I don't need to hear any more. Just plain cool.

-- Kurt Schlichter, author People's Republic

The Powers of the Earth

Chapter 1

2064: Mining debris heap, Aristillus Crater, Lunar Nearside

The sky above the spaceport was as black as a freshly bored lunar tunnel before the lights were installed. Earth hung overhead, the once-bright cities of its western hemisphere glowing dimly with low-energy bulbs and rolling brown-outs. Except California. California was dark.

Mike Martin squinted against the brightness of the lunar noon and squeezed the trigger slowly, waiting for the break -

The thunder traveled through the rifle stock to his spacesuit and then into his chest like a punch from a giant. A moment later he was engulfed by a cloud of dust blown off the lunar surface by the muzzle blast.

Javier pretended to cough over the in-helmet radio. Mike ignored him and smiled like a kid. The first five versions of the rifle had failed in simulation. The next two had blown up in their test rigs. This one, version 0.08, had survived a hundred rounds in the rig... and now Mike had fired it by hand for the first time ever. He whooped in celebration.

Javier's voice came through his helmet speakers. "You sound pleased with yourself."

Mike grinned. "When am I not?"

The lunar dust settled onto the ground - and on the shooting bench and their suits. Javier brushed his faceplate ineffectively. "Seriously, Mike, why such a big
Mike flipped the rifle's safety. "Because I'm from Texas."

"That was a serious question."

"...which is why I gave you a serious answer."

Javier shook his head. His helmet didn't move, but Mike saw it via his in-helmet display and grinned again. "During the CEO Trials they seized my company, my house -"

"I was THERE, Mike. Ancient history."

Mike held up a finger. "They took my dad's collection." He paused, inventorying it. "A 1772 Brown Bess, a few 18th century officer's swords-"

"But what -"

"I miss my dad's fifty."

"You MISS it?"

"Well, I only fired it once, but it was his favorite. So it's my favorite."

"So you needed to design and build a gun just as big?"

"Just as big? Fuck that! It's twice the diameter, and eight times the mass."

"Has anyone ever told you that you're a lunatic, Mike? I mean, besides me?"

"Not for about a week."

Javier tilted his head back and looked up at the Earth. "Darcy's on a run?"

"Getting back tomorrow. Or maybe the day after."

Javier grunted and then looked at the impromptu rifle target - just a piece of white-painted steel propped up on small mountain of tailings a kilometer away. "Did you even hit it?"
"The spotting scope is on channel four." Without waiting for Javier Mike brought up the feed in his helmet display. The target was clean. "Missed. Let me try again with a tracer." Mike pulled a massive round from the ammo box with two bulky gloved fingers; then a new voice, crisp and British, came over the radio.

"Michael, we've got an incoming flight. If you boys could put your games on hold for a bit it would be greatly appreciated."

"Albert, I'm facing in the opposite direction from the docks. The chance of a ricochet hitting a ship is - what? - no more than fifty percent?" He grinned at Javier, inviting his friend into the game. "At MOST. Probably not more than twenty five percent. Let me take a few more shots."

Albert gave a sigh. "I take it that SOME people are entertained by your behavior." A brief pause. "I need you to shut it down. Now, kindly."

Mike rolled his eyes. "Aye aye, Albert." He slipped the tracer back into the case and laid the rifle on the shooting table.

Javier pointed a thumb over his shoulder. "Want to watch the ship come in?"

Mike affected an air of disdain even as he stood and turned to face Lai Docks. "These modern landings aren't nearly as exciting as -"

Javier groaned. "Spare me from yet another retelling of The First Landing. Rust, money, a jerry-rigged crane and a Chinese tunnel boring machine -"

"The first TBM was Korean -"

Javier continued as if Mike hadn't spoken. " - and one man, working alone-"

"Hey - I ALWAYS give Ponzie credit. His drive -"

Javier gave him a stern look. "Saying that ONE other person helped build Aristillus isn't much better than saying you did it yourself."

"Well, I mostly - woah!"

A shadow darker than any on Earth swallowed them. The rifle, the bench, Javier-
all disappeared in the black. Mike turned. The incoming ship had slid across the sky, unseen by them - until it eclipsed the sun, cutting off the light like a guillotine.

Mike looked - there! A spot of dark in a dark sky, with just a thread of white along one edge - and then it was past the sun and the dark shadow was replaced by an actinic glare. Mike's helmet dimmed almost immediately, but not quite fast enough to prevent a small squiggle of afterimage color.

Mike watched the ship as it drifted through the sky. The oceangoing freighter wouldn't have been noteworthy in any harbor on Earth - except perhaps for its extreme age and small size. If it were bobbing in the salt water of, say, Matamoros or Durban, it would be lost among the Panamax container carriers and the odd 500 meter LNG tankers doing business under loopholes in the Carbon Law.

Such a ship would be nothing more than a bit of foreground clutter there - but here? Even after ten years, watching a container ship floating over the stark black and gray lunar surface struck him as magical and unreal.

He followed the ship as it dropped toward the solar farms, tailing dumps, refineries, and rolling plants. It slid lower, toward the open pit of Lai Docks. Mike noted the subtle restraint with which the ship's navigator played the game - small maneuvering rockets embedded in the cargo containers on the ship's deck fired from time to time to correct the course, but never for too long.

Suddenly its descent slowed and stopped. Slowly, laboriously, the massive ship rolled a few degrees one way and the other, as if it were being rocked in an invisible sea. The oscillation stopped and the ship resumed its descent.

Ha!

Mike raised one hand high in acknowledgment. Would she able able to see it from there? Yes, her cameras must be good enough; she'd waved first. Mike lowered his arm and turned to Javier. "Looks like I was wrong about the schedule - Darcy's back now."

The men continued to watch the ship until it dropped into the open pit of the hanger and disappeared and the vast concrete doors began to slide shut. Mike turned back to the shooting bench and reached for the rifle. "Don't you want to
go see Darcy?"

Mike looked at him. "Are you kidding? I'm not sighted in yet, and I've got a box full of ammo left."

Javier shook his head. "You've got to pay more attention to her. She's a good woman."

Mike loaded a tracer and locked the bolt forward. "I know."

"Do you?"

Mike pulled his helmet away from the stock. "Are you giving me dating advice now?"

"I'm giving you advice on getting along with people." Javier let a hint of a grin slide onto his face. "And, yes, part of that is dating advice."

Mike considered this for a moment before dismissing it. He pointed his chin at the rifle. "So what do you think of it?"

Javier sighed, then looked at the rifle. "It's impressive." He paused. "But I don't know what the point is."

"The point? Jav, if the government ever gets up here -"

Javier put up a hand. "I know. I know. But if it ever comes to that, negotiation -"

"Negotiation? Fuck the government and fuck negotiation. When the Bureau of Industrial Planning said I couldn't buy more earth movers, I negotiated. I paid three lawyers for a year and it didn't accomplish shit. Then the Racketeering and Unjust Profits Act -"

"Mike, my point is -"

"WHEN THEY PASSED RUPA, I negotiated. I played by their rules, I went to court, and you know how well that worked. Fuck negotiation. If they ever come after us, I've got an answer for them." He slapped the rifle.

Javier shook his head. "Mike, let's pretend I accept your thesis and we've got this
existential risk. If that's true, you're being an idiot."

Mike turned, shocked. "I - what?"

"If the government is trying to destroy us, then anything other than the plan with the best chance of success is idiotic."

Mike pursed his lips.

"If you're serious about this, and not just signalling that you're a crazy bad ass, then you've got to think strategically. You need to recruit allies, build a power structure, do -"

"I AM building a power structure. Once the rifle design is perfected I'm going to build a militia and -"

Javier sighed. "Hiring a bunch of guys and giving them rifles isn't what I meant. You don't need one militia; you need to motivate everyone to get ready. Build alliances, get other leaders interested -"

"Other? Other than who?"

Javier smiled ruefully. "Other than you, Mike."

Mike snorted. "I'm not a leader. What I am is the only guy who sees the problem that's going to be in our lap in five years, and the only one who's trying to get us ready for it."

"And building guns - but refusing to network - is the best way to do that?"

Mike grimaced. "Enough. This is getting my pulse up and that'll throw off my aim. Spot for me."

Javier sighed and Mike rolled his eyes at the sound.

Javier was his friend, but Mike would never understand his insistence about committees and talking and the rest of that bullshit. Not when there was real work to be done. Mike adjusted the sling around the upper arm of his suit, clipped the free end onto the rifle, and then pushed the weapon out, drawing the sling tight. He drew a breath, and squeezed -
The thunderclap punched him in the chest and dust engulfed him again. Mike raised his head from the stock. "Did I hit it?"

"No, but you clipped a boulder ten meters to the right. Check the replay - you sent a nice chunk of rock shooting off into the sky."

Chapter 2

2064: West Wing of the White House, Washington DC, Earth

The taupe-carpeted corridor that ran down the center of the West Wing was quiet. Senator Linda Haig looked at her watch. Almost half an hour late. Hardly surprising; that woman was never -

Suddenly the doors of the Cabinet Room flew open and the president strode out. Linda, without missing a beat, fell into step beside her. Behind and around them, the president's staff hurried to keep up. One of the aides said "Madam President, I know your schedule is tight, but we really need an answer on the fertilizer allocation -"

President Johnson looked straight ahead as she walked briskly. "Don't pressure me, Don. Do you think that YOU get to dictate my schedule?"

From the corner of her eye Linda Haig could see Don bite his lip. The president's moods were legendary. What sort of amateur was Don that he not only was letting the president get to him, but was letting his emotions show like that? How the man could be Chief of Staff and be so bad at the game was beyond her. Still, it would be instructive to watch - any data on how Don and the president interacted was useful.

Don nodded. "Ah - no, ma'am. It's just that we're getting a lot of pressure from the Department of Agriculture, and they're getting a lot of pressure from the farmers, who -"

They reached the central lobby and Senator Haig turned the corner crisply alongside the president. Don, on the other hand, almost ran into the back of the man in front of him. Linda suppressed a smile - and then suddenly had to stop without warning when the president halted in her tracks. Linda turned and watched - was she going to see Themba stop to harangue an underling?
The president gestured around the sitting area in the corridor. "Don, all this old furniture. I don't like it." She paused and looked up. "And the ceiling is too low."

Linda looked at Don. She could almost see the man fighting the urge to roll his eyes. And reasonably so - he was the Chief of Staff, not some flunky. But he should hide it better. Linda considered carefully - was Themba really this much of an idiot, talking about furniture and ceilings, or was there some deeper game going on here?

Don cleared his throat. "I'll make sure the Chief Usher gets the message and brings it to the Preservation Committee."

The president nodded, said "Good," and resumed her pace toward the courtyard.

"Ma'am, the fertilizer -"

Themba was dismissive. "Don, if the farmers don't like it, they don't have to take their allocations. They want something from me? They can wait until I've decided...and I haven't decided. Next topic."

Catherine, the DoD liason, spoke. "The DoD wants your approval -"

Linda's ears perked. THIS was interesting. There wasn't much to be done with the fertilizer issue, but military issues...well, there were fault lines there - and ways to use information.

Catherine continued "- for a renewal of the mixed deployments with PK forces."

Linda kept the disappointment off her face. Procedural crap. She was looking for something juicier. She had been TOLD that there would be something juicier.

The president brushed out of the lobby entrance, past the Marines who held the French doors open for her, and outside to the covered motor court where the limousine, the decoy limousines, and the hulking black security escort vehicles waited. The secret service agents around the vehicles straightened slightly. The president ignored them. "Fine, Catherine. Renew it. What else?"

Catherine held her slate under one arm but didn't need to refer to it. "The Senate is going to bring up the renewal for the California Earthquake Relief next week - what are your instructions?"
Linda made a mental note - was it really true that the president didn't yet have a position on the Earthquake Relief bill, this late in the game? Linda had assumed that there was no way the woman could be as much of an idiot as some people said. So: stupidity? cleverness? Or something -

"Our polls are a bit weak, and we need those electoral votes - let's do the same package as last year, but increase it ... I don't know ... what? Ten percent? Twenty? Let's do twenty."

Twenty percent? Dear God. The president WAS insane - and from the looks exchanged around the semicircle, Linda Haig wasn't the only who thought so. Don cleared his throat. "Ma'am - twenty is a big number. The Fed is already really nervous about inflation, and if we print that much -"

"Don, if Simons squeals, remind him that he has his job because I kicked out Zachary, and I'm not afraid to do it again. Earthquake relief is a huge problem! Does Simons want those people to starve?" She rolled her eyes upward, as if looking for relief from her burdens.

Linda watched as the secret service agents, the Marines and the other staff clustered in a semi-circle stoically pretended not to notice. The president's theatrics had served her well on her vlog, and then on her talk show, but Linda thought the effect was noticeably different in person.

And not better.

Don cleared his throat. "Ma'am, no one is saying that relief isn't important - it's just that it's been six years, and given the state of the budget and the bond markets, at some point we have to start looking at ramping it down. Holding it steady is bad enough, but twenty percent -"

"Don't tell me how to spend my money, Don! Neither you or Simons or anyone else in this city -" she gestured grandly "- has to make the hard decisions I have to make!" The president lowered her arms and grew serious. "This isn't optional - we need those electoral votes."

Don raised one finger. "Yes, I know, but -"

The president jabbed a finger at Don - and then was actually poking him in the chest. "Don, I have made MY DECISION. Stop questioning me! I can replace
Simons, I can replace Bonner, I can replace anyone in this room - do you understand me?"

Don took a step backward, let the silence stretch, and then lowered his eyes and nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

The president turned from Don to the rest of her entourage. "OK, that's it, people. I need to be on Air Force One ASAP - I've got an important meeting. Is there anything else?"

Sarah spoke up. "Yes, ma'am, we desperately need to talk about the tax reform bill - we're getting pressure -"

The president waved her off contemptuously. "When I get back."

From another arc of the group: "The energy allocation is cutting into manufacturing and the web engine folks are on the verge of rolling brownouts in their data centers, so we -"

"Damn it, Nathan, I've told them before - they're getting more than enough power. They're using enough electricity to power a billion homes -"

"A million."

"Jesus, Nathan! Forget the details and listen to me! They're getting all the electricity they're going to get. There's no more. They should stop whining. Tell them to green-up those data centers. If they can't do their damned jobs we'll appoint some CEOs who can." She looked at the open limousine door. "I'm late for Taos, and the plane is waiting."

She clapped her hands. "Do your jobs, people!" and then turned to Linda. "Senator, would you care to join me?"

Linda nodded. "Thank you."

The two slipped into the vehicle. The door closed behind them and the throaty gasoline engines of the security vehicles rumbled as the convoy pulled out.

The president turned to Linda and suddenly her smile lit up the vehicle. "Linda, I know we're from different sub-parties -"
Where was this going? "Oh, the factions aren't as bad as that."

"I'm happy to hear you say that. I agree, and that's exactly why I want to reach out to you."

Linda smiled back. "I was quite happy to get your message. What can I help you with?"

"High Sprawl."

Linda took a moment to compose a look of confusion. "High Sprawl?"

The president smiled again. This time it was different, but perfect for the situation; it was a smile that seemed to say 'Oh, you playful rogue.' "Linda, I know there are leaks. And I know WHO is leaking and to whom."

Linda felt her eyebrows narrow. Had she been underestimating this woman? "Ma'am -"

She put one hand on Linda's arm. "Call me 'Themba.' Please."

Linda nodded. "Themba." She thought quickly. How much did the president know? And how much of that did the president know that Linda knew? She glanced out the window as the limousine passed the Washington National Park and started to cross the Frederick Douglass Bridge. Best, perhaps, to play this entirely straight. "Themba, I need to gather more data."

The smile dimmed a notch, but just one. "And how long will that take?"

"Not long; I've got people looking into it."

A pause, and then the smile was back. "Good. Can I offer you a fruit juice?"

Chapter 3

2064: lunar surface, Aristillus, Lunar Nearside

Allan looked up. The next handhold was just a short reach up the wall. He stretched for it - and the suit alarm went off.
Damn it.

He silenced the warble tone, cleared the flashing "overheating" warning from the heads-up display in his helmet, and settled in to wait.

He'd gotten this alarm every day he'd been out climbing the face. The first day he'd ignored it and had gotten REALLY uncomfortable. The second day he'd used some instructions he'd found on the net for working around it - he'd ignored the stenciled "never open this panel" warning on the suit backpack, opened the calibration panel, and backed the water flow limiter screw all the way out.

That had helped, but not enough - the cooling underwear in the suit could only do so much, and then you had to stop and let the equipment catch up.

Hanging onto the rock face with one hand and one wedged foot, he turned as far as he could and looked back over his shoulder toward the ground. There, down near all the vehicle tracks and the footpath, the three girls were watching him. Selena - he thought it was Selena; it was the tallest suit - waved. He paused a long moment and then gave a single calculated nod. It telegraphed that he was cool, collected, not begging for her approval, but just accepting it as his due...then he realized that Selena wouldn't be able to see the gesture because of his helmet.

OK, raise one hand in acknowledgement then.

He hadn't closed the deal yet - Selena claimed she had a boyfriend back at Berkley, but he'd been working her slowly and she'd been warming up. Last night he'd gotten her away from Hugh, Allyson, and Louisa and and taken her to a dive bar in the Kenyan section. He'd faux absent-mindedly dropped a few words of Swahili to the barkeeper, Selena had gotten a bit gigglier than her one drink warranted, and she'd leaned in when he told his stories of a strong-yet-vulnerable-guy helping the strong, spiritual, friendly Kenyans string telecom cables during his volunteer year abroad.

He grinned, remembering how he'd played it. The stories were perfect - well, the ones he'd told. The jokes that he and his buddies on the trip had come up with he kept to himself...not to mention some of the stories of their extracurricular activities! God, that thing with Kelton and the three shitfaced NGO nurses was HILARIOUS - but not exactly the kind of tale this maneuver called for.
Allan turned his attention back to the present and checked his display. The suit's temperature level was dropping, but he still had another minute or so until he could resume climbing.

The trick was how to nail Selena without queering his chances with Allyson. He wasn't even that turned on by the shorter girl, but it was clear that Hugh had a thing for her, and he relished the idea of rubbing that conquest in that fat little fuck's face - but gently, gently. Hugh's mom was paying for this whole trip - although that was supposed to be a secret. Why, he had no idea. The whole thing made no sense, given her job. Anyway, the trick was to needle Hugh, but not TOO much -

The suit beeped and Allan looked at the read-out. The temperature was green. Awesome.

He looked over his shoulder again to make sure that the girls were watching. They were. Maybe now was the time for a show-off move he'd been practicing in his head. As he'd climbed, the other crevice to his right had been drifting closer and he was pretty sure that with a single strong leap - especially in the lighter gravity - he could get two meters to the right, grab onto that small horizontal crack, and then swing a foot into the chimney. And, even if he failed, he was roped in, and wouldn't fall more than a meter or two.

In fact, maybe a calculated slip would be exactly the thing? Pretend to lose his grip, slide down a few meters, and then make a big show of twisting an ankle? He liked that - a twisted ankle, then after the brave "no, no, I'm fine" limp back to the airlock, he'd grudgingly accept a bit of help from Selena. No, wait, Selena under one arm, Allyson under the other.

He grinned.

Yes.

Now!

A leap, the brush of the gloved fingers across the small crack, and then the planned slip. He let his fingers bump over the rock wall as the drastically lower gravity pulled at him, accelerating him only slowly.

Perfect.
Hmm, a bit of a drift to the right. He grabbed at the horizontal crack as it slid into position - and missed.

Missed? Fuck.

OK, the rope would catch him in a few more meters. But, damn it, this wasn't going to look NEARLY as cool as planned.

Allan looked down and noticed an outcropping rushing up at him. Shit. Even in the low g he could break a rib, or -

What if he hit that face-first? If he got a black eye - or worse yet, a broken tooth! - he was going to be seriously pissed. He'd best straighten. He tried. Fingers slipped over rock, then slipped again, and then -

His head snapped forward into the faceplate as he hit the rock face-first and slid off. A moment later a hard jerk as the safety line caught. He hung face down, his eyes closed against the pain. God DAMN it. Right in the helmet. Right in the fucking helmet. Oh, SHIT, his nose hurt. His mouth was full of hot iron. Blood from a broken nose. Shit. Without thinking he spat, and then remembered he was wearing a helmet. And speaking of his helmet, what was that alarm? And that whistling?

He opened his eyes.

The helmet display was dead, and the faceplate was - cracked? He struggled to focus. Were there small pieces of the faceplate missing? What the fuck?

His ears hurt - hurt bad. And the pain was getting worse by the second. He bellowed in pain and frustration. He needed help, damn it! But what was he supposed to do? The suit radio was controlled by the helmet, and the faceplate was cracked, the interface dead. His scream turned into a cough - a thin painful cough. Then a second one, and he could see the blood spraying from his mouth onto the cracked faceplate.

What the -

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