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July 16

10:27 P.M. Eastern Daylight Time

WASHINGTON, D.C.

ONCE UPON A TIME we had a love affair with fire, the president of the United States thought as the match that he'd just struck to light his pipe flared beneath his fingers.

He stared into it, mesmerized by its color—and as the fire grew he had the vision of a tower of flame a thousand feet tall, whirling across the country he loved, torching cities and towns, turning rivers to steam, ripping across the ruins of heartland farms and casting the ashes of seventy million human beings into a black sky. He watched with dreadful fascination as the flame crawled up the match, and he realized that there, on a tiny scale, was the power of both creation and destruction; it could cook food, illuminate the darkness, melt iron and sear human flesh. Something that resembled a small, unblinking scarlet eye opened in the center of the flame, and he wanted to scream. He had awakened at two in the morning from a nightmare of holocaust; he'd begun crying and couldn't stop, and the first lady had tried to calm him, but he just kept shaking and sobbing like a child. He'd sat in the Oval Office until dawn, going over the maps and top-security reports again and again, but they all said the same thing: *First Strike*.

The fire burned his fingers. He shook the match out and dropped it into the ashtray embossed with the presidential seal in front of him. The thin thread of smoke began to curl up toward the vent of the air-filtration system.

“Sir?” someone said. He looked up, saw a group of strangers sitting in the Situations Room with him, saw the high-resolution computer map of the world on the screen before him, the array of telephones and video screens set in a semicircle around him like the cockpit of a jet fighter, and he wished to God that someone else could sit in his seat, that he was still just a senator and he didn't know the truth about the world. “*Sir?*”

He ran his hand across his forehead. His skin felt clammy. Fine time to be coming down with the flu, he thought, and he almost laughed at the absurdity of it. The president gets no sick days, he thought, because a president's not supposed to be sick. He tried to focus on who at the oval table was speaking to him; they were all watching him—the vice-president, nervous and sly; Admiral Narramore, ramrod-straight in his uniform with a chestful of service decorations; General Sinclair, crusty and alert, his eyes like two bits of blue glass in his hard-seamed face; Secretary of Defense Hannan, who looked as kindly as anyone's old grandfather but who was known as “Iron Hans” by

both the press corps and his associates; General Chivington, the ranking authority on Soviet military strength; Chief of Staff Bergholz, crewcut and crisp in his ubiquitous dark blue pinstriped suit; and various other military officials and advisors.

“Yes?” the president asked Bergholz.

Hannan reached for a glass of water, sipped from it and said, “Sir? I was asking if you wanted me to go on.” He tapped the page of the open report from which he’d been reading.

“Oh.” My pipe’s gone out, he thought. Didn’t I just light it? He looked at the burned match in the ashtray, couldn’t remember how it had gotten there. For an instant he saw John Wayne’s face in his mind, a scene from some old black-and-white movie he’d seen as a kid; the Duke was saying something about the point of no return. “Yes,” the president said. “Go on.”

Hannan glanced quickly around the table at the others. They all had copies of the report before them, as well as stacks of other Eyes Only coded reports fresh off the NORAD and SAC communications wires. “Less than three hours ago,” Hannan continued, “our last operating SKY EYE recon satellite was dazzled as it moved into position over Chatyrka, U.S.S.R. We lost all our optical sensors and cameras, and again—as in the case of the other six SKY EYES—we feel this one was destroyed by a land-based laser, probably operating from a point near Magadan. Twenty minutes after SKY EYE 7 was blinded, we used our Malmstrom AFB laser to dazzle a Soviet recon satellite as it came over Canada. By our calculations, that still leaves them two recon eyes available, one currently over the northern Pacific and a second over the Iran–Iraq border. NASA’s trying to repair SKY EYES 2 and 3, but the others are space junk. What all this means, sir, is that as of approximately three hours ago, Eastern Daylight Time”—Hannan looked up at the digital clock on the Situation Room’s gray concrete wall—“we went blind. The last recon photos were taken at 1830 hours over Jelgava.” He switched on a microphone attached to the console before him and said, “SKY EYE recon 7-16, please.”

There was a pause of three seconds as the information computer found the required data. On the large wall screen, the map of the world went dark and was replaced by a high-altitude satellite photograph showing the sweep of a dense Soviet forest. At the center of the picture was a cluster of pinheads linked together by the tiny lines of roadways. “Enlarge twelve,” Hannan said, the picture reflected in his horn-rimmed eyeglasses.

The photograph was enlarged twelve times, until finally the hundreds of intercontinental ballistic missile silos were as clear as if the Situations Room wall screen was a plate glass window. On the roads were trucks, their tires throwing up dust, and even soldiers were visible near the missile installation’s concrete bunkers and radar dishes. “As you can see,” Hannan went on in the calm, slightly detached voice of his previous profession—teaching military history and economics at Yale

—“they’re getting ready for something. Probably bringing in more radar gear and arming those warheads, is my guess. We count two hundred and sixty-three silos in that installation alone, probably housing over six hundred warheads. Two minutes later, the SKY EYE was blinded. But this picture only reinforces what we already know: the Soviets have gone to a high level of readiness, and they don’t want us seeing the new equipment they’re bringing in. Which brings us to General Chivington’s report. General?”

Chivington broke the seal on a green folder in front of him, and the others did the same. Inside were pages of documents, graphs and charts. “Gentlemen,” he said in a gravelly voice, “the Soviet war machine has mobilized to within fifteen percent of capacity in the last nine months. I don’t have to tell you about Afghanistan, South America or the Persian Gulf, but I’d like to direct your attention to the document marked Double 6 Double 3. That’s a graph showing the amount of supplies being funneled into the Russian Civil Defense System, and you can see for yourselves how it’s jumped in the last two months. Our Soviet sources tell us that more than forty percent of their urban population has now either moved outside the cities or taken up residence inside the fallout shelters....”

While Chivington talked on about Soviet Civil Defense the president’s mind went back eight months to the final terrible days of Afghanistan, with its nerve gas warfare and tactical nuclear strikes. And one week after the fall of Afghanistan, a twelve-and-a-half-kiloton nuclear device had exploded in a Beirut apartment building, turning that tortured city into a moonscape of radioactive rubble. Almost half the population was killed outright. A variety of terrorist groups had gleefully claimed responsibility, promising more lightning bolts from Allah.

With the detonation of that bomb, a Pandora’s box of terrors had been opened.

On the fourteenth of March, India had attacked Pakistan with chemical weapons. Pakistan retaliated by a missile strike on the city of Jaipur. Three Indian nuclear missiles had leveled Karachi, and the war was deadlocked in the wastes of the Thar Desert.

On the second of April, Iran had unleashed a rain of Soviet-supplied nuclear missiles on Iraq, and American forces had been sucked into the maelstrom as they fought to hold back the Iranians. Soviet and American jets had battled over the Persian Gulf, and the entire region was primed to blow.

Border wars had rippled across North and South Africa. The smallest of countries were depleting their treasuries to buy chemical and nuclear weapons from arms brokers. Alliances changed overnight, some due to military pressure and others to snipers’ bullets.

Less than twelve miles off Key West, a trigger-happy American F-18 fighter pilot had sent an air-to-surface missile into the side of a disabled Russian submarine on the fourth day of May. Cuban-based Russian Floggers had come screaming over the horizon, shooting down the first pilot and two others of a squadron that arrived as backup.

Nine days later, a Soviet and an American submarine had collided during a game of cat-and-mouse in the Arctic. Two days after that, the radars of the Canadian Distant Early Warning line had picked up the blips of twenty incoming aircraft; all western United States air force bases had gone to red alert, but the intruders turned and escaped before contact.

On the sixteenth of May, all American air bases had gone to Defcon One, with a corresponding move by the Soviets within two hours. Adding to the tension that day was the detonation of a nuclear device in the Fiat complex in Milan, Italy, the action claimed by a Communist terrorist group called The Red Star of Freedom.

Incidents between surface ships, submarines and aircraft had continued through May and June in the North Atlantic and North Pacific. American air bases had gone to Defcon Two when a cruiser had exploded and sank, cause unknown, thirty nautical miles off the coast of Oregon. Sightings of Soviet submarines in territorial waters increased dramatically, and American submarines were sent to test the Russian defenses. The activity at Soviet ICBM installations was recorded by SKY EYE satellites before they were blinded by lasers, and the president knew the Soviets saw the activity at U.S. bases before their own spy satellites were dazzled blind.

On the thirtieth of June of the “Grim Summer,” as the newsmagazines were calling it, a cruise ship called the *Tropic Panorama*, carrying seven hundred passengers between Hawaii and San Francisco, had radioed that they were being stalked by an unidentified submarine.

That had been the final message of the *Tropic Panorama*.

From that day on, American naval vessels had patrolled the Pacific with nuclear missiles armed and ready for launch.

The president remembered the movie: *The High and the Mighty*, about an airplane in distress and about to crash. The pilot was John Wayne, and the Duke had told the crew about the point of no return—a line beyond which the plane could not turn back, but had to keep going forward, whatever the result. The president’s mind had been on the point of no return a lot lately; he’d dreamed he was at the controls of a disabled plane, flying over a dark and forbidding ocean, searching for the lights of land. But the controls were shattered, and the plane kept dropping lower and lower while the screams of the passengers rang in his mind.

I want to be a child again, he thought as the other men at the table looked at him. Dear God, I don’t want to be at the controls anymore!

General Chivington had finished his report. The president said, “Thank you,” though he wasn’t sure exactly what Chivington had said. He felt the eyes of those men on him, waiting for him to speak, to move, to do anything. He was in his late forties, dark-haired and ruggedly handsome; he had been a pilot himself, had flown the NASA shuttle *Olympian* and been one of the first to walk in space

wearing a jet pack. Contemplating the great cloud-streaked orb of the Earth, he'd been moved to tears, and his emotional radio transmission of "I think I know how God must feel, Houston" had done more than anything to win him the presidency.

But he'd inherited the mistakes of the generations of presidents before him, and he'd been ridiculously naive about the world on the eve of the twenty-first century.

The economy, after a resurgence in the mid-eighties, had tumbled out of control. The crime rate was staggering, the prisons packed slaughterhouses. Hundreds of thousands of homeless people—"The Ragtag Nation," as the *New York Times* called them—roamed the streets of America, unable to afford shelter or cope mentally with the pressures of a runaway world. The "Star Wars" military program that had cost billions of dollars had proven to be a disaster, because it was realized too late that machines could only work as well as humans, and the complexity of the orbital platforms boggled the mind and broke the budget. The arms brokers had fed a crude, unstable nuclear technology to Third World nations and mad-dog leaders thirsting for power in the seductive and precarious global arena. Twelve-kiloton bombs, roughly the strength of the device that had decimated Hiroshima, were now as common as hand grenades and could be carried in a briefcase. The renewed riots in Poland and the Warsaw street fighting the previous winter had chilled United States–Soviet relations to below zero, quickly followed by the collapse and national disgrace of the CIA plot to assassinate Polish Liberation leaders.

We are on the edge of the point of no return, the president thought, and he felt an awful urge to laugh, but he concentrated on keeping his lips tightly sealed. His mind was grappling with an intricate web of reports and opinions that led to a terrible conclusion: the Soviet Union was preparing a first strike that would utterly destroy the United States of America.

"Sir?" Hannan broke the uneasy silence. "Admiral Narramore has the next report. Admiral?"

Another folder was unsealed. Admiral Narramore, a gaunt, wiry-looking man in his mid-sixties, began to go over the classified data: "At 1912 hours, British recon helicopters off the guided missile destroyer *Fife* dropped sonobuoys that verified the presence of six unidentified submarines seventy-three miles north of Bermuda, bearing three hundred degrees. If those subs are closing on the northeastern coast, they're already within strike range of New York City, Newport News, air bases on the eastern seaboard, the White House and the Pentagon." He gazed across the table at the president, his eyes smoky gray under thick white brows. The White House was fifty feet above their heads. "If six were picked up," he said, "you can rely on the fact that Ivan's got at least three times that many out there. They can deliver several hundred warheads within five to nine minutes of launch." He turned the page. "As of an hour ago, the twelve Delta II-class Soviet subs two hundred and sixty miles northwest of San Francisco were still holding their position."

The president felt dazed, as if this all were a waking dream. Think! he told himself. Damn you,

think! “Where are our submarines, Admiral?” he heard himself ask, in what might have been a stranger’s voice.

Narramore called up another computer map on the wall screen. It displayed a line of blinking dots about two hundred miles northeast of Murmansk, U.S.S.R. Calling up a second map brought the Baltic Sea onto the screen, and another deployment of nuclear subs northwest of Riga. A third map showed the Russian east coast, a line of submarines in position in the Bering Sea between Alaska and the Soviet mainland. “We’ve got Ivan in an iron ring,” Narramore said. “Give us the word and we’ll sink anything that tries to break through.”

“I think the picture’s very clear.” Hannan’s voice was quiet and firm. “We’ve got to back the Soviets off.”

The president was silent, trying to put together logical thoughts. The palms of his hands were sweating. “What ... if they’re *not* planning a first strike? What if they believe *we* are? If we show force, might it not push them over the edge?”

Hannan took a cigarette from a silver case and lit it. Again the president’s eyes were drawn to the flame. “Sir,” Hannan replied softly, as if speaking to a retarded child, “if the Soviets respect anything, it’s force. You know that as well as every man in this room, especially since the Persian Gulf incident. They want territory, and they’re prepared to destroy us and to take their share of casualties to get it. Hell, their economy is worse than ours! They’re going to keep pushing us until we either break or strike—and if we delay until we break, God help us.”

“No.” The president shook his head. They’d been over this many times, and the idea sickened him. “No. We will *not* deliver a first strike.”

“The Soviets,” Hannan continued patiently, “understand the diplomacy of the fist. I’m not saying I think we should destroy the Soviet Union. But I do believe—ferverently—that now is the time to tell them, and decisively, that we’ll not be pushed, and we won’t let their nuclear submarines sit off our shores waiting for launch codes!”

The president stared at his hands. The knot of his tie felt like a hangman’s noose, and there was sweat under his arms and at the small of his back. “Meaning what?” he asked.

“Meaning we intercept those goddamned submarines immediately. We destroy them if they won’t turn back. We go to Defcon Three at all air bases and ICBM installations.” Hannan looked quickly around the table to judge who stood with him. Only the vice-president glanced away, but Hannan knew he was a weak man and his opinion carried no weight. “We intercept any Soviet nuclear vessel leaving Riga, Murmansk or Vladivostok. We take control of the sea again—and if that means limited nuclear contact, then so be it.”

“Blockade,” the president said. “Wouldn’t that make them more eager to fight?”

“Sir?” General Sinclair spoke in a folksy, down-home Virginia drawl. “I think the reasonin’ goes like this: Ivan’s got to *believe* we’ll risk our asses to blow him to hell and back. And to be honest, sir, I don’t think there’s a man jack here who’ll sit still and let Ivan throw a shitload of SLBMs at us without gettin’ our own knock in. No matter what the casualty toll.” He leaned forward, his piercing stare directed at the president. “I can put SAC and NORAD on Defcon Three within two minutes of your okay. I can send a squadron of B-1s right up to Ivan’s back door within one hour. Just kinda give him a gentle prod, y’see.”

“But ... they’ll think *we’re* attacking!”

“The point is that they’ll know we’re not afraid.” Hannan tapped a stalk of ash into his ashtray. “If that’s crazy, okay. But by God, the Russians respect insanity more than they respect fear! If we let them bring nuclear missiles to bear on our coastlines without lifting a finger, we’re signing a death warrant for the United States of America!”

The president closed his eyes. Jerked them open again. He had seen burning cities and charred black things that had once been human beings. With an effort he said, “I don’t ... I don’t want to be the man who starts World War Three. Can you understand that?”

“It’s already started,” Sinclair spoke up. “Hell, the whole damned world’s at war, and everybody’s waitin’ for either Ivan or us to give the knockout punch. Maybe the whole future of the world depends on who’s willin’ to be the craziest! I agree with Hans; if we don’t make a move right soon, a mighty hard rain’s gonna fall on our tin roof.”

“They’ll back off,” Narramore said flatly. “They’ve backed off before. If we send hunter-killer groups after those subs and blow them out of the water, they’ll know where the line’s drawn. So: Do we sit and wait, or do we show them our muscle?”

“Sir?” Hannan prodded. He glanced again at the clock, which showed fifty-eight minutes after ten. “I think the decision belongs to you now.”

I don’t want it! he almost shouted. He needed time, needed to go to Camp David or off on one of those long fishing trips he had enjoyed as a senator. But now there was no more time. His hands were gripped before him. His face felt so tight he feared it would crack and fall to pieces like a mask, and he wouldn’t want to see what lay underneath. When he looked up, the watching and powerful men were still there, and his senses seemed to whirl away from him.

The decision. The decision had to be made. Right now.

“Yes.” The word had never sounded so terrible before. “All right. We go to”—he paused, drew a deep breath—“we go to Defcon Three. Admiral, alert your task forces. General Sinclair, I don’t want those B-1s over one *inch* of Russian territory. Is that clear?”

“My crews could walk that line in their sleep.”

“Punch your codes.”

Sinclair went to work on the keyboard console before him, then lifted his telephone to make the voice authorization to Strategic Air Command in Omaha and the North American Air Defense fortress in Cheyenne Mountain, Colorado. Admiral Narramore picked up the phone that instantly put him in touch with Naval Operations at the Pentagon. Within minutes there would be heightened activity at the country’s air and naval bases. The Defcon Three codes would hum through the wires, and yet another check would be carried out on radar equipment, sensors, monitors, computers and hundreds of other pieces of high-tech military hardware, as well as the dozens of Cruise missiles and thousands of nuclear warheads hidden in silos across the Midwest from Montana to Kansas.

The president was numb. The decision was made. Chief of Staff Bergholz adjourned the meeting and came over to grasp the president’s shoulder and say what a good, solid decision it was. As the military advisors and officials left the Situations Room and moved to the elevator in the outside hallway the president sat alone. His pipe was cold, and he did not care to relight it.

“Sir?”

He jumped, turning his head toward the voice. Hannan stood beside the door. “Are you all right?”

“A-OK.” The president smiled wanly. A memory of his glory days as an astronaut had just flashed by. “No. Jesus Christ, I don’t know. I think I am.”

“You made the correct decision. We both know that. The Soviets have to realize we’re not afraid.”

“I *am* afraid, Hans! I’m damned afraid!”

“So am I. So is everyone, but we must not be ruled by fear.” He approached the table and paged through some of the folders. In a few minutes, a young CIA man would be in to shred all the documents. “I think you’d better send Julianne and Cory to the Basement tonight, as soon as they can pack. We’ll work out something with the press.”

The president nodded. The Basement was an underground shelter in Delaware where the first lady, the president’s seventeen-year-old son, ranking cabinet members and staff people would—they hoped—be protected from all but a direct hit by a one-megaton nuclear warhead. Since news of the carefully constructed Basement had leaked to the public several years before, such underground shelters had started appearing all over the country, some dug into old mines and others into mountains. The “survivalist” business was booming as never before.

“There’s a subject we need to talk about,” Hannan said. The president could see his own face, weary and hollow-eyed, reflected in the man’s glasses. “Talons.”

“It’s not time for that yet.” His stomach had knotted. “Not nearly time.”

“Yes. It *is* time. I think you’d be safer in the Airborne Command Center. One of the first targets would be the roof of the White House. I’m going to send Paula to the Basement, and, as you know, you have the authority to send whomever else you want there. But I’d like to join you in the Airborne Center, if I may.”

“Yes. Of course. I want you with me.”

“And,” Hannan continued, “there’ll be an Air Force officer aboard with a briefcase handcuffed to his wrist. Do you know your codes?”

“I know them.” Those particular codes were among the first things he’d learned after taking office. An iron band of tension gripped the back of his neck. “But ... I won’t have to use them, will I, Hans?” he asked, almost pleadingly.

“Most likely not. But if you do—*if* you do—I want you to remember that by then the America we love will be dead, and no invader has ever, or will ever, set foot on American earth.” He reached out and squeezed the president’s shoulder in a grandfatherly gesture. “Right?”

“The point of no return,” the president said, his eyes glazed and distant.

“What?”

“We’re about to cross the point of no return. Maybe we already have. Maybe it’s way too late to turn back. God help us, Hans; we’re flying in the dark, and we don’t know where the hell we’re going.”

“We’ll figure it out when we get there. We always have before.”

“Hans?” The president’s voice was as soft as a child’s. “If ... if you were God ... would you destroy this world?”

Hannan didn’t respond for a moment. Then, “I suppose ... I’d wait and watch. If I were God, I mean.”

“Wait and watch for what?”

“To find out who wins. The good guys or the bad guys.”

“Is there a difference anymore?”

Hannan paused. He started to answer, and then he realized he could not. “I’ll get the elevator,” he said, and he walked out of the Situations Room.

The president unclasped his hands. The overhead lights sparkled on the cufflinks he always wore, embossed with the seal of the president of the United States.

“I’m A-OK,” he said to himself. “All systems go.”

Something broke inside him, and he almost cried. He wanted to go home, but home was a long, long way from this chair.

“Sir?” Hannan called him.

Moving as slowly and stiffly as an elderly man, the president stood up and went out to face the future.