

China Gamble

Eric Preston jumped at the chance to take the maiden voyage of the cruise yacht Champagne. She was a two-hundred-fifty foot long super mega yacht. Fast, with a long range. Eric's boss knew the people that were involved with the operation, and knowing Eric's fondness of the open water, arranged for his trip as a bonus for the last three years of exemplary work.

The only real drawback to the trip, in Eric's eyes, which was also its primary reason, was the fact that the cruise would take them into the Chinese sphere of influence. Eric had a bad feeling that the Chinese were up to something, on a global scale. But he was a closet prepper and didn't spread his beliefs around.

Despite a bit of unease, there was no graceful way out of the trip. And besides, as long as war didn't break out while he was over there, it should be a fun trip. He'd have the run of the yacht, including bridge privileges, something the other guests would not.

So here he was, on a private estate, waiting to go aboard the Champagne when the other clients arrived. The yacht was anchored just off shore of the estate and had two tenders already pulled up to the beach. He made small talk with some of the house staff, and then went down to talk to the yacht's boat crews.

He tried to carry his own bags, but the house staff wouldn't have it and took them down for the boat crew to stow. "Hi, guys," Eric said. Then he noticed that one of the crew was a woman. They all looked pretty much alike in the ship's crew livery. "And Miss," he quickly added.

The woman shot him a small smile. "That's okay. I am just one of the guys. There are several of us aboard as crew. And who would you be?" she asked.

"I'm Eric Preston. Sort of won the trip as a bonus. I'm afraid I'm not one of the wealthy patrons that'll be aboard. You don't have to go out of the way for me. I'm not going to be able to tip you much at the end of the cruise."

"Gratuities are not necessary, sir," said the person apparently in charge of the two boats. "And I'm sure it will be cooler in the house. We don't expect the other guests for another half an hour."

"I got my hat on," Eric said, touching the wide brim hat a bit self consciously. It was his outdoor adventure hat and past its prime in terms of looks.

"You might want to leave that in your suite, sir," the woman said. "There are areas aboard the Champagne that will be exposed to some wind, especially when we are at speed."

"Oh. Yeah. Thanks. I'll keep that in mind. I... uh... don't suppose I could go ahead and just swim out?"

Several of the crew looked at him incredulously. "This is a known shark area," said Brian Collingsworth, the man in charge. Eric finally was able to read the man's name tag. He didn't dare try to read the woman's. "I wouldn't advise it."

"That's okay. It's not far. I'm a pretty fast swimmer. Shark wouldn't have time to locate me. You watch my stuff?" he asked the woman.

"I assure you that your... stuff... is in excellent hands," said Brian. "And I urge you..."

Eric already had his hat, shirt, and shoes off and was running toward the water. "I just can't wait to see the yacht!" he called back over his shoulder.

Brian nodded his head and the woman and another of the men tossed Eric's things in one of the boats and pushed it off, climbing in when it was in deep enough water. The man went to the helm and started the engine of the tender, then sped off after Eric.

"Geez," said the woman. "He wasn't kidding! He is fast. Don't get too close. It'll stir up too much stuff if I drag him into the boat."

The man nodded and kept pace with Eric. Two of the crew aboard the yacht saw them coming and hurriedly opened the passage to the swim deck off the stern of the yacht and lowered the swimmer access ladder into the water.

Eric swam up and climbed aboard on his own. "Evelyn, what is the meaning of this?" asked a man, not in livery, that came up to the small group.

"I was in a hurry to get aboard and they were waiting for the others... Which, I think I see," Eric said.

Evelyn didn't say anything, but motioned the man at the helm of the boat and he handed Eric's suitcases up to the man on the swim deck. Another nod and he had the boat headed back to shore.

"I'm Eric Preston," Eric said. "Hope I didn't get anyone in trouble. "I really did insist on swimming out her."

"Never mind," said the man. "I'm Shepard Graves, owner of Champagne. Welcome aboard."

"Thank you," Eric said. Standing there, dripping, he shook Shepard's hand.

"A towel for Mr. Preston," Shepard said. One was handed to Eric almost immediately. "Show him to his suite so he can change out of his wet things."

"Thank you, Mr. Graves," Eric said, now feeling a bit silly.

Shepard Graves was already walking away and gave a slight wave with his hand.

“Looks like I stepped in it,” Eric said, following the man into the interior of the yacht

“You’ll have to excuse Mr. Graves. He has a lot on his mind with this voyage. You should know that.”

Before he could react to the cryptic statement another crewman, this time another woman, came up. “I’m sure... Mr. Preston, isn’t it? Pay no mind to him. He’s a sourpuss.” Eric caught the cautionary look that the woman gave the man. He took a quick look at the nameplate on the woman’s chest. Melissa.

The guy hurried on as Melissa walked more slowly with Eric. He was totally lost by the time she led him to his suite and showed him inside. Both his bags were on the bed. “I’ll leave you to change. It is casual for the evening.” She started to turn around, but looked at Eric again and added. “Aboard the Champagne casual is sport coat and tie.”

“Oh. Thanks. I would have shown up in jeans and a tee. I’m a bit out of my league here.”

“You’ll do fine. Just keep a low profile and enjoy the amenities.”

Eric found the statement almost as cryptic as the man’s. Closing the door, and shaking his head, Eric looked around. “Geez!” he muttered. He’d seen some of the pictures of Mega Yachts and Super Yachts but the reality of the luxuriousness was amazing. He went into the shower. He needn’t have brought his grooming kit. Everything he needed was lined up nicely on the bathroom counter.

Feeling a little overwhelmed, Eric dressed in one of the three sport jackets he had, with a shirt, tie, and gray slacks before he went exploring, to familiarize himself with the layout of the ship.

He noticed that the other passengers were in the process of boarding. He began to get a hinky feeling. The people boarding looked rich, but they sure didn’t act the way he thought the rich would. For one thing, they didn’t seem to have much luggage with them. But there were a lot of industrial packing cases being hoisted aboard with one of the tender outriggers.

“Sir,” I’m going to have to ask you to come with me.” Eric jumped. It was Melissa. She moved like a cat.

“Sure. What’s up?”

“The Captain would like to talk to you.”

“Me?” Eric’s heart fell. “He’s going to put me ashore for that swimming stunt, isn’t he.”

“I don’t think so. I’ll let him explain.” Melissa swung an arm to usher Eric onto the bridge.

He saw Shepard Graves talking to someone in a ship's officer's uniform and walked over toward them with Melissa. But she touched his arm and guided him away. "That's the ship's Captain. My Captain needs to see you."

"Your Captain? I'm afraid I don't understand," Eric said.

Melissa guided Eric around the two men and approached another man in ship's uniform. He was talking to two other men, in livery. When he looked over and saw Melissa coming with Eric he waved the two men away. Eric noted that one of the men saluted the man in uniform. And Eric suddenly had an inkling of what was going on.

Melissa's Captain gave a stern order. "Belay that, Marine!"

"Sorry, Sir. Habit." The two men hurried off and Melissa introduced Eric to Captain Roger Meyers, USMC.

"I think I'm in the wrong place at the wrong time, aren't I?" Eric said when the Captain shook his hand.

"Afraid you're right, son."

"So, I'll just grab my stuff and go..."

"Can't let you do that," Captain Meyers said. "You're aboard for the duration. I'm sorry about this, but we can't chance a security leak."

"I don't know anything to leak!" Eric replied.

"You know there are Marines aboard a private yacht. That's enough to cause trouble. Now," said the Captain, there are two ways we can play this. I can keep you locked up in your cabin... er... suite, for the duration. Or, if I can trust you, you'll have the run of the ship, just like was planned before this operation came up. You a loyal American, Mr. Preston?"

"Yes, sir. I am. More so than most, I believe."

"And how would that be?"

"Just... I volunteered for the Army. Couldn't get in because of health issues. But I've supported the country in every way I could since then. Pay my taxes, plus a little each year, because... well, just because. I stand at attention with my hand over my heart when I hear the Anthem. I don't know. I just believe in the country when people around me just complain."

"That's good to hear. And all very well. I will give you the benefit of the doubt and let you roam. You do anything I feel that would jeopardize our mission, I'll lock you up so fast your head will swim."

“Yes, sir,” Eric said. “What is the mission?” Seeing the look on the Captain’s face, Eric quickly said, “Uh... Never mind. I don’t have a need to know.”

“That is right. You don’t. And you don’t have to call me sir,” replied the Captain. “The less military we seem, the better off we are. You can help in that by acting just as you would if this trip was what you thought it would be.”

“I will do my best, si... I will do my best.”

As Melissa escorted him from the bridge, he asked her, “Who all is military and who is civilian, besides me and, I assume, Shepard Graves?”

He was startled by the answer. “Everyone but the two of you, the actual captain of the ship, and his First Mate are Marines. Ship’s crew, service staff, guests. Everyone. Captain McAlister and his First Mate, John Collingsworth, are both ex-Navy.”

Eric suddenly felt something, and then realized what it was. The engines of Champagne had just started up. He hadn’t heard or felt the generators running, and could barely tell the big diesel propulsion engines had started. And with them running smoothly, he really had to concentrate to tell they were. There was the sound of the anchor chain and then they were moving, slowly.

“I need to get back to my duties. The Captain said you had the run of the ship. I’d suggest you go topside, with the other ‘guests’, and enjoy the first part of the trip.”

She was gone then, and Eric headed up to the open deck above the pilot house. Looking around at the assembled ‘guests’, Eric noted that every one of them looked like a Marine in casual clothes. Ramrod straight backs, short haircuts on the men, and carefully tied up pony tails on the women. All looked fit and hard as nails. Eric wasn’t sure anyone would take them for rich guests of Shepard Graves out on the shake down cruise of the Champagne.

Eric looked out seaward and saw several other boats and a couple of ships, all seemed to be interested in the Champagne. He thought he saw some cameras, but they were keeping their distance and he wasn’t sure.

He tried a bit of casual conversation, but that didn’t go over very well. They were talking quietly among themselves, but all found an excuse to be elsewhere when he approached.

Evelyn came up to him with a tray of champagne tulips. “Take one,” she said. “Or two.”

“Thank you,” Eric replied, taking a lone glass of champagne and she moved over to one of the smaller groups of Marines standing and talking.

Eric could hear her when she cajoled them to take some of the champagne. “Come on, here people. There are cameras on those other boats. You’re supposed to be rich guests. Even the civilian is acting the part.”

Several hands reached for the drinks then, and people started to relax. Eric even managed to talk to a couple, about the ship, mostly. After that first break of the ice, the others started talking to him when he struck up a conversation.

Evelyn leaned over to whisper to him a bit later, as he took another glass of the champagne, “Thanks. You were a big help in getting the others to start their role camouflage by acting rich.”

“Sure thing. Anything else I can do to help?”

“No. You’re doing fine. I’m glad you didn’t do something to get locked up for the duration. That would have been a shame. Most of this trip is going to be fun.”

“That’s good to know,” Eric replied. Evelyn moved off and Melissa came up on the deck and said, “Hang on, guys! They’re going to open her up in stages. Lose the paparazzi.”

A few moments later Eric adjusted his stance. Champagne was definitely increasing in speed. It wasn’t long before Eric found a rail to hang onto. Suddenly a new sound commenced and the yacht, going fast anyway, seemed to leap forward.

“Holy Mackerel!” shouted Eric in excitement. “What do they have in this thing? A jet engine?”

“That’s exactly it,” said the Marine standing next to Eric. He had a hand on the railing, but his body was compensating for the movement mostly on its own. “A GE LM-1600 gas turbine, with a pair of five thousand horsepower Cat diesels driving Arneson surface penetrating variable pitch props.

The ship was well out of the protection of the curving shore line and in open sea. The seas weren’t running very high, but Champagne was literally leaping from one swell to another.

“We will be testing the high speed maneuvering momentarily. Everyone be cautioned,” came over the loudspeakers here and there in the ship.

Eric took a better grip, using both hands, and held on. The abrupt movement even had the Marine gripping the rail as Champagne made a rapid full circle turn to port. When they lined up again on the original course, the ship did the same thing to starboard, with the same ease and precision she had gone to port.

The ship slowed dramatically after that, almost squatting in the water and slowly drifted to a stop. Another announcement came over the PA system. “Testing for high speed acceleration. Be cautioned.”

The words had barely been heard when there was a roar from the water and Eric staggered back. They went from dead in the water to high speed in just a few seconds.

Eric wasn't the only one holding on to keep from slow stepping backwards. Several people had done just that, until their backs came into contact with the deck railing. "Sweet," Eric said. Those around him agreed.

But the fast trials didn't last long, and Champagne was brought down to long distance cruising speed of fifteen knots, and the SkySail wind propulsion system deployed, increasing speed slightly and greatly reducing fuel consumption at the rather sedate speed.

"That's amazing," Eric said, watching the big aerodynamic sail climb to its best cruising altitude and angle for the bearing Champagne was on. "I didn't even know such a thing existed."

"The Skipper, Captain McAlister swears by it," Melissa said, startling Eric again with her quiet approach. "He said he used one for a while on his last captaincy. Another mega-yacht."

Evelyn came over and took Eric's empty glass. "Everyone in the Great Room," she said quietly. She moved on to others, and after talking to them they slowly, by ones and twos, made their way below.

Eric followed suit, after Melissa left with a couple of the others. In an out of the way corner Eric took up an innocuous position, he hoped. Captain Meyers showed up a few minutes later and the group fell silent.

"Listen up, Marines," the Captain addressed the group, his voice clear without being overly loud. "This mission is of utmost importance. There is a good chance it will all come to naught, if we're lucky. If we aren't, we have the vital mission of informing the Joint Chiefs of whatever situation we find."

"Captain," asked one of the men, "What is the mission, exactly? All we've been told is we were going to be on this yacht for several days, but not where we would be going."

"Well, Lieutenant, I'm glad to hear that nothing has slipped out about this trip. We have Shepard Graves to thank, in large part, for that. He has gone out of his way to make this voyage look like simply another rich man having fun with an expensive toy.

"As to our mission goal, it is simple. Look and see what is going on in the North Pacific, between 20 North latitude and 40 North latitude. As good as the satellites are, they aren't telling us much, considering the rumors we are hearing."

"Those being, Captain?" It was Evelyn speaking.

"That the Chinese are readying an invasion force, destination the West Coast of the US."

There was quiet murmuring among the Marines.

"How can that be? Surely enough troop ships to mount an invasion would show up like candles in the dark to the satellites."

“Not these,” replied Captain Meyers. “It is believed a series of container ships have been modified to carry troops, while maintaining the look of simple, but very large, cargo ships.

“A sub has taken a close up look, but didn’t see anything through the periscope or through sound analysis of passive sonar sweeps. We don’t think the sub was detected. An aircraft would be. We do not want to show any active interest in the ships, which are out there. Another one shows up at high speed and then slows down when it rendezvous with the others. Last known count was four ships. More are expected.

“It is the commanders’ belief that we can get close and get a good look without much problem. We document what we see, using civilian cameras, and then leave, looking like it was just a chance encounter. We get far enough away on the same course, we change course, radio the information, and head for home.”

“That sounds pretty simple,” said Brian Collingsworth, one of the few Marines besides Melissa and Evelyn Eric had been able to put names to. “Why so many of us? Wouldn’t just one or two among real civilians have looked better?”

“It was considered too great a risk for any civilians, except for those aboard.”

Eric felt a chill go down his back at Captain Meyers’ words.

The Captain continued. “So, on the off chance we happen to be viewed, by accident or intent, I want the ruse kept up. Mr. Graves is a well known and sought after man. That was why the initial ruse boarding. I’m sure you all saw the other boats and ships all around.”

Again there was a murmur of sound, quickly ended.

“That’s all for the moment. Except... Switch around the duties of service staff and civilian. Those acting as ships crew will maintain their jobs without changing.”

The group split up and most left the Great Room. Eric stayed where he was for a while, thinking about the situation. There really was nothing to do but accept it. He headed up to the bridge, knocking on the door before entering.

Shepard Graves looked over and indicated for Eric to enter.

“Don’t want to disturb anyone, but I was wondering if what my boss told me was still true. Considering things.”

“What was it he told you?” Shepard asked.

“That I would kind of have the run of the ship. Get in here and see how a yacht is run. See the engine room and maintenance room. The galley. Things most guests wouldn’t have any interest in.”

“As long as Captain Meyers doesn’t object. I’m sorry about all this, Eric, wasn’t it?”

“Yes. Eric Preston.”

“When I set this up with Cal, I had no idea of what this first run would be.”

“That’s okay,” Eric replied. “I admire you, risking your yacht and even your life, for the sake of the country.”

“Thank you. Remember you said that, if something goes wrong.”

Eric smiled, and then listened carefully as Shepard, his melancholy dissipating as he showed Eric the features of the yacht, gave him the deluxe tour. Eric soaked it all up like a sponge.

He found those first few days a real joy, spending much of his time studying the layout and mechanics of the ship. He was even allowed a stint at the helm. But once they reached the North Pacific and crossed the 180 degree longitude line, everyone began to tense up some. They were traveling a fairly straight course, after getting a course correction based on satellite recon of the Chinese ships. Two more days and they should come upon them.

It became very clear that Captain Meyers, though he wanted the observation to appear as innocent as possible, had everyone of his personnel do a weapons check the day before they came up on the Chinese ships.

Eric was right up there with the Marines, dressed in shorts and a tee shirt, with his camera in hand, just like them. He had to admit, the Chinese had done a good job. It was only with close observation, via the built in telephoto lens on his video camera, that Eric could discern the fact that the containers were not individual containers, but a huge outer shell of portions of them welded together.

Eric waved to several men that lined the railing of the first ship. They waved back, very half heartedly, Eric thought. They were coming up on the second containership, and slowing down even more.

One of the Marines came up and told his buddy, “They’re jabbering back and forth on the radio. I heard the Captain talking to them. I don’t think they like us being here.”

They passed a second, and then a third ship. They were traveling a mile or two apart. There were several more to either side of the course. Those on the ships that they could see were no longer waving. They were shouting and brandishing fists.

Captain McAlister was steering the yacht further away and increased speed slightly. After passing the last ship, number thirteen by radar count, the speed was upped a bit more, but the same course was held.

There were a lot of grim faces at the dinner table, and around it, when it came time for the evening meal. Talk was very quiet, buddy to buddy. No one spoke to Eric, except to ask for the salt.

Suddenly those at the table were sliding to one side and those standing, serving the food, were staggering, trying to keep their balance and not dump anything on any one.

“Rig for evasive action!” came over the loud speakers and everyone tried to brace themselves. Serving dishes went sailing, and then place settings as the Champagne heeled hard over and increased speed going into the hard turn.

There was a loud explosion and the ship heeled over the other way. “Somebody is shooting at us!” yelled out one of the Marines. More explosions and more evasive action for what seemed an eternity, and then the ship headed in a straight course, but moving at very high speed. Faster by far than the first run the day they left California.

“All hands to the Great Room!” When the announcement came over the speakers, people scrambled up and headed that way. Eric waited until the others were gone before he got up from his braced position and followed. He settled himself in the same place as before and listened to Captain Myers.

“Somebody,” he said, “Didn’t like us snooping around. Lucky for us we’re still too far out for attack aircraft to be dispatched and I doubt their carrier is anywhere in the area. The cruiser that took a few pot shots at us was most likely on station at a distance for any aggressive action toward the container ships.”

“No ship to ship missiles, Captain?” asked someone.

“I don’t know. I think they probably didn’t want to waste one on us and figured to get in some gunnery practice at long range. They obviously didn’t expect our speed. We were out of their range pretty quick. But they’ll be hunting for us. That includes subs, if they have any in the area, and I bet they do. So be prepared, at a moment’s notice, to brace yourself for evasive maneuvering until I give the all clear.”

“Better get up here, Captain Meyers!” It was Captain McAlister on the PA.

The speed surged again as Captain Meyers worked his way toward the bridge, hanging on tight to something every step he took.

Everyone was braced when the sudden turn came. And then a turn the other way. It was several minutes before the course straightened once again. Eric made his way up to the bridge and eased inside, not disturbing anyone. But Shepard Graves saw him and came over. He looked pale.

“Mr. Graves, are you all right?” Eric asked.

"I'm afraid I am scared. Rather more than I thought I would be. Two torpedoes just missed us. Literally by inches on one. The maneuverability and speed of the Champagne let us dodge and then outrun them."

Eric's eyes went to the two Captains. Both were talking on radios. Captain Meyer's radio looked like an after thought to the communication suite on the yacht. The one Captain McAlister was on was one of those built into the console.

Shepard saw Eric looking over at the two men, and at First Officer John Collingsworth who was at the helm. "Captain Meyers is trying to get some naval or air cover as we head back toward the States. Captain McAlister is up to something. I'm not sure what."

"You've got a great ship here," Eric said. "And who could ask for a better crew than Marines? Everything will turn out all right, I'm sure."

"Perhaps I should go lie down. Would you be so kind?" Shepard lifted an arm and Eric took it, guiding what was now a frail old man down to the owner's suite.

Eric saw Evelyn in a passageway and asked, "Do you have a corpsman with you?"

When she nodded, Eric added, "I think he or she needs to take a look at our host. I'm taking him to his suite."

Evelyn turned and ran back down the passageway and then up the stairs at the end of it.

Shepard was breathing with difficulty when Eric eased him onto the bed in the luxurious suite. "Do you have nitro pills?" Eric asked.

When he saw the man trying to fumble something out of the pocket of his white slacks, Eric reached down and pulled the pill bottle from the pants pocket, opened it and shook out one of the tiny pills.

He dropped the pill under Shepard's tongue when he opened his mouth. His right hand went to his head and Eric was sure the nitroglycerin was working. It caused terrible headaches when taken.

The Marine corpsman came through the open door of the suite and began to check Shepard.

"He got pale," Eric said, "and then was having difficulty breathing. I put a nitro under his tongue just a few seconds ago."

"I think you probably saved his life," the corpsman said after taking the earpieces of the stethoscope from his ears. "Without an EKG, I can't tell, but he probably just had a mild heart attack. Can you keep an eye on him while I go talk to the Captain about getting a naval medivac?"

“Sure,” Eric said.

The corpsman left and Eric felt a hand on his arm. “Help me up, please,” Shepard said.

“I don’t think you should try to stand up,” Eric said.

“Just want to sit up.”

Eric helped Shepard sit up. “You want a glass of water?”

“Yes, please. And about half a bottle of Excedrin.”

Eric came back with the water and Excedrin bottle. He shook two out into Shepard’s open hand.

“More, the Corpsman will have to okay,” Eric said. “I know you have a splitting head ache, but it will fade. My father used to have to take nitro and sometimes said he didn’t know which was worse. The heart pain or the headache.”

Shepard managed a weak smile and handed Eric the almost empty glass. “You’re going to need rest, for sure. Let me help you get into bed.”

Shepard didn’t resist, letting Eric remove his shoes for him, and then throw back the coverlet. Shepard eased himself back and Eric lifted his socked feet onto the bed. He brought the coverlet over Shepard and tucked it in slightly. He adjusted the pillows until Shepard said he was comfortable and then stepped back.

“Nice work,” Evelyn said from the doorway. “You could be a nurse.”

“I was,” Eric said, “For all intents and purposes. Caring for my father before he died.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It was a few years ago. This just kind of brought it back.”

The corpsman showed up again and said, “We’re on our own for a while. Nothing close enough for evac. As soon as we come into range, there’ll be a helicopter waiting for us. It’ll take Mr. Graves and you off the ship and to a hospital.”

Eric knew better than to argue.

“You want me to keep an eye on him for a while?” Eric asked, seeing the corpsman whispering to Evelyn.

“If you would. We need to get ready for... whatever,” the corpsman said. He and Evelyn took off and Eric pulled up a chair by Shepard’s bedside.

“Would you... would you mind reading to me?” Shepard asked.

“Of course, sir. What would you like me to read? You have a book started?”

“The Good Book. There on the table.”

Eric turned and saw the small bible sitting on the bedside table. He picked it up and Shepard requested a particular passage. Eric wasn't all that religious, but the words he was reading made him feel better about things.

Shepard guided him through passage after passage, and then said he was going to take a nap. “Son, you've been very kind to an old man. There is solace in that bible.”

“You'll be up and about in no time, Sir. You have this beautiful yacht to enjoy.”

Shepard smiled and closed his eyes. Eric continued to read random passages in the bible, silently. When he looked up again Shepard's chest wasn't raising the comforter at all. Eric checked his breathing and then his pulse. Both were absent.”

“Well, nuts!” Eric said softly. He left Shepard's suite to find the Corpsman. Better if he examined Shepard and pronounced the death.

He found everyone in the Great Room. Gone were the casual clothes of the pretend rich. Everyone was now in MARPAT BDU's. Each had a weapon of some sort.

Eric went up to Captain Meyers, attired like his team. “Sir, Shepard just died. Can the Corpsman check him and verify?”

“Hanley! With the civilian!”

“Yes sir!”

Hanley was quick about it, but was thorough. “He's dead, all right. Too bad. He was a good guy, letting us use this ship.”

“Yeah.” Eric flipped the comforter over Shepard's face. He followed Hanley back to the Great Room.

“Okay, people, listen up! Command knows about the Chinese ships and will react appropriately. Our job is now to get back home and join our forces to be ready to resist the invasion force.”

“We going to nuke'em, Captain?”

“That's up to them, Smitty. You just take care of that M-16 and stay ready. Leave the nukes to the President.”

Several people laughed.

“Now I know this seems a bit... shall I say... useless? But let me remind you. Get caught out of uniform and you’re a spy, not a soldier. The Chinese have shown themselves to be rather hard on spies. If the worst were to happen, you are Marines, not spies. You can leave that to James Bond.”

More laughter.

Things settled down, and as the hours passed, a new routine developed. It wasn’t much different than the routine before being discovered, but now each one of the Marines did the job aboard that best suited them. A small group offered up to do galley duty and no one objected. Eric just stayed out of the way, spending much of his time up on the bridge, watching the horizon for US forces.

Captain McAlister, in consultation with Captain Meyers, slowed the Champagne down once it crossed the 200-mile limit from the California shoreline. “The speeds we’ve been traveling,” said Captain McAlister, “has our fuel reserves down pretty low. It’s going to be tight getting to port without running out. Without the SkySail, we wouldn’t even come close.”

“Well, we’re low priority right now. If we run out, we’ll just have to wait for a tow by tug,” replied Captain Meyers.

Sure enough, the Champagne ran low on fuel and Captain McAlister shut down her main engines, reserving enough fuel to maneuver when towed to port. The generators were kept running as well, and the SkySail system kept a bit of headway on the vessel to make it a smoother ride, rather than wallowing in the swells.

It took two days for a tug to get to them and another day to get them the rest of the way into the marina that would be the Champagne’s homeport. All during that time there was a constant radio watch kept. Nothing at all in the news to indicate that an invasion was imminent.

The Marines disembarked immediately, and Captain McAlister and First Mate John Collingsworth disappeared as well. Eric found himself alone on the ship. He debated what to do for a moment, but an ambulance showed up and Eric led the attendants down to Shepard Graves’ suite. Not knowing what else to do, Eric explained what had happened, leaving out any mention of the Marines or their mission.

He signed the paperwork the Paramedic asked him to, wondering what kind of trouble he was going to get into over it. As the two started to wheel out the gurney with the body on it, Eric said, “Wait. His bible. He said it was a comfort to him. They may want to have it in the casket with him.”

Eric picked it up off the table, but dropped it and the bible fell open. Feeling like a klutz, Eric picked up the bible and laid it on the edge of the gurney and stepped back to let the Paramedics get on their way.

Eric started to go get his bags and try to figure a way home. As he stepped forward he kicked something and looked down to see what it was. What he saw was a key and a piece of paper.

Picking up both items, Eric started to try and catch the gurney, but looked at the paper. His eyes widened. It was the layout of the Champagne, with several small X's marked on it. Curiosity got the best of him. He went searching, the key in hand. He didn't have to search far. One of the X's was in the master suite.

Eric checked the area where the X was on the paper. It took him a while and some close looking to find a small safe, inside a cabinet. The key opened it and took out the contents. There was a relatively flat packet and a plastic case. The packet contained a large amount of cash. In several different national currencies.

"Must be for emergencies when out of the country. And have to hide the gun, since many of the places the yacht would visit, it's a crime to own them," Eric thought aloud. There was something else small in the packet and he turned it upside down to dump it out. There were several gold coins of various sizes. Setting the gold and currency aside, Eric opened the plastic case. Inside was a small handgun, with magazine inserted. A Walther PPK, in .380 ACP.

Eric automatically checked the pistol, dropping the magazine. It was full. When he checked the chamber, he found it empty. There were four spare magazines, loaded, and a full box of .380 ammunition.

Eric sat back on his heels. Suddenly he put the objects back into the safe and locked it. It took an hour to check the other locations. Eric was expecting to find a similar packet and handgun in each. That wasn't the case. There was a similar hidden safe in the pilothouse, though it had a Glock 17 instead of the Walther.

But each of the others were much more elaborate. Each was a gun safe, albeit smallish. But each was large enough to hold four long arms and four pistols, each with ammunition. And there was a similar packet of currency and gold inside each.

With everything back in place and the key and note in his pocket, Eric went back to the bridge to think. He found Captain McAlister and First Mate John Collingsworth there, going over the ship's papers.

"Eric? What are you doing still here?" asked the Captain.

"I'm kind of stranded. Trying to figure out how to get home. Oh. An ambulance came and picked up Shepard Graves body."

"Good. Look, Eric, you can't stay here. We consulted with the Graves estate and they're going to refuse final delivery of the yacht. It's going to be tied up for years in the courts, unless I miss my guess, with or without a war. We're just getting the log and other ship's papers in order."

“You’re just going to leave the ship here?” Eric asked.

“Nothing we can do about it,” replied Captain McAlister. “Mr. Graves’ lawyer was adamant. Walk away from it and let the manufacturer worry about it.”

“But... there are things aboard that I don’t think Mr. Graves would want just left aboard... Things he brought aboard after taking delivery.”

Captain McAlister and First Mate Collingsworth exchanged a look. Both men shrugged and Captain McAlister said, “Well, Eric, if you are concerned, feel free to remove them. Chances are this whole area is going to come under attack if the Navy and Air Force can’t stop the Chinese in the North Pacific. I don’t think either side is going to worry too much about the fate of an essentially abandoned yacht, now matter what it’s worth.”

“But this stuff...” Eric protested.

“Take it and go. Deliver it to Graves’ attorney,” Captain McAlister said. “Or just keep it for all I care. The estate isn’t going to miss a few trinkets.”

“But...”

“Go on, Eric,” said First Mate Collingsworth. “Take the stuff and go. We have to finish this and take off ourselves.”

Eric decided not to argue. “Okay. Take me a few minutes. Then I’ll be out of your hair.”

The decision made, Eric didn’t think about it very much. He hurried off the ship, stopped at the first place that had a telephone book. He looked up an Enterprise Rental place and ordered an SUV delivered to the Marina.

It would be an hour before the vehicle was delivered and Eric went back aboard the Champagne. There was no sign of McAlister or Collingsworth. But in case they came back, he emptied the hidden cache in the pilot house first, taking the items to his suite.

After he emptied his suitcases he began to fill it with the packets and handguns from the other caches. He checked several of the other accommodations. The Marines had left behind their civilian clothing and the bags in which it had been brought about.

He also found the weapons cases that had been used to bring the Marines weapons on board. Eric smiled. He’d just planned on wrapping the long guns in a blanket and trying to sneak them to the SUV. The crates would work much better.

It took a total of four hours to get everything packed up and moved to the Chevy Trailblazer Enterprise delivered. He hired a couple of marina loafers to lend a hand with the heavier stuff, paid them well, and took off. He’d been tense the entire time, but began to relax slightly.

Though not for long. The realization hit that he had more than a small fortune in currency, gold, and weaponry. None of which he could account for with any degree of legal claim. He'd go to jail if he got caught with the items. Especially in California. Most of the weapons weren't California legal.

Eric got a bite to eat in a fast food joint, sitting where he could see the Trailblazer. He thought as he ate. With a plan firmly in mind, Eric went out to the SUV, and headed out, first stop a used car dealership.

He was partial to Chevy's and bought a well used, older model Suburban, with a diesel engine, that was well equipped for off road use. Eric paid cash. He called Enterprise to come pick up the Trailblazer. Off in one corner of the lot, Eric transferred everything from the Trailblazer to the Suburban.

He breathed a bit easier with a vehicle of his own. He found a rental storage place close by and rented a room big enough to park the Suburban in. With it in a relatively safe place, Eric called for a cab. He had transferred all the foreign currency from all the packets to just two of them. At the airport he exchanged some of it. He didn't want to get on anyone's radar, so he kept the transactions relatively small.

He hit several major banks and exchanged some more of the foreign currency. After taking the cab back to the storage place, he got the Suburban out and headed for Reno, Nevada, at a nice, sedate, but not too slow to be noticeable, speed. He knew he needed to relax some, or he'd wind up doing something that would draw attention to himself. Not only was the concern about the weapons and cash he was carrying, but the threat of invasion and war.

Eric drove straight through, and then found a rental storage place and rented a unit to hold the Suburban. As before, he had to pay a month's time, but he didn't want the rig on the street or in a big parking lot with all the guns and cash in it.

He took a cab to down town Reno and checked into one casino after another, exchanging more of the foreign currency in the process of getting a player's card. He made it look good and played for a while at each place, working his way through the casino to the next one where he did the same thing.

In all, he registered seven times and exchanged all the currency. He was dead tired and stayed in the casino where he'd exchanged the last of the foreign currency. After a magnificent surf and turf supper that set him back two hundred dollars of Shepard Graves' money, Eric turned in.

When he got up the next morning, late, he showered and shaved and changed clothes, then went gun store shopping after picking up the Suburban again. He hit every gun store he could find in Reno and sold all the guns he didn't want to keep. He picked up quite a bit more ammunition and magazines for the magazine fed weapons, along with some MOLLE gear. Next he hit the big outdoor sports stores, getting top of the line camping and wilderness survival equipment.

He bought out all the Mountain House foods he could find in those shops as well as Wal-Marts, which he knew carried a few items in most of their stores.

Feeling much better with his smaller arsenal and increased cash, Eric thought about things again and then headed for Orem, Utah and the Emergency Essentials store there. He bought a sixteen foot tandem wheel box trailer on the way, and half filled it with a huge order at Emergency Essentials.

When one of the clerks asked him if he knew something, it was all he could do to not yell out in the middle of the store that the Chinese were coming. But he didn't. He did head for Mountpelier, Idaho and Walton Feed. The trailer was full when he headed for home, just outside St. Louis, Missouri.

Just east of Kansas City, Missouri, Eric heard the first report remotely related to the possible invasion. There were several call-ups of National Guard personnel. The reason given was that they were to exchange out some of the troops in Iraq, who would be coming home. It was presented as cheerful news. No mention was made of China or the fleet in the North Pacific.

Eric upped his speed just slightly, to go the speed limit, rather than his usual five miles slower. He had things he wanted to do before the battle broke out. Eric thought time was running out.

Eric made it to his modest off-grid house outside Robertsville. He parked the trailer in the old pole barn, but left it loaded. He unloaded the Suburban into the basement. He'd long ago converted the basement into a shelter, capable of withstanding even a large nuke on or over St. Louis. Fallout protection was over PF 5,000, and the supplies he had before his windfall, care of Shepard Graves, would get him through three months.

Checking his wallet, Eric shifted some cash from one of the packets to it. Then he set off for St. Louis, nervous as a cat in a room full of rocking chairs that something bad would happen before he could do what he wanted and get back home.

Stopping at the big chain tire store he got his tires from for his old diesel engine converted Jeep, he ordered ten new tires, six mounted on new wheels for the Jeep, and 12 new tires for the Suburban, also with six of them mounted on new wheels.

"What'd you do? Rob a bank?" asked Randy Smith, the tire man Eric usually saw. He'd gone to school with him and gave him all the business he could. Just not usually this much.

"Can you deliver them, Randy?"

"For this order, you betcha!"

Eric's next stop was at another trailer sales place. He bought another large tandem wheel box trailer. The dealer got him hooked up with the trailer and Eric left.

It took stops at three Sam's clubs to get the long term storage items that Walton Feed and Emergency Essentials didn't carry. The trailer was full and Eric went to his next stop. Like the tire store, the fuel bulk plant in town was owned by the family of one of the people he'd gone to school with. In this case, Sheila Baker.

Taking out his cash first, since Handy Baker was a suspicious old coot, Eric asked for delivery of a two thousand gallon diesel tank and a one thousand gallon gasoline tank, the underground installation of the tanks and pumps, and the filling of both tanks.

"Don't have a one thousand underground tank. Have a five thousand and the two thousand."

"I'll take them," Eric said. He wanted fuel for the duration.

"If you got the money there, it'll be two weeks."

"I want it tomorrow," Eric said.

Handy sputtered. "Who do you think you are? Tomorrow? Hah!"

"Extra thousand in it for you," Eric said softly.

"Okay. Where?"

Eric gave Handy directions on how to get there. "I want them filled as soon as they're buried."

"I said okay, didn't I?" Handy retorted.

"Now, I need some oil and other lubricants." Handy's eyes widened at the list Eric gave him. "Delivery tomorrow, too."

Handy could only nod. It was the largest non-commercial, non-farm sale he'd ever made.

Next stop for Eric was a chain automotive store. Or, more accurately, five of them. For oil and fuel filters, and plenty of other maintenance and spare parts for the Jeep and the Suburban.

He didn't go by, but he called his propane supplier and asked for his propane tank be topped off. He had two, from two different suppliers, one buried and one surface mount. Neither company knew about the other. One was 90% full and the other, the one to be topped off, 80%. The clerk said they could do it that very afternoon and would bill him for the fuel.

Eric stopped at a Redwing Boot store and bought six pairs of boots to fit him. He'd picked up several pairs of hiking shoes and boots at the sporting goods stores, along with several pairs of athletic shoes.

J. C. Penny supplied the clothes he wanted, that the Wal-Mart's hadn't.

Tired and hungry, Eric stopped at another fast food place to get something to eat. He moved the Suburban and trailer over out of the way to eat it. He was listening to the radio as he ate. Eric paled when the news came on and a report of a special envoy going to China was announced, to 'Strengthen relations with that country.'

Eric had a feeling there was another reason. He finished his burger and headed home. He'd done about all he could. He was going through the money from the yacht fast. A sudden thought, about the gold had him heading for one of the big coin dealers in St. Louis.

There was a lot of gold in the packets, but no silver. Eric wanted more than his few rolls of silver bought several years previously. Crossing his fingers, Eric asked the coin store clerk for a \$1,000.00 face bag of pre-1965 US silver coins. His heart fell when the woman said they didn't have any.

But before he could turn around, she said, "We have \$500.00 and \$100.00 face value bags. Three of the first and two of the latter."

He'd only wanted the \$1,000.00 face, but, "What the heck, it's only money," he whispered to himself and told the clerk he'd take them all.

"No wonder you don't keep the \$1,000.00 face bags. Even these \$500.00 bags are heavy," Eric commented as he, the clerk, and the shop owner carried the bags out to the Suburban.

The silver was his last purchase of the day. He headed home, fingers crossed that he would have at least one more day to get ready.

After parking the trailer in the pole barn beside the other one and unhitching it, Eric took a shower and went to bed early. His conscious was bothering him a little, and he tossed and turned for a while, but finally fell asleep. He got up at five the next morning and turned on the news. Still nothing about a possible Chinese invasion. After a quick breakfast, Eric went out and marked the spots where he wanted the fuel tanks placed. Good as his word, Handy showed up at eight, with a convoy.

It took the entire day, but the job was finished and the tanks were full. Handy got his thousand off the top. The trucks were going down the road when Randy pulled into the driveway in the tire truck. The two transferred the tires to Eric's large garden shed in the back yard. Randy was about to climb into the truck and leave when the weather alert radio Eric was carrying sounded an alarm. "Uh-oh!" Eric said and lifted the radio to his ear. The warning was a message to listen for a broadcast by the president in another hour.

"I wonder what's up?" Randy said. "I'd better get home."

"Thanks for the delivery, Randy," Eric said. "And good luck."

"Good luck? About what?"

“Oh. Just whatever that message is about.”

“Oh. Yeah. Sure. It must be important.”

Eric took a turn around the house. He didn't know much else he could do to get ready for what might come. He went inside, turned on the satellite television and watched the news network channels. All were speculating on what the President was going to speak about, but there was no mention of China or invasion or war. Most thought it would have to do with the Iraq withdrawals.

When the President came on he looked tired and drawn, even with the TV makeup. “My fellow Americans. I come to you this evening with disturbing news. We face a grave situation. Our intelligence agencies have informed me that Communist China has assembled an invasion fleet that is now circling in place in the Pacific Ocean. Our envoy to China has tried to negotia...”

The TV went white, and then black. Eric tried several other channels. Nothing on any of them. He tried his cell phone. No signal. Eric went outside and looked around. Total darkness. There wasn't a light shining anywhere, except from his house. He should have seen the lights from several homes. They would just be pinpricks of light, through the trees, but they would be there. Nothing. The electrical grid was down. “EMP!” Eric said softly.

Eric went back inside and closed the security shutters, and then the black blackout curtains, and finally the inside curtains on each window. No one would be able to tell he still had power. His PV system was unobtrusive and very few people knew he had one.

His generator was a slow speed diesel, quiet anyway, but the extra quiet enclosure for it reduced the sound even more. And the placement behind the house, coupled with the woods between him and the road shielded what little noise there was from the road. There were several acres of woods between him and his closest neighbors to either side and behind him. There was no one directly across the road from him.

No one could hear him run the alternator, when he exercised it once a month. He hadn't had to use it since he put the PV panels up. They kept the battery bank charged, no more electricity than he used. The genset was strictly to recharge the batteries if the solar panels failed. He wouldn't really know if they were okay until the next morning.

Eric took one of his inexpensive crank up radios outside and gave it a few cranks and then turned on the radio function. Static on every frequency. “Definitely EMP,” Eric said, again keeping his voice soft.

Deciding there simply wasn't anything he could do, Eric made sure everything was locked up tight and fixed himself a sandwich before taking a shower and going to bed in the basement.

He was up at his normal time. The first thing he did after getting up was check the remote reading radiation meter. Nothing out of the ordinary. After going to the bathroom and getting dressed, Eric took the wind-up radio outside and tried again. Still just static.

He'd felt no shocks during the night. Between that and the lack of radiation, Eric didn't think there had been a widespread nuclear attack. Possibly just a HEMP attack.

Eric went back inside and fixed some breakfast. As he ate, he tried to figure out what to do. He checked the cell phone again. Still no service. Eric decided, despite the possible danger, to go into town and see what he could find out.

He breathed a sigh of relief when both the old Jeep and the Suburban started. He turned off the Suburban and drove the Jeep out of the garage. He always backed his vehicles into the garage so he could pull straight out in case he ever needed to make a fast departure.

Stopping the Jeep, Eric went inside the house and grabbed his BOB. He hesitated, but slipped the little PPK he'd liberated from the Champagne in the inside-the-waistband holster he'd picked up for it and put it in place. He grabbed a jean jacket and put it on. It concealed the weapon well enough, Eric decided.

When he went back to the Jeep, Eric triggered the security remote and closed the front door and the garage door security shutters. The other shutters were still closed from his black out routine the night before.

The Bourbeuse River looked just the same as he drove along the road parallel to it. He saw a couple of vehicles stopped on the road, but there was no one in them or near them so Eric didn't stop.

When he saw several vehicles blocking the road ahead he stopped and looked the situation over. It didn't look like a roadblock. More like the road was simply blocked from an accident. "Probably when the EMP struck," Eric mumbled. He decided that getting information in person had too many risks at the moment and turned around and went home.

He parked the Jeep inside the garage, next to the Suburban, closed the garage door and the security shutter, and went inside.

Eric kept a radio on KMOX AM radio in St. Louis. If anyone in the region would be on the air, it would be them. He also made sure the weather radio was on, too. If there were official announcements, it was as likely they would come over it as it was they would come over the broadcast stations. That was assuming there had not been a full scale nuclear attack.

He wasn't due back to work for another week, and with the situation the way it was, he wasn't going to go back early, the way he normally would have. With nothing else pressing that he could think of, Eric went into the basement and fired up the shelter laptop. It was his older model kept in the basement and only charged by a battery that Eric would charge with the solar system, and then disconnect for independent use.

Eric entered everything into his prep inventory program that he'd acquired from the Champagne or bought with Shepard Graves' money. He was literally a hundred times better off than before. Having taken the things was still bothering his conscious.

He put those thoughts out of his mind and reviewed some other information in the computer, trying to keep his mind busy and off the problem of lack of information.

The lack of information didn't last as long as he feared it might. He was fixing lunch upstairs when the alert signal on the Weather Radio sounded and then a voice came over the speaker. Apparently some of the national communications system was hardened against EMP, and the short antennas on the receivers weren't enough to produce damaging voltages in them.

"My fellow Americans," said the unrecognized voice. "It is with deep regret that I have to inform the nation that Washington, D. C. was destroyed with three small nuclear devices. They were in-place detonations and there is yet no determination on where they were made, how they were smuggled in, or by whom.

"It is also my sad duty to inform you that the President, Vice President, and most of both houses of Congress were killed in the attack. I was sworn in as president a few minutes ago.

"The attack on Washington, D. C. was in coordination with a high altitude electromagnetic pulse attack on the entire United States. The three devices used in the HEMP attack came from just outside our territorial waters. The vessel that launched them has subsequently been destroyed.

"In an attempt to avoid a Global Nuclear War, I have reopened negotiations with the Chinese Communist Government with the understanding we will not retaliate in kind for this dastardly attack, if China withdraws the suspected invasion force and offers restitution for the damages to Washington, and the damages in the rest of the United States from the HEMP attack. They were made aware that the failure to do so will result in grave consequences for them.

"Until such time as regular communications lines are again available, this network will be the sole means for National, State, and Local Governments to communicate information to citizens.

"Please cooperate with all levels of authority willfully and quickly. Martial law has not been declared as I believe that we, as a nation and as individuals, have the fortitude and willingness to meet this disaster with brave and selfless action when such is called for.

"Please share this information with others that do not have the appropriate radio to receive them. Monitor these radios constantly as the transmission schedule will be variable.

"May God bless us all."

Eric put down the bread and the knife of peanut butter he'd been spreading on it that he'd held motionless the entire time of the speech.

The radio suddenly sounded again. It was the Governor of Missouri. Basically reiterated the call for willing cooperation with the local authorities. Next came the announcements for Franklin and surrounding counties. More of the same. Share information and transportation.

Eric finished making the sandwich. He ate it and drank a glass of milk standing at the counter, thinking all the while. He was not prepared to turn over his preps. That hadn't been asked for, yet, but Eric thought it would be at some point. But he had made some preps with the intention of handing out some humanitarian aid, particularly for pregnant women, women with babies, and for children. But that could come later. At the moment, he could do something positive. Get the word out. He went to the basement and got another portable Weather Alarm Radio to keep in the Jeep.

He got the Jeep out again, locked everything up, and headed for his closest neighbor. When he pulled up the driveway to Albert and Hanna Hogstein's both stepped out of their house. Eric stopped and stepped out of the Jeep. "Did you hear the new President's speech on the weather radio?" he called out to them.

"Sure did! What do you think about it?"

Eric shook his head. "Don't really know. I'm going around to let people know, in case they don't have one of the radios."

"Thank you, Eric. Look. Neither the truck or car will work. Can you run me in to Pacific to try to get a mechanic to see about them?"

"Let me make the rounds, first and I'll get back to you a little later. Okay."

Albert waved a hand in acknowledgement, so Eric got back into the Jeep and went to the next house down the road. Less than a third had the Weather Alarm radios and Eric spent several hours explaining the situation to many nearly panicked people. He got several requests for transportation. Only a few had vehicles old enough to not have sophisticated engine electronics in them, that remained useable.

It was dark when Eric went back to the Hogsteins. Again they came outside. Hanna was carrying a Coleman lantern. "Sorry I couldn't get back earlier, Mr. Hogstein. Several more want to go in and I thought I could take some of you in tomorrow, if nothing else happens. About nine in the morning?"

"That'll do, son. Thank you." Albert and Hanna went back inside their dark home.

Eric went home and locked everything up tight again, went inside the house and locked it down, too, before he turned on any lights. He ate a bowl of cereal for supper, went down into the basement, and went to bed.

He was up at first light and ate a quick breakfast. There had been no announcements during the night, and Eric was going to follow through with his promises the previous day. He lifted the rear seats that had been folded down for extra cargo space and then pulled it out of the garage.

He locked everything down and headed for the Hogstein's. He picked Albert up, and then made three more stops to pick up other people that wanted to try to get the electronics for their vehicles. Two wanted to pick up Weather Alert radios so they could hear the announcements first hand.

The blocked road where Eric had stopped the first trip out was open, though two of the cars involved were still there, pushed over onto the shoulder of the road. Eric went to the first auto parts store in Pacific and let everyone out. "I'm going to try to get fuel. I'll be back in a bit."

He checked several stations. The ones that had emergency generators, or had access to one, were all out of fuel. Those without the back-up power had some fuel, but no way to get it out.

Eric went back to the parts store. All four men were disappointed. Not a spare computer available. Normally the clerk would have called around for the customer, but the phones were down, including the cell system.

It took all morning to check out all the local resources for automotive parts. And it was fruitless. Not one of the seven vehicles owned by the four families had the parts available to repair them.

While they were in town, Eric took them to the grocery stores for them to try and get some additional supplies. There was some success with that. The stores had already been picked over heavily, by town residents that had walked to the stores. Eric was surprised to see the prices had not jumped up.

When Eric headed back to the boondocks, it was with seven bags of groceries between the four men. He dropped each one off in turn, with their goods, and went back home. Still fearful of additional EMP, Eric wasn't ready to risk a good radio, so he again took outside one of the wind-up radios that had a shortwave band, cranked it, and tried the bands. There wasn't as much static, but he still couldn't tune in anyone.

He tried the AM and FM broadcast bands. Nothing there either except static. Less than before, but still just static.

The next morning the Weather Radio activated again. The local authorities were asking for help with transportation. The announcer stressed that the vehicles would not be confiscated, and would stay under the control of the owner. They were needed to transport rescue workers and medical personnel. Fuel would be provided.

Eric hesitated, but fired up the Suburban and went to the closest staging point. He worked steadily for three days with the Suburban, mostly transporting the ill and injured, since he had one of the few vehicles with enclosed space to do it.

He was also privy to information coming down the official pipeline. No more nukes had been used, but there were vicious naval battles going on in the Pacific Ocean. Much of the satellite spy capability had been lost between the EMP and direct attacks on the satellites. The position of a large number of the invasion force ships was not known.

But it became obvious the next day. The central west coast of California was under attack. With most of the effective combat troops still in Iraq, staging for return to the States, the Chinese managed to get a foothold, despite the ferocious defense put up by all the troops that could be moved to the area, under post HEMP attack conditions.

Very much to Eric's surprise one of the official announcements over the Weather Alert radio was the call for any former military with crew-served weapons experience, former military with small arms experience, and experienced hunters with private weapons and ammunition to volunteer for reserve defense line participation.

Some weapons and ammunition would be available, as would drinking water, but those bringing their own weapons, ammunition, and food for two weeks or more was preferred. Eric didn't hesitate. Transportation from central locations would be provided. Eric started making plans to head west again.

As he was still one of the few that had a Weather Alert radio, and broadcast radio and TV weren't yet up, Eric made the rounds again and let everyone he knew know of the call to duty. He added a few stops at some of his old high school buddies' places, to see if they were going to go.

Randy Smith and Sheila Baker both offered to go. While both were hunters and had good hunting guns, which were better than nothing, and certainly capable of taking down an enemy soldier, Eric offered to equip them with arms more suited to the task.

Both gratefully took the offer, as did one Allan Stokes, another of the group of friends from high school. Eric was the only one of the four that had not served in the military in some capacity. Allan and Sheila had both served in Iraq, in infantry support positions, and Randy had been in the navy as a fireman. A day at an improvised range and everyone was comfortable with the new weapon they had for use for the duration.

Pacific was one of the pickup points for volunteers. Eric thought about driving the Suburban all the way, but in a combat zone it was just asking to lose it. He and the others made arrangements to get to Pacific with his equipment, and the things he was contributing to the others.

Eric and Randy both had game carts and loaded them down with the equipment for all four of those going. They planned on staying together, share a camp, and look after one another's backs.

Their transport turned out to be a Greyhound bus. The loaded game carts barely fit into the luggage compartment of the bus, but were shoehorned in. The four, with their personal equipment and weapons, entered the bus, took seats and settled themselves for the long ride.

It took four days to get to Reno, this particular group's staging point. Everyone unloaded and sorted out their gear. Everyone was checked by a military doctor, and their equipment was inspected by a couple of army sergeants for suitability of use.

"You four... You're survivalists, aren't you?"

When the other three indicated they weren't, all looked at Eric. "Yeah. Sort of. I'm a prepper, not a survivalist like the media makes them out."

"Well, you're here, fighting on the right side. So call yourself what you want. And thank you for coming. Looks like you won't need to draw anything but water at the moment."

The four nodded, and filled their canteens and water bottles when directed to a water truck set up for that purpose. An hour later and the four, with twenty others, lead by an Army National Guard Lieutenant, supported by a Sergeant, a Corporal, and two enlisted men, hit the road on foot, headed, the Lieutenant said, for Donner pass on I-80.

Sheila was one of five women in the group and she opted to stay with her friends rather than join the other four that had grouped together for mutual aid and support.

She took her turn pulling one of the game carts. Most of the other volunteers were carrying large packs and having more than a little trouble keeping up with the pace Lieutenant Davidson set. There were several rest stops. More than the Lieutenant liked, but he accepted the fact that he was leading a group of civilians that couldn't be expected to stay on a military pace.

Several people offered to help pull the game carts if they could add their packs to the load. Soon the game carts were loaded to the max, and over. But both were heavy-duty Cabelas Magnum versions with dual wheels, capable of carrying seven-hundred pounds each.

It was dark when the group made it to the location they'd been assigned. Only Eric and the Guardsmen had e-tools and everyone took a turn digging the latrine. The tents were set up, with Randy and Allan sharing Eric's three-person, four-season tent. Sheila had her own small tent and set it up next to Eric's.

Assigned a spot in the night watch rotation, everyone went to bed, waiting for what might come the next day.

Nothing. That's what came the next day. No information over the working, secure, radio the team had. The day was spent improving two person fighting positions and the camp, again using the e-tools on a shared basis. Eric's tomahawk came in handy, too. It was the only one the group had. There were a couple of machetes in the group, including Eric's, but they weren't of much help in the tough brush and trees the group was dealing with.

The Lieutenant was finally satisfied with the fighting positions and the camp area, well down below the ridge where the fighting positions were.

The group stayed where they were for three days without incident. They saw and heard military aircraft zooming overhead and heard the sound of explosions at some distance when the wind was from the west and it was otherwise quiet.

The morning of the fifth full day, the Lieutenant had them up and the camp packed by seven AM. They were to move forward and join the fight. Another group would move up and take over the positions the group had prepared. That caused a bit of grumbling, but everyone shut up and moved out when the Lieutenant gave the word.

They were able to pick up rides a couple of times on passing convoys of trucks moving tanks and artillery toward the front lines near Sacramento. But the team left I-80 well before getting to the battle for Sacramento. The worry was that the Chinese would break off and do an end run either north or south of the city and the volunteers would be placed to deal with it if that happened.

Things were quiet until after they passed through Yuba City. The sounds of battle could be heard in the distance. The Lieutenant put them in the battle line they'd practiced the few days at Donner they'd had. They met a steady stream of refugees heading for Reno. There were a few vehicles, and many motorcycles and bicycles, with the majority on foot.

Eric, with no military experience, was assigned to one of the game carts that had now become essentially military property. Sergeant Jacobs, because they had the cargo capacity that few of the other volunteers had, acquired an M-240 machine gun and several cans of ammunition, along with an M-249 SAW and ammunition packs.

A Javelin launcher and five missiles rounded out the midnight acquisitions. The two machine guns and ammunition were carried on the carts, as was the Javelin launcher and missiles. Many of the others had discarded some of the gear they found they didn't need, and were carrying their packs again, allowing plenty of ammunition and water to be carried.

The farther west of Yuba City they went, the louder the sounds of artillery shells and aviation bombs going off got. The Lieutenant, walking with the Radioman for the team was on the radio almost constantly. He raised his hand and formed a fist. Everyone stopped and the Sergeant and Corporal Higgens got everyone off the road.

A few seconds later and the Lieutenant and the other Guardsmen were setting the team up in an ambush formation on the road back some distance from where he'd got the radio call.

A fast mover flashed overhead and the sounds of bombs detonating were much louder than anything they'd heard before. Corporal Higgens and PFC Kirkright took the M-240 and M-249 respectively, with Eric designated ammunition handler for the Corporal, and Sheila for the PFC. Randy and Allan were part of the side of the L-ambush.

When it came, it was a surprise. A Chinese Type 92 Infantry Fighting Vehicle came around the bend and into the kill zone of the ambush. Sergeant Jacobs, with the Javelin ready, waited until the IFV got almost to the stop force before he fired. The missile arced up and then down into the top of the IFV, putting it out of action immediately.

The platoon of foot soldiers that was marching behind the IFV began to fall as twenty riflemen and the two machine guns opened up on them. Sergeant Jacobs had reloaded the Javelin and waited. It was well he did. Another IFV was following and came around the bend shooting. Sergeant Jacobs fired the Javelin again, and again hit his target. The second IFV was burning as furiously as the first one.

Everyone held their position, waiting to see if there were any troops following the second IFV. The Lieutenant signaled the Corporal and he gave the M-240 to Eric before heading forward to check around the bend for additional troops. He came back three minutes later and signaled the all clear.

The Lieutenant followed suit and the team checked the carnage. The ambush had been laid and executed perfectly. There wasn't a single survivor and only one minor wound was inflicted on the ambushers. The Lieutenant radioed in the action and then got the team on the move again, headed west.

Some of the civilians, Eric noted, looked a little pale. He suspected that a few of them hadn't fired at all during the ambush, and some probably did without actually sighting their rifle or carbine.

They set up a camp and perimeter that night without further incidents. The following morning they headed for Williams at a steady pace. It took another day of marching to reach the small town. Or what was left of it. It had been a staging point for the Chinese in their attempt to flank the US forces fighting the main force of Chinese in and around San Francisco. Our own aircraft had hit it heavily, after dropping warnings for civilians to evacuate.

With the destruction of their forces in Williams and beyond, the Chinese were withdrawing, slowly, to the west and south. The Lieutenant told his team that their job was to march down Highway 20, pushing any Chinese they met further west and further south. Additional civilian teams would follow behind and create an encircling line on the north side of the Chinese incursion.

Since the likelihood of ambush was high, the going was fairly slow. They saw the destruction the Chinese had wrought during their advance. There were dead civilians everywhere, with the occasional Chinese soldier's body here and there. Many of the dead civilians had died with weapons in their hands, obviously trying to protect the un-armed during their refugee trek east.

The Guardsmen leading the civilian team that included were very good. All had worked together before, in Iraq. They kept the team out of ambushes, and managed to circle behind one ambush set and eliminated another platoon of Chinese soldiers. But this time they suffered casualties of their own. Three dead, and three wounded. One of the wounded was Allan Stokes.

He had a sucking chest wound. They did what they could for him, and a medivac was called in to take him and the three dead to an aid station set up in Reno. The other two injured were patched up and insisted on continuing.

Ever more careful the team advanced. They made it to Clear Lake, which was on the south side of Highway 20, and picked up their pace along the river. After getting past the river, they left the highway and took side roads toward Ukiah.

Eric was beginning to wonder if he might get to see how the Champagne had fared at Point Arena. It took a month to get there, but they did march to the Pacific, part of the civilian line containing the Chinese to the south. Three more pitched battles left the team with only sixteen of the original twenty-four civilians, but all five of the Guard members.

They'd been re-supplied twice, and the last drop put them back to almost where they were, supply-wise, when they started out. With things secure at Anchor Bay, Eric asked permission and received it, to go to Point Arena, just to their north. He hired a local with a boat that had survived the Chinese going through, to take him up the coast.

The Champagne was nowhere to be seen. There were many other boats in the marina that looked like they'd been bombed or strafed. Eric wasn't sure if there was a single useable boat at the marina. "I wonder what happened to the Champagne." Eric said.

"I can tell you that," said the man Eric had hired to bring him up. "Bunch of us from up and down the coast took our private boats, the bigger ones, and tried to cause some trouble for the Chinese. The yacht was just sitting there, abandoned, so we filled her with some fuel and took off. Didn't work worth a hoot. Bunch of us died, and they came through here and sank every boat at the marina as a lesson to us, I guess. Had a few come in since then, but almost all the original boats were lost at sea, or sunk when we got back.

"I was on that big yacht. Sweet, she was. Ran over three of the Chinese small boats working to move people and material ashore. Took a bunch of small arms fire and then one of their planes got a good bead on her and dropped a bomb right amidships while we were headed back here. She went down like a stone. Only ten of us out of fifteen got off and were picked up by some of the other boats."

"Maybe they can salvage her after the war," Eric said.

"Son, that ship, good as she was, is in little pieces on the continental shelf. Ain't going to be no salvage of that ship, fer sure."

Eric nodded. "Could you take me back now?" Eric wasn't sure how he felt. He hated the fact that men had lost their lives when the yacht sank. Proud of the fact that she had served her country in two ways. The initial source of information, and then taking out a few of the enemy. Had the weapons and money been aboard, they would have gone down with the yacht and been lost. His having taking the items had saved them, and provided much of the means for him,

Randy, Allan, and Sheila to fight. "Maybe it was just meant to be," Eric muttered, too low for the man to hear him.

When Eric got back to the unit, he was surprised to hear that they were being sent home. The Chinese were loading up and taking off, leaving much of their military gear behind. As is often the case, the US President refused to let the military give chase and destroy the troop transports and remaining supply and combat ships as they ran for home.

Two days later, Eric, Randy, and Sheila landed in St. Louis on a charter flight that broke all the old post-9/11 security rules. There were enough guns on the aircraft to fight a small war. Which they'd done. Allan wasn't with them. He would be sent home later, after recovery from his wound.

A bus took the three and their gear back to Pacific and then some admiring citizens got each of them home again. Eric pushed the game cart, looking a bit worse for the wear, into the garage. He'd unload it later. After taking a careful look around he decided that no one had been there or disturbed any of this things. All the locks on the outbuildings were intact, as were those on the fuel tanks, and the security shutters on the house showed no signs of attempted forced entry.

With a sigh, Eric relaxed, went in the house and took three hamburger patties from the freezer. He'd been hungering for a hamburger since he'd left for Reno. He ate the first burger in a few bites, and the second and third more slowly, washing them down with ice cold Classic Coke.

After that, he did another thing he'd really missed. A long, hot, shower. Then sleep between cool, clean sheets. He went to bed feeling better than he had in a long time.

It didn't last past the next day. Eric was standing at the pole barn, the doors open, staring at the two box trailers. Where was he going to store everything? He still had a lot of Shepard Graves money left, and all the gold. He could afford to built a larger shelter, with storage room for the additional supplies.

The thought was still in his mind that evening as he sat outside, enjoying the peace and solitude of a neighborhood without electrical power or operating vehicles. It was clouding up, threatening rain, when off to the north-east a ugly purple-orange glow lit the undersides of the clouds.

"Oh, no... They couldn't have..." Eric headed for the basement shelter, taking only enough time to activate the security shutters. He felt the basement shake for long seconds, but there was no damage that he could see.

Praying that it wasn't what he was thinking, Eric went to bed in the basement. When he woke up the next morning, the remote reading CDV-717 survey meter was making some noise. He checked the reading. Only 5.0 r/hr. But there was fallout. That meant a nuke attack. He'd seen the fireball reflected in the clouds, but it was north-east. There must have been additional detonations to his west or northwest to be getting fallout. "Probably Whiteman AFB," Eric

muttered. If it was, the fallout was probably just getting to his location. He checked the survey meter again. Sure enough, it was up to 5.5 r/hr. It was climbing.

Eric made breakfast and ate it, checking the CDV-717 regularly. He wanted to catch the peak, and the reading one hour after the peak so he could calculate his needed shelter stay. The peak came at three-fifteen that afternoon, and an hour later was at 57.2 r/h. According to the 7/10 rule, he should be able to go outside for short times three days hence, and then stay out for extended periods after two weeks, and not need to worry much about it after four months.

Eric filled his time in the basement shelter getting his decontamination gear ready for a trip outside as soon as it was safe, and reading up on subjects related to post apocalyptic life.

When the three days had passed and Eric suited up and went outside, he did a quick look around the property. Again, nothing was disturbed.

Twelve days later he went out again to start decontamination. That's when he found the bodies. One was Handy Baker. He was sitting on the front porch, a GI 1911A1 in his hand. He'd been dead, Eric estimated, three days.

There was another body out in the front yard that Eric didn't recognize. He'd been dead for several days and the dogs had been at him. Which did the dogs no good. There were five of them lying around, also dead.

Barely able to keep his stomach contents in his stomach, Eric worked most of the day getting a two graves dug in a small open area in the back woods, using his rototiller and a shovel, wondering about the second man. "Handy," Eric thought, "knew about the fuel and may have assumed I had more than fuel stored. But who is the other guy?" When the graves were done, Eric dragged the dog bodies over and dumped them in one of the graves. He was a bit more careful with Handy's and the other body.

He searched both men. Handy had a couple of spare magazines for the Colt, and the other man Eric thought was unarmed, until he lifted one leg in preparation of loading him onto the game cart he was using to move the bodies. The man had an ankle holster with a Ruger LCP .380 compact pistol. The holster carried the pistol plus one magazine and the other leg, when Eric checked it, had a double magazine carrier with two loaded magazines in it.

Eric finally figured out who the second man was, after he found the man's wallet. It had his driver's license in it. One Galvin Shoemaker. He owned the tire store. "Must have been the same with this guy," Eric thought. "That sale of tires made him think that I might have more than just them." After getting both bodies into the second grave, Eric slowly filled them, wondering now what Sheila and Randy might be thinking. And doing.

"Nothing to do about it but wait and see," Eric said aloud. He went back into the house, took off the protective gear and went down into the basement. He wasn't hungry and simply took a shower and went to bed.

He finished the decontamination he'd planned on a week after he'd started. He hadn't been off the property to check on anyone, wanting the decontamination done first. Sure he would find more bodies, Eric suited up in his Tyvek hooded, sock foot coveralls, rubber boots, rubber gloves, and his MSR Millennium respirator. He hesitated what weapons to take. He didn't want to be threatening to anyone, but he wanted to be able to protect himself.

Eric went with his original weapon, before acquiring Shepard Graves' yacht collection. A .308 Savage 99A, with built in 5-round rotary magazine and aftermarket peep sight and sling. He slid two 20-round leather ammunition cases on a leather gun belt, added two dual pouches for magazines for the Glock 21SF he'd picked up on the yacht, added the holster for the Glock, and buckled it around his waist.

He also debated whether to take the Jeep or the Suburban. Thinking of recovering items that he might find, Eric opted for the Suburban, with the rear seats folded down. With the Suburban out, fueled, and ready to go, Eric locked down the house and headed out.

First stop was the Hogsteins. Their front door was unlocked. He went in after he knocked and didn't receive an answer. The Hogsteins were lying side-by-side on the bed in their bedroom, fully dressed, holding hands. There was a bottle of pain medication open on the bedside table. It was empty.

Eric shook his head and looked around the house. There simply wasn't any food to be found. Rather than starve to death, they had opted to take their own lives, rather than suffer. He found a serviceable double barrel 12-gauge shotgun and a Ruger 10/22 rifle with a couple of boxes of shells for each. He took them out to the Suburban and put them in the back, throwing a tarp over them.

He continued his search. He found only one family alive. The Mathews. Father, mother, two daughters and son. They were one of the families in the area that had an operating vehicle and Weather Alert radio when Eric had made the rounds after the HEMP attack. They had come through the nuclear attack in good shape. Eric didn't come right out and ask, and they didn't come out and say, but it was obvious they were preppers like Eric.

Colin Mathews had met Eric in the driveway with a holstered pistol and slung rifle. They exchanged a few words, and agreed on a CB radio channel and time to contact one another on a regular bases. If either had trouble, the other would come to help.

It was just too much effort to bury all the bodies that he found. Hopefully there would be a local FEMA response that could help with that at some point in time. Eric took what food that was still good, and all the firearms and ammunition he found. He left jewelry and other similar valuables.

When he got home that evening, he stacked the food that would keep in the living room, and took the guns and ammunition to the basement to sort through in more detail.

He did the same thing for three days, finding one more prep family that was doing okay, and plenty more bodies. Some of which had gone violently. They were the ones closest to the highway. "Must have been refugees from St. Louis," Eric mused.

On the fifth day, Eric loaded all the food he found, and some of the firearms and took them into Pacific. The trip was two-fold. One, to turn in the things he'd found, and additionally, to report the deaths of those he'd found. He hedged a bit about the two prep families, saying only that there seemed to be a couple of families that made it on their own. He didn't offer names and they didn't ask, assuming he didn't know.

It wasn't FEMA that he found in Pacific, it was just the city making it on its own, and Franklin County authorities trying to do what they could county wise, which wasn't much. The city had suffered quite a bit of physical damage from the nuke that hit St. Louis.

Eric made no effort to hide his weapons, though he again carried the less threatening Savage 99A and the pistol. Nothing was said about them. Quite a few of the people he saw in Pacific were going armed.

He was also open about having gone through the area in which he lived and taking the things he was turning in. "I'm okay for the moment and I thought others might need this stuff." No one thought about it, or if they did, didn't care, as no mention was made of anything that Eric might have kept.

Rather reluctantly, Eric went to the Baker house. He saw Shelia and her mother both outside, apparently digging a grave in the front yard, for their dog, that lay lifeless a few feet away.

When they saw the Suburban stop both women walked over. Both were armed. "He did it, didn't he?" asked Shelia's mother. "Went out there to try to make you give up some of what you have."

"I'm afraid so."

"Did you kill him?" she asked as Shelia looked on, dry eyed.

"No. I found him sitting on my front porch. He was dead." Eric handed over Handy's wallet and the Colt and two magazines. "I buried him. If you want to come out and have a service, or move him..."

Handy's wife was shaking her head. "He made his bed and slept in it. We told him the radiation would kill him, but he wouldn't listen. He couldn't get that fuel tank installation out of his head. That you had to have food and other things if you had fuel."

"I do have some," Eric replied carefully. "I'd just as soon that it not be common knowledge. If you two need help for yourselves, come out or get word to me. I'll do what I can."

“Thank you, Eric. And thanks for making sure my Shelia made it back from the war in California. I never thanked you properly for that.”

“Think nothing of it. All of us were watching each other’s backs. Sheila held up her end. She’s a good soldier.”

“Still,” Marlene said, “Thank you.”

Eric left, still felling bad for them. They would most likely suffer because Handy had made a serious error in judgment.

Next Eric went by Randy’s place. Randy opened the door and Eric almost lost his breakfast. Randy was a wreck. Hair falling out, gums and finger nails bleeding, the skin of his face sloughing loosely.

“Oh, Randy!” Eric said softly and followed his friend into the house.

“I stayed away from the windows and everything. But I still got it. Radiation sickness.” Eric didn’t have the heart to tell him how little protection the house had provided. He obviously knew it now. “Running at both ends. Doc said I didn’t have much longer.”

“You saw a doctor?” Eric asked.

“Yeah. I was still in pretty good shape when I first went looking around. Doc Jones looked me over and told me what was wrong with me.”

“Is there anything you need?”

Randy shook his head. “Got a couple bottles of booze to keep the pain down. Doc wouldn’t give me anything. Said he had to keep it for people that had a chance to live.”

“Randy, I’m sorry. I don’t know what to say,” Eric said.

“Would you... Could you see that I’m buried right? Never went to church much. But I’d like some words said over my grave. Could you do that for a friend?”

Blinking back tears, Eric nodded. “I’ll see to it, Randy.”

“You’re smart, Eric. You’ll make it. You knew something was up and got those tires and must have got a shelter. I wish I’d been smart, like you. I got no one else. My parents were in St. Louis. You can have any of my stuff you want when I’m gone.”

“Eric, don’t talk like that. Maybe...”

“No maybes for me, Eric and we both know it. You don’t want to hang around too long. Doc said I might come down with just about any illness, weak the way I am.”

Randy wouldn't shake Eric's hand when he offered it. "Too dangerous for you, Eric. Give me a couple of days and come see about me, will you?"

Blinking back the tears again, Eric nodded and said, "I will, Randy. You can count on me."

Eric went home a saddened man. He spent the two days avoiding people and cutting firewood. When he went back to see about Randy, no one answered his knock. Eric forced the door. He gagged when he found Randy on the bed in his bedroom, in a pair of shorts. The bed was a mess, with Randy in the middle of it.

There was still a half a bottle of liquor left, so Eric told himself Randy had not been in pain at the last. Or cognizant of his condition. Eric had to leave the room several times, to clear his nostrils of the smell, but he finally had Randy wrapped up in a clean sheet, blanket, and the afghan that his grandmother had made for him. It was one of Randy's prized possessions and Eric knew Randy would like to have it with him.

He loaded the body in the back of the Suburban, with some difficulty, but, suspecting the worst, he'd brought the game cart, which made the task easier. He went to the high school, where the recovery effort, such as it was, had headquartered. When he told the receptionist he had a body of a friend for burial, that was as far as he got.

"Sorry. You will have to deal with it yourself. We're overloaded with bodies we're clearing from necessary locations. Give me the particulars, including where you plan to bury him, and I'll log it in."

Eric didn't even try to protest. He told the clerk that he would bury Randy out at his place, and gave her the location. Eric hesitated to take any of Randy's things, especially with the body still in the Suburban, but Randy had insisted, so Eric went back to Randy's house.

There wasn't much to take. Randy's game cart, identical to Eric's. A couple of hunting rifles and shotguns, along with a few boxes of ammunition. He added Randy's camping gear to the other things in the Suburban and took another look around. There was no food in the house, and nothing of great value, at least to Eric.

He drove slowly back to his place, fired up the rototiller and dug another grave, out by the other two. He dug Randy's deeper than he had the other two, and eased Randy's body into it as gently as he could.

Eric had to look for his old bible, but he found it and read several passages over the open grave. Finally he began to fill it. It was almost dark when he finished, and it was full dark by the time he unloaded the Suburban and parked it in the garage.

Eric again spent several days cutting firewood, preparing for the expected nuclear winter. Eric had his doubts about the effect, but wasn't prone to take chances. He already had thirty cords cut, stacked, and covered. But he needed something productive to do and cutting wood filled the bill.

But again his sense of civic duty came to the fore, and he went into Pacific to see if he could help in some way that didn't compromise his personal preparations. Being young and healthy, they put him to work clearing more areas of bodies. Something he would have preferred not to do, but he did it, anyway. People were still dying from their exposure to radiation in the weeks after the attack. Those that hadn't stayed in what shelter they had, or didn't have much in the way of shelter to start with. Like Randy.

Another group was tasked with gathering the immensely valuable farm animals in the area and taking them to several specific farms for care, breeding, with many destined for the soup kitchen that was being planned for when other supplies of food ran out.

As he'd done when working on his own, anything with food value was loaded up and taken to the high school for distribution to those in need. Everything else was left. Eric couldn't believe it. He asked, finally, about all the goods being left behind. The official word was that there would be a further effort to gather important items for future use, but it could be years before it was done.

"What about things that will deteriorate in the mean time? There are bound to be fires. Floods. A lot of useable items are going to be lost to the elements, and probably to people just taking them."

"That's just the way it is," replied the county civil defense official. "Sure, we'll lose some things, but we don't have the personnel to do anything but bury bodies and salvage food. That's all I care about. As far as I'm concerned, everything else that doesn't have an owner around is fair game to anyone that wants it."

Eric took the woman at her word. He continued to help with the body collection and census, but made note of things he felt should be salvaged for the community, plus things he could use personally.

When he had time he went back and picked up what he wanted. He even hired Sheila and her mother to help him with things it needed two or more people to handle. He paid them in much appreciated food. He bought a triple axle open trailer he found when checking out a place with a family living there. Again, food was the currency.

He gathered up all the guns and ammunition he could find, along with fishing gear, and premium camping goods. Those he kept himself. Most of the other useful things he began storing in the Hogstein's barn. It was old, but in good shape. It hadn't been used in years.

The Hogsteins had been Eric's closest neighbor. He cut a direct path through the woods so he could get to the property without going out on the road. It saved a good mile on the trip, and was private, too. He blocked the entrance to the Hogstein property with several of the abandoned vehicles he towed to the spot. It was partly to get them out of the way on the road, for when winter set in, as well as a handy place to put them. Them blocking the driveway up to the Hogstein's house was a plus.

He buried the Hogsteins the same way, at the edge of the woods that surrounded their property. With Sheila's and Marlene's help, Eric gathered up and stored wood burning stoves; solar panels, batteries, and controllers; tools of all sorts; generators; several working vehicles; gardening equipment; and a whole list of other things he thought would be useful in the future.

The winter that had been pending arrived. Before it got too bad, Eric asked Sheila and Marlene to stay at his house, at least through the winter. Neither of their homes were, by any stretch of the imagination, off-grid. Even if they installed one of the wood stoves they had salvaged, they had to carry water from the city pumping station, and dump their bucket toilet at the waste treatment plant. It was not going to be an easy life during the winter.

Eric made sure both women understood he wasn't looking for anything more than help during the winter. That they would share his spare bedroom, and he would be in his own. It didn't take much to convince them. They moved in during the first snow storm of the year.

As the snow continued, off and on, for a week, both women thanked Eric several times for allowing them to move in. Eric and Sheila took care of most of the outside work while Marlene, a stay at home wife and mother all her life, took care of the house.

Eric maintained regular contact with the few families left in the local area by CB, with a regular round table discussion twice a week. Though in no way formal, they essentially had a MAG (Mutual Aid Group). Everyone was willing to help everyone else, where they could, when it didn't lessen their own chance for survival that winter.

Eric took Marlene over to stay with one expectant mother that had three other children that the Father was having trouble taking care of while maintain the house in living condition.

Sheila and Eric helped more than one person cut firewood to add to their stocks, when it became obvious they might fall short if the winter lasted longer than normal. It was already colder than average.

With the river within walking distance, Eric did a lot of fishing, using several trotlines. One of the other families had the Jon boat that Eric needed to use, and got the lion's share of the catch for his family of seven. Eric kept a little to vary the menu at home, and gave away the rest for future consideration. He had to give up the practice when the river froze over. The ice wasn't thick enough to do ice fishing, but too thick to maneuver the Jon boat through.

Like many of the other survivors in the area, Eric went hunting to supplement the stored supplies. He decided to let the others have the small amount of game that had survived the fallout. It might be years before game made a comeback from areas that had suffered less fallout damage.

Eric, Sheila, and Marlene went into Pacific once a month to draw the community provided food in return for the work they had done. Eric wouldn't accept his, but Sheila and Marlene both took their shares to stretch the supplies Eric had.

The winter, though slightly worse than normal, didn't turn into semi-permanent Nuclear Winter. There was a real spring, and the first thing Eric and Sheila did was get a large garden started. Second was to go and recover a nice greenhouse they'd found at one of the abandoned houses they'd otherwise salvaged.

Sheila and Eric got it up and ready for use. Marlene took it over from there. The greenhouse would be her bailiwick, with Eric doing any heavy work needed. After the gardens were established, Sheila and Eric went into Pacific to see what was on the agenda.

What they found was reassuring. Though he always kept one of his Weather Alert radios on, and had been monitoring the Amateur Radio bands during the winter, he'd not heard of much in the way of real national aid. There were two Federal FEMA reps on hand when Eric and Sheila went into the high school gymnasium.

Eric kept an eye on them as he and Sheila registered to help work again that summer. The two FEMA reps seemed to just be watching what was going on, and perhaps, Eric thought, making a suggestion here and there.

Eric asked, and found out, that he and Sheila were among only a few that had signed up since spring. "I'm afraid you may be doing the same things you did last year. Collecting bodies and burying them. The reports we've been getting are that a lot of people didn't make it through the winter due to the lack of heat and the lack of food and water." The man sighed. "Can you handle it a few days on your own? I've got someone to run the backhoe, but not do the field work. Have some fuel, but not much."

Eric let Sheila make the decision. She nodded, so Eric did, too.

The Civil Defense worker was right. Eric and Sheila found body after body, entire families sometimes, that had not made it through the winter. They found very little food in those homes with dead. It was tough on Sheila, but she persevered.

As they'd done the previous summer and fall, the two salvaged the things they wanted to keep, turned in what little food there was, and delivered the bodies for burial. The names and particulars were dropped off at the high school with the food collected.

A week into the work one of the FEMA people stopped Eric and Sheila on their way to the Suburban from the gym. "Can I ask you something?"

Eric nodded.

"Why don't you take the food for yourselves?"

"There are other people that need it more than we do," Eric said carefully. "Why?"

"Just curious, that's all. Most people I know would keep it all."

"We don't," Sheila said. Eric could tell she was getting her back up.

“We take care of ourselves,” Eric said. “We have a garden and a greenhouse. I hunt and fish. We get a share of what’s collected for doing the work. We’ve traded some of the things we salvaged for some of the meat the local farms are producing.”

“I see. And I see you always have a gun on you.”

“There hasn’t been much trouble that I know of, around here. But from Amateur Radio reports, that’s not the case everywhere. And the more desperate things become, the more dangerous it will get.”

“You’re not thinking of trying to disarm everyone but the criminals, are you?” Sheila asked. “I didn’t fight the Chinese to have a bureaucrat come around and take my gun or the food out of my mouth.”

“Settle down, now,” said the man. “I’m just gathering information. Your position seems to be a common one. I don’t think there will be any gun grab or food confiscation.”

“There won’t be,” Eric said.

“How can you be so sure there won’t be an attempt?” Sheila asked in surprise. The FEMA man looked curious, too.

“Didn’t say there wouldn’t be an attempt. Said there won’t be any guns grabbed or food confiscated, if it is tried.”

“The old, ‘from my cold dead hand’ situation?” the FEMA man said.

Eric nodded. “I’m afraid so. Like Sheila, I fought as a civilian in the counter force action in California. So I could continue to do those things enumerated in the constitution that a free people do. All of them.”

With a nod, the FEMA walked off.

“Do you think they’re really going to try something?” Sheila asked Eric as they got into the Suburban.

“I don’t know, Sheila. I suspect they’re getting an earful from people like us. The majority in the attack affected areas are preppers to one degree or another, or they wouldn’t still be alive. If they do gather the information and learn what the cost will be to institute a New World Order in the aftermath of the war, I really don’t think they will attempt it.

“The call to arms during the invasion will be remembered as civilians taking action for something important by other civilians, and probably most of the remaining military and political leaders. I was serious that even if attempts are made, they won’t succeed. A lot of people will die, that shouldn’t, but I don’t think a majority of the American’s left are going to allow gun grabs or food confiscation and redistribution.”

“Wow!” Sheila said softly. “You are very set on this, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” Eric said. “Aren’t you?”

Shelia sat back in the seat. “Yeah. I am. I just can’t say it as pretty as you.”

Eric laughed and Sheila did, too. Both wondered what the FEMA man would have thought had he seen the pile of guns under the tarp in the back of the Suburban.

Perhaps Eric’s and Sheila’s words made a difference. Neither a gun ban nor food confiscation occurred during those hard years after the war.

When things had eased slightly, Sheila moved her mother to the post apocalypse house Sheila was able to acquire when she went to work for FEMA in Pacific.

Eric stayed where he was, more than set for life. As time passed and non-essential activities once again became possible, Eric discovered his collection of arms and ammunition was one of the best in the country. He spent his last days polishing the guns and counting the gold and silver coins he had. His will stated that his estate would go to the federal government to help out things a little.

End *****

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