

Project Initiative

by E.S. Strout

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1.

Dugway, Utah. 2230 hours, Tuesday 2 August 2011.

Staff Sergeant Ramon Evangelista was bored. "Nothing ever happens here," he muttered. "Last bit of excitement was back in '06 when a civilian aircraft violated the no-fly zone." He flipped a page on his new issue of Sports Illustrated, grinned with satisfaction. "Yeah, the Phillies might make it this year."

There was an insistent high-pitched trill of the red phone. "Sergeant Evangelista, duty Security NCO here."

Automated arms fire and muffled shouts assaulted his ears for several seconds and then suddenly went quiet.

"Everything has gone to hell, Sergeant. I need some help here ASAP," the panicked female voice screamed. "Colonel Snyder is gone and the scientists are bailing out."

"Say your identity, please."

"Corporal April Flore, Project Initiative. Oh merciful God. I think the soldiers are all dead."

2.

Twenty minutes later:

First Lieutenant Roger Ellison, General Ellenbecker's Aide-de-Camp, listened to the digital recording with a shocked expression. "Who is Flore, Sergeant?"

"Corporal April Flore. She's not one of ours, sir. I checked all of Dugway's current Personnel Rosters. She said she was assigned to Project Initiative."

"Project Initiative? Are you sure, Sergeant?"

"Yes, sir. The call originated from Test Area 3. A highly classified exercise is underway there. I alerted the Health Clinic Doc, then notified Security and told them to execute emergency code Bravo-6. Then I called you."

Captain Ellison picked up the red phone and identified himself. “Confirm code Bravo-6. Nobody leaves Dugway Proving Ground without authorization by General Ellenbecker. All civilians attempting to exit from Test Area 3 are to be apprehended. Be on the lookout for Colonel Lee Snyder. He is missing.”

“Thank you, Sergeant. General Ellenbecker has been notified and is on his way to the scene.”

3.

General Ellenbecker’s quarters, Three weeks earlier:

“Make yourself a martini and relax for a bit, Marcus,” his sometime live-in companion Carolyn DeWald said. “I picked up a pizza.”

Carolyn was a 48-year-old trim blond woman dressed in casual tan slacks, white blouse and brown flats. She was a Utah state senator representing the Second District, which included Tooele City and Dugway.

She joined the General for a drink, and then eyed him with an inquiring grin. “You seem preoccupied this evening, Marcus.”

Ellenbecker, a tall, fit and tanned 54 year-old veteran of Iraq and Afghanistan said, “I had a curious visitor this morning, Carrie. Aaron Crosby. A civilian with high level credentials who claimed to represent a research group that would be conducting classified testing here at Dugway.”

Carolyn held a finger to her lips. “Should you be telling me this?”

”I was informed that civilians would be allowed to violate base security at will, Carrie. There is something going on that’s above my security level. Crosby put me in touch with a high level individual who said my command was only to provide backup for the operation. I protested to no avail.”

“Can you tell me who it was,” she asked, her voice a soft hush.

“I can’t say. I could lose my command. I’m going to do nothing right now but comply. I’m just concerned that if anything goes wrong with their project I could be held responsible.”

“Aaron Crosby. Let me see what I can find out. I know a U.S. Senator who sits on the Senate Armed Services Committee.”

4.

Barracks Foxtrot, Test Area 3, 1930 hours, Tuesday 2 August, 2011:

Corporal Matthew Edison nervously approached his senior NCO. “Sarge, I’ve got a problem.”

Staff Sergeant Thomas Willetts grinned. “Nervous about this exercise, Matt? I think we all are a little up tight.”

Edison mopped his brow with a sleeve. “I forgot my patch, Sarge. I just put it on half an hour ago.”

Willetts’s voice exploded in ear splitting rage. “How the hell could you forget the damn patch? Corporal Flore is supposed to stick it on your arm at 1600 hours, sign you off on a checklist and remove it at 1900.”

Corporal Edison stammered, “I was in the latrine barfing my guts out. Nerves, I guess. Christ knows, I’m aware how important this exercise is. Do you think it will make that much difference? ”

Sergeant Willetts muttered a stream of choice expletives and then shook his head. “Too late now. Just leave the damn patch on. We’re ready to deploy. Corporal Flore is going to be in a world of hurt.”

“She gave me a break. Signed me off, left the patch on my bunk and left me a note to leave it there when I took it off. I just plain forgot. I’ll be ready. Sarge. I won’t let you or the team down.”

Sergeant Willetts swore under his breath. “Damn patches are supposed to increase mental capacity and memory. Guess they didn’t work on you, Corporal.”

“Does initiative count, Sarge? I know where we can liberate some real weapons, not the hand to hand combat crap they are limiting us to.”

Willetts opened his mouth to unleash another stream of invective, and then stopped. “Like what kinds of weapons?” He asked. “And how are we supposed to get hold of them?”

Edison smiled. “I’ve been watching Test Area 2, Sarge. The troops there are involved in live fire exercises. The motor pool and armory are close by. Their security is very lax after 1900 hours. All we need is a pickup truck. Thirty minutes there and back.”

“How the hell can you know this, Corporal Edison?”

“I borrowed Captain Evans’s night binoculars. Told him I was scoping out the battlefield, getting a head start. Initiative, like he and the Colonel keep telling us. He said to keep him informed. Sarge, It’ll only take two of us. PFC Rayburn can go with me.”

A klaxon sounded. “2030 hours, Sergeant Willetts said. “Time to hit it, Corporal. Get in formation with PFC Rayburn.“

“We will capture all those Team Romeo guys and march them right up to Colonel Snyder, Sarge. I can feel it. Promotions for all of us. Couple of pay grades, maybe.”

5.

Test Area Three viewing platform, 2130 hours:

Under a partly cloudy sky and light warm desert breeze, three scientists clad in dark coveralls looked over the hilly terrain with night vision binoculars. Colonel Lee Snyder turned to them and announced, “This exercise will determine the value of these biologically enabled volunteers in simulated combat conditions. Two teams of ten men each will participate.”

He continued, “Team Romeo holds that hill to your left. They will dig in and prepare to defend against Team Foxtrot, which will attempt to dislodge them. No live armament will be in play but they will have night vision equipment. Hand to hand combat only. Ingenuity, quick thinking and physical fitness will be primary aspects of the exercise.”

He pressed a switch. “That klaxon begins the exercise.”

For thirty minutes neither team gained an advantage. One of the scientists pointed. “What’s the purpose of that truck, Colonel Snyder?”

The officer turned his night vision glasses on the intruder and nodded. He read off the numbers inscribed on the vehicle’s side to the soldier who was seated at a computer. “Please find out where that truck came from, Corporal Flore.”

“Right away, sir.” She pushed keys then announced, “This is weird, sir. It’s from the motor pool at Test Area 2, right next to us.”

Snyder looked at his watch. “35 minutes since exercise onset. Looks like Team Foxtrot has grabbed the initiative and gotten themselves mechanized. Initiative in action,” he said to the scientists, who made entries on their laptops. “Their central nervous system upgrades peaking after those months of conditioning. Let’s see what they can do.”

Twenty minutes later the test area erupted with automatic weapons fire. “What’s happening?” The Colonel shouted. There was no response as dust and debris occluded the vision of the observers.

“Christ,” Colonel Snyder yelled. “Those are live rounds. This is not part of the test scenario. Corporal Flore, get me some field input and wear some body armor.”

Corporal Flore jumped from her seat and raced down the stairs from the observation post. “I’ll report as soon as I know something, sir.”

6.

Test Area 3, Dugway Proving Ground. 2345 hours:

General Ellenbecker roared up to the scene in a jeep. Bodies of teams Romeo and Foxtrot soldiers were scattered over the ground and hillside. The doctor and some medics were going over each of the combatants under hastily erected floodlights. He approached and saluted. “No survivors, sir. Only place I’ve seen similar was in Afghanistan. What in hell happened here?”

“I wish I knew, Captain.” He shaded his eyes from the intense floodlights. “I’m looking for Corporal Flore. She alerted us from here.”

“She’s helping us with ID’s of the casualties. Told us she was with Project Initiative. Does that mean something to you, sir?”

Ellenbecker nodded. “Please send her over when she is finished with you.”

Twenty minutes later a slender woman soldier with tangled brown hair and frightened hazel eyes rushed up and saluted. Her camo fatigues, boots and cap were soil and blood stained, as were her hands, arms and face. She took a deep breath. “Corporal April Flore reporting as ordered, sir.”

General Ellenbecker returned the salute. “Go get yourself cleaned up, grab your gear and report back to me.”

“Right away, sir.” She took off at a run toward the Test Area 3 temporary barracks.

When she returned she was clad in clean fatigues and had a freshly showered and shampooed appearance. She saluted. “Thank you for the time to clean up, sir.”

He returned her salute. “Stand by, Corporal.” He turned to the doctor. “Captain, get hold of the hospital at Hill Air Force Base ASAP. Tell them our situation and ask them to send a pathologist with whatever he needs to handle a mass casualty situation. I want a complete autopsy on each victim. It must include blood and urine testing for illegal drugs or any other unusual substances. They can use one of the air-conditioned temporary structures. Make it happen now, Doc.”

He grabbed his iPhone and began punching in saved numbers. “I’m on it, sir.”

The General said, “Corporal Flore, we’re going to my office for debriefing.”

Flore’s eyes widened, her features reflecting a trapped look. She stammered in a soft voice, “I request a JAG attorney, sir.”

The General shook his head. “You are not a suspect in any criminal action, Corporal. I’m the Commanding Officer of Dugway Proving Ground. I have been excluded by higher authority from any information regarding Project Initiative. You are my only source of information at this time.”

Flore gave a long tremulous sigh. “Sir, Project Initiative is highly classified and I may not reveal any such information under penalty of court martial, imprisonment and possible death sentence for treason.”

General Ellenbecker nodded. “I understand. Stow your gear in the back of my Jeep and strap in.” He handed her his iPhone, “Ring up Legal, ask for the duty JAG officer.”

She did so. “I am Corporal April Flore, ID 3660732. General Ellenbecker requests the duty JAG officer meet us at his headquarters. We’ll be there in less than 20 minutes, so you’d better step on it.” She listened. “I understand, Sergeant. Wait one.” She handed the iPhone over.

“This is General Marcus Ellenbecker. You have my voice print ID by now. Make it happen.” He listened for a millisecond, gave Flore a nod. “Well done.”

7.

General Ellenbecker’s office, 0135 hours, Wednesday 3 August:

Lieutenant Eugene Whitley stood at attention and saluted. “How can I be of service, General?”

“At ease, Lieutenant. Please have a seat next to Corporal Flore. She has requested legal representation. She has not been accused of any crime or misconduct. Her situation is unusual.”

The JAG lawyer greeted his client and turned to the General. “Please give me a description of the situation, sir.”

Ellenbecker gave a resigned shrug. “Corporal Flore is a medic assigned to a secret undertaking, Project Initiative. She has been sworn to secrecy under penalty of death for treason were she to reveal any aspects of such project.”

Lieutenant Whitley said, “Sir, if this is accurate, Corporal Flore is duty bound to abide by the conditions laid out by her senior officer according to the Uniform Code of Military Justice.”

“I’m sorry, Corporal,” Whitley said. “the definition is clear cut.”

Flore slumped in her chair and nodded. “I understand, sir.”

The General’s office phone beeped. He listened for several seconds with an expression of surprise. “Damn. All of them? The Colonel also? So we weren’t quick enough locking down. Okay Sergeant, ask the duty MP Officer to alert the appropriate authorities. List the Colonel as AWOL.” He scowled with frustration as he dropped the phone into its cradle. “Lieutenant Whitley, you will have excellent grounds for representing Corporal Flore.”

The lawyer settled back in his chair, surprised. “What has changed, sir?”

“Corporal Flore is now the only witness in a case of gross negligence with twenty confirmed deaths of military personnel resulting from this action. Civilian scientists involved in Project Initiative have illegally fled the scene. Colonel Snyder, the responsible officer is AWOL.”

Lieutenant Whitley stood and saluted. “Corporal Flore will have our full legal coverage, sir.”

General Ellenbecker dismissed the lawyer, picked up his office phone. “I need quarters for Corporal April Flore. Yes, I said Corporal. She is the only witness in a pending major legal action regarding deaths of Army personnel. Thank you. I will bring her to the Bachelor Officers Quarters as soon as I assign 24 hour armed guard coverage for her.”

8.

0730 hours Wednesday morning, General Ellenbecker’s quarters:

“Lots of noise out there last night, Marcus,” Carolyn DeWald said. “What happened?”

He shook out three Tylenols from the bottle, swallowed them with orange juice and uttered a soft groan.

Carolyn stepped to the kitchen and returned with two cups of coffee and a look bursting with curiosity.

The General took a swallow of the hot brew. “Project Initiative turned to crap last night. Twenty good soldiers died in a test scenario gone wrong.”

Carolyn put a hand to her mouth to stifle a gasp of horror. “My God, Marcus. Does this have something to do with that civilian who visited you?”

He nodded. “I think so. This fiasco reaches into the highest levels of our government. Three scientists have gone missing and Colonel Snyder is AWOL.”

Carolyn lifted her coffee cup with a trembling hand and took a long swallow. “Is there anything I can do, Marcus?”

Ellenbecker said, “I’m going to call in a few favors and see what I can dig up. How well do you know this Senator you mentioned a few weeks back, Carrie?”

“Senator Tilbury is a good friend. She has been on the Senate Armed Services Committee for the last five years.”

Marcus raised his head, smiled. “Ask her if she could give me some input on what’s happening in her committee regarding this situation.”

Carolyn dug her laptop out from its case. "I'll get on it right now."

He gave her a lingering kiss and headed out the door. "I'll be in my office making some phone calls. Let me know."

9.

General Ellenbecker spent two hours on the phone with prior associates from the Pentagon and Fort Bragg, North Carolina. They had heard rumors but nothing could be confirmed.

At 1130 hours he received a call from the duty MP Officer. Civilian police in Tooele City had discovered the body of Colonel Lee Snyder at a local motel, a suicide by pistol shot.

He thanked the officer and requested a fax of the report, then muttered to himself, "Damn. What next?"

That came a few minutes later when his private line buzzed. Carolyn DeWald said, "Have you heard the latest, Marcus?"

"No, Carrie. Been on the phone. Tell me."

"CNN and Fox News are reporting the Vice President has just resigned. He gave no reason and would not speak to the press."

A long pause followed. The General's soft voice betrayed shock. "Carrie, That's the person whose name I couldn't reveal to you."

"What's going on, Marcus? The President just came on. He says he knows nothing but I can tell he's pissed."

"He's been left out of the loop too. Something so ultra secret even he was bypassed. Something weird is going on and I'm going to try and find out what."

"I spoke to Senator Tilbury earlier. She's intrigued and will come here to meet with you this weekend."

"Good. Maybe she can fill in some blanks."

He rang the duty MP Officer and directed that Corporal Flore be brought to his office with her armed escort.

10.

Corporal April Flore was dressed in clean khaki fatigues. She cast a bewildered look around General Ellenbecker's office, taking in the paraphernalia of his rank. The General told the MP Sergeant to wait outside and stay alert.

"Please sit, Corporal. Were your quarters okay?"

She nodded. "Better than I'm accustomed to, sir. The guards did put me a bit on edge. I mean no disrespect sir, but why do I rate so much security?"

Ellenbecker said, "You are a vital link in a mystery that involves misconduct of high level government officials. I'm taking no chances with your safety. You will remain in protective custody until further notice."

Flore asked in a tremulous voice, "The soldier casualties, I knew them all. Why did they die, sir?"

He nodded. "Excellent question. I know how they died. I need to find out why. Did you know Colonel Snyder?"

"Yes, sir. He was the military commander of Project Initiative. He sent me out last night to report on conditions on the field."

"Colonel Snyder is dead. He went missing after the incident and was listed as AWOL. His body was discovered this morning, a suicide."

Flore exhaled a tremulous breath. "Why would he? He did not seem depressed during the exercise. He was pretty upbeat."

The General shook his head. "Project Initiative, whatever it is, is a colossal failure. Colonel Snyder is a casualty and the scientists are unaccounted for. All their computers, photos and hardcopies are missing as well. Your laboratory spaces were clean also. Explanation, Corporal?"

"We were packed for our return to Fort Bragg, sir. Nothing of a confidential nature was included. We would have left this morning."

"Can you think of anything that I may have missed, Corporal? Anything at all, no matter how insignificant it may seem to you."

"There was a late model Dodge Ram 2500 pickup truck at the scene, sir. I ran an ID on it for Colonel Snyder. It came from the motor pool at Test Area 2. The Colonel seemed quite pleased."

The General gave a surprised blink. "Not upset that this mystery vehicle was intruding on his classified exercise?"

"Not at all, sir. He mentioned something about Team Foxtrot grabbing the initiative. He did seem pleased."

“Damn,” the General muttered. “That truck has several bullet holes and four flat tires. The forensic people are working on it. You have a sharp eye, Corporal. Is there anything else you can recall?”

“No sir, I don’t think so . . .” Then her eyes grew wide and she uttered a soft gasp. “Oh my God, in all the confusion last night I forgot I’d recovered this.” She reached in a uniform pocket and produced a small clear plastic wrapper. It contained a tan, shiny piece of material about the size of a large Band Aid. She laid it on the General’s desk. “When I was helping with casualty ID’s I took it from Corporal Matthew Edison’s left upper arm. It’s the only one that I hadn’t recovered.”

General Ellenbecker looked without touching. “Please explain, Corporal.”

“It’s a drug patch, sir. One of my duties was to apply one to each soldier’s upper arm at 1600 hours each day and collect it at 1900 hours. Corporal Edison was ill, in the latrine vomiting. I placed it on his bunk and left a note for him to apply it and return it to me after three hours. That’s the time it takes for the experimental drugs to be absorbed through the skin.”

“How long do you think Corporal Edison could have had his patch attached?”

“Two hours or less, sir.”

Ellenbecker grabbed his phone and pressed a speed dial number. “Biomedical Safety, this is General Ellenbecker. I need a technician to pick up a specimen right away, please.” He reached in a desk drawer, took out a printed form and passed it across the desk. “This is a chain of custody form, Corporal.”

April nodded and began to fill it out. “We used them at the Fort Bragg labs. I’ll use Corporal Edison as the source and check off complete drug and toxin screen.”

After they both had signed, General Ellenbecker said, “This is a powerful piece of evidence that cannot be compromised. It may give us some answers. Well done.”

11.

At noon his office phone buzzed. The caller identified himself as Senator Jacobs of the Armed Services Committee. He informed the General that an official vehicle would arrive at 1630 hours your time to pick up Corporal Flore for a flight to Washington.

A red flag of suspicion went up immediately. “By whose authority, Senator?” Ellenbecker asked.

“Mine. Preliminary hearing before reaching the full committee, General.”

“I will require a Presidential order, sir. I am dealing with a highly sensitive situation here.”

The Senator's voice exploded with rage. He threatened court martial, dishonorable discharge and loss of pension if he was not obeyed. The General sat quietly until the tirade ended, then said, "Senator, right now I trust nobody in Washington. This witness will not be allowed to disappear or die on my watch. A Presidential Order must be hand delivered to me." The line went dead.

He next ordered a squad of Army Rangers to back up the MP's guarding Corporal Flore. Then he doubled security at all entrances to Dugway Proving Ground.

12.

At 0930 hours Thursday the laboratory results on the casualties were hand delivered by a CBW Safety technician. The General thanked the woman and dismissed her. No evidence of illegal drugs or toxic substances was found in any of the casualties' specimens.

Five minutes later Biomedical's head organic chemist called. "This is a skin patch, am I correct, Marcus?"

"That's right, Bill. It's part of an experimental drug delivery system. It was recovered from a soldier who was a casualty in Tuesday night's disaster."

"You have hit the jackpot, sir. There are residual traces of an anabolic steroid, norepinephrine and the real kicker is NZT."

"Keep it simple for an ancient trooper, Bill. I know about anabolic steroids in body building. The other two are mysteries. Enlighten me."

"General, NZT is an experimental nitrogen based psychogenic compound. Studies have shown that it has significant impact on the human brainstem. It can prolong long and short term memory and memory capacity as well as the brain's analytical capability. Norepinephrine is an adrenal hormone that accentuates nervous system response times, awareness, the so-called fight or flight response. It must have been a one-time additive to the drug patches to get the soldiers extra alert and aware for the combat exercise."

"General, if all twenty soldiers in the Initiative Project received NZT and an anabolic steroid on a regular basis, they would have had highly advanced mental and physical skills. Somebody is trying to create super soldiers."

General Ellenbecker exhaled a deep sigh "Bill, I had postmortem blood and urine tests run on all casualties. The results were negative for anabolic steroids and epinephrine derivatives. Our clinical lab can't test for NZT. According to Corporal Flore the patch needed to be in place for three hours to administer the full dosage. Corporal Edison's patch was on for less, so there was some residual for you to find."

“That’s a surprise, General. Some byproducts should have been present in every man using the patches.”

“All tests were rechecked three times, Bill. What kind of drug delivery system would leave no degradation products?”

“Beats me. Any hints on what those civilian scientists knew?”

“Not a clue. Corporal Flore is only a medic and had no direct contact with them.”

13.

At 1800 hours the pathologist, Air Force Major James Watterson, a tall red haired 36-year-old officer from Hill Air Force Base in Ogden reported that all the casualty autopsies had been completed. “My lab people took photos and recorded the external findings. The casualties’ internal organs were normal, except for one man, Corporal Matthew Edison’s. I have some photos to show you.”

Marcus booted up his desktop Mac. The pathologist clicked on his iPhone and a large purple mass appeared on the screen. “This is part of a normal spleen from one of the other casualties.” A click and another spleen appeared. “Corporal Edison’s. Do you see the difference, General?”

Ellenbecker eyed the screen for several seconds, then pointed. “What are all these little gray dots?”

“That’s the Final Jeopardy question, sir.” He clicked up another image. A large brown shape appeared. “Edison’s liver. Same little abnormalities. At first I thought it was spread of a cancerous tumor, but when I tried to remove one I got a surprise. It was not soft like tumor. It was hard and granular like a mineral deposit. I looked at one of the lesions under the highest power of a microscope.”

He clicked for another image. “Those dots on the screen are about the size of bacteria, but they are not organic. One of your CBW guys did some stains and found it’s an inorganic compound of silicon and iron oxide.”

The General massaged his temples with his fingertips. “So what are you telling me, Major?”

“I’m not sure, General. Tomorrow I’ll video stream these photos to the Joint Pathology Center in Maryland for their pathologists to consult on.”

Ellenbecker nodded. “Could you hazard an educated guess, Major Watterson?”

“I’m going out on a pretty fragile limb here, sir, but I wonder about a medical adaptation of nanotechnology. This area of medicine is in its infancy and I know of no ongoing clinical trials.”

The General nodded. “Good going, James. All these photos, DVDs, notes and dictation will remain in the custody of Dugway Security. There is going to be a huge investigation.”

14.

General Ellenbecker’s quarters, 2030 hours.

He changed into casual civilian wear after a shower, then poured large vodka martinis for he and Carolyn. After dinner he related the day’s discoveries, dwelling at length on Major Watterson’s possible nanotechnology discovery.

She thought for a moment. A very small unit if I recall dimensions correctly. Something to do with Tuesday’s tragedy?”

“Carrie, could you ask your Senator friend if she has heard anything about medical nanotechnology testing on soldier volunteers in her committee? Also, ask her about a Senator Jacobs, who is on her committee.”

“Oh wow, Marcus, the one who threatened you today? I’m on it.” She brushed loose curls from her forehead and grabbed her MacBook.

15.

0645 hours Friday morning:

General Ellenbecker found Carolyn tapping keys on her laptop, a cup of fresh coffee at her side. “You couldn’t sleep, Carrie? Anything good?”

She handed him a printout. “From Senator Tilbury. She couldn’t sleep, either.”

The General grabbed a cup of coffee, took a large swallow and then sat next to Carolyn and began to read.

“Carolyn, Marcus has kicked over a killer bee’s nest. Since the Vice President’s resignation, Senators from California and Illinois have resigned. Tell Marcus that Senator Jacobs suddenly took a leave of absence commencing on August 3. I consider this action and its timing as suspicious as he does.”

“I have issued a federal warrant for Aaron Crosby, whom I have discovered is associated with Microsystems, Inc. They are actively engaged in nanotechnology research and have a number of government contracts. The President has assigned this investigation to me. I can be there later today.”

Carolyn began to type again. “I’ll get the flight details and pick her up.”

16.

0830 hours Friday morning:

When he was settled with coffee in Ellenbecker's office, Major Watterson handed him a DVD disc in a plastic sleeve. "This is the results of my meeting with the Navy guys at the Joint Pathology Center an hour ago. They agree that my pathology findings are consistent with an experiment in medical nanotechnology. They knew of no nanobot studies in progress, but the internet has hinted at unconfirmed testing in some civilian laboratories."

"This is beginning to make some sense," the General said. "How would it work?"

Watterson nodded. "Millions of nanobots would be constructed and sensitized to specific body organs. They would flow through the blood stream and deliver a nanogram amount of the drug to a single cell or group of cells in the target organ. Those dosages would be so small that they would be completely absorbed by the target organs. That's why all the casualties' blood and urine samples were negative. Corporal Edison's spleen and liver were not finished filtering out the used nanobots, so there were some left for us to find."

"Diabolical, Major," General Ellenbecker said with a mystified grin. "Well done. I'll be asking for a commendation for you and your crew."

17.

General Ellenbecker's quarters, 1830 hours:

"This is my dear friend, Senator Bette Tilbury," Carolyn said. Tilbury's hair was dark having early streaks of gray. Her eyes were green and inquisitive. She wore dark slacks and jacket over a pastel blue blouse open at the collar.

The Senator stepped forward with a smile and a firm handshake. "General. As you are probably aware, you and your command have been the topic of considerable discussion at the White House. To paraphrase Queen Elizabeth I, there are many persons of importance in Washington who may soon find themselves shorter by a head. That includes your Senator Jacobs and others who are now under investigation."

After dinner they settled comfortably in the living room and sipped brandy. The Senator said, "I was saying, there are some folks in Washington who are in a lot of serious trouble."

The General nodded. "Senator, let me give you a synopsis of what went down Tuesday night."

Tilbury poised her pen over a note pad. "Please, General."

It took Marcus forty-five minutes to relate the details and ramifications of Tuesday night's tragedy. "Senator, I think it's evident that one of the teams planned to capture the others with the confiscated weapons but as I've described, both teams ended up with live armament and neither side backed down. Twenty soldiers high on norepinephrine fought to the last man."

"God in Heaven, how could this happen?" the Senator muttered with a soft sigh.

"Any thoughts, Senator? Marcus asked

She said, "There is a race between competing civilian laboratories to be first to develop successful medical nanotechnology. I know now that Microsystems got a large cash infusion from our government and was given permission to use U.S. Army soldier volunteers as test subjects. In their haste to succeed they began cutting corners. Twenty good soldiers were wasted in an out of control experiment lacking established guidelines and strict oversight. Some of the involved parties are still at large. One being Aaron Crosby, yes, Marcus?"

"Pompous little man. He put me in touch with the Vice President."

"Mr. Crosby is the subject of a federal arrest warrant . . . wait one."

She was interrupted by beeps from her cell phone. She popped in an ear bud and checked caller ID. "Go ahead, officer." She listened for several seconds, and then raised a fist. "Thank you so much."

Her smile was radiant. "Airport Police at Dulles just nabbed Aaron Crosby as he was boarding an Air France flight to Paris with connecting flight to Geneva, Switzerland. His luggage contained two million in U.S. currency."

General Ellenbecker gave her a fist tap. "One down."

The Senator smiled. "I'll let him stew for a week in solitary."

Marcus said, "I'll have JAG witnesses and a court reporter ready for you and Corporal Flore in the morning."

18.

General Ellenbecker's conference room, Saturday August 6, 0945 hours:

Corporal April Flore arrived with her armed escort. She was sharp and attractive in her blue Class A dress uniform. General Ellenbecker dismissed the guards and said, "Corporal, Senator Tilbury and the JAG officers will have questions. You know all the answers."

She nodded. "I'm more than ready, sir."

Senator Tilbury smiled and shook her hand. “I hear you have a sharp eye for detail, April. Your affidavit today will be the most important evidence that we have so far in this unfortunate affair.”

Corporal Florek’s testimony took an hour and ten minutes. Her sworn statement was not rebutted by any of the JAG lawyers.

Outside, General Ellenbecker said to her, “I’ll arrange for your transportation back to Fort Bragg on Monday. The armed guards are dismissed. You are a good soldier, Corporal Flore. The Army needs more like you.”

She smiled. “I appreciate that, sir.”

19.

General Ellenbecker’s office, Thursday August 11. 1130 hours.

There was a chirp of his Iphone. Caller ID identified Senator Tilbury. “Yes, Senator?”

Her voice barely masked her excitement. “General, after six days in solitary Mr. Crosby broke. He gave up the three missing scientists from Microsystems. They are in Switzerland with thirty million from Project Initiative funds in U.S. dollars.”

“I’m delighted. Well done, Senator. What happens now?”

“The President is in highly classified discussions with the Swiss. I wish I could give you a clear answer, Marcus, but these things take time. We will be speaking again soon.”

Epilogue

Two years later:

In January of 2012 Corporal April Flore was awarded the U.S. Army’s Soldiers Medal for her unselfish actions on the night of 2 August 2011. In 2013 she graduated from Officer Candidate School with the rank of Second Lieutenant. Her request for assignment as General Ellenbecker’s Aide-de-Camp was approved.

General Marcus Ellenbecker achieved four-star rank in 2013. He was appointed to a position on the Secretary of the Army’s staff in Washington, D.C.

His testimony before a Senate Investigating Committee resulted in the indictment of a number of high-ranking government individuals for their involvement in Project Initiative. Their charges include perjury, misappropriation of government funds and gross negligence resulting in deaths of military personnel.

Carolyn DeWald was elected to the U.S. Senate in 2012. When in Washington she was a regular

guest of General Ellenbecker's.

Senator Tilbury was instrumental in achieving the extradition of the three fugitives and return of all Project Initiative records. The Swiss would keep the thirty million as the cost of doing business.

The U.S. government and Microsystems, Inc. turned over a combined one hundred sixty million dollars to reimburse the families of the soldiers who died at Dugway Proving Ground. Microsystems, Inc. declared bankruptcy a month later.

Deep in the fifth sub-basement of the inner ring of the Pentagon, there is a long corridor lined by shelves. These are packed with the remnants of failed, discarded or rejected projects and experiments. All gather years' collections of dust, water staining and rat droppings. At the end next to the staircase and elevators there is a medium sized carton sitting on an eye level shelf labeled PROJECT INITIATIVE, 2011. Across the front is a segment of yellow tape marked in stark red letters: SCHEDULED FOR REACTIVATION.

The End