

A DAY LIKE THIS

2043

It was all arranged. Organised. He had only to wait.

Tsao Ch'un rolled over, to find himself staring at the woman's back. He smiled. Another day he might have stayed there. Rolled her on her back and had her again. But not today.

He slid over and, naked as the day he was born, walked through into the bathroom, whistling to himself as he went. He was due in Beidaihe at two, but it wouldn't take long. An hour at most by private jet.

As he showered, he ran through things in his mind. Something would go wrong. Something always went wrong. That was the way of things. However well one planned it, one had to build in a margin of error. The 'cock up factor' as his Chief of Security, Wang Ti-mo termed it.

Even so, if only half of it went right it would be a triumph.

And if it failed?

If it failed, he would slug it out. That was, if they didn't get him first. Spies... they were the secret to all of this. And it would all come down to whether his spies were better – yes, and more loyal to him – than theirs.

Of course, there was always the possibility that they knew already. That their spies had uncovered his scheme. Only that was unlikely. If they'd known he would have been dead already.

As his servants came to dress him, he couldn't help grinning. Every second that passed, every breath he took, brought him closer.

And the others?

He imagined them, like him, preparing for the day. A day like this. Standing just as he stood right then, as their hand servants brought them silks and jewellery, brushed out their hair and manicured their nails. Making these little lords of China shine like mighty dragons.

Yes... it might fail. But what had he to fear? No. He would defy the God of Hell himself. Meet him face to face and bid him do his worst. Since he had been sixteen and a cadet at the Party School, he had dreamed of this. Had seen it in his head, just as though it had already happened.

Dressed, his long hair brushed and his nails buffed and polished, he went out into the main room, looking about him as he went, searching, in every face he passed, for some knowledge of what was about to happen. But there was nothing. They didn't have a clue. Not one of them.

His Master of the Kitchens stepped forward, bowing to the waist. 'Will you eat Master?'

Would he eat? Tsao Ch'un laughed, then nodded, realising only then just how ravenously hungry he was. Why, he could eat a whole haunch of cooked pork... cooked with apple sauce, the way his mother always had, back in Sichuan province, when he was a child.

Oddly, that disturbed him. She had been dead for years now. Dead and in the earth, and no thought of her from him. Only today...

Today he defied her too. Defied the sweet, peaceful woman she had been and all she stood for. Yes, and scorned her for her weakness. Because what he had to do, in the next few hours, defied all humanity. Only a man who had steeled himself could undertake such a task. A man like himself, devoid of any weakness and lacking any of those soft notions that kept other men from acting.

'Is Chao Ni Tsu here yet?' he asked, as he swept through into the breakfast room.

'Not yet, my Lord.'

He slowed, troubled by that. If they had taken Chao Ni Tsu then all would be up.

Tsao Ch'un turned, looking to one of the guard captains. 'Find out where he is and bring him. Now!'

The captain bowed lower, then, without a word, turned and ran from the room.

The massive table was set, everything in its place. As it was every morning.

Only this morning was different.

He looked to his Chief Cook, who stood, half bowed, in the doorway to the kitchen. 'Will our guest be joining us?'

'Our guest' was Yu Chang-shang, Tsao Ch'un's 'equal' and one of the seven great lords who made up the CCP's Politburo Standing Committee. He had arrived in the evening, meaning to discuss various matters with Tsai Ch'un on the journey up to Beidaihe.

'He will be with us shortly, Master.'

'Good...' And, without allowing the 'tongue' to do his work and sample the different courses for traces of any poisons, Tsao Ch'un sat and, pulling a simple bowl of pork noodles toward him, began to eat.

'Master!' the tongue exclaimed, horrified, rushing towards him, remembering only at the last moment that he was not – under any circumstances whatsoever – to touch his Lord. 'What if?'

Tsao Ch'un looked up at the man and grinned. What if, indeed! If it was poisoned, then he was dead. Or as good as. But today he trusted to his luck. Yes, and his audacity.

He swallowed the first mouthful, then took another. As he did, so Chao Ni Tsu made his appearance.

'Forgive me, Tsao Ch'un... there was a storm. It delayed me.'

Tsao Ch'un waved all that aside. 'Come. Sit with me, Ni Tsu. Share some breakfast while you're here. These pork noodles are very good.'

Chao joined him, the two men eating in silence for a time. Then, looking up abruptly, Chao asked, 'Is he here?'

'He is... I imagine he'll be joining us any minute now.'

'Ah...' Chao looked thoughtful. 'Will you... tell him?'

'At some point, yes. But listen, brother. ' Tsao Ch'un leaned towards the older man. 'I would prefer it, this once, if you would keep your thoughts to yourself.'

Chao smiled. 'You wish me to do what I do best, neh?'

'Precisely.'

'What if he asks me something directly?'

'Then I will answer him.'

'And afterwards?' Tsao Ch'un reached across and plucked a grape from the stalk, then popped it into his mouth, biting it hard; a gesture that suggested Tsao Ch'un's innate savagery.

‘Afterwards the fun and games begin. But first let’s see what our friend knows, neh?’

Yu Chang-shang arrived ten minutes later, rubbing his hands with delight at the sight of the massive -breakfast spread. It was said his wife, fearing that he’d pile on weight, rigorously controlled what he ate, and it seemed that must be true, for he sat and tucked into the various delicacies like he’d been denied them for years, and with scarcely a nod to Tsao Ch’un and ‘his man’.

Chao, knowing that his Master was particular about dining alone, knew also that he was only there for one purpose – to observe Chang closely. And observe him he did, even as he tasted a small morsel from each of the big serving bowls in turn.

Not that Yu even acknowledged that Chao was there. But that was fine. It gave him the opportunity to stare. To note every gesture, every mannerism that the man displayed. Oh, they could have done this just as easily from a tape, but today it mattered. It was important that they did not get this wrong. And so he watched, analysing the man just as he might analyse a computer programme, to identify the particular nuances – the shape and pattern – of his behaviour. For words meant little when it came to this. It was not *what* was said, but *how* it was said. And Chao noted one thing very quickly.

Yu Chang-shang did not know. He had no idea how important this all was. He thought this was just another day, and Tsao Ch’un’s invite... Chao almost laughed aloud – was as transparent and innocuous as the Great Man had made it seem.

How did such a fool get elected to the Seven? he asked, somewhat astonished to find this degree of naivety, or trust, in Tsao Ch’un’s co-ruler. Yet Tsao Ch’un must have known, or he would not have risked bringing him here this morning.

And his spies, his Security generals, his advisors? Were they all as stupid as their Master? Or was his stupidity a mask? Was this all a great act?

He looked and looked some more, then, unaware he was doing so, shook his head.

‘Yes?’ Yu Chang-shang said, turning to look at Chao for the first time. His face had changed. Was harder than before.

Chao ducked his head; let his Master answer.

‘Forgive me, brother Yu,’ Tsao Ch’un said, swallowing down a small

spicy cake. 'Chao Ni Tsu is an old friend. He had an accident a while back. It made him something of a ... how should I put this? ... a simpleton? If he nods or shakes, that's part of his condition.'

Yu stared a moment longer; then, relaxing, turned to Tsao Ch'un again. 'Forgive me, brother. Only...'

Tsao Ch'un gestured to Chao, dismissing him.

But Chao Ni Tsu had seen enough. Not stupid. No. That *was* an act. But not a threat, either. And, in this one important matter, he knew nothing. Or nothing worth knowing, anyway.

The breakfast table had been cleared, and they were about to take their seats on the big security cruiser for the brief flight up to Beidaihe, when Tsao Ch'un's aide, Ts'ui, rushed into the room. Breathless, he knelt and touched his forehead to the stone floor before his Master, blurting out the news.

'It's Shen Wen-ti, my Lord. He's dead!'

'Dead?' Tsao Ch'un stood abruptly, as if shocked.

'Yes, Master. At Nanjing airport... his plane...'

Ts'ui turned and gestured towards the big screen on the far side of the room which had come to sudden life.

The two men stood there, watching, a gasp coming from each as they saw the plane lift fifty feet from the runway and then explode in a bright orange fireball that filled every pixel of the massive screen.

'Aiya!' Yu said. 'And Shen was aboard?'

'Without a doubt, Masters,' Ts'ui said, not daring to lift his head, his eyes as shocked as theirs at the scene. 'He was seen waving goodbye on the steps only moments earlier.'

'Kuan Yin preserve us,' Tsao Ch'un murmured, then shook his head. 'Get me my cousins... now! If this is a concerted attack...'

Yu turned and stared at Tsao Ch'un, horrified by what the other was suggesting might be happening. 'Do you think...?'

'I don't know what to think. But it's best to take precautions, neh?'

'No...'

Yu hesitated, then asked. 'Do you think this might be the Americans?'

Tsao Ch'un snarled. 'If it is, they'll regret it, I promise you, cousin! I will have that cunt Griffin's life... see if I don't!' And he gripped Yu's shoulder, firmly but with a reassuring friendliness.

‘Whatever this is, let’s face it squarely... Yes, and let’s get to Beidaihe. I’ll feel safer with my cousins about me, neh, Cousin Yu?’

If they ever got that far...

The dead man, Shen Wen-ti, had been a tall and gangly man in life, a ‘man of the people’, who had flaunted his Maoism at every opportunity, hectoring and lecturing his fellows without a thought for their feelings. As he climbed aboard the cruiser, Tsao Ch’un scowled, thinking of him. He had loathed Shen; loathed him with a purity that surprised even him at times. It was not just that he was a charlatan, secretly obsessed with those luxuries his position brought him, it was the man’s arrogance; his belief that he was always right, while others...

Tsao Ch’un forced himself to relax, realising that he was gripping his left hand tightly with his right, as if to strangle it.

Dead, he reminded himself. The cunt was dead. And Chou Lai-fu?

News should have come by now. He should have heard. As Yu came aboard, Tsao Ch’un looked past him at his captain of the guard.

‘Is all well?’ he asked. ‘I mean... there’s no more news, is there?’

The captain hesitated, not quite knowing what to say. With Shen dead – possibly assassinated – things could not be ‘well’, but his Master clearly meant something else.

‘No, my Lord,’ he answered, finally. ‘There’s nothing more.’

Inside, Yu Chang-shang was taking his seat, letting Tsao’s steward, Ts’ui, fasten his belt and make him comfortable.

Tsao Ch’un took the seat across the narrow aisle, smiling at Yu, even as he noted Yu’s chief bodyguard - a big, shaven-headed fellow named Li Pao-an – staring back at him with an almost impudent suspicion.

As well he ought, Tsao Ch’un thought, deciding there and then that he would hire the man once everything was settled.

‘Cousin Yu, I...’

But he had barely said that much when Yu’s bodyguard interrupted him. ‘Forgive me, Masters,’ he said, his face taking on an expression of deep concern, ‘but news is coming in of another incident. It isn’t clear yet, but...’

‘But what?’ Tsao Ch’un said calmly.

‘Liu Teng, it seems, is dead. Drowned in his bath.’

‘What?’ Yu Chang-shang said, wide-eyed, his whole body straining to

escape the restraining straps. ‘Liu Teng?’

‘Something’s happening,’ Tsao Ch’un said, chewing at his thumb-nail thoughtfully. ‘Maybe we should delay this flight...’

He saw Yu consider that, then nod. ‘Maybe...’ He stopped, then, ‘Let’s send the cruiser on ahead of us... empty but for the pilot. Then follow in another craft.’

‘A good idea,’ Tsao Ch’un answered, surprised by the man’s invention. Not that it will help him...

Yu still thought it was the Americans. He didn’t realise where the current danger lay.

‘Chao Ni Tsu,’ he said, addressing his chief advisor, who had been sitting all this while in the shadows on the other side of the cabin. ‘What do you think?’

‘I think we should stay where we are. The craft’s been screened for devices, and any ground attack could easily be intercepted.’

Tsao Ch’un looked to Yu, who shrugged. ‘I don’t know, I...’ He looked to his bodyguard, who stooped to whisper in his ear, then nodded. ‘Okay. We do as you say, Tsao Ch’un. But let’s take another route, neh?’

Tsao Ch’un smiled, as if amused by the comment. ‘I always take a different route. It’s why I’ve stayed alive all these years.’

As they flew north, news of what had happened to Liu Teng came to them. He had died in his bath, that much was true. Only he hadn’t drowned. He had been stabbed more than twenty times by his Chief Steward; a man whom he would have trusted with his life. Stabbed while two others of his trusted men held him down. They had cut off his cock and gouged out his eyes. And then – alive still, after all of that! – they had snapped his neck.

Yu, hearing the details, had gone white.

‘It’s alright,’ Tsao Ch’un said. ‘While five of us still live...’

Which was when news of Chou Lai-fu finally reached them, the man himself tapping through to their craft, his larger-than-life features filling the screen in the cabin.

‘Tsao Ch’un... Yu Shang-chang... I’m glad to see you alive and well.’ ‘And you, cousin,’ Tsao Ch’un answered, wondering what game this was he was playing.

He had to know, surely?

‘I’m on my way,’ Chou said, no trace of anger or suspicion in his face. ‘We’ll rendezvous in an hour at most. Until then, keep safe. Oh... and maybe it’s best we maintain radio silence until we’re you-know-where.’

Tsao Ch’un made to say something, then simply nodded and cut contact.

He *did* know. The sheer nonchalance he displayed confirmed it. Only if he knew, then what was he planning to do about it? Hit back? Take the fight to him? Or go in hiding?

Tsao Ch’un almost smiled at that. The one thing he knew about Chou was that he wasn’t the type who ran away and hid. No. Only what precisely would he do now?

‘Cousin?’ Yu said, making Tsao Ch’un turn to look at him. For a moment he had forgotten that the man was there.

‘Yes, Yu Chang-shang?’

‘Do you think all this is Chou’s doing?’

It was a good guess, but not a correct one. ‘I think,’ he began, then shook his head. ‘For once, dear friend, I honestly don’t know. But maybe we should divert our journey, neh? Just in case

Chou Lai-fu is behind all this.’

‘And if he is?’

‘Then let’s pray he’s on his own, neh? Yes, and let’s also pray that we can outplay and outwit the little fucker!’

It was round about then that the high-speed train, hurtling at over two hundred kilometres an hour, encountered difficulties – the small matter of six lengths of missing rails – and embedded itself, one carriage after another, into the side of the nearby hillside.

The loss of life was massive, but the chief loss was of Chang Fa, the eldest of the seven standing members of the Politburo, whose presence aboard the high-speed train had been a well-kept secret... though clearly not well enough.

Three dead in a single hour! Rumours of war abounded on the communications media, and the stock market plummeted briefly before it closed.

Aboard the speeding cruiser, Yu Shang-chang watched the news anxiously, even as Tsao Ch’un consulted with the pilot up ahead.

The American president, Griffin, had made an announcement. If he

could be believed, this was nothing to do with him, and he had gone out of his way to state that whatever help China needed in the coming days, the United States of America would give. He had asked for calm and had offered his deepest sympathy for the families of the dead men... and indeed all of the other victims of both the plane and train crashes.

Yes. It was clear from what Yu had seen, the man was shitting himself; was terrified – as were they all – that this might just escalate into a global confrontation. And if that happened...

Just then, Tsao Ch'un came back into the cabin. He looked to Yu, then to the screen, then back to Yu again.

'We're going to press on,' he said. 'Beidaihe's fifteen minutes away, and we've secured a corridor to it. No sign of Cousin Chou, either. The last we heard of him was when he cut contact half an hour back. I think we should get under cover as quickly as we can, then try and work out just what's going on.'

'But you think it's Chou, neh?'

Tsao Ch'un shrugged. 'I really, honestly don't know. If it is, and he's at Beidaihe already, then we're dead men, you and I both. But I don't think he is. I think we've stolen a march on him.'

'And the Americans?'

'You've seen Griffin's face. What do you think?'

'I think he's terrified. Scared shitless, as the yanks say.'

'Okay. Then it's Chou. There's no one else it could be. But where is he? Our pilot couldn't get a trace.'

'Shanghai... that's where he'll be. That's where his power base is. For a coup like this, he'd want to feel secure.'

'Then let's hope he's still there.'

'Do you think...?' Yu paused, afraid, it seemed, even to say it. Then he steeled himself and finished. 'Do you think Po Tse-wen is in with him?'

Po Tse-wen was the last of the seven to be accounted for. He had been somewhere in the south, only his current whereabouts were a mystery. If he, too, was dead, then it would be a simple matter of slugging it out with Chou. But if he was a partner in this coup...

Tsao Ch'un looked down. He seemed distracted.

'Cousin?' Yu said, frowning. 'Is something the matter?'

Tsao Ch'un looked up, meeting his eyes. 'No. It's just... Shen I could

imagine wanting sole power. That man always was a selfish bastard. Chang too, at a stretch. But Chou... I've always believed Chou wanted the best for China.'

'And maybe he still does. But without us, it seems.'

Tsao Ch'un smiled at that. Yu smiled back at him. 'You know what, Cousin Tsao?'

'What?'

'For a moment back then I suspected you. I thought...' He slowly shook his head. 'We should make an announcement, cousin. When we're safe at Beidaihe. To calm things down and reassure the people. Yes, and make them understand that this is all Chou's doing.'

Tsao Ch'un nodded. 'That's good. That's very good. But not straight away. Let's deal with the situation first. Speeches later, neh? Let's deal with Chou... yes, and Po, too if he's involved in this. Let's have the fuckers' heads.'

Yu Chang-shang considered it a moment, then laughed. 'You know what, cousin Tsao? I've dreamed of this. Of war between the seven. And always you were opposed to me.'

'Opposed?' Tsao looked puzzled. 'How so? You and I... we want the same things, neh? Whereas Chou, or that bastard Shen... or Po Tse-wen come to that... they want different things for China. Between us... well, we could make China great again. Make her the supreme power in the world.'

Yu stared at him a moment, then, as if finally relinquishing all doubt, in an act that signified his complete acquiescence to Tsao Ch'un's vision, he lowered his head. 'Let it be so,' he said. 'Let's take this burden on, dear cousin.' Tsao Ch'un smiled. 'Let it be so.'

He had first come to Beidaihe some twenty years before, as aide to some important official whose name now slipped his mind. *Some faceless suit with identikit black hair*, as he liked to think of it. Back in those days he had struggled with his temper, his indifference to the political games they played. Only you got nowhere with that kind of attitude. As he quickly learned. He was sent home after just two weeks and it was another twelve years before he saw Beidaihe's sandy beaches again. And that time he was prepared.

Beidaihe... what was Beidaihe? One Western journalist had called it 'China's smoke-filled room.' Certainly, every summer the place was crawling with members of the upper echelons of the Party and their families, there to

holiday, but also to make deals and seal agreements and forge alliances. Alliances that would shape the nature of the Party – and its thinking - for the next century.

It was Mao who had first come to Beidaihe, back in '54, just five years after the revolution had succeeded. Back then the idea was to relax and talk – informal, off the record stuff that later would take shape and form as decrees and laws. Casual remarks that would result in a million peasants' deaths or the imprisonment of a whole generation. Mao had had a summer house built here, and so those others of his circle had done the same. And every August, to escape the stifling heat and dust of Beijing, they came here. To make decisions for the whole of China. And sometimes to plot and scheme and, in Liu Baoi's case, to be ousted and pursued and ultimately killed, the wreck of the airplane he had been in scattered across a mountainside.

Tsao Ch'un stood there, on the beach, looking out across the bay at Mount Lianfeng, its two peaks rising up into the sky, its slopes green with pines and cypresses. Beautiful it was. Why, it even touched his soul .

In recent times, Beidaihe had changed. Gone was the informality. These days the members of the Politburo would arrive at the electric gates in their black Audis, hidden behind the tinted bulletproof glass, guarded by a dozen or more bodyguards, the very size of their motorcades hinting at paranoia.

Well, today had proved them right.

'Master...'

He turned, facing his Chief of Security. 'What is it, Wang?'

Wang Ti-mo knelt, bowing his head. 'It is the American, Master. President Griffin. He wishes to talk with you.'

It was not unexpected.

'He asked for me?'

'Specifically, my Lord.'

Tsao Ch'un considered a moment, then, 'Have Yu Chang-shang take it.'

'And will you come, Master?'

Tsao Ch'un grinned. 'Of course. I'd not miss it for anything.'

President James B. Griffin, 60th President of the 69 States of America, leaned in towards the screen, a real fury in his eyes. A Texan by birth and inclination, Griffin liked, as he so often said, 'to take the bull by the horns',

and so he did now.

‘What the flaming fuck is going on? And where’s Tsao Ch’un? I specifically asked for the man!’

Yu ducked the insult, bowing his head to the slightest degree, and addressed the first of Griffin’s questions.

‘Forgive us, President, but it seems our former cousins, Chou Lai-fu and Po Tse-wen, have attempted a coup...’

‘Nonsense!’

‘Nonsense?’ Yu stared back at the grey-haired Griffin as if he didn’t understand. ‘Po’s dead.’

‘Dead?’ Yu blanched for the fourth time that day.

‘Sure is. My agents tell me he had secured himself in some kind of bomb proof cell. Only someone sucked all the air out of it while he was in there. Poor man suffocated, along with all his bodyguards. Couldn’t get him out in time.’

Tsao Ch’un, who had been standing in the dark, just outside of camera range, now stepped into view.

‘Then it seems that Chou has much to answer for. Do your spies know why *we* are still alive?’

‘They do not.’

‘And Chou? Do you know where he is?’

‘I do not.’

‘And yet you knew all about Po. Let’s be realistic, Mister President. You have your spies in all our camps. And we in yours. But on an occasion like this, it would surely make sense to come clean and just tell each other what we know, neh?’

Griffin growled. ‘You’re gonna have to give me a little time, Tsao Ch’un...’ And he gave Tsao Ch’un’s name a deep south drawl that annoyed the shit out of the Han.

‘One hour,’ Tsao Ch’un said, then cut connection, before the American could haggle.

He turned, looking to Yu. ‘Cousin... we must act. I’ll get all the Chiefs of Staff on the line. Instruct them to keep their forces on a state of alert. Once that’s done, our first priority must be to find out where Chou Lai-fu has got to. He’s not made any attempt on our lives as yet, but...’

As if on cue, the alarm started sounding. Yu looked to Tsao Ch’un,

fearful. But Tsao Ch'un was listening to something, his left hand up to his ear. 'Right,' he said, then 'Right,' again. He turned to Yu. 'We need to get somewhere secure. He's launched a drone attack against us. They'll be here within the next ten to fifteen minutes.'

'Can't we intercept them?'

'Some of them, sure. But Chou's throwing the whole of his armoury against us. We're certain to take some hits. So let's get our heads down, neh? And we'll take oxygen supplies in there with us... just in case.'

Yu nodded, then, as Tsao Ch'un turned away, making for the door, hurried after him, half running to keep up.

The first drone hit thirteen minutes later, making the building shudder to its foundations. In the break between that and the second strike, Chou Lai-fu sent them a message – 'Surrender and face trial, or die.'

Yu, beside Tsao Ch'un in the secure room, was taking reports from his men outside.

'They've confirmed it,' he said, turning toward Tsao Ch'un. 'They're Chinese drones, not American.'

'You still thought it might be the Americans?'

Yu nodded. 'This business with Griffin... it might all be a hoax, a front to conceal their real intentions. To make us so totally off guard that we'd be push-overs.'

'Maybe,' Tsao Ch'un agreed. 'But we've one urgent task. We need to lay hold of Chou and get him back here as quickly as possible. Before anyone thinks to take advantage of our situation.'

'You think they'd dare?'

'Oh, I know they'd dare. And Griffin foremost among them. The Americans have never forgiven us for ousting them. For demoting them to Number Two in the world. To have us quarrelling among ourselves and murdering each other - our friend must have wet dreams just thinking about that!' Tsao Ch'un scowled. 'No, Yu Chang-shang. it would not surprise me if they were behind Chou Lai-fu. Funding him, aiding him in his foul schemes.'

The whole building shook once more. Tsao Ch'un looked past his 'cousin'. 'More drones... He might just get us yet, neh?'

Yu laughed. 'He might.'

It was then that the screen lit up again, revealing Griffin's face, twice life-size. 'Okay... we have him.'

'You have him? Chou Lai-fu? Then hand him over. He'll get a fair trial...' 'I can't do that,' Griffin said, steely-faced. 'Besides, I want to talk to the man myself, face to face. To get his version of events.'

Tsao Ch'un looked to Yu, incredulous, then turned back to face the screen, furious now. 'Where did you take him?'

Griffin shrugged, as if he didn't want to say, but it didn't matter. Tsao Ch'un knew where. Just as he'd known all of Chou's movements throughout the day. Indeed, the only reason Chou was alive was because he, Tsao Ch'un willed it. Because he needed someone to blame for this. To be the scapegoat.

He cut contact again. Let Griffin make of that what he wanted. Let him play at being equitable. It did not matter. Nor did the drones – which his men, even now, were carefully targeting, so as not to harm their Master. All that mattered was how the people viewed this afterwards. How they *perceived* it. That they saw him as the underdog. The good guy. The man they'd tried to kill... and failed. The survivor who would take them forward, no longer weak – no longer simply one of Seven – but the One, the Son of Heaven, ruling as the ancient Emperors ruled. His word the law.

But first he had to settle things. To finish the play he had begun and place the last few stones upon the board.

He turned to Yu Chang-shang. 'Let's give it half an hour, neh? Let's let Griffin stew. Make him wonder what the fuck we're up to. Send your men off somewhere – anywhere, it doesn't matter – so that it looks to his spies like we're doing something.'

Yu didn't look too happy at that, but he went along with Tsao Ch'un. After all, there was nothing else to do. Not until things had resolved themselves with the Americans.

'We should be speaking to the central committee,' Yu said. 'If they're behind us... well... surely it doesn't matter what the Americans say or do?'

Tsao Ch'un smiled. 'My thoughts exactly. Why don't you contact them now. Let them know what the situation is. Get them on our side.'

'You think they'll support us?'

'I'm certain of it.'

'Only Chou Lai-fu has a lot of support on council.'

'Had.' Tsao Ch'un stood and walked over to the huge map of China

that was on the wall. 'What do we know, Yu? Have we any idea as to his movements today?'

'My last report had him in Fuzhou, but that was last night. After that he disappeared off radar... round about the same time that the killings began.'

'Well, there you are, then. He's clearly behind all of this. All we need is to convince the majority of the central committee... those that are still alive, that is.'

Yu started at that. 'You think...?'

'I don't think, cousin, I know. The second-tier assassinations have already begun, and Chou is clearly behind them. Destroying our base of support. Or trying to.'

This clearly shocked Yu Chang-shang. His own spies had not had a word of this.

'Aiya!' he said quietly, standing and wringing his hands. 'This is happening right now?'

'Right now. So make your calls. Warn our friends and get their support. And make sure you let them know of the Americans' involvement.'

'Of course...'

He waited, listening to Yu Chang-shang as he contacted one after another of their 'friends', explaining what he knew of the situation and seeking their support. Of the twenty two members of the Politburo's outer circle, six were now dead, murdered in the last few hours. A lot more had gone to ground, afraid for their lives. But some of the older, more influential members of the Politburo had stood firm, pointedly making public appearances, trying to keep things calm, for the good of China, even as China began to fall apart.

Tsao Ch'un watched the silent images on the second screen – news items from across the nation. Things were bad. The people were afraid, and many had taken the opportunity to vent their anger at the Party. Official buildings had been set on fire across China and officials strung up.

When Griffin called him again, half an hour later, his mood was very different from before. 'Tsao Ch'un...' He bowed to the President respectfully. 'Well?'

Griffin hesitated, then. 'Chou Lai-fu tells me he's innocent. He says it's you, Tsao Ch'un, behind it all. He says...'

Yu stepped into camera view, interrupting the American. 'Then Chou's a liar. I've been with my cousin every minute of today. He's been as shocked

as I by these developments. If it *were* him, I would know.

‘My security people...’

‘They know nothing,’ Yu said, angry now. ‘And your interference is something of an impertinence. Would you put up with us meddling in your affairs? No. Then back off, Mister President, and let China deal with its own internal problems.’

A flash of anger passed across the Texan’s features before he calmed himself and spoke again. ‘I’d gladly let you deal with matters , Yu Chang-shang, only... well, only this isn’t just an internal matter, is it? Who rules China... that’s a pretty damn important thing. You’ve only got to look at your TV screen. China’s falling apart, and the fall-out from that affects us just as much as it does you. We need stability every bit as much as you.’

‘Then don’t back the wrong man,’ Tsao Ch’un said. ‘Your friend Chou... he’s murdered twelve of his political opponents already. How many more does he need to kill before you understand what’s going on? This is a coup, Mister President.’

‘Then why aren’t you two dead?’

‘To have someone to blame,’ Tsao Chun answered him. ‘To make Chou seem a hero, not a villain. He wants the Mandate.’

‘The Mandate?’ Griffin looked confused.

‘The Mandate of Heaven... get one of your experts to explain it to you, Mister President. Maybe it’ll help you understand. Chou Lai-fu wants some kind of sanction for his actions. Some kind of justification for taking sole charge.’

‘But he denies it.’

‘Of course he does. You think he’d come clean with you? Give me an hour, Mister President and I’ll prove it.’ Tsao Ch’un hesitated, then: ‘Look, make whatever preparations you feel you need to. I understand your predicament. But don’t act. Not yet. It would be disastrous for us both if you took the wrong side in this dispute. So bear with us. My cousin Yu and I are doing all we can to resolve this. One hour. That’s all I ask.’

‘One hour?’ Griffin narrowed his eyes. ‘Okay. But not a second longer. Sort things, Tsao Ch’un. This is not good for the markets.’

Tsao Chun cut contacts. *Fuck the markets. And Fuck America.* But an hour was all he needed, now that Chou had been effectively taken out of the equation. Yes, an hour was more than enough, now that Chou’s hands were tied.

‘Chao Ni Tsu!’ he called.

At once his old friend was at his elbow. ‘What is it, Master?’

Across the room Yu was speaking on a phone to one of his subordinates, his whole manner urgent. Tsao Ch’un lowered his voice almost to a whisper.

‘It’s time to pour game. You’ve got everything ready?’ Chao smiled. ‘I have.’
‘Then let leash the dogs. And Chao?’

‘Yes, Master.’

‘No mercy, neh? We need to win this one.’

Chao Ni Tsu sat at his desk, in the upper levels of the fortress, tapping away at his specially- designed keyboard, putting into effect what he had been carefully preparing for every day of these last three years.

‘Ghostnet’ was down, crashed by him in the first thirty seconds of his assault. It would be two hours, maybe three before they got it functioning again. In the meantime more than forty thousand young hackers would be sitting idly at their machines, their screens the colour of dead TV. Spiritual Civilization – the central government department responsible for ‘propaganda ‘ – would be pulling their collective hair out right now, wondering where the fuck this had come from and probably blaming the Americans.

Chao chuckled. No one would guess that it was one of their own ‘sons’ who had done this to them. But shutting down Spiritual Civilization was only the first step. The great hub that was Central Communications was his real target. And that was not so simple.

No. Even for someone of his own undoubted talents, taking China’s internet security system was a huge challenge. With all its defensive walls, it was ready for something like this. Had been designed, one might say, specifically for someone like Chao Ni Tsu to come along and try to shut it down.

Like a game of *wei ch’i*, this required patience and subtlety. Required a cleverness and deviousness no one but he – a Grand Master of *wei ch’i* - possessed. Even so, it wasn’t going to be easy. Given a full day and a back-up team of a dozen razor-sharp young hackers he could have done it. As it was... well, it was just him, and he had an hour. Yes, and in that time he would have to do what he could; bring down what walls he could, neuter whatever firewall programmes that he might. Yes, and turn the tables on

those clever little fuckers. As his fingers danced over the strange-looking keyboard, so he grinned. He'd get them examining their own entrails, see if he didn't.

Yes, as he saw it, his job was to poke a stick into the ants' nest and see the ants run. Oh, this would be deep magic, see if it wasn't. But whether he could damage it sufficiently, whether he could kick a prop or two away... that he didn't know. No. But it would be a fucking hoot trying!

Forty five minutes in and he had them. If this was a game of *wei ch'i* then it would have been at that stage where his opponent hadn't yet realised that they had lost. Only they had. They could play a stone wherever they wanted now and it would have no effect.

Tsao Ch'un sat there, studying the bank of screens, seeing more and more evidence of Chao Ni-Tsu's destructive influence.

'Fuck the man, but he's good!'

'What?' Yu said, coming into the big control room. 'Who's that?'

'Oh, nothing... but look. China's burning.'

Yu nodded, his eyes fearful. 'What's happening, Tsao Ch'un? We've heard nothing from the Central Committee for ages now.'

Tsao Chun glanced up. 'The Communications Hub is down, that's all. It's crashed, probably from over-use. I'm sure they'll get it up and running again before long.'

'I hate this,' Yu said, standing beneath one of the screens. 'We ought to be out there, putting the fires out. Clamping down on all of this.'

'It's alright. It won't be long now.'

'You know that?'

'For a certainty. We have them, you see.'

You turned, facing him. 'Who? ... Have who?'

'Chou's wife, his children... eight other members of his family, including his paternal grandfather. We took them, half an hour back. They're our insurance policy. While we hold them, Chou doesn't dare act.'

'But I thought the Americans had him anyway.'

'They do. In a manner of speaking. He's on Taiwan.'

'Ah... I wondered... but how did you know? I thought Communications were down.'

'They are. But I have my own sources, and they tell me that the only reason

Chou's staying where he is, is that he thinks that, with American backing, he can convince the Central Committee to put him in charge. He thinks Griffin is his ace, but I think he's wrong. I think him siding with the Americans only harms him. It makes him seem... unpatriotic, neh?' 'Maybe. But what if he's right?' Tsao Ch'un made to answer that, then shook his head. 'Then we're fucked, dear cousin.'

Yes, and maybe that was so. Only he didn't say what else he had been doing these last forty five minutes; sending his assassins in to polish off the last remaining opposition; getting all the dirty work out of the way while the security screens were down; while the news could still be contained. No. He didn't want to pour oil on the flames. Not just yet.

And as for Yu... Yu's usefulness was almost drawing to its close. It was time for the penultimate act. Time to grasp the nettle and push things to a conclusion.

This was where things could fail. Where they could fuck things up royally. Because if, for a single moment, they were to be seen as a threat to China, if the blame for all of this could be placed on them and not Chou, then they would fail, no matter how many senior CCP members he'd had killed. No. He had to be very delicate in handling this next part. Had to make sure he didn't lose the people's sympathy, however much he despised them secretly.

Yes, and here, in the Endgame, was where all of his years of preparation – of recruitment and indoctrination – paid off. For it was not enough simply to cut the head off the beast. No. Kill all twenty two member of the Politburo and there were still close on a million party members yet to oppose him, if they willed that. That was the nature of China. And that was why his coup had had to be so big. Nothing subtle would have worked. Which was why there was a secondary list. Or, rather, two. One to keep and one to kill, as Chao Ni-Tsu, compiler of those lists, had put it.

Those to keep were those hundreds of young men – and women - who had been secretly recruited to his cause. Pupils of the Party School who had sworn blood loyalty to Tsao Ch'un. They alone justified his six years 'wasted' at the academy; were the fruit of his new found patience. Indeed, it was through these 'little emperors' that he had risen to the Politburo. And now he would take it one step further.

Those to kill were those who – when the Twenty Two were dead – would

seek to fill the void. To make a grab for power. Yes, he knew who they were and where they were, and in an hour they too would be dead. Or most of them. If things went as they should.

They wouldn't, of course. They never did. Hence his contingency plans.

Wang Ti-mo, his Chief of Security, appeared in the doorway, bowing low, the complete surrender of that gesture an indication of Wang's understanding of just how far they had come. Within the next hour or two, his Master might be the power, the One Man, in all of China.

'They are here, Master. Or most of them, anyway.'

'How many absences?'

'Sixteen. Three of which I know to be dead.'

'I see.' Tsao Ch'un scratched at his chin. Yu, nearby, was speaking on the comset, but he knew he was listening. When he cut contact Yu turned towards Tsao Ch'un, ignoring Wang Ti-mo.

'Who's come?'

'Some friends of mine. CYP people.'

'Ah,' Yu said, knowing of the connection. He had been a member of the Communist Youth Party himself, but had never cultivated the connection as much as Tsao Ch'un. 'Is there any reason why they're here? I mean... they're not dangerous, are they?'

Only to you, Tsao Ch'un thought, smiling benevolently. Yes, and I've smiled too fucking much today, he added, wishing he could snarl like a tiger, here at the Endgame.

'Cousin Yu,' he said, throwing off his mood. 'Would it help you if some of our young friends were to serve you. Until your own men can make it here, that is.'

He could see that Yu was unhappy with that idea. He was afraid of assassination, and still did not trust Tsao Ch'un one hundred per cent. His hesitation, however, was only for a moment.

'That would be kind, Tsao Ch'un. I...'

He managed no more. Right then the big screen lit up again, showing President Griffin's face.

'Tsao Ch'un... Yu Shang-chang... our hour is up.'

'It is,' Tsao Ch'un said, stepping forward.

'So... what's the situation?'

'Is Chou Lai fu linked in?'

Griffin looked to one side, probably to his chief advisor, who probably nodded, as Griffin looked back and gave a nod.

‘Good. Then he should hear this. There’s only us three left... of the twenty two, that is. And there’s no time to call a general assembly and put up new candidates, so...’

‘Now hold on...’ Griffin said, a look of sheer disbelief on his face. ‘Are you serious? There’s nineteen dead?’

‘Oh, many more, thanks to our friend Chou. But only nineteen that matter. So if we’re to form a quorum...’

Chou’s voice cut in, anxious and high-pitched. ‘Yu Shang-chang... Can’t you see what he’s been doing! The man’s a murderer! Oh, he keeps his own hands clean, but...’

Tsao Ch’un said nothing, merely turned to Yu Shang-chang, who studied him a moment, then stepped forward, into camera range.

‘Cousin Chou... today’s events... I have seen much that I never thought to see, but nothing to make me suspect my cousin Tsao.’ He raised a hand, as if to stop Chou from intervening again. ‘I say this only to clarify what I have felt all day. If I am forced to pick sides, I choose to be here, beside my cousin Tsao. And if it comes to a vote... well, I vote to remove you from power, Chou Lai-fu. To demote you and remove you from the Standing Committee.’

‘You can’t!’ Chou said off screen, horrified.

‘Oh, I think you’ll find he can,’ Tsao Ch’un said, smiling now. The faintest, deadliest of smiles. ‘We are two votes. And you, Chou Lai-fu?’

Griffin, who had been a silent witness to this exchange, took a deep breath. ‘Look, I don’t know how legal all of this is, but...’

‘But nothing,’ Tsao Ch’un said coldly. ‘You are interfering in China’s business, President Griffin, and that interference is not welcome. Tell your protectee, Chou, that he is to give himself up at once. Oh, and in case it might influence his decision, tell him we have his family.’

‘His...’ Griffin looked about to explode. It seemed that it was only the presence of his chief advisor, just off camera, that stopped him. A hand reached out to touch his arm. A moment later Griffin stepped out of camera range, while a guard, complete in black suit and dark glasses, put his hand over the microphone, to ensure they did not get to hear what was being said between Griffin and his advisors.

Tsao Ch’un turned to face Yu Shang-chang again. ‘Have you ever seen

such impertinence, cousin? It seems they do not like us making our own decisions. But let me reassure you. Chou shall be given a fair trial. The people must get to learn of the depth of his iniquity. In the meantime, we must set up the apparatus to appoint a new Politburo. Oh, we'll not be able to match the experience of those we've lost, but... we must rebuild. And that rebuilding must begin at once. If I could leave that part of things to you, Yu Shang-chang?'

Yu seemed delighted by Tsao's words. He bowed his head, a broad smile settled on his lips. 'It shall be as you say, cousin. Only...'

'Say no more,' Tsao Ch'un said. 'If the President will not hand him over, then we shall be forced to take him.'

'And his family?'

'Let us keep that as a threat, neh? A last resort.'

The screen was blank a moment longer, and then Griffin returned to it, flushed and clearly angry, his voice agitated. 'I don't trust you, Tsao Ch'un. I tell you that for nothing! You're a devious little weasel, and no mistaking it. I'm just amazed you've managed to fool your friend there!'

'Mister President!' someone said off screen, almost groaning at the undiplomatic manner in which Griffin was pursuing this.

'I don't give a shit!' Griffin said, glaring into the camera. 'What are you going to do, Tsao Ch'un... come for me? You don't fool me, see. I can see right through you. And there's nothing you could do to make me hand over Mister Chou to your un-tender mercies. Oh, and let me make it clear. If *anything* happens to his family...'

Tsao Ch'un slowly shook his head, as if regretting what he was hearing.

'Cousin,' he said, speaking to Yu. 'It seems we are wasting our time here. Let us make a decree, neh? Right here and now. To remove our cousin Chou Lai-fu from power, permanently and officially. Are you in agreement?'

Yu nodded. 'I am.'

'Then it is done.'

Chao Ni Tsu glanced up. 'What?' he asked irritably. 'What in the gods names' do you want, Wang Ti-mo?'

'Your Master summons you. He says it's time.'

'I see...' He closed the programme down he had been 'building', then set his computer to 'play dead' as he called it. If anyone tried to attack it, by

any means, he would be sent a signal in his head. Something he alone could hear and attend to.

That done, he closed the lid and stood. 'Lead on, friend Wang... How go things?'

Wang laughed gruffly. 'They go well, friend Chao. Chou Lai-fu has been fired from his post and made an outlaw.'

'And Griffin?'

Wang slowed and stopped. 'Griffin seems to know a lot more than we credited him with. He knows for a fact that our Master was behind all this.'

'Does he now? And how do you think he got to know all that?'

'You mean...?' Wang roared with laughter.

'Our Master wanted to bait the man. To make him rise to the occasion, shall we say, and lose his temper. Because ultimately it's not Griffin who'll be allowing or not allowing this. It's the Chinese people. And nothing's guaranteed to get them on your side than foreign interference. If Chou can be seen as Griffin's lackey...'

Wang nodded, delighted with the scheme. 'So what now? What does our Master mean by it being time?'

'You'll see,' Chao said, smiling broadly. 'Just be patient a moment longer and all will be ours.'

'You say that with great confidence.'

'Do I?' Unexpectedly, Chao Ni Tsu laughed. 'You know what, friend Wang? I didn't think the day would come. But here it is. And nothing our enemies can do will stop us now.'

'It helps that most of them are dead...'

'It does...'

Both men laughed, then began to walk on. It was time.

It would have been a great delight to have had the bastard killed. Greater yet to do it himself, to slit the bastard's throat from ear to ear, but for once Tsao Ch'un was happy with things as they were. With Chou Lai-fu in the American camp and every breath he took discrediting him further in the eyes of the Chinese people. No. Dead, Chou would have been a problem. Ditto Yu Shang-chang.

As he sat in the chair, waiting for the girl to finish doing his make-up, he knew this was the most important speech of his life. If this went well then

China was his, whatever Yu or Chou or President Griffin wanted. If he could persuade them of his innocence, or his love of China, of... oh, of a myriad things... then all else was irrelevant. No. He would offer them order and stability, and, after a day as frightening as any they had ever had, they would grab at that with a feverish anxiety.

Leaving the two men alive – Yu on his side and Chou against him – had been the key to everything. And whatever certain individuals thought, the vast majority would see it as he intended it to be seen, with Chou as the villain – hiding beneath the protective arm of the arch enemy, America – while Yu's backing gave him a legitimacy he could not have claimed had he acted alone.

In the end it was simple numbers. Two against one, and he effectively the two.

'Are you ready, Master?' Wang asked, putting his head around the door to the dressing room. 'Communications are back on, and they'll be putting out a live-feed. They reckon you'll have close on five billion viewers.'

'Good', he said, knowing that Chao Ni Tsu was doing his stuff, blocking Chou even as he allowed his Master to broadcast. And even should Chou somehow find a way to have his say, it would be the words of a liar and a murderer. A man who had single-handedly brought China to the brink. And who would listen to such a man?

And even as he thought that, so an idea occurred to him, making him grin broadly. His mother. That's what he'd speak about. His mother and her values. The values of Old China itself. Of Filial Piety and Duty and... Oh, he could see it now. See them out there in their tens of millions, weeping at his words.

He pushed the girl aside roughly, then, as if he meant it, turned back to her, seeking her forgiveness for his poor manners. 'Forgive me, Mistress, but...'

She bowed her head, blushing fiercely. 'It's okay. I understand... Good luck...'

He smiled, again as if it meant something to him, then reached across to gently touch her arm before turning away, hurrying now to meet his date with destiny.

It was that evening, after the speech, that Chou made his attempt on Yu

Shang-chang, Chou's men -ambushing Yu as he stepped from his craft on his helipad in the north of the great city of Beijing. With things as they were, they got it all on live-feed, millions tuning in within moments as word got out.

The first thing they saw was the image of Yu, slumped, holding his shoulder, as his guards formed a barrier about him. The two assassins were dead already, lying in a pool of blood from where Li Pao-an, Yu's security chief had 'taken them down'. It seemed Yu had survived; that Chou's attempt had failed. Only suddenly there was a booming noise in the air behind the tracking camera and, as it turned, it picked out a second craft hovering some fifty metres above the platform, a dull black shape that was totally unmarked. As it swung round, even as a dozen heavy-duty guns opened up from below, sending great fire-storms of bullets up into the chassis of the craft, two rockets streaked down.

The live-feed halted abruptly. There was a gap of twenty, maybe thirty seconds and then there were other images, taken on handhelds and phones from the balconies of overlooking buildings. The platform had gone, as had both craft, while the tall building behind it burned fiercely. Chou had got his man.

Tsao Ch'un was on TV five minutes after it had happened, his eyes red with tears, his whole manner a mixture of grief and anger. Many might have thought he would have seized the occasion to strike back at Chou and end it all, but Tsao Ch'un gave a dignified little speech about justice and a 'new China'. He spoke about stepping down and placing civil government in the temporary hands of a 'council of Elders', until things settled, that was.

It was a triumph. China was one hundred per cent behind him, while Griffin, back in the States, was floundering - struggling to justify why he had backed what was clearly the wrong man.

Alone in his rooms at Beidaihe, Tsao Ch'un waited. Publicly, he had disavowed any action against Chou, but privately...

Even now, more than a dozen separate attempts on Chou's life were being set up. Surround himself as he might with endless guards and 'loyal men', nothing could stop it now. No, try as he might to avoid his fate, China was against him now.

The executions had begun an hour back; first Chou's wife and then his eldest son, and then his father, a tape of each killing sent by

discreet messengers, to Chou himself at his fortress in Fujian. Each tape accompanied by a glimpse of Tsao Ch'un's smiling face. To remind him who was inflicting this on him.

Oh, it must have driven him quite mad before the end. To know himself to be in the right. To be the honest man and have this happen to him. And no one believe him.

It was eight minutes to midnight when word came. Chao Ni Tsu was the one who brought it to him, handing him the ipad with the image on it – that famous historical image the whole world saw for the first time only hours later.

Chou Lai-fu had poisoned himself. Had swallowed arsenic rather than watch another of those tapes.

And so it was done. And even as the world looked on, as if at true events, so Tsao Ch'un was crowned, at a private ceremony. Made Son of Heaven, as it had always meant to be. Not two against one, but the One Man. Ruler of China. Or rather, of Chung Kuo, for that, from henceforth, was what the Great Man called it, granting no concessions to the West who had opposed him.

And Griffin?

There is a little known story, one which is still to a great part unsubstantiated, of a private conversation between Griffin and the new Emperor of China. It took place at an economic summit the two attended in Strasbourg, less than a month after the coup that wasn't a coup. It's said that Griffin tried to mend bridges; that, off camera and off tape, he met Tsao Ch'un, in a locked room without windows. There, in that secret place, Griffin had apologised, laying much of the blame for their 'little misunderstanding' on his advisors.

For a while, it's said, Tsao Ch'un was silent. Then, stepping closer, his voice quiet, quite unlike the voice of calm reason he used in public, he called Griffin a worthless sack of shit – a hypocrite and a fool. The Texan, furious, flew completely off the handle, threatening to 'wup' the other's hide. Tsao Ch'un, it's said, simply shook his head and turned away.

And that would, perhaps, have been that. Only at the doorway, even as he was about to be hurried away by his guards, Tsao Ch'un turned to face Griffin again, his eyes cold and threatening.

'If I were you I'd watch my back, Mister President.'

Others have said that what he actually said was, 'You're dead, Mister President.' But even for Tsao Chun that would have been going one step too far. But the implication was the same. One world leader had just threatened another. And not just with 'diplomatic measures'.

And so it might have rested, only less than two months after that, at a baseball game in Comiskey Park, Chicago, President James B Griffin, the sixtieth president of the United States of America, was assassinated; shot dead by one of his own countrymen, an unemployed worker with a grudge.

Was Tsao Ch'un involved? No one will ever know. Only that if it *was* Tsao Ch'un's hand that lay behind it, then it was, in effect, the first step towards war; a war which, almost twenty five years later, would still be being fought, between the last two surviving superpowers, in a contest which would result in a world state called Chung Kuo.

David Wingrove