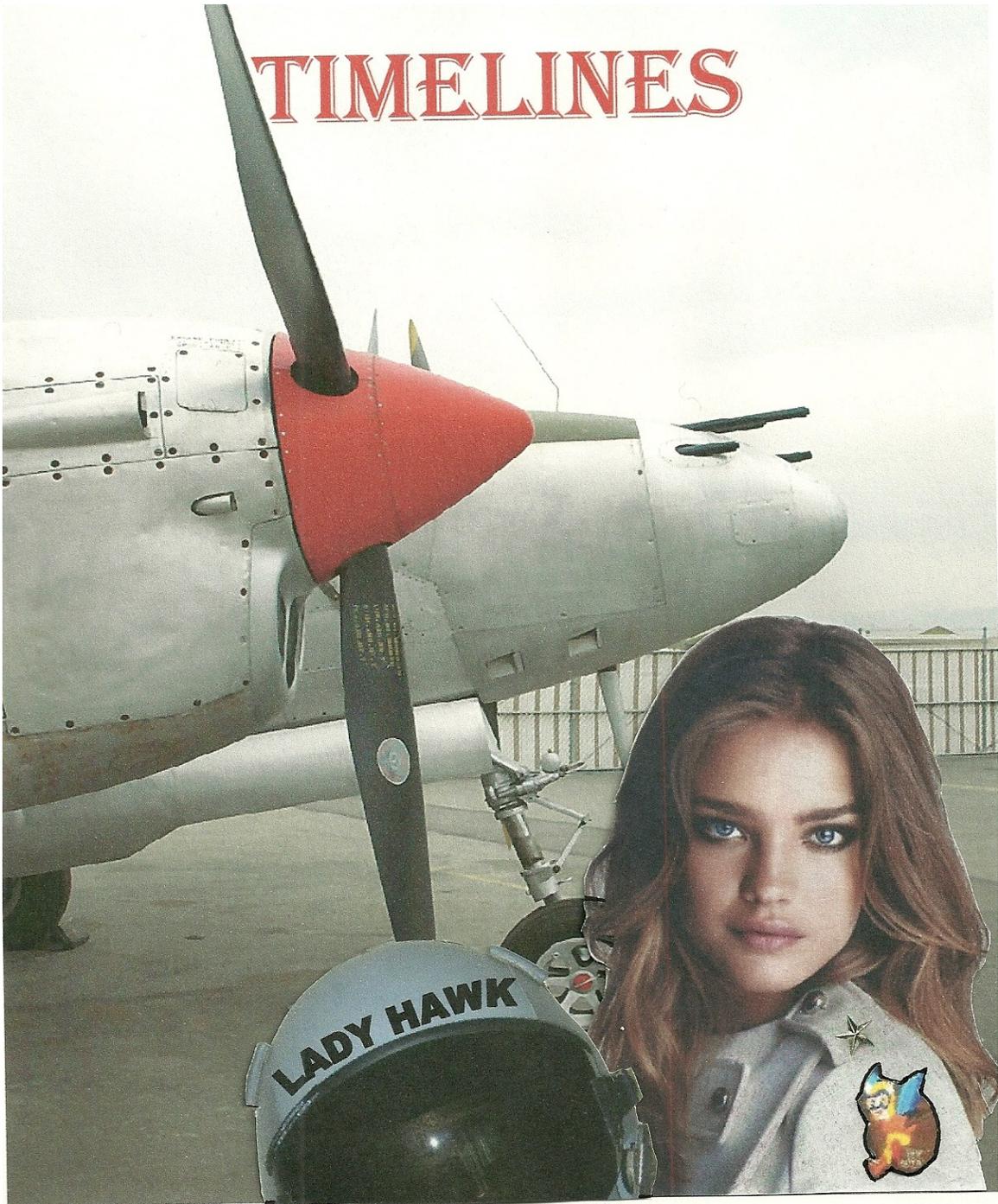


TIMELINES



**A SCIENCE-FICTION NOVEL
BY
MICHEL POULIN**

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WARNING TO POTENTIAL READERS

THIS NOVEL CONTAINS GRAPHIC DESCRIPTIONS OF WAR, VIOLENCE AND SEX AS WELL AS COARSE LANGUAGE AND CONTROVERSIAL SUBJECTS UNSUITABLE FOR CHILDREN. WHILE THIS NOVEL DEPICTS MANY HISTORICAL PERSONS AND EVENTS FROM THE PAST, THIS IS A WORK OF FICTION AND WORDS OR DEEDS ATTRIBUTED IN IT TO PERSONS WHO EXISTED DO NOT REFLECT HISTORICAL EVENTS AND ONLY DESCRIBE ALTERNATE HISTORICAL SCENARIOS. RELIGION-RELATED EVENTS DEPICTED IN THIS NOVEL IN NO WAY REFLECT THE RELIGIOUS BELIEFS OF THE AUTHOR.

ABOUT THIS NOVEL

This science-fiction novel is the fourth installment in a collection of five novels depicting the adventures through time of Nancy Laplante, a female Canadian war correspondent from the year 2015 and the chief of operations of the Time Patrol, an organization originating from the 34th Century. Those novels were written prior to the fictionalized events of the 21st Century depicted in them, thus should be treated as novels about alternate realities. The year in the dates shown in the headings are followed by the letters 'A', 'B' or 'C', denoting in which timeline the action is happening. Timeline 'A' is the original historical line, while Timeline 'B' is a parallel alternate history created accidentally by Nancy Laplante when she was transported against her will from 2012 to the year 1940 and changed history by her actions. Timeline 'C' is a second parallel alternate history created from 1941 'B' when enemies of Nancy tried to kill her and thus change history in their favor. The fifth novel in the collection, DESTINIES, will be published in 2013.

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CHAPTER 1 – SOUTH CHINA SEA

09:16 (Philippines Time)

Monday, December 7, 2015 ‘A’

Tugboat SAN MARINO, near Second Thomas Reef

Spratly Islands, South China Sea

Captain Olivero Muñoz scanned again the western horizon with his binoculars as he stood on the bridge of his tugboat, feeling apprehensive. There had been bad blood for decades already between the Philippines and the Peoples’ Republic of China, or PRC, about the possession of the various small islands and reefs in the northern portion of the Spratly Islands. The Philippines were in fact not alone in this dispute, with Brunei, Malaysia, Taiwan and Vietnam all claiming some or all of the Spratly Islands area, while the PRC claimed the whole of the South China Sea, including even waters that were inside the traditional 200 nautical miles limit of the Exclusive Economic Zone, or EEZ, of the countries bordering the South China Sea. All that was basically to control the rich resources of the region in fish and in potential hydrocarbon deposits under the seabed. Some shooting incidents had even occurred in the past because of the dispute, like when Vietnam had been violently thrown out of the Paracel Islands by the Communist Chinese in 1974, or when Chinese ships had fired on Vietnamese fishing boats in 2005. More recently, a Filipino Navy ship had exchanged fire less than a year ago with two Chinese patrol boats near the Scarborough Shoal, another disputed area of the Spratly Islands. In the case of the SAN MARINO, Muñoz knew that he had reasons to be anxious, as his ship was towing a big tanker barge towards an oil exploration platform of the Shell Philippines Exploration B.V., or SPEX, that was anchored near the Second Thomas Reef, known to Filipinos as the Ayugin Reef and to the Chinese as the Ren’ai Jiao Reef. That tanker barge was presently empty, but not for long if all went well on this trip. The SPEX had done its best to keep this a secret, but its platform had struck gold a few days ago, with all indications pointing to a huge oil field under the seabed near the Second Thomas Reef, which was itself situated less than 200 kilometers off the western coast of the Philippines’ Palawan Island, thus well inside the Filipino EEZ. The problem was that only a few kilometers away from the Second Thomas Reef was the Chinese-occupied Mischief Reef. The Chinese had been building and expanding there since

1995 an outpost that supposedly was only a shelter for passing Chinese fishermen but that was in reality much more like an artificial fortress island, complete with radars and military garrison. With the PRC insisting that the whole of the South China Sea was part of its territorial waters and with the growing aggressiveness of Chinese patrol ships, the eventual knowledge of a huge oil find in this area would certainly attract Chinese action of some kind. In view of the potential huge revenues at stake, the Filipino government had lent the support of one of its navy ships as an escort to the SAN MARINO, to keep at bay any Chinese ship that could try to intercept it.

Not seeing other ships except the Filipino escort ship and with the SPEX oil platform now visible on the horizon, Muñoz looked down on the forward deck at his three passengers on this short coastal trip. Two of them were SPEX employees, one an engineer and the other a production manager. The third passenger was a tall, athletic Canadian woman that had been the visual target of his crew since she had come aboard to go do a news report for CNN on the oil platform. Apart from exciting the libido of his crewmen with her fantastic body, stretching along 183 centimeters of height, she was famous all over the World for many reasons, one being that she had won the Women's World Karate Championship in Tokyo only a month ago and had then defeated the World's male champion in a challenge match after he had insulted her in public. Her numerous television reports and articles from various war zones as a war correspondent had also established her as a professional reporter of great courage and competence. Further, this Nancy Laplante was also a part-time actress, having played in two successful action films to date, including as the She-Hulk in AVENGERS 2, which was still breaking records at the box office and making a fortune for the Marvel Studios. She was certainly bound to attract the undivided attention of the men working on the oil platform once there.

The first sign of trouble came when a small, speedy ship appeared on the western horizon as the SAN MARINO and its towed tanker barge were less than a kilometer from the oil exploration platform. The Filipino Navy ship reacted to it at once, increasing speed and changing its course to interpose itself between the newcomer and the SAN MARINO. Muñoz swore to himself when he recognized the incoming ship as being a Chinese armed patrol boat, probably coming from the nearby base on Mischief Reef. Hoping that the presence of the Filipino Navy ship would be enough to keep that

Chinese boat away, Muñoz concentrated on the delicate job of slowing down and maneuvering the big barge towed by his ship, so that it could be tied alongside the platform prior to being filled with crude oil. That was no easy feat by itself and took a good twenty minutes before the barge and the tugboat were secured to the oil platform. Muñoz' three passengers then climbed aboard the oil platform with their luggage, while crewmen connected a large hose to the tanker barge in order to fill it. Thankfully, the presence of the Filipino Navy ship, an old ex-American minesweeper built in 1944 but bristling with guns and automatic cannons, seemed enough to deter the Chinese patrol boat from approaching too close from the SAN MARINO and the platform, but Muñoz could bet that it was transmitting by radio what it was seeing right now. More Chinese ships could thus very well show up soon.

Nancy gave a worried look at the Chinese patrol boat as she reached the main level of the oil platform with the two SPEX employees that had traveled with her on the SAN MARINO. The dispute for the Spratly Islands had been tense enough for years but, now that a sizeable oil field had been found and was about to start being exploited, the stakes had just become much higher. From her long career as a war correspondent, she understood fairly well how the Chinese communist government functioned and behaved when what it perceived to be its national interests were at stake. With many competing bureaucracies and powerbrokers in the PRC trying to outdo each other constantly in order to get bigger pieces of the pie, diplomatic niceties were often thrown aside, with sometimes rash, uncoordinated actions taken while government spokesmen would spew with straight faces some outrageous statements in order to justify their actions. With the level of animosity and distrust that this dispute had reached, she was nearly certain that something bad was going to happen here, hence her presence as a war correspondent for CNN. As the senior field agent of the Time Patrol, she could have used her access to archives from the future to learn in advance about this crisis, but she had chosen not to, for many reasons. First, she was resolved to live this life of hers in the 21st Century, her true time of origin, as a simple war correspondent and, for the last few years, as a part-time actress, without using her time travel talents except when she had to protect herself in truly dire circumstances. Second, using foreknowledge from the future in order to help her career as a war correspondent ran the risk of creating time causality loops, with consequences often impossible to predict and which could damage the integrity of history, something she had vowed to prevent at all cost as an agent of the

Time Patrol. Finally, using such foreknowledge would be plain cheating, something she was loathe to do. She prided herself of being a true expert in military and international affairs and had used strictly her professional knowledge and experience to predict this looming crisis and then propose to CNN to make an in-depth coverage and analysis of the South China Sea dispute. She had now been roaming the coasts and waters of the South China Sea for two weeks already, much of that time spent in and around Vietnam, one of the main players in that dispute and a country that was engaged in a particularly harsh, bitter confrontation with the PRC. Up to now, everything told her that this dispute was ready to turn sour very fast all over the South China Sea, with the PRC's hard line and militaristic approach succeeding in making the other players in this dispute, tired of being pushed around, agree to form an informal alliance against China.

A big Caucasian man greeted Nancy and the two SPEX employees once they set foot on the main level, shaking hands first with Ferdinand Santiago, the production manager sent from Manila to assess the true potential of the newfound oil field.

"Welcome aboard, Mister Santiago. I am Jack Simpsons, manager of this exploration rig. Unfortunately, as you can see, things may soon become tense here."

"I can see that, Mister Simpsons. Hopefully, cooler heads will prevail. May I present you Mister Derek Blandy, one of our top engineers, who will help me evaluate the production potential of your field. Also with us is Miss Nancy Laplante, correspondent for CNN, who is working on a story about the South China Sea dispute. She is here with the full blessing of our company."

"Welcome aboard, Miss Laplante." Said with a big smile Jack Simpsons while shaking hands with her, admiring her pretty face framed by long black hair, as well as her sparkling green eyes. "It is both a honor and a pleasure to welcome such a famous person as you on our modest installation."

"Some would rather call me infamous, Mister Simpsons. I promise that I won't be in the way while on your platform. I just need a bunk bed and a space to drop my kit and I will be happy. I would like your permission to set up my small portable satellite uplink unit near an external power outlet, so that I could transmit my reports to CNN. In fact, with this Chinese gunboat nearby, I may just send in a report as soon as I'm settled here."

"No problems, Miss Laplante. If you will all follow me, I will lead you to your quarters."

Nancy, along with Santiago and Blandy, followed Simpsons to a nearby access door situated just under the fringe of the platform's helicopter landing pad, entering the fairly large section housing the crew of the platform and following a series of steel corridors. Simpsons finally stopped near three doors lining a side corridor, turning to face his visitors.

"We are now in the senior crew quarters section of the platform. You will each have a cabin with private bathroom and shower. I hope that you will be satisfied."

Nancy entered one of the cabins offered by Simpsons, finding it of fair size and reasonably comfortable in view of where she was. It had air conditioning, a small television set connected to a satellite downlink, a captain's bed and a small work table, plus a large storage locker. A small adjacent bathroom contained a toilet, a sink and a shower stall. Dropping her kit bag on the floor but keeping her backpack satellite antenna unit and her video camera with her, she came out and smiled to Simpsons.

"This will do just fine, Mister Simpsons."

"Please, call me simply Jack, miss."

"And you may call me Nancy. Could you show me a spot where I could set up my antenna unit out of the way of your crew?"

"I certainly can do that while Misters Santiago and Blandy unpack, Nancy. This way, please."

Describing the various compartments they were passing while guiding her, Simpsons went up a series of steep stairs, going up the superstructures of the platform next to the drilling derrick tower. They finally emerged in the open air on the top platform, where a number of antennas were fixed to the steel deck. Going to an empty spot away from the other antennas, Simpsons showed to Nancy a nearby power outlet box next to a guardrail post.

"I believe that this should do for you, Nancy. You can use the guardrail post to tie down your antenna pack. This platform is quite stable but sometimes the winds can be fierce."

"Perfect! If you don't mind, I will do a short report to Atlanta as soon as I'm set here, so that I can test the satellite link."

"You are welcomed to roam around the platform as you wish, Nancy. I will be in the control room, two levels down from here, if you need me."

"Thank you again, Jack. You are very helpful."

“To a beautiful woman like you, always.” Replied the platform manager with a grin before leaving her alone on the top platform. It took only four minutes to Nancy to put down her backpack unit, secure it to the guardrail and deploy its folding antenna, then to point the latter towards a specific point of the sky, getting a satellite link signal. Next, she took out her handheld satellite telephone and called the communications center of the CNN headquarters in Atlanta, advising one of the duty technicians there that she was set up and ready to operate, giving him at the same time the coordinates of the exploration platform. Powering her video camera, which had a UHF radio linking it to her backpack antenna unit, she pointed her lens first at the nearby Filipino Navy ship, then at the Chinese patrol boat still turning around the platform, in order to make sure that Atlanta was receiving a good quality signal. When the CNN technician confirmed that he had a good picture and sound from her, Nancy thanked him and powered down her camera, intent on saving its battery pack for later. Her equipment, paid for by CNN, was the best there was on the market and, while compact and lightweight, had some very advanced features, including an integrated GPS positioning receiver in both her backpack unit and her camera. The GPS unit in her camera was further linked to an eye-safe laser rangefinder that, once powered and pointed, transmitted the precise coordinates of what she was filming, showing them and the date-time data in a small corner window of her recorded picture. She also had a special night vision lens that adapted to her camera if she wished to film in the dark. She was in fact about as well equipped as a modern artillery forward observer in terms of communications and surveillance equipment. The only thing she didn't have with her was a weapon, but then she didn't really need one. First, an openly armed reporter would be frowned upon and would repel potential sources of information. Second, she didn't need weapons to be deadly, at any distance. Her supernatural powers as a Chosen of The One, the immaterial but immensely powerful spiritual being that had first connected with her in 1940 'B', gave her ways to both defend herself and destroy or neutralize an attacker if need be.

With her video camera back in an equipment pouch she wore slung from one shoulder and with a still camera hanging from her neck, Nancy left the antenna platform, going back down to the main level and exploring the oil platform for the next hour or so, getting familiar with its setup and also reading up on the safety regulations and procedures of the platform, which were posted on a wall of the crew lounge. By then,

most of the 37 men working on the platform had learned of her presence aboard, with many of them approaching her to get an autograph from her. She was in the process of signing one of her calling cards and giving it to a happy rig worker when the platform's P.A. system came alive.

"Miss Laplante is requested urgently in the control room. Miss Laplante, please report to the control room at once."

From the tone of Simpsons' voice, who had done the announcement, Nancy guessed that it wasn't simply to invite her for lunch. Getting some quick directions from the rig worker, she then ran down a corridor and up a staircase, ending up in the platform's control room in less than two minutes, barely breathing faster than usual. Jack Simpsons, who stood with Ferdinand Santiago and Derek Blandy in front of one of the large windows of the control room, gave her a worried look.

"I'm afraid that you may have something to report even sooner than you expected, Nancy: three more Chinese warships are now approaching our platform."

"Three warships on top of that gunboat? Let me look at them and I will be able to tell you which type they are."

Taking out of her equipment pouch her camera and pointing it in the direction indicated by Simpsons, she used her zoom lens to focus on three ships approaching fast. She tensed on recognizing them.

"This is effectively bad news, Jack. You have a TYPE 054 missile frigate, the latest type in service in the Chinese Navy, leading two fast missile catamaran boats of the HOUBEI class. I'm afraid that this will be more than just a courtesy visit. You better inform your company headquarters that trouble is brewing here. On my part, I will contact CNN headquarters in Atlanta and will start reporting live."

As Ferdinand Santiago hurriedly went to a satellite telephone unit on a nearby control station, Jack Simpsons looked at Nancy with apprehension.

"What kind of armament would those ships have, Nancy? Could our Filipino escort ship deal with them?"

"Not a chance, Jack! Each of those two catamaran boats is armed with eight long range anti-ship missiles, while the JIANKAI-Class frigate has both anti-ship and anti-aircraft missiles, a main 100mm gun, four close-in Gatling 30mm guns and two anti-submarine rocket launchers. It also carries one medium helicopter. I'm afraid that this old Filipino corvette out there is hopelessly outgunned and outclassed."

Simpsons, like Blandy and Santiago, paled at these words.

"But, then, what could we do?"

"I don't know about you but, on my part, I will make sure right now that whatever happens here will be shown to the whole World. If you will excuse me, I will go outside on the open bridge to film those ships."

Leaving the control room by a door that gave on the open walkway surrounding it, Nancy grabbed her satellite telephone and called Atlanta, getting a technician there to answer her within seconds.

"CNN central communications center!"

"This is Nancy Laplante, calling from the SPEX exploration oil platform near the Second Thomas Reef, in the South China Sea. I have a situation developing here that could turn into an international incident. Be ready to record my signal and to switch it to the live news desk. I am powering up my video camera right now."

Activating and pointing her camera, Nancy confirmed with the technician that he was getting her video and sound signal well, then asked to be connected to the live news room, getting there the duty editor in charge of collating and prioritizing the news presented live on CNN.

"Jeff, this is Nancy, reporting from the Filipino SPEX oil exploration platform in the Spratly Islands. I arrived on that platform about two hours ago, to report on a new and promising oil field just discovered under the seabed. The tugboat that brought me was towing an empty tanker barge that is presently being filled with 5,000 tons of crude oil from that new oil field. That tugboat was in turn escorted by a Filipino Navy ship that is still protecting the platform. One Chinese patrol boat at first tried to make the tugboat turn around but was kept away by the Filipino ship. However, I now have in sight three more Chinese warships coming fast towards the platform. This may turn ugly very quickly, with the Filipino ship hopelessly outgunned."

"I can see those approaching warships on my television screen now. What do you expect them to do once close to the platform, Nancy?"

"At the minimum, they will try to intimidate the Filipino ship into fleeing, then could very well board this platform and take it by force, as they claim that this whole area is part of Chinese territorial waters. The new oil field just discovered by the Filipino SPEX company has too much potential not to attract greed, Jeff. At the worse, the Chinese may simply sink that Filipino escort ship and then take the platform. Whatever happens next, I will be transmitting live as long as I can."

“Christ! This could indeed become big news. I’m going to switch you to Bill, at the live anchor desk.”

“Thanks, Jeff. I am ready to report now.”

11:42 (Philippines Time)

United States Pacific Command headquarters

Pearl Harbor, Hawaii

“Sir, you should see this on the CNN news feed.”

The duty operations officer in the big operations center of the United States Pacific Command, which controlled all the American forces in and around the Pacific, hurried to one of the television sets tuned at all times to various news channels, including CNN, and watched and listened for a few seconds the live report from Nancy before giving an order to a junior officer sitting at a nearby station.

“Show me what we have near the Spratly Islands at this time, Lieutenant.”

The young officer frowned when he got that information, projecting it on a monitor screen for the benefit of the duty operations officer.

“It is rather slim, sir. We only have the USS INDEPENDENCE over there, but it is presently less than a hundred nautical miles from that oil platform. Our next nearest ship, the USS VIRGINIA nuclear attack submarine, is over 560 nautical miles away.”

The rear admiral on duty frowned on hearing this: despite what official Navy spokespersons said, the LCS class, for Littoral Combat Ship, was an expensive lemon, overpriced, under armed and full of design and construction flaws. The only thing it had in its favor was its high maximum speed of over forty knots.

“Very well, Lieutenant. Advise the USS INDEPENDENCE and tell her to head at highest speed towards that oil platform in order to assess the situation there. Then, advise as well the USS VIRGINIA and tell her to be ready to support the INDEPENDENCE if need be. Do we have any combat planes in or near the Philippines at this time?”

“Uh, one moment, sir... Sir, we have four F/A-18F SUPER HORNETs on the ground at Clark Air Base, in the Philippines. They are there on a joint training exercise with the Filipino Air Force. With drop tanks, they could get to that oil platform and keep station over it for about one hour.”

“Scramble them! I am going to inform the Admiral of this: this whole thing could turn ugly quickly indeed.”

11:58 (Philippines Time)

SPEX oil exploration platform

Near Second Thomas Reef, Spratly Islands

South China Sea

Looking gloomy, Jack Simpsons joined Nancy, who was still on the open catwalk and filming the approaching Chinese ships, now less than four kilometers away.

“The Chinese just contacted us by radio: they gave us one hour to evacuate the platform and leave what they call ‘Chinese territorial waters’ before they will board and seize this platform.”

“And what are the SPEX and the Filipino government saying about that, Jack?”

“We still don’t have a reaction from them, but I suspect that they will try to call the Chinese bluff on this: there is too much at stake here to simply abandon the platform and flee.”

Nancy gave the manager a cautious look.

“Jack, this may not be a bluff. If the oil field you found is as valuable as you think, then the Chinese will do everything to grab it and annex it. You know that the Filipino Navy is in no state to oppose such a Chinese move.”

“Maybe, but Mister Santiago is not ready to let go our platform without at least some token resistance. He ordered me to arm my workers with the few rifles and shotguns we have aboard to deter local pirates. He also expects Manila to order us to stay put and to hope for the best. The escort ship will stay around in the meantime, at least until our tanker barge is full, in about half a hour. Then, it will escort the SAN MARINO and its barge back to port, but will leave with us a squad of armed sailors to help defend the platform against boarders.”

“You realize that this could well result into spilled blood, Jack.”

“I know, but simply giving in to these Chinese bullies is too infuriating.”

Simpsons then returned inside, leaving Nancy to continue watching the Chinese warships.

Twenty minutes later, as the SAN MARINO and its now full oil barge were ready to separate from the oil platform, Ferdinand Santiago called Nancy inside the control room to give her the official Filipino response to the Chinese ultimatum. Waiting for Nancy to be online and filming him, the SPEX official put on a brave face and spoke up firmly in English while facing Nancy's camera.

"My company and the government of the Philippines have just issued the following joint declaration concerning the attempts by Chinese warships to take control of this oil exploration platform. Despite what the government of the Peoples' Republic of China may say, the Ayugin Reef, also known as the Second Thomas Reef, are Filipino possessions, along with the waters surrounding it, being well inside our Exclusive Economic Zone and having been claimed by the Philippines as such according to recognized international rules. The claims by the PRC that the Ayugin Reef and its waters are territorial Chinese waters are considered baseless by the government of the Philippines and will thus be ignored. Furthermore, the government of the Philippines will officially complain to the United Nations and to the ASEAN organization about this attempt at high seas piracy by the PRC. It is also resolved in defending its rightful possessions in the Spratly Islands from the abusive behavior of Chinese ships and has called for the help of its allies in the region to help it defend its maritime borders. It is now up to the Chinese government to show common sense and restraint and thus avoid the pointless use of violence over that of diplomacy."

"And what will be the response of the Filipino government if the Chinese try to seize by force this oil platform, Mister Santiago?" Asked Nancy while still filming.

"It will defend its territory, as international law gives it the full right to do, Miss Laplante. The Philippines Navy ship QUEZON is now going to escort back to port the tugboat SAN MARINO and the barge it is towing and has been authorized to open fire if any Chinese ship tries to interfere with the tugboat or its barge. Let this be a warning to the PRC government about our resolve in this matter. That is all for now."

Nancy blew air out as Santiago finished his speech and she stopped filming him.

"This is a very dangerous game that your company and government is playing, Mister Santiago."

"Maybe, but we are proud people and we have been pushed too often and too far by the Chinese to back down from this. Please keep this to yourself, as it would only fire up Chinese greed, but our latest estimate of the capacity of this oil field is over twenty billion barrels of high quality crude."

“Twenty billion barrels?! But, that could completely turn around the economy of the Philippines.”

“Very much so, miss. That is why we are resolved to stand up at all cost to China on this. The QUEZON just sent by boat a squad of armed sailors to help defend this platform. Furthermore, more soldiers will arrive soon by helicopter to reinforce our defenses, while all the available warships of the Philippines Navy are starting to converge on us. If the Chinese want a fight, then it will get one.”

Nancy had the good taste of not pointing out that such a fight could well turn into a one-sided massacre, but she also had to admire the resolve of the Filipinos. She could thus only wish like them that the Chinese would become reasonable and back down from their threats.

That wish proved futile fifteen minutes later, when the SAN MARINO and its towed barge full of crude oil started sailing away under escort. The original Chinese patrol boat that had challenged the SAN MARINO on arrival at the platform moved at once to cut its path, despite the presence of the QUEZON. With the scene filmed and transmitted live on CNN, the QUEZON at first fired in succession three warning shots across the bow of the Chinese boat to warn it away. The Chinese captain still came on, going for the tugboat while pointing its guns at the QUEZON. Now out of options, the Filipino ship fired its three-inch guns again, this time shooting straight at the Chinese patrol boat from a distance of less than 400 meters and hitting it squarely with two shells. While seriously damaged and with casualties on board, the Chinese boat continued on towards the SAN MARINO while shooting back at the QUEZON with its heavy machineguns. Pumping out shells as quickly as they could, the gunners of the QUEZON were able to immobilize the Chinese patrol boat and turn it into a smocking, burning wreck, despite suffering casualties of their own. That triumph was however short-lived, as long flames and trails of smoke then marked the launch by the two HOUBEI-Class boats of two of their anti-ship missiles. Fired from what was for them short ranges, the missiles quickly hit the QUEZON and exploded. Under live television coverage, the unfortunate Filipino ship broke in two and sank rapidly, pulling its entire crew to its death, save for one sailor. That drama was watched with both shock and horror on the oil platform. On her part, Nancy then concentrated her attention on the three surviving Chinese warships. To her surprise, her camera then caught the launch of one of the HongQi-7 surface-to-air missiles of the JIANGKAI-Class frigate. Tracking the outgoing

missile with her camera, she then realized that a helicopter had been approaching the oil platform from the East. She was able through her zoom lenses to recognize the type of the helicopter just before the missile impacted it, disintegrating it into small pieces that fell in the ocean.

"ATLANTA, THE CHINESE FRIGATE JUST SHOT DOWN A SH-60 SEAHAWK HELICOPTER THAT WAS APPROACHING THIS OIL PLATFORM FROM THE EAST. I...WAIT A SECOND! I CAN NOW SEE ITS MARKINGS THROUGH MY ZOOM LENS: IT IS A UNITED STATES NAVY HELICOPTER! ATLANTA, A CHINESE WARSHIP JUST SHOT DOWN AN AMERICAN HELICOPTER INSIDE THE PHILIPPINES EXCLUSIVE ECONOMIC ZONE!"

Both at the CNN headquarters in Atlanta and at the Pacific Command headquarters in Hawaii, where a number of duty officers were watching Nancy's report, men and women froze at that announcement for a moment. The admiral in command of the Pacific forces, cold rage filling him, grabbed at once a telephone linking him with his operations officer, barking in the handset.

"Vice Admiral Parker, contact at once our four SUPER HORNET fighter-bombers about to fly over that oil platform in the Spratly Islands and tell them that their mission is now to sink those damn Chinese warships that just shot down our helicopter... Yes, you understood me well: sink them! Put as well all our forces in the Pacific on high alert."

Totally oblivious of the huge mistake he had just made and thinking that he had simply shot down a Filipino helicopter bringing reinforcements to the SPEX oil platform, the captain of the Chinese frigate decided to concentrate for the moment on the main prize, the platform itself, instead of pursuing the fleeing SAN MARINO and its barge full of crude oil. Slowing down and stopping while the two missile boats kept watch from some distance away, the frigate started lowering a motor boat full of armed sailors in the water. With Nancy still filming live, the motor boat then sped towards the oil platform while the 100mm main gun turret of the frigate rotated to point at the big floating structure. The motor boat was still 300 meters from the platform when the captain of the frigate was advised that a speedy ship of apparently small size was now showing on the surface search radar, heading directly for him. Assuming that it was a Filipino fast attack boat rushing in to the rescue of the oil platform, the Chinese captain gave at once the order to fire on it, tasking the two accompanying HOUBEI missile boats for that. On the SPEX platform, Nancy was again able to film those missile firings, with a total of six anti-

ship missiles flying away towards the East. Not knowing on what the Chinese were firing, she did a short comment for the benefit of her viewers before concentrating back her attention on the approaching Chinese motor boat. It was now less than 200 meters away and was visibly packed with armed Chinese. The armed Filipino sailors previously transferred from the BRP QUEZON who had taken defensive positions around the edge of the oil platform, resolved in avenging their dead comrades, then opened fire with their M-16 rifles when the Chinese boat came within a hundred meters. Eight of the platform workers that had rifles also opened fire then, helping to spray the Chinese motor boat with dense automatic rifle fire. A number of Chinese sailors were hit at once, while the boat's hull was perforated in multiple spots, creating water leaks. The Chinese sailors who could return fire did so, but their aim from a small boat bobbing up and down on the waves proved erratic. It was however enough to send bullets flying all over the place, forcing Nancy to crouch while still filming the action. It soon became clear to the Chinese sailors that they were getting the worse of the fire exchange, with half of them becoming casualties within thirty seconds. The boat pilot then decided wisely to beat a hasty retreat in face of this unexpected Filipino resistance. He however still had to contend with continuing rifle fire as he turned his boat around and fled. Nancy then saw through her camera lens the 100mm gun of the Chinese lower a bit, aiming at the oil platform.

"Aww shit! INCOMING! GET DOWN!"

She barely had time to shout her warning to the occupants of the control room behind her before the frigate's main gun barked, spitting a shell that crashed and exploded against the base of the platform's superstructures, two levels below Nancy. The explosion shook the catwalk she was on and sent deadly shrapnel around. A second shell then followed a mere ten seconds later.

"ATLANTA, THE SPEX OIL PLATFORM IS NOW UNDER CHINESE NAVAL GUNFIRE. I MAY NOT BE ABLE TO KEEP FILMING FOR LONG AT THIS RATE."

"Don't take unnecessary risks, Nancy." Urged in response the CNN anchorman, proving to Nancy that her satellite link was still functional. "Go take cover and return on the air when it will be safer."

"There may not be an oil platform left for me to stand on by then, Atlanta. That frigate..."

A third shell then exploded, this time to the left of Nancy and a mere thirty meters away. The shockwave both deafened her and projected her a good five meters down the

catwalk. By some miracle she was able to keep her hold on her camera, but she landed hard on the steel deck and she felt as well multiple stabs on her left side. Thankfully, the steel decking and a steel beam stopped the worse of the shrapnel from hitting her, but she understood at once that she had been hit, with burning pain from her left leg and arm. With her ears ringing and unable temporarily to hear anything except a constant buzz, she quickly examined herself. Blood was coming out of maybe five or six small puncture wounds on her left arm and leg, but the wounds seemed relatively light compared to what she had seen in the past during her career as a war correspondent. She thus clenched her teeth against the pain and pointed back her camera at the Chinese frigate, which was still firing its main gun at the oil platform. Not able to hear herself, she involuntarily shouted in her camera microphone.

“ATLANTA, I’VE BEEN HIT, BUT MY WOUNDS SEEM MINOR. I HOWEVER WILL BE DEAF FOR A MOMENT, THUS WON’T BE ABLE TO ANSWER YOUR QUESTIONS. I WILL CONTINUE TO COVER THE BATTLE HERE AS LONG AS I CAN, BUT IF THIS NAVAL FIRE KEEPS ON, THIS PLATFORM WILL SOON BE TOAST.”

The anchor in Atlanta tried to tell her something as the dramatic pictures from her camera kept coming, but she didn’t hear him and concentrated on filming the action.

12:39 (Philippines Time)

Command operations center

United States Pacific Command headquarters

Pearl Harbor, Hawaii

“What do you mean, the USS INDEPENDENCE is off the air?”

“Just that, sir. She was reporting that she was under missile fire when her radio operator was cut off in mid sentence. I tried to reestablish radio contact, but to no avail. Also, all our data links with the INDEPENDENCE went dead at the same time.”

The four stars admiral in charge of the U.S. Pacific Command swore to himself, then looked back at the junior operations officer.

“When will our four F/A-18Fs be over that oil platform, Lieutenant?”

“They should be there in a few minutes, sir. In fact, they should be within weapons release range of these Chinese ships by now.”

“Good! The order to sink those Chinese warships is reconfirmed by me. I will now have to make an urgent call to the Pentagon: we need some quick policy decisions about this growing mess in the South China Sea.”

Thousands of kilometers away, in the South China Sea, a drama was playing fast as the USS INDEPENDENCE, the lead ship of her class, was quickly sinking under the waves. Her stealthy design had actually played against her, making her appear on the Chinese radar screens as a much smaller ship than the 3,000-ton coastal combat ship she was. With her high speed, that had made her look like a small fast attack boat, of which the Philippines Navy had in sizeable numbers. Her extremely light armament for her size had however been the biggest reason for her demise, with only one single 57mm gun and one launcher for light, short range anti-aircraft missiles as her standard armament. Four of the six Chinese anti-ship missiles fired at the LCS-2 had broken through her short range defenses and had hit her squarely, penetrating deep inside her triple hull and superstructures before exploding. With all electrical power instantly gone and with half of her compartments open to water and flooding, the 700 million dollar ship had quickly become an aluminum coffin for her crew. While she was not the first ship to be sunk in this conflict, the USS INDEPENDENCE would be far from being the last one.

12:44 (Philippines Time)

SPEX oil exploration platform

Near the Second Thomas Reef, Spratly Islands

Nancy clenched her teeth as the fourteenth shell fired by the Chinese frigate impacted on the oil platform, this time at the level of the helicopter landing pad. She now could hear things somewhat and was able to understand the anxious anchorman in Atlanta if he shouted in his own microphone. Suddenly, as she was grimly filming the firing frigate, two small, speedy objects fell out of the sky, one slamming into her forward hull section and the other penetrating her helicopter hangar. Two huge explosions tore open the Chinese ship like a simple tin can, projecting its forward main gun turret high in the air. Secondary explosions then shook the mutilated ship as its forward gun ammunition magazine and torpedo magazine blew up. Nancy watched that with wide eyes, having expected to die in the next few minutes. Her professional reflexes then

took over and she firmed up her grip on her camera to better cover the demise of the Chinese frigate.

"Atlanta, the Chinese frigate firing on the SPEX oil exploration platform has just been hit by two heavy air-to-surface missiles. I however don't know who fired those missiles. That frigate is probably going to sink soon in view of the massive damage she just received. Its ammunition magazines are now cooking off, further mangling its hull. The...WAIT! One of the two Chinese missile boats that was escorting the frigate just blew up as well. THERE GOES THE SECOND ONE! ATLANTA, AN AIRSTRIKE JUST DESTROYED THE WHOLE CHINESE FLOTTILA OFF THE PLATFORM."

"Nancy, can you see any planes in the sky?" Asked the CNN anchorman. While still keeping her camera pointed at the doomed frigate, Nancy looked up for a quick scan of the sky but didn't see anything.

"Negative, Atlanta. Those missiles must have been stand-off weapons, fired from many miles away. However, I am pretty sure that the Filipino armed forces don't have such weapons. A third party thus just got involved in this fight. This may well be the opening salvo of a new conflict centered on the South China Sea."

Someone came to Nancy's side as she was filming the breakup and sinking of the Chinese frigate. Looking up, she saw Jack Simpsons, concern on his face, hovering over her. Seeing the blood on her arm and leg, the man knelt beside her and quickly examined her wounds.

"Dammit, Nancy, you got me scared for you. You should have taken cover."

"To where? This whole platform was being thoroughly shelled. Besides, I had a job to do. Are there many other casualties on the platform?"

"I'm afraid so. We will in fact need emergency medical evacuation for some of the men if we want them to survive. Damn those Chinese and their arrogance and greed! I will go get a first aid kit for you: that bleeding needs to be stopped."

Simpsons then left her at a run, going back inside the control room. As he was reappearing a minute or so later, a first aid kit in hand, the screaming of jet aircraft swooping by over their heads made Nancy and Jack look up, in time to see four fighter-bombers overflying the platform. Nancy raised her camera and filmed the receding jets, which then started wide turns to come back over the platform, their national markings clearly visible. Nancy nearly shouted with joy in her microphone as she filmed the four aircraft.

"ATLANTA, I HAVE FOUR BEAUTIFUL UNITED STATES NAVY F/A-18 FIGHTER-BOMBERS THAT JUST FLEW OVER ME!"

21:19 (Philippines Time)

Private patient's room, Philippines Air Force hospital

Clark Air Base, Northwest of Manila

Philippines

"Miss Laplante?"

Nancy, still a bit groggy from the painkillers she had received and half-sitting in her military hospital bed, looked away from the television set of her room on which she had been watching the latest news about the confrontation in the South China Sea. She saw a handsome United States Navy lieutenant commander in going out uniform, standing in the doorway of her private room.

"It's me! Please come in, Commander."

She eyed from head to toe the tall, athletic man in his thirties as he approached her bed, his service hat under one arm, then smiled to him.

"That's funny: I first met my boyfriend in similar circumstances, while sitting in a hospital bed. I must say that you are nearly as handsome as he was then."

The navy officer smiled at that, himself appreciating what he saw.

"Your boyfriend is certainly a lucky man, Miss Laplante, and thank you for the compliment. Let me present myself: Lieutenant Commander James Stockwell, Assistant Naval Attaché at the United States embassy in Manila. How are your wounds, Miss Laplante?"

Nancy pulled away her bed sheet to uncover her left leg, which was like her left arm covered with a number of bandages.

"I had a total of seven pieces of shrapnel extracted from my left arm and leg. Thankfully, the damage was rather superficial and I will be as good as new in a few weeks. The doctors here however insisted that I stay overnight for observation."

"A wise precaution, I would say. You got very close to being killed...again, Miss Laplante."

"Please, call me Nancy. As for risking my life, I guess that it is part of the job as a war correspondent. So, what can I do for you, Commander Stockwell?"

"I first came here to thank you for the way you covered live that confrontation at the SPEX platform. Your live report allowed our forces to react that much more quickly to the outrageous actions of those Chinese ships. You must have heard by now that the USS INDEPENDENCE was sunk by Chinese missiles while going in to investigate."

"I did catch that on the news. That Chinese flotilla commander was either brash as hell, or he had some very ruthless orders for the way he acted. Has the Chinese government disavowed him or apologized in any way for the sinking of the INDEPENDENCE and the shooting down of its helicopter?"

"No...and no!" Said glumly Stockwell. "They are actually doing their best to paint themselves as the wronged party in all this."

"You must be kidding!" Said Nancy, incredulous. "I recorded the whole thing live, for God's sake!"

"I know, and your video recording is helping us a lot in countering their arguments and lies. In this, the United States is grateful to you."

"Well, I certainly made the headline news...again." She replied philosophically. "What else could I do for you?"

"Actually, the Navy is ready to do something for you, in view of the great way you reported while under fire. It probably won't surprise you if I told you that our forces in the Pacific are now on top alert, with many ships and planes converging on the South China Sea. What I am offering you, once you are out of hospital, is a position as embedded reporter on the nuclear carrier USS RONALD REAGAN, which will be the command ship for our task force heading into the South China Sea."

Stockwell thought for a moment that he saw dismay appear for a fleeting moment on Nancy's face, but she quickly grinned to him.

"That would be fantastic, Commander. I accept and thank you in the name of CNN. Uh, I know that your carrier crew is probably going to be at sea for at least a couple more months. Will I be allowed to disembark on relatively short notice if need be? I have a rather busy professional schedule next year, including some work to do in Hollywood."

Stockwell rose an eyebrow in interest at those last words.

"You are going to play in another movie, Nancy?"

"Yes! Keep this to yourself, please, but Tony Gilroy has offered me to play the leading role in a prequel to my first movie, CROSSROADS. It will be about how my

character of the Shadow Dancer became what she was in CROSSROADS. It should be one kick-ass of a movie, according to Gilroy.”

“I bet it will! To answer you, yes, you will be able to fly off the carrier on a few days notice if need be. So, when are the doctors due to release you from here?”

“They said that I could walk out tomorrow morning...in crutches. I should be able to walk normally within a week, albeit with some temporary restrictions.”

“That’s perfect! The RONALD REAGAN is anyway going to need another three days before it is in position in the South China Sea. We will then pick you up from Manila by helicopter to drop you on it. You will just need to show up at the embassy once you will feel up to taking your embedded position.”

“I will do my best to heal as fast as I can, Commander. Again, thank you for offering me such a position.”

“It was my pleasure, Nancy. Get well soon.”

The navy officer then walked out, leaving Nancy to think over how she was going to handle her time aboard the USS RONALD REAGAN. The problem for her was that a number of members from the crew of that aircraft carrier were going to be lost at sea and declared missing in the Atlantic in the year 2021. In reality, those crewmembers were going to be rescued in-extremis by the Time Patrol and then enrolled as field agents of the organization. If any of those crewmembers were already serving on the RONALD REAGAN in 2015, then this could create some embarrassing causality loop in 2021. Finally chasing away that worry for the time being, she looked back at the television set, where the Chinese ambassador to the Philippines, who was about to be kicked out, was reading a rather outrageous official Chinese statement meant to explain and excuse the actions of the Chinese ships sunk today. Nancy sneered on listening to him.

“Yeah! And I am a virgin.”

Using the remote control, she shut off the television set, then lowered her bed frame to the horizontal, so that she could get some sleep. Today had been a truly rough day, even for her.

Nancy flew out of Manila to join the USS RONALD REAGAN four days later and ended up spending two weeks aboard the giant nuclear aircraft carrier. Thankfully, none of the persons she was worried about meeting on the USS RONALD REAGAN were aboard at this time. The PRC government finally backed down under the mounting military and diplomatic pressure, which included an American boycott of all Chinese

imports, and pulled out its warships from the Spratly Islands waters. The Chinese had however the time to lose many more ships during those two weeks, trying to bluff their way out of trouble and then finding the hard way that the United States and most of the countries bordering the South China Sea were in no mood to be pushed around or browbeaten by threats of military action. Seeing the way things were going, the Russian government studiously kept out of that mess, only proffering a few pious declarations wishing for a peaceful resolution of the conflict. The coastal states around the South China Sea ended up the big winners in this, with China being forced to recognize their sovereignty over their respective 200 nautical mile EEZ. As well, the so-called shelter for fishermen built by the Chinese over the Mischief Reef, near the SPEX oil platform, was evacuated and dismantled under threat of being bombed out of existence, to the relief and joy of the Philippines government. However, the crisis deeply soured in the long term the relations between the United States and the PRC, something that not everyone in the United States regretted.

08:15 (New Zealand Time)

Saturday, September 2, 2999 BCE (Before Common Era)

Residential section, secret main base of the Time Patrol

Future site of Auckland, New Zealand

Nancy, having just arrived by time scooter from Montreal, where she had concluded another period of her life in the 21st Century, and still fresh from her adventures around the South China Sea, was all excited at the idea of finally being able to see again her three youngest children. Out of a common accord, she had left thirteen month-old Eli and two month-old Patrick and Suzanne in the care of her husband, Mike Crawford 'B', during her stint in 2015 'A'. She could have left them under the care of Diana, her faithful baby sitter in 1943 'B' Jerusalem, where she reigned as Overseer of the Holy Land of Palestine, and return there barely ten minutes after leaving for Montreal, making her time in 2015 be what she called 'hidden time' for her babies. However, Mike had been dying to have them with him for some extended period, so she had brought her children to the main base of the Time Patrol. That base, which was actually mobile and could jump space-time and fly, was located far in the past, where it was mostly safe from potential historical manipulations that could erase and rewrite history.

Still wearing a casual 2015 'A' outfit of jeans and T-shirt, Nancy stopped in front of the door of the suite assigned to her as the operations officer of the Time Patrol, then put her right hand on the fingerprint recognition pad to unlock her door, which slid silently open. Grinning with anticipated joy and expecting a tender family scene inside, she braked abruptly to a halt and opened wide her mouth with surprise and shock when she walked in her lounge, finding her husband Mike and her adopted teenage daughter, Ingrid Weiss 'B', standing there in most disturbing garbs. Mike, a powerful man standing 193 centimeters, with green eyes and short black hair, was wearing a steel studded leather 'submissive' outfit worthy of the best S & M porno movies, complete with zipper-covered leather hood and spiked leather collar. The leather leash hooked to his collar was held by Ingrid, who was dressed in a sexy red leather S & M dominatrix outfit that included red, knee-high leather boots with high heels. The young, beautiful woman also held a short flogger in one hand. Nancy could only stare at them for a few seconds before she could speak.

"What the hell are you two playing at? You're supposed to care for my babies." Mike, his mouth barely visible behind the opened zipper covering it, grinned like an idiot and replied in a reassuring voice.

"Things are not like what they look, Nancy. Diana is in the main bedroom with the babies. As for us, we were about to go produce another segment of our latest historical documentary, in which we play the narrators."

"A historical documentary, dressed like this? Is the Time Patrol now producing pornographic movies?"

"Some prudes would answer yes to that, Nancy." Answered Ingrid, grinning with malice. "That documentary, which was my idea to make, is going to review and show the role of sex in history, complete with sex scenes and situations filmed in various periods of the past. It will be titled 'Sex in History: an intimate relationship'."

Nancy then burst out laughing, taken completely off guard by this. She next eyed her husband and her adopted daughter with an amused smile.

"It certainly sounds like it will be quite fun to watch. You two are sure dressed appropriately for narrating it. Are any other members of the Time Patrol, uh, playing in that documentary?"

"Not up to now, unless you want to pitch in, Nancy. We already have tons of juicy scenes and situations from many historical periods that we recuperated from visual

mission records segments that were cut out or kept confidential in our archives. Many of our agents have also volunteered to play voyeur and go to the past with spy probes. I am afraid that the Vatican may not like what we will show about the sex life of past Popes. That documentary will however have a quite serious side to it, by showing the abuses caused in order to obtain sex and also the influence of sexual relations and desire on important decisions taken by prominent historical persons. You could think of the love triangle between Queen Cleopatra, Mark-Anthony and Caesar as a good example of sex impacting on history.”

“Hum, you do have quite a point there, Ingrid. If well done and if kept with a serious purpose in mind, this could turn out to be a most interesting and instructive documentary. Well, I won’t keep you further from your documentary work, you two perverts. I have three little kids to go cover with kisses.”

“Right!” Said Ingrid, who slapped Mike’s bum with her flogger, making him yelp. “Come on, slave!”

The two of them then left the suite, leaving a laughing Nancy behind.

CHAPTER 2 – MERRY CHRISTMAS

07:06 (London Time)

Saturday, December 25, 1943 'B'

Regional air traffic control center, Northolt Airport

London region, Great-Britain

"Hey, George, what is that flight plan registered under the call sign 'North Pole One'? I know that it is Christmas today, but I still have an unidentified radar echo from the North approaching London on my screen."

"An echo?" Said the air controller's supervisor, surprised. "But I thought that this flight plan was simply a joke. If that echo is coming from the North, then the controller in Manchester should have passed him to you, no?"

"He didn't transmit me anything, George, I swear! This echo suddenly appeared out of nowhere, at the maximum detection range of our radar."

"Did you try to contact it?"

"Uh, not yet."

"Then, do it! In the meantime, I will advise the R.A.F. that it could have to go identify visually an unknown airplane."

"Will do!" Replied the controller before activating his radio microphone, connected to the radio frequency for the London area. "North Pole One, this is Northolt Control, identify your aircraft type, your exact point of origin and your final destination, over."

A couple of seconds later, a jovial male voice answered him on the radio.

"OH OH OH! This is North Pole One, coming from the North Pole. I am on my way in my flying sled to go distribute toys to the little poor children of London, over."

Normally, the air controller would have smiled at this attempt to promote the spirit of Christmas, but he didn't feel like laughing now, not with an unknown aircraft out of nowhere approaching London. The other controllers on duty in the room were now listening on, both curious and intrigued.

"North Pole One, be serious and give me your true identity. If not, I will be forced to have you intercepted, over."

To the frustration of the air controller, the answer came in the same jovial tone as the first one.

“OH OH OH! But I am Santa Claus, Northolt Control. I must go deliver my toys. If I don't, the children of London will be most sad. Your pilots are welcome to come see me and escort me, if you think that it is necessary, over.”

“GEORGE, TELL THE R.A.F. TO SCRAMBLE THEIR ALERT PATROL! THIS IDIOT IS STARTING TO BUG ME!”

07:18 (London Time)

Pair of Gloster METEOR jet fighters

Sky over Bedford, north of London

Flight Lieutenant Desmond Radwell was in a bad mood as he led his wingman on the interception heading given by the fighter controller in Uxbridge. It was frustrating enough to get stuck with a supplementary duty on Christmas day as punishment for having started a fight in the officers' mess of the base four days ago. To have to abandon his breakfast before he could even touch his eggs had really ticked him off. And all that because some idiot who thought that he was funny was passing himself as Santa Claus. Well, if 'Santa Claus' refused to obey him, he had some 20mm candies for him.

“Vampire Four, this is Uxbridge. The intruder is now six miles straight ahead of you. Can you see him, over?”

“Negative, Uxbridge! The intruder must be of small size and he is not producing any trail of smoke. What are his speed and altitude, over?”

“Vampire Four, the intruder is flying at a speed of 230 miles per hour, at an altitude of 6,000 feet. It is still flying straight south towards London. Your orders are to approach him and identify him visually, but hold your fire for the moment, unless he fires on you, over.”

“Understood, Uxbridge.”

A few seconds later, Radwell saw far ahead in the sky a small moving dot.

“Uxbridge, this is Vampire Four. I have now the intruder in sight and will approach him for identification.”

Performing a wide 'S' turn, Radwell approached the intruder from behind, followed himself by his wingman. However, the more he got close from the intruder, the more he became confused.

"Uh, Uxbridge from Vampire Four. What was the supposed nature of the intruder, over?"

"Vampire Four, the intruder claimed to be Santa Claus in his flying sled. What do you see, over?"

"Uh, Uxbridge, I see a red sled with a white top pulled by six flying reindeers. I am serious, over."

There was a long silence on the radio, silence that Radwell used to approach further the intruder and to come alongside it, his wingman sandwiching the flying sled between his jet and Radwell's jet. Radwell thought that he was becoming crazy when he saw a fat man with a white beard and wearing a red costume wave at him from inside the sled.

"Uxbridge, I am now flying alongside the intruder. Santa Claus is inside the sled and he his waving hello to me. What do I do now, over?... Uxbridge, did you hear my last transmission, over?"

The voice of the military air controller in Uxbridge finally answered him, sounding shaken.

"Vampire Four, this is Uxbridge. We just received a directive from the Air Ministry. Abandon your interception mission and return to base. We will explain the details once on the ground."

"Uh, understood, Uxbridge. Vampire Five, we are turning around and returning to base."

His wingman, who had also been punished for getting involved in the same fight as Radwell, giggled.

"Thank God for that, Vampire Four. I really didn't want to have to tell others that I had shot down Santa's sled today: my nieces would have cut me to bits."

07:46 (London Time)

John Benn Orphanage (run by Barnado's Vision)

1 Bower Street, Stepney District

London

The nearly 400 boys, of ages between two and fourteen, that were anxiously looking out by the large windows of the big dining hall of their orphanage craned their necks when one boy shouted with joy.

“I CAN SEE SANTA’S SLED IN THE SKY! IT IS APPROACHING!”

Wild, happy cheers came out from the crowd of children as more boys saw the red and white sled and its six reindeers. The director of the orphanage, James Wilkins, was also standing in front of one of the windows of the hall and smiled to the representative of the d’Orléans Social Foundation close besides him.

“Thank you so much for having arranged this Christmas event with the help of the Time Patrol, Mister Jones. Your foundation is truly spoiling my children.”

Emery Jones, a small, thin man of ordinary appearance, smiled while watching the flying sled come down for a final approach to land in the street in front of the orphanage.

“To help the less fortunate and most vulnerable in the society has always been the main goal of the d’Orléans Social Foundation, Mister Wilkins, and this for nearly a century now. What better partner than the Time Patrol to help us in that goal? It possesses the advanced technology that can make the dreams of most children come true, while my foundation has the financial means to buy the toys that will be distributed this morning in this orphanage and in other establishments of London.”

Wilkins nodded his head, stopping himself from asking the dozens of questions he had in his head. He knew that the d’Orléans Social Foundation had been created in Paris in 1851 by a young French aristocrat, Jeanne d’Orléans, and that it specialized in financially helping many charitable organizations, including orphanages and shelters for abused women. While it obviously had access to huge financial assets, little was actually known publicly about the foundation, apart from the fact that it typically embraced liberal social causes.

The flying sled landed softly on Bower Street and then stopped in front of the main entrance of the orphanage, which occupied a rather austere-looking multi-storey brick building. The few pedestrians and drivers along the street watched with incredulity as Santa Claus stepped out of his sled, while the children in the dining hall screamed with joy when he waved at them from the sidewalk. Santa then disappeared suddenly in a flash of light from the sidewalk, to reappear at once in the dining hall, in front of the high chair prepared for him at one end of the room.

“OH OH OH, MY CHILDREN! I AM HERE AND I HAVE MANY GIFTS FOR YOU. COME SIT AROUND ME, WITH THE YOUNGEST ONES IN THE FRONT.”

As he finished saying that, dozens of big red bags appeared as if by magic around him, flopping on the floor. James Wilkins smiled with contentment on seeing the children hurry to sit on the floor around Santa. The Time Patrol had decidedly prepared a masterful show for the occasion. Once all the children were sitting in front of him, Santa Claus snapped his fingers and a young Elf appeared at his side out of nowhere, attracting a concert of marveled exclamations from the children.

“My assistant will now open one by one my bags of gifts and will help me distribute them. Farfadet, the first gift, please!”

Herakles Sirtis, now nine years old, quickly opened one of the bags, each marked with discreet tags to indicate the age group appropriate for the gifts inside. Taking out the first box, wrapped in Christmas paper, Herakles then made the gift fly into the waiting hands of Mike Crawford, using his power of telekinesis for that and attracting more exclamations. Mike then read the name marked on the gift.

“WILLIAM BLAIR, COME SIT IN MY LAP, MY DEAR BOY.”

A small boy of four, encouraged by one of his monitors, nearly ran to the throne used by Mike, who then picked him up effortlessly to put him down on his knees, then presenting him the gift.

“Happy Christmas, William. Be a good boy.”

“I will, Santa.” Replied the child in his small voice, making Mike smile through his fake white beard.

“You can now return to your place and open your gift, William.”

“Thank you, Santa.”

The little boy, once put down by Mike on the floor, then hurried back to his previous place and quickly opened his gift while another boy was called forward by Santa. William screamed with joy on seeing what his gift was: a set of multicolor construction blocks.

The gift distribution was done at a fast rhythm, but still took a good three hours. At the end of the distribution, Santa got up from his throne and waved goodbye to the children.

“I must now leave to go give other gifts to more children, my little ones. Have a very merry Christmas and be good boys.”

He then disappeared in a flash of light, along with his Elf and the empty bags, leaving the crowd of happy children with their toys. Two minutes later, his flying sled took off, taking some altitude and then flying away towards another orphanage in London, this one for girls.

11:01 (London Time)

Cardiff Castle

Cardiff, Wales

Great-Britain

Miri Goshenk 'B', ex-First Mistress of the Imperium 'B', had invited for Christmas the other surviving members of the royal family of the Imperium 'B'. The Time Patrol had now erased the Imperium from history a year and a half ago in subjective time for Miri, or in 3386 'B' in calendar terms. However, despite the presence of her children and of the other mistresses and children of King Stan 'B', Miri was hard pressed to feel truly cheerful. She had felt empty since the death of her husband, King Stan VI 'B', who had disappeared in the crash of his flagship near New Lake City on July the Second of 3386 'A'. Stan had been trying to destroy the Time Patrol and the society of the Global Council, which supported the Time Patrol, before the latter could erase his Imperium from history in order to protect the Global Council, a pacifist, unarmed society. Despite having fought bitterly the Imperium 'B', the Time Patrol had then treated Miri and the other survivors from the Imperium with great humanity after the destruction of the ROYAL SOVEREIGN, even buying for the members of the Imperium royal family their ancestral castle of Cardiff, in Wales. Since then, Miri and her son Len had joined the ranks of the Time Patrol, coming regularly to Cardiff for vacation. Christmas was one of the occasions when Miri returned to Cardiff Castle, despite the fact that she was an atheist, like all citizens of the Imperium.

Miri was supervising the preparation of the noon meal when one of the Imperium royal guards that had survived the crash of the ROYAL SOVEREIGN and was still serving Miri and her family, came to her. The man, a bald giant with six fingers per hands, like all citizens of the Imperium and of the Global Council, seemed both shaken and happy as he stopped at attention in front of her.

“Your Majesty, Nancy Laplante is here...with the King.”

"You mean King George VI?"

"No, Your Majesty: she came with King Stan."

Despite her strong willpower, Miri nearly fainted at those words.

"WHERE ARE THEY?"

"In the entrance hall, Your Majesty."

The guard couldn't say more, Miri starting at a run towards the entrance hall. Arriving there in less than a minute, Miri accelerated at the sight of the bald giant standing besides Nancy Laplante.

"STAN!"

"MIRI!" Replied the man, opening his arms to greet her. They kissed each other with passion for a long moment before looking each other in the eyes, tears on their cheeks.

"By the stars, Stan, you are exactly as you were the day you crashed with the ROYAL SOVEREIGN."

"That's because Nancy just saved me in-extremis less than one hour ago...according to my biological time. She sent a team in 3386 'A' to extract me by time transit probe just before my flagship crashed. They also at the same time saved the two crewmembers of their patrol ship that we shot down a few minutes before that."

Miri looked at Nancy, who was wearing her customary white robe of Overseer of Palestine and was waiting patiently two paces away.

"I will never be able to thank you enough for this, Nancy. You are the most generous and comprehending woman in the Universe."

Nancy made a modest smile at that.

"To see you happy with Stan will be my reward, Miri. Stan may have been my enemy in 3386, but he is a brave man and showed that he was ready to sacrifice himself to save innocent people. If he would not have stayed at the commands of the ROYAL SOVEREIGN to steer it away from New Lake City, thus preventing it from crashing on the city or on other inhabited areas, tens of thousands would have died. Well, I believe that you will have much to tell each other, so I will leave you alone. Merry Christmas to all of you."

Nancy then disappeared in a flash of light before Miri could say more to her. Returning her attention to Stan, she smiled to him with eyes sparkling with joy.

"Come, Stan. Your children and your other mistresses will be happy to see you after all that time."

13:00 (Jerusalem Time)

Thursday, December 30, 1943 'B'

Justice Hall, Government Administrative Tower

Jerusalem, Holy Land of Palestine

Nancy, wearing her embroidered white and gold robe, took place on the elevated chair at one end of the Justice Hall that she customarily used to administer high justice as Overseer of the Holy Land. She did this every Thursday afternoon and this would be the last session for this year, if one followed the Common Era calendar. The whole business of judging personally the most serious criminal cases and the judicial appeal cases had at first attracted a lot of negative comments, mostly from outside Palestine, with many calling this a return to medieval justice and an example of power going to her head. However, her demonstration of absolute impartiality and honesty, allied with her mental gift of telepathy, which allowed her to read the truth directly in the minds of the accused and of the witnesses, had quickly convinced everybody in Palestine that her administration of high justice ensured that the innocents were spared and the guilty punished. After over a year of such high justice courts, the number of violent crimes and other serious offences in Palestine had dropped dramatically, to the point where some court sessions lately had no cases to judge. In such cases, as with all past sessions, Nancy then heard the requests of the citizens of Palestine who wanted to petition her on various matters. This was such a day, with no criminal cases for her judgment, but despite that the crowd in the Justice Hall was still surprisingly large. Her prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, was even present, along with all the members of his cabinet. Nancy was reluctant to use her power of telepathy to learn what was going on, but she could sense that something was brewing, something that made many around the hall smile discreetly with anticipation.

With the doors of the hall now closed and the benches facing her full of expectant people, Nancy spoke in the microphone set besides her chair.

“There are no judicial cases or appeal cases on the agenda today, so the floor is now free for anyone who would wish to petition me or ask me a question.”

David Ben-Gurion came forward at once, walking to the lectern set up for those who spoke to her or gave testimonies. Speaking in its microphone, he read from a sheet of paper taken out of one pocket.

“Overseer, you have been administering this land and rendering justice for nearly fourteen months now. From a divided, war-torn land full of ethnic and religious hatred, Palestine has become under you, with the generous help of the Global Council, a country at peace that now lives in prosperity and justice. You have proved yourself to be selfless, compassionate, fair and generous and have made for a large part what the Holy Land is today. Furthermore, you have proved many times already that you truly are ‘The Hand of God’, even though you still shy from that title. You also proved to be of absolute honesty and always lived frugally, contrary to the standards one had come to expect from the rulers around the Middle East. What I want to present you today is more than a personal petition, or one from my cabinet: it comes from all our citizens, who were unanimous in their response to the discreet poll I had circulated about this.”

“You circulated a poll, Prime Minister Ben-Gurion?” Said Nancy, truly surprised, making the old politician smile with malice.

“I have to say that hiding that poll from you was no easy feat, Overseer. I however have the results in my hands and am now presenting to you a petition in the name of all the citizens of the Holy Land...for you to become Queen of Jerusalem, our queen.”

For a moment Nancy was left speechless, while a wave of emotions washed over her. All along during her life she had practiced self-discipline and kept her personal living standards modest, shunning luxuries and vain honors. Yes, she often indulged in sex and was ready to accept her dues when she deserved them, but she was the opposite of most of the rulers in this time period. The power she yielded was for the good of all, not for her own personal good. She would normally flatly refuse to become a royalty, finding such nobility titles vainglorious and snobbish. In this case, however, it was her own people of Palestine, a people she had devoted herself to help and make prosper in peace, that wanted to crown her, not some group of sycophants or opportunists. A powerful voice then shook her mind.

“ACCEPT, NANCY. YOU ARE MOST WORTHY OF THIS TITLE.”

From the stunned looks that came to all in the hall, Nancy understood at once that the mental message from The One, the nearly omnipotent spiritual entity from which she held her supernatural powers, had been heard by all around her. Taking a deep breath

to slow down her heartbeat and calm down, she got up from her chair and looked around at the crowd now staring at her with expectation.

“Good people of the Holy Land, your petition for me to become your queen honors me greatly and warms my heart. To refuse your petition would be to insult you. I thus accept your request, but I will ask you in return not to link wasteful fast and pomp to that title.”

Obviously relieved that she had accepted so readily, Ben-Gurion smiled and motioned to one of his assistants to approach him. He then took the wooden box the man was holding and walked slowly to Nancy’s chair, stopping three paces in front of her.

“Nothing would normally be too good for a ruler such as you, My Queen. However, your modesty and selflessness is known and recognized by all. We thus only asks of you to carry these jewels as a token of your title and position.”

Ben-Gurion then opened the wooden box in his hands, revealing a golden tiara, a necklace and one ring. While evidently of high quality manufacture and made of gold, the three items could not be called extravagant, having only a few modest gems set in them. The Arab mayor of East Jerusalem then came forward as well, along with the Jewish mayor of West Jerusalem. With Ben-Gurion still holding the opened box, the Arab mayor took the tiara from the box and put it on Nancy’s head. The Jewish mayor then took the necklace and clipped it around Nancy’s neck. Ben-Gurion completed the ceremony by slipping the gold ring, which bore the likeness of Palestine’s contour, with a diamond inserted in the location of Jerusalem, around Nancy’s left index. As the three men knelt in reverence to her, The One’s voice boomed again.

“YOU ARE NOW THEIR QUEEN AS WELL AS MY CHOSEN. LET ME NOW GIVE TO YOU AND TO YOUR PEOPLE A GIFT.”

Through the large windows lining two sides of the hall, Nancy and the crowd then saw with growing emotion a huge cloud of intense white light come down from the sky on top of the Temple Mount of Jerusalem, which supported the Dome of the Rock, the Al Aqsa Mosque and the recently built Jewish shrine containing the Ark of the Covenant, saved from looting and destruction in the distant past by the Time Patrol and then brought back to Jerusalem in 1942 ‘B’ by Nancy. The luminous cloud penetrated down into the mass of the Temple Mount like water being absorbed by a sponge, until it had nearly all disappeared inside the stone structure. As the last part of the light cloud was going inside, a stream of light suddenly shot out of it, heading towards the government tower and getting to it in a second. It passed through a window of the Justice Hall without

breaking it and went to the ring just slipped around Nancy's finger. What looked to her like hundreds of cubic meters of intense white light was then absorbed by her ring, as if sucked in. While the ring then looked normal afterwards, the same thing could not be said of the Temple Mount, which was glowing faintly from under it. Before anyone could comment on that, the voice of The One spoke again to all.

"MY ESSENCE IS NOW MOSTLY INSIDE THE TEMPLE MOUNT, WHILE ANOTHER PORTION OF ME IS CONTAINED IN THE RING OF THE QUEEN OF JERUSALEM. FROM NOW ON, ANY JUST AND HONEST PERSON VISITING THE TEMPLE MOUNT WILL SEE ITS HEALTH RESTORED BY ME. HOWEVER, BEWARE THOSE WITH EVIL IN THEIR HEARTS WHO WILL GO TO THE TEMPLE MOUNT, AS THEY WILL THEN BE JUDGED BY ME."

The next part was heard only by Nancy, as she and all others present knelt in reverence towards the Temple Mount.

"THE PART OF ME IN YOUR RING WILL BOTH PROTECT YOU AND ENHANCE YOUR POWERS, NANCY. FURTHERMORE, NOBODY WILL BE ABLE TO TAKE THIS RING AWAY FROM YOU, OR EVEN SEE IT IF NEED BE. I WILL NOW BE PART OF YOU, AS YOU ARE PART OF ME."

"Thank you, Great One." Said softly Nancy, tears in her eyes. "You just gave my people the greatest gift possible: the gift of health."

CHAPTER 3 – AN ACT OF GOD

16:09 (Solomons Time)

Wednesday, October 7, 1942 ‘C’

Point Cruz, west of the mouth of the Matanikau River

Northern coast of Guadalcanal

Solomons Islands, South Pacific

“COME ON, MEN, MOVE YOUR ASSES! THE LANDING BARGES WILL NOT WAIT ALL DAY!”

The energetic words of their leader, Lieutenant Colonel Lewis ‘Chesty’ Puller, gave back some courage to the men of the 1st Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment, who had literally the Japanese right behind them. The original mission of the battalion had turned sour when the Marines had stumbled on most of a Japanese regiment that nobody suspected was there before. Caught in a trap, the Marines had fought like demons to escape that trap, retreating towards the coast through the thick jungle, so that they could board the landing craft waiting for them. With half of his men already carrying wounded men, Puller knew that his chances of holding his ground until reinforcements arrived were very slim. His only viable option was thus to load back on the boats and get out. However, the Japanese seemed to be in no mood to let him escape so easily, shooting at his men continuously while running after them.

To the relief of Lewis Puller, whose nickname of ‘Chesty’ he owed to his gorilla-like torso, the beach and the landing barges finally appeared between the trees, with the destroyer USS BALLARD visible a few kilometers off the shore. Staying at the edge of the jungle in order to encourage his men and make sure that no one was left behind, Puller waited as long as he could, while the destroyer fired its 127mm guns at the jungle to keep the Japanese away. Puller could see about ten of his men still inside the jungle, hurrying while carrying three wounded comrades, when a group of Japanese soldiers exited the jungle and stepped on the beach maybe 300 meters to the right of the Marine officer. The Japanese in turn saw the waiting landing crafts and quickly took firing positions behind the trees bordering the beach. Two Japanese machineguns opened

fire as Puller was escorting his last Marines and the three wounded towards the last landing craft. One Marine was killed outright just besides Puller as he was stepping on the bow ramp of the craft. Swearing about his bad luck, Puller pulled the body of his man inside, something that also made him see about a hundred more Japanese appear between the trees at the edge of the beach. He then realized that he would need a miracle to save himself and his men in the last landing craft.

The miracle came in the shape of two P-38 fighter-bombers painted dirty gray. Flying very low, the two P-38s opened fire with their heavy machineguns, forcing the Japanese to get down and take cover. Puller screamed in triumph as the bow ramp went up and the landing craft started backing away from the beach, shouting as the two planes swept over his head.

“YEAH! IT’S LADY HAWK, GUYS! WE GOT THE BEST COVERING US!”

However, they still were not out of danger, as bullets kept hitting the bow ramp and sides of the craft, killing or wounding more Marines. Puller watched anxiously as the two P-38s were coming after a tight turn. A second strafing pass finally silenced the two machineguns on the beach, attracting sighs of relief from the Marines.

“My God, I will never make again bad jokes about female Army pilots.” Said a corporal. A sergeant smiled at him then.

“But you would still love to jump their bones, hey, Bagley?”

“And why not, Sarge? What’s wrong with wanting to date a true American girl?”

“Nothing!” Replied the sergeant. “Okay, guys, take care of the wounded. Stop the bleeding quickly if you want them to arrive alive at the destroyer.”

Puller, who was watching the P-38s as they started a third strafing pass against the beach area, was shocked to suddenly see a stream of tracer bullets come up, coming from his left, just before he heard the bark of a Japanese heavy machinegun. Snapping his head around and looking over the side of the craft, he saw one 13mm heavy machinegun mounted on a tripod, now in position on the beach about 400 meters away. By the time that he turned his head again, the P-38 flown by Lady Hawk, recognizable by the letters in pink and black on its nose, had been hit hard as it was flying just above the surface of the water. With one aileron ripped away, the left wing of the P-38 dipped down and hit the water, sending the twin-engine fighter-bomber in a spectacular series of tumbles. After ricocheting three times off the surface, the fighter

penetrated the water nose-first and dove like a submarine. The P-38 was now however less than a hundred meters from the beach and hit the bottom nearly at once, to then come back to the surface like a cork. The Japanese heavy machinegun then fired again, targeting the sinking aircraft. Lady Hawk's wingman, enraged by the loss of her leader, then sprayed copiously the machinegun with its eight .50 caliber guns, killing the Japanese gunners.

Puller watched with horror as the P-38 disappeared under the water, with no sign of the pilot coming out: Ingrid Dows had become a legend for the Marines in Guadalcanal during the month since her arrival with her female air unit.

"NO! NOT HER, MY GOD!" Shouted Puller, shaken. As he was losing all hopes for her and as the landing craft was turning around to go to the destroyer, he suddenly saw a burst of bubbles on the surface, followed by the appearance of a yellow dot. Puller's heart jumped in his chest and he screamed at the sailor piloting his craft.

"TURN AROUND! TURN AROUND! LADY HAWK JUST SURFACED!"

"But, we will be shot at by the Japanese still on the beach and we have wounded on board, Colonel." Objected the sailor at once.

"I SAID TURN AROUND, NOW!"

The sailor then obeyed him and turned his slow craft around towards the pilot floating on the surface with the help of her life vest. In the meantime, the other P-38 kept making strafing passes to force the Japanese to keep their heads down. After a minute that felt like eternity to Puller and his men, the craft finally arrived besides the floating pilot. Puller could now see that Dows was bleeding from under her leather pilot's helmet, apart from bleeding heavily from the nose. She appeared to be dazed or unconscious as Puller bent over the side of the craft, braving the few bullets still whistling by, with a sergeant holding him by the belt. Grabbing the collar handle of Dows' life vest, Puller lifted the young woman out of the water, momentarily sitting her on the edge of the craft's side. As he was rearranging his hold on her to get her inside, a bullet struck the side near him, while another bullet slammed in Dows' chest, making her jerk under the impact. Blood mixed with bubbles then started coming out of her mouth as Puller gently laid her down on the deck of the landing craft, a sign that a lung had been hit.

"I NEED A FIELD BANDAGE, QUICKLY!"

Forgetting what a prude could say later about that, Puller removed Dows' life vest, then ripped open the front of her flight suit, then her T-shirt, exposing her bare chest so that

he could apply a bandage. Nobody made a crude remark then as Dows' breasts were fully exposed to the Marines: this was now a life or death situation for the young woman.

Puller continued to treat Dows the best he could until the landing craft arrived at the side of the destroyer. A Navy corpsman immediately jumped in the craft and plugged Dows to a blood plasma pouch, then did the same to a wounded Marine. Once Dows was pulled up on the destroyer's deck in a stretcher, Puller was then free to concentrate his attention on his wounded and dead Marines, finding out how many men he had lost. He then went to the radio room of the destroyer to send a quick message to the command post of General Vandegrift: that Japanese regiment he had found west of the Matanikau had to be reported at once. Once that was done, he went to visit his men to try to improve their morale after this fiasco of a raid. While he was truly sad for what had happened to a brave young woman like Dows, his first preoccupation was for his Marines.

The destroyer made it back to the beach near Henderson Field in less than twenty minutes, it being only ten kilometers from the Matanikau. The wounded Marines and Dows were then sent to the shore by landing craft, with ambulances picking them up and bringing them to the small field hospital of the 1st Marine Division. Puller, on his part, took a ride in the jeep sent by Colonel Thomas, the divisional chief of staff. After a short ride across the airfield, he got out of the jeep at the fortified command post of the division, where Colonel Thomas greeted Puller with a handshake, then led him to a tactical map.

"I am happy to see that your men were able to escape that Japanese trap, Chesty. Have you suffered many casualties?"

"Too much to my taste, Colonel: 97 dead and 62 wounded. We stumbled on a whole Japanese regiment and, by the state of their uniforms and equipment, I would say that they have not been on Guadalcanal for long. My operations officer will soon bring the papers captured on the dead Japanese."

"A whole regiment..." Said Thomas in a discouraged tone. "They must have been landed here during the last few days of bad weather that grounded our aircraft. God knows how many more Japanese we will have to face. Anything else?"

“Unfortunately, yes, Colonel. Lady Hawk was shot down while covering our retreat. We were able to fish her out of the water but she is now in critical condition at our field hospital.”

“Damn! That will impact severely on the Witches of the 170th Fighter Squadron. I hope that she will make it. Well, that is all with me, Chesty. Have your men rest for the remainder of the day. I will see you again tomorrow morning.”

“Yes, Colonel! I will first go visit my wounded at the hospital, to make sure that they are okay.”

After saluting Thomas, Puller got out of the divisional command post and walked to the nearby field hospital. The modular tents forming the field hospital were surrounded by high sandbag walls to protect them from the sporadic Japanese mortar and artillery attacks, while Marine sentries guarded the entrance. Puller admired the six Navy nurses that worked in the crude conditions found in Henderson Field, as much as he admired the women of the 170th Fighter Squadron. The fears of the Navy and Army brass about negative effects on the discipline from the presence of so many women in the first lines had rapidly proved unfounded. Instead of awakening the worst instincts among the Marines, the female aviators and the nurses had by their quiet courage won the widespread admiration of the Marines of the 1st Division. Any man who would dare abuse one of those women was sure to find a minimum of ten Marines on his back and would be lucky to be left alive. On their part, the young women pilots of the 170th Fighter Squadron did the utmost to support the Marines in the first lines, often taking insane risks to push their attacks against the Japanese soldiers attacking Marine positions. The Witches were renowned for their very low altitude attacks, which added to the precision of their ground strafing but also made them more vulnerable to ground fire. One SBD pilot from a Marine squadron had even confided to Puller that he would never have dared fly attack missions from so low if not for the example given by the Witches. Puller had personally observed such attacks by the Witches as they were supporting his battalion. During a fight he was not about to forget, Ingrid Dows had flown so low to make a devastating strafing pass that she had decapitated a few Japanese soldiers with her propellers, something that had sent the Japanese survivors running away, terrorized, under the cheers of the Marines.

Asking permission first from a nurse to go visit his wounded men, Puller was led to two large tents connected to the central modules of the hospital. There, he found the tents in question full of wounded Marines. Walking slowly along the double row of camp cots, Puller stopped repeatedly to talk to his men and encourage them, hiding his sadness at seeing the extent of their wounds. Many of his men were going to suffer sequels for the rest of their lives, having been amputated of one or more limb, having lost one or both eyes or having lost their hearing. Others had been horribly disfigured or burned and suffered constantly when they were not knocked out by doses of morphine. Puller came out of the tents depressed, but still went to the tent where two Navy surgeons were performing operations. He was able to see on a small chalkboard at the entrance of that module that one of his men, a young lieutenant, was being operated on right now, at the same time as Dows. Seeing an empty folding chair nearby, he sat down and waited, to see if his lieutenant and Dows made it or not. The young lieutenant was the first to be carried out of the operating tent, covered with bandages. Puller immediately jumped on his feet to ask a question to the nurse in surgical garb escorting the wounded.

"How is Lieutenant Higgins, Captain?"

"He will be okay after a couple of months in hospital, Colonel." Answered the beautiful redhead. "Doc Stinson was able to extract the bullet in his left shoulder while avoiding possible sequels. Your lieutenant is a lucky man."

"And...Lady Hawk? She saved the lives of a lot of my men today."

The nurse then lowered her eyes, apparently discouraged.

"We did our best but we are losing her. The bullet that punctured her right lung then ricocheted and grazed her heart, damaging it."

The rabbi of the division arrived at that moment, his face reflecting worry. Despite his religion, Captain Ariel Bernstein was popular with all the division, having risked his life many times to save wounded men on the battlefield, irrespective of their religion.

"How is Lieutenant Colonel Dows? I was told that she was gravely wounded."

The nurse then shook her head sadly.

"I am sorry, Rabbi Bernstein, but she will probably not survive the operation."

Bernstein lowered his head for a moment before talking again.

"Then, I would like to be near her in the operating tent, to support her with my prayers."

"Follow me, Rabbi: I will get you a surgical mask and coat."

As the nurse walked away with Bernstein, Puller saw another of his men being carried inside the operating tent. Taking back his place on the chair, he reflected mentally on the price of this war and on the things he could have done differently that could have saved at least some of his men. A minute later, Rabbi Bernstein and the nurse went in the operating tent as well. The waiting after that felt endless to Puller. Twenty minutes later, Bernstein came out of the operating tent, tears in his eyes.

“Lieutenant Colonel Dows is now with God.” He barely managed to say in a strangled voice. That also brought tears to Puller’s eyes. He was about to say something to the rabbi when he heard some sort of commotion inside the operating tent. Thinking that some Japanese soldier had managed to sneak inside the hospital, he rushed in with his THOMPSON submachine gun pointed, Bernstein at his back. What they both saw then made them freeze with stupor about six paces away from the operating table where Ingrid Dows had been operated on: Dows’ body, still smeared with blood and with the chest cut open, was now floating about one meter above the table, with Dows apparently still lifeless. Her body then gradually but quickly became luminescent, soon becoming too bright to be looked at directly. A wave of white light then silently exploded outward from her, passing through the tent’s walls without disturbing them the least but with a persistent white light bathing everything in the tent and, Puller would learn later, the whole area of the airfield. To the stupor of all in the tent, Dows’ eyes slowly opened, then fluttered, with the long, deep cut on her chest now closed. Rabbi Bernstein fell on his knees, transfixed, as Dows’ body kept shining and floating above the table.

“A miracle! A miracle from God!”

A few more seconds passed before the light slowly faded out and Dows, now fully conscious, floated back down to the table. Puller then noticed that her body was now pristine, clear of any blood. He didn’t remark on it then, but he could swear that her breasts were now clearly much larger than before, while the old burn scars she had before on her left arm, shoulder and neck were gone. With the surgical team still frozen by stupor and incredulity and with more than one making the sign of the cross, Ingrid Dows slowly sat up on the operating table, then pivoted and swung out her legs. She stayed sitting on the edge of the table for a moment, apparently dazed, then looked slowly around her before jumping on her feet.

"How...how long was I gone?" She asked to no one in particular. Rabbi Bernstein took on him to answer her while still kneeling.

"Less than a minute, Colonel. Did you see God?"

"I was with him, yes, but he has no shape per say, so I can't really describe him to you, Rabbi Bernstein. He is immaterial, pure spiritual energy."

"My God, I still can't believe my own eyes." Said weakly Puller, making Ingrid look somberly at him.

"Believe them, Chesty. I was not the only one to be helped today. All the souls on this airfield are now fully healthy. He told me so."

Only then did Puller and the others realize that the young soldier that had been operated on at the same time than Ingrid was now apparently fully healed and was standing besides his table, as naked as Ingrid. One of the nurses then had the presence of mind of grabbing a spare bed sheet to cover Ingrid's nudity with it, then also giving a bed sheet to the healed Marine. When Puller also knelt in reverence at this miracle, Ingrid hurried to him, gently making him and Bernstein get up.

"Please, do not kneel to me: I was only the object of his manifestation, not the cause of it."

The chief-surgeon of the hospital then shook out of his trance and stepped to her, touching her shoulder.

"Could you please sit back on the table, Colonel: I would like to examine you quickly to make sure that you are indeed alright."

Ingrid didn't object to that and sat back on the table, then smiled to Puller.

"I noticed your looks, Chesty. You are right: my breasts are now much larger, but still as firm as before. I always wished for bigger breasts. I guess that my wish was fulfilled at the same time he brought me back to life and healed me. It seems that He has a sense of humor after all."

Puller involuntarily reacted to her nudity as he contemplated her young, splendid body and her angelic face, with her big blue eyes. He was about to excuse himself for staring at her like that, but she silenced him with a gesture and a smile.

"Don't worry about that, Chesty. I am actually flattered. What is beauty for if not to be admired?"

"Why you, Colonel?" Then asked Bernstein, making her look at him calmly.

"He may have long term plans concerning me, Rabbi, but I don't know for what...yet. The only thing I wish now is to be able to return to my pilots and resume my duties...once I get some clothes on."

"I will call your unit and ask that they bring you a spare uniform, Ingrid." Replied Puller before running out of the operating tent. He nearly collided with a crowd of dazed, incredulous but happy Marines that had previously been lying on cots in the patients' wards. All of them now appeared fully healthy. One corporal came to attention and asked hesitantly a question to Puller.

"Sir, do you know what happened exactly? What was that white light?" Immense joy filled Puller as he understood that all his wounded men were now fully healed. He then patted the shoulder of his young corporal.

"You can truly thank God today, son."

It was later realized by the occupants of the airfield that, apart from healing all the wounded and sick men in Henderson Field, the explosion of white light from Ingrid had also flushed out of their bodies all traces of the malaria parasites infecting them. Furthermore, none of the persons touched by the white light ever caught malaria again, as if having been immunized against it. All the medical attempts at explaining that were for naught, with Rabbi Bernstein's belief that it was a miracle from God soon accepted by all. When alerted about what had happened at the field hospital, Major General Vandegrift ordered at once a tight censure on the event and told his Marines to keep their mouths shut about it: he had no wish to see a wave of reporters and investigating officers descend on what was still a hotly disputed combat ground. His encoded report of the incident thus was sent to only a very few addressees as an 'Eyes Only' message. That still caused quite a commotion in Noumea, Pearl Harbor and in Washington. As for Ingrid, she was greeted with profound emotions by her unit personnel but urged them to forget about the event and concentrate back on their combat operations. She then showed the example by leading the next morning a combat mission against some Japanese barges attempting to bring supplies to the Japanese troops on Guadalcanal. To her relief, she was not ordered out to go report to Washington, as she had feared at first, and was able to concentrate on commanding her air group. With their moral now reinvigorated, the Americans fighting on Guadalcanal then continued their hard fight to evict the Japanese from Guadalcanal for good.

CHAPTER 4 – SEXUAL SLAVERY

07:44 (London Time)

Saturday, June 22, 3388 ‘C’

Richmond Park, Outer London Area

British Isles Governorate, Imperium ‘C’

Liana Cormack had no trouble finding the crime scene in the large forested park: the gyro lights of three police air cars and one ambulance indicated the spot to anyone who cared to look. As a detective with nine years of service in the London Metropolitan Police Department, Liana was paid to care, but she didn't do her job just for the pay. Her friends and colleagues kept saying to her that her sense of justice and dedication would get her in trouble one day in the corrupt, violent world of power politics and organized crime that was the Imperium society. She in fact had the reputation of being incorruptible among a police force undermined by widespread corruption, and she was proud of her reputation.

Landing her unmarked police air car near the ambulance, she got out in the light autumn rain and walked to a drainage ditch running alongside the pedestrian trail crossing the park. Four uniformed police officers kept watch around a small area cordoned off with yellow tape, while two medics were standing beside a plastic sheet covering a shape lying in the bottom of the ditch, half submerged by water. Thankfully there were only a half dozen curious onlookers around at this hour, most looking like typical morning joggers. One of the three male police officers watched her with interest as she approached the police cordon. At 230 centimeters, Liana was of medium height for an Imperium woman, but she had an athletic body and a more than pretty face that attracted her fair share of men. Her blue eyes were a genetic rarity in the Imperium and enhanced further her smooth Eurasian features. Flashing briefly her police badge, Liana bent under the police tape and went down the ditch's steep, grassy slope, stopping besides the plastic sheet covering what was obviously a human body. Her head-mounted micro camera on her left temple was already on, protected from the rain by her wide-brimmed hat and recording everything she was seeing and hearing. She flashed

her badge again at the medics before bending and pulling away the plastic sheet. Under it was the mutilated and naked body of what looked like a small girl. The poor wretch bore the marks of prolonged and cruel tortures. Liana's face hardened at once: murder was a common enough crime in the London metropolitan area but it very rarely involved a child, especially when torture was added to it. As violent and corrupt as the society of the Imperium was, abusing or killing young children was widely considered taboo, with perpetrators looked at harshly by nearly all, even by other criminals. Unfortunately, there would always be some isolated, depraved individuals who would do about anything to satisfy their sick tastes. This was going to be prime news on the media channels today. Straightening up, Liana looked at the senior medic.

"Was she found like this?"

"No, miss. We had to pull her out of that concrete drainage culvert over there. She was found by a morning jogger. That's the man in yellow sports suit over to your right."

Liana looked at the drainage culvert: it was less than one meter in diameter and was half submerged, being at the bottom of the ditch. That jogger must have been very close to it to see the body. She then looked back at the medics.

"Thanks, guys. Bring her to the Metro Police Forensic Center for a full autopsy. Here is my card."

Then letting the two medics put the small body in a body bag and then loading it in their ambulance, Liana went to see the jogger in yellow outfit. The man, who appeared of mature age, looked understandably shaken. Showing him her badge first, Liana then smiled reassuringly to him.

"I am sorry if you had to wait like this, mister. I won't take much more of your time. Can I see your social identity card first, sir?"

"Of course, miss."

The man then produced a small plasticized card with a picture, some written information and a data strip on it. Taking a card reader from a pocket of her trench coat, Liana scanned the card with it. She would now know everything the Imperium public administration and services knew about the man. Giving him back his card, she pointed at the body of the girl, which was being zipped inside a body bag.

"Could you tell me how you found that girl, Mister Vorak?"

"Certainly, miss. I was doing my daily jogging session through the park when I had to relieve myself."

The man then smiled in embarrassment.

"I know that it is not very hygienic but I really had to go in a hurry and the next public bathroom is some distance from here. Anyway, not wanting to be seen by other joggers, I went down in the ditch and faced that drainage culvert to do my thing. That was when I saw what I believed to be a bare foot. I bent down and looked inside the culvert. That was when I saw the body. That truly scared the hell out of me, miss. I used my wrist phone to call the police and stayed besides the ditch until the first police air car arrived."

"At what time did you find the body, Mister Vorak?"

"At 07:06, miss. I noted the time as I called the police."

"Did you touch the body at any time, mister?"

The man shook his head emphatically.

"Oh no! I was too scared to do that. Who could do such a thing to a little girl, miss?"

"A monster, Mister Vorak. Be assured that we will do our best to catch the murderer. Thank you very much for your cooperation, mister. You may go now."

Vorak nodded somberly.

"Whoever did this deserves no less than death, miss. I hope that you will catch him."

Letting Vorak walk away, Liana went to the ambulance and briefly stopped the medics in order to have a second look at the girl's face: she had taken the habit of printing in her visual memory the faces of the victims she was investigating. As she stared at the battered, puffy face, Liana suddenly noticed a faint color demarcation between the top of the head and the face. Looking more closely, she found something weird behind the girl's right ear: a small patch of very short hair. The problem was that Imperium citizens were completely bald and devoid of body hair, the result of genetic manipulations in the 24th Century meant to combat the effects of radiation exposure from the 2015 nuclear Third World War. Only animals had hair now. Puzzled, Liana examined more carefully the rest of the small body, soon noticing something curious about the hands. Asking the medics to step away for a moment, she then took a closer look at the hands. The little finger of the left hand then broke away as she was holding it. Jumping back in revulsion and horror, she let go the loose finger, her heart beating furiously. After a moment to calm down, Liana then looked down at the finger in the

grass and froze, barely keeping in a curse: it was an artificial finger. Picking it up, she approached again the body and examined very closely the hands of the girl. Both had artificial little fingers to make them appear like normal six-fingered hands. Liana's first thought was that the odds of being born with such a deformity had to be small. Then, she added that to the patch of hair behind the girl's ear and suddenly had cold sweats: the only logical explanation she could think of now was an impossible one. Resolved to keep this discreet for the moment, she pocketed the artificial finger and zipped back the body bag, then nodded to the medics.

"You may load her in the ambulance now. I'm going to follow you to the forensic center."

Returning to her air car, she took place in the driver's seat, thankful to be out of the rain. Taking off her hat and putting it on the front passenger seat, she switched on the car's fuel cell generator, then the flight computer.

"Autopilot on! Follow the nearby ambulance to the Metropolitan Police Forensic Center and land on the roof parking lot once there. "

Now free from the task of piloting the air car, Liana switched on the police computer sitting on a swivel mount between the two front seats, then called up some historical files about the 20th Century, wanting to see what pre-holocaust women looked like. Blood rushed to her head when she understood that the body she had just seen had to be that of a pre-holocaust woman, and not the one of an Imperium girl. The problem was that having such a woman here now was impossible: time travel was still only a fantasy written about only in fiction literature. Or was it? Officially, it was still a pipe dream and nobody had publicly announced a breakthrough in that domain. So, was her logic flawed or did someone develop secretly a time travel capability? If the second hypothesis was correct, then it was very bad news, as it was plenty obvious from the mutilated body just found that a criminal organization now had such a capability, and not some government agency. Liana started wondering in what kind of shit pit she just had stepped into. With cold sweat on her forehead and with her heart accelerating, she sat back and took a minute to calm down the storm in her mind. The one thing that was still clear to her was that a crime had been committed and that it was her duty to find those guilty of it, wherever or whenever the victim was from.

The beeping signal from the autopilot soon took her out of her thoughts. Looking out through the windshield, Liana saw that she was on final approach to the roof landing pad and parking lot of the forensic center, a four-storey steel and glass building in the Chelsea District of London. Landing beside the ambulance and then parking her air car in an empty parking slot nearby, she stepped out in the rain and ran inside the access hut of the hospital's roof, entering it at the same time as the two medics and their anti-gravity gurney loaded with the body bag. She accompanied them down to the reception desk of the center, then waited as the medics registered the body in. The forensic doctor who showed up then was thankfully one Liana knew well and respected: Tina Venlis was both very competent and dedicated and shared Liana's thirst for justice and truth. Liana shook hands briefly with Tina before following with her the gurney as it was pushed towards one of the autopsy rooms.

"So, what do we have here, Liana?"

"A girl found dead in a ditch in Richmond Park. She was possibly tortured to death."

Tina frowned at those words.

"Another sadistic pimp acting up his frustrations?"

"Possibly. We will talk further once alone in the autopsy room."

Tina noticed the cautious tone of her voice and gave her a side look, but didn't remark on it. The forensic doctor had too often seen the results of violence from criminals not to have grown careful about the possible implications of the cases she studied.

Once they were inside the forensic examination room and the two medics had taken the body out of the body bag and onto an examination table, Tina dismissed them, locking the doors behind them. On a discreet signal from Liana, Tina also switched off the microphones in the room before turning to face the detective, speaking in a very low voice.

"So, what is going on, Liana?"

"Examine first the body visually, then we will talk. Be prepared for the unexpected and shocking."

"By the stars! You are really intriguing me now, Liana. Very well, let's examine that girl."

Putting on first a set of medical garb and latex gloves, Tina Venlis then approached the body and had a first glance at it from head to toe. She was quick to see that the left

hand missed one finger. Looking at that hand and expecting some kind of wound, she was surprised to see the plastic prosthesis meant to give a normal appearance to it.

“What the...? This girl had a deformity to her left hand?”

“Look at her right hand, then behind her right ear, Tina.”

Tina did so, to then look with shock at Liana.

“That is not a normal human. Where is she from?”

“From the past, I believe. Tina, this is a fully-grown woman, not a small girl. Pre-holocaust humans had only five fingers per hand, had hair on their heads and parts of their bodies and were much smaller than us. You are however more qualified than me to judge that with any certainty.”

“A woman from the past? But, nobody knows how to travel through time in the Imperium.”

“Officially? Nobody! In reality, some crime syndicate may well have found a way to travel through time and is now running some kind of sex slavery ring with girls from the past. You know how much some people would pay to bed such ‘exotic’ girls, Tina.”

Tina Venlis stared at her for a moment, then nodded slowly her head once.

“I see what you mean, Liana. Let’s see if your hypothesis is correct.”

Twenty minutes of work were enough for Tina to convince her that Liana was right: this was not an Imperium human. One thing she found was a branding mark on the girl’s left shoulder blade that appeared to be some identification mark, like the ones branded on cattle.

“Why would they have branded that poor girl like this?” Wondered Tina. “simply taking her fingerprints would have been both more efficient and simple.”

“Uh, I frankly don’t know, Tina. To be frank, I wasn’t too good in history at school.”

“Well, whatever that mark was, that girl was horribly tortured but it was done in a slow, methodical way: whoever did this wanted to make it last as long as possible. That poor girl probably died from a heart attack caused by massive pain. Let me check for traces of rape.”

Two minutes later, Tina swore quietly as she was finishing to examine the victim’s vagina.

“She was raped alright, repeatedly. Her vagina was then washed thoroughly with a disinfectant, probably to make it impossible to retrieve the DNA from the rapist’s

sperm. Whoever did this was thorough...and without mercy. Liana, I'm afraid that you have indeed a very hot case in your hands."

"Great! If illicit time travel is indeed involved, as what we have seen would tend to prove, then the culprits most probably benefit from vast means...and powerful contacts. They may even have contacts inside the LMPD."

Tina looked gravely at her friend, the full implications of this case coming to her mind.

"Liana, we will have to walk on eggs about this. Just the knowledge we have now about the true origin of this girl could be enough to mark us both for death by whoever did this. Even if I play dumb and issue a bland report not mentioning that this is an ancestor, the criminals who killed her will probably not take any chances and will eliminate both me and the body...and you."

Liana clenched her teeth, seeing that Tina was right about that.

"But we can't just abandon this case and run. Illicit time travel is involved. Worse, a criminal organization is probably in possession of a time machine that they are using to run a sex slavery ring. With the kind of money they are probably asking from their customers who abuse those ancestor girls, they certainly have many rich and powerful men in their pockets. This may spell absolute chaos for the Imperium. We have to do something to stop this, Tina."

"But, alone, we won't be able to do much, Liana. You probably won't be able to trust your own superiors about this case. You told me often enough that you doubted their honesty."

"True!" Said Liana, thoughtful. "This leaves us possibly only one alternative: the King."

"The King? Why him?" Said Tina, flabbergasted.

"Because he probably would be the one most endangered by the existence of such a time machine. Did you think about how easily someone that could travel through time could go kill the members of the royal family in the past and then seize power in the Imperium? Remember the big purge that King Stan had to do six years ago to get rid of that bastard of General Veck and of his collection of minions, and that just before Veck and his Ministry of Security could conduct a coup against the King."

"Uh, I see what you mean. So, what do we do now?"

"We go see the King, with this body as proof...discreetly."

"When?"

“Right now! The faster we move, the less chances that the bastards who did this will have to learn that this girl’s body was found and then would go after us.”

“Makes sense. Then, help me put this poor girl back in a body bag. We will then bring it as discreetly as possible to your car. Your car is in the roof parking lot, I suppose?”

“It is.” Replied Liana before proceeding to help Tina slip the battered body back in its original body bag. Zipping it closed, the two women then transferred the body bag onto an anti-gravity gurney and pushed it out of the forensic examination room.

Their hearts beating frantically, Liana and Tina used a nearby elevator reserved for the use of medical personnel to go up to the roof parking lot. The security guard watching the roof access hut thankfully didn’t ask questions to them, simply smiling and wishing good morning to Tina as she passed in front of him with Liana and the gurney. Tina was quite thankful for the fact that she was part of the senior medical staff and thus could go around the forensic center without arousing questions from most other staff. The two women however had to leave the gurney behind and transfer the body bag by hand in Liana’s car, as it was not large enough for the gurney. While Tina quickly brought back the empty gurney to the access hut, Liana started her air car and waited anxiously for Tina to return. Once the forensic doctor was in, she backed out of her parking spot and took off under manual guidance. At first, she flew away towards the East, in order to throw off anyone who would later try to guess where she was going. Only after she was out of sight of the forensic center did she turn on a new heading, towards the royal palace. As she approached the palace, the automated air traffic control system of the Metropolitan London area directed her air car onto one of the authorized air lanes passing near the palace, as the airspace around the royal residence was a restricted zone. As her vehicle was about to fly past the palace, Liana veered abruptly towards it and started descending steeply towards the only authorized entry points, a heavily guarded ground checkpoint. A female voice quickly spoke on the radio of her air car as she was slowing down and was about to get to the ground.

“Vehicle NB883902, this is the royal palace security center. You are approaching a restricted zone. Identify yourself and state your purpose at once.”

“Royal palace security center, this is Detective Liana Cormack, of the London Metropolitan Police Department. I am coming to the palace to alert the King about a

grave threat against him. That threat is such that I can't trust my own superiors at the LMPD, over."

Liana's brutal frankness was meant to convince the ones responsible for the palace security that they could not ignore her: it worked.

"Detective Cormack, stop at the main access checkpoint. The duty officer there will then speak to you."

"Acknowledged!" Then replied Liana on the radio before driving at a moderate speed towards the palace checkpoint, a heavily fortified gate in the tall wall surrounding the royal residence. Five armed royal guardsmen surrounded her air car as soon as she stopped in front of the armored gate, with an officer then approaching her driver's window. The man, a hand on the grip of his holstered pistol, bent forward and looked inside the car through the opened window, then fixed Liana.

"May I see some identification from you and your passenger, miss?"

"Certainly, Lieutenant. Here is my police badge. My friend is Doctor Tina Venlis, from the Metropolitan Police Forensic Center."

The officer examined closely her badge and the identity card of Tina, scanning them as well with his card reader, then pointed at the body bag in the rear of the air car.

"What do you have there, Detective Cormack?"

"The body of a woman from the distant past, Lieutenant. I believe that a major crime syndicate now has access to a working time machine. If that is so, then someone could well decide to go in the past by a few years and kill the King while he is still young."

The lieutenant gave her a shocked look, then his jaws tightened and he motioned to the back of her vehicle.

"Open the rear gate of your car, miss."

"Right away, Lieutenant."

As soon as Liana popped open the rear gate of her air car, the lieutenant and one guard went to it and opened the body back, contemplating for a moment the naked, mutilated body inside, then searching thoroughly the inside of the car. Liana and Tina were asked to step out of the car and were then searched bodily, while two guards examined the car from all angles with portable sensors, looking probably for possible explosives and weapons. Liana's service pistol was taken from her and put inside the guardhouse as the officer eyed her somberly.

"I have orders to lead you and your friend to the palace security center, where you will be able to explain yourself in more detail. You will be able to pick back your pistol when you will leave the palace. I will now go with you to guide you to the security center."

Taking one of the rear passenger seats, the lieutenant gave Liana directions as she drove slowly through the security checkpoint, passing in succession the two armored gates of the vehicle security airlock and then picking up speed towards the impressive mass of the palace. Using a secondary vehicle entrance, Liana soon found herself inside a large garage where no less than eight royal guards were waiting, along with what looked like a senior guard officer. The latter, a man clearly in his fifties but still fit, approached Liana as soon as she stepped out, eyeing her quickly before extending his right hand for a shake.

"Detective Cormack, I am Colonel Anton Xitak, Commander of the Royal Guards Corps and head of security for the royal palace. If you will please follow me, I will lead you to the palace security center with the body you brought with you."

"Thank you, Colonel. I must say that I expected more, uh, incredulity when I told your guards about my story."

"That is because we already had reasons to fear that someone is using time travel, miss. This whole matter has however been kept very quiet for the moment. This way, please."

Xitak then led the two women through a large door, with two of his guards following them with the body bag. They walked quickly down a series of wide, luxurious corridors, finally entering what looked like a large guardroom. Liana and Tina were shocked when they recognized the big, powerful man waiting in the middle of the room. They knelt in unison while bowing their heads to the man.

"Your Majesty!"

"Rise, both of you!" Said King Stan the Sixth in a firm but neutral tone. "Then, tell me your story."

Liana, getting up on her feet, took on her to tell the ruler of the Imperium how the body of the girl was found, then what she and Tina had found about her, along with her suspicions about her superiors at the LMPD being untrustworthy. Stan listened quietly to her, then went to the body bag and opened it completely before examining carefully

the mutilated body, with Tina Venlis describing what her autopsy had found up to now. His face now somber, Stan got back up and stared at the two women with gravity.

“Detective Cormack, Doctor Venlis, I am afraid that you have stumbled upon something that will attract you very powerful and unscrupulous enemies, enemies that I consider to be a grave threat to the security of the Imperium. I am afraid that, for your own safety, you will have to stay here as guests of the palace until this matter is resolved.”

“If I may ask, Your Majesty,” said Liana after swallowing hard, “how do you intend to stop those illegal time travelers? Do you have a time machine of your own?” In response, Stan gave her a devilish smile.

“I’m working on that, Detective Cormack.”

09:53 (Greece Time)

April 20, 430 BCE (Before Common Era)

Athen’s Agora (city central market)

Ancient Greece

Nancy, with Mike walking alongside her, discreetly kept scanning visually her surroundings as they slowly made their way around the Agora, or central market square of Athens. A series of space-time emergences in various ancient time periods by one or more stealthy ships had been signaled by the Time Patrol’s secret network of surveillance satellites, which watched continuously over five millenniums of Human history. Patrol ships of the Time Patrol had tried to find and catch the said ships but, up to now, the latter had proved most elusive, probably because they possessed the same kind of cloaking system that the Time Patrol ships used. One could thus detect the emergence in the past of such a ship by its space-time ripple, but then lost its trace as it flew around under cloak. One emergence had been detected near Athens early last night, prompting Nancy and Mike to come investigate with the scout ship BRITANNIA. Both wore contemporary Greek clothes, Nancy a long peplos pleated tunic with sandals, Mike a short sleeveless tunic called a chiton, plus sandals. The crowd around the market square this morning was fairly dense, partly due to the fact that a slave merchant was busy offering a group of young slaves for sale. Nancy hid her disgust and anger on seeing a lineup of naked young women and teenage girls being paraded on the merchant’s platform, while a crowd of onlookers and potential buyers surrounded the

said platform. Slavery was easily one of the things that Nancy detested most in the often sad and tragic history of Humanity. Torture was the other thing she detested with a passion, having had to endure it once in her present life, plus a few more times during past incarnations. Mike, who had also been looking around them, then whispered to Nancy in English.

“Nancy, there is something weird happening: many people in the market are looking at you as if they think that they have seen you before somewhere.”

“Maybe they are looking at us because we are much taller than the average Greek, Mike.”

“Maybe, but I don’t think so. There is something, uh, strange in the way they look at you in particular.”

Diverting her attention from the slaver’s platform, Nancy telepathically scanned the minds around her. What she found in the thoughts around the crowd made her frown.

“They are wondering if I could be the Goddess Athena, visiting the city under human form. Now, why the hell are they thinking that? I...”

Mike looked at her, seeing that she was now concentrating about something. Knowing about her telepathic powers, he didn’t speak for the moment and waited for her to be done.

“Mike, someone just thought about going back to a shuttle.”

Mike Crawford ‘B’ tensed at once then: the port of Athens was a few kilometers from the city and someone planning of going there would think of a ship, not a shuttle. Nancy then started walking in a new direction, forcing him to follow her. He then heard her voice via the mental wave radio implanted at the base of his cranium as she called the BRITANNIA on their mission frequency.

“Elizabeth, this is Nancy. I may be on something here in the Agora: someone thought about returning to a shuttle. If any such shuttle shows up, immobilize it with a tractor beam and bring it out of visual range of Athens.”

“Understood, Nancy.” Replied by radio Elizabeth Windsor ‘B’, who was piloting the scout ship BRITANNIA. In her haste to catch up to the man who had thought about a shuttle, Nancy had to push her way through the crowd a couple of time. One bearded man dressed in a long himation tunic took exception at a woman pushing him and shouted at her in an indignant voice.

“HEY, WOMAN, HOW DARE YOU PUSH ME LIKE THIS? WOMAN, I’M TALKING TO YOU!”

Mike, following behind Nancy, briefly stopped by the man, dominating him by a good head, and gave him a warning look.

“It was not intentional, mister. No need to create a raucous for so little.”

As Mike continued on his way, the man, who was in his advanced forties, reddened with anger and looked at another man who had been walking with him.

“By Zeus, nobody pushes me around like this, especially not a woman. I’m going to get a few soldiers to teach her a lesson.”

His friend nodded his head in approval: in Athens, women had few precious rights and were not supposed to go around by themselves, being relegated to their houses unless fetching water. For a woman to get physical with a male citizen in good standing like Euristide was a serious social offense.

Oblivious of the reactions to her charging through the crowd, Nancy soon saw a group of tied slave girls being led out of the Agora by three men dressed in short tunics and armed with daggers. Blood rushed to her head when she saw one man turn his head and talk to another man of the group in modern English. That prompted her in turn in sending a new mental radio call.

“Nancy to BRITANNIA. I have in my sights three men speaking in modern English and escorting seven young slave girls out of the Agora while heading towards the gate of Dipylon. Get a probe on them, so that we don’t risk losing them.”

She then slowed her pace, trying to stay out of sight of the men until they had left the city. Initiating a fight inside the crowded city would only attract unhealthy attention history-wise. Her pious wish was blown away when one of the men looked to the rear of the group to check for possible followers and saw her, her head sticking out above the other pedestrians. His face reflected instant panic and he shouted at once in modern English to his companions.

“LAPLANTE IS AFTER US! RUN!”

Forgetting all thoughts of holding on to their newly acquired slave girls, the three men bolted at once, running as fast as they could down the street leading to the Dipylon Gate. Now certain that they were illegal time travelers, Nancy broke as well into a run while sending yet another mental radio message.

“The men leading the slave girls have recognized me and are now fleeing. Mike, get hold of the slave girls and lead them to safety. I will chase these men down. BRITANNIA, be ready to send the backup team if they lead me to their shuttle.”

Seeing an old man sitting against the wall of a house and selling what appeared to be a set of bronze armor and weapons, Nancy quickly searched in her purse and extracted a gold coin while continuing to run, then threw the coin down in front of the man while grabbing at the same time the lance propped at the vertical near him against the wall.

"I'm buying your lance, good man. Sorry if I'm in a hurry."

She then resumed her run, leaving behind the stunned old man. The other pedestrians along the street now all looked at her, having never seen before a woman running by herself while holding a lance. Her physical size, being a near giant for contemporary Greek men, who measured on average 167 centimeters compared to her own 183 centimeters, also made her even more obvious. Swearing quietly about the attention she was attracting but having little choice but to pursue those men, Nancy kept running after the three men but was careful not to overtake them, hoping that they would lead her to their shuttle. At one street intersection, she ran past a patrol of seven Athenian soldiers coming out of a side street, surprising them. After a moment of stupor and confusion, the leader of the patrol then ordered his men to follow Nancy but, being encumbered by the weight of their bronze armor and shields, were quickly outdistanced by her and the three fugitives.

Finally passing the Dipylon Gate, the three men pursued by Nancy soon left the main road and started running along a trail snaking around a few dispersed huts and dilapidated houses. That was when one of the men made a major mistake in Nancy's mind and took a revolver out of a bag slung to one side. He had time to fire on the run once, missing Nancy by a good meter, before she replied by throwing her lance with superhuman strength. The man, who had turned away to resume his run at full speed, was skewered by the lance, screaming with pain before collapsing on the ground. His two companions, by now nearly out of breath and with their legs shaky, then gave up and stopped running while raising their hands.

"OKAY, WE GIVE UP! DON'T KILL US, LAPLANTE."

Recuperating first her lance and the revolver wielded by the now dead man, Nancy approached them cautiously, revolver in hand and pointed.

"You will have a lot of explaining to do, gentlemen. First, where is your time shuttle?"

"It is presently away, miss." Answered one of the men. "It is supposed to pick us up once it is dark, at an abandoned farm where we were to assemble the girls we bought."

"And where the hell did you find such a time shuttle, mister?"

"We...we work for giants from the future, miss. They say that they are from the Imperium. I can tell you everything, if you show us clemency, Miss Laplante. We are only intermediaries in this business."

Nancy stopped a few meters in front of the two men and eyed them severely.

"Normally, you would be in for big trouble, but I will take account of your cooperation, misters. What kind of business are you mixed with, exactly?"

"We were hired to go in the past and buy slave girls for a sex ring run by a criminal organization in the Imperium called the Black Hand. Apart from that, we know very little, miss. We were hired in London in 1943 'B'."

"I see! Very well. If you have other firearms with you, drop them on the ground now, along with your daggers."

"We have no other firearms, miss: our friend Greg violated the rules of our employers by bringing his revolver along."

"At least your employers showed some common sense. Not much but some. Okay, drop your daggers then."

The two men complied at once, with Nancy then searching them quickly to make sure they had no other weapons. She did however find a small communicator on one of the men, who explained at once.

"This is our way to communicate with the shuttle once the time has come to be picked up. It is due over Athens at eleven tonight, local time."

"Your cooperation is appreciated, mister." Said Nancy before sending a mental radio message. "BRITANNIA, I have two live prisoners and one dead man to be picked up by transit probes. You may collect them now."

"BRITANNIA understood. Otto and Jeffrey will take delivery of them. The probes will be coming to you in a few seconds. Be advised that Mike is now aboard with seven very scared girls."

Nancy took two steps back, the confiscated communicator still in one hand, and waited calmly. Two transit probes appeared after ten seconds out of nowhere, to then glue themselves to her prisoners before they disappeared with the men in brief flashes of white light. The body of the dead man followed five seconds later. Her mind now

thinking over the revelations given by her prisoners, Nancy looked quickly around her and, not seeing anyone close by, went into phase shift.

Her body now surrounded by a bubble of highly accelerated time that made her invisible to others as well as a thousand times faster, Nancy reentered the city, crossing on the way the patrol of Athenian soldiers that had been running after her. To her, they were like being frozen on the spot, with only the tiniest sign of movement detectable. With the communicator and revolver stuffed in her belt pouch and the lance she had bought in her right hand, she waited until being inside a hidden corner near where the old man was sitting before coming out of phase shift. Walking calmly out of her hiding place, she went to the old man and smiled down to him.

"I am sorry if I didn't have time before to ask you about these weapons, old man. Are they yours?"

The old man shook his head, sadness coming to his face.

"They were my son's weapons, woman. He was killed at war, defending his comrades from a surprise attack on their camp. These are the arms of a true hero. Unfortunately, I am poor and need the money from their sale to survive in my old age." Crouching down to face the old man, Nancy gave him a warm smile.

"Then, I would not want to take away from you your most precious souvenirs of your son. Please take this gold and keep those weapons, including that lance."

The beggar looked with wide eyes at the fistful of gold coins she had taken from her belt pouch, then at her, tears in his eyes.

"But, why do you do this for me?"

"I do it so that a hero can be remembered by his father. May his memory live long."

She then straightened up and put the lance against the wall, where she had taken it originally. She was just turning on her heels to leave when the man she had pushed away in the Agora arrived, four soldiers at his back, and pointed an accusing finger at her.

"THAT'S HER! SHE DESERVES A GOOD FLOGGING FOR PUTTING HER HANDS ON A HONORABLE CITIZEN."

Nancy frowned and looked contemptuously at the man as the four soldiers came towards her. The misogyny of the Ancient Greeks had always grated on her and she was in no mood to be treated like an inferior now. Raising one hand, palm facing the

soldiers, she concentrated on them. The soldiers immediately stopped, as if they had hit an invisible wall. As they tried with growing dismay to advance without success, Nancy stared at the man she had pushed out of her way in the Agora, who was like the rest of the onlookers watching with disbelief the soldiers' frantic efforts to step forward.

"If you want to speak to me, Mortal, then you will bow first. Less arrogance and more humility would do you well indeed."

Thunderstruck, the officer in charge of the soldiers put one knee to the ground, bowing low to Nancy while letting out an exclamation.

"THE GREAT ATHENA! SHE MUST BE THE GODDESS HERSELF!"

The onlookers and the other soldiers also knelt at once on hearing this. Only the slighted man hesitated for a moment, until Nancy eyed him severely.

"Well?"

Understanding that not paying respect to her would probably result in the crowd lynching him, the man slowly knelt, then bowed, making Nancy nod. She then looked at the old beggar, who was trying to kneel.

"Please stay sitting, old man. What was your son's name and your own name?"

"Theophilus, O Great One. I am called Aristides."

Nancy then looked back at the crowd, sending a strong telepathic message around her.

"TO ALL IN ATHENS, KNOW THAT I RECOGNIZE THEOPHILAS, SON OF ARISTIDES, AS A TRUE HERO FALLEN IN BATTLE. MAY HIS NAME BE SUNG FOR GENERATIONS, LIKE THOSE OF OTHER TRUE HEROES."

She then started rising slowly in the air through levitation, before disappearing in a flash of white light. As the old beggar cried tears of joy, the crowd got slowly back to its feet, commenting excitedly on the fantastic event that they had just witnessed. As for the slighted man, seeing the dark looks many were now throwing at him, he decided to make himself rare.

Nancy reappeared on top of the Acropolis, the rocky promontory in the center of the city on which were built the most important temples of Athens. Walking to the magnificent Parthenon, with its 46 white marble columns surrounding its facade, she climbed the four steps leading to the main entrance and walked in the Naos, the huge room sheltering the giant statue of the goddess Athena, protector of Athens. The few men already inside the Naos started staring at her as she walked calmly towards the gigantic statue covered with gold and ivory. Stopping maybe ten meters in front of the

statue, Nancy examined it slowly from head to toe, apparently impassive, letting her micro-camera hidden in her tiara record the statue in detail. In reality, her mind was in deep turmoil right now, as the statue was an accurate rendition of herself. After a minute, having seen enough, she turned around and walked out.

10:26 (Greece Time)

Time Patrol scout ship BRITANNIA

Flying under cloak over Athens

Mike came to Nancy at once when she appeared in the large cargo bay of the BRITANNIA.

“Nancy, where have you been? I was getting nervous about you.”

“Oh, I was in no danger, Mike, believe me. I just went to visit the Parthenon.”

“The Parthenon? Why?”

She then gave him a disarming smile.

“Just remind me one day to go pose for the great sculptor Phidias, Mike. Now, let’s take care of those poor girls we saved from slavery. After that, we will prepare a nice trap for those Imperium bastards.”

23:02 (Greece Time)

Abandoned farm outside of Athens’ walls

The shuttle, a model built to accommodate at most thirty passengers, silently landed besides the ruins of an old stable adjacent to an apparently abandoned house. Painted a matte black, the shuttle was nearly invisible in the darkness of the night, which had allowed its crew to safely switch off their cloaking generator with little fear of being seen by locals. The copilot of the shuttle, a bald giant like his companions, smiled on seeing a rhythmic signal made with a red-filtered flashlight come from the house.

“Stanfield and his team are here alright. Let’s load him and the girls he bought quickly. MENKEL, YOU MAY LOWER THE ACCESS RAMP.”

The Imperium man standing in the cabin went to a small control box at the rear of the cabin and switched the internal lights to red, then pushed a button, lowering the rear access ramp. Expecting three men and a bunch of girls to then get in the shuttle, Menkel froze with utter stupor when the intimidating metal masses of three robots

suddenly flew in, then landed on their twin tracks on the floor of the cabin while the weapons supported by the turrets that served as their heads rotated, pointing at him and at the two men in the cockpit. One of the robots then spoke in a man's voice, strong enough to be easily heard from the cockpit.

"DO NOT MOVE AND KEEP THIS SHUTTLE ON THE GROUND! AN ARMED SCOUT SHIP IS OVERHEAD AND HAS YOU IN ITS TRACTOR BEAM. YOU ARE UNDER ARREST FOR ILLEGAL TIME TRAVEL AND SLAVERY."

"Aw shit!" Could only say Menkel, just before a woman and two men dressed in the dark gray uniforms of the Time Patrol and wearing full combat armor ran inside the shuttle, weapons pointed. The woman, despite being much smaller than Menkel, roughly pushed him against the wall of the cabin while pointing a pistol in the Imperium man's face.

"Hands up, now! You resist and I shoot."

"Alright, alright, don't get excited: I surrender."

"A sensible decision, mister." Said sarcastically the woman before handcuffing Menkel. The pilot and copilot were similarly handcuffed, then pushed out of the cockpit, to join Menkel in the cabin, where the three of them were forcibly made to sit in the jump seats lining the sides of the cabin. The pilot, fuming at having been caught like this, gave a hard look at the woman who was apparently in charge of the Time Patrol team.

"You don't know who you are fucking around with, do you?"

The woman gave him a contemptuous look, not intimidated one bit.

"And you don't seem to realize in how deep you are, mister. Your Black Hand is about to learn some humility soon. As for you and your friends, I will let King Stan decide what he wants to do with you."

The mention of King Stan made the pilot pale, attracting a mean smile on the woman's face.

"Why so glum suddenly? King Stan can be a reasonable man...when he wants to. I however suspect that he won't be very reasonable with you and the Black Hand once I pay a visit to him and tell him about your sordid traffic through time."

19:20 (London Time)

Tuesday, June 25, 3388 'C'

Royal Imperium Palace, London

British Isles Governorate, Imperium 'C'

Stan felt pleased as he read the latest progress report submitted by the scientist he had put in charge of replicating the time travel technology invented by the two physicists that had worked for the Black Hand. Doctor Farah Tolkonen was claiming that she had mastered the theory on that subject, no small thanks due to the information extracted from the physicist captured by Mersant's agents, and was now in the process of building a prototype ship. A knock on the door between his private office and the family lounge of the royal suites then made him look up from his computer viewing screen.

"Enter!"

Expecting one of his mistresses to come in, Stan nearly jumped out of his swivel captain's chair when a small young woman with long black hair and green eyes entered at a calm pace. She was dressed in an antique white robe and wore a gold tiara and a gold chain with pendant around her neck.

"LAPLANTE?! What are you doing here and now? Don't you belong in the 20th Century?"

"I belong in the whole of history, Your Majesty." Said Nancy, smiling to the giant monarch. "Do you mind if I simply call you 'Stan'? I know that you hate formalities."

"And what would you know exactly about me, Miss Laplante?" Asked Stan, tense as a steel bar. That made Nancy's smile widen into a grin.

"Oh, about everything, including your tastes in sex. And please call me simply 'Nancy'."

"Alright, Nancy. To what do I owe a visit from the Queen of Jerusalem?"

Nancy's smile then vanished, replaced by a sober expression.

"To a rather sordid and revolting business, Stan. I am talking about sex slaves trafficking through time by one of the crime syndicates of your Imperium, the Black Hand. My Time Patrol just caught a Black Hand team in Ancient Greece as it was about to collect a new cargo of fresh slave girls. Would you already know anything about this business, by chance?"

Normally, when faced with such an intrusion, Stan would have alerted at once his guards, but he somehow felt that he could trust this ancestor woman. He thus pointed one of the comfortable chairs facing his desk.

"I do! Please sit down, miss."

He then waited for her to be in the chair, himself sitting back straight, before speaking again.

“To answer you, my intelligence services have recently alerted me to this business of slave trafficking through time and even captured one of the two scientists that invented the time machine now used by the Black Hand. Unfortunately, my information about this traffic is rather sketchy at the moment.”

“Then allow me to fill in a few blanks for you. The Black Hand has now been importing slave girls from the past for close to two months now, relative Imperium time. Those girls are now forced to work as prostitutes and sex objects in a number of Black Hand exclusive and secret sex clubs around the planet that cater to the rich and powerful, people like judges, high functionaries and even a few ministers, generals and admirals. One of those secret sex clubs is here in London, inside the Tower of London to be more specific. The Black Hand was operating two time shuttles to provide girls for that business. One of them is now in the hands of the Time Patrol and the other is presently idle in a secret hangar in Shanghai that is under surveillance by my people, pending a strike to take it out. I however delayed our intervention so that I could first come and speak with you. This is after all your realm and I truly wish for the Time Patrol and your Imperium to come to an amiable understanding in this matter. If all goes well, maybe we could end up opening inter-time trade between the Imperium and the 20th Century of Timeline ‘B’, where time travel is widely known to exist, after this business is taken care of.”

“Your consideration to respect my authority here is well noted...Nancy. I have to say that what I read about you was quite impressive. I however can’t quite forget that your Time Patrol erased another Imperium in Timeline ‘B’, as you call it. Logically, I should be treating you like a potential enemy, and a powerful and dangerous one at that.”

“Which would be understandable on your part, Stan. However, I assure you that I and the Time Patrol tried everything to avoid that war with the Imperium ‘B’. Unfortunately, the then Security Minister of the Imperium ‘B’, a bastard named Veck, precipitated things with a series of grave blunders. Also, King Stan ‘B’ did not have effective control of his Imperium, contrary to you: Veck controlled the Imperium ‘B’.”

“Well, if it can reassure you, Veck and his minions in the Ministry of Security were purged by me six years ago. The armed forces of the Imperium now obey strictly to me.”

Nancy nodded at that and took out a data chip that she then gave to Stan.

"I am truly glad to hear that, Stan. We can thus start our mutual relationship with a clean slate. Here is the information that I was able to obtain on this slave trafficking from the crew of the captured time shuttle. You can either decide to deal yourself in isolation with this problem, or we could collaborate in this. However, I would like at a minimum to participate myself in any strike on those sex clubs. The girls who were enslaved and brought here know nothing about science and technology and probably think that they are in some kind of demonic hell. The help of a woman similar to them could help them a lot to get over their horrible experience once freed."

"And what do you intend to do with those girls afterwards, Nancy? I understand that ancient people are not meant to know that time travel exists."

"You are correct about that last point, Stan. What I will do is to use some of my mental powers to induce in them a partial amnesia covering the period that they were transported through time and held here. I already did that to the seven girls we freed in Athens, who were then returned to their cities and villages of origin, with some compensation money to help them rebuild their lives. As for the girls presently being exploited and beaten here, they will see an ancient goddess free them, something that will help reassure them somewhat until I could induce amnesia into them."

Stan sat back, his eyes fixed on Nancy.

"Talking about your mental powers, you do realize that psyonics have a very bad historical reputation here in the Imperium. We in fact hunted them down and exterminated them back in the 29th Century."

"I know about that, Stan. However, I am not a psyonic. I owe my powers to a powerful spiritual entity I call 'The One' and that many associate with God, not to some genetic mutations. Unfortunately, that misunderstanding contributed to the negative reaction I got from the Imperium 'B' when I tried to negotiate an armistice."

"And how powerful are you exactly, miss?" Asked Stan, trying to sound nonchalant. Nancy gave him a sober look then.

"My full powers would actually both amaze and scare you, Stan. I am no goddess and am still mortal, but I could easily pass as a true goddess in most time periods, like I will when freeing those poor girls held by the Black Hand. So, would you prefer to deal with the Black Hand by yourself, or would you be ready to coordinate your strikes with my Time Patrol?"

“No offence to you or the Time Patrol, but this is MY Imperium and I intend to make a personal statement when I will deal with the Black Hand. You are however welcomed to come along with me, in order to help reassure those girls.”

To his surprise, Nancy smiled at his answer.

“That was the kind of response I was expecting from you, Stan. King Stan ‘B’ was an enemy, but he was a good enemy, and we respected each other a lot. Now, we are good friends.”

“Wait!” Said Stan, jerking his head in surprise. “Stan ‘B’ is alive? But, he is supposed to have died in the crash of his flagship.”

“He would normally have died then, but I went back to the future and saved him in-extremis. He and the members of his Imperium royal family are now living peacefully in their ancestral castle of Cardiff, in Whales.”

“The Castle of Cardiff...” Said dreamily Stan. “So, it does still exist in your time period?”

“It certainly does, Stan, and I would be more than happy to bring you there to visit it and meet with the royal family of the Imperium ‘B’. Consider that as an offer of proof of my goodwill.”

Stan then smiled for the first time in their conversation and got up from his chair, extending his right hand.

“Then, let’s shake on this, Nancy.”

Nancy took his hand and shook it vigorously, secret relief washing over her.

21:14 (London Time)

Wednesday, June 26, 3388 ‘C’

Beauchamp Tower

The Tower of London

Talia knew by now what to expect when one of the bald giant demons showed up in front of the steel bar door of her tiny cell: she and other girls held in this tower were going to be brought to another building of the demons’ fortress, to be paraded in front of other male demons who would then choose the girls they wanted for the night. The Thracian teenager of fourteen had been brought to this impossible world six days ago and already was resigned to her fate, despite her natural strength of character. She had tried to rebel at first and to refuse the orders given to her, but one very painful session in

the torture chamber of the fortress had convinced her that resisting those demons was futile. The fact that she had been relatively well treated once she had accepted to submit had then tamed her somewhat. The sad fact was that, compared to the abundant food and warm cell here, her previous life as a farm girl in Thracia had not been much better. Her and her family had endured all their lives periodic famines, harsh winters, the dangers of roaming bandits and marauding soldiers, back-breaking labor and grinding poverty, while Talia had been promised by her father to a local boy she felt little for, in exchange for a piece of land. In contrast, some of the male demons that had used her up to now had actually shown some kindness in bed, truly admiring her beauty and even paying attention to her own pleasure. Talia however knew that not all demon customers here were nice with the girls. Some girls had returned to adjoining cells with tales of rough, sometimes even violent sex, while other girls had never returned to their cells.

The giant demon had just opened the door of her cell and was signaling her to follow him when what sounded like repeated thunder from inside the stone walls of the fortress made both Talia and the demon jerk in surprise. With a look of alarm appearing on his face, the demon's right hand went to the weapon holstered to his belt, while he turned his head towards the stone arch of the staircase giving access to the level they were in. Talia gasped when the steel tip of a lance suddenly pierced the demon's throat, going all the way through his neck. The demon, blood suddenly pouring out of his mouth, collapsed to the stone floor, convulsing as he was dying. Talia then stared wide-eyed at the one who had jabbed the lance in the demon's throat. The woman had hair, like Talia and the other slave girls, and was smaller than the giant demons. She was however much taller than Talia and her sleeveless peplos pleated tunic showed her muscular arms and shoulders. The newcomer also wore a Corinthian style bronze helmet and a large, round bronze shield was strapped to her left arm. Apart from her lance, she had a short sword at her belt and a short cuirass covering the upper part of her chest that was decorated with a gorgon head. With blood rushing to her head, Talia put one knee down at once and bowed to the newcomer.

"The great goddess Athena!"

"You may bow later, girl." Said the newcomer in Thracian. "Right now, you will stay in the back of your cell, where you will be safer while the demons in this fortress are being killed."

“Yes, Great One!” Could only say Talia before obeying the goddess, who then repeated her warning in Greek and in at least two other languages for the benefit of the other girls held in the tower’s upper floor. The noise of boots coming up the staircase preceded by a few seconds the arrival of another demon guard of the fortress, his weapon pointed and tension visible on his face. Facing the giant with her shield held in front of her, Athena then made a quick jabbing motion with her lance pointed at the newcomer. Talia jumped back when a ball of blue flame shot out of the lance’s tip with the loud crack of thunder, hitting the demon guard and incinerating him instantly. A second demon guard following close behind the first one was also reduced to ashes by another ball of blue flame from Athena’s lance. A few seconds later, more giants showed up but, this time, they were obviously dressed differently, all of them wearing helmets and armor painted royal blue. Athena spoke to them in the same language Talia had been made to learn via magic after arriving in the fortress.

“THIS FLOOR IS SECURE! I WILL STAY ON GUARD HERE.”
The giant leading the blue-clad soldiers had one disbelieving look at the blackened remains of the two demon guards, then simply nodded to Athena and continued with his men towards the next level.

Finally gathering enough courage to speak, Talia took a few steps towards the opened door of her cell and knelt in front of Athena, bowing low to her.

“Thank you for saving us, Great One. I will praise your name for the rest of my life.”

The goddess look down tenderly at her and touched her head with one hand, speaking to her in Thracian.

“Your faith is appreciated, girl. What is your name?”

“Talia, Great One. What will become of me and of the other girls now, Great One?”

“It will depend on what you wish for, Talia. Do you want to return to your old country, or do you want to try for a new life in a world like this one, but populated by good giants?”

The surprise made Talia raise her head to look into Athena’s green eyes.

“I really could ask for a new life in a better world, Great One?”

"Yes, you can, young Talia. I know how harsh life can be for most in Thracia, especially for women, and I can understand your wish for something better. For the moment, you will sleep until I can bring you and the others away from this place."

A slight stun discharge from Nancy's hand then rendered Talia unconscious. Holding her so that her head would not bang on the stone floor, Nancy then gently took the Thracian girl in her arms and carried her to her cell's bed. A transit probe taken from a belt pouch then made the body of the teenager disappear from the bed, making the other slave girls watching her gasp in surprise and wonderment. Nancy then repeated the process in succession with the other fourteen girls and young women held in the Beauchamp Tower. By the time she was finished, the noise of gunfights had largely abated around the old fortress. Going down the stone spiraling staircase, she emerged on the grass of Tower Green and in the inner yard of the fortress, illuminated by modern electrical lamps. Royal guardsmen were everywhere, weapons at the ready and searching in detail the numerous towers of the fortress in order to flush out any Black Hand member that could still hide to evade capture. As for the fate awaiting those taken prisoner, it became quickly evident to Nancy. A group of five Black Hand men and women being escorted out of the White Tower central keep was made to line up against a stone wall and then was executed by a firing squad. Nancy watched that scene without emotion: those men and women had amply deserved their fate in her mind. At least they had a quick death, contrary to some of the poor slave girls abused by the Black Hand. Turning away from the five bodies, Nancy hurried to a wounded royal guardsman being carried out of the White Tower by two of his comrades.

"Hold on for a moment, please!"

The sergeant helping to carry the wounded gave her a dubious look.

"I am sorry, miss, but my man needs immediate medical attention."

"I know, but I can heal him."

"Heal him, miss?"

Nancy didn't answer him, instead putting gently one hand on the blood-soaked left leg of the wounded guardsman and then concentrating. The wounded and his two comrades watched on with disbelief as her hand started glowing, along with the wounded leg. The glow subsided after about a minute, leaving the guardsman standing cautiously on his now healed leg.

"How...how did you do that, miss?" Asked the incredulous soldier as his comrades stared at Nancy with wide eyes.

"In my time period, I am called by many 'The Hand of God'. I hold a number of spiritual powers but I am not what you call a psyonic. You should however take it easy, soldier: you lost a lot of blood. Did you suffer other casualties, Sergeant?"

"Uh, yes, miss. We have one dead inside the basement of the White Tower. We also found a slave girl being horribly tortured by a Black Hand customer there."

"Then lead me to that girl, Sergeant."

"Yes, miss."

Following the sergeant inside the massive central keep, Nancy spoke to him while going down the stairs leading to the basement.

"The customer torturing that girl, where is he, Sergeant?"

"Dead, miss! The King killed the bastard himself."

"Good old Stan!" Said Nancy, smiling, attracting an amused look from the NCO.

"The King is known to lead by example, miss. That is part of the reasons why he is liked by most in the Imperium. Here we are, miss."

Nancy had one look around the sinister room they had entered, full of torture instruments, then hurried to where a teenage ancestor girl was lying, a guardsman medical orderly kneeling besides her with a first aid kit. Nancy's face hardened on seeing the pitiful state the girl was in. Not wasting time with words, she put down her lance and shield and knelt beside the girl, gently pushing away the medic. She then bent down over the girl and started glowing, making the medic jump back in surprise and shock. When she was finished, she got back up and helped the shaken girl to her feet, only to see that King Stan had entered the torture chamber and was looking gravely at her.

"I see that you were not lying about your powers, Miss Laplante. I have good news: the second time shuttle has been captured in its Shanghai hangar, along with the second physicist that started this whole affair. The Black Hand is now out of the time travel business, at least for the time being. A total of 157 slave girls have been freed up to now, while my men either killed or captured 86 members of the Black Hand, including one of the top leaders of that organization."

"All good news indeed, Your Majesty." Said Nancy, nodding with satisfaction. "Maybe the Black Hand will get the message and will abandon all plans for further inter-time trafficking."

"Talking of message and knowing that you are an expert on history, what do you think a past king would do with such bastards?"

Nancy gave him a calm but resolute look.

"He would make a public example out of them, notably by cutting their heads off and then planting those heads on pikes lined along the outside walls. If you will now excuse me, Your Majesty, I will go take care of the poor girls freed from this hell. I will visit you tomorrow morning at your palace so that we could discuss the future relations between your Imperium and the other two timelines."

Nancy then hugged tightly the slave girl she had healed and disappeared with her in a flash of white light. Stan, like his guardsmen, stared at where she had been.

"Damn! I wish I knew how she does that."

He then turned towards the sergeant present with four other guardsmen in the torture chamber, pointing at the dead customer that had tortured the slave girl for his own sadistic pleasure.

"Sergeant, I believe that there is a well-stocked arsenal of ancient blade weapons in a museum a couple of floors above us. Go get pikes and lances there, then cut the heads of those executed here and plant them on pikes along the outer moat. Let the Black Hand and its accomplices see what is in store for them."

CHAPTER 5 – THE JUNGLE GIRLS

17:h39 (Eastern Australia Time)

Thursday, January 7, 1943 'C'

Southwest Pacific Area headquarters

Brisbane, Australia

Lieutenant General George C. Kenney, Commander of the United States 5th Air Force, was reviewing operational reports from his various units when his chief of staff, Brigadier General Donald Wilson, came to him with a printed message in one hand.

"General," said respectfully Wilson, who was on a first name basis with Kenney when in private, "we just got a message from General Arnold, in Washington. It is basically a good news, but it has strings attached to it."

Kenney, sitting at one of the duty tables in the operations center of his command, situated in the same downtown Brisbane building than the headquarters of General MacArthur's Southwest Pacific Area Command, gave Wilson a puzzled look.

"A good news with strings attached? Very well, Donald, let's hear it."

"Basically, General Arnold has finally relented in giving us some reinforcements by transferring an Army air wing from the South Pacific Area to us, and this despite the owls of protests from the Commander, South Pacific Aircraft, in Noumea. The catch is that this wing is an all-female unit and, because of congressional rules about the segregation of female units, cannot be broken down and parceled out. We are talking here about the 99th Composite Air Wing presently based in Guadalcanal and Espiritu Santo."

"Young Dows' unit? I thought that she was commanding a group, and not a wing."

"She was effectively commanding an air group until this December, when her unit was reorganized and enlarged, General."

"And was Dows upped in rank as well then?"

Wilson rolled his eyes before answering that.

"No, General. She is still a lieutenant colonel...and still nineteen years old."

Kenney had a chuckle then. While he was himself 53 years old and had taken decades of service to rise to his present rank, thanks mostly to the stagnation in ranks inflicted on everyone during the lean years between the First and the Second World War, he believed in promotions gained from merit rather than only from simple seniority. He was considered by many as a revolutionary in terms of air tactics and doctrines and frequently clashed with the proponents of the heavy bomber's strategic supremacy in war, who presently held the high ground at the headquarters of the Army Air Corps in Washington.

"And what is there exactly in this new 99th Wing, Donald?"

"Quite an eclectic mix, actually. I'm afraid that this wing conforms to no official doctrine or table of organization. The message from Washington did list its main components and equipment, General."

Wilson then handed over the message in his hand to Kenney, who read through it quickly once before concentrating on the composition of the 99th Wing. That composition, while truly unorthodox, lit up a smile on his lips."

"But, this would actually be perfect to support our troops in Papua New Guinea! It even has a whole group of helicopters, something we certainly could put to good use over there."

"Uh, General, the employment doctrine and tactics of helicopters are still being debated and studied by the Air Corps. We should be careful about using them in a haphazard way until an official doctrine could be agreed upon."

Kenney gave a somewhat disapproving look to his chief of staff.

"Donald, you obviously have not read in detail the operational reports from Guadalcanal, or talked to the senior Marine commanders in charge there. They are all unanimous in saying that helicopters have changed completely the game on Guadalcanal and that Dows has used them in a masterful way to support the Marines. Now, the nature of the geography in Papua New Guinea is very similar to that of Guadalcanal, with thick jungles and mountain ranges and hills. Also, these girls have been fighting on Guadalcanal since last September, with great success. They are thus jungle veterans, contrary to most of our reinforcement or replacement units, which are on the whole green units straight from the United States. I certainly am ready and willing to employ them."

"But, General, with its unorthodox mix of units, the 99th Wing cannot fit under either our Fifth Bomber Command or our Fifth Fighter Command."

"True, but I already see a way to get around that. Let me just go see first General MacArthur, to give him the good news. We will discuss the assignment of the 99th Wing later tonight."

"Understood, General."

Rising from his chair with the message from Washington still in his hands, Kenney then left his operations center and took a lift ride up to the level where General MacArthur had his command staff offices. He found the old general in his office, studying a map of the Southwest Pacific Area. MacArthur returned Kenney's salute before looking at the message in his hand.

"What do you have for me, George?"

"Good news from Washington, General: they are sending us some extra air units."

"At last!" Said MacArthur, sighing. "The European Theatre is truly becoming a vacuum cleaner for our forces: it is swallowing everything in terms of units and equipment. So, what are we getting?"

"The 99th Composite Wing, presently based in Guadalcanal and Espiritu Santo. It is the unit of young Lieutenant Colonel Dows... A female unit, General." MacArthur's reaction then surprised Kenney. At the mention of Dows, a big smile appeared on the old general's face.

"Thank God! Dows is worth a whole air group by herself."

"Uh, aren't you overestimating her a bit, General? She may be our best air ace, by far, but she is still extremely young."

MacArthur's smile then changed to a most sober and serious expression as he stared at Kenney.

"George, there are things about that girl that very few people know about, things that would blow you away if you knew them. I can tell you this, though: when it comes to the application of air power in support of joint operations, she is an absolute master without equal. When she was in the Philippines, apart from shooting down Japanese planes like there was no tomorrow, she revolutionized our fighter tactics. When the Japanese finally tried seriously to land troops en masse there, we were down to only a few dozen planes and were despairing of being able to repel the Japanese landings. My air commander then, Major General Brereton, confided to me afterwards that he was at a loss on how to defeat the Japanese then and couldn't decide what to do. He then did

something that takes a lot of humility: he called Dows, who was a simple captain at the time, and asked her if she had any ideas about how to repulse the Japanese. Well, within a couple of hours, that teenage girl cooked up an air attack plan and then implemented it, flying herself many missions afterwards against the Japanese invasion fleets. As a result, the enemy troopships were decimated and the rest of the Japanese ships were forced to sail away, leaving the few troops ashore at the time stranded and without supplies. George, we owe our victory then in the Philippines to that girl, and I'm not joking."

Kenney was left open-mouthed for a moment before he could speak again.

"I...I didn't know about that, General. Everybody I know praised you and Brereton for repelling the Japanese invasion fleet."

"Then know this as well: Dows never tried to grab the glory for that. Do you know why? Because she believed that it had been a joint effort, with Marines, soldiers and sailors as well as aviators contributing to the victory. Dows is actually a rare example of a senior officer who puts more importance on helping the common war effort than on furthering her career. To be absolutely honest myself, she kind of shamed me then with her selfless dedication. All this is to say that this girl is pure gold, George. The best thing you could do would be to put her unit in the frontlines and then let her do her magic with the minimum of command guidance."

Kenney took a deep breath to recover his composure, then gave the message in his hands to MacArthur.

"Well, you may just have answered a dilemma I was having about her unit, General. As you will see from this message, her wing is a very unorthodox organization that won't fit well in either my Fifth Bomber Command or Fifth Fighter Command, especially since it can't be parceled out because of political rules about segregation of female units. That left me with one possible solution: to place her directly under the command of my deputy, Brigadier General Whitehead, who is commanding my advanced echelon in Port Moresby."

"That sounds like an excellent idea, George. Go for it! Uh, what is this Fairchild AC-142G? I don't know that aircraft variant. And that 118th Special Close Air Support Squadron? I have no clue about what kind of unit it is."

"To be frank, General, I don't know either. Her unit is equipped with many brand new types of aircraft and details on some of those types are still classified. I will find out right away, though."

“Do something better, George: ask Dows to come see us here in Brisbane. I would love to have an opportunity to talk at length with her and get her opinion about our situation in Papua New Guinea. Tell her that she can bring her main subalterns with her if she wants to, so that they can start planning for their move to Port Moresby.”

“Understood, General!”

MacArthur then gave back the message to Kenney, who then saluted before leaving the office, his mind in turmoil about what he had heard from MacArthur.

10:51 (PNG Time)

Friday, January 15, 1943 ‘C’

Jackson Airfield, 8 kilometers from Port Moresby

Southwest coast of Papua New Guinea

Southwest Pacific Area

Brigadier General Ennis Whitehead was a stocky man of 47 with a normally jovial face and with a long experience as a military aviator, having joined in 1917. He could say that he had seen about everything up to now in his long career, but this would definitely be the first day he saw female military aviators. He was thus watching from a corner of the main aircraft parking area, with two of his staff officers and a jeep driver, as the first planes of the 99th Wing were starting to land on the main runway. The first aircraft to land was actually a type of plane he had never seen before except in photo. An obvious variant of the outstanding Fairchild C-142 heavy transport aircraft, the lead plane had a multitude of small antennas sticking out of its boxy fuselage, with big radar domes in the nose, tail and belly.

“So, this is the mysterious EC-142E WAVEMASTER airborne command post.” Said Lieutenant Colonel James Tyrone, Whitehead’s operations officer. “I heard a lot about what it did over the Solomons but they sure kept discreet about the plane itself. Anyway, it should help us tremendously here.”

“I sincerely hope so.” Said Whitehead. “We certainly could use its radars and its ability to fly at night and in bad weather. God knows that the local weather is atrocious enough.”

A second EC-142E then landed, soon followed by another type of four-engine aircraft quite similar to a regular C-142A, but with notable differences. Whitehead nodded his head as the third and last of the new type was landing.

"These must be AC-142G REAPER heavy gunships. General Kenney warned me to expect them."

"Heavy gunships?" Asked his chief of staff, Colonel John Marsden, puzzled. "And what do they do exactly?"

"According to the Marine commanders in Guadalcanal, they massacre Japanese troops on the ground. They are basically flying gun platforms and have night vision equipment and radars. They are still considered experimental and Dows was charged with developing their employment doctrine. From what I was told, they are up to now a huge success."

"Decidedly, this 99th Wing promises to be a pot full of surprises."

"Wait until our airfields around Port Moresby are invaded by close to 3,000 young women, John." Replied Whitehead with a small smile. "You may have to read the riot act to our male pilots here."

"Ouch! That could effectively be an explosive mixture, especially if those girls are anything like pretty."

"Some of our men would bed anything that is female and breathing, Colonel." Remarked Tyrone in a sarcastic tone, making Marsden wince.

"Too true! I better brief seriously our provost marshal after this."

The five first four-engine aircraft were then followed on the ground by two regular C-142A cargo planes, six RP-38N photo-reconnaissance fighters and, finally, two P-38N fighter-bombers. Whitehead then gave the order to his jeep driver to approach the nearest EC-142E, which had just shut down its engines once parked. As they were rolling towards the big plane, a jeep rolled out of one of the two C-142A and stopped briefly by the P-38N fighter-bombers, picking up their pilots before racing to meet Whitehead's jeep. Seeing that, the deputy commander of the 5th Air Force told his driver to stop and wait for the incoming jeep. The latter soon pulled alongside his jeep and a very beautiful teenager and a stocky woman with curly black hair jumped out of it to present themselves to Whitehead, saluting him. The teenager had a young, angelic face framed by brownish-red hair, had big blue eyes and a sexy and fit body well contoured by a custom-fit flight suit. An impressive pistol was strapped to her upper right leg in a futuristic-looking holster. When she spoke, it was with a melodious young voice, but her tone was firm and her eyes drilled into Whitehead's eyes.

"Lieutenant Colonel Ingrid Dows and Major Teresa James, reporting to you with the first elements of the 99th Composite Wing, sir!"

"At ease!" Replied Whitehead while saluting back. "I must say that I am quite happy to get your wing here in Port Moresby. There are still a lot of Japanese around and our troops need all the air support that they can get."

"It will be a pleasure to give them a hand, sir." Replied Ingrid, smiling. "Some of my main subordinate officers, including Major James, came with me today, so that they could start planning the arrival and lodging of the rest of my wing, which will fly in during the next four to five days, depending on the weather."

"Then, let's go greet them, Colonel. Lead the way."

"Yes sir!"

Jumping back in her jeep with Teresa James, Ingrid told her driver, a young female corporal, to go to the first EC-142E. The two jeeps soon stopped besides the starboard side access door of the big aircraft. A small crowd of male and female majors and captains dressed in either flight suits or combat fatigues were already standing at the foot of the plane's access ladder and came to attention to salute when Whitehead and his two staff officers stepped out of their jeep. Whitehead noticed at once that the women outnumbered the male officers two to one, something that Marsden and Tyrone also noted. What shocked the brigadier general was the presence in the small crowd of a distinctly Japanese-looking young woman wearing the insignias of a captain on her combat fatigues. Seeing Whitehead slow down and hesitate, Ingrid hurried to interpose herself before a misunderstanding could happen.

"If you may allow me to present you my officers, General. First, my wing's chief of staff, Major Evelyn Hudson..."

Whitehead started shaking hands, doing his best to memorize the names of the ones presented by Ingrid. His attention redoubled when the time came to shake hands with the Japanese-looking woman.

"General, this is Captain Jenny Kawena, the wing's assistant intelligence officer. She regularly flies as mission commander on our EC-142Es, coordinating the information gathering and the sensors analysis. She was born in Hawaii and has my complete trust."

Those last words were said by Ingrid in a firm tone, putting emphasis on them and making Whitehead nod in understanding as he eyed the beautiful young woman with brown skin, silky black hair and almond eyes.

"I see! Pleased to meet you, Captain Kawena. Your name certainly has an exotic touch to it."

"My father is Polynesian, while my mother is of Japanese stock, General. Before the war, I was working as a civilian translator and cryptanalyst for the Navy in Honolulu."

"And what happened after the start of the war, Captain?"

"I lost my job as a cryptanalyst when someone deemed I was a security risk because of my Japanese blood, General. Colonel Dows however showed confidence in me and enrolled me in her unit. She also enrolled a number of other Japanese-American women, a few of which work as radio operators and electronic warfare specialists on this plane."

"And they all performed admirably up to now, General." Ingrid hastened to say. "They were instrumental in locating and tracking a number of Japanese ships that we then attacked and sank."

"If you have full confidence in those women, then I will as well, Colonel Dows. After we are finished here, you and your officers are all invited to have lunch with me and my staff at the officers' mess."

"Thank you, General." Replied Ingrid, secretly sighing in relief. She had wanted Whitehead to meet Jenny Kawena as soon as possible, so that she could clear that possible point of contention right away. Thankfully, Whitehead seemed not to be a racist...up to now."

There were some tense reactions from a number of male officers once they showed up at the officers' mess, but Whitehead took no time to pass a discreet but firm message for his officers to accept all the newcomers without reservations. By the time that the lunch was over, Ingrid felt much better about the work atmosphere her young women would encounter here. One thing she noticed as well during lunch was the presence in Port Moresby and the airfield of quite a large number of Australian aviators, whose units used some of the six operational airfields around Port Moresby and its port. There were also a number of Australian Army officers in evidence, as their units were forming a large part of the Allied ground forces in Papua New Guinea, according to Whitehead. All those men showed little discretion while ogling hungrily Ingrid and her

female officers during lunch, something that Ingrid had fully expected and tolerated...to a point. It was both futile and hypocritical to expect that men stuck for months in a dangerous, inhospitable environment, would forget their male drive, or that women in similar circumstances would forget their own nature. Up to now, Ingrid had managed to keep passions and temptations in check, but what she was still quite worried about was the possibility that some reporters and war correspondents in search of cheap press material would invent sexual scandals where there weren't any...yet.

Once lunch was over, Whitehead invited Ingrid and her officers to his headquarters building, where they were briefed on the status and facilities of the seven airfields built around Port Moresby. One, Berry Airfield, was still being completed, with work going on to resurface its runway, but Ingrid took it for her use anyway, deciding with Whitehead's approval to base her helicopter group there. Two other airfields were already full, housing various American and Australian bomber and fighter squadrons. Whitehead thus allotted to Ingrid's wing the partial or total use of Jackson Airfield, Wards Airfield, Kila Airfield and Schwimmer Airfield, on top of Berry Airfield. Very satisfied with that deal, Ingrid then offered to Whitehead a helicopter tour of the said airfields, using the Bell UH-1 DOVE light helicopter brought in the cavernous fuselage of one of her two C-142As already in Jackson Airfield. Whitehead, who had never flown in a helicopter before, eagerly took her offer, bringing with him Marsden and Tyrone, while Ingrid took with her Major Evelyn Hudson, her chief of staff. Apart from allowing Ingrid and Hudson to have a good look from the air at the airfields allotted to their wing and to take pictures of them, that excursion helped Ingrid explain to Whitehead the capabilities of her helicopter group and what it could do for the allied troops presently fighting in Papua New Guinea. By the time the UH-1 light helicopter landed back in Jackson Airfield, expectations were high on both sides about how useful the 99th Wing could prove to be here in Papua New Guinea. It was only left now for Ingrid's units to either fly in or sail by ship to Port Moresby and to make themselves at home after four months spent on Guadalcanal and Espiritu Santo.

17:45 (PNG Time)

Saturday, January 23, 1943 'C'

Headquarters, 99th Composite Wing

Jackson Airfield, Port Moresby

"We definitely need better photo-map coverage of the coastal area North of Buna, all the way to and including Lae and Nadzab, and this as a matter of priority, Dorothy. We could then work on taking high resolution air pictures of the Japanese installations in Salamoia, Lae and Nadzab, in prevision of..."

"ROOM!"

Suddenly cut off by the shout from a junior staff officer, Ingrid stopped her conversation with Captain Dorothy Avery and snapped her head towards the entrance of the Nissen Hut allotted to her wing's headquarters. She herself came at attention and saluted when she saw that Brigadier General Whitehead was entering the hut in the company of General Sir Thomas Blamey, Commander of the Australian Army, who was also the commander of all Allied land forces in Papua New Guinea. Blamey, a short but stocky, solidly-built man with a thick moustache, wore the typical Australian tropical dress of short pants, short sleeved tan shirt and wide-brimmed felt hat. As the two generals stopped in front of her and returned her salute, Ingrid noticed the way Blamey looked at her with an interest that was not all professional. She however chose to ignore that for the moment and spoke to both generals.

"What can I do for you today, sirs?"

Whitehead answered her while giving a brief look at his Australian counterpart.

"Sir Blamey has come to me with an urgent request for air support, a request that I believe your wing is in the best position to satisfy, Colonel Dows."

Blamey, who obviously had trouble believing that such a young woman could be a lieutenant colonel, cleared his throat then while fixing Ingrid, who was taller than him.

"I am told that you have a lot of helicopters in your wing, Colonel, and that they arrived here the day before yesterday. What is exactly the combined lift capacity of your helicopter units, along with their radius of action when fully loaded?"

Starting to see where Blamey was driving at, Ingrid answered him from memory.

"General, I have a total of 48 medium transport helicopters in my three helicopter transport squadrons, with a total lift capacity of 1,152 fully equipped soldiers, if no light vehicles are transported as well, and this over a radius of 210 miles. I also have a total of six heavy lift helicopters in those same squadrons, each capable of carrying sling loads of up to twelve tons over short distances, or up to eight tons over a radius of 160 miles. My fourth helicopter squadron is an attack squadron, with AH-4 VIPER attack helicopters and a few support transport and lift helicopter. Do you wish to use my helicopters to reinforce our troops in Buna, General?"

Blamey was obviously taken aback by the numbers quoted by Ingrid, not having hoped for that much. He then nodded his head once, a grim expression on his face.

"It sounds like your helicopters could indeed be my savior, Colonel. Right now, I have a badly outnumbered force in Wau, near Salamaua, called the 'Kanga Force'. It is composed presently of less than 400 exhausted, underequipped men with no artillery support and little ammunition. A Japanese regimental-sized force is now approaching them from Salamaua and they are also under intermittent fire from Japanese planes based in Lae, Wewak and Rabaul. If I don't succeed quickly in reinforcing and resupplying the Kanga Force, it will be crushed by the Japanese and we will then have lost a valuable jump point for any future attack on Salamaua and Lae. The problem is that the airfield in Wau is a short, rudimentary strip blocked at one end by a mountain, which makes landings very tricky, even for C-47s. Add to that the nearly constant bad weather, low-lying clouds and mist, plus surrounding hills and mountains, and you will see how difficult it is to reinforce Wau by air. As for ground routes, there is only a series of rudimentary trails and creeks that can be used, but they cannot be used by motor vehicles."

"I see, General. My helicopters can certainly do the job as you request. My wing can however do a lot more for you and Wau than simply airlift troops and supplies to there. I can also provide close air support to your soldiers in Wau and also suppress the enemy air power in the area with my medium bombers and fighter-bombers."

Blamey gave her a somewhat dubious look then.

"Colonel, the bombers and fighters of the 5th Air Force have been trying for months now to neutralize the Japanese air threat over Papua New Guinea, with little success, no disrespect meant of course to General Whitehead. What makes you think that you will have an easier job of it?"

Ingrid then looked at Whitehead, her expression sober.

"Permission to speak frankly, sir."

"Go ahead, Ingrid."

Ingrid then looked back at Blamey.

"Sir Blamey, for one thing my planes are new models that outperform the ones in present service with the 5th Air Force. I also have more of them right here, while the bombers of 5th Bomber Command are only staging through Port Moresby in penny packets. Second, I use air and joint tactics that are exclusive to my wing for the moment and that came from the future. If you didn't know before about that, then know that I was

adopted in 1941 by Nancy Laplante, the Canadian time traveler from the future. She taught me many things before her death, including some modern air and joint tactics. Third, I already beat twice the Japanese at their game, in both the Philippines and in Guadalcanal, and I believe that I can do it here again, if given a modicum of freedom in my actions. As for those who say that a female unit can't do the job, then I could tell you that the laughter of the male doubters in Guadalcanal is now quite forced. Now, about your problem in Wau, do you want the basic transport package, or the complete air support package, deluxe edition?"

Both Blamey and Whitehead couldn't help chuckle at her choice of words.

"You should be a used car salesman, Colonel." Said Blamey, smiling. "You certainly have the confidence of one. I will take your deluxe package, if General Whitehead is ready to pay for it."

"It's on me, Sir Blamey." Replied a grinning Whitehead. Ingrid made a show of rubbing her hands together then.

"Excellent! That will give me a chance to finally practice a few things I learned from Nancy about joint operations that I didn't have a chance to try in Guadalcanal."

20:29 (PNG Time)

Command hut, Headquarters 99th Composite Wing

Jackson Airfield, Port Moresby

"The volunteers for the forward air control ground team are here, Ingrid."

"Very well, Evelyn, let them in."

Ingrid got up from behind her improvised work desk as four women marched in her office, situated at one end of her command Nissen Hut. She smiled on seeing one of them but waited for all four to be stopped at attention in front of her before speaking in a friendly, relaxed voice.

"At ease, girls! Have a seat."

Ingrid sat as well, then looked thoughtfully at the four volunteers. The highest ranking was First Lieutenant Elizabeth Gardner, a young and pretty B-25NG bomber pilot that had been with the Finellas since its formation in 1942 and had fought in all its battles. Then, there was Corporal Mary Takahashi, small but also beautiful with her almond eyes and deep tan, who had quickly become maybe the best radio operator of the unit. Next was Private Frida Horst, another excellent radio operator and the archetype of the blond

Aryan girl, tall, blue-eyed and with generous curves. To top the cake, there was finally Private Katharine Hepburn. The B-25NG machine gunner and Hollywood actress was tall for a woman, standing 171 centimeters, and had a slender but athletic body. At the age of 35, she was distinctly older than the average woman of the wing, but she was still in top physical shape. Having spoken to her before at length, Ingrid also knew that she was an avowed feminist, atheist and non-conformist with very liberal ideas and a strong character. She also happened to be an accomplished outdoors person and a top notch shooter, apart from being fearless. On learning about the exploits of the 99th in Guadalcanal, the actress had then acted with typical impetuosity and had enrolled without a second thought for her Hollywood career, stunning her cinema producers but also spurring a large number of young women in following her example. Overall, Ingrid thought for herself that she had now a very high quality forward air control ground team in front of her.

“First of, girls, I thank you for volunteering for this job. It will be a very important one but also a dangerous one, as you will be in the frontlines for days.”

“Gee, that will be a real change from Guadalcanal, Colonel!” Said Frida Horst in a joking tone, making the other women, including Ingrid, laugh.

“True, but you will be in real danger of being surrounded and overwhelmed far from other friendly forces. You will also be the only women in the midst of hundreds of male soldiers.”

“HA!” Exclaimed Katharine Hepburn. “I’ll beat them back with a stick if need be.”

They laughed again, then Ingrid concentrated her attention of Elizabeth Gardner.

“Liz, you will be inaugurating our concept of forward air control ground team, thus a lot of attention will be on you and your girls. A lot of lives will also depend on you. You will be responsible to call in and coordinate our airstrikes and to direct our helicopters’ approach to their landing zones. You will also be my prime liaison means with the local ground commander. About that last point, I must emphasize that, while you will be there to support him, don’t let him tell you how to do your job or how we do our job. He wants a certain location or group of Japanese hit? Fine, but you will decide the best way and means to do it, not him. Once you will be on the ground in Wau, I will keep at your disposal a permanent air cover of a few planes that will be rotated around. That will include at a minimum one of our AC-142G heavy gunships, armed with everything

including a five-ton BLOCKBUSTER bomb. That AC-142G will stay overhead even in bad weather and at night, so you will always have something above to back you up.” Gardner’s eyes lit up at the mention of the AC-142G.

“That’s great! The Japanese on Guadalcanal have grown to be terrorized at the simple sight of one of our gunships. They should impress as well the Japanese here.”

“I certainly hope so, Liz. Don’t spare the use of them, as they were designed for exactly this kind of situation.”

“Hell, I would love to become a gunner on one of our REAPERS!” Said dreamily Hepburn, prompting a serious look from Ingrid.

“Kat, you do well over in Wau and you will get your wish, I promise you. You have already proved to be an outstanding air gunner and you will certainly do the job on an AC-142G. I will deal with Captain Straughan if she screams and bitches about losing you. While in Wau, I am counting on you as its driver and machine gunner to keep your team safe.”

As Hepburn made a triumphant gesture with her fist, Ingrid turned her attention on Mary Takahashi.

“Mary, you and Frida will be vital for Liz in keeping opened a radio link with our planes. Protect and maintain your radios as best you can once there, as they will be the main tools of your team. You will also have with you a number of infra-red beacon lights to mark landing zones and friendly locations. Our orbiting gunship will help your job by retransmitting any call from you or from the local Australian commander to Port Moresby. Once we are finished here, you will go see Major Hudson to establish with her a list of predetermined code words you will use instead of standard codes, in order to speed up the sending of calls for air support. You will be bringing to Wau two jeeps, one with a machinegun mount and one with a trailer, so you will have ample space for your kit and supplies. You will also be regularly resupplied via helicopter.”

Ingrid then looked at the group as a whole.

“Well, that’s about it for me. Make sure that you are packed by tomorrow morning for a stay of at least a week in a remote jungle location. Please don’t forget to bring a supply of anti-malaria tablets and insect repellent, girls: I would hate to see you get sick over there.”

All four women nodded soberly at those words: they had seen too many Marines in Guadalcanal and Espiritu Santo contract malaria because of their negligence in following prophylactic anti-malaria measures.

“Do you have any questions? No? Then you are dismissed. Pick up your assigned jeeps from our airfield security platoon and go pack your kits. Be back here tomorrow after breakfast.”

The four women and Ingrid then got up and exchanged salutes before the volunteers left the office. Now alone, Ingrid felt a pang in her stomach: while her forward air control ground team will have a crucial job to do, it will also be at very high risk, especially in the first few days, before strong reinforcements could arrive in Wau to stabilize the situation there. She would hate to lose those four brave women. In fact, she always hated losing any of her women, even though she knew too well that losses were inevitable in war.

09:13 (PNG Time)

Sunday, January 24, 1943 ‘C’

Berry Airfield, Port Moresby area

Both General Blamey and Brigadier General Whitehead were on hand with Ingrid to watch over a thousand Australian soldiers of the 17th Infantry Brigade load up aboard the waiting 48 Sikorsky UH-2 PELICAN medium transport helicopters of the 79th Helicopter Group ‘The Hornets’. Six 25-Pounder howitzers of the Australian 1st Field Regiment and their light tractor trucks, along with a total of six jeeps with trailers, were also being loaded inside eight heavy UH-3 SKYCRANE helicopters. Twenty fully loaded and armed AH-4 VIPER attack helicopters were waiting in another corner of the airfield for the time to lift off and escort the fleet of transport helicopters. Added to that were four UH-1 DOVE light reconnaissance helicopters that would serve as a reconnaissance screen, plus a fifth one that was going to act as a flying command post.

One UH-2 that had been sitting apart from the 48 other medium helicopters of the fleet then started its engines in advance of the others, attracting the attention of Blamey and Whitehead.

“Isn’t that pilot a bit early in starting his engines, Colonel Dows?” Asked Blamey, making Ingrid shake her head and smile.

“That pilot is on time, General: she is going to fly our forward air control ground team in advance of the main force, so that they can land and visualize the ground ahead of our helicopters. This way, if the Japanese try to oppose the landing of our helicopters, Lieutenant Gardner will be able to call in air support at once.”

“Hum! You seem to have developed your helicopter tactics to quite a dept, Colonel.”

“Without exaggerating or bragging, General, my wing actually is a pioneer in terms of both joint air support tactics and helicopter employment doctrine and tactics. I just hope that others will see the light and pay more attention to those two domains. Right now, there is still too much inter-service rivalry for our own good.”

That earned Ingrid a look from Whitehead, who however didn't say a word as she continued for the benefit of Blamey.

“My fighters and bombers will be flying in successive waves over Wau, to provide a continuous air coverage over the area, while one EC-142E will be flying over the sea East of Wau to detect and track any response by Japanese planes from either Lae or Rabaul. All my planes will be able to communicate with Lieutenant Gardner on the ground, in order to facilitate air-ground cooperation.”

Blamey nodded his head, impressed.

“When I think that the radios between my army ground units and our air force planes can't interact because their frequencies are incompatible. If this operation proves successful, then I will have a few pointed recommendations to send to the War Office.”

“Instead of recommendations, General, may I suggest that you instead act on whatever success we get in Wau and prepare more troops to be then used quickly in a helicopter air assault on Lae. This could be a tremendous opportunity for us to take the Japanese completely by surprise while they still don't realize the full threat my helicopters represent and to grab their main base in New Guinea overnight.”

Both Blamey and Whitehead snapped their heads to look at Ingrid with both surprise and understanding.

“But...that's a stroke of genius, Colonel!” Exclaimed Whitehead, making a sour smile appear on Ingrid's lips as the helicopter carrying her forward observation team was lifting off.

“Nothing that a 21st Century general could not think of, General.”

10:51 (PNG Time)

Village and airfield of Wau

246 kilometers North of Port Moresby

Elizabeth Gardner didn't like what she saw as the UH-2 she was flying in finally had the village of Wau in sight in the middle of a rather narrow valley surrounded by large hills and mountain slopes. For one thing, the occasional explosions of what looked like mortar bombs among the dispersed houses and huts of the village were a sure sign that the Japanese were already near Wau and had the place under their sight. Thankfully, there were no Japanese planes visible in the gray sky. Elizabeth patted the shoulder of the pilot of her helicopter and shouted over the noise of the rotors.

"LAND IN THE CENTER OF THE LANDING STRIP, AS PLANNED."

The woman nodded to show that she had understood and put her helicopter in a wide right side turn, pointing it towards the grass strip visible about 800 meters away. As they approached it, some tracer bullets fired from the hills to the South of the airstrip came up towards the helicopter, but thankfully missed. Elizabeth clenched her teeth at that.

"Well, these are either Japanese soldiers trying to shoot us down, or Australian soldiers that never saw a helicopter before and are not worrying about identifying their targets before shooting at them. Great! I can't even call in air support before knowing which it is."

Going back in the cargo cabin of the helicopter, she sat back in her jeep, in which also sat Katharine Hepburn and Mary Takahashi, while Frida Horst stayed behind the wheel of their second jeep.

"Listen up, girls! The village of Wau is under mortar fire and somebody south of the airstrip just tried to nail us with a machinegun. We will thus be landing on a hot LZ. The moment our helicopter touches ground, I want those retaining chains on our jeeps taken off, and quickly! We will then drive out and rush to the nearest bushes along the northern edge of the landing strip. Once there, we will try to find the local commander, to warn him that mass reinforcements are on their way. Hopefully, that commander will be able to confirm to us where the nearest Japanese are, so that we could start calling in our bombers for some strikes."

The three other women nodded in understanding, then instinctively checked that their M2A2 carbines were loaded and had their safeties on.

Watching nervously by a window of the cabin, Elizabeth sprung up from her seat as the helicopter bumped gently on the grassy surface of the airstrip.

"TAKE OFF THE RETAINING CHAINS!"

Helping her three comrades to do that, she undid herself one of the chains, then jumped back in her jeep as Katharine Hepburn started the engine of their vehicle and as the rear cargo ramp of the UH-2 went down.

“GO GO GO!”

Hepburn didn't have to be told twice, driving the jeep out at a slow speed at first, then accelerating as soon as her wheels were on the grass. Frida Horst didn't waste time either in following out in their second jeep, which had a trailer full of supplies attached to it. As soon as the two jeeps were out, the UH-2 lifted off in a hurry, turning west to avoid overflying what could be Japanese positions south of the airstrip. As the jeeps were racing across the grass strip towards the nearest clump of trees and bushes along the northern edge, Elizabeth saw an Australian soldier, with his typical 'barber bowl' style steel helmet, rise from behind a bush to wave at her.

“THERE, KAT! GET US BEHIND THAT BUSH!”

A few dispersed bullets hit the ground around them then, missing them but still pushing them to hurry to cover. After a few more tense seconds, the four women and their two jeeps finally made it to behind a clump of trees and were immediately surrounded by seven Australian soldiers wearing tattered uniforms and carrying bolt-action rifles. The corporal in that group had one wide-eyed look at the four American women in combat uniforms and steel helmets.

“Well, strike me pink¹!”

He then turned around and shouted towards someone further away along the edge of the landing strip.

“THEY'RE YANKEE SHEILAS²! THEY'RE IN GIGGLE SUITS³!”

One of the soldiers then stared for a moment at Mary Takahashi and swore while pointing his rifle at her.

“There's a Jap with them, Corporal!”

Elizabeth Gardner interposed herself at once to avoid a tragic misunderstanding, while Katharine Hepburn pointed her carbine at the Australian threatening Takahashi.

“EVERYONE CALM DOWN! SHE IS AN AMERICAN AND IS UNDER ME, SO PUT DOWN YOUR RIFLE, SOLDIER!”

¹ Strike me pink! Exclamation of surprise or disbelief in Australian slang.

² Sheila : A woman in Australian slang.

³ Giggle suit : combat fatigue in Australian slang of the Second World War.

The soldier who had pointed his rifle at Mary Takahashi hesitated for a moment, then obeyed her reluctantly.

“What are you Sheilas doing here? And what was that flying contraption you came in with?”

“First, soldier, you will address me as ‘Lieutenant’ and not ‘Sheila’. American women have had the right to join the Army since early last year. Now, where could I find an officer? I need to find out where exactly the Japanese are, so I could direct air strikes on them.”

The Australian soldiers looked at each other with bemusement.

“A Sheila, calling in air strikes?”

As Elizabeth sighed with frustration, Katharine Hepburn whispered to her.

“I think that we found the local equivalent of Kentucky Hillbillies, Lieutenant.”

“I think that you’re right, Kat.”

The arrival at a run of an Australian lieutenant, whose uniform was about as tattered as that of his men, finally put an end to the uneasy confrontation. After a disbelieving look at the four women, the newcomer went to face Elizabeth, who had climbed down from her jeep.

“Who are you, ladies?”

“I’m First Lieutenant Elizabeth Gardner, from the 99th Composite Wing of the United States Army Air Force. My team came ahead of a large group of helicopters that will soon land over a thousand men of the 17th Infantry Brigade. Now, if you could please show me where the nearest Japanese are, I will be calling some airstrikes on their heads in advance of the landing of our reinforcements, Lieutenant.”

After a moment of stunned silence, the young Australian officer led Elizabeth to a nearby tree and, using it as partial cover, pointed in succession a series of hills to the South of the airstrip, maybe 600 meters away.

“We don’t know where all the Nippo⁴ are, miss, but they positioned their machineguns and mortars along the ridgeline of those hills to the South. We however suspect that a sizeable number of Japanese soldiers are advancing towards us and the airstrip through the jungle between those hills and us.”

⁴ Nippo : Japanese in WW2 Australian slang.

“Very well, Lieutenant. I will see what I can do about those Japanese. In the meantime, could you warn your commander that Brigadier Moton should arrive here soon with a first wave of reinforcements?”

Not waiting for an answer from the Australian, Elizabeth then twisted her head around to make a sign towards her jeep.

“CORPORAL TAKAHASHI, I NEED YOUR RADIO!”

She then returned her eyes on the Australian lieutenant, who had tensed up.

“Corporal Mary Takahashi was born and raised in California, Lieutenant, and she is a loyal American, so don’t get excited about her. You better pass the word among your men that she is with us, before some idiot takes pot shots at her. If one does, I will shoot the said idiot myself.”

Before the Australian could get over his indignant reaction to those last words, Mary ran up to Elizabeth and took cover behind the tree, close to the man, passing her radio handset to her superior, who grabbed it at once and spoke in it while consulting her map.

“Blue Hell One, this is Jane Gee! Request for support, over!”

“Send request, Jane Gee!” Was the nearly immediate answer.

“Blue Hell One, I need you to flame up the ridgelines south of the airstrip, at the following coordinates...”

While he would have liked to see those airstrikes, the lieutenant from the New Guinea Rifles knew he had some important news to pass on to his commander, thus he started on his way to a hut about 200 meters away that sheltered the temporary command post of his unit. Before that, though, he grabbed hold of his sergeant and told him about Mary Takahashi and the threat from Elizabeth Gardner, making the NCO make an indignant face.

“Bloody hell, sir! How could a Sheila dare to give us orders? The Yanks must be bloody balls up⁵ to enlist Sheilas in their army.”

“Maybe, Sergeant, but just make sure with the men that there is no arse about face⁶ with that Nippo Sheila while I’m gone to see The Bull⁷.”

“Uh, right, sir.”

⁵ Bloody balls up: In a total mess, in Australian slang.

⁶ Arse about face : Confusion or mix up in Australian slang.

⁷ The Bull : Commanding officer in Australian slang.

The Australian sergeant was still passing the directives from his lieutenant to his men when he saw eight B-25 medium bombers fly down from the gray clouds covering the sky and swoop over the hills to the South of the airstrip. The rolling balls of flames from bursting napalm bombs covering the ridgelines then made him and his men yell in approval.

“YEAH! THAT’S WHAT I CALL A REAL BONZA⁸ JOB!”

One soldier then pointed with alarm at the sky just above the ridgelines to their West.

“SARGEANT, A BUNCH OF, UH, DOOVER⁹ THINGS ARE COMING IN!”

The sergeant had one look and suddenly felt hope rise at the mass of flying dots now heading towards the airstrip.

“THOSE ARE REINSTOUSHMENTS¹⁰, LADDIES¹¹! WE WILL SOON BE GREETING SOME MORE DIGGERS¹² TO HELP US.”

The Australians then watched with fascination and mounting joy as nearly sixty helicopters, eight of them huge machines that would dwarf even a C-47 transport aircraft, approached in two long parallel lines, then turned abruptly to the right in a coordinated move to come down on the airstrip. The helicopters landed nearly simultaneously, the rear line fifty meters behind the first one and with approximately sixty meters between helicopters of the same line, then lowered their rear cargo ramps, disgorging hundreds of Australian soldiers. Six trucks towing field howitzers, along with a few jeeps, also rolled out of the bigger helicopters and immediately drove away towards the village of Wau. The helicopters stayed on the ground less than half a minute, time only to unload their troops and equipment, then took off and veered west, flying away at top speed. One of the jeeps stopped besides the sergeant, who had come out in the open to cheer the newcomers. The NCO barely stopped himself from saluting when a brigadier jumped out of the jeep to come see him. He still came to rigid attention as the brigadier, a tall and lean infantry officer, stopped in front of him.

“Sergeant, could you direct me to your unit’s command post?”

⁸ Bonza : Very good, alright in Australian slang.

⁹ Doover : Word for any item with an unremembered name, in Australian slang.

¹⁰ Reinstouchments : Reinforcements in WW2 Australian slang.

¹¹ Laddies : Boys, in Australian slang.

¹² Diggers : Australian soldiers.

"Of course, sir! It is in that hut over there. I can go with you to guide you to it, sir."

"Then jump in, Sergeant."

"Yes sir! Uh, there are four Yank Sheilas nearby that also came by helicopters, sir. Should they also come with us?"

"Yes! Go tell them to follow us."

"Right away, sir!"

Leaving at a run, the NCO came back barely a minute later, atop one of two jeeps driven by women. The brigadier smiled to Elizabeth Gardner as her jeep stopped level with his jeep.

"Good job on that airstrike, Lieutenant. When should we expect the arrival of the second wave from my brigade?"

"If the weather holds, in about four hours, sir."

"Excellent! Let's go meet the commander of the New Guinea Rifles together, so that we can plan a close air support program with you."

"I'm following you, sir."

With the sergeant of the New Guinea Rifles transferring to the brigadier's jeep first, the three jeeps then sped away down the sloping grass airstrip, taking a dirt track to get into the village.

Guided by the sergeant, the three jeeps finally stopped besides a thatched roof hut from which a long HF whip antenna stuck out from a window. The brigadier jumped out, along with Elizabeth and her three women, and entered the hut, finding five men inside the main room who were either manning radios or looking at maps.

"ROOM!" Shouted one of the men, making the others come up to attention.

"At ease, laddies!" Said the brigadier. "Who is in command here?"

"Me, sir!" Answered a graying major with a thick moustache while stepping forward. "Major Fred Bullock, New Guinea Rifles."

The brigadier shook hands with him then.

"Brigadier Murray Moten, Commander of the 17th Infantry Brigade. I came here on the authority of General Blamey to take command of Kanga Force. I brought a thousand men with me, along with six 25-pounder field howitzers. More troops should arrive by helicopters in about four hours."

"That's splendid news, sir! The Nippos were about to fall hard on our backs here."

"How many of them are attacking Wau in your best estimate, Major?"

"I'd say regimental strength at least, sir, three to four thousands at a minimum. However, they don't seem to have heavy weapons with them, apart from mortars and machineguns."

"Good! My howitzers should make an impression on them. By the way, this is Lieutenant Gardner and her forward air control ground team, from the 99th Composite Wing. She will be coordinating the close air support from the 99th Wing for our benefit." Bullock hesitated for a moment but then shook hands with Elizabeth and her three women, frowning noticeably at the sight of Mary Takahashi but not saying a word before facing again Brigadier Moten.

"I must say that those helicopters were quite a new sight to us, sir."

That made Moten smile with amusement at Bullock.

"Oh, the 99th Wing is full of surprises, Major. For one thing, it is an entirely female unit. Further, it has some new planes that we never saw before here in New Guinea. Those women however proved their worth already in Guadalcanal, giving quite a beating to the Japanese over there. I thus expect you and your staff to pay attention to what Lieutenant Gardner may tell you and to assist her team as much as you can. From now on, all requests for close air support will go through her."

"Uh, understood, sir." Said Bullock, visibly having some difficulty with that but not daring to question Moten's directives. "Shall I brief you on the tactical situation here, sir?"

"By all means, Major."

Moving to a nearby map board, Bullock spent a couple minutes to describe the ground and the positions of both Australian and Japanese troops to Moten, with Elizabeth listening on. At the end, Bullock gave a concerned look to the brigadier.

"My biggest worry right now, sir, is about Japanese soldiers infiltrating our lines through the jungle at night, when our planes won't be able to support us. To prevent that would take many more soldiers to form a tight perimeter around the village and airstrip, sir."

"If I may, sirs." Then cut in Elizabeth politely. "Even at night, the 99th Wing will be able to provide close air support. While we will keep on rotation eight B-25 medium

bombers and four P-38N fighters over Wau during daylight hours, we will also have at all times two AC-142G heavy gunships orbiting overhead, on call for immediate close air support.”

“And what would those ‘gunships’ be exactly, Lieutenant?” Asked Bullock, intrigued. Elizabeth made a mean smile at that.

“Very mean beasts that have radars and night vision sights to point their guns. Each AC-142G is armed with twelve 40mm automatic guns pointed as a single battery from one side of its fuselage, plus one nose-mounted five inch gun with limited traverse. It also can carry an assortment of bombs of up to five tons. The Japanese on Guadalcanal had grown terrorized of our gunships...until we and the Marines of 1st Division threw them out of the island.”

“Twelve 40mm guns and one five inch gun?” Said Bullock in total disbelief. “How big are those gunships of yours, Lieutenant?”

“They are actually a variant of the C-142 transport aircraft, which is the biggest flying plane in existence right now, Major. They have enough fuel to stay on station for over ten hours at a time and can fly and operate at night and in bad weather. If the Japanese make the mistake of concentrating for an attack, then they will regret it.” Said resolutely Elizabeth.

14:39 (PNG Time)

Australian frontline positions

Wau Valley, New Guinea

Elizabeth, accompanied by Mary Takahashi, was following closely Brigadier Moten and Major Bullock during an inspection tour of the Australian frontline positions just south of the airstrip when she received a radio call on the hand portable UHF radio hooked to her web gear.

“Jane Gee, this is Dragon One, message, over!”

Stopping a moment to answer the call, Elizabeth keyed the microphone of her small, transistorized transceiver.

“This is Jane Gee. Send message, over!”

She then recognized the voice of Captain Betty Guild, the pilot of Dragon One, also known as ‘Puff the Magic Dragon’, and the commander of the 118th Special Close Air Support Squadron.

"Jane Gee, be advised that our FLIR cameras have detected what seems to be a large concentration of troops assembling in the jungle at the foot of the hills south of the airstrip. They are actually massing on the northern side of the hills facing you. I need confirmation that no friendly troops are in that area, over."

"Wait one, Dragon One!" Replied Elizabeth before stepping quickly to the side of Brigadier Moten, attracting his attention.

"Yes, Lieutenant?"

"Sir, one of our gunships flying overhead has just sighted a large troop concentration forming at the foot of the ridgeline facing us. Can you confirm to me that none of your troops are in that area, sir?"

Moten became tense at once while starring at her.

"Our most advanced positions are barely fifty meters to the South of us, Lieutenant, and I am not aware of any patrol that has been sent towards those hills. How many troops did your gunship spot?"

"One moment, sir." Replied Elizabeth before keying again her UHF radio. "Dragon One, this is Jane Gee. Give me an estimate of the number of troops you spotted near the hills, over."

"Many hundreds, maybe even a thousand or two, Jane Gee. They are now starting to advance towards the airstrip in multiple columns through the bush, over."

"How far are they from the southern edge of the airstrip, Dragon One?"

"The main mass is still at the foot of the hills, 800 yards from the airstrip. The heads of the columns are now roughly 600 yards from the airstrip. Do you authorize a BLOCKBUSTER strike, over?"

Elizabeth then looked gravely at Moten.

"Sir, we are talking about one to two thousand troops. They have started to advance in columns towards the airstrip and are now 600 yards away. Our two gunships overhead could engage them now with heavy blast bombs, but delaying their use could let the Japanese approach too close to then use them without risks to your men."

"How powerful precisely are those heavy blast bombs, Lieutenant?"

"Sir, we are talking about five-ton Fuel Air Explosive bombs. Anyone within 200 yards will be killed by their blast overpressure, while anyone within 500 yards would end up in hospital. It is now or never, sir."

Moten was visibly stunned by those figures, while Major Bullock's jaw dropped wide open.

"Christ! I better tell our men to take cover. You have my permission to drop your blast bombs, Lieutenant."

"Thank you, sir." Said Elizabeth before keying her radio again.

"Dragon One, this is Jane Gee. You are cleared to drop two BLOCKBUSTER bombs along the northern foot of the hills south of the airstrip. Be advised that friendly outposts are positioned about one hundred yards south of the airstrip. Be careful with your aim, over."

"Will do, Jane Gee! I will assess the results after the drop, to see if we need to strafe with 40mm fire. Dragon One, out!"

Elizabeth looked again at Moten, who was now speaking in the handset of a backpack VHF radio carried by a signalman. She waited for him to be finished before speaking to him.

"Two heavy bombs will be dropped within a minute, sir. We better take some cover now."

"Right! Let's go to that drainage ditch over there."

Elizabeth, still followed by Mary Takahashi with her long range backpack radio, didn't need to be told twice and started running. She had seen already one F.A.E. BLOCKBUSTER bomb explode in Guadalcanal and it had been a titanic sight. The carnage it had caused then had been even more fearsome. In fact, if Betty Guild or her wingman misjudged their aim and dropped their bombs near her, then the protection of that drainage ditch would be only illusory.

Their group was jumping in the drainage ditch as the two AC-142G gunships, flying just below the gray clouds covering the sky, were lining up on the hills to the South. Crouching in the bottom of the ditch, Elizabeth grabbed her field binoculars and anxiously pointed them up at the two big aircraft. She had to wait only twenty seconds before the gunships each released one big, fat bomb. A small parachute then deployed from the tail of each bomb, pulling out a long cable that actually ended with the ignition device for the ethylene oxide and aluminum powder mix filling the bombs.

"BOMBS ON THE WAY!" Shouted Elizabeth as a warning. The Australians around her, curious about those bombs, however kept watching the two big projectiles fall towards the ground. What they could not see from that distance were the long spike-like nose probes of the bombs, meant to initiate them well above the ground in order to maximize their blast effects. What they did see was the bursting open of the bombs and

the near instant dispersal of two wide clouds of droplets at treetop level, each cloud about 250 meters in diameter and fifty meters thick. The ignition devices, following at the end of their cable, then touched the cloud of fuel now mixed with atmospheric oxygen. The two clouds suddenly flashed into huge balls of flames, while a huge blast overpressure wave traveled out of each ball of flames at hypersonic speed. Even from 800 meters away, the residual overpressure wave washing over the Australian troops made every helmet or hat that was not attached fly away, while the air was nearly sucked out of their lungs. Two seconds later, titanic roars rumbled over Wau as the fireballs turned into rising mushroom clouds of black smoke. Brigadier Moten, who had just lost his bush hat, starred in awe at the mushroom clouds.

“Dear mother of God!”

He barely had time to duck then before a rain of debris and ripped tree branches started falling all around him and the airstrip. Something thudded to the ground maybe ten meters away from him as he was cautiously raising his head again. Elizabeth had one look at what had just landed, then had to turn away before violently throwing up. Moten opened wide, horrified eyes when he realized that the object was the mangled and burned up torso of a Japanese soldier, the head, arms and legs ripped away and with the flesh in tatters. More than one Australian soldier also threw up at the sight. Moten then saw that the jungle at the foot of the hills facing him had now been completely defoliated over areas hundreds of meters wide. He gave a pale look at Elizabeth.

“It was a bloody good thing that your bombardiers aimed well, Lieutenant. I would hate to receive one of those things on my head.”

Elizabeth, her mouth still sour from throwing up, nodded weakly her head at that.

“Oh, I wouldn’t care either for that, sir. I can tell you from my experience in Guadalcanal that there probably are now dozens of dying or severely wounded Japanese soldiers in the area surrounding the blast epicenters. These Japanese soldiers will still be dazed for a few moments..if they have not gone crazy.”

“I don’t doubt that for a minute, Lieutenant.” Said Moten before shouting at the troops around him. “FIX BAYONETS AND FORM AN EXTENDED SKIRMISH LINE! WE ARE GOING TO SWEEP THE BLAST AREA TO FINISH OFF ANY SURVIVING NIPPO. GIVE NO QUARTERS!”

Elizabeth rose from the ditch with Mary Takahashi and keyed her UHF radio while starting to follow Moten and his command party.

“Dragon One, this is Jane Gee. Hold on to your 40mm gunfire for the moment: our infantry will now advance and sweep the blasted grounds. I am going forwards as well and will call you again if needed. Confirm receipt of my message, over.”

“Dragon One understood! Holding out gunfire unless requested to support again.”

The first 200 meters of the advance were uneventful as the long line of Australian infantrymen swept south through the progressively more devastated jungle. Then, the Australians started encountering dispersed, feeble resistance from a few Japanese soldiers that had survived the airstrike. However, being heavily outnumbered and still being under the shock of the titanic blasts, those Japanese were quickly overwhelmed and either shot or mercilessly bayoneted. The advancing line of Australians then started encountering dozens of wounded Japanese, along with pieces of human bodies littering the jungle floor. Those wounded Japanese were nearly all bleeding from the nose and mouth, their lungs ruptured by the overpressure from the bombs, and all of them proved to be deaf, their eardrums punctured. The Australians gave them no mercy, having seen in the past too many atrocities committed by Japanese soldiers in previous battles, and bayoneted them, saving their bullets for the moment. Moten was secretly surprised and also impressed on seeing Elizabeth Gardner and Mary Takahashi do their bit at bayoneting without flinching, their faces impassive. What he couldn't know was that the women of the 99th in Guadalcanal had seen on two occasions what happened to female aviators shot down and captured by Japanese soldiers. Those women, already wounded in the crash of their helicopters, had been gang-raped, then tortured to death in a most barbaric way. The resolve of Ingrid's women to not let themselves be captured alive and their hatred of the enemy had then been further reinforced by that grim lesson.

The line of Australian soldiers was arriving at the foot of the hills facing the airstrip as the second wave of reinforcements from Port Moresby was starting to land. Looking around him at the denuded and uprooted trees littering the ground, mixed with pieces of flesh and ripped body parts, Moten shook his head in disbelief, a mix of relief and triumph washing over him.

“The Japanese must have lost at least 2,000 men in this airstrike, if I can judge from the amount of body parts around us. This was nothing short of a massacre. With most of my brigade now here, we will be able to push away and chase down what's left

of the Japanese around Wau. Your gunships are indeed fearful weapons, Lieutenant Gardner.”

“They were designed for just such type of fighting, sir.” Replied Elizabeth in a firm voice. “I can promise you that this will not be the last time the Japanese will have to taste their medicine in Papua New Guinea.”

11:08 (PNG Time)

Tuesday, January, 1943 ‘C’

Headquarters, 5th Air Force Advanced Echelon

Jackson Airfield, Port Moresby

Papua New Guinea

Ingrid could have rightly felt that she was the small fish in the conference room of the headquarters building, being the most junior in rank in the crowd of American and Australian senior officers present. Apart from General Douglas MacArthur and General Thomas Blamey, there were four lieutenant generals, five major generals, three brigadier generals and four full colonels. Apart from being the only woman present, Ingrid’s stunning youth also contrasted sharply with the crowd of men in their advanced forties and fifties. Despite all of that, she showed self confidence and assurance, something that seemed to both surprise and irk some of the generals and colonels present. After all, those senior commanders were all here because of her suggestion for an air assault on Lae, a suggestion enthusiastically supported by General Thomas Blamey, who had pushed it to General MacArthur. As a result, MacArthur had called for a command meeting in Jackson Airfield to review with his main unit commanders his general strategy for the offensive in New Guinea. Right now, many of those commanders looked at her with barely hidden misgivings or even contempt as Blamey introduced to them Ingrid’s basic idea to take Lae. The chief of staff of the First U.S. Army Corps, Major General Byers, who was still sporting a bandaged wound from the battle for Buna, leaned forward as Blamey finished speaking.

“Let me get this straight, General Blamey. You are basically proposing to flush all of our detailed plans for a ground offensive across Papua New Guinea, and this to replace them with a half-cooked suggestion from an air force lieutenant colonel. Is that it?”

Before Blamey could reply to that, MacArthur intervened to rebuke Byers, surprising most of the generals present by his forcefulness.

“General Byers, that lieutenant colonel has more than proved her tactical and strategic savvy in the past and has my full confidence. Colonel Dows’ idea is actually interesting me a lot and has the potential to quicken our offensive while dealing a stunning blow to the Japanese...the same way she has helped save our garrison in Wau. Colonel Dows, you may present in detail your proposed plan for the taking of Lae.”

“Thank you, General.” Said Ingrid while getting up from her chair. She then walked to the large map of Papua New Guinea spread on one of the walls and grabbed a wooden pointer, then faced the assembled commanders.

“Gentlemen, you had up to recently little choice of means at your disposal to proceed with your offensive in New Guinea, something which severely limited your options for action. However, I believe that the arrival of my helicopter group and of the planes of my wing that are equipped with night vision equipment has drastically changed the equation, as shown in Wau. But, apart from those new helicopters and planes, new tactics and doctrines are also needed in order to use to the utmost those helicopters and planes. As well, speed and surprise will be crucial if we want to seize Lae with a minimum of casualties. Lengthy preparations and buildup would only let time to the Japanese to appreciate and understand the threat our helicopters represent to them. This said, here is the plan I propose to take Lae. First, I intend to destroy on the ground and at night the Japanese planes based in New Guinea and Rabaul, and this just prior to launching an air assault on Lae. This assault...”

“Excuse me, Colonel Dows,” interrupted rather brusquely the commander of the American Fifth Bomber Command, Brigadier General Ramey, who looked irritated, “but my bomber groups have been hitting the Japanese airbases for months now. How can you say that you will be able to destroy the whole enemy air fleet on the ground in one night?”

Ingrid was tempted then to say something about present American bomber doctrines and the way the Fifth Bomber Command had used its heavy bombers piecemeal in high altitude attacks that lacked any precision. She however stayed polite and kept an impassive face while answering Ramey.

“Personal experience tells me so, General. The Japanese have very little night intercept capability and the few primitive radars they have are easily jammed by us. In

contrast, most of my planes can fly and attack at night with precision and my aircrews have months of experience in such night attack missions. My six AC-142G heavy gunships will use Fuel Air Explosive bombs and their 40mm gun batteries to destroy any Japanese aircraft found on the ground at Lae, Malabang Airfield, Finschhafen, Madang, Wewak and Rabaul. Two of my EC-142E electronic reconnaissance and command planes will both guide and support them, while also jamming the Japanese command radio nets. This way, the Japanese won't be able to communicate and realize that they are being attacked in a systematic way and will have little or no planes left to react anyway. At the same time, eight of my B-25NG medium bombers, guided by my EC-142Es, will strike the Japanese warships docked in Lae, while another eight B-25NGs will attack enemy warships in Simpson Harbor Bay, in Rabaul. I will reserve the rest of my medium bombers, along with my fighters, to provide daylight support for our troops landed in Lae. Now, for the troop landings in Lae..."

As Ingrid moved to near a large air photo mosaic pinned to the wall, Lieutenant General Robert Eichelberger, the commander of the U.S. First Army Corps, gave her a bemused look.

"Your planes can really attack at night with enough precision to hit planes and ships, Colonel?"

"Yes, General! They are equipped with both thermal imagery cameras, light intensification goggles and high definition radars."

"And why is your air wing the only unit here that seemingly have such wondrous night fighting equipment? How come that our other air units don't have them?"

"For two reasons, General: first, my wing was equipped fairly recently with the latest models available. Second, our units in the European Theatre are now receiving in priority nearly all the newer production models. That is unfortunately something that we can do little about here. Before you ask why my wing got a preferential treatment, the reason is simple and straightforward: I was tasked by General Arnold to develop new air doctrines and tactics in the context of joint operations. To return to the assault on Lae, I am planning for a three-stage operation. First, just after two heavy gunships will have eliminated the Lae air defenses, all fourteen of my C-142A heavy transport planes will land directly on the Lae airfield forty minutes before dawn and disgorge a full battalion from the 503rd Parachute Infantry Regiment, along with a squadron of M3 STUART light tanks. My transport planes will stay less than five minutes on the ground and will be doing what I call an air assault landing. A forward air control ground team will also be

landed at the same time and will provide a direct air support link to the ground assault commander, as it did for Brigadier Moten in Wau.”

Lieutenant General George Kenney, the commander of the 5th Air Force and the superior of Ingrid, discreetly watched the reactions of the generals and colonels around the table to what Ingrid was saying, concentrating in particular on American Army Air Force officers. He didn't like the way many of them seemed to either have difficulty following her concept of operation or to believe in it. He himself was already bought on her plan, having already discussed it quickly with Blamey and Whitehead. However, resistance to new ideas and blind adherence to official tactics and doctrines were still major scourges in the United States Army Air Forces. Allied to the generally low level of tactical training shown by the mostly green aircrews he was getting from the United States, it made for a frustrating situation for him. In contrast, the women of the 99th Wing had so far proven to date to be well-seasoned veterans, with generally at least twice the amount of flying hours than their male counterparts, apart from being superbly led by Ingrid Dows. Taking mental notes on a few of his subalterns, he then returned his attention on Ingrid, who had continued speaking.

“The second stage of the assault will be a massive landing at dawn by 54 helicopters carrying a total of 1,200 paratroopers from the 503rd P.I.R.. Those extra troopers will then help clear the Japanese from the airfield and port areas while my helicopters take off for Port Moresby to go load more troops and supplies. The third stage of the assault will, if this plan is approved, be provided by the C-47 medium transports of the 54th Troop Carrier Wing, which would be tasked to airlift more troops and supplies to Lae via a continuous daylight air bridge from Port Moresby. That air bridge, with my C-142s providing the night flights, would essentially continue until amphibious ships could dock in Lae and land heavy equipment and vehicles.”

“What about the enemy in Lae?” Asked Colonel Paul Prentice, the commander of the 54th Troop Carrier Wing, who had been taken by surprise when Ingrid had mentioned his unit as being a potential part of her plan. “What if your, uh, air assault fails, or if the weather becomes too poor for my C-47s to fly?”

Ingrid gave him a penetrating look: she had not been impressed up to now by the flying performance or navigation skills of the average American Army transport pilots based in Australia and New Guinea.

“If the weather becomes too heavy for the taste of your pilots, Colonel, then my women will pick up the slack as best they can. As for the enemy forces in Lae, our

intelligence is that there are less than 7,000 Japanese there, a good part of them being actually sailors and not soldiers. I have consciously limited my assault plan to Lae itself, with nearby Malabang Airfield to be captured afterwards, precisely to make sure that the odds are not heavily against us. The enemy will still in theory outnumber us on the ground at first, but they will have no air support and will be themselves hit by constant airstrikes. Once we will have secured a solid bridgehead in Lae, we will then be in prime position to reduce or isolate in detail the Japanese forces in New Guinea. As for the Japanese units presently occupying Salamaua, to the South of Lae, I say let them rot and starve there! With us in Lae and Wau and with the control of the air and of the sea in the area in our hands, that Japanese garrison will be cut off and deprived of supplies, with a long march through the jungle as its only possible escape route. The Japanese troops we cut off in Guadalcanal were mere walking skeletons by the time the last of them could flee by sea. Losing hundreds of men simply to take Salamaua by force would only be a criminal waste in my mind.”

“But,” objected Lieutenant General Eichelberger, “there are over 7,000 Japanese soldiers in Salamaua. Ignoring them would leave a serious threat on our flank along the coast. Aren’t you a bit cavalier in dismissing them so quickly, Colonel?” Douglas MacArthur could have intervened then to cut that dispute but, for some reason, chose not to, even though he was listening very carefully to the exchange. George Kenney’s bet then was that MacArthur wanted to see how Ingrid Dows would handle the much more senior Eichelberger. If MacArthur expected a strong response, then he was not disappointed, as Ingrid didn’t flinch at the tone used by the commander of the First Army Corps.

“General, starving men aren’t much of a threat, especially if stuck on foot in jungle country. We will only need to keep strong outposts and roadblocks in Wau and Lae to keep them bottled up in Salamaua, where my planes can strafe and bomb them at will, without the need to risk thousands of our soldiers in a ground attack. Me and my women went through four months of a similar scenario on Guadalcanal, while supporting the First Marine Division there. Now, we have with my helicopters a viable alternative to those debilitating jungle approach marches our troops had to endure before. Let’s use that advantage to the fullest, while sticking it up to the Japanese, sir.”

Eichelberger frowned, not happy at being rebuked like this by a teenage girl, but didn’t shoot back or object further, especially since none of his troops would be used in her plan. Seeing that there apparently were no more objections or questions about Ingrid’s

plan, MacArthur then announced his approval of her plan and ordered his staff officers to work up the logistical and support details as quickly as possible.

As the meeting broke up for lunch, MacArthur called to his side his chief of staff, Lieutenant General Sutherland, plus George Kenney and Clement Whitehead, talking in a low voice to them in order not to be heard by others.

"Gentlemen, if this assault on Lae proves a success, then my mind is made to promote this young girl to full colonel, and damn what the Pentagon could say about the seniority list! The rank of colonel is anyway the standard for a wing commander, and Dows has more than proved her competence for that level of command."

"And what if the assault fails, General?" Asked Sutherland. MacArthur bit on his corn pipe before replying in a sober voice.

"I'd rather not think about that right now, Dick. However, I am confident that she will succeed. She always succeeded so far, even against impossible odds."

21:46 (PNG Time)

Friday, January 29, 1943 'C'

Lead B-25NG of the 77th Bomber Group, The Hellhounds

On approach to Simpson Harbor Bay, Rabaul

New Britain Island, 800 kilometers northeast of Port Moresby

Helen Richey was both nervous and excited as her bombers and heavy gunships approached the important Japanese base area of Rabaul: this was the first time that her whole bomber group would conduct a mission as a single formation since the expansion of the 99th from an air group to an air wing. She was now leading thirty other B-25NG medium bombers and five AC-142G heavy gunships in a night attack that should hurt the Japanese badly, guided and supported in that by two EC-142E electronic reconnaissance and command aircraft. The late addition of another American medium bomber group based in Australia to the Lae attack plan had made it possible to enlarge the planned initial strike on Rabaul. Ingrid Dows had in fact wasted no time in then rethinking her pre-assault airstrikes, in order to concentrate the efforts of her planes and improve their striking power. That, in Helen's mind, had been a wise move, as the distance between Port Moresby and Rabaul meant that her B-25NGs had to fly with reduced bomb loads and with supplementary fuel tanks to effect the mission. Now, with

one 2000-pound armor-piercing bomb per B-25, her two medium bomber squadrons carried a total of 31 such bombs, enough to do some very serious damage to the Japanese ships anchored in Simpson Harbor Bay.

Her bomber formation was still about sixty kilometers from Rabaul and flying at medium altitude over the ocean when the EC-142E flying ahead as a reconnaissance asset sent a radio message, using a crude but simple one-time code system.

"Hellhound One, from Oracle One: business at the fruit market is brisk. I picked up five melons and about twenty assorted small fruits there. You should really look at the melons: they are big and juicy, over."

"Understood, Oracle One." Simply answered Helen, keeping her answer as short as possible to prevent the Japanese from detecting her bombers. So, she thought to herself, there were at least five major warships in Simpson Harbor Bay, along with twenty other, smaller ships of various types, according to the surface search radar on the EC-142E. A more precise identification would soon follow, according to the planned sequence of attack, once the EC-142E would be directly over Simpson Harbor Bay and able to use its night cameras to visually examine those Japanese ships. However, the choice of the words 'big and juicy' meant that the five bigger radar echoes must be really large ships. Helen thus decided at once to concentrate her bombers on those five targets. If she had any bombs left after dealing with them, then she would switch to the lesser targets, but not before that.

"Oracle One to Dragon Ladies. Dragon One 348 and 35. Dragon Two 352 and 34. Dragon Three 354 and 32. Dragon Four 357 and 27. Dragon Five 004 and 26. Break, break, break!"

On that coded message giving the azimuth and distance to the target of each of the five AC-142Gs of the attack formation, the heavy gunships broke off from the medium bombers and accelerated away to go strike five separate Japanese airfields around Rabaul. That would take care of any possible threat from Japanese night fighters that could intervene, plus would destroy on the ground the Japanese bombers and fighters in Rabaul ahead of the planned air assault on Lae, scheduled to start in less than six hours. If any Japanese radar lit up then, the second EC-142E, flying well separate from the attack formation, would then jam it at once, apart from jamming all the Japanese radio command frequencies as soon as the attack started. This mutually supporting

effort was, in Helen's mind, one of the major differences that distinguished the 99th Wing from the other American air units in the Southwest Pacific. While their aircrews were brave enough, the other bomber units of the 5th Air Force too often conducted missions piecemeal, unsupported and according to outdated, unimaginative tactics, striking from too high an altitude to achieve any precision. While those bomber crews could claim having flown a respectable number of combat missions, the results they actually achieved, if one didn't buy automatically their inflated claims, frankly didn't justify the fuel and the bombs they too often wasted without real results.

"Hellhound One, from Oracle One. The melons I bought were three flat ones and two really thick ones. Get some more for me, over."

Helen's heart accelerated on hearing the message sent by Major Evelyn Sharp, the deputy commander of the 99th Wing, who was directing the mission from aboard the lead EC-142E. That message meant that the command plane had just identified visually three Japanese aircraft carriers and two battleships anchored in Simpson Harbor Bay. There was no question now as to where she would have to concentrate her efforts.

"Hellhound One understood! At which fruit stand can I find them, over?"

"From Oracle One, check for the flat melons at stand number 33 and for the thick ones at stand number 25, out."

Helen smiled to herself as she quickly consulted the air photo map of the Rabaul area produced by the girls of the 171st Reconnaissance Squadron: good luck to the Japanese who would try to understand what that strange radio exchange meant. The Rabaul area had been subdivided on that air photo map into dozens of grid squares, each with a specific number. Helen now knew precisely which headings to take to get at those carriers and battleships. Thinking for a moment before taking a decision, she then keyed her radio microphone, calling her bombers.

"All Hellhounds, this is Hellhound One. I will lead our Succubus Girls to stand number 33. Our Zombie Girls will go shop at the stand 25. Spend your money wisely, girls and have fun!"

Helen then lowered over her left eye the heavy and bulky, by 21st Century standards, light intensification night scope she wore from a head band and switched it on while speaking to her copilot, Second Lieutenant Ruth Tree.

"I'm going on night vision mode, Ruth. Keep to visual and FLIR and start our attack run against grid 33. Turn to heading 350 and accelerate to attack speed."

"Got it!" Answered the young woman, tense as a steel bar. She was a relative newcomer to the 99th Wing, even though she had already flown eight combat missions. This was however her first anti-ship attack mission.

Aboard the lead EC-142E, Evelyn Sharp nodded slowly her head after taking a look through the FLIR camera of one of the observation stations of the electronic reconnaissance and command plane. She now knew precisely which major Japanese warships were in Simpson Harbor Bay and their presence there could only mean that the Japanese had been preparing for something big. She thus keyed her intercom to speak with the signals officer of the plane.

"Janet, prepare and send the following message in code to Port Moresby. Fleet carriers AKAGI, KAGA and ZUIKAKU, plus the battleships MUSASHI and YAMATO, are anchored in Simpson Harbor Bay, along with three cruisers, eight destroyers and nine transport or tanker ships. We are starting our attack now on the major units."

Evelyn then got up to give back to the duty observer her seat. If they could succeed in sinking or at least seriously damaging those carriers and battleships, then they would administer a truly stinging blow to the Japanese and possibly kill in the egg whatever major operation the Japanese were preparing. The two battleships present were however huge behemoths with very thick armor and were certainly going to prove to be tough customers indeed. One thing she was going to do before the B-25s of Helen Richey entered the fray was to have pictures taken of those Japanese ships. More pictures would then be taken at the end of the attack, in order to confirm the results of the strike. The claims of the Fifinella girls had too often been disputed by male aviators and commanders in the past and she was going to make sure that these male officers would not be able to deny what her girls were going to accomplish tonight.

22:04 (PNG Time)

Command bridge of the battleship YAMATO

Simpson Harbor Bay, Rabaul

Admiral Yamamoto Isoroku, unable to find sleep, had elected to go have some fresh air on the open wing of the command bridge of his flagship, the mighty, 72,000-ton YAMATO. Contemplating the dark sky and calm waters of the harbor, Yamamoto reflected bitterly on the misfortunes this war had brought already to his navy and to

Japan. All had gone so well at first...until the Philippines had proved too tough a nut to crack. The American victorious fight to retain the Philippines, apart from proving extremely costly in both ships and aircraft to Japan, had also completely disrupted the ambitious war strategy of the empire. As a result, the invasion of Burma had been postponed indefinitely and the British forces in India had been left nearly alone. Then the fight for Guadalcanal and the Solomons had cost more precious ships and aircraft to the imperial forces, apart from demolishing the myth of the invincibility of the Imperial Japanese Army. Now, the Americans and Australians were starting to push back in New Guinea. With their continued advance in the Solomons, they obviously hoped to effect a double pincer in order to take and destroy Rabaul. If they succeeded in doing that, then the Dutch East Indies, with its precious resources in oil and rubber, would be isolated and cut off from Japan, which desperately needed its resources. As a result, the geniuses now in control in Tokyo had decided to launch an operation to destroy Port Moresby, ignoring the protests of Yamamoto about having insufficient means to do that. It was all a case of too little, too late. In contrast, the American industrial giant had now fully awakened, as he had predicted before the war had started, and was now churning out a seemingly endless amount of war materiel, including many brand new weapons, ships and aircraft that outclassed anything Japan had. It was only a matter of time in his mind before the Americans steamrolled their way across the Pacific, on their way to Japan. However, as disillusioned as he was now, Yamamoto had no choice but to obey his orders and do his best.

Yamamoto was looking at the eastern shores of Simpson Harbor Bay when a large, bright flash of light from afar, over the main airfield of Rabaul, temporarily blinded him. By the time he regained his night vision, the flash had turned into a gigantic fireball slowly rising in the night sky. Yamamoto was still staring with dread at the rising fireball when a distant but powerful rumble came from the direction of the airfield. What looked like a lance of fire then appeared in the sky above the stricken airfield, impacting on the airfield and creating a carpet of small explosions on the ground. A second bright flash of light then came from another airfield near Rabaul, also turning into a rising ball of fire. Three more flashes followed within less than a minute, all well apart and each over a particular airfield in the area. Yamamoto swore on understanding that this was a massed night air attack on Rabaul, using some of those new American weapons he had

been thinking about. Walking quickly to the nearest intercom, he grabbed the handset and activated it.

“SOUND BATTLE STATIONS! ALL ANTI-AIRCRAFT GUNNERS TO THEIR POSTS! ENGINE ROOM, FIRE UP THE BOILERS!”

He knew that his last order would be somewhat too late if any aircraft came in to attack his mighty battleships and carriers: it took hours to build up enough steam pressure to be able to sail around. Until then, his flagship would be a sitting, immobile target, like the rest of his armada. No more than twenty seconds later, a flash and powerful explosion marked the impact of a bomb on the fleet carrier KAGA. His worst fears realized, Yamamoto ran inside the command bridge, closing the armored door behind him just before a bomb went through the forward weather deck, going down through three more decks before exploding, splitting a few hull plate seams and creating huge water leaks. A second bomb then made a lucky hit on the joint between the roof and front plates of the number one 460mm gun main turret of the battleship and penetrated it. That bomb, having made its way down to the upper powder room, then exploded and ignited the hundreds of 55-kilogram bagged cordite charges stored there. With the watertight and anti-flash doors of the battleship still not closed and secured, huge searing sheets of flames blew out of the forward upper powder magazine, igniting as well the cordite charges stored in the lower powder room. Making things worse for the Japanese was the fact that the YAMATO's crew had been conducting some needed maintenance and had opened the anti-flash doors of the ammunition hoists to lubricate and paint them. The searing gases quickly cooked up the 180 one and a half-ton shells kept inside the turret's barbette and the 120 other 460mm projectiles kept in the forward shell room. Just as a third one-ton armor piercing bomb pierced the ship's superstructures and detonated just above the port side engine room, the 300 huge shells stored under the forward main gun turret started blowing up in a quick chain reaction. That terrifying explosion ripped open the bulkhead separating the powder and shell rooms of the two forward main gun turrets, igniting another 300 giant shells and ninety tons of cordite bags under the number two main turret. The resulting massive explosion, apart from cutting the ship in two, mangled most of the forward half of the YAMATO as well as its superstructures and bridge tower, killing instantly all the staff and crew members there, including Admiral Yamamoto. What was left of the ship quickly sank, while a fuel tanker ship and a supply ship anchored alongside the battleship were sunk by the blast wave from the explosion. That same blast wave also washed over the

superstructures of the MUSASHI, anchored 300 meters away, killing the sailors and officers standing in the open on that ship and also destroying outright one of the attacking B-25 bombers that was pulling out of its attack dive on the MUSASHI. After a moment of stupor on both sides of the battle, the remaining B-25 bombers went on with their attacks, concentrating on the MUSASHI and the three fleet carriers. The sister ship of the YAMATO proved tougher, however, and stayed afloat even though it absorbed in succession five direct hits from one-ton AP bombs that severely damaged it, plus three near misses that opened breaches in its hull under the waterline. Attacked by a total of seventeen B-25s, the three anchored fleet carriers were quickly set ablaze and started sinking, with the bombs and torpedoes stored inside the KAGA blowing up as well, cutting it in half and dooming it. Six B-25 bombers originally assigned to attack the YAMATO and that still had their bombs then switched to the MUSASHI, raining more bombs on it. The giant battleship absorbed four more direct hits, plus two near misses, before the B-25s left it alone. The ordeal of the Japanese ships in Simpson Harbor Bay was not over yet, however. Using their nose-mounted 75mm guns and batteries of heavy machineguns, the American medium bombers made two strafing passes each against the anchored destroyers, light cruisers and transport ships, joined in this by two of the AC-142Gs that were done devastating their assigned airfields and still had some ammunition left. By the time that the bombers withdrew and that the EC-142E still circling overhead unobserved took a series of pictures of what remained of the Japanese ships, all the destroyers and transport ships, as well as two of the light cruisers, had sunk or were sinking. As for the MUSASHI, AKAGI and ZUIKAKU, they were listing low on the water and burning fiercely, while the two halves of the KAGA had sunk. Operation SHO-GO, as the plan for the attack on Port Moresby was called by the Japanese High Command, was now as good as dead.

05:29 (PNG Time)

Saturday, January 30, 1943 'C'

Fairchild C-142A 'U Haul'

On landing approach to Lae Airfield

Lae, New Guinea

"TWO MINUTES TO LANDING! CHECK YOUR SEAT BELTS!"

The warning from the cargo master of the big transport aircraft made Elizabeth Gardner check one more time her seat belt. Mary Takahashi, Katharine Hepburn, Frida Horst and a new member of her team, Corporal Masha Lebowitz, also checked their seat belts, like the forty or so American and Australian soldiers traveling with them. The two jeeps of the forward air control team were solidly held by chains to the cargo deck, like two more jeeps and one M3 STUART light tank. Elizabeth turned her head to the right and gave a forced smile to Colonel Kenneth Kinsler, the commander of the 503rd Parachute Infantry Regiment, sitting beside her.

“So, Colonel, what do you think of being flown around by a female pilot?”

“Can I answer you after we have landed, that is if we are still in one piece, Lieutenant?” Replied the paratrooper commander, deadpan. “May I ask you a question in return?”

“Of course, sir!”

“Your Private Hepburn, she looks a lot like the famous actress, Katharine Hepburn. Is she related to her?”

“You could say that, Colonel: she IS the famous actress Katharine Hepburn.” Kinsler, who would have never believed that such a famous woman would enlist as a simple private and even less in such a dangerous specialty as air gunner, gave an incredulous look at Elizabeth, then at Hepburn, who was grinning to him.

“You’re shitting me!”

“I’m serious, Colonel.”

“Well, I’ll be!” Said Kinsler before extending his arm past Elizabeth to shake the hand of Katharine. “Miss Hepburn, I knew that you were one strong-headed woman, but you are really impressing me now.”

“Why, thank you, Colonel. I will be most happy to sign you an autograph...once this little party is out of the way.”

“That would be great, Miss Hepburn! Uh, General MacArthur’s public relations officer must be biting his nails right now at the thought that you are part of this assault.”

“He isn’t actually, because he doesn’t know that I am here, or even that I enrolled. The other girls of the 99th have all promised me to keep quiet about me, that is all but one, GRRRR!”

Elizabeth Gardner smiled and shrugged as the actress growled at her.

“Sorry, Kat! I couldn’t lie to a full colonel, could I?”

Kinsler was laughing at that exchange when a strong turbulence shook the plane up and down, making him swallow hard. Elizabeth tried her best to reassure him then.

"That must be the shockwave from one of our Fuel Air Explosives bombs, sir."

"Hell! How powerful are those bombs, Lieutenant?"

"Our biggest model has the explosive equivalent of twenty tons of TNT, sir. Three of them were scheduled to be dropped on the airfield in Lae just before we landed. If all goes well, we should only encounter dead or dying Japanese at the airfield once on the ground."

"Jesus! I..."

Their plane was then shaken violently a second time, followed quickly by another strong turbulence, attracting a comment from Elizabeth.

"There goes the second bomb...and the third one. We should now be on final approach, sir."

Looking outside by a nearby window of the dark cargo cabin, Kinsler could see nothing but darkness and the vague outlines of dark shapes under them. Not knowing much about the night vision equipment used by this plane, he fervently hoped that their pilot could see where she was flying. In that he was probably imitated by all his men aboard.

Less than a minute later, the roar from the four powerful piston engines of the heavy transport aircraft throttled down just before the landing wheels touched the ground, shaking the whole plane and its occupants. Nearly immediately, the engines went back to full power, with Kinsler having to grab the handle above his seat in order not to end up having his head across Elizabeth's lap, so strongly their plane was now slowing down. He barely had time to sit back up as the aircraft had slowed to a walk before the cargo master, a strongly-built woman, shouted at the top of her lungs.

"START UNDOING THE TIE-DOWN CHAINS! MAN YOUR VEHICLES!"

Elizabeth's team, like the paratroopers and tankers in the cabin, quickly obeyed, with Frida Horst and Masha Lebowitz sitting behind the steering wheel of their respective jeeps. This time, Elizabeth would keep her two radio operators with her, while Katharine Hepburn manned the machinegun mounted on Masha's jeep, ready to protect Elizabeth's jeep if need be. All five women wore steel helmets and carried a carbine and a handgun, plus combat web belts. The paratroopers aboard their plane were similarly equipped, except for the fact that they carried AR-41 assault rifles instead of carbines

and had their backpacks on them. The C-142A then veered sharply to the right, prompting Elizabeth to shout at Kinsler.

“OUR PLANE IS NOW TURNING OFF THE RUNWAY. IT WILL ROLL FOR ABOUT ANOTHER HUNDRED YARDS BEFORE STOPPING. YOUR MEN SHOULD RUN OUT AS SOON AS THE CARGO RAMP IS DOWN, SIR.”

“GOT IT! THANKS, LIEUTENANT! ALRIGHT, MEN, GET READY TO TANGO!”

The cargo master banged her fist on the side of the M3 light tank as the big rear cargo ramp started lowering with a noise of hydraulic actuators.

“START YOUR ENGINES!”

For a few seconds, exhaust fumes filled the dark cargo cabin, illuminated only by a few red lights, until the ramp was fully down and the cargo master shouted again, making the tank and four jeeps race out.

“OUT! OUT! OUT!”

With Colonel Kinsler’s jeep in the lead, followed closely by the light tank and then by the three other jeeps, the platoon of paratroopers ran down the ramp and onto an asphalt surface. What they saw then through the darkness was a scene of utter chaos and desolation. A whole lineup of parked Japanese planes had been swept away and were now lying in burning pieces, many of them overturned. The barracks and buildings bordering the tarmac had mostly been blown away, with some human screams of pain coming from them. Not a single shot could be heard yet. Not believing their good fortune, Kinsler ordered his driver to roll towards their nearest objective, a battery of 75mm anti-aircraft guns positioned near the southern end of the runway, with his paratroopers following him at a run. Many of his men had in fact itched improvised rides on the jeeps and on the light tank, while the drivers kept their speed low, in order not to outdistance the men on foot. Behind them, their cargo aircraft had already closed its rear ramp and was rolling along the taxiway, imitated by the twelve other C-142A participating in the air assault. A total of thirteen light tanks, 28 jeeps and 800 paratroopers were now dispersing around the airfield’s perimeter, taking hasty defensive positions in order to secure the airfield for the incoming helicopter-borne second wave. Except in a handful of spots, they encountered no resistance at first, instead finding numerous bodies of Japanese that had been blown and burned to blackened bits by the three five-ton F.A.E. bombs dropped prior to their landing.

Kinsler chose to stop and establish his temporary command post at a Japanese anti-aircraft gun position made of piled-up sandbags, near the road leading to the nearby port. The crew of the 75mm gun lay around the position, having evidently been killed by the blast overpressure of one of the F.A.E. bombs. On her part, Elizabeth Gardner sent her two jeeps seek cover inside two adjacent sandbagged gun positions, then jumped out and ran with Mary Takahashi and Frida Horst to go join Kinsler and his small command team. While things were surprisingly quiet on the airfield itself, with hardly a shot heard, things around the port were another matter, with the ships at dock or at anchor being under heavy air attack by B-25 medium bombers of the 99th Wing. Kinsler watched for a moment the fire lance of 40mm tracer shells coming down from an orbiting AC-142G that was otherwise invisible in the dark sky, creating a carpet of small explosions among a group of barrack buildings 400 meters away, then looked at Elizabeth.

“God! The firepower of your heavy gunships is truly frightening. Thanks to them, this is turning out to be the smoothest assault I ever was in.”

“Well, I’m sure that things will get interesting once the Japanese regroup and recover their wits, sir. If there is something that we in the 99th have learned in Guadalcanal, it is that the Japanese don’t give up easily.”

“You are too right on that, Lieutenant. Let’s hope that the second wave arrives before the Japanese recover from the initial shock.”

Elizabeth’s prediction came through as the dozens of helicopters carrying the second wave of paratroopers were about to land on the airfield in two long parallel columns just after dawn. By then, the C-142 cargo planes that had carried the first wave were long gone and an increasing number of firefights were starting around the airfield between paratroopers in defensive positions and groups of Japanese soldiers trying to react to the attackers. Thankfully, the Japanese actions were uncoordinated, something that allowed Kinsler to move by jeep small groups of his paratroopers to help defend the threatened points. One of those threatened points turned out to be the access gate from the port area, something that didn’t surprise Elizabeth Gardner. The first sign of trouble for her group was the falling of the first Japanese mortar bombs around her as 1,200 American paratroopers scrambled out of their helicopters and rushed to reinforce the perimeter. A Japanese machinegun then started raking the sandbagged positions occupied by the command group, shooting from the roof of a warehouse 300 meters

away. Katharine Hepburn then engaged in a machinegun duel with the Japanese crew, standing behind her Browning M1919 in the back of her jeep and firing a succession of carefully aimed short bursts. Katharine won the duel after four bursts, with the Japanese gunners tumbling from the roof of the warehouse after her last burst, with paratroopers cheering Katharine on. That however still left the Japanese mortar firing on them. As Colonel Kinsler was distributing his newly arrived men and preparing to push out his perimeter, Elizabeth called in support one of the AH-4 VIPER attack helicopters that had come with the second wave and had stayed over the airfield after the departure of the other helicopters. That AH-4 found the culprit Japanese mortar men after a minute of searching, blasting the enemy crew with a salvo of 3-inch rockets and silencing it for good.

Things then became interesting a half hour later, as the C-47s carrying the third wave of American paratroopers were on approach. A Japanese unit commander that had finally succeeded in assembling a coherent force launched a coordinated counter-attack from Malabang Airfield, to the East of Lae. That counter-attack force, counting at least a thousand Japanese soldiers, also included nine TYPE 95 light tanks, small vehicles armed with a 37mm caliber gun. As American paratroopers reported by radio to Colonel Kinsler the Japanese they could sight, Elizabeth got busy, calling airstrikes by either B-25s, AH-4s or AC-142Gs on those Japanese. Continuously pounded from the air and hitting determined resistance by American paratroopers, the Japanese attacking force had to withdraw after three costly successive attempts at breaking through the American perimeter, having lost all its tanks along with half of its soldiers. There were however still a lot more Japanese soldiers left in and around Lae. Then, heavy rain started to fall, cutting visibility and grounding further transport flights to Lae.

10:15 (PNG Time)

Port area, Lae

New Guinea

“God damned rain!” Hissed Colonel Kinsler, crouching back behind a big wooden crate in time to avoid a few bullets that flew over his head. He was accompanying one of his battalions that was now engaged in a hard fight to clear the Japanese from the docks and warehouses area of the port. The problem was that a

seemingly numerous Japanese force had assembled in that area and was trying to overwhelm his paratroopers by slowly creeping forward, using the cover provided by the multitude of crates, barrels and piles of bags littering the area. Low dark clouds were still hanging over Lae and pouring rain, cutting severely the visibility on the ground and making extremely risky any use of airstrikes, apart from continuing to impede the arrival of more reinforcements and supplies by air. Both Kinsler's paratroopers and the Japanese soldiers were now engaged in a short range firefight, with less than a hundred meters between the opponents and with most soldiers reduced to firing at the muzzle flashes they could see through the rain. In these conditions, calling for fire support from the two heavy gunships orbiting over Lae would most probably result in American soldiers getting hit as well as the Japanese. After seeing what the 40mm gun battery of an AC-142G could do, Kinsler was certainly not ready to try his luck at that. On the other hand, he couldn't blame Elizabeth Gardner, who was crouching with her team behind another crate a few meters away, for not being able to call in air support in those conditions. Unfortunately, if left a chance to creep up to his lines, the Japanese would then be able to get down to close quarters fight, something they were known to excel at and in which their numerical superiority would weigh heavily.

Crouched behind her own protective crate and surrounded by paratroopers firing back at the Japanese, a soaked and miserable Elizabeth was desperately trying to think of a way to help by more than simply firing her own carbine. By all standards, air support was out of play in the present weather conditions, making her and her team useless. However, the volume of enemy fire clearly showed that the Japanese were outnumbering the paratroopers by a wide margin, even though their aim was at least as inaccurate in the rain as that of the American soldiers. An idea then struck her mind as Katharine Hepburn got up briefly to fire her carbine from behind their crate. Searching inside the equipment pouch slung across her torso, she counted the number of red flare sticks she had with her, then looked at Mary Takahashi and Frida Horst.

"Quick! How many red flares do you have with you?"

"Uh, I have two flares on me, Lieutenant." Answered Mary after searching her own equipment pouch.

"I have three flares." Said Frida, making Elizabeth nod and look at Masha Lebowitz.

"Masha, I will need you to run back to my jeep and to bring back the box of red flares in the trailer. Make it quick!"

"Yes, Lieutenant!" Answered the Jewish woman before running away at a crouch, splashing her way through the muddy ground of the port area. She was back in less than five minutes, a metal ammunition box in one hand.

"Here you are, Lieutenant. You have twelve flares in that box."

"Excellent! Girls, I want you all to each grab three flares out of the box. Mary, you give one of the flares you already have to Katharine. Frida, give one flare each to Masha and me."

"What do you have in mind, Lieutenant?" Asked Masha, curious but also apprehensive.

"What we are going to do is to form an extended line, while being careful at the same time to stay within visual range of the next girl. We will then run forward to the next cover and advance in ten-yard bounds for a total of fifty yards. We will then take back cover and, on a double whistle from me, will each light up a red flare and let it burn on the ground near you. This line of flares will then act as a separation line that our heavy gunship will be able to use to rake the enemy-occupied area to our west. We will then repeat the procedure as needed. We will however have to be sharp and have our carbines ready to fire, as the enemy will be very close to us."

More than one woman in her group swallowed hard then but, to Elizabeth's pride, none objected to her plan, as they all understood how precarious their present situation was already. After the flares were redistributed among them, Elizabeth took a minute to spread out her women in a line about sixty meters long, with her two radio-carrying signalers at each end of the line. She then did a short sprint to join up with Colonel Kinsler and explain to him her plan. The paratrooper commander looked at her with horrified eyes.

"I can't let you and your girls take such risks, Lieutenant! The Japanese could capture you!"

"And what if the Japanese are allowed to close in on us and then rush us, sir? This is the only way that we could get the air support we desperately need now."

"Maybe, but then let some of my men do this."

"No, sir!" Replied Elizabeth, her voice hardening. "This is my job and I will do it with my personnel. Besides, your men wouldn't know how to direct the fire of my heavy

gunships. Just have your men ready to advance once our gunship fire will have cleared the enemy directly ahead, but keep them behind us for their own safety...sir!"

Not letting a chance to the stunned Kinsler to object again, Elizabeth looked left and right at her women and whistled loudly to them while waving her arm, then ran forward.

The first bound forward put Elizabeth behind a crated piece of machinery, on which a few bullets clanked as she checked that her women were ready or not for the second bound. With her heart pounding hard, she whistled again before running forward again, imitated by her four subalterns. This time, a bullet whizzed past her, missing her by only a few inches, before she crouched behind a pile of bags of rice. Taking a quick look past the corner of her pile, she evaluated by the muzzle flashes of their rifles how far the first Japanese soldiers were still and decided to make a third bound forward, whistling to signal to her women to sprint with her. Once behind another pile of rice bags covered by a heavy canvas tarp to protect them from the rain, she peeped again at the enemy and swore quietly to herself: some of the Japanese soldiers were actually closer than she had expected, proof enough that they had been creeping forward under the cover of the rain. Grabbing her portable UHF radio, she keyed the microphone and spoke in as much of a calm voice as she could muster.

"Dragon Three, this is Jane Gee. I am presently in the port area with my team, forming a line about thirty yards west of our forward line of friendly troops. We are going to pop red flares besides our positions. I want you then to rake with your fire the zone west of the flares. I say again, I want you to rake the zone west of our flares, over."

"Dragon Three, I copy. How close to the flares do you want my gunfire? My normal security standoff distance is a minimum of a hundred yards, over."

"Cut that to twenty yards, Dragon Three. We are running out of options down here."

There was a short pause before Elizabeth got an answer.

"Twenty yards standoff, understood. Pop your flares when ready, out."

Taking out a flare stick, Elizabeth took a deep breath, then whistled twice loudly before lighting her flare and throwing it on the ground besides her. She then grabbed her carbine and raised it at the ready while checking that her subalterns had gotten her signal. To her relief, she saw through the rain the bright red spots of four other flares forming a rough line: the FLIR camera on the AC-142Gs gunner's station would have no trouble seeing those flares, even through the low clouds and rain. The problem was of

course that the Japanese nearby could also see the glare of the flares, even from behind the cover used by her women and herself. Ten seconds later, what sounded and felt like God's wrath struck the zone to her front, making her crouch and roll into a protective ball. Looking up after a couple of seconds while staying down, she saw a dense, awe-inspiring column of tracer shells coming down from the clouds and sweeping from North to South, with some of the exploding shells striking the ground and exploding barely a few meters on the other side of her protective cover. As she was fervently praying that the gunship's aim stayed accurate, someone running away from the exploding 40mm shells crouched behind the pile of bags next to hers, less than three meters to her right. Elizabeth felt her blood freeze when she realized that the terrified young man was actually a Japanese sailor armed with a bolt-action rifle. On his part, the Japanese starred at her open-mouthed for a second, equally surprised, before he started to point his rifle at Elizabeth. Her heart pounding hard, she managed to point and fire her own weapon first, shooting three times and hitting the sailor in the belly. The Japanese sailor, grimacing with pain, still tried to raise his rifle, but the front of his head suddenly exploded, spraying Elizabeth with blood and gore. His body then crumbled to the ground, revealing Katharine Hepburn, crouching behind a crate twenty meters away with her carbine up and pointed in Elizabeth's general direction. With relief washing over her, the latter gave a thumbs up signal to the actress before returning her attention to her front, looking cautiously past the corner of her pile of bags. The column of tracer shells was now coming back on a South to North motion, but along a line ten meters further west than the first sweep. Elizabeth could hear, even with the noise of the shells exploding, some ugly screams from the Japanese being peppered with steel shrapnel and being ripped apart by the explosions, with over twenty 40mm shells per second bursting around them. Elizabeth waited until a third sweep by gunfire had been completed, with the shells now exploding over fifty meters away to the West, then whistled hard towards where she had left Colonel Kinsler.

"IT IS NOW SAFE TO ADVANCE UP TO MY LINE OF FLARES."

Her shout attracted at a run dozens of paratroopers, including Kinsler, who then crouched besides Elizabeth before giving her a concerned look.

"Are you and your girls okay, Lieutenant?"

"I believe so, sir. Our heavy gunship is presently sweeping the area to our front with gunfire and must have cleaned up about every Japanese within at least fifty yards. We should be able to go forward and occupy some of that ground now, sir."

“Excellent! By the way, well done, you and your girls, Lieutenant.”

Kinsler then patted in a friendly manner her shoulder before getting up and shouting an order to his paratroopers to advance slowly behind the cover of the rolling fire of the gunship. Elizabeth, her heart still beating fast, took a couple of deep breaths before getting up herself and calling for her women to join her. She felt immense relief on seeing that all of them seemed intact.

“Thank God that you made it in one piece, girls! That was one scary stunt, I must say. Let’s follow Colonel Kinsler now. I suspect that this fight is far from over.”

“No shit, Lieutenant!” Replied in her pure Californian accent Mary Takahashi, making the others giggle nervously.

14:27 (PNG Time)

Monday, February 1, 1943 ‘C’

Lae Airfield, New Guinea

Douglas MacArthur, flanked by General Blamey, Lieutenant General Kenney, Lieutenant General Sutherland and Brigadier General Whitehead, listened on carefully to Colonel Kinsler as the latter described to him the assault and taking of Lae. They were all assembled around the hood of a jeep supporting a photo map of Lae, which Kinsler was using to illustrate his briefing. At the end of it, MacArthur nodded with satisfaction and smiled to the paratrooper commander.

“That was a great job you and your men did here, Colonel. Taking Lae so quickly and with so few casualties was an outstanding feat of arms.”

“Thank you, General. I must however say that I owed a large part of my success to the impeccable close air support provided to my regiment by the girls of the 99th Wing. Talking about feat of arms, General, I would like to recommend for outstanding bravery the women of the forward air control ground team attached to me during the air assault. They saved my regiment from a potentially serious setback early on.”

“Please tell me about that, Colonel.” Said the old general, sniffing another good occasion for a good public relations photo opportunity. Kinsler then spoke for a couple of minutes, pointing to where the feat had happened, while an aide of MacArthur took notes on the order of his commander. At the end, MacArthur nodded again, visibly impressed by the story.

"That was indeed quite a feat of bravery and dedication, Colonel. Do you have the name of those women?"

"I have that of their team leader, First Lieutenant Elizabeth Gardner, and of one of her subalterns, but I'm afraid that I don't remember all of their names, General."

"And where could we find them right now, Colonel?"

"I believe that they are presently being debriefed by their boss, Lieutenant Colonel Dows, near the control tower of the airfield, General."

"Very well! Send for them and Lieutenant Colonel Dows and get them here while we continue with this briefing."

"Yes, General!"

Kinsler then grabbed his driver and told him to go get the women in question, then returned to the business of briefing MacArthur on his progress in enlarging his perimeter past Malabang Airfield, to the East.

Three jeeps approached MacArthur's command group as it was surveying visually the installations that were still intact in the port. With an aide gathering the group of war correspondent and press photographers that nearly always accompanied him, Douglas MacArthur watched with interest the five women that approached him with Ingrid Dows. His paternal smile changed to a puzzled, uncertain look as he stared at the tallest of the five women, who soon stopped at attention three paces in front of him and saluted. Ingrid, also saluting, then presented her group in a strong voice, guessing what was to follow.

"Reporting as ordered, General. I have with me the members of my forward air control ground team assigned to the 503rd Parachute Infantry Regiment for the air assault on Lae."

"May I have your names, ladies?"

Each woman then presented herself in turn while still at attention.

"First Lieutenant Elizabeth Gardner, General!"

"Corporal Mary Takahashi, General!"

"Corporal Masha Lebowitz, General!"

"Private Katharine Hepburn, General!"

"Private Frida Horst, General!"

While some of the war correspondents and photographers frowned at Takahashi's name, Hepburn's name brought consternation on their faces, while MacArthur's smile

changed to a wide grin. He however returned quickly to a proud expression as he spoke in his strong, solemn voice.

"Ladies, Colonel Kinsler has informed me of your feats of daring and bravery during the air assault on Lae. He spoke in particular about the instance when you went ahead of our paratroopers to mark under fire the enemy positions with flares, so that our planes could strafe them despite the heavy rain and poor visibility. Such bravery should and always will be rewarded under my command. CAPTAIN REED, COME TO MY SIDE!"

MacArthur's aide then stepped forward, a large briefcase in one hand, and opened his briefcase, presenting it to MacArthur. The old general took out of it six small boxes, keeping one box and handing the others to his aide so that he could hang on to them for the moment.

"Lieutenant Gardner, step forward!"

Elizabeth did so, saluting MacArthur, who spoke up to be clearly heard by the war correspondents while taking a medal out of the box in his hands.

"First Lieutenant Elizabeth Gardner, for gallantry in action shown here on the Thirtieth of January, I am proud and happy to award you the Silver Star. Congratulations, Lieutenant Gardner!"

"Thank you, General!" Replied Elizabeth, more moved than she cared to show, before MacArthur pinned the medal to her combat shirt. MacArthur then saluted her before stepping in front of Mary Takahashi, repeating the same process and giving her as well a Silver Star medal. When Katharine Hepburn's turn came, MacArthur added a few more words in a low voice for her benefit while grinning to her.

"Seeing such a celebrated and talented actress like you serving our country with such distinction truly warms my heart. I was always a great fan of yours, Miss Hepburn."

"You are too kind, General." Said Katharine, proud as a peacock.

Once the five women had medals pinned on them, MacArthur looked at the assembled war correspondents and photographers.

"Gentlemen of the press, those five women were not alone in proving their dedication and bravery lately. The night before our troops landed in Lae, more brave women attacked the main Japanese base of Rabaul from the air, destroying hundreds of Japanese planes and sinking numerous ships in a daring night operation. The ships sunk then in Simpson Harbor included the giant battleships YAMATO and MUSASHI,

plus the fleet carriers AKAGI, KAGA and ZUIKAKU. That attack, along with the taking of Lae, would however never have happened if not for the tactical and strategic genius of one of our best combat aviators, Lieutenant Colonel Ingrid Dows, Commander of the 99th Wing. Despite her young age, Colonel Dows has repeatedly shown great leadership talents, along with incredible courage and stunning feats of arms as a fighter pilot. The last few weeks have proved that she is more than worthy of commanding an air wing. In fact, I fully expect her to become one day soon our first female general. This said, I believe that it would be only just that her command performance at the head of an air wing be rewarded by giving her the rank that is considered standard with such a command. Lieutenant Colonel Dows, step forward, please!”

“General!” Shouted Ingrid, stepping in front of MacArthur and then saluting him. MacArthur saluted back, then took the last box from his aide and opened it, extracting two eagle insignias from it.

“Lieutenant Colonel Ingrid Dows, I am most happy and proud today to be able to pin on you the rank insignias of colonel. Congratulations, Colonel Dows!”

MacArthur, after removing her old rank insignias and pinning the eagles on her collar, then turned partly to look at the photographers while shaking hands with a smiling Ingrid. One of the war correspondents couldn't help whisper then to a nearby colleague as he snapped pictures of the scene.

“Full colonel at the age of nineteen! Quite a few in Washington will blow a gasket on hearing that.”

CHAPTER 6 – ASHIGARU

13:41 (Kyoto Time)

Thursday, October 6, 1583 ‘A’

Southern Shimabara Peninsula, Hizen Province

Island of Kyushu, Japan

Ujiro, like the other nine ashigaru¹³ and the ashigaru ko gashira¹⁴ of his patrol, froze for a moment at the sound of a not so distant shot. They were halfway on the narrow coastal road leading from Arima to Kuchi, on the southernmost point of the Shimabara Peninsula, an area where bandits were known to roam around. The banditry problem had actually grown worst in the last year since the army of Ryuzoji Takanobu had invaded the fief of their daimyo¹⁵, Arima Harunobu, and taken his main castle of Shimabara. Now, Arima Harunobu stood weakened and squeezed into the southernmost part of his previous domain, with bandits and renegade soldiers profiting from his temporary weakness. Since no enemy soldiers had been reported this far South, that pistol shot must have come from a bandit. Saburo, the ashigaru ko gashira, drew his sword and pointed it down the road to Kuchi, where the shot had come from.

“Follow me and be ready for combat!”

His ten men followed him at a moderate run single file on the narrow dirt road, which was bordered on both sides by a thick forest. The six spearmen of the squad were in the lead, with the four arquebusiers, including Ujiro, last. As they ran, they started progressively hearing the noise of a fight which was getting closer to them. A second shot could then be heard, making Saburo and his squad accelerate their pace. After turning a bend in the road, the squad came within sight of the fight: a band of maybe twenty bandits had ambushed a small group of travelers leading six loaded mules and was trying to finish their victims in order to take off with the mules and their loads. Out of the three men in the group of travelers, two were obviously dead, pierced by numerous

¹³ Ashigaru: low level foot soldier in Japanese feudal armies

¹⁴ Ashigaru ko gashira: Lieutenant of ashigaru, who normally commanded up to 30 ashigaru soldiers

¹⁵ Daimyo: Japanese feudal lord in control of a castle, district or province in medieval Japan

arrows, while the third one was wounded and sat against a large tree while holding on to the bridles of the mules. A young woman, apparently the sole intact person of her group, was now swinging wildly a sword, trying to keep the bandits away from her wounded companion and from the mules. Saburo and his men couldn't help slow down from the surprise on looking at this. For one thing, the three male travelers were obviously foreigners, probably Portuguese, while the young woman was Japanese. Furthermore, three bandits lay dead or dying around the woman, while two more bandits lay down some distance away besides their bows. Held at bay by the furious resistance of the woman, the remaining bandits seemed undecided about how to get at the precious mules. Ujiro felt contempt at these bandits: they were obviously cowards with no real military skills. Saburo then shouted at the top of his lungs.

“CHAARGE!”

Ujiro and the nine other ashigaru, brandishing either a spear or a sword, followed their leader and ran at the bandits while screaming war cries. The bandits, taken completely by surprise, stared for a moment with horror at the charging ashigaru, then broke and ran. They didn't have time to run far, however, before the ashigaru fell on them at a full run, slashing or stabbing them down without mercy. Only four of the bandits managed to escape in the woods, leaving the patrol in control of the scene of the battle. The ashigaru took the time to finish off the wounded bandits before turning their attention to the travelers. Saburo then saw from his garment that the wounded foreigner holding on to the mules was a priest. The Japanese woman was already kneeling besides him and talking to him in a foreign language while examining the arrow stuck in his upper chest. She actually seemed to know what she was doing, so Saburo checked the two other foreigners. As he had expected, they were dead but each had an empty pistol by their side: they at least had the time to defend themselves. When he got back on his feet, he saw that young Ujiro had taken the bridles of the mules from the wounded priest, letting the young woman free to care for the foreigner. Saburo thought that his master was not going to like the fact that a foreign priest had been attacked and wounded on his lands: Arima Harunobu had converted to the Christian faith four years ago and counted heavily on foreign merchants to provide him firearms that could help him resist the armies of Ryuzoji Takanobu.

“Hey, girl! What were you doing with the three Gaijins?”

She looked at him briefly, letting him see in detail her beautiful face framed by long black hair.

"I am their interpreter. I have been traveling with them since Nagasaki. My name is Junmi."

"Junmi..." Repeated the young Ujiro, who had eyes only for the girl. "Pure beauty... A fitting name indeed."

The young woman smiled briefly to Ujiro, who was himself a very handsome young man, then resumed her care of the priest. Saburo, who had seen plenty of battle wounds before, grimaced: the arrow had lodged itself near the heart, making taking it out very tricky. The priest was also bleeding heavily. Junmi was actually trying to stop the bleeding by pressing pieces of cloth around the point where the arrow was sticking out. Seeing a bedroll attached on top of one of the mules, Saburo pointed it to two of his men.

"Daigoro, Heiji, take the wool blanket of that bedroll and improvise a stretcher with it and two spears."

The two ashigaru obeyed quickly and the priest was soon carefully laid on an improvised stretcher and then lifted by four men, while the bodies of the two dead Portuguese were thrown on top of two mules. Saburo examined briefly the two pistols that had belonged to the dead foreigners and whistled in admiration: they were beautiful pieces of a design he had never seen before. He put the two pistols in his belt, then picked up the sword used with such efficiency by the girl: it had a long, narrow blade and a basket hilt to protect the hand. The blade was smeared with blood. Saburo eyed the girl, who was standing next to the wounded priest and holding in place the bandages over his wound.

"You seem to be good with a sword...for a girl."

Junmi bowed her head briefly to acknowledge his compliment.

"My father was an ashigaru and showed me how to defend myself, ashigaru ko gashira. I do not want to press you but Father Pietro needs medical attention urgently."

Saburo nodded in understanding and ordered his men to move out.

"Back to Hara Castle, men! Ryobe, Kansuke, Jigoro and Hyozo, you throw the bodies of the bandits in the forest, off the road. Let the beasts take care of their bodies. Also, pick up their weapons if they are worth it. Ujiro, you keep holding the mules."

"Hay!" Replied respectfully the young man. The other ashigaru didn't protest about not taking the heads of the bandits as battle trophies: such low level criminals did not make worthy trophies. The captured swords and other weapons, on the other hand, would be much more valuable as booty.

The small caravan had to move at a fairly slow pace because of the priest's wound, so it took a good two hours for them along the winding dirt road to cover the six kilometers to Hara Castle, which was presently the main home of Lord Arima Harunobu and his family. Alerted by the watchmen of the castle, Lord Harunobu was on hand in the inner courtyard when the patrol finally walked in through the main gate. The Portuguese priest staying in Hara, Father Luis Frois, was also in the courtyard and shouted in Portuguese in a horrified tone before running to the wounded priest being carried in. As Frois said a few encouraging words to his colleague, who was being transported towards the office of the castle's physician, Saburo walked to Lord Harunobu and bowed deeply in front of him.

"My Lord, we encountered a group of about twenty bandits attacking three Gaijins and one local girl halfway between Arima and Kuchi. Two of the Gaijins were already dead and the priest we just brought was wounded. The girl was defending him and their mules when we intervened. Only four bandits escaped alive into the woods." Harunobu raised an eyebrow and looked at Junmi as Saburo finished his report.

"She defended the priest? Was she armed?"

"She was swinging a sword taken from one of the dead Gaijin when we arrived, My Lord, and there were three dead bandits around her. She told us that her father, who was an ashigaru, taught her how to fight. This is the sword she had in her hand." Harunobu took the long sword offered by Saburo and examined it for a few seconds before swinging it around in the air to try its balance.

"The blade is quite light but I doubt that it could measure up with a good katana. Are those pistols at your belt from the Gaijins?"

"Yes, My Lord. The Gaijins apparently had time to use them before being killed." Harunobu took one of the two pistols, planting the long sword he still had in hand in the dirt so that he could use both hands to handle the pistol. The design of the weapon intrigued him at once.

"This is no ordinary pistol. In fact, I never saw such a mechanism before. Where is the match?"

"The girl told us that she was an interpreter for the Gaijins. Maybe they told her about these pistols during their trip with her, My Lord." Harunobu immediately stared at the young woman, who was waiting respectfully besides the ashigaru of the patrol. She was truly beautiful, with a most shapely body and long silky black hair. Her rough dress and sandals were those of a peasant or a low level

merchant. She also wore a bundle across her back, held by a leather strap. What struck the most Harunobu, though, was her extremely fit body and her height: she was as tall as the tallest ashigaru of the patrol, making her a good half head taller than most Japanese women.

“You, girl, come here!”

She ran lightly to him, then kneeled and bowed down in front of him, drawing an approving grunt from Harunobu: at least she knew her proper place and had manners.

“What is your name, girl?”

“Junmi, My Lord.” Answered the girl without raising her head.

“Alright, Junmi, get up and tell me what you know about the Gaijins.”

Harunobu felt curiosity rise in him as he was able to look at her from up close. While she dressed and apparently acted like a low class girl, there was a look of sharp intelligence in her eyes and her posture denoted self-assurance, while she answered him in precise sentences, as if she would be one of his high level retainers delivering a report.

“The two dead Portuguese were arms merchants who were on their way to your castle to sell you the weapons carried on their mules, My Lord. They came off a big ship that arrived in Nagasaki from the West two weeks ago. They took me as their interpreter in Nagasaki so that they could travel to your domain. A small boat landed us in Kuchi yesterday, where we spent the night.”

Harunobu showed her the pistol handed to him by Saburo.

“Did they tell you something about this type of pistol?”

“Yes, My Lord! In fact they were very proud of this weapon and of the other ones they had, bragging to me that these were the latest designs of pistols in their own country. They call this kind of weapon a wheel lock pistol.”

“A wheel lock? Did they tell you more about this?”

“They did, My Lord. They even demonstrated to me how to load and fire it.”

“Then show me!”

“Yes, My Lord!” She replied, bowing again. She then went to one of the dead Portuguese, still on top of one of the mules, and undid his belt, which carried an ammunition pouch and a powder flask, apart from a sword’s scabbard and a dagger. Watched very carefully by Harunobu and by the ashigaru, she loaded the pistol in a few seconds. While most of the steps were the same as the ones used with normal pistols, there was no slow burning wick to lit. Instead, Junmi turned a few times a large ball

attached to the base of the handle, then cocked a sort of lever on top of the pistol. She looked next at Harunobu.

“Should I fire it, My Lord?”

Harunobu smiled and pointed at a large wooden pole planted in the ground maybe twenty paces away. The pole was used for sword practice and was covered with cuts.

“Shoot that pole...if you can touch it, girl.”

The ashigaru soldiers present smiled as well then, seeing that their master was making fun of the girl. Only young Ujiro secretly hoped that Junmi would hit the pole. With normal matchlock pistols, hitting at such a distance would take a good shooter indeed. To everyone's amazement, Junmi hit the pole dead center, showing the assurance of a well trained soldier. Ujiro nearly clapped his hands but restrained himself in time as Harunobu stared with disbelief at the woman now bowing to him.

“My father taught me what he knew about weapons and fighting, My Lord, since he was not able to have a son. He however died four years ago from a disease, along with the rest of my family.”

Harunobu was thoughtful for a moment, eyeing that most unusual girl with interest. Apart from her uncommon skills, she had a truly beautiful body. There was however something he needed to know. Pulling the gaijin sword out of the dirt, he then threw it at Junmi.

“Catch!”

At the same time he speedily drew his own katana sword and slashed at the woman. If she had lied and had not been trained properly in handling weapons, her reactions, or lack of them, would show it. To everyone's surprise, including Harunobu's, the young woman caught deftly the sword thrown to her and was in time to block his katana's blade with the Gaijin sword. Harunobu then had a cruel smile as he held his blade against hers.

“Let's see how good you are, girl.”

Swinging his katana in a series of vertical and horizontal slashes, Harunobu went in full attack mode, ready to stop his blade if the girl left herself open to an attack. Using a form of sword fighting he had never seen before, Junmi managed to not only block his swings but also to force him back with lunges of her own. Then, she abruptly put one knee down on the ground and bowed her head while laying down her sword.

“I wish to serve you, My Lord, not to fight you.”

Harunobu's answer was to push a wild war scream and to swing down his blade at her exposed neck. He however stopped his sword a mere three centimeters from her neck, then withdrew and sheathed back his katana, a satisfied look on his face: the girl had not moved or even flinched as he had swung down his blade.

"Get up, Junmi!"

Her face impassive, she did so and stood in front of him, waiting. The ashigaru and the castle servants present in and around the inner courtyard also stood quietly, realizing that their daimyo was about to say something important. Harunobu finally broke in a smile as he eyed Junmi.

"Young Junmi, your father taught you well. He must have been a good ashigaru indeed. I certainly need the services of every trained fighter available right now, so your wish will be fulfilled: I take you in my service as a castle's guard assigned to the women's quarters. Do you own weapons and armor?"

"No, My Lord." She replied in an embarrassed tone. "I lost my father's equipment when a boat I was in capsized and sank two years ago. I was never able to afford new weapons since then."

Harunobu looked at the Portuguese belt she had buckled around her waist before loading and shooting the wheel lock pistol. It supported a dagger, a sword scabbard, an ammunition pouch and a powder flask, plus a water pouch and a belt purse.

"Then, consider the weapons and equipment you are wearing now yours, including the sword and the pair of pistols. You earned them by protecting the Portuguese."

"Thank you for your generosity, My Lord." Replied Junmi while bowing low to him. Saburo handed her the two wheel lock pistols and patted her shoulder as Harunobu went to inspect the loads on the six mules that had belonged to the Portuguese.

"Well done, Junmi! You will have to tell me about your father later on. What style of sword fighting did you use with our lord?"

"The Portuguese call it 'fencing'. It is supposedly highly developed in their country. My father learned it while in Nagasaki, along with the Gaijin's language, and passed his knowledge to me."

"Yes, Nagasaki." Said Saburo in a non-committal tone. That port was one of the rare legal ports of entry for foreign ships that wished to visit Japan, with Chinese ships calling at the port along with Portuguese ships. Nagasaki was probably as cosmopolite

a place as you could find now in Japan and thus was looked upon with suspicion by most Japanese, especially since the rights to that port had been ceded to the Portuguese Jesuit priests three years ago by Harunobu's uncle, Omura Sumitada. Junmi, after putting the pistols in her belt and sheathing back the Portuguese sword, was then taken in charge by the retainer in charge of the castle's guard force, who took her away towards the women's quarters. Saburo went to join his master near the mules as ashigaru soldiers were unloading the bundles off the mules and opening them on the ground. His eyes, like those of Harunobu, opened wide when they saw that the bundles contained both muskets and pistols, along with their accessories and the tools to maintain them. All the weapons were of the wheel lock type just demonstrated by young Junmi. Harunobu nodded with satisfaction after counting a total of 48 muskets and 34 pistols now laid on the ground in front of him.

"These weapons will be a most welcome addition to our arsenal, especially since they don't need a lit wick to be fired and can be used even when caught by surprise with one's wicks extinguished. I will talk with Father Frois about proper compensation for these weapons to the families of those two dead merchants. In the meantime, have these weapons carefully wrapped back and brought to our arsenal room."

"Yes, My Lord! What about the weapons taken on the dead bandits?"

"Your patrol killed these bandits: you divide the spoils among the men of your patrol." Said Harunobu matter-of-factly before walking away towards the central tower of the castle, leaving a content Saburo to execute his orders.

Once the new firearms had been taken to the main arsenal of the castle, Saburo enlisted the help of young Ujira to bring the weapons taken from the bandits to the barrack occupied by their ashigaru unit. The men that had formed the morning patrol gathered quickly in a circle when Saburo called them up: loot was one of the very few ways for them to earn something more than their meager pay of one third of a koku¹⁶ a year on top of food and lodging. The men kept quiet as Saburo lined up the weapons and the few pieces of armor on the floor of the barrack: they knew Saburo to be a fair and honest commander. Besides, calling openly in doubt his fairness would only get

¹⁶ Koku: One koku equaled 180 liters of dry rice, the amount deemed sufficient to feed a man for a year. Values in medieval Japan were given in koku and salaries were often paid with rice, which could in turn be bartered for other goods or staples.

them trouble. There were anyway enough items for everyone in the patrol to have at least two each. Saburo was starting to split the loot in eleven roughly equal parts when Ujiro objected.

“Wait! What about Junmi’s part? She did kill three of the bandits after all.”

“Are you joking?” Replied Daigoro, the next oldest veteran in the unit after Saburo and a big man of rough manners. “You want us to share our loot with a girl? Besides, she already got the weapons from the dead Gaijin.”

“Maybe, but she still killed three bandits by herself.” Insisted Ujiro. “She is entitled to a share of this.”

“You young pup! You are smitten with her, aren’t you? You want to gain her favors by getting her something.”

“That’s not true!” Protested the young ashigaru, who was actually sixteen years old, while reddening. Saburo, who was listening with interest to the argument, then raised a hand to call for silence.

“Ujiro is right, however weird this sharing of loot with a girl may sound. Our lord gave her the dead Portuguese’s weapons for helping safeguard the shipment of weapons. The loot from the bandits is a separate matter. Do you realize that, if she had not held those bandits at bay, those thieves would have run away with everything, and we would now have nothing?”

The men of the patrol, including the big Daigoro, grudgingly acknowledged the truth in his words and let Saburo split the loot, which consisted of a collection of swords, knives, bows, spears, naginatas¹⁷ and three sets of inexpensive tatami do folding armor, plus some silver and copper coins. The men showed little interest in the tatami do armor, as their own okegawa do cuirass armor was much superior. Saburo thus selected a set of tatami do armor that was not damaged and put it aside, along with a nagemaki, a shorter variant of the naginata, and a wakizashi short sword. He also added to that a few of the silver and copper coins. The rest was then divided up among the members of the patrol. That was still enough for each of them to gain the equivalent of maybe thirty or so silver coins, a nice sum for an ashigaru. As the satisfied soldiers returned to their respective mats, Saburo took his own portion of the loot and that meant for Junmi and went to the separate room that he shared with three other ashigaru ko gashira. Dropping his portion in his assigned corner, he then left the barrack with the loot meant for Junmi and went to

¹⁷ Naginata: Pole arm consisting of a curved sword blade on a stout wooden shaft.

the central dungeon of the castle, entering it by a secondary entrance reserved for the servants and the lower classes of warriors. He however had to stop at the entrance to the women's quarters, which was guarded by two ashigaru with strict orders not to let any man but the daimyo himself enter. Expecting that, Saburo, stopped a passing servant that was coming out of the door with a big bundle of dirty clothes in her arms.

"Hey, girl, could you fetch the new girl that arrived this afternoon and tell her to come see me here?"

"The one that was loaded down with weapons? She is taking a bath right now in the female servants' laundry and bath annex. I am going there right now, so I will be able to get her to the door for you."

"Thank you!" Said Saburo before following the young servant.

The annex was in a low building separate from the high central dungeon, besides one of the wells of the castle. The annex was in turn segregated from the other buildings by a brick wall but the gate in that wall was not guarded, as the traffic of incoming and outgoing servants was constant. Saburo still had to stop at the door of the annex itself and wait while the young servant went inside to pass his message. She was back a couple of minutes later, cracking open the door just enough to speak with him.

"She promised to make it quick. In fact, she was out of the bath and drying herself when I came to her."

"Good! Uh, could you tell me if she had any battle scars visible on her body? I am just curious about her being really trained for battle."

His question seemed to amuse the young servant, who smiled and answered in a low voice.

"I didn't see any scars but I can tell you that she has a strong and well-shaped body and appears to be well fed. I'm sorry but I have to go do my laundry now."

The servant then closed the door, leaving Saburo to wait again. Junmi however came out within minutes, bowing to him respectfully. She now wore the blue and red baggy trousers and long-sleeved shirt that was regulation wear for the ashigaru of Lord Arima Harunobu. She also had her weapons and belt on. Saburo inspected her with satisfaction.

"I see that you have been already provided with new clothes more fitting for your duties."

“The retainer in charge of the guards of the main dungeon saw to it that I was properly fitted, so as not to detract on the household of our lord, ashigaru ko gashira. I was already assigned a guard shift for tonight at the entrance to the noble women’s quarters.”

“Excellent! Then, you may need those things.”

Junmi took the tatami do armor, the weapons and the money handed by Saburo, looking with surprise at them.

“Didn’t these come from the dead bandits?”

“They did! This is your share of the loot. You may thank young Ujiro for this, as he protested that you were entitled to a part of it when we started splitting the loot.”

Junmi gave him a warm smile that made her beautiful face look even prettier. She then bowed low to him.

“Thank you for your fairness, ashigaru ko gashira. Please tell Ujiro that I will not forget this.”

“You will be able to thank him at supper time, Junmi: you may be a woman but, as an ashigaru in the employ of our lord, you will eat with the other ashigaru in the main mess hall. I will see you there.”

Saburo then left her to return to his duties, feeling quite good now: a woman ashigaru may be a rare anomaly but it was liable to make the atmosphere in the mess hall more agreeable.

17:06 (Kyoto Time)

Time Patrol scout ship BRITANNIA

30,000 meters above Hara Castle

“So, any comments or questions concerning the latest developments in the mission?” Asked Nancy Laplante while looking around the small table of the scout ship’s crew lounge. Apart from Carolyn Anderson, who was presently in the pilot’s seat on the bridge of the ship, and one sensors specialist manning the ground surveillance sensors and probes from a station in the cargo bay, the full mission crew of twelve field agents and specialists was present in the lounge. Behind her, on a wall of the lounge, was a giant viewing screen showing the view from the micro-probe following Jenny Kawena ‘B’ everywhere. Prince Len ‘B’, who was the designated mission historian, raised a hand.

“As a guard in the employ of Daimyo Arima Harunobu, Jenny would now be expected to kill if ordered so by an ashigaru officer or any other superior, or if she is forced to defend the daimyo’s family and household against any invader or intruder. What if she then kills someone who was not meant historically to be killed? That point is even more delicate than usual since few people in Japan at this time have family names, making the tracing of their family tree nearly impossible. Maybe a descendant from one of the bandits killed by her was destined to become someone important.”

Nancy thought about that in silence for a moment. That point had bothered her for hours now and, as the head of mission, it was up to her to take decisions that could possibly change history, even if it was only in very minor ways. Unfortunately, when traveling through time, historical interference was simply impossible to completely avoid, something she could thank the Chaos Theory for. That well-established theory simply said that any interaction in any situation always ended up influencing that situation in some way, even if one did nothing more than observe that situation. That influence could translate into something as benign as an object being dropped to the left instead of to the right of a person, or as catastrophic as an historical event being affected so drastically as to split the timeline or rewrite history in a major way. Nancy’s own actions after finding herself marooned in 1940 England without knowing how she had ended there had been enough to split the timeline and create timeline ‘B’, from which most of the people around the lounge’s table were from. Nancy was thus very much aware of the seriousness of the present dilemma.

“I have reviewed that event over and over, Len, and I am fairly convinced that the death of those bandits will not change history. For one, they were of a very low social class, in a time period and country where rising up in social class was very difficult and infrequent. Also, as road bandits, their life expectancy was going to be short anyway, especially in the turbulent times of the Japan of the late 16th Century. Jenny had no choice but to defend herself at that time and was in fact lucky not to have been killed or seriously wounded then. Disappearing was also not an option for her, as there were way too many witnesses present. Granted, some future Japanese families may have a slightly modified DNA because of this but history has proved itself to be somewhat flexible in that respect. While not killing anyone would be the ideal end goal here, it will simply be impossible to guarantee, unless we are ready to lose Jenny any time something happens. We already nearly lost her twice today and that is plenty enough for me.”

Heads nodded around the table at those words. Jenny Kawena was a sweet and very popular young woman well liked by everybody who knew her. She was also on her first solo mission in the past, which had resulted in the beefing up of the mission team compared to other missions done by veteran field agents. Nancy, as the Time Patrol senior field agent, made a point of heading all solo missions in the past that involved a rookie field agent, while Miri Goshenk 'B', as the Time Patrol senior psychologist, was present on the mission team in order to assess at all times the mental and emotional balance of Jenny Kawena as she faced a number of stressful situations. Lori Kano, who was editing and putting together the audio-visual recordings taken during the mission in order to produce a historical documentary to be released to the public in the future, spoke next, looking at Len.

"What are the chances that this castle will be attacked, something that could force Jenny to kill again? There is after all an enemy army not far from Hara, roaming the countryside."

"True!" Replied Len while looking back at the beautiful ex-news anchorwoman. "However, the historical records show no recorded attack or siege against Hara Castle, at least not in this decade. Granted, the records we have are very incomplete, which is one of the main reasons we are conducting this mission in the first place. Thus, I cannot vouch that spies or assassins, or even advance parties from the army of Ryuzoji Takanobu, will not show up in or around Hara Castle while Jenny is there. I guess that we will have to play that aspect as it goes."

"Should we widen our sensor coverage around Jenny in order to be able to warn her in advance of any impending danger?" Asked Princess Xinia, a young beauty from the now defunct Imperium 'B' and a sister of Len who acted as a sensors specialist for the mission. Nancy nodded after a second of reflection.

"That certainly can't hurt and could in fact give us time to give Jenny an alternate course of action in case trouble is coming. Let's deploy four Class 'B' probes around Hara Castle and put them on automatic overwatch mode. Also, we will deploy two extra micro-probes around Jenny in order to warn her of approaching intruders. All this will however mean a lot more work in monitoring all that extra visual data."

"Hell, if it means that Jenny will be safer, then I will help monitor the probes." Replied at once Jeffrey Norton, the young and extremely handsome assault specialist who was part of the two-man ground backup team and was also an intimate friend of Jenny. Nancy smiled at his eagerness, which was however easy to understand.

“I’m sure that Jenny will appreciate that, Jeffrey. Alright, we will tighten surveillance around her as of now. It will give us at the same time an even better coverage for Lori to choose from to produce our documentary. If there are no other questions or comments, we will now resume our respective individual routines: we are after all here for quite a few more weeks.”

16:28 (Kyoto Time)

Friday, October 7, 1583 ‘A’

Hara Castle, Southern Shimabara Peninsula

Hizen Province, Kyushu Island

Japan

There were only a few persons present for the burial of Father Pietro in the cemetery lot outside the castle. Apart from Father Luis Frois, who was officiating with the help of a choir boy, Junmi and the four servants who had dug the grave were in attendance. That didn’t surprise Frois, even if it saddened him to see so little respect paid to his dead religious brother: death was so common these days in the region, with enemy patrols and raiding parties roaming the countryside constantly. Besides the hole now containing the body of Father Pietro were the graves of the two Portuguese arms merchants, who had been buried last evening. Concluding the burial service with a last prayer, Frois then signaled to the servants to start filling the grave with dirt. He observed in silence, along with young Junmi, as the men worked. A wooden cross with Father Pietro’s name and dates of birth and death engraved on it was finally planted on the grave. As the small party broke up, Frois went to Junmi to speak to her. While thankful for her attendance, he secretly disapproved of a woman bearing arms and dressing like a man, which reminded him too much of a certain famous French maiden girl who had been burned at the stake for her unnatural ways. From the whispered comments he had heard around the castle since yesterday evening, many others also found a female ashigaru a most bizarre idea to accept. However, with the precarious military situation of Lord Arima Harunobu, few complained about having an extra body to help guard the castle, as long as she was not sent into the field with male ashigaru soldiers and samurai warriors. Frois couldn’t help glance at the Portuguese sword belt she wore, which made her look even more incongruous. He then spoke to her in Portuguese,

knowing that she spoke that language well, while his Japanese was still somewhat hesitant.

“I meant to ask you, my child: are you a good Christian?”

She gave him a somber look at that.

“I am a Christian, Father, but I suppose that I could not be called a devout one. I am sorry that I could not protect Father Pietro better. He was truly a good man.”

Frois nodded at that: the girl sounded sincere enough. As for not being devout, that was about the story of half of the converts in this country, starting with Lord Harunobu.

“You did very well, my child. God will be thankful to you for protecting one of his servants. Do you have plans to marry soon, as a good woman should?”

“I now serve Lord Harunobu, Father. He will decide when I marry and with whom.”

On that most Japanese answer, Junmi then walked away, leaving Frois to shake his head: Japan was such a strange country, where the concept of duty seemingly overrode everything else.

14:18 (Kyoto Time)

Sunday, November 6, 1583 ‘A’

Hara Castle

Ujiro had managed to end up facing Junmi for this daily afternoon weapons practice in the inner courtyard. By now, with slow, patient and discreet courting, he felt that the time where he would ask for her hand was getting close. Junmi herself seemed to appreciate his company and had smiled happily when Saburo had put Ujiro in front of her for the wooden sword practice. However, that did not mean that she was going easy on Ujiro now. Like many other ashigaru, Ujiro had learned quickly enough that she was surprisingly good with most types of weapons, something that had arisen the interest and curiosity of many of the samurai warriors of the castle. What she lacked in brute strength she compensated for with speed and skill. Ujiro was being pummeled back by her rain of baton swings when the shouted alarm from a lookout froze them all.

“ENEMY CAVALRY ON THE ROAD!”

The samurai in charge of the weapons practice immediately reacted to that, shouting at the ashigaru present in the courtyard.

“EVERYBODY TO THEIR POSTS! LOCK THE INNER GATES!”

Junmi patted quickly Ujiro's shoulder as she was about to run inside the central tower, where she was assigned a post.

"See you later, Ujiro!"

Ujiro then had to run himself to his post, which was on top of the East side ramparts of the old castle. With less than 2,000 samurai and ashigaru to garrison his last fortress, Lord Harunobu was completely outmatched in terms of military forces compared to the large armies of Ryuzoji Takanobu, better known as 'The Bear of Hizen'. Sooner or later, Takanobu would come to evict his weak rival from Hara Castle as well. Maybe this was the time for that after all, thought Ujiro as he climbed the steep stairs to the ramparts. When he arrived at his assigned station on top of the wall, he saw a large column of cavalry, with maybe a thousand or more mounted samurai in it, that was passing on the coastal road 500 meters away, heading South. Their banners and colors were definitely those of the Ryuzoji. Ujiro then heard the loud calls from the horagai shell trumpets of the castle, giving the alarm to the surrounding villages. Soon, more shell trumpet calls answered those of the castle from a distance, passing the warning to other villages. At least, the ashigaru and the few samurai stationed in the villages of the region would be ready to defend themselves and were not going to be taken by surprise. Ujiro then saw Lord Harunobu on the balcony of his apartments, surrounded by his top retainers and apparently giving orders while watching the enemy column. A few minutes later, Harunobu's top retainer ran out of the central tower and shouted orders around him.

"ALL THE WARRIORS EXCEPT FOR THE MEN OF THE COMPANIES OF THE ASHIGARU KASHIRA KANBE AND HYOZU WILL ASSEMBLE IN THE COURTYARD! WE ARE MAKING A SORTIE!"

His company being part of the force ordered out, Ujiro ran down the steps of the ramparts with his comrades and lined up in good order with his unit. Amongst a flurry of orders from the various officers and samurai retainers, he and the other ashigaru quickly collected extra ammunition and arrows, along with rations of rice. Less than a hour later, a strong column of 200 mounted samurai and 1,600 ashigaru that included Ujiro left the castle under the encouragements of the 250 ashigaru and samurai staying in the castle. The servants and the wives of the samurai also joined in to cheer the departing troops, making Ujiro's excitement grow even more intense as he marched out, ready for battle. His only regret was that Junmi could not be allowed outside of the central tower in order to wish him luck.

The general in charge of the column first sent a few samurai scouts on fast horses ahead, so that they could follow the enemy and report back its position. He then made his force march South down the coastal road, pursuing the enemy column. When they arrived in the small coastal town of Arima one hour later, it was to find that the small local garrison had already been massacred, with only a small group of women armed with naginatas still barricaded in the local rice granary. The enemy cavalry was already gone, apparently heading towards Kushi, about ten kilometers down the coastal road. That presented Harunobu's general with a tactical dilemma, since his own force was much less mobile than the enemy column. Either he kept his force united, in which case he was probably going to be outrun by the enemy, or he could surge ahead with his mounted samurai and leave his ashigaru to follow as fast as they could. The general decided on the second solution and galloped away with his 200 samurai, while the ashigaru officers shouted orders for their men to quicken the pace. Heavily loaded with their armor, weapons and supplies, the foot soldiers lengthened their pace and endured in silence the exhausting march that followed. Darkness fell by the time they reached Kushi. One mounted scout was waiting for them there, with orders for the ashigaru force to establish a blocking position across the coastal road just West of the port and wait there for either the enemy to show up or for the friendly cavalry to join them. As Ujiro took position with his comrades and started building a hasty barricade, he was able to see that the town had been mostly spared, except for the fact that the local garrison of the port had been massacred, like in Arima. The quick advance of the Harunobu column had however prevented the enemy from taking off with the reserves of rice stored in Kushi. Drenched with sweat and shivering in the rapidly cooling night, the tired Ujiro stood behind the new barricade and waited anxiously for the enemy cavalry to come out of the darkness, resolved to prove to all his valor if battle was joined.

02:40 (Kyoto Time)

Monday, November 7, 1583 'A'

Hara Castle

Silence was nearly total inside the central tower of the castle, save for the snoring of sleeping people and the occasional cracking of the wooden floors when someone got up to go down to the latrines of the castle. Junmi had been standing guard with a male ashigaru for over three hours now in front of the reinforced wood and iron

door of the noble women's quarters, on the second floor of the pagoda tower. The implanted radio inside her right ear then came to life with a short message from Jeffrey Norton.

"Jenny, heads up! Don't react yet but we are presently tracking a total of seven intruders quietly climbing the walls of the west side of the castle. Nancy has been called in and will give you precise instructions soon."

"Understood, Jeffrey." Replied mentally Jenny, her implanted radio picking up her brainwaves and transmitting them silently. Two minutes later, Nancy's voice came on the radio.

"Jenny, you are not to react to these intruders unless they come at you or if another guard shouts the alarm. If you have to react, kill only if necessary to defend yourself or preserve your cover. I now assess those intruders as being probably ninja assassins or saboteurs."

"Got that, Nancy!" Replied silently Jenny, now nervous. She glanced at Joshiro, the male guard: the ashigaru was half asleep and not exactly qualified as being alert. She elbowed him gently, keeping her voice low in order not to wake up the occupants of the female quarters.

"Hey, Joshiro, don't go to sleep on me!"

The man jerked up, looked around in confusion, then smile weakly at her.

"What I would like is to go to sleep with you, Junmi."

"Of course you would!" Replied Jenny in a sarcastic tone. "Just keep your eyes open for the moment, unless you want a samurai to find you asleep at your post."

That motivated Joshiro into waking up: the punishment for such an offense was at a minimum a good flogging and could go all the way to death.

Another ten minutes passed before the next radio message came in from Nancy.

"Jenny, the intruders split up into two groups. Three of them are heading slowly towards the well supplying the central tower, while the four others are presently climbing through an open window on your floor. None of the guards have apparently seen them yet. That cavalry column earlier yesterday was probably meant to draw out most of the garrison in order to facilitate the infiltration of these ninjas. Stand your post and defend yourself but don't run after them unless ordered to by an officer."

"I copy that, Nancy." Replied mentally Jenny before looking at both ends of the hallway she and Joshiro were standing in. The staircase leading up to the quarters of

the senior samurai officers and of the daimyo was nearby. Anyone wanting to go upstairs would have to go by her. She however doubted that the incoming ninjas were after the daimyo: if so, they would have climbed directly to his window, two floors up. They were probably here to assassinate the daimyo's family, in order to plant fear and doubt in the castle. She discreetly made sure that her two pistols would not get stuck in her belt if she drew them quickly, then flexed her legs slowly, getting ready for action. She was holding firmly her nagemaki pole arm as she scanned again both ends of the hallway, which was poorly lit by three torches. Her heart skipped a beat when she saw a dark shape crouched behind the corner to her left, only partially visible because of its cover. Joshiro was between her and the intruder and had not seen him. The ashigaru was in fact not even looking around, being still fighting sleep. Looking only from the corner of her eyes and appearing relaxed despite being as tense as a steel bar, Jenny then saw two more shapes suddenly step out from behind the corner. The three intruders then strung bows, pointing arrows at her and Joshiro.

“JOSHIRO, WATCH OUT TO YOUR LEFT!”

Totally taken by surprise, the ashigaru turned halfway around, facing the left end of the hallway while starting to point his naginata. At the same time, Jenny was crouching down, letting her nagemaki drop to the floor while she pulled out both of her wheel lock pistols and cocked their hammers. The unfortunate Joshiro got hit by all three incoming arrows, one of which was apparently meant for Jenny, judging from its trajectory. The ashigaru fell down to his knees with a groan of pain as the three intruders charged down the hallway with short swords drawn. Normally, if armed with the standard matchlock pistol found today in Japan, Jenny would never have the time now to light the wicks and fire, something the ninjas had probably counted on. Jenny caught them at a full run, firing first the pistol in her left hand, which was her weak hand, then her right hand pistol, with the shots ringing loudly inside the building. Both of the heavy lead balls struck home, stopping dead in their tracks the two first ninjas. The third one kept running towards Jenny, his sword high. Now out of time to pick up her nagemaki or even to draw her own sword, Jenny blocked the blade swishing down at her head with her crossed pistols. She then kicked hard her opponent in the testicles, making him groan in pain while he collapsed to his knees. Not giving the man any time to further react, she pistol-whipped him hard across the side of his head. The ninja fell heavily to the floor, unconscious, as Jenny shouted out at the top of her lungs.

“NINJA INTRUDERS! ALARM! INTRUDERS IN THE CASTLE!”

As Nancy had told her, she then stayed at her post, picking up her nagemaki after putting her two pistols back in her belt. She briefly saw a dark shape peep for a second from behind the far corner of the hallway but didn't go after that ninja, instead going to check on Joshiro. Her unfortunate comrade was however dead. She was getting up after examining the ashigaru when four samurai, one of them in full armor, came down at a run from the upper floors. The one in armor looked quickly at the bodies littering the hallway, then looked at Jenny.

"Did you see any other intruder?"

"I saw another one peep from past the far corner of the hallway a moment ago, Kashira¹⁸." Answered quickly but respectfully Jenny, prompting the samurai to rush down the hallway with the three other samurai. Jenny then got a radio message from Nancy.

"Well done, Jenny. You however have one more thing to do to play your role to the hilt."

"What would that be?" Asked mentally Jenny, not seeing what Nancy could be talking about. Nancy's answer nearly froze her blood.

"Take the heads of the enemies you killed. You will be expected to do that and it will make you more credible in the eyes of the men around you."

"Uh, I understand. Jenny, out." Replied Jenny, turning a bit green. Going to the two ninjas she had shot, she stood over one of them and raised her nagemaki. She hesitated briefly, then brought it down with all her strength, severing the man's head cleanly. Feeling sick, she nonetheless was able to repeat the process on the second ninja, then took the two heads by their hair and walked back to her post. She had just stopped in front of the door she was tasked to guard when a samurai in full armor and leading six ashigaru came up the staircase at a run.

"What happened here?" He growled in a rough tone while eyeing the bodies, then the two heads still held by Jenny. The field agent explained quickly what happened, pointing last at the ninja she had knocked out.

"This one is only unconscious: I hit him on the side of the head, Kashira."

"Excellent! We will be able to interrogate him later. You four, make sure that this intruder is fully disarmed, then tie him up tight and bring him downstairs in the basement cells."

¹⁸ Kashira: Samurai officer in charge of an ashigaru unit.

The samurai then gave a pleased look at Jenny, smiling to her.

“Well done, woman! Your warnings allowed us to catch and kill three more intruders who were trying to poison our main well. Is your companion dead?”

“Unfortunately yes, Kashira. His name was Joshiro.”

The samurai grunted, then pointed Joshiro’s body to his two remaining ashigaru.

“Bring his body outside for burial and inform the ashigaru kashira and the priest.”

As Joshiro’s body was being picked up and the unconscious ninja was being summarily stripped naked to make sure that no weapons were left hidden on him, someone opened the door of the noble women’s quarters from the inside. The samurai growled on seeing that three young boys and a little girl were now looking wide-eyed at the scene and at the heads held by Jenny.

“Get back inside and keep that door closed, children!”

The samurai then looked back at Jenny.

“I will send a replacement for your comrade. Remind me of your name, woman.”

“Junmi, Kashira.” She answered while bowing low to him. She then had to bow even lower, imitated by the samurai, as Lord Harunobu himself came down the stairs, accompanied by four bodyguards in full armor. The samurai gave a quick report to the daimyo, who then nodded gravely.

“So, yesterday’s enemy raiding party was probably meant to empty the castle in order to facilitate the job of those intruders. Have the garrison sweep thoroughly the whole castle. Make sure that there are no more intruders. Also have the ramparts fully manned.”

“Yes, My Lord!” Replied the samurai, who then ran downstairs. The daimyo then nodded once to Junmi and also headed downstairs with his bodyguards.

Four minutes later, a work party of six ashigaru and four female servants armed with buckets showed up. As soon as the ashigaru had picked up the decapitated bodies of the two dead ninjas, the servants sponged up the blood splattering the floor and walls and washed them thoroughly. They were still working when a lone ashigaru in full battle attire showed up and presented himself to Junmi.

“My name is Akira. I was sent to replace your dead comrade.”

“And I’m Junmi. Let’s hope that the rest of the night will be quieter.”

The young man looked down with envy at the two severed heads lined up against the wall near her feet.

“It was certainly a good night for you, Junmi.”

“I simply did my duty.” Replied Jenny, drawing a nod of approval from Akira. For the first time since her arrival in Hara Castle, Jenny felt that she was finally getting some genuine respect.

16:02 (Kyoto Time)

Hara Castle

Ujiro was tired, dirty and disappointed as he entered the castle with the rest of his column: they had not been able to catch up with the enemy at all and his harquebus was still clean, not having shot once. The enemy cavalry had played with them around the countryside until a messenger from Lord Harunobu had brought orders to return to the castle. He was however happy to see Junmi, waving to him from a corner of the courtyard. Ujiro’s eyes then bulged out when he noticed the two human heads attached to her nagemaki.

“How did she do that?” He exclaimed, prompting the other ashigaru around him in looking in the direction of Junmi. They also stared open-mouthed at the heads, with Saburo speaking in an admiring tone.

“Well, we certainly picked a rare gem a month ago. We will have to listen to her story tonight.”

They then fell silent again as their samurai officers lined them in parade order prior to dismissing them back to their barracks. Once dismissed, Ujiro and the rest of his squad ran to Junmi, who greeted them with a proud smile.

“I killed two ninjas and captured a third one last night, after seven of them infiltrated the castle.”

“Did any of them escape?” Asked Saburo.

“One.” Replied Junmi. “They tried to get into the noble women’s quarters and also to poison the main water well. In recognition for my work, I am now allowed to stand guard on the ramparts and go in the field with you.”

“But that’s fantastic!” Exclaimed Ujiro, truly happy: she would now be able to accompany him everywhere. “You will have to tell us in detail at supper time about your fight.”

“I will be happy to, Ujiro.” She said in a tone that made the teenager warm up despite the cold wind. A blood-curling scream came out at that moment from deep

inside the central tower, making their heads snap around. Ujiro saw a fleeting look of grief on Junmi's face.

"They are still interrogating the ninja I captured. It can be a bit unnerving at times."

"He is getting what his kind deserves." Pronounced Saburo firmly. "They attack from behind at night and are not worthy of being called warriors. Do not feel pity for him, Junmi."

Another horrible scream made Junmi wince. She then pointed at the two heads attached to her nagemaki, looking a bit embarrassed.

"Uh, now that I have those two, what am I supposed to do with them? I never took heads before."

Her question, along with her expression, made the men around her broke out in laughter.

18:11 (Kyoto Time)

Time Patrol scoutship BRITANNIA

30,000 meters above Hara Castle

"I kind of feel guilty at eating all this meat while Jenny is stuck eating boiled rice day in and day out." Said sheepishly Jeffrey Norton while looking at his steak. Xinia, sitting across the crew lounge's table, smiled at his remark.

"Jenny is eating as well as the other ashigaru in the castle. In fact, she is better fed than most of the peasants in the Japan of today."

"That's easy for us to say while we are sitting here and barfing on all that modern food stored by the ton in our ship's cold room." Replied Jeffrey, glancing at the giant young woman from the royal family of the Imperium 'B'. "I can't wait until Jenny is back with us."

"She is with us, as we are with her, Jeffrey." Cut in Nancy Laplante, also eating her supper at the table. "We will be with her until she can exit the scene discreetly in about five weeks."

"What if she gets killed in the meantime?" Said the young man, sharpening his tone a bit. "Is researching daily life in a Japanese castle worth risking her life like this? A probe could observe that without risks."

Nancy put down her fork, now looking very serious.

“Jeffrey, we all love Jenny very much and want her to come out of this mission safely. However, this time period is very poorly documented and only human interaction will make some things come out, like motivations, morale and personal thoughts. We all joined the Time Patrol voluntarily while knowing the risks that the job entailed. Jenny is a responsible and mature girl who is proud of her work. Pulling her out now would be deeply insulting to her, believe me. Besides, this will not be her last such mission, by a long shot. Do you think that Jenny is not hurting for you when you are on a mission? We will pull her out when her job will be finished, or when her presence will threaten the integrity of history. Our job in the meantime is to make sure that she gets all the support that can be allowed.”

Jeffrey lowered his head and sighed.

“I suppose that you are right, Nancy. I’m sorry: I just can’t help worrying about her.”

“I can understand that perfectly, Jeffrey.” Said Nancy softly while patting his hand. “If that can help you feel better, consider that she is due soon to disappear for five minutes of relative local time and to take a well-deserved two weeks of vacation in 3389, like the rest of us. You will be able to cuddle her then all you want.”

Jeffrey couldn’t help look dreamily at the opposite wall at those words.

“Two weeks with Jenny... I just can’t wait for that.”

07:16 (Kyoto Time)

Tuesday, November 8, 1583 ‘A’

Hara Castle

Jenny was awakened gently to find a female servant kneeling besides her, an apologetic look on her face.

“I am sorry to wake you up like this so soon after the end of your night shift but Saburo, the ashigaru ko gashira, gave orders to wake you up so that you would join up with his squad. He said that you have to get ready to be away from the castle for a while.”

“I’ll be ready in a few minutes.” Answered groggily Jenny, starting to get up from her straw mat and pulling off her blanket. Like the female servants sleeping in the dormitory of the female quarters section of the central tower, Jenny slept nearly naked, wearing only a loin cloth. Putting on first the baggy blue pants provided to her by the

daimyo's retainer, she next put on a simple, white sleeveless shirt as an undergarment, then her regulation red and white shirt. She tied her trousers under the knees and at the ankles, then put on a pair of socks and straw sandals before slipping on her tatami do folding armor and fastening it. The conical iron jingasa helmet that was standard to the ashigaru soldier and which she had finally been equipped with yesterday was on next. She put on her Portuguese leather sword belt, with its scabbards and pouches, then slung her personal equipment pouch before slipping both of her pistols in her belt and grabbing her nagemaki pole arm. Thus equipped, she hurried outside, where she found Saburo and his mixed squad of thirty harquebusiers and archers in the process of assembling with other ashigaru squads and a few samurai in the inner courtyard. Seeing her come out of the central tower, Saburo waved at her to join him, which she did at a run, stopping at attention in front of him.

“Reporting as ordered, ashigaru ko gashira!”

Saburo nodded, glancing at her to inspect quickly her equipment.

“Welcome to my squad, Junmi. Our company is going to march to Kushi, where we will take up temporary garrison to replace the soldiers killed there two days ago. Hyozu's company is going to garrison Arima. Right now, we are about to collect our filled provision bags and our supplies. We will leave in one hour.”

“What position am I going to fill in your squad, ko gashira? I am neither an harquebusier nor a bowman.”

“You will carry an arrow supply quiver. You will be under my yumi ko gashira¹⁹, Toramon.”

Jenny secretly felt relief at that: while heavy enough, the supply quiver, loaded with one hundred spare arrows, was still less heavy than a bullet supply box. Bowing briefly to Saburo, she then went to Toramon, a young man in his mid twenties that was still older than most of his archers. His ten archers supplemented the firepower of the two squads of ten harquebusiers each, also under the command of Saburo. Toramon was a decent enough person and had shown some tolerance at the idea of a female ashigaru once she had demonstrated her fighting skills. He thus greeted her without visible dislike or mistrust and sent her straight to the armory, where Jenny was given an open-top wooden box filled with arrows. Using the primitive and uncomfortable shoulder straps

¹⁹ Yumi ko gashira: ashigaru in charge of an archer squad, itself part of a mixed ashigaru squad commanded by the ashigaru ko gashira.

fixed to the box, she shouldered her load and walked out of the armory, rejoining Toramon's squad. She and the men then formed a line to each be given a tubular cloth bag containing twelve days worth of rice rations, each ration being separated from the other rations by a knot in the bag. The rice itself was already half-cooked and could be eaten without further preparation. It was bland food but it was at least filling.

Once fully supplied and equipped, Saburo had his total mixed squad of 36 ashigaru form up in marching column with the other four squads of Kanbe's company. The ashigaru kashira then reviewed and inspected his soldiers one by one. He stayed expressionless and silent when he inspected Jenny but she could nearly feel his doubts about her. The fact that the daimyo himself had made her an ashigaru however prevented Kanbe from openly voicing his opinion about her. He did sneer at her Portuguese sword, though.

"A Gaijin's blade! It will probably snap at the first blow from a katana. You better rely on your wakizashi, soldier."

Jenny let that pass and grunted in acknowledgement, even though she knew for a fact that Japanese katana swords, while excellent blades, could not compete in metal quality with her sword, which was made of Toledo steel. The secret of Toledo steel had been lost by the time of the 20th Century, except of course to the Time Patrol, which had been able to find it back in time. That steel had probably been the best ever made prior to the high-technology alloys of the end of the 20th Century and had justly been famous in medieval Europe. Kanbe went on with his inspection, then reported to the samurai kashira that commanded the column. Soon, that samurai got up on his horse and, bowing to Lord Harunobu, who was watching from his balcony, signaled his force of nearly 400 ashigaru and fifteen mounted samurai to march out. Jenny couldn't help feel a shiver of emotion when her column was cheered on by the servants and families living in the castle and by the soldiers and samurai staying behind.

The weather was fairly cold but dry and the march went on well at first for Jenny. One of the two companies of the column, along with eight samurai, fell out once in the town of Arima, three kilometers down the coastal road, leaving Kanbe's company and the rest of the samurai led by the samurai kashira to continue on towards the port town of Kushi, about eight kilometers further down the road. Jenny could understand Lord Harunobu's wish to replenish the garrisons of those two towns: they represented

important sources of revenues and of supplies to be safeguarded from the enemy. He was however sending way too few soldiers in her opinion to be able to really secure the two localities and their surrounding villages, while keeping many troops idle in his overcrowded castle in Hara. Unless he soon found some new allies, Harunobu was in real danger of losing what was left of his domain at the hand of the 'Bear of Hizen'. Jenny knew however from historical hindsight that such allies would eventually come to Harunobu's help. She was still thinking about the local strategic situation when her unit arrived in sight of Kushi and of its small fishing port by late morning. By now the narrow and stiff shoulder straps of her supply quiver were starting to eat into her skin, making the march less than a comfortable one for her despite her high level of physical fitness. The welcome they got inside Kushi was rather muted, something Jenny could easily understand: most of the households of the small fishing town had recently lost their men folk, killed while defending the locality against the samurai of Ryuzoji Takanobu. While better equipped and trained, the new force was only slightly bigger than the previous garrison. The samurai kashira in charge of Jenny's column was apparently no fool and understood the situation well, so he did not berate the civilians for their lukewarm welcome. Instead, he passed on a series of orders, distributing his small force around the town and arranging for accommodations for his soldiers in the various houses and buildings. Saburo's mixed squad, including Jenny, drew the west end of the town, facing the road to Kazusa, the next town along the coastal road. Their accommodation, chosen by Saburo, turned out to be an old barn, now empty since the enemy raiders had taken off with the few cows and donkeys that had been there before. Jenny sighed with relief when she was allowed to take off her heavy supply quiver and to sit on the thick pile of hay inside the barn. Her time to rest was short, though: Saburo soon called up his ashigaru around him just outside of the barn, on the narrow dirt road passing through Kushi. He looked around at his foot soldiers, stopping maybe for a fraction of a second to glance at Jenny, then spoke quietly.

"We could be here for many days, maybe weeks or even months. Furthermore, the enemy could show up here at any time, without warning. We will thus have to be vigilant and be ready for anything. The orders from the kashira are to work at strengthening the local defenses of this place. We will thus start building a low palisade around the town after we have lunch. The kashira has asked the local women to cook some fish for us, so at least we won't have to use our rice rations. Afterwards, everybody will work on the palisade except for four archers that will keep watch on this

part of the town. We will work with our armor on and with our swords at our belts. Until the food arrives, you are free to rest a bit but stay in or near the barn. I want the four archers on watch now, though.”

The ashigaru, including Jenny, grinned at the news that they would eat something else than rice for a change. Being able to rest was also good news. Having had a very short night’s sleep, Jenny returned at once to the pile of hay and took off most of her kit, keeping only her tatami do armor on before going to sleep.

She was awakened half a hour later by a smiling Ujiro bent over her.

“Junmi, lunch is served. You better get your portion before the others eat all the fish.”

“Hell, I’m coming!” She replied, waking up fully at those words. She however quickly donned her sword belt and took her pistols before going with her wooden bowl to the corner of the barn where two local women were serving fish from an iron cooking pot. Saburo, standing near the women, observed her put her weapons on with secret satisfaction. She was up to now proving to be a very well disciplined ashigaru and showed a lot of initiative without any need to be prompted. She had also show in the past month that she had a very sharp mind and had also surprised him when he had seen her read and write as well as a scribe could while helping Father Luis Frois translate a letter from Japanese to Portuguese. Some would have accused her of possibly being an enemy ninja in disguise if not for the fact that she had killed two ninjas and foiled what could have been a very damaging night attack on Hara Castle. Saburo would never dare say so openly but she was in many respects making some of the samurai in the employ of Lord Harunobu look like thick-headed peasants. He was looking forward to see her in a real battle, as he was starting to suspect that she still had surprises for him. Her father must have been a ronin²⁰ samurai instead of a simple ashigaru. The two local women, one of which had gray hair, looked understandably surprised to see a woman being part of the troop. As she was being served a goodly portion of fish stew, Jenny bent down and whispered to the old woman.

“Could you tell me where the women of the town go to bathe and also where they go relieve themselves away from men’s eyes?”

The old woman smiled at that and also whispered to answer her.

²⁰ Ronin: Samurai with no master who wanders around the country.

“There is a bathing establishment for women and girls at the crossroads of the main road and of the street leading to the quays. A copper coin is the normal admission price and the establishment is run by women only. The bath house for men is across the street from it. As for latrines, there is a stand-alone outhouse maybe fifty paces from here down towards the shore.”

“Thank you!”

Returning to the pile of hay with her steaming bowl, Jenny sat besides Ujiro and gave him a big smile.

“So, how is the fish?”

“Damn good!” Replied the teenager, his mouth half full. “I think that we will like this place.”

Jenny nodded at that and then started wolfing down her fish stew, which was effectively very tasty, with herbs and salt in it along with big chunks of various types of fish and even a few shellfish.

Twenty minutes later, Saburo ordered his ashigaru to work, with one group going into the nearby forest to cut down trees while another group started digging a long trench that would be used to plant the wooden poles of the palisade. Jenny, being the only one of the squad with a pole arm, ended up going with the wood-cutting party, chopping off the branches of the cut trees with her nagemaki before the trunks could be brought to the trench being dug. One of the samurai of the column was on hand to observe the work and direct the fortification work. While not a military genius in Jenny's mind, he at least had enough common sense to use the outer buildings along the perimeter of the town to anchor solidly the palisade being built. The squad ended up working until nightfall, helped by a few old local men press-ganged by the samurai kashira. When the samurai supervising the work called a halt to it for the night, Jenny and the other ashigaru were tired, dirty and drenched with sweat. While she, like the other ashigaru, could live with that, she still asked Toramon for permission to go use the town's bath house before going on guard duty. The yumi ko gashira's face lit up when she told him about the two bath houses in town.

“Great idea, Junmi! I certainly could use a bath right now. Let me ask Saburo.”

Being also anxious to wash, Saburo quickly gave his consent, with the provision that the ashigaru would split in three successive groups to go bathe. Being the only woman of the unit, Jenny got to be on the first group heading for the baths. As Ujiro was about to

enter the men's bath house with his harquebus squad, he gave a longing look at Jenny, who was heading into the women's bath house: he would have given a lot to admire her naked body and even more to touch it. The truth was that he had never touched a girl yet, which made his longing only more painful. Jenny saw his expression and gave him a warm smile before entering the women's bath house. The establishment turned out to be small and crowded, with one area where one could first wash the worst off from pans full of lukewarm water before going to the separate room where a deep wooden bath tub filled with hot water sat. Eight women and five young girls were already crowding the bath when Jenny stepped in the hot water with delight, watched by the curious women. A preteen girl was the first to start the avalanche of questions that hit her.

"Are there many ashigaru girls in the daimyo's army, strong one?"

Jenny smiled to the girl, a pretty but very thin child. The town's people were not exactly prosperous and she suspected that the food she had enjoyed came at the cost of further rationing for the locals.

"I am the only one, and please call me Junmi."

"How did you end up an ashigaru, Junmi?" Asked an older woman. Jenny thought over her answer carefully before replying to that.

"It was an accident, in a way, even if it was something I wanted to do for a long time. My father, who died a few years ago, was an ashigaru and trained me in the art of weapons when he was unable to have a son, so that someone could protect our family when he would be gone or became too old. While I was acting as interpreter and guide for a group of Portuguese going to Hara Castle, bandits attacked us and I was forced to defend myself. An ashigaru patrol came in at a run then and saw me fight. When the daimyo heard about that, he took me in his employ as an ashigaru."

"Ah, yes, I remember you and the three Gaijins coming off a small boat here a month ago." Said another woman. "You came from Nagasaki, right?"

"That's right. I spent many years in Nagasaki. That's where I learned Portuguese, along with many other things from the visiting sailors."

"Please, tell us about those things!" Urged the preteen girl. The other users of the bath tub, while more discreet about their curiosity, nonetheless listened with intense interest as Jenny described things that typical Portuguese sailors and merchants could have told to a young local woman. The geographical descriptions of Europe and the everyday life in Portugal attracted particularly intense interest, along with more questions. Jenny however had to cut the discussion short, to the disappointment of the

preteen girl, whose name was Tama, as she could not take too long for her bath. Smiling apologetically, she started stepping out of the bath tub in order to dry herself.

“I am sorry if I leave you now but I have to go back to my duties. However, I promise to be back often, with more stories for you, little Tama.”

“Wait!” Said quickly one of the women. “We run a laundry service here. If you want, you can leave your dirty uniform and have it washed and dried overnight.”

“You could do that?” Said Jenny, pleased. “That would be great!”

“It is the least that we could do for the ones defending us.” Replied the woman, her voice somber. Jenny saw sadness appear on many of the women’s faces then and she nodded gravely.

“And we will defend you to the death if need be. You have my word on that.”

She then hurried out of the bathroom, taking in passing a towel from an old attendant to dry herself. Within ten minutes she was fully dressed and equipped, with a clean uniform on. She gave her dirty uniform to the old attendant, along with an extra copper coin, and was promised to get it back clean by noon tomorrow. Ujiro came out of the men’s bath house only moments after she walked out in the street. The teenager looked positively content as he walked to her.

“It feels so good to be clean again! Being full of good fish stew also is nice.”

“Agreed! Let’s go back together to the barn: the others will certainly be anxious to go wash as well.”

“True!”

The walk to the barn didn’t take long, as the town was a small one indeed, with maybe less than 2,000 inhabitants. Saburo sent two more ashigaru to go wash as soon as Jenny and Ujiro came back, then put the two of them on watch duty together to guard the point where the main road entered the town’s west end. That suited young Ujiro just fine, as it gave him the perfect excuse to be with Junmi. They were silent at first, mindful of their guard duty. As midnight approached and most of the ashigaru were asleep, Ujiro grew confident enough to start speaking quietly in a low voice to Jenny.

“Junmi, what do you intend to do once this war is over?”

“Continue to serve our daimyo, if he lets me.”

“How about marrying and starting a family?”

Jenny looked at him in the dark, smiling.

“Maybe. What about you, Ujiro?”

“I will probably return to the fields of my father to work them. I would like very much then to be able to marry a strong and beautiful girl.”

It didn't take a genius to figure out who such a girl could be for Ujiro. Jenny found him nice enough but she didn't want to be cruel by giving him false hopes.

“Ujiro, we shouldn't make plans that we may not be able to realize. However, we certainly can be friends...good friends.”

“Just that would make me happy, Junmi.” Said Ujiro truthfully, still hopeful. Jenny smiled to herself, then concentrated back on watching and listening for any possible enemy nearby.

11:03 (Kyoto Time)

Thursday, November 17, 1583 'A'

West end of Kushi

Southern Shimabara Peninsula

After nine days in Kushi, the small force from Hara Castle had fallen into a well-rehearsed routine and had done as much as one could to reinforce the defenses of the town. Some of the ashigaru, with the consent of the samurai kashira, had even started to help the local women and old men do some fishing, as the death of most of the men of military age eleven days ago was starting to impact severely on the local economy. That in turn was bound to affect negatively the future revenues and cut the supplies available to Lord Harunobu, who could hardly afford such cuts. The samurai kashira had thus acted with the view to prevent a severe drop in the shipment of fish supplies to Hara Castle. Since the cold weather had put a stop to agriculture production, those fish supplies were now more vital than ever, since coastal fishing could go on mostly year round. The war had not stopped because of the cold, though, as enemy raiding parties and patrols kept showing up around the countryside. As recently as last night, a village less than two kilometers away had been raided, with its winter reserves of rice and grains taken away by the enemy. That had in turn created a small movement of refugees from that village to Kushi, since the villagers had now nothing left to eat. Those refugees had then been put into use, helping the few fishermen left in the port, which had in turn allowed some of the ashigaru to return to their military duties.

Having awakened a short while earlier after resting from her latest night shift, Jenny was receiving instructions with a few other ashigaru from Saburo about their incoming day tasks when a guard shouted in alarm.

“SIR, I CAN HEAR A CAVALRY TROOP APPROACHING FROM THE WEST!”

Running to the palisade, Saburo listened carefully for a moment, then snapped his head around and shouted as well.

“GRAB YOUR WEAPONS! MAN THE PALISADE!”

Jenny, who had run to get her supply quiver as soon as she had heard the guard's warning, was already running out of the barn, ready for combat, as the other ashigaru ran to get their harquebus or bows. She soon was standing behind the west end road gate, made of two thin logs held horizontally above the ground and across the road. She was now solidly holding her nagemaki, pointed out, and had her supply quiver on her back and within reach of the archer that had been standing guard at the road gate. Toramon soon joined her there, hurrying his remaining archers into forming a line across the road. Saburo was in the meantime forming up his two squads of harquebusiers on either side of his archers squad after having sent a runner to warn the samurai kashira of the incoming cavalry. Jenny stiffened and steeled herself when the incoming cavalymen finally became visible as they turned the bend of the road a mere 200 meters away, emerging from the forest: there were hundreds of them, all heavily armored and clearly displaying the standards of the Ryuzoji. The enemy samurai then charged the gate at a gallop while screaming their war cries. It took everything for Jenny not to flee in panic at the sight of nearly 600 mounted samurai charging her troop of less than forty ashigaru: if not for the palisade, the enemy would certainly sweep away the ashigaru and herself in mere seconds. Since she was flanked on both sides by the ten archers of her squad, she extended forward her nagemaki while resting its shaft on top of the upper horizontal log of the gate and holding solidly to it. At the same time, she put one knee down on the ground, both to make her spare arrows more easily accessible to Toramon, who was standing behind her, and to show that she meant to hold her position at all cost. Toramon understood her move and patted her shoulder in encouragement before shouting orders at his archers.

“ON MY ORDER, ONE VOLLEY AT THE HORSES FROM A HUNDRED PACES, THEN HOLD FIRE!”

Toramon then looked anxiously at the harquebusiers, who were frantically getting their weapons ready. If they could not light their wicks quickly enough, they would then be

powerless to slow down the enemy charge. To his relief, the two teppo ko gashira²¹ managed to light all of their men's fuses in time. The enemy cavalry then came to within a hundred meters of the gate, still charging furiously with lances pointed horizontally.

“ARCHERS, FIRE!”

Fired at their maximum effective range, ten arrows then flew out with swishing noises. Six of the horses at the front of the charging column were hit and fell, projecting their riders violently to the ground and blocking the path of the following cavalymen. Some confusion was caused in the enemy ranks but the few hundred samurai behind the fallen horses then flowed around them and kept charging at the gate. When their first ranks arrived to within fifty meters of the road gate, Saburo shouted at the top of his lungs.

“HARQUEBUSIERS, FIRE!”

The twenty arquebusiers, facing nervously the incoming cavalymen, then fired in unison from their optimum range. The twenty heavy lead balls easily pierced the armors of the enemy mounted samurai, unhorsing over a dozen of them all at once and throwing more confusion in their ranks. Toramon then shouted more orders as the arquebusiers frantically started reloading their matchlock weapons.

“ARCHERS, FIRE AT WILL! COVER THE HARQUEBUSIERS!”

The archers, who had been ready for that, let fly at once another volley of arrows in the mass of enemy cavalry, then kept shooting as quickly as they could, concentrating their fire on the enemy samurai who were approaching the arquebusiers standing behind the palisade. That was when the palisade really proved its worth. The Japanese horses of the time were much smaller than modern horses, weighing only half as much, and simply could not jump over the one and a half meter-high palisade while carrying an armored rider. The enemy samurai riding towards the arquebusiers lined on each side of the road gate had to stop and vault around before turning towards the gate, which represented the weak point of the ashigaru defenses. Jenny thus suddenly found herself and the archers flanking her the center of attraction for hundreds of incoming enemy warriors. More terrified than she ever had been before, she nonetheless emptied both of her pistols, dropping two cavalymen, one of which wore a richly decorated armor. Quickly slipping back in her belt her two empty pistols, she then grabbed back her nagemaki in time to parry down the point of a lance thrust at her and in turn jabbed in the throat the unhorsed samurai running at her. Her next move was a vertical

²¹ Teppo ko gashira: Leader of an ashigaru arquebus squad.

chopping swing with her nagemaki that cut off the tips of two lances that were about to impale two of her comrade archers. She repeated her vertical swing on the other side, saving more of her comrades and giving them the chance to shoot down their closest opponents from nearly point blank range.

Now packed solid in front of the gate with no space to maneuver and having to walk over a steadily thickening carpet of dead and dying men and horses, the enemy simply could not advance fast enough before being shot in quick succession by Toramon's archers. That was when Saburo's arquebusiers delivered their second volley in the flanks of that mass and from very short range. More screams of pain were heard through the thick white smoke that enveloped the scene of the battle. One enemy horseman then suddenly emerged from the smoke in front of Jenny and made his mount jump over the road barrier. Jenny barely had time to react to him, sticking her nagemaki's long curved blade deep in the man's right armpit as he flew by her and making him scream horribly. He fell off his horse behind the line of archers but Jenny's pole arm was ripped from her hands in the process.

"SHIT!" She shouted in frustration before drawing quickly both her Portuguese long sword and her wakizashi short sword. She needed them both at once as two samurai yelling war cries ran out of the smoke towards her. Facing what they considered lowly adversaries unworthy of them, the two Ryuzoji samurai didn't expect to find a swords expert in front of them, especially a female one. Jenny was however a lot more than a simple woman, thanks to the 10,000 years of past life experiences she could draw on. While mostly serving as a scout ship crewmember, Jenny was still a qualified Time Patrol field agent with extensive and advanced training in the handling of practically all types of weapons known in history. She had also been a warrior many times during her past incarnations, like nearly all of the field agents of the Time Patrol, and knew how to kill. Lunging fencing style under the raised katana of one of the samurai, she jabbed him under the jaw, making her blade penetrate all the way to the brain and killing the man instantly. Then, blocking the sword of the second enemy samurai with her wakizashi while she extracted her long sword, she bunted the man in the face with the top of her conical iron helmet. Surprised and stunned for a second, the samurai then got her long sword through his throat. Jenny next stepped back a bit and returned to her original position in front of Toramon, so that he could grab arrows from

her supply quiver. Those arrows were in fact sorely needed now, the archers having shot their own quivers nearly empty.

By now Jenny could hear in her back the samurai kashira of her unit shouting orders as he approached at a run with his samurai and the unit's spearmen. They were barely in time to stop a fresh surge forward of enemy samurai from finally overwhelming the thinned ranks of the ashigaru holding the western palisade. Disgusted by such ferocious resistance and apparently temporarily leaderless, the mass of surviving Ryuzoji cavalymen retreated out of range after weathering a third arquebus volley from close range that fell a further fourteen of them. Hardly able to believe that she was still both alive and unhurt, Jenny planted both of her swords in the ground in front of her and started reloading frantically her two pistols one after the other. She and her comrades then eyed with disbelief the dozens of enemy corpses now littering the ground in front of them. The enemy had apparently lost close to a hundred samurai, most of them now packed in front of the road gate. The cost to Saburo's small unit had been heavy, however, with six arquebusiers and five archers either dead or seriously wounded. To Jenny's relief, she saw that Ujiro was still standing, reloading quickly his arquebus while protected by a few spearmen. The samurai kashira also eyed the carnage with incredulity before nodding to Saburo.

"Your men have fought valiantly, ashigaru ko gashira. Lord Harunobu will hear of this."

Saburo, along with his surviving soldiers, straightened up his back with pride: there could be no greater praise than being commended to your lord. The samurai kashira then got closer to Saburo, nearly whispering in his ear.

"How did the woman perform?"

"She truly fought like ten men, Kashira. I saw her kill by herself at least six enemy samurai, including the enemy commander. She also fought with her swords with incredible skill and protected constantly her comrade archers while they were shooting." Having problems believing this, the kashira eyed Jenny as she left briefly the line of archers after reloading her pistols in order to recuperate her nagemaki. He nodded with approval when she also chopped the head off of the samurai killed by her nagemaki, then grabbed it and brought it back to the road barrier. He next looked at the mass of enemy cavalry 300 yards away. They seemed to be debating what to do now. The enemy unit suddenly started to split in two, with maybe 200 mounted samurai charging

the road gate again with wild screams while the rest galloped to the left, towards the shore. The kashira understood at once what the enemy was trying to do now.

“THEY ARE GOING TO GO AROUND THE PALISADE AND TAKE US IN THE FLANK! TEN SPEARMEN WILL STAY HERE WITH THE ASHIGARU KO GASHIRA SABURO. THE REST, FOLLOW ME!”

With seven samurai and fifty spearmen at his back, he then rushed down the nearest side street leading towards the sea, intent on blocking the way before they could be completely outflanked by the enemy cavalry.

Despite the cold air, Jenny started sweating profusely as she stared at the approaching mass of cavalymen: it was going to take a true miracle for her and her comrades to come out of this alive. The other ashigaru seemed to understand that as well but grimly stood at their post, except for one spearman who lost control of himself and ran away in panic after throwing down his long spear. Saburo swore violently at the man, then looked at Jenny, whose supply quiver was now empty.

“Junmi, take off your empty supply quiver and take that spear, quickly!”

Jenny was too happy to take off the empty but still heavy and uncomfortable wooden pack and to drop it in front of the road gate. She then ran and grabbed the five meter-long spear before returning to her original position in the center of the line of archers, her two swords planted in the ground within arm's reach. On second thought, she sheathed back her swords before the enemy could fall on her: if a quick retreat was called, she would need those swords on her. As in the first charge, Toramon had his surviving archers fire one volley to slow down the enemy, followed by one volley from the arquebusiers. The surviving enemy horsemen then fell on the line of spears. The shock was of an incredible violence, with men and horses being skewered by the long spears and either dropping down or cartwheeling. Most of the Japanese spearmen were thrown back a few paces by the violence of the impact. Jenny, who was holding her spear like an European pikeman, with the base of her spear stuck in the dirt and kneeling with her right leg and foot on the base of the spear to anchor it, was the only one to keep steady. The samurai she skewered was stopped literally dead in his tracks and unhorsed, with his mount jumping over the road barrier and trampling the archer to the right of Jenny. As the four remaining archers fired arrows as quickly as they could under the protection of the spearmen, the enemy cavalymen then did something they should have done during their first charge: they took out their primitive matchlock pistols

and fired them from a distance of six meters in a massive volley. The archers and the spearmen blocking the road were their main targets and suffered heavily, with all but one archer and three spearmen not hit. Jenny's luck ran out at that moment, with one lead ball piercing her lower left leg and breaking the bone and with another lead ball penetrating her torso armor and ricocheting over her right ribs. With the main obstacle to their advance falling apart, the enemy cavalymen screamed in unison and rushed through the shattered line, trampling, skewering, stabbing or slashing the surviving ashigaru. Saburo's arquebusiers, who were still in the process of reloading their guns, were instantly overwhelmed and cut to pieces, including Ujiro, who died with a spear through his throat. In the wild confusion and melee, nobody saw Jenny's body disappear in a brief flash of light that was mostly obscured by the thick white smoke from gunpowder and the dust from the horses. A few ashigaru who then tried to flee in panic were quickly overtaken and killed. The triumphant Ryuzoji horsemen then regrouped and galloped down the street leading to the shore, charging the samurai and spearmen of the Arima in the back while the latter were already fighting with the 300 cavalymen that went around the palisade. The Arima men were also quickly massacred there despite fighting like demons. The samurai kashira was the last to fall, skewered by no less than five spears. One Ryuzoji samurai then dismounted and chopped off his head before grabbing it and showing it to his comrade while shouting triumphantly.

“THE TOWN IS OURS! LONG LIVE LORD TAKANOBU!”

The surviving 400 Ryuzoji cavalymen, out of an original total of 600, shouted in unison.

“LONG LIVE LORD TAKANOBU!”

11:24 (Kyoto Time)

Time Patrol scout ship BRITANNIA

Jenny, transported through space-time to the cargo bay of the scout ship via a coded remote control radio command to her implanted time distorter, fell from a meter down on a thick mat meant to cushion her fall on arrival. Nancy and Jeffrey, deadly worried, immediately ran to the moaning, writhing young woman splattering blood on the mat. Nancy swore when she saw that Jenny had also been stabbed in the stomach by a passing cavalryman.

“Damn! Jeffrey, help me quickly take off her armor!”

They did so in a few seconds, trying to ignore Jenny's cries of pain. Nancy then bent over her young agent and started glowing from the inside. Jeffrey, who knew that he could do no more to help Nancy, stood back with the rest of the mission team and watched as Jenny was healed by Nancy. The latter finally got up and helped Jenny to her feet, then hugged tenderly the shaking, crying young woman.

"It's over now, my poor Jenny. You did all that you could down there."

"Ujiro, he must be dead by now." Said Jenny through her tears and sobs. Nancy nodded her head grimly.

"We saw him die with the other ashigaru. I'm truly sorry, Jenny."

Nancy then hugged her again tightly as the young Hawaiian-Japanese cried her loss.

CHAPTER 7 – CLASH OF BELIEFS

10:51 (Jerusalem Time)

Tuesday, June 20, 1944 'B'

Offices of the Overseer of the Holy Land

Government Administrative Tower, Jerusalem

Holy Land of Palestine

The crowd of visitors and pilgrims was moderate this morning, compared to the dense crowds that were now customary on the Temple Mount on weekends. Most of the outside visitors and pilgrims coming to the Holy Land did so mainly on weekends. Those who came to be healed by walking across the Temple Mount, which was inhabited since last December by the spiritual mass of The One, were often poor and sick people who could barely afford the trip to Jerusalem from their country of residence and who could only pay for a short hotel stay, thus came on two-day trips. Nancy had been most vigilant about making sure that those poor, desperate pilgrims seeking healing in Jerusalem didn't get fleeced by unscrupulous local hotel and restaurant owners during their short visits to the Holy Land. Scrupulously honest functionaries had been personally selected by her to act as tourism industry inspectors, charged with discreetly checking out for any case of price gouging in the now booming hotel and restaurant businesses in and around Jerusalem. Those who were found to overcharge visiting pilgrims, especially the old and feeble ones, were then subjected to heavy fines and back taxes. Nancy and her justice administration had to make a few examples at first, but now things were mostly under control. What was nearly out of control now was the mad boom in the building or opening of new hotels, restaurants and boutiques by local residents and investors wanting to profit from this swarm of tourists and pilgrims. The local medical establishments and practitioners, after fearing with some reason to see their usual clientele evaporate because anyone could go now to the Temple Mount to be healed instantly, had however been able to stay in business for two reasons. First, many foreign pilgrims seeking healing arrived in often precarious medical shape in Palestine and needed medical supervision overnight before they could go or be carried to the Temple Mount for healing the next day. As a result, hotels offering extensive

medical supervision and services were now the rage around Jerusalem, employing countless doctors and nurses that would otherwise be nearly out of work. The second reason had to do with the fact that, as demonstrated more than once already, someone with significant crimes on their conscience and who tried to be healed of a disease or wound by going to the Temple Mount risked being judged on the spot by The One and punished. The more heinous the crime, the more severe the punishment. One German ex-Nazi official hiding behind a false identity to escape prosecution for his war crimes had made the mistake of ignoring the warning signs in multiple languages posted at the entrance points to the Temple Mount. The moment he had stepped on the Temple Mount proper, that ex-Nazi had literally burned up from the inside in front of the other visitors and pilgrims. Others that had been similarly punished on the Temple Mount included foreign organized crime figures, petty dictators, serial murderers, violent drug dealers, pimps, human traffickers and predatory pedophiles. As a result, those in Palestine who had something on their conscience and needed medical attention had to use traditional medical care in order to avoid judgment. One celebrated incident on the Temple Mount a few months ago had involved an Irish Christian Brother that had come to Jerusalem to have his arthritis healed, only to see his condition worsen dramatically once he set foot on the Temple Mount. On confronting him afterward, Nancy had found out that the man had a long history of sexually abusing orphan boys placed under his 'care and guidance' at an Irish orphanage. His Irish superiors, along with the Vatican, had however refused to believe Nancy, instead proclaiming that she was lying and had caused the Christian Brother's worsening condition in order to defame the Roman Catholic Church. This case was in fact far from being the only reason why the relations between Nancy and the Roman Catholic Church were now strained.

Nancy was still looking out at the Temple Mount through one of the large windows of her office when someone knocked lightly on the door connecting the office and its anteroom.

"COME IN!"

Nancy, wearing her customary white and gold embroidered robe, plus her tiara, gold necklace and ring of Queen of Jerusalem, slowly turned around to face the door as her secretary entered and stopped a few paces from the door.

"Cardinal Sylvio Reggiani is here to see you with two other Vatican dignitaries, Nancy."

“Very well! Let them in, Yasmin.”

The young Arab secretary nodded once her head and then turned around, going out of the office for a few seconds and returning with three men in their forties wearing the black and red robes of high-level Vatican churchmen. One of them also carried a leather briefcase in one hand. Yasmin then closed the door behind them, leaving the three men alone with Nancy. While they showed a façade of confidence and righteousness, Nancy could sense their nervousness, helped in that by her telepathic abilities. Despite the present bad blood between herself and the Catholic Church, she kept a polite expression and pointed a group of comfortable padded chairs surrounding a low coffee table in one corner of her office.

“Please, gentlemen, have a seat and make yourselves comfortable.”

“Thank you, Overseer.” Replied politely the leading churchman, who was probably Cardinal Reggiani. The four of them then moved to the corner and sat around the table.

“Would you like some coffee or tea, gentlemen?” Offered Nancy, getting Reggiani to shake his head.

“Thank you but no, Overseer. Our visit is intended to be a short one.”

Nancy gave him a somber look: that could only mean that they had come to deliver some kind of announcement from the Vatican, and probably not a very nice one. Reggiani however took the time to present his two companions to her.

“May I present to you Monsignor Aldo Fellini, my executive secretary, and Bishop Felipe Franco, from the office of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith?”

“And may I ask why you brought with you a member of the Inquisition, Cardinal Reggiani?” Asked Nancy, deciding to cut the bull. “Does it have to do with the fact that the Pope called me publicly a witch only three weeks ago?”

Reggiani tensed up at that, but kept his tone polite.

“Bishop Franco is here because of the nature of our visit to you, Overseer. We are here to deliver to you an official letter from His Holiness, The Pope.”

“I see! Then, you may show me the said letter, Cardinal.”

Fellini opened his briefcase and took out of it a velum envelope sealed with a large red wax seal bearing the arms of the Vatican, then handed it to Nancy. Before Nancy opened it, she eyed somberly Reggiani.

"You do realize, Cardinal Reggiani, that once I open this letter and read it, then there will be no turning back in our mutual relations. Now is still the time to find a reasonable agreement between us."

"I fully realize that, Overseer. However, these are the words of His Holiness and he has carefully weighed them before putting them down on paper."

"Very well, then." Said Nancy before breaking the wax seal and opening the envelope, extracting from it a three-page letter. The three churchmen tensed up as she started reading, obviously expecting a negative reaction from her. While keeping an impassive expression during her lecture, Nancy effectively became progressively angry on seeing the content of the letter. Taking the time to reread a few key paragraphs of the letter, she then lowered it and looked coldly at the churchmen facing her.

"This is all that your Pope could come up with, Cardinal Reggiani? A tired reiteration of lies and utter denial of reality and scientific facts, capped by an insulting ultimatum? Does he realize what this letter will cause?"

"You and your Time Patrol have left His Holiness little choice but to call up your heretical, blasphemous statements, Overseer." Replied Reggiani, hardening his tone. "You publicly challenged and contradicted many of the most sacred teachings of the Christian Bible, both from the New Testament and from the Old Testament."

"Sacred teachings..." Said Nancy in a clearly contemptuous tone. "Like that Humanity was created only 6,000 years ago, with God using simple dirt to make the first man and woman? That the theory of evolution is blasphemous, despite being supported by thousands of scientific finds and by on-the-spot research by Time Patrol exploration teams sent to the distant past? That the whole Universe was created in only seven days? That women are born sinners? Do you realize how ignorant and intolerant those so-called sacred teachings, written centuries or millenniums ago, often are? And the Pope is condemning me as a heretic and blasphemer for simply telling the truth? No! Don't say a thing now, Cardinal Reggiani! This letter says enough by itself. Your church wants to shut me up and discredit me so that it can keep its spiritual and social grip on its masses of followers, thus also ensuring that the revenues from those masses keep flowing towards Rome. All the while, it is shamelessly protecting those of its members who use their spiritual authority to abuse sexually and beat young children, in order to satisfy their repressed lust and their urge to impose their authority on others. You want to dirty my name in order to protect your hold on others? Then expect in return to be shamed publicly in a way that will convince even the most naïve and myopic of your

followers that your precious church stands mostly for hypocrisy, misogyny and intolerance. I came from the future and fought to end early the Second World War, saving in the process millions of innocent people. I healed tens of thousands of people through the powers given to me by The One. I brought peace and prosperity to Palestine. I even prevented a genocidal war in the future. And your Pope is calling me a witch, a heretic and a blasphemer? He should rather look back at the history of his own church and publicly recognize its failings and crimes.”

“Crimes, Overseer?” Started to protest Bishop Franco. Nancy however cut him off at once.

“Yes, crimes, Bishop Franco. Crimes like the senseless massacres of the Christian Crusades, committed in the name of the Christ and sanctioned by Rome. Like the torture and burning at the stake of over 200,000 unfortunate girls and women accused unjustly of witchcraft and then killed by your own Inquisition. Like the mass killings of so-called heretics during the various wars of religion in Europe, wars sponsored and approved by the Church of Rome. God is with us, proclaimed the various murdering armies on both sides! Yeah, sure! Or what about the massacre of indigenous populations in the Americas, committed supposedly to ‘save their souls’, by conquistadors accompanied by Christian missionaries? Should I also mention the prosecution of Galileo by the Church, or the Salem Witch Trials? The hands of the Catholic Church and of other Christian churches are drenched with blood, Bishop Franco, yet they still cover up crimes committed to this day by its members. How many boys have to be sodomized by an abusing priest or Christian Brother before that said priest or brother is finally punished by your precious church? The answer up to now? Too many to be counted. In fact, most of those priests and brothers never are punished. Your church moves them around instead to hide them and protect its reputation. I have lived for months besides Yeshua of Nazareth, the man your church is supposed to honor and proclaim as a savior of Humanity, and spoke with him countless times as one of his disciples. Well, I can tell you with confidence that, if Yeshua could see what your church has done in his name, then he would be mightily pissed. Show me where the tolerance, compassion and kindness were in the past crimes I described? Oh, that’s right: I am lying about me meeting Yeshua, and so is his widow, Miriam of Magdala.”

A fiery Nancy then looked directly in Cardinal Reggiani’s eyes while waiving the letter from the Pope.

"Be assured that both me and The One will have appropriate responses to this letter, Cardinal Reggiani. You may now return to Rome and tell the Pope to sit tight and grab solidly his chair, as his precious church may be seriously shaken in the weeks and months to come. As for me recanting my so-called blasphemous declarations, Hell will literally freeze over before that happens. Good day, gentlemen!"

She then got up from her chair, imitated by the three red-faced churchmen. She escorted them to the door of her office without a word and waited for them to be out of the anteroom, being escorted out by her secretary, before taking a deep breath to calm down. If there was something that she truly couldn't stand, apart from cruelty and intolerance, it was hypocrisy. However, she could not afford to underestimate the political power of the Roman Catholic Church and of the other various Christian churches. This would need some serious thinking and planning on her part in order to respond properly to this challenge from the Vatican.

10:07 (New York Time)

Sunday, June 25, 1944 'B'

Cathedral of St-Patrick

50th Street and Fifth Avenue, Manhattan

New York City, U.S.A.

Sean Manning had come to the Sunday morning mass with his whole family, as he customarily did every Sunday. This time, however, he had even better reasons to come, as he intended to thank God for the healing of his younger son, James, who was six years old. Sean, having limited financial means, had gone alone with James to Jerusalem a week ago with the hope of seeing his son's sequels from polio healed on the Temple Mount. Sean would never forget how the pavement had started to glow as soon as he had rolled his son's wheelchair on the stones of the Mount. That glow had then enveloped James, with his two atrophied legs growing back healthy and strong in a mere minute. That first dance of joy with his son had brought tears to Sean's eyes. Afterward, his younger son had finally been able to go play and run with the neighbors' children and had realized his dream of riding a bicycle, watched by his ecstatic parents.

Sean was a bit surprised when his parish priest gave early his pulpit to the Archbishop of New York, Francis Spellman, announcing that His Eminence had an

important speech to deliver. The small and a bit overweight Archbishop Spellman, looking as if he was going to perform an exorcism, then spoke with a strong voice in the microphone of the pulpit.

“My good parishioners and believers, I am addressing you today to warn you about a great evil. That evil is even greater due to the fact that it is hiding behind a mask of goodness. That evil resides in Jerusalem, where the so-called Overseer of the Holy Land has been spreading lies and blasphemies against our sacred church and the Holy Bible. That evil has now reached new heights, with that Jerusalem witch tricking sick and desperate people in coming to her city to be supposedly healed. While those desperate people are often effectively healed by walking across the Temple Mount of Jerusalem, what they don’t know is that the Devil, and not God, actually resides under the Temple Mount, stealing their souls in exchange for some temporary healing. Those unfortunate ones who had hoped for miracles thus were condemning themselves to Hell, while that witch of an Overseer gets rich with all the money made by the flow of pilgrims to Jerusalem. Our holy father in Rome has however uncovered the true nature of that witch, along with the abominable crimes she is committing under the guise of kindness.” As Spellman continued his fiery speech, Sean Manning could only look and listen on, now as white as a ghost. A glance at his son James showed him to be frozen with a look of horror on his young face, while his wife Mary was strangling her sobs, nearly hysterical. Worst of all, some of the other parishioners nearby that knew them were now looking at James as if he was truly damned to Hell. Sean’s horror quickly turned into denial, then in anger as Spellman promised to personally help those duped into going to Jerusalem in reclaiming their lost souls. Finally unable to take it anymore, Sean rose up to his feet and shouted at his archbishop.

“THIS CAN’T BE TRUE! I SAW MY SON BEING HEALED IN A MERE MINUTE IN JERUSALEM AND THE ONLY THING I FELT THERE WAS THE GOODNESS OF GOD. ARE YOU SAYING THAT MY SON, ALONG WITH ALL THE OTHERS THAT WENT TO JERUSALEM TO BE HEALED, SHOULD HAVE STAYED HOME AND CONTINUE SUFFERING? GOD KNOWS I PRAYED OFTEN ENOUGH IN THIS CATHEDRAL IN THE PAST FOR SOME MIRACLE TO HEAL MY SON. YET, NOTHING HAPPENED DESPITE ALL THOSE PRAYERS. NOW, YOU WANT US TO FORGO THE ONLY HOPE FOR HEALING LEFT TO US, BASED SOLELY ON YOUR WORD? NANCY LAPLANTE SAVED MILLIONS OF PEOPLE BY HER ACTIONS TWO

YEARS AGO, BY PUTTING AN END TO A DREADFUL WAR. WHY ARE YOU TRYING TO SMEAR HER LIKE THIS?"

Spellman was speechless at first, surprised to see that any of his parishioners would dare challenge his words. He then exploded in righteous anger.

"WHY? BECAUSE SHE IS A BLASPHEMER AND HERETIC OF THE WORST KIND! SHE DEFAMED THE GOOD LORD'S WORDS BY SPREADING LIES ABOUT THE CONTENT OF THE HOLY BIBLE. IF YOU WOULD LISTEN TO HER, WE WOULD SUPPOSEDLY ALL DESCEND FROM MERE MONKEYS. SHE ALSO DENIES THE ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF GOD IN CREATING THE UNIVERSE AND MAN, WHILE CLAIMING THAT OUR LORD JESUS WAS MARRIED TO A PROSTITUTE. WHAT KIND OF WOMAN BUT A WITCH WOULD UTTER SUCH BLASPHEMIES?"

Sean could now see that the parishioners around him were quickly getting polarized, with some appearing to agree with him, while others seemed ready to believe anything Spellman said. There however was also a large portion of the persons attending mass that looked unsure of where the truth lay. That however didn't matter much to Sean, who had made his mind about who to believe.

"MAYBE SHE IS ONLY A WOMAN THAT IS TELLING THE TRUTH. MEN WROTE THE BIBLE, NOT GOD! AS FOR YOUR STORY ABOUT THE DEVIL BEING INSIDE THE TEMPLE MOUNT, I DON'T BELIEVE IT."

He then looked down at his wife and children.

"Let's go home! We will continue to pray there."

Spellman watched with disbelief and fury as other parishioners followed the example of Sean Manning and started leaving the cathedral in growing numbers.

"HOW DARE YOU QUESTION THE WORD OF YOUR SACRED CHURCH? YOU WILL END UP IN HELL FOR THIS!"

Those words, pronounced under the influence of rage, only convinced more parishioners to leave, with a good fifth of the audience ending up walking out on their archbishop.

Only a few days later, through the reading of newspapers and listening to radio news, did Sean learn that the Roman Catholic Church had tried to spread the same message as Spellman's across the World, via Sunday sermons. In some places, notably in France, the Catholic Church suffered a significant drop in attendance as a result, while parishioners in countries around Latin America and Africa, plus Spain and

Italy, mostly believed blindly the accusations thrown at Nancy Laplante. The small drop that followed in the number of Catholics travelling to Jerusalem afterwards was however more than compensated by the growing numbers of Muslims that had started to favor Jerusalem over the Mecca as a pilgrimage site. In an ironic twist, that mass defection in favor of Jerusalem then soured up the Islamic authorities' relations with Nancy, who had up to now enjoyed a fairly amiable relationship with them save for issues about women. Nancy, while defending her versions of things every time someone questioned her publicly, finally decided to let the Catholic Church hurt itself with its own intolerance and obtuseness and limited her actions to releasing worldwide a public statement about her beliefs and her denial of the accusations by the Catholic Church. Her restraint, compared to the often shrill accusations thrown at her by churchmen, actually convinced many to start listening to her instead. While slow, the decline from then on of the influence of the Catholic Church around the World soon proved irreversible.

CHAPTER 8 – NEW ASSIGNMENT

14:26 (PNG Time)

Thursday, June 17, 1943 'C'

Headquarters of the 99th Composite Wing

Hollandia, Dutch New Guinea

Major Fred Bedingfield, the wing's signals officer, had what looked like a despondent expression when he came to see Ingrid, who was studying a map in the wing's operations center, with a message in his left hand.

"A message for you, Ingrid. A personal message."

Ingrid looked at the message offered by Bedingfield, then looked him in the eyes.

"You look like it is some bad news, Fred."

"Because it is...for the rest of us."

Now frankly intrigued, Ingrid took the message and read it quickly. It had been originally sent from the personnel office of the Army Air Force headquarters in the Pentagon, then had transited through the headquarters of the 5th Air Force in Brisbane, Australia. It was classified 'Confidential', with 'Routine' handling priority, and effectively named her as the specific recipient intended. Her heart sank when she saw what the message was about.

"You're right, Fred: this is indeed bad news. I am being posted to Washington, to the office of Plans of the Army Air Force headquarters. Evelyn Sharp is to take command of the wing in my place. DAMN! I don't want to go simply shuffle paper in Washington! There is so much still to be done here. We have thrown the Japanese out of Papua New Guinea, but there is still the whole Dutch East Indies to retake."

"Well, every officer is eventually obliged to serve a term in purgatory, behind some desk, at least once during their career." Replied philosophically Bedingfield. "You can actually count yourself lucky not to have had to do it before, Ingrid."

"I still don't like it, Fred." Said Ingrid, feeling suddenly discouraged. "General Kenney and General MacArthur will also not be too happy about this. Without bragging, I think that I am considered somewhat indispensable here in the front lines."

"Somewhat indispensable? But you only advanced the completion of General MacArthur's campaign to retake Papua New Guinea by a mere eight months, making the

Navy's Central Pacific campaign look like a turtle in comparison, that's all!" Said Bedingfield in a joking tone. "Anyone could have done that!"

Ingrid gave him a sarcastic smile.

"Yeah! That's probably why they want me in Washington, to use my crazy ideas. Could you get Evelyn Sharp and the other senior staff officers of the wing headquarters together in our conference room in one hour? I will give them the bad news then."

"Consider it done, Ingrid." Said Bedingfield before turning around and walking away.

He was back with another message forty minutes later, as Ingrid was still mulling how to announce the news to her comrades. This time, the message came directly from General MacArthur's office.

"Hmm... I am to report to General MacArthur in Brisbane no later than the nineteenth, in two days, with all my personal kit and my medical, pay and personal files. It sounds like the old man wants to give me some flashy sendoff."

"That would be his style, Ingrid. He was always a PR man."

"Still, I would have much better liked to finish the war with you guys and girls. I just can't see myself behind a goddamned desk."

"Then, turn that desk into your cockpit, Ingrid."

Bedingfield's joking proposal actually struck Ingrid, who grinned widely at him.

"That, Fred, is an excellent idea. Thanks!"

She then went to the conference room with MacArthur's message still in her hands, leaving Bedingfield to figure out what she had in mind about her future desk.

Five men and five women gradually came to sit in the conference room, around the rather rickety set of folding tables placed end to end that formed the conference table. By now, news of Ingrid's departure had flashed around the small headquarters building and all came individually to Ingrid before the formal start of the meeting, in order to pass their regrets to see her go. Her announcement somewhat defused now, Ingrid could only contemplate longingly her comrades sitting around the table.

"Well, I really don't know how to say it, apart from the fact that I would rather stay with you until the final victory, instead of going to play paper shuffler in Washington. I will miss you all terribly."

"We can put your P-38 aside until your return, Ingrid." Suggested jokingly Evelyn Sharp, who already knew that she would inherit the wing from Ingrid. The latter shook her head at once.

"Thanks for the thought, Evelyn, but no! Give it instead to Shirley Slade: I understand that her own P-38 has suffered some structural damage on her last mission. Besides, Shirley was my wingman during our first combat missions and she is full of promises. Just paint over my personal markings and kill flags before giving my P-38 to her, unless she wants to attract to her all the shit that the Japanese could throw in the air."

The men and women around the table briefly laughed before Ingrid continued.

"I fully intend to go see all of our personnel before I leave, but I don't want to turn that occasion into the usual pain in the ass change of command parade that so many senior officers like. Instead, I will visit in succession each unit mess and have a drink, er, I mean a coke, with our girls and guys."

That prompted a knowing smile from Captain Angie Dickinson, the wing's security officer and head of its Military Police detachment.

"Good! I would hate to have to arrest you for underage drinking, Ingrid."

Ingrid pulled her tongue out in response, attracting laughs around the table.

15:40 (Brisbane Time)

Saturday, June 19, 1943 'C'

Southwest Pacific Area Headquarters

Brisbane, Australia

To Ingrid's surprise, her arrival in Brisbane had not been marked by any pomp or ceremonial, even though that suited her just fine. After dropping her personal kit, including her weapons, in the transit room assigned to her in the high-rise building housing the Southwest Pacific Area Headquarters, she went up to the floor occupied by the offices of General MacArthur, where she was promptly introduced to the old general in his personal office. Douglas MacArthur, his famous corn pipe in his mouth, smiled on seeing Ingrid and got up to go around his desk to shake hands with her, not even letting her time to salute him.

"Ingrid, I am truly happy to see you. I must also say that I am sad to lose you: your place is in a cockpit, not behind a desk."

"I couldn't agree more with you, General. Hopefully, my new job in Washington will serve some useful purpose, apart from producing paper."

"A job is what you make out of it, Ingrid. You were always a no-nonsense girl and I am confident that you will bring some common sense in Washington. This said, please sit down: we have to talk."

A bit surprised, Ingrid took the sofa offered by MacArthur, who then sat opposite her in a padded armchair before speaking in a slow, deliberate tone.

"Ingrid, I will need your services one last time before you start work at AAF Headquarters. I am due to fly out on Monday, to go attend an important meeting of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and of theatre commanders in Washington, scheduled for the 28th of June, in one week. I want you to be part of the staff that will accompany me to that meeting. I know that you were supposed to take some leave in the States before taking your new post on the 5th of July, but I could seriously use your brain of yours at that meeting. I expect that meeting to decide the allocation of resources among the various theatres of operations, along with our future war strategy. From what Lieutenant General Kenney heard through the Army Air Force grapevines, things are not going well at all in Europe, especially for our bomber force. There is now as a consequence a big debate going on about our bomber doctrine and our war plans for Europe. I suspect in fact that this prompted in part your posting order to the Plans office of the Army Air Forces Headquarters."

"And what do you expect exactly from me at that meeting, General?" Asked Ingrid, who was starting to take a fresh look at her future new job.

"To stay close in the background, to listen to everything and to discreetly pass to me any useful idea or comment you would then have. You are quite unique in the way you can think outside of the box, Ingrid, and I want to be able to contemplate all the options available to us, even if they go against established rules and doctrines. I owe a lot of my late successes to you and your ideas and I am more than ready to acknowledge that publicly. No need to look surprised at that, Ingrid: I know full well what kind of glory hog I can be. By the way, that's strictly between you and me."

"Of course, General!" Replied Ingrid, smiling. MacArthur had always tended to be more open with her and to acknowledge his own faults than with male officers. In a way, the old general used to treat her like a daughter rather than like a subordinate officer. She also suspected that the fact that he knew about her memories of past

incarnations and the vast life experience they brought to her made him treat her more like an equal. "You can count on me in Washington, General."

"Thank you, Ingrid. Now that this is out of the way, there is only one other small matter to take care about you."

Getting up and going to his desk, he grabbed his telephone receiver and dialed a number, then spoke briefly on getting an answer.

"I will be with you in two minutes... Thank you!"

Putting down the receiver, MacArthur then faced Ingrid and nodded to her.

"I you will follow me, Ingrid."

Ingrid got up from her sofa at once and followed the old general out of his office. They actually took an elevator cabin to go down to the level occupied by the personnel and public relations sections of the headquarters.

They ended up entering what looked like a large briefing room, with an officer shouting an order the moment that MacArthur walked inside.

"ROOM!"

Ingrid then saw the close to 200 officers and NCOs, both American and Australian ones, that lined the walls of the room. All the chairs normally lined up in rows in the room were now folded and stacked away in corners, leaving the center of the floor empty, except for three senior officers standing as a small group in the middle. There were also a goodly number of Army photographers and civilian reporters and cameramen present along the walls. Realizing that she just had been ambushed by MacArthur, Ingrid didn't say a word and kept a straight face as she followed him towards the trio of officers in the middle of the room. She could now recognize General Blamey, the Chief of Staff of the Australian Army, along with Lieutenant General Kenney, her direct superior. The third officer was an Australian Army major carrying a flat wooden box. With Ingrid staying at his side and slightly behind him, MacArthur stopped three paces from Blamey and faced the officers lining the walls.

"Gentlemen, we are assembled here to say goodbye to a fellow officer of great merit, who has just been ordered into exile to the paper jungle of Washington."

There was a roar of genuine laughs at that barb at the Washington bureaucracy. MacArthur then became solemn as he continued.

"Colonel Ingrid Dows, up to recently commander of the 99th Composite Wing, is unique in many ways, apart from her sex and young age. For one, she is still by far our

top Allied air ace, with 117 confirmed air victories to date. She has also proved to be a tactician and strategist of true genius, having devised and then conducted a number of unique air operations that brought repeated victories to our forces. In truth, we ultimately won the Battle for the Philippines thanks to her, while her aviators sank more Japanese warships than our whole Pacific Fleet has up to now. Her ideas and leadership in combat also contributed greatly to our recent successes in Papua New Guinea. More than anything else, though, is the fact that Colonel Dows always fought with the goal of supporting to the utmost our soldiers, sailors and Marines fighting on land and at sea. Her enlightened outlook at joint operations both saved thousands of our soldiers and sailors, by giving them vital air support at critical times, and helped turn uncertain outcomes into outright victories. She also proved no less valorous on the ground, leading her women twice in critical night fights on Guadalcanal that helped save Henderson Field from being taken by the enemy. If I wanted to show to the American and Australian public the example of a true fighting leader, then I would not hesitate one second in putting her forward as such a leader.”

MacArthur then paused briefly, letting the photographers present take pictures of a slightly reddening Ingrid. He next nodded to George Kenney.

“General Kenney, if you would please assist me.”

Kenney stepped forward without a word, then presented to MacArthur a small box that he opened first, revealing a small medal. MacArthur took the medal from the box before facing Ingrid and speaking up to be heard by all.

“Colonel Ingrid Dows, for exceptionally meritorious service in a duty of great responsibility and for outstanding leadership in combat, I am proud and honored to give you the Distinguished Service Medal.”

As MacArthur pinned the medal to her uniform’s vest and as camera flashes exploded around the room, Ingrid felt blood rush to her head. The DSM was normally given to generals or admirals in charge of large commands. To get one as a simple colonel was probably another first she was creating. Once the medal was pinned on her, MacArthur stepped back and saluted her, to which Ingrid saluted back. General Blamey and his aide then took positions at her side, with Blamey addressing the onlookers.

“While I agree with all that General MacArthur said about Colonel Dows, I must add a few things in order to do justice fully to this exceptional young officer. As early as 1941, with the war only weeks old in the Pacific, then Captain Dows demonstrated her courage and leadership qualities when she defended nearly single-handedly from

Japanese air attack the Darwin Airfield, where she was being treated for wounds suffered in combat over the Philippines. Her timely warning of the raid also helped minimize greatly the damage in Darwin, while she shot down two Japanese aircraft and damaged a third one with a machinegun. Only a few days later, she was on her way back to the Philippines, where she helped defeat the Japanese invasion forces. Last year, her expert leadership in commanding an air group tasked with supporting our troops in Guadalcanal resulted in heavy enemy casualties and, eventually, the withdrawal of the surviving Japanese soldiers on that island. This January, her novel tactics and outstanding leadership in New Guinea resulted in both saving our garrison in Wau and taking Lae, a key Japanese stronghold. All this brought great benefits to Australia, plus saved the lives of many of our soldiers. To properly thank Colonel Dows for all these accomplishment, I am now making her in the name of the Australian government and of the British Empire a honorary Commander of the Order of the British Empire.”

The onlookers applauded as Blamey took from the box carried by his aide a medal attached to a pink and white neck ribbon, then put the ribbon around Ingrid’s neck. After exchanging a handshake and salutes with Blamey, Ingrid was invited by him to a long table alongside a wall that supported a collection of coffee urns and tea pots on burners, plus piles of cups and plates of tea biscuits. As all present lined up to get a cup, Ingrid got of course first serving, along with Blamey and MacArthur. As Ingrid was mixing sugar in her coffee, MacArthur looked her up and down quickly and smiled to her.

“After this, I think that the next priority will be to get a military tailor to visit you, Ingrid, before we leave for Washington.”

She looked with some surprise at the old general, having expected anything but that.

“A tailor, General? Why? My service dress uniform is practically new, since I hardly wore it in my months in Guadalcanal and New Guinea.”

“It is effectively in a good state, Ingrid, but it wasn’t custom-fitted for you.”

“Uh, I’m afraid that you lost me there, General. Why would I need to have it custom-fitted?”

A malicious smile came on MacArthur’s face as he answered her with a knowing expression.

“But, so that all those generals and admirals we will meet in Washington can be jealous of me, of course!”

08:46 (Washington Time)

Monday, June 28, 1943 'C'

Anteroom to the Joint Chiefs of Staffs' main conference room

The Pentagon

Arlington, Virginia

U.S.A.

Dwight D. Eisenhower was about to get himself a cup of coffee prior to the start of the JCS war planning conference when his eyes caught the cover of a copy of the latest TIME Magazine, lying on top of a rack of newspapers and magazines near the coffee table. Picking up that magazine, he contemplated for a moment the cover picture showing Ingrid Dows getting the DSM from General MacArthur, with the title 'Fighting Leader' in bold letters. Admiral Ernest J. King, the tall Chief of Naval Operations, stopped besides Eisenhower to admire the picture of Ingrid with lustful eyes.

"God, what a babe that girl is!"

Eisenhower smiled to himself while glancing at King: the admiral, apart from having maybe one of the most irascible temper in Washington, was also widely known to be a hard drinker and a womanizer.

"She certainly is, Admiral. In fact, I was just wondering about how she could go up in ranks so quickly despite her youth. Did she use her beauty to get special favors and attention?"

King shook his head at that.

"She effectively could have, but she didn't need to, General. She really is that good as an aviation commander."

"But, she must be barely in her twenties, Admiral. Where does she gets her battle savvy?"

"She's actually nineteen, if I am not mistaken. Just know this, General: there is a Top Secret annex to her personal file, and you were obviously not cleared to see it. If you would, it would blow your pants away. Suffice to say that she made a few of my admirals in the South Pacific look like badly trained monkeys in comparison. I was the one who asked that her air group be put in support of our amphibious landing on Guadalcanal and I never got to regret that."

The noise of a large group entering the anteroom then made both men turn their heads towards the main entrance, in time to see General Douglas MacArthur enter as if he owned the place, followed by numerous staff officers.

"Well, well," said King sarcastically in a low voice intended for Eisenhower, "here is the Emperor in person with his band of sycophants."

"Hail Caesar!" Replied Eisenhower, also in a low voice. He had worked closely in the past with MacArthur and he had less than fond memories of those times as his aide. His eyes then caught on the very beautiful young woman with reddish-brown hair and blue eyes following as part of MacArthur's group. She wore an Army Air Force dress uniform with an aviator's wings badge over her left breast pocket, along with a stunning collection of medal ribbons. Her dress uniform was also closely fitted, enhancing her tall, sexy silhouette. King also saw her and couldn't help stare at her.

"God, she is even more beautiful in person! I really need to get an aide like her." From the expressions on the faces of the other generals, admirals and politicians present, King was most probably not the only one to think that. MacArthur smiled on seeing the effect created by Ingrid and went first to present himself to General George Marshall, the powerful Chief of Staff of the Army, who was drinking coffee besides Secretary of War Henry Stimson.

"Good morning, General Marshall. Good morning as well to you, Mister Secretary."

"Thank you, General MacArthur. How was your trip from Australia?" Asked politely Marshall, who didn't always see eye to eye with his flamboyant subaltern, while shaking hands with him. MacArthur sighed then.

"Too long for my old bones, to say the truth. The C-54 is a good plane, but three days of alternate air travel and overnight stays were a killer on my back."

"I can sympathize with you on that, General." Said Henry Stimson, a slight smile on his face. "I must congratulate you on your successes in the Southwest Pacific: you conducted a very brisk business indeed down there."

"Thank you, Mister Secretary. I must say that much of the merit for that should go to Colonel Dows and her female aviators."

"Is that so?" Replied Stimson, surprised to see that MacArthur was ready to praise somebody other than himself. He looked at Ingrid Dows, standing two paces behind MacArthur with Lieutenant General Kenney and Major General Sutherland, as MacArthur spoke again.

"Absolutely, Mister Secretary. The helicopters of the 99th Wing were crucial in our success in taking quickly a number of key Japanese bases, including Lae, while the bombers from that wing inflicted some painful blows to the Japanese. You must have heard about their attack on Rabaul just prior to the air assault on Lae?"

"I certainly have, General, and so did the President, who was elated on hearing those news. I can tell you that there are now only a few left here in Washington who would still belittle the performance in combat of those women."

As Ingrid grinned with pride at that compliment, Marshall eyed her critically: this was the first time that he met her in person, although he had heard and read quite a lot about her already. Her accomplishments and her talent for leadership in combat could not be denied without a lot of bad faith, but her youth was still shocking in view of her present rank. The United States Army had been and still was very much ranking years of seniority as a main factor for promotion. However, Marshall himself had in the last few years been guilty of promoting many officers he judged to be specially meritorious or full of promises, ignoring the seniority list in the process and creating at the same time quite a lot of grumbling from old officers who were being jumped over for promotion. That a person this young, and a woman to boot, could have been promoted to full colonel had created quite a storm of controversy in Washington and across the Army leadership. Marshall had however supported MacArthur's decision to promote Dows, and this after having heard the opinions of a few senior commanders who had personally watched Dows' performance in the Pacific, including Lieutenant General George Kenney and Major General Lewis Brereton. In truth, if Dows would have been a man, Marshall would not hesitate one minute to promote her to the rank of brigadier general right now. That would however more than probably open a nasty political can of worms in the Congress, which oversaw and confirmed the promotions and appointments to general officer positions. Henry Stimson then looked at his watch and spoke up to be heard by all.

"Well, gentlemen...and lady, I believe that we could start filing in to put this show on the road. We certainly have a lot to discuss about and many important decisions to take."

The close to fifty senior officers and politicians, along with a good forty aides and advisors, then filled the large conference room to capacity, with the aides and more junior officers having to sit on chairs placed along the walls. There were already a number of trestles supporting map boards placed near the head of the table, plus a

retro-projector for transparent slides on the tail end of the table. Ingrid sat on one of the chairs along the wall, behind the chair occupied by General MacArthur, and took out of her briefcase a clipboard with paper and a pen, ready to take notes or write comments to be passed to MacArthur. She quickly noticed that a tall Army Air Force brigadier general that looked younger than the norm and sported a thin moustache was examining her discreetly from across the room. His interest however seemed a professional one rather than a lustful one, so she didn't make a case out of it, although she recorded his face in her mind. Secretary of War Stimson then opened the meeting.

"Welcome all to this command conference! As you may know already, one of the goals of this conference is to elaborate and formulate the official positions on the future conduct of the war that the United States will present to its allies at the next inter-allied command conference, to be held in Quebec City this coming August. We thus cannot afford to end this present conference in discord or without firm plans for the coming months. If this still happens, then the President will have the final word as Commander in Chief, and some of you may not like the decisions he would then take. This said, I would like the commanders of the respective theaters of operations to present in turn the actual situation in their respective sectors, so that all of us could start with a good understanding of the general military situation. General Eisenhower, commander of our forces in Europe, will give the first briefing."

Eisenhower, a solidly built man in his fifties with a balding head, then got up from his table-side chair and went to a trestle supporting a large map of Europe and of the Mediterranean, including the coast of North Africa and the Middle East. An aide then flipped a marked transparent overlay marked with both red and blue symbols, along with a few green symbols, before Eisenhower started speaking.

"Gentlemen, this is the present situation prevailing in and around Europe. The zones occupied by the Germans are in red, while the zones we and the British occupy are in blue. The few countries or regions that are either neutral or not involved presently in the war are in green, while those in brown mark countries that are allied with Germany but are not occupied by German troops."

Ingrid couldn't help feel a bit depressed at the sea of red on the map of Europe. The whole of Western Europe, save for Norway, Turkey, Switzerland, Spain, Sweden and Yugoslavia, were in German hands or was controlled by allies of Germany. So was Poland, Czechoslovakia and the western half of the Soviet Union, including the whole of Belorussia, the Ukraine and the whole of the Caucasus, with its precious oil fields. Even

Italy had red symbols on top of it, something that surprised Ingrid. Eisenhower then continued.

“As you can see on this map, Mussolini’s pussyfooting with us since late 1940, when he was persuaded by the British to keep out of actual combat operations in exchange for keeping his African colonies, finally made Hitler lose patience with him. Mussolini was unofficially put under house arrest by the Germans and is now a mere puppet of Hitler. The Italian forces on their part have been mostly disarmed by the Germans during the last few months, with the ships of the Italian Navy seized early this month while they were in port. Only a few minor Italian units and ships either tried to resist the Germans and were wiped out, or defected to us. The result of this for us is that major air and naval German units are now operating from Italian soil and are making our lives, especially those of the British, miserable around the Mediterranean. You can be sure that, at the coming conference in Quebec, Prime Minister Churchill will gripe about that and will try to convince us to spare forces to expel the Germans out of Italy. I in fact already got a number of unofficial feelers about that from British officials in the last few weeks.”

“As if we had the forces available for such an adventure.” Grumbled Marshall, with many nodding at that, including Eisenhower.

“Well, that is unfortunately only one of the things that are really bugging the British right now, General Marshall. Their biggest fear right now is of a potential German push South, out of the Caucasus and into either Iraq, Iran or Syria. That hypothetical push could then go all the way down to Egypt, grabbing both the oil fields of the region and the Suez Canal. While there are no indicators that the Germans are massing troops for such a push South, I have to agree with the British that it would be a potentially catastrophic move for us if successful. The British would lose all their sources of crude oil and their ships going and coming from India would then be forced to take the long route around Africa, exposing them to German submarine attacks all along the way. Just a week ago, Sir Alan Brooke suggested to me that we should help him reinforce his troops defending Syria and Iraq, to block such a possible German move.”

“Great!” Exclaimed Admiral King, throwing his hands in the air. “So, the British would expect us to send reinforcements and supplies through a Mediterranean mostly controlled by German aircraft and submarines, all that so that they could keep their precious colonies in the Middle East. What a brilliant idea!”

Henry Stimson then intervened before the discussion could overheat.

"We will put those two scenarios and the British wishes about them on the backburner for now, gentlemen, to be debated once all the situation briefings have been given. Please continue, General Eisenhower."

"Thank you, Mister Secretary. Unfortunately, what I have left is more bad news. The fight for Norway and the failed landings in Denmark late last year have done many bad things for us, apart from making the Germans discover the fact that we were reading their ENIGMA crypto communications and thus leading them to switch to a new system that we still can't decode. Examples of many of the British new weapons and some of ours as well were then captured by the Germans, who have proved very adept at learning from them. Unfortunately, the last few weeks have brought us another bad news about our equipment being copied by the Germans: they have started using on a large scale anti-aircraft shells equipped with proximity fuses. I will let General Spaatz, commander of our strategic bomber forces in Europe, cover that point."

Ingrid felt utter discouragement on hearing that. She had seen how successful the American anti-aircraft guns in the Philippines had been against the Japanese bombers when firing proximity-fused shells. To think that the sophisticated and well-equipped German anti-aircraft defenses now had such fuses could only be very bad news indeed. On his part, George Kenney, like MacArthur, appeared mightily pissed by that piece of news, looking angrily at Spaatz.

"First, what tells you that the Germans have such fuses? Second, how the hell could they have captured copies of proximity fuses, General Spaatz?"

Spaatz, who had shown a downcast expression during Eisenhower's briefing, replied in a rather subdued tone.

"The French resistance was able to steal a German 88mm shell equipped with what proved to be a proximity fuse, then managed to send that shell to England, where it was studied by our experts. As for how the German got hold of that technological secret, our best bet is that one of our anti-aircraft units overrun by the Germans during the landings in Denmark failed to destroy its proximity shells before being captured."

Douglas MacArthur seemed genuinely angered by that and bit hard on his corn pipe before speaking in a loud voice.

"Decidedly, that plan to invade Denmark is turning out to have been even more ill-advised and botched up as time passes. First, we had an American ground force commander who turned out to be a complete dud, then we had instances of American troops fleeing in panic in the faces of the German. Now, this! All the while, the

European theater keeps getting top priority for everything despite this litany of farces. We should reinforce victory instead of defeat and concentrate on defeating the Japanese in the Pacific first before putting nearly all our eggs in the European basket.”

“If the Germans really have started using proximity-fused shells on a large scale,” said George Kenney, adding his voice to MacArthur’s, “then I suppose that the impact on our bomber forces over Europe must have been bad, General Spaatz. I can tell you that the impact of our own proximity-fused shells on the Japanese bombers was quite severe.”

Ingrid then thought for a moment that Spaatz, an old aviator who had been one of the main advocates of the present strategic bomber doctrine, would break down at that moment and cry, as he nearly shrank in his chair.

“It...it has been more than severe, General Kenney: on the last four major bombardment missions the 8th Air Force conducted over Germany, the units involved suffered an average loss rate of 23 percent, due to a combination of anti-aircraft artillery fire and German fighters, including jet fighters. Morale is now quite low among our heavy bomber crews in England.”

The senior commanders from the Pacific theatre, who had not been informed of those reverses before, looked in unison at Spaatz with dismay. Lieutenant General Joseph Stilwell, who commanded the American forces in China, snapped at Spaatz.

“And what are you doing to correct that situation, General Spaatz?”

That seemed to prick Spaatz into fighting back, as he snapped back with a fiery look at Stilwell.

“And what am I supposed to do exactly, Stilwell? Go steal all the Germans’ proximity shells? Don’t you think that I care for what is happening to my bomber boys?” As General Marshall intervened to stop with some difficulty the verbal, acrimonious match that developed between Stilwell and Spaatz, Ingrid quickly wrote down a short note, then ripped off the top page and got up to pass it to Lieutenant General Kenney. The latter looked at it quickly, then passed it with a whispered comment to MacArthur, who also read it before speaking up, addressing Spaatz, who by now had somewhat calmed down.

“General Spaatz, what about adopting new bomber tactics, even a new bomber strategy, in order to counter those new German weapons?”

"New bomber tactics?" Replied Spaatz, apparently taken off balance. "What new tactics could they be? They won't change the fact that the Germans have both proximity-fused shells and jet fighters, General MacArthur."

"Have you even tried to think of new tactics, General Spaatz?" Fired back MacArthur, his tone hardening as he saw that Spaatz seemed to be unable to cope with the problem. "Or are you planning to simply tell your remaining bomber crews to go on with their missions without any changes to your offensive program?"

Henry Stimson didn't miss the dumbfounded expression that appeared on Spaatz's face. He had also noticed how Ingrid had passed a note to Kenney, who had then given it to MacArthur just before the latter had asked his pointed question. Pretty well convinced now that Spaatz was not up to the situation in Europe, but wanting an alternative to simply firing him, Stimson looked intently at MacArthur.

"Would General Kenney, or even your young Colonel Dows, have some suggestions on that subject, General MacArthur?"

"They may, Mister Secretary." Replied soberly MacArthur before turning in his chair to look at Ingrid behind him. "Colonel Dows, if you could approach the table please and tell us what ideas you may have on this subject?"

Somehow, Ingrid knew that MacArthur genuinely believed that she had something concrete in her mind and wasn't putting her under the spotlight simply to try to embarrass her. Thankfully, she did have something concrete in mind, thus got up and approached the table in assured steps, stopping between MacArthur's and Kenney's chairs as all eyes were on her. That high-level attention didn't faze her out, however: her past incarnations had lived through many instances of such high-powered scrutiny.

"Mister Secretary, gentlemen, I believe that there are ways to make our bomber missions over Germany safer, and not simply by flying at night. Let's look first at how our bombers are presently flying bombardment missions over Germany, so that we can look at where the problems lay. First, we typically have hundreds of heavy bombers flying in daylight and at high altitude in large, concentrated formations and following fairly straight flight paths along most of the mission, including during final bombing approach. Second, we expected the defensive machinegun fire from those large bomber concentrations to be enough to repel enemy fighters, so we mostly neglected to assign fighter escorts to those bombers. Those fighter we had in England until recently didn't have enough range anyway to be able to escort the bombers all the way to the objective. All this presented the German air defenses with a few large, concentrated targets that

were easy to detect and follow on radar and whose paths and final destinations could be predicted. That allowed the Germans to alert the defenses of the probable objectives in advance and to start allocating and coordinating fighters to attack our bomber formations, thus ensuring that our planes would be under near constant attack during their trip. Those concentrated packs of heavy bombers also presented the Germans with ideal targets for their anti-aircraft guns, especially during the final bombing approach, when our individual bombers must fly straight for many minutes and are not allowed to deviate the least from their formations. Lastly, carpet bombing from high altitude may be good at churning up plowed fields or blow to bits large urban surfaces, but in terms of hitting pinpoint targets or even relatively large individual buildings, it is both extremely inaccurate and very wasteful in bombs. In the Southwest Pacific Theatre, our heavy bombers dropped thousands of tons of bombs from high altitude on Japanese ships, with barely any hits being achieved.”

“So, what would you do differently, Colonel?” Asked testily Major General Ira Eaker, the commander of the 8th Air Force. Ingrid stared back at him.

“First, let’s stop giving obvious targets to the Germans, General. Approach from very low altitude, under the German radar coverage, and send in small groups of bombers along multiple flight paths, with frequent heading changes to keep the Germans guessing about what the objective will be. Second, protect those small bomber packs with both escort fighters and radar jamming electronic reconnaissance aircraft, and this up to the objective. Third, have dedicated fighter-bombers precede the bombers by a couple of minutes, so that they could eliminate or soften up in advance the enemy anti-aircraft guns around the objective. Fourth, let’s bomb as well from low altitude and let the individual bombers approach on varied paths. What you will lose in instant tonnage of bombs dropped on or close to the objective, you will gain in accuracy, especially if you bomb from just above the safe minimum altitude for those bombs. Attacking from very low will also mostly negate the threat from 88mm guns firing proximity-fused shells, which work badly near the ground. Fifth, as extra insurance and to throw a further wrench in the Germans’ efforts to intercept our bombers, have a high cover force of long range fighters fly near but not above the flight path of our bombers, so that any enemy fighters that would react would hit those high-flying fighters first. Before you ask me why I think that this would work, General Eaker, I will tell you that all that was done on September the fourteenth of last year, when my air group flying out of Guadalcanal attacked a Japanese naval force of four battleships, two heavy cruisers and seven

destroyers in broad daylight. With my squadrons guided individually along multiple paths by an electronic reconnaissance EC-142E, my fighter-bombers went in first, strafing the Japanese ships to soften them up, followed by my medium bombers and by a single Navy torpedo plane squadron. In a total of three group sorties, we sank all four battleships and the two heavy cruisers, at the cost of two medium bombers, two fighter-bombers and one torpedo plane. We also expended a total of only 90 tons of bombs and sixteen torpedoes to sink those warships. I could also tell you about how my bombers sank three fleet carriers and the super-battleships YAMATO and MUSASHI in Rabaul, but I believe that I already exceeded my time allotment. Mister Secretary, I hope that this answered your question.”

As Douglas MacArthur smiled and George Kenney blew air out, impressed by Ingrid’s aplomb, most of the other participants to the conference looked at Ingrid as if she had just changed into another person. On his part, Henry Stimson nodded slowly his head and looked rather severely at both Eaker and Spaatz while answering Ingrid.

“I believe that it did, Colonel. Well, General Spaatz, what do you think of those novel tactics?”

“Uh, I would have to study them in detail with my staff first before I could pass judgment on them, Mister Secretary.”

“Then I would suggest that you do so promptly, General. Admiral Nimitz, I believe that it is now your turn to present the situation in your sector.”

Ingrid went back to her chair as Nimitz got up and went to a map board to describe the situation in the Pacific. She knew that what she had said was only the truth, but by speaking up like this she had just exposed the beloved bomber doctrine of the Army Air Force as being deeply flawed. That could have only hurt General Arnold, one of the strongest advocates of the present bombing doctrine. Was he going to fall hard on her, or would he be able to accept that he had been wrong and say so? She also had just stepped on the toes of a lot of Army Air Force generals present at the conference, making them look mostly clueless. The least that she could say now was that her posting time in Washington was probably going to be quite interesting indeed.

Once Nimitz was done exposing the situation in his sector, Stimson asked MacArthur to speak next. The old general, having good reasons to look sure of himself, then described in a rather elaborate presentation how his forces had retaken all of

Papua New Guinea and were now starting to pound the Japanese based in the Dutch East Indies. His description of how Lae, Wewak and other important Japanese strongholds had been taken left many, including Stimson, open-mouthed. One small detail then struck the War Secretary.

"Uh, those forward air control ground teams, you said that they were made up of aviators, General? Weren't they quite at risk in the middle of an infantry battle?"

"No more than, say, forward artillery observers, Mister Secretary. Many of those women had anyway seen ground combat before in Guadalcanal."

"WAIT! Did you say women, General?"

"Yes, Mister Secretary." Said patiently MacArthur, knowing how politically sensitive the participation in ground combat of women was in Washington. "All the members of those ground teams were from Colonel Dows' 99th Wing and I can tell you that they performed admirably. Their presence allowed much faster and accurate close air support to our troops and that saved countless lives. I even had the pleasure to decorate five of those women for outstanding bravery, giving them the Silver Star."

MacArthur then scanned quickly the faces around the table before continuing.

"I myself didn't think much of women in uniform at the start of this war, gentlemen. Then, a certain young woman volunteered to become a fighter pilot and proved to me that some women could indeed fight, and fight damn well. A few months later, that same young woman came back to the Pacific with more women and showed me that we had been wasting a tremendous pool of skills available at home for our war effort. War is becoming more and more technical and less dependent on raw strength, gentlemen. We should acknowledge that and stop shrinking away from sending women in combat in roles they can fulfill. Men don't have a monopoly on courage and they certainly don't have one on brains either."

At that stinging barb at some old generals and admirals present that he considered to be intellectual lightweights, MacArthur went back to his seat, most satisfied with himself. After a hesitation, Henry Stimson looked at his watch again.

"Well, gentlemen, I believe that it is time for a short, fifteen minute break, so that some of us could run to the washrooms. I will see you back here at five past eleven."

As soon as he got up from his chair with General Marshall, Dwight Eisenhower went to them with a question delivered in a low voice.

"Would it be possible to obtain the services of this young Dows, General Marshall? I certainly could use her ideas in London to prepare the plans for our landings in France next year."

"You will have a fight with General Arnold on that, Ike: he just had her transferred out of the Pacific so she could help rewrite our air plans and doctrines here in Washington. In truth, I suspect that many could now want her, and not only because she is pretty as hell. Personally, I believe that we need her here, at least for a few months, so that she could rewrite our air doctrines. God knows those doctrines badly need a review now."

"Then, could she be sent to London afterward, General?"

"I will see what can be done, Ike." Said Marshall, non-committal. As Eisenhower walked away, Marshall couldn't help stare for a moment at Ingrid Dows, who was now talking with MacArthur and Kenney.

"Nobody wanted her at first. Now..."

"She sure made her mark quickly, George." Replied Stimson, who went on after a pause. "You know, I easily could see her with a general's stars one day. Frankly, she couldn't do worse than some of the generals and admirals we have presently."

"Is that a hint, Henry?"

"Maybe! You certainly could put her in your little black book." Said Stimson, alluding to a small notebook in which Marshall was rumored to keep notes on officers he was evaluating for eventual promotion. The Army Chief of Staff had a slight smile then.

"And what makes you think that she is not already in my little black book, Henry?"

Ten minutes later, as Ingrid was serving herself a cup of hot coffee in the anteroom, the same tall and lanky brigadier general that had stared at her at the start of the conference came to her, presenting his right hand for a shake.

"Colonel Dows, I'm Laurence Kuter. May I tell you that I found your exposé on your novel tactics in the Pacific most interesting. I was until very recently a proponent of our present strategic bombing, but our recent troubles in Europe have certainly left me open to new alternatives that could prove more efficient...and less costly to our aircrews."

"Thank you, sir." Said Ingrid while shaking his hand. The man seemed to have a sharp mind and also had inquisitive eyes. Added to his apparent young age by normal

standards for his rank, that told her that he was probably a rising star in the Army Air Force. "I must say that the statistics I heard this morning on our bomber losses in Europe hurt me: so many good men dying for so little results."

"I feel the same, Colonel, and I truly hope that you will be able to help us turn that around with your ideas. Do you know where exactly you will be employed here in the Pentagon, starting next month?"

"Uh, not exactly, sir. I just know that I will be assigned to the office of the Assistant Secretary for Air Plans, effective the fifth of July."

"Then, maybe I can help you on that, Colonel. You are due to take control of the Joint and Combined Chiefs of Staff Subjects Section. That section deals with all the projects that also affect the other services and our allies, like the air support concept for our pending Europe invasion. I believe that your experience in the Pacific will be most relevant there."

"That is nice to hear, sir. Do you know who is the actual boss of the Air Plans Office, sir?"

The brigadier general had a small smile before answering her in an amused tone.

"Sure I do! I am the Assistant Secretary for Air Plans, Colonel."

Ingrid involuntarily came to attention then, nearly spilling the cup of coffee in her hand and making Kuter's smile widen.

"At ease, Colonel! I may have a reputation around the Army Air Force as a hard ass bastard, but I only fall hard on incompetents and lazy asses. From what I know of you, I doubt that I will ever have to come down on you. So, what kind of formal officer training do you have?"

"Apart from the officer conversion course I followed in Florida before leaving for the Pacific, I learned everything I know now about Army Air Force procedures and regulations on the job, sir. I was however lucky in having under me very competent career administration, logistics and maintenance officers that taught me all they knew about paperwork and staff procedures in the Pacific. I also am an autodidact with an excellent memory and went through our operations and administration manuals, apart from dirtying my hands often on actual aircraft maintenance work when I was commanding a fighter squadron in the Philippines."

Kuter nodded at that, apparently satisfied by her answer.

"And what about your academic background, Colonel?"

"I obtained my high school equivalency certificate in the Philippines, just before the war started there, sir. Since then, I have been studying on my own time various subjects, notably mathematics, physics, aerodynamics and chemistry, with the view of eventually getting a college diploma. I also learned a lot about future technology, geopolitics and military tactics from my late adoptive mother, Nancy Laplante, the Canadian time traveler. In terms of flying, I practiced glider flying and learned the basics of flight in my youth, then obtained my private pilot's license at a flying school in the Philippines. The rest I learned the hard way, in combat, sir."

"Impressive indeed, Colonel. I believe that you will do just fine in your new job. Well, it looks like it is now time to go back in. I will see you again at lunch, Colonel." Kuter then left her with her cup of coffee as a stream of officers reentered the conference room. Ingrid gulped down a large sip of her cup, then left it on the service table and joined the others inside.

Things became heated again after lunch, when the question of how to proceed in Europe came up. On hearing Henry Stimson say that the British needed all the help they could get to face the Germans, Douglas MacArthur nearly exploded in frustration.

"Mister Secretary, with all due respect, I am really getting tired of this constant give and no take in favor of the British. My forces in the Philippines bled for long months to suck in as many Japanese forces from around the Pacific as possible, disrupting the Japanese war timetable and preventing their invasion of Burma. What did the British do then? They cut back their Indian Ocean fleet and stayed still in Burma, instead of supporting China against the Japanese, doing so in order to be able to reinforce their Mediterranean front. While we fought on and around Guadalcanal and Papua New Guinea, the British cut back on the little they were sending to Australia, forcing us to redirect some of our precious supplies and units to compensate. Now you are telling us that we have to contribute even more to help the British, while they care only about retaining their precious empire? Does Prime Minister Churchill think that we are still a colony of his British Empire? Right now, we are acting as if we still are! If we are not strong enough yet to get the upper hand in Europe, then let's shift our efforts to the Pacific and defeat the Japanese for good. Once the Japanese are out of the game, then and only then should we concentrate on the Germans."

"I must agree with General MacArthur on this, Mister Secretary." Added Admiral Nimitz, the commander of the Pacific Fleet. "The British have been treating us like a

simple dairy cow up to now, milking us for everything we've got while playing the grand master on the European Theatre. It should be time that we tell them to stop pushing us around. God knows how many times Prime Minister Churchill dragged us into some ill-advised strategic move or tried to convince us to adopt some harebrained plan, like the failed landings in Denmark and his proposed reinforcement of British forces in Syria and Iraq. Churchill suffered most of his lumps because of his own mistakes and he should be told to listen to us for once instead of ordering us around."

A lot of heads nodded then around the conference table, something Stimson and Marshall didn't miss. Ingrid also nodded her head, as frustrated as MacArthur at the British. She however tempered somewhat that frustration on remembering how the United States had stayed in its splendid isolation for two years while Europe descended into war and mass destruction. General Marshall then did something totally unexpected by all, including Ingrid: he looked at her and asked her a question directly.

"Colonel Dows, you spoke for months with Nancy Laplante before her death. What would she say about this if she would be here today?"

Understanding that Marshall's question was in reality a backdoor opening he was offering her to present her own opinions, Ingrid calmly got up and walked to the side of the European map board, grabbing the wooden pointer hooked to the supporting trestle.

"General Marshall, I must point out first that the present situation around the World is quite different from that known in the history she knew. However, she taught me the principles of geopolitical and military strategy she was following in her own time period, principles she used all the time to analyze the then conflicts of the early 21st Century. In her history, us Allies had landed in North Africa and then Italy, instead of in Norway and Denmark. Also in her history, after quick successes at first in Russia, the Germans had finally been stopped by the Soviets just short of the oil fields of the Caucasus, before being progressively pushed back towards Poland and Germany. By contrast, the Soviets are now utterly defeated and have lost access to the Caucasus and its oil resources, while Moscow is in German hands and Stalin is hiding somewhere behind the Urals. While Italian forces are not a threat to us, the Italian industries and resources are still supporting the German war effort. In the Pacific, our own situation is rosier than in Nancy's known history, as we were able to hold on, barely, to the Philippines, contrary to Nancy's history, where the Philippines fell in early 1942. Another major difference between the two histories is that both us and the Germans are now fighting using some military technologies that were not known or used in the original

history, like our new electronic equipment, our fuel air explosives bombs and German jet aircraft, which are now being used much earlier than originally. This said, Nancy would probably point to us that we are now making the same mistake as the Germans did in this war: fight on two fronts at the same time. In the Pacific Theatre, we are doing mostly the right things at the moment, in my opinion. With Papua New Guinea and the Philippines in our hands, we are in a perfect position to shut off the flow of Japanese supply ships and tankers connecting the Dutch East Indies with Japan, and this without any further need to grab territory in the South and Southwest Pacific. We can now simply sit tight, block access to the South China Sea and thus cut Japan's access to the oil from the Dutch East Indies and Borneo. Allied to a maritime blockade around Japan, that would basically render Japan helpless and progressively starving in the dark, while we would thus avoid tens of thousands of unnecessary casualties. Such a blockade, to be effective, would however need a lot of ships, submarines and planes. If applied diligently, I believe that such a blockade would force Japan into either submission or military impotence in less than two years, probably more around a year. The one thing that we should avoid in the Pacific, in my opinion and that of Nancy, would be to take by direct assault the various islands in the Central Pacific presently occupied by the Japanese. Let's bypass them outright and let the Japanese garrisons there wither, with us taking only the islands nearest Japan that we could use as bases to blockade and bomb Japan."

While General MacArthur and Admiral King seemed to like most of what she said, Admiral Nimitz showed some disapproval then: her ideas would effectively cancel much of his plans for the Central Pacific. General Marshall and War Secretary Stimson however were showing certain interest in what she said, so she went on.

"Going on to the European Theatre, I'm afraid that some of my Army Air Force bosses may not like what I will say now. Basically, Nancy's judgment, and that of the original history, was that our present strategic bombing campaign, conducted in parallel with the British night bombing campaign, is a tremendous waste of men and materiel, with only modest results to show for it up to now. Carpet bombing from high altitude, as I said earlier this morning, is too inaccurate and exposes our bombers to the full force of German air defenses. Also, indiscriminate bombing of civilian population areas, as is so favored at this time by British Air Chief Marshall Harris of Bomber Command, is only going to prove that the German population is at least as resilient as the British population under bombardment."

General Arnold, along with Generals Spaatz and Eaker, visibly took offense at her words, but an authoritative gesture from Stimson prevented him from cutting off Ingrid. The latter thus continued on, knowing that she was burning up a lot of goodwill points right now but was unwilling to simply go along just to protect her career.

"If we are to use our heavy bombers in a way that would effectively hurt the Germans militarily without costing us an unacceptable level of casualties, then we will definitely have to change our bombing tactics, at the least. I however believe as well that we should drastically change our objectives priority list. Contrary to what most of you gentlemen may think, not all Germans want to continue this war, not by a long shot. Most of the German civilian population and of the lower-ranking German conscripts would prefer to end the war right now, or even wish for Hitler and his minions to disappear, but are too afraid of the German secret police to speak up."

"And how would you know that, Colonel?" Interrupted brusquely Major General Walther Bedell Smith, Eisenhower's chief of staff. Ingrid stared back squarely at Bedell Smith, a staff officer with only a very brief exposure to combat at the end of the First World War and who was also known in the Army as Eisenhower's 'hatchet man'.

"Because I was born and raised in Berlin, Germany, General, and had to fear that secret police as a closet German Jew. The reason I was raising the point about the level of fervor, or rather lack of it, of the average German civilian for the war is that I believe that we should target Nazi leaders instead of the general German population. Basically, we should try to cut the head of the serpent rather than its tail. The various official residences, properties, clubs, headquarters, offices and associations of the main Nazi leaders are well known to us from pre-war documentation. Have we tried even once to bomb Hitler's 'Eagle's Nest' in the Austrian Alps? No! Have we tried to do a pinpoint bombing of Hitler's Chancellery in Berlin, or of the Gestapo headquarters? No and no! They certainly would be more legitimate targets than simple residential areas. Also, by using the tactics I described this morning, we could finally hit in a significant way the German military production capability without losing thousands of aviators."

Henry Stimson, a profoundly moral man, nodded in agreement, while George Marshall fixed Ingrid with a stony expression.

"I certainly can praise your concerns about unnecessary German civilian casualties, Colonel. The idea of hitting German leadership assets is also an attractive one, but we are actually concerned with concrete military steps for striking back at

Germany. For example, we have to decide where, when, how and with what we should strike the Germans in Europe.”

“With what to strike is an easy enough question to answer, Mister Secretary: with everything we’ve got! That’s simple concentration of force principle. Where to strike is also easy: where the Germans are not expecting us and don’t have powerful forces to oppose a landing by us. I believe that the Denmark landings were a good example of where not to strike. Unfortunately, the Atlantic coasts of France, Belgium and the Netherlands have been diligently fortified along much of their length by the Germans, who are continuing to reinforce their so-called Atlantic Wall. A landing on the coast of Northwest France or Belgium would thus most probably be both difficult and costly, although not impossible. There are however three other possible alternate invasion entry routes that exist in my mind: the area of Marseilles, on the Southern coast of France; the area of Venice, in the Northern Adriatic, where we could try to push up to Vienna through the Austrian Alps; or a push North to the Caucasus from Syria. Each of those options would have both advantages and disadvantages.”

Many generals and admirals looked at each other with consternation as Ingrid slapped the tip of her pointer on the port of Marseilles, in Southern France.

“A landing in force around Marseilles and Toulon would both give us a number of main ports for the unloading of our supplies and heavy equipment and a shorter route to the German border, up the Rhone Valley, than from the French Northwest coast. Also, that route’s right flank would be naturally protected by the mountain barrier of the Alps and the Swiss border. Another benefit is the fact that the old fortifications of the Siegfried Line, along the Rhine, have mostly been stripped of guns and troops in the last couple of years, in order to help man the Atlantic Wall. If we achieve surprise and then advance rapidly once we land, we could very well get to the Rhine and enter Bavaria before the Germans could have the chance to reoccupy in force the Siegfried Line. On the minus side, a landing in Southern France would force our ships to transit the Strait of Gibraltar, a choke point that could be blocked by German aircraft and submarines. Moving to the area of Venice and the Northern Adriatic, it would give us a very short and direct route to Austria and Southern Germany and would allow us to cut off as well the German units based in Italy and the Balkans. A major negative point is however that there is only one fair passage through the Austrian Alps to get to Vienna: the Brenner Pass. If that pass gets blocked by the Germans, then our troops North of the pass would be utterly cut off. I however have some ideas about how to get rid of that

problem. Another problem is that our convoys would be exposed to air attacks by German planes based in Italy, but carrier-borne fighters could counter at least partly that threat. Finally, the push North to the Caucasus from Syria. We could bring in the necessary forces and aircraft around Africa and up the Suez Canal, to be landed in Palestine or Lebanon, thus avoiding the choke point at Gibraltar and preserving surprise for as long as possible. Once launched, the offensive would have at first the Caucasus oil fields as its objectives. If we could take them, that would be a painful blow to the German war effort. It would also allow the Soviet Red Army to regain access to a major supply source of fuel. From the Caucasus, we could then drive through the Ukraine towards Romania, to seize the other major source of oil for the Germans there. No oil, no war machine. This would also put the Soviets firmly back in the war. The dangers of that plan are of course the large distances and strong opposition involved and the uncertain reactions of Stalin to such a move by us. However, whichever option we will eventually decide on, Mister Secretary, I would strongly caution that we and the British concentrate only on one of them, not two. If we split our efforts, we risk losing on both spots. That is all that I have at this time, Mister Secretary, apart from the fact that I still prefer a Pacific endgame first, followed by a European invasion. Do you have any questions, Mister Secretary?"

"Just one, Colonel." Said a Stimson half-stunned by the audacity and depth of her ideas. "Where did you gain such a sense of strategy?"

Knowing that Stimson knew about her souvenirs from past incarnations, Ingrid smiled with malice to him.

"From something you may or may not want to divulge now, Mister Secretary." George Marshall, who was also in the know, then hurried to ask her a question before someone around the table could wonder what she had meant.

"Could you produce for me in the next three days a draft paper exposing in more details the options you just described, Colonel?"

"If General MacArthur gives me some time off, I would be happy to do so, General."

As Marshall then looked at MacArthur, the latter grinned and nodded.

"You have my permission to use and abuse her, General Marshall, as long as she can continue to stay near me while I am attending this conference in this room. She is all yours after hours."

Henry Stimson, who had been in deep thoughts for a few seconds, then slowly got up from his chair and looked at the men around the table.

“Gentlemen, you are all loyal American officers with high security clearances. I will thus now reveal to you a secret about Colonel Dows that you will have to keep to yourselves but that will hopefully help you better accept her as she is. She has since 1941 gained through a sort of miracle access to the full souvenirs of her past lives, or incarnations if you prefer. That fact was tested by General Arnold, who established with the help of historians and linguists that then Major Dows can speak dozens of languages, many of them now extinct or obscure. Her souvenirs go back a full 7,000 years and include those as a Chinese emperor and as various warriors through the ages. Furthermore, she was the object of a second miracle last October, in Guadalcanal, when she was shot down, died on the operating table and was then resuscitated by God. She may be young of body, but she has more life experiences than all of us combined. Am I right on that, Colonel?”

“Yes, Mister Secretary.” Said somberly Ingrid. “In fact, I roamed the Pacific in the past as a Filipina woman, a Japanese Geisha, a Chinese emperor and a Javanese fruit merchant, to name only a few of my past lives. In Europe, I roamed Southern France as a Templar knight and as a Frankish heavy cavalryman, while I went through Italy and the Alps as a Roman surgeon attached to a legion. In the Caucasus and the Ukraine, I lived and travelled as the daughter of an Ukrainian boyar, a Sarmatian nomad boy and an Indo-European warrior and hunter. I was also the third wife of the Prophet Mohammed, a Spartan hoplite killed at the battle of Thermopylae and Agar, an Egyptian slave girl bought by Abraham. The only thing I am now, however, is an American officer, and I will die as such an officer.”

07:56 (Washington Time)

Monday, July 5, 1943 ‘C’

Joint and Combined Chiefs of Staff Subjects Plans Section

Army Air Force Headquarters, The Pentagon

Arlington, Virginia

“Here they come, guys! Take positions besides your desks!”

Urged by Jeffrey Martins, the eight men and three women, including a civilian typist-receptionist, hurried to stand to the left side of their respective desks in the common

office they shared at the Pentagon as part of Army Air Force Headquarters. A minute later, Brigadier General Laurence Kuter entered the office, leading by two paces Ingrid Dows and an airman carrying a long, large bag, then stepped aside and made a gesture of the hand to Ingrid.

"Your new kingdom, Colonel Dows. I will now leave you in the good hands of Lieutenant Colonel Jeffrey Martins, your second in command for this section. I will see you at the Plans meeting at three this afternoon."

"I will be there, sir." Replied Ingrid, then saluting Kuter before he left. She next shook hands with Martins.

"Pleased to meet you, Colonel Martins. Where is my desk, so that the good airman here can drop my things besides it?"

"Corporal Donovan will guide him to your office while we do the presentations here. Corporal Donovan?"

The female military clerk stepped forward and signaled to the airman, who then followed her towards the back of the office, where large windows provided light to the area. Ingrid then started going down the line of men, with the two other women present last, shaking hands as they presented each other.

"Major Ted Sturgis, strategic bombing specialist officer, Colonel."

"Major Stephen Polanski, tactical bombing specialist officer, Colonel."

"Major Michael Dunbar, fighter specialist officer, Colonel."

"Major Ben Anderson, aircraft maintenance engineer, maam."

"Major Edward Stockwell, aircraft ordnance specialist officer, Colonel."

"Major Neil Price, statistics and computations officer, maam."

"First Sergeant Tony Rossini, chief-clerk for this office, Colonel."

"Sergeant Helen Cameron, administrative clerk, Colonel. Corporal Megan Donovan is our typist-clerk."

"Rhonda Smith, typist-receptionist, pleased to meet you, Colonel." Said the last in line, a civilian woman in her thirties.

"Pleased to meet you as well, Miss Smith."

Ingrid then waited for Donovan to return in the line to shake her hand as well, then looked around her at the men and women facing her, smiling to them.

"I don't know what you may have heard about me up to date, but know this: I am very easy to work with and I don't care much about military etiquette, nor am I a stickler for uniform regulations. Just don't look like slobs and keep the office clean, that's all. As

for your desk tops, a desk that is too tidy is a mark of laziness for me. I am sure that we have plenty to do already and you shouldn't feel bad about having multiple piles of papers and files on them. Just make sure that you secure all your classified papers before leaving the office for lunch or for the night. I suppose that we have a safe in this office, Colonel Martins?"

"We sure have, Colonel, along with three secure filing cabinets. They are in the corner to your right."

"Excellent! I will get the combination for that safe from you later on, along with the keys to this office. I will just go take five minutes to place my things around my desk, then we will have a group talk with cups of coffee. We do have a coffee machine here, I hope?"

"Of course, Colonel!" Replied Martins, smiling. "We drink coffee by the gallon here."

"Good! I will see you in five minutes, then."

Waiting for Ingrid to walk away, the other male officers then congregated around Martins for a whispered exchange, with Michael Dunbar, the fighter pilot, speaking first with admiration in his eyes.

"Did you see her four rows of medal ribbons, topped by the Medal of Honor ribbon? She is not hot only in terms of looks!"

"Yeah!" Commented Stephen Polanski. "However, the term 'bomb' would well apply to her. She must have had all the men in her unit on their knees."

"Hey, she commanded an all-female unit, remember?" Said sarcastically Ted Sturgis. That only made the B-25 bomber pilot wet his lips.

"An all-female wing... Sounds like paradise to me."

"Well, just don't forget that she is the boss here, Steph." Warned Martins amicably. "You try to grab her ass, or that of any of our female staff, and you will end up with a new asshole. Now, go all get a cup of coffee and be ready to brief her on your various works in progress."

Five minutes later, the seven officers, three NCOs and one civilian employee sat in Ingrid's office, a fair-sized cubicle with glass and wood walls that had been built in the far corner of the office. As they placed their chairs in a semi-circle in front of her desk, they saw that a Japanese Army sword in an elaborate scabbard hung from the wall

behind Ingrid, surrounded by a multitude of framed pictures and with a large sign besides the sword that said 'In case of dumb idea, grab and swing'. Many smiled at that humorous piece, but all eyes bulged when they read the brass plaque now sitting along the forward edge of the desk.

Colonel Ingrid Dows

MoH, DSC (X2), NC, DSM, Silver Star (X4), Legion of Merit, DFC (X7)

Purple Heart (X2), Air Medal, APCM (X4 Campaigns), DCS, DSO, CBE

"Uh, what do DCS, DSO and CBE stands for, Colonel?" Asked Edward Stockwell, the ordnance specialist. Ingrid took a sip of coffee before answering calmly.

"The DCS is the Filipino Distinguished Conduct Star, the second military highest award for valor that the President of the Philippines can give. The DSO is the British Distinguished Service Order, about equivalent to our Distinguished Service Cross, while the CBE is the Order of the British Empire, Commander grade. That last one is honorary, as it is a chivalry order and is normally reserved for British subjects."

"I must say that I am jealous, Colonel." Said Michael Dunbar, the fighter pilot. "May I ask at what stands your air victory score these days, Colonel?"

"You may, but you can forget already about beating it, Major: it presently stands at 117 confirmed air victories. And no, contrary to the European Theatre, in the Pacific Theatre we do not count aircraft destroyed on the ground as air victories. Before you ask what the photos of ships behind me are, they show all the major Japanese warships my unit sank in the Pacific. As you may deduce from all this, I believe firmly that the most important job of the Army Air Force, apart from gaining and keeping air superiority, is to closely support our soldiers and sailors fighting on the ground or at sea. Bombs may do a lot of damage, but they cannot occupy ground or enforce a naval blockade. This may sound anathema to many of you, but it is a hard fact in this war and we shouldn't feel less important for supporting other combatants. We all wear American uniforms after all, whether we are in the Army, Navy, Marine Corps or Army Air Force, and our jobs are the same: to defend the United States and vanquish its enemies."

"But," objected politely Ted Sturgis, a B-17 bomber pilot, "that leaves little for our heavy bombers to do, Colonel."

"Not true, Major! What they can do, instead of wasting thousands of tons of bombs on dubious area targets, is to indirectly support our ground and naval forces.

This notion that air forces can win wars by themselves is a fallacy. If we want to win, then all of our forces will have to fight in a coordinated way, instead of competing against one another.”

“That is somewhat contradicting the doctrine in which General Arnold believes, Colonel.” Cautioned Martins. “Brigadier General Kuter is also a proponent of strategic bombing.”

“I am well aware of that, Colonel Martins.” Replied Ingrid calmly. “However, the Germans are presently shooting that doctrine full of holes and our present bomber offensive over Europe is on the verge of collapse. Following last week’s command conference, I can tell you that our strategic bomber doctrine is now under urgent review by the Strategic Section, which will coordinate its review with me. General Kuter agrees with the necessity of such a review and General Arnold was told by General Marshall and Secretary Stimson to get on with it with the best speed possible.”

What Ingrid didn’t say was that Marshall and, in particular, Stimson, had been quite blunt with Arnold, who at first had balked at dropping a doctrine he personally had spent decades to formulate and promote. Marshall was also presently reviewing her working paper she had given him at the end of the conference which covered her proposed three options for an offensive in Europe. In that paper, Ingrid had rated the Southern France option as her preferred one and she expected Marshall to agree with her, since the Northern Adriatic and the Caucasus options ran much higher risks, even though their potential rewards could be huge. Returning her mind to the present meeting, she scanned quickly the faces around her desk, seeing mostly curiosity and anticipation.

“I am personally going to be busy writing up a formal doctrine and tactics manual on helicopter operations and air assault, plus another manual on close air support to ground and naval forces. Majors Polanski and Dunbar, I will be using your help to write up the paper on close air support. Colonel Martins, I will also need your support on the paper on air assault, for the air movement details. All of you will in fact be involved in helping me produce those two manuals, which will have to be written up and finalized as quickly as possible: our future air operations, both in the Pacific and in Europe, will be based on those manuals. The other main priority of this section for the next few weeks will be to help prepare the position paper that President Roosevelt and our service chiefs will present to the British and Canadians at the oncoming strategic conference in Quebec in August. General Marshall is presently studying with Admiral King and General Arnold a number of options for our future war plans and we will be advised as

soon as an option will be selected, so that we can start planning it formally. Are there any questions up to now?"

"What about the various projects we were working on at this time, Colonel?" Asked Martins, raising his nose from the notepad on which he had been scribbling notes.

"We will continue working on them, but on a lower priority. The writing of the two manuals I mentioned, plus that of the position paper for the Quebec Conference, will take top priority. While we are at it, can you tell me in turn on what you are presently working? Colonel Martins, you start first."

Reviewing with her subaltern their present workload took a good hour, at the end of which Ingrid nodded, her writing pad now nearly covered with lines of writing.

"Well, it looks like we will be busy enough for the next few weeks, gentlemen. I do have however a few questions for you concerning off hours activities. For starters, as desk-bound pilots, could you tell me if there are ways for me to get some flying hours during weekends, so that I don't get rusty?"

Michael Dunbar smiled to her at once.

"Well, that's something we were all worried about when we got posted to Washington, Colonel. Thankfully, there is an unofficial policy in place at Army Air Force headquarters that encourages and supports pilots on staff duties to keep their flying qualifications. Basically, the deal is that pilots wishing to get a few flying hours only need to book a plane at one of the airfields near Washington. The nearest, Bolling Field, is just on the other side of the Potomac River and caters mostly to transport and heavy bomber pilots. The next nearest airfield is Camp Springs Army Air Field, eight miles east of Washington, where they train fighter and medium bomber pilots. Personally, I regularly go to Camp Springs to keep up my qualifications as a fighter pilot. I can drive you there next weekend if you want, Colonel."

That brought a happy grin to Ingrid's face.

"That sounds great, Major! What types of aircraft do they have there?"

"Mostly Republic P-47 THUNDERBOLT fighters and a few Martin B-26 MARAUDER medium bombers. What? Is there something wrong, Colonel?"

Ingrid, who had made a grimace at the mention of P-47s, shook her head.

"Not really, Major Dunbar. It is just that I was hoping that they would have some P-38s there. Oh well, I will have to live with piloting that P-47 flying brick."

“Uh, I’m sorry if I didn’t give you a complete picture about Camp Springs, Colonel. They do have some other models of fighters apart from the P-47, but in smaller quantities. Last time I was there, there were a few P-38s on the field, along with some of the brand new North American P-51 MUSTANG.”

“Thank God, I’m saved!” Replied Ingrid, blowing air out and making the others grin. Martins then got in with a question on that subject.

“Are you qualified on other types than the P-38, Colonel? If I remember well, you started your career on a P-40.”

“Actually, I started flying in combat in a Boeing P-26 PEASHOOTER in the Philippines. I then transitioned to the P-40. While in command of the 99th Wing, I also qualified on all the other aircraft types my unit had, namely the B-25, the C-142, the UH-1, UH-2, UH-3 and AH-4 helicopters and the C-47. I suppose that I will have to split my weekends between Bolling Field and Camp Springs. I will also have to find time to practice my pistol shooting and to keep in shape.”

“Gee, Colonel!” Said Sergeant Helen Cameron with fake reprobation. “What about some time for a bit of personal fun in all that?”

Ingrid gave him a blank look then.

“Fun time? What’s that?”

08:51 (Quebec Time)

Tuesday, August 17, 1943 ‘C’

Quebec Citadel, Quebec City

Province of Quebec, Canada

Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden, a tall, lean and handsome man with a small moustache and who had always enjoyed success with women, smiled with appreciation as he and Prime Minister Churchill entered the large conference room that had been prepared in the officers’ mess of the old Quebec Citadel. His eyes had just hooked on a very beautiful young woman wearing an American Army Air Force uniform and who stood as part of the American delegation that accompanied President Roosevelt.

“Well, some American general certainly found himself a personal aide worth the look, Mister Prime Minister.”

Winston Churchill, who had done his share of womanizing when a young man, eyed the young woman in question, only to utter a quiet swear after examining her for a second.

"By Jove! I saw this girl before! She was at Laplante's funeral, two years ago. In fact, she was one of her pallbearers."

Anthony Eden then connected who that girl could be and eyed her with disbelief.

"Laplante's adopted German Luftwaffe girl, here in American uniform?"

That got him an incredulous look from Churchill.

"I'll be damned! We will definitely have to go speak with her afterwards. First, let's go pay our respects to President Roosevelt."

Followed by his own pack of generals, admirals, political aides and counselors, Churchill walked to Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who was sitting in a wheelchair and was surrounded by his highest ranking officers and officials. The American President pivoted his wheelchair to face the approaching British Prime Minister, then presented his right hand for a shake while smiling at Churchill.

"Mister Prime Minister, it is nice to see you again."

"And it is a pleasure to meet you again, Mister President. I couldn't help notice the fact that you included a member of the fair sex in your staff this time."

Roosevelt, an unrepentant womanizer, grinned at that and looked briefly at the young beauty with reddish-brown hair and blue eyes standing a few paces away in the background.

"Actually, she is part of General Arnold's staff, not of mine, although I am furiously tempted to have her transferred to the White House. I'm afraid however that my wife would not approve if I grabbed Colonel Dows for my own use."

"She's a colonel?" Said Churchill in a disbelieving tone. He then saw the impressive collection of medal ribbons on the girl's chest. Eden also noticed the ribbons and raised an eyebrow.

"Well, like mother, like daughter. She seems to be following in the heels of Nancy Laplante, Mister President. Would you mind if we go briefly talk with her?"

"No need to find an excuse to go admire her from up close, Sir Anthony. Be my guest!"

Eden and Churchill thus made their way to Ingrid, shaking hands and exchanging greetings with the American officers in their path. Ingrid came to attention and saluted when Churchill got close to her. She proved to be nearly as tall as Eden and was actually a bit taller than Churchill. Her closely fitted dress uniform also put in evidence her sensual curves.

"Mister Prime Minister!"

"At ease, Colonel!" Said Churchill, noting in passing the ribbons of the American Medal of Honor and of the British DSO and CBE as part of her collection on her chest. "I believe that we met once already in London, at the funeral of Nancy Laplante."

"You are correct, Mister Prime Minister." Said soberly Ingrid. "My maiden name was Ingrid Weiss and Nancy had secretly adopted me while I was being interned in the Tower of London as a Luftwaffe auxiliary. I acted as one of her pallbearers. A few weeks later, I married a Marine Corps officer and accompanied him to the Philippines after being pardoned from the Tower of London."

"Quite a story, I must say. Well, it was truly a pleasure to be able to meet you, Colonel. Maybe we will have a chance to talk further about Nancy later during this conference."

"I would be happy to, Mister Prime Minister."

She saluted again before Churchill turned around to go meet other participants to the conference, including the host of the conference, Canadian Prime Minister Mackenzie King. The latter, seeing that everyone of substance was now in, then called for the participants to take their seats around the large conference table.

After a few minutes spent on formalities, King invited his guests to present condensed situation briefings on their forces and actual operations, both in Europe and in the Pacific. That still took the better of one hour, at the end of which a short break was called. When the conference reconvened, the agenda moved to the future plans and operations proposed respectively by the British and the Americans. The meeting became tense at once as it quickly became evident to all that the British and American opinions about how to prosecute the war diverged sharply. While those differences were notable concerning the war in the Pacific and Asia, they were sharpest when the question of how to take on the Germans in Europe was raised. For one, the news that the American 8th Air Force would suspend temporarily its strategic bombing campaign against Germany in order to regroup, reequip and retrain was greeted with something close to anger by the British R.A.F. commanders present and by Churchill, with the latter nearly pounding the table with his fist.

"So, my Bomber Command would be left alone holding the bag for those weeks and months? Is that it?"

General Arnold, who had visibly aged in the last few months under the growing stress he was under, answered as calmly as he could.

“Mister Prime Minister, the bomber groups of the 8th Air Force have suffered a total of nearly forty percent casualties in both aircraft and aircrews during the last three months alone. We need some time to replace those losses and to reorganize. We will also adopt new bombing tactics in order to minimize future casualties once we resume bombing operations. Those new tactics will involve the systematic use of escort fighters and electronic jamming, a dispersal of our attack units into smaller, more flexible groups and the use of low level attacks. We will also favor pinpoint targets rather than area targets.”

“Why don’t you do like us and bombard by night?” Replied Air Chief Marshall Charles Portal, the commander of the R.A.F..

“Because night bombing does not allow precision bombing. We have always believed and continue to believe that precision bombing is the best way to significantly hurt the German war effort.”

Seeing quickly that the Americans seemed set on that question, Churchill decided to let it go for the moment and signaled to Portal to hold his fire, then changed the subject.

“I suppose that we could live with some delay on that matter, General Arnold. General Marshall, what is the United States Army ready to make available for an eventual invasion of Europe?”

Marshall gave Churchill a pointed look.

“Shouldn’t we discuss first where we will invade, and under whose command, Mister Prime Minister?”

That started another round of often heated discussions that went on until it was interrupted for lunch.

While heads had somewhat cooled by the time lunch was over and the conference was reconvened, the debate tensed up again at once on the question of who would be in overall command of the invasion force. After over one hour of acrimonious discussion, the American side won the argument, with General Eisenhower named as supreme commander for the allied forces that would invade Europe, with Air Marshall Tedder as his deputy and with a mixed Anglo-American staff. The question then shifted to where the invasion would take place and when. Prime Minister King, in an attempt to avoid another verbal confrontation, proposed that each side presented its preferred

options, something to which Churchill and Roosevelt agreed to readily enough. The British went at it first, with Field Marshall Alan Brooke doing the presentation in front of a huge map of Europe. Ingrid, watching and listening from her seat along a wall, held her breath when Brooke described a tentative invasion plan that was split in two axis: a main attack against the northwest coast of France and a second, nearly as powerful attack up the Northern Adriatic, with Vienna as its objective. The attack up the Northern Adriatic, if made alone with all forces available, would have been acceptable in her eyes, but dividing the Allied forces in two axis as widely separated as those was for her a losing proposition. General Marshall and most of the rest of the American delegation obviously believed the same thing and objected at once. It soon became evident from the arguments presented by the British that their true objective was as much the isolation and taking of Italy as it was the taking of Vienna, highlighting the obsession Churchill had about the control of the Mediterranean. The debate that ensued went on until supper time and was still unresolved by the time the participants left their chairs to go eat at the dining room of the officers' mess, with an understanding to continue the debate the next morning.

Once the supper was over and the participants started leaving the 19th Century citadel to return to their rooms in the nearby Château Champlain Hotel, Ingrid elected to leave on foot, refusing politely the offer of Brigadier General Kuter to take a place in his staff car. Walking out of the fortress, built on the sunken bastions system invented by the celebrated French engineer Vauban, Ingrid passed first the main inner gate, guarded by Canadian soldiers of the Royal 22th Regiment, the unit based in the Quebec Citadel, then went down through the outer gate and its narrow S-shaped sunken access road, barely wide enough to allow the passage of heavy trucks. After walking down the steep street giving access to the fortress, Ingrid found herself near the St-Louis Gate, one of the fortified gates in the stone wall that surrounded the Old Upper City. She stopped for a moment there to admire the view of the old city she had from near the gate. Quebec City was the oldest walled city in North America and its stone houses and buildings and stone street pavement made her mind project back a good three centuries, when she had gone by the imposing rock promontory of Cap Diamant²² that the then French settlers had chosen as a site to build their settlement. Then, she was an Algonquin

²² Cap Diamant : Cape Diamond in French. Actual site of the old city of Quebec.

hunter and warrior named Nitsoatong, a member of a tribe allied with the French against their common enemy, the Iroquois. Wanting to change her mind from the acrimonious discussions of the day, she started walking slowly along St-Louis Street, admiring its 18th Century houses and looking into the various shops front windows. Even the language spoken by the passersby, a French tainted by many old words and expressions dating from the Renaissance, made old souvenirs rush to her mind. After less than one kilometer of slow walk, she came into full view of the Château Champlain Hotel, a huge brick building strategically sited at the edge of the rock face leading down to the Old Lower City and the Port of Quebec. Ingrid knew already that the rooms of the hotel, built in the style of a huge square Renaissance tower, gave a fantastic view of the majestic St-Lawrence River and of the whole surrounding area. Walking around the wide, stone-paved square in front of the hotel, Ingrid stumbled on a narrow, steep pedestrian side street lined with old boutiques and restaurants. She looked up at the wall plaque that bore the street name and smiled.

“La Rue du Trésor, Treasure Street. How aptly named!”

Ignoring the looks from the many passersby and tourists frequenting the street, Ingrid started slowly examine the various shops, boutiques and restaurants, all housed in picturesque 18th Century stone buildings. There were also many amateur artists, painters and vendors installed outside along the street, proposing to make quick portraits of passersby or selling their artwork or products. She soon stopped at the portable stall of a man that was visibly of Amerindian origin and wore a deer skin vest. The stall showed a small collection of handmade objects and a few pieces of clothing of traditional Amerindian manufacture hung from hooks. Ingrid’s heart jumped in her chest when she recognized the objects as being of typical Algonquin style. She smiled warmly to the old man in his fifties and stunned him by speaking in Algonquin to him.

“You sell some very nice ware, my good man. Did you make them yourself?”

“Some were made by me, some others by my grand-mother or by my mother. May I ask where you learned how to speak Algonquin, young woman?”

“In Montreal, a long time ago.” Answered Ingrid while examining the wares on sale. A pair of moccasins made of deer skin, which looked the right size for her, quickly attracted her eyes, along with a sleeveless tunic also made of deer skin.

“May I try one of those moccasins?”

“Of course, woman!”

Taking off one of her service shoes and trying on the moccasin, Ingrid was delighted to see that, although slightly large for her, it fit her reasonably well, especially if she laced it tight. Putting back on her shoe and putting aside the pair of moccasins, she then tried the tunic, which also fit her. Happy with her finds, she then selected a traditional Algonquin leather headband decorated with stitching and beads, along with an Algonquin bracelet and necklace. She finally took a red loincloth and used it to wrap together her acquisitions. Paying the happy old man, Ingrid patted his shoulder and spoke to him a few last Algonquin words.

“Thank you for reviving some very old memories in me, good man. May the Great Spirit be with you.”

“And him with you, woman.”

Her newfound treasures wrapped together in her hands, Ingrid then continued her exploration of the Rue du Trésor. Unfortunately, most of the shops were now closing due to the late hour and she soon had to turn around and go up the street to go to her hotel. Due to the presence of so many high-level dignitaries and of three heads of states, numerous security officers and soldiers had been posted around the Château Champlain and its various entrances and Ingrid had to show her military identity card and special conference pass in order to be able to enter the hotel. Going up to her small but very comfortable room, she put her wrapped acquisitions on the chest of drawers and, deciding to take a shower, undressed and went into the bathroom attached to her room. When she got out of it, dried up but still naked, she felt an urge at the sight of her new possessions and decided on the spur of the moment to try them on. The loincloth went on first, held by her uniform’s belt, followed by the tunic and the moccasins. She then put on the necklace, bracelet and headband before going to admire herself in the tall wall mirror of her room. Somehow, she now felt a kind of physical freedom that she had not experienced in a long time, back when she had spent a day at the beach with her family as a little girl, running naked on the sand of the Baltic coast. She giggled at the thought of the reactions she would create among the distinguished guests of the hotel if she ran around naked like in that past happy time in 1931, before the Nazi nightmare had descended on Germany. She may have souvenirs dating back 7,000 years in her head and was holding a position of great responsibility, but she was still a young girl at heart. She was still standing in front of the mirror, submerged in souvenirs, when someone knocked on her door. Ingrid’s head snapped around towards the door

and she then felt indecision: should she answer it in her present accoutrement or should she ask her visitor to wait or come back later? She finally decided to go see who it was as a second series of knocks resonated. Looking through the peephole of her door, she felt her heart jump in her chest: it was none other than Doctor Reginald Jones, the scientific counselor of Prime Minister Winston Churchill. He was as well the successor of Nancy Laplante as the head of the Athena Section, the special and very secret British office in charge of managing the technological and historical data imported from the future by Nancy in 1940. Jones had visited the Tower of London a number of times with Nancy and had met Ingrid before, proving to be a nice and decent man, apart from being a true scientific genius. Taking a decision, Ingrid unlocked her door and opened it, stepping aside to let the way in free.

"Please come in, Doctor Jones."

Jones did a double take on seeing her outfit but walked in quickly, speaking once Ingrid had closed and locked the door.

"Well, your clothes are, uh, a bit unusual, Ingrid. Are you planning to play cowboys and Indians?"

"Oh, I was just trying on some new acquisitions I found near the hotel. Quebec City is a truly fascinating place, with so much history in it."

"Indeed! Could we speak a bit?"

"Of course, Doctor Jones! Take the chair at the desk."

As Jones sat in the said chair, Ingrid sat on the bed, facing him with her legs crossed. Both eyed each other in silence for a moment before Ingrid spoke again.

"It has been a while since we saw each other, Doctor Jones."

"Please, call me simply Reginald." Replied the tall, slim and young physicist. "I am sorry if I didn't come to speak with you earlier today, but Prime Minister Churchill kept me quite busy."

"No need to excuse yourself, Reginald: we both have our responsibilities to fulfill. From what I knew of Nancy's job in London, you must indeed be a busy man."

The mention of Nancy brought a longing look on Jones' face, who paused before replying to Ingrid.

"Nancy... I miss her so much. You must have missed her and Mike terribly during the last two years, Ingrid."

"I have." Answered Ingrid in a subdued voice. "I also miss terribly my late husband Ken. I suppose that you know that he was killed in the Philippines in 1941."

"No, I didn't know. I'm sorry to hear that. Please accept my most sincere condolences."

"Thank you! And how is your family doing?"

"My wife Vera is well, and so is my little daughter Emily. Vera is due to have our second child in a few months."

"Congratulations! And what about the other guys of the Athena Section?"

The look of pain that showed on Jones' face alarmed Ingrid at once, but she let the scientist speak once he had gone over his memories.

"They are all dead, Ingrid. Commander Stilwell, Major Townsend and Squadron Leader Wilson were killed in action during the Campaign of Norway, last year."

Truly saddened by those news, Ingrid lowered her head and stayed silent for a few seconds, then looked back at Jones.

"And the girls in the Tower of London? Did you visit them recently?"

"My last visit there was a month ago. Your comrades are doing mostly well, but the constant missile bombardment on London, while at low cadence, is affecting their nerves as badly as those of Londoners. The city is presently hit with near clockwork regularity by one ballistic missile per two hours, with each missile powerful enough to destroy most of a street block. I must say that their psychological effect on the population of London is terrible."

Ingrid didn't dare comment on that, measuring in Jones' tone how deeply that bombardment truly affected the British. Her own opposition to the bombardment of German civilians suddenly felt hypocritical to her. Jones however regained his composure quickly, looking with determination at her.

"However, those Nazis are not going to win, Ingrid. That I promise you! We have a few surprises in store for them, thanks to Nancy. Don't ask me about them, though: I wouldn't be allowed to tell you about them anyway. The only thing that I can tell you is that, with some luck, this war will be over in maybe a year."

Ingrid nodded slowly her head. She didn't need to ask him about those surprises, as she had just read them in his thoughts. Besides, Nancy had spoken to her about atomic weapons in 1941, although she had affirmed to Ingrid that she would never divulge their secrets to anyone. The British must have stolen that information from her computer after her death. She however played the innocent and didn't comment on that. She wasn't sure anyway if she really wanted to know about those 'surprises'.

"Well, I certainly wouldn't mind see this war end quickly, Reginald. I have already seen too many good people die or suffer because of it. In turn, I must tell you about something concerning me and Nancy. Back in 1941, shortly after we started to be attracted to each other, some kind of miracle happened to both of us at the same time: we started remembering our past lives. You are familiar with the concept of reincarnation, I suppose?"

"I am!" Said Jones, showing surprise and some incredulity as well. "You are saying that it is more than an imaginary concept?"

"It is actually a reality and I am a living proof of it, Reginald. I now remember in detail all my past lives, totaling 71, spread over 7,000 years, including the languages I spoke and the skills I used. It was the same with Nancy, but her own souvenirs went back 9,000 years. Those past souvenirs are why I was able to rise so rapidly in the American Army Air Force. As for how we got that ability, I can only say that a superior spiritual being gifted us with it, with the eventual goal of using us as some sort of intermediary."

"Are you talking about God?" Asked Jones, visibly shaken.

"Some may call him so. I and Nancy called him 'The One'. He however does not correspond to the God described in the Bible, as he didn't create the Universe, or even the Earth. The One is the actual source and gathering point of all the human souls, which return to The One at the death of their supporting bodies before being sent to inhabit newborns. I may be a teenage girl in body, but I have an accumulated life experience worth millenniums. Some in the American high command know about that, including President Roosevelt, but it is still considered a national secret, so I would appreciate if you didn't mention this to Prime Minister Churchill or others in Great Britain."

Jones hesitated for a moment, then nodded his head somberly.

"You can count on my discretion in this, Ingrid. Well, I suppose that I should go, before the Prime Minister starts looking for me to help him solve some problem or answer a question. It was a true pleasure to see you and speak with you, Ingrid."

"And it was also a pleasure for me, Reginald. Let's hug before you go."

Jones didn't have to be told twice, getting up like Ingrid and then pressing her in his arms for a few precious seconds. They finally parted regretfully, with Jones planting a kiss on her forehead before leaving.

"You remind me so much of Nancy, Ingrid. May you have happiness and success in your life."

Ingrid felt a pang of her heart when Jones closed the door behind him: his visit had reminded her of so many things about Nancy. Going slowly to the door, she locked it and turned around to go change out of her Algonquin outfit, only to freeze on the spot and open her eyes wide.

"Nancy?"

"It's me, Ingrid." Said softly a smiling Nancy, wearing an embroidered white and gold Arabic robe and standing in the middle of the room. Without asking how she had come or how she could be alive, Ingrid ran into her arms and hugged her tightly, tears coming to her eyes.

"Nancy, oh Nancy! But I saw you dead, two years ago. How is this possible?"

"One Nancy Laplante died then, but two are still alive, including me. I am actually the original Nancy you first met. The one you lost actually existed only for a fraction of a second, time to create this present timeline as she died."

Her eyes still blurred by tears, Ingrid looked up into Nancy's eyes, confused.

"What do you mean by that, Nancy?"

Nancy made a benevolent smile and answered her in a soft voice while still holding her in her arms.

"There is a lot that you must learn about, Ingrid. Hold on to me and I will bring you to a place where we will be able to speak freely."

The duo then vanished from the room in a brief flash of white light.

They reappeared in the same spot in the room five minutes later, by the clock on the dresser. Ingrid still wore her Algonquin outfit but, in reality, a full month had elapsed for her as she stayed at the secret main base of the Time Patrol, five millenniums in the past. She was now much wiser about the reality of multiple timelines and what their existence implied. She had also been able to meet Mike Crawford and her own two timeline twins, along with the timeline twin of Ken Dows. She would have loved to stay in the past, but she knew that she had both a destiny and many responsibilities here in 1943 'C'. She however had a few gifts to remember her time in the past, as a large box had appeared as well, to fall from a few centimeters on the bed of the hotel room. Tears came back to her eyes as she stepped back reluctantly from Nancy.

"Will I see you again, Nancy?"

“When circumstances call for it, yes, my sweet Ingrid. However, you must make your mind to the fact that this life is yours to live. You will have to make your own decisions based solely on your judgment, not mine. Besides, I have a deal with King Stan, of the Imperium ‘C’: I won’t interfere in this timeline and he will keep his peace with the two other timelines. Whatever is in store in the future of this timeline will not be mine to interfere with. Just continue to be the brave, kind and tolerant girl that you are and that will be enough to make me most proud of you. Shelamah²³, Ingrid!”

“Shelamah, Nancy! I love you!” Said tearfully Ingrid before Nancy vanished in a flash of light. She then slowly went to the bed and sat on it before sobbing quietly for a while. When her tears finally dried, she pulled next to her the box on the bed and opened it. The first thing she took out of it was a fantastic-looking supersonic jet pilot helmet, complete with Sun visor and adapted with a 1943-era oxygen mask and radio headset. The helmet was painted with the red, white and blue stripes and white stars of the American flag and bore her name and flying nickname on the front. Ingrid smiled on thinking how many pilots she was going to make jealous of her with this helmet. Next, she took out two GLOCK pistols similar to those she already owned, but in .45 caliber instead of in 9mm, something that was going to simplify getting ammunition for her pistols. The two pistols came with spare magazines, holsters, laser dot and holographic sights and with cleaning tools. An ultra-modern aviator’s wristwatch, manufactured in 2016, along with a military pilot’s survival vest incorporating both Kevlar ballistic protection and an inflatable flotation collar, came out next. The last item in the box, a gift from Mike Crawford, made her giggle as she took it out and eyed it: it was an outrageously tiny cream-colored thong bikini that was better suited to the beaches of 2016 Brazil than to the American beaches of 1943. She was going to have to be careful about where she was going to wear it, if she didn’t want to be arrested for public indecency.

07:04 (Quebec Time)

Wednesday, August 18, 1943 ‘C’

Château Champlain Hotel

Quebec City

²³ Shelamah : Peace, in Aramaic.

Ingrid, feeling supremely sure of herself this morning, was making her way down to the restaurant of the hotel reserved for the participants to the Quadrant Conference, planning to have breakfast there, when she nearly collided at a hallway corner with an agitated Brigadier General Kuter. Before she could excuse herself, Kuter spoke to her in an urgent tone.

"Thank God that I could find you, Ingrid! General Arnold was found fifteen minutes ago in his room, unconscious. It seems that he suffered a major heart attack. An ambulance just picked him up to rush him to a local hospital."

"My God! Will he make it?"

"We don't know yet, but the hotel doctor said that his case was critical. We should know more in a few hours. In the meantime, General Marshall asked me to take over General Arnold's duties for this conference. I will in turn ask you to help me handle his dossiers."

"You can count on me, sir."

"Good! Go have breakfast quickly, then meet me at our delegation's private lounge, so that we can review together the points to be covered during the conference."

"I will be there in half a hour, sir." Promised Ingrid. Kuter nodded, then left at a near run. Ingrid, now thoughtful, hurried herself to get to the restaurant, so she could eat as quickly as possible. This would be just another serious blow to happen lately to the top ranks of the Army Air Force. General Marshall, at the direct request of Secretary of War Stimson, had forced General Arnold to relieve of command Lieutenant General Spaatz, the commander of the American strategic bomber forces in Europe, along with Major General Eaker, the commander of the 8th Air Force, for being unable to handle the present crisis among the American bomber units in England. As a result, Lieutenant General Lewis Brereton, Ingrid's old commander in the Philippines, had taken the place of General Spaatz, while Major General James Doolittle had taken the place of Eaker. Combined with the ordered reorganization of the 8th Air Force and the change to new tactics and doctrines, that had thrown the heavy bomber forces of the American Air Force in turmoil. The incapacitation of General Arnold could thus only add to that turmoil.

As promised to Kuter, Ingrid arrived at the private lounge of the American delegation less than thirty minutes later, where she took forty minutes to review with him the air dossiers involved with the conference. When they went together to the

conference room shortly before nine o'clock, Ingrid found herself sitting at the main table, besides Kuter, who took the place previously occupied by General Arnold. They were now by far the two youngest faces sitting at that table, alongside men that were mostly in their fifties and sixties. The absence of Arnold was also quickly noticed by the other participants, prompting General Marshall in getting up from his chair just before the resumption of the conference, to deliver a somber message.

"Mister President, Prime Minister Churchill, Prime Minister King, gentlemen, I am sad to have to announce that General Arnold suffered what appeared to be a major heart attack this morning, while in his room. He has been rushed to the nearest hospital but we are still waiting for a definite word on his condition. In the meantime, Brigadier General Laurence Kuter, chief of the Plans Department of the Army Air Force, will take over from General Arnold for the rest of this conference, assisted by Colonel Ingrid Dows, head of the Joint and Combined Chiefs Subjects Section of the Plans Department. Both have my complete confidence and are amply qualified to answer any questions you may have about our air force plans."

There was a short exchange of whispered comments and exclamations around the table before Canadian Prime Minister King, still acting as host and chairman of the conference, spoke up in a subdued voice.

"We can only pray God that General Arnold will come out of this, gentlemen. In the meantime, we must concentrate on how to win this war. Yesterday, Sir Alan Brooke exposed Great Britain's preferred option on how to retake Europe from the Nazis. I will now ask the United States to brief us on its own proposed plan to land on the continent." After a short whispered conversation with President Roosevelt, General Marshall got up from his seat and walked to the large map of Europe pinned to a portable board and grabbed the pointer hooked to one side.

"Gentlemen, our chosen area of landing to set foot in Europe is the southern coast of France, in the area from Marseilles to Nice. We intend to use a total of twelve divisions, three of which will be airborne divisions, in the initial phase of that operation. Once a wide enough secure perimeter will have been seized, more divisions will then be ferried from England to help engage decisively the German forces that will rush in to counter-attack."

The British and Canadian representatives opened their mouths wide from surprise and shock at first. They were however in for more surprises as Marshall continued.

“Our initial main targets will be the ports of Marseilles, Toulon, Cannes and Nice, plus the collection of smaller ports in that section of the French coast. Our landings, by air cushion vehicles and amphibious ships, will be preceded within half a hour by the landing of multiple helicopter-borne and air-landed units totaling two airborne divisions and two light infantry regiments. The task of those initial units will be to take the enemy by surprise in a dawn air assault and to neutralize the main enemy defensive points, including coastal fortifications and the main German Luftwaffe airfields in the coastal area. Once taken, those airfields will then be used to ferry in by air more troops, equipment and supplies. I have to make a special mention here about Toulon, where the French fleet is docked. As you may already know, the Vichy government, while allowing a year ago the Germans to bring in troops and various units in the part of France it still controls in the South, put as a condition that the port of Toulon would stay out of bound to German soldiers, to ensure that the French fleet based there is not seized by the Germans. While Hitler had reluctantly agreed to that in order to be able to defend to a degree the southern French coast and to be able to use the port of Marseilles for his own navy, he has stationed one division around Toulon, to allow to take the port quickly if need be. Our intention for Operation TSUNAMI is to use only Free French ground forces to take Toulon, and this with the goal of capturing the French fleet intact. Hopefully, with those warships back under Free French control, that fleet will be able later to fight on our side.”

Air Chief Marshall Portal, his face reflecting puzzlement, then raised a hand to ask a question.

“Excuse me, General Marshall, but the existing helicopters we have in service are notoriously short-legged. With the coast of North Africa still under French Vichy control and with German units in Sicily, Sardinia and Corsica, from where will those helicopters full of troops take off for those assaults?”

“From ships, Air Chief Marshall Portal.” Replied Marshall, his face impassive. “Concurrently with preparing troops and equipment for a future invasion of Europe next year, we have started to build on a top priority basis a new class of amphibious ship we call a LPDH, for Landing Platform Dock Helicopter ship. That LPDH is based on a modified and lengthened CASABLANCA class escort carrier design to which we added a large well deck in the stern. Each of these LPDHs will be able to carry two heavy air cushion vehicles or LCT landing barges, plus two helicopter squadrons and a reinforced battalion worth of troops, with all their equipment and supplies. We intend to make these

LPDH ships the backbone of our amphibious forces, along with our air cushion LCHACs.”

“And who would operate such ships? Your navy or your army?” Asked in turn Admiral Mountbatten, the British chief for joint operations. That question made Marshall smile slightly.

“I would never dream of asking Admiral King to relinquish to the Army control of even one of his precious ships, Admiral Mountbatten. As is already doctrine in the United States, those ships will be manned by Navy men, while the helicopter and ground units aboard them will belong to the Army. Overall command will be with the invasion force commander.”

“I must say that this LPDH concept is a very interesting one, General Marshall.” Said Winston Churchill, who always had been fascinated by new weapons concepts and had been as well First Sea Lord previously in his career. “Who thought of it? Your Navy?”

“No, Mister Prime Minister. The concept for that new class of ship, like the idea and general plan for Operation TSUNAMI, came from Colonel Ingrid Dows, the head of the Joint and Combined Chiefs Subjects Section of the Plans Department of our Army Air Force.”

All eyes immediately went on Ingrid, who couldn't hide a slight malicious smile at the attention she was getting. Churchill stared at her while munching on his cigar before speaking to her.

“Decidedly, Colonel, you do seem to follow in your mother's footsteps. Is that LPDH design from the future?”

“Yes, Mister Prime Minister. Nancy Laplante extensively educated me, in secret of course, about future technology and geopolitical history before her death in 1941. That knowledge from the future also inspired me while I was fighting and leading an air group, then a wing, in the Southwest Pacific. The biggest lesson she taught me was that, in war, all air, sea and ground units must fight in a coordinated, joint fashion. If you don't, then tremendous waste and duplication of effort will result, possibly causing defeat.”

“Uh, weren't you still held as a prisoner of war in the Tower of London at the time, Colonel?” Asked Churchill, having difficulty to digest the first part of her answer. Surprised exclamations and whispers, including on the American side, went around the table as Ingrid answered calmly.

“Yes, Mister Prime Minister. I was still a simple young Luftwaffe female auxiliary then in 1941. However, I would tell anyone who would think of Nancy’s actions as a treasonous act to cool down and measure their words: I was never a believer in the Nazi cause, being a German Jew, and Nancy had total confidence in me, with good reasons. I consider myself a loyal American officer, with two Purple Hearts won in combat to prove it, and I am ready to challenge anyone who will doubt my loyalty to the United States.”

“And I have total confidence in Colonel Dows, Mister Prime Minister.” Added firmly Marshall, still standing by the map board. “Her ideas, suggestions and actions in combat contributed greatly to our ultimate victory in the Philippines and in Guadalcanal, then in the taking of Papua New Guinea. Don’t let her young age fool anyone here about her true merit and abilities, as I honestly consider her to be our best joint operations planner and commander. Now, to continue with Operation TSUNAMI...”

While the other participants then returned their attention to the map and General Marshall, Ingrid from then on kept getting the occasional glance or look from many, especially from the British and Canadian sides. While most looks were simply curious ones, a few were tainted with hostility, either because of her German origin or because they were jealous of her growing influence. To those hostile looks Ingrid simply kept a closed expression, while noting in her mind from whom they came. Then, as lunch hour was approaching, came the news that General Henry Arnold had died.

CHAPTER 9 – INTERTIME TRADE

07:14 (London Time)

Monday, February 10, 3389 ‘C’

Northolt Astroport, London Metropolitan Area

British Isles Governorate, Imperium

Even for a woman of the Imperium, Merchant Marine Captain Rose Laren could be described as big, apart from being built like a professional wrestler. Standing a full 233 centimeter tall, she still had a feminine body despite of her built but calling her pretty would have been stretching reality. She could at most be described as fair-looking and her bald head, a universal feature in Imperium citizens, only made her more intimidating when she chose to give someone the cold look. Rose Laren was however in a good mood this morning. After all, she was about to take her cargo ship, the freshly-refitted FINDER’S FEE, on the first intertime commercial trip in the history of the Imperium. To have been chosen for that trip was a true honor and reflected on her status as a most experienced and competent merchant officer. Her past service in the Imperium Navy probably had also a lot to do with being chosen by the King for that commercial mission. Another member of the Imperium Navy, albeit still a current one, then presented herself to Rose, saluting her before presenting her with a cargo manifest.

“Our cargo is now finished loading and is being secured in the holds, Captain.” Rose smiled to Major Dini Moran, a member of the Imperium Intelligence masquerading as her Second Officer for this mission, while taking the manifest.

“We don’t salute in the merchant navy, Miss Moran. You will have to forget some old habits if you want to avoid been singled out by the Time Patrol once we arrive at our port of destination.”

Moran, who was contrary to Rose a true beauty despite being bald and 218 centimeter tall, smiled in embarrassment and nodded.

“Noted, Captain. I have to say that this mission is getting me all excited. It should be a fascinating trip: we know so little about ancient history. To be able to see it and visit it will be most interesting.”

“Agreed, Miss Moran. However, such trips will hopefully become routine matter soon, once full commercial trade between our century and the 20th Century of timeline ‘B’ is established. Too bad that the past of our own timeline is off limits to all time travel.” Moran became very serious then, eyeing cautiously Rose.

“There are very good reasons for that, Captain Laren. It wouldn’t take much for any irresponsible idiot able to travel in time to rewrite our own history and make us all disappear. Many people hungry for power in the Imperium wouldn’t hesitate much to do it if they could get their hands on a time ship, so that they could go back in the past and eliminate their enemies in advance, or even prevent King Stan the Sixth from getting on the throne of the Imperium.”

“Hence the tight security around this apron.” Said matter-of-factly Rose while sweeping a hand around to show the numerous soldiers guarding the approaches to her ship. Moran nodded.

“Exactly, Captain. That is why you will have from now on to be vigilant at all times with your ship: it, along with the other time cargo ships to be commissioned soon, would constitute a highly prized booty in the eyes of many.”

“Well, the Jovian pirates already tried twice to get my ship before it was modified for time travel. The only thing they got was a bloody nose. Anyone trying again will get the same.”

Moran nodded again, somber: she knew that Laren was not bragging but was simply stating facts. Laren had been decorated with the Order of the Imperium for the manner in which she had conducted resupply missions with her cargo ship in the pirate-infested space around the Jupiter planetary system. With the nearby Asteroid Belt and the numerous satellites of Jupiter available for hiding, pirates had more than a fair chance of evading the relentless searches from the Imperium Navy. It was then Laren’s turn to eye carefully Moran.

“Talking of historical manipulations, aren’t you worried about that mysterious Time Patrol? After all, it supposedly erased the counterpart of our civilization in the 34th Century of timeline ‘B’. How much of a threat will agents of the Time Patrol be for my ship?”

“Potentially, a huge threat, Captain Laren. However, all the indications we have show that the Time Patrol, while extremely capable and competent, is also a most responsible organization and is at least as worried as us about illegal time travel and

historical manipulations. The intelligence we have is that the late Imperium 'B' was the one to initiate hostilities through time, forcing the Time Patrol in having to react to it."

Rose nodded at those words but didn't ask more about that. She knew how sensitive that subject was, with the information about it being closely guarded. She was going to have to find out more by herself once in the Paris of 1945 'B'.

"Well, we will see how it goes soon enough, Miss Moran. Have the cargo hatches closed and the crew ready for takeoff."

"Aye, Captain!" Replied Moran, barely refraining from saluting Laren again. She then turned around and went to the ship at a measured jog. Rose followed her at a walk, inspecting one last time the exterior hull of her ship before departure. The FINDER'S FEE was a relatively small but modern cargo ship that had just been converted for time travel at an Imperium Navy shipyard. Generally ovoid in shape, the cargo ship measured 170 meters in length and eighty meters at its maximum diameter. Capable of carrying up to 14,500 tons of cargo, the FINDER'S FEE also had cabins and facilities for up to 160 passengers and was armed with two medium power lasers for self-defense against pirates and rebel ships. With the turbulent state the Imperium had now been in for over a century, those lasers were a definite must if one wanted to survive cargo and passenger hauling in the outer parts of the Solar System for more than a few months. Compared to a standard resupply run to, say, the Navy's outpost on the Neptune's moon of Triton, this trip to the past should actually be quite safe. Rose was however not ready to risk her ship by letting her guard down, even during a supposedly safe trip under diplomatic protection.

Getting her fifteen crewmembers ready for takeoff didn't take long: they were all experienced and well qualified in their jobs and had been personally selected by Rose. To her annoyance, she found herself having to wait instead for the representative of the Imperium Ministry of Trade and her delegation, which was accompanying the 700 tons of various merchandises now in the cargo holds of the FINDER'S FEE. Xinia Halter and her six aides finally showed up at ten past eight, coming aboard in two air cars that parked themselves in the small garage of the ship. Halter came on the bridge fifteen minutes later, obviously a bit embarrassed, and went directly to Rose, who was standing in front of her command chair.

"Please excuse my tardiness, Captain Laren. I had to get some last minute instructions at the Royal Palace before coming here."

“You are excused, Miss Halter.” Said Rose in a neutral voice. “Being on a trip to the past, we can fortunately make up for any delay here by simply jumping space-time and still arrive at the intended time at our destination. Are you and your delegation ready for departure?”

“We are. You may leave at your convenience.”

“Very well. Please take one of the V.I.P. passenger seats.” Replied Rose before taking place in her command chair and giving an order to her pilot, Len Bardak. “Take her out, Mister Bardak!”

“Aye, Captain!” Replied the veteran pilot. Working smoothly his controls, Bardak soon had the cargo ship lift gently from its moorings, then gradually took speed and altitude, flying the FINDER’S FEE through the dense air traffic of the London area. Rose waited until they were safely out of the traffic before giving her next order.

“Mister Bardak, enter the jump coordinates for Paris. Desired time of arrival: eight O’clock in the morning, on Saturday, February 10 of 1945, timeline ‘B’.”

“Coordinates set! Ready to jump, Captain.”

“Then jump, Mister Bardak!”

Two seconds later, a flash of white light enveloped the whole ship.

08:01 (Paris Time)

Saturday, February 10, 1945 ‘B’

Imperium ‘C’ time cargo ship FINDER’S FEE

6,000 meters above Le Bourget Airport

Paris, France

Nobody on the bridge spoke for a minute after the pilot confirmed that they had arrived at the correct space-time coordinates: to see for the first time a civilization in the distant past was a profound experience for anyone. Just the sight of the old monuments and buildings of Paris, visible a few kilometers away, was captivating to the Imperium crewmembers. Rose Laren finally got over her awe and looked at Dini Moran, who was manning the sensors station besides the pilot’s station.

“Have we been detected or scanned yet, Miss Moran?”

“Beams from a single radar has swept over us since our appearance, Captain. From the signal analysis, that radar is a sophisticated one. I however can pick no other

radar signal, not even from the few aircraft flying around. The radio frequencies are well used, though.”

“Alright. Let’s listen to the frequency the Time Patrol told to use for our approach and to announce our arrival.”

“Aye, Captain!” Said Moran. After tuning one of the ship’s radio transceivers on the correct frequency and putting that channel on the overhead speaker, she spoke calmly in the microphone of her light headset.

“Paris Control, this is the Imperium ‘C’ time cargo ship FINDER’S FEE, now hovering at 6,000 meters above the airport of Le Bourget. We request landing instructions, over.”

The response came in nearly immediately in a voice speaking English with a heavy accent.

“FINDER’S FEE, this is Paris Air Traffic Control. You are clear to land vertically on apron number four of the space terminal, on the Northwest corner of the airport. Apron number four is presently marked by blinking red beacon lights, over.”

“I see them!” Said quickly the pilot before Moran answered on the radio.

“Understood, Paris Control. We are starting our descent now.”

As they went down towards the marked landing apron, they were able to see on the visual screens of the bridge a number of primitive aircraft, both in the air or on the ground. The space terminal of Le Bourget was another thing, however: a huge saucer-shaped ship of advanced design was on the ground there, along with a much smaller ship painted a dark gray. Rose’s attention was immediately attracted to the smaller ship: it had an aggressive shape and looked like a warship.

“Zoom in on the smaller starship, Miss Moran. Tell me what you can on it.”

A greatly magnified picture of the gray ship soon appeared on the small viewing screen attached to the left armrest of Rose’s command chair. Painted insignias and markings were now plainly visible. Moran then reported, confirming Rose’s initial assessment.

“It is a Time Patrol ship, Captain. I see laser and gun turrets distributed around its hull, along with a dozen missile launchers. I also have detected four large structures ringing the airport that could very well be fixed defense batteries.”

“Show me one of them, Miss Moran.”

The picture of a truncated pyramid-shaped structure about fifty meters to the side and maybe forty meter high quickly replaced that of the Time Patrol warship on Rose’s

screen. The flat surfaces of phased array radar antennas were visible on the sides of the pyramid, while what had to be beam directors for heavy lasers sat on the truncated top of the structure.

“Fixed defensive lasers!” Said curtly Rose to herself. “What about the bigger ship, Miss Moran?”

“Judging by the size, shape and paint scheme, it is most probably a simple cargo ship, Captain. It is named the ‘STAR CHILD’.”

Rose laughed briefly at that.

“I indeed doubt that the captain of a warship would choose such a name or paint it a mix of bright pink and yellow. It must be a commercial ship of the Global Council, that civilization from the 34th Century of timeline ‘A’ for which the Time Patrol is working.”

“I would concur with your assessment, Captain. On the other hand, those defensive batteries are serious customers and could carve us up quite easily and quickly if they wanted to.”

“Agreed! However, I do not believe that we are threatened now. Mister Bardak, land on Apron Four as directed and be careful not to cut the flight path of any of those flimsy 20th Century aircraft.”

Six minutes later, the FINDER’S FEE was firmly on the ground, with its passenger and cargo hatches and ramps opened. An air car then lifted off from the edge of the apron and flew briefly, landing and parking at the foot of the main passenger ramp. Four persons, one of them a bald giant and the others 20th Century ancestors, came out of the air car and walked up the ramp. Rose Laren, Dini Moran, Xinia Halter and her six assistants greeted them inside the passenger airlock. The eight Imperium members however had eyes at first only for the young ancestor woman of the group sporting long blond hair: apart from being incredibly beautiful, she also wore Time Patrol insignias on her gray uniform and was the only one of her group to be armed, with two pistols holstered to her belt. She also carried a briefcase in one hand. The giant in the group of newcomers, who was as tall and bald as a normal Imperium citizen but was much more frail, bowed and addressed Rose Laren.

“Welcome to Paris, Captain! I am Lara Tesch, representative of the Global Council Intertime Trade Commission. My companions are Mister René Dutour, of the French Trade Ministry, Mister Marcel Lorrain of the French Customs Offices and Field Agent Susanna Berghof, of the Time Patrol.”

“Pleased to meet you.” Said Rose while shaking hands with them. “I am Captain Rose Laren, master of this ship. This is Miss Xinia Halter, of the Imperium Ministry of Trade, and her six assistants.”

Rose let Halter present her assistants, then pointed at Moran.

“This is my Second Officer, Miss Dini Moran. If you need anything while aboard my ship, you will just need to ask her. I have 700 tons of various goods in the holds of my ship, the nature of which you will be able to review with Miss Halter. How would you like to proceed for the unloading?”

“Airport ground crews will unload your cargo now, Captain.” Answered Marcel Lorrain. “It will then be temporarily stored inside our bonded warehouse until it can be cleared through by my customs officers. By then, Mister Dutour will have undoubtedly determined with Miss Halter how the cargo is to be displayed to potential buyers and importers. As for the cargo your ship will be bringing back to the Imperium, it will be gathered as soon as Miss Halter decides what type of goods from this century are of interest to your Imperium. That may take a few days, which will give ample time for your crew to sample the pleasures and sights of our magnificent city of Paris.”

“Be assured that my crew is more than impatient to visit your city, Mister Lorrain. May I ask what the functions of Agent Berghof are concerning my ship and cargo?”

“You may, Captain Laren.” Replied in a pleasant voice the Time Patrol woman, who had the four male assistants of Xinia Halter nearly salivating. “I am going to brief your crew about this time period, which is quite alien to that of the Imperium after all. I may be also able to give you a few tips on what to see and do around Paris. Mister Dutour and Miss Tesch will take care of Miss Halter and of her assistants in the meantime.”

The two groups looked around at each other for a moment, then Xinia Halter bowed to Tesch and Dutour.

“Let us go discuss our trade issues together while Captain Laren is left unencumbered to unload his cargo. Me and my assistants have two air cars for our displacements in the ship’s garage.”

“Then we will be waiting in our own air car outside while you take your air cars out.” Replied Lara Tesch. “We will then guide you to the offices of Mister Dutour in this airport.”

The two groups then dispersed, leaving Rose Laren and Dini Moran to face Susanna Berghof in the airlock. Rose took the time to discreetly examine Berghof before

speaking: the Time Patrol agent was obviously fit physically, apart from being impossibly beautiful, but didn't appear to be particularly muscular. Rose could probably overpower the blonde woman without a sweat.

"Do you mind if I invite you for a drink at the ship's mess while my crew unloads our cargo?"

The blonde gave her a warm smile.

"It will please me, Captain, as long as you have non-alcoholic drinks for me: I don't drink on duty."

"I understand, miss. Please follow me."

The trio then made its way two decks up to the crew mess via a series of corridors and stairwells. Rose didn't miss the hungry looks the blonde woman got from the male crewmembers they passed by on the way. While a confirmed heterosexual herself, she could easily see that the blonde Time Patrol agent had an exotic sex appeal that was quite dramatic where men of the Imperium were concerned, partly because of her natural beauty but also because of her hair and of her pure racial type. All the Imperium citizens were the result of a prolonged and thorough mix of the original human races and ethnicities that had once inhabited the Earth. A pure racial type like the blonde thus could not be found in the Imperium in 3389. Her small size also seemed to make her look more fragile and feminine to Imperium men. Rose would have to monitor closely how her male crewmembers would react after their first nights out in Paris.

The ship's mess was not very big but it was at least comfortable, something quite essential if one had to stay and travel in space for months at a time. Inviting Berghof to the bar, Rose then went behind the counter and showed the blonde a collection of bottles and cans.

"In terms of non-alcoholic drinks, we have fruit juices, mineral water, iced tea and soda drinks."

"I will have an iced tea, please."

Rose quickly served the blonde her drink, then took a mineral water for herself, with Moran taking a soda. The three of them then took place at a table, with the blonde all but sinking out of sight in the chair that was oversized for her. After taking a sip of her iced tea, the blonde put her briefcase flat on the table and opened it, taking out a pile of brochures and folded maps and handing them to Rose.

“These are tourist information brochures and maps of Paris, for the use of your crew. The French Ministry of Tourism produced them with citizens of the Global Council in mind, so you will find them quite pertinent. I am sure that you will have a thousand questions about this time period for me, but I would prefer to wait until I can talk to your whole crew before covering that subject. In the meantime, we could cover another subject that may interest less the rest of your crew: my organization.”

Rose’s interest, already quite high, suddenly went up by a notch, while Dini Moran sat back in her chair. Berghof smiled and took a holographic data chip from her briefcase, giving it to Rose.

“This is a video documentary made by the Global Council with information open to the public about the Time Patrol. It may answer most of your questions concerning us. You can keep that chip afterwards. Do you have a chip viewer in this mess?”

“We have, since this is where the crew views movies for entertainment during long space trips.” Answered Rose, getting up. “Just let me get the remote control for our viewing unit.”

Rose was back a few seconds later, having put the chip in the reading unit of the giant viewing screen that covered half of a wall of the mess. Sitting down first, she then activated the viewer with her remote control.

The first pictures were aerial views of a medium-sized city on the shores of a huge lake stretching nearly over the horizon. A female voice was then heard.

“Welcome to New Lake City, the birthplace of the Time Patrol. The Time Patrol is the sole armed agency of the Global Council and was co-founded in 3384 by Nancy Laplante and Doctor Farah Tolkonen. Prior to 3384, the Global Council was a totally unarmed society that had not known war for 500 years and had banned all weapons since the 30th Century. While the pacifist nature of the Global Council has not changed, a crucial event forced the High Council of the government into reconsidering the total ban on weapons. That event was the kidnapping and marooning in time of Nancy Laplante by two renegade scientists of the Global Council who wanted to conduct experiments on time travel.”

The picture then changed, showing a young woman with green eyes and black hair driving a four-wheeled vehicle up a forest road.

“Nancy Laplante, a journalist specializing in the coverage of wars and also a reserve military officer, was kidnapped with her vehicle and a few of her possessions in

the year 2012 of timeline 'A', then dropped in the British Isles near London in the year 1940, at a time when a fierce worldwide war was raging. Unfortunately for Nancy Laplante, the two scientists who had kidnapped her and were intent on watching and studying her in the past were victims of an accident and were killed shortly after dropping her off. That left Miss Laplante alone and marooned in the past, with no way for her to return to her original time or even to know how she got to 1940 in the first place. That placed her facing a dilemma that eventually resulted in her actions changing history as it was known. However, instead of simply rewriting history, her actions instead split the original timeline, creating a parallel world we now call Timeline 'B'. That parallel world was, at least at the beginning, similar to Timeline 'A'. However, as Miss Laplante was getting more and more involved in the war raging in 1940, Timeline 'B' grew more and more different from the primordial timeline, something that resulted in severe space-time distortions that shook Timeline 'A' all the way up to the 34th Century. That alerted the Global Council to the fact that something was seriously wrong with space-time and also put Doctor Farah Tolkonen on the trail of Miss Laplante. Working hard to reconstitute the research done by the two scientists who had kidnapped Miss Laplante, Doctor Tolkonen was eventually able to build a time ship and time probes, which she used to first find, then watch Miss Laplante in the past."

By then the view was showing Nancy Laplante either preparing or leading military operations and introducing a number of technical novelties to the British of 1940. Rose Laren had to secretly recognize that Laplante proved herself to be both a first class soldier and a woman of incredible courage. The narration and show went on for another ten minutes, until Tolkonen and her two young assistants managed to bring Nancy Laplante to the year 3384, where the Time Patrol was authorized and founded. Then the documentary became really interesting for Rose and Dini, with the mandate and general organization of the Time Patrol explained. What was shown suggested a well trained, well motivated and superbly equipped force that was however surprisingly small in size.

As the documentary came to an end, Rose was left wondering how such a small force had been able to take on and defeat the mighty Imperium in Timeline 'B'. She thus looked critically at Berghof, who was patiently waiting for her questions.

“This was truly very interesting and informative, Agent Berghof. I however have a problem believing that your Time Patrol is really that small, considering its accomplishments.”

The blonde smiled gently, not appearing angered one bit by Rose’s doubts.

“Captain, we are effectively a very small organization, with less than ninety field agents on our roster. Time is however our ally, and we use it for all its worth.”

“Time?”

“Yes, time. By skilful tactical and strategic use of our ability to travel through time, we can overcome enemies much bigger than us if war is the only option left to us to solve a problem. Believe me when I say that erasing the Imperium ‘B’ was an act we did not relish. Nancy Laplante agonized for a long time before taking the final decision and even ran extra personal risks in order to offer a last minute way out of war to King Stan ‘B’. King Stan was not however in true control of the Imperium ‘B’ and the actions of his Minister of Security, including a raid on Buckingham Palace in 1942 ‘B’, made war impossible to avoid. Realizing that we could never face the whole of the Imperium Navy in a standup fight, we instead went back in time and changed drastically the course of the war in 1942. That prevented the future formation of the Imperium ‘B’ and erased it from history.”

Rose sat back, nodding her head. What Berghof had said made sense. It was also probably true, if Rose could still have confidence in her talent in judging persons.

“So, how do we of the Imperium ‘C’ get into that picture?”

“It is actually both simple and complicated, Captain. To make it quick, King Stan ‘B’ was able to escape aboard his flagship, the battleship ROYAL SOVEREIGN, just before the Imperium was erased. With the hope of preventing the formation of the Time Patrol and thus saving the Imperium from oblivion, he then went back in time, to the year 1941, with the intent of killing Nancy Laplante while she was being held as a prisoner of war by the Germans. The guard sent down to kill Nancy while she was still tied to a torture rack succeeded in shooting and killing her but, by doing that, she split the timelines again in the process. One Nancy Laplante survived in 1941 ‘B’, while the Imperium guard found herself with a dead Nancy Laplante in a new timeline, your timeline. What King Stan had failed to understand was that Nancy constituted a crucial node for Timeline ‘B’ and that her fate was closely interlinked to the fate of that timeline. After we defeated and destroyed the ROYAL SOVEREIGN in an ultimate and costly battle, Nancy Laplante and Farah Tolkonen jointly decided to put timeline ‘C’ out of

bounds for our operations and to let the Imperium 'C' develop and exist on its own. First contact between us and your Imperium occurred after King Stan 'C' became aware that a criminal consortium of the Imperium was in possession of a couple of time shuttles and were using them to conduct a female sex slave trade in the distant past. Fortunately, the contacts that followed went well and a mutual treaty of non-interference and non-aggression was signed shortly thereafter. Now, here we are!"

"Hell!" Said Rose in a low voice. "These must have been tense times indeed."

"They certainly were, Captain." Replied Berghof, her head bowed low and her tone subdued. "An intertime war between the three timelines would have resulted in an unmitigated disaster for the whole of humanity. Fortunately, cooler heads prevailed."

The three of them were silent for a moment, digesting those words. Susanna Berghof finally smiled weakly to Rose and Dini.

"Well, enough of doom and gloom. You are here to conduct trade and have a good time, so let me help you in this. Since we are all women, I would like to talk to you about a problem that your men may encounter in Paris and in this time period in general. I am sure that you saw the looks your men gave me when I came aboard, Captain."

"I am not blind, miss, and my mother didn't raise a fool. Yes, I saw how my men were attracted to you. What about it?"

"The point I want to make is that our experience with male visitors from the Global Council showed us that men from the 34th Century, be they from the Global Council or the Imperium, have generally a strong sexual attraction towards what they call ancestor women. With the, uh, size of 34th Century men, ancestor women often return the attention, resulting in a lot of mutual intercourse and some problems as well. Captain, your men will probably find themselves popular with local women in and around Paris and will undoubtedly profit from it as much as they can. Public morality and mores in this time period are however very different from those of the Imperium, even if you may find some of the actual customs a bit hypocritical. I intend to give your men a few safety hints about the local sexual mores and taboos, so that they can have fun while avoiding problems with the local law. This said, though, Paris is still a fun city to visit if one follows a minimum of common sense."

Rose, now grinning, patted Berghof's hand.

"Miss, your counsel will be truly appreciated. Be careful not to fall yourself into the sights of my men, though."

“Don’t worry, Captain: I am happily married. I did experiment with 34th Century men before my marriage, though, so I know what I am talking about.”

“And?” Said Rose, bending forward with curiosity on her face. It was the turn of Berghof to grin.

“They are...quite nice.”

10:26 (Paris Time)

Imperium time cargo ship FINDER’S FEE

Le Bourget Airport

“DON’T DO ANYTHING I WOULDN’T DO, GUYS!” Shouted Rose Laren to her crewmembers about to get in a bus that would bring them to Paris for shore leave. Her First Officer, Stan Lousma, grinned and waved at her, then got on the bus. Tomorrow, when Lousma and the men would be back aboard, it would then be Rose’s chance to go visit Paris. While the sexual experience aspect of Paris didn’t really interest her, the history of the city, which was apparently very rich if she could believe the brochures from the French Ministry of Tourism, was something she was anxious to see. Looking at the city in the distance from the top of the passenger ramp, she eyed the old buildings and the Eiffel Tower for a moment, then sighed and went back inside her ship.

The first of her crewmembers started trickling back to the ship late at night. Those were however in majority female crewmembers. While many of them were quite intoxicated, at least they had come back safely and seemed to have had a good time, with most bringing back bags and bags of souvenirs bought in Paris. Dini Moran, who had been part of the first returnees and was still in control of herself, was quite happy and had also bags full of souvenirs with her.

“Hell, Captain, this place may be primitive but it is also a fascinating one. The people are also quite friendly.”

Dini then lowered her voice after looking around her quickly.

“I am quite sure that I was not followed around Paris, Captain. There also is no indication that the local people is watched closely or forcibly guided by their government. In fact, public security in Paris is quite lax compared to the Imperium. That city should be safe for our people.”

“As long as they don’t behave like idiots and break the local laws.” Replied Rose, only half reassured. “Well, come inside and show me what you found of interest in Paris.”

Most of her male crewmembers didn’t come back until mid-morning, at the least. When they did, it was with big idiotic grins on their faces and smashing hangovers. All declared however to Rose that they had a great time in Paris. When questioned further about that, the words ‘ancestor girls’ kept coming back, along with the promise that they would head back in Paris for more of the same as soon as possible. Repressing a smile, Rose sent her men to bed to nurse their headaches. Her youngest male crewmember, an apprentice deck hand only 21 years old, then showed up back at the ship around one O’clock in the afternoon. While fairly sober, he also got up the ramp while holding gently the hand of a tiny ancestor woman. At least Rose gave the young man credit for good tastes, as the young woman was a true exotic beauty, with slanted eyes, long black hair and delicate bone structure. The woman seemed somewhat confused and didn’t speak English, which didn’t surprise Rose much. She eyed critically the woman, then her deck hand.

“Alright Mister Gershon, what do we have here?”

Faced with his big, redoubtable captain, the young man’s initial assurance melted away quickly, leaving him stuttering for an explanation.

“Well, uh, Captain, I found this girl last night in Paris. Ziyi, that’s her name, is a very nice girl and seem to like me a lot. However, when we started to leave her place together this morning, a man attacked her and tried to rip her away from me. She clung to me and sought my protection, so I punched the lights out of the bastard attacking her. Then I got into a taxi with her and came back. Could she stay aboard with me, Captain?”

Rose was about to flatly refuse when she saw the imploring look in the girl’s eyes and the way she was clinging to the arm of Gershon. There was more to this than was apparent at first sight. Not knowing much yet about this time period, Rose decided to get the counsel of someone who could help clear this situation. She thus waved her deck hand in.

“You may bring her to your cabin for the moment, Mister Gershon. I can’t promise however for how long she will be allowed to stay aboard.”

Gershon then seemingly gathered his courage and looked up resolutely at her.

“What if I marry her, Captain? Could she then stay for the duration?”

Rose was unable to answer for a second, stunned by this.

“Uh, we will discuss that later, Mister Gershon. Go to your cabin now.”

“Yes Captain!”

As soon as Gershon and his newfound love had disappeared inside, Rose activated her wrist videophone and called the bridge of her ship.

“Stan, this is Rose. Call the local Time Patrol office and ask that Agent Berghof come see me on the ship as soon as possible. Tell her that I need her help to resolve a delicate personnel problem involving a local.”

“What happened now, Captain?” Asked her First Officer in a not so amused tone.

“Just call Berghof, Stan. I will take care of the rest.”

“As you wish, Captain.”

Thankfully, Susanna Berghof showed up in less than fifteen minutes. Rose then briefed the blonde quickly, making her nod in understanding.

“I’m afraid that I may understand what is happening here. May I talk with that young woman first?”

“By all means! Follow me!”

Going together to Gershon’s cabin, Rose knocked on the door and waited for the young deck hand to answer. The young man opened the door wide when he saw that it was his captain, letting her and Berghof see the young Ziyi sitting timidly on the bed of the small cabin. Berghof had one look at her, then spoke in a language totally alien to Rose. The blonde actually tried two languages before Ziyi reacted and answered her in the latter language. An animated conversation then went on between Ziyi and Berghof for a good four minutes, with Ziyi apparently getting quite emotional. Berghof finally turned to face Rose, sadness on her face.

“This is actually even more tragic than I expected, Captain. Ziyi is from China, a large country on the East coast of Asia. If I can believe her, and I have no reasons not to, she was sold away by her family to pay off debts. She was then brought illegally to Paris, where she was forced into prostitution. The man who tried to grab her and whom your deck hand punched was her pimp. If she is returned to him, she will probably be beaten, or worse.”

Rose eyed Ziyi critically, trying to see if she could be lying. The young woman however had only fear in her eyes. Rose had seen that look before in Imperium prostitutes beaten by their pimps.

“Agent Berghof, what could be done for that girl, apart from returning her to her pimp?”

“Very little, frankly. She entered France illegally and has no valid identity papers. If handed to the police, she will be deported back to China, where she will be either sold off again or will starve on the streets while trying to survive there. Please understand that this time period came out of a horrible World war only three years ago and that many countries are still recovering from it. China is presently in dire economic straights and many people there are starving.”

“What does she want to do, then?” Asked Rose, keeping her stern appearance only with difficulty. Berghof spoke again with Ziyi for a moment, then faced back Rose.

“She asks to be allowed to stay with your deck hand, Captain. She says that he was the first man to show real concern for her in a long time. Just between you and me, Captain, what are the laws of the Imperium concerning foreign immigration?”

“Uh, we have no such laws, as the Imperium controls the whole of the Solar System. Technically, every human being in 3391 ‘C’ is a citizen of the Imperium.”

“I see! What could be the reaction of your government if Ziyi showed up in the Imperium?”

“Hell, I don’t know, frankly! This never happened before. I guess that Xinia Halter, as a high level government representative, would know more about this. I will call her right away. In the meantime, I am ready to offer asylum to that girl.”

“Thank you, Captain. You are a kind woman. With your permission, I would like to take Ziyi with me for a hour, so that I could have her learn English through a mnemotronic session. Your deck hand could accompany her if he wishes so.”

“Granted! That will give me time to speak with Halter.”

Rose felt her heart melt when she saw how happy the ancestor girl became after Berghof spoke to her and then led her out with Gershon. She then called up Xinia Halter, hoping fervently that the trade representative could give her some positive information to help this case.

Rose was ready with good news when Berghof returned a hour and a half later with Maran Gershon and Ziyi, but her smile froze when she saw that another ancestor

woman was with them: it was none other than Nancy Laplante! Rose came to attention and saluted Laplante when the group came up the passenger ramp, prompting Laplante into saluting back. The latter was wearing an embroidered robe and had a jewel-studded gold tiara of ancient design on her head. Rose didn't miss also the fact that Gershon was lugging a bulging kit bag that he didn't have when he had left.

"Miss Laplante, it is a honor to receive the visit of the first ever time traveler on my ship."

Laplante smiled warmly to Rose, her sparkling green eyes conveying a strong, magnetic personality.

"The honor is mutual, Captain Laren. You must be a first rate merchant marine officer to have been selected for this first intertime trade mission."

"Bah! I just did my job, miss."

"You are too modest, Captain. Simply doing your job doesn't normally get you the ribbon of the Order of the Imperium, which I can see on your uniform."

"You know our honor and awards system, miss?" Said Rose, not a little surprised. Laplante nodded, still smiling.

"I have made good friends with the royal family of the Imperium 'B', to which I offered asylum in this time period after the destruction of the flagship ROYAL SOVEREIGN. The ribbon for the Order of the Imperium also happens to be the exact same one than the one for the Order of the British Empire, of which I am a Grand Dame. Well, enough about medals and honors! I came here on Susanna's request to help a young woman in need. As Susanna told you yesterday, this time period is afflicted with a number of diseases unknown to the Imperium, including some sexually transmitted diseases. Having been forced into prostitution has put Ziyi at high risk of catching some of those diseases, so I performed a preventive body-wide healing on Ziyi, using my mental powers. She is now in perfect health and is free of any germs and viruses from this time period. Since she will be starting a new life in the Imperium and had nothing in her possession, I took on me to provide her with a trousseau and a purse. I also used my contacts with the newly-opened Imperium embassy here in Paris to obtain proper papers for Ziyi."

Laplante then handed Rose an Imperium identity card and a letter. The card was in Ziyi's name and bore her picture, while the letter was a safe-conduct signed by the Imperium Royal Representative, who was none other than Prince Len, the oldest son of

King Stan the Sixth. Rose stared with stunned surprise at Laplante as she gave her back the card and letter.

“Why? Why all this for someone perfectly unknown to you until today?”

Laplante took the time to give the card and paper to Ziyi before answering Rose, her expression sober.

“Why? Because I care. Because it is my mission from The One to care for others and protect the innocents. As for promoting justice, which is my second mission from The One, Ziyi’s old pimp is about to get a visit from me. He will soon be out of the business of sexual slavery. Heartless bastards like him have no business defacing the surface of this planet.”

Rose nodded once somberly: she could only agree wholeheartedly with Laplante’s position.

“Miss Laplante, I can only thank you for helping one of my crewmen be happy and for helping this poor girl. Be assured that Ziyi will be well treated and respected on my ship.”

“And I thank you for caring, Captain Laren. I wish you and your crew an enjoyable stay in Paris.”

“Well, it seems that my crew has already started to enjoy themselves quite a lot.” Joked Rose, attracting a grin on Laplante’s face.

“They indeed seem to. Don’t hesitate to call or visit me in Jerusalem if you need anything during your stay.”

Laplante then faced Ziyi and Gershon, first shaking hands with Gershon before hugging Ziyi.

“Good luck in your new life, my little Ziyi. You found a good, caring man. Make him happy and you will be happy.”

“Thank you, Overseer.” Replied in English the Chinese girl. She had tears in her eyes as she watched with Gershon and Rose the departure of Laplante and Berghof. Rose then went to the tiny woman and gently patted her shoulder.

“Don’t worry, Ziyi, we will make you a nice place on this ship.”

“I can cook, wash and clean, Captain.” Said Ziyi softly. “I don’t want to be a burden on you or your crew.”

“You won’t be, my dear Ziyi. Come, I will make you visit your new home.”

15:38 (London Time)
Tuesday, August 21, 1945 'B'
Ballroom, Buckingham Palace
London, England

Princess Margaret again forced herself to smile as she greeted another guest to her birthday party, an old aristocrat whose sole distinction was to be born of so-called noble blood. At least, some of the previous aging male guests could claim to have fought and earned honors on the battlefield, contrary to this one.

“Thank you for coming to my party, Lord Ascot.”

“It is always a pleasure to be in your presence, Your Highness. Happy birthday to you, Your Highness!”

“Thank you again, Lord Ascot.” Replied Margaret, bowing her head politely. She let the old man walk away towards the punch table set in a corner of the palace ballroom, then watched who would show up next for her fifteenth birthday. Her father the King had insisted on making her birthday party a public affair, claiming rightly that such occasions were part of the duties of the royal family. Margaret was however tired already of having her life treated as a public commodity to be managed by a bunch of dreary, conservative royal courtiers. She didn't mind participating in charity work or anything else that could help the people of the Empire, but she certainly minded when those courtiers told her what was or was not proper to do in her own private life. The catch was of course that, as the heir to the throne, she had next to no real private life to speak of. Her mother, Queen Elizabeth, came to her at that time and discreetly whispered to her.

“This is your birthday, yet you distinctly look unhappy, Margaret.”

“Does it show that much, Mother?”

“For trained eyes like mine, yes! What is it?”

“What is it?” Replied Margaret, containing her frustration with difficulty. “Mother, I am approaching adulthood, yet I know next to nothing of real life except for what I am permitted to do by those damn courtiers! What have these old decrepit men done to deserve the right to dictate my private life in the minutest details?”

“They have served loyally the Empire and the royal family, that's what, Margaret.”

“Have they really, or have they in reality served their own ambitions and outdated preconceptions of what is right and wrong, Mother? Look at what they have done to

Nancy Laplante! That woman saved our country and has brought peace to the Middle East, apart from personally saving my life, yet those courtiers allied themselves with the Church to smear her name and call her a blasphemer. They even called my own sister Elizabeth a heretic, for God's sake! Yet, those old bastards are still employed by the palace and telling me what to do every day."

Queen Elizabeth waited until a new couple of guest had arrived and had introduced themselves to Margaret before answering her daughter.

"My dear Margaret, you will have to understand that even your father the King has little say in those political matters."

"Then what is the real worth of all our titles if they are only an empty façade used by courtiers, churchmen and politicians, Mother?" Hissed Margaret, getting really fired up by now. "You saw like me and Father the video documentary on the life of Jesus Christ published a couple of years ago by the Time Patrol. Are you saying, like those old hypocrites, that this documentary was a tissue of fabrications amounting to blasphemy, or do you like me believe it to be showing the truth?"

Queen Elizabeth bowed her head in embarrassment then: due to her young age and fiercely independent personality, Margaret was obviously much more ready to buck the accepted official views than her.

"I believe it personally to be the truth, but don't forget that your father the King is also the temporal head of the Church of England. That Time Patrol documentary has created a storm of public controversy and has shaken the doctrine of the Church to the core. The government is right now still deciding on how to react to that controversy. Until an official position is taken, we have no choice but to stay away from the debate and let the politicians do their jobs."

"Yeah, the same politicians who listen to those old courtiers and churchmen. How balanced do you expect their eventual position to be, Mother? Are we as persons going to shun away both my own sister and a woman I admire above anyone else just because old men tell us so?"

"As persons, no! As members of the royal family, we may have to do just that. We are bound to support the position of the British government and of the Church of England. Doing otherwise would disqualify us from claiming the throne. Elizabeth and Nancy Laplante will be able to attend your private party later on tonight. That was the best your father the King could arrange."

“Such hypocrisy!” Said Margaret a bit too loudly before storming away, creating confusion and dismay around the ballroom. Her mother hurried after her, catching her by one arm before she could leave the ballroom and talking in a low but severe tone to her.

“Where do you think that you are going, Margaret? This is an official reception in your honor. You leave now and you will not only bring scandal to your name but also to your father the King as well.”

Caught in an intense debate of conscience but unable to willingly hurt her parents, Margaret broke up in tears, prompting her mother in hugging her.

“Come, my dear Margaret. You have to show some mettle now.”

“Is our name really worth more than our personal convictions, Mother?”

“Our names and titles belong to England, Margaret, not to us. Wipe your tears now: you have to take back your proper place.”

Margaret didn't tell her mother then how she was coming to hate her so-called proper place, instead drying her tears as best she could before putting up a neutral façade and going back to her previous spot near the main entrance of the ballroom.

She spent the next half hour greeting a collection of government officials, foreign diplomats and British aristocrats, including Prime Minister Attlee. Knowing very well that what she was doing was against all royal etiquette, Margaret however couldn't stop herself from whispering an urgent question to the Prime Minister after he presented himself with his wife.

“Sir, please tell me if your government has taken a position yet concerning the accusations of blasphemy against my sister Elizabeth and Nancy Laplante.”

Attlee hesitated, looked around him, then whispered back to Margaret.

“The official cabinet position will be announced publicly tomorrow, Your Highness. Your father the King will however be informed privately of it by me this afternoon.”

“Please, can you tell me what the position is, sir?”

“I am sorry, Your Highness, but telling you before your father would be most incorrect on my part. Be patient and you shall know by supper time.”

The Prime Minister then walked away a bit too fast to Margaret's taste. The teenager, accustomed by now to the silent body language of officials, could only take it as an indication that she was not going to like the government's position once she would be

told of it. Now frustrated to near blowout point, she barely managed to stay civil with her official guests, throwing without realizing it a sheet of cold water over the atmosphere in the ballroom and prompting countless whispered comments and rumors around her.

As the party proper was about to begin, a royal valet brought to Margaret an envelope on a silver platter. She was about to thank the man after taking the envelope when she froze, anger flashing in her mind: the envelope bore the wax seal of the Overseer of Palestine but that seal had been broken. Signaling the valet to stay where he was, she examined more carefully the envelope and the seal. The envelope clearly was addressed to her in her name, while the seal had been broken deliberately. She threw a furious look at the valet, who stiffened.

“Who brought that letter, sir?”

“A young boy, Your Highness. He showed up without warning at the main entrance half an hour ago and said that it was a letter from the Overseer of Palestine for you.”

“The envelope was clearly addressed to me, yet the wax seal on it was broken. Who opened it?”

“Uh, the King’s Principal Private Secretary, Sir Alan Lascelles, Your Highness.”

“AND DOES HIS POSITION GIVE HIM THE RIGHT TO OPEN MY PRIVATE MAIL? TELL SIR LASCELLES THAT HE IS NOT TO ATTEND MY BIRTHDAY PARTY!”

“Uh, yes Your Highness.” Said quickly the valet before retreating at a near run. Ignoring the guests now staring at her, Margaret opened the envelope and extracted a single sheet of folded paper. The text on it was written in the clear, precise handwriting of Nancy Laplante.

Dear Princess Margaret.

I have learned about the position of the British government concerning me that will be made public tomorrow. You may or may not have been told about it at the time that you will read this letter but I wish that you be as prepared for the coming events as possible. I am to be stripped of my title of Grand Dame of the Order of the British Empire and be called publicly a blasphemer, while your sister Elizabeth is to be branded a heretic and written off the Civil List, on top of losing any royal title she had. While I value your friendship greatly, I cannot attend even privately your birthday party without possibly smearing your name as

well with the same paintbrush of intolerance and ignorance that is going to do so much damage to the relations between Great Britain and Palestine. This will be the second time that Great Britain will disavow me after I repeatedly risked my life for it and I cannot let this pass without reacting strongly to it. I fervently wish that our friendship will endure despite this incoming crisis.

Your friend truly

Nancy Laplante

VC and two bars, GBE, DSO and two bars, MC, DFC

Chosen of The One

Overseer of the Holy Land of Palestine

Operations officer of the Time Patrol

P.S. A similar letter will have been hand-delivered directly into the hands of your father, King Georges VI, informing him as well of the expected delivery of the letter to you. The state of my confidence in British officials has sunk to such low depths that I am forced to use such means to communicate with you. Please forgive me for using such methods.

Margaret's hands started shaking with a mix of rage and sorrow, then tears came to her eyes and she started to cry openly while surrounded by her guests. Her mother, who had been attracted by the raucous with the valet, immediately rushed to her.

"Margaret, what's wrong?"

Unable to speak, Margaret could only present her Nancy's letter. She regained her voice as the Queen was nearly finished reading it.

"Sir Alan Lascelles had the gall to open it before me, Mother."

"Dear God!" Exclaimed the Queen as she finished reading. "Come! We will go see your father right away with this."

Both of them didn't have to go far, as the King was himself going towards them with an alarmed expression on his face. The trio met in the Paintings Gallery, just outside of the ballroom. Margaret was about to speak when her father signaled her to hold on.

"Not here, Margaret! Let's go to the Blue Lounge, where we will be able to speak in private."

Going to the nearby room and expelling a maid that was dusting off the furniture there, the King closed the doors carefully before facing his wife and daughter.

“I just received and read a letter from Nancy Laplante, delivered to me in my private office by her adopted son, Heracles. Did you get your own letter, Margaret?”

“Half a hour late and already opened by Sir Lascelles, Father. Did he tell you about it already?”

“No, but that won’t matter anymore: I’m firing him as of this afternoon. As for the decision of the cabinet, I still can’t believe that they reached such a stupid decision. God! My Lilibeth, to be declared a heretic!”

“And what are we going to do about all this, Father?” Asked Margaret, her voice still half choked up. The King shook his head in discouragement.

“I don’t know yet. I will have to talk with Prime Minister Attlee before I can take any serious decision. I am afraid however that our options are strictly limited, my poor Margaret: the parliament could vote an act calling for my beheading and I would technically be obliged to sign it.”

“Well, I do have an option left to me personally.” Said Margaret, her anger turning into resolve. “I can renounce my right of succession as heir to the throne. Then let those old idiots deal with that!”

Both of her parents stared at her with unmitigated horror.

“But,” objected the King, “you are my only remaining heir, Margaret. If you renounce your right to the succession, I will be left with nobody to succeed me on the throne. It would be the end of the House of Windsor. You can’t quit!”

“What about Elizabeth, Father? Are you ready to have her dragged in the mud while doing nothing?”

“No, of course not, Margaret. Let me talk to the government and the church first. In the meantime, I guess that this birthday party is quite ruined by now. Elizabeth, could you break the news gently to our guests and send them home? I am not sure that I can trust Margaret about being diplomatic with this.”

“Smart move, Father!” Replied Margaret, feeling very much a rebel right then.

10:06 (Paris Time)

Thursday, August 23, 1945 ‘B’

Imperium embassy, Champs Élisés

Paris, France

Prince Len read again the front page titles on the few newspapers fanned in front of him on the conference table, then shook his head in disbelief while watched by his diplomatic staff.

“Decidedly, religion defies common logic! How could supposedly responsible governments support the nonsense now thrown around by the various Christian churches?”

“The position of the Christian Church concerning the Time Patrol historical documentary on that religious prophet certainly flies in the face of scientific facts, Your Highness.” Said quietly old Lord Carneavon, the ambassador of the Imperium to timeline ‘B’. A distinguished gentleman with a quick mind, Carneavon was officially one rank under Prince Len. Len was however more than content as the Royal Representative to let the true diplomatic work to the old Imperium aristocrat, so that he could concentrate on studying human history, something he was a recognized expert at. Dorian Mersant, a very handsome man in his mid thirties who was officially the embassy’s head archivist but who was in reality its ranking Imperium intelligence officer, then spoke up.

“If I may, Your Highness. I believe that this crisis has little to do with true religion and a lot to do with money and power.”

“That is an interesting viewpoint, Mister Mersant. Could you elaborate, please?”

“With pleasure, Your Highness. Religion in this time period is actually a subject that both intrigued and fascinated me when I first took my post here six months ago. Its connections to politics and high finance cannot be denied, however. Take the positions of the Church of England and of the Catholic Pope in Rome. Since the Time Patrol released its documentary on Yeshua of Nazareth, which I found by the way to be fascinating and extremely well made, the attendance at the churches around Europe fell off drastically. That meant in turn a brutal drop in revenues for these churches and also a loss of public influence. Don’t forget also that the old, traditional pilgrimage sites run by the Christian churches around Europe, where people previously went to pray and hope for miracles that would heal them, have been mostly deserted now for eighteen months. The Church can thank Nancy Laplante for that, as the pilgrims quickly switched to going to Jerusalem after the powerful spiritual entity called ‘The One’ established itself there. After all, why pay good money to travel to a shrine, where a priest would ask you

for more money in form of donations and then let you hope to get better, when you can go to Jerusalem and be healed with one hundred percent certainty for free?”

“How much of a financial loss to the various churches are we talking about here, Dorian?” Asked the beautiful Countess Lara, Imperium Consul to Western Europe.

“The equivalent of hundreds of millions of Imperium Credits per year at the least, Countess. That lost revenue also translated in less means for the Church to influence politicians and governments. The last year has been a very lean one for the Christian churches indeed, and the times have possibly just turned even leaner.”

“Incredible!” Exclaimed Lord Carnevon. “All this just by contradicting the beliefs concerning one man in the distant past.”

“Excuse me, Milord, but I have to qualify your statement.” Replied Mersant. “The Time Patrol never intended to say that Yeshua of Nazareth was a fraud, on the contrary. Miss Laplante herself went out of her way to say publicly that the teachings of Yeshua were as worthy of being followed as before and that, while he was not the son of God, he was nonetheless a Chosen and a great man. If we take the specific accusations of blasphemy leveled against Laplante by both the Church of England and the Catholic Church, it said that Laplante’s fault was to say that Yeshua, or Jesus Christ if you prefer, is not the son of God. That belief is a fundamental theological pillar of those two churches and of the other Christian churches. Contradicting it renders pointless nearly the whole of the Christian doctrine...unless the various churches adapt their theologies to the new realities exposed by the Time Patrol documentary. Miss Laplante has proposed just that, but I believe that the Christian churches are too inflexible and conservative to heed her advice.”

“What about the other major world religions?” Asked Rani Lomak, the embassy’s First Secretary. “How much have they been affected by this theological dispute?”

“Not much, it appears. Muslims always believed that Jesus Christ, while an important prophet to be respected, was only a simple man conveying the word of God. The Time Patrol documentary thus only confirms the opinion the Muslims had of Jesus. As for the Jews, Jesus was for them only one Jewish rabbi among many others in his time period. That point of view was mostly confirmed by the Time Patrol documentary, so the Jews have no bones against that documentary. What some of them have though is a bone is about Laplante’s declaration that there is no such thing as a chosen people. There are only chosen individuals, according to her, with Jesus having been one of

those. The other religions of this time period, which are mostly polytheist in nature, are not touched at all by this debate about Jesus.”

Prince Len nodded, truly impressed.

“A brilliant analysis, Mister Mersant. You certainly went to the core of the problem. This however leaves us still with the main question of the day for us: what are going to be the political ramifications of this controversy? Could they affect our own relations with this time period?”

“For Miss Laplante, being called a blasphemer is probably only a minor nuisance, Your Highness, especially since she is not even a Christian. For Princess Elizabeth of England and her family however, this is a very serious situation with heavy political consequences. King George the Sixth now has to either disavow his own daughter or risk impeachment himself. Also, relations between Great Britain and Palestine have just sunk brutally. While Miss Laplante didn't want to turn what she considers to be a personal problem into an international problem involving her beloved Holy Land, the people of the Holy Land love and respect her way too much to let her name be slighted this way. I am told that Palestine's cabinet of ministers took the decision to recall their ambassador in London without the prior knowledge or approval of Miss Laplante.”

All heads turned towards one of the holographic video monitors positioned around the conference table when Baroness Vinka, Consul to the Middle East, spoke from her distant post in Baghdad.

“Mister Mersant is correct, Your Highness. Furthermore, the few Christian churches in Jerusalem have been picketed by spontaneous crowds of protestors after the accusation of blasphemy was officially leveled against the Overseer. The Christian Church is going to take a hard nosedive on this in Palestine.”

“What about the Time Patrol?” Said Lord Carneavon. “They are the ones who produced the documentary that started this. It is two of their field agents whose names are being smeared now. How are they going to react to this?”

Prince Len made a wry smile then.

“The way I know them, they will probably tell the Church to screw itself and ignore it afterwards. The printed edition of their documentary on Yeshua, like the others on the evolution of man, is selling like hot cakes all around Europe despite it being blacklisted by the Catholic and Protestant Churches. That and the drop in church attendances should be enough indications to tell the Time Patrol on which side the public is on this question. The public here in France certainly doesn't seem much

sympathetic to the Church's views. After all, it was Miss Laplante and her Time Patrol who liberated this country from the Germans three years ago, not the Pope!"

"You may add also that the large number of local communist sympathizers, who are mostly atheists, greatly reduce the influence of the Church in France, Your Highness." Added Mersant.

"True! All this seems to mean that the impact of this fracas should be fairly localized and shouldn't seriously affect us. The only ones that may be really affected will probably be the members of the British royal family. I frankly wouldn't want to be in the shoes of King George the Sixth right now."

16:53 (London Time)

Buckingham Palace

London, England

Normally, the Queen and Princess Margaret would be helping the King fill some official duty or other in or around the palace today. The times were however anything but normal. Resolved to deal with the theological controversy that was smearing his eldest daughter's name, the King had gone to Westminster Abbey to try to reason with the leaders of the Anglican Church, leaving his wife and Margaret in Buckingham Palace. The latter two were thus reduced to waiting anxiously for the return of the King, to see if common sense had prevailed or not. The Queen was especially worried by this whole affair: the often acrimonious and highly emotional controversy was taking a heavy toll on the King, who had to defend the family name while torn by the gap between his old religious beliefs and the recent facts presented by the Time Patrol that basically rendered many of those beliefs meaningless. The Queen, trying to read a book while sitting in her dressing room, looked up when someone knocked urgently on her door.

"Come in!"

She was immediately alarmed by the expression of the royal valet that then entered: the man's face was ashen. The valet then spoke with difficulty, his voice half strangled.

"Your Majesty, the King's equerry just called from St-Thomas Hospital: the...the King has died of an apparent heart attack."

The valet then had to hurry to the Queen, who had suddenly become dizzy, having been overwhelmed by the awful news. Helping her sit back straight in her chair, he then held and patted gently her hands.

“Will you be alright, Your Majesty? Do you wish for me to call the palace doctor?”

“N...no, no need. How did the King die?”

“He was apparently overtaken by a stroke while in the middle of a heated argument in Westminster Abbey. He was immediately rushed to St-Thomas Hospital but his death could only be confirmed on arrival there, Your Majesty.”

Quiet sobs then overcame the Queen. She however regained control of herself after a minute or so and looked back at the valet.

“Does Princess Margaret know yet?”

“No, Your Majesty. In fact, I came directly to you after taking the call and have not had time yet to warn anyone else of this.”

“Then, go discreetly but quickly fetch Princess Margaret and escort her to here, then tell our driver to be ready to drive us.”

“Right away, Your Majesty.”

The Queen took the next few minutes to cry her grief while left alone in her dressing room. By the time that Margaret came in, her mother had mostly dried her tears. Margaret was alarmed when she saw the Queen’s eyes, red and puffy, and hurried to her.

“Mother, is something wrong?”

“I’m afraid so, my dear Margaret. You better sit down.”

“Mother, you are scaring me.” Said the teenager while taking a chair a few paces from the Queen.

“Margaret, I just got some awful news: your father the King is dead. He apparently died of a heart attack while in Westminster Abbey. We are going to see his body now at St-Thomas Hospital.”

At first, Margaret simply sat and stared at her mother, stunned by the news. Tears were next as she bowed her head and sobbed, her shoulders shaking. The Queen got up and went to her, bending down and hugging her.

“Come, Margaret. You will have to be brave.”

After a couple of minutes, the young princess had calmed down somewhat and was able to accompany her mother downstairs to the main entrance, where a palace Rolls Royce was waiting. Still dressed in simple, informal dresses, the Queen and the Princess got in

the big car, with a royal footman opening the rear left door for them. The footman then joined the driver on the front bench seat as the Queen gave a terse order.

“To St-Thomas Hospital!”

“Yes, Your Majesty!” Replied the driver, not realizing yet that the Queen was now effectively the reigning monarch of England, and that until Princess Margaret had reached 21, the age of majority.

The driver rolled out of the palace’s inner courtyard, then drove expertly through Whitehall District and across the Thames River over Westminster Bridge, escorted by a car full of royal bodyguards. The car then turned right on Embankment Road and parked right in front of St-Thomas’ main entrance, only to be set upon immediately by a small crowd of reporters and photographers.

“Damn!” Exclaimed Margaret, shocked by the sight of the media men pressing around the car. “How could they know already?”

“If it’s bad news, these people will always know immediately, my dear Margaret.” Replied the Queen sarcastically. She waited until half a dozen policemen had rushed in to somewhat control the crowd of reporters, then stepped out of the car after the footman had opened her door. Followed closely by Margaret and with four bodyguards as close escort, the Queen entered the hospital at a hurried step, ignoring the shouted questions from the reporters. They were met inside by the hospital’s chief administrator and by Group Captain Peter Townsend, the King’s Equerry. The Queen only gave a short order to Townsend, cutting him off.

“Just lead me to the King, Mister Townsend. We will talk later.”

“Yes, Your Majesty. This way, please.”

The staff and visitors they met in the hallways all bowed respectfully on the passage of the Queen and of the Princess. While keeping a closed expression, the Queen returned the bows with nods of her head, always careful to show courtesy to her subjects. Townsend finally pushed open the door of an examination room which was guarded by two government security services men in suits.

“The King’s body is on the examination table, Your Majesty. Do you wish to be alone for this, Your Majesty, or do you prefer that I be present?”

“I will go alone with Princess Margaret. I don’t want anyone else inside until I come out.”

“Understood, Your Majesty.”

The Queen had to gently nudge Margaret to get her to move inside the room, where a human shape lay under a sheet on an examination table. She then closed the door behind her. The two women slowly approached the table, stopping a step from its side, near the head. The Queen steeled herself, then carefully pulled away the sheet, uncovering the head of her dead husband. Despite her self-control, she couldn't stop tears from coming to her eyes, while Margaret started crying nearly at once. They stayed near the body for long minutes, contemplating the white face of the King. The noise of soft footsteps in their back made the Queen turn around angrily, ready to blast at the intruder. Her harsh words stuck inside her throat when she saw that the intruder was none other than her eldest daughter, Elizabeth. The young woman was wearing a gray Time Patrol uniform, with a black armband around her upper left arm. She also wore a gun belt with two pistols and an assortment of knives.

"Elizabeth! Thank God that you could come this fast!"

The Queen, followed by Margaret, then hugged Elizabeth tearfully. The latter then spoke with difficulty, her voice strangled by emotion.

"Nancy will send tomorrow a message to our main base in the past, informing me of Father's death as soon as the news got to her. I then jumped space-time to the future and came straight here to wait for you. I have been here for ten minutes already."

Margaret stared gravely at her older sister.

"Does that mean that you could have come earlier and prevent the death of our father?"

"Not without splitting the timelines again, Margaret." Replied Elizabeth, shaking her head with deep regret. "Our father was too much of a historically important figure: changing his destiny would have gravely affected this timeline."

"That's not important now." Cut in the Queen. "The important thing is that we are now reunited as a family to grieve our beloved King."

The three women were silent then, their attention back on the King's body. The Queen finally approached the table and gave a last kiss on the King's forehead.

"Goodbye, Bertie! You will be sorely missed."

Elizabeth also kissed the King's forehead, with Margaret following after a short hesitation. The Queen then covered back the King's head and headed for the door of the examination room, her two daughters behind her.

The two security service men and Group Captain Townsend nearly jumped to the ceiling when they saw Elizabeth come out with the Queen and Margaret. The Queen put a hand up, stopping their questions.

“How Elizabeth got here is not important. Tell me now, Mister Townsend: how did the King die?”

“Uh, I was not present when he suffered his stroke, Your Majesty. The King was discussing with the bishops of the Church of England inside the chapel of Henry VII, with the doors closed. I was waiting in the nave of Westminster Abbey, along with the King’s bodyguards. One of the bishops then came at a run, shouting that the King was ill. When we rushed in, the King was already lying on the floor and was not breathing. We tried to revive him but without success. We then called an ambulance and continued CPR until it arrived and the medics took over. The King unfortunately never came back to life.”

“How long was it between the time the King collapsed and the time you rushed in, Group Captain?” Asked Elizabeth, getting a frustrated expression from Townsend.

“That I can’t say for sure, as those bishops were quite panicky and did little but stand around the King. Maybe two or three minutes went by, maybe more. The bishop that alerted us didn’t run very fast.”

“And did any of those bishops attempt CPR before you came in?”

“No! As I said, they seemed at a loss about what to do and simply stood around, with the exception of the archbishop, who was holding the King’s hand.”

“That was a big help!” Replied Elizabeth sarcastically, obviously fuming. “Father was thus very possibly brain-dead already by the time you were alerted and rushed in. You could not realistically have done better, Group Captain. There is only one thing to be done now.”

Elizabeth then faced her mother and put one knee on the ground while bowing her head, surprising the Queen.

“Your Majesty, I pledge my allegiance to you. The King is dead. Long live the Queen!”

Townsend, the security men and Margaret then imitated Elizabeth, moving the Queen deeply.

“Please rise, all of you! Our first and most important task now is to make sure that the King’s body is properly taken care of. Mister Townsend, could you arrange for a royal vigil to be put in place here?”

“I will get on it right away, Your Majesty.”

As the equerry walked away, the Queen looked at the senior bodyguard.

“Mister Harding, has the Prime Minister been informed of the King’s death?”

“Yes, Your Majesty! Group Captain Townsend called the Prime Minister after calling the palace. The Prime Minister should be on his way to here now.”

“Then I will wait for his arrival here with my daughters.”

The bodyguard nodded, then took back his post by the door of the examination room with his colleague. The Queen, on her part, invited her two daughters to sit on a visitor’s bench a little further down the hallway. She eyed quietly her two young daughters for a moment, both beautiful but so different. Margaret was a small and frail but very beautiful and sensuous girl, with a thin waist, dark brown hair, lavender eyes and exquisite complexion. Her youngest daughter had always been somewhat of a rebel and a bohemian, with very real talent for music, particularly the piano. In contrast, Elizabeth, four years older than her sister, was taller and physically fit and had always been more serious and solemn about life. She would also have been dead for four years now, along with her dressing lady, following a German missile strike that had hit directly her room in Buckingham Palace in 1941. Only the secret intervention of Nancy Laplante had saved her life and that of Margaret MacDonald. The price to pay for that rescue had been Elizabeth’s exile in time, in order to preserve preordained history. Only the Imperium ‘B’ raid on Buckingham Palace in 1942 had forced the Time Patrol to reveal itself to the Great Britain of the time. Elizabeth had then reappeared a very changed teenager from the one her mother had known. Apart from being even more fit physically and being stronger, Elizabeth was by then highly educated, with advanced degrees and competences in sciences and applied technologies that contrasted with the rudimentary and very basic education she had received at the palace in her youth. She was also by then a crewmember of one of the Time Patrol fantastic scout ships and had proceeded to gain war combat experience against both the Germans, the Japanese and the Imperium ‘B’. The biggest change that the Queen had noted was however about Elizabeth’s personality. She, like other field agents of the Time Patrol, had her mind opened by Nancy Laplante to the souvenirs of her past incarnations. Elizabeth was now a young woman with over 12,000 years of accumulated life experiences to draw on, including many lives as a man. Her depth of knowledge and experience was now staggering and had only reinforced the serious, dutiful outlook to life that Elizabeth always possessed. She was also by now sexually active, something that had surprised

and somewhat scandalized her mother at first. Lastly, she had become a deadly fighter, being a master archer and a swordswoman with the skill and cold-bloodedness of Diego de Monterey, the 16th Century Spanish court assassin and spy she had once been. The Queen looked at both as she started speaking in a low voice, so that the security services men could not hear her.

“My dear daughters, while the death of your father is an immense tragedy, it also leaves our family to cope with a number of pressing problems. Because you, Margaret, are only fifteen, I will legally have to act as Regent until you attain the age of majority. In a way that is a benediction, as you give me the distinct impression that you don’t want the throne of England anymore.”

Margaret lowered her head, a sour expression on her face.

“How could I wish for a position I believe will force me to live a lie, Mother? To be the Queen, I will have to accept publicly the Church’s position on Jesus Christ, a position I and Father knew to be flawed. You know how religious I was before, Mother. Yet, I am intelligent and independent enough to come to the right conclusions after watching the Time Patrol documentary on the life and death of Jesus: he was a very gifted man and a Chosen but not the son of God. The Church’s intransigence on this has just cost the King his life. I am not about to reward their intolerance by parroting their lines. Besides, you should have realized by now that their position is motivated as much by their fear of seeing their revenues go down as by religious beliefs.”

“What are you talking about, Margaret?” Asked the Queen, shocked by those words. Her younger daughter answered in a resolute voice, looking her squarely in the eyes.

“It doesn’t take much sense of observation to see that, Mother. Church attendance has fallen sharply since the publication of the Time Patrol documentary on Jesus. So has its revenues. If that trend continues and if we as the royal family disavow their official theological position, then it could very well become irrelevant in England and eventually disappear.”

“But, what do you expect them to do?”

“The Church could adopt a revised theology as suggested by Nancy Laplante, Mother.” Answered Elizabeth firmly, cutting in. “Yeshua of Nazareth’s teachings, as Nancy repeatedly said, are still valid and worthy of following. The Church could emphasize the influence and power of God through Yeshua instead of insisting on the divinity of Yeshua. It is the Church that has painted itself in a corner because of its

intransigence and intolerance, not the Time Patrol or Nancy. Are you really ready to parrot the Church's line without discussion in order to keep the throne, Mother?"

"Now, you listen up, Elizabeth..." Started the Queen. To her surprise and that of Margaret, Elizabeth cut her off firmly and without hesitation.

"No, Mother! You will listen! Father just died while trying to bring some common sense to those old religious hypocrites. Are you ready to disavow him now? I certainly will not! If Margaret decides that she doesn't want to live a lie, then I say good show to her! The England of today is based on the presumption of the separation between the Church and the State. Let's complete that separation and abolish the rule about the monarch having to be also the secular head of the Anglican Church. We are not in the Middle Ages anymore and being called a heretic in the 20th Century reminds me too much of the damn Inquisition."

The Queen, shaken to the core by Elizabeth's vehemence, gave a nearly pleading look at Margaret.

"And you, Margaret? Are you going to cling to that position as well?"

"I will, Mother! I am not ready to blindly follow the Church's theological position, especially not after what just happened to Father. Let the Church adapt to modern times, not the other way around."

The Queen was silent for a long moment, trying to think of a honorable way out of this mess. However, as much as her strict upbringing had taught her to obey and follow the established rules, she could not deny the truth in her daughters' arguments. Realistically, there were only two options left to her right now.

The arrival of Prime Minister Clement Attlee caught the Queen as she was still pondering her position. Attlee, surrounded by security services bodyguards, saw the Queen and the two princesses and walked to them at once. He stopped near the Queen, who had got up from her bench on seeing him, and bowed to her respectfully.

"I am truly saddened about the death of the King, Your Majesty. May I present to you and to your two daughters my most heartfelt condolences?"

"You may, Mister Prime Minister. Thank you for coming so quickly."

"It was the least I could do, Your Majesty. If you may excuse me, I would like to pay my homage to the King. I would like to speak to you afterwards, if you don't mind, Your Majesty."

"We will wait for you, Mister Prime Minister."

The Queen, along with her two daughters, didn't miss the quick, reprobate glance Attlee gave to Elizabeth before entering the examination room. The three women then sat back, waiting for Attlee to come out.

Attlee came out four minutes later, visibly troubled, and walked to the Queen again. The Queen and her daughters rose again to greet him.

"Your Majesty, the death of the King and the young age of Princess Margaret dictates that you should assume temporarily the throne of England as Queen Regent until the majority of your daughter. Do you accept this heavy responsibility, Your Majesty?"

Attlee, who was expecting only one possible answer from the Queen, was thus shocked by her answer.

"On one condition, Mister Prime Minister: that the government prepares quickly and puts to a vote in the Commons a constitutional amendment abolishing all links between the Throne of England and the Church of England. The death of the King should be proof enough that such an amendment is now most pertinent in the England of today."

"A...a constitutional amendment, Your Majesty? But the crown is founded on the basis of belief in the Anglican Church."

"It has been for four centuries, but it was not always so. Before, the monarch owed allegiance to the Catholic Church. Before even that, it owed no allegiance to a particular church. England has shown that it can adapt to the times. Now, it will be time for the Church to adapt."

"But...what if such an amendment cannot be passed?"

"Then the government will quickly find itself with a constitutional crisis on its hands. Princess Margaret, the heir to the throne, is unwilling to accept the intransigence of the Church concerning the dispute on the true nature of Jesus Christ, a dispute that has already resulted in my daughter Elizabeth being branded a heretic. As for me, I will act as Queen Regent as long as a true effort is made to pass such a constitutional amendment and as long as I am not forced to blindly accept the words of the Anglican Church. If not, then I will abdicate as Queen and you will find the throne of England empty."

The Prime Minister was nearly knocked down by those words. From the expression of both the Queen and of Princess Margaret, he could see that they were dead serious

about this. While a handful of other royals had the necessary blood line to take the throne in the place of Queen Elizabeth, he was not sure putting them on the throne would be a very popular move. Besides, the scandal that this family abdication would cause would rock the very foundations of the British Empire.

“But...why? Why this now?”

“Why?” Exclaimed the Queen, anger showing in her voice. “Your government stripped my eldest daughter of her titles and let her be branded a heretic by the Church. It also stripped our biggest war heroine of her GBE and, now, my husband the King lies dead after trying to defend his daughter’s name. You brought this crisis on you by blindly kowtowing to the Church’s intransigence, Prime Minister Attlee!”

“But your daughter and Miss Laplante have openly committed blasphemy by claiming that Jesus is not the son of God! They left no choice to the Church, Your Majesty!”

“Have you even considered the possibility that what the Time Patrol is saying was true? Have you even watched the documentary produced by the Time Patrol on the life of Jesus or are you simply going on the simple assumption that everything written in the Bible is sacred and true and can never be disputed? How could you dismiss so easily a woman like Nancy Laplante after all that she has done and with all the powers she demonstrated in the last three years?”

Attlee stiffened as the Queen rebuked him. Not having any ready reply to her arguments and questions, he bowed to her after she was finished.

“I will take your arguments and your request into consideration, Your Majesty. As well, I will give the necessary directives to make sure that the King’s funeral be properly arranged. Have a good evening, Your Majesty.”

“Good evening to you as well, Mister Prime Minister.” Replied the Queen in a neutral voice. She then watched Attlee leave with his bodyguards before turning to face her daughters.

“We won’t get firm answers from the government or the Church for at least a day or two. We might as well go to the palace now and have supper. You are coming I hope, Elizabeth?”

“I will be honored to, Mother. Thank you for standing with me and Margaret on this.”

“I would have been a poor mother to let you out to dry on your own, my dear Elizabeth. Besides, I do believe that those churchmen are in need of a lesson in humility.”

10:15 (Paris time)

Tuesday, August 28, 1945 ‘B’

Imperium embassy

Paris, France

“Welcome to Paris, Dad!” Said warmly Prince Len while shaking hands with his father, King Stan the Sixth. He next exchanged a hug with his mother and First Mistress of the Imperium, Dame Miri Goshenk,. “Welcome to Paris as well, Mom! You should love visiting this place.”

“What I saw from the air was already very interesting, Len.” Replied Miri, one of the most beautiful women of the Imperium. “This may be a sad excuse to visit but me and Stan will certainly want to stay a few days afterwards. We were overdue for a vacation.”

That made Len smile, pleased.

“I will be most happy to guide you around. You both have as well an invitation from the Overseer of Palestine, Nancy Laplante, to visit Jerusalem during your stay.”

“Talking of her, how is she?” Asked King Stan while he and Miri followed Len to the roof access cabin of the embassy’s roof landing pad. Len’s smile faded somewhat at his question.

“She is as healthy and fit as ever but she is quite pissed at the British right now, Dad. Despite being an old friend of the British royal family and a head of state, the British government, under pressure from the Church, has not invited her to attend King George the Sixth’s funeral on Thursday. Queen Elizabeth tried to overturn that decision but was overruled. Princess Elizabeth, or should I say more properly now Miss Elizabeth Windsor, was also barred from the funeral. I have to say that the Church of England is playing very much hardball on this right now and has the support of the Catholic Pope in Rome.”

“Thank the stars that we don’t have to deal with this religious nonsense on top of the rest in the Imperium.” Said King Stan while shaking his head. “So, Miss Laplante is losing that fight with those religious fanatics?”

“No, I wouldn’t say that, Dad. Public opinion is gradually rallying behind her position concerning the nature of Yeshua of Nazareth, better known here and now as Jesus Christ, but the Church and its supporters in the British government are refusing to acknowledge that. The Church in particular is quite obstinate. After all, it knows that its very existence and privileges are threatened and it has thus hardened its position and called in political favors. It will just fall harder when the time comes.”

Len then glanced behind him, looking at the two servants pushing baggage carts that had followed the royal couple out of the shuttlecraft from the Imperium flagship, the super-battleship ROYAL SOVEREIGN. The flagship was actually too big to land in Le Bourget and was thus staying on a high altitude station over Paris.

“You did say that you were coming with a lean party, Dad, but is that all that you really brought down with you?”

Stan smiled at that and, getting closer to Miri, passed an arm around her waist.

“Hey, Miri did tell you that we wanted to take some vacation time here, Len. Apart from the official funeral ceremonies for King George, we fully intend to drop all ceremonial and travel around like simple, low-blooded tourists. Because of that, I would appreciate if you could tell the embassy staff to keep our presence here incognito and to not make a fuss if they see me and Miri leave the embassy without escorts. You did report that Paris was a safe city, didn’t you?”

Len couldn’t help himself smile at that. His father, while a tough and ruthless monarch with immense power at his disposal, was also a man who hated protocol and did his best to escape it when he could. King Stan had been known in the past for going undercover in person and alone in the bars of the Imperium to get a feel of the public mood about his reign. This place and time would effectively be a perfect occasion for him to loosen up.

“Paris is indeed a safe city, unless you really look for trouble and frequent certain areas. Your diplomatic passports should anyway keep the local authorities off your back if you do get in trouble.”

Len had said those last words while glancing with a smile at his father, making Stan grin maliciously.

“Come on, Son! You don’t expect me to make trouble while on vacation?”

“Dad, I may be the gentle academic type but I do know you. I will give you a map with a list of not too shady places to visit later on.”

“That will be appreciated, Son.”

The royal trio and the two servants then took an elevator from the roof landing pad of the ultra-modern building housing the Imperium embassy, going down two levels to the V.I.P. suites. Len was showing the King and First Mistress their suites when his wrist videophone buzzed. Excusing himself first with King Stan, he opened and activated the flip-up video cover and found himself looking at a smiling Nancy Laplante.

“Oh, hello Nancy! How are you today?”

“Still mad at the British and the Pope but otherwise alright, my dear Len. Would King Stan be with you, by any chance?”

“He certainly is! One moment please.” Replied Len before taking off his wrist videophone and giving it to his father. “Call from Nancy Laplante to you, Father.”

“Thanks!” Said Stan, then looking at the videophone’s tiny screen. “What may I do for you, Overseer?”

“Please, just call me Nancy, Your Majesty.”

“Only if you call me simply Stan.” Replied the King while grinning. Nancy’s smile widened at those words.

“Deal, Stan! In fact, I was going to ask you if you would be interested to go around Paris and London incognito with me, so that we could talk quietly while getting a feel of the local mood concerning this fracas concerning the true nature of Yeshua.”

“I thought that you were too famous here to ever go around incognito, Nancy.”

“True, but I have ways to disguise myself, my dear Stan. Could we plan for me to join you for lunch in Paris? We could then jump to London and have a beer or two there.”

“Sounds perfect to me! Do you mind if I bring Miri along?”

“Miri is with you? Great! I would be truly happy to have her with us. I will show up at the Imperium embassy in fifteen minutes. Dress informally and bring your passports.”

“We will be waiting for you. See you in the lobby of the embassy.” Replied Stan, who then cut the link and gave back the wrist videophone to Len. “Can you get us some funds in local French and British currencies, along with our diplomatic passports while me and Miri change?”

“Consider it done, Dad. I will also pass around to the guards the directive not to salute you when you are in informal civilian clothes.”

“Good boy! I didn’t raise an idiot.”

Len grinned, then left. Stan faced his two servants, who were also highly trained bodyguards.

“Just let us choose an outfit, then undo our bags while we are gone. Don’t worry about us: we will manage. Besides, treachery is just not Miss Laplante’s style. If you want to go play tourist around Paris while we are gone, then you are welcome to it. In fact, consider yourselves off duty until tomorrow morning, and that’s an order!”

“Uh, thank you, Your Majesty.” Said the King’s bodyguard, who knew when it was or not time to argue with the King. This time, the King was definitely in his no-nonsense mood. He and his colleague thus put the royal suitcases on the huge bed of the King’s suite and opened them to let the King and First Mistress choose new clothes for their outing.

By the time Len was back with two diplomatic passports and a large sum in French Francs and British Sterling Pounds, Stan and Miri had changed into plain, informal clothes. While Stan now wore a pair of dark blue trousers and an opened collar short-sleeved blue shirt, Miri had changed into a burgundy leather ensemble made of a short skirt, knee-high boots and sleeveless corsage over a silk golden blouse. She had also removed her expensive jewels, wearing only a simple gold chain and a pair of small earrings instead. The First Mistress of the Imperium could now pass easily as a simple but stunningly beautiful working-class secretary, while her husband could be a low-level bureaucrat or plant worker on vacation. Len grinned as he looked at his parents.

“Perfect! You could mingle with any group of tourists from the Global Council and no one would know better. Here are your money and passports.”

“Thanks, Len.” Said Stan, taking the money and documents. He then gave an appreciable sum in French Francs to each of the two royal bodyguards.

“Consider this money as a special mission premium. Your task is now to burn that cash away and have as much fun as you can. Just don’t kill any Frenchman during your time off: it would look bad.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty!” Said the senior bodyguard with a grin. He then left with his colleague, mentally thanking himself for having such an understanding monarch. Len looked at his father, noting the wrist videophone at his left wrist and his military grade pocket radio, tucked in a leather belt holder.

“At least I shouldn’t have any problems in contacting you if needed, Dad. Just to remind you, the official funeral of King George the Sixth is still scheduled for the late

morning of Thursday, in two days. I have secured a place for you and Mother in the escort of dignitaries and heads of states traveling behind the casket.”

“Talking of that, what is the official reason for the British government to refuse to invite Nancy Laplante, who is a head of state, and Elizabeth Windsor, the eldest daughter of King George? Is it really for religious reasons?”

“It is, Dad. Both are officially considered blasphemers by the Church of England, while Elizabeth Windsor has the added stigma of being a heretic and apostate, since she was a member of the Anglican Church before. Since the sovereign of England is also the secular head of the Anglican Church, the government had little choice but to support the position of the Church on this. It is however paying an increasingly high price for this, with many in the British press and public asking how the Church could stop a young woman from attending the funeral of her own father. The British opposition, led by ex-Prime Minister Churchill, is also using this crisis to best advantage to attack the Labor Party government of Prime Minister Attlee. Another aspect of this is the threat of a constitutional crisis in England, with the widow and youngest daughter of King George threatening to abdicate over the treatment of Elizabeth Windsor by the Church. The only realistic alternative to the throne in case of an abdication is Duke Henry of Gloucester, a brother of the deceased King, who is married and has two young sons. A remote secondary option is Princess Mary, a sister of King George, but she would clearly be a last option. The problem for the government is that Queen Elizabeth is extremely popular with the British public, which adores her for the devotion she showed to the welfare of the people during the recent war. Going against her stated wishes and humiliating her has brought much criticism on the government and on Prime Minister Attlee. You may get yourself a feeling for that as you read the British newspapers.”

“I certainly will read a few of them, Son. Well, don't worry if me and Miri are not back until quite late: I fully intend to use this time to enjoy myself with Miri.”

“Well, as long as I don't have to fish you out of the police drunk tank in the morning...”

“Don't worry, Son!” Replied Stan, grinning. “If I am to be picked up by the local police, it will be for something more serious, say aggravated assault and battery. This said, see you tomorrow, Son.”

“Have fun, Dad! You too, Mother!”

“Thanks, Len!” Said Miri, kissing him on the cheek before leaving the suite with her husband. She was both happy and anxious to start her visit of Paris, having

dreamed of this for a long time. As Stan had already said, they had not had a real vacation for years and were overdue for some relaxation away from royal duties. The Imperium may officially control the whole of the Solar System in 3389 'C' but it was far from a peaceful place.

When the royal couple arrived in the lobby of the embassy they found Nancy Laplante already waiting for them there, sitting on a padded bench reserved for visitors. She wore a nice embroidered robe and a pair of laced sandals and had a large leather carrying bag. She also wore a white shawl over her hair and a pair of sunglasses. Stan looked at her critically.

"I'm afraid that you are still quite easy to recognize, my good Nancy."

"That's because I haven't really disguised myself yet, my dear Stan." Replied Nancy while smiling and getting up. "I have to make a confidence to you: I changed somewhat lately, thanks to a gift I received a year and a half ago."

She then showed to Stan and Miri a large gold ring she wore on a left hand finger. The ring had the shape of some irregular triangle, with a diamond set in it. Stan examined it closely for a few seconds.

"An unusual design, I must say. What does it have that makes it special, if I may ask?"

"It is the receptacle for part of the spiritual essence of The One and opened to me a number of new powers."

"What kind of powers, Nancy?" Asked Miri, as intrigued as Stan and trying to digest the fantastic words from Nancy.

"Let's just go to a more discreet corner of the embassy and I will show you both." Replied Nancy, obviously enjoying being mysterious. She then headed towards one of the public washrooms meant to be used by visitors to the embassy that had to wait in the lobby. The washroom she entered with Stan and Miri was meant for one user at a time and could be locked from the inside, apart from being large enough to allow a person in a wheelchair to use it. Nancy locked the door behind them, then removed her carrying bag, sunglasses, shawl and sandals, putting them down on the sink's counter.

"Do not be afraid by what you are about to see: it may look like magic to you but it is harmless to the ones around me." Said Nancy quietly. She then closed her eyes and seemingly concentrated. Stan and Miri recoiled with surprise and apprehension when a kind of white halo enveloped Nancy, soon transforming her into a white human

silhouette. The silhouette then apparently shrank in size, lowering in height from 183 centimeters to a mere 152 centimeters. When the halo dissipated, it let the royal couple look with amazement at a small but stunningly beautiful teenage girl with deeply tanned skin and long black hair. She had strong Semitic traits and the robe Nancy had been wearing was now floating on her. The girl grinned to the Imperium couple and showed the gold ring, still on the same finger as with Nancy.

“This ring is what allowed me to change to the shape of Sarai of Ur. It in fact allows me to change to the shape of any of my past incarnations, then to change back to the shape of Nancy Laplante. So, what do you think of Sarai of Ur, Stan?”

“She is a very beautiful girl indeed, Nancy, or should I call you Sarai?”

“Call me Sarah when I’m under this form: Sarai is a name that is no longer used now, while Sarah, my Hebrew name, is still a very common one and won’t attract questions. Let me just change into clothes of the proper size now, then we will go play tourists.”

Stan couldn’t help stare when Nancy, or rather Sarah, pulled her robe over her head and removed the underwear that was about to fall off by itself, being oversized by a wide margin. The naked teenage girl then pulled out a new robe, sandals and panty out of her leather carrying bag, stuffing her previous clothes in the bag before dressing again. Sarah soon was ready to come out, with her shawl and sunglasses completing her disguise. Stan, his mind still disturbed by the fantastic transformation he had witnessed, nodded once while staring at the Semitic girl.

“This is...incredible, Sarah. No one could imagine now that you are the famous Nancy Laplante. Could anyone else use your ring to change shape?”

“No! It cannot be used by anyone but me, nor can anyone actually take it from me. Well, let’s go explore Paris and have some fun before visiting London!”

17:38 (Paris Time)

Open air terrace, Champs Élisés

Paris, France

Miri took a last sip of her espresso coffee, then looked again at the nearby Arc-de-Triomphe to admire it.

“This city is a truly fascinating place to visit. Thank you for playing the guide for us, Sarah.”

“Oh, you barely scratched the surface of Paris, my dear Miri.” Replied Sarah/Nancy, also sipping a cup of coffee with Miri and Stan at a downtown terrace. “You could easily spend a week visiting the worthwhile sights of this city. Shall we move to London after this?”

“Why not?” Replied Stan, wiping the side of his mouth with a napkin. “I never saw Buckingham Palace except in picture, even though my own palace stands on its ruins. How do you propose for the three of us to go to London, Sarah? I know that you can move around at will, but what about us?”

“Easy! You will both hug me and I will carry you through space-time. Don’t worry: I have the procedure thoroughly down path.”

“That should be an interesting experience.” Conceded Stan. “Since we are finished with our coffees, how about going now?”

“Just let me pay the bill and I will be with you.”

Nancy called the waiter and paid the bill, leaving a generous tip, then got up and invited the royal couple to follow her.

“Let’s go near that tree besides the sidewalk: it will make our exit a bit less visible. I wouldn’t want to cause a poor old man or woman to have a heart attack.”

The trio left the terrace restaurant and walked to the tree, stopping a couple paces from it. Sarah then had Stan and Miri stand directly against her. Putting her arms around their waists, she then concentrated and levitated with both of them off the grass. The three of them then disappeared in a flash of white light, the whole thing being observed by only a handful of stunned Parisians.

16:43 (London Time) / 17:43 (Paris Time)

Hyde Park Corner

London, England

The trio reappeared a meter over the grass of Hyde Park Corner, near the grounds of Buckingham Palace. Sarah/Nancy, holding firmly Stan and Miri by their waists, then floated down with them to a smooth landing. Seeing that maybe a dozen persons had witnessed their apparition and were watching them with disbelief and excitement, Sarah took the hands of Stan and Miri and led them across the street and into Green Park. She walked at a quick pace with them among the trees until they were out of sight of most onlookers, then stopped and faced the two Imperium royals.

“As you can see, even after three years of my antics, the average people are still not accustomed to seeing persons appear and disappear out of nowhere.”

“Uh, I am not sure that the public of the Imperium would react otherwise, or even without violence.” Replied Stan. “Your talent to move around like this would give a devastating advantage to a criminal or someone bent on waging war. I give you credit for not abusing it, Sarah.”

Sarah nodded, her expression sober.

“It is too true that time travel, if misused, could cause untold damage. A large scale war between forces equipped for time travel would be truly catastrophic for Humanity. That is reason enough by itself to do our best to stay friends, Stan.”

“And I appreciate your understanding of this, Sarah. Be assured that I wish no more for such a war than you do. Let’s walk towards St-James’s Park: I would like to see the front façade of the palace.”

Now unnoticed among the many other pedestrians in Green Park, the trio walked at a relaxed pace along the sidewalk parallel to Constitution Hill Road. As they got close to the roundabout of the Queen Victoria Memorial, they saw and heard a teenage boy selling newspapers by shouting front page titles.

“SPECIAL EDITION: THE DUKE OF GLOUCESTER SAYS THAT HE WILL NOT TAKE THE THRONE FROM QUEEN ELIZABETH! BUY THE DAILY TELEGRAPH!”

Those words made the trio hurry to the sales boy and buy three copies of his newspapers, which were selling fast. They then went to a nearby park bench and sat down to read the front page article about the declaration of Duke Henry of Gloucester. Sarah nodded with satisfaction as she read through it.

“Good man! I met the Duke a couple of times during the war and he appeared to be a decent person. That he is not ready to backstab the widow of his brother in order to take the throne is a credit to him. That should make the government and the Church eat humble pie.”

“He also threw a nice barb at the Church by comparing their intolerance and intransigence to that of the Inquisition.” Said Miri, who had been won over as a history buff by her son Len. “He gives me the impression that, while not saying it outright, he believes what your documentary said about Jesus Christ. Did you see his comments about your exclusion and that of Elizabeth Windsor from the King’s funeral parade?”

"I just did. Duke Henry has been wearing an army uniform for decades and he understands what true honor and loyalty is. He also knows firsthand how close I was to King George and the royal family during and after the war. These comments from him should seriously shake the government's position in this present crisis."

"I doubt that this will be enough to shake the Church's position, though." Said Stan, making a face as he read an article on the second page. "From what the Archbishop of Canterbury is saying, his Church is not about to budge in this whole affair."

"If it wants to end up looking like a bunch of idiots, it is welcome to it." Said Sarah, nearly gloating. "I once had to face the Church's hypocrisy when I was put on trial as Joan of Arc and I just can't smell their damn righteousness."

They read on for a few minutes more, then folded their newspapers and put them in Sarah's carrying bag. By then, it was obvious from the reactions of other pedestrians reading the newspapers that the announcement by the Duke of Gloucester was creating a sensation. Sarah smiled and looked up at her two giant companions.

"How about going up Piccadilly and finding a good pub where we could have a pint of beer, eat and listen to the public's opinion on this?"

"Sounds like a good plan to me, Sarah." Replied Stan. "Just let us first have a look at the front façade of Buckingham Palace."

Sarah obliged and they went together to the iron grill of the fence closing off the front yard of Buckingham Palace, where a large group of tourists from the Global Council were listening to a tour guide describing the palace and its history. While it didn't show, Stan enjoyed greatly being able to go around like an anonymous tourist: it truly changed his mind from the constant weight of responsibilities resting on his shoulders as King of the Imperium. King George the Sixth would probably have enjoyed as much such a precious moment. When the group of tourists moved on, Stan and Miri started walking with Sarah up The Mall. They next turned left on Marlborough Road and passed by St-James's Palace, which the Imperium couple took a few minutes to admire. Then following St-James's Street, they turned on Piccadilly after a lazy fifteen minute walk during which Miri took the time to gaze at more than a few shop front windows. Once on Piccadilly, the trio started to look seriously for a good pub. While there was no lack of pubs or restaurants in the area, Sarah wanted something that was truly traditional. Remembering one pub she had been once, she led the Imperium couple down a side

street, passing by St-James Church and soon stopping in front of a pub on the Duke of York Street.

“The Red Lion Pub, one of the best and oldest pubs in London. The exterior brick façade may not look like much but wait until you see the inside. It also has a nice variety of good beers and ales.”

“Let’s try it, then.” Replied Stan, not needing much to be convinced. He opened the door for Miri and Sarah and entered last. As promised by Sarah, the interior of the pub, which was quite small, was magnificent. The walls of the Victorian pub were covered with beautiful ‘brilliant-cut’ mirrors of dazzling design, while the island service counter was made of polished mahogany wood. Stan liked the place at once, while Miri admired openly the mirrors. The place was fairly quiet, despite being nearly full, with most customers being men in conservative suits talking quietly between themselves or sipping their beers in silence. Sarah went to the island counter and secured three stools for herself and the Imperium couple, then showed three fingers to the barman.

“Three half-pints of Burton bitter, please!”

The barman gave her a dubious look and approached her while still drying a glass.

“How old are you, miss?”

Sarah smiled, not taking offence at the barman’s question, and took out a passport from her carrying bag, opening it and showing it to the barman.

“I am nineteen and I’m from the Holy Land of Palestine, mister.”

After looking quickly at the passport, the barman nodded and smiled back to her.

“Sorry about having to ask, miss. Three Burton bitter half-pints coming up!”

Stan and Miri sat on each side of Sarah and waited for their beers while listening to the conversations around them. Understandably, many of them were about the monarchy crisis and the controversy about Jesus. Sarah went for a toast when they got their beers, raising her glass.

“To King George the Sixth, may he rest in peace!”

“Hear!” Replied Stan, Miri and the other customers around the island counter. One of the latter, a slightly overweight man in his forties wearing a good quality suit, spoke to Sarah after the toast.

“So, how are the people in Palestine reacting to this dispute between the Church of England and Miss Laplante, miss?”

“Most people there are actually surprised that the Church could be so intransigent about it, mister.” Answered amicably Sarah, actually stating the truth. “If

you look at the documentary made by the Time Patrol, you will see that the facts speak for themselves. Besides, the Overseer's word is considered rightly in Palestine to be as good as gold. She went to the past to research Yeshua and reported the things as they were then, end of story. And how are the people here in England taking this, mister?"

"I have to say that, at least where I work, opinions vary widely, depending mostly on how religious one is. Personally, I am not much of a churchgoer and I tend to believe things that are proven scientifically. You see, miss, I am an hydraulics engineer working for the government. I was never ready to blindly believe everything the Church or the Bible said, so I have no problem with what the documentary of the Time Patrol said."

"Well, I do!" Cut in a small, thin man in his late thirties sitting beside a slightly younger woman. "The Bible is not meant to be proven: it is only meant to be believed in. If you don't, then you will go roast in Hell for eternity."

Miri gave the man a cautious look, the psychologist in her trying to analyze his thought process.

"The methods of the Time Patrol are well proven and scientific, mister. They had the means and the people to go see on the spot what this Yeshua was like. How could you dismiss so summarily their findings without having contradictory evidence of your own?"

"I have evidence of my own, miss! It is called The Bible."

The engineer looked with annoyance at the small man.

"I wouldn't call that evidence, not when considering the number of rewrites and translations the texts in the Bible went through. The Bible was written by men, imperfect men, not by God. Besides, Nancy Laplante went to the past, while we didn't. I am thus inclined to favor her version of the history of Jesus over that of the Church."

Seeing that the argument could heat up and generate hostilities, Sarah tried to redirect the conversation.

"Everyone is entitled to his or her opinion, so let's not get wrapped up around the axle on this, gentlemen."

While she took a sip of her beer, another male customer sitting around the island counter spoke.

"I wonder what the government will do with Queen Elizabeth and Princess Margaret, now that the Duke of Gloucester has refused to take the throne if asked."

"And what could the government do?" Replied a young man sitting near one of the windows of the pub. "Burn the two at the stake? Every time that religion mixed with

politics in this country, it ended up causing only misery and abuses. I say that the Crown should be separated from the Church, as the Queen requested from the Prime Minister. This business of the monarch being the secular head of the Church is a relic of the past that is overdue to be thrown out.”

“What are you talking about?” Protested the small man that had proclaimed the undisputable truth of the Bible. “Having the Crown and the Church tied together only assures that this country stays close to God.”

“Mister, I am a professor of history and there are no lack of examples of religion bringing only injustice and suffering. Think of Queen ‘Bloody Mary’, or of the Puritans of Cromwell, who massacred tens of thousands of Irish people just because they were Catholics. If you switch to the continent, you just need to look at the Thirty Years War to see an example of religion being used as an excuse to kill, rape, burn and pillage.”

“You got it wrong, man.” Shot back with a smile a big man sitting at the counter. “It is rape, kill, pillage and burn, in that order. Let’s do the things properly, please.” Most of the customers of the pub, including King Stan and Miri, laughed at that. Sarah smiled at the big man.

“You seem to have practice in the matter, mister.”

“I am in the Irish Guards, miss, and I do it for King and country, not for the Church.” Replied the man proudly. Sarah beamed at those words.

“You’re in the Irish Guards? Were you by chance part of the big commando raid in Hamburg in 1941?”

“I was! Collected a Military Medal and a bullet in the left arm in that desperate fight in the submarine building yards. I still remember how Brigadier Laplante led us in the final bayonet charge. What a woman!”

“She’s a blasphemer!” Protested the small religious man, attracting a mean look from the Irish guardsman.

“Screw that! I saw her do her bit in the war, mister. Let’s not forget also the way she came back a year later to put a quick end to that war. That alone probably saved many of my friends in the Guards that would have died if the war had went on longer. Nancy Laplante is a woman of honor. If she says that she saw the life of Jesus, then I am ready to believe what she will say about it, Church or no Church.”

Sarah gave the big man a sympathetic look.

“Coming from an Irishman, this is quite a statement, mister.”

The soldier smiled and took a good sip from his beer before replying to that.

"I was raised in an orphanage run by Christian Brothers in North Ireland, miss. You could hardly find a bunch of more sadistic, abusive and self-righteous bastards. They claimed to do the work of God but acted like the worst the Inquisition could offer, beating us for the slightest excuse or bugging the prettiest boys in the orphanage and never answering for it. When I was seventeen, I broke the jaw of the senior Brother, fled the orphanage and enrolled in the Irish Guards."

Sarah nodded once at that, knowing too well that what the soldier had described was way too common right now in institutions run by the Church. Most of the hidden stories about such abuses that the Church was presently keeping hidden from public ears would blow in the open by the end of this century, with the Church then being hit with multiple collective lawsuits and with some churchmen ending up in court as well. Too many of them would still go away scot-free, though.

"Let me pay you a beer, sir. Barman! One pint of his choice for this soldier of the King!"

"Why, thank you, miss!" Said the pleased Irishman. "What do I owe this pleasure for? You are obviously too young to have known much of the war."

That attracted a malicious smile on Sarah's face.

"I come from the Holy Land of Palestine, sir. Anything is possible over there." That brought a thoughtful look on the Irishman's face.

"Palestine... I should go there one day, to get my old war wounds healed, but the airplane ticket price is a bit stiff for an old sergeant like me."

"You still suffer from your wounds, Sergeant?"

"I still got some shrapnel in my back and left arm, dating from the Norway campaign. I can really feel them when it's wet and cold."

Sarah got off her stool and walked around the island, taking position close behind the intrigued soldier.

"I believe that I can help you with that, Sergeant. Don't worry and don't move."

Sarah then pulled out the back of the man's shirt and then slipped her two hands under, applying them on the man's back and then concentrating. Even from under the shirt and jacket, the glow from her hands was visible to the other customers, who stared on with disbelief as she healed the soldier. After one minute, she pulled out her hands and put down on the counter a dozen small metallic fragments. Sarah next touched the man's left arm, making her hand glow again for a few seconds and making the Irishman sigh

with relief as his arm stiffness disappeared. As the sergeant stared at her, unable to speak, Sarah gave him a gentle kiss on the cheek and whispered to him.

“It was a honor to lead men such as you in that bayonet charge in Hamburg, Sergeant.”

Not giving the man a chance to get over his surprise, Sarah went back to Stan and Miri, who were getting ready to leave. Sarah dropped a generous tip on the counter and smiled at the barman and the customers around.

“Have a good evening, gentlemen.”

Sarah then left the pub, stopping briefly on the sidewalk to face Stan and Miri.

“Please excuse me for this little incident, but I couldn’t let a loyal soldier suffer if I could help him.”

“You did well, Sarah.” Replied gravely Stan. “My own power depends on loyal soldiers such as this man. Besides, he did appear to be a decent fellow. How about finding a good restaurant now? I am positively famished!”

“Then, I have just the perfect place in mind.” Replied Sarah, smiling.

07:21 (Paris Time)

Thursday, August 30, 1945 ‘B’

Imperium embassy

Paris, France

“Do you think that I will impress the crowds in London, Son?” Asked Stan playfully after adjusting his uniform tunic and turning around to face Prince Len, who had just entered his suite with a document in his left hand. Len looked up and down his father, resplendent in his uniform of Monarch of the Imperium, and smiled in approval.

“You certainly look as dashing as ever in this uniform, Dad. Don’t forget your crown, though.”

“Right!” Replied Stan, walking rapidly to a cabinet and pulling out a long, locked hard case. He then brought the case to the bed, putting it on the bed and unlocking it. Once opened, the case revealed the King’s Crown jewels. Stan delicately took a sort of platinum skull cap studded with gems and exquisitely engraved with the coat of arms and motto of the Imperium, then adjusted it on his bald head. The King’s Imperium crown was made to fit his head tightly but had a soft, cushioning lining that also helped dissipate heat, making it actually quite comfortable to wear. It still weighed a good half a

kilo, though. Stan put on next his parade belt, which supported his ceremonial sword and pistol. Both weapons were fine works of art but were also functioning ones as well. Once fully ready, Stan closed back the jewel case and looked at his son Len.

“Do you have something for me, Son?”

“Yes, Dad!” Said Len before approaching, stopping just in front of Stan and presenting him the document he had in one hand. “The British government sent us the protocol procedures for this morning’s royal funeral ceremony in London. It also contains the order of precedence of each of the invited guests to the ceremony. You will see from the list of guests that the British finally came to their senses and permitted Nancy Laplante and Princess Elizabeth to come to the funerals. Our contacts have learned that, while they will be part of the funeral parade, they will not be allowed inside the chapel in Windsor Castle. The British Privy Council couldn’t get the Church to budge on that last point.”

“At least, the public opinion got Nancy Laplante that much. Let’s see that order of precedence: hopefully they didn’t put me and Miri somewhere behind a prime minister from some tiny speck of island state in the Pacific.”

“Oh, don’t worry about you, Dad: you will find your name and that of Miri right after that of the Vice-President of the United States. Princess Elizabeth will be with her mother the Queen and her sister, Princess Margaret. As for Nancy Laplante, that’s another matter, though.”

Stan looked through the list for Nancy’s name but had to go all the way down to the bottom of it, something that made him frown.

“They put her dead last in the procession? I’m not big on protocol matter but this is the surest way to insult and demean a head of state, especially one as powerful and influential as Laplante. Why are the British so mean with her?”

“Dad,” said quietly Len, “don’t underestimate the influence of the Church or of religion in general in this time period. The Church has been holding a mighty grudge against Laplante for a couple of years already. This crisis is its first serious chance it has to get at her and it used all its political clout to influence the Privy Council.”

Stan looked up from the list, eyeing resolutely his son.

“Len, there is an old saying: the next important thing to a good friend is a good enemy. I considered Nancy Laplante at first as a very dangerous potential enemy for my Imperium. She could still be one if some unpredictable future event pushes us apart.

She has however acted up to now like someone who truly wishes to keep the peace between us and the Time Patrol. For that, I intend to support her now.”

“What do you intend to do, Dad?” Asked Len, suddenly a bit worried. Stan smiled to him reassuringly and patted his shoulder.

“Don’t worry, Son! I won’t go to war with the British over this. I however know how powerful I am and so do the British and all these other heads of states. I will thus show them who really counts around here, that is as soon as Miri is ready, so that we could go.”

“And why do men keep thinking that it is women that are always late? I’ve been ready for a good fifteen minutes now, guys.”

Both Stan and Len turned to face Miri, who was now standing in the open doorway connecting both royal suites. Despite the years he had already lived with her, Stan was nearly mesmerized by his First Mistress then. Miri, a shapely and fit woman standing 220 centimeters, wore a new formal uniform meant for somber ceremonials and customized to her requirements. She wore what looked at first like a long, satin black pleated skirt over highly polished boots, topped with a royal blue and red double breasted jacket of formal but very modern cut. Miri wore the bow ribbon of the Order of the Imperium on her jacket, along with the three medals she had earned while serving in the Imperium Navy prior to catching the eyes of Stan and becoming the First Mistress of the Imperium. A ceremonial belt supporting a leather belt purse and a decorated long dagger that was nearly a short sword were clipped around her waist and she also wore the crown and jewels of the First Mistress of the Imperium. When she started walking towards the two men, the latter saw that her skirt was in reality a sort of wide-legged pair of trousers that provided much better ease of movement than a skirt, especially if one had to ride a horse.

“Miri, you’re simply splendid like this!” Could only say admiringly Stan, attracting a grin on Miri’s face.

“That was the intended effect, my dear husband. Are we all ready to go?”

“We certainly are, Miri. Let’s go to the roof landing pad.”

Saluted along their way by the various guards and officials of the embassy, the royal couple and Prince Len went up to the roof landing pad, where the royal limousine was waiting for them, and took place inside the big, shiny black vehicle. On the order of the King, the driver then took off and gained altitude quickly, heading towards England

and London. Being a powerful machine in its own right, the Imperium royal limousine took only twenty minutes to fly the distance between Paris and London, finally coming to a smooth, rolling landing on St-Margaret Street behind the Palace of Westminster and stopping in front of the St-Stephen's Porch. The Aide riding in the front passenger seat quickly jumped out to open the door for the King and the First Mistress. The journalists presents and more than a few citizens looking on took picture after picture of the royal couple and of Prince Len as they stepped out of the limousine. Even with the impressive lineup of horse carriages and the presence of dozens of heads of states and World royalties, the Imperium royals still cut a most majestic figure as they walked towards the other waiting dignitaries and guests while their air limousine flew off. A British protocol officer wearing a black frock coat and top hat hurried to them with a list in his hands and bowed respectfully in front of King Stan.

"Your Majesty, it is a honor to have you and your First Mistress present. If you will follow me, I will show you your place in the procession."

Stan didn't say a word then, simply following the British official up the lineup of carriages parked along the rear façade of the Palace of Westminster while exchanging salutes and courtesies with the dignitaries they passed in front of. The official soon stopped besides an open horse carriage made of polished wood and brass.

"This is the carriage reserved for the Imperium royal family, Your Majesty. You are right behind the American delegation. The coffin of our poor King will be carried out of Westminster Hall at nine thirty precisely. It will then be pulled on a Royal Navy gun carriage to Paddington Railway Station, where it will be put on a special train to Eton Railway Station, along with you and the other dignitaries. More carriages will be waiting for you in Eton, to bring you to the St-Georges Chapel of Windsor Castle, where King George the Sixth will be buried. Do you have any questions about the ceremony, Your Majesty?"

"I have one, my good man. I see that there are places for four in this carriage and that we are only three. I would like to invite another head of state to ride with me during the procession."

The British protocol officer paled as if Stan had proffered a blasphemy.

"But, Your Majesty, that would throw the order of precedence in disarray. Who did you have in mind, Your Majesty?"

"The Overseer of the Holy Land of Palestine." Said Stan calmly, making the British recoil and hesitate.

“Your Majesty, that is impossible! Miss Laplante is too far down the precedence list to allow such a change.”

“Then, contact the chief protocol officer right now, because I intend to have her besides me during the procession. If she can’t ride in my carriage, then I will want to ride in her carriage.”

“I...I will see what can be done, Your Majesty.” Said the official, near panic, before hurrying away. Stan looked with little sympathy at the man, then faced his son Len.

“I’m going to find Nancy Laplante and talk with her. If that man comes back in the meantime, direct him towards me, Len. Will you come with me, Miri?”

“Of course, my dear Stan!” Replied Miri, smiling, before taking the arm offered by her husband and walking slowly down the line of carriages. They soon found Nancy Laplante talking with a small group of foreign dignitaries near the end of the line. She wore her silvery Time Patrol parade uniform, along with a wide silver sash passed over her right shoulder that supported both her numerous medals and a sword in its silver scabbard. She also wore a gold tiara on her head and a large, gold necklace that looked like an official jewel. Nancy smiled with happiness when she saw Stan and Miri and bowed deeply to them.

“Your Majesty, I have to say that you and First Mistress Goshenk are truly resplendent this morning.”

“And you look impressive yourself, Overseer.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty. May I present you General De Gaulle, President of France, Prime Minister Jawal Nehru of India, King Abdullah of Transjordan and Prince Franz Josef II of Liechtenstein.”

Stan had to stop himself from asking where and what the hell was Liechtenstein. Instead, he shook hands with the four men around Nancy, while Miri kissed them on the cheek, to their delight. Nancy went on as Stan was shaking hands with Prince Franz Josef, a relatively young aristocrat in frock coat and top hat.

“I actually am assigned to ride in the same carriage as Prince Franz Josef.”

“Maybe, maybe not.” Said Stan seriously. “I just asked a British protocol officer that they change your position so that you could ride in my carriage.”

Nancy gave him a surprised look, then made a deep curtsy to Stan.

“That is a gesture I greatly appreciate, Your Majesty. I will be honored to ride with you...if the British let me.”

“The British government acted foolishly in this, Nancy.” Cut in General De Gaulle, visibly irritated by the subject. “To show such pettiness on such a sad and solemn occasion...”

“I agree with you, General.” Seconded Jawal Nehru. “The Overseer has been acting as peace mediator in a number of present conflicts, including in the Kashmir. She should be recognized like the World-class peacemaker she is instead of being snubbed like today.”

“May I ask what the conflict in this...Kashmir is about, Prime Minister?” Asked Miri out of pure curiosity. Nehru smiled good-naturedly while discreetly admiring the statuesque First Mistress.

“Since my country is a protagonist in that conflict, Miss Laplante may be a less biased person to tell you about it. Nancy?”

“With pleasure, Prime Minister.” Replied Nancy, then looking at Stan and Miri. “To make a long story short, India has just won its independence from Great Britain after close to 150 years of British rule. That however immediately sparked horrible ethnic and religious riots between the Hindus and Muslims in India. The Muslims insisted on having their own state, even if that meant the mass relocation of millions of people from both faiths. That state, which is known as Pakistan, is now at war with the Indian Union over the territory of Kashmir. I have been trying for months now to bring peace back to the Indian sub-continent, unfortunately with little success. The depth of hatred and distrust between the Muslims and the Hindus is very great and dates back from many centuries. I am however still hoping to make a difference.”

“You have already made quite a difference, miss.” Protested Nehru. “Don’t sell yourself short on this.”

“How bad is that conflict?” Asked Miri after an hesitation. Nancy sighed in apparent sorrow and discouragement.

“Over 300,000 people have died already in the ethnic clashes and in the fighting around the Kashmir. Many more will die before things can cool down. The main problem I hit there is the same as here: religious intolerance.”

“Miri, remind me to pass an edict banning public preaching of any religion in the Imperium once we are back.” Said Stan with a gesture of irritation. “Up to now, I have heard little to commend religion to me.”

Len then approached them, leading a British official dressed in a uniform seemingly covered with gold braid.

“Father, this is the Lord Earl Marshal, who is responsible for the protocol during this funeral.”

The gray-haired man saluted Stan, who saluted back, then cleared his voice.

“Your Majesty, I was just informed of your desire to have the Overseer of Palestine travel in your carriage instead of in the one originally allotted to her. I however am afraid that this is not possible, as it would disturb gravely the order of precedence of the funeral procession. The Overseer will have to ride in the last carriage, Your Majesty.”

Stan gave the man a dark look. He never had been fond of protocol but adding political hypocrisy to it only made it worst in his eyes. His voice was frosty and cut like a blade then.

“Lord Earl Marshal, could you tell me how you could justify on protocol grounds putting dead last a head of state that is more powerful and controls more population than half of the guests preceding her? How could you put a queen behind countesses and even ladies-in-waiting in a procession? I, along with my First Mistress and my son, share the Overseer’s beliefs concerning Jesus Christ. Does that mean that I could be snubbed as well and relegated to the tail of the procession? The Overseer and I came here to pay our respects to a worthy monarch, not to be used like political pawns by your Church. Either she moves to my carriage or I will ride in her carriage, sir.”

The Earl Marshal, completely taken aback by Stan’s firmness, could only pale and stutter as he tried to find a polite answer to Stan’s challenge.

“But, Your Majesty, that carriage is too small for all of you!”

Stan’s glare then hardened noticeably in a way that Len knew meant that he had just taken an irrevocable decision.

“Then I and my First Mistress will walk behind that carriage with the Overseer, Lord Earl Marshal! Tell your Prime Minister that this display of pettiness has disappointed me greatly. Don’t bother changing the procession order now: I have chosen my definitive place for this event. Be assured that this reflects in no way on my deep respect for the memory of King George the Sixth.”

General De Gaulle then stepped forward as the Earl Marshal, suddenly sweating, was about to turn around and walk away.

“I will walk with the Overseer and King Stan as well, Lord Earl Marshal.”

“I will do the same as well.” Added King Abdullah of Transjordan, closely followed by Prime Minister Nehru. Now nearly apoplectic, the Earl Marshal all but ran

away, entering the Palace of Westminster by the St-Stephen's Porch. Nancy looked around at the others close to her, gratefulness in her eyes.

"I must thank you from the bottom of my heart for your support, my friends. I will never forget this."

"You helped all of us in our respective times of need, Nancy." Replied softly De Gaulle. "It is only just that we pay you back the favor."

"Still, thank you again, all of you."

"Now that this is taken care of, how about telling us more about this conflict in Kashmir?" Said casually Stan while smiling. "I am afraid that I need a very quick lesson in the politics of this time period."

"I will be pleased to help you in that, Your Majesty." Replied Nancy, also smiling.

Nancy then spent the next forty minutes discussing the political situation of the present time period with Stan as they waited for the funeral ceremony to start. During that time, no less than eleven other heads of states or monarchs came one by one to her, both to pledge their support to her and to walk with her. Stan watched all this unfold while listening to Nancy, who truly impressed him with her vast political knowledge and wisdom. Most of the newcomers to their group were from countries that owed her either their freedom from German or Japanese occupation, or their independence from the old European colonial powers. Stan saw from the corner of one eye the Earl Marshal watching their growing group with increasing dismay. That man however didn't come to them to try to restore order to his now severely disturbed precious list of precedence. The journalists and photographers present around the Palace of Westminster were however quick enough to smell a juicy story in the making and took copious pictures of the group assembled around Nancy. More pictures were taken when Queen Elizabeth and Princess Margaret, accompanied by the former Princess Elizabeth, briefly came to Nancy and her group to thank her for coming, then returned to the head of the procession. A bit before nine O'clock, the dignitaries and the military escort were lined up on both sides of St-Stephen's Porch by the Earl Marshal. At nine, the casket of King George the Sixth was carried out of Westminster Hall at a slow, solemn step, with a military band playing the royal anthem and the dignitaries and soldiers either saluting or presenting arms or swords. It was then put on top of the Royal Navy gun carriage that would transport it to Paddington Railway Station. All the dignitaries got in their carriages at that point, all except for Nancy and her supporters, who lined up on foot behind the

last carriage. Forming up in a frontage of five persons, with Nancy in the center of the front rank, the group of dignitaries on foot started following at a slow march the procession of carriages. Behind Nancy's group was a large crowd of people on foot which represented the lower British classes of guests to the funeral. Many of those were renown members of liberal professions or government bureaucrats. The hydraulics engineer that had met Sarah/Nancy and the Imperium royal couple at the Red Lion Pub was part of that crowd and had watched the congregating of heads of states around Nancy with growing glee. The engineer thought to himself that it was a sad state of affair indeed to see that it was taking such an occasion to shake the British establishment and wake it up to the modern world. Hopefully, Nancy Laplante was going to be around for a long while, to keep kicking those old conservative men in the seat of their pants. At the least, she already had a few political allies of consequence to help her in her task.

CHAPTER 10 – RESCUE MISSION

17:39 (Montreal Time)

Tuesday, February 14, 2017 'A'

Suite 215, 800 Montarville

Boucherville, Quebec

Canada

Nancy closed and locked the door of her condominium suite behind her, then temporarily suspended in the entrance closet the dress bag she had brought in before taking off her winter coat and boots. Mid February was when you could expect about the worst from the Canadian Winter and this year was no exception. Rubbing her frozen cheeks with her hands to reestablish sensations to her face, Nancy then grabbed back the dress bag from the closet and brought it to her bedroom, where she laid it on her big bed before unzipping it opened. The splendid emerald green and gold reception gown she took out of the bag had just been picked up by her in a Montreal haute couture boutique and had cost her over 3,400 dollars. Normally, she would consider such an expenditure to be an extravagant waste of money, but one didn't show up on the red carpet in Hollywood for the Academy Awards annual ceremony while dressed in jeans and T-shirt. She had after all been nominated as one of the finalists for the award of Best Actress in a Drama Motion Picture, for her role as the main protagonist of 'DANCES WITH THE SHADOWS', the prequel to her first movie 'CROSSROADS'. Her latest movie, which told the story of how her personae of The Shadow Dancer had evolved from being a promising French secret government agent to that of an international assassin for hire, had been a resounding success, both with critics and at the box office. With her previous Oscar nominations in 2015 and 2016 for the Supporting Actress in a Drama award, first for 'CROSSROADS' and then for 'AVENGERS 2', this nomination and her last movie had definitely consecrated her career as a respected and sought after actress. The surest mark of this was the fact that she had been asked a month ago to play one of the main roles in the next James Bond movie. While she didn't intend yet to give up war reporting, she certainly felt that she could start slowing down a bit in that respect. Her husband Mike and her children, living

as they did in different time periods than this one, would certainly feel happy about that. Her secret career as a senior field agent of the Time Patrol was already risky enough as it was, but her crazy stints at war reporting in the 21st Century were starting to seriously worry her family.

Next out of the bag was a pair of expensive high heel shoes matching the gown. While also expensive, that pair of shoes got a less enthusiastic glance from her, not because they were ugly, but rather because she still wondered how women could have put up for so many centuries with something as uncomfortable as high heel shoes. The answer was of course that such shoes made them look taller, but Nancy didn't need high hell shoes to feel tall enough. She felt a lot more comfortable in a pair of combat boots or running shoes. Stowing her new shoes in a box inside her bedroom closet, next to her new gown, she then went to wash her hands before going to her small kitchen to prepare her supper.

With a beef stew warming up in her kitchen, Nancy served herself a glass of chilled, fruity white wine before going to sit in her lounge in front of the television. An eternal news freak, she switched her television set on to the CNN channel as she sat down on her couch. She wasn't even fully sitting before she froze with alarm on seeing a flash news scroll across the bottom announcement strip: Anderson Cooper had been kidnapped in Afghanistan! Deadly worried at once, she raised the volume and listened on to the CNN news anchor, who was in fact talking about that precise piece of news. The details were still very sketchy, but the star CNN anchor and talk show host had been kidnapped about twelve hours ago near the Pakistani border in Kandahar Province, while his cameraman and his local interpreter had been killed, along with a number of Afghan policemen escorting him. Nancy nearly threw up her hands in frustration when the anchorman said that, while unconfirmed, the kidnapping could have been the work of Taliban extremists.

"Of course it is the Taliban, Greg! Who else could it be down in Kandahar?" Containing her frustration and worries, she listened carefully to the next twenty minutes of the news broadcast, nearly forgetting in the process her stew and taking the pot off the oven only when alerted by the smell of something that was starting to burn. Swearing like only a Quebecer could do, she quickly saved what she could of her supper before sitting back with her plate in front of her television set. Unfortunately, very few

extra details became available in the next hour, except for the fact that the White House and American State Department were aware of Cooper's kidnapping. Unfortunately, there were no American soldiers left in Afghanistan these days, save for a few liaison officers and training specialists in the capital, Kabul. If there were any American special force units left in Afghanistan, the White House certainly wasn't saying so, while the present relations with the Pakistani government pretty much ensured that no American soldiers would be present in Pakistan and ready to track down Anderson Cooper's kidnappers there. Finally, Nancy grabbed her telephone and called CNN headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia, passing by the duty dispatcher to get in contact with the central newsroom there and obtain as much information as she could about Cooper. Unfortunately, what she got then was flimsy indeed. Putting down slowly her telephone receiver, Nancy then thought about what she could do. Contrary to most people, she knew quite a lot of details about the Taliban and their organization in that region, and for good reasons: they had put a death fatwa, or religious edict, on her head while she was still an officer in the Canadian Military Intelligence. With a prisoner as valuable and World-renown as Anderson Cooper, his handling would most probably be controlled by the upper top command echelon of the Taliban. That, and the fact that he had been kidnapped in Kandahar Province, near the Pakistani border, was enough for Nancy to focus her mind on a particular region of Pakistan. Her mind made up, she got up from her couch and went to her bedroom to start packing things for a sudden trip.

10:03 (Washington Time)

Thursday, February 16, 2017 'A'

Operations Directorate's conference room

CIA headquarters, Langley

State of Virginia, U.S.A.

Deputy Director for Operations John Moore appeared rather somber to Dean Price as he sat down with Erik Johnson and other agents and analysts of the Operations Directorate in the large, sound-proof and bug-free conference room. The big and strong CIA covert action agent already could guess why they all had been called in like this with little advance notice: it must have something to do with the kidnapping of the star CNN talk show host, Anderson Cooper, in Afghanistan two days ago. Unfortunately, Dean, along with his longtime teammate Erik Johnson, knew that the CIA could do little in

Afghanistan or Pakistan at this time: most of the CIA agents and informers had either been burned and forced to leave Afghanistan after the departure of the American forces from that country, or had been expelled out of Pakistan, or worse, by the Pakistani intelligence services, the ISI. Right now, the CIA considered the ISI pretty much as a hostile intelligence service that too often supported unofficially the Taliban. Moore, having taken the head seat at the table, then started speaking in a sober tone.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I just received an operational tasking that comes direct from the President. As some may have guessed already, it concerns CNN talk show host Anderson Cooper, who was kidnapped two days ago in Kandahar Province. The President wants us to do everything possible to find and liberate Cooper. I have already told Director Perkins that our network in Pakistan is now next to non-existent and that the ISI will probably actively work against us, but he told me that the President’s tasking stands. Thus, we will do our best regardless of difficulties. To resume quickly what happened two days ago, or at least what we know about it, Cooper, a CNN cameraman and a local translator were visiting the region of Spin Boldak, near the Pakistani border in Kandahar Province, with an escort of six Afghan policemen. Unfortunately, from what we could piece together afterwards, one of those policemen was in reality a Taliban mole, who led the group into a Taliban ambush and even shot some of his police colleagues when the ambush was sprung. The CNN cameraman and local translator we shot dead at that time, while the Taliban grabbed Cooper and disappeared, most probably passing clandestinely the Pakistani border afterwards. Then, late last night, Washington time, the Taliban released through Pakistani television a video showing Cooper, being held in an unidentified location in Pakistan. A Taliban spokesman that we have since identified to be connected to the Quetta Shura of Mullah Omar claimed in that video recording that Cooper was being held as a spy of the United States and would be judged as such by the Taliban leadership. Thus, we can fairly safely bet that Cooper is being held in or near Quetta, in the province of Baluchistan. That is however a large piece of very rugged estate with a population of around one million persons, most of whom are of Pashto ethnicity. Two drones were directed by Central Command into Pakistani airspace yesterday in attempts to obtain fresh sensor coverage of a number of suspect locations in and around Quetta that had been connected in the past with the Quetta Shura. Unfortunately, the Pakistani Air Force detected those two drones and sent fighter aircraft that then shot down our drones.”

Dean Price felt some frustration on hearing that. As valuable as drones could be over uncontested airspace, too many amateur strategists and techno-warriors tended to forget that remotely-controlled drones flying at low subsonic speeds could not survive long in an airspace properly defended by an effective air defense network that had both surface-to-air missiles and fighter aircraft. At least in that respect, the protracted wars in Iraq and Afghanistan had taught the wrong lessons to too many people about the proper place of drones in the American military arsenal. In the case of Pakistan, which had lived through multiple wars with India and watched diligently its eastern borders and airspace against possible Indian incursions, the Pakistani Air Force was a factor that could be ignored only at one's peril. A female analyst then raised a hand to ask a question.

"Then, what can Director Perkins really expect us to do, sir? We in fact have exactly zero assets left on the ground in the area of Quetta. The rare informers and agents left to us in other parts of Pakistan are being actively hunted down by the ISI, while any Caucasian agent we would infiltrate in the Quetta region would stand out like the nose in the middle of the face. Notwithstanding all the respect I have for our action agents, sending any of them there sounds to me like a suicide mission."

Dean, like Erik Johnson, didn't get irritated at that remark, instead nodding their heads somberly: the analyst was unfortunately right. Only ethnic Pakistani agents could reasonably hope to travel to Quetta without attracting immediate and unhealthy attention. Unfortunately, the CIA was presently lacking in such agents.

"As much as I hate to say this," said Erik Johnson, who was the most senior action agent present in Langley, "Johanna is right, sir. With the Pakistani government effectively, if not officially, working against us in concert with the Taliban, we simply lack the assets to mount a quick operation in Quetta. As for launching a military special operation similar to the one that killed Osama Bin Laden in 2012, we would need a lot more intelligence than what we have right now. Besides, such an operation would take time to prepare and launch, by which Cooper will probably be dead already. This leaves only one possibility in my mind: to parachute a couple of agents from high altitude at night over Quetta and then hope that those agents could survive long enough to find Cooper and then call in a massive air support package to extract them. That, however, would have severe diplomatic and political consequences, even if the operation succeeded. Is the President ready to assume such consequences?"

"But, those two agents would have next to no chance of survival." Objected the female analyst, looking at Johnson with shock and concern. Erik nodded his head once.

"True, Johanna. Personally, I would rate my chances to come out of such a mission at less than twenty percent. However, we have a tasking from the President and we have to try something."

John Moore stared for a moment at his senior action agent, his face impassive. In reality, his stomach was souring up at the mere idea of sending such a prize agent and other action agents in such a hopeless trap. Contrary to some of his predecessors, Moore was not the type to send agents to their deaths on meaningless or suicide missions. Another analyst in the room, a geeky type slim young man, suddenly seemed to think about something, straightening up in his chair. Moore gave him a sharp look: while his appearance was quite unimpressive, Ian Dorset was a true genius when it came to data research and analysis, and had often been paired with Johnson and Price as their supporting mission analyst. Dorset also held the highest security clearances available at the CIA and had access to many secrets that were unknown to other, more senior CIA analysts.

"You have something in mind, Mister Dorset?"

"Uh, maybe, sir. However, I would need to leave this room for a moment, time to go check something on my computer."

Moore nodded at once in understanding: the conference room had no internet or computer network connection, for obvious security reasons.

"Go ahead, Mister Dorset. In the meantime, we will review what we know about Quetta and the Taliban Shura, in case we effectively send action agents in."

"Thank you, sir. I shouldn't be long."

Dorset was actually back in the conference room after less than fifteen minutes. Moore noticed at once the concern visible on his face as he sat back at the table.

"Do you have something for us, Mister Dorset?"

"Uh, you could say that, sir. Miss Laplante, the celebrated war correspondent that works part-time for CNN, left Montreal yesterday to go to Dubai via New York. She left Dubai last night, Washington time, on a Pakistan International Airlines plane headed for Quetta. Right now, Miss Laplante is thus in Quetta, if she is not dead already."

Johanna the analyst nearly jumped into her seat on hearing that. For one thing, she was not in the know about Nancy's secret life as a time traveler.

“WHAT? CRAZY NANCY WENT TO QUETTA? But, the Taliban have placed a death fatwa on her head years ago. As a tall Caucasian woman travelling alone, she will stand out even more than one of our male agents in Quetta. She must be suicidal!”

“Maybe, maybe not.” Replied calmly Erik Johnson. “Maybe she is actually planning to get captured, so that she would then be brought to the same location where Cooper is being held. Then, she could unleash hell on the Taliban from the inside. It’s a risky plan, but it has the merit of being simple and it actually has a chance of success, especially if the Taliban make the mistake of underestimating her.”

“A risky plan, Mister Johnson?” Said Johanna, obviously troubled. “I know that Laplante can be a very dangerous woman when she wants to, but to escape the Taliban once captured? That’s if they don’t torture her to death right away to make an example out of her. Now we may have two CNN celebrities in trouble in Pakistan instead of one. That’s great!”

“If that’s the case, then let’s at least use that as much as we can.” Cut in Moore in a resolute tone. “I want Nancy Laplante’s name to be inputted into our ECHELON listening program, in connection with the words ‘Taliban’, ‘Shura’, ‘Quetta’ and ‘Pakistan’. Hopefully, if some Taliban or Pakistani official sees her and signals her presence, we will then be able to locate where Cooper is being held. In the meantime, let’s be ready to send in a raid package in case we obtain that location. Hopefully, the President will then authorize such a raid.”

20:29 (Pakistan Time) / 10:29 (Washington Time)

Boarding house, western suburbs of Quetta

Pakistan

Parmat Singh Rajat was a bearded man of medium height but solid built and, as someone originally from Srinagar, in Kashmir, his physical type blended easily with others around Quetta. He however was presently wearing a Muslim turban and baggy pants and tunic more typical of Pakistani men’s outfit as he watched with other clients of the boarding house the news on the old television set of the communal lounge. Except for an old couple of travelers, all the other customers of the boarding house in which Parmat had taken a room this early afternoon were unaccompanied men, mostly merchants on business trips or men visiting relatives in Quetta. Parmat himself, traveling under the assumed name of Khalid Zulfikar, was officially on a business trip,

looking to replenish his stocks of merchandise with contraband goods coming from nearby Afghanistan. Right now, the news on the Pakistani official news channel had everyone's attention in the lounge, with the newsman repeating the news that the famous CNN war correspondent, Nancy Laplante, had arrived today at the Quetta airport, coming from Dubai, only to then disappear from the airport. The newsman then reminded his viewers of the religious death edict put on Laplante's head by the Taliban, making one of the customers in the lounge chuckle.

"These idiots at the airport managed to lose track of a tall woman infidel traveling alone? They are even more incompetent than I thought."

"Or she bought them." Suggested another customer, making many heads nod around him. "With CNN to support her, she must have a lot of money with her."

"A distinct possibility. Maybe Mullah Omar should call for some heads to roll among airport officials, for letting such an enemy of the Taliban escape so easily."

"I wonder if that Laplante came here to try to find that CNN person captured by the Taliban, Anderson Cooper if I remember well his name." Said Parmat, aka Khalid Zulfikar. That got him a few questioning looks from around him.

"You think that this woman would be crazy enough to try that, friend?" Asked the oldest customer present.

"Why else would she come here? Normally, this should be the very last place in the World where she would come, and she does work for CNN. With a CNN man in Taliban hands, that would be the only possible reason I can see for her to come here."

"You very well may be right, friend. I suppose that the Taliban Shura leadership must have had the same thought than you."

"Well, if they didn't, then maybe they should pray to get some more brains." Replied Parmat caustically, making many in the lounge laugh briefly. "Have they offered any kind of money reward for her capture or death?"

"Nobody said anything about that yet." Answered a young male customer. "Maybe that would be the best way to find that woman. If not, that devil incarnate could well seduce some in Quetta with either money or her body into helping her. There are still way too many weak believers around town to my taste."

"Hmm, with her known physical appearance, she would indeed be able to seduce many weak men." Said the old customer. "My nephew Saleem could certainly fall for her big chest."

There was more collective laugh at that remark, followed by a string of rather vulgar jokes about the power of infidel women to pervert believers. Those jokes however didn't appear to be to the taste of the young man that had answered Parmat. Wearing a black turban and with an AK47 assault rifle at his side, he was more than probably a Taliban fighter, something his next words confirmed to others.

"My faith will be stronger than all her temptations. I came from Bellpat in response to the Shura's request for extra volunteers to reinforce its security in Quetta. If that female devil shows up, I will slay her."

"What if the Shura wished to capture her alive, to parade her beside that Anderson Cooper and judge them together?" Suggested Parmat in an informal manner.

"Then, God willing, I will be among the firsts to see her die."

The young Taliban then didn't say more, maybe realizing that he had said too much. Nobody dared ask him more questions afterwards, probably fearing of being accused of being spies or informers for the Americans. Parmat certainly didn't push further on that subject, as his goal was to be as unobtrusive as possible. The young Taliban's words had however just given him some precious information.

A bit over one hour later, most of the customers of the boarding house started to retire to their individual, minuscule rooms, to go sleep, since there was very little to do at night in Quetta apart from conversing with others with cups of tea in one's hand. Parmat went to his own room at about eleven and made a show of going to sleep until the house became utterly quiet. At a bit past midnight, he opened his eyes in the dark and got quietly up, then went with the silence of a cat to the room used by the young Taliban, finding the latter sound asleep. Very quietly kneeling besides the Taliban, Parmat then started cautiously a telepathic introspection of the young man's mind, basically inducing him to dream about why he came to Quetta. He explored the Taliban's souvenirs for a good twenty minutes, recording mentally names, faces and locations, before suddenly grabbing the young man's head and violently twisting it. The neck broke clean at once, killing the Taliban instantly with little noise. Parmat then quietly searched the dead man, finding a set of Pakistani identity papers, a knife and some money. Next, he packed up the dead man's possessions, which were rather meager, and shouldered the pack before picking up the body in his arms and getting to his feet. Both disappeared in a brief flash of light from the little room, with Parmat reappearing two minutes later, without the Taliban's body. Picking up the Taliban's turban, rifle and ammunition belt, Parmat

returned to his own cubicle and stuffed the rifle, with its stock folded, inside his own pack, along with the ammunition belt. As she silently walked out of her room, the dead Taliban's turban on Parmat's head, Nancy thanked the fact that her most recent past incarnation had been that of Parmat Singh Rajat, a Sikh merchant that had died in 1919, killed with his family by bandits during a pilgrimage trip to Srinagar. Along with the fake Pakistani identity card produced for her by the Time Patrol while she was under the physical form of Parmat, she could easily pass for a native Pakistani man, something that the Taliban certainly didn't expect or couldn't even imagine. In fact, if she wanted to she could become, with the help of the extra powers given to her by her ring of Queen of Jerusalem, any of her past incarnations, including Karl Beck the German mercenary chieftain or Joan of Arc.

Leaving the boarding house discreetly, Nancy, or rather Parmat, went to a dark corner to take the AK-47 rifle and ammunition belt out of her pack: if she was going to go around at night, better do it as a Taliban, to prevent any embarrassing question by policemen, soldiers or other Taliban fighters. With the AK-47 now shouldered by its sling, Nancy decided to cheat a bit more and went to phase shift, essentially creating a bubble of accelerated time around herself and disappearing from the sight of other persons: she now moved at a thousand times the normal speed. She literally zipped around Quetta in minutes, heading towards the Murdaar district of the town, named after one of four imposing hills surrounding Quetta. There she found a large walled compound near a local mosque, as it had been described by an envoy from Quetta to the young Taliban she had killed. If anything, it was rather easy to spot simply because of the heavy security around it. No less than six armed bearded men in black turbans guarded the main access gate, along with a parked pickup truck sporting a heavy machinegun. More armed men were visible in guard towers at each corner of the compound, while a large green Islamic flag floated above the three-story brick building sitting inside the compound, along with a smaller annex building. A careful visual scan of the area while hidden in a dark corner showed to Nancy more armed men standing guard on the roofs of a number of houses surrounding the compound, which was itself situated right at the foot of the Murdaar Hill. For any conventional assault force, taking this compound would involve a tough fight that would inevitably attract quickly all kinds of reinforcements in either Taliban fighters or Pakistani soldiers. Nancy, either in or out of Parmat's physical form, was however no conventional assault force. Before doing any

more killing, though, she had to ascertain for sure if Anderson Cooper was in this compound or not.

00:50 (Pakistan Time)

Friday, February 17, 2017 'A'

Locked room, Taliban compound

Murdaar District, Quetta

Pakistan

Anderson Cooper was awakened by progressively stronger but gentle shakes. He then instinctively rolled himself into a protective ball before he could see clearly, expecting more blows from his normally brutal guards. Instead, he heard a soft female voice that he knew well.

"Don't be afraid, Anderson: it's me, Nancy."

The CNN talk show host looked up with incredulity at the dark silhouette bent over his sleeping mat, unable to believe his luck. A horrible thought then came to his mind.

"Nancy? Don't tell me that they captured you as well?"

"Hardly!" Replied the turbaned shape above him, smiling and showing white teeth. "I came to rescue you."

Sitting up on his mat, Anderson looked around the dark room, whose door was ajar. He however didn't see anyone else.

"Don't tell me that you came here alone, Nancy."

"Not exactly, Anderson. I had some discreet help to find you and get in here, but they had to disappear, in order to protect their own identities."

"Uh, I don't understand. They had to disappear? You don't have Navy SEALs with you?"

"Anderson," said Nancy in a patient tone, "keep this strictly to yourself, but I also happen to work for the CIA from time to time. Covert agents found where you were held and then opened the way for me in this compound, but from now on we will have to go it mostly alone. Are you wounded anyway? Can you walk?"

"My pride took most of the bruising, Nancy." Answered Anderson, slowly getting up. He still wore the same T-shirt and jeans that he was wearing when kidnapped inside Afghanistan. They were now grubby and worse for wear but still usable. He then quickly put on his hiking boots and laced them while Nancy went to the door to watch.

Nancy however stopped him before he could walk out and showed him an old backpack at her feet.

“You are not leaving here like this, Anderson: you are too easy to spot as a foreigner. I have a few things with me to help disguise you.”

She then took out of the backpack a turban, a beige Pakistani man’s robe and jacket, a pair of sunglasses, a wig of black hair and a false black beard. She took a few minutes to help him dress and put on the wig and false beard, ending up by giving him the kind of mouth inserts used in Hollywood to make your cheeks look fatter. Taking a step back, she eyed him from head to toe and smiled to him.

“That’s much better. Now, follow me closely and don’t say a word. I suppose that you don’t speak Urdu or Pashto?”

“Not at all!”

“Then let me do the talking...or the killing, depending on the circumstances.”

His heart beating furiously, Anderson followed Nancy, who was also disguised like a Taliban and had an AK-47 rifle, out of his cell and into a corridor, nearly tripping on the bodies of two dead Taliban covered with blood. Both men had their throats cut wide open. Only his long experience of reporting from war zones stopped Anderson from letting out an exclamation. That was however only part of quite a scene of carnage that followed. Everywhere around the building and the compound, bloodied corpses lay still, all with throats cut or with hearts punctured. Anderson couldn’t help shiver at those sights: whoever had done that had been incredibly ruthless and efficient. Nancy saw his expression and smiled to him to reassure him.

“I suppose that you could say that spying is truly a cut-throat business. This way!”

Surprisingly, she didn’t lead him immediately out of the building, instead bringing him to a large bedroom where a dead man lay in bed, covered with blood. The dead also wore an eye patch. Nancy gave the corpse a hateful look.

“This is Mullah Mohammed Omar, the spiritual leader of the Taliban. That old bastard finally paid for his crimes.”

“My God! This alone would rate as a great coup, Nancy.”

“Well, don’t forget that outing a CIA field agent is a federal offense, Anderson, so I will ask you again to say as little as possible about this mission once back in the United States. I however agree that we should announce publicly Omar’s death, something that

should seriously shake the Taliban's morale. We will now go grab one of the vehicles parked in the compound, before starting to drive towards Chaman and the Afghan border."

"The Afghan border? But, why not instead fly directly out of here? Quetta has an international airport, no?"

Nancy gave him a no-nonsense look.

"Anderson, understand that we must from now on consider Pakistani authorities and officials as possibly hostile to us. If they catch us, there are no assurances that they won't hand us back to the Taliban. As for driving all the way South to the coast and Karachi, there are simply too many checkpoints along the way: we would be stopped and caught well before getting to Karachi. At least, in Afghanistan we could get to Kabul and take refuge there at one of the western embassies until an American plane could pick us up. I suppose that you don't have your passport anymore?"

"That's right, Nancy. However, I should be recognized easily in most places, once out of this disguise."

"Same for me. I suppose that it could be both a bore and a help to be famous...or infamous. Anyway, enough talking! Let's go down to the compound."

They encountered yet more dead bodies on the way down to the ground floor, plus two more behind a row of four small pickup trucks parked inside the compound. Nancy checked their fuel tank levels first, finally selecting the truck with the most gasoline left in it. She put as well in the back of that truck four jerry-cans of fuel taken from the other vehicles. On a second thought, she went back to one of the dead Taliban and took a pistol from his belt, along with two spare magazines. She then returned to Anderson and gave him the pistol and magazines.

"Here, in case we have to shoot our way out. Get in! I will drive."

Anderson, the pistol in one hand, sat in the cab of the truck and had one last look around the compound as Nancy took place behind the wheel. He must have counted over twenty dead Taliban since walking out of his cell. The engine of their truck then came to life, with Nancy speaking as she engaged gears.

"Remember, Anderson: let me do the talking. If anyone tries to speak to you, pretend that you are mute and take your cues from me. I will try anyway to avoid as much as possible road checkpoints."

She then drove out of the compound and turned into the street outside, leaving behind a silent, dark place full of dead men.

Shortly after leaving the northern-most suburbs of Quetta, Nancy pulled over and stopped her pickup truck behind a closed and deserted roadside vending stall, shutting down the engine and killing the lights, alarming Anderson.

“Why are we stopping here, Nancy?”

“I need to do a phone call. It shouldn’t be long.”

Grabbing her backpack, Nancy took out of it a satellite telephone and switched it on, thinking for a short moment before punching in a number.

“Hum, we are ten hours ahead of Washington time, meaning that it is a bit past three in the afternoon over there. My contact should be in his office.”

Watched anxiously by Anderson, Nancy then waited for an answer. Thankfully, a male voice answered after two rings.

“Moore speaking! Who is it?”

“Sir, this is Nancy Laplante, calling from Quetta, Pakistan. Do you have a minute?”

She could tell by some shuffling noise and by the fact that Moore temporarily covered his microphone that he was probably alerting his staff to listen on to the call. He however answered her quickly enough.

“Miss Laplante, are you alright?”

“Perfectly alright, sir. I now have Anderson Cooper with me and we just drove out of Quetta. We however may need some counsels on how best to get home from here. I suspect that just showing at the Quetta Airport won’t do, while driving all the way to Karachi would be extremely risky and long. Right now, I am on my way to Chaman and the Afghan border, but I am not sure how the Pakistani border guards or even the Afghan ones will react to us.”

“You are right about the Quetta Airport, Miss Laplante. Right now, the Pakistani authorities have refused all our requests for help to find Mister Cooper. They also fired at our drones. Unfortunately, the Afghan are proving only a little less problematic.”

Nancy was actually not surprised to hear that: while Afghan officials were as corrupt as ever, more and more of them were also quietly dealing with the Taliban since the departure of NATO troops and trainers from Afghanistan three years ago. Afghan politicians also had been forced by circumstances to accommodate the Taliban in many

ways. The whole picture in Afghanistan was a depressing one indeed to Nancy, who had done her part in the past to try to help the Afghans out of their problems. An idea then suddenly popped in her mind.

"Sir, when I arrived by air in Quetta yesterday, I saw there a civilian light helicopter parked a bit aside from the tarmac. It is of a model that has enough range to get to Kabul, or to India if need be, and I happen to be qualified on light helicopters and private planes. Would you be able to find out quickly if it is still parked at the airport?"

"I certainly can give that question a top priority, miss. In the meantime, I would counsel that you stay out of sight until I can call you back."

"I can wait for maybe one hour, sir, but more than that would cost me too much precious time. Here is my number..."

Moore took note of her satellite telephone number, then hung up after promising to get her a quick answer. Putting down her satellite telephone, Nancy gave a comforting smile to Anderson Cooper.

"Well, we will wait here a bit, hoping that we soon get some positive information on how to get out of Pakistan. Are you hungry?"

Anderson nodded wearily.

"Those bastards didn't feed me since my capture. I guess that they were figuring that they didn't need to, since they were about to execute me anyway."

Nancy gave him a pained look, then searched inside her backpack, taking out a bottle of water and a small bag of beef jerky sticks and giving them to Anderson.

"Here! Don't worry about eating all the jerky sticks: I have more in there."

"Thanks! You are a good friend indeed...and an incredible woman."

Nancy smiled at that but let Anderson eat in peace, as he was obviously famished. The irony was that they could have both returned to the United States quickly and safely, but the price of that would have been for her to divulge to Cooper that she was a time traveler, something she just could not do.

Her satellite telephone rang maybe forty minutes later. Grabbing it quickly, Nancy answered it, to hear the voice of Deputy Director Moore.

"Miss Laplante, I have some good news and also some bad news. That helicopter, a Bell Jet Ranger of the Askari Aviation company, is still at the Quetta Airport and was supposedly fuelled up in advance yesterday for a charter trip this morning. That's the good news. The bad news is that we got confirmation that the Afghan Border

Police unit in Spin Boldak is in league with the Taliban, and so are the Pakistani border policemen in Chaman. Showing up there would be suicidal for you.”

“I see!” Said drily Nancy. “By the way, I do have a piece of news for you: Mullah Omar is dead, his throat cut open. I guess that means that letting myself be captured alive is not an option for me. Then, I will make my way to the Quetta Airport. Could I at the least expect a warm reception in Kabul, or will I get the cold shoulder from the Afghans, sir?”

“Kabul should be safe, Miss Laplante. I will alert our embassy there so that they could be ready for you and Mister Cooper. I will also alert the Defense Department. Call me back once you are in the air.”

“I will, sir.”

As she closed the connection, Anderson gave her a questioning look.

“So?”

“So? We go steal a helicopter at the Quetta Airport and fly to Kabul. Simple, indeed!”

Anderson reflected on that for a moment, then eyed Nancy soberly.

“Nancy, whatever happens, I will owe you. You must be the bravest woman I ever met, and also one I admire for many more reasons.”

“And you are the kind of man worth saving at all cost, Anderson.” Replied Nancy, equally serious. “The only thing that I would like back from you would be for you to attend the Oscars ceremony in Hollywood, on the 26th. With luck, I may just win an Oscar that night and having you there then would truly please me.”

“Consider that a deal, Nancy.” Said softly Anderson, smiling to her. She smiled back, then started the engine of their pickup truck and drove off, taking the direction of the Quetta Airport.

16:57 (Washington Time) / 02:57 (Pakistan Time)

Thursday, February 16 (Washington) / Friday, February 17 (Pakistan)

Office of the Deputy Director for Operations

CIA headquarters, Langley

John Moore was reading an analysis report on the command structure of the Taliban when his telephone rang. Looking at the caller identification display, he saw that

it was an internal call coming from Ian Dorset, one of his best analysts. He thus put his telephone on intercom mode and spoke up.

“Yes, Mister Dorset?”

The urgency in Dorset’s voice alarmed at once Moore.

“Sir, I just got a report from our ECHELON system on a call made in Quetta, naming Nancy Laplante. The call came from the known cell phone of our lone informant left in Quetta, the one we asked a bit over one hour ago to check on that helicopter parked at the Quetta Airport. In turn, that call was made to the cell phone number of a known Pakistani ISI officer in Quetta, and this after we contacted our informant. Sir, that bastard is a double agent working for the Pakistani intelligence services!”

Moore couldn’t help letting out a pungent swear on hearing that. Containing with difficulty his anger and worry, he spoke urgently in his intercom.

“Mister Dorset, pass that information to Erik Johnson and Dean Price and tell them to come at once to my office. You come as well.”

“And Miss Laplante, sir? She is going to fall into a Pakistani trap.”

“I realize that too well, Mister Dorset. I will now try to warn her, if it is still not too late for that.”

Closing that line and then composing the satellite telephone number of Nancy Laplante, Moore then waited with growing dread as the connection was made and the phone started ringing at the other end.

02:58 (Pakistan Time)

Askari Aviation Bell Jet Ranger helicopter

Tarmac of Quetta Airport, Pakistan

Nancy had just sat on the pilot’s seat of the Bell Jet Ranger helicopter she intended to use and was reviewing quickly the instrument panel, with Anderson Cooper sitting beside her and watching her anxiously, when her satellite telephone rang. Swearing briefly at getting a call at such a time, she pushed its ‘talk’ button while bringing the set to her right ear.

“Nancy speaking!”

“Nancy, this is Moore. Stay away from that helicopter at the Quetta Airport: it’s a trap!”

“SHIT! Me and Anderson are already sitting in it and we were about to start it.”

"Then get out of there, NOW!"

A warning from Anderson Cooper then made her raise her head to look outside.

"Nancy, there are men running to our helicopter!"

"It's too late, sir!" Said Nancy urgently in her telephone. "I will now destroy my phone's memory chip. Wish us luck!"

Before Anderson could ask what was happening, Nancy ripped open the access panel at the back of her telephone set, exposing its circuits. Grabbing the pistol Anderson had put down beside his seat, Nancy used it as a hammer, smashing with repeated, furious blows the telephone's circuits. She was barely finishing her sabotage work when the pilot's door was thrown open and the muzzles of two rifles were pointed at her head.

"DROP THAT PISTOL! HANDS UP!" Shouted a man in Urdu. With two more rifles being pointed at Anderson Cooper, Nancy had no other choice but obey. Rough hands then pulled her out of her seat, to then push her face first against the side of the helicopter. Someone then quickly patted her down, finding and taking her combat knife. She was then stripped of the ammunition belt she was wearing before being turned around, her hands still up. No less than six Pakistani soldiers were surrounding her on the dark tarmac, with their rifles pointed at her, while a seventh man in civilian clothes stood two paces behind the soldiers. Three more soldiers then roughly led Anderson Cooper to her side of the helicopter, pushing him against the fuselage, one pace to her right. The civilian then spoke in good but accented English, sarcasm in his tone.

"Well well well, isn't this the famous CNN war correspondent, Nancy Laplante, caught trying to steal a helicopter."

"I was simply trying to save my friend from being executed by the Taliban. If your government would not have been so busy helping out the Taliban, you could have saved him yourselves." Replied Nancy, not sounding intimidated one bit. The civilian man quickly stepped forward and punched her hard in the stomach, bending her in two. He then pulled her back up by her hair and nearly spat in her face.

"We are not the lackeys of the Americans, Miss Laplante."

"No, you're just the lackeys of the Taliban and can't even control your own country." She shot back, earning a second punch in the stomach for that. The civilian man then gave an order in Urdu to the soldiers, who promptly grabbed Nancy and Anderson and tied their hands in their backs with ropes before pushing them towards the nearby airport terminal building. They however never entered the building, as a military truck rolled to them and stopped, time for the soldiers to throw their two prisoners in the

back. With nine soldiers surrounding Nancy and Anderson in the back, their rifles pointed, the truck then drove out of the airport and towards the still sleeping city.

Being forced to stay face down on the cargo floor of the truck, Nancy could not see where they were being driven, but she already had a good idea about that. Maybe thirty minutes later, the truck entered a large walled compound and stopped in front of a big four-storey building made of concrete blocks. When they were taken out of the back, Nancy was then able to see that the lower windows of the building had steel bars. Understanding with a sinking feeling that they were at a prison of some sort, Nancy let the soldiers push her inside with Anderson. The whole group then went down to a basement level, ending up in a large, mostly bare room made of concrete. Nancy and Anderson were then forcibly sat in two wooden chairs, to which they were promptly tied. The civilian who had punched Nancy at the airport, a big man with a beard and mean eyes, then looked at both of them.

“You will tell me what you were doing in Pakistan and who was helping you.”

“As I told you before at the airport,” answered Nancy calmly, “I came by regular air transport to Quetta to find and free my friend, Anderson Cooper, who was kidnapped three days ago in Afghanistan by the Taliban. He is only a victim in all this and didn’t even enter Pakistan willingly. You have no reasons to hold him.”

“You may be right about him, Miss Laplante, but things are more complicated for you. For one thing, you were trying to steal a helicopter at the airport. Second, you were caught with two illegal weapons.”

“Please, don’t make me laugh! Illegal weapons, in Pakistan? Your country is awash in weapons...and in terrorists. As for stealing that helicopter, your reactions at the airport proved to me that your government would not have let me take Anderson Cooper out of Pakistan, even though he was a kidnap victim about to be executed by the Taliban. Your superiors should be very careful about how they handle our case.”

The civilian man, most probably an ISI officer, then stepped forward and delivered a resounding slap that made Nancy’s head snap around. He then looked down at her with hatred.

“My superiors know exactly how they want to handle you, Miss Laplante. Granted, Mister Cooper has probably nothing working against him in our eyes and we may just release him and let him leave Pakistan on the next flight to Dubai, but your case is quite different. For one, we do...”

A second, younger Pakistani man in civilian clothes suddenly burst in the room, cutting off Nancy's interrogator and going to him before whispering excitedly in his ears. The interrogator's face first reflected incredulity as he listened to the newcomer. Then, his expression darkened and he nearly shouted at Nancy.

"Mullah Omar and two dozen of his bodyguards and followers were just found murdered in a compound here in Quetta. All of them had their throat sliced or their heart pierced by a knife. You wouldn't know something about that, would you?"

As the soldiers present in the room exchanged looks of shock and disbelief, Nancy looked calmly back at her interrogator.

"Sure I do! I told you that I came to Quetta to find and then free my friend, Anderson Cooper. I did find him, being held in Mullah Omar's compound, and then freed him."

"You will pretend that you could enter a compound guarded by over twenty armed men and then kill them all by yourself?"

"What did the fatwa made against me by Mullah Omar say?" Asked Nancy to the interrogator. "That I was the Devil personified? What if I am?"

More than one Pakistani soldier then took a step back in fear, while pointing their rifles at her. Her interrogator, himself shaken but unwilling to show it, quickly signaled them to lower their guns.

"HOLD YOUR FIRE! DON'T YOU SEE THAT SHE IS MOCKING US?"

He then hit Nancy again on her left cheek, this time with his fist.

"You had accomplices with you, didn't you? You couldn't possibly kill all these men by yourself."

Nancy spat blood, then stared at him with utter contempt.

"Yes I could! How? Because they were nothing more than poorly trained thugs able only to kill unarmed women and throw acid in the face of young girls. They deserved death ten times over and I can assure you that they didn't end up in Paradise. Me and less than thirty other women killed over 400 of those cowardly bastards in one night in Afghanistan four years ago, so why would killing a mere twenty of them be at all difficult for me? Do you think that you would fare any better against me in any fair fight?"

Now starting to seriously wonder if she was actually telling the truth, the interrogator gave a number of hurried orders in Urdu to the soldiers present, who all appeared tense and fearful.

"Take the man upstairs, to the Colonel's office. I will have to go discuss the fate of that woman infidel with Islamabad."

The ISI officer somehow felt better once the steel door of the interrogation room was slammed shut and its three bolts were pushed in place. He then looked at Anderson Cooper and tried to appear more assured than he really was.

"How many men helped her kill all these Taliban, mister?"

Anderson didn't miss the 'mister' in the interrogator's question, a good sign that he was going to be treated more decently than Nancy.

"As she said, she was alone. I never saw anyone else but her. The Taliban were already all dead when she took me out of my cell. Now, you better remind your superiors in Islamabad of the possible consequences if you continue with this sinister farce. You do remember what happened to the Taliban in 2001, after they refused to stop sheltering Al Qaeda? You think that my government will look kindly on your government for blatantly supporting and protecting Taliban terrorists that kidnapped me and murdered my cameraman? Think twice before your next move, mister."

A spark of anger appeared in the interrogator's eyes, but he controlled himself and simply gave an order to the two soldiers escorting Anderson.

"Bring him to the Colonel's office! I am going with you."

As the trio escorted Anderson upstairs, the remaining soldiers and ISI man conversed excitedly together while going to the main guard room., commenting the words of Nancy. Their conversation however only served to spread their unease about Nancy to the other soldiers and guards of the prison. The news of Mullah Omar's death at her hands also helped spread consternation among the Pakistanis.

Anderson Cooper ended waiting for more than one hour in the anteroom of the office of the ISI center's commandant, a Colonel Hamahuddin, before being escorted in. He then found himself facing a small, swarthy man wearing a Pakistani Army uniform and sitting behind a big work desk. Nancy's interrogator stood behind and to one side of the colonel, who looked coldly at Anderson.

"I reviewed your case with Major Kholkar, Mister Cooper, and I agree with him that we have no reasons to detain you further, since you didn't commit any crime in Pakistan, nor in Afghanistan. You will thus be escorted to the airport, where you will be able to board the first plane to Dubai. I am sure that your company and government will then be able to repatriate you from there."

“What about my friend, Nancy? She risked her life to find and save me from the Taliban.”

Hamahuddin’s expression hardened at Nancy’s name and he nearly glared then at Anderson.

“Her case is a lot more complicated, Mister Cooper. For one thing, she killed a total of 26 men here in Quetta. Even if those men were Taliban extremists, she still doesn’t have the legal right to kill anyone here in Pakistan. She also was caught trying to steal a helicopter at the airport. Finally, we suspect her to be a foreign spy and to have contacts and accomplices here in Quetta. All that will have to be investigated before we can decide what to do with her. Right now, I can tell you that her prospects in avoiding a lengthy jail term here are quite dim.”

“Not as dim as the reputation of your country will be after this, Colonel. Pray that my President will not decide that this blatant show of support for a terrorist group will be the last straw and then decide to put up sanctions against your country...or worse.”

Hamahuddin caught at once on what Anderson alluded to by ‘or worse’. He however kept a brave façade and stared back at him.

“Miss Laplante will still have to face Pakistani justice, whether the United States likes it or not. Major Kholkar, have Mister Cooper escorted to the airport and make sure that he leaves for Dubai on the first available plane.”

“Yes, Colonel!” Replied the interrogator, who then made a sign to the two soldiers flanking Anderson. The latter was then walked out of the office and down to the main entrance, where he was stuffed in a military jeep with Kholkar and two soldiers. The jeep then drove out of the prison’s compound, heading towards the airport. Anderson’s heart sank as he had a last look at the prison and thought about what was probably awaiting Nancy in there.

09:12 (Washington Time) / 19:12 (Pakistan Time)

Friday, February 17, 2017 ‘A’

Oval Office, The White House

Washington, D.C., U.S.A.

John Moore, following CIA Director James Perkins in the Oval Office, found the President already in conversation with John Kerry, her Secretary of State, and Susan Rice, her National Security Advisor. Moore frowned on seeing Kerry and Rice: while

their presence was amply justified for this occasion, none of the two had been cleared to know about the little secrets of Nancy Laplante. He however kept his remarks to himself and politely shook hands with Kerry, Rice and Hillary Rodham Clinton before taking place in a sofa with Director Perkins. The President then nodded to Perkins, her expression sober.

“So, James, what can the CIA tell us about this rescue mission that turned sour in Pakistan? CNN is all up in arms about their star war reporter, Nancy Laplante, being detained and supposedly tortured by the Pakistanis after helping free Anderson Cooper in Quetta.”

“Well, Madam President, the gist of it is that, after learning that Cooper had been kidnapped in Afghanistan, Laplante apparently took on her to leave Montreal and go to Quetta, Pakistan, where she expected Cooper to be detained. It seems that her hunch was spot on, as she apparently found in less than a day where Cooper was being detained inside Quetta. According to the testimony of Anderson Cooper himself when he was interviewed after arriving in Dubai, Nancy Laplante then infiltrated the Taliban compound where he was detained and killed by herself all the Taliban inside before breaking him free. They then went to the Quetta Airport, where they were hoping to fly out in a civilian helicopter, but they fell in a trap set by the Pakistani intelligence services, which had been alerted by a double agent we were not aware of. While Cooper was let go after a couple of hours, the ISI kept Laplante and, still according to Cooper, must now be busy torturing her to make her tell who in Quetta helped her. Mister Moore, my Deputy for Operations, has more details if you wish to hear them.”

“I certainly wishes so, James. Go ahead, Mister Moore. What else can you tell us?”

“First, that it is evident from all the facts we have presently that the Pakistanis did nothing to help us find Cooper in the first place and that they even actively protected the Taliban involved in the kidnapping of Cooper, Madam President. Second, Anderson Cooper was being held in no less a place than the personal compound of Mullah Omar, the spiritual leader of the Taliban. By protecting Omar the way they did, the Pakistani did no less than aiding and abetting an enemy of the United States. One bright note in all this is that Mullah Omar is now dead, killed by Nancy Laplante, along with over twenty bodyguards and followers.”

“That’s certainly a good news!” Said Susan Rice, smiling then. “His death should deal quite a blow to Taliban morale.”

"Yes, but it could cost Miss Laplante dearly if we don't get her out of Pakistan quickly." Said Moore. "Imagine what the Taliban would do to her if the ISI handed her to those bastards. I suspect that Laplante is already enduring quite an ordeal at the hands of the Pakistanis as a payment for her good deed."

"You know," said Hillary Rodham Clinton to nobody in particular, "I have had about it with the hypocrisy of those Pakistanis. They have let both the Taliban and Al Qaeda take refuge in their country for far too long, apart from fomenting trouble in Afghanistan in order to prevent India from gaining influence there. Then I am told that they refused outright to let us inside Pakistan so that we could look for Cooper and even shot down two of our drones. With friends like them we certainly don't need enemies. I am inclined to have the United States play hardball with them on this issue, to remind the Pakistanis that all acts ultimately have consequences. Mister Moore, can you vouch to me that Laplante was not in Pakistan at the behest of the CIA?"

"She wasn't, Madam President. She is a good friend and colleague of Anderson Cooper and decided on her own to go to Pakistan to try to save him. She contacted us by satellite telephone after breaking Cooper free, but only to ask for help in getting him out. You may remember that she was extensively debriefed by us following her trip to Iran in November of 2013, when she was allowed to visit the Iranian uranium enrichment plants. It seems that she had kept our telephone number after all."

Clinton understood at once the hidden meaning of his words, having been briefed then about Nancy and her special connections. John Kerry however seemed to be puzzled by something from early on and looked at Moore and Perkins.

"Look, I know about that woman's reputation as a fighter and soldier, but how could she find Cooper so quickly by herself and how could she kill so many Taliban? She sounds nearly unreal."

Moore gave him a somber look.

"Mister Secretary, there is simply no one else like her. She is an extremely intelligent woman, an ex-military intelligence analyst and a complete athlete, apart from being the top karate fighter in the World. She probably would qualify on the Navy SEAL training course and has seen and gone through about all the war zones on this planet as a war correspondent. She also speaks and reads a godly number of languages. I believe that she guessed where Cooper was being held through simple but solid reasoning, basing herself on her extensive experience as a war correspondent. Once on the ground in Quetta, she possibly used previous local contacts to gather information

and then scout various locations of interest to her. According to Cooper, she was heavily disguised when she broke him free and had even brought some items to disguise him as well. As for killing all those Taliban, I have no problem believing it. The average Taliban fighter is actually no more than an illiterate thug with a rifle. Her downfall was actually to call us, when we used an informant in Quetta to help her, not knowing that the bastard was a double agent for the Pakistani intelligence services.”

“She certainly sounds too good to lose, Mister Moore.” Said Clinton. “Besides, we owe her big for freeing Anderson Cooper and for killing Mullah Omar. I also believe that it is more than time to put the Pakistanis in their place.”

The President then pointed at John Kerry.

“John, I want you to recall our ambassador in Pakistan and then to call on the carpet the Pakistani ambassador. Give that man a good grilling and make him understand that there will be very serious consequences for Pakistan if Miss Laplante is not released very quickly. In particular, tell him that we will now be ready to treat them as a hostile nation, on the same footing as Iran and North Korea, if they don’t reform their ways and continue to protect the Taliban. Tell him also that any hint of threatening us with nuclear weapons in any way, including by threatening to give one to terrorists, will result in me branding them as ‘a clear and present danger’ to the United States. One last thing for you: please call our friends up North in Ottawa and remind them that it is a Canadian citizen being held and tortured in Pakistan. It would be nice of them to do more than just utter a few pious words for a change.”

She then turned to face her National Security Advisor.

“Susan, I want you to get together with our military chiefs of staff and to study with them how we can militarily pressure Pakistan, including by cutting them off from any American supply of aircraft spares or weapons and ammunition. See what we could possibly do if the Pakistanis play stupid and need a more direct reminder to behave.”

This said, the President looked at the three men and one woman around her.

“Hopefully, the Pakistanis will see the light and release Miss Laplante quickly. However, I am not ready to play around with them for long, as time is critical here. Make sure that the Pakistanis understand how pissed we are at them. I will on my part have a statement prepared, so that it could be given no later than this afternoon to the White House Press Corps. You may now go. Mister Moore, please stay a bit longer.”

While surprised by that, neither Kerry nor Rice asked why Clinton wanted to speak in private with the CIA official.

Once she was alone with Moore, with all doors closed, Hillary Clinton spoke to him in a low voice.

"Mister Moore, are we talking here about Nancy Laplante the war correspondent or Nancy Laplante the time traveler?"

"In this case, I believe that she is acting purely as Nancy Laplante the war correspondent, Madam President. She may however have used some of her paranormal powers to find Cooper, like her power of mind reading. Just that probably helped her immensely in her search. While I told you the truth when I said that she was not acting in the capacity of a CIA agent, she still possesses the fake CIA identity card and badge we gave her in 2013 to help her on her return from Iran. Hopefully, she didn't bring that badge with her to Pakistan, but I don't think that she would be that stupid, Madam President."

Hillary Clinton lowered her head then.

"So, she really acted on her own, out of friendship for Cooper. I really wish that I could meet her one day. Hopefully, we will be able to get her out quickly. What are the chances that her Time Patrol could intervene to save her?"

"That is always a possibility, Madam President, but even if they react, it will probably be staged in such a way as to make it look like Laplante escaped by herself. As for an intervention by 'The One', the spiritual being that gave her powers, that is also possible but also totally unpredictable, Madam President."

"I understand. Do your best on your side to get her back intact, Mister Moore. You may even contact directly the Director of the ISI to put some sense in him."

"I may just do that, Madam President." Said Moore, who already had some pungent ideas on how to influence that ISI head. "Do you have anything else for me, Madam President?"

"No, Mister Moore, just keep me apprised about any development of importance in this case when it comes up. Thank you for coming."

"It was my pleasure, Madam President." Said Moore while getting up and shaking her hand. He then left the Oval Office and walked back to his official car, parked in the secure lot of the White House. His driver for this occasion was actually no other than Dean Price, with Erik Johnson acting as a personal bodyguard for this trip to Washington. Moore had however specific reasons to have brought his two best action

agents with him today. The moment he was in the back, with the door closed, he spoke up to them.

“The President has decided to play hardball with the Pakistanis in order to get back Laplante and to put them back in their proper place. We will recall our ambassador in Pakistan, while the Pakistani ambassador to Washington will be called on the carpet and given a good grilling. The Joint Chiefs of Staff will also be asked to prepare contingency plans in case the Pakistanis become real stupid. On the CIA part, I promised to do all I could to get Laplante back. I would like you two to start devising a plan to quickly break Laplante out of prison in Quetta if that becomes necessary. Once that is done, then find that bastard of an informer that doubled-crossed us and terminate him with extreme prejudice as soon as practical.”

20:40 (Pakistan Time) / 10:40 (Washington Time)

ISI center, Quetta

Pakistan

Nancy clenched her teeth hard in order not to scream as electricity flowed through her body via the electrodes clipped to her nipples, clitoris and vagina. She could not however stop her naked body, suspended by her wrists from the ceiling, from convulsing as four ISI men looked on. The man that had been turning the handle of the dynamo to which the electrodes were plugged then stopped for a moment, to let Major Khorkar approach her and ask a question.

“SO, WILL YOU SPEAK AT LAST? WHO HELPED YOU IN QUETTA? HOW MANY AMERICAN AGENTS ARE THERE HERE?”

Her whole body glistening with sweat and also covered with bruises from whippings with steel cables, Nancy swallowed hard and stared into the eyes of her interrogator.

“What’s the matter? Your man at the dynamo is already getting tired?”

Khorkar, enraged by her defiance, looked at one of his men standing behind Nancy.

“Soltam, add another weight, then whip her back more!”

With a mean smile on his face, the said Soltam went to get a heavy steel weight as used in weight-lifting exercise machines and, approaching Nancy from behind, dropped it in the bucket attached to her feet. The bucket already contained a good hundred kilos worth of weights and the additional weight only stretched more Nancy’s body, making her grunt with pain. Soltam then grabbed a long steel wire made of four twisted strands

and started flogging vigorously Nancy's back, buttocks and legs with it. On a sign from Khorkar, the man at the dynamo resumed his cranking as well as Nancy was being flogged. After four minutes of that treatment Nancy passed out, but without ever pushing a scream, to Khorkar's utter frustration.

"By the Devil, she must be the toughest woman I ever saw! Well, we should maybe call it a night, or else we could kill her too soon. That would be a pity indeed, as I am enjoying making this infidel pay. Take her down and throw her in a punishment cell. No need to put clothes back on her: we will get back at it in the early morning with her."

"How about having some fun with her?" Proposed one of Khorkar's men, making him shake his head.

"Not yet! She is still strong and could be dangerous. Later, when she is truly spent."

The disappointed soldier obeyed him, but still used the occasion to fondle Nancy's naked breasts as he was taking her down with the help of another soldier. The other man smiled and imitated him, seeing that Khorkar was already out of the interrogation room with the third soldier, then slipped his hand between her legs.

"It is a true shame not to use her: she has quite a body."

Soltam bit his lip, then took a decision.

"Put her down and undo the chains holding her feet together, Nazir. We will use this chance to take her."

Rendered nearly crazy with lust by Nancy's nakedness, Nazir did quickly as Soltam had said, then spread Nancy's legs open.

"Hold her wrists while I do her, Soltam."

Kneeling between the opened legs of Nancy, who lay on her back, and with Soltam kneeling near her head to hold down her still tied wrists, Nazir started undoing his belt and trousers. Nancy suddenly came back to life in a flash, with her legs bending and rising to close around Nazir's neck and form a scissor to strangle him, while her hands grabbed Soltam's testicles through his trousers and crushed them with savage strength. Soltam's passed out nearly at once from the atrocious pain, while it took a bit longer to Nancy to kill Nazir by strangling him with her legs. Letting go her holds, Nancy got up quickly and made sure that Soltam was also dead by twisting and breaking his neck. Only then did she allow her brain to acknowledge the continuous waves of pain coming from all over her body, shivering and moaning to herself for a short moment. Nancy however knew that she had little time: another soldier could come at any time to check

what her two interrogators were doing. Concentrating, she healed herself partly in seconds, healing the internal burns from electricity but leaving her surface wounds intact. Those wounds would continue to make her suffer for days, but she wanted to be able to show later to the World what methods the ISI used on its prisoners. Next, she went to the small table where her clothes lay and put them back on slowly, her torso, buttocks and legs being very sensitive from the bruises caused by flogging. She was not surprised to find out that the cash money in her wallet had disappeared, but at least she still had her credit card and her passport, plus her home keys. Thinking about something, she went to the dead interrogators and searched them. She actually found some of her American money on them and took it back, along with what they had in Pakistani rupees. As for the rest of her money, she pretty well could guess who had it now.

Passing into phase shift, she walked out of the interrogation room and went upstairs, looking for one man in particular. It took her a good ten minutes of her bubble time, or less than one second of normal time, before she found that man. Major Khorkar was actually sitting in his office, writing what appeared to be Nancy's interrogation report. He never had the time to react to the noise of his office door opening and closing in a micro-second before Nancy appeared in his back. The moment Khorkar turned around in his swivel chair after sensing a presence behind him, Nancy grabbed him by the throat with monstrous strength, making it impossible for him to scream or speak while being strangled. Her eyes reflected cold hatred as she stared down at the terrorized man.

"You are done torturing and abusing prisoners, Major Khorkar. Welcome to Hell!"

Her right hand then pressed even stronger, crushing the vertebrae in his neck and killing him. She held his body in place on the chair while she searched him. She eventually found the rest of her American money in his wallet and took it back, then let the body drop down on top of the desk. The next thing Nancy did was to go to the window of the office and open it. Contrary to the windows of the two first floors, this one wasn't barred. Looking in the direction of the airport to the Southwest, she evaluated quickly the distance and effected a short space-time jump, reappearing near the airport while floating in the night sky. Thankfully, the helicopter she had earlier tried to steal was still parked at the airport. In fact, a fuel truck was finishing right now to refuel it. Floating

down to an area of the tarmac that was not illuminated, Nancy hid behind a rusting steel container left near the perimeter fence of the airport and waited for the fuel truck to roll away. Once she was certain that nobody was near the helicopter, she switched again to phase shift, returning to normal time once she was in the pilot's seat of the helicopter. Praying that the Bell Jet Ranger had been well maintained, Nancy turned the master switch, then pushed the starter button. To her immense relief, the turbo-shaft engine of the helicopter started whining at once, soon gaining in turbine revolutions per minute as the engine powered up. An anxious look out through the canopy told her that nobody seemed to have reacted yet to the unexpected powering up of the helicopter. That however wouldn't last long. Consulting quickly the air chart left in the cockpit as the engine went up to operating temperature and revolution, Nancy calculated the most direct route to Kabul, which lay 460 kilometers north of Quetta. She then switched on the UHF radio of the helicopter and tuned it to the frequency of the Kabul Airport. Her helicopter lifted off from the tarmac and disappeared in the night sky, its navigation lights kept off, as the first airport employees were starting to come out to investigate this unscheduled departure.

19:33 (Washington Time) / 02:33 (Pakistan Time)

Friday, February 17 (Washington) / Saturday, February 18 (Pakistan)

Office of the Deputy Director for Operations

CIA headquarters, Langley

Virginia, U.S.A.

John Moore was munching with little enthusiasm on a sandwich as he did some late work in his office, trying to thin down the pile of files and memos in his 'in' basket, when his telephone rang. Hoping that this was fresh news about Nancy Laplante, he quickly grabbed the handset to answer the call.

"Moore speaking!"

"Sir, this is Floyd, at the communications center. We just received an encrypted message from our chief of station in Kabul. He says that Nancy Laplante landed at the Kabul Airport two hours ago in a helicopter she stole in Quetta. She was reportedly severely tortured by the Pakistani ISI but her life is not in danger. The chief of station has arranged for her to be flown out in an Air Force C-17 cargo plane in the morning, in about five hours. That C-17 will then stage through our base in Ramstein, Germany,

before continuing on to the United States. It should arrive at Dover Air Force Base at around one thirty tomorrow afternoon. Should we make arrangements to pick her up there, sir?"

"Yes!" Answered at once Moore, overjoyed. "Send a helicopter to wait for her in Dover and have agents Johnson and Price go with it, to provide an escort to Laplante. I will confirm with you later where she is to be brought from Dover. Has Director Perkins been advised of this?"

"Not yet, sir."

"Then, let me do that. Thanks for the call!"

Terminating that call, Moore then called his boss to pass the news and obtain permission to advise the President. When he called the White House next, he was able to get President Clinton on the line quickly, as she apparently was still at work in the Oval Office. The news of Laplante being safe and on her way to the United States obviously pleased her, but she had one directive for Moore.

"Mister Moore, I would like that your helicopter brings Miss Laplante directly to the White House once she is picked up in Dover Air Force Base. I am long overdue in having a private conversation with her."

"Madam President, with all due respect, if you are planning to ask her to work formally for us, I can assure you that it will be a non starter with Laplante. She has her own agenda, and a pretty inflexible one at that."

"I understand that, Mister Moore, but I want to see her for other reasons. Can you vouch to me that she will not represent a threat to me if I see her in private, without Secret Service agents around? I do understand how, uh, sensitive her secret is."

"Madam President," replied Moore without hesitation, "even with Secret Service agents surrounding her, she could still vaporize you and the whole White House without a sweat. However, she would never do that, or even raise a finger against you. She may be a very efficient killing machine when needed, but she is also the ultimate goodie-two-shoes at heart. The worst you could expect from her is for her to refuse to answer your questions."

"I understand. I still want to see her in private, though. In the meantime, keep the news of her escape from Pakistan secret until I can meet her."

"It will be done, Madam President. If all goes according to schedule, her helicopter should land in front of the White House at around two thirty tomorrow afternoon. Two of my best agents will be escorting her."

“Excellent! I will be expecting her then. Thank you for having informed me, Mister Moore.”

“It was my pleasure, Madam President.”

As he hung up his handset, Moore started to worry about what exactly President Clinton wanted to talk about with Laplante. In the CIA business, the less said was often the better.

14:36 (Washington Time)

Saturday, February 18, 2017 ‘A’

White House lawn

Washington, D.C.

A lieutenant of the Marine Corps in dress blues uniform and white gloves saluted Nancy as she slowly stepped out of the CIA helicopter that had brought her from Dover Air Force Base, careful not to brush hard her still painful bruises. He then looked at Erik Johnson and Dean Price, who were ready to follow her out.

“Excuse me, sirs, but your presence will not be required with Miss Laplante while she is in the White House: directive from the President. The Secret Service will escort her to Langley tomorrow morning.”

Erik Johnson was tempted to object to that, but a directive from the President was for him an order.

“Very well, Lieutenant. Be aware though that this woman has many enemies: be on your guard.”

“The White House Marine Detail is always on its guard, sir. Thank you for the warning anyway.”

On her part, Nancy took the time to shake hands with both Dean and Erik, giving them a genuine smile.

“Thanks for escorting me, guys. I will see you at Langley tomorrow, during my debrief.”

The Marine lieutenant then closed the passenger door of the helicopter and started guiding Nancy towards the West Wing of the White House. Erik watched Nancy, walking slowly and laboriously towards the White House as his helicopter started lifting off.

“You know, Dean, maybe there is something to like in this woman after all. For her, friends do indeed count.”

"Indeed, Erik. She may be too sentimental for her own good at times, but her word is as good as gold. Besides, she's got really nice tits."

Three Secret Service agents were waiting for Nancy at the door to the Oval Office. When one of them got close to her with his hands forward to pat her down for weapons, she grabbed at once his wrists to stop him, prompting the two other agents to go for their pistols. She ignored the other two agents and stared down at the one wanting to search her.

"No patting down, please! I was recently tortured and my body is covered with sensitive bruises. You can do a visual check, though."

Then, taking the agents by surprise, she undid her belt and her jeans and pulled them down, then pulled up her T-shirt, ending up in her underwear in front of the agents. The Marine lieutenant that had escorted her from the lawn eyed with horror and disgust the marks left by the flogging she had received, while the Secret Service senior agent nodded grimly after a few seconds.

"I'm sorry for that, miss, but we needed to ensure that you were not armed. The Pakistani intelligence did that to you?"

"Yes, and those who hurt me are now dead." Said Nancy while pulling back up her jeans. Once she was dressed, the senior agent opened the door to the Oval Office and stepped aside.

"The President will receive you now, Miss Laplante."

"Thank you!"

Nancy found Hillary Rodham Clinton standing in the middle of the Oval Office, waiting for her. The President eyed with sorrow her swollen face and split lips, along with the whip marks visible on her arms, as Nancy walked slowly towards her. She then shook hands with her.

"Welcome to the White House, Miss Laplante. Do you feel up to a short conversation now or would you like to receive some medical attention first? The White House doctor is on standby to examine and treat you."

"The doctor can wait a bit, Madam President. Thank you for giving me the honor of meeting you."

"The honor is mine, Miss Laplante. Please, let's sit down! Would you like a coffee or something?"

"Some coffee would be nice, Madam President. That air trip from Afghanistan was a long one."

"Then, have a seat while I pour you a coffee."

Having expected Clinton to call in a White House steward, Nancy was surprised to see her go to a coffee service left on a trolley in one corner of the Oval Office and pour by herself two cups.

"Cream or sugar, Miss Laplante?"

"Uh, one cream and one sugar, please. You do seem to really want to speak with me in total privacy, Madam President?"

"I effectively do, Miss Laplante."

Hillary gave her a cup of coffee, then grabbed her own cup and sat facing her on a sofa, waiting for Nancy to take her first sip before speaking in a sober tone.

"What you did in Pakistan was incredibly brave...and risky, Miss Laplante. Yet, your sole motives to do it appears to be simple friendship and concern for another person. You may not be an American, but the United States certainly owe you for rescuing Anderson Cooper, even more so since you also killed Mullah Omar."

"I did it to save a friend and a man I admire from a certain, horrible death at the hands of fanatical barbarians, Madam President. I would have done the same for anyone worthy of saving. As for killing Mullah Omar, let's just say that he amply deserved to die."

Hillary nodded, sensing that she was sincere about that.

"Miss Laplante, I was briefed about your ability to travel through time and the fact that you are involved with some type of law enforcement organization based in the future, but I know that you don't want to talk about that, or about time travel itself, for reasons I can understand. Be assured that, contrary to the Israeli and Russian governments, this government has no plans or intentions to try stealing the technology of time travel from you. I will personally turn down any suggestion to do such things coming from any American official."

"That is most appreciated, Madam President. So then, what would you like to talk about with me?"

"Well, about you, of course!" Replied Hillary with a malicious smile. "Without getting into details about time travel, I was made to understand that you actually live multiple lives in other time periods, on top of being a war correspondent in this century."

"Don't forget my second career as an actress, Madam President." Said Nancy, warming up to Hillary. "Yes, I do live multiple lives, not only in different time periods, but also in other timelines. There are presently three timelines, each developing in parallel but also independently from each other, except if some ill planned action through time disturbs them. The world you and I presently live in, the one I was born in, is called Timeline 'A' and is the original historical line of Humanity. Then there is Timeline 'B', created inadvertently by me in 1940 when I was kidnapped by scientists from the far future to be used as an involuntary test subject for their experiments in time travel. Last, branching out of Timeline 'B', is Timeline 'C', created when someone tried to kill me in 1941 'B'. Right now, I live three distinct lives, Madam President: this one as a war correspondent and actress in Timeline 'A'; another one as a Time Patrol agent conducting missions in a wide variety of time periods, in order to document the past and prevent illegal time travel and, finally, a third live as the supreme ruler of Palestine in the 1940s 'B', with the titles of 'Overseer of the Holy Land of Palestine' and of 'Queen of Jerusalem'. I must caution you right away that the history of Timelines 'B' and 'C' are already quite different from the history you know and will only grow more different as decades go. Personally, I do my best to keep my life here in the 21st Century completely separated from my other lives, in order to preserve the historical integrity of Timeline 'A'. Here, I am a single woman with a reputation as a wild girl. In Timeline 'B', I am married and have a total of six children, four of them adopted."

"Please, tell me about them." Asked Hillary, an eager smile appearing on her face. Nancy smiled back, happy to speak about something that brought her pride and joy.

"First, there is Ingrid, an orphaned German teenage girl I adopted in 1941 'B', during the World War Two as it was also known in that timeline. She is now twenty years old and married. Next is Eli, an orphaned boy I adopted just after his birth in 1942 'B' in Jerusalem. He is now three years old. I then had natural twins in 1943 'B', Patrick and Suzanne, who are now two years old. Finally, I adopted two more children who were orphaned in the 5th Century Before the Common Era, Herakles and Tera, who are now respectively ten and fourteen."

"My goodness, that is quite a family you have! But, who is taking care of your children while you are living your life in this century?"

"While I do have a very loyal and dependable nanny for my younger children, I actually cheat time in order that they don't miss me for more than a few minutes at a

time, Madam President. I then use what I call 'hidden time'. For example, I left Jerusalem, where my children stay most of the time, on November the 6th of 1945 'B', at precisely 23:00, local time, to come here to my home in Montreal. I have now spent already two months in this century and will leave to return to Jerusalem in approximately four more months. Then, I will jump space-time and reappear in Jerusalem at 23:10, on November 6 of 1945 'B'. As a result, after living here for about six months in a row, I will have disappeared for only ten minutes in 1945 'B'. Thus, my children will not have time to miss me, although I invariably cover them with kisses on my returns to Jerusalem. I use the same hidden time trick when I have to go on lengthy missions in the past."

"But, you will burn yourself out quickly by living three lives like this." Objected Hillary, making Nancy nod.

"Normally I would, Madam President. However, the advanced civilization in the 34th Century that employs me to patrol time has developed a longevity treatment that lets its citizens live well past 200 years of age. I may now be officially 34 years old but, as a result of repeatedly jumping time between multiple time periods, my true biological age is now 42."

Hillary gave her a jealous look.

"Yet, you look to be thirty at the most."

"And I will mostly continue to look like I am thirty for my next hundred biological years or so. Then, I will start to slowly age in appearance until I am past 200, when the aging will accelerate. Thus, for the people here in the 21st Century, I will continue to look to be in my thirties for another thirty years or so. The ironic part in this is that most people will think that, like many actresses, I will keep my youthful appearance through cosmetic surgery and the use of heavy makeup. In reality, I will still be in my physical prime...if I don't get killed in the meantime."

"Which is a distinct possibility, considering the insane risks you often run as a war correspondent, Miss Laplante." Said Hillary on a sober tone. "And your husband in all this? Does he also travel frequently through time? How do you get to keep your relation going?"

"Well, I hope that you have a tolerant mind, Madam President." Replied Nancy with a somewhat embarrassed smile. Hillary raised an eyebrow at that.

"Is it something that my husband would like to listen to, miss?"

"Probably, Madam President. You see, in 2012, before I started to travel through time, I already had a reputation as a fun-loving girl, while my husband was in 1940 'B' a

very handsome hunk who liked female company and had a lot of success with women. So, when us two sexy-looking, fun-loving people met in London in 1940 'B', it was love at first sight. We were married to each other right here, in the White House in December of 1940 'B', by no less than President Roosevelt."

As Hillary opened her eyes wide at that, Nancy continued on.

"Our first months of marriage were faithful ones, during which we adopted Ingrid. Then, someone from the future came to bring me back to my time and things got complicated. While my husband Mike and my adopted daughter Ingrid accompanied me to the future and enrolled like me in the Time Patrol, this meant that, in order to live my life here in the 21st Century without exposing my secret lives, I would have to continue to be officially single. Also, with both me and my husband periodically leaving for long missions in the past, we found ourselves separated from each other for months at a time, according to our respective biological clocks. This is where things get a bit spicy, Madam President. Seeing how our personal lives would be affected by our work through time, and since we both made a difference between love and simple sex, we came to a mutual understanding. When we live together in Timeline 'B' or in the 34th Century, we stay totally faithful to each other. However, during long missions in the past, or when I spend months by myself in the 21st Century, we each allow ourselves to date others from time to time, for simple sexual relief. When we get back together, we actually tell each other our adventures and then enjoy each other. I must also tell you that the society of the 34th Century that employs us is a very liberal one compared to the United States of today."

Hillary wrung her hand and made a face then.

"You're right! Bill would definitely love to listen to this. Uh, you do keep mentioning long missions in the past. How long could those missions be?"

"Many months, Madam President. My longest consecutive stretch on a mission was eight months, when I was documenting the life of Yeshua of Nazareth, better known now as Jesus Christ. By the way, I helped deliver Yeshua when Miriam gave birth to him, and I was present at his crucifixion. While I am nowhere mentioned in the Bible and did everything to keep it so, I was in effect a disciple of Jesus, like many other women that followed him. And yes, Miriam of Magdala, a.k.a. Mary Magdalene, was married to Jesus."

Hillary took in a breath, shaken by those revelations. An idea then came to Nancy.

"Madam President, would your husband be by chance in the know about me being a time traveler?"

"I...I did brief him myself about you after being sworn as President, so that he could counsel me on how to handle your case, which is quite fantastic, you must agree."

"That it is, Madam President. In this case, and in view of the security arrangements you have around you, I think that I could safely loan you two films that would interest you both. Do you mind if I leave you for a couple of minutes, Madam President?"

Hillary gave her a puzzled look as Nancy got up from her sofa.

"A couple of minutes? To go where?"

"To Montreal, to get something for you. It won't be long, I promise."

Nancy then disappeared in a silent flash of light. Feeling her hair rise on her head, Hillary could only stare in disbelief at the empty sofa at first, then took a sip of her coffee, her hands shaking. She nearly jumped out of her own sofa when Nancy reappeared in the Oval Office, in the middle of the room. She smiled to Hillary while sitting back on her sofa and handed her two laser disks in their plastic cases.

"I will ask you to view those films in utter privacy with your husband and to treat them as classified items, Madam President. The one titled 'Yeshua' is a historical documentary on the life and death of Jesus Christ, as it really happened in the 1st Century. The version you have now is a sanitized one that will give no clue to a viewer about the Time Patrol. The second DVD, titled 'Sex in History, an intimate relationship', is however quite sulfurous and is a documentary the Time Patrol made about the influence of sex on the history of Humanity. All the scenes were filmed in their stated time periods and the persons depicted in it are actual historical characters as named in our documentary. It was produced in a rather humorous style and you will probably burst your spleen watching it, Madam President. You will, among other things, see in it Julius Cesar having his fling with Cleopatra."

While Hillary had not been sure at first if she wanted to view the second DVD, the mention of Cleopatra made her snap her head.

"Cleopatra? Hell, Bill won't let me rest until he could see this!"

"I thought so! By the way, my husband Mike and my daughter Ingrid are the two narrators for the documentary on sex. I think that you will like them."

"Then, I will certainly view it with Bill."

"I am sure that you will both like it, Madam President. I also have brought you those three front-row tickets for the oncoming Academy Awards show in Hollywood next weekend. As a nominated finalist in the category of Best Actress in a Drama, I got a number of complimentary tickets to be given to friends or family members. Since I have officially no family in 2017, I thought that your daughter Chelsea, who is a media correspondent like me, could possibly be interested to go and have a chance to mingle with some of Hollywood's finest."

Hillary had a big grin on her face as she gratefully took the tickets.

"You are too kind, Miss Laplante, truly. I am sure that Chelsea will love to go. Now, since you are here and will be spending the night at the White House as a guest, I think that it would be a good idea for you now to have my doctor examine and treat you. We will also want to document your wounds, so that the Pakistanis could not later on deny having tortured you."

"That sounds like a good idea, Madam President." Agreed Nancy, becoming more serious. "In truth, I think that seeing your doctor will be no luxury indeed for me."

19:13 (California Time)

Sunday, February 26, 2017 'A'

Main entrance of the Dolby Theatre

6801 Hollywood Boulevard, Hollywood

California, U.S.A.

Actors, actresses, film producers and other celebrities had been arriving for a good half hour by limousines at the foot of the red carpet leading inside the Dolby Theatre when yet another limousine rolled to a stop. The crowd of media photographers and cameramen, along with dozens of paparazzi, pointed at once their lenses at the limousine, hoping that a big name or two would come out of it. They were not disappointed, as the statuesque woman in an emerald green and gold gown that stepped out of the limousine had been recently front page news in the United States and in the World and was still creating waves. Many gasped on seeing that the strapless gown, which left denuded the woman's shoulders and put in valor her muscular arms and shoulders, also made visible a dense pattern of whip marks that were only starting to fade away. Her face was also still healing from a savage beating. Yet, her facial expression was one of complete self-assurance and good humor. The reporter from the

Entertainment Weekly television show spoke in his microphone as his cameraman filmed the arrival of the woman.

“And Nancy Laplante has just arrived! Many had doubted that she would show up at the Academy Awards in view of her extensive wounds sustained recently in Pakistan. The celebrated war correspondent and actress has thus just proved once again that she never shies away from adversity. A man is now stepping out as well from her limousine...It is Anderson Cooper, looking well despite his recent ordeal! CNN thus has quite a famous duo attending the Oscars tonight. Wait! Another man is stepping from the limousine, but I don't think that I know him. Let's go talk to the trio and find out.”

Barely beating other reporters and cameramen to Nancy, the EW reporter smiled to her while raising his microphone.

“Nancy, your presence here tonight probably surprised many who were predicting that you would not come because of your injuries. How are you feeling tonight, if I may ask?”

“I feel fine, Rick. My injuries, while still a bit sensitive, actually look much worse than they are. Another month or so and I will be like brand new.”

“You're not afraid that those scars would impede you from producing any new film, then?”

“Not at all! In fact, I'm presently reading a script that was sent to me recently. However, I am not at liberty to discuss with you or others what that script is.”

“That is unfortunate but understandable, I suppose. So, what are your expectations about your chances tonight to get the Oscar for Best Actress in a Drama?”

“What I will say is that I have a lot of professional respect for the other actresses that are contending for that Oscar. That said, though, I expect to beat the crap out of the lot tonight.”

The EW reporter laughed at that.

“A most appropriate answer from the Shadow Dancer, indeed. And you, Anderson? What do you expect the chances of Nancy to be for winning an Oscar tonight?”

Cooper smiled and gently put one hand on Nancy's left shoulder, careful not to touch a bruise.

“What I expect is for her to do her usual: fight great odds and win. I believe that her talent as a great actress cannot be denied without a lot of bad faith and that this talent will be justly rewarded tonight.”

“A belief that I certainly share, Anderson. And may I ask who your friend here is?”

Anderson beamed with pride as he presented the man that had stepped out of the limousine after him.

“This is my spouse, Benjamin Maisani. Nancy was most generous in giving us two front-row tickets for the show tonight.”

As the EW reporter was thinking quickly about a follow-up question to that, Nancy came to his help by cutting in.

“Rick, while we are on this, I would like to use this occasion to make a public announcement to your viewers. Anderson has had the personal courage to openly acknowledge his sexual orientation for years and I couldn’t possibly show less courage than him about my own sexual orientation. To all those who ever wondered if I could possibly be bisexual, or hoped that I was one, I have only one answer for them: I am bisexual. So, let the gossips begin!”

The EW reporter repressed a smile with difficulty, ecstatic that Nancy had chosen him to make public such a juicy announcement.

“Well, Nancy, I am sure that the likes of Angelina Jolie and Drew Barrymore will take good notice of that.”

“I sure hope so, Rick! Ah, I think that a couple of other friends I invited to the ceremony are now arriving.”

The EW reporter, like his cameraman, turned their heads in time to see a long black limousine escorted by two big black sport utility vehicles stop at the foot of the red carpet. He nearly choked from the surprise when five big men and one woman in black suits and sunglasses came out of the two SUVs and formed up a protective box before one of them opened the passenger door of the limousine, letting out ex-President Bill Clinton. The latter was soon followed by his daughter Chelsea, now a mature woman of 36, and her husband, Marc Mezvinsky. Photographed and filmed by dozens of lenses, Bill Clinton exchanged a kiss on the cheek with Nancy, then shook hands with Anderson Cooper and Benjamin Maisani. The group soon moved as one inside, with Bill Clinton smiling and waving at the onlookers, while many of the latter took out their cell phones to tell excitedly friends or relatives about this.

Both the presence of Bill Clinton and the declaration by Nancy outing herself as a bisexual quickly created quite a swirl in the big lobby where the celebrities already there were mingling and waiting to take their seats. Bill Clinton couldn't help smile with contentment when he soon found himself in the close company of such women as Angelina Jolie, Drew Barrymore, Natalie Portman, Kristanna Loken, Scarlet Johansson and Lena Headey, all coming to congratulate Nancy on her actions in Pakistan and to wish her a prompt recovery from her wounds. The ex-President, like Anderson Cooper, didn't miss the way a couple of those actresses caressed gently Nancy's bruises, supposedly to feel them. The call finally came for all to go take their seats in the show room and they filed in, with the Clintons and their Secret Service bodyguards taking places in the first and second rows, along with the top cinema celebrities present. As for Nancy, she actually sat next to Angelina Jolie and Keira Knightley in the first row, where she chatted quietly with them until the animator for the show walked on stage and started the ceremony.

The presentation of the Oscar for the Best Actress in a Motion Picture Drama came up maybe forty minutes after the show started. Sensing Nancy's growing excitement, Angelina Jolie smiled in encouragement to her and patted gently her hand, then pressed it as a show's guest opened the envelope with the name of the winner in it.

"...And the winner in the category of Best Actress in a Motion Picture Drama is...Nancy Laplante, for her role in 'Dances with the Shadows'."

Refraining herself from screaming out loud her joy, Nancy got up and kissed in quick turn Angelina Jolie, Keira Knightley, Anderson Cooper and Bill and Chelsea Clinton before climbing the stairs of the stage, followed by the cameras. After accepting her Oscar statuette from the animator, Nancy stood behind the microphone and faced the thousands crowding the theatre.

"Mister President, ladies and gentlemen, I could do like many other recipients and start enumerating a long list of parents, relatives, friends and colleagues to thank them for their support. While I have no parents or relatives left alive, I do have many friends, good and honorable people that I consider nearly like family and that helped make life so wonderful for me. To those friends and to my colleagues, and particularly to Director Tony Gilroy and to the wonderful cast and crew of 'Dances with the Shadows', I

say 'thank you' from the bottom of my heart. Finally, to all my fans who cheered me in my movies, I promise this: THAT I WILL CONTINUE TO KICK ASS!"

Her last sentence, delivered while raising high her statuette in one hand, touched off a storm of cheers and applauses in the theatre.

In Tel-Aviv, an ex-Mossad agent named Bennie Kellerman, now working as a private security consultant, cheered as well as he watched her acceptance speech on television. In Moscow, President Vladimir Putin made a note to himself while sitting in front of his television set. In Teheran, Captain Farah Qalibaf, of the Intelligence Bureau of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps, smiled with amusement on hearing Nancy's last sentence when the show was retransmitted in Iran. The demise of Mullah Omar in Pakistan had brought out very few tears in Iran, where the Taliban's murderous habit of killing indiscriminately Shiite Muslims in Pakistan and Afghanistan was viewed quite dimly. As one who had escorted Nancy during her visit to Teheran in 2013, Farah had been quickly approached by many who were wondering how Nancy Laplante could have done what she had done a week ago in Quetta. Her answer to them had been simple and concise: intelligence, courage, discipline and determination.

CHAPTER 11 – EUROPEAN THEATER

09:08 (Washington Time)

Tuesday, January 4, 1944 'C'

Camp Springs Army Air Field, 13 kilometers east of Washington

State of Maryland, U.S.A.

Ingrid, wearing her flight gear and ready for a practice flight, gave a critical look from a few paces away at the fighter-bomber parked in front of a hangar, along with 23 similar planes.

“So, this is the new production model of the P-38, the P-38NC. It looks quite similar to the P-38N I flew in Papua-New Guinea.”

“But it has a few crucial new features that represent significant improvements over the P-38N, Colonel.” Said the major accompanying her. “For starters, it has new engines, the Packard Merlin 2130 and 2131, each rated at 2,060 horsepower. That’s nearly 500 horsepower more per engine compared to the previous Packard Merlin V-1650-3/4. That thirty percent in extra power gives it a top speed of 480 miles per hour, an increase of fifty miles per hour, plus a faster climb rate of 5,000 feet per minute. Like the old engines, the 2130 and 2131 turn their propellers in opposite directions, ensuring that the pilot doesn’t have to fight an engine torque effect. The second big improvement is with the armament. Instead of the eight .50 caliber heavy machineguns of the P-38N, this beast has four 20mm cannons, each provisioned with 150 rounds.”

Ingrid gave her escort a sharp look then.

“The AN-M2C 20mm cannon has always proved unreliable in the past, Major. Replacing reliable machineguns with more powerful but unreliable cannons doesn’t sound like a smart move to me.”

“True, Colonel, but the cannons in the P-38NC are AN-M2F models, which are modified and reworked variants of the AN-M2C. The AN-M2F has been extensively tested and has proven extremely reliable. For one thing, the pilot can remotely rearm the cannons in the air via pneumatic pistons, contrary to the old model, which could only be rearmed on the ground by an armorer. The hammer and firing pin are also new and ensure constant and reliable strikes on the percussion caps of the rounds. All this was

done after too many complaints from frontline pilots finally forced the Bureau of Ordnance into putting a fire under Colt's ass for them to produce more reliable cannons."

"I will take your word for it, Major." Said Ingrid, sounding only half-convinced. She then approached slowly the plane, examining it carefully. She soon pointed at two long and narrow panels visible under the belly of the central nacelle.

"What are those panels for? They don't look like maintenance access panels."

"You are right, Colonel. I must say that you really have some sharp eyes, for noticing this. The panels are actually the bottom covers for two retractable rocket pods. Let me show you."

The major quickly climbed into the cockpit, using the integrated retractable ladder of the plane, and pushed a button, making what looked like two tubular racks extend vertically down from the belly of the central nacelle. Ingrid went at once to examine them from up close.

"These hold a total of twelve launch tubes for five inch folding fins rockets. That's a lot of firepower, especially against ships or armored vehicles. I like the fact that those tubes are retractable: that will cut a lot of aerodynamic drag compared to under wing launchers."

"That was the main rationale for adding them to the plane, Colonel." Said the major from the cockpit before activating the racks and making them retract inside the plane. "The P-38NC was designed as much as an attack plane as a fighter and interceptor, and those rocket pods add a lot to its firepower while keeping the four wing hard points available for bombs or fuel drop tanks. That brings me to the last main improvement, Colonel. Space for an extra internal fuel tank was found between the four 20mm cannons, which gives the plane an extra one hundred miles of range on internal fuel, and this while carrying a full 4,000 pound load of bombs. Finally, some extra armor was fitted around the two engines and the cockpit. So, would you like to try a spin in it, Colonel?"

"Hell yes!" Replied at once Ingrid with a happy grin.

"Then, you may hop in, Colonel. The plane has been fuelled and checked up and the control tower already has a provisional flight plan for you. You may fly east until the open ocean and then wiggle around to your content."

"Thank you, Major. You are truly very helpful."

The major then climbed down from the cockpit, to give his place to Ingrid. As she was about to climb in, he eyed with envy the fantastic flight helmet she wore.

"Is that a new model of Army Air Force helmet, Colonel? It sure looks nice."

Ingrid smiled to him: he was not the first to ask about her helmet, something that made her proud to have it.

"Unfortunately it is a one of a kind model, developed experimentally. It is a great helmet, but the Army decided it was too costly to produce in quantity, so terminated the project."

"A true pity indeed, Colonel. Well, have a good flight!"

"Thank you!" Replied Ingrid before gingerly climbing the ladder and stepping into the cockpit. She had been developing a severe case of cabin fever during her months spent doing planning work at the Pentagon, and that despite weekly practice flights on planes borrowed here at Camp Springs. With the drafts of her two doctrine and tactics manuals completed and ready for mass printing and distribution, she had been pestering Brigadier General Kuter for a posting back to the frontlines for weeks now.

Once strapped in her seat, she checked quickly her instruments, then started her port side engine, which coughed up to life immediately. With the major standing clear, she then started her second engine and contacted the control tower of the airfield by radio.

"Camp Springs Control, this is Lady Hawk, in aircraft number 20638, requesting permission to roll to line up and take off, over."

"Camp Springs Control to Lady Hawk, permission granted, out." Replied the apparently bored air controller. Sliding her bubble canopy closed and insulating herself from the crisp January air, Ingrid then gave a thumbs up signal to the major standing to the right of her plane and pushed the throttles, making her P-38 roll forward. Camp Springs didn't have yet a hard pavement runway, so she simply rolled to the middle of the grass surface before lining up in the wind and pushing her engines to maximum power while releasing the brakes. The acceleration immediately pushed her into her seat, making her yell in approval as her fighter-bomber took off in a near record short roll. The P-38NC proved at once to be a powerful beast, climbing at a tremendous rate while accelerating quickly past 400 miles per hour. Elated by her plane's performances, Ingrid flew straight East for about fifteen minutes, until she was over the open waters of

the Atlantic, then checked visually the sky around her. With no other aircraft visible in the sky and with her plane now flying at 30,000 feet, she pushed her engines to maximum, wanting to verify the top speed at altitude. She was not disappointed.

“YES! 485 miles per hour! That’s barely less than what German jet fighters can do. Let’s see now how agile this beast is.”

She soon found out that the P-38NC had at least the same degree of agility than the P-38N, but with the added bonus of greater accelerations. Also, playing with the left and right engine throttles resulted in snap roll turns that were more than satisfactory. It still couldn’t outturn a Japanese ZERO fighter at low speed, but again nothing could, and trying to dogfight with a ZERO was a dumb thing to do anyway. The P-38NC however certainly would outturn a Messerschmitt 262 jet fighter and should be about on par in that department with the latest models of Bf 109 and Fw 190 fighters. Its superior accelerations and top speed and, especially, its lethal armament of four cannons, should however give it a definite edge over those German fighters, while its very long range had no equal on the German side.

After twenty minutes of flying to her heart’s content, Ingrid regretfully turned around to return to Camp Springs, landing back at the airfield after nearly one hour in the air. The same major that had shown her the P-38NC was eagerly waiting for her verdict as she opened her canopy after stopping her plane at the end of the line of parked P-38s.

“So, Colonel, what do you think of the P-38NC?”

“That it is a winner, Major! If those cannons are as reliable as you say they are, then the Germans and Japanese will hurt at the hands of this beast.”

“I am happy to hear that, Colonel. Uh, we got a phone call from Brigadier General Kuter, at the Pentagon, while you were in flight. He requested that you return to the Pentagon as quickly as possible and go see him.”

Ingrid’s happiness was partly deflated by that and she sighed audibly.

“Damn! Another planning project to do, I suppose. Well, thank you again for letting me fly this wonder, Major.”

“It was my pleasure to accommodate our Ace of aces, Colonel.”

“Yeah! A desk-bound Ace of aces verging on depression.”

The major laughed at that as she was climbing down from the cockpit.

"Spoken like a true fighter pilot, Colonel. Hopefully, someone at the Pentagon will regain his senses and will send you back where you belong: in the sky."

"I hope so as well, Major." Said Ingrid before exchanging a last handshake with the major. She then walked back to her jeep, parked along one side of the hangar, and threw her flying equipment in the back of the vehicle, then sat behind the wheel and started the engine.

It took her twenty minutes of driving before she parked in one of the immense parking lots of the Pentagon. Bringing her flying gear and particularly her precious helmet with her, she entered the massive building, showing her access pass to the MPs guarding the main entrance, then made her way to her office. Major Michael Dunbar greeted her there with an expectant smile.

"So, how was the P-38NC, Ingrid?"

"Like a dream, Mike! Do you know why General Kuter asked for me to come back at once from Camp Springs?"

"Nope, but it sure sounded important."

"Then I will go see him as soon as I will have stowed away my flight gear."

That took her only a minute, following which she straightened up her uniform and combed her hair back into shape before leaving her office to go see Kuter. She found her boss sitting at his desk, reading some document. Kuter smiled to her and returned her salute while getting up from his chair.

"Aah, Ingrid! Just the person I wanted to see. Come with me!"

While Ingrid obeyed and fell one step besides and behind him, she couldn't help ask him a question.

"Where are we going, sir?"

"To General Kenney's office. Something came up concerning Europe."

Hoping at once that this wasn't about yet another disaster in the air over Germany, Ingrid however refrained from asking more questions and followed Kuter, who was walking with quick, long strides. They soon arrived at the office suite occupied by General George Kenney, who had succeeded the late General Arnold as commander of the Army Air Force. There, Kenney led the duo out of his office and towards General Marshall's office after calling him in advance, making Ingrid wonder what the hell was happening. She suddenly had the feeling that she had just been ambushed when they walked in Marshall's office and found him waiting, standing in the middle of his office with his

deputy, General McNarney, Secretary of War Henry Stimson and Undersecretary of War for Air Lovett. Ingrid could only come to attention and salute the lot, imitated by Kenney and Kuter. Marshall made a rare smile while looking at Ingrid and returning their salute.

"Thank you for coming this quickly, lady and gentlemen. Colonel Dows, I understand that you just tested our new P-38NC at Camp Springs Army Air Field. What do you think of it?"

"That it should knock the socks off the Germans and Japanese, sir." Replied Ingrid, making the men present smile with amusement. Marshall then became serious, giving Ingrid what seemed like a predatory stare.

"Colonel Dows, since your arrival in Washington last June, you have greatly impressed me with the quality of your staff work and, particularly, with the depth and soundness of your strategic judgment and thinking. Allied with your well proven performance in the frontlines as a combat unit leader, that makes you in my eyes most worthy of being given again a combat command. I am thus happy to be able to announce to you today that your time in staff purgatory is over. Colonel Dows, you are as of today the designated commander of the Ninth Tactical Air Command in England, which is tasked with providing tactical air support to our First Army for our future invasion of France. You are to take effective command of the Ninth Tactical Air Command as soon as you can arrive in England. A brand new P-38NC has been put aside at Camp Springs on orders from General Kenney and will become your personal aircraft for your tour in Europe. However, such a command entails some very heavy responsibilities, responsibilities that must be counterbalanced with appropriate command authority. Thus, and with the approval and support of Secretary of War Stimson and of General Kenney, I am proud to promote you today to the temporary rank of brigadier general. Also, your permanent rank as of today goes up to that of full colonel. Gentlemen!"

As Kenney and Kuter stepped to each side of her to remove her rank insignias of colonel from the collar of her shirt and from her epaulettes, Ingrid felt blood rush to her head as she stood at rigid attention. She was becoming the first woman to ever attain flag rank in the American forces, on top of being given command of a force of over 600 combat aircraft. Once her old rank insignias were off, Marshall stepped forward and pinned on her the single star insignias of a brigadier general. Once this was done, he gave her a vigorous handshake while smiling to her.

"Congratulations, General Dows! I am sure that you will do great things in Europe."

“Thank you, General! I will depart for England in my new P-38 no later than tomorrow, weather permitting.”

“Excellent! Then you will need these.” Said Marshall, quickly going to his desk to grab a set of documents and then return to her to give them to her. “Here are your posting message, promotion announcement and mission orders, along with a detailed list of the units and bases that will be under your command in England. Once there, you are to report to Major General Hoyt Vandenberg, the commander of the 9th Air Force, to which your Ninth Tactical Air Command is attached. You are now dismissed, General Dows.”

Ingrid saluted Marshall, then pivoted on her heels and walked out of his office, her heart beating hard from the emotion. Brigadier General at the official age of twenty! Many old officers in the Army Air Force were going to have heart attacks over this.

16:47 (London Time)

Friday, January 7, 1944 ‘C’

Lockheed P-38NC on approach to the British Southwest coast

Bristol Channel

Ingrid’s buttocks felt like lead after over seven straight hours of flying, and her bladder was starting to urge her to land soon. Taking advantage of the phenomenal range of the P-38, which exceeded 2,500 miles when flying at economical speed and with supplementary drop tanks, Ingrid was about to complete her move from Washington in only two legs, via Saint-John, Newfoundland, instead of the three legs required in P-47 or P-51 fighters. Bad weather in Newfoundland had however delayed her departure from there by a day and she nearly had to abort her takeoff early this morning because of continuing bad weather in Saint-John. Resolved to get to her new command as quickly as possible, she had however taken a gamble and had departed Newfoundland despite the advice of the local meteorological officer. She had been lucky in encountering decent weather soon after departure and had been able to make good time, helped by a rear wind that had saved her a lot of fuel. As a result, she was now approaching the port of Bristol, close to her final destination of Middle Wallop, in the county of Hampshire, with still enough fuel in her internal tanks to fly another 450 miles. Her four external drop tanks were however empty by now, but she was counting on

keeping them on and saving them for another use: she had no idea about the supply situation of her still forming new command.

Consulting her notepad fixed to her upper right leg, she switched her main radio to the frequency of the British regional air controller near Bristol, to advise him of her approach and to get a final heading for Middle Wallop. To her surprise, her radio came alive at once with what sounded furiously like British fighters being vectored by the R.A.F. air controller for an intercept over Bristol. The frustrated tone of the leading fighter pilot and remarks about the high speed of the German planes he was trying to intercept however told her that this intercept was going to be a bust. Looking out towards Bristol with her legendary eyesight, Ingrid soon saw the explosions of bombs falling on the port in the distance. She could also see a number of small black puffs of smoke in the sky above the port, an indication that the anti-aircraft guns defending Bristol were trying their best to shoot down German intruders. From the altitude of those black puffs, she could also deduce that the enemy planes were flying at a noticeably lower altitude than her. Thankfully, and contrary to the opinion of the maintenance officer in Camp Springs who had insisted that she didn't need to do her transatlantic trip with loaded guns, her four 20mm cannons were fully loaded, with rounds in their chambers. Jettisoning her drop tanks, she pushed her engine throttles to maximum military power and entered a gentle dive, picking up speed quickly. She then spoke on the radio as soon as a break in the radio traffic gave her the chance to do so.

"Bristol Control, this is United States call sign Niner Niner Six, approaching Bristol at the end of a transatlantic crossing. I can see that the port of Bristol is under attack. What is the situation, over?"

"United States Niner Niner Six, from Bristol Control. Avoid the Bristol area and reroute north towards Cardiff: we have eight fast hostile bogeys over the port area, over."

Ingrid shook her head in frustration: the British air controller had probably taken her to be one of the multitude of long range transport aircraft that were daily crossing the Atlantic on solo flights. Her female voice may have also helped the controller in making his mistaken identification.

"Bristol Control, from Niner Niner Six, negative! I am a fully armed fighter aircraft and intend to jump in this fight, since your other call signs seem to be too slow to intercept. Give me a heading to these bogeys, over."

Probably because of the stress he was under, the British air controller lost partly his temper then.

"You will be too slow to intercept them, Niner Niner Six. I say again, reroute away from Bristol!"

Having just spotted in the distance ahead and to the left of her a group of speedy dots in the sky, Ingrid kept diving her plane and gave back a typically American answer.

"Fuggedaboutit, Bristol! I'm going in!"

As her P-38NC was breaking through 500 miles per hour of speed, she saw that the enemy jet aircraft, as they could only be jet aircraft, had made wide turns over the sea, in order to avoid passing again over the guns of the port, and were going to cross her path from left to right. Added to her extra speed from diving, that was going to give her a decent chance to intercept those German planes. Doing a carefully calculated correction course, Ingrid pointed her plane at the lead enemy aircraft, figuring out that their sheer speed would make them file past her one by one. As she was closing in on her maximum cannon effective range, the eight jets, twin-engine Arado 234 light bombers, suddenly accelerated, black trails coming out of their jet exhausts as they went to maximum power: they had seen her.

"Too late, buddy!" She said, while lining up the lead jet bomber in her gun sight. She then pressed her trigger button, firing her four 20mm cannons and sending thirty 20mm shells per second towards her target. The first shells missed, but then four of them hit, shredding the fuselage, port side wing and engine pod. Its port wing breaking off, the bomber then fell down into a crazy, uncontrollable spin. Without wasting a second, Ingrid pointed her plane at her next target, which had been following its doomed leader. Fired from a mere 200 meters, her salvo hit at once, exploding the jet bomber. Speeding past the surviving bombers while crossing their path, Ingrid then came back at them, losing her speed advantage then due to her turn but not before she could line up a third bomber in her gun sight and fire a devastating salvo. The aft section and vertical rudder of the German plane were shredded to pieces by the exploding 20mm shells, making the plane impossible to control. As Ingrid was ready to deliver a second salvo on that bomber, she saw the top of its canopy fly off just before something zoomed upward out of the cockpit.

"Hell! These things have ejection seats!" Said Ingrid, who then held her fire. As she watched the bomber pilot separate from his ejection seat and then open his parachute, she could only look at the surviving five Ar-234, who were now too fast for

her to catch up and were fleeing at maximum speed towards the Southeast and France. Reducing her own speed back to a more economical 300 miles per hour, she started turning around the German pilot suspended under his parachute and spoke on her radio.

"Bristol Control, this is United States call sign Niner Niner Six. I have splashed three Arado 234 jet bombers off Bristol, with one enemy pilot parachuting out. Request that a boat gets ready to pick that man up before he freezes to death in the water. I will also need a final heading for Middle Wallop, over."

This time, a different male voice answered her.

"Niner Niner Six, this is Bristol Control. Good show! Take heading 103. You are now 45 miles from your destination. Thank you for your assistance and good luck, out!" Instead of feeling elated by her first air kills over Europe, Ingrid looked one last time with mixed emotions at the German pilot floating downward towards the freezing waters of the Bristol Channel. She may very well have met that pilot in the past, when she was still a Luftwaffe auxiliary based in occupied France. She knew that the average Luftwaffe pilot and aircrews were decent men who didn't hate their opponents, contrary to many Japanese pilots who despised Allied airmen because of racial prejudice. Seeing that she still had a decent fuel reserve, she thus elected to continue turning slowly around the German pilot, in order to help guide a rescue boat towards him. She even saluted him, getting a salute back from the startled German. As her downed opponent was still 300 meters above the sea, she saw a fast patrol boat approach at top speed. Now reassured about the survival of the German pilot, she turned around and headed towards Middle Wallop.

She landed fifteen minutes later on the grassy expanse of R.A.F. Middle Wallop, surrounded by peaceful-looking small villages, patches of woods and cultivated fields. There were actually very few aircraft in evidence on the airfield, with only a squadron worth of P-38 fighters and two C-47 transport aircraft parked in dispersed spots around the grass field. Guiding herself on signals from a man waiving a pair of small green flags from near a parked P-38, Ingrid rolled her P-38NC to a spot thirty meters from the nearest plane and pivoted around before applying the brakes and shutting down her engines. By then, two trucks and a jeep with a total of six men in them had approached the parking area and were stopping near her plane. With her bladder now about to burst, Ingrid quickly undid her seat harness and her parachute retaining straps, then slid open her bubble canopy and deployed the integrated ladder. An American mechanic

ran to her as she jumped on the ground, but stopped abruptly on seeing the single star on her collar and saluted, his eyes wide with surprise.

“General?”

“Quick, where is the nearest toilet?” Asked urgently Ingrid as she saluted back. The corporal seemed put off for a second by that question, then pointed at a outhouse standing by the side, maybe eighty meters away.

“Uh, that’s the nearest outhouse, General.”

“Thanks!”

Ingrid then ran towards the outhouse while undoing in advance her survival vest and unzipping her mutton-lined jacket. The corporal, soon joined by a technical sergeant and five other mechanics, could only watch her run away. The sergeant then looked at his corporal, perplex.

“So, who is this? I don’t believe that we were expecting anyone to fly in today.”

“She is a brigadier general, Sergeant. No shit!”

The sergeant gave his subaltern a sarcastic look.

“A girl general...yeah, sure! More likely a ferry pilot from the United States, judging from her unpainted, brand new plane. Talking of brand new plane...”

Approaching the P-38NC, the sergeant examined with curiosity the unorthodox armament of the new plane.

“Hey, this P-38 is armed with four 20mm cannons instead of heavy machineguns! And they were fired recently. The engines also seem different. It must be a new production model.”

His mechanics also had a look at the cannons and the engines until the sergeant ordered them to refuel and rearm the plane. That necessitated sending one truck go get some 20mm ammo at the base ammunition dump, as he had only .50 caliber ammunition on hand. The maintenance team were hard at work when Ingrid came back at a walk, having relieved herself just in time. She saluted back the disbelieving sergeant and pointed his jeep.

“Sergeant, do you mind if I borrow your jeep and driver to go to the headquarters of the Ninth Fighter Command with my personal kit?”

“Uh, of course not, General! Are your things due in soon by cargo aircraft, General?”

Ingrid smiled to him while going to the baggage compartment of the P-38, in the right side tail.

"Did you expect me to bring in a truckload of furniture and a complete silver and china set, Sergeant? Could you just take out for me the suit bag and small bag stored behind the pilot's seat?"

"Right away, General!"

Climbing on the right wing, the sergeant retrieved the two requested items from the radio compartment behind the cockpit, then climbed down with them, finding out that Ingrid had taken a kit bag, a M2A1 folding stock carbine and a tightly rolled blanket holding some kind of long object out of the tail compartment. Putting her things in the waiting jeep, Ingrid searched for a few seconds in her kit bag and took out of it a thick manual, handing it to the sergeant.

"This is an extra copy of the maintenance manual for the new P-38NC, Sergeant. Make sure that the maintenance officer sees it and have your mechanics follow its instructions while maintaining my aircraft. And please don't lose it!"

Thinking about something, she went to the nose compartment containing her gun camera and took the film out of it, pocketing it. Next, she then took place in the jeep and told the driver to roll. As the jeep sped away, the corporal asked something to his sergeant in a low voice.

"Uh, Sergeant, do you think that the general is legally old enough to drink?"

"Don't think so, but don't ask her!"

The jeep driver rolled for maybe less than two kilometers before stopping his vehicle in front of the main entrance of a 16th Century red brick manor of respectable proportions in the tiny village of Middle Wallop. Two American military policemen guarded the main entrance and saluted her after a short hesitation when she walked in with the jeep driver, carrying her three bags and rolled blanket. A young captain manning a telephone at a desk in the main lobby jumped to his feet on seeing her rank insignias.

"General!"

"Good day, Captain! I am Brigadier General Ingrid Dows and I just arrived from the United States to take command of the Ninth Tactical Air Command. Where could I find Major General Quesada?"

"I will lead you to him, maam! You can leave your things behind the desk in the meantime."

"Thank you!"

As she rounded the desk to put down her things, the captain saw the mean-looking pistol strapped to her upper right leg, plus the M2A1 carbine slung in her back. He however didn't remark on that and led her up the large polished wood staircase leading to the upper floor, then walked down a large corridor, up to a door on which he knocked discreetly. A muffled male voice answered him, making him open the door and then stepping aside to let Ingrid pass. Ingrid entered a fairly large room that had been turned into a conference room, complete with multiple maps pinned to the walls. Three senior officers sat at a large table covered with papers and files. All three fixed Ingrid with a mix of surprise and admiration at her physical beauty as she came to attention and saluted the Hispanic-looking major general sitting at one end of the table.

"Brigadier General Ingrid Dows, reporting to take my new command, sir!"

Elwood Quesada, a mature man of medium stature but solidly built, returned her salute and smiled to her while getting up and going around the table to come shake her hand.

"Welcome to Middle Wallop, General Dows! I must say that I wasn't sure when you would show up, what with the bad weather in Newfoundland."

"It detained me there for a day, but I took a chance and departed early this morning for England. I just arrived in my P-38NC."

A sparkle lit up in Quesada's eyes at the mention of her plane.

"You flew in on a P-38NC? I will have to go inspect it tomorrow morning: we have none of them yet here in England."

"A lot more will come in the next few months, General. By the way, I will be claiming three air kills for today: I encountered some enemy jet bombers over Bristol and shot down three Arado 234 light jet bombers. I have the film from my gun camera and the records of the Bristol air controller as proofs."

Himself an aggressive fighter pilot, Quesada stared at her, dumbstruck for a few seconds.

"Uh, the Arado 234's top speed is close to 500 miles per hour. How did you manage to catch them?"

"The P-38NC can top 485 miles per hour in level flight, sir. I also had an altitude advantage and was able to dive on them. The P-38NC is also armed with four 20mm cannons that made mincemeat of those bombers, sir."

"Wow! I definitely must go eye that plane tomorrow. So, with those three bombers, where does your victory score stands now?"

"At 120 air victories, sir. I guess that I would qualify as an 'Experten' by German standards."

Quesada's jaw nearly hit the floor then. He however regained his composure quickly and pointed the two other senior officers present.

"Well, we could discuss exploits later at suppertime, Ingrid. May I present you Brigadier General Haywood Hansell Junior, my chief of staff, and Colonel Vincent Matthis, your chief of staff for the Ninth Tactical Air Command?"

Ingrid exchanged handshakes with both men, then took the chair shown to her by Quesada, who sat back himself and eyed her for a moment, taking in her youthful beauty.

"I must say that the news of your promotion to brigadier general made a lot of people here in England talk, Ingrid. How old are you, if I may ask?"

"You may, since you are my superior: I am twenty right now. I hope that the drinking age here in England is less than in the United States, sir."

Quesada grinned at that remark.

"You will be able to drink in English pubs, but not in American military messes, I'm afraid. We were able here to go through the new tactics and doctrine manuals that you wrote in Washington. While I liked a lot of things in them, I must be honest and warn you that many other senior officers were not so thrilled at the way you shot down most of their old, cherished concepts. Don't get me wrong, though: I found your new concepts fascinating and extremely innovative, especially your tactics on the tactical employment of helicopters in air assault operations."

"Well, since my manuals have been officially endorsed by General Kenney and General Marshall, I guess that those critics will have to shut up and go with the flow, sir."

"Exactly! Before I present you to your staff and get you installed, I must tell you that your command is presently mostly a paper organization. Most of the Ninth Air Force is in fact still waiting for its planes, equipment and personnel to come from the United States. Right now, your only operational unit at present is the 15th Reconnaissance Squadron, based here and equipped with RP-38Ns. We however expect many fighter groups to arrive in the next two months. On the other hand, that will give you a chance to organize things here in advance of your units' arrival."

"Not a single helicopter unit has arrived yet, sir?" Said Ingrid, not liking that. "We will soon need some helicopter units to start training our paratroopers on how to use them."

"I was told that your first helicopter squadron will not be ready to come to England before another month, at the least. It is like our fighter units: they are still being formed and trained from scratch. Like me, you will be ending up with a mass of greenhorns to train and hold by the hand."

Ingrid sighed at that.

"Well, I suppose that I can't always expect to lead a bunch of combat veterans, like in the Pacific. The cold here is already enough to remind me that I am not with my Jungle Girls anymore."

"The Jungle Girls..." Said Quesada, chuckling. "We veterans from North Africa are called the Sandmen here. Your girls and my boys would have made an interesting group."

"Indeed!"

"Well, you must be quite tired from your transatlantic trip. I will thus let Colonel Matthis get you to your room and then present your staff to you. I will see you again for supper, Ingrid. Colonel Matthis, she's all yours!"

Ingrid saluted a last time Quesada before following Matthis out of the conference room. Once the door was closed, Brigadier General Hansell gave a bewildered look at his commander.

"I knew that she was very young, sir, but this is nearly...obscene!"

"It may appear so, Haywood," said soberly Quesada, "but you have to look at what she accomplished up to now, instead of at her body. I would have been proud to simply do half of what she achieved in the Pacific. On the other hand, you and I know plenty of old farts with stars on their shoulders that would only deserve to be thrown out to the curb."

"You will find that Fifehead Manor is a nice place, even if it is a bit tight to house two major headquarters, General. In fact, our more junior personnel have to live in Nissen Huts built around the airfield."

"Hum! I was priding myself of living like all my girls while in Guadalcanal and New Guinea. On the other hand, once we start invading France, all of us will be back to field living conditions."

"Talking of living conditions, General," said Matthis as they climbed down the main staircase to go retrieve her things, "when are you expecting your unaccompanied baggage to follow you?"

"I have no unaccompanied baggage, Colonel." Answered Ingrid, making Matthis snap his head around in surprise. "What you see near the reception desk is about all I possess. You could say that I am quite Spartan in my living habits."

"Gosh! I once knew a general who needed a full C-47 planeload to ship his furniture and cutlery. You are certainly out of the norm, General."

"And proud to be, Colonel."

They grabbed her things quickly, then went back up to the upper floor. This time, they went to the opposite of the conference room, with Matthis finally introducing her into a small but comfortable suite that included a bedroom, a private bathroom and a small office. Ingrid nodded, more than satisfied, then started opening quickly her bags on her bed. Matthis lifted an eyebrow on seeing that the rolled blanket actually contained a Springfield 1903 bolt-action rifle and a Japanese saber. Ingrid smiled on seeing his puzzled look.

"A little combat trophy won in Guadalcanal, when I led an infantry charge by my female aviators to sweep away some Japanese soldiers that had infiltrated the perimeter of Henderson Field. As for the rifle, I bought it in the Philippines before the start of the war and it has accompanied me everywhere since."

"And that pistol strapped to your leg, General? It isn't a regulation model."

"A weapon I inherited from my late adoptive mother, Nancy Laplante, the Canadian time traveler. I have other weapons that belonged to her, plus this portable radio."

Matthis got closer to look at the futuristic radio set she had just taken out of a bag, along with a small briefcase.

"It is from the future, General?"

"From the year 2012, along with this case full of musical recordings on compact laser disks. I left it in the care of a friend in Montana before leaving for Guadalcanal, but decided to get it back while I was serving in Washington. Our younger staff will be pleased to know that they will soon be able to boogey to some future beat after duty. Talking of our younger staff, how many people do we have presently serving at our command headquarters here?"

"At last count, 83, including me, General, but most of our people are accommodated at the airfield in Nissen Huts and not in this manor. As General Quesada had said, we are still building up our units. You may be interested to know that the large majority of our administrative and communications staffs are made of women.

Your command intelligence officer, signals officer and administrative officers are in fact women. That is a trend that is growing quickly among our units in England. Our female staff is however segregated into separate living facilities and are commanded directly by female officers, in order to respect Army rules about the employment of military women and to avoid abuses.”

“Those separate living facilities, are they of the exact same standards than the facilities for men, Colonel?” Asked Ingrid in a sharper tone.

“They are, General! I could give you the grand tour of our command headquarters and of the airfield tomorrow, General.”

“That would be appreciated, Colonel. Just give me two minutes to suspend my uniforms and I will be with you.”

“Then you will find me outside in the corridor, General.”

Matthis effectively had to wait only a short while before Ingrid left her room to join him.

“I’m ready, Colonel. Show me our command facilities.”

“Yes, General! Our command staff works mostly on the upper floor, while the staff of the Ninth Fighter Command works mostly on the ground floor. We will go first to our operations room.”

They needed only to do a few dozen steps before entering a fairly large but cluttered room full of duty desks, map boards, filing cabinets and rows of telephones and radio set repeaters on table. Two male senior officers were in the room, along with two female officers and five female junior NCOs. The lot came to attention on Matthis’ command, with Ingrid smiling to them.

“At ease, please! I am Brigadier General Ingrid Dows and just arrived from the United States to take charge of this command. From now on, relax in my presence and continue your work as if I am not here.”

She then started going slowly around the operations room, stopping first in front of the two senior officers, both at least twenty years older than her, who presented themselves at attention.

“Lieutenant Colonel Richard Hunter, Deputy Chief of Staff, General!”

“Lieutenant Colonel Robert Ford, Operations Officer, General!”

“Pleased to meet you, gentlemen. Who is my deputy commander?”

"Colonel Graham Hainsworth, General." Answered Hunter. "He hasn't arrived yet from the United States."

"Hum! Something tells me that I will hear that line quite often in the next few weeks. Any outstanding problems that I should know of right away, gentlemen?"

"None, General, except for the lack of actual units on the ground." Replied Ford, making Ingrid smile.

"I hear you, Colonel. Carry on!"

Ingrid's next stop was near the female major examining a map of France. The woman, who was maybe 27, was reasonably pretty and was much shorter than Ingrid, came to attention to present herself.

"Major Helen Sturgis, Intelligence Officer, General!"

"I believe that you enrolled in 1942, Major, right?"

"Correct, General! I had a diploma in international relations and knew German, so I chose to go in the Intelligence Branch, maam."

Ingrid nodded, satisfied, then switched to German.

"Is your German good enough to interrogate captured Luftwaffe aircrews, Major? Do you have some training in prisoner interrogation techniques?"

"Yes I do, General!" Answered Sturgis in good but slightly accented German. "Before coming to England, I was used for many months to interview German prisoners, mostly submariners and downed pilots, sent to camps in the United States. May I ask where you learned your German, General? It is excellent!"

"I hope so, Major! I was born and raised in Berlin, Germany."

Patting gently the shoulder of the startled woman, Ingrid continued her slow tour of the operations room, then visited in succession the adjacent communications center, followed by the administrative section, where she met the senior female officer in charge of the female detachment of the headquarters, Major Maggie Smith, who was also the command's administrative officer. After a few pleasantries, Ingrid isolated herself with the mature woman in her small office and closed the door before speaking to her in a low voice.

"Major, I am now officially the senior female officer in this unit. Is there anything I should know about any possible case of sexual abuse or misconduct concerning any of our women?"

"We haven't had any problems yet with our own command personnel, General." Said Smith, a woman in her early thirties who had been an executive secretary in civilian

life. "However, a couple of my clerks have approached me in the last couple of weeks to say that a Major Rockford, who works on the staff of General Quesada, approached them at the local pub and then tried rather insistently to invite them to follow him outside. Both politely turned him down, but they are afraid of the consequences if Major Rockford tries again. He is said to become rather forceful after a few drinks."

"I see! Tell your two clerks that they reacted correctly. If Rockford approaches them, or any one of our other girls, then advise me at once. What is the name of that local pub?"

"The 5 Bells Pub, General. It is just down the road from this manor, in Nether Wallop. You can easily walk to it, in fact, and is a nice place."

"The 5 Bells Pub, got it! Carry on, Major!"

Then looking at her watch, she saw that it was now close to six in the afternoon. She might as well go have supper now at whatever filled the role of the officers' mess here: her sandwich eaten over the Atlantic was now quite far down.

It turned out that the manor's old dining room had been converted for use as the officers' mess for the officers of both command headquarters, with an adjacent reception lounge used by the enlisted personnel. The food served proved to be typical American Army fare, meaning plentiful but not inspired menus. Ingrid ended up eating near Major General Quesada and Major General Haywood Hansell Junior and inevitably got asked to tell how she had become a fighter pilot, with all the other officers at the big table listening on discreetly. Something however kept coming to her head and she finally spoke about it as she was finishing her meal.

"General Quesada, that jet bomber raid on Bristol I encountered this afternoon, is that a frequent occurrence?"

Quesada, a fighter pilot himself, nodded soberly.

"Too much, as a matter of fact, and not only against Bristol. The Germans are using with great success and regularity their Arado 234 bombers all over Southern England for both bombing and reconnaissance. Only the British Gloster METEOR jet fighters, which are in service in limited numbers and are reserved for the defense of London and of the East Coast, have realistic chances of intercepting them. That you could shoot down three of them in your P-38NC was quite a feat. Talking of that, do you have still that gun camera film of yours?"

Ingrid searched in her pockets and, finding the small film cassette, handed it to Quesada while making a remark.

“You know, sir, the fact that the Germans can do reconnaissance flights over British ports nearly at will could endanger our invasion plans: they will be able to see the buildup in amphibious and transport ships and deduce that we are about to invade.”

“Unfortunately, there is little we can do about that, short of chasing those bombers away from their airfields in France. However, with the Germans having jet fighters, we don’t exactly enjoy air superiority over France right now. Their latest piston engine models of Messerschmitt and Focke-Wulf fighters are no slouches either, while their antiaircraft guns are both accurate and expertly manned. Our losses in heavy bombers are proof enough of that. In terms of our own fighter strength, my command has right now the use of a single fighter group, the 357th Group, equipped with P-51. As for our 8th Air Force, it does have three complete fighter wings equipped with a mix of P-47 and P-51, with a sprinkling of P-38s, but it has not exactly enjoyed great success in air combat up to now. With the Soviet Air Force mostly defeated, the Germans were able to transfer much of their air units from the Eastern Front back to France, Belgium and the Netherlands.”

Ingrid gave him a critical look then.

“Excuse me for being blunt, sir, but the Germans can’t have so many jet fighters in service that we can’t manage them. Besides, speed is nice but is not everything. I was able to test fly both the P-47 and the P-51 from Camp Springs Airfield while serving in Washington. While my opinion of the P-47 as being a flying brick was confirmed, the P-51 is an excellent fighter. I believe that part of the 8th Air Force problems stems from inadequate tactics and, maybe, incorrect aircrew training. Now, our invasion plans call for gaining progressively air superiority over France, in order to prevent any effective Luftwaffe actions against our invasion fleet and troops. We will have soon to start working up the Luftwaffe in France if we really want to be ready to invade on schedule.”

Ingrid deliberately didn’t mention the precise time period or location of the planned invasion, as that information was still ‘TOP SECRET’ and was known only to top level planners and commanders. Quesada, who was in the know, could only nod to her.

“You are correct on all counts, Ingrid, but the 8th Air Force is still reworking its tactics and many of its aircrews are green and suffer from low morale, due to the recent heavy losses.”

"Haven't they adopted yet the new bombing tactics I pushed for while in Washington, sir?" Asked Ingrid, feeling irritation mount in her. Quesada shook his head at that.

"Not yet! Both General Brereton and General Doolittle have been trying to readjust the tactics and practices of their bomber force, but they have encountered a lot of passive resistance from many bomber group, wing and division commanders who still believe in the old doctrine or don't have enough imagination to implement properly the new tactics. Brereton and Doolittle have in fact had to relieve of command a depressingly high number of senior air formation commanders in the last two months, something that indirectly played havoc on both training and operations. Combined with the..."

Quesada then interrupted himself and looked up at one of his staff officers, who had entered the dining room at a hurried pace and had gone to him with a message in his hands.

"What is it, Captain Weiner?"

"We just got a copy of the latest bombing mission report from the 8th Air Force, sir. The 41st Bombardment Wing was sent earlier today to bomb a munitions factory in the Ruhr, but, apart from encountering the usual heavy German fighter and antiaircraft artillery response, was decimated by what seems to be a new German weapon."

"Let me see this message, please!"

Quesada read quickly the message, then reread a particular paragraph out loud for the benefit of Ingrid.

"Our bombers saw at first what appeared to be multiple firings of V-4 ballistic missiles from around Dortmund. However, those missiles then tracked our bombers and exploded while passing through their formation. Each missile warhead proved powerful enough to down simultaneously two or three bombers, plus damaging others. The 41st Wing lost 44 percent of its attacking force by the time it returned to England."

There was dead silence around the dining table as stunned officers measured the significance of that disaster. Something that Nancy had once told her about then came back to Ingrid's mind.

"The WASSERFAL! The Germans have put it in service!"

Quesada, like the others around him, looked sharply at Ingrid.

"The Wasserfal? What's that?"

Ingrid put down her fork and sat back, her mind racing over the implications of this.

"The WASSERFAL was in Nancy Laplante's history a surface-to-air guided missile based on the old V-2 ballistic missile and was designated the V-4A2. It was however developed too late in the war for the Germans to actually use it operationally. It seems that, in this history, the Germans have just put it in service. This could mean more bad news for our heavy bombers."

Feeling dread wash over him, Quesada stared expectantly at Ingrid.

"What can you tell me about that Wasserfal, Ingrid?"

"Well, since the German ballistic missile technology has shifted from liquid rocket propellant to solid propellant in this history, I suppose that the same happened to this variant of the WASSERFAL, sir. The V-4A2 was smaller than the original V-2 but still carried a massive fragmentation warhead of at least 500 pounds initiated by a proximity fuse and was guided via radio by a ground operator who lined it visually with its target. The last V-4A2 model was said to have a radar guidance system, to allow night firing. The missile had enough range and ceiling to get at the highest flying aircraft of the time. It was also supersonic, so none of our aircraft will be able to evade it. It seems that the Germans have just given us quite a New Year gift, if I may say so, sir. If this missile is indeed in operational service, then the days of massive bomber formations flying at high altitude are truly over. Our bomber commanders will have no choice now but to adapt, or their aircrews will die in droves."

"Jesus!" Exclaimed quietly Quesada while closing his eyes for a second. "We need to fire up this information upstairs at once. Ingrid, can I ask you to write down what you can remember about this missile, along with your conclusions and, if you have any, your recommendations for counter-measures against it?"

"Of course, sir! I will go at it right away."

"Thanks! In the meantime, I will place a phone call to General Vandenberg and to General Doolittle, to give them a heads up. Hopefully, the Germans will not have yet a radar-guided variant in service. If they do, then the British will hurt as well."

Quesada's pious wish was shattered the next day, when word that the R.A.F. had also encountered surface-to-air guided missiles during their last night bombing mission over the Ruhr came in. In turn, Ingrid's report touched off a wave of near-panic among the upper ranks of the 8th Air Force and of the British Bomber Command. Many who had clung doggedly to their beliefs about the supremacy of the heavy bomber as a strategic weapon found themselves suddenly out of both excuses and arguments.

09:33 (London Time)

Tuesday, January 11, 1944 'C'

Headquarters, United States Strategic Air Forces (USSTAF)

R.A.F. Bushey Hall, Greater London area

There were a lot of long faces around the conference table, including British ones, as those called to this emergency command meeting of Allied air forces commanders took their seats. Ingrid was there as well, despite her relatively low rank, mostly because she had been the first to identify the new missile threat. She was however hiding her anger and frustration that morning, as the British had at first refused to recognize the new threat for what it was and had persisted in continuing their night bombing for two more nights before huge losses in the air had forced them to open their eyes. Another participant to the meeting, albeit in an observer status, was General Eisenhower. As the designated Allied supreme commander for the incoming invasion of France, he should have been in Ingrid's mind directing this meeting, as the bombing campaign over Europe had a direct impact on his invasion plans. However, both British and American air commanders still had the unfortunate habit of ignoring him, not willing to let any ground commander control in any way their precious air forces. Ingrid was in fact wondering if herself and Major General Quesada were the only air officers present who understood the true meaning of 'joint operations'.

Sir Charles Portal, the commander of the R.A.F., finally called the meeting open.

"Gentlemen, we are here this morning to deal with a new, unexpected threat that has played havoc with our bombing operations of the last few days. I will not go over our losses from that new threat again, as you all know how painful they have been. We however have to either find fast a counter to that new German missile or adopt new bombing tactics. Air Chief Marshal Harris, has your staff come to any conclusion yet on this subject?"

Arthur Harris, the commander of the British Bomber Command, shook slowly his head.

"Not yet, Sir Portal. We still have too little information about that new missile to make a proper analysis. I however suspect that the Germans have only a limited number of those missile batteries in service. I am thus of the opinion to switch temporarily my bombers to secondary targets that are less likely to be defended by

those missiles. To stop completely our bombing campaign is in my mind totally unacceptable anyway. We must continue pounding the Germans, whatever the cost.” Portal nodded, then looked at Lieutenant General Lewis Brereton, the commander of the American strategic bomber forces in England.

“What about your staff, General Brereton?”

“Sir Charles, the opinion of my experts is that our best hope lies in finding a way to jam the guidance system of these missiles, or at least jam the radars associated with them. The problem is that the jamming aircraft would then become quickly a prime target for the German guns and fighters, as the source of the jamming signal would be easy for them to pinpoint. While a jamming aircraft could save most of our bombers from these missiles, it would end up being itself on a near suicide mission.”

Ingrid then raised her right hand to signal that she wanted to say something, but Portal ignored her studiously, instead looking at his top signals officer.

“Commodore Winslow, could a ground station in England jam such German guidance signals?”

“No, Sir Charles! It would however probably be able to detect and analyze those signals, but the jamming would still have to be done from an aircraft in reasonable proximity to the signals emitter, in order for it to have enough power to jam it. Aircraft with passive detectors could also help pinpoint the sources and frequencies of those missile guidance signals.”

“If that is the case,” said Arthur Harris, “I believe that specially equipped MOSQUITO reconnaissance aircraft would be best for that task.”

“But,” objected James Doolittle, the commander of the 8th Air Force, “wouldn’t this necessitate that some bombers be in the air as well, to entice the Germans into activating their targeting radars? However successful such a jamming operation could be, those bombers would still be at extreme risk during such a mission.”

“True, but I believe that such risks would be inevitable.” Replied Harris, impassive. Lewis Brereton, having noticed Ingrid’s wish to speak, then pointed her to Portal.

“Sir Charles, I believe that Brigadier General Dows has something to say.”

“Does she?” Said Portal, in the same tone that a cabinet minister would use with a junior secretary trying to give him advice. Brereton, who had learned to appreciate and listen to Ingrid’s advice while both were in the Philippines, bent forward in his chair and hardened his tone.

"She does indeed, Sir Charles! Should I remind you that she was the first to correctly identify these new German missiles? Furthermore, her advice and ideas helped both save the Philippines from invasion in 1942 and then were instrumental in the retaking of Papua New Guinea. I personally believe that she is well worth listening to."

"Very well! Your brigadier may speak." Replied Portal haughtily.

Ingrid was tempted to say something sarcastic like 'My Lord is too kind', but restrained herself and spoke instead in a calm, paused voice.

"Gentlemen, the problem of having to deal with concentrations of mixed antiaircraft guns and surface-to-air missiles, or SAMs in short, is something the American Airforce encountered in Nancy's history in other conflicts. Losses were very heavy at first, like in this case, until the American Airforce perfected what it called 'Wild Weasel' tactics. Those tactics used fighter-bombers equipped with special electronic warfare equipment to both pinpoint and then jam enemy fire control and surveillance radars in advance of attacking bombers. They also carried special guided missiles that could home on the signals from enemy radars, or used normal bombs to destroy them once found. These Wild Weasel units had a very dangerous job but were considered elite air units and helped cut dramatically the losses among the bomber units. I believe that we could adapt some of our planes to act as Wild Weasel units but I tell you right now that standard doctrines and tactics can't be forced on them, or they will fail. I concur with Air Chief Marshal Harris that the MOSQUITO would be a good type of plane to adapt to Wild Weasel missions. As for special radar-homing missiles, I proposed such a concept to General Kenney months ago, while I was in Washington, and I know that he did initiate a project for such a missile. I however don't know where the project is now at."

"This Wild Weasel concept sounds very interesting indeed." Said Harris, smiling as he mentally visualized the notion. "It would be a job perfectly cut for the long range fighter-bombers of the Ninth Air Force and Leigh-Mallory's MOSQUITOs."

Ingrid, like Eisenhower, nearly did a double take at those words.

"Air Chief Marshal, the Ninth Air Force, including my own Ninth Tactical Air Command, already has an assigned mission: to prepare for and then provide close air support to our troops for our amphibious assault on France this summer. We also still have to gain air superiority over France and to plan in detail the air support plan for our army divisions."

Portal, like Harris and many R.A.F. commanders present, looked at Ingrid as if she was a child that had not understood her lesson.

“To be frank, this notion of wasting a whole air force to support an invasion that our bomber offensive makes redundant is nonsense. Your planes would be better used in support of our bomber force, helping it force the Germans to surrender under our bombs.”

Ingrid, fired up by such blind attachment to a doomed doctrine, couldn't help herself raise her voice in anger.

“Sir Charles, I proposed the Wild Weasel concept so that all of our aircraft could be protected from those new German missiles, and not simply to help perpetuate your bomber offensive, which has been a costly failure in the last few months, if I may remind you. If there is anything I learned while fighting in the Philippines, Guadalcanal and Papua New Guinea, it is that we will win this war only if we all fight in a coordinated way on the ground, in the air and at sea. Also, bombs may destroy much things, but they can't occupy ground. This notion that heavy bombers can win the war all by themselves is a dangerous fallacy that should be put to rest once and for all. My Ninth Tactical Air Command will dedicate itself to the close air support of Allied troops and to protecting them from the Luftwaffe, and I will have no qualms in closely coordinating my operations with those of our ground units. In fact, such coordination will be vital if we wish to be successful and avoid unnecessary casualties. I was proud to support closely our Marines in Guadalcanal and our Australian Army troops in Papua New Guinea and I will certainly not feel like a simple servant for helping and protecting our valiant soldiers and sailors during this summer's invasion.”

While Major General Quesada nodded his head in support and agreement, along with Eisenhower and Brereton, Ingrid was disappointed to see that Lieutenant Generals Doolittle and Vandenberg kept silent then, obviously reluctant to back her. She was however only slightly surprised by that, both men having been for decades fierce advocates of the strategic bombing doctrine. The problem was that Vandenberg, as commander of the Ninth Air Force, should have supported her when she had stated what was after all the official mission of his own command. None of this was lost on Eisenhower, who then rapped his knuckles on the table to attract attention before speaking in a firm, displeased tone.

“May I remind you all gentlemen that both President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill have jointly approved an invasion of France for this summer, and this

under my command. That invasion is certainly still on and I will expect our air forces to provide it with adequate air support. You may think that your bomber offensive is more important than our planned invasion, Sir Charles, but that was not what our political leaders decided, and General Marshall would be the first to remind you of this if he was here.”

Most airmen in the room looked crossly at Eisenhower but didn't reply, except for Portal, who opened his mouth only half a second before Harris.

“Surely, General, you are not suggesting that our heavy bombers be also put in support of your invasion?”

“As a matter of fact, yes!” Replied Eisenhower, making Harris and Doolittle explode in indignation.

“Abandon our bomber offensive on Germany? Never!”

“We must complete our POINTBLANK campaign if we want to destroy the Luftwaffe's capacity to replace its losses and build more aircraft.”

“By plowing fields and killing German cows?” Cut in Ingrid, now truly angry. “Most of your bombers can't get within five miles of their objectives and they bomb from such a high altitude that their loads end up all over the place. My experience in the Pacific showed me that the only way to achieve pinpoint precision bombing is by dive bombing by light or medium bombers or fighter-bombers, or by flying very low. What's the point of gloating about dropping thousands of tons of bombs on Germany when only a few tons actually hit meaningful military or industrial objectives?”

“Brigadier General Dows, you are being insulting to a superior officer.” Said icily Lieutenant General Vandenberg, her actual superior. “Sit down and keep to the subject of countering the new German missiles, or leave!”

Shocked by Vandenberg's reaction, Ingrid stared at him with incredulity.

“General, I am simply pointing at facts, and...”

“General Dows, consider yourself relieved of command. You may now leave.”

Many of the British air marshals present smirked at Ingrid's discomfiture as she could only obey and pick up her papers. Lewis Brereton threw a disbelieving look at Vandenberg, while Eisenhower looked on at the scene with anger.

“What the hell do you think that you are doing, Hoyt? She's the best we have in terms of close air support operations.”

“And she should have stayed on that subject, as ordered. That young opportunist needed to be put back in her place.”

"A young opportunist? She got where she is because she proved her worth in combat in the Pacific, Hoyt! I can't believe that you could be this petty!"

As the exchange between Brereton and Vandenberg became even more acrimonious, Eisenhower, having seen and heard enough, rose from his chair and nearly shouted at Ingrid

"General Dows, wait for me in the hallway, please!"

He then looked sternly around the table, finally fixing Vandenberg with clear displeasure.

"In case you didn't notice, General Vandenberg, Brigadier General Dows simply stated what the official mission of the Ninth Air Force, your command, was: to support my invasion force, not to play second fiddle to our heavy bombers. If you can't or won't understand that this must be a joint effort, then I will ask General Marshall to have you relieved. Good day, gentlemen!"

Eisenhower then left with his aide and his tactical air commander, Air Chief Marshal Trafford Leigh-Mallory, following closely Ingrid out of the room. Once in the hallway and with the door of the conference room closed behind him, Eisenhower went to Ingrid, who stood in one spot while fuming over her lost command.

"General Dows, know that I am with you on this. Be assured that General Marshall will be informed of the proper details of what happened at this meeting."

"Thank you, sir, but I am still without a command. Damn! I should have stayed in the frontlines, in the Pacific: I'm no good at letting such idiotic bull go by without calling it for what it is."

"Don't worry too much about your command, General Dows. You may get it back soon enough. In the meantime, I am offering you a job on my air planning staff: we still have to plan in detail the close air support part of our invasion and you sound like the perfect officer to me to do that."

"General," then said Leigh-Mallory, who was too conscious of how unpopular he was himself with the bomber doctrine advocates, "we still need the assistance of the heavy bomber force to help chase the Luftwaffe out of France before we launch our invasion. If this conflict on operational planning is not resolved soon, it may seriously impact on our invasion plans."

"I am unfortunately too aware of it, Leigh-Mallory." Replied grimly Eisenhower.

That same day, Eisenhower wrote up and sent to General Marshall in Washington a rather blunt and caustic report about the lack of cooperation of various air

commanders concerning preparation and support for the planned summer landing in France. That report soon created a fierce response in Washington, with Marshall meeting with General Kenney, in charge of the Army Air Force and technically a subaltern of Marshall. As a result, and with the approval of Secretary of War Stimson, Lieutenant General Vandenberg was promptly relieved of command of the Ninth Air Force by Kenney and replaced by Major General Quesada within a week, with Ingrid regaining command of the Ninth Tactical Air Command. With Vandenberg recalled to Washington to explain himself, but with the bomber lobby still alive and strong in both the R.A.F. and the U.S. 8th Air Force, Marshall told Eisenhower to task the Ninth Air Force directly concerning the air support to the future invasion, while General Kenney ordered the 8th Air Force and USSTAF to cooperate fully with General Eisenhower. That would not have happened under General Arnold, who had been himself a strong advocate of strategic bombing and who would have probably sacrificed Ingrid rather than call to order his subalterns. However, all this didn't do a thing to help the Allied heavy bomber forces face the German air defenses and its new missiles. On Ingrid's part, even though she was back at the helm of her Ninth Tactical Air Command, she continued as well to act on Eisenhower's behalf as the main planner for the close air support plan of the future invasion, finding herself being more busy than ever.

CHAPTER 12 – D-DAY

08:54 (London Time)

Tuesday, May 30, 1944 'C'

Camp of the U.S. 82nd Airborne Division

Area of Salisbury, Wiltshire County

Southern England

“Hey, Captain! Do you know where we are going?”

Captain George Stockwell, of the 505st Parachute Infantry Regiment, smiled benevolently to the young private who had boarded with him and thirty other paratroopers the UH-2 PELICAN medium helicopter.

“Yes! Somewhere in France. Look, guys, I don't know any more than you do about our next operation, except that it's the big one. The one thing I know is that these helicopters are going to ferry our regiment to the amphibious ships that will carry us and our helicopters to close to our launching points along the enemy coast. I guess that we will be told about our final destination only once securely on our ships and away from indiscreet ears. Now, make sure that your seat belts are buckled: remember how these things can throw you around.”

More than a few grunts answered him then. The men of the 82nd Airborne Division had been practicing how to quickly get in and out of helicopters for a good month now and had flown in the noisy, vibrating machines in about every weather condition possible. The rear cargo ramp of the UH-2 then closed up and their helicopter soon started to lift off the ground. Through the small windows, the paratroopers could see the seven other helicopters of their group also take off from the grassy field adjoining their old camp. They had taken down and folded back into packs their field tents after breakfast this morning, so that they could also be shipped out.

Their group of helicopters stayed at relatively low altitude as they flew southwards in the grey sky, crossing the coast after maybe thirty minutes. After another twenty minutes of flying, the paratroopers had their first glimpse in the distance of the

largest naval armada they had ever seen, with dozens after dozens of gray-painted warships lined up in parallel files.

"Wow! There must be hundreds of ships here!" Exclaimed one young paratrooper. A much older sergeant, who had been a teacher, looked as well outside before replying.

"Learn how to count properly, Mathews: there isn't even one hundred ships here."

"So, Sarge? I come from North Dakota and we don't have a single ship over there, especially big ones like these."

"Hey!" Exclaimed another paratrooper. "They all seem to be aircraft carriers." That remark made Stockwell look outside with curiosity. To his surprise, he had to concede that his soldier was mostly right: a good forty of the ships of the armada looked furiously like aircraft carriers, albeit not really big ones. The decks of many were crammed with helicopters, their rotor blades folded and the machines tightly lined up side by side. The paratroop officer then fully realized the scale of what he and his men were now part of.

Another six minutes and their helicopter landed smoothly on the flight deck of one of the small carriers, guided in by a sailor wearing an orange vest and helmet and waving two small flags. The rear ramp came down nearly at once, with the cabin chief of the helicopter shouting and gesticulating to the paratrooper.

"EVERYONE OUT AT A WALK! NO NEED TO RUN!"

Stockwell led his men out, to immediately be directed towards a nearby ladder fixed along the side of the flight deck. That ladder in turn ended in a large steel open tub in which two twin anti-aircraft gun mounts flanked the ladder. A sailor was posted there and showed Stockwell an opened steel door in the side of the ship.

"Go inside through there, sir, then turn immediately right and go down three more levels to the troop quarters. Another sailor will be waiting down there."

Stockwell nodded and followed the sailor's instructions. Once inside and going down yet another ladder, he opened wide eyes at the sight of the vast internal hangar he was now into. It was crammed with more helicopters, all with their rotors folded, and with dozens of mechanics working around them.

"My God! How many helicopters are there on this armada?"

The answer was probably in the hundreds, at a minimum. Continuing on his way down, Stockwell encountered the sailor he expected on the level below the hangar. The sailor, a mature petty officer, asked for his precise unit, then consulted a list in his hands.

“Your company is allotted the cabins on this deck, Captain. Your men may take any cabin between the numbers 04B and 40B inclusively. You and your officers have the cabins 01B to 03B. You will find washrooms and shower rooms at each end of this section.”

“Thank you!” Said Stockwell, not knowing how to call the man’s navy rank. Cabin 02B turned out to be only three doors down the long, narrow passageway. Entering it quickly to drop his pack and combat gear in it, he found that it was a fair-sized cabin with a double bunk bed that was probably reserved for the use of officers. The next two cabins were similar but the rest proved a lot more cramped, housing each two triple level bunk beds, plus steel lockers for packs and equipment. Staying in the passageway, the paratrooper officer then directed his men for the next fifteen minutes, distributing them along the cabins. The ship’s paint actually smelled nearly new and the accommodations proved overall better than on the old troopship that had brought Stockwell’s regiment to England four months ago. Then came the real fun, with the paratroopers trying to find their way in this unfamiliar environment. A navy lieutenant commander finally had to ask the paratroopers to stay in their cabins until lunch time, promising to provide sailors then to guide the soldiers to their messes. The same navy officer however took the time to give to Stockwell and to his junior officers and one First Sergeant a quick tour of the ship. The sight of the big floodable well deck, situated under the helicopter hangar, flabbergasted Stockwell, who had never seen that feature before on a ship. Measuring 120 meters in length and fifteen meters in width, the well deck had a giant stern door and was actually filled with two big air cushion landing craft, which the navy lieutenant commander described as ‘LCHAC’s. Those LCHACs were in turn each preloaded with a dozen 2.5-ton trucks and four jeeps belonging to the 505th P.I.R. of the 82nd Airborne Division. More vehicles and dozens of pallets supporting all kinds of supplies occupied a forward cargo hold linked to the well deck, hangar and flight deck by a heavy elevator platform. According to the lieutenant commander, the ship could transport a reinforced battalion with all its equipment and vehicles, plus over thirty helicopters and two LCHACs or an assortment of smaller landing craft. Stockwell then realized something with a shock.

"But, if this ship can transport a battalion or more, and since I saw close to forty similar ships in our fleet, then this armada could be transporting as much as three complete divisions, no?"

"Correct, Captain." Said proudly the navy officer. "And this is only part of our invasion fleet. The British also have similar ships, many of them built in the United States, to transport their own divisions. Add to that tankers, ammunition ships, cargo ships and escorting warships and you end up with the mightiest armada ever assembled in history."

"Wow! The Germans are going to get one big, nasty surprise. And where are we heading exactly?"

The navy officer could only shrug then.

"Personally, I don't know. Secret has been tight about that. However, briefings are supposed to be held for the officers of your unit after lunch, once we are on our way."

Suddenly, Stockwell grew more anxious for lunch hour to come, so that he could finally get to learn where he was going to fight for the first time in this war.

As announced, the battalion commander kept his officers with him in the officers' mess after lunch and assembled them around a mess table, then unfolded a map on the table. Stockwell, like the others, was confused at once by the map.

"Uh, sir, that's not the Northern coast of France."

"Of course it's not! We are heading for the Southern coast of France, via the Strait of Gibraltar. Our whole division is going to be dropped in and around Marseilles."

"Marseilles?" Exclaimed another company commander. "Are there even Germans in there? I thought that the French had made a deal with the Germans to keep control of the Southern half of their country."

"They did, but they then allowed a limited number of German units to deploy along their Mediterranean coast. The beach resorts on that coast are also used by the Germans as rest centers for their soldiers and aviators. Overall, our intelligence services estimate that we should face only weak to medium opposition, with most of the German units we will encounter being second rate divisions or units being reconstituted after combat in Russia. The other good news is that the French Mediterranean coast has not been fortified at all, except for some sea minefields laid. The problem for the Germans is that our air cushion vehicles laugh at such minefields."

“What about the French themselves, sir?” Asked Stockwell. “Will they fight along the Germans?”

“Some Vichy units may, but we predict that most will simply surrender or desert en masse. There are actually Free French troops that are part of the invasion, so be careful at who you shoot at. If you encounter Vichy soldiers or policemen, try at first to make them surrender without fighting but, if they shoot, too bad for them.”

“And what is the objective for our battalion, sir?”

The lieutenant colonel then put an index on a spot to the north of Marseilles on the map.

“We will pay a courtesy visit via helicopter to the Luftwaffe’ regional fighter control center, in the town of Aix-en-Provence, about fifteen miles north of Marseilles. The rest of the regiment will land only a few miles away, on the airfields of Salon and Istres. We will do our best to capture our objectives intact in terms of the infrastructures: our own air force wishes to be able to use those airfields and installations, and particularly any reserves of aviation fuel that could be captured intact. We don’t expect too much resistance on the ground in terms of small arms fire, but the biggest threat to us will be German anti-aircraft guns. We have however been promised that our aircraft will take tender loving care of these guns. As for our battalion’s specific objective, we want to take prisoners and capture documents intact. Look mean and intimidating but don’t shoot everybody on sight, especially since we could encounter a number of nice young Luftwaffe women at that German headquarters.”

The paratroopers broke out in laughter then at the hidden meaning in that remark.

00:50 (London Time)

Tuesday, June 6, 1944 ‘C’

R.A.F. Andover, Hampshire County

Southern England

Ingrid had been tempted at first to fly her first mission of the invasion in her P-38NC fighter-bomber, but she had quickly abandoned that thought and had elected instead to fly out aboard one of the EC-142E electronic reconnaissance and command aircraft of her command. She was going to be a lot more useful as a forward air commander with a battery of radars and radios available to her than as a lone hunter in the sky, especially since nobody else had the kind of experience she had in commanding attacking air formations from a flying command post. She had thus left her

deputy, Colonel Hainsworth, at her headquarters in Middle Wallop, with Hainsworth in charge of coordinating the successive waves of aircraft that were going to fly out of England and towards France in the hours to come. She was also bringing her full combat kit and weapons with her aboard her EC-142E for this mission: if things went well, she was fully resolved to use a captured enemy airfield in Southern France to land and refuel her command plane, thus saving precious hours and keeping her near where the action was, able to react quickly to any enemy response to the invasion. Her intelligence officer, Major Helen Sturgis, was also boarding the EC-142E with her and was going to help her keep track of the enemy situation, along with the plane's crew of radar operators, radio operators, electronic warfare specialists and air observers.

Going first to the upper deck to stow away her weapons and field kit, Ingrid then went to the cockpit to speak briefly with the pilot and his navigator. The latter was going to have a particularly delicate and important job on this mission. Their EC-142E was in fact going to be the first allied aircraft of the invasion force to enter enemy airspace tonight, along with four escorting P-61 BLACK WIDOW night fighters. Hopefully, the full moon tonight, along with the pilots' night vision goggles, was going to help their four escort fighters stay in formation with the EC-142E. Going next to the lower main cabin, where the work stations and electronic systems of the plane were, Ingrid checked that the whole crew was ready, then gave by intercom the order to take off. With their external navigation lights fully on for takeoff, in order to make it easier to form up once in the air, the four P-61s took off first, followed by the EC-142E. The navigation lights stayed on until they crossed the English coast near Weymouth. Then, under total electronic silence, the small group flew Southwest over the English Channel, staying safely away from the French coast, but with the passive sensors of the EC-142E fully manned. Ingrid was satisfied to hear then that no German radar signal was being detected from the Atlantic coast of France. As part of the air plan she had produced in support of the invasion, hundreds of Allied bombers and fighter-bombers had been pounding every day for two months the German coastal installations along the Pas-de-Calais and the Normandy coast, especially targeting coastal guns and radar stations. The goal of those repeated strikes had been to make the Germans believe that the invasion would be somewhere along those two areas, and also to open a wide gap in the German radar coverage, gap that was soon going to be exploited by thousands of planes that were going to rush over France towards the Marseilles, Toulon and Nice

areas. That was when Ingrid's EC-142E would start its most important role: to guide those incoming planes towards their respective targets and to warn them of any enemy air activity. It would also help guide the hundreds of helicopters now waiting to take off from their LPDHs, far out to sea South of the French coast. If any German radar proved active in the Marseilles and Toulon areas, then it would also be the task of her EC-142E to jam it. In turn, this meant that her plane would become a prime target for the Germans if detected. She was counting a lot on surprise and confusion on the German side to get through this but, in truth, she and the other people on her EC-142E had as many chances of being killed today as anyone else in the invasion force. It was however a gamble that had to be taken.

Once over the open waters of the North Atlantic, the small formation turned South, towards Spain, and kept on that heading for about forty minutes before turning again, this time to the South-Southeast. Watching closely their progression on the inertial navigation system display, Ingrid then gave a short order by intercom to the pilot.

"Start descending to our penetration altitude, Major."

She next looked at the electronic warfare officer of the plane.

"Any German radar signal yet, Captain?"

"We have a very weak signal from a radar station near Bordeaux, General, but its strength is well below detection level."

"Advise me the moment it becomes powerful enough to be at risk of detecting us."

"Yes, General!"

She mentally thanked the fact that the German radar network in Southern France, especially in the areas adjacent to the Spanish border and the mountain ranges of the Pyreneans, was so dispersed and thin. The same kind of weak radar coverage plagued the Germans along the Mediterranean coast, something that was helping the invasion fleet in its covert approach from the Strait of Gibraltar. German maritime reconnaissance bombers based in Sardinia, Corsica and around Marseilles would have normally picked up the armada's approach by now, but the weather had been lousy lately. Even more, massive bomber raids on the German airbases in Sardinia and Corsica in the last days had left those airfields in utter shambles, with no German plane left in flying state there. With luck, none of them would be repaired in time to fly out and spot the fleet. This however made for a lot of things that could go wrong and Ingrid was

a fervent believer in Murphy's Law, which stated that anything that could go wrong would go wrong. She thus had planned for a number of contingency plans and diversion measures in order to have a reasonable chance of obtaining the initial surprise in this operation. Now, it was left to see how vigilant the Germans in Southern France truly were.

04:14 (Paris Time)

Luftwaffe regional fighter control center

Aix-en-Provence, Southern France

"Sir, I may have something on my radar."

Attracted by the call from the senior radar operator, the night shift duty officer of the fighter control center let the newspaper he was reading drop on his desk and got up, walking quickly to the radar screen in the semi-darkened room. The Luftwaffe captain looked for a moment at the radar picture before asking a question to the operator.

"It seems quite intermittent, Volker. Could it be simply a false echo caused by the mountains in that area?"

"I thought that at first, sir, but this echo is approaching us steadily from the West at a constant speed of 480 kilometers per hour. A false echo would have stayed in approximately in the same spot. My bet is that this is an enemy solitary plane, probably a reconnaissance aircraft, skirting the Spanish border and using the Pyreneans to confuse our radars. It may be coming to either assess the damage from the bombings of the other days or to plan more bombings."

"Hum! You may me right. Very well! Call Avignon-Gaumont and have them scramble a pair of night fighters to intercept that echo. Keep me posted about any change to that echo."

"Will do, sir!"

While the radar operator contacted the night fighter base, the captain, himself an experienced fighter pilot, returned to his desk and grabbed his telephone receiver. He then asked the Luftwaffe female auxiliary manning the telephone exchange to connect him with the fighter control center of the Luftflotte 3 in Wissant, near the Pas de Calais on the Northwest coast of France. The last few times that the areas around Marseilles had been hit by enemy bombers, those aircraft had come flying directly over the Luftflotte 3 area, blasting open a flying corridor in the process. If that echo was indeed a

reconnaissance plane sent to plan more strikes, then the enemy bombers may well fly again over the Northwest coast. To his annoyance, the captain had to wait quite a bit before someone finally answered in Wissant. He was however alarmed at once by the harried tone of the officer that answered and by the background noise of what sounded like near chaos in Wissant.

“Major Herlinger, JagdFliegerFuehrer 3!”

“Uh, this is Captain Messner, calling from the regional fighter control center in Aix-en-Provence. I was calling to check on the situation in your sector, as I have a suspected enemy reconnaissance plane trying to infiltrate my area. Is something wrong at your end, Major?”

“Is something wrong at my end, Captain?” Replied the major, sounding indignant. “How about having just gotten a few direct bomb hits on our headquarters? A whole squadron of fighter-bombers attacked us maybe one hour ago, helped by parachute flares dropped by pathfinder aircraft. What was left of our radar network was also attacked heavily and we are now blind. In fact, I am surprised that the telephone line to the South survived the bombing.”

Now tense and expecting the worse, Messner asked another question in an urgent tone.

“Major, could you tell me if any bomber formation overflew your area, heading southeast?”

“Large groups of bombers effectively overflew us, heading Southeast, just after we got blasted out of business. I unfortunately can't give you precise numbers or even headings or speeds, as our radar and communication networks here are completely down. It is however safe for you to assume that bombers are heading your way and should be over your area in maybe a bit over a hour, Captain Messner.”

“Thank you, Major Herlinger.” Said Messner, who then cut that link. He was about to call the center's commander, asleep in his room two floors above, when the senior radar operator swore violently and shouted a warning to him.

“SIR, MY RADAR HAS JUST BEEN JAMMED! I CAN'T SEE A THING ANYMORE.”

Hurrying to the radar station, Messner saw that the screen was now full of parasite signals, with the original echo all but lost in the middle.

“Have our two night fighters scrambled off the ground yet, Volker?”

“They did, sir, but now our radio link to them is also being jammed by a very powerful emitter. I think that our original contact may be one of those devilish American electronic warfare planes they use as flying command posts.”

The words ‘flying command posts’ struck Messner’s mind at once, awakening a nightmarish scenario in his head.

“Mein Gott! Massive enemy bomber formations just broke through France’s Northwest coast one hour ago, heading this way. This plane could be here to direct them to their objectives. We must warn all our units at once.”

“But, sir, all our radio frequencies are being jammed: I tried all the alternate frequencies to contact our fighters and our airbase in Avignon and all of them are hopelessly jammed.”

“Then, let’s start using our telephones! You call Avignon, while I wake up the colonel and start passing the alert around.”

“Yes sir!”

Unfortunately for Messner and his operators, the telephone network in the 1940s was a clumsy affair dependant on multiple relay and switching centers that were manually operated. One could not simply compose a number and get an instant connection, like in the 21st Century. Calling a few dozen different locations over an area of a few tens of thousands of square kilometers thus took time, a lot of time, and time was running out quickly for the Germans.

04:35 (Paris Time)

Lead Junkers Ju 88G night fighter

Night sky of Provence

Captain Franz Kellermann scrutinized carefully the night sky, hoping that the moonlight would help him locate his target. His radar operator was however the first to spot something.

“I have an echo at two O’clock, distance nine kilometers! It is slightly above us.”

“Very well, Bayerlein.” Said Kellermann before activating his radio microphone to contact his wingman. “Howl Two, this is Howl One. We have an echo at two O’clock, distance nine klicks and slightly above us. Arm your guns and follow me!”

Before his wingman could answer him, a powerful growl suddenly filled his radio frequency, making Kellermann swear.

"SHIT! WE'RE BEING JAMMED!"

"My radar scope also just filled up with parasites." Announced Bayerlein. Kellermann swore again, more quietly this time.

"Then we will have to complete this intercept the old-fashioned way: visually. We should see our objective soon anyway."

Barely fifteen seconds later, Kellermann spotted a moving dot, barely visible in the night sky. His triumph then quickly turned into worry when he realized that the dot was heading directly towards him. A bomber or reconnaissance aircraft would not rush at him like this, which made the dot as...

"ENEMY FIGHTER COMING AT US!"

Kellermann immediately veered to the right, barely avoiding a thick line of tracer shells just fired by the incoming enemy aircraft. To his shock, a second line of tracers also appeared, pursuing his wingman. The latter, not having realized what they were up against, was hit squarely and turned into a flying torch, watched by an enraged Kellermann. A massive black shape then zoomed by his plane.

"NORTHROP P-61 NIGHT FIGHTERS! OUR TARGET IS ESCORTED BY AT LEAST TWO P-61s."

"Then, it must be an important aircraft." Said his radar operator, equally as shocked as Kellermann. The pilot nodded grimly and pushed his engine throttles to maximum power, then engaged the methanol-water booster system. He could now see in the distance a big gray aircraft illuminated by moonlight as it was trying to race away from him. With the vision of his wingman's death still in his mind, Kellermann's keen eyes fixed on the fleeing aircraft.

"You're going to pay for Hugo, you bastard!"

He was now clearly overtaking the enemy aircraft, ignoring for the moment the pursuing P-61s, who were being outraced by his Ju 88G. Anxious to avenge his wingman, he opened fired at maximum effective range, straddling his target but missing it. However, a few hits on his second salvo rewarded him, making him shout in triumph.

"TAKE THAT, YOU BASTARD! NOW, FOR THE FINALE!"

In his obsession to shoot down his target and avenge his wingman, Kellermann never noticed the two other P-61s that had been staying back, protecting the rear of the EC-142E. He realized his mistake only when tracers flew by him, half a second before his plane exploded under the impact of 20mm shells.

Inside the EC-142E, Ingrid clearly felt and heard the impacts of multiple 20mm shells on her plane and clenched her teeth, expecting the worst. The first physical sign of damage came at once, with the pressurized cabin being swept by a whirlwind as it lost its pressure through multiple holes.

“PUT YOUR OXYGEN MASKS ON! QUICK!”

Ingrid did so as well, then checked that Helen Sturgis and the others around her had put their masks on. Once she was reassured about that, she used the intercom to talk with the pilot.

“Major Bentley, we have lost cabin pressure but I don’t see casualties among the crew. How is your plane?”

“I’m afraid that one of our two tail gunners was hit and may be dead, as he is not answering on the intercom. I also have a leak in one of our wing fuel tanks and have started pumping what’s left in it into another tank. Fortunately, all four engines seem intact and I see no hydraulic fluid or coolant leaks. We should however turn around and return to England: our oxygen reserves will only last for three hours now that we lost cabin pressure.”

“Negative! We will stay on station and complete our mission, Major. Go down to 9,000 feet, so that we can work here without masks.”

“But, General, at such a low altitude we will be hideously vulnerable to antiaircraft gunfire once daylight comes. It will be like being in a shooting gallery.”

“I realize that fully, Major, but our mission is critical to the eventual success of our invasion and we must continue on. Have your cockpit crew don their parachutes in turn, just in case. I will pass the word here in the cabin.”

“Very well, General.” Replied Bentley in a resigned tone, now expecting to lose his aircraft and crew in the next hours. On her part, as their plane was descending to low altitude, Ingrid shouted around her.

“LISTEN CAREFULLY, ALL OF YOU! WE ARE CONTINUING OUR MISSION DESPITE OUR DAMAGE, BUT WILL HAVE TO FLY LOW BECAUSE OF CABIN DEPRESSURIZATION. WE MAY THUS BECOME VULNERABLE TO GROUND FIRE. YOU WILL ALL GET IN TURN YOUR PARACHUTES AND DON THEM, IN CASE WE HAVE TO BAIL OUT. DON’T LEAVE ALL YOUR STATIONS UNATTENDED AT ONCE, THOUGH.”

She then looked at Major Helen Sturgis, who had paled slightly at those words.

"Get your parachute, weapons and pack first, Helen. I will go after you."

"Uh, yes, General." Answered Sturgis before getting up from her seat to go get her things on the upper level. Once she was back with her parachute, backpack and carbine, Ingrid went herself upstairs and collected her things. She however solidly tied her Japanese katana and her Springfield 1903 rifle, held inside a canvas bag, to her backpack. After putting on her parachute, she then took two strong lanyards with her before coming down to the operations cabin, giving one lanyard to Helen Sturgis.

"Here, Major! Watch how I fix this lanyard to my belt and then to my backpack and then do the same. If we have to jump, do it while holding your pack with one hand and then let it go once your parachute is deployed. That way, your pack's weight will get to the ground first and will allow your parachute to slow you down to a safe speed. That's what our paratroopers do on combat jumps."

"Uh, understood, General. Do you think that we will have to jump?"
Ingrid gave her a big grin.

"While flying at 9,000 feet over German-held territory and with nearly all anti-aircraft guns within effective range of us? Probably!"

05:56 (Paris Time)

Hôtel De La Plage, St-Tropez

Côte d'Azur, France

The distant wailing of alert sirens woke up Frida Lindstahl from her slumber, making her grumble to Helena Siefried, sleeping besides her in the large bed of their hotel room.

"Not a damned air raid practice here, during our vacation?"
She then put her pillow around her ears to cut off the noise of the sirens and tried to go to back to sleep. Helena, an appetizing young blonde of 22, got up to go look through a crack between the curtains of their window.

"I don't see any signs of an air raid on St-Tropez. You must be right, Frida: it must be a practice drill."

"Then do like me and go back to bed: we have four days still left in our leave."
To Frida's surprise, Helena didn't go back to bed, instead going to the chest of drawers of their room and undressing completely there.

"What are you doing, Helena?"

"Putting on my bathing suit. A dip in the sea will be a nice way to wake up."

"Actually, that's not a bad idea. Wait for me!"

By the time that the two vacationing Luftwaffe female auxiliaries walked out of their hotel by the door on the beach side, wearing bathing suits, flip flops and sunglasses and with beach towels over their shoulders, the air raid sirens had stopped. Frida grumbled again as she looked around her.

"Nothing! I knew that this was only a stupid drill. I hope that the other girls didn't waste their time finding air raid shelters."

"Well, if they did, they will be able to blame only themselves. Let's find a nice spot on the beach, preferably with long chairs."

They actually had only to walk maybe fifty meters down the sandy beach before finding a dozen beach long chairs, all empty and still with no one in sight. They laid down their beach towels on two selected long chairs, then ran on the fine sand of the beach and into the sea, giggling at the contact of the fresh water. They swam for a few minutes before coming out of the water and returning to their long chairs to dry up. Helena then smiled as an idea came to her mind.

"Hey, why not take some Sun with our tops off? There is nobody around at this hour."

"Great idea! After all, many of those Frenchwomen don't mind doing it."

The two young German women then quickly lowered the top half of their bathing suits, rolling them down to their groin before lying down in long chairs. On second thought, Helena decided to take her bathing suit off completely and laid down completely naked on her long chair to take on the first rays of the Sun. Seeing that, Frida decided to imitate her.

They had been taking the Sun for maybe four minutes, relaxing utterly in their long chairs, when the growing noise of aircraft piston engines struck their ears, making them open their eyes to look upwards. Frida frowned on seeing not a single plane in the sky at first. She then looked towards the sea and opened her mouth wide from surprise: at least twenty strange machines with rotors pointed upwards were approaching quickly from very low altitude, nearly skimming the waves. She and Helena were so surprised and shocked by that sight that they forgot to put back on their bathing suits until the helicopters were about to land on the beach. The pilot of the helicopter that landed

nearest to them, barely thirty meters away, was actually grinning like an idiot while eyeing the two German women scrambling to cover themselves. The thirty or so American paratroopers that ran out of the helicopter with weapons at the ready all waved happily at Frida and Helena, some even blowing them kisses while running towards the buildings bordering the beach. About 300 paratroopers in total ran out of the dozen helicopters that landed on the beach, while another dozen machines flew past the beach to go inland. The problem for the Germans was that, being essentially a rest and vacation center, the town was not defended by any combat unit, antiaircraft weapons or coastal guns. The taking of St-Tropez and of St-Raphael, the sister town across the Gulf of St-Tropez, was actually no more than a walkover for the paratroopers of the 101st Airborne Division. Frida and Helena, not sure what to do and afraid of going back to their hotel in case a firefight started there or around a nearby building, stayed on the beach for the time being. They were about to move back to their hotel a few minutes later, not having heard yet a single gunshot, when more engine noises made them look again towards the sea. This time, they saw two huge machines apparently sliding on top of the waves and propelled by two big ducted propellers at the rear of each machine. This time, the two women didn't wait and ran to their hotel as the two LCHACs slid on the sand of the beach and lowered their bow ramp, letting out a total of eight medium tanks and six jeeps.

Inside the hotel, Frida and Helena found their five female Luftwaffe companions sitting in the lobby with long faces, watched over by two American paratroopers that looked very satisfied about their job. The French owner of the hotel grinned ferociously on seeing Frida and Helena enter and pointed them at one of the American soldiers.

"Them Germans!"

The American, a tall, athletic young man, nodded and made a sign for the two women to sit down. Frida, seeing that her comrades wore their Luftwaffe uniforms, pointed at them, then at her bathing suit, using the little English she knew.

"Us...change."

The American thought that over for a moment, then nodded, showing them the staircase leading to the rooms on the upper floors. The two German women then ran upstairs, but not before the second American soldier playfully patted in passing Helena's bum, attracting a protest from her and a laugh from the first American soldier.

07:48 (Paris Time)

Area of Istre-Le Tubé airbase

43 kilometers Northwest of Marseilles

"We have to jump out now, General: our two remaining engines are badly overheating and are about to catch fire. Besides, all of our Phase Three helicopter and air landing assault troops are now within visual sight of their objectives. We did our job here, General."

"Any chances that we could land at one of the airfields we captured, Major Bentley?"

"Not without a serious risk of breaking up on landing, General: our hydraulics have been shot to pieces and one of our landing legs is hanging out by itself, while the other legs are stuck in the closed position."

"What about our wounded?" Objected Ingrid, staring hard at Bentley. "They are in no state to jump. Are you proposing to abandon them?"

Bentley clenched his teeth, realizing how bad this made him look.

"General, all but three of us can jump. It is the lives of 28 against three."

"Then, have your intact crewmembers jump along with you, Major. I will stay at the controls and try to land safely our wounded."

"But..."

"NO BUT, MAJOR! I WILL TAKE THE CONTROLS. YOU JUMP OUT WITH YOUR CREW. GO!"

Knowing that he couldn't object anymore, Bentley turned around and started passing orders to his crew. Ingrid, who was heading towards the cockpit, saw that Helen Sturgis was following her and turned to face her.

"You will jump with the others, Helen. There is no point in risking more lives. Unfortunately, Major Bentley is right: landing this aircraft in its present state is near suicide."

"Our three wounded people need someone to watch over them, General, in order to prevent them from bleeding to death. I want to stay with them."

"As you wish, Helen. Then you might as well move them against the forward cabin partition, so that the shock from our landing will not project them around."

"Understood, General!"

Ingrid soon entered the cockpit, where the copilot and flight engineer were doing their best to keep it flying for a few more minutes. Even if she managed to survive a belly landing now, Ingrid knew that this EC-142E was good only for the scrap heap. Sitting down in the pilot's chair, Ingrid then let the copilot describe to her what still worked and what didn't. That lone 37mm antiaircraft gun battery that had managed to evade the attention of Ingrid's bombers and fighter-bombers near Marseilles had truly peppered their plane before being taken out by airstrikes. The good news was that the invasion overall had been a complete success, with surprise achieved at most levels and with Allied casualties being very low. Even the warships of the French Fleet in Toulon had been taken intact, their commanders surrendering without a fight to the Free French troops of General Leclerc. Whatever happened to her now, Ingrid had the satisfaction of knowing that the plan she had devised had succeeded brilliantly, dealing a decisive strategic blow to the Germans.

Once she was satisfied with the briefing given by the copilot, Ingrid sent him and his flight engineer to the cabin, so that they could jump out. Now at the controls of the wounded heavy aircraft, she watched anxiously as 26 crewmembers parachuted out one by one over the captured airbase of Istre-Le Tubé. Once this was out of the way, she used all her strength to turn the nearly frozen controls and make the EC-142E do a half turn to return towards Istre on a gentle downward slope. All the while, her mind thought furiously about how she was going to land without breaking up her plane into pieces and thus killing the three wounded inside. By the time that she was lined up on the grass surface parallel to the paved main runway and was fifty meters above the ground, she had what approached a decent plan. When she was twenty meters from the ground, she spoke quickly on the intercom.

"We are about to land. Brace for impact!"

Cold sweat on her forehead and with teeth clenched hard together, Ingrid then committed herself, rolling slightly her left wing tip down and making the lower left edge of her fuselage touch the ground at about the same time as the lone wheel carriage sticking out on the right side. She immediately applied full brakes on her lone wheel carriage deployed, to avoid the start of a crazy rotation that would have violently propelled the wounded against one side of the cabin. The shock was still jarring, sending her forward by a few centimeters before her harness saved her teeth from shattering against the top of the controls column. She still had her breath knocked out

by the impact on the ground and her plane started rotating on the grass, but not as violently as she had feared. The lone wheel carriage finally broke off, improving a lot her chances by making the EC-142E's slide easier to control. After fifteen very long seconds the plane finally came to a rest. Not wasting time wondering how she had done it, Ingrid undid her seat harness at once and ran to the cabin without delay. There, she found a shaken but mostly intact Helen Sturgis, along with three wounded men that were still alive. Ingrid blew air out on seeing them.

"Thank God, you are all intact! Let's transport them out before any fire could start aboard."

Thankfully, eight American paratroopers then entered the cabin by one of the opened side doors, having raced after the aircraft in their truck. Their leader, a sergeant, shouted to Ingrid at once.

"ARE YOU OKAY, MAAM?"

"YES, BUT I HAVE THREE WOUNDED MEN HERE TO CARRY OUT BEFORE THIS THING CATCHES FIRE."

The sergeant didn't waste time to ask for details and had his men carry at once the three wounded outside. That left Ingrid free to recuperate her weapons and field kit and help Helen do the same before jumping out of the plane with her and walking quickly away from it. They had time to cover maybe thirty meters before one of the fuel tanks caught fire, sending a ball of flames high in the air. Running with Helen the last twenty meters to the paratroopers' truck, Ingrid looked with regret at the now burning plane.

"There goes one precious asset."

Helen Sturgis nodded at that, sober.

"It indeed did an important job today, General. What do we do now, General?"

Ingrid looked around her at the apparently mostly intact airbase, save for rows of German planes destroyed on the ground, then pointed the headquarters building.

"Let's see if I can find a decent place from which to continue directing the air war for the rest of the battle."

20:35 (London Time)

Main conference room, SHAEF headquarters

Bushy Hall, London

England

General Dwight Eisenhower sat back in his chair and blew air out in relief as the last of the briefers of his staff finished his presentation. They had done it after all, and that at the price of what most generals would consider ridiculously low casualties. He now had the best part of twelve combat divisions on the ground in Southern France, with six enemy airfields, two major ports and two minor ports captured intact and now helping to land more troops, equipment and supplies in France. The capture intact of the whole French Fleet in Toulon had also been a masterstroke. The fact that both flanks of the invasion force were protected by major geographical features, the Alps to the East and the Rhone and Saone Rivers along the West, had done a lot to insure this success, allowing a rapid advance without fear of exposing a vulnerable flank. Incredibly enough, except for the fierce response by the lone German panzer division located in Provence, it seemed that the German top commanders still believed that the Provence invasion was only a diversion and that the real invasion was going to come in the Pas de Calais area. Those German commanders, Hitler included, were in for a rude awakening when they were going to understand that Allied armored columns were already more than halfway to the French-Germany border in Alsace and that American tanks could well start rolling inside Germany proper in less than four days. In this, the invasion plan was proving absolutely brilliant. Eisenhower's next task now was going to ensure that enough follow-on forces were landed quickly in France to help hold the western flank along the Rhone and the Saone against the inevitable German counter-attack by the forces now finding themselves facing the wrong way, with their rear door wide open. Even if the Germans woke up quickly and turned to face Southeast, Dows' plan had another devilish option available to then strike them in their back...again. Eisenhower chuckled as he pictured in his mind the faces of those German commanders as they got their own briefings this evening. Looking at Prime Minister Churchill and Field Marshall Alan Brooke, who had listened on to the briefings, he saw that they still had a nearly stunned expression on their faces.

"So, Mister Prime Minister? I would say that our strategic prospects have improved immeasurably today."

"Indeed, General! I never thought that this would prove this easy."

"Ah, but it was easy because the right thinking and planning went into it, Mister Prime Minister. We had weak local enemy defenses, good geographic conditions and surprise, plus powerful close air support to help our forces."

"Yes, but the Germans are liable to recover their wits in a day or two and then launch a full scale counter-attack against us with much of their forces now deployed along the English Channel." Objected Brooke. "We will then have to face up to six armored divisions and possibly up to a dozen infantry division assaulting our Rhone-Saone line."

Eisenhower looked gravely at him and Churchill as he replied calmly to that.

"This has already been taken into account in our overall invasion plan, Sir Alan. Brigadier General Dows, who devised the major lines of our invasion plan, expected such a massive German counter-attack to follow in the days following our landings. Her reasoning, which I find eminently sound, was that such a massive movement of forces would take days and would basically clog all the available roads and railway tracks with military convoys from Northwest France. We are now waiting for just that to let our tactical air forces loose over Northwest France and shoot from the air the hell out of those road and rail convoys. We still have in England over 2,000 medium bombers and fighter-bombers poised for just that task and they will exact a very painful toll out of the Germans before the latter can even get into position to counter-attack. Furthermore, if the Germans are stupid enough to really denude of troops parts of the Atlantic coast of France, we are ready to exploit that and use again our helicopter force to assault and take one or two major French ports and insert more divisions in the back of the Germans heading for the Provence. Either the Germans stay facing the English Channel and let us enter the South of Germany, or they turn around and present us with ideal targets for our fighter-bombers. Unless we fumble the ball badly at this point, I believe that we have the Germans by the balls."

Churchill eyed him with disbelief for a moment before speaking hesitantly.

"This young girl...she really did all this thinking and planning?"

"She did, Mister Prime Minister. To be perfectly frank with you, she could be wearing two or three stars on her shoulders and I wouldn't mind it one bit."

"And...where is this young girl right now, General?"

"She was aboard a flying command post over the Marseilles area early this morning, just before the start of our operation, in order to coordinate and command on the spot our tactical air forces and helicopters. Her plane was shot up and she had to crash-land in France, but she is thankfully intact and is presently commanding her tactical air command from near Marseilles."

That left Churchill thoughtful and speaking to himself.

"...so much like Nancy."

Churchill then hesitated and nearly said something, but finally decided not to. Thanking Eisenhower for the briefings, he then got up and left with Brooke.

CHAPTER 13 – ON GERMAN SOIL

09:17 (Newfoundland Time)

Wednesday, June 7, 1944 'C'

Command bridge of the battleship HMS HANSON

Canadian Northwest Passage, Arctic Ocean

Doctor Reginald Jones, head of the Athena Section and renown British physicist, watched absentmindedly the Canadian icebreaker ship that was leading the long line of British warships through the celebrated Northwest Passage, which was in this season mostly free of ice. Such a trip through Arctic waters would normally fascinate him but his mind was on much uglier things than killer whales and polar bears. He was on a mission of death, pure and simple. He and a team of forty other physicists, engineers and technicians had taken place aboard the three battleships of Task Force 44, which also included an aircraft carrier and escorting cruisers and destroyers, in order to watch over and maintain the twelve THUNDERBOLT medium range ballistic missiles loaded in launch containers aboard the battleships. Those MRBMs, each armed with a thermonuclear warhead with a power of two megatons, actually represented over half of the ultra secret nuclear arsenal of Great Britain, developed mostly at the Canadian atomic center of Chalk River and then tested on a remote island of the South Atlantic. The missiles themselves, using solid powder rocket technology adapted from the German A-4 ballistic missile, had a range of 1,800 miles, but their accuracy was fairly poor, something that had decided the government to arm them with such a powerful warhead. Thanks to the information on nuclear weapons stolen from the computer that had belonged to Nancy Laplante, Great Britain now was way ahead of the American atomic bomb program, PROJECT MANHATTAN and could produce both fission and fusion weapons. The thought about how that information had been acquired, by breaking the access code Nancy Laplante had put to protect key files she didn't want anyone to see, embittered Jones. Nancy had refused more than once to share her information on nuclear weapons, even rebuffing a direct request by Prime Minister Churchill. She had stated then that such weapons should not be used in this war, or ever. Churchill had then secretly ordered that the best British cryptographers break the

password put by Nancy on her hidden computer files. Nancy had been a great friend of Reginald Jones, who had admired the tall Canadian woman. Despite that, he never had the honesty and courage to warn her of the theft of her nuclear information before her death at the hand of the German Gestapo. Reginald still felt awful about that and doubted that he would ever live over that. Yet, here he was, on his way to use that stolen technology to erase millions of lives.

13:46 (Paris Time)

Saturday, June 10, 1944 'C'

Area of Châlons, 150 kilometers East of Paris

France

"Hawk Leader, this is Howl Three. We have fifteen fast bogeys heading your way. They are presently on your heading 110, at a distance of 36 miles and decreasing and flying at 12,000 feet. Their speed is 520 miles per hour, over."

"Howl Three, from Hawk Leader, I copy." Answered Ingrid, keying the radio microphone of her oxygen mask. She then looked around her, checking the sky for undetected German aircraft. She saw only the sixteen other P-38NC fighter-bombers flying in loose formation around her own P-38NC. Looking down next, she saw the twenty P-47 THUNDERBOLT fighter-bombers continuing to strafe and rocket the remnants of the long column of German armored vehicles and trucks stuck on a road near Châlons. These P-47s had just replaced a squadron of B-26 MARAUDER medium bombers that had been adding to the daylong destruction of the 2nd Panzer Division as it had tried to rush Southeast from the French coast on the English Channel. Supported by an EC-142E that gave warnings whenever Luftwaffe fighters tried to intervene to bring relief to the German Army column, the strafing American fighter-bombers and medium bombers were in turn protected by fighters flying high cover. With her plans now being in full implementation mode, Ingrid had decided to at last do some flying of her own and help her aviators in their destruction work. Up to now, everything had gone as she had predicted, with totally flustered German senior commanders having ordered most of their mechanized units in France to rush towards the Rhone and Saone Rivers to counter-attack the Allied invasion force rushing northward from Provence. In doing so, those German commanders had presented Ingrid's planes with easy to detect, massive targets on the ground. Having to use roads and rail lines in order to move as

fast as possible, the German columns had quickly clogged all the roads in Northwest France and had monopolized the railway trains, which had become in turn targets for Ingrid's aircraft. What could only be called a massacre from the air had been going on for two days now with a ferocity rarely seen before. While mobile German anti-aircraft guns did their best to protect the vulnerable columns and trains from Allied fighter-bombers, the Luftwaffe had also reacted strongly, throwing its fighters en masse in the battle. This had turned into a number of epic air battles, with heavy losses on both sides but with the Allies being better able to sustain and replace such losses. Ingrid had to devise new air tactics to counter in particular the speedy German jet aircraft, with squadrons of P-38NCs and of P-51s flying high cover for P-47s and B-26s and ready to dive on any German fighters that showed up. In a dive, the P-38NC in particular was able to catch even a Me 262 jet fighter, a plane that was fast and well armed but not particularly agile. The P-51 could also do it, but with a much slimmer margin of speed than the P-38NC.

Receiving an update from the EC-142E one minute later, Ingrid decided on her tactic for this particular engagement and ordered her accompanying squadron to turn around and fly East to meet the German fighters away from the strafing P-47s. With the help of the air controller in the EC-142E, she was able to calculate an optimum intercept point and dive angle, then calling the leader of the P-38NC squadron.

"Blue Hawk Leader, this is Lady Hawk. Turn now to heading 260 and then start diving at a fifty degree angle to pick up speed. The enemy jets should start to pass under us by now. Go first with your pilots: I will keep the rear in case some bogeys slip through. Good Hunting!"

"Wilco, Lady Hawk!" Replied the squadron leader, grateful that she let his men the first honors in this battle. Nobody but a true moron would accuse her now of cowardice for not diving first on the Germans: her record as a fighter pilot was too well established for that. Turning on the heading indicated by Ingrid, the sixteen P-38NCs then dove at a sharp angle, followed a few seconds later by Ingrid. Her intercept course calculation then proved right nearly at once, with fifteen fast fighters with swept wings passing under them and falling unknowingly in the sights of the American fighters. Such intercepts had become routine for Ingrid and for the female pilots of the 99th Wing in the Pacific, but the use of EC-142Es as airborne command posts for intercepting fighters seemed to have been ignored in the European Theatre...until the arrival of Ingrid. Now,

few Allied air commanders could deny how important an advantage an EC-142E could bring to an air engagement. On their part, the Germans still had not caught on fully to that new factor in air combat, something that was costing them dearly these days.

The P-38 squadron leader was the first to open fire on a Me 262 jet fighter, peppering it with 20mm shells from a distance of 600 meters while still diving on it. He proved to be a fair shot, hitting the German jet after a second and a half of firing and putting one of its engines on fire. The American pilot then started pulling out of his dive while lining up a second Me 262 in his gun sight. This time he narrowly missed his target and flew down through the German formation. To Ingrid's disappointment, the other American pilots proved on the average to be rather mediocre shooters, except for two pilots who exploded their targeted jet on the first pass. The engagement then turned into a confusing scene of planes chasing planes, with a few German jets electing to keep going on their original heading while pushing their engines to maximum to escape the P-38s. Ingrid decided at once to target those Me 262s and lined up the tail jet fighter of that group in her gun sight, opening fire from a distance of 900 meters while diving at a speed of 560 miles per hour, faster than she had ever flown. Her target was hit nearly immediately, with a wing breaking off and the jet aircraft then spiraling down out of control. Raising a bit the nose of her aircraft, Ingrid targeted a second German jet and quickly fired a second burst that exploded her unlucky opponent. With still some speed advantage as she pulled level behind a third Me 262, she lined up her guns on it and fired from a distance of a mere hundred meters, shredding the rear half of the jet to pieces. The German pilot then didn't lose time before ejecting out of his doomed plane, but Ingrid was already out of the way, not giving a chance to the surviving two Me 262s to line up their sights on her. Those two jets, either armed with very strict orders to defend the German Army columns at all cost or being piloted by particularly stubborn pilots, went on at full speed towards the P-47s still strafing Germans on the ground. Now unable to keep up with them, Ingrid fired a long burst in desperation at the lead Me 262 about to outrace her. She yelled in triumph on seeing that jet suddenly turn into a flying torch. The wingman of that jet however kept on, diving on a P-47 busy spraying a group of German trucks with heavy machinegun fire.

"LADY HAWK TO RED BUZZARDS, YOU HAVE ONE SHARK IN YOUR MIDST! BREAK! BREAK!"

Thankfully, the targeted P-47 pilot, like his comrades, immediately reacted to Ingrid's warning and rolled hard, turning left and narrowly escaping the 30mm cannon fire from the Me 262. The latter then started turning to try pursuing the P-47. However, the P-47 was much more agile at low altitude than the Me 262 was and the German pilot ended up doing a wide high-speed turn. That turn however severely bled his speed, giving a chance to Ingrid to catch him at last. Turning inside him, she lined her sight for a very difficult ninety degree deflection shot and opened fire again. Her first shells missed, but not her four last ones. Ripped off its wing by the exploding shells, the left side engine pod fell away, completely unbalancing the jet and making its pilot lose control. The Me 262 then plowed hard into the ground, exploding in a big ball of flames. Ingrid didn't have time to stay and linger to enjoy her victory, as she had to evade ground fire coming from surviving German soldiers.

"LADY HAWK TO RED BUZZARDS, YOU MAY GO AT IT AGAIN: SHARK NOW DOWN, OUT!"

"Thanks a lot, Lady Hawk." Replied the happy squadron leader of the P-47s. If you need witnesses to your kills, just call us, out."

Satisfied with herself, Ingrid then looked at how the P-38 squadron had done. The good news there was that the remaining Me 262s had turned tail and were fleeing. The bad news was that the American shooting had not proved very impressive, with only five German jets downed by the P-38 pilots. That made Ingrid grimace with disappointment: decidedly, the female pilots of the Witches had accustomed her to a much higher standard than this.

"Lady Hawk to Blue Hawk: break pursuit now and go back up to high altitude until another squadron can relieve us. Howl Three, from Lady Hawk: you may call replacements squadrons to finish the job here, both on the ground and in the air, over."

"Understood, Lady Hawk! We are... Wait! We have more bogeys appearing on our radar screens, coming from the East. Do you still have enough fuel and ammo to fight, over?"

After a quick look at her fuel gauge, Ingrid answered the EC-142E operator.

"Affirmative on my part, Howl Three. Blue Hawk, report how many planes you have left with fuel and ammo for another combat, over."

The definite answer came a bit slowly to Ingrid's taste, with the American P-38 pilots showing poor radio discipline and confusing their leader by answering out of turn. Too many of the P-38 pilots had also expended way too much ammunition for little results,

leaving her in the end with only nine other P-38s able to follow her for a second intercept. She took a mental note then to have a hard chat later on with the pilots of that squadron as she led those nine P-38s to meet the incoming German aircraft, which were now numbering 32, according to the EC-142E radar operator. Ingrid took that piece of news grimly: they were going to be heavily outnumbered.

“Very well, Howl Three. Call in all the fighter reinforcements you can find nearby and make sure to stay out of reach of those new bogeys: we will probably not be able to stop all of them, over.”

“Understood, Lady Hawk. I am going to enlist the help of a high cover squadron from a nearby kill zone. They should be here in less than ten minutes, over.”

“Good move, Howl Three! Lady Hawk out!”

Ingrid then concentrated back on the incoming German fighters, feeling more adrenaline flowing through her as she prepared again for combat. However dangerous her trade could be, she still would not give it up for anything else in the World.

14:22 (Paris Time)

Istres-Le Tubé airbase

Northwest of Marseilles

Ingrid was hungry, tired, out of ammunition and nearly out of fuel by the time she landed back at Istres-Le Tubé, where she still had the advanced headquarters of her tactical air command. Thankfully, her plane proved to be undamaged when she stepped out of it and performed a quick visual inspection. Taking out the film cassette of her gun camera and pocketing it, she left orders with her ground crew to service and check her P-38NC, then elected to walk all the way to her headquarters building, 300 meters away, in order to wind down and stretch her legs. She was finally about to get into her office when a staff officer ran to her.

“General, General Eisenhower has asked that you call him as soon as you would be back.”

She sighed briefly, then nodded her head.

“Thank you, Captain. I will call him now.”

She still took the time to take off her flying gear and to go wash her face and hands in a nearby washroom before grabbing her telephone receiver and asking for a

connection with General Eisenhower. It took two connections and nearly a minute before getting Eisenhower on the line.

"General, this is Brigadier General Dows, calling you as requested."

"Ah, Ingrid!" Said Eisenhower in a happy tone. "Glad to see that you came back in one piece from your air mission."

"It went well, but it wasn't a piece of cake, sir. The Luftwaffe is truly doing its best to try getting us off their ground comrades. The fight in the air was hard and we lost a few pilots, but the Germans lost much more than us."

"And you personally, Ingrid?"

"I am going to claim five Me 262 jet fighters and two Fw 190D prop fighters shot down, sir. So, what can I do for you, sir?"

Eisenhower hesitated for a moment, stunned by the number of planes downed she had just given him.

"Uh, I was calling to tell you that the date for Operation JUMPER has been fixed. I will need you to come at Bradley's headquarters in Marseilles to be briefed, along with the other commanders concerned. Can you be here for five O'clock?"

"Affirmative, sir! I will come by helicopter. Anything else, sir?"

"No, Ingrid! We will talk once you are in Marseilles."

Eisenhower then cut the line, making Ingrid slowly put down her own receiver. Normally, she would get her orders through General Quesada, but the latter was still in England. Ingrid was in fact still one of only two air commanders of flag rank to be operating from France, Brigadier General Otto Weyland being the other one after arriving in France yesterday. As for Eisenhower, he had come in from England only last night on a temporary visit to the advanced headquarters of the U.S. First Army of Lieutenant General Bradley.

Ingrid then went to take a quick shower and to change into a clean combat uniform, her flight suit being soaked with sweat. Forty minutes later, after leaving instructions to her chief of staff about the missions to be flown this evening and night, she went out to the UH-1 DOVE utility light helicopter parked in front of her headquarters and took off for Marseilles, bringing with her her weapons and a briefcase containing maps and classified reference documents. The flight was a relatively short one, her UH-1 landing in front of Lieutenant General Bradley's headquarters 25 minutes later. The headquarters actually occupied a large requisitioned manor on the outskirts of

Marseilles, with a large private lawn that gave Ingrid plenty of open space to land on. Shutting off all the circuits and securing her helicopter, she then walked quickly to the manor's main entrance, which was guarded by four armed soldiers and two MPs. Returning the salutes from the guards, Ingrid entered by the double doors and went to a young lieutenant sitting at a small table with a telephone in the lobby.

"Good afternoon, Lieutenant. I am Brigadier General Dows and I was asked by General Eisenhower to come see him here."

The young officer had a hard time not to stare at her youthful beauty and took a half second to react, getting to his feet and coming to attention.

"General Eisenhower is presently in a meeting with General Bradley and General Montgomery, General. You are to wait in a nearby lounge with other general officers due to see General Eisenhower. Follow me, please."

"Thank you!"

The lieutenant then led her to a luxurious Renaissance style lounge where she found no less than thirteen other general officers, American and British ones, waiting there while sipping coffee or tea and talking between themselves. A short silence and a collective stare greeted Ingrid's arrival in the lounge. She came to attention briefly and saluted the group as a matter of courtesy.

"Gentlemen!"

Air Marshal Coningham, commander of the 2nd British Tactical Air Force, returned her salute, following which Ingrid walked to him and Brigadier General Otto Weyland, who was standing next to Coningham.

"There is quite a lot of stars in this room, Sir Arthur. You are all waiting to see General Eisenhower?"

"Indeed!" Answered the small R.A.F. officer while sipping on his cup of tea. "However, it could be a while before we could file in: he and General Montgomery are having a, uh, slight difference of opinion about Op JUMPER."

Ingrid rolled her eyes at that: General Montgomery generally didn't like operational plans that were not made by himself and had a rather difficult character that was nearly legendary.

"I hope that the operation is still on, Sir? After all, seizing quickly crossings on the Rhine and entering Germany was one of the main goals of this whole invasion."

"Well, it will probably go on, but maybe not according to the original plans or timings, General Dows." Said phlegmatically Coningham. "General Montgomery is

arguing that we are going too fast and that British forces are given only secondary roles in the operation.”

Ingrid repressed her frustration with difficulty at those words.

“But speed is the whole point of the operation, Sir Arthur. We cannot allow time for the Germans to reoccupy their Siegfried Line and prepare the Rhine bridges for demolition. If we don’t go in the next few days, then we might as well scrap the operation.”

“I fully realize that, General Dows, and I agree with you. Unfortunately, the decision is now well above our pay grade.”

“Indeed! If you will excuse me, I will go get myself a cup of coffee.”

Going to a table supporting a collection of coffee and tea pots and of biscuits, Ingrid found there a tall, athletic and handsome baby-faced American brigadier general who wore the shoulder patch of the 82nd Airborne Division. She couldn’t help herself from discreetly eyeing the paratrooper general, her heart accelerating, noting at the same time that he was also eyeing her appreciatively. They finally exchange a warm smile and a handshake by the table, with the paratrooper presenting himself first.

“Hello! I’m James Gavin, Deputy Commander of the 82nd Airborne Division. You must be the famous Lady Hawk, of Pacific fame.”

“Correct! Ingrid Dows, Commander of the 9th Tactical Air Command. My helicopters were due to lift your paratroopers for Operation JUMPER.”

Gavin then made a sour smile while shaking his head.

“If the operation is still on after Generals Eisenhower and Montgomery are finished arguing over it. I must say that it would be a damn shame if we didn’t go.”

“Agreed! Op JUMPER is in my mind our best chance for putting a quick end to this war.”

“I think so as well. Can I call you Ingrid?”

Ingrid smiled widely to Gavin, her eyes sparkling.

“Of course, James! Well, let’s pour ourselves some coffee while we are here.”

Standing a few meters from the table, Major General Matthew Ridgway, Gavin’s superior, grinned as he watched him and Ingrid, then gave a knowing look at Major General Maxwell Taylor, the commander of the 101st Airborne Division.

“It looks like we are having two young pups in love, Max.”

"Right!" Replied Taylor, a sarcastic smile on his face. "God, that girl is even younger-looking than I thought. How could she climb so fast to the rank of brigadier general?"

"Through sheer combat performance and talent." Said Ridgway in a sober tone while eyeing Ingrid. "Hell, you saw like me how smoothly this invasion went up to now? Don't forget that she was the one who did the master plan for it."

"I still have a hard time believing that, Mat." Said Taylor, attracting a critical look from Ridgway. Taylor was a competent combat leader, but he had a burning ambition and was said to think mostly about himself first. Ridgway didn't reply to that, though, and walked away to go talk with Major General Lawton Collins, the commander of the 7th U.S. Corps.

Ingrid was still having a very pleasant conversation with James Gavin when Lieutenant General Omar Bradley entered the lounge twelve minutes later, his expression somber. The conversations died down at once and the tall, thin commander of the 1st U.S. Army spoke up in a calm, nearly subdued tone.

"I am sorry if you have to wait like this, gentlemen. Unfortunately, we may have to wait yet a little more, as Generals Eisenhower and Montgomery are now in private conversation. Make yourselves comfortable and be patient. Thank you for your attention."

That started the conversations anew, with many clearly dismayed by this. Ingrid herself didn't like at all the implications of that 'private conversation' between Eisenhower and Montgomery.

"Damn! I bet that Montgomery is trying to have the whole plan rewritten...by himself. We don't have time for this. Heck, we have precious little time left before we throw away our initial successes and lose the opportunity to seize intact bridges on the Rhine."

"I couldn't agree more with you, Ingrid." Said Gavin, equally displeased and worried. "Unfortunately, it seems that General Montgomery only speed settings for operations are 'slow' and 'slower'. I hope that General Eisenhower finally tells him who is the boss."

Ingrid nodded at that: Eisenhower was known to be an uncommonly conciliatory leader who preferred to use consensus and compromise rather than simply impose his authority. That quality had made him an ideal leader for the Allied coalition, but Ingrid

wished that he could just once put his foot down and tell the irascible and arrogant Montgomery to shut up and listen.

Ingrid had time to get a second cup of coffee and, at the invitation of Gavin, go have a chat with Major General Ridgway, before a British Army major who was part of Eisenhower's staff came in the lounge and made an announcement in a loud voice.

"Gentlemen, General Eisenhower is requesting your presence in the briefing room. Please follow me!"

Feeling some dread, Ingrid went with the rest of the generals to a nearby room that had been once a large private study, now full of map boards and folding chairs. They found Eisenhower and Montgomery waiting there for them, their facial expressions telling Ingrid at once that their 'conversation' had been plenty acrimonious. Montgomery in particular seemed most unhappy, something that pleased Ingrid: it probably meant that Eisenhower had finally put him in his place.

"Please, lady and gentlemen, have a seat!" Said Eisenhower, prompting the small crowd to grab folding chairs and sit down, expectation on their faces. In another sign for Ingrid that Montgomery had lost his argument, the British general went to sit on a front row chair rather than stay by Eisenhower's side. The latter waited for the shuffling to be done and for all to be seated before speaking again.

"Gentlemen, Operation JUMPER will proceed, but with some changes to it. However, the timings will stay basically the same, especially concerning the helicopter assaults on the Rhine bridges."

Ingrid couldn't help discreetly let out air as she felt relief at those words. Eisenhower then went on.

"The changes to Operation JUMPER concern mainly the tasks assignments. Since General Montgomery was concerned about the lack of time available to prepare his British units for a rapid advance towards the Rhine River crossings, I decided the following changes to our operational plan."

Everybody, including Ingrid, then got ready to take notes, maps at the ready.

"First, instead of both the First U.S. Army and the Second British Army advancing in parallel towards the Rhine, the Second British Army will halt and pivot to redeploy westward to take defensive positions along the east banks of the Rhône and Saone Rivers, insuring the security of our left flank against German counter-attacks coming from the Atlantic coast. This is to be effected immediately, with British units

relieving in place the American units presently holding our left flank. Our whole rear area will become a joint one, so I expect your chiefs of staffs to show flexibility and not start futile turf wars. Since our present frontage is only sixty miles wide, the respective divisional logistic and administrative points should be easily able to continue on without redeploying. Thus, only combat units will shuffle positions in this change.”

Ingrid saw Lieutenant General Dempsey, the commander of the Second British Army, nearly rise in protest at that, as this effectively turned his divisions into rear area security units. Montgomery however restrained him from speaking by touching his arm, letting Eisenhower go on.

“Second, from the start line of Dijon-Besançon-Pontarlier, the U.S. First Army will advance Northeast on two parallel axis and at best speed towards the Rhine, in order to effect a junction as quickly as possible with our airborne forces that will have seized the bridges and towns originally targeted in Operation JUMPER. General Bradley, I want your lead units to start rushing towards the Rhine no later than tomorrow noon. Even if not all your units can redeploy in time by then, at least launch your two lead divisions by noon. General Patton’s Third Army, which is due to start arriving in Marseilles tomorrow, will act as your second echelon and will take the lead once your units will have secured the Rhine crossings and established strong perimeters on the East bank. This leads me to the third major change to our plan. As you all know, our air forces have been able up to now to slow down and hurt badly from the air the German counter-attack forces, which still have to make firm contact with our left flank. However, the Germans are not stupid and must by now realize what our ultimate goals are. They are thus probably already starting to prepare the bridges on the Rhine for defense and possible destruction. We cannot allow them to complete those defenses. Speed will thus be of the essence in order to be able to grab those bridges intact with minimum casualties. Initially, the plan called for two days of preparation from the issue of a warning order for our airborne troops and helicopters to launch their assault on the bridges. My next question is thus addressed to Generals Ridgway, Taylor, Gale, Dows, Weyland and Coningham. When could you launch at the earliest possible time your helicopter-borne assault on the Rhine bridges?”

Ingrid, who was seated close to Ridgway, Gavin and Weyland, looked at once at Ridgway, speaking in a low voice to him.

“My helicopter units already have their flight plans and mission briefings ready. I just need to tell them a start time. Right now, I could launch my helicopters and

supporting planes for the first phase of Op JUMPER within four hours, if I give them a warning now. If it can help, my helicopters could go pick up your paratroopers directly in their present locations.”

“That would be great! My own men have been mostly idle for a couple of days and I made sure that they were ready to move on short notice. Let’s go for a launch time of nineteen hundred hours this evening for the initial reconnaissance and sabotage groups and for a main force launch at twilight tomorrow morning.”

Ridgway was thus the first to give his answer to Eisenhower, who was pleased by the early timing. Taylor, after consulting with Weyland, answered a minute later that he also could launch his men at nineteen hundred hours. Eisenhower’s was nearly as satisfied when Major General Gale, the commander of the 6th British Airborne Division, said that he could launch his initial groups at twenty hundred hours in the evening.

“Very well then! Let’s make twenty hundred hours tonight as our initial launch time for the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions and for your units, General Gale. The main helicopter-borne force will then lift at 05:30 tomorrow morning. Since time is now racing for you, I thus now free our airborne and air unit commanders involved in the assault phase of Op JUMPER to leave now, so you can get your units on the move. Good luck to you all! The rest will stay here to work out the details of our modified plan.” Satisfied about her part of the plan, Ingrid then got up with Ridgway, Taylor, Gavin, Gale, Weyland and Coningham and walked quickly out of the room. Once outside in the main hallway, she exchanged handshakes with Ridgway and Gavin.

“Well, I’m going to make a quick phone call to my helicopter wing commander, to warn him of this new timing. My helicopters should be landing at the bivouacs of your units in less than two hours, General.”

“And where will you be for the operation, Ingrid?” Asked Matthew Ridgway. She smiled and pointed upwards.

“Where I belong: in the air. I will be piloting your helicopter, General Ridgway. I intend to establish a forward aviation command post in Karlsruhe, in order to better assess the local situation and potential landing fields for my aircraft. I will land to pick you up at your headquarters at twenty to eight in the evening. In the meantime, good luck to you!”

“And good luck to you too, Ingrid.”

As Ingrid walked away, heading for a telephone, Ridgway watched her for a moment before smiling to James Gavin.

"A man could do worse than marry such a girl."

"Indeed, sir!" Replied in a subdued tone Gavin, whose marriage had been shaky for years and who was for all practical purposes separated from his wife, who was ferociously keeping custody of their daughter.

05:30 (Paris Time)

Sunday, June 11, 1944 'C'

**Landing zone adjacent to the command post of the 82nd Airborne Division
Southeastern suburbs of Lyons, Southern France**

After a last look at the Eastern horizon, where the first glows of twilight had appeared, Ingrid lit up the navigation lights of her UH-1 DOVE light helicopter as a signal for the rest of her helicopters assembled and waiting in fields just outside of Lyons. She then lifted up, imitated in turn by the more than ninety other helicopters lined up in the surrounding fields. This force, as impressive as it could appear, was however only a small part of the assault force for Op JUMPER. Numerous teams of American Rangers and of British commandos had already been inserted covertly by helicopter during the night and dropped within easy marching distance of their objectives both West and East of the Rhine, with large groups of bombers flying overhead on low altitude strike missions meant mostly to drown out the noise of the helicopters flying nap of the Earth. The mission of those Rangers and commandos was twofold: to cut at a predetermined time all the telephone lines in their target zone and to prevent at all cost the Germans from destroying the bridges on the Rhine before the main assault force could land. In about one hour, over 600 medium bombers and fighter-bombers would start attacking the German anti-aircraft guns defending those bridges and adjacent objectives in and around Colmar, Strasbourg, Baden-Baden, Karlsruhe and Ludwigshafen. The helicopters were due in turn to arrive and land their troops while those planes were still engaging the German guns. So said the plan anyway, but Ingrid knew too well that many things could go wrong and thus throw a big wrench in the operation.

Heading Northeast at very low altitude, Ingrid led her force towards Karlsruhe, a major German industrial city on the East bank of the Rhine that was the main objective assigned to the 82nd Airborne Division. Apart from the female copilot of her helicopter she had two female signalers from her own air command headquarters aboard, plus

Major General Matthew Ridgway and two of his own signalers. Ingrid had chosen the female helicopter group of her helicopter wing for the assault on Karlsruhe, along with a female heavy transport group of her Ninth Tactical Air Command, for a number of reasons that had little to do with feminism or sentimentality. The number of female air units in the American forces had grown steadily in the Army Air Force since she had formed the first such unit in 1942. While the 99th Composite Wing was still fighting and gaining glory and fame in the Pacific, female volunteers with previous civilian piloting experience had continued to flock to recruiting centers. Most of those women had then been used to form new transport and helicopter units, jobs that most male pilots found lacking in prestige and glory, a rather vain and shortsighted view in Ingrid's mind. Those women volunteers, being generally older and more mature than their male counterparts and also having more flying experience, had in turn made superior transport plane and helicopter crews that Ingrid was too happy to use right now. Female air units were still segregated by sex, but at least some of the prejudices and bias they had to face at first had gone in light of their outstanding service in combat. With Ingrid at the head of the Ninth Tactical Air Command, any male officer under her that would be dumb enough to harass or discriminate against female personnel or units would find himself relieved very quickly anyway, as more than a few had already found out to their sorrow in England.

05:31 (Paris Time)

Maximiliansau, West bank of the Rhine, opposite Karlsruhe

After another look at his watch, Staff Sergeant Michael McDonnel, of the 2nd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment, grabbed his flashlight, equipped with a red light filter, and pointed it up towards his man already up the telephone pole by the side of the rail line leading to the Karlsruhe rail bridge, flashing a predetermined code. Corporal Jim Rourke then raised his pair of wire cutters and cut one by one the telephone wires at the top of the pole. His job done, Rourke hurried down before any of the German soldiers guarding the West bank entrances of the rail bridge and of the nearby road bridge could see him in the growing light of dawn. He then joined McDonnel and the other three Rangers of their team, hidden in trees besides the rail line.

"All the wires are cut, Sarge."

“Good! Now, let’s creep quietly towards the entrance of those bridges and see how close we can get to them. We still have over an hour and a half before the 82nd Airborne Division gets here, so take your time and be stealthy.”

Taking the lead, McDonnell navigated his way as quietly as he could through the small wood sandwiched between the rail line and the small town of Maximiliansau. After forty minutes of very cautious approach, he saw through the trees the dark waters of the Rhine and got closer to the Northern edge of the wood. He actually could hear faintly the voice of two Germans speaking near the entrance of the rail bridge as he quietly crawled for the last ten meters. The Rangers NCO was finally able to see in the dark the shapes of two German soldiers standing guard near a quad 20mm anti-aircraft gun mount positioned just besides the entrance of the rail bridge. Another similar gun mount sat on the other side of the tracks, but its servants were not visible, probably because they were still sleeping. Raising his binoculars, McDonnell studied at length the two bridges and the German defenses visible around them in the light of dawn. Each bridge was approximately 300 meters long and appeared very sturdy. The rail bridge supported two rail lines, while the road bridge had four lanes. From his position, he could see no less than six 88mm guns positioned along the East bank, while three quad 20mm guns were on the West bank. McDonnell was however certain that there were more guns North of the bridges, where he couldn’t see them. In fact, his photomap, produced specially for this operation showed more guns to the North. As for ground fortifications, the anti-aircraft guns were ringed with low sandbag parapets, while at least two machinegun sandbagged positions sat at the East bank entrance of the bridges. Then looking at the trees around him, McDonnell pointed the tallest one, less than six meters away from him, to his team’s sniper, Corporal James Karpinski.

“Karpinski! Do you think that you could climb up that tree?”

The Polish-American looked up and answered in a near whisper after a few seconds.

“With a little help? Sure, Sarge!”

“Then go up, quietly! The moment that the action starts, I want you to take out any German you see yelling orders, along with any servant trying to point those quad mounts.”

“Got it, Sarge!”

As Karpinski started climbing the tree with the help of another Ranger, McDonnell patted the shoulder of his radio operator, Corporal Edward Lee.

"Stay close to me from now on, Lee: I want to know the moment that our helicopters will announce themselves. In the meantime, we will try to get the best picture possible of the German defenses around those bridges."

The two men then made themselves as comfortable as they could on the long grass of the wood's floor and resumed their observation of the Germans and the bridges.

It was nearly seven O'clock when the sound of approaching engines in the sky made both the Germans and the Rangers look up. A whole squadron of P-47 THUNDERBOLT fighter-bombers then appeared from the West, flying low. The Germans who were guarding the bridges, now all up since a hour ago, scrambled at once to man their anti-aircraft guns. That was when McDonnell gave orders in a low voice to his men positioned on both sides of him.

"Alright, guys, this is it! The moment Karpinski takes his first shot, we will open slow, aimed fire at those anti-aircraft gunners. Radwell, Bushmaster, you concentrate on the quad mount visible near the road bridge. Me and Lee will take on the two closest guns around the rail bridge."

McDonnell then turned on his back to give a quick signal to his sniper, hidden among the branches of his tree. Karpinski nodded to signal that he got the message and aimed his Springfield 1903 scoped rifle at what appeared to be the German officer in charge of the anti-aircraft battery, who was yelling orders left and right. That officer dropped down, dead, just as sixteen P-47s lined up for strafing passes against the anti-aircraft guns defending the West bank entrances of the bridges. More P-47s were now visible as well, diving on the 88mm guns on the East bank. The German gunners took a couple of seconds to notice that their officer was down, but by that time McDonnell and his men were opening fire, shooting down the gun aimers sitting on the quad mounts. Shot at from a distance of at most eighty meters in the case of the farthest mount, the German gunners were killed one by one in mere seconds, with their mounts then disappearing momentarily in a blizzard of hits on and around them by hundreds of .50 caliber slugs from the attacking P-47. Each quad mount was sprayed in succession by no less than four fighter-bombers, leaving no Germans alive around them. With the quad 20mm guns on the west bank utterly silenced, the P-47s then flew eastward to go help neutralize the anti-aircraft guns on the East bank, leaving only four fighter-bombers behind to circle over the West end of the bridges. Seeing that, McDonnell shouted at his sniper up his tree.

"KARPINSKI, CAN YOU SEE THE MACHINEGUN POSTS NEAR THE EAST END OF THE RAIL BRIDGE?"

"I SURE CAN, SARGE!"

"THEN, TAKE OUT THE MACHINEGUNNERS!"

"CONSIDER IT DONE, SARGE."

Less than fifteen seconds later, a shot rang out from the tree, with McDonnell seeing through his binoculars one of the German machine gunners at the East end of the rail bridge jerk and fall back inside his sandbagged position. The German loader of that machinegun then attempted to take over but was also shot a mere six seconds later. The second machinegun crew at that end of the bridge didn't fare better, not realizing that a sniper was after them rather than the P-47s strafing along the East bank. That was when McDonnell took a quick decision and rose from the grass, shouting an order to his men.

"WE'RE GOING TO CROSS TO THE EAST BANK ON THE RAIL BRIDGE. LET'S FIND AND DISCONNECT THE WIRES TO THE DEMOLITION CHARGES FOR THAT BRIDGE! KARPINSKI, YOU COVER US!"

The four Rangers, emerging from their hiding places in the small wood, sprinted to the West entrance of the rail bridge, then split in pairs and started crossing the bridge at a fast walk, using the steel beams of the bridge's structure to make tactical dashes from cover to cover. Their hearts beating at an accelerated pace and expecting at any time to be mowed down by rifle or machinegun fire from the East end of the bridge, the Rangers arrived at the machinegun positions on the opposite bank unscathed. Not believing his luck, McDonnell then looked for the command detonator for the charges that must have been placed to blow the bridge in case Allied troops were threatening to capture it. To his utter disbelief, he didn't find any such detonator or plunger, nor did he find any wires leading under the bridge. He exchanged a befuddled look with his radio operator.

"I'll be damned! Those Germans haven't yet prepared this bridge for demolition. Give me your handset, quick! RADWELL, BUSHMASTER, MAN THAT MACHINEGUN AND DON'T LET ANY GERMAN APPROACH THIS BRIDGE."

As two of his men jumped inside the nearest machinegun position, McDonnell then spoke urgently in the radio handset.

"Eagle Kilo One, this is Snake Kilo One. The rail bridge is intact and in my hands. No demolition charges have been found. The way is clear, over."

He got an answer within three seconds.

"Eagle Kilo One understood! We will be at your location very soon, out!"

Satisfied, McDonnel gave back the handset to Lee, then searched inside his combat jacket, pulling out a large folded American flag.

"Let's mark our territory, so that our planes and helicopters don't strafe us by accident. Go take position in the other machinegun position in the meantime, Lee."

Looking around him quickly, McDonnel then ran to the superstructures of the bridge's entrance, climbing up the steel trusses until he stood on one of the horizontal beams linking both side structures. By now, all the German antiaircraft guns in view of the bridge had been silenced by repeated strafing passes by the P-47s still flying around like angry hornets. He took two minutes to spread out his large flag and solidly tie its corners to the trusses, so that any plane overflying the bridge couldn't miss the flag, then climbed down. He was setting foot back on the ground when an armada of low-flying helicopters suddenly jumped over the treetops on the West side, with some of them splitting up from the main group and landing near the West end of the raid and road bridges to disgorge hundreds of American paratroopers. Running to the machinegun position occupied by his radio operator, McDonnel jumped in and grinned to Lee.

"Do you realize that we are probably the first American soldiers to set foot on German soil in this war?"

The corporal grinned as well when he realized that his sergeant was right.

"Hey, I didn't think about that! I wish I had a bottle of bourbon to celebrate that."

"I got something nearly as good." Replied McDonnel, who then produced four cigars, giving one to Lee and throwing two others to his other two men before biting one cigar himself and lighting it. Karpinski showed up then at a run and got a cigar as well. The five Rangers were smoking happily inside their two captured machinegun positions when a whole company of American paratroopers ran up to them after crossing the rail bridge in a mad sprint. The major leading the paratroopers looked with disbelief at the smiling and smoking Rangers, with McDonnel greeting him with a wide gesture.

"WELCOME TO GERMANY, MAJOR! ANYTHING TO DECLARE?"

"YEAH: A SHITLOAD OF WEAPONS AND AMMUNITION! GOOD JOB, SERGEANT!"

At about that moment, Ingrid was landing her UH-1 light helicopter in front of the main entrance to the Karlsruhe ducal palace, along with eight UH-2 medium helicopters loaded with American paratroopers. Four AH-4 VIPER attack helicopters had preceded

her helicopter by a few seconds, strafing the Germans visible outside the palace. However, on Ingrid's specific orders, they had refrained as much as possible from damaging the palace itself, since she intended to use it as an advanced headquarters for her command and for the 82nd Airborne Division. As Major General Ridgway jumped out of her helicopter with his two radio operators, Ingrid patted the shoulder of her copilot.

"Take off once we are out and fly circles around the palace for fifteen minutes before landing back in this spot. While the other helicopters will return to Lyons, I may need this machine in the next hour or two to do some reconnaissance flights around town."

"Understood, General." Replied the young woman, nervous and expecting sniper fire against her helicopter at any time. Ingrid stepped out of the helicopter and extracted her backpack and Japanese saber from the rear compartment, imitated by her two radio operators. She then smiled to Sergeant Mary Takahashi, a veteran from the 99th Wing who had been transferred to Ingrid's command a mere two months ago, to their mutual delight.

"We are going to go up to the observation gallery of the palace's tower, where we will set up my command post. Follow me with Corporal Reinhold and be ready to blow away any German in our path."

"I have your six, General." Replied with a smile the Nisei, who had already participated in many air assault landings in the Pacific while under Ingrid's command. With their backpacks and radios on their backs, the trio of women ran to the main entrance of the palace, encountering there the bodies of four SS soldiers mowed down by machinegun fire. Ingrid examined briefly the insignias on their black uniforms and nodded to herself.

"Allgemeine SS men. They are not from a fighting unit, but are rather political troops. We may well find a high-level Nazi official inside the palace. Alright girls, be ready to rock and roll."

Leading her two radio operators inside via the now widely opened double doors, Ingrid ran to the foot of the large staircase inside the central lobby and crouched, looking up. Seeing that some paratroopers were already upstairs, she ran up the stairs to the first floor and waited for her two operators, then pointing to them a wide corridor leading to the palace's tower, situated at the base of the wide 'V' formed by the wings of the building.

"Let's go that way to the tower. Be careful, though: we may have friendly troops all over the place. Make sure of who you shoot before opening fire."

"Got it, General." Said Mary Takahashi, holding firmly to her M2 carbine, while the tall, blond Jessica Reinhold simply nodded. The trio then ran to the opening of the corridor, looking and listening there for a few seconds before Ingrid started a series of tactical leaps, backed by her radio operators. She however encountered only deserted rooms or offices along the corridor and they arrived at the staircase of the tower without incident. Ingrid again crouched at the foot of the stairs to listen and look. The noise of hurried steps coming down from above then made her signal her two operators to hide under the stairs.

"Somebody is coming down. Hide and be ready to fire on my command."

Ingrid then hid herself under the stairs, but on the opposite side from her operators. Seven armed Germans, six in black uniforms and one in a sort of mustard brown uniform, soon came down the stairs in a big hurry, with the man in mustard uniform admonishing the others to hurry. That man, contrary to the others that were armed with submachine guns, had a pistol in one hand and a leather briefcase in the other hand, while one of the Allgemeine SS soldiers carried a big suitcase. They came in full view of Ingrid when they stepped on her level and went around to start going down to the ground level. Dispensing with any attempt to take them prisoners, Ingrid immediately fired on full automatic with her carbine, imitated by her two radio operators. Totally taken by surprise, the SS men were mowed down quickly, with only one of them able to fire a wild burst while crumpling down. As for the man in mustard uniform, who was clearly much older than the others, he cried out in pain and let go his pistol, a bullet through his right shoulder. Letting her two radio operators check out the other Germans, Ingrid slowly approached the wounded Nazi Party official with her carbine pointed and spoke harshly in German to him.

"Who are you?"

The Nazi, surprised at first to face a woman, then seemed to recognize her and eyed her with hatred.

"YOU? HERE? DAMN TRAITOR!"

Taking a decision, Ingrid grabbed her katana, slung across her back, and pulled it out of its scabbard before sticking its tip under the chin of the German, eyeing him with cold hatred.

“Men like you had my adoptive mother tortured to death, you bastard! Now, who are you?”

With the sharp point of the katana nearly breaking the skin of his throat, the Nazi started sweating and answered her in a much less belligerent tone.

“I’m Gauleiter²⁴ Robert Wagner, Gauleiter of Baden.”

Ingrid’s face hardened even more at those words, knowing full well what kind of crimes Wagner had committed, as his reputation was already quite dreadful in 1940, when she was still a resident of Berlin.

“There is only one sentence possible for a monster like you, Wagner.”

She then raised her katana and swung it sideways, cutting cleanly Wagner’s head off. Ingrid’s radio operators watched on, horrified, as the headless body slumped to the floor.

“Who...who was he, General?” Asked Jessica Reinhold, getting a dispassionate answer from Ingrid.

“A war criminal who didn’t deserve a trial. Let’s go upstairs to establish our command post in the observation gallery. Keep an eye out for more Germans.”

Before following her radio operators upstairs, Ingrid took the time to wipe her blade clean on Wagner’s uniform and to sheath back her sword, then grab the briefcase that Wagner had carried.

They didn’t encounter any more Germans on their way up, but Ingrid did find a treasure trove in Wagner’s office, one level below the observation gallery. A large map of Karlsruhe, plus another map of the state of Baden, sat on a large board hooked to a trestle. Both maps had pins and markings on them indicating various locations of interest, like Gestapo and Nazi Party offices, military barracks, prisons, industrial facilities, state ministries, city halls and official residences. Ingrid grinned as she examined quickly the marked maps.

“Well well well! General Ridgway’s intelligence officer will be quite happy to examine those maps. I will have to advise him about these once things calm down. Alright, girls, drop your backpacks in this office and follow me upstairs with your radios: we have an air battle to run.”

²⁴ Gauleiter : Nazi official representing Hitler and the Nazi Party in a German state or province (Gau). Gauleiters had extensive powers over political, social and economic affairs in their Gau.

11:14 (Paris Time)

Karlsruhe Flugplatz (city airfield)

While waiting for the C-142A carrying her M20 armored command car to roll towards the tarmac area of the city's central airfield, now bustling with activity, Ingrid started chatting with the very young woman on duty as the tarmac ground guide, who was wearing a fluorescent vest and was holding a pair of small red signal flags. Corporal Norma Jean Dougherty, despite being only nineteen officially, was already a veteran of the Pacific, having served with the 99th Wing in Papua New Guinea and in the Dutch East Indies, where she had participated as an advanced group ground guide in two air assault landings. She, like Mary Takahashi and a number of other female veterans of the 99th Wing, had been transferred two months ago to the European Theatre, to flesh out the female transport group and other female units of Ingrid's command. Norma Jean was enthusiastically telling Ingrid about her experiences during her two previous air assault landings when an intense flash of blinding light from the Northeast suddenly cut her off, forcing her to cover her eyes with one arm. At the same time, both women, along with everybody else around, felt heat from the source of the flash. After a couple of seconds, the flash turned into a distant, rising ball of fire on the horizon. While Norma Jean and the others around her looked on with incomprehension at the silent, rising ball of fire, Ingrid couldn't help horror reflect on her face. Looking at her watch and noting down the time, she then took out her pocket compass and took a heading of the rising fireball. Her heart then sank as she realized what had just been blasted by a nuclear weapon. If the sound of a distant explosion came in 29 minutes later, then her guess would be confirmed, but she was already pretty sure that it was Berlin. Tears came to her eyes as she thought about her native city and what a nuclear weapon could do to it. As for who could have dropped such a weapon, she had little doubts about it. The same ones who had killed her whole family in a bombing in 1940 had just erased every souvenir of her childhood.

"Those British bastards! They didn't even bother warning us of this in advance."

"What was that, General?" Asked the young Norma Jean. "It looks quite distant, as I still haven't heard the noise of this explosion."

"You probably won't hear it for another 29 minutes, Corporal." Answered Ingrid in a shaken voice. Norma Jean's eyes widened at those words.

"This far, General? What could produce such a huge explosion?"

"Something straight out of Hell. Once my armored car is unloaded, I will go have to make an urgent call up the chain of command. Things could become hectic in the next few hours and days."

13:28 (Paris Time)

**Advanced headquarters of the U.S. First Army
Marseilles, France**

General Dwight Eisenhower appeared to be furious when his deputy, Air Chief Marshal Arthur Tedder, was introduced in his office.

"Close the door behind you, Sir Arthur." Said drily Eisenhower, who was standing behind his work desk. He waited for Tedder to be standing at attention in front of his desk before pointing an accusing finger at him.

"Did you know in advance that your government would drop an atomic bomb on Berlin today? Be frank with me!"

Tedder hesitated for a moment, not liking one bit his role in all of this.

"Yes I did, General! However, I was under strict orders from Prime Minister Churchill himself not to say anything about it until the deed was done. May I ask how you know that it was an atomic bomb, General?"

Eisenhower took a deep breath to calm himself down, then stared hard at Tedder.

"Brigadier General Dows saw the flash of the explosion from as far as Karlsruhe and recognized it for what it was. It seems that Nancy Laplante had shown her pictures of atomic explosions in 1941. That point is however not important. What is important to me is to know why your government decided to do such a unilateral move without warning me first. Goddam it, we presently have over 30,000 of our people on German soil, possibly exposed to the effects of that bomb of yours, with another 50,000 men rushing right now towards the Rhine! We are supposed to be an alliance, Sir Arthur. What should I expect next from your government?"

"I...I was told little details about this, General, I swear. I only knew that one bomb would explode on Berlin this morning, with an ultimatum for the Germans to surrender to follow this evening. I also know that similar atomic strikes were planned on Japan, but don't know the timing of those strikes."

Eisenhower fixed him in silence for long seconds, then spoke in a deliberate, cold tone.

"I see! Know that I will immediately contact my own government to inform it of this. I suspect that President Roosevelt will not be pleased by this, Sir Arthur. In the meantime, I will let our divisions that are on the move complete their junction with our airborne troops on the east banks of the Rhine, but will then have them halt after forming a strong defensive pocket. If the Germans are to surrender soon after this bomb of yours destroyed Berlin, then I see no sense in further risking the lives of our soldiers. You are dismissed, Sir Arthur!"

Tedder saluted him, then left the office, his head low. Once the door of his office was closed again, Eisenhower grabbed his telephone and called his chief signals officer, an American.

"This is General Eisenhower. Send a top priority message to Karlsruhe to tell Brigadier General Dows to fly back at once to Marseilles and to report to me."

Putting down his handset, Eisenhower then turned around to look out of a window while thinking furiously. He knew very little about atomic weapons or the American nuclear program, except that it had absolute priority over all other American weapons programs and that it was meant to produce a new weapon of tremendous power. He would have to know a lot more than that before he could take some educated decisions here. Right now, Dows seemed to be the only person who could quickly answer the tons of questions he had about that new weapon. His mind made up, Eisenhower sat back at his desk and started writing down a short but concise message, to be encrypted and sent on top priority to General Marshall in Washington.

CHAPTER 14 – THE WAR IS OVER

08:07 (Washington Time)

Wednesday, June 14, 1944 'C'

Cabinet conference room, White House

Washington, D.C.

U.S.A.

Ingrid looked plainly out of place right now as she sat with a dozen men, all much older and higher in rank or position than her, including President Roosevelt. The only military officer of her rank was a big, powerful brigadier general of the Corps of Engineers named Leslie Groves, of whom Ingrid knew nothing about. The civilians present counted the Secretaries of War, Navy and State, plus a top physicist from the American nuclear program. Roosevelt, visibly frustrated, looked first at Secretary of State Cordell Hull.

"So, what is the latest word about the Japanese, Cordell? Have they told us that they were ready to capitulate, like the Germans did yesterday?"

"Not yet, Mister President." Answered the old diplomat. "However, the situation in Japan is unclear, to say the least. Contrary to the Germans, who lost only Berlin to what we know now to have been a British atomic missile, the Japanese were struck by no less than ten such missiles, which destroyed Tokyo, Yokohama, Yokosuka, Nagoya, Osaka, Kobe, Kure, Hiroshima, Nagasaki and Sasebo. The British ships that launched those missiles then moved within range of Mukden, the Japanese stronghold in Manchuria, and of the main Pacific base of Truk, destroying them as well. To our knowledge, the British have not even bothered presenting a call for surrender to the Japanese, instead going for the pure and simple destruction of Japan."

Ingrid, to the surprise of most, then raised her hand to politely jump in the conversation.

"If I may, Mister Secretary, I must qualify one term you used. The British didn't use an atomic warhead on Berlin: they used a thermonuclear warhead, judging from the effects on the ground that I saw while flying a photo-reconnaissance mission over Berlin."

While both Leslie Groves and Robert Oppenheimer snapped their heads in her direction, shocked, Hull and the others looked at her with incomprehension.

“Uh, what is the difference between an atomic bomb and a thermonuclear one, General Dows?”

“A huge one, Mister Secretary. A thermonuclear device, or fusion bomb, is one step further from an atomic, or fission bomb. The power of a fusion bomb is typically measured in megatons, or millions of tons of TNT equivalent, while fission bomb power is quoted in kilotons, or thousands of tons of TNT of equivalent explosive power. They also use a very different detonation process. The damage I saw over Berlin was from a weapon with a power of at least one, if not two or three megatons. The British now thus possess nuclear weapon technology that should not have appeared for at least another decade.”

“For God’s sake, how could you know about all this?” Exclaimed Leslie Groves, now quite agitated. “All the data on our atomic program is classified Top Secret and is restricted to very few officials. I don’t even know anything about your so-called fusion bomb.”

“Me neither.” Added Doctor Oppenheimer. “However, Doctor Teller, who works under me, has theorized about such weapons. Where did you get your knowledge, General Dows?”

“From the future, Doctor Oppenheimer, like many more things I know about. While educating me in secret in early 1941, Nancy Laplante showed me some video documentaries and written articles about nuclear weapons, including films of nuclear explosions and their effects.”

“And what exactly do you know about nuclear weapons, both fission and fusion types, General Dows?”

Plainly conscious that this could cost her any future frontline duty but resolved to serve to the best her country of adoption, Ingrid answered after a short hesitation, with both Oppenheimer and Groves taking notes frantically.

“First, about fission weapons. They can be of either the gun type or of the implosion type. Gun type fission devices use highly enriched uranium, containing over ninety percent of uranium 235 isotope. Two sub-critical masses of enriched uranium are joined together by explosive charges to form a critical mass that then explodes. Plutonium 239, another type of isotope that is used in nuclear weapon, cannot be used in such gun type devices, as it will only partially explode, producing what is called a fizzle

reaction. Plutonium 239, which is easier to produce than highly enriched uranium, is better used in implosion devices, where a sub-critical ball of plutonium is compressed from all sides by the simultaneous explosions of carefully shaped high explosive charges, causing a fission reaction and detonation. In thermonuclear weapons, a fission bomb is used to trigger a fusion reaction in a mix of deuterium, lithium and tritium isotopes, with the whole often contained inside a thick jacket of uranium 238 that serves to both contain the explosion for the first crucial microseconds and to add to the explosive power of the weapon. Such bombs are called fission-fusion-fission devices.”

“And... do you know something about producing enriched uranium, General Dows?” Asked Oppenheimer, nearly holding his breath as the generals and cabinet members around looked with disbelief at Ingrid. The latter nodded her head soberly.

“I do, Doctor Oppenheimer. I know that your program is trying both gaseous diffusion and electromagnetic separation methods, both of which are extremely complex and inefficient methods. In the early 21st Century, in Nancy’s time, the preferred method is by high speed centrifuge separation of uranium gas, where the heavier uranium 238 molecules falls to the periphery of the centrifuge’s tube faster than the uranium 235 molecules. Such centrifuges are typically used in so-called cascades of hundreds and thousands of centrifuge tubes, where the uranium is progressively enriched to higher levels.”

Leslie Groves then looked at her as if she was crazy.

“And you were serving in the frontlines despite knowing all this? What if you would have been captured by the Germans, or by the Japanese?”

“I would have blown my brains out before that could happen, General Groves.” Said coldly Ingrid while staring into his eyes. “Besides, nobody up to now knew that I held such information.”

She then looked at President Roosevelt with nearly imploring eyes.

“I know that many would now want to disqualify me from serving in combat, Mister President, but combat flying is my life. Please do not restrict me from the frontlines after this: I want to continue taking care of my combat crews and pilots.”

“We will discuss this in private after this, General Dows.” Answered Roosevelt in a guarded voice. “You have said much about how such weapons function, General. What about their effects? What could our troops expect if they entered an area struck by a nuclear weapon?”

"First off, they shouldn't even enter such areas, at least in the first days and weeks, Mister President, and then only while wearing special protective equipment. In Nancy's history, the first nuclear tests were often conducted in irresponsible ways, with officers in charge of the tests assuring their men that they could enter without risks such as contaminated zones only hours after the explosions and could even pick up debris as souvenirs. As a result, hundreds of men were condemned to long, horrible deaths through cancers and skin mutations, the results of radiation poisoning. Inhaling contaminated dust or touching radioactive soil or particles can also bring radiation poisoning, while radioactive particle clouds projected high in the atmosphere can spread deadly radiations over hundreds or even thousands of miles, depending on the winds and the altitude of those clouds. Zones near the point of explosion can stay dangerous for years, even decades, before the radiation dissipates enough to permit short visits to those sites. In the case of Berlin, I already ordered my meteorologists to closely track the wind patterns in the area, so we could have an idea of where the radiation fallouts could go. I would also strongly urge that no troops enter the stricken area for at least a month or two. As for Japan, if the British missiles that hit there were of the same power than the one that destroyed Berlin, then I would urge that no American troops land in Japan proper or cruises downwind close from the Japanese islands, and this for the next few years."

"Come on!" Objected Admiral King, the Chief of Naval Operations, evidently skeptical. "These radiations can't possibly be that bad or persistent, Dows." Ingrid gave him a jaundiced look, not intimidated one bit by the irascible admiral.

"Then feel free to go set foot yourself in Japan, Admiral, but don't send men to their deaths there unless you are ready to live with that responsibility. Maybe Doctor Oppenheimer could tell you more about the dangers from radiations." Oppenheimer, looking most somber, nodded his head at her words.

"In fact, I can tell you about one example of how terrible those radiations could be, gentlemen. Recently, a physicist on my team was exposed from no more than a second to the radiations from a nearly critical mass of uranium whose two halves had accidentally joined together. He only took the time to slap the two pieces apart, but that was enough. That poor man's body started bloating within days, with the cells in his body breaking down, causing massive internal bleeding. He died after two weeks of horrible suffering, his body a deformed, bleeding mass. The other two physicists

assisting him survived, but are still in hospital, losing all their hair and throwing up constantly.”

The other participants, including the President, gave him horrified looks. Now convinced, Roosevelt looked around the table at his military advisors.

“Gentlemen, after hearing this, I believe that our troops should stay well clear from the area around Berlin and from the Japanese islands. Make sure that our commanders in Europe and the Pacific know and respect that directive.”

“But, then, what do we do with Japan?” Asked Admiral Nimitz to nobody in particular, attracting a bitter answer from Ingrid, who was secretly weeping at the thoughts of those millions of dead and dying people.

“Nothing! The Japanese are now dying by the millions and will continue to die for the months and years to come in their home islands. We now have to worry about what the surviving Japanese soldiers in other parts of the Pacific and Asia will do once they learn about the nuclear strikes on Japan. For one, I expect those Japanese soldiers to take revenge on whatever Allied prisoners they are holding presently. This may just be the signal for an atrocious bloodbath to start across the Pacific. Since most of those prisoners are British, then Prime Minister Churchill may be about to regret his decision to use nuclear weapons the way he did on Japan. On our part, we should sit tight, stay away from Japan and wait for things to follow their course. On hearing of such a disaster, I expect many Japanese soldiers stuck on Pacific island garrisons to commit suicide.”

She then retreated into sorrowful silence, watched by the others until Secretary of War Henry Stimson spoke up in a subdued tone.

“I believe that General Dows hit the nail on the head, gentlemen. We should keep a loose blockade around Japan and its island garrisons and concentrate in liberating ex-allied territories in Asia, while disarming and occupying Germany.”

The discussion went on for two more hours, mostly on how to effect the disarmament and occupation of Germany. All the while, Ingrid listened with only one ear, her mind filled with horrible images. She was finally returned to reality when the President called an end to the meeting, finishing with one sentence directed at her.

“Well, gentlemen, I will let you go now, as things may become truly hectic in the days to come. General Dows, I would like you to stay, along with Generals Marshall and Kenney.”

Waiting for the others to file out, Roosevelt then eyed Ingrid with gravity.

"General Dows, you have up to now served our country admirably and we owe you a big part of victory in this war, thanks to your courage and strategic genius. Yet, you have just proven that you could be even more useful to the United States via your knowledge and counsels. General Groves was right when he questioned the wisdom of having such a knowledgeable person serve in combat. However, your adoptive mother also fought at the front and never betrayed her secrets, even under torture. I believe that you are made of the same mold as her and will thus allow you to continue serving at the front. You would in fact make a perfect military governor for the state of Baden, where your command already has an advanced headquarter. Do you intend to stay in the service after the war?"

"I do, Mister President, but I would also like to have the opportunity to take a few years of part-time service, time to obtain a degree in aeronautical engineering."

"That could be arranged, Mister President." Then said General Marshall. "General Dows would normally be due to go study at the Army War College, to make up for her lack of formal military education, but the Army War College was shut down for the duration of the war and it is not due to reopen for another couple of years, time to reorganize and rewrite its curriculum. Obtaining an engineering degree while serving on weekends and summers sounds like a very acceptable compromise to me and one that could greatly benefit both her and the service in the future."

"General Kenney?" Asked Roosevelt, looking at the head of the Army Air Force.

"I agree with General Marshall, Mister President. General Dows, with her knowledge and her spirit of daring and initiative, would be perfect to one day take charge of our new aircraft projects."

"Then, General Kenney, put that on paper as a firm deal. I also strongly believe that her temporary rank of brigadier general should be made permanent, in view of her performance in Europe. General Dows, do you have any other questions or wishes at this time?"

"I have one question, Mister President." Answered Ingrid, encouraged by the way things were going. "What will happen to the other women in the American forces, particularly to female combat units like the 99th Wing?"

"Well, I expect that we will have to demobilize many units once this war is formally over. However, all servicewomen joined on a voluntary basis and at least some female units will be kept in service, I suppose."

Roosevelt then gave a malicious smile to Kenney.

"Maybe the 99th Wing could be kept whole as an overseas unit in the Pacific post-war, possibly in the Philippines."

"That would be feasible in my opinion, Mister President." Replied Kenney, making Ingrid smile with joy.

"That would be great, Mister President! Thank you so much for your comprehension."

"It is really not much, in view of all that you and your female pilots accomplished, General Dows. Well, I will now let the three of you go. Good luck as military governor of Baden, General Dows, and for your future university studies as well."

"Thank you again, Mister President."

Ingrid then walked out with Marshall and Kenney, feeling good about her future and that of her female pilots and crews.

Most of Ingrid's predictions for the Pacific came true in the next few weeks, with tens of thousands of Japanese soldiers around the Pacific and Asia committing suicide when they heard about the destruction of Japan. However, they took as well with them thousands of Allied prisoners, massacred in a vengeful orgy of killings. Most of the remaining Japanese soldiers, when confronted by advancing Allied troops, offered themselves in mass suicide charges, hoping to die a glorious death. Instead, they ended up being butchered by the superior firepower of Allied forces. After three more months of a sickening bloodbath, most of Asia and the Pacific was finally back in Allied hands, while Japan faced a long and painful agony, cut off from vital external supplies and with most of its agricultural soil hopelessly contaminated by radioactive particles. Those who didn't die in the first days and weeks following the nuclear blasts then had to face starvation and the debilitating long term effects of radiations, including stillbirths and deformed babies. The only Japanese territories of importance to survive mostly intact were the Northern home island of Hokkaido and the Ryukyu Islands to the Southwest of Japan, including Okinawa.

In Germany, things went a lot smoother. With Hitler and most of his Nazi minions killed in the destruction of Berlin, most Germans only wished for peace to return and they surrendered and disarmed most readily. Only a few fanatical SS units decided to fight to the end and were crushed in a few weeks of combat, out of fuel, ammunition and

spare parts. The Allied occupation that followed was harsh by any standards, especially in the French-occupied sector, but Ingrid did her part as military governor of Baden province with as much humanity as she was allowed, while showing no pity for the Nazi officials and war profiteers trying to hide their true past from the occupiers.

A near crisis developed in Eastern Europe in August of 1944, when Soviet troops advancing to retake their country from the departed Germans tried to push into Poland, the Baltic States, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Rumania. However, threats by the British to strike Moscow and Leningrad with nuclear-tipped missiles if the Soviet troops didn't turn around finally put back some sense in Stalin's mind. Eastern Europe thus was kept out of the Soviet grip, to the relief of many.

For their part, the British, intoxicated at first with their new power as the sole nuclear state in the World, quickly had to sober up on contemplating their war-ravaged, deeply indebted economy. Like the United States, they had to massively demobilize their forces, but showed more common sense than Washington and put in reserve most of their surplus military equipment, ready to be used in case another war came, instead of scrapping planes and vehicles by the tens of thousands. Ultimately, what proved to be the economic salvation of Great Britain was the access to high technology knowledge given to them by Nancy Laplante. The British soon were adapting that advanced technology to produce advanced consumer goods that few could beat, selling these products to the rest of Europe and particularly to the countries of the Commonwealth, which in general had suffered little or not at all from the war and had the means to buy those products.

To Ingrid's satisfaction, President Roosevelt kept his word about the female units in the American forces and the 99th Wing found itself the designated resident Army Air Force formation in the Philippines, with its main base at Clark Airfield. Most of Ingrid's old combat comrades stayed in the service, too happy to be able to pursue their dream of flying, a dream too often denied to them in the past by condescending and bigoted men.

As one of the American officers with the most time in combat in this war and with easily the most decorations earned, Ingrid would have been entitled to a priority

repatriation to the United States once post-war demobilization started, but she held on to her promise to Marshall to serve at least four months as military governor of Baden province, finally returning to the United States in early December 1944 with an admission letter to the prestigious Massachusetts Institute of Technology, or M.I.T., in her pocket and with the recently voted G.I. Bill covering her studies and living expenses as war veteran. Ingrid was thus able to spend Christmas in Havre, Montana, before heading to Boston to start her studies and start a new chapter in her life.

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