

Right Back At Ya

By E.S. Strout MD

1.

“You’d better take a look at this, Marshal.”

Communications Marshal Zorbek gaped an unimpressed yawn. “Another damn spy satellite or a radar glitch, Captain Vorniid?” His breath expanded in a cloud of icy condensation.

The radar operator tapped a gloved fingertip on a brilliant green dot traversing the CRT screen. “It’s real, sir. Southern and Eastern commands confirm. And this one is going to touch down.”

Marshal Zorbek’s sleepy, half-closed eyes sparked a trace of interest. “Point of origin, Captain?”

“Same as the others, Marshal.” Vorniid jerked a thumb toward one prefab wall of the outpost. “This is my best guess, you understand.”

“I see. Best guess, hmm? Equipment failure again?”

“Probably a relay tower that didn’t fully extend from its silo. It’s always something, sir.”

Zorbek balled a gloved fist and hammered the tabletop. “Damned West. Can you pinpoint its landing site?”

Vorniid rubbed his receding hairline and tugged at the sleeves of his thick military-issue khaki sweater. “That I can do, sir. It’s close enough to us. Four thousand five hundred kilometers inside the Winter Province, plus or minus twenty-five clicks.” He tapped computer keys and pulled up a map of the area on his screen. “This little red star is the projected landing site.”

Zorbek stamped his booted feet on the packed earth floor, raising puffs of dust. “Insane Western Alliance again. What can they be up to now?”

Vorniid shrugged. “I’d say more espionage, sir. An adjunct to their orbiting satellites. Up close and personal.”

Zorbek slammed his fists together in impotent rage.

“Take a look at this, sir. It’s only a month old.” Captain Vorniid handed him a telegraph reply copy. “Response to Supreme Military’s latest complaint to Western Alliance Headquarters. They insist . . .”

Zorbek grabbed the smudged sheet, gave it a dark scowl. “. . . that the orbiting spy devices are ours? Lying bastards. We don’t have the capability.” He spat and shredded the offending paper into minute parallel strips.

“Unless Supreme is being, ah, less than truthful with us,” Captain Vorniid observed in an ironic hushed voice.

Marshal Zorbek held a finger to his lips. “That kind of seditious talk, Captain, could result in your court-martial or worse. You’d best hope nobody is listening,” he whispered.

Vorniid shook his head and gave the Marshal a tired smile. “Sir, any Security bugs in these walls would have frozen solid by now.”

Zorbek nodded. “Probably true, Captain. In any case, Supreme Military has assured me the spy satellites are of Western origin.”

2.

“I’ve just downloaded something else that could be important, sir.” Captain Vorniid tapped computer keys in rapid sequence. A star field appeared. “This is from the Mount Lorvodon long range array. They popped up just long enough to photograph it. It’s only three months old.”

Zorbek stared at the screen. “This little streak. A satellite trail? Just one?”

The radar operator traced with a pencil point. “Yes, sir. A single orbit. It could be consistent with a Western Alliance launch but tracking results are ambiguous.”

Zorbek chewed off the tip of a cigar and struck a match to the business end. Clouds of aromatic smoke filled the radar outpost, unaffected by the feeble recycling efforts of the heating ducts. His gaze was intense, puzzled. “Unbelievable. One satellite. What the hell happened to the rest of them?”

“Unknown, sir. Perhaps the West has developed satellite retrieval technology.”

Zorbek activated the field telephone with a vicious crank of its rusted handle. “I’m going to get Deputy Commissar Baantrisk’s ass over here.”

3.

The overcoated guard snapped to attention with a rigid military salute and strained to push the heavy metal alloy door shut against the raging gale outside. Deputy Commissar Baantrisk stomped mud, dust and snow off his boots, unbuttoned his heavy uniform coat and pulled off his summer gloves. “Got anything to drink in this hell hole, Marshal Zorbek?”

Zorbek extracted a bottle of pale liquid from a cabinet drawer and poured an ounce into a shot glass. “This should warm you up a little, sir.”

Baantrisk downed it in one swallow. “Much better. Thank you. Refill, please?” He plopped down in the proffered chair and drained the glass. “Now, Marshal, what’s your concern about the West?”

“This, Deputy Commissar. A new bogey. He brushed away a thin film of frost from Captain Vorniid’s radar screen. “It’ll land some time on tomorrow’s midmorning watch.”

Baantrisk raised an eyebrow. “Land, you say?”

“Yes, sir. The West will deny it of course, but Supreme Military informs us they are responsible for all the spy devices.”

“True, Marshal. Most likely to augment their only orbiting satellite. The others seem to have gone missing. And we are aware of this new threat, thanks to you and the Captain.”

“And what will we do this time, Deputy Commissar? I recall hearing of a similar landing in our southern desert last annual rotation.”

Baantrisk’s chin sank to his chest. “Friggin’ rumor mill. Nobody at Supreme can keep their stupid mouths shut,” he muttered under his breath. “True enough, though,” he continued. “Our closest outpost was not within easy reach. When a surface detachment reached the alleged site months later all they found was a kilometer-wide dune, result of a massive sand and sleet storm. Frozen ground. Impenetrable. We can’t even rule out the possibility that the whole incident was due to a radar glitch.”

Marshal Zorbek’s eyes widened in surprise. “A glitch? Even so, why weren’t we placed on full alert?”

“Supreme is fed up with the number of false alarms. The accuracy of our radar sightings has been suspect for at least an annual orbit. Antiquated equipment, unavailable replacement parts, scarcity of raw materials, prolonged downtimes, damnable weather conditions. Believe me, Zorbek, this frustrates me as much as it does you.”

“But this Winter Province situation poses an entirely different scenario,” he went on. “The anomaly will come down in an immediately accessible area, Marshal. Your section will be involved now.”

Marshal Zorbek straightened his stormproofed tunic and raised his arm in a salute. “Thank you, Deputy Commissar. We are prepared to carry out your orders in exemplary fashion.”

“Excellent. Now what is your closest unit to the projected landing site of the Western device?”

Zorbek consulted a page on a clipboard. “The One Hundred Twelfth Surface Battalion, Deputy Commissar. Sergeant Zeitz’s unit. They can be mobilized to a cross-connecting tunnel less than half a kilo from touchdown site. They will be in place by 0600 hours with full winter camouflage gear and icebreaking equipment.”

“Good. They will receive a new item of military hardware. We have a little surprise in store for our Western friends.”

4.

“What’s your status, Sergeant Zeitz? Your signal is weak.”

“Damned ice and rock outcropping are making transmission on these damn obsolete sets a problem, Marshal. Wait one, switching to auxiliary frequency. How do you read now, sir.”

“Marginal. Have you acquired the device?”

“Affirmative, sir. We checked for booby traps per your instructions and found none.”

“Was it functioning?”

“Hard to tell, sir. We threw an alloy mesh net over it. I’m not certain whether we stopped any transmissions.”

“Any indication of its Western origin?”

“I’m just a ground-pounder, sir. I know nothing of surveillance technology. The hull does have some I.D. graphics. I’ll have my Corporal make a sketch.”

“Excellent. And the Deputy Commissar’s package?”

“In place, Marshal.”

“Very well, Sergeant Zeitz. You have one hour to remove your troops to the nearest main intersecting tunnel. At that time the package will be activated by remote signal. And Sergeant, you and your men will receive a unit commendation and individual Stars of Valor.”

“Thank you, Marshal. Zeitz out.”

5.

“Please join me in a drink, Zorbek,” Deputy Commissar Baantrisk said as he held the bottle aloft. “Damn Westerners will think twice before they screw around with us again.”

Marshal Zorbek tossed back the ounce of fiery liquor and refilled his and Baantrisk’s glass. His forehead wrinkled in a confused frown. “Think twice about what, Deputy Commissar?”

“You’re not aware of our newly developed return trajectory missile capabilities?”

“Negative, Deputy Commissar Baantrisk. We’re too low on the food chain out here at the rim for such briefings.”

Baantrisk spread his arms in an expansive gesture. “Our tax dollars at work, Zorbek. Supreme Military has developed a missile guidance unit utilizing all computer input from the rim stations. It is incorporated in the propulsion package attached to the Western intruder. The spy device will be returned to the exact point from which it originated.”

Zorbek squinted a skeptical eye. “I’ll bet you a half-rotation’s pay, Deputy Commissar, it won’t get off the ground.”

“I understand your cynicism, Marshal Zorbek, but I’ve been assured by higher authority that this package cannot fail.”

“Hmpf. So the West gets its spy lander back, what’s to say they won’t send another?”

Baantrisk gave him a knowing grin as he downed his drink. “Another little military secret, Marshal Zorbek. A small nuclear device.”

Zorbek removed his knit cap and scratched his head. “Nuclear . . . what, sir? I’m not familiar with the terminology.”

“An atomic bomb, Marshal. Many annual rotations in its development. Primitive, but it will send them a message they can’t ignore. Ground zero will be their spy launch complex, total devastation within a two thousand five hundred-kilo diameter circle.”

Zorbek wiped his brow with his tunic sleeve. “They have no such capability? It will mean another tunnel war if they do.”

Deputy Commissar Baantrisk smiled as he uncorked a second bottle and filled both their glasses. “None, Marshal Zorbek. We’ve been monitoring for any suspicious gamma and neutron radiation levels for two solar cycles now. They have nothing.”

Marshal Zorbek fidgeted uneasily. “More unfamiliar terminology, Deputy Commissar. Radiation?”

“Not your concern, Marshal. Another secret, well kept. The Westerners have no idea what’s about to crawl up their pathetic asses.”

6.

“I’m sorry to interrupt, but I have something odd on the radar, Marshal Zorbek,” Captain Vorniid said.

“Yes, Vorniid. Show us.”

Zorbek and Baantrisk peered over his shoulder as the Captain tapped a glove on the screen. “The device has achieved escape velocity, sirs. But its projected path doesn’t match its prior incoming track.”

Marshal Zorbek’s lips curled in a derisive grin. “Told you Supreme Military’s piece of garbage wouldn’t work.”

Deputy Commissar Baantrisk chuckled and lit up a cigar. “No matter, Marshal. The package has been programmed to select the most optimal route to the target. It must have chosen a shorter polar orbit. It will guide the spy lander to its source, and then . . . Kaboom!” Baantrisk blew a cloud of cigar smoke toward the tobacco-stained grid of the gasping ceiling ventilator. “Another drink, Zorbek?”

The intercom buzzed. “Yes? Who’s there?” Vorniid asked.

“Sergeant Zeitz, sir. I have something for Marshal Zorbek.”

7.

The officers bent over the crude drawing. “This was inscribed on the intruder’s hull. My corporal traced it,” Zeitz said. “A code, Marshal?”

A puzzled frown creased Zorbek’s forehead. “None that I’m aware of. You, Deputy Commissar?”

Baantrisk frowned, puffed his cigar. “No idea, Marshal. Captain, send this over to the crypto geeks at Intelligence. See what they can make of it.”

“Yes, sir.” Captain Vorniid traced an idle fingertip over the strange angular hieroglyphics:

MARS POLAR LANDER

NASA USA

The End