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WIND-GONE-MAD

GALAXY
P R E S E N T S

CHAPTER ONE

A GAINST a sky the color of a chalk-smudged slate, there appeared a black cotton ball which vanished as swiftly as it had come. In its place, long black lines came into being, disappearing in their turn. These were warnings only. The next markers of potential death would be much closer to the sleek biplane which rode the China sky.

The man called Feng-Feng, “Wind-Gone-Mad,” looked down and smiled with half his mouth. He eased back his stick and jumped another thousand feet into the glowering sky. Once more he gave the landscape a careful scrutiny.

Below and ahead lay the town of Taiy of the Shan Province, sprawling out like the yellow toy blocks of a child, hemmed on two sides by the craggy Khinghan Mountains, split apart by the golden Y which marked the Fen Ho River and its two northernmost tributaries.

Another puff—near this time—spread itself out into oblivion. The black streaks of tracer machine-gun bullets did not reach this high. The man called Wind-Gone-Mad jockeyed his slim fighting craft abruptly out of range and scanned the terrain for the landing field of North China Airways.

Evidently, they did not know him, and to land meant a shattering baptism of fire. But land he must. Both gas gauge and mission demanded that. Wind-Gone-Mad angled down

in a screeching power dive, and wondered what the admirals would say if they could witness this reception in “peaceable Northern China.”

Yesterday, a representative of the great Amalgamated Aeronautical Co.—Jim Dahlgren—sat across a mirrorlike table from the military powers that rule China’s destinies. Before them were scattered squares of cheap yellow paper which bore messages marked “Urgent.” Arms bedecked with gold braid picked them up. Lips accustomed to bawling orders on a quarterdeck spoke hushed words.

“It comes,” the C-in-C of the USN muttered, “it comes of letting the implements of war wander into the unscrupulous hands of power-crazed men. With three bombing planes, ‘The Butcher’ is of the opinion that he can rule all China. Gentlemen, it must be stopped.”

“Stopped!” the British officer echoed. “Rather. But how? We cannot land armed forces. Such would be regarded as an antagonistic move against the Japanese along the border.”

“I appreciate that,” the Italian officer clipped. “But perhaps if we were to advise B-34 to kill The Butcher at all costs—”

The Frenchman growled deep in his many-chinned throat. “Murder! Bah! We cannot stoop to that. Besides, my dear Gian, The Butcher has repelled such attacks before.”

And then the Chinese adviser to the council of nations unexpectedly uttered an opinion. “As the gods of war will have it, let it rest. Before this, men like The Butcher have risen up in the provinces with fire and sword. The Butcher has purchased his three bombers. He has decreed that Shen

Province is at war with Shan Province. Nothing will stop his conquest because without additional taxes, The Butcher's administration is at end. After all, I say, it has happened before. In a few years, The Butcher will most likely die or be killed. It is best to wait for that which is decreed by the gods—"

Eyes raked him scornfully—Western eyes, unhampered by fatalism.

The man called Jim Dahlgren stood up and wiped blond hair out of light-gray eyes. His lips were tight in a sardonic smile. "There is, as you say, a brand of diplomacy." He waited until all of them gave their attention. "That brand is called eye for an eye. Force must be met with force."

The C-in-C muttered, "Men like you profit by that. Sit down, Dahlgren. You want to sell Shan Province a fleet of bombers. We will not have it. That is the only solution to you—the one which will put dollars in your pocket. Sit down."

But Dahlgren remained on his feet, still smiling. "No, I was not thinking of that. There is a man called Feng-Feng—Wind-Gone-Mad—"

"You know him?" bawled the C-in-C with unexpected heat. "That pirate! If you do, tell us where we can find him. The United States will be only too glad to pay you for your trouble."

Dahlgren shrugged and his lean face was hard. "Yes. I imagine that you would, all of you. In your hearts you know what he wants and you also want it. He stands for a unified China. A China without civil war. A China which can resist invasion from without and treason from within. You will

not let others of us interfere with politics. We must sell only when a buyer comes to us. But Wind-Gone-Mad knows who should buy and he sees that they come unhampered when they need defense. He has studied this country for years and he knows better than you who have been here months.”

Dahlgren reached for his soft felt hat. “I go now to find the one they call Wind-Gone-Mad.”

“I forbid you to contact that man!” bawled the C-in-C. But it was the official who spoke and not the man. He watched Dahlgren go out and heard the staccato heel beats going down the corridor.

The Italian’s eyes went up to the smoke-clouded ceiling. “Well,” he remarked to the room at large, “I for one am glad. This Feng-Feng, after all, *has* done things in the past—”

But that was yesterday, and today the man called Wind-Gone-Mad lanced down toward the airways field, finding a reason to smile. Instead of anti-aircraft guns, Taiy was using ancient 75s and a quantity of bluff.

The square of yellow earth slid up over the motor cowl with appalling speed. The altimeter shot down to five hundred feet before the pilot whipped his ship into a slashing sideslip.

Men in gray uniforms were running away from deserted machine guns, disappearing behind piles of sandbags. An officer stopped to empty his automatic at the charging slash of color.

The pilot fishtailed wildly and shot over the stiff wind sock. The plane snapped suddenly into landing position. With a crunching slap, the ship was down.

It was as if an electric current had been shut off. Men began to fumble for their lost caps. Gunners slouched back to their pieces. The officer calmly slid another clip into his gun and holstered it. On the side of the red fuselage they had all seen the dragon and the two mammoth characters which identified their visitor. They knew this man and they also knew that he had little connection with The Butcher.

The pilot stood up in his narrow pit and stretched. But he did not remove the goggles which hid a quarter of his face, nor did he so much as unfasten the chin strap of the lurid helmet he wore.

The officer, a White Russian, stopped and looked at the red dragon which spat fire above the pilot's eyes and then curled down around the ear pads. Assured of the man's identity, he came forward again.

"I am sorry, Feng-Feng. Had I but seen the dragon—"

"Quite all right," interrupted the pilot. "I wish an audience with Cheng-Wang immediately."

"Cheng-Wang is at your service, I am sure. But perhaps it would be better for us to place your plane in a bombproof hangar. We are waiting an attack by The Butcher. Perhaps if we service your engine, when the bombers come you can—"

Wind-Gone-Mad laughed joyously. "Such faith! You think that I would attack three Demming bombers single-handed? Really, my good friend Blakely sells better ships than you suppose. I would be downed in an instant."

It was the Russian's turn to laugh. Wind-Gone-Mad shot down? The thing was impossible, ludicrous. In a moment he subsided and spoke again more seriously. "Had Cheng-Wang

listened better to the proposition to buy three Amalgamated bombers when you asked—”

“Quiet,” said Feng-Feng, not unkindly. “That is a secret that only a few of us hold. Its release would mean my death. But never mind. I go to see Cheng-Wang. Service my ship and listen in on my panel radio for talk in Shen Province. The pigs will give you warning. If you know that they come, send for me and I will do my best to beat them off.” He dropped to the ground lightly and strode toward a waiting motorcycle.

Cheng-Wang was old. On his parchment face was stamped the weariness of one who has seen too much, has fought too many battles, has witnessed too often the summer’s fading into the dusty harshness of winter.

Cheng-Wang was frail and when he moved his hands the almost-fleshless bones clattered above the click of his long fingernails. With an impassive nod, he gave the order that the man called Feng-Feng be admitted to the audience room.

Still masked by his goggles and casqued by his helmet, Wind-Gone-Mad entered with long, determined strides. His leather flying coat rustled when he sat down in the indicated chair.

“It pleases me that you come,” said Cheng-Wang in five-toned Mandarin Chinese. “Long have I wanted to give you my regrets for not accepting your offer and your warning. Now there is little we can do. The Butcher has begun his fight and it will be short. Along the eastern border, my troops lose miles of ground each day. They are harassed from the air. But you have come too late.”

Behind the lenses of the great goggles, Feng-Feng's gray eyes held those of the provincial governor. "I do not think that I have. Our friend Blakely sold them no pursuit planes because they could procure no pilots. At the North China Airways field I now have a fighting ship—my own. It has two machine guns and it travels four miles a minute. With that I can help you."

"It is useless," mourned Cheng-Wang. "I will not allow you to throw your life to The Butcher. You do it out of sympathy alone and you use no regard for your own safety. The Butcher has placed a price on you, and that long ago. He would see your helmeted head dangling from a picket. Blakely, the man you oddly call your friend, negotiated that these many months gone by."

"There are no bombers at my call in Shanghai," stated the man called Feng-Feng. "I can only do as fate and my hand dictate. Is it true that you are to receive an air attack today?"

Without explanation, knowing that it was not needed, Cheng-Wang presented a square of paper which bore black slashes. Deciphered, it said:

The Hawks of The Butcher strike before dark. It is better to accept an honorable surrender from Cheng-Wang than for The Butcher to occupy a lifeless town.

The massive black doors swung back and a soldier in gray stood rigidly at attention in the opening. He saluted. "To the east, heaven-borne, are the Hawks of The Butcher." Dropping his hand he left-faced, waiting for Wind-Gone-Mad to precede him out of the palace.

The pilot turned, and his mouth was set. “Refuse to know terror, Cheng-Wang. This one goes to dull the claws of The Butcher.” He tramped rapidly away and the black doors swung softly shut behind him.