

RICK DUKE chomped on his unlit cigar in frustration as he stomped back and forth on the rich carpet in front of the Committee's doors. He grumbled in a low volume that was mercifully only barely audible to those around him, with words like "goddam commies" and "mincing faggots" occasionally rising into hearing range. Hearing them made his aide, Tom Cotton, stiffen and harden his jaw in agreement, but compelled his personal assistant to place her slender hand on Rick Duke's thick forearm.

"Please be careful, Mr. Duke," she said softly, her eyes downcast. "Remember what you told all of us. Treat every inch of the Capitol building as if it was wired for sound."

Rick's stern gaze softened as he looked down at his loyal and long-suffering PA. "Wise words, Faith," he said, patting her hand before adjusting his belt and shifting his slacks in an attempt to conceal a mild erection. "The person who told you that must have been a real smart guy." Rick smiled indulgently. "But still. To think that these twinkle-toed motherfucking stool pushers have the balls to subpoena MY ass, it just..."

Faith winced and Rick raised a placatory hand. "Yeah, yeah," he said around the cigar in his mouth, "I got it, I got it."

Tom Cotton's eyes shone. "Give 'em hell, sir," he said in a voice whose tone of firm command he had spent the previous night practicing in front of the mirror. He tried to stand a little taller, to come closer to the six feet and two inches of his superior. "Just...give 'em hell."

Rick eyed his subordinate up and down a little dubiously before turning to the oaken twin doors that were opening before him. "Uh...thanks, Tom," said Rick, giving the man a firm pat on the upper arm and ignoring the shiver this provoked. He squared up to the open doors, gave his suit jacket a corrective tug, and said, "Alright, kids. Let's show 'em Daddy's home."

He marched into the chamber as the sound of clicking cameras rose like a percussive prelude to a symphony.

"RICHARD DUKE in the hot seat today as he faces questions about his role in Ammogate," breathed the blonde anchorwoman on MSNBC. "More on this story later in the broadcast."

Jimmy Scanlon chuckled as he poured another finger of bourbon into his glass. "You're on the hook now, tricky Ricky. Now let's see you wriggle." He leaned back in his chair, as the television advertisement finished explaining why Martin Luther King Jr. would have wanted you to buy a Ford truck, and returned to the broadcast.

"Mr. Duke goes to Washington and well, Chad, it doesn't look like he's enjoying the trip."

Chad laughed and allowed his teeth to briefly gleam. "You're certainly right, Kate. Let's see how controversial weapons manufacturer and private military contractor Richard Duke explains his role in the unfolding story that many are referring to as Ammogate."

Pretty sure you guys on MSNBC were the first ones to rush to call it that, thought Jimmy. The screen was now showing Duke seated at a table before the Senate Committee on Appropriations. He was flanked by his aide, Tom Cotton, and his top lawyer, Bob Plissken. Faith Chaste sat behind them, her doll-like face pursed in an expression of concern. In the middle was the man himself, Richard Duke, old “Duke Nuke’Em,” multimillionaire scion of the Duke family fortune, the man Jimmy considered to be one of the most dangerous people in America.

“Mr. Duke, we’re looking for a simple yes or no answer,” the Senator from Virginia pronounced, giving his trademark over-the-glasses glare. “Did your company purchase ammunition from the Igman Konicj factory in Bosnia?”

“Senator,” Rick Duke growled, “Old Glory Armaments is committed to providing our troops with the finest, highest quality munitions at the most competitive prices to be found anywhere in the world.”

“Mr. Duke, please answer the question.”

“I believe I just did, Senator.”

“Mr. Duke, you did not.”

“Senator, yes I did, and frankly I’m surprised at your willingness to endanger the lives of thousands of U.S. servicemen and women serving overseas even as we speak.”

“Er...what?” the Senator looked vaguely panicked. “I did no such thing.”

“I believe you just did, Senator.”

The news broadcast cut back to the anchor team. “That was Richard Duke before the Senate,” smiled Kate. “Chad, he certainly is living up to his reputation, isn’t he?”

“What a scoundrel,” chuckled Chad. “For more insight on today’s hearings, let’s turn to our panel of experts.”

Jimmy Scanlon sighed and took a deep drink of his bourbon.

The camera panned to encompass a trio of middle-aged, affluent white people who shared a remarkably homogeneous appearance. Kate crossed her famous legs and turned her profile to the panel. “Here tonight with us are retired General Daniel Masterson, Benjamin Moskowitz from the Harvard Law School, and Dr. Stephen Ingram from the Patroclus Institute. Gentlemen, let’s turn to the key question tonight: will America find Richard Duke believable?”

Of course that’s the key question, thought Jimmy angrily. *Everybody knows he did it. But will he get away with it, that’s the issue.*

Dr. Ingram jumped in first. “Well Kate, what I think that what today proved is that the Senate messes with Richard Duke at their own risk.” Everyone laughed. “Duke did not look in the least bit shaken by the very tough questions posed by the Senate Committee today.”

“I think we’re witness to what happens when a group of people who are not military experts try to question someone who is,” said retired General Masterson gravely. “Richard Duke served this country with our Special Forces for many years, putting his life on the line for our freedoms again and again. Including the freedom for these...politicians...to ask these questions!” He barked a short laugh. “They should be thanking him!”

Chad gave the camera another blinding flash of his teeth, then turned congenially to the third panelist. “Benjamin, what are your thoughts about the international implications of today’s hearings?”

Moskowitz leaned forward. “Well Chad, quite frankly I’m surprised that the Senate Committee is spending so much time on what is a relatively minor issue while international affairs are balanced so delicately. What will our valued allies think if we can’t even keep our own house in order?”

Jimmy sighed and turned the television off. He drained the last of his bourbon, and walked across the hardwood floor of his apartment and stepped out onto his tiny balcony. He lit a cigarette and breathed the smoke in deeply as he surveyed the New York city evening. It was getting a little cold at night, but it was nice, it cut through the humid heat of the day and provided some relief.

He shook his head regretfully. He had been forced to pull the trigger on the story sooner than he had wanted to, but Duke’s people had been too close to finding out, and Jimmy had wanted the advantage of surprise, before the cover-up. He knew that Duke’s company had been buying cheap ammunition from the Bosnian munitions factory and selling it to the Department of Defence at a ridiculous markup. This same ammunition had been responsible for an enormous number of misfires in combat, costing goodness knows how many lives.

Proving it? Well, Jimmy had been close. But there had been no definitive proof, no – Jimmy winced – smoking gun, and Rick Duke had blustered his way through again. Jimmy butted his cigarette out in a disused flower pot, and tramped inside.

Next time, you asshole, he thought to himself. He unconsciously ground his teeth at the thought of how Duke must be laughing at him, right now.

Epilogue

RICHARD DUKE stood like an angry American Colossus, hands on hips as he surveyed his terrified entourage. “Tom, Bob, you’ve had more than enough time,” he barked. “Who the fuck authorized buying bullets from that Slavic shithole?!?”

Bob held a series of folders protectively close as he stepped forward. “We traced the purchase orders as originating from-“

“*Fuck* the purchase orders, Bob!” grated Duke. “Whose name is on the dotted line?”

Bob Plissken looked at the carpet, then up at his boss. “Uhh...Richard Duke Junior, sir,” he mumbled.

“SONOFABITCH!” exploded Duke. He turned to Faith. “Get my *goddamned* idiot son on the line!”