

SAN FRANCISCO

Michael Alan Burton managed to make it to his desk just in time, tossing his knapsack on the floor as he rocketed into his chair and sailed on its five legged rollers up against the wall of his cubicle just as the news room clock's long minute hand hit the 35 mark. But he knew he was caught when he heard the booming voice of his editor, Charles Allen, yell across the large room, "Burton, you're late!! Get in here!!"

He froze, winced, then glanced across the aisle to his fact checker and all around bud, Jerry Gale, for some sign of support. His friend smiled and shrugged, throwing up his hands. "Don't look at me. I'm not the one who's late."

Michael was tall and slim but solid, with a shock of thick black hair and cornflower blue eyes, a handsome face that all the women admired, and a mind that was razor sharp most of the time. But today he was a mass of awkward impulses from lack of sleep. He frowned at Jerry with narrowed eyes. "Some friend you are," he said, then got up slowly to walk the forty feet to the editor's glass walled office.

Allen was in no mood for excuses today, and Michael knew better than to try to furnish one. Allen simply pointed at the chair across from the large brown steel desk. Michael sank into it ready for the long lecture about the institutional integrity and honor he had destroyed by waltzing into the news room whenever he felt like it. It wasn't laziness which made him late, it was the god-awful noises coming from the next door apartment in the middle of the night that made him hit the snooze button in the morning one time too many.

"Mister Allen, I'm sorry I'm late but I have been having a hard time sleeping lately..."

"Oh?" Allen rounded on him. "Out partying all night?"

"No, sir. The new neighbors are noisy. I'd move, but you know how the rent's been soaring through the roof."

Allen was more irritable than usual today. He leaned down and squinted into his face like a drill sergeant. "Are you saying we don't pay you enough, son?"

Michael realized that anything he said was just going to make it worse and cringed a little. "No, sir."

The old man grumbled a bit under his breath, then relaxed visibly. "Well, anyway that's not why I called you in here. I suppose noisy neighbors are a legitimate reason to sleep in. Okay, you're off the hook this time, but I don't want to see you crawl in here like that again."

"You can count on me, sir," Michael said bravely while fighting off the urge to salute. The old man was a veteran of the Viet Nam war, and had been an embedded correspondent with the troops. He was used to sleeping in cold ditches or dodging bullets and picking his way through minefields with little more than twenty minutes of hard won sleep in between sorties, and Michael admired him for that. He also knew that his youth, his college degree and his five years of reporting experience counted for squat until he got better assignments like that one. What he did not know was that today was his lucky day.

"Okay, you know how the Chinese gangs have been up in arms lately," Allen said, interrupting his thoughts. "Two rival clans have moved into Chinatown and are tearing up the place trying to take it over. I need somebody with a fresh eye, and I'm impressed with the work you have done so far. Are you interested in taking over coverage of this war?"

Michael fought down the impulse to jump up and down and scream his joy at being selected and simply smiled, drew himself straighter and said, "I am, sir."

"Good!" Allen said, echoing Michael's innocent face. "Go see Wing Ma and she'll catch you up to speed. I want you to know what's going on from top to bottom before you go out there."

But when Michael told Wing Ma what Allen had in mind she simply shook her head while she closed the steel file drawer in her cabinet and tossed the folders in her hand onto her desk. Ma was middle aged and knew the ins and outs of the news business. She had been at the Chronicle for over ten years.

At the end of his proposal, Ma said, "Michael, I don't think Allen knows what he's doing. I wouldn't send you out to cover the clans. It takes an Asian to understand another Asian, you know what I mean?"

"I'm not sure. Are you saying I can't do this because I'm a white man?"

"Well... yes," she said. "In order to see what's going on you need to know something about the culture, the history of the Chinese triads. There have been wars between rival clans that last so long that sometimes the factions have

forgotten how they started. They have a code of behavior that makes them honor certain traditions that are not revealed to occidentals. This is not warfare the way it's waged in the rest of the world. This warfare is waged with backroom deals, with business mergers, with swift and quiet executions in the middle of the night to eliminate the competition. They are devout capitalists in the purest sense of the word. These factions boost their power by dealing in drugs, human slavery, prostitution, illegal arms sales, you name it. They also deal in money laundering using very legitimate businesses to cover their tracks. The more wealth they amass, the more firepower they accumulate to back their political influence, and the corruption goes all the way to the top."

"Yes, but this is very important to me, Wing," Michael said. "I may be getting in over my head but Allen wants me to cover this story and I can't let him down. What can I do?"

"I don't know," Ma replied. "Let me ask around and see if there is someone you can talk to at the police department. I don't want to see you wandering around in that warzone alone. You might get killed."

"Thanks for covering my butt," Michael said, and kissed her cheek.

She smiled and replied, "you are so nice, Michael. You always seem to know what a girl wants. Now let me get you some reading material. If you have time, go to the library and check out some books on Chinese history. You must become the dragon to catch the dragon."

"Something from Confucius?" Michael asked.

"No, something from Wing Ma," she said. "Now get out of here. I'm busy."

Sometime in the afternoon the research cart came trundling up the aisle piled high with papers and folders, pushed along by the young black mailroom clerk. The cart came to a stop next to Michael's desk while he was reading through some newspaper clippings on microfiche. "Wing Ma must have it in for you good, Michael," the black clerk said. "I've never seen so much stuff come your way before."

"It's a very important assignment and I've got a lot of background to explore," Michael explained as he helped the clerk move the pile into a corner of his already overloaded desk.

"I suppose when you're finished with it you want me to move it all back?"

"I'm afraid so, Clarence," Michael said, smiling at the clerk's low inertia.

Clarence scratched absently at his dark scalp and said, "Why don't you just feed it back to me in little bits? That way the cart won't be nearly so heavy to push."

"You got a deal," Michael replied.

When the clerk moved on his attention returned to the folder at the top of the pile. There was no system to research. One either read it or not, and it didn't matter what order it came in. He picked up the folder, opened it, and began reading.

For the next few hours the newsroom was arush with people moving. Michael sat in the center, the eye of the hurricane of activity, reading the pile and making notes until the rest of the room was dark and the only light came from his desk lamp. When he was finished he sat back, rubbed at his aching overworked eyes. He blinked at the moving shadow of the janitor emptying the trash baskets into the master bin before he shut down the computer terminal setting on his desk, then picked up his backpack and turned off the light before he made his way toward the elevator.