

DORMANT



Curse

BY

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Dormant Curse

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Chapter (Zero)

“Hurry...hurry...hurry now! They’re coming!”

The small boy studied his mother’s face with interest and confusion. Her eyes were wide, screaming at him, while her voice barely made a sound. It was almost like watching a silent movie. But the tension in her tone still came through, making her panic palpable. This was unlike anything he had seen from her before and he was struggling to make sense of what was happening.

“Qiang...now! With Lien-Hua!” her mouth whispered and face yelled at him, as she frantically pointed to the small cubbyhole in the kitchen. Qiang’s mother wanted him to take his little sister and hide. Pain, fear and anger wrenched his mother’s beautiful face.

Running to the kitchen, dragging the baby girl by the hand, the four-year-old pushed his little sister into hiding. With her safely in the crawl-space, he stood looking back at his parents and older sister, Bao-Yu. They were scurrying to roll Bao-Yu under their canopy bed, flipping the sheets back down to touch the floor and then smoothing over the wrinkles in the fabric on top of the covers. Nothing must look out of place.

The dark cubbyhole was once used to store extra bags of rice, now long depleted during the siege of their city. Their side had surrendered. The enemy was coming. The Japanese were going door-to-door to find Chinese soldiers attempting to escape by blending back into the community.

As the boy backed his rear onto Lien-Hua’s face and into the storage space, she asked, “Are we playing a game?”

“Shhh!” Qiang sharply whispered back. “This isn’t a game. Be quiet or you’ll get a bad spanking!”

Reaching to pull the door shut, he could hear Bao-Yu say from under the bed, “But they won’t hurt us, Father, will they? They want the soldiers.”

Qiang stopped moving. He wanted to hear the answer. He studied his father’s face as best he could from two rooms away, looking for any hint in his reaction.

His father pursed his lips and looked at his wife. She shook her head as if to say, "don't tell her." He nodded.

"Bao, they want to find any soldiers hiding out," said Father, feigning confidence. "But I don't want them to see such a beautiful girl as you and think they can take and marry her. They would be fighting each other for your hand in our own house."

"Oh, Father," Bao-Yu said in a hushed tone, "I'm not that beautiful! But I'll stay here and be quiet until they leave."

The boy could see the tears in his mother's eyes as his parents looked at each other in fear and hopelessness. He now knew what Bao-Yu could not see from her hiding place: his father had lied.

His mother looked past her husband, into the kitchen. When she saw that Qiang had not yet closed the cubbyhole door, she realized that he had seen and heard their conversation. She pointed at him wordlessly, which caused Qiang's father to turn and face his young son. His look of disappointment was quite easy for Qiang to discern.

Qiang saw what was coming and backed hurriedly into the cubbyhole, pulling on the door as his father, now almost sprinting from the bedroom, made his way through the foyer and into the kitchen. When their eyes met, his father's look was one of sadness, not anger.

Why such sadness? thought Qiang.

Father reached Qiang just as the boy caught the door's edge with his hand and was starting to pull it closed.

His father grabbed Qiang's arm before he could draw the door shut.

Qiang cringed and ducked his head down, expecting a slap from his father's hand as a reaction to his disobedience. Instead, when he looked up, he saw the calmness that had come over his father. Father leaned into the hole, gently pulled little Lien-Hua close enough to kiss the top of her hair, and drew his head back out.

Now with his hand gently on Qiang, he looked his son squarely in the face and said, "Keep yourself and your sister quiet, no matter what you see or hear. Promise me this."

"Promise me" was clearly not a question. It was both a plea and an order. Qiang nodded in response.

“I love you,” he said, as he kissed Qiang on the forehead and swiftly shut the door.

All went immediately dark for the children. His sister couldn't help but whimper.

“You heard Father. Quiet or I'll make you be quiet,” Qiang whispered his harsh reminder.

After a few moments, Qiang's eyes adjusted to the darkness. Through a thin gap between the door and the cabinet edge, he could see just a little slice of the entry room.

With the cubbyhole door shut, sounds were now muffled, but even so, he thought he could hear screams and gunshots drawing closer.

Were these the Chinese soldiers the Japanese were looking for? Why did they scream so?

He saw his father's figure go past with a cup of tea in hand, trying to appear as if nothing was amiss. Surely this wasn't a game after all, was it?

Bang-bang-bang-bang on the door followed by a shout. “Open the door or we'll break it down!”

The voice came in broken Chinese. It was the Japanese soldiers.

“I'm coming!” his father responded.

Qiang strained to see anything through his private viewing hole. Nothing.

“Brother, who is it?” came the hushed query from behind.

“Quiet. No noise.”

“Where are they?!” demanded the soldier.

“Who? We are the only ones home.”

“You lie!” said the soldier. The thud of the butt end of a rifle could be heard as it struck against Qiang's father's back.

“No, no...I'm not lying!” he said pleadingly.

“Look for the knapsack marks,” commanded the soldier in charge. Heavy knapsacks used by the Chinese soldiers would dig deep marks into their shoulder that would be visible for hours. These soldiers were looking for evidence.

Qiang heard the tear of ripping cloth.

“Humpf. No marks. So, you won't die...yet.”

There was silence for a few moments; Qiang held his breath, hoping the next sound he would hear would be the door closing and his parents coming to pull him and Lien-Hua from their hiding place.

“So, I see your wife is quite lovely. What will you pay me to keep her? I will not ask again.”

The soldier’s broken Chinese made it hard to understand what the soldier was asking, so his father was hesitant in his response.

Pay him? thought Qiang. Mother didn’t belong to the soldier. Why such a strange question?

“I have food...”

There was a long pause.

“No! Don’t take her, I have silver! Let me get it!”

“Well, that’s more like it. Get it now or we leave with her!”

Qiang glimpsed his father dashing into his bedroom to retrieve the silver he had stored in the ceiling. Moments later, he saw his father dart back into the entry room.

“Very well. You can keep her, but both of you will come with us! You carry the silver, and while you are at it, carry that chair over there. I want it, too,” the soldier commanded.

“But you said—” his father protested.

Another thud made it clear that no arguing would be tolerated.

“I said you could keep her. I didn’t say that either of you would stay. Now, let’s go!”

Next to him, Qiang heard the sound of his sister building up a sob. He realized from her breathing that she had been crying, though he could not see her tears.

“No sound!” he fumed. Rationalizing that his parents might return after they carried the stolen goods for the soldiers, he continued, “They will be back soon.” He hoped this would quell his sister’s panic. He almost believed it himself.

Qiang’s father walked past the viewport, carrying the chair on his back and the silver in a knapsack on his shoulder.

The door slammed shut.

The sound of the soldiers’ yelling and commotion moved down the street.

Qiang decided he would wait for his big sister to come and get them out of their cubbyhole. He was much too afraid to move right now.

His little sister had a different idea.

“Let me out! Bao-Yu! Help!” she yelled.

Immediately, the door to their small house slammed open and the sound of a soldier’s voice was heard. “Stupid Chinese! I knew you were in here! Come out now! I heard you!”

Qiang was quick to cover his little sister’s mouth before she could make another noise.

“There you are!” came the next voice.

Oh no, they’ve seen us! thought Qiang.

“You look much older than your voice sounds...”

“What do you want?” came the reply. The voice was Bao-Yu’s. She must have come out from under the bed when she heard Lien-Hua’s cry.

“See what you did!” Qiang seethed to his little sister, tightening his grip on her mouth to silence her.

The soldier didn’t reply, but instead laughingly called out the door to his other compatriots in Japanese. Qiang couldn’t understand what was being said, but the call quickly drew three or four more soldiers’ voices. He saw their shadows pass by his viewport on their way toward his parents’ bedroom.

“No, don’t! Please don’t!” Bao-Yu cried.

A slap, a scream, and more soldiers’ voices in Japanese. Laughter, threats, and his sister’s screams intermingled together.

“NO!! Please, NO!!” she yelled again and again.

Qiang wanted to cover his ears, but he was afraid his little sister would make a noise when he uncovered her mouth. The tension and fear caused the pressure on his grip to grow, which, in turn only increased the fight she put up against his hand and arm.

This went on for what seemed like an eternity, with pauses in screams and cries every few minutes, followed by more laughter and taunting and slaps.

What are they doing to her!?

The shadow of a soldier crossed in front of Qiang’s view again, but this one was different. It had a knife drawn by his side, in a fighting stance.

Is someone finally going to rescue my sister? Qiang thought hopefully.

After the next pause in screams, it all continued again. The shadow moved into the room. Rather than the screams stopping, they increased in intensity and

pitch. Yelping, hollering and taunting increased as Bao-Yu's scream became one long death-cry of agony.

Only then did Qiang realize that his little sister had stopped fighting him completely.

The sound of Bao-Yu's screams blended with and eventually became a voice from the Hua Dan, a Chinese opera whose shrill tone had triggered memories of the childhood atrocity.

“Sir, Leader, we are here...sir? Leader?”

The Leader was in a trance. His bodyguard never knew what would set off these spells—it might be a sight, a smell, or a sound.

The bodyguard would have to wait until it passed. Realizing that might take a few moments, he motioned for the limousine to pull into the waiting area next to the hotel entrance and for the music to be silenced. They were arriving at the Shanghai Grand Hyatt for important meetings. Now was not the time for any difficulties.

The Leader, who had been staring blankly forward, expressionless and barely breathing, now called out, “Bao!” before snapping into the present. He blinked, took deep breaths and looked around frantically. The bodyguard knew the Leader's exit from whatever trance he was in was usually marked by some reactionary response, however transient.

Chapter (One)

Michelle pressed her lips hard against Greg's. Kissing, licking, then biting his lower lip.

"Greg, I want you now..." she whispered.

Michelle's figure was silhouetted in the moonlight as they stood on the beach, just beyond the reach of the lights from the bar. Her bright yellow bikini took on a muted tone as her sheer, white shawl flowed gently over her tan skin in the ocean breeze. Greg's tall, muscular frame stood in complimentary contrast next to Michelle's diminutive build. She fit him perfectly.

Caught up in the moment, and feeling Michelle's ample chest now pressed against him, Greg almost forgot where he was.

"We can't, not here on the beach in front of everyone," he whispered back hoarsely.

"They can't see us, Honey. Not out here in the dark. Besides, don't you want me? Don't you want me now? Your body says you do," Michelle said with a playful smirk. "At least, it's giving me that impression."

Greg felt tingles all over. Of course his body was responding. How couldn't it? Michelle had him wrapped around her finger. All of five-foot-two and one hundred five pounds, with curves in all the right places—she had him mesmerized since his freshman year.

Michelle had her own buzz going. After a couple of Mai Tais, she would start to lose control. The meds pretty much controlled her impulses, but with some alcohol, her manic side would start to kick in. She was going to have her way, even if it got them arrested.

"Well, *part* of your body is extending an invitation," she whispered as she licked and tugged at his earlobe, "and here's my RSVP."

She started to slowly kiss his neck, his collarbone, and then work her way down his chest. The fear of being caught and the excitement he felt made Greg think he was going to explode.

Buzz... Buzz... Buzz... Buzz...

What? Where was that sound coming from?

Buzz... Buzz... Buzz... Buzz...

Greg wasn't on the beach. He wasn't even near the ocean. He was laying flat on his back in bed.

Greg slapped the snooze on the clock and tried jump back into the dream. It was no use; he was much too worked up to sleep now. Making sure the alarm was shut off, he rolled over to Michelle, who lay in a deep sleep next to him.

Michelle could sleep through anything. Ambien had that effect on her. But it was five in the morning, when most normal people were sleeping. Still, it was worth a try.

Greg brushed his fingers over the nape of Michelle's neck, down to the arch of her back and then back up again, seeing if she might stir without much effort.

"Mmmmm..." came the response. "That feels nice."

Greg was hopeful as he continued to kiss the back of her neck and gently rub his hand down the curve of her side.

"Oh, Honey," Michelle cooed. "When does your plane leave?"

"I have some time," responded Greg, trying not to let the anticipation show in his voice. It was going to be a quick, two-day review with their regional office in Dallas, but it had been days since they had last made love and he needed relief now, especially after that wild dream had left him aroused and unsatisfied.

Still lying on her side, spooning, Michelle took Greg's hand and moved it up to her breast as she pressed her ass into his thigh. Greg's body responded eagerly.

"Mmmm...OK, Honey, I'm still groggy...so...mmmm...you're gonna have to do all of the work," Michelle whispered softly.

Pulling her close, Greg sighed heavily and sensuously as he pulled Michelle's body firmly onto his.

Chapter (Two)

Security was tight for anyone entering or leaving the assembly and packaging plant in Shenzhen. The facility, owned by Hon Yao Industry Group, was responsible for the manufacturing of high-tech gadgets, devices, phones and computers, and serviced many customers. The parts list used in specific products was classified. Secure work sections were implemented to ensure no individual worker had access to the complete assembly information for any one product.

One section of the facility literally had processed silicon wafers going in and plastic integrated circuit packages coming out. The workers familiar with this section called it “No-Man’s Land,” for only a few personnel were required to run the fully-automated area. When a piece of equipment needed repair or service, the area around the equipment was curtained and cordoned off, allowing the technician to see and work only on what was necessary to get the job done.

Each day at the Hon Yao factory, a nondescript worker arrived at precisely 7:15 a.m. Where most workers would merely use their key cards to enter the plant, this privileged individual was met by security and allowed to enter anonymously. He carried a locked aluminum briefcase, and was allowed to bypass the typical inspection process forced on every other employee and visitor arriving at the gate. Unless someone was looking specifically for the deliveryman and his guard escort, he blended seamlessly into the surrounding busyness of the factory, undetected.

Once inside, the worker was escorted directly to the inner sanctum. No-Man’s Land. Once there, he delivered his unique package to the material stocker holding the days’ supply of silicon wafers.

Most other wafers were products from the US, Korea or Taiwan. These wafers contained leading-edge microprocessors, GPS receivers, Wi-Fi and Bluetooth circuits, DRAM and Flash memory. These were made everywhere but

China, on large 300mm silicon disks the size of a 12-inch vinyl record. The wafers were ground down as thinly as possible, sometimes as thin as a sheet of paper. After grinding, the wafers were diced into individual chips, which were then stacked and combined into one package. This was a relatively new technology called 3D integrated circuits, or “3D ICs.” It made for incredibly small devices, and reduced cost and power usage. Any company not using this technology was left behind in performance and cost competitiveness.

The downside to 3D ICs was that one couldn’t inspect between the individual chips—called dies—very well. It was difficult to examine when things were stacked perfectly and all of the individual connections between the thin silicon chips were lined up and fused together.

No one in No-Man’s Land knew what was on the special set of wafers that were delivered, nor did they have any identifying marks. All they knew was that the dies appeared to be made in China, and from the looks of them, had a somewhat simple design. For those who caught a glimpse of a special wafer, it looked as if nothing was on it but the connections. Perhaps it was just a simple die that routed circuit traces between other chips? No one really knew or cared. After thinning the wafer and cutting and assembling the die into the stack, it was hard to discern it was even part of the stacked assembly. However, this seemed the intent.

In No-Man’s Land, anyone who asked questions beyond how to do their immediate job was at once removed from the section and made to work on rather mundane activities. They knew better than to question. Getting selected for a job in this section was an enviable honor. Only loyal employees with substantial service with Hon Yao would even be considered, and significant raises and bonuses were sufficient incentive for volunteering. Sometimes the pressure of working in the inner sanctum and keeping the secrets of No-Man’s Land took a toll. Some staff ended up committing suicide—or so the factory rumors said. Young workers jumping to their deaths became a fairly common occurrence, though the behavior was blamed on high stress. Workers in the factory doubted this cover story, but they knew better than to question their authorities.

Amidst all of the commotion of the factory, the mirrored windows of the management office overlooked the overall operations. Even the factory manager

didn't know exactly what was on the unique wafers that were brought in each day. He only knew that the special die went into the stacks with GPS, and that its presence didn't seem to have any impact on system performance. Beyond that, there was nothing else to know or question. The managers knew that their livelihoods depended on obeying government orders. If one had forgotten for a moment that this was ultimately a communist, state-controlled system, it took only a terse meeting with the local party officials to remind them of the benefit they received from being allowed to run the factory. They needed to work with the officials to ensure it ran smoothly, lest it not run at all.

Most finished products from Hon Yao were complete end systems: smartphones, tablets and netbooks bound for the United States or Europe. Hon Yao also shipped assembled chips to final integrators that would use the circuits on in-flight and in-car navigation systems. With the cost efficiency of 3D IC technology, it was difficult for other assembly and packaging companies to compete. Financial incentives given by the Chinese government, in return for Hon Yao's cooperation, ensured that no one else ever would.

Chapter (Three)

Phones off already? Why do airlines still have this stupid rule?

Michael James was on his way from Atlanta to Salt Lake City to visit his grandparents. It was much too early in the day for him, so he was already in a foul mood. He wasn't too thrilled with the announcement to shut off all electronics.

Everyone knows the phones don't interfere with anything, he thought. Control freaks.

Sitting in the aisle seat of row 34, it would be easy enough for Michael to just stand up and slip his phone, still on, into the side pocket of his carry-on.

It's irritating enough that I'm sitting in the last row on the plane, with seats that don't recline and that for some reason that damn oxygen bottle is taking up my overhead space. Don't they have some special compartment for that? I've had enough impositions. I'm not gonna shut off my phone, he rationalized.

Michael was dressed in sloppy, low-hanging pants, the kind his mother hated, with an Ozzy Osborne t-shirt, Converse All Stars tennis shoes and a buzz cut. His large, strong frame betrayed the fact that he regularly exercised. He didn't really fit any stereotype—punk, rocker, emo or preppie. But that was Michael. He defied categorization, except “rebellious;” his look vastly different from the one he sported in his days as a Boy Scout. His parents hoped he would grow out of it, but at 18 years old, it didn't look very promising.

Having said his goodbyes to Mom and Dad before boarding the plane, Michael was looking forward to getting out of Georgia and spending time with Pops and Grams before starting a job in California. His grandparents always accepted him for what he was—whatever that was. He usually left their place feeling pretty good about himself. It was going to be an excellent trip.

As he stood up to slip his phone into his bag, he made sure his Blather account was up and going. He didn't want to miss any good updates from Lady Gaga while they were taking off, before he could get on the on-board Wi-Fi.

Sitting back down and trying to get comfortable, Michael looked around the plane at who else was traveling on this early flight. It was mainly businessmen, but a few families were on-board. He spied a tattoo on the arm of a jet-black haired beauty about four rows in front of him.

That's what I'm talking about, thought Michael.

Quickly that thought came into check as Michael remembered his girlfriend, Jill, and how she would have disapproved of his glance.

He was taking the job in California so he could move in with Jill. She had graduated a year earlier from Milton High and was the love of his life. When he was a Junior, she had her sights set on him, won him and bagged him. She was his first, though she had been around the block a few times. She had his head spinning with the way she made him feel. The spinning didn't stop for a whole year, during which his grades, social life and relationship with his family tanked.

After graduation, Jill was done with Michael and ready to move out of the state and onto bigger things. Having no real interest in academics, Jill started full-time work in a Pleasanton tanning salon. However, that hadn't worked out so well. Within a few months, and disillusioned with her low-paying job, she started calling Michael again, forging a long-distance relationship, much to Michael's parents' dismay. They had hoped the destruction Jill had wreaked over the past year was done and that their son was back on the right track. The phone calls and text messages from Jill had been in secret, but his parents knew something was up as Michael's grades began to slide again and his mood became more irritable.

Mid-way through a miserable school year, Michael announced that college was not in his plans and he was moving to California after high school. No amount of encouragement, cajoling, or threats by his father to cut off financial support could change his mind. At least Michael graduated. Still, his performance was a far cry from the promise he showed as a young teenager, when he was learning science theory and building advanced computer projects in his school's gifted program.

Jill had selfishly taken much more than Michael's heart and virginity. It appeared that she had also taken his future. The job at the local Safeway in Pleasanton he'd secured wasn't the future he or his parents had envisioned a few years ago, but with his income and Jill's combined, they'd have an okay life. His vision of the future now included only the next few weeks and dreams about being back with Jill. He thought about how good he would feel again, being completely intimate with her in every way like he had always wanted, but never could under his parents' thumbs.

Michael settled into his seat, closed his eyes and let his mind go.

Chapter (Four)

Greg arrived at National in a sweat. Making love with Michelle was so distracting and all-encompassing that he'd almost lost track of time.

That would be just great, Greg thought to himself. My first chance to show my skills and I miss my flight, and my only excuse is that my wife sidetracked me.

He wasn't that late, but with the number of passengers trying to get a flight out, security was worse than he'd expected.

Greg Cannon was a bright, young electrical engineer working for the National Transportation Safety Board. The NTSB headquarters were in Washington, but he was on his way to a regional meeting at their Texas office near DFW.

Greg was usually pretty quiet, but he was always ready with a warm smile or "hello" for anyone willing to acknowledge him. To those who took the time to get to know him, Greg was quite a character. He had a dry sense of humor and was good at making people feel comfortable. His biggest flaw, though, was his tendency to worry. If he dwelled on a problem long enough, his mind could blow things out of proportion.

Greg had just graduated with his Master's degree from the University of Illinois in December and felt lucky to have a job, considering the shape of the present economy—unless he wanted to work near Des Moines, back on the family farm. This was his first trip with NTSB, and his supervisor, Dennis, was travelling with him. He was to report on some commonalities he had been researching regarding Cessna 207A's electrical systems failures. It was not all that interesting to Greg, but it was a way to get started with the agency.

Dennis Wright was a middle-aged man, though the lines on his weathered face made him look older. His life had been hard. The deep scar above his right

eye that separated the eyebrow into two distinct pieces, confirmed the blows he'd been dealt.

From the little that Greg knew about Dennis, it seemed that Dennis just made things tough on himself. In some ways, Dennis was kind of an old crust. Not that he was difficult to work for—he could hold very interesting conversations and wasn't nearly as unpolished as most engineers. But you had to get used to his straightforward, blunt style. Dennis had never been married, at least according to the office grapevine; no one could put up with such a curmudgeon. One thing everyone knew was that one didn't ask Dennis about his personal life.

The line through security was long, and Greg was getting more concerned about missing his flight. The 80-year-old grandmother in the wheelchair six passengers in front of him had been randomly selected for screening by TSA.

Isn't there a way to un-profile a case like this? She looks really dangerous to me, thought Greg sarcastically.

The poor woman had a very difficult time and looked a little lost throughout the process.

Once on the other side of security, Greg checked the departures schedule. He still had 45 minutes before takeoff—not nearly as bad as he'd thought.

As he walked toward Gate A-14, Greg thought he saw a familiar face. There was Dennis, already camped out in his seat. He looked like he had been there a while.

“Boy, you sure like to cut it close,” quipped Dennis in his gravelly voice.

“Well...never mind, it's a long story, and I need to run to the restroom before we get boarding. Can you watch my stuff?” said Greg.

“Sure, Greg. Just don't get lost, and get me a Coke while you're up and about—here's a five,” came the gruff reply.

Great, something else to slow me down, thought Greg.

Dennis saw a little anxiety on Greg's face as he left.

He thought to himself: This new kid sure is uptight about the trip. I hate breaking these new guys in, but that's life in lower management.

Dennis kicked his feet up on the chair across from him and tried to get back into the book he was reading. He had learned long ago that he couldn't worry

about things that were out of his hands, especially a late employee. He wasn't about to start worrying now.

All his life, Dennis had known he wanted to leave a mark on society. He wasn't doing a good job of it so far. The goal of most engineers was to work themselves out of engineering and low-level management by the time they were fifty. At his current pace, Dennis would be lucky to make it by sixty. Half of his friends had left NTSB to start their own businesses. Dennis had been promoted to supervisor two years ago. He decided to give it a shot, even though he figured he was offered the position more out of his seniority than the management's desire to see him move up.

Waiting in line at McDonald's for Dennis' Coke, Greg wondered who would drink a Coke so early in the morning? He started to run his fingers through his short, blond hair as he grew impatient. He had developed this nervous habit as a kid and had never grown out of it. His mom used to tell him that he would lose his hair prematurely if he kept it up.

From the airport TV, Greg overheard a CNT world report.

"...coming up next, China's saber rattling in Asia. Is an invasion of Taiwan imminent? What is the US's responsibility in negotiating a settlement to ongoing disputes? And we'll cover the latest developments with Iran: do they really have multiple nuclear weapons ready for deployment? What are the implications for the US and Israel if reports are accurate?"

Can't anyone just get along? Greg thought. I'm so tired of the national and religious conflicts in the world.

"What'll you have this fine morning?" asked the attendant.

"I'll have a large Coke. It's not for me; it's for my boss. He's addicted to the stuff," replied Greg.

The girl looked at Greg carefully. "And you're his buyer for this addiction—I see how it is," she said with a bright smile. "Too much information," she smirked as she turned to get his order.

Ugh, that did sound strange, thought Greg. I need to settle down.

Part of Greg's nervousness was because he felt he just didn't know enough about his job. Most staff in his department were experts and aficionados in

aviation, aerospace engineering, meteorology, and, well, all things related to flight. His specialization was in semiconductors. He had taken this job because most jobs related to his field required moving to Singapore, China, India, Taiwan, the United Arab Emirates or Korea. In fact, the position at the NTSB had been the only reasonable job offered to him in the States.

It was obvious from his few months at HQ that Greg had a lot to learn. Half of his on-the-job training was learning to deal with contrary personalities. No course in college prepared him for office politics.

Rumor was that Dennis would be close to Director by now if he would play the political games like everyone else. From Greg's experience with Dennis, he could see that. Dennis was extremely intelligent, but he spoke his mind. From the subordinate's perspective, that made a great supervisor. You knew exactly what he expected, and he didn't make any promises he didn't intend to fulfill.

Dennis was asleep and snoring when Greg got back. How could someone sleep in an airport?

All around, people were trying to find one of the few seats left in the gate area. Well-dressed businessmen in Priority Class were beginning to line up at the gangway entrance. A young mother sitting with a child on her lap across from Dennis was obviously miffed that he had the gall to take up three seats: one for himself, one for his feet and one for his luggage.

It's obvious Dennis wasn't looking after my luggage very well, Greg thought. Looks like it's all here, though.

Greg tried to step over Dennis' sprawled out legs and take his seat without disturbing him. Dennis woke with a start.

Dennis felt the hot glare of the woman sitting across from him.

"What's with her?" Dennis mumbled to Greg as he sat up, moving his feet.

"Don't know, maybe she's had a rough morning," Greg said under his breath. The woman quickly moved her luggage to the vacated seat before it was snatched up.

"You get my Coke?" asked Dennis.

"Sure. Here you go. Hey, you seemed pretty relaxed there," Greg said with a grin. "When did you get here anyway?"

"I spent the night, couldn't you tell?" replied Dennis.

It was pretty tough for Greg to judge Dennis sometimes. Obviously, he hadn't been there all night, but it looked like he had certainly been there for quite a while. Greg noticed a few empty Coke cups and junk food wrappers under and around Dennis' seat.

Boy, this guy needs some help in his personal life, thought Greg.

"Dennis Wright, please report to the check-in counter," came a call over the intercom.

"Got my upgrade," said Dennis as he hopped up.

Lucky, thought Greg.

Over the course of Dennis' long career, he had saved a few hundred thousand miles. Government employees weren't supposed to use their miles for flights, so Dennis used them for upgrades whenever he had a chance. Nothing like investigating airline accidents to keep you accumulating lots of miles.

"American Airlines Flight 367 to Dallas Fort Worth is now ready for pre-boarding..."

Greg hadn't planned to tackle any work or reading on the flight, but he wasn't necessarily prepared for a nap, either. Thoughts were competing for priority in his mind—those of his stimulating dream and real climax of passion this morning with Michelle, and those of his presentation and how it would be received by the regional office. Once comfortably in his seat, Greg would be able to relax. Even without an upgrade, he still managed to get a reclining exit row, which gave him more leg room.

Once in row sixteen, the stately gentleman seated next to him smiled politely and offered Greg part of his paper.

"Thanks very much, sir," Greg said as he took the front section.

Once again, he was reminded of the ongoing tensions in the Middle East and Asia.

China invading Taiwan? he thought. Not a chance. We'd never stand for that.

From his semiconductor training, Greg knew that the leading-edge foundries in Taiwan made a ton of high-tech integrated circuits that were used in all electronic products. China had been trying to get their own leading-edge chip manufacturing capabilities, but so far they had only been successful in luring Intel there to build processors using legacy technology. They had also secured

low-cost assembly and packaging facilities. In contrast, foundries in Taiwan controlled over fifty percent of the global market for specialized chips, including many used in US defense systems. The US would protect that supply from China's control at all costs.

Issues like these were way above his pay grade and what's more, they were way outside of his control. He went back to thinking about Michelle. Once the plane climbed to altitude, the steady hum of the engines lulled Greg to sleep.

Chapter (Five)

The room was hushed and the lights dimmed in the Polaris executive meeting room on the 53rd floor of the Grand Hyatt in Shanghai. There were sixteen designer, leather chairs stationed around the high-gloss, walnut conference table—eight of which would soon be occupied by sharply-dressed Chinese businessmen in dark suits and ties. Upon arrival, each guest presented his engraved invitation to the guard at the door, who shone a handheld UV light on it to ensure the appropriate symbol of the secret clan was stamped on the card at the intended location. The guard requested and received cell phones and all other potential transmitting or recording devices from each guest and placed them in a partitioned cabinet labeled with corresponding seat numbers. Passing through a metal detector in the short hall between the inner and outer doors, the attendees entered and promptly took the pre-assigned seats indicated on their invitations. Though there was a door at the far end of the meeting room, it was locked and guarded. There was only one way in and one way out.

No one really looked at each other, and they certainly did not speak. They just stared at the front chair, waiting purposefully. Soft music played in the background to mask any conversations that might have been taking place between the organizers as final details were being prepared.

The symbol on the invitation—the symbol of the “Zhonghua Nine”—had deep meaning and a long history. Behind the Chinese characters for Zhonghua and Nine on the group’s symbol was the image of a dragon. For the men in the room, Zhonghua had two connotations. *Zhonghua Minzu* meant the “One China” they had always believed in, a notion of a unified country that included and assimilated all ethnic communities and lands that were Chinese in name and history. Zhonghua was also the name of the most famous gate in the city wall of Nanjing, known as the China Gate. It was built during the Ming Dynasty and for

these men, the gate not only symbolized the strength of China and its history, but also held their attention for the massacre that had occurred in that city at the hands of the Japanese in 1937. Though the Japanese would have expunged the violence of those days from the record of the world's collective mind, the Zhonghua Nine's mission was to ensure that no one forgot.

The number nine, the last and greatest single-digit number, was historically associated with the Emperor of China. The Emperor's robes often had nine dragons, and Chinese mythology held that the dragon had nine children. When pronounced, the number nine sounds like the Chinese word meaning "long-lasting." Nanjing was one of the earliest established cities in Southern China; it had been the capital city of various dynasties over the millennia. It had been destroyed and rebuilt many times, and it was now one of China's largest commercial centers. "Long-lasting" was an appropriate term for Nanjing.

Finishing off the symbol design, the five-clawed dragon used in the background represented power, strength and good luck. These were all characteristics desired for the group. Together, the combined symbols represented the beliefs and desires of the collective group of nine.

One had to be chosen to join the high-ranking sect. None of the members knew of its existence before being approached, if "approached" is really the right word for it.

Once the Zhonghua Leader had selected a loyal, influential and powerful man to join the secret group, a message went out to the cult members to establish contact and begin compulsion. The man selected couldn't be just anyone; he had to already hold a unique position or possess certain potential to be promoted to a position in the military, government or university that would afford the Leader the skills, political savvy, and power needed to fulfill the cult's mission. The selection of the Nine was a well thought-out and essential process—the Leader's team was his arms and legs to do his work. He considered himself the soul and intelligence behind the movement, but each member of the team had his own superior intellect to support the operations.

As the selected one could not be allowed to expose the group, he was typically kidnapped, gagged and brought to a secret location where the discussion would begin. After a full history of the sect's formation, purpose and structure,

and his proposed role in the organization, the conscript's choice was simple: either join the sect with full loyalty to the Zhonghua Nine, its Leader, and its goals, or face immediate execution. Fortunately, the prospect had already been fully investigated for his sympathy to the Nine's premises, principles and loyalties.

In the twenty years since its formation, only three men had chosen execution. Two of the sentences were carried out immediately, the bodies dumped discretely in the Huangpu River. However, the other's execution was the day after his indoctrination. It was clear he planned to alert the authorities and expose the Nine. Collisions between pedestrians and buses are, unfortunately, common occurrences in Shanghai, and the pedestrians almost always lose. If the potential conscript had been able to testify, he would have said that he was tripped and pushed at the same time; but with thirty other hurried, pushy pedestrians on the same crowded street corner in the Pu Dong district, it would have been difficult to prove his story, even if the man had lived.

Moments after the last attendee took his seat, the curtains to the expansive windows were automatically lowered, as if on cue, cutting from view the evening lights of the shimmering city and magnificent Pearl Tower.

Now securely out of sight of any potential witness beyond the group, the Leader walked in, slowly and deliberately. An old, crippled man, the Leader was escorted to his place at the head of the massive table, at which time the eight followers rose to attention and bowed to him in unison. At the same time, the guards exited the room and stood in the short hallway between the room and the outer door.

Though the Leader had founded their movement and society twenty years ago, his life, history and memory were much older. In fact, at 81 years old, the Leader even remembered the Rape of Nanking, as the massacre was then called. As a four-year-old during the invasion, he was lucky to escape with his life. If it were not for the Safety Zone set up by western missionaries and businessmen, the Leader would not have survived.

Experience with the government that abandoned the city during the Japanese invasion, as well as the ensuing insanity meted out by Mao's government during the Chinese Revolution, showed him that government could not be relied upon.

The current openness in the government—and its willingness to do business with the very nations that had tried to destroy their culture, history, and people—left the Leader with no choice but to recruit trusted allies with similar views and similar power with the aim of taking matters into their own hands.

When the Zhonghua Nine was formed, they didn't know how or when they would be able to seek their vengeance for past atrocities, and establish the rightful Zhonghua Minzu and its dominance in the world. They assumed that their destiny was assured, as they were guided by the good of the nation, its people and the principle of justice. They thought that greed, power and exploitation, which were once the foundation of domination they had experienced, would eventually be the seeds of destruction for these same adversaries. In their minds, they were in the right, and as their July target date was approaching, things were lining up on all fronts.

The Leader outstretched his gnarled hands and motioned downward as he said, "Please sit."

After the eight were seated, the Leader stayed standing and continued, "The time has come."

After a lengthy pause, he breathed deeply and deliberately, raised his fist, and stated: "Dormant Curse preparation is now complete and ready to be released."

Everyone in the room knew what project Dormant Curse was. It was the ultimate weapon. The Nine were instrumental in its development, design and deployment. Four years in the making, the ability to design such a pervasive and secret weapon only came to fruition with the latest development in high-technology, not developed in China, but assembled there for other purposes.

"The testing at our target city in the Midwest United States was completely successful. The test city allowed us to assess the impact on aircraft, homes, hospitals and vehicles, including ones just passing by town on the interstate highway. Seward, Nebraska is a town of only six thousand, barely the population of a city block here in Shanghai."

The Leader smiled broadly, obviously very pleased.

"The death count of ten was small enough that it did not catch the attention of the Federal Government. However, one plane, fifty homes and over one hundred vehicles were either disabled, damaged or destroyed. As a rural town,

the Dormant Curse weapon was not as pervasive as it will be in higher-value target areas where people use advanced, leading-edge technology.”

The Leader’s smile turned into a small chuckle as he continued. “The Americans think that a freak magnetic pulse destroyed the processing and communication capabilities for the city. The article in the news said that a solar flare, sunspot or magnetic field anomaly was responsible. No additional investigation has been done, so they won’t be any further along in figuring this out when the real attack happens...”

He paused for full effect.

“...which will be in precisely 15 minutes, at 7:30 a.m. on the East Coast of the United States.”

This unanticipated announcement caused the energy in the room to suddenly rise as the cult members took it all in. Each of the eight wanted to talk, but decorum and respect demanded their silence.

The Leader could sense their tension, and expected it. He motioned for them to stand.

“Zhonghua Nine, my faithful and loyal sons, you have all known the parts you have had to play and have not questioned the overall plan. Have continued faith that this is the destined path toward glory, strength, power and vengeance. But please, ask questions if you must.”

There was anxious silence in the room. No one wanted to be first to speak.

“Zhonghua Two?” asked the Leader as he extended his crippled hand toward the follower on his right. Names were not used among the sect, so as to not absentmindedly slip and expose an identity. “Do you have a question?”

Zhonghua Two quickly bowed toward the Leader and graciously asked, “Leader, may we know where is this next target?”

The Leader replied slowly. “We had considered attacking multiple targets at once, but then decided on a large section of a major US City...a city that would receive both public and Federal attention. I cannot tell you the city, but you will know shortly. Three...any questions?”

Zhonghua Three likewise bowed, and with a more nervous voice, asked “Leader, has the order already been given?”

“Yes, it has. Dormant Curse is now in motion and cannot be stopped, even by me. In fact, we will all sit in the room and watch the American news channel to see the results.” The Leader’s reply was serious, but he wore an underlying grin. “Zhonghua Four—any questions?”

Zhonghua Four detested his number. In Chinese the number four sounded much like the word used for “death.” Most Chinese tried to avoid this number if at all possible. The Leader, astute man that he was, reserved this position for the most ruthless of the group, ensuring that the number assigned most closely matched the personality of its recipient. Zhonghua Four secretly suspected this, and likewise resented it.

With a crisp bow to the Leader, Four asked, “Will this demonstration be sufficient? Will we be allowed... I mean, will we *possibly* be required to perform another demonstration?” his own words revealing his sadistic tendencies.

“Zhonghua Four, remember that we are only using the weapon as a means to gain our ultimate goals. Our goal is not to destroy or permanently injure the United States. However, if the attack is insufficient to meet our needs, yes, we will be required to attack again. Once the initial attack occurs, it will be a race between the Americans discovering the source of Dormant Curse and our ability to attack again. We must act quickly on all other plans in order for our destiny to be fulfilled. However, we will only inflict injury to the extent required.

“The time for discussion is done; we have five minutes. Let us sit and face the display.”

At the Leader’s command, they turned their chairs to face the display at the other end of the room, which had been tuned to CNT.

“Now we wait,” the Leader said with a sigh.

Thousands of miles away in a nondescript apartment in San Francisco, a rogue programmer was preparing unique messages to be sent through the top one hundred most-followed Blather accounts. Joe had been jilted in the initial public offering of Blather, and grew angry when he thought that not only should he be retired right now, but he should have been given credit for creating the core code Blather was based upon.

However, a friend he'd made last year who intended to start his own social networking company had asked Joe to help send out hacked Blather updates. It was supposedly a means to send hidden messages to his staff in the field who needed a way to get fast, secure information over otherwise public communication forums. Joe didn't feel too badly about making some money off the backdoor openings he had put into the system. The hacks were originally for testing, but he had never had a chance to seal them up before being forced out of the company. The money was good, a few hundred thousand a year for a few messages a month. Whoever was behind the operation had deep pockets and didn't want to be found out. The messages were so few and far between, Joe would never get caught, so he didn't really care who was paying him.

Today was unusual, though. Instead of a random message on a specific account, two messages were going out on many. The first message was clearly bogus and confusing, plausibly from someone playing a prank. The second, to come precisely two hours later, was either more gibberish from a celebrity or an apology from a politician recognizing the miss-sent message. The first was intended to go out early in the morning, when most followers wouldn't even read it. However, almost everyone in the Internet-connected age left computers, phones and iPads on all night to catch emails, texts and messages. All of these systems would still receive the coded message even if the owner was asleep.

Joe had already sent the first message and set his alarm to wake up ten minutes before the next one was due. He waited impatiently until precisely 4:30 a.m. to finish the job. He wasn't used to getting up this early and was looking forward to hitting Send and lying back in bed.

"55, 56, 57, 58, 59, Send!"

Joe hit Enter and waited for the messages to come full-circle, back to the accounts he was following. There they were, just as he had sent them.

All done, he thought as he quickly closed his lid, flopped back in bed and pulled his pillow over his head in one swift motion.

Little did Joe or anyone else but a few members of Zhonghua Nine know that a whole team of disconnected, disgruntled, independent programmers and hacks in the San Francisco Bay area had sent similar messages on Facebook, Twitter, Blather and other social networking sites, all simultaneously.

Dormant Curse had been released.

Chapter (Six)

7:32 a.m. Eastern Time Zone, USA

“Pop... pop, pop... pop...” Smartphones and tablet computers popping and smoking sounded like microwave popcorn. But the smell developing on the plane was anything but appetizing—the space suddenly reeked of burning, melting plastic. Yelps and cries for help came from across the plane. Within seconds, the cabin was being engulfed in smoke.

Michael had been dreaming about Jill and how good he felt when he was with her. He woke with a start. It took him a few seconds to realize where he was and what he was seeing.

“Mayday, mayday, mayday, this is American 1225, requesting emergency landing. We have a fire on board, I repeat, we have a fire on board,” came the frantic call from the pilot.

The emergency request was met only with static on the receiver.

Again, the pilot tried to reach air traffic control: “Mayday, mayday, mayday, this is American 1225 requesting emergency landing. We have a fire on board!”

Suddenly, the radio sprung to life. “Mayday, mayday, mayday, this is Delta 289, we have a fire in the cockpit, I repeat, we have a fire in the—”

The transmission suddenly stopped.

“For God’s sake, what’s going on?” exclaimed the pilot.

“Jack, look at that!” Shouted the co-pilot as he pointed to a bright flame in the distance.

“Fred, we’re going to land NOW. It’s clear no one is listening on the other end and we’re not going to try to make it to a runway.” Jack accessed the PA system. “This is the Captain speaking. Prepare for emergency landing. Put on your seatbelts and oxygen masks. Hang on tightly.”

Oxygen masks dropped from the ceiling and passengers frantically pulled them toward their faces to escape the toxic smoke.

In the cabin, though, smoke was already filling the space and burning lungs and eyes. Michael jumped out of his seat to help the flight attendants extinguish many of the fires. Blankets, drinks, and pitchers of water were all used to combat the smoke and flames.

Passengers whose seats were quickly becoming uninhabitable unbuckled their seatbelts to scramble for safer parts of the plane, clogging aisles and abandoning the safety of their oxygen masks in the process.

The captain, a skilled ex-military pilot, was acting quickly and decisively to push the descending plane to its limit. So far, the smoke and fire in the cabin had not made it into the cockpit. The trouble was determining where to land. Without contact with air traffic control, Jack was on his own. He aimed for the closest ribbon of highway he could see. The navigation system's last reading placed them over Northern Alabama, so the city off in the distance was likely Huntsville. Ominous smoke-trails on the horizon let him know that other planes were going down. There was no time to waste in coordinating a landing; he just needed to get on the ground.

Though it could hardly be noticed with all of the other commotion going on, there was a thin trail of smoke coming from the overhead bin in row 34. Michael's smartphone, left on in his bag, had also fried. The smoldering side-pocket had burst into flames.

In the meantime, the flight attendants, assisted by Michael and a few other courageous passengers, were succeeding in smothering the many fires. They were soon getting thrown around the plane, with their ears and sinuses screaming, while the pilot was making extreme descent maneuvers. But in the adrenaline rush of the moment, none of that was registering in their minds.

We may make it, thought the co-pilot as the highway came closer into view. The sun was up, but Jack hoped that his landing lights would be visible to the few cars on the road below.

"Passengers, prepare for landing!"

In the intensity of the moment, he had almost forgotten to warn them.

“Place your head between your knees if you can, with your hands clasped on top of your head, or brace your forehead against the seat in front of you. Now!”

Michael quickly ran for his seat. The tattooed beauty who had previously run to the back of the plane in a panic was now sitting in his place. Fortunately, her seat was still empty. He made eye contact with her and saw tremendous fear. Michael tried to smile reassuringly and mouthed, “It will be OK.” It seemed to make an impact as the fear disappeared from her face, even if only for a moment.

Quickly jumping into the seat and buckling the seatbelt, Michael curled up into a ball as best he could. He knew that protecting his head and brain were key.

In the cockpit, there was no more time to talk or give further instructions to the crew or passengers. The highway was right below them and there was a curve in the road a little over a mile away. Jack knew he either had to land now, or try to line up for the next straight portion of road. Under normal circumstances, they needed nearly five thousand feet of runway to stop the heavy aircraft. The image of the other planes Jack had seen plummeting to the ground flashed through his mind. He backed off the engines and brought the nose up.

“This is it!” Jack exclaimed.

Cars on the highway that were behind the plane had quickly clued into the fact that something was up when they saw the body of the MD-80 rapidly descending over them. Some slowed and some hit their brakes or pulled onto the shoulder. In front of the plane, it was a different story. The few drivers that had seen the plane in their rear-view mirrors either grabbed the exit or ran off the road into the grassy median. However, one new Mustang GT decided his best chances were to accelerate. Going from 70mph to 180mph in about five seconds, he was quickly pulling ahead of the danger. The few cars that didn’t see the plane at least saw the other cars’ erratic driving, awoke to the danger and followed the others’ paths—some with only seconds to spare.

The landing was hard, but the wheels stuck to the ground and gave Jack ample ability to hit the brakes and reverse thrust as hard as he ever had. The plane shuddered and groaned under the stress. It was only the plane’s design that held the engines to the wings and kept the landing gear from collapsing.

As quickly as the plane skidded to a halt, the passengers in the emergency exit rows were pulling the doors out and leading others off the plane.

As he jumped up, Michael looked back toward the girl who had taken his seat. She looked almost petrified and wasn't moving very quickly. It was just then that Michael saw the smoke billowing out of the bin above her head—as the plane was now depressurized and the oxygen levels normal, the fire inside the overhead had more fuel.

Shit, that oxygen bottle! thought Michael.

The aisle was full of frantic passengers, so Michael jumped over the few empty seats between he and the girl. Her surprised look made it plain that she had no idea what in the world he was up to.

There was no time to explain. With her seatbelt already undone, Michael grabbed her by her tattooed arm and yanked her up out of her seat. She was a tall, thin girl, and with the momentum gained from Michael's strong pull, the girl flew by him in the space he created by shifting to the right, in a move almost as graceful as something he'd seen in "Dancing with the Stars." Pushing her in front of him and pulling her close to protect her with his own body, he tried hustling her toward the emergency exit.

In any other situation, the girl would have thought she was being assaulted. But Michael's heroic efforts in fighting the fires as well as the calming, winsome smile he had given her somehow left her trusting whatever he was doing.

There weren't many thoughts going through Michael's mind. He was acting on instincts that came from somewhere he couldn't have predicted. It was almost as if a force outside himself were using his body, leading his mind—providing him with speed, energy and strength.

All this time, the fire in the overhead in row 34 had been steadily growing behind the closed compartment door. The oxygen bottle had heated to its combustion point. A small micro-crack in the canister, caused by a stamped date code embossed into the side, provided the added stress that allowed a fracture to rapidly grow, releasing the pure, flammable oxygen. The explosion from the oxygen bottle was deafening, but Michael didn't hear it. All he saw was a flash and stars.

Then darkness.