

BLACK DRAGONS ATTACK

A NICK GRANT ADVENTURE
Book Four



BY
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To the Reader

WELCOME TO THE FOURTH VOLUME in the Nick Grant Adventure Series. These are works of fiction, but built around historical events, people, and places, the climax of which was the most cataclysmic event in human history — World War II. There are hundreds of books and websites dedicated to this topic, and it is not my intent to join that august group. Rather, I hope to provide the reader with a glimpse of life as it existed before that great cataclysm. The people who lived in those uncertain times were no more prescient than those living today. While some held a deep foreboding about what lay ahead, most were simply trying to get along in the worst economic downturn in our nation's history.

I have remained as close to the historical record as possible while writing what I hope to be a compelling narrative. Most readers will recognize the name of the famous movie mogul and aviator Howard Hughes. During the Golden Age of Aviation, Hughes had the genius, drive, and finances to push the boundaries of science, technology, and engineering to dizzying heights. His Hughes H-1 was a revolutionary aircraft that was years, if not a decade, ahead of anything else flying. Its performance was something that gained the attention of fascist regimes of Nazi Germany and imperial Japan. Both intelligence agencies were deeply involved in stealing US technology — especially tech with a military application.

At first the Japanese attempted to buy or license the H-1.

That was not unusual during this period. Japan bought and licensed the Douglas DC-2. In addition, they also purchased the four-engine prototype Douglas DC-4E after US airlines declined to upgrade their DC-3 fleets. Japan claimed that Imperial Japanese Airways would use the DC-4E for evaluation. Interestingly, shortly after purchase, the Japanese press reported that the aircraft had crashed in Tokyo Bay. However, military and corporate interests at Nakajima, Japan, were secretly studying it. Engineers reverse-engineered the DC-4E, and it became the basis for the Nakajima G5N bomber used to attack allied forces during World War II.

The crux of my the story revolves around Howard Hughes' claims. During the war, Hughes was able to evaluate a captured Mitsubishi A6M Zero. He went on record and claimed that the Zero copied many of the innovations he incorporated in his H-1. He further claimed that in 1936 someone broke in to Hughes Airport, Culver City, California and stole H-1 plans.

Nick, his family, colleagues, and friends are figments of my imagination. The aircraft, ships, and places are real, as are many of the other characters. I have taken artistic license with some because no records exist of their conversations about the topics in my novel. I have strived through research to stay true to the personalities, passions, and failures of those people.

I hope you enjoy *BLACK DRAGONS ATTACK*, A Nick Grant Adventure.

Jamie Dodson
Madison, Alabama
August, 2017

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Dedication and Thanks

WRITING FOR PUBLICATION is among the most difficult endeavors I have attempted. Without the assistance of many people and organizations, I would not have written this dedication to my fourth Nick Grant Adventure. There simply is not enough room on this page to thank all. Regrettably, I must limit my dedication to those I found the most influential.

- *The members of the What You See Is Under Revision (WYSIUR) writer's critic group. Thanks for listening to me read and offering tough-love criticism.*
- *The members of the Coffee Tree Writer's Critic Group. Thanks for your comments and support.*
- *Steve Gierhart of Ardent Writer's Press. Thanks for taking a chance on me, for your tireless editing efforts, and the patience of Job.*
- *Writer Homer Hickam and his wife, Linda. Thanks for believing in me and providing many opportunities to present my work and ideas.*
- *Dr. William Humphrey, M.D. Thanks for reading the early versions of what became **Black Dragons Attack**. Your insight and attention to detail helped my journey and improved the story.*
- *Thanks to Navy Captain Rick Saunders, retired, for his review of naval terms and culture. He was emphatic, "I'm not that old, Dodson!" None the less, his review gave me confidence that I got my sister service right.*
- *Ms. Karin Haubold, curator, Naval History and Heritage Command, Washington Navy Yard, Washington, D.C. Ms. Haubold was marvelous in finding and providing the original art that graces the cover. Her help*

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was invaluable.

Finally, I dedicate this work to my wife, Dr. Joan Dodson. What can I say? She has put up with me for decades and never wavered. She encouraged and supported my ideas over the years, but nothing comes close to her support for my writing career. In my darkest hours as a writer, she never lost her belief that I could do this. She is my ***rock, my inspiration, and the love of my life.***

**Jamie Dodson
Madison, Alabama
March, 2017**

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Prologue: The Lazarus Effect

Afternoon, May 15, 1936

Aboard the Emperor's Cruiser, *Suzuya*, East China Sea
East of the City of Fuzhou, China

SOFT LIGHT ILLUMINATED the room as Lieutenant Commander Toshio Miyazaki opened his eyes. Waves of pain shot through his chest and stabbed into his brain. *I must remain conscious. Where am I?*

Someone spoke close by.

"Doctor! The commander is awake. Come quickly."

Slowly turning his head, Miyazaki saw a medical orderly. Realization temporarily cleared his thoughts. *What did that worthless sergeant tell me? When was that?* Then he drifted off to sleep. He ran through rice paddies, chasing Grant and the Tanaka girl. They had something that belonged to him, and honor demanded that he get it back. Every time he got close enough to grab it, their bodies drifted apart like smoke rising from a campfire.

A gentle hand touched Miyazaki's shoulder, and new waves of agony tore through him.

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“Commander Miyazaki, sir, can you hear me? Are you awake?”

Miyazaki opened his eyes, gritted his teeth, and spoke in barely a whisper. “Yes. Where am I?”

A doctor dressed in a Japanese naval uniform answered. “You are in sick bay aboard the Emperor’s Cruiser *Suzuya*. You have been seriously wounded and have lost a great deal of blood.”

Miyazaki raised his head and surveyed his bandage-swathed body. “Where are the Americans and their Chinese lackeys?”

“Gone. They left on the *Clipper*.”

Miyazaki laid his head back. “Then I am shamed once more. Perhaps now Admiral Shinozowa will allow me to complete *seppuku*.”

“I do not think so, Commander. You are to be congratulated and promoted.”

“What madness is this? I have failed and brought shame on my country, my service, and my family.”

“No, Commander, you played your part well, and the admiral is most pleased. Your diversion allowed the I.J.N. to complete another mission. The Emperor himself was very pleased.”

“Tell me more,” Miyazaki ordered.

“That is all I know, Commander. We rendezvoused with the Gunboat *Uji* at the mouth of the Minjiang River two days ago. The *Suzuya* will take you back to Yokohama where you will receive the very best medical care.”

“How badly wounded, doctor?”

“You are very lucky to be alive. And healing will take a very long time.”

More pain stabbed through Miyazaki’s body. “I do not feel lucky.”

The doctor nodded emphatically. “Oh, but you are, Commander. A bullet tore through you but missed vital organs and bones. Fortunately, the bullet was a high velocity and did

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not tumble inside your body. That minimized the damage.”

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Miyazaki nodded, remembering how close he had been to killing Grant. Only a *katana* swing away. He also remembered the shock of the bullet hitting his chest and the searing heat from the muzzle flash.

“Given time, you will heal completely. That is, except for the scars. The muzzle flash from the American automatic rifle burned your uniform to your flesh. That is the reason for all the bandages. I’m afraid that it will be a long and painful recovery.” Miyazaki nodded grimly, and the doctor motioned to the orderly who approached with a hypodermic needle.

“What is that, doctor?”

The doctor began to swab Miyazaki’s upper arm. “It’s a sedative and pain killer to help you sleep.”

In a lightning move, Miyazaki knocked the hypo from the doctor’s hand. The glass hit the bulkhead and smashed into a thousand pieces. “No more pain killers. I need to think, and I cannot with junk in my veins.”

Shaken, the doctor stepped back. “But Commander, the drugs will aid the healing process.”

“No!” Miyazaki’s shout brought on a bout of coughing.

The doctor held up his hand to the orderly who had already begun filling a new hypodermic. “Alright, Commander. Should you change your mind, let the corpsman know. We should be at Yokohama in a few days. Until then, I must insist on complete rest.”

Miyazaki closed his eyes and let the pain wash over him. It was good. The pain would help him focus — when to push and when to rest. He must rest and regain all of his strength. He would need it for his next encounter with Grant and Tanaka. He would retrieve the sword of his ancestors and enjoy watching them die slowly. Maybe split over an open fire, or hacked apart piece by piece. Tanaka first, so Grant could watch her die and hear her screams. Then Grant would feel his blade.

If only Miyazaki could capture someone else near and dear to that meddling teen. But who? His parents or his sister?

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His thoughts turned to the Portas. He still owed Guilherme Porta for his double cross. What if he kidnapped one of his daughters? The older was in Baltimore attending Johns Hopkins Medical School. Where was the younger one? *What was that brat's name? Leilani!* Yes, then Grant would have to bring him whatever his emperor wanted. Now that had definite possibilities.

First, he must heal, and then he would see what assignment he might draw. Perhaps he could figure a way back to the States. He opened his eyes. "Orderly, fetch the ship's intelligence officer."

The orderly stood and bowed. "Yes, Commander." He walked through the hatchway, and the doctor immediately walked back with the orderly in tow.

"I said complete rest, Commander. And speaking with Lieutenant Commander Yamata is not what I had in mind."

Miyazaki stared at the ceiling. "I will not always be an invalid, good doctor. Better that you should not interfere in my affairs. Or I might have to call you out on a point of honor."

The doctor paled. "I am no *samurai*. I cannot fight you with *akatana*. That would be suicide."

"Then, good doctor, I suggest that you let the orderly go on his mission."

The doctor bowed to Miyazaki then nodded to the orderly who disappeared into the passageway.

Chapter One: Mission Brief

9:30 a.m., July 4, 1936
4 Cherry Blossom Road
Yokohama, Japan

TOSHIO MIYAZAKI winced as his manservant continued to apply pressure to his back.

“Master, only a few more seconds.”

Miyazaki grunted. “It gets easier, Mitsu. Every day I grow more limber. Perhaps the burn scars will heal well and will not restrict my flexibility.

Mitsu slowly eased the pressure. “Let me take a look at your bandages.” Mitsu frowned. “Blood has seeped through again, master. Perhaps we should stop for today.”

Miyazaki cuffed Mitsu. “Be silent! If I want your thoughts, I will ask for them.”

Mitsu cowered, then stood and bowed. “My apologies. Let me apply new dressings, please.”

Miyazaki boiled inside as he thought about Grant and the Tanaka girl. He forced himself to breathe. *Be calm and take deep breaths. Thinking about those who did this to you will not help you heal.* Slowly, with an enormous effort of will, he nodded to

Mitsu.

Mitsu scurried over and gently removed the blood-sodden bandage from Miyazaki’s chest. He cleaned and dressed the wound. “The fish oil liniment seems to be working. Only one torn scab this time, master.”

Miyazaki glanced down at his naked chest. It was a mass of ugly pink flesh, interspersed with ragged scars and fresh scabs. It seemed no matter how much liniment Mitsu applied, at least one scab tore open every time he stretched. Yet, if he did not, his chest would become as hard as a tortoise shell and about

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as flexible. Then his days as a Section 9 *ninja* would be over. Miyazaki looked across the room to the mirror and gazed at his once handsome face. The burn scars rose from his chest, up his neck, and onto his left cheek.

A rap came at the door, and both men turned. Miyazaki said, "Come!" As the door opened, Miyazaki hurriedly pulled on his kimono and tied the black belt. Ignoring the pain across his chest, he stood and bowed deeply to his visitor. "Admiral Shirozowa. I am honored. What brings the director of Imperial Intelligence to my home?"

Shirozowa slipped out of his shoes and entered Miyazaki's sleeping quarters. He looked about the room, admiring the twelfth-century paintings, the *kabuki* masks, and other trappings. "I came to see how my favorite Black Dragon is healing."

Miyazaki bowed. "I'm fit, as you can see."

Shirozowa scanned the wall hanging. "I see that you display your father's treasures."

"Indeed, Admiral."

The admiral stood in front of his underling and bowed. "The answer is still no, Toshio. You will not commit *seppuku*. While I regret the loss of your father's *katana*, it was a worthy trade."

"Worthy, Admiral? I fail to see any worth in my failure."

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Shirozowa looked at a framed picture showing a younger version of himself and Miyazaki's father. Dressed in fighting *Gees*, they were smiling, and between them stood a young Miyazaki holding a *bodkin*. "I regret granting your father permission to perform the ritual. I miss him so. Nevertheless, we both knew that it was the only way out. Your father's sacrifice allowed many other naval officers to live."

Miyazaki grimaced at the memory. "The Army officers under Tojo will bring disgrace to Emperor Hirohito. I fear my father's sacrifice was in vain."

"Not so, Toshio, my wounded warrior."

Miyazaki clapped his hands. "Mitsu! Bring us tea and sweet rice. We must make our guest comfortable." He gestured to a low table. "Admiral, please sit. Mitsu will have refreshments shortly."

"*Dozo!*" Shirozowa sat cross-legged on the floor in front of the small table. He placed his *katana* across his knees and looked at Miyazaki now seated across the table. "You were part of an elaborate scheme that has paid off handsomely."

"How? I failed to retain the codes."

"True, but your real mission was to distract the F.B.I. and Naval Intelligence — a job you did marvelously."

Miyazaki felt confused. "Then what was the true mission?"

"Steal the American Pacific war plans — War Plans *Red*, *Red-Orange* and *Yellow*, the so-called *Rainbow Plans*."

"And did our agents get them, my admiral?"

"Almost, but now they are within our grasp, and you are the key."

As if the admiral had rolled a boulder off Miyazaki's chest, the words lifted the weight of failure from his soul. Suddenly, he no longer felt the burning need for the relief of *seppuku*.

Shirozowa closely observed Miyazaki. "How are you healing?"

"Well enough, my Admiral." He felt rejuvenated, reborn. He smiled. "I am ready for the assignment."

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“That is good. Our sources have determined that your nemesis, Nick Grant, has access to the San Francisco Federal Building. Further, that his ladylove has moved to University of California Berkeley.”

Miyazaki’s smile was lopsided. The facial scars that Grant had given him in their first encounter in Hawaii had destroyed his face. Now he saw a way to repay the teen. “If I understand you, my admiral, I must kidnap the Porta girl to force Grant to bring us the plans.”

The admiral bowed slightly. “Just so, Toshio. And then I have another.”

Miyazaki leaned forward. “Please, tell me.”

“Our aeronautical engineers and designers were most intrigued by the H-1.”

Miyazaki nodded. “Howard Hughes has built a truly remarkable racing airplane, but surely the Imperial Design Bureau has no interest in racing aircraft?”

“You are wrong, my trusted subordinate. That airplane is decades ahead of its time and would make a fine basis for an advanced fighter aircraft.”

“Then surely the Americans must have started designing new fighters that will sweep ours from the sky.”

The admiral smiled. “Actually, they haven’t.”

Miyazaki’s eyebrows rose. “How can that be?”

“Our agents have determined that the US War Department is not interested in a cantilevered monoplane. They consider it too feeble and unable to stand up to the stress of modern aerial combat.”

“And our designers? What do they say?”

Shirozowa was about to reply when the doors opened and Mitsu returned holding a bamboo tray with a steaming kettle, a teapot, and two ornate teacups. He set the tray on the table. “Shall I pour, master?”

“No, get out and sit by the side of the door. I do not wish to be disturbed. I will summon you if needed.”

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Mitsu bowed his way out of the room and slid the door closed.

The admiral waited until they were alone then began again. "Our designers think it must be some sort of ruse and want to examine the aircraft."

"Admiral, are you saying you want me to steal the H-1?"

The admiral chuckled. "We are after the plans and material samples. However, if anybody could do it, Toshio, it would be you." He paused. "Of course, should the opportunity present itself, by all means, bring the H-1 back to Japan. I should love to see the American *gaijin's* expression should you manage that."

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Chapter Two: Dogfight

1045 Hours, Friday, August 21, 1936
Miramar Naval Air Station,
Coronado Island, California

MIDSHIPMAN NICK GRANT advanced the throttle and the N2S *Yellow Peril* trainer began to roll. At thirty knots, Nick felt life spring into the controls and the tail wheel lifted. When the airspeed indicator reached fifty-five, he eased back on the stick, and the large biplane gently lifted into the air.

Once airborne, he pushed on the left rudder to compensate for the huge radial engine's torque. Out of the ground effect, Nick eased the stick forward to maintain sufficient airspeed and avoid a stall. As the biplane climbed steadily into sky, Nick checked for other traffic in the pattern. Satisfied, he banked east toward San Diego. The sun was shining, the sky an azure blue, and he was flying! What could be better?

While Nick found the *Yellow Peril* a dream to fly, it had earned its deadly moniker. Many cadets had crashed, and a few had died this summer — some on takeoff. If the student pilot

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didn't compensate at this crucial transition, he would surely crash back to Earth with disastrous consequences.

Dutifully, he banked the *Yellow Peril* onto the downwind leg of the pattern and started to set up for his landing. At eighteen, Nick had more flight hours than most of his instructors. He had flown across the Pacific Ocean five times, had hundreds of hours in a variety of commercial and civil aircraft, yet he had to go through initial pilot training with everyone else. It was the Navy way. By God, if Howard Hughes joined the Navy, he'd be right here with Nick learning to fly with the zero-hour pilot wannabes.

The roar of the Wright J-5 Whirlwind was reassuring as he checked for other traffic and banked onto final at about 500 feet A.G.L. — above ground level. He was halfway through his first Navy solo. It required that he takeoff, fly around the pattern once, and then land. *Too easy.* Nick grinned.

Whoosh!

A red biplane flashed by so close that Nick felt the engine's hot exhaust. The N2S rocked, but he easily brought it back under control. He watched the sleek red biplane climb into the vertical and hang on the prop thrust. A second later, it slipped back, flipped over, and dove straight at him.

Nick kicked the left rudder and yanked the stick to the left. As he banked sharply away from the landing strip, he cursed the other pilot. Five hundred feet is not a lot of altitude to play with, especially when some lunatic wants to play tag with his red airplane.

But what an airplane! It was a heavily modified Boeing 100A, an export version of the Navy's F4B fighter. By the sound of it, someone had replaced the 450-hp Pratt & Whitney radial with something much bigger. As Nick watched, the pilot flew at him inverted, passing mere feet from his head, before flipping over and coming around on his tail.

Okay, buddy, you want to play. I'm up for it. Game on!

Nick executed a quick aileron roll to the right and hauled back on the stick. As the G-forces mounted, the *Yellow Peril*

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moaned in protest, and the guy wires sang in the wind. The N2S cart-wheeled across the sky, and Nick's world spun in a dizzying whirl of colors. His altimeter indicated a frightening 200 feet as he came out of the maneuver and saw the tail of the red Boeing biplane directly ahead.

The pilot turned around, his face obscured by his white silk scarf and goggles, and waved at Nick. Then the other pilot peeled away in a diving turn, and Nick followed. They flew mere feet above the airfield as Nick stuck like glue to the Boeing's tail. The Boeing was much faster than the Navy trainer — but not as maneuverable.

The red biplane streaked across the airfield at over 100 mph, just feet about the tarmac. It twisted to avoid the surrounding hangars before flying deeper into the naval air station dodging around barracks and headquarters buildings alike. Nick edged closer and realized the Boeing carried no registration numbers.

That's weird.

The Boeing turned to a northerly heading and continued weaving its way through the base at roof-top level. Sailors, Marines, and their officers dove for cover or shook their fists as Nick zoomed by, but the other pilot showed no sign of letting up.

Suddenly, they were over San Diego Bay and headed for Coronado Heights. Once over the far shore, the Boeing lined up on Route 101, *El Camino Real*, and followed the highway north, away from the air base. Nick clung stubbornly to the red tail, and he wondered why the other pilot didn't just pull away. The Boeing had almost three times the horsepower and was smaller than his underpowered trainer.

Trainer! Oh my God, I am in so much trouble!

Still, Nick just couldn't let himself end it and pull off. The pilot was leading him somewhere — but where, and who was he? Occasionally the Boeing pilot would look over his shoulder, checking to see if his pursuer had given up. Then the pilot yanked and banked in a half-hearted effort to shake his persistent tail.

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Down on the deck again, they flew along 101 low enough to see into the windows of the stores and houses they passed. A few minutes later, they flew into the town of Encinitas. Nick remembered coming here on a weekend pass for some ice cream. Then he remembered the arch over the highway welcoming all to the sleepy ocean-side town.

The Boeing's engine roared as it climbed for the sky, but the *Yellow Peril* did not have the power. Nick had no choice and flew through the arch, scattering newspapers and pedestrians alike. The red biplane dove on Nick, and the mock dogfight resumed.

After another twenty minutes, they were at 1,500 feet, and Nick heard the Boeing's engine throttle back. Then the pilot pointed down to a small airstrip. Nick realized they were just south of LA and it must be Culver City Airport. He was about to pull off when he glanced at his fuel gauge. Notoriously unreliable, the needle hovered over the E. He would have to follow the Boeing down and gas up before he returned. Returned to what, he wondered? A captain's mast? A court martial? A firing squad? He had truly screwed up this time and couldn't see a way out.

The Boeing gently touched down and taxied over to a Shell gas sign that hung from a small open hangar. Nick lined up with the runway, landed, and pulled up next to the red Boeing. As Nick killed his engine, the other pilot jumped down from the open cockpit and removed his goggles and white scarf.

A tall man of medium build sporting a pencil-thin moustache walked toward the trainer. Nick jumped down to the tarmac as the pilot extended his hand and spoke.

"I'm Howard Hughes. Welcome to my airport."

Flabbergasted, Nick extended his hand. "Yes, I know. I'm former Midshipman Nick Grant."

Hughes frowned. "Former?"

"After this stunt, I'll be lucky if they don't shoot me when I get back."

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Hughes tugged off his leather flight helmet and ran a hand through his dark brown hair. "Well, if you're in no hurry to get shot, perhaps you'll allow me to show you around my private airport."

Nick raised an eyebrow. "I thought Culver City owned it."

"They did but decided to sell it. Tough times, and they needed the money. So, you want to look around?"

Nick grinned. "Sure, Mr. Hughes. But if you wanted a dogfight, why didn't you fly the H-1?"

"I'm about to show you. The H-1 is in my hangar." He gestured toward a small door on the side of the adjacent hangar. A man in oil-stained coveralls ran out from the Shell hangar carrying a Fedora in one hand. "Afternoon, Mr. Hughes. Fill up the B-100?"

Hughes nodded. "Yes, and the *Yellow Peril*, too." He turned to Nick, "Nick, this is Sam Waterton. He helped me build the H-1, and he keeps all of my planes flying. Sam, this is Nick Grant."

They shook hands, and Sam smiled. "Did Mr. Hughes jump you down at Miramar?"

Sheepishly, Nick nodded. "Yes, and like a lamb to the slaughter, I followed."

"Thought so."

Chapter Three: The H-1

11:55 a.m., Friday, August 21, 1936
Culver City Airport,
Los Angeles County, California

HUGHES RAKED A HAND through his hair and donned the offered Fedora. "This way, Nick."

He guided Nick through the side door of an enormous hangar where they entered a small windowed office that looked out on metal presses, lathes, and other machine tools that lined the walls. However, the fastest airplane in the world drew Nick's keen interest. "Mr. Hughes, did you build the H-1 here?"

"Glenn Odekirk and I did ... with Sam's help."

Waterton came into the office wiping his hands on a rag. "Yeah, I helped." He quipped. "Like making Mr. Hughes' daily changes."

Hughes grabbed a cup and reached for the coffee pot. "It worked, didn't it, Sam?"

Sam pushed his flap cap back and absently scratched his head. "Oh, yeah. It worked. Or I'd still be bending metal or grinding rivet heads out there."

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Hughes poured the coffee and offered the cup to Nick. The warm cup felt wonderful on fingers still cold from the flight. He took a sip.

Hughes looked out through the glass to the sleek tail-dragger. "Well, Nick, what do you think?"

"She's beautiful. Can I get a closer look?"

"Sure."

Nick hastily put the cup down. "Let's go!"

The H-1's polished aluminum fuselage gleamed under the high intensity lighting. Almost thirty feet long, it had a wing span of over thirty feet.

Nick ran a hand down the smooth blue wing and noticed the individually machined flush rivets. The effort left the aircraft skin completely smooth. He had never seen anything like it. Then he traced the smoothness to the wing-root where it curved gracefully into the highly polished fuselage. *Beautiful!* "Streamlining must have been a paramount design criterion."

Hughes nodded. "Indeed, this is the cleanest and most elegant aircraft ever built. And she's fast as greased lightning."

Nick tore his eyes from the H-1 and turned to Hughes. "How on Earth did you manufacture this airplane? The metalwork is incredible. Not a trace of stress fatigue near the bends."

"Odekirk developed some groundbreaking technologies to build the H-1."

"What's the wing load?"

Hughes lifted an eyebrow. "That, young man, is a very sensitive question. How much do you know about wing loading?"

"Some — I'm a Pan Am flight engineer at Alameda, when I'm not a playing naval reservist. I crew the Sikorsky S-42 and the Martin M-130. The S-42 has a wing loading of 28.6 pounds per square foot. The H-1 must be much higher. What is it, 38-40?"

Hughes smiled. "That, my boy, is a trade secret and a big part of the H-1's magic."

BLACK DRAGONS ATTACK

“Okay, Mr. Hughes. No offense.” Nick ducked under the sleek wing and looked up into the wheel wells. “The DC-2s and 3s have retractable landing gear but not like this. The H-1’s wheels look like they tuck up completely and close flush with the wings.”

Hughes chuckled. “It’s a small thing that Glenn was against initially. He thought that the weight of the actuating mechanism would negate any aerodynamic advantage. But since I pay the bills — I got my way.”

Nick walked forward, stood under the two-blade prop and read the engine manufacturing plate aloud. “Pratt & Whitney R-1535 twin-row 14-cylinder radial engine.” He turned to Hughes. “The *China Clipper*’s engines produce 850-hp each. What does your Pratt & Whitney put out?”

Sam put a hand on the engine cowling. “One thousand-hp the way we’ve got this baby souped-up.”

Nick smiled in wonder. “This has the makings of a fantastic fighter plane. Are you going to approach the military, Mr. Hughes?”

Hughes shook his head in disgust. “They’re not interested. The Navy’s Bureau of Aviation and the Army Air Force won’t even consider it.”

“But why? It’s faster than anything else in the sky and can out-maneuver them, too. I don’t get it.”

Sam tapped the wing. “The military only wants biplanes. They say, ‘Turn it into a biplane and we’ll have a look.’ It’s madness, I tell you, complete madness. They’re idiots!”

Hughes put a hand on Sam’s shoulder. “Easy, Sam, you’ll blow a fuse. Someday, the armed forces will wake up.”

Nick was perplexed. “The Japanese A5M is already in service in China — it’s a fast monoplane fighter.”

“Oh, this will fly rings around the A5M, and they know it. A Japanese naval officer said as much a few weeks ago.”

Nick felt uneasy. He could guess why the Japanese were interested. “Really? How did you meet him?”

BLACK DRAGONS ATTACK

“I got a note from the Japanese Embassy asking if their military liaison could visit, and I agreed. That guy offered to buy the plane and the plans. Said to name my price. It would seem that the Japanese are very interested in the technology.”

Nick cast a speculative glance at Hughes. “What did you tell him?”

“I sent him packing. I told him I’d only sell to the US government. He didn’t much like that.”

Sam looked at Nick. “I’ll say. He looked real angry to me. That guy gave me the creeps.”

Nick was intrigued. “What’s his name?”

Hughes dug a card out of his wallet. “He gave me this.” He handed the card to Nick. It read:



Nick felt like a cold dagger had sliced through him. “What did he look like, Sam?”

“Late 20s, medium height, moved like an athlete. And that face!” Sam shuddered.

Nick asked, “What about the face, Sam?”

BLACK DRAGONS ATTACK

Hughes looked at the H-1 and spoke softly. "Huge, ugly scar on his left cheek and burns up his neck and across part of his face. But it was his eyes that I noticed the most."

Nick swallowed. "The eyes of Death Incarnate?"

Hughes turned to Nick. "Yes, exactly. Have you met Mr. Moto?"

Hughes' description shook Nick. *Could Commander Miyazaki still be alive? Worse yet, could he be here?* The use of one of his aliases was more troubling. In May, Nick had shot Miyazaki point-blank and left him for dead, deep in China.

Nick recovered his wits. "I think so, but I can't be sure. Tell me, Mr. Hughes, is this hangar guarded?"

"Yes, I have one man in here, and two men patrol the airport."

"Are they armed?"

Hughes shook his head. "No. Why?"

"Because, if Moto is who I suspect, you're going to need a lot more men, and they had better be armed."



2:16 p.m., Friday, August 21, 1936
Culver City Airport
Los Angeles County, California

BACK IN THE OFFICE, Nick spoke into the phone. "It sure sounds like Miyazaki. But he's dead. Isn't he?"

The long-distance line made Commander Boltz's voice sound tinny. "According to *your* Shanghai report, yes."

"He *should* be, and Nancy Tanaka's report supports my claim." Nick thought for a moment. "Let me put Mr. Hughes on the line. He can tell you what he saw." Nick covered the mouthpiece. "Mr. Hughes, it's the Navy's West Coast Counterintelligence — a Chief Commander Boltz."

BLACK DRAGONS ATTACK

Hughes took the phone. "Hughes here. ... Yes. ... I will." Hughes provided the description to Boltz then listened intently. "Well, what can we do about that?" There was a pause as Hughes nodded then handed the phone back to Nick.

"Grant here." Nick listened for a minute. "Yes ... okay. I need a favor. Will you call Miramar and straighten things out with my O.I.C.?"

Boltz chuckled. "Seems I do that a lot, Nick."

"True, but usually after one of *your* harebrained schemes."

"That's harebrained schemes, *SIR*," corrected Boltz.

"Hey, I'm just a reservist. Reservists don't say, 'sir', do they?"

Boltz laughed. "You're a smart ass, Grant, but thanks for the tip. What's the name of your O.I.C.?"

"Walker, Lieutenant Walker."

"Nick, someday your smart mouth is going to get you into some serious trouble."

"Even with you, Commander?"

"Yes. Remember, you're in the Navy now! You fly the *Yellow Peril* back to Miramar while I smooth the troubled waters. Watch yourself. If Miyazaki is back, he'll be out for your blood." The line went dead.

Hughes opened a locked cabinet behind the desk and took out a holster, ammunition, and a .38 revolver. He handed all three to Sam who looked dubious. "Ever fired a revolver, Sam?" "Once, Mr. Hughes, when I was in the Army — a longtime ago."

Hughes tossed the key to Sam. "Good, strap that on. From now on I want you armed at all times. I'm going to get a few more guys down here tonight. I want you to arm them as soon as they arrive. Make sure they don't go shooting at shadows or each other. Got that?"

Sam nodded as he strapped on the holster then loaded the pistol.

Hughes turned to Nick. "You ready to head back south?"

BLACK DRAGONS ATTACK

“Yes, Mr. Hughes.”

“Good. I’ll make a few phone calls myself. Maybe I can save you from being keel-hauled.”

“Thanks, I hope so.” Nick put on his flying helmet and turned to go.

Hughes grabbed Nick’s elbow. “One more thing. How much do you make working for Pan Am?”

“Twenty-seven-fifty a month. Why?”

“I’ll give you two hundred a month to come work for me.” Nick was flattered and smiled. “I’d like to, Mr. Hughes, but I’ve given my word to Pan Am.” However, he thought, it was very tempting. Eighteen months ago, he would have jumped at the chance — but not now. “Thanks all the same. I’m going to stay with Pan Am and finish college.”

Hughes nodded, “Suit yourself, but if you ever change your mind ...”

Nick was halfway out the door. “I won’t forget, Mr. Hughes