolted Sir Henry, who rose on his toes and indicated that he was pleased.

He whispered to Captain Tow, “Buy all their day’s catch at ten times the market price plus five hundred dollars tip. Invite them aboard for some refreshments.”

“Yes, Sir Henry,” the captain responded.

Captain Tow called out, “I’ll purchase all your fish. Would you please come aboard the yacht to receive your money?”

Grandfather Lu Ke and Snow Flake placed all the fish into sacks, and two crew members came aboard the small boat to collect them. Snow Flake followed her grandfather up the ladder of the big vessel. On board, Captain Tow counted out the money as he placed the bills in Grandfather Lu Ke’s hand. The grinning man bowed deeply to the captain. It was Snow Flake’s first time aboard a yacht. She was very impressed with the spotless appearance of wealth. After he asked their names, the captain introduced Lu Ke and Snow Flake to Sir Henry.

Sir Henry beamed at Snow Flake. “What a lovely name you have, dear. It sounds so charming and has a musical ring. Would you care to have some refreshments?”

“Yes, sir, if grandfather permits.” Lu Ke nodded his head. Sir Henry snapped his fingers and a steward came to escort Snow Flake and Lu Ke to the dining cabin. The table was set with an overabundance of food. They were served by two stewards and a chef. After they cleaned their hands with hot towels, Snow Flake ate slowly to savor each bite, while sipping the fragrant tea. Lu Ke was served fish and white wine. This was an experience that Snow Flake wanted to cherish and remember so she could tell her grandmother and her friends.

In addition to the good food, the teenage girl was in complete awe of her surroundings. She especially enjoyed eating with ivory chopsticks and drinking from crystal glasses. After they finished the meal, the pair was escorted back to the deck. Seeing Snow Flake again, Sir Henry was dazzled by her smile.

Lu Ke thanked them for their hospitality. “The food was wonderful, sir. It was very kind of you to allow us to visit your yacht.”

“Would you like to see more of the yacht?” Sir Henry asked Snow Flake.

“Yes, sir.” A deck hand was immediately ordered to escort Snow Flake on a tour. While Snow Flake was absent, Sir Henry started a light-hearted conversation with Lu Ke. Suddenly he stopped talking, and his face grew serious and discontented.

Shaking his head, Sir Henry sighed, bemoaning his fate.

“Would you believe all my wives have produced only daughters? I employed Taoist priests to exorcise any evil ghosts that might have wandered into my house, but that didn’t help. Soon I shall be beyond the age of raising children, and I don’t want to adopt a son who isn’t of my blood.”

The men continued their chat for some time. Sir Henry asked Lu Ke where they lived, and during the long conversation, he inquired the young woman’s age. Soon Snow Flake reappeared and Sir Henry’s delight showed on his face. Her natural beauty and graceful body movements fascinated him. He held his breath. For him, seeing this young innocent girl was pure enchantment. Sir Henry recognized that she had a quality that set her apart from other females he had known. Calming his emotions, he thought to himself, “Snow Flake and I were destined to meet. She is the one who will give me a son.” He saw in her face a mystical aura.

Sir Henry thought of the prestige he would get by flaunting this young beauty before his peers. “She will be an attraction that will cause men to envy me,” he mused. Lu Ke scrutinized this rich man’s eyes and saw that they displayed desire for the girl. Sir Henry pulled in his paunch while he stood up straight and then ordered another round of drinks. Standing next to her grandfather who was broadly smiling, Snow Flake wondered what the two men were talking about that could bring such happiness to her grandfather’s face. Lu Ke thanked Sir Henry again for the hospitality and the parting gifts, including a large basket loaded with cooked beef, bread, Japanese apples, and two bottles of French wine.

Sir Henry was in a jubilant mood, sensing that God made this meeting with Snow Flake happen. Suddenly another thought entered his mind. Sir Henry’s eyes turned to study the emotionless face of his captain and mentally questioned the man’s loyalty to him. It had infuriated him when he discovered that his wife, Victoria, had bribed some of his employees to spy on him. The very idea that Captain Tow would sell him out was unthinkable. He relied upon the captain’s discretion and sense of professionalism too much to enter into that kind of intrigue. As a boss, Sir Henry demanded nothing less than total loyalty from his subordinates, and they were well-paid for their service. Certainly he believed that the captain would not betray him. Snow Flake’s image returned to his mind.

With confidence he stated out of the captain’s hearing, “This one will give me a son.”

Thirty-five years earlier, fresh out of college, Henry Shih became employed by Chao and Pan Limited. It was a well-paid job obtained through a

recommendation from a college professor who was a distant cousin in the Chao Family. Mr. Pan sold his holdings to Mr. Chao, but the name of the firm was retained. Mr. Chao became CEO of the company and Chairman of the Board. Ever since Henry started to work at the firm, he projected an image of being humble, polite and hard-working, a respectful young man who supported his widowed mother. Combining a positive image with a sharp mind for business dealings, Henry's performance outshone his competitors within the firm. As a result, Mr. Chao singled him out as the rising star of his enterprise.

At a company party, Henry was introduced to Victoria, the eldest daughter of Mr. Chao. Having just graduated college, she had the healthy glow of youth and beauty. She was also an independent woman. Even at an early age she always knew what she wanted. From all the enterprising young men surrounding her, she selected Henry to be her future husband. She understood that, with Henry's driven desire to succeed, coupled with an easy-going disposition, charm and intelligence, she could use him to gain control of her father's fortune.

While Victoria was indulging her dream of a prestigious future, Henry was having fantasies of his own. He desired a rich and powerful wife, the daughter of the CEO of the firm. He wanted someone who would adore him, a mate who could be easily manipulated and who could assist him to reach the top. Power and money are strong aphrodisiacs that often build into sexual attraction. Victoria and Henry soon found themselves drawn into a strong need for each other. Neither was aware that their attraction to each other was based on pure illusion and the idealized image of the other person.

After a two-year courtship, they married with all the festivities that money can buy. Shortly after the wedding, Henry's charm, together with his talent for business dealing and money-making schemes, won over the entire Chao family as well as the board of directors of the company. Noticing Henry's mounting accomplishments, Mr. Chao gave him a free hand in using the company resources on money-making treaties.

Shortly after the honeymoon, it did not take long for conflicts to arise. Victoria discovered that Henry's ambition clashed with her plan to gain control of her father's empire. That displeased her. She also started to notice that Henry wasn't as easy to bend to her will as she thought. Mr. Chao died a few days before Henry and Victoria's twentieth wedding anniversary. According to his will, Henry succeeded him and became the new CEO.

With power and money in hand and a desire to improve his image, Henry started to donate a huge part of the corporate funds to charities specializing in

humanitarian purposes. This, in turn, would help him gain the support of the general public and establish his social status as a kindly rich man and a philanthropist. At the same time, the ambitious man gradually eliminated his opponents to secure his kingdom.

Henry was recommended to the English crown to be knighted due to his good name, his generosity to the needy and the poor in the districts of Hong Kong, and his connection with the British Hong Kong public officials. The company was soon renamed 'The Sir Henry Shih Limited', a name of which he was inordinately proud.

Back on their small fishing boat, Lu Ke was excited as he showed Snow Flake the money which he received from the day's catch. It was much more than they usually earned in half a year. The sun was setting over the horizon as they made their way to the shore where they secured the boat. Snow Flake often glanced at her grandfather who appeared to be extremely happy, radiating an inner glow which showed on his face ever since they left the yacht. She became curious as to what had produced this mood and wondered how this would relate to her.

After supper, Snow Flake sat on the stone stairs outside the house while the old couple spoke in whispers in the kitchen. Suddenly, Grandmother Fei Fei's angry voice leaped through the closed door, followed by banging on the kitchen table. Snow Flake glanced at the open window and saw her irate grandmother vigorously shaking her head as she swept the money off the table. She then turned away from her husband to cover her face with her hands and began to sob. A downtrodden grandfather exited the house and joined Snow Flake who placed her arms around his shoulder.

"What did Sir Henry say to you?" the young woman asked hesitantly.

"He wants you to be his little wife."

"Why?" she inquired.

"Sir Henry desperately wants a son. He has seven daughters by different women. I'm supposed to speak to you about this. Sir Henry will be generous and, if you agree, he will set you up for life. I consented to have him come over to speak to you. Did I do wrong?" Lu Ke kept rubbing liniment on his hands to alleviate his pain. His face was gloomy.

"Bad health combined with poverty, has stripped away what pride I had left. I'm not a wicked man; all I want is what is best for you. Your grandmother thinks that I'm putting you up for sale. That's not true. We both love you and wish that you could have a better life than the one you now have. I know very well that someone without an education or money in this society can go nowhere."

The news hadn't come as a complete shock. She had heard corresponding tales from other girls. A few friends who lived nearby had told her about the Red Light District as well as the working conditions in the big cities. Many poor youngsters toiled long hours in factories and had very little to show for it. Her grandparents' life showed her how poverty could crush a person. Snow Flake's heart was broken. She rose, took her grandfather's hand, and led him back inside the house.

In the dimly lit kitchen, Snow Flake somberly spoke to her grandparents.

"There is nobody in this world but I who will look after you."

"When Grandfather is not able to fish, I have to do it. We cannot exist on my meager earnings because it is not steady. Look at yourselves. You are worn out from a lifetime of hardship. For the love you have been giving me, I ought to take care of you." Her grandmother was crying while her grandfather kept his hands under his armpits.

"When Sir Henry arrives, I shall talk to him. I want to make sure that you're financially secured. It's the only way for us to get out of this hellhole."

Snow Flake went over to hug both grandparents. She hoped they would understand the depth of her love for them.

"In the entire world, you're the ones who are most precious to me."

Soon after, the Yuan family moved to a house in the upper class section in Kowloon Hill. Her grandparents received a bank account containing more than enough money for the elderly couple to live on for the rest of their lives. Not only did Snow Flake return to school to continue her education and to prepare her to be presented to high society, Sir Henry hired tutors to teach her French, music, arts, dance, and official Mandarin.

Eager to learn, she absorbed the training like a young spirited mare.

Two years passed and on her eighteenth birthday, at Sir Henry request, Snow Flake moved into a house on Victoria Peak in Hong Kong.

In the house, there were three staff members at her disposal as well as a tutor to teach her social graces.

Judy, one of Snow Flake's personal assistants, a slender young woman with puppy dog eyes and an eager-to-please attitude, chaperoned Snow Flake. What was unknown to Snow Flake was that Judy was paid to report to Victoria on whatever occurred in her household during her daily activities.

When Sir Henry came for a short visit, he always wanted Snow Flake to know that he was taking valuable time out from his busy schedule to be with her. But it wasn't long before she discovered that Sir Henry was an insufferable bore and he only talked about money, deals, and power. No matter what assurances Sir Henry gave Snow Flake, she understood that

mistresses were shadows in Chinese society. Financial compensation was the only insurance against the time when Sir Henry Shih grew tired of her. From time to time, Snow Flake would visit her grandparents to comfort them and receive emotional support. Her only solace was in knowing their days of poverty were over and that she had grown into an intelligent and independent woman.

Eight months after she became Sir Henry's little wife, Snow Flake told him that she was pregnant. Delighted, he immediately employed nurses around the clock to ensure no mishap would befall the unborn child or the mother. When the doctor gave the news that the unborn child would be a boy, Sir Henry could hardly contain his happiness. To the expectant father, it seemed like an interminable pregnancy. Eventually the birth moment finally arrived.

Sir Henry, along with his entire entourage, waited anxiously in the hospital after Snow Flake was rushed to the delivery room. Soon a healthy male child was delivered.

Learning that Snow Flake gave birth to a son, Victoria became livid with rage. Quickly she left her residence to visit Tin Hau Temple where she prayed that the child would become sick and die. She pleaded with the gods not to desert her and reminded them that she had donated large sums of money to this temple. Now it was up to them to pay her back.

Later that day, Victoria sat in her drawing room. Her heavy, round face made her appear like an owl. But that was not where the resemblance ended. Victoria took to adorning herself with expensive jewelry, as if to prove to herself that she was really a worthy human being. Like her distant husband, she became totally arrogant and self-absorbed.

She was waiting for her younger brother, Ung, to get out of his chair to light her cigarette. He was in his late forties, with a fat body and a dull face. Her late father had given him a job in the company twenty years ago. Ung had failed to live up to the family's high expectations, largely due to his weak character and lack of ambition. Disappointed, his father had chosen the next best thing for his son and placed him in an office with nothing to do. He soon became Victoria's whipping boy and running dog. After Ung dutifully lit her cigarette, Victoria demonstrated her displeasure by blowing smoke in his face. Whenever she was unhappy, the woman made sure that those around her were miserable. After two puffs, the cigarette was crushed in an ash tray. Victoria demanded a drink. Ung hurried to the bar to fulfill her command.

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She tasted the drink. “Can’t you even make a simple cocktail right?” Ung lowered his eyes and meekly stood by her. They easily fell into the routine behavior of mistress and slave.

In the hospital’s baby ward, a nurse held up Sir Henry’s son for inspection. The proud father tapped the window with his fingertips and emitted sounds of joy as he shouted, “It’s my son!” He thought that he could now divorce Victoria and marry Snow Flake. He already had a name in mind for his son, Charles Albert Shih. Long before the boy was born, Henry had selected the name of English kings. Now he felt his life would be complete.

Victoria's Last Laugh

On the following day, the newspaper reported that Sir Henry's newest arrival was a boy. Accompanying the news was a rumor that Sir Henry was planning to divorce his wife of thirty years, so he could marry his new son's mother. The report added salt to the wound of haughty Victoria's bloated ego.

In the living room, hurling the newspaper to the carpet, she shrieked, "How dare that vile man bring shame upon my family and humiliate me in public!"

The turbulent nature of Victoria would never concede defeat. To gain an edge over her husband, she planned to hire the finest lawyers in the district of Hong Kong to assist in her divorce case. When Ung saw that his elder sister had calmed down, he suggested an alternate plan which delighted her. Victoria being Victoria, her hatred and jealousy fed her mind with a secret plan of her own that was even better than the one Ung had suggested.

Sir Henry moved out of the large estate he shared with Victoria one week later to be with his son and Snow Flake. The following day, Victoria met with Lawyer Lum in her drawing room with nobody else present. She was dressed regally, much like a queen preparing for court. The lawyer appraised his client's jewelry and the richly furnished interior of the house while he sat on a high-back chair. He concluded that Sir Henry's wife treated herself very well. From the tone of her voice, he gathered that this woman wanted her orders to be immediately executed. Victoria looked down her nose at the short middle-aged man. He was wearing thick glasses and sported a pencil thin mustache. His hair was arranged carefully to hide his bald spot.

Calmly he lit a cigar. Unaffected by Victoria's glare, he exuded self-confidence. The lawyer waited for the woman to speak her mind. He earned a reputation for defending high-profile criminals who could afford his high-priced service. He often acted as a go-between among the gangs in the area, negotiating shady dealing with a big return. In a round-about way, Victoria finally reached the point of this meeting. Lum was aware of the current happening with Sir Henry and Victoria. It had been front page news for the past few days.

"I want some people to be eliminated," she said.

The expression of the lawyer's face never changed. "Whom do you want killed, the woman or the child?"

"Both," came back the quick reply. "How much do you charge?"

Knowing the wealth of his client, Lum lifted five fingers. “That’s five million of Hong Kong dollars.”

Victoria nodded stoically. Lawyer Lum would take half of the payment up front. He requested a good faith retainer while the remainder would be paid when the job was done. Victoria rose, indicating that the meeting was over.

“Goodbye Mr. Lum. Remember that this meeting never occurred. Just let me know when the deed is done.”

He nodded in assent.

“Send the cash to my office tomorrow morning. No check please.” After he left Victoria’s residence, Lum informed his associates to start gathering information about Sir Henry and his little wife’s daily schedules and activities.

Two months later, on a Sunday evening in the Green Jade Night Club in Kowloon, Lawyer Lum conducted a meeting in a private dining room. He stated that someone wanted two people to be killed. Gascon, in his early forties, known as Red-Headed Devil, was a pitiless, cold-blooded killer. He came to the districts of Hong Kong seventeen years earlier from Ireland. Gascon was six feet two, handsome, with burning green eyes, and a thick head of flaming red hair. He was in command of the Blood Brother Gang. He calmly replied that the price depended upon the target.

Lum placed some food in his mouth and chewed slowly. “Sir Henry Shih’s little wife, Snow Flake, and their newborn son, Charles Albert Shih.”

Gascon elevated his head and peered at the ceiling, mentally deciding how much money to ask. It took thirty minutes of bargaining to settle on a price of two million Hong Kong Dollars in cash which would be delivered to his Golden Pagoda club in Hong Kong at 8:00 PM tomorrow night. Lum agreed.

“Time frame and location?” Gascon inquired.

“On November 15th, at 6 PM, Sir Henry will throw a grand party aboard his yacht docked in Hong Kong harbor to introduce his son, Charles Albert Shih, to the world. That is the time to strike.”

After Lawyer Lum’s departure, Gascon refilled his glass with French wine. Holding the glass up to the light, he said, “With the death of the woman and child, Mrs. Shih will get the last laugh on her husband from the comfort of a jail cell. The evidence we leave behind will point directly at her.”

In her office, the night club owner, Green Jade, raised her eyes from an account ledger book as Gascon came to her desk and sat on the edge. She was in her late twenties, with a movie-star face and body. The voluptuous beauty’s rich perfume stimulated him. Filled with desire, he wanted this woman now.

Green Jade read what was in his mind. Ouyang, a big and muscular bodyguard was standing behind her and lifted the hilt of his knife from the scabbard.

Gascon asked, "Are you free tonight?"

"No, I'm not," she replied curtly.

"Could you change your schedule for me?"

"Mr. Gascon, for that, you have to speak to Takamura the Dandy, who is my date for tonight." She realized she was rejecting him rudely, but she didn't care. She detested this man.

"That Jap fag," Gascon snorted. Takamura was the owner of the Gates of Hell Bar in Kowloon. He was also an exceptional fighter as well as a cold-blooded killer in his own right. He usually dressed in a white suit, bright red shirt, white shoes, and carried a black sword cane. Gascon knew better than to tangle with him. This man had killed many of the Blood Brother Gang's members with his bare hands.

When Green Jade noticed the fire in Gascon's eyes, she shivered. He pressed her again. "Can I see you some other time?" Standing tall, the bodyguard was ready to earn his pay.

"Some other time, when I'm free," she replied, trying to mask the loathing in her voice. Thwarted, Gascon left Green Jade's office, mad as hell.

Later that night, Gascon returned to his Golden Pagoda Club. Gaval, the second-in-command, and Sasin, the third-in-line in the Blood Brother Gang, were seated in Gascon's office. They clasped their hands together in an Indian greeting when Gascon entered the room. Gaval, in his early forties, was considered to be the brains of the gang. The lightly-skinned native of Calcutta was five foot nine, thin, with a pock-marked face, and a highly styled coiffure. Thick lips gave him the appearance of pouting. Sasin, in his thirties, was dark-skinned, muscular, five feet eight, possessing a large head and dark snake-like eyes. He was the chief enforcer.

Gaval listened intently while Gascon announced their new job. He absorbed the details with his ears opened and his eyes closed. Finally he spoke.

"As a rule, we leave nothing that could point to us."

Gascon agreed. "Yes. What I want is to leave evidence that will point to Mrs. Victoria Shih, who is Sir Henry's wife. That responsibility is yours, Gaval."

After the meeting, Gaval was sitting at his usual table away from the bar and near the dance floor. He ignored the noise and concentrated upon the job at hand. A waiter brought him his usual drink. He envisioned potential

variations of his plan to accomplish the task. Hours passed and gradually a concept grew in his mind. Eventually the ideas developed into a series of events.

Gavial's final plan involved two boats decked out with large banners hanging from the top masts and fireworks orchestrated to compliment Sir Henry's happy day. A half dozen of Gascon's men under disguise would be aboard Sir Henry's yacht before hand, waiting for a signal to take out the security guards on the yacht. Knowing that additional helpers would be needed to service the guests for that big event, he would arrange for their gang members to be recruited to work on the yacht on that day.

After the gangs took control the vessel, the young woman and her child would be transferred to one of the Blood Brother Gang's boats and killed. Later, a ransom note would be sent to the grieving father who would believe it was a kidnapping. An expert forger would write the note using Mrs. Shih's script which would be recognized by Sir Henry. Pleased with his plan, Gavial reached for his drink while peering at the scantily clad women on the dance floor. He nodded to one of them, a petite thing that seemed to be steadily looking at him while rotating her hips.

It was 10:00 AM on Monday morning as Sir Henry sat behind his huge desk in his office located on the top floor of the Shih Building in the central commercial district of Hong Kong. It had a panoramic view of the ocean and the island. He was on the phone ordering his lawyer to commence divorce proceedings and validate his new will. The newly signed document made Albert Charles Shih his sole heir under guardianship of Snow Flake. It bruised his ego that some journalists dared write coarse stories in their columns insinuating the child wasn't sired by him. Their names were added to his black list.

When the time was right, he would destroy them, one by one. Sir Henry was certain that it was Victoria's money which paid his attackers. Gloating, he pictured himself as the winner in this dispute. No longer would he be Victoria's comic foil. This male child was living proof of his virility, manhood, and absolute power.

He wanted to introduce Charles Albert to the world and to celebrate his hundredth day. Two weeks before the big event, invitations were sent out to the elite of the District of Hong Kong. The celebration was to be held on November 15th, 1966 at 6:00 PM, on his yacht which was docked in the Hong Kong Harbor. The yacht had been renamed from *The Nine Dragons* to *The Nine Dragons of Prince Charles Albert*.

At that big moment, Sir Henry, with Charles Albert in his arms, posed for the press aboard his yacht. Snow Flake and an amah were delegated to walk behind Sir Henry who wore a jacket embroidered with his big crest in gold thread. He dominated the scene like a peacock among chickens. Snow Flake presented a stunning picture in a long blue silk gown with a gold sleeveless duster. Her hair was piled high topped with a long decorative hairpin in true regal fashion. She appeared to be much older than her nineteen years.

Aboard the yacht, security was extremely tight. The tables were lavishly arranged with plenty of food and flowers. Waiters toted trays of liquid refreshments to be served to the guests. It was slowly getting dark. Weary and bored with this humdrum party, Snow Flake's thoughts turned towards her son. With too much to drink and flushed by the praise of his guests, Sir Henry was delighted. He stood and touched the child's cheek with his jeweled fingers. In the meantime, his security guards continuously circulated among the guests.

Two illuminated boats decorated with long red and gold banners were approaching the yacht. The people on the boats were firing off brilliant displays of rockets, cherry bombs, and strings of fire crackers. Several guests rushed to the side of the yacht, applauding to show their appreciation.

Gascon concealed his red hair under a black wig and darkened his face, hands, and neck with makeup. He wore a large pair of sunglasses to hide his true features. More banners, red in color, were unfurled; it was a signal to the Blood Brother Gang's members on the yacht to overcome the guards. When the boats had maneuvered next to the yacht, a long loud whistle was blown from the yacht. Heavily armed men poured forth from concealment on the Blood Brother Gang's boats toward the yacht. After they boarded Sir Henry's regal vessel, they gathered the fearful guests together.

Once his men had secured the area, Gascon proceeded to board the yacht himself. Gavial was the last one to board. He had darkened his skin and inserted cotton inside his mouth to give his face some roundness. It was decided that Sasin would stay on one of their boats to await the arrival of their new guests, baby Charles Albert Shih and his mother, Snow Flake. It was his responsibility to carry out the killings.

Sir Henry was unaware of the danger because of all the drinks he had consumed. When he noticed that he was surrounded by unfriendly and rough-looking strangers, however, he raised his voice. "What is the meaning of all this?"

Gascon viciously punched him in the face. “Shut up, old man!” Sir Henry staggered backward, bleeding from his mouth and nose. He still held his son in his arms as he struggled to stand on his feet.

Gavial forced Sir Henry to relinquish his hold of Charles Albert and immediately passed the baby to Gascon. Being forcible handled, Charles Albert wet his diaper. Feeling greatly insulted because the baby peed on his hand, Gascon reacted by tossing the baby overboard while the horror stricken guests watched. Gascon seized Snow Flake by her wrist while she tried to jump into the sea after her son. The petite woman fought hard against him, using the natural strength and courage of a mother desperately wanting to save her baby. Snow Flake broke free of Gascon’s grip and managed to rake his face with her nails.

This act sexually aroused him and he ordered his men to bring the woman below, instead of killing her. At the same time, when Sir Henry saw his son thrown overboard, he used a father’s instinct and forced himself to move forward to save his only son. Unperturbed, Gavial shot him in the head.

Gascon entered the cabin where Snow Flake was being restrained by two men. Touching his cheek, his fingers came away bloody. He responded by sucking the blood and making loud noises, as if he enjoyed the sensation. Gascon waved the men out of the cabin before he locked the door.

“My beauty, it’s all in a day’s work.” Suddenly, he punched her viciously in the stomach. As she bent over, he proceeded to rip off her clothing and shoved her onto the bed. He laughed while she was crying from the pain.

“I am Gascon, the boss of the Blood Brother Gang! I am the king of the districts of Hong Kong! Why don’t you admit that you want a real man like me, instead of that old fart?” Hearing the name Gascon, Snow Flake inked it in her brain and in the depth of her heart. Combat and submission was his idea of foreplay. Gascon thought of strangling the woman just when he was climaxing. While Gascon was busy undressing, Snow Flake touched her hair and found the long decorative hair pin still in place. She lay quietly and acted subdued on the bed. While he lowered his body to cover hers, Snow Flake moved her hands behind her head, quickly removed the pin and stabbed it into his left eye. The attack caught Gascon by surprise. Red hot pain shot through his body causing him to violently retreat from the woman.

On his feet, Gascon shook his head like an animal in an effort to dislodge the pin from his eye. His loud screams alarmed the men outside the cabin door. They began pounding on the locked partition and Snow Flake realized they’d break it down soon. Worried, about to be caught, Snow Flake sought a means of escape. She spied the fastened port window. With a mother’s

vengeance permeating her body, she unfastened the bolts that secured the window and opened it.

With a last look back, she saw Gascon leaning against a wall still screaming. She pulled herself through the porthole and dropped into the cold sea. Snow Flake swam under the water propelled by strong, rapid movements of her feet and shoulder muscles. Further and further into the dark sea she swam, before she dared to pause for a rest and look back at the yacht. She began to swim toward the shore, but was caught in a strong undercurrent which carried her out further into sea.

Gavial and his men managed to break the locked cabin door. Inside, they found Gascon pounding on the walls with his fists and a tasseled hair pin protruding from his left eye. The woman was nowhere in sight, but an open port window told the story. Gavial shouted, "Bring the woman back! Do whatever is necessary to find her!"

Gavial ordered his men to spread out and look overboard. At the same time he ordered a boat which was headed by Sasin to circle around the yacht and look for a woman in the water. Meanwhile, Gascon's men assisted him back to the deck.

When Gascon noticed some of the guests were staring at him, his blood began to boil and he was filled with rage. He roared, "Kill every living thing on board and set the yacht on fire."

His men opened fire into the crowd above, and shots were also fired below decks. It didn't take long. Soon, all lay dead, including those who worked on the yacht. Blood was everywhere. Gascon was foaming at the mouth and his veins bulged in his neck as was aided onto his vessel. Gavial ordered the men to pour gasoline on the deck and over the bodies. Before boarding his own boat, he threw a lit match onto the pool of gasoline.

His crew quickly separated their ships from the doomed yacht, which soon became an inferno. Once ashore, Gascon was taken to a doctor. Sasin conducted his boat to continue the search for Snow Flake.

Adrift in the dark sea for hours, Snow Flake lost all awareness of time. Suddenly, a very bright light appeared on the sea. It took a while for her to realize that it was the yacht on fire. She felt hopeless and exhausted, swimming in the cold, icy waters surrounded by the vast darkness all around her. Snow Flake acknowledged a growing fear as well. She was certain that the killer would be looking for her and the knot in the pit of her stomach grew. Unexpectedly, something bumped against her back. It turned out to be a wooden beam about ten feet long. Hooking an arm around it for support, she

allowed the waves to push her farther from the frightening scene behind her. She was grateful the piece of wood had not been a shark.

The sea and stars were witnesses to her torment, but they were indifferent to her loss. The same stars had seen many ships and men sink below the waves. The single powerful force that kept her going was the hope of one day facing her son's murderer. The scene of his death was clearly etched in her mind, and it drove her to seek revenge.

The next morning, November 16th, Victoria sat in her study, waiting for Lawyer Lum to report that the deed had been done and collect the second half of the payment, which amounted to two and a half million Hong Kong dollars in cash. Soon a maid arrived and announced that she had a visitor. To Victoria's surprise, her guest was not Lum but Detective Hom from the British Hong Kong Royal Police. He said he was investigating the case of the fire on her husband's yacht the previous night and the deaths of all aboard. When she heard him say that everyone onboard was dead, her first reaction was to laugh uncontrollably. She quickly became aware, however, of the disastrous situation her action had caused for herself. With the death of her husband, she would lose his royal title and drop out of the high society life which she had enjoyed for so long. The worst part of all was the thought that she could end up in prison for murder. She started to cry loudly and soon fainted. When she was brought to the hospital, doctors declared her dead from a heart attack.

Snow Flake Now Called “Shirley”

The hot sun and the strong current combined to work against Snow Flake. From her position in the sea, she could only take an educated guess where the land lay. She had no idea how far away she was from the shore. The waves broke over her, carrying her up and down in the swells. She picked a direction and pushed the beam towards where she believed the shore might be. Continuous exertion, no matter how small, took its toll. Snow Flake’s muscles were aching and beginning to cramp but, driven on by her strong will, the young woman persisted to move on.

From sunrise to sunset, a day passed slowly and Snow Flake was feeling hunger pains. She also was thirsty and very tired. Finally, exhaustion caused her to succumb to sleep. Subconsciously, her arms locked around the beam. In her dreams she was eating and drinking in the port, but mouthfuls of salty water awakened her. Snow Flake became disoriented but her will to live kept her going.

On the third day, still clinging to the wooden beam, she became extremely dehydrated and she began hallucinating. By mid-morning, she was at the edge of losing consciousness. The low sound of engines didn’t register in her mind and she was unaware of the approaching boat.

Standing at the rail on deck, men were calling out and pointing at the sea where they saw an arm clinging to a wooden beam. Lao Tung was sixty-three years old, with a husky, muscular definition. He was of medium height and had a weather-beaten face. Lao Tung was the master of the vessel and directed the helmsman to slow down because he wanted to see if anyone was alive. The first thing that caught his eyes was the hand holding onto the beam. It had a diamond ring which was reflecting sunlight.

He asked himself what the hell someone doing in the water so far away from the land. We saw no sign of a shipwreck. He ordered his men to lower a net from the boom to bring the person aboard.

When Snow Flake was laid on the deck, she suddenly became aware that she was on something solid and that there were men around her. Although incoherent and dazed, she still was consumed by rage and prepared to fight to the death. San Lin, in his early thirties, a medium-sized man with small head and weak face, went to grab the woman and was immediately bowled over by a series of vicious punches. The woman scratched his face with her nails. Hurt, frightened and panicking, he ran behind King, a large man.

Looking for sympathy, San Lin made a great show of touching his face and showing everyone that he was bleeding.

“Look what she has done to me!” he whined.

Snow Flake spied some clubs on the rail and, not knowing the men’s intentions, quickly picked one up. She was like a coiled serpent. King walked towards her and feigned a move in her direction. Snow Flake ran at him. King, in his late twenties, tall and stocky, lost his nerve and hurriedly moved away, retreating behind his gang. They all laughed at him.

Yu, one of the group’s best fighters, was slightly over twenty years old with a short but strong body. When he stepped forward, Snow Flake charged in his direction. Yu kicked the club out of her hand and dropped her to the deck with a punch. No sooner did she hit the deck, when she was on her feet again, on the attack. Down she went under a blow from his fist. The scene was repeated several times.

Lao Tung observed all the incredulous action. He thought that this woman was really something. He looked at her, haggard, water-logged, and exhausted. Yet she didn’t know when to quit. What fired her up?

Her whole body was hurting but Snow Flake ignored the pain. She was still full of fight so again she arose and continued to stand her ground against these strange men. Lao Tung foresaw that, with the proper training, she could be an asset to his crew. This time he studied the features of her face. He liked what he saw in her and said to the men, “Yu, that’s enough! This woman is mine!”

Obeying his uncle, Yu backed away from her. Gasping for breath, Snow Flake turned to glare at Lao Tung. One more time, she retrieved a club and held it ready for use. Lao Tung approached her and said, “Sea Devil, put that club down and come with me.”

Without a warning, Snow Flake made an effort to spring at him. He applied a lock to Snow Flake’s arm and applied some pressure. To his surprise, the young woman endured the pain and, didn’t release the club. He swung her around, lifted her off her feet, and dropped her on her back.

King, who had fled from the woman, asked, “Sir, is this the woman whom the Blood Brother Gang’s members are seeking?”

“Fool, does she look like a prostitute who stole Gascon’s watch and money? This one would tear him apart, piece by piece. The woman Gascon is seeking is already on shore. This Sea Devil was washed or thrown overboard from a boat. If you believe the red-headed devil’s men, then the woman is yours.”

He sniveled, “She will kill me.”

“You are a real Jelly Brain.”

Suddenly, Snow Flake was on her feet and swinging at Lao Tung again. He applied a lock to her arm and, using pressure, forced her down on the deck. King picked up a club and came over to brain her, but was stopped by Lao Tung who dragged Snow Flake into his cabin and shut the door behind him.

Upon being released in the cabin and spying a knife on the table, Snow Flake made an effort to grab it.

This action amused Lao Tung who said, "I never encountered a woman as wild as you. You don't even know when you're beaten. That is what I like about you."

Snow Flake went for him again. He threw her down so many times that he lost count. Finally Lao Tung flattened her with a punch. The old man watched the woman lying on her back, making an effort to rise. He asked himself, "Who is this wild woman and why are her eyes projecting fire and madness?"

While he persisted to observe her, Snow Flake searched the cabin for an exit and a weapon.

Lao Tung raised his voice. "Sea Devil, do you have a name?"

She chose the English equivalent of her Chinese name. "Shirley."

"Shirley what?"

"Just Shirley. If you don't release me, I'll kill you."

He nodded his head while looking at her. "I believe you. I like a woman who isn't afraid to fight on men's terms. Since you can't beat me, this is what I want you to do. First, remove all of your jewelry and give them to me. These stones can get you killed. Secondly, get out of those wet clothes. You will find dry clothing in the chest by my bunk."

Snow Flake removed her jewelry and placed them on the table. Quickly Lao Tung applied a wrist lock forcing her face to the table. She felt her hair being twisted into a tight knot but no sound escaped from her lips. Lao Tung sheared the hair close to the scalp with his knife. He cast her cut hair into a garbage can before easing his hold on her.

"Shirley, what is your family's name?"

She shrugged her shoulders, answered, "Call me anything you like."

"I'm going outside. Change yourself. There is food in the refrigerator. I shall return in a half hour."

Outside the cabin, the crew gathered to talk among themselves about the strange woman. Lao Tung emerged from the cabin and called all hands on deck. He gave them an ultimatum.

"Do not talk to outsiders about this woman. I will break anyone who disobeys me. Is that clear?" The men then went about their respective chores.

Yu was scanning the horizon on the lookout for the ship they were supposed to contact. It was a rust bucket of a cargo ship, loaded with relics from the Philippines destined for the black market in Hong Kong and Kowloon. Lao Tung mused, "I wish my crew was as tough as Shirley and possessed her guts."

He returned to the cabin to find Shirley seated at the table sipping tea from a cup. When he saw that her breast was pushing out from the shirt, he roared, "Has the sea washed away all the grey cells from your brain? The Blood Brother Gang's members are searching the sea for a woman. I want you dressed like a man in loose clothing. Do it now!"

He kicked open the chest and pulled out more pants, shirts and overcoats. While she put some over-sized clothing on again, she observed him from the corner of her eye. He was mixing something in a glass bowl that smelled awful. "Girl, come here!"

Snow Flake still felt pain from all the fighting and Lao Tung's punches. She reluctantly came towards him.

Looking at her eye-to-eye, Lao Tung said, "Devil Woman, that won't do. Put on enough clothing to give your body bulk." She followed his orders and that pleased him.

"Sit in this chair and show me your hands." Snow Flake sat, glaring rebelliously. Lao Tung cut her fingernails very short. He pointed to the glass bowl on the table. "I am expecting visitors. You will apply this mix on your exposed skin." He left the cabin.

Snow Flake sat on the deck with her back against the cabin door. Together with the effects of hot sun and too many layers of clothes, she was sweating. Waves of fatigue overcame her and she fell into a deep sleep. Swirls of violence and unfocused emotion rapidly consumed her sleep. Snow Flake relived bits and pieces of the recent tragedy but couldn't seem to put them all together. Distressed, she wove them into a nightmare where she was being beaten and clubbed by faceless men.

From a safe distance, San Lin was mesmerized by the woman's changing facial expressions. The sun made the scratches on his face sting. This female wasn't like any woman that he had ever met, and she terrified him. He pointed out to his gang that tears were coming from the sleeping woman's eyes.

Lao Tung's nephew, Yu, sternly scolded the men. "Dog Shits, is there no work on this ship for you but to watch that Devil Woman?"

San Lin replied, "This woman will cause us a lot of grief. Let's cast her overboard."

Yu slapped the top of his head very hard, saying, “Imbecile! Even if she is a sea monster, you dare not touch her. Lao Tung will kill you!” The fear of the old master was enough for the men to leave the woman alone.



A young peasant woman from Hong Kong gets an unexpected introduction to the wealth and privilege of high society only to have it violently ripped away from her, along with everything she holds dear. She is forced to go underground among the criminal street gangs that plague the city, and become someone she does not recognize - a fierce warrior with a heart of stone. Seeking revenge against her enemies, she finds love and loyalty.

The Nine Dragons Saga

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