

THE SUMMIT

A Tragicomedy for the Stage

by *Seyom Brown*

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

President of the United States, Wilbur W. Williams
President of the Peoples Republic of China, Chen Zhao-Dong
The U.S. National Security Advisor, Leena Isabel (“Libby”) Bismarck
Spokesperson for President Williams
Marine Officer in Charge of Nuclear-Codes “Football”
General Carlos Bruce-Morton, Military Aide to President Williams
Jake Epstein, Moderator of “Face the People” TV talk show
Blitz Wolferman, Anchor on TV News Channel
Journalists at Press Briefings
US Outer-Space Mission-Specialist Astronaut
Chinese Outer-Space Mission-Specialist Astronaut

For the opening, the proscenium is split: President Chen’s Crisis-Situation Room on the left side of stage; the White House Situation Room on the right side.

Large TV monitors are on in each Situation Room, and visible to the theater audience – the Chinese TV coverage showing a US Navy Taskforce of destroyers and an aircraft carrier in motion; the U.S. TV coverage showing Chinese military planes landing and taking off from an ocean sandbar airstrip.

Agitated conversations are going on simultaneously in both Situation Rooms -- untranslated Chinese in Chen’s. (The theater audience hears the noise but can’t tell what is being said)

After about a half-minute of the cacophony:

Main curtain opens to show the White House spokesperson briefing the press (sounds and TV monitors in Situation Rooms diminish and cease).

WHITE HOUSE SPOKESPERSON (WH) (*pointing to large projected photo*): Yes, definitely. That’s a Chinese military airstrip. On an artificial sandbar. Next to Scarborough Shoal, some 140 miles off the west coast of Luzon Island in the Philippines. Those airplanes are Peoples Liberation Army stealth bombers, PLA planes armed with cruise missiles.

JOURNALIST #1: Nuclear tipped?

WH: Could be. Might be. Their missiles are dual capable, as far as we know. Could be carrying nuclear or conventional weapons. Maggie?

JOURNALIST #2: But isn't sending the U.S. 7th Fleet warships toward the Philippines just making matters worse?

WH: President Williams and the Joint Chiefs have concluded just the opposite. No more appeasement. No more acceptance of Beijing's version of peaceful co-existence: letting China persist in actions blatantly asserting its illegal sovereignty claims, and bullying America's Asian allies – establishing by default what President Chen Zhou-Dong calls “facts in the water”. We've been in a losing game. That's gotta change. As President Williams said in his election campaign, said many times: gotta change Chen's calculus.

JOURNALIST #3: But the game of chicken – is that the only alternative? Sending our destroyers and aircraft carriers into what we insist are international waters, China deploying its submarines and revving up the jets on its stealth bombers, demanding that the US Navy desist from sailing into what Beijing insists is China's territorial sea – the game of chicken: a winning game? For us, a *winning* game? *Really?*

WH: President Williams understands what's going on. The Chinese are posturing. Beijing knows that a war between China and the United States would leave China devastated.

JOURNALIST #3: He thinks Chen Zhao-Dong is *bluffing*?

WH: President Williams knows President Chen is a realist. Not anyone who would let his country commit national suicide.

JOURNALIST #4: But what happens if President Chen thinks *we* are bluffing?

WH: President Williams does not bluff. To disabuse the Chinese of any such assumption, of any such miscalculation, to impress Beijing that we mean business, unequivocally, President Williams is publicly and dramatically making a big show of our Naval deployments, plus ordering -- and *announcing* -- an increase in the alert level of our strategic forces --

JOURNALIST #1: He's putting our missiles on high alert?

WH: The President has authorized me to make this statement on his behalf (*points to TV screen, which is now showing text; reads aloud, slowly, authoritatively*): Quote. The United States will not tolerate any interference with freedom of navigation in international waters or in the airspace above these waters. We are prepared to meet any use of force with overwhelming counter-force. To remove any ambiguity in our capabilities and resolve, the Defense Condition of our strategic forces has been raised to level 3, the highest since the Cuban Missile Crisis, when they were at DEFCON 2. I, Wilbur Williams, President of the United States of America, am in continuing contact with Chen Zhou-Dong, President of the Peoples Republic of China, in an effort to peacefully resolve the maritime disputes in the Western Pacific. Unquote. We are

posting this statement on both the White House web site and on the Pentagon's at defense dod.gov.

JOURNALIST #4 : But what gives the President confidence that this warning will compel President Chen to back off?

WH: Chen Zhao-Dong knows the United States, he's lived here, studied here. He knows Wilbur Williams; they were friends, fellow graduate students at the University of Chicago. Chen knows that in our democracy the President cannot afford to retreat from such a public display – a public display of unequivocal national resolve.

JOURNALIST: #4: Yet the think tank studies, the magazine article profiles, the interviews of President Chen. They show him to be a dictator, yes; but to have plenty of enemies in the Communist Party, who are itching to see him humiliated, ready to jump on him. What if Chen too can't afford to be seen backing down? What if Chen too has to demonstrate resolve? Doesn't *that* bother President Williams?

WH: Sure. That's the challenge. The challenge for *both* of them. To find a non-humiliating way of reducing the tension without sacrificing either country's vital interests. To avoid war in a way that they can both define as statesmanship. And that's why they're in intense communication right now, planning a face-to-face meeting to calm things down and resolve the crisis before –

Commotion among the journalists, much shouting: A summit?! When?! Where?

WH (not taking any particular question): I can't give you any details now. But stay tuned, ladies and gentlemen. I know it's a super-bowl weekend, but stay tuned.

Journalists keep shouting at the spokesperson as he turns and leaves the briefing room.

* * * * *

In Oval Office. Late at night.

President Wilbur W. Williams and National Security Advisor Leena Isabel Bismarck seated on couches across from each other.

[A wide variety of types could play Williams]

[An attractive woman in her early 50s, "Libby" Bismarck exudes a business-only aura]

BISMARCK (skeptically): Another summit? Chen-Zhao-Dong's game, Mr. President: Chen's proposal that as context for the summit, we and they call off the China-US military confrontations in the South China Sea. And at the summit he and you freshly commit to the peaceful settlement of disputes. A ruse! We deny ourselves a military backup to our diplomacy - while China continues to illegally dig for oil and natural gas in the international seabed and

continues to build artificial islands on which to base its advanced fighter-bombers, its cruise missiles, its ABMs. Do we really want to endorse that kind of modus vivendi? Such asymmetrical peaceful coexistence. Like in the summit Trump had with Kim-Jong-Un -- Kim getting Trump to suspend the US-South Korean military exercises while North Korea continued to build up its nuclear arsenal. These highest-level one-on-one, face-to-face meetings are fraught with risks. You know my position on this, Mr. President. Unless, the groundwork is most carefully laid by pre-summit working groups, they can --

WILLIAMS: You comparing me to Trump? That I'm prone to fall into the traps our adversaries are setting?

BISMARCK (*obsequiously*): Heavens no, Sir! You know how I respect and admire your judgement, on policy and strategy, your political skills – diplomatic as well domestic. I was only ---

WILLIAMS: I know, I know. You're just trying to put my initiative with Chen into, as you put it, *historical perspective* (***gets up and comes across to sit next to her on other couch***). And I do value that. Your scholarly works on the history of diplomacy – one of the reasons why I wanted you by my side, as National Security Advisor. I meant it when I hired you that I wanted – and still want (***pats her knee***) – *need* you to be, not just my representative in the inter-agency arena and liaison with Congress, but my principal advisor on grand strategy. Like Kissinger for Nixon. Brzezinski for Carter. Almost an alter ego. And you must continue to tell me when you think I'm wrong. Also, I need to be able to tell you frankly when I think *you're* wrong, and go against your advice. Your excessive skepticism of summits --

BISMARCK (*having recovered her composure, laughs*): Same old story, hunh, Mr. President? Even as your aide when you were senator: Your soaring statements for world peace. Me trying to pull you back down to Earth – to get you also to express your *realism* –

WILLIAMS *nods appreciatively* --

BISMARCK: Your frustration with our still-anarchic planet where, unfortunately, might makes right, rather than the other way around. . . .

WILLIAMS: Always the true Bismarck. Your great grandfather, the Chancellor, would be very proud of you.

BISMARCK (*waving away that last remark*): Maybe. I shouldn't be telling you this . . . but the biographies and his private diary, show that he *loved* summits. And he was very good at them.

WILLIAMS: And so was one of your other heroes: Churchill. Wasn't it Churchill who said '*To jaw- jaw, always better than to war-war*'?

BISMARCK: But remember when and why he said that? Nearly ten years after World War II. Churchill was out of office. He was criticizing Prime Minister Eden for conspiring with France

and Israel, behind President Eisenhower's back, to (*notices Williams glancing at his watch*). . . I'm sorry, Sir. We can do this at another time (*stands up and starts to leave*).

WILLIAMS: No, no. It's okay. Nora's probably already asleep. She's hosting an early morning breakfast tomorrow for University of Chicago alumnae who live and work in the Washington area. They wanted me take breakfast with them, but I'm gonna be flying down to Cape Canaveral. Now, where were we ? Churchill? The Suez crisis?

BISMARCK: Really, Sir. I can tell that you're tired. Some other time. You need your sleep.

WILLIAMS: It's *okay*, Libby. I thrive on this stuff (*glances at his watch again*). The larger context. Makes me sleep better. . . So? . . . (*opens his hand, palm side up, gesturing her to resume sitting on the couch, which she does*).

BISMARCK: About Churchill . . . You were quoting his preference for diplomacy, for talking rather than resorting to force to invade Egypt to reverse Nasser's takeover of the Suez Canal. And I was about to remind you that Churchill, like President Eisenhower, thought the Suez crisis was only a sideshow in the Cold War and not worth provoking the Soviets to counter-intervene. . . So yes, jaw-jaw rather than war-war in those circumstances. But I doubt, I doubt that Churchill – if he were sitting here along with us – I doubt that Churchill would be advising you to call off the Navy in our current confrontation with Beijing over their expansive sovereignty claims in the South China Sea. He'd regard the whole balance of power to be at stake – not just in the Asia-Pacific – but the global balance of power. And remember: it was Churchill who was dead set against Chamberlain's appeasement of Hitler in the 1938 Munich conference. It was Churchill, who even before Pearl Harbor, was pressing Roosevelt to get into the war against Germany and Japan –*wah*, wah-wah *early* – not just jah-jah. Churchill, the great war leader who

WILLIAMS: Yeah, yeah. But even during the war, he wanted *negotiations* – negotiations at the highest level as much as possible – his private one-on-one with Stalin. And then, of course, the Yalta summit. The Big Three – Churchill, FDR, Stalin -- getting Stalin to accept a defined sphere of influence for the Soviets, getting both Stalin and Roosevelt to accept also a sphere of influence also for America and Britain, even in Europe, continental Europe. By jaw-jawing, right? Jaw-jawing with Stalin and Roosevelt. Summit-level diplomacy. Instead of plunging into yet another world war after all the carnage of World War II --

BISMARCK (*warming to the discussion*): A huge mistake! –the Yalta summit. We and the Brits should have first pushed militarily into Eastern Europe, deeply, rather than let the Russians be the liberators so far West. We let Stalin have not only Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, but also half of Germany, the half which enveloped Berlin. We let Stalin have *all* of that! An enormously expanded Russian empire. But we didn't have to.

WILLIAMS I (*also into it*): Didn't *have* to? But Stalin's *troops* were there – in Eastern Europe, in East Germany, in Berlin. *Your* aphorism, Libby: military occupation is nine/tenths of the law.

BISMARCK: The Soviet military were exhausted; they had no capacity to take us on, to throw us out of Eastern Europe, if FDR ordered General Eisenhower to push farther East. Stalin was bluffing. . . .

WILLIAMS: We know that *now*. The opening up of the Soviet historical archives. But in February 1945 (*Buzzer sounds. He reaches under the coffee table. Door to Oval Office opens*)

MARINE OFFICER (*enters and salutes*): Sorry to interrupt, Sir, but Lieutenant Gibbons is here to spell me. He's in the hallway. Has the Football.

WILLIAMS: Thanks, Harrison. See you tomorrow.

(*Marine officer exits. Door starts to close behind him*)

VOICE (*hollering from hallway*): Wait! Wait!

(*WILLIAMS reaches under coffee table again; door re-opens*)

GENERAL CARLOS BRUCE-MORTON (*in full-dress Army uniform, three stars gleaming on each shoulder, enters, breathing somewhat heavily, salutes*): Good, you're still here!-- Mr. President, Doctor -- thought you'd already gone to bed.

BISMARCK (*hand over mouth, laughs*)

GEN. BRUCE-MORTON : No! I mean –

WILLIAMS: What is it, General?

GEN. BRUCE-MORTON: Sir. We just got the latest intel on China's military movements – they're activating their new land-mobile DF-26 missiles – the ones Admiral Luo Yuan – claimed could destroy our aircraft carriers entering the South China Sea!

WILLIAMS: Wha'da'ya' mean *activating* ?

GEN. BRUCE-MORTON: Putting them on the high alert, Sir – comparable to our DefCon 2. Upping the ante on our DefCon 3. Shouldn't we do a counter-high-level alert? Match them? The Joint Chiefs are recommending --

WILLIAMS: Whoa! Not so fast. I knew Chen would be doing this. He was on the phone with me this afternoon. Part of the show, he told me – for the home audience. His need to put on a tough face. He's not going to do anything irrational. But needs to balance it against his other face -- his face for the summit, his conflict-resolution, peaceful co-existence face. He also understands *my* political need to look tough.

BISMARCK: So then, he'll understand our counter-alert too – right? Raise it. At least to match him. For *your* home audience.

WILLIAMS (*calmly*): I'm not ready to go there. Could provoke his military. They'd think we're about to pre-empt. Better that both of us reduce the alert-levels of our strategic forces in anticipation of the summit, and take them off alert during the summit. What if I reduce our DEFCON, back to level 4? Give Chen an excuse to reciprocate –

BISMARCK: Or, thinking he's backed you off, he'll be tempted to up the ante in the South China Sea. I think --

WILLIAMS: Let's convene the Joint Chiefs, General. 10 a.m. Here, in the Situation Room. I don't want a cumbersome National Security Council meeting. But invite the Secretaries: Defense and State, and the Director of Central Intelligence. Libby too.

GEN. BRUCE--MORTON: Will do, Sir! (*salutes and briskly exits*)

BISMARCK: Libby *too*? Meaning *what*? Otherwise he might leave me out?! Stuff's been going on which I don't know about -- is that it? I've been left out of the loop?

WILLIAMS: The General sometimes forgets he's my Military Aide, and not the National Security Advisor, and I sometimes have to remind him that *you're* the one filling that role.

BISMARCK: Really, Will! Something's going on. The General's clued into something –

WILLIAMS: A worst-case-analysis guy. He thinks it's his responsibility to make sure we're prepared for the worst. Throughout his career, trying to counter the expectation created by his name, Carlos Bruce-Martin -- the initials, CBM, the acronym for Confidence Building Measures, CBMs, which many in the military regard as overly dovish, naive approaches to confrontations, confrontations which are based on a real clashes of vital interests. I joke with him about it. His parents should have given him the first name of Isadore -- Isadore Carlos Bruce-Morton. Then he'd be ICBM, and probably chair of the Joint Chiefs by now.

BISMARCK: I appreciate his problem – the name, creating false expectations. Having to compensate. But for the current confrontation – he might be right. Still, something's been going on that I've not been fully apprised of. I can sense it. Am I being cut out of the action?

WILLIAMS: Relax, Libby. No need to be anxious. What's important is that Chen and I are in touch. We understand each other. The confrontation in the Western Pacific. A show. It's under control. . . (*takes bottle and two glasses from the cabinet*). So. . . where were we before the General interrupted us? . . . Some cognac for our midnight seminar?

BISMARCK (*sighs, and shakes her head, incredulously*): I was criticizing the rush to the summit in 1945 -- the peace-conference table, prematurely stopping one's military advance, before establishing postwar spheres of political control (*pauses*). . . . You sure you want to do this, Will? It's so late. You've got a very crowded schedule –

WILLIAMS: It relaxes me, you know that. If I were a pot smoker . . . So continue . . .

BISMARCK: And then there was the other huge mistake at the Yalta summit: FDR's promise to give Stalin some of his territorial demands in East Asia if he would join us in defeating Japan.

WILLIAMS: But the bomb, the atomic bomb, not available yet.

BISMARCK: Exactly. Fortunately, we were able to a-bomb the Japanese in time to prevent the Soviets from getting in on the kill and postwar occupation. Good it was Truman who was at the helm that summer. FDR -- so self-infatuated with his skills as a negotiator and his ability to charm Stalin -- even after dropping the bomb, Roosevelt, if he had lived, would have invited Stalin to join him in working out the Japanese surrender terms, giving the Russians much more than Sakhalin.

WILLIAMS: We don't know that. Speculation, Libby. Speculation.

BISMARCK: Admittedly. But then what about the most embarrassing summit? Vienna, the summer of 1961, Kennedy and Khrushchev in Vienna. Four months after Kennedy's humiliation in the Bay of Pigs. There he is: Harvard graduate, son of a millionaire Ambassador, and precocious historian of pre-World War II diplomacy -- and across the table: a frumpy Russian farmer type, cow dung still on his shoes, former low-level communist functionary, having clawed his way up into the Politburo by his dirty fingernails. And so what happens in Vienna? The outcome? . . . (*takes a sip of cognac*) Bullied! Kennedy gets bullied. Strategically bullied. *Intellectually* bullied! On the history of empires, anti-colonialism, self-determination, theories of sovereignty and non-intervention, the rights of victors in war, and the meaning of the rumbles on the *Autobahn* and nuclear threats. Khrushchev making it abundantly clear to Kennedy that the Red Army and East German police controlled the access routes to Berlin, even from West Germany to West Berlin, and this was part and parcel of Russia's vital interest in never again allowing regimes unfriendly to it to come to power east of the Elbe river. The rube, the red neck (*laughs at her double entendre*) -- red neck! -- better at geopolitical dialectics than his worldly, oh-so-sophisticated, adversary.

WILLIAMS: Your point?

BISMARCK: I've got to be totally honest with you, Mr. President --

WILLIAMS (*slyly*): You're telling me there are times when you haven't been (*shakes his head and mimes signing a piece of paper*). Your resignation, Madam.

BISMARCK (*laughing*): You've already got it, remember? -- in your desk drawer there. All it needs is our signatures . . . Seriously, Sir, like Kennedy, it's too early in your tenure as President. It's not like when you and Chen Zhao-Dong were graduate students at the University of Chicago -- when you debated each other, as equals. Since then, Chen has been in the thick of the in-fighting at the highest levels in Beijing. He's developed into a superb dialectician, and first-rate strategist. Meanwhile you've been making yourself popular with the American public -- catering to their hopes, expressing their anger, fashioning policies which connect with their concerns. Your strong suit: democratic leadership. The complexities of geopolitics? Of course, you're

good at it. But with all due respect, Sir, Chen is going to run circles around you – like Khrushchev did to Kennedy in their Vienna Summit before the Soviets turned the screws on us in Berlin, before the Cuban Missile Crisis.

WILLIAMS: Oh? Thanks for the vote of no confidence.

BISMARCK: Forgive me, Sir. That came out wrong. I meant to say Chen will *try* to run circles around you. He'll *try*. But --

WILLIAMS: Yeah, yeah. I appreciate your knowledge of history, Libby – but you cherry-pick it to serve your arguments. What about the deeper value for Kennedy of the Vienna summit? The summit, after all, gave Kennedy the opportunity to take the measure of the Soviet leader, to take the measure of the man, which proved to be crucial later in the Cuban Missile Crisis.

BISMARCK: The Missile Crisis? A crisis which should never have happened. *Would* not have happened if Kennedy – first by his behavior in the Bay of Pigs, and then in his ineptitude in the Vienna Summit – if Kennedy hadn't revealed to Khrushchev that the United States was being led by a president who was squeamish about using force. It was Khrushchev's taking the measure of Kennedy – inaccurately, it turned out, but very dangerously – his mistaken assessment of Kennedy as squeamish, which prompted Khrushchev to gamble that the Americans would come to accept the deployment of Soviet missiles in Cuba as a *fait accompli*.

WILLIAMS: Yet we *didn't* accept it. Instead, the negotiated deal: they remove their missiles from Cuba, we pledge not to invade, and secretly agree to remove our missiles from Turkey – the quid pro quo negotiated at the highest level between Khrushchev and Kennedy, the deal that avoided nuclear war. The deal at the very top. It needed the two of them. . . .

BISMARCK: But it *wasn't* just the two of them -- nothing like the face-to-face you're planning to have with Chen Zhou-Dong. The Kennedy–Khrushchev deal was initiated by an exchange of telegrams, very carefully drafted by their respective staffs. And then the key meeting, in which we delivered an ultimatum, sugar coated with the no-invasion and Turkey missiles promises – the key meeting was between the Soviet ambassador, Dobrynin, and the President's brother Bobby – either of whom could make threats, or concessions, which could readily be reversed by their bosses. No direct contact between JFK and Khrushchev. But the direct face-to-face in Vienna? The *Summit*? That was the problem. A fiasco -- which allowed Khrushchev to believe he could get away with his missiles-to-Cuba ploy, which came very close to igniting a nuclear war.

WILLIAMS: Okay, you may be right about Kennedy and Khrushchev. But what about summits that you have to admit *were* a success – that were clearly a success, that *did* accomplish their purposes of avoiding war and serving U.S. national interests, our vital strategic interests? Nixon and Mao, in Beijing, finessing the Taiwan issue, the issue that was propelling us toward war.

BISMARCK: But don't forget, Sir, that the groundwork was laid by Nixon's National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger, in his secret preliminary meetings with Mao's foreign minister, Chou en Lai. And in the Mao-Nixon face-to-face meetings in Beijing -- Chou was always at Mao's

side, and Kissinger was at Nixon's. And there were translators, note takers, and other aides in the room. And then the famous Nixon-Mao Shanghai Communique finessing the Taiwan issue and instituting the rapprochement between the United States and China? Negotiated and drafted by Chou and Kissinger.

WILLIAMS (*bristling*): You're saying I should be letting *you* lay the groundwork? You and whoever Chen designates. And you should be the one who shapes the dialogue between me and Chen, and sits right behind me, like in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearings, handing me notes on the questions I should ask witnesses --

BISMARCK (*slapping her hands against her cheeks*): I didn't mean --

WILLIAMS: Look, Libby, before hearing what I'm about to tell you . . . know how much I continue to respect your political sophistication, your knowledge, also your geopolitical judgment. And I'm sure great grandfather Otto would be proud of you. Your Bismarckian understanding --

BISMARCK: *See?!*

WILLIAMS: *Your* understanding! I don't care where, from whom, you got it. Your understanding of the relations between force and diplomacy -- the reason I made you my National Security Advisor. But sometimes -- like now--I think you're too ready to apply the Chancellor's 19th century *realpolitik* -- which Kissinger, his American disciple, ultimately learned, won't always work in the 21st century. And I'm . . .

BISMARCK: *Please*, Will --uh, sorry. Mr. President. Sorry, Mr. *President*. I've been -- I don't mean to be so familiar --

WILLIAMS: It's okay, okay -- after hours --

BISMARCK: No, I shouldn't. But please. I *do* have to keep reminding you --I'm not really a disciple of my great grandfather, *or* of Henry Kissinger -- despite my earlier writings. My approach, what should be our grand strategy, could be called Bismarckian or Kissingerian in that it regards force, hard power, as a necessary backup to diplomacy. The balances of military power around the globe -- essential determinants of who gets what when and how. Of course, the political issues we're facing today are different, than those faced by Nixon and Kissinger. And therefore what goes into the calculus of military power balances is different, with the calculus of military power also now affected by the proliferation of cyber capabilities to countries large and small and to non-state actors. My effort is to give realist diplomacy -- for *you* to give realist diplomacy an up-to-date face. Whereas the Chancellor --

WILLIAMS: Of course, my dear, of course. (*looks at his watch again*). It is getting late. My apologies for keeping you up. We'll continue our seminar on European diplomacy at another time -- over cognac (*lifts his glass*). See, I'm officially promoting you -- to be my alter ego.

BISMARCK *waves away that comment.*

WILLIAMS: But before turning in, before our meeting with the Joint Chiefs, let me take a few minutes to bring you up to snuff on the details – the details of my plans for the summit with Chen – which will be as new to them as it is to you.

BISMARCK: So you *have* been putting me off. Our seminar, as you call it, merely a means to deflect –

WILLIAMS: Actually, my philosophical discussion with you has been very useful. Cautions me not to inflate public expectations of what the summit can accomplish. I'm scheduled to be on Meet the People – Sunday morning. Jake Epstein, doing the interview. I'll need you to help me – the questions he'll be throwing at me. But right now, I need your counsel on what we should be telling, and asking of, the JCS tomorrow morning – about the diplomatic side of what's been going on. Here's what the summit's gonna --

BISMARCK: Then Chen's *accepted*? I thought he was equivocal in his phone conversations with you.

WILLIAMS: No, he's on board with it. That is, as soon as he finally re-confirms his acceptance of the details of the spacecraft we'll be using. I'm pretty sure he'll approve.

BISMARCK: *Spacecraft?! What the fuck?! --*

WILLIAMS: Yes, my dear. Spacecraft. Dr. Malcolm Quest and his team are flying up from Cape Canaveral early Friday morning to give us a comprehensive pre-Summit briefing. And the PLA top brass are being flown from Beijing to Cape Canaveral to be briefed by NASA that afternoon. I'll announce it on the Meet the People interview Sunday. President Chen will be making a simultaneous public announcement in Beijing. Immediately after my and Chen's statements, Dr. Quest and his team will do a technical briefing for journalists at the Cape.

BISMARCK (*bangs her cognac glass down on the coffee table and stands up abruptly*): What on earth? I've been kept out of the loop! I knew it!

WILLIAMS: More than *on* earth, baby! And everyone -- the SecDef, Chair of the JCS, Secretary of State, Director of the CIA – all will be screaming at me tomorrow morning for being kept out of the loop. Only Dr. Quest at NASA and his special team of astrophysicists and space-flight engineers, and me, and, of course, General Bruce-Morton – no one else has been privy to the purpose and design of Project Newton. Even the personnel at the satellite-launching base in Kazakhstan we share with the Russians, including Director Petrov, have been kept in the dark. All the work on it has been at the re-activated Shuttle facility at Cape Canaveral. And the launch will take place from Cape Canaveral. The project would never have gotten off the ground – let alone in orbit (*laughs*) -- if I let too many in on it. Too much why-it-can't-be-done would be found. I have absolute faith and confidence in Malcolm Quest, the first NASA Administrator who's also a distinguished astrophysicist. I've been determined not to let politics prevent Quest and his team from giving us this breakthrough.

BISMARCK (*her composure regained*): Dramatically unveiling some new space capability to impress the Chinese in advance of the Summit? I get it. But why all the super super-secrecy until now? Even from members of your own team – the SecDef, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, and *me* –reminds me of how closely Reagan kept his Star Wars fantasy, his SDI, kept it even from even Secretary Weinberger until his surprise public announcement of it in 1983. A mistake. They could of at least prevented him from over-hyping it.

WILLIAMS: Actually, Dr. Quest didn't want the secrecy. He wanted the whole world to be informed about Project Newton from the beginning, even about his futuristic idea of making it an Oval Office in outer space. He believed the people would be impressed we were undertaking it. I wasn't so sure. A secure station out there for the Commander-in-Chief, free of radioactive and other effects of nuclear war, assuming the spacecraft is armed to protect itself from enemy ASAT attacks; *that* might make sense. But the extra Oval Office concept -- ridiculous: Me, and whoever else joined me, floating around in our bulbous spacesuits, bumping into each other. And the effort to replicate the Oval -- my desk, the sofas –pretentious! I thought, ludicrous! An *orbiting* Oval Office. It would be political suicide for me to go public with the plan for such a project. Unless I could present the thing already completed, and Dr. Quest could testify as to how safe it was, I'd be ridiculed for authorizing such a cockamamie idea.

BISMARCK (*unable to contain her laughter*): It *does* sound crazy, sir.

WILLIAMS: *But!* But *then*, when Dr. Quest excitedly phoned me about the amazing success they were having in achieving what was, for NASA, Project Newton's core objective -- the technological breakthrough, bringing the magnetic force of gravity into the spacecraft -- everything changed!

BISMARCK: Gravity in the space satellite?

WILLIAMS: Yup! Mutha-fuckin' *gravity*! Forcing gravity into the space capsule! The name Project Newton – cute, huh? I don't pretend to understand all the physics shit, the technological breakthrough. Maybe you'll do better. Dr. Quest's updated briefing of us on Friday. But the basics are clear: (*Slowly for emphasis*) No longer zero gravity inside the orbiting space capsule; no longer weightless astronauts or other passengers outfitted with special attire; no longer will they be floating around; because now they will have weight --- that is, subject to the pull of gravity. All of their movements, body functions, eating, going to the bathroom, are just the way they are on Earth, or in an airliner. Same for any of the objects in the spacecraft – tables, chairs, whatever; no longer do they need to be anchored to the floor or walls.

BISMARCK: A breakthrough, alright! Fabulous! . . .But the Oval Office in orbit idea. I don't --

WILLIAMS: Dr. Quest's dream from the beginning – which at first, when he told me about it three days before my inauguration, I thought it was wild. Still I complimented him on his creative imagination. But about six weeks ago, when he showed me a bunch of elaborate computer-generated mockups of the Oval Office grafted into a space vehicle – *flash* in my brain!

A summit out there with President Chen. I asked Dr. Quest how soon NASA could build the Oval Office into one of their satellites awaiting launch.

BISMARCK (*angrily*): You told me about *none* of this? None of these preliminaries with Chen?

WILLIAMS: Knowing of your dislike of summits, Ma'am . . . Anyway, Quest assured me his team could in fact prepare a satellite to house the alternative Oval Office by late January. A summit in orbit, Libby. A summit in orbit with Chen! Get the picture?

BISMARCK: Yes, but –

WILLIAMS: The beauty of it – *my* brainstorm, and Dr. Quest told me it's do-able – is to have the Summit in Orbit *private*. I mean it will be totally man-to-man, Chen and me, just the two of us. No aides. No note-takers. No language translators; we don't need them; Chen's fluent in English. Will and Dong, like when we were grad students at the University of Chicago.

BISMARCK (*speaking loudly and quickly*): Really? Absolute privacy for your conversations up there. Doesn't that fly in the face of the Congressional resolutions passed in reaction to Trump's overly-private meetings with Putin. -- that there has to be a public record of what U.S. officials at any level are committing the country to? Some of it, because of security needs, can be classified. But only temporarily, and subject to periodic declassification reviews! And doesn't it violate your positions on accountability and freedom of information that you made so much of in the election campaign?

WILLIAMS (*motioning with his hands for her to slow down*): Calm down, Libby. Chen and I have agreed that all of our official and policy-relevant conversations in the space ship will be audio-recorded. And that we will deactivate the recording only temporarily -- only when we want to talk negatively about particular individuals, or about very personal matters.

BISMARCK: Sorry. I shouldn't have doubted you'd be meticulously careful about such things -

WILLIAMS: No, no – you're right. To remind me. That's your job. . . .

BISMARCK: So you're determined to go ahead with it.

WILLIAMS: Yup. Now that the folks at NASA have solved the leaking-while-mating problem. Still, as Yogi Berra would say: It ain't on till it's off – off its launching pad, that is.

BISMARCK: Leaking while mating? Sounds awfully sexual.

WILLIAMS: The TC –technically correct – concept is the docking and transfer problem. The NASA guys and gals on this project like to devise fun terms for its most challenging aspects. Docking and transfer refers to the temporary mating of the shuttle that will launch me and Chen into outer-space and its hook-up with the already-orbiting Summit capsule, which we will then climb into. The problem was the retention of gravity – how to prevent the loss of the gravity in the summit capsule during this docking procedure. Well, it's been solved. Some kind of electronic field, an electronic screen blocking any significant loss of gravity while Chen and I are

crawling out of the zero-gravity shuttle which lifts us into orbit, out of the shuttle and into the gravitationalized Summit capsule. Again, I don't understand some of the technical stuff, but Quest assured me that the O-in-O -- Project Newton team's name for thing, Oval in Orbit -- it's all ready to go, he's assured me, except for exactly what to include in the satellite's replica of the Oval. He'll be discussing that with us when he visits us here on Friday.

BISMARCK: Are you absolutely sure you want to do this? It's so new, untried before, so experimental.

WILLIAMS: *Seems* a very courageous venture, Chen and me orbiting around the Earth; that's its appeal, its virtue, the drama of it. But actually it's very very safe. The launch into orbit of the shuttle -- long time now since it's been standard operating procedure. And the new spacecraft, the gravitation-embodying capsule's been subject to some ninety top-secret simulations at Cape Canaveral and numerous in-orbit tests by professional astronauts. Safe, but so *innovative* -- that's its appeal for Chen too -- so awe inspiring as to create widespread popular receptivity to anything the two of us might negotiate up there.

BISMARCK: Clearly the people will expect something grand. If it crashes --politically, I mean -- if you don't satisfy popular expectations, no Nixon-in-China accomplishments, what then?

WILLIAMS: That's why we'll need to prepare carefully for Sunday morning's Face the People interview.

BISMARCK: If I may, Mr. President. It would be better if I were the one being interviewed on Face the People about it.

WILLIAMS: There you go again, Libby. You really don't have much confidence in my --

BISMARCK: Don't *you* be so sensitive, Will (*closes her eyes and shakes her head at again using his first name*). Mr. President, . . . you know how much I admire your --

WILLIAMS (*dismissively*): Yeah, yeah --

BISMARCK: But my concern is that you, we, not say anything about this unprecedented and very unusual summit which can be pounced on by the Chinese, or by your domestic opponents. It's much easier for us to say that it was me, your National Security Advisor, who misspoke, and for you to correct me, rather than to have me or one of your other aides correct you. Also, it allows us to do a bit of good cop, bad cop --

WILLIAMS: OK. That's a consideration. . . . Alright. . . . You do the Face the People bit. But let's discuss just how I should put it to the group in the Situation Room tomorrow. . . . Oh shit, it's already tomorrow. . . .

(Bismark opens her large purse, and takes out her laptop)

* * * END OF FIRST ACT * * *

ACT TWO

TV broadcast screen facing audience. News program in progress

BLITZ WOLFERMAN (*on screen in front of backdrop displaying his name and THE WORLD TODAY*): The meeting in the White House Situation Room has been in session for two hours now, and when it breaks up, we'll be on hand to interview the participants as they emerge. We've been told only that the session with the Joint Chiefs is supposed to be dealing with the escalating crisis in the South China Sea. Possibly also with plans for the forthcoming summit meeting between President Williams and Chen Dong, the President of China. Rumors are that both the United States and China have put their strategic missiles on highest pre-launch alert, but there has been no official confirmation by either government.

TV screen switches to videos of U.S. naval battle group, including destroyers and an aircraft carrier, and of Chinese fighter-bombers taking off from a small island.

WOLFERMAN (*voice only*): For the past 48 hours there has been a total blackout of real-time videos of the relevant military deployments. What you are seeing are videos from last week's confrontations: Demonstrations of resolve by the United States and its allies to exercise their freedom of navigation in international waters and airspace in opposition to Beijing's illegal assertions of sovereignty over virtually the entire 1.4 million square-mile South China Sea – the Chinese digging in, *literally* digging in, with shovels and bulldozers, building up dozens of the Sea's shoals and reefs with sand and gravel, converting them into artificial islands, which they then militarize.

TV screen now shows satellite photo of a flat island with no trees, but lots of rectangular structures –bunkers, hangars -- next to two parallel roads which traverse its entire length. In the waters surrounding it are some 50 vessels.

WOLFERMAN: You're now looking at Fiery Cross Reef, one of those artificial islands, located in the Spratly island group, halfway between the Philippines and Vietnam. You can see the island's new airstrip; and the Defense Intelligence Agency tells us that quite a few of the structures you see house SAMs, surface-to-air missiles. Many of those vessels in the ocean around Fiery Cross are Chinese warships – some of them also outfitted with SAMs. The DIA's assessment is that China's military buildup in the South China Sea is only partly for reinforcing its sovereignty claims against its neighbors' sovereignty claims, and against U.S. assertions of a willingness to fight for freedom of navigation. China's local buildup is overkill for these purposes.

TV screen switches to map of region, centering on China and Taiwan

WOLFERMAN: Beijing's apparent purpose, says the DIA, is to make it clear to Taiwan as well as to the United States that in the event of a non-nuclear war – conventional or unconventional -- to prevent Taiwan's independence, China can rapidly achieve victory, while deterring the United States from escalating the conflict to nuclear war.

TV screen again shows Wolferman talking

WOLFERMAN: But then, there is the apocalypse-is-coming view popular among scholars like Allison Graham – the view that China, like ancient Sparta, is embarked on a determined effort to replace today's Athens, the United States, as the world's superpower, and that the United States, equally determined to prevent that, will, like Athens, plunge the world into war, even nuclear war. I'll be interviewing Professor Graham next Tuesday night on my . . . Wait a minute! President Williams' meeting with the Joint Chiefs appears to be over. . . . Jeremy, Jeremy? (*Wolferman adjusts his earpiece*) Jeremy, can you patch in the video? What? They're not allowing any. . . He says everybody's walking away fast, not taking questions. Wait! You've got Dr. Bismarck? Hello? Dr. Bismarck?

BISMARCK (*just her voice; only Wolferman's picture on screen*): Can't talk now, Blitz. Working out a position everyone can support – the Chiefs, State, everyone.

WOLFERMAN: At war? We're at war?!

BISMARCK: Not yet, for god's sake! But if you guys force us to over-define what's going on, we could be!

WOLFERMAN: Anything we can tell the people? *Something!*

BISMARCK: Big news. Believe me, big news. But we've got to coordinate first. And everyone will hear it at the same time.

WOLFERMAN: The summit. The summit's off.

BISMARCK: No, it's *on*. The summit's on. That much you can tell the people. Now get the damn mike out of my face, Jeremy!

WOLFERMAN: Libby?! Jeremy?! She must have turned off the mike. . . . Well, people – at least you heard that. The summit's *on*. . . . So stay tuned. I'll be back after a short break – with more of The World Today.

* * * * *

Oval Office, the White House

General Bruce-Morton enters (carrying a clip-board), followed by President Williams, National Security Advisor Bismarck, NASA Administrator Malcolm Quest, and US Space Astronaut-Technician Sampson Sokolov.

Dr. QUEST: The satellite's orbit and basic condition remain entirely subject to Ground Control. But the Presidents, as if meeting in a normal terrestrial conference facility – you'll be able to operate the light switches, the microwave oven, refrigerator, and water-use mechanisms. The only other humans aboard will be the two Space Mission Specialists, Sampson Sokolov (*pats Sokolov's shoulder*) and his Chinese counterpart. They'll occupy a small compartment with monitoring equipment (*points to the corner of the ceiling*) up there. They'll only have access to the Presidents' meeting area in an emergency.

We're of course having to compress things a little. The insides of the capsule are two-thirds the size of this room, and the control compartment for Sammy and his partner – additional space –

BISMARCK: But we also need space for the table at which the presidents can both sit – the president's desk will be awkward, and the sofas are not sufficiently – you know – down to business.

(Gen. Bruce-Morton takes notes on his clip-board throughout this visit to the Oval Office)

Dr. QUEST: I hadn't figured that in, but . . . The conference table can be small, can't it? And we'll need just two chairs, right?

BISMARCK: Swivel chairs. They need to be comfortable swivel chairs.

Dr. QUEST: Here, Sammy! Give me a hand (*with Sokolov, starts to push the President's desk away from windows and toward the sofas*) Heavy! (*The President and the General join in*). That'll still leave enough space for the sofas – see? Even with the conference table and chairs between them and –

BISMARCK: Kind of cramped, though. And I don't know about moving the President's desk. It'll show in the photos. People will realize it's been moved –

WILLIAMS: Not a problem, Libby. Everybody's gonna know the O-in-O's not the real Oval.

BISMARCK: Course not! I mean, if we're doing this, we should do it right. Not all squeezed in. It still needs to look presidential. If the Chinese were doing it, in their spaceship, you can bet there would be a perfect replica of Chen's desk—the carvings and everything. . . .

DR. QUEST (*moving around to point out things; the others follow*): And here, this closet in the O-in-O will house a refrigerator and freezer, for drinks and food, and for storing the plates and cutlery, with one of the drawers serving as a cutting board. The microwave on a shelf next to it. Also a spring water container. So you'll be on your own, you and President Chen. Sokolov and the Chinese space specialist will be largely confined to their special compartment.

BISMARCK: And the bathroom facilities?

DR. QUEST: Immediately adjacent (*points*). Just like here. Slightly cramped. But completely functional.

BISMARCK: And what if their discussion goes on for more than a day. They'll need to take naps. To sleep.

DR. QUEST: The two sofas. Storage space for the bedding. In each of them. Underneath.

(General Bruce-Morton and Bismarck are whispering to one another off to one side)

BISMARCK (*gets the attention of Williams*): If I may, Sir, on the matter of who controls what -- it occurs to us (*hand motion indicating the General*) that if something goes wrong, say, an actual lethal exchange in the South China Sea while you and President Chen are up there in orbit, you'll want to have the option of aborting the summit, and returning to Earth immediately -- you'll want, won't you, that you, not just Ground Control, not just the Space Astronaut Technicians accompanying you, you'll want to have your own Mission Override, Mission-Abort button.

DR. QUEST: We can do this if you wish, Mr. President. We can graft it into the system -- for President Chen too, for each of you. I should have asked you. It's good you have Dr. Bismarck here to --

WILLIAMS (*angrily*): To come up with complications at the last minute!

BISMARCK (*points to the General*): It was his idea, Sir.

GEN. BRUCE-MORTON: My apologies, Mr. President. I should have thought of that earlier.

DR. QUEST: No, no. Not to worry. We can easily do it. It won't delay anything. It's good that you also have the General here --

WILLIAMS: But not good that the National Security Advisor forgets the General's *my* military aide (*looks hard at Bismarck*) not hers. Sorry, Dr. Quest -- A side issue.

DR. QUEST: About the audio recording, Sir. You sure you don't want it to be also video?

WILLIAMS: No, the audio is enough. If we know we're also being filmed, we'll be more prone to put on an act, self-conscious posing. Even with the audio recording, there's that temptation. But as I told you, we want it designed so that both of us need to be okay with the recording being on -- that either of us can, in effect, turn it off whenever we want, if it's getting into sensitive personal issues, that kind of thing.

DR. QUEST: Understood, Sir. Both of you need to approve to turn it on. Either of you can turn it off. Like the whole mission. Standard fail-safe arrangement --

GEN. BRUCE-MORTON : Sorry to interrupt, but Dr. Quest is due across the river in 20 minutes -- his briefing of the JCS and SecDef --

DR. QUEST: Yes, thanks. Anything else for now, Mr. President? We've still got six days before launch. Meanwhile (*holds up his cell phone and waves it*) I'm at your beck and call.

GEN. BRUCE-MORTON: I'll escort you. Car's waiting.

(Everyone shakes hands. Gen. Bruce-Morton, Dr. Quest, and Sokolov exit)

BISMARCK (*hands on hips*): What was *that* all about?

WILLIAMS: Wha'da'ya mean?

BISMARCK: Your slap in my face at my raising the mission-abort issue. I would have thought that –

WILLIAMS: I get the feeling, Libby, that you and the General are in cahoots, searching for ways to at least delay, if not abort, the whole thing. Your dislike of summits. And the Pentagon – which Carlos still wants to please -- is not at all happy with the project, which has a lot of military implications and puts NASA once again into the military-space business.

BISMARCK: You might think that we're working against you. But you're absolutely wrong in suspecting there's any conspiracy behind your back to prevent the summit. As always, I may disagree with what you want to do or say, and voice that to you privately, but once you've decided, I support you with complete loyalty. The General can speak for himself. Surely, you must know you can trust him. *(Puts her hand on the President's arm)* I understand your irritation of what just happened here with Dr. Quest; and, believe me, I have no illusions that the Carlos is *my* military aide, and I'll make sure he knows that.

* * * * *

“FACE THE PEOPLE” MODERATOR JAKE EPSTEIN *(catching up with the National Security Advisor)*: Libby! Before we're on camera –

BISMARCK: Ask me *on* camera, Jake.

EPSTEIN: Off the record, Libby. Off the record. Is it true.? –

BISMARCK: Whatever I have to say, I'll say to the American people –

EPSTEIN: Is it true that you're opposed to a Summit meeting? That you tried to persuade the President not to have one just now?

BISMARCK: I gave him the pros and cons.

EPSTEIN: The cons?

BISMARCK: I was candid with him: Too early in his tenure as President; not like when he and Chen Zhao-Dong were graduate students at the University of Chicago –when they debated each other, as equals. Chen has been in the thick of the political in-fighting at the highest levels in in his government, in the Communist Party. A master of dialectics, not just Marxist dialectics, also debates about the emergent geopolitical realities. Meanwhile, Williams has been embroiled in primarily domestic political squabbles, leaving it to me, and the Secretary of Defense, to generate and articulate our opposition to China's aggressiveness. I didn't say it to the President directly, but I strongly implied that Chen was more prepared, would try to run circles around him

– like Khrushchev did to Kennedy in their Vienna Summit before the Soviets turned the screws on us in Berlin, before the Cuban Missile Crisis.

EPSTEIN: And his response?

BISMARCK (*scooting ahead of Epstein to let a makeup woman powder her face*) : In five minutes, Jake. On camera. Your own show. Ask me on camera. . .

* * * * *

In “FACE THE PEOPLE” studio, surrounded by TV cameras

EPSTEIN: And we’re privileged to have with us this morning, in her first TV appearance since being appointed National Security Advisor, Dr. Leena Bismarck, former Deputy Secretary of Defense, and no stranger to FACE THE PEOPLE. Right, Dr. Bismarck?

BISMARCK: Glad to be with you again, Jake.

EPSTEIN: Let’s get right to it. The White House press conference Friday afternoon, the revelation of a forthcoming Summit between President Williams and President Chen – but holding us all in suspense. Leaks all day yesterday that a big surprise is forthcoming. Nothing yet. Can you finally break the silence?

BISMARCK: President Williams, soon after his election and well before inauguration, has been sounding out Chen Zhao-Dong on their having a Summit meeting to try to reverse, or at least moderate, the deterioration in US-China relations of the past few years – to at least set the boundaries of the global rivalry, to establish red lines and agree not to cross them.

EPSTEIN: But hasn’t the dramatic escalation of the sovereignty versus freedom of navigation disputes in the South and East China Seas, and the mobilization of military forces, and then Friday’s brink-of-war warning to Beijing – hasn’t the current crisis atmosphere mooted the idea of such a meeting of the presidents for the time being?

BISMARCK: That’s exactly what the President wants to transcend. That Paradox. The fact that that the more we urgently need such a Summit meeting, the more remote is the possibility of having it, as the crisis inflames nationalistic passions. But he’s determined to transcend that paradox; and here’s the surprise. . . .*(long pause)*

EPSTEIN: Yes? . . .

BISMARCK: In outer space. The Summit will be held in outer space – in outer space, free of the turmoil and noise here on the ground. In an orbiting satellite. Peacefully orbiting the Earth. Just the two of them, Williams and Chen. No aides, no note-takers, no translators – Chen is fluent in English, having been a student in the United States for six years. There will be an audio

recording of their dialogue – the mutually-approved transcript to be released to the public. But no leaks to the media while the Summit is in progress.

EPSTEIN: You're joking! Did I hear you right? A Summit in outer space? You're joking!

BISMARCK: No. Deadly serious --

EPSTEIN: But *how*?

BISMARCK: A technological breakthrough. The Presidents will be up there --

PEPSTEIN: You *are* serious! (*Laughing*) I can see it now: the Presidents in their space suits. Floating around in the space capsule --

BISMARCK: No, this is something very different. We've been sitting on it till now. NASA, a handful of physicists and technologists at Cape Canaveral working with Dr. Quest, working on it for years. Top Secret, the project. The President, of course, has been kept abreast. The spacecraft -- the space capsule for the Summit -- no floating around in it, no weightlessness, no bulbous astronaut suits . . . A technological breakthrough. Dr. Quest and his team. They've conquered the weightlessness phenomenon. Inside the satellite, gravity – *gravity* -- the magnetic force of gravity can be harnessed to operate *inside* the orbiting spacecraft. Passengers can sit, stand, sleep, eat, go to the bathroom. Normally, like they can on a passenger airline. It'll still be a bit cramped up there in the orbiting space capsule, but the Presidents can sit across from each other at the negotiating table, very comfortably. And they'll be the only ones in it, except for two technicians in a monitoring compartment adjacent to the main cabin.

EPSTEIN: No weightlessness? Just the two of them? In outer space! It blows the mind! And President Chen has agreed to this?

BISMARCK: *His* National Security Advisor – it's almost midnight in Beijing now – National Security Advisor Xu Qiliang will be making their announcement as soon as we finish with this interview. They want to wait to make sure I've said nothing that the two Presidents haven't agreed to.

EPSTEIN: And the technological breakthrough, the gravity stuff -- can you tell us more about it?

BISMARCK: NASA's Administrator, Dr. Malcolm Quest – he'll be holding a press conference at Cape Canaveral this afternoon. He'll have the physicists, the meteorologists, the spacecraft engineers there with him to explain it, to answer questions.

EPSTEIN: But while we have you here, Dr. Bismarck, can you –

BISMARCK: I'm really not the one to give you the details. My doctorate is in political science, not astrophysics.

EPSTEIN: Okay, okay. We'll wait till this afternoon. But meanwhile, the crisis in the South China Sea – it looks like a military confrontation is imminent. Isn't that going to short circuit going ahead with the Summit in outer-space? Won't our space satellites, core links in our military command and control, won't all our satellites be prime targets if war breaks out? The Presidents in one of them. Isn't this the worst time to proceed with such a Summit?

BISMARCK: Just the opposite. The impending Summit in Orbit gives us both – China and the United States – gives each of us the overriding immediate imperative of putting our respective military operations in and over the South China Sea on hold. Also, the world's media – on hold. Until President Williams and President Chen, back on Earth, are ready to tell us what they've decided. But make no mistake: We're reducing the high alert level of our forces, yes, but are ready to ratchet it up again; and the President still stands behind his statement of January 28th. Let me read from it once more. (*Articulating slowly for emphasis*): *The United States will not tolerate any interference with the freedom of navigation in international waters or in the airspace above these waters. We are prepared to meet any use of force with overwhelming counter-force.*

* * * * *

ACT THREE

Inside the space satellite

The two Mission Specialist Astronauts are helping President Williams and President Chen out of their space suits, which the Specialists fold and carry into their monitoring compartment. While being helped to shed their space suits, the Presidents express appreciative sounds and thanks – Chen in Chinese to the man helping him.

Chen and Williams, smoothing out the normal business attire they were wearing under their space suits, walk around, inspecting the capsule's accoutrements.

CHEN: I must compliment you, Mr. President, you and your NASA people have done a most impressive job.

WILLIAMS (*stopping to look out the window*): I've seen the videos filmed from up here. But the feeling. . . knowing and feeling the distance. Breathtaking. And so blue.

They converge at the table.

CHEN: Well . . . (*putting his hand on Williams' shoulder*), here we are! How the other students at Chicago used to joke about it. Will and Dong someday determining the fate of the world.

WILLIAMS (*wheeling around and making a pretend sword thrust at Chen*): But still dueling. Those were the days, weren't they?

CHEN: Professor Hightower's graduate seminar on great-power politics – how we'd take over the debate, making sure to be on opposite sides, against each other, whatever the issue, whatever our real convictions. Poor Hightower, in his nineties, starting to lose control of his seminar, but still attracting a crowd – not just the students taking it for credit, but others, including undergrads, crowding in the seminar room. The greatest show on campus, they called it, our debates with each other – right? That's what it was.

WILLIAMS: Amazing, wasn't it. That your Foreign Ministry, the Consulate in Chicago – they let you. The irreverent stuff you were spouting. About *both* our governments.

CHEN: A different era – under President Guo Qiliang. His doctrine (*abruptly stops talking*). . . Will ! The audio recording arrangement we agreed to: we're supposed to be able to turn it on and off. Where are the controls?

WILLIAMS (*pointing at the middle of the conference table*): Right here (*waves to get attention of one of the Mission Specialist Astronauts in the monitoring booth, who comes to the table*).

MISSION SPECIALIST ASTRONAUT (MSA): Sir?

WILLIAMS: Lieutenant, the audio recording stuff. Please brief President Chen and me how to work it.

MSA: Yes Sir. (*Points to the middle of the table*) These two green buttons imbedded in the table – one for each of you --when pressed they will light up. Both buttons have to be lit for the recorder to be activated. They will stay lit until you again press either one of them.

CHEN: The wires? cables?

MSA: Completely wireless, Sir.

CHEN: Microphone?

MSA: Not necessary, Sir. The system picks up any and all sounds in this room, and transmits them directly into two recorders, one for each of you to take with you upon completion of the mission. None of your recorded speech or sounds are accessible to me or my partner, Lieutenant Ming, in the monitoring booth. If the booth door is open, we might be able to hear some of what you are saying, but not if it's closed. But if you want to get in touch with us, you should wave or knock hard on the side of the booth.

Simultaneously:

CHEN: Excellent.

WILLIAMS: Got it.

MSA: Anything Else?

WILLIAMS (*shakes head, and extends open hand to Chen*)

CHEN (*also shakes head*)

MSA (*salutes both Presidents, and starts to head back to monitoring room*)

CHEN: And when we get hungry – should we signal you?

MSA: It's all self-service, Sir. Let me show --

WILLIAMS (*waving off the SMA*): I'll show him, Lieutenant. (*puts hand on Chen's back, guiding him toward the closet containing kitchenette-like items: Whatever we need (opening the closet and pointing them out)*). Microwave, tea and coffee maker, ready-to-microwave dinners – American or Chinese; see: chow mein --

CHEN: American is fine –

WILLIAMS: Whatever. The liquor over there, whatever you want. Can I mix you a drink?

CHEN: Later my friend (*returns to conference table*). Good. The recording lights are off.

WILLIAMS: Right. You were about to tell me something about President Guo Qiliang's regime.

CHEN: During our Chicago days – President Guo's allowance of humor – humor as a safety valve. A brief period. . . . But Guo went too far: allowing satire that crossed the line, jokes ridiculing the regime, jokes that deflated the respect needed to rule. The Confucian balance – (*extends his index figure and appears to be pressing it down*)

WILLIAMS: You turned on your green light for recording us. Want me to turn on my green light too?

CHEN *gives a thumbs up*.

WILLIAMS: Great! (*presses down on the table; returns Chen's thumbs up*). Ladies and gentlemen, peoples of the world: This is President Wilbur Williams speaking to you from outer space. Across the table from me is President Chen Zhou-Dong. Most of our dialogue up here is being recorded. Our discussion of some matters, because of the dangers to the security of either of our nations, will not be recorded. As much as possible, we will be operating according to the principle Open Agreements Openly Arrived At. . . . President Chen?

CHEN: My greeting too to peoples of the world. Not just those in peoples republics, but to all peoples, whatever the form of government they may live under. The record of this meeting between President Williams and me, unlike the mostly secret summits between Presidents Trump and Putin, will be made available to all of you. We are starting this historic and unprecedented dialogue with a discussion of our respective philosophies of the good society. My philosophy,

which my government is instructed to implement in all fields, is that of Confucian balance: the people's respect for the rulers, the rulers' for the people. The balance needed to maintain order without resorting to force.

WILLIAMS: *Confucius?* ! I never thought I'd hear *you* invoke Confucius! You used to mock the Chinese-Americans who quoted him. Fortune-cookie philosophy, you called it. (*He walks toward the liquor table; Chen follows*).

CHEN: Confucius understood something that, I must admit, some of our leaders lost sight of -- even Mao --

WILLIAMS: Remember, this is being recorded.

CHEN: What Lenin knew: The leaders of a peoples republic, in order to rule effectively, have to *identify* with the common people, and the common people have to identify with the regime, to believe it is *of* the people, not simply for the people. *Dis*-respect is incompatible with this necessary Confucian balance. We cannot allow disrespect. Not by the people toward the rulers. Not by the rulers toward the people. Enlightened Leninism – my regime –is encouraging the revival of Confucianism. Its daily rituals. Its templates as well as its temples . The Confucianism of mutual respect.

WILLIAMS: So today, then -- today you would not allow an irreverent Chen Zhao-Dong – your younger self-- the freedom you had studying abroad, the freedom you had at the University of Chicago, the freedom to *dis, to* disrespect the Communist regime.

CHEN: Nor, probably, to have the kind of friendship I had with you.

WILLIAMS: Yeah. We were inseparable weren't we?

CHEN (*walking briskly back to their conference table, and bending over to press one of the green buttons, deactivating the recording*): I don't think we should be recording this very personal talk.

WILLIAMS: I guess not. (*Chuckling*) But I can't help remembering how the students, even some of the professors, thought we were gay. And what was that you told them? None of your foo --

CHEN (*doing exaggerated effeminate hand motions and two-step*): None of your foo-king business!

WILLIAMS: None of your foo-king business! Sent them all scurrying to their Chinese-American dictionaries, to other Chinese students.

WILLIAMS and CHEN [*simultaneously*]: Foo-dogs! (*High-fiving one another*): Foo-dogs!

WILLIAMS: Lions! The foo-dogs. The lion statues in front of official Chinese buildings. A new vocabulary for our fellow graduate students at the University: None of your foo-king business. Fook you! . . . Those *were* the days, eh? We could insult one another, our cultures, our governments. Even as a student you could insult your own government. No more Tiananmen Squares. What a time that was!

CHEN (*turning serious*): A very brief time. Ended with the death of President Guo. A narrow window of. . .

WILLIAMS: Of opportunity. Of fresh air.

CHEN: Of illusions, my friend, of illusions. Professor Hightower had it right, despite his dotage. The Thucydian Trap, the tragedy of great power politics. Thucydides, the Greek historian, had it right, about the Peloponnesian War. Unavoidable once Sparta, the rising power, seriously challenged the dominance of Athens, which Athens was determined to prevent. Athens, hypocritically professing to be democratic, ruthlessly threatening and then massacring the people of Melos. Today China, this era's Sparta, challenging America, this era's Athens. We've even begun to say so publicly, like some of your academics, like Allison Graham, are – invoking Professor Hightower's analogy of the Thucydian Trap, with you the declining power; us the rising power. And my people love it . . .

(Pause)

CHEN: So, tell me, how is Nora?

WILLIAMS: She sends her regards.

CHEN: Mine to her. I always knew you guys would seal the knot.

WILLIAMS: *Tie* the knot. Even she was one of those who thought you and I had a thing going; that I was bi –

CHEN: But she knew you and I liked to go to those strip joints together – where the women did the pole dancing, and who'd do a lap dance on you. We didn't go to the ones the gay guys went to, where it was the males who stripped . . .

WILLIAMS: I think the idea excited her. She asked me once whether I would like to try a threesome, whether you would like to join us in bed. I told her I didn't think so; that I didn't think you had any such inclination, nor did I.

CHEN (with a broad wink and nod): Too bad. We could have simulated the US-Russia-China triangle.

WILLIAMS (chuckling): Oh? And who would be which?

CHEN: Nora, America of course.

WILLIAMS: Ha-hah-hah! And you'd be Russia?

CHEN: What?! *I* should be Russia? And *you* China?! No ways!

WILLIAMS: No way. You say: no way.

CHEN: Again correcting me. You act like we're back in Chicago.

WILLIAMS: Again sorry. But in some ways, it's like that, isn't it? Just the two of us. Having a private conversation. Able to share even personal concerns. My hope for this Summit: that maybe if we approached things, not in our official roles, but just as two human beings –

CHEN: You Americans! Thinking that the person, the individual, is somehow an autonomous agent – an agent who can ignore the basic socioeconomic and political structures. Who can ignore history, even change the course of history. You remind me of. . . perhaps you've already heard it. . . . The famous arms control negotiation, where the US team was led by Ambassador Arthur Dean and the Soviets by Semyon Tsarapkin. The negotiation was at an impasse. In the coffee break, Dean comes up behind Tsarapkin, throws his arm around the Russian's shoulders, and says, "Semyon, why can't we deal with this like two human beings?" Tsarapkin's answer: "Of course, Arthur. If I were a human being, I could agree with you. But you forget – I'm a Soviet official."

WILLIAMS: A great story. But what's the moral? Who's the laugh on? The Russian's rigidity, right? Tsarapkin's inadvertent admission. . . confessing to being bound by impersonal forces, by sterile ideology, confined by his official role. The story's perfect, Dong. *Your* admission too, right? Of a dehumanized geopolitics.

CHEN: Not admission, my friend. *Recognition*. A recognition of the realities: The hard realities that we're expected to understand – to understand and put to the service of our countries. A realistic understanding of who rules in our countries, its class basis. The structure of the international system. The distribution of military power. Borders drawn in blood, where the troops stood and fell in the last round of war. The structural constraints that you fantasize breaking out of.

WILLIAMS: So what are you saying, Dong? That there's no escape from the Thucydian Trap? . . . Then maybe we should stay up here, and never come down.

CHEN (*glancing around*): Hmnn. . . They've got a microwave; too bad they don't have some open gas burners and a wok. Well, maybe they've got a supply of microwavable noodles and some kind of mix. That way you can eat Chinese and I can eat American.

WILLIAMS: Seriously, Dong. . . . I think we should get back to being on the record (*presses one of the green buttons*).

CHEN: Not just yet. . . . Of course there's an escape from the war-is-inevitable Trap. But it requires that you first truly free yourself from the ideological America-centered knots you've tied yourself up in: that you stop undermining China's peaceful coexistence philosophy – the philosophy of mutual respect between the superpowers – the philosophy you seemed to be endorsing in persuading me to join you in this Summit.

WILLIAMS (*incredulous*): Oh? That I simply roll over, and accept your definition of peaceful coexistence? In the economic realm, that I accommodate to your wrecking of the rule-based global system, your unilateral manipulation of interest rates, your subsidies of exports in violation of WTO rules, your theft of intellectual property, your provocation of tariff wars that can cause a worldwide depression. And your openly proclaimed expansionary strategy: what you call your – what is it?—sounds sadomasochistic. Oh yeah, Belt and Road.

CHEN: Not funny, Will. One Belt One Road. You persist in distorting it. It's not at all expansionary. We provide knowhow, experts, technology, financial investments, physical protection, sometimes even construction workers. . . . where they are wanted. We put no ideological, no political strings on such help – unlike the US, which tells other people how they must structure their societies, their economies, how they should govern themselves – arrogantly claiming that your free market – hah! Your capitalist exploitative system, your *unfree* market – how it's a system of human rights that should be universally adopted. Arrogant hypocrisy! China respects the *sovereignty* of nations.

WILLIAMS: Sovereignty! Where in the hell is your respect for the sovereignty of countries over their coastal zones – the Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia?

CHEN: You mean their illegal claims of sovereignty hundreds of miles out from their coasts, their proclamations of extended economic zones which you, the Americans, and your oil corporations have pushed them to make.

WILLIAMS: But it's China! – China who's unilaterally constructing oil drilling rigs on the seabed, in the disputed zones, ignoring provisions in the Law of the Sea and other treaties prohibiting such drilling without prior approval by the United Nations Environmental Program?

CHEN: And who are *you* to invoke the Law of the Sea Treaty, which you, almost alone among the countries, have refused to ratify? Besides, those oil rigs are within China's sovereign jurisdiction.

WILLIAMS: China's *unrecognized* assertions of jurisdiction. Your bogus claim of sovereignty over virtually the whole East China Sea.

CHEN: Historically validated. We've published the maps.

WILLIAMS: Centuries-old maps; centuries-old surveys. Much has transpired since. Depends on when we want history to start. 1945 or the 15th Century. (*Slaps the table in exasperation*) Shit! . . . Look at us, Dong! This is not what's supposed to be happening. (*Stands up. Walks to the window*) Look at us, detached from that beautiful planet way down there, on the brink of

destroying itself, creating a new black hole – a black hole which might never be able to regenerate human life – here we are, still stupidly unable to transcend the stale arguments we've been throwing at each other down there for decades. How come as students – as students we could so easily switch sides? Embrace either side of these arguments, punch holes in both sides! Shows how absurd our disputes are, how absurd that we could go to war over them!

CHEN: Glad to hear you say that, Will. That war would be absurd. Contrasts with what your National Security Advisor – with what Leena Bismarck has been saying. . . .

WILLIAMS: And with the belligerent editorials in your newspapers.

CHEN: They don't speak for the Party, for the government.

WILLIAMS: Really? The editors. The media people. Dummies! You know that we know they're dummies. That you're the ventriloquist.

CHEN: Enough, Will! I didn't agree to come way out here to listen to your old propaganda. Talk about stale arguments. . . . If that's all it's going to be, we should have stayed at home, and continued to send our *messages* into orbit. . . or into the cloud, or whatever they call it. . . .

(Slight pause)

WILLIAMS (*Points to the counter*): Time for a drink, yes?

CHEN Okay. (*Goes to the countertop with the liquor bottles*): A note to us here. Says there's ice in the refrigerator.

(They occupy themselves mixing the drinks)

WILLIAMS: Funniest malapropism in the annals of high-level diplomacy -- I used to think it was apocryphal; but the notes of the meeting, the embarrassment, held very closely, have been declassified. . . . Dean Rusk, Kennedy's Secretary of State, and Rusk's wife, were being hosted in Moscow by Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko. Gromyko, the Kremlin's most sophisticated diplomat -- who, like you, prided himself on his knowledge of American colloquiums. So Gromyko gets everyone to raise their vodka glasses and he delivers this toast: We are honored to be hosting this first visit of an American Secretary of State to the Soviet Union, and are particularly delighted that he is accompanied by his charming wife. So our first toast – to you, Mrs. Rusk: *Up your bottom!*

CHEN (*almost spitting out his drink*): *Bu la wo!* Bravo! The Russians -- so stupidly boorish. Even their best educated most skilled diplomats. Their entire history, a crude pendulum swing from anarchy to rigid dictatorship, dictatorships so brittle that any cracks lead to a collapse of the regime, and then a destructive careening back again to anarchy. Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy – the Russian novelists – they exposed this tendency, this weakness. Karl Marx didn't think the Russians were advanced enough, capable enough, flexible enough to wage a successful revolution and install communism. Marx thought it would happen first in Germany or England. The supposedly communist regime in Russia, lasted a mere 70 years – an historical sliver –

giving way, because of mismanagement, to a wholesale disintegration of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics into separate countries. What Putin called the greatest geopolitical tragedy of the 20th century. Nor could the Kremlin hold on to the sphere of influence in Eastern Europe which Russia gained in World War Two, nor will Putin be able to win it back. . . . Looks like we're off the record on this, unuh?

WILLIAMS: As we left the table. But it *registered*. My brain's record. It's good for me to know, for America's leaders to know, for China to know, that neither of us need fear the other will pursue a grand strategy premised on an alliance with Russia.

CHEN: Ah, but don't be so sure. Remember the ancient wisdom Mao liked to quote: The enemy of my enemy is my friend. That wisdom brought Mao and Nixon together in the 1970. To tame Russia. Currently, there are situations festering which could bring China and Russia together – depends in large measure on your actions.

WILLIAMS: Oh? Shall we turn the recorder back on?

CHEN: No, let me continue. The Russians. We need to share with each other our views of the Russians – but not to share it with them. Because even though we might doubt Russia's political competence, they still, for years to come, will have the most powerful nuclear arsenal after yours, plus a wide range of non-nuclear strategic capabilities, including cyber. So whenever, like now, when there is a military confrontation contemplated between China and the United States, you have to know that our ability to count Russia's military forces in the balance facing you is a crucial asset for us. And certainly in our diplomacy prior to and during any possible Sino-American war, we need to make sure that the Kremlin would not seriously consider the reverse -- an alliance with you against China. In advance of any such alliance of Washington and Moscow materializing, we're making sure, with oil deals and other inducements, that it won't happen.

WILLIAMS: Of course. At that ultimate strategic level, I can see how you might yet regard Russia's siding with either you or us as crucial. But at the levels of everyday international relations. . . is there really sufficient durability and depth of China's shared interests with Russia to make you reliable allies against the United States? And if any of our conflicts with you do, god forbid, explode into a hot war, do you really think that Russia, at that moment of truth for them, will allow itself to become a prime strategic target. Put yourself in their shoes. They'll want to sit the war out. They'll be frantically trying to assure the US of their neutrality.

CHEN: Same with your allies, hnnh? Even Japan. Or maybe I should say especially Japan. Despite their prime minister's brave talk, and his efforts to get the country to revise its pacifist constitution, if China and America seem headed for war over an issue which doesn't directly involve Japan's interest – like Taiwan's assertion of independence – do you think Japan is going to activate its so-called Self Defense Forces? Just as it would be naïve for the Japanese to think that you will be bound by your Mutual Defense Treaty with them over issues that don't involve your vital security interests. Our Ministry of State Security, our intelligence service, for example, has picked up fears on the part of the Japanese military that when shove comes to push –

WILLIAMS: Push comes to shove –

CHEN (*piqued at the interruption*) *When Fart come to shit! OK? . . .* When the PLA Air Force next prevents unauthorized Japanese flights over the Diaoyus, our islands in the East China Sea –

WILLIAMS: Sinkakus! Japan claims sovereignty. All maps call them the Sinkuku Islands –

CHEN: Not *our* maps.

WILLIAMS: The International Court of Justice has yet to decide the dispute --

CHEN: The ICJ? Stacked with your judges! Anyway, meanwhile, we can't allow hostile flights over our islands --

WILLIAMS: *Commercial* airline flights! You have no right –

CHEN: Commercial, schlemmercial! How do we know they're not gathering intelligence? All overflights need our prior authorization. And your threat of fighter escorts? You know we can't allow that. And we know you're not so stupid as to try. Yet such scenarios have become a major talking point for the faction in the Japanese military, a growing faction who doubt the credibility of the U.S. commitments, who are pressing for Japan to develop its own nuclear arsenal.

WILLIAMS: Which is in the interest of both of us to prevent. That's what this Summit is all about. Laying out, to one another, our interests. Our primary interests, our secondary interests. Distinguishing what we would fight for from what we could compromise on. That's what I'm trying to get you to face up to: that freedom to navigate our ships, our planes, our space satellites – freedom to sail them, to fly them, in and over the international oceans, in international air space, in outer space, the global commons – that's an absolutely vital interest of the United States. But it's also vital for China. No? Your claimed right to fly over the Sinkakus. Also for Japan. And we should be able to negotiate rules of the road for those realms. Right? So tell me – objectively, not because of the fanatic nationalist pressures you're subject to, but for geostrategic reasons, for fundamental economic reasons, tell me : how critical for the security of the people of China, for their well-being, is it for you to have sovereign control over everything within the so-called nine-dash line you have drawn encircling the South China Sea?

CHEN: Our *ancestors* have drawn.

WILLIAMS: You, your ancestors, whoever – Put aside the legalisms, the legal dispute. I'm talking about the implications for peoples' security or economic and well-being –

CHEN: If our access was blocked –

WILLIAMS: I'm saying if *you* were unable to block the access of *others*. But OK, OK, let's say that others were able to block your access –

CHEN: We'd never allow that, we'd –

WILLIAMS: I know, I know. But just hypothetically. . . .

CHEN: I don't engage in hypotheticals.

WILLIAMS: When the media are present. Neither do I. But they're not. We can speculate, and nobody's going to distort it. And, apart from what's recorded, whatever I might say you said, you can deny it. So be with me a little on this. . . . Let's imagine you no longer have control of the South China Sea, and the United States and its allies do. The economic consequences for you – some surely, but only a fraction of your GDP, right? . . . And militarily? You'd still have many avenues of access to the Asia-Pacific, Indian Ocean theater. And your standoff weapons for military attack – cruise missiles and the like – don't require you to maintain bases in the South China Sea itself. What I'm saying is that your dominance in and over the South China Sea is far from a strategic necessity for you, nor an economic necessity. Whereas for America's allies, their being blocked from using it for commerce or militarily would be devastating; and we couldn't allow that to happen; also, as we've been telling you, our global commitment to freedom of navigation for all maritime states, is unconditional, is absolute. In other words –

CHEN: In other words, *your* words, since China doesn't *need* to exercise sovereign control over the South China Sea, our actions there – extracting oil and natural gas, constructing artificial islands, even fishing – according to you, are acts of aggression, unprovoked aggression. Forecast by Thucydides: the rising power's effort to displace the prevailing hegemon. But you persist in drawing the wrong lessons from Thucydides. It was Athens, still the prevailing hegemon, who was the aggressor, the provoker, eager for a preventive war in time to keep Sparta down. The implication of Thucydides' history, which it would have been subversive for him to state explicitly, was that Athens, rather than fighting an unjust war, should have accommodated to the new reality. The new reality of Sparta as king of the Hellenic hill. China's rise – I use the word unapologetically – is, face it, your decline. The way to avoid a catastrophic war is to accept that fact, the fact that your time as king of the global hill is over.

WILLIAMS: You can't break out of it, can you?

CHEN: What?

WILLIAMS: The zero-sum paradigm. What's good for me is bad for you. And vice-versa: What's good for China is bad for America. You can't break out of it -- the zero-sum paradigm.

CHEN: Para-dime! Para-buck! Para-yuan – the currency of *your* thinking, not ours. Para this, para that -- para-*noid*! That's what you are. Paranoid! No. Better yet (*self-satisfied laughing at his own jibes*). Bipolar! That's what you are; that's your mental pathology: how you see the world, still distorted, in bipolar terms, Cold War bipolarity: If a country, a political movement, is not with you and against us, then they're against you. That's how you see it. And how do you put

it? *My way or the highway?* That's your paradigm! A psychological disorder, bipolar, that's what you're suffering from --

WILLIAMS: Whoa! Cut it out, Dong. Be serious.

CHEN: I'm perfectly serious. Look, Will: You persuade me to join you up here for a candid realistic discussion, uncontaminated by ideology, freed from the need to cater to our Neanderthal constituents, in the hope that we can find a common approach to over-ride our respective war hawks who are itching to play with their technologically-advanced toys. And what do you do? You start lecturing me, farting about what you say is my mistaken paradigm. So I'm fuckin' blowing it back in your face. You want a para-shit debate? OK! Let's -- how do you say it? -- Let's duke it out. *Puke* it out!

WILLIAMS (*laughing*): Glad to know you haven't forgotten how to swear in English.

CHEN: You should hear me in Arabic, Hindi, Swahili. Take your pick. Swearing – should be the lingua-franca of diplomacy. It lets us communicate what we really mean, what's most important. I've mandated that anyone who wants to join our country's foreign service, you've got to be fluent in at least three languages besides Mandarin – to swear in them.

WILLIAMS: Same old Dong!

(*Slight pause*)

CHEN: I hear you're a grandfather already.

WILLIAMS (*reaching for his wallet, and showing photo to Chen*): Seven weeks old.

CHEN: Chip off the old blockhead.

WILLIAMS: The old *block*. Again, sorry. I love the way you stumble on our colloquiums –

CHEN (*laughing*): Deliberate. This time it was deliberate. I was making a joke.

WILLIAMS: Funny. . . . Very good. . . . And so, Dong, what about you? Any dings?

CHEN: Any what?

WILLIAMS: Dings. Little Dongs. Any little ones yet? (*Chen waves his index finger in a "no" motion while Williams continues talking*). Your daughter. She's old enough to give you grandchildren --

CHEN: No, no. We don't do that. Don't Joke about family names. Too easy to be taken as insults. Tribalism. Class conflict. Not consistent with the –

WILLIAMS: The new Confucianism. I get it. It's like P.C. – political correctness – in the U.S. But grandchildren? They help us – that's why we're up here, isn't it? – not only to manage some of our immediate conflicts, which seem so petty from up here, but to take the long-range view of the world, the universe, we're bequeathing to them.

CHEN: My daughter – the physicist – she's not ready for children. She's too involved in her work. Our leading expert on artificial intelligence.

WILLIAMS: She could design herself a robot to do the mothering – the time-consuming stuff.

CHEN (laughing): I'm sure that's one of her priorities!

WILLIAMS: Artificial intelligence, robotics, autonomous weapon systems – you're increasingly invested in them, aren't you?

CHEN: Like you are. The increasing use of robotics. It's in our common interest to prevent it from getting out of hand.

WILLIAMS: Let's reactivate the recording. (*They push the record buttons*) Artificial intelligence. Robotics. The looming problem of life and death decisions being made without humans in the loop. How can we avoid being seduced into an all-out military arms race in such systems? Even if not driven by the arms race between us, and by what the Russians are doing, also by the need to counter the proliferation of cyber and other unconventional warfare capabilities around the world, especially to prevent their possession and use by terrorists, we seem to be *addicted* -- addicted to whatever technology is serving up to us -- driven as much by commercial and economic imperatives, and yes, by pride, the determination not to be left behind. The new toys are being incorporated into our force postures, our grand strategies. We seem unable to get off that self-propelled escalator. By and large we're already being massively controlled by the technologies rather than us controlling them. We're becoming the robots of the robots we're creating.

CHEN: That's you. Not us. You let the market determine which new technologies get adopted and how they should be programmed. We control the market, putting it to the service of human needs.

WILLIAMS: The old ideological argument! It doesn't work anymore – if it ever did. The cyber and artificial intelligence phenomena overwhelm the left-right debates. Whether politically or economically driven, our most intelligent machines, the one's we're increasingly relying on to do our dirty work, our boring work, our dangerous work; also relying on them to make our micro decisions – artificial intelligence, your daughter's field. What concerns me the most, and concerns our strategic planners, is what they're calling *autonomous* systems. Systems programmed to convert inputs to outputs without any human intervention.

CHEN: So, what else is news?

WILLIAMS: Is new. Is *new*. Of course, we've been living with such systems for a long time.

Simple ones like the thermostats that turn our heating and cooling systems on and off. And more recently all kinds of drones, including, very soon, flying automobiles. And the biggest danger: I'm talking about military systems designed to both assimilate incoming information and decide to attack –

CHEN: They're not actually deciding. They're – you've said it – *programmed*.

WILLIAMS: O.K., O.K, programmed, but programmed to convert the incoming information faster than humans can into a sequence of action commands, commands to be implemented – say, mass-destruction attacks -- prior to any reference back to human decision-makers or programmers –

CHEN: Sure. But we – we humans, the initial programmers, and thus the ultimate decision-makers – are the ones who determine, and can re-determine at any time, how much action-commanding scope to devolve to the artificial system. And we can recall that power at any time.

WILLIAMS: Right. And we're not about to program our robots to refuse to accept our instructions. We're not going to give them the power to fight against us. But what's worrying me is how much leeway, how much autonomy, we are likely to voluntarily cede to them – on grounds of military necessity. We've already begun to do so. And, from Intel reports, I know the PLA is. The most dangerous arms race since the invention of nuclear weapons!

CHEN: You exaggerate.

WILLIAMS: Hypersonic weapons, Dong! Your DF East Wind series. Hypersonic missiles that can fly more than five times the speed of sound – as much as 25,000 kilometers per hour or five miles per second. The Russians say their Avangard missiles will be able to fly twenty times the speed of sound.

CHEN: What about your X-51A Waverider?

WILLIAMS: My point exactly. Neither of us can afford to fall behind in this new arms race. Nor can the Russians. What's frightening is how it's forcing all of us to accelerate the automation of our entire strategic systems -- forcing us to give decision-making power to the machines. No time for deliberation if we detect an enemy attack underway. No time for live people even to verify the machine's intel that an attack at us has been launched, let alone for me or you to consult with our advisors about how to respond. Maybe not enough time even for me or you to press the button. It all has to be pre-programmed if we don't want to lose our prime strategic forces before we can use them against the enemy systems. Putting them on hair-trigger alert, activating our use-'em-or-lose 'em programs, which can be triggered autonomously – not by either of us – but by electronic impulses processed by the machines. Your daughter isn't alarmed by this? . . . I'm scared – aren't you? -- scared that while today we humans are still in control of the technological entities we've created, like this spaceship, what we will be bequeathing to our grandchildren --

CHEN: My green recording light just went dead. I'm pushing the button. It still won't come on.

WILLIAMS: Mine too

Overhead lights flicker for about 10 seconds, and Williams and Chen are suddenly weightless, separated from their chairs, and begin floating around, as do all furniture and loose objects not fastened to the floor or walls.

WILLIAMS: What the fuck!

CHEN: *Ta ma de?!*

All further talk and movements by the characters is in their condition of weightlessness, until stage direction specifies gravity has been restored.

Door from monitoring room flings open. Space Technician floats into main room

SPACE TECHNICIAN: Sirs! We've lost contact with Ground Control!

WILLIAMS: What's going on?!!

CHEN: (Comparable question in Chinese)

SPACE TECHNICIAN: Gravity's off, Sir. That's why you're floating. (*Swings arms around*). And all this.

CHEN: Turn it back on!

SPACE TECHNICIAN: Can't. Sir. Only Ground Control can do that?

WILLIAMS: Why in the hell did they turn it off?

SPACE TECHNICIAN: No idea, Sir. Nothing in the flight plan about it. Could be a malfunction.

CHEN: *Mal-fucking!* Tell them to turn it back on. They're your people, Will! Order them!

SPACE TECHNICIAN: Lost all contact, Sir. As soon as communication is reestablished –

WILLIAMS: When?!

SPACE TECHNICIAN: No idea, Sir!

CHEN (*Breathless from flailing around*): I don't believe it! It's one of your tricks, Will! Your CIA. You get me out of the way, incommunicado, while your military attacks our South China Sea bases. You think our military is paralyzed, that they can't fight until I command them to do so. Kidnapping! That's what's going on! *Chink-napping*. That's your game, *Chink-napping!*

WILLIAMS (*Also breathless*): That's crazy! You're out of your mind! You think I'm so stupid to try anything like that? Most likely it's *your* military's doing. My Defense Intelligence Agency has briefed me on the PLA's strategic war plan. It starts with pre-emptively knocking out our space satellites – the essential communications link for locating and guiding our weapons to target. Whichever side does this first gets a decisive edge. That must be what's happening : You're launching a combined ASAT attack against U.S. spacecraft in orbit and a cyber-attack disabling Cape Canaveral and other ground control facilities.

Chen and Williams collide with each other

CHEN: Ahgh! **WILLIAMS:** Fuck!

*Williams tries to push them apart, but Chen grabs his arm
They hang on to each other*

WILLIAMS: You're shivering!

CHEN: We're going to die!

WILLIAMS: Oh god! Let me pass out! Before we crash!

CHEN: You believe in god now?

WILLIAMS: No. But what's the alternative?

Still in each other's arms, floating around

CHEN: That David Bowie song we liked (*sings*): This is Major Tom to Ground Control. Can you hear me Ground Control? (*Yells*) Somebody! Somebody! Can you hear us?

WILLIAMS (*also yelling*): Dr. Quest! Can you hear us? Libby!

CHEN: Zhōngyāng wěiyuánhùi Tóngzhì lǐsī téng! [*Chinese for “Central Committee Comrades, listen!*] Assholes! They won't know what to do. They'll go to war. They'll destroy the planet. . . . My ring! Maybe it will be recovered from the crash debris. We can tell the people what to do.

WILLIAMS: Your ring?! (*pushes Chen away angrily*) You've had it recoding us all the time! The green light system. We agreed to record only when both of us pressed our record button. . . *Bastard!*

CHEN: My enemies in the Party. I have to be able to prove I didn't give away the store!

WILLIAMS: Turn it off! Damn you, turn it off! We can't let everyone know how scared we are!

CHEN: We've got to let them know, to know we're bluffing! – we've got to tell them. The South China Sea crisis, bluffing --not actually keeping to the game of chicken; we're too smart for that. My people, your people, we thought we had to show them how tough we were. But now – for us, our militaries, to actually keep driving toward each other down the center-stripe of the highway: *Diān!* Crazy! MAD, your stupid acronym. Not assured deterrence. Assured destruction! Millions dead. Probably billions! Einstein's warning: evolution will have to start all over again, from amoebas, if *they* survive. You and I –we're going to die in the crash, aren't we? Or an explosion or implosion, burned alive – aren't we?

WILLIAMS: Or *starve*, maybe. Maybe we're headed way out there, *outer-outer* space, un-recallable –

CHEN: Let's hope it's a crash. Onto Earth. And my recorder in my ring is retrieved from the debris – we've got to tell our people that our game of chicken, our rhetoric, our arms buildups, we've been doing it to impress them. We know there can be no winners in a war between China and the US. Everyone loses. Not zero-sum. *Negative* sum. We *all* perish. Bluffing. That's what we've been doing: bluffing!

WILLIAMS: O.K! O.K! Oh no! Fuck! Just peed in my pants!

CHEN *waves arm at Space Technicians' compartment*

WILLIAMS: What are you *doing?!*

CHEN: We need to tell them.

WILLIAMS: They don't have to know.

CHEN: If I have to pee or shit. They need to tell us what to do.

SPACE TECHNIAN (*now next floating near them*): Sir, what is it?

CHEN *pointing at Williams' crotch*: He had to pee. When I have to – what should I do?

SPACE TECHNICIAN: Wait. I'll be right back. *Floats back into monitoring compartment. Searches among floating objects.*

WILLIAMS: What's the idiot doing?

CHEN: Maybe they've got something they forgot to give us.

WILLIAMS: Better be for shitting too.

CHEN: Hold it in! Can you?

WILLIAMS: I mean for whenever. For you as well.

SPACE TECHNICIAN *returns carrying a small plastic bag, which he gives to Williams:*
Condoms. Put them in your pocket for –

WILLIAMS: We don't need to jerk off! We need --

SPACE TECHNICIAN: For urination, Sir. They're bigger, longer. When you finish, there's a velcro strip at the end you should seal, and we'll collect it.

CHEN: And for –

SPACE TECHNICIAN: For defecating, Sir. Signal us, and we'll bring you a special felt pot, also velcroed, and toilet paper, which you then seal up.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, yeah, which we then give back to you. But why, man – why didn't you give us, or at least tell us about, this bathroom stuff at the outset?

SPACE TECHNICIAN: Dr. Quest didn't think you'd need it, Sir. Didn't think we'd lose gravity. Lucky the condoms must have been left over from one of the test flights. Also lucky, a few food packets were left. Can be opened and consumed in weightless contexts. Not that difficult. You might have trouble handling what's in the refrigerator, getting it into the microwave. Anything else we can do for you? Let us know when you're hungry, so we can bring you the packets and help you with them – somewhat different than eating with regular cutlery . . . or chopsticks.

CHEN *waves off Technician:* We'll be fine, I guess.

WILLIAMS: Fook it all, hunh? Fook it all! (*nearly screaming*) Shit!!

CHEN: Shall I beckon them to bring the potty?

WILLIAMS: No, asshole! Delete the damn stuff in your ring! About me pee-ing, and all that talk!

CHEN: Can't. It's got no erase function.

WILLIAMS *grabs Chen's hand. Chen pushes him away, but Williams still hangs on, shouting into the ring:* O.K.! O.K.! Listen up, people of the world! Here's the crucial take-away from this Summit: Nuclear weapons, cyber, artificial intelligence, any kind of technology,. Including condoms for pee-ing in outer-space – none of that is going to solve our problems. It's only making it worse. Our overwhelming predicament: We, President Chen and I -- or our successors if we don't survive this Summit – we command enough power to destroy planet Earth and possibly the universe. But --

CHEN: I know what you're going to say: that we haven't figured out a way to prevent ourselves from doing it.

WILLIAMS: No! I was going to say that we have the absolute obligation – higher than any other -- to do everything we can to prevent such destruction. Even if it requires sacrificing our lesser interests. . . . which it *does*. The US must accommodate to China's rise – to allow China to proceed with its economic exploitation of South China Sea resources, even prior to settling the island sovereignty disputes, and China must –

CHEN: That's what we've been saying to you. Your attempt to stop us from exercising our territorial rights in the South China and East China Seas. Our historic rights. Stopping us – can't be worth destroying one another, destroying the planet.

WILLIAMS: But you too must compromise, asshole! What we've been saying to you: You've got to guarantee freedom of navigation in international waters. To stop preventing flights in international airspace. Worth a nuclear war to you?

CHEN: We're going in circles!

WILLIAMS: I *hope* we are! . . . Around Earth!

CHEN: Hah! But we agree on at least one thing, the most important thing: we can't settle our maritime conflicts, our territorial conflicts –

WILLIAMS: Our sovereignty disputes –

CHEN: Can't settle them by war. If we ever come down from this, this Summit, or if my ring recorder survives, it'll show that we agree that our governments should negotiate a Peaceful Resolution of Disputes treaty for these maritime conflicts.

WILLIAMS: But meanwhile you must cease all work building up those artificial islands --

CHEN: And you, are you willing to suspend the joint US-Philippines maritime conflict exercises?

Vigorous shaking of the space capsule, lights on and off, bursts of loud noise.

WILLIAMS (*wailing*): Here we go!!!

Williams, Chen, and all the floating objects fall hard to the floor. The lights come on. Loud noises cease.

SPACE TECHNICIAN (*shouts from monitoring room*): Contact with Ground Control re-established!

WILLIAMS (*continuing to hold on to Chen, moves to the satellite's window*): It's still there. So beautiful, so peaceful – from up here.

CHEN: So deceptive. On the brink of blowing itself up, or suffocating itself.

WILLIAMS: Not on its own, though maybe eventually. But now, if it implodes, or chokes to death, it will be because of what *we* – the human species – have been doing, or failed to do.

CHEN (*shouting to Space Technicians*): What happens now?

SPACE TECHNICIAN: Soon, Sir. We'll be landing soon.

WILLIAMS: Our space suits. Do we need to put on our space suits?

SPACE TECHNICIAN: No. We're making a direct landing, Sir. We don't need to be brought down by a shuttle vehicle. We're already within Earth's gravitational field.

CHEN: How soon? Hours? Days?

SPACE TECHNICIAN: Minutes. But hold on to something stationary. One of those hand grips fastened to the wall would be good. There might be some slight bumps as we land, like an airliner; and, apologies, we didn't provide seat belts.

WILLIAMS (*still standing next to window*): When I feared we were about to die, I had this epiphany, Dong: that the disintegration of our bodies in outer-space was only poetic justice for our hubris, our pride in having transformed nature, symbolized by this satellite, including our power to destroy the natural world – our deaths up here being mother nature's punishment of us for having neglected her needs.

CHEN: Beautiful, Will. But what good does it do us now, or if we would have died – what good does admitting our hubris, our guilt – how does that translate into changed behavior, behavior that will allow for the healthy survival of the human species?

WILLIAMS: The change in orientation, that's most critical. Not seeking to undermine the other, not zero-sum strategies –what's good for you is bad for me. But seeking positive-sum, and avoiding negative sum policies. At least us, China and America, the most powerful global actors, recognizing that we are *trustees* of the planet's security and healthy survival, and must act as its trustees –pursuing the *world* interest, the over-arching interest, symbolized by our orbit around it, subordinating national interests and local and class interests to it -- *sharing* sovereignty of the planet's land, waters, airspace outer space. Trustees, *accountable* trustees -- accountable for how we treat the commons, the common heritage of humankind.

CHEN: Acting in defense of the world interest, not only our national interests. Trustees for the human community. Confucius would approve. Higher Realism we can call it – overriding the territoriality, state-sovereignty obsessions of the Western *realpolitik* I win, you lose, paradigm.

WILLIAMS (*hugging Chen*): You're *with* me, Dong!

CHEN: But how can we get our constituents, also the smaller powers jealous of their sovereignty, to buy into it, to allow at least us to practice this Higher Realism?

WILLIAMS: We have to try. And start now: announcing it as the post-orbit theme of the Will and Dong Summit, mandating at least *our* officials to program the world interest – Higher Realism or whatever we name it – programming it into the specific policy options they give us, programming it also into the Artificial Intelligence systems that will be calculating the costs and benefits of alternative policies. Right away – the confrontation in the South China Sea --

Spaceship starts shaking, lights flicker

WILLIAMS: Whoa! Hang on!

BOTHE SPACE TECHNICIANS (*now nearby, speaking in English and Chinese*): All is OK.

Diminished shaking as spacecraft taxis to a halt. Williams and Chen are silent. Space Technicians open Exit door motion Williams and Chen to follow them through it.

Stage lights off for a few seconds.

Chen and Williams on opposite sides of the proscenium, facing the theater audience (who are surrogates for gatherings of official greeters and press). Image of the spacecraft behind and between them. Simultaneous press conferences are already in progress.

JOURNALIST (*in group greeting Chen*): President Chen, Can you tell us what China has gained from the Summit? Was it worthwhile, from your point of view?

CHEN: The opportunity to clean the air. To *clear* the air, as you Americans like to say. To lift the fog, the fog of the war of words. The United States can no longer have any misunderstanding, no miscalculation of the depth of the Peoples Republic's determination to enforce order in the South and East China Seas.

JOURNALIST (*in group greeting Williams, shouting to get his attention*): Mr. President, the military alert: You called it off, got the aircraft carrier to stop heading for the Philippines during the Summit. Are you continuing to keep the military pressure turned off for the time being?

WILLIAMS: We can always turn the military valve back on. It was about freedom of the seas, of navigation in and over them, in the Asia-Pacific, globally. If China doubted our resolve on this issue before the Summit, if there was any ambiguity in our position, they now know differently.

JOURNALIST: But their claims of sovereignty over various island groups, over the South China Sea itself, their building of artificial islands –

WILLIAMS: The conflicting claims need to be negotiated. Or arbitrated by the international courts. We won't accept a fait accompli.

JOURNALIST: But what about President Chen? Has he agreed to suspend his aggressive moves until there's a peaceful resolution?

WILLIAMS: The ball's in his court. I've made it perfectly clear. The ball's in his court.

JOURNALIST: Sir, the temporary loss of connection with Ground Control. Can you tell us what was running through your head at that time?

WILLIAMS: I admit to being apprehensive, actually frightened that we'd crash, or were about to explode or – silly -- stay up there forever, and starve to death.

JOURNALIST: And President Chen – how did he react?

WILLIAMS: He was shook up too. But, amazingly, he became suddenly quite pliable, willing to perhaps compromise on some of the sovereignty issues. A joint responsibility concept. Some bilateral working groups – we'll be setting up some groups.

JOURNALIST: He agreed to that?

WILLIAMS: Not exactly. I need to talk with him some more.

Spotlight back on Chen group

JOURNALIST: Mr. President, on the substance of the issues: Any progress? Any movement by either of you?

CHEN: I can say we agreed to disagree – without going to war. So, yes, some progress.

JOURNALIST: But China's oil drilling in disputed areas of the seabed, and your militarization of the artificial islands – they will continue? Isn't that the source of dangerous confrontations, possibly war?

CHEN: No, it doesn't have to be. We want to be responsive to international community concerns, such as damage to marine life from oil drilling and the construction of new islands. And we're perfectly willing to allow others, including the US, freedom of peaceful navigation in our sovereign waters, the South China Sea, also the East China Sea – as long as its for scientific and environmental research. Also we'll give permission for flying above our seas to commercial – not armed—aircraft. But no state, no international institution, can dictate to the Peoples Republic what it can and cannot do in its sovereign maritime and air space. We're ready to resolve the disputes, peacefully. Peaceful coexistence is the only sane policy. But as you Americans put it, the baseball's in your court.

* * * * *

In White House Oval Office

BISMARCK (*reading aloud from Washington Post*): Their editorial: The baseball's in your court, said President Chen last night, confusing tennis with baseball, while continuing to fail to deal with the source of the potentially fateful game of chicken: China's unilateral illegal assertions of sovereignty over most of the South China Sea and some of the East China Sea, and its construction of military facilities on various of the island groups it controls, including stealth bomber bases on the artificial islands its been building. If the game of chicken off the West coast of Luzon has been called off, at least temporarily, we can all breathe a sigh of relief, and credit it to the daring innovation of the in-orbit Summit conceived of by President Williams. But we are left with the suspicion that Chen ate Williams for lunch out there –with chopsticks -- getting the United States, in the name of peaceful co-existence, to tolerate China's bullying of its neighbors. No softening whatsoever of Beijing's position. We understand from NASA that the presidents audio recorded some of their exchanges in orbit. And each has a copy of the recording. In the interest of transparency and accountability, President Williams should allow it to be broadcast to the world.

WILLIAMS: You're saying I told you so. I can see it in the curvature of your mouth. But you're wrong. You, the Post's editors -- didn't have the experience. My experience of Chen's acting like . . . like. . . a human being. Those public remarks upon landing – his, like mine – for the crowd, not really reflecting. . .

Staff person appears at door to Oval Office with package.

BISMARCK (*accepting package and handing it to Williams*): From the Chinese Embassy. Has our guys' security stamp on it.

WILLIAMS (*opens package and unfolds a small note; reads it aloud*): From your co-trustee of the planet – Dong. (*Unwraps and holds up a quite large ring*): The devil! Must have already transcribed the recording on it – of the whole summit. Now giving it to me, knowing how embarrassing it would be to make it public. But *Why?* (*Takes a small translucent bag from the package, and holds it up*).

BISMARCK (*staring at it*): Condoms ? !

WILLIAMS (*laughing*): Fook!

BISMARCK: What?

WILLIAMS: Let me explain . . .

CURTAIN

CURTAIN

