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February, 2001

A harsh winter wind whipped the East China Sea into angry froth as the massive ship plowed effortlessly through the whitecaps. *Zhongguo*, China's first aircraft carrier and the world's largest, had been commissioned and launched on New Year's day.

Zhongguo. The central kingdom.

Bright red pennants stood stiffly on their tall stanchions in the strong wind, flat against the guy wires as if pressed from steel. On routine reconnaissance maneuvers, the carrier patrolled the coast of Zhejiang province, not far from the coastal city of Shanghai. To the northeast lay the peninsula of Korea; due east, Japan.

The *Zhongguo* was huge: five floating acres of sovereign Chinese territory, a massive displacement of 100,000 tons, four football fields from stem to stern. It was 10,000 tons heavier and fifty yards longer than the *USS Enterprise*, flagship carrier of the American fleet. And it was home to a hundred of Beijing's most advanced *Julang* Great Wave JL-8-II twin-jet fighters that formed the greatest floating air force in the world.

Four state-of-the-art nuclear reactors powered the premier carrier, based on secret American technology stolen from Los Alamos by covert Chinese spies. It boasted eight advanced *Eagle* missile launchers and a dozen *Sparrow* 20mm minigun mounts. At the dawn of the new century, the *Zhongguo* gave China what it had painfully lacked: true power projection -- menacing, mobile, fully armed.

Colonel Fu Barxu winced as a sharp gust knifed across the deck. Stiffening, he adjusted the familiar olive-green cap of the People's Liberation Army snugly around his short-cropped silver-white hair. Fu was tall for a Chinese, well over six feet, and hammer-hard. His eyes, black as coal and unblinking, scanned the cold gray distance like a hawk as the *Zhongguo* steamed south toward the Straits of Taiwan.

Fu steadied himself and leaned forward against the railing. He raised a pair of heavy binoculars to his dark eyes and found a distant speck on the horizon.

Bastards!

Fu knew from intelligence reports that the *USS Nimitz* was patrolling the East China Sea again. Only months earlier, ships from America's imperialist Pacific Fleet had interfered with China's offshore missile tests by illegally invading the target zone off the coast of its renegade province, Taiwan.

It had been another arrogant attempt by the powerful to intimidate the weak. But Fu knew that China was far from weak now and the *Zhongguo* proved it.

Taiwan was China's internal affair, Fu muttered as he tracked the *Nimitz* in the distance. China would deal with the Taipei traitors in its own way and on its own terms. Someday America would pay for its uninvited interference in China's proprietary affairs.

Insensitive and hypocritical, America hammered China endlessly on human rights. Like a tyrant, Washington threatened to deny preferential treatment on trade, harassing Beijing constantly for more openness, more liberalism, more "democracy."

It was obnoxious and it was demeaning and it made Fu sick. His eyes narrowed as he glared at the enemy across the water.

A century ago, drunk with missionary power, America's religious zealots tried to convert the Chinese to Christianity. When they met with only limited success, the Western imperialists used their superior military power to crush China.

Like schoolyard bullies, America and Europe brutally suppressed the Chinese and forced them to become impoverished prisoners in the West's colonial empire.

The once-powerful central kingdom had been carved into powerless pieces.

Enough!

Fu ignored his frozen fingertips as he refocused the field glasses.

But it was never enough and he knew it.

Now America's political zealots were at it again, trying to subvert China to market forces and free elections. America flaunted its economic success like the new rich, wore its status arrogantly on its sleeve, shoved its dogma at Beijing with the hypocrisy that China was vastly inferior to its own jaded notion of superiority.

Hushuo. Nonsense.

Accumulation of wealth and power depended upon a delicate balance of give and take. Now Washington had dangerously redefined the age-old equation into a selfish one-way pattern: China must give, so America can take.

Perched proudly atop the peak of success, America wanted to kick away the ladder just as reëmerging nations like China were clearing the bottom rungs. Using its obscene wealth and power to embarrass and weaken, America needed to keep China subservient, snuff out its authoritarian heritage and prevent the central kingdom from regaining its rightful place in the world.

Bastards!

His eyes were glued on the hated object, tracking the *Nimitz* as it steamed steadily south. Col. Fu glanced at the distance gauge and confirmed his hunch. The Americans were headed for Taiwan again on a course parallel to his.

He reached down and slammed a large orange button.

Seconds later there was a massive roar.

Fu spun around to watch a Great Wave fighter spring out of its powerful catapult on the flight deck and leap into the flat winter sky. One by one, like clockwork, five sleek black *Julang* jets blasted off the runway.

The squadron screamed overhead, wingtip-to-wingtip in tight formation behind the lead jet, 805. They rolled side-to-side and banked above the massive carrier.

Fu tugged on the left lapel of his dark-green tunic, pulling it close to his chin.

“Engage the enemy,” he barked into his wireless microphone. He watched as 805 peeled away and shot toward the foreign invader.

Raising his binoculars, Fu brought the *Nimitz* back into focus. He growled into the lapel mike again.

“Dash and smash.”

Within seconds, he could see 805 draw close to the American carrier. Fu’s lips tightened into a thin smile as he watched the *Julang* descend toward the command tower. Then it shot sharply into a vertical climb and accelerated over the upper deck.

An instant later, Fu heard the thunder from its sonic boom and his smile broadened into a wide grin. He couldn’t see the direct damage but he knew the *Julang’s* powerful twin-jet blast would shatter the carrier’s tower windows.

Maybe they’ll think twice next time, Fu thought. Stay the hell out of our territory. We control these waters now.

Above the *Nimitz*, 805 curled up in a sharp arc and accelerated toward home.

Suddenly Col. Fu’s smile disappeared with his breath in the frozen air.

A gleaming silver F-18 Hornet roared off the American carrier in hot pursuit.

Fu pulled the lapel mike closer.

“Ready, cross!” he shouted. He refocused the binoculars and watched.

Two of the remaining four *Julang* jets reacted instantly and sped toward 805. One rose above his returning squadron leader, the other dropped below.

After passing 805, the two outbound fighters drew a bead on the encroaching Hornet. The top jet began a steep dive while the other entered a sharp climb. They crossed at Mach-II speed within a wingspan of the American, their timing as precise as a stopwatch.

The American veered abruptly to the northwest to evade the Chinese cross, heading away from the *Zhongguo*.

Fu watched the dark plume from the American jet’s exhaust as it roared back to its floating base. Moments later, a cloud of black exhaust billowed from the back of the *Nimitz*. Its engines were powering up. It turned slowly east, away from China, heading home to Sasebo in Japan.

The *Julang* fighters circled cautiously and slowed, waiting for clearance to land. Down first, 805 caught the reinforced rubber-and-steel restraining device and bounced to a quick stop. After the crew pulled it aside, the other four returned in sequence.

Teams of olive-clad mechanics in bright orange helmets swarmed over the squadron on the flight deck. One of the returning pilots demonstrated the crossing maneuver like a puppeteer to a cheering crowd.

Lt. Gen. Min Taibao emerged from the control tower and clanked down the gray metal steps with both thumbs-up. Min held the second-highest rank in the Chinese Army. Short and squat, like a Buddhist priest, he had an expressionless, egg-shaped face that belied emotion. Inside, he was ecstatic; outside, cold as stone.

“Well done, Colonel,” the general said. “That’ll show the barbarians a thing or two. Next time they stick their damn noses in our business, we’ll get a little tougher.”

Fu returned his commander’s stiff salute.

“Should have gotten tougher today,” he said crisply. “All we ever do is shatter a few panes of glass. You think that will ever stop them?”

“Next time they might not be so lucky.”

“Next time, *next time*. What song is that chorus line from, General? We need a new theme song now, with new lyrics -- *this time*.”

Min’s smile was wire-thin.

“Patience,” he said. “Time is our ally. The Jiangxi plan is proceeding?”

Fu paused. Then he nodded.

“On schedule,” he replied. “It’s in the Russian’s hands.”

The two officers stood on the upper deck, silhouetted against the dull gray sky, hands clasped behind their backs. They leaned into the cold wind and walked slowly toward the bow.

Fu looked out across the wide sea and thought about the delicate steps they had taken to get their secret plan this far.

After the collapse of Soviet communism a decade earlier, Russian scientists began to defect, selling their dark secrets overseas at high prices. To rogue nations like Iraq and Syria. To splinters of their former empire, like Uzbekistan. To the powerful Russian mafia, newly addicted to murder and corruption in Moscow.

Fu thought China could profit by investing in this new talent pool. He knew the Soviets had run a well-disguised and heavily funded effort to develop biological weapons, despite having signed the multilateral bioweapons agreement in 1972.

By 1996, Moscow had weaponized anthrax, tularemia, smallpox, Q fever, and plague -- the Black Death of the Middle Ages. Soviet microbiologists had even perfected an aerosolized weapon that spread a deadly filovirus called ebola, a microbe with a devastating kill rate of nearly 90%.

After an extended series of interviews in Moscow, Fu lured the famed Russian virologist Boris Lukanov to help China start its own secret bioweapons program. Shielded by Gen. Min, Fu ran it himself from a covert PLA unit called Technology Project/Millennium 21. It was kept intentionally out of the Army’s database, known only to Min and Fu. And it was nestled snugly underground at the foot of the Jiulian Shan mountains in Jiangxi province across the border from Guangdong, well hidden from American arms inspectors and their prying satellite eyes.

Heavily armed and closely guarded, the Jiangxi mission was to formulate a lethal pathogen unlike anything the Russians had done before. Fu wanted to clone an avian microbe that incubated harmlessly in ducks and chickens but would be fatal to humans.

He needed a killer virus that could cripple America.

The general's familiar voice brought him back.

"*Ni chifanle meiyo?*" Gen. Min asked, blowing on his hands. "So how's it going?"

He used the intimate greeting common among friends and relatives rather than the conventional *ni hau ma?*

"You know me," Col. Fu said, still gazing at the choppy sea. "Results are what matter. Lukanov is brilliant but slow. He needs to be squeezed."

"Well, we can't expect the quick results we had in the border dispute with Russia twenty years ago or from your brilliant plan that crashed the stock market in Japan."

The rogue Colonel nodded.

"But time is less important than flawless execution," Fu said. His voice rose and then died, carried away by the harsh wind. "Deng Xiaoping is dead. President Jiang is nothing but a puppet of his handlers. China needs a strong leader now with guts and backbone to oppose the meddlesome Americans who use freedom and democracy as ill-conceived proxies for arrogance."

Jiang Zemin, the President of China and General Secretary of the Communist Party, had risen to power in the Politburo after Deng's death three years before. A former mayor of Shanghai, he had inherited the risky balancing act of keeping China's economy strong while blocking the frustrated students, intellectuals, and entrepreneurs who agitated Beijing intolerably from within.

"Like spoiled children, our dissatisfied students and the new rich alike taunt and needle us to permit more freedom," Min said. "Turning their backs on discipline, they ignore the spirit of perseverance that made this country great."

"Jiang is totally rudderless," said the Colonel. "He's nothing but a pandering member of the *fengpai*, the moronic wind faction. Their principles are weightless and their policies without direction, always changing like the weather. Jiang has infected China with poison from the West. He must go."

"And he will." Min turned to look his trusted confidant in the eye. "But the Jiangxi plan is critical. To break Washington's back, we need a breakthrough with your virus, and soon."

Fu tightened the top button in his tunic and knotted his black wool scarf to shut out the cold.

He remembered the very day Captain Min came to his isolated village of Puqi in Hubei province to solicit young recruits. The PLA targeted the top boys. In China, then as now, only males

mattered. When Min gave his fiery speech to the tiny high school class, Fu was hooked. For the first time in his short life he saw a way out.

Fu lived in a tiny, one-room hut with a dirt floor and a leaky cracked-tile roof. A single incandescent bulb was his family's sole claim to modernization. Their cabin was drafty in winter, suffocating in summer. Fu lived under the constant threat of typhus and cholera, more likely to be ravaged by dysentery or rotting teeth than he was to survive and work the parched farms.

Fu was stuck in a dusty, nowhere village, his life a permanent dead-end. He grasped the opportunity of a lifetime and never looked back. There was something about him, something more than his high IQ; something dedicated, something *hard*.

When he graduated at the head of his class from the prestigious Dengshen Military Academy, China's West Point, few were surprised. Min took Fu under his wing to mentor him, and their relationship grew as close as father and son.

As they rose in rank, Fu and Min grew bolder with each success. Step by careful step, they hatched plans to eliminate foreign military adversaries like Russia and to weaken regional economic rivals like Japan. Few in the chain of command knew the details of their radical exploits; intimidated by the stunning results, seniors and juniors alike were afraid to ask. Over time, Fu began to operate virtually on his own. It didn't take him long to realize he and Min could depose the *fengpai* in Beijing by causing it to lose the mandate of heaven.

He knew the real enemy was always outside, never at home. All he needed now was a plan to cripple China's sole remaining obstacle across the Pacific.

Fu watched the *Nimitz* grow smaller in the distance.

He barked a final command into his lapel mike and felt the great carrier shudder as it changed course, bearing north. Two shrill blasts from the *Zhongguo's* powerful horn signaled its destination: the homeport of Pudong, in Shanghai.

Fu turned to face his mentor.

"Today, our economic power is unsurpassed, and no market is growing faster. We'll have the largest economy in the world in ten years. More than twenty of our DF-5 ICBMs and 100 ABM interceptors now target the continental United States."

Min looked at his protégé with pride.

“And our regional position is secure. We grabbed the Spratly Islands because Vietnam and the Philippines were weak. When America abandoned Subic Bay and Clark Field, we took Mischief Island and dared Washington to stop us. We now claim oil deposits in the South China Sea without opposition.”

“But the best is yet to come,” Fu said, his dark eyes on fire. “Hong Kong is ours again, and Portugal has surrendered its former colony at Macau. Taiwan will fall into our hands like a ripe fruit once we weaken the United States and eliminate that arrogant pretender as a hostile adversary.”

The two Army renegades clanked up the metal stairs toward the conning tower.

“All the more reason the Jiangxi plan must not fail,” Min said when they reached the top. “America has to learn that interference in our internal affairs cannot be tolerated. You were right. The real battle this century will be with the United States.”

Fu clenched a fist and hammered the railing.

“The pathetic hypocrites dare to challenge us. Guns and violence rule their society; drugs control their cities; children kill children in school without remorse. Fueled by greed, shameless artificial wealth props up one social extreme while homelessness and poverty ravage the other. Racial prejudice festers in their soil, the white supremacy movement protected by the highest court. *Imagine!* A decadent nation in decline telling an ascendant China how to behave.”

“*Lu fen dan, biaomian guang!*” Min said, roaring with laughter.

On the outside, even donkey shit shines.

“President Jiang and the *fengpai* tolerate this nonsense,” Fu said. “Fawning to foreigners, they worship the West. But it is *they* who will kowtow to you and me. Vengeance is overdue.”

The general nodded, his face sober.

“The mandate of heaven is never easily preserved. Rulers lose it because they fail the virtue of their ancestors. Our time is coming, my son.”

The rogue colonel composed himself and took a deep breath.

“The Jiangxi plan is on course. I will push Lukanov to produce new results from his experiments with the birds. Slip away from Beijing, come to Jiangxi and see for yourself. Summer is cool and beautiful in the mountains.”

Min’s eyes grew wide with anticipation.

“I will,” he said without hesitation. “I will.”