

The Bimini Threshold

by

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Foreword

It is my fervent hope that this book not only entertains, but inspires. Toward the end, I talk about the “new normal” that will be in place when energy is free and endless and the lives of people are not cut short by the infirmities that eventually come to everyone. The generation growing up now is getting used to the *miracles* of modern technology. Let’s hope they continue to use technology wisely to make themselves and their children simply *more*.

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Perspective

Raguel, an Archangel of God, was sent to Earth as a man being born into this world, and called Lucasiah, the fifth son of Seth, the third son of Adam and Eve. In His infinite wisdom, God took away any recollection of the time Raguel had spent with Him before his human birth. Early in Lucasiah's life and much to his surprise (and everyone else's), Lucasiah learned that he could not be hurt and did not age. Because of his memory loss, it was a mystery to him how and why he could not die -- or even to know what he was supposed to do with this gift. It took Lucasiah over six thousand years to figure out what he was destined to accomplish here on Earth. His mission was to help humankind to not destroy itself and even to thrive. Having done all Lucasiah could, God gave him another gift -- mortality. Mercifully, Lucasiah was now aging and would die.

That was also when God gave him a last name, Champion. He had blessed Lucasiah, also called Luc, with a wonderful wife, three children and the very best friends anyone could have. Together Luc and his friends ran the largest multinational corporation that ever existed on -- and off -- Earth. As one might imagine, Luc accumulated great wealth in six thousand years. With wealth comes power. With power comes responsibility. Hopefully, responsibility breeds an understanding of the difference between right and wrong. Luc often found himself in the interesting position of being both judge and executioner. He had not always made the most humane choices. But, he had always tried to make decisions based on the good of the many over the good of a few. Often, it was an easy choice. Other times, it was agonizing.

Along with immortality and invincibility, Luc had been given the gift of a perfect memory. After his rebirth on Earth as Lucasiah, he remembered everything -- literally, everything. That talent had helped him to gather his fortune and keep it growing and growing and growing. Some might consider a perfect memory a curse, but it seemed quite natural to Luc after all this time.

God still gave him help from time to time through Michael, another Archangel. And Luc was so very glad, because he really needed Michael's help ten months ago when four Eastern Federation Leadership Council members decided to assassinate him. They did manage to kill two of his most trusted and closest friends. So, Luc made an unannounced visit to Beijing. He spoke with the president of the Leadership Council about it. Luc thought the chairman deserved a chance to explain face-to-face, man-to-man. The chairman did, quite clearly. He was sorry the assassins had failed. Luc considered this attack an act of war and partnered with the U.S. military. Once the Joint Chiefs learned of Luc's intelligence capabilities, his secret submarine fleet and his personal army, they made him a general and gave him command of a new military branch, Special Operations. The Joint Chiefs knew they needed to work with Luc rather than against him. After all, his companies supplied most of the hardware and software they used.

So, Luc crippled the Eastern Federation's capital city with a blackout from a new weapon he had tucked

away for a rainy day. Then he wrecked one of their brand new submarines. That wasn't enough, so Luc ruined the economy of the country by clamping down on the sanctions and embargoes imposed. Apparently, that *was* enough because, a couple of months ago, the first state -- one of the four territories that used to make up Mongolia -- officially left the Eastern Federation and declared itself sovereign. The secession caused a domino effect resulting in fifty-eight nicely manageable country-states.

An announcement was broadcast just a few minutes ago that the Eastern Federation decided to go with locally managed provinces for the good of the people, blah, blah, blah. In other words, the leadership gave up. Six officials had asked for political asylum -- all but the former council leader, who was killed by his own generals. The military was the first to fold. Thousands and thousands of soldiers put down their weapons and deserted their posts. The international news teams on the ground, for the first time in years, interviewed several of the men. All said they felt they were needed at home to participate in the transition. Almost every new state had started its own militia to help maintain order.

Because of this incredible event, Luc's family, friends, and command were having a hoedown that night on the surface (their base was below ground in an old missile silo). They were also celebrating the completion of the dome that covered the base they were constructing on the wide-open plains. The last sheet of fabric was going on tonight and would hide them from any prying eyes. Then the real construction would begin. They would need the acreage for living quarters and everything that entailed a community -- stores, schools, etc. The soldiers were in the process of designing their training areas. The tough part was going to be the airfield. It would be difficult to keep aircraft invisible as they come and go. That problem was being worked on. Besides the common stealth features that defeat radar and thermal detection, they would need to be invisible from sight as well. The world should be a more peaceful place soon, but there would always be a need for a special operations force.

The dome was four miles in diameter and one thousand feet from peak to ground. It had a simple framing system of crisscrossing arches and lateral concentric circles. The diamond filament material, Elysium, was used to construct the framework. The same material made airplanes twenty times stronger and fifty times lighter. Moreover, that made them cheaper to build and cheaper to fly. Elysium was also used in the construction of the undersea structures Luc propagated in the Caribbean and along the Great Barrier Reef. Elysium had replaced steel used to make I-beams in constructing almost every high-rise building. And Luc controlled the manufacturing and distribution of this wonder material. His company made it on a space-based orbiting manufacturing plant where it was cultivated in zero gravity. The plant traveled parallel with the New Texas space station, also built from Elysium. Many of the people living on the station commute to the plant to work.

For the dome, Luc wanted the framework to be transparent. That has kept the construction project relatively invisible to anything flying over their South Dakota wheat fields. The Elysium fabric used in the dome was much different from the type used to make airplane skins. This fabric was designed to allow sunlight through

and externally display a computer-generated simulation of the vast plain surrounding the dome. Luc did not think it was possible when he laid out the requirements for stealth capability to his chief technology officer, Dr. Cassandra James. She and Luc invented Elysium and continued to find ways to grow it into new strains of material for foreign applications.

The fabric arrived on huge rolls and was literally blown up onto the frame. This project was being done in secret because of the sensitive work performed by Luc's command. He had about ten thousand soldiers and five thousand civilian contractors that answered to him.

It was a unique time in history for Luc and everyone. His fortune and the power it brought was now self-sustaining. No matter how much he spent, it did not make a dent in his capacities or resources. The invention of Elysium alone some eight years ago had given him the technological and financial upper hand around the world for the near future. Therefore, he had given his two greatest enterprises to the people who lived and worked there. The chain of undersea labs that he funded was now an independent country called the United Undersea States. And his space station was now a state of the United States of America called New Texas.

However, no matter what else he did, the most important thing he had done was to gift the world with the Ark of the Covenant, which he had protected for twenty five hundred years until the time was right for unveiling.

Luc thought he should be more careful with what he said, because he thought he might have something in the works that would top the Ark. For the last ten years, he had been having his collection of scrolls and documents cataloged in secret. About eighty percent of the scrolls were copies of the originals from the Library at Alexandria. At the time, the ancient library was like the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian Institution combined on the known western world scale. His collection also included personal writings on historical events. That alone would change the way history was perceived in totality. Other documents were copies of everything he could get his hands on from the Far East. The collection was not small. There were over twelve thousand scrolls. The team working on translating and cataloging the works just finished last week and was wondering what to do next. Luc was about to have an enlightening discussion with the team as soon as they were back to work. He sent them all on much-needed vacations with their families to anywhere they wanted to go. The team was small by security constraints -- only eight of them. Four families went to New Texas for a month, and the other four were enjoying a stay at Luc's lodge in Banff, Canada.

It had been a busy ten months since Luc was at war with the Eastern Federation's leadership. That ended quietly without the public ever being aware of how close they came to being part of the third world war. The events were the catalyst needed to make an evolutionary change in how humankind dealt with cash. Half the world was now on the way to becoming a moneyless society. Luc funded the model in Haiti and convinced most of the richest people on the planet to bankroll the change in Australia and beyond. The model they used required that the territory be a manageable size in square miles and balanced with the correct ratio of

inhabitants. Natural resources were a huge factor as well. Luc had felt the change when he visited and talked to the people of the transitioning states, provinces and countries. Many were afraid of the future, while most were embracing the opportunities provided for self-growth and improving their families' lives.

Luc had been taking a very active role in trying to manage the economic upheaval he helped to thrust on the world. Thank goodness for Dr. Teresa. She was Luc's great great great great great great granddaughter and a world-renowned economist. He thought that she might be his greatest legacy to humankind overall. She refined the moneyless model after it was created by the people living in the underwater labs. Something she predicted was happening at a pace quicker than expected -- City populations were spreading into empty territory. Deserts were reclaimed as well as colder ice-covered areas. Smaller versions of domes similar to Luc's were being built and helping to make the barren areas productive and habitable. Careful controls were being placed on growth to make sure humanity was reversing the damage done to our planet's ecosystems. Each state was encouraged to create animal sanctuaries and small national parks. They were naturally completing the envisioned model by developing a group of specialty products or capabilities. One specialty might be manufacturing and the next territory specialty might be fruit or software. None were left without food production and a decent portion of things that make each state self-sustaining. Luc visited many of the newly populated lands and was pleased to see the denizens being generally happier. He didn't know how to put it other than that. Perhaps he could say that morale was becoming more uplifting.

Luc was still not sure what the transition would mean to him personally and all his holdings. Most wealth is based on the perception of its value and those perceptions are changing dramatically. It still sounded odd to Luc that they needed to bankroll the implementation of a moneyless society. Luc decided to leave that to some very smart people who were focused on that activity alone. The whole moneyless society thing was being referred to as the "Grand Experiment" in the media. Luc found it funny that the same phrase had been used to describe the Greek city states forming a union, Alexander the Great's conquest of much of the Western world, the birth of the United States of America, Communism, and let's not forget the hippy communes of the 1960s and 70s.

Behind the scenes, he had to conduct seven military special operations. Two of the ops resulted in military dictatorships ending and a democracy being installed. Both places were in the Baltic States. Two more ops were transparent to the public and involved security for good leaders of countries trying to do the right things against oppressive religious zealots. Three ops prevented terrorist attacks on the regular meetings of finance ministers, chief state economists, presidents of major banks, and all the various global financial institutions' leadership that were held daily in Slovakia.

When it became apparent that face-to-face and ongoing discussions were needed daily, Luc reviewed the options that capital cities offered and passed on them. He chose the location of the temporary financial capital of the world on the advisement of his friend, confidant, chief security officer and brigadier general, Gunther Adams. They leased the entire village of Dakov Lom and the surrounding farming pastures in the south of

Slovakia for twenty years. The people that lived there were quite happy with the deal. They would never have to work again and Luc sweetened the deal if they would relocate for the next twenty years. They left the village unchanged and a small number of the residents stayed on as caretakers.

The complex was much like a military base, but without local interaction. It was isolated except by air. They built an airport and a modern campus of buildings and bunkers to handle twenty-five hundred participants. Gunther had secured the area with state-of-the-art toys available to him and his command.

There had been three attempts to attack the talks, each identified well before they were carried out and the people responsible for the planning would not be planning anything similar ever again. Two of the ideas were stupid and were easily stopped before they even started, but one was serious. The attackers had their own missile-launching submarine in the Black Sea. The sub was now rubble on the seabed and the owner -- a billionaire who did not like the Grand Experiment -- was in custody in a most unpleasant facility in Ankara. He was an under-the-table competitor of Luc's in the arms trade and took one last chance to keep business operating as usual. There were about one hundred people who had the same means and self-interested philosophy as the arms dealer. They were being monitored by Gunther and company twenty-four/seven. All submarines had also since been accounted for, as well as every documented warhead and delivery-system missile.

Of all the people opposing the new economy, there was only one that Luc was really worried about -- Joaquin Santana. Santana fell off the grid a year ago. He was the largest landowner in Brazil and had most of the local politicians in his pocket as well. He had always fought against Luc over energy concerns. He also held most of the oil drilling and mining rights around Rio de Janeiro. When Santana vanished, so did over fifty thousand of his employees. Luc's team had been unable to find any trace of them. Luc personally thought they went underground, literally. Santana had a lot of ties to the East and their secrets were only coming out now. Some of their mining technology was more advanced than anything known in the West.

The most important thing to Luc now was his family. His wife, Angela, was amazing. They had three children, twin boys, Harry and Michael who were seven years old and a little girl, Susan Angelica who was just two months old. Angela was the granddaughter of an old friend of Luc's, a pretzel vendor that Luc enjoyed in Central Park early in the last century. Angela had really blossomed since they had married. She ran several large important charity projects and Luc would guess she had the equivalent of two PhDs. Most importantly, she had a special gift of keeping Luc focused. She helped prioritize his activities and let him know with no uncertainty when he was wandering off his path. Luc has had many wives and she was by far the best of all of them.

Last year, the boys suddenly started to display Luc's memory ability. That was to say, they now remembered everything, literally everything their senses fed to their brains, sight, sound, smell, etc. Luc developed a new learning approach for them that included live connections with many of Luc's friends and

colleagues. The hardest and most important lesson was a group effort. Luc brought his friends together for a party and gave the boys this speech.

“Always being the smartest person is a challenge. You need to learn the lesson that I had to learn the hard way several times. You have to act normal. You need to not be over-bearing about always having the right answers. It gives others the chance to be part of the discussion. Trust me, they will have good ideas that you need to listen to. Even though you may have already reached the correct conclusion, you must learn to hold back and give others an opportunity to help. It’s like having a super power that you need to hide when you are in your day to day identity.” The boys could relate to this well having watched every Marvel Comics movie out there. They particularly liked Ironman. But, they always wanted to know why he was called that if his suit was made of steel or other composite material. Sometimes they were too logical and missed the fun of things. Ah, the curse of intellect.

Luc was sure that he would have to give this speech many times as his sons grew older. But, they got it and had been living and practicing it much to their mother’s delight. The boys had just turned seven and were at the grade equivalent of finishing American high school. In a few years, they would have surpassed the intellect of most everyone except Luc. Harry favored the arts while Michael loved engineering. Harry already was playing a variety of musical instruments and working in all sorts of artistic mediums. Luc was teaching him oil painting along with music lessons. Michael was a Lego freak and was close to having built everything they had plans for. He was almost to the point of building free form out of his head. Luc was trying hard to help him learn to plan before he attacked a project. He would need a good dose of reality some day and Luc figured it would come in the form of some apprenticeship at one of his manufacturing plants. He needed to learn the mundane repetition of assembly-line construction. That lesson was often missed by engineers who only worked in the drafting design side of the process without getting their hands dirty actually constructing their concepts.

Now, Luc had a party to attend.

A Lot to Party About

Friends and dignitaries had been flying in all day to the base. Admiral Elizabeth Tanner, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, had just arrived with her family and wanted some time for them to get together with Luc's brood to get to know each other. When she requested the family time, Luc immediately connected her with Angela. Luc shared as equally as he could with Angela taking care of the kids. He often would work and feed the baby at the same time. The Joint Chiefs were not used to having one of their generals on video conference meetings feeding a bottle to a baby. But then again, they were not used to a four star general looking thirty years old either. It was a whole new world.

Elizabeth, her husband, Bert, her only child, Laura, and Laura's five-year-old daughter, Christie, arrived at Luc's underground apartment in the former missile silo he used as a headquarters. Laura was thirty years old and single. She was pretty and, the second they met her, Angela and Luc both thought of Sully. Bert owned a large construction company that specialized in temporary prefabricated buildings and scaffolding. He and Luc visited about the effect the money-less system was having on his business. Bert explained that it was doing quite well in that regard since his client was usually the U.S. government. He got paid in vouchers for fuel, food, housing, and everything else. He concluded by whispering to Luc that the vouchers felt a lot like cash and they got a good laugh out of that.

The twins, Michael and Harry, immediately took Christie to their play area. Elizabeth scooped up baby Susan and would not give her up. Angela was quite happy for the break. Talk was light and began about the children. Elizabeth wanted to hear about Angela's family and Angela chatted away. It was obvious the women were enjoying sharing about their kin. Luc could tell Angela was happy to have someone to talk to about her grandfather that Luc had known personally. She did not have many people that she could talk to about it since they must be in on Luc's secret to get the story. It was interesting how Angela and Elizabeth talked about it with Laura and Bert nearby. However, if you live with classified secrets in your head all the time, you learn to watch for signs of understanding in sometimes-coded words. There was a lot of back and forth opinions, ideas, and agreement between Angela and Laura on raising children.

Bert wanted to hear all about the dome construction. It was very difficult for Luc not to grab a computer and just show him the specs, but he resisted and talked him through it. He avoided the classified stuff. Elizabeth was multi-tasking and listening to their conversation as well as carrying on her own.

Luc offered adult beverages and all accepted. Luc suggested a couple of rare wines and that got Bert's attention. Bert was something of a wine connoisseur and wanted to see Luc's stock. He was shocked when Luc took him into the wine cellar off the kitchen and showed him his collection. He made a big deal over some of the bottles and knew many of them well. Luc was pleased to meet an enthusiast, opened a bottle of 1865 Chateau Lafite for the occasion and everyone got a glass. At around \$5000 a bottle, it was an enjoyable treat.

Luc owned a case and made sure that a bottle would go home with Bert. Luc's glass contained a very small portion, no more than a gulp. Before his transformation, he was not affected by alcohol or any drug. But, now he could tolerate only a few sips of wine before he would get plastered. If he were to finish a glass full, he would be out for the night. However, that didn't mean he didn't love the taste. The wine lubricated the conversation and everyone enjoyed themselves.

When it became obvious the women were doing very well, Luc took Bert aside and asked him if he wanted to look at the dome up close. Bert quickly took Luc up on the offer and they told the ladies they would be back in twenty minutes. The men grabbed an electric cart outside in the hallway and off they went.

As they were driving along, Luc radioed Cass, his chief technology officer and asked her to meet them. They picked her up and headed to the outer edge of the dome. A hanging elevator rode on the frame that they could take close to the top. They entered the cage and began the ride. Bert grilled Cass on everything, but Luc started off the discussion by telling Bert that much of what he would want to know just couldn't be talked about. Cass said the words, "I cannot discuss that aspect of the construction," a lot. The ride was very pleasant as was the comradery. Bert asked to stop several times and wanted to know about the joining of the intersecting beams or about tensile strength and the sheer force on the connections that hold everything together. Cass explained that there were no rivets or screws. Two beams were simply melted together with a laser, like a super weld.

When they reached the highest point they could go, Bert started to take a better look at the fabric. Cass taught him the material was flexible like silk until a charge hit it and it stiffened to about twenty times the strength of aluminum. She pulled out a small piece of the fabric and handed it to Bert. He played with it for a minute and smiled. Then he asked if he could have it and they all laughed as she took it back.

On the ride back down, Bert started to think it all through about his business and came to the conclusion that Luc knew he would. Bert had told Cass what he did for a living earlier when they met. Bert said, "Elysium would make a far better framework for my scaffolding than the steel I am still using." Cass and Luc smiled at each other and Luc saw that she knew this discussion was coming as well.

Luc answered Bert's question before he asked it, "Let me run some cost figures by you tomorrow and we shall see if it could work out." That satisfied Bert for the time being.

As Luc looked down at the party going on below, he remember a time when he was almost at this very spot.

October 21, 1919 ~ South Dakota 1200 feet above the Plains

Luc's Havilland-4 was holding up just fine in the Army Transcontinental Air Race of 1919. He was on the first leg across the country and should be in San Francisco in another day and a half. He had been having a battle with the plane flying next to him since he took off this morning. This race was the first of its kind in the

Americas and would test the endurance of both plane and men as they carried on. Two of the planes had already crashed killing both pilots. Each leg would be added up to a total time deciding the winner. But, to make the cross-country trek, turn around and fly back would be no easy feat. There really should have been no interaction between pilots as they flew since they were battling the clock, not each other. Lieutenant Tommy Bristol did not seem to see things that way. He had been cutting Luc off every chance he got and it was beginning to make Luc mad. If he went higher, so did Tommy. He was acting as if this was a dogfight between the two of them and ignored the other planes. They were spread out across the sky and behind Luc at present. He happened to be leading the pack. He took off in the first place spot this morning and had held it all morning. Luc may have to have words with Tommy at the noon stop. And that was only a few miles away now.

Fuel was good, oil pressure was good and his airplane "Beatrice" was showing no signs of any problems so far. Luc had top notch crews set up at each stop. The last one went long because her flaps needed some adjustments and a number of loose fasteners were tightened or replaced.

As Luc approached the airfield, Tommy cut him off again and Luc had to circle the field to make a safe landing. Luc watched Tommy line up and touch down. Then he looked on in horror as Tommy's right landing gear crumpled, his plane tumbled end over end and exploded and finally stopped its horrible ballet. Luc set down in a field next to the runway, jumped out and ran for Tommy's plane. He got close enough to feel the heat and stopped knowing that Tommy didn't survive.

He may have been a jerk, but nobody deserved that kind of death in this friendly race.

Present Day ~ South Dakota

They rode the cage back to the ground and hurried back to the women who didn't seem to notice that they had been gone twice as long as Luc guessed.

The rest of the two hours passed quickly in very pleasant conversation. The time came for them to make their appearance at the shindig on the surface. Before it was time to head up, Elizabeth asked for a private word with Luc. They stepped into his office and she seriously asked him, "How are you?"

Luc replied, "I am doing very well. My family is good. My friends are good. My command is good. The end of the Eastern Federation is really good. The Grand Experiment is working. Why, what's up?"

She looked down quietly and said, "I'm retiring. I have Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease."

Luc hugged her knowing that it was incurable and fatal. "How far along?"

She whispered through her tears, "Six months down, six months to go." The symptoms were coordination problems, memory problems, general weakness, and blindness. Luc knew this because he was a medical doctor and kept up on the latest advances. He recognized her symptoms months ago and had Sully track her doctor visits to try to help her. He knew something was up and was waiting for her to tell him herself. She was actually doing well considering the rate the disease attacked the body.

When they regained their composure, she asked, “Want my job? The President asked me to ask you.”

Luc’s answer was immediate, “No. In fact, I was going to ask for some time off. I have something to look into that has been on my mind for three thousand years or so.” She expected an explanation now, but he wanted to keep the excitement going about the surprise. He continued, “Let’s table that discussion until after the night’s festivities. But, I promise I will tell you all about it. It may turn out to be nothing or something very amazing. Depending how you feel, you may want to help me with it.”

She knew she would get nothing more out of Luc tonight, sighed and smiled at him. In light of her illness, Luc made a quick decision. He called Sully and asked him to join them. He arrived a few minutes later and it was clear that he had been enjoying a few drinks at the party. Even a little drunk, he was still quite capable of fulfilling Luc’s request. “I want to have a secure meeting online with these people.” Luc showed Sully a list on his computer. Sully wanted to know who they were and Luc told him that it was a surprise and he would be informed at the meeting. He told him to include only himself, the Admiral and Angela. And to make the meeting at one a.m., after the party.

With that set up, they gathered up their families and headed upstairs.

They emerged on the surface to a party in full swing. They were out of uniform, but still received salutes from many people. Captain Sylvia Dennis was in charge of the show and greeted the new party attendees. She escorted them to one of twenty or so groupings of tables laid out around a huge open area. There was a stage set up and a band was playing. A train of about ten food trucks was set up outside of the tables and everyone was eating, drinking, and being merry. Luc was pleasantly surprised to find Duncan Freeborn, his close friend and former Secretary of State, seated with their group. Gunther was there as well and he had a few guests. The current Secretary of Defense, the Secretary of Energy, and three past Secretaries of State, not counting Duncan. Luc recognized three members of the Joint Chiefs as well. Saying hello to these friends took Luc a good amount of time as each one wanted to shake hands, salute and/or hug every one of them.

Colonel James Reed, Luc’s aide and son of Megan Reed, his former project manager, was watching Luc and came up to whisper in his ear. He briefed Luc on the night’s schedule. He also gave him names of people that he should know as Luc was greeting them. He was most helpful. Sully was having a quiet discussion with Gunther when Angela captured him and sat him next to Laura, Elizabeth’s daughter. Food and drink was served to their group with orders being taken from touch terminals placed on each table.

They enjoyed the wonderful food and company until James told Luc it was time for him to say a few words. Captain Dennis mysteriously appeared and escorted him to the stage. The band ended a song and Luc walked on stage to cheers from the crowd that had gathered to listen to him.

“Hello everyone. I’ll keep this short because I know if I was you, I wouldn’t want to listen to me.” That always got a laugh. “For those of you who stopped by today, thank you for coming. For those of you, who live

here, enjoy the party and break, because the real work starts tomorrow.” That got a few boos from the soldiers who had been drinking a bit too much. “We are here to celebrate the completion of the dome. But I would like to offer whole-hearted sincere thanks to the Eastern Federation for timing the formal demise of their country to coincide with the completion of our dome.” There were cheers and clapping from everyone as they rose to their feet. This lasted for a full minute. “We asked everyone here if they would like to say anything and much to my surprise, considering the jobs of the people here, there was no takers. That in itself is worth a party.” Luc got the most laughs from the very people he was referring to and continued, “There is one person here that I insisted say a few words. She is my boss and, more importantly, my friend. Please welcome the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Elizabeth Tanner.”

Elizabeth walked on stage and Luc could see that she was steeling up for her address. As she came up, Luc came to attention and gave her a smart salute. Everyone saluted in respectful silence following Luc’s lead and then erupted into cheers. When they were finished, she began. “We are here tonight to celebrate many things, but the victory over a powerful enemy is the most important. Today the dreams of almost every Miss America pageant contestant for world peace are one giant step closer.” She paused and waited for the laughter to die down and continued, “It is due in large part to the brave efforts of one man, General Lucasiah Champion.” Luc was taken aback by her statement and waved a little to acknowledge the kind remark. “I am thankful to have seen these changes in my lifetime and on my watch. But, be careful. There will always be someone who violently disagrees with what has been accomplished.” She paused and looked at Luc. She teared up a bit and fought them back. Luc knew what she was thinking and nodded in support. “I hadn’t intended to do this tonight, but I feel this is the right time, the right place, and the right audience to make an announcement.” Luc came over to her side. “I am retiring and stepping down from my command.” The crowd grew silent except for whispers from some of the senior visitors to each other. “I do this with a glad heart knowing things are better now than when I took this job. I leave you with one final order. Stand vigilant. Stand prepared. And always, stand with honor.”

The Air Force Joint Chiefs General had come onto the stage and was standing close to Elizabeth and Luc. When she was finished, he moved in and took the mic and simply said, “Ah-ten-SHON.” Everyone saluted the Admiral again. She turned, shook the general’s hand, then turned to Luc and gave him a hug.

Captain Dennis waited until the three of them left the stage, took the mic and said, “It is now time to place the final covering sheet on the dome.” America the Beautiful started to play and a loud hum from the huge fans that were used to blow up the cloth started. Getting the sheet from the ground to the top would take thirty minutes or more, so they saw nothing for a few minutes. Then far on the horizon, the top of the sheet being dragged up the opening could be seen. There were cheers and applause. As the fabric rose and more became visible, you could see it rippling in the wind from the turbine fans below. It was really quite beautiful.

Luc had wandered over to Cass and put his arm around her shoulder and said, “Well done. Top notch.” And

then he added, “Give yourself a raise.” They both laughed at Luc’s stupid joke.

The fabric finally reached the peak and the robots that climb on the framework were running down from the top connecting the skin to the frame. They took only three minutes to make it to the bottom and the dome was sealed. The lights dimmed and the projection started. You could barely see it, but the stars were visible through the cloth. Monitors placed everywhere showed a satellite picture of the facility but it was nowhere to be seen. The facility area looked like fields of wheat at night. There were cheers again.

After the cheers died down, the lead singer from the house band came to the mic and said, “Everyone, please put your hands together for Mister Charlie Daniels.” Wow. Luc had no idea they had wrangled Charlie Daniels to come and play. Luc was back at his table as the band started to play *The Devil Went Down to Georgia*. Luc grabbed Angela and headed for the dance floor. After the first dance, he found Teresa, danced with her and then Elizabeth. They all had a blast.

When Charlie finished his set, the band announced that they were switching artists again and Luc saw Stanley Clarke, the world’s finest jazz bassist getting ready to play. After they were introduced and Stanley said a few kind words, he played *School Days*, one of his best compositions. It went on for a long time and was just wonderful. He introduced his band and then said, “We are short one saxophone player tonight. I was hoping that someone in the crowd could cover the part for us?” No one said anything, but several of Luc’s friends were looking at him and nodding. Then Sully walked up and handed Luc his sax case.

The group at Luc’s table started to chant, “Lucas, Lucas, Lucas...” So, Luc got up and headed for the stage. As he was walking up, Stanley Clarke said, “While General Champion is coming forward, I would like to let you know how we came to be here tonight. I was home working on my new project between tours and I got a call. The gentleman on the other end asked me for a favor and I immediately said yes. Besides, it’s really not easy to turn down a ride on Air Force One when the President of the United States is the one asking. And now I find out that Charlie Daniels got a similar call. But, I am really happy to be here tonight. This is pretty special. Ah, here is my new horn player now.”

Stanley asked Luc if he could handle *Goodbye Pork Pie Hat* and Luc asked the key. He told him and Luc said he was good. Stanley kicked it off and they played the long version. He was obviously surprised that Luc could play as well as he could, so they pushed the song to the limits and had a great time. When they were finished, Luc thanked him and his band and retired to let the pros carry on. But, what a blast.

Angela and Luc were beaming at each other when they saw Sully and Laura hitting it off. They had been talking for nearly three hours and were enjoying flirting with each other. Luc and Angela had been watching Elizabeth and she was all smiles seeing her daughter with Sully. Luc danced with Elizabeth again and told her, “I will make sure that your family never wants for anything and I will do my best to see that they are happy as well.” She said thank you and that Luc didn’t have to say anything because she knew he would do those things. And

Luc got a big hug as a bonus.

The party wound down and it was close to the meeting time anyway. Back at the VIP tables, the visitors were either heading to their rooms or airplanes and heading out. Luc had walked around and said goodbye with Angela and they headed down to the meeting. Luc had given it some thought and he asked Sully and Cass to join them as well. This should be fun.

The Atlantis Myth

Sully had taken over Luc's office and had everyone set up. Online were the eight team members who had been working on the scrolls. With Luc live were Angela, Elizabeth, Sully, James and Cass.

Sully gave Luc a nod and he began, "Thank you all for taking this meeting -- so late for some of us and early for others."

Julia Whitcomb, the team leader was on the station and said, "We were all wondering when this meeting would be called. We knew it was coming when we finished and we are on pins and needles waiting to hear what the next step is. So, on behalf of my colleagues and myself, please tell us where we are going with all of this incredible work."

"I was hoping you would react like this and not be mad at me."

"Oh, no. Please proceed. We are like kids at Christmas."

"Ok, then." Luc continued, "I am the only person here that knows the whole picture of what we are going to discuss. Each of you may know bits and pieces, but the time is right to let everyone in on the project. There are aspects that must remain a secret but, trust me, what I am about to share with you is quite true and founded in facts."

Luc waited until everyone really understood the last statement and began again. "First off, when we are done, you will see that there is some urgency to this conversation. With the world changing so fast right this minute, I don't think we can pause even for that minute. For nearly ten years, these eight scientists have been living and breathing the work of translating and cataloging my library of scrolls. I am in possession of ancient scrolls that date back many thousands of years. I believe I kept them in pretty good shape. How would those of you who studied them classify their state of being?"

One of the team said, "They were in wonderful condition. The process of unrolling and preparing them for our work was the first thing we did. None of us had ever seen anything like this. The sheer quantity and quality of them is a miracle in itself. We probably lost less than five percent of the text. The Dead Sea Scrolls had about twenty percent lost. So, these really are nothing short of a miracle."

"How many did it turn out to be?"

Another team member said, "Twenty two thousand three hundred eighteen. Thomas, can you share the breakdown we came up with, please."

Thomas said, "Sure. Ten percent are significantly incomplete and too damaged to categorize at present, but the computer modeling has filled in most of the missing text. You asked us to focus on the general subjects and avoid the details for now. That was a good thing because, if we were to go there, we would not be done for

another ten years. This will rock the world and change history as we know it. As far as the general makeup by subject area, forty percent are historical. Twelve percent are prose, songs or stories. Another twelve percent are stories that are best described as myths. Twenty-two percent are science and math texts. Four percent are descriptions of war machines. The last ten percent are either personal letters or notes from several people through the centuries.”

Luc moved on, “What subjects are in the science category?”

A different team member spoke, “Everything. Physics, biology, medicine, geology, and on and on. Everything.”

Luc replied, “Thank you. You all have done an amazing job. I am confident that many, many wonderful things will come from the writings we now have organized. But, I want to focus on one area of them in particular right now. Let me tell you a story, the story of the lost continent of Atlantis.”

“Poseidon took a mortal wife named Clieto. He created a huge island continent for their home in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. One of their children was Atlas. The men of Atlantis were seafaring warriors and attacked and plundered the outer edges of the Greek territory for centuries. Until the entire civilization was wiped out by the cataclysmic upheaval of the ocean that swallowed up the entire continent without a trace.”

James said, “Luc, we’ve all heard the tale. And, we all know that there is usually some truth in mythology. Is any part of the story true?”

“Well, if you take out the Poseidon part, the rest is quite factual.”

Angela said what everyone was thinking, “There really was a land mass between the Americas and Europe?” Luc was nodding his head and she asked, “How big?”

Luc gave details, “It actually was a chain of large volcanic islands that stretched from the Bahamas to about five hundred miles off the coast of Portugal. They were created by the same moving hot spot just like the Hawaiian Islands were. The main island was about the size of Iceland. There were over five hundred thousand inhabitants.”

Angela said, “What’s a hot spot?”

“It’s a place in the hard outer mantle of the planet that is thin enough to let the magma below ooze out. It travels just as the land masses do on their plates all the time. There are several, but the one that is under Yellowstone Park is the most familiar.”

One of the scroll team finally said, “I can’t not ask this question. How do you know this for a fact?”

Elizabeth helped Luc out and said, “That is the part that we cannot discuss at this time. But trust us, what Luc is relating is a fact.” It was clear this explanation did nothing to satisfy the scroll team.

Luc continued, “There was a road around most of the main island built out of quarried stones about the size of the ones used in the pyramids of Egypt. Part of the road is now called the Bimini Wall or Bimini Road and is

under 30 feet of sea in the Bahamas. The island had a system of large caverns under the volcano, which the inhabitants kept a close secret. The people had integrated the underground with the surface as a complete city and capital of their country. The stones protected the entrances to the underground areas from any would-be invaders. Many of them were placed strategically for a quick retreat if necessary. They could hide the entire population down there. It is my belief that the entrances are documented in the scrolls in some kind of textual map. The remaining sections of the road below water are long enough that there should be at least one entrance still in existence. The map won't be obvious, but I am sure it is there.”

One of the scroll team said, “It is true that we really didn't have time to look at all the writing in detail, but we saw enough to be able to say that what you are looking for just doesn't exist.”

“That is quite true.” Everyone looked puzzled as Luc turned around and opened up a cabinet behind him. He took out a serious looking metal case. He put his thumb up to the fingerprint reader and the case opened. “I have kept one scroll from you until this moment.”

He opened the case and let everyone see the contents. Sealed in a glass tube was a very large scroll. “This one is dedicated to the technology of the Atlantians. It is a treatise compiled by several of the leading scientists of the people who lived there. It talks about power sources and their application on the transportation and infrastructure the people used on the island. They had a sophisticated type of monorail system to get around. The other vehicles include flying machines, ships and underwater vessels. They used a lot of thermal energy that was obviously abundant and dangerously accessible. But, there is one power source they spoke of in detail. It was abundant and plentiful. I believe it to be cold fusion.” Luc waited until they understood and he finished with the words, “I want it.”

Cass said, “If that turns out to be true, the applications are endless. It would change the face of the world just as Elysium has done.”

“Cass, you are absolutely correct. But, what I want it for is to power interstellar spacecraft.”

Angela said, “Wow. That will be a quantum leap into the future if we can actually harness the technology.”

Elizabeth followed on and said, “I need to tell the President about this ASAP. And we need all the security we can get.”

“I've got that covered with my team and the command I have.”

Sully said, “Luc, is this a good point to ask some data cataloging questions?”

“It is the perfect time.”

The scroll team member who talked about the contents of the data said, “Mr. Sullivan, let me send you the briefing document on the database I built. It is complete with an entity relationship diagram that has all the primary and foreign key fields defined.”

“Excellent.” Sully was working his laptop and pulling up the diagram. Once he had had a few seconds to

look at it, he said, “This is perfect. I remember reviewing the design. Now I need the data.”

“On its way.”

“I can work with this. Luc, I have everything I need except for the content of that scroll.” He was pointing at the case. Luc could see Sully’s mind flying along as he continued, “I want to take their data to the next level. I have an artificial intelligence program that I wrote. It can cross reference the text and then answer our questions as we ask them.”

At that comment Luc said, “I was wondering if your program was ready. Very cool.”

Cass jumped in then, “I want the scientific material. And we need a team of medical doctors and pharmacists to look at that data.”

Luc asked the scroll team to hold and Sully cut them out for a minute. Luc turned to Elizabeth and Angela and said, “Would you two consider co-managing this project?”

Angela said, “I am booked solid with the responsibilities I have now. I will help by reviewing what I can with the little free time I have, but that’s it.”

Elizabeth said, “I want it. This would be a lot more fun than managing the world’s largest military complex. And I find myself suddenly with a bunch of time on my hands. Sully, are you okay with me taking the lead on the overall effort and you leading the technical side?”

Sully was figuring things out quickly, as usual, and replied, “Admiral, I would love to work with you.”

Luc had a couple of requirements. “Admiral, before you commit, I have more. Please bring the scroll team back.” Sully worked the keyboard and they reappeared. “Hello again and thanks for being patient with me. You have earned the right to be the lead publishers on the scrolls. As you can imagine, this is going to be very big. I want your proposals submitted on publications that you want to write. This program is now classified and under the command of Admiral Tanner, if she still wants it when I am finished adding requirements. Admiral, number one: I want you to take my team of scientist working in the Amazon on medicines and assign them to studying the pertinent data in the scrolls. Two: I am confident that Sully will discover the clues to Atlantis and I want you to prepare a team to go on the expedition. Three: I want all the right people looking at all the right data. I am sure there is data that will lead to breakthroughs in many fields. Have I reached your limit yet, Admiral?”

She laughed and said, “Child’s play.”

Luc continued, “Four: Elizabeth, I am assigning Cass to you. Let her pick the areas she wants, get her the right people and Sully will provide the data as needed. Five: James, there will be no change in your role between the Admiral and myself. Find someone else to take on your responsibilities with briefing the new chairman when he or she is named. The main archive of the scroll data is in Boston. You need to physically go there, get it now and shut down that facility. The Admiral will sign off on it being closed up for good.”

Luc turned to clearly address the scroll team. “Enjoy your vacations because I have a feeling the real work is about to start.”

One of them said what they were all thinking, “Mr. Champion, we want to start now. Vacations can happen anytime. None of us will sleep with this in front of us.”

Another team member asked, “Can our families stay?”

“Of course.” Luc turned to the Admiral and said, “Elizabeth, last chance to bail. You still want this?”

“I simply cannot pass up the opportunity to work with these fine people on what may turn out to be the most important discovery in the history of mankind. Damn straight I want it”

As Luc expected, Elizabeth immediately took charge. “Luc, get a plane ready. We need to see President Schaffer. Everyone else, please make preparations for your part in the plan. This project is now code name *Bimini Threshold*. I want all of you here at seven a.m. day after tomorrow. Luc, translate that last scroll for Sully as fast as you can.”

The meeting ended with everyone very excited. Sully had sobered up and was ready for anything. The others were showing the wear and tear from the party or from their odd time lag. After all, it was now four a.m. where half the scroll team was and who knows what time it was in New Texas, the space station.

Luc escorted everyone out of his apartment and helped Angela with the baby for a few minutes. He packed a bag quickly because Elizabeth said he had thirty minutes before she would be knocking on his door. He put on his uniform and said goodbye just as the rap on the door came.

To Luc’s surprise, it was Bert. He said, “Luc, Elizabeth needs your help please.” He set his bag down and walked down the hall to Elizabeth’s apartment. They went right in and found her sitting on the couch shaking. He sat down across from her and took her hands. He was really checking her pulse. It was racing and Luc could see that she was showing some of the symptoms of her illness.

“Bert, lay her down here and elevate her feet. I’ll be right back.”

Luc ran to the infirmary, grabbed his doctor bag, some meds and returned. He pulled out the correct items and fixed a cocktail shot. He injected her and she immediately began to relax and calm down.

She sat up and said, “Thank you, Doctor Champion. You are a most amazing fellow. Help me up and I’ll get ready.”

Bert took her arm and walked her into the bedroom. When he returned, Luc said, “Bert, I’ll have an aide outside with a cart when she is ready. I’m going to the plane to set it up for her.”

“Thanks Luc. Really. Thank you so much.”

Luc took the elevator to the surface where their jet was waiting. He wanted to take his personal fighter jet, but with Elizabeth feeling ill, Luc opted for a Gulfstream. For this trip, he kept the assigned pilots and would not pilot himself. He had a lot of work to do and Elizabeth might need him again.

Luc was only on board for ten minutes when Elizabeth’s cart arrived and she slowly boarded the craft. Luc escorted her to a large reclining seat and helped her to sit down. She was pretty stoned from the drugs he gave

her, so he grabbed a blanket and pillow to get her settled in for the two hour flight. They were airborne in minutes and she was out for the rest of the ride.

Luc set up his computer and pulled up the images of the scroll to work on. It took him the entire flight to write up the translation and off it went to Sully.

They landed at Andrews Air Force Base and helicoptered to the White House. The president had a breakfast meeting waiting for them.

He started the meeting, “Well, when my two favorite people call and want to chat, I figure it’s not about the weather. What’s up?”

Luc started off, “Mr. President,”

The president interrupted and said, “Please, it’s only the three of us, can we use first names?”

“Certainly, Charlie. Elizabeth and I have a new project code named, Bimini Threshold. She is taking charge of it. We believe we have found a door that will lead us to the lost continent of Atlantis.”

“If anyone else would have said that, I would throw them out on their ear. But, you two? Okay. Lay it out for me.”

Elizabeth took over, “Ten years ago, Luc started a project that is nearing completion. He has had a team of specialist cataloging and translating his collection of scrolls that date back about four thousand years and are copies of the work from the Library of Alexandria. With his actual knowledge of the legendary land mass and the scrolls, we think we can take up the trail and actually find it under the seabed in the Atlantic Ocean.”

“Amazing,” was all he said.

“The writings detail advanced designs in aircraft, submarines and a whole lot more. What we really hope to uncover is the power source described. If correct, Luc believes it must be cold fusion. This technology would revolutionize literally everything.”

“Well, this conversation was certainly worth having. Can I assume that this is simply informative and that you are not requesting anything from me?”

“Yes, Charlie. Between Luc’s and my resources, I think we have it covered.”

“I also assume that I will receive status reports when they are appropriate.”

“We can do better than that if you wish. We can set up a holographic projection room for you to watch in real time or recorded.”

“Amazing. I will take that indeed, if only for the fun of seeing the technology in action.”

“I’ll have my team contact you and make it happen.”

“Excellent.” The president paused and saw that the briefing was over. “Well then, what would you like for breakfast?”

Dinner in Athens

Luc had a home in the south of France on the Mediterranean Sea. It was pretty beat up during an attack on him a while back and was still in the process of being rebuilt. He took the opportunity to upgrade the whole place. There was a house on the top that overlooked the sea and a complex of rooms under it that was hidden in the cliffs. He needed to visit it before he embarked on Bimini Threshold.

On the flight back from Washington, Luc made the arrangements. He also informed everyone that the president wanted to join their team when he left office in another year. Wow. Duncan was most excited. He and Charlie were lifelong friends. Luc thought he knew what he wanted to do. He would spearhead the disaster relief teams and the aide teams that were working to upgrade the third world countries. If Charlie did this right, he would drag the other two ex-presidents into the teams. This was wonderful.

Elizabeth and Luc talked about it on the flight back for a few minutes until she had another attack of her illness. He gave her a shot and made a call.

“Is Dr. Longstreet available? Let him know that Dr. Lucasiah Champion is calling please.”

“Hold please.”

He came on the line in just a moment and said, “Hello.”

“Hello, Doctor. My name is Lucasiah Champion and I am calling to request a consultation.”

“Mr. Champion, or should I say doctor?”

“Well, sir, I guess you can call me doctor, because I am an M.D. Or you can call me general, because I am a four star general on the Joint Chiefs of Staff. But I would really like for you to call me Luc.”

“Okay, then. Luc, what can I do for you?”

“Admiral Elizabeth Tanner is a patient of yours, I believe. I know you cannot divulge that information, but she has personally confided in me. She is here with me now and I just gave her a shot to help her through the attack she is having at present. She is a dear friend of mine and she is starting to suffer the symptoms of her disease acutely.”

“May I have a word with her? Is she up to that?”

“Yes. Let me put her on.”

Luc told Elizabeth who was on the call, and she took the phone. “Hello, doctor.” The conversation was one sided of course, but Luc knew what was being said. “Not too good at the moment.” There was a pause while Dr. Longstreet asked the next question. “Yes. You have my permission. And thank you so much.”

She handed the phone back to Luc and Dr. Longstreet said, “I’m not sure there is anything I can do for you or her at this point. What did you have in mind?”

“I just wanted to keep you informed of her status. I am going to assign her an Army medic and I will look after her day to day for a while.”

“I really would like her to be at home resting.”

“Well, that is just not going to happen until she has absolutely no choice.”

“Yes. That sounds like the admiral.”

“I will keep you informed of her status. Thank you, doctor.”

The call ended and Luc turned back to Elizabeth. She said, “Thank you, Luc. I have someone in mind for my medic. I’ll make the call.” She pulled her blanket up to her chin, smiled and closed her eyes.

Once she was settled, Luc got up and moved forward to an area where she wouldn’t be bothered by his conversation. He put in a call to Harry. They talked for a few minutes giving each other updates on ongoing work. Then Luc got to the real point of his call. “I want to bring my family to our home. And I would like you to watch over them while I go off on my new project. Can you move from New York to France quickly?”

“Yes, easily. I am very mobile these days.”

“Great. Let me call Angela and make the arrangements. We’re going to stop in Athens for dinner. See you soon, old friend.” There was a place Luc would love to go to for dinner in Athens, but he really wanted to see the dome over the Parthenon that he had built. The structures were just getting too beat up from the smog, so Luc offered to preserve them inside the sealed atmosphere that a dome could provide. The governments immediately took Luc up on the offer.

Angela was thrilled to be going home and started to pack as soon as she and Luc hung up. Luc made arrangements with Les Dixon, his family’s personal security chief, and left the rest to Les. They landed and were met by a swarm of people including Gunther and his lead team of commandos. Gunther wanted to be briefed on what was going on. Of course, he had read all the reports and just needed an update on the visit to the White House. Luc got Elizabeth settled in and talked to everyone as they followed him around asking questions.

Elizabeth was her usual self again after some rest and took charge along with Gunther. They were getting along well and that was very good news to Luc’s ears. His other plane was waiting, so Luc was on the ground just long enough to take care of business. James was staying with the admiral, and Les had his family on board the plane waiting for him. Luc was hurried aboard and they took off for Europe.

It was afternoon and the boys wanted to sit in the cockpit while dad flew the plane. Luc was always ready to take the left seat and he gave the two pilots a break after they were at altitude and cruising speed. He had back to back to back conference calls starting in an hour. So, for now, he was going to just enjoy being dad. Rather than have both the boys at once, Luc made them take turns of about thirty minutes each.

Michael started the first shift and wanted to know everything. Luc talked through all the controls and indicators until he finally let Michael take the yoke. He handled it perfectly and then switched with his brother. Luc repeated the same lesson with Harry and he too got it down immediately.

Luc signaled the pilots to please return. They came back into the cockpit and relieved Luc. When he left the

cockpit, both boys gave him great big hugs and thanked Luc for the lesson. They really were nice young men and just like their mother in a lot of respects. Luc gave a quick five minutes to Angela and the baby and then headed to the back office to start his work. He had three hours before they landed in Athens for dinner.

The first meeting was with Harry. It was fairly brief since they had just talked. The most important thing Luc was interested in was the progress of the second space station that was orbiting the moon. They finished New Texas four months ago and moved the entire assembly and manufacturing plants to the moon. It was halfway complete. Mini versions of the space-planes were already making the hop from the lunar surface to the new station. The lighter gravity on the moon made using the big space-planes silly since there was no atmosphere to worry about. The base on the surface would soon want autonomy, as would the moon space station. By the way, the nickname they used for the moon station was *Charlie Station*. Only the president and Luc knew that Luc named the project after him. Everyone else believed that it was simply the third large station -- alpha, bravo, charlie -- and that it would get a name from the populace eventually.

“Harry, I want to do a feasibility study on creating a cable system between the two stations that we can connect cargo and passenger cars to. The orbits are good enough that it would only have to move twenty percent off of the center axis and the length can be fixed.”

“Okay, I’ll need Cass.”

“She’s working with Elizabeth on Bimini Threshold, but this is simple stuff. Just let her assign a couple of people. Also, I want you to schedule about two weeks for me and the Tic Toc people all day, every day. It can all be remote, but everyone needs a holographic projection system. It’s going to take that dedicated time with all of us together to continue. It’s very exciting.” Tic Toc was the code name for a project that involved nothing less than time travel. The team knew that it might end up not being possible, but they were making astounding breakthroughs in understanding the physics of the universe and the nature of the relationship between space and time. The group consisted of eight of the brightest minds around the world, each with their own discipline.

“That will be a while out there on your calendar. You are pretty booked.”

They spent the rest of the time going over specific company statistics and progress on projects. Then it was time for Luc’s meeting with the Joint Chiefs. The president had scheduled twenty minutes at the start of the meeting to talk privately with Luc.

Once the pleasantries were done, Charlie said, “I have to name a Secretary of Special Operations. I’ve put it off too long.”

“Yes, I was going to ask you about that.” Luc paused and said, “If you are looking for advice...” The president was nodding his head. “Let me get someone else on the line.”

Luc typed a few commands and Duncan Freeborn came on the screen wearing a nice suit in his airplane office. “Hello, General Champion. Hello, Mr. President. This is ominous with you two pairing up to call me.

What can I do for you?"

"Duncan, the president needs some advice on naming the new Secretary of Special Operations. Any thoughts?"

"Charlie, you and I talked about this a few months back. I'll take whatever job you believe is in the best interest for humanity. I like what I am doing now." He paused and then said, "But, I do have a good alternative for you." He knew he had them, paused to take a drink from a coffee cup and then continued, "Move Air Force Secretary Buddy Willis to the Secretary of Special Operations and promote Buddy's right-hand man, Colonel Digby Truman." Duncan saw the blank stares of both the president and Luc and said, "Don't you guys pay attention to these things? Read up on the files of these folks. Go about three management levels in. There are some amazing people out there."

"This is why we have you, Duncan, old pal. And by the way, which admiral is the SecNav going to be naming to the Joint Chiefs of Staff?"

Without hesitating Duncan answered, "He is waffling between two men, Admiral Bettencourt and Admiral Poe. Bettencourt is the one that retiring Admiral Tanner put forth on her way out the door. She has been working with him for several months on a hopeful transition. SecNav thinks the guy is a kiss-ass and likes the other man better. Admiral Poe is a no bullshit bulldog, who goes by the book. And if there is no book, he writes one on the spot, gets it approved and moves forward."

The president said, "Duncan, you like Bettencourt?"

"Yes, Charlie, I do. First of all, Tanner wants him and that should be good enough. But, he is a genuinely good man with a reputation as an innovator."

"Then that's who it shall be. I am the president after all, last time I checked."

Luc said, "Well that settles that. Any other words of advice? We have the other Joint Chiefs waiting by now."

"Yes. Buddy Willis is a very smart person. Let him do his job. You can trust him."

"Thanks, Duncan, as always."

"Goodbye, all."

The president said to Luc, "You know, you'll probably have to let Buddy Willis in on your secret, Luc."

"Yes, probably." Luc waited and slowly said, "Hey, you want to have some fun?"

"Sure. This job doesn't come with much of that."

"Let's tell Buddy together at the Occidental. That worked pretty well with Duncan, showing him pictures of me with all the famous people. In fact, I think I will drop off a few new photos at the restaurant."

"That sounds great. When will you be back in town?"

"Good question. Let me get back to you on that one."

The president turned to an aide and asked that everyone be brought into the meeting. Once they were

situated, Charlie said, “As you all know, Admiral Tanner has stepped down and is retiring. We need a new chairman. General Podgorny, you are next in seniority. Would you accept the position?”

“I would be honored, sir.”

“Then, sir, it is now your meeting.”

General Titus Podgorny assumed command. “Okay, then. We’ll spend the end of the meeting talking about the next meeting’s agenda. But, first, Mr. President, we need a meeting with the secretaries to fill the vacant seats. Can you help with that?”

“Yes, of course. I’ve got some shuffling on the org chart to do.”

“Then I’ll wait to hear from you on that meeting, but the sooner the better. We’ve got a lot of work to do.”

“Yes, sir. Understood.”

The rest of the meeting was spent talking about the next agenda. There were lots of funding priorities and each member had their special projects to add to the list. It was a typical priorities/budget/capital authority discussion that went nowhere. And everyone was confused on how to proceed with a new financial system coming online.

Luc got off the line and came forward to find his family all snuggled asleep in the comfortable lounge chairs. Luc stretched out next to his wife. She turned over and gave Susan to him. He loved it and spent the rest of the flight napping.

Luc woke up as they were starting their descent. He checked the local time and saw that it was nine thirty p.m. The restaurant he was planning on going to was a short drive from the airport where they were landing and he woke the family.

They were really out of it and Luc asked Angela if she would just like to stay on the plane and sleep the rest of the night. She said yes and he helped put the kids into real beds. He got her settled as well and, since he was wide awake, he asked Les if he wanted to get a bite. They were parked at a shared military airbase, and the local Army security team was guarding the plane. Les thought the family was safe and he decided to take Luc up on the dinner invite. Besides, he would be taking his laptop and watching the aircraft security cameras constantly. Or he would pull out his phone and watch them on it. Les took his job very seriously.

Since it was now just the two of them, Luc called for something special to drive. The weather was perfect with a full moon. The car pulled up as they walked down the stairs and Les said, “I’m driving.”

“After I break it in, sir.”

“Okay. Boss,” Les said with much sarcasm.

The car was a new charcoal gray Lamborghini Centenario LP 770-4, a two million dollar car and Luc had to buy it to get them to deliver it in the half hour he gave them to have it ready.

“You can drive after I check out my new car.”

“You own this? How did you make that happen?”

“It’s amazing what a black American Express card can do.”

Before they got into the car, they walked over to a Humvee waiting for them. A weapons master had the back open and ready. Les had his case and Luc had his. It took Les as much time as it did Luc to strap on their weapons and Les only had three while Luc had seven. They also had Interpol IDs on them in case they got stopped. But, they wouldn’t.

Once they were all set, they walked over to the car. A salesman was with the car to brief Luc on the automobile and hand over the keys. Les was right beside Luc and heard everything. Except, the fellow was speaking Greek because Luc greeted him with a salutation and apology for the rushed sale in perfect Greek. He did it just to bug Les. What fun. But, Les was watching and asking Luc some questions. Luc gave very abrupt answers just to have more fun. When the salesman was done, he said goodnight and drove away in another waiting car.

Luc turned and threw the keys to Les. He screamed like an excited girl and dashed to the driver’s side. Then Les looked at the keys and then at the door and back again.

Luc laughed at his puzzlement and said, “The car is voice activated. My voice. In Greek.” They both laughed and Luc said, “Tha íthela na páo gia mia vólta tóra.” And the doors unlocked. They got in and looked and felt around. It was magnificent -- like a fighter jet.

Les said, “What did you say to the car?”

“I would like to go for a ride now.” Luc reached over, pressed the start button and said, “The start button only works with the fob being in close proximity. There’s no place to actually put a key.”

Luc pointed in the correct direction and Les took off very, very quickly. Luc talked Les through getting off the base and into the hills. They were taking the long way around.

After a few minutes they were on a long stretch of winding road. They were watching their track on the GPS map display. Les took the opportunity to speak, “Luc, tell me a story about something that happened to you here, right here in Athens. You must have been here a thousand times.”

“I lived here for six years, then twenty-two, then four. Other than those times, I was here two hundred eighty-eight times, if you include tonight. And I’m not counting the time before the city was born.”

He paused a moment and said, “Well, there was nothing too interesting about it. The first time was at the height of the city state wars. I watched Athens and Sparta fight to a tie and go home. I thought that both were losers. All those good men. Hey, the next time, I talked to Socrates a lot. Want to hear about that?”

“I have a minor in philosophy along with a Bachelor’s in history. Socrates would be great.”

“We’re going to Vassilenas for dinner, but we can stop afterward at the exact place where I talked to him and tell you the story. But, in the meantime, tell me about your family.”

They chatted nicely until they had to find parking for the Lamborghini. It was no easy task to make sure a

two million dollar car was safe. In the end, Luc paid two valets to hang around the car and just watch it.

The restaurant was as wonderful as Luc remembered from his last visit twenty years ago. The place had been upgraded, but the same family still owned and managed it. Luc had checked beforehand just to make sure he wasn't wasting his time.

The food was wonderful and they continued with somewhat normal conversation. In the middle of dinner, Les wanted to know about all the weapons that Luc carried and why. Luc explained, "The two shoulder holstered Sig 320s should be obvious. I like fire power. The boot knife is utility and a deep backup. The ankle holstered Taurus TCP 380 is backup. The two wrist knives are quick response weapons and are silent for the most part. My throwing stars are an old habit. They are very dependable and pretty much silent as well. I carry six."

Les said, "I like the wrist knives. Can you teach me to use them?"

"Of course."

Dinner wrapped up and Les was surprised when Luc ordered six complete dinners to go. He had them packed and delivered to the plane. They paid the bill and retrieved their ride.

Luc took over driving much to Les's whining.

He drove up to the Acropolis and looked at his dome. It was perfect and covered everything nicely. Wonderful. It was almost transparent so as to not spoil the beautiful view of the hill from the city below.

Then he drove around in the tiny streets until he found a clearing with a small garden under an olive tree. He parked and they get out. Luc walked over to the tree and sat on a short stone wall.

"I used to sit here and Socrates would stand there and lecture. There would be several of us and it would end up being an open discussion. He was a very logical thinker."

Summer 422 BC ~ Athens, Greece

"Master Socrates, you are teaching us to learn in a new way. The way we people have been taught is to hear or read about a subject from a learned man. Am I correct in my understanding that you have been showing us by example a question and answer dialog that is designed to make the person with an answer to a question think through his conclusion?"

"Lucasiah, that is a simple way of putting it, but you are correct in essence. If I ask you what is beauty, you could only give me examples and nothing definitive. It is impossible to define such a state. I would simply ask you if the examples answer the question and you would eventually have to say *No*." Socrates paused, sat down and then continued, "But, I ask you a simple question to which there is no real answer. I may have asked you to describe the color blue or the smell of an orange. These are cruel questions to ask." He paused and looked around. Seeing they were alone, he said, "But, I have a kind question to ask of you my young friend. You are something of an anomaly to me. You move with the grace of a dancer and the confidence of a warrior. You

remember my words weeks after I have spoken them. You have wisdom that you hide, but when it slips out, it is well beyond your few short years on this Earth. What am I to make of you?”

“You have been a good and kind friend to me and I will give you the answer to the question you asked and no more. You should make of me *a gifted and learned man who looks younger than he is.*”

Socrates laughed a big belly laugh and then said, “Ah, you are indeed gifted. Gifted in learning one of my tricks. Answer with the shortest answer possible and then *only* answer the question.”

Luc stood to leave as it was getting late. He reached into his bag and pulled out a small leather coin pouch and handed it to Socrates. “Here is a small contribution toward your wellbeing. I would be honored if you would take it in appreciation of our friendship.”

“Lucasiah, it is I who am honored.”

They hugged, Luc turned and walked away.

Present Day ~ Athens, Greece

“Some years later, some of the people he had offended got together and had him killed ‘legally’. I wonder what his thoughts on justice are now that he has experienced the most serious injustice that can befall an innocent man firsthand.” Luc paused to indicate he was finished.

“Wow. Thank you, Luc. We must do this every chance we get. We need to get back to the plane. Angela is up and stirring. I think she is looking for food. Better call her and tell her about the food being delivered, sir.”

Home

When they got back to the plane, Luc arranged for the car to be driven to his home some thousand miles away. Angela and Luc ate a complete meal after he gave the pilots orders to move on to his home airport. They arrived in France just in time for the kids to wake up around three thirty a.m. local time. Who knew what time they felt like it was?

Harry, his wife Roberta, and their security squad met them. They were at their house in fifteen minutes and anxious to look around.

They entered the complex through the main one story surface building that was about four thousand square feet in size. It looked pretty much like it had before the missile attack. But, the rooms had been automated by Luc's tech support company. There was a robotic cleaning system now that Roberta had finally embraced. And, there were two robots that fetched and took things away. Of course, the security system was upgraded as well. A new state of the art indoor climate and energy efficient lighting system controlled by presence of a person was also installed. The security system included a radar controlled large gun from a battleship pointed out of the cliff and then to the land-side of the estate. There was now a squadron of elite troops stationed around the perimeter twenty-four/seven.

The family was going to be staying here while Luc headed off on the Bimini Threshold project. But, currently, he was bushed and headed for his good old bed. It really was nice to be home.

At nine thirty local time, Luc was awakened by Angela sitting on the side of the bed. "Hello, sleepyhead. The boys have been waiting for you to get up for an hour. They just have to show you their new classroom."

"Did you tell them that I designed it?"

"Yes, but they want to show it off anyhow. And Roberta is making waffles."

With that said, he flew out of bed and into his usual jeans, sneakers and sweater. He pushed and pulled Angela to the elevator to head for the waffles.

Roberta's waffles were to die for. They all sat down for the breakfast and Roberta controlled the meal using her new helper robots. It was extremely pleasant for Luc to sit with his wife, twin boys, baby girl, Roberta and Harry and have a nice meal together. It was rare with their schedules. Les would be joining them, but he had flown back to Athens to drive the new car to France. He thought that was a better idea than having someone unknown drive it home. Luc told him to take his time and enjoy the sights.

The house also came with a state of the art intrusion detection system. Every person that was granted access to the house was scanned biometrically and identified in forty different ways. Once their identity was verified, they became a permissions based user. Luc set up the initial settings and then made Roberta the administrator. There were even sensors that measured minute changes in air-pressure and could sense by the displacement in

the room if there was a person or anything there that should not be. Between the sound, movement, thermal print and air density, the house pretty much knew what was going on at all times.

After three helpings of waffles and making the boys squirm in their chairs for ten minutes, Luc pronounced himself finished. Harry and Michael ran over and grabbed his arms with both of them yelling, “Come on, Dad, come on.”

Luc let them drag him away, smiling all the time at the adults who knew exactly what he was doing. They went to the elevator and took it down forty feet to the top level of Luc’s real home. Every level had a carefully camouflaged balcony in the cliffs that looked out over the sea. The doors opened and the boys took off running to their new playroom.

When Luc entered the room, both boys were talking and they looked at each other and laughed. Michael nodded to Harry and Harry started off, “We know that you designed this place, but have you seen it in action?”

Luc shook his head, though he had seen all the simulations, but the boys didn’t need to know that.

“Okay. Well first, there is a comm setup that is really cool. It’s got the normal vidcall, but it can do holographic if there is another holosys on the other end. Watch.” He turned to his brother and said, “Is Sully on the line?” Michael nodded and Harry said, “Well bring him in.”

And Sully appeared walking around in his studio. He said, “Hello boys. Well, I see your father has decided to get out of bed, finally.”

Luc said, “Hi, Sully. Have you been helping them get acclimated?”

“They don’t need much help. I just sent them the user manuals.”

“Thank you. This is really very cool. How many holoterminals do we have around now?” Luc had a thought and got it out before Sully could answer, “That the boys can access.”

“New York, the Silo, Tsubatsu’s in Japan.”

“I thought we would have a lot more,” said Michael.

“Time, grasshopper, time. Be patient. Think of this as your personal work area. You can build three dimensional worlds that move as you do. Imagine the vidgames you can make.” Luc loved using archaic sayings on them that they didn’t understand.

They let Sully get back to work and Luc let the boys show him everything about the room. Then, when they were done, Luc called the rest of the family together to watch the magic trick he was about to pull. Everyone showed up and Luc said, “Michael and Harry have shown me all there is to know about this room. Isn’t that right, boys?” They looked at each other and knew Dad was about to pull a fast one. But, they nodded their heads in agreement. Luc paraded into the center of the room and said, “But, wouldn’t it be nice if the room could convert to, let’s say, a woodshop?”

The room was covered in small square panels that looked seamless but were not at all. At Luc’s request, some panels slid back, work benches, power tools, cabinets, large shop tools and more all slid out from the

walls. The walls sealed back up when everything was in place. The whole process took about thirty seconds.

“Wow. This is just like Harry Potter!!!!” and then the other one said, “Can we use all this stuff?”

“With time and supervision. It’s just like the house. All the tools are permission driven. And the administrator is?”

“Aunt Roberta.” Both of the boys said at once.

He continued, “Mom, if you could have it your way, what would you like this room to be set up as?”

Angela and Luc planned this part, “Well, I think it should be set up for doing school work.”

The room seemed to hear her command and the little panels opened until all the workshop equipment slid out of the room and new furniture slid in. And, like magic, there were computer terminals, white boards, large monitors and even a table surface work area. The boys immediately picked their terminals and looked at everything until they remembered others were standing there.

“What else can it become?”

“A gym, a super playscape complete with climbing walls and trapeze, a real game room with ping pong, a pool table, a card table, and several board game tables and a toddlers playground for you to babysit your sister.”

Everyone laughed at the joke and then Luc said, “No, seriously, it does have that equipment. Really.”

They were done and the boys wanted to play. Roberta said, “Lunch at 12:30. That’s in eighty eight minutes. On time. We’ll talk about chores tomorrow.” That got grunts from the boys and laughs from all the other adults.

Harry wanted to show Luc a few things and they took off alone with Luc carrying Susan. “I want to show you the upgrades in the sea accesses. The tunnel systems you designed are working great. The torpedo tube out is a lot of fun. The opening coming in works fine, but you just have to do most of the work. But wait until you see what the sub pen looks like.” He walked Luc through the tunnels and hallways until they opened into a large enclosed warehouse-sized room with a two hundred and twenty-foot submarine sitting at the dock.

“I had one of our nearby subs come and test it all out -- from the physical tunnel, the dock, the equipment beside the dock and the new computer system interface. Let’s go say hi to the crew. They have been waiting for you to get up so they can go ashore for some down time.”

There was a watch on the deck waiting for Luc. When the sailor saw him, he spoke into a walkie talkie and hatches flew open. All the sailors exited the two hatches and lined up on the pier in parade salute Luc. The captain was there and he called the sailors to salute at attention. Luc stopped, returned the salute and said “At ease.”

The captain stepped forward and said, “General Champion, we would like to congratulate you on your new command. In honor of this occasion, our cook baked a cake.” They rolled it out. It said in big letters; *Congratulations General Doctor Admiral President Shipmate Champion.*

The captain said, “We didn’t know what to call you, so we put them all on.”

“Thank you Captain Witts, XO Bryton, COB Tsing ...” Luc ran through the names and ranks of every person on the dock from memory.

“Harry, I think you better make lunch plans for these folks. How about take-out from in town and a couple of barrels of beer and wine.”

“I was just going to ferry them into town and let them go free.”

“No, I think they need some South of France hospitality. Call up Phillip at the Le Jardin and order to go for everyone.”

“Okay. And I’m going to get the concierge at the Hilton to come over for lunch and take care of all of these people’s entertainment needs for the evening.”

“That’s a great idea. Set them up with tickets or dinner reservations, taxis, anything. Let’s move to the main house and surprise Roberta.”

“She already knows. I figured this would happen.”

Luc talked to the captain and crew and everyone was onboard with the plans and schedule. Luc called up a squad of marines from the nearby base and had them guard the sub while the crew partied.

Everything came together quickly. That happens when you literally have an army at your disposal. Besides, these fine sailors missed the party celebrating the end of the Eastern Federation. Luckily, they never had to use the one weapon that Luc was still hiding from the government. The subs control a sophisticated gun that piggybacks on the company’s communication satellites. It was against several treaties, having space-based weapons, but Luc did it to have the stopping power in the event of any serious war. So far, there had been no need to use the weapon. The satellites carry forty steel rods of different sizes that can be aimed and released by command. The rods plummet to Earth picking up speed. They hit like an asteroid with devastating destructive power. The smallest rod can destroy a car, while the biggest can mutilate a full nuclear submarine at a good depth. Even though they are drop and release, they are deadly accurate. Luc had yet to tell the military about the existence of these weapons. These could not be put into the wrong hands.

As things were being prepared, Luc took the time to walk through the vegetable garden on the side of the house with his sons. He had them get a couple of baskets from Roberta. It was very pleasant and Luc realized how happy he was right that very minute. Besides his sons and family, this place seemed to be a focal point in his long life.

The Grand Hotel, 1786 ~ Hyeres, France

Luc talked his friend, Thomas Jefferson, into coming down from Paris with him to Hyeres on the Mediterranean Sea. Luc had been eyeing a piece of land on the coast for a long time and now was trying to purchase it, but the owner was still saying it just wasn’t for sale. Luc thought that seeing him face to face with a wad of cash in hand would change his mind.

Luc had them staying at the Grand Hotel, an opulent structure with lots of social life. It was fun traveling with Jefferson as he was recognized often. As they entered the front of the building, Luc noticed there was a room off to the side where men were coming and going quite mysteriously. They slipped in quickly and closed the doors just as fast. Luc checked them in while Thomas dealt with a couple of ladies that just wanted to shake his hand. With a discreet inquiry at the desk, Luc learned that the room was a men's only game room where chess and backgammon were favored. And, that serious wagers were placed.

It was early afternoon, so Luc had the staff order up a horse and buggy for a quick visit out to the land. The two put away their luggage and changed out of the clothes they wore on the long trip from Paris. The buggy was waiting when they came down from changing. The ride was beautiful and short. They arrived and walked the acreage.

Thomas was clearly impressed with the view. "This is magnificent."

"Breathtaking is the word that comes to my mind."

"Oh, yes. That is perfect, breathtaking. Do you think the owner will change his mind?"

"Of course. I'll pay whatever it takes, but he doesn't know that. We have our first meeting tomorrow morning. In the meantime, I would like to play some games."

"Play games?"

"Yes. Let's have some fun. Trust me."

They returned to the hotel and, after tipping the staff very well, Luc was introduced to the men in the game room.

Thomas and Luc waited at the bar at the back of the room until there was an opening at a chessboard. Luc had studied the room and identified the players he would like to challenge. He had also paid close attention to the money being exchanged and had used that factor to make his first challenge.

He couldn't just start with the high rollers; he had to work his way up. He accepted a seat with a fairly poor player who seemed to like to give his money away. Luc later learned that it was his wife's money and he didn't care in the least about losing. It took Luc just twelve minutes to defeat him. It had the desired effect. Other players had taken notice of the quick game. France was at the start of a financial crisis and the value of paper money was in question. The rich had reverted to gold and silver coins for the time being. Luc pocketed his winnings and was immediately challenged by another player. They set a wager and began the game. It took sixteen minutes to beat the gentleman. He took his thrashing well with a thank you and a handshake as he slipped coins Luc's way.

Now there were several players wanting a go at Luc. He announced that he only had time for one more game before dinner, but would return later. He put the third victim out of his misery in twenty-two minutes and won twice as much as the other two games combined. Excellent.

As they left, Luc was introduced to the rest of the men in the room. The one he really wanted to play was

the last to be introduced to him. The man commented on the three games Luc had played and said that he would like a game after dinner. Luc agreed and the trap was set.

Thomas and Luc took their leave for a half hour to clean up before dinner. They met in the lobby and walked to a fine restaurant a few blocks away from the hotel. They had light conversation over dinner until Luc asked a question that had been on his mind for years.

“When you penned the words, *all men are created equal*, where did you place the Negro?”

“No one has been so bold or thoughtful to ever ask me that before. Leave it to you.”

“I mean no disrespect or ill will by the question, my friend.”

“I know that and I will give you the answer you deserve. I avoided the issue of slavery by careful phrasing. It was not the right time to bring it up. I was trying to bring solidarity to a group of colonies, not to divide them. It was most perplexing. Slavery is an economic fact whether we like it or not. I fear it may be the downfall of our grand experiment in the end.”

“Thank you for that candid answer. I see no peaceful solution. I fancy that you have birthed twins and not a single child.”

They both laughed over that one and then Thomas changed the subject and said, “I had no idea that you were such a good chess player.”

“It isn’t something that comes up in conversation as a matter of course. At the risk of sounding pompous, it really is a simple game. The fourth move an opponent makes will tell you his skill level and then it becomes a game of utilizing a man to do two or three things at once.”

“Well, I think I will start to call you Pompeii after the destroyed city in Italy.” He had no idea that two thousand years ago, Luc was General Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus and that the city was named after him.

They both laughed and Luc threw the leather coin purse at him that held his winnings and said, “There. Now you can treat for the dinner.” He paid and they walked back to the hotel.

In the lobby, Jefferson begged off to get some sleep and left Luc to his games.

He slipped into the game room and was surprised by the crowd. There were men waiting for him to come and play. Some side wagering was being completed as Luc took on the first challenger. The stakes had doubled from this afternoon and Luc was glad to take the money quickly. He played three games and finally got to the mark he really wanted to play. Luc’s new opponent was over confident and started the first game with a very large wager.

They agreed on the amount and began the game. Luc strung him along and then faked surprise at his victory. The man paid and wanted a rematch. Luc suggested no wager, but his opponent would have none of that. He doubled the first wager and they began. Luc stretched out the game and won with just nine pieces left on the board. Luc’s opponent was getting angry and, when Luc tried to end the games, he insisted on another. Luc knew his opponent’s ego would get him in the end and, sure enough, the mark jumped the bet by ten. After

some verbal dancing, Luc accepted and they began after agreeing this would be the last game. This time, Luc ended the game quickly. There was some quiet clapping as Luc took the money and left the room. Everyone else stayed as this was apparently a late night gaming institution.

Luc decided to get some air and smoke a cigar on the back terrace before turning in. It was most serene. He heard the thief long before he saw him and was ready for anything.

“I’ll take that coin purse, sir.” He was holding two pistols and wearing a mask.

“I think not.” Luc pulled his two wrist throwing knives and placed them in each of the assailant’s shoulders with a swift double-handed throw. The assailant dropped the guns and fell to his knees in pain. Luc walked over and gathered up the weapons. He pulled the robber’s hands behind his back before he could pull out the knives. Luc man-handled him up and pushed him back into the hotel, through the lobby and into the game room.

Everyone stopped and watched as they entered. Luc let everyone see the knives in the man’s shoulders as he pulled them out to loud screams. Then he pushed him to the ground at the feet of the man he just beat and said, “I believe this belongs to you.”

The men started to grumble and gathered behind Luc seeking justice. A few wanted to kill both men on the spot. Luc had a better idea. He picked up the man with the shoulder wounds and threw him out of the room. Then Luc turned to the sore loser.

“Empty your pockets on the table.” He hesitated and Luc yelled, “Now.” A couple of the men stepped forward and helped him. He dumped his wallet, a hidden knife and several coin pouches. Once that was completed, Luc said, “Now, take off your clothes.” A few of the men started to laugh knowing where Luc was going with this. This only made him make a gesture of standing tall, proud and defiant.

Luc threw the two bloody knives into the wall behind the man just missing his head on either side. The man had a sudden change of heart and stripped quickly. He stopped at his underwear and Luc said, “Keep going.”

When he was completely naked, Luc pulled off a window drapery cord and told the men to bind his feet and hands behind his back. Then he said, “Anyone have a problem with me keeping his money?”

One man said, “I think you have earned it, my friend.”

Luc gathered it up and put it in his pocket. Then he said, “Wouldn’t he look nice on that tree across the street on the beach?” Luc said goodnight and got several hearty handshakes as he left for his hotel room. The men followed him out carrying the would-be thief across the street.

The next morning, Thomas and Luc left for their meeting just in time to see two local police cutting the man down. Thomas asked about it and Luc filled him in on the story. They got a good laugh out of it.

The owner of the property really did not want to sell until Luc started to lay out gold coins. He put down a fair price, but the owner held firm. Luc added a stack and the property owner waivered. Luc was watching his eyes and could tell he was close to giving in. Luc added five coins to the stack and pretended that was all he

had. Luc pulled the old *get up and walk away from the table* trick and it worked. They made the deal, signed the contracts and ended the meeting.

On the ride back to Paris, Luc slipped the rest of the money to Jefferson telling him he would be treating for the next six months. The chess match winnings covered the trip, the cost of the property and left Jefferson with a little pocket money. It was a very good trip.

Present Day ~ Hyeres, France

The impromptu party was a big success. The crew had a great time eating and drinking at the house. Afterward, Luc turned them loose on the town with carefully planned escorts from the other military people at his disposal. The security was not only for their protection, but to keep everybody on track to avoid any problems with the locals. Submariners are an interesting breed of sailor. The confined quarters put them a little bit off balance from the rest of society until they resurface into normal life again.

Planning for the Unknown

The next day, all was quiet with the house and they all slept late. Around noon, the boat left as quietly as it came and got back to work.

Elizabeth had been running meeting after meeting and kindly leaving Luc to listen in as he continued with family business. They were used to seeing Luc wearing an earpiece and doing several things at once.

Sully called and announced he had readied his computer with the data from the scroll team. He wanted a meeting with just Luc and Elizabeth to familiarize them with the new Artificial Intelligence application. Elizabeth was still at the Silo with Sully. Luc had his projector up and running and was watching the same 3D image as Elizabeth and Sully. Sully explained the parameters of the software's interaction capabilities and they began. Sully told Luc to pick a voice and name for the interaction. Luc chose Nadine and one of the canned female voices. Sully set a few system settings and was finished getting ready.

Sully got to work, "Nadine, display the scrolls that are pertinent to Atlantis." The room lit up and created a round wall about thirty feet in diameter. There were at least one hundred scrolls shown. The threesome wandered around studying the scrolls and Sully asked Nadine a question, "Was Atlantis a real place or a myth?"

Nadine answered, "It was real and located in the Atlantic Ocean. Its civilization existed for over one thousand years."

A map and timeline appeared hanging in another inner circle wall. They reviewed it together and this time Elizabeth asked Nadine a question, "Do any physical remnants of their culture exist today?"

Nadine replied, "Yes, many. Besides the scrolls, pottery and art are mixed in with items from Greek and Roman times. They are misidentified. The Bimini Wall is part of the main island and the likelihood that underwater ruins exist today is very high. And there is a strong probability that the underground caverns are intact to some degree."

Elizabeth continued, "Show us a map."

One appeared in the center of the room laid out on a holographic table. Sully was standing in the middle of the holograph and moved to one side as they gathered to study it. After a few minutes of discussion, Luc asked Nadine, "Do entrances to the main cavern area exist today?"

Nadine answered, "There are twenty-two clues across four scrolls that indicate an entrance exists underneath one of the stones in the Bimini Wall."

Sully asked a question, "How is the entrance accessed?"

"An entrance is under one of these six stones." Nadine showed several pictures of the wall and highlighted the six stones in question on the map and in the pictures.

They talked about the findings and were all very excited to say the least. Luc saw that Elizabeth was having trouble staying focused and her movements were sometimes jerky. She was in the middle of the twelve-month

downhill run with her disease. Her symptoms were indicative of the timeline the disease usually manifests.

She asked Luc, “Do we have assets that can map the caverns?”

He answered, “Yes, I believe so. Let’s get the right people involved.” He pulled out his phone, called Admiral Zamora and Commander Yeager, and asked them to join the meeting. Luc had Nadine shut down every reference to Atlantis for now. Both officers were on their subs and connected in a few seconds.

Each sub was outfitted with the holographic system on the bridge. Luc asked Zamora and Yeager to make the visit private and they ordered their command cleared. Once everyone was online, setup and ready, Luc said, “How fast can you give us a pretty good picture of the Atlantic undersea bed? Here is the territory we need charted.” He highlighted the grids and watched the officers think it through.

Zamora said, “Can Yeager and I have a few minutes?”

“Sure.” And they cut the line.

While they were offline, Luc asked Nadine the same question and she replied, “It will take both submarines six days to map the area in question.”

Elizabeth said, “That’s too long. I can be ready to move in three and I want the charts by the time we move the stones.”

Nadine answered, “If we use the Horatio instead of the Enterprise, we can get the west side of the area completed in three days, with the rest taking just one more day.”

The sub commanders came back online and Yeager said, “We want to bring in the Horatio, instead of the Enterprise and start from the west. We can have what you want in four days.”

Elizabeth, Sully and Luc smiled at each other and Luc said, “Nick, please take charge of the project and get started immediately. Sully will connect you with our database and give you all the codes you need. Thank you very much. This is important data. I’ll let Elizabeth give you the briefing.”

Luc said goodbye to his family, headed for his jet and took off on his flight to Nassau. He was in constant communication with different people throughout the five-hour flight. Elizabeth had set up headquarters in an old dockside warehouse. There were ships anchored offshore waiting for their turn to dock and load. About one hundred men and women were working in the area with forklifts running all around. Once Luc landed and got to the warehouse, he was greeted warmly by all.

Elizabeth wore a headset and was standing in a holographic terminal talking to several people. She ended a conversation as Luc approached. “Hi Luc. Welcome to my command center.”

They both chuckled at her joke and he said, “I think we can do better than this for the next time.”

“Let’s hope there is a next time.” She paused and then said, “There’s someone I want you to meet.”

A man in sandals, shorts and a tee-shirt walked up. He was around forty and very, very fit. “This is Sergeant Smith. Smith, this is General Champion.”

At that, he came to attention and saluted Luc. Luc saluted back and said, "At ease. We're pretty loose around here until it's time to not be."

"Smith is my nurse." She looked at Luc and they smiled.

"Sergeant, you've got your hands full."

"Admiral Tanner and I go way back. There won't be any problems. Will there, ma'am?"

"No problems. Especially since your wife is my niece."

Luc couldn't resist, "Nepotism at its finest. And why not. If you can't trust blood, who can you trust?"

They all laughed at that and Elizabeth said, "Cameron is also a Seal under your command."

"Well, it looks like you just fell into the fire, my friend."

"It seems to be where I live, sir." He paused and said, "May I have a word, sir?"

"Elizabeth, please excuse us."

"No problem. Go do that male bonding thing."

They walked out of ear shot from Elizabeth. Cameron said, "Dr. Longstreet gave me a briefing on what to expect with the Admiral's illness, but I want to hear it from you."

Luc explained the condition and he took everything in quickly and easily. They walked back to Elizabeth and Cameron said, "I think it's time someone told me where we are going."

Luc had some fun with Cameron and said, "We are going to find Atlantis." Then he walked away before Cameron could say anything.

Cameron and Elizabeth were talking and she called Luc over.

"What have you got?"

A 2D map of the area displayed regular traffic and more.

"Sully, show Luc what you showed me."

"Sure, here you are with your five ships. All nice and clustered around your warehouse." They all turned a nice blue. "And here are the two unmanned subs we ordered." They turned a soft green. "Here are our three subs and one regular nuclear sub, the Eisenhower." They turned the same soft green as well. "There are five commercial airliners right here." They turned yellow with tail numbers lit up next to them. "Can I remove them?"

Elizabeth said, "Yes, but if they or any other airliners deviate from their flight plans, let us know immediately."

"You got it." And just like that they disappeared. "Now's where it gets dicey. There are three cruise ships, twenty-two fishing trawlers and several large personal yachts."

"Leave the cruise ships and yachts up and put their owners next to them just like the airliners."

"Sure, hold on please." A few seconds later, the blips had text next to them and turned the same soft green

as their ships. “I’ve watched the satellite feeds on the fishing boats and twenty out of the twenty-two come up clean. They left port at the right times, have the right size crew and are indeed fishing.”

“And the last two?”

“They are acting very odd. They stay anchored and never come to dock. They stay near each other and never get farther than 1000 feet apart. Here’s the really funny thing. There is something under them, but nothing shows up on radar or sonar as well. But, our displacement units we have around the habitat shows a huge bubble.” Luc’s company developed a sensor that could identify the displacement solid things would make in the atmosphere or water. It acted like a negative radar emission of sorts.

“What does Nadine think it is?”

“She has nothing like it in her database. She does not know.”

“Sergeant, what do you say you and I go for a swim?”

It took Sergeant Smith and Luc two hours to prep for the dive. Luc wanted to wait until dark and he wanted several stations in place for their swim. The almost two miles to the fishing boats would take a few stops to get there safely. Also, Luc wanted to wait until there was an unmanned sub very, very close at hand.

A Zodiac with a support team of six was waiting for them. The men aboard briefed Luc and Cameron on their equipment. Elizabeth was sitting in a chair watching the whole thing. She would be in her control center while they were out on their four-hour mission. Before they got started, Cameron and Luc talked to Elizabeth alone in a makeshift bedroom.

When they were alone and she was sitting down, Cameron and Luc went to work. She argued, having thought they were going to give her last minute information. Instead, they checked her vitals and Luc gave her a shot to keep her going. Her symptoms subsided and they were now ready to go. She thanked them with a beautiful stubborn smile they both recognized.

The Zodiac team awaited their return and, as they approached the boat, two men released the lines and made ready to shove off. Once onboard, they quietly eased away from the dock. When all the comms were connected, Luc had a few things to say, “I’m Luc Champion and this is Cameron Smith. We are both experienced divers and in good shape. You know the station layout and the timetable. Thank you. Out.”

Cameron and Luc visited for the next twenty minutes on a side channel. Cameron had been a friend of the Admiral’s family for years. She helped him a few times with good advice and he had always been there for her.

They arrived at the drop-off point and two men helped Cameron and Luc into their gear. The aides rolled into the water with them and helped to set the computers on their chests. Comms were checked and Cameron and Luc grabbed their first piece of gear, underwater scooters. In a few seconds, they were doing twenty miles an hour and headed to their second station. At three minutes out, they slowed and watched the equipment for any signs of trouble. Nothing. At the second station, they hooked up the scooters for charging and waited a few

minutes to relax for the last swim.

They were equipped similarly in large double-leg flippers and the latest in webbed glove technology. The gear certainly helped to swim faster, but the effort equaled the distance in the end. Simple physics. At one hundred yards out, they switched to night vision and cut all their sounds, lights and communications. They used hand signals to talk and as they approached the structure, it became apparent this thing was huge. It was much larger than an old nuclear sub. They got to within a few feet of it and signaled to each other for a moment. Cameron would take the size readings, while Luc would study the hull itself. Luc approached the side of the vessel and the hull shimmered with the underwater waves he was making. It had a complete chameleon invisibility system. Astonishing. The second Luc figured out what was going on with the hull, he realized that their pictures were being taken by a thousand tiny cameras. The computer would analyze them in seconds and announce their presence. Luc turned around to see Cameron taking his own readings. Luc swam to him and signaled that they had to go now.

Just then, they saw and heard the approach of several divers, one with a spear gun. Five on Luc's left and four on their right. They were trying to out flank them on both sides with their speed.

"We've got company. We are moving away from the boat pursued by nine unfriendlies. They are twenty yards behind us. Looks like we are maintaining our distance."

The support team radioed, "We are two minutes out to your position. No surface traffic, but the two trawlers are lit up like Christmas trees."

As the word *trees* died in their earpieces, a spear missile shot past Luc on his left and exploded twenty feet ahead of them. They were both prepared, but still the shockwave stopped them dead in the water while the divers moved in. Cameron and Luc regained their composure and took off as fast as they could, but this time they went down as they moved forward. Luc wanted the boat's people as deep as they could go. Cameron and Luc's equipment would let them go deeper. In just thirty seconds, the divers from the boat were at their limit. Cameron and Luc disappeared down into the depths. They circled below the group and came up behind them. They both opened fire with their HSPW guns. The hyper-sonic paralysis wave units make a sound so excruciating to the listener, that they are simply paralyzed in pain. Cameron and Luc both wore protective earpieces and suffered no effects. Luc cut the sound and approached the divers. He hooked a rope between five of them and Cameron did the same to the others. Luc and Cameron's support divers arrived, dropped in the water and pulled the men to the surface and into the crafts. In less than one minute, they were zooming away with their new *friends*.

Once back at the dock, the divers from the boat were given dry clothes and asked to come to the main command area for a visit. There were two women in the group of nine. All were from Brazil and were serious intellectuals in some highly technical fields -- astrophysics, quantum mechanics, bioengineering and others.

They were on the watch shift on their vessel and were sent out by the computer to investigate the presence of Luc and Cameron. The people from the boat didn't know what to do when Luc and Cameron swam away, so they followed them. They fired on Luc by accident. The one who brought a weapon really didn't know how to use it and fired by mistake. They were scientists, not soldiers.

They would simply like to be released now if Luc didn't mind.

At this point, Luc separated them in order to visit with them one by one. He got very little from each, but it was enough to piece together their story.

An hour later, Luc addressed all of them.

“As I have explained to each of you, we are the United States Coast Guard and simply doing our job. We understand that you have signed non-disclosure agreements and we will respect that considering your citizenship. Thank you for your time. We will take you back to your vessel now.”

They were escorted as kindly as possible to their ride and then to their big boat.

When they were gone, Luc let his people in on what he learned, “They work for Southern Energy Systems and have been onboard their boat, the Garcia, for nine months. Their families are with them and they have no intention of returning to our society. All seems pretty peaceful until you realize you are dealing with Juakin Santana.” Luc paused while Sully displayed a brief on Santana on the big screen. Luc continued, “He was the biggest opponent of the new fiscal system. He is ruthless and there are rumors of secret weapons research.”

There were some questions and answers that went on for a few minutes. Elizabeth said, “This only changes one thing. We may have a tail. Let's move out as soon as possible. Get to it.”

They were ready to leave port in three hours. Sully had asked Nadine to give them a list of supplies they would need cross-referenced with the existing list. A few adjustments were made and they boarded their flotilla of five surface ships for the four-hour voyage to the first coordinates. Two unmanned subs were in route to meet them at the target zone. They had nearly two hundred people assigned to make the journey with them or to provide support.

The Magical Door

Elizabeth and Luc were in a quiet comm center to discuss some issues with his folks back at the base in South Dakota. Sully was the only person on line with them at present. They were discussing the new development about Santana and his new world order.

Their mini flotilla arrived onsite mid-afternoon and they used the rest of the daylight to get organized. The admiral was in her element and did a masterful job of setting up for the mission. It was a timed ballet of the right ship in the right place at the right time. They had the site circled with two rings of vessels. At the center was the lifting dredge. There was a command vessel and the support craft were set to move around as needed for each phase of the adventure.

Once everything was in position, six of them made the initial dive on the spot Luc expected the entrance to be located. It was only in forty-five feet of water and three of the team began the work by setting up the holographic camera poles. Luc and two others began cruising the area studying the features. It did not take long for Luc to get oriented and identify the stone he was looking for. He dropped a few flags to help mark positions and let the others know what was what. He ordered some dredging equipment and it was lowered down from the surface. He instructed the team to clear the block on all sides. This was a slow process and took almost an hour. They had swapped their tanks for hoses from above and could now stay down indefinitely.

They all helped with positioning the suction hoses and began the work. It was slow going as they were moving about five large playgrounds' worth of sand. When there was enough room all around the twelve by twenty block, Luc surveyed its edges and found nothing that might be used to move the block -- no openings, no handholds, nothing. He was online with everyone above and they could see everything the divers saw through video feeds.

"Admiral, this stone is simply not a correct one. I expected to find a clue or something that would help me, but no such luck. We're losing light down here. What are your orders?"

"I'm sending down some lights and more people. Take a break, return to the surface and let me get things set for work in the dark. We are not waiting. We have a storm sixteen hours out and we either do it now or wait days."

The divers made their way topside and dried out from three hours in the water. They passed the new team as they were coming up. Luc changed clothes and made his way to the command center.

Elizabeth was anxious to start a brainstorming session with some of the best minds in the world.

"Sonar shows a solid stone with sand all around to a depth of twenty more feet below the surface of the stone."

"Logically, there is only one option -- clear the next likely stone. Sully, zoom out on the projection. There are two other stones in the line that match the pattern we have guessed to be our best chance. One is about sixty

feet north and the other about one hundred feet south."

"Yes, but we counted them out because of their larger thickness. One is twice as deep as the number one guess and the second is almost three times as deep."

"I understand, but they are still the next best choice. Admiral, let's clear those the same as the first."

She turned to her op-commander and said, "Chief, please put the men to work on both of these stones right here and here. Get more suction hoses down there to dredge both clear. I want it done in one hour." With this command, she walked out of the room, clearly in some distress. Luc followed her out of the room and was right behind her as she collapsed. He caught her, picked her up and carried her two doors down to the nearest cabin.

Luc made a call, "Sully, Elizabeth has passed out and I need help now. Get Cameron in here."

Cameron flew through the door and started to assist Luc in checking her out.

Luc ripped the stethoscope off a nurse and listened to Elizabeth's heart. He addressed the people in the room after he was satisfied she was in no immediate danger, "I am a doctor and she is okay, just faint from a condition she has that is getting worse. Raise her legs and get a blood pressure cuff on her. And get me some smelling salts."

They had put an oxygen mask on Elizabeth's face and covered her with a blanket. Luc waited until all was set and waved the noxious fumes under her nose when he lifted the oxygen mask. Her eyes fluttered and she came awake pushing the salts away. A good sign. He answered the question on her face and said, "You fainted and are okay now. Just lay still." She complied with an embarrassed look. Luc turned to the helpful team and said, "Please leave us alone now. Please."

"Thank you Luc. You have to keep me going. I need to see this mission through. Do you understand?"

"More than you can imagine." He had seen this reaction hundreds of times at the end of someone's life. They wanted to die with purpose and dignity. The few extra days they might gain were not worth the price of the slow collapse of all bodily functions they know they would suffer. Luc stepped out the door telling her to lay still and walked back to the control center.

"Everyone, the admiral needs some rest and so do I. Notify us when the two blocks are clear." Luc waved as he turned away. He returned to her room, walked in and simply laid down on a couch across from her. She smiled and closed her eyes.

There was a quiet knock on the door and the ship's captain came in. He whispered to Luc that the stones were clear. Luc turned to find Elizabeth gone and followed the captain back to the control room. She was up and running again and smiled as he entered.

She walked over to greet him, shook his hand and said, "Thank you." Then she spoke loudly to him so that everyone in the room could hear, "You snore like a chainsaw."

Luc laughed and said, "I've heard that before. Where do we stand?"

"Ready to go down again. Get suited up."

It was now ten p.m. local time and Luc headed for the prep room. He was changed and ready to dive in two minutes with a little help from the dive master.

Luc and the others dropped into the water and immediately took off for the north deep stone. They saw it in the distance with lights all around it. The other divers were waiting around to see if Luc would find what he was looking for. He waved at them and started at one corner and went along the side. He felt with his gloved hand and found nothing. When Luc signaled he was finished and ready to move to the other stone, everyone moved with him. Luc swam slowly so as not to lose anyone. They arrived and Luc started his search on this stone at the first corner he came to. He touched it and found it to be smoother than the others. He made his way along the side surface top to bottom and found a soft spot about two feet off the bottom. He cleared it with his fingers. It was only silt. The hole becomes clearly round and perfectly circular. He requested a dredge hose and began to suck away the muck.

Once clean, Luc aimed a light inside and saw nothing but a nice round hole. He knew what it was, made his way to the other side and found the same sized hole. He cleared it, moved on to the other end of the stone and found two more holes.

"Get me some big chains and outfit the ends with solid steel rods, two feet long. I need four of them and we are going to pick this rock off the bottom."

He explained what was going to happen while the work was performed and, fifteen minutes later, they were ready to set the rods to begin the lift. When all was prepared, the chains were tightened and the stone was ready to be moved after a few thousand years of sitting right where it was.

By now, there were twenty men and women helping out and ready to watch the lift. The excitement was high. The stone began to move with the pull from above. Once free from the bottom, Luc ordered it moved one hundred feet to the side and set back down. The water was too cloudy to see the bottom of the sea that just recently had a one hundred ton rock on it. So, they waited. It was agonizing. The camera crew of several divers moved in to get ready to take the shots they wanted.

The water finally cleared and Luc moved in to find a perfectly rectangular opening that had a staircase of stones leading down into the darkness.

The admiral gave her orders, "Luc, do not enter the opening. It's time for the drones to do their job." Luc moved back to a safe distance as a unit approached. It quickly dove into the opening and was gone.

The admiral narrated, "The steps continue for two hundred and forty feet and end in a room with two tunnels. I've sent the drone in the one to the right. That would be west." She paused and waited until there was something to report. "It dead-ends after only twenty-five feet. I'm backing it out now." Another pause. "Luc, I'm sending down tanks for the three of you and rope as a life-line. I've got the drone in the other tunnel now and its sonar is showing a large opening after a run of one hundred and ten feet. It's a cavern complete with stalactites

and an island. You can proceed inside now. But watch the acidity of the water as you go. It is spiking with lime deposits."

They changed from breathing hoses to tanks and entered the opening single file stopping every thirty feet to set a pole. More men had been stationed behind them and were passing poles as they moved along. Luc made it to the turn into the raw tunnel and kept going until he found the lagoon as described. The island had a small beach and they simply walked up and onto the shore. It was a good two hundred feet across and there was plenty of open space to walk around.

"I've checked the air and it is stale but breathable. Run some hoses down and let's give it some new life. I need some lights as well."

Soon there was a camp of sorts set up and air pumped into their freshly lit cavern. It was beautiful. A tunnel with a manmade arch and side columns were noticed on the far side heading east. It was big enough for an ATV to fit into easily and the ground looked smooth and straight.

"Let's get Simi down here and a case of the bats. And Elizabeth, I think it's time you joined us. You gotta see this live."

In one hour, all of the equipment was in place. The drones charted the next tunnel system out to four miles and then returned. They could drive the whole way.

First, Elizabeth and Luc wanted to talk to some people. The first one was Angela. Luc told her about the discovery and finding the cavern. She went to the playroom and linked in to the projection. They talked about it for a few minutes and then she called everyone in the house. They showed up just in time for Luc to hang up. They had to make more calls.

The next one was to the President. He was already in the projection system area with all his staff watching the discovery. Elizabeth talked to him while Luc talked to the others around the world that needed to watch the adventure as it unfolded.

With Base One secure, fifteen of them took off for the next known point four miles away. The trip was uneventful and slow with all the system of sensors they were stringing out. The electric extension cords added to the slow pace. They planned to put the sensor posts at their limit of communication, which was about a quarter mile. A mile in, they sent another drone and got a map of the tunnel four more miles ahead. The tunnel took a few degrees dip over the next mile, but it was still straight and large. At fifteen miles from Base One, they came to a natural large cavern and decided to set up Base Two.

Elizabeth ordered six hours of rest for the travelers. The rest of the crew shuttled items back and forth in preparation for the next day's run. So far, they could still charge their electric vehicles without too much trouble.

Elizabeth had taken no chances. They were loaded with escape lifelines, food and water, batteries and enough firepower to start a small revolution. And then there was always the tech toys Luc's group had at hand.

“Luc, Admiral. This is Sully. I need you both online now, please.”

“What’s up?”

“One of the scroll team members has been found dead. He is Dame Pope. He was in his apartment in Boston after returning from the station. He didn’t show up for a meeting and his friend stopped by his home to check on him. He had been tortured. And from the looks of things, he held out for quite a while.”

“He gave up our Atlantis plans. The poor man. Sully, who’s responsible?”

“Santana is your leading possibility. He’s got enough resources to pull this off and be right behind you now.”

Admiral Tanner asked the support team questions. “Any anomalous readings? Anybody *feel* anything?”

“Admiral, this is Comstock. We are watching your back in the sky, topside and submerged. We laid out the sensors as ordered and all is working perfectly.”

“Same here, Admiral.”

“Good to go here as well.”

“Sully, get Gunther online please.” He did.

“Hi General, Admiral. What can I do for you?”

“Gunther, are you up on everything?”

“Of course.”

“Your opinion on moving forward?”

“Proceed as planned.”

“Thank you. Out.”

“Well, Elizabeth,” Luc said. “Since we are up, let’s hit the road.”

“The order is given.”

From Base Two they set out at a good pace and had nearly forty miles of good, straight, and down-sloped tunnel road ahead. At the end of the slope, getting readings from more drones, Elizabeth opted for a break. They were running low on batteries and the comm team following them would have a hard time charging them tonight at this pace. They were just about to stop, when a dragonfly-sized drone buzzed them. One of the men standing in the rear vehicle had watched the little airplane go by and was going to try to catch it with a net. The bug was almost out of sight when it got lit up by several of Luc’s spotlights. Then, it suddenly made a long slow bank and headed back toward the convoy for another pass. The men were ready, made a clean toss together and it sputtered to a stop in the net. All was quiet.

“How the hell could a drone get in front of us?” The Admiral was pissed.

Luc told her, "There are only two explanations. The culture that may live here sent it or Santana did." Before she could interrupt, he said, "Set up a tent here. I want a look at that little beast."

Luc's command was executed and quickly they were hooked up with Sully taking a look. The drone had been plugged into a laptop and Sully had taken command of it. "I was just about to call you with an update on Santana. Let me look at this thing. ... It's our technology, four years old. It's Santana. And, he isn't technically ahead of you. He came in from under another stone using a different tunnel. The one he is in and yours intersect about a mile down the road from you. I checked the long range satellite pictures and he went in about thirty miles from you and should now be in about twenty miles. If he stays on path, he is about one hundred forty miles behind you. The drone is another story. It is an old second generation insect. We never put it into production. Too noisy."

Elizabeth said, "Okay. We move out to the intersection."

They were there in just a few minutes. Elizabeth had Base Three set up while Luc looked around. The intersection was a wide spot, but it was still just tunnels, no caverns.

She walked up to Luc who was standing at the entrance to Santana's tunnel. "What do you think of stringing a bunch of sensors down this tunnel. I would like to know where Santana is."

Luc said, "I have just the thing." Luc pulled a case from his pack and opened it. It contained twelve little drones the size of a bee. "I'll pass these off to a techie and have them stay at Base Three until Santana gets close. I'll have Sully calculate the optimum launches. How long are we staying here?"

"I want to do one more thing. Hold on." She called a captain over and talked to him. Then she said to both Luc and the captain, "I want to dig a tiger trap at the end of this tunnel. You've got two hours."

The captain said, "Just so we are clear, ma'am, this is what I am going to do. I am going to cut a trench at the end of the tunnel. We'll cover it with screen that we rig to blow and drop their vehicles four feet into a pit. It will need to be twice as long as a jeep." He looked at his watch and said, "Two hours, you got it."

The captain got it together and went to work. A mini backhoe was ordered up and on the way. Others started preparing the top covering and digging the large hole with shovels. Fortunately, the floor of the tunnel was packed sand and gravel.

Eight of the team were heading on. Others would be following as ordered later. They did another ninety miles. It had all been mapped out and they were stopping at a large section of the tunnel coming up. The tunnel opened as expected into an obviously manmade room. It was big enough to set up a station and Elizabeth ordered this to be Base Four. But, they had a problem. The tunnel further on was the size of a standing man. A motorcycle could get through. The bats mapped the slender opening and found that it went on for just four miles and dead-ended into a very large cavern.

The eight of them were riding in two vehicles. Cameron and another man started to take the vehicles apart. The two sides separated into two motorcycles once the cowlings and braces that held them together were taken

off.

Luc made a suggestion to Elizabeth, "Let's send Murdock and Tsing ahead to scout."

"Good idea." Luc gave the order after discussing it with everyone. The two men rebuilt their packs and took off into the tunnel on foot.

Cat and Mouse

The two scouts had lights bright enough to see far ahead and they took off running. Everyone was watching their helmet cameras. It was all very uneventful during the fifteen minutes of their run.

They reached the end of the tunnel and stepped into a cavern. Just as they came out of the tunnel, alarms went off telling everyone that Santana's team had hit the first bee sensor. Six large vehicles were moving at a good clip. Three hours behind -- except for the trap laid for them. Theoretically, the trap would slow them down significantly. They were now sixty miles from the end of the tunnel and the pit.

Murdock and Tsing were now into the cavern about fifteen feet and sending observations back to Elizabeth. It seemed the weather in the cavern could turn rough quickly. The farther in they moved, the stormier it seemed to get and the fog kept them from seeing how expansive the area was. There was nothing obviously dangerous about the cavern. The plant life was jungle-like and there were several new species that could be identified immediately from the video feed. The source of light for the plants was the ceiling. It was brightly lit by some natural stone. The cavern appeared to have its own little ecosystem.

Elizabeth and Luc agreed that they should take the bikes and follow the scouts to the cavern. She rode on the back of Cameron's motorcycle, while the rest of them paired up and took off. They drove the four miles quickly and parked the bikes against the tunnel wall. Murdock and Tsing were there to meet them. No sooner than the bikes were parked, they got a signal that Santana had found the trap. The video feed from the pit was hilarious. The men were pissed. Santana himself was with them and that was reassuring to Luc. He liked to keep his enemies close.

Elizabeth and Luc walked into the cavern and looked around. The wind started blowing and rain started to fall. They turned around and walked back inside the tunnel and it turned spring-like again.

"What the hell is going on?" They were baffled by the cavern's sudden changes. Elizabeth said, "Tsing, Murdock, please reconnoiter the area."

Tsing and Murdock raised their weapons and moved out into the light of the cavern. "We're at the edge of the center lake and there seems to be a path around the water." There was a shimmer in the light in the cavern and the wind started to get a bit stronger.

Luc said, "Come back to the tunnel immediately. Move out. Now."

The men came rushing into the tunnel and moved to the back of the line of people. The light in the cavern changed back to the way it was just a moment ago and the wind stopped. Luc turned to one of the men who was sweating and clearly fearful of what was going on. He was hiding it well, but Luc could see it ten different ways. "Hey, I need a little help with an experiment. Come on up here."

As he came to the front of the line, Luc asked him to remove all his weapons. His heart rate went up and he was getting more and more anxious. Good. When he was cleared, down to his pocket knife, Luc told him, "I

want you to walk out into the cavern until there is a change in the environment and then come right back. Don't worry, nothing will happen to you. I think you won't be out there more than ten seconds. Now go."

He moved into the mist and the light dimmed significantly and very quickly. A light rain started just as he flew back into the tunnel grabbing his guns and other stuff as he went to the end of the line.

Elizabeth was looking at Luc funny and he said, "Now watch this." He dropped his weapons, all of them, and walked into the cavern. The light got brighter and the rain turned into a cooling mist with a bit of wind to wisp it around very pleasantly. He came back in smiling and watched Elizabeth's face. She couldn't figure it out.

He explained it to her, "The ecosystem out there is alive and very sensitive to everything. It sensed the controlled aggression our two scouts carry around as a way of life. It didn't like them." She looked at Luc like it was a crazy idea.

She said, "The cavern didn't like them? You can do better than that. The second scared man? What, the cavern didn't like his fear?"

"Hold on. What did it do for me and why?"

"It turned beautiful. It must like you."

"Maybe it is all about confidence. Strength without aggression. Being at peace with yourself and your destiny. I feel that way about myself. I'm not afraid to die. Let me prove it to you with one more test. You walk out there. But, tell me what you predict is going to happen."

"It is going to get cold. That's what I feel like these days sometimes."

She walked into the cavern and the light, wind and temperature stayed exactly the same. She came back into the tunnel and said, "I think you are right. I felt the same as the life out there. It was very refreshing. What should we do?"

"Test everybody after we explain the situation to them. Anybody that fails, stays here or goes back."

One by one, they tested everyone and there were just three that had no effect or an improved one. It was Luc, Elizabeth and Cameron. They decided to send the others back with strict orders to hide from Santana and not engage him.

Once everyone else was gone and their bikes were parked right outside the tunnel in the cavern hidden under some bushes, they talked about the next move. The cavern didn't seem to mind when they parked the bikes there.

Luc thought he understood what was going on. When they were ready, he said, "Lady and gentleman, please come with me and I will tell you what is probably going to happen." They started on a very pleasant walk to the lake. "This place is some kind of life system of its own with all these plants and bugs living together with shared energy. To some people, this might be a holy place."

They walked completely around the lake and there appeared to be no exit. They got back to the starting

place and decided to make camp. They set up a camping table and laid out their sleeping bags. They were hungry and made something to eat. All this took about an hour since they were in no hurry now.

When they were finished eating, Cameron and Luc took a walk around the outer rim of the cavern and mapped it in their heads. The outside was natural stone that was sweating water. They were almost through when they found something interesting. A section of the wall was bricked up with the stones lying around. This wall had mortar between the stones. They studied the wall looking for anything that would open it if indeed it was a door.

Luc and Cameron gave up and went back to the little camp. They told Elizabeth about the mortared section and she had to go look for herself. Cameron went with her and Luc sat down and opened his laptop to see if it was possible to video conference with a few people so far underground.

He felt a presence behind him and turned to see a man and a woman in long robes. They appeared to be around sixty years old and did nothing but stand there and smile. Luc stood and approached them slowly. He stuck out his hand for a handshake and maintained a big grin. They both took his hand and shook it. A good sign. They were smiling too.

In ancient Greek, Luc said, "Hello, I am Lucasiah. I have two friends over there." He pointed to the place.

They recognized the words he was saying and the woman started to speak. It was a different dialect but still Greek. Luc listened and then said back to them, "I can learn your language very quickly. Please continue to speak."

The woman started into a long dialogue telling Luc about the cavern. It was a holy place to them. It was where they talked to Poseidon. The cavern answered their questions with its changes. The woman was the oracle that talked to Poseidon for the people. She was a priestess.

Elizabeth and Cameron returned from looking around and saw Luc talking with the couple. Luc explained what was going on and they shook hands with big smiles. Cameron set up chairs for everyone in a circle. They sat down and Luc continued to speak with them.

"We are from the surface and discovered a way into your kingdom. I am very old, six thousand years or so." They looked skeptical and then Luc said, "I visited your island before it was hidden under the seabed. I met some people. Perhaps you have legends about them." Luc said their names and the priestess recognized them. It turned out the one person Luc met was the first priestess of her order.

This priestess's name was Lydia 4356. When they reused a name, the number that was their last name incremented by one to separate them from other Lydias. The man's name was Pontos 223. His name was not popular. Luc learned that occasionally a newborn was given a new name, but rarely. There were 123,231 people living at this time. Two women were expecting children when they left the city a few minutes ago. They were very precise with their speech. Luc loved it. He asked about the history of the island, and they told him about an upheaval. Only forty people survived, but the culture remained intact through them and the massive archived

writings. To them, Luc explained all the important things about the surface civilization. They had many questions. Elizabeth put some food together and they ate as they talked. The meal was mostly fruits and salads, and Lydia and Pontos enjoyed it all. Luc spent a lot of time translating back to Cameron and Elizabeth who were being remarkably patient.

Luc asked Lydia, "Would you take us to the leaders of your city, please?"

"Yes, of course. We want to share the information that you have given to us with our people."

"Will they be afraid of us?"

"Some might, but I have all the proof that I need in front of me in this place. Poseidon's home has passed its natural judgement on you and that is good enough for me. You all have peaceful hearts. And that means that you say what you believe to be the truth. You have integrity and kindness. We trust you just as you are asking for our trust. It is granted."

Luc translated and the Admiral said, "Tell them about Santana."

"I was just about to."

Luc turned to Lydia and said, "This is going to be difficult to explain, but there is an enemy following us. He is in the tunnels and will arrive here in less than two hours."

He gave a little more explanation and then Lydia said, "This place will not let them pass and it will tell me there are unwelcome people in here. I am the priestess of this temple. I will consider communicating with them in the same way I decided to visit with you. Lucasiah Champion, what is so special about you? No outsider has ever found this place after The Hiding. I take it that not everyone lives as long as you have. I am old, but not six thousand years."

"How old are you?"

"I am four hundred and fifty."

"Amazing. As for myself, I was born the grandson of the first man, Adam. I lived my long life in secret among the people on the surface and was immortal until the one god above all gods told me that I was an angel sent to Earth to help it. He rewarded my work with the years that are left of this now mortal body. I know this is hard to believe. I am the only one of my kind on this planet. These people here are my friends and good people. But, let me ask you something, Does your society have one government?"

"Yes, we have a minimal apparatus for having the people contribute to the upkeep of the land and our buildings. And we have a respected group of people who help keep order when there is a dispute."

"On the surface, there are many, many nations each with their own leaders. I am a member of the United States of America and, although I am not the leader, I can speak for him. I can get him on this device here if you wish to speak with him anytime."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because, I have an important thing to tell you. We promise to not reveal your existence to the surface

people if that is your desire.” Luc stopped and translated for the others and they all nodded yes showing they agreed with his words.

“That was nice, but we assumed as much when I decided to speak with you. And by the way, the reason was that you figured out the moods of this place so quickly. I knew you must be very special or come from a race that is special in and of itself. Now I see that it is you and you alone. And this explains why you could speak our language.”

“By the way, I’ve had my friends on the surface program up a translation application. Here, take these and touch that. And then press this little picture here and speak in your normal speech.” He paused while Lydia gave it a try. And then Luc said, “Now press this and what you have said will come out in my language and you can talk directly with these other people and anyone else with whom you wish to communicate.”

She took the device and said thank you. This woman was the very picture of a peaceful soul who wanted to help others and be kind. Luc hoped the rest of her people were the same. He had to protect their privacy at all costs, even if they didn’t want to.

Lydia walked over to Elizabeth and used her phone to talk to her. She spoke and then it said, “May I have a word in private with you?”

“Yes, of course.” Was translated back to Lydia.

They walked to the center of the cavern and Lydia said, “I am going to quiet the others in the room from this temple except for you. I want to show you something.” She closed her eyes for a few seconds, opened them and said, “Now, we can look at the pure you. What do you see?”

“The light is dimmer than it was, the temperature is up, and the wind is down. It’s like it was when no one was in it.”

“Exactly. You do not choose to let it know you. You are very strong, but gentle as well. You are capable of hiding yourself inside. I want you to let yourself be seen and felt. Open your doors and windows.”

Elizabeth understood what Lydia was saying. She started to stare into the tops of the cavern and quiet her inner self with some breathing exercises. It worked and the cavern light turned a deep blue and was very dim. All sound stopped and there was no wind.

“What does this mean?”

“It means that you are nearing the end of your life and are very sad about it.”

Elizabeth could say nothing. She looked at Lydia with tears in her eyes and said, “Yes. I want to see my work finished. It was important to our world and people.”

“I understand.” They started to walk back and the cavern returned to its happy self as before. Lydia said, “Can you and your friends really keep this place and my people a secret?”

“Yes. Absolutely.”

Atlantis

Lydia and Elizabeth came back from their walk and Lydia said, "Let's go meet some people, shall we?"

They closed up camp and asked Lydia about where to leave things and what to take. She saw their cycles and other equipment, thought for a minute and talked to Pontos. He said to Luc, "Move this down the wall a bit and you will find a good size opening. Put all this in the hole, cover it with stones and make it look like the wall as best you can. Hurry up. Lydia wants to go now."

It took twenty minutes to hide the equipment. They all met in the center for their trip.

Lydia said, "Please come with me." And they all walked over to the brick wall. "Place your hands on this brick one at a time."

Luc stepped up and put his hand on the brick and she touched a place on another brick. This was repeated for the others and then she said, "Hold your hand on the key brick and then when it shimmers, walk through the door. Pontos will go first." He did and was gone. Luc moved forward, smiled at the others as he put his hand on the key brick and walked through.

He was now in a beautiful large marble-lined room with columns, tapestries and painted murals. It was all very Greek. The room was open on one side and looked out over a vast city that was beautiful. A dome that was lit up like the sun topped the city. The ceiling glistened and shone filling the land with heat and light. Mixed in with the city were many farms, homes, rivers, ponds, roads and parks. It was the perfect organization for an integrated combination of agriculture, art and manufacturing society. He was staring when Elizabeth walked up to his side and whispered in his ear, "Thank you for this, Luc. Thank you."

The others walked up and looked out at the amazing view. "It really is quite a site, isn't it?"

Cameron said, "What is this room?"

"This is my temple on this side of the door."

"By the way, how far did we travel when we walked through the door?" asked Cameron.

Lydia laughed and answered, "About a foot, the cavern is just on the other side of this wall."

Lydia walked back to the large side inside wall and touched a clear piece of crystal and a terminal came up. She hit an icon with her finger and then said, "The chairman, please."

The terminal showed a man working at a desk and he said, "Hello, Lydia. Are those the people from the surface behind you?"

"Yes. May we come and see you?"

"No. I'll come and see you. I've been giving this some thought and I think we must keep this a secret between you, Pontos and me. So, I will be there shortly."

She turned to us and said, "Well, let's continue our pleasant cultural exchange. Now we will give you some of our food. It's quite different from yours. Yours was very, very good."

“Can we work while we eat?”

“Of course.” She touched the terminal again and then said, “Extend tables five and seven with bench seats.” She turned to her new friends and said, “Move back a little.” They did so. A section of the wall opened, and tables and benches moved into place as if by magic. The wall closed as silently as it opened. Two carts with food slid out from another room toward the tables. The trays slid off the carts onto the table tops. Amazing. The food was just piled in bulk in the baskets and they didn’t recognize most of it.

Luc and Elizabeth opened laptops, signed in to accounts and Luc said, “No hint that we found anyone to anybody other than to the gang.” The gang was Gunther, the President, Sully, Harry, Les, Roberta, Duncan, Teresa, Cass, James and Angela. “Not even to the support team waiting for us for now. The story for them is that we are fine and holding in the last cavern for now.”

They were interrupted by Lydia who said, “Santana has reached the cavern. Let’s watch.” A perfect holographic projection appeared in an open area. It was probably six feet across with wonderful detail. It was realistic looking whereas Luc’s holographic projections were obviously projections -- good projections, but still projections. Just as the image settled in, men poured into the cavern and did a standard sweep of the area. They assumed positions around the lake, and the cavern reacted. The ceiling dimmed to darkness and the wind started to blow very, very hard. The driving rain came and caused the men pain when it hit their faces. They were signaling they wanted to go back into the tunnel when the order was obviously given. They ran back to the entrance where other men were waiting. “We won’t be speaking with any of those people. Let’s see what they do next.”

They watched for ten minutes and nothing happened. The men finally came out with rain gear and face protection and went to their same spots. The same thing happened, but this time they stayed put when it got intense. Two of them stopped by the brick wall and were studying it.

Luc asked Lydia if they could hear their conversation. She touched an icon on her display panel and two men’s voices came in loud and clear. They were speaking in Portuguese. Luc translated.

“Santana is not going to be pleased if we can’t figure out what the hell is going on in this cavern. It seems to just not like us.”

“Keep that thought to yourself. You sound crazy. I get no reading off this wall at all. It’s *not* solid but we *feel it* as solid. Let’s report back.”

The men walked back to the tunnel and were gone a long time while the twenty men outside in the storm were now getting cold sleet blasted at them. The two men returned to the door with explosives. They set the charges and moved back. Lydia did nothing to intervene. They blew the bombs and nothing happened except the temperature dropped twenty degrees in the cavern. Lydia smiled.

The men examined the door and were baffled. They headed back to the tunnel for more directions.

Just then, the chairman came bounding up the stairs on the far side of the open terrace.

“Hello, hello. I am so glad to meet you. Lydia has told me all about you and now you must repeat everything for me.” He laughed a big laugh and then said, “Just kidding. Your conversations have been sent to me and I have been reading them almost as they occur. What is going on in the temple?”

Lydia explained with some help from Luc, and the chairman was not amused by this activity.

The men stationed around the cavern got orders over their comm units and headed back to the tunnel. The cavern changed back to ambient. Then one man entered and the cavern started to react the same way. It did not like him. The man set down a gun and his rifle, then his helmet and other headgear. It was Santana himself. The temple started to change a bit to being ambient. He set down his other weapons and the cavern began to calm a bit more. It was still negative towards him, but not as bad as with the weapons. He went back inside after picking up his hardware.

The chairman discussed something with Lydia in private for a moment and then said, “I am so happy to meet someone from the surface. There have been many myths about what happened to you. Most believe the top is barren wasteland with no life. To find that there are thriving vast sets of cultures is both exciting *and* frightening.”

Elizabeth said, “The myth of your existence has kept you secure all these years. I think it best to keep it that way. The whole world would invade your space if they knew about you. However, I would like to exchange some technology with you on an ongoing basis. It would be a secret treaty of sorts. We can figure out the details later, but does that idea sound good for a start?”

“Yes, in principle, but I am skeptical. What can you share with us?”

Cameron answered, “For starters, we can teach you how to cook. Your food is bland and boring. It can come alive with a little help.” They all laughed at that one.

Then Elizabeth said, “Sir, I would really like you to meet our leader, President Schaffer. He is a wonderful person and will be a good friend to you, if you choose.”

“That sounds good for a start. Oh, what are these people doing now in our temple?”

Santana’s entire army of people had come out of the tunnel ready for anything. They looked like they were going to set charges to all the walls and try to bring it down. It was crazy. Finally, Luc said, “We can stop them. And without hurting them. Please let us before they do any damage to your temple.”

Lydia agreed and Luc and Cameron went to work. They asked how the door worked going the other way and grabbed their bags. They put in their earpieces as they approached the door. They pulled out a few of the sonic grenades and walked through the door. They took off running and tossed a couple of the bombs into the far cavern and then into the tunnel as they ran by. The charges went off and there were screams of pain as the people fell over incapacitated. Elizabeth, Lydia, Pontos and the chairman came through the door and started to assess the situation.

Luc needed help. He called the support team and ordered them to attack the Santana people with their sonic

weapons and proceed to the cavern with all due haste. While they were taking a look at the men in the cavern and beginning to move them, Elizabeth collapsed. Cameron was there to catch her. Lydia saw what was happening and took her back through the door to the other temple. Luc followed along and got ready to give Elizabeth a shot or two. Lydia had her laid out on a sofa and was rubbing her forehead. She saw Luc and said, “Do you mind if we heal her?”

“You can save her?”

“Oh, yes. This is a simple problem of adjusting things on the cellular level. Bring her over here to this work area.”

Cameron picked her up and carried her to the table. He laid her gently on the platform and stepped back as Lydia used her console to scan Elizabeth. They heard nothing, but the readouts showed up on Lydia’s screen for all to see. Then the system took over and ran through some checks, showing the progress with a slide bar. Luc asked about the readouts and Lydia explained everything. He could see that the illness was indeed gone. The machine finished and Elizabeth woke up.

She said, “Did I faint again?”

“Yes. And we brought you in here for Lydia to take a look at you.” He paused while she sat up and then said, “Elizabeth, they healed you. Your illness is gone.”

She smiled and jumped off the table. “I feel great.” And she started crying.

Cameron and Luc left Elizabeth behind and went back to the cavern temple. They hogtied Santana’s men and stretched them out end to end inside the tunnel. They would wake up in thirty minutes or so. Luc and Cameron had to hurry. As they got to the last man, Luc and Cameron both noticed that Santana was nowhere to be found. He had vanished.

The team from the outside had taken the small army that Santana had left behind without any trouble. They were on their way to Luc and should be there in about two hours.

Lydia was watching Luc and he asked her, “Is there any way you can keep these men unconscious for the next six hours while we return them to their ship?”

“Certainly. I can give you a patch that will keep them out.” She fetched the patches and they applied them to the men’s skin. Perfect.

They separated their equipment from the men and left them for the cleanup people.

Luc contacted Harry and told him to pack up a variety of plant seeds and spices and send them to the cavern as fast as possible.

Once they were settled back on the other side, they set up a comm line with President Schaffer. He came on immediately.

“Hello Luc, Elizabeth. Are these our new friends?”

Elizabeth answered, “Yes, this is Lydia and this is the chairman of the people of this place. These two and another man named Pontos are the only people from here that know we have made contact. Mr. President, I would like you to meet Lydia and the chairman.”

The chairman said, “Please, my name is Zeus. Call me that.”

And the President said, “And my name is Charles. We shall all use first names today. I like it.”

Luc helped get things started, “Charles, secrecy for this culture is paramount. This place will be destroyed if word got out to the whole world. I would like to send everyone but myself back to the surface and put a lid on this secret. I wish to stay and read up on their history and current culture. In the meantime, I would like some things sent here. More food and seeds for starters. I will keep a few laptops here for communications and for them to study our culture. Is there anyone who disagrees with my plan?”

Everyone was good with it, including Zeus and Lydia. “Good. Charles, I will leave you to visit with our new friends.”

Luc took Elizabeth aside and said, “Sorry for blindsiding you like that, but I had to let them know we are serious about their security.”

“No problem. I am not at the top of my game right now. Being healthy again is the number one thing on my mind. I want to go tell my family in person.”

“If you agree, I want you to be the ambassador to these people for us. I can’t think of a more important job on the planet right now. What do you say?”

“Perfect. Just perfect.” She gave Luc a really big hug.

Charles and Zeus visited for quite a while and then they called Luc and Elizabeth back over for a closing word. Charles addressed Elizabeth and Luc. “Luc, Elizabeth, what are your plans?”

“Elizabeth and I have talked and we would like to name Elizabeth as ambassador to these people. By the way, what do you call yourselves?”

“We are Atlantians and this is Atlantis. We are children of Poseidon.”

“That is what I have called you since I first heard of you four thousand years ago. Elizabeth will keep your secret and protect you to whatever degree you wish. She is going to leave now and make all the security arrangements.”

The President said, “I agree, and thank you for helping my friend. Thank you very much.” Zeus obviously told the President about the healing. “You are in good hands. Good bye and I look forward to our new friendship.”

After they closed the connection and put away their laptops, the four sat around and talked about family for a few minutes. They were interrupted by Luc’s support team telling them they were at the end of the tunnel and starting to move the men and equipment.

“Well, it looks like we need to go help our guys, Elizabeth.”

“You are right.” They all stood and Elizabeth said to Lydia and Zeus, “I look forward to getting to know you better. We will leave a computer so that you and I can talk. Luc will show you how to use it. But, for now, I must go and make sure this place and you are protected from the attention that my world will give you.”

Lydia smiled and said, “We have a request. We would like two of our people to visit your world. Can they go with you now?”

“I don’t see why not.”

Lydia turned around, waved and two young people came out from the other side of the room. They looked to be around twenty and were a man and a woman. Both were very attractive. They were introduced as Areolous and Xydymeter.

“Are they ready to go right now?”

“Yes, except they need your help with some new clothes and bags for their things.”

Luc said, “Of course, just a minute.”

He contacted Cameron and asked him to join them. When he came, Luc introduced the two new friends to him and said, “They need new names. How about Debra and Alex?”

“They can change the names later if they want to.” Luc explained what was happening and gave them new clothes Les had brought with him. There were two nice shoulder bags for each of them and they filled them quickly with items.

This concerned the admiral a bit and she said, “For your own safety, might we ask what those things are?”

Lydia stepped forward and said, “Toiletries, dryers, a terminal, some medicines and a few spare batteries. It is all very safe.”

Cameron asked to see the batteries, “These are very light for their size. What is the power source?”

Alex said, “The stars.”

“What?”

He pointed to the roof and said the stars again.

Luc understood and asked to see one of the units. He put a scope on it from his cell phone and identified an enormous amount of power in it. “How long will one of these last?”

“Last? Forever, of course.”

The Golden Fleece

Cameron, Elizabeth and Luc shared a look and Luc said, “You can’t bring those outside yet. They are very valuable on the surface. Many people would die to obtain these things.”

Lydia said, “You know best. What can they bring?”

“No technology. Nothing that would make them stand out or be a target. We’ll help you talk to anyone here you wish. You can return anytime you would like as well. Although it is kind of a long trip.”

They removed everything from their bags. “How about filling them with some of your food?” They all smiled and filled them from the bowls on the tables.

Now they were ready to go. Elizabeth gave them all a hug. The Atlantians liked to hug. They stepped through the door and were gone. But, then Cameron came right back through with a crate of fruits and vegetables. There were four more.

Luc took the food and said, “And take all the equipment we left in the temple with you. No footprint. I’ll be fine. Thanks.” Cameron went back and forth until they had the last package. He waved and was really gone this time.

Luc, Zeus and Lydia took the packages to a table and opened them. As they were going through them, Zeus said, “Luc, you need a new name as well. What were you called when you visited this place when it was an island?”

“Jason. And I left something when I came. I was wondering if it was still around. It is a woven ram’s fleece. Made of gold.”

“You are *that* Jason. And your ship was the Argo. Your fleece is safe and sound. It is in the temple storeroom. Let me go get it.”

1305 BC ~ The Island of Atlantis

“Jason, they are getting away. We need more wind and they are very fast ships.”

“Just follow the last heading we had on them. And keep going as fast as we can. Trust me. They are going somewhere and it isn’t to the middle of the ocean.”

“As you say. We haven’t gone wrong following you yet. The gods bless everything you do.”

They smiled and he turned away. He went to tell the men the plans. They had been chasing these raiders for hours. They came upon them as they were leaving the mainland after finishing their quest. They had the Golden Fleece and several other treasures that had been laying around. Luc was supposed to take the fleece to a king, but that path had been interrupted by this encounter. The crew was the best of the best champions and they wanted to catch the raiders from the sea.

They sailed for the next two days sailing as fast as their little boat could go. The evening of the second day, they spied land. They slowed and took down the sail to hide their approach. They slid into a bay and anchored

as close as they could to a cliff wall to keep their ship as hidden as possible. Luc left three men on the boat, and the rest went ashore. They were armed with everything they had. No one had ever encountered these people in a fight. They were marauders that came and went, only taking food and livestock. They really never harmed anyone, but Luc would rather have his men armed than not. This had been going on for five hundred years.

They walked the coastline until they found a stone staircase that was a thousand feet up the side of a cliff. They took the stairs to a mountain meadow with a temple in the center. Men and women were gathered there and it appeared to be mealtime. Luc watched from the edge of the rock cliffs until they were all peacefully eating. He was close enough to listen in on their conversation and they were speaking Greek. He laid down his weapons and told the others to wait there.

He walked to the tables and a few of the men took notice of him. In their language, Luc said, "Hello. I am a visitor from far across the sea. I would like to speak with your leaders. Can you help me?"

One of them spoke, "Yes, friend. He is just down the hill. Come, we will walk with you there."

They asked all kinds of questions as they walked and Luc answered them honestly. When they learned where he was from and who he was, they became fearful. Luc assured them that he would rather be their friend than their enemy. They told Luc about their families and that one was a doctor, one a teacher and the other a farmer.

They got to a building with a good size crowd all wanting to get a look at a person from off the island. Luc was greeted warmly by all and ushered into the large building in the center of the city. It was a copy of the Parthenon in Athens and all the other buildings were of a similar design. There were many flowers and plants in little gardens, pots and small trees of every kind. Every place was neat and clean as was the inside of the building they were entering. One of the men had gone ahead and came back with an older gentleman.

"Hello. I am Parisis." He took Luc's hand and shook it with both of his.

"I am Jason. I am from across the sea. My men and I have come chasing three fast ships that raided a nearby country of ours. We mean no harm. We are just curious. These raiders have been legends for five hundred years. Just to prove to you I am telling the truth, I am carrying no weapons."

"I was the captain of the gathering party of three ships and eighty crew." A large and muscular man stepped forward. He stood about four inches taller than Luc.

"You are an excellent seaman, my friend, and your ships are swift."

"I find your story of curiosity to be ridiculous. I am more likely to believe that you are warriors intent on stopping the gathering we do. What did you call us? Raiders?"

"Sir, if I wanted to stop you, would I come into your city unarmed?"

"If your deceit was to be believed, yes, I think you might." At that statement, he moved toward Luc and threw a right cross. Luc ducked out of the way and moved into a defensive stance. He took another swing and Luc slid off to the outside of the punch. Luc could see he wasn't going to stop, so he moved in and caught the

fist of the next punch thrown at him. He clutched it and twisted until the captain went down on his knees. Luc held it while the man winced in pain.

“And now, I am going to prove my wish for friendship by letting you up and hoping that you can be my first real friend here.” Luc released his hand and helped the captain up.

“Maybe you do speak the truth.” He was laughing and rubbing his arm.

“May I go and get my men?”

“We will all go and welcome our visitors.”

They all walked back the same way they came and Luc visited with Parisis along the road. He was called the chairman of the Senate and the job rotated every few years or months depending on what the wishes of the job holder were. As Luc was walking, two girls each took his hands in a very friendly gesture. They were both very beautiful as were all the people there.

He called to the men and ordered them to give all their weapons to just two of his men. Luc ordered these two to go back to the ship and stand watch. The men that were left were welcomed just as Luc was and they too had girls clinging to them, lots of girls.

They all arrived back at the main building in the center of the city and were escorted into the main open area. Tables and food had been laid out for them and the others. They all sat down and enjoyed a long meal with much conversation. The sun was beginning to set and Luc sent food and men for a shift change to the Argo. The meal ended and they started to play some music on the side. It was very pleasant. Everyone was getting tired and the girls were very anxious to show Luc and his crew to their rooms. The party broke up and Luc and his men were taken to private rooms where the girls, two each, stayed with them for the night. These were very friendly people.

The next day, Luc had a long talk with Parisis. They visited about the meal time gatherings, their society and their technology. These people were a little behind in most areas, but far in advance in others, like medicine. They were very good at pharmaceuticals and their applications.

As they were talking, Luc had an idea and he took Parisis for a walk to his ship. He had shooed away all the other interested parties and they were finally alone. Luc showed him the ship and got out a large chest. They carried it back to the hall where they were staying.

Once there, Luc opened the case to reveal the Golden Fleece. “As a gesture of friendship, I would like to give you this as a gift.”

“Oh my, this is truly a treasure of the gods. We will keep it always as a token of your visit.”

“Excellent. Now can you show me your library.”

Present Day ~ Undersea Atlantis

Lydia brought out the same chest that had held the fleece for a very, very long time ago. She set it on a table and

opened it. The fleece still shone as beautiful as ever. Luc took it out and laid it on a table. Then he saw a beautiful marble pillar stand with a vase on it. He removed the vase and laid the fleece on it. It looked like they were made for each other. “You should have this out for people to see. Not hidden in a safe somewhere.”

“You are right and that looks like an excellent place for it.”

They talked about the story for a few minutes and then Luc asked him another question, “I would like to see your library. May I?”

“Yes, of course. Tomorrow. But first, you need new clothes. Lydia can you help him out with the clothes and can you let him stay here for a few days?”

“Yes, of course. And as far as the library goes, if he is as clever as I believe, it will only take him a few days where anyone else could spend a lifetime.” They all laughed at this and then Lydia said, “Now, it is time for rest.”

Zeus left with a promise to return tomorrow. Lydia took Luc to an open-air room across from hers. She apparently slept alone at the temple. They were separated by shades and cloth hangings, but it was still a little too close for Luc. Anyway, nothing came of it. He took the time to call Angela and told her all he could for now over their channel. She updated him on the kids and projects and he told her his schedule as best as he could figure it out. They ended their chat and said goodbye. Luc checked emails, his other messages and took care of them quickly.

He shut his laptop and laid down on his really comfortable bed to get some sleep. He just got relaxed when he heard Lydia moving around. She shuffled some things around quietly, came across the aisle from her room to his and said, “May I share your bed tonight?”

Luc hopped out of bed and a light came on with his movement. “Well that is a very nice idea, but I am monogamous with my wife Angela. We don’t share ourselves outside that relationship.”

“I was wondering if that was your way. I am sorry if I offended you.”

“Oh, no. I am flattered and you are very desirable, but it just would not be the right thing to do.”

Then Lydia clearly had a thought and said, “*Oh, no* is right. We better call my friends that went with your people. They will want to share themselves with your people and it will be awkward.”

“I will take care of it now. Good night.” Luc made the call and it was just in the nick of time. They were about to bed down for the night. Elizabeth and Cameron had some words with Debra and Alex to prevent any misunderstandings.

They finally got to sleep for the night and it was very pleasant and peaceful. In the morning, such as it was without the movement of the sun to guide them, they rose and cleaned up. They ate a good meal and Lydia gave Luc new clothes to wear. He looked pretty good in his tunic and sandals. And off they went to the library.

The library was not far, as nothing really was that far in this small place. It was smaller than Luc would have expected. There were no books. He learned that the entire collection was digitized long ago and he can

access anything from one of the terminals around the room. He got settled in with Lydia showing him how to work the system. It was easy and, in no time, he had gotten organized. Lydia left and said she would be back to get him for the next meal.

When she was gone, Luc pulled out a pair of glasses and put them on for his morning of reading. They recorded what he was seeing and were not connected to anyone back home. After reviewing the works, the volume and the complexity, he estimated it would take him two days to read everything. He started to work and was immediately amazed. The medical files would take half a day alone. He started with history to get his bearings and there was even a story about the visit from Jason and the Argonauts. An hour into the task, Luc felt funny. He was having trouble maintaining focus. He fought it off and plowed ahead.

Lunch time approached and Pontos came to get Luc for a picnic lunch with Lydia. They met and it was very nice with bland food. Luc asked if it was okay for him to cook dinner that night and they agreed that would be nice. He read for the rest of the day and then they went back to the temple for dinner and an evening of music.

Luc cooked for everyone in a kitchen that was wonderful and well stocked. His supplies were there and he used them to make a lobster bisque, a salad with dressing, a grilled white fish and a chocolate cake.

They loved the food and wanted Luc to show them how to cook. He promised to do just that and they retired to listen to music. The music was played well by some very good musicians. They were playing a version of a harp laid on its side, a few different sizes of guitars and other stringed instruments. There were no wind or percussion instruments. What a shame. But it was lovely anyway. It was tempting to sit in with the musicians, but Luc passed for the time being.

The music ended and conversation picked up. There was so much to talk about. They retired for the night and Luc thought about the knowledge he was gaining from these kind people. He was very close to finalizing a plan to share things with the Atlantians. Food preparation, different foods, music and some others were on his list. From them, he hoped to take away the medical data and the music. Anything else would show his hand at their existence for now.

Instead of going to sleep, Luc asked Lydia if he could return to the library and read. She said, "Of course. Let's go."

They went to the library and he got back to his *light* reading. He was through with the history and moving on to the literature section. It was very short. Writing fiction was not one of the things of value there. In fact, other than music, sex and conversation, Luc couldn't seem to find anything that they simply passed the time with. There was no TV, no radio, no sports, no games at all and nothing was recorded for posterity. They had an interesting work setup. It seemed there were about one hundred jobs for people to do. Each person was trained from youth to do each and every one of the jobs. When they were in their late teens, they started into a rhythm of doing one job at a time for a growing cycle, which turned out to be forty-five days. Then they all moved on

to another assignment. As they gained seniority, they could begin to opt out of the jobs they did not like and spend more time in the ones they did like. There were strict rules about changing and opting out of a job because no one would ever do the lousy ones that needed to be done. Lydia and a few other temple priestesses in waiting were the only exceptions to the job requirements.

The thing that made this all work was that they had specific rules on having children. It was population control at its finest. The birth of a new child was not allowed until a death occurred. And they all lived long lives. Lydia was four hundred and fifty years old and looked to be around fifty. However, their year turned out to be a bit shorter than three hundred sixty five days -- only three hundred thirty six days, which made Lydia really only four hundred and fourteen. A mere child compared to Luc, but still long enough to have gotten very good at some things. She expected to live another hundred years or so. That seemed to be about the average for life here. The young people Luc saw turned out to be about fifty and they looked twenty.

Children were raised in an extended family environment. The core were the parents, rarely sisters or brothers, and then the community pitched in.

Thank goodness, they still used a precise twenty-four hour day. Luc learned this was passed on from the beginning with working mechanical clocks. They were run by a small motor powered by the crystal batteries that had been around since almost the start of their civilization. Luc explained to Lydia and Zeus over a meal that there were different times zones on the surface and somewhat different measuring systems were used as well.

The Atlantians practiced a somewhat liberal form of marriage -- not monogamous, but they tended to stay dedicated to a mate for a long time. Then, it was common for them to separate and hook up with someone else. A union of two hundred years was not uncommon. There was no sign of homosexuality and Luc had read nothing of child abuse or any abuse at all. These people were kind and generous. They seemed to live by the golden rule of treating others as they wished to be treated.

Luc had finished the literature section. He found it amazing how uncreative some people can be in some areas and super creative in others. Oh, well. Every culture was different. These people would be destroyed if the outside knew about them. He interrupted his studies to take a video call from Elizabeth.

“Hi Luc, how are you?”

“I am fine. While I am here, you should call me Jason.”

“You said you had been to Atlantis, the island, before. You wouldn’t happen to be Jason from the Argonauts and the Golden Fleece, would you?”

“Keep this to yourself, Sherlock Holmes, but yes. And this afternoon, I saw the fleece again. It was amazing. It is still so beautiful. I’ll show it to you sometime.”

“Very good, General.”

“Uh, oh. What’s with the *General*?”

“I have a message from the Commander in Chief for you.”

“Oh, boy. I thought I had a little time off. Okay, what does Charlie want?”

“You are to be present in Washington, D.C. in” She looked at her watch and said, “fifty-two hours.”

“What’s happening?”

“No idea. I pressed and got only that your physical presence is required. Fifty-two hours means fifty-two hours.”

“Okay, I’ve got my watch set. I can see by your face that you are doing very well.”

“A new lease on life, literally.”

“I don’t have to tell you to not waste it.”

“Oh, no. I’m going to live, live, live. Thank you for everything. See you in a couple of days.”

“You are welcome. Goodbye.”

Luc continued reading for a while. His watch said two a.m. and he was trying to read even faster than usual, but having difficulty. He felt different, but decided it was nothing worth worrying about. He might have to start skimming to finish in time. Besides, he always had his glasses as a backup.

Across the room, Pontos came in and said, “Hello, Jason.”

“Hi Pontos. How are you?”

“I am fine. May I interrupt you?”

“Sure, I need a break.”

“Let’s go for a walk.”

They got up and walked quietly out of the building, down some streets and into a field of grain. Pontos looked around sort of sneaky-like and said, “No one can hear us out here. There are monitors everywhere in the city but here.”

“I take it this is a serious conversation.”

“Yes. I want to let you know about a movement that is growing strong here. There is a quiet underground group of people that want to go to the surface to find out what is up there. If they knew of you, there would be a mass exodus of about one-third of our people. It would destroy our society here.”

“My experience has shown me that no culture remains intact forever. They blend, they die out or they grow strong and take over others. I must say that I am at a loss as to what to do with yours. When your two people come back with a report, that will break everything wide open. Unless you keep it a secret.”

“That will be impossible without killing them. And no one has been killed here by another in thousands of years.”

“On the other hand, there are plenty of people on the surface that would love to come and live with you and embrace your culture for their own.”

“It is precarious. We are on the verge of something. Whether that is something wonderful or devastating, I

do not know.”

“Well, I can promise you this. The information that I am learning here will not be used to harm your society. I will see to that.”

“I trust you because the temple trusts you.”

“And that is an amazing thing. It is almost a life form in and of itself. It feels.”

“Yes. It is truly a miracle. And my people take it for granted.”

They walked back to the library without having settled on anything. They said goodnight and Luc got back to reading.

General Business

Luc spent the rest of the night and the next day in the library reading. In the afternoon, he was done and it was time for him to get moving. But, before he left, he asked to meet with Lydia and Zeus.

“I have made some decisions. I am keeping the information that I have gathered to myself except for some things on plant life and medicines. Anything more would give your presence away. I will meet with your two people and see what their intentions are. They are just about to leave the quarantined area and Elizabeth and I will take charge of their education after I learn what they intend to do with the information they gain.”

Lydia said, “As you see fit. We trust you.”

It was a quick meeting. Then Lydia said, “Now you need our help to get through the tunnels as fast as you can. We have these for you.” She held a box about the size of a wine bottle crate and handed it to Luc. He set it on the table near them and opened it. There was a strange pair of shoes, each with three wheels. They looked like an old pair of metal skates that were strapped on to regular shoes. The wheels were soft rubber. In addition, there was an item that looked like a TV remote control.

He left them a laptop for communications. He packed up, said goodbye and went through the door to the cavern temple.

He notified Elizabeth that he was on the way and gave her his best guess at his arrival at the outer cavern. Wearing his new roller skates, he was moving right along and would have a much shorter trip than coming in. He made a few calls while he was cruising along. Angela and the family were doing well as was Harry and their company. Luc let them know his schedule and plans as best as he knew them to be. He coordinated with James, who set up a few meetings for Luc while he was in D.C.

When Luc was close to the end of his trip, he had an idea and called Elizabeth. “I want to build an undersea city complex over the spot where Santana went into the tunnels. It should be a secret and able to hold over one thousand people at any given time. Make sure there are a couple of docks for my subs and all that it entails.”

“Perfect, I was just going to talk to you about how to solve that problem. I’ll get with General Adams and let him take care of security. This means opening up the secret to more people. Can I put Adams in charge of the classification and security?”

“Yes. Set up a meeting with the right people for us in D.C. while I am there. And keep our guests in quarantine until I say so. There is something else going on that I will brief you on when the time is right. For now, just get me moving to the White House with all due speed. See you in about an hour.”

Luc arrived at the first cavern and found Les waiting for him. He had flown over from France to meet Luc and continue with his job of being Luc’s bodyguard. He helped Luc with his gear and set him up for the short swim to the awaiting boat. They made the trek from the entry site to the base on land where Elizabeth was waiting with a crew of medical people to take Luc’s blood and check him out. After the short workover, Luc

and Les were put on a plane headed for D.C.

It was just dark when they landed with Luc's meetings set to begin early the next morning. They were ferried to the White House where President Schaffer was waiting for Luc. Les had to stay in the security offices while Luc went inside.

Charlie said, "Hello, General."

Since the president wanted to be formal, Luc saluted and said, "Good evening, Mr. President." They walked to the kitchen where the chefs had prepared something light and wonderful. Luc hadn't paid much attention to it, but it turned out he was famished. They kept the conversation light and talked about family while others were running around waiting on the two of them.

They finished eating and left for the Oval Office. Once inside, President Schaffer ordered the recording devices turned off and they started the important conversation.

"Tell me about our new friends." Luc gave him the short version promising to provide details tomorrow at the meetings. When Luc finished, he asked why he was summoned.

"Your new boss is being sworn in tomorrow and there are some senators and congressmen that need to meet you. There is nothing going on in the world that is more important than your discovery. I apologize for interrupting, but the changing of the guard and even installing a new position needs to happen to keep your post running smoothly. You just can't run away from politics sometimes."

"Good. I was hoping that was all it was."

"All it was? This is important. These things keep the government running and people happy to do their jobs."

"Sir, I meant no disrespect. It is just that information I am bringing back from Atlantis is a real game changer. Mr. President, they have a battery that never runs out. It is an endless energy source. Endless."

"Oh, my goodness. Well, that really is something to write home about. I assume you have all of this sorted out, protected and ready for the right people to see."

"Not completely, but I am getting there very quickly. That is what my meetings are about tomorrow. My people are on their way here as we speak. This should be a very interesting next few days."

Luc spent the night in the Lincoln bedroom and made a few video calls until he could finally go to sleep. It was funny for Luc to sleep in this room since he had met Abraham Lincoln just after he was sworn in to his presidency. Lincoln had been a very interesting man -- down to earth and yet deep as a well. He was one of the kindest people Luc had ever had the privilege of knowing. As the Civil War took its toll on the young men, Lincoln moved to the hospital where the wounded were treated so he could be there for them anytime, day or night. Some modern leaders could take more than a few lessons from him.

The morning started early at six with all his team showing up -- Gunther, Sully, James, Les and Cass.

Elizabeth, Cameron, Duncan, Harry, and Angela would be online. Of course, President Schaffer was in attendance. Luc had asked to use the Situation Room to hold this very important meeting and Charlie obliged.

When everyone was ready, Luc began. "I am going to go pretty fast through this sitrep and some of you will hear some things for the first time and not believe them to be fact because of how amazing they are. I don't have time for that now, and you can check with someone else later to gain confidence that they are one hundred per cent honest and truthful. Please hold all questions until I am done.

As some of you know, we have discovered the lost continent of Atlantis. And there is a thriving culture of about one hundred thousand people. Two of them have come to the surface as a scouting party to investigate us. They are still being held in quarantine at my request. It seems our situation is a lot more complicated than just meeting a new culture that has been hidden in a jungle.

I spent a few days reading their library, recording everything I saw and getting to know them." Luc handed his recording glasses to Sully and said, "Back that up, please."

He continued, "Cameron, the rest of us are in on a secret that I have. It is time for you to be let in on it. I was born over six thousand years ago, an immortal human. I have perfect memory, in that I have remembered everything, every detail of my entire long life. I am now mortal, can be damaged or killed and am aging toward the end of a long and wonderful life. The library at Atlantis is in my head now. I understand everything.

"These are a kind and generous people, perhaps a bit naive as to the impact of their situation with the discovery. There is a power that is not documented in their writings in a cavern that leads to their city. It appears to be something mystical. The cavern is part of a temple to Poseidon and feels the temperament of the people that enter it from the only tunnel in. It changes its own weather to greet or defeat any person. It seems it likes or dislikes you personally. It also sees or feels the weapons brought in. Admiral Tanner, Sergeant Cameron Smith and I were *liked*.

"The three of us were then contacted by the priestess, Lydia 4356." Luc took the time to explain, "They reuse the first name and then have a number to be specific on each Lydia throughout their recorded history. We were invited into their main cavern, which is almost round, twelve miles across and four thousand ninety-nine feet at the highest point. The floor of their world is almost flat with housing and structures spread across the entire surface. Their growing land consists of smaller patches integrated into the buildings. There are many parks, lakes and ponds. Some of the lakes are salt water and some are fresh. They all contain sea life they harvest. There is no animal life that I saw or recorded in their history. The buildings are all of the ancient Greek style with beautiful columns adorning the larger buildings.

"The ceiling of the dome is covered with crystals that give off heat and light. They harvest a small amount every so often to make batteries. These batteries are one by six by three inches and put out enough power to run a suburban block of twenty homes. They never wear out. Lydia cannot remember a battery dying, only getting damaged and recycled. And she is about four hundred fifty years old.

“Their medical technology is about one hundred years ahead of ours. They cured Elizabeth of an illness while we watched. Their lifespan averages about five hundred years with the oldest being eight hundred and twenty.

“Their society requires that every person be trained in each of one hundred twenty-two carefully defined jobs. They rotate through them every planting cycle and earn seniority as they grow older. They get to stop doing jobs they do not like as they gain seniority. However, job scheduling is carefully regulated, as is their population. Eventually, they get to stay in the job they choose as their favorite. It is all very pleasant and totally accepted as a fact of life.

“Juaquin Santana, a South American and one of my business competitors, fell off the grid six months ago along with about fifty thousand of his employees. A person of note in his business empire is his right-hand man, Miles Gilderdale. He is former British Special Forces and in charge of Santana’s military. He is also a highly trained and highly successful assassin. They surfaced the other day in the form of a new sea-going vessel, a submarine about the size of a carrier and hovers only thirty feet or so under the surface of the sea attached to two tugs designed to look like fishing trawlers. I would guess Santana has four or five of these things running around the world. They are stealthy, but I am sure his people could find a way to track them.

“After my group, Santana led a team of armed men into the Bimini tunnels using a different entrance. We had the advantage of being ahead of Santana and were able to subdue them. With help from the Atlantians, we delivered them unconscious to their boat and they have since slipped away. I saw Santana at the temple. However, when we tied up the men, he vanished. I have no idea how he did it.

“I have ordered the construction of an undersea complex on top of the entrance that Santana used. We will use it as a permanent outpost in and out of Atlantis and will approach it only by sub. From now on, keep all knowledge of its existence classified.

“We have already shared some cultural items with the Atlantians that I have deemed harmless. We gave them some plant seeds and spices -- their food is bland and horrible. Their music is dull and boring and I think we can safely share most of ours with them but very, very slowly.

“There is another factor we have to deal with -- an underground movement there of people who want to find out about the legend of surface dwellers. There are only three Atlantians that now know about us and they are waiting until we talk with them further before making any changes to that situation. I left a laptop with them so that we could communicate anytime we wish.

“This grew more complicated with every new piece of information that I gained. And here we are.” Luc paused and then continued, “Here is the dilemma. If the existence of this culture is publicized, it will be destroyed. I never thought the Prime Directive from the Star Trek series would actually be something we would ever have to talk about. But this is not just a one-way street. Both societies would be dramatically affected by each other with one possibly ending. Or” Luc hesitated a fair amount to make them feel the change in

options. “We share everything with everyone. Their culture will continue to change as it has been and a new one will emerge. Just as in old New York, there will be little cities of grouped people from all over the world. Our lifespans will increase to probably four hundred for the people under the age of fifty at present and two hundred for our older folks. We might or might not have to deal with the population explosion since we are on the verge of establishing communities on the moon and Mars, not just outposts. With their power source to help us along, we all could realistically enjoy interplanetary travel on a common basis. All destruction of the Earth’s environment would stop with the freedom we will gain from fossil fuels.

“These two options are quite different from each other and I propose no decisions be made until we have a short time to digest this. General Adams, please take care of the complete security of our Bimini Threshold project from now on. Coordinate with Admiral Tanner in the shifting of responsibilities. Do whatever you have to. Put guards on all of us. This must be hidden for the next day until we can decide what actions to take.

“In the meantime, I will have a meeting with some very distinguished medical researchers and am going to test the waters on how they will receive the new data from the Atlantians.

“Now, everyone, give a one minute comment to what you have heard. Pass if you possibly can. Everyone, please feel free to talk to everyone else in this meeting for the next day. We will meet again and see what we shall do, if anything. Angela, please.”

“I believe the choice on everything is up to the Atlantians. We have no right to do anything. Period.”

Elizabeth goes next, “I concur.”

Cass said, “I concur.”

Harry said, “I concur.”

And the rest concurred until they got to President Schaffer, who said, “I abstain. I will not vote where there is the slightest chance that we will hurt an entire society. You see, whatever the Atlantians decide, we must make sure it is the right decision and not just a kneejerk one from discovering there is a new world right outside your door. We must protect them, even if it means from themselves.”

“In light of these comments, Colonel Reed will set up the next set of meetings to take our actions forward. We will be in touch. It’s going to be a wild next few days.”

They stood, Luc shook hands and/or hugged everyone there and hurried out the door to the Smithsonian Institution where he had reserved a wing for the meeting with the doctors he asked to attend. He had no less than five agents following him. And even though it was around seventy degrees, one of the quick thinking men had thrown a bulletproof trench coat over Luc’s shoulders for the one-mile walk.

Luc was directed by his friend who ran the place and escorted to the conference room. Luc had built and furnished an entire wing of the building and always got VIP treatment. He walked in and the room got quiet as the doors closed. His coat was removed showing his very impressive uniform. It would help with the theatrics

of the moment.

“Ladies, gentlemen and doctors of every kind.” That got a laugh and Luc continued, “Thank you for coming today on such short notice. I guess you can’t really turn down a presidential request, now can you.

“I am General Lucasiah Champion. I am also the owner of Champion Industries. I am a medical doctor as well and hold more than a dozen PhDs. So, please listen to what I am about to tell you very carefully.”

Luc paused and sipped some water and continued, “My company has developed a breakthrough treatment for Alzheimer’s and dementia. It technically is a brain repairing technique and may even be used to enhance normal individuals. I would like to bypass the normal research process and give the formulas for the process to you to do with as you see fit. Test it. Study it. Bless it. Proceed using your combined research capabilities and let’s get the people who are suffering back to the freedom they once enjoyed. Here is the formula.” He proceeded to write on a tablet that projected behind him. He narrated the process as he went along where different compounds were used at the right time to stimulate each other, et cetera. After thirty minutes and three tablets, he was finished. He looked up and said, “Are there any questions?”

No one said anything. Luc was amazed that there were no questions. One man stood and said, “General Champion, I am astonished, as I believe many of my colleagues here will facilitate the way this major medical breakthrough is being given to the world. All I can say is, thank you!”

The room erupted in applause and Luc walked out the door after sharing handshakes all around. This time, there was a caravan of Suburbans waiting for him as he flew to the next meeting at the Pentagon. He arrived at the back underground VIP entrance and was met by several security personnel who did their job quickly and efficiently. After a quick ride in a golf cart, they arrived at their destination. The main auditorium had been reserved and no press had been let into this highly classified ceremony. Luc was herded around some hallways, through some doors and then to some dressing rooms behind the stage. He was fifteen minutes early. As he walked in, President Schaffer saw him and came over to shake his hand. The other joint chiefs and their secretaries were in a circle to welcome Luc and to check him out. At last, Luc met his new secretary of Special Operations, Buddy Willis.

Gunther was politely waiting for his turn and, when the time came, he saluted Luc and started to laugh. He said, “And who would have thought that some old CIA spook would end up here?”

“I would, you old dog. And straighten up that salute, mister.” Luc poked him in the arm and they both laughed. He turned back to Buddy and said, “Excuse me, Mr. Secretary, this has been a wild ride for the past year and it shows no signs of slowing up. Are you ready for some serious business, sir?”

“General, I am more than ready. As far as I am concerned, you started a snowball down a hill in the last few years and we either get buried or go along for the ride. And maybe, just maybe, we might get a chance to steer it a bit. I’m going to need some time with both of you very shortly. Let’s make it a retreat somewhere for a week with our families.”

“That doesn’t sound like a suggestion, sir.”

“It’s not. Take the next three days to set it up and let’s hunker down and just see where we are going with all of this.”

“Yes, sir.” Luc saluted and they were all escorted onto the stage where there were as many people on it as there were in the audience.

The new Chairman of the Joint Chiefs stepped up to the microphone and said, “Welcome. We are here to celebrate the changing of the guard in our highest military leadership.” He gave the reasons everyone was present and described the changes going down. He introduced President Schaffer and turned the mic over to him.

The president ran through the formal protocol describing the creation of the new branch of the military. The new command for the branch was announced. The new secretary position was talked about and Secretary Willis introduced. It was all very formal. The whole thing lasted sixteen minutes. Then they all went back to the large room behind the stage. There was a lunch buffet complete with a bar. They grazed and visited and visited and grazed. The reception broke up and they went their separate ways, except President Schaffer, Gunther, Luc and their security people went to the White House.

Gunther and Luc returned to the Situation Room to talk to their teams. They were literally taking meeting requests by take-a-number and promising to hear everyone. They started limiting the visits to fifteen minutes, which worked better. Luc gave Angela and Harry thirty minutes each. They were briefed as the news of the new medical breakthrough was hitting the world with great enthusiasm. Santana was nowhere to be found and that worried a whole new project team that Gunther created earlier that day. The prefabricated parts for the new seafloor sub docking port were on the way and the bed was being prepped to accept the new structure.

Luc had asked Elizabeth to release the two Atlantians from their rooms and to show them a night on the town in Nassau. Luc was planning to return there with a few others within the next day.

Death and Life

The next day started at six a.m. just like the past few had. Gunther and Luc went until two in the morning with their short meetings. They kept going until it was time to leave. They left at noon with President Schaffer onboard Air Force One for Nassau. The plan was for Luc, Gunther, Charlie, Les, Cameron, two of the president's Secret Service detail and Elizabeth to make the trip into Atlantis. The temple would decide if Charlie, Les and the Secret Service men could enter Atlantis.

Earlier, Luc asked Charlie about the fact that none of his closest staff was requested by him to be in on Bimini Threshold. The president told Luc that it was Luc's show and he would follow Luc's lead. His staff always seemed to take the long road to get to where they were going and he enjoyed watching Luc orchestrate some wonderful things. He trusted Luc and that was all there was to it. Then he asked Luc about the temple cavern and what if it didn't like him. What would they do? Luc assured him the cavern would like him (or at least tolerate him). Charlie laughed at the joke and let everything proceed as Luc had planned.

Luc called Cameron and asked to be put through to Elizabeth as soon as she was available. Cameron told Luc she had not come in until almost four and was still asleep. It seemed Debra and Alex liked to drink and dance. It was all the security people could do to keep them from having a go with every patron at the four establishments they visited. They got a belly full of surface life, literally.

There was some good news from Cass and her engineering team. Luc asked them to figure how to stretch a cable from the space station orbiting Earth and the one orbiting the moon. He wanted to ferry cargo and passengers back and forth. They were ready to present a completed project proposal. The bottom line in cost savings would more than pay for the construction. It would take eleven months, and they were ready to start immediately.

The group landed in Nassau around four in the afternoon local time. They were swept onto a sub where the hungover Atlantians, Elizabeth and Cameron were waiting in the Captain's quarters. Everyone switched clothes and got ready for the next leg of their journey. The dock was completed and ready for their arrival. No swimming was required from the dock into the tunnels with the new enclosure.

Luc made sure that their two friends received no medicines to help with their hangovers. He wanted them to really understand what the surface world had to offer. So while they rode, Luc grilled them with a loud voice until they were visibly in pain. Then, he asked about their families in Atlantis and their chosen work up to this point. They finally started giving him more than one word answers. He continued this torture until their arrival was signaled.

They were led toward the air lock with special emphasis on President Schaffer. He was having a blast. Luc could tell that he really needed to get away from the job for just a bit. Even though, this was the perfect definition of him doing his job.

They went from hatch to hatch to a dry habitat with a newly shaped tunnel. They were met at the tunnel by their escorts, four very serious men with some very serious firepower. The trip to the temple cavern would only take two hours on the vehicles provided for all of them. They took off and in no time found themselves approaching the intersection where Santana's men had been stalled.

They slowed and made sure not to hit anyone coming the other way. The tunnel system had been staffed and supplied at the four bases along the other route they were about to intersect. The base at the intersection was Base Two and they could see a couple of people walking around working.

Luc was in the third vehicle in the line of four. He heard and felt the rumble and knew instantly what it had to be. He turned his head and used the variation in the sound to pinpoint the direction it was coming from. He judged the distance and speed and shouted over the comm system, "Faster, faster!"

The lead vehicle took a right at the intersection and kept going. Then the second one made it. Luc switched comm channels and notified the people at Base Two that their convoy was under attack. Les overheard and gave Luc a funny look. Luc just pointed to the right wall as they were passing it. His arm moved backward as they sped along, but it kept pointing at the same spot. There wasn't time to speak. A split second after the fourth car got past where Luc was pointing, the wall erupted and a shiny flat-sided machine slid out blocking the tunnel. A door panel slid open and a dozen men in battle fatigues flew out of the door two by two on motorcycles. They hit the tunnel floor and took off after the convoy.

The two men and two women at Base Two picked up weapons and were getting ready to use them as Luc's car passed around the corner. The last car turned and came to a stop blocking the tunnel. The three men in the car got out and took up firing stances behind the vehicle. Santana's men shot an RPG into the camp killing all four people there. The motorcycles stopped before turning the corner and took cover. As the explosion died down, two of them, each with their own RPGs, hopped around the corner and fired at the convoy car. One of them was shot by the men holding the tunnel entrance, but the two missiles exploded ending the lives of all three men.

The first three vehicles kept on going and were now several miles down the tunnel. Santana's men dragged the car out of the tunnel enough to get around it and took off in hot pursuit. The next Base was thirty-six miles ahead. One of the Luc's soldiers took charge on the radios and ordered support from the five people currently at Base Three. The plan was for the three cars to run right through the base, block the tunnel with everything they had at the camp, booby trap it, break the cars into bikes and keep everyone going to the temple through the final skinny tunnel. Base One had ten men in pursuit up the tunnel now with a few dozen more on the way.

Luc phoned Lydia and told her their situation, "Is there anything you can do to help?"

"Not until you are in the temple. I have nothing in the tunnel system."

Santana's men were four minutes behind them. Everyone with Luc was doing fine. It looked like President Schaffer had been assured by Luc's confidence of their safety and was actually enjoying himself. Elizabeth was

holding on to him tightly. She was as tough or tougher than any one of them ever was. Luc was worried about more tunneling machines and ordered his topside people to check for seismic activity. They made one hell of a racket up close. It must carry through the seabed and water. His submarines reported there was nothing registering.

Base Three was coming up for Luc's three-car convoy. The people there were ready for them. Everything was as coordinated as it could be considering the wild and quick circumstances. The first car flew out of the tunnel into the slightly larger base camp and pulled off to the right side. Just behind it, the next one pulled to the left. Luc's car came out of the tunnel and skidded to a stop. There were now the five people at Base Three, Debra, Alex, Luc, Elizabeth, Les, Cameron, Gunther, Charlie and two secret service agents that had to make the run to the temple. That was fifteen men and women. Six bikes were provided after splitting the cars in two. The camp had two bikes. It was not going to be easy getting fifteen people on eight small dirt bikes.

As soon as the cars pulled out of the tunnel, two of the men ran in and placed some charges as far in as they could go in a few seconds. They came out and a large fan was moved into place at the tunnel entrance. The two men tossed smoke grenades in and the wind from the fan drove the smoke back inside. Two small carts were moved sideways in front of the tunnel and a couple more large items tossed on the top of the cars for weight.

The Base Three bikes immediately took off with the two agents, the President and Elizabeth. The first two motorcycles from the split cars were ready and four of the five people from the Base camp took off on those. They could hear Santana's men coming from the tunnel. Two more bikes were ready and Gunther and three others took them leaving Luc, Les and one of the commandoes. The first of the charges went off in the tunnel. Five seconds later the cars blocking the tunnel exit had two RPGs hit them and were blown out of the way. The last two bikes were ready to go. Luc wanted to ride alone and take up the rear. The others took off into the slender opening. Luc hopped on his bike and it wouldn't start.

Luc stepped into the tunnel and fired a few rounds into the other tunnel. Santana's men returned fire and a couple of the men worked their way out of the opening into the camp. They kept up the firing as they moved. Luc pulled off his backpack and got out his Atlantis roller skates. He fired a couple more shots, stopped and put his shoes on. He got up, fired a few more and turned to go. A bullet from one of Santana's team caught Luc in the back of his left arm. He stumbled, but kept upright and was quickly speeding along at a good clip.

When Luc stopped firing, Santana's men quickly stormed out of the tunnel, looked around and bolted to follow him. They entered it one by one and were soon all catching up to Luc. Luc could hear the motorcycles ahead of him and those behind him as well. He had six minutes left at this speed before reaching the temple.

The first group of cycles reached the temple and Lydia was waiting. President Schaffer, Elizabeth and the two men laid down all weapons and walked into the open space. The weather immediately turned stormy and Lydia asked if the two men could go back inside for a minute. Charlie passed the test and Lydia had Elizabeth

take him through the door. The second group arrived and discarded their weapons. They entered the temple and it went stormy for all the group. They decided to test the group one by one, when the last cycle showed up.

Gunther was worried about Luc and radioed to him. Luc didn't bother to take the call because he came into view just then. Everyone finished stripping themselves of their guns, knives and other tools. The cycles of Santana's men were just a little bit away. Luc's group carried everything into the cavern and stashed it just as the approaching cycles shut down. The group followed Luc to the far side of the enclosure and hid behind some plants. Lydia had gone back through the door and was watching the temple via projection with Charlie and Elizabeth.

Santana's men reached the tunnel end and were ready to enter the cavern with full gear on. They came out into the open and spread out. The temple was already angry with the hidden group and the new men only made it worse. When all the men were out in the cavern, Lydia touched an icon and everyone fell over unconscious.

Luc awoke in the same bed he had slept in a few nights ago. He felt his arm and the bullet hole had disappeared. He realized that Lydia must have repaired it. He got up and went to the courtyard to find Charlie and Elizabeth sitting and talking with Zeus, Lydia, Alex and Debra. "Hello. What's been happening for the last thirty-four minutes?"

Lydia said, "We kept Santana's men unconscious and your men are getting things organized."

Luc smiled. As he walked to the wall doorway and went into the temple cavern, he said, "Thanks for fixing my arm." Lydia smiled back. Luc found Les and Cameron moving the last of Santana's men toward the tunnel. The team from the far outside had arrived and were taking Santana's men back to the surface. Luc looked at each of the men and, as expected, Santana was not there. However, he did identify Miles Gilderdale, Santana's security chief. Luc told the men to keep him knocked out at Base Three. Luc helped with the work and was the last one to leave on his special skates.

When Luc was back at Base Three, he had them wake up Gilderdale and handcuff him to a chair. Luc had them zip-tie him as well.

"Mr. Champion, or should I say, General Champion. How do you do? I'd shake hands, but I'm a wee bit indisposed at the minute."

Luc said, "I like your drilling machine."

Miles laughed and said, "You may think you have the edge on everything, but you do not. Santana's mining machines will revolutionize the process on any planet or moon. Now, are we supposed to just give it away? I must say, I admire your cashless society. However, that is just a little premature for my boss. He would like to stall your work in that area until his fortune and power base are simply bigger than yours are. And that shouldn't be too long the way you are giving yours away."

Gilderdale talked philosophy with the ease of a really good jazz guitar player. He even looked like one --

slender and balding with a goatee. Perhaps that was one of the reasons he was successful at his work.

Luc had ordered an engineering team to clear Santana's machine out of the tunnel it was blocking. He had told them to impound it and start to do an engineering analysis of the technology it used.

Luc got Elizabeth on a call and talked to her about Miles. Luc suggested bringing him into Atlantis. She said, "Yes, let's take him, introduce him to our friends and see what they think."

With the decision made, Luc freed Gilderdale secured by two men with rifles pointed at him and ready to use. Luc stood Miles up and he immediately took a swing at Luc. Luc blocked it and knocked Miles on his butt.

Luc said, "I can do this all day long. Get up. Give it another go."

Miles did and Luc put him back on the ground. He did it one more time and gave up. "Okay, okay. You win. Billionaires aren't supposed to be so tough."

"Let's go. You want to go to Atlantis and I am granting that request."

Luc picked Miles up off the ground and sat him down again. Luc opened his backpack and pulled out a small box. He set it on the table and opened it. It had a pair of locking bracelets inside and a remote control. Luc pulled them out and said, "Put these on each wrist."

Miles did and said, "And what would these lovely things do?"

"They will teach you some manners." Luc hit a button on the remote and Miles got a jolt of electricity that made him scream. They finally left for Atlantis through the slim tunnel.

Luc and Miles were at the cavern in forty-five minutes and prepared to enter. Elizabeth was waiting when they arrived. "Let's go. It will probably be a rough weather run to the door with him along."

The cavern immediately started to storm when Miles walked through the door. They passed through and into the inner temple. Much to Luc's surprise, there were a few hundred people waiting for them.

Cameron and Les stepped forward and took Miles. They handcuffed him to a column, Cameron waved something under his nose and he passed out. Luc found Lydia and gave her a hug. She liked it and said, "Well Jason, we certainly have put ourselves in an unsettling position, both you and I, my friend."

"I am so sorry for all of this." Elizabeth walked up to Luc's side and took his hand.

Elizabeth said, "Well, I am not sorry about meeting you at all." She turned to Luc and said, "They have shared our existence with their people and these are the representatives they sent to greet us."

Charlie stepped up to Lydia's side and she explained, "We had decided to share everything with you and merge our two cultures. And now that we all discovered that we are vulnerable to an attack by a faction of your race that is greedy and selfish, the only way to defeat them is to work with you. We all believe and trust your president," she turned and hugged Luc, "and you, Jason, and you, Elizabeth. And besides." She turned to the crowd and spoke in a very loud voice, "We all want to get out of here and see what the rest of this world has to offer and what we can offer it."

The crowd cheered and they were surrounded by well-wishers patting their backs and some even hugging them. Luc said *wow* over and over again.

Gunther came up to Luc and said, “The subs have detected boring sounds. Santana could bore into the city cavern any minute with who knows how many men behind him.”

They stepped over and talked to Lydia. “Lydia, is there a way to protect this cavern world from tunnel machines like we described?”

“Wait a minute while I get a few friends together.” She left, found a couple of people and brought them back. She said to them, “Please describe the defense we have against physical breakthrough into our world.”

One of the women said, “Certainly. The star ceiling is protected by the crystal formations themselves. Nothing can penetrate the sky. The drill you have told us about will bounce off the outer shell of the sky.”

Another woman spoke, “As for the floor of the world, it is just earth inside of the bigger part of the crystal sphere.”

Luc couldn’t believe what he was hearing, “Are you telling me the dome sky is just the top of a sphere lined with the crystals?”

“Yes. Exactly. Nothing can enter this world except with the temple god’s blessing. And even then with help from us.”

“Well, I guess that gives us some time to plan this culture merging. But, first, let’s celebrate. May I address the crowd?”

“Yes, it would be most welcome.”

Luc gathered Elizabeth and President Schaffer together for a quick consultation. When finished, he walked with Lydia to the front of her people and they quieted in anticipation of his speech. “My people come here today with this message -- You are welcome to come to the surface and live with us in secret or in public. You can share your technology as you see fit. We will try our best to protect your wishes, whatever they may be. In short, we support any decisions you make. But, now, two things have happened. A very powerful man from the surface is trying to take your technology by force. We have slowed him, but he is very near. Second, I return to find this glorious display of friendship and trust, and I am overwhelmed by all this kinship demonstrated by your decision. I am going to work with Lydia and whomever she wishes to put together some ideas on how to proceed. This is new territory for all of us. I do know this, together we can be more than we are alone. Thank you.” They all cheered and Luc stepped away. He asked Lydia for his shoulder bag and the computer he left with her. They were brought immediately and they walked back to a large table to sit and talk.

When the surface friends, Lydia, Zeus and a few others were gathered around the table, Luc set up the laptop and got Sully online. He got everyone else that was in on the secret online as well and then Luc started. “Sully, display a 3D globe of our world and give me control from my terminal. Thanks. I am going to give you a two-minute lesson on the political state of affairs on the surface.”

Luc switched to professor mode and ran through how the world was aligned politically at present. He sent messages back and forth to update the display as he talked. "It is our opinion that, in order to maintain your culture, you will need some surface area to call your own -- a homeland, if you will. You can come and go or stay or move away to anywhere you wish, but you will always have a place to call your own. More importantly, following generations will need that anchor. And, of course, you still have this wonderful place as well. I've been giving this a lot of thought and this is what I propose."

Luc zoomed in the globe display to the site where they were right now and said, "This is your under-seabed world." The display showed a sphere under the bottom of the ocean and with a proximity picture of it filled partially with soil and rock. Then buildings appeared as the display showed more detail. He let them get a good look and then zoomed out to the Atlantic Ocean. "And this is the ocean above it. The entry point that Santana created with his tunneling machines is right here." He pointed. "It is ninety miles from the Florida Keys. We will build a causeway for surface vehicles to get to this point. Then we'll sink piling all the way out and then a lot more covering this area of twenty-five square miles. The water depth here is only forty feet at high tide. That's a total of four thousand and six piling that need to be driven. We connect them with a system of interlocking beams and infrastructure items like water pipes and anything else you desire. At the right time, we will cover the new floor with soil and build hills and even small mountains. I will leave all that for you to plan. We are giving you two new ships to use as you see fit. We would like to build a hospital ship to take your medical technology to the world. And, we will need a full international airport. What do you say?"

Lydia and Zeus reached across the table and shook Luc's hand. Everyone cheered and Lydia said, "Jason, we accept your kind offer. How long before the first of us can leave?"

"Let's get over some problems right away. You will need a brief education on some of our customs and laws. Then there is the language issue. It would be best if everyone could learn at least one foreign language. And we must not forget the administration of this beautiful place."

"The two cruise ships can be here tomorrow and we can accommodate fourteen thousand people for a short time until we can get you to land. There is another problem -- where do we put all of you until we have your new home built? We are going to look at a large-scale foreign exchange student kind of thing. That would entail one or several of you moving into a home with a family until your home here is livable. All these logistic issues are nothing compared to the new wonderful friendship between our cultures."

"We think there may be an answer to all of these problems. It is time for us to announce your existence to the world. President Schaffer will be addressing the leaders of the world shortly. So, let me excuse myself and get some things organized. I suggest you start looking for volunteers to go to the back of the line to leave this place." That got the desired laugh as Luc stepped away.

High Hodos & Lost Brazilians

President Schaffer's men got him set up for communication with the outside world. Everyone was gathered around as things were made ready. Luc stepped to his side and said, "Mr. President, I would like Admiral Tanner to make the announcement. She is the engine behind this adventure."

"Agreed. I don't have a clue what to say."

Elizabeth said, "It would be a privilege to represent this team by introducing our new friends. However, I want to stop calling them the Atlantians for security reasons. And I don't want to say where exactly they have been living. Lydia, what can we call your people for the time being?"

"Amongst ourselves we are called the Hodos."

"Perfect." She turned to the monitor and said to the president, "Ready, sir."

The screen filled with little pictures of the people connected online. Luc recognized all of them. There was over thirty leaders of the world on the video. President Schaffer began, "Thank you for taking the time to listen to what we have to tell you. You will understand the immediacy of this meeting request in a few moments. I am going to turn the meeting over to Retired Admiral Elizabeth Tanner."

"Hello, everyone. I have with me General Lucasiah Champion and two very special people you shall meet shortly. A few years ago, an ancient scroll gave clues to a lost people. Luc and I led an expedition to see where the writings might take us. We discovered a culture of people one hundred thousand strong that has been hidden from us. Likewise, they have been unaware of our presence. We have made friends with them and they wish to share their technology and culture with us. They are called the Hodos. Luc, would you describe your experience in getting to know these people, please."

"The Hodos are a warm and kind people. They live together with no crime and no want. This is a learned society of highly skilled individuals. The medical knowledge they will share with us will advance our health care one hundred years. These people live to be five hundred years old. They are as curious about us as we are about them. Let me introduce you to our hostess, Lydia. I will switch to her language and type the translation on the monitor as we speak."

Lydia said, "Hello. I am Lydia, a priestess to our god, Poseidon. I understand that all of you lead your world. I speak for our people. I am pleased to meet you."

Luc said, "Lydia is a member of the clergy here and guides her people as needed from time to time. We made first contact with her and a couple of other Hodos. It was most pleasant. Their home is very tranquil. And for that reason, we will be carefully deciding on how to introduce these people to our culture and vice versa. They are anxious to come visit us, but their number will cause us to proceed slowly and patiently. Lydia, what would you say to these good people who I am sure are full of questions?"

“I would say, if we take the best of both our societies and bring them together in peace and harmony, there is no dream too big for us to accomplish together.”

There was applause from the monitors.

Elizabeth took the floor. “We are going to open this up for questions after a short briefing paper is delivered to each of you and you have a few moments to scan it.”

Just as she was finishing her sentence, a huge boom occurred followed by the unmistakable grinding of metal on metal -- ear piercingly painful. The group in the broadcast room all ducked instinctively and covered their ears. Luc grabbed a cloth, tore it into pieces and stuck two in his ears. He passed the cloth around and the others did the same thing. They all stood and waited. Luc typed on the monitor what was going on and that they were safe and sound. After two full minutes, the sound changed as the gears were destroyed and then it stopped. Santana had sent a tunneler to breach the sphere and now it seemed that the mechanism has ground itself to death.

After just a short pause, Luc went back to the video conference and filled in the viewers. “We are under attack. We’ll get back to you as soon as we can. Out.” Luc closed the link

Luc walked over to where Miles was fettered and removed his handcuffs. He waved some smelling salts under his nose and Miles came to. “Hello Miles. We need to talk. Get up.”

Miles Gilderdale rose to his feet and took a good look around. His mouth dropped open and he walked to the edge of the terrace. He looked out over the city and said, “Unbelievable, just unbelievable.”

“Yes. It is. But, I assure you, it is very real. These people have agreed to share their culture with us -- everything, including a battery that lasts forever. Their medical data is way beyond ours. I would guess about a century. They live to be five hundred. All they want is our friendship. No strings attached.”

Miles looked at Luc as he was speaking and clearly understood everything. He said, “Well, this is a game changer. It looks like you do indeed have the winning hand.”

Lydia walked up to see what was going on and said, “We are in no danger. But, it is most disheartening. Why is Santana attacking us?” Gilderdale was listening intently.

“Santana has a vast fortune made from mining and oil drilling. If you give us a free and forever energy source, his businesses are no longer needed. He will lose all his power, but never his wealth. I’ve had my fill of wealth and power. It’s not all its made out to be.”

Lydia smiled at Luc and said, “These concepts are foreign to us. Wealth, power, greed. They all seem like they would just get in the way of living.”

“And they do for lots of folks.”

Gilderdale said, “Santana will use his tunnelers to destroy this place to save his empire.”

Luc said, “He’s already tried.”

There was another attack. This time there were two machines. Each at the opposite sides of the sphere. Luc

shoved his cloth wads back into his ears, as did Lydia. Miles was writhing in pain until Luc handed him some of the material. Everyone waited with the same results. The machines tried to bore their way through the sphere, but could not. They both stopped at the same time after their digging bits were destroyed.

Everyone stopped cowering and regained their composure. When all was calm and quiet again, Miles said, “Well that about settles it. I see I may have chosen the wrong side. I always want to be on the winning side when the game is over.”

“I was wondering just how smart you are. Now, I know that you are at least not stupid. How many men are on a tunneler?”

“Two to drive, but it can hold twelve.”

“How many rigs will Santana ram into this place before he gives up?”

“Oh, he won’t give up. Destroying your source of free energy is just as good as having it all to himself. He’ll never stop.”

Gunther was listening and said, “We can stop them from sending tunnelers by taking out the boat he has nearby. I can have them take out the topside tugs. That should stop them.”

“Do it.”

Gunther grabbed a comm unit and gave the order. Then he said, “Luc, brace for impact. Twelve missiles were just launched from around the globe all headed right for us. First two are ninety seconds out.”

Luc ran out to the main area where the biggest crowd was and yelled, “Move into the open areas. Hurry. Now.”

Everyone scampered out into the open area away from the buildings. And they waited. Then the whole world shuddered twice. Then came the waves of explosions. Just when everyone caught his or her breath, another two missiles hit and then another two. There was a brief pause long enough for everyone to check and make sure all was okay. They were.

“Gunther, have you got anything near the boats shooting at us that can take out their tugs?”

“Yes, one of theirs is off Australia and our destroyer fleet is within range.”

“Fire when ready. And move resources to take out the remaining boats. All of them need to be stopped.”

Another two explosions followed by two more hit in quick succession. Then it stopped. Gunther said that all of the missiles were down.

Luc found Lydia and realized she was as calm as ever. All the Hodos were. “We are going to disable their missiles. Perhaps then, they will leave us alone.” That got a hug from Lydia and one of her associates, a priestess in training.

Luc went back to where Charlie and Elizabeth were and reopened the connection with the world leaders.

“Hello, Juaquin Santana has just attacked this place with everything short of a nuclear warhead. It has not been damaged or has any person been hurt. We are in the process of dealing with Santana right now. But back

to the matter at hand. Lydia is with me and now that you have all read your briefing papers, we will entertain questions.”

The chancellor of Germany was the first to talk. “General Champion, I believe I speak for many of us here who, upon hearing this incredible news, are both excited and fearful. Excited to get to know a new culture of such advanced learning and fearful that they are not what they seem to be upon first glance.”

“Sir, I have personally read their literature dating back thousands of years and there is no hint of anything secret or devious about these people. However, I understand your comment. I am not ignorant to the fact that any change, especially one as huge as this one could be, brings with it that natural fear of the unknown. Next question.”

The prime minister of Pakistan said, “I for one am excited to get to know these new friends. My country welcomes these people to our land.” There were claps and cheers from many of the screens.

One of the EU ministers said, “General Champion, the other day, you gave away a cure for Alzheimer’s out of the clear blue sky. Did this cure come from our new friends?”

“Yes, it did. I wanted to see how our community would react to being handed such a gift. Our people got an A plus. Next question.”

The Russian president said, “Would you entertain a delegation from each of our countries to meet our new friends?”

The President Schaffer said, “Yes, of course. We have the situation in control for the next few days. Now, who wants to stand next to me, at least in spirit, as I announce this discovery to the citizens of our world?”

They all wanted in on that action, so the president set up a joint remote White House press conference and scheduled it for the upcoming evening. He agreed to use photos of Lydia and Luc so that they could avoid all the fuss and muss. They wrapped up the schedule and ended the call.

“Miles, a word, please?” He approached and Luc said, “Now what am I to do with you?”

“These people are going to need people like me with my unique talent set to help them along.”

“I don’t think they are going to want to kill anyone anytime soon.”

“I meant in the area of security.”

“We’ll handle that. We are going to free the people on Santana’s boats. They think he is some kind of guru or saint. I met some of those people and they just want to do their scientific research. I don’t believe that he has turned an entire corporate population into his disciples.”

“He is a very charismatic man.”

“You know, it just occurred to me what we should do with you. I think we will draft you into our security forces. You could be handy at certain times in certain places. And I know just the men to help you get into the program. What do you say? You come join an elite squad of very talented people for a few years or do twenty in Interpol’s dungeons. Break any rules with my deal and its automatically into the poky. For sure, its dangerous

work. You may actually want to think about it.”

Miles stood at attention and saluted Luc, “I’m your man, sir.”

They relaxed and a party was in the works with everyone invited. A line formed to shake the hands of the new people from the surface and say quick encouraging words. They stood in the impromptu reception line for an hour and the line stretched out for a mile at least. Finally, Lydia helped out and called an end to the procession for the night. But, the party continued.

Elizabeth had been trying to be polite, but she wore a headset and orchestrated a naval battle as she visited with the people. She led Luc off alone for a briefing and said, “Santana’s boat outside of Sydney, Australia was hit and disabled. Their boat is floating and people are coming out and asking for help to get off.”

“What should we do?” It really was nice for Luc to be able to leave some decisions to another trusted friend and Elizabeth was one of those friends.

“They are a day out of port and I certainly will not let them onto one of our battle ships. These are hostiles until proven otherwise. They are in no eminent danger.”

“You could slip in a couple of guys in my chameleon suits.” It was more a question than a suggestion. “I’d certainly like to know their command structure and how a ship of war also carries over five thousand men, women and children. That breaks about every rule a decent society has regarding warfare.”

“That is not a bad idea. I’ll get it set up. Would you like to talk to the person who stepped forward as the captain of the boat? He seems to only speak Portuguese and I know that you do too.”

“Sure. Put him on.”

A moment went by and a man said in Portuguese, “Hello, who am I speaking with?”

“I’m Lucasiah Champion. And who are you?”

“I am the general manager of the Orchid. I assume you gave the order to disable my unarmed science vessel?”

“Yes, I did. Sir, may I speak to your boss, please?”

“I am the boss.”

“Well, then that makes you the worst captain that ever sailed the seven seas. Your vessel and five others just like it fired two long-range missiles at my location.”

“That’s not possible. We have no missile system onboard. We are nothing but scientists, engineers and their families. There are no missiles.”

“I have an idea. Give the phone back to the person that gave it to you.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Scan this man for any internal communications or other devices. Then set up a place on your deck for me to video conference with him. A good laptop and a large monitor. Call me back when you are ready.”

Luc briefed Elizabeth on what he was about to do and she approved. Then he suggested that she hit the other boats as fast as possible. “You could send down a spaceplane and drop some small bombs on them. Just a thought. You figure it out. Oh, and maybe ask Sully if any of the boats are in range of our DEMP seafloor guns.”

“Excellent. I got it.”

Lydia had come back to Luc’s side and he let her know what he was going to try to do with the enemy vessels. She smiled and gave me a hug. When she turned away, Luc realized something. He forgot the last time he ate. He just didn’t have that memory at the ready. He had never forgotten anything, ever. He had now. Luc stepped into a quiet corner and called Harry. He answered immediately and said, “What’s the matter, Luc?”

“How do you know something is the matter?”

“I just do. What is it?”

“Harry, I forgot something. For the first time ever, I forgot something.”

“Interesting. Let me share some insight with you. I’ve been monitoring everything and I have seen an interesting pattern. You have not had the time to watch and read up on all that has been going on, especially with our two Atlantian Nassau partiers. Our new friends seem pretty mellow, right?”

“Yes. It does seem like they have an inner peace.”

“Wake up, Luc. They’re stoned.”

“What? No way! We would have noticed something. It’s not in their literature anywhere. It’s just their way.”

“And how much of their food have you eaten, Mister Forgetful?”

“My gosh. I just had a meal a few hours ago. I’m stoned too?”

“Relax, just don’t eat anything else and stop our people from eating too.”

“Thanks, Harry. I gotta run.”

Luc sat down and got ready for his important video call with the skipper of the missile-firing-unarmed-science-vessel. Luc opened his laptop and Cameron appeared next to him. He pulled out a needle and syringe, filled it from two different vials and then said, “Roll up your sleeve.” Luc did what he said because right then, he trusted Cameron more than he did himself. And he knew that Harry had called Cameron and this little cocktail would straighten him right up. Luc stopped his work and let Cameron find a good vein. Luc looked away and Cameron stuck the needle in. In just a few breaths, Luc was feeling a lot better. Luc told him thanks and Cameron waited around in case Luc needed anything else.

Luc’s phone rang. It was Sully telling him they were set for the call. Luc started working the monitor and said, “Thanks, Sully. Bring them online.”

“Hello, Captain. Before we begin, I want to let you know that I can spot a liar a mile away. So far, I think you believe what you have told me. I would like to show you some video and some data logs.” A section of

their screen showed the radar track from around the globe of the missiles inbound for Atlantis. “These twelve missiles were launched at my present location from your boat and five others that we know of. Fortunately, I am protected from the missiles by advanced technology. But, we need to stop your boats from firing anymore, so we disabled yours and are about to hit the rest of your fleet.”

“We didn’t fire any missiles. We have no missiles or guns or anything.”

“May we see the blueprints on your boat please?”

“Sure. That will clear up a lot of this mess right away. Good idea.” He typed at the keyboard and brought up a website for Santana Energy. He logged in as an employee and entered his password. Then he quickly navigated to the information on the boat. When it was up, he said, “There are forty-one sets of blueprints and schematics and each set has about two hundred pages. I’m really not sure where to start.”

“Hold on for a minute please.” Luc closed his connection, stepped away from the terminal and called Sully.

“How long until you have it all?”

“I’ve already got the blueprints and now I’m going for anything I can get. We don’t need him anymore. This was the easiest hack I’ve ever done. Oh, to make sure it all is accurate, I need the dimensions of the boat. Center diameter and length should do it. And be sure to have them look for any shape sticking out, like a missile battery box on the bottom of the boat. I’ve fed the prints into Nadine and she’s crunching away already. I’ll have the prints analyzed in about twenty minutes.”

“Thanks. Talk to you in twenty.” Luc closed that connection and opened one to Elizabeth.

“Hi, I need you to have some divers measure the Sydney boat.” He told her what Sully needed. She finished the call to get the divers in the water.

Luc opened the connection to the manager again.

“I’m back. Something has come up that requires my attention immediately. I will be back with you in about thirty minutes. Please wait right where you are. Thank you, sir.” Luc closed the call before the manager could object.

Luc was really hungry and couldn’t eat the food put out by the Hodos. So he grabbed a bite from the snacks and supplies that he brought. He laughed to himself while he thought, “What is going to happen when these people come down off of a lifelong high?”

Friends

Luc visited some while he ate and waited for the data to show the Santana scientists that they were on a ship of war. In the meantime, Elizabeth informed Luc that all six of Santana's boats had been disabled. Everyone on the boats wanted to talk about why their vessels were attacked.

Finally, Sully came back online and said, "Your divers found the missile battery. It's on the bottom and looks like a huge cigar box. And the blueprints show the unit on only one appendix in one place. Almost hidden, but not. Here is your data. Go educate those idiots." Sully cut the feed and Luc initiated a call with the Sydney manager.

He pulled up the drawings and showed the man what was on the bottom of his boat.

"That's not possible. I would have known about it."

"Why would you, if someone didn't want you to know? It's perfect. You guys travel around doing your scientific research and, at any time, your boss can fire a volley of missiles or torpedoes at anything he wants -- you don't even know it's happening. All you might feel is a slight jerk, which is probably just like some turbulence you pass through every once in a while. And nobody can shoot back because your vessel is loaded with civilians made up of families."

"I didn't know. None of us knew. I am sorry. What can I do to get my vessel moving again and go about our business?"

"We need to secure your boat. Consider this a Coast Guard of the ocean inspection. That means search it from top to bottom. We will need all cell phones, laptops, any comm device. And the passwords to everything from everyone."

"I can save you a lot of time. We have no laptops or cell phones. We have had no access to the Internet or the outside world for over two years. We are trying to build a better society here and that requires isolation." He paused like he was preaching to a congregation of followers and then continued, "We have a central mainframe that is accessed by the one website we can use any time, SantanaEnergy.com."

"Captain, are you at least in contact with the other boats in Santana's fleet?"

"Oh, yes. We trade people all the time between boats."

"How many are in your fleet?"

"Six."

"Hold on for a few moments, please."

Elizabeth, Cameron and Les had been going back and forth between Elizabeth's makeshift operations center with three laptops working and Luc's lone one. They had been passing Luc notes and asking him questions. Elizabeth was there now and wanted a word.

"I can get the Princess of Australia cruise liner there in two hours. The ship has a skeleton crew and no

provisions. But they can use it to float around on while we search their boat.”

“Thanks.”

Luc stood up and got his thoughts ready for the next exercise. He walked over to the table where Miles Gilderdale was sitting. Gilderdale was not told about the laced food and was stoned to the max. Luc waved for Les to come with him and they both sat down with Miles.

“Private Gilderdale, how many boats does Santana have in his utopian fleet?”

“Six. And his own.”

“His own? That would be his command vessel, I assume.”

“Yes. That’s right.”

“Is his like the others?”

“No, it’s small. It only takes twelve to run the whole thing. But, if you’re hunting for it, forget it. He’s gone to ground already.”

“Gone to ground?”

“Yes, underground. Under the seabed with his tunnellers. He bores in enough and takes his sub in like a sea anemone. Once in, he’s invisible. But, that’s just the start of what he can do. He has machines that can take a tunnel he made and enlarge it to the size of a warehouse. Then he digs some more and makes another warehouse. Pretty soon, you have room for thousands of people. And the real beauty of it is that everything the tunneler goes through is used to build the supporting structure or is mined. Nothing goes to waste. He can build under-seabed honeycomb habitats with airlocks to the ocean floor in just a few weeks.” Miles was starting to bob a bit from side to side and becoming animated. “He can wait and evade forever. He may choose to start his little kingdom again somehow. Or not. I thought he was close to giving up the fight with you blokes. And then you go and find the way into this place. I like it here” He rolled over into a long comfortable chair and fell asleep.

Luc turned to the others and said, “I wonder what other tricks Santana has up his sleeve. *I* always have a few. Let me patch a few more people in.” Luc let Les recap the narrative from Miles about Santana’s operations. Meanwhile, Luc put it together and then gave some orders. “Track Santana from the last known location and chase him down. I need to talk to him. In the meantime, everyone coordinate with Admiral Tanner and take care of those Santana cult people. Fill them in on the facts and let them make up their own minds as to their future. Oh, by the way, wouldn’t Santana’s tunnelers work very nicely on the moon? We already have one. FYI, they are nuclear powered. Most efficient.”

Luc got a short discussion on that point from several engineers. Santana’s six boats were equipped with four tunnelers and one machine that create a very large space from a tunnel. The tunnelers were called *worms* and the other was referred to as an HD for Habitat Digger.

Apparently, Santana had the only command sub out there. Luc took a break from the chaos and let his guys

schedule a video call with all six captains of the boats. Luc had an hour to do as he pleased, so he slipped away into a planted field and called Angela. Soon, someone was coming across the field to him, so he said goodbye and looked up to see Michael.

“So, you finally made it back to Atlantis. Only took you four thousand years.” They laughed as they walked through the rows of grain. Luc knew these visits were serious and important so he got to the questions at hand.

“Am I doing the right thing with the Atlantians and the people on Santana’s boats? Should I stop helping so much? I know they should get to choose their own destiny, but what if they don’t know what is best for them, like a child?”

“You are asking the same question God deals with all the time. All of God’s children, both animal and human need to be taken care of until they leave the nest. Then they are on their own. If you have done all you can for them, then you must leave them to their own choices and capabilities. They must be ready to sink or swim in the great adventure of life.”

“I have shown them the world outside theirs as it really is now and will give them the tools they will need to be *fruitful and multiply*, a quote from the Father.”

“There you have it.” Michael paused and then said, “God will not abandon them, ever.”

“Can you stay here a while? Would you consider meeting Elizabeth and Charlie?”

They had walked to a little park with picnic tables right next to the field and a small stream. Beautiful willow trees lined the bank.

“Yes, if they can come to us. And, have them bring some food and drink please. Don’t worry about the food, it will have no effect on us for this meal. And have her bring a lot to sample.”

“Sounds like fun. I have many questions for you. Let me call them and ask them to join us.” Luc stepped away and made the call.

“Hi. Look out over the terrace. Do you see me and a friend down in a park?” After a few seconds, she saw Luc and waved. He said, “Please drop what you are doing and join my friend and me down here. Bring Charlie too.” She asked why and if it was important. “Yes, it is important. It may be the most important thing to ever happen in your life. Trust me. And I want you two to come alone and bring some things.” He gave her the shopping list and told her to hurry.

Luc sat across from Michael on the picnic table. Michael put up one of his arms as if to wrestle. Luc laughed and said, “You want to arm wrestle?”

“Sure. We used to all the time.”

“And who won, God’s keeper of the flaming sword or the friend to humans?”

“You’ve won before. I tell you what, I’ll use only the physical powers that this body has, no heavenly gifts.”

“Okay, you’re on.”

Luc took Michael’s hand and they started. They both went easy at first and there was no movement from the twelve o’clock position. Then they both took it up a notch, but still there was no movement. A long time passed and they both pushed a bit harder. This was going on eight minutes and still they were locked at noon. They both looked at each other, smiled and pushed harder and held.

Elizabeth and Charlie came driving up in some kind of cute little cart. They saw what was going on and had the sense to say nothing. They just stood and waited, not moving at all.

Michael and Luc shoved harder and Michael began to shake a tiny bit. They both saw it and Luc gave it all he had. The shaking got worse and they moved to Luc’s eleven o’clock. Luc knew he had Michael then and took advantage of it. He pushed with all his strength and Michael’s hand slowly hit the table. They were both out of breath, but managed to hug each other across the table. They both stood rubbing their arms and shoulders. They helped Elizabeth and Charlie unload the cart. As Michael approached them, Elizabeth extended her hand and said, “Hello, I am Elizabeth Tanner.”

Luc said, “And this is my brother, Michael.”

She thought about it for a second and said, “Michael, as in Archangel Michael?”

“That would be me, Elizabeth. It is very nice to meet you.” He turned to Charlie and said, “And you must be Charlie.”

The president said, “Sir, I am honored.”

Michael said, “Sir, it is I who am honored.” He turned back to helping with the food and went on, “I don’t get here often and I really like the food and drink.”

Charlie looked at Luc as Michael walked away and mouthed, “Michael, the Archangel of the Lord Almighty?”

Luc nodded his head and smiled.

While they were unloading the baskets, Elizabeth asked a question, “Michael, would you give a message to God for me?”

“Certainly.”

“Tell Him thanks for healing me last week. And I won’t waste the time.”

“No problem. But, He already knows. Luc, you had a few questions for me.”

“Yes. Tell me about my life in heaven before I made the deal to become a human and when it came time to make the change.”

“You want to find out what you forgot. Okay.”

Michael started to eat and said, “This is really good food. A little bland, but very crunchy. I like it. And this drink is wonderful. And don’t worry about the effects of the food on you. You will be fine for this meal. Eat up. I’m going to talk while I eat.”

The other three ate as well while they did the *try this and try that* thing. Michael started the narrative, “When you and I were created, there was no sense of time. There was just one fluid moment where all of us coexisted in peace and harmony. We each had our position and everything was in order. Then in an instant, there was a rebellion and banishment. In another instant time started and it brought the creation of this universe with it. Time moved very quickly at first and then it slowed until it is much like now. It gets slower all the time, only a few seconds every few years. But since it is relative, no one ever feels a thing. You and I just did our jobs in harmony with the Lord of the universe. When God felt it was right, he made these heavens and these earths. When God created your grandfather, there was much love and disappointment. Adam rejected God and was banished just as our brothers were. God and you had long talks about Adam and Eve, Seth, your father, and the rest of your family before you were born. You would walk and talk for days about them -- how they felt, how they processed things they saw and heard, but most importantly, how they felt about God. Why would anyone *not* want to be with God and obey Him? You watched Eve disobey Him and eat the fruit from the tree of knowledge. She lost her innocence at that moment and it became time for her to leave the nest. Then she led Adam astray and it became time for them both to leave the garden that God had prepared for them. When you saw what was happening, you wept for them before God. That was when you both started talking about you becoming a special human to help them secretly. You talked and then you proposed the idea clearly and God agreed. You would go to Earth as a human with two gifts -- your memory and your immortality. You knew that if you remembered your time in heaven, you would not act as a human. You would make different choices. You had to make *human* choices, not *heavenly* ones. The day you left, we had a celebration. All the choirs sang a special song for you. It was both sad and happy. God has told me many times that He misses you. And then you were gone.” He stopped for a second, looked at Raguel and said, “I miss you too.”

Luc could see that Michael was finished, “Thank you. So, God let me make my own choices when I left the nest, but He still watches and takes care of me. And now I have to do the same with the Atlantians and Santana’s cult.”

“Yes.”

Charlie had remained silent during all this conversation. Michael said to him directly, “Charlie, you are very quiet. That is unusual for someone with your job.”

They all laughed and the president said, “I know when to shut up and listen.” That got another laugh. Then he said, “I would like to know one thing. How am I doing in my job? Is He pleased?”

“Wow. Now I know why you got the job. You are very straightforward. Your question is a difficult one to answer. Your world is changing. For the better. You are steering the ship with wisdom and kindness.”

No one said anything for a bit while they ate. Elizabeth fidgeted and asked, “Is there something special that God would like for me to do?”

“Funny you should ask. There is a project that needs a very wise and steady hand.”

“Yes?”

“The moon will soon be colonized thanks to the mining equipment that has been invented. People will want to move there and be a part of the exploration. However, the challenge will be the selection process. The Universal Relief Organization that now umbrellas all the charity agencies in the world needs a strong leader to make sure the poorest of the poor are given the advantage they need to break the poverty cycle and live a life of accomplishment and peace. You would be changing society forever and helping millions of people. Perhaps the poorest people should lead the colonization of a new place, a new start. And then there is Mars. Take the URO top job. The man in charge is announcing his retirement next week. You would have to start early next year. And find the right person to team with to colonize these new places with the right people.”

“Okay.”

“But, I think that you should take care of your new one hundred forty-five thousand eight hundred eighteen new friends. Oops, add two to that number -- twins on the Pacifico, one of the six boats.”

Luc looked at Elizabeth with tears in his eyes, “With your skills, the new mining equipment and the unending power source, we can do wonders. Wonders. And we can start with a new home for the Atlantians.”

“I know where we can get some good honest labor. Besides, how can I argue with God?”

Michael and Luc looked at each other knowingly. Michael touched her shoulder, “Elizabeth, there are many souls out there that *do* argue with the Lord all the time. It is sad that they lose the blessings that He had in store for them. So, the answer to your question is a question. Will *you* follow him right now with all your heart?”

“Yes. Yes. Yes.” And she started to cry.

Luc hugged her until she broke away and spontaneously hugged Michael. He was surprised, but managed to hug her back a bit.

She kept saying, “Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.”

They finished eating and Michael wanted to know all about their families. Luc got Angela on a video phone call and she and Michael said hello. She had the boys talk to him as well. When they hung up, Michael said, “That is a fine family. Your sons are very special people with an exciting and wonderful future ahead. They will eventually be great dreamers, accomplish great things and be great leaders of people.”

Luc just smiled and nodded his head in agreement.

Michael said, “Let me help clean up. I gotta run.”

They stacked the plates, bowls and cups into the baskets they came in and Michael said to Elizabeth and Charlie, “Please forgive me but I must say something to Luc in our language and then I will be off.” He hugged Elizabeth and, much to the president’s surprise, Charlie as well. He turned to Luc and said, “Raguel, the Lord continues to be blessed and honored by your service to mankind. Now, He has something for you that you will need in hunting Santana. Santana is no mortal man. He is the Sword of the Fallen One, my opposite. You must

stop him. Your shield is restored. You will still age and die, but not by the hand of any man.” He reached behind him and mysteriously pulled out his sword. He handed it to Luc and said, “Take good care of it. It will take good care of you.” He smiled really big at Luc, “Nice arm wrestle, brother. Blessed be the Lord.” He looked hard at Luc for a moment, turned and walked toward the stream. He waved behind him as he went around a building and was gone.

Luc turned back to Elizabeth and Charlie. They both had questioning faces. Luc saw that they would not let it go and said, “Michael let me know what I am up against in Santana. He is not mortal. He has heavenly origins, just like me. But, he is not on God’s side. In order to defeat him, my shield powers have been restored. I can’t be hurt by anyone again. And I have this.” He held up Michael’s sword and it shone with all its heavenly glory. Luc laid it on the table and it changed to a normal steel sword. They all watched as it shrank to the size of a dagger and turned translucent, almost invisible.

Charlie touched it and it shimmered so you could kind of see it. Luc picked it up, put it in his pocket and it was a part of him already.

Charlie asked, “What happens when you are attacked? Do bullets bounce off?”

“Yep. And knives, and spears, and sharks, and everything. You want to test it? I have to sometime.”

“I don’t want to be the person that killed Lucasiah Champion. No, thank you.”

“Okay, I’ll do it.” Luc pulled a knife out of the picnic items and tried to slice the palm of his hand. It made a grating sound but no damage was done to the flesh. “If Michael and God think I need my shield and the sword to battle Santana, I must be in for the fight of my life.”

They all got in the cart and went back to the group. Luc told Lydia what he had to do and said goodbye. He got Miles and Les together and told them to gather their things, they were leaving. After collecting their weapons and putting the punishment cuffs back on Gilderdale, they left on the bikes they had previously stashed. The cuffs would stay on Miles for the time being. The outside teams were notified of Luc’s movement and were set to receive him. They reached the locks and transferred to the waiting sub. The sub left for Nassau immediately. It quickly returned to get the president, who was to attend the same meeting in Washington as Luc. There was a jet waiting for them when they arrived. Once onboard, Luc slipped Miles a knock-out cocktail and he was out.

Luc and Les grabbed some sleep on the ride back to their base. When they landed, it was six a.m. and Luc’s entire command was there to welcome him back from being sworn in. It was all very formal, with flag raising and a few short speeches. Then Luc gave the men and women a few minutes to dress down, ready to get to work. They met in the main op center. Luc had Gilderdale locked in an apartment and sedated until he could figure out what to do with him.

Luc had his friends and his command beside him or online as he called the meeting to order and began.

“We have an imminent and serious threat. Our target is Juaquin Santana. He needs to be neutralized as quickly as possible. He has six boats that look like this.” A model of one of the boats appeared on screens for a moment. “There are four thousand people on each of these vessels. Santana fired missiles from these boats without the people onboard knowing it. They didn’t even know their boats had missiles. Santana is ruthless. Assume everything is booby-trapped. Assume that he is watching at all times. I need these boats secured as quickly as possible. Go in as regular sailors, but pull out every sniffer, detector and tracker you have. Admiral and General Adams will take command. I suggest two hundred in a unit. Six units, one per boat. Go. Now.”

All but the commanders hurried off. Luc gave them their missions in a bit more detail and promised them inflight updates. A space-plane would take the group headed to the farthest boat away first. With them gone and operational, Luc told his friends about the visit with Michael. Actually, Elizabeth and Charlie told most of it. Luc told them about having his shield back. Then he said, “Michael lent me something.” Luc pulled the sword out of his pocket and held it up to a camera. He moved it back and forth until it came into focus. Then he backed up and held it vertical. It grew into a dagger, then into a broadsword. And finally, it changed its appearance to a silver fire of metal.

A Stop Over to Brief the New Guy

Luc assembled a team of Les and two of his friends, Gumbi and Earl, both very competent Delta Force men. After some thought and talking to Les, Luc ordered Gilderdale to be brought with them. Luc ordered Les to load up and head to Rio de Janeiro.

Luc had business to take care of as he chased them south. He set up a dinner meeting at the Occidental Restaurant in Washington, D.C. with his new Secretary of Special Operations, Buddy Willis, Duncan Freeborn and President Schaffer. Luc was going to tell Buddy about his age and have a good time doing it. He took his personal jet and then a chopped motorcycle he had custom-built at Orange County Choppers. He loved riding through D.C. on a chopper. They just never see those around the Capitol. He parked the bike himself in a secure valet parking garage.

Luc arrived at the restaurant with no escort wearing blue jeans and a leather riding jacket. All he carried was a briefcase for Buddy. His friends arrived accompanied by their security forces. The four ordered dinner and chatted for a few minutes. They all wanted to know why Luc was dressed like he was. The rest at the table were in suits and ties. Luc just laughed and told them about the bike. They all wanted to see it. Perhaps some other time. The moment came to show Buddy a few pictures and reveal the secret. "Secretary Willis, I have a secret that only a few close friends are in on."

Buddy looked at Duncan and said, "Okay. I'll bite. What would your big secret be?"

"I have been alive for six thousand years. I am an angel of God sent to Earth to help mankind."

"That's it? Oh, I thought it was something important. What's with you guys? You could make up a better joke than that one."

Duncan said, "It's no joke. Luc is the grandson of Adam and Eve."

President Schaffer just sat back, smiled and nodded his confirmation.

Luc said to Buddy, "Let's take a walk around the restaurant for a minute." The others wanted to go too. This was just too much fun to pass up. Everyone got up, and they started in a far corner. Luc showed Buddy five pictures of him. The last two, Luc had someone drop off just a few days ago. One was of FDR and Luc shaking hands. The next one was Truman standing next to Luc and Robert Oppenheimer.

They got back to the table and Buddy said, "A well-orchestrated joke."

Charlie said, "So the pictures weren't enough to convince you that our friend is a very special guy. Well Buddy, I can personally verify that this man is older than dirt."

Buddy said, "Mr. President, tell me that you are not in on this elaborate prank?"

"I thought he was joking for a few minutes when he told me, but then I verified some of his stories. Luc is who he said he is. He has accumulated his wealth over the centuries and I am glad to say that he is on our side. I would hate to have him as an enemy."

“So, this is some classified secret, I guess.”

“It doesn’t get any more secret.”

“How many people are in on this?”

“Twenty-two at present count, including you. Here is a laptop for my special friends.” Luc had one of the security people bring the briefcase that he had brought with him. He handed it to one of Buddy’s men standing nearby. “We video conference a lot. And I think it would be good if you spent some time getting to know my CIO, Daniel Sullivan. When you turn on the computer for the first time, it will take you through everything including talking to Sully. An icon on the screen leads to a file of my bio. Have fun. It still sounds funny to me when I read it and *I was there.*”

Then Buddy said, “I guess you had to tell me this to keep me in line with your program, right?” He was obviously patronizing everyone.

Charlie became angry and said, “There is no program. Luc has proved to be a perfect supporting sponsor for some wonderful initiatives in our lives. And he has been smart enough to build a nice arsenal that has folded into the total world security picture like a hand in glove. Do not ever question the integrity and motives of this man again.”

It’s not easy taking a dressing down from any person when you get to be at this senior level of the government, but Buddy did.

“I see, sir. But, I would like to understand them. When am I going to get some time with you, General Champion?”

“Soon. We have a crisis that we are dealing with at the moment.”

They talked about many things, including the crisis and how Buddy was supposed to do his job with the smartest person in the world as an underling. They convinced him that it was more like a partnership. He would be an integrated member of the group with privileges to everything. He was satisfied, a gentleman’s agreement was reached, and hands were shaken all around.

The food came and they talked about the Hodos and then about their families. However, as happened more often than not these days, Luc was asked for a story.

December 24, 1808 ~ White House, Washington D.C.

It was almost nightfall and snow was beginning to drift as Luc and his four companions arrived by private coach at the White House. It was the current home of Thomas Jefferson, a good friend of Luc’s. Luc’s four companions were Chinese men whom Luc had sent for when he was on the West Coast last year. They were soldiers of the emperor of China, Jiaqing. The emperor’s Mongolian name was Sayishiyaltu Yirugertu Khaan. Luc knew him well and they called each other by first names when they were alone. The soldiers were on loan to Luc as a personal favor. In return, Luc had taught them the ways of the West and the English language. They

assisted him with communication to his interests around the world and in his current travels. He was going home to Paris and these men would assure that Luc arrived safe. Luc carried a good amount of gold and silver with him. He designed and built a special coach for the trip across country from Baja, California to New York. Then onto a steamer bound for London and from there home to Paris with a stop in Geneva to rid himself of this precious metal. The coach had a long wheelbase and was drawn by six horses. The five of them slept in it if necessary on shelves inserted as makeshift bunks. The upper area carried Luc's necessities, clothes and special items. The under carriage of the wagon had hidden steel lock box compartments that held over three hundred pounds of silver and gold. Luc personally mined the ore and smelt it into coins some fifty-five hundred years ago. He thought it was a good time to retrieve the treasure.

He told the men to find shelter and pick him up in two hours. They had to continue on the road as the ship he wished to catch was scheduled to launch in a few days. It would be tight to make it, but they would probably wait a few hours for Luc if necessary. He owned the shipping line.

They took off and Luc passed the two soldiers standing guard as he walked to the front door. It opened and a man servant greeted him kindly. He told Luc that Mr. Jefferson and his daughter Martha were in the parlor and asked if Luc would be staying for dinner. Luc said yes, of course.

Luc entered the room and both Thomas and Martha got up to greet him. He had known Martha since meeting her when she was in Paris with her father twenty-three years prior.

Luc got hugs all around. They were obviously quite happy to see him. Luc was really happy to see them as well. It had been four years since he connected in person with Thomas. The presidency had taken its toll on his old friend. He looked ten years older than his sixty-five years.

There was a large cozy fire going with children running around looking at presents under a beautifully decorated Christmas tree. They were kept quiet and away by a nanny as best as she could. There would only be the three of them for a dinner of roast duck and a good deal of wine. They chatted over dinner about Thomas's plans after the presidency. He had finished his two terms and was retiring to Monticello. He wanted to hear all about the trip Luc just finished with Lewis and Clark. So, Luc told them tales of the journey. He included the tidbits that bring a story to life even if it was logged and written up in reports. They loved it. Their time was short and Luc had to leave. Luc knew this would be the last time he would see his old friend and it saddened him.

As Luc's coat and bag were being retrieved, he took Martha aside and handed her a letter. It was a letter of payment from Luc to them for one thousand dollars. Luc told Martha it was to pay off the debt for British goods Thomas had been purchasing on credit for years. Martha told Luc the money would only make a dent in the amount owed. He pulled out a bag of gold coins and handed that to her as well. She teared up and thanked him with a kiss on the cheek.

They said their goodbyes and gave Christmas blessings to each other. Luc's coach was waiting when he left

the new presidential residency. The coach flew into the night headed to New York and beyond.

Present Day ~ Washington D.C.

The foursome was done with dinner and Luc suggested they head to the White House for a more secure conversation. Luc paid the bill and they all left with their security people surrounding them. Once they were in the Oval Office, Luc and Charlie told Buddy the tale of their visit with Michael and who Santana really was.

“Would you like to see the sword?” Of course, they did. “I hope this doesn’t set off any alarms.”

Luc pulled out the sliver of almost invisible metal. It weighed nothing -- really, nothing. Luc held it out for them to see and touch it before it changed. He stood away from everyone and raised the weapon high, and it immediately grew until it was full size. It began to glimmer and then its heavenly glory shone as it became the pure silver flaming weapon that it was. It now had the weight of a typical large broadsword.

Luc laid the sword across his arm, walked over and let the men touch and hold it.

Duncan said, “Looking at this, I feel the same heavenly power with it as I do when I am around you, Luc.”

Charlie said, “Yeah. But, I forget when I am around you that you are an angel and God talks directly to you through Michael. I do not take it for granted anymore. But, that is why I trust you with my life and the lives of billions of people.”

Buddy took hold of the sword with two hands in the proper way and said, “Well, from now on, I will believe everything you say without question. But, it will be weird for me since I’m used to being the smartest person in the room.” They all laughed at that, but Luc saw that what he said was true. Buddy was indeed a very smart man. He handed the sword back to Luc. Luc held it toward the ground, it shrank back to the shard and he slipped it back into his pocket.

“For Michael to give me this, my foe must be a mighty one. He specifically told me that, when my made-of-steel power shield returns, I can’t be hurt or killed by any man. But, Santana is no man.” They all realized the seriousness of Luc’s statement.

“So, we have an operation to unload and secure Santana’s six boats. I asked my people to look at putting a better propulsion system on them if the people want to stay on them. I suspect we will have to dock three or four boats. The new island we are making for the Hodos would be a nice place to put them. We are sending liners to house the Hodos while they get ready to meet this world. Maybe the empty sub-boats could also be used. But, that is up to Elizabeth. My team back at the silo is hunting for Santana. The first pile drivers are on the way to the Bahamas to start building the causeway to the new island.”

President Schaffer poured drinks all around. With his shield replaced, alcohol doesn’t affect Luc. Right then, he was glad for that.

“I need some help and here is what I suggest we do. Mister Secretary, go to the silo and get familiar with

everything. Make Sully your best friend. Work with him, read for a bit and stay on top of what I am about to do. You will approve the plan of action before each move. I love input. Right now, I am headed to Rio. I want to see the city in the mountains that Santana has built. Mr. President, Duncan, please be the front people introducing the Hodos to the world. Host a few at the White House and that kind of stuff.”

They both nodded and confirmed setting up a meeting for tomorrow. Luc asked for a moment to make another call and he rang up Harry. He put the call on speaker, set the phone on the coffee table and told them whom he was calling.

“Harry, we have a new friend, Secretary of Special Operations, Buddy Willis. When you have the time, please make our special inner circle job offer to him and to President Schaffer as well.”

“Sounds good. I look forward to getting to know you, Mister Secretary.”

“And I, you, as well, Mr. McMasters.”

“Is that it, Luc? I need to get back to sleep.”

“Yes, old friend. Good night.” Luc turned to Duncan and said, “Would you please describe the job offer to our friends.”

He did and they both accepted immediately. Duncan painted exactly the rosy picture Luc knew he would. The president did not think he would need much help getting around since his current job had an excellent retirement program.

Luc briefed them on the message Elizabeth received from Michael. He thought they needed to start thinking about that aspect of the future.

Then it was time to let the new kid watch the action. Luc opened his laptop and video-called with Sully who was in the IO Center working on tracking Santana.

“Sully, pull up the one known location from a few days ago. Leave that up. Now show me the flight logs of the twelve missiles that were shot at Atlantis. I’m looking for firing time.” He paused while it came up. “Look, there is a half-second delay from ship to ship. That means that someone walked their hands down a bank of switches to fire the birds. Have Nadine tell us where the signal was sent from.”

“Oh, I got it. Hold on.”

Luc told the others Nadine was their new AI database and search engine.

Sully came back in a few seconds and said, “In the Atlantic near the equator. Now we have two positions.”

“Extrapolate them and start the search. Try to set a perimeter and corral him in. Drop buoys, lay down more density sensors and all of the seabed DEMP guns we have in stock. And, better start making some more. Five hundred should do. Move all resources. Buddy and Charlie will communicate with the Navy, Army and Air Force to get them mobilized.” Luc paused while Sully typed notes.

“Now, I want you to start looking for the sounds that Santana’s worms make and feed it to all our subs and other listeners. Then figure out the shape of the seabed around the entrance he starts with his worms. There

must be a trough of some kind for his sub to dock into. Once you have the shape, start searching the Atlantic for his hideouts. Use everything we have and get creative. And run checks on Violet. We may need it.”

“Got it. Go to Rio. If you are in the air in forty minutes, you can beat the others on the way there. Out.”

Luc turned to the men in the room and said, “Violet is a space-based weapon attached to my communication satellites. It aims with incredible accuracy a metal rod dropped from space. There are three sizes of rods to take out a car, take out a building or take out a naval destroyer. And yes, I know it’s against all kinds of treaties. I designed it as a failsafe after the Cuban missile crisis. The technology allowed me put it up in space only thirty years ago. It is my most closely guarded secret.”

All the men looked at each other and then Buddy said, “Well, I for one am glad to have it in our hip pocket. Last resort, right?”

“It’s your call now, boss.”

“Oh, that’s right.” And they all had a laugh.

They left the Oval Office and went to the rec room. Duncan loved to shoot pool. Buddy continued to ask questions as they moved and resettled. Luc answered them and that led to more questions from everyone. Buddy asked one that no one had ever asked before, “Luc, you have been the driving force for significant quality of life improvements on a global scale. Your invention of Elysium alone changed the world. And now with this energy source, we can achieve miracles in our lifetime, which should lengthen when we get the medical data from the Hodos. I know you are involved with many scientist around the world working many different projects. And now I believe that you not only spur these innovations along but are pivotal in their development and use.”

He stopped for a split second to select a cue stick and Charlie said, “I didn’t hear a question.”

“Hold on, here it is. What’s next? Time travel, interdimensional shifting or intergalactic space travel?”

Luc looked at him to see that Buddy was deadly serious. He glanced at the other two men who were watching intently and said, “We have a fully functioning space station orbiting Earth. We will have another orbiting the moon in four months. I have plans to build a physical rail system on cables that runs the span from Earth to the moon to connect the two stations. Plans are in the works to build permanent habitats on the surface of the moon, but the new mining equipment may change those plans. When Charlie Station is finished, the whole manufacturing plant goes to Mars to build another one.” It was Luc’s shot, so he took it and ran the rest of the table. The men were watching in amazement as he cleaned up. Then Luc racked the balls for the next game of eight ball and let Buddy break. He fired a nice clean shot with nothing going in. Luc sized up the table and took solids. He showed off and sank three balls with one shot. He finished the rest of the solids and dropped the eight ball in. He laid down his stick and said, “Now, why don’t you fellows have a nice game and I’ll finishing answering the question.”

“Okay. Smart Alec.” Duncan enjoyed giving Luc a hard time.

“There are two projects that I think may have the potential to rock the world again. One is being conducted in Berkeley with a team of just four people working for me. They are brilliant people and are close to creating an antigravity device that uses a completely new force. The other project is run out of the far north of Canada, where they have the necessary privacy and the room. They are building a device that will allow for a shift in the space-time phase. We are not sure what we will discover, but it will change physics as we know it.”

He paused and had a drink. Duncan was sitting this game out and asked Luc, “Can Santana stop our plans?”

“Yes. He is probably the only being on this planet that could hurt us and our friends. He must be stopped.” Just then, Luc’s phone buzzed with a text from Sully. “Get in the air as soon as possible. Head south.”

“Gentlemen, I have to go. Thank you for a wonderful time and, next time, I’ll only use one hand.”

They all laughed, shook his hand goodbye and wished him well. He left the White House by the side gate and retrieved his motorcycle. He made for the airport and was in the air in twenty minutes.

Dragnet

Once Luc was settled and on autopilot, he called Sully, “Okay. I’m in the air.”

“Yes, I see that. Listen, we got a lot done while you were playing pool with the boys. We are sure that we have containment of Santana. We have a net that we can now tighten. And, we have a model for the seafloor tunnel entrances. The search for those will start shortly.”

“Excellent. At my present speed, how long will the guys have to wait for me?”

“Not long. I have the transport from Rio into the mountains ready for you. They will prep it while you come in. Gilderdale has given us the location of the complex. He swears it is abandoned.”

“Good job as always, my friend. If it’s the size I think, I’ll want to leave a security contingent to protect it. You better order up a squadron of army grunts.”

“Okay. Our people are an hour away from reaching the first of Santana’s boats. I’ll keep you informed.”

“Thanks. Out.”

Luc cruised the sky for a few moments of peace and counted his blessings. Then he worked to get in the right frame of mind for the battle ahead. He called Angela and then Harry just to stay in touch. He had been reading email from Elizabeth on setting things up. The first pile driver was onsite and starting from the beach to the final city site. The floating highway sections were being constructed beside the piles and then floated and locked into place as they went. They should cover the ninety miles in five and half days. This made the design of the city a more pressing task.

The news was running nothing but the Hodos story since it broke and now people with terminal illnesses were begging for a cure. Luc thought the time was right to give the medical world another miracle from their new friends. Luc had one hour until he would be over the highway construction site, so he connected online with four of his favorite research doctors from the meeting the other day. Luc set up for them to take notes as fast as they could. He gave them an anticancer agent that was designed to kill the disease and nothing else. It could be in production in weeks if they hurry. The formula was long and there were many steps in the process, but these guys were smart and got it quickly. Luc ended the lecture and one asked where he was.

“I’m sorry, I never thought to tell you. I am in a fighter jet over the coast of North Carolina headed to South America.”

“How long until we get the translation of the medical texts?”

“I’m glad you asked. Would you please help a friend of mine with the work?”

They all said yes, of course.

“And I would like you to go to South Carolina and work with the team of Hodos that are accompanying their medical equipment. You may want to take a couple of design engineers. And once you are set up, you can request anyone you need, including tests subjects, if you know what I mean. The place where you can work is

being organized now and one of my people will be in touch after we hang up.”

Luc told them to pack for a few days and everything else would be supplied to them however long they wished to stay. They could call in all the people they wanted to help, but they were to be the leads.

They thanked Luc and he said, “No, thank *you* all. I’ve got to run now.”

He was approaching the highway site and wanted to come down from forty thousand feet to get a look. Lights were everywhere on the shore as the crew got ready to modify the existing highway to intersect with the new one. The first five sections were in place with piles planted four sections ahead. The main lane was a high-speed rail that should take care of most traffic, but there were two large vehicle lanes as well. Luc stayed high enough to not scare anyone, but low enough to get a great look around. He made a couple of passes and sent a message to Elizabeth that it looked great. He went back up to cruising altitude, moved out over clear waters and took it up to Mach 1.6 with afterburners. He had a fuel tanker connection scheduled in an hour near Panama and needed to make up some time.

Luc arrived at their base outside of Rio only thirty minutes after his chums. They had unpacked and repacked their new transport. After a few minutes to stretch, Luc was ready to roll again. But first, they needed to pay a visit to the headquarters of Santana Energy, Inc.

Luc and his team had a couple of cars that looked exactly like the ones driven by the Interpol police and took off into the streets of Rio de Janeiro. They changed clothes into the bad suits that Interpol detectives would wear. Gilderdale was the only one dressed casually. Forty minutes later, they pulled onto the campus and made their way to the main lobby.

They walked up to a receptionist with two armed guards behind her watching everything. Luc said in English, “I am Interpol Marshall Wilhelm Dormer and we are here to see the person in charge.”

Luc handed her a business card and several IDs. She looked at them, took a bunch of notes and handed them back. She said, “Please wait while I call upstairs.” She talked to her direct supervisor only. Luc overheard and understood every word. “They are on their way, Marshall Dormer. Perhaps you could use the time to pass through security?”

“Sounds good. Let’s get going. I’ve got a busy day.” He walked over to security officer and handed him their Interpol identifications including his as a marshall. They opened their coats and showed that they were packing a lot of hardware. “Now, what do you want to do? Make a fuss? Or come with us and help us get in and out of here as fast as possible. No trouble and you can look like perfect security officers. Okay?”

The security guard looked at his partner, handed back the IDs and said, “You may keep your weapons. Always glad to work with government officers of any nation or world. Now, let’s wait and see who comes to see you.”

A woman came out of an elevator and walked right up to Luc and said, “Mr. Lucasiah Champion himself.

And pretending to be an Interpol officer, no less. Why not just stick to a general or how about owner of the company that is trying to ruin ours. I am Jocelyn Orlena Santana. Please come with me.”

She waved off the security people and they all got on the same elevator she had used. She said, “Hello Miles. How are you?”

“I am just fine, Jocelyn. And you are looking fine as well.”

“Thanks.”

“What? They wouldn’t give you a suit? How unfriendly. Stop by your office and get cleaned up if you want to.”

“Oh, I’m just along for the ride this time. Just along for the ride.”

The elevator stopped on the highest floor and they walked into a suite of offices. Doors were opened as they came in and a woman asked if they would like something to drink. They ended up in a beautiful large corner office with a spectacular view. They were invited to have a seat around a coffee table with soft couches sitting on a Persian carpet. No one wanted anything to drink.

Santana’s daughter spoke, “Mr. Champion, what can I do for you?”

“Can you get a message to your father?”

“Of course.”

“Please tell him to call the number on my card. I want to meet with him. Just the two of us. As soon as possible before any more people *die*. He can pick the time and place. And again, sooner is better than later.”

She handed the note to a secretary who left to send the message. They stood to leave and Jocelyn said, “Mr. Champion, may I have a word with you in private?”

“Sure.” Luc turned to the men and said, “I’ll be right down.”

Les said, “Yes, Mr. Champion. We’ll wait in the car.”

They left and Luc was alone with Santana’s daughter. He wandered over to the window and looked out at the far distant ocean. “It really is a spectacular view. Can we see any of your oil rigs from here?”

“Yes, four, on a clear day. Only the one to the south today.”

They chatted about the city for a moment and Luc saw his men get to their car and drive away as planned. Luc hoped she didn’t notice. But then, her phone chirped and she looked at the text message and said, “It seems your men have abandoned you. I wonder why that is?”

“Because I didn’t want them hurt in the collateral damage.”

“Collateral damage? What is that supposed to mean?” As she said this, she turned and threw a pinpoint of energy at Luc from the ten feet distance between them. She changed a bit with a shake and started to glow and, as Luc suspected, she was not human. He dodged the energy bullet and it hit the opposite wall and put a meter-sized hole in it. Luc pulled out his sword. In an instant, it was full size. With one stroke, he sliced Jocelyn Orlena Santana in half at the waist. When she hit the floor, her insides were black and they were smoking. Her

body continued to change until it was just a pile of charcoal. A robot came out of the wall, came over to the heap of ashes and swept it up as if she was never there. Then it went back into the wall.

Luc put the sword behind his back, but kept it out and walked to the door. He opened it and saw the two men standing guard outside. He put the weapon away, looked back into the room and said, "Thank you. I enjoyed our visit."

He stepped out and closed the door behind him. He got on the elevator and the two men went into the office as the doors closed. Luc figured he had about a forty percent chance that he would make it out of the building before they locked it down and came after him. At the fourth floor, the elevator stopped. He got the sword back out, used it to open the doors and climbed up into the fourth floor lobby. There were people all around and several helped him out. He followed several to the stairs and made it down to the bottom floor. He stepped into the lobby behind several ladies and heard, "Over here, Mr. Champion. Over here." Three men had guns pointed at him and were motioning him to move around away from the people. That was a good idea. He put his hands up and pretended to fall over a woman's foot. He drew his gun on the way down and shot the men square in their vests. They all crumpled over in pain and Luc walked out the front door. He took off at a jog and saw Les racing across the lot to pick him up. Les skidded the car to a stop, Luc got in and they drove away. The second car was waiting and met up with them just after they hit the road outside the parking lot. Luc told them to get the hell out of there. Luc was betting the security guys were still wondering where their boss was, but the shoot out in the lobby wouldn't help matters.

They merged onto the highway back to the airport and a pair of choppers came up from the rear straight for them. They had planned for this eventuality and took a tunnel into a park. They stopped in the middle of the tunnel, got out of the cars and ran over to five motorcycles they had stashed beforehand. They threw on helmets and took off in different directions, three going forward and two back the way they came in. Luc, Les and Miles came out of the tunnel to see the helicopters waiting for them. The pilots fired two small missiles at the tunnel entrance. The three of them coming out that end of the tunnel could feel the explosion, but they were missed by a few yards. The choppers rose high into the sky and one followed Luc and one followed Les. The other three bikes were clear and headed back to the airport. Les lost his pursuer in the busy streets, but Luc pulled off into a busy shopping center with the chopper shining a light on him the whole way. He went up to the front doors of the biggest store, dropped the bike, tossed off his helmet and entered the store. Luc went out the rear of the store and found a delivery truck idling as the driver unloaded goods from the back. He hopped in behind the wheel and pulled away knocking the driver off the tailgate lift. Luc looked at the gauges and saw the gas gauge on empty.

It ran out of gas two miles away from the airport. He had radioed to Les and told him his problem. Luc got out of the truck, waited in the bushes on the side of the road and Les pulled up on his bike. Luc hopped on and they drove through the entrance to the airport. The section of the airport where they were working out of had

been secured by Brazilian Army troops and even Santana wouldn't take these guys on in a public place.

Two new Sikorski S-97s were ready and waiting for them. They climbed aboard, Luc piloted one with Les onboard and Gumbi flew the other with Miles and Earl riding along. They lifted off and were gone into the morning sun, headed for Argentina. The trip was about three hours in these fast choppers.

They were just up to cruising altitude when Luc's phone rang. It was Gunther. "Luc, we sent in the first team of men to secure the boat in the Caribbean. They found the hatch into the missile compartment, but are afraid to blow it. Any thoughts now that you have had some time to size up Santana?"

"Yes. Pull your men out and do it with a robot. Now."

He gave the order and Luc asked him, "Are all the boats off-loaded?"

"No, there are two with about one quarter of the residents left. The others are empty."

"Get those people off now. Now."

Luc heard him give that order and Gunther said, "I need to take care of business here. I'll be back in touch in a few minutes."

"Over."

Les had not heard the conversation with Gunther. Luc explained for a few minutes and Luc's phone rang again. It was a Brazilian number. "Hello. This is Lucasiah Champion."

"Well, Mr. Champion. I have a message that said you would like to get together. Is that so?"

"Santana. I figured it was about fifty-fifty that you would call. I'm not sure if these are the best words to use, but *I challenge you to a duel*. You and me. Before anyone else gets hurt."

"You mean like the death of my daughter." There was no anger in his voice, just ice.

"And others."

"Any others will be on your head. I accept your challenge. I'll be in touch. I've got to do something now." And he hung up.

Luc called Gunther back and said, "Evacuate all boats immediately."

"We are ..."

He was cut off by a loud thud of an underwater explosion.

Gunther came back on and said, "He's scuttled the boat. Hold." Luc waited a moment until he came back and continued, "He's scuttled all of them. The two with people aboard are breached and in deep water. There were hundreds not yet off."

"Save however many you can. Santana will stop at nothing it seems. Leave the babysitting of his followers to others. Take your teams and head for Argentina. I think I am going to need your help cleaning up. See you there. Out."

Over a thousand people died in the destruction of the vessels.

Luc and his team were all quiet for the rest of the trip. They arrived over their rendezvous with their land

vehicles and kept going to check out the entrance to the city. Miles had told them the city was named Eden. They flew over the entrance and it looked vacant. No missiles, no movement, no heat signatures, nothing. The road was steep and easy pickings if someone wanted to defend the entrance. But, there was no choice. They came around and headed back to their new rides.

The choppers settled down and they unloaded everything with the help of a setup team of two men and two women. Their two vehicles looked like something Batman should drive. They stuck to the same pairing and started engines. One of the women showed Luc how to work the onboard defense systems. Then she showed Gumbi who was driving the other beast.

Together, Gumbi and Luc turned on the stealth mode and their cars disappeared. They took off up the hill for the twenty-mile drive. Fortunately, Santana had paved the road or they would be leaving a dusty trail that could be seen for miles. The sun was just going over the mountains and it would be dark shortly. They arrived and pulled the cars up to a small entry door. They parked near the side of the mountain and left the cars in stealth mode. Anyone walking by would miss them. They all exited and met up at the person-size door next to a large warehouse roll-up metal door. Miles tried his code and it opened right up.

“What’s on the other side of this door?” Luc asked Miles.

“A large garage. Very large.”

“Les, on my six. The rest of you, wait here. Do not enter unless Les or I say so. Be patient. This could take a while. Turn on your chameleon suits and stand next to the cars.”

Luc and Les went through the door when Les signaled that he was ready. Luc went right and Les went left by a wall. He covered Luc while he walked out into the ramp that led down. There were hundreds of parked utility vehicles. The lights came on as Luc’s phone rang. He answered it. It was Santana. “Hello, Lucasiah. I am on my way. I wonder if you wouldn’t mind waiting for me for a day or so. I’ve got to untangle myself from your dragnet.” He hung up.

Luc felt it coming as they were hit with a hypersonic paralysis wave. Les collapsed. Luc ran over and dragged him to the door, but it had shut and was sealed. Les was unharmed but out cold. The two doors were blast doors and Luc radioed for Miles to open them. He tried but his codes were deactivated. Luc was trapped.

Luc told the men outside to return to the staging area below and wait for Gunther’s men and the regular army folks he had ordered. Gunther himself was about four hours away. Luc left a note on Les’s unconscious body that told him to stay put and hide when he came to. Luc went for a walk.

Design & Discovery

About ten thousand of the Hodos had moved out to the ships. One had set sail for the Mediterranean and the other headed for South Carolina. Lydia, Zeus and a few other Hodos were on the way to Washington, D.C. The causeway to their new island was ten miles out with eighty to go.

Luc had submitted his design for the city to Sully who was managing the process. Lydia and the other Hodos had been putting in their ideas too. They were all over the place. They ran from Disneyland to a Swiss village. The modern ideas were taking the lead including tall skyscrapers with skyway walkthroughs between the towers. The city was now in the shape of an octagon in the center with smaller islands off each of the eight sides. This functioned very well, giving lots of docking room and a system of canals that could be used to get around. It was a kind of modern and larger Venice. It was to be multi-layered with the first lower floor for public transportation. They also had in mind two parallel personal transport lanes, one covered with a portico system. Instead of open farmlands, there were buildings equipped with hydroponics that had a symbiotic setup of fish and plants. Suggestions were streaming in from around the globe for the testing of new living concepts, such as personal aircraft in densely populated areas and the use of animals as transportation. The Hodos never had pets or animals and were anxious to have them. They loved the horse and carriage idea and considered the poop just a part of the eco system. There was a cleaning mechanism built into the streets that flushed when needed. It included a trough funneled into small reclamation plants that would be everywhere taking care of all the waste materials.

On two of the smaller islands, they wanted to create beaches and set it up for surfing and normal beach activities. The design would not be too difficult by sloping an edge into the ocean about two thousand feet.

One idea Luc really was encouraged by was putting domes over three of the smaller islands so they could make habitats that are not native to the Atlantic Ocean. The models included a redwood rain forest, an Amazonian rain forest and a scaled-down version of the Swiss Alps with only one mountain. They wanted to adjust the air pressure in the faux Alps and create simulated weather. It would be like climbing the top four thousand feet of the Matterhorn.

Their drug addiction came as a surprise to the Hodos population and they unanimously wanted to stop it. There was an easy cure -- just one blast from one of their miracle machines. Those machines were being transported to the States where a team of the Hodos were meeting a team of Luc's. Sully had now worked on Luc's recordings taken from the Hodos library and cataloged them for translation. Julia Whitcomb, the lead scroll translator, who was fluent in ancient Greek, fed Sully's new computer Nadine the translations of a few of the documents. Nadine translated as she learned and then passed the unknown texts back to Julia. The medical texts were first and Luc's four doctor friends were helping as best as they could. They were currently tied up in transit to the facility in South Carolina where the Hodos medical equipment was being taken. They read enough

of the text to know what the machines will cure and discreetly had patients travel to the site for testing. Depending on how many machines were coming and how long it would take to replicate them, there was talk of a traveling medical unit that would tour the United States. The problem was not only immediacy, considering the number of people on the edge of death, but avoiding a rampage of sick people. It could be a struggle with security and planning. Luc had advised President Schaffer to let his Surgeon General, a very sharp woman, take charge in partnership with security people that should be assigned from the FBI. They knew the country better than anyone did, except perhaps the IRS.

Five of the forever batteries had been delivered to one of Luc's R&D labs for analysis. He read a report that they had successfully dissected one and had asked the Hodos to make some more in several power configurations -- one for vehicles, one for suburban housing and one for the bigger applications. They would have to be daisy-chained together, but that did not appear to be a problem.

Santana's followers from the sea-going homes that were destroyed had all requested asylum in the United States until they could pick countries to spread out. But, there were requests for the whole of them to be resettled. Luc wondered if he should build another island. They wanted to reintegrate and be a part of the world that was now moving faster than ever. They felt left behind and backwards -- though, some of their research had possibilities for positive applications. A small group wished to move to the new Hodos island, if they would have them. The Caribbean boat that was full of the followers was another day away from Florida. Luc had real concerns about some of them being covert operatives for Santana. So, until that was settled, they would be watched closely.

Luc took a good look around the little alcove that he had Les stashed in. There appeared to be no cameras. Santana obviously had some kind of detection system since he called and welcomed Luc to this place. He gathered all he wanted and turned on his suits. The lower one was a motion enhancer suit. The MES made him about ten times stronger than normal and was as thin as a flight suit. The outer suit was a chameleon outfit that made him invisible.

Once ready, Luc walked into the garage warehouse. He watched and saw no movement from the security cameras that were everywhere. So, they at least were not seeing him. There were about one hundred vehicles in the garage, all shiny and clean. At the end of the garage were several doors against the big back wall. One was a garage rollup that must contain the road into the rest of the complex. He checked the knob on the far right door and it opened right up. He let the door go, making it seem like it just blew open, and looked inside. An empty office went on for about two hundred feet. Luc went back outside and tried the door to the left of the rollup door. It opened as well and was the same size office as the opposite one. This one was a security center with about ten people working at stations. They workers, all with headsets on, were farther down the room studying monitors. Only one person noticed the door opening and approached to investigate. He looked at a monitor that

showed the outside of the door and was satisfied there was no threat. Luc stepped inside and off to the corner as the worker reached past and closed the door.

If Luc was to make a mess here, there would be people somewhere that would notice. So, he walked through the office and waited until one of the workers opened a door at the far end of the room. He followed the worker through into a conference room. The man continued into a dining room where there were lots of people eating and serving. Luc walked to the side of the room against a wall and saw four women leaving through a side door. He followed them out and they got into a golf cart and took off down the tunnel. He followed at a jog behind them easily at about thirty miles an hour.

After about two miles, they pulled onto the left of four forks in the road. There were signs that directed them, but they meant nothing to Luc since they were just letters for the road names -- A, B, C and D. There was no other traffic in any direction. There were a few people walking on the sidewalk next to the road, but they seemed to be in no hurry. Five miles later, they came to a super large room created by the exterior walls of apartments with balconies. Foliage was blooming everywhere and two streams ran beside the road and sidewalks. The women pulled into the left complex and parked. They got out and went into the building. It looked like they were home for the night. It was almost ten p.m. their time. The group of women were Chinese and spoke Mandarin. They were talking about food for tomorrow, some new recipes to try out and that sort of thing.

Luc took a quick count of the apartments -- twelve per floor and eighteen stories. There were a couple of catwalks stretched from each side of the street. Luc decided to speed things up and went into the apartment building on his right. He took the elevator to the top floor and got off. He looked down the hallway and saw lots of doors all in a nice spacing. He pulled out a SIG MPX-K fitted with a cool sight and other gadgets. He aimed it at the first door he came to. The heat and sound sensors were ticking quietly as they detected the family asleep inside. Two doors down was the same. Then he hit a series of six apartments that were empty. He went back, opened the third door and sneaked around a bit. No alarms and no one home. He opened the kitchen counter drawers and found what he was looking for in a top drawer -- a small phone book, complete with a map of the entire complex.

He spotted a thin notebook computer and took it just because he could. Luc helped himself to a bottle of water out of the fridge and exited as quietly as he came. The elevator opened as he approached and a young couple got off holding hands and walking towards him. He moved against the wall and they passed by without notice. He took the elevator down and, thankfully, no one stopped to get on. He went out to the lobby and back toward the street. He found a picnic table and sat down to study the map. No one was around and he was in a secluded spot. The complex was huge with twenty rooms. Ten were for manufacturing and ten were for living. There were smaller complexes for administration and some for relaxation as well. This was an entirely closed sociological eco system. These people might be families of those on the boats and they rotated off here from

time to time. Luc really had no idea.

Studying the map, Luc saw one room labeled only 'S'. He decided to run a circuit of all of the rooms to see everything. It should take him two hours. But, he needed to rest and eat. He walked down the street and found a better hiding place under some stairs. He sat down and had a bite to eat and some water. Luc texted everyone that he was okay and to carry on with the schedule as planned. Then he kicked back, closed his eyes and remembered a time when he visited these mountains before.

1840 ~ Buenos Aires, Argentina

Fourteen months ago, a three-masted freighter owned by Luc was pirated off the coast of Buenos Aires, Argentina. The crew and ship were set free, but the cargo was never to be seen again. It happened again, three months ago. Luc needed to put an end to this before his insurance rates got too high. He traveled to Lisbon and hired six well-trained ex-soldiers that he had employed before to accompany him on the trip. On the two-week voyage, Luc upgraded their training to include some hand-to-hand combat, a little knife-throwing and learning to use the new rifles and pistols he had brought with him. They were in the best fighting shape any man could be in and he was paying them well besides.

They entered the harbor, docked and unloaded everything. He had horses for them and lots of crates of necessary items. They settled in at the best hotel in town and got some rest before they went to work the next day. He sent two of the men out to shop for clothes that were in tune with the rough gaucho look. They were supposed to be working cattle drivers at the end of the trail. The disguises would get them around the docks to start their search for the pirates.

Early the next morning, they all took off on their assigned routes and started looking for something to indicate that they were on the right trail. Luc checked with his local office but they had nothing new to share. The other men were hanging around and asking for easy money work. They all met back at ten and shared what they had learned. Two were meeting potential employers at noon and four o'clock. They all went out again to another section of the docks and repeated the routine.

Luc's assignment had him in the roughest part of town, hitting the bars early to make friends. It only took him a few minutes to attract several compadres when he was buying the drinks. He told the bartender that he was looking for some quick cash before he went back out on the cattle trails. The bartender took the information and a silver coin. Luc continued to drink with his new friends until a rather large man came into the place and talked to the bartender. He pointed to Luc and the man came over. He said, "Follow me." He turned and walked to a door in the back of the place, opened it and they walked through. The door led to an alley and once they were alone he continued, "So, you want to make some easy quick cash, do you?"

"If possible."

"Well, I think you're a cop." He hauled back to take a mighty punch at Luc, but he was too slow. Luc

kicked a thigh and the big man went down. He was up fast and madder than hell. He wanted to box now, so Luc had a go at it. He dodged everything the man had and then started to land some good blows.

Then Luc surprised him by pushing him back and pulling a gun. He put his hands up and Luc said, "I don't need any more of this. Sorry to have bothered you." Luc put the gun away, opened the door and started to walk through.

The big man said, "Wait a minute. I might be able to find you a job after all. You got a good punch."

"What's the take for me?"

"Four hundred pesos."

"What's the job?"

"Be here at six and you'll find out."

"Okay." Luc walked through the door saying, "And you've got to work on your jab."

He returned to their hotel past their meeting time and found the others waiting for him. Luc told them what had happened. They devised a plan and took a few hours off.

At four, the men left to get reinforcements from the local police. By four thirty, fifteen of them were aboard the ship Luc had come in on. An hour later, it sailed away, fully loaded.

Luc went to the bar for his meeting and was whisked into a room jam packed with rough looking men. As soon as he was in, the man from the morning started to talk. "Our ship was two berths down and just sailed. We sail immediately when you are all onboard. Grab a pistol as you get on the ship. This whole thing shouldn't be a problem considering the spies we have onboard her."

That meant there were crewmen who were going to use force to stop Luc's ship so it could be boarded. They figured that might be the case and were ready for it. The bar emptied and they walked quickly down the street and then to the pier to their ship. It was small and fast. They shoved off in no time and were told to take specific positions around the deck. They would herd and watch the crew of the other ship while others transferred the cargo.

The prize was sighted dead in the water exactly where it was supposed to be. They pulled up beside her and saw men scurrying about to get ready to defend themselves. The pirates boarded with ease and then the trap was sprung. Luc stuck a pistol in the back of the pirate leader and told him to have everyone lay down their weapons or he was a dead man. He believed Luc and gave the order. At the same time, Luc's well-armed men surrounded the pirates that boarded the ship.

They sailed both ships back to harbor and locked up the pirates. They put Luc's ship in order and got it properly sent off. He settled his affairs with some letters and orders. A day later, Luc and his men took off into the mountains to have a look around and enjoy the country. He was in no hurry to get home.

Present Day ~ Argentina

Rested, Luc took off, quickly hit forty miles an hour and ran past several little cars going slower. One interesting room turned out to be a base for a serious bunch of soldiers -- about one thousand men and women, complete with weapons and armor. He kept going and everything was as expected. He ended up back at the start next to Les. Luc whispered, "You okay?"

"Yes. What's the plan?"

"Gunther is outside with twenty men outfitted just like us. He has enough knock-out patches from the Atlantians to take care of everyone in this place. But first, before I let them in, you and I are going to sedate the security room staff. Let's go."

They turned on their suits and made sure they were configured correctly. The two suits had many adjustments and features. They walked to the door, opened it and waited until someone noticed the open door. A woman did and came over to shut it checking the monitors as she got close. Luc stuck a patch to the back of her neck and helped her to the ground when she became unconscious. Les shut the door and headed for the back of the room. There were eleven people at terminals. Luc and Les walked down the row of seats applying the patches as they went. The last two people saw what was happening and tried to leave the room, but Luc and Les snagged them and they went down with the others.

They raced back to the blast doors and Luc pulled out his sword. With one stroke it cut through the lock and the door swung open. Gunther and his men came pouring in and circled Luc. He held up the map and made assignments. They set their watches and everyone took off at a run down the ramp. Two stopped at the cafeteria and the rest kept going.

Luc was taking the apartment complex he had stopped in before. He arrived quickly and found a place to sit and wait. He waited forty-five minutes until the designated time and then pulled the fire alarms. People rushed out of their buildings and gathered in a tight group to talk about what was going on. Luc started on the outside and people were dropping as he moved along. A couple of people noticed and tried to help the fallen ones. Luc darted around and hit them as they came to help. He cleared fifty-five people there, dashed across the street and did the same thing. A few tried to run back inside the building, but he cut them off and hit them with patches. All was secure. Reports were coming in from all the teams with the same results. Everything was working as planned. And then, the stun weapon was used and all Luc's men went down. He immediately ordered the platoon of men below to come up and begin evacuating people, especially Luc's team.

There were several buses back at the garage and Luc dashed there to get one. He headed for the closes place his men were and found them quickly. He loaded them up and headed for the next point, eight minutes away. He found his next team member there and carried him to the bus. He did this for the next forty minutes. When he had all his men, including Gunther, he started to fill up the rest of the vehicle with all persons he could find.

Luc raced back to the doors and unloaded his unconscious passengers outside into the early morning light. As soon as they were unloaded, he went back to the cavern, gathered another sixty people and made the run again. He was moving as fast as he could because he was afraid of what Santana might do at any moment. Luc worked through the day as the stun pulse hit again about every hour. It took him all day, but he finally had everyone that he could find.

They had set up a kind of refugee camp below on the hillsides along the road. He had figured out how to open the blast doors and moved an assortment of vehicles out of the garage to help below.

His team came back to life, but they were leaving the others unconscious for now. The weather was not too cold and they were easily making do as the day went on. And then, Santana escaped.

Horde

As far as Luc's team could tell, a modified space-plane landed on the Atlantic Ocean, picked someone up and took off as quickly as it landed. It was down and gone as fast as anything could be. Luc had been looking at landing on water with one of his space-planes himself, but it had been a challenge not worth the effort. Santana headed north, but that meant nothing when you could circle the globe in a few hours. With this news, Luc had the people moved farther away to a small town. Gunther, Les, Cameron and Miles stayed behind with Luc and waited.

They were staked out on the outside of the huge blast door. They had to stay away from the neural disrupter that fired inside the complex. Luc's friends collapsed when a strong wave hit. Thanks to his invulnerability, he could withstand the concussion now, so he went inside for food and anything else anyone wanted. The food in the cafeteria was pretty good and they helped themselves with Luc fetching everybody's lunch and probably dinner. He had done this five times to pass the time and stay ready. He checked out the security system and sent its connection to Sully just to have it. He was coming out of the security center with a tray full of food when Gunther told him that two men under chutes were coming in. Luc set down the food and saw they were a good four minutes out. They looked like they were going to go right into the main garage. They were cloaked, but Luc's team could see them with their more advanced system. They were loaded with weapons on their flight suits. They could already see a rifle and a handgun with a sling of grenades on their chests. The good thing was that they probably could not see Luc and his men.

Luc wanted to see what they were going to do once they got inside, so he let them land. He knew it was risky but needed to take the chance. The men floated into the garage, landed and dropped their chutes. They both ran over to one side, got on motorcycles and drove past Luc into the honeycomb. He couldn't let them get into the complex. Who knows what they could turn on. He got another bike and took off. The first split in the road was four miles ahead so Luc had to take out one before then. He told Gunther to shut the doors and shoot to kill any others that landed.

Luc got within shooting range and pulled out his sidearm. He shot at the one on the right. The man took the direct hit in the back and only flinched. Luc switched targets to his bike and hit a tire on the first shot. The bike flipped and the man went down. Luc shot him in the head as he drove by.

Now Luc had to speed up to catch the other one. They reached the first divide and man rode left toward the military area. Luc was slowly gaining on him. The man tossed out a couple of grenades and Luc dodged them all, but it slowed the man down enough where Luc was gaining on him quickly. He stopped tossing grenades and got back to driving. Luc tried the same shoot out the tire trick, but his target was just a bit out of range. They were matching speeds at both bikes' top ends.

Luc and his target reached the military warehouse. The man dove off his bike and ducked behind a tank.

Luc went to the same side and chased him. Luc saw the man had a satchel charge next to a propane storage cage. He threw it and ran. Luc shot him as he went in between cars and he dropped. Luc took off running away from the impending explosion. He was almost clear when it went off. Luc was thrown a few feet but his clothes were not burning. He looked back and the bomber was burning up. Then he rolled over, got up and walked out of the fire toward Luc, still burning. He threw one of those pinpoint bombs of energy and another and another. Luc ducked them and moved to the flaming man with his sword drawn. Luc swung as he got to him and the man's head flew from his body. This time, he stayed dead.

Luc was watching him die when he was hit in the back by one of those energy pops. Luc was surprised when he actually felt a wince of pain. He turned to see the other man coming at him ready to throw another blast. Luc threw his sword and it landed square in the attacker's chest. He fell over and turned to charcoal around the blade just like the other one.

Luc retrieved the sword, grabbed a vehicle and headed back to the entrance. His men could not win against these assailants, whatever they were. He warned his team and they hunkered down. Luc drove like a madman back to the entrance. He was eight minutes away. He finally reached the door and walked through just as a fire fight started.

One of Santana's men had landed a mile out and climbed cross-country to the facility entrance. He looked over the edge of the road and saw nothing. He stood up and Gunther shot him with a burst of nine-millimeter bullets to the chest. Luc ran for the man, but was too late. The bullets had no effect except to give him a target. He threw a pop at Gunther and hit him full force. Luc reached the man and he dodged the first swing of Luc's sword. He pulled a handgun and shot Luc three times in the side as he turned to swing again. The last look he had on his face was amazement that the bullets just ricocheted off Luc. The attacker crumbled and turned to charcoal.

Luc ran to Gunther, but he was dead. He sent out a message to his friends and told them his status. Luc loved Gunther, but had an otherworld beast to stop. He sent the men away with Gunther's body and carried what he needed back to the garage.

Once there, Luc put charges in the right places and blew the top of the first tunnel to seal it. Now there was only the garage. He opened the large blast doors and cut the lights everywhere with other charges. He stood in the middle of the expansive room and waited.

Fifteen minutes later, three parachutes showed up in the distance. Luc got set for their arrival and watched them land in the garage the same as the other two did. Once they were down and clear of their chutes, Luc came out of his hiding place and turned off his suit. The jumpers were startled and pulled weapons. One took a shot at Luc immediately. He ducked the shot and fired his pistol back to slow them down. One moved, pulled a pair of swords from his back and attacked with both weapons swinging. Luc sidestepped the attack and cut off both his arms at the wrists. He finished the attacker with a straight stab in the chest and he died just as the others had.

The attacker's terrified face turned to charcoal and blew away. The second attacker was now moving in, throwing his charges as fast as he could. Luc deflected them with the sword and moved closer to the man. The attacker desperately took a shot at Luc with a regular gun. Three bullets connected and bounced off with no effect. Luc kept moving in, finally he thrust his sword into the attacker's chest and the man disintegrated. The last man hid and watched what happened to his friends. He darted away out the front door and Luc gave chase. Luc threw the sword like a javelin and hit him between his shoulder blades. The man morphed into a black statue, then flaked away as he stood there.

Luc pulled his sword out of the ground where it had stuck, walked over to the edge of the outside road and looked out at the sky. It was clear and there was nothing else coming in. He watched the hills but none of Santana's soldiers were out there. Luc was alone again.

He gave Elizabeth a call. She would understand what he was going through. "Hello Elizabeth. Just needed to hear a friendly voice."

"Any sign of Santana, himself?"

"No, just his minions. I'm thinking they were his sub crew personal security force. Nothing gets to them except for Michael's sword." He paused and said, "I was too late to save Gunther. He was trying to protect me."

"I'm so sorry."

"Thank you. That means a lot coming from you. Tell me about your world. Did I get you out of bed?"

"No, but I was headed there for a few hours. Let's see... There are now ten thousand Hodos off-loaded to ships and they are getting a four-day mandatory course on our world. Not sure where they are headed yet, but we are working on it. I brought in more equipment. The causeway is complete and the rail is being installed. Already cars and trucks are using it to get things staged for the island development."

"That's wonderful. I read a report that listed the usual incidents and there appear to have been a couple of fist fights. Welcome to the real world and not some drugged utopia."

"Yeah. Boys will be boys, even if they are two hundred years old. The airport is side-by-side with the construction crews area so it is going to be the first priority. The docks are next, but this is only a difference of a week at most. It's amazing what you can do when the whole world is behind you. Sure they want to meet our new friends, but mostly they want to live to be five hundred. And people will be people."

"It will settle down in a few years and then we can take our people into the stars. Nothing will be impossible." He told her about the question that his new boss asked him and the answer that was given.

"That is amazing. You know, I will tell you something I have never told anyone."

"That seems to be how you and I work."

"I know all the math around physics and the forces that act on our world. But, invisible forces still feel like magic to me. Magnetism just befuddles me every time I see it in action. Isn't that silly?"

“No. Perfectly natural. I always think that I have seen every act of hatred, barbarism, or cruelty that ever existed and then someone like Santana comes along. But, I always think that I have seen and felt kindness, friendship and love to their limits and then something happens. I meet someone special, feel very small again and then very happy.”

“I understand. I feel the same way about my husband and daughter and granddaughter. There just always seems to be more room for love.”

Luc saw something on the horizon and told his friend that he had to go take care of business. He saw a dark movement on the ground like a wave. Then he heard the clicks of metal and knew what it was. This was a horde of mechanical insects, all with one intent -- Luc's destruction. These things looked like some digger scout droid that can search out tunnels or dig their own. They were not hard to destroy, the problem was the numbers. They stretched from across the horizon from ten to two o'clock and they were still two miles out. Luc could just get an airlift out of there, but then the bugs would just keep going destroying everything in their paths. He had to stop them.

Luc's people and their comatose human baggage were long out of the area. He ran to his bag, got out his laptop, logged in, navigated to his failsafe system and looked at some data. He made a few decisions on size and trajectory, entered the code and pressed return. He ran into the garage and shut the blast doors. He stepped outside and saw the area the little killers covered and it all looked correct. He saw his personal guided meteor on its way. It kept getting brighter; there was no trail since it looked like it was coming right at him. It just grew bigger and got redder and redder. The red color lightened as the atmosphere got thicker. He stepped back inside the doors as it hit.

The floor rippled from the explosion and Luc was tossed around a bit. The turbulence passed almost immediately and all was still except for the howling wind. There was a good size sand cloud with it. Luc had to wait ten minutes until it passed before he could go outside to scan for movement. He saw nothing but stillness as he walked out into the blast zone. He found thousands of little shiny puddles of metal. He got an idea and scooped up forty or so pounds of them into one of his bags. He took the bag up the hill to the garage and found his stash of explosives. He moved two of the trucks to the first parking spots by either side of the garage near the door. Luc aimed the truck beds toward a center spot in the lanes and opened the tailgates. He picked up some of the bigger stones from the caved in tunnel and put them against the cab of each truck. Luc wanted the bombs he was building to go in one focused direction and meet in the center. He was as satisfied with his design as he could be under the circumstances and laid out C6 explosive in a stack against the rocks. Then he covered it with the little melted metal blobs making two of the biggest claymore mines ever built.

He opened the blast doors and waited.

At exactly four a.m., Juaquin Santana appeared, standing on the gravel outside the huge blast door. He looked around and took off a coat. He had a shoulder-holstered handgun and a belt that held two short fighting

swords. He set the coat on the ground and walked into the garage very slowly. Luc was confident Santana could not see him hidden behind a car with his chameleon suit turned on. Santana walked a few steps and looked around. He walked a few more and stopped. He was finally in the center of the crossfire bombs and Luc set them off. Luc could see Santana blown out into the open air. The dust cleared quickly after a few seconds and Luc came out to search for Santana's body. Luc didn't expect the blast to kill Santana knowing that it would not be that easy. He was just hoping to slow Santana down.

Luc turned off his invisibility suit and worked his way through the debris into the driveway outside. Santana was crouched down and tearing off his burning clothes. He saw Luc coming, finished stripping and stood up quite naked holding his two swords.

He came at Luc with his swords and they started to glow and then shine brightly. Luc pulled his sword and got ready to do battle. Santana saw the sword and stopped in his tracks.

"Oh, so that is how you have been killing off my children. You have Michael's sword. Let's see if you know how to use it."

He took a stance, as did Luc. They both moved at the same time and brushed by each other with Luc's sword sliding down both of Santana's. They actually made sparks fly and the sound was cold and clear. Luc changed to an overhand hold and attacked again with the same result. That pass left Santana unbalanced and Luc took full advantage by stepping backward with him. Santana tried to defend against Luc's lightning fast move and was caught by Luc's sword at the left wrist. Santana's hand was still holding the sword as it went flying. He sheathed his remaining weapon, picked up the fallen one and turned toward Luc. He stood tall, sheathed the second sword and vanished into thin air.

Luc saw Santana in three different spectrums of energy and they all went black. He walked through the spot where Santana was when he disappeared and felt nothing. He searched all around and saw no sign of anything except the cool morning air. Luc turned, walked back to the bunker and started to hear quiet clicking sounds all around him. He felt the cause of the sound. It was raining needles and they were burning through his suits quickly. He started to run into the cavernous garage when he realized the tiny darts had some kind of powerful acid on them. By the time he hit the garage, he looked like a dog that had put its nose in a cactus. Luc ran inside, but the needle rain followed him. He stripped off his clothes and still the needles came. A cloud had formed inside the garage and continued to drop the deadly projections. The good news was they only made Luc's skin itch. The cloud became contained in the garage and started to dissipate a bit. Luc sought shelter in a car to wait it out. After an hour, it stopped.

Luc decided it was time to leave this place. He called for evac after the morning sun was well up. His crew was there in fifteen minutes with clothes for him as well. They flew to the nearest airport big enough to handle the space-plane Luc had ordered to meet him. He needed to get to his base as fast as possible.

Together

They landed in Santiago, Chili after a one-hour ride. Luc touched base with everyone and let them know the situation at that minute. He also gave them his planned itinerary and asked Angela if she wanted to join him at the base. He had only been gone a week and the boys were taking lessons in many things, so she didn't want to interrupt them at this point. He totally understood. He would visit with them several times a day, for a while anyway.

Luc talked to Buddy and asked him what to do about replacing Gunther. Buddy was at the silo and they decided to hold off planning until they were face to face in an hour. Luc transferred from a chopper to a space-plane and was in the air in a few minutes. He was piloting the huge plane, so there really was no chance to talk to anyone as he traveled during this flight.

Luc landed at the base and taxied under the dome. He was met by a large group of people who wanted to give their condolences about Gunther. Gunther's memorial service would be performed online in two days. Luc knew that was what Gunther would have wanted. Luc was whisked into the underground headquarters and into his apartment. He was told he had fifteen minutes until the meetings started. It was eleven forty five a.m. local time. He grabbed a shower and a sandwich, then put on his working uniform. His door opened and his aides escorted him to the command center. There was a picture of Gunther on the large monitor. Everyone stopped when Luc walked in and looked at it. He said, "It should say *Our Friend, Our Brother, Our Protector* under it."

It took just a second and those words popped up below Gunther's picture. Luc said, "Thank you. That's better. Captain, please begin the first meeting."

"Yes, sir." Captain Dennis announced roll, "President Schaffer, Secretary of Special Operations Willis, CEO Advanced Industries McMasters, CIO Sullivan, Dr. Donnelly, CTO James, Admiral Tanner, Security Officer Dixon, Lydia 4356 and Mr. Freeborn. Your meeting, General."

"Thank you, Captain. Gunther will be missed and each of us can deal with that in our own way. But, right now, I need one replacement, maybe more. Any suggestions?"

An org chart appeared on their terminals and Sully said, "We've worked with your three colonels and they are top notch in my book. All three would fill your senior staff slots and then they could build their own support staffs."

Duncan said, "I concur."

There were several *hear hears* from people. Luc said, "Any objections or other ideas?" Luc was doing this as a courtesy to his two bosses. They nodded and he said, "It is so ordered. Please call those men into this room."

All three colonels were nearby and came into the room in just a few moments. They came to attention and saluted when they entered. Luc returned the salute and ordered them to wait in a side area until they were all

gathered.

“Colonel Bradley Norman, Colonel D’Angelo Croce and Colonel Thaddeus Billingham. You are all hereby promoted to the rank of brigadier general. Congratulations.”

There was applause all around and then congratulations from some of the men to each other.

“Gentlemen, we are going to have to postpone the celebration for now. But, I promise you, there will be one. Please stay for the rest of the briefing. Take these terminals and my CIO will be sending you briefing papers right now. Hold your questions until the end, please. Now we have a modified org chart on our displays. Generals, you will now have to fill in your staffing charts. You can drag and drop them into their new place. And then I need you to gather your forces that are mostly in Argentina and set them up for a worldwide manhunt.” Luc’s phone rang and he answered it.

Santana said, “Hello, Lucasiah, how are you?”

“I am fine. How’s your hand? Still gone I hope or do you get to grow it back?”

“Still gone. The new artificial one is way better anyway. No problem. Here’s the thing, you’ve won. And I’ve lost. So, now I just want revenge, plain and simple. I like your meteor toy by the way. Very clever. Anyway, how about a couple of nice continent-size ice shelf fractures? No real surprise, but global warming has made it really easy. I have to wait for the tides to be right in four days, so you’ve got some time for a game. Find all the charges and you can stop it. It only takes a few, so you have to find all of them. And there are a lot of them.”

“Revenge is usually a waste of time. How about a nice game of chess?”

“No. I like mine better. And do you like this trick?”

Santana opened the main doors into the command room and walked in. All the guards sprung into action and took aim at him. Luc pulled his sword and held his position.

“No need for that, I just thought I would say hi. Look at all these nice people.” He walked around making no quick moves. “Let’s go for round two tomorrow. What do you say?”

“Any time, any place.”

“I’m glad you said that. I agree. I love surprising people.” He smiled an evil smile and then disappeared just as he did before at the South America underground complex.

Luc had the phone on speaker so everyone knew what was going on. He said, “Well, cancel that manhunt. You’ve got a bunch of bombs to find and neutralize.”

President Schaffer interrupted and said, “Luc, excuse me. Can you defeat him?”

“Yes. But, now he has the element of surprise. And I have to play defense. I can handle it.”

General Billingham said, “You should change the venue. Take the battle somewhere you want. Try to gain any advantage you can. Strategy 101. You should go now.”

“And I know just the place. Anybody want to know where the Garden of Eden is?”

Luc had his D-jet prepped for immediate departure and loaded with all kinds of goodies. He let two pilots come along and fly this time. He needed to work. Les was coming and no one else. Luc couldn't stop him if he wanted to. They took off and reconvened the meeting in flight.

Once everyone was online again, Luc moved to the next item -- Hodos city status.

Elizabeth took over, “The island causeway is complete and twenty percent -- that's about twenty thousand - of the Hodos are onboard cruise liners and headed somewhere to be determined. If we keep up the pace of construction, some might actually be able to move onto the island and not have to go anywhere. They want to help with the building. People from two of the Santana ships are headed our way. Others are making for the nearest ports. We are trying to figure out where they want to go. The design for the city is finished and subassemblies are moving toward the island right now. People all over the world want to contribute. We have vessels and equipment stationed around the site for defensive measures if we need them. End of report.”

The next item on the agenda was space-based construction. Harry gave the report. All was on track, but he wanted to integrate the Santana mining equipment into the projects as soon as possible. Several were being recovered from the sea floor around the sunken boats. The New Texas-Charlie Station cable was halfway strung and everyone was excited about the prospect of quick and easy transport to the moon.

Moving down the agenda, Teresa gave her report on the economic changes that the world was getting used to. Things were ahead of schedule as the lower class was jumping on the bandwagon to improve their lot.

Then Luc finished up, “All of this is wonderful news and, with the addition of the forever batteries from Lydia and our new friends, we can actually speed things along. The medical information is disseminated and the machines the Hodos have loaned us are being replicated with a little help. We should have a dozen ready to be shipped later this week.”

Luc took a break from the meeting to refuel in Nova Scotia. Once, back in the air, he finished up the meeting. “Sully, you know what to do. Give me some answers when I land in four hours. Thank you all. If anyone wishes to continue smaller meetings, feel free. I've got to go. I can do short one-on-ones if you need me. Out.”

Luc was immediately texted by Buddy for a meeting. Luc called him and Buddy said, “Luc, this has been the wildest three days of my life. What can I do to help? I'm not the sit-around type.”

“You could help with the staffing selections the new leadership guys will have to make. I have learned that many good people are passed by because men like us just do not read their resumes. Could you go a little deeper with the men and even look to the other services if you need to? We have top-notch commandos. Now they just need leaders.” Luc had an idea. “I want to bring someone else in on this conversation. Sir, this is Leslie Dixon. I recruited him from the Seals to be my private bodyguard after a mission we were on together. Les, how would

you proceed to help the new generals find their staff? You know what we need. Care to have a go at it?”

“Why, yes I would. Can you give me a few hours?”

“Sure. Buddy, tell the guys to wait on some research we are doing to fill those slots. Thanks, out.”

Les turned to Luc and said, “I would love to see the guys with the real brains be put in charge. So many of the operation colonels were not up on today’s equipment and tactics. The three you promoted are the cream of the crop. We are golden there, but they need a team of specialist that can work together. Let me get to work. This should be fun.”

Luc called Angela and told her what was going on, but she had already seen the recording of the briefing. She pretended like it was nothing and that Luc could easily vanquish this enemy. God had protected him before and He would continue to do so. Angela’s sentiments were exactly the way Luc felt but coming from him sounded over confident. He liked it better coming from the one person he loved more than anything, ever. He video conferenced with the boys and they wanted flight data to locate him on their 3D globe. He gave them the latitude and longitude coordinates and they were satisfied. He listened to them go on and on about something they learned that day in their new playroom. Luc sensed it was starting to turn into the tool he designed it to be and not an amusement park.

Angela and Luc talked about Gunther and what a blessing he was to have had around. They would miss him terribly. The world would never know how much safer it was thanks to Gunther. He literally saved lives all the time. Thousands of lives. Luc remembered it all.

Les was back with his org chart and Luc ended his time with the family.

Les put his version up on the large display and Luc took a look. He clicked on all the pictures one by one for a few seconds each and read their files. He could see immediately what Les had done. Each general would have three colonels with specialties in tactics and planning, training and skill assessment and logistics.

All nine of the candidates that Les set up were ready to be promoted except two would be ahead of schedule by one year. No problem.

Luc said to Les, “Now show me the entire list of people you considered and their files, please.”

It took him a minute, but they appeared on the screen and Luc read through the three hundred forty-four files in twenty minutes.

When finished reading, Luc said, “Brilliant. Just brilliant. Good job.”

“Thank you, Luc, but you must have a tweak or two.”

“Yes, but just a tweak, as you say. Please take a look at this man and this woman again.”

Les did so and said, “They were both close contenders, but the people I have chosen have a history together and that means a lot.”

“Done. Get ready to send the file.” Les did and waited while Luc made a connection with the Op Center and got Buddy on the line. Luc told him what Les had done and sent him the file.

“Thank you gentlemen. Where should I say I came up with this file? I’m not this good.”

“Sully, are you there?”

“Yes, Luc. I’m working on that physics problem we have, but what can I do for you?”

“We are sending you files of personnel Les considered for the new generals’ senior staff and his suggested org chart. Please run all their files through Nadine and come up with the org chart file we are including. Understand?”

“Yes. Buddy can release the chart in five minutes or so. Anything else?”

“Nope. Thanks as always.”

He left the conversation and Buddy, Les and Luc had a good laugh at their secret. These very senior soldiers would have a fit if they knew that a lowly Navy Seal master sergeant had selected their staff.

Again, Luc congratulated Les on his input and then Les asked, “By the way, where is the Garden of Eden?”

“It is only a wide spot in a stream now, but it is in the southern foothills of Mt. Ararat in Turkey. And we are coming into their airspace right about now. You will love it tactically. You’ll see what I mean in about an hour.”

Les did not realize that Luc had been holding his sword for the last hour and was sitting with his back turned opposite from any open space. It would be this way until they reached their destination. Then it would get worse.

They landed at Erzurum, Turkey in the middle of the night. Another new Sikorski S-97 was waiting for them and they ran between aircraft as their baggage was transferred. They were done just as they powered up the rotors. Luc did a flight check and they lifted into the sky for the twenty-minute ride.

This helicopter had a silent mode that was the quietest Luc had ever experienced. He turned it on and they flew low and fast over the mostly desert land below. He had the night vision and terrain tracking auto system on and kept them skimming along at five hundred feet. During almost every easy-going minute when Les and Luc were alone, Les wanted Luc to teach him something. They were working on Les’s Russian and Arabic now while they skimmed along. His Spanish and German were already good. And he was becoming a very good pilot. Most importantly, he was also becoming a very good friend.

They got close to the base of the mountain and Luc slowed down to find the right ravine. He recognized it and took them slowly into it. It had a running creek, but they could see nothing but stones at this point. As they moved up the little valley, the creek bed was closed off by a hillside. The water went under the wall of stones through fissures in the lower rocks. They lifted over the wall and, as expected, the ravine continued up the other side. They flew down low and the creek flowed a bit harder and wider. The vegetation started and was lush in just a half a mile. They were flying just above the creek and alongside trees growing against the canyon wall. The walls leaned into the gorge and hid it very nicely from satellite view. The river took a couple of drops and pooled up making postcard picture-perfect waterfalls and swimming pools. Luc told Les the garden ended just

up ahead and they decided a good place to set down was one pool back on a nice beach. They turned around and came down easy. Luc was even able to slide the chopper under an overhanging rock formation and some trees. From this point on, Luc expected Santana to appear behind his back and take a slice at him. He told Les that was how his mind was working and Les said that his brain was in the same mode.

Les and Luc had talked over what to do and Les was going to set up a base and hide. He could do nothing against Santana without getting killed in the process. Luc must deal with him alone.

They quickly unloaded the chopper. They were both wearing MESs and they unloaded and set up the heavy material easily. In three minutes, they had made an eight by eight blast shelter. It was even air conditioned. They were online in five and ready to start their stakeout. Luc needed to talk to Sully.

“What do you have for me?”

Sully replied, “I measured the energy it took for Santana to appear and disappear. Our whole Op Center is wired to collect the energy readings of everything going on in the room. Mostly we watch bio readouts of personnel, but I got everything I needed to understand what he is doing. I got Cass to help me program Nadine and here you go. He is side slipping into another dimension. He actually isn’t going anywhere. He physically is there, but sitting outside your physical world and probably watching you in some kind of black and white reality. Here’s the thing, it takes a lot of energy to shift. A lot. His swords must be a part it.”

“So, what good does all that get me if he can still appear without warning?”

“But there is warning, plenty of it. Now, please hurry and plant my poles around the perimeter. Hurry, technically it is now the next day on Santana’s clock.”

Luc left Les to program the poles and he took the first four out in a dash. He returned and did the same with four more. The next trip got five and the last one just three.

Sully said, “Got it. They are working just fine. Now, let me reconfigure the holographic poles to measure what I am looking for... There, got it. You should have two, maybe three seconds warning before he shifts.”

“What! Two or three seconds? I’m pretty fast, but whoa. Okay, send the warning through my implant. Now, let me get one thing straight. He was physically at our silo and left just ten minutes before we did. And he has to take conventional travel just like we do. Right? That means he is behind us by at least an hour. Then he has to shift to hide, come find me, wait for the right time and shift again to appear. Right?”

“You got it.”

“Thank you, my patient old friend. Be cool. Out.”

Luc made sure Les was set and then he moved out. Les would be Luc’s eyes and ears monitoring the area while Luc would be the bait. He climbed out of the vault-like door of their compound and instantly checked around to get detailed bearings. He walked slowly and steadily around the entire overgrown forest. There were fruit trees everywhere and Luc ate a couple of peach-like things. They were really excellent. He continued on his walk at the same pace as before. He was memorizing the terrain, the plants, the views, everything. Luc was

done with the mapping and squatted behind a bush to have a drink of water. Now he would start to use a trick a man in Tibet taught him seven hundred years ago.

He walked the same paths as before at the same pace. This time with his eyes closed using the only thing he had available. He clicked his tongue and listened for the sound to come back. With practice, you can *see* the shape of things by how fast the return sound is. In other words, you can hear the shapes of what's around you. This took Luc an hour to do and then he took a break standing by a tree. The entire time, he had his sword ready.

He walked the path another two times and took another break. This time he had a sandwich and water. Stakeouts can be long and boring. It was okay -- Luc was the most patient man you could ever meet. He decided to expand the perimeter of the poles. He went to the edge of the field and moved four of them down lower than the hiding place. Then he moved the lower edge down so they were well clear of the chopper and Les's bunker. This was much better.

And he waited. The sun came up directly over the ravine providing the only light the plants in this place would get all day. He walked around looking at it coming up from different places and just enjoyed the moment without dropping his guard.

Luc walked back to the center of the kill zone and ate more fruit. Then his warning sign went off in his head and he spun to meet Santana as he shifted, but he did not appear. "Sully, did you read that? What gives? My alarm went off."

"It was an echo from when he went into the shift. He is on the far range of the posts. He could be on you in another minute but you'll get a strong warning then. Be ready."

Thinking that Santana could see him right then from a distance, he put the sword away and walked the same path at the same pace as he had all night. Luc was tuned to his environment and ready. He was acting as casual as he could knowing that he was about to be attacked. The warning went off. This time it was solid. He spun and waited for any glimmer. He saw it and thrust his sword right into the center of the shape. Santana appeared swinging his two swords as he came. Luc missed him by an inch but on this next attack, he was ready and pushed him off to one side. Luc's sword came around as Santana passed, but he blocked it with one of his short swords behind his back. He spun and was ready to go again, as was Luc.

They paused and adjusted their stances. Santana started to do a double handed spin attack again. Luc anticipated the move, stepped back and took a swing. It hit Santana's shoulder and sliced down his back as he passed. They came around and Luc saw the wound was smoking. Santana was furious and came at Luc with both his blades cutting the air across each other slicing back and forth. Luc moved back and countered each attack. He thrust the sword knowing that Santana would deflect it down. He did and Luc managed to get a good cut across his thigh. Santana limped around to defend, but was too slow and Luc got in another cut on his other side. Santana was getting angrier and more reckless as he was injured. Luc heard the warning in his ear

indicating that Santana was about to shift. Luc spun quickly and thrust the sword into Santana's chest just as he disappeared. Luc's sword fell to the ground and he heard the cry of Santana dying. His form reappeared in front of Luc on the ground. Santana looked up and smiled as he turned to ashes.

The Challenge

Luc had seen that look a thousand times. It was the look of revenge satisfied. Even in his death, Santana thought he had won. Now, Luc must prevent his revenge from coming to pass. He called Les out of the hideaway and got everyone online that was available. He let them know that Santana was dead and their stopping the ice shelves from breaking loose and melting was the next priority. The result would truly be a cataclysm on a global scale. The sea level would rise thirty feet. That would take most of the coastlines in the world back a few miles or more. There would be tsunamis and earthquakes to match the change in ice-to-water ratio. Millions could die and certainly billions would be displaced since the coastal areas were densely populated. Half of the land-ice mass of the Antarctic had shrunk in thickness by at least four percent because of global warming. With every melt, the ice shelf half of the continent got a little weaker at the joining or fault line. If it shrank another ten feet, it would break free and become the largest iceberg on the planet. The same was true for several spots at the Arctic as well. But none would be as big as the southern polar ice pack breaking up.

Les and Luc packed up, took one last look around and headed back to their jet. They didn't leave without picking every piece of fruit they could reach. How often could you say you had fruit from the Garden of Eden, or what was left of it.

Luc and Les decided it would be best if they went to Luc's home in France. The location and facility made it a good stopover. It was just three hours away. They took off from the canyon leaving the posts at Sully's request. He wanted to know how many people knew about the place. Luc let Les fly pilot's seat for the short hop. It was once again nightfall and they flew past the people on the ground in near silence. A stop to change aircraft and they were off in the jet for France. Luc had the captain allow Les to fly left seat and gave Les all the guidance, wisdom and training he could on the short flight. Luc went aft and cleaned up. He was suddenly tired and he crashed in one of the big recliners. It felt really good. He was startled awake by the landing. He realized he was desperate to see Angela and the kids. They disembarked the aircraft and Luc's home security force escorted them to the house.

It was eleven o'clock in the morning and he called home to let them know he was close by. He didn't want to scare anyone. They pulled up to the front door after going through two security stops and Angela, Michael, Harry and Baby Susan were there to greet him. Then he saw Harry and Roberta behind them. This was wonderful. Even Uncle Les got hugs from the boys. They went inside and talked about how Daddy killed the dragon. Luc brought out the sword to show everyone. He opened it and let them touch it and hold it as much as they liked. But, when it came back to Luc, it shrank back to the sliver size. He held his hand open to show it to them and it shrunk away to nothing. He looked at his empty hand, then at his family and smiled. He quietly looked toward heaven and whispered, "Michael, thanks for the loan."

Everyone was silent at that for a moment, even the children. Les and Luc were famished and Roberta knew

it just by instinct. She just happened to have some fried chicken she could heat up. Anything Roberta made was wonderful. Anything, everything, wonderful, period. They hung around the kitchen for an hour and then Les said he and Luc needed to get to work. Luc asked if he could use the boys' playroom for a while and they granted him permission. Oh, brother. Les, Harry and Luc went to the playroom and set it up for holographic interface with all the displays they needed to get data or visit with people.

Luc rang up his command to see who was available, and every one of his new generals and their new colonels logged in. Seven of them were in the Op Center. So, there were twelve squares on the screen with labels below.

“Hello. Congratulations on your promotions. You have all earned them and now you are going to apply all your skills to form some very serious teams. Read through the list of available weapons, vehicles and full body suits. Order whatever you want. Everyone contributes. Everyone looks at every situation with their expertise in the forefront and then combine your intel to make the best choice. Teamwork. Once you are settled in next week, train your backup. Redundancy in skills makes no individual critical. We move forward. That's my pep talk. I mean it. Now tell me about the poles. What's going on?”

General Billingham went first. “Santana's clue about the tides being just right turns out to be true. In fifty-two hours the shelves will be the most unstable. Nadine has mapped the probable location of the mines and we have many surface and underwater vehicles in route. Planes are headed to each of the locations loaded with men from all our units. We split them up according to Nadine's guidance and off they went. One sub was in port in the Antarctic and turned around and set sail. It is just a two-hour run. They will be on station in sixty four minutes. There is a 3D holographic globe model of all of our assets available anytime, sir.”

“Thank you. Do you three men like the people suggested for you?”

General Croce said, “Absolutely. First rate. I've been making a bullet list of skills that the team leads need. We've got a few holes and little cross-training. But, that will sort itself out.”

General Norman said, “Yes. My thoughts exactly. But, right now we've got a mission to run, sir. I've got reports coming in and need to stay on top of them. Can we table the rest of this conversation?”

“Yes. Go to work. Thank you”

Luc loved it. People he could count on. Wonderful. He turned to Harry and Les and said, “Well, I guess they told me. Harry, Les picked all the people directly under our new generals. Then we made it look like Nadine did it. Ha ha. What fun.”

They were in conference all afternoon and into the evening. Harry said, “Get some rest. I think you are going to need it.” They closed down, said goodnight and went their separate ways. Angela was waiting for Luc and then he needed to get some rest.

It was five a.m. and Luc was awake so he got up and went to the playroom and logged in. He looked at the

virtual model of his assets and skimmed through each blip until he had the feel for the oceans. The first sub onsite sent out a robot to look at the first suspect bomb and it was a doozie. They were not sure how to disarm it. Luc had an idea. He told them to hold while he had his security forces get Miles Gilderdale out of bed and online. When he came on the terminal, Luc said, “Hi Miles. I hear you’ve had a change of soul since Santana died. Is that what you have been calling it?”

“Yes, sir. The second he was dead, I felt a freedom come over me. His control was gone. I was a good man before I met him. And I am ready to be one again, sir.”

“Stay online. I need to bring some other people back on the call.” Luc activated their links and said, “Now, Miles, what can you tell us about the bombs Santana placed on the polar ice shelves?”

“Everything. I designed them, mapped the locations and deployed them. Did Santana start the countdown toward the lunar equinox tides?” Luc pointed out the countdown clock on the walls all around Miles. He saw the forty-seven hours and cursed. Then he started to spill, “There are fifty-two across the south and six, four and five across the north. The explosive is a new compound, forty times stronger than C4. Each bomb has sixty-five pounds of the stuff in it, making it virtually a nonnuclear low-yield nuclear bomb. The bombs themselves are encased in seamless containers that cannot be broken into. Move them too quickly or too far off of their lat-long coordinates and they explode. Leave them alone and they explode when the tidal measurement is right. They are perfectly defended and perfectly timed to do the most harm. I am sorry I made them. I am so sorry.”

“Miles, how can we stop them? There must be a way.”

“I don’t know. We talked about the possibilities and I accounted for every one that was dreamed up. You can’t move them. You can’t open them. You can’t move them very far even slowly. Each one is programmed for its location by GPS and locked. Get off those coordinates by twenty feet and they will be triggered. And if one goes off, the ones next to it goes off and continues to the end of the line.”

“Dictate as much of the code to Sully as you can remember. Now.”

He got up and walked to another terminal to talk to Sully. Sully gave the thumbs up signal and Miles left to go to work.

“Get Cass to head up a team of whoever she wants to brainstorm on how to stop these bombs. And get Nadine working on it too.”

“Already feeding Nadine everything that comes in. She’s the system putting up all your charts and building all of your models. And she just keeps getting smarter as she learns how people think. She listens to my questions and is learning to know that it is me. Then she answers them adjusted for my goofy personality.”

“Can I use her now? Is she ready?”

“Yes. But she’ll be a little formal with you until she gets to know you.”

“No problem.”

“She’s available to you now on your login. Reboot and go to work.”

“Thanks.”

They waved goodbye and cut off the connection.

Luc rang up General Croce and he answered immediately, “Good morning, General.”

“Good morning, sir. What can I do for you?”

“I am going to do some modeling with our computer about the bombs and I would like to have one of your colonels watch over my shoulder. Can you make someone available for me?”

“Yes, of course. But the person you want isn’t a colonel. She is a lieutenant and only twenty-two. Trust me, sir. Lieutenant Elan is the man for the job.”

“If you say so. Have her call me when she’s ready to work for a few straight hours.”

“That will be in just a few minutes, sir.”

“Thanks. Talk to you soon.”

Luc ended the call and fired up Nadine. Once logged in, he clicked on the vocal interface and she said, “Welcome, General Champion. What can I do for you?”

“Are you interfaced with the room I am in?”

“Yes. Fully.”

“Please configure it for a large 3D work area with terminals around half of the room. And replicate the same configuration at the Silo. Clear everyone out of that room except for a lieutenant that is going to be joining my session.”

“I believe she is here now, sir.”

Lieutenant Elan put on a headset and sat in front of a terminal and said, “General Champion! I wasn’t told what the meeting was about. You are certainly not someone I was expecting. What am I doing here?”

“You are going to watch over my shoulder while I do some modeling on the bombs. Our computer, Nadine, has all the data and can do amazing things very quickly. I am going to start now and go as fast as I can talk and Nadine can go. Take notes, be ready to interact with me and answer questions. Help me, please.”

“I’ll do my best, sir.”

“Okay. Let’s go.” Luc walked into the edge of the space and said, “Nadine, put up the 3D globe model of the bombs and our assets at present.” Nadine complied instantly. Luc grabbed the globe and spun it so the bottom was in front of him. Then, he expanded it to show specifically the land mass. The bombs were highlighted in blinking red and there was a timer clock running on the top of the display. He turned the image so the land mass was more to the top and said to Nadine, “Put up the bottom of the ocean under the ice where it exists. Make the ice light blue and the bottom dark gray.” Nadine did and Luc said, “Now take the bombs and put them directly under their present location on the sea floor. Label them one to fifty-two. Put up a chart of the distances each of the fifty-two will have moved to get to the bottom.”

Lieutenant Elan asked, “And now you will ask if they explode on the seafloor, will they still break the ice

shelf loose. Right?”

“General Croce said you were a sharp one. Nadine, pull up Lieutenant Elan’s file, please.” It appeared and Luc read it in less than one minute and said to her, “Most impressive for a young person to be so driven at anything these days. Two PhDs. I based some of the design of New Texas on your calculations using the new materials in zero gravity. Almost all of your numbers were accurate in the real world. Nobody probably ever told you that, eh?”

“No. I loved writing it, but no one seemed to care.”

“Well, I did. Saved me a lot of time and money in test. I owe you. Nice to meet you Lieutenant Martha May Elan. What do your friends call you?”

“Marti.”

“Mine call me Luc. Please call me that when we are alone. May I call you Marti?” She nodded and Luc said, “Nadine, put up an org chart of my command. Everyone.” It appeared and Luc had to go pretty far down to find Marti. “Nadine. Find a better group for Marti to be in rather than logistics. And if there isn’t one, make it. And get Cass’s opinion. Marti will be her counterpart on the military half.”

“Sir? Luc, I mean, sir...”

“Yes. Spit it out.”

“I can’t believe what you just did.”

“Why not. Your talents are being wasted. Now you’ll have to produce. Ha! No seriously, you’ll love Cassandra James, my chief technical officer. Now back to the modeling.” Luc looked at the numbers and asked Nadine, “Will the new model with the bombs on the seabed stop the ice shelf from fracturing?”

“No. One through eight are still too close.”

“Okay. Encase every one of them in a material that will slow down the explosion. Try a two-foot thick bell-shaped covering that will direct the detonation down into the seabed. Make it out of solid Elysium.”

“You have added a twenty-five percent chance of saving the shelf with this concept. If the bells were three feet thick and shaped properly, you would have a seventy-five percent chance.”

“Okay, now make the bells out of woven Elysium cloth layered and welded together like Damascus steel is made.”

“Now you have a one hundred and twenty percent chance of success. I have a question. How are you going to get the bombs to the seafloor?”

“I have a couple of ideas. By the way, with every possible haste, when can I have the bells to install?”

“Four days, four hours, depending on the weather.”

“Okay. Marti, you got any ideas?”

“I would first deconstruct the problem by looking at the constraints. Nadine, put this list up as I dictate it. Inner workings of the bomb are inaccessible. The bomb uses simple GPS to know its coordinates. Move the

bomb away from those coordinates and it explodes. Move the bomb too swiftly and it explodes. If one explodes, they daisy chain until they are all detonated. That's it, right?"

"Yes. And I own all the GPS satellites. We could change their signal, but what good would that do us without moving them?"

"Where's their tidal information coming from?"

Nadine answered, "That information is not available. But, Miles Gilderdale is almost done with his code transcription. As soon as I get that, I can tell you a lot more about everything related to these bombs."

"Notify me when you have his data." Luc said to Marti, "Nice working with you, Marti. Check on Miles's progress and get back into the loop when it is ready. And get Cassandra James online this time as well. She's on the moon."

"You bet, Luc."

Nadine came back to life and said, "I have the answer to your question about the transfer of Lieutenant Elan. Would you like it?"

"Yes."

"She is unique. No one under your command has these skills. I checked with Cass and she believes there should be a group parallel to hers on your military side and that Lieutenant Elan would make a fine leader of that team. I picked a name and a place on your organization chart for the new entity. It is the Solutions Company, designated as S Company, and they should be under General Croce. I have the new members of the company chosen if you would like to see them."

"Send the idea to the new generals for approval. Thank you."

The boys woke up and joined Luc in the playroom where he was working. They sneaked in while he was finishing his conversation and cuddled up to him for a hug. Luc terminated the signal and picked both of them up. They walked upstairs and found Roberta cooking as usual. Angela was downstairs with the baby and came up when she could. Harry wandered in with Les.

"Good morning, family. I've got to work most of the day and will probably be taking off on short notice."

Right in the middle of his good morning, he was signaled that Nadine had finished assimilating Miles' code and was ready to work. Luc and the boys got up to go see what was going on. They started to walk away, but everyone wanted to see and followed Luc.

The room was still set up and Luc saw that Cass and Marti were online and waiting. "Hello, Cass. Hello, Marti. Cass, I think you are going to like our new friend, Marti."

"Yes, I do believe I will. Show me what you have tried."

Luc did and Cass got it immediately.

Luc started working, "I need to try something. Nadine play back the recording of Santana and me from one minute before he appeared in the garden." Luc turned to Angela and said, "This is pretty graphic."

“No more than any video game. Play it. I want to see it.”

It was projected so that Luc was about three feet tall. Santana appeared and Luc said “Freeze.” He walked into the image and said, “Nadine, catalog the items on his body. This is one, this is two, etc. And try to identify them.” A list appeared hanging in air. “Continue playback.” He stopped it again and again to get a better view of Santana’s equipment. Finally, it came to the end and the boys were getting into it by pretending to swing swords at Santana’s image. Luc finished him off as he vanished. Then Santana reappeared as he died. They were all shocked by his reappearance. Angela hugged Luc hard and kissed his cheek.

She said, “My hero.” And everyone did the same. Luc got a congratulations hug from Harry, who realized the deadly danger Luc was in.

“Family, I need to work now, so if you wouldn’t mind some privacy, please.”

They all left except for Les and Harry.

“Cass, Marti, do you have any ideas?”

Cass answered, “I have been thinking about the separate problems as Marti has segmented them and I have possible solutions to every part, but nothing works in totality. I can tell you a lot of what doesn’t work.”

They spent the next hour brainstorming the problem and came up with more ways not to succeed. They dragged in more scientists and engineers and spent more time bringing them up to speed than working. Finally, Luc let them keep going and just listened in an earpiece. He rejoined his family who were just finishing breakfast. He took Angela, the baby and the boys for a swim at the fourth lower floor indoor pool. He listened and thought as they played and he got to hold Susan the whole time while walking in the water. There was no progress on the solution, but the assets were all almost in place for whatever action they could come up with.

Luc had to break in on the session while he was in the pool and said, “Hello, this is Luc. We have reached a time where our deadline is approaching and we must have a solution. None of what we have suggested will work. Keep that information in the back of your mind. We did learn a lot. But, now I need outrageous ideas. Move the ice, shift the Earth’s polarity, have giant worms eat the bombs, anything. Thank you.”

He went back to swimming and having fun. He even got to change Susan’s diapers.

They got Miles back online and asked him to tell them the composition of the casing. He did and they asked him to stay online. They talked for a half an hour about using acid to eat the entire thing and then discarded the idea. It was worth the half hour.

Luc got Sully online and said, “Have you seen the list of equipment that Santana had on him?”

“Yes. I got nothing out of it.”

“Pull it up again. All of it I recognize except for this. I think it is part of the dimensional shift control. It would work with the swords as the power source. Design me one that is big enough to handle the bombs under the ice and I will explode them in another dimension.”

“What happens to the reality in the other dimension? Do *their* polar icecaps get destroyed?”

“I’m already thinking about that. Can you build it?”

“The energy wave forms shouldn’t be too difficult to recreate and now we have a power source that will work. Yeah, I think I can. You need one for every bomb right?”

“It will take seven hours for me to deploy the Antarctic run of fifty-five. The others can be done quickly. You have twenty-four hours to whip them up. Keep this to yourself. I want the scientist working on the problem to keep going on their own. I would rather use one of the other solutions. This is a last resort.”

“Got it. Bye.”

Luc sent a few emails to his generals. He directed them as to which people, vessels and equipment to move to what locations as fast as possible. All the bombs were underwater so he had to get a mini sub that could get close to them. Luc ordered four of them for each of the five runs of bombs. Of course, he ordered support from the mother ships.

It was lunchtime and they all went to the surface level for lunch. Angela was cooking too and they were having BLT sandwiches. They all ate, but Luc spent most of the time helping Susan with a cookie. Cass’s team was making no headway. They had tried every whacky scenario they could think of. But, they just could not seem to get a total solution together. Sully had ordered up the hardware for the shifter and reported that a prototype would be ready in four hours there in South Dakota for testing. So, Luc was headed that way.

He said goodbye and he and Uncle Les left to catch a plane.

Shifting

They made the run to the airport in ten minutes, suited up, got into the plane, and took off in another fifteen. They were at thirty thousand feet in another six and cruising along nicely. Luc let Les fly and grabbed a couple cycles of good sleep. He figured he wouldn't get much sleep for the next while.

They tanked up twice as they crossed the pond and landed easily at their base. Luc was greeted by the ground crew and everyone had heard about his defeat of Santana. They were whispering to each other and smiling as they shook hands with him extra hard. He knew something was up. When he entered the main complex, cheers and clapping greeted him from everyone. The whole base seemed to know that he had killed the dragon. He waved and smiled and made the best of it. Luc was not one for spotlights. They all meant well and he walked around and shook hand after hand after hand. Finally, General Croce saved Luc and pulled him to safety. They talked for a minute as General Croce accompanied Luc through the crowds to Sully's lab.

Sully was ready for testing. Luc entered the room and was a little shocked by the size of the shifting unit. It was no bigger than an old transistor radio, about two by six by four inches. Sully was holding it up as Luc entered the room. "Hi Luc, I just finished putting the code into its memory right as you landed. I'm going to test with this block of wood I got from the shop."

"Well don't let me stop you. Go to it."

He attached the unit to the wood and pressed a button on the unit. It hummed for a second and then vanished. "I call that a success."

Luc said to him, "Now shift me there and then back to our world."

"Why?"

"I want to see where we are sending these bombs."

"Okay. You just need two of these babies."

Luc walked to the place near where the wood was and hit the first unit's button. He felt a tingle and the room started to fade into a black and white TV show. It was the same as normal reality but flatter. There were no smells, sound was muffled and there was no air movement. He decided that detonating the bombs in this dimension would have little or no effect on it. That was his best guess at least.

He pressed the other shifting unit's button and reappeared in the room.

He looked at Sully and said, "Good to go. Make two hundred of them."

"They'll be ready in three hours."

"Now I know why I keep you around."

"Thanks, old man."

Luc walked into a working session of the most brilliant minds in the world tackling their problem and interrupted them. "Hello, thank you for your work here. We are going with a plan to take each bomb and shift it

into a parallel dimension where it will explode harmlessly. I have actually been to this dimension and I assure you it will do no harm there. I need to proceed with mission planning now. Thank you and goodbye.”

Marti said, “Where did you get the wave model for the dimensional shifting device?”

“From data we took on a person who shifted right in front of us. We measured everything and recreated it. I leave in two and a half hours. Go see Sully if you want to know more.”

“Thank you, I will. Good day and good luck, sir.”

“Thanks.” He then visited with Cass for a bit before heading to his apartment. He cleaned up and got ready to brief the men on the assignment. He invited everyone to the meeting, but announced that there was always a recording and transcript of all of their meetings available directly after the meeting. He put on his working general uniform and walked to the briefing room.

He walked in and everyone stood at attention. He signaled at ease and they did so. “Please take your seats. After hours and hours of the brightest minds looking for a solution to our problem, we came up with this.” He set the unit on the table in front of him. “This gets attached to a bomb and the whole bomb is shifted into a parallel dimension where it will explode and do no harm. I have been in that other dimension and it is a safe place for detonation.”

“Sounds good to me since this is the only plan we’ve got,” President Schaffer chimed in.

“Thank you for the vote of confidence, sir.” They all laughed. “I am taking enough of the shifters down to the southern polar ice cap and personally sending these bombs where they won’t bother us, one by one by one.”

“That’s why you ordered up the mother ship and four tethered minisubs.” General Croce said.

“Yes, precisely. I like contingencies, but this seems to be the only option at this point.”

“Who’s your team? Who do you want?” General Croce again.

“Well here’s the plan and you tell me who I need.”

“Excellent.”

“I will take the shifters down to the top of the chain of bombs and hook up with the sub. We go to the first bomb with four subs tethered to the mother. I will approach the bomb, connect the shifter to it, and pull back. I will then remotely turn on the shifter and watch the bomb disappear. Hopefully, without a trace. We’ll link everybody in and the northern teams can learn from our technique on the first couple. Then, the four teams up north go to work. They should finish when I am halfway done. Now, who do I need?”

“I’ve got the crews,” said General Norman. “They are already in place and waiting.”

“Good. Any questions? Okay. Welcome to the end of the meeting.” That got the expected chuckle.

They adjourned and Luc invited the generals and their immediate staff to his apartment for drinks and chow. They all accepted and, in a few minutes, they had a party going. Luc ordered a selection of food that showed up in a few minutes. It was grazing fare and the chef was preparing some steaks as well. Eventually, they all wanted to see the recording of his fight with Santana. So, Luc pulled it up and showed it as quickly as

he could. But several of them wanted to run it over and over. Oh, well.

Somebody saw Luc's piano that Teresa had made for him. It was a keyboard with a holographic simulator of a lot of piano shells around it. The instrument could be projected as an old upright or as a full concert grand. Right now, it was set for concert grand. One man went to lean on it and almost fell over. Luc guessed he should probably turn it off when he had company. Luc was pressured into playing a tune, but he insisted on having a volunteer singer. A colonel stepped up and said, "Can you play Moondance in D?"

"You bet." And Luc started. They ran through it and the colonel was a darn good singer. Everyone wanted them to keep going and they talked it over. They did Summertime and tried to end there. But, they wanted an encore so they wrapped it up with Bad Moon Rising. Go figure. Then Luc was buzzed with a message letting him know the units were ready and being loaded on his jet. "Goodbye. Feel free to keep the party going. I gotta run." They all applauded as Luc ran out of the room.

Les and Luc met at the jet and Luc took the stick. It was his turn. They taxied out of the dome and onto the long runway. He lifted off into the sky and headed due south. The two men enjoyed talking as they flew most of the time. Luc was always talking to someone on the ground. Les cracked up because, most of the time, they didn't know Luc was not in an office somewhere but wafting along near the speed of sound at thirty or forty thousand feet.

They ran through the concept of what they were doing again and Les made a few excellent suggestions. He knew the submersible system they were going to use. He helped test it four years ago. It was a suit you laid down in. You worked all controls with joysticks in your stretched out hands. Les explained it was like you were flying. Your body made direction changes. There were many computer-guided modes, like stationary or drift. Luc's plan was to have the other three operators stay close and cover him. They all would get to a bomb, uncouple from the mothership, take off with a few shifters as spares, attach, shift and go. Then they would all couple back to the sub and speed to their next bomb. Repeat the process fifty five times. Les knew the capabilities of the men working with them and believed Luc would only need one to accompany him out carrying a spare. He would teach his partner the job, just as he was teaching the northern teams. Luc would rotate through the three team members and keep them fresh and cross-trained. If he felt comfortable, they might be able to handle the main job. Luc would really like to play it that way, but felt he should take the responsibility.

Luc approached the aircraft carrier landing pad, and lined up for approach. As they got closer, Luc asked Les how he was doing since this was his first carrier landing. Les didn't answer. The ship was moving up and down in the rough seas and, as they got close, Luc heard a squeal from the back seat that turned into a full on scream. Too much? These landings really were like a controlled crash. They were helped out of their jet and into parkas by the ground crew. Several pilots had come out to see Luc's personal custom jet. Currently, it was painted a cool black and silver for their new command. It took a few minutes to show one of the pilots how to

fly it as they were getting out. He was the squadron commander and learned fast. When they both climbed down from inspecting the cockpit, Luc told him he could take it for a spin if he wanted. All the other men were cheering their commander on and then it was back to business.

They were escorted inside for a short break after their long flight. They scarfed down a couple of sandwiches that had been prepared for them. Then it was back outside into the cold weather for the dash across deck to a waiting chopper. They got onboard and Luc could see a tug moving his jet around for a takeoff. He just smiled. They took a twenty-minute ride to the destroyer that was supporting the submarines. They landed on the aft chopper deck after a wind gust made them go around for a second try. They climbed out with their parkas pulled in close and were greeted by a handshake from the captain. They quickly boarded the launch that would ferry them to the sub. This ride was the coldest yet. Luc chose to stay outside and just feel the freezing air. They came up next to the top hatch and climbed from boat to boat. Again, a captain was there to greet them. He made the introductions to their team. They were now forty-five minutes away from the first bomb.

The sub lurched as they took off with two others following for backup. Their sub dived and they went under the ice shelf. It was an eerie realm of cold and bitter cold. At first glance, it seemed lifeless. However, with a little concentration you could see the tiny life forms that not only lived in the inhospitable environment, but thrived.

Luc met his three other team members and they went over the procedure. Les watched over Luc's shoulder and approved everything Luc said with quiet nods. Luc showed the two men and one woman the shifter device and they wanted to know how it would be attached. He showed them the suction device and they looked at each other. The woman said, "That won't stick against the metal in this cold. The metal is mottled and that cup is soft now, but in the cold it won't stick."

One of the men said, "All of these mines have an antennae array at the top. Why not just hang it over the array with a chain."

Luc smiled and said, "Sounds good. Cut us some chain."

Chain appeared cut to length and attached to the shifter. By the time they were ready, they were coming up on the first bomb.

The team got set up in their little subs and all four released from the mother ship. The first bomb was less than one thousand feet away. Luc could see it in the distance and they all trained their lights on it. It grew as they got closer, of course, but it turned out to be smaller than Luc had envisioned. He told the others to hold back and he moved in. He glided up to the bomb slowly and took a turn around it, filming from all angles. When he was done, he called Sully. "Hey, I see some differences between Miles' description and the real thing. Don't you?"

"Yes. Hold on. Nadine, what are the differences between the model and the real item?"

Nadine reported, "There are two items attached to opposite sides that are one by four by four inches in size.

Their purpose is unknown.”

Sully said, “Miles is online right now. Miles, what are the boxes on the side of the bomb?”

“Those are backup battery boxes. They are only on two of bombs. I forgot.”

“Thanks.” And, Luc cut them off. He moved forward with the chain ready to let it wrap around the top. It snagged at first try and the shifter banged into the side of the bomb making an ear-piercing loud ring. They all held their breath and then Luc tried again and the shifter dropped right over. It hung properly and Luc backed off slowly. When he was about ninety feet away, he hit the remote button and the bomb vanished. There was no movement except for a little whoosh from the water filling the void the device left behind. Luc slowly moved back to the place where it used to be. And there was nothing there. It worked. He made the announcement to all and the four of them turned and went back to the ship.

Luc climbed out of his suit and the four of them along with Les celebrated for a few seconds. They called Luc butterfingers and patted him on the back. Then they got ready for the next outing.

They made a quick run to the next bomb while the northern teams were getting into position to do their first ones. When they got there, they found it encased in about a foot of ice. They could see it through the frozen water. One of his fellow aquanauts said, “Hold on. Stay put. Be right back.”

The soldier turned around and was gone two minutes. He glided past them saying, “There are heating units onboard the ship used for this very purpose. Hold your positions.”

He eased up to the bomb and held out a panel. He turned it on and they could see the reflective glow of the heating coils on the ice encasing the bomb. He kept it gentle and took a few minutes before the top and side of the mine were now exposed. He backed away and said, “There you go.”

“Thanks.” Luc pulled in and laid the chained shifter over the top of the bomb. He backed away and stopped when he was clear. All their lights were aimed at the bomb and this time Luc said, “Three, two, one.” He activated the shifter and just like the other, it vanished. One of the other team members said, “Let me inspect the area.” She eased out ahead slowly. She was able to see the space and pronounced the area clear. She returned and they all went back to the boat. They docked and the ship left for the next bomb.

On the way to the next bomb, Luc talked to the team, “This is easy, right?” They all nodded. “Do you think it would be safe to send out another team or two down here, just like in the north?” They all nodded. Luc went to see the captain and had him patch Luc through to everyone. “This task is time consuming, but easy to do. I want more teams out there hanging the shifter devices around the top of the bomb, backing off and sending it on its merry way. Let the people who watched me on the first two take the lead and just send out two remote units at a time. I’ll leave you captains to figure out how best to deploy the teams and get them the shifters. I’m going to keep getting rid of these things.”

They moved on to the next device as three were taken care of in the north. They cleared their next one and

the one after thirty minutes later. They spent a good ten minutes looking for the next one in line. It was hidden behind a chunk of drifting ice. They cleared it and moved on. The next four were easy and one of the strings up north was completed.

Another boat came by and picked up the shifters they would need to start their own run. That boat shared a batch with the third sub and now they had Luc's boat coming from one end, another starting at the other end and the last one working its way out from the middle. The other two teams cleared their first bombs as Luc cleared another two. Some of the bombs took a few minutes and some took time to find and then melt the ice that had encased them. They all carried on slow and steady for a few more hours. The north announced they were finished.

Luc let the other sub drivers do their share as they continued to cruise through the work. Finally, Luc reached the other team and were finished. The last team only had two remaining. They waited on station until they were done. They announced completion and Luc made the announcement to everyone. President Schaffer wanted to say a few words, "To the dedicated men and women who train for these horrible scenarios, I give you your country's thanks. Once again, you stepped up to the line. You are the needle and thread that keeps this world woven together. I salute you all."

Luc was suddenly tired and laid down in an open bunk for a moment. Four hours later, Les nudged him awake and said, "Hey, pal, time to catch our next ride. Where we headed?"

He looked at his watch and decided, "Atlantis."

To Infinity and Beyond

They left the sub and got aboard a small skiff to take them to the huge destroyer sitting right next to them. The captain was there to meet them as they boarded the ship. He led them into the heart of the destroyer to the mess hall. They went into the officer's mess hall and had dinner with them. The captain was a chatty fellow and Luc let Les do most of the talking. They finished just as they met up with the carrier. They said goodbye, thanked the captain for his hospitality and boarded another skiff for another cold short ride. When they were onboard the carrier, that captain insisted on having them come inside before they left. He had set up a small celebration for them with his senior staff. They toasted Luc and Les to loud applause from the crew. They stayed and mingled for a few minutes until a group of pilots cornered Luc. The one who had flown his jet said, "General Champion, I love your aircraft. Can you get them into production for us? We all want them. Or can be borrow yours?"

They all laughed and Luc said, "Captain, if you loan me a Hornet, I will leave my personal toy with you for a while."

The pilots started giving themselves high-fives all around. The captain said, "I don't see how I can argue with that deal. Done, sir."

The pilots erupted into cheers and whistles. Luc asked the captain if they could go to his cabin. When they arrived and had taken seats, the captain pulled out a bottle of scotch. "You a scotch man, Champion?"

"No, not much of a drinker. But, I'll have one with you."

He smiled and poured Luc a stiff one, just like his. Luc downed his and said, "That's smooth." The captain finished his and started to put it away. Before he could, Luc said, "Let's have another. And keep the bottle out. We did just stop the end of the world. You know?"

They had another shot and Luc pulled out his phone. Luc pressed a speed dial button and put the phone on speaker. When it was answered, Luc said, "Hello, Charlie."

"Hello, Luc. Thanks for saving the world."

The captain realized who Luc was talking to and almost choked on his next shot. He was turning a nice shade of red and Luc felt nothing.

"You are welcome. I was looking at the new Atlantis and I think it will be far enough along in two days to accommodate a lot of people and ships. Everything will have to be done in tents and temporary buildings, but what do you say to having a party?"

"Wow. A party... Why not?"

"Let's get the Hollywood people to turn it into a huge international gala like the Olympics. We play down the saving the world from destruction thing and focus on a wonderful new friendly country being born."

"Wonderful. Let's make it a week-long event and we can celebrate their new constitution by establishing embassies and all that U.N. official stuff. Sounds like a job for Duncan."

“I was just thinking that.”

The initial construction was finished by the time the party kicked off with all the ship docks fully functioning and occupied. Luc and his family participated, but were fairly secluded from the press. There were balls and parties going night and day for two weeks. Over four hundred thousand people came and went. Cruise ships were brought in to accommodate the crowds and makeshift buildings were everywhere for the parties. Every country on Earth sent official representatives and everyone had to sit through speech after speech after speech. It finally ended with celebrations all over the globe, like a super New Year's Eve.

Everything returned to the new normal and Luc took his family home to rest. They stayed hidden for a week and then Luc called up his science buddies to continue working on their pet project. They had been interrupted by the Atlantis discovery and all were anxious to get back to the work. They were not sure where this work would take them, but with the discovery of the parallel dimension, they were hopeful their research would take them somewhere amazing. They had made major headway understanding the origins of space and time.

It didn't take long before they clearly understood some very, very important ideas. They believed when the current universe began with a bang, that tiny spec of infinitesimal matter burst out in a perfectly round ever-expanding explosion. Along with it came time, the fourth dimension. The first three dimensions are height, width and depth. The physical manifestation of time sits outside of the other three. It too is an ever-expanding sphere and, interestingly enough, had the same kind of reaction to gravity that our three dimensions had on blobs of matter. Gravity turned them into galaxies and, inside those galaxies, star systems with planets and moons. The time sphere is filled with bubbles that make ripples around us. The ripples would make it possible to surf to a different point in time if there was a way to leave the boundaries of the first three dimensions and get to the fourth.

Leaving the three dimensions behind is quite simple really. All one had to do was become subatomic. Simple, isn't it? One might shrink down by compressing the space between an atom's nucleus and the outer shell of electrons. However, that would still leave the electrons, neutrons and protons in your atoms the same size. But, if you can actually shrink the entire atom including the physical size of the pieces, then you have a special kind of matter that is subatomic. Assuming you could generate a field of significant volume to hold something the size of a car, then you could be outside the boundaries and confines of the three dimensions and surf the ripples of time.

Eight of the brightest minds from around the world and in outer space would start work each day and go for hours and hours discussing mathematical proofs of theories that were now concrete and proven facts. They ran into several dead ends along the way but never for one instant gave up. Every one of them felt that a breakthrough was imminent. They usually worked in the virtual world of the 3D holographic projection system

with ideas and models displayed for them to pick apart and build up. They had reached a point where none of them had any more ideas on what to look at next. It was frustrating and they were feeling like they may have to wait and let everyone solidify their ideas. Luc was walking around the large model of the universe they had built, when he said, “It looks like we need to take a few months off and rethink our direction.” They were all saddened by that prospect, but they were simply at a standstill.

Luc shut down the large universe projection and was saying goodbye to his friends when he noticed a small piece of paper on the floor. He didn’t think much of it as he picked it up. Everyone was still online making plans as he read what was on the note.

The note was written in Luc’s own hand and read, “Luc, keep working. You are close.” It was signed by him and dated June 2, 2037.

The End