

“I think he’s gone,” Hongru said as his voice cracked. “A truly great man has died.”

Wednesday, April 6, 2016, 1:44 PM, Spruce Island, East Cape, Alaska

The company helicopter pilot, Tim Scroggins, spotted the temporary beacon light erected by the special Air Force squad liaising with the Bergstrom Engineering Corporation technicians. He took a last pull from a sixteen-ounce bottle of orange soda, banked the company’s dark blue and white Sikorsky S-76 helicopter sharply to the right, leveled-off; then trimmed rotor speed, permitting a slow descent to the well-marked spot that ensured adequate rotor blade clearance.

General Smiley scanned the dense forest and rock strewn beach below him. “Don’t go too far away, pilot. I doubt if this test will take over an hour, and I want to get back to civilization. I don’t know how people live here,” General Smiley said.

“Yes, sir,” Scroggins said yelling over his shoulder. “It’s okay to exit, General.”

“Thanks, and by the way, I appreciate the smooth landing,” General Smiley said, allowing a smattering of praise to leak through his scowling countenance. General Glenn Smiley, a dedicated military officer with twenty-seven years service, ignored Scroggins’s civilian salute as he stumbled his way off the helicopter.

“Welcome to Spruce Island test facility, sir,” Air Force Lieutenant Margaret Clay said, as she snapped to attention and saluted.

General Smiley returned the salute and adjusted his coat against the pervasive chill. “The weather here has teeth.”

“Yes, sir, it’s the dampness,” Lt. Clay said, stating the obvious as they stood in the frigid rain.

“We’re going to run the test in this weather?”

“That’s what the specs call for, sir. We need to ensure that the system works in various weather conditions. Let me introduce you to Howard Porter, Bergstrom’s senior engineer. He’s been with the project since we awarded the contract.”

General Smiley shook hands with Porter, a gangling six-foot-four specimen with a neck that appeared too long for a normal human. “How soon can we start the test?” General Smiley asked, putting pressure on the contractor’s representative who was a hundred million over budget and eight months late perfecting the system.

“All we have to do is give Malmstrom the signal and they’ll start the countdown. So we’re ready when you are,” Lt. Clay said.

David S. Rosenberg

“Let’s get on with it then, I’m due back in Anchorage later today. Porter, you’ve got one more chance to keep this project going—make it good. My report will either make or break this program. What do we hope to accomplish today?”

“Sir, we have an observation area positioned at a safe distance from the target. Once the weapons controller sends the signal to our geosynchronous Thunderbolt-1 satellite, we expect total annihilation of the target within three seconds,” Howard Porter said.

“What’s the target, *du jour*?” General Smiley asked.

“Du jour, sir?” Lt. Clay asked as they walked through the wet grass to the observation bunker.

“Today’s target.”

“Oh, it’s an old F-14 that bears similar characteristics to many foreign aircraft in existence today. Our jet fighters are well beyond this now,” Lt. Clay said as the cold rain intensified.

“And we expect the laser light to travel twenty five thousand miles, penetrate the atmosphere in this weather, and then have enough energy to destroy the plane?”

“Yes, General Smiley,” Howard Porter said. “The theory is that the high-energy laser light will flash the rain in its path to steam. It should have enough residual energy to burn holes in the target’s structure that are large enough to upset stable flight, destroy vital aircraft flight controls, or cause a disastrous fire. That’s why we’re behind concrete walls, steel doors, and safety glass.”

“I hope for your sake this system finally works, or your company is in real trouble.”

Porter swallowed hard and merely nodded. “Better get everyone inside the enclosure. There’s no point risking injury to anyone.”

“I gave the order when I saw the general’s helicopter approach. There’s the last of our staff coming in now,” Lt. Clay said, pointing to two Tech. Sergeants who closed the heavy bunker door behind them.

The general estimated the distance from the bunker to the target at one hundred yards and he moved to the bunker’s center window. “Whenever you’re ready, lieutenant,” General Smiley said.

“Better put these on,” Lt. Clay said, and handed General Smiley the same type of dark lens glasses that the others wore.

“Tell Montana that we’re ready to start the countdown,” Lieutenant Clay said to Tech. Sergeant Small who instantly passed the order to his counterpart at the Thunderbolt-1 system control room.

“They acknowledge receipt of your order, Lieutenant. Countdown timer is running, T minus thirty seconds. Standing by to abort on your command,” Tech. Sergeant Small said.

“You’ll hear something that sounds like a crack of lightning, general,” Howard Porter said.

General Smiley looked briefly at the consultant. “Let’s hope so.”

“Five seconds—four, three, two, one...”

Instantly, a bright light flooded the bunker accompanied by the predicted thunderous crack.

The enlisted Air Force personnel cheered as they assumed successful destruction of the target, but a bright yellow light to the left of the bunker was the first indication that something was wrong.

“It looks like you missed the target, Mr. Porter,” General Smiley said as he ripped off his glasses. “I think we’d better find out what’s burning.”

A sudden secondary explosion launched debris toward the observation bunker just as Howard Porter opened the door.

“What happened?” General Smiley asked.

“It’s the helicopter. We hit the helicopter,” Howard said over his shoulder. “My God, it’s a total wreck.”

General Smiley forced his way past Lt. Clay and the enlisted personnel who were all trying to exit the bunker at the same time. “Porter! I told the pilot—eh—Scroggins to stay close to the chopper so that I could leave right after the test. Is there any sign of him?”

Porter raked his hand through his hair and gaped at the destruction and the billowing fire from the burning helicopter fuel. “It’s all for nothing—nothing,” he mumbled.

“Lt. Clay, is there any way to extinguish the fire so we can get close enough to find the pilot?”

“No, sir, but the rain is at least knocking down the heat,” Lt. Clay said turning to the enlisted men. “Circle around the fire; see if you can find the pilot.”

Four enlisted men finally understood the urgency, and split into two groups.

“Any idea how this happened, Porter?” General Smiley asked.

Porter, who was stupefied by his company’s weapons system failure, only gazed at the carnage.

“Porter, pay attention, man,” General Smiley said, as he grabbed Porter by his coat and shook him. “Is there any chance your equipment will fire again and possibly kill us while we’re searching for the pilot?”

“No—no, it’s not possible. It’s not in the automatic mode, besides it takes seventeen minutes to recharge the power cells to support firing another beam.”

“Seventeen minutes, huh? That’s practically a lifetime when you have missiles with nuclear warheads coming your way.”

*David S. Rosenberg*

“General, we’re working on this problem, too. As for missing the target... well, it’s just a small delta error. We can fix that,” Porter said in desperation to save his company’s contract with the government.

“Small delta?”

“That’s just an error in the firing angle. The algorithm needs a tweak. That’s all.”

“Firing angle, huh? Well let me tell you, sir. If your company’s weapons system can’t hit a sitting duck airplane, how the hell is it going to hit a ballistic missile or a high-speed aircraft?” General Smiley fumed and stormed away toward the burning helicopter.

“You’re not giving us a fair showing,” Porter said, trying to regain the general’s attention.

“I think you’d better leave him alone,” Lt. Clay said. “After all, we may have killed someone here today. Now that I think about it, that killer beam could have struck the bunker just as easy.”

“He’s over here,” Tech. Sergeant Small said, yelling from the far side of the destroyed chopper.

General Smiley caught up with the enlisted men who rushed toward the standing pilot who looked dazed and confused. “Are you okay?” Tech. Sergeant Small yelled as he grabbed Scroggins by the arm.

“I guess so. Hey, what happened to my chopper?”

“You better ask your engineer about it,” General Smiley said. “Are you injured from the explosion or fire?”

“No, sir, I had to relieve myself so I’d be ready to fly you back to Kodiak. I was over in the bushes when the light beam struck. I guess that bottle of soda pop I drank wound up saving my life.”

“What’ll we do now?” Tech. Sergeant Small asked Lt. Clay who joined the group of concerned people surrounding Scroggins.

“I’ll tell you what you’re going to do,” General Smiley said, pre-empting Lt. Clay’s response. “Since Bergstrom Engineering brought me here, they’re going to get me off this damned island as soon as possible. Better tell Porter to get cracking on this or he’ll lose more than the contract.”

Lt. Clay directed one of the sergeants to facilitate backup transportation for the general. “What’s going to happen with this weapons system, general?”

“It’s a disgraceful waste of the taxpayer’s money, lieutenant. Right now, we should sell it to our enemies. That way they can blow themselves up and we won’t have to do a thing,” General Smiley said, as rain dampened the helicopter flames but only fueled his temper.

Tuesday, April 12, 2016, 7:33 PM, New York, New York

The United Nations lobby brimmed with men and women from around the world. Hundreds of simultaneous conversations from most languages spoken by humans drowned the best efforts of a twelve-piece band. Men and women dressed in black-tie and evening gowns mingled with those who preferred the colorful native dress of those countries that sent them abroad seeking representation in the world forum. While everyone present enjoyed their diplomatic status, few harbored any hopes that the state of their respective homelands would actually improve by the debates, diplomatic ploys, and endless posturing that typified United Nations inaction.

United States President William Claymore stood next to his wife, Heather, on an elevated platform and whispered in her ear while waiting impatiently for the ceremony to begin. He turned his head from side-to-side beaming his brilliant lighthouse smile across the ocean of humanity spread before him. Women, attracted by his power, wealth, and sparkling eyes, often flirted and fluttered by the president to determine if there was any truth to the rumors that swirled around the first family of the United States.

From a distance they appeared as a stunning couple. He wore a tailored dark blue business suit and maroon and blue silk tie, while she wore a cranberry colored suit with a gray blouse and matching cranberry shoes. Even with her two-inch heels, she stared upwards as she watched him make eye contact with several nearby females. Anyone who studied body language and observed the president and first lady knew that her smile was as thin as her makeup and often signs of inner seething leaked to the surface.

The designated host for the evening, a Brazilian man, with a well-tanned complexion, and black swept-back Pomade-loaded hair pleaded over the public address system for the collective attention of the diplomats and guests.

President Claymore felt Heather's hand suddenly tighten; then she leaned against him for support. "You may be fooling everyone here with your plastic smile, but I know you're not feeling well. What's wrong?" he asked, whispering again in her ear.

"I already told you. I had a terrible headache last night, and I didn't sleep very much. It's come back again and I'm exhausted," she said, talking louder to compete with the screeching feedback from the public address system speakers. She forced another smile and touched the side of her head checking for loose brown and blonde streaked tendrils of hair that might spoil her photogenic appearance.

"We'll be done in a half-hour and you can go back to the hotel. Unfortunately, I'm trapped and it will take hours of hand pumping and small talk before I'm through here."

*David S. Rosenberg*

“I’ll stick with it, I’m tougher than you give me credit for,” the First Lady said letting her disdain for her husband’s chauvinistic air surface. “It was you who mentioned not to show any weakness in front of these self-effacing fat-cats.”

“It’s also not a place to fall on your nose, but let’s not fight about it,” President Claymore said as he turned and smiled at the Israeli Ambassador. Yehudah Hasniri, a short balding man with a reputation for his Jekyll and Hyde accommodating yet hard-nosed personality, approached.

“Is this your doing?” Ambassador Hasniri asked while engaging President Claymore with a handshake that bordered on pain.

“You’re referring to the selection of Prince Abdullah Korati as U.N. Secretary General?” President Claymore asked, then disengaged with Hasnari and flexed his hand to dissipate the discomfort.

“Yes, you know exactly what I mean. My country has enough trouble with the Arabian jackals without elevating one of them to a position of power and leadership.”

“Bringing one of them into the spotlight puts the pressure on...”

“Oh, that’s typical American theory, but you assume the rest of the world will object to any favoritism or misconduct on Korati’s part. My government thinks that you’re gambling with our security to soothe the growing Islamic population in your country.”

“That’s not what we have in mind,” President Claymore said. “Be assured that the United States continues to support Israel and nothing that happens here at the United Nations will change that position. Ah, here comes Prince Korati now. Perhaps we should continue this conversation at another time.”

“Yes, of course, I cannot be seen with him on the same stage. My countrymen would never condone it,” the Ambassador said and nearly ran to the end of the platform.

The president nodded; then took his seat as Abdullah Korati busied himself by shaking hands with others on the podium. Gradually the simultaneous conversations abated and Korati took his seat. After a few opening remarks, the host introduced several speakers who talked about the United Nation’s contributions and effect on the world’s population and the remaining challenges needed to end human suffering. Each speaker received thunderous applause.

Heather Claymore leaned toward her husband to share her thought. “Haven’t we heard these speeches before?”

The president only nodded in agreement while he listened for his introduction, but stared at the voluptuous wife of the Italian U.N. ambassador whose evening gown advertised a mile of well-tanned thigh as she took her seat. After his introduction, President Claymore assumed his position behind

*The Hungry Dragon*

the podium and beamed his boyish smile toward the woman. Her glistening eyes sent a message that indicated her desire and availability if time and circumstances permitted a few hours together.

President Claymore adjusted the microphone; then turned on his infectious charm capturing his audience like voters before an election. “Good evening ladies and gentlemen, delegates, and guests. It’s an honor to be here this evening to celebrate the decision of the world governments in the selection of Prince Abdullah Mohammad Korati as the new Secretary General of the United Nations. Prince Korati served as president of the Bank of Saudi Arabia, advisor to his country’s royal family, and Saudi Arabia’s delegate to this august body. I’m sure his talents, energy, and skillful diplomacy will be of great value in maintaining the fragile peace recently attained in the Mid-east. I know he plans to sustain the good work of the United Nations as the leaders of the world turn their backs on violence and conflict and seek solutions for the problems that plague the world’s citizens.

“Prince Korati cannot accomplish anything without—” The president noticed the Italian woman pointing to something behind him and he heard the rustling of chairs and someone say, “Mrs. Claymore? Oh my God, get an ambulance.”

Everyone stood trying to see why the president’s wife slid to the floor.

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