

The Evolutionary War

by

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Foreword

This book was obviously inspired by my first book, *Almost Eternity*. I skipped ten years between books to let the technology reach a more futuristic state.

Luc is an intriguing character for me. If I had his photographic brain and were centuries old, I would be just like him. I like kid toys, man toys and little children, just like him. I play the sax too.

However, my favorite part of Luc is his humanity. He gets surprised, he philosophizes, he cries, he gets angry, he gets sad, he's honest and he cares more for everyone else than himself. All in all, my type of super hero.

So, I dedicate this book to the human weaknesses and strengths in all of us -- particularly, the three most important that are both a weakness and strength at the same time, Love, Faith and Hope.

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A New Beginning

77 BC Hyeres, Roman Empire (France)

The man stood quietly looking out at the sea far below. He thought, “Peace. A few minutes of blessed peace at last.”

It was late afternoon and time to stop for the night. He spoke, “Hectus, make camp here. Send four wagons into town and procure two days provisions. Have my tents put up here looking out at the sea.”

Twenty minutes later his small compound was set up with a nice fire going. If he could keep the constant stream of men who wanted to talk to him at bay for a little longer, perhaps he could actually enjoy this beautiful place. There was a one hundred and twenty foot drop to the small beach and sea. The limestone cliffs held this large stretch of seaside meadow intact and stable.

He had been on the move with his men for three months. They were returning to Rome after trying to put down a rebellion in Spain. The leader, Setorius, had held out for seven years and even he, Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus, General Pompeii, was not able to crush the rebels, but he managed to delay any progress they might make. There were rumors of dissension amongst the Spanish assembly about Setorius’s leadership, so the problem may just take care of itself. He had bigger things to worry about now with Julius in Rome. Julius was consolidating his stranglehold on the government. It had fallen on Pompeii’s shoulders to stop him. The Senate had made an urgent appeal to Pompeii for help. The problem was that he and Julius were good friends. And the many thousands of men at their commands had brothers and relatives on the other side. None of them wanted a bloody fight between brother Romans. They all worried that it was now inevitable.

Hectus wandered by the front of the general’s open tent where he was reclining and said, “There is fresh fish for your table tonight, sir. It will be ready in an hour.” He hesitated and then said, “There are eight of your commanders wanting to see you.”

“Okay, send them in.” These men were good soldiers but liked to complain to anyone that would listen.

Pompeii was surprised when all eight showed up together. “All at once? I thought it was one at a time, as usual. What’s on your minds?”

One man started to talk and it was clearly prearranged. “Sir, we want to know what will become of us in Rome in four days when we arrive. Are we really going to have to fight Julius’s men?”

“It is very likely. The Senate is pressing me very hard. They think my popularity and success will make Julius give up like a whipped puppy. We all know that it will be quite the opposite.”

“He has twice the number of men as we do and many are our friends and even family.”

“The Senate has promised more men... I simply do not know what will happen when we arrive.”

The men glanced at one another and shared a planned look. The designated speaker gave the prearranged speech, “General, we are behind you as always. We would ask you but one thing: before you give the command to fight our brother Roman soldiers, give pause and consider what we have voiced.”

“You men border on insubordination. If any one of you had told me this in private, I would have listened to these words, as I would counsel from an old friend. All of you at once is another thing altogether. I have heard your thoughts and I will not forget them. This veiled mutiny will never be tolerated again and we shall never speak of it again. Go, get out of my sight.” He totally understood their position and had little else on his mind. He had respond to them harshly to maintain decorum and discipline. He was worried about one of them, however. Riolett was standing to the right and was fuming when Pompeii chastised them. Pompeii noticed Riolett’s body language; his internal stress was displayed in his bulging veins and rapid heartbeat. Pompeii even caught the smell of anger coming from him as he left. He would watch Riolett closely for the next few days.

His aide, Hectus, peeked around the opening in the tent and checked to see if it was okay for him to come in. Good man. Pompeii waved him in. Hectus cleared his throat and said, “Sir, the meal is ready, shall I set it up for you?”

“No. Set up a table for two right there on the edge of the cliff and please dine with me. Have my guards prevent anyone from seeing us eating together. We would not want them to get the wrong impression. A general eating with his aide! Most unheard of! Go, man. Let’s dine like two old friends at the beach vacationing.” Hectus ran off and had everything set up in five minutes. Pompeii helped with the last of the setup and they enjoyed a fine meal of grilled fish, mussels and fresh local fruits. They split a bottle of wine and Hectus’s tongue got looser as the meal progressed.

“Your commanders are not pleased at the possibility of what awaits us in Rome, are they?”

“Hectus, you’ve been eavesdropping.” Pompeii was making a joke and Hectus knew it. Hectus heard everything and shared it all with Pompeii eventually. He went on for half an hour with the latest gossip and told Pompeii nothing he did not already know. But, it was nice to have his thoughts verified. With dinner long over and the conversation dropping off, they said goodnight and Hectus left him alone on the cliff. The moon had arisen at three-quarters full and there was a quiet breeze to break the heat of the day.

Pompeii heard slow footfalls coming, turned in time to see Riolett stop his sneaky pace and burst into a full running charge at him with daggers in both hands. Riolett was a big man and Pompeii could not avoid the long reach as he dove out of his path. The knife in Riolett’s right hand caught Pompeii’s shirt and would have stabbed deep into his lung if not for the iron skin Pompeii was born with. But, Riolett had swept Pompeii in an arc and the general found himself flying off the cliff to the rocky beach below. He bounced off a couple big rocks and saw Riolett watching him fall. Pompeii finally toppled far enough away from the cliff that he ended

up in the surf about ten feet out. Since Riolett was watching, Pompeii played dead and began to float out with the tide. He was in deep enough water so that when he went under the surface he could not be seen. It was night, after all.

Pompeii swam up the beach and came ashore about a quarter mile to the east. He found a path quickly and climbed up the rocks to the road above. By the time he walked to the camp, he was dry. The guards let him pass when they recognized him. He walked to his tents and surveyed the area from the shadows.

All eight of the captains were gathered around a table with Riolett standing at the end. His attacker had taken command. He found Hectus cowering in one of the food tents fretting away. He saw Pompeii and the signal to be quiet as he approached him. Hectus whispered, "Riolett claims you started a fight with him and fell over the cliff. They are talking about killing me and the other aides who are loyal to you. They called for your guards and then I came in here to hide. Thank the gods you are alive. We are saved."

"Yes, I am very much alive. Time for me to end this mutiny, permanently." Pompeii was not quiet anymore and told Hectus to get the soldier in command of his guards.

Pompeii left the food tent and walked around the corner of his tents to confront the men. Riolett looked like he had seen a ghost. "You are dead. I saw you fall and hit the rocks."

"Was that after you stabbed me with a dagger or when you threw me off the cliff?" The others stood and two drew swords. They did not hesitate and pointed them at Riolett.

Another man said, "General, I thought his story was not truthful." Pompeii had walked right up to Riolett who was still in shock to see his victim standing in front of him. Pompeii said nothing, pulled out a wrist knife, and stabbed Riolett with one quick move. Riolett fell into his arms and Pompeii walked him over to the edge of the cliff. He let Riolett fall backwards into the air. His guards, Hectus and many others had gathered around as he turned to the remaining seven commanders.

"Anyone else want to take my job?" They all cowered and said different words all at once indicating their undying loyalty. Go figure.

Pompeii ordered two of the men that he was sure he could trust to go to Riolett's troops and kill his top staff. They were to divide Riolett's men among the seven remaining battalions. Finally, the whole business was concluded and he was alone except for his guards positioned off in the shadows.

Pompeii walked to the cliff and looked out at the sea. As always, the sea did not pay any mind to the drama on the cliffs above. So much for peace.

Today Hyeres, France

Ten years ago, he was immortal and had lived on earth for more than six thousand years. Recently, the very

hand of God blessed him with mortality and gave him a last name befitting with the times, Champion. He began existence as Raguel, an archangel, and was sent on a mission to protect humanity. The memories of his time with God were taken away and he was reborn as a human, Lucasiah, fifth son of Seth, the third son of Adam, the first man.

Lucasiah Champion was the name he went by, or Lucas or Luc. He no longer needed the alter ego aliases he had used for centuries to protect the secret of his immortality. His body felt about thirty years old and he now enjoyed aging as the rest of the world does. He was blessed with the best friends anyone could have and a wonderful wife, Angela. She and Luc had been living in France for eight years. They had twin boys, Michael and Harry, who were now ten years old. Luc traveled often and was busier than ever. After his transformation, he began to need sleep, food and water -- a big adjustment after being invulnerable. The strangest things were feeling pain for the first time and getting sick. Oh, and he could get drunk. He still hadn't gotten the hang of that. One glass of wine and he was out.

Over his long life, Luc amassed a fortune and was easily the richest man on the planet. He used to manipulate different identities to protect his wealth. Now, he was just another mega rich person. He still tried to stay unknown and hidden, but his name was appearing on too many corporate legal documents to keep him a total secret.

Angela made Luc get rid of the ultra-light aircrafts and motorcycles. "They are too dangerous and you have a family that needs you now. You are not indestructible anymore... blah, blah, blah..." And she was right, of course. Luc broke his arm working out with Harry four years ago and it was horrible. He felt helpless.

But, some good came of it. He started another company that designed a quarter-inch thick exoskeleton system with an artificial intelligence computer control. It protected the broken bone and allowed the patient stay mobile. It learned how the wearer of the device moved by monitoring a good limb and moved just as if the broken limb was never damaged. Healing time was increased by thirty-five percent on average. With that success, Luc took the idea one step further and designed a version that is not for broken bones at all. The device multiplies force and makes the wearer five to seven times as strong depending on size and strength. The invention was possibly due to the breakthroughs in materials. Gunther's soldiers were using the prototypes right now. Gunther was Luc's Chief Security Officer who commanded a private army of highly trained and skilled soldiers that Luc put together years ago.

Luc had a whole network of labs staffed by over two thousand scientists and support personnel working on nothing but material innovation. That one discipline was working miracles and making things possible that were not achievable just four years earlier. The Independence was a manufacturing plant located in space in parallel orbit with the old International Space Station. The plant was used to manufacture a diamond filament that was as thin as a spider's web with tensile strength two hundred times that of the best steel filament. In other words, a

string woven with forty strands, about the size of a thick thread, could lift one ton. A ten-mile roll of it was about the size of a roll of toilet paper and weighed about ten ounces. The filament made into a cloth and with the right hardening process was two hundred times stronger than titanium and fifty times lighter.

Diamond is composed of carbon atoms connected together in a special pattern by sharing (covalent) electrons. This pattern can only be achieved under extraordinary circumstances of great heat and pressure over a long time in the natural world. The energy used makes the bond much stronger than other easily combined materials. The new material goes through a process of applying the energy equivalent to that of six times the surface of the sun, which allows it to be reconfigured into a molecular strand only two atoms wide. The two-atom strand is run through the process again with other two-atom strands to build the strings of atoms to bond as well. At this point, the bonding is something like welding but at the atomic level. The process continues until a precise diameter equal to upholstery thread is reached for optimum strength.

Luc named the diamond filament Elysium. The invention revolutionized transportation industries. The old metal space planes were retired and replaced with crafts using Elysium as structural parts and skin. The material could withstand tremendous heat, so porcelain heat shield tiles were no longer necessary. Luc had thirty-eight planes in operation making round trips into space three times a day.

This breakthrough alone sped up Luc's dream of creating the Independence space station by years. The station he envisioned ten years ago was now in reality four times as big, almost eight hundred yards in diameter, with three concentric wheels. The station was about fifty percent complete with one working ring containing sixteen docking stations. Over twenty-five hundred people lived and worked there. Angela, the boys and Luc would make their first family trip to the station next week. Luc had been there twenty-two times so far and loved it. If he had a motto, it would be Dream Big.

Luc's home was built on a cliff in the Riviera about sixty miles southwest of Cannes near Hyeres, a lovely resort city of about sixty thousand. His home overlooked the sea one hundred twenty feet below. The cliff rocks were solid limestone and perfect for what he had in mind. He purchased a three thousand square foot home, had it renovated with all the latest technology and dug tunnels beneath the house toward the cliff. That is where he built their real home thirty feet below the surface house. Each room had windows and balconies overlooking the Mediterranean Sea, camouflaged by plants and paint that made them hard to spot from the sea or beach below.

Luc also dug out a huge five thousand square foot complex connected to the subterranean home by a straight tunnel. It housed his personal control room and was maintained remotely by Sully's team. The coolest thing about it was the holographic projection area about fifty square feet, where all his meetings were held with remote images of everyone. He and his team had aged ten years with the exception of the loss of two of his closest friends four years ago. Megan Reed, his Special Projects Officer, and had been with Luc for twenty-six years. He missed her a lot and often. Ruth Hanson, his psychiatrist and dear friend, had only been in on Luc's

secret for six years. He lost them both to cancers. They died two weeks apart despite the best medical care money could buy. Luc had foundations set up in honor of both women and now both forms of the cancers that took them were close to having cures -- much in part due to the research going on at the undersea facilities working in conjunction with a team of scientists hunting medicines in the Amazon.

Angela took over most of the special project work that Megan was responsible for, and the mental health of Luc and his closest friends was handled by outside professionals. Harry and his wife of nine years, Roberta, lived with Luc and Angela in the surface house and were godparents to Michael and little Harry. Harry still acted as Luc's executive secretary and had been with him for thirty-eight years. He was Luc's best friend. Roberta had been introduced to Harry at Angela and Luc's wedding.

Luc's other loyal friends included John Dawkins, the chief executive officer of his company, Gunther Adams, his chief security officer, "Sully" Sullivan, his chief information officer, Mary Jo Smyth his chief financial officer, and Duncan Freeborn, former Secretary of State. It was hard to come up with a title for Duncan, but they finally settled on special liaison officer.

Teresa, Luc's great great great great great great great granddaughter, now sixty-four, was struck by severe debilitating arthritis. She and her husband resided in the Independence space station. The station spins creating artificial gravity on the outside of the outer ring the same as on Earth. Teresa spends her time within smaller inner ring which only has half gravity and she functions there comfortably.

John was doing well. Luc had forced him to hire three vice presidents, and John was mentoring them into taking over his work when he finally cuts back -- which could be a long time with the advances they were making in medicine. John had been receiving a form of gene therapy that was pretty much stopping his aging process. The project was classified Top Secret and had been since it began five years earlier.

Gunther was very busy keeping the world balanced with Luc's personal military. That was getting harder every day, thanks to the Eastern Federation created when China peacefully took over territory from Japan to India seven years ago. Luc could not stop the development even with his wealth and power. The process had been complicated and mostly accomplished with the buying of the nations. The West retaliated of sorts by merging countries. Most of the Americas joined the United States. Canada came in first with thirteen states. Mexico joined directly after with thirty-two states. South America and all the Caribbean countries were still being added state by state. As of now, there were one hundred thirteen states comprising the United States. The European Union was solid. The African continent was down to eleven countries but firming up nicely. Russia stood alone and was isolating itself again. The Middle East was a mess as usual. The Antarctic still belonged to no one -- with the exception of Luc who had a secret submarine base there.

Mary Jo and Sully were doing better than ever. Sully was solely responsible for keeping the data network secure. He took over all the R&D facilities that worked on technology projects for Luc. Most had DARPA

contracts and that gave him access to everything new. Sully even had secret connections into the Eastern Federation's advanced 'toy shop', as he called it. Mary Jo had managed to keep the world markets stable despite Luc and his materials work. When the diamond filament was manufactured, the bottom fell out of the diamond and precious gem markets. Many fortunes were lost that year. The team was hiding the fact they could synthesize gold now and Mary Jo was working to prepare the world for that huge transition. It was only a question of time and planning for it was her secret priority.

Angela had given up her schooling without finishing her bachelor's degree. She quit shortly after she and Luc were married. However, her work in management and environmental science gave her the equivalent of two PhDs. She received her education by connecting personally one on one with her informal teachers every day. Angela had a team of project people to help her and they trained her as well with discussions on everything. Luc knew this because he gave her at least two hours a day of lectures at her request. She also talked with the scientists in the underwater labs a lot, Mary Jo several times a week, and Tsubasa Saitou, Luc's good friend the Japanese astronomer. Angela could speak French and Spanish fluently and was working on Japanese. She was very, very smart and getting scary smarter every day. She homeschooled Michael and Harry with a lot of help from Harry, Roberta and the online resources that were scheduled for lessons almost every day.

United Undersea States

It was spring and the Mediterranean weather was perfect. Luc and his family enjoyed breakfast on their large main balcony, then Harry and Luc headed to the gym to work out together. They stopped sparring years ago and stuck to machines now. Luc swam a lot in a fifteen by fifteen foot stationary pool, which would be his workout that day. It was weird now for Luc to experience sore muscles after a workout. Ah, the life of a human.

Swimming is a solitary sport, with no scenery or input unless music is piped in music, and there is no team camaraderie. However, for Luc, it was time to think, pure and simple. He had a lot on his mind. Things were percolating out there and there were bad things. He had read that the human race had doubled its knowledge in twenty years spurts, but the next doubling would be in sixteen years; spurts would be shorter and shorter all the time. What were humans doing with that data? They were changing things and changing them quickly. Change has always been the conundrum of humans. They wanted to improve things but, at the same time, they wanted things to remain the same to stay inside their comfort zones. How do you reconcile that dichotomy? The answer was straightforward -- you didn't. Change would continue at its increasing pace and those not adapting would be left out of the decision-making. They would grumble their way along and be miserable. Luc felt that the vast majority would be oblivious. As long as they had whatever makes them happy, be it something simple like television, beer, church, work, or air conditioning, the world would not hear a peep from them.

There were incredible changes happening and Luc and his companies were a big part of those changes. Space travel was almost common now. Living on the ocean floor was a reality for over eighteen thousand people. Medical breakthroughs were helping people live longer and healthier. Poverty levels were down across the board. People traveling to another continent by air increased by four hundred percent in the last twelve months with no expectation of the trend slowing. These were the public and obvious things considered to be progress by most people.

But there were some very exciting and top-secret things going on behind the public's purview. Luc had a facility in the Rocky Mountains where a group of scientists thought they were close to bending time and breaking the speed of light. Another group in Germany had already digitized matter, sent it around the world and reconstructed it perfectly. Granted, it was only a string of twenty molecules, but was a serious breakthrough, nonetheless. There was another team in Sydney worth mentioning. The Sydney team consisted of one college professor and some seriously smart students. They created new animals using genetic algorithms. Luc had seen the menagerie that included a twelve-inch tall horse proportionally matched a full-sized horse and a dog with perfect leopard spots. When Luc saw all these new creatures, he clamped a security lid on the project as fast as he could. Then he added several oversight teams to monitor the morality of what they were creating.

He also hired all the students to different team facilities, slowly separating their team. This was some scary stuff that brought the usual possibilities of being weaponized somehow.

In the middle of his swim, Luc was beeped by Gunther on his internal communication unit. He stopped the thrusters in the pool so he could stand and take the call. Gunther said, "I was watching you on the pool video feed to wait until you were done, but you just kept going and going. I finally had to interrupt. There are fifteen people waiting on you. Jonas needs to talk to us." Jonas Prescott was the manager of the underwater labs. Luc dried off, changed and communicated to Angela and Harry that they were needed in the communications room immediately.

A few minutes later, the team members were connected and Jonas kicked off the conversation with pleasantries, but got down to business quickly. "The mayors of the complexes have just officially informed me they are ready to change their operating procedures into a constitution to form the United Undersea States. They are asking us for protection and security; other than that, they want their independence and autonomy. We knew this was coming and I think it is a good thing in principle. After all, the population of the chain of facilities is now at 1,822 as of this morning. I think there may have been a birth in the Caribbean. Obviously, you would lose ownership, and I assume that is a very bad thing."

Ten years ago, there were three of these labs in the Caribbean. The Pacific units that monitored the Great Barrier Reef and beyond initially started with fourteen labs. Each one of those habitats became a hub for spokes to many units and now each one had twenty to thirty structures. With the development of the diamond filament, the structures had grown quickly and were much larger than the originals. Tethered to the main unit was a floating barge that housed the communications gear and surface transport.

Luc led the discussion, as the sticky issue of ownership was beat to death. Luc's main transnational corporation, Champion Industries, owned the labs. There was consensus that the people living there came before the money. The arrangement was agreed to in principle with the provision that the rights to all patents would stay with Champion. There were operational, maintenance and overhead costs to worry about, but taxes were created to manage that.

Gunther asked to confer with the inner team in private, while everyone else took a break. He and Duncan chatted for a minute and then Gunther said, "We have early warning systems, fixed place electromagnetic pulse guns, satellites, our sub fleet and our new drone submarines."

Sully was pulling up assets on a globe as Gunther listed them. Everyone studied the display and came to the same conclusion -- they needed a few more subs and drones. Placement was discussed and decided.

They brought everyone else back online and gave them the good news. Luc concluded the meeting with saying, "Duncan, please help set up the newest member of the world community. They'll need a whole government, ambassadors and a lot more."

“Of course.”

Duncan was a powerful asset to Luc with all of his experience. Duncan had at his disposal two former United States Secretaries of Defense hired by him and a combination military/political think-tank called the Angel Institute, which he had formed. A handbook about creating a country actually exists. Interestingly enough, one of the first things a new country does is issue postage stamps. Millions are sold to collectors and never used for postage. This is pure cash -- and pure history as well -- for a new country.

After the meeting ended and they had a closed connection, Angela, Harry and Luc were alone. Angela said, “This is really exciting. We are helping a new country be born. When they sign the constitution, we need a pen to go with our others.” She was talking about the other pens and quills Luc had collected over centuries. He had pens used to sign the U.S. Constitution, the Declaration of Independence and the Magna Carta. Then she added, “I want to organize a festival at the capital of our new country to celebrate.”

Luc thought about it for a moment. He looked at Harry and Harry shook his head. Luc explained, “That might not be a good idea. Sully has been picking up chatter that my new open identity might be making me a target. And that makes you a target as well.”

Harry said, “If you are here, you are fine. If either of you leaves to go to a public event, that would be a problem.”

Luc added some information to the discussion, “While we were in that meeting, another piece of intel came in. Let’s up our security level here one notch.”

Harry pulled out his phone and made a call with them listening. “Hello Tom, please go to Defcon two immediately. Thanks.” They walked back through the tunnel to their house. Harry was quiet on the long walk, but as they reached the security doors, he made one last comment. “It’s a good thing we are taking a vacation. Let’s get packed. Be ready to leave in thirty minutes.” They were going to their secluded cabin in the Okavango Delta in Botswana, Africa for a week of vacationing.

Defcon two at the cliff-side house meant the guards were doubled and drone air surveillance was stepped up. There were at least two small bat-sized drones flying around their house all the time with video feeds linked to a control room in the guardhouse at the entrance to the grounds. There were also two underwater drones as well. They also had a small submarine pen five stories below used to travel to a specially designed yacht that putted around the sea near their home all the time. It looked like any of the huge yachts that live around the Riviera, sans the usual luxury interior. This yacht housed a hangar for a small jet. The whole system was Gunther’s brainchild and served Luc quite well. Luc usually piloted the jet, equipped with room for a copilot and two passengers. It was all very cramped and uncomfortable, but they could reach a base in Spain in twenty minutes

where they could transfer to one of the larger jets for long distance flights. The yacht-based jet was a small version of an old British Harrier with movable thrusters for vertical takeoff. Gunther decided to arm the bird as well, so Luc had to go through hours of training to learn to fly it.

On another important note, John and Mary Jo had reorganized Luc's holdings into the first public transnational conglomerate company called Champion Industries. Again, publically, it was founded with the creation of Elysium. That small company, then called Advanced Materials, bought Luc's airplane manufacturing companies; then that company bought his shipping companies. At the last count, he had three hundred and fifty thousand employees world- (and space-) wide. They ended up taking over several government agencies around the world through outsourcing contracts. NASA, the U.S. and European Postal entities and the U.S. Department of Energy were now basically Luc's. He had given John public ownership of a lot of it. Their Board of Directors looked like the old Trilateral Commission and the Federal Reserve combined. John was a public crusader for the environment and for lowering poverty levels worldwide. He and Luc decided ten years ago that they had enough money and it was time to give back to the world at large. With the invention of Elysium, they had all the cash any industry could use in five lifetimes.

One very important thing Luc's group did was bolster the United Nations when they partnered with it to give it some teeth for once. That was when the Eastern Federation formed and did not join the United Nations. Luc and his advisors knew it might happen, so they weighed options, decided not to back down, and suffered with the split. China was incredibly cash heavy due to trade imbalance. Some embargos in place were really pissing them off. China and the Federation were Luc's only competitors building their own space station. Who knew what other projects they had going on. However, their standing army of over four million soldiers is what troubled Luc the most.

Remembering Everything

The beginning of the trip was uneventful and that was always very good. A chopper landed in the front yard and took Luc, his family, Harry and Roberta to one of Luc's jets parked twenty minutes away from the house. They all enjoyed the start of the two and a half hour flight. The boys and Luc spent most of the time in the cockpit giving the pilots a break. They all knew Luc could fly and appeared to appreciate some time out of the chairs. Luc took the time to show Harry the operations and then Michael. They both caught on quickly and Luc let his sons hold the yoke for a minute before taking it back and then letting the pilots do their jobs.

They returned to the main cabin and found Harry and Angela asleep. Roberta was reading a book several seats back and they joined her quietly. The seats were set up with a table between them, Harry was sitting in the seat next to Roberta and Luc was across from her with Harry next to him.

Harry said, "Aunt Roberta, what are you reading?"

"It's a book about reading tarot cards. The book says they can tell you about yourself as you are right now and about your future too. It just sounded like fun to me. Luc, let me give you a reading." He had had many readings and only one was ever accurate. The gypsy that did the reading refused to do another one ever again. Michael picked up the book when Roberta put it down while she shuffled the deck. Michael flipped through the pages looking at the pictures. When he put it down Harry took it and did the same. They each had the book less than thirty seconds.

Roberta flipped up the first card and it was the Chariot. She said, "This card indicates you are a warrior who will win many victories."

Both Michael and Harry said, "No, it doesn't." They looked at each other and laughed. They didn't often act like twins, but when they did, it cracked them up.

Harry continued, "It means that Dad will get what he wants but with a struggle."

Roberta said, "Hey, go easy on me. I just started. Let me try another card." This time she flipped over the Six of Wands, "This means you will be victorious." She eyed both boys, "Did I get that one right?"

Michael answered for both of them, "Yes, but it also is about getting help from the people watching the victory for inspiration."

Luc was watching and listening to all this and then it hit him. He called to the sleeping Harry and Angela, "Hey, you two, wake up. I have something I need to show you both right now." They stirred and Harry was up and walking towards them almost at a jog.

"Is everything okay?"

Luc answered him, "Everything is fine. No, way better than just fine." Angela was up now and looked at

her family.

Luc moved the table out of the way, made the two boys sit together facing all four of the adults and then began. "Harry, let's start with you. Did you read Roberta's book when you flipped through it?"

"Yes, but not the whole thing."

"What's the first word on page 12?"

"Crowd."

"Michael, is he correct?"

"Yes. The whole sentence is, 'Both are uplifted: the victor with the adulation, the crowd with a hero to adulate.'"

Luc took Harry in his lap and said, "When did you start remembering everything you saw and heard?"

"Thirteen days ago at 4:12 p.m."

Angela got what Luc had discovered. She took Michael in her lap and asked the same question. He answered it, "Yesterday, when I woke up at 7:15 a.m."

Luc asked, "Do either of you know what adulation means?" They both shook their heads. Then Luc said, "Would you mind going into the rear room and playing on the computers?" They took off in a flash and Luc turned to the other three adults and said, "Do you know what this means?"

Angela answered, "It means they have inherited your memory abilities."

"Yes and so much more. Since it just hit them at this age, this ability is caused by a recessive gene. Angela, you are the key. No child of mine has ever inherited this. Your DNA contributed to the boys and triggered the gene. And that means that we can isolate it." Luc saw they still understand his point. "That means we can give it to anyone." Looks were exchanged and they finally understood. "Don't get me wrong, I am not advocating letting everyone on the planet have this ability. There are too many philosophical issues to make a blanket statement like that. It is quite natural to me, but many may think of it as a curse rather than a blessing. I think it could be overwhelming for adults. But for someone young, it might not feel like something out of the ordinary."

Roberta said, "Well I can tell you one thing, we are going to have to start teaching the boys from a whole different perspective. This is a whole new world for them and us. Luc, you are our only benchmark on this. It won't be long until they are smarter than their teachers. What happens then?"

"I don't know! And that is exciting. I have no idea where this will go. We need to be very, very careful. This needs to be kept secret. We're going to tell Teresa, John, Mary Jo, Sully, Gunther and Duncan." Luc calculated the time zone differences and Teresa's artificial schedule -- artificial because day and night on Earth are ignored in space. "Everyone's available now. Let's go to the conference room." They relocated and kicked the boys out of the room for the meeting.

"Hello everyone. I know we are supposed to be on vacation, but something wonderful has happened. The

twins have inherited my memory capabilities. Each of them had it show up within the last few weeks. We noticed it just a few minutes ago. I tested them and, sure enough, they remember everything since it started.”

Teresa was excited and said, “Whoa, has any other of your children ever shown this?”

“No. It has to be a gene that Angela is carrying in combination with a recessive gene in me.”

Mary Jo said, “Luc, there may be another explanation that you are overlooking. What if it is a gift from God to the boys? It may have nothing to do with recessive genes or anything biological or physical.” Luc paused and considered what she had said.

“I got so excited that I never considered that possibility.” He looked at Angela, Roberta and Harry. Their faces showed they were just as dumbfounded as he was. After a long pause, Luc said, “Then I suggest our best course of action is for me to calm down.” Everyone laughed at that.

Roberta said, “I was telling Luc their schooling will have to take a whole new direction. It won’t be long until they are smarter than everyone, except him.”

Angela listened patiently until everyone had said what they wanted to say, “I will tell you how we are going to proceed. We are going to have a nice week in Africa, treat the boys as we always have and think about this new development when we get home next week. I’ll write up a transcript of the events that occurred as they happened and send it to all of you tomorrow or the next day. You can think about it and we will take it up next week.” She looked at Luc and said, “Agreed?”

“Yes. A wonderful plan.”

“I mean it Luc, no grilling them, no reading up on recessive genes, and no talking to your scientist friends. No nothing. Understood?”

“Yes. Yes. Yes. Understood.”

Angela ended the meeting, “Thank you all for your time. Don’t call us. Love you all. Bye.”

Luc loved his large cabin located on a game preserve that overlooked the Okavango plain. It was magnificent and home to a great annual flood that turned four thousand square miles of arid plains into a wetland. The lush grass attracted elephants, deer, zebra, and buffalo. Hippos showed up when the water got deep enough. Luc was born there. He lived his first two hundred eighty years in the surrounding territory.

The airplane touched down and they were met by the managers of the property in two large Land Rovers. The jet was refueled and sent to the Pretoria airport for security. They took off on a dusty, smelly road that was in need of a good grading. The ride was long and reminded Luc why he liked the lodge location and not here with all the bugs, smells and other unpleasant things.

The lodge was on a slope well above the wet plains. They approached from the other side and drove over a small ridge leading to an oval driveway. The building was three stories tall and over ten thousand square feet.

The kitchen, dining, seating, entertainment, and everything else non-bedroom were located on the bottom floor. The next two floors held the bedrooms and bathrooms. Each suite was configured with two separate bedrooms, each opening to a shared kitchen and TV/family room. The decor theme was African with old world British furnishings. There were a full-length decks on each floor in the front and back. The lodge itself was built from native hardwood and was one hundred thirty years old. It had been remodeled and upgraded about every twenty years since Luc built it. He loaned suites out to visiting naturalists, professors and their students from around the world. He had even allowed a film crew stay there for a year to film the flood and the migration that followed. It was spectacular. If Luc timed it right, the flood was going to hit their end of the valley the next day. He had been watching satellites and drones for a month now. The grass would grow a couple of days after the flood, and then the buffalo would come by the thousands for it. Buffalo attract predators, specifically lions. Lions bring hyenas and vultures. It should be a great week.

The back decks led to three pools and two ponds. One of the pools and one pond were in a glass conservatory. Off to the opposite side of the conservatory was a small rotating star-gazing observatory with a beautiful telescope housed inside. The front decks had long-range animal spotting telescopes everywhere and the boys ran through the main area to get to them. They were on a mission to look for lions. The staff was on their best game with Luc there and they had outdone themselves. There were wild flowers everywhere and the chef had decided to put together buffet meals for them all week. Luc had brought crates of Mediterranean seafood on ice to be added to the fare.

When everyone seemed settled and there was a break before dinner, Luc went for a walk.

About 3720 BC Okavango, Africa

It was very frustrating, being trapped behind a string of very young children on a single-person path through thick forest. Lucasiah could not stop and he could not pass. Of course, the speed was equal to that of the slowest person. That would be a cute little blond girl about six years old. She was Meya and was his youngest brother's child. He had eleven brothers and twelve sisters. He didn't see most of them anymore. They had moved away from their birthplace. Most of the others on the trail were children of his father's brother's family -- from his grandson, Arcow. Arcow had twenty-six children, but none of those had children yet.

Lucasiah saw three children behind him that were identical, born all at the same time. He thought there should be a name for that. He had eleven children and forty-three grandchildren. That made Lucasiah a popular person in his home. His house consisted of twenty-four separate rooms made from stone and wood. Some rooms were large to keep animals, some were smaller for people to live in and many were for storing food. The food storage rooms were also where things were made or repaired -- things like tools, yokes, plows and baskets.

He was going to the home of his oldest brother, Enosh, taking the only path to get there. The brothers were trying to agree on what to do with the one-lane trail. Lucasiah wanted to widen the path enough for a wagon, but Enosh liked it the way it was. He could defend his home better with only one small entry point. Enosh's home had a central area at ground level. From that point, stairs, ladders or ropes were used to get to rooms. His home was built high in the trees to escape the annual flood.

Lucasiah was two hundred and eighty years old. He looked at his brothers and sisters and their hair was turning white -- that is, those who still had hair. Their skin was getting dry and saggy. Lucasiah thought they looked like they were wearing out. Lucasiah's hair was staying brown and he had looked the same for a very long time.

His youthful looks were only part of the problem. While other people sustained a variety of normal injuries, scrapes and cuts, Lucasiah did not. Sometimes the others were hurt badly and died. But not him. No, his skin was like stone. And they all knew about it. He had talked to his father's father about it and he needed to again, now. Everyone talked about him when he wasn't close enough to hear. They were becoming afraid of him.

Lucasiah finally came out of the forest and entered an opening where crops were being tended. Some living and working rooms were built on poles ten feet above the ground, but the edge of the opening was surrounded by tall trees. There were big living rooms high up in the trees. Ladders and ropes hung everywhere. The rooms were connected by walkways in the air. The place was busy with people moving about.

Standing in the middle of the open area, he called out, "I am Lucasiah and want to see Enosh. Brother, are you here?"

Lucasiah saw a bent-over white haired man with a long beard come out of a high room. He waved and turned around and went back inside. Lucasiah walked to the ladder leading to the room Enosh was in and climbed up. He got to the top where several young men were standing guard. They were afraid of Lucasiah and backed up to let him by. He went inside and found Enosh sitting at a table eating.

"Sit down brother and have some food." Lucasiah obeyed and began eating. The food was really good. It was bread made with nuts and fruits.

"This is really good. What do you call it?"

"Fruitcake."

"Fruitcake. I like the name." They ate quietly and Enosh took a good look at his brother.

Finally, he said, "Lucasiah, you do not change like the rest of us. Why is that?"

"I don't know. I see the others look at me and they are afraid. I am afraid too. I am going to talk to our father's father about it soon. It has been many days and nights since we talked last. What has happened at your home in that time?" This was casual conversation.

"More new children all the time. I sent half the people in my home to make a new home for them. It was

hard to command, but it had to be done. I told them to walk towards the evening sun from sunrise to sunset and make their new home wherever they ended up. Close but not too close.”

“I too am thinking of sending some away. But maybe, I should be the one going away.” Lucasiah watched Enosh for a comment to his statement, but his brother remained silent. “Have you thought about my idea to make the path between our homes bigger?”

“Yes. I think it should stay as it is.”

“Very well. However, you should consider that we have more goods to trade, but no one at my home wants to carry them here on that path. They want to use a wagon.”

“I understand.” That finished the discussion.

“I have gifts for you from my wife and children.” Lucasiah reached into a leather bag he carried and pulled out smaller bags of food to start with. They spread out the goods on the table to examine. Enosh was pleased. Lucasiah took out another bag and handed it to him.

“Ah, the dried meat I love. And you have cut it small just as I like as well. Eating hurts with these rotten teeth I have.” He called to the adjoining room and his new wife came into their room. Enosh had her take the food away, except for the meat.

Next, Lucasiah pulled out several large pieces of colorful woven cloth. Enosh thanked his brother and called his wife again. Again, she slipped in and took the items away. Lucasiah had saved the best for last. He reached into the bag, took out a wooden box and set it before Enosh. Enosh removed the lid and saw the thing inside was wrapped in zebra hide. He lifted it out and unwrapped it. It was a knife made of black stone. Lucasiah had chipped and carved it himself. This was made from a hard stone that one of his sons brought back with him from the foot of a volcano. If you didn’t work with it just right, it cracked and broke in two. The leopard skin wrapped handle made the long, sharp blade look that much more frightening. The sheath was made of the same skin with a thin piece of wood sewn into the blade covering.

Enosh said, “This is beautiful. Does the stone have a name?”

“No. Why don’t you give it a name?” Lucasiah tried to honor his older brother whenever possible.

“I have been saving a very special word for just the right thing and this is it. We shall call it obsidian.”

“Perfect. A delightful word, obsidian. The knife is very sharp. Enjoy it. I shall have my family bring the goods they wish to trade with your family in two days’ time. I will have four of them carry the bags on a long pole that rests on their shoulder. That way, they can walk one after the other on the trail. With half your family gone, that should be enough for ten days or so. Please tell me who left your home.” Enosh related to his brother the names and relations that went away. He did so with sadness.

Lucasiah was the unofficial keeper of records. The fact that he remembered everything made him the perfect choice. He even remembered learning that his memory was different from everyone else’s. He never

understood what it meant to forget something. Others explained it to him, but this was something he had never experienced.

It was becoming late and Lucasiah wanted to make the trip back home before sunset. He said goodbye to his brother and all the family as he left. There was no one on the one-person path so he made good time. He was moving at a slow run and turned a sharp corner to find a large mean surprise. A young man was standing there with a short sharpened stake spear and a stone knife ready to lunge at him. Lucasiah pulled out an exact duplicate of the obsidian knife he just had just given to Enosh. The assassin lunged forward with the stick and Lucasiah deflected it aside. He used it to keep the attacker's momentum going and threw him to the ground. The attacker rolled over quickly and fought to stand. While attempting to get up, Lucasiah kicked him in the head. The attacker fell back and laid there quite still. Lucasiah quickly cut a small thin branch off a tree and split it several times so it could be used to bind his attacker's hands and feet. Lucasiah had finished tying him up when the attacker opened his eyes, saw the trouble he was in and yelled to be released. Lucasiah kicked him in the head again to still him. Lucasiah stretched the rest of his makeshift rope from his shoulder to his feet and dragged the attacker back to Enosh's home.

He walked into the center and called to Enosh, "Enosh, my brother, I am Lucasiah and need to talk to you."

Enosh appeared on the porch and said, "What is that you are dragging behind you?"

"I think this is one of your family, Egran. He tried to kill me on the trail. What should I do with him?"

"Our laws say he should die. You have the right to do it."

"I choose to give him and his punishment to you, brother. I won't slaughter an idiot. He's not very good at killing. I am leaving. I have a long walk ahead."

"Be safe, brother."

"Goodbye."

The sun was moving toward the plains quickly. Lucasiah would have to run to beat the sun setting. He took off at a solid fast run down the path. He was home just as darkness took hold and was greeted by many small children looking for treats. Lucasiah always had a supply in his pockets. He was also met by men who wanted to know the outcome of his talk of widening the trail. He shared the disappointing news, then stopped and played with the kids. Lucasiah loved giving the children rides on his back. While he was playing, he had an idea. They had horses that were brought from Arabia, Adam's first home. The horses pulled wagons and helped with clearing trees for farmland. Lucasiah talked to his smartest son, Rotan, about his idea. He thought they could ride on the strong animals. Rotan said he would try the next day.

At first light of the next day, Lucasiah set off to his father's father's home. He carried a heavy bag with him, a

spear, two obsidian knives and a bow and quiver of arrows. Under his outer layer of clothes, he carried a sling and a bag of stones. The heavy bag he was carrying contained food, some grains and planting seeds as gifts.

The path to Adam's home passed the home of Enosh's eldest son, Kenan. His home could not be seen as it was approached. The wide path traveled along a cliff over a large, fast river at the bottom. A traveler not knowing where to look would miss the stairs built over the cliff on the side of the rock face. A maze of stairs led between sixteen caves cut into the stone. Two were large common rooms used to socialize or conduct business.

Several women were working in the fields across from the stairs. They saw Lucasiah and approached as he reached the stairs. One called out, "Lucasiah, good to see you again. You look young! I have not seen you in a long time and you have not changed. Good for you. How is your family?" She was Reda, Kenan's daughter.

"They are all well. Is Kenan home?"

"No. He is visiting Adam."

"That's where I am going as well. Would you have a meal with me? I have everything, except drink."

"Yes. That would be welcome." She led him down the stairs into her cave. There were many children around and they swarmed Lucasiah to see if he had treats. He did, of course, and shared until they went away satisfied. He did not know the younger ones, so asked for their names and who their parents were before they received goodies. Young men had now noticed Lucasiah and were afraid of him. They tried to warn the women away. Reda ignored them and set a table for eating. Lucasiah offered the day meal food he carried, and they enjoyed it together. The visit was pleasant, except for the whispering and bad looks he got from the others. This was getting worse as time passed. When they finished, he prepared to leave. Reda walked him to the top of the stairs, where four men were waiting.

One said, "Don't come back here again. You are in league with the devil. Stay away."

Lucasiah decided not to press it and started his walk away. When he was a short stone's throw past them, he was pelted with rocks from behind. They had no effect and it scared the men even more. It took all Lucasiah's strength to keep walking without confronting them. He continued to head away and saw two of the men running outside the path headed for Adam's home.

He reached the perimeter of Adam's lodges surrounded by the usual fields of grain. Adam's home was built of both wood and stone. There were many lodges, but it appeared some homes were empty. Lucasiah's coming had been announced in advance. Adam's people were afraid and avoided Lucasiah just like Kenan's family. When Lucasiah reached the center of the community, Adam and Kenan were sitting by a fire and eating with a group of others. Both stood up and greeted Lucasiah warmly. They were certainly not afraid of him. Adam walked Lucasiah into a large home and the three men sat around a table and talked. Lucasiah emptied his bag and shared the gifts. They were much appreciated.

Adam said, "Lucasiah, I have new words for family. A father's father is called a grandfather and a mother's

mother is a grandmother. A brother or sister's child is your nephew for a boy and niece for a girl. You would be their uncle and a woman would be their aunt." Adam continued and ended with cousins. It all made sense to both Lucasiah and Kenan. Good.

"These are fine words, grandfather. Thank you. Do you have others?" Adam did and told Lucasiah all of them for the next long while.

When Adam was done, Lucasiah continued, "I have a new knife made from obsidian." He showed it to them and told them that Enosh named the stone. Grandfather liked it so much that Lucasiah gave him one of the two he had.

Lucasiah could tell that Grandfather wanted to talk about his situation then, so he brought it up first. "More and more people are afraid of me now as time passes. I do not know why I am staying young. Do you, Grandfather?"

"I think it is a gift from God and not from Satan. You are a good man, Lucasiah. But, the fear the people have for you will only grow. It will not die just as you do not. People will get hurt trying to destroy you."

"I am sorry. What would you have me do?"

"It is not easy to do this, but you must leave here and never return. You must hide your blessings and keep them secret. Be careful whom you share anything with. They will eventually turn against you out of fear. I am sorry." He got up and called to a woman, "Fill this bag with the best food we have and bring three skins filled with our best wine and three filled with water as well."

"I have knowledge of the names of new young ones and people who have moved and started new homes. What would you have me do with these memories?"

"It will have to go with you, my grandson. Do not return to your home. I will send word that I have sent you away. It will be on me. May God continue to bless you."

Adam walked Lucasiah to the edge of the community, which was now called a village. When they were alone, Lucasiah said, "I am afraid, Grandfather. Why am I different?"

"I do not know. I have asked God to answer that question and He has been silent. I am so sorry. You are truly a good man. You will bring good things with you wherever you go. Peace be yours, my child."

Lucasiah turned with tears in his eyes and slowly walked away. He missed his family already.

Okavango

Today Okavango, Africa

The terrain had changed over the centuries, but the foothill ridgelines and surrounding mountains were still the same. The plain below was a lake at one time, then a swamp, then a wetland and someday would become high arid plains. The rivers that fed the area would bring silt and eventually fill something.

This was still Luc's birthplace. He could feel it. He walked along the ridge trail leading to the lodge and went inside just in time for dinner.

"Dad! Dad! Dad! We saw lions! Didn't we?" Michael was turning to his brother Harry and Harry nodded his head yes.

Luc casually asked, "How many?"

They both said together, "Eleven."

"Were they in one group or in several?"

Harry said, "Two groups. One on each side of the plain. Five in one and six in the other."

"Your mother would love it if you both drew pictures of what you saw. Harry, would you draw the group with five and Michael, would you draw the group with six, please? There are paper and pencils in the desk in the hall."

They dashed off and Luc could hear them in the hall tearing through the desk. This was going to be fun. He could do a verbal brain dump and all his memories would be somewhat preserved in them.

He found the adults grazing on the buffet. "Hi, is everything looking good?"

Roberta said, "It would be if we could get some spice in this seafood. I need to visit the chef."

Angela said, "This is all wonderful. What's the plan for the week?"

Luc described the annual cycle of the water reaching them, the grass following close behind and the animals that would arrive practically at their front door. When he started telling them the times of day when each thing would happen, they all started laughing. Harry said, "So much for spontaneity." Everyone laughed again, except for Luc.

"Okay, you want spontaneity, you got it. Tomorrow morning at first light, I am going to take everyone for a hot air balloon ride across the delta and land in our front yard. Everybody in?"

Everyone loved it. "That will take two balloons. I'll take care of it."

They ate some great food. When they were done, the boys ran in with their drawings. They showed the drawings to their mom, she looked at them amazed and then at Luc. The sketches were perfect. Michael favored

fewer lines while Harry liked shading to blend the lines. Both were exact representations of what would actually be seen, like a photograph. The child-like drawings with crayons the boys did a month ago were done. Luc expected this.

“We have a big day tomorrow and it will start before the sun comes up. So we must go to sleep soon. But, let’s go out on the deck and I will tell a story.”

“Yeah!!!”, and the boys ran out. The adults eased out of their chairs and meandered out to the deck where the brothers were waiting. When they were settled, Luc began.

“There was a man who lived right here many, many years ago. He was sent away from this place because he was very special and it frightened the other people. With great sadness, he walked away quietly and wandered north for many months. He went to places he had never been before and was thrilled by the new sights and experiences. He reached the edge of where other people lived but kept going on and on, all alone. He passed through some great jungles and then some great deserts, always with wonder at the new memories he was experiencing. Finally, he came to an ocean and stayed on the beach for many years, exploring the sea as much as he could. He loved the constant sound of the waves as they never stopped and didn’t change much one after another.

Then, after many years, he was wandering his beach and saw something wonderful. He came upon a family living there too. He cautiously entered their camp. They were afraid at first and then saw he had no weapons and welcomed him. The family was large, mother and father with fourteen sons and daughters. Several of the older sons had wives, but no children yet. There were four pretty young girls, all looking to have a husband and family of their own. They were not shy with the new visitor to their home. Their father kept chasing the daughters away so that he could talk with the visitor.

The man eventually went back to his home but visited with the family often. He got to know the girls and picked one to marry because she was quiet and shy. She was the prettiest too. He married her and they lived in his place for fifty years. They had a large family of fine men and women.

But, his being special was noticed eventually by all his family and friends. They became frightened of him just like the first family he had. He went swimming in the ocean one day and kept going and going until his family was safe without him. He was sad again, but excited to be seeing new lands.

He lived the rest of his life being happy and sad at the same time.”

Angela herded the boys off to their sleeping quarters and returned to the quiet of the adults. Harry and Roberta were cuddling on the couch across from Luc. Angela returned and wiggled her way next to Luc. They all sat there quiet until Luc said, “I’ve never told you this. This is where I was born.”

“This is wild and beautiful country. Was it tough growing up here?” asked Harry.

“No, no, no. You don’t understand. You didn’t get what I just said. I was born *here*. Right here. In a hut, on

this site.”

Angela said, “Wow.” After a pause, she continued, “That was you in the story, wasn’t it?”

“Yes. Of course. But, I’ve got to tell you that I’m not sad anymore.”

They all said goodnight and retired for five hours until they needed to get up and get going. The staff had taken care of all the arrangements. There was a slight chance of a passing thunderstorm, but they should be done with the flight well ahead of the possibility.

They got knocks on their doors at 4:30 a.m. and the rest was up to them. The vacationers forced themselves out of bed and got the boys dressed and ready for a wild day.

Everything was timed for a dawn takeoff. The winds were cooperating, moving slowly and at the right altitudes. When the group arrived at the balloons, the staff had them half inflated with the hot air burners going nicely. A wonderful lunch had been packed and they were ready to fly soon. They should see magnificent herds of buffalo and everything that travels with them -- birds, lions and more. Luc checked the weather once more and decided they could take off. He could see a thunderstorm way off in the distance and it appeared small anyway.

He gave Harry instructions on how to fly his and Roberta’s balloon. It wasn’t very complicated. More fire, more heat, you rise. Pulling on the rope attached to the top of the balloon from the inside forced the warm air out and you went down. The wind pretty much dictated your path and the current direction put them heading straight to the lodge. Everything was as ready as it could be.

Angela and Michael were with Luc and they took off first. Big Harry, Roberta and Little Harry took off one minute later. They were all wearing communication headsets and chatted away. Roberta was the designated still photographer. Both crafts were equipped with video cameras directed from inside the baskets. They rose quickly with both fires cooking at full speed. Everyone was busy looking down while Luc could now see the distant weather clearly thanks to the height. The little thunderstorm was much larger and darker than just a few minutes ago.

Below them, they had reached the herd of buffalo and it was a magnificent sight. There were thousands of them. On the edges in the grass, waiting for any opportunity, were the lions. Luc saw twenty of them working in groups, waiting.

The thunderstorm had reached the edge of the plain and was headed right for them. Luc could see now that the storm was quite violent with torrential rain and lightning. He knew they could not be in the air when it reached them. Luc had time before making any decisions and wanted to see if they could outrun the storm. It would be close. He didn’t worry the rest of the family yet. They were having a wonderful time. Luc saw Harry take a good look at the storm and then at Luc. Luc smiled and nodded. Each of the boys had taken over the

video cameras and they are having a blast.

Luc finally had to make a decision. They were landing as fast as possible. He radioed the landing team that they were going down.

“Harry, start a slow descent following my lead.”

“Understood.”

They both pulled the ropes and turned off the burners. They started down as Luc explained to the rest of the family what was going on. They were a few hundred feet off the ground and Luc was trying to get past the buffalo herd before they touched down. The herd was so vast that it looked like that would not be possible. Luc saw the vehicles headed for them, but they would not make it in time.

“Harry, we need to land now. Follow me.”

As they neared the ground, the startled herd scattered beneath them. Luc tossed out a grappling hook for an anchor and they jerked to a stop. He opened up the balloon and let the hot air out so the crew could pack it up before it got too wet. He looked around and the animals were beginning to crowd the baskets making it too dangerous to exit.

Fifty feet away, the lions had seen an opportunity created by the landings and were moving to attack a baby buffalo. They were close and the boys were fascinated. In a flash, the mothers made the attack. Some of the larger buffalos moved too late to protect the calf and were chased away. The lion dragged the kill away with the younger ones helping in order to get a taste. It was turning into a frenzy. On the other side of the balloons, another pair of lions made a second attack and brought down a full-grown female buffalo. This happened a bit more than eighty feet away and the lions were not dragging this huge animal anywhere. This was getting more and more unsafe.

“Harry, draw your sidearm.” They both pulled out their pistols and prepared to defend their baskets. Two lions were circling and Roberta and Angela were getting scared. The trucks were still five minutes away. The rain hit them now hard and fast. In the turmoil, a bold lioness made an attack on Harry’s basket targeting Roberta. Her back was turned and she didn’t see it coming. Luc shot the lion with his Colt Python and it went down with a cry of death. Everyone but Luc screamed at the sound of the gunshot and then saw the dead animal only fifteen feet away.

Harry was scanning now, looking for another attacker. The rest of the lion pride had backed off and was content with their kills. Luc and Harry kept vigilant until the trucks parted the buffalos and pulled up beside the baskets. Three men jumped out in the downpour and took up defensive positions to get everyone from the baskets to the trucks. Luc told them to take the dead lion with them. Luc wanted the skin. It was a clean kill and there was no sense wasting the carcass to hyenas.

Everyone calmed down as they drove away. Two large trucks arrived to take in the balloons. Several men

had pulled out big rifles to defend themselves if necessary as they worked as quickly as possible.

Once they were clear of the other trucks, safely away from all the animals, Roberta said, "I hate spontaneity." They all laughed at that one and relaxed even more. The boys snuggled into the women and were both asleep quickly. Thirty minutes later, they pulled into the lodge driveway and unfolded themselves from their seats. Harry and Luc carried the boys inside and took them to their room. They returned to find the women mixing drinks. Luc wasn't at all surprised.

The couples ate their picnic lunch and chatted about the day's events. When they were done, they all agreed that joining the boys for a nap was a very good idea.

The sun was almost down, when the families awoke from their restful afternoon. They headed for the back deck to sit and visit. The boys were out in the workshop watching the lion be skinned and cleaned. They came bounding up the stairs to show the adults their necklaces of lion's teeth. One of the staff had drilled small holes in the teeth and threaded them on a string to make the prize. The women thought it was gross. Harry and Luc examined each tooth closely and told the boys they were now great African warriors.

Later that night, they watched the videos and reviewed Roberta's photographs. They were all magnificent.

The next few days were spent watching the flooding cycle from the porch. Everyone was just fine with staying above the plain while the drama unfolded below.

Luc gave directions to the staff to prepare a plane he had on site to take up. The biplane was painted bright red and carried two people. Everyone wanted a ride and Luc started with Angela. It was just like the flying scene in the movie *Out of Africa* but without the beautiful music. And Luc didn't crash and die the next day. The airplane was not an old model. This was a replica he built some thirty years ago and it was running and holding up just fine.

With just two days remaining until they were scheduled to return home, Luc was saving the best activity for last. He had arranged to take a day trip to Kenan's cliff homes. They were a national park now and Luc made a healthy donation to arrange private access for an hour. The night before they were to go, he set up the visit with a story.

"There was a very old man a very long time ago who had a very large family. He was the eldest brother of nine children. He warned his people that if they did not do good, they would be destroyed. Not a very popular fellow at the time. He wanted a place to live that was very special. He wandered the country and finally decided to build a secret home where no one could see it. He built it on the side of a cliff that was far above a river canyon. From there, he could hide and be protected from any bad men that wanted to hurt his family. We are going to see his home tomorrow. It will be very special, I promise you. I bet we will still feel his spirit there and then we can feel a little just like he did those many years ago when he was very, very, old."

Luc got the boys moving off to bed with a stop in the computer room for a quick lesson on their ancestry. On a big monitor, Luc brought up the family tree chart of Adam that he compiled years ago. It included everyone until Luc left the large family. When Luc was convinced that his sons had learned the chart, he circled Lucasiah and said, "Please remember this man. The stories you will hear tomorrow will be from his point of view." There were more than fifty three thousand names on the chart and the boys had memorized all of it -- Luc's very own personal data backup system.

The drive to the park was only ninety minutes and they arrived just as the staff showed up. The staff unlocked the gates and welcomed them as special guests. Luc talked to the director in his native Shona. Eighty percent of the people of Zimbabwe spoke this dialect. Luc could tell that the director appreciated this courtesy.

The area had not changed since it was inhabited. The stair system had been rebuilt many times and the current one was solid. Luc expected the same old rickety ones and was surprised by its solidness. Muscle memory.

Luc took a second and used his internal comm unit to reach Gunther, asking him to record the narration for the next few hours.

"The only way to see the caves is taking the staircase down. It is hidden over the side and can't be seen until you approach the edge. For starters, we are going to the largest of the twenty-one caves. It was a common meeting room for business and group gatherings. Kenan would meet visitors here."

They took the stairs down and entered the cave. There was a wooden table in the center of the room that was rustic and a good guess at what it really looked like. The walls had eroded making the room a good two feet bigger on all sides. Someone had added support beams to shore up the ceiling as well. Luc asked everyone to sit around the table. He took a couple of small bags out of his old courier bag and set them on the table. The first bag contained dried fruit and nuts. They enjoyed the snack with some water from skins Luc carried as well. "This was the common food for meals when Kenan lived here. It was a treat to have meat and baked bread."

Luc opened another bag and took out something wrapped in leather. He removed the folds of the wrap one by one revealing his obsidian knife he made six thousand years ago. It was still razor sharp. "This was Lucasiah's knife. He gave one just like it to his oldest brother Enosh and another one to his grandfather, Adam." He passed it around the table for everyone to handle. Angela made sure the boys held it properly and not get hurt.

Luc opened another bag and poured out wheat grain. "This was a gift to Kenan from Lucasiah. It was the custom then to honor the host. In return, the host would provide food and water for the next leg of travel." Luc told his story quietly. Everyone felt correct that this was hard for Luc, but important.

After a moment, Luc got up and told everyone to watch him. He walked around the walls and added details. "There were bags of grain hanging here and these channels in the wall held food and eating utensils. The doors

and windows were covered with animal hides. A hippo and a zebra. It could be made dark in here during the bright daylight. These holes that are angled into the wall were for holding torches and oil lamps. It was always smoky in here at night. Not ventilated very well.”

Luc led them into the next room, which was a kitchen. The chairs and tables inside was really a poor choice. “This furniture is all wrong. These were tree trunks made of pine from the mountains over there.” He pointed south and then continued. “The tables had three legs and thick tops. Many smaller ones and never a big one that is perfectly rectangle. There were lots of clay vessels everywhere, from large bowls to bottles with stoppers.” As he was speaking, he realized he was being horrible to his family. He stopped, shook his head and said, “I’m sorry everyone. I am spoiling this for you. Let’s move on and we can just read the display placards.” He got hugs from Angela and Roberta and they moved along.

After that, everyone had a great time looking at the ancient dwellings and taking pictures of everything. Luc helped out by being quiet and letting things flow. When they were done, he thanked the staff and tipped them well in small gold coins. Gold was never turned down. Besides, he tipped the staff three months’ salary.

The night was lazy and the boys were just playing games. All of a sudden, they loved chess. Luc asked them about it, and they told him they read a couple of chess strategy books and now the game was simple.

The next day they headed home after a late breakfast. Luc was worn out. This was a very emotional time for him. Between learning of the boys’ new ability, visiting his birthplace, reliving the ouster from his first family and being caught in a lion attack, he was bushed. He needed a vacation from his vacation. That was not about to happen. They were making another trip in just two days to the space station to see Teresa. Luc wondered if he could get a bit of vacation there.

A Quiet Night at Home

Everyone fell asleep on the way home. They followed the same routine backwards ending with a short chopper ride to their house. The staff took care of the luggage and they went inside to unwind. Roberta had invited Luc and his family to dinner on the ground floor where she and Harry lived. She was preparing her famous gumbo. They went separate ways and Harry and Luc ended up in the Input/Output room. Luc preferred the name I/O room better than control room or command center.

Harry was ten seconds behind Luc. He came in, patted Luc on the back and said, "I practically ran down here and you still beat me."

"That's easy; my place is twenty-two feet closer than yours. You want to comm together or separate?"

"Together, I'll let you drive."

Luc logged into their network and sent a message that Harry and he were online. He wanted to see who was most anxious to talk to them. While they waited, Luc ran a program on another terminal that displayed stories from the wire services. He could glance at the headline and let it keep rolling or stop it until he could read the whole article. Ding!

"Hello John, how are you my old friend." Luc was speaking for both Harry and himself.

"Don't give me that 'old' business. Compared to you, I am a speck of dust on the timeline. Anyway, what happened on your vacation with the lion attack?" Harry filled him in and continued with their visit to Kenan's cliff home.

John pulled up their schedules and saw a staff meeting was scheduled in twelve hours. He had nothing that couldn't wait until then with the exception that he wanted Luc to read the proposed timetable for the cheap manufacturing of diamonds. They had been dumping their gems and diamonds for a while. They would still take a loss when the bottom falls out of that market. Luc had been reading his email and found nothing that couldn't wait as well, so they signed off. No sooner had they ended the transmission with John, when Gunther and Sully connected in at the same time. They had been waiting until Luc and Harry were done with John to connect in.

"Hello, gentlemen. How are you?"

"We're fine but, Luc, you may not be. We've had three separate intelligence reports that indicate there may be a contract in place to kill you. MI6 and the CIA both confirm it through sources in the Middle East. Mossad has a report that a contract killer named Serge Montenov has been engaged. He's an old KGB dog and, if he's active again, it would be bad. He was very, very good. He'd be sixty now. But Sully has a different take."

"Hi Luc. Hi Harry. I've looked at the three reports and I think they are faked. They are timed too perfectly

and the sources hit the same dead end for real verification. Another thing is the wording of the texts. They are similar and scripted, but meant to not look like it. I think it's a diversion. Look at my left hand while my right hand hides the coin."

"Interesting. Show me all the reports." Sully put them up on the big screen and Luc read them. "Sully, I think you are right. What are the possibilities if it is a diversion? Any ideas?"

"Nothing immediate comes to the forefront. Nothing actionable."

"Then Harry, it's your call."

Harry thought about it and said, "Defcon Four for the home would be a reasonable action." Everyone concurred and Harry made the call to the house security chief. Then he asked a question, "Gunther, are you raising the threat levels at the New York offices?"

Gunther said, "If you are at four, then we are at four."

Harry answered, "Thank you. That's all we've got."

Anything else could wait until the regular staff meeting in eleven and a half hours. They signed off and Luc was alone with Harry again. "I really don't like this. I mean my being a known quantity. I liked my anonymity."

"It is beginning to make things very challenging. I think we have done everything we can for now. I will tell our wives what's up." Luc and Harry headed to their homes knowing they would see each other again in four hours for dinner.

Luc walked the house and got a feel for it again. It was a wonderful place. He caught up on some TV and relaxed for an hour. He agreed earlier to give Michael a music lesson and both the boys a science lesson. Michael was learning to play the piano and violin. He was a natural, whereas Harry would rather be playing soccer. Harry was not studying an instrument now, but Luc thought he would come around next year. Harry heard the conversations about how well his brother was doing in music and Luc thought Harry was getting a little jealous. Michael was running through some exercises that Luc wrote for him. At the end of the lesson, Luc always played something new for his son, usually making it up right there on the spot. He didn't think Michael had figured out that isn't something all music teachers do. Luc wanted to inspire him. Today, they were doing something different. Michael now was talented enough to play chords with a drum track as an accompaniment. Luc got out his sax and they played together with Luc carrying the melody on the sax. This was great. They played "Four" by Miles Davis and sounded okay. The lesson ended on the hour and it was time for science with both twins together.

Today they were studying Newton's laws of motion. This would set the stage for the next week of study about the four fundamental forces of nature -- strong, weak, gravitational, and electromagnetic. Luc was quite good at keeping heavy math and science stuff interesting. He complemented the boring stuff with real stories

about the people behind the science or he made up practical demonstrations on the subject. They were about to get a real practical lesson in the laws of motion and nature's forces tomorrow on their trip into space. The day's lesson ended and they all went for a swim in the indoor pool before they headed to dinner upstairs Roberta and Harry. The boys were currently into playing the water game Marco Polo. Luc never got it. Where's the fun in pretending you can't see and try to catch someone. And why did Marco get tagged as the title to the game? Luc met Marco Polo several times in the East on buying trips. He was just another crude, rude businessman from the West. The import-export business as he used to call it, talk about buying low and selling high. That's what Marco was good at. Personally, Luc thought he was a jerk. Maybe it was a good thing that he got the dumbest game in the world named after him.

They all put on nice clothes to make it a dress-up dinner. They were guests, technically. Angela and Luc herded the boys to the elevator and into the surface house. They immediately shot for the kitchen to see what Roberta was cooking. They hung out there until she shooed them away to help set the table. Dinner was heavenly. Shrimp gumbo was the main entree and it was prepared with an old family recipe that Roberta swore came from family in New Orleans. Luc didn't care where it came from as long as it ended up in his stomach. Conversation was light and they talked about tomorrow's trip into space in detail. Harry and Roberta had visited the station a couple of times and offered free advice to the boys on all kinds of things.

As the dinner dishes were cleared by the staff, Luc had an announcement to make. He stood and made a big show of it. "Ladies and gentlemen, if I can have your attention please. Tonight, for the first time on stage or screen, Michael Champion and yours truly will be performing a jazz classic composed by Miles Davis, "Four". The show will begin promptly in five minutes. Please move into the auditorium and take your seats." Luc gestured to the living room.

Luc had everything set off to the side and Michael was beaming as they moved it. Big Harry joined in the fun by dimming the lights and aiming two table lamps at Michael and Luc like spotlights. They picked and plowed their way through the song and it came out poorly as Michael missed many chords. But no one cared, they were family. Michael's brother Harry seemed to be the only critic. It was bedtime for the boys and they were sent off to get ready.

Angela and Luc waited a minute and followed them to make sure they really were getting ready for bed. They found the twins halfway done and playing games. The parents broke it up and pushed them along with a combination of threats and growls. Fifteen long minutes later, they were in bed with the lights out. The twins were the second best thing ever in Luc's life. Maybe the third. Angela was the first or maybe it was God. Luc and God had many one-sided discussions during the last ten years. And his brother, Michael the Archangel, was nowhere to be found. He had quit his job and disappeared. Luc had hoped they would stay in touch, but apparently, that was not God's plan.

Angela and Luc sat on the balcony outside their bedroom and watched the Mediterranean float below them. It was most tranquil. Angela enjoyed hearing Luc tell his stories. Tonight she asked him what it was like in this very place sometime in the past. He told her the story of Santorini, a beautiful island, being devastated by the volcanic eruption of the lone mountain peak. They finally grew tired and eased their way to bed.

At three twenty one a.m., klaxons went off and startled them from their sleep. They were out of bed in a flash just as Harry opened the door and said, "We gotta go. Now." Angela darted past them to the boys' room where two soldiers were picking up the boys. Roberta was giving them orders and Harry told Angela and Luc to follow him. They all obeyed and he yelled, "We are under attack at the front guard gate from ground forces."

Luc could hear the muffled sound of automatic weapons. Then louder booms, like grenades, were heard and felt at the same time. Gunther began speaking in Luc's ear and gave him the situation report. There were at least twelve heavily armed men assaulting the front. The outer defenses were holding the attackers off for now. It looked like four were down from the claymore mine trip wires. Two automated Gatling guns were hitting the first wave of attackers now. He told Luc there were two armed drones twenty seconds out.

By this time, they were in the stairwell and headed down to their escape vehicles -- small manned subs that would take them to the yacht and Luc's jet. The subs were being prepped as they entered the pen. The cave was dark and misty from the salt water. They continued to follow Harry's commands and loaded into the subs. Harry, Luc, and their protectors were in the first sub. The women and boys were jammed into the second sub. The third was filled with soldiers.

Just as they were ready to go, Luc heard Gunther through his internal communication device give a narration of what was happening on the surface. The drones had taken out the remaining attackers and then destroyed their vehicles parked about a quarter mile away. They lost two of Gunther's men in the battle, but the rest were secure. They were abandoning the surface and heading down to the lower complex for protection. Gunther started yelling and telling them there were four inbound missiles. The phalanx guns hidden on the cliff walls opened up and went to work on the missiles. Gunther said, "Two acquired. Two destroyed. Moving to the last two. Acquired, but out of range. In range now. Last two destroyed."

Their subs were underwater now and headed through the outer doors. The trip would take three minutes. It was the longest three minutes of Luc's life. He talked to Angela through the comm and told her what was going on. Luc let her know the four of them would be taking the plane while Harry and Roberta would continue to a submarine fifteen miles away. He saw the yacht up ahead and they pulled into the underwater docking pool, which could only hold two of the mini subs at a time. As Luc's sub was parked, two crewmembers hustled him out of the boat and into a changing area where the flight suits were kept. He was halfway dressed, when Angela and the boys were escorted into the room. Luc let Angela know that he had to hurry and do the preflight check

on the plane. She tossed off her nightgown and started to put on her flight suit. The boys were being dressed right over their pajamas and crying loudly. Luc ran ahead to the jet located one tall deck up.

The little black jet was being readied by the crew and Luc climbed into the cockpit to prep for a quick takeoff. One minute had passed while he ran through checks. All those hours of training had paid off and he was ready just as his family was loaded into their tight seats. He started the engines and heard Gunther say, “Four more incoming missiles headed for the yacht. The cliff guns are almost out of range, but two missiles are acquired. We aren’t going to get the others.” Luc went on the wide area comm and told the yacht captain to abandon ship.

Harry and Roberta were away and safe. The ship’s elevator had the jet on deck quickly and they lifted off vertically with the thrusters pointed down. Luc quickly gained forward speed and made a loop around the yacht as they gained altitude just in time to see the yacht get hit by the last two missiles. Luc was angry and asked over the comm if everyone made it off. Gunther quietly told Luc that all hands were safe and accounted for except for Captain Julius Nomirain. He would not leave until every other crewmember was off.

Luc immediately turned to other things. After all, his family’s lives were in his hands now. He said over the comm, “Gunther, give me a threat assessment please.”

“We are not tracking anymore missiles. In fact, the two planes that launched them have been downed by the sub’s missiles. A nearby destroyer is assisting and sending boats out to collect the wreckage. But it looks like we have a video record from the destroyer of the attacker’s planes. Hold.” They were at altitude now and Luc went supersonic as he headed to Spain just as rehearsed. Two Raptors had joined him as escorts as they continued to rocket across the sky. Twelve minutes to the airfield. “We have an initial analysis of the attackers’ planes and they look to be a new Chinese prototype fighter bomber.”

Luc said, “Whoa.”

Gunther continued, “Every one of us is on comm now. Please give us your situation report.” Luc did and it was fast. Then he asked what was planned for their arrival at the airbase in Spain.

“This is John. We’ve been talking and Teresa has a suggestion.”

She came on from the space station and said, “Come to me as fast as possible. We can protect you here better than anywhere on Earth.” Luc discussed it with Angela and they agreed.

John then said, “Okay, I’ve got a space plane stationed in the U.K. on its way to you. Should be there about thirty minutes after you land. One hour to attach the boosters and top off the gas and you are on your way.” With that done, Luc talked to his sons who had stopped crying and were actually enjoying the ride. Luc let them know that their vacation in space was about to happen immediately. They got even more excited and wanted to know where Roberta and Harry were. Luc assured them they were safe and sound. The Raptors peeled off as they approached the base and Luc made a quick landing. They were escorted into a hangar and the doors were

closed as soldiers surrounded the building. They climbed out of the little jet and were taken to a locker room to change from one flight suit into another for the ride into space.

Luc used the time to help the boys and prepared them for the trip. Luc was also listening to Gunther give a briefing. He was talking back and forth with the sub, the destroyer, the artillery battery on the cliff and the captain of the house security. Luc heard the names of the men killed for the first time and realized that he knew them well. They both had families. Now, he was really angry. The boys were okay now and wanted to look around at the other aircraft in the hangar, so Luc asked a nice female lieutenant to escort them. He excused himself from Angela and told her that he had to go to work. She understood. He stepped outside into the hangar and talked to his team.

Independence

“Guys, are we ultra-secure?” That meant Luc’s confidants were to be on a secured line. Gunter said hold and then quickly said secure. “Duncan, did the Chinese just try to assassinate me?”

Luc waited while Duncan composed his answer. “It looks that way. They think in economic terms these days and taking you out would give them advantage on the financial playing field. You are becoming well known these days and, if they thought killing you would up their cash reserves or their stock, they might. For all we know, they may have a grand plan and it is time to make another big move.”

John asked the obvious question, “And what would that be?”

Duncan drew something on a terminal. Luc had to switch to his phone to see the drawing. It was a map, crude, but accurate. “There are two possibilities. The first is territorial expansion. Either north to Russia and or south to Australia. Australia has no cash to fight off a hostile takeover. They are an easy target. And they might welcome a financial savior. Their government is on the verge of collapse because of the bad economy. Or they might make a military move on Russia. If the latest models are accurate, and we made them, if nobody used nukes, Russia would lose in two months. The next possibility is they might think that killing you would be enough for them to break the embargos and huge tariffs we sanctioned when they formed the Eastern Federation. We basically isolated them. They still have lots of cash but, for the first time in a very long time, they have inventory.”

In the end, everyone, including John, thought it was best to be patient before taking any action. They believed it was just too soon to react without being proof positive. Luc listened patiently until he had heard enough. “Well, I’m pissed off. Find out who gave the orders and prepare to retaliate. I had to sit by and watch China take over their neighbors and there was nothing I could do. But they just crossed the line. Let’s downplay this attack on my home and get our own attack prepared. Get our men in position to retaliate. All off the books. But make no mistake, they will be made to understand that we have teeth and they crossed the line we drew in the sand. Duncan take the lead on this. And let’s move very quickly to provide defensive support to our new United Undersea States. The bad guys may see it as a foothold and try to get it. The Japanese saw that territory as vital in WWII and we should protect it. Go to work, everyone.”

Luc made a call, “Captain Perrin please.” He waited a minute and Perrin came on the phone.

“Hello Captain Perrin, this is Luc Champion.”

“Sir, I am so sorry for your losses today. I knew the men who died and they will be missed terribly.”

Luc replied “I know Captain and thank you for that. But, what I really wanted to say was this; thank you for your work and vigilance. Even though we lost comrades today, you saved a lot of others. You and your

command are to be commended. How about taking a week off and all of you and your families go to my castle in Northern France outside of Pontoise?”

“Sir, we really cannot take the down time now.”

Luc countered with, “Oh, yes, you can. We will all be gone for a while and with the reconstruction needed now, it is the perfect time. I know I can’t give you orders, but I know someone who can. What do you say?”

“If you insist.”

“I do. You and your men deserve it. And you all probably need some time with your families since we have had you on extra shifts. Pack up. I will have a ride there in an hour.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Luc signed off, got Gunther on the line and told him what was up. “Gunther, please arrange for them to have a great time.”

“You got it.” Gunther ordered up a bunch of bounce house toys for the kids to play in and a local rock and roll band to play for the parents at night.

Luc walked off his anger around the hangar and everyone was smart enough to stay clear of him for a bit. Angela stepped out of the locker room and approached Luc. “How bad is it?”

Luc gave her the details and she hugged him long and hard. She kissed him and said, “Let’s get to the station and wait for proof that the Chinese attacked us. If they did, then do what you have to do to protect us and make sure they don’t do it again. But right now, let’s go see Teresa and hide.”

Just as she finished, an announcement over the hangar P.A. system saying “Mr. Champion, your ride is landing. Please gather your family and proceed to the front of the hangar where a van is waiting for you.”

The pilot announced their departure and the plane was turned around by a tug. It detached and the engines fired when all was clear. The plane rumbled against the brakes. When they were released, everyone was pressed back into their seats as they blasted down the runway and into the sky. The boys were laughing with delight while Angela looked sick.

After a few minutes of rocketing into the morning sun over Spain, the boosters were fired and the boys screamed as they were leaving the atmosphere. Luc told Angela and the boys not to miss the view. He heard “oohs” and “aahs” and “wows” over the comm. They all watched the view for the couple of orbits it took to get to their destination. When the new station came into view, they were silent.

It looked small at first but, as they approached, it began to dwarf them. Luc forgot how massive the station was when he had not seen it for a while. This sight always helped him gain perspective of the universe. The station was now about sixty percent complete. The center axle was finished with one complete set of rings in the center. There were to be three sets, a large outer ring and a smaller inner ring. There were four spokes that

connected the rings to the hub. Luc saw that it was spinning as they pulled alongside and matched its spin. They waited until the right moment and glided forward into the locks.

December 9, 1988 Mir Russian Space Station, Earth Orbit

Luc had arranged to be included in the November 26, 1988 launch of the Soyuz TM-7 spacecraft as French research scientist named Jean-Luc Dumouchel. Everything had gone well so far on the three-week long space mission. Thirteen days in, he prepared for a spacewalk with Cosmonaut Aleksandr Volkow to deploy a 240-kilogram hexagonal truss structure. He would be the first spacewalker not originating from Russia or the United States.

He and Volkow were helped into spacesuits by crewmembers on board the Mir. Volkow went into the airlock first; the pressure was released and he climbed outside. Luc shut the door behind him, then pressure was let back into the lock and Luc entered. He checked his valves and gave the signal to let the air out. When the lights turned red, Luc opened the hatch and Volkow helped him out of the hatchway. They closed and sealed the door together. At this point, the scripted checks and statuses ended and Luc and Volkow could just talk about the challenge ahead of them.

The truss parts were onboard an unmanned ship that was still docked to Mir. Luc and Volkow would assemble the truss parallel to the rocket cargo bay. In Russian, Luc said, "I will open E4." E4 was a bolted hatch that held the larger cargo bay door controls. It took a minute to unbolt the hatch using an impact wrench. The hatch came free and opened on its hinges. "Opening the cargo bay doors." Luc pressed a couple of buttons and the large doors pivoted open. Inside was the truss parts and assorted small parts boxes. The doors stopped and Luc worked his way to the center where Volkow was waiting.

Volkow said, "This is going to be like putting a bicycle together. Let's go." They both had impact wrenches in their hands to remove the nuts and bolts that held the parts to their containers. The first section came free easily. Together, they lifted the section out of its box and attached each end to the rocket with cables. They retrieved another section and attached it to the first section like an Erector set. There were six sections. They had to attach electronic equipment to the truss as they built it. The build and deployment schedule said this should take three hours to complete. They were just at three hours now and they were less than half finished with construction.

Two bolts refused to come loose on the last truss section and the men were becoming frustrated. They had spent more than an hour working on that problem alone. Luc touched Volkow on the shoulder and pointed to the Earth below. "The Great Wall of China."

"It is winter in China and the clouds have covered it up for a month." They kept working. It had been six

hours now and the assembly was finally ready to be attached to the main station structure. This was the most challenging maneuver. The size of the truss made it difficult to move, even with zero gravity. They detached some of the cables and swung the long structure away from the assembly area. Luc worked the cable attached to the end swinging out. He caught it at the right angle and prepared it for the next move.

Luc's arm was outstretched holding the cable, when he felt several strong impacts to his forearm and wrist, like bullets. His suit began to leak in four holes about the size of a dime. Luc instantly realized what had happened. He had been struck by micrometeorites, little balls of gravel traveling in space at ten times the speed of sound. They did not injure him of course, but his suit was quickly losing pressure.

"I've got a pressure loss. I'm heading inside." He covered the holes with his right hand to minimize the escaping air. With one hand, he pulled himself along his ropes and was inside the lock in a matter of seconds. The emergency brought the whole crew to help as he came out of the chamber back inside the station. Luc stripped off his suit with everyone ready to treat his injured arm. The first man to get a good look at his arm examined one side, turned it over and then back again.

"You should have holes through your arm. There were two hits and four holes, all on the front. Your bare arm deflected the micrometeorites back out of your suit making four holes, two in and two out."

Luc said, "That's impossible. It must have been four pellets of ice. I didn't feel a thing except the bumps when they hit." The crew seemed to buy that explanation for the time being. "Give me another suit and let me get back to work. We are almost finished."

They helped Luc into a fresh spacesuit and he went back outside. It took three more hours until they finished attaching the truss assembly. It was connected and working well. Luc took a good long look around at the stars, the moon and Earth. He went back inside and returned to Earth almost twenty-five days later. No one ever mentioned the incident with the micrometeorites again and it never showed up in any report.

Today Space Station Independence, Earth Orbit

Luc studied the station while they waited for help getting out of their seats. Luc saw maybe fifty people working on the construction and at least twenty robots. The robots were remotely controlled from inside the station. There was a constant ferrying of large beams from a large rectangular box floating free and not spinning to match the station. Luc wondered at how they got the beams in place with the station spinning constantly. He designed the process, but he was still amazed that the complicated ballet worked so smoothly. The beams fed into a unit that passed them through just as they were needed. It sped them up to be in perfect orbiting sync with the section that was being worked on. After the beams were in place, wall sections were moved in and the workers guided the robots to bring the section closer. At the last second, the walls were pulled into place and

quickly snapped down. They placed three of the massive sections and then moved on to build the beam skeleton for the next one. The beams and wall panels were prewired and plumbed. It looked like they would finish the exterior within the next week. This was an engineering marvel. And it was all Luc's. His company owned everything he could see. For now. He thought it should become another United State soon -- if not for political representation, then for defense.

They were finally helped out of their seats. Teresa and her husband, Mac, were waiting right outside the door. Both their children were back on Earth going to college. They all got hugs and kisses and Teresa examined the boys as if she was seeing them for the first time though they video chatted all the time. She was their economics teacher too. Of course, the economics lessons were simple since the boys were only six years old. Mac was a clarinetist and worked with the boys on music sometimes as well. Luc took a good hard look at Teresa and whispered to her, "You hurt all the time, don't you." She nodded yes. He asked her what level and she held up five fingers, on a scale of zero to ten -- ten being writhing in pain. Living with five really sucks.

They were walking on the outer wall of the outer ring and the gravity was pretty close to one G -- Earth's strength. Teresa had two rooms all set up for them on the outer ring. She and Mac lived on the inner ring where the simulated gravity was half that of the outer ring. To get to Teresa and Mac's residence, they would take an elevator to what was equivalent to six stories above them; it was strange to talk about up and down in space. The artificial gravity took some getting used to. The boys wanted to go to the center axle and float around. Teresa promised she would take them after they saw the room she had prepared for them. She took Luc aside as they walked and told him that six men in his security detail were behind them wearing the newest chameleon suits. Luc hoped he would never be able to tell they were there.

The apartment was grand. It was spacious and on a corner so they had lots of windows to view the stars. Teresa had presents for the boys in their room -- a new violin for Michael and a new set of gravity balls for Harry. These were the latest toys from the R&D people. Eye activated goggles were used to keep as many gravity balls floating as possible. Luc thought it was more like work than play. They both loved their gifts and Michael told Teresa and Mac about the father-son recital from the night before. Of course, Teresa and Mac wanted to hear the recital later that night.

Then Teresa said that she has a gift for Luc. Mac got it from another room and said, "Teresa dreamed this up just for you, Luc." Mac set it down in front of Luc and he studied it. It was a piano keyboard. The frame was clear polymer and even had rods down to working pedals, but there were no strings, no mechanism, no electronics, just the black and white keys and the frame to hold them. Luc watched Teresa as he hit a few of the keys and heard nothing. She was grinning like there was a big secret.

She accessed her laptop and said, "Watch this." A beautiful holographic projection of a full size grand

piano appeared around the polymer keys. When Luc touched the keys this time, perfect sound was emitted. Teresa explained that she had Sully working on it for a month since she had the idea. There was now a library of twenty pianos from which to choose. She touched a key on her laptop and the image changed to an old out of tune upright. This was just glorious. Luc played a bit after the hologram was switched to a decent piano and he loved it. Teresa explained that there were tiny sensors in the frame that aligned the projection to the keyboard. It was one of the nicest gifts that anyone had ever given Luc especially because she invented it just for him. She got several big hugs as a reward.

The boys were about to bust and wanted to go to the floating room right then. Luc told them all to go or brains would explode. Angela wanted to go too, so Luc was left alone.

He connected with Sully, the only person online at the time, and asked for an update. Sully informed Luc that their friends were working to find out who was behind the attack. They created a holographic file of suspects that Luc could access. Sully pulled it up for Luc and projected holograms into the main living room open area. Luc thanked Sully and let him know that he would be studying it for a while. A wall of faces with bios connected lines to positions in the Eastern Federation's government. Some pictures had been crossed out as the investigation continued. In fact, one was marked out and a note appeared beside it while Luc was reading. Gunther was working as Luc watched. Luc studied the rest in silence for a few minutes taking it all in.

Luc saw movement out of a window and looked to see one of the construction robots going by. It was a big one about twice the size of a person. The robot stopped at Luc's window and turned to face inward. It was only twenty feet away and Luc could see the cameras on it focusing on him. He knew something wasn't right and moved toward the door to the outside hallway. The bot kept the camera on him as he moved. Then with a blast of speed, it rammed into the window. Luc was at the door now and saw the thick plastic window start to crack. He pressed the door release button and it slid open. He dove through just as the window blew out. The door sealed shut nearly catching on his feet.

Two of Luc's security detail picked him up and ran him down the hallway. The air pressure breach in the apartment made alarms sound everywhere. Emergency airlock doors were shutting around them as they moved along.

They reached a door labeled Emergency Evacuation Pod. One of the security team pushed open the door and they all piled in. The suits they were wearing were being turned off and the team was appearing one at a time.

Luc said "Gunther, report."

Gunther said, "Teresa and Mac jumped into an Evac Pod as soon as the alarms went off. They are all safe."

"The robot crashed into the window after it recognized my face. It was looking for me."

“It is being retrieved as we speak. But, its memory has been downloaded already. Sully is getting a copy of the dump and analyzing it. You need to suit up and get to the command center as fast as possible.”

“I’m almost ready.” As soon as the pod was secure, the security people with Luc had him slip into a full zero atmosphere spacesuit.

Once they were all suited up, they opened the airlock door and made their way to the command center. Luc entered to find everyone dressed like him.

Rashad Hadi, the station manager, came up to Luc and said, “Mr. Champion, trouble seems to be following you. Come over here and let me show you our situation.”

They walked over to a large display of the station and Hadi gave Luc a short briefing. “All the robots have been docked and shut down. Their memory cores have been dumped and your CIO, Mr. Sullivan, has access to everything. I am so sorry for this, sir.”

“It is not your fault. The emergency procedures seem to be working quite well. Thank you.”

They shook hands and Luc said, “Can you provide a terminal for me?”

“Yes, of course. Let’s go to my office.”

They walked to the back of the room, through a door and into a rather cramped and Spartan office.

“Please use this one. I’ll be out in the control room if you need anything else.”

“Thank you for your hospitality.”

“Well, considering this entire station belongs to you, I should thank you for *your* hospitality.”

They laughed and Hadi left Luc to his business. Luc went online and got everyone together.

“Sully, tell me about the robot.”

“It was being controlled remotely from the surface. The signal was routed through a transmitter in Australia. It was a pretty good hack job, but they left a trail. They tried to hide it, but we have new sniffer software on all our systems that copy all data passing through. The hack went through four routers around the world -- Singapore, Sydney, Paris and Toronto, all of them ours. It originated in Shanghai at a small military installation.”

“The Eastern Federation.”

Gunther said, “Speaking of them, we have the debris from the downed fighter jets and the bodies of the pilots -- two of the best test pilots the Chinese had. There are serial numbers and other identifiers all over the planes. We have all the proof we need. We have enough evidence to go before the United Nations World Court if you wish to go that route. What do you want us to do, Luc?”

New Texas

“Actually, I’m going to set the attack to the side until I take care of something else. I want to give the station to the people that live and work here by making it a U.S. state right now. How about we make Teresa acting governor?” They had talked about this before and everyone knew it was coming.

“Wait a minute,” said Duncan. He continued, “I’m sorry, but I disagree. Teresa is busy helping Mary Jo on economic issues. Big, big economic issues. I have someone in mind. How about former Vice President of the United States Raul Delgado? He has always loved the new station and has the public creds as former Governor of Texas to make it work.” Luc saw everyone nodding in agreement. He told everyone to wait online and he would be right back.

Teresa, Angela and the boys were safe and sound in Teresa’s apartment. All precautions had been taken. With the station being in an emergency status, Mac had to go to work. Luc and two security folks made their way to Teresa’s apartment and Luc was greeted by everyone with hugs and kisses. He had spoken with them several times since the robot attack to make sure they were good, so they knew he was okay. Luc comforted the boys by picking them up and hugging them for a long time. Reassured, the boys went into a back room and continued playing in the half G gravity. Luc asked the security people to wait outside.

Angela asked, “What are you planning?”

“I’m not sure yet. I want to know the individuals who gave the commands. Once I have that information, I will probably make sure they can’t do it again, permanently.” Angela and Teresa knew what that meant. The boys started fighting and Angela left to take care of them. Luc carried on the conversation with Teresa.

“I’m going to make the station a new U.S. state, right now. I nominated you for the acting governor position, but Duncan thinks you are too busy with other things. What would you like to do?”

“I’m flattered, but I am working on the new economic models. I must stay focused on that.”

“That’s what Duncan said. How does Raul Delgado sound?”

“Perfect. He has everything needed to be legitimate. I say do it.”

“Thanks. I’ve got to go back to Earth and take care of this Eastern Federation business. I’m going to have Harry come up and take over for me here. He won’t want to leave Angela and the boys alone.”

Luc hurried back to the office where his team was waiting. He brought the video conference back together and said, “Teresa agrees with Duncan. Please get Delgado onto the conference call now.”

Duncan replied, “He’s on hold. I thought you might want to talk to him.”

Sully added Delgado’s feed into the group feed. Delgado appeared to be transmitting from his home office. Luc said, “Good evening or day or morning or whatever it is where you are, Mr. Vice President.”

He replied, "Hello, Mr. Champion. And look at all the other friendly faces. To what do I owe this call? It looks ominous. What has happened?"

Luc filled him in on the events of the last twenty-four hours. Delgado was shocked and then angry. He got angrier with the more he was told.

Then Luc got to the point of the call. "I want to make the station an autonomous state of the U.S. And I want you to be the acting governor until we can hold elections. What do you say?"

Delgado was surprised and everyone else was smiling. "Just like that, eh? That is a very interesting proposition."

Duncan added, "Raul, we need you. This is going to get nasty and we need a steady hand to handle the station. I believe this is the most important thing you will ever do with your life. I would consider it a personal favor if you would help us."

"I see. However, I need to run it by the boss who is in the kitchen fixing dinner. Could you give me a few minutes?"

Luc said, "Take all the time you need. We'll hold on." Everyone laughed and Raul left the room.

Luc went to the door, opened it and asked Hadi to come into the office. Luc told him what was happening and Hadi listened patiently.

Delgado and his wife appeared back at his desk and Mrs. Delgado asked for specifics about where they would live and how long the job would last.

Luc gave her the same answer he gave all the time. "You may live wherever you wish. The job will last as long or as short as you want, as well. You will have to handle the ceremonial aspect of being the governor's wife. Besides that, you can make up the rest as you go."

She whispered in Delgado's ear and said to the computer, "I look forward to getting to know all of you better." She smiled a big beautiful smile and left the meeting.

Raul said, "Well, I guess that's a yes. When do I start?"

Luc said, "Right now."

"Okay ... May I have dinner first?"

Everyone laughed. Duncan said, "Raul, enjoy your dinner and we'll all get back together in an hour. I know Luc's first order of business will be to rename the station. Independence is a lousy name for a U.S. state. I personally like New Texas, but you may name it whatever you like. Then we need to think about the station's defense. Let me introduce you to your right-hand man, Rashad Hadi. He is the station manager."

Introduction were made and all agreed to meet again in an hour. Luc used the time to review the list of suspects responsible for the attacks. The list had dwindled down to fourteen. That was excellent progress.

When all were back together after the break, Luc started the meeting, "Let's talk about defense for the

station. I need a threat assessment ASAP. But in the meantime, let's get a couple of the big guns up here to counterattack any missiles." Luc was talking about his DEMP guns, a new development from one of Luc's labs. They were Directed ElectroMagnetic Pulse guns. In simple terms, they were a nuclear device that did not cause physical destruction and radiation. The only teeth the weapon had was to destroy any electronics powered up. Directed pulse meant that a pulse can be aimed at anything and appropriately sized, such as for a basketball. "Does anyone think we should land a bank of missiles here as well?"

Raul Delgado said, "I'd like that, but how do you get around the Space-based Weapons treaty?"

Duncan said, "What they won't know, won't hurt them. I can handle it."

"Okay then, let's do it. Gunther?"

"Already sending orders."

"Let's give the defense command to Captain Perrin, if he wants it. And get him a promotion. What does the construction schedule look like right now?"

Sully pulled up the schedule and put it on a shared monitor. Luc looked at it and was not pleased. "This is taking too much time. The technology will be old by the time this is finished. Let's get it done in the next two months. John, you and I can work on crashing the schedule. Governor Delgado, it's your baby now. Please take command and make this place secure as fast as possible. Things are likely to get hot on the planet below."

Luc presented another idea just to make things really interesting. "I want to move the Elysium production facility and the old ISS here. I would like them protected -- the ISS for historical reasons and the plant out of obvious necessity. John, Duncan, can you two work together to make that happen?"

Duncan answered for both, "I'll work the permissions to move the ISS and John, if you handle the logistics, we can do it in about a day."

"Excellent. Since we are almost all together, I have some plans I want to share with everyone. I want to continue to build more stations. I want two identical stations orbiting the moon and Mars."

Delgado spoke first, as any good politician would do, "Wow. Just like that, you want two more stations?"

John covered Luc's back, "It's the next logical step forward. The design for a ship that does not enter any gravity fields is done. It's basically a big cargo mover. We can move the manufacturing plants to the moon's orbit as soon as they are finished with New Texas. Luc, the next things to build are surface bases. Do you have designs in your head?"

"Yes, but they depend on the locations. They are all modular, but I am wondering if subterranean wouldn't be a better answer. I'll put some engineers on it. And I'll ramp up the manufacturing of the needed ships and such. We have an engineer here that I would like to steal, Dr. Casandra James. She and I invented Elysium together. We've never met in person, but I think she is one of the sharpest thinkers there is."

Hadi said, "She's right outside in the control room now. I'll get her." He stepped out and returned with a

petite woman of around thirty years old. She was suited up, but was carrying her helmet. Her long curly red hair looked like it would be a real challenge to fit into her helmet.

Cassandra saw Luc, reached out and shook his hand vigorously saying, “Mr. Champion, sir. It’s nice to finally meet you in person.”

“Yes, it is. I feel like we are old friends after all the hours we put in on Elysium.”

“It is really nice to see the work we did become something wonderful for humankind.”

“I couldn’t have said it better myself.” They both laughed.

Then Luc said, “How would you like a chance to have that same feeling all the time working with me on other projects?”

“Yes. Of, course.”

“Do you have family with you?”

“No. I’ve always been too busy for a family. I hope to have one someday.”

She wasn’t aware that there were a bunch of people listening into the conversation. Luc turned to the monitor and said, “John, why don’t we give Dr. Cassandra James…”

She interrupted and said, “Please call me Cass.”

Luc continued, “Let’s create a new slot for *Cass* as Acting Chief Technology Officer. Work with her and write up a responsibilities contract. Give her wide discretion and latitude.” Luc turned to her and said, “Does that sound good?”

“It sounds incredible. Like a dream come true.”

Luc said, “Oh, you’ll earn your salary. Trust me. We have a lot of work to do.”

“Mr. Champion, thank you for this opportunity. Really, thank you very, very much.”

“Please call me Luc.”

“Yes, Mr. Champion. Luc it is.”

“Cass, please stay for the rest of this meeting. We’ll save the introductions for later. Harry, please catch the next ride here. If I leave the station, I know that you will keep my family safe. Is that okay with you?”

“Yes. I’ll coordinate the protective details with Gunther. I’ll be there in a few hours and you can leave then.”

Luc turned to Cass and said, “You heard it. You’ve got three or four hours until your life gets turned upside down.”

“In that case, I’ve got a lot of work to do. Excuse me while I get to it.” Cass smiled and left the room.

Mary Jo said, “I like her. You know you are going to have to share your secret with her eventually.”

“Probably more sooner than later.”

Luc moved on, “Harry, is Roberta okay?”

“She’s fine. She’s going to manage the repairs to our home. They start tomorrow.”

“While we have this opportunity, I want to upgrade the house with a new system. It’s a smart function that will provide voice activated control into every room and much, much more. I’ve been designing it for the last few months. Sully, can you get the folks we have been working with to get moving on it?”

Sully replied, “You bet. I’ve even got some specs I want to throw in too.”

“Harry, how about we expand the I/O Room to three times its current size? I would also like a new playroom for Harry and Michael. They are going to outgrow the current facilities very soon.”

Governor Delgado chimed in with that one, “Harry and Michael are your sons, right?”

“Yes. They are six years old now.”

“Wow. I would have guessed three. Time flies. Why are they going to need more room?”

Duncan said, “Luc has a very special gift. He remembers everything, literally. And his sons have inherited this gift.”

Raul said, “Ah, now things are beginning to make sense. I always knew there was more to you than meets the eye. And here I just thought you were a shrewd businessman.”

All of Luc’s friends were thinking the same thing, “Delgado only knows the half of it.”

Delgado continued, “Well good luck with that. I had a hard enough time with my five kids. And now I’m having it all over again with my thirteen grandchildren.”

Luc said, “Wow. ‘Good luck’ back at you.” Luc felt he had found a kindred spirit. He knew he liked Raul for a reason.

Luc concluded the meeting, “As soon as Harry arrives, he will take charge of my family’s security and they will finish their vacation here as planned. I am heading to the old backup HQ. Anyone care to join me?”

Sully said, “I love it there. It will need some expanding, again. I’ll leave as soon as we end this meeting.”

Gunther said, “I’m going too. I could use the space as well. However, I can’t leave for a few days. I’m in the middle of finding the bastards that attacked us.”

“John, I think it’s time I met your three new vice presidents. Can you have them travel to the silo, please?”

“Yes. I’ll have them there when you arrive.”

“When I leave here, I need to make a quick stop in D.C. and have a few words with the Joint Chiefs. Duncan, would you please head that way and set up a meeting for me.”

“Yes. No problem.”

“Everyone, thank you. Watch your backs. Have a good day or night or whatever.”

When the meeting was over, Luc went to Teresa’s apartment. The boys were awake, but ready for bed. Teresa arranged for them to stay at her place. Luc visited with the boys and had a serious talk with them about the

events of the past twenty-eight hours. Luc found himself speaking differently with them now. Their new memory ability required more detailed answers and explanations. They would understand almost everything they heard and read soon. However, until then, they would bank the data and find the answers to any questions as soon as they could. At this stage and age, they were old enough to know something big was going on, but not old enough to understand the threat to daddy's life. Harry cried a bit, but was consoled by the fact that they were staying on the station for another week. Now it was time to tell Teresa and Angela what was up.

The women were sitting in the living room waiting for Luc. Before he started talking, he asked Sully to cut off all the monitoring in the room. He asked the cloaked guards leave the room as well. When they were gone, Luc paced the perimeter of the room and discovered a remaining cloaked guard. Luc asked the guard to take off his headpiece. He did and Luc introduced himself. The guard was a young corporal in Gunther's corp. He was upset that he got busted, but Luc explained that he had extensive experience with the suit and not to feel bad that he had been spotted. Luc asked him to leave as well. The women were getting a good laugh out of all of this and that just made the exposed guard feel worse.

After the guard had exited, Luc said, "Harry is on his way and I am going back to Earth after he arrives. I've promoted Cass James, the woman that worked with me on Elysium, and bringing her with me. I'm heading to D.C. to talk to the Joint Chiefs with Duncan. You two have never seen me at war. I'll act quite differently and it may scare you a bit. But, attacking my family is a whole new ballgame. I've always had only me to worry about. This isn't going to be pretty. We are close to finding the men who gave the orders. They must be stopped. The world is changing and they are trying to hold onto their power base. They have no idea who they are messing with. They think I'm a fat cat businessman trying to make money. They are in for a real surprise. This is war, whether outright in the open or in the shadows. Make no mistake, the full might of my resources and those of the U.S. are about to come down on them with a very large hammer."

Teresa and Angela had been sharing looks while Luc was ranting. Angela said, "Luc, I love you. You do what you have to do to protect us. I grew up watching the Chinese trying to take over the world by using their slave labor to produce goods cheaper than the West could. The time for totalitarian regimes is past. Bring them down, honey. Set those people free." She had tears in her eyes now. Luc knew that she was thinking more of the people out there in the real world than she was of herself and her family.

Teresa understood all that was being said and added, "I don't like what has happened, but some sort of showdown is inevitable. They started it. You finish it and let's end this form of government on our planet once and for all."

"Thanks. I sure wish Ruth and Megan were still with us. They always helped me keep my perspective when I would turn a bit too cold-blooded.

Angela then gave Luc the best advice he had gotten in years. "Call James Reed, Megan's oldest son. He

just finished his doctorate in military tactics or something.”

Teresa said, “Great idea. He and Megan are a lot alike. You would find his counsel wise beyond his years. He’s a captain now and stationed at the Pentagon.” Luc knew what she meant by saying that Megan and James were a lot alike. James lived his faith, as his mother did. Not many people really do that.

Commandeering an Old Young Friend

Luc left the women and used a terminal in Teresa's study. He started out by calling Sully, who was already in route to the Silo in South Dakota on a small jet. Luc told him what he wanted and Sully had no trouble fulfilling the request, even in flight. Luc's request was complicated and would awaken many people. Sully asked for fifteen minutes. Luc was going to commandeer Captain James Matthew Reed and make him his military aide and liaison as of right then and there. Luc returned to Angela and Teresa but, seeing that they were in a deep economic conversation, he chose not to break their momentum. Luc's new piano had been retrieved from space after the decompression mishap and brought to Teresa's apartment. Luc moved it to another room and played quietly. Luc knew it might be the last bit of peaceful time he would have for a while. He was amazed at the instrument. The action, the sounds and the feel of it were wonderful. He started with one of his favorites, Smile. It always uplifted him and put him in the proper perspective, as he called it. He looked out the window at the stars as he played and that gave him the serenity he needed at that moment. Lucasiah Champion knew he was making a positive difference in their tiny segment of the universe, but it was still humbling to realize that he was just a speck in the big picture of it all.

Sully came back online right on time and told Luc that he could get started with his commandeering in thirty minutes. The wheels were in motion and there was no stopping them now. Luc thought it would be fun. It would be for Sully and Luc, but not so much on James's end, he thought. Luc played and played and played while the time passed. He was constantly multitasking in his head. Tickling the ivories without concentrating on performance gave him time to think about the serious course of action he was preparing to take. He was fearful that it would get a lot worse before it got better.

Luc made the call to James right on time. James's sleepy voice made Luc realize that he had awakened Megan's son. Why does everybody talk like Elmer Fudd when they get woken up? "He-whoa."

"James, this is Lucasiah. How are you?"

James woke up a bit more upon hearing Luc's name. "I was asleep, that's how I am. It's four a.m. Lucasiah, is this a call that can wait until daylight?"

Luc replied, "No, I am afraid it can't. I'm about to turn your world upside down and thought I would give you the respect of telling it to you personally instead of hearing it from your commanding officer in a few minutes."

"Is it something that's going to make him upset? I love seeing him upset. Okay, Lucasiah, or should I call you Luc?" he said, preparing himself for whatever was coming.

"You can call me anything you want, but I'm afraid it's going to end up "sir" most of the time. Oh, by the

way, where are you?”

“I’m in D.C. I work at the Pentagon.”

“I know where you work, I was just wondering where you lived. Answer your door.”

“What? Answer my door?” Three sharp knocks sounded on James’s front door. “What the hell?” Luc heard him walk to the door and slowly open it. There was muffled talk and then the door shut. James returned to the terminal camera and sat down with the package that was just delivered. “Sir, what’s in the box?”

Luc answered exactly what Sully was saying into his ear, “It’s a very special laptop designed for me and my team, and it was built by the best of the best of the best... Excuse me, James. Please open the box and I will be right back.” but Luc let him hear his side of the conversation. “Sully, that was really good. You turned me into a puppet again. This time it only took ten words for me to catch on. Very, very good, but remember I can play practical jokes with the best of them. How about I tell your new girlfriend that you like to play with Legos? Yes, I know you have a new girlfriend... I like her file. I think you should keep this one. Anyway, I gotta get back to work.”

Luc turned his attention back to James. “James, are you there?”

“Yes, sir. This is a pretty cool looking machine. Walk me through startup.” Luc did and in about two minutes had him on a secure video conference.

Luc called Teresa and Angela into the room and said, “Ladies, let me show you what a captain in the Army looks like when you wake him up at four a.m.”

Teresa and Angela said together, “Hi, James.”

He replied, “Aunt Teresa, Angela. I should have known that you two would be around if Luc was calling.”

Luc blurted out, “Aunt Teresa? When did you become his aunt?”

“Megan insisted. Who do you think has been pushing this kid’s tail through school? If he had his way, he’d be a lifeguard on a beach in Hawaii.”

James quickly replied, “That was only one summer three years ago.”

Luc interrupted the love fest and by asking them to back him up with the story he was about to tell. “Girls, please nod your heads and chime in anytime to help me out here. James, I need you to be my military aide and liaison to your big, big bosses. The Eastern Federation attacked our home in France. We escaped and came up to the station with Teresa. They tracked me and programmed a construction robot try to kill me. Obviously, it failed. I’m going to work with the military to take care of this and I need your help.”

“Is everyone okay?” James was genuinely worried.

“Yes, we are fine. A few very good men lost their lives in the attack, but we are fine, thanks to them. We believe the East intends to leverage my demise to further their territorial and economic expansion. I am meeting with the Joint Chiefs to bring them up to date tomorrow morning or as soon as I can get to D.C. I am going to

be asking for their partnership in what is going to happen next.”

“And what would that be?” James was almost awake now.

“I’m not sure, I’m making this up as I go. But, more importantly than all that, I need you to do for me what your mother did for so many years. I need you to tell me when the decisions I’m making are wrong.”

Luc paused and Teresa took over, “James, this is what your mother would want you to do. Please help us.”

Without hesitation, James said, “Of course I will. I love you all and so did my mother.” He rose to his feet and said, “Sir, where and when, sir?” He was standing at attention and saluting with tears in his eyes as he remembered his dear mother.

Luc stood and saluted back. After all, he was a general in an army once a very long time ago. Then Luc said, “Answer your door.” James took off for the door and came back with an angry older man in sweats. James pointed the newcomer to the video camera on the laptop and said, “Sir, this is my CO, Colonel Moulder.”

The Colonel said, “What the hell is this? Who are you anyway? You can’t just come here and take my staff apart without an explanation to my face.”

Luc asked the women to leave then turned and faced the camera, “Sir, you are right. I was wrong to go around you and I apologize. I am Lucasiah Champion, owner of Champion Industries. I am about to partner with your military in a joint action against a conglomerate nation that has taken action against me.” When Luc saw that Moulder understood, he continued, “By attacking me, they have attacked my company and my country. I need this man to help me keep my cool during the dark time I fear that is ahead.” Luc gave him another second. “His family and mine have been lifelong friends. I would consider it a personal favor to me if you would help me out with keeping this between us and his reassignment played down as much as possible. And I always repay my favors.”

“Well, now that you have explained it, I understand.” He paused and then said, “Besides, I was really sent over here by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs to find out all I could and report back.” He broke out laughing and dropped the angry act. “I think I’ll tell her that Captain Reed has no clue what’s going on. And we will just pretend this conversation never happened.” He was still laughing and then stifled it a bit and continued, “But if you boys need anything that a lowly old Colonel can do, you just ask.” With that, he stood, saluted James, shook his hand and said, “Make me proud, son.” He turned to the monitor, “Good luck, Mr. Champion. May God be with you.” He had no idea.

Luc told James the story of what had taken place in the last day or so, and James was really wide-awake now. In fact, he had moved into his kitchen and was making coffee. Knowing that James wouldn’t sleep anymore that night, Luc introduced him to Sully and asked him to show James how to get access to the team’s private net at the appropriate level. Sully would know with those words to give James access to files up to the point of

knowing their trusted friend's inner secrets. "And make sure that he has comm access to me continuously. I would like James to have an internal comm unit like Gunther and I have, but can we set it up to somehow transmit sub-vocally? All I need is for us to be in the same room to get a signal from James without him speaking."

Sully replied as James was looking dumbfounded at the terminal, "Sure. I could read eye blinks and send a beep to the other's earpiece."

Luc replied, "Good. Make it three fast blinks. James, I would like to have my team implant a tiny comm device behind your ear just like mine. Gunther is my head of security and he and I have been linked for twelve years. Now it will be the three of us. The units are quite undetectable when not transmitting. They are activated by voice command."

James was thinking fast, which was good, and said, "Excellent. I was wondering how I was going to signal you in a room full of people when there is a problem with what you are hearing or doing." Sully explained the installation procedure and assured James that it was almost painless. Then he talked through the operations procedure of the implant.

When they were finished Luc continued, "James, let me ask you a question. What rank would one have to have to be taken seriously by the Chairman?"

He thought about it and then answered slowly, "Lieutenant Colonel."

Luc replied, "Do any of the Chiefs or their aides know you?"

"No, I'm not even sure who they are." He was beginning to understand.

"Would a Lieutenant Colonel turn up from out of the blue without them knowing him?"

"Sure. We're a big Army. But, I'm way too young."

"Sully, take care of all this please and have James ready when I land in D.C. I think my ride will be here in a couple of hours with Harry on board. One hour to turn it around and one to bring it home. Have James meet me at the airfield when I land. We can sync up on the trip into the city. James, sorry about all this but, as I told Teresa and my wife, I am now at war."

Luc said goodbye and let James and Sully get to work. He returned to the next room where the women were laughing together. "What's so funny?"

Teresa stopped laughing enough to say, "We just realized that Angela is my great great great great great great step-grandmother. Ha ha ha."

He went to Teresa's kitchen and found her wines. She had a bottle of a nice red open and Luc poured himself a glass. He sat next to Angela and she looked at it, then him and laughed. "What are you doing? You know you can't handle half of that."

Teresa grabbed the glass and said, "Here, let me help out." She drank half and handed the glass back to

Luc. He smelled it, took a sip and then finished it in one gulp. Five minutes later, he was nodding off. Angela pushed him over and he was asleep on Teresa's couch.

Up to Speed

Luc's phone rang a couple of hours later and it was the Hadi telling him the plane had arrived with Harry aboard. Luc got up and went to the bathroom. He looked at Teresa's meds that were sitting out. He recognized them all and was distressed by the regiment she had to maintain. It must wear on her terribly. Decent parents always wish the suffering of a child to be on them instead of the helpless ones. Teresa was far from a child, nonetheless, Luc felt the same.

He quietly went in and kissed the boys goodbye and then found Angela curled up fast asleep in another room. He woke her a bit and said goodbye.

Teresa got up and helped Luc gather what little stuff he had. She gave him a good long hug and said, "Take care of yourself, Grandpa. I know you have a world to save, but this family needs you. I love you. And listen to James. He is wise beyond his years." Then she added, "You know, that just made me think, for being as old as you are, you should be a whole lot wiser."

That comment earned her a very honest answer, "I've never told anyone this before. My memory ability did not hit me until I was seventy years old. Before that, I was pretty stupid. I was the dumbest of my brothers and everyone knew it. And if I wasn't indestructible, I would have died from stupidity a hundred times. After seventy, it took me about two years to be smarter than the second dumbest brother. Then I was the freak. Don't you dare tell anyone."

Harry had quietly entered the apartment and was politely waiting. However, he could not resist commenting on that last statement. "I heard that."

Luc retorted quickly, "And if I didn't know that you would forget it in ten minutes, I would be worried." When you had had as many of those 'I should have said this' moments as Luc did, you would have quick comebacks too.

Luc and Harry hugged in greeting, and Harry said, "I've got it covered here now. You go and do what you have to do."

"Thank you, my young friend. Thank you."

Cass and Luc met at the dock and settled in for a quick ride to take care of some very important business. The preparation time was just a few minutes these days after they put on their flight suits. There still was no way to overcome the G-force that would cause blackouts without the pressure that the suits put on the space travelers' legs at high Gs'. The dream of inertial dampers from Star Trek still had not materialized. Neither had anti-gravity.

Luc had designed a saucer-like vehicle that floated. It worked with a slightly off-balance spinning system of moving weights that generated enough centrifugal force, so it just barely overrode the one G gravity on Earth. It was just too costly without enough benefit to take the design any further than the one prototype. It was a nice science experiment. Leonardo Da Vinci would have been proud.

When they had uncoupled the plane from the station and were orbiting, Luc asked Cass, “If you could work on anything you wanted starting now, what would it be? What do you dream about doing?”

“That’s easy. I would like to take Elysium to the next level. I’ve already been working on morphing it using different techniques.”

“Morphing? Are you talking about changing its characteristics instantaneously?”

“Exactly, I’ve already been synthesizing a new strain that acts exactly like the good stuff, but will change with sound waves. Really, really low frequency sound waves. Too low to be heard, just felt.”

They touched down at Andrews Air Force Base. Duncan’s jet was parked near four armored SUVs and what looked like a plain fair-sized RV. Luc climbed aboard Duncan’s aircraft while Cass was escorted to the RV by twelve well-equipped soldiers. Lieutenant Colonel James Reed was working at a conference room table with his laptop open.

Luc said, “Hi, James.”

“Hello, Luc.” James and Luc shook hands and then hugged each other like brothers.

“James, I cannot thank you enough for coming along peacefully into this mess.”

“If you had started off by telling me the story, you couldn’t have stopped me from helping.”

“I appreciate that. We’ve got a lot of work to do.”

Just then Duncan came into the room from the rear of the plane. “Luc, good to see you in one piece.”

Luc and Duncan just shook hands. Duncan slid a set of panels located on the side of the room to reveal a fully stocked kitchen. He opened a refrigerator and made Luc pick from a variety of soft drinks. Luc grabbed two water bottles and turned to a monitor where the suspect org chart was displayed. There were more faces crossed out and photographs now appeared next to several names.

They talked about the strategy they would use in the meeting that was less than forty-five minutes away. Duncan and James had printed several sets of documents stored in folders. There was a folder for every member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, boldly marked with the name of the Chief and ‘Eyes Only’. Duncan showed Luc the folder contents and Luc suggested a couple more items that Sully could provide.

One of Duncan’s aides announced that it was time to go, and the group headed to the RV. Cass was ready, dressed in a smart business dress outfit. She had tamed her hair into a braid that hung down her back. Cass shook hands with Duncan and James. When she shook James’s hand, she held it and took a long deep look into

his eyes. He smiled and enjoyed the moment. Then, she was dragged back to the dressing rooms to put on makeup.

Luc was met by a pushy man who held up two suits and three ties for Luc to choose from. Luc pointed to the items he liked and started to change right there.

James set up his laptop while he and Duncan watched the clothes selection with amusement. James laughed, shook his head and said, “And I thought you were a lab tech working for my mother.” Then he went to work.

James had his new computer set up on a foldout table in the dining area. He said to Luc, “Sully, Gunther, John, Mary Jo, Teresa, Angela, Harry, Raul and Rashad Hadi are waiting, sir.” He spun the laptop to show Luc pulling up his suit pants. Angela was the only one who laughed. Everyone else displayed really big smiles, like they were at a surprise party.

Harry spoke first, “Angela has something to tell you.”

She said, “Luc, honey, I wanted this to be private, but I don’t think we are going to have much private time for a while. I’m pregnant.”

Luc was so surprised that he let go of his pants as he sat down and that got everyone laughing. Just then, Cass came from the back of the RV. She looked at Luc, then at the computer with all the people’s faces on it and said, “What did I miss?” That created more laughs and Luc yelled something that was between “Yippee” and “Yahoo,” over and over again. Then he heard a chorus of “Congratulations” from everyone, including the RV staff.

When they had settled down, one of the RV staff said, “Sir, we are fifteen minutes from the destination and your meeting starts in thirty.”

They all understood and Luc said, “Sully, please make us ample secure.” That meant they would be talking about everything with the exception of Luc’s life before ten years ago. James asked the three staff persons to move to the cab of the RV and closed the door. He then told Sully that the room was as secure as it was going to get. Sully had James swept the entire RV earlier.

Luc started the meeting by taking a good look at James and saying, “Colonel, you look great.”

Sully said, “A little gray highlights and makeup to add some wrinkles and he is now forty-five. I created a new file for him that has his complete new glorious career in it. And poof, a new man is born.”

Luc said, “Very cool.” He then got his first real look at Cass. “Ladies and gentlemen, may I present Dr. Casandra James, my co-inventor of Elysium and our new acting Chief Technical Officer.”

John said, “Welcome to our team.” Several people echoed the welcome.

Cass looked at all the faces and said, “I look forward to working with all of you.”

Luc moved on, “Okay, reports all around. Three minutes each. Cass and James last.” And off they went.

Raul was heading to the station later that day and had been in extensive contact with Hadi to coordinate activities. He and Duncan had put together a formidable team to write the station's new state constitution. John would introduce Raul at a press conference later that morning and Raul would announce the request for statehood.

Mary Jo reported that the United Undersea States had initiated a brilliant new non-monetary system. It was a barter system of trading labor or combining and sharing goods. It sounded a lot like communism on the practical day-to-day living level with a democracy sitting on top to run the country. Most intriguing. Luc requested a complete briefing paper and asked Raul to analyze if the model would work on the station.

In a surprise move, Israel asked Duncan about becoming a U.S. state. Everybody thought Israel would be an ally but remain standing alone. Luc asked Gunther to investigate what was really going on. Duncan continued, "And I would like to say welcome to our new military attaché, Colonel Reed." Everyone applauded quietly. "James, looking at you, I see your mother and I know she would be proud, son."

James nodded a thank you and Gunther took over, "We have identified the East's leadership that ordered the hit on you, Luc. It was the North Korean former president Kyong Wonha, along with three of the Chinese leaders. Wonha sits on the leadership council with his new buddies, Dishu Lin, Quon Ding and Shen Li. Lin and Ding are also generals and Li is a protégé of both and new to the council. He is the head of their new Information Ministry. It's really the old Ministry of State Security with a new name."

"So, they have the motive, opportunity and means. Two failed attempts and no indication that they will stop there. Am I correct?"

Gunther said, "Unfortunately, you are. Sully, would you please repeat the briefing you gave me. I'd botch the story up somewhere along the line and you would end up telling it anyway."

Sully complied, "A few years back, I hacked a list from the Chinese on their top choices for recruitment from leading universities to join their software security department. It was not considered classified at the time and was easy to get. The list had a memo attached that said the women should be favored. There were three on the list. Two were finishing their master's degrees in the U.S. Their schools were close together, Stanford and Berkeley. I played the odds and became good friends with those two women. The third was in London. My favorite, Wendy from Stanford, got the job. She's been sending me lightweight stuff and anything she thinks is interesting because she hates her government. I have been storing their emails for a long time hoping to crack their decryption algorithms someday. I took a big chance and hit Wendy up for the keys, and she sent them thirty minutes later. As a free bonus, she included in her message a complete list of the demographics and up-to-date bios of the entire sixteen-man council. And a request for asylum here in the U.S. She may be compromised now by helping me, but she can't take any more. Gunther is taking care of that.

We had to decrypt about forty thousand emails going back three years to find the ones we needed. The

emails had lots of project code names. One message referenced a bunch of database files and even had a nice drawing of their databases' key relationships, mapping of the regular downloads between systems and a list of users for everything. It was the Rosetta Stone to their entire government network of systems. After that, it was easy to gain access to any one of them as a user. Blue Dragon is the code name for the project to neutralize you, Luc."

Luc spoke, "That leaves me with one course of action. All four of these men must be neutralized before they can act again. To avoid spooking any of them, they need to die at the same moment and in the same way. And without a trail of any kind. They can conclude anything they want, but they must have no evidence that can come back on us. Nothing."

Gunther said, "That's not possible. To coordinate a strike like that just cannot be done." Gunther had never said these words before and he is not pleased with having to now.

Then Cass said in a matter of fact tone, "I know how to do it."

No Such Thing as a Casual Meeting with the Joint Chiefs of Staff

The motorcade pulled into one of the Pentagon's garages and stopped. Doors opened, Luc's security detail got out and made contact with some very nice soldiers with big guns. Luc announced to his team that they had arrived at the Pentagon and the meeting must continue later. He said, "Let's finish this conversation as soon as the meeting here is over. Probably about an hour. Thank you all. Especially you, honey. I love you."

Luc, Duncan, Cass and James assembled as a major approached and said, "Good morning. Please follow me. The group fell into order and headed inside the massive office building. They went quickly through their first ID check and metal detectors. Badges were produced and signed for. They proceeded on until they arrived at another checkpoint. This time the foursome were frisked and scanned with handheld metal detectors. Badges were checked and checked again. Names were located on lists and they were given another set of badges with their photos that magically appeared. They were led down corridor after corridor and finally into an elevator. They descended four floors where the doors opened to another shorter corridor. There, they were handed off to another Army major who politely welcomed them and walked them into a very large and plush conference room, decked out with monitors and comm systems. Even Luc was impressed.

Six uniformed flag officers milled around waiting for the visitors. Duncan knew everyone and made the introductions. Nobody blinked as the colonel was introduced. Beverages were offered all around. Duncan and Luc both took a cup of coffee. Luc zeroed in on Admiral Elizabeth Tanner, the Chairperson. Luc liked her already. He had read everything they had on all the staff, but her bio was the most impressive. She had to outperform the best men in the services by a wide margin to get this job, now held for four years and two presidents.

When the visitors were comfortable, Admiral Tanner began, "Mr. Champion, this meeting is highly unusual. We are not used to being summoned by anyone but the Commander and Chief. He quite pleasantly asked us for some time to hear what you have to say. Pleasant or not, getting us together on such short notice is a feat in and of itself. Now, would you care to enlighten us on the necessity for your visit?"

"Certainly. Colonel, would you hand out the briefing papers please." The folders were set in front of the Chiefs. "Duncan, would you take over this part of the discussion."

"Yes, Mr. Champion." It took ten minutes to lay out the story of the attacks on Luc and the data the team had uncovered. There were some pauses while rapid phone calls were made, orders exchanged with staff and files dropped in front of each and every one of them quickly and cleanly. Everything Duncan said was checked and verified. The Chiefs did not take the story well and were all ready to take action. One does not become a Chief of Staff by sitting on the fence waiting to get a butt kicking.

Duncan finished and Luc said, "Thank you, Secretary Freeborn."

The Chairperson said, "Mr. Champion, I am very concerned that you have resources that are obviously better than mine. But, that is a discussion for another day. And we will have that discussion. I assume that you are not here to beg for help."

Luc made the pitch, "No Admiral, I am not." He leaned forward to make his point and went on, "I intend to kill these four men."

The four-star Marine general said, "Well, I've never heard it put that plainly before. You are blunt, Mr. Champion. I'll give you that."

"They committed an act of war by attacking me." Several of the Chiefs wanted to argue the point, but Luc explained too fast to give them the chance. "My company holds the keys to economic stability on a global scale and you all know the amount of business I conduct on behalf of our nation. My interests are your interests. Like it or not, we are partners in protecting our country and the entire western civilization." Luc let them ponder that statement for a few seconds and then carried on. "So far, we can still consider them to be renegade terrorists and not representative of their governments."

A general said, "It is true that we are partners. But only up to the point of you trying to do our job. If you follow through with this, you will be acting outside the law. You will be a vigilante."

"I've been called that before, sir."

Duncan said, "We came here as a courtesy to you. If this escalates, you will need to be prepared."

Admiral Tanner said, "We do not have the authority to condone the course of action you are about to take."

Luc stood and said, "If that is the case, our business here is concluded."

"Hold on," said Admiral Tanner. "We're still sitting here and so should you." It was a kind and reasonable request with no sense of ordering him around.

Luc took his seat again.

Another general said, "Things don't get any more serious than this, Mr. Champion. We have protocols and procedures. There are contingency plans that should be reviewed."

"I am not going to let this get bogged down in procedure and bureaucratic red tape. I don't have time to waste and let them take another shot at me. This world is changing right before your eyes and you need to think and act just as fast. Or we can all roll over and let the East take over the planet."

The chairperson said, "You don't need to try to intimidate us. This is a dire situation, but hardly the end of the world."

Luc said, "Duncan, please inform these good people of some things they may not be aware of."

"Yes, sir. The undersea labs are requesting sovereignty as a new country -- the United Undersea States. They have officially asked Mr. Champion to outsource his protection services agency for their defense. We

have agreed and already have made moves to do just that.”

Several aides left the room to verify the statement.

“The space station Independence is going to have a new general manager appointed in a couple of hours -- Vice President Raul Delgado is taking the job. His first act is to submit a request to the U.S. to make the station a U.S. state. He will be the acting governor until he can organize elections. I believe the new state will be called New Texas.” The Army general actually gaped in shock.

“And, Israel is willing to give up its sovereignty and become a U.S. state, as well.”

“What!” shouted the Army general.

Luc said, “Thank you, Secretary Freeborn. Toss all this stuff into one pot and you have a recipe for World War III.” Admiral Tanner had kept a poker face during this last information dump. Luc sat directly across the table from her and could see her heartbeat in the veins of her neck. The red in her face was climbing.

Tanner said, “I wonder if you wouldn’t mind giving us some time to confer?” Luc, Duncan, Cass and James all got up and stepped out into the hallway.

Luc took the opportunity to talk to Cass, “Please tell me about your idea on solving my problem with the four men in China?”

Cass had been waiting to lay out her idea ever since she thought of it and was very excited. “There are fifty-three distinct configurations of Elysium, as you know. We created a standard properties table of all of them, which you designed, by the way. We used that to find sixteen and twenty-seven, the ones we use in production.” Luc was easily following her and Duncan and James were even understanding so far as well.

“I decided to expand your table past the standard hardness grades of ductility, elastic stiffness, plasticity, strain, strength, toughness and viscoelasticity. I hit Elysium with the entire electromagnetic spectrum from Extremely Low Frequency to gamma rays.” She saw she was losing Duncan and James with that sentence and backtracked for them. “The hardness grades are used to classify any material. The electromagnetic spectrum is made up of light, radio, microwaves and ionizing radiation, like X-rays.”

They both nodded their appreciation for the explanation and she continued, “I hit it with the complete scale of every physical and energy spectrum, including acoustic. Nothing unusual turned up until 12 Hertz at 125 decibels. It made number forty-eight disintegrate into carbon dust.” She looked at Duncan and James and said, “That is a very loud extremely low sound. You would feel it as a tremor rather than hear it.” Once she saw that they understood, she got out her cell phone and pulled a table up to show to Luc.

He scanned for number forty-eight, looked at the data and said, “The hardness rankings are at the top of the scales all across the table.”

Cass smiled and said, “Yeah.”

Luc smiled back and she kept going, “I took a one-inch long thread and fired it with a magnetic pulse

system. After a lot of trial and error with size and shape, I got it to ninety-eight percent of the speed of light. At that velocity, it passes through anything and everything and just keeps going and going.”

Luc got it and said, “A micro-bullet.”

Cass was grinning ear to ear and said, “And then we turn it into dust.” She was leading Luc along with her hands. At the words ‘into dust’, she made her two clenched fists blossom open up like an explosion.

The conference room doors opened and the four were asked to come back in.

The Admiral spoke once they all had taken seats, “Mr. Champion, this is a very serious game you want to play. Can you assure us that the deaths of these men will not leave evidence that can come back to you?”

Luc answered, “Yes, or I wouldn’t do it. However, just to be clear, I am going to hit all four men at precisely the same time. That will send a clear message to the rest of the council. They will know that I am responsible, but will not leave any proof.”

“Mr. Champion, you leave us little choice in this matter. With your resources, we either are with you or are left behind. And we never want to be left behind, ever.” With that, she stood, as did everyone else in the room. She walked to Luc and extended her hand. He took it and they looked each other in the eye. They both knew what that handshake meant. It was a binding contract between two people of honor.

They all stood there for a moment. Luc took the time to get another cup of coffee.

Then he said, “This is really good.”

The Air Force commander said, “I get it from South America. I’ll get you some as a lovely parting gift.” They all laughed hard at that one.

Luc said, “That would be wonderful.” After the smiles stopped, he continued, “I have a favor to ask.” That got everyone’s attention. “Colonel Reed is an old family friend and I trust him. Would you mind assigning him as our liaison officer?”

The Admiral said, “Interesting that you should ask that. I wholeheartedly agree with that decision. Colonel, you are to provide us with accurate, detailed and timely reports with every action. And we would like advanced notice if possible. Remember, your loyalty is to your service and country. To assure that you have no conflict of interest, Mr. Champion, I am going to do something that has not been done since the Revolutionary War. I am going to authorize a battlefield appointment to a civilian.” An aide handed her a piece of paper. “You are now a brigadier general.” She handed the conscript form to Luc.

Luc was dumbfounded. He never expected the meeting to take this turn.

“Please respect the chain of command as much as you can. However, you are granted much latitude in your actions. Now, you are indeed a partner, as you say, like it or not.”

All the officers in the room saluted and Luc returned the salute as smartly as he could. He replied, "I am honored. I was told you were a person of action. Colonel Reed and Secretary Freeborn will be in contact in a few hours. I must leave now. I have a press conference to watch. It's not every day I give away a forty billion dollar space station and watch it become a new state in our country." Luc turned to James and said, "Colonel, please make arrangements to get Admiral Tanner one of our special laptops. Admiral, please don't try to have one of your IT folks re-engineer it. You will just have to trust me for now. All in good time."

They all said goodbye and were escorted back to their RV. Once they were settled and moving, the RV staff relayed the plan, "We're headed to Reagan where transport is waiting." Luc asked James to get the team back online. That took about thirty seconds.

"Hello everyone. First order of business: Cass, please explain your plan to everyone." She did so with Sully capturing everything. He had the first draft of an operational white paper when they were finished.

Luc changed clothes into tennis shoes, jeans and a sweatshirt. He came back into the camera's range when they were done conferring and had a suggestion of his own. "I'd like the gun to shoot a barrage of the thread bullets like a machine gun. Let's spray them so there is no chance to miss a moving target. Then one gun can do the job. Gunther, have the weapon designed to be applicable to many different scenarios. If the range turns out to be almost limitless, we will have something that works underwater and in space as well as in our atmosphere."

"Got it." And then Gunther added, "If this works, this will be a breakthrough improvement in weaponry on an order of magnitude. It will change everything."

Luc said, "Yes, it will. We seem to be doing that more often than not lately. It is a wonderful time to be alive. And a bad time to be our enemies." He got nods and smiles from everyone and then he made the big announcement, "And ... you are now looking at a brigadier general. They believe they can keep tabs on my actions better this way." Luc got a bunch of "wows" from the group as well as a very proud look from Angela. He provided details of the meeting and the transcription appeared on a screen. He watched James and Cass for concurrence and got it as he touched on the high points. Then he added, "James, you are going to have your work cut out for you."

They arrived at the airport. Luc thanked the staff and guards as they left the RV and support vehicles. Duncan's jet was there to take them to the Silo.

Revenge and/or Justice

During the two-hour ride, Cass worked with Sully on design specs for the new machine gun rifle. Gunther was putting together the logistics of targeting the four council members together. He had to get the sound generating equipment in place as well. The offices of the four targets were in the front of the huge building where the ministry worked. With the offices in the front, they could get an infrared picture of each of them. The shooters only needed coordinates for each target from as far as three miles away. The low frequency sound wave generator would be positioned around the corner from the building in the back of a store and would feel like a mild earthquake, if anyone noticed at all.

The plan was to identify the targets as they walked into their offices and lock onto their body's infrared signature. They all had a habit of coming into work early and starting meetings at seven a.m. Each had morning briefings at that time every day. Two of the targets met in a conference room together and the other two sat at their desks while their briefings were delivered. All insisted on punctuality. Seven-oh-eight would be the time for the event, but the shooters would have to stay flexible and coordinated. Timing was critical considering they had to perfectly match the very slow sound wave to the much faster speed of the bullets. Miss the timing and the bullets might dissolve before they hit the windows or go too far through the building.

Once the council members were identified and targeted, the shooters were there only to manage the weapon. The onboard linked computers would coordinate the targeting system, firing of the bullets and sonic wave system. The lead shooter would initiate the countdown, but he had a four-second window to abort and reset if necessary. The bullets would penetrate the armored windows, hit each target in the head with a burst of ten shots and dissolve as they exited through the walls behind the men. Gunther's men would disappear without a trace. Examining doctors would initially think each man had a stroke until someone realized that four men had died at precisely the same moment. The building would be locked down to secure the remaining council members immediately.

Luc spent an hour visiting with his pregnant wife and their children. The boys were excited to be getting a baby sister or brother. They went on and on about the station and what fun Teresa and Harry were showing them. They really loved the lighter gravity in the inner parts of the rings. For the remainder of their stay, their lessons focused on astronomy. Luc's friend, Tsubasa Saitou, was the professor and giving lessons in French. The boys had grown up with English as their first language and French as their second. Now with their new memory abilities, they would start picking up any language allowed into their sponge-like brains.

They arrived at the Silo and dug in for a long stay. The facility was manned 24/7 and the apartments were

prepped for everyone coming in. Luc stashed the few things he had with him and headed for the I/O Room where everyone was online and working. Mary Jo and John had elected to stay in New York for the time being. Angela, Raul and Teresa were on the station. Admiral Tanner was online from the Pentagon, while Gunther was in the air heading to the Silo. Duncan was there with James and Cass sitting by him. He had taken them under his wing for the next few days at Luc's request. Sully had the meeting up and running and signals indicated for James, Raul and Cass to attend as well. There was no one else in the huge room.

Sully said, "The press conference is about to start."

Duncan's face appeared on a large central monitor. On the next monitor, a CNN set was displayed with a well-known political anchor waiting. Duncan went live and the CNN screen changed to include his feed.

The news anchor said, "We are bringing you live via satellite former Secretary of State Duncan Freeborn. He has requested airtime to share some news. Secretary Freeborn?"

"Thank you. Champion Industries has a long history of giving back to our world through its many charitable projects. In keeping with this philosophy, the company is transferring ownership of its undersea colonies to a new sovereign nation now known as the United Undersea States."

The CNN anchor said with genuine surprise, "That is incredible! And just like that a new country is born."

Duncan resumed, "I will be working with the good people who live and work there to draw up a constitution and get their government up and running."

The anchor's monitor told him to say this next, "I understand there is even more news you have for us."

"Yes. In another move to further the ideals of democracy, Champion Industries is also giving up its ownership of the space station Independence. The new government there has plans to ask to become a new state in the United States of America. Raul Delgado has accepted the position of acting governor until elections are held. He will be holding his own press very shortly, conference as will the representative of the United Undersea States. Thank you very much."

Sully cut the feed and the anchor started to recap while the network pulled in analysts as fast as they could to keep this exciting story alive.

All of Luc's friends started to cheer and applaud. Luc walked over to Duncan and shook his hand. There were more cheers and applause.

When it died down, Luc said, "I've never given away sixty-eight point seventy-five billion dollars before. It feels good." Mary Jo had the figures up on her terminal for everyone to see. There was a stock ticker beside it as well with the company numbers displayed. They were tumbling as everyone expected. The sixty-eight and change figure was dropping along with the stock.

They settled down and Luc said, "Raul, when are you going to hold your conference?"

"Later today when we get the other projects moving along. There is no hurry."

Luc picked it up, “Welcome, Admiral Tanner. I will give you the floor at the end of the meeting. Everyone, this is Admiral Elizabeth Tanner.” There were welcomes from everybody.

“For you new people, send your questions via the Quick Message application to Sully. Okay, reports all around. Harry, please go first.”

“Our families are safe. Everyone is fine, especially Roberta who is redoing our kitchen while she’s overseeing the renovation of the entire complex. Cass and James should see the house plans. That’s it”

Luc nodded and Sully announced, “I got it.” The Admiral shot the first of many messages to Sully asking about Luc’s family.

Duncan went next, “Admiral, we are most interested in your plans for General Champion. Can you share any thoughts with us at this time?”

“Command scenarios are being drawn up as options right now. We only came up with this crazy idea one hundred fifty minutes ago. General Champion will receive further orders when the time is right.”

Luc thought she did a good job standing up to Duncan.

Mary Jo went next, “With the announcement of us giving up ownership of the underwater labs and the space station, our stock will take a hit. It should rebound in the next few days or so. Wherever it settles will be fine because it will be short term. If you want to keep giving away things, we should look for a different way to pay for the two new space stations and the lunar base. That’s it for me.”

John said, “I’ll go next. It’s short and sweet. Nothing is more important than stopping the threat from the East. Nothing.” He was clearly finished.

“Cass, James and Raul, welcome. We need to move on, so you all get to pass on your reports.”

Cass made a sign of wiping her brow in relief.

“Angela?”

“Nothing to report. Thank you, General Champion.” Everybody laughed.

Luc said, “That makes you Missus General Champion.” Everybody laughed again.

“Teresa?”

“Nothing to report that can’t wait. You have to stop those men. If they were to succeed in assassinating you, the economic balance of the entire world would tilt dramatically in their favor and set us back fifty years. I love you, Luc, but you are personally the lynchpin to any new economic ideas we propose. You must survive. You must.”

“Thank you, Aunt Teresa. I love you too. That leaves Gunther and Sully. Gentlemen?”

Another text was sent to Sully from the Admiral.

Gunther started, “Luc, congratulations on your appointment.” He paused to let Luc know he was proud. “The prototype weapon is being tested right now. We are using off-the-shelf stuff as much as possible, optics,

etc. The last round of improvement modifications are being made right now. The magnetic firing system is working fine and achieving velocities as expected. It makes the gun large, but not too heavy for a man to run with. It breaks into three parts, so it's somewhat concealable in a fair-sized shoulder pack.

The bullets themselves will leave holes in the window, but they will be too small to see. The neurosurgeons we tapped to do our impact analysis believe the headshots will look like aneurisms. The entry point of each bullet will look like small welts on the skin. We should have it tested and ready for the production run of ten units in another four hours. They are being made in a shop in Beijing right near the building we will be firing from. It's about two miles down the hill from the target. The target time is six hours thirty-two minutes from now. We should make it just fine."

Luc said, "Thank you, Gunther. Admiral?"

"I have ordered our services to a Defense Condition High Alert status. Your aide is keeping us in the loop minute to minute as promised with transcripts. The President wants to know before the shots are fired and would like to give the final go ahead."

Luc did not hesitate and said, "No. The call is mine. Have him call me if he is unhappy." No one spoke. Luc continued, "Let's do this again in four hours on the next hour."

He closed the transmission, looked at James and said, "Am I doing the right thing?"

James thought for a minute and said, "It's hard to say, since the line between defensive retaliation and revenge is so close. If you think about the lives you are protecting from these mad men, there is no question that you are doing the right thing. I advise you to continue with the course of action that you have laid out, sir."

Luc told him thanks and gave him a hug. "Hey by the way, when do I get a uniform?"

Luc took the time to set up his apartment with the help of some beefy staff members. He had them bring up some of the remaining personal furniture from the warehouse floor. When he was done there, he checked out the other quarters and made some adjustments for the incoming personnel. Luc called the manager of the facility for his help and they continued to walk the floors as Luc gave him a long list of things to do and acquire. They paid attention to the bunkrooms where multiple people crashed at all times of the day or night. Luc had the facility manager ramp up the food production in the mess hall for the new people coming in. Four hours passed quickly and the team met online as planned with one new attendee. Admiral Tanner was in the Oval Office with the President.

Luc began the meeting. "Mr. President. Welcome. Let's get to work. Gunther, please proceed."

"Everything is in place. The shooters have tested the new weapons and everything has been checked and checked again. The first of the targets is in route to work. One had a late night, and there was activity at the other two's residences recently. However, this is the time when adjustments may need to be made. There are too

many factors to expect the plan to go unchanged.”

Luc gave the order, “For the record, you are hereby ordered to continue. On my authority and my authority alone. We will reconvene when Gunther gives us the word.”

Luc needed to be alone and headed for the surface to feel the sun on his face. It was 6:20 p.m., sunny and windy. There was nothing around to look at for miles with the jets gone. Good. It was a short walk to the wheat fields. The wheat was tall and green then and had that young smell to it. Luc was careful not to disturb any of it and simply enjoyed it. He called Angela and carried on a quiet conversation mostly about the new baby’s possible names. The boys had favorites already picked. Gunther texted that it was time to meet again and Luc went inside.

They were all back online and Gunther narrated. “All four men are at the building. Two are at their desks alone and on the phone as expected. The other two are meeting with two other council members in an impromptu meeting. They are the only four in that room. The meeting is in a room two floors beneath their offices. We have the coordinates on all four programmed into the weapons. The lead shooter is calling green on all four. The issue is now the other two men in the conference room. We can hit all four targets, but the non-targets will be present. What’s your call, sir?”

“Take the shots now.”

Gunther continued, “You are clear to engage.”

The lead shooter said, “Countdown initiated.” He paused, “The meeting is over. Countdown halted. They have sat back down alone. Countdown initiated. Two, one. Shots taken. We are breaking down and going dark. Goodbye.” Luc and everybody else were watching remote readouts from the weapons on a screen and saw that nearly one hundred shots had been fired.

Sully started the aftermath report, “All four are down with people calling for help. Alarms are sounding. The building is going into shutdown.”

Luc summarized, “It appears physics did its job and mission accomplished. Follow up to make sure all four are dead.” There were choruses of cheers that left Luc both happy and sad. Happy for the success and sad for the fact that he had to do this at all. “Congratulations ladies and gentlemen on a job well done. Raul, thank you for your time. Goodbye. Everyone else, let’s keep going. Mr. President, Admiral, please help me prepare for any backlash, and let me help you. Colonel, please arrange for the Admiral’s people to have access to our encryption algorithms that gave us the ability to read the council’s email.” The president nodded in the affirmative and a big smile appeared on the admiral’s face.

“I’ve been giving this some thought, Mr. President, Admiral. What would you say to creating another branch of the military out of Mr. Adam’s team of security specialists? There are over eight thousand very skilled professionals in my employee.”

She was startled for once. “That is a very interesting idea, General. If we take that route, they would need to be integrated with the existing units, the Seals, Delta and all the rest.” Then she smiled again and said, “Would their hardware come with them?”

Luc replied, “Why, of course. I’ll even throw in a budget for the foreseeable future. I wish to stay in command. Mr. Freeborn can attest to their effectiveness.”

The president shot a stern look clearly directed at Duncan and answered, “In for a penny, in for a pound. You have already clearly demonstrated your commitment to this quickly changing country by donating your space station and seafloor cities. Might I ask what other surprises you have for us?”

“John, your opinion, please.” John had been silent for a long time now and broke it. “We need full disclosure at this point. We are technically at war, after all. I approve. Go ahead.”

“I have a submarine base in the Antarctic and it supports nine very special vessels. Two more will be ready for operation within the next month. No more are under construction.” Luc paused while the admiral regained her composure. “And I have some very interesting aircraft besides my fleet of space planes.”

Admiral Tanner broke out laughing and said, “General, might we trouble you for an inventory list at some point? And, put on a uniform. At least, when we are around. Colonel, make the arrangements.” James signaled his understanding.

Luc said, “Hey, I just realized that you have not met my wife, Angela. Angela, this is President Schaffer and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Admiral Elizabeth Tanner. Angela just informed me that we are expecting a baby.” Congratulations were given with big smiles from the Oval Office.

When everyone settled down, John said, “Luc, a word in private please.” Luc asked everyone to hold and left only the connection with John open. “I think it is time for total full disclosure with the admiral and president. If we are going to stop World War III, we need their complete trust. There is only one way to really get that. They must see you as a partner.”

It did not take Luc long to decide, but there were other loose ends. “What about Cass and James?”

John replied easily, “Full disclosure.”

Luc opened the conference back up to everyone and said, “Old friends, John thinks that I need to share something else with the president, the admiral, James, and Cass. What are your opinions?”

Everyone in the inner circle nodded. Harry said this to summarize it, “Luc, we are at a pivotal point in the history of this planet. We must enlarge our trusted friends to include these people. The survival of all requires it. Go ahead, son.”

“Mr. President, Admiral, James, Cass, I need to tell you a story. President Schaffer, please turn off the recording devices in your office. This needs to be a truly private conversation between us.” Schaffer picked up a phone, spoke for a second and hung up. An aide entered the room, opened a panel on the wall and flipped some

switches and then left. “Thank you. Now if you both wouldn’t mind, please put in the earpieces that came with the laptop.” They complied and Luc began, “This will be hard to believe, but it is all true and there is no time for you to question it. I was born six thousand years ago. I am the grandson of Adam, the first man. I am Lucasiah, the fifth son of Seth, the third son of Adam. I spent my whole long life not knowing why I was different from everyone else and, ten years ago, God revealed why. I was one of His Archangels, Raguel, God’s champion of Justice and brother to Michael and Gabriel. He sent me on a mission to protect humankind through the ages. My task was accomplished with the revealing of His treasures, which I had gathered and protected. You may recall the discovery of the Ark of the Covenant, King Arthur’s sword, Excalibur and lots and lots of hidden treasures. That was my doing. My wealth comes from six thousand years of accumulation. My real strength is the memory ability He gave me. I remember everything. Literally everything. When all this was revealed to me ten years ago, instead of taking me home to be with Him, He further blessed me by making me mortal and giving me a wife, Angela, our two sons, and these fine friends who help me run my business and my life. I am going to step away from the monitor to give you a few minutes with these people to allow you to question them and get some kind of independent verification. It’s a lot to take in.” Luc got up from his seat and went to use the bathroom.

When he returned, the President spoke, “General Champion, if I didn’t know Duncan so well, I would have you locked up to get some serious professional help. But, I believe you and your amazing story. We need a face to face meeting as soon as possible.”

“At your convenience, sir. I believe a lot of your questions will be answered in the papers we are sending to you.”

The president asked Duncan, “Is this why you resigned so suddenly?”

“Yes. I have been able to do some amazing things behind the scenes. I have secretly been supporting you and your predecessor all this time.”

“Sully, please send our new friends our security briefing paper on this. It includes details on my different identities, the treasures and my transformation. Admiral, are you okay?”

“Yes. There is no denying all this with these people standing beside you. You really will be a powerful ally. The Chinese have no idea what they are up against.”

“I could not stop them when they created their regime, but I can now. I believe this is one of the reasons God left me here to carry on my work. It is time we stopped worshipping the almighty dollar and started caring more about nurturing the capabilities He has blessed each and every one of us with. Getting rid of the oppressive totalitarian governments of this world seems like a good place to start.”

Home

All was quiet after the attack on Luc's home in France and Harry informed him that the exterior had been repaired. Roberta needed some guidance on the interior dealing with all the new smart systems Luc had requested. The technicians were at a standstill. Harry had already taken the initiative to have Luc's personal jet delivered to the Silo. It would show up within the hour and Harry planned for Luc to fly to France to help move things along. Luc agreed with Harry's decision and informed everyone via email of the plans.

Luc's jet was a copy of the F-23 Advanced Tactical Fighter that lost the fly-off competition to the F-22 and became the Raptor line of production military fighters. He liked the design, even though it lost the award, and had one built for him personally that included many changes. He didn't need weapons or stealth capabilities. Luc thought it might be a good trainer to replace the ones currently in service. That hadn't panned out, but the bird was still his favorite to fly and he used it often.

When his mechanics let him know that the jet was ready to go, Luc thanked the delivery team and took to the sky. He kept it subsonic and cruised over the eastern United States smoothly and quickly. When he reached the Atlantic, a pre-arranged tanker topped off his fuel for the long ride over the ocean. Another tanker was waiting when he reached the coast of Spain. That allowed Luc to use afterburners to travel supersonic almost the entire trip. He slowed over populated areas and approached his landing strip without incident around 1 p.m. local time. A crew was waiting to prep the bird for reuse quickly because his schedule needed to remain extremely flexible with all that was going on.

Two of the four men's deaths had been confirmed, but otherwise there was nothing from China after the lockdown. They were digging hard for information on the other two and expected updates shortly. Military transport was waiting for Luc. That was something new he would have to get used to now that he was in the Army again. They deposited him at his home where things looked quiet. The Army security team took up defensive positions at the house and integrated with the Gunther's security forces nicely. Luc took a few minutes to visit with his men and let them know how much he appreciated what they did for him just a few short days ago when he was attacked.

Roberta greeted Luc at the door with a big hug and tears. "I was so worried about all of you when I heard about the second attempt."

"We're okay now. The men who attacked us are all probably dead. We know two definitely are and we are waiting on verification of the other two. Why don't you fix me a sandwich and tell me what's going on around here." That wasn't a demand -- Roberta liked taking care of them with food, and Luc knew it would calm her down.

Roberta reported, “It only took a day and an army of men to repair the exterior. The technical folks are asking me questions I can’t answer about frequencies and stuff like that.”

“I’ll take care of it. You’ve done a wonderful job and you can take over again once I get these people out of your hair.” Luc finished his lunch while they talked about the vacation the rest of the family was having. He knew she was afraid of going into space or he would suggest that she join them. He finally broke away and found the team down in the I/O Room waiting for him.

Art Burnacil was the head engineer and one of Luc’s main R&D men from his robotics lab in Savannah, Georgia. Art was a no-nonsense visionary in his field and was looking forward to applying the latest innovations on a practical level in Luc’s home. He told Luc what he had in mind, “The estate management system will have input from eighteen hundred sensors. It will monitor everything for security compliance and take appropriate actions. All are voice programmable and voice activated. Complete security and environment controls. Every room is securable with reinforced doors and more, in some cases. The defenses will be online as well. The four household bots are up and running and already prepared for programming.”

“Good. Send one to the upstairs kitchen now if you please.” Luc hit a terminal and had Sully online in a few seconds.

“Hi Luc, I see you’ve made it home in one piece. What’s up?”

“Could I impose upon you to work with Art on interfacing the new house system with ours?”

“Sure. That sounds fun. Do you want the same system in any more of our facilities?”

“Yes, but I want to work out the practical day-to-day programming that Roberta and Harry will want first. Should be about two months’ worth of check and adjustments.”

“Cool. No problem.”

“Thank you. I need to run a local errand to get ready for my family’s return in a couple of days.” First, Luc had to go to the kitchen and see what the new robot had done to Roberta. Luc stepped out of the elevator to find her talking to it.

“Ok, R2D2, what do you think you are doing in my kitchen? Shoo, shoo.” The unit was twenty-nine inches tall, rectangular in shape and had four independent tank treads that allowed it to go almost anywhere. It had four mechanical arms with interchangeable ends, a claw, a suction wand, suction cups, and more. Right now it was waving all four claws at Roberta and not helping. The poor robot was trying to vacuum a mess that it had found from the construction but could not find a way around Roberta. It finally gave up and parked itself in a corner waiting for another opportunity to do what it was programmed for.

“I see you’ve met your new helper.”

“My new helper? Who said I needed any help? The last thing I need is a little beast under foot.”

“We can program it to do its magic after hours. You need never see it. But if you give it a chance, you

might find it useful. There are four of them. They actually are part of the security system. Cleaning is just a side function.”

“Well, let them do their security function somewhere I’m not!”

“Yes, ma’am. As you wish.” Luc turned to the unit and said, “Go to the I/O Room and wait. Have one, three and four do the same.” Number Two took off immediately.

Luc walked up to Roberta, put his arm around her and said, “I have to run an errand. I gotta go get something at the Pontoise Castle. Want to come?” He hugged Roberta hard and kissed her on the cheek.

“And how are we going to get there?” She knew the answer and was smiling.

He let loose of her, turned and faced her, “I have my jet at the airfield. It’s a ninety minute hop.”

She wagged a finger at him and said, “You promise not to make me throw up?”

“I’ll do my best. I’ll even let you fly. It is a trainer after all.”

“Let’s go. This place is lonely without the boys around.”

Luc called the security team and let them know they were ready to head out. They showed up in a minute and escorted Luc and Roberta to the vehicles. It was a short ride and there was a flight suit waiting for Roberta right next to Luc’s. They dressed and Luc gave Roberta a two-minute briefing. She was helped aboard and, after a quick preflight check, Luc started the engines. He aimed the thrusters down for a Harrier-like vertical takeoff and lifted them into the air. When they had enough altitude, he began to ease forward. Luc continued to accelerate and they were doing five hundred miles an hour in a few seconds. Luc could hear Roberta giggling with delight over his headset.

“How are you doing back there?”

“Just fine. This is great. But no funny stuff. This could be addicting. I see why you like this so much now.” Roberta had never been in a fighter jet before, just the big airliners and Luc’s smaller passenger jets.

“Put your hands on the stick in front of you.”

“Oh, no. You just keep on flying. I’m fine just the way it is.”

“Trust me. Put both your hands on the stick just like a computer game.” Luc kept control, but Roberta could get the feel of flying. “Now, I’m going to do some easy banks.” He banked left and her stick mimicked his. He eased right and then straightened up. “The secret is little movements. Now I’m going to ease us down a bit. You’ll feel the roller coaster ride effect.” So far, Roberta had only giggled and that was a good sign. “Now we are going to climb back to where we were at thirty thousand feet. Watch the altimeter.” He pulled back slightly and they climbed gently. “That’s enough for now. Hey, I have an idea, let’s call Harry.” Luc set up the comm and Harry was online in a few seconds. He let Roberta do the talking.

“Hi, honey. You’ll never guess where I am.”

Harry knew could not guess the answer, “I can tell by the frequency and noise that you are not at home on a phone. What are you up to?”

“Thirty thousand feet with Luc in his jet! That’s what I’m up to!”

Harry was genuinely shocked, “Oh, my word. And you did this voluntarily?”

“Yep. I was bored and he offered. This ain’t so bad. I’m even holding the stick.”

They chatted for a few minutes with her describing every detail.

When they were finished, Harry said to Luc, “Lucasiah, you take care of my girl. You hear me?”

“Of course. She already told me that there would be no fancy stuff.”

“Where you taking her?”

“I’m going to the castle to pick up something. We’re getting close, so I gotta sign off. We’ll call you on the way back.”

Harry replied, “You can try, but I might be busy. I’m going on a spacewalk.” He said it like he did it every day.

“Wonderful. You’ll love it. Why don’t you call us from the suit.”

“Okay. That would be great.”

Roberta said, “Bye, honey. I love you.”

Luc closed the transmission and began the approach to land. He slowed, eased into hover configuration and put them down with just a bump. The crew was waiting to help Luc and Roberta out of the airplane. On the ground, Roberta gave Luc a huge hug and a kiss on the cheek too.

Luc said, “I’m going to leave my flight suit on. We should be here about twenty minutes. That’s how long it will take to refuel for the return trip. Follow me.”

She took his arm and he helped her into a waiting golf-cart for the ride to the main castle building about a quarter mile away.

1877 Pontoise, France

Camille Pissarro, his wife Julie and Thomas Chandon (aka Luc) were searching for a spot to paint for the afternoon. Luc had suggested this area because it was on his land and near his castle. The castle was not livable at present and was about to get a complete restoration. Finally, Pissarro was satisfied with the location and said, “This will do nicely. Let’s set up here.”

They put the easels and pallets down and helped Julie set up the picnic. Under her specific direction, the blanket was properly spread out, the food from the basket laid out just so and three glasses of wine were poured. Only then could they take their places on the blanket.

She said, “This place is lovely. Why have you never taken us here before, Thomas?”

“There are so many beautiful choices around here that I have just now gotten around to this one. Camille, where are you going to choose to start today?”

“The grove and creek over there are perfect with the blossoms on the trees. That farmhouse has some interesting possibilities too.”

“I’m going to take a look at the area from that direction and see if I can get a more peaceful view. This view reminds me too much of work.” They all laughed at Luc’s comment and enjoyed the food and wine quietly.

“How are your young protégé’s doing these days?” Luc was always curious about Monet and the others that Pissarro had taken under his wing.

“They are all broke. I am trying to find a patron, but with no luck.

“I have lots of money. Would you like me to set up an account for you to use to cover their expenses until they get some of their work into shows?”

“I’ll keep that in mind. But, let’s let them suffer a bit more in poverty just as I had to do. It works wonders for creativity. Let God take care of them a while longer while they find themselves.”

“And how are they progressing?”

“Monet shows the most promise. This new style we have been using is intriguing. It reflects a vagueness that is in focus at the same time as being out of focus. It feels like a new reality that is hidden in every man’s mind, but forgotten with age.”

“I like it as well. It is changing my own art and taking me in a new direction. The realism required for common portraits is boring to me now.”

Julie joined in the conversation, “This is all well and good, but men still have stomachs and families.”

Camille said as he patted her on the hand, “Very true, my dear.” Turning to Luc, he added, “She always is the sensible one. Well, speaking of good sense, let’s get to work.”

They set up a good distance apart and began. The day turned to evening and they grew weary of the work. Camille called it ‘the time inspiration fades’. Luc called it getting tired. Pissarro had finished one canvas and Luc had done four. All of them were repeats of exactly the same scene but interpreted differently. The first was the landscape exactly as you saw it in stark reality. The colors matched perfectly as well as the shadows down to every detail. The next three lost the sharp focus progressively until the last was almost a blur up close. You had to stand a good five feet away to recognize it. They discussed their work as they packed up the food and blankets.

Camille commented on Luc’s, “These really are a study in the history of our craft, Thomas. The first matches the work of the early use of oils, while the progressive ones jump about one hundred fifty years each.

But the last is a masterpiece for the future. We really should have a show of your work. What do you do with all of your work?"

Luc told the truth, "For now, I just store them. I have no need for the income the art might bring or the attention. Would you like one?"

Julie answered first, "Yes, yes, yes. Which one?"

"You pick. After all, you prepared the most important ingredient for the day -- the food."

"I like this one best." She had selected the third in the series.

"My gift to you for your friendship and kindness."

Today Pontoise, France

When they reached the back doors, Luc led Roberta into the castle and through to the main parlor. They paused and took a slow look around. It had been a year since Luc had been here. Roberta's last visit was more than two years ago.

It was forty-eight feet to the ceiling with a magnificent wrought iron candelabra chandelier hanging as the centerpiece. The chandelier held one hundred twenty-eight candles and was hoisted up by a crank chain apparatus that was as old as the castle itself. The place looked great with all the furniture placed there ten years ago. Luc escorted Roberta up a large winding staircase into the master hall. He headed directly for a big painting. It was a portrait of himself with a white wig and fancy velvet clothes. He hoped Roberta wouldn't recognize the subject as him. She did and laughed. Luc took it down and laid it upside down on a table. He opened the back of the mounting and removed two parchments. One was a rubbing that was very old and delicate. The other was a handwritten document written in four language blocks.

"What are these?" she asked.

Luc took one and laid it out on top of the other. "This is a rubbing of the Rosetta Stone before it was damaged and lost a corner. The other is a set of translations of the same text." He pointed to each block as he described them. "This is ancient Chinese and this one is the original Japanese. This one is Samaritan, but this last one is the First language, the language of God's original tongue."

"And how did you come to have these?"

"I made them when the Stone was displayed in a courtyard as public record in Damascus. There were lots of rubbings, but none with this many translations. Eventually, the Stone was discarded and broken in the process. Sometime later, the rubble was used as part of a wall in another building. The text itself is a decree in three languages and is pretty accurate. The Stone is in the British Museum and these will end up there. But first, I want to show them to my sons."

John

Roberta and Luc flew back to their home with Roberta handling the stick alone for a good portion of the flight. Luc taught her to make easy, gentle maneuvers and walked her through the use of all the dials and gauges. Harry called from his spacewalk and went on and on describing the experience for fifteen minutes. They landed around dusk and returned to the house where dozens of workers were still going strong. The technical equipment installation was complete and the plastering and wall coverings crew was ready to move in. They coordinated with the painters who were the next in line. Those two teams would be able to overlap for a while, but it looked to be a long night for everyone. The workers were happy to receive the pay the overtime was providing but still looked tired. The place was ablaze with floodlights and Roberta and Luc retired to the guest quarters where she had been staying for the last two nights. The guest quarters included a two-story barrack for the security group and technical visitors. The building was not damaged by the attack but about to get the same renovations as the house after it was complete.

Luc got up early to make the return flight to the Silo to keep things moving along. He caught up on his reading over the Atlantic and managed to make a few calls. The fueling process was repeated in reverse. Luc arrived safe and sound and the same pilots that delivered the plane boarded to return it to New York. Luc had chased the sun and it was daybreak when he arrived. Luc checked statuses and found everything just as he left it with the exception that a third council member was now verified as dead.

Luc spent the day in video conferences or reading and writing. He was monitoring the media for any sign of the death of the last council member, when Mary Jo called, “Luc, John is dead. He was shot by a sniper as he was getting into a limo outside the building just a few minutes ago.”

Luc was devastated. He had lived through the deaths of countless millions of lives, but this news was painful. He broke down and balled. He managed to call Angela and she immediately said, “Luc, what is it?” He told her and they both cried even harder. Luc was the first to regain his composure, but Angela already had Teresa and Harry by her side and managed to tell them. Teresa was sobbing and Harry was angry.

Harry initiated a joint video meeting with everyone. He took charge seeing that Luc was in no shape to run a meeting. “Sully, get Roberta on our call too.” He waited until she was online and then said, “Everyone, John is dead.”

He let Gunther give the details then continued to lead the call. “How is this possible? Is this an order given before we took out the four of them?”

Sully was reading off three terminals and said, “Crap. Shen Li survived the hit. I just found a medical report. It was a private hospital that we weren’t monitoring. I’m sorry.”

Harry brushed it off and said, “We knew there were risks. No time for that now. Are the rest of us safe?”

Roberta said, “I’ve got to go.” There were two soldiers ready to escort her away.

Gunther reported, “Roberta is being taken from the Riviera compound and is getting another submarine ride to the destroyer Brighton. Mary Jo is still in the Empire State Building and will stay there surrounded and secure. Everyone else is safe.”

Harry kept going, “I am taking command until Luc is up to it. Copy all reports to everyone. Gunther, you know what to do and so do you Sully. We need defense plans all around. That includes the Silo, the station, the New York offices, and the undersea cities. Get satellites, get our drones in the air, and get the subs positioned to protect the compounds in both the Caribbean and the Pacific. Defcon 4. Now. The probability of staying covert on this is not likely now. Gunther, keep a lid on John’s death, please, for as long as you can. Duncan, put all your ears out. Mary Jo, watch the markets. Cass, figure out how to arm the space planes. Sully, get John’s three vice presidents secured and in route to the Silo. Oh, and add Winslow and Pratt to the game. Move them to the Silo too. I want those plans set in ten minutes and be ready to act on them in fifteen. Keep this conference line open. Mr. President, I suggest you get moving to your Situation Room. We have a lot of work to do. Teresa, I need you to be my second. Monitor this conference while I start receiving reports. And get John’s VP, Shirley Redcloud, up to speed on what’s going on. She is already at the Silo for a meeting with Luc. She will have to publish press releases as the public gets wind of anything we are about to do.”

When Hitler took control of Germany between 1931 and 1933, Lucasiah married into the Krupp family. The family business thrived when it became Hitler’s personal armament company. If Luc had paid better attention, he would have seen what was coming. He felt that the support he tacitly gave Chancellor Hitler, gave the Nazi leader the extra confidence to make his move on the Czechs and then the Poles. Luc still felt horrible about it.

This time was all about stopping another war – though perhaps not possible. Now, he had to make a decision on how to make that happen. The loss of John compounded the difficulty for Luc. He loved and respected John so much. John had been the force behind the final growth of the company. Since Harry wanted to take the lead on defense and further organization, Luc continued to let him. He was showing a side that Luc had never really seen. He thanked Harry over and over again. John’s three vice presidents arrived and Luc arranged for them to meet immediately on a mezzanine that over looked the busy bottom floor of the Silo. He thought the distraction would keep them off balance. Luc wanted to study the executives. He had read their files and video conferenced with them several times. He had a favorite already -- Sanvi Bhatnagar. John spoke of his brilliant skills several times. The other two were women. Both had management PhDs and had written books. Luc thought their concepts were a bit too impractical, but John loved their management results. Luc already had a plan in mind on the reorg and he asked Mary Jo to conference in on the visit. The VPs were hanging around

the table Luc had set up and looked anxious.

“Hello. Good to finally meet you face to face. I wish it were under better circumstances. There are things going on that necessitate this meeting. Please briefly describe your current responsibilities.”

He asked one of the women to start. She was Shirley Redcloud; a short rotund woman of about fifty years of age. She wore a dress business suit and was carried a briefcase chained to her wrist. Her escort gave Luc the key when they arrived and he passed it off to her now. She opened it and pulled out several folders. She arranged them in front of her on the table and started, “I am the Vice President of Public Relations. My staff and I spin the things our companies do into positive descriptions. We watch our public image and provide advertising. These folders contain new campaigns that I put together under John’s direction in the past few days. I am old-school and do not trust computers. These are some very bold initiatives he and I devised.”

She passed them over to Luc and he said, “Let’s take a five minute break while I look at these. I will be right back.” Luc walked up two flights of stairs to the I/O Room and found Sully and his team working away. “Sully, please scan these and pull them up on the main monitor.” He did and, in less than one minute, the first page was displayed. This was a white paper describing news footage put together from existing recordings to be released tomorrow showing the life on the United Undersea States and focusing on their moneyless system. The next was similar, showing what was going on in Haiti. The last was about New Texas showing the intention to implement the same program. This piece was scheduled to film with Barbara Walters interviewing Raul as the main spokesperson. This stuff was great. Luc returned to the ground floor and restarted the visit.

“I reviewed the files and they are brilliant. The timing couldn’t be better. Excellent, just excellent.”

Shirley Redcloud knew enough to not question the big boss about reviewing the files so quickly. Luc moved on to the next VP. She was tall at six four, had long dark hair and was beautiful. Her height was a real oddity because she was Japanese. Her name was Sakura Higuchi and she was around forty. “I am the Vice President of Manufacturing. All manufacturing, including the space-based activity.”

“Tell me about the construction schedule for New Texas, please.”

“The schedule is being revised as we speak. The timeline has been accelerated per John’s direction and should put the completion at two hundred fifteen days from right now.” She looked at her watch, which was a good thing. You didn’t keep track of as many things as she did without managing time to the minute. “The resources have been shifted as necessary. The costs will be 1.43 times as much with the crashed schedule, but actually the ROI will be realized sooner and that will make it a push. It is a wise move considering the advances we are making across the board.”

“Did John fill you in on the plans for the construction teams and equipment after New Texas is complete?”

“No. It’s only been two days since the acceleration was ordered. What’s next?”

“The whole operation moves to the moon to create a duplicate station.” Sakura took some notes and the

news appeared to not faze her in the least. Luc decided to keep going to see if he could shake her up. “Parallel with that construction, we need a permanent base on the surface. There is a wealth of materials there to be harvested.” She continued to write quickly. “When that is done the whole process gets repeated at Mars.” She looked up and stopped writing, finally.

“This changes everything, every schedule we had for support at all our plants, including the automotive, airplane and ship production. Just everything. Nothing will go untouched. The ripple effect will be massive. The imports from the Eastern Federation will not be able to keep up.”

“Ah, and that’s the point. I intend to break their back. We must stand alone as fast as we can.”

All three of them started to talk at once and then stopped out of courtesy to each other. Luc continued, “The East’s population will need to be integrated into our plans. Their time of cheap manufacturing by using the people as slave labor is about to end. It is a whole new world. You and I need to look at new models and processes immediately. Harry McMasters is replacing John. Put on your seat belts -- it’s going to be a wild ride.” They were all smiling now and Luc turned to Sanvi.

“I know exactly what your responsibilities are. No need to brief me.” Sanvi ran client services. That meant he managed the egos of a bunch of high government agency directors.

Luc asked the VPs to wait while he talked to Mary Jo privately. He walked to a corner of the room out of hearing range and asked Mary Jo for her opinion. She said, “Split John’s job in half and promote Sanvi to day-to-day ops. Give the other half, oversight, to Harry.”

Luc had expected to put more responsibilities on Sanvi and Mary Jo’s opinion caught him off guard. She continued, “We all have read the status reports, but Harry really surprised me with his complete knowledge of our company and his ability to take charge when someone needed to.”

“Me too. He has been sorely underutilized all these years. Perhaps this is what he was meant to do all along. Time for the butterfly to emerge from the cocoon. Thank you very much.” Luc’s voice drifted off and she waited for the rest of what he wanted to say. She knew him very well. Finally, Luc said, “I miss John already.”

“I know, Luc. I do too. He was brilliant and kind and...” She broke down and cried and Luc did too.

After a minute or so, they pulled themselves together. Luc waited another minute and returned to the table with the three VPs watching him closely.

Luc added Harry, Duncan, James, and Admiral Tanner to the call along with Mary Jo. “Harry, I am giving John’s job to you and promoting Sanvi to be your day-to-day ops manager.”

“Luc, a word in private please,” Harry said quietly. Luc told everyone to hold and walked away and used his phone to call Harry alone. Harry continued, “Are you sure about this? I’ve never handled this much responsibility and there are so many more qualified people. John was a powerhouse and I am just a master

sergeant at most.”

“Harry, you know our company inside and out. The job requires some innovative thinking and I will always be there for you, just as you have been for me. But, the most important thing is the ability to make decisions and take charge. You know how to do that. And look at the team you have. Rely on them and delegate. I know a winner when I see one. You are the right man at the right time. I need someone I can trust. Please take the job, old friend. Besides, I saw the same thing in your father once and look what he accomplished.”

“You promise to watch my back?”

“The same as you watch mine.”

“Okay.”

They reconvened the meeting and Luc continued addressing Harry. “I think you should consider adding staff to these ladies’ organizations. The plans that have been made and transpiring will push them to their limits. They will need serious help to stay on top of things. Both of them are up to the task but they will be swamped very quickly. I’ve looked at the manufacturing processes for each product line and maybe it’s time we stopped treating them as separate entities. They are siloed by product. You can’t tell me that the automotive manufacturing industry can’t take a few lessons from our aircraft production plants and vice versa. It won’t be long until they are using the same materials, the same computer systems and more. Give it some creative consideration is all I am suggesting.” All were taking notes as fast as they could. Luc felt he had said enough and tried to wrap it up, “But that is your and Sanvi’s decision. Admiral, I would consider it a personal favor if you would help Harry with the transition since a lot of his work will be directly with the military.”

“That makes perfect sense, General Champion. I look forward to our new arrangement.” The three visitors were shocked to hear that Luc was a General.

“Admiral, thank you. Colonel, please bring these folks up to speed on our situation immediately. I need to meet with Gunther, Winslow and Pratt. Thank you all and I am sorry for our loss.”

Luc was about to hang up when Admiral Tanner caught him and asked to have an immediate personal conversation with him. He was already out in the hall and moving when he heard her request. He touched his phone and had her instantly. “General, I have some orders for you. Could you please connect our video displays?” Luc walked into the I/O Room and complied with her request. She saw the room full of people and said hello to Sully. Then she asked to have the others clear the room. The team left Luc and Sully alone in the room, and Admiral Tanner said, “That’s better. Please stand at attention.” Luc did so. “General, you are hereby promoted to the rank of full four-star general. Furthermore, you are ordered to take command of the new military branch, Special Operations. Welcome to the Joint Chiefs, General.” She paused while Sully shook Luc’s hand and clapped him on the back.

“Furthermore, Lieutenant Colonel Reed is promoted to full colonel and Gunther Adams is to be given a field commission as a brigadier general on your staff. The President wishes to conduct a ceremony in forty minutes. Will that work for you?”

Luc stood at attention and gave the salute used in the French Army in the Sixteen Hundreds by mistake and said, “Yes, sir.”

Luc’s new staff and uniforms were delivered by special transport set up by the admiral’s staff and Colonel Reed. Luc now had twenty people to set up shop for. He texted everyone to be on a video conference call at an appointed time and then got Gunther, Duncan, and James online to break the news. Gunther was not angry as Luc expected, but relieved that his secret actions were now sanctioned. While they were talking, a package was delivered directly to Luc. He opened it to see his new uniform and orders. James was dumbfounded that he was a captain two days ago and was now a full-bird colonel, officially. Luc looked at the Army uniform and thought about what his branch should wear. He decided that civilian clothes were best, but how could he pull that off?

Forty minutes passed quickly as arrangements were made for the ceremony. Someone talked about a party, but it just felt inappropriate with the loss of John so fresh in Luc’s mind. The ceremony was conducted in a quickly set up holographic projection studio in the warehouse. Everyone was invited from the facility and many attended remotely including Luc’s family. Angela and Luc spoke for just a few minutes before the ceremony began and she was proud and worried at the same time.

When the ceremony began, Luc saw there were guests at the Oval Office -- two Senators and two Congressmen. The new branch of our military, Special Operations, was born with these words from the President: “By the powers given to me by the Constitution of the United States, I do so order that a new branch of the military be commissioned and shall henceforth be known as Special Operations. These members of the Senate and Congressional Oversight Committees concur with this action and attest to it by adding their signatures to the order along with mine.” There was a long pause while all the men present slowly signed a document. Many pens were used during the process. President Schaffer continued, “It is my honor to promote Brigadier General Lucasiah Champion to the rank of full General. Furthermore, I am issuing his first order at this rank to take command of the new Special Operations branch of our military.” The president saluted as did Admiral Tanner and two of the four politicians. “Congratulations, General Champion. I wish it were under happier circumstances that I take this action. I am very sorry for the loss of your long-time friend. Let’s hope his death will not be in vain.”

“Thank you, Mr. President.”

President Schaffer continued, “Mr. Adams, please step forward.” Gunther did so. The order for his promotion was officially given and he received the same salute, congratulations and kind words honoring John.

The procedure was repeated a third time for James, this time, by Admiral Tanner.

Then the ceremony was over. The president asked Luc to say a few words and Luc complied.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I feel that my whole life has led me to this moment. I accept this responsibility freely and with all due respect. Thank you.”

Breaking a Submarine

After the ceremony, Luc kept his people online for an instant meeting. It was his turn to give orders. “It’s all official now, so here we go people. General Adams, work with my aide, Colonel Reed, and set up our new branch of the U.S. military. Start by offering field commissions to whomever you wish in our security company and bring in the current military special ops folks. We get the Seals, Deltas, Rangers, everyone. I believe their commanders will be here shortly. Who is next in rank after Colonel Reed?”

“Sir, I am Captain Susan Nelson. I am the ranking staff officer.”

“Captain, please get your new space organized. Let’s use the ground floor warehouse space. Have it built out any way you see fit. Get it ready for incoming officers and their staff. Let’s make the center a large I/O Room. Sully, would you please give advice on the buildout. But, this isn’t temporary. You need to build in several mezzanine sub commander posts. And we need to be able to cut every ante room off with solid black out blinds. Let’s take our I/O Room upstairs apart and start there. This is our new home. Let’s get it done.”

Everyone nodded and Luc continued. “This outfit is not going to run like the normal military. I am going to manage this command the same way I run my businesses. Attempt consensus and listen to everyone. Then the decisions fall on me. I would like a holographic org chart put up at that end of the room. Leave blanks for unassigned positions and we’ll start to fill them in. On this end of the room, I would like a holographic construct of Beijing in wireframe. Be ready to zoom out to the whole world and outer space, but I need details on the city first. Let’s get our little bats deployed around that city to watch what is happening there in real time.” The bats were bat-sized video surveillance units that flew high enough to go unnoticed. “I need sit-reps on the Spec Op commanders’ arrival here. And let’s get construction going on apartments above us for our unit commanders. Nice apartments, like ours. Colonel, I suggest you choose a couple of senior staff to help you because you are in charge of this facility now as well as your other responsibilities. I’ll be back here in fifteen minutes and I need to see some quick organization. Go.”

Luc took a fifteen-minute break and talked to Angela. She was still proud and worried. The boys were beside her on a couch with Teresa. They thought daddy looked funny in his uniform. He needed to get back to work and ended the visit. He went one floor down to the warehouse and it was moving right along. Tables and chairs were set up, monitors were running and the floor had been taped off for office construction. Luc found Captain Nelson and asked to see what they had on the two holographic studios. “Your org chart is under construction on these terminals here, ready to display in a few minutes. Your map is ready for viewing here.” She led Luc to the center of the studio, yelled a couple of commands and the area lit up with a wireframe layout of Beijing.

Luc asked who put this together and Captain Nelson introduced him to her tech people and a young lieutenant with a nametag that read Walker. “Lieutenant, where did you get the data for this?”

He was shy and quietly replied, “Google Earth.”

“Good start for fifteen minutes. Please continue to add details from other sources.” The special ops commanders arrived and wanted some answers. They were already in route when Luc was told of his promotion. Apparently, Admiral Tanner didn’t waste any time. Luc asked the five commanders to meet him in the old I/O Room, already being disassembled. When Luc walked into the room, the commanders jumped to attention.

“At ease gentlemen. President Schaffer has created a new branch of the military and put it under my command. I am Lucasiah Champion the owner of Champion Industries and I have been integrated into the military structure because of our situation with the Eastern Federation. They have tried to assassinate me twice and succeeded in murdering the CEO of my company. Three of the four men responsible are dead. We are on a war footing and need to get organized at the same time. You are now in Special Operations and we do not exist. We go black from this minute on. My military experience is lacking and I need your expertise to make this work. Follow me, please.”

Luc led them to the warehouse floor. When he entered, the room came to attention. Besides, there were four colonels and a brigadier general with him. Luc started up again. “This is our command center. Let me show you my org chart.” He walked them into the projection, let them get a feel for it and then continued, “We can change anything we want right now. Please work with Colonel Reed and Captain Nelson to have this center detailed the way you want it. Pick your offices now. Figure out what personnel you want here, your comm setups, your armories, staging logistics, anything and everything. Ask now, the toy shop is open. I have weapons manufacturing companies and we make everything. If you can dream it, I will get it for you. However, we have an op to do. Captain, please bring the room to order for a couple of minutes.”

She did so and Luc continued, “There is a man in a hospital in Beijing that needs to be dead. We took a shot at him and he survived. Then he killed the CEO of my company on a street in New York. Sully, please convene a meeting with my business staff on this side of the room on these terminals and my military staff on this side as soon as possible. I need Raul in the meeting as well.” In two minutes, everyone was online.

“I’ll make this short. The men seated here are the Special Forces commanders. They are in with us and I need them brought up to speed. I need a plan to kill Shen Li now, before he takes any more actions against us. At this point, I am ready to accept reasonable collateral damage. Covert if possible, but I really don’t give a damn. General Adams, these men are under your direct command. I have some data that might give us an advantage. Beijing has been rebuilt on top of itself four complete times throughout history. There are tunnels below it everywhere. I can provide details to improve our map. Many are unknown to the current people living

there. Let me know when you are ready for me. Harry, please be ready to help Gunther with any details and get these men any of our toys they want. To top all this off, we need a whole military base built topside. These people have families. We need housing, schools, stores, the whole works. No non-military personnel, no civilians except family. No contractors except for people employed by my company. We will be self-contained. Mary Jo, you better start watching my new budget responsibilities. I'm spending money with every word. A lot of it. Adams, take over."

Luc needed a break to think and headed topside. There were five C130 transport airplanes parked outside being unloaded. There were pallets of prefab building walls, plastic wrapped boxes, wooden crates, and lots of steel I beams. Forklifts were moving them through the ramp that led down into the Silo and returning faster than was safe, but necessary. Luc watched the ballet and admired the men and women working so hard. One of the planes began to roll and he could see another preparing to land. They had set up a temporary flight control tower and Luc tried to envision how he wanted this area laid out to include all the military buildings and then the nice little community of homes for the families. The model was complete in his mind in seconds. The pace these planes were arriving, unloading and taking off would only get more hectic.

Luc's phone rang and Sully said, "Luc, you are needed inside. The East has moved two of their subs toward the Pacific labs and ours are moving to intercept." Luc ran back into the warehouse. Sully was briefing the in-house people and those on the screens around the room.

Luc took command, "General Adams, Harry, don't we have something that can hamper the progress of those subs?"

Harry was the first to get it. "Why yes, General. We could use our DEMP guns on the sea floor when the time is right."

One of the commanders said, "What are you talking about?"

Sully provided the explanation, "A few years back, we developed a Directed Electro Magnetic Pulse gun and put them all around the undersea installations as a precaution. They can hit an area as small as a one-meter sphere without damaging anything outside of that."

The commander who spoke continued, "Are you telling us that you have a working rail gun?"

Luc said, "Yes and no. The rail gun you know of is large and unmanageable. Ours can target any area we want once the target gets into straight-line range. How about we catch their subs when they wander into range and make the missile control systems melt. That should make the captains head for port."

The commander then smiled and said, "Could we use one to wreck all the electronics in a hospital?"

Gunther got the idea. "I could have one built in Beijing at the same shop that built our Elysium rifles and put it in a truck in six hours." The same commander began to say something about the rifles Gunther referred to,

stopped himself and just walked over to Gunther. He introduced himself and they had a quiet conversation. They chatted quietly and Luc saw Gunther send an email -- a white paper briefing the commanders on the DEMP Guns.

Luc had read all the files on the people showing up as they were provided to him. He got back to the subs. “Commander Yeager?”

“Yes, sir.” Yeager stepped up to Luc and saluted.

Luc returned the salute. “At ease commander. Would you please work with Sully.” Sully raised his hand. “Figure out exactly where to hit the subs without hurting their maneuvering capability. I don’t need any dead Chinese sailors to complicate the situation.” Yeager’s file said he knew all about Chinese nuclear attack submarines. “How long until they are in range?”

Sully answered, “If they maintain current course and speed, twenty-eight and forty-four minutes.”

Luc said, “Anybody think this is a bad idea?” The new people were not used to a consensus process and were smiling. Luc waited the right amount of time and heard nothing from anyone. “The order is given. Sully, you and Commander Yeager carry out the action please.”

Luc grabbed two of the other commanders and took them to his org chart. They took a few minutes to get a good feel for the format and then the personnel. Luc saw changes required immediately. So did the commanders. The entire base construction and maintenance groups were absent. The current divisions were shown how they currently existed and Luc’s private security force only had placeholders.

They discussed the layout and made some significant changes. One of the commanders had been dreaming about this day for a long time and knew when an opportunity was being presented. The other commander caught on and joined in. They talked about the separation of the divisions and the advantages of overlapping them.

Time passed quickly and they had accomplished a lot, but it was time for the first sub to be hit. The sub had sped up and was close to being within range of one of their guns. Maps with their locations were up on several monitors. Commander Yeager provided the narration, “When the sub is passing the firing unit at a perfect ninety degree angle, we will shoot at the missile bay and the twenty-four missile guidance control systems with three bursts of five meters each to get all of them. The bursts are milliseconds apart so it will look like one event.”

“What will they think went wrong?” Luc asked when Yeager took a breath.

“They will see it as a major malfunction. Then they will spend time troubleshooting by the book without success.”

“Perfect. I like it very much. Mysterious breakdowns under these circumstances will give me leverage in

the future.”

Yeager continued, “We have four minutes until we should take the shot.”

Luc asked, “What is the margin of error?”

Sully replied, “We tested these things last week. The system is already locked on target and the sphere of effectiveness is set at precisely four point eight seven meters per ship specs. We know the boat’s size and position by using a bunch of the thirty-two thousand density sensors we scattered on the sea floor years ago. The sensors gauge the delta between the seawater and the boat’s density. Before this meeting, there were seven of us aware of the sensors existence. The Chinese do not know we can see their sub. One minute to best position.”

Again, Luc said, “Any objections to taking this action?” Luc paused, heard no objections and then said, “Take the shot.”

A countdown appeared on the monitors. When it hit zero, it looked like nothing happened. The subs were maintaining course and speed. Thirty seconds passed and still nothing changed. Luc knew better than to do anything but wait, but some of the people were looking like there was a failure in the procedure. Luc looked at Sully and Yeager. Yeager held up one finger indicating to wait longer. Finally, he said, “Patience, it takes time on a sub to react to an unknown event. Once the captain knows the breakdown doesn’t affect his propulsion and steering, he won’t worry about the issue until he has a handle on what the problem is. Then he’ll contact the other sub captain and they will decide what to do.” While he was explaining, another thirty seconds had ticked by. He looked at his watch and continued his narration, “And they will jointly decide to make the next moves.” Yeager paused, looked at his watch again and said, “Which should happen right about now.” And, as if he were standing on the bridge of the damaged sub, the boat began to slow down. He looked at Luc and smiled. Then the second boat changed course to intercept the first one. The targeted boat turned and headed toward its partner. They would meet in twelve minutes.

While they watched, Luc walked over to Captain Yeager and whispered to him, “Amazing. Welcome aboard.” He shook Yeager’s hand and then said, “Have we told you why you are really here yet?”

“I thought this action here was why.”

“Oh, no. This was just something that happened and we’re glad you were here for it.” Luc turned to Sully who was about to split a gut and said, “Pull up a blueprint of one of our subs.” Sully did with a couple of keystrokes.

“What is that? I’ve never seen anything like it. Is this what you have planned to build?”

“No, Captain. We have nine of these boats cruising the ocean as we speak.”

“What! That’s not possible. Where is their base?”

“Antarctica.”

“What!”

Luc stopped him before he said anymore and pointed to the big screen. Yeager looked and they watched as the Chinese subs got closer. When they were side by side at one hundred feet below the surface, the boats stopped. Yeager asked Sully to start another timer at that point, which showed on the screen in a second.

When it was clear they were going to wait a few minutes again, Yeager turned back to Luc and stammered through his bewilderment, “How long have they been out there?”

“Four years ago the first one hit the water and then one was finished every six to eight months. I have two more almost ready to sail and that will do it for a while.”

“Who are the captains?” They walked him over to the org chart and Luc pointed to a specific column. Yeager commented, “I know all these people. I thought they retired.”

“Want to take command of number ten next month?”

“Hell, yes.”

“Sully, where’s the nearest boat?”

“That would be Cuba.”

“Captain Nelson, please cut some travel orders to Cuba for Commander Yeager. Commander, run the boat around and get the feel for it. Then get all the other captains together, decide how to organize command structure to best use these weapons side by side with the Navy’s boats and we’ll take it from there. Remember, these vessels and personnel stay with us, Special Operations. But, pick your slot. You can have a boat, you can have the port or you can be promoted to admiral and run all the other captains. I’ll need an answer in eight weeks.”

“Thank you for the opportunity, sir.”

“You are welcome. You’ve got a lot of homework to do as well. I expect you to be an expert with all this power very soon.”

“Aye, aye, sir.” Yeager saluted.

They all looked at the monitors and the subs were still sitting there unchanged.

Luc decided to test Yeager, “When will they make their next move and what will it be.”

Without hesitation Yeager said, “They are running diagnostics now and doing visual inspections as well. Four minutes for that and then about two more before the captains both concur they must head home.” The timer on the display said four minutes forty-eight seconds.

“Captain, I know this has been a lot to take in, but there’s more.”

“There’s no way you can top a whole secret fleet of super subs.”

“No, probably not, but we have thirty-five little sister boats to support our fleet. They are half the size and unmanned. They are smart and can run by themselves or be controlled remotely from any of the subs or from

here. They too are heavily armed.”

At this point, Yeager just started laughing. “Did I fall through a wormhole into the future or something?”

Luc laughed as well and said, “Yes, you kind of did. It’s a whole new world. I’ve been saying that a lot lately and probably will for a while.” They all looked at the countdown clock and there was one minute left. Luc continued, “You know, I was going to complete that sentence with the words, *until things settle down*. But I have a feeling, things will never settle down again, ever.”

They silently watched the clock and the map on the monitor. It reached six minutes and kept going into the negative. Then, at six minutes ten seconds, both subs turned and began the route home. The room cheered. Colonel Reed made a bold action considering the people in the room and said very loudly, “No time for this now. We are ready for the Beijing subterranean data, sir. Now, please.” The people rolled back to setting stuff up.

The Key to Success

Everyone was busy and Luc was led to a desk where the shy techie lieutenant was sitting.

The lieutenant asked Luc, "Sir. How do you know of these hidden tunnels?"

"Lieutenant, that is classified." Luc smiled. The lieutenant smiled and nothing else was said about it.

"Sir, what view would you like to start with?"

"There are three independent layers of tunnel networks. Let's start with the one closest to the surface."

Luc was studying the model and for the first time saw the location of the hospital. He realized that the one tunnel below it was actually a vault used by Emperor Kublai Kahn to hide the country's gold reserves in case of invasion. Luc knew -- he designed it for the emperor. There was no way around it. Using explosives would only block the tunnel. There was only one key and it was in a safe deposit box in Geneva where it had been for over one hundred years. In order to get the key, Luc's physical presence was required for authorization. Even after all this time, the bank proprietors still had orders to validate a long string of numbers that would be spoken by Luc from memory. He made the orders foolproof and even he could not get around them. It seemed he was too clever for his own good in this case.

Luc turned to Sully and said, "Sully, pull up the locations of all the space planes." He did and Luc quickly reviewed the map. There was one in Dallas. "What's the one in Dallas doing there?"

Sully hit a couple of keys and reported, "Maintenance. For another sixteen hours. Then back into flight service."

"Get the maintenance chief online." Sully did and Luc had a short conversation with him. They were just starting work on the plane and could have it ready to fly in ten minutes. Luc ordered it prepped and sent to him. It would be there in thirty minutes.

Luc shouted, "Harry, Sully, a word in private please." They were behind Luc as he left the room and found a quiet hallway to talk. He explained to them about his bank vault dilemma. They would carry on without him as best as they could.

Luc ran to his apartment, changed clothes, used the bathroom and dashed topside just as the plane was taxiing to him. The ground crew opened the hatch, helped get Luc dressed and situated in his seat. The plane headed back to the runway and lifted into the sky immediately. It would be a forty-minute flight.

Luc had ordered up the quickest ground transportation he could and gotten the bank president and several of his subordinates out of bed. It was the middle of the night in Geneva.

Luc asked the copilot to let him take his seat for the flight and, of course, the copilot complied. Luc had never flown the space plane and took the stick for a few minutes when they made the transition from

atmosphere to space. It was a bumpy ride. Once through the turbulence, the craft handled a lot like a glider. They had a twelve-minute window in space to do nothing, so Luc made a couple of calls to his street vendor friends in New York. The timing was perfect and Luc got hold of Maggie. She was glad to talk to Luc but he sensed something was wrong. It had been six months since they had talked and first she wanted to hear all about his family. Luc told her all he was able to without lying too much. Then she broke down and shared her problem. Thomas, her longtime boyfriend, died several years ago and she was having trouble with her husband of four years now, Rafael. She thought he might be having an affair and was worried. Rafael swore he was not, but all the signs were there.

Luc asked her directly, “Do you really want to know, one way or the other?”

She hesitated and then said, “Yes.”

“Hold on for a second.” He called Sully, “Hey, I’m sorry to put more on your plate, but you remember my friend in New York, Maggie Sprowell?”

“Of course. What’s up” Luc recounted her concerns and Sully said he would take care of it. Luc signed off with Sully and got back to Maggie.

“Okay, our friend Sully will be calling you soon with the answer. Don’t ask how, just trust him to tell you the truth. I gotta go. I love you. Call me more often. Bye bye.”

Just as Luc hung up, the plane started skipping off the atmosphere for reentry. This was Luc’s thirty-seventh flight on a space plane, but it still caught him by surprise and tossed his stomach a bit. The turbulence was over as fast as it started and they were making the approach to the airport. The glide down was quick and, just like that, they were taxiing. The plane’s fuel tanks would be topped off and ready for the return flight as fast as Luc could take care of his business.

They reached their parking spot and a crew was ready to help Luc deplane. He got out of his flight suit just as a woman on a brand new BMW motorcycle pulled up in front of him. She got off the bike, dug into a pack and pulled out a full leather dress outfit for Luc. He slipped it on while carrying on a pleasant conversation about the bike and his route to the Swiss bank. She handed Luc a helmet and the keys to the bike and he was off.

He followed her instructions and in less than eight minutes, he was turning onto the bank’s street. The place didn’t look that different than it did one hundred and two years ago when he deposited the key in the bank. It did, though, from when he was there in 1850 with the magician, Heinrich Basch.

1850 Geneva, Switzerland

“Hurry, hurry. The curtain is about to go up,” whispered Helena. She was the third person in Heinrich Basch’s

Phantasmagoria Show. These shows were the current rage in Europe and Heinrich was capitalizing on their popularity by doing three shows a night. The shows were nothing more than a small audience watching a haunted story showing lighted projections on glass of ghosts, skeletons, and witches accompanied by spooky music and sound effects. They truly scared some people and they loved it.

The whole projection system was new and designed by Luc. He was the technician behind Heinrich's idea of scaring the money right out of their pockets. He told Luc this plan almost a year ago when he was a down and out magician who's popularity had long since disappeared. Heinrich was swimming in cash now and wanted more and more and more. Luc designed and built his first projector using candles, lenses and mirrors. It worked brilliantly. They had five projectors now and used them to make apparitions appear on walls, ceilings and mirrors. They were strategically placed to surprise the audience and make them jump out of their seats. It was a whole lot of fun except many took it too seriously and requested séances thinking that Heinrich could conjure up their departed loved ones. It was sad really. But, the show was sold out again and Heinrich was doing his spooky voice behind the curtain thing as it went up. The show kept Luc hopping, changing glass plates and moving the projectors in a prearranged ballet of technical and mechanical effort. This was the third and last show of the night. Luc had a date afterward with a cute local girl who he befriended when she attended the show. She was hooked when he took her backstage and showed her how it all worked. The troupe was in Geneva only two more nights and then off to Bonn for a two-week run.

Luc hadn't told Heinrich yet, but he was quitting after the Bonn shows. He had serious work to continue. Luc used the days to make contact with his business managers keeping his companies running smoothly in his absence and dedicated his nights to the shows. Luc was getting what he wanted out of Heinrich. He was teaching Luc escape artist tricks and more sleight of hand magic. Luc needed the vacation of sorts, but there were some very big opportunities in the United States brewing in the energy, transportation and construction industries right now and Luc could not let them get away. The world might pass him by and he couldn't let that happen.

The show finally ended and the audience left with the usual banter between the groups over who got the most frightened. The kids called each other chicken and young women clung to their dates. Heinrich and Helena came to help Luc shut down the equipment for the night and they were ready to leave. Heinrich had the cash from ticket sales with him as usual in a small locked box. Both Luc and Heinrich were going to escort Helena back to the boarding house where she was staying and then Luc would meet his date at a local restaurant for a late dinner. Heinrich would continue on to their hotel a few blocks away. It was a chilly night out, but the sky was clear with a full moon. Geneva was lovely and Luc was looking forward to the walk and his date. The trio chatted quietly about a few extra-frightened people in the audience and laughed about it as they left by the stage door.

Once outside, Heinrich locked the stage door and they all turned to walk toward the street ten meters away. It was then that two rough looking men in masks appeared from behind some crates and demanded the ticket receipts cash. They were holding muskets and long knives and looked like they knew how to use them. Luc stepped in front of both his companions and said to the robbers, "This is really a bad idea. You should turn and walk away now before you get hurt." They laughed at him thinking he was unarmed. He pulled a dagger from his sleeve and they laughed even louder. Then they got serious. One swore at Luc and offered him the choice of the cash or his life. Luc chose neither and threw the knife. He hit the center chest of the man on the right, but the other got a shot off at Luc's heart. Of course, the lead was deflected and Luc moved quickly to pick up the dead man's gun. The living thief was frightened and turned to run. Luc took aim and shot him in the back. He dropped forward into the street face first. A few people across the street screamed at the commotion and gunshots. One man began yelling for help and Luc could hear people running towards them.

By this time, Heinrich and Helena were grabbing at Luc to try to help. Heinrich was the first to realize that Luc was indeed shot evidenced by the hole in his overcoat. He pawed at Luc looking for the wound and said, "My God, the shot did nothing to your flesh. How can that be? What kind of devil are you?"

Luc tried to change the conversation, but Heinrich was truly afraid of Luc now. This had happened to Luc before many times and he chose the same course of action every time. He disappeared.

Without another word, Luc walked to the corner, turned and slipped away through the growing crowd.

Today Geneva, Switzerland

Luc pulled up in front of the bank and parked the bike. He dismounted, setting his helmet on the seat, and peered through the window of the bank door. The interior was dark, but he knocked anyway, loudly. Lights came on quickly and two men walked to the front door and looked at him through the glass.

"Are you Mr. Champion?" Luc nodded his head yes and they opened the door.

They were speaking English, but Luc started the conversation in German. "I apologize for the short notice and the late night, but certain events demand it." They were somewhat surprised that this man was conversing with them in their native tongue.

"That is no problem considering the nature of your visit. We have always wondered if anyone would ever show up for that box. I am the president of this institution, Helmut Fromlich, and this is my senior vice president, Johann Von Tessler. Welcome. It is obvious there is urgency to this visit, so we will get right to the business at hand. Follow us, please."

They walked through the front public business area of the large old building and reached a door with a keypad lock. Von Tessler punched in ten numbers and the door opened. They invited Luc in first and he

obliged. “As I said, we never thought anyone would ever come for this after all this time. It’s sort of a legend here at the bank amongst the employees. I was briefed on it when I took this job, eighteen years ago. I laughed it off at that time and it is mentioned every few years by someone around here. With all due respect to your privacy, but anything you are able to share would be very much appreciated by everyone, sir.”

“I will be glad to tell you what is in the box, once I see it.” They went through another set of locked doors and entered a vault room with many safe deposit boxes on the walls. This room was old and small compared to the new ones they had passed through.

“We actually had to maintain the integrity of this room just for your box. We renovated around it some twenty years ago. Our commitments are held sacred here.” Fromich had an old brown envelope sealed with a wax stamp. Luc had sealed it when he left the orders in the president’s hand all that time ago. “Per the instructions written on this envelope, I must ask you a question, “What color is a Tibetan rose?”

“The correct answer is that there is no such thing as a Tibetan rose.”

“That is the right answer. And now I am permitted to open the envelope.” He looked at his partner, pulled out a fine letter opener and used it to gently open the old folded envelope. They both peer inside and Fromlich pulled out one small parchment. In handwritten fine penmanship, it gave one simple instruction and he read it after perching his reading glasses on the end of his nose, “To the current president of this bank, the man retrieving the item in the safe deposit box must be present.” He paused and looked at his vice president and Luc and said, “Well you certainly are present, Mr. Champion.” They all smiled and he read the next sentence. “He must recite the list of numbers exactly as written.” He stopped, looked at Luc, and both of them looked at the list. Fromlich said, “Please begin.”

“One hundred four, seventy-six, two thousand one hundred seventeen, eleven, one, five hundred six, and zero.”

“Astonishing. You are correct. Most astonishing.” When they finished gaping at the numbers, they finally read the bottom sentence. “It concludes with this direction – ‘Under no circumstances are you to ever reveal the identity of the person retrieving the item in the box. Ever.’” The bankers looked at each other and were obviously saddened at the last sentence. “That is most disappointing. When we were finished, I was going to say that it is an honor to meet the reclusive Luc Champion. Your name is very familiar to us, but no one has ever met you in person. It was going to make for a most entertaining story.”

“I’m sorry to disappoint you, but it is crucial for the success of my many enterprises that I remain as reclusive as I possibly can. I have many enemies in the East who would very much like to see my demise. Can I count on you gentlemen to continue with this sacred responsibility?”

They both said together, “Yes, sir.”

“Excellent. May I have your cell phones for a second, please?” They both looked a little frightened and

handed them over. Luc laid them on the table and took out a device that looked like a larger newer phone. He placed it beside one of the cell phones, hit a few keys on it and his device. Luc repeated the process with the other phone.

He reached inside his leather coat and pulled out his own SAT cell phone and made a call. "Did you get their numbers?" After a short pause, Luc said, "Good," and hung up. One of their phones rang immediately. The president picked it up and answered.

"Hello." He said in English. He listened and shook his head yes over and over saying nothing. Then he said, "Yes, I understand. The code is 17676548. Yes. Our pleasure, sir. Thank you." And hung up. He looked at his partner and said, "That was Mr. Champion's security. I gave him the outside access codes to our security system. He is deleting the video recordings of the time Mr. Champion was in the building." He looked at Luc and said, "You are very careful, Mr. Champion. I had forgotten all about the fact that you were captured on our surveillance system. We are glad to accommodate your requirements. Most glad, indeed."

"Good. And my company is glad to continue to do business with your establishment. Can you bring me the safe deposit box now, please? I am in a bit of a hurry." The bankers got up and pulled keys out of their pockets. They walked to the correct unit and unlocked it. The president pulled the box out, carried it to the table they had been sitting at and set it in front of Luc.

"Would you like a little privacy at this time, sir?"

"No gentlemen. You are welcome to watch." Luc opened the box and reached inside. He pulled out a mechanical device about the size of a softball. It was intricate with parts made of ebony, a black hardwood from Africa. It rattled as Luc set it on the table in front of them.

They looked at it closely and one asked, "What is it?"

"It is a key. Well I must take my leave now. Thank you for your time and professionalism."

The vice president said, "But, what is the key to?"

"I don't know." Luc lied to the curious bank official. Luc stood up and held out his hand to shake theirs. They rose and reciprocated Luc's gesture. He started walking and they followed knowing better than to ask any more about the key.

They reached the front door without further conversation. Luc shook their hands again and said, "Goodbye. Sorry to have bothered you at this late hour. Get some rest, if you can."

In a series of fluid motions, Luc stepped the ten feet to his motorcycle, pulled on his helmet, threw his leg over the seat, and took off. He was back at the airport in six minutes with virtually no traffic during that time of day.

The same team was waiting for him by the plane and he handed off the bike to the woman driver. He thanked her as she jumped on and drove away. Two members of the ground crew and the captain of the plane

helped Luc with his flight suit and they climbed aboard.

The flight home took another forty minutes and they touched down back at the Silo. Luc had been gone a total of two hours and eleven minutes. Not bad for making a round trip to Europe.

Take Arms Against a Sea of Troubles

Luc got back to the wireframe model of Beijing. Four techs walked around him with location sensor pens tied to the model remotely. They clicked and stretched lines and clicked again to end the lines as Luc was speaking. Another tech followed to fill in the connecting lines to add a third dimension. One tech showed Luc how to work the wand and the whole process sped up dramatically. Soon, Luc was the only one drawing quickly and precisely. He couldn't help himself and took a second wand and worked both, one in each hand. He was ambidextrous, but the men around the edge watching were looking on in amazement as he drew and added details. He was deep in concentration, when he casually said, "This is fun." Everyone started laughing more in awe than finding his statement humorous. Luc didn't care what they thought at that point. He was thinking of John. He went on for the next ninety-two minutes without slowing down. In fact, he found himself getting faster as he expanded on the underground out many miles from the starting point. He had reached a place well known to him and constructed it.

It took shape and one of the techs said, "What is that you are laying out?"

Luc answered him without slowing down, "Kublai Kahn's tomb."

The lieutenant mothering the model along said, "That doesn't exist on any satellite imagery and there is no record of it anywhere I can find."

Without giving it a second thought, Luc said, "I know."

The word had gotten around from the lieutenant that what they were seeing was classified, so everyone was afraid to ask Luc anything about how and why he knew all this. Luc saw Sully talking to one of the four techs discouraging further questions.

While Luc drew well outside the city, the five commanders were standing in the hologram and talking tactics. They were joined by some badass looking people. Luc overheard a lot of their discussion and made a necessary decision. "Cass, would you please bring those men up to speed on the machine gun you designed." She headed toward them, introduced herself and began explaining. Luc wanted them briefed on the new weapon, but he also wanted them outside the hologram so that he could review it. Luc talked to the lieutenant and asked to be taught how to move it around. The lieutenant gave him a brief tutorial and Luc began walking through the tutorial, expanding, shrinking and spinning it around. Luc asked the lieutenant to color code some of the features and he did quickly. When Luc was satisfied, he began by enlarging it to reality. Only a fifty by fifty by fifty-foot picture showed at that resolution. Luc was standing at the beginning of a tunnel and started to move through it. He walked back and forth through several more smaller tunnels just to get a feel for the projection. The five commanders finished their briefing, saw what Luc was doing and joined him on his walk.

One said, "I'd like to see walls on this wireframe. It's confusing to me."

Luc said to the lieutenant, "Please oblige Colonel Norman." Luc knew from his file that Norman was the best at planning these ops, but not running them.

In a few seconds, walls appeared and the frame was gone. Texture was added to the walls and then colors. This kid was a genius. Sully was actually looking over the lieutenant's shoulder watching his keystrokes.

Norman said, "This is going to make preparing for an op so much faster than actually building the site." They were working through the tunnels and Luc realized they were thinking about a plan of action. Their men had started to arrive and were watching from the side. One of the master sergeants that led these operations was looking frustrated and he saw Luc looking at him.

Luc said "Sergeant Dixon, how would you like to proceed with the planning?"

"Thank you for asking, sir. Now that you boys are done playing with the new toy, perhaps you could zoom that projection out and explain what we are trying to accomplish. I read the transcripts of previous conversations that were mysteriously texted to us while we were in route, but I want to hear it from you."

"I'd be happy to explain. We need to kill a man who is a patient in this hospital right there. He is on the sixth floor right here." Luc highlighted the spot and tagged it with a blinking red light. "There is a system of ancient tunnels below ground that could be our access route. One of the tunnels runs sixteen feet below the hospital's basement. This route right here," Luc highlighted it, "would lead us to it from this drainage access in this runoff creek here. Would you please take over and ask the questions from this point on."

"Well, that's a first. I've never heard a general ever say please. I like it here already." Dixon walked into the hologram and looked around. Everyone else had cleared out recognizing his authority in this area. "Curt, Bob, come here." They joined him and discussed some things quietly. Dixon turned to Luc and said, "First things first. How are you going to get us to this point?"

Luc began his explanation, "We are going to take a new aircraft that will place us outside the city undetected. From there, we are going to make use of two types of body suits. The inner one is an exoskeleton that will make us about ten times stronger than we are. The outer suit is a chameleon covering that makes us virtually invisible. We'll make the rest of the mission on foot."

"I've heard rumors of both, but you really have them?"

"Yes. And they are proven effective. Will all that take care of your first concern?"

"We will need to verify the exact degree of capability, but we can move on for now. How accurate is the model we are looking at?"

"There could be some deterioration in the tunnels, but they are all reinforced and should be passable."

"I'm not comfortable with the words 'should be', sir."

"There will be some necessary improvising. I have equipment that should cover the problems we

encounter. I will provide details shortly. Please proceed with your next concern.”

He laughed with his other two companions and said, “There’s that word again. *Please*. You keep saying us. Who is us?”

“Myself and however many men you want to have with us.”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t have time to nursemaid a billionaire who wants to play Seal Team 6, sir.”

“I see your point, but you need to trust me. I am more than qualified to accompany you as an active and capable participant.”

Dixon rolled his eyes, the universal sign for *give me a break*. Luc could not sit by after that challenge. He walked over to one of the security team and asked for his sidearm. It was a Glock 17 and Luc checked to see if a bullet was chambered. It was. Everyone in the large room was watching Luc now with great interest. He took quick aim and shot all eighteen bullets in the gun in rapid-fire succession at a two-foot square blank area on the far wall. He made a perfect circle twelve inches in diameter. The room was quiet except for a few gasps from some people. The sergeant still had that unbelieving look on his face. He was obviously not easily impressed. So, Luc pulled out the throwing daggers that were always on his wrists and threw them forty feet into a pillar sticking them perfectly one inch apart. Then he walked over to Sergeant Dixon and took up a stance to fight him. Dixon instinctively prepared to defend himself and Luc hit him with a one two lightning set of punches into his face. He threw the punches with enough force to make him hurt, but not enough to injure him. Dixon took it well and started to laugh rubbing his chin and said, “Okay, then, let’s see the suits and the equipment.” Some people laughed and some were too stunned at the demonstration to move at all. Luc’s friends just smiled and Harry was shaking his head as Luc and Dixon walked by.

Luc asked Sully to get the sergeant manuals on the hardware they had been talking about and a few other items as well. Luc thought it was a good time to leave and let the professionals take charge and prepare.

Luc went up to his apartment, changed into his street clothes and ate a sandwich. After he was finished, he wandered back to the warehouse floor and was greeted by salutes and a newfound respect. It was amazing what kicking a little butt did sometimes.

It was now five hours after they had damaged the sub. Both eastern boats were clearly heading back to port when the team could not track them anymore. The DEMP guns were on schedule. Gunther had three built. The Spec Op folks had a plan and wanted to present options to the entire command including Luc’s civilian team. James had set up a visit and they got started with a quick two-minute briefing from each of the nine people Luc designated. That would take eighteen minutes. They were almost through and ready to hear what the men proposed. Duncan was wrapping up when Mary Jo’s terminal went blank.

Someone said, “Hold please.” They waited in silence as the moment stretched on. And on. And on.

Then Sully said, “Mary Jo’s feed has been cut in her office at the Empire State Building. Hold.” Luc’s phone let out a beep that a Quick Message had been received from Gunther. And so did Sully’s, Teresa’s and the rest of the inner circle. They all looked at the same message, EXPLOSION AT OFFICE. MARY JO KILLED.

Gunther was busy on a terminal and two phones working the emergency. When he paused a second, Luc said, “Gunther, report when you are ready.” Luc was holding up better than he did when John was murdered.

Gunther was reviewing some video footage and finally said, “There was an explosion on our floor of the building. It was a missile strike. I’m looking at a live feed from a camera on the outer hallway and it is showing a blast. My team down the street already had simple surveillance drones around our building and one caught the missile hitting and... Hold.” Everyone waited in silence while Gunther looked at another recording a couple of times. When he was done, he said, “Another drone caught the missile being fired from a drone half a mile out, directly north. The missile was targeting Mary Jo’s office. I’m sorry.”

But, this time, instead of breaking down, Luc said this, “Gunther, secure the area with our people, but let the NYPD take the lead. Forensics will show nothing more than what you already have told us. Secure it and let it go. I need you to help stop this.” Gunther ended his feed and all eyes were on Luc as he walked to the holographic world of Beijing taking Sergeant Dixon with him.

Luc indicated for him to proceed with his briefing, “Highlight the hospital that Shen Li is in. Now highlight the two possible entrances to the long tunnel that is on the lowest level. That looks right. And now highlight the tunnel that is one level up that crosses it almost at its end. You said it was a sewer drain line, but we can stand up in it. Good. Now highlight the tunnel that crosses it at the other end. There is a vault-like door at this point and you said you can get us through it. The vault room takes us to about twenty feet below the hospital. We’ll have the DEMP gun hit the hospital just before we break through the floor. We’ll need all the new toys you have to pull this off. There are risks, but necessary ones considering what is at stake. Who’s the best at commanding these types of missions on your end, General?”

“Winslow.” Luc made the formal introductions referring to Winslow’s titles retired Commanding General of the British Army MPs and, most importantly, Sir, as in a Queen’s royal knight. Almost all of the soldiers present recognized the name. And, by the looks on their faces, Winslow’s reputation as well.

Then Luc asked, “Who’s the best at running the op from here on your side, Sergeant?” Luc said it loud enough for everyone to hear. He was looking for the most confident person in the crowd and, sure enough, he got a volunteer.

“That would be me, sir.” Another one of the commanders stepped forward next to Colonel Norman and no one was arguing. Colonel Blake was short and all muscle. “I see the plan roughed out, but...”

Winslow handled that comment, “Colonel, perhaps you, myself and Colonel Norman should discuss this

somewhere we can concentrate without all the spectators. We can use my office right upstairs next to a conference room.” They followed him and Luc continued with his planning.

“Sully, let the support vehicles know the schedule and make room for fourteen people and our personal equipment, please.”

Luc asked Dixon, “If I were to get you into a hospital where people were running around with flashlights, can you shoot him?”

“Yes. Can you get us to here?” He was pointing to the entry point to the tunnel system.

Luc studied all the imagery he could get of the area but could not actually see the entrance. It was simply obscured by time. He was confident that he could find it. Seemed like yesterday. He said, “Yes.”

Slaying the Dragon

Everything was coming together and they were scheduled to leave in two hours thirty-two minutes. Angela did not like that Luc was going, but there really was no choice considering he was the only one who had ever been below Beijing in the tunnels. He knew this was deadly serious, but the transport he had arranged should be fun.

Packages kept arriving as ordered by the team. Colonel Blake and General Winslow had synced responsibilities and were running their group, twelve men and three women, through the op as best they could considering the unknowns. Luc felt very comfortable with the plan knowing what he knew. No matter how much detail he provided and used in simulation, they were apprehensive. This was a new kind of operation for all of them, considering the technology Luc was adding and the fact they had yet to get to see it in use. But now, all the equipment was laid out on a section of the warehouse floor and Luc was ready to brief them. They would regain their confidence once they experienced all that Luc was providing.

“Here is what I have to offer. Upgraded Chameleon suits for starters. The set includes small Chameleon duffel bags. The suit now also suppresses odors and sounds. Software handles the biggest detection problem, density. Detectors check air density and catch the change even with the suit. These are just like the undersea suits. This is seven-year-old technology and most everyone passed on using the suits when the detection method was developed. *We* developed it and leaked it to the East years ago knowing that we could upgrade.” One of the team had put on his suit, packed his bag with his weapons and was standing in a corner. Cass had set up cameras to test the suit and pack. The invisible man spoke into his internal mic and they heard him on a comm, but Luc could not hear him when he walked within two feet of him. Luc even made an effort to smell him. There was no infrared signature either. He was totally invisible. Luc was concentrating on the one man and missed the fact that everyone had dressed and was testing their comms and being able to see each other.

“Hold on ladies and gentlemen. There is another suit that should go underneath that one.” The Chameleon suits were flexible with plenty of layering room. He opened a crate filled with smaller boxes and showed them the contents. It was a complete Exosuit, neck to ankles. “These are suits I designed a few years ago that multiply your strength eight to ten times, considering how big, strong and flexible you are built.”

“How can they do that when they are so thin?” asked one of the women.

“They are built using the Elysium thread as both the bone and muscle. The system uses nanotechnology in smart membranes that learn how you move with a few stretches and flexes of your legs, arms and torso. It will match your own movements and stress points to help you do it better. There are nine fabrics layered in the quarter-inch thickness. The layers work in threes and each tri-layer farther toward the outer surface multiplies the one below it.” It was clear they didn’t care about the technical side of it, but just wanted to put them on and

play. They were already stripping off the Chameleon suits and grabbing the Exosuits. Luc helped one of the team that had finished removing his Chameleon and was waiting by the boxes of the Exosuits. Sizes were labeled on the boxes. The troop found his size, had it out of the box and was ready to put it on. Minor adjustments were made as he slipped it on. Luc adjusted some clamps. Cass oversaw the connection of the different pieces and, when everything was attached, he began to flex and stretch. Then he picked up a two hundred pound crate, laughing the whole time. Everyone else had dug through the crate and found their sizes and were fitting into the Exosuits quickly. After they played around testing them for a few minutes, the women realized they were the strongest. One of them asked Luc why that was. "It's because of your size-to-strength ratio. The men are bigger and stronger, but your smaller size allows the suit to enhance your movements more."

Then, on went their Chameleon suits and, one by one, the troops disappeared. Luc had never used the combination of suits, but they were perfect. These best of the best soldiers in the world were now invisible and stronger than they could ever have imagined possible. In combination, this was the most capable team in the history of this world. And Luc was about to put the icing on the cake with firepower.

He opened another crate filled with hand weapons and small rifles. One of the commanders had requested these very special guns. The commander hadn't been sure if they really existed or not. He just heard rumors and asked Luc for them if they were real. They were set to go. Luc asked James to brief everyone, packed his things and found Harry.

"How's your team?"

"Pretty much invincible. How are you?"

"Doing pretty well actually. Keeping active has helped me push aside our losses for a while. I am deathly afraid of the time when I can grieve." Luc looked at him and they both knew the other felt exactly the same.

"I've had to push the loss of loved ones inside so many times for so long that it has almost become second nature. The death of John and my breakdown was a total surprise to me. It made me feel... human. I loved and hated it at the same time." They both just looked at the floor for a moment and then Luc had an idea. "I know what will help. Have our family here when I get back. Everyone. Roberta, Angela, the boys, Teresa, Gunther, Sully, Duncan and Admiral Tanner too. I like her. She is a very special person. I can feel it. And I'm worried about her. She has medical issues she is hiding. I can see the symptoms."

Harry smiled and said, "I forget that you are a medical doctor along with everything else."

"My last residency was in the early sixties. But I can still read. She is sick and it is serious. Have Sully hack her medical files. Have him dig deep and look everywhere. Track her movements for the last seven months to see if she is seeing a doctor off the military's records. We need to help her."

Luc's phone rang. He answered it, listened and ended the link. It was James. Luc said, "My ride is here. I gotta

go.” Luc looked Harry in the eyes and said nothing. Nothing needed to be said between them. Luc shook his hand, gave him a quick hug, turned and walked away.

Luc returned to the team, and they instinctively picked up their gear and followed him out. No one said a thing as they walked by the other people in the area. It took three elevator rides to get everyone to the top floor and the ramp to topside. They waited until all were assembled, climbed on board a shuttle bus and headed up the ramp. It was still dark outside, but the glow of the sun could still be seen over the horizon. The night was clear and still. The team saw their transport for the first time on the runway. The heat from the exhaust made a ghostly trail in the fading light. Their first ride was a space plane.

They rode in a cargo compartment in a capsule of sorts designed for moving a group this size. Pratt ordered it up a year ago. The plan was to land in Australia where their second ride would be waiting. Sully had scheduled Luc’s two prototype stealth transport jets. They were not just stealth, they were Chameleon as well. And each carried two jeep-size vehicles that used the same technology. These units were one year old and Luc had been waiting for a justification to put them into production. This op would probably make that happen sooner than later.

They quickly loaded up the capsule. It was cramped, but the ride would be short. When it was loaded, they took off. The team was too professional to look like they were enjoying the ride, but Luc saw the excitement in many of their eyes as they made the jump out of the atmosphere. The time in outer space was about fifteen minutes. They landed in a remote desert plain near the north coast of Australia and it seemed like no one was there to greet the unit. The soldiers hadn’t figured it out yet, but their rides were sitting right in front of them. When they were out of the plane and unloaded, Luc radioed the flight crew and ordered the two planes to show themselves. They did by opening up a cargo door in the back and walking outside. The team was laughing as the four vehicles were backed out to be loaded with their equipment. It looked like something out of a cartoon -- invisible planes sitting there with cars appearing out of the back.

The unit and gear were transferred and took off for a farm twenty miles out of the target city, Beijing. The trip would take two hours fifteen minutes. Luc was asked a lot of questions by one of the troops and he answered as much as he could. They were interrupted by the pilot of the second plane with bad news. His Chameleon function was failing. Luc asked the two commanders, “If we land, can we fit enough stuff and men into the good plane and still execute the op?” They conferred and said they could still pull it off, but with no margin for further error. There was a small island in the Indian Ocean that they set down on, made the reload and the good plane took off. They now had two cars and nine team members, including Luc.

The questioning continued as they finished the ride. Luc felt like a professor again, but it was time to get into soldier mode. The farm where they were landing was vacant due to arrangements that Gunther had made with the farmer and his family, who were enjoying a nice sudden vacation. They landed, unloaded their stuff

themselves into the cars and drove into the city. Their cars were invisible, so the drivers had to watch closely. As the traffic got busy, Winslow decided they were close enough to walk the rest of the way. They were four miles out in a rundown part of the city. They found a quiet spot to leave the cars and set off on foot. The target was still in the hospital with no sign of that changing.

The unit only walked about a block until the first team member figured out that they could run very, very fast. He told the rest of the team to follow him and they did in single file. Nine of them, seven men and two women, all with a carry bags across their chests, were now running at seventy miles per hour, not making a sound and totally invisible. It took them four minutes to find the area where the entrance to the tunnel should be located.

The team automatically circled the area and waited while Luc looked around. The area was now an apartment complex with a ravine behind it. The ravine was covered with trees and brush. A small creek ran at the bottom about twenty feet down and behind a chain link fence. There were people walking on the street and not noticing them at all. They found a side street to use as a gathering place and secured it immediately. One man pulled out ten of the bat UAVs and threw them into the air one by one where they went about their business.

Luc was studying a map displayed on a clear flat screen mounted on the side of a building. He enlarged their area and found what he was looking for. He took three men, walked to the chain link fence, cut it open and stepped through. Luc hooked a line on one of the posts and eased himself down the side all the way to the creek. He walked the bed downstream, returned after a short search, went upstream about twenty feet and stopped. There was water trickling out of the ground under some rocks. Luc moved the rocks and enlarged the hole. He called the team and told them to come to him, that he had found the entrance.

Two of the men had enlarged the hole further and were ready to enter when three kids came around a bend. They were playing in the creek and immediately saw the new cave entrance. Luc heard them say the rocks must have washed away and opened it up. They were talking about going inside. But, suddenly shut up when they heard a hissing sound. One of the men thought quickly and climbed into the entrance of the opening until he was just ten feet in. He pulled off his head cover and made the sound that scared the kids. The kids took off to get friends to help them investigate. After they were gone, the team entered the small tunnel one by one. They stopped forty feet in and discussed how to handle their unwelcome friends. One of the women volunteered to stay at the entrance. She would go back outside, cover the entrance and guard it. She a logical choice because she spoke Chinese. Now, they were down to eight. They moved out and found where the crossing tunnel should be about ten feet above. There was solid rock all around, but they used a portable sonar unit and found the tunnel above them immediately.

Luc was thinking about how to get through the ceiling rock, when one of the men took his handgun and told the others that he was going to shoot into the ceiling. He did so and it produced a straight hole like a drill about three feet in. It was loud, but the sound was kept local by the solid rock all around. They were all amazed and he said, "What? Don't you guys read the instruction manual? This thing has four different kinds of ammo. One is incendiary and goes through rock like butter until it burns up". They decided to shoot holes in a square and then take out the center. Three of them got ready to fire and the rest backed out of the way. They shot together and two shots worked as planned. The third round did not light off before it ricocheted. It started to burn when it hit one of the shooters in the chest and killed him instantly. Their suits were not bulletproof.

Two of his comrades picked up his body and carried it back to the entrance to the cave. Luc relayed to Sully what had happened and was told to have all the incendiary rounds inspected. The gun that had the bad load was opened and the cartridge checked. It had a double ring stamp on one side indicating it had been hit twice during loading and damaged. With that discovery, they were told to check all the remaining rounds before using them again, which took ten minutes.

They found two more double stamped rounds out of the one hundred they carried.

Again, they proceeded to shoot through the rock. In twenty minutes, the ceiling crumbled away and they could see into the next tunnel. The new problem to troubleshoot was getting up to that tunnel, almost thirty feet above them. They ran it by command, they ran it by the engineers, and the solution came back -- they should be able to jump the height to the next level. They were quickly instructed how to proceed and the last woman with them made the first attempt. She made it easily and secured a safety line for the rest of them. One by one, they all jumped twenty-eight feet straight up.

Luc had not told anyone about the vault door other than that it was there and needed a key. They moved through the tunnel and came to a dead end. Luc let the others lead and he was enjoying their confusion over not finding a vault door. Luc stepped forward, pointed to the wall and said, "This wall *is* the door. There is a complicated set of gears and levers like a clock that work magnetized steel rods fit into the sides of the doorframe. The rods are triggered by specific movement of four pencil-sized slide bars. Each of the small rods must be moved in the correct order to engage the larger, stronger mechanism."

Luc knew that some of the people would now be questioning how he possessed this detailed information. If it came up, he was going to lie and say that he read it in some old manuscripts. But, who among them was going to question a four-star general?

Luc placed the key six inches from the top right corner, felt it take hold and slid it three inches diagonally toward the center of the door. He could hear a quiet movement inside as he dragged the key along. He repeated the opposite movements on the bottom left corner and heard the same sound. Then he moved to the center and

stretched his hand from thumb to little finger toward the top right to where he had moved the first rod and slid that shaft ninety degrees from that corner to the top left. This moved the small metal dowel out of the way of the longer one he moved first. Luc repeated this action to move a blocking rod out of the way of the second rod. Then he returned to where he started, engaged that shaft again and moved it toward the center. This time it clicked at the center two feet away and stayed put. Again, he repeated the move in mirror image to the lower left rod until it clicked in the center as well.

Then the fun started. The door started ticking like a clock. They waited. Luc knew exactly what to expect, but the team didn't. He had never opened this door in front of anyone except the emperor and treasurer, the emperor's youngest brother. It would take a full ninety-two seconds. After fifty clicks, other pieces inside started to move. Big pieces. Then bigger pieces. Then it stopped. Eight seconds passed with no sound or movement, like it was broken. Then, one solid movement unlatched the big rods in the doorframe and the door swung open.

Opening the door was anticlimactic now because there was nothing inside. The vault used to contain one of the greatest amassed treasures in all of history. This was the only treasure trove Luc ever had access to that he did not touch. It was a sacred trust he held very dear. The emperor had been his friend.

The team had not made a sound the whole time while Luc worked the vault door lock. They really were professionals. They entered and Luc led them to the next intersection and through catacombs with no caskets. Only broken pottery was scattered about on the shelves. They approached the crossing point and found the floor ahead cluttered with rubble from an ancient collapse between the two tunnels -- a lucky break that saved them a lot of time. They climbed the loose rocks and reached the upper level quickly. Luc led them to the correct place and checked the sonar. There was good news. The tunnel ceiling had deteriorated, leaving only twelve feet of rock to go through now instead of the twenty initially calculated to clear in order to hit the floor of the hospital basement. Luc relayed the findings and thickness of the ceiling above them. After consultation with the engineers back home, the team members followed the same process as earlier until they reached concrete. They took measurements and the slab was three and a half feet thick. They were under a basement floor that housed the climate control system and hot water heaters. Measurements were checked and rechecked and the team took out the bottom of the slab until they were where the engineers said they should stop. They pulled out demolition charges and stuck them to the ceiling/floor above them. The signal was given that they were ready to blow it.

They were told to hold while the DEMP trucks were made ready. They all had the hospital floor plan memorized and had organized their search patterns. In a few minutes, the guns were in position and the countdown started. At three the building shook a bit from the electromagnetic pulse, more felt than heard. At zero, the ceiling was blown and one big chunk fell to the floor. They were up into the basement in two seconds and heading for the exit. A stairway stood just to their left and they took it up two flights. Just as the point man

was reaching for the door to the main floor, it opened and two uniformed men rushed through and headed downstairs. Luc was the last in line and the others had made no attempt to stop the soldiers. It happened too fast. When they reach Luc, he tripped them. The fall put one man out and, when the other rolled over to get up, Luc cold-cocked him. Luc checked and they were alive, but would be out for a long time. He took their radios and tossed one to a troop he knew spoke Chinese. Les said, "You've got skills, General. Glad to have you along after all."

They split up into three teams with Sergeant Les Dixon and Luc staying together. Luc and Les took off upstairs for their assigned floor and stopped in the stairway to do a weapons check. Luc had nine-millimeter Parabellum rounds and was satisfied. They both signaled ready and stepped out into the hallway. There were people standing behind a nurse's station with flashlights looking at charts. One was on the landline phone and two security men stood at the outside counter -- both were looking at their inoperable cell phones with flashlights. Two doctors passed by Luc talking about a patient with head trauma. Luc stepped in behind them and followed down the corridor. At the end of the hall, security men were stationed outside one of the doors. The doctors entered the room, and Luc signaled for Les to hold outside while he followed the doctors inside. Armed men lined the wall surrounding a bed. The target was sitting up on pillows cradling his right hand with his left one. Luc moved to get a closer look and could see that one side of the target's face was drooping probably from a stroke caused by the weapon. He was talking fast to the doctors and they left quickly. Luc followed them outside and called Les over. Luc notified the team that they had the target and the rest needed to spread out along their evacuation route.

Luc and Les talked over the plan, unpacked necessary items and nodded ready. Les tossed a flash bang grenade into the room and, one second later, it did its job. It incapacitated everyone in the room for the two seconds Luc needed to do his job. He stepped into the room, put two bullets in Shen Li's head, then left. The men in the room weren't even aware their boss was dead until Luc and Les were in the stairway. They retraced their steps and picked up the team as they moved out. They reached the closed entrance to the tunnel in seconds and pushed their way through the rocks and into the dark. It was six a.m.

In two minutes, they had covered their tracks and were back in their little alley. It was then, Luc told them goodbye. They didn't understand until he explained that he needed to see someone face to face. He selected the gear he needed and sent them away.

China Used to Be a Nice Place

Luc found a quiet place to stash his stuff and changed into a business casual outfit. He wandered around to kill a couple of hours.

1271 Beijing, China

Lucasiah was busy reading the logs of the past emperors in his private chambers, when his personal manservant entered and said, “Master, the caravan from the west has finally arrived at the city gates and the Emperor is requesting your presence.”

Luc got up as he set the writings down and asked him, “How large is the parade this time?”

“I counted twenty camels, ten horses and four llamas. All are loaded down with goods until the animals are carrying all they can bear. The Polo brothers are riding and a young man I did not recognize.”

“That could be the son of Niccolo, Marco. He would be seventeen now. They spoke of him many times. He is supposed to be extraordinary.” Luc paused and thought for a second then added, “But extraordinary people can often be very conceited. Let’s see if there is any humbleness in the lad.”

“There certainly is not any in the two brothers. They think too highly of themselves and so does the Emperor.”

“Quiet. Keep those opinions to yourself. I will not always be around for you to be so truthful. It could get you into serious trouble, my friend.”

“Of course, master. You better hurry off to court.”

Luc changed into his best robes for the emperor and made his way across the courtyard to the main greeting hall. Luc served Kahn as royal interpreter and advisor. Kahn knew Luc as Sancho of Andalucía.

Emperor Kublai Kahn had been looking for the return of the Polo brothers for quite a while. He seemed fascinated by anything Western. Luc had seen this many times before. The opposite seemed true as well. Any visit from an Asian in Rome was a very big deal. Especially when they were royalty.

Luc entered the throne hall where the emperor was pacing around the windows anxiously awaiting the Polo brothers and the young Marco. They had been gone a few years after spending several years in the service of the emperor here in China. He used them as trade emissaries to various regions in China, among other duties. Luc arrived halfway through their first long period of working for the emperor, and came to know them both well -- he did not care for either one of them. They were smart and good businessmen, but they were bullies to their employees. The brothers drove their employees to work hard and then exhibited a complete lack of common courtesy to them. Worse than that, in Luc’s eyes, they pretended to fawn over the emperor with too many

compliments and then talked badly about him behind his back. In short, Luc thought they were only here for the money.

“Ah, there you are. What is taking them so long?”

“They are probably cleaning up before coming to see you, my lord.”

“Yes, yes, yes. But I wish they would hurry up. I want to hear the news from Rome on my request for ambassadors.”

“I fear the answer from the Pope is not the one you are hoping for. The Pope has other business to attend to with wars in the north and south. Perhaps if you declare war on the Romans, he would pay you the attention you are due, my lord.”

The emperor laughed at Luc’s little joke just as the page announced the entrance of the three Italians. Kahn took a seat on his throne and pretended to be busy reading something.

He said, “Ah, there you are, my old friends.” Luc interpreted verbatim to the visitors and added his personal greetings as well.

They returned his kind words with bows and removed their hats. They gave their welcome in Latin and introduced the youth, Marco. Marco bowed again and stepped forward a bit.

The emperor said, “So this is the young man I have heard so much about from a proud father and uncle. If you are half the man they claim you to be, you will have a lot to live up to. I will not listen to them and learn your dispositions for myself.” Luc interpreted loosely considering the specific dialectic words Kahn had chosen.

Kahn turned to the older men and said, “Come to my table and feast with me. I am anxious to hear what news you have brought me from your Pope.” These words Luc could interpret exactly, even with the hurried tone of the emperor’s voice.

The men looked at each other and the answer was plain. Kahn saw it too and stopped short as he was walking toward the dining hall. He looked at Luc and said, “It seems you were correct. The Pope says no. Most disappointing.”

Luc responded, “I’m sorry, my lord. I know you sincerely hoped the exchange of cultures would be for the enlightenment of humankind and not for profit or power. It was an honorable gesture. I am proud to be called your friend. Indeed, most disappointing.”

They all dined at a long table and were joined by the emperor’s favorite women to decorate the room. The Polos sat to the right of Kahn with Luc between them and the emperor. Luc did not eat while he listened and repeated what each diner was saying. The Polos were learning the Mongol language and butchering it nicely when they attempted a few phrases here and there. Luc was listening and learning carefully about their understanding. He had often used his gift for languages to pretend he did not understand the tongue someone was speaking to gain an advantage, which he found very helpful because people spoke freely believing they

were not being understood. However, since he was supposed to know languages in his current position, he could not use that trick here. However, he leveraged another advantage by teaching his servant Latin, the only language they used now in private, and it allowed him to spy for Luc quite nicely.

While they were at the table, Luc noticed that young Marco had taken a fancy to one of the Kahn's many women -- one of the emperor's favorites, no less. She was returning Marco's glances when Kahn was not looking. These actions could be embarrassing for Marco and deadly for her. She was taking quite a risk. The emperor's business with the guests and everyone else eating and enjoying themselves continued while Luc worked and observed. The other women were taking notice and whispering about the flirtation. Luc caught Kahn almost looking to see what was going on. This was escalating and becoming serious. As much as Luc did not care for the Polos, he did care for the woman who was being foolish. She was his friend as were many of the women.

The men were speaking about the exchange rates in goods between their countries and the countries around Rome. After the few sentences were exchanged and translated, Luc said to Kahn in Mongol, "Young Marco needs an explanation about your discussion, my lord. With your permission, I wish to tell him some things in his language. It will help him to participate more."

The emperor replied, "Yes, of course. He is new to this type of exchange among men of different cultures."

Luc turned and addressed the Polos in Latin, "What I am about to say is very important." When it was clear he had their attention, he continued, "Do not react in any way to what I say except to nod and appear interested. Do not act shocked or startled. Do you all understand?" They looked at each other and nodded as if the conversation was interesting and helpful. Good. Luc addressed Marco directly, "The emperor has not noticed your looks at his favorite woman across the table from you." Marco stupidly looked at her and then caught himself. "I said you are not to react. Do not look at her again. This is most serious and I am trying to save you from making a very bad mistake." The older men understood and were nodding and feigning they were not frightened. "Stop making even the slightest advances toward her immediately." Luc faked a laugh and they all laughed a little to complete the show they were putting on. "If the emperor sees your attention directed to his woman, he will have her executed. Your little flirtations will cause her death. If you understand, nod and thank me loudly." They did so. Perhaps a bit too much, but Luc had accomplished what he wanted. He turned to the Kahn and in Mongol said, "Thank you, my lord. The youth has been made to understand some of the more subtle ways of your country. Please carry on."

They started where they left off and talked through the meal and beyond. When the meal was over and the Polos prepared to leave to retrieve the gifts they had brought, Marco's father spoke with Luc in private. "Thank you. My stupid son has learned a valuable lesson today. I am indebted."

"Just make sure you teach him the ways of a foreign ruler's court before you bring him along next time. He

may not be so lucky as he was today.” Luc turned and walked away in disgust.

Today Beijing, China

The person Luc was meeting face to face was the chairman of the Governing Council, Ming Chang. Luc needed to watch his reaction to the question, “Did you know about the attacks?”

Luc had to wait a bit until he was sure Chairman Ming was in his office working. Luc walked into McDonald’s, ordered coffee and a breakfast sandwich and read the paper until it was time. He watched the people as they grabbed something to eat on their way to work. He felt the pain they have had for so many years of servitude to a government that treats them like cattle. They were a commodity, pure and simple. Luc was well aware that what he was about to do might lead to collateral damage causing their lives to be severely disrupted or worse for the next few days. He didn’t start all this, but he still felt poorly about it. In the end, they were going to gain a lot and Luc would focus on the here and now, where real people with real lives existed.

And then, Luc’s brother, Michael the Archangel, walked in.

Luc’s heart leapt to see Michael again. His anxiety over the coming course of actions left him instantly. Luc thought, “Thank you, God, for being there always and especially now, when I need you most.” Michael saw Luc, waved hello and motioned that he was going to get something at the counter. Luc set his paper aside and ate the last bite of his sandwich so he could pay attention to Michael when he sat down. The restaurant was crowded, but he had a table with two chairs.

Luc took a good look at Michael; he had not changed since the last time Luc saw him, ten years ago. Michael saw Luc looking and smiled back. He was dressed in jeans, sandals, and a dark t-shirt under a blue windbreaker. When it was his turn to order, Michael pretended he did not know the language and held up two fingers, indicating the second item on the menu and ordered coffee in English from the girl taking his order. The girl understood and then said the total. He pulled a couple of bills from his pocket and held them out to her like he had no clue what bill was what. She took the correct one and gave him only coins in return. His order was delivered as they finished the transaction and he took the tray. He bobbled it a bit making his way through the crowd and sat down at Luc’s table. Luc helped him clear his tray so he could discard it and have room to enjoy his food. When Michael was finally settled, he took a long sip of his coffee and smiled. Then he looked at Luc and said, “Hello, old friend.” He had a bite of his Egg McMuffin, closed his eyes, smiled and kind of sung, “Ummmm.”

Luc smiled at that and said, “That’s the same way I feel whenever I eat anything, except liver.”

Michael chuckled and continued to gobble down everything, drinking his coffee between bites. Luc simply smiled and waited, not wanting to interrupt Michael’s bliss. When he was eating his last few bites, Michael

started talking with his mouth full. He was like a little kid without their parents around. “God thought you might want to talk to a friend before you went to see Chairman Ming. So, here I am.”

“I lost a good man earlier this morning.”

“He is with the Lord now and just fine.” Luc waited a few heartbeats taking that in and found himself smiling.

Then he returned to what was ahead and said, “Am I doing the right thing?”

“Why are you doing it?”

“To prevent a real war?”

“And?”

Luc thought for a moment and said, “To stop these men from trying to kill me and killing others.”

“And?”

Luc knew what he should say, but it was hard. Finally, he summoned the courage and whispered, “Revenge.”

“Of all three reasons, where does revenge fall? How much of your heart is focused on it rather than the other two?”

This question was easy and Luc did not hesitate, “Small, but it is there.”

“You wouldn’t be human if you didn’t feel it.” They thought in silence for a full minute. And then Michael said, “As your friend, I would advise you to stay focused on the future and not the past.” He got up to leave. As Michael turned to go, he looked back at Luc and said, “It sure is a beautiful day today.” He smiled, walked through the people and out the door.

Luc sat for a bit and gathered his thoughts. His comm unit had been silent for some time when Gunther came on and said, “That was Michael, wasn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“How are we going to proceed?”

“As planned.” Luc got up, walked outside and took a deep breath. It really was a nice day. He took off walking with renewed purpose in his step.

He told Gunther to begin the operation. They immediately began briefing Luc as he walked. General Winslow was leading the briefing and allowing access to others only as necessary. He was very good at his job. They had told Luc the assassination reports were getting delivered and security was running high for all the rest of the Committee. This news should actually facilitate Luc’s actions rather than hinder them. Somebody had to be thinking that Luc had something to do with what was happening. Good. He wanted them fearful of him -- and they should be.

Luc arrived at his destination, walked across the plaza and into the building where the chairman of the Eastern Federation was sitting behind his desk. Right about then Chairman Ming should be learning of the death of Shen Li.

Luc had a file folder with him and his wallet. That's all he should need.

He walked up to the reception desk and made this announcement in perfect Chinese, "My name is Lucasiah Champion and I am here to see Chairman Ming. Here is my card and identification." The woman took them and grabbed a phone. Twenty seconds later, two men asked Luc to follow them and he did so. He was taken to a small room and asked to wait with them. Both were wired with earpieces and carried weapons. A man entered the room and greeted Luc warmly, "Mr. Champion, how nice of you to drop in. The chairman would be honored to have a few words with you. Please follow me."

Luc was taken through security and frisked. His papers were checked and left in his possession. He entered Chairman Ming's office. It was beautiful with antiques that were between two and four hundred years old. Luc was left alone for a minute and, as he scanned the room, he smiled when he saw one of his pieces -- an entryway short cabinet with an ornate black marble top. It had lots of carving and lots of gold leaf. It was the gaudiest model of the line, but it went well with the beautiful Chinese pieces. The chairman was using it as a sidepiece to his desk.

A door opened and the chairman entered alone. They bowed and Luc greeted him in Chinese. Chairman Ming replied, "Your Chinese is excellent. Please have a seat. Would you like some tea?" Luc said yes and they went through the process of preparing and pouring their drinks. It was very good. "What would you like to discuss, Mr. Champion?"

Luc got right to the point, "Four of your council members have been trying to assassinate me and have successfully killed two of my senior management. Here is the proof." Luc passed him the file. The chairman called an aide, gave the folder to him and asked the aide to give him a report in five minutes. Luc continued, "My only question is, did you know about these attacks?"

Chairman Ming paused and then said, "Yes, of course. Your sanctions against my country are unlawful. We will not tolerate it any longer. The isolation you have forced us into is over. This is not negotiable. Anything less than return to our free trade status is unacceptable and will be backed by the full economic and military power this country possesses."

"I had honestly believed the men were acting as an independent rogue group. It is most disheartening to learn otherwise."

"Nothing goes on here without me knowing it."

Luc thought about his next course of action and said, "There is another side to this that you do not know." He proceeded to tell Chairman Ming the story of his long life, however, the chairman did not believe it for a

minute. Luc finally told him about his furniture-making business and described the signature on the bottom of the locked top drawer of his desk sidepiece.

The chairman reached into his pocket and pulled out a set of keys. He unlocked the drawer, pulled it out and dumped the contents on the floor next to him. He took the drawer, turned it over and set it on top of his big desk. He studied the bottom and then stood in anger and said, "That's a good trick. Your fantasy is ridiculous. I don't believe it for a second. And even if it were true, it means nothing." He actually hissed the last words. It was clear the time for talking was over.

Luc stood and looked back at Chairman Ming. "I don't care what you believe, I just wanted you to know who you are dealing with. Now let's see how you like this trick." Luc used his comm and signaled Gunther. All the electrical outlets and lights exploded in the building, shot off a few sparks and went out. They were now in a pitch-black office. The chairman's aide and two guards rushed in with flashlights. When they saw he was okay, they stood and waited for instructions.

Luc looked at Chairman Ming and said, "I can do that anytime anywhere I want. I have killed your four men and you do not know how I did it. I crippled one of your newest submarines. In my lifetime, I have seen over one hundred billion people die and your pitiful existence will be a pleasure to snuff out with a snap of my fingers." Luc paused, gave the chairman a moment to comprehend what Luc had said and then finished the threat. "Do you really want to go to war with me?"

Chairman Ming turned to his guards and said, "Take this man and throw him into the streets." They approached Luc and reached for his arms. He let them grip his shoulders and then made his move. In a series of lightning fast actions, Luc broke one man's arm and hit the other in the face while taking the unsuspecting guard's weapon. Luc's aim encompassed all of them. They put their hands up as best they could considering their injuries, including the chairman.

Once the room was still, he disassembled the gun and threw it in the corner. He turned to Chairman Ming, pointed a finger at him and said, "Lay a hand on me again and I will black out your entire country." The chairman waved his men off and left Luc alone. Luc continued, "You will not provoke further escalation of this vendetta. You have created this situation and I am putting an end to it here and now. I will let you live to watch the collapse of your country." Chairman Ming was stunned and truly frightened this time. He was finally acting like the coward he really was. Luc turned to leave. He opened the door, walked out of the office and down the hall to the elevator, accompanied at a distance by the aide and uninjured guard. When Luc was at the elevator, the aide stepped up and entered a code to open the doors. They all entered it, dropped a few floors and the doors opened again. Luc took another hallway and another key code was entered at the door into the main entry area. Luc walked out the front door alone and the guard closed the doors behind him.

When he was outside, Luc stopped, looked around and said out loud, "Yes, it is a beautiful day." He

signaled James to initiate a second command. There was a kind of “whump” sound and everything electrical in the city stopped. Cars stalled and kept rolling until they crashed into each other. People got out of the vehicles and looked around, quickly joined by people coming out of buildings. They were all asking each other what had happened. In the chaos, Luc walked back to where he stashed his bags. Eight minutes later, he was invisible and running at seventy miles per hour back to the farm where they landed.

Aftermath

A plane came to a stop from a well-timed landing on the farm airstrip, and Luc ran up to the hatch. He boarded and the plane taxied a short distance and blasted into the morning sky. They headed north for a rendezvous with a space plane that would take Luc back to the Silo. As he traveled, Luc narrated the story of his meeting with Chairman Ming to everyone.

When the questions ended, President Schaffer asked Luc, “General, what is your next move?”

Luc answered, “Protecting ourselves. Now that we know the true colors of the chairman, we should expect something stupid and big. On the other hand, he is going to have his hands full with the blackout in his capital. Let’s disrupt his capability to take any action against us at all. General Adams, prepare the DEMP weapons necessary to hit their main military installations. Admiral, can you give us the priority on which ones should be hit first?”

Admiral Tanner replied, “Yes, of course. We have those scenarios updated frequently. I can tell you right now that the subs are the most dangerous. What do you have that can find them, so we can neutralize them?”

“Gunther, Sully, Harry, what percentage of exact locations do we have on all the armed subs in the world?”

Harry unexpectedly spoke first, “We have the build and decommissioning records on every sub ever made. Sully, search our records and give us a current active count, please.”

They waited a few moments and Sully said, “There are one hundred eighteen. Of those, sixty-one are U.S. Navy, nine are yours, Luc. The remainder are Russian and Eastern Federation. Take away the Russians and that leaves twenty-eight Eastern. Hold please... Six are in dry dock or docked for repairs or refits. Hold... hold... We have exact coordinates on nine. Hold... And location coordinates on four that are between twenty-four and forty-eight hours old. We have the projected locations on the rest -- guesses, but very smart guesses. Give me access and a little help from the Navy and we can pinpoint all of them precisely in less than six hours.”

Admiral Tanner said, “Amazing. I can give you anything you need to make that happen. Amazing.”

Luc gave an order, “Everyone, let’s make that a priority. I want a projection area dedicated to that end when I arrive back at the Silo. Match the locations of the Eastern subs to our undersea weapons to let us know which ones we could hit immediately. Then take the remainder and put one of my boats behind each one of theirs.”

Sully said, “We’re going to need a bigger area here, Luc.”

“Colonel Reed, take care of that. I do not want stupid logistics stuff to hinder us. Gunther, let us know when you can have the weapons set up to hit their military bases. And build another twenty and set them up in every major Eastern city. Move the ones we have from Beijing to North Korea. As soon as they are in place, I

want to hit their capital unless we hear from Chairman Ming. Mr. President, Admiral Tanner, I will take no action without your approval from this point forward, but do not get soft on me now. It is crucial we keep them off balance.”

President Schaffer answered, “Understood, general. Mr. Freeborn, could you help me with a few folks on the hill please.”

“I was already making a list, sir.”

Luc continued, “Let’s switch to non-military items. Wouldn’t it be nice if the whole world used the economic model that the United Undersea States use? Haiti and New Texas are aboard. The entire news media is talking about the concept since it was successfully demonstrated when the U.U.S. became a country. And many small territories have already positioned themselves as well. Many more consider this an eventuality. There are even petitions from some U.S. states toward that end. Referendums are pending in many other territories. The concept is becoming popular. If we get enough commitments, that would destroy the Eastern Federation swiftly. Teresa wrote a book on the existing rules of Federation economics, which includes a treatise on how to improve their economics and make it workable on a larger scale. I have a place in mind to give it a real test, Australia.”

Teresa said, “Wonderful. They are ready to declare bankruptcy any day now. Mary Jo and I have been monitoring their worsening situation constantly. Their leadership would like to quit and run away and hide. It’s the perfect time and the perfect place.”

“I need to switch planes in a few minutes. Admiral, could you stay on with me while I let everyone get to work?”

“Of course, general.”

“Harry, please break this link into sub-groups in line with specific activities. I could be back online in thirty minutes, but I need to talk to my wife first.” Luc stayed on while he was cut off from all except the admiral.

“Elizabeth, I suggest you concentrate on the defensive postures for the Indian Ocean and North Pacific. And I will handle the South Pacific and Atlantic.”

“Agreed, but let me plan it and get back to you shortly. I need staff help, unlike you.”

“Sorry, I just get bossy sometimes.” Luc heard her chuckle and continued on to a topic that was new to her, “I’d like to make another trade with you.”

Admiral Tanner asked, “Do you have more toys that I don’t know about?”

“Kind of. You know about them, but not the numbers. I have drones. Lots of them. I have twenty-three different models and over twenty thousand total at last count.”

“Wow. I only have four thousand. We need another service branch. Probably one for space as well. And what would you be asking in return in this trade?”

“I need some very special people. I need an admiral who knows subs and sub bases. The best of the best, please, and make sure he or she will stick around for a while. Perhaps some young hotshot. You pick. In addition, I need a general, or whatever, to be a tactical commander on a global and further scale for my Special Operations command. I have a person in mind. I was just reading some bios and came upon this guy. He’s a major now and a teacher of tactics at West Point. He’s young and has a PhD in History of Warfare. Can I have him?”

“Sure. You also need someone to build and run your new base. Let me give you your own architecture team. They handle only the Seals now, but they would work just fine for your purposes.”

“Wonderful. Now that you mention it, I need a real air traffic control center and a large ground crew. Can you put those together for me?”

“Yes. Would you like a finance office as well? Or would you prefer your staff to handle finances?”

“Let’s integrate the two. So, send me whatever you can give me.”

“You’re going to need a motor pool and the vehicles as well. I’ll arrange that.”

“How are the other Joint Chiefs handling all this change?”

“Not well, but I don’t care. These times call for quick and decisive moves. We have always had an advantage, but with you onboard, we now have a stacked deck. We can change the world if we have the guts. And I do.”

“I agree. Wait until you see what I have in mind to get our economic model born.”

After a brief pause while Admiral Tanner told her staff some things, she said she had a personal item to discuss. “Luc, I am sorry about the loss of your man on the mission. Are you okay?”

Luc replied slowly, “Elizabeth, I am not sure how to answer that question, but I will try. There have always been mad men in the world. There always will be. I have only started dealing with them in the last one hundred years. It was when communications advanced enough to allow for quick actions decided by quick leadership with power to make a difference. About twenty years ago, my empire reached a self-sustaining point. That was when I decided to use my excess to take care of some of pet peeves. There is always the possibility of collateral damage -- though, for the most part, I have been successful at actively minimizing those occurrences. That man’s blood is on the Eastern Federation’s leadership. Four have paid the debt already.”

Luc stopped talking and Admiral Tanner said, “Come on, Luc, you just gave me the public newspaper quote. How do you feel? *You*, personally?”

Luc bowed his head a bit and answered, “Elizabeth, I have seen so much death that it didn’t faze me in the least. I know it should and I am ashamed.”

She looked away so as not to embarrass him. An aide walked in and handed her a note. She read it and said, “General, Major Jonathon Tennyson is in route to your headquarters and has been transferred under your

command. Furthermore, I am transferring Admiral David Zamora to you immediately. He will be in route within the hour from Norfolk. You might want to think about enlarging your silo. Thank you, Luc. Thank you very much.”

“Elizabeth, now I have a personal question for you. I haven’t given you my bio previously, but I have eleven modern PhDs and an MD as well.”

“Why am I not surprised? You may ask your personal question, but I may choose to not answer it.”

“Fair enough.” Luc waited a moment while watching her steel herself for his question. “How are *you*?”

She paused before answering, “Luc, we will leave that discussion for another time. But, thank you for your concern.” She spoke with no malice or anger in her voice, only kindness one shows to someone respected and liked.

“Another time. But, let me make myself clear -- I will be there when that time comes.” They said goodbye and ended the call.

Luc switched planes and called his wife, but she surprised him by saying that she was busy and would talk to him when he got home. Then Angela abruptly cut him off. Something was cooking.

He switched gears and called Sully. “How are you, my friend?”

“I am fine. How are you?”

“I am fine as well. I want to talk philosophy with you and get your personal opinion.”

“Heavy, master. Grasshopper is ready.”

“Most amusing, but seriously, folks,” Luc paused while they really did get serious. “There is an opportunity in front of us that will change humankind forever and for the better, in my opinion. Is that the way you feel as well?”

“Luc, I have lived without wanting for anything since I met you. I have been busy, growing, loving, and leading a good life. I want the same for as many people as we can give it to. Will taking money out of the equation do that?”

“If we can sustain the basic needs of people and even beyond, it gives them an assurance that they can pursue other things. Education, to begin with. That is the step to contributing to a society rather than taking from it.”

“What about the lazy people? The ones who will be quite happy living at the simple subsistence level, watching TV and drinking beer while sitting on a couch all day.”

“I don’t know. I really am making this up as I go. But I believe. I believe in the human spirit for realizing that true happiness comes from wanting more for someone else rather than yourself.”

“I hope you are right.”

“I’ve seen it billions and billions of times, literally. Money and things turn out to be nothing. Family, friends and people in general turn out to be everything. Ask any rich old guy. Many would tell you the thing that makes them the most happy is their grandkids. They never even mention the wealth.”

“You know, I write code. I more build it than write it these days, but it makes things happen. Code can control almost anything. I don’t just write code line by line -- I visualize the goal I am trying to achieve and the code just comes out. It builds on itself. I take pieces from here and there and it grows. I feel like an artist, not a developer. It is very satisfying personally. That’s what you are talking about, isn’t it?”

“Exactly. It’s called reaching your potential, Grasshopper.” Luc waited until Sully caught the humorous reference and then explained, “To me, I think of it as one of Newton’s inertia laws applied to the human personality. Once people begin to realize their potentials by bettering themselves personally, through education or service or anything, they tend to stay in motion, always improving.”

“Heavy.”

When Luc arrived back home in South Dakota, his family was there to greet him and Teresa had come as well. He got off the plane, boarded the shuttle bus and they yelled “Surprise!” He was. He got hugs and kisses galore. The boys had made a sign that read “Welcome Home Dad” just as if he were a soldier coming home from war. He really was this time. The homecoming was glorious. This was the first chance he had to hug his wife since she told him she was pregnant again. Then Angela and Teresa broke the news that a party had been planned.

Luc barely had enough time to clean up before they were to go downstairs. Teresa was upstairs with them and she was not doing well. Luc made a call to have an Exosuit brought out, which he helped Teresa don. She tested the suit’s attributes and was shocked. It had successfully stopped her pain and she loved it.

Luc visited with Harry and suggested Harry pick a security officer for his family from the new staff, as he would be quite busy with his new job. Harry reluctantly agreed. Then it was time to go downstairs to the party. Luc was no longer accustomed to being around so many friends, comrades and associates. The experience scared him.

Luc was not wearing his uniform as they all went to the warehouse. He had sent a message requesting that there be no acknowledgment of his rank during the reception. He did not want to go through all that saluting. There was a country band playing made up of military folks. They were quite good and the lead singer was great. The soldiers were in fatigues but as casual as they seemed to be able to be.

Many people shook Luc’s hand and congratulated him on a successful mission. All of these greetings were made quietly with reverence to the fallen team member, Sergeant Ronald Cherny. Luc had his picture displayed in memorial on a large monitor.

Luc was introduced to many new people who were in attendance, and several saluted out of habit. James

took Luc around and handled introductions. There were a lot of people present and it was sobering for Luc to know that he was responsible for them now. They got to the team that went on the trip to China with Luc and Sergeant Dixon spoke for them, “General, we want to know how you have the skills you have without ever being in our military.”

“I knew this was coming. I just didn’t expect it so soon. Please follow me.” The group of twelve men and three women fell into a single file line and followed as ordered. Luc took them to the gym. Once there, he gathered them together and gave a talk. “I have a special gift that lets me think and learn quickly. I retain memories better than most, which has given me success in business and anything I try. Then my wealth has given me the time to train in physical combat as a sport. I learn and adapt easily.” They tried to ask questions, but Luc cut them off and said, “That’s all I can say. Let’s have some fun.”

He called Dixon onto a mat to spar. Once they were facing each other and everyone else was around the mat, Luc said, “How about a little judo? No hits, just rolls and throws to start.”

Dixon nodded in compliance and made the first move. Luc took his feet out from underneath him and helped him to the mat. Dixon got back on his feet and they grabbed each other’s arms. This game was to use your legs to throw the opponent. After each trying a few times and failing, Luc finally got leverage and threw Dixon to the mat again.

He got up and said, “Let’s take this up a notch, okay?”

Luc said, “It’s your broken bones -- are you sure?”

“Yes, sir.” The bystanders started encouraging Luc and Dixon loudly. Les adopted a standard fighting stance and got ready to throw a swing. He did, Luc deflected it and hit him with two jabs to the torso before Dixon could react. Dixon grunted and backed up. He regained his composure and took his stance again. This time he threw a left jab and tried to follow with a right cross. Luc deflected the jab and backed away from Dixon’s right swing. As it passed by Luc’s jaw, Luc grabbed it and helped Dixon to the mat again.

Luc picked him up and said, “This is my hobby. I spar all the time and I will with each of you if you would like. But, I think we should get back downstairs now. Dixon, you’re a good sport. Rematch anytime; guns, knives, throwing stars, spears -- I like them all.”

The reception went on for a few hours and began to break up into small interest groups. The brass wanted to see the org chart. The soldiers wanted to design their new base. The computer geeks were all huddled around Sully. Luc sat with his family as people came and talked to him one by one. It was very pleasant. The party finally wound down and Luc needed to go get some warm cuddly sleep with his beautiful pregnant wife.

Three hours after he fell asleep, Gunther awoke Luc via his internal comm unit and said, “The DEMP gun is in position in North Korea, or what used to be called North Korea. We can hit it anytime.”

“Let me get to the warehouse floor.” Luc whispered trying not to wake Angela, but she heard him anyway and asked about it. He explained as best he could to a sleepy pregnant wife and got up.

Three minutes later, he walked into the massive space and found Gunther waiting with the whole team of field leaders. Some saluted, some didn't. Luc didn't care.

He read the monitors, saw where the gun was positioned in the city and noted the time there, 12:15 p.m.

“Is there a time that is better to minimize casualties?”

“I thought you might ask that. Sully?” Gunther replied.

“Not really. The trains just glide to a stop. No air traffic to worry about. Nothing else we can do.”

“Can you take over their FM and AM band emergency channels?” Luc asked.

He saw Sully smile and look up some information on his terminal. “Yes. It will take me a few minutes to make the connections to the channels and set up a more powerful signal.”

“Please do it.”

One of the commanders hanging around asked what Luc was doing.

“I'm going to warn the people to pull over to the side of the road.”

“Isn't the point to create chaos?”

“It will, but why hurt innocent civilians if I can avoid it. These people are going to be our partners very soon. This one act could be the start of a long friendship.”

“I see,” the commander said halfheartedly.

“Wake President Schaffer.”

A few minutes later, Schaffer came online. “Mr. President, I am going to hit Pyongyang with our DEMP gun now. I'm taking over their emergency radio frequencies and warning the drivers to pull over before I do to minimize casualties. Do I have your concurrence?”

“Proceed General Champion. I am on the way to the Situation Room now. I will assemble my team. Can you patch us in please?”

“Of course. Thank you, sir.”

A few minutes later, Sully said he was ready. Luc looked at everyone and got nods indicating that they were ready as well. “I want to watch the real time satellite imagery of the city to time the hit as best we can.” When everything was ready and he had a headset on, Luc signaled Sully to patch him in.

Sully pointed at Luc and mouthed, “You are live.”

In Korean, Luc said, “This is a message from the emergency broadcast warning system. This is a message from the emergency broadcast warning system. We are under attack. I repeat, we are under attack. Pull all vehicles to the side of the road immediately. I repeat, pull all vehicles to the side of the road immediately.” Luc

cut off the mike and told Sully to replay his message over and over.

All of them watched the satellite images and, sure enough, cars, buses and trucks began to pull off the roads and stop. Some continued to drive, but they were beginning to slow and stop as well. They probably didn't have their radios on and were wondering what was happening. Luc's team also had air raid sirens blaring. Luc studied the images. When he surmised that the vehicles continuing to move would not pull off the road, he signaled Gunther to initiate the weapon.

At first, it looked like nothing was happening. Then they saw drivers start jumping out of their cars. People were flooding out of buildings into the streets as well.

"Looks like we did our job. Thank you, Gunther. Thank you, everyone."

President Schaffer said, "General, congratulations. What's next?"

"The military. General Adams, when will the weapons you are building be ready to hit the military installations?"

"Between twelve and eighteen hours."

"That's too long. They might take action out of desperation. Find a way to make it happen faster."

"Affirmative."

"Let's take a look at the subs." Luc saw that Admiral Tanner was now online with them. Luc walked into the projection area and started to get his bearings. "Highlight the ones we can hit with our seafloor weapons now." Four subs were in perfect range. "Now show me the subs we are shadowing with our company's boats." They were near two of the targeted four with the seafloor weapons and six others. That's ten total. Not bad. But it only took one launch from one submarine to start a war.

Luc asked a question, "Admiral Tanner, what is your opinion on the subs?"

She responded, "When all is normal, we think in terms of playing chess. Now the game has changed to poker. You were face to face with Chairman Ming. It is your call, General Champion."

"Interesting. I want to confer with someone. Please give me a few minutes." Luc took off his headset and looked around. He saw who he was looking for and waved for General Winslow to follow him into a closed room still under construction.

"General Winslow, you can read people better than anyone I've met. I have told you everything I can about my encounter with Chairman Ming. What would you advise?"

He thought for a second, then said, "How tall is he?"

"Five feet, nine inches."

Winslow stroked his chin and said, "How was he dressed? How expensive was his suit?"

"Nice. Probably \$2000 in Hong Kong."

He nodded and thought of the next question, "Did you see any females working directly for him?"

“No.”

“A pity. It can be very telling, if they are pretty or not. Does he have family, particularly grandchildren?”

“Yes, six. Four boys and two girls.”

“Well, considering everything, I advise you to wait and do nothing further. He will call President Schaffer before he pulls any trigger.”

“Thank you.” They reentered the big room and Luc got back online.

“I am not going to take further action at this time. Mr. President, I believe you will be getting a call from Chairman Ming very shortly. When you do, I would appreciate being in on the call.”

Money, Money, Money

The next day, Luc called President Schaffer, “Mr. President, I would like to run an idea by you and your economic advisors. Can you make some time for us?”

“Am I talking to General Champion or Lucasiah Champion, the owner of the biggest company on the planet?”

“The latter, sir.”

“You’ve kept me hopping the last few weeks, so why should tomorrow be any different. Hold on.” He was checking with his scheduling staff. “Yes. I’m available tomorrow except for some short appointments throughout the day -- visiting Boy Scouts and the like. I can’t break those. The rest can wait.”

“Thank you, sir. I am bringing one person along. See you at 8 a.m.”

Very early the next morning, Luc, Teresa, and Luc’s new private bodyguard, retired Master Sergeant Leslie Dixon, hopped on a plane and flew to Washington D.C. Luc coerced Les into leaving the military and taking the job. Les was thirty-seven years old and planning on retiring in two years with twenty years’ service. Luc took care of the difference in pension the early departure would cost, and Les was quite happy with the new arrangement. As part of the deal, he made Luc agree to teach him his moves and skills. Then Les asked his two best buddies to be the security team leads for Luc’s family, and they retired as well. This was all Harry’s idea. None of the three men had families. They did now.

When all new security personnel were in place, those three men and Gunther arranged Luc’s military security team. They split up shifts and responsibilities quickly and easily.

Out of necessity, Luc asked Teresa to help present the inevitable conversation to Les during the ride to D.C. After the initial shock, Les accepted the truth about Luc’s long, long life.

When they were done talking and about to land, Les said, “Now I understand how you got so good at everything. You cheated.”

Luc laughed and replied, “That sums up my life very nicely.” And they laughed some more.

They arrived and were met by a convoy of black SUVs and a group of armed men and women. The ride was uneventful and Luc was thankful for that. They pulled onto the White House grounds and were escorted through security. Their weapons were taken from them and stored with care. The White House security team was not pleased with Luc’s normal attire of wrist throwing knives, an ankle holstered Ruger LCP handgun and his pocketful of throwing stars. Old habits die hard. Luc felt naked without the accessories. Les was loaded with more conventional firepower -- a shoulder holstered Sig 226, a rear waist concealed old Beretta 92FS and a Chiappa 2” Barrel Rhino 357 ankle holstered revolver. He got to keep his because he was required to stay with

the White House security people in a special holding area -- a very comfortable room well equipped with entertaining toys. Teresa was armed with nothing but a briefcase and her huge intellect.

They were escorted by the Chief of Staff to a large boardroom and introduced to the tech support team that would help with the workgroup setup. The technicians began trickling in soon and all greeted Teresa warmly as longtime colleagues. Every one of them knew her either personally or at least by reputation. She and Luc were both well familiar with all of them, having read their bio files. Luc knew only two personally, but all knew him by reputation. Many took a second look at him, having imagined him to be much older. Angela told Luc that he looked about thirty now. Funny, he didn't feel thirty.

Introductions were made by President Schaffer, who had just arrived to begin the meeting. After that, he spoke for a bit. "Ladies and gentlemen, we are here to usher in the boldest experiment ever attempted. We are going to lead the human race into taking a --," he paused. President Schaffer looked at his notes, then at Luc, smiled and continued, "*An* evolutionary leap into a society no longer bound by the confines of the almighty dollar. Did I get that right, Mr. Champion?"

"Yes, sir."

Still looking at Luc, the president warned him, "There are many in this room who believe it is impossible. That this experiment will lead to the greatest economic depression ever imagined; and the collapse of our society as we know it on a global scale."

He was looking over his reading glasses at Luc like an old school teacher eying a very bad third grader. The president continued, "While others seem to embrace the ideas as inevitable." He paused for effect and then continued, "I, personally, am not smart enough to totally understand the mechanics of it all, but I am a believer in the human spirit. I am a man of faith in the goodness of the individuals who gave me this job."

He turned and addressed everyone on his staff and their respected guests. "I only ask one thing of each of you: Leave your preconceived ideas behind. Open yourselves to this possibility. Work with us. Because, right now, this very moment, we stand with an opportunity to change the world. I will leave you to your work now with mementos of this historic meeting to help you along." Two of his aides began placing very beautiful large porcelain coffee mugs and saucer sets in front of each attendee. They examined the porcelain pieces and read the gold lettering around the presidential seal, "If you are not part of the solution, then you are part of the problem." Each set was signed and dated by the smiling President Schaffer.

Luc stood up and took the podium as the aides placed a folder in front of each of the attendees. "There is a Top Secret file in front of you that briefs you on the events of the last few weeks concerning actions taken by the Eastern Federation and myself, as an authorized sitting member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. I hold the rank of full general in our military as well as being the owner of Champion Industries, the largest business entity in the world." This statement got Luc some extremely interested looks. "I have personal resources equal to the

combined wealth of the next twelve richest men in the world today. I have wholeheartedly blessed the creation of the newest sovereign country, the United Undersea States. That investment of over eleven billion dollars was handed over by me personally to the people who live and work in those undersea complexes. I have done the same with my space station, Independence, now existing as a full partnering union state called New Texas. That investment was over thirty-six billion dollars. I gladly gave it away as a commitment to the spirit of innovation present in the men, women and families who live and work there.” He paused and took a drink of water to give them time to take notes. Luc could see by their faces that many were doing economic calculations in their heads as he rattled off the numbers. “Please open your folders and follow with me as I brief you on the actions that have led me here today.”

For the next hour, Luc walked them through the story and ended with the last call he had with the president yesterday. None of these people were military. They were the best and the brightest economic minds. They were terrified by some of Luc’s story, as they should have been.

“This experiment will end the Eastern Federation’s totalitarian government and bring the hard-working people of that region into a free society after over seventy years of oppressing their dignity and spirit. Fold that into your economic forecasts if you can get your minds around something that momentous.” For the sake of impact alone, Luc walked away and took a seat.

Teresa stood up and said, “Let’s take a twenty minute break, come back and get down to the business at hand.”

Many of the people in the room made their way to Luc with questions. He sidestepped most of their questions and asked for them to look to the future, not the past -- of course, not in such blunt words. One man approached Luc, stood at attention with tears in his eyes and saluted. Luc returned the salute. The man turned and walked away.

Luc watched as a security person entered the room and whispered to the president’s chief of staff, who had been sitting quietly in a corner. The official nodded and walked directly to Luc. He leaned in and said, “The president wants you in the Oval Office now, sir. The chairman of the Eastern Federation is on the phone.”

Luc walked into the Oval Office and President Schaffer said, “He just called and we put him on hold while you were summoned.”

Luc turned to the Chief of Staff, the only other person in the room, and said, “Let’s make him get on a video call in a few minutes. I need my uniform, which is in the car that brought me from the airport ... and all the weapons I was relieved of.” The Chief of Staff looked at the president and got a nod of approval. He stepped outside and barked orders at an aide.

The president was smiling and said nothing. He knew how Luc wished to play this. Luc suggested a plan,

“You speak and I’ll stand in the background, but clearly in view. Chairman Ming will balk at seeing me, especially in my uniform. He may even hang up. But he will call back. Remember, this is poker. And we hold all the cards. He may bluff with reference to some secret weapon. We should be prepared for that eventuality. Let me call General Adams.”

Luc stepped over to a corner and called Gunther, “How close are we to having any DEMP weapon ready in any Eastern location?”

“Five are ready and being moved across the country to the target locations as we speak.”

“Can you have any one of them ready to fire on a relatively benign town within the next fifteen minutes? Like maybe one with a population of around five thousand?”

“Hold on.”

Luc turned to the president and said, “Can you get a paper map of China hung on a wall around here somehow? The Chief of Staff said he would take care of it.

President Schaffer got everything moving, “Let’s relocate downstairs and set it up just as General Champion has requested, knives and all.” Luc thought the president was a good man and was showing real strength and confidence. He opened the doors and led the way. President Schaffer’s protection detail fell in behind them and they were in the Situation Room in two minutes. The Chief of Staff gave orders to the support group already in the room and they were set up just as Gunther gave Luc a reply.

“We can hit Guan Xian in five minutes. It is 9:20 p.m. there now.” Gunther knew that Luc would know exactly where that city was.

“Perfect. Get it ready and wait for my order. I will give it to you through our internal comm.”

“Copy that.”

Luc turned to the people in the room, “Initiate the link with Chairman Ming now and make him wait four minutes.” Several people looked to the Chief of Staff and he nodded.

Luc’s uniform appeared and he put it on right there in front of everyone. There was no time to be shy.

“I figure the chairman will keep his cool, but he will be mad as hell when he sees me. Any suggestions on how we handle the translation issue? It might make things worse if I translated for you, Mr. President. But he’s no fool. He will know I understand him whether the translator is one of theirs or ours.”

“Let’s make him provide one.”

Luc was finished changing and adjusted his peaked cap just as Gunther signaled him that all was ready.

“Let’s see what he will see on a monitor.” That view was displayed next to the big screen on which Chairman Ming would be projected. The president ordered everyone out of view except for Luc. Luc took a position well to the rear, but clearly in sight. “Remember, poker, not diplomacy.”

President Schaffer signaled to initiate the link. Chairman Ming appeared front and center with a translator wearing a headset directly to his left. Before he could react to what he saw, the president said, “Sorry to keep you waiting Mr. Chairman. What can I do for you?” The translator was in mid-sentence when the chairman recognized Luc. He smirked and said, “I see Mr. Champion is there with you wearing a party costume.” The translation was accurate. The president looked at Luc and they both realized Chairman Ming was not ready to admit defeat.

The president forcefully replied, “*General* Champion is a duly authorized member of the United States of America’s Joint Chiefs of Staff. I asked him to be present for this communication. Belittle him or the uniform he wears again and this call is over.” Chairman Ming’s translator gave an accurate translation until the last sentence. Luc walked forward before the fuming chairman could speak, corrected the translation and repeated President Schaffer’s entire statement. This gave Chairman Ming time to get even angrier.

He then spoke directly to Luc, “How dare you two insult me with these words. You are the ones who began this with your economic sanctions and murdering us when we are trying to bring justice and order back to the world.”

Luc was ready with a reply and said, “It is clear that you do not understand your position. At this point, we do not care what you think about our economic sanctions. We only care about giving your people the freedom and dignity every person deserves.” Before Chairman Ming could respond, Luc turned and threw a knife into the map hanging on the wall in clear view of the chairman. Luc walked over to the map and read the name of the town he had hit. “Guan Xian.”

Luc signaled Gunther and then he heard Gunther say, “Initiating now.” Gunther paused one second and finished with, “Done, Luc.”

“We just hit Guan Xian with our weapon. Would you like me to throw another knife?”

“No. Stop!” Chairman Ming picked up a phone on his desk and ordered the person on the other end of the call to check Guan Xian.

“You won’t be able to reach anyone, you idiot. Enough of this. Call us back when you are ready to hear the terms of your surrender. Don’t even think about retaliating with missiles from your submarines. I know the exact location of all nine and can cripple or destroy them with a blink of my eye.” The president took his cue, reached to the console in front of him and cut the video link.

President Schaffer looked at Luc and said, “I was getting a translation on my teleprompter from one of my quick-thinking people and watched in complete horror at the exchange. I’m pretty sure I held a stone face, but inside I was scared to death.”

“I didn’t think you got your job by being a wimp, sir.”

“And I think it’s time you started calling me Charlie, Luc. At least when we are alone, as friends.”

“I would be honored, Charlie. Oh, one last move. Let’s issue a Defcon Four alert.”

“Agreed.”

Luc took a break and changed from his uniform back into his business suit. Then he visited with Les in the guestroom where he had been waiting. Les had kept himself busy talking to his team back at the Silo to fine-tune schedules and responsibilities. He had also made some friends in the Secret Service and arranged private training from them in exchange for a working vacation at Luc’s castle in France, all expenses paid. They ran it by their boss, who figured that since Les was technically guarding a Joint Chief, they would gladly help him improve his skills. They also realized that a seasoned Seal sharing knowledge with them in return was a good deal all around.

Luc relaxed a bit and touched base with his friends. All was quiet in the East even with the Defcon 4 alert.

He returned to the large room set up for the economic team and found them laughing and talking as they grazed at a buffet that had been prepared. Luc found Teresa and asked her how it was going.

“Just fine. They have all come around and are now modeling the way exchange rates for services can be realized. These are bright people. We got through my book just a few minutes ago. After lunch, we break into five groups to brainstorm different challenges. The biggest one, and everyone agrees, is valuing shares in publically traded companies. The next biggest problem are the institutions -- banks, brokers, etc. After that comes funding this experiment. As odd as it sounds, it takes cash to buy our freedom from cash itself. It helps if you think of it as a catalyst that burns up when the real combustion takes place. How do you intend to bankroll all this?”

“Here’s a list of the people I want at a summit with all of these folks present to help them to understand. Think of it as a fundraiser gala.”

“This would be a good time for you to brief the people here about the gala.” Luc walked to the podium, got their attention and told them his plan. They smiled and nodded a lot. He had a specific request and asked them to figure out the amount of cash needed for some specific targets territories.

Luc popped in and out of the meeting, while keeping an eye on China. Soon the end of the meeting was close with all planned items completed.

The new economic team briefed the president and Luc in closing and they planned a funding meeting. They checked the calendar and decided four days away at Camp David would work. Plans in preparation for that event were made, as many were on committees that had work to do.

The funders were invited personally by President Schaffer, who provided little detail to keep the meeting content mysterious and applied pressure when needed. All accepted.

The meeting broke up and everyone was reminded that they were sworn to secrecy about the economic

model they were designing.

President Schaffer invited Teresa and Luc to be his guest that evening at the White House and they gladly accepted. Luc invited them for a private tour of the new wing at the Smithsonian. He made some calls and everything was set up when they arrived on foot. They had changed into very casual clothes and walked the half mile to the destination. Charlie's Secret Service detail and Les' cover were as discrete as it could be. To most passersby, Luc, Teresa and Charlie looked like any other tourists. Much to everyone's delight, no one recognized the president in his shorts, Hawaiian shirt and sandals.

Luc led the tour telling the same stories Teresa had heard almost ten years ago when Luc donated much of his antique creations here. Charlie asked many questions, as did Les. It was a very nice time.

They returned to the White House, but stopped by the Lincoln Memorial. By coincidence, a full moon lit the night sky and the Washington Monument was beautiful with the moon sitting off to the top left.

They had dinner with President Schaffer's daughter, her husband and two boys about Luc's sons' age. After dinner, they sat in a huge family room and Luc played games on the computer with the two boys while the other adults enjoyed getting to know each other.

Luc and his entourage flew home the next morning and worked long hours the next few days prepping for the summit. Of course, they were also monitoring China. There hadn't been any mention of the city-wide blackouts in any of the media. The day of the conference arrived and the group flew to Andrews Air Force Base to catch a helicopter to Camp David.

The economic team was seated off to one side of the large room, expertly prepared and keeping to themselves. The guests all wanted to know what they were doing there and what this was all about. Luc knew several of the funders personally and said hello. The president entered and immediately took the stage as everyone sat down.

President Schaffer addressed the group, thanked them for coming and introduced Luc. Luc started his presentation, "Together, the people in this room represent five percent of the world's wealth. I am in the process of giving my excess money away. My company is self-sustaining and I have more than I could ever spend. The space station Independence that I am building and my undersea labs have been permanently donated to the people that live and work there. I have integrated some major defense weapons projects that I paid for into the U.S. Military. I am funding the economy in Haiti until it is self-sustaining. The new United Undersea States is going money-less. So is the Independence, now the newest U.S. state, New Texas. I am going to let Dr. Teresa Donnelly present the new economic system. Doctor."

Teresa got up, introduced the President's Transitional Economic Committee, as it was now called, and showed chart after chart. She walked the funders through every aspect from the ground up. She passed the mic

to several sub-committee chairpersons and they handled their special subject areas. Luc was watching the audience and saw that they were mesmerized with the exception of a few people who looked angry. When the presenters were finished, they took a long break for lunch. The funders were now thinking about their options. From several, Luc heard commitments to join the experiment. However, several expressed outrage that the new system would effectively destroy their wealth by turning the world into a communist government. Luc thought they had a strong point, but this was a time for the real heroes to show themselves. He had a few philosophical discussions with several small groups and then addressed the group impromptu in the middle of lunch because everyone seemed to want to hear his thoughts. Luc tried to keep it short and simple.

“We have an opportunity to help our society evolve. It is time for people to realize their dreams through contributing into society rather than building up liquid capital that is only an illusion. We all know that our wealth is based on the perception of its value. There is nothing tangible in most of our fortunes. The bottom fell out of the metals market and then the diamond and gem markets because we can synthesize those things from almost anything now. Energy is next and we all know it. However, let’s discuss why I really got you here. I need one hundred twenty billion dollars to bankroll Australia’s move to go money-less. Almost any three of you could provide that and still have resources left to live as you personally always have; your companies would not feel a hit in the least. Making a move this big will send the Eastern Federation into a tailspin and surely be the downfall of their government. Mr. President, would you please tell us what is going on with the individual states.”

The president took the mic and said, “I have discussed options with the state governors and already eighteen have requested bankrolling. Once sponsors are identified, we can get started. It’s time to lead our world into a new era of freedom where every individual can reach their potential as a contributing member of their community.”

They spent the rest of the day matching fortunes to places. With just a few commitments, the ones hanging back were beginning to realize what was about to happen to their wealth if they stayed out of the game. One way or another, their fortunes were about to lose value. It took a few more hours but, at the end of the meeting, they had over one trillion dollars committed to the grand experiment. The summit ended with several of the bigger contributors preparing a press statement that would rock the world’s financial markets. Teresa was put in charge of the final draft. They decided quickly that they needed time to prepare in secret before the announcement. However, they wanted to release a statement that an aid package was being put together for Australia and no further details. That should get the East thinking hard. With Luc’s overall goal accomplished, he and Teresa head back to South Dakota.

Another New Beginning

The next few days were spent watching the East and building out the command center. Luc was thinking about digging more tunnels, but then had another idea. The ground soldiers wanted a simulation area and the former Seals wanted a huge swimming pool. Luc shared his idea with Cass and she loved it. He asked her to gather the scientists and engineers together and he laid it out for them to think about. He wanted a dome built on top of the silo. A huge one, the size of which could cover a small army base. And, he wanted the fabric to allow the sun to shine through in the day, but still be hidden from view from above. They went to work.

The East was still silent. Beijing and the other cities Luc attacked were slowly recovering. Enough time had passed for them to realize exactly what their options were and that even the best options were bad. Therefore, Luc was not surprised when he received a call from Chairman Ming, who was now willing to cooperate. He was quite polite and reserved. He had obviously done his homework and discovered that there was no defense against the technology Luc possessed. His economists had probably told him to make some kind of a deal before it was too late. The chairman's back was against the wall and he finally knew it. He may know part of the bigger plans that were being developed, but the details to be revealed in a few days would tell him that his country was about to fall apart. The system would spread to the rest of the world by trade necessity if not by choice. The East's stranglehold on the purse strings of the world was at an end. Luc was not willing to tell Chairman Ming anything, so he ended the conversation with one statement. "President Schaffer will be in touch."

Lucasiah Champion just won World War III and most of the planet would never know.

The End