

# MASTERS OF WAR

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A MAXX KING THRILLER

BOOK 2

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## EPIGRAPH

You will hear of wars and rumors of wars but see to that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come.

Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places.

- *Matthew 24:6-7*

## PROLOGUE

MONDAY FEBRUARY 25, 2002

Maxx swallowed the double espresso in one gulp. He side-eyed Gabby and asked, “Why do they make these servings so small? I swear a child could drink one of these and barely get a caffeine buzz.”

“You’ve become quite the coffee expert since you replaced your whiskey habit with skinny lattes. I’m sure Starbucks will be calling you soon for advice.”

“Why are you busting my chops?” He held up what looked like a miniature teacup in his oversized hands. “You have to admit, this size isn’t meant for grown men. Tiny, teenage girls in size-two jeans is their target customer.”

Maxx and Gabby had been in an exclusive relationship for a year. While the last seven months had been extremely tense and at times dangerous, it had made them closer than the average fresh couple. They knew they could explicitly trust each other in any circumstance. They were also an odd-looking couple, with Maxx at 6’4” and every inch an ex-soldier and Gabby a cross between a nerdy programmer and an aerobics instructor.

They were seated on the heated patio outside the coffee

shop near their condo on Capitol Hill. It was a rare sunny day in Seattle for February. They were willing to sit outside even if the weather was a chilly fifty-two degrees. The small tables were set close together, decorated with simple tablecloths and colorful clay pots of white snowdrops. The sounds of light chatter, the clinking of coffee cups, and the occasional laughter blended with the noise from the nearby street.

They'd picked this spot to meet with one of Gabby's friends who was familiar with the area. There was a steady blend of residents, nearby tech workers, and the occasional meeting of a coffee klatch. And no shortage of dogs sitting on the patio. Anyone unusual would clearly stand out from the normal routine of the Seattle neighborhood.

Maxx had relaxed his safety precautions as time had passed since their "run-in" with a group of Chinese spies in the fall. He and Gabby had become embroiled in a plot to steal ultra-sensitive data from her employer, TechCom. He liked to think they'd put any suspicion behind them but was cautious because of the aftershock of the events on 9/11. It seemed as if the country was heading into a protracted war in the Middle East. And less public but just as worrisome, a covert intelligence race with the Chinese simmered below the surface.

Hoping to improve the relationship between the US and China was why they were excited about this morning's meeting. They were optimistic about a breakthrough in the relationship between the two countries. Gabby's friend was the daughter of Dr. Xi, a high-level Chinese scientist who was categorized as a state enemy by the State Department and the lead on a highly competitive communication program at the Commission for Science, Technology and Industry for National Defense. COSTIND was the competitive counterpart to DARPA in the US. DARPA, or Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, was a highly secretive agency within the US Department of

Defense tasked with developing innovative technologies for national security purposes.

Chao-Xing, Xi's daughter, used her Americanized nickname Connie while she was in the US. She graduated from Stanford with her PhD in artificial intelligence and then moved north to Seattle after graduation to work for TechCom. Even with her father's connection to the Chinese scientific community, she was too valuable for TechCom to turn down.

It was at TechCom that Connie and Gabby met. When Gabby had learned who Connie's father was, they had developed an immediate connection because of her interest in astrophysics. In the last six months, the two of them had been trying to broker an unofficial relationship between the Chinese and US to reach an agreement on a secretive project. Thus far, Connie had successfully convinced her father that Maxx and Gabby could be trusted.

"What's the plan for today's meeting?" Maxx asked after the barista brought him another double espresso.

Gabby furrowed her eyebrows, creating small wrinkles on her forehead. "I'm not entirely sure. When I ran into Connie last night at work, she said she had something important to talk to us about. She wanted to meet with us both as soon as possible, and this was the first time we could arrange."

"It sounds interesting, but I'm still puzzled about what it has to do with me. You two talk at work all the time. When we've spent time with Connie outside the office, you talk so much shop that I can hardly follow the conversation. And you know how smart I am."

Gabby snorted and rolled her eyes. "It's not about work or she would have mentioned it at the time. It must be something sensitive that shouldn't be overheard. Even the walls have eyes and ears in my office."

Gabby spotted Connie walking up the tree-lined sidewalk toward the café and waved her over. She looked like she was in

early twenties, although she was closer to her mid-thirties, like Maxx and Gabby. Wearing a short, conservative hair style with a pants suit, she stood out from the rest of the younger, casually dressed tech workers. A pair of thick-rimmed glasses completed her distinct look.

When she walked to their table, Gabby gave her a hug.

Maxx said hello and waved to her from across the table. “Can I get you something? Keep in mind, they are very tiny servings.”

“That’s sweet of you, Maxx. I’ll take a large black coffee in a to-go cup. I can’t stay long.”

Gabby and Connie continued chatting while Maxx stepped inside the cafe to grab Connie’s coffee and a refill for himself. He enjoyed watching Gabby smile as she talked, waving her hands to make a point. It was a relief to see her regaining her easygoing nature after the trauma she’d been through last year. He’d seen plenty of combat in his life and still occasionally woke up in a cold sweat, reaching for the pistol he kept in the nightstand.

After he picked up the coffee, Maxx stepped up to their table and set down Connie’s drink. Both Connie and Gabby broke out into loud laughter and avoided making eye contact. Obviously, they’d been talking about him. “Did I miss something?” he asked.

“Nothing really,” Gabby said with a smirk.

“Mmm hmm. So what’s the meeting this morning about, Connie? Gabby said you wanted to talk with both of us outside the office.”

“First, I wanted to pass along a message from my father. He feels guilty about Haoyu killing your friend Scott, although he was acting against my father’s orders. Haoyu lied about the situation and was told to only scare Scott. But he disobeyed my father and took matters much too far. Will you pass my father’s condolence message to his family?”

“I’ll tell Scott’s father. Tell your dad not to expect a thank you card.”

“I understand. It’s a terrible burden for a parent to watch their child die.”

“What about Maxx?” Gabby asked. “Haoyu also tried to kill Maxx three times!”

“That is true, but my father believed Maxx was an enemy agent, so those attempts on his life were justified.” She shrugged, indicating that it was a closed subject to her.

Maxx scoffed. He’d never expected an apology from Xi and considered the score settled.

“Then I guess that’s not what you asked us here to talk about,” Maxx said as he looked sullenly at his empty coffee cup. He was glad to move off the topic, since Connie didn’t know Maxx had ended up killing Haoyu. He hoped that she and her father at least felt a little guilt over the how much it had affected Maxx and Gabby but wasn’t holding his breath.

“I’ve convinced my father to work with your government on this project,” Connie said excitedly.

“That’s fantastic news,” Gabby exclaimed.

“He’s finally agreed with me that it is best to set aside our nationalistic competition and address the situation together. There is too much to gain—and lose—he said. He’s convinced others in the government to at least hear what you have to say. He believes we can find common ground.”

“I’m certain we can make that happen,” Maxx said. “Did he indicate where and when he’d like to meet?”

“He said that sooner is better, and he is thinking we could meet somewhere in the middle. Hawaii seems like a good place for a private meeting. Plus, you can work on your tan... You’re starting to look like a ghost with a crewcut.”

Maxx laughed. “Yeah, the big dark in the winter makes it hard to stay bronzed. If your father is comfortable with a meeting in Hawaii, I’ll start making some calls.”



Connie paused. “He does have one precondition before he agrees to meet. He wants written assurance that there is no remaining link between the US and Doctor Smith. He wants it in writing, and if there is any indication that Smith is involved, it’s a deal breaker.”

“I can understand his concern,” Maxx said, “but I am confident that if anyone in the US knew the location of Doctor Smith, he would be a dead man. We want that guy out of the picture as much as, if not more than, your father. He dropped out of sight after he engineered the disaster on September 11th. The US government is determined to hunt him down.”

“Do you think you can get me an official response today?” Connie asked. “Now that my father has been given the authority to share what we know, he’s anxious to meet soon. He says there is a ticking clock. A clock with a figurative bomb attached to it.”

“I’ll try and get you a response by the end of the day. The government doesn’t usually move that fast, but I know some people who are impatient to move forward. If you don’t mind, I’ll excuse myself now and start making some calls.”

“Thanks, Maxx, I knew I could count on you,” she said. “It’s always great to see you.”

Maxx sipped the last drop of coffee from his cup, kissed Gabby, and walked across the street to an empty bench in the little neighborhood park. He sat down on a bench that was catching some mid-morning sunshine filtering the trees and pulled his phone out.

He tried dialing a couple of numbers but didn’t get anyone live. It was midmorning back in Washington DC, and they were probably deep into their meeting schedule. He left messages indicating that it was an urgent topic but couldn’t leave any details for now. Maybe that would pique some interest.

While he was searching through his contacts looking for who to call next, he felt the hair on the back of his neck stand

up. He'd learned through years of war to pay attention to a warning from his subconscious. He hadn't heard or seen anything that registered consciously, but it was an early sign that it might be time for him to fight or run.

Looking up from his phone, he tuned in to his surroundings. He could hear some kids playing on the swings behind him while their parents chatted. A quick scan told him that there wasn't anything happening behind or around him in the park. He shifted his eyesight to Gabby and Connie, who were still relaxed across the street on the café patio.

Lastly, he began to search the street. Traffic was normal. Slow but normal, mostly minivans and Subarus. No black cars with tinted windows.

As he looked past the traffic, he recognized the source of the danger. Although he hadn't seen her for half a year, and she looked very different now with short blonde hair and oversized sunglasses, he instantly recognized her. *Li Jing*.

It was no coincidence that she was here at the same time as Connie and Gabby. Li Jing was on the FBI most wanted list and had essentially disappeared after murdering Gabby's boss in the TechCom parking lot. She was focused like a laser on Gabby without making any attempt to be sneaky; she was homing in on the café like a missile that had identified its target.

Maxx stood up quickly. He was too far away to reach Gabby before Li Jing got there, so he yelled and waved his arms, frantically attempting to get Gabby's attention. He began to sprint toward her. *I'm not going to make it in time*.

Gabby turned her head and saw Maxx trying to get her attention. She looked confused at first. But when she heard him yell Li Jing's name and saw him point, she immediately began to react. She was licensed to carry a concealed weapon, and Maxx saw her reach into her purse.

When Li Jing heard Maxx shout her name and point at her,

she stopped moving toward Gabby. She waved to Maxx then ran in the opposite direction, away from Gabby.

Li Jing's change in direction didn't stop Maxx's momentum. He changed direction in the middle of the street and began running after her through traffic. He knew he could outrun her, and even if she was armed, he was willing to take the risk to catch her. She was much too dangerous to be let escape – especially now that she was obviously tracking Gabby.

There weren't very many people on the sidewalk at this time of the morning, and Maxx was quickly gaining ground. Despite Li Jing's head start and his plodding winter boots, he was going to catch her. This was a race he was determined to win. If he got close enough, a gentle tap would send her reeling onto the concrete where he could effortlessly disarm her.

As Maxx closed within the last hundred feet, Li Jing suddenly stopped at the intersection. She was surrounded by a group of people waiting for the light to change. He wondered how it would look if he bowled over a bunch of innocent people when he tackled her. Concerned, but not enough to slow him down. He was running like he was finishing the four-hundred-meter race at the state championships. With boots on.

Suddenly, a modified Acura roared up, causing everyone at the curb to jump out of the way, everyone except Li Jing. The passenger door swung open, and she effortlessly slid inside. As she closed the door behind her—with Maxx only fifty feet from success—she looked at him with a wide smile and shouted, “You forget something, Maxx!”

Li Jing pointed back toward Gabby. Laughing, she slammed the car door shut as the Acura sped through the red light and away from Maxx.

Shifting his focus from the vanishing car, Maxx spun on his heel and changed his direction back to Gabby. He didn't know what Li Jing had meant, but it had to be bad. Gabby was at least two blocks down the street, and there were too many people on

the sidewalk between him and the café to see what was happening.

He was struggling to keep his breathing steady as he kept his pace at a near sprint. In his twenties, this would be another easy day at the races, but at thirty-four he wasn't in the same shape. Sure, he was in better shape than almost everyone else his age, but that was small consolation after running at full speed for a couple hundred yards. In boots. *Thank God I drank all that coffee*, he thought.

After getting through the next intersection, dodging cars and getting a clear view of the café patio, he could see the real danger. Gabby and Connie hadn't moved from their table but were still alert. Unfortunately, they were looking toward Maxx and not behind them.

Two men were walking quickly toward Gabby's table. As Maxx stared at them, they pulled pistols from beneath their leather jackets and held them down at their sides.

Maxx yelled, "Behind you, Gabby!"

It wasn't much of a warning, but it was enough to catch Gabby's attention. She'd kept her pistol under the table when Li Jing had first appeared, and it gave her enough of an advantage to catch the two men unprepared. They hadn't expected to face an armed target.

Gabby turned when the men were still a dozen paces beyond her and screamed at them to stop. Of course they didn't stop. They were professional killers motivated to finish a hit.

However, Gabby's shout did prompt them to raise their pistols, take aim, and fire. Maxx could hear the guns discharge, but it was impossible to tell how many shots were fired. There was too much noise around him as he cut through the patio tables and people scrambled to get out of the way. He was entirely focused on protecting Gabby and eliminating the threat.

It didn't look like Gabby had taken any hits, since she was

still crouched behind a large concrete planter and firing in short bursts like he'd taught her. But even from a distance, Maxx could see that Connie was slumped on the ground and not moving. He could also see that one of the men was down on the ground and rolling.

He screamed to his partner, "Kill her, kill her!"

The man still standing was continuing to move toward Gabby while taking cover behind the few cars parked on the street. He was not stopping his forward progress despite Gabby's shots to keep him pinned down.

With his focus on Gabby, the assassin didn't notice Maxx swing around the street side of the car.

When Maxx heard the gunman start shooting again at Gabby, he stepped around the trunk and swung a right hook using all his momentum. It was the kind of punch that would have stunned a professional boxer if he'd had gloves on, which of course he didn't. It was bare knuckle against the guy's jaw, shattering it. The guy fell to the ground like he'd been struck by lightning. The sound of his head slamming into the asphalt made it certain he probably wouldn't be getting back up for a week.

Maxx yelled to Gabby that it was okay to stop shooting, and he picked up the guy's gun and walked over to the first shooter. He'd stopped yelling at some point. Maxx rolled him over with his foot. Dead. *Good.*

Gabby's eyes were opened wide, her mouth set in a tight, straight line. She looked to Maxx like she was in shock and trying to process what had happened. The tears would come later, but for now she was focused and alert while she called Connie.

The coffee shop was chaos. Maxx walked back toward Gabby as he heard her calling Connie's name and trying to help her. Sirens were already echoing off the glass buildings in the distance, moving toward them rapidly.

It took Maxx a moment to notice that blood was dripping down his arm onto the ground as he walked. He couldn't feel any pain, but he could see a hole on the shoulder of his jacket. He pulled off his jacket to see that it wasn't a deep wound but would need some attention later. Right now, he needed to make sure that Gabby was okay.

Gabby sat on the ground with Connie's head in her lap. She was covered in blood, and it took Maxx a few moments to make sure that none of the blood came from Gabby.

"Wake up, honey," Gabby said as she gently shook her friend. "Everything will be okay. You're safe now."

Connie had been hit multiple times and had died quickly from what Maxx could see. It was difficult to believe that Gabby hadn't been hit in that melee when there were several other wounded people lying on the ground around her. While he felt terrible for Connie, Maxx was visibly relieved that Gabby had escaped unharmed – physically.

Maxx put his hand on Gabby's shoulder as she sat on the ground cradling Connie's lifeless body.

"She's already gone, babe," he said.

Her body hitched, holding back a sob. "I know, Maxx. Let me say goodbye to her."

He touched Gabby reassuringly and moved back a step to give her some space.

While he hovered nearby, a constant buzzing was the second thing that got through his sensory overload. With all the noise and activity, it had taken time to realize that the noise and vibration were coming from Connie's coat pocket. She must have been carrying a phone or pager.

Maxx carefully removed the pager from the dead woman's coat pocket. He was trying to silence the device when he inadvertently looked at the message. It was from a blocked number. "Tell Xi hello from an old friend! P.S. Your girlfriend is next,

Maxx. I'm saving you for last." *Connie, not Gabby, had been Li Jing's target today. And I failed to stop her.*

## FALLACIES AND FEINTS

Miss Grey's phone vibrated again in her jacket pocket. She'd been in the meeting without a break for the last two hours, and this was the second voicemail someone had left her. Taking out her phone would result in more than glares from the senior staff around the table. As a guest at the meeting, she was repeatedly told not to bring in any electronic devices. Obeying orders wasn't one of her strongest characteristics, so she'd put her phone on vibrate and dropped it in her suit pocket. It would be bad form if the others saw that she'd brought a phone into the conference room, let alone started taking calls or texting. The meeting would be wrapping up soon, and she decided to wait to listen to the voicemail.

Despite the annoying phone, she was absorbed in the conversation that was happening around the table, by video and on the phone. She'd been invited to the meeting because of her experience in the early days of the confrontation with the Chinese around the top-secret project, Thunderbird, named after the alien communication device that the US and China had been in a fight to activate. The race had resulted in the cataclysmic events surrounding 9/11.



September 11th was an inflection point in the United States. The shock was used by the government to address the national security questions raised by the communication with an alien civilization and the looming threat of conflict with China. Consumed by fear and outrage over what were portrayed as terrorist attacks in the heart of Manhattan, the population called for decisive action from its political leadership.

That action had been framed as the rationale to begin a considerable military effort framed as a global War on Terror. The broad, soft definition had allowed for a rapid expansion and creation of a foreign invasion force. While the president had framed the conflict as aimed at Al Qaeda and the Taliban, he was clear that “it does not end there.” This military and intelligence expansion served two purposes that were lost in the details behind the stated justification. The invasion of Afghanistan less than a month after September 11th launched a sustained military campaign.

Afghanistan had been selected as the target because of the proximity to China’s western border. It would be impossible to justify a military expansion into India, southeast Asia, or Russia. Access through Korea would be a slog but a plausible plan B if necessary. Channeling a conflict through Afghanistan and Pakistan on one front and pressing a naval interdiction from Japan and the Philippines would essentially keep China in both a land and sea war with limited geographic options for resources. The attack on Al Queda forces made this an easily justifiable location.

The hawks in the Pentagon and intelligence agencies who had been saber rattling for a preemptive war with China had grown silent after the debacle on September 11th. They were satisfied for the time being to focus on Afghanistan and Iraq. After the communication with alien civilization had begun in interest, the primary strategy at the highest levels of the government had been to focus on fostering the relationship with

Thunderbird without accelerating the competition with China. It also helped that China seemed to shift its focus away from Taiwan and creating a separate association with Thunderbird.

The initial communication with Thunderbird on September 11th led to a scramble within the government about how to respond appropriately. The US then received the updated communication files shortly thereafter. The communication from the aliens was dubbed the Lamba Files. They had been addressed to the Doctors Smith and Xi, also known as The Masters of War. The US had been unable to contact Smith after he had disappeared from New York. The US used every formal and informal channel to connect with Xi, but he had remained steadfast in his decision not to collaborate with the US.

The president participated in the second communication with Thunderbird and had relayed the fact that Doctor Smith couldn't be found, and that Xi had deferred any attempt to jointly communicate. The response had been less than cordial, but the aliens decided to proceed in discussions with the US and deal with China separately for the time being.

The first formal directive from Thunderbird had been to initiate the military buildup and the subsequent invasion of Afghanistan. They were explicit that the US was not to engage in a large-scale conflict and avoid a direct confrontation with the Chinese. The aliens initially suggested North Africa as the location for a buildup but had deferred the selection of the Middle East to the US. Naturally the US strategy of hemming in China in case of a future conflict wasn't mentioned by the president.

The reason stated by the aliens for the military and intelligence efforts masked by The War on Terror was to prepare for the possible invasion by the Others. They were clear that they considered the US and China to be the most capable global military powers that could engage an invasion in opposite sides

of the planet. The US could battle in the Americas, China would shield Asia, and the two countries would work together to overlap in Europe and Africa. They thought it was odd that Russia or NATO were excluded from the alien plans, and any effort to explain it to the aliens was entirely ignored.

The aliens also ignored concerns raised about the abilities of the US to engage with an extraterrestrial hostile invasion. Thunderbird informed them invasions in the past had been focused on collecting and destroying the Thunderbird devices, in effect eliminating Earth as a watchtower. Historically, the Others sent small expeditionary forces, armed forces that could be defeated by the indigenous inhabitants if they worked together and prepared properly. After being defeated, the Others would move on to minimize the loss of limited resources.

In the event there was a protracted engagement, or the battle became too onerous for Earth, Thunderbird would help provide knowledge that would rapidly expand Earth's technical capabilities. But the current stockpile of nuclear weapons kept by the US and China meant that wouldn't be necessary. The Others wouldn't want to get into a conflict where they were targeted multiple times with that much energy. Thunderbird assured them it wouldn't destroy them or their transportation, but it would be a deterrent for further exploration. The Others were not interested in conflict with Earth or a protracted occupation. Earth was primarily a means of tracking down their real enemy—Thunderbird.

In contrast, Thunderbird said they did have a long-term interest in maintaining an interest in Earth. The primary benefit was a manned watchtower of an aligned intellectual species. Many of the people felt Thunderbird's view of humanity was that of a faithful watchdog. Humans weren't very advanced technically and of no threat to them—they knew they could count on us as faithful servants. Their only rule it

seemed was that we didn't get in a position to cut off communication by fighting against each other. Therefore, they had positioned themselves through history as a god of punishment if humans lost focus on their primary purpose: To warn them if the Others landed on Earth.

That resulted in the current effort to encourage cooperation between the US and China. Their near-term objective seemed to be averting a war between the two countries and working jointly to intercede when the Others arrived. According to Thunderbird, they were also pushing the Chinese to align with the US.

For now, they were not forcing the issue, but they made it clear that cooperation was in Earth's and both countries' long-term interests. Leadership had no illusions that if Thunderbird felt that noncooperation was jeopardizing them in any way that they wouldn't hesitate to initiate punishment against one or both countries. The strategy to minimize the chances of the Chinese attacking the US was to make it clear that they were actively trying to engage China. Therefore if there was any blame, it would be solely on China's shoulders.

Miss Grey presumed that this was the reason she had been invited to the meeting. Every other attendee at the meeting was above her pay grade. She had largely been ignored before and during the meeting until the meeting agenda reached this topic. She'd made several attempts to provide input earlier in the meeting and had been soundly ignored. One of the hotshot CIA associate deputy directors, Barth Anderson, had openly rolled his eyes the last time she made a comment. *Pendejo*.

After a report from the State Department outlining their lack of success in reaching out to a wide array of formal contacts in the Chinese government and research industry, the vice president looked directly at her. "Miss Grey, thanks for participating in the meeting today."

"Thank you, Mr. Vice President Cheney."

He nodded. "I understand you were the agent who worked closely on the attempts by the Chinese to undermine DARPA's efforts related to the Thunderbird device. What are your thoughts about why the Chinese are now stonewalling us about working together?"

Miss Grey had communicated her answer to this question several times in the last six months. There must be others in the room that had a contrary opinion, and he was voicing it to get the issue out in the open. That was fine with her. She was comfortable with her perspective, and wasn't going to shy away from a fight now. The worst they could do was keep ignoring her.

"As we all know, Dr. Xi is the primary architect of the Chinese version of the Thunderbird program at COSTIND. He's been competing with Doctor Smith for decades, and a great deal of personal and professional animosity built up between the two of them over the last twenty years. My source tells me that Xi believes Smith is still in charge of the Omega program despite our assurance that he is not."

Barth coughed. "What sources do you have that we don't?" he asked.

"I've been asked to not reveal my source at this point, but it is someone very close to Xi," she said.

Vice President Cheney said, "Miss Grey, this is a sealed room, and I don't think it's out of bounds for the CIA to want to verify your source. Our national security and possibly the fate of the planet are dangling by a thin thread."

"I'm not being disrespectful, sir. It's only that I have given my word to the source that I wouldn't divulge their identity until they gave me permission. If their name were ever leaked, it would burn them as a source and guarantee that Xi would never willingly engage with us."

"I respect your judgment on this, Miss Grey, but I'm not

persuaded. I'll leave it for the moment, but I'll loop back to this topic."

"I understand, sir. The point is I believe Xi may be changing his position because of pressure from Thunderbird. I'm told they have been clear that they will hold China accountable if the Others are successful...and there will be punishment. This has Xi between an anvil and hammer, so to speak. While he doesn't trust the US, he does believe that Thunderbird and the politicians in his country see him as the wedge."

"He's survived many purges, and it's hard for me to believe that even the Chinese would eliminate him and risk causing a rift with Thunderbird."

"I don't believe they would kill him either," Barth interjected.

"It's not himself that is at risk. It's his daughter, Chao-Xing, who goes by Connie in the US. The threats are directed at her. If he fails, she will pay the price. With her in the US, there is nothing he can do to protect her if there is an official sanction ordered by the CCP."

"Well, why don't we pull her in? We can frame it as protective custody, but it's also a way to keep her close for our own purposes," Barth said smugly.

Miss Grey stared at him. "That's a guaranteed way to get Xi not to work with us. He already doesn't trust the US, and he'll see it as a threat no matter what you tell him."

The vice president put his hand up to halt the line of discussion. "We are not taking Mr. Xi's daughter into custody unless she requests it. I agree with Miss Grey that such an action would have negative repercussions for Xi and the Chinese government."

"We have been providing loose security, however. I have some contacts in the Seattle area who stay in close touch with her, and I've been augmenting with a small security team from

the Department of Homeland Security. DHS is new, but we have some top-notch people.”

“Is there anything else we could be doing to informally do to convince Mr. Xi to collaborate with us?” the vice president asked.

“I think focusing on the message that Smith is an enemy of the state. He knows that we, and specifically I, have no love lost for Doctor Smith. His trust in me when I tell him that Smith is out of the picture may be the most successful assurance we can give him.”

A voice from the phone said, “And why does he trust you, Miss Grey?”

She knew that was the critical question and could guess why the speaker on the phone was asking. Of course, the woman on the phone already knew the answer, or she wouldn't have asked the question in this setting. In a meeting like this, knives were quick to be drawn.

“Good morning, Senator. He trusts me because his daughter has told him that he can,” she said.

She could see the surprise register on several faces around the room. Even that fool Barth raised his eyebrows, having overlooked this critical piece of information.

Vice President Cheney spoke up, “Good morning, Senator Traficant. I wasn't aware you were joining us this morning.”

“When I saw the agenda, I changed my schedule so that I could listen in, Mr. Vice President. Thanks for having me.” The senator continued, “Miss Grey and I have been working together on this project before it was popular here in Washington. As some of you know, she was commended by the president himself for her efforts to stop Doctor Smith and get the contact with Thunderbird off on a positive foot. I strongly encourage you to take what she is telling you very seriously.”

“Thank you, Senator, that's very kind of you,” Miss Grey said. “As the senator knows, after September 11th, two of my

colleagues in Seattle established a relationship where I was introduced to Xi's daughter, Chao-Xing. She is unaware of my exact role at the Department of Homeland Security but knows that I was the person who exposed Doctor Smith's attempts to start a war between the US and China by misleading our own government and Thunderbird. Not only is Chao-Xing grateful on behalf of her country, but she also knows that her father sees Doctor Smith as evil and as a mortal enemy."

"The important thing to know is that Miss Grey is actively working through a trusted informal channel to convince Xi that he can trust us," the senator said. "According to Miss Grey's confidential source, her relationship with Xi's daughter is causing him to improve his openness to join forces with us on this decisive project. I believe that, and you should too."

"Well said, Senator." The Vice President looked around the room and said, "Unless there are any other points to add to this topic, I'd like to move on to the next item of the agenda."

Everyone shook their heads, and few murmured no.

"Great. Thank you, Miss Grey and all of the visitors who joined us this morning. The next item on the agenda is for the standing committee only, so please show yourselves out."

Miss Grey and a few other people seated in the chairs around the edge of the room stood and made their way to the exit. She made certain to give Barth a half smile as she exited. It was a subtle sign that she had won that round. She was sure he'd find some way to get her back for embarrassing him, even if no one else had noticed.

After stepping out of the conference room, she quickly found an empty office she could step into. She closed the door but stayed standing while taking out her cell phone. There were several voicemails that she skipped over to find the two voice messages that Maxx had left her while she was in the meeting.

The first voicemail was cryptic but benign. Maxx had been



using this kind of messaging and texting since they had first started working together last fall. More than words, which really didn't say more than to call her back, he needed to talk with her. It was the tone of his voice. He generally lived up to the nickname she sometimes teased him with, *Steady Eddy*. The guy rarely got rattled or excited about anything. If he was excited, then it was some information that she'd want to know.

By contrast, his second message came about thirty minutes after the first. The contrast in his tone couldn't be starker. His tone was his normal flat communication, but what he said and the sounds in the background concerned her. She could hear sirens blaring in the background of his voicemail as he said to disregard the first message, but he still needed to talk to her ASAP about a recent development. She pressed redial on her phone.

When Maxx answered after a half-dozen rings, she could still hear sirens in the background before he said anything. *Please let him be okay.*

"Hey. I'll cut to the chase. Gabby and I were attacked by a couple of gunmen a bit ago. We stopped them. The police have one of them in custody, so we may get more information later. You may want to step in and take the guy out of local jurisdiction and into DHS."

"You're okay, right?"

"Yeah, we're both fine. But the person we were meeting with isn't fine. In fact, she's the opposite of fine. As in dead."

She could feel her stomach drop. "Who is dead, Maxx?"

"Connie. She took multiple bullets and didn't make it."

"Oh no," Miss Grey gasped. "How did it happen?"

"She or Gabby was the target. Li Jing was running the operation. We won't know until you talk to the guy the police are holding. That's why I was telling you that you may want to intervene."

“I definitely will. If it has anything to do with her father, then we’ll want to get involved.”

“It’s all about her father. There was a text on her phone right after the shooting to tell Xi hello. It was a clear message to him not to get involved with us.”

“A message from whom?” she asked.

“That’s what we need to find out.”

“I’m on my way now, Maxx,” she said as she hung up and raced for the door.



## FRENEMIES

**D**r. Xi aggressively ran his hands through his thick, unruly hair as he stared at the black metallic cube sitting in the other room.

He was surprised he hadn't gone bald from the unconscious habit in the last few months. He was puzzled about many things since he'd escaped from New York last September. Things had seemed so clear at the time, but in the last six months he had developed the feeling that he was being pulled from one event to another. He no longer felt as if was the driver, merely a back seat passenger in a car sliding down an icy mountain road.

The lab where he was sitting was filled with instruments of every kind. They were constantly taking measurements from the cube-shaped device in the other room. To the naked eye, the device sat in the concrete chamber on an elevated platform, no signs of energy or movement. Even through the many inches of reinforced glass between the lab and the holding room, he still didn't feel comfortable. He'd seen firsthand the destruction that the device could unleash when triggered. He wondered if he'd even realize it was triggered before he was vaporized.

In the first forty years of controlling the device, they had learned very little about how it worked and what signals to monitor. However, in the last six months they'd finally decoded the instructions due to the advances with AI and information that an American spy had forwarded to him. The final pieces of information came directly from communication with the extraterrestrials.

As he watched the instruments, he could tell activity was happening in ways that they hadn't been aware of six months ago. There were no visible signs, and no telltale changes in the environmental factors that they traditionally monitored. But they had learned to measure changes at the subatomic level indicating the device was active. It was both a receiver and generator of signals that they hadn't been able to interpret. Precisely how much information was being transmitted had been difficult to determine since the instruments they had couldn't accurately measure such small changes in mass at the subatomic level. However, they'd determined that the inbound information was relatively small compared to the outbound signals. He'd surmised from the information that the device received a signal that triggered a predefined set of routines that were precoded into the device.

With all the monitoring instruments that they had added since he'd returned from New York City, they'd not been able to determine the end points of the communication to and from the device. They'd also had no success in disrupting the flow of information. Even though the lab and device were in a sealed environment buried beneath hundreds of feet of bedrock, it seemed to have no impact on the function of the device. Nothing blocked the flow of information once it was connected to a power source.

He had learned long ago that it required tremendous amounts of power to operate, but it didn't have to be physically connected to the power. Even if it was proximate to a natural

power source such as geothermal, solar, or seismic, it could capture the nearby energy and utilize it. Whereas they had initially thought the device was not active because of the lack of external indicators, they now knew that the device was essentially in standby mode waiting for a power source. They had not seen it power itself up without an external signal, but he wondered if they knew enough to discover that kind of activity.

Deep in thought, he jumped when he heard his assistant clear their throat. “Dr. Xi, excuse the interruption, but there is a caller on your personal line. She says it’s urgent.”

“Unless it’s my daughter, take a message.”

“It’s not Chao-Xing, but she still insisted that she speak with you. She says she has some very important news for your ears only.”

“Fine, I will be there in a minute,” he said with exasperation.

After he heard the door close behind him, he bent over the instruments. He made another adjustment to the signal receiver that they’d constructed. He’d been trying for the past month to divert the stream of data from the device to a separate instrument. He’d built the apparatus using information found in a subsection of the data file that had come with the device. Prior to the events in September, they’d overlooked it because they’d been in a sprint to prepare for the initial implementation. The arcane file hadn’t seemed relevant at the time but now seemed important.

The information indicated the ideal conditions for data flow to the device, and he had been trying to see if he could capture and record the signal externally. An external copy of that function would allow them to decipher the data inflow without being concerned that they’d trigger an unintended response of the core device.

Xi wasn’t positive about how or when the core device, which was referred to as Xixi, had first been found. The early days

were a closely guarded secret within the CCP, as it was somehow linked to the early days of the COSTIND. There was plenty of speculation about how the alien cube was discovered and then handed off from the early leaders to a group of scientists that could be trusted. Eventually a secret research division had been formed to handle the device and some other projects that were deemed crucial to the success of the future of China.

Eventually those early, strategic projects were combined into COSTIND, a black box organization that was designed to compete with the American formation of ARPA. Both organizations were highly secretive but superficially focused on advanced research projects. Xi was first exposed to the device in 1970 when he was assigned to the project as a research assistant after completing his PhD in astrophysics. He was confused about why he was assigned to the project until later it became apparent that his dissertation and research about extraterrestrial communication was directly relevant.

There had been little progress made in understanding the purpose and use of the device in the decade prior to his arrival. The constant turnover of unsuccessful project leaders hadn't helped in accelerating the project. It was considered a dead end by the time he was being promoted to senior-level positions. His reputation for considering innovative approaches to problem solving was a last-ditch effort. When he was assigned as project director in 1975, it was made clear that he was either going to make significant progress in the following year or he'd be demoted and the project scrapped.

There had been considerable advancement in supercomputing capabilities during that period of time that allowed Xi to focus on the encrypted files accompanying the device. Although it was still unclear exactly how the device was intended to function, he had made a few assumptions that had resulted in a cursory understanding. He convinced others that the device was intended for alien communication, and a test

deadline was set for July 28, 1976. Racing against the clock to save himself from demotion (or worse), and meet the July deadline, Xi had convinced the leaders in the CCP to test the device. The location chosen was in an underground facility in remote area of Tangshan.

Unsure of how the device functioned, Xi had the foresight to remotely position himself and the rest of the team for the initial trial. They had only been able to translate small portions of the manual, and while Xi had exuded confidence in his conclusions, he was not so egotistical to believe in his infallibility. It was likely that the device wouldn't operate at all, but on the other hand he didn't want to be responsible for an explosion that would kill himself and others.

The result of the test exceeded his imagination. He had never considered that there would be enough energy unleashed by the device to cause an earthquake with a magnitude of 7.8. Despite all the precautions, when it was initialized, the device triggered a disastrous seismic event. He would never rid himself of the guilt knowing that he had taken action that had resulted in the death of at least a quarter of a million people. For decades, he wasn't sure what had been the cause of the mishap. Even though he was not directly blamed by the politicians for the cause of the earthquake, they assumed it was a weapon that the Americans had covertly supplied them. A seismic trojan horse.

It had taken him over a year to excavate the test site, looking for remnants of the device to understand the cause. Underneath the tons of earth and rubble, he was shocked to learn that the device was unscathed. It had not only survived intact—there was not even a scratch on the smooth outer casing. This of course raised more questions about the development of the device and how it was possible to create such an artifact from elements that were unknown to them. Years of research followed that led to more questions than answers.



The initial premise that it was an American weapon were deemed unlikely. A major turning point for his research team occurred in late 1980. The working assumption that it was an American war device was answered with the explosion of Mount Saint Helens. What had at first seemed like natural massive eruption was determined to be the result of a device like their artifact. From several high-level sources, they had learned after the fact that DARPA had also been in possession of a similar device and was testing it at the time of the eruption. It was also made clear from the American sources that this was an unexpected event. The US government had been expecting a first contact communication, not a volcanic event.

That led Xi to the determination that they and the American's had possession of an alien device of some sort. And DARPA was under the impression that it was intended to be used for communication. Because of the relatively recent arrival of the device, they assumed it was from an active alien civilization. What they didn't understand was why the seismic events had occurred. They had gone in circles for years about whether it was intentionally detonated or due to an error. They had no evidence to support either conclusion, but no one was willing to undertake another test in China. After the initial information leaked from the US, DARPA had withdrawn their project into complete secrecy.

Instead of spending time on the endless debates without answers, Xi focused the team on two paths of action. First, trying to deconstruct the device in an attempt to reverse engineer it. They were partially successful but were still missing some key information about the physics that the device depended on. It was far beyond the understanding of known science. The second path of action was more fruitful: Deciphering the files supplied with the device.

By convincing the CCP to invest in technical capabilities focused on improving artificial intelligence that would generate

immediate military benefits, Xi was able to co-opt the advancements to benefit his project. Using those advancements, in conjunction with the fruits of several covert programs embedded in American companies and universities, they were making steady improvements. The results were inadequate to convince anyone to test the device again but gave him hope that a useful application was possible in his lifetime.

The most significant event had happened in the last year, after decades of tortuously slow progress. The rapid progress in 2001 that had led to the completion of the deciphered files had provided the information that they needed to understand how the device operated and where they had made errors in 1976 resulting in the disaster at Tangshan. It had also provided them with the opportunity to attempt to use the device, with low risk to themselves. Piggybacking off DARPA's efforts on September 11th in New York, they had planned to attempt to contact the aliens using the device without risking Chinese lives.

When the American's discovered Xi's plans to communicate using the device in Manhattan, his attempt failed. He had been lucky to escape New York with the Chinese device during the chaos occurring at the World Trade Center. No one in CCP intelligence had ever learned what the cause was that destroyed Tower 1 and 2, but they were certain it was related to the device. Of course, he had caused the detonation that brought down World Trade Center 7, but that had not been revealed to the public. As far as he knew, the events surrounding the devices and the subsequent communication remained a closely guarded secret.

He had only been back in China for a few days when they had received instructions from the aliens that was specifically directed to The Masters of War. It was generally accepted that included himself and Doctor Smith at DARPA. There had been attempts by the Americans to connect with him to coordinate a

response, and he had resisted those overtures. He still harbored considerable distrust of Smith and did not want to be included in any coordination – knowing that at some point it was likely to lead to complications.

Following 9/11, he had worked long hours preparing the device for contact as the instructions indicated. In the initial communication the instructions were only to include himself and General Secretary Jiang Zemin. He presumed the Americans were operating under similar guidelines.

The purpose of the initial call provided the background about why the alien civilization was initiating contact and the expectation that they were to be coordinating with the Americans for preparation. Even though there were no overt cues, the conversation seemed to become more tense when the topic of cooperation with the Americans was broached. Xi had made it clear that his preference was not to work with the Smith under any conditions.

The Americans had reached out through formal and informal channels to encourage cooperation between the two countries. Xi had rebuffed all of the formal offers, and there was little that the Chinese government could do to force him to cooperate. The Americans had held out several olive branches in December. They even took the extraordinary step of granting permanent normal trade status despite no reciprocating concession on the part of the Chinese. None of that mattered to Xi.

The aliens made it clear that Xi was to remain their key contact, which left the Chinese leadership with few options. They couldn't remove him from involvement or even attempt to strong arm him into participating. The risk was too great that the aliens would stop the conversation completely or even initiate a form of punishment for crossing them. So the CCP kept the pressure on and convinced his daughter Chao-Xing to find ways to persuade him using personal pleas.

The last several months had passed quickly, as Xi worked long days preparing for the arrival of the aliens. Between meetings, he split his time working on the device in the lab and seeing his daughter when she was visiting. He was exhausted but had no choice but to keep pressing forward.

He had initially been motivated by his scientific fascination with the device and interaction with alien life forms. However, as the implications of failure grew with the imminent invasion, his motives changed from excitement to fear. Not fear of what would happen to him if he failed but fear about what that meant for Earth, and for the most important thing in his life: his daughter.

He was lost in thought when another knock on the door startled him. “Doctor, the woman is still waiting on the phone. She is becoming very unpleasant.”

“Fine,” he said as he shut off the instrument testing. He reluctantly followed his assistant down the hall to his office.

His assistant transferred the call to him once he was settled in his office. Spartan, with a few pictures of him and his daughter scattered between the papers and books. The story of his life was captured in a barren, square office.

“Hello, this is Doctor Xi. Who am I speaking with?” he said into the receiver.

“A voice from the past, Doctor.”

The voice sounded familiar. Puzzled, he said, “I told you I would do as you asked. Why are you calling me again, Li Jing?”

“Because I don’t trust you. I heard from a little bird that you were going to attempt to betray me. Again.”

He could feel his face heat up with anger. Her accusation stung on many levels. Because they were true, and he couldn’t undue the past.

“Continuing to threaten me is pointless. Tell me what information you have that I am not keeping my promise not to work with the Americans?”

“I suppose that’s true. No more threats, it’s time for you to be punished.”

“There’s nothing you can do to punish me,” he said as fear ran like ice through his veins.

“I warned you before not to work with the Americans. I told you there would be consequences if you didn’t listen to me. I’m calling to let you know that I left a message with your precious daughter. A personal message from Doctor Smith.”

He felt all the air escape the room at the mention of Chao-Xing. “A message?”

“Yes, this is what happens when you cross him.”

“What did you do?” he shouted. “What have you and that animal Smith done to my daughter?”

“Call her and ask her yourself,” Li Jing said as hung up the phone.

John lives in the Seattle area with his wife and the world's sweetest cat: Karmann. Raised in a nomadic military family, he is annoyingly curious, a consumer of whiskey, and a political junkie at heart, but his greatest interests are his family and their collective adventures. And, for the record, he enjoys swimming in the ocean — even if it's with sharks.

