

STARDRIVE:Promethea

John Work

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CHAPTER 1 – RUNNING

Just staying on her feet was a challenge as Ellen trotted unsteadily down the game trail. Twice in the last few minutes she had almost fallen into the deep ravine as her boots slid on the loose stones. Recreational running at home hadn't prepared her for this.

There, she ran three miles in under thirty minutes every other day. Running on flat streets and pathways at sea level in suburban San Diego, she had a full water bottle and wore jogging shoes, shorts, a tank top, and a sun visor. There, as she ran, she thought about her circuit diagrams and the devices she was designing and of traveling to the stars.

Here, she had lost all sense of distance, but she had been running now for almost three hours. Following rough, undulating, mountain trails in the Bitterroot National Forest, she had an empty canteen and wore hiking boots, baggy cargo pants, a sweat-soaked flannel shirt, and a baseball cap - and she had a pack on her back and a shotgun clutched in both hands. Here, she thought only of escaping the men who were pursuing and trying to kill her.

Each breath was agony, and a stitch was beginning in her right side. Her heart was beating so hard from fear and exertion that it felt like her whole body was throbbing. Her arms burned with fatigue from the weight of the small shotgun, and she was barely able to keep it at waist level, making running on the treacherous footing of the game trail even more difficult. To her left, a dark pine forest

swept up the steep slope above her; to her right, a deep, rocky ravine descended into the valley below. The game trail was narrow and rough, a barely visible trace running down the boundary where the forest met the edge of the ravine. It was a cool day in late April, somewhere near the Montana-Idaho border, and even though it was nearly noon, the sun was only now starting to burn off the gray clouds that hung above in the treetops and smothered the ridge behind her. Twenty feet ahead the path vanished to the left behind the trees; the view of the distant valley seen over the edge of the trail made it seem as though she was about to run off into space.

As she glanced over her shoulder for a last check on the trail behind, she tripped on an exposed root. Suddenly she was falling headlong toward the shear drop. She lost her grip on the shotgun, and it flew ahead and down into the ravine as she sprawled to a stop at the edge. The shotgun clattered, once, twice, and faintly again, as it bounced down the rocky, near-vertical slope. Then there was silence. Lying facedown in a mixture of dirt, stones, and pine needles, all she could hear was her sobbing breathing and pounding heart.

Maybe she had finally escaped them, but she doubted it. She thought briefly about looking for the shotgun, but she knew she didn't have the strength to climb down into the ravine, much less to climb back up. Anyway, the shotgun was no match for the rifles the soldiers were carrying. She couldn't run much farther, but she certainly couldn't stay here, lying on the ground in plain sight. She pushed up and paused a moment on hands and knees, her head hanging down, before struggling wearily to her feet. After another look backwards, she rounded the bend and began trudging down the trail. As the pain in her side subsided and she began to catch her breath, she gradually picked up her pace.

She'd shot and killed the man! It had been so sudden and so unexpected – and so horrible. She wanted to forget, but it kept replaying in her mind like a bad dream. She knew nothing about firearms, but the old man at the country store had insisted that she accept his gift of the shotgun. “You may need it for hunting or protection,” he'd said. After showing her how to load and shoot the little single-shot, he'd also given her a box of shells. She hadn't imagined being able to shoot anything, either for food or for

defense, but after the Chinese attack, nothing was certain. So she had carried the shotgun slung over one shoulder, loaded and ready, just in case. Then early this morning she'd been nearing the lake. As she'd come out of the trees into a large meadow, there'd been the soldier, standing only twenty feet away. The bad dream replayed once more.

As she stopped in surprise and uncertainty, he said something sharply in Chinese and started toward her. Icy fear rushed through her arms and legs, and at the same time she felt flushed and faint. She managed to croak in a stranger's voice, "Stop or I'll shoot," as she backed away, un-slinging the shotgun. There was a soft metallic clack as she reflexively followed the old man's instructions to cock the hammer before shooting. *How did I remember that?* The soldier just laughed contemptuously and kept coming. As he reached toward the barrel, the gun boomed, and he was lifted off his feet and thrown backwards to the ground. She stood there in shock, staring at the bloody hole in his chest and at the pool of blood spreading on the ground from beneath him. Now she felt nauseous and chilled all over. There was a faint roaring in her ears, and dimly, she heard distant shouts. Several hundred yards away, beyond the meadow and on the other side of a broad, dry streambed filled with large boulders and thick brush, she saw more soldiers. One raised his arms, and she heard a sharp snap as a bullet broke the sound barrier over her head, followed by the faint sound of a gunshot. An instant later another bullet ricocheted off a rock a few feet away. She shook off her paralysis and started running.

She'd been running ever since, except for a brief to stop to lighten her pack and reload the shotgun. She'd thrown away her tent, extra clothes, and most of her food; she'd kept her sleeping bag, jacket, mess kit, and the box of shotgun ammunition. Her hands had been shaking as she broke open the shotgun's action, ejecting the spent hull. After clumsily inserting a new shell and closing the action as the old man had shown her, she had resumed running. Somewhere along the way she'd lost her map, and she no longer knew where she was or where she was going. As she ran, following game trails and open spaces between the trees, her course had taken her up over the cloud-covered ridge she was now descending. In the beginning she had heard occasional shouts behind her, but for the

past hour she had seen and heard nothing; the swirling mist had dampened all sounds and at times had made just seeing the trail difficult. It wasn't until a few minutes before her fall that the trail had descended out of the clouds.

Now that the fog was gone and she was around the bend in the trail, she could see that the ravine ended several hundred yards below in a small meadow. The dried, yellow grass covering the meadow made it look like a sandy beach at the edge of the dark green ocean of pine trees that filled the valley. Over a mile away, a low, rocky ridge rose like an island out of the trees. She was still too exhausted to resume running, but maybe she could hide in the forest. She wanted to drop her pack, but that would mean admitting that she had no chance to survive. Without the shotgun and with only a few packets of freeze-dried food in her pack, her chances weren't good anyway, but she wasn't ready to give up. Not yet. She walked more quickly, eager to reach the forest and wishing she could find some water. She was very thirsty, and she'd emptied her canteen over an hour ago.

When she reached the bottom of the ravine, she left the game trail and broke into a weary trot across the meadow toward the safety of the forest. Here and there she could see the first green shoots of spring pushing up through the dead, yellow stalks. There was no wind, and the only sound was the swish and crackle of the brittle grass underfoot. The sky was a clear blue with scattered puffs of clouds, and the noonday sun felt pleasantly warm on her hands and the back of her neck. In spite of everything, she couldn't help thinking how peaceful and beautiful it seemed. Surely she'd lost them. When she got into the trees, she could slow down. They wouldn't be able to find her there, even if they were still following her. She had to find some water and get some rest.

Just as she reached the edge of the trees, she gave a startled yelp at the loud smack of a bullet hitting a trunk a few feet away. The echoing sound of the gunshot followed a split second later as she plunged into the forest and began running between the tall pines. She realized she wasn't going to make it. She'd keep running, and she wouldn't give up, but she was already gasping for breath. With the sun completely hidden by the dense treetops, she rapidly lost all sense of direction in the gloom of the forest. The slender, closely-

spaced, gray trunks looked nearly black in the dim light and were almost bare of branches for their first ten feet in height. There was very little undergrowth of any kind, and the ground was covered with a dark brown layer of dry needles and half-buried pinecones. As she ran, she could hear nothing but her labored breathing and the occasional crunch as she stepped on a pinecone.

Something inside wouldn't let her quit. She couldn't have said whether it was fear of dying or just stubbornness. Her situation certainly seemed hopeless - death and destruction all around and death in close pursuit. Everyone she knew and loved was dead, and the country was devastated. Millions of people were dead. Jacob was dead, and now they would never finish the work they had started. They'd been so close! In a few more days they would have begun building the prototypes. If the prototypes had worked as expected, *everything* would have changed. Mankind would have entered a new era, but now that wouldn't happen. The carefully laid out circuit diagrams and drawings, the results of over four years of work, were sitting on her desk in San Diego, and Jacob was dead, and she was alone in the wilderness being hunted like an animal. It was a waking nightmare. How had it all come to this? Everything *had* changed, but not in any way that she could have imagined. Mankind was indeed entering a new era, but it would be one of death and enslavement, not one of limitless power and travel to the stars. Jacob was dead! He had been such a gentle, kind, and brilliant man. Tears filled her eyes, but she shook her head and tried to concentrate on running and not falling as she dodged between the trees.

CHAPTER 2 – RESCUE

A shot echoed faintly in the distance. Frank and Max were standing on a rocky slope that was thinly covered with grass, brush, and young pine trees. Lying scattered about were a few large logs, most over two feet in diameter, gray and smoothed by years of sun and rain, remnants of an older forest destroyed by fire many years before. About seventy yards below at the base of the slope was a broad, shallow stream gleaming dully in the sunlight as the clear water undulated quietly and smoothly over the rounded, brown stones of its bottom. A small, grassy clearing separated the stream from a thick forest of pine and budding aspen that extended south across the valley to a tree-covered ridge wrapped in gray wisps of cloud over a mile away. Overhead, the clear sky was dotted with a few cotton-ball clouds, but a cool breeze was beginning to blow from the west, where there was a dark band of storm clouds on the horizon.

The shot had come from somewhere in the valley; Frank wasn't sure of the direction or the distance. He took cover behind a nearby log and studied the trees beyond the clearing. Max, a large Saint Bernard, padded over and lay down in the dry grass beside him. Was the shooter an American survivor or a member of a Chinese hunting party? Frank didn't want to get involved in either case, but he and Max might be seen if they started back up the open slope behind them. He thought they'd better stay under cover and

see what happened. It was noon and wouldn't be dark for another six hours. If necessary, they could wait and move then. He leaned his rifle, an M1 Garand, against the log, shucked his pack, and got out a canteen and some dried venison. After tossing Max a strip of meat, he chewed on another as he continued studying the trees. If this was a Chinese hunting party, he wanted to keep an eye on them anyway. Wouldn't do to have them get too close to his cabin.

He wanted to avoid contact with anyone, particularly the Chinese, but now he was especially glad he had brought the M1. During World War II and Korea, it had been the principal US Army infantry weapon, a semi-automatic rifle firing .30-06 cartridges fed from an eight-round clip. It was an adequate rifle for the deer and elk he was hunting, but more important now, it was a proven combat weapon and with this rifle he felt that he could hit whatever he could see. This was his first hunting trip since the attack over a week before, and he had wanted to be ready for anything. He couldn't imagine what the Chinese would be doing in such a remote area, but he couldn't afford to take any chances. Too bad, he thought. This would have been a great hunting spot. He would have an easy shot at any elk or deer that came into the clearing below to graze or drink from the stream. But until he knew who had fired that shot, hunting was over for the day.

After an hour, Frank was starting to get drowsy as the overhead sun warmed him through his jacket despite the coolness of the air. There had been no signs of movement in the forest. Max was sleeping, sprawled on his side in the grass behind the log. In the stillness, broken only by the occasional croak of a raven or the shrill whistle of a hunting hawk, Frank could barely hear the murmur of the stream below. Suddenly he saw someone wearing a baseball cap and loose-fitting clothing running from the trees across the clearing toward the stream. The runner stumbled and fell, but scrambled up and kept running. At the edge of the stream, the runner dropped and without removing his cap, plunged his head into the stream and drank thirstily. Water streamed from the bill of the cap as he hopped up and began wading across, moving slowly in the knee-deep water and occasionally slipping on the rocky bottom. He was halfway across when the silence was shattered by a burst of automatic weapons fire from the trees. Bullet strikes made fountains dance

across the stream, and the runner went down with a splash as a five-man squad of Chinese soldiers came trotting into the clearing. The runner struggled back up and continued with faltering steps toward the bank. Max had leapt to his feet at the sound of shots and now gave a deep growl. Frank saw that the runner's cap had come off. Water flew from swinging, shoulder-length hair and drenched clothes clung to what was obviously the figure of a woman. She fell forward into the water as the soldiers began to rush toward her.

Everything seemed to move in slow motion. Frank felt like he was looking through a dark tunnel, seeing nothing but the soldiers, brightly lit and magnified in sharp focus. He had raised the M1 without thinking, and his first shot took down the leading soldier. As the others skidded to a stop in surprise, his second shot hit the last man in line, and while the remaining three crouched and began shooting wildly he fired again and saw the dirt jump as the bullet hit a few inches to the left of his target. "Down Max!" he said without taking his eyes off the Chinese, not seeing that Max was already racing down the slope towards the woman. The soldiers saw him now, and he heard sharp snaps and thuds as bullets flew over his head or hit the log in front of him. He fired again, and one of the crouching figures was thrown backwards to the ground. The last two soldiers jumped up and fired full-auto as they retreated for the cover of the forest. He shot the one nearest the trees and felt something slap his left arm as he was firing at the last man. His shot missed, but he fired again and the man collapsed at the edge of the clearing.

He watched the fallen men and the border of the forest as he took a loaded clip from his jacket pocket. Holding the clip between his thumb and forefinger, he pulled back the operating rod handle with three cupped fingers to eject the last round. The bolt locked back in the open position with a solid clack, and the empty clip came out with the metallic 'ching' that was a characteristic of the M1. He inserted the loaded clip, pressing it down with his thumb while holding the operating rod handle back with his stiffened fingers. When the clip was fully seated and his thumb was clear, he released the handle and the bolt slid forward, loading the first round.

As he continued to watch for any sign of movement, he heard his heart thudding and his ears ringing in the sudden silence. He no longer had tunnel vision, and time had resumed its normal pace. The

sharp odor of gun smoke was in the air, and he felt a dull ache in his left shoulder. He glanced down and saw blood on the sleeve of his jacket. Just a graze, he thought as he cautiously moved his shoulder. Looking back toward the clearing, he was surprised to see Max tugging at the woman's backpack as he pulled her onto the near bank of the stream. After watching the tree line and the bodies in the clearing for another minute, Frank slipped on his pack and began to move carefully down the slope, his rifle ready. By now the pain in his shoulder was getting sharper, but it didn't seem to be bleeding too badly.

When he reached the stream, he saw Max standing over the motionless woman lying facedown half out of the water. "Good boy, Max," Frank said softly. He continued to watch the clearing while he edged over to crouch a few feet from the prone figure.

"I'm a friend," he said quietly. "Are you badly hurt?" No answer, no movement. His eyes flicked back and forth between the woman and the clearing. Only one of her hands was visible, but she didn't seem to be armed. He shifted so he could nudge her gently with the barrel of his rifle. She didn't stir, but a slow, slight rise and fall of her pack showed that she was still breathing. Watching the other side of the stream, he cradled the M1 in his left arm and grabbed the straps of her backpack with his right hand. As he pulled her out of the water, he rolled her onto her right side, facing away from him, so that he could see her hidden left hand. With her back to him and his hand still gripping the straps, attacking him would be difficult if she had a weapon and wasn't really unconscious. But the left hand was empty, and she was limp and only gave a little moan as he moved her. Now he could see that she'd been hit in her left hip and her right arm. Both wounds looked superficial and there wasn't much blood. She was either unconscious or 'playing possum', but before he could take care of her, he had to make sure that all of the soldiers were dead and that they were alone.

"Stay," he said to Max. Then he waded carefully across the stream, holding the rifle at the ready and half expecting to get shot at any second. When he got to the other side, he began checking each man. One was still alive, but shot in the belly and not likely to live. Frank had no choice, but shooting armed men in the heat of the moment was a completely different thing from shooting a helpless,

wounded man at close range. It took all his will to point the rifle at the man's heart and shoot him again. The man jerked and lay still as Frank grimaced and moved to the next man. When he had checked them all, he followed their trail for about a hundred yards into the forest. There was no sign of anyone else; no movement and no sounds except the wind sighing in the trees. The storm clouds had moved in from the west during the last hour; it was getting darker, and it would probably start raining soon. Good news and bad news, he thought. The storm would help cover their tracks, but it would make traveling more difficult. This time of year, the rain could easily turn to snow, and he could feel the temperature dropping. By now, his shoulder was really hurting, and the upper sleeve of his jacket was damp with blood. He was starting to feel a little light-headed as the adrenaline wore off. He'd never killed anyone before. He was trembling and feeling a little sick as he sat on a fallen tree. He shook his head and concentrated on taking a few slow, deep breaths as he watched the forest around him. It was only eight days since the Chinese had slaughtered tens of millions of Americans. He was faintly surprised that he felt no satisfaction in killing the men. The emptiness and desolation he felt was as untouched as a desert by a single drop of rain. After a few moments he stood up and went back to the clearing. A storm was coming, and he still had to tend to the woman and hide the bodies somehow. And then they had to get out of here before anyone else showed up. So much for not getting involved, he thought.

He stopped in the clearing and removed wound-dressing kits from the belts of three of the soldiers. Recrossing the stream, he knelt beside the woman, taking care to face the clearing so he could watch for other enemies. After laying down the M1, he pulled off his pack and took out a poncho, which he spread on the ground next to her. Raising her limp body to a sitting position, he slipped off her backpack, and then picked her up and eased her onto her back on the poncho. She had been grazed on the outside of her left hip and on the inside of her right arm. As he pulled out his knife, intending to cut her clothing away from the wounds, he thought about the approaching storm and the falling temperature. After checking her pack and seeing no clothing other than a lightweight down jacket, he realized he'd better do this another way.

Working quickly, he unbuckled her belt and unbuttoned her baggy, khaki cargo pants. He rolled her onto her right side and carefully pulled the pants down past the wound on her hip. Hope she doesn't wake up now and take this the wrong way, he thought as he glanced back across the clearing before checking the wound. The bullet had cut a shallow furrow about three inches long on the outside of her leg in the fleshy area where her thigh met her hip just below the material of her underwear. After cleaning and dressing the wound, he eased the pants up over the bandage and rolled her onto her back before unbuttoning her soaked, green and white-checked flannel shirt. Then, after turning her onto her left side, he pulled the shirt over her shoulder and slipped her right arm out of the sleeve. As he did, he noticed a large, fresh, circular bruise on her back just below the strap of her bra. After checking to be sure there wasn't a third wound, he cleaned and dressed the arm and worked it back into the sleeve. Rolling her onto her back, he tucked the shirt into her pants as best he could and then rebuttoned her clothing and buckled her belt. Both wounds had just been shallow furrows in the flesh. The arm wound was little more than a scratch; the hip wound was a little deeper. Neither was serious, and the bleeding was slowing even before he applied the dressings. Wondering about the bruise and why she was unconscious, he checked her pack again and saw a small hole with blackened edges in the lower, outside fabric. The bullet had been slowed by a box of shotgun shells and then stopped by a stainless steel mess kit. It had passed through the lower portion of the box of shells, striking the ends filled with lead shot and missing the powder and primers. The mess kit was badly dented on one side, and the shape and size of its other side matched the bruise on her back. The flattened slug was lying in the bottom of the pack. Pretty lucky, but why was she carrying a box of shotgun shells and no shotgun, he wondered? He removed the jacket from her pack and wrapped it around her before easing her back onto the poncho. She might be in shock, he thought, remembering his Boy Scout training. Her clothes were soaking wet, and the temperature was falling. Better keep her as warm as possible and elevate her feet using the pack.

As he put the pack under her feet, he noticed that she was beginning to come around. Her eyes opened, and she jerked and

clutched at the jacket, looking around wildly. “Who are you? There are soldiers chasing me! We have to run,” she said, trying to get up.

“Wait, hold on!” Frank said, speaking softly and pushing her gently back down. “I’m Frank Hawkins, and this is Max. We’re ok for a while. You’re hurt, but not seriously. First we’ve got to cover our tracks, and then get moving. What’s your name?” She saw a tall, fit-looking man bending over her. He had gray eyes and black hair and looked to be in his late thirties or early forties.

“My name is Ellen Hamilton. But what happened? The Chinese were chasing me, and then there were shots. My back hurts, and my hip and my arm. Ow!” she grimaced, as she started to move again.

“You’ve been shot up a little, but you’ll be fine. You were grazed on your hip and your arm, but I’ve dressed the wounds and the bleeding has mostly stopped. The wounds aren’t serious. You were lucky. Your mess kit and that box of shotgun shells in your pack saved your life. They stopped a bullet that hit your pack; just bruised your back and knocked the wind out of you.”

“But, the soldiers?”

“I killed them while Max was pulling you out of the water. Do you know how many were following you? I backtracked a little ways and didn’t see anyone else. I’ve got to hide the bodies somehow so we won’t be followed. Can you move?” She nodded, looking at him with amazement. Who *is* this guy, she wondered? He just killed those soldiers and seems so calm and matter-of-fact about it. And he dressed my *wounds*? She felt the ache in her arm and hip and flushed as she looked down and realized that the bandages were *under* her clothes.

He helped her up and guided her over to the base of a nearby pine. Nice looking woman, he thought as he helped her sit under the tree. Her wet clothes clung to a slender but well-curved figure like a swimsuit model’s. Dark brown, shoulder-length hair framed an oval face with a high forehead, well-defined cheekbones, and a strong, but delicate jaw. Thin eyebrows arched over striking violet eyes, and her small mouth and full lips beneath a slightly upturned nose lightly dusted with freckles gave her a sexy, girl-next-door look. In her direct and appraising gaze, he could see strength, determination, and intelligence. Despite being wet, dirty, and exhausted, she had a cool,

elegant, understated beauty. Pretty calm for someone who almost got killed a few minutes ago, he thought. What's she doing out here by herself, and why were these guys chasing her?

"Sit here while I take care of the bodies. There's food and water in my pack – just help yourself. You'll need your strength when we start moving in a little bit. Max will stay with you. Can you shoot a rifle?"

"No," she said, shaking her head and thinking of the man she'd killed. "I'm afraid not".

"We'll just have to hope we don't have any more visitors then," Frank said with a faint smile. He moved the poncho, their packs, and the M1 over beside her under the tree. "If it starts raining, use the poncho to cover yourself and our gear as best you can. In the meantime, while I'm taking care of the bodies, you should get the spare shirt out of my pack and put that on instead of your wet one. I saw you didn't have any extra clothing - which is why I didn't cut your pants and shirt to dress your wounds. But we can't build a fire right now to dry yours out. If you put on my shirt and your jacket and stay under the poncho, you'll warm up and dry out some before we have to leave. After you've finished drinking, you might want to refill our canteens in the stream over there.

"Oh, and maybe you'd like a little hot tea or coffee," he said squatting down and taking a canteen heater stove and a small fuel bar from his pack. "I have a couple of packages of instant and a canteen cup here in the pack. You can use the stove and fuel bar to heat up some water. There're matches in there, too."

He removed a belt carrying a holstered pistol from his pack and buckled it around his waist as he walked over to the bank of the stream. About thirty yards to his right, a small gully cut into the bank. As he walked upstream, he could see that the gully was full of rocks and boulders that had come down from an outcropping above. He clambered up the gully, stepping from rock to rock, and soon found what he wanted: a place directly below the outcropping where several large boulders formed a roofless pocket about five feet wide. Returning to the clearing, he began removing the soldiers' gear, putting their weapons and equipment belts in a pile. On the squad leader he found a GPS location transmitter used to help his commander track their movements. On another man he found the

squad's radio. He made a separate pile of the radio and transmitter and the two remaining wound dressing kits. He paused, and then selected a rifle, a pistol, some grenades, and ammunition from the large pile and added them to the smaller one.

Next he hoisted one of the men onto his right shoulder in a fireman's carry and took him across the stream to the gully and up to the opening between the boulders. After dropping the body there, he returned to the clearing and repeated the process until all the soldiers were piled between the boulders. Then he scouted the clearing once more, picking up all the brass shell casings he could find and using a pine branch to try to erase any signs of the skirmish. Satisfied that he'd done the best he could, he gathered up the equipment belts and weapons and threw them and the brass he'd collected in with the pile of bodies.

By now there was thunder and lightening all around. The wind was blowing harder, and it was starting to rain lightly. He took two grenades from the pile of weapons and climbed up onto the outcrop, fifteen feet above. After finding a gap in the rocks a few feet back from the edge, he pulled the pin on one of the grenades, dropped it in the gap, and ducked behind a nearby tree. The grenade went off with a muffled thump, and a section of the outcrop fell into the gully, burying the pocket where the bodies and weapons were piled in a heap of rock and a shower of stones.

He climbed back down and made sure that the bodies and weapons were completely hidden. Then he crossed the stream once more, retrieved the small pile of equipment he'd left there, and crossed back over to Ellen and Max. On the way he noticed her dark green baseball cap caught in some brush at the edge of the stream; he stooped and scooped it up, shaking it and slapping it lightly against his leg as he walked.

"Feeling better?" he asked as he handed her the soggy cap. As he had suggested, she had spread the poncho over herself and their gear and was wearing her jacket over his dark brown wool shirt. She had eaten a few pieces of jerky and a trail bar she found in his pack, and when she'd seen him preparing to carry the first body up the gully, she'd hurriedly refilled both their canteens from the stream. Now she was sitting next to Max under the tree and had both hands wrapped around a steaming canteen cup of tea.

“I’m okay. But you’re *bleeding*! I’m sorry. I didn’t see that before. Are you hurt badly? Let me bandage that for you,” she said setting down the cup.

“Okay,” Frank said, wincing as he took off his jacket. “I think the bleeding has stopped, but I guess we better take care of it before we start off.” He sat beside her and draped the poncho loosely over their heads. After handing her one of the dressing kits, he took off his shirt and turned to let her examine the wound.

“Doesn’t look too bad,” she said. “Just a nasty gouge in the shoulder muscle. The bleeding’s stopped, but I’m sure it still hurts.” She cleaned and dressed the wound with crisp, sure movements as though it was something she did every day.

“You seem to know what you’re doing there,” he said as he put on his shirt and jacket.

“While I was in college, I took some courses and worked as a nurse’s aide in the local hospital to earn extra money,” she replied. “I didn’t treat any gunshot wounds, but changing dressings was pretty routine.”

It was raining harder. The pine boughs kept most of the water off Max, and Frank and Ellen huddled together under the poncho as he put the Chinese pistol, grenades, ammunition, and dressing kits in his pack and removed a plastic sandwich bag and some fishing line. He looked around under the tree where they were sitting and picked up a chunk of wood several inches long and a little thicker than his wrist.

“What are you doing?” she asked, sipping her tea as she watched him work. She was feeling better after eating and drinking, and her pants were starting to dry out. She felt soothed by the warmth of the cup in her hands and the patter of rain on the poncho. She was tired and sore, and except for the possibility of more Chinese, it would be very pleasant to lean back against the tree and nap for a while. Despite being here with a complete stranger, for the first time in days, she felt safe.

“This is a location transmitter I took off one of the soldiers,” he said. “It continuously monitors the GPS coordinates of the squad and transmits them to their unit command center. If we leave it here or destroy it, the Chinese will come right to this spot looking for their men. I’m going to seal it in this sandwich bag to help

waterproof it and then use this piece of wood as a 'boat' to float it down the stream. I'll tie the bagged transmitter on one side of the wood and this rock on the other. The rock will act as ballast to keep the transmitter above the water - at least most of the time. It should keep transmitting, and with some luck, it'll drift downstream miles from here before water or a low battery cause it to stop. That should throw any search party far enough off that they won't be as likely to find the bodies."

After finishing his work, he got up, waded to the center of the stream, and put the bundle into the water. He watched it disappear around a bend in the stream before returning to Max and Ellen. "I'm sorry, but now we have to get moving," he said as he reached down to help to her feet. "No telling when some more soldiers will show up. We need to start back to my place, and we've got a long way to go. How are you feeling now?"

"I'm okay. I'm exhausted, and I hurt, and I've been running from those guys all morning, but other than that I'm ready," she said gamely with a faint smile that momentarily wiped the fatigue from her face. "I know we have to keep moving and get away from here. Do you really live near here? Is it safe? Can't they find us there?" She put on her sodden cap and held the poncho up with one hand to partially shield them from the rain. They had to raise their voices slightly to make them heard over the sounds of the wind, rain, and occasional clap of thunder.

"I have a house about ten miles from here. They probably won't find us if we don't attract their attention. Hopefully they won't find the bodies and won't have a reason to come looking for us. Are they hunting you for a particular reason?"

"Because I shot one of them," she said with a pained look. "This morning I was hiking along a trail and came out of the woods and there he was. He said something in Chinese and started toward me. I was carrying a shotgun, and I pointed it at him and told him to stay back. He just laughed and kept coming, and the gun went off, and he was dead! I don't know anything about guns, but I was terrified, and somehow it just happened. I was almost sick at what I'd done. I was standing there in shock, and I heard shouts, and I saw the others on the other side of a dry streambed, a few hundred yards away. They fired a few shots at me, and I ran. I've been

walking, running, and hiding ever since. I thought I'd gotten away, but about noon they shot at me again, and I was still running from them when you saved me. Thank you. They would have killed me."

"You're welcome, but I wasn't planning to save anyone. We heard a shot earlier, and we were just waiting under cover to see who was out there. I started shooting before I really thought about it, and you might have drowned anyway if Max hadn't pulled you out of the water. But I'm glad we could help. Now let's get going. It'll be dark soon. We should travel by night and rest by day. We should talk as little as possible and whisper when we do have to talk. We don't know if there are any more of them around. We can talk more when we get to the house. You'll need to carry the extra rifle; we may need it". She nodded. He put the Chinese radio in a jacket pocket. "Maybe we'll hear something if they start looking for you. Speak any Chinese?" She shook her head.

After repacking the pistol belt and the rest of his gear except the poncho, he helped her put on her pack. "My jacket's waterproof. You'll need this more than me," he said, shaking out the poncho before slipping it over her head and pulling it down over her pack. He removed the magazine from the Chinese rifle and cycled the action to eject the round from the chamber before reinserting the magazine, engaging the safety, and handing her the weapon. Then he picked up the ejected round and put it in his pocket, shrugged on his pack, picked up his M1, and the three of them started walking up the slope the way Frank and Max had come earlier. The wind and thunder masked the sound of their movements, and the rain washed away their tracks and finished Frank's attempts to hide the signs of the fight in the clearing and the bodies in the gully. The rain also caused the stream to swell, and the transmitter package was over twenty miles downstream before the transmitter finally came loose and sank to the bottom the next day.

They traveled most of the night, but moved more slowly than Frank hoped. Ellen was exhausted, and they had to stop frequently for short rests. Although his cabin was only about ten miles away as the crow flies, he was taking them on a roundabout path that doubled that distance to try to confuse anyone who might try to follow them. The cold rain stopped about 2 AM, but thunder still rolled distantly as the storm moved away to the east. A little before

dawn, they found a dense patch of trees and made camp. They spread their sleeping bags under the low-hanging branches of a large spruce, had a little dried venison and water, and both slept soundly for most of the day. When they woke, they ate and drank again, packed their gear, and waited without talking for night to fall. After dark, they started out again and made it to Frank's cabin late in the evening two days later. Lost in their own thoughts and trying to be silent to avoid detection by the Chinese, they said less than ten words during the whole journey.

Frank was wondering what he'd gotten himself into. He had killed the Chinese, and now he was bringing a stranger to the place where he'd lived in voluntary solitude for almost three years. He felt some regret for killing the soldiers, but he couldn't see that he'd had any choice. Even if he'd thought about it more before starting to shoot, what else could he have done? He couldn't just sit by and watch someone get murdered. And the Chinese had started this; it was kill or be killed, now. He'd lived with more than enough guilt ever since his wife, Shirley, and their three-year old daughter, Suzy, had been killed in a car accident. He'd been away on a business trip at the time, and he'd never been able to shake the idea that if he'd just been at home, it wouldn't have happened. Almost three years and he still missed them both terribly. No, he hadn't been there for Shirley and Suzy, but this time he'd done the right thing. No matter what happened next, he couldn't have done anything else.

He was amused at himself for feeling a guilty twinge of disloyalty at finding Ellen attractive. Been alone by myself up here too long, he thought. He liked looking at a beautiful woman as much as any man, and Ellen was sure to turn heads wherever she went, but no one could ever take Shirley's place. After what he and Shirley had shared, anything less seemed pointless and uninteresting. He'd never thought of himself as attractive to women, and he considered himself rather judgmental and even boring. The fact that he'd never had many close friends, male or female, was probably the proof of that. He thought of the lines, loosely translated, from one of Robert Burns' poems, "Would to God the gift he'd give us, to see ourselves as others see us". Oh, well. He was what he was. Shirley had loved him for what he was, and he had loved her deeply for that and for the fact that she was the best friend he'd ever had. She had what he

thought of as a 'shining soul'; she was brilliant, loving, and honest to a fault. She'd been physically attractive, but her inner beauty made her seem the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. It was her friendship he missed most. He didn't think he was ever going to get over losing her.

And as for finding Ellen attractive, he often found that as he got to know good-looking women better, they lost their physical appeal as he discovered that the inner woman wasn't as attractive as the outer shell. Though he had to admit that he was impressed at how Ellen was handling everything. He could tell she was exhausted and in pain, but she never complained, and he hadn't had to remind her to move quietly or not to talk unnecessarily. For now, he'd just have to take care of her as best he could and sort things out as they got to know each other better. As things now stood in the country, there probably wasn't much future for either one of them anyway.

Ellen was so tired, she found it difficult to do anything else but plod along after Frank and Max. But she did wonder who this man was and whether she should be following a stranger off to an unknown place in the wilderness. He could be anybody. He'd killed those soldiers and seemed completely unconcerned. What if she was following a killer or a wanted criminal to his hideout in the forest? He had saved her and treated her wounds, and he seemed like a decent man, but she was taking a big risk going with him. On the other hand, she didn't have much choice. Where else was she going to go? The Chinese *would* have killed her, and even if she'd gotten away, she still might have died out here by herself. At least now she had a chance. If Frank turned out to be a monster, maybe she could still get away. Or if he just turned out to be someone she didn't want to be around, maybe he would let her have some supplies, and she could go on – to where or to do what, she didn't know.

CHAPTER 3 -- THE GENERAL

Lieutenant General Ma Qiang of the Chinese People's Liberation Army relaxed in comfort in the executive jet flying high over the Pacific. His PLA 15th and 16th Airborne Army units had completed the process of seizing and securing American military bases in California, and he was flying to join them. Other than the pilot and co-pilot, the only other passenger on the plane was the General's aide, Colonel Liu, a short, wiry man who, like a good waiter, only appeared when he sensed some need of his master. The Colonel's primary duty on this flight was to refill the General's cup of tea from time to time.

The occupation was going smoothly. As anticipated, it had taken the General's engineers almost a week to repair the EMP damage to the bases' electrical systems and for his troops to remove the corpses of the enemy and bury them in mass graves. There had been a few survivors on the bases, but they had been so debilitated by radiation sickness that his soldiers had an easy time of killing them. They would be taking no prisoners; his men had orders to kill anyone in uniform regardless of whether they fought or tried to surrender. The American military must be completely exterminated. As expected, there was no residual radiation from the neutron bombs that had been used to neutralize the bases. But he had timed his arrival a week after his troops' - just to be sure.

It was a glorious time for the People's Republic of China, he thought as he leaned back in the luxurious, well-padded leather seat and took a sip of tea. Their victory had been total, surpassing their most optimistic expectations. The Americans had been taken completely by surprise. Over one hundred million enemy civilians had been killed. The American military was essentially wiped out; most of its personnel had been killed outright or had died from radiation poisoning within a few days of the attack, and the majority of its equipment had been disabled.

He smiled with satisfaction as he thought back over the events that had led to this glorious success. The Chinese had been preparing for this for over thirty years. But the sudden and shocking collapse of the Soviet Union in the early '90s had caused them to intensify their efforts and had strengthened their resolve to ruthlessly deal with the threat from the West. They had been determined not to repeat the Soviets' mistakes. The Soviet strategy of competition with the West would have only led the PRC to the same unpleasant defeat. And peaceful coexistence hadn't been an option; that would have eventually led to demands for democratic reforms and an end to rule by the Party, just as in the former Soviet Union.

Seeking other alternatives, they considered their military options, which initially didn't look promising. The only possibility seemed to be in launching a devastating surprise attack - but how? The MAD, mutually assured destruction, strategy used by the Americans had prevented even the powerful Soviet military from launching a first strike, and although the USSR was no more, the Americans still possessed their triad of nuclear forces: bombers, ballistic missiles, and nuclear submarines. Even if the PRC could mount a surprise attack, the consequences were unacceptable unless they could somehow insure that the American response would be weak or non-existent.

One of the most successful surprise attacks in history had been the Japanese attack on the Americans at Pearl Harbor. But it hadn't been decisive, and it had failed to win the resulting war. Even so, studying that attack and its aftermath caused the Chinese to conclude that a more aggressive attack, with better follow-up, might have succeeded in defeating the Americans. The Japanese just hadn't been bold enough. They had failed to destroy the American

carriers, and they had failed to seize and occupy Pearl Harbor. Destroying the carriers would have crippled the American Navy. But even more important, taking Pearl Harbor would have denied the Americans their principal base in the Pacific and would have created the opportunity for direct attacks on the United States. And even though the attack had been tactically successful, it would have failed if only the Americans' intelligence had been a little more effective or their military a little more alert. Obviously, any new attack on the United States would have to be different, better planned, and far more decisive. The PRC began to look for a way to deliver a first strike that would be a complete surprise and decisively defeat the United States, with little or no chance of a retaliation that might make the entire planet uninhabitable.

At first it seemed an impossible task, but that was precisely why it was likely to succeed. The Americans would never think that such a thing was possible because the Chinese had so many major military weaknesses. The PRC's army was large, but not suitable for mounting an invasion using conventional means. Their missile program was far behind the Americans' and the Soviets', and their air force and navy were totally inadequate to mount bomber strikes against the US or to carry, protect, and supply an invasion force across the Pacific. And China was relatively poor; the cost of competing with the West in all these military areas had broken the Soviets and was well beyond the means of the PRC.

But in a series of intense meetings during the year after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Chinese gradually began to put together a plan. Of course, the key element of such a plan was surprise. The Pearl Harbor attack was a surprise mainly because it made use of a new and previously untried weapon: the aircraft carrier. Even though the Americans had had carriers of their own, the military doctrine of that time hadn't adequately planned a defense against such an attack. Until Pearl Harbor, aircraft carriers had never been used in such a way. Inspired by this lesson, one of the Chinese military's junior planners had made a tentative suggestion that at first seemed ridiculous, but gradually gained support. The suggestion was that they attack the United States from outer space. Not using conventional ballistic missiles to launch warheads into space, which then rained down on the enemy. Instead

they would use satellite-launched weapons, pre-positioned months or years before the attack and disguised as weather, communications, or other types of peaceful satellites. This plan had a number of advantages. Like the use of aircraft carriers at Pearl Harbor, it made use of a new technology in a way that was previously untested and therefore unlikely to be adequately considered in defense planning. But its major advantages were in not requiring building up their army, navy, or air force units and in not competing with the West in a broad range of military and technological developments. They would continue to make modest improvements in their other military forces, but all that would be a diversion. For this plan, they would concentrate their real efforts in their 'peaceful' space program.

And the fall of the Soviets had created an opportunity for the PRC in this area. It was plain that the people of the United States were weary of the Cold War and competition with the Soviets. And now the Soviet threat was gone, and the Cold War was ended. For years the Americans' space program had been faltering. Without the goad of competition with a threatening enemy, it would likely have even less support from the American public in the future. The Chinese manned space program had been mostly unfunded during the '80s, but in 1992 they announced that they would resume funding the program and that they had new ambitions for peaceful space exploration. As they hoped, this news was little noted in the West. There was no indication from the Americans that a new space race would begin.

Then, it seemed that fate had smiled on the PRC. No sooner had they defined their plan than events occurred which enabled them to implement that plan more effectively and more quickly than they had ever expected. In 1993, the newly elected American Administration showed itself to be favorable to improving relations with the PRC. As a first step, it implemented new policies of 'Openness' and 'PRC Engagement'. The Openness policy resulted in large amounts of previously secret information being declassified and being made freely available to everyone, including the PRC. Much of the information that *was* still classified was passed to the PRC during the 'Lab-to-Lab' exchanges that were encouraged as part of the second new policy, PRC Engagement. As a result of

these American policies, a vast amount of classified and previously classified military information was obtained from the Americans, and very little actual espionage was necessary.

The policies were publicly justified as part of a diplomatic plan to end the nuclear arms race and ease international tensions. The Administration would promote world peace by getting all nations to sign a nuclear test-ban treaty. Next they would disclose many of America's nuclear secrets in order to bring all nations up to the same technical levels. With everyone at the same level and without the ability to test new weapons designs, the theory went, no new weapons would be developed, peace would be assured, and the arms race would be over. Well, the arms race is certainly over, the General thought as he gave a bark of laughter, which caused his aide to give him a curious glance.

There had still been the problem of the Americans' nuclear defense triad: the bombers, the missiles, and the submarines. The most difficult part of the problem was the existence of the American ballistic missile submarine force and its ability to strike back from unknown locations in the sea if the United States was attacked. The bombers, mostly an aging fleet of B52s built in the 1950s and 1960s, were the weakest 'leg' of the triad, but the land-based ballistic missiles were only slightly less threatening than the submarines.

The PRC had still been struggling with those problems when they were solved as a result of the 'Lab-to-Lab' exchanges of the new 'PRC Engagement' policy. These exchanges also created other unexpected opportunities that advanced the PRC's plan by at a decade or more. The submarine problem was solved when the PRC obtained plans for a secret radar system being developed by the Americans for tracking submarine movement from satellites. This ingenious system tracked the submarines by identifying very minute surface water disturbances caused by the movement of the subs, even while they were at great depths. Means to deal with the bomber and land-based missile problems were provided by other military secrets obtained through the 'Lab-to-Lab' exchanges: neutron and EMP, electromagnetic pulse, bomb technology and laser and other technology associated with the Americans' work on their 'Star Wars' or SDI, satellite defense initiative, program. Through these largely one-sided 'exchanges', they obtained classified detailed

design information for the latest American laser, missile, MIRV, missile defense, and nuclear weapons technology, including the miniaturized W-88 nuclear warheads and the enhanced radiation versions known as neutron bombs. By attacking the American military using a combination of satellite-launched EMP and neutron bombs backed up by a laser-powered, satellite-based missile defense system, they felt confident that the bombers and land-based missiles would no longer be a serious threat.

The secrets gained through the 'Lab-to-Lab' exchanges also enabled the PRC to speed up the implementation of the plan and to widen its scope in a way that ensured the decisive victory they were seeking. Their original plan had called for using conventional nuclear weapons and attacking only major military sites and large cities in order to intimidate the Americans and force their surrender. The MIRV, W-88 warhead, and neutron bomb technology made possible a much better alternative. Because of their new ability to make small, light bombs requiring less weapons grade material, the process of building the necessary number of bombs and secretly positioning them in orbit would take much less time. And the use of neutron bombs, which didn't produce large amounts of radioactive fallout and caused little damage to buildings and other infrastructure, coupled with the MIRV precision targeting capability, opened a new opportunity. They could broaden their attack to include all American military bases and large population areas and reap the benefits of seizing useful farmland and other assets in the conquered country. The miniaturized, precision-guided neutron bomb was the key to making a devastating attack that would completely destroy the Americans without the risk of spreading nuclear fallout and contamination over the entire globe, including China itself. Getting the Americans to surrender was no longer an objective. The objective now was nothing less than the total destruction of the United States and all of its citizens.

Another boost to their plan was the new Democrat Administration's implementation of more liberal trade policies with the PRC. This allowed them to purchase American supercomputers and high-precision machine tools used in F-15 and B-1 bomber production. One of the more important uses of the supercomputers was enabling them to test the neutron and EMP bombs by

simulation, eliminating the need for atmospheric or underground tests. Otherwise, the tests might have been detected and would have been in violation of the test-ban treaty the PRC eagerly signed in the mid-90s as evidence of their desire and intention to live peacefully with the West. The aircraft machine tools were necessary for the precision required in the construction of the miniaturized neutron bombs, a combination of the Americans' neutron bomb and W-88 warhead technologies. The machine tools also greatly improved the construction of the various components of their manned space program, the official justification for their purchase. Even though the PRC's acquisition of much of this material and secret information was later detailed in the 1999 American House of Representatives 'Cox Report', the American media downplayed it, the American public paid little attention, and the American government took no action.

To enhance the opportunities that these policies had provided and to take advantage of the American Left's strong anti-war and anti-military inclinations, the PRC stepped up its covert contributions to the Democrat Party. It also began actively bribing various politicians in both major parties. These actions helped promote economic and political policies toward the PRC that enabled them to get billions of dollars in foreign loans and investment for 'peaceful economic development'. Masked as wasteful spending and inefficient operations, much of that money was used instead to secretly fund their space and military development programs. They received vastly more money in loans than they invested in political contributions, and the progress of their plan accelerated as a result. They couldn't believe their good fortune as the Americans willingly provided the means and bore the major costs for their own destruction.

Despite the PRC's best efforts, in 2000 the Republican Party regained the White House. Initially that had little effect on the PRC's plans, and they weren't greatly concerned. But then came the September 2001 terrorist attacks that started the US 'War on Terror'. During the period after the first Gulf War, the American military had been reduced to nearly half of its former size. The Army had been reduced from eighteen divisions to ten, the Air Force had been cut from twenty-four fighter air wings to thirteen, and the Navy's

ships were reduced from five hundred forty-six to a little over three hundred. The American public had been lulled into a sense of complacency, thinking that the 'Cold War' was over. After the 9/11 attacks, there was a worrisome resurgence of patriotism and interest in national security and defense, and the Chinese had to quickly take steps to control the situation and turn it to their advantage.

Attempting to secure oil supplies needed for their growing economy, the PRC had already established good relationships with several countries in the Middle East. Their Islamic partners saw them as infidels, to be hated and destroyed as all infidels. But in the near term, they realized the Chinese were a useful economic, diplomatic, and military offset to the influence of the United States in the region – 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend'. So it only seemed natural for the PRC to begin secretly supporting and funding the Islamic terrorist groups as part of a struggle against their common enemy, the 'Great Satan'. This enabled the PRC to control both sides of the conflict. They monitored and influenced the activities of the terrorists, and at the same time they encouraged dissent and opposition to US military action by funneling more money to the American political parties and anti-war groups in the US and other parts of the world. To draw attention away from the War on Terror, they encouraged the North Koreans to create a 'nuclear crisis' that they eventually stepped in to 'mediate'. This was successful in blunting the focus on terrorism and in creating fears of escalating unilateral military action by a 'reckless and out of control' Republican Administration. It had the further side benefits of eventually leading to the withdrawal of American forces from South Korea, the weakening of US alliances in the area, and the creation of a public relations and foreign policy defeat for the Republican administration. Even though the Americans were successful in their second Gulf War, Operation Iraqi Freedom, the Republican administration only managed a narrow victory in the 2004 elections. Chinese covert support of terrorist groups and American opposition groups rendered the administration's second term ineffective and led to a sweeping Democrat victory in the 2008 elections. Chinese involvement in the terrorist organizations helped ensure small victories, but prevented major successes that would further arouse the Americans. As they expected, the American

public's support for the 'War on Terror' couldn't be maintained for an extended time in the face of high costs, continuing minor defeats, American combat casualties, unrelenting negative media coverage, and opposition from the political left. In retrospect, the Chinese viewed the 9/11 incident as another stroke of good fortune. It further dampened the American public's interest in military and foreign affairs and helped convince them that diplomacy and multinationalism was the proper approach to dealing with matters they wished to ignore. Fortunately, during all this, there were no real increases in American military power or force levels. In fact, the American military was actually weakened by their efforts in the 'War on Terror' and by the fierce resistance to increased military spending on the part of politicians and anti-war groups. Even the Republican Administration's somewhat feeble but alarming attempt to rekindle interest in the US space program was quickly squashed by members of both parties, citing more pressing domestic needs. The foolishness and weakness of the Americans was greatly encouraging to the PRC, but it only strengthened their resolve to eliminate the threat once and for all while the opportunity presented itself.

With the Democrats back in control after the 2008 elections and with apparent good relations between the US and China, the master plan continued without further problems. The PRC used its acquired knowledge and influence over the terrorist groups to insure that there would be no new incidents to distract the Americans' attention from their internal domestic affairs. Where the PRC couldn't buy off or otherwise control the terrorist leadership, they used their inside knowledge to ruthlessly exterminate them. The American media celebrated the sudden drop in terrorist attacks and loudly praised and credited the Democrats for their success in using diplomacy and multinational efforts to end them. Predictably, the Democrats quickly began downsizing the military and shutting down military bases. They also began a unilateral reduction in submarine forces and land-based ballistic missiles to provide evidence to the rest of the world that the United States would no longer be a threat to peace. They scrapped the fledgling US ballistic missile defense system as another sign of their commitment to world peace, and they completely eliminated the already weak American

NASA organization and all its projects in order to free up more money for social spending, even while China continued to vigorously expand their own 'peaceful' space program. The American media celebrated these enlightened moves, and the American public largely accepted them as they turned their attention inward to the national economy, government sponsored health care, tighter regulation of business, increased taxes for the rich, saving the environment, gun control, and other vital domestic issues.

The PRC's manned space program proved to be an excellent cover for the deployment of China's ballistic missile defense system, the submarine tracking system, and their own space station, which was really an orbiting weapons platform. Under the guise of weather and communications satellite launches and trips by their astronauts to their space station, over a period of less than six years beginning in 2005, the Chinese deployed their anti-satellite laser weapons, their own GPS and surveillance satellites, the submarine tracking satellites, the EMP bombs, and the thousands of neutron bombs needed for the attack. Great things were possible with a determination to succeed and hadn't the Americans themselves completed their Apollo program in an equally short period of time? After the elections of 2008, the Democrats even authorized the long blocked sale to China of the Boeing BC-17X heavy transport aircraft that had recently made possible the rapid transport of the General's personnel and equipment to the American bases they were now occupying. The General remembered that Comrade Lenin had coined a term 'useful idiots' for describing pro-Soviet flacks, apologists, and lickspittles in the capitalist West. The General smiled and raised his cup of tea in a mock tribute to the 'useful idiots' of America who had helped make the PRC's victory possible. Of course not all were idiots in that sense, he mused. Some were knowing accomplices who were foolish enough to think that whatever happened to the United States, they would always be part of the ruling elite. Almost all of both groups, idiots and fools, had lived or worked in the large metropolitan areas, and now most were dead. Any that had survived had less than a year to live, unless some of them were recruited as farm laborers. Unlikely, but wouldn't that be ironic, he thought with a wolfish smile. The self-anointed

intellectual elite of the United States bent over, toiling in the fields like Chinese peasants.

By the spring of 2012, they were ready to make their attack. The submarine tracking system was working so well that the Chinese knew at all times the locations of the less than ten American missile submarines that were on patrol in oceans around the world. The anti-satellite laser systems were ready and programmed to systematically destroy all non-Chinese satellites in orbit. Afterwards the same laser systems would be used as part of the PRC's ballistic missile defense system. And the EMP and neutron bombs were in position, disguised as weather and communications satellites, or as orbiting 'space debris' from discarded boosters, or hidden in the Chinese space station. Polls in the United States showed that the Democrats were on their way to another sweeping victory, and the Chinese continued to supply political funding as before to insure that no suspicions were aroused, even though they knew there would be no elections that fall.

The attack had been brilliantly planned and executed. It had begun at 1:30 PM EST on a Wednesday in the third week of April 2012 and was timed to catch the maximum number of people in the metropolitan areas. This not only enabled them to kill the largest number of people, it also tended to kill the most educated and well-trained portion of the population – important for reducing the amount of post-attack rebuilding of infrastructure in the event that the plan didn't go as well as expected.

The strike had begun with the detonation of six high-altitude EMP bombs – two over each coast and two over the center of the country. These were twenty-megaton hydrogen bombs that were especially designed to generate strong electromagnetic energy pulses. The bombs were detonated milliseconds apart to amplify the damaging effects of the electrical surges that rippled across the country. These pulses were harmless to the population, but they destroyed the majority of civilian electrical and electronic infrastructure. Power generation facilities, communications networks, radio and television broadcasting and receiving equipment, telephones, televisions, computers, and even the electrical systems of vehicles were overwhelmed and destroyed by the strong electrical surges that lasted only a fraction of a second.

Even most military electronic systems were destroyed, despite having been especially designed to resist this kind of attack. Many fighter aircraft were forced to crash as their flight control and engine electrical systems were disabled. Most surviving operational aircraft on the ground were unable to take off after the initial attack, due to the crippling of refueling, maintenance, and supply vehicles and systems. There was a complete power 'blackout' over the entire United States, and even most emergency backup systems were disabled. Roads all over the country were clogged with wrecked and disabled vehicles, trains coasted to a stop, and many commercial and civilian airplanes fell from the sky as their engines' failed due to the destruction of their electronic components and electrical systems. Surviving civilian airliners' communication and navigation equipment was destroyed, the national air traffic control system was disabled, truck and rail transportation systems were shut down, and the nation's banking and financial systems were obliterated as computer networks were destroyed and electronically stored information was erased. In one stroke lasting less than a second, the United States was set back technologically over a hundred and fifty years.

At the same time that the EMP bombs were released, long-orbiting Chinese 'weather' and 'communication' satellites used lasers to systematically destroy all non-Chinese satellites in orbit around the world in the matter of a few minutes. Except for China, global civilian and military satellite communications and observations ceased. Except for fiber-optic lines and a few surviving electronic systems, the American public and military were now deaf, dumb, and blind.

As a finishing touch to the first phase of the attack, the Chinese launched a precision-guided hydrogen bomb from their orbiting space station and detonated it, a few minutes after the EMP strike, a thousand feet in the air directly over the American White House. Congress was in session, and the PRC's ambassador to the United States was attending a pre-arranged meeting at the White House with the American President and her Cabinet officers to discuss future cooperation between the two countries. The whole first strike happened so quickly that there was almost no warning before the blast obliterated Washington DC. The sacrifice of the

unsuspecting ambassador and his embassy staff was unfortunate, but, after all, the PRC would no longer need an ambassador to the United States. These were the only Chinese casualties during the entire attack except for the unfortunate few who were visiting or traveling in the country. A plaque would be erected in Beijing in their memory. The strike on Washington was partially symbolic, but the destruction of the White House, Capitol Building, Pentagon, and all their occupants in the first minutes of the attack served the main purpose of disrupting the Americans' civilian and military command and control while the second phase of the attack was underway.

As expected, the Americans were thrown into great confusion. Some military communications survived the initial attack, but in the beginning it wasn't clear who was attacking or that there had even been an attack. For a few minutes it seemed to many that there had just been a massive power blackout and a temporary failure of communications. By the time they realized otherwise, it was already too late.

Chinese satellites carrying the precision-guided neutron bombs for the second phase of the attack began discharging their payloads immediately after the strike on Washington. Because of the initial EMP attack and because all the bombs were launched from satellites, the few surviving American early warning systems, which were primarily focused on detecting land or sea missile launches, gave little or no warning. Over six thousand two-kiloton neutron bombs, each about the size of a volleyball and weighing less than fifty pounds, were targeted on all US military installations and the five hundred American municipal areas with populations larger than fifty thousand. The bombs were GPS guided by Chinese satellites to explode at intervals of two miles in grid patterns designed to blanket each of these areas. And the explosions were timed so that all of the bombs targeted on an area went off simultaneously to maximize the radiation and secondary EMP effects and to minimize blast interference between bombs in the same area. The bombs exploded at an altitude of about five thousand feet and were designed for maximum generation of neutron radiation. Their blast effects were small, only affecting an area of a few hundred yards in diameter directly below the point of explosion. But the radiation created a lethal dose for any living thing in a three-mile radius. With the

exception of the few who were in underground bank vaults or subway systems or other well-shielded locations, everyone in this area was either killed outright or was severely disabled and would die of radiation sickness within a few days. There was little or no residual radiation or radioactive fallout from this type of weapon, so the invasion forces didn't have to be specially equipped, and the value of the country as farmland for China wasn't affected. A further result of the neutron bombs was to create additional EMP effects that overwhelmed electronic equipment not already destroyed by the EMP bombs.

Everything worked so well and so quickly that the American retaliatory strike was completely ineffective, the result of an outdated defense concept that assumed much longer reaction times than were actually available. All but one of the American submarines were sunk by satellite-launched, GPS-guided, nuclear depth charges before they were able to launch their missiles. The other was sunk within thirty minutes. Almost all of the few American bombers that weren't disabled by the EMP strike were shot down far from their targets by the rail guns and lasers of the PRC's missile defense system. Those that survived that line of defense were easily dealt with by the Chinese air force. Due to the blanket destruction of American military bases, the elimination of their satellites, the destruction of civilian command and control, the disruption of communications and the resulting confusion, the American land-based missile response was equally ineffective. As a matter of policy, the Americans hadn't pre-targeted any of their missiles on China. Due to the killing of civilian and military leadership, the lack of communications, and the lack of clear knowledge about who was attacking, very few American land missiles were actually targeted on China and launched.

The few missiles that *were* launched from land or sea were immediately shot down by the Chinese missile defense system. General Ma smiled thinking how the American intellectuals and liberals had steadfastly resisted the development of such a system for the United States ever since the 1980s, claiming that it was unnecessary, unworkable, and a provocation to other peace-loving nations. Using the technology obtained from the Americans, it had taken less than fifteen years for the Chinese to secretly develop and

implement their own missile defense system. Not only did the system work exceptionally well, but also much of it had been paid for by the Americans themselves, both in the original research and development and by using the money loaned for economic development to build and deploy the system. It was so effective that not a single American nuclear weapon reached PRC airspace.

All significant American overseas bases and naval task groups were also hit by EMP and neutron bomb attacks at the same time as the attack on the continental US. There had been no effective responses from those forces. In less than an hour it was all over. The Americans hadn't been 'nuked into the Stone Age', but they *had* been nuked into the Pre-industrial Age. Their military was destroyed, their much-vaunted technology was destroyed, and nearly half their population was dead or dying.

He smiled and sighed with contentment at the thought of it and the remembrance of the glorious spectacle it had made as he and others in the command center in Beijing had watched the attack unfold in the images relayed from their satellite cameras. A thunderous cheer had gone up and clenched fists were raised in victory as they viewed a close-up image of the bomb burst over the American capitol. The image had temporarily gone black as the camera blocked the sudden flare of the explosion, but after an instant the camera panned back, showing the expanding fireball rising above the ruins of Washington DC. Minutes later they watched an image showing most of the continental US from a vantage point higher in space. Even though it was daylight below, there were excited oohs and aahs and they cheered themselves hoarse as they watched clusters of neutron bombs flicker like flashbulbs as they struck in an apparent random manner that covered the United States in a continuous light show that lasted over half an hour. In reality, the timing of the explosions was carefully orchestrated to prevent interference between the blast effects of bombs attacking adjacent target areas. This was accomplished by insuring that there was an interval of at least sixty seconds between attacks on nearby population areas. As the attack progressed, a thin cloud of brown dust began to cover the American continent, like a final curtain being drawn over the corpse of their enemy, but it never interfered with their magnificent view of the annihilation of the

United States. After the attack, they had repeatedly replayed the wonderful images during the parties celebrating their victory. He had never experienced such feelings of exultation as when he watched those images. A commemorative DVD with videos of the attack set to music, made by the Party and issued to all its members, would always be one of his most treasured possessions. Chinese communications satellites continuously broadcast the videos to all parts of the world not affected by EMP strikes. In the Middle East and other areas there was wild rejoicing at the destruction of the 'Great Satan', in some parts of the world there was simple amazement, and in a very few areas, despair.

It was now ten days since the attack. General Ma's forces had begun their deployment seven days ago after waiting to allow radiation sickness to deal with those not killed outright. Most of his force was on the ground in the conquered territory. The initial entry bases in California were secured, and they were already beginning the next phase of their plan – the occupation of all military bases in the continental United States.

Detachments of his forces were being sent to every base, where they would secure the area, bury the corpses in mass graves, make repairs to the base electrical systems, and repair or set up backup power generation systems. They would then leave only enough troops to protect the military equipment and weapons from any survivors in the area foolish enough to try to resist. They would bypass the bombed population centers, only sending teams into those areas where there were documents, materials, or equipment they wished to remove to Mainland China or use in the planned farming and food production activities. In some cases, though, they would make exceptions to the general plan. They would occupy and begin repairing or replacing the damaged electrical systems of a long list of critical manufacturing facilities, such as electronic, computer, and aircraft plants that they had 'inherited' as a result of their good planning. It would take months to get these facilities operating, but now they had plenty of time. They expected the securing of military bases and initial occupation of manufacturing facilities to take no more than four weeks.

Next they would begin the roundup of the 'farm stock' - slave laborers who would work the food production centers they planned

to establish in the heartland of the country. They would select young, physically fit males, preferably with some farming experience and with as little education as possible. Women would not be included in the stock to avoid the distraction of sex and the inefficiencies of pregnancies and children. Over time the American slave laborers would be replaced by Chinese peasants from the Mainland, so breeding the stock would be unnecessary. The stock would be inoculated against the bio-agent that the General's forces would be using later and would be implanted with a microchip for identification and tracking. They expected this phase to take four to six months. During this time, they would eliminate any organized resistance that might arise, though they didn't expect this to be a serious problem. The General's PLA troops would control all military facilities and their supplies of weapons. And, with only a little encouragement from the PRC, the US government had passed laws in 2009 outlawing the possession of firearms and had conducted vigorous confiscation programs in the name of 'Homeland Security', even though the 'War on Terror' had been largely abandoned. Hunting had also been banned, and cash rewards had been offered for information leading to the arrest of people who refused to turn in their weapons. This had greatly reduced, but not entirely eliminated, the civilian possession of firearms. The Americans had amply demonstrated their weakness and foolishness; there would be little resistance.

When all the farm stock had been inoculated and tagged, they would execute the final phase of the total destruction of the United States: they would release their bio-agent in all parts of the country. This was an airborne agent genetically engineered to only attack humans. During the early development of the agent, some of it had been accidentally released and caused the 2003 'SARS' epidemic. Fortunately, the early version wasn't very effective, but the final version was fatal over ninety-nine percent of the time and took only a few days to kill its victims. By next spring, when the first crops would be planted, only the farm stock and less than two million random survivors of the bio-agent would be left alive. After that time, any untagged survivors who had somehow escaped the bio-agent would be killed on sight or would be eliminated later by a second, different bio-agent. Farming and food production would be

carried on in the central part of the country; the rest would be allowed to revert to its natural state, except for the mining and manufacturing facilities they chose to operate. Food would be shipped by rail from the production areas to ports on the West Coast and then would move by ship to Mainland China. Enough troops would be left to occupy key areas of the country and to insure control of the farm stock, but most would be withdrawn. The United States would no longer exist. Its land would be used as farmland for the People's Republic of China. All that would be left of its former population of over three hundred million would be two to three million slave laborers working the food production areas. After another five to ten years even these would be gone, replaced by Chinese peasants. With the total extermination of the United States and all its citizens, the only obstacle to the future of the PRC would be completely eliminated.

Next year, after the release of the bio-agent, China could turn its attention to other parts of the world. The Middle East would be one of their first projects. A combination of neutron bombs and bio-agent would cleanse the whole region and prepare for its occupation by Chinese oil production personnel. Eventually all the world would be similarly cleansed to make way for future generations of Chinese. All citizens would be implanted with microchips for identification and tracking, and the rule of the Party would insure control and global peace for millennia to come.

The General signaled his aide for more tea and relaxed in his seat with a satisfied sigh. The Great War of the People's Liberation was a glorious success!