



Aggressor

Volume I

FX Holden

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The first novel in the Aggressor series

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*And to editor, Nicole Schroeder,
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for putting the cheese around the holes.*

*Also by FX Holden: The Future War Series
(though each is a stand-alone story the recommended reading order is below)*

KOBANI
GOLAN
BERING STRAIT
OKINAWA
ORBITAL
PAGASA
DMZ

Ag•gres•sor

(ə'grɛs ər)

noun:

A person, group, or nation that attacks first or initiates hostilities.

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US President Warns Chinese Invasion ‘Imminent’

Associated International Press, 30 April 2038 — US President Carmen Carliotti warned Thursday morning a Chinese attack on Taiwan was “imminent,” framing the current economic blockade as a pretext for war.

It was the latest sign of mistrust from the West at Chinese claims the country is seeking a diplomatic solution to the current standoff. Carliotti, while maintaining there was a “diplomatic path” that avoids conflict, nevertheless used stark language to predict imminent violence.

“It’s very high,” Carliotti said when asked by AIP’s Paul Raleigh how high the threat level is for a Chinese invasion of Taiwan.

“It’s very high because they say they are conducting a naval and air economic blockade, but they have troops and landing ships by the thousands marshaling along the coast,” she continued, speaking on the White House South Lawn before departing for Ohio, where she plans to sell the Taiwan Support Act passed last year.

“They have moved more troops in, number one. Number two, we have reason to believe they will manufacture an incident at sea or in the air as an excuse to go in. Every indication we have is they are prepared to go into Taiwan, attack Taiwan,” Carliotti said.

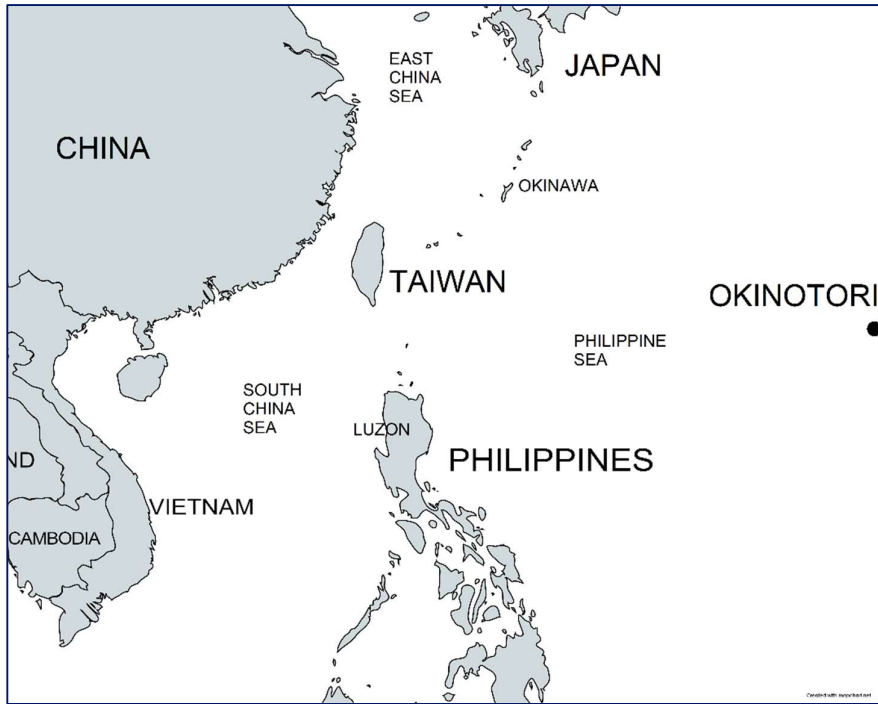
Carliotti has predicted a Chinese invasion of Taiwan before but has previously softened her warnings by saying China’s leader hadn’t made up his mind. She was more definitive on Thursday, a day after Pentagon officials said 70,000 more Chinese troops have arrived at Chinese ports along the Taiwan Strait, along with strategic bombers, contradicting earlier Chinese claims of a pullback.

Pressed on whether she believes an attack will happen—and what the US response will be—Carliotti said: “Yes. My sense is it will happen in the next several days. As to our response, China knows it will be swift, and resolute.”

Contents

Area of Operations	10
Cast of players in order of appearance	11
Foreword	12
1. 'Any landing you can walk away from...'	13
2. 'That was yesterday'	22
3. 'Or die trying...'	31
4. 'A sky full of stars.'	41
5. 'Not a snowball's chance'	49
6. 'An atoll the world had forgotten about'	58
7. 'A speck on the skyline'	69
8. 'Defender of Okinotori Station'	81
9. 'Launch permission granted'	94
10. 'A meat locker?'	103
11. 'That way be dragons'	113
12. 'A shark that had just smelled blood'	122
13. 'This day is never going to end'	133
14. 'Down among the fish'	141
15. 'It gets real'	151
16. 'So close, so many times'	161
17. 'Sky train'	171
18. 'The least painful option'	181
19. 'Invisible adversaries'	191
20. 'Did China just declare war?'	199
21. 'Her long ponytail trailing behind her...'	209
22. 'Why isn't that reassuring?'	220
23. 'Meat kill'	232
24. 'Breathe, alright?'	242
25. 'How do I look?'	257
Next.....	269
Author note.....	270
Glossary.....	275

Area of Operations



Area of Operations at the outbreak of hostilities



Map of the Western Pacific showing the location of the carrier PLAN FUJIAN relative to Guam and Okinotori Island

© Mapchart

Cast of players in order of appearance

COALITION

Lieutenant Karen ‘Bunny’ O’Hare (USAF Reserve), Sixth-Generation Combat Aircraft Training Lead, Aggressor Incorporated

Lieutenant Colonel Kevin ‘Salt’ Carlyle (USAF Reserve), Chief Operations Officer, Aggressor Incorporated

Michael Chase, Pentagon Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for China

Carmen Carliotti, US President

HR Rosenstern, White House Chief of Staff

NSC ExCom members: Vice President Mark Bendheim, Homeland Security Secretary Emily Harvey, Defense Secretary Ervan Holoman

James Burroughs, Head of Defense Intelligence Agency China Desk, Chair of the Joint Wargaming Council

Captain Anaximenes ‘Meany’ Papastopolous (USAF Reserve), CO, 68th AGRS

Charlene ‘Touchdown’ Dubois (USAF Reserve), F-22 Training Lead, Aggressor Incorporated

Fleet Air Arm Squadron Leader Jules ‘Two-Tone’ Hamilton, *HMS Queen Elizabeth*

CHINA

Lieutenant Asien ‘Shredder’ Chen, Pilot Officer, Ao Yin Fighter Squadron, PLA Navy carrier *Fujian*

Second Lieutenant Min ‘Maylin’ Sun, Pilot Officer, Ao Yin Fighter Squadron, PLA Navy carrier *Fujian*

Colonel Wang Wei, Air Wing Commander, PLA Navy carrier *Fujian*

Major Tan Yuanyuan, PLA Navy Intelligence, PLA Navy carrier *Fujian*

Vice Admiral Li Zhang, Fleet Commander, East Sea Fleet

Captain Xi ‘Casino’ Bo, Ao Yin Squadron Commander

Major General Huang Xueping, Deputy Director for the People’s Liberation Army Office for International Military Cooperation

Captain Yi Zhizhi, Commander of Water Dragon Commandos Detachment 23, PLA Navy

JAPAN

Takuya Kato, Marine Biologist, Japan Oceanographic Research Command

Captain Shinji Kagawa, Japan Self Defense Force Destroyer, *JS Haguro*

Empress Mitsuko Naishinnō, Head of the Imperial Family of Japan and Constitutional Head of State

Foreword

I hope you enjoy AGGRESSOR. Before we start, a word about the concept of a private military contractor, or PMC, providing military services to governments, which is central to this series.

This is not fiction; it is already a reality. You might be aware of the extensive use of PMCs to support Coalition Military and Intelligence security and ground operations in the Middle East during the Gulf, Afghanistan and Syrian wars. You might also be aware of the significant role played by the PMC Wagner Group in the Ukraine War. You may *not* have been aware that PMCs in the aviation field have provided Aggressor opponents (friendly aircraft playing the role of enemies in training and exercises) for militaries around the world, including the USAF and RAF. These contractors are equipped with some of the most modern fourth-generation fighter aircraft currently flying, including F-16 and F/A-18 fighters. The world's largest private air force is a US-based PMC that provides Aggressor services and flies three squadrons of F/A-18 Hornets.

The central idea in this novel, that a private contractor flying US-made fighter aircraft would be hired by Taiwan's government to help train its pilots, is not really a stretch.

As to the use of private Aggressor squadrons to support combat operations, that is a stretch, but only a small one in the context of future fiction. In 2022 the US Air Force confirmed that F-16s from the 18th Aggressor Squadron in Alaska had been used to fly armed interceptions of Russian aircraft off the coast of Alaska and advised it was normal practice for Aggressor squadrons to fill gaps in the USAF order of battle if active-duty units were temporarily deployed elsewhere.

So for this series, all I have done is combined the existing practice of using private military contractors to provide Aggressor services with the recently reported practice of Aggressor squadrons backing up active duty USAF squadrons where needed.

All it would take is a clause in a contract, and AGGRESSOR INC. would be a reality.



1. ‘Any landing you can walk away from ...’

Luke Air Base, Arizona, April 1, 2038

“Uh, Luke Approach, this is Aggressor flight one ninety-four. I have a slight situation ... will have to go around.”

Karen ‘Bunny’ O’Hare had more than a slight situation. What she had was a could-put-you-six-feet-under situation.

“Aggressor one ninety-four, Luke Approach, proceed southwest five clicks at 10,000 and hold over Aqua Caliente. You want to tell us about your ‘situation,’ pilot?”

Bunny checked the warning on her instrument panel and ran a quick diagnostic before she flipped the switch on her left that retracted and deployed her landing gear. Same procedure, same result.

“Yeah, Luke, I’ve got a ‘neuromorphic chip reboot’ kind of situation.” She pulled up a checklist on her screen as she was talking, but she also had it in her head and was halfway through it already. “Can’t get the nosewheel down. Need to dump fuel, and you probably want to wake up emergency services. This bird don’t skid pretty.”

It wasn’t her first chip failure in the P-99 Black Widow II—there was a reason pilots unofficially called it “Widowmaker”—but it *was* the most inconvenient. A result of the US Air Force Next Generation Fighter program, the Black Widow had set a record for the fastest non-wartime speed from approval to first production. It had been “test flown” digitally in 2021 before a physical prototype was approved, and Bunny was learning that being a Black Widow pilot also meant discovering the bugs that hadn’t been squashed along the way.

Especially the teething problems with its “state-of-the-art” neuromorphic central processing unit—a bunch of chips designed to emulate an organic brain, processing data in electrical bursts like synapses firing. When it worked, it could interpret data from the aircraft sensors and respond to it even if it hadn’t been specifically programmed to recognize a particular image, sound or sensor reading: like a human realizing that a crocodile doesn’t look quite like an alligator but that doesn’t mean you can pet it.

So it was great at recognizing unexpected threats. But it sometimes sucked at the simple things, like lowering a damn nosewheel, because when it hit a situation it couldn’t figure out, its default was to hand off processing to a legacy backup CPU while it rebooted—and that handoff was where things went sideways. Actions you were undertaking during the handoff got stalled or parked. Five years and 10 software upgrades later, and it was still happening.

“Alright, pilot, you can dump fuel beside Davis-Monthan Boneyard and get back to us to organize a low-level flyby so we can check if your nosewheel is maybe down and you’re just looking at a system error.”

Bunny had been through a neuromorphic CPU reboot before and she also had a feel for how the Black Widow flew with nose gear deployed, and it wasn't feeling right—but she flew to Tucson, dumped her fuel over unused ground at the air force aircraft storage facility, or “boneyard,” and then got cleared in for a fly-past of the tower at Luke.

Her cockpit canopy was just a narrow, stealth-preserving sliver of Perspex above her head, and she could see all the way around the aircraft using the virtual view from cameras mounted in the aircraft fuselage. One of those cameras was showing her nosewheel hatch still stubbornly closed, but as the tower slid past her starboard wing at a leisurely 400 knots, she banked her machine to give the controllers there a good long look too.

“Uh, yeah, that's bad news, pilot. Nosewheel has not deployed, but your rear wheels are down. How do you want to do this?”

“Patch me through to Aggressor CO Colonel Carlyle, will you?”

The Aggressor Inc. operations commander, Kevin ‘Salt’ Carlyle, had already been alerted and responded immediately. “On my way out to the field now,” he told Bunny. “What're you thinking?”

“I'm thinking I take the runway option, wheels down, glide it in nice and slow and then drop the nose right in front of a nice big fire truck.”

“The owner will prefer that to you bailing and making a lawn dart out of our new Black Widow,” Salt agreed. “But it's your call, O'Hare. You sure?”

“No. But I can't see a better option. Can you make that *two* big fire trucks, Salt?”

She circled again while the Luke controllers cleared traffic for her and got emergency services in place beside the runway.

“Aggressor one ninety-four cleared to land runway two one right, wind two six zero at one four. Good luck, ma'am,” the tower said as she came around and lined up on the runway now visible on the horizon.

The coming crash landing would start deceptively smoothly, with a near-stall-speed rear wheels touchdown.

She'd practiced nosewheel-out landings in the Black Widow in a simulator, and what made them tricky was the machine tended to skew randomly left or right on landing. That hadn't been a problem in a simulator, but in the real world, if she started skewing, there was a very real risk of sliding off the runway, a wheel strut buckling, a wing digging in and the whole 15-ton plane flipping onto its back.

She had a sudden flashback to another aircraft, another time. Weird, where had that come from? She pushed it aside.

CPU_N online, a line of text flashed on her helmet visor, announcing the neuromorphic CPU had returned to the party. *Re-engage CPU_N?* “Hell no,” Bunny said out loud. She was on her final approach. There was no time for another unexpected event. “You've caused enough trouble, buddy.” She ignored the prompt.

As she trimmed her machine, checked the rear wheels were down and locked and adjusted her line for the slight crosswind, noting with probably misplaced relief the flashing lights of emergency vehicles beside it, all she could think about was the hundred ways this could end badly. She concentrated on the emergency landing checklist in front of her on a screen, letting it push thoughts of disaster out of her

mind. And then she was over the runway and her wheels hit the tarmac and she stopped thinking completely.

Touchdown ... rear wheels down ... speed 140 knots ... 135 ... 130 ... half the runway gone ... brakes ... gently ... keep the nose UP ...

Bunny pitched forward as the nose of the Black Widow slammed into the ground, about as gently as if she'd been catapulted through the windscreen of a car in a head-on crash. Her harness bit into her shoulders, crushing her chest and knocking the wind out of her. She heard tearing, screeching metal, and sure enough, the machine swung first left, then radically right, and the entire plane was skidding sideways down the runway. Controls useless now, she dropped her hands to the ejection handle between her legs, ready to heave on it if the machine showed the slightest sign that it was going to flip.

The rear wheel struts held. She heard tires blow on her left, the whole aircraft heeled over to port, and the sound of metal on tarmac intensified as the rim of the rear wheel scraped across the runway, adding its protesting scream to the surrounding noise.

But it *held*.

Just as the machine was about to leave the runway, it ran out of momentum and, with a last sideways shudder, came to a stop and rocked to a standstill, port wingtip just inches off the ground.

The normal exit was through a hatch in the floor, but Bunny had her harness off and punched the emergency canopy release, not waiting for the mechanism to lift the canopy out of the way. It opened at the front, which meant it started lifting from behind her and she was up in her seat, back against the armored acrylic and shoving hard. When it had opened enough for her to squeeze through, she clambered out on the port side and slid down the canted wing like a two-year-old on a playground slide. She smelled smoke and hit the ground running, and only when she was a good 50 feet away did she stop, turn around and start pulling off her helmet.

A fire truck was moving in cautiously from about 50 yards away, another right behind it, and an ambulance behind them. She crouched down, panting.

The smoke was coming from her shredded starboard tires. But she couldn't see any flame, and while the nose of the Black Widow was a scarred mess, no flame or smoke was coming from up front. The Widow was a big machine, more missile truck than dog fighter, more like the B-21 Raider it had borrowed so much of its design from than its predecessors the F-22 and F-35. If anything, it looked like a big, fat, tailless paper plane, its smooth, downwardly-curved triangular shape disturbed only by the bumps housing its two engines and the rectangular slit of the cockpit canopy.

Dodged another bullet, O'Hare, she told herself, wiping sweat from her face. She stood, hands on hips, looking at her machine. Airframe could be bent, wheel strut's just a stump, but definitely salvageable. At least they'll have an easier time working out what went wrong than if I'd climbed out at 5,000 feet and buried her in a state forest.

The ambulance crunched to a halt on gravel just behind her and she turned.

A paramedic came jogging up to her. "How you doing, ma'am?" he asked in a cowboy drawl.

Bunny rolled her shoulders. "Pretty good. Just a few bruised ribs. You're going to tell me I need to get checked anyway."

He smiled. "Not your first crash landing, Lieutenant?"

Bunny turned and surveyed the bent nose section of the Black Widow ruefully. “Any landing you can walk away from is a good one, right?”

Colonel ‘Salt’ Carlyle walked into the sick bay as she was getting checked over by a medic.

“Breathe in ...” the medic told her. Actually, his first comment as she had stripped off her flight suit and stood before him in briefs, socks and a cotton vest was, “Wow. That’s a lot of ink.”

“That’s a lot of ink, *ma’am*,” Bunny had chided him.

But she was used to that reaction from people seeing her uncovered for the first time. There was very little real estate on Bunny’s body that didn’t have some sort of tattoo on it. Every one of them was a memento of something she didn’t want to forget, whether a person or a place, a victory or a defeat. And there had been plenty of all of that in her short life.

“Sorry, *ma’am*.” He’d put his stethoscope in his ears and approached. “Uh, alright, please breathe in.”

Bunny took a big breath, trying not to wince.

“... and out.”

She let the breath go and stifled a cough she just knew was going to hurt. You didn’t decelerate from 140 knots to zero inside a few seconds without a *few* bruises. But that was better than what might have happened to her if she’d had to punch out of the machine at altitude: concussion, spinal compression, contusions or fractures from landing in a tree ...

“Why is it always you, O’Hare?” Salt asked, walking up beside the gurney she was sitting on as he shook his head.

“Not bad, thanks, Salt. Yeah, that *was* an amazing landing, thank you.”

“I can see you didn’t bruise your ego. Good news is we’re insured for noncombat damage to our inventory.” He coughed. “Uh, but also ... I’m glad you got out of it in one piece.”

The medic asked Bunny to lift her arms above her head and moved around behind her to check her back, lifting her tank top from behind and running his stethoscope across her back as she breathed in and out. Bunny gave Salt moon eyes. “Aw. I think that’s about the nicest thing you ever said to me.”

“Glad from a company, not a personal point of view. I’ve got a job for you,” he said. Then checked himself. “I’m doing it again, aren’t I?”

Bunny gave him a fake smile. “The thing where you ignore the person on fire in front of you and say what you were going to say anyway instead of looking for a fire hose? That thing?” The banter was an attempt to cover her basic disdain for Aggressor Inc.’s pedantic, punctilious and self-promoting operational commander.

“You’re right. Sorry. What happened? Hydraulic failure?”

“Neuromorphic chip reboot,” she said, rolling a shoulder to test it and wincing. “There’s a reason Aggressor Inc. got a great deal on those Block 1A Widowmakers, Salt.”

“They’ve had the same software updates as Air Force Block 2 Widows,” Salt said defensively. “The airframes have had a bunch more hours is all. Besides, if your situation was caused by a neuromorphic chip reboot, it’s still rare.”

“It’s the *second* time it’s happened to me.”

“So maybe we need to look at the pilot instead of the airplane, O’Hare.”

Bunny let that one hang there. The look she gave him did all the talking. “I have a theory if you want to hear it.”

“All ears,” he said, in a tone that implied he was anything but.

“Both times the failure happened, I was on approach or in the pattern. I think ground radar is messing with the chip.”

“Two data points don’t make a proof.”

She sighed and turned to the medic. “I think we’re just about done. Aren’t we?”

The medic straightened and came around in front of her again. He lowered the stethoscope and took out a pencil light, shining it first in one eye, then the other. “Now we’re done. Looks like you got some bad bruising is all, but you need X-rays to be sure you didn’t crack any ribs and probably a CT scan to check for spinal injury. I’ll book you in.”

“Right.”

The medic nodded, picking up a chart from the gurney and reading off a page. “And in the meantime you call us if you experience any neck pain or stiffness, dizziness or confusion, headache at the base of your skull, muscle spasms in the back, arms or legs ... numbness or tingling in the arms and legs, radiating or stabbing pain down the arms and legs ...” He looked up. “Loss of mobility or limited sensation, such as the ability to feel heat or cold ...”

Bunny blinked at him and gave him her broadest Australian accent. “Mate, you just described the morning after a good night out, but I will let you know.” As the medic left, Salt handed Bunny her T-shirt, and she pulled it on and glared at him. “So what’s this new gig?”

Salt closed the door behind the medic, then leaned back against the wall.

“You up to date on the Taiwan situation?”

She looked at him warily. “The situation where China issued Taiwan with a reunification ultimatum and Taiwan said screw you, so now China has the island blockaded tighter than a nunnery with Vikings at the door, trying to starve it into submission?”

“That was a coarse but accurate summary, and yes. That situation. Or more particularly, the Aggressor Inc. Taiwan situation.”

“Of course. And now I am morbidly curious. What is the new gig?” Aggressor Inc. was a small and close-knit unit. So she knew all about the team trapped on Taiwan by the Chinese blockade. They’d won a contract a year earlier to provide F-22 Aggressor opponents to help train Taiwan’s fourth-generation non-stealth fighter pilots in how to survive against the fifth-generation stealth opponents like the ones China would throw at them.

“Chicken and egg. I can’t tell you the finer details until you sign a nondisclosure,” he said. “But it’s a straightforward job. Just another day at the office for you.” His slight smile told her it wasn’t. He was not in the habit of offering Bunny the choice jobs.

Bunny scratched the platinum stubble on her head. “Taiwan. It’s never somewhere nice and peaceful, is it? Why don’t you go and get us a contract to train the New Zealand Air Force, Salt? Six months zooming around the Land of the Long White Cloud *not* worried about getting our asses shot down. How about that for a great idea?”

“We train fighter pilots, O’Hare. Does New Zealand even have an air force?”

“They don’t need one, because they are friends with everyone. Unlike Taiwan, which is at war with the most powerful military in the region.”

“Most powerful?” Salt raised his eyebrows. “You mean second most powerful, right?”

“No, I know what I said,” Bunny said, climbing down from the gurney. “I said ‘region.’ So everyone else turned you down already, right?”

He balked. “Not exactly. You are our UCAV Training Lead, and there’s a heavy UCAV angle to this one ...”

She wasn’t buying it. Yes, she was Aggressor Inc.’s UCAV, or Uncrewed Combat Aerial Vehicle, training lead. But while Salt tried to keep his professional and personal opinions separate, he had a poorly disguised dislike for Bunny O’Hare, which ranged from her preferred attire (torn) to choice of jewelry (piercing), taste in music (heavy rock) and general attitude to authority (deficient). She would not be his first choice for this sort of mission. It was one reason she was still in Arizona and not on Taiwan already with Salt’s preferred A-Team. For which she had been kind of glad until now. “Yeah, nah, the others turned you down.”

He shrugged. “You sign the nondisclosure agreement; I’ll brief you and you can decide.”

Bunny O’Hare had many flaws, one of which was a tendency to say yes quickly to dubious offers that she would then regret at her leisure. “Send me the NDA,” she said. “I’ll look at it when I get out of here.” She knew enough to know this was not a job she should rush into. China was pretty upset that six former USAF F-22 fighters were based on the rebel island for “training purposes,” but since Aggressor Inc. was a private commercial entity registered in the Bahamas, all of China’s protests to the US government had fallen on deaf ears because government officials just shrugged and said “nothing to do with us.” Higher-level political realities had overtaken the protests. Since the Chinese ultimatum giving Taiwan’s parliament three months to vote in favor of reunification or “face the consequences” had lapsed, China had thrown a ring of steel around Taiwan, allowing no commercial shipping or aircraft through. Chinese aircraft patrolled the skies just outside the 40-mile range of US-made Patriot missiles, and dozens of Chinese warships circled the island, stopping and inspecting every ship from the smallest fishing vessel to the largest freighter.

For nearly two months, it had declared the international waters of the Taiwan Strait a “military security zone,” warning off and intercepting international shipping trying to transit the Strait. The US had forced passage through the Strait several times with ships of its Indo-Pacific fleet, but it had stopped short of trying to break the Chinese blockade and dock at Taiwanese ports or fly aircraft in. So the Aggressor Inc. aircraft and personnel on the island were trapped too. China had made it clear any aircraft trying to run its blockade, either inbound or outbound, would be intercepted and risk being shot down.

Salt reached for his phone. “No time like the present. I got the NDA right here.”

While O’Hare was busy crash landing, Aggressor Inc. had already hit “send” on a press release announcing a new contract with the Republic of China Taiwan Government. While it was light on specifics, it contained enough detail to provoke a reaction on both sides of the Pacific Ocean.

Aggressor Incorporated, the Arizona-based military aviation training services provider, is pleased to announce a new \$175 million contract with the Government of Taiwan. After intensive evaluation by the ROCTAF, Aggressor Inc. has been successful in winning a two-year extension of its existing contract to provide aircraft, pilots and related services to Taiwan.

The aircraft included in the contract are Aggressor Inc.’s fleet of USAF surplus fifth-generation F-22 fighters and newly leased Black Widow 2 pursuit aircraft.

While the announcement pleased Aggressor Inc. shareholders, not everyone who read it was quite as delighted. Inside the Pentagon, Michael Chase, deputy assistant secretary of defense for China, cursed and reread the paragraph.

He was alone in his office and swore out loud. “Who in the *gibbering depths of hell* authorized this press release?” he asked the walls around him. Chase wasn’t up to date on every little private defense contractor with its hooks in the defense pie, but he was most definitely aware of Aggressor Inc. since it had already been the subject of several irate calls from his Chinese counterpart because of its inconvenient presence on Taiwan. His cell phone was next to the laptop on his desk. He was willing to bet that in a few hours, when China woke up, it would run hot.

He was wrong. Fifteen minutes later, the laptop chimed with a video call and he answered. The uniformed army soldier on the other side of the screen spoke without preamble. “Call for you on the U.S.-PRC Defense Link, sir. Major General Huang Xueping.”

Chase looked at his watch and wiped a hand across his face. The press release had been timed for a NY stock exchange audience, so it had gone out at 11 a.m. East Coast time. It was now 2 a.m. in Beijing. This meant that the Chinese officer on the other end of the call—the deputy director for the People’s Liberation Army Office for International Military Cooperation—had probably been woken up to be presented with the press release. That he was calling Chase now instead of waiting for the morning was a sign the coming call would not be a friendly one.

The U.S.-PRC Defense Link had started its existence as the U.S.-PRC Defense Telephone Link, and had been set up by both countries after an incident in the South China Sea where a Chinese fighter collided with a US early-warning aircraft and the Chinese pilot was killed, while the US aircraft had to make an emergency landing on a Chinese island and its crew was imprisoned. Neither side had been able quickly to contact the other as the incident unfolded, so the communications link had been established to provide a channel for “resolving military misunderstandings.”

In Michael Chase’s experience, it had become a bullhorn down which the Chinese general staff vented constant outrage and hollow warnings, and as the US defense community representative, he gave meaningless assurances and restated public government positions. It had, however, proven its value the

few times it had been used during actual military incidents—most recently during hostilities between China and the Philippines over a disputed island, in which US forces became embroiled. That particular fracas had cost Chase several sleepless nights, and he'd spent many hours on the line with his counterpart, General Huang, before it had been settled.

Chase sighed and straightened his tie. One thing he had learned over recent months, no matter what the time of day or night, General Huang always appeared on camera as though he had just showered, shaved and dressed in a newly tailored uniform. Damn him. He opened his laptop and slapped his cheeks, trying to shake off his pre-lunch blood sugar low. Then he tapped the icon on the screen that opened the video link. "Hello, General. It's early for you, so this must be serious."

The man on the other side of the screen was young for a senior officer in the PLA. In his early 50s, he had thick black hair, parted on the right, a high forehead and large glasses, with an overbite that made it appear he was smiling: a rare occurrence in his calls with Chase.

"Assistant Secretary Chase, a disturbing notice has just come to my attention," the General said.

And to mine, Chase thought, *if this is about what I think it is*. "And what is that, General?"

"That the US government intends to extend the presence of its fighter aircraft on the Chinese territory of Taiwan."

Chase ran his eye over the press release again. It said nothing about the US government. "I'm sorry, General, I'm not following."

"The American F-22s on Taiwan ..."

"The *privately owned* F-22s on Taiwan, you mean."

"Do not dissemble, Mr. Chase. Your government has just announced these aircraft will remain on Taiwan beyond the life of their current contract. By extending their presence on the island, you are trying to achieve a de-facto military presence on Taiwan, which you believe will complicate the political situation for China."

In principle, what the Chinese officer was saying made perfect sense. There was a reason that diplomatic efforts to pull the Aggressor Inc. aircraft out of besieged Taiwan were not moving quickly. And of course, until he was briefed to do otherwise, Chase had to deny that.

"That was a private company press release, General, not a notice from the government of this country. I know this is a hard concept for a Chinese military official to grasp, but the US government is *not* involved here. I have no more information than you do about the commercial arrangements between this company and the government of Taiwan." That much at least was true. "This is a private contractor, providing training services as part of ..." Chase did his best to hold some sort of line, but Huang interrupted.

"This is a US government contractor!" Huang said. "Do not play shell games with me, Mr. Chase. This company works for your government. Whatever it does is sanctioned by you. This is a dangerous provocation, and this 'contract' must be canceled! Those aircraft must be removed from that island."

Chase scanned the press release again. "I am a Pentagon official, General," Chase said. "You are talking about a private commercial arrangement. Perhaps you should take up your protest with the company itself, or with our State Department. I'm not sure a political protest is the correct use of this operational link, or our relationship."

Perhaps it was the early hour in China, or pressures on him of which Chase wasn't aware, but Huang slapped the table in front of him with uncharacteristic anger. "Mr. Chase! China has declared a naval and air defense zone covering all of Taiwan. I have already warned you that China will *not* allow the US to sell any new weapons systems to the rebels or base any US military personnel or assets on that island. For 'training' purposes or otherwise!"

"And I can only repeat, General," Chase replied calmly, "that the US government does not recognize your illegal 'air and sea defense zone.' We reserve our right peacefully to transit international waters and fly in international airspace, or with its permission, the airspace of Taiwan. Plus, this is a private commercial arrangement, not a US government initiative." He was repeating himself. It was time to cut the call. "But I will look into the matter and convey your concerns."

"Convey *this*, Mr. Chase," Huang said. "This provocation will not be allowed to stand. If the US insists on going through with it, China's military will make a legitimate and necessary response using all the means at our disposal."

Chase paused, the General's words hanging in the air between them. Chase understood now why China was using the military deconfliction link for its protest. Unlike Chase, they had clearly been forewarned about negotiations between Taipei and Aggressor Inc., and the press release in front of him merely confirmed what they already knew. They had already prepared a response, and it was being delivered to Chase now. Via the military deconfliction hotline, which meant it was more than an expression of diplomatic outrage: it was a military threat. In these situations, the line he had been ordered to convey by the Secretary of Defense was clear. "The US government has no desire for conflict with China, General, but neither do we fear it. Your concerns are noted and will be passed along. Is there anything else?"

"No. Take this warning *seriously*, Mr. Chase. Good night."

Oh, Chase planned to take it very seriously, but perhaps not as the Chinese General intended. He picked up his phone and called an aide. "Get me the Deputy Under Secretary of the Air Force for International Affairs. I want a full brief on this new Aggressor squadron contract with Taiwan," he said, then changed his mind. "No, wait on that. First, find out who the hell the CEO of 'Aggressor Inc.' is." He read the contact information at the bottom of the press release. "They're based at Luke AFB in Arizona; details are on that press release you sent through. And when you get him or her on the line, tell them I am not a happy man and they better have a change of underwear ready before we speak."