



ATTACKING THE DRAGON



A. MARC ROSS

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A NOVEL

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Publisher Page
an imprint of Headline Books
Terra Alta, WV

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Shenzhen, China

The American had been in Hong Kong. Now, only hours later, he was in the city of Shenzhen on China's mainland, dashing from a long black sedan as he hurried to meet the senior Chinese government official and high-ranking member of the Chinese Communist Party who had summoned him. He rushed past a delegation of Party members, ignoring them, while they were surprised to see hurrying by them the tall white *qweilo*, a derogatory term for foreigners.

Haofu Tao, the woman who had called Wesley Robertson, greeted him outside the building where the Delegation was to go. She and Wes exchanged bows, his deeper than hers, then they stood talking quietly, drawing the attention of more members of the Delegation since Haofu Tao was its principal leader. She led Wes into a far corner of the lobby by a mannequin dressed as a warrior, where they sat, huddled in conversation.

This was the corporate headquarters and a manufacturing facility for a Chinese tech company. After exchanging bows with company executives lined up to greet them and entering the lobby, the Delegates continued to sneak looks at the two, wondering why Haofu Tao was talking to this *qweilo* and whispering about it among themselves.

The Delegates were to receive a tour of the company's facility, so they followed a company executive down a long hallway through heavy double metal doors onto the factory floor. A member of the Delegation, a short young woman, stopped just

inside the factory area. She held open one of the doors, waiting on Haofu Tao and the *qweilo*, who was following slightly behind her. The two of them were almost at the door as Haofu Tao smiled at the woman.

An ear-splitting blast erupted. Explosions ripped through the factory space. Flames shot up. The force blew Haofu Tao backward, driving her into Wes and hurling them both back further into the hallway. It flung the young woman against the edge of the door. The factory floor became littered with splintered machines, slices of metal rods, blood, limbs, and corpses as flames and smoke engulfed the space.

Wes lay unconscious on the floor. Slowly, he came around. His left shoulder was in agony, his hearing was dulled, and he was dazed. Haofu Tao lay near him, unmoving. Her clothes were torn and she was bleeding. He dragged himself to her, put an ear to her mouth, and was relieved to hear breaths, faint but audible.

Using his right arm for leverage, he pulled himself to his feet and limped toward the smoke and heat. He got only a few steps onto the factory floor before the heat stopped him from advancing any further. The smell of burning flesh seared his nostrils. He could barely see through the smoke and flames into the blast area, but he made out enough. There were shattered machines and mangled bodies strewn everywhere. He could see body parts and make out pools of blood. He did not see anyone moving nor hear any sounds other than the roar of the fire. He closed his eyes briefly, unable to look at the carnage, then backed away, stumbling over the lifeless body of the woman who had been holding the door. He reached Haofu Tao and, with his good arm, lifted her torso and dragged her, backpedaled up the hall and then through the lobby. He was near the front door when he crumpled to his knees and gently placed Haofu Tao down. Cradling her head with his good arm, he passed out.

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Mumbai, India, Several Months Earlier

The meeting had been set for Mumbai, India. June. The humidity sat at ninety and the city baked in the ninety-five-degree temperature. Rain pounded the streets, drenching the fancy new buildings, the shacks in the surrounding slums, and the unfortunate people trying to survive in them. It was *that season*.

A taxi stopped opposite a luxury western-style hotel. A man wearing a raincoat and a large, brimmed hat clambered out. He started to open his umbrella, but the wind flipped it inside out, almost striking him. Cursing, he tossed it away before darting between the traffic coming from both directions. The wind whipped open his partially buttoned coat, and he could feel the rain soaking his pants' legs. By the time he made it across the street and was sheltered under the hotel's overhang, the rain had anointed him a member of the city's great washed.

Inside the hotel, he removed his hat and coat and shook them, spraying the marble floor. Loudly exhaling, he took several cloth hand towels from a side table and wiped his face and his pants. He shook his head and frowned while tossing the wet towels into a nearby gold-rimmed basket and thought *I hate having to come to this city*. Shaking himself like a wet dog, he deposited his outerwear with the sari-clad coat check girl before making his way to the tearoom off the lobby, stepping gingerly so his wet shoes did not slip on the slick mosaic-patterned marble floor.

Pausing at the entrance, he smelled the fragrant odor of spices. The room was decorated with traditional Indian motifs, including basreliefs of Hindu gods and pillars bearing fake carvings. Rugs hung from some walls and long strands of small glistening multi-colored beads dangled in entranceways. A fountain with a six-foot-high gold-colored hookah in its center occupied the middle of the room. Water jetted from the hookah's base, splashing near the fountain's outer rim.

Spotting the person he was to meet, the man weaved his way to a table at the fountain's edge. As he did so he noted that the splashing water drowned out the sound of conversations, a plus for his meeting. The man he had come to meet remained seated, not rising in greeting nor showing any emotion. A tea service rested on the table, and the newcomer, still wet, took the empty seat, muttered about "Old Testament" weather, and poured himself a cup.

He examined his tablemate, struck as always by the latter's appearance. The man's coal-black swept-back hair, thin, angular face with an aquiline nose, and, as his observer knew from past meetings, measuring at slightly below average height but with a lean, strong body. His skin had the light brown coloring of a native of the Indian subcontinent whose ancestors had mixed, probably by force and probably more than once, with the Empire's soldiers. Today, the man was wearing expensive white linen slacks, an off-white tailored jacket, and a heavily starched pale blue shirt with several buttons left open.

The new arrival knew that even if he had not been wet and sweating from the rain and the humidity, his appearance would have paled in comparison. By contrast, the newcomer was stout. He had a roundish, wide face bearing Mongolian features and a heavy, unkempt beard. His clothes were of cheap manufacture and well worn. He looked harmless but secretly took pride in having heard it said by those who had survived encounters with him *he didn't seem like the sort of man who would...*

His table mate went by the code name *Chaucer*. He had given the new arrival the code name *Oscar* although the man usually went by the alias Nambaryn Ochirbat.

Chaucer flicked an invisible speck from his lapel. Not bothering with preliminaries, he announced, “For that mission, we’ve decided how we’ll use what you are to provide. How does your part stand?”

Oscar wiped more remnants of rain and sweat from his face. “I’ve narrowed it to two choices back in China. Either should be satisfactory. I’ve made initial contact with my likely agents, although they’ve no idea yet that we want anything from them.”

“Good.” Chaucer glanced around. “What about your business here? Is it doing well?”

Oscar shrugged. “Fair. I met with two potential outlets which could prove to be good long-term customers. My manager here continues to run the office well.”

“That’s good. Your foreign offices provide useful covers for us.”

Oscar’s eyes latched onto a beautiful woman in her early twenties with fair skin and blonde hair. She wore a tight silver dress with a deep plunging neckline. She was coming toward them from behind Chaucer. As she passed, she did not glance down, but her right hand glided across the tabletop and, for the briefest of moments, slid under Chaucer’s napkin. She was good; Oscar barely caught the drop despite sitting right there. He looked around. Oscar was sure no one else had seen. He thought *anyone watching would’ve been fixed on that cleavage and the dress stretching across her round behind, not her hand*. Oscar was right. Most of the men and some of the women were watching her, and the looks of many showed they wanted her. Exiting, she turned and looked over the room, noting the faces watching her but revealing no emotions.

Chaucer paid her no attention, and while others looked at her, he nonchalantly slid his napkin with its contents onto his

lap. Quietly, he said, “Here are the details. Our intended use and the required formula and methods. Study them and let me know your chosen source...soon. I will make sure it is selected as the supplier.”

Oscar nodded. They sipped their tea.

Finishing his cup, Chaucer rubbed his face around his mouth and asked, “What about Project Falling Stars?” referring to another of Oscar’s assignments.

“I’ve picked the target and the when. It will be in several months. I haven’t yet decided upon the exact details, but am confident it will be a high body count.”

Neither showed any emotion.

“Do so, then once you have worked out your plan, forward it through the usual channels for approval.”

Oscar nodded. Knowing he was pushing, with a cocked head, he asked in an even quieter voice, “What about the plans for the coup?”

Chaucer’s mouth turned down. “Don’t concern yourself with that. I’ll just say that it too will take time. Remember, our foes may have forgotten how to be patient and to take the long view. But we have learned well.”

Chaucer pushed back his chair and stood, smoothing out invisible creases in his jacket. As he left, he walked by Oscar, briefly blocking him from sight by the rest of the room and dropped his napkin on top of Oscar’s. Oscar reached underneath it and pocketed its hidden thumb drive and a hotel room card key.

Without looking back, Chaucer said over his shoulder, “It’s room 1607. Enjoy.” He stopped and looked back at Oscar. “Do not fail us. It would not be good for our plans. And it would be very bad for you.” In moments, he had left the tearoom and then the hotel.

Oscar sat for a few minutes, mainly watching the steam rise from a second cup and trying to block out Chaucer’s last words.

He did not know Chaucer's motives for involving himself in these actions, but he did not doubt the man's threat. He raised one arm, beckoning for the check, and pulled out several damp bills. He did not mind paying for the tea especially because, as was their practice, Chaucer had paid for the room upstairs as well as the fair-skinned blonde awaiting him there.

Several days later, an obscure government office in Beijing received the blonde's report. It arrived along with many other weekly reports by others from many locations. Her report contained some details, including physical descriptions of both men. She wrote, "Did not learn either man's name. The Mongolian-looking one is from China; he has no distinguishing body marks. The South Asian man does not seem native. Learned no information of concern, but they seem suspicious." The report was filed away with so many others.

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An unknown group is carrying out terrorist attacks to undermine China's Communist Party and China's global expansion.

Wes Robertson, an American businessman who is injured in one of the attacks, becomes caught up in the hunt for the terrorists as does Maria Braga, the American Ambassador to an African country where people died from another.

As Wes and Maria hunt the perpetrators in China and the United States they become romantically involved. Meanwhile, Chinese officials suspect Wes may be involved with the terrorists, and the terrorists seek to stop Wes, killing him if need be. Can Wes and Maria discover who is behind these attacks and stop them before it is too late? Their search leads to a final confrontation and a surprising ending.



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