

Excerpt from *Dominance*

By B.D. Stewart

Edits and Comments by Milo Sanders

Day 1, Thursday, 2:07 A.M.

Near the San Andreas Fault

The High Desert, California

The rabbit took off running when the earthquake began, a strand of deer grass dangling from its mouth as it darted between the brittlebushes and yellow-flowered creosote shrubs that dotted this dry, barren terrain.

Several hundred feet below, in an extraordinarily armored bunker that had been built into the underlying bedrock, a dreamless slumber of eons was disrupted when a violent shudder cracked her life-suspension cocoon. As air seeped in and touched her face, she awoke.

Groggily, with a glacial sluggishness, her consciousness rose from the void of dark oblivion into which she had been immersed. Memories slowly crept in. Questions came with them.

What had transpired while she slept? What became of those who'd rushed her here in the final moments? Did any survive?

Questions she was eager to answer.

She reached out with her forelimbs and touched the cocoon's egglike shell. Feeling weak after this simple exertion, she rested, letting herself awaken more completely. Then, with a surge of willpower, she pushed against the shell, causing it to break apart when pressure was applied from within, per its design. As expected, her joints were stiff from extended slumber.

Therefore, with slow, cautious movements, she emerged from the cocoon.

After a few steps across the floor, she stopped, confused. For some reason the glows had not activated when her cocoon opened, and she could see nothing in this coal-black darkness. She also noticed there was no breeze caressing her face, which meant the air rejuvenator had not started either. These realizations came as a surprise and a disappointment, since the bunker had been built for extreme longevity. Given the meticulous preparations, a mechanical failure should not have occurred, much less two.

She then realized there was another, far more ominous explanation of why the mechanisms had failed to activate—she'd slept in life-suspension substantially longer than the eighty thousand years that was intended. Her cocoon would open only if conditions upon the surface were safe. Perhaps the devastation wrought by the nova device had been greater than expected?

She turned around and went back to her cocoon, fumbling about in the dark until

**Commented [MS1]:** I know what you're going for here, but instead you're saying that the slumber is feminine. I'd recommend changing to "the". Or just rewriting the sentence to be two sentences, since that clause is really long anyway.

**Commented [MS2]:** recommend deleting.

**Commented [MS3]:** a period would work just as well here.

she found the storage capsule that had been placed with her, filled with everything she'd need to begin a new colony. She opened the capsule and took out the chronometer, pressing its activation nub. The device glowed after it powered up, providing enough light for her to see her surroundings. The life-suspension chamber looked undisturbed. Other than the stale air and failure of the glows to activate, nothing seemed amiss.

The chronometer ticked softly while it analyzed specific isotopes in the surrounding bedrock, measuring their decay against known half-lives to determine how much time had elapsed. The result should be accurate within a few decades.

The analysis took longer than expected. Finally, a number appeared.

She staggered sideways, almost falling, stunned by the date. She had been in life-suspension more than sixty-six million years!

This realization brought on feelings of despair. In all probability she was the very last of her kind, the only survivor of a terrible war that had decimated Earth.

**Later that Morning, 3:52 A.M.**

***Big Bang*, Blackhorse Regiment**

**The NTC at Fort Irwin, California**

Sergeant Luis Hatcher studied his thermal viewer, rotating the image until he found a target. "Tank, eleven o'clock, sabot," he said into his helmet mic.

The servos gave that distinctive high-pitch hum as the gunner swung the turret left, aligning the crosshairs of her telescopic sight onto a Russian T-90 tank peeking over a low ridge. Once locked on, the laser rangefinder calculated the target's distance, then the fire-control computer adjusted the gun elevation accordingly.

"Sabot up," the loader called after shoving a shell into the breech.

"Shoot!" Luis snapped.

A fifty-foot muzzle blast erupted from their 120mm gun.

"Hit," Luis said with a grin when the target vanished from view behind a cloud of pale-gray smoke. No matter how many times he'd done it, there was no bigger thrill than firing that gun. "Driver, grid point Echo-Three-Two. Fast and tight. Execute."

*Big Bang*, as their Abrams M1A2 tank was called, veered right. As Luis had explained to his mother, it was named after the sound its gun made, not her favorite TV show. Per long-standing tradition in the U.S. Army, a crew could name their tank after they had qualified as war-ready through the gunnery process, stenciling that name across the gun barrel. There were restrictions. First, the name had to be "clean" to avoid embarrassing the Army. Second, the first letter had to match their

unit designation, which in this case was B Troop, normally referred to as Bravo.

On both sides of *Big Bang*, spread out at one-hundred-meter intervals, were the thirteen other tanks of Bravo Troop, all a yellowish-sand color, all moving across the desert at thirty-plus miles per hour. Luis kept track of them on his map display, each tank a “friendly” green dot that marked it as friendly with a corresponding ID number.

As tank commander, ~~he~~ Luis also had to search for targets. The gunner could help with this, but her view was limited to the direction their gun was pointed. The loader did not have a view at all, effectively blind to the outside world. The driver, meanwhile, stationed up front and down low in the tank’s hull, was focused exclusively on the terrain ahead, keeping *Big Bang* out of any depressions or dry gullies that might knock a track off their sixty-eight-ton vehicle.

Luis rotated his thermal viewer—mounted in an elevated housing atop the turret—back and forth. The viewer could spin completely around, providing a view in any direction.

A target popped up ninety meters ahead and to their left, this one representing a Kornet anti-tank missile launcher with a two-man crew. Luis used the joystick control of his roof-mounted, fifty-caliber machine gun to remotely aim the weapon. He fired a long burst, using the glowing tracer rounds to zero in on the target. It dropped back down out of sight on its hinges, “killed.”

Every so often Luis heard muffled booms when their sister tanks fired at other targets. More frequently, pillars of smoke and desert sand erupted high into the air when demo charges went off, mimicking enemy artillery fire.

On the map display, they’d almost reached grid point Echo-Three-Two.

“Roll to a hold,” Luis said into his mic.

*Big Bang* slowed when the driver eased back on his dual throttle controls, and the wide tank tracks wound down to a stop.

They were particularly vulnerable now, idling motionless, but they had been ordered to take this position and hold it. Luis noticed every tank of Bravo Troop was now stationary. Together, they formed a battle line a mile long behind a low ridge. He had participated in enough of these live-fire exercises to have a good idea what the training director would throw at them next.

Sure enough, the order to partake in his favorite drill—indeed, the entire troop’s favorite drill—came a few seconds later.

“Bravo, this is Hawk,” the director called over the command channel. “Advance to grid line Sierra-Tango. Execute.”

“Full ahead,” Luis said, ~~excited~~.

The drive sprockets on fourteen Abrams spun in unison, their tracks spitting gravel and sand as the tanks charged up and over the ridge. On the opposite side, a desert plain stretched before them. Target replicas with the distinctive profile of a

**Commented [M54]:** Just a suggestion on how to streamline this sentence.

**Commented [M55]:** when a complete phrase is used as an adjective, it’s hyphenated.

**Commented [M56]:** This is an example of you getting really into the details of this tank early on. I think before this you were okay, but at this point it’s getting a bit much. I recommend cutting this and keeping an eye out for more (I will too).<sup>11</sup><sub>SEP</sub>

Russian T-90 battle tank started to pop up, here, there, seemingly everywhere.

“All Bravo units, fire at will!” snapped the director.

Luis had already picked out their first target. Now he pressed the DES-1 icon on his display, causing the turret to rotate toward that target while simultaneously highlighting it on the gunner’s sights. “Tank, designate. Sabot.”

While the gunner centered her crosshairs onto a T-90, Luis searched for the next target.

“Sabot up,” the loader called.

“Shoot!”

*Big Bang*’s 120mm gun snapped back in recoil. Moving over a mile a second, the shell came apart in flight, the sabot sloughing away from the penetrator, a 40mm dart of depleted uranium.

“Hit,” the gunner reported, knowing Luis’s attention was elsewhere.

All **Each of the** fourteen Abrams fired within a second of the others. Fourteen targets dropped from view after the penetrators bored a white-hot hole through the plywood replicas. A smoke bomb burst in front of each target to signify it had been killed.

Luis pressed the DES-2 icon, causing the turret to rotate right toward the next target. “Tank, designate. Sabot.”

Some five seconds later, he heard a satisfying “hit” from the gunner. Luis pressed the DES-1 icon, starting the firing cycle again as he switched back and forth between his dual designators. Like a finely tuned engine, Sergeant First Class Luis Hatcher and his crew took out four more targets in half a minute. Impressive, even for them. But perfection was expected in this outfit, the elite Blackhorse Regiment, its storied history dating back to 1901. Widely regarded as the premier unit in the U.S. Army, the Blackhorse served as the opposing force (OPFOR) in training exercises against mechanized units, both from the U.S. Army and NATO forces abroad. In five days, the OPFOR would “school” the 150<sup>th</sup> Regiment in the finer points of armored combat. To keep them razor-sharp, drills were conducted routinely. Today’s exercise, for example, had jostled the tankers of Bravo from their bunks at 0300 hours for a surprise op that simulated an attack by a Russian tank battalion.

*Big Bang* fired two more rounds, both kills, while Luis machine-gunned an anti-tank missile team that popped up off to their left, about a hundred meters away.

He glimpsed an anti-aircraft vehicle, a Tunguska by the looks of it. The Tunguska could not penetrate an Abrams’ armor with its twin, radar-controlled, 30mm autocannons, but it was lethal to friendly choppers and planes. Once Luis centered it on his screen, he pressed the DES-2 icon. “AA vehicle, designate. HE round.”

“HE up.”

**Commented [MS7]:** another example of too much detail. Recommend deleting.

“Shoot!”

The life-size replica of the Tunguska blew apart when their high-explosive shell detonated against its turret. Flames and shattered plywood flew high and wide in all directions.

“Got a T-14 at ten o’clock,” the driver announced. “Call it two miles out.” The driver helped locate targets while they were stationary.

**Commented [MS8]:** recommend deleting.

Luis swung his thermal viewer toward the sighting, zooming in. “Nice find, Colton,” he said, giving credit where credit was due.

The T-14 Armata was the newest Russian battle tank: next-generation armor with a 125mm smoothbore gun and the Afghanit active protection system, consisting of exploding charges to detonate incoming missiles. It also utilized laser dazzlers to confuse enemy guidance systems. T-14 targets were sometimes sprinkled around a training field like golden eggs on a children’s Easter egg hunt. They’d earn bragging rights if they got it.

Luis pressed the DES-1 icon. “Tank, designate. Sabot.”

He watched the target closely, hoping they were the first to find it. Their laser rangefinder pinged the distance at 3,489 meters. More than two miles out. A long-range shot, but Corporal Hodge was, arguably, the best gunner in the Regiment. Hodge was also one of the first female tankers in the U.S. Army, a snowboarder from Boise, Idaho, if Luis remembered correctly.

**Commented [MS9]:** possibly good detail to add later, but not here.

“Sabot up.”

“Shoot!”

Their gun jerked backward once again, and Luis stared at his viewer as a white dot hurtled through the air, fading into the distance. It took a few seconds to get there, then it struck the T-14 dead center. The target disappeared behind a cloud of smoke.

“Hit!” Luis grinned like a little kid. “Well done, fantastic shot.”

By now, few targets remained. He guessed at least 125 had been killed by Bravo in a minute of rapid-fire action. Yep, definitely his favorite drill.

Suddenly, a dozen new targets popped up. The nearest to *Big Bang*, a Russian T-90, was hull down behind a low mound with only its turret visible. A : a tough shot that required precise aim. Hodge took a little longer than usual lining it up, raising the fire-control computer’s elevation an extra .75 degrees, then she jammed her thumb against the trigger.

**Commented [MS10]:** to mix up your sentence construction a bit.

Another hit, heralded by billowing smoke.

Even though it was a clear, moonless night, with their only light source the stars above, visibility was not a problem. The latest thermal-imaging optics and night-vision gear were truly outstanding. Most tank commanders, Luis included, preferred thermal view over normal vision, even in broad daylight. The contrast between landscapes and manmade objects made it easier to pick out enemy

**Commented [MS11]:** might be too much detail?

combatants.

Luis rotated his viewer back and forth, scanning the desert terrain with the driver and gunner helping him. No more targets could be found. Their sister tanks were also quiet. They kept at it regardless, learning from hard experience that the training director liked to surprise them.

No nasty surprises this time, however, and the stand-down order came in a few minutes later. With their training drill concluded, the director ordered Bravo Troop, “back to the barn.”

With a celebratory whoop, the driver put the right track into reverse and twisted the throttle controls of his steering yoke in opposite directions, one up, the other down. Luis held on tight while *Big Bang* spun in place. Specialist Colton loved to make donuts in the sand, and he spun their Abrams a full three-and-a-half times in a near-perfect circle before he straightened out and sped off, revving up their 1,500-horsepower diesel engine.

Luis grinned the entire time, something he did often in a tank. Where else could one ride in such an amazing vehicle that could smash through anything? Such a rush! Plus, the crew comradery was special. This was his second home. Luis felt comfortable here.

The “barn”, as it was called, happened to be a 48,300 square-foot garage. The nickname was a holdover from the regiment’s early days as a calvary unit. Inside it, highly specialized system maintainers kept the regiment’s tanks and other vehicles operating at peak efficiency.

It took them fifteen minutes to get off the training field, then another dozen to reach the barn. Located at Fort Irwin, the National Training Center (NTC) was a big place, more than one thousand square miles. Lots of room for large-scale maneuvers.

Luis admired the view on the way in. There was a pre-dawn glow to the east, backlighting the Calico Mountains. Sure had some pretty scenery up here in the High Desert, he reflected, the air cool and crisp, a welcome change from the smog and grime of East LA, where he’d grown up.

Bravo Troop drove up to the barn in a single-file column, slow and easy. Hand signals from a pair of enlisted specialists guided the tanks through a side entrance of this large, warehouse-type structure. The 48~~eighteen~~-foot-tall industrial doors had been rolled open for ventilation. *Big Bang* was guided to its parking spot, defined by yellow-dashed lines on the polished, concrete floor. When the cut-engine signal was given, Colton switched off the big diesel.

Luis powered down his systems, as did the other members of his crew. He opened the cupola hatch above him and climbed out. After everyone had exited *Big Bang*, they gathered in front of their tank, formed a circle facing each other, then did a crew fist bump. It was a ritual they had been doing a while now. Something

Commented [MS12]: feels unnecessary.

Commented [MS13]: is this the name of the desert? If not, lower case.

Luis had begun to help bond them together.

“Great teamwork,” he said. “First round of beers is on me tonight.”

“Copy that, Sarge,” the other three replied in unison.

A woman cleared her throat behind Luis. He turned around to face her.

The nametag and rank insignia identified her as PFC Oatley. She wore desert fatigues, the predominant uniform here at Fort Irwin; the sandy brown, tan, and light-beige camouflage pattern matching the surrounding landscape. She eyed *Big Bang* critically. “I hope you didn’t dent my tank again?”

“No, ma’am,” Luis answered. He outranked Oatley, but only a foolish tanker failed to show proper respect to the system maintainer that took care of their tank.

*Well... her tank*, he reminded himself, *here in the barn*.

“Any problems?” Oatley inquired.

Luis shook his head. “None, purred like a happy kitten.”

His crew indicated they’d had no problems, either.

“Glad to hear it. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have diagnostic tests to run.” Oatley walked off to the backend of *Big Bang*, where she loosened a bolt on the engine’s cover plate.

“Go get some breakfast,” Luis told his crew. “I’ll catch up with you later.”

“Don’t forget to mention that T-14,” said Private Ramirez, the loader. “The Cap’n just might give you a cookie.”

There were a few chuckles, then his crew headed off. Luis went the other way.

He met with his fellow tank commanders outside the barn a minute later.

Bravo’s commander, Captain Sadler, and the executive officer, XO for short, soon joined them. The captain liked to talk with them right after an exercise while the action was still fresh in their minds.

“One hundred and thirty-seven targets,” the captain declared. “A hundred thirty-three kills on the first shot. That’s ninety-seven percent accuracy. Should be better.” After a long pause to let his tankers think about that, the captain peered down at his tablet, browsing the gunnery results. He looked up at Beckett. “Your shot at target six-one was half a meter high. Probably adrenalin. Work with your gunner on that.” His gaze returned to his tablet. “MacCallum, three meters to the left on target seven-four. Bad miss. Figure out what went wrong and correct it.” When the captain looked up again, his face had a disgusted grimace on it, like he had just taken a bite out of something foul. “Meyers,” he sneered to the commander of *Bama Bruiser*, “you didn’t even shoot at target five-six. That was a missile team. Obviously, if that’d been a real Kornet ATGM launcher, you’d be dead.”

Meyers didn’t offer an excuse. None was expected. The motto “Lead Train Win” wasn’t just a fancy slogan here at the NTC, it was operational doctrine. Additional training drills would be given to Meyers and his crew to make certain

**Commented [MS14]:** is this s different person than Captain Sadler?

this mistake was not repeated.

Captain Sadler focused his attention on Luis next. “Hatcher, top score yet again, ninety-nine point seven-five percent efficiency.”

A few of the gathered commanders whistled.

“Damn, Hatcher,” Perkins blurted. “You been juicing again?”

Even though it was good-natured ribbing, this was a reasonable guess. Luis had the physique to match some of those slick, pumped-up wrestlers on TV. Not through steroids, however, but from years of determined weightlifting when he’d been a gangbanger on the streets of East LA. Back then, Luis soon learned that the bigger his muscles, the bigger his intimidation factor, and the faster he rose up the gang hierarchy. As a half-Caucasian, half-Latino mix, his street name of Latte came easily due to the light-caramel coloration of his skin. He also had a natural talent for boxing, training in the ring when he wasn’t pumping iron. He was quite skilled at it, another factor that eventually led to his “forced” service in the Army.

“My crew deserves the credit, sir,” Luis said, ignoring Perkins. “Especially Corporal Hodge, she’s a true sharpshooter.”

The captain nodded in agreement. “The major just signed off on her promotion. Hodge will be a sergeant in three weeks.”

“Well deserved,” Luis replied.

“Someday, Hatcher,” said Williams, commander of *Bouncin’ Betty*, “you’ll get knocked off that lofty perch of yours atop our leader board.”

“Perhaps,” Luis answered with his characteristic grin. “But not by you.”

Everyone laughed, even Williams.

The captain went over a few more details about the training exercise, reminded them the one-five-zero regiment was rolling in next Tuesday for live-fire drills, and gave notice their Abrams would be updated with the new SE Pv6 mods. “So read the damn technical specs.”

Then, finally, they were dismissed.

Luis headed for the mess hall. Given he’d been up and at it since 0300, it was about time he got some coffee.

**Commented [MS15]:** that could be the reason for his lighter colored skin, but Latines come in all shades too.

**Commented [MS16]:** Abramses?