

# **Red Phoenix Burning**

*Sequel to Red Phoenix*

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## **Prologue**

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**Heungnam Union Fertilizer Plant**

**Hamhung, North Korea**

A gust of wet wind blowing off the Sea of Japan sent acrid vapors from the plant's tall stacks swirling through the maze of rusting sheds, massive steel piping, and storage tanks. For a brief moment, the scarred, treeless slopes rising beyond the tangle of industrial buildings were visible. But then the wind shifted back, and the desolate hills were blotted out again.

General Tae Seok-won coughed, hacked, and then spat to his right, narrowly missing the highly polished shoes of the dapper, middle-aged man at his side. Even a brief exposure to the Heungnam plant's caustic fumes made his eyes water. Some of the substances manufactured here—precursors and stabilizers for Sarin nerve gas—were used for the chemical weapons he controlled as chief of the Sixth Bureau of the General Staff Department.

The others, heroin and crystal methamphetamine, were essential to him and to many others in the hierarchy of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Money from the sale of these drugs in China, Japan, and other countries around the world helped pay for the luxuries enjoyed by Pyongyang's military and political elites—Mercedes sedans, gourmet food, and elegant furnishings for their spacious apartments and country homes. Making sure this plant ran smoothly was a vital task.

Vital or not, Tae felt uncomfortably exposed. This facility was dangerous in its own right, as the annual toll of fatalities from industrial accidents and exposure to toxic chemicals attested.

And if one of his rivals decided to strike at him here, this labyrinth of pipes and tanks could easily be turned into a deathtrap.

He scowled. In ordinary times, he could have deployed a full battalion of security troops to guard against sabotage.

But these were not ordinary times.

“You seem uncomfortable, Comrade General,” a smooth voice said quietly, barely audible over the background noise of clanking machinery, pumps, and the blare of patriotic music from the loudspeakers.

Tae forced a smile as he glanced at the dark-suited man beside him. Ri Il-chun was the deputy chairman of the Second Economic Committee—the group in charge of coordinating North Korea’s military production and procurement. Ri was not a friend. On the other hand, he was not an open enemy, either. Their political and economic interests often coincided. Amid the ever shifting, complicated, and covert war waged between Pyongyang’s competing factions, this made him almost an ally.

Many in the West looked at North Korea and saw a monolithic tyranny dominated by the “Supreme Leader,” Kim Jong-un, and his cadre of close supporters. That was a façade, as Tae and his peers knew all too well. The political turmoil and economic stagnation of the past three decades had fractured the monolith.

Cold-eyed Kim Jong-un and his ruthless cronies presided over a precarious balance as the many factions within the Korean Workers’ Party and the armed forces struggled for wealth and influence. Whenever any one group seemed on the edge of amassing enough power to be truly dangerous, Kim could rely on jealous rivals to pull it down and tear it apart.

The system worked, however imperfectly and inefficiently, but it depended entirely on the maintenance of a rough balance of terror among those contending for power.

And now Tae knew that balance was threatened. This was why he and Ri were “inspecting” this foul-smelling labyrinth of poisons, so far from the convenience, and the constant surveillance, of their respective offices in Pyongyang.

He turned to face the other man squarely. “Comfort is not a concern of those who serve the Supreme Leader . . . and the state.”

Ri smiled slyly back at him. “Aptly expressed, Comrade General.” He shrugged. “That is good, because the news I bring is not especially comforting.”

Tae frowned. “The rumors were accurate, then?”

“Completely accurate,” Ri confirmed, his lopsided smile fading. “General Chu will be appointed as the head of the Department of the Economy.”

“When?”

“A few weeks, at most.”

For an instant, Tae stood frozen in place as he contemplated a future filled only with catastrophe. It was as though he were trapped on a sheer cliff, condemned to helplessly watch the avalanche of ice and rock roaring down the mountain toward him.

Ri’s report confirmed what his own sources had conveyed earlier. Chu and those in his circle were among the bitterest enemies of the factions to which Tae and Ri belonged. Chu’s old post as the head of the State Security Department, the secret police force enforcing the Kim family’s preeminence, had made him dangerous enough. His spies and agents were seeded throughout the military and the government, a constant threat to those with whom his interests clashed.

But control over the Department of the Economy would magnify Chu's power exponentially. This new bureaucracy was a recent creation of Kim Jong-un. Tasked with tightening the party's control over every aspect of the North's economic life—including the shadowy trading companies that ran drugs and exported weapons—its chief could pry into the secret finances of any enemy, any rival, exposing all the illegal payoffs, bribes, and kickbacks that were the common currency of every transaction in the DPRK.

With that kind of information at his disposal, Chu could break anyone he desired, consigning them, their wives, and their children to torture, firing squad, or exile to a death camp almost on a whim. And he would not show mercy to anyone he deemed a competitor.

Tae felt his hands tighten into fists. Previous directors of the Department of the Economy had been relative nonentities, easily swayed and easily frightened into ineffectiveness. What madness had possessed Kim Jong-un to hand so much power to someone like Chu? And this wasn't the first unwise decision by the young Kim. He seemed even less stable than his father.

Tae forced himself to speak calmly. "Can anything be done?"

"Officially?" Ri shook his head. "No. The Supreme Leader's decision is final."

"And unofficially?"

Ri hesitated for a long moment. He glanced over his shoulder, making sure that no one else was in earshot. "Others are . . . concerned," he admitted softly.

"Who?" Tae demanded.

He listened intently as the other man quietly ran through a list of names. Tae knew them all. Some he could tolerate. Others he despised. Some he feared. All held high positions in rival factions within the party and the military, with many commanding the allegiance of units in the

Pyongyang Defense Command, the Guard Command, the III Corps, and the State Security Department—the interlocking security apparatus of the regime and the Kim dynasty.

The general felt cold. Even hearing this list of names could mark him for a lingering and infinitely painful death. Were Ri and these others serious? Or was this a trap, designed to ensnare him and others like him? A way for Ri to curry favor with Chu and his allies?

He looked up to find Ri watching him closely.

“You are wary,” the other man said. “That is wise. This is no time for rashness.” Then his voice hardened. “But neither is it a time for hesitation or cowardice. Like the rest of us, you must decide. And soon.”

Tae nodded stiffly. “I understand.”

Ri handed him a small sheet of rice paper. “There are two futures, Comrade General. The choice is yours.”

Tae glanced down at the paper. On one side, it bore the words 큰 위험, “Great Danger.” On the other, it carried the message 기회, “Opportunity,” and a telephone number. He looked up again.

Ri nodded slowly. “That number is secure...for now. But do not delay too long, Tae.” With that, he turned on his heel and walked toward the black limousine waiting to take him back to Pyongyang.

General Tae Seok-won stood silently, watching the bureaucrat as he got into his car, unconsciously flipping that single small scrap of paper from one side to the other.