

ANGEL GIRL

By

Michel Poulin

ANGEL GIRL

Science-Fiction novel
by
MICHEL POULIN

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WARNING TO POTENTIAL READERS

THIS FICTION NOVEL CONTAINS GRAPHIC DESCRIPTIONS OF WAR, VIOLENCE AND SEX, AS WELL AS COARSE LANGUAGE AND CONTROVERSIAL SUBJECTS THAT ARE UNSUITABLE FOR CHILDREN. WHILE THIS NOVEL DEPICTS SOME 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 NECESSARILY REFLECT HISTORICAL REALITY.

ABOUT THIS NOVEL

This novel is a sequel to RAISING NANCY and is the eleventh book of the Nancy Laplante Series. It is a mix of science-fiction, alternate history and fantasy and its story takes place in a parallel timeline I designated as 'Timeline C', which split from another parallel timeline, 'Timeline B', in 1941, while Timeline B itself split from the original historical timeline (ours) in 1940, due to the involuntary time travel of Nancy Laplante, a Canadian war correspondent and reserve army officer, from 2012 'A' to 1940 'A'. This story is centered on the adventures of Ingrid Dows 'C', the adopted daughter of Nancy Laplante, who has risen to the top of the United States military through her sheer abilities, courage and intelligence, and on the adventures of Ingrid Dows' daughter Nancy, a girl of haunting beauty with fantastic abilities and supernatural powers.

OTHER BOOKS BY THIS AUTHOR

(All available free online at Free-Ebooks.net, or can be ordered direct via email to the author at natai@videotron.ca.)

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CHAPTER 1 – TAKING CHARGE



General of the Army Ingrid Dows, Commander of the United States combined military forces in 1993 'C', as she appears at the age of 67, after her latest rejuvenation.

09:06 (Washington Time)

Tuesday, July 06, 1993 'C'

Joint Chiefs Briefing Room (The Tank)

National Military Command Center (NMCC), The Pentagon

Arlington, Virginia, United States of America

The atmosphere inside the Joint Chiefs Briefing Room, commonly called 'The Tank', could be rightly described as 'mixed' when a very young woman dressed in a Space Corps uniform and wearing the rank insignias of a five-star general entered the room with Secretary of Defense John McCain, Under-Secretary of the Army Robert Parnell, Under-Secretary of the Air Force Helena Mercer and Under-Secretary of the Navy Charles Brubaker. One of the generals already sitting around the large conference

table of the room, General Charles C. Krulak then corrected himself mentally. That 'young woman' was actually 67 years old, despite having the looks of a very beautiful late teenager. Krulak's father, the legendary Victor 'The Brute' Krulak, had served and fought as a Marine Corps senior commander at the side of Ingrid Dows during World War 2, the Korean War and the Indochina War and had told Charles many stories about Ingrid Dows and her exploits as he grew up. Charles, who had been named only four days ago as the new commandant of the Marine Corps, in replacement for ousted General Mundy, thus knew well her story, including the fact that Dows possessed incredible supernatural powers and had been repeatedly rejuvenated by a mysterious spiritual being she called 'The One'. However, Charles Krulak admired her for being the incredibly brave and talented fighter pilot, aerospace designer and combat commander she was, and not because of her beauty or powers. Others around the table were however not so fond of her, to say the least, mostly because they had trouble accepting the fact that a woman (and apparent teenager) was now in command of all the American military forces and because the recent purge among the Joint Chiefs ordered by President Ross Perot had created much resentment among many old-school American military commanders.

Ingrid Dows, an athletic, fairly tall woman sporting reddish-brown hair and blue eyes, took a seat next to that of Secretary of Defense John McCain, himself a decorated ex-Navy veteran pilot, as the three under-secretaries took seats to the other side of McCain. It was the latter who then opened the meeting in a neutral but firm voice.

"Good morning, ladies and gentlemen! First, let me tell you that me, my under-secretaries and General Dows had a long discussion yesterday about our defense policies, procedures, organization and command structures. The reason for that discussion was that, while I believe that the United States still has the best and strongest armed forces in the World, the recent incident involving the loss of one of our reconnaissance aircraft over the Caucasus area has demonstrated that our forces suffer from some very serious flaws. Those flaws mostly concern our command-and-control structure but are not limited solely to that area. As a result of our discussion of yesterday, I have approved a number of measures and changes, which General Dows will be in charge of turning into facts and reality. I will now let General Dows present and explain to you those measures and changes planned for our armed forces. General Dows..."

“Thank you, Mister Secretary!” said Ingrid before having a junior officer switch on a retro-projector and make a text slide appear on a large wall projection screen. As the generals and admirals around the table read the text being projected, Ingrid spoke up.

“Lady and gentlemen, what you see now on the screen is what will be the motto describing the United States armed forces from now on. They will be, quote, a combined and unified mobile, flexible and powerful force able to prevent, deter and counter any threat to American citizens, territory and interests, as well as threats to the allies of the United States, unquote. Personally, I would have called this simple common sense but the Secretary of Defense insisted on calling it ‘The Dows Doctrine’. Some of you may say that we are already that, but I would then strongly disagree. The loss of our reconnaissance aircraft over the Caucasus and the mad dash that resulted from it to rescue its crew via an improvised operation has proved that we are not a truly unified force. That same incident was in fact the latest manifestation of what has been undermining our military for decades: interservice rivalry. To measure how nefarious and costly this interservice rivalry has been to us, just think back to the disaster of Pearl Harbor, in December of 1941. The Japanese attack that morning should not have come as a surprise, as plenty of advanced intelligence warnings and even a few instances of detection of enemy activity had been received. Unfortunately, those warnings were either ignored or dismissed, while the Navy and the Army refused to share the information they received from their respective intelligence services or from Washington. The defense of Hawaii was then split between the Army and the Navy, with little to no coordination between those services. The result of all that was the disaster we endured that day. A few years later in that same war, only weeks before D-Day, I personally witnessed senior Army Air Force commanders in Europe insisting that a landing in Europe was unnecessary and that our bomber force would be enough to break the Germans’ will and force them to capitulate. It took some forceful action by General Marshall, supported by President Roosevelt, to knock back some sense into the heads of those bomber commanders. If we jump to the First Korean War, the command structure in the Pacific was so stratified and split that it took days after the start of the North Korean invasion for me to obtain the permission to strike north of the 39th Parallel, because the various command elements in the Pacific had to wait for Washington to stop discussing and finally give the authorization to strike North Korea. If we switch to the present, we lost an aircraft over the Caucasus because the Air Force wanted to prove that it could do the mission as well or better than the Space Corps. Well, history

should have amply proved to us that combat decisions via committee discussions and debates are nonsense which result in unnecessary losses and even defeat. From now on, if the United States needs to go to war or to launch a military operation overseas, it will do so as one, with one voice in command, and I am not talking about the President's voice. President Perot named me 'Commander-in-Chief of the United States armed forces' but, since I felt that this title somewhat undermined his own legal authority over our armed forces, I convinced him to change it to 'Commander of the United States combined military forces'. That new title, which I will use from now on, better reflects what I will be, in my opinion. My job, as approved by the President, will be to prepare and ensure that our forces are fully ready for combat at any time and, if combat there will be, to lead and direct our forces against the enemy. That is the declared intention. Now, about how to turn that into reality..."

Ingrid paused then, giving time for the junior officer to change slides on his retro-projector.

"As recent past wars have shown to those ready to accept reality, war is a 'come as you are' business, and not a 'please wait while I mobilize' affair. The days of conflicts like the First World War, when the belligerents took weeks to mobilize, are long gone. Now, we have to be able to react instantly to threats that materialize around the World and to any attack against our citizens, territories, interests or allies, be they from hostile countries or from terrorist groups. Such a needed instant reaction implies a single, unified command in charge of all our armed forces, as well as forces that are always ready to go instantly into combat. As a consequence, our present National Military Command Center, in which we presently are, will stop being a simple coordination center and will be turned into a functional national combined combat command center, or NC4 in short, with me at the head of that new command center. On top of directing our forces in combat, it will also be my job to ensure that our forces are indeed ready for combat at any time. This implies many needed changes to our present forces, changes which will directly impact your services, gentlemen. After reviewing in depth the structure and operations of our actual armed forces, I have identified a number of areas which will need to be improved or even drastically changed. Know that I already discussed those needed changes with both the President and with Secretary of Defense McCain. Those areas needing improvement are: command structures and communications; strategic, operational and tactical mobility; concentration of force; flexibility and speed of use; superior training and morale of our personnel; early

identification and targeting of the direct causes of the threats to the United States; sustainability of combat operations and, finally, the elimination of wastage and duplication of resources.”

The seven service commanders present looked on at the slide on the screen with various degrees of dismay or confusion, with the brand-new Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Herres, then asking a question.

“General Dows, what will be my role in all this? All this kind of implies that my present position has just become redundant, no?”

Ingrid gave Herres a sober look.

“In a way it has, General Herres. Your new title will be as ‘Deputy Commander of the United States combined military forces’ and you will work directly under me. The service chiefs will stay as they are presently and will concentrate on administering their respective services under the guidance of their Under-Secretaries of Defense, on top of ensuring that their services are ready for combat. Now, I do have a caveat about that last point.”

The six other generals tensed up to varying degrees at those words and they listened on intensely as Ingrid spoke further, while a new slide came on the screen.

“Combat readiness implies having the right kind of equipment and weapons to do the job, along with well trained and motivated personnel ready to operate that equipment and weapons. Now, in the past, each separate service issued their own requirements and specifications for the equipment and weapons they felt they needed to fulfill their tasks. That too often resulted into tremendous duplication of efforts, unnecessary increased costs for the development and acquisition of those weapons and equipment and also incompatibility in the field between our air, ground and naval forces’ equipment. Just the subject of our tactical radios will prove that point. Too often, our fighter-bombers tasked with supporting our ground units can’t even communicate directly with those ground units because of incompatible radio frequency ranges, forcing them to use skip-echelon communications and thus wasting precious time and possibly costing lives. That has to change! My command office will thus from today rationalize, coordinate and, if necessary, modify the various requests for development and acquisition for weapons and equipment coming from your respective services, with the Secretary of Defense then signing on to those massaged requests before they go to the Congress for funding. This last point in turn will dictate a radical change to the way we handle defense contracts. Right now, lobbying by defense contractors and politicians, plus what I call

'gold-plating' of requirements and specification for our future equipment, weapons and infrastructures, has and still is resulting into tremendous waste and extra costs for our national defense budget. My solution to this is twofold: first, the various separate services directorates and commands in charge of equipment development and acquisition will all be unified under a single National Defense Equipment Development and Acquisition Command, with the General in charge of that command answering directly to me and to the Secretary of Defense; second, lobbyists and members of the Congress will no longer be allowed to influence the choice of equipment and defense contractors we will use. We will acquire what is best for our combat forces, not what will fatten specific defense contractors in states with influent senators and congressmen. Our forces main goal is to protect the United States, not to be a milk cow for politicians and their friends."

General Edward White, the Commander of the Space Corps, wiggled his right hand at that.

"You are going to make a lot of senators and congressmen squeal and scream about this, General."

That was when John McCain jumped in, his voice firm.

"Let them! I will personally make sure that those senators and congressmen understand that this is for the greater good of the nation and I will also make sure that our citizens understand that, which should help calm down those senators and congressmen. The President will also veto any defense bill from the Congress that will contain what is called 'pork-barreling' or blatant lobbying influence that could result in unnecessary or unjustified costs to our defense budget. As for distributing equitably the various defense contracts for new equipment, infrastructure or services, our criteria will be simple: we will go for the best quality available at reasonable cost. We wasted literally billions of dollars in the past on equipment that then proved either inadequate or deficient. The unification of our various development and acquisition departments into one command will also prevent the unnecessary duplication of equipment and weapons that has cost us so much up to now. If an air-to-air missile, for example, is good enough for the Navy fighters, then it will be good enough for the Air Force and, in modified form as a surface-to-air missile, for the Army. As for you and the other service chiefs, new rules about contacts with lobbyists and politicians will apply, starting today. General Dows..."

On a sign from Ingrid, a new slide appeared on the projection screen, with a list of bullet points which made more than one general or admiral stiffen as she spoke, taking the relay from McCain.

“As of today, all direct contacts between you and your officers with defense industry lobbyists, senators and congressmen will be prohibited, if those contacts concern the development or acquisition of new weapons, equipment, infrastructure construction or service contracts at national level. You will of course be able still to get through the normal bidding process local contractors who provide services like food and fuel supplies to your various bases but, if we are talking about the selection of a contractor to acquire new equipment at national level or to initiate a major infrastructure project, then our new Development and Acquisition Command will take care of it. If a lobbyist or congressman invites you to a lunch or supper paid out of their own pocket, then politely refuse that invitation. The same goes for so-called ‘gifts’ from the same people, like golf club memberships and free family vacations at private resorts. If I hear about any officer accepting such invitations or gifts, then that officer will be in trouble with me. I will be very firm about this point. We work for our soldiers, airmen, sailors and citizens, not for politicians and fat cat industrialists.”

As the men around the table digested all that, Helena Mercer, the under-secretary for the Air Force and a veteran combat pilot, asked a question to Ingrid.

“General, you mentioned a number of times the training and morale of our military personnel. While I perfectly understand the need for our people to benefit from the best training available, could you explain what you meant about their morale?”

“With pleasure, Madam Under-Secretary. Captain Biddle, put on Slide Number Eleven!”

A chart with columns of numbers appeared on the projector screen, with the generals and admirals starring at it as Ingrid spoke.

“This, lady and gentlemen, is the pay scale chart for the members of our military, showing basic pay per rank and years of experience, plus the various allowances that go with them. Right at the bottom of the slide, you will see a dollar number in bold red. That number corresponds to this year’s official national poverty line for a family of four persons. You will see that such a family earning a total of 14,763 dollars or less this year is considered at or below the poverty line. Now, take for example the case of a young married soldier with two children and who has the rank of E-2, our second lowest rank. Even with the daily subsistence premium and the quarters allowance for enlisted

members with dependents, that E-2 member earns an annual grand total of 17,416 dollars. If you do a quick calculation, you will then see that this E-2's income is barely eighteen percent above the official national poverty line. Even though our young officers are better paid, with a second lieutenant with dependents earning 25,501 dollars a year, all premiums included, those junior officers are expected to maintain a higher standard of dress and appearance, including the purchase of expensive mess kits that cost hundreds of dollars."

"And what exactly is your point, General Dows?" asked Admiral Normand Klasser, the new Chief of Naval Operations, attracting a dubious look from Ingrid.

"My point is that we should stop treating our military personnel like cheap labor while also treating their families like simple camp followers, Admiral Klasser." she replied in a rather stern tone. "On top of being paid barely enough to provide adequately for their families, we also make those families move constantly between posts, often providing them with either substandard family quarters or, when not enough quarters are provided on base, force them to find civilian accommodations they can hardly afford. When some of my combat pilots and ground personnel, who had just lived and fought in two successive combat zones, followed me to new postings in Germany in 1953, they had to mostly make do with antiquated barrack accommodations and civilian accommodations with prices way out of their means. If anything, the situation for our lower rank sailors is even worse. Yes, they earn extra sea pay when on sea deployment, but they have then to live for weeks and months on ships with extremely cramped living conditions while away from their families. Hell, our sailors aboard our nuclear submarines still have to practice 'hot bunking' because there are less bunks available than there are crewmembers aboard! It is high time in my opinion to start treating our junior personnel and their military dependents in a more caring fashion."

"Our sailors knew what they were enlisting for, General Dows. It was their choice if they got married and had children while they knew what kind of salary they would earn."

Klasser's reply positively infuriated Ingrid and she had to restrain herself not to shout back at the head of the Navy. Instead, she slammed one fist on the table and stared hard at him.

"You still believe in the saying that if a military member needed a wife, the quartermaster would assign one to him, Admiral? You personally earn more than seven and a half times the salary of a simple sailor, and I am not counting your special perks

as a general officer, which include a chauffeured car, an official residence and the use of military-provided aides and servants, while you rate a personal suite when at sea. Our present priorities need to change in order to help our lower enlisted members, and they need to change right now! With the way they are treated presently, we should not be surprised to see how low our retention rate is for our lower ranks. In turn, that forces us to constantly recruit and train large numbers of new military recruits, something that costs us a pretty penny in the long run.”

“What specific measures do you have in mind to help our junior ranks, General Dows?” asked softly Helena Mercer as Ingrid’s eyes still were shooting lightning bolts at Klasser. Ingrid took a deep breath to calm down before looking at the female under-secretary.

“Among other things, I intend to switch and reallocate funds from within our military budgets in order to implement significant pay raises for our lowest-paid members and to start a widespread construction program of new family military quarters destined specifically to help our junior enlisted personnel and our more junior officers. Family accommodations at our overseas posts would get top priority in that program. I also intend to put a brake to this mad, senseless practice of constantly moving our personnel around the country and overseas, supposedly to help their advancement in the ranks. There are ways to reassign our people to higher positions without having to force them and their families to move out every two to three years. Our present system of career ticket-punching also has to go! It may help fill the service files of our personnel but it also prevents them from staying long enough in a given job to become true masters of their trade.”

“And from which parts of our budgets will you take the money for these programs, General?” asked General Edward White, the Commander of the Space Corps, who had worked for many years under Ingrid.

“From the fat I will cut from various programs and expenditures which richly deserve to be looked at closely, Ed. To name only one such type of expenditure, I am cancelling as of today and until further notice all renovation projects to our officers’ messes and clubs in our bases in the United States and overseas. Only the renovations needed to correct deficiencies which make those messes and clubs either unsafe to use or render them a health risk will be authorized...after I personally will have revised those individual claims.”

Edward White forced himself not to grin in response, while a number of generals and Admiral Klasser showed both shock and disapproval. Thanks to the over two decades during which Ingrid Dows had been at the head of the Military Space Command, which had then become the actual Space Corps, the kinds of priority changes advocated today by Ingrid had already been put into effect through the Space Corps years ago, with the service conditions and base accommodations for the personnel and their family dependents now being the envy of the lower ranks from the other services.

While he was staying silent for the moment, Secretary of Defense John McCain was taking notes on the various reactions to Ingrid's announcements and on who had what reactions. As an ex-Navy fighter pilot who had served repeated tours both onboard aircraft carriers and at overseas bases, he was well aware of the kind of living and working conditions endured by sailors on American Navy warships. If you had the bad luck of serving on a ship whose captain acted like a martinet or a tyrant, then you ended up living months of quasi-hell while you were separated from your family, which too often would have to make do as well as they could with often substandard housing and strictly limited family budgets. He thus had only sympathy for Ingrid's envisioned programs and was intent on fully backing her up. If Admiral Klasser was displeased by what he was hearing today, then he better batten down his hatch, as a lot more was to come in the next few weeks and months. And if Klasser did the mistake of either resisting Dows changes or of complaining about them, then McCain would be too happy to push him out.

18:09 (Washington Time)

The Dows residence, 326 South Grove Street

Aurora Hills, Arlington

Ingrid, as per her habit, landed her Hiller AIR BIKE on the hard surface of the small landing pad set in the courtyard of her house in Aurora Hills, situated a mere few kilometers away from the Pentagon, then rolled it inside its custom-sized garage before shutting down its engine and stepping out of the compact machine. Walking out of the garage and locking it, Ingrid then walked to the back door of her two-story bungalow. Her stomach growled as she was about to open the door, reminding her that she had only eaten a light lunch at noon in order to return quickly to work. Today had been a

very busy day for her and she expected the coming days and weeks to be equally busy, as there was so much she needed to plan, direct and supervise at the Pentagon. A tempting smell hit her nostrils when she entered her home by the backdoor, which was not far from the kitchen. She also could hear the voices of her three living-in teenage children, also coming from the kitchen. Ingrid thus went straight into the kitchen before going to change out of uniform, finding Nancy, Leonardo and Lucy there, all apparently working on preparing supper. Nancy, who was standing in front of the deep frier set on a counter, was the first to turn her head and smile to Ingrid.

“High, Mom! You worked a bit late today, no?”

“I did! Unfortunately, I may stay very busy for a while during the next few weeks.”

Ingrid then stepped forward and kissed in succession her three teenage kids on the cheek. Nancy was her natural daughter and was biologically ten years-old, but had the appearances and sexy body of a sixteen-year-old, the result of herself morphing her body in order to look older than she was in reality. That, and many other fantastic things about her was due to the fact that, while Ingrid was her mother, her father was Archangel Michael, an angel of The One who had inseminated Ingrid aboard the U.S.S. PROMETHEUS, during her five-year space trip to the Jupiter and Saturn systems. That made Nancy a very special girl, half-Human and half-Celestial, with a number of supernatural powers. A girl of fascinating beauty with a well-curved teenage body, dark blond hair and deep blue eyes, Nancy was also a highly-intelligent, kind and compassionate person who made Ingrid most proud of having her. Ingrid kissed Leonardo and Lucy, her two adopted children, who were both sixteen years-old, after kissing Nancy. Ingrid had adopted Leonardo five years ago, when he was ten-years-old, after his whole family, which was deeply involved in organized crime, had been murdered by a rival gang. Leonardo himself would have been killed then if not for the protection of both Ingrid and Nancy, who was the girlfriend of Leo at the time and still liked him a lot. Leo was in fact a very handsome teenage boy, with an athletic body, a smooth face and curly black hair. He also happened to be a most likeable, bright, kind boy. As for Lucy, earlier named Lucy Wong, she had also been adopted by Ingrid after her parents had been assassinated by the Chinese Triads a mere ten months earlier. A very pretty ethnic Chinese-American girl with long silky black hair, Lucy loved music, like Nancy, and was a near-virtuoso with a violin. Less obviously, Lucy also loved Nancy, as she was a closet lesbian. Nancy, who was a bisexual thanks mostly to her ability to

remember her past incarnations, both as a man and a woman, also loved Lucy. Ingrid, herself a bisexual woman due to the same reason as for Nancy, knew about their relationship but did not object to it.

Looking down into the deep fryer, Ingrid took a good sniff of the smell of the meat cooking in it.

"This smells good! What are you cooking, Nancy?"

"I'm preparing your favorite dish: schnitzel mitt spatzel¹, Mom!"

"A wonderful idea: I am starving!"

"It should be ready in some ten to fifteen minutes, Mom. You thus have time to go change before we have supper together."

"Make it twenty minutes, Nancy: I will take a quick shower before supper. I had to run around the Pentagon all day to attend a bunch of meetings and planning sessions."

"Did those old goats of the Joint Chiefs cause you trouble, Mom?" asked Lucy, making Ingrid smile.

"Not as much trouble as they will get from me if they don't follow my directives, Lucy. Well, I better go upstairs in a hurry if we want to eat together soon."

After saying those words, Ingrid hurried out of the kitchen and, passing through the large lounge of her house, went to the main staircase leading to the upper floor, climbing it at a near run. Once in her bedroom, she shed her uniform and underwear and went for a quick shower in her private bathroom, which was attached to the main bedroom.

Some 21 minutes later, she came back down to the ground level, dressed in a relaxed interior exercise fleece outfit, to find that the dining table had been set, with the service plates being brought to the table by Nancy and Lucy, while Leo was opening a bottle of red wine. Coming from an Italian-American family, he had been accustomed to drinking wine with meals at a fairly young age compared to the average American teenager, who still didn't have the legal right to drink alcohol in public until the age of 21, something looked at with some derision and perplexity in Europe. With the food and drinks on the table, all four of them sat down and served themselves. As Ingrid was hungrily eating her first bite of breaded veal cutlet, Leo spoke up in a happy tone.

¹ Schnitzel mitt spatzel : Breaded veal cutlets with buttered noodles, a popular dish in Germany.

"I was thinking that we could go spend a day or two this weekend at our beachside cottage in Atlantic City. What do you think, girls?"

"I would love that very much, Leo." replied Nancy before looking at Ingrid. "Please, Mother, come with us! You have been working a lot lately and you really need to change your mind from work."

Lucy then jumped in as well.

"Please, Ingrid, say yes! We haven't had a family outing together in weeks." While she would have had many reasons to say 'no', Ingrid then realized that she indeed had been somewhat neglecting her kids lately due to her heavy workload. She thus relented after a short pause.

"Alright, I'll go with you to Atlantic City for at least one day this weekend. We can leave here by air car on late Friday afternoon and spend at least Saturday at our cottage. If things quiet down a bit at the Pentagon in the next few days, then I may also stay another extra day and return here with you as a group on Sunday afternoon." Cheers and grins from her three children greeted that announcement. Leo had a sneaky smile on his face when he spoke again.

"Would you mind if I invited Kimi to come with us to the cottage?" That attracted in turn three pairs of sarcastic female eyes on him, with Nancy replying in an equally sneaky tone.

"You have enough condoms in reserve for that weekend, Brother?" A concert of 'OOOOH' greeted that bomb, as the rather hot relationship between Leo and Kimi Park, a very pretty teenage girl who was friend with the whole family, was no secret in this house. Ingrid then sighed audibly as a thought crossed her mind.

"You know what, guys? I miss Hien and my grandson Jeffrey, whom I have not seen in over two years. Maybe we should go visit them in Vietnam sometimes this Summer."

That brought an instant smile on Nancy's face: Hien had been the first child adopted by Ingrid, who had first met Hien in 1952, in Vietnam, when Hien was a five-year-old war orphan being taken care of at an orphanage in Da Nang run by French nuns. Hien, who was now an officer of the State Department with a promising career and who was presently serving at the American embassy in Hanoi, was now 45 years-old, was married and had one ten-year-old son named Jeffrey.

"I love that idea, Mom. We could also invite Hien and her family to come spend some vacation time with us at our beachside cottage."

“That is an equally good idea, Nancy. Maybe we will do both...one at a time, in the months to come.”

After that, the conversation turned to more mundane and routine subjects as they ate supper. After they had finished eating, both Nancy and Lucy declared that they were going up to the house’s attic, where Ingrid had turned part of it into a soundproofed music practice room. As for Leo, he disappeared into his bedroom to go talk by phone with Kimi and invite her for a weekend at the beach, leaving Ingrid alone to gather and wash the dirty dishes before sitting down in front of the large television set in her lounge to watch the various evening news programs. It was well past eleven at night by the time all four of them were in bed and asleep.

07:02 (Washington Time)

Wednesday, July 07, 1993 ‘C’

Leonardo’s bedroom

The noise of engine and ducted propellers coming from the outside woke up Leonardo, in time for him to see Ingrid take off in her air bike and fly away towards the Pentagon. Looking at his watch, Leonardo shook his head in concern: Ingrid had been putting on longer and longer work hours lately since she had been promoted to five-star general and had been put in charge of all the American military forces. On the other hand, Leo understood how huge her job was, with innumerable problems and deficiencies to fix and also having to battle the politicians in Congress and around the country who opposed her reforms, which promised to cut the grass from under the foot of the many companies and lobbyists who had been feeding at the large trough constituted by the American defense bureaucracy.

Using first the communal bathroom of the upper floor and brushing his teeth, Leonardo then went down to the kitchen to have breakfast, finding Nancy already there, about to cook some bacon and eggs. The two of them exchanged a quick kiss on the lips after Leo walked into the kitchen, with the latter then eyeing the bacon and eggs laid on the kitchen counter.

“Could I ask you to add two eggs and some bacon for me, Nancy?”

“Of course you can, Brother!” replied Nancy with a bit of a smile. In truth, both of them had been very good friends before Leo’s family had been assassinated, prompting

Ingrid in adopting him, the same way she had adopted a few years later Lucy, after her own parents had been murdered by the Chinese Triads. Nancy and Leo had slept together before he had been adopted and, while they had kept their relations relatively chaste since then, Leo still had strong feelings about Nancy. While Nancy started cooking the bacon and eggs, Leo went to the toaster and put in two slices of bread in it, then fetched some butter and a pot of strawberry jam from the refrigerator. Once his toasts were ready, he put them on a plate and went to sit at the kitchen's breakfast counter to eat them, washing them down with a glass of milk.

"Do you know if Ingrid took the time to have breakfast before leaving for work, Nancy?"

"She did! I found a dirty plate and utensils in the sink when I came down to the kitchen."

"Good! She is working really hard lately and she needs to eat properly."

"I know!" replied Nancy, sighing. "However, her present job is extremely important for the country and there are many things that she simply can't delegate to others, like thinking outside of the box and finding new solutions to old problems. You simply can't trust most of those old goats at the Pentagon to come up with novel ideas by their own or even to recognize that there are real problems to fix. They are too stuck into their 'traditions' and usual ways of doing things."

"That's true!" recognized Leo while munching on his toasts. Nancy soon put a plate with eggs and bacon in front of him before going to sit down at the counter with her own plate and glass of milk. They ate in silence for a minute before Leo spoke softly about something he had been thinking about for a while already.

"You know, Nancy, I believe that we are sadly underusing my beachside cottage in Atlantic City, especially now during the Summer months. Yes, we had a couple of weekend group gatherings there with our schoolmates from the International High School, but the cottage sits unoccupied most of the time, which is a sad waste."

"And you have an idea about changing that, Leo?"

"I think so. While I drastically improved the pay and work conditions of the employees at the two companies I inherited from my father, many of those employees at the lower levels still don't earn enough, in my opinion. With me having already voluntarily lowered the profitability rate of my companies in order to pay for those boosted salaries and work conditions, I am now left with no real financial safety margin to further boost the lower salaries there."

"And?"

"And I was thinking of another way to help my employees and their families. Why not offer their families, particularly their young children, the use of my beachside cottage during weekdays, when we are not using it ourselves? That would give those families some good time for free during the Summer months when schools are closed. I would further contribute by providing free food and drinks for a BBQ picnic during their stay there."

Nancy's response to that surprised Leo: she stopped eating for a moment and gave him a tender kiss on his lips before gently smiling to him.

"Leo, I love it when you show your generosity and care for others like this. This is a great idea and I will be happy to help you with it by playing monitor and lifeguard for those kids."

"Thanks, Nancy! I will certainly use your help in this. Maybe we could also get Lucy to help."

"What am I supposed to help in, guys?" said a voice in their backs, making them twist their heads in time to see a still sleepy Lucy enter the kitchen, wearing only her panties and bra. Leo briefly eyed with delight her slim but well-curved body before answering her.

"We were talking about offering the use of my beachside cottage to the families of the employees of my two companies during week days. We would end up helping by offering a BBQ picnic and by playing monitor and lifeguards for the kids. Could we count on you to help us with that project?"

"Sure! That sounds like a nice, generous idea. Count me in!"

"Great! I will go visit my two companies this morning, to do my regular inspections and to arrange these beach days. You two are invited to come with me in my Porsche 911 Turbo."

"Yes! Just give me time to eat breakfast and have a cup of coffee and I will then go dress for that visit."

"I wouldn't mind if you stayed like how you are right now, Sis." replied Leo, making Lucy throw a sarcastic look at him while Nancy giggled.

"You boys think only about sex. That's so pathetic!"

One hour later, the trio jumped into Leo's fiery red Porsche 911 Turbo sports convertible, with Leo at the wheel, and rolled out of the house's driveway. Leo then

headed towards Reston to go visit first the food processing plant he owned there, situated just East of the Washington International Airport. They arrived at the main gate of the 'Wholesome Foods Company' some fifteen minutes later, where a private security guard came out of his gate hut to check them out. The guard, a big, beefy black man who was an ex-Army veteran with combat experience, smiled on recognizing Leo.

"Oh! Good morning, Boss! Coming for an inspection visit?"

"That and other things, Tom. Uh, you have a few young children, I believe, right?"

"I have four of them, aged between four and eleven, Boss." replied proudly the guard, making Leo nod and smile.

"I suppose that they are a bit restless during those weeks of school closure."

That made the guard roll his eyes.

"You can say that, Boss."

"Then, I could have something to help them burn their energy. I am planning to arrange some vacation days at the beach in Atlantic City for the employees' kids and their mothers. Be assured that I will remember your kids while organizing this. Have a good day, Tom!"

"You too, Boss!" said the guard before letting Leo's sports car drive through the gate and following it with his eyes as it drove towards the main plant building.

"A day at the beach... Now, that should be really nice for the kids and Martha."

Parking in the spot reserved for him, Leo then stepped out of his Porsche with Nancy and Lucy and led them towards the entrance to the administrative section of the company while speaking for the benefit of Lucy, who had never visited the company before.

"The Wholesome Foods Company presently employs about 450 employees and specializes in producing vacuum-sealed, ready meals items, like wrapped sandwiches, submarines and burgers, which are then used in vending machines around the States. We also have a division that specializes in making in-flight meals for the airlines flying in and out of the nearby airport. With the present boom in air travel around the United States, that division is quite busy and has been so for years."

"And how connected to the criminal activities of your late father was the company?" asked Lucy, trying not to sound judgmental. Leo took that in stride: he was

realistic enough to know where the money that had bought this company had come from.

“While my father financed it with money gained from illegal activities, he used this company simply to launder his dirty money and made sure that no criminal activity took place here. As a consequence, the FBI could find no excuses to seize the company and I was able to inherit it without problems. The same applies to the moving company I own in Gaithersburg, which employs 240 employees. The only links to crime those two companies have apart from their past ownership is the fact that my father employed many ex-convicts who had trouble finding jobs because of their criminal records.”

“Decidedly, your father was quite a well-planning and cautious man...for a mobster.” said Nancy, making Leo nod once.

“He was! My father kind of stood out as a Mafia boss. I could say that he was more of a businessman than a mobster. Unfortunately for him and my family, his Irish Mafia rivals were much fonder of violence than he was.”

“Well, the important thing here is that he was offering decent, honest jobs to nearly 700 employees. For that, his soul earned a rather quick cleansing period with The One.”

Leo gave a sober look to Nancy then and didn't ask how she could know that: she was after all a half-Celestial with direct contacts with The One, the immensely powerful spiritual entity whom Ingrid served as a Chosen. There were however huge differences between 'The One' and the 'God' known and worshipped by many monotheistic religions around the World. First, The One didn't want to be worshipped and mostly acted through its Chosen, which had been few and far between in Humanity's history, while it stayed invisible and apparently quiet. Second, The One didn't have a human form, although it could take any shape it wanted at will, being an entity made up of pure spiritual energy. Third, The One did not create the Universe, contrary to the claims made by religious followers about their Biblical or Koranic God. In fact, the Universe had created itself, with no supposed help from some divine, all-powerful entity. The One limited its activities and influence solely to the Solar System and Earth and did not have a presence in other star systems. Nancy had told him once that The One suspected that other spiritual beings similar to him/her/it could exist in other star systems, influencing life in them, but had no contacts, past or present, with such hypothetical beings.

They were greeted inside the administrative section by a young receptionist sitting behind a desk, who gave a warm smile to Leo when he entered with Nancy and Lucy.

“Good morning, Mister Dows! Are you here to talk with Mister Rinaldi?”

“Among other things, Miss Lombardi. Is he in his office?”

“I can check, but I believe that he went on the production floor to take care of a small problem with a piece of machinery.”

“Oh? Then, I will go to our production hall. I will look for him there while talking with the employees. By the way, these are my two sisters from my adoption family: Nancy and Lucy.”

“How do you do, miss?” said Nancy while shaking hands with the receptionist, with Lucy next to exchange greetings with Carla Lombardi. With that done, the trio followed a corridor and used one of its side doors to access the production area of the plant. There, the noise from dozens of robotic pieces of machinery occupied in wrapping and sealing in clear plastic thousands of individual sandwiches, submarines, hamburgers, pieces of cheese and cold cuts forced Leo into raising his voice to be heard.

“This is the commercial distributing machines food items wrapping area. As you can see, we use a lot of automated machinery, with the employees you see around mostly doing supervisory work and final packing in cardboard boxes. Those full boxes are then stored into cold rooms until they could be shipped out to our customers, often on the same day.”

“And how popular are those food products, Leo?” asked Lucy, making Leo smile.

“Quite a lot, actually. Americans have had a long love story with snack foods and our wrapped products are sold all around the country. Even after noticeably raising the employees’ pay scales, the company still makes a small but safe and steady profit margin. The trick here is to ensure that our products are always of high quality. I even have a small team in charge of thinking about possible new products that could satisfy even better our customers.”

“Well, I am quite a fan of the ‘Big Jack’ burgers you produce here.” replied Lucy. “They are easy and quick to eat in a microwave oven and fill you up quite nicely.”

“Thanks, Lucy! I must say that our ‘Big Jack’ is very popular with construction workers and other manual laborers, as it could be eaten equally cold or hot and fill one’s stomach quite well. It is one of our biggest sellers, along with our various submarines

and our wrapped pieces of cheese. Ha! I seem my general manager over there. Let's go see him."

The trio then approached a big man in his early fifties who was discussing with an employee next to a processing machine on which a technician was working. The manager smiled on seeing Leo approach, with his smile widening further at the sight of the two young and beautiful teenage girls following him.

"Aah, Mister Dows! Nice to see you here this morning."

"Well, I came to discuss an idea with you, Luigi. I took that opportunity to bring my two sisters from adoption with me, so that they could visit our plant with me. What is wrong exactly with this automated wrapping machine?"

"Oh, it is actually quite a minor problem indeed, Boss: it is a bit out of alignment, resulting in the wrapping ending being improperly sealed around our submarines. We should have that fixed within one hour."

"How many submarines were improperly wrapped before that machine was stopped?"

"About 600, Boss."

"Ouch!" said Leo while wincing. "That's quite a lot of items that we won't be able to sell. Are they still safe to eat, though?"

"Absolutely, Boss! The wrappings around those submarines are fully sealed and airtight, but are kind of crooked, something that would deter our customers from buying them, as it is quite apparent that the wrapping was not done properly. Appearances count for a lot in our business."

"Agreed! Luigi, would you hesitate to eat one of those submarines, or to serve them to your kids?"

"Not at all, Boss! Those submarines are perfectly edible and safe to eat. They just look a bit crooked, that's all."

Leo, watched by Nancy and Lucy, thought for a moment before looking back at his general manager, pointing an index at him.

"Then have those 600 submarines put in a cold room until the end of the shift at four this afternoon. Then they will be made available near the exit, so that our workers could grab a couple of them on the way out if they wish so. However, limit each worker to no more than two submarines, so that most will be able to grab at least one. I would hate to see so much good food be simply thrown away into our garbage dumpsters."

That decision brought a wide smile to both Luigi Rinaldi and to Nancy and Lucy.

“Boss, I like that! It should make our employees quite happy.”

“Well, I may have another thing that could make them happy, Luigi: I am planning to open my beachside cottage in Atlantic City for use by our employees’ families during the weekdays of the Summer schools closure period. I am ready to pay for transportation and for food there, with groups of families coming to spend a day on the beach, weather permitting. Since my cottage there is not the size of a castle, I however would be able to receive only up to maybe forty young kids and their mothers at a time.”

Luigi’s smile then widened to a full grin, with the employee nearby also grinning.

“Boss, you’re an angel! Our employees will love you for that.”

“She’s the angel, not me, Luigi.” replied Leonardo while pointing at Nancy. The manager gave a sober, respectful look at Nancy then. While Nancy had done her best to downplay both her nature and her reputation while keeping her supernatural exploits discreet, she was widely known by the employees of the plant for being in essence an angel on Earth. That she was as beautiful as one would expect of an angel didn’t hurt either in attracting admiration and respect for her. Luigi thus bowed his head politely to Nancy.

“I know, Boss. Having her here is a great honor.”

“Well, she will act as both a monitor and a lifeguard for the kids at my cottage, along with my other sister. Now, let’s go to your office, so that we could arrange together a schedule for the use of my cottage in Atlantic City during the next few weeks, before the hurricane season starts. I intend to receive the first group of kids with mothers this Friday, with the second group following on next Monday.”

Some forty minutes later, with basic arrangements to select and transport the first groups of guests to the beachside cottage done, Leo returned to his car with Nancy and Lucy and drove off, this time heading towards Gaithersburg, to the northwest of Downtown Washington D.C. After a half-hour drive through the rather dense traffic around the capital, they arrived at the main gate of the ‘Express Vans Company’, situated in the industrial area of the small town and near a number of connecting highways. There, Leo discussed his idea about the use of his cottage with the general manager of the company, John Tomassini, who showed equal enthusiasm to that of

Luigi Rinaldi for the project. After a half-hour discussion with Tomassini, Leo jumped again in his Porsche 911 and smiled to Nancy and Lucy.

“Well, with a bunch of kids and mothers due to visit my cottage on this coming Friday, we better go buy some food and drinks for all those people. We of course will have to have those delivered to our house: my poor Porsche has a rather limited car trunk capacity.”

“Your poor Porsche...pff!” said derisively Lucy from the tight back seat. “Nice way to describe an expensive sports car that costs twice the amount of the average annual salary in the United States.”

Leo pulled out his tongue in response before starting his engine and backing out of his parking spot.

09:18 (Washington Time)

Friday, July 09, 1993 ‘C’

The Dows beachside cottage

Corner of West Brigantine Avenue and Vernon Place

Brigantine Beach, Atlantic City, New Jersey



Nancy smiled on seeing that the rented bus which had just pulled to a stop on Vernon Place, just next to Leo’s cottage, was full of excited young kids screaming their joy at seeing the nearby beach and ocean, a mere fifty meters away.

"Something tells me that we are going to be very busy today, girls."

Lucy, along with Kimi Park, nodded her head at those words.

"You can say that again, Nancy."

They then came forward together to greet the children and their mothers as they started to come out of the bus, with Nancy giving out instructions to their visitors.

"Welcome to Atlantic City, kids! If you will please follow Lucy and Kimi, they will bring you into our cottage, where you will be able to change into your bathing suits."

Nancy had a gentle smile when she saw that a couple of the mothers were carrying babies. However, her smile faded somewhat when she saw a young girl come out nearly last with her mother and one younger sibling: the girl, who was maybe five or six years old, had crooked legs and wore very thick spectacles. Nancy, feeling instant sorrow at the girl's sight, gently stopped her mother as she was about to lead the girl towards the house.

"Could I speak to you in private, madam?"

The woman, who appeared to be of Latino blood, looked at Nancy with some suspicion.

"Uh, why, miss? What do you want to tell me?"

Nancy understood nearly at once the apparent suspicion of the mother: her daughter had probably been mocked or even ostracized in the past by strangers. Nancy led the mother and her two children a few meters away from the bus, near the fence that separated the parking lot on Vernon Place from the sand and rock area along the coast. Once away from the others, Nancy spoke in a low, soft voice to the mother.

"Don't worry, madam: I only want to help. Was your daughter born with her deformities?"

The woman lowered her head in sadness before answering Nancy.

"No! Our family immigrated from Puerto Rico some four years ago, when Maria was two years old. We were then living in a very poor village which was situated next to a toxic chemical dump. The doctors told me there that she had probably been poisoned by those toxic chemicals after drinking the local water. Her physical development was then severely affected and her bones became deformed, while her eyesight dramatically diminished. She also has some mental retardation issues. My husband and I then decided to emigrate to the United States to escape our toxic environment and to wait until living there to have more children, so that they would not also get sick or be born deformed. Unfortunately, the doctors here told us that Maria's condition is irreversible."

Nancy looked down sadly at the little girl, who was quite small and frail for her age. Taking a decision nearly at once, she looked back at the mother.

"Maybe I can do something for her, madam. Do you know who I am?"

"No! I suppose that you are one of the monitors and lifeguards that Mister Dows hired for this excursion at the beach, right?"

"I am a bit more than that, madam. First, I am his sister and I volunteered to help the kids today. Second, I also am somewhat special, but I would prefer to talk with you about that once we are in the cottage, where we could speak in private. Please follow me."

Nancy then took the little girl's left hand, while her mother held her right hand and the left hand of her toddler son, before starting to walk towards the cottage.

Going in via the patio door of the dining room, which faced Vernon Place, Nancy led the small family to the adjacent kitchen, which was deserted at this time. There, she made the confused mother and her two children enter the walk-in pantry and closed the door behind herself before looking the mother in her eyes.

"Please do not be scared by what you will see next. Know that my nickname in school and around Washington is 'Supergirl'. I owe that nickname to the fact that I possess a number of superpowers, one of which is touch healing."

The woman looked back at her with apparent skepticism.

"Supergirl? But I thought that it was some kind of fable made up by some sensationalist reporters. And how could you possess such powers anyway?"

"Simple, madam: while my mother, Ingrid Dows, is human, my father was an angel, a spiritual being who impregnated my mother. As a result, I am myself half-human, half-angel. What I would like from you now are two things: first, that you give me your permission to heal your daughter; second, that you keep discreet about what will happen next. I am ready to help anyone in need, but I don't want to be hounded by a pack of reporters and paparazzies afterwards."

The woman, who wore a small cross on a chain around her neck, opened her eyes wide as her skeptical expression was replaced by hope.

"You? An angel?"

"Half-angel, actually. So, do I have your permission to heal your daughter?"

The mother then nodded her head as tears came to her eyes.

“Yes! Whatever you do, you can’t make her condition worse than what it is now.”

“Thank you, madam.” said Nancy before kneeling in front of little Maria. “Don’t be afraid, sweet Maria. I am going to touch you and you will then see light coming from my hands, but that light will make you feel better.”

Nancy then concentrated while gently laying both hands on the girl. Her mother and her younger brother watched with wide eyes and gaping mouths when Nancy’s hands started glowing with progressively intense light that enveloped both her and the girl for long seconds. After some thirty seconds, the glow faded away, leaving Nancy still kneeling in front of the girl. Tears of joy came to the mother’s eyes when she saw that her daughter’s legs were not deformed anymore and looked perfectly normal. Little Maria was also taller and looked generally much healthier than before. Nancy smiled to the girl while removing the thick spectacles she had been wearing.

“I believe that you will not need them anymore, Maria. You may now hug her, madam.”

Crying nearly hysterically with joy, the mother then took her daughter into her arms and held her tightly while kissing her on her cheeks and forehead.

“Oh, Maria! You will now be able to live a normal life.”

Next, the mother looked with gratitude at Nancy.

“Miss, I don’t know how to properly thank you for this miracle. Did God or Jesus send you?”

“Not them, madam. As for thanking me, you can do that by keeping this as discreet as you can and, especially, to not talk to reporters about this.”

“You have my word, miss. Uh, what do we do now?”

Nancy replied with a big grin.

“We change into bathing suits and go to the beach to have fun together, that’s what!”

19:55 (Washington Time)

Driveway of Leonardo’s beachside cottage

Ingrid landed her air bike at the vertical on the paved driveway of the cottage that faced West Brigantine Avenue and shut down her engine, then stepped out and got both her personal bag and a thermos box from the baggage compartment of the air bike,

situated under the passenger's bench seat. Still wearing her military uniform, she then carried her two pieces of luggage to the main entrance, where Nancy opened the door from the inside and greeted her in a happy voice.

"Welcome to the cottage, Mother! I guess that your day was quite busy."
That made Ingrid roll her eyes as she walked in.

"You can say that again! However, it was time well spent and I will have a nice surprise for our navy in a few weeks. By the way, sorry for arriving late."

"Don't be, Mother! Uh, there is something that I have to talk to you about."

"Okay! Just let me put the content of that thermos box into our kitchen's refrigerator, then we will talk."

Crossing the wide entrance lobby, with its large staircase leading upstairs, and entering the kitchen by a side door of the central hallway, Ingrid put down her bag and the thermos box next to the refrigerator and started transferring the fresh meat and drinks she had brought with her.

"Alright, Nancy, what's up?"

"Well, I had to perform a little miracle healing this morning." started to say Nancy, who then described what had happened with little Maria. Ingrid gently smiled in response while nodding her head.

"You did well, Nancy. Care and compassion deserve to be praised, not discouraged. Do you think that Maria's mother will keep quiet about this?"

"I believe that Misses Theresa Cardona will stay quiet, yes. However, the fact that little Maria is now healed didn't escape the other mothers. I thus had a discreet pep talk about this with them before they left by bus with their kids half an hour ago, after having a BBQ supper here. Unfortunately, I can't swear that they will all stay mum about this. You know how fast rumors can go."

"Oh, I do! Well, since we both already started making anonymous night visits to various hospitals to heal severely sick or wounded children, I can only agree with your actions today. By the way, where are Leo, Lucy and Kimi?"

"Slouched on the sofas in front of the television in the bar-lounge, dead tired. Those kids positively burned them out today, but the day was a big success and both the kids and their mothers were most happy about their excursion. I predict that the next few weeks will see hundreds of more kids visiting our cottage."

“Excellent! By the way, if you see more kids with severe health problems among the groups which will visit the cottage this Summer, you have my benediction to heal them...discretely of course.”

“Of course!”

CHAPTER 2 – RATTLING THE U.S. NAVY



10:20 (Washington Time)

Wednesday, July 28, 1993 'C'

**National Military Command Center's (NMCC) conference room ('The Tank')
The Pentagon, Arlington, Virginia**

On entering the NMCC's conference room with two of his senior officers, Admiral Normand Klasser's eyes were immediately caught by what appeared to be a large-scale model of some kind of ship which had been laid on top of the conference table. Both Ingrid Dows and Secretary of Defense John McCain stood near it, along with a man in a civilian suit. However, Klasser's initial surprise and curiosity were quickly replaced by confusion and disapproval as he got nearer to the model.

"What kind of bastardized ship is this, General Dows? It seems to be some kind of aircraft carrier, but it looks like nothing that I would consider a proper aircraft carrier." While John McCain threw a dubious look at Klasser, Ingrid took his initial judgment in stride and pointed at the civilian man next to her.

"That is a joint baby of me and of Mister Michael Ferranti, a naval systems engineer and naval architect from the firm Naval Dynamics. It is indeed the model of a new aircraft carrier project, which I commissioned Naval Dynamics to develop."

“But we already have plans for new carriers of the NIMITZ-Class, General. Why add a new carrier project to my Navy’s plans?”

That was when John McCain jumped in on the exchange, looking coldly at Klasser.

“Because I agree with General Dows that we seriously needed to review our carrier doctrine and plans, Admiral. I thus decided to freeze for the moment all the funds planned for future aircraft carrier construction, until this new concept could be developed. By the way, our Navy is the United States Navy, not your personal property. As an ex-naval aviator, I have a lot of first-hand experience with life aboard a carrier and with its operations and tactics. General Dows exposed to me her concerns about our present carrier force and her ideas about how to deal with those concerns and I must say that she was very convincing. But I will let her explain to you her concerns and ideas. Let’s all sit down, lady and gentlemen.”

Containing with difficulty his growing irritation, Klasser and his two senior officers, respectively the head of the Bureau of Naval Aeronautics and the head of his Carrier Operations Division, took seats opposed to that of Ingrid, McCain and Ferranti, with the ship model on the table between them. Once they were all sitting, Ingrid started speaking while making a slide appear on a wall projection screen. The slide showed an American aircraft carrier at sea, accompanied by its typical escort fleet of cruisers and destroyers.

“This slide shows the U.S.S. ENTERPRISE and its close escort flotilla, which was composed then of two cruisers and seven destroyers and frigates. Far behind it is its support group of fleet tankers, ammunition ships and logistical ships, itself escorted by more destroyers. Do you see a problem there, Admiral?”

“No! In fact, this shows a typical carrier task group, of which we presently have eleven. Our carrier groups constitute the backbone of our naval power worldwide.”

“They effectively are, Admiral, and they have done an admirable job up to now...despite their potential shortcomings.”

Both Klasser and his two subalterns tensed up at once on hearing those words.

“Shortcomings? What shortcomings? What would you know about carrier operations and doctrine, General?”

Ingrid noted the sarcastic tone used by Klasser to say the word ‘General’, undoubtedly meant to underline her lack of naval experience. She however answered back in an even tone while starring into Klasser’s eyes.

“What I know about carrier operations and doctrine is what was known in 2012, Admiral, thanks to our old Athena Files. I also have more than enough experience at commanding theatre combined forces in active war zones to see what could and should be improved. Furthermore, the Secretary of Defense has quite a lot of experience of his own about carrier operations and he happens to agree with me on what I am about to tell you. Up to now, our carrier force has met with success in combat operations, mostly thanks to the fact that our potential adversaries have nothing that could compare to it. However, those potential adversaries have developed and are continuing to develop other ways to counter our carrier groups. For the Soviets and, now the Russians, it is the use of nuclear attack submarines armed with anti-ship missiles and tasked to track and then attack our aircraft carriers at sea in times of war. For the Chinese, it is the building up of a sizeable force of terminally-guided ballistic missiles armed with nuclear warheads and specially designed to strike our carriers from hundreds of miles away. Also, despite what our own warship commanders would say, a number of hostile nations possess diesel attack submarines which would present a high threat to our carriers when they operate in or near coastal waters. Remember that last big allied naval exercise off Norway, when a Norwegian diesel attack submarine was able to slip inside the escort screen of the U.S.S. INDEPENDENCE and then theoretically torpedoed it? Or the instance three years ago when a Canadian submarine caught the U.S.S. MIDWAY flat-footed off the coast of our Washington State? And how about the old saying about a carrier being a ‘bomb magnet’? We may want to keep quiet about such events but the fact is that our carriers are facing a number of dangerous threats, with those threats multiplying constantly.”

“And what would be your proposed solutions to those threats, General?” replied Klasser, refusing to concede to her points. Ingrid then pointed at the ENTERPRISE carrier group shown on the slide.

“For one, we should stop making our carriers so conspicuous, Admiral. One of our carriers and its escort force, apart from representing by itself a sizeable portion of our total naval combat power, also represents a large concentration of juicy targets for enemy planes, missiles and submarines, with their combined electronic radar and radio signatures acting like beacons for the enemy. Furthermore, while our carriers are nuclear-propelled and can sail tens of thousands of miles without refueling, the same cannot be said of their escort ships or of their embarked aircraft. Thus, our carriers and their escort ships still have to refuel and resupply at sea every few days, thus mostly

negating the advantages of our carriers' nuclear propulsion, unless our carriers sail along by their own. However, if they do that, then they will find themselves vulnerable to enemy nuclear submarines and to long-range missile attacks, as they have no anti-submarine defenses of their own and possess only a limited anti-missile and anti-aircraft capability, if you except their air wings. If, because of bad weather, our carrier's embarked aircraft can't fly off and land back on it, a rather frequent occurrence, then it becomes even more vulnerable. Thankfully for us, we have not had to fight yet a serious war at sea against those developing threats, but I am afraid that this has led to a complacency on our part that could prove disastrous in the future. Before you ask me again what we could do about that, I will resume my thoughts in a few words."

A new slide then appeared on the screen, showing a number of bullet points which Ingrid read in succession.

"First, as I just said, we need to disperse more widely our carrier forces and to make them smaller targets for the enemy, notably by avoiding the use of large escort forces. Second, our carriers need to have much better self-defense capabilities, including against submarines, so that they could operate by themselves, without escort ships. Third, by making the use of large escort flotillas superfluous, we would free a lot of our combat ships for other tasks, or we could build more carriers for the same total cost. Right now, a typical carrier escort flotilla of two cruisers and seven destroyers and frigates represents a total of nine separate propulsion systems and nine sensors, weapons and command and control ship suites. Those suites are what truly costs the most budget-wise, not the construction of their steel hulls, especially if you consider that most of our escort cruisers are nuclear-powered. With the same amount of money spent on building such an escort flotilla, we could easily build one or two extra aircraft carriers. Fourth, we should have more and smaller carriers in terms of tonnage, but still with sizeable embarked wings, in order to better disperse our forces at sea and make them less vulnerable to detection and long-range attacks. After discussing this with Secretary McCain and gaining his approval, I commissioned Mister Ferranti and its firm, Naval Dynamics, to study a new class of aircraft carrier for our Navy, a class that would respond to the new threats and make our carrier forces less vulnerable. The scale model of ship you see on the table is the preliminary result of that study, which am calling 'Project Neptune'."

"But...this looks like a simple flat box mounted on stilts attached to underwater cylindrical hulls. You call that an aircraft carrier, General?"

Ingrid's eyes narrowed then, as she was getting truly tired of Klasser's resistance to change.

"I call that the future of our carrier force, Admiral. It may look very unorthodox in design, but new problems demand new, innovative solutions, so I told Mister Ferranti and Naval Dynamics to think outside of the box and I also gave them a few suggestions of my own. I may not be a naval officer or ship designer but I have a doctorate in aerospace engineering and have personally designed or directed the designs of dozens of aircraft, spacecraft and even spaceships, like our U.S.S. CONSTITUTION and our U.S.S. PROMETHEUS. Furthermore, I piloted all of those aircraft, spacecraft and spaceships. I even piloted our U.S.S. PROMETHEUS to a landing on the surface of Titan, one of Saturn's moons, flying through its thick nitrogen and methane atmosphere to do so. I am both an experienced user, designer and combat leader and I used that experience to direct this project. As for Mister Ferranti, he is an ex-navy commander and served aboard a number of our aircraft carriers as a ship's engineer, so he has plenty of relevant experience and knowledge of his own. Since he did a lot of the preliminary concept study for this project, I will thus let him describe to you our Project Neptune. Mister Ferranti..."

"Thank you, General Dows! Let me now describe our ship model to you, gentlemen. It is what is called a modified SWATH hull concept, SWATH standing for 'Small Water Area Twin Hull'. In this case, our SWATH concept model was slightly modified by the addition of two short, separate centerline hull sections, one at the bow and one at the stern, with those sections linked to the two, full-length cylindrical underwater side hulls by pairs of stabilizer surfaces. In the case of an aircraft carrier design, a SWATH hull provides a number of very important advantages. First and foremost, a SWATH ship is a lot more stable and resistant to roll and pitch than a traditional monohull ship, and this even at high speed. That is due to the fact that nearly all of its buoyancy's volume is under the surface of the water and is thus little affected by waves, which are the cause of pitching and rolling in conventional hulls. For an aircraft carrier, that means a lot, as it will remain rock steady even when sailing in rough seas and at high speeds. A SWATH aircraft carrier will thus be able to launch and retrieve its aircraft in weather conditions which would basically prevent a conventional carrier from operating its aircraft. Second, its hull form, with a large flat box-like superstructure mounted on lateral stilts and situated high above the sea surface, provides a maximum amount of internal volume for a large aircraft hangar, plus provides lots of flight deck

surface for a runway and for aircraft catapults and elevators. That also provides plenty of space for a very powerful armament of guns and missiles, plus comfortable, decent quarters for the members of its crew. As envisaged, our preliminary model may be even bigger than one of our NIMITZ-Class carriers, with a length of 440 meters, or 1,452 feet at the flight deck level, but it is in reality a much slender design, with a displacement tonnage that is less than that of a NIMITZ-Class carrier. However, on that displacement, our NEPTUNE has an aircraft hangar measuring some 1,353 feet in length, 247 feet in width and 25 feet in free ceiling height, which makes it three times larger than that of the U.S.S. NIMITZ. That allows our NEPTUNE to safely shelter sixty or more aircraft and helicopters, with flight deck parking space for at least twenty extra aircraft, depending on the size of aircraft used. That hangar capacity still leaves an 82-foot-wide centerline aircraft circulation lane, which could be used to shelter the aircraft parked on the flight deck during severe storms. In contrast, the U.S.S. NIMITZ, despite its huge size and displacement of over 91,000 tons compared to the full load displacement of 85,000 tons of our NEPTUNE, can accommodate less than a third of its ninety or so aircraft inside its hangar, thus must keep most of its aircraft parked along the flight deck, where they are vulnerable to both storm damage and to enemy fire. Another, less obvious advantage of the SWATH hull of our NEPTUNE is a much-reduced construction cost and time, thanks to the fact that its main hull section above the waterline is made nearly exclusively of flat steel plates with no curves in them. In comparison, if you look at a NIMITZ hull, you will see a complex hull shape made up of curved plates of widely varying forms, which take a lot of work-hours to manufacture with precision on big hydraulic presses before they could be welded together to form ship modules. My preliminary calculations show that the hull of our NEPTUNE will take less than half of the time needed to build a NIMITZ hull, thus will result in tremendous savings in terms of man-hour costs. Also, being basically a large, long flat steel box, the main hull structure will be easy to build by sub-sections in separate construction halls and then assembled in the construction drydock, resulting in more time and money saved.”

One of Klasser’s two subalterns, a rear admiral who was a qualified naval architect, seemed to appreciate Ferranti’s arguments and pointed at the long runway running from bow to stern along the starboard side of the model.

“Those are very attractive features of your design, Mister Ferranti. I also noticed that your hull shape allows for a long runway running parallel to the ship’s centerline. How long and wide is that runway, exactly?”

“The runway on the NEPTUNE is 1,452 feet long by 115 feet wide, sir, and incorporates seven arresting wires and one crash barrier. Because it runs parallel to the ship’s centerline axis and is free from any nearby deck structures, our pilots will be able to land in a much safer manner than with our present oblique landing decks, which are lined on both sides with parked aircraft and superstructures and which measure only some 800 feet in length compared to the 1,452 feet of the NEPTUNE’s runway.”

“That is something that endeared it a lot to me, gentlemen.” then said John McCain. “As an ex-naval aviator, I can fully appreciate how much this will help our pilots and will greatly reduce the potential risks of accidents during carrier landings. That, along with the steadier ride in rough seas, makes the NEPTUNE’s concept very attractive to me.”

“Uh, may I ask why the sides of the ship, which support the main box structure above the water, are sloped instead of being vertical?” asked the other officer accompanying Klasser, making Ferranti nod his head and point at Ingrid.

“To be frank, that feature was incorporated into the design by General Dows, so I will let her answer your question, Admiral.”

“Thank you, Mister Ferranti!” said Ingrid, who then looked at the three admirals facing her from across the table.

“Those sloped sides will actually help turn our carriers into ghost ships, by making them stealthy to radar. You will notice that there are no vertical surfaces on the hull and superstructures of the ship. That is deliberate and is meant to reflect away the radar waves coming from other ships or shore stations, instead of letting them bounce back and thus provide a radar signature of our carrier to the enemy. We still have to conduct extensive radar signature testing on our model, compared to a NIMITZ ship model, to see how effective this stealth feature really is, but I fully expect our NEPTUNE to only have the radar signature of a small boat, at the most. If sailing by itself with no escort fleet, then our NEPTUNE will be extremely hard to detect and to target by the enemy, one of the major reasons I pushed for a SWATH hull design.”

Out of arguments by now, Klasser mostly caved in but still asked a final question.

“And when could the first ship of this class be built and put into service? Our U.S.S. INTREPID is getting quite old and will need a replacement soon. Our proposed NIMITZ-Class addition was planned to replace the INTREPID in about three years.”

“While much design work needs to be done, sir,” answered Michael Ferranti, “the easier and cheaper construction methods for our NEPTUNE should make it

possible for us to have the first of our new class of carriers completed and put into service in less than three years. That is, if the Congress and its cohort of lobbyists don't object to this project and delays its approval and financing."

"The President and I will take care of the Congress, gentlemen." declared at once John McCain, reassuring both Ingrid and Michael Ferranti. "This is too important to let a few politicians play budgetary games and pork-barreling with it."

The meeting was concluded some ten minutes later, at which time the participants filed out of the conference room. Before they could go their separate way, Admiral Klasser politely stopped Ingrid to speak with her in a corner of the NMCC.

"General, I was at first doubtful about your competence in such naval matters, but I can now see that I was wrong in this. I am sorry if I appeared too antagonistic about your ideas and concepts."

Secretly relieved by that change of attitude, Ingrid smiled to Klasser and presented her right hand, which Klasser shook.

"The important thing is that we all work for the better good and security of the United States, Admiral."

CHAPTER 3 – A LITTLE PEP TALK



Nancy Dows in 1993 'C'

20:46 (Washington Time)

Thursday, August 26, 1993 'C'

The Dows residence, 326 South Grove Street

Aurora Hills, Arlington, Virginia

Ingrid was working on a private design project on her computer, with the door of her private study closed, when light knocks on the door made her turn her head.

"Come in!"

She smiled on seeing her daughter Nancy, still nine-years-old by a calendar but with the appearance of a stunningly beautiful teenager of about fifteen or sixteen with a very sexy body, enter the study and then close the door behind her.

"What's up, Nancy?"

"Uh, could I speak with you, Mother? I need your counsels."

"Of course! Take that chair!" replied Ingrid, saving her work on her computer and then swiveling her work chair to face the chair in which Nancy was going to sit. While Nancy did not appear to be in any kind of mental distress, Ingrid could see that what she wanted to speak about was a serious matter.

“So, what is bothering you, Nancy?”

“Well, bothering would be a bit of a big word here, Mother. What I want to discuss with you is about myself, my nature and my future life.”

“Ooh! Meaty subjects indeed!”

“Indeed! First, about myself and my true nature. You know too well that I am not fully human, also being a half-Celestia, something that gave me many supernatural powers. It also basically makes me immortal: even if my physical shell is ever destroyed for good, then my Celestial essence will continue to exist and could then form at will a new physical shape for itself.”

Ingrid nodded gravely at those words: she was very conscious of those facts and had been wondering for many years already about what that could do to their long-term relationship.

“I know, Nancy. I have thought about that many times in the past. What is your specific problem?”

“My problem is about how to live as a Human on Earth while possessing powers and immortality, Mother. That in turn is bound to heavily impact what I will do with my life here. I am not like a normal girl, whose life turns around studying, getting a job or marrying a man in order to be able to have a home, eat properly, live in decent conditions and possibly having children and form a family of my own. My powers could allow me to become a true person of exception in this World, to become rich and famous and to become known and even venerated around the planet. However, I don't want to become any of that. I want to live as normally as a Human girl would, while discretely helping others in need with my powers. My problem is how exactly to do that while avoiding to become some kind of venerated celebrity.”

“That is a very good question indeed, Nancy. As the saying goes: power corrupts, while absolute power corrupts absolutely. However, your soul is of too good a nature for you to become some kind of self-centered megalomaniac. The simple answer would be to follow your heart and do what you feel to be good, but that would be way too simplistic as an answer in my opinion.”

“I know, Mother. You also have superpowers and, while not truly immortal, you are bound to live much longer than a normal human being. However, by becoming a fighter pilot and then a high-level military leader, you were able to channel your powers and abilities towards defending and protecting the United States throughout the decades. In fact, with your actual position, you have basically become the ultimate

military protector of this country, while your past actions have either prevented or shortened many wars, saving the lives of millions of people in the process. I envy you in that regard, truly. However, my talents are not geared towards the military. Rather, I may well become some kind of famous musical star or entertainer, in view of my taste for playing music, singing and dancing. The problem is that, if I look around at such famous artists who exist in the United States or around the World, too many of them are in reality nearly the puppets of big production companies, music or film industry moguls and impresarios. Emerging female artists in particular too often are abused by such moguls before they could break away on their own, if they ever do. Look at what happened to stars like Marilyn Monroe, who had to go at first on the 'casting couch' in order to get meaningful roles in cinema, or to too many aspiring singers whose songs were then seized by big record companies and who got only a portion of the royalties they deserved. On the other hand, I don't want to center my life around the accumulation of money and to become rich simply to live in luxury. I want my life to be truly meaningful and to be used to help the others around me who deserve help. My dilemma is how to do that without corrupting my soul and becoming too centered on my own needs and wishes."

Ingrid's expression was by now most sober, as Nancy's dilemma was both very real and most weighty.

"Okay, Nancy, let's peel this problem into its different aspects. Let's start with what you like to do. Up to now, you obviously have both a talent and a taste for music, be it playing instruments or singing. You are also a highly talented dancer. You thus have everything to be able to become a great musical star. Am I correct so far?"

"Yes, Mother! Playing music, singing and dancing truly makes me happy. I particularly enjoy playing music and performing with Lucy and with others like Sarah Weissman and Carmen Estrada."

"Do you like studying music and other performing arts?"

"I do, but I also want to not be boxed in by the present trends, genres or cultures. I like it when I am free to innovate, make new music or new dance moves. Don't laugh but I also have started to gain interest in fashion. Fashion is such a powerful way to express yourself while fulfilling a basic human need to protect and cover the body in varying climates, conditions and surroundings. Also, the potential for empowering one's imagination via fashion design is truly huge, and I am not talking about becoming one of those pretty bimbos who call themselves 'supermodels.'"

Ingrid couldn't help smile in amusement at those last words.

"I do agree with you on that, although you could probably send those supermodels back to their changing rooms if you ever modeled your own creations."

"Well, many of those girls are now rich, but they are still on the whole simple puppets and catwalk accessories for the big fashion houses who employ them, like Dior and Victoria's Secret. I don't have only a sexy body: I have a mind, and a brilliant one at that! I want to use all my talents and skills, and this while helping others, and I certainly don't want to become someone else's puppet."

"Nancy, I can only agree to all that you just said. Your heart is in the right place and your wishes are most legitimate. I especially agree with you about not becoming someone's puppet and to be your own master while thinking about the others around you. You already follow a school curriculum geared towards music, singing and performing arts at the Northern Virginia International High School, where you are soon due to start Tenth Grade, along with Lucy and Leonardo. I say, continue your studies in music and performing arts and improve on your skills there, alongside Lucy as a musician partner. Since your academic schedule will already be quite full, I suggest that you get books and magazines about fashion and clothes making that you could read at leisure on your own time. I can help you choose which books and magazines would help you the most while not putting a brake on your own imagination."

"And what about my superpowers and my immortality, Mother? They are bound to influence both the course of my life and the way others will perceive and react to me."

"That is true!" replied Ingrid, thoughtful. "The best counsel I can give you now about that is to not flout your superpowers unless necessary and to live as normal a life as you can."

"Thank you for your counsels, Mother. They were very helpful." said Nancy, who got up from her chair and quickly went to Ingrid to kiss her. She was about to leave the study when Ingrid spoke.

"You know, Nancy, you do have one human trait that I don't have that would allow you to do something that I never will be able to do."

Nancy, intrigued, stopped where she was and turned around to look at her mother.

"Oh?! And what would that be, Mother?"

"You are a natural-born American citizen, while I was born in Germany, then became a naturalized citizen. You could one day become President of the United States, while the Constitution stops me from ever becoming President."

CHAPTER 4 – FLYING AGAIN



10:15 (Washington Time)

Tuesday, September 14, 1993 'C'

Main tarmac, Langley Air Force Base

Langley, Virginia, U.S.A.

"Here is your mount for this morning's flight, General: one of our most recently delivered North American F-93A MUSTANG II fighter-bomber. It was delivered to this base a mere two weeks ago and is only the 23rd series production aircraft of this type to enter service in the whole country."

"It is a true beauty!" said Ingrid while admiring the supersonic jet aircraft parked on the tarmac along a line of other military aircraft.

"It certainly is, General." Replied Brigadier General Mack Hollingsworth, the commander of the First Fighter Wing based in Langley. "Our pilots positively love it: it is very fast, extremely agile and is also well-armed, with three 30mm cannons, internal bays for four air-to-air missiles, retractable rocket launchers for a total of 64 76mm rockets and a total of nine external weapons pylons. It has shown no vices or bad surprises in terms of in-flight handling and accelerates like a rocket. It may not be as fast as our old F83, which you helped develop some forty years ago, I believe, but it is still capable of attaining Mach 2.5 at altitude."

"Well, I did direct the development of our F-83 EAGLE in the early fifties, but it is still an excellent aircraft, even after 41 years in service. However, I will be happy to see the new Lockheed F-95 EAGLE II enter service in one or two years. I see that you reserved a single-seat version for my flight, instead of a twin-seat trainer variant." Hollingsworth nodded his head soberly at that.

"I decided so after seeing how easily you aced your two simulator sessions, General. I didn't want to insult such a superb and highly experienced combat pilot as you by sticking you with an instructor pilot, so I ordered this plane to be reserved for your flight."

Ingrid, wearing a supersonic pilot's helmet, grinned on hearing that.

"Flattery will get you nowhere, General Hollingsworth, but thank you for your consideration. Well, time to see what this baby got!"

Approaching the small ladder positioned against the left side of the plane's cockpit, Ingrid quickly climbed it and stepped into the cockpit, sitting on its ejection seat and then letting an aircraft mechanic help her attach her safety harness, plug her radio and oxygen connection and finally remove the safety pins of her ejection seat. Once the ladder was removed and the personnel around the F-93 stood at a safe distance, Ingrid switched on her aircraft systems and lit up the single turbofan engine with afterburner, then did a quick instrument check before giving a thumbs up signal to Brigadier General Hollingsworth, who replied with a similar sign at once. Pushing slightly forward her engine throttle, Ingrid then made her aircraft roll out of the lineup and turned it towards the nearest taxiway leading to the main runway of the base. At the same time, she contacted the control tower by radio.

“Langley Control, this is Foxtrot Charlie 24! I am now rolling towards Runway 08, over.”

“Langley Control acknowledged!”

Ingrid did not speak further until she positioned her aircraft at one end of the 3,048-meter-long runway.

“Langley Control, from Foxtrot Charlie 24: I am in position on Runway 08 and ready to take off, over.”

“Foxtrot Charlie 24, you have permission to take off. Have a good flight!”

“Thank you, Langley Control! Taking off now!”

Pushing forward gradually her engine throttle while stepping hard on her brakes, Ingrid then released her brakes once she was at full power, with the afterburner on. Her F-93 fighter-bomber then jumped ahead and accelerated down the runway at a tremendous rate, pushing her back into her seat. Ingrid then felt again the excitement that she still got during every flight in a military jet: she had truly been born to be a pilot. Attaining her takeoff speed, she then pulled gently on her control stick, making her aircraft rotate its nose up and lifting it from the concrete runway surface. She retracted her landing gear nearly as soon as she was airborne and continued her climb, enjoying every second of it. Langley then contacted her as she was passing the altitude of 2,000 meters.

“Langley Control to Foxtrot Charlie 24, turn to heading 095 and continue climbing up to 30,000 feet to get to the free practice airspace zone.”

“Turning to heading 095 and climbing to 30,000 feet. Foxtrot Charlie 24 understood!”

Less than two minutes later, she entered the free practice zone used by the Langley pilots to practice their air maneuvering and started making a succession of air maneuvers, cautiously at first, to get the feel of her new aircraft. The F-93 then proved to be as agile as Hollingsworth had claimed it to be, with a very low wing loading and high thrust-to-weight ratio close to unity, even when fully loaded. In the interceptor configuration she was in for this flight, that ratio was actually just above unity, allowing her to do a spectacular zoom climb to the altitude of 15,000 meters. Once up, she admired for a moment the surface of the sea below her before doing more maneuvers. She was in the middle of a ‘S’-turn when an alarm klaxon sounded out in her cockpit. Looking down at her instruments, she swore when she saw that the pressure in her hydraulic fluid lines was dropping, and fast!

"Damn it! A nearly brand-new aircraft."

Turning back at once towards Langley, Ingrid then spoke in her radio microphone.

"Langley Control, this is Foxtrot Charlie 24! My hydraulic fluid pressure is going down fast. I am returning to base while I still have some fluid pressure left, over."

"From Langley Control: acknowledged! We will free the air traffic close to the base and reserve Runway 08 for you. The base emergency services will stand by, over."

"Thanks, Langley Control! Know that my hydraulic pressure is still going down fast and is now only at one third nominal pressure."

In the control tower of Langley, the air controllers on duty exchanged worried glances: without hydraulic pressure, her flight controls would become extremely hard to move, making the F-93 nearly impossible to control. A new radio message from Ingrid then added to their worries.

"Langley Control, from Foxtrot Charlie 24: my primary hydraulic circuit is now empty. The secondary hydraulic circuit is also emptying fast now, over."

"How could both hydraulic fluid circuits on a brand-new aircraft fail like this?" asked a junior air controller to his supervisor, who shook his head.

"It shouldn't happen but it apparently is happening right now. Get our fire trucks and our ambulance ready next to the one-third point of Runway 08 and tell them to be ready for a probable belly landing. Without hydraulic fluid pressure, General Dows won't be able to lower her landing gear."

"Right away, sir!"

The supervisor then went to a telephone and called General Hollingsworth's office, getting his military secretary to answer his call.

"Sergeant, this is Warrant Banks, in the control tower. I need to speak urgently to General Hollingsworth."

"I am sorry, Warrant, but the general is still somewhere around the flight line. Can I pass a message to him?"

The supervisor swore quietly to himself, then answered the secretary.

"If he comes back to his office in the few coming minutes, then tell him that General Dows' plane has called an in-flight emergency and is on its way back to the base. I will now make an announcement on the tarmac area P.A. system to alert him."

Putting down the telephone receiver, the supervisor then grabbed a microphone and switched it to the loudspeakers posted outside around the tarmac area.

“Brigadier General Hollingsworth, please call the control tower at once. This is an emergency!”

He repeated his message twice, then went back to the air controller who was in liaison by radio with Ingrid Dows.

“How is General Dows doing now, Scarlett?”

He didn't like the face the corporal did then.

“She just said that she now has zero hydraulic fluid pressure left in her aircraft, sir. She however is still approaching the base and is now 26 nautical miles away and at an altitude of 16,000 feet.”

In the cockpit of her F-93, Ingrid needed nearly all of her supernatural strength to be able to move her flight control stick, which felt as if it had been sunk into concrete. Still, she was able to keep control of her aircraft...barely, and kept her maneuvers very progressive. She toyed with the idea of trying to lower her landing gear but, with no hydraulic pressure left, it would probably only come down partially by gravity and would not lock. That would in turn make any attempt at landing very risky, with her partially deployed landing gear possibly sending her aircraft into a deadly cartwheel. Also not available were her flaps, which meant that she would have to land at a much faster speed than usual. There was always the option of ejecting, but she rejected that nearly at once: that would leave her uncontrolled aircraft to crash about anywhere, putting at risk the civilians living and working around Langley. She thus decided to try her luck at a hard landing in Langley. Looking down briefly at her navigation display, she then started a very gradual and large 'S'-turn in order to approach Langley and line up on Runway 08. Again, she needed most of her unnatural strength to make her stick move. If she would have been a normal pilot, then that pilot would have lost control of the plane many minutes ago. She wondered for a second about how she could have suffered such a catastrophic hydraulic pressure failure but quickly concentrated back on her flying: now was not the time to speculate about this. If she managed to land in one piece, then the base technicians will have something to work on to find what happened.

On the grass surface next to the east side of the main runway, Captain George Brown, the head of the firefighting department of Langley AFB, nervously scanned the

skies with a pair of binoculars while standing next to one of his firefighting trucks. He finally spotted a small dot in the sky which was heading towards the airfield. Brown then ran back into his firefighting truck while giving orders on his hand-held radio.

“To all vehicles: be ready to roll! Man the foam cannons!”

In the control tower, where Brigadier General Hollingsworth had just arrived, short of breath after running up the stairs of the tower, the air controllers also spotted Ingrid’s incoming aircraft and pointed it to the wing commander. Hollingsworth had one look at the incoming F-93 before going to the radio microphone of the tower.

“Foxtrot Charlie 24, this is Langley Control Six: your plane is not worth risking your life by attempting a belly landing. Your aircraft is still full of fuel and you will probably catch fire on landing. Turn towards the sea and eject once over the water, over.”

“Langley Control Six, from Foxtrot Charlie 24, if my plane crashes at sea, then we may never know why my hydraulic systems failed.”

“I realize that, Foxtrot Charlie 24, but we can deal with that later. Now, turn around and eject over the sea, that’s an order! Our coastal patrol craft will be waiting to retrieve you.”

The air controllers didn’t miss the irony of a one-star general giving an order to a five-star general but, as the base commander, Hollingsworth was in his right to order Ingrid Dows around when it came to air traffic control. There was a short delay before Ingrid’s voice came on the radio.

“Understood, Langley Control! Am now turning towards the sea to eject, out!”

In her cockpit, Ingrid swore to herself about her bad luck on a flight that should have been pure fun but nonetheless started a wide 160 degree turn to the left to point her aircraft towards the sea. With Langley being on the coast of Virginia, she needed only a few seconds before she started overflying the ocean. Sighing in resignation, she pulled back her feet next to her ejection seat, then grabbed the ejection handle situated between her legs and pulled hard on it. To her surprise and shock, nothing happened! Pulling again for a second time and still getting nothing, she swore out loud.

“For fuck’s sake! How can I have two separate major systems failures at the same time in a brand-new aircraft? Ejection seat failures are nearly unheard of! And the canopy should have flown off, independent of the seat.”

The truth then hit her like a hammer: this was no simple aircraft systems failures, it had to be sabotage! Starting another wide turn to head back to the base, she keyed her oxygen mask's radio microphone.

"Langley Control, this is Foxtrot Charlie 24. I was unable to eject due to the failure of both my ejection seat and of my canopy. I now suspect that my plane was sabotaged. I have no choice left now but to return to the base for a belly landing. I intend to land on the grass surface on the west side of the main runway, in order to soften a bit the impact with the ground, over."

In the control tower, Brigadier General Hollingsworth looked with disbelief at his microphone for a moment, then exploded in rage.

"SHIT! That's the only plausible explanation for this cascade of failures in a new plane. Warrant, you are now in charge of guiding General Dows to a landing next to the main runway. I have calls to place to the base security office."

"yes sir!"

As the senior air controller spoke on the radio with Ingrid Dows, Hollingsworth jumped on a nearby telephone and called the duty desk of the base security section.

"Hello, Base Security? This is General Hollingsworth speaking! Go to Red Alert at once and have all the access points of the base closed immediately. Nobody is to either exit or enter, no matter what the person or the excuse. We have a possible saboteur on the base. Have our personnel at the gates break out their rifles as well. I also want an armed squad ready to secure an aircraft that is about to crash-land besides the main runway. Get to it!"

Hollingsworth was still fuming as he was putting down his telephone receiver. A thought then came to him and he did a second call, this time to the aircraft maintenance section, where he got hold of Major Tina Golding, the Base Aircraft Maintenance Officer.

"Major Golding, this is General Hollingsworth speaking. The F-93 that had been prepared for General Dows flight has suffered both a complete loss of hydraulic fluid and failures of both its canopy and its ejection seat. I can only see sabotage as an explanation for what just happened to a brand-new aircraft. Find out the names of all the maintenance personnel who worked on that F-93 during the last 36 hours, then make sure that they don't leave the base. Call a squad of Air Force policemen as a backup and get a pistol for yourself... Yes, you heard me! Get those names quickly, Major!"

With that call done, Hollingsworth walked to the side of the senior air controller.

"Where is General Dows now, Warrant?"

"Over there, on approach to Runway 08, sir."

In her F-93, Ingrid now had the main runway of the base in sight, but lined up her aircraft with the grassy surface to the left of it instead of with the concrete runway. With all the fuel she still had aboard her aircraft, a belly landing on a concrete surface was going to cause lots of sparks, sparks that would most certainly light up any fuel leaking from the F-93's reservoirs and turn it into a bouncing torch, with her still stuck inside. The sight of the waiting fire trucks and ambulance near the runway reassured her a bit but the toughest part was still to come. Her first move was to unlock and manually slide back her canopy, leaving it wide open and making fierce winds rush into her cockpit. Whatever happened, she had no wish to be trapped inside a burning aircraft. Next, she slowed down her aircraft to just above stalling speed and flew down in a gentle slope until she was a mere ten meters above the ground, so that she could touch the ground as soon as she was over the runway area. In this she was helped by the very small wing loading of her F-93, which was only half that of most other fighter jets. That low wing loading allowed for slower stalling speeds, something that she desperately needed right now. Her aircraft then overflew the perimeter security fence of the base and she started to see the main runway's surface go by her right side.

"Time to show that you are a real pilot, girl!" she said to herself as she lowered her aircraft to a mere two meters above the grass, then cut power to her engine.

On the other side of the main runway, Captain Brown saw her fly to just above the grass surface, then slow down while raising a bit the nose of her aircraft. The tail of the fighter-bomber made contact first with the grass, digging a long furrow in it and creating a trail of projected dirt and grass behind the plane. Ingrid Dows was able to keep the nose of her F-93 up for a couple of crucial seconds as her tail dragged on the ground and slowed it down. Then, its aerodynamic lift spent, the nose of the F-93 slammed down on the ground, creating an even bigger geyser of grass and dirt as the plane slid on the ground at more than 180 kilometers per hour. Brown then patted hard the shoulder of his truck driver.

"ROLL ON THE SURFACE OF THE RUNWAY AND GO TO TOP SPEED, PARALLEL TO THE PLANE."

Brown then spoke on his radio.

“TO ALL EMERGENCY VEHICLES: ROLL ON THE RUNWAY AND FOLLOW THAT PLANE. START SPRAYING FOAM ON IT THE MOMENT THAT IT WILL STOP.”

As his big fire truck accelerated down the runway, Brown anxiously watched as the F-93 kept sliding on the grass, creating a big furrow on the ground. Thankfully, the friction with the ground gradually slowed down the crashed aircraft and it finally came to a stop halfway down the long surface, still on its belly. Brown let out a sigh of relief on seeing no flames burst out of the wrecked F-93. Still, he could not become complacent now.

“STEVE, START HOSING DOWN THE PLANE WITH FOAM AS SOON AS WE ARE CLOSE ENOUGH TO IT.”

“GOT IT!”

The fire truck finally stopped once some twenty meters from the F-93, with one fireman already spraying fire-retardant foam on the plane as Brown stepped out in a hurry, an axe in one hand. Sprinting towards the cockpit of the crashed fighter-bomber, he saw the pilot in the process of jumping out on the ground after undoing her seat harness. He met her halfway, then directed her retreat towards the approaching ambulance. Once they got to it, Brown anxiously looked at the young female pilot.

“Are you okay, ma’am?”

“I believe so, Captain. I feel no pain anywhere and, as you could see, I was able to run away from my plane. By the way, tell your people to disturb or damage that wrecked aircraft as little as possible: I suspect that an act of sabotage caused it to fail in flight and crash.”

“Sabotage, ma’am?”

“Yes! I suffered multiple failures in flight in a nearly new aircraft, including a complete loss of hydraulic pressure and a failure of both my ejection seat and of my canopy ejection system.”

“Damn! That does sound suspicious.”

“Indeed! Ah, here is General Hollingsworth.”

Ingrid then walked towards Hollingsworth, who was stepping out of a jeep, worry on his face.

“Are you alright, General Dows?”

“I am a bit shaken but, apart from that, I am okay.”

“Still, you should be examined by a doctor soon, General: that was quite a rough landing. By the way, my congratulations for the fantastic piloting job you just pulled.”

“Thank you! However, I am afraid that your new F-93 is now good for the scrap heap.”

“It can be replaced, General, but you can’t.” replied Hollingsworth. “By the way, I have put the base on alert and had all access points closed until further notice. I also called the AFOSI² headquarters in Quantico and asked them to send me an investigative team ASAP³. Right now, I can see no explanation other than sabotage for this incident. The base security force will also cordon and guard this crash site and preserve it as a crime scene.”

“Good! We really need to find the rats who did this.”

Hollingsworth was silent for a second before asking Ingrid a question in a low voice.

“General, who could want you dead to the point of causing this?”

Ingrid nearly broke out in laughter at that question.

“Who could want me dead? Well, White supremacists and racists around the United States, including the KKK and more than a few members of Congress, all hate my guts with a passion and call me a ‘nigger lover’. Then, you have all the defense firms and lobbyists whom my new defense procurement policies caused them to lose juicy contracts with the Pentagon. Then, you have the Chinese Triads and some sectors of the Mafia who consider me a major shit disturber. Believe me, General Hollingsworth: when you cause someone to lose a multi-billion-dollar contract, the grudge that follows is quite sizeable and intense. Your AFOSI field agents won’t be lacking in suspects in this affair.”

“My God! You do live an interesting life, as the Chinese would say.”

“A very interesting life, General Hollingsworth.” corrected Ingrid with a slight smile on her lips.

11:03 (Washington Time)

Personnel locker room, Aircraft maintenance section

Langley Air Force Base

² AFOSI : Air Force Office of Special Investigations. It is responsible to combat and investigate instances of criminal activities, espionage and terrorism within the United States Air Force, plus provides protection services to its personnel and installations. Its headquarters are situated in Quantico, Virginia.

³ ASAP : As Soon As Possible. A commonly used abbreviation around the United States.

"How could this nigger-loving bitch have survived this? She should be dead now, stuck inside her aircraft lying at the bottom of the sea." muttered to himself Technical Sergeant Zacharia Bedford as he frantically unlocked his individual effects locker in the changing room of the base's aircraft maintenance section. Once his combination lock was off the door of his locker, he opened it and quickly grabbed a canvas tool bag lying at the bottom of it and took it out, then put back in place his lock. His tool bag in hand, Bedford turned around to leave but had to freeze at once: facing him and blocking the exit door of the room were Major Tina Golding, the base aircraft maintenance officer, and two Air Force policemen. The policemen had handguns pointed at him as Golding spoke to the technician, her voice cold.

"Sergeant Bedford, what do you have in this bag and where were you going?"

"Uh, just tools, Major. I was going to double-check something on our F-83C EAGLE presently in refit in our hangar."

Golding obviously didn't believe him, as she then gave a curt order to one of the Air Force policemen.

"Go get that bag and bring it to me, Airman."

"Yes ma'am!"

With the policeman being a big, powerful man weighing nearly fifty kilos more than him, Zacharia Bedford didn't dare resist him and let him take his tool bag from him. The policeman then returned to Golding and gave her the tool bag, which she opened at once to inspect its content. Bedford felt cold sweat run down his forehead when the maintenance officer took out a two-liter bottle made of ceramic and stainless steel. Golding read quickly the sticker on the bottle, then threw a murderous look at her mechanic.

"Nitric acid?"

Not waiting for him to reply, she opened the bottle and cautiously sniffed its content, keeping her nose well away from the opened cap.

"It is indeed nitric acid and this bottle is nearly empty. Men, arrest this mechanic for suspected sabotage and attempted murder and put him in a cell. He is not to speak with anyone until AFOSI agents will have arrived to interrogate him."

As the two Air Force policemen went forward to arrest and handcuff Bedford, Tina Golding looked again with disgust at the bottle of nitric acid. Bedford's plan, which was becoming too apparent to her now, had apparently been to mix a quantity of nitric acid

into the hydraulic fluid circuits, and this during last night, after a particular F-93 had been pulled aside for use by General Dows. The strong acid would then have started damaging the fluid pipes, but slowly at first, until the hydraulic circuits would have been put under pressure at engine startup. Then, it would have been a question of mere minutes before some joint or seal would fail, eaten up by the nitric acid, causing a catastrophic leak. As for the failure of the ejection seat and of the canopy jettisoning mechanism, she already had a couple ideas about how that could have happened. She threw a last dark look at Bedford as he was being escorted out, then hurried out of the locker room with the incriminating bottle and tool bag: Brigadier General Hollingsworth had to know about this right away.

13:47 (Washington Time)

Detention and interrogation section, base security building Langley AFB, Virginia

AFOSI senior special agent Dan Karpinski went directly to Ingrid and to General Hollingsworth after leaving the small interrogation room where Zacharia Bedford was being kept under guard. Karpinski's face was somber as he spoke to Ingrid.

"The good news is that Bedford cracked and gave up names and details after being threatened with a possible death sentence for sabotage and attempted murder. The bad news concerns the names he gave us: there is one congressman in the lot, plus a lobbyist for the Chesapeake Naval Yards and a KKK Grand Wizard."

While Ingrid stayed quite composed on hearing that, Hollingsworth's eyes popped wide open.

"Holy shit! I can understand the part about the congressman and the KKK Grand Wizard but why a lobbyist for the Chesapeake Naval Yards?"

"Easy!" replied Ingrid. "I cost that shipyard a three-billion-dollar contract when I had a project for the building of a new aircraft carrier at their shipyard cancelled some two weeks ago and gave a new contract to another, more dependable shipyard better suited for the production of our new class of aircraft carrier."

Karpinski made a face at the figure quoted by Ingrid.

"Three billion dollars? That's a lot of reasons to have someone killed."

“Effectively, Special Agent Karpinski. Well, I will now return to the Pentagon and leave you free to continue your investigation in this affair. Please keep me informed if you find anything else worthy of mention.”

“I will, General.” promised the AFOSI field agent. Ingrid then turned to face Hollingsworth and shook his hand.

“Well, I must say that your F-93 was a dream to fly...until it ran out of hydraulic fluid. We now have a truly great fighter-bomber to replace our tired F-10s. On the other hand, I can’t wait for the first F-95 to come out of production, so that I can test fly it.”

“Just check the hydraulic fluid before you fly off in it, General.” replied Hollingsworth, a smirk on his face.

14:31 (Washington Time)

Monday, October 04, 1993 ‘C’

General Ingrid Dows’ office, The Pentagon

Arlington, Virginia

Advised by her secretary of the arrival of a trio of visitors, Ingrid walked around her work desk to greet the three men, two of them in Air Force uniforms and the third one wearing a civilian suit, as they entered her office. She returned the salutes from the two uniformed men before starting to shake hands with the trio.

“Welcome, gentlemen. I suppose that I owe your visit to the investigation on my crash in a sabotaged F-93?”

“You supposed right, General.” replied AFOSI Special Agent Daniel Karpinski while shaking Ingrid’s hand. “I brought with me Commander James Turner, of the Air Force JAG Office, and FBI Special Agent Charles Hurst. Commander Turner will be prosecuting those military members named as involved in this affair, while Special Agent Hurst is conducting a parallel investigation about the civilians involved. Our investigation is still ongoing but we already unearthed quite a lot of dirt, some of it quite shocking.”

“Then let’s discuss this while sitting in the sofas of my coffee corner. Would you like some coffee, tea or other refreshment? I can even offer some strong espresso coffee.”

Karpinski’s eyes popped open at the mention of ‘espresso coffee’.

“I will certainly accept a cup of espresso, General.”

"I will also take one, General." said Turner, with Hurst also asking for a cup of espresso. Ingrid took a few seconds to pass the word to her secretary to have a pot of espresso prepared and delivered to her office, then led her visitors to a low coffee table sitting in one corner of her office and surrounded by three well-padded sofas. Once they were all sitting, Ingrid looked at Karpinski, who was taking out a few files from his secure attaché case.

"So, what do you have up to now, Special Agent Karpinski?"

"Well, General, you already know that the Air Force mechanic who sabotaged your plane gave us names while interrogated. That allowed us to quickly advance on our investigation and to conduct a number of search warrants and hand subpoenas to some civilians implicated in this affair. By the way, you may be interested to learn that a detailed technical examination of your crashed F-93 confirmed that it had been sabotaged. Nitric acid had been poured inside the hydraulic fluid lines of your plane during the preceding night, while the ejection mechanism of your seat had been disconnected, something that also disconnected at the same time your canopy ejection system. Normally, you should have been unable to control your aircraft once all the hydraulic fluid had been drained out and you would have then crashed into the sea while still stuck inside your cockpit. In theory, it was a simple but sound plan to kill you, but the saboteur didn't count on how special you are, General. One of the engineers from North American who helped examine your crashed aircraft noticed that your control stick was bent from the force you exercised on it while flying your F-93 to a belly landing and calculated that such bending would have needed over 700 pounds of pull to happen. He apparently either forgot or didn't know about your special powers, so I told him to forget about that."

"Thanks!" said Ingrid, smiling. "I already have too many stories about me running around. Now, that mechanic most probably didn't decide by himself to sabotage my aircraft, I suppose?"

"You are right about that, General. That man was actually a covert member of the KKK and was paid ten thousand dollars in cash by another KKK member sent by their Grand Wizard. That other KKK member apparently was quite a loud mouth, as he bragged to our mechanic that a congressman and a shipyard executive also wanted you dead and funded that murder contract."

Ingrid shook her head in derision then.

“Well, KKK members are not exactly known to be deep thinkers and they do like to scream and shout around. So, do we know why that congressman and that shipyard executive wanted me dead?”

“We uncovered that when we conducted search and seizure of documents and reviewed pertinent telephone calls and bank transfers, General. That congressman, a Republican from Mississippi, hated you for being actively anti-racist and also because your cancellation of that aircraft carrier building contract with the Chesapeake Naval Yards made him lose money. That congressman, which I will leave unknown until he is formally charged, had an illegal scheme going with that shipyard, a scheme that also involved a top executive of that company as well as the top Navy liaison officer assigned to the Chesapeake Naval Yards. By the way, that Navy officer happens to be the younger brother of that congressman.”

Ingrid's expression hardened then, apart from showing disgust.

“Better and better! And what was exactly that illegal scheme those fine people profited from?”

“You are sitting tight on your sofa, General?” said Karpinski, playing some melodramatic effect in his disclosure. “Basically, the Chesapeake Naval Yards was using substandard black market parts falsely marked as being original items in the building and repair of Navy ships. The shipyard executive had some people buy at low cost those fake parts overseas, then had the Navy liaison officer certify them as the real deal, so the Navy would end up paying full price on what were essentially junk parts. Those people thus made a fortune, literally, with that traffic. The NCIS⁴ is now investigating in depth that part of our investigation. And you will never guess where some of those fake parts came from, General.”

Ingrid gave Karpinski a cautious look.

“I am nearly afraid to ask, Special Agent Karpinski.”

“Well, some of these parts came from Russia, via Finland, and ended up as part of our carriers built or repaired at the Chesapeake Naval Yards.”

It took everything for Ingrid not to explode on hearing that.

“WHAT? Fake Russian-made parts in our aircraft carriers? Does Admiral Klasser know about that?”

⁴ NCIS : Naval Criminal Investigation Service. The law enforcement branch of the U.S. Navy charged with fighting criminal activities, acts of terrorism and espionage within the U.S. Navy.

"We informed him, General, since those were his carriers. We then had to stop Admiral Klasser from making that Navy liaison officer walk the plank."

"I can't blame him for that, I must say. So, your investigation is doing well, with plenty of leads?"

"It is, General. We have found enough incriminating evidence to prosecute those responsible for the murder attempt against you and to dismantle that fake parts business at the Chesapeake Naval Yards."

"What about that Mississippi congressman?"

This time, it was FBI Special Agent Charles Hurst who answered her.

"Since he is a member of Congress, we have to proceed cautiously, so that he doesn't have a chance to cover his tracks, but he will soon fall...hard! That I can promise you, General."

"You reassure me, Special Agent Hurst. Is there anything else that I need to know right now, gentlemen?"

"No, General!" said the JAG officer. "Because of the sensitivity of this affair, we are keeping this investigation as discrete as possible for the time being. However, when the hammer will fall, it will reverberate all over Washington."

"I can't wait for that moment to arrive, Commander Turner. Well, here comes the espresso coffee we asked for...a bit late I must say. Will you make me the honor of drinking a cup with you before you leave?"

"Why not, General?" replied the Navy commander, a smile on his lips. "The coffee at our JAG cafeteria is positively awful."

That made Ingrid smile as she got up to serve her three visitors. Commander Turner closed his eyes in delight as he savored his first sip of espresso coffee.

"Aah! That's what I call a real cup of Joe⁵!"

As innocuous as those words would sound to most people, they actually made Ingrid think for a moment before she spoke softly.

"You know, Commander, a lot of things have changed since 1914, when the then Secretary of the Navy, a teetotaler and a prohibitionist on top of being a white

⁵ A cup of Joe: Popular expression in the U.S. Navy which appeared after the then Secretary of the Navy, Josephus Daniels, published on June 1 of 1914 his Navy General Order 99, which prohibited the presence of alcohol aboard U.S. warships. To this day, the U.S. Navy is still a 'dry' navy.

supremacist and a segregationist, banned alcohol from U.S. Navy warships. To have such a ban being still enforced today strikes me as an unnecessary anachronism. If you look at the navies of our allies, they nearly all allow alcohol aboard their ships and still manage the situation quite well. You just need a fair, realistic and reasonable policy about its use and consumption by our sailors while at sea.”

Struck by her words, Turner was left with his cup halfway to his lips as his mind went into gear.

“General, if you ever manage to make the Navy drop its alcohol prohibition at sea, then every American sailor will want to kiss you.”

“They all already want to kiss my butt, no matter the excuse, Commander.” replied Ingrid, making Karpinski and Hurst giggle. “Seriously, just go North a bit and look at how the Canadian Navy is handling alcohol at sea. Hell, they even have beer can-distributing machines on their destroyers!”

“They do?” asked Turner in disbelief.

“Yes! Yet, you don’t see their warships zigzag around port or at sea. You just have to have a sensible policy in place that would allow occasional, moderate drinking by sailors and would avoid cases of drunkenness while on duty. You know what? I think that I’m going to research this subject as a possible boost factor to the morale of our sailors.”

“Booze at sea... Wow! That would be something!” said dreamily Turner.

CHAPTER 5 – FORMING THE BAND



Nancy with her guitar.

12:32 (Washington Time)

Friday, October 08, 1993 'C'

Cafeteria of the Northern Virginia International High School

9431 Silver King Court, Fairfax, Virginia, U.S.A.

The teenage blonde hesitated for a moment before approaching the cafeteria table where four male students were finishing their lunch. Those students were known to be amateur musicians and they had posted ads on the school's news billboard asking for students who played the drum kit. Well, Erika Lang considered herself to be an excellent drum kit player and also a good guitar player and she really wanted to join a band.

"Uh, excuse me, guys. I saw your ad about you looking for a drum and percussion player and I would be interested to join your band."

The four teenage boys looked up at her, eyeing her athletic built, small chest and wide shoulders. The leader of the band, a tall but thin teenager with a bit of an arrogant expression, replied to Erika with what she thought was derision in his tone.

“Sorry, but we don’t take girls in our band, unless they just accompany us. Then, we choose real girls, not tomboys like you.”

The three other boys laughed at those last words, making anger flash into Erika: she had too often met this kind of boys, who treated girls like they were simply part of their harem. His allusion at her strong physique for a girl also insulted her. She was about to shoot back a remark when a hand from behind her patted her left shoulder.

“Forget those losers, friend. I have a better idea for you.”

The band leader was about to tell the newcomer to mind her own business when his words strangled in his throat as he recognized her. That was ‘Supergirl’ in person! His three band members also recognized Nancy Dows and clamed up as Erika followed Nancy away from their table.

Erika Lang, who had also recognized who Nancy was, felt a bit of trepidation as she followed her to another table where three other girls were sitting. The stories concerning Nancy Dows were so fantastic, yet were too numerous to be mere fabrications. She also had proven during her previous year at the International High School to be an extremely talented musician, singer and dancer, on top of being of haunting beauty. Erika remembered as well one of the girls sitting at the table, a very pretty Asian teenager with long silky black hair, who was known to be a top violin player. This indeed promised to be a good opportunity.

“Are you in need of a drum and percussion player?”

“We are indeed, friend. I am Nancy Dows and my friends here are my sister by adoption, Lucy, plus Sarah Weissman and Carmen Estrada. We had been tinkering with the idea of forming an all-girl amateur band but we were missing a drum and percussion partner to form a proper band. A word of caution, though: we play what I would call soft music, like classical music, soft pop, ballads and historical music. We are not into the loud, screaming stuff like Metallica, hard rock or, God forbid, what passes as singing, like Rap and Hip Hop. But please, sit down with us and let’s discuss for the few minutes before we have to return to our classes.”

They then both sat down, with Erika facing Nancy, Sarah and Lucy, with Carmen to her left. Erika quickly looked around at the four other girls before speaking.

“First, thank you for considering me for your band. My name is Erika Lang. I am best with a drum kit but I can also play well the guitar and have a fair voice. So, what instruments do you play, girls?”

"I play a number of ancient instruments, like the Persian qanon, the lute, the goblet drum, the flute and the bardic harp, but I have started playing a couple of years ago the electronic synthesizer and the electric guitar. " said Nancy. "I also sing and dance."

"I mostly play violin but I can also play the piano and the bass." answered in turn Lucy, followed by Sarah.

"I master the piano and also play the violin. I recently started to play the harpsichord and the synthesizer."

Carmen Estrada, a beautiful Latino girl, was last to answer.

"I play the guitar, the Andean flute and the maracas, but I concentrate mostly on singing and dancing."

"My! You play a really wide range of instruments. Your choice of music is also quite unconventional for a teenage group. These days, it seems that boy bands mostly know only two instruments: the guitar and the drum kit. I suppose that you play music and songs from known artists?"

"Uh, not really, Erika." replied Nancy. "My mother happens to possess an extensive musical library from the future that she inherited from her own adopted mother, who was Nancy Laplante, the famous time traveler. Up to now we play quite a few songs from that future repertoire but always give the credit due to those future artists when we perform their songs. We also play historical pieces from the past. However, I have written a couple of songs and musical pieces of my own and we are currently practicing and rehearsing them, with the idea of playing them at the incoming school show in December."

"That sounds fascinating!" exclaimed Erika. "I would be truly honored to join your band. By the way, what is the name of your band?"

There was a bit of an awkward silence then before Nancy answered her.

"Uh, we still haven't decided on a band name yet, as we had been playing rather informally up to now. We also wanted to wait until our band was complete, with a drum and percussion player added to our group."

"Then, let's choose a band name now!"

"Now, with only twelve minutes left before the classes resume?" objected Sarah Weissman. "We should take the proper time to think of a good name, no?"

"You are right, Sarah." said Nancy. "Let's wait until the end of the classes today and we will then reassemble to see what names popped up in our heads in the meantime. By the way, how do you get back home after classes, Erika?"

"I take the school bus number 25 to the Aurora Hills District.

"Great! I live in Aurora Hills myself, on South Grove Street. We could all go to my home after classes and have a good discussion there before I could bring you back home, Erika."

"That won't be necessary, Nancy." said a smiling Erika. My family's home is only two streets away from South Grove Street: I can easily walk back home after our reunion."

"Then, we have a deal. Let's see tonight if some good ideas for a band name will have come to us during this afternoon."

16:37 (Washington Time)

The Dows residence, 326 South Grove Street

Aurora Hills, Arlington

Erika detailed with interest Nancy's home, a two-story bungalow with garage, as their air bike was landing in the courtyard.

"It does look like a nice, fairly large home, Nancy. However, it is a bit of an old-style one."

"It was actually built in 1949 and my mother bought it in 1956, when she came back from her first series of overseas tours with my older sister Hien, who was then eight-years-old. It is a bit old now but it is in very good condition and is a comfortable house. I actually love living in it, especially since my mother had a good part of the attic rebuilt as a sound-proofed musical practice room. I guess that the neighbors were getting tired of my drum playing."

Both Erika and Lucy giggled at that before stepping out of the air bike. They then waited until Nancy had rolled her air bike inside its dedicated mini-garage and had locked its door before following her inside, using the back door of the house. Once inside, Nancy smiled to Erika.

"Would you like a quick tour of my house, Erika?"

"I would, Nancy. I am particularly anxious to see your attic's musical practice room."

“That will be last.” Promised Nancy before starting to lead Erika around the house, while Lucy went immediately up to her room to have a shower and change. Erika was particularly surprised and struck by the large number of ancient weapons and pieces of armor on display around the front entrance lobby area.

“Your mother seems to be a collector of old weapons, Nancy. That is rather rare in a woman. However, those pieces are quite fascinating. Are they authentic historical pieces or are they replicas?”

“They are authentic historical pieces, Erika. My mother and I have a high interest in history, thanks to our ability to remember our past incarnations. Her incarnations go back by 7,000 years, while my incarnations go back a mere 2,000 years.”

“A mere 2,000 years...” said softly Erika, taking some time to digest that. “And what do you remember exactly from your past incarnations?”

“Everything! That includes my past skills, the languages I spoke, the people I knew and met, my actions and what my past lives were like as either a man or a woman. However, those past souvenirs are only that: souvenirs. They don’t control my present personality.”

Erika’s ears caught on the ‘man or a woman’ part and she gave a sharp look at Nancy.

“You were a man during one of your past incarnations?”

“Oh, I was a man during eleven of my past twenty incarnations, Erika. My mother also was a man during about half of her past incarnations. If you could remember your own past incarnations, then you would probably find out that you also had been a man about half of the time. Your past lives would as well vary in terms of how high or low you were in the social scale of your time and would certainly vary widely in terms of your past skills and occupations. I myself owe much of my present musical abilities to my past lives, in which I was among other things an Iranian professional musician from the 19th Century, a well-educated Polish aristocratic woman from the 13th Century and a 1st Century Indian dancing girl. However, I did learn a lot more about music in recent years and have learned to appreciate and play new, modern instruments, like the electric guitar and the synthesizer.”

“But...if you remember your past lives as a man, you then remember the women you loved, no?” asked hesitantly Erika. Nancy smiled at her question and took a couple of steps, getting very close to her.

"I effectively do, Erika. I hope that this will not make you uncomfortable when close to me? If so, tell me and I will keep my distances."

Erika, who had felt attraction towards Nancy from the start, shook her head as a wave of emotions went over her.

"That doesn't disturb me at all, Nancy, on the contrary."

"Good! We will now go visit the upper floor, where we have three bedrooms, two bathrooms and a private study used by my mother. After that, we will visit the attic, where my musical practice room is."

"Alright! Lead the way."

Climbing the main staircase to the upper floor, Nancy showed to Erika her own bedroom and those of Lucy and Leo, but didn't open the door of Ingrid's bedroom.

"We will pass on visiting my mother's bedroom, bathroom and private study: without her prior consent, that would not be appropriate. We will now go to the attic."

Going to a set of wooden stairs at the end of the central hallway, Nancy climbed it and pushed open a floor trap covering it before stepping into a vast attic space formed by the inclined roof of the house and switching on a set of overhead lights. Also stepping into the attic, Erika saw that the space, contrary to many attics she had seen before, was fully finished and clean, with internal walls and ceiling panels covering the thermal insulation of the roof. The part of the attic she was in now had two dormer windows facing the street outside and had been furnished with six beds, night tables and chests of drawers, while a thick carpet covered the floor. Nancy swept one arm around as she spoke.

"This installation dates back from the time when my older sister Hien was still a small kid. Ingrid renovated this space for her to use for slumber parties and as an internal playing ground in Winter. More recently, my mother uses it to accommodate extra temporary guests, as all the bedrooms of the upper floor are now used by her, me, Leo and Lucy."

Erika grinned while looking around the vast, clean space.

"This place is great! I wish I had that kind of place at home when I was young. Hell, I wish I had that even today!"

"Wait till you see the other half of the attic space, Erika." replied Nancy before leading her to a door at one end. Opening it and entering, she then invited Erika to follow her in. The latter had her jaw drop as she looked around, embracing the details of

the room she was now in. The double-sloped roof provided over three meters of free height clearance along the house's centerline, while there still was a clearance of more than one meter along the side walls. Those side walls and both end walls, which looked quite thick, were covered with acoustic tiles and there were even acoustic insulation panels mounted on hinges that could cover the openings of the two dormer windows of this part of the attic. Even the floor was covered by a thick plastic foam mat that absorbed sounds. Positioned around the room in a 'U'-shaped formation were various musical instruments and chairs, including a complete drum kit set, while various sound amplification and speaker systems were stored in one of the far corners.

"This...this place is fantastic!" exclaimed Erika while slowing walking towards the drum kit set, where she sat down behind the drums and cymbals. She then looked back at Nancy, envy visible on her face.

"You lucky you! This would be a dream place for any amateur musician. Does your band practice often here?"

Nancy smiled as she both answered and corrected Erika.

"Yes, OUR band often assembles here to practice together. Since we don't use sound amplification when playing here and with the thick sound insulation of the room, we are able to practice at any time without disturbing others, like my mother and our neighbors. That is even truer when I practice with my synthesizer, as I can then plug in a headset and play without any sound coming out except in my headset. Now, about our band: do you have an idea for a band name?"

"I mentally went through quite a few today until I selected one: 'The Capital Girls'."

"Hum, not bad but a bit dry: it sounds like we are a group of Washington female lobbyists."

"And you, Nancy, what do you propose as a band name?"

"I also went through quite a few possibilities but I have settled on 'The DC Five'. It would describe us well as a group of five musicians from Washington."

"The DC Five... That sounds fine with me, Nancy: it isn't strange, pretentious or vulgar the way many boys' bands are named. It is also an easy name to remember and pronounce. Let's see what the others have to propose once they are all here."

"Agreed! If you want to practice a bit while we wait for them, feel free to do so. I will accompany you on the synthesizer."

They actually had a good ten minutes available to practice together before Lucy, Sarah and Carmen showed up in the practice room, accompanied by a curious Leonardo.

"Aah, you're here! Come in as well, brother: we will need a second opinion after we choose a band name between the five of us girls."

"Uh, okay!"

Nancy then looked at Lucy, who had changed into a relaxed internal outfit after her shower.

"What are you proposing as a band name, Lucy?"

"I propose 'The Minstrel Girls', Nancy."

"Okay! And you, Sarah and Carmen?"

"How about 'The Sunshine Girls'?" said Sarah, with Carmen following up after her.

"I would say 'The Five Chicks Band'. What about you, Nancy?"

"I settled on 'The DC Five'."

"And I chose 'The Capital Girls'." added Erika. The five of them then stayed silent for a moment, mentally debating the choice of names they were facing. A short discussion followed, with one name finally winning over the others. Nancy then grinned to Leonardo.

"Well, Leo, what do you think of our choice as a band name?"

"Well, 'The DC Five' sounds fine with me, Nancy. For one thing, it doesn't discriminate your group right away as a female band. It also sounds good to the ear and is not pretentious. I like it!"

Nancy, pleased, then looked around her, smiling at her band members.

"Excellent! We are thus from now on 'The DC Five'. Give me five, girls!"

All five teenage girls then slapped their hands together in a 'high five', joined in by Leonardo.

CHAPTER 6 – RESPECT IS A TWO-WAY STREET



U.S. Navy ship quarters: Enlisted Men's berths (left)/ Officer's cabin (right)/ Captain's cabin (lower)



09:10 (Washington Time)

Thursday, November 04, 1993 'C'

Office of the Commander of the United States Combined Forces

The Pentagon, Arlington, Virginia

The moment that he entered Ingrid Dows' office with five of his senior officers and saw what was on the low coffee table in one corner, a discouraged thought came to Admiral Normand Klasser's mind.

'Oh no! More models, again?'

He also noticed at the same time that both the Secretary of Defense and the Under-Secretary for the Navy were present in the office. This was thus serious business. Ingrid then smiled to the newcomers and showed them the sofas set around the low table and its scale models.

“Good morning, gentlemen! Please have a seat around this table.”

All eight men then sat with Ingrid in the three large sofas surrounding the low coffee table. The first to speak then was John McCain.

“First off, gentlemen, know that this is a project I and Under-Secretary Brubaker have previously discussed with General Dows and have fully approved. The subject here is crew accommodations standards aboard our warships. While I fully understand that modifying the accommodations arrangements aboard our existing warships will often be next to impossible due to the lack of space in them, I intend to see these new standards taken in consideration in the design of all of our future warships. The new standards will in fact become the minimum acceptable standards and will not be optional.”

Klasser, like his five officers, then looked at the six scale models set on the low table. They were actually not ship models but rather looked like architectural models of various rooms set by themselves, complete with miniature sofas, beds, lockers and tables. Ingrid Dows took over from McCain at that point.

“What you see on the table, gentlemen, are scale models of various concept designs for warship accommodations meant respectively for enlisted ranks, officers and ship captains. There is also a scale model for submarine accommodations and one for carrier accommodations. You may find those concepts rather posh and expansive, but they are in my mind absolute minimums to be respected in terms of the furniture and facilities to be available, as well as in terms of minimum deck surface they occupy. They have also been designed with compactness in mind and with the most efficient use of the space provided. This project has one main directing purpose to it: to improve the living conditions at sea of our sailors and thus improve both their morale and their combat efficiency. A happy crew is a better crew in my opinion and our men and women who serve our country at sea deserve to be better treated than the way they are now, gentlemen. One vital factor that is missing presently for our enlisted sailors is privacy, or rather the complete lack of it, aboard our warships. Right now, the Navy standard for enlisted ranks is triple-stacked bunk beds with personal effects and spare uniforms stored in a thin locker under each mattress. The average deck space per sailor in

enlisted ranks sleeping quarters, including circulation spaces, is presently around ten square feet, taking into account the fact that they are stacked three-high, with barely enough free height between beds to be able to turn around while sleeping...and this is if you are not too wide of shoulders. In terms of privacy, it is presently a fat zero. Just for the fun of it, I researched how much space past sailors had on old sail ships and found that their space allotment was actually bigger than today, since they didn't stack their hammocks. Meanwhile, officers' accommodations have become larger and larger with the years. This situation is simply unacceptable when we are approaching the start of a new millennium."

One vice admiral then objected while pointing at the model showing the enlisted quarters on a medium-sized warship.

"But, General, if I can go by this model here, you are planning for each sailor to have his own private cabin: that's downright extravagant!"

"Extravagant, Admiral Jamieson?" shot back Ingrid. "When that cabin totals no more than forty square feet of deck space and contains only one bunk bed, one small desk and a locker, plus barely enough room to move around? Yes, I want each of our sailors to have his or her own cabin, so that they could finally enjoy a minimum of privacy when not on duty. If you want to see some really extravagant accommodations, go visit some captain's suites on a few of our destroyers and cruisers. I understand that those captains have heavy responsibilities and need comfortable accommodations but what I saw was plainly too much when compared to the conditions their sailors have to live in. I could also say a few things about the way some of our captains treat their crews but that discussion will be for another day. A big problem with our present warship designs is that the naval architects throw in every weapons, sensors and propulsion systems they can into their designs, then add the crew quarters as an afterthought in whatever space is left. As I said before, the fact that the sailors aboard many of our nuclear submarines still have to 'hot-bunk' because there are less bunks than there are crewmembers is simply unacceptable and has to stop, period!"

"General, don't you have more important things to do than to worry about the amount of square feet of deck space occupied by each of our sailors?" replied the vice admiral, earning an immediate and stinging rebuke from John McCain.

"CHANGE YOUR ATTITUDE NOW, VICE ADMIRAL JAMIESON, OR LEAVE AND GO EMPTY YOUR DESK! GENERAL DOWS HAS BEEN WORKING LONG HOURS ON MANY THINGS, INCLUDING REWRITING OUR WAR PLANS AND

STRATEGIC DIRECTIVES. CREW MORALE IS AN ESSENTIAL FACTOR IN COMBAT AND SHE IS FULLY JUSTIFIED IN BEING PREOCCUPIED BY IT. DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME, VICE ADMIRAL JAMIESON?"

"Uh, yes, Mister Secretary." could only say Jamieson, realizing that he was just one step away from being dismissed from his command.

"Good! Now remember this, gentlemen: this project has my full approval and our naval architects will be directed to incorporate those new habitability standards from the start in our future ships, and this starting today. Also, be prepared to receive in the next few weeks new directives from Under-Secretary Brubaker concerning the way our ship captains and senior officers treat their crews. The main point about that will be that respect is a two-way street. Our naval officers will have to treat their subalterns correctly and with respect while ensuring adequate discipline aboard their ships. The time of the screamers and martinets on our warships will soon be over, gentlemen."

Ingrid then took over from McCain, speaking to the Navy men.

"I will send you a finalized list of the new habitability standards in the next few days. While those new standards will apply to all our future warships, the ships we presently have in service should strive to improve as much as possible their crew facilities within their space capacity. Thank you for coming, gentlemen."

On that, Klasser and his officers got up and walked out of Ingrid's office while keeping a stiff upper lip. However, once in the main hallway and some distance from Ingrid's office, Vice Admiral Jamieson growled in a low voice at Klasser while walking alongside him.

"Can't we do something to rein in that Dows, Admiral? She is dipping her nose in matters she knows little about and which are the traditional purview of the Navy."

"I know, but the Secretary of Defense is firmly on her side and we can't simply ignore his directives. After all, he is an experienced ex-naval aviator and he knows how things are on our warships. To be perfectly fair to Dows, she does have a point about the poor living conditions of our sailors when at sea. As long as those new standards don't have negative repercussions on the fighting abilities of our ships, then I don't see a valid reason not to go along with them."

"But, Admiral..." started to say Jamieson. Klasser then stopped cold and faced him while pointing an index at him.

“Listen, Jamieson! We have our orders and we will follow them, end of discussion! If I catch you in trying to impede the application of those new directives, then it will be me who will relieve you of command, not Dows or McCain.”

Klasser then resumed his walking, leaving behind him a baffled and furious Jamieson.

CHAPTER 7 – GETTING NOTICED



Nancy preparing to give a show at her school.

19:06 (Washington Time)

Friday, December 17, 1993 'C'

Auditorium of the Northern Virginia International High School

Fairfax, Virginia

"Aah, here they are!" said Ingrid in a low voice to Greg and Carolyn Loomis, who were seated next to her and Leonardo in the auditorium of the Northern Virginia International High School. She had invited the old couple, who had been good neighbors for decades, to come watch with her and Leonardo the pre-holiday show given by the students of the school. There were a number of other parents of students and friends also sitting in the small auditorium. Now, the time she had been waiting for had come, with Nancy and her four band members taking place on stage while the school director took place behind one of the microphones.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to the evening portion of our school's talent show. For the first act of our evening, we have a talented new musical band ready to play and sing an unusual repertoire that I am sure will fascinate you. Please welcome The DC Five!"

Applauds rose as the director left the stage, allowing Nancy, dressed in an evening gown, to step up to the microphone as her four companions took place at their respective instruments.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen! My name is Nancy Dows and the members of our band are respectively, from left to right, Sarah Weissman, Lucy Dows, Carmen Estrada and Erika Lange. Our group specializes in playing historical music as well as songs which were imported from the future in 1940 by Nancy Laplante, who happens to be my grandmother by adoption. Before playing a song from the future, we will give proper tributes to the original singer or group who had been recorded playing that song in the future. We will start our show by playing one of the most popular songs of Nancy Laplante’s time, titled ‘My heart will go on’ and sung by Canadian singer Céline Dion.”

Silence fell for a moment in the auditorium as Nancy went to sit behind a harp. Then, Carmen Estrada started the piece by playing a few notes from a flute, following which Nancy started singing softly. Carolyn Loomis covered her mouth after a few seconds of singing, utterly impressed by the quality of Nancy’s voice. She however refrained from speaking then and continued listening like the other spectators, enthralled by the song. Then, Lucy Dows joined in with her violin, while Sarah Weissman started playing from a synthesizer, with Erika Lang playing her drums as well a bit later. Nancy progressively raised the volume of her voice as the song went, with the emotions expressed in it making blood rush to Carolyn Loomis’ head.

“My God, what a voice she has!” she whispered to her husband Greg, who could only nod in agreement.

“Her voice is golden indeed. Her band members are also very good.”

A few minutes later, the song ended in enthusiastic applause from the audience, including from Ingrid, who could not be prouder than now. Getting up from her chair and grabbing an electric guitar, Nancy stepped behind the central microphone to announce her next song.

“Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much. We will now play a song from another diva from the future, Sarah Brightman, titled ‘Once in a lifetime’.” Nancy then started that song by playing from her guitar before starting to sing in a melodious voice, with Carmen Estrada playing a flute and with Sarah, Lucy and Erika respectively accompanying them on the piano, the violin and the drum kit. The song

ended up being as well received as the first one and drew mass applauses from the parents and guests present, who had not expected such a high quality of music from an amateur school band. Nancy again spoke in her microphone as the applauses calmed down.

“Thank you! Thank you! Our next piece is a song of medieval inspiration made by the German group FAUN and titled ‘Rosenrot’.”

Nancy and Erika then surprised the audience by actually starting to sing in German. While the song started on soft, slow notes, it then quickly picked up in rhythm, with guitar, drums, violin, flute and synthesizer jumping in. While Erika Lang backed up Nancy with the singing in German, it was quickly evident who was the star singer. More than one spectator rocked on their chair during the song, fired up by the music’s rhythm. Again, warm applauses and quite a few shouted compliments greeted the end of that song. Nancy and her companions bowed to the applauses, with Nancy then speaking in her microphone.

“Thank you, ladies and gentlemen. We will now have a short ten minutes pause, time for us to change costumes before playing our fourth song of the evening.

As Nancy’s band left the stage, Ingrid got up from her chair and smiled to the Loomis.

“So, what do you think, my friends?”

“We’re blown away!” replied Greg Loomis. “Your daughter Nancy has an incredible voice, while her band plays very well. Those songs from the future are also beautiful. I am impatient to hear what they will play next. Do you know which song it will be, Ingrid?”

“Nope! Nancy studiously refused to answer my questions about tonight’s show. She said that she wanted to surprise me.”

“Well, it is certainly a nice surprise up to now. Uh, you will have to excuse me for a minute, time to go take my precautions at the washrooms. I am afraid that my old bladder is not as controlled as when I was young.”

“I think that I will go too.” added Carolyn, who then walked out of the auditorium with her husband. Wanting to walk a bit herself, Ingrid got out of her row of seats and walked slowly up and down the steps of the auditorium’s aisle. That was when a man in his mid-forties wearing a good quality suit approached her, a smile on his lips.

“Hello, miss! You are the mother of Nancy Dows, right?”

"I am! Ingrid Dows, at your service! What may I do for you, sir?"

The man answered at the same time that he extracted a calling card from a pocket of his vest and offered it to Ingrid.

"My name is Joseph Polisi, Doctor of Musical Arts and the present president of the Juilliard School, a private performing arts conservatory in New York City. Two of your daughter's music teachers contacted me recently to encourage me into coming to watch your daughter's performance and that of her band tonight and I must say that I am very impressed up to date."

Ingrid shook hands with Polisi while smiling back to him and taking his calling card, understanding that this could be important for Nancy.

"Thank you, Mister Polisi. I have to say that I am very proud of my daughter and of her band tonight."

"And you have plenty of reasons to be proud, Misses Dows. Or should I call you 'General Dows'?"

"Misses Dows will do, Mister Polisi. And what can I do for you tonight?"

"Well, I know that your daughter and her band members are still studying in tenth grade this year and will have another two years of high school after that, but such a talented group would certainly deserve to get a degree in music once they have their high school diploma. The Juilliard School is without bragging one of the best music conservatories in the country and its admission selection criteria are quite demanding, with an acceptance rate of only eight percent. What I have seen up to now tonight however convinced me that your daughter and her band members all would deserve to be admitted to the Juilliard School to get a degree in music there, once they complete high school."

Ingrid nodded slowly her head at that: this was indeed an important moment.

"I am honored and happy to hear that, Mister Polisi. However, while I am Nancy's mother and she is still a minor, thus would need my approval and support to join a college, I think that it would be best if the two of us would meet with Nancy and her band member at the end of this show, so that you could discuss this matter directly with them. My Nancy may still be young, but she is very mature for her age, thanks to her ability to remember her past incarnations."

"I read a few articles about your daughter's fantastic abilities and I believe you on this. Meeting with her and her band members after the show sounds like a very good idea, Misses Dows."

“Then give me a second to warn Nancy to tell her band members to stay on after the show.”

Polisi, who then expected to see Ingrid walk away towards the stage and its back area, was surprised to see Ingrid simply close her eyes and apparently concentrate for a few seconds. Ingrid smiled again to him once she opened her eyes again.

“I just communicated telepathically with Nancy and passed your offer of meeting with her and her band. She agreed to it and will make her friends stay after the show.”

Polisi, who had been struck by her impossible youth but knew about her powers, shook his head in amusement.

“Well, if your daughter ever joins my conservatory, she will certainly be the first person with supernatural powers to do so. However, be assured that she will be treated exactly the same way as all the other students of my school.”

“And that’s the way I want it, Mister Polisi.” replied Ingrid, pleased. “Well, the show should resume in a minute or so. Why don’t you change seats and come sit next to me for the rest of the show?”

“I would be delighted by that, Misses Dows.”

Ingrid then led Polisi back into her row of seats and offered him the seat to her left before sitting herself. The Loomis then came back from their washroom break, at which time Ingrid quickly presented them to Polisi. They just had time to complete their presentations before Nancy and her band returned on the stage. Ingrid grinned on seeing the new attire worn by Nancy, which was limited to a very tight pair of low waist jean trousers and a bikini top that let most of her torso and belly exposed.

“I think that I know which song she will play next. You may find it quite a hot one, Mister Polisi.”

“If you say so, Misses Dows.” replied Polisi, who was eyeing with delight Nancy’s well-curved and sexy body. Carmen Estrada, Erika Lang and Lucy were dressed in equally sexy attires, while Sarah Weissman, a much more conservative girl, had switched to a conventional pleated skirt with short-sleeved blouse. Not picking up any of her musical instruments, Nancy went to the central microphone and took it off its support and into her hands as her band members took their positions in the background.

“Welcome back to our show, ladies and gentlemen. Our next song will be a bit spicier and is titled ‘Whenever, wherever’, originally sung by a Colombian singer named Shakira. On top of being a great singer and dancer, Shakira was also well known for her belly dancing. Music, please!”

With Carmen Estrada and Erika Lang starting to play the guitar and drum kit, Nancy started dancing and singing, moving slowly at first. However, the rhythm of her dance and her hip swinging accelerated quite quickly as Carmen switched to the Andean flute and Sarah and Lucy started playing their respective synthesizers, tuned to different octaves. Many in the audience, including Polisi and the Loomis, started bobbing their heads, fired up by the singing, dancing and music playing. Thunderous applause and a standing ovation greeted the end of that song, with Nancy and her band members bowing deeply to the spectators. Nancy then replaced her microphone on its fixed stand and spoke up, happiness showing on her face.

“Thank you, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you very much! For our last song tonight, we will play a song titled ‘Dancing queen’, made by one of the most popular pop bands of Nancy Laplante’s era: ABBA.”

“My God!” said softly Joseph Polisi to Ingrid. “I would love to have a chance to listen to this repertoire of songs from the future. Up to now, it is proving to be truly fantastic music.”

“That could be arranged, Mister Polisi.” replied Ingrid while smiling to herself. The band then started playing, cutting her off.

The end of that last song also brought applause and cheers from the audience, with Nancy’s band bowing to the spectators before leaving the stage. That was when Ingrid led both Polisi and the Loomis towards the backstage lodges, where they found the five girls of the band in the process of packing up their instruments. Not surprisingly, the parents of Carmen Estrada, Erika Lang and Sarah Weissman also showed up backstage, intent on congratulating their daughters. Ingrid happily hugged Nancy and Lucy and then let time for the other girls to hug their parents before she asked for their attention.

“Could I have your attention, all of you? To my left is Mister Joseph Polisi, Doctor of Musical Arts and President of the Juilliard School conservatory in New York. He came to me to tell me how much he liked your performance tonight and would consider all of you to be well qualified to be admitted to his conservatory at the end of your high school years. I will however let him speak to you now. Mister Polisi?”

“Thank you, Misses Dows. Girls, you were truly fantastic tonight and not only because of your choice of music but because of your obvious talent and mastery of your instruments and singing. The Juilliard School is a private conservatory dedicated to

teaching the various performing arts, with diplomas at the bachelor, master's and doctor's degree awarded by my school. The admission to my school is very selective, with only eight percent of applicants accepted to it, but what I saw and heard tonight was truly worthy of my school's standards. While you still have to complete your high school studies, know that all of you will be most welcome to enroll at Juilliard then. I will now distribute calling cards, so that you can contact me at the end of your high school studies. I will then be most happy to register you as students of my conservatory."

Both the girls and their parents eagerly took the cards distributed by Polisi, with the latter hugging in turn all five girls, with Nancy being the last. He then stared into her eyes while holding both of her hands and whispering to her.

"Miss, you have the potential to become a World-class artist, truly, both as a singer, musician and dancer. I can't wait to have you and your friends as students of my conservatory."

"I am certainly going to consider very seriously your offer, Mister Polisi. My band members and I will most probably meet again with you in two in a half year."

"And I can hardly wait for that moment, miss."

CHAPTER 8 – FACING CONGRESS



U.S. Congressional hearing session

15:29 (Washington Time)

Monday, August 23, 1995 ‘C’

Aircraft carrier U.S.S. NEPTUNE (under construction)

Covered Drydock Number One, Roanoke Shipyards

Virginia, U.S.A.

President Ross Perot opened wide his eyes when he was able to see the true size of the aircraft carrier’s aircraft hangar from his position in the narrow, elevated observation gallery, which was situated halfway down the 410-meter-long hangar.

“My god! This hangar is truly huge! Is this the norm in our other carriers?”

“Hardly, Mister President.” replied Michael Ferranti, who was guiding Perot, Admiral Klasser and Ingrid Dows around the nearly completed U.S.S. NEPTUNE. “The aircraft hangar of the U.S.S. NEPTUNE actually has three times the deck surface of the hangar in our NIMITZ-Class carriers. It can comfortably shelter up to sixty aircraft, along with a wide centerline circulation lane that facilitates the moving of aircraft around the hangar. In case of severe weather, an additional twenty aircraft or more can be lowered

from the flight deck and sheltered in this hangar, to avoid having them damaged by large waves and hurricane-strength winds. In contrast, our NIMITZ-Class carriers have to keep the majority of its aircraft on the flight deck, due to their constricted hangars. That in turn makes their aircraft highly vulnerable to enemy fire of any kind and to strong storms. Despite the huge size of its hangar and of its external dimensions, the U.S.S. NEPTUNE displaces less tonnage than a NIMITZ-Class carrier, thanks to its modified SWATH hull, which is much leaner than that of the NIMITZ. The other important difference with our previous classes of carriers is its very heavy and powerful armament, which allows the NEPTUNE to cruise around without the need for an escort flotilla. It can also augment the offensive power provided by its embarked aircraft with its missile battery, which uses a new model of our vertical launch system, or VLS. If you would like, Mister President, we could go have a look at the ship's VLS battery once we are back on top of the flight deck."

"I am certainly interested in looking at it, Mister Ferranti. What's next?"

"General Dows proposed earlier to me to show you the various crew facilities, which she pushed hard to be improved compared to the present standards, especially when they apply to enlisted sailors. Know that every member of the crew and every embarked marine has an individual cabin on this ship."

That attracted an incredulous look from Ross Perot.

"Everyone has its own cabin?"

"Yes, Mister President, although the enlisted sailors' cabins on the NEPTUNE are quite tight and cover a deck surface of only fifty square feet. Petty officers' cabins cover a surface of 64 square feet, while junior officers' cabins have a deck surface of ninety square feet. In order to use to the maximum those limited cabin surfaces, General Dows sponsored a contest between naval architecture students at Georgetown University to see what kind of designs they could produce within those surface limitations. I must say that I was personally impressed by some of the proposals we got back."

"Very well: let's go visit a sailor's cabin!"

Leaving the observation gallery and going to the nearest set of elevator cabins along the port side of the ship, the group went down by four levels and stepped into a long and fairly narrow passageway running along the outer side of the port strut linking the main, box-like superstructure of the ship with its port cylindrical underwater hull.

Ferranti then turned right along the passageway and walked for about ten paces before stopping and opening a sliding door on the inner side.

"This cabin is one of the few sailor's cabins which have been completed and furnished to date, Mister President. If you may step inside..."

A curious Perot did so and found himself inside a tiny cabin measuring two meters in width and 2.5 meters in depth. The cabin was nearly filled with a bunk bed with integrated drawers under it, a small work desk with bookshelf and a steel locker. A couple of wall hooks were also fixed to one wall, while a small flat screen television set was mounted on shock-absorbing wall brackets facing the bed. Turning slowly around while looking at the inside of the cabin, Perot nodded his head in appreciation.

"Not bad! This may look like a tight space but I bet that the previous sailors' accommodations were much tighter than this."

"Oh, they definitely are, Mister President." replied Admiral Klasser. Right now, the standard for enlisted sailors' accommodations is a bunk piled three-high, with the only place to keep a sailor's spare uniforms and personal effects being a shallow bin situated under the bunk. I was skeptical about what I considered at first to be an outrageous waste of precious space, but I must say now that the very special shape and design of this ship provided plenty of space for those new accommodation standards. Our serving Navy men and women will fight to be assigned to this ship."

"Well, anything that can reinforce the morale of our Navy personnel will get my approval, Admiral. Mister Ferranti, I have only one question concerning this cabin design: why the television screen? What will our sailors be able to watch on it?"

"They will be able to watch the same main national television channels that every American can watch, including one channel dedicated to sports events. The Navy recently signed a contract with the country's four main television channels, to be able to retransmit their programming to our ships at sea via satellite links. This is another measure meant to improve service conditions at sea for our men and women."

"An excellent idea, I must say." said Perot, truly pleased. "How about we go see those vertical launch systems now, Mister Ferranti?"

"With pleasure, Mister President! Please follow me!"

Going back to the nearest bank of elevators, the group went up to the upper deck, where the elevator cages ended, then climbed a steel staircase that gave access to the huge expanse of the NEPTUNE's flight deck. There, Ferranti flagged one of the

electric carts used by the workers busy putting the finishing touches on the aircraft carrier, so that President Perot would not have to walk the 290 meters between their spot on the deck and the VLS battery, situated close to the bow. Perot shook his head in wonderment as the cart sped towards the distant bow.

"I can't believe how vast this new carrier is, Mister Ferranti. Can you remind me of its length and width?"

"I certainly can, Mister President. The NEPTUNE's flight deck has a length of 1,452 feet, or 440 meters on its runway side, and a width of 297 feet, or ninety meters, including its deck leading edge extensions, which are made of wood and fiberglass rather than steel. Those edge extensions are meant to deflect away any giant waves that could crash against the sides of the ship and thus become a threat to the aircraft parked on the flight deck. Furthermore, they were built of wood and fiberglass in order to make them non-reflective to radar and thus help the carrier stay stealthy."

"And how stealthy is this carrier, Mister Ferranti?"

"We conducted tests with small scale models inside a radar echo chamber and we believe that the U.S.S. NEPTUNE will basically have the radar signature of a surfaced submarine, or that of a small fishing boat, at the most. That is mainly due to the sloped sides of the hull and of its superstructures. The NEPTUNE will also be a very quiet ship acoustically-wise, thanks to having its nuclear reactors and turbo-generators mounted on elastic cradles situated high above the waterline, just under the hangar deck. That way, the carrier will generate the minimum of noise through the water, making it more difficult to be located via sonar. It will also be able to operate in electronic silence conditions, using passive infra-red, electronic warfare passive sensors and passive sonar sensors to keep a silent watch around the ship."

Ross Perot couldn't help nod his head then, thoroughly impressed.

"Decidedly, this ship seems to be a true revolution in terms of warship design."

"And it was meant to be so, Mister President." added Ingrid, sitting with Admiral Klasser and Secretary of Defense John McCain in the back of the cart. "I firmly believe that it was high time that the American forces adopted new, more modern and efficient equipment and concepts."

"Like your proposed family of new combat armored vehicles? Many Army generals screamed murder when you decreed that the time of heavy tanks was gone."

"Unfortunately, too many of those generals possess little true vision and refuse to look at newer weapons concepts, Mister President. With the weight of tanks now

generally up to and even past fifty tons, our armored units were becoming too heavy to be quickly moved strategically around the World, while our main battle tanks can't roll over many bridges and highway overpasses in Europe and the United States without collapsing or damaging them. Added to that is the fact that, as thick as their armor is, it still can be penetrated and defeated by many of the simple and cheap to manufacture models of portable anti-tank weapons flooding the World military markets these days. What is the point of paying over a million dollars for a tank that can't fit inside most of our transport aircraft, can't roll over half of the bridges and highway overpasses and can be killed by a 2,000-dollar man-portable antitank weapon?"

"Please excuse my ignorance on the subject of armored vehicles, General Dows," said Admiral Klasser, "but what was the solution you proposed to this problem?"

"Smaller and lighter armored combat vehicles armed with missiles and rockets rather than with large caliber guns." answered at once Ingrid. "For that purpose, I relied on our present aircraft rocket technology, which is quite advanced and gave us rockets with velocities approaching those of the fastest tank gun rounds used presently. We further saved both weight and complication by using multiple-tube rocket launchers, something that eliminates the need for a human loader and saves many tons in weight. I further proposed a model of rocket launcher that could also accommodate guided missiles and which popped up from inside an armored box for a second or so just before firing. The WOLVERINE, the concept combat vehicle presently being designed, will be smaller than our present main battle tanks, much lighter at less than 25 tons and will be both heavily armed and well armored, with highly-sloped armored sides and front to resist portable anti-tank weapons and light cannon fire."

"Still," said John McCain, "you now have an army of defense contractors' lobbyists and politicians clamoring for your head because of the various contract cancellations and redirected weapons procurement your new projects caused, Ingrid." Ingrid couldn't help make a bitter smirk at those words.

"I don't care about those lobbyists and politicians, John. What I care is about making our armed forces better, more powerful and more efficient. Improving the service conditions and morale of our military members is part of the solution as well."

"And I wholeheartedly agree with your innovations, Ingrid. Still, be careful about those lobbyists and politicians: they well could try to stab you in the back one day."

“They already tried to have me assassinated, John.” replied Ingrid, getting a bit agitated. “What the hell am I supposed to do? Capitulate and let outdated thinking and corrupt practices hurt our armed forces?”

“You won’t need to do that, Ingrid.” said Ross Perot, his expression most sober. “If politicians try to smear you, I will have your back.”

“Thank you, Mister President.” replied Ingrid, feeling some relief at those words.

The cart soon stopped next to a group of large steel hatches which were flush with the portion of the flight deck they were in. With the group stepping out of the cart, Michael Ferranti went to a small panel hidden on the deck and opened it, revealing a control box with a number of buttons and light indicators.

“This control box is meant to be used by technicians when they want to inspect the hatches of the ship’s VLS cells. I am going to open the armored hatch over one of the eighteen Mark 95 VLS modules fitted to the NEPTUNE. Each of those modules incorporate eight launch cells, making for a total of 144 launch cells. Each of those cells, with an internal cross-section of four feet and four inches and a depth of thirty feet, can accommodate either one heavy missile or four smaller, medium-range missiles of various types contained in a quad pack arrangement in their own launch tubes.”

Ross Perot’s mouth opened when he saw a thick steel plate pivot to the vertical, unmasking a double row of launch cell silos, which were presently empty.

“Look at the thickness of that cover hatch! It looks to be heavily armored.”

“It effectively is an armored hatch, Mister President.” said Ferranti. “All the VLS modules, gun ammunition handling rooms and ammunition magazines of the NEPTUNE are heavily armored and sunk well within the ship’s hull in order to give them maximum protection. The armor around and over our VLS modules is actually made of eight inches of armor steel. Add to that the multiple hull internal walls a missile, shell or bomb would have to pierce through before reaching those modules and you have something that could resist about anything short of a nuclear weapon or battleship shell. Also, the SWATH design of the NEPTUNE’s hull allowed us to modify our existing VLS system, the Mark 80 VLS, by eliminating the need for the hot gas venting from a missile firing to have to be redirected upwards via a ‘U’-shaped hot gas duct. Now, our new Mark 95 VLS simply vents the hot gasses from rocket exhausts directly under the hull of the main box superstructure, which stands a good 45 feet above the water. The hot gas then is vented through armored bottom hatches which prevent seawater from splashing up

through the vent channels. On top of hiding from direct view much of the flames and smoke from a missile firing, this new system allowed us to fit double the amount of missile cells compared to the Mark 80 VLS, since there were no more needs for the 'U'-shaped gas venting duct. With the extensive use of quadpack launch cells, the NEPTUNE could in theory be armed with up to 576 missiles."

"My god! With so many missiles, this ship could devastate any enemy fleet or coastal area."

"That is actually one of the goals we were aiming for with the building of this new class of carriers, Mister President: to have a single, hard-to-detect ship able to crush an enemy from a respectable distance, using both missile power and embarked aircraft. Since this ship will not need an escort fleet and since it actually cost less to build than a classic NIMITZ-Class carrier, we thus saved enough money to be able to build two of them in exchange for one NIMITZ and its nine escort warships. Also, by navigating by itself under nuclear power, the NEPTUNE will be free to maneuver at will, without having to coordinate its moves with escort ships."

"Wait! How could such a huge ship cost less to build than a NIMITZ-Class aircraft carrier?" objected Perot, making Ferranti smile.

"Simple, Mister President: by drastically cutting the number of man-hours needed for its construction. Nearly all of its hull is built out of flat steel plates, with only very few curved plates needed. Curving a large steel plate to precise specifications and forms necessitates both a powerful hydraulic press and highly skilled shipyard workers, plus takes a lot more time than just welding in place a bunch of flat steel plates. In comparison, the hull of a NIMITZ-Class carrier is mostly nothing but curved plates, save for its flight deck. That is one reason why we were able to build this ship so quickly. We are now at the stage of final fitting of internal systems and furnishing and will be able to officially launch the ship in less than three months. You will be able to baptize this ship well before the end of your first White House mandate, Mister President."

"Wow! That will be quite a moment. Uh, I have one last question for you, Mister Ferranti: why build the NEPTUNE inside a covered drydock? Is it to hide it from the view of potential spies?"

"It is, Mister President. We also intend to launch the ship at night and without prior public announcement for the same reason. The less our potential enemies will know about this ship, the better."

"I certainly agree with that. Well, if you have nothing else to show us, then I believe that we can return to Washington."

"Oh, there could be lots more to show you, Mister President. However, it would take me days to show you everything of interest aboard this ship. I will now drive you back to your transport aircraft."

With the group loading back on the cart, Michael Ferranti drove his cart down the flight deck, stopping it once near the Hiller PELICAN 'C' VTOL transport aircraft parked next to the stern superstructure island of the ship. Perot, Ingrid, Admiral Klasser and John McCain then boarded the aircraft, which was a militarized variant of the Hiller AIRBUS designed years ago by Ingrid, when she was still retired from active military service. The pilot of the PELICAN then started its turboprop engines, making the four large pivoting, shrouded propellers start to spin. Less than a minute later, the PELICAN deftly jumped into the air, then cautiously flew out via the large doors of the covered drydock before turning towards Washington and picking up speed.

17:16 (Washington Time)

Ingrid's office, The Pentagon

With John McCain in tow and with the intention of discussing with him their visit to the Roanoke Shipyards, Ingrid entered the anteroom occupied by her secretary, to find a young man wearing a business suit waiting for her there, sitting in the sofa of the anteroom. The man got up on his feet as soon as she entered the room and walked to her, an envelope in his right hand.

"General Dows? I have been sent by Senator Sam Nunn to give you this subpoena in person: you are being summoned to a closed joint hearing of the Senate and House Armed Services Committees, to be held next Monday, on August 28, at ten in the morning."

Taking the envelope offered by the man, Ingrid opened it and quickly read the document she extracted from it before giving a caustic look at the congressional aide.

"First, you can tell Senator Nunn that I will be there. Second, please erase that arrogant smirk from your face before leaving my office."

The aide, knowing Ingrid's reputation for quick, decisive action, did not protest her rebuke and left the office at a quick walk. John McCain then looked at the document still held by Ingrid.

"What is this all about, Ingrid? Does this subpoena say it?"

"No! It just says that the Senate wants to review our latest weapons acquisition programs with me. I guess that I will have to extensively prepare for that hearing before going to the Capitol on Monday morning. They may want to discuss...or rather dispute, a good dozen programs or more."

"Do that, Ingrid! In the meantime, I will contact Senator Nunn and ask him for his true motives to call this hearing. Unfortunately, since the Perot administration is officially an independent one, we can't count automatically on the support of the Democratic members of the committee, as a number of past recent cases have proven."

"Yeah! Having a President that is neither a Democrat nor a Republican is still a bit disconcerting to many Americans, even though President Perot's approval ratings are still quite decent. Well, that's American politics for you, I guess."

"Right! Backstabbing, rank partisanship and all." replied McCain in an acerbic tone.

09:51 (Washington Time)

Monday, August 28, 1995 'C'

Senate closed hearings room, The Capitol

Washington, D.C.

Arriving a bit early at the Senate closed hearings room, Ingrid, wearing her parade uniform and accompanied by John McCain, found it nearly empty, with no Congress members present at the time. After the Senate's Sergeant-at-arms registered their arrival, Ingrid and McCain went to the witnesses' table, set in front of the elevated dais to be used by the committee members, and set their various files and reference documents on the table, then sat down and waited for the politicians to show up. Ingrid nodded in approval on seeing that no reporter was present, with only a congressional official camera team present to take an official video record of the session. That video recording was going to be treated as a classified document afterwards, as per Congressional rules concerning closed hearings. She was thus going to be able to use classified data to support her positions and affirmations.

"At least, they had the good sense to keep this hearing a closed one." said John McCain. "An open hearing would have severely limited your ability to defend your positions without compromising some important classified data. I would have refused to expose you to an open hearing anyway."

"Thanks, John! I am curious to see if those politicians will solely concentrate on military matters or if they will try to smear me by attacking my private life or my political positions."

"What political positions?" replied McCain, smiling slightly. "You have served as presidential advisor for about as many Democratic presidents than for Republican presidents. They will have a hard time nailing you on that aspect."

"Well, I am known to be a passionate anti-segregationist and anti-racist. That should attract a few barbs to me, especially with that old James Strom Thurmond being the ranking member of the Senate's Armed Services Committee. Remember as well that a Republican congressman from Mississippi is presently appealing his conviction for complicity in an attempted murder as a result of the FBI's investigation in the sabotage of my test fighter aircraft. That congressman is said to be a good friend of Senator Thurmond."

"I am sure that Congressman Dillum, the chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, will do his best to keep Thurmond in check on that matter, Ingrid." Ingrid nodded at that: Robert Dillum was an African-American and had been fighting racial segregation for decades, thus would have no sympathies towards Thurmond's opinions or views. The first members of Congress then started entering the room via a door situated behind the elevated dais, making Ingrid and John McCain stand up. The sole woman in that group, Representative Patricia Schroeder smiled and waved discretely at Ingrid while taking her seat behind the dais.

Some four minutes later, the last politicians, including Senator Sam Nunn, had taken their seats. Nunn then banged his gavel twice before speaking in his microphone.

"I now declare this joint session of the Armed Services Committees of the House and of the Senate open. The Sergeant-at-arms will now make the witnesses officially swear."

Ingrid and John McCain took a minute to swear to tell the truth, then were able to sit back in their chairs. Sam Nunn then spoke again as he fixed Ingrid directly.

“For the record, this joint session of the Congressional Armed Services Committees has been called to get the testimony of General of the Army Ingrid Dows, Commander of the Combined Forces of the United States, concerning various aspects of our defense program and policies. I would like to first remind all the persons present that this session will discuss a number of highly classified matters and that no parts of it may be made public without my prior express consent. I will deal very severely with any breach of that rule...from anybody. We may now begin this session with the individual declarations and questions from each member present, with five minutes allowed per member. The Ranking Member of the Senate Committee, The Honorable James Strom Thurmond, may be first to speak.”

Ingrid hid her contempt as the 92-year-old Southern senator activated his microphone to speak. The man actually represented some of the things she despised the most personally: on top of being an avowed racist, Thurmond had a widespread reputation as a sexual abuser who kept touching inappropriately female members of the staff and employees of the Congress and was also known to have been involved into a number of extra-marital affairs. Having studied what was available as information about Strom Thurmond in the old Athena files kept in the Pentagon, Ingrid felt confident that she knew enough about the old politician to counter attacks from him. In return, there was no hint of friendliness towards Ingrid in the old man's eyes as he started speaking in a frail voice.

“General Dows, one of the reasons that prompted the calling of this session is the fact that a number of things are putting in doubt your motives about a number of your decisions touching our military, especially when concerning defense equipment acquisition programs. First off: what is your present official salary as a five-star general?”

Guessing what Thurmond was trying to get at, Ingrid nonetheless answered him at once and without hesitation.

“My gross annual salary before taxes is presently just short of 94,000 dollars, Senator.”

“Do you have other sources of financial revenues apart from your military salary, General Dows?”

“Yes! As the holder of two copyrighted aeronautical design patents concerning a revolutionary aircraft wing shape, called commonly a ‘diamond’ or ‘box’ wing, and of another design patent concerning wing profiles and called ‘Adaptive Wing Profile’, I still

get a one-hundred-dollar royalty for each civilian transport aircraft designed and built using either of those two patents. The royalty for small, private aircraft is fifty dollars. Both of those two concepts were registered as private patents under my name in 1949, before I graduated from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology with a bachelor of aeronautical engineering's degree."

"What about military aircraft? Does the Defense Department also have to pay a royalty for each military aircraft built with either of your patents integrated in them?"

"No!" replied Ingrid in a firm voice. "I sold the rights to use my patents to the U.S. Air Force in 1949, for the grand total of one dollar. A couple of years later, I also sold the use of my patents to the U.S. Navy and Army, again for a dollar. Since then, our military has not had to pay a cent to use my patents, even when the planes built were destined to equip the air forces of some of our allies."

"What about the money you got from selling to our military a number of new aircraft models you designed for the Hiller Helicopter Corporation?"

With Thurmond's end goal now becoming clear, Ingrid stared hard at the older politician while responding to him in a strong voice.

"Before you start insinuating about improprieties and contract favoritisms on my part, Senator Thurmond, let me make a few points clear to the members of this session. First off, at the time that I designed various models of aircraft for Hiller, I was already retired from active service and was only an inactive member of the Reserves. Second, I didn't sell those new models to our military: Mister Stanley Hiller did. Third, I resigned my position as designer at Hiller and also cut my contacts and links with that company the moment I rejoined the active ranks of our military. Whatever contracts were made after that with Hiller were arranged with other defense officials, with no inputs on my part."

"Then, General, how do you explain the fact that your personal bank accounts actually contains a total of 2,683,441 dollars as of ten days ago? You will tell me that over 20,000 aircraft were built in the U.S.A. with your patents incorporated into their designs?"

John McCain's jaws clenched hard as he saw what kind of smear Thurmond was trying to paint over Ingrid, but the latter replied at once as a wave of whispers and quick glances were exchanged among the politicians sitting behind the bench.

"Only a third of that amount you just quoted came from the patent royalties I still own, Senator Thurmond. As for the rest, the explanation for it is simple: it represents my

accumulated, unspent part of my past pay. I have spent the majority of my military career in either active war zones, fighting the enemies of the United States or enforcing peace in turbulent regions of the World, or in deep space missions. Believe it or not, but you will not find shopping malls or night clubs in the Jupiter and Saturn Systems, nor will you find some on the Moon or on Mars.”

Her retort did trigger a short-lived concert of amused giggles and smiles before she continued on while starring into Thurmond’s eyes.

“If you would take the time to properly study my military career, Senator, you will see that I served in wartime field conditions, for three months during the First Korean War, then for two months in Vietnam during the Indochina Conflict, followed by four months in Palestine during the Israeli-Arab War. From there, I went to serve in Europe, only to end up fighting for a month in the East European War. Two years later, I was posted back to the United States, where President Dewey tasked me to create and lead our space program. Then, in 1971, I departed for Mars on the U.S.S. CONSTITUTION, to return to Earth two and a half years later, in time to participate in the China-Taiwan War, followed a year later by the Second Korean War. Next, I flew out of Earth orbit in August of 1980 aboard the U.S.S. PROMETHEUS, heading for the Jupiter and Saturn Systems. I returned to Earth a full four years and seven months later, after which I retired from the active military. I didn’t engage in wild buying sprees between those wars and deep space missions and anybody who knows me well will tell you that I always have been a frugal person. I don’t own expensive jewelry; I rarely go to expensive restaurants and clubs and my wardrobe is quite modest. What you see in my bank accounts are my accumulated savings from unspent paychecks and patent royalties, nothing more. I intend to use much of that money to support my children and to leave to them comfortable sums for the day I will eventually die. If you intended to accuse me of illegal profiteering or bribe-taking, then you better do a better job than that, Senator Thurmond.”

Completely taken off-balance by Ingrid’s forceful reply and also seeing that the other members of Congress behind the dais now looked at him with a mix of derision and skepticism, Thurmond wisely decided to cut it there.

“Mister Chairman, I yield the rest of my time.”

“Very well! Congressman Dillum, as the Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, you are next to question the witness.”

“Thank you, Mister Chairman!” said the sixty-year-old black man, who then looked down from the dais at Ingrid.

“General Dows, let me first thank you for your decades of valorous service to our country.”

“You are most welcome, Congressman Dillum.” replied politely Ingrid. However, she didn’t let her guard down then, as Dillum could also be a problem for her, although not at all like Thurmond. In truth, Dillum was known to be strongly against most defense spending, arguing that the money would be better spent on social programs. Dillum then proceeded to confirm her suspicions.

“General, I had hoped when you became commander of all American forces that your proposed reforms would ultimately save a substantial amount of taxpayers’ money. However, two years have elapsed since then and we haven’t seen any significant diminution of our defense budgets. Why?”

“First off, Congressman Dillum, the President, the Secretary of Defense and his deputies write our defense budgets, not me. My only part in this is to counsel them on what kind of equipment, training or support our forces need to be more efficient in combat. If I judge that a certain shortcoming is hurting our combat efficiency, then I advise Secretary McCain about it and usually propose what I believe to be the best solution to correct that shortcoming, be it about inadequate equipment or facilities or factors which hurt the training and morale of our troops. Secretary McCain is then free to accept or reject my recommendations but, up to now, I would say that we are pretty well tuned to the same sheet of music. Second, when I got my command, there were many existing shortcomings and things in need of change around our forces. Those take both time and money to fix. I am happy to report today that my reforms and improvement measures are advancing quite rapidly, but I must caution that there is still a lot left to do, especially concerning the service conditions of our military personnel and their families, especially concerning our more junior ranks. Right now, too many of our enlisted personnel and their families still live barely above the poverty line, on top of being moved around too frequently to my taste. We still have many new family quarters and community facilities to build, while pay scales are still much too low to my taste when it comes to our junior enlisted personnel. To resume this, I don’t expect us to be able to significantly lower our military expenditures for at least another two to three more years.”

Anger showed on Dillum’s face on hearing those words.

“Two to three more years? Do you realize how many American citizens need more help right now, General? Those billions spent on weapons and military installations could help millions of American citizens around the country.”

“And you think that I don’t care as well about our citizens in general, Congressman Dellum? If you do, then you better learn to know me better than that. I have risked my life countless times in order to protect them from external threats and I believe that it should count for something. I didn’t fight to earn money: I fought out of resolve to protect our country. Our servicemen and servicewomen are also American citizens and they serve our country at the risk of their lives. They don’t have the luxury to be able to go on strike when faced with poor service conditions or to quit if an enemy threatens the United States and forces us to go to war or to launch some military action in reaction to that threat. They deserve decent pay, adequate equipment, fair service conditions and caring support for their families and I intend to do my best to provide all that to them.”

John McCain was nearly tempted to applaud at Ingrid’s forceful reply to Dellum but managed to restrain himself. Looking at the politicians sitting behind their bench, he could see that a number of them seemed to have liked Ingrid’s statement. However, others kept cold expressions. Dellum then made a last attempt at countering Ingrid’s arguments.

“You talked about adequate equipment, General, yet the United States military is widely acknowledged to be the most powerful in the World. Why spend more on it?” What he got in response was a near-contemptuous look from Ingrid.

“Congressman Dellum, are you ready to allow our forces to become second best just so that you could build more subsidized housing in our cities? Are you really ready to gamble with our national security by cutting our defense budgets without regard to what we have to face around the World? Have you already forgotten how our state of Hawaii was devastated by a nuclear bomb that forced its citizens into a painful exile to the Continental U.S.A.? Right now, what was the Soviet Union is now reduced to a bunch of unstable, quarreling states, some of which possess nuclear weapons. A few of those separatist states are also governed by governments which I would qualify as either dictatorial or hostile to us, or both. China, which already attacked Taiwan with nuclear weapons and tried to invade it in the past, keeps adding to its arsenal, including its nuclear one, and presently has the most numerous armed forces in the World. If the

wars I fought for the United States in the past taught me something, it is that you can't be a sheep when surrounded by hungry wolves."

"General, I believe that you may like wars too much and..."

Ingrid instantly shot up to her feet and sharply rose the volume of her voice while pointing an accusing index at Dellum.

"DON'T EVER SAY AGAIN THAT I LIKE WARS, CONGRESSMAN DELLUM! I SAW TOO MANY TIMES THE PAIN AND DESTRUCTION THAT WARS CAUSE, WHILE YOU NEVER SERVED IN THE MILITARY OR LIVED IN AN ACTIVE WAR ZONE. SO, DON'T MORALIZE ME ABOUT WAR!"

Ingrid then sat back, still fuming, while Senator Nunn banged his gavel repeatedly.

"Please, calm down, General Dows. As for you, Congressman Dellum, I will ask you to pay more respect to a decorated combat veteran like General Dows. I will now let the floor to Senator John Warner."

Dellum tried to object to having his speaking time cut like this but a dark look from Nunn shut him out.

John Warner, a veteran from World War 2 and from the First Korean War, proved to be much more sympathetic towards Ingrid, merely asking for clarifications about the various projects concerning new weapon systems, including the U.S.S. NEPTUNE. John McCain also spoke in order to add to Ingrid's answers, apparently satisfying Warner. The next few senators and congressmen to speak also treated Ingrid with politeness and patience. Things changed when came the turn of Senator Trent Lott, a politician from Mississippi who was a known supporter of Strom Thurmond. Lott, a still relatively young politician at the age of 53, had an impassive face as he looked down at Ingrid from his bench.

"General Dows, I have a question for you that may appear to be a personal one, but which I believe to be relevant to the military code of discipline. During your mission to Jupiter and Saturn aboard the U.S.S. PROMETHEUS, you gave birth to a baby girl, which you named 'Nancy'. However, you refused to name the father of your daughter on the birth certificate signed by the ship's doctor and, to this day, continue to refuse to name the father. Now, you were traveling through space along with a large crew composed of both military personnel from your Space Corps and of civilian scientists and support personnel, some of them foreigners, including more than a few Soviet citizens. You are still officially single and have a total of three children still in your

charge, two of which were adopted by you, while you have as well an adopted daughter who is now grown up and married. Now, if the father of your daughter Nancy proves to be a military member of the Space Corps, that would mean that you had improper relations with a military subaltern, a punishable offense according to the U.S. Code of Military Conduct. On the other hand, if the father of your daughter Nancy turns out to be a foreign citizen, especially if that foreign citizen is a Soviet one, then this would mean that you failed to disclose a personal relationship that could compromise you in terms of security clearances. Now, are you ready to tell us who the father of your daughter Nancy was, General?"

Ingrid threw a dark look at Lott, while Patricia Schroeder showed clear misgiving at Lott's question. Ingrid then decided that it was time for her to come clean and to settle this matter once and for all.

"Senator Lott, the father of my daughter Nancy was neither one of my military subalterns, nor a Soviet citizen. While he is not an American citizen, I can assure you that he is no threat to the national security of the United States."

"Can't you be more specific, General?" replied Lott, getting impatient. Ingrid nodded her head as John McCain's mouth dropped wide open.

"I can, Senator Lott: he is standing right behind you."

Lott, like the other politicians present, twisted around in his chair to look behind him and found himself faced with a tall, luminescent and semi-transparent humanoid shape floating a foot above the floor. Gasps went around the congressmen and senators as a strong telepathic male voice resonated inside their heads.

"I am called 'Michael' and I am the father of Nancy, Senator Lott. I am also an Archangel of The One, while Ingrid is a Chosen of The One. Nancy is thus half-human and half-celestial, but is still very much the natural daughter of Ingrid. And don't equate The One to your 'God' from the Bible: he is not! He did not create the Universe, or even this Earth, and he would never have committed any of the atrocities attributed with such exaltation to your 'God' in your Old Testament. He is a being made of spiritual energy who can manipulate matter and energy nearly at will and he has been following the advancement of the Human race for millions of years. The One has no interest about being worshipped or prayed to. He simply wishes Humanity to improve itself and show more care and love towards others. He has been most patient until now, but the advent of nuclear weapons, with their capacity to destroy life on this planet, has pushed him into becoming

more active. Take this as a warning, all of you: do not threaten a nuclear holocaust through your actions, or The One may take measures to preempt such a monstrosity. Remember my words!

Before any of the politicians could ask him a question, Michael then vanished, fading to nothingness and leaving behind a group of deeply shaken Congress members. Ingrid waited until the politicians regained some semblance of composure before speaking in a strong, calm voice.

“Lady and gentlemen, if you truly wished for us to lower our defense expenditures without endangering national security, then you will examine seriously a solution that I have been suggesting for some time already but that few of you were ready to accept: to cut our nuclear arsenal to a safe minimum that would be just enough to deter any enemy from striking at us with nuclear weapons. In my mind, a few hundred warheads would be plenty to achieve that goal, in contrast to the thousands of nuclear weapons we have been accumulating over the years. That way, we could still ensure the security of our nation without risking to blow our planet to bits in the process. The choice is ours.”

CHAPTER 9 – THE BIG APPLE



The Juilliard School of performing arts conservatory, New York City.

14:35 (New York Time)

Tuesday, August 29, 1995 'C'

Superintendent's office, Manhattan Plaza Towers

400, West 43rd Street, Manhattan, New York City

"I am sorry, miss, but we already have a waiting list with 186 names of prospective tenants for our apartments. You can still leave your name to add it to the list, but I don't expect an opening for at least another nine months."

"Nine months?!" said Lucy in a discouraged tone. "But we are supposed to start studying at the Juilliard School next week."

The building superintendent, a tin man in his late fifties, shrugged his shoulders in response.

"I am truly sorry, girls, but there is nothing that I can do for you now."

Disappointed, the group of five teenage girls walked away from the superintendent's office before stopping further down the hallway in order to discuss the options left to them. Taking out of one pocket the list that the band members had compiled of the apartment locations where they could hope to rent a place for their years of study in New York, Nancy grimaced on seeing that there was only one address left to investigate.

"Damn! We are left with only one address to check out. It is on West 51st Street, near the corner with 11th Avenue, in Hell' Kitchen District."

"Hell's Kitchen?!" exclaimed Sarah Weissman. "Do we really want to get a flat there? It has a scary reputation!"

"Would you prefer to continue paying for a hotel room for the next four years, Sarah? I doubt that your parents would be ready to fork out that kind of money. As for Ingrid, she may be very well-off, but she has other priorities than to burn her money on hotel rooms. I say: let's check out that last address. Erika, you know how to get there?"

"Sure!" replied the nineteen-year-old tomboy and drum kit player. "This is not my first time in driving around New York. Let's go back to our minivan."

Going out of the building and to their parked rental minivan, the five teenage girls piled in, with Erika Lange taking place behind the driver's wheel, while Nancy took the front seat, armed with a map of New York City. Nancy however didn't need to give directions to Erika, who drove like a pro through the city traffic and quickly got to the corner of West 51st Street and Eleventh Avenue. As their minivan turned onto West 51st Street and passed in front of a local food market, all eyes went to a three-story brown brick building sporting a blue canopy marked with the number 607 over one of its doors.

"There it is, girls: 607 West 51st Street!" announced Erika while slowing down and lining up to a parking spot. Lucy nearly made a grimace as she detailed the old building.

"It looks like a converted garage or warehouse. One of the two garage doors is even bricked over. Are you sure that this could be a good choice for us, Nancy?"

"Don't go only on its external appearance, Lucy. Besides, old garages and warehouse converted into residential flats are far from uncommon in New York. With the way Manhattan is crowded out, no space goes to



waste here. Let's reserve our judgment until we could see the inside and what they are asking for the rent."

Once Erika had parked their minivan, the group stepped out of it and went to the main entrance, where Nancy pressed the doorbell. A fat man in his forties and sporting a beard and a bald head answered the ring after half a minute or so, opening the door after looking at the waiting teenagers through a peephole.

"Yes?"

"Good day, sir!" replied Nancy, giving the man her best smile. "We are a group of students about to start college in New York and we are looking for a place where we could live during our studies. Do you still have at least two apartments available?" While the man appeared happy to have customers, he still eyed Nancy with some suspicion.

"I have in fact three units available at this time, miss: the two top-level ones and the one above the garage. The garage is also available for rental. My question is: can you afford the rent?"

"My mother is quite well-off, mister, and I am ready to pay in advance for two months for starters. Could we first visit your units and the garage? We could then discuss the rent."

"Certainly! Please come in!"

After letting in the five teenagers and firmly closing back the front door behind them, the man then led them towards a rather narrow wooden staircase going up. As he was climbing the stairs, he asked a question to Nancy.

"And what are you girls studying?"

"Music! We are starting to study at the Juilliard School next week."

"Ah yes! I know that school: it has a very good reputation and is said to be very choosy about the students it accepts. Uh, are you planning on practicing your music here?"

Nancy, along with her band members, tensed up a bit at that question: most landlords didn't appreciate having practicing musicians as tenants, objecting to the noise they could make. She however answered the man honestly.

"Yes, as much as possible, if that would not incommode your other tenants."

"Then, I may have a special offer to make to you. However, I will wait until we are on the top floor before talking about it."

While intrigued, Nancy didn't ask for more precisions and waited until the whole group was on the top floor, where the man, who was probably the superintendent of the building, unlocked a door bearing a tarnished brass number three sign and opened it wide before inviting her in.

"This is one of my available units. It comes mostly unfurnished and was previously a warehouse space but the plumbing has been upgraded, along with the heating system, and there is a refrigerator and an electric stove in the kitchen corner."

Walking in with her four band members, Nancy found herself in a large high-ceiling room with naked brick walls. The room was lit by a large, high multipaneled window of the kind commonly found in warehouses. The floor was however made of good quality wood and the place was clean. The superintendent spoke further as the teenagers looked around the large room, which measured at least thirty square meters, with a free height of well over four meters.

"This is meant to be used as the main living room. It was originally much larger but part of it was partitioned to create two separate bedrooms and a bathroom. I will show those to you now."

The man then walked to the entrance of a short hallway at the back of the room, past a kitchen corner with a counter with sink, an electric stove and a refrigerator and opened in succession three doors along that hallway.

"If you may now look at the bedrooms and the bathroom, ladies."

Her hopes rising about this place being a good one for her group, Nancy entered one of the bedrooms and looked around it: it was of very respectable size and, while the outer wall was made of naked brick, like in the living room, it incorporated a large window which provided ample daylight to the room. Going to the second bedroom, she found an identical room, then went to see the bathroom. The man had not lied about the plumbing having been extensively renovated: the bathtub incorporated a shower head and was of modern design, as were the large sink counter and the toilet. Ceramic tiles covered the floor of the bathroom. Nancy felt good about the place but something was bothering her. Looking up at the ceiling, she pointed at it.

"How come the ceiling of this bathroom and of the two bedrooms is apparently much lower than that of the living room, mister?"

"You are an observant girl, miss." replied the superintendent, smiling. When those separate rooms were built out of this old warehouse storage room, their ceilings were so high that the owner had the idea to use that extra height to build more rooms

above the bedrooms and the bathroom, thus hoping to be able to rent additional rooms. Unfortunately, those top rooms didn't pass muster with the city inspectors, who ruled that their free height of six and a half feet didn't respect the minimum requirements for occupied dwellings. The owner, stuck with those empty rooms, then decided to offer them as extra storage space for the people occupying the bedrooms below them. Think of them as a sort of attic space. The staircase to those top spaces is still in place, by the way. Now, your wish to be able to play your instruments in this building gave me an idea: if you only use those top rooms to practice music and don't actually live and sleep there, then I believe that I could legally rent them to you girls without being hassled by city inspectors."

"Mister, you are a genius!" said Nancy while pointing an index at the smiling superintendent. "Show us those top rooms, please."

"Then, follow me!"

Going out of the bathroom and following the superintendent, Nancy was about to follow him up a wooden staircase at the back when she noticed a door that had apparently not been use in quite a while. Stopping for a moment, she pointed at the door while calling up to the man.

"What is this door, mister? It nearly looks like it was condemned."

"Oh, that door gave access to the cargo elevator lift which originally linked this floor and the one below with the garage. The owner decided to close the access to it and condemn the lift after a past tenant misused it and caused an accident that brought us lots of legal grief. Do you really want to see it? I have to warn you that this part was never renovated and is in a rather poor condition."

"Still, I would like to see it. Maybe we could get something out of that space."

"As you wish, miss." said the man before taking out a key and unlocking the door. He had to push hard against it before it opened with a noise of rusted hinges. Nancy was then able to walk in a small room mostly filled with an old-looking cargo lift. Her sharp eyes then spotted something in a far corner. Walking to that corner and bending down, she cautiously picked up a spend syringe needle and showed it to the superintendent.

"Let me guess: that past tenant of yours was using this room as a drug den, right?"

"Correct, miss. That idiot very nearly caused the municipal authorities to closing down for good this building and putting it on their list of old buildings scheduled for

demolition. The owner was thankfully able to plead his case and change the minds of the city inspectors, but he had to agree to officially condemn this part of his building, along with the cargo lift.”

‘Meaning that he bribed those officials.’ thought Nancy to herself.

“Then, we will leave this place as is. Let’s go see those top rooms now.”

With the teenagers again following the superintendent up the staircase after he had locked back the lift room, the group ended up in a low ceiling hallway poorly lit by a single window on one side at the top of the staircase. However, Nancy judged the head clearance to be acceptable for what they intended to use this space for. While of low ceiling, the two empty rooms they visited were actually slightly larger than each of the two bedrooms below them.

“As you can see, these top rooms are quite large, thanks to the additional floor space of the bathroom below them adding to the floor space of each bedroom. So, miss, what do you think?”

Nancy first exchanged looks with her four band members and, seeing smiles on their faces, turned back towards the superintendent.

“This could indeed prove very useful to us, mister. Up to now, we like what we saw. I suppose that the second unit you intended to rent to us is the one directly below this one?”

“That’s correct, miss. It has the same floor layout than this unit. Do you wish to visit it?”

“I would like to, yes.”

Leaving the suite number three, the group went down the stairs to the median level and quickly visited Suite Number One, which effectively proved to be similar to Suite Number Three and was equally bare but clean. Asking for a minute in order to discuss with her friends, Nancy gathered them in a small group and spoke in a low voice.

“So, what do you think, girls?”

“I like this place!” replied Lucy at once. “It doesn’t look like much from the outside but the space available here will greatly help us practice properly after school hours. We will just have to get some proper furniture to make this an adequate place to live.”

"I also like it." added Carmen Estrada, the dedicated dancer, guitar and flute player of the band. Sarah Weissman, their timid piano near-prodigy, also gave her approval, along with Erika Lange. Nancy then walked back to the waiting superintendent, hoping that the rent he would ask would prove to be reasonable...by the standards of the New York City housing market.

"Well, we definitely are interested in those two units we visited, along with your top rooms. Is your garage also available for rental?"

"It is, miss."

"then, here is the question of the day for you: how much are you asking per month for the garage, two suites and your top 'storage' rooms?"

"That would amount to a total of 5,600 dollars a month, miss. I must say that you would normally find other rental units around Manhattan to be much more expensive than these ones."

"I don't doubt that for a minute, mister. We will take your two units plus the garage. As I said before, I am ready to pay two months of advance rent. Do you accept credit cards as a payment mode?"

"Of course, miss!" replied the superintendent, quite happy to be able to close this deal. "Let's go down to my own place, where I have my office."

Officially paying for the rent with her gold standard credit card after filling and signing a rental contract, Nancy then exchanged a solid handshake with the happy superintendent, surprising him with her strength.

"Wow! You are quite strong for a teenage girl, Miss Dows."

"I do a lot of musculation, Mister Connors. We will start shopping for furniture tomorrow, so you may start to see delivery trucks stop by to drop off various pieces of furniture. Just let them in then: one of us will be present to direct the delivery men to the right place for each piece."

"Then, I believe that I can close this deal by handing you five sets of keys for your two units and the garage."

"Thank you very much, Mister Connors." said Nancy while accepting the sets of keys handed by the superintendent. "Uh, supper time is approaching for us. Where could we find a good, decent restaurant around here?"

"Oh, there are quite a few of them around Hell's Kitchen, Miss Dows. For a wide choice of good ethnic restaurants of all kinds, you just need to walk down two blocks to

the Ninth Avenue, then go to the West 46th Street: that street his widely nicknamed 'Restaurant Row'. I strongly counsel it. On the other hand, don't get food from that store on the corner with Eleventh Avenue: the food there is bad and the service atrocious."

"Thank you for the tip, Mister Connors. We will see each other again sometimes tomorrow. Have a good evening."

"And a good evening to you too and to your friends, miss."

Nancy then left the man's office and returned in the main hallway, where she distributed the set of keys she had just obtained."

"Well, girls, we now have a place to live for the next four years or so. We just need to get furniture for it and turn it into our new den of music. Mister Connors told me where to find some good ethnic restaurants nearby. I propose that we walk to there instead of driving: that will give us a chance to explore the neighborhood a bit."

"Good idea! I'm getting quite famished." said approvingly Erika Lange.

Taking first the time to drive their minivan inside their garage and then lock it, the teenagers then started walking eastward along West 51st Street, crossing Eleventh Avenue and continuing on, looking in passing at the stores along the street. Once at the corner with Ninth Avenue, Nancy made her group cross it before turning south and going down until they arrived at the corner of Ninth Avenue and West 46th Street, where they turned left before stopping for a moment, looking at the myriad of restaurant signs and façades now visible to them.

"Wow! Mister Connors didn't exaggerate about this 'Restaurant Row': look at that choice we have for supper." said Nancy. "I see Chinese, Thai, Japanese, French, German, Italian, Mexican restaurants and more. What do you think, girls?"

Her friends proved indecisive for a moment, put off by such a varied choice. After a minute or so of discussion, they ended up agreeing on a promising-looking Thai restaurant and entered it to have supper there. That restaurant easily proved to be up to their expectations and they ended up passing over an hour in it, taking their time to sample and share many various dishes, some of them quite spicy, to the delight of Carmen Estrada.

All five of them were quite content and full when they left the Thai restaurant to return towards their new residence, planning to get in their minivan there and return to the hotel where they had been staying for three days now while they went apartment-

hunting, since their new residence was still devoid of furniture. However, an idea came to Nancy as they were crossing Eleventh Avenue and were approaching their apartment building.

"Hey, maybe we could go around our block and explore our new neighborhood a bit before driving back to our hotel. What do you think, girls?"

"That's a good idea, Nancy." replied Erika Lange. "There is still plenty of daylight left and it should be safe to walk around a bit. After all, we are probably going to live around here for the next four years, so we might as well start to learn more about our neighborhood. I suggest that we first go westward: I would like to see what kind of view we have of the Hudson River from Hell's Kitchen."

"I buy that!" replied Lucy, soon echoed by the others. The group thus continued walking on the sidewalk of the West 51st Street, heading towards the Hudson River. However, as they were passing by their new apartment building, Lucy noticed that Nancy was craning her neck to look up at the edge of the building's roof.

"What are you looking at, Nancy?"

"The roof of our building: it is a flat roof. I wonder if it would be solid enough to allow my Air Bike to land and park on it."

"It should! After all, it weighs little more than half a ton and our roof should easily be able to support it. The question is, would the owner let you use the roof as a landing pad for your Air Bike?"

"I guess that this will be a question for him tomorrow. If he says no, then our garage is still large enough for both our minivan and my Air Bike. Having my Air Bike in New York could greatly facilitate our periodic trips to Washington. Since I have only three seats in my Air Bike, I would of course be ready to make return trips then, so that all of us could visit our families from time to time."

"That sounds like a great idea, Nancy." said approvingly Sarah Weissman. With that settled, the five teenagers walked on past their apartment building and passed in front of an empty lot containing some debris from the demolition of an old building. A sign and a light chain-link fence announced the future start of the building of a large clothing store on that site. However, the group soon had to stop when at the corner with Twelfth Avenue: beyond it was a wide highway where many vehicles circulated at high speed. They thus had to stop on that corner and contemplated for a while the Hudson River and the piers lining its shore, with the old, decommissioned aircraft carrier U.S.S. INTREPID, which had been turned into a floating museum, docked at Pier 86, some 700

meters south of their location. Once everybody had ample time to look around, Nancy then led her group northward at a slow pace, passing by a large underground parking complex before arriving at the corner with the West 52nd Street. They then got a view of a relatively small park that covered maybe two to three hectares of surface. While there were many trees in the park, the area was littered with trash of all kinds and had a derelict look to it. An eclectic assortment of people was milling around the park or sat on the grass, while numerous small tents and improvised shelters could be seen, dispersed inside the park grounds. Erika Lange shook her head slowly as she read a dirty sign fixed to a low fence surrounding the park.

“The DeWitt Clinton Park... This place doesn't look like a spot where I would go at night. I see many homeless people camping in it and I also see many youths who seem to be using drugs.”

“You are probably right about those youths using this park as a drug injection or smoking place, Erika.” said Ingrid, who had the sharpest eyesight in her group. She also shook her head in sadness as she eyed the dozens of homeless people visible in the park, dressed in dirty rags and looking idle next to their improvised shelters, with some shopping carts full of personal effects also visible besides some of the shelters.

“Poor people! Nobody should have to end up like this, without a proper home and with no steady source of revenue to buy food and clothes.”

“Many would say that they have only themselves to blame for that, either because of drug use or of an alcohol problem.” said Carmen Estrada, attracting a reprobative look from Nancy.

“Still, these are people and they deserve better than this, Carmen.”

“And what could be done, Nancy? You know that both the municipal, state and federal governments will never vote enough funds to properly take care of this homeless problem. There are a number of private charitable societies, like the Salvation Army, who do great work, but they never have enough resources to fully take care of this. Some of these homeless people also suffer from mental illnesses that made them lose their jobs and estranged them from their families. Only the government would have the proper means to care for them, but you know as well as I do that many of our politicians don't give a hoot about homeless people and will never vote the kind of funds needed to properly help them.”

Nancy's shoulders sagged at those words: Carmen was unfortunately right about that. Still, her own special essence told her that doing nothing was not an acceptable option.

"You may be right, Carmen, but that won't stop me from trying to do what I can to help. I am going to visit those homeless people and talk with them. Feel free to either come with me or to return to the hotel by yourselves, girls."

The four other teenage girls looked at each other, hesitant at first about what to do. Then, Lucy spoke up while starting to follow Nancy across the street.

"I'm coming with you, Nancy!"

"What the heck?!" said Erika Lange. "We might as well stay in a group, for our own protection."

Carmen Estrada and Sarah Weissman, while still a bit reluctant, followed the example of Lucy and Erika and ran to rejoin them and Nancy. As they stepped on the sidewalk surrounding the park, a thin black young man dressed in a pair of jeans and a leather jacket approached them, a wide smile on his lips. However, Nancy spotted at once the switchblade knife worn at his belt.

"Hi, girls! Need some nice stuff to spice up your day?"

"No, thanks!" replied Nancy at once while throwing a cold look at the young drug dealer. The latter didn't seem to appreciate her tone of voice and erased his smile from his lips.

"A little stuck up, girl? If you came only to snitch on us, then things could become dangerous for you and your friends."

"Things will become dangerous for YOU if you don't fuck off right now and leave us alone."

"Ooh! I'm scared! And what would you do to me then, girl?"

Before the drug dealer could say another word, he was suddenly and violently thrown backward by what felt to him like an invisible hand. He tumbled three times around before ending on his ass on the concrete sidewalk, bruised and hurting. Nancy looked down at him with contempt as her friends looked on at that scene.

"I would do THAT, asshole. Now, scram!"

Completely bewildered by this, the young black man didn't insist and cautiously retreated back into the park, where he joined up with other drug addicts and dealers. Lucy, Sarah, Erika and Carmen, already knowing about the true nature of Nancy, didn't show surprise at her actions and simply followed her as she resumed her walk towards the part of the park occupied by the homeless people. As they were approaching the first cluster of improvised shelters, Nancy looked behind her to speak in a low voice to her sister and her friends.

"Whatever we end up doing to help those people, don't give them cash money except for small change: they could well use that cash to then buy drugs or alcohol instead of buying food. I intend to help them via another, more useful way."

"Whatever you say, Nancy." replied Lucy, who knew how her sister thought from over two years of experience living with her.

The first group of homeless people, four men and one woman, all of mature age and wearing near rags, looked at Nancy's group with curiosity as the teenagers approached. However, none of them made any hostile move or appeared afraid of the girls. The older man of the group, who may have been in his fifties and wore a disheveled and dirty beard and long hair, addressed Nancy as the latter stopped in front of him.

"You should be careful about coming here, girl: some of the people in this park are not exactly nice with visitors like you."

"I know, mister: I just told one of them to fuck off. Do you mind if I speak a bit with you and your friends?"

"Not at all! After all, we have precious little to make out of our days except for talking between ourselves and trying to get some charitable tips from passersby. But why would you want to speak with us?"

"Because I want to see what we could do to help you and your friends in a more useful way than simply throwing some small change around. By the way, my name is Nancy and I am here with my sister Lucy and my friends Sarah, Erika and Carmen. What is your name, friend?"

"I am George... George Walsh. My friends here are Stanley, John, Thomas and Mary. It is truly kind on your part to come visit us like this, Nancy. You all look quite young. Are you college students, by chance?"

"Yes, we are! We are from Washington D.C. and came to study music."

"Aah, musicians! Some here in this park once had dreams of becoming famous musicians. Unfortunately, fortune never smiled to them and they ended up here, often due to depression and with no money left to them. I sincerely wish that your own dreams will come true."

"Thank you, George. Do you get any help from municipal authorities or from private charitable associations?"

Some bitterness then showed up on the face of the aging homeless man.

"The only thing we saw from the city officials is efforts to chase us out of this park, Nancy. We do get some help from the Salvation Army, which runs a shelter where they serve us hot meals when they can and provide us with a warm place to sleep in Winter, while Pastor Pat Bumgardner, from the Metropolitan Community Church on West 36th Street, helps those of us who are gay or are sick from AIDS."

Nancy nodded her head slowly then while mentally recording that information.

"I see! How many people live in this park these days? I am talking about homeless people, not young junkies."

"It varies a bit, but it turns around close to thirty or so homeless people. Why do you ask?"

Instead of answering him, Nancy turned to face Erika and, taking out her wallet, extracted 300 dollars from it and gave the money to her friend.

"Erika, take the other girls with you in our minivan and go to that BBQ grill counter we saw on our way to supper, then buy as takeout orders enough chicken, fries and soda drinks to feed thirty people, then come back here with that food. I will stay here in the meantime. Oh, and ask for sets of plastic utensils as well."

"Got it!"

As the four teenagers quickly walked away, George Walsh looked with disbelief at Nancy.

"You...you are going to feed all of us at your own expense? You are a true angel!"

"I know!" replied Nancy, a malicious smile appearing on her face. "Now, tell me about your respective lives, you and your friends."

18:53 (New York Time)

DeWitt Clinton Park, Hell's Kitchen District

Erika, Lucy, Sarah and Carmen were back some fifty minutes later, their arms loaded with takeout boxes from the BBQ counter they had visited and with a couple of plastic crates full of soda drink bottles and quarts of fresh milk. Nancy then helped them to distribute the food and drinks to the ecstatic homeless occupants of the park, all the while making sure that no junkies or drug dealers would try to steal part of that food. For enhanced security, she thus asked to the homeless to gather as one large group in one corner of the park, then stood nearby to watch for any approaching junkie. The group

picnic had been going on for about twenty minutes when Nancy saw a police patrol car roll next to the park, slowing down noticeably before it parked near the corner with the Eleventh Avenue. Nancy then watched as two NYPD policemen got out of the patrol car and entered the park on foot, heading her way. Hoping that those policemen would prove to be decent, caring cops, she greeted them with her warmest smile.

“Good evening, Officers! What may I do for you?”

The oldest policeman, a big, beefy one who was around his late thirties, quickly examined her from head to toe before answering her in a polite tone.

“We were just checking what was happening here, miss. I see lots of BBQ takeout boxes around. What gives?”

“Me and my friends were passing by after having supper at a local restaurant and, when we saw those homeless people, I decided to buy them a good meal for a change.”

That obviously impressed the policeman, who nodded politely to salute her.

“That was a mighty generous gesture on your part, miss. Uh, did I see you before, two or three years ago?”

“You may, if you were involved in the raid on the Wong import/export warehouse on the East River shore, which was involved with the human trafficking of young Russian women. I was there as well at the time.”

From simply impressed, the policeman’s expression changed to that of near veneration.

“You were the angel who healed one of our officers wounded by gunfire?”

It was then the turn of Nancy to nod her head soberly.

“I am, Officer! Nancy Dows, at your service.”

“Aren’t you from the Washington D.C. area, Miss Dows?”

“I normally am, but I am about to start studying music here in New York for four years, at the Juilliard School. I just found and rented an apartment on West 51st Street, just one block away from here, and I was going around my new neighborhood to become familiar with it.”

The senior policeman looked briefly around at the homeless people eating with delight their chicken and fries, then saluted Nancy.

“Then, we will not bother you further, Miss Dows. Have a good evening.”

“The same to you, Officer Burns.”

As the two policemen were walking back to their parked patrol car, the younger policeman looked with curiosity at his senior partner.

"What's this nonsense about some angel healing one of our men? And who is that girl, exactly?"

"You didn't hear about the raid on the Wong import/export warehouse, Dan?"

"Uh, no! I joined the force only last year, remember? That's why they stuck you with me, so that you could teach me the ropes."

"Right! Well, that girl alerted us when she saw something suspicious at that warehouse. One of our first men to arrive on the scene was shot and gravely wounded by one of the Chinese Triads thugs involved in the trafficking of the Russian women we subsequently freed there. That girl you just met then demonstrated a number of superpowers and killed the gunman who had shot our officer by catapulting him high in the air, then magically healed by the touch of her hands our wounded officer, saving his life. Her nickname around Washington is 'Supergirl' and you better believe that she is for real, Dan. Boy! I will have to inform Captain Manning that she is in town for four years: this could be important for him and for the rest of the department to know."

14:40 (New York Time)

Friday, September 01, 1995 'C'

Apartment # 3, 607 West 51st Street

Hell's Kitchen District

"Thank you for coming this quickly to connect our telephones, mister."

"It was a pleasure, miss." replied the AT&T technician, who gave a discreet glance at Nancy's inviting cleavage before leaving her apartment. Closing the door behind him, Nancy then shouted out at the four other girls presently busy putting the last touches to their new home.

"THE PHONES ARE NOW CONNECTED, GIRLS!"

That created a near race to the newly installed and connected telephones, of which there was one per bedroom and two per apartment's living room. Each of the girl had their private line, accessible both in their personal bedroom and in the lounge of the apartment they lived in. The only exceptions were Nancy and Lucy, who shared the same bedroom and had the same house to call to in Washington. Nancy let Lucy use their line first and looked around with satisfaction at the brand-new furniture, carpets and

decorative objects they had bought during the last three days to turn the empty apartments into proper homes. Even the refrigerator and pantry in her lounge's kitchen corner had been stocked up with fresh foodstuff and beverages. However, the supper tonight would definitely happen at a local restaurant: they all deserved to rest and relax from their three days of crazy activity and wild shopping. Looking at her watch, Nancy decided to wait before calling Ingrid: at this hour: she certainly was still working at the Pentagon, dealing with the myriad of things she needed to do to improve the American armed forces. She was about to go to her bedroom to finish arranging a few things there when the control box of the main entrance door at street level buzzed.

"Now, who could that be?" she asked herself before pushing the 'talk' button of the control box. "Yes? Who is it?"

A female voice then came out of the speaker.

"I am Reverend Pat Bumgardner, from the Metropolitan Community Church on West 36th Street. I would like to speak with Miss Nancy Dows."

"That's me! You may come up to apartment number three." replied Nancy before pressing the button that unlocked the front door. As she waited for her visitor to arrive upstairs, she mentally speculated on the possible reasons for her visit. The most probable one she could think of was that the reverend would have heard about the good action of Tuesday evening, when they had bought food and drinks for the homeless in the DeWitt Clinton Park. Holding the door half open, Nancy opened it wide when her visitor arrived on her floor, puffing a bit from climbing the two flights of stairs. The woman, small and thin, nearly frail, could easily have passed for a man with her hair cut short in masculine fashion.

"Miss Nancy Dows?" said the woman as she approached the door of the apartment.

"That's me! Please come in, Reverend."

"Thank you!"

Once inside, Bumgardner smiled as she looked around the newly furnished living room of the apartment.

"Wow! This is quite a contrast with the outside look of this building."

"Well, we just spent three days to furnish it and make it a proper home for us. Our group also occupies the apartment below this one and we use as well the garage. We are five girls from the Washington D.C. area and we came to New York to study music at the Juilliard School, on West 65th Street."

"Musicians? That's interesting! Well, you must be wondering why I am paying you a visit like this, Miss Dows."

"Please, simply call me Nancy, Reverend."

"With pleasure, Nancy. Basically, I came to thank you and your friends for your generous act towards the homeless people of the DeWitt Clinton Park on Tuesday."

"Bah, no need to thank us for that, Reverend: any decent persons would have done the same."

"Unfortunately, that is not exactly true, Nancy. Most people too often ignore the homeless they see and even actively try to avoid them, or simply throw them some small change and walk away. In contrast, you and your friends stopped to talk with these poor people and you then sent the other girls to go buy food for the homeless people of the park. Very few people around here would do the same. From what I was told, you also showed genuine interest in their problems."

"I thought that someone needed to show some care and kindness to them, Reverend, that's all."

"But that's not an insignificant act, far from it. If you ever wish to help those people again, maybe you could coordinate your actions with those of the charities we run out of our church. We have a homeless youth services section, a popular food pantry for the homeless and the poor, a professional training and job placement program for the members of the LGBTQ community and we also offer quick, confidential HIV testing to gay people."

Nancy's expression sobered up on hearing the words 'HIV testing'.

"And how bad is the HIV epidemic in New York, Reverend?"

The female pastor lowered her head then as sadness showed on her thin face.

"More than bad! The gay community has been hit especially hard by it and the common prejudices it faces from both the public and from the local authorities don't help a bit. Many members of our church have died from AIDS during the past months and years and more of them are presently sick, some of them being close to death. Unfortunately, the medical science is still not very effective at treating these AIDS patients and many people treat them like lepers or worse, sometimes saying that they are being punished by God for the sin of being gay."

Nancy sighed, sympathizing with the pastor's sadness.

"I know! Bigotry will always exist in this world."

Before saying more, Nancy took a couple of seconds to think and take a decision, making Bumgardner look up at her. She finally committed herself and looked straight into the eyes of the female pastor.

“Look, Reverend: I have no prejudices against LGBTQ people. In fact, I am a bisexual girl and am not ashamed one bit about that, while two of my friends are closet lesbians. I would like very much to help your sick church members hit by the AIDS, to heal and then support them.”

“To heal them? But even doctors still don’t have a reliable treatment or cure for AIDS. The best they can do now is to combat the infections caused by AIDS with an arsenal of drugs.”

“Reverend, do you know who I truly am?”

“Uh, what do you mean?”

“What I mean is that I really have the power to heal those sick people. In the Washington D.C. area, I am popularly known as ‘Supergirl’. Does that ring a bell in you?”

Bumgardner looked confused for a moment. Then, recognition started to dawn on her.

“Wait! Are you the one who is said to have some supernatural powers? Are you truly an angel of God?”

“No, I am not an angel of your ‘God’, Reverend. However, half of my essence is celestial and comes from a powerful spiritual being I call ‘The One’. The One has nothing to do with the ‘God’ described in your Holy Bible or in the Koran, but it still is very powerful and I hold many powers from him.”

Bumgardner looked at her at first with skepticism but quickly changed her attitude when Nancy’s eyes turned into two bright spots of white light, while her voice resonated inside the head of the pastor as Nancy’s lips didn’t move.

“I am half-angel and half-human and one of my goals in life is to help others in their times of need. I also punish from time to time those who deserve it. I want to be able to help your sick church members and the gay people suffering from AIDS but, in exchange, I want you to stay discreet about this and what I told you. The last thing I want is to be hounded everywhere by a pack of reporters, paparazzi and religious nut cases. I want to heal your sick people in private, as anonymously as possible.”

Nancy’s eyes then returned to their normal aspect. Baumgardner was ready to kneel before her but Nancy stopped her at once.

“Please, stay sitting! I don’t want to be revered or worshipped, nor does ‘The One’. I will do this simply by charity and because I care and believe in kindness. If you are ready to accept to keep mum with others about this, then I would be ready to start healing your sick community members tomorrow night. Select your sickest members, then lead me to them tomorrow night, or bring them to your church, where I could heal them in private. Do you agree to my conditions?”

“I...I do! I can call you once I will have arranged your visits.”

“Then, please note down my telephone number. It is on that beige telephone near you, on the low table.”

Bumgardner nodded her head, then took out a pen and a small notepad and wrote down the number visible on the telephone. Imitating Nancy, she got up from their sofa and pressed Nancy’s hand into her hands, deep emotions still showing on her face.

“This must be the most incredible day in my life, but it also is one of the happiest ones. Thank you in advance for offering to heal our poor community members.”

“I am the one who needs to thank you, for paying me a visit and informing me of this, Reverend. I will be expecting your call tomorrow.”

“And I will come pick you up in my car in order to simplify things. I drive a green VW Beetle.”

“A good idea, Reverend. Have a good evening.”

“You too, Nancy.”

Bumgardner then left, with Nancy closing and locking the door behind the pastor. Looking again at her watch, she saw that there was no point in trying to call Ingrid in Arlington before at least another four hours: ample time for her to go have a shower and change to then go to a restaurant for supper.

20:18 (New York Time)

Saturday, September 02, 1995 ‘C’

Metropolitan Community Church of New York

446 West 36th Street

Before stepping out of Pat Bumgardner’s car,



who had just parked in front of the white and brown brick façade of the Metropolitan Community Church of New York, Nancy put on the white and gold Venetian costumed ball mask she had bought in the morning and raised the hood of her long white robe over her head. She was as well wearing a pair of long white gloves when she got out of the car with the female pastor. With her theatrical costume hiding her identity, she followed Pat Bumgardner inside the church, entering via a set of double doors situated at street level. While crossing with the pastor the inside of the chapel, Nancy attracted some curious looks from the few church members present but didn't say a word and continued following Bumgardner to a door at the back of the chapel. Both of them then climbed a set of stairs, ending on an upper floor hallway lined with doors. Putting one hand on the handle of one door, Bumgardner looked up at the masked Nancy.

"Inside is Jonathan Farris, our sickest community member. He is 26 years-old, is gay and was diagnosed with AIDS some seven months ago. The doctors have basically given up on him and he anyway had no money left to pay for hospital treatments or even for his drugs."

"Did he contract AIDS via a sexual relationship or through an infected needle?"

"Jonathan's companion died of AIDS two months ago, Nancy. Both used illegal drugs. Jonathan is conscious, but very sick and weak. One of my assistants is in the room with him, caring for him as best she can while being careful not to get infected herself."

Nancy closed her eyes for a moment, saddened by this. She then entered the room behind the pastor and found herself facing a bed in which a young, very thin man lay, while a young woman sat in a chair set in a corner at some distance from the bed. The woman wore a surgical mask and gloves, plus a white nurse's apron. Bumgardner approached the patient in the bed from its left side, letting Nancy approach from the right side, and spoke softly to the young man, who wore a surgical mask.

"Jonathan... Jonathan... I brought a friend who could help you. I will ask you to have confidence in her and to stay calm, whatever you see or feel. Do you understand me?"

"Yes!" replied the man in a barely audible voice mixed with his wheezing breathing. That was when Nancy knelt next to his bed and applied both of her gloved hands on his chest.

"Do not be afraid by what is about to happen, Jonathan. I am here to help you."

Even though she had been forewarned by Nancy about what was to happen, Pat Bumgardner still couldn't help take one step back when Nancy's hands started to glow, with the glow gradually enveloping Jonathan's whole body. Soon, both Nancy and Jonathan became too bright to be looked at directly. Seeing that the young woman who had been watching over Jonathan was about to flee the room in near panic, the pastor grabbed her by one arm to stop her.

"Don't run out of here now, Cathy! This is the power of good at work, not some demon's act. Also, keep this to yourself: the friend I brought here needs anonymity in order to heal our sick community members."

The two women then watched as Nancy healed Jonathan in a couple of minutes, with the glow enveloping both of them gradually fading away. Pat Bumgardner felt her heart jump from joy in her chest when she saw that Jonathan was now looking healthy: the gauntness of his face was gone and his cheeks were full, while his breathing sounded completely normal. The young improvised nurse looked at that with incredulity while grabbing her hair with both hands.

"But how? How could this be possible?"

"Call it a gift from above, miss." replied Nancy before looking down at Jonathan, who was sitting up in his bed. "As for you, know that I also healed you from your drug dependency. However, if you don't want to become sick again, don't use illegal drugs again! Ever! Promise me that, Jonathan."

"I... I promise! Who are you?"

"As I said: a gift from above. Pat, you told me that you had another patient waiting for me here?"

"I did! He is in the next room to the right. Follow me."

Both Jonathan and the improvised nurse watched Nancy and Bumgardner leave the room, still having a hard time to believe what had just happened. The nurse finally took a stethoscope and quickly examined Jonathan, also checking his pulse and blood pressure before looking with incredulity at the young man.

"All your vitals are okay, Jonathan. You really are healed! This is nothing short of a miracle!"

"Well, maybe it WAS a miracle, Cathy. Do you know where my clothes are? I can't wait to walk out of here on my own power."

Despite Pat Bumgardner's admonitions to keep quiet about the two healings performed that night at the church, it took less than 24 hours before wild stories about a 'white angel' which could heal with the touch of her hands started circulating around the church's community and the local LGBTQ population. Those stories became even more widespread as more gay people suffering from AIDS were healed by the same 'white angel' during the following days.

12:06 (New York Time)

Thursday, September 07, 1995 'C'

Students cafeteria of the Juilliard School

Irene Diamond Building, West 65th Street

New York City

Having collected some food and a glass of milk at the service counter of the students' cafeteria of the school, Nancy went to a corner table occupied by her sister Lucy and by Sarah Weissman and sat opposite Lucy.

"High, Lucy! High Sarah! How did your piano class go?"

"A lot better than with my first class in mathematics this morning." replied Lucy after finishing to swallow a bite of her food. "I may be tops with a violin but, when it comes to mathematics, I am no Einstein. By the way, did you read the morning newspapers?"

"Uh, no! Is there something in them that could interest me?"

"You could say that." replied Lucy before searching for a moment in her school bag, lying on the floor next to her, and extracting from it a folded copy of the New York Times that she then passed to Nancy.

"Check page 3: you will love the top article."

Not knowing if this meant that she would truly love it or hate it, Nancy opened the newspaper to page 3 and scanned that page quickly. A title jumped at her eyes at once.

"A white angel is healing gay people sick with AIDS. Oops!"

"It's a 'oops' alright: the reporter who wrote the article seems to be on your scent, Nancy, and he appears to be quite a good investigator."

Nancy didn't reply at once, taking the time to read in full the article before looking back at Lucy.

"Uh, do you mind if I keep this newspaper, Lucy?"

"Go ahead, Nancy." said Lucy before lowering her voice to a near whisper. "Maybe you should slow down your healing activities or even suspend them for a while. If you are publicly outed as the 'White Angel', that could bring a lot of unwanted attention on you. Religious nut cases and reporters could then hound you all the way back to our apartment, while all the people in New York and beyond sick with AIDS could come and ask you to heal them. Then, you would have a hard time to concentrate on your studies."

Nancy felt some discouragement then, as Lucy was quite right about this.

"But I only wanted to help some poor people who were going to die from this horrible disease. And it's not as if I was doing those healings for money. How could I stop helping those people and watch as they die? I just can't do that!"

Lucy covered Nancy's left hand with her own right hand while smiling to her.

"Nancy, I love the way you always think about helping others, which is truly admirable. However, if you continue to heal people, then you will have to prepare some kind of response in case you are publicly outed as the White Angel."

"You are right, Lucy, but what kind of response should it be? I just can't think of anything right now."

"You will think about something, Nancy. Of that I am sure." replied Lucy in order to reassure her sister by adoption.

Nancy tried to keep that problem out of her mind for the rest of the day but only with partial success. Once the classes were over for the day, she returned to her apartment with the other girls of her band, using the bus line running along Tenth Avenue. After eating a quick supper at her place, she called her family home in Arlington, hoping that Ingrid would be home and not working late at the Pentagon...again. Thankfully, Ingrid answered her telephone after two rings.

"Hello?"

"Mom, this is Nancy! I have a little problem here and I really need your counsel." Somehow, Ingrid's voice then became tainted with some amusement.

"Is it about a certain white angel who is healing gay people sick with AIDS?"

"Uh, how do you know that?"

"How, because there have been snippets of information about that for the last two days in the medias, including on television news. You really should pay more

attention to the news medias, Nancy. It could help you avoid some embarrassing surprises.”

“I’m sorry, but I am concentrating presently on my studies and on helping others. That doesn’t leave me much time to watch the news on television.”

From amused, Ingrid’s voice went to concerned and understanding.

“Look, Nancy: this is not meant to criticize you. What you are doing is admirable and The One is most proud of you. Don’t worry about the consequences of your healings and continue to help those poor people. In the meantime, I will think of a way to help you.”

“Thank you for that, Mom! By the way, happy seventieth birthday to you!”
That made Ingrid laugh briefly.

“My staff actually threw a short birthday party for me today at the Pentagon, complete with a cake sporting seventy candles. One young lieutenant told me then that she wished that she could look as young as me when she would be seventy. I told her not to hold her breath about that.”

It was the turn of Nancy to giggle on hearing that.

“Right! I wish that I could be home today to properly wish you a happy birthday with a gift.”

“Nancy, your healing of those poor people was the best gift you could offer me. Continue to do good and don’t worry about the possible consequences.”

“Thank you, Mom! I love you! Have a nice evening!”

“You too, Nancy!”

Ingrid then cut the line. Nancy slowly put her own receiver down, now partly reassured by her mother’s words of support. She couldn’t help wonder then about what Ingrid would do to help her with her dilemma.

19:58 (New York Time)

Infectious diseases department

Mount Sinai West Hospital, 1000 Tenth Avenue

New York City

Nurse Rachel Irving was busy with another nurse and one doctor in a patient’s room, doing their best to alleviate the suffering of the young man who would probably die tonight from the multiple infections caused by AIDS, when a luminescent, semi-

transparent humanoid shape appeared next to the foot of the patient's bed. Both nurses and the doctor hurriedly stepped away in fear from the luminescent being but heard nearly at once a female voice in their heads.

'Do not fear me, as I came to help.'

Less than a second after that, the shape apparently exploded in a silent wave of blue light which enveloped the whole room, being so brilliant that Rachel Irving and the two others had to temporarily close their eyes. Still, they were able to perceive the intense blue light through their closed eyelids. Rachel was finally able to open again her eyes after a good ten seconds, just in time to see the luminescent being fade away and disappear. The other nurse, Sarah Chapman, quickly looked around the room but didn't see the apparition anywhere.

"What was that?"

"I don't know, but..." started to say Doctor Benjamin Shapiro, who then fell silent as he stared at the patient in his bed: the young man now looked healthy and was even removing by himself his oxygen mask in order to speak.

"Doctor, I don't feel any pain anymore. What happened?"

"Uh, I don't know, Mister Rubenstein. Let me examine you quickly."

Helped by Rachel Irving and Sarah Chapman, Shapiro took three minutes to examine his patient, finding him to be apparently healthy and free of medical problems. Sarah Chapman, who was wearing glasses, then removed her spectacles in apparent bafflement.

"What's wrong with these glasses? I..."

She then stopped speaking as she looked around her with growing joy.

"My myopia: it is gone! I can see perfectly without my glasses!"

Shapiro, completely overwhelmed by all this, put a reassuring hand on his patient's shoulder to keep him from stepping out of bed.

"Please stay in bed for the moment, Mister Rubenstein: I am going to get the senior doctor to examine you. We will then make you pass a few X-Rays to check on your lungs."

Walking quickly out of the patient's room, Shapiro could only make a few steps before he had to stop at the spectacle in the main hallway: both nurses and patients were now nearly dancing with joy or running around, as if a big party had just been called on.

"What the hell is happening here?"

Nearly running to the nearest nurses' duty station, he pointed an index at the senior nurse manning the desk.

"Miss Goldman, a sort of luminescent being appeared near me while I was in Mister Rubenstein's room, then exploded into blue light. Mister Rubenstein is now fully healthy. Have you heard something from the rest of the department?"

"It's the whole hospital, Doctor Shapiro!" nearly shouted the old nurse, smiling and with tears of joy on her cheeks. "All of our patients are now apparently healed. This is a miracle from God!"

Shapiro was taken aback by that, but quickly concluded that Nurse Goldman had to be right: nothing else could explain such a fantastic event and mass healing. He later learned that the blue wave had spread around all over the New York State and the adjacent states in the Northeast of the country, on top of touching parts of the Canadian provinces of Quebec and Ontario, healing everyone it touched of whatever illnesses, medical handicaps or wounds they had been suffering from. The next day, a similar occurrence happened on the West Coast, with a blue wave exploding from a San Francisco hospital and extending up and past the Canadian and Mexican borders.

CHAPTER 10 – FIRE IN THE CAUCASUS



The Caucasus Region.

02:16 (East Coast Time)

Wednesday, November 29, 1995 'C'

Bridge of the battle carrier U.S.S. NEPTUNE

Inside Drydock Number One of the Roanoke Shipyards

Virginia, U.S.A.

“The drydock doors are now fully opened, sir. We have authorization to leave the drydock.”

“Thank you, Miss Woods. Engines one quarter ahead, take us out.”

“Engines one quarter ahead, aye, sir!” replied the young bridge duty officer, who then retransmitted the order to the petty officers posted at the engine controls and at the ship’s wheel. Soon, the 73,000 tons, 420-meter-long aircraft carrier started slowly sailing out of the covered drydock where it had been built, which was presently lit only by red lamps, and into the night, floating into the shipyard’s completion basin. Normally, a newly built ship would be taken out of drydock well before that, to be completed at quayside in order to free the drydock for another ship to be built, but the level of secrecy concerning its design and capabilities had pushed the Navy and the Roanoke Shipyards into completing the U.S.S. NEPTUNE inside Drydock Number One. Even the transfer onboard of sixty aircraft of its embarked wing and the filling of its vast magazines and storage spaces had been done while inside the drydock. The battle carrier was thus already fully ready to go to sea and, if necessary, into combat while sailing out for the first time. However, the first mission of Rear Admiral Mack ‘Big Mac’ Benson, its captain, was to conduct the initial sea trials of the huge warship, in order to be able for it to be officially accepted into the United State Navy. Since the battle carrier’s design incorporated so many new or even revolutionary designs, it had been decided that the initial sea trials would also include the certification of its pilots for landing and takeoffs from the battle carrier and a series of test-firing of its weapons systems once at an official naval firing range.

Rear Admiral Mack Benson, a big, 188-centimeter-tall man with broad shoulders, muscular built and red hair, felt immense pride as his new command slipped out of its construction drydock. At the age of 48, this was going to be his third command at sea but it also was going to be by far the most significant one, as the advent of the U.S.S. NEPTUNE could well signal a revolution in ship design and in aircraft carrier operations, on top of revolutionizing naval warfare. Some forked tongues in the Navy Department had alluded that Mack had been given command of the U.S.S. NEPTUNE thanks to his friendship with the Secretary of Defense, John McCain, who was an ex-naval aviator. However, while Mack Benson was indeed a good friend of John McCain and was still a fully-qualified and flight-certified Navy pilot, he owned his new command to something else entirely. When Admiral Klasser, the Chief of Naval Operations, had wondered who

he should select as the first commander of the U.S.S. NEPTUNE, General Ingrid Dows had answered that Klasser should choose someone able to 'think outside of the box', in view of the revolutionary design of the new battle carrier. Klasser's reply to that had been that he in fact knew a qualified and competent commander who, in his opinion, 'lived outside of the box'. That commander had been Mack Benson. Benson, a naval aviator who had flown combat missions during the Second Korean War, was widely known as an unorthodox officer who exercised a high level of initiative, something that was grating on many senior admirals and had been endangering his prospects for further promotion in the Navy. Thus, Mack Benson could truly say that he had earned his new command thanks to his habit of 'interpreting his orders in innovative ways'. As for his relations with his younger crewmembers, his nickname of 'Big Mac' reflected the respect his sailors paid to him as much as it reflected his physical size. That his new command had come along with a long-delayed promotion to the rank of rear admiral (lower half) was the cherry topping up his cake.

The night of the sailing out had been chosen mostly because it would be a moonless one, something that would seriously impede the efforts of any would-be spy to take photos of the new carrier as it left its drydock for the first time. However, that moonless night presented no problems to the pilot and navigator of the battle carrier, thanks to the ship being equipped with the most modern ship sensors available, including thermal viewing cameras and ultra-high-definition navigation radars. Once fully out of the drydock building, Mack Benson then activated one other anti-spying device.

"Light up the anti-snoop projectors!"

On his order, forty powerful projectors equipped with conical reflectors and temporarily positioned along the edges of the flight deck lit up. While their conical reflectors would stop their light from illuminating the ship itself, they would also project outward blinding spots of lights that would make any attempt at photographing the ship fruitless, especially with low-level light lenses.

On the opposite bank of the Albermarle Sound, Peter Shilling, whose real name was Piotr Smirnov, thought at first that his long period of waiting inside his isolated shoreline cabin would finally be rewarded and hurried to prepare to take as many pictures as he could of the new American carrier. However, before he could even take his first photograph of the U.S.S. NEPTUNE, a number of powerful projectors lit up on

the ship, blinding him completely and also half-burning the sensitive night scope attached to his still camera. Exploding in frustration, he violently swore out loud as the carrier, visible only as a group of blinding lights, sailed past his cabin and down the Albermarle Sound.

“KAKOGO CHYORTA? SOOKSIN⁶!”

03:52 (East Coast Time)

Combat Information Center (C.I.C.) of the cruiser U.S.S. BUNKER HILL Sailing 83 nautical miles to the northeast of Norfolk, Virginia

Captain James Thurnbull was standing near the main tactical plot table of his ship’s C.I.C., along with a Navy radar systems engineer provided by the Pentagon for this occasion, when his signals officer approached him and stopped at attention.

“Sir, we just received a message from the U.S.S. NEPTUNE, announcing that it has sailed from the Albermarle Sound and is now at Point Alpha.”

Somehow, that seemed to confuse Thurnbull, who looked at the radar systems engineer next to him.

“But we have not detected it yet on our radar. At our present distance from Point Alpha, we should be getting a firm radar echo, especially when considering the size of the U.S.S. NEPTUNE. What do you make of that, Commander Jones?”

The said Jones gave an embarrassed smile to the cruiser captain at that question: he was fully in the know about this detection test, while Thurnbull was not.

“I would say that it seems that the design of our new battle carrier is as stealthy as we had hoped for, Captain.”

“But my cruiser is equipped with the best radar suite that we have in the Navy. How could it not detect such a big ship at such a relatively short range?”

“Because of the hull forms of the U.S.S. NEPTUNE, Captain. All its sides and its superstructures are sloped inward at significant angles which redirect incoming radar waves away instead of bouncing them back towards us. Right now, it seems that this new design is working perfectly. I would thus ask you to have your ship approach further Point Alpha, so that we could see at what distance we will be able to finally detect the U.S.S. NEPTUNE with our radars.”

⁶ Kakogo chyorta? Sooksin! What the Hell? Son of a bitch! (in Russian).

"Very well!" replied Thurnbull before shouting an order to his operations officer.

"Commander Jenkins, have us sail to Heading 170 at top speed! Keep a tight radar watch for the U.S.S. NEPTUNE!"

"Aye, Captain!"

Thurnbull then looked back at Jones.

"We will see soon enough how good that 'stealth' concept is, Mister Jones."

"Indeed, Captain!"

Some two hours later, with the BUNKER HILL now a mere 25 nautical miles from Point Alpha, Captain Thurnbull grumbled something to himself and threw a dark look at his sensors officer.

"Mister Gorman, are you sure that our radars are functioning properly? We should have had the U.S.S. NEPTUNE appear on our radar screens a long time ago."

"I know, sir! However, I can certify that all our radars are functioning correctly and at full power."

"Which makes this cruiser show up on passive electronic warfare sensors like a bright floodlight." said Jones, nearly jubilant by now: this was a most convincing proof that the stealth design of the new battle carrier was indeed extremely effective. "Right now, the NEPTUNE could probably target your ship with its own fire control radars, Captain."

"Let's continue to approach Point Alpha at top speed: I want to see when we will finally be able to detect this damn NEPTUNE." replied Thurnbull, hiding his frustration as best he could. If such a formidably armed ship as the NEPTUNE was indeed this close and still undetected, then it would be able to make minced meat of his beloved cruiser...or of any other warship.

Another twenty minutes or so passed, with each of them aggravating Thurnbull further as he waited for his sensors officer to finally announce that he had the NEPTUNE on radar. Suddenly, the cruiser launched into a hard turn to starboard, throwing many crewmembers on the deck and forcing Thurnbull and Jones to hurriedly grab the edge of the tactical plot table in able to steady themselves. Furious, Thurnbull grabbed a ship's telephone receiver and called his navigation bridge, getting his navigation officer on the line.

"WHY THE HELL DID YOU STEER THE SHIP THIS HARD WITHOUT WARNING, MISTER DAVIS?"

"It's the NEPTUNE, Captain! We had to do an emergency collision avoidance turn to starboard in order not to ram it. We saw it only when it lit up its own projectors and blew its horn."

"At what distance was it to us then?"

"Less than 2,000 yards I would say, Captain."

"WHAT? WE HAD A CARRIER LESS THAN 2,000 YARDS AHEAD OF US, WHILE WE STILL DON'T HAVE IT ON RADAR? THAT'S PURE SORCERY!"

"No, Captain." replied Jones to that. "That's the future of naval warfare at work."

15:43 (East Coast Time)

Navigation bridge of the U.S.S. NEPTUNE

Sailing towards the south off the American East Coast

"Sir, our top speed has now been verified twice and recorded as being 41.5 knots."

"Forty-one point five knots... Goddam! It is even better than what I was expecting. What is our present draught, Mister Collins?"

"Our keel is presently 32 feet below the surface, sir. We are at full load displacement, plus 2,000 tons of water ballast, to keep our underwater hulls fully submerged."

"Hmm... I would like to test the ship's stability when it has its ballast tanks full, but the sea is presently a very moderate one. Very well, Mister Collins: register our top speed test result in the ship's log, then check with our meteorological section to see if there is any storm brewing down our path to Puerto Rico. I really want to test the stability of our new carrier while sailing through a strong storm."

"Aye, sir!"

As his navigator walked away from his command chair, Benson gave an order to the petty officer sitting at the engine control bridge station.

"Reduce speed to thirty knots! Keep the present heading!"

"Reducing speed to thirty knots, keeping present heading, aye sir!"

Mack Benson then sat back in his command chair, a satisfied smile on his lips. While all the existing nuclear-powered American aircraft carriers could easily reach and sustain

speeds of thirty knots or more, the NEPTUNE possessed one big advantage over all of them: it didn't need to be accompanied by an escort flotilla of cruisers and destroyers. Those cruisers and destroyers could theoretically also maintain a speed of thirty knots but could only do so by burning huge amounts of oil fuel, thus cutting significantly on their autonomy. Because of that, a nuclear-powered carrier was in effect constrained by the range limitation of its escort flotilla, something that largely negated the value of being nuclear-powered itself. Those limitations also meant that a support fleet of tankers had to follow nearby, in order to refuel the flotilla every few days, unless the carrier group reduced its speed significantly to the cruising speed of the escort ships. In the case of the NEPTUNE, its formidable armament and full range of sensors, including sonars, meant that it didn't need an escort flotilla, thus was fully free to maneuver and sail at full speed whenever and as long as it wished, which was a huge advantage in Mack's opinion. Also, any non-nuclear enemy ship trying to keep up with his new battle carrier would quickly run out of fuel...if it was not sunk first by missiles from the NEPTUNE.

His navigation officer returned on the bridge some fifteen minutes later, a meteorological map in his hands.

"Sir, a storm has been signaled off the coast of Florida. Here is its present position and estimated heading and speed."

Taking the map offered by Collins, Mack studied it for a moment before nodding his head.

"That storm suits me just fine, Mister Collins. Steer us towards it: we will enter it first at our present displacement, to see how it affects us, then we will fill our ballast tanks to attain maximum stability. Be ready then to record in detail the data from our inclinometers while we sail through that storm. I want to verify that we could then still be stable enough to launch or retrieve our aircraft."

"Understood, sir!"

As Collins plotted a new course heading and gave orders to the helmsman, Mack mentally hoped that this new SWATH hull design would truly prove as stable in bad weather as it had been promised to be. An aircraft carrier that couldn't operate its embarked aircraft because of bad weather was basically reduced to a nearly-impotent floating parking lot for combat aircraft. Sure, the formidable missile battery of the NEPTUNE, along with its four 127mm and six 76mm dual-purpose guns, would then still make it a most lethal ship, but not being able to launch or retrieve its embarked aircraft

would be a severe handicap in combat. Those thoughts made Mack remember the incident in World War 2 when Admiral Halsey had made his fleet sail through a typhoon. His fleet had sustained some heavy damage and had even lost a few of its smaller ships, while his carriers had seen many of their aircraft parked on their flight decks being either swept out by huge waves or damaged. Right now, the flight deck of the NEPTUNE was empty of aircraft, but not because it had none aboard: 56 aircraft presently sat in its huge aircraft hangar, with enough space left for 24 more aircraft, if they were crammed in tighter, another advantage provided by its SWATH design's roomy shape.

17:04 (East Coast Time)

Bridge of the Russian cruiser GROZNYI (KYNDA-Class)

Sailing off the Florida coast



Russian KYNDA-Class missile cruiser

Captain Valentin Klimov was both elated and worried as his cruiser was starting to follow the unknown American aircraft carrier they had spotted by sheer luck a few minutes ago. Elated because that spotting was giving him the opportunity to examine from up close a totally new and unknown type of American carrier; worried because the fact that the Americans had built an aircraft carrier which was apparently invisible to radar represented a huge threat to Russia if it ever started hostilities against the United States. Klimov's cruiser had sailed out of Havana Harbor a day ago after conducting a classic 'showing of the flag' around Cuba and had been on its way back to its home port of St-Petersburg, in the Baltic, when a huge aircraft carrier of unknown type had been

spotted in the distance. Klimov had immediately ordered his pilot to reverse course and get closer to the giant carrier, so that photographs of it could be taken. Unfortunately, that American carrier was proving to be a very speedy one, forcing Klimov into pushing his cruiser to the limit of its machinery. In turn, that meant that he was going to drastically cut his autonomy, possibly to the point where he would be forced to return to Havana in order to refuel before heading home again. However, learning about that new American carrier was well worth the trouble, in his opinion. His first officer, Commander Konstantin Marchenko, then appeared on the bridge and went to Klimov's command chair before speaking to him in a lowered voice.

"Captain, we were unable to send our sighting report to Fleet Headquarters: we encountered strong radio jamming before we could complete our message. We attempted to use another frequency but that was also jammed nearly at once." Klimov swore at that, making a couple of sailors nearby turn their heads for an instant.

"Chyort⁷! It must be that American carrier: they probably want to delay as much as possible any information about it to filter back to Moscow. Well, we will send our message from Cuba if need be. What do you think about that new American carrier, Konstantin?"

Marchenko couldn't help glance out through the windows of the bridge at the dark silhouette of the giant American ship some eleven nautical miles away.

"That it is definitely a new worry for us, Captain. The fact that we still can't see it on our radar despite its relative proximity is frankly disturbing. Also, its size means that it can probably transport a large number of aircraft, possibly up to a hundred or more of them. If it ever attacked Russia or our ships, then it would probably cause us a lot of damage. Moscow definitely needs to know about it."

"I concur! We will thus do our best to trail it and get closer to it in order for us to examine and photograph it. Tell our ship's photographer to be ready with his cameras loaded with low light level films.

"Yes, Captain!"

Marchenko then left the bridge, leaving Klimov free to return his attention to the American carrier. Despite going at its maximum speed of 34 knots, Klimov's cruiser was only very slowly cutting the distance between it and the carrier. In turn, going at such a speed in a less than calm sea meant that the GROZNY's ride was a bumpy one.

⁷ Chyort : 'Damn' or 'Hell' in Russian.

Klimov was too well aware of the fact that his ship and the other three cruisers in its class were known to be top-heavy and to be somewhat unstable in rough seas, which meant that he had to run some risks in order to trail that American carrier. The fact that they could still not see it on radar prompted Klimov into calling to him one of the bridge officers, who was in charge of the lookouts. That officer, a young man of 24, also happened to be one of his nephews.

"Sergei, I want you to double our lookouts around our open bridge wings. We cannot afford to lose sight of that carrier. Also, have them don life vests before stepping outside: we are approaching some bad weather."

"Understood, Captain!" replied his nephew, saluting Klimov before going to see his lookouts standing outside the bridge.

17:49 (East Coast Time)

Navigation bridge of the battle carrier U.S.S. NEPTUNE

Mack Benson, standing next to one of the armored windows of the bridge, looked critically at the state of the sea around his ship, then at the inclinometers that indicated the angle at which his carrier was pitching and rolling. While the ride was definitely rougher than before they entered this storm area, it still was quite manageable, the huge size of his ship in terms of length and beam helping to soak up the effects of the waves. It was now time to see how he could effectively gain more stability despite of that storm.

"Mister Collins, fill our ballast tanks! Go to overload condition!"

"Aye, Captain!"

As Collins relayed his orders and checked on his bridge personnel, Mack returned his attention to the dark sky and agitated sea outside. One objection he had heard against SWATH hull designs was that managing any change in a ship's loaded condition would be difficult, due to the tight buoyancy margins of a typical SWATH hull. The designers of the NEPTUNE had gone around that problem by fitting it with larger than needed underwater hulls, giving it much higher buoyancy than what was required, and to add ballast tanks that would allow the ship to adjust its displacement independent of how loaded the ship really was. That in turn allowed the NEPTUNE's keel to stay at a depth that would help strongly attenuate the effect of waves, thus making it more stable in rough seas. A pair of stabilizer ailerons linking the lateral and centerline underwater

hulls together would also help dampen their rolling and pitching. He was soon going to know if that concept truly worked.

The answer to that question came quickly enough, with Mack feeling after only a couple of minutes a very apparent and dramatic improvement in the ride and stability of his ship as its keel went down to a depth of 12.5 meters. Looking in turn at the sea state, the speed of his ship and the inclinometers, Mack nodded his head, impressed.

“Wow! This is really working! The sea must be at least at sea state five and we are doing thirty knots, yet the ship is rock steady, with our flight deck barely rolling or pitching. We could easily launch or retrieve aircraft right now. Miss Woods, do we still have this Russian cruiser tailing us?”

“Yes, sir, but it is rolling and pitching like a cork plug. They must be enduring quite a beating right now. If I was the captain of that ship, I would abandon that pursuit and slow down drastically.”

“I would too, but I can understand why they are persisting in their efforts. Keep me advised of any change in their course and speed, Miss Woods.”

“Aye, Captain!”

On the GROZNY, Captain Klimov and his crew were effectively getting severely beaten by the sea and were having to hold on tight to fixed objects in order to stay on their feet. Klimov, holding tight to the armrests of his command chair, swore silently to himself as the giant American carrier was gradually disappearing out of sight with the coming darkness of the evening. Soon, he was going to be unable to sight it visually, while his ship's radar could only get a very faint echo from the stern aspect of the carrier, even at the short distance of six nautical miles. However, his main worry now was about his own ship: its rolling was approaching the maximum safe angle preventing it from capsizing and the storm appeared to be intensifying further as the minutes passed. The GROZNY and its sister ships had been scheduled to be retired a few years earlier already, but the chaotic days after the Moscow Coup had resulted in severe cuts to the military budgets of Russia and there had been no money available to build new replacement ships. The GROZNY, now having been in service for 33 years and with ageing machinery and hull, thus had to go on, at least for another few more years.

The cruiser had just recuperated from a brutal slamming caused by the ship pitching down hard and digging inside the sea when an alarmed shout came from one of the bridge lookouts.

“BIG WAVE COMING FROM STARBOARD!”

Snapping his head in that direction, Klimov immediately felt his blood freeze in his veins: what he was now looking at could easily win the title of ‘rogue wave’. Worse, it was going to slam directly into the starboard flank of the cruiser, the worse possible scenario for Klimov in the present circumstances.

“ALL CREW: BRACE FOR IMPACT!”

A mere few seconds later, that giant wave slammed into the cruiser’s side, even submerging its decks as it washed over the ship. A horrible noise of tortured metal was heard as the cruiser rolled hard to port. Klimov, watching the readings from his inclinometers, then saw with horror the needle of his roll indicator reach and then pass the red line indicating the safe rolling limit. He had no time to give an order before the roll turned into a capsizing, with his cruiser’s port side ending on the surface of the sea. The bridge windows on the port side exploded under the pressure of the water as the GROZNY completely capsized in seconds, with Klimov and his bridge crew drowning shortly afterwards, trapped inside their sinking ship.

On the starboard open bridge wing, Ensign Sergei Klimov and two of his lookouts were able at first to hold on to the bulwark of the bridge wing as their cruiser capsized, but soon found themselves swimming for their lives in the cold Atlantic water. Only their life vests allowed them to reach the surface and burst out in time to gasp for air. Seeing one of the two lookouts close to him, Sergei Klimov swam to him and grabbed his left arm.

“LET’S HOLD TOGETHER BY OUR ARMS: WE WILL BETTER BE ABLE TO FLOAT THAT WAY.”

“VASYLI, I DON’T SEE HIM!” said the lookout, referring to the other lookout.

“HE WAS PROBABLY WASHED AWAY FROM US. WE WILL PROBABLY BE ABLE TO SEE HIM SOON.” replied Sergei, not really believing his own words but doing his best to reassure his sailor. Another wave then crashed over their heads, sending them down again. Thankfully, they were able to keep hold of each other and they resurfaced again after a few seconds. The lookout, a young man barely out of his teens, then cried out in fear.

"DEAR GOD, I DON'T WANT TO DIE!"

"YOU WILL NOT DIE, YURI! DO AS I SAY AND YOU WILL LIVE."

On the bridge of the U.S.S. NEPTUNE, Mack Benson suddenly heard an alarmed shout from First Lieutenant Betty Woods.

"SIR, THE RUSSIAN CRUISER HAS JUST DISAPPEARED OUT OF SIGHT. I CAN'T SEE IT ANYMORE AND IT ALSO DISAPPEARED FROM OUR RADAR."

That made Mack snap his head around at once, concerned. Even in war, the laws of the sea dictated that any sailor from a sunken or sinking ship, be it enemy or friendly, had to be rescued from the sea. Mack may have been innovative about his tactics, but he still believed in naval traditions and honor.

"HELM, TURN HARD PORT! HEAD AT TOP SPEED FOR THE LAST POSITION OF THAT RUSSIAN CRUISER."

As the helmsman was obeying him, Mack grabbed the ship's telephone next to his command chair, dialing his air operations center.

"Air Ops, this is the Captain! Launch immediately our plane guard aircraft: the Russian cruiser trailing us apparently just sank. Do your best to find and rescue any survivors from that cruiser."

"Understood, Captain. Our duty PELICAN should take off in less than five minutes."

"Good!" said Mack before calling his operations officer, presently on watch in the ship's Combat Information Center. "Mister Carpenter, the Russian cruiser trailing us apparently just sank and we are turning around to render assistance. Have both a boat crew and divers plus a small detachment of marines on standby in case we find survivors. I also want our medical center to be ready to treat those survivors."

"I'm on it, Captain."

Benson then put back down his telephone receiver and looked out through the bridge's windows and grimaced: in such a strong storm, he didn't expect many survivors to be found, if any.

Inside the flight deck-level aircraft hangar that was part of the aft superstructures, the six-person crew of the plane guard Hiller PELICAN 'A' rushed to their aircraft as the doors of the small hangar were being opened, letting in strong winds and some rain and sea spray. At the same time, the hangar operator opened wide the back doors,

designed to allow an aircraft to light up its engines inside the hangar for a quick exit. As soon as Lieutenant (Navy) Diane Bowman was strapped into her pilot's seat and saw that all her crewmembers were aboard, with no deck technicians in the way, she lit up in succession the four interlinked turboshaft engines of her aircraft, a militarized and navalised variant of the very successful Hiller AIRBUS civilian VTOL⁸ short-haul transport. After a quick instrument check with her copilot, Second Lieutenant Jerry Kronenberger, Bowman switched on the electric motors of the retractable landing wheels which were lodged inside the two long cylindrical floats running along the sides of her machine, then made the PELICAN 'A' roll out of its hangar on its own power. The strong winds started shaking the PELICAN as Bowman unfolded and locked into position the four large ducted propellers of the craft, which had been folded to the vertical along the sides while inside the hangar.

"Damn! We can expect a bumpy ride, people. Make sure that you have your seat belts on before we take off."

After a quick look at her crewmembers behind her, in the passenger cabin, Bowman then throttled up her engines and adjusted the pitch of her four ducted propellers, which were presently in flat horizontal positions, making her machine jump deftly into the air. She immediately had to use her ducted propellers' vectoring flaps in order to compensate for the winds, which were trying to push her PELICAN back against the superstructures of the U.S.S. NEPTUNE.

"Those winds are truly vicious, Jerry. I will concentrate on my flying while you keep an eye out for Russian survivors."

Jerry Kronenberger, a young man who had graduated from the naval flight school only two years earlier, nodded his head and switched on the multi-sensors mini-turret situated under the chin of their aircraft, then started scanning the surface of the ocean ahead as the PELICAN 'A' sped away from the battle carrier. The night had by then fully fallen, while intermittent lightning bolts flashed down among low black clouds.

"Nice night for flying, eh, Diane?"

"You can say that again, Jerry." replied Bowman, constantly using her controls to keep the winds from pushing them off course. "KEEP A GOOD EYE OUT, GUYS! SURVIVORS WILL BE DIFFICULT TO SEE IN THIS WILD SEA."

⁸ VTOL : Vertical Takeoff and Landing.

Her two observers/gunners, loadmaster and rescue diver all raised a thumb in response, signifying that they were vigilant at their posts.

The combat search and rescue aircraft arrived on the scene of the Russian cruiser's sinking some three minutes later, seeing at once a number of floating debris at the surface of the ocean. At first, the crewmembers saw no signs of any survivors and, after five minutes of searching, were starting to feel discouragement. Then, Jerry Kronenberger saw something through the thermal camera of his multi-sensors mini-turret.

"I HAVE TWO WARM SIGNATURES AT THE SURFACE, TO OUR TWO O'CLOCK!"

"Veering right!" replied Diane Bowman. "TOM, HOOK UP OUR RESCUE BASKET AND OPEN THE BELLY HATCH."

"AYE, LIEUTENANT!" said Petty Officer First Class Thomas Kirkland, their loadmaster, before activating the overhead rescue winch in order to lower its hooking cables. Opening the floor hatch in the center of the passenger cabin and uncovering their rescue basket, he then hooked the basket to the winch cables and verified that it was well secured, then opened the outer belly hatch that would allow the rescue basket to be lowered. At that point, their rescue diver, Petty Officer Second Class Ricardo Alban, wearing a thick dry suit, a mask and a pair of fins, sat on the edge of the hatch, ready to get inside the basket the moment it would be needed. He had to wait only half a minute before Jerry Kronenberger spoke up on the intercom.

"WE ARE OVER TWO MEN WITH LIFE VESTS SWIMMING ON THE SURFACE. TIME TO GO GET THEM, GUYS!"

"Get in, Rick!" said Kirkland, who then started lowering the rescue basket once the diver was in it. Using the communication wire linking the basket to the aircraft, Alban then guided the pilot and the loadmaster as he descended towards the stormy waves, all the time keeping his eyes on the two men now visible on the surface.

"Veer right a bit... We are now in line with the two survivors and some twenty feet from them... STOP! Lower the basket into the water, Tom."

The loadmaster obeyed him and lowered the rescue basket into the ocean, where its plastic foam flotation ring kept it on the surface. Using a telescopic gaffe, Alban was able after a couple of attempts to hook the loop in the back of one of the Russians' life vests and pulled him towards the basket. Since they were linking arms, the two Russian

survivors came to him at the same time. Opening the chain gate of the rescue basket, Alban was soon able to pull in the two Russians inside the basket, then secured its gate before telling the loadmaster to start winching the basket back up. As they were rising from the water, Alban made a big encouraging smile to the two shivering Russian sailors, using one of the very few words of Russian he knew.

“You will be safe now, tovarich⁹.”

“Spasiba¹⁰, tovarich.” Replied in a weak voice Sergei Klimov, half-frozen and shivering. With the two Russians not knowing English, their conversation was limited to that as the rescue basket returned inside the aircraft. As soon as it was secured in place, the loadmaster helped the two Russians out of it and made them sit on two of the 45 passenger seats of the PELICAN ‘A’, then offered them a thermos of hot coffee, which Sergei and Yuri gratefully accepted. As they sipped in turn the hot coffee and as the crew of the aircraft continued to search for more possible survivors, Sergei spoke in a low voice to his young sailor, using Russian.

“Remember, Yuri: while we are not at war with the Americans, you only need to tell them your name, rank, date of birth and service number. I will do the same and will also tell them the name of our ship, but no more. Normally, I wouldn’t even reveal the name of our ship but our fleet headquarters will need to know that the GROZNY was lost. If the Americans ask you more questions, politely refuse to answer them, even if it concerns your family.”

“What do you think that they will do with us, sir?”

“Well, since we are not at war and since they showed enough humanity to come search for us, I don’t expect them to brutalize us or interrogate us at length. They will probably fly us tomorrow to one of their bases in the region, where they will probably put us on a plane to Russia. Remember: say only your name, rank, date of birth and service number.”

“I understand, sir.” Said weakly the young lookout before taking another sip of hot coffee.

Diane Bowman kept flying around for another twenty minutes, searching for more survivors, but found none. She finally decided to return to the battle carrier, where she

⁹ Tovarich : Comrade in Russian.

¹⁰ Spasiba : Thank you in Russian.

landed back a few minutes later, as the U.S.S. NEPTUNE had approached the sinking site and was now slowly turning around it. Rolling back into her assigned hangar after folding up her ducted propellers, Diane shut down her engines and did a final instrument check before getting up from her pilot's seat and going to see the two Russians as Kirkland lowered the rear access ramp of the PELICAN 'A' to let a Navy medic, four armed marines and one officer come aboard. That officer turned out to be Lieutenant Commander Kimi Kawena, the ship's intelligence officer. Kawena nodded to Bowman once inside the low-ceiling cabin.

"Nice job you did out there, Lieutenant Bowman. I will now take charge of these two Russians: I happen to be fluent in Russian."

Diane Bowman was not surprised by that, due to the fact that Kawena was from the Intelligence Branch of the Navy. She was also widely known to be an accomplished linguist, being fluent in Chinese, Japanese and Spanish. Diane also knew that she was the daughter of a highly decorated veteran, retired Brigadier General Jennifer Kawena, who had fought as an intelligence officer during World War 2, the First Korean War, the Indochina Conflict, the Palestine Conflict and the East Europe War, all at the side of the famous Ingrid Dows. While in her late thirties, Kimi Kawena was still a very beautiful woman, with her mixed Polynesian-Japanese bloodline adding an exotic touch to her looks. She was also both admired and respected by the crew for her competence and her kindness and respect towards her subalterns. Diane thus left Kawena, the medic and the marines take care of the two Russians and exited her aircraft, returning to her squadron's ready room in order to fill her flight report.

After asking the four armed marines to stay a bit back, in order not to alarm the two Russian survivors, Kimi and the medic guided Sergei and Yuri out of the PELICAN and across the hangar. Her first destination was the ship's medical center, a large, superbly equipped facility able to fully treat dozens of combat casualties at a time. There, a doctor quickly examined the two Russians and found them mostly healthy apart from suffering moderate cases of hypothermia. Kimi waited until the Russians had been treated and given a hot shower and dry, unmarked work coveralls, before finally asking them her first question in Russian, addressed to the junior officer.

"First, let me say that I am happy to see that we were able to save you and your sailor. I am Lieutenant Commander Kimi Kawena and I am the intelligence officer of the U.S.S. NEPTUNE. Do not worry about what will happen to you now: you will be well

treated and will be flown to one of our bases in the Caribbean, where you will be able to take a plane to Russia, probably via Cuba. The only thing I will need for you are your name, rank, service number, date of birth and the name of your ship. By the way, can you tell me how many men there were aboard your cruiser?"

Sergei Klimov lowered his head in sadness before answering in a soft voice.

"There were 390 men aboard the GROZNY. I am afraid that they had next to no chance to survive this: a rogue wave slammed against the side of our cruiser and made it capsize in mere seconds."

Kimi nodded politely at that: she knew about the design faults of the KYNDA-Class cruisers and their top weight problems. Also, going at full speed through a strong storm certainly couldn't have helped the hapless Russian cruiser. She then wrote down the personal information of the two Russians before smiling again to Sergei Klimov.

"Are you and your sailor hungry? I can have you eat a hot meal before leading you to your bunks."

The two Russians exchanged a glance and a nod before Sergei answered Kimi.

"A hot meal would be nice, thank you."

"Then, follow me!"

Still followed from a few paces behind her by the four armed marines, Kimi led the two Russians out of the medical complex and down a series of passageways, arriving after two minutes or so later at the officers' wardroom, which covered a surface of 800 square meters. Sergei was at once taken by the vastness of that compartment. In fact, everything on this ship seemed to him to be on a gigantic scale. He became further impressed when he was able to taste his first bite of the menu of the day, a chicken pot pie with fresh vegetables. The food aboard the GROZNY, even in the officers' mess, could not even start to compare with the food here. Starting to truly relax for the first time since he had been fished out of the frigid waters of the Atlantic, he looked around the wardroom to embrace details about it. While not truly luxurious-looking, its furnishing and decoration gave it a warm, welcoming look.

"This is a nice ship, Lieutenant Commander. I must say though that this is the first time that I visit an aircraft carrier."

"The U.S.S. NEPTUNE is brand new, thus benefits from the best we have right now. However, you will understand that you will have to be restricted to only a very limited portion of the ship, as many of our systems and equipment are classified."

“That is perfectly understandable to us, Lieutenant Commander: the Russian Navy also takes to heart the protection of its secrets. What will happen after we finish eating?”

“I will lead you to the two bunks assigned to you where you will stay until we can fly you out in the morning. You will also have access to a nearby washroom but to nothing else. Be advised that armed marines will be posted near your bunks, in order to control your movements. If you ever feel sick or in pain, then tell your guards the word ‘doctor’ and they will then bring you back to our medical center.”

“Talking of your medical center, I must say that I was impressed by its size and quality of equipment: I could have believed myself to be in a top Moscow hospital.” Kimi gently smiled at that.

“Like I said, the facilities aboard the NEPTUNE are the best we have. I...” Kimi suddenly stopped talking and rose to her feet, standing at attention, as a big redhead man approached their table. Sergei, out of military habit, got up as well while signaling Yuri to do the same. He then saw that the newcomer wore the insignia ranks of a one-star admiral! He thus saluted him at the same time as Kimi saluted. The admiral returned their salutes, then solidly shook Sergei’s hand while saying something in English that Kimi translated in Russian.

“Rear Admiral Benson is the captain of the U.S.S. NEPTUNE. He is happy that you and your sailor could be saved, but he is also sad about the loss of so many lives on the GROZNY.”

Looking into the eyes of the big, graying officer, Sergei saw only genuine feelings on his face and returned his handshake.

“I am Ensign Sergei Klimov and this is Sailor First Class Yuri Luschenko. I must thank you with the way your people quickly rescued us. Did you find any other survivors after we arrived here?”

“Unfortunately not. Tomorrow, weather permitting, one of our planes will fly you to Puerto Rico, where another plane will fly you to Cuba, where your embassy will be able to take care of you. Again, I sincerely regret the deaths of your comrades on your cruiser.”

Once Kimi had translated those words to Sergei, Benson walked away, leaving behind a slightly intimidated ensign. Kimi then smiled to him and Yuri.

“Well, feel free to finish your meal, gentlemen. After that, you will be able to catch some sleep.”

Sergei could only agree to that and promptly sat back to attack again his chicken pot pie.

With Kimi again in the lead, Sergei and Yuri were guided after supper to a long, large passageway situated one deck down from where the officers' wardroom had been. Yuri, like Sergei, then couldn't help look with bemusement towards both ends of the seemingly endless passageway.

"Zaebis¹¹! How long is this passageway?"

"Long enough!" answered Kimi, unwilling to tell to the Russians how long the NEPTUNE was, which was 42'0 meters. "You will use two of our emergency alcoves, meant to accommodate large numbers of short-term occupants, like survivors from a sunken ship or evacuees from a war zone."

"Or troops for an amphibious operation?" sneakily suggested Sergei, making Kimi grin.

"Or troops. While not as comfortable as the accommodations given to our permanent crewmembers, you will find those alcoves very comfortable. Here is the one assigned to you, Ensign Klimov. It has a bunk bed situated over a large storage bin and two drawers, with a personal locker next to it. The alcove itself is quite deep, to allow the occupant to dress or undress inside it, and has a privacy curtain."

Both Russians looked with big, unbelieving eyes at the said alcove, which had a depth of 1.5 meters and a free height of one meter. Its walls were painted a soft blue-green tone and a number of shelves and a reading light were visible inside. Sergei then pointed at the small flat screen television set hooked to a wall via a shock-absorbing stand.

"Your...your sailors have a television next to their bunks?"

"Yes!" said proudly Kimi, who had herself been overwhelmed at first by the quality of the living facilities when she had first set foot on the NEPTUNE. "Every crewmember, either enlisted or officer, has a television set, on which they can watch five of the most popular television channels in the United States. This may appear like an extravagant luxury but the ability to watch national news, shows and sports events during their off time and in private is doing wonders for the crew's morale."

"And even your lowliest sailors have such...alcoves, miss?" asked a disbelieving Yuri, attracting a devilish grin on Kimi's face.

"Oh no! They have better than this."

¹¹ Zaebis : Holy shit! In Russian.

Before the Russians could protest that, Kimi signaled them to follow her to the next intersection of the long passageway, turning into a short passageway with two watertight doors along its sides. Opening one of the doors, she let Sergei and Yuri step inside another corridor running along the port side of the ship and lined with dozens of light, sliding doors.

“You are now inside one of the sailors’ quarters sections of the ship, which contains 24 individual cabins for junior enlisted ranks. Every crewmember on this ship, from the admiral to the most junior sailor, has his or her own private cabin with, at the minimum, a bunk bed with drawers, a locker, a desk with a chair and a television set. Before you think that I am lying, I must recognize that the living facilities on this ship are way above the standards of our other, older ships. When they started to design this carrier, our combined forces commander, General Dows, insisted that the Navy needed to drastically improve the quality of living of our sailors when at sea. So, you now have those individual cabins, which provide privacy to everyone aboard.”

As the two Russians exchanged bewildered glances, Kimi went to the nearest sliding door and, after checking that its lock was in the ‘unlocked’ position, knocked lightly on it. Not getting an answer, she slid the door open and quickly checked inside to make sure that there was no occupant in it, then invited the Russians to have a look. What they saw was a tiny, two-meter by 2.5-meter cabin that contained a captain’s bed, a steel locker, a small desk with chair and book shelf and a small flat screen television set. A number of posters of music and movie stars were fixed to the walls.

“This is a typical cabin for a junior sailor, gentlemen.”

Sergei Klimov gave her a nearly haggard look.

“And how is your own cabin, Lieutenant Commander?”

“It is much larger than this, of course, as I am a senior officer. It actually has a bit less than four times the deck surface of this sailor’s cabin and, most importantly, has its own private bathroom with sink, toilet and a shower stall.”

“Bozhe moi¹²! They will never believe me back in Saint-Petersburg.”

Kimi then couldn’t help laugh out loud at Sergei’s discomfited look and tone.

The next morning, with the storm having abated, a PELICAN took off from the NEPTUNE with Sergei Klimov and Yuri Luschenko aboard, heading to Puerto Rico.

¹² Bozhe moi : My god! In Russian.

That was the first and last time that Sergei was able to clearly see the shape and size of the battle carrier. What he saw then stunned him.

“Bozhe moi! I never saw the likes of this before.”

Remembering his duties as a Russian naval officer, he mentally recorded what he could see of the NEPTUNE as the PELICAN flew away from it, including the fact that no less than ten medium caliber gun turrets were visible and that a long runway ran along its starboard side, while three aircraft elevators were also plainly visible. He however was unable to locate any missile launcher system, something that left him perplex: such a new and modern ship must have had some missile systems. However, that would be up to the naval intelligence people in Saint-Petersburg to elucidate that mystery, along with many other things about this new American carrier.

05:59 (Caucasus Time)

Sunday, January 7, 1996 ‘C’

Armenian defensive position near the border with Azerbaijan

Territory of Nagorno-Karabakh (under Armenian control)

South Caucasus region



Private Anton Varanian had difficulty not to fall asleep at his post, having been on watch duty since ten last night. Because of the Christian Orthodox Christmas, many of his comrades were presently gone on permission, thus leaving the defensive positions

along the border with Azerbaijan lightly manned. Armenia, along with the Nagorno-Karabakh Region, which it controlled, was not presently at war with Azerbaijan, but their relations had been tense for years now, partly because of ethnic and religious hostility but also because of Azerbaijan's claims that Nagorno-Karabakh, an ex-autonomous region of the now defunct Soviet Union, belonged to Azerbaijan, something that Armenia strongly denied. There had also been numerous border clashes along the years, but those had been contained and prevented from turning into full-scale wars by the Soviets. Unfortunately, Moscow now controlled little more than what officially constituted the Russian Republic these days and even had difficulties keeping in hand its distant territories in Siberia and along the Pacific Coast. On the other hand, the government of Azerbaijan, which was a Muslim republic, had found a sympathetic ally in the neighboring new Caucasus Independent Republic, which was also a Muslim state, and a radical one at that. Unfortunately, Armenia had very few allies in the region. It certainly could not ask for the help of Turkey, because of the intense historical animosity dating back to the infamous Armenian Genocide, a series of massacres of Armenians by Turkish forces during World War One, and by the Turkey-Armenia War of 1920, when Turkey had invaded the territory of the first Armenian Republic and had annexed much of it. Most of the European powers and the United States had studiously stayed officially neutral for years, while both Iraq, Iran and Syria kept their distances with the present dispute. The only ones who could possibly be counted on to help in some way was the recently formed Kurdistan Autonomous Province, which had split from Iraq after the death of the Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein. However, the Kurds had their own problems, having to face hostility from Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran, although Iran had shown far more tolerance than the others towards Kurdistan.

Anton felt relief when the first rays of dawn appeared on the eastern horizon: he soon would be relieved and would then be able to get some badly needed sleep. His eyes suddenly were attracted to a series of brief flashes of light far to the East. Being young and inexperienced, he didn't recognize those flashes for what they were and was taken by surprise when he heard many seconds later the rumble of artillery guns firing a massive salvo, followed more seconds later by the howl of incoming shells. Anton barely had time to crouch down in his wood and earth bunker before the shells started impacting and exploding around him. Then, a shell made a direct hit on the underground shelter connected to his bunker by a short trench, collapsing its overhead

cover and killing the Armenian soldiers inside it. With his ears ringing and with shells still exploding around him in a dense pattern, Anton could only look with horror at what was now left of the dugout shelter: he was now alone to defend this position. The thought of fleeing to the rear once the artillery fire would stop crossed his mind for a moment, but he then quickly rejected it. The Azerbaijanis would undoubtedly follow up this artillery barrage with a ground assault and he was loath to leave this position undefended. The local capital of Stepanakert was less than twenty kilometers away, with few Armenian Army units close by to defend it. He had to slow down and block any Azerbaijani advance in this portion of the border in order to give some time to other Armenian units to mobilize and recall their soldiers from leave. Getting back up once the artillery fire slackened, Anton took position behind the PKM 7.62mm medium machine gun of his bunker and pulled its arming lever twice, loading a round into its chamber, then looked through the firing slit built on the Azerbaijan-facing side by piled sandbags and old car tires. Dawn was still young, so he could not see much at first. Some movements in the fields and patches of trees in front of his bunker then attracted his eyes after a few more minutes. Grabbing the binoculars left in his bunker by his now dead squad leader, Anton anxiously scrutinized the grounds in front of him. He stiffened when he saw a number of furtive dark shapes cautiously moving towards him, going from cover to cover at a crouch. Again, fear filled Anton for a moment but he was able to overcome it and quickly brought next to his machine gun additional ammunition boxes which had been stacked in one corner of his bunker. When he looked again through the firing slit, he saw that, probably emboldened by the apparent lack of reaction from his side, the Azerbaijani soldiers who had been approaching his bunker had now straightened up and were running openly towards him. With the rays of the rising Sun in their back being attenuated by low clouds on the horizon, those Azerbaijanis were now perfectly silhouetted for him. With both hatred and resolve filling him, Anton grabbed the pistol grip of his machine gun and shouldered its butt, then carefully aimed his weapon before firing a short burst. To his satisfaction he saw one of the enemy soldiers collapse, while the others around him hurriedly threw themselves on their bellies, hiding in the high grass and behind bushes. However, that was followed by dense automatic rifle fire directed at Anton's bunker. Fortunately, the Azeri fire proved inaccurate, many of the enemy soldiers firing blindly from behind cover. Despite the occasional bullet slamming against the face of his bunker and many more bullets flying overhead, Anton fired carefully aimed bursts, sweeping at ground level the field in front of him. His aim

was apparently true, as the rifle fire slackened considerably. However, Anton understood that he was not out of danger yet: those Azeri soldiers would now probably crawl forward, hidden by the vegetation, until they would be within grenade-throwing range. Taking a deep breath to steel himself, he then methodically swept the field facing him, keeping his aim very close to the ground. He was then rewarded by the sight of a panicked Azeri soldier who had lost his nerves under fire and had gotten up to run back the way he had come. A short burst downed that enemy soldier but Anton's PKM's bolt then slammed on an empty chamber. Swearing to himself, he hurriedly opened the top cover of his machine gun and quickly inserted a fresh ammunition belt in it before slamming shut the cover and pulling twice the arming lever. When he looked again through his firing slit, he saw that the Azeri soldiers, encouraged by the long seconds of silence from his machine gun, had again gotten up and were running towards him. Aiming at the nearest group of soldiers, now some 150 meters away, Anton fired burst after burst, downing at least half a dozen of them. Encouraged by his success, Anton emptied his second ammunition belt in a series of short bursts, then had to again load a fresh belt. He was about to resume fire when a lucky rifle bullet flew through the firing slit and struck him in the chest. Anton Varanian was dead by the time that the first Azeri soldier threw a grenade inside his bunker, mangling his body into a bloody pulp.

09:13 (Washington Time)

Monday, January 8, 1996 'C'

United States National Combined Combat Command Center (NC4)

The Pentagon, Washington D.C.

As per her custom, Ingrid entered the operations center of her National Combined Combat Command Center, or NC4, which had previously been known as the National Military Command Center, without fanfare, casually walking to the big status board showing the readiness status of all the American military units and detachments in the United States and around the World. That board also displayed the current hot spots around the World which could become or were a concern to the United States. Nobody screamed 'ROOM!' when she entered and nobody came to rigid attention...and that was the way she wanted it. She had always been against unnecessary, parade-style B.S. which would impede efficiency and was secure enough about her leadership not to feel slighted if the whole room didn't come to immediate and rigid attention and saluted her

when she entered it. However, she expected her personnel to be competent, knowledgeable and to pass information around efficiently. She thus smiled to the young female captain in charge of keeping the status board updated.

“So, how are things around the Caucasus, Captain Wells?”

“Excuse my language, General, but the Caucasus is presently a gigantic shit pit. From our overhead imagery from orbit and from electronic intercepts and multiple open-source information, we know that Azeri forces have by now entered Stepanakert, the main city in the Nagorno-Karabakh Region. There is now very hard fighting inside the city, with the Armenians defending it ferociously.”

“Yes, I saw the footage taken by the local BBC crew last night. What else?”

Lynda Wells then pointed at a portion of the Armenia-Azerbaijan border well to the North of Nagorno-Karabakh.

“Something potentially much more disturbing, General: large concentrations of mechanized units have been detected gathering on the Azeri side, ready to enter Armenia proper and then drive down the road leading to Yerevan, the capital of Armenia. The worst part is that those mechanized units are not all parts of the Azeri Army: they also include a full armored division from the Caucasus Independent Republic.”

Those last words made Ingrid look with concern at the young intelligence officer.

“How sure are we of that and when did that division show up on the Armenian border, Captain?”

“We are pretty sure about that identification, General: we intercepted coded communications between the field headquarters of that division and the Grand Headquarters of the C.I.R. Armed Forces in Stavropol. We were able to decode those communications and they basically said that this armored division, which arrived near Gazakh last night, was cleared to spearhead a push towards Yerevan at ‘H’-hour. Unfortunately, we don’t know when that H-hour will be. Furthermore, orbital imagery is showing more C.I.R. units on their way towards the Georgia-Armenia border.”

Ingrid didn’t like that information one bit: Georgia was part of the Caucasus Independent Republic, as was Dagestan, while Azerbaijan had recently shown signs to be ready to become part of the C.I.R. The C.I.R. leaders were probably willing to support the Azeri attack on Armenia in order to encourage the Azeris into joining them into a federalized state that would then cover the whole Caucasus and would border both the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea. Moreover, the C.I.R. would then have full access to the rich oilfields around Baku, in Azerbaijan. However, what worried Ingrid the most was the

potential human disaster of such an invasion of Armenia. Both the C.I.R. and Azerbaijan were Islamic states with radical leaders, while Armenia had been a Christian Orthodox country for nearly two millenniums. Armenia had already suffered in the past at the hands of Muslim armies, in that case Turkish ones, during the early part of this century, but an invasion of Armenia now would most probably be followed by widespread acts of ethnic and religious cleansing by Azeri and Caucasian forces. Ingrid definitely wanted to prevent that but her problem was that the United States would probably limit itself in this case to diplomatic efforts in order to resolve this crisis. As much power as Ingrid held as General of the Army, only President Perot had the authority, with the approval of the Congress, to order some military intervention in Armenia. Her hands were thus tied until the President gave her the green light. However, she still could take some precautions and prepare for the eventuality, however slim, that President Perot would decide to involve the United States in that conflict. Ingrid thus examined in detail what American forces there were in and around that region. The present answer to that was 'not much'. There was an American air wing based at the Turkish airbase of Incirlik, relatively close to the Turkish-Armenian border, plus an American aircraft carrier group operating in the Mediterranean and based in Italy, but no significant army unit in the whole region. She also had nothing in Syria, Iraq or Iran, the three countries bordering Turkey or Armenia. Her eyes then fell on Kurdistan, situated on the northern border area of Iraq. It was quite close to Armenia and bordered on Turkey and was also in good terms with the United States but was possibly in nearly as precarious a geopolitical situation as Armenia, with Turkey having been hostile to it for decades now, while the Kurds could not count on much support from either Iraq or Iran. Ingrid definitely had a lousy poker hand here. Looking for possible ways to reinforce the American presence in and around the Eastern Mediterranean, her eyes fell on a single ship marker located in the Mid Atlantic, far from the usual maritime commercial routes. After a moment of reflection, Ingrid walked to the naval status desk of the operations center and asked a question to the navy commander sitting at the station.

"Commander, could you give me the detailed operational status of the U.S.S. NEPTUNE?"

"Sure, General! We in fact received an updated report from the NEPTUNE just yesterday. Just give me a second."

Ingrid patiently waited next to the desk as the officer sifted through the thick binder containing the most recent messages and reports received from ships at sea. Taking out a four-page document, the officer handed it to Ingrid, who smiled while taking it.

"Thank you! I will just go make a photocopy of it, then will return the original to you."

"Lieutenant Jefferson could do that for you, General." replied the commander, referring to his young assistant.

"No, thank you, Commander. Your handsome lieutenant probably has better things to do than playing the photocopier operator."

That remark from Ingrid, made with a malicious smile while eyeing the young male officer sitting at the desk next to that of the commander, made Michael Jefferson redden a bit with embarrassment before he continued typing a text on his computer. Going to the nearest photocopier, Ingrid quickly made a duplicate of the classified report from the U.S.S. NEPTUNE and slipped that copy inside a 'Secret' file folder before returning the original to the navy commander. Next, Ingrid went to the desk and chair reserved for her use in a corner of the operations center and sat down to read the report. On the establishment of the NC4 over two and a half years ago, Ingrid had elected to have only a simple desk in the open work area of the center, rather than have a closed office built for herself. She had done so for two main reasons: first, that would allow her to easily listen to and watch what was happening inside the center at all times; second, it made her fully accessible at any time to officers and subalterns who would want to report something urgent or important to her with the least delay possible. Too many things had gone wrong in past wars due to avoidable delays in the transmission of crucial information across the American military command system, the Pearl Harbor disaster of 1941 being a prime example of it. This open and accessible desk was one way to avoid such delays. At first, the senior officers working in the NC4 had balked at that, arguing that this would encourage junior officers and NCOs to go see her directly with fresh reports, thus short-circuiting their supervisors, but Ingrid had stayed firm about her decision and that new way of doing things had become quite smooth within months, with the junior members now knowing when to go see Ingrid at once with something.

Ingrid quickly scanned the whole report once to see if anything critical was in it, then reread it carefully, mentally noting its main information of interest for her. She nodded her head in satisfaction on reading that the U.S.S. NEPTUNE was close to

completing its sea trials, with no significant problems or incidents to date. Its missile battery was also fully loaded, having been so before it had sailed out of its construction drydock at the Roanoke Shipyards. However, its embarked air wing, while of decent size and composition with sixty aircraft now aboard the NEPTUNE, could still be reinforced. Most importantly for Ingrid, no Marine Corps units except for a tiny armed security detachment had been put aboard the battle carrier yet and neither had the necessary squadrons of PELICAN 'A' assault transport VTOL aircraft been transferred to the NEPTUNE. If she was going to possibly use the NEPTUNE to reinforce the American military presence around the Eastern Mediterranean, then it would definitely need to carry a significant number of ground troops in order to be able to reinforce the defenses of existing American bases in the region or launch amphibious attacks if needed. Grabbing a message pad, she started writing a draft message by hand, keeping it direct, short and simple. Once completed, she brought her draft to the naval readiness desk and handed it to the navy commander manning it.

"I want this message to be typed and sent with an 'urgent' priority status. I am going to send a Marine infantry battalion aboard the U.S.S. NEPTUNE, along with two squadrons of Marine Corps PELICAN 'A' assault transport aircraft. I also want full ammunition, field supplies and spares for those Marine Corps units to be sent to the NEPTUNE. Those transfers are to be completed in less than three days. Have the NEPTUNE get closer to our East Coast in order to speed the process. As you will see in the 'warning' section of my draft, those units and the NEPTUNE will stand ready to react to the present situation in and around Armenia. Our battle carrier will sail for the Mediterranean once all the troops, materiel, supplies and aircraft transfers will be completed. I am now going to talk to the air readiness desk to put our airbase in Incirlik on alert and for it to be prepared to evacuate the family dependents there to Italy, in case things go wrong in the region."

"Your message will be ready for your signature in no more than twenty minutes, General." promised the navy commander, making Ingrid nod her head before she walked away from his desk. Reading quickly the draft message, the commander then passed it to his assistant.

"Lieutenant, drop that report you were typing and type this draft message as a top priority, then print three copies ready to be signed. In the meantime, I will phone Camp Lejeune on our encrypted line to give them a preliminary verbal warning about this."

"I'm on it, sir!" replied the young lieutenant while grabbing the draft message. With Jefferson starting to type the message on his computer, Commander Madison opened an encrypted telephone line to Camp Lejeune in North Carolina, the largest Marine Corps base on the East Coast. He shook his head and smiled as he waited for a response on that line: such a speed of reaction to mobilize units from more than one armed service would have been unthinkable only three years ago and would have then taken days instead of mere minutes...if the respective service commanders involved would have obeyed without making objections or presenting alternatives of their own to that order.

10:51 (East Coast Time)

Headquarters of the 2nd Marine Division

Julian C. Smith Hall, Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune North Carolina

Lieutenant Colonel Paul Wilkinson, Commander of the 1st Battalion of the 6th Marine Regiment, was quickly introduced into the office of Colonel George Hatfield, his regimental commander, the moment he showed up in the regimental headquarters suite of offices. There, he found Hatfield on the telephone, passing some orders in an urgent tone to what sounded to Wilkinson as the 2nd Marine Assault Transport Wing, which was attached to the 2nd Marine Division and was based in the Camp Lejeune complex, like Wilkinson's battalion. However, Hatfield quickly concluded his call on seeing Wilkinson enter his office and hung up while getting on his feet to face his 1st Battalion commander.

"Aah, Paul! Thanks for coming so quickly."

"Well, you did sound to be quite in a hurry, sir."

"True! The division commander received less than a half-hour ago a top priority tasking message from the Pentagon, asking that one of his rifle battalions be sent ASAP¹³ to sea with two squadrons of PELICAN assault transport aircraft and all the supplies and support required for possible ground combat. Your battalion and those two squadrons are to depart Camp Lejeune today and land on the carrier U.S.S. NEPTUNE, which is now approaching our Atlantic coast."

"Uh, may I ask why we are sent out like this in such a rush, sir?"

¹³ ASAP : As Soon As Possible. Very common expression in the American military.

“You certainly can. Basically, General Dows is smelling a possible problem developing in the Caucasus, where Armenia is being invaded by Azerbaijan, and wants to send the NEPTUNE and your battalion to the Mediterranean as a backup force in case the United States gets implicated in that new conflict.”

“It certainly sounds like a good precaution to take, sir. Are there some specific points that I should be aware of, sir?”

“There are effectively a few, Paul. First, you will go as a light, airmobile infantry unit, so you can leave behind your armored vehicles, trucks and the likes. Instead, you will get from the divisional reserves sixty of our light all-terrain vehicles, plus the eighteen fast attack light vehicles from your scout platoon, which can be carried inside our PELICANs. You will have both 24 PELICAN ‘A’ VTOL assault transports and the aircraft embarked on the NEPTUNE to act as your fire support and tactical transport elements, if you have to land your troops. The emphasis here will be on flexibility, speed of response and maximum firepower via airpower. Now, since you may have to do ground operations in the Caucasus area, I have already directed the regimental intelligence officer to pack up maps of the area in sufficient quantities and to find and attach to your battalion a number of linguists and country experts from our S-5¹⁴ section. Those specialists will report directly to your battalion’s offices with their field kits as soon as they are ready to go.”

“They will certainly be welcome, sir. Uh, my battalion counts close to 1,200 men, all ranks. Does the NEPTUNE have adequate facilities to accommodate so many marines?”

“To be frank, I am not sure about that, although the Pentagon told me that the NEPTUNE does have adequate lodging facilities. Like most people, I know very little about the U.S.S. NEPTUNE, which was built in secret, apart from the fact that it is our latest aircraft carrier. It was in fact still conducting its initial sea trials when it was tasked with that new mission.”

Wilkinson sighed on hearing that: accommodations standards for embarked marines on dedicated amphibious carriers were already tight, so he could only imagine how his battalion would fare on an aircraft carrier not built specifically for amphibious operations.

¹⁴ S-5 : Designation for the section in a military unit in charge of civil affairs. S-5 sections are typically deployed only in wartime.

“Well, we will manage as best we can in the present circumstances, sir. Anything else, sir?”

“Not for the moment, Paul. I will send you any extra information or directive as they come. I want you for the moment to solely concentrate on putting your troops on overseas mission footing and preparing them for a quick air move no later than tonight. One last thing: this move is to stay secret. No blabbing to family members about a rushed deployment at sea and no talking in public spaces about that either. The public affairs aspect of this will be dealt with later by the division commander. Now, go and kick your troops into action! That will be all for the moment.”

“Yes sir!” replied Wilkinson, coming to attention and saluting his regimental commander before walking out of his office at a hurried pace.

11:03 (East Coast Time)

Weapons Classroom # 6, 6th Marine Regiment Training Complex 2nd Marine Division lines, Camp Lejeune

Sergeant Jeffrey Brown was supervising a weapon stripping practice for the members of his rifle squad when Staff Sergeant Vincent ‘The Mafioso’ Gambino abruptly threw open the door of the training classroom and shouted an order.

“EVERYBODY IS TO GO BACK TO THE BARRACKS AND PACK THEIR FIELD KIT FOR IMMEDIATE OVERSEAS DEPLOYMENT! PACK FOR EUROPEAN CONTINENTAL CLIMATE: BROWN-GREEN CAMOUFLAGE! JUMP ON IT! OH, AND NO BLABBING TO ANYONE ABOUT THIS SUDDEN OVERSEAS DEPLOYMENT: THIS UNIT MOVE IS CLASSIFIED.”

On that unceremonious announcement, Gambino then left to shout his order into another classroom, leaving Brown to give orders to his eleven men and one woman.

“YOU HEARD THE MAN! GO PACK YOUR FIELD KIT...IF IT IS NOT ALREADY PACKED AS IT SHOULD BE. I WILL JOIN YOU BACK IN THE BATTALION INTERIOR PARADE SQUARE. I WANT EVERYONE THERE BEFORE NOON HOUR. GO!”

Jeffrey, a big African-American in his mid-twenties, couldn’t help glance then at the only female member of his squad...and of their rifle company, as she reassembled her assault rifle in a hurry before leaving the classroom at a run: Greta Visby was one of the first women ever to have qualified as a marine rifleman and to join a marine combat unit.

She had no prior overseas experience, if you excepted of course her early youth in Sweden. However, she was unusually tall and strong for a woman, measuring a good 178 centimeters and being an avid culturist and weight-lifter, things that had earned her the nickname of 'Valkyrie'. She also had a strong 'Tomboy'-like character and didn't shy from shooting back profanities at those she deemed to have insulted her. More than a few marines in her rifle company salivated at the sight of the tall blonde but, to date, Visby had studiously ignored them. Jeffrey honestly hoped that this new mission would prove her worth as a marine. He then grabbed his own rifle and left the classroom at a run.

Contrary to most of the other members of his rifle squad, who were single and were living in the new singles barracks of the base, Jeffrey headed towards the private military quarters, or PMQs, of the base, where his family lived in a townhouse unit built only two years ago. Those new townhouse units had been part of the wave of new military accommodations constructed at the direction of General Dows and had replaced the ageing and often rickety housing units previously found on the various military bases around the U.S.A. and overseas. Even the barracks for single soldiers had been replaced by more modern and comfortable habitation complexes, something that had tremendously helped the morale of the troops, who no longer had to live in platoon barracks devoid of privacy. Now, even the most junior marines had their own little private suite in the new, five-story buildings housing the single personnel, with only raw recruits still living in open barracks during their training and formation.

Six minutes of light jogging brought Jeffrey to his family unit in the nearby PMQ area, with him also crossing path on the way in with other married marines going to their respective houses. He was still debating mentally how to pass the word to his wife as he unlocked the front door and entered.

"ANGELA, I'M HERE!"

"JEFFREY? I'M IN THE KITCHEN!"

Jeffrey headed at once towards the small kitchen of the townhouse but was met halfway by his three-year-old daughter Lucie, who was running towards him with her arms extended and with a happy grin on her face. Jeffrey caught her at once and raised her up to kiss her on both cheeks.

"My sweet Lucie! You are truly adorable. Let's go see Mama together."

With his little daughter in his arms, Jeffrey walked into the combined kitchen/dining room, finding his wife busy preparing the noon meal for their two children. His fourteen-month-old son Matthew, standing next to Angela, ran at once to him on his little legs on seeing him. Jeffrey happily scooped him up with his one free arm and kissed him on his forehead before approaching his wife, who had a surprised expression on her face as she eyed him and the rifle slung across his back.

"I was not expecting you for lunch, Jeffrey. What's up?"

Jeffrey sighed deeply before answering her in a soft tone.

"My unit is being deployed on a no-notice move overseas, Angela. I don't know how long I will be gone or where we are going. We were also told to keep discreet about it."

Angela's expression changed at once to a worried one and she took one pace to face him from up close.

"The morning news mentioned a new war between two countries near Turkey. Could that be where you are going?"

"I frankly don't know but my instinct would be to say that you are probably right on that. I know that we have a big airbase in Turkey."

"And when are you leaving? Can I still hope to see you tonight?"

Jeffrey couldn't help tenderly kiss his wife then, with both of their children still in his arms.

"I don't think so, Angela. This thing seems to be quite an urgent business. We will probably fly out this afternoon or this evening. I came to retrieve some extra personal kit for our deployment. Unfortunately, I won't have time to have lunch here." Tears appeared in Angela's eyes at those words, prompting Jeffrey in kissing her again.

"Don't worry: I will be alright. We are probably being deployed simply as a precautionary measure. I promise you that I will call or send a letter the moment I will be able to do so. I will now have to go upstairs to pack my things."

Before he could walk away, Angela hugged him tightly, nearly shaking with apprehension.

"Please, be careful, Jeffrey."

"I will, Angela, I promise."

Kissing her again, Jeffrey then went upstairs to their main bedroom, his two children still in his arms. There, he dropped Lucie and Matthew on the large bed so that he could pack things.

“You can play on the bed while daddy packs a bag.”

With his two children watching, Jeffrey opened the bedroom’s large closet and fished out of it a camouflaged haversack, then filled it with extra spare military socks, briefs, T-shirts and two packs of expendable razor blades. After a moment of reflection, he added to that his digital still camera: maybe he would get permission eventually to take pictures of where he was going, in which case he could then return home with those pictures. He was about to close his haversack when he remembered something and went to the closet, where he searched for a moment its top shelf, retrieving a black knife in its leather scabbard. Jeffrey contemplated it for a moment with some emotion: that K-Bar Marine Corps knife had belonged to his father, who had himself been a marine and who had carried that knife while fighting in the Second Korean War of 1975. Grabbing as well a knife sharpening kit from the closet’s shelf, he packed both items in his haversack and closed it, then shouldered its carrying strap before retrieving his two children. Going down the stairs with them, he returned to the kitchen, where he put down his children so that he could hug and kiss Angela one last time. They stayed glued together for long seconds, tightly hugging each other. When they separated, Angela said something to him in a hopeful tone.

“Maybe I could drive you back to your unit? That would give us a last opportunity to be together as a family?”

“That’s an excellent idea, Angela. You can drop me at the regimental parade hall, where we are due to assemble with our field kits. Oh, one last thing...”
Fishing out his wallet, Jeffrey then nearly emptied it of the cash money in it, then handed the dollar bills to Angela, who looked at the cash with incomprehension.

“Why are you giving me this money, Jeffrey?”

“Well, I probably won’t need to spend any of my money over where I am going and you will need this more than I do. I can always get some extra money from the unit’s pay office while on deployment anyway.”

“Oh, okay! Let me get the car keys.”

Two minutes later, the small family drove out in their well-used AMC Jeep, heading towards the unit lines of the 6th Marine Regiment. Another minute and Angela was stopping their car in front of the big building housing the indoor regimental hall and stores, where Jeffrey stepped out and retrieved his haversack before kissing his wife and two young children one last time.

"Don't worry about me, Angela: I will be careful, I promise."

"Please do, Jeffrey. We need you back." replied Angela, nearly choking up. With one last waved goodbye, Jeffrey then watched with a pinched heart as his wife drove away. Walking to the main entrance of the regimental hall, which was guarded by two marines, he entered it and walked quickly to the locker room where his company's field kit was stored inside locked individual steel lockers. Opening his own locker and taking out his field backpack, protective vest and helmet, he took a moment to quickly add in his backpack the items he had brought with him in his haversack, then threw the now empty haversack inside the locker and locked it back with his combination lock. Carrying his field kit and rifle, Jeffrey walked to the indoor parade hall, meeting a few members of his rifle squad on the way and finding more of them in the hall. There, Staff Sergeant Gambino, his own field kit and rifle by his side, directed him and his squad members to join the ranks of the marines already lined up by platoon formations.

"LINE UP IN THREE RANKS! COLONEL WILKINSON WILL ADDRESS US IN TWENTY MINUTES."

Jeffrey in turn gave a couple of orders to the twelve members of his rifle squad to form a line between the First Squad and Third Squad of their platoon, then quickly inspected their field kits to make sure that they had packed the correct items. When he came to Private First Class (PFC) John Milken, one of the three light machine gun assistant gunners of his squad, he found a six-pack of full beer cans inside his backpack. Taking out the six-pack and dangling it in front of Milken's eyes, Jeffrey spoke in a low but severe voice to his young squad member while fixing him in the eyes.

"Milken, I am not aware that beer cans are part of the standard field kit list. Why did you pack those?"

"But, Sarge, we are probably going to end up on some Navy ship, where they still have a 'dry' policy. I just wanted to bring my own supplies with me."

"And break Navy rules at the same time? I will be charitable and will give you two minutes to go store back those beer cans inside your locker before Staff Sergeant Gambino catches you with them and skins you alive. GO!"

Milken didn't dispute him then and ran away, his six-pack hidden inside his gas mask carrying bag. While he was gone, Jeffrey completed his inspection of his squad members' field kits but found no other irregularities. Milken then returned into the ranks and waited like the rest of the assembled marines for Lieutenant Colonel Paul Wilkinson, their battalion commander, to show up.

Wilkinson arrived some fourteen minutes later, accompanied by his battalion staff officers and by Sergeant Major Richard Fielding, who called the battalion to attention before Wilkinson started to speak up, using a microphone in order to be heard clearly around the vast hall.

"Marines of the 1st Battalion, 6th Marine Regiment, we are about to leave on yet another overseas deployment, this one being an urgent, no-notice one. The information available to me is still limited due to the unusual speed of this deployment but I can tell you this right now: we are going to fly out this afternoon aboard the PELICANs of the 2nd Assault Transport Wing and will land on the newly-built carrier U.S.S. NEPTUNE, which is presently cruising off the coast. Once we are aboard with our equipment and supplies the NEPTUNE will sail East, towards the Mediterranean, which it will then enter and sail further to take a position off the coasts of Turkey. We will then wait for more orders as the situation will warrant. Know that Armenia, immediately to the east of Turkey, is being invaded by its Muslim neighbors and that the United States, while not involved at this time in that conflict, is reinforcing its military assets in the region, in case we have to intervene. Our battalion will thus act as a floating reserve for the time being but we will go fully armed and ready for action. Right now, we will go have a quick lunch at the regimental mess hall, then will return here, where you will receive a full combat load of ammunition and field rations before we go board our aircraft. In order to speed up things, I got permission for you to go eat with your weapons and also obtained priority service into the chow line. If those bums from the Second Battalion object to you jumping the line, then tell them to stuff their objections where the Sun doesn't shine."

A concert of general laughing greeted that last sentence, with Wilkinson then concluding his speech.

"One last thing: this move is being done as discretely as possible and is classified information. Don't repeat any of what I said to others outside of this battalion and, if asked by other marines, simply say that you are going on a snap training exercise. That will be all for the moment. Buses are waiting outside to carry you to the regimental mess hall, in order for you to be back here faster. Leave your field gear and packs here but carry your weapons with you to the mess hall. Now, go eat quickly and come back here."

From there, Sergeant Major Fielding took control of the troops and ordered them out of the hall and into a long line of waiting buses. Jeffrey Brown ended up sitting next to First Lieutenant Kenneth Gomer, his platoon leader, in one of the buses. Gomer, a young but competent, no-nonsense junior officer, smiled to Jeffrey as he sat down.

"Another surprise deployment for our unit, Sergeant Brown. I wonder if we will see combat this time or will simply wait at sea for weeks and months."

"I also wonder about that, sir. Uh, do you know anything about Armenia or this story of an invasion?"

"Nope! The only thing I know about Armenia is that it is a Christian country, has been so for a long time, while its neighbors around it are all Muslim countries. There is thus a religious element to this crisis that could make it particularly nasty if we have to jump in. I was told that more information will be waiting for us aboard the NEPTUNE."

"And that NEPTUNE, what do you know about it, sir?"

Gomer formed an 'O' with one hand and moved it back and forth at the level of his nose in response.

"Fuck knows! Until today, I didn't even know that the NEPTUNE existed, which is strange, considering that the Navy is usually quite proud and likes bragging about its aircraft carriers. I was however told by the colonel that the NEPTUNE is supposed to have all the facilities needed to accommodate us."

"Which probably means that they have enough three-high stacked bunks for all of us." Said Jeffrey in a disillusioned tone, making Gomer nod his head.

"Probably! We will soon see about that."

The ride to the regimental mess hall was a short one and the marines of First Battalion stepped out of the buses at a near run, entering the mess hall and jumping ahead of the waiting line as a group, prompting a few complaints from marines from other units, with obscene gestures replying to those complaints. Jeffrey served himself a moderate portion, not wanting to travel by air with a full stomach: the Hiller PELICAN 'A' was a great aircraft, but the ride in them could be bumpy at times. Jeffrey made sure that his squad members also ate both moderately and quickly, then led them as a squad to the waiting buses. With the whole battalion moving back as one to the regimental hall, Jeffrey reformed his squad next to their waiting field gear and backpacks and waited for more instructions. What he saw arrive some half an hour later were a number of transporter plates loaded with boxes and crates of ammunition and field rations, pulled

by members of the battalion's quartermaster section. Two plates stopped in front of each company of the battalion as Sergeant Major Fielding shouted out a few orders.

"EACH COMPANY WILL NOW LINE UP AT THEIR ASSIGNED PLATES, WHERE YOU WILL COLLECT YOUR INDIVIDUAL COMBAT LOAD OF AMMUNITION AND RATIONS. ONCE YOU HAVE YOUR AMMUNITION AND RATIONS, YOU WILL LOAD YOUR WEAPONS MAGAZINES AND PACK YOUR RATIONS IN YOUR BACKPACKS. WE WILL SOON GET SOME MORTAR AND ANTI-TANK MUNITIONS AS WELL AND WILL THEN DISTRIBUTE IT. EACH RIFLEMAN WILL CARRY AS AN EXTRA ATTACHED TO THEIR BACKPACKS EITHER A MORTAR BOMB, ANTI-TANK ROUND CARRYING CASE OR A BOX OF MACHINE GUN AMMUNITION. LET'S GET TO IT, MARINES!"

"Great! More weight to carry." said in a low voice Private Anthony Scalini, prompting a warning glance from Jeffrey.

"We always divide up the extra ammunition, Scalini. You should know that by now, so quit complaining and grab what they will give you."

Leading his squad members to the loaded plates, Jeffrey received himself two days-worth of field rations, 400 .243 Winchester cartridges, two hand grenades and two 60mm rifle grenades, plus an ammunition box of belted .243 rounds for machine guns. Returning to his original position, Jeffrey sat down on the wooden floor of the hall with his squad members and started unpacking his cardboard boxes of .243 caliber cartridges, loading the bullets in his rifle box magazines with the help of a stripper clip feeder. Greta Visby was smiling as she was loading her own magazines with bullets.

"I hope that we will see combat during this deployment. I really want to try my Winchester M1985A2 in combat and see what it is really capable of. The ones who designed that rifle certainly got it right in my opinion. I especially like that idea of attaching side-by-side two 25-rounds magazines with a spacer plate between them: it is a simple, compact system that gives you fifty rounds ready to fire, with only a quick magazine switch to do. I also want to see what our under-the-barrel 60mm grenade launcher can do."

"Well, you did fire at least one 60mm grenade during training, right?" replied Jeffrey, making the young woman nod her head.

"Yes, Sergeant, I did, but one round was all that we were each allowed to fire, because of budget constraints, they said. While our AGL-95 kicks like a mule, its long-

recoil pneumatic buffer helped a lot to soak up the excess recoil. I can't imagine what it would feel like to fire it without a recoil buffer, though."

"I can!" replied Jeffrey, smiling. "During the Marine Corps acceptance trials for the AGL-95, one grenade launcher suffered a defective recoil buffer. The man firing it ended up with a broken collar bone and a spectacular bruise. Still, the AGL-95 is a great weapon and gave us a lot of extra firepower at rifle squad level."

"But Sarge, why do they call our rifles M1985A2 if we got them only two years ago?" asked PFC Kim Lee, a 23-year-old young man of Korean descent. Jeffrey had a short chuckle at that question.

"Because our Corps commander finally saw the light in 1994 and adopted it then in its A2 variant. The M1985 was originally designed and put into service in 1985 for the benefit of the security forces of the Space Corps. General Dows is said to have pushed for its development and adoption then and may even have contributed to its design. Since General Dows was the big boss of the Space Corps, which is an independent service, she didn't have to compose with the opposition of a bunch of old-school generals and admirals and was thus free to do basically what she wanted within the constraints of her budgets. Thankfully, she stuck to simple and reliable but innovative solutions while designing that rifle. As you have all been able to see by yourselves, the M1985A2 has proven to be very dependable, resistant to jams in the field and very accurate at long ranges, thanks to its Winchester .243 cartridge, which has been widely known for years as a great hunting cartridge. It is also simple and easy to disassemble for cleaning without any tools. The idea of incorporating from the start a grenade launcher unit under the rifle barrel was also an inspired one in my opinion. Believe me, guys: we could have ended up with a lot worse as a standard rifle."

"Sarge, if our rifle design is so advanced, then why does it still come with this humongous bayonet?" asked Private Charlie Cotton, a young black man barely out of his teens. "Isn't that a kind of anachronism?"

"I can answer that!" replied at once a grinning Greta Visby. "As you may know, I am a big fan of General Dows and admire all that she was able to do despite of her sex and all the bigotry concerning the subject of women in combat. I read many books about her while I was a young girl growing in Sweden, including her autobiographies as a fighter pilot in World War 2 and the First Korean War. In her book about World War 2, she described how she fought on the ground against the Japanese in order to defend her airfield in Guadalcanal. There, she killed a number of Japanese soldiers with a

Japanese Katana sword taken from a Japanese officer she had just killed. Also, don't forget that she is known to be able to remember her past incarnations over a period of 7,000 years. Some of those incarnations were as ancient warriors who fought with blade weapons. She was even one of the celebrated 300 Spartan hoplites who fought and died with King Leonidas against the Persians at the battle of Thermopylae, so I certainly can understand her belief in the worth of a good rifle bayonet."

"Wow, Greta, you sound like the perfect man-eater!" said Corporal James Fuller while continuing to load cartridges in his rifle magazines, prompting an instant reply from Greta.

"Because I am! I grew up in the forests of Northern Sweden and hunted and fished with my father there. That was where I learned to shoot a rifle and use a hunting knife. I even hunted with a bow a few times and am still quite a good archer." At that point, Jeffrey had a question of his own for her.

"Private Visby, how and why did you become an American citizen if you were born in Sweden?"

Greta Visby's enthusiasm was then replaced by a sober, thoughtful expression.

"Well, I lived in Sweden until I was fourteen. Then, my mother died and my father fell into a depression and lost his job. He decided after a few months to move to the United States when an American friend of his offered him a job in Alaska as a forestry expert. I then moved to there with him. With Alaska being in many aspects quite similar to Northern Sweden, save for the lack of social measures, I thrived there and continued to roam the woods with my father while doing my studies. Then, a few months ago, a recruitment poster for the Marine Corps caught my eyes and I enlisted at once. So, here I am!"

"That's quite a story, Visby." said Jeffrey, meaning it. "Did it take you long to learn English once in the United States?"

"I already spoke English when I moved with my father to Alaska: the Swedish education system is one of the best in the World and second and third languages are part of the standard Swedish school curriculum."

"Third language?" said with some bemusement Private John Milken, who only knew English. "What else can you speak apart from Swedish and English?"

"Finnish! My house was relatively close to the border with Finland and we knew quite a few Finns who worked and lived in my area."

"I am impressed, Private Visby, truly." said Jeffrey. "You should have a great career in the Marine Corps with your numerous abilities and skills."

"Thank you, Sergeant." replied the young woman, grateful, before continuing to load her rifle magazines.

After another hour and with all the ammunition and rations packed away in their backpacks and in the carrying pouches of their protective vests, the order came to go out to go to the nearby New River Marine Corps Air Station, in order to board the aircraft which would fly them to the NEPTUNE. Putting on their protective vests, helmets and backpacks and grabbing their weapons, the nearly 1,200 heavily loaded marines filed out of the regimental hall and boarded a fleet of waiting buses. This time, the buses rolled out of Camp Lejeune and followed a public road to get to the air station, which was also situated next to the city of Jacksonville. When they arrived at the large airfield, with its two asphalt runways and huge concrete tarmac, the marines saw a long row of PELICAN 'A' VTOL assault transport aircraft lined up on the tarmac, in front of a series of hangars, with forklifts and trucks around them busy loading pallets of materiel and dozens of small all-terrain vehicles inside them. Greta Visby felt excitement mount in her as she looked at the fleet of assault transports: this was going to be her first operational overseas deployment and, possibly, real combat. The buses finally stopped in front of a line of hangars, close to the waiting PELICAN 'A's. Those aircraft had an unusual look to them, with their wide fuselage shaped like an aircraft wing profile and their four large ducted propellers mounted on pivot points attached to their sides. However, having trained in air assault exercises aboard such aircraft, Greta knew that they were in reality very effective and highly performing machines. Each of them could carry a full platoon of equipped marines and were heavily armed with two fixed 30mm cannons, a turret-mounted heavy machine gun, two side-door medium machine guns and a pair of retractable rocket launcher pods for 76mm rockets. Apart from being able to take off and land vertically, they could land on water and float safely, thanks to their cylindrical floats. They also could reach speeds of up to 760 kilometers per hour, much faster than the helicopters which they had replaced in service, and had enough range to cross the United States without refueling or, with supplementary fuel drop tanks or one in-flight refueling, could cross the Atlantic. In truth, the Hiller PELICAN had given to both the Marine Corps and the Navy a new set of vastly improved capabilities in various types of combat operations, be it air assault, anti-submarine hunting or pure cargo and

personnel transport between ships and the shore. They also happened to be fun to ride in, at least in Greta's opinion. With Lieutenant Gomer giving the order to get out of the bus and line up in front of the nearest hangar, Greta grabbed her heavy, bulging backpack and her rifle and stepped out on the tarmac. She was about to form a line with the rest of her rifle squad when her eyes fell on the large squadron insignia attached to the side of the hangar.

"You're fucking kidding me! We are going to be flown to an overseas deployment on a carrier by guys calling themselves the 'Thunder Chickens'¹⁵?"

PFC Alphonso Calderon looked up at the insignia and rolled his eyes.

"Hay, cogño¹⁶!"

A few other marines either shook their heads in disbelief at that or hid their faces with one hand. On his part, Jeffrey Brown, who already knew about this squadron, having trained with it in the past, was simply amused by the reactions of his squad members and concentrated on making them line up before allowing them to put down their heavy backpacks on the ground.

After a wait of a few minutes, an aviator holding a clipboard approached Lieutenant Gomer and spoke briefly with him while pointing at one of the PELICANs. In turn, Gomer then pivoted around and shouted out instructions at his rifle platoon.

"ALRIGHT, MARINES OF THIRD RIFLE PLATOON: WE ARE GOING TO LOAD UP IN THE PELICAN BEARING THE MARKING 'EG5'. LET'S MOVE, MARINES!"

Greta Visby put again her backpack on and slung her rifle, then followed with the rest of her squad behind Sergeant Brown, heading for their designated aircraft. Just before arriving at the port side access ramp of their PELICAN, an aviator stopped them briefly, time to ensure that the marines' weapons were unloaded, then led them inside, pointing to the marines the lines of folding seats installed on each sides of the cabin and in the forward section. Two six-wheeled light all-terrain vehicles were already parked inside the cabin, tied down with chains.

¹⁵ Yes, there is really a Marine Corps aircraft squadron called 'Thunder Chickens', VMM-263, based at the New River Marine Corps Air Station, in North Carolina.

¹⁶ Cogño : An expression in Spanish meaning basically either 'oh shit' or 'asshole'. Very popular around the Caribbeans and the Dominican Republic.

“TAKE A SEAT AND BUCKLE YOUR SAFETY BELTS: WE ARE GOING TO TAKE OFF IN A FEW MINUTES.”

The 58 marines forming the Third Rifle Platoon and its attached mixed heavy weapons squad dropped their backpacks on the aluminum deck of the cabin and slid their weapons under their respective seats, then sat down on them and started buckling up their seat belts. Excitement mounted again in her when the turboshaft engines of the PELICAN started turning in a strong whining noise and the large side ramp went up. Then, after another few minutes, her aircraft took off and started taking both altitude and speed. Greta was able to see through the windows of her aircraft the air station shrink with the distance as the formation of PELICANs headed eastward, towards the sea. She suddenly remembered something that made her swear out loud, making heads turn.

“Shit! I forgot to pack female tampons!”

“Uh oh!” chuckled PFC John Milken. “We are going to have a very mean marine around soon.”

Jeffrey Brown, on his part, didn't laugh at that: he realized how much of an inconvenience and embarrassment that small lapse could mean to the young female marine. He thus smiled reassuringly to her.

“Don't worry, Private Visby: I am sure that you will find some tampons aboard the NEPTUNE, either at the ship's pharmacy or at its convenience store.”

“They have convenience stores on aircraft carriers, Sergeant?”

“Of course they have! You will also find things like fast food counters, at least on the carriers I went on in the past.”

“Oh! Uh, do they have separate accommodations for female marines?”

“Not on the carriers I visited before. Don't forget that you were part of one of the first small batches of female marines to qualify as riflemen and be accepted in the Corps as a member of an infantry unit. But I am sure that Lieutenant Gomer will arrange something acceptable for you aboard the NEPTUNE. After all, the Navy has had female sailors for a few years already and it must have provided separate quarters for them.”

“But I don't want to be separated from the rest of the squad, Sergeant! We are a team!”

Jeffrey smiled again, liking her words: that girl certainly had the right spirit in her.

“Don't worry about that for the moment, Visby. We will take care of that once on the NEPTUNE.”

“Thanks, Sergeant!”

16:19 (East Coast Time)

Flight deck of the U.S.S. NEPTUNE

On station off the North Carolina coast

On the flight deck of the NEPTUNE, near the aft superstructures of the ship, Rear Admiral Mack Benson, his carrier air group commander, or CAG, Captain (Navy) Nicolas Scaldi, and his personnel officer, Lieutenant (Navy) Sarah Schwartz, stood next to each other while watching the western sky for the announced PELICANs. About a hundred of the flight deck personnel, wearing colored vests according to their functions and specialties, were also up on the open deck, waiting to guide to a landing and then move into the hangars the incoming aircraft. The Atlantic winds were proving to be freezing in this early January and the tiny Sarah Schwartz shivered in her winter coat.

“God, this is really cold! Are those PELICANs due to arrive soon, sir?”

“They were signaled by our air control radar to be only minutes away, Lieutenant.” replied Nicolas Scaldi, who was then cut nearly at once by Benson.

“I see them coming at our two o’clock! They are at most two minutes away.”

Scaldi and Schwartz looked at once in that direction and effectively saw 24 dots approaching at low altitude.

“With these 24 PELICANs, our aircraft hangars will be quite full, Admiral.” said Scaldi. “Do you still want to keep our flight deck empty?”

“Yes! If any other ship crosses our path, I want it to see an empty flight deck and thus assume that our carrier is still not operational. I will also have us pass the Strait of Gibraltar at night, in order to keep our carrier’s presence in the Mediterranean as discrete as possible. For the moment, let’s focus on receiving those PELICANs and those marines and their equipment.”

With aircraft handlers and guides in their yellow vests guiding them in for a landing, the 24 PELICANs formed up in two long parallel files and lined up on the 420-meter-long runway of the battle carrier. While one file stayed in hover mode some distance aft of the NEPTUNE, the other file slowly approached the runway to land on the starboard half of the 36-meter-wide runway, guided in by aircraft handlers holding light batons. As soon as the first twelve PELICANs had landed, the second file of aircraft were signaled to come in to land. Only when all the PELICANs had landed and shut

down their engines did the Landing Safety Officer, Lieutenant Commander Andrew Lester, give permission to the pilots of the PELICANs to lower their access ramps and let out the marines. Mack Benson grinned to the tiny Sarah Schwartz as what looked like an army of invading marines and dozens of light vehicles came out of the assault transports.

“Well, I believe that you will have your job cut out for you, lodging all these marines and their equipment, Lieutenant Schwartz.”

“It could have been worse, sir: we could have been a simple carrier, in which case we could never have been able to accommodate so many people. Fortunately, our ship is one of the first to have been designed and built following the new habitability standards ordered by General Dows. By the old standards, this ship would be considered the near equivalent to a cruise ship.”

“The NEPTUNE is superior to a cruise ship, Lieutenant.” replied a smiling Nicola Scaldi. “Name me a cruise ship that can offer air rides to its passengers.”

The three of them chuckled at that remark before Benson led his small group nearer to the landed aircraft. There, a marine lieutenant colonel and a major soon came to them, stopping at attention in front of Benson and saluting him.

“Lieutenant Colonel Paul Wilkinson, Commander of First Marine Battalion, Sixth Marine Regiment, requesting permission to come aboard with my unit, sir!”

“Permission granted, Colonel! Welcome aboard the U.S.S. NEPTUNE. Captain Scaldi, to my right, will take care of moving your aircraft down into the hangars and will also lodge their aircrews, while Lieutenant Schwartz will lead your men to their accommodations.”

“Uh, talking of men and accommodations, sir, I do have a few female marines who are part of my combat sub-units and whom I would like to keep together with their respective units. Would that be possible to do, sir?”

“No problems, Colonel!” replied Benson, grinning while pointing at Sarah Schwartz. “The good lieutenant here will take care of all your needs. The personnel accommodations on this battle carrier are of truly gold standards.”

“Did you say ‘battle carrier’, sir?” asked Wilkinson, a bit confused by Benson’s choice of words. “I did see that you had quite a few guns visible for a carrier, though.” The latter then nodded his head once, still smiling.

“You heard me right, Colonel. What you didn’t see was our missile battery, composed of vertical-launch silos hidden under the flight deck. The NEPTUNE can

defend itself against any enemy threat and can also devastate an enemy coastal area with missile fire without even getting within sight of it.”

“That is definitely nice to hear, sir. I suppose that we will now sail eastward towards the Mediterranean, sir?”

“Not yet, Colonel: we will sail away after two heavy assault hovercraft will have joined us and will be secured in our drydocks. They are bringing in a marine artillery battery, a signals platoon and other support vehicles from the 2nd Marine Division.”

This time, Wilkinson’s jaw nearly dropped on the deck.

“This ship has drydocks for heavy assault hovercrafts, sir? Your NEPTUNE is definitely full of surprises, sir.”

“It has even more surprises reserved for our enemies, Colonel. One of my deck officers will now lead your light vehicles to our vehicle elevator, so that they could be lowered to our vehicle hangar. At the same time, Lieutenant Schwartz will lead you and your men...uh, personnel, down to the ship’s upper deck, where the marine accommodations are situated. I now have to go take care of many things but I will see you later at the officers’ wardroom, for supper.”

Wilkinson and his second-in-command, Major Christopher Walker, again exchanged salutes with Benson before the later walked away towards the aft superstructures, while Nicola Scaldi went to see the newly arrived marine aviators. That left Wilkinson and Walker with a smiling Sarah Schwartz, who saluted the marine lieutenant colonel.

“Lieutenant Sarah Schwartz, Personnel Officer of the U.S.S. NEPTUNE, sir. If you will line up your men in company groups, I will then lead them down to the battalion assembly area. That compartment is large enough to assemble a whole battalion group at a time in it. Once your whole unit will be there, I will then assign quarters to your people and will provide guides to them. This battle carrier is a huge ship and a newcomer could easily get lost in it if clueless about its layout.”

“Providing us guides certainly sounds like a wise idea, Lieutenant. Just give us a few minutes to assemble and line up my battalion and we will then follow you.”

“No problem, sir!”

Waiting where she was standing, Sarah patiently waited while Wilkinson and his officers regrouped his marines in company-sized groups. That took less than fifteen minutes, after which Wilkinson returned to her.

“We are ready when you are, Lieutenant.”

“Thank you, Colonel! We will now move to the aircraft elevator number three, situated inside the port stern superstructure, and will use it to bring down your unit to the level of their accommodations.”

“Then, lead the way, Lieutenant. I will have my marines follow behind.”

“Yes, sir!”

With Wilkinson and his officers barking orders to make the marines follow in columns of triple ranks, Sarah walked to the stern aircraft elevator, a vast platform measuring 25 meters by 23 meters covered and contained by the large superstructure and tower occupying the port stern corner of the flight deck. As she stepped on the elevator platform after going through the opened steel curtain door of the superstructure, she spoke to the petty officer standing next to the command box of the elevator.

“P.O. Shelby, please lower the elevator to the level of the Upper Deck once the marines will be on the platform. I am bringing them to the marines assembling hall.”

“Understood, ma’am!”

Stepping on the elevator platform but staying near its forward starboard corner, Schwartz waited for the marines to walk on it. However, as large as the aircraft elevator platform was, only a bit more than half of the marines was able to fit safely on it. Sarah thus gave another instruction to Petty Officer Shelby.

“I will go down with this group, P.O. Shelby. Once we will all be inside the Upper Deck, raise the platform and make the rest of the marines step on it, so that they could also be lowered. You may lower the elevator now.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

The giant platform then started to go down but stopped nearly at once after only four meters of vertical travel. The marines now could see that the elevator well’s walls surrounding them sported a few well-separated windows and doors. Sarah Schwartz opened one of those steel doors, a large sliding type, using a command box recessed into the well wall next to the door. The two-meter-wide door then slid open with a noise of electric actuators, revealing a wide passageway going towards the bow and connecting at right angle with another passageway.

“These passageways will lead us directly to your battalion assembly hall, Colonel. If you will follow me with your marines...”

Wilkinson did so, followed by his staff officers and his marines, but was immediately struck by many details about the interior of the ship. For one thing, the passageways, at least on this level, were painted an appealing pastel blue-green color rather than

sporting the usual navy gray paint. Even more surprising was the fact that the passageways were also decorated at intervals with big, floor-to-ceiling panorama pictures showing various American cities, towns and natural vistas, all printed on non-flammable tempered glass surfaces. Another thing was the width of those passageways he went through: they were over two-meter-wide! In the navy amphibious ships and carriers he had visited in the past, passageways were usually narrow affairs which often forced two people crossing each other to at least pivot a bit to avoid knocking shoulders. His astonished marines were thus able to walk down the passageways in their regular columns of three, making them exchange wondered exclamations and smiles between them. Their trip along passageways was however a short one, with the marines soon entering after only ten meters a vast hall measuring fifty meters by 35 meters. The hall was also painted a pastel blue-green and sported numerous large pictures showing either past illustrious marines or historical battle scenes showing marines in combat or landing on beaches. There was also a big, prominent sculpted wooden blazon of the Marine Corps suspended high on one wall, above an elevated dais. After stepping aside to let his marines file inside the big compartment, Wilkinson looked slowly around it, completely taken in.

“This place is fantastic! Any marine would feel at home here, Lieutenant Schwartz.”

“That was the goal of its designers, Colonel. Pursuant to the general directives from General Dows about improving the habitability of Navy ships, this whole deck was designed and furnished in order to give the best at-sea living environment possible to a complete reinforced battalion of marines. Apart from the four catapult compartments and a number of weapons modules and tractors garages, this whole deck is dedicated to the sole use of marines. The Upper Deck includes accommodations in individual cabins for all of 1,356 marines of all ranks, with dedicated washrooms, shower rooms and laundromats for each platoon-level quarters. It also has, apart from this assembly hall, a marines all-ranks cafeteria and kitchen, a marines all-ranks club, laundry services and a large weapons vault. Your marines will also be able to use the ship’s central gymnasium, situated on the Bottom Deck, plus use the large peripheral passageway of the Median Deck as a running track. However, unless the flight deck is cleared of aircraft activity, you won’t normally be allowed to go up on the flight deck to exercise. Oh, I nearly forgot: we have a pool on the Bottom Deck.”

"A POOL? ON A CARRIER?!" exclaimed Wilkinson, overwhelmed, making Sarah grin as the marine officers around her looked at her with bulging eyes.

"You heard me well, Colonel. It isn't of Olympic size but you can play team water polo in it. Finally, in terms of community facilities aboard, you have a convenience store on this deck plus a fully-equipped medical center, a chapel, a synagogue, a prayers room, multiple barber shops and hair salons and a cinema cum auditorium, all of those spread around a couple of other decks."

"But...we didn't bring bathing suits with us." Objected Major Christopher Walker. "This was supposed to be an operational deployment."

"It still is, sir, but you will travel in the best conditions the Navy can provide today. As for the lack of bathing suits, our various convenience stores stock them." Many of the marines rolled their eyes at that, not believing their luck. Shaking off his disbelief, Wilkinson asked another question to Sarah.

"So, how do we proceed from here, Lieutenant?"

"We will assign quarters to your marines and guide them to their assigned places, so that they can drop off their packs and weapons and make themselves at home on the ship. By the way, every individual cabin has a strong steel locker designed to secure individual weapons in them. I had the quartermaster drop one key padlock per cabin, in case your marines don't all have one with them already. Before your marines disperse to their cabins, I will have distributed to them a two-pages simplified deck plan of the NEPTUNE, which they will be able to use to avoid getting lost around the ship. Contrary to the aircraft carriers and amphibious landing ships you were accustomed to, the layout of the NEPTUNE is quite simple and straightforward, due to its box-like design: no fancy hull curves and tiny compartments and plenty of large rectangular spaces. Beware though: that deck plan is classified 'Restricted' and is not to be shown to non-military personnel. The NEPTUNE is still a mystery to our potential enemies and we want to keep it that way, sir."

"That is perfectly understandable, Lieutenant. I believe that all of my marines are now inside this hall. You may now start giving your quarters assignments."

"Thank you, sir!"

Going with Wilkinson and his staff officers to the dais located along one wall of the hall, Sarah then gave the signal to dozens of sailors to start distributing copies of her promised ship's deck plans to the assembled marines lined in multiple rows in front of

the dais. As her sailors started walking up and down the rows of marines while giving them copies of the plans, Sarah quickly explained the two-page document to Wilkinson and his officers.

“As you can see, the top page shows a fairly detailed layout of this deck, called the Upper Deck, which is mostly reserved for this battalion’s use. On it, you will see that each platoon-level quarter areas and support areas are either numbered or named. When assigning quarters to your marines, I will refer to these numbers. The second page is less detailed and shows the other decks of the ship, with the compartments and facilities that could interest or involve your marines clearly indicated. You will see that each deck shown on my plans are colored a different color, which corresponds to the color of the walls and passageways on that particular deck. That was another of the measures meant to make life easier and more agreeable to the occupants of this ship. Each of the platoon-level quarters areas numbered on this plan contain a total of 66 cabins, including a junior officer’s cabin, seventeen senior NCO’s cabins and 48 enlisted rank’s cabins, enough to house a full marine weapons platoon, or a reinforced marine rifle platoon. Each of those platoon-level areas also include a platoon assembly area, communal washrooms, a shower room and laundromat room, plus one separate bathroom meant to be used by female marines, in case you have some of them in your unit.”

“We do have a few female marines with us, Lieutenant. This is excellent, as it will allow them to stay with their respective sub-units. Those who designed this ship truly took great care in their work.”

“Thank you, sir! You will also see on this plan the locations of the cabins reserved for you and your command staff. We basically have six levels of individual accommodations aboard this ship: junior enlisted; NCO or Petty Officer; First Sergeant or Master Sergeant or Chief Petty Officer; junior officer; senior officer and, finally flag rank and Navy Captain. Those levels of accommodations are of increasing size and comfort, with all the CPOs’ and officers’ cabins having private bathrooms. The only bunk-type accommodations we have are some alcove-type bunks reserved for the emergency lodging of rescued survivors from shipwrecks or civilian refugees.”

“Damn! You didn’t lie when you said that this ship’s accommodations represent the gold standard, Lieutenant. So, how do you plan to assign those accommodations to my marines?”

"I don't, sir! You will!" replied Sarah with a smile. "The easiest way is to first assign areas to each of your platoons, keeping in mind that they each have 66 cabins, then to assign areas and cabins to your command and support personnel. I will stay next to you to help you if you have questions. You can discuss the cabin allotments with your staff before you start ticking off each area or cabin."

"Sounds like a plan!" replied a satisfied Wilkinson before he started a group discussion with his staff officers, a copy of the ship's deck plans in hand. He needed only a few minutes before he was ready to announce the quarters' assignments out loud to his troops. In turn, Sarah Schwartz had one of her sailors guide each group of marines to their quarters, with the directive of giving them a short briefing on the facilities available aboard the battle carrier. Soon, the marines started to disperse in platoon-sized groups around the Upper Deck, heading for their respective quarters' areas.

Sergeant Jeffrey Brown's squad and the rest of the Third Rifle Platoon of Bravo Company ended up being led to the platoon quarters' area situated at the starboard aft corner of the ship, right under the starting threshold of the ship's runway. The Petty Officer Third Class leading their platoon first let the whole platoon and the heavy weapons squad attached to it enter a wide compartment with folding tables lined up along its walls before speaking up in a strong voice.

"If you may listen up, please! We are now in the platoon assembly area of your designated quarters, which is marked as 'Area 7' on your deck plan. The tables you see along the walls here can be folded up and out of the way and are meant to serve to clean weapons and do other collective activities. Behind me, along the bow wall, are the cabins for the platoon commander, his platoon sergeant and one other senior NCO. Facing me are cabins for three more senior NCOs, plus an individual bathroom reserved for female marines. I in fact see that you have one woman in your group, so she is welcomed to the exclusive use of that bathroom. One word about the ship's rules concerning sexual harassment before I continue. The ship's Captain, Rear Admiral Benson, will be very severe about any case of sexual harassment or, God forbid, sexual assault, so please respect the privacy of your female marines. Cases of hazing or personal abuses will also be dealt with severely. Now, to continue describing this quarters' area. If you look to your right, you will see the entrance of two long corridors. Those corridors are lined with a total of four rows of thirteen cabins each, with the first cabin of each row reserved for squad commanders. Beyond those rows of cabins, you

will find the platoon's communal facilities, which include a laundromat and cleaning room with sets of washers, dryers and large cleaning sinks, sinks, urinals, toilet stalls and a large shower room. That communal area has an emergency exit leading to the starboard outer passageway, in case a fire blocks out this room's exit. In the very improbable case that a ship evacuation is called, you will then go out on the starboard outer passageway and go down five decks to the Lifeboat Deck, where lifeboat crews will assign you to board a lifeboat."

The navy man then turned to face Lieutenant Gomer.

"I will stay here while your marines take possession of their cabins, so that I could answer any question they would have, then will guide your platoon to the Marines Cafeteria for supper. Will that be satisfactory to you, sir?"

"Very! Thanks, P.O.3 Sully!" replied Kenneth Gomer, who then shouted out an order to his marines.

"The squad sergeants will now lead their marines down those corridors, with the First Rifle Squad taking the cabins most to the left and with the Second Rifle Squad taking the cabins facing the First Squad. The Third Rifle Squad and the Third Machine gun Squad will take the cabins lining the second corridor. LET'S MOVE, MARINES!"

Private Greta Visby felt excitement and anticipation as she followed Sergeant Jeffrey Brown and the rest of her rifle squad down the first corridor, which was fully one-meter-wide and allowed the heavily loaded marines to easily walk down it. As they went down the row of cabins, Brown designated each cabin for a particular member of his squad, with Greta ending up in the ninth cabin of the squad's row. Opening the sliding door of her cabin, Greta stepped in and was struck at once by its comfort and practicability: it was definitely a small cabin, measuring only two meters by two meters, but that surface had been well used and actually appeared bigger than it really was. First putting down on the deck her heavy backpack and putting her rifle on the bed of the cabin, she then took off her armored load-carrying vest and helmet, also putting those down on the bed, then examined in detail the inside of her cabin. The bed, which occupied half of the cabin's deck surface, had four large drawers under it and looked quite comfortable, with a much thicker mattress than those she had seen previously on amphibious ships during her basic training. Above it, with plenty of free room to sit down in bed without banging one's head, was a large storage bin big enough for a loaded backpack and a kit bag. Above one end of the bed was also a strong-looking steel

weapon locker big enough to contain a medium machine gun or even an anti-tank weapon or medium mortar tube. One steel personal items locker and a small table with bookshelf and a chair occupied the wall surface opposite the bed. However, what truly stunned Greta was the sight of the small, flat-screen television suspended to the wall via a shock-absorbing pivoting shelf to which it was secured with four clamps.

“No! I have my own television?! I wonder what I could watch on it while at sea.” Unable to resist her curiosity, Greta went to the television set, which had a fourteen-inch flat screen, and switched it on. As the image appeared on the screen, she noticed a small printed note fixed to the base of its shelf. She grinned with joy when she read it and saw that her television was linked via satellite to six of the biggest American national TV channels, plus had a channel dedicated to ship’s addresses.

“Great! I will be able to watch my favorite shows.”

Her morale now quite high, Greta first secured her rifle into her weapon locker and locked it, using the new key padlock she found on her bed and then adding the key to her personal key ring. Next, she started emptying her backpack of her personal hygiene items and spare clothes and underwear, leaving inside it her ammunition and field rations before storing the backpack in the overhead storage bin. Taking a couple of minutes to put away her clothes in the drawers under her bed, she then looked around her, satisfied. This operational deployment was decidedly starting on the right foot. She then remembered about the female bathroom mentioned by the sailor who had guided her platoon. Going out of her cabin and sliding closed her door, which had an interior locking bolt, Greta went back to the platoon assembly area and walked to the door of the designated female bathroom, opening it and taking a quick look inside: it measured about three square meters in deck surface area and contained a shower stall, a toilet and a counter with sink and mirror, plus a garbage can with lid. That garbage can then reminded Greta of something important.

“My tampons! I must get some, and quick!”

Closing back the sliding door of the bathroom, Greta went to PO3 Sully, who was patiently waiting while leaning his back against one of the tables lining the walls.

“Uh, sorry to bother you about this, P.O., but could you tell me where I could find female tampons on this ship?”

“Sure! We have a good 300 female sailors aboard the NEPTUNE, so female tampons are routinely stocked by our convenience stores and our pharmacy. There is a convenience store dedicated to serve marines on this deck, in the forward port section.

Just go out and down this passageway to join with the port side main passageway, then walk all the way to the level of the catapult compartments and turn right on the passageway leading to the marines' all-ranks cafeteria, then left to the convenience store. You will see signs on the walls of the intersections indicating the direction for various facilities. You should have no problems finding the convenience store."

"And would it be still opened at this hour?"

Her question attracted a mild smile on the sailor's lips.

"A carrier is active 24 hours a day, miss. It will be open."

"Thanks!"

Greta's next move was to go knock on the door of Sergeant's Brown cabin. Her squad leader opened his door nearly at once.

"Yes, Private Visby?"

"Permission to take fifteen minutes to go buy some female tampons at the marines' convenience store, Sergeant. PO3 Sully told me that it is on this deck, near the bow catapults, and explained to me how to get there."

Brown thought for a second or so before answering her while stepping out of his cabin.

"I have no problems with that. In fact, I will go with you, to see by myself what that convenience store has to offer. Those I previously saw aboard carriers and amphibious ships had a rather limited range of items to offer. Show me the way."

"With pleasure, Sergeant."

In turn, Brown advised Staff Sergeant Gambino that they were going to visit the convenience store, ending up with Gambino also deciding to accompany them there. The trio then left the platoon area and went down the passageway connecting both sides of the ship near the stern, to turn right on the port side main passageway, which was a good two meters in width.

"I can't get over how wide the passageways are on this ship." said Jeffrey Brown. I saw wider passageways only on the cargo decks of supply ships."

"Well, with over 5,000 persons living and working aboard this ship, you certainly don't want it to feel like a sardine can." replied Gambino. "However, I must recognize that this ship is impressing the hell out of me to date."

"And how is your own cabin, Staff Sergeant?" asked Greta. "My cabin was small but quite well equipped. It even has a television set."

"I also have a television set, Private Visby. My own cabin has a small private bathroom with shower stall, toilet and sink, something I am quite grateful for. If everything else aboard this ship is of the same caliber, then we should have quite a fine time during our deployment, compared to past deployments I spent on amphibious ships."

The trio continued to converse as they went, exchanging comments as they passed a number of intersections and facilities. Gambino made their trio stop for a short moment when they passed in front of a barber shop, its entrance advertised by the classic colored sign of barber shops. When asked by Gambino, the barber present informed him that he and his two colleagues could do female hairstyles as well as the classic marines' 'whitewalls', something that greatly relieved Greta. Continuing on along the apparently endless passageway, they finally arrived at an intersection with a sign and arrows pointing towards the marines' cafeteria and convenience store.

"This is decidedly much simpler than I expected to find our way around this ship." said Greta, making both Brown and Gambino nod their heads in agreement. After only ten meters down the new lateral passageway, they turned again in another passageway, arriving at the entrance of the marines' convenience store. Greta was amused by the fact that it had been made to look like the storefront of a typical civilian convenience store. She was then surprised by its size when she stepped inside it: it measured a good twenty by twelve meters, which compared favorably with many civilian convenience stores she had visited around Jacksonville. The variety of items offered for sale also impressed her. Roaming around it with Gambino and Brown, she found a whole row of shelves dedicated to hygiene items like razors, soap, shaving cream, aspirins and much more. She nearly yelled with joy when she found a shelf lined with a good choice of female tampons and other female hygiene products: even her favorite brand of tampons was on sale here. Grabbing quickly two boxes of tampons, she then continued to follow Gambino and Brown in their exploration of the convenience store. Then, they arrived in front of a long rack supporting a variety of bathing suits. While the vast majority of the stocks on sale were of men's bathing suits, Greta did find a total of six female bathing suits, three of them one-piece suits and the three others two-piece bikini suits. She gave a cautious look at Gambino while pointing at the bikinis on sale.

"Uh, would you have an objection to me buying a bikini, sir, or would you prefer I buy a one-piece suit?"

“You have my benediction to grab a bikini, Private Visby.” replied Gambino while hiding his amusement: the Swedish blonde was probably going to create quite a stir when she was going to use the ship’s pool. Greta thus happily grabbed one of the bikinis, choosing the tiniest of them. Both Gambino and Brown burst out laughing when they saw at the same time as Greta the hand-made flashy sign fixed to the bikini and probably made by the convenience store clerk.

“Warning! Smallest size of bikini allowed aboard! Wear with caution! That’s rich!” exclaimed Gambino as Greta reddened with embarrassment. She however kept that bikini and proceeded to the cash register of the store after picking up a fashion magazine in a nearby newspapers and magazines rack. On their part, the two NCOs bought a few hygiene items and one bathing suit each. The three of them were quite satisfied as they returned towards their platoon quarters with their new belongings.

“Well, this deployment is certainly starting well.” pronounced Gambino. “We will see if it is also a peaceful deployment or if it will turn into a slugfest.”

CHAPTER 11 – AN ACT OF WAR



T-72 SIM-1 tanks of the Azeri Army.

14:46 (Caucasus Time)

Thursday, January 11, 1996 ‘C’

Main gate of the American embassy

1 Amerikyan Street, Yerevan

Armenia, South Caucasus area

Staff Sergeant Rick Smith, manning the main gate of the American embassy in Yerevan with three other marines of the embassy’s marine detachment, instinctively tensed up when yet another artillery shell howled overhead. Thankfully, it was not aimed at the area of the embassy, by the shore of Lake Yerevan, and crashed instead some three kilometers away to the South, near a group of Armenian government buildings.

“Those damn Azeris are not too discriminate about their artillery fire.” he muttered to himself. As if attracted by his remark, five more shells followed, bracketing the government buildings. One of the marine guards manning the gate with Smith, PFC Anthony Masseria, gave him a sober look.

“At this rate, there won’t be much left of Yerevan in a couple of days, Sergeant. These Azeris are shooting all over the place, as if they don’t care about what they hit.”

“Of course they don’t care, Tony: they seem to hate everything Armenian.”

“Do we know why the Azeris started this war and invasion, Sergeant?”

“Lieutenant Eastwood told me and Gunnery Sergeant Tisdale yesterday that he still has seen no direct reasons for that invasion, other than pure political opportunism on the part of the Azeri and Caucasus leaders. Whatever that reason is, though, the Armenians are in a really tough bind. They are badly outnumbered and the Azeris have a significant superiority in firepower, especially in terms of airpower. The few combat aircraft that the Armenians possessed were destroyed on the ground in the first hour of this war, taken by surprise by the early air raids effected by the Azeri Air Force. As of the latest news, Azeri armored units are in sight of the city and the Armenians have little left to oppose them.”

“Shouldn’t we evacuate our non-essential staff and dependents then, Sergeant?”

“Oh, you can be certain that the ambassador is already thinking about that, Tony. Unfortunately, the Yerevan airport was closed on the first day of the war, due to Azeri and Caucasian airstrikes, and the only way to evacuate our people now is to go by road to the Turkish border and find safety there.”

Anthony Masseria could only nod his head at that: right from the start, the Azeri attack had taken everybody by surprise, especially since it had happened on the day of Christmas, which fell on January 7 according to the Christian Orthodox calendar. A renewed series of distant explosions then made the marines snap their heads towards the Southeast.

“Hey, that didn’t sound like artillery fire!” remarked at once Corporal John Merrick, to which Smith nodded his head.

“You’re right, Merrick: this sounded more like guns firing in direct fire mode, possibly tank guns. We could hear the hits within a second or two of the firings. I don’t like this: it could mean that an Azeri armored column is trying to surround the city in a pincer movement.”

Just as he finished saying that, the noise of distant heavy machine gun fire was heard by the marines, making Smith swear out loud.

“SHIT! The Azeris ARE attempting a pincer movement from the Southeast. I better go warn the lieutenant of this. Stay near the gate, men, and don’t open for anybody who will not have an American passport.”

Smith then ran into the nearby gate guardhouse to grab a telephone.

15:03 (Caucasus Time)**Office of Ambassador Rosen**

Ambassador Victor Rosen had just finished a telephone conversation and was putting down his receiver when someone knocked on the door of his office.

"Come in!"

The door was then opened by his military attaché, Colonel Steven Wright, who was closely followed by Lieutenant Jason Eastwood, the head of the embassy's marine detachment, which provided security for the embassy. Rosen didn't like the expression on the faces of his visitors.

"Is something happening that I should know about, Colonel?"

"Definitely, Mister Ambassador! We have indications that the Azeris are attempting to encircle the city with a pincer movement: we can hear tank gun and heavy machine gun fire to the Southeast, in the Vardashen District. Soon, we may find all our avenues of evacuation towards Turkey cut. With the Azeris shelling and bombarding Yerevan pretty much at random, this puts our staff and dependents at great risk. We must either move out now or get our people to shelters, Mister Ambassador."

"But, the Azeris would never deliberately target our embassy, Colonel."

"The Azeris, maybe not. However, the Caucasians are another matter entirely. Don't forget that their parliament recently voted to change the name of their republic from 'The Caucasus Independent Republic' to 'The Caucasus Islamic Republic'. Their leader, President Kadimov, has spewed some pretty extreme fundamentalist views lately and he certainly doesn't hold the United States dear to his heart. Furthermore, since he still has in his possession at least ten ex-Soviet nuclear-tipped mobile ICBM¹⁷ launchers, he probably thinks that he is untouchable and is capable of anything, in my opinion. I strongly recommend that we evacuate the embassy as soon as possible and drive to the Turkish border, which is only some twenty miles away."

"But we must first assemble our families at the embassy and prepare a convoy. That will take time, Colonel."

"The more reason to start now, Mister Ambassador. The basement levels of the embassy are not solid enough to resist direct hits by aircraft bombs and staying here will

¹⁷ ICBM: Intercontinental Ballistic Missile.

only get our people trapped in the middle of a city subject to street fighting with tanks and heavy weapons.”

Rosen, who was no expert in military strategy and tactics and had never experienced war before, hesitated for a moment before asking a question to Wright.

“What about evacuation by air, via one of our helicopters based in Turkey?”

“I already discussed that option by telephone with the commander of our air wing in Incirlik. While he has helicopters that could do the job, he says that flying to Yerevan would be a near-suicide mission: the Azeris have declared the whole Armenian airspace as a free-fire zone, meaning that anything flying through it that is not an Azeri or Caucasian aircraft will be shot down on sight. Yes, they could fly in at night with some chance of getting through, but the risks would be enormous. Our best bet is to form a road convoy at once and leave for the Turkish border. The faster the better, Mister Ambassador.”

Rosen’s shoulders sagged as the truth of Wright’s words sank in: this crisis had simply happened too quickly and without warning, eliminating any reasonable chance of being able to defuse it diplomatically.

“Very well, Colonel. Have all our staff and dependents assemble at the embassy at once with the minimum of baggage. Prepare also to destroy our classified materiel and documents. In the meantime, I will call Washington to alert the State Department about the situation here.”

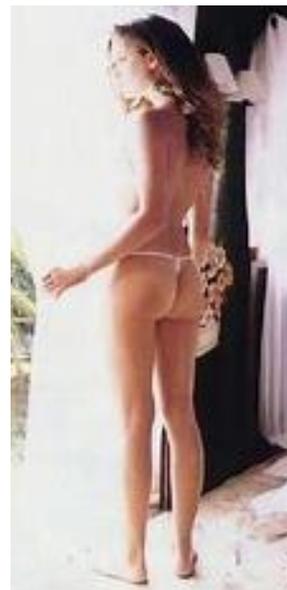
“Yes, Mister Ambassador!” replied Wright before storming out of the office with Lieutenant Eastwood, leaving behind a depressed and worried Victor Rosen.

06:58 (Washington Time) / 15:58 (Caucasus Time)

326 South Grove Street, Aurora Hills

Arlington, Virginia, U.S.A.

Ingrid felt her house to be quite empty as she ate breakfast alone in her kitchen. With Nancy and Lucy studying in New York and Leonardo studying in Boston at the famous



M.I.T.¹⁸, she had her whole house to herself. On the other hand, that made it a lot easier for her to discretely bring in some 'guest' from time to time, be it either male or female. It also allowed her to go around her house in the buff at will: she had always enjoyed being nude in private, for the sensation of freedom it gave her, and also slept naked. At the calendar age of seventy but with still the body of a young woman barely out of her teens, her sexual appetite was as strong as ever. However, with the notoriety and publicity surrounding her title of Commander of all American military forces, she had to be cautious in order to avoid giving some juicy story to the hordes of paparazzi who would love to invent a false scandal concerning her. She still remembered the small raucous caused some forty years ago when she had visited a topless beach in Southern France and had been spotted and photographed by a paparazzo. At that time, she was wearing the rank of major general and was the commander of all the U.S. Air Force units based in Europe. However, apart from a few desiccated fossils in the U.S. Congress, nobody had made much of a fuss about that, her having just illustrated herself by stopping cold with her fleet of aircraft the Soviet invasion of Eastern Europe by Stalin. In contrast, the magazines and daily tabloid newspapers which had published the photos showing her suntanning topless on the beach of Saint-Tropez had sold out very quickly, while the PLAYBOY Magazine had contacted her to offer her a nice sum to do a photographic session with her...in the nude of course. She had then politely refused that offer, but had later paid a visit to the Playboy Mansion in Los Angeles, on the condition that any photo of her there would stay private between herself and Hugh Hefner. Hefner had accepted her conditions and had certainly not regretted that deal afterwards, as he then had a chance to prove to Ingrid that he was truly a first-class lover. That had also given an occasion to Ingrid to cavort with some of the truly fantastic-looking young women frequenting the Playboy Mansion. Now, with her wearing the rank insignias of a five-star general and being a constant center of attention due to her responsibilities and position, such a risky adventure was unfortunately out of the question.

Ingrid was letting out a heavy sigh as she reminded her more worry-free days of past decades when her telephone rang. Wiping quickly her mouth, she then grabbed the receiver of her kitchen's telephone.

¹⁸ M.I.T. : Massachussetts Institute of Technology. One of the best and most famous American center of technological learning, situated in Boston.

"Ingrid Dows speaking!"

"General Dows, this is Brigadier General Long, at the NC4 operations center. We just got word that the situation in Armenia has deteriorated quickly and that our ambassador there has decided to evacuate his staff and dependents by road as quickly as he can."

That was enough to convince Ingrid that she needed to leave for the Pentagon right away.

"I'm on my way, General Long. I should be at the NC4 in no more than 25 minutes."

"Understood, General. I will have a briefing package ready for you on arrival."

"Thank you very much." replied Ingrid before putting back down her telephone receiver. Leaving aside what was left in her plate, she ran upstairs to her bedroom to put on her uniform, as she was presently nearly naked, wearing only a tiny panty. Some six minutes later, she walked out of her house via its rear door, so that she could take her Air Bike out of its small shed and fly out to the Pentagon.

07:16 (Washington Time)

National Combined Combat Command Center (NC4)

The Pentagon

Entering the operations center of the NC4 at a quick pace, Ingrid went at once to the night shift commander, Brigadier General Andrew Long, who was standing in front of the big wall situation board.

"So, what is the exact present situation in Yerevan, General Long?"

Long, an infantryman by profession, answered her while using a laser dot pointer to show her a few points.

"Some forty minutes ago, we were notified by our military attaché at our Yerevan embassy that the Azeris had formed a pincer around Yerevan and were entering the city with armored forces from both the Northeast and the Southeast, with Azeri tanks only a mile from our embassy. With the airport closed and the Armenian airspace having been declared a free-fire zone by the Azeris, our ambassador decided to evacuate his staff and dependents by road to Turkey as fast as he could, before the roads to the Turkish border are closed by the Azeri advance. Then, about five minutes ago, we got an ultimate call from our attaché, Colonel Steven Wright, saying that they were about to

destroy their crypto communications equipment and that a convoy should leave the embassy with the staff members and their dependents in about four hours. We thus have now lost our links with our Yerevan embassy, General.”

Ingrid frowned on hearing part of Long’s briefing.

“Four hours?! But that would make them leave the embassy after sundown: they would be traveling in the dark through a city shaken by urban combat. That could too easily cause some mistaken identity incident if they meet Azeri forces on their way out. Personally, I would have waited until next morning, to avoid such possible incidents.”

“I would agree with you on that, General, but it appears that our ambassador, Victor Rosen, was losing his nerves quickly and was insisting on leaving as soon as his convoy would be ready. Colonel Wright thus had little choice about the time of departure.”

Ingrid shook her head, her jaws tight.

“I don’t like this, at all! They risk being fired upon, and not only by Azeri soldiers: the Armenian soldiers defending Yerevan are undoubtedly on edge and liable to shoot without warning at anything moving. What is our air wing in Incirlik doing about this situation?”

“To be frank, General: not much! They can’t enter Armenian airspace without risking to start a war between us and the Azeris and the Caucasians, while the Turks warned our air wing commander that they would not allow him to act in Armenia because they want to avoid provoking an Azeri air attack on their territory. The Turks also told us that they would not let us fly in reinforcements in Incirlik.”

“Nice fair weather ally we have here.” said Ingrid in a bitter tone. “Turkey has one of the strongest armies in the region, yet they are cowering in front of the Azeris instead of telling them to fuck off?”

“They are mostly afraid of the nuclear-tipped missiles that the Caucasians possess, General.” replied Long in a cautious tone. Ingrid was however not convinced by that argument.

“Did the Turks forget that we have guaranteed their safety from nuclear attacks years ago by pledging a response by our own nuclear forces to such attacks? No, I am smelling some other reason by the Turks to refuse to let our air wing act in response to this crisis. Unfortunately, this crisis is as much a political one as a military one and we won’t be able to ignore the Turks’ directives without the explicit consent of President Perot. What about the U.S.S. NEPTUNE? Where is it now?”

"It is presently approaching the Strait of Gibraltar and is planning to cross it once night has fallen, in about two hours, General. It just established a new unofficial transatlantic record by staying at a speed of 35 knots all along."

"Which would have been impossible to do if it would have an escort flotilla with it during that crossing of the Atlantic: destroyers would have run their fuel tanks dry by keeping such a breakneck speed for so long. We definitely bet on the right design with the NEPTUNE. I can't wait to see more of its sister ships enter service. Could you remind me of what our battle carrier has aboard in terms of troops and aircraft?"

"Certainly, General! Let me just get my notes on that."

Ingrid waited patiently while Long sifted through the piles of messages and notes on his desk, using that time to look in detail at what the giant situation board could tell her. Long returned to her side after a couple of minutes, a few sheets of paper in hand.

"Here you go, General! The U.S.S. NEPTUNE presently has aboard its initial air wing, formed of two fighter squadrons equipped with F-93Ns, one strike squadron equipped with A-20Ns, a reconnaissance flight with four RF-95Ns, a maritime patrol flight with four MP-21s, an anti-submarine squadron with twelve PELICAN 'B's and a Carrier-Onboard-Delivery flight with four PELICAN 'C's, for a total of sixty aircraft. To that, we added four days ago two squadrons of PELICAN 'A's from the 2nd Marine Aircraft Wing in Camp Lejeune, which flew to the NEPTUNE with a complete marine infantry battalion equipped with light vehicles. Also, two of our heavy assault hovercrafts joined with the NEPTUNE at that time, bringing aboard a marine artillery battery with six 105mm towed howitzers, a marine communications detachment and a few transport medium trucks."

Ingrid nodded in satisfaction at that.

"Good! If we have to face some kind of hostage or extraction situation, that marine battalion and our PELICAN 'A's should be able to take care of it. What about the NEPTUNE itself? Its missile battery was fully loaded, I believe."

"That is correct, General. Its 144 launch cells are fully loaded, with half of them containing self-defense anti-air, anti-ship and anti-submarine missiles, and the other half loaded with PSM-LR long range precision bombardment missiles in quadpack configuration. The NEPTUNE could thus unleash a total of 288 PSM-LR missiles, each with a maximum range of 600 miles and a thousand-pound explosive warhead."

“That should get the Azeris’ attention if we ever have to respond directly to this crisis. However, I suspect that the Azeris are not the true instigators of this sudden, unprovoked invasion of Armenia. My bet is that this asshole of Kadimov, the President of the newly-renamed Caucasus Islamic Republic, started all this. Without the support of the Caucasus forces, the Azeris would never have attempted a straight-out invasion of Armenia: they would have limited themselves into retaking the Nagorno-Karabakh enclave. Also, the refusal of the Turks to allow us to react to this smells all wrong. President Urban of Turkey has been turning towards Islamism and away from secularism for years now. We did move all of our nuclear weapons out of Incirlik, did we?”

“Yes, we did, General. Our last nuclear bombs were flown out two years ago, after this incident with our reconnaissance aircraft downed over the Caucasus. It was done discretely and the Turks don’t know that our nuclear weapons are gone from Incirlik.”

“Good! What about our dependents and civilian presence in Incirlik?”

“Er...they are still there, General. There were political objections from the State Department about moving them out, on the pretext that it would offend the Turks.”

Ingrid let out an exasperated sigh on hearing that.

“Politicians! Well, I suppose that I will have to push that subject again with President Perot, along with a few other things. I am going to call the President from ‘The Tank’, if you need me in the next few minutes. The time for dithering is now well past, in my opinion.”

Andrew Long nodded in agreement to that as she walked away towards the large conference room, commonly called ‘The Tank’, attached to the NC4 operations center. Ingrid Dows was a no-nonsense, quick-acting commander of the kind he truly liked.

21:31 (Caucasus Time) / 12:31 (Washington Time)

Compound of the American embassy in Yerevan

Armenia

“Let’s go, Corporal Biddle: we have already wasted enough time.”

“Yes sir!” replied Thomas Biddle, who was driving the big SUV heading the convoy of diplomatic cars about to leave the embassy. It had taken way too long in the minds of the marines of the embassy detachment to assemble the staff members of the

delegation and their dependents: some of those dependents had fussed about the limited amount of baggage they were allowed to bring with them and also had taken their sweet time in packing up, not fully understanding how urgent the situation was. Now, the night was firmly in and, to make things worse, a general power outage had plunged the whole city in the dark. Only the emergency diesel generator installed in the basement of the embassy had allowed them to have some lights to work with in the last hours. With Colonel Wright sitting in the front passenger seat of his SUV, Biddle then started his engine and started rolling at moderate speed towards the main gate of the embassy compound. Two marines waiting at the gate opened it for the convoy of cars and minivans, then closed and locked the gates back and got into the last vehicle, which had stopped to wait for them. The convoy, carrying a total of 55 American citizens, including nineteen marines and sixteen children, then rolled with all lights on down the U-5 Highway, intent on getting to the intersection with the U-3 Highway, which led to the Turkish border town of Ortaalican. Wright, like every marine sitting in the individual vehicles of the convoy, was holding on to a handheld two-way radio, so that all could monitor his warnings or indications about the road ahead. After rolling less than a mile, the convoy arrived at an Armenian defensive checkpoint set at the junction of Highways U-5 and U-1, where an Armenian Army captain quickly approached Wright's SUV, a pistol in his hand. That Armenian officer then asked a question in a harsh tone in Armenian to Wright, who had lowered his side window. Thankfully, Wright knew some Armenian and was able to answer the officer while showing his American passport.

"I am Colonel Seven Wright, from the American embassy, and we are on our way to evacuate our ambassador, his staff and their dependents. Could you please let us pass?"

The Armenian officer looked quickly at Wright's passport, then looked at the occupants of the SUV, which included the assistant consul, his wife and three young children, before nodding his head.

"Very well, you may pass. Beware, though: Azeri tanks have been signaled not far from here and they are said to be shooting at anything that moves. I can't guarantee your safety beyond this point, Colonel."

"I understand, Captain. Thank you for your cooperation." replied Wright before telling to Biddle to drive. As they passed through the checkpoint, they were able to see

that the Armenians had set in position a number of machine guns and RPG-7¹⁹ anti-tank launchers.

"Damn! These guys are definitely expecting big troubles soon, sir." said Biddles, making Wright nod his head.

"And they will probably get some soon, Corporal, the way things are going. Hell! I wish that we could have left before darkness fell. Don't roll too fast for the moment: I want to check that all our vehicles make it through that checkpoint."

"Understood, sir!"

Once he was certain that all fourteen vehicles of his convoy were safely through, Wright told Biddle to take some speed and continue down the highway. They had gone through the small town of Vagharshapat and were rolling southward on the M-3 Highway when Wright saw another checkpoint ahead. As Corporal Biddle was slowing down before arriving at the checkpoint, the soldiers at that checkpoint suddenly opened fire with rifles and machine guns, but not at the convoy. Wright understood at once what was happening.

"THAT CHECKPOINT IS UNDER ATTACK! STOP! STOP AND TURN BACK!" Swearing at their bad luck, Biddle braked hard as Wright passed his warning via radio, then started turning around. That was when all hell broke loose. A number of big muzzle flashes and thunderous detonations from close by in the night marked what had to be a salvo from a group of tanks advancing towards the checkpoint, coming from the South. However, not all the shells and subsequent machine gun bullets that followed were directed at the Armenian checkpoint. Two of the cars of the diplomatic convoy exploded, hit by 125mm tank gun shells, while the other cars in the convoy were raked by 12.7mm heavy machine gun fire which pierced easily their thin steel bodies, ripping through human flesh and igniting gasoline tanks. Wright froze for a second at that scene of horror, then shouted out at the occupants of his SUV.

"EVERYBODY OUT NOW! HIDE IN THE WOODS!"

While he and Corporal Biddle got out at once, the assistant consul, David Greenspan, his wife and his three children, aged from seven to twelve, were much slower to react,

¹⁹ RPG: Rocket Propelled Grenade. The RPG-7 is a portable anti-tank rocket launcher designed and built by the Soviet Union and that was widely exported all around the World.

paralyzed by fear. Wright, helped by Biddle, had to forcibly pull them out of the back seats of the SUV to make them move.

“COME ON! RUN WITH ME INTO THE WOODS OR YOU WILL DIE!”

Either pushed or pulled by Wright and Biddle, the Greenspans finally reacted under the effect of adrenaline, with the ‘flight reflex’ switching in. Thankfully, the highway was bordered along its northern side by a thick forest, allowing the seven Americans to quickly run behind the cover of trees. Wright however urged the Greenspans to continue deeper into the woods, worried that ricocheting bullets could hit them. Stopping for a moment behind a tree in order to look at the convoy and see if other Americans had managed to get out, Wright felt tears roll on his cheeks at the site of the cars of the convoy: all of them were receiving dense machine gun fire, with a new tank shell hitting at interval the immobilized vehicles. He could see no movement around the cars, while many of the vehicles were now on fire. Looking at the ambassador’s car, which had also been transporting the ambassador’s wife and the embassy’s consul, he saw it explode under the impact of a tank shell that turned it into a fireball. A few seconds later, another shell hit his own SUV, destroying the now empty vehicle and turning it into a torch. Shaking off his grief and horror, Wright then ran to where the Greenspans and Biddle were hiding, crouched behind a big tree surrounded by bushes.

“I couldn’t see any other survivor from our convoy. We will have to get deeper into the woods, in case the Azeris comb the area afterwards.”

“But we can’t abandon the others like this, Colonel!” objected at once David Greenspan, attracting a hard look from Wright.

“And what are we supposed to do, armed with only two pistols against a tank unit, Mister Greenspan? Besides, we will not be abandoning our people: as soon as this fight is over and the area proves more secure, I will return towards our convoy to check for survivors. You and your family will however stay hidden when I will go check our convoy. Now, let’s get at least 200 yards deeper into this wood and find a good place to hide.”

“Will those men kill us too if they find us?” lamented one of the two daughters of the consul, nine-year-old Tina, making Wright look grimly down at her.

“Possibly! That is why we have to find a better hiding place. Follow me! Corporal Biddle will cover our rear.”

Making his small group move cautiously at a crouch and telling them not to speak or make noises, Wright walk for some 200 meters until he found the large trunk of a dead tree lying among a group of bushes. Judging it to be as good a hiding place as could be, he made the Greenspans lay down on their belly behind the dead tree before giving a few instructions to Biddle.

“Stay with the Greenspans and protect them, Corporal. Make sure that they don’t speak or make noises and stay under cover. I will return close to the highway to see when I could look safely for other survivors.”

“You can count on me, sir.”

Wright did not reply to that, instead running at a crouch back towards the highway, his pistol in his right hand. Once he found a good hiding place with a view to the highway and the destroyed car convoy, he lay down behind a bush and cautiously made a small hole through the leaves and branches, then took out his compact handheld night vision scope. By now the firing against the cars of the convoy had stopped but, in contrast, the Armenian Army checkpoint was now under full-scale assault by at least nine T-72 tanks followed by a number of BMP-1 armored troop carriers. Against such firepower, the Armenian soldiers couldn’t do much to stop them. Despite of that, the Armenians managed to knock out at least one BMP-1 with an RPG round and break the right-side track of a T-72 tank before being overwhelmed and overrun. Wright clenched his jaws hard when he saw Azeri infantrymen finish off the wounded Armenian soldiers they found still alive inside the destroyed checkpoint, showing no pity or regards to the laws of war. Then, more infantrymen reached the highway and the destroyed diplomatic convoy and started looking around the wrecks. Wright suddenly tensed up on hearing some of those soldiers speak among themselves: those were Caucasian soldiers, not Azeri soldiers! One of those soldiers then shouted something while looking at a body next to a car riddled with bullets. To Wright’s shock, he saw that body move, with one arm extending out as if to ask for help from the Caucasian soldier. The latter then called up to him another soldier, who was possibly his officer. That officer came at a run and stopped next to the man lying next to the shot-up car and bent down to listen to what the wounded man was saying. What that officer heard somehow made him angry and he shouted at the wounded man on the ground in broken English.

“AMERICAN? AMERICAN?! FUCK AMERICANS!”

The Caucasian officer then shot twice the wounded on the ground, killing him and nearly making Wright shout out with rage. Next, that officer gave out orders to the soldiers

around him, making them disperse along the cars of the convoy, looking for something. What they were looking for quickly became too obvious to Wright when isolate shots or bursts from the soldiers' rifles rang along the destroyed convoy: the Caucasian soldiers were finishing off every American found still alive. Filled with cold rage, Wright decided that he had seen enough and cautiously crawled deeper into the woods before getting up at a crouch and walk as silently as possible to the hiding place of the Greenspans and of Corporal Biddle, who asked him a question, dread in his voice.

"I heard isolated shots from the highway, sir. Did you see what was happening?"

"I saw too well, Corporal: those ones who fired on the convoy were Caucasian soldiers, not Azeris. Also, I saw one of their officers kill one of our people, who was wounded and asking for help. That bastard then ordered his soldiers to find and kill any survivor of our convoy."

"OH MY GOD! WHAT..." started to shout Mary Greenspan, the consul's wife, panic rising in her. To his credit, her husband quickly clapped one hand over her mouth and admonished her.

"Do you want to get us all killed, Mary? Get a grip on yourself and think about our children!"

With his hand still over his wife's mouth, the consul then looked at Wright.

"What are we going to do now, Colonel Wright?"

"We need to get out of here and walk to the Turkish border while avoiding Azeri and Caucasian soldiers. We should march by night and hide during daytime, to avoid detection. Our goal is now twofold: the first one is to survive and get safely to the Turkish border; the second one is to signal this atrocity to our government. I will be damned if those bastards don't pay for their crimes."

07:22 (Washington Time) / 16:22 (Caucasus Time)

Friday, January 12, 1996 'C'

Operations center of the NC4, The Pentagon

The first thing Ingrid did on entering the NC4 in the morning was to go see Brigadier General Long, whose night shift was about to end.

"Any news from our diplomats in Armenia, General?"

"None, ma'am! I am getting worried about them: they should have reached the Turkish border hours ago."

"You are right: this doesn't smell good. What about the situation in Yerevan itself?"

"Urban fighting is raging inside the city, with Armenian soldiers resisting as best they can the advance by Azeri forces. However, they are hopelessly outgunned and outnumbered and will ultimately be crushed. Do you know what our government's response to that unprovoked invasion will be, ma'am? After all, we had a friendship and cooperation treaty with the Armenian Republic."

Ingrid couldn't help sigh out in frustration then.

"I did speak with President Perot and his cabinet yesterday about the Armenia crisis. Unfortunately, while President Perot would be ready to react and call the Azeris and the Caucasians to task for this, the Congress is refusing to condone military action on our part, arguing that the United States has not been attacked, thus should use only diplomatic means to deal with that conflict. Since President Perot is an independent politician who is neither a Democrat nor a Republican, he has no direct support inside Congress and must rely on the good graces of the congressmen and senators from the two official parties. Right now, that is hampering his range of options to deal with that crisis."

"Do we at least have the permission to evacuate our dependents and non-essential personnel from Incirlik, ma'am?"

"Not yet, but I think that the President will soon give us his authorization for that." Long shook his head at those words, clearly frustrated.

"Politicians! I wish that you would be our ultimate commander-in-chief, General."

"Aah, but that would then be called a military dictatorship and would be contrary to our constitution, General Long." replied Ingrid in a light tone before becoming serious again. "However, I intend to do everything possible to prepare our forces to react to this crisis, in the case that our politicians grow some backbone. I want regular photo reconnaissance missions to be flown from orbit over Armenia, to monitor and document every troop movement and military activity there. Were we able to find enough intelligence personnel fluent in Azeri, Armenian and Chechen to fill our communications monitoring units in both the DIA²⁰ and the NSA²¹?"

²⁰ DIA : Defense Intelligence Agency. The intelligence branch of the American armed forces.

“Unfortunately, we are having a hard time finding such linguists within our military ranks, General. All three of those languages were not part of the lists of languages of high interest to us, until a few days ago. Furthermore, we can’t use about anyone who is proficient in Azeri, Chechen or Armenian, as those communications positions require a very high security classification. The few suitable candidates we have found are already swamped by the amount of traffic to be analyzed.”

“Damn! Maybe we will have to approach some of our allies about this. However, that would again raise the subject of the security classification of those positions. Right now, I am not confident enough about the Turks, who may have the most people able to speak Azeri, Chechen or Armenian, to trust them with such a job. Alright, scour all of our forces’ units and ask them to list any military personnel they have who would possess the linguistic skills we need right now. Put a red-hot urgent tag on that!”

“Understood, ma’am!”

14:40 (Western Europe Time) / 08:40 (Washington Time)

Saturday, January 13, 1996 ‘C’

Combat Information Center (C.I.C.) of the U.S.S. NEPTUNE

Sailing eastward in the Central Mediterranean

“You wanted to see me, Admiral?”

“Yes, Colonel Wilkinson! We just received a warning order from Washington that is of interest to both of us.” answered Mack Benson before handing a printed message to the marine colonel. “This copy is for you.”

Taking the four-page message, Wilkinson read it out loud for the benefit of his second-in-command, Major Chris Walker, who had accompanied him to the C.I.C.

“Warning order to the U.S.S. NEPTUNE and the 1st Marine Battalion of the 6th Marine Regiment. Situation: the diplomatic staff and dependents of the American embassy in Yerevan, counting a total of 55 individuals, signaled on the afternoon of January 11 that it was evacuating the embassy in Yerevan in a road convoy, with the goal of driving to the Turkish border and find safety there. However, that convoy has not

²¹ NSA : National Security Agency : A highly classified intelligence branch of the U.S. government that specializes in communications monitoring and crypto analysis. It also is tasked with insuring the security of American classified communications systems.

arrived yet in Turkey as of 12:00 (GMT) on January 13 and its whereabouts are presently unknown. Also, the governments of Azerbaijan and of the Caucasus Islamic Republic have proven to be completely unhelpful in this matter, while we are suspecting that they may have detained our diplomatic staff and dependents. Mission: the U.S.S. NEPTUNE and the 1st Battalion of the 6th Marine Regiment are to be prepared to launch on short notice a search-and-rescue operation within Armenia, in order to find and rescue our diplomatic staff and their dependents. Once the mission is formally authorized, the use of lethal force will be permitted for the self-defense of the search-and-rescue force and for the extraction and safe return of the American citizens presently missing in Armenia. If found, the members of our embassy and their dependents are to be flown to the U.S.S. NEPTUNE and not, repeat, not to Incirlik Airbase in Turkey, as Incirlik Airbase has been deemed unsafe at this time and is being partially evacuated. The methods and tactics used to find and retrieve our citizens will be left to the discretion of the rescue force commander, once the mission go is given by this headquarters. The U.S.S. NEPTUNE will provide any support needed by the rescue force in terms of air support and fire support. If Azeri or Caucasian forces try to oppose this rescue operation, then use of maximum force is authorized in response of any hostile action on their part. A detailed list and biographical information of our diplomatic staff members, their dependents and of the nineteen members of the embassy's marine detachment are to be found at Annex 'A', while information on the location and layout of our embassy in Yerevan is to be found at Annex 'B'. If deemed necessary, any search-and-rescue operation is to be launched within three hours of receipt of final mission authorization by the U.S.S. NEPTUNE. Signed: General of the Army I. Dows."

Looking up from the message, Wilkinson then spoke to Rear Admiral Benson, his expression somber.

"This message is quite clear to me in authorizing my troops to use lethal force if necessary to find and rescue those Americans in Armenia. To what degree will you be ready to support my marines with the firepower of your ship, Admiral?"

"If we have to fight to free those diplomats and their dependents, then you can count on the full firepower of this ship and of its embarked air wing, Colonel." replied at once Benson. "You will only need to radio for support to get it and I intend to have a strike package loiter off the Turkish coast as soon as you lift off from this ship in your PELICANs. I will also have a number of my long-range bombardment missiles ready to

target enemy forces and locations which you will signal to us while effecting your mission.”

“I truly can’t ask for more than that, Admiral.” replied Wilkinson, pleased. Now, I believe that we should start immediately to study the terrain and situation in Armenia in order to ascertain what could have happened to our diplomatic convoy.”

“Agreed! I already ordered my ship’s intelligence officer to take out sets of relevant maps of Armenia for your battalion and for our tactical staff. I will however let you time to pass the warning to your marines to get ready before we start studying those maps together.”

“Thank you, Admiral! I should be back in about half an hour.”

Wilkinson then saluted Benson before walking out of the C.I.C. with Major Walker.

14:44 (Western Europe Time)

Ship’s pool complex, on Bottom Deck of the U.S.S. NEPTUNE

Private Greta Visby hid a smile as she approached the edge of the large pool, located on the Bottom Deck of the fantastic U.S.S. NEPTUNE. She was wearing the small bikini bought at the ship’s convenience store and she could tell already that she was having quite an effect on the sailors, aviators and marines presently using the pool. Making a show of bending over the edge of the pool, she then dove into the water, finding it to be about the right temperature for her. Resurfacing and swimming to the shallowest end of the pool, where water depth was about one meter, she started to swim lengths along one of the corridors still free of other bathers. She however had time to do only three lengths, using crawl, before she heard a loud message coming from the ship’s P.A. system.

“ATTENTION TO ALL MARINES! GET YOURSELVES READY FOR A POSSIBLE INCOMING GROUND OPERATION. RETURN TO YOUR QUARTERS AT ONCE AND WAIT FOR FURTHER INSTRUCTIONS THERE.”

“Damn! I was really enjoying this swimming session.” uttered Greta as she swam to the nearest ladder hooked along the sides of the pool. Climbing quickly that ladder, she then hurried to return to the female locker room of the pool complex, where she took a quick shower and dried herself before putting back on her camouflaged combat uniform and running back to the quarters assigned to her rifle platoon.

03:29 (Caucasus Time)

Sunday, January 14, 1996 'C'

Armenia-Turkey border, near Margara



Colonel Steven Wright stopped behind one of the last trees of the forest his group had been walking through all night and took out his night scope to examine the ground ahead. His heart jumped in his chest when

he saw what he recognized to be the Turkish border post opposite the small Armenian town of Margara.

“At last! The border!” he muttered to himself before looking again through his night scope, making out the details about the border post. Not too surprisingly, he saw no guards on the Armenian side: those guards probably had been redeployed to help face the Azeri invasion. He however did see that the Turkish border post had been reinforced by at least two armored personnel carriers, which was in his opinion a prudent precaution on the part of the Turks. Corporal Biddle, who was shepherding along the Greenspans, then joined him with the consul and his family.

“Are we close to the border, sir?”

“The border is in sight, Corporal. However, let’s not rush forward without thinking. The fields next to the border fence may be mined and that border fence also appears to me to be electrified. There are soldiers on the Turkish side but no one visible on the Armenian side. I believe that we should get to that drainage ditch alongside the border road and follow it at a crouch until close to the border. Then, we will climb on the road to avoid any possible mines close to the fence. Did you get all that, Mister Greenspan?”

“I did! Thank God that this will soon end. The kids are dead tired and hungry.”

“I understand that, but we still must be cautious. Those Turkish soldiers are probably on edge because of all the fighting they can hear inside Armenia. Whatever happens, don’t run and let me speak with those Turks. And please make sure that your wife follows my instructions.”

The consul nodded at that, a bit embarrassed: to say that his wife had not proved up to the challenge up to now would have been an understatement, with Mary Greenspan often complaining about everything and asking for frequent rest periods which had

greatly slowed down their progress. After a last look through his night scope, Wright then pointed at where the border road to Margara emerged from the forest.

"We will follow the forest's edge and stay within the cover of the trees until we get to that drainage ditch. Let's go!"

With the members of the group finding new energy at the prospect of soon being safe inside Turkey, they walked along the trees, getting to the road some twenty minutes later. Wright then made his group stop and crouch while he checked again for any guard or soldier on the Armenian side. He saw nobody, while there was no vehicular traffic on this portion of road. Encouraged, he jumped down in the roadside drainage ditch, which was a good meter deep and waited for all the members of his group to also be in the ditch before telling them to start walking at a crouch and follow him. Even though he was an experience military officer, those last 300 meters to the border fence appeared to him like a much longer distance, thanks to his anxiety and fear of a hasty reaction on the part of the Turks. Once within fifty meters of the border fence, he decided that the risk of landmines was becoming too great and climbed on the road, then started helping the Greenspan children to get out of the ditch, while Corporal Biddle was helping Madam Greenspan. Wright was pulling up twelve-year-old Janet Greenspan when the harsh light of a projector illuminated him, nearly blinding him.

"Quick, don't react to this! Just raise your hands high in the air, all of you!" he urged to the members of his group. He himself did so and turned to face in the direction of the border post while shouting as loud as he could.

"DON'T SHOOT! WE ARE AMERICANS!"

He then continued to shout while leading his group at a slow walk. Someone on the Turkish side then shouted at him as he was passing the abandoned Armenian road gate.

"YOU AMERICANS?"

"YES! WE ARE AMERICAN DIPLOMATS! WE HAVE CHILDREN WITH US."

"COME FORWARD BUT KEEP YOUR HANDS UP!"

Encouraged to see that the Turks had not simply fired at them without questions, Wright walked to the Turkish road gate, which was still closed, and was met there by a Turkish Army lieutenant waiting for him, his pistol in one hand.

"Do you speak English fluently, Lieutenant?"

"Enough to understand you. Do you have proofs that you are an American diplomat?"

"Yes! Here is my diplomatic passport. I am Colonel Steven Wright, Military Attaché at the American embassy in Yerevan. Our embassy staff and dependents departed from Yerevan three days ago, when the fighting started in the city. However, our convoy of diplomatic cars was shot at and destroyed by Caucasian tanks and 48 of our people were then killed. We are the only survivors from our embassy and have been walking through the forests for three nights now."

The Turkish lieutenant gave him a shocked look on hearing his story.

"Caucasian soldiers killed American diplomats? Could it have been a case of mistaken identity?"

"No!" replied at once Wright. "I personally saw those soldiers murder the wounded survivors of my convoy, even though those survivors identified themselves as Americans. Now, could you please allow my group through, Lieutenant? We are awfully vulnerable while standing like this on the road."

The Turkish officer nodded his head at that, then shouted an order in Turkish to two of his soldiers, who then hurried to unlock and open the gate. Feeling a wave of relief wash over him, Wright stepped on the Turkish side of the border, then waved to his group to come join him. The Turkish lieutenant checked the passports of the group's members as they entered Turkish territory, then shouted more orders in Turkish to his men before looking back at Wright.

"A truck will now bring you under escort to my unit's command post, where you will be able to tell your story to my battalion commander. Then, my commander will probably give you transportation to your airbase in Incirlik."

"Thank you, Lieutenant! You can't know how I am grateful for all this. Does your battalion commander have access to a telephone with international connections? I would need to advise as quickly as possible the American State Department that we are now safe inside Turkey."

"He does have such telephone connections, Colonel."

"Excellent! Thank you again, Lieutenant."

The young Turkish officer nodded again and looked with sadness at the three young American children in the group.

"Children should not have to experience war. Allah will smile about them reaching safety."

Wright could only agree heartily with that statement.

23:08 (Washington Time) / 08:08 (Caucasus Time)
Saturday, January 13, 1996 'C' / Sunday, January 14
Ingrid Dows' office, The Pentagon
Washington, D.C., U.S.A.

Ingrid, having left the NC4 operations center two hours ago in order to study in peace some classified documents, was about to go sleep on the portable cot installed in one corner of her office when her telephone rang. She got to it quickly to answer the call.

"General Dows speaking!"

"General, this Major Manning, at the NC4. We just got a flash message from our base in Incirlik: a group of seven members of our embassy has arrived there, escorted by Turkish soldiers, after walking to the safety of the Turkish border. Unfortunately, 48 members and dependents of our Yerevan embassy have been killed on the night of the eleventh by Caucasian troops who fired on their convoy, then massacred the survivors they found."

"WHAT?! I'm coming! In the meantime, open a telephone line to Incirlik and get the ranking survivor on the line: I will want to speak directly with that survivor."

Putting down her receiver, Ingrid then left her office at a dead run, all ideas of sleep forgotten.

Major Manning was still in the process of getting a line to the Incirlik Airbase when Ingrid ran into the NC4 operations center. However, Ingrid did not press him and took the time to read the message from Incirlik while Manning got hold of Colonel Wright in Turkey. When the call was arranged, Ingrid was already fuming about the actions of Caucasian soldiers against the diplomatic convoy. Taking a deep breath to calm down first, she then spoke in a soft tone in her telephone.

"Colonel Wright, this is General Ingrid Dows. First, I wish to say that I am happy that you and your group were able to make it to safety. Now, please tell me in detail what happened to our embassy convoy, starting when it left the embassy. I will be taking notes, so don't speak too fast."

Still, Ingrid made sure that Major Manning was recording the conversation before Wright started speaking. Ingrid didn't interrupt Wright as he described the events concerning

the diplomatic convoy, that is until he had described in detail the destruction of the convoy by the Caucasians.

"Here is an important question to you, Colonel: are you sure that these Caucasian soldiers didn't kill our people in a case of simple mistaken identity?"

"I am sure of that, General." answered at once Wright, his voice hardening. "I saw one of our wounded people ask for help and identify himself as being an American. In response, a Caucasian officer retorted to him by saying 'Fuck Americans!', then shot him twice. That same officer then ordered to check for more survivors and to shoot any they would find. I heard and saw at least three more of our people being shot after that. At that point, I ran back deep into the woods and joined the only survivors from the convoy apart from me: one marine corporal, the assistant consul, his wife and his three young children. By the way, there were twelve other children in the convoy apart from the Greenspan kids. All of them were killed with their parents."

Ingrid again had to contain her anger before asking another question.

"Did you or any of your marines shoot once at those Caucasians, either before or after the start of the attack?"

"No, General! We never had a chance to even try to defend ourselves, as our convoy was overwhelmed at once and without warning with tank and heavy machine gun fire. Our convoy was literally destroyed in mere seconds. By the way, those Caucasians also massacred the wounded Armenian soldiers they found at that road checkpoint."

"I see! I will now inform President Perot about all this and make sure that this atrocity doesn't get unanswered. Has our airwing commander in Incirlik arranged for a repatriation flight for you and the other survivors?"

"Uh, I am not sure about that: he didn't mention anything to me about such a flight and said that he was waiting for further orders concerning us."

"Tell him to get on the line right now, Colonel. Stay close, as I will want to speak further with you."

"Understood, General. Hang on!"

A few seconds passed before another male voice came on the line.

"Colonel McConnell, Commander of the 39th Air Base Wing, speaking, General."

"Colonel, what are you waiting for to get Colonel Wright and his group of survivors on a plane and return them to Washington? Why isn't a plane already ready for them?"

"But, General, I was waiting for instructions from the Commander, Third Air Force, concerning them and..."

"FORGET GENERAL TURNER AND GET THOSE PEOPLE ON A PLANE TO WASHINGTON WITHOUT FURTHER DELAYS, COLONEL. DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME?"

"Uh, perfectly, ma'am."

"Then, get Colonel Wright back on the line and get to it."

"Yes, ma'am!" said the thoroughly intimidated air force wing commander before giving the telephone back to Wright.

"I am back on the line, General. What are we going to do about the Caucasians' actions in Armenia, General?"

Ingrid's voice was icy cold when she answered Wright's question.

"They committed an act of war against the United States, Colonel, and they will get war in return."

CHAPTER 12 – PAYBACK'S A BITCH!



U.S. marines boarding an assault transport aircraft on an aircraft carrier.

16:10 (Western Europe Time)

Monday, January 15, 1996 'C'

Air control bridge of the U.S.S. NEPTUNE

Sailing off the island of Cyprus, Eastern Mediterranean

Captain (Navy) Nicola Scaldi, Commander Air Group (CAG), was sitting in his command chair on the air control bridge of the NEPTUNE when one of his air controllers pivoted his seat to look at him.

"Sir, we have an unannounced friendly aircraft on approach asking for us to light up our TACAN beacon for thirty seconds, so that it could guide itself to a landing."

"But we are not waiting for any aircraft arrival today. What type of aircraft is it and are you sure that it is a friendly?"

"It squawked the right I.F.F. code, sir, and it is identifying itself as a Douglas C-90 carrying cargo for our embarked marines."

"A C-90?! Hell, that will certainly be the first time that one of them will land on one of our carriers: the ATLAS is one big beast. Very well, light up our TACAN beacon as requested. Mister Crossley, have the runway and the area adjacent to it completely

cleared, so that this C-90 can land there. In the meantime, I will call the admiral to advise him about this surprise visitor.”

“Understood, sir!”

Using the ship’s telephone attached to the left armrest of his command chair, Scaldi called first the C.I.C., where someone told him that Rear Admiral Benson was forward, on the navigation bridge. So, Scaldi called that bridge, situated at the bow and next to the ship’s runway, and got Benson on the line.

“Sir, this is Scaldi. You may be interested to know that a previously unannounced Douglas C-90 VSTOL²² heavy cargo aircraft is on approach and will land on our carrier with some cargo destined for our marines.”

“A C-90?! Hell, that will be a first, truly. Can it really land safely on the NEPTUNE, Nick?”

“It can, sir: it can either land vertically or do a short landing with a run of less than 500 feet. It could then even do a short takeoff, especially with our extra-long runway.”

“Damn! I should get pictures taken of this for the benefit of our ship’s photo album. I am going to warn our ship photographer and Colonel Wilkinson of this. I am also going to go down on the flight deck: I would really like to see the inside of this C-90.”

“I will also be on the flight deck for the same reason, sir. It should be in sight in a few minutes.”

“Then, see you on the flight deck, Nick.” said Benson before putting down the receiver and looking at the helmsman. “Turn us into the wind and go to maximum speed, Petty Officer Farmer: we have a big, heavy bird coming in.”

“Turning into the wind and going to maximum speed, aye, Captain!”

Benson’s next task was to call the ship’s photographer, a grizzled chief petty officer who had taken pictures in many war zones during his career, and Lieutenant Colonel Paul Wilkinson, to warn them to go up on the flight deck at once. With that done, Benson then left the navigation bridge and used one of its two elevators to go down to the flight deck. He however removed first his service cap before stepping out of the bow superstructure tower: wearing any hat in a forty-plus knot wind was the best way to lose it in seconds. He also grabbed a pair of ear defenders and a safety helmet, dozens of which were stored next to the hatch leading out to the flight deck. The flight deck or an

²² VSTOL : Vertical and Short Take Off and Landing.

aircraft carrier was always a place where one had to be cautious and alert, especially when flight operations were occurring. It was also a noisy environment, making ear defenders a necessity rather than an option. Once out, he found himself very near the bow end of the 440-meter-long runway, which ran along the starboard side of the ship and measured 35 meters in width. A few minutes later, he was joined on the vast expanse by Scaldi, Lieutenant Colonel Wilkinson, Major Walker and CPO2 Mason, who had also brought with him a sailor carrying a big video camera mounted on tripod, to supplement his own still camera.

“Aah, a good idea, that camera, Chief Mason.”

“Well, if this is really the first time that a C-90 will land on an aircraft carrier, then that moment should be recorded for posterity, sir.”

“True! I wonder what it is carrying for you, Colonel, to be worth landing such a big bird on my ship.”

“Uh, I don’t know anything about that C-90, Admiral. Is it very big?”

Benson smiled to himself as he mentally pictured the incoming cargo plane.

“Big? It can land vertically with more than twenty tons of cargo, including any type of army vehicle you could think of, except for tanks. However, I never actually got close to one, so I am really anxious to visit it once it will have landed.”

CPO2 Mason, who was using the zoom lens of his still camera to look around the sky, suddenly pointed out in the direction of the stern.

“THERE, AT OUR SIX O’CLOCK! I SEE AN AIRCRAFT APPROACHING IN THE DISTANCE.”

“Yes! Sailor, you might start filming now: I would like to have the whole approach recorded.”

“Yes sir!”

Standing as a group next to the low bow structure housing an aircraft tractors garage, so that it could partially protect them from the strong relative wind, the five men watched, fascinated, as the small dot in the sky progressively turned into a big cargo aircraft. The noise of its powerful engines also was becoming quite audible. Wilkinson then noticed something unusual about the approaching aircraft.

“Hey, it has eight propellers: four over the wings and four others under the wings.”

“That is how the C-90 manages to be able to land vertically, Colonel. Those eight propellers can pivot to the vertical, allowing the C-90 to turn itself into a kind of giant helicopter.”

“What a sight it is!” said to himself Scaldi, who was admiring the fine lines of the C-90’s fuselage. He then saw the eight propellers, which were contained inside ducts, and their engines pivot upwards by 45 degrees.

“The pilot is now going into short landing mode. I was told once that, in that mode, the C-90 could land in as little as 500 feet.”

“Really?” replied Wilkinson in disbelief. By then, the noise from the C-90’s eight turboprop engines was becoming very loud and the five men could even feel the vibrations caused by those engines. Benson, a qualified naval aviator, watched intently how the incoming pilot was handling his big aircraft on what had to be his first approach to a carrier landing. Up to now, that pilot was acting like a pro, following a near-perfect glide path down towards the runway. Its 24 main wheels soon touched down on the deck at the level of Arresting Wire Number three, some 120 meters beyond the stern edge of the runway, while going barely faster than the battle carrier. For a Navy pilot landing in a fighter-bomber, that would have qualified as a very good landing. Benson nearly applauded as the pilot of the C-90 instantly put his propellers in reverse mode, bringing the heavy cargo aircraft to a full stop well before the bow end of the runway.

“Nice landing! Maybe I should get a special certificate prepared for this pilot. What a splendid beast this C-90 is. Well, let’s go see what it has brought for us, gentlemen.”

With the sailor manning the video camera staying where he was and continuing to film, Benson started walking towards the Douglas C-90, followed by Scaldi, Wilkinson and Walker, as a deck crew team was running to secure the aircraft with blocks and chains. As they were getting close to the front left side door of the C-90, someone inside opened it, revealing it to be of the airstairs²³ type. That someone turned out to be a young and very pretty female Air Force specialist, who came to attention and saluted when Benson climbed aboard.

²³ Airstairs : Type of aircraft door that pivots down to become a set of stairs. A common feature on small civilian transport aircraft and on military cargo planes which allow them to operate without having to wait for an airport mobile stairs unit.

"Welcome aboard, sir!"

"Thank you, Airman! Where is the pilot? I would like to congratulate him on his first carrier landing."

"The pilot is still upstairs, in the cockpit, sir. That spiral staircase will lead you to the cockpit and upper cabin, sir."

"I am going to check out what this aircraft brought us, Admiral." said Wilkinson, making Benson nod.

"Go right ahead, Colonel."

"I am going upstairs with you, Admiral." said in turn Scaldi as Wilkinson and Walker were led towards the cargo cabin by the Air Force specialist. Followed by CPO2 Mason, the two Navy officers climbed gingerly the spiral staircase, arriving in a small passenger cabin containing fifteen airline-type seats. However, those seats were empty, so Benson went to the forward door giving access to the cockpit, finding it open. Looking inside, he saw the pilot and copilot of the C-90 exchanging a happy handshake, with the copilot speaking to the pilot, a young woman.

"That was a hell of a nice landing for a first carrier landing, General. It was a true pleasure to fly with you."

The word 'General' and the youthful appearance of the female pilot made Benson stop dead in his tracks as he swore mentally to himself.

'No! Not her?!'

Then, he saw the nickname printed on the flying helmet of the pilot: Lady Hawk. He thus came to rigid attention and saluted, surprising Scaldi and Mason, who still couldn't see inside the cockpit.

"General!"

The female pilot smiled and returned his salute, then removed her helmet, revealing neck-long reddish-brown hair and a young angelic face with blue eyes.

"Sorry for not announcing myself in advance, Admiral Benson but, if you didn't know about my coming, then the enemy could not know either. The present situation calls for absolute discretion...until we start unleashing hell of course."

By now, Scaldi and Mason finally saw who the pilot was and also came to rigid attention to salute. Ingrid returned their salutes as well before speaking to Benson.

"Admiral, I have brought with me a total of 32 tons of cargo, most of it special anti-tank ammunition for the marines of the 1st Battalion, along with stocks of highly-classified photo-maps and individual instruction booklets about enemy military

equipment, uniforms and ranks, also for the marines. This aircraft will take off once that cargo will have been unloaded and stored away. As for me, I am afraid that you will be stuck with me being aboard for the next few days...or weeks. As of now, your ship is becoming the official advanced headquarters location of Operation PAYBACK. Just let me grab my personal kit and my secure briefcase and I will then follow you to your Combat Information Center.”

“Then, let me call in a sailor, who will bring your kit to our V.I.P. quarters, General.”

“Nah, don’t bother with your sailor, Admiral: I believe in the ‘one man, one kit’ principle. I will carry my own stuff, thank you.”

Scaldi and Mason couldn’t help exchange bemused looks then: a five-star general who insisted on carrying her own luggage? On his part, Benson got back his balance quickly and smiled down to Ingrid, whom he dominated by twelve centimeters.

“General, I went up to the cockpit to congratulate the pilot for an excellent carrier landing. Was this your first landing on a carrier?”

“Nope! Don’t forget that I am a qualified test pilot and an astronaut, command-level. I followed a qualification course to certify as a carrier-capable pilot decades ago, while I was still flying on a daily basis aircraft prototypes, and have since flown many different aircraft types on carrier landings when new models entered service. As they say, rank has its privileges! Well, with this said, let’s go down! By the way, I brought with me a team of six military pathologists. They are in the lower nose cabin. They will also need personal quarters.”

“Pathologists, General?” said Benson, surprised. Ingrid answered him in a most sober tone.

“Part of Operation PAYBACK will be to find and retrieve the bodies of our diplomats and their dependents from our embassy in Yerevan, who tried to get to safety in a road convoy four days ago. The American public does not know yet about this, but 48 of our people were massacred by Caucasian soldiers outside of Yerevan.”

“But why does our public not know yet about that, General?”

“Because we don’t want to see the Caucasians make those bodies disappear before we could retrieve them, Admiral. In fact, retrieving those dead Americans will be our top priority and I intend to have a search team leave this carrier tonight at the latest. The faster we act, the better our chances to retrieve those bodies. I will be able to give

you and your command staff more details about Operation PAYBACK once I will have dropped off my personal kit.”

“Then, follow me, General.”

Going down the spiral staircase behind Benson, Ingrid then made him enter the nose passenger cabin, where they met with four men and two women wearing the uniforms of Navy medical officers and busy collecting pieces of luggage from a baggage locker. Ingrid pointed at the older officer, a navy commander with gray hair and wearing spectacles.

“Admiral Benson, let me present you Commander George Stewart, Chief Pathologist at the Bethesda Navy Hospital. He is the leader of the team of pathologists I brought with me from Washington.”

“Pleased to meet you, Commander Stewart.” said Benson while shaking hands with the chief pathologist. “I wish that we could have met in happier circumstances.”

“Me too, Admiral! Hopefully, we will soon be able to establish and prove to the World what happened to our unfortunate diplomats in Armenia.” replied Stewart before quickly presenting the five other members of his team to Benson, who also shook hands with them. Before they all left the plane, Ingrid briefly rerouted Benson and Scaldi to the entrance of the vast cargo cabin of the C-90, which measured 24 meters in length, four meters in width at the floor and 4.1 meters in height. That cabin proved to be nearly filled with pallets of crates and boxes, which Lieutenant Colonel Wilkinson and Major Walker were in the process of inspecting when Ingrid, Benson and Scaldi entered the hold.

“I also brought with me 32 tons of extra ammunition for the marines, including M881 Tandem HEAT and M885 HEAT-CS rounds for their 90mm recoilless guns and more 60mm grenades for their rifle-mounted grenade launchers, plus four tons of specially-produced classified photo-maps of Armenia and of the Caucasus and individual training booklets to help teach to our marines the various equipment, uniforms and ranks of the Armenia, Azeri and Caucasian armies. If you could have your crew store away safely that ammunition and bring those maps and booklets to the marines’ storage areas, Admiral.”

“Of course, General.” said Benson before turning to face his C.A.G.

“Nick, take charge of that cargo and coordinate with Colonel Wilkinson about where to put it.”

With Wilkinson and Walker having joined her small group and saluting her with shock and surprise evident on their faces, Ingrid returned their salutes but kept a sober expression.

“Colonel Wilkinson, your battalion, like the NEPTUNE, is now part of Operation PAYBACK, while the advanced headquarters of the operation, led by me, will be on the NEPTUNE. I will soon brief all of you about Operation PAYBACK but know right away that I will want one of your rifle companies to start getting ready for a combat search and rescue mission within Armenia tonight. I intend your marines to fly to the area of Yerevan aboard PELICAN assault transports and to find and retrieve the bodies of our diplomats and their dependents murdered by Caucasian soldiers. Please select right now which company you will send out, so that they could start preparing at once for their mission. Have them also take the necessary photo-maps from the stocks I brought with me.”

“Yes, General! I am going to send my Bravo Company on that mission: it is commanded by my most combat-seasoned company commander, with solid platoon commanders under him as well.”

“Excellent! I will see you and your senior officers at the command briefing I will call as soon as I have dropped my kit off in my temporary quarters. Dismissed!” Both Wilkinson and Walker saluted Ingrid again before walking away with Nicola Scaldi to discuss the storage of the pallets brought by the C-90. Only then did Ingrid leave the aircraft with Rear Admiral Benson.

16:31 (Western Europe Time)

V.I.P. quarters, port side, Platform Deck

U.S.S. NEPTUNE

“Here you are, General, your new temporary home on the U.S.S. NEPTUNE: V.I.P. Cabin Number Two, Frame 308, Platform Deck level. My own cabin is next door, to your left.”

Ingrid took a moment to visually embrace her cabin, or at least the part that was visible to her, as there evidently were portions of her suite that she could not see from the entrance door area. The section she was in now was obviously the work and lounge areas and measured a good twenty square meters of deck surface.

“Not bad at all, Admiral! I would have been content with a bunk bed, a work desk, a sink, a toilet and a shower stall.”

Benson smiled in appreciation at her remark: she was definitely living up to her reputation as an unusually frugal senior officer.

“You know what, General? I have met a number of admirals in the past who complained about getting cabins even larger than this, whining either about the absence of a private dining room or about the lack of lush carpets.”

In return, Ingrid gave him a dubious look.

“They did? If they would have complained to me, I would have relieved them of command on the spot for caring too much about themselves and not enough about their own crew. I once had to deal with such a navy commander, a rear admiral, while I was commanding the Palestine Interposition Task Force in 1953: I relieved him of command for insubordination and I can tell you that his crew was happy to see him go.”

“Wow! Could I ask who that rear admiral was, General?”

“You certainly can, as that asshole has left the Navy some forty years ago: it was Rear Admiral Felt.”

“Oh! Him! I knew him from reputation, when I was still a very young Navy ensign at Annapolis Academy. A few of my teachers there had served under him and used him as an example on how not to be a good navy commander.”

“Believe me, Admiral, he richly deserved to be booted out of the Navy: he was a martinet and a tyrant of the worst kind. Unfortunately, he was not the only senior commander I met who deserved to be sacked. Only a year ago, I had a navy captain court-martialed for gross abuse and negligence. The bastard had screamed at his junior officers that, if he caught them sleeping more than four and a half hours per day, he would find extra tasks for them to do. Because of those poor officers being dead tired, their destroyer collided with a cargo ship in full daylight and clear weather, causing the deaths of seven sailors²⁴.”

“Believe me, General: you will never see such things happen on my ship.” replied Benson while shaking his head in disgust. Ingrid in turn gently patted his left shoulder.

²⁴ Such a deplorable incident actually took place recently for the reason stated on this page, involving a U.S. Navy destroyer and a civilian cargo ship. The destroyer captain involved and a few other senior officers were subsequently reprimanded and relieved of command.

"I know and I believe you, Admiral Benson: I personally pushed for you to get this command at sea after reading your service file."

"You did, General?" said Benson, stunned.

"Yes, I did! Well, give me just one minute to drop my things off in my bedroom...er, sleeping cabin, then I will go with you to your command conference room."

Walking across the office-cum-lounge area, Ingrid pulled open a curtain and stepped inside a small but comfortable bedroom containing a captain's bed, a large closet, a chair, a chest of drawers and a night table next to the bed that supported a telephone and a lamp. Unceremoniously dropping next to the bed her kit bag and suitcase, she took a second to inspect visually the small bathroom adjacent to the bedroom, finding in it a full-sized bathtub, a sink and a toilet. Quite satisfied, she walked back into the lounge, carrying her secure briefcase and a map-carrying tube.

"I'm ready, Admiral! Is your conference room very far?"

"Not at all, General! In fact, we are next to the Combat Information Center, where the conference room is."

"Once there, I will list to you the officers I want to brief."

The C.I.C. proved quite close indeed from her cabin, as Ingrid had to walk no more than ten paces before arriving at the conference room, situated in the air operations section of the C.I.C. There, Ingrid quickly wrote a list of the people she wanted to see at her briefing and gave it to Benson. As the latter used the P.A. system of the ship to call in the officers on that list, Ingrid used that time to extract a few maps and photo-maps from their carrying tube and then pin them on a corkboard hooked to a wall. She also took out of her briefcase a small booklet and two files, putting them on the large conference table. She was about to ask a question to Benson but didn't, seeing at the last moment that a photocopier stood in one corner of the conference room. She was producing enough copies of her files for the briefing participants by the time Benson completed his ship-wide address. Looking at her, he showed dismay at seeing her do what he believed a simple sailor could have done.

"General, you should have asked for one of my sailors to do that job. You are a five-star general!"

"And? Does that make me incapable of doing manual work, Admiral? This way, I am certain that no extra, unneeded copies will be done, as those files are highly

classified. But don't worry: my own staff at the Pentagon has by now learned my little quirks. It took them a few months before they stopped pulling their hair out, though."

Benson couldn't help briefly laugh at that.

"General, you are one unusual fish, I must say."

She in turn gave him a malicious smile.

"Of course I am! How many seventy-year-old women do you know who could still attract the eyes of twenty-year-old men?"

"Er, not one, I must say. In fact, you probably would win a beauty contest against the women of my crew, or those who are part of the marine battalion we have aboard."

"That battalion has female marines in its ranks? I like that! I have always been a strong proponent of equality and integration. Well, I am now ready here: we just need to wait for the others before I brief you all on Operation PAYBACK."

The first officers to answer Benson's call showed up a mere minute later, having been present at the time in the adjacent C.I.C., while the last ones arrived ten minutes later. Ingrid, standing at one end of the table, looked around at the mix of navy and marine officers present, seeing with satisfaction that CPO2 Mason was also sitting at the table: he may have been the lowest ranking person in the room now, but he was actually an important actor for the operation Ingrid had in mind.

"Welcome to all, ladies and gentlemen! I am General of the Army Ingrid Dows, Commander of the United States Combined Military Forces, and I came on the NEPTUNE in order to command from up close Operation PAYBACK. Most of you probably don't know this yet but, some four days ago, the staff of our embassy in Yerevan, in Armenia, decided to evacuate their embassy before Azeri forces could reach the city and engulf it in street combat. Due to the fact that the Yerevan airport was closed following Azeri airstrikes, our diplomats decided to leave in a car convoy and drive to the Turkish border with their family dependents. Unfortunately, they met just outside of Yerevan an advancing column of Caucasian tanks and mechanized troops which opened fire on our diplomatic convoy, and this without provocation or warning. Forty-eight of our people, including many children, were murdered by Caucasians, with only seven people surviving by fleeing through the woods. One of those survivors, the embassy's military attaché, was able to witness Caucasian soldiers killing in cold blood a few wounded Americans asking for help. He and his small group walked for three days

before reaching the Turkish border, where they were able to get assistance from the Turks and were brought to our airbase in Incirlik. I was able to speak with him on the phone from the Pentagon and then decided to launch Operation PAYBACK. Right now, the American public still doesn't know yet about this atrocity committed by the Caucasian forces in Armenia, and for a good reason: we want to find and retrieve the bodies of our murdered diplomats before the Caucasians or Azeris make them disappear. Once we will have found and retrieved their bodies, then I will be able to tell President Perot that he can publicly declare war on the Caucasian Islamic Republic and on Azerbaijan, for committing a war crime and for starting an unprovoked invasion of a country with which the United States had good relations. Tonight, the first phase of Operation PAYBACK, the retrieval of our dead diplomats, will be launched, with one company of the 1st Marine Battalion being air-transported to the known site of the massacre in four PELICAN 'A's, where they will photograph the crime scene, retrieve the bodies and bring them to the NEPTUNE, where a pathology team from the Bethesda Hospital will perform autopsies on those bodies. Once that is done, we will have then all the physical proofs needed to take to task the Caucasians and Azeris. Do you have any questions so far? Yes, CPO Mason?"

"I suppose that I will be the one who will photograph that crime scene, General?"

"Exact! You may bring with you another photographer or cameraman if you deem it necessary. In fact, I would encourage you to do so."

"I will, General!"

"Excellent! Now, I have brought with me a few things, on top of a team of pathologists. My C-90 brought some extra ammunition for our marines, including special anti-tank ammunition meant to defeat the explosive reactive armor kits carried by Azeri and Caucasian tanks. I also brought stocks of classified photo-maps produced especially for this operation. I have pinned to the board behind me one of those maps, so you can see what kind of details are shown on it. I have brought as well 1,400 copies of an equipment and uniforms identification booklet which is meant to inform our marines about the enemy. Now that those preliminary points have been covered, here is what I have in mind for tonight..."

19:05 (Western Europe Time)

Quarters of the 3rd Platoon, Bravo Company, 1st Marine Battalion

Stern section of the Upper Deck, U.S.S. NEPTUNE

"Here, Private Visby: hold on firmly to the top corners of this sheet of map foil and keep it vertical while I peel off the outer layer."

"Got it, Sergeant!" replied Greta, grabbing the large cut sheet of transparent map foil as told by Sergeant Brown. Brown then cautiously peeled off the bottom film, exposing the sticky surface of the foil.

"Now, come close to this map on the table but hold it still at the vertical. You must not let the bottom part of the foil touch the map before it is properly aligned, or it will stick at once to it and ruin the map. Once you are near the map, I will grab the two bottom corners of the sticky film and fix them to the map, then we will cautiously and progressively lower the film and glue it to the map."

Doing as she was told, Greta managed to do everything right, allowing Jeffrey Brown to cover his photo-map with a waterproof transparent film. Brown then did the last part of the job, which was to cut at angles the corners of the film overlapping the map surface and then fold and stick to the rear of the map the borders of the film. Smiling, he then grabbed the photo-map and proudly raised it so that Greta could appreciate the finished product.

"Voilà! We now have our section map ready for field operations. This may all look trivial, Private Visby, but an unprotected map exposed to rain or snow will quickly turn into paper mush without a film of map foil."

Brown was starting to fold his map the proper way, so that it could fit into one of his cargo pockets, when 1st Lieutenant Kenneth Gomer shouted out an order to his marines preparing their maps in the platoon's assembly area.

"LISTEN UP, MARINES! WE WILL GO IN TEN MINUTES TO THE BATTALION ASSEMBLY HALL, WHERE WE WILL GET SOME EXTRA GRENADES AND AMMUNITION. HURRY UP WITH THOSE MAPS!"

"Thankfully we are done here." said Brown. "Thanks for helping me, Private Visby. You may now go do a final check of your equipment."

"You're welcome, Sergeant! Gosh, I am getting so excited! This will be my first real combat mission."

Jeffrey Brown gave the pretty young blonde a sober look then.

"For a marine, his or her first experience of combat is a crucial episode, that is for sure. However, it can also prove to be a traumatic one. Don't even ask yourself if you will get scared the first time that you are shot at: only fools or liars will say that they

weren't scared on such an occasion. When you will get scared, fight it off and do your job: that is what true courage is about."

"I understand, Sergeant." replied Greta, her tone a lot more restrained now, before returning to her cabin to check her kit and rifle one more time.

22:52 (Western Europe Time)
Flight deck of the U.S.S. NEPTUNE
Sailing between the coast of
Turkey and the island of Cyprus.



Despite the prior warning given to her by Sergeant Brown, Greta Visby felt more excited than she had been in a long time as she followed in single file her comrades in the process of boarding their PELICAN 'A' assault transport, parked with three other PELICANs on the dark flight deck of the NEPTUNE. Her assault rifle was presently unloaded, as required prior to boarding an aircraft, but she carried a full load of ammunition in the cargo pouches of her armored vest, plus two water bottles and one day's worth of field rations. As she was about to get to the rear access ramp of her aircraft, she saw two dark silhouettes standing nearby on the flight deck, watching the marines getting into the assault transports. One of those two silhouettes was that of a woman, judging from the neck-long hair Greta could see move in the wind. However, the time for her to climb the ramp came up and she forgot about that woman, going instead to the seat indicated to her by the cargomaster and sitting down on it before buckling her seat belt. Soon, the rear access ramp closed with a noise of hydraulic actuators and the four turboshaft engines of the PELICAN started to turn with a strong whining noise. Three minutes later, Greta felt her aircraft jump up from the deck and take quickly both speed and altitude. She was now on her way to possible combat for the first time in her life.

On the flight deck, Ingrid turned her head to look at Lieutenant Colonel Wilkinson.

"We can now only wish the best of luck to your marines, Colonel. Hopefully, all will go well and we will not incur losses tonight."

"And what about the next few days, General? I doubt that the Caucasians and Azeris won't react badly to our intervention."

“Colonel, I am now participating in the seventh war of my military career. I have seen too much of war to even hope that we will not suffer at least some casualties in this one. The only thing we can hope for is to keep our losses as low as possible.”

23:07 (Western Europe Time)

Control tower, Incirlik Air Base

Adana, Mediterranean coast of Turkey

One of the Turkish Air Force air controllers working the night shift in the control tower of the Incirlik Air Base, which was run jointly by Turkey, the United States and a number of European member states of the NATO alliance, looked with some surprise at his radar screen, then called to him his supervisor, a Turkish Air Force captain.

“Captain, I have four unidentified blips that just appeared at the edge of my radar screen. They are coming in from the Mediterranean at low altitude and they are squawking American IFF codes but I don’t have any flight plan recorded for them.”

His officer looked at the radar screen for a moment, noting the unusually low altitude at which those four aircraft were flying, along with their speed of about 700 kilometers per hour.

“Let me just check our latest recorded flight plans, Sergeant.”

Going back to his own work station, the captain went through the latest listed flight plans but found nothing about those incoming aircraft, which was both unusual and irregular. He was about to go see again his sergeant to check on the trajectory of those four aircraft when the American major in charge of the American team of air controllers came to him and spoke to him in a low voice.

“No need to become nervous about those four aircraft, Captain Erdogan: I just received a call concerning them. They are coming from one of our aircraft carriers and are headed on a search and rescue mission inside Armenia. You remember those American diplomats and dependents who escaped Armenia yesterday, after their convoy was attacked by Caucasian soldiers? Well, we recently got new information that there may be still some other survivors from that diplomatic convoy hiding in Armenia, close to the Turkish border. Those four planes have been sent to find and rescue those survivors, but their mission was kept secret in order to prevent the Azeris and Caucasians from learning about it and then hunt down those survivors. I would

appreciate if you could advise discretely your air defense units along the border not to engage our aircraft.”

“Oh, I see! While this is quite irregular, I can understand why we got no prior flight plans for your aircraft. I will contact our border air defense batteries and pass the word right away.”

“Thanks, Captain Erdogan! That is much appreciated.” replied the American major before walking back to his own section.

23:40 (Western Europe Time) / 00:40 (Caucasus Time)

Lead Hiller PELICAN ‘A’ assault transport

Flying low and approaching the Turkish-Armenian border near Margara

“Captain Santiago, we are about to cross into Armenia.” said in the intercom the pilot of the PELICAN ‘A’ transporting the first platoon of Bravo Company, 1st Battalion. Captain Roberto Santiago, Commanding Officer of Bravo Company, who was sitting in the mission commander’s seat to the right of the two pilots, in the front section of the aircraft, nodded his head and spoke in his own microphone.

“Good! Go as low as you can and reduce speed: this area is liable to be lousy with Azeri or Caucasian air defense assets.”

“Got it!”

Santiago then adjusted his night vision binoculars, fixed to his helmet, in front of his eyes and checked his map before speaking by radio to the other three aircraft transporting his company.

“Tango Mike Six to Tango Mike callsigns: we are approaching the objective. Load your weapons but do not chamber rounds until you are out on the ground. Be ready for anything.”

Less than half a minute later the copilot of the PELICAN, who was watching his GPS navigation display screen, spoke up.

“Five miles to the objective! All gunners to your stations! Be ready for action!”

The copilot spoke again some 25 seconds later the copilot spoke again, this time with alarm showing in his voice.

“Our FLIR²⁵ cameras show activity at the objective! I see a number of vehicles and personnel. The vehicles are stopped on the road but not deployed tactically, while the personnel are walking around, doing some kind of work.”

Santiago swore when he understood in a flash what that meant.

“Those Caucasian bastards! They are trying to erasing the traces of their massacre! We must stop them at once! TO ALL TANGO MIKE CALLSIGNS, THERE ARE ENEMY PERSONNEL AND VEHICLES AT THE OBJECTIVE, POSSIBLY PICKING UP THE REMAINS OF OUR DIPLOMATIC CONVOY. ONCE ON THE GROUND, STOP THEIR ACTIVITY AND PREVENT ANY VEHICLE FROM LEAVING THE AREA.”

In the cabin of the third PELICAN ‘A’, Greta Visby tensed up when she heard that announcement relayed to the marines by the cargomaster, who had manned his door machine gun. Checking again that her twin magazine was well inserted in her rifle, she took a couple of deep breaths to slow down a bit her heart, which was now beating furiously. Her aircraft then suddenly started to descend and slow down, while the two big side cargo ramps of her aircraft started lowering. Having done air assault exercises in PELICANs in Camp Lejeune during her training, she knew that this meant that the troops in the aircraft would have to jump off the side ramps and deploy once the PELICAN would touch the ground. At that moment, the forward gunner of the aircraft, sitting next to the pilots, opened fire with his turret-mounted gatling heavy machine gun, spitting fifty .50 caliber slugs per second. Six seconds after that, the PELICAN landed on the side of a road, with Lieutenant Gomer shouting at his marines while running towards the right-side cargo ramp.

“OUT, OUT, OUT! DEPLOY IN SKIRMISH LINE ONCE OUT!”

Undoing her safety belt and getting up from her folding seat, Greta ran behind the members of her rifle squad, holding her rifle at the ready, and jumped down from the ramp, bending her knees on landing to absorb the shock. Arming her rifle with a swift pull of its arming lever, she then ran to take position in the assault line led by Sergeant Jeffrey Brown. The noise level was now deafening, with the heavy and medium machine guns of the four PELICANs firing at a group of vehicles parked on the road less

²⁵ FLIR : Forward-Looking Infra-Red. Thermal imaging cameras able to see heat signatures in the dark.

than fifty meters from where Greta was and with many of the marines also firing their rifles while charging towards that road. As soon as all the marines were out on the ground, the pilots of the four PELICANs took off in a hurry, both to avoid shooting their own soldiers and to take a dominant position over the enemy. That enemy was also firing back but in a disorderly manner, with their firing proving mostly inaccurate, possibly because they didn't have night sights on their rifles, contrary to the marines. Still, there were plenty of bullets flying around, with quite a few whizzing past the ears of Greta. One marine in the line ahead of Greta's squad stumbled and collapsed on the ground, probably hit by a bullet. Three seconds later, another marine fell down. However, the enemy soldiers were suffering heavy losses in exchange and the survivors were starting to panic and run away. That was when one of the trucks parked on the road started rolling, prompting a shouted order from Lieutenant Gomer.

"STOP THAT TRUCK AT ALL COST, MARINES!"

On hearing that, Greta, who had just stepped on the road, sprinted towards that truck while firing her rifle in automatic mode from the shoulder, spraying bullets at the level of the truck's cab. The truck suddenly veered off the road and into the left-side ditch, rolling on its side and brutally stopping. While still sprinting towards that truck, Greta quickly switched magazines on her rifle, using to good effect its double magazine feature. The passenger door of the truck was then pushed open and a man started to come out, pointing a rifle at Greta. Stopping running at once, she activated her rifle's laser dot sight, fixed to one side of her forward hand guard and, placing the green dot on the chest of the enemy soldier, fired once. The man jerked and fell back inside the cab as Greta resumed her running. One enemy soldier on foot who was ahead of her on the road, seeing her and other marines charge towards him, threw down his rifle and raised his hands high while shouting something that Greta didn't understand. Running up to the man, she butt-stroke him in the belly, making him bend over in pain, then projected him on his belly with a push of one hand before planting not too gently her booted left foot in the man's back, holding him down on the asphalt.

"DON'T MOVE OF YOU'RE DEAD!"

While still holding down the enemy soldier with one boot, Greta quickly looked around her with the help of her night goggles. What she saw coming down the road made her swear out loud.

“SHIT! INCOMING APC²⁶!”

What she remembered of the identification booklet she had read quickly before leaving the U.S.S. NEPTUNE told her that she had a Soviet-era BTR-70 eight-wheeled



APC coming at her, firing its 14.5mm heavy machine gun and apparently trying to hit one of the four PELICANs. Before leaving her PELICAN, Greta had inserted a dual purpose anti-armor/anti-personnel DP HEAT/FRAG²⁷ 60mm grenade in her rifle's single-shot grenade launcher. Raising her rifle and shouldering its butt, she quickly aimed her weapon at the coming armored vehicle, which was now less than a hundred meters from her. Praying that her aim would be true, Greta pressed the trigger of her grenade-launcher unit and was nearly thrown back by a foot by the severe recoil, despite the highly efficient pneumatic recoil buffer unit of the launcher. Her heart jumped in her chest from triumph when her grenade hit the APC at about the driver's position and exploded. The armored vehicle, now clearly out of control, progressively rolled to a stop, with its nose diving into the right-side drainage ditch. A second 60mm grenade fired by another marine then hit the BTR-70 on its exposed belly side, putting it on fire. Then, as abruptly as the firefight had started, the firings stopped, with only the shouted orders from marine officers and NCOs resonating in the night. Concentrating back on her prisoner, Greta quickly searched him while he was still on his belly, taking and throwing away a bayonet before rolling him on his back and relieving him of two hand grenades. Next, she forcibly pulled him up on his feet and, with the muzzle of her rifle stuck in his back, forced the man to walk forward while holding his hands high.

“KEEP YOUR HANDS UP AND NO TRICKS, ASSHOLE!”

Hearing the voice of Sergeant Brown ahead on the road, she pushed her prisoner in that direction and made him stop three paces from her squad leader.

“I have a juicy prisoner for you, Sergeant.”

Brown grinned to Greta before eyeing the Caucasian soldier in a much less friendly way.

“Excellent job, Private Visby! Were you the one who took out that APC with a rifle-grenade?”

²⁶ APC : Armored Personnel Carrier.

²⁷ DP HEAT-FRAG : Dual Purpose High-Explosive Anti-Tank Fragmentation round.

"I was, Sergeant!"

"Again, excellent job! We have two more prisoners being held some twenty yards down the road. Bring your prisoner there and help Stern guard them while the rest of us see what we can find of our dead diplomats.

"Yes, Sergeant! You, start walking!"

As she pushed forward her prisoner, Greta did her best to calm down from the adrenaline rush of combat, telling herself that she had just passed with success the ultimate test.

Captain Roberto Santiago hurried to regroup his marines and form a defensive perimeter, in case more enemy soldiers showed up, before checking for casualties. Unfortunately, one marine lay dead, while another had been seriously wounded. Making one of the four PELICANs land, he had his two medics plus two marines carry his wounded man to the waiting assault transport and load him aboard for immediate medical evacuation. Four other marines took care of carrying their dead comrade aboard that same aircraft, which then flew off. Santiago still had plenty of seating capacity in the remaining three PELICANs still on the scene, so he didn't worry about that and initiated a search for the bodies of dead diplomats and dependents that they had come to recuperate. It soon became obvious that the Caucasians had indeed been in the process of gathering those bodies, probably with the goal of burying them in an anonymous mass grave, when his unit had caught them flat-footed. In the back of the truck stopped by Private Visby, he found at least two dozen cadavers piled unceremoniously on the cargo floor. The marine captain clenched his teeth in anger when he saw that the bodies belonged to men, women and children, many burned beyond recognition and most of the others horribly mangled.

"Madre de Dios!" he swore to himself on seeing the eviscerated body of a small toddler boy, thrown on top of the pile of bodies. "CPO MASON! I NEED YOU HERE AT ONCE!"

The navy photographer came at a run, his still camera in his hands, but stopped cold on seeing the bodies in the truck and had to turn around before violently throwing up. Santiago gave him time to regain control of himself before pointing to him the dead Americans in the truck.

"I will need multiple pictures taken of these unfortunate people, from different angles and distance, CPO."

"I...I will get on it right away, Captain."

Letting Mason do his macabre work, Santiago then toured the scene of the battle, checking on his marines and seeing if more American bodies had been found inside the carcasses of the diplomats' cars. Two of his marines then waved at him to come to them, so Santiago joined them in the left-side drainage ditch running alongside the road. Once there, he saw that his two men were standing around the body of an apparent teenage girl. One of the marines, a corporal, spoke to him in a tone containing disgust and revulsion.

"Sir, I believe that CPO Mason should photograph in detail this body before we move it."

"Why, Corporal?"

"Because somebody pulled down her panties, sir."

Stiffening, Santiago then used his flashlight to illuminate the girl's body, which was lying on her back. She could not have been more than fourteen or fifteen years old and both her jeans trousers and her panties were down, rolled around her left ankle and with her right leg wearing only a sock, while a bullet hole was plainly visible on her forehead. Santiago ragefully kicked away a rock while swearing out loud.

"Those fuckers raped that girl before murdering her! Alright, men: stay with that poor girl. I will send you Chief Mason once he will be finished at the truck. Then, you will put that poor girl in a body bag, so that we could lift her body out of here with the others."

"Understood, sir!"

Some twenty minutes later, the remaining three PELICANs were lifting up from the site of the battle, the marines, their macabre finds and three prisoners aboard, and headed back towards the U.S.S. NEPTUNE. After a one-hour return flight, they landed back on the battle carrier, where Ingrid, Rear Admiral Benson and Lieutenant Colonel Wilkinson greeted the marines with a sober exchange of handshakes. The three commanders listened on with mounting anger at what Captain Santiago reported to them about his mission, then watched on gravely as dozens of body bags were taken out of the aircraft, saluting each body bag as it passed by them. When the three Caucasian soldiers taken prisoner were brought out of one PELICAN, Ingrid stared hard at them for a moment before giving an order to their guards.

"Throw them in the brig! No food or water until they will have been interrogated."

“Yes General!”

As the three prisoners were being led away, Ingrid turned to face both Benson and Wilkinson.

“I will wait until we get the preliminary results of the autopsies to be done on our dead citizens and until those three prisoners have been interrogated before firing off a message to Washington. You have the capabilities to retransmit pictures via encrypted satellite communications, right, Admiral?”

“We certainly do, General.” answered Benson. “What next after you send your message to Washington?”

“We prepare to launch Phase Two of Operation PAYBACK.” replied Ingrid.

09:11 (Washington Time) / 18:11 (Caucasus Time)

Tuesday, January 16, 1996 ‘C’

The Oval Office, The White House

Washington, D.C., U.S.A.

“My god, the poor people!” muttered President Ross Perot as he read the report sent from the U.S.S. NEPTUNE by Ingrid Dows and looked with revulsion at the pictures which were part of the report. He then looked up at his chief of staff, Hamilton Jordan, while giving him back Ingrid’s report.

“Could you please have twelve copies of this whole report done, Hamilton? Once that is done, give it back to me. While those copies are made, call the Congressional leaders and tell them that I want to see them urgently here, at eleven this morning, for a national security business of the utmost importance. I want to see the majority and minority leaders of both the Senate and the House, plus the chairmen and the ranking members of the Senate and House Armed Services Committees and of the Foreign Relations Committees. I also want to see Senator Bill Clinton and Senator Bob Dole. Each of them will get a copy of this report. I will call myself Secretary of State Inouye, Secretary of Defense McCain and our ambassador to the United Nations.”

Jordan looked briefly at the report before eyeing his president.

“You intend to declare war on Azerbaijan and the C.I.R., Mister President?”

“Yes! Decency and justice demand no less.”

Ross Perot closed his eyes for a moment as his chief of staff walked out of the Oval Office, trying to chase away the nightmarish pictures he had seen in Dows’ report.

04:07 (Western Europe Time) / 21:07 (Washington Time)
Wednesday, January 17 (U.S.S. NEPTUNE) / Tuesday, January 16 (D.C.)
Squadron ready room of the VMA-231 'Ace of Spades', U.S.S. NEPTUNE
Sailing eastward off the Black Sea coast of Turkey

"...the unprovoked, brutal invasion of Armenia, a country with which the United States maintained friendly relations, and the barbaric conduct of the forces of Azerbaijan and of the Caucasus Islamic Republic which, on top of conducting indiscriminate bombardments against Armenian civilians, murdered in cold blood 48 American citizens, including young children, leaves me no choice about the actions to be taken by us. I, President Ross Perot, with the unanimous support of our leaders in Congress, am thus announcing that the United States now considers itself at war with both the Republic of Azerbaijan and with the Caucasus Islamic Republic. To those countries in the region or around the World who were thinking of supporting in any way Azerbaijan and the C.I.R. in their barbaric actions, I say this: do that and you will be treated as harshly as we will treat Azerbaijan and the Caucasus Islamic Republic. I will end this national address by asking all American citizens to pray for our valiant sailors, aviators, marines and soldiers who will be fighting and risking their lives in this war. Thank you for your attention."

Lieutenant Colonel Jake Sutters, the squadron commander of the VMA-231 'Ace of Spades', had been listening the presidential address on national television, which had been retransmitted via satellite, with his aviators but was watching with growing worry Lieutenant Commander Mike Barstow, sitting next to him in the squadron's ready room, who was showing signs of being in pain. Barstow was not a member of VMA-321 but was rather the commander of VAQ-132, the 'Scorpions', a small reconnaissance and electronic warfare unit equipped with four of the new RF-95N. Being such a small unit, the 'Scorpions' didn't rate a squadron ready room of their own and thus shared the same squadron room as the 'Ace of Spades', which was why Barstow and his aircrews were watching the presidential address with Sutters and his aviators.

"Are you okay, Mike?"

Barstow's face was clearly showing pain as he answered Sutters in a weak voice.

"I don't know: I must have eaten something yesterday that is not passing well."

"You really should go see a doctor at the ship's infirmary, right now, Mike."

"And miss such an important mission? I can't..."

Barstow then bent forward while raising his left hand to his side.

“AAH! What the hell?”

“That’s it! You will have to go see a doctor, Mike. Airmen Rickman and Berkley, come here and help Lieutenant Commander Barstow to get to the infirmary in a hurry.”

As the two airmen were helping Barstow, who was still in pain, get up from his folding seat, the voice of Rear Admiral Benson resonated out of the ship’s P.A. system.

“ATTENTION ALL HANDS! ATTENTION ALL HANDS! THIS IS ADMIRAL BENSON SPEAKING! WE ARE NOW OFFICIALLY AT WAR! GO TO ACTION STATIONS! ALL AIRCREWS INVOLVED IN OPERATION ‘PAYBACK’ ARE TO GET TO THEIR AIRCRAFT. WE WILL START FIRING A MISSILE BARRAGE IN LESS THAN ONE MINUTE.”

“Damn! Talk about bad timing for getting sick.” Said Sutters. Then, the two aviators scheduled to fly with Barstow in his RF-95N, Electronic Warfare Officer Lieutenant (Navy) Natalie Conway and Radar and Weapons Officer Lieutenant (Navy) Sheryl Craft, came to him, worry on their face.

“Sir, what are we going to do now, with Commander Barstow sick? He obviously will be incapable of flying our RF-95N, yet our mission was supposed to play a critical part in our strike plan.”

“I know! Let me just contact the CAG about this.”

On the air control bridge, situated atop the aft superstructure tower of the U.S.S. NEPTUNE, Captain (Navy) Nicola Scaldi was looking out with the help of a night scope binocular as dozens of aircraft were being raised up to the flight deck. One of his junior officers, who had answered the telephone, then called up to him.

“Sir, it’s Lieutenant Colonel Sutters for you: he says that there is a problem with Lieutenant Commander Barstow.”

“Shit! Not Barstow! I really need him for this operation.”

Watched intently by Ingrid Dows, who was also on the air control bridge, Scaldi took the receiver offered to him and spoke in a quick tone.

“What’s up, Colonel Sutters?”

“Sir, I just had to ask two of my men to escort Barstow to the infirmary. We were watching together the presidential address when he started feeling some intense pain in his side. Unfortunately, that means that we will now be short one RF-95N for the opening airstrike of our operation.”

"Damn and thrice damn! Barstow's plane was scheduled to jam and suppress the Caucasian air defenses in the Novorossyysk and Rostov areas. Without him, our strike aircraft will face a much-elevated threat while flying towards their objectives inside the C.I.R. How serious would you say that his condition was?"

"Serious enough, sir: he was doubling down in pain while holding his left side. I suspect that this could well be an appendicitis crisis."

"Which means at the minimum a surgical operation and weeks of recuperation. Shit!"

"What is happening, Captain?" asked Ingrid, who had approached him while listening to his side of the conversation.

"We are now short one RF-95N for our operation, General. Lieutenant Commander Barstow is now on his way to the infirmary with a suspected case of appendicitis."

Those words made Ingrid grimace with frustration.

"Hell! We simply can't afford that, not right now."

Thinking quickly for a second, Ingrid then patted Scaldi's shoulder, resolve on her face.

"Tell the flight crew of that RF-95N that I am going to replace their pilot for this mission: somebody has to pick up the slack."

"You, General? But you are in command of this whole operation and..."

"...and you know all of its details, while I am probably the only other pilot qualified and available to replace Barstow. You do know well the various phases of this operation, aren't you?"

"Of course I do, General!"

"Then, you are in temporary charge of our airstrike plan, while Admiral Benson will be in charge of our bombardment plan. I am now going to run to my cabin to get my own flight gear."

Before Scaldi could protest further, Ingrid ran to the nearby spiral staircase, not even bothering to wait for an elevator cabin before starting to slide down with both hands and feet on the hand rails of the staircase. That was when the vertical launch missile batteries of the NEPTUNE erupted and started to fire dozens of heavy long-range missiles in quick succession.

Less than fifteen minutes later, Ingrid arrived on the flight deck and ran to the RF-95N parked near one of the four aircraft catapults of the battle carrier and beside which

stood two aviators in flight gear. She shouted to the two aviators as he was approaching them at a run.

“THIS IS LIEUTENANT COMMANDER BARSTOW’S AIRCRAFT?”

Sheryl Craft, shocked to see who was coming in at a run, answered her.

“YES, GENERAL! ER, YOU’RE NOT GOING TO FLY THIS MISSION, ARE YOU?”

“And why not, Lieutenant?” replied Ingrid as she stopped next to the two female aviators. “You got something against female pilots?”

“Of course not, General, but...”

“...but I am the head cheese on this ship and you think that I can’t be spared here. Wrong! You have Barstow’s mission map and flight profile?”

“Yes, General! Here they are!”

Ingrid, who knew already in detail how that part of the operation was supposed to go, eyed quickly Barstow’s flight profile, penciled on his map, before speaking again.”

“Do you girls mind if I make a few minor changes to our mission profile?”

“Like which changes, General?”

“Let’s say that I will add my own sauce to this recipe. I have two strong preferences for airstrikes and air defense suppression missions: ‘shake and bake’ and ‘stir-fry’. Let’s climb aboard, ladies!”

Rear Admiral Benson was standing on the navigation bridge atop the bow superstructures tower of the NEPTUNE and was thus in a good position to watch as his long range precision strike missiles, or PSM-LR, were being fired off and flew up into the night one after the other, while dozens of aircraft were being readied for launch. He then got a call from Captain Scaldi, in the stern tower.

“Yes, Nicola?”

“I have a bad news and a so-so news for you, Admiral. Which one do you want to hear first?”

“Start with the bad news, Nicola.” replied Benson while steeling himself.

“The bad news is that Lieutenant Commander Barstow was just admitted at the infirmary with a suspected case of appendicitis, which puts us short one RF-95. The so-so news is that a replacement pilot for him stepped forward at once: General Dows.”

“You’re shitting me!”

"I'm quite serious, Admiral. Before leaving to get her flight gear, General Dows put me in temporary charge of the airstrike program, while she expects you to take charge of our bombardment program. General Dows should be piloting the first of our four RF-95N about to be catapulted off our battle carrier."

"Jesus! I really don't want to think about the consequences if she gets shot down on this mission."

"Admiral, General Dows would be the first to say that this is part of the job. Personally, I would not be ready to prevent a twice-recipient of the Medal of Honor from going into combat. Besides, she was right when she told me that both of us know the operations plans by heart. The only thing we can now do is to wish her and all of our other pilots the best of luck."

"You're right...and she is right! Still, this will probably give me ulcers in the hours to follow. Thanks for warning me."

Benson then put down the telephone receiver and looked down at the launch position of Catapult Number One, where Dows' RF-95N was being hooked to the catapult. He then came to attention and saluted when the big aircraft was catapulted off his ship.

"Keep your pretty butt safe, General." he muttered in a near whisper, in order not to be heard by his bridge crew.

In her apartment in the Hell's Kitchen district of New York City, Nancy had watched with her four band members President Perot's national television address with growing emotion. As her four friends kept listening to the comments by the television presenters at the end of the presidential speech, Nancy did a silent prayer.

'Please, Great One, watch over my mother.'

04:41 (Western Europe Time)

Ingrid's RF-95N, flying at Mach 1.3 and at an altitude of fifty meters

On approach to Novorossyysk, on the Black Sea coast

Lieutenant (Navy) Sheryl Craft was nearly afraid to look again at the altimeter and speed indicator of her instrument panel: she had never flown so fast and so low before and would actually not have believed that anyone could do so without quickly crashing and cartwheeling into the sea. However, General Dows made it appear like a

nearly routine flight. No wonder she was such a legend as a combat pilot. A series of flashes on the night's horizon was followed by a remark from Dows on their intercom.

"Our missiles are now hitting the known air defense positions around Novorossiysk. Tell me if you still see some radar emissions from there afterwards, Lieutenant Conway."

Nathalie Conway looked at her electronic warfare sensors indicators cramming the rearmost of the three cockpit positions in the nose section of the RF-95N and answered after a few seconds.

"Most of the signals have now shut down, except for an I/J-band fire control air acquisition and tracking radar that just lit up, General. It emits from Heading 09."

"Then prepare to launch a NAGA-3 anti-radiation missile tuned to that radar while I slow down and take a bit more altitude."

"Understood, General!"

"Please, girls, just call me Ingrid when in private." Replied Ingrid in an amused tone. Maybe ten seconds after that, Natalie was able to make an announcement on the intercom.

"Launching one NAGA-3 now!"

The bright flare of the missile's rocket engine forced both Natalie and Sheryl to close their eyes for an instant, to avoid being temporarily blinded by it and losing their night vision. Somehow, Ingrid Dows did not seem affected by that and continued flying in a rock-solid level trajectory. Natalie, who had just made her first war missile launch of her career, nearly shouted in triumph when the signal from the I/J radar was suddenly cut off.

"A HIT! THAT RADAR IS NOW SILENT!"

"Good job, Natalie. Now, let's see if there were some anti-aircraft guns paired with those missile batteries."

Nathalie Conway nearly asked Dows why there would be guns near such a powerful missile battery but was proved wrong some thirty seconds later.

"Damn! I am now getting signals from the acquisition radars of two ZSU-23-4 self-propelled anti-aircraft guns. How did you know to expect them, General?"

"How? Because I have been shooting at and being shot at by Soviet and Russian aircraft and air defense systems for over forty years by now. Like they say, practice makes perfect! Don't bother preparing more NAGA-3 missiles: I will work those

ZSU-23-4 with my cannons. Just be ready to jam those two radars on my signal. Hold on to your pants, girls: it's going to shake up a bit.”

Just after Ingrid had finished saying that, Sheryl and Natalie were crushed in their seats by a sudden 4-G turn to the right, followed a few seconds later by another turn, this time to the left and less brutal. Sheryl understood that Ingrid had just done a classic ‘S’ turn in order to line up parallel to the coast. One glance out and down then told her that their aircraft was now in fact overflying the coast at an impossibly low altitude, being barely higher than the top of the highest trees lining the coast. Sheryl then heard a warning from Natalie, who was watching her electronic warfare sensors like a hawk.

“GUN DISH²⁸ RADAR DEAD AHEAD, TRYING TO LOCK ON US!”



“I HAVE IT IN SIGHT!” replied nearly at once Ingrid. One second later, Sheryl and Natalie heard and felt the two 30mm cannons of their RF-95N fire two short bursts in quick succession. Natalie saw the radar signature she had detected only seconds ago disappear right after the first cannon burst. Looking out for a brief moment, she barely managed to catch with her eye the sight of a pair of burning ZSU-23-4 which had been positioned inside shallow protective revetments. However, those were left behind in a flash as Ingrid continued to follow the coast at high speed and very low altitude. Another four seconds later, Ingrid fired a volley of six unguided 76mm rockets that collapsed an already damaged giant long range air search radar antenna topping a bunker. Their aircraft then performed a hard turn to the right to take a north-northeast heading, then fell back down to an extremely low altitude while accelerating past Mach 1. Natalie understood that Ingrid Dows, after having conducted a devastating strike against the surface-to-air missile regiment covering this area of the Black Sea coast, was now heading for their second objective: the radars and surface-to-air defense systems around Rostov-on-Don, at the mouth of the Don River. Seeing multiple radar signals from the direction of Rostov, Natalie started tuning her powerful radar jammers on those radars, selecting for jamming those which had the longest detection ranges. However, she strongly doubted that any of those radars could presently detect their RF-95N as it

²⁸ GUN DISH : NATO codename for the fire control radar of the Soviet ZSU-23-4 self-propelled anti-aircraft gun system.

flew at less than fifty meters of altitude while zooming about at Mach 1.2. In fact, the most modern and performing Russian-made air search radars could not acquire targets at the altitude at which Ingrid was presently flying. The latter then spoke briefly on the intercom.

"Natalie, prepare to launch NAGA-3 anti-radiation missiles on the radars with the longest detection ranges you can detect. Fire when within range!"

"ON IT!"

Ingrid continued flying at less than fifty meters of altitude for another few minutes, jumping over any high obstacle in their way before dropping back at her insanely low flying altitude. This had to be the most exciting and also the most dangerous roller coaster ride Natalie and Sheryl had ever experienced. However, having seen by now the incredible level of flying expertise shown by Ingrid, their initial terror was turning into resolved confidence that they would get through this mission despite its high level of risk. When the radar signals she had detected from Rostov attained a high enough level of power, Natalie gave a verbal warning to Ingrid and Sheryl before pushing her launch button.

"FIRING NAGA-3 MISSILES NOW!"

This time, she fired in quick succession five missiles, each of them tuned to a specific radar signal. The four-meter-long missiles, with a body diameter of 305 millimeters and carrying a high-explosive fragmentation warhead weighing sixty kilograms, sped away in long tails of fire from their rocket motors. Then, Natalie waited anxiously to see how effective her missiles would prove to be. To her disappointment, one of the five missiles apparently missed its target, as one radar continued to emit while the four other targeted radars went abruptly silent.

"LAUNCHING ANOTHER NAGA-3 NOW!"

Natalie prayed that this time would prove to be the good one as she fired off her missile, leaving her with only one NAGA-3 in her weapons bays. She felt immense relief some half a minute later, when the signal from that persistent radar finally shut down.

"ALL SEARCH RADARS AHEAD NOW OUT! I HOWEVER AM STARTING TO SEE WEAKER SIGNALS FROM FIRE CONTROL TRACKING RADARS AHEAD AND I HAVE ONLY ONE NAGA LEFT."

"Then, reserve that NAGA for the fire control radar which will be the first to try to lock on us, Natalie. I will take care of the others myself from up close."

“Understood!” said Natalie before looking briefly ahead through her section of canopy. Since her seat was slightly higher than those of Ingrid and Sheryl, she was able to see on the horizon, many kilometers away, fires raging ahead around Rostov: the missiles from the U.S.S. NEPTUNE had already done some significant damage to the various airfields and city installations selected as targets prior to the launch of this mission.

Some ten minutes later, Natalie launched her last NAGA-3 missile against an I/J Band tracking radar from a S-300 surface-to-air missile battery trying to acquire them. To her joy, that missile did the job.

“One tracking radar out! Two more tracking radars at our headings of 351 and 003 respectively, approximate distance: twenty miles!”

“Thanks!” simply said Ingrid before doing a slight heading correction to head towards the radar detected slightly to their left. At the same time, she selected her two 30mm cannons for short bursts and went even lower, even though Natalie and Sheryl had deemed that to be impossible. A poor old farmer, who had been awakened by the noise of explosions coming from Rostov and who had come out on the balcony of his farmhouse’s upper floor to watch, nearly got a heart attack when Ingrid’s RF-95N zoomed past his house at the level of his balcony, while a thunderous supersonic bang made all the windows of the house explode and also killed all of the farmer’s chickens, shocked to death by the supersonic boom.

Aboard the air defense suppression aircraft, Natalie was kept busy as she monitored a growing number of both radar and radio signals from the Rostov region, blocking with her powerful onboard jammers those she deemed to be the most significant or threatening. Looking again ahead and out, she saw fires raging in both one district of the city, where its main power distributing station was, and at three of the airbases situated around Rostov: the missile firepower of the U.S.S. NEPTUNE was decidedly proving to be outright devastating. The sudden noise and vibrations from their 30mm cannons firing short bursts then made her look straight ahead, in time to see the high mast-mounted tracking radar of a S-300 surface-to-air missile battery collapse, its mast cut in two by 30mm explosive shells. A crushing 6-G turn followed as Ingrid turned around to target the mobile command post of that battery, blowing it to pieces with a volley of 76mm unguided rockets. Two more crushing turns followed as Ingrid

systematically destroyed the remaining command vans of that Caucasian air defense regiment. Then, their RF-95N started a zoom climb as their two stato-turbo engines were gunned to maximum power.

“TIME TO PLAY THE BABBLING OLD BUSYBODY, NATALIE! DROWN THESE FUCKERS OUT WITH ELECTRONIC NOISE!”

“WITH PLEASURE, INGRID!”

Next, Ingrid leveled off from her climb and then dove back to an altitude of 300 meters while adjusting her speed to Mach 1.5, close to the maximum ground level speed of the RF-95N. At such speed and altitude, Ingrid's plane was proving to be next to impossible to target, being both too low for most surface-to-air missiles and too fast to be tracked by gun systems. She also started to fly large 'S' turns over the city, making all the windows inside Rostov shatter with her supersonic shockwave and rudely awakening its inhabitants at the ungodly hour of five twenty in the morning, while continuing to jam radar and radio transmissions. Sheryl, watching closely her radar screen, shouted a warning after five minutes of that playing around.

“I HAVE TWO DOTS CLIMBING FROM ROSTOV-NORTHWEST FIGHTER BASE, AT OUR TEN O'CLOCK!”

“Those guys finally decided to cut their beauty sleep? Too bad for them!” replied Ingrid, making both Sheryl and Natalie chuckle. Their chuckles were however strangled by another crushing turn, this time to the left, by Ingrid. A few seconds later, their 30mm cannons spat shells again, transforming an incoming Mig-29 into a flying torch.

“CUSTOMER NUMBER 170 SERVED! CUSTOMER NUMBER 171 COMING UP!” shouted triumphantly Ingrid as the second Caucasian Mig-29 trying to intercept her zoomed past her in the opposite direction, unable to react fast enough. The poor Sheryl and Natalie were then crushed again in their seats and nearly passed out as Ingrid performed a tight loop upward to get back at the remaining Mig-29 fighter jet. The pilot of the latter, having expected Ingrid's plane to turn around at the horizontal, didn't see her dive on him before it was too late. That Caucasian fighter pilot died when his canopy exploded under the impact of two 30mm explosive shells. As soon as that Mig-29 went down in flames, Ingrid resumed her fast and low flying over Rostov while talking on the intercom.

“Rostov is such a nice-looking city, don't you think, girls?”

“Yeah, but I wouldn’t want to be in a town hall discussion with its citizens after this, Ingrid.” replied Sheryl, now a lot less nervous than at the start of their mission: with such an incredible pilot at the helm of their RF-95N, she now felt next to invincible.

07:01 (Caucasus Time)

Lead PELICAN ‘A’ approaching the missile testing complex of Kapustin Yar West of Astrakhan, Caucasus Islamic Republic

Lieutenant Colonel Paul Wilkinson smiled with satisfaction when he started to see in the distance ahead of his PELICAN ‘A’ assault transport the Caucasian missile testing complex of Kapustin Yar, situated west of the city of Astrakhan, close to the Volga River and the shores of the Caspian Sea. He and two of his companies of marines



SS-25 mobile intercontinental ballistic missile

were now over 700 kilometers inside C.I.R. territory, flying at very low altitude and about to attack the C.I. R. base where ten Russian-made SS-25 mobile intercontinental ballistic missiles armed with thermonuclear warheads constituted a mortal threat to the United States. The other two companies of his battalion, also air-transported in PELICAN ‘A’ assault transports, had just signaled that they were landing at the heavy bomber base in Mozdok, Georgia, and were assaulting the installations of the base to find and destroy the nuclear-tipped air-to-surface missiles meant to arm the C.I.R. heavy bombers based in Mozdok. Mentally wishing good luck to Major Walker and to the marines of Charlie Company and of the Heavy Weapons Company of his battalion, Wilkinson then concentrated back on the missile complex ahead. He had benefited from having detailed and recent photo-maps and orbital overhead imagery of Kapustin Yar and of Mozdok when he was planning these two missions for his battalion and knew pretty well where to land his marines once over Kapustin Yar. Those same photo-maps had also allowed Rear Admiral Benson to precisely program his long-range missiles to target specific points of those two bases. No less than 54 PSM-LR missiles had been fired at Kapustin Yar by the U.S.S. NEPTUNE before a whole squadron of F-93N fighter-

bombers had bombed the complex. The fires and columns of smoke visible inside the base were now testament to the efficiency of those strikes.

Wilkinson became even more jubilant when his aircraft started overflying the Caucasian base complex: nearly every building inside it had been either flattened by a bomb or was on fire. Similarly, the few aircraft hangars had been blown open and no anti-aircraft guns or missile launchers fired on the PELICANs. The main objective of his marines, the missile silos and protective revetments and hangars built to house ICBMs had suffered similarly heavy damage. However, being by far the best protected and resistant structures on the base, many of them still looked at least partly intact.

“Time to finish the job here! Major, put us down next to those revetments.”

“Right away, Colonel.” replied the pilot, who then slowed down his aircraft and switched to vertical flight mode in order to land. One minute later, the PELICAN ‘A’ touched down some sixty meters away from one of the revetments, imitated by the eleven other assault transports of the force, each of which landed near separate hangars or revetments.

One of the first marines to come out of the PELICANs was Greta Visby, sitting with three other marines on one of the two light all-terrain vehicles carried by her PELICAN. Once it had rolled out via one of the two side cargo ramps, her vehicle raced towards the large covered revetment near their landed PELICAN, arriving there in seconds. Greta jumped off the ATV with two of her comrades, then ran to the armored side doors giving access to the inside of the revetment. That door proved to be both heavy and quite thick, impressing one of the marines.

“Wow! Talk about a bank vault-like door! That thing could probably survive a near-impact by a bomb.”

“Hey, this is a protective revetment for a nuclear-tipped missile!” shot back Greta in a sarcastic tone. “What did you expect? A plywood door?”

John Milken threw her a black look but didn’t reply, instead pulling open the thick steel door with some effort. Entering inside, he found it utterly dark, with no lighting on at all. Using his flashlight to look around him, he nearly jumped back on seeing a monster of a truck with sixteen wheels which nearly filled the inside of the revetment.

“WOAH! Talk about a big truck!”

Greta, who had followed Milken inside, found a light switch and flipped it but got no result.

"Nothing! The power to this revetment has been cut off. We can probably thank the missiles from the NEPTUNE for that. If the main doors of this revetment needed electrical power to open, which I strongly suspect, then it is no wonder that this missile transporter was abandoned inside."

"Still, be cautious, guys." added Corporal Terence Green, Greta's fire team leader. "The Caucasians may well have booby-trapped this missile transporter before fleeing. Let me check it out first before touching anything."

With Greta, John Milken and Thomas Finch following him and providing him illumination with their flashlights, Green started cautiously turning around the huge vehicle, checking for wires or other suspect objects. It was actually Greta who noticed something as Green was about to climb the ladder leading up to the driver's door of the front cab.

"Wait, Corporal! Remember that the passenger-side door had its window partly rolled down? The window on this door is fully closed."

"So?" replied John Milken, demonstrating again his celebrated obtuseness.

"So?! That could mean that this door and probably the other one as well was booby-trapped, genius!"

"You have a point there, Greta." said Green. "I am going to climb up on this side but will not open the door and will instead shine my flashlight inside to see if there is anything suspect inside the cab. Greta, go climb up on the other side and do the same, but don't touch the door handle."

"Got it, Corporal!" replied Greta before running around the vehicle to get at the right-side ladder. Slinging her rifle across her back first, she then quickly climbed the ladder to the passenger side door and aimed the light beam of her flashlight through the half-opened window. What she saw made her shout a warning at once.

"DON'T TOUCH THAT DOOR, CORPORAL! I SEE WHAT LOOKS LIKE A BLOCK OF EXPLOSIVES ON THE FLOOR, NEXT TO THE DRIVER'S DOOR: IT IS CONNECTED TO THE DOOR HANDLE BY A WIRE."

Green, who had not seen anything suspect from his side and was about to turn the door handle, froze and took a deep breath to slow down his heart, which had just jumped into his chest.

"Christ! It was one second to Armageddon here! Thanks, Greta. I didn't see anything from my side, so I will now climb down and use the door on your side."

Quickly climbing down and running around the missile transporter, Green was about to get to the right-side ladder when he saw with some surprise Greta running out of the revetment at a near sprint.

"HEY, WHERE ARE YOU GOING, GRETA?"

"GOING OUT TO WARN THE OTHERS BY RADIO ABOUT THIS!"

"Shit! That girl has decidedly more brains than half of our squad put together." said Green to himself.

Sprinting out of the revetment, so that her pocket radio's signal could propagate out, she then nearly shouted out in the microphone of the headset she was wearing under her helmet.

"WARNING TO ALL MARINE CALLSIGNS: DO NOT TOUCH THE DOORS OF THE MISSILE TRANSPORTERS! THE ONE WE JUST CHECKED WAS BOOBY-TRAPPED WITH EXPLOSIVES. I SAY AGAIN, THE MISSILE TRANSPORTERS HAVE BEEN BOOBY-TRAPPED!"

It took only seconds before the voice of Lieutenant Colonel Wilkinson came on the air.

"Unknown callsign, this is Mike Six: identify yourself!"

"This is Private Visby, from Third Platoon! Sorry about the improper radio procedure but I haven't had a chance yet to get on a radio operator's course, sir."

"That's alright, Private: you did the right thing. TO ALL MIKE CALLSIGNS, I CONFIRM THE WARNING JUST GIVEN. DO NOT TOUCH THE MISSILE TRANSPORTERS AND INSTEAD PREPARE THEM FOR DEMOLITION. MIKE SIX OUT!"

Feeling like a million dollars after the praise she had just gotten from her battalion commander, Greta then returned inside, where she found Corporal Green waiting for her next to the giant vehicle.

"Corporal, the colonel says to not touch the missile transporters and to instead prepare them for demolition."

"Great! We don't have demolition charges with our squad. I will have to ask for a team of combat engineers to come and rig one here. Let's get out of here, so that I could call in a demolition team."

"WAIT, CORPORAL!" suddenly urged Greta before giving Green an innocent smile. "Could we first take the time to take a picture or two of this thing before leaving? It will probably be the only time we will encounter a thing like this."

Green, who was not much older than her, smiled at her suggestion.

“Why not? However, we will need to make it quick: this business is dead serious.”

The members of the fire team ended up taking a few pictures of themselves, posing in front of the missile transporter and switching places while taking pictures before they left the revetment, so that Green could call in a combat engineer team. Some twelve minutes later, that team arrived aboard an ATV and immediately went to work inside. The sergeant commanding the team came out five minutes later with a warning.

“Okay, let’s take some safe distance from this revetment before we blow that missile transporter up: the missile on it is filled with a few tons of rocket propellant and the explosion will also project around radioactive debris from its warhead. In fact, I will counsel to Colonel Wilkinson to all get back in our PELICANS and take off before initiating our demolition charges. We are talking about some very dangerous shit here.” Greta and her fire team could only agree with the combat engineer and got back on their ATV to return to their waiting PELICAN. Less than twelve minutes later, the whole marine force lifted up and flew out to a safe distance before the demolition charges they had put in place were remotely initiated. The explosions which followed and burst wide open the missile revetments proved spectacular, to say the least, giving a chance to Greta to take more great pictures with her mini pocket camera before her aircraft turned back to return to the NEPTUNE.

09:24 (Caucasus Time)

Flight deck of the U.S.S. NEPTUNE

Sailing off the coast of Armenia, on the Black Sea

The Sun was well up when the PELICANS carrying the marines back from Kapustin Yar landed on the flight deck of the NEPTUNE. Getting out of their transports and walking in multiple single files to the stern-most aircraft elevator, the marines then used that elevator to return to their quarters, where they were able to put down their equipment in their individual cabins, where they were ordered to clean their weapons before doing anything else. Private Greta Visby was just doing that when Captain Santiago and Lieutenant Gomer came to see her in the platoon’s meeting area of their

quarters section. She jumped to her feet at once and came to attention to salute when she saw that Lieutenant Colonel Wilkinson was right behind her company commander.

“Sir?”

Wilkinson returned her salute, then smiled to her and spoke in a paternal-like tone.

“Private Visby, you have distinguished yourself twice in as many field operations. First, you destroyed a truck and an enemy APC and took one prisoner, then, today, you warned your comrades about a deadly threat that could have cost us many lives, while showing great initiative and plenty of guts. Consider yourself promoted to the rank of Private First Class as of now.”

“Thank you, sir!” said with difficulty Greta, a wave of pride surging inside her. “That is a great honor indeed.”

“And you deserve it, PFC Visby. Keep up the good work and you will rise up quickly in the Corps.”

Wilkinson then shook hands with her, followed by Captain Santiago and Lieutenant Gomer, with the latter patting her back while smiling.

“You may now resume your weapon’s cleaning, PFC Visby. Again, great job!”

“Thank you again, sir!”

With Lieutenant Gomer then walking away with Wilkinson and Santiago, Greta sat back at the table supporting the disassembled pieces of her rifle and resumed her cleaning work, feeling great about herself. She had another reason to smile when the voice of General Dows came out of the ship’s P.A. system some twenty minutes later.

“ATTENTION ALL HANDS, THIS IS GENERAL DOWS SPEAKING. I HAVE A TRULY GREAT NEWS TO GIVE YOU FOLLOWING OUR VERY SUCCESSFUL MISSION INSIDE THE CAUCASUS. WHILE WE WERE OUT FIGHTING, THIS SHIP RECEIVED A DIRECTIVE SIGNED BY PRESIDENT PEROT, ABOLISHING THE PROSCRIPTION AGAINST ALCOHOL ABOARD U.S. NAVY SHIPS. YOU WILL NOW HAVE THE RIGHT TO CONSUME A LIMITED RATION OF ALCOHOL PER DAY DURING YOUR OFF-DUTY TIMES. A GROUP OF PELICANS WILL LEAVE THE SHIP SHORTLY TO GO GET PROVISIONS OF BEER, LIQUORS AND WINE FROM OUR AIRBASE IN INCIRLIK. TONIGHT’S TIME AT THE RESPECTIVE CLUBS WILL BE A WET ONE!”

A thunderous collective cheer then resonated all over the battle cruiser.

CHAPTER 13 – RUSSIAN TREACHERY

20:16 (New York Time)

Thursday, January 18, 1996 'C'

Apartment # 4, 607 West 51st Street

Hell's Kitchen District, New York City

U.S.A.



"...With the destruction of those nuclear weapons, the danger of seeing the United States attacked with such weapons by the Caucasus Islamic Republic has now been effectively eliminated. President Perot has sent this morning a congratulatory message to the men and women serving on the carrier U.S.S. NEPTUNE, from which the strikes against the Azeris and Caucasians came from. Presently, the NEPTUNE is still cruising in the Black Sea and is said by the Pentagon to be actively engaging the Azeri and Caucasian forces which invaded Armenia without provocation a week ago. We apologize to our viewers for our incapacity to show you pictures of the U.S.S. NEPTUNE, as the newest aircraft carrier in the U.S. Navy is still covered in secrecy and since the Pentagon won't release yet any pictures of the NEPTUNE to the public. On being asked about the ultimate goal of the United States in the present war in the Caucasus, now officially named the 'Caucasus War', Secretary of State Inouye declared that the United States is demanding the full withdrawal of Azeri and Caucasian forces from inside Armenian territory, the restoration of a legitimate Armenian government and, ultimately, the payment of compensations to Armenia by Azerbaijan and by the Caucasus Islamic Republic as reparations for the extensive destruction caused inside Armenia. As of now, there has been no response to the United States demands by either Azerbaijan or the C.I.R. It should be noted however that the governments of those two countries have been severely disrupted by the American airstrikes against them, with some sources alluding that their leaders have suffered some casualties in those bombardments. When asked about the reaction of other countries in the area to the American strikes, Secretary Inouye said that he had responded this morning to a note of protest from the Russian government, which complained about the American airstrikes, by enjoining it to stay out of that conflict and to instead work to convince Azerbaijan and

the C.I.R. to withdraw from Armenian territory. Here in Washington, the members of Congress in both the House and the Senate were nearly unanimous in praising the actions and combat performance of our military in this new conflict, with one notable exception: Senator Ronald Preston of Texas. Senator Preston, who was initially voted in as a member of the Republican Party, has since declared himself as an independent member of Congress with Libertarian ideas and policies. Senator Preston objected yesterday in the Senate about the participation of the United States in the Caucasus War but was quickly and massively rebuffed by the other members of the Senate. Last night, Senator Preston appeared on CBS and called for quote all peace-loving Americans to protest publicly this latest instance of American military interventionism around the World unquote...”

Nancy, who was watching the evening televised news with Lucy, Sarah, Carmen and Erika, lowered a bit the volume of the television set and shook her head while frowning.

“American military interventionism my ass! What a hypocrite that Preston is! It makes one wonder about how that asshole is thinking.”

Lucy, her sister by adoption and a top-rated violinist, who had been watching the news while glued to Erika Lang, the battery player of their band, then wondered aloud.

“What could this Preston hope to gain from espousing such an unpopular view?”

“Don’t try to find some logical reason to his acts, Lucy.” Replied Sarah Weissman, a near-prodigy with a piano. “Those kinds of politicians only care about short term opportunities and quick gains. From what I heard around the Juilliard School today, there are quite a few idiots ready to criticize and oppose any military action in the name of peace.”

“In the name of peace...” said Nancy in a sarcastic tone. “You can’t have peace when you act like a sheep while a wolf is circling around you. History has proven that many times.”

That made Carmen Estrada, their guitarist and flute player, smile at Nancy.

“You sure know about that, Nancy: you were one of those wolves some 400 years ago, when you were the famous English corsair, Francis Drake.”

“It’s SIR Francis Drake to you, Carmen.” Feistily replied Nancy. That attracted a sneaky remark from Erika Lang.

“And the Queen of England offered you a knighthood for returning Sir Drake’s body to England and for having been Sir Drake in a previous incarnation. Too bad that American laws do not permit American citizens from accepting such aristocratic titles.”

"But the British still gave me an honorary British citizenship and a passport to go with as a thank you. I was also granted by the present owners of Buckland Abbey, the old manor in Devon which Sir Francis owned in England in the 16th Century, unlimited visiting and staying rights, along with a room reserved for my exclusive use." said Nancy. "That was quite an irony: me getting an honorary British citizenship while Ingrid is still considered by many British as a war criminal for sinking the HMS TIGER during the Palestine Crisis of 1953. The World can be a truly weird place at times."

"Only at times?" replied Lucy.

"Alright, alright: most of the time. However, it is that diversity and unpredictability that makes our world an interesting place. Imagine if everybody on this planet had the same tastes, the same ideas and the same opinions: that would be an utterly boring place."

"True!" said Sarah. "But we certainly could use less wars and more peace. By the way, that was not meant to criticize what your mother is doing: Ingrid did the right thing by pushing back against those Azeris and Caucasians, as they were clearly the aggressors in this case. I just wonder if the Russians will dare trying to intervene in that conflict."

"Well, if they do, then they will regret it quickly enough, Sarah: Ingrid is not shy about distributing lumps around to those who deserve them. Well, should we do a last practice tonight or go to bed early?"

"Let's call it a night." replied Sarah. "We have individual auditions tomorrow which will count in our final notes, so we should rest tonight."

"Agreed!" said Lucy. "I think that I'm going to have a shower now, then will go to bed."

"Need someone to scrub your back, Lucy?" asked Erika, a closet lesbian, a hopeful smile on her face. Lucy, who was also a closet lesbian, grinned at that request.

"Why not? Go get your robe and soap."

Carmen Estrada, who was a straight heterosexual but who had grown quite tolerant about lesbianism in other girls, had a chuckle as Lucy and Erika got up from their big sofa and walked out of the lounge.

"Life sure isn't bland around this place."

"And it shouldn't be!" shot back Nancy, a certified bisexual girl. "You should try a night with a girl one fine day."

"Er, thank you but no! I feel no attraction towards that kind of relationship. On the other hand, I am starting to despair about finding a truly appealing guy in Juilliard School: most of them are either too wimpy to my taste or are homosexuals. Who would have believed that so many male dancers are gay?"

"Then, look elsewhere, Carmen!"

"I think that I will do just that, Nancy."

16:06 (New York Time)

Friday, January 19, 1996 'C'

Music Division, Juilliard School

West 65th Street, Manhattan, New York City

Nancy, having finished school for the day and going to her individual locker, situated with dozens of other lockers along the sides of a hallway of the Music Division, met Sarah Weissman on her way and greeted her with a big smile.

"Hi, Sarah! How did your audition go?"

"Very well indeed, Nancy: my teacher gave me an 'A Plus'. And you?"

"The same! My singing teacher told me that I could easily win a big musical award if I ever performed publicly. Maybe we could start giving group performances in a few select little music clubs on Broadway: that would help our group gain some recognition and earn us some money at the same time. God knows how expensive good musical instruments are these days. I..."

Nancy suddenly stopped talking and froze, forcing Sarah to stop as well. She then looked in the same direction that Nancy was now staring at with growing anger.

"Hey! Someone wrote something on your locker."

Nancy, followed closely by Sarah, then charged towards her locker, stopping one pace in front of it and reading aloud what had been written on it with a black bold felt pen.

"Your mother is a war-mongering bitch...THE FUCKERS! If I catch the one who did this, he or she will regret it!"

Looking down on both sides of the hallway and seeing a school guard passing by, Nancy loudly called to him, making him turn towards her and walk to her and Sarah.

"Yes, miss?"

"I would like to make an official complaint, mister: someone vandalized my locker."

The security guard looked at her locker and read the inscription on it, then took out a small notebook and a pen.

"This is certainly against school rules, miss. May I see your student I.D. card, so that I could register properly your complaint?"

"Certainly, mister! Here is my card."

The guard noted down her name and student I.D. number, then copied on his notebook the graffiti on her locker.

"I will advise one of our janitors to come erase this graffiti tonight, miss. Would you know why would someone write this and call your mother a 'war-monger'?"

"I certainly do, mister: my mother is General Ingrid Dows, the top commander of our armed forces. She is presently fighting in this new Caucasus War."

That made the security guard look up from his notebook.

"I see! General Dows deserves the respect of all the American people and she certainly has my respect. Be assured that your complaint will be passed promptly to the school's administration."

"Thank you, mister: you are quite helpful."

"My pleasure, miss."

As the guard walked away, Sarah gave a concerned look to her friend and band leader.

"I hope that the jackal who did this will not persist in harassing you about your mother, Nancy."

"He better not! If he or she does so and I catch him, he will regret starting this."

Nancy then opened her locker and put some of her books inside it while taking out other books already in her locker, so that she could study during the weekend. Doing her best to forget this incident, Nancy then left for her apartment with Sarah and the rest of her band after meeting them in the students' cafeteria, as per their habit at the end of each school day. However, calming down her anger proved quite difficult for her and she was still simmering when she arrived at her apartment.

10:30 (Western Europe Time)

Monday, January 22, 1996 'C'

Flight deck of the U.S.S. NEPTUNE

At anchor in the bay of Rize, Northeast coast of Turkey

Black Sea



The city of Rize and its bay, Turkey.

“Another hour or so and we will have completed the reloading of our Mark 95 VLS cells, thanks to those reload missiles brought in via C-90 cargo aircraft, General. One of our fleet tankers is due to join with us here in the early afternoon with some 12,000 tons of jet fuel, while a fleet resupply ship accompanying it will replenish our fresh food supplies. Both of those ships are being escorted in by the destroyer U.S.S. SPRUANCE.”

“Aah, the SPRUANCE!” said Ingrid, smiling. “I already visited it, when me and a SEAL team used it as a floating relay base during the mission to rescue a pair of downed aviators in the Caucasus, some four years ago. I saw one of your two assault hovercraft leave the ship some two hours ago, heading for the port of Rize. What business was it on, Admiral?”

“More resupply stuff, General: it went to buy in bulk fresh fruits and vegetable to vary our menu. Its crew was also tasked to get more wine and beer for our various ship’s clubs. On that subject, I must say that this new Navy policy about allowing limited alcohol consumption on ships is going better than I had expected. There has not been a single case of drunkenness to date, something that greatly relieved Master Chief Vernon, who had been expecting the worst.”

“We do have to give more credit to the maturity of your crew and of our marines, Admiral. They are well disciplined people and they are conscious of their responsibilities during this mission.”

Ingrid then looked towards the open sea to the North of the Turkish city, where a small Turkish warship was patrolling along the coast.

“I am a bit worried about our ship’s position being known by the Turks, Admiral. I do understand that we had to ask for their permission before anchoring here, within Turkish territorial waters, but this could have caused a security leak by the Turks, either intentionally or through insufficiently encrypted communications.”

"As you just said, we had no choice but to contact the Turkish Navy before coming here, General, and we needed a protected anchorage in order to reload our VLS magazines with the minimum of ship rolling and pitching."

"You are right, Admiral but I will still feel better once we will be able to sail again and cruise around in open waters."

"Me as well, General."

The two of them then continued to watch as a group of sailors, supported by a mobile crane, loaded one of the last missile canisters into one of the few empty VLS cells left. The technique used was actually both simple and ingenious. First, the sailors inserted the hinges of a lightweight support cradle into special pivot brackets installed at one edge of the vertical missile cells hidden under the flight deck. A loaded missile canister was then laid flat on the cradle, with the top end of the canister secured to a winch cable. Then, the cradle and missile canister were raised to the vertical by a pneumatic piston, which made the missile canister align vertically with the empty launch cell. Finally, the winch to which the missile canister was attached was activated, lowering the loaded canister down into the waiting launch cell. That reloading system had been adopted by the U.S. Navy years ago, when attempts at reloading ships' VLS systems at sea were made impossible by the unsupported missile canisters swinging wildly around from under the cranes attempting to load them into their VLS wells, the swinging being due to the ship's rolling and pitching while at sea and to wind pushing the canisters sideways.

There was now only one missile canister left to load into the forward VLS launch magazine when the P.A. system of the battle carrier came alive.

"ADMIRAL BENSON TO THE C.I.C.! ADMIRAL BENSON TO THE C.I.C., PLEASE!"

"Oops! Sounds like we may have an emergency on our hands." said Benson before starting to run across the deck to get to the nearby stern superstructure tower. Ingrid easily followed his pace, arriving at the tower's access hatch just behind him. Once inside, Benson led her at a run down to the ship's Combat Information Center, or C.I.C., arriving there after some six minutes. While Benson was huffing a bit and had sweat on his forehead, Ingrid looked still as fresh as a rose, something that Benson noticed.

"You are in a good physical shape, General."

"I exercise every day, Admiral. But let's see why you were called."

“Right!”

Going to join his operations officer next to the large tactical plot table of the C.I.C., Benson looked down at the plot while asking a question.

“What do we have, Commander Carpenter?”

“One of our two patrolling PELICAN ‘B’ anti-submarine aircraft has just located via passive sonar listening an approaching diesel submarine, which is now at a distance of about 73 nautical miles from us to the Northwest of our position. Since there could be more submarines approaching, I have ordered an extra pair of PELICAN ‘B’s to launch, so that we could thoroughly check the ocean area around us. There is more: our C-21MP on patrol over the Black Sea has detected a group of five warships coming from the Crimean peninsula and heading towards Rize at high speed. From their radar signatures, we were able to identify those ships as one SLAVA-Class missile cruiser, two KRIVAK-Class missile frigates and two TARANTUL III-Class missile boats, all belonging to the Russian Black Sea Fleet.”

“And the one submarine we have detected to date?”

“It is a KILO-Class diesel attack submarine. The problem with it is that, while the Russian Black Sea Fleet owns a number of KILO submarines, the Caucasian Navy also has a number of KILO submarines, which it inherited from the Soviet Union when the U.S.S.R. broke up. That submarine could thus be either Russian or Caucasian, Admiral.”

“I see! If it is a Caucasian-owned submarine, then we can expect it to try to torpedo us. However, if it is a Russian-owned KILO and we attack it, then those approaching Russian warships will have the perfect excuse for firing missiles at us. That is a dangerous game that the Russians are playing here.”

“What if this is not a game, but rather a coordinated plan between the Russian and Caucasian navies to sink us, Admiral?” then said Ingrid, having just had a mental flash. “Let’s say that those surface warships are indeed Russian but that this approaching submarine is a Caucasian one. If we don’t fire at them out of political restraint, then that KILO submarine will be able to approach us and torpedo us while we are at anchor and vulnerable. However, if we fire at the submarine, the Russians will be able to accuse us of firing first at them. Another point: I doubt that this KILO submarine is the only one approaching us. Such a coordinated attack plan by the Russians and Caucasians would plainly justify using everything that the Caucasian Navy has in terms

of submarines, plus many submarines would render their attack plan that much more effective.”

Benson’s face hardened when he saw the logic in Ingrid’s exposé and he looked at his operation officer to ask an urgent question to him.

“Commander, how many submarines does the Caucasian Navy possess in the Black Sea?”

Carpenter consulted quickly a booklet taken out of a drawer of the plot table before answering Benson in a tense tone of voice.

“The Caucasian Navy has a total of four KILO-Class submarines in the Black Sea, one of which is known to be in refit at their base of Novorossiysk, Admiral.”

“Then, Admiral, expect that you may well have up to three Caucasian KILO attack submarines approaching the Turkish coast, on top of those five Russian ships. I would counsel strongly that we immediately advise the Turks about this, so that they could react to this. It is after all their territorial waters which are now under threat.”

“Agreed, General. However, I have no intention to stay here at anchor while those warships and submarine are coming in. Commander Carpenter, have our anchors raised and put us out to sea on silent running while calling the crew to action stations. Also, have the signals officer warn the Turkish Navy headquarters about these approaching hostiles.”

“Aye, Admiral!”

As orders were being passed around the C.I.C., Ingrid looked at Benson and spoke to him in a low voice.

“Is there something I could do while your ship prepares for combat, Admiral. I hate to be standing around and do nothing when fighting breaks up.”

Benson thought for a moment before nodding his head.

“Major Barstow is still at the infirmary and his RF-95N is thus available. Take off as quickly as you can, then go overfly the Russian fleet and be prepared to jam their radars on my order.”

“Thank you, Admiral!” replied Ingrid in a happy tone before running out of the C.I.C.

11:08 (Western Europe Time)

PELICAN ‘B’ anti-submarine aircraft

Floating on the surface of the Black Sea while dipping its sonar

Ensign Jennifer Wells, manning the sonar station of her PELICAN 'B', suddenly tensed up and concentrated while listening to what her dunking sonar, dipped some forty meters under her floating aircraft, was hearing in passive mode.



KILO-Class diesel attack submarine.

"Lieutenant, I have something on the sonar! I hear screw noises passing to our right. It is definitely a submarine."

"Can you identify the type, Jennifer?"

"One moment, please!... Its acoustic signature is that of an IMPROVED KILO-Class submarine, Lieutenant."

"Good job, Jennifer. I will advise the NEPTUNE about this new submarine and will also get ready to track and attack it. In the meantime, do your best to establish its azimuth, depth, course and speed."

"On it, Lieutenant!"

Some ten minutes later, as Jennifer had a firm lock on the KILO submarine, Lieutenant Jones' voice came on the intercom.

"Listen up, guys, this is getting serious: a third submarine has just been located, approaching the Bay of Rize. This is a full-scale submarine ambush being put in place against the NEPTUNE. However, those submarines will soon be quite disappointed: our battle carrier has now left Rize under silent running conditions and has started to trail its toward array sonar."

Jennifer briefly chuckled on hearing that, imagining the faces of those submarine captains when they would discover that they were now the hunted, rather than the hunters. Silent running mode for the U.S.S. NEPTUNE meant that it would be sailing only on the electrical power provided by its secondary diesel generators, rather than by its four nuclear reactors. With those nuclear reactors basically shut down and silent and with the secondary diesel generators mounted on acoustically-insulated rafts high above the waterline, the battle carrier, already nearly impossible to detect via radar from long distance, would also be next to completely silent for any sonar operator working in passive mode. With the NEPTUNE also in the habit during the last week to operate in

electronic silence mode, using only passive infra-red and electronic sensors, Jennifer doubted very much that the enemy would be the one gaining the effect of surprise today.

There was also another surprise in store for the approaching submarines, which were now well inside the Turkish exclusive maritime zone in the Black Sea. Alerted by the U.S.S. NEPTUNE, a fleet of Turkish submarine chasers and patrol aircraft and helicopters were now rushing towards the locations provided to them by the NEPTUNE. As the three KILO submarines were arriving at their planned ambush positions off Rize, just outside of the Turkish territorial waters, Turkish helicopters were either already starting to dip their dunking sonars or were about to arrive on the scene. On the SLAVA-Class cruiser MOSKVA, Admiral Pushnikov was pulling his hair out on seeing that the plan carefully orchestrated and coordinated with the Caucasian Navy was about to fall to pieces.

“Chyort²⁹! I can’t fire on those Turkish helicopters! Our orders are not to start a war with the Turks! Do we finally have that damn NEPTUNE on our radars?”

“Negative, Admiral. It is still as invisible as a ghost and we are not detecting any electronic emissions from it.”

Pushnikov then banged his right fist on the ledge of his tactical plot table: there was now nothing he could do but either watch or turn around and return to his base in Crimea.

In the control room of the Caucasian submarine KRASNODAR, its captain ordered his telescope to be raised to the surface, so that he could visually acquire the U.S.S. NEPTUNE, which his sonar operators had not succeeded in locating by sound. Assuming that this was because the NEPTUNE was still at anchor, with its machinery shut down, the submarine captain waited until his periscope was fully up, then glued his eyes to the eyepieces of the optical instrument. To his utter surprise, the second-in-command of the KRASNODAR saw his captain suddenly jerk violently while jumping back from his periscope.

“Captain? What...”

His captain had a near-panicked expression on his face and his eyes were bulging when he answered his second-in-command with a shout.

²⁹ Chyort : ‘Hell’ in Russian.

“THERE’S AN HELICOPTER OVERHEAD, IN HOVER MODE! FULL AHEAD, TURN AROUND TO HEADING 348!”

As his crew scrambled to obey him, a depth charge intentionally set to detonate deeper than the submarine actually was exploded, severely shaking the KRASNODAR and also making it rise up by a few meters, enough to make the top of its kiosk break through the surface. The crew of the Turkish helicopter was then able to visually see the Caucasian markings on the side of the submarine’s kiosk, an information it passed at once by radio to its headquarters. With no love lost lately between the C.I.R. and Turkey, the local Turkish commander then authorized his helicopter to sink the submarine, which had mistakenly strayed by about fifty meters inside Turkish territorial waters. With the door gunner of the helicopter hovering next to the KRASNODAR opening fire with his 20mm cannon and piercing holes in the kiosk of the submarine, the latter found itself in a dire situation indeed. Another depth charge was dropped next to the KRASNODAR but, this time, it was set to the right depth and exploded immediately next to its hull, caving it in and creating a big leak. With its engine room flooding and his batteries starting to produce toxic acid fumes, the captain of the KRASNODAR saw no other option but to surrender and evacuate his sinking submarine. However, the Turkish gunner showed a bit too much enthusiasm in peppering the submarine with his cannon and killed a few crewmembers who were trying to get out of their submarine before a shouted order from the helicopter pilot made him stop shooting. Thankfully for the Caucasian submariners who managed to escape and jump into the water, two Turkish fast patrol boats soon arrived on the scene to fish them out of the Black Sea.

The captain of another Caucasian submarines, the KOLPINO, made an even greater mistake when he saw a Turkish submarine chaser approach at full speed and, thinking that it was an attack boat launched by the NEPTUNE, fired one of his ShKval super-cavitation torpedoes at it. Coming out of its torpedo tube at a speed already attaining nearly fifty knots, the ShKval then quickly accelerated to its top speed of over 200 knots. Being basically a straight-running, super-fast torpedo, the ShKval sped to the approaching Turkish sub-chaser boat in only a few seconds and hit



Russian ShKval super-cavitating torpedo

its bow, the kinetic force of the impact being enough for the torpedo to penetrate the hull deeply before exploding. The unfortunate Turkish boat then disintegrated from the inside, blown apart by the torpedo.

One of the PELICAN 'B' of the NEPTUNE which had first located the KOLPINO could at first only look on in horror at the destruction of the Turkish boat. Its pilot then radioed to the NEPTUNE to pass urgently that info. The response he got made him give an order by intercom to his weapons officer, sitting in the cabin behind him.

"JEFF, SINK THAT FUCKING SUBMARINE! WE GOT A 'WEAPONS FREE' FROM THE NEPTUNE."

"With pleasure, John!" replied Jeff Zelnik before arming and dropping a homing anti-submarine torpedo into the water. That torpedo found the KOLPINO in seconds after its active sonar seeker activated and then sped towards the submarine which was now attempting to flee towards its base on the opposite shore of the Black Sea. The KOLPINO could not go far before the torpedo from the PELICAN 'B' hit its propeller and exploded. With its propeller destroyed and with water flooding its aft section, the captain of the KOLPINO had no choice left but to blow his ballasts and get to the surface in a hurry. There, it managed to stay afloat with a severe list to aft, its crew having reacted fast enough to seal the hatches to its flooded aft compartment. Within ten minutes and while being watched closely by the gunners of the PELICAN 'B', two Turkish patrol boats arrived on the scene and, having seen floating bodies from the sunken submarine chaser's crew, none too gently took the crew of the KOLPINO prisoner. As for the third Caucasian submarine, the NOVOROSSIYSK, it became the first official victim of the American NSAS-1 KRAKEN anti-submarine missile, which was being fired for the first time in a war by the U.S.S. NEPTUNE. Hit squarely by the heavy dual-purpose torpedo carried by the KRAKEN missile, the NOVOROSSIYSK broke up in two at a depth of ninety meters, giving no chance to its crew to survive.

On the MOSKVA, Admiral Poshnikov, who had climbed up to his navigation bridge to watch what was happening, could only look on at the underwater explosions visible in the distance as the three Caucasian submarines were being sunk. Now debating what to do with his surface fleet, he was asked a question by his bridge duty officer, who had a telephone receiver in his hand.

"Admiral, we just received a radio-telephone message in clear...from the NEPTUNE. Should I pass the call to you?"

"Yes!"

Mortified, Poshnikov took the handset offered to him and firmed himself up before speaking in it.

"This is Admiral Poshnikov, on the Russian Federation cruiser MOSKVA."

"Admiral Poshnikov, this is Rear Admiral Benson, on the U.S.S. NEPTUNE. We now know that you coordinated your approach with three Caucasian Navy submarines in order to attract my carrier into a submarine ambush. Know that your despicable plan has failed and that those three Caucasian submarines have either been sunk or have surrendered to the Turks. I would now have plenty of justifications to sink your ships right away but I will let you go back to your base so that you can transmit the following message to your government. We consider your actions of today as nothing short of an act of war against the United States. However, I will defer to Washington and my president on the actions we will take in return against the Russian government. Advise your government to refrain from now on from any hostile actions, either open or clandestine, against the United States and to stop intervening in the present conflict in the Caucasus. We still remember the way your government falsely accused, imprisoned and tortured innocent American citizens when it tried to hide its own culpability in the assassination of the last Soviet government, so don't even hope to try to lie about your true intentions of today. From now on, any Russian ship, plane or submarine approaching to within fifty nautical miles from my ship or from other American ships inside the Black Sea will be fired upon at once and without warning. Do you understand me, Admiral Poshnikov?"

"Admiral Benson, I find your tone and your hostility insulting and resent your unfounded accusations. I..."

Poshnikov then heard some kind of argument in the background before a female voice came on the line, speaking in fluent Russian.

"Admiral Poshnikov, this is General of the Army Ingrid Dows, Commander of the United States Combined Military Forces, presently aboard the U.S.S. NEPTUNE. I don't give a rat's ass about your offended virgin's denials and enjoin you to pass on our warning to your superiors, both the military and the political ones. If Russia then ignores our warning, it can then expect to pay the price for it, and I will be the one to personally exact that price from Russia, starting with your top leaders. Now, if your ships don't turn

around right now and decide to stay close to the Turkish coast, we will fire missiles in fifteen minutes and sink them to the last, with the benediction of the Turkish government, which your actions just pissed off mightily. This will be your sole warning. Goodbye and have a nice fucking day!”

The line was then cut, leaving an angry Poshnikov looking at the handset in his hand.

“The gall of that young bitch!”

He then reminded himself that the ‘young bitch’ in question was presently seventy-years-old. More importantly, that ‘young bitch’ had inflicted numerous stinging defeats to the Soviet Union and to Russia in the past and had just beaten the shit out of the Caucasians and the Azeris. Her warnings thus had to be taken seriously.

“Lieutenant, have the fleet turn back towards Sevastopol at top speed.”

09:16 (Washington Time) / 17:16 (Western Europe Time)

White House Situation Room, Washington, D.C.

U.S.A.

President Ross Perot’s expression was most somber as the members of his National Security Council arrived one by one in the Situation Room, located in the basement of the White House. By now, the news about the latest confrontation in the Black Sea had not yet been made public, on the express directive of Perot, so most of the NSC members, save for Vice-President James Stockdale, Secretary of State Daniel Inouye, Secretary of Defense John McCain and National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft, were still in the dark about the reasons for that urgent meeting. Once everybody was in, Ross Perot started speaking in a tone containing some restrained anger.

“Lady and gentlemen, I have called this urgent meeting of the NSC following the receipt of an incident report sent by General Dows, presently aboard the U.S.S. NEPTUNE, which is sailing in the Black Sea. In front of your seat, you will find a file containing a copy of that incident report. I will now let you read your copy of that report before we start our discussion. Please refrain from speaking until everybody has finished reading their copy.”

Ross Perot stayed silent as the NSC members read their copy of Ingrid’s report, but watched closely their facial expressions and reactions as they read it. Not

surprisingly, he saw many faces show outrage and anger at the lecture of the report. After about two minutes, with all the participants now having finished reading their copy, Perot spoke again.

“As you can see from that report, the Russians have again conducted themselves with their usual duplicity and hypocrisy. What they did could rightly be considered as an act of war, as General Dows declared in her report. However, you saw at the last paragraph of her report a list of suggestions from her about how to react to this. Personally, I found her suggestions to be both sensible and practical and mostly agree with them. Also, I heeded her suggestion about seeking the cooperation of the Turkish government in this affair, as the Turks suffered losses in that encounter with the Caucasian submarines. I thus placed a call one hour ago to Turkish President Osmanieh and discussed with him at length on how to react to these actions by the Russians and the Caucasians. In turn President Osmanieh agreed with me on a mutual line of conduct towards Russia, based mostly on the suggestions from General Dows. Now, I would like to hear about your own opinions on how to react to this incident. How far and how hard are we going to react? Secretary Inouye, you speak first.”

Daniel Inouye, a war veteran and amputee who still mourned the loss of his cherished native state of Hawaii, which had been rendered uninhabitable in 1975 by the explosion of a nuclear bomb put on a Russian cargo ship by the North Koreans and then detonated inside Honolulu Harbor, didn't mince his words.

“Let's give them Hell, Mister President.”

06:10 (Turkey Time)

Tuesday, January 23, 1996 'C'

Northern entrance to the Strait of Bosphorus, north of Istanbul

Turkey

The captain of the Russian cargo ship SIMFEROPOL was expecting his passage through the Strait of Bosphorus to be routine. In fact, he had gone through that strait more times than he could recount in the past while transiting between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean Sea. He was thus both surprised and baffled when he was told via radio by the Turkish Coast Guard Service to stop and hold short of the northern entrance of the strait. His surprise then turned into worry when a Turkish patrol boat came to his ship and stopped along its port side access ladder, with fully twenty armed Turkish

sailors then climbing aboard his cargo ship. The captain of the SIMFEROPOL hurried down from his bridge to meet with the junior officer leading the armed sailors, who were already fanning out around the ship with the apparent intent of searching it.

"Lieutenant, what is going on? Why have you stopped my ship like this and why are your men searching it?"

The young Turkish lieutenant replied to his question with a hard look and an even harder tone.

"Captain, Russian ships are no longer welcome in Turkish waters and the Bosphorus Strait is now closed to all Russian ships, be they civilian or military, and this on an indefinite basis. Once we have finished to search your ship for any illegal cargo, then you will have to turn around and return to Russia. As for any Caucasian ship entering Turkish waters, it will be sunk on sight without warning."

"But, why? Such a closure will completely cut our access to the Mediterranean: I have perishable cargo to deliver in Syria."

"That's too bad for you but there will be no exceptions made to our new rules concerning the Bosphorus, Captain. As for the why, listen to the Turkish radio news and you will understand why."

Completely flustered by this, Captain Nikolayev returned to his bridge and went to the adjacent radio room, where he asked his radio operator to tune in on an English-language Turkish radio news channel. At first, he heard only a program of Turkish music but, some ten minutes later, heard the start of a news bulletin. What he then heard made him and his radio operator open their jaws wide.

"Nooo! Did these idiots really do that?"

Shaking his head at the latest imbecility from his government, Nikolayev returned inside his bridge, where he anxiously waited for the Turks to finish inspecting his ship. His hopes to be able to leave without further trouble or fuss were dashed when the young Turkish lieutenant appeared on his bridge, his expression severe and with a metallic box in his right hand. The Turk then threw the box at Nikolayev's feet, making it open and spilling on the deck a long belt of machine gun ammunition.

"That's the 'perishable cargo' you were talking about, Captain? We found this box and hundreds of similar ones hidden inside crates marked as 'canned fish' and destined to the Sudan."

'SHIT! That Semnov fucker lied to me!' thought Captain Nikolayev as two Turkish sailors came in to handcuff him.

At about the same time of the morning, in a posh hotel in Istanbul, a rich Russian oligarch well connected with the government in Moscow was abruptly awakened by a series of hard knocks on his room's door. Swearing about who could disturb him like this, the oligarch told the pretty young Russian model he had 'hired' for this business trip to Turkey to stay in bed while answering the door. He was however taken aback when he opened his door only to face five Turkish policemen who most evidently had not come for a welcome visit. Using his fair Turkish, the oligarch spoke to the senior policeman.

"Yes? What can I do for you, gentlemen?"

"You are a Russian citizen, mister?"

"Uh, yes, of course! Why do you ask?"

"Because Turkey is now closed to all Russian citizens, ships and aircraft, by order of President Osmanieh. All diplomatic and commercial relations with Russia are being terminated. Pack your bags quickly: we are escorting you to the airport. Is your, uh, friend, also Russian?"

"Yes, she is!"

"Then, she will also have to pack and leave. Make it quick!"

The Turkish policemen grinned and exchanged crude jokes when the young model had to get out of bed, revealing the fact that she was fully naked. As for the oligarch, he didn't pay attention to the embarrassment caused to the poor girl, busy instead mentally swearing about this as he started to pack his bags.

'Has some idiot screwed up in Moscow to piss off the Turks like this? If that's the case, then they will hear me on my return to Moscow.'

In the United States, Russian diplomats and visiting businessmen and tourists were similarly told to pack up and leave, while an indefinite cutting of diplomatic relations with Russia was announced via all the big television channels and on radio stations, at the same time as the details of the Black Sea incident were finally made public, creating a storm of American public outrage at Russia's duplicity. The fact that compromising documents seized by the Turks aboard the captured Caucasian submarine KOLPINO clearly showed that the Russians had colluded with the C.I.R. in trying to attract the

NEPTUNE into a submarine ambush only made Russian attempts at denying culpability even less credible. By the evening, thousands of bewildered and angry Russian citizens were on their way back to Russia by air. When those Russians arrived back in Russia, the Russian government in Moscow then had to contend with lots of recriminations, many coming from important and influential 'businessmen' and bankers who suddenly had found their lucrative businesses in Turkey and in the United States abruptly shut down.

In her New York apartment, Nancy laughed out loud while listening to the evening news on television, then grinned to Lucy, sitting next to her on the sofa of their lounge.

"That's Ingrid at her best and most sneaky: how to put a hostile government in deep shit without firing a shot at them. Judging from the comments from those newscasters and the calls they are getting from listeners, I don't think that many Americans will pity the Russians or try to excuse or deny their conduct."

"Be careful not to underestimate human stupidity and gullibility, Nancy." was Lucy's sardonic reply.

CHAPTER 14 – BACK AT HOME

16:12 (New York Time)

Friday, February 2, 1996 ‘C’

Students’ cafeteria, Juilliard School

West 65th Street, Manhattan

New York City, U.S.A.



Carrying her electric guitar in its case and a haversack containing her school books needed by her to study during the weekend, Nancy came down to the students’ cafeteria with Lucy and Sarah. As per the band’s routine, she saw Erika and Carmen sitting at a table, waiting for them to return together to their two apartments in the Hells’ Kitchen District in Erika’s minivan. However, Nancy also saw that Erika and Carmen were talking with another girl sitting at their table. Nancy’s jaw dropped on recognizing that girl.

“MOM!”

She ran for the rest of the distance, slowing down only in order to put down her guitar case before warmly hugging Ingrid, who was wearing a simple pair of jeans and a beige turtleneck sweater. On her part, Ingrid returned her hug with passion, kissing Nancy on the cheeks multiple time.

“It is so nice to see you after so many weeks, Nancy. How are you doing?”

“Just fine, Mom! My studies are going well and I love this school. And you? I thought that you were on a warship sailing in the Black Sea.”

“Well, I returned to Washington as soon as the situation had improved enough there to permit me to leave the U.S.S. NEPTUNE. With my position at the top of the Pentagon hierarchy, I cannot afford to concentrate solely on one thing for too long: there are so many things that need my attention in Washington. However, I took the liberty of clearing this weekend and take a few days off, to relax from those weeks of fighting. Since I was dying to see you and since I actually have rarely visited New York in the past, I decided to come and spend my weekend off here with you. I hope that you will be able to accommodate me for the weekend at your apartment?”

"Are you kidding, Mom? How could I not accommodate you for a few days? As for visiting New York, me and the girls will be more than happy to play guides for you: we have explored the city quite a lot since our arrival last Summer. This city has so much to offer and show. Well, we are now all together, so let's pile up in Erika's minivan and drive to our home in Hell's Kitchen."

All five girls grabbed their things and walked out of the cafeteria with Ingrid, who put back on her winter coat before going down to the underground garage of the building. With Erika driving, they soon were rolling south down Eleventh Avenue, heading towards the Hell's Kitchen District. As they were rolling rather slowly due to the dense city traffic and the thin coating of snow on the roads, Ingrid asked a question to nobody in particular while looking around.

"So, is the Hell's Kitchen District as bad as its name implies, girls?"

"Not really!" replied Sarah Weissman, an extremely intelligent girl who knew well New York City and its history. "It earned its nickname mostly around the start of this century, when waves of poor European immigrants came to New York, in search of jobs and better living conditions. However, the city has done a lot of efforts to improve things during the last couple of decades. While there is still quite a lot of poverty, homelessness and criminality around the district, things are nowhere as bad as one would think just from its nickname."

"I see! And is it safe for girls to walk around at night?"

"Uh, there are places where I would hesitate to go at night, but not only in Hell's Kitchen: the South Bronx and Harlem are two other places in New York where things can get rough. Drugs is one of the main problems the city has, along with gang violence and homelessness. There was also a severe epidemic of AIDS among the city's gay community but the miraculous mass healing done by an angel in September of last year basically eradicated AIDS in New York. You must have heard about that, General?"

"Please, just call me 'Ingrid', girls. Yes, I did hear about it. Being a Chosen of The One, I can tell you that it was an angel sent by The One who performed that healing energy burst."

"Could we talk more about this 'One' once at our place, Ingrid?" asked Carmen Estrada, attracting a surprised look on Ingrid's face.

"Nancy didn't tell you anything about The One? You do know that Nancy is half part of The One, right?"

Nancy then interjected herself at that point of the conversation, her tone sober.

"I have not really discussed much about The One with my band members or anybody else, Mom: I try to stay discreet as much as I can about that subject. After all, you know as well as me that The One doesn't seek public recognition or worship: there are already too many gods being worshipped around the World, with mostly negative consequences like intolerance, bigotry, misogyny and ignorance."

"You are too right about that, Nancy." agreed Ingrid. "This war in the Caucasus was partly caused by religious hatred, with Armenia being a Christian Orthodox country and with most of its neighbors being Muslim countries. The leaders of the Caucasus Islamic Republic in particular were peddling a lot of religious hatred and intolerance...until our missiles and aircraft flattened most of them inside their palaces and government buildings."

"And who is leading that country now, Ingrid?" asked Sarah Weissman, who as a Jewish girl was very conscious about the religious tensions in the Caucasus and Middle East.

"Basically, we don't know yet. There is presently a dispute for power in their capital of Krasnodar and the situation there is quite confused. The one good thing about that is that our strikes have convinced both Azerbaijan and the C.I.R. to pull their troops out of Armenia, at least the ones who survived our airstrikes. In their present weak state and with most of their military infrastructures and major equipment holdings destroyed, those bastards are not about to attack Armenia again. Unfortunately, they had time to cause tremendous damage and kill many Armenians before they had to withdraw from Armenia."

"And Russia in this?" asked Erika while driving. "They did try to intervene indirectly in that war, no?"

Ingrid guffawed at that question before answering it.

"Oh, they did, Erika! However, it didn't do them any good. As a result of their treacherous attempt at attracting the U.S.S. NEPTUNE into a submarine ambush, the Russians are now trapped inside the Black Sea and cannot sail into the Mediterranean, except by coming from the Baltic Sea or from their Arctic ports. That's on top of their citizens being barred from entering Turkey and the U.S.A. As a result, the present leaders in the Kremlin are having to face a lot of recriminations and hard questions from their own political and economic elite, which is suffering the most from those embargos. I predict that the time in power of those leaders is counted."

"Yay!" exclaimed Nancy. "I despise tyrants and dictators. Let them eat humble pie!"

"I can't agree more about that, Nancy." replied Ingrid, smiling. However, Erika was not as enthusiastic as Nancy on the subject of Russia and the Caucasus.

"Excuse me if I play the killjoy here but it seems to me that you cut off the head of the monster only to possibly see a new head as ugly as the previous one grow up in its place. Am I too pessimistic?"

"Actually, you are quite right about this, Erika." said soberly Ingrid. "We still don't know what kind of new leadership will emerge from this conflict in the C.I.R. and Russia. That's unfortunately the nature of the beast in that region of the World."

The rest of the trip to their apartment building was then spent mostly in silence, as they mentally reflected on the troubling reality of the Caucasus.

Some fifteen minutes later, Erika was parking her minivan inside the private garage her group had rented along with their two studio apartments. Locking from the inside the garage door, she then followed the rest of the group up to the apartment on the top floor she shared with Nancy and Lucy. Once inside the apartment, Nancy smiled to Erika as Ingrid waited with the single suitcase she had brought with her from Washington.

"Erika, would you mind if my mother would share your bedroom with you? Me and Lucy already pretty much fill the other bedroom in this apartment."

Erika, not believing her luck, broke at once into a wide grin.

"Of course I won't mind, Nancy!"

"Excellent! Mother, you can now settle in in Erika's bedroom: it is the second one down that short corridor."

"Alright! Show me your place, Erika." replied Ingrid. Erika led her at once to her bedroom, where a large queen-size bed throned, surrounded by a large chest of drawers, a work desk supporting a computer, a vanity and a large closet. One window provided a fair level of illumination to the room, which had been painted a light beige-salmon pink.

"Give me a minute and I will clear one of the drawers, so that you could put your things in, Gen...uh, Ingrid."

"That's better! In the meantime, I will suspend my outfits in your closet."

Watching discretely while emptying one drawer, Erika saw that Ingrid had brought only three sets of spare clothes with her, including a going out uniform in the style of the U.S. Space Corps, a style that Erika found both futuristic-looking and most appealing. Ingrid was soon able to put her personal hygiene items and underwear inside the drawer emptied by Erika.

“By the way, I normally sleep in the nude, Erika. Do you mind that?”

With a rush of blood to her brain and suddenly feeling quite hot, Erika took a second to respond, trying to hide her jubilation at those words.

“Uh, of course not, Ingrid.”

Once finished putting her things away, Ingrid surprised Erika by walking to her and gluing herself to her while gently smiling.

“Erika, I have to warn you that, like Nancy, I am a telepath. I thus know that you like girls. I also wanted to tell you that, because I remember dozens of past incarnations, including as a man, I am bisexual, like Nancy. So, don't be shy tonight about getting close to me.”

“Oh my god! Ingrid, to be frank, I have dreamed of getting in bed with you since the first day I met you: you are a fantastic-looking girl and you have an even more fantastic mind and personality.”

That declaration brought a big smile on Ingrid's lips before she kissed Erika on the lips while holding her tightly. That kiss quickly turned into a full-blown mutual French kiss, with Erika hungrily fondling with both hands Ingrid's firm breasts. Erika finally parted from Ingrid, breathing heavily and with sparkles in her eyes.

“My god! I can't wait for tonight's bed time, Ingrid.”

“And I will do my best to satisfy you, Erika. The one thing I will ask from you is to keep my revelation about me being bisexual strictly to yourself. The American military is still quite intolerant about LGBTQ people, not to speak about the intolerance shown by most American citizens, and I could be forced to leave the service if this becomes widely known. The only one you can talk about this with is Nancy, which I understand you have flirted with many times already.”

“I understand and promise to keep mum about you, Ingrid. Uh, would you like to go out with us on foot for supper? There are a lot of very good ethnic restaurants nearby, on Ninth Avenue.”

“That sounds like a very interesting idea, Erika. Let's go see the other girls and discuss our choice of restaurant for supper. Personally, I like pretty much everything,

thanks to the souvenirs from my past incarnations. However, I have a weakness for German and Asian cuisines.”

“I also love German cuisine! My family descends from German immigrants. I do also like Chinese, Thai and Japanese cuisines.”

“Then, we should have a nice supper together as a group.” declared Ingrid.

20:13 (New York Time)

Corner of West 51st Street and Eleventh Avenue

Hell’s Kitchen District, Manhattan

Having eaten together at a Thai restaurant on Ninth Avenue, Ingrid, Nancy and her band members were about to cross Eleventh Avenue to return to their apartment building when Nancy paused and touched Ingrid’s arm while speaking to the other girls.



Dewitt Clinton Park, corner of West 52th and 11th Ave.

“Go back to your apartments without me, girls. I’m going to show a bit of our neighborhood to my mother.”

“Uh, don’t you think that it is a bit late for that, Nancy?” asked Sarah, clearly worried. “This is not the safest time for walking around.”

“Do not worry, Sarah. You know that I can defend myself, while my mother is no slouch in that department either. We will be fine.”

“As you wish, but be careful!”

On this the group parted, with Nancy walking north along Eleventh Avenue with Ingrid, to stop briefly at the corner with West 52nd Street, where she pointed at the Dewitt Clinton Park across the avenue. “This is the Dewitt Clinton Park, the sole public park in this district. It was once a den for drug dealers and a violent street gang, but the city cleaned up the park during the last year and frequent police patrols forced the drug dealers away. Also, the park was home to many homeless people, except in Winter, when the cold forced them to find places in the various shelters around here. The girls and me took on us to help them after we first met those homeless people, often bringing them hot meals from nearby restaurants. As Winter approached, I tried to find a better way to help them, as the shelters available often don’t have enough places for all of them in

Winter. Then, I found out about an old apartment building nearby that was built in the 1880s but had been neglected by its owner, who also abused his tenants and even used vandalism and violence to try to evict them. That owner is now doing jail time and the city took over the administration of the building, which is considered as a historical landmark, until it could find an honest developer who would renovate and restore the building. Since that building was by then nearly empty of tenants, I talked to the city managers and convinced them to let the homeless people from the Dewitt Clinton Park occupy some of the empty apartments, with the promise from me to pay for the most urgent repairs and renovation work, on top of paying the rent for those homeless people. While they still are very poor and destitute people, at least now they don't need to freeze anymore while trying to sleep on park benches or in beaten up improvised tents."

Ingrid couldn't help look at her daughter with renewed respect and appreciation.

"But that must have cost you a fortune!

Property is so expensive in Manhattan! Where did **Windermere Apartments Complex** you find the money for that?"

That question brought a malicious grin on Nancy's face.

"Officially, the money came from my share of the treasure we found in Panama four and a half years ago. Unofficially, while I sank much of my share of that treasure in renting and renovating those apartments for the homeless people from the park, I also got some financial help...from The One."

Nancy nearly laughed on seeing the face Ingrid made on hearing that.

"You heard me right, Mom: The One really helped me financially for that project, as it promoted charity and care for others. Basically, The One materialized gold coins similar to those Spanish gold pieces we found in Panama and also gave them the old, eroded appearance of 16th Century Doubloons. I actually paid the city administration and the renovation company with those gold doubloons, so my story is quite a solid one in their mind. In return, they promised to keep me in mind as a prospective new owner of the Windermere Apartments Complex, with what I already spent on renovations considered as a part down payment for the building."



“And the raw gold itself? Where did it come from, or did The One simply materialized it out of thin air?”

“The raw gold was taken by an angel of The One from the private vault of an African dictator who I will leave unnamed. So, this was for both making a charitable gesture and for rendering justice against a bastard who richly deserved it.”

Ingrid nodded her head slowly, truly impressed.

“And how much more would you actually need to have to finish buying that building and renovate it, Nancy?”

“A bit over six million dollars, but don’t worry about that: The One is ready to send me more gold once the city will have taken a decision about the building. My feeling is that I am going to become the new owner soon, in the next few weeks.”

“Nancy, you make me proud of you, truly.” replied Ingrid before kissing her daughter on both cheeks. “You are my angel!”

“But I am an angel, Mom! At least half of me IS an angel.”

21:34 (New York Time)

Nancy’s and Erika’s apartment

607 West 51st Street, Hell’s Kitchen District

“You wanted to speak to all of us, Ingrid?”

“Yes! Please have a seat, girls.”

Lucy, Sarah, Carmen and Erika then took place on the two sofas of the apartment’s lounge, while Ingrid stayed on her feet, facing them and with Nancy at her side. Both of the latter showed serious, nearly solemn expressions on their faces as they looked down at the four teenagers. Ingrid then started speaking, addressing the group in a soft voice.

“Girls, I have had years now to get to know you as you studied and played music with my daughter Nancy. All four of you are good, decent and caring girls and I am sure that you will do much good during your lives. However, something that Nancy told me while we were going around the neighborhood convinced me that this world needs all the good people it can get. You already know that both me and Nancy can remember our past incarnations. In fact, that talent helped Nancy find Sir Francis Drake’s hidden treasure, of which you got a share, except for Erika, whom we didn’t know at the time. I am personally convinced that all four of you would be worthy of acquiring that particular talent, and Nancy fully agrees with me. If you accept to gain the ability to remember

your past incarnations, then me and Nancy will start individual sessions with each of you in order to open up your minds to your past lives. That process, in order to reawaken all of your past memories since your first incarnation on Earth, normally takes many weeks but, with Nancy's help, this could be shortened to a few days. I will be here only for the weekend but, once started by me, Nancy will then help you complete the process. Now, I must warn you: not all of your lives may have been as good, decent people. Don't be shocked if you find out that you were, say, a bloodthirsty pirate or a mercenary soldier in some past life. You will also certainly remember a few lives as men, so don't be surprised afterward if you feel new tendencies towards bisexuality. With this said, I will let you a few minutes to decide if you want to open your minds to your past incarnations. Don't forget: once started, that process will be irreversible."

"Ingrid, those past personalities of ours, will they change our present personalities and conduct?" asked Erika, her mind already boiling about this fantastic opportunity.

"No! You will gain memories and remember past skills that may or may not turn out to be useful to you in your present lives. You will also remember the languages you could speak in the past, something that can only be beneficial in terms of improving your selves. Those memories will not control you: they will only enrich your personalities with new abilities, knowledge and skills."

"Then, I want to learn about my past lives, Ingrid." said firmly Erika, making Ingrid nod her head in acknowledgement. All three other girls also accepted quickly to have her minds opened, making Ingrid looking at them with a gentle smile.

"That was what I expected from all of you. I will now start with Lucy, while Nancy will start with Sarah. I will then take care of Erika, while Nancy will continue with Carmen. Lucy, if you may come with me, we will use Erika's bedroom."

Ingrid then left the lounge with Lucy, while Nancy went to her bedroom with Sarah, leaving Erika and Carmen by themselves in the lounge. Carmen gave an awed look to Erika, who was also quite moved by what was going to happen to her.

"I am a bit afraid about what kind of lives I had in the past. What if I discover that I was some kind of murderous criminal, or a tyrant?"

"Then, I say this: take the good parts in them and forget their bad parts." replied Erika. "They are only memories, remember? Let's watch television in the meantime: my favorite science-fiction show is going to start soon."

A bit over one hour later, Sarah, looking a bit overwhelmed, came back to the lounge with Nancy, with Erika and Carmen trying to ask her questions at once. However, Nancy stopped them with an imperative gesture of one hand.

"Please, girls, let Sarah time to digest her new souvenirs. Don't ask her about her souvenirs before at least one hour. Carmen, it's your turn."

Carmen didn't have to be told twice and quickly went with Nancy in her bedroom. Then, Lucy came back with Ingrid after another twenty minutes, with Erika eagerly taking her place. Once inside her own bedroom with Ingrid, the latter surprised her by starting to gently undress her.

"Hey, why undress me, Ingrid?"

"Because, the more relaxed you are during this assimilation process, the easier it will go."

"Oh! It's like learning at school then."

"Exactly! Go lay on the bed while I also undress."

Feeling hot for a couple of very different reasons, Erika did as she was told and watched with glee as Ingrid peeled off her clothes, revealing a perfect female body with firm, generous breasts, long, well-shaped legs and a general athletic look. With her beautiful, youthful face and sparkling blue eyes, she was for Erika a true delight to look at. Her groin was also closely shaved and as smooth as that of a baby. Once fully naked, Ingrid joined Erika in bed and lay on her side, next to her, before taking hold of her hands and directing them to her breasts. Then, Ingrid took hold of Erika's head with both hands and put her forehead directly against Erika's forehead.

"Now, relax, close your eyes and let your mind wander, Erika."

Expecting about anything now to happen, Erika felt at first a sort of faint light in front of her closed eyes. Then images and noises started filing past in her brain, like when watching a movie in accelerated motion. The speed of that motion increased even further during the next few minutes, to become an uninterrupted flow passing by at incredible speed. Despite of that, Erika didn't feel confused by that flash kaleidoscope of images and thoughts, eventually ending up in a quasi-hypnosis state.

When Erika finally woke up from the mind opening process, she still had her hands cupped over Ingrid's breasts, who then spoke to her while smiling.

"So, how do you feel, Erika?"

"Fine! It is as if I simply slept and had dreams." Replied Erika before she realized that Ingrid had spoken a language other than English or German and that she herself had answered back in that same language. She was also able to name that language, even though she never learned it before: it was Chinese!

"I...I can speak Chinese now, Ingrid?"

"More exactly, you can now speak Cantonese. Eighty years ago, you died in Hong Kong as an old, 72-year-old Chinese merchant."

"And my name was then Ling Piao. My god! I really can remember a past life! I can see mental pictures of my family then, where I lived and what I did during my life. This is simply fantastic, Ingrid!"

"Then, would you like to continue right now and learn about earlier lives?"

"Of course I want to, Ingrid! Uh, can I keep my hands on your tits?"

"Please, enjoy!" replied Ingrid, breaking into a grin. "Now, close your eyes again and relax."

This time, her second recall session made Erika remember two separate lives, lived in succession with a break of 66 years between them. As she made sense of the souvenirs now filling her mind, Ingrid spoke softly to her.

"In this process, each recall becomes easier and quicker than the more recent incarnation that chronologically followed it. Eventually, you won't need my help anymore and all your remaining souvenirs will come to you by themselves, going back to the point of your first ever life on Earth."

"And you, Ingrid? What was your first ever life on Earth?"

Ingrid then looked straight into Erika's eyes as she answered her question.

"That life was some 7,000 years ago and I was a nomad woman living in the Mesopotamian basin. My primordial name was 'Amdira'."

CHAPTER 15 – A RUINED VACATION



16:10 (New York Time)

Saturday, February 4, 1996 'C'

Terminal Number Three (Pan Am Worldport)

J.F.K. International Airport, New York City

New York, U.S.A.

“AND DON'T DO ANYTHING I WOULDN'T DO, GUYS!”

Nancy, about to pass through the passenger security check point with Lucy and Leonardo, waved back at Ingrid while grinning to her from a distance.

“WE WILL DO WORST THAN THAT: WE WILL DO EVERYTHING YOU WOULD DO!”

On that last crack, Nancy walked through the metal detector gate of the check point and, being cleared by the security agent, recuperated her things that had gone through an X-ray machine and joined back with her adopted siblings. All three had a last look at Ingrid, who was now walking away in order to return to the Pentagon and her command office.

“Poor Ingrid: she works too much! She should have come with us on vacation in Italy for this school Spring break.” said Lucy, prompting a reply from Leonardo.

“Yes, she could have used a vacation but, unfortunately, the bad guys of this World don't take vacations, at least not all at the same time. Let's get to our departure lounge.”

Carrying their cabin bags by their straps, the trio of teenagers walked to the departure lounge assigned to their flight, Pan Am 110, due to leave for Rome in some ninety minutes. However, having still plenty of time before boarding, they decided of a common accord to tour the duty-free gift shops available inside the checked departure zone. While they didn't buy any souvenir or bottle of alcohol, they did buy a collection of magazines in order to have something of interest to read during their flight. Not surprisingly for Lucy or Nancy, Leonardo grabbed a sports car magazine, while Lucy bought a fashion magazine. As for Nancy, she also bought a fashion magazine, having developed an interest for female fashion in the last few years, then grabbed as well the latest number of the TIME Magazine, which contained an article about the Caucasus War, which had cooled down somewhat but was not finished yet by any measure. Returning to their gate lounge, they sat down and started reading their magazines. Another half hour and the start of boarding was announced for their flight.

Their plane was a Boeing 717-400, the most recent variant of a basic design conceived under Ingrid's direction in the 1950s, when she had directed the development and production of a whole range of new military jet aircraft as the National Director of Aerospace Programs. The Boeing C-200 military passenger transport of the time had then been quickly produced in civilian version, the Boeing 717, which had then revolutionized commercial air travel all around the World. It had also caused many big British aircraft manufacturers and commercial airlines to go bankrupt, British aircraft designers proving incapable of putting in service an aircraft that could even merely approach the Boeing 717 in terms of speed, efficiency and commercial rentability. Since the three of them still had comfortably padded bank accounts, thanks to their share of Sir Francis Drake's hidden treasure, Nancy, Lucy and Leonardo had bought first-class tickets to Rome, not because they felt entitled but simply because they didn't like being squeezed in tourist-class seats. So, the trio went down to the first-class lounge, situated below the main cabin and forward of the cargo holds, close to the nose of the aircraft, where a smiling Pan Am stewardess showed them their seats. Leonardo was grinning with anticipation as he buckled his seat belt.

"I can't wait to show you the things worth seeing in Italy. Just exploring properly Rome would take a couple of weeks, at the least, and that would still leave all the other great places, like Florence, Venice, Milan, Naples and so many other jewels in Italy. And the food..."

"No need to wet our appetite, Leo." replied Lucy, amused by his enthusiasm. "We are already sold on this Italian vacation. As for Italian food, me and Nancy already love it. By the way, which place in Italy makes the best pastas, in your opinion?"

"Are you nuts?" shot back Leonardo, a horrified look on his face. "You could start a knife fight by asking that question around Italy! Let's simply say that every region of Italy makes great pastas. Each of them simply does them differently."

"Now, that is what I call a diplomatic answer." said Nancy in an approving tone.

Another twelve minutes later their aircraft started pulling back from its gate, then rolled down a taxiway towards one of the runways. After a brief stop at one end of the runway it was about to take off from, the pilots gunned down the four jet engines of the Boeing 717-400, making it accelerate quickly down the runway. Leonardo yelled in delight as their plane's nose rose and the aircraft lifted off.

"Yay! Italy, here we come!"

On her part, Nancy stayed much more restrained than Leonardo, partly because she had already traveled frequently by air before since a young age, while traveling with Ingrid to many places. Hell, she had been born in a spaceship while midway between Jupiter and Saturn! So, going to Italy, while a nice thing, was not exactly sensational news for her. There was also the fact that she was only half human: the other half was celestial and much more able to keep in any excess enthusiasm.

As their plane was still climbing towards its cruising altitude, Leonardo felt a buzz and some pressure inside his ears, so he pinched his nose and blew hard in order to equilibrate the pressure inside his ears with that of the aircraft's cabin pressure. Ingrid had explained that to him many years ago, telling him that commercial aircraft cabins were pressurized to levels lower than atmospheric ground pressure. Typically, a commercial airliner's pressurization system would sustain a cabin pressure equivalent to an altitude between 2,000 and 2,400 meters, thus the need for many passengers to blow their nose during the ascent to altitude. Feeling better now, Leonardo sat back in his seat, waiting for the signal that would tell the passengers that they could take off their seat belts. What he got instead some one minute later was a brutal shock accompanied by a loud, somewhat muffled detonation. Then, complete mayhem broke out. What felt like a hurricane swept through the first-class section, sucking out everything not tied down or fixed. That hurricane turned nearly instantly into a glacial wind that was clearly

coming from the outside. The emergency oxygen masks stored in the overhead bins then dropped out of their compartments, ending up dangling down in front of the confused and terrified passengers. At the same time, the part of the plane which contained the first-class lounge started a wild carrousel, rotating around in two axes while tumbling down. Herself quite terrified at first by all this, Nancy managed to regain some composure within seconds, then put on her own mask over her face and took a few deep breaths. Looking around her, she was alarmed to see that most of the other passengers in the lounge were too terrified to think about putting on their oxygen masks. With the violent, glacial wind sweeping around making herself being heard nearly impossible, Nancy instead concentrated and sent out around her a powerful telepathic message.

'PUT YOUR OXYGEN MASKS ON, NOW!'

Looking to her left and right, Nancy was relieved to see that both Lucy and Leonardo had already put on their own masks. The young stewardess sitting in the lounge had also put on her mask, while most of the other passengers were now reacting properly and were grabbing and putting on their masks. The others who didn't or reacted too slowly soon lost consciousness and became in danger of dying from hypoxia. Looking through the nearest window, Nancy saw that their plane, or rather their part of the plane, was tumbling down towards the sea, which was still about 2,000 meters below but was approaching quickly. At the speed they were falling, the impact with the sea would certainly kill everybody on board. Looking backward over her shoulder, Nancy was stunned to see that the aft bulkhead of the lounge, which separated it from the forward baggage hold, was mostly gone, ripped open! That allowed her to see with a pang of her heart that the nose section of the aircraft, in which she was, had broken off from the rest of the aircraft and was now tumbling down by itself, nose tip first. Taking a quick decision on what to do, she looked at Leonardo, who was sitting in the inner seat of their row, and sent him a telepathic message.

'I am going to try to slow down the fall of our aircraft section before it impacts on the surface of the sea below. Stay sitting with your seat belt on and let me do what needs to be done.'

Not waiting for a reply from him, Nancy then unbuckled her seat belt, then grabbed the tops of her seat and of the seat forward from her in order to control her movements while levitating out of her seat. The stewardess and a few passengers looked at her with incomprehension as she made her way towards the ripped aft bulkhead. From what she

could understand out of her observations so far, their free-falling nose section was now roughly shaped like a badminton birdie. That actually was helping them, as that shape was gradually stabilizing the nose section in its fall and diminishing its tumbling movements. However, the speed of their fall was still too high and would kill everybody on impact with the sea. Conscious that she now had only seconds to succeed in her efforts, Nancy arrived at a vertical spar of the aft bulkhead which still appeared to be holding solidly enough for her to use. Bracing her back against that spar while holding on to it with both hands, Nancy then concentrated her levitation power, which allowed her to fly, into pushing back hard on the spar by doing as if she wanted to fly up, while fervently hoping that this would slow down the fall of the nose section. Anyone watching her now would probably compare what she was trying to do to a scene typical of a movie about the fictional hero 'Superman'. Nancy felt hope grow as she felt that the speed of fall of the nose section, which had to weigh at least a dozen tons, started to slow down at once. Hoping that the spar she was using as a sort of lever would continue to hold, she increased further her mental effort at levitation while also using her power of telekinesis to further keep a hold on the nose structure. Now watched by most of the fearful and stunned passengers and by the Pan Am stewardess, Nancy gave it her maximum, unconsciously starting to glow from the inside as she used all her powers of half-celestial to save the occupants of the nose section. While she did that, she also sent out another powerful telepathic message around her.

'WE ARE GOING TO IMPACT THE SURFACE OF THE SEA. PUT ON YOUR INFLATABLE LIFE VESTS BUT DON'T INFLATE THEM YET! WAIT FOR THE WORD OF OUR STEWARDESS BEFORE INFLATING YOUR VESTS!'

To her relief, the other passengers, including Lucy and Leonardo, obeyed her and, taking their individual life vests stored in pockets attached to the seat in front of their own seats, started putting them on, encouraged verbally by the stewardess. By now, with their section fully depressurized and with their speed of fall diminishing constantly thanks to Nancy's efforts, it was now possible to be heard if one shouted out loud. However, the temperature inside the first-class lounge was still frigid and Nancy could well imagine how cold the waters of the Atlantic would be at this time of the year. Even if they survived the impact with the ocean, they were still at great risk of dying from hypothermia once in the water.

'One thing at the time, Nancy. One thing at a time.'

In the control tower of J.F.K. Airport, the air controller watching the radar scope on which the Pan Am B-717 appeared suddenly saw its blip break up in multiple smaller blips before it disappeared completely from his radar. Not believing his eyes at first and checking out his radar settings, he soon had to accept what it was telling him and shouted an urgent warning to his shift supervisor.

“PAN AM 110 JUST DISAPPEARED FROM MY RADAR SCOPE!”

That brought his supervisor, a very experienced man, to his station at a near run.

“Tell me what you saw, Ted!”

“I had Pan Am 110 here, climbing to its cruising altitude, when its blip suddenly fractured into at least four smaller blips at an altitude of about 6,000 feet. It was then over the ocean, some 26 miles to the East-southeast of us. Those blips then disappeared completely from my radar. I heard no calls or warning from Pan Am 110 before that happened.”

“Try calling them now!”

The air controller did so, calling and repeating his message five times before his supervisor picked up a nearby telephone.

“Keep trying, Ted! I am going to call for a search of that area.”

Back in the falling nose section of the broken-up B-717, Leonardo suddenly shouted a warning to Nancy, who was still glowing and doing her best to slow down their fall.

“WE ARE GOING TO IMPACT THE SEA IN A FEW SECONDS. YOU BETTER BRACE FOR IMPACT, PEOPLE!”

On hearing that, Nancy switched position at once, turning around the spar she was holding and going outside of the broken nose section, where she ended lying on her belly on top of the spar. That gave her the double advantage of being able to see clearly outside and to protect her from crashing down inside the nose section on impact. With an ultimate mental effort, she managed to lower the impact speed with the ocean's surface to a very manageable three meters per second, allowing the nose cone section to stay intact and avoid creating water leaks inside it. However, they were not out of trouble yet and Nancy kept pulling up on it, in order to keep it to the vertical and avoid waves to fill it. At the same time, she started towing it towards the nearest shore she could see, some two kilometers away. Thankfully, the strong wind coming from the East helped her by pushing the nose cone towards land.

Nine minutes later, a completely exhausted Nancy arrived with her aircraft nose section on a section of sandy beach, where she gently let it lay down well away from the surf before landing herself on her feet. Walking to a nearby large rock, she wearily sat on it and wrapped her arms around her torso to stop her shivering. The external temperature was close to freezing and the sea spray had thoroughly soaked her, making her freeze during her supreme effort to bring the nose section to safety. She was still sitting on that rock, her head low and eyes closed, trying to recuperate from her effort, when someone gently touched her shoulder. Opening her eyes, she saw that it was Lucy, smiling at her.

“Nancy, you were extraordinary, truly! Without you, all of us would be dead.”

“But all these other people in the main cabin: they are now dead. This is still an immense tragedy.”

“Nancy, you did all that you could. Thank you, in the name of all the other passengers you saved.”

“Thanks!” replied Nancy, shivering from the cold wind. “Can you see some houses nearby where we could find shelter and warm up?”

“There is what appears to be either a hotel or a residential tower some 300 meters away.”

“Then, let’s go there!”

Nancy just had time to get up from her rock before the pilot of their aircraft came to see her, a grave expression on his face.

“Miss, my stewardess just told me what you did and I must thank you most profusely for saving us all. May I ask how you did what you did, miss?”

Nancy nodded her head wearily: it was not as if this would be the first time that she would become the subject of breaking news on television or in the newspapers.

“In Washington, I earned the nickname of ‘Supergirl’ at a young age due to my supernatural powers. My name is Nancy Dows and I am basically half-human, half-celestial.”

“Half celestial?”

“Or half angel if you prefer. Right now, I think that we should concentrate on getting to a warm place where we could call for assistance. We can always talk further about this later on, once we are all safe.”

The pilot stared at her for a moment, then nodded his head once.

“You are right, miss. Do you need my help to walk? You look exhausted.”

“I am, but I can walk by myself, thank you. There are old people with us who need help more than I do.”

The pilot nodded again, then returned to his copilot, flight engineer and stewardess, discussing briefly with them before telling the survivors to follow him. As for Nancy, she accepted Leonardo’s help, who lent her his arm to help steady her tired pace. She was pained to see that, out of the more than 400 people who had been on the Pan Am flight, only a grand total of 35 people, including herself, had survived. But survived what? She was still thinking about that when a police patrol car and a fire engine truck stopped near her group as they were walking along it towards the tall building Lucy had seen. From then on, things went fairly fast, with a number of ambulances and emergency vehicles arriving and helping the survivors.

In the control tower of J.F.K. Airport, the news of survivors being found on the shore near Freeport brought some relief from the catastrophe atmosphere in the control room. However, that relief was all but forgotten when an air controller watching his radar scope shouted in alarm.

“HEY, TWA 124 JUST DISAPPEARED FROM MY SCREEN!”

“Not another one?” exclaimed the shift supervisor while walking quickly to that station. Looking at it and asking questions to the air controller, the supervisor banged furiously one fist on his desk.

“TWO PLANES DISAPPEARING FROM RADAR WITHIN ONE HOUR OF EACH OTHER, AFTER EACH OF THEM LEFT FROM THIS AIRPORT? THAT CAN’T BE A SIMPLE COINCIDENCE! THAT’S IT! GROUND ALL THE FLIGHTS AND CANCEL ALL TAKEOFFS UNTIL WE CAN UNDERSTAND BETTER WHAT IS HAPPENING. LET ONLY INCOMING FLIGHTS LAND BUT, ONCE LANDED, THEY WILL STAY DOWN. I AM CALLING THE NTSB³⁰ RIGHT AWAY ABOUT THIS.”

22:53 (New York Time)

Air control tower, J.F.K. International Airport

³⁰ NTSB : National Transportation Safety Board. The American government agency responsible to investigate accidents involving transportation systems (aircraft, trains, road vehicles, boats and ships).

The control tower's evening shift supervisor was on edge and tired when he was told that a group of NTSB investigators wanted to talk with him. Putting down his telephone handset, he made a forced smile to the two men and one woman wearing suits who came to him and shook hands with him, with one of the two men presenting himself.

"Hi! My name is Jeff Zelanik and I am a senior investigator at the NTSB. My assistants are Robert McClelland and Sylvia Krystal. We just arrived by aircar from Washington. Another team is also on its way to where the wreckage from the Pan Am 110 flight washed ashore, to study it."

"And I am Dennis Brockovich, evening shift supervisor in this control tower. I was on duty when both airliners disappeared from our radars after taking off from this airport. Uh, about that Pan Am wreckage, it didn't exactly wash ashore."

Brockovich then took a couple of minutes to explain to the NTSB team what had transpired to date concerning the Pan Am flight, leaving the investigators to look at him with bulging eyes and dropping jaws.

"You, you can't be serious, mister!" protested Zelanik, making Brockovich insist.

"Yes, I am! That girl has already made the media headlines a number of times in the past and her nickname at school is 'Supergirl'. You will be able to interview her soon anyway: she and the other survivors from Pan Am 110 are presently in a private airport lounge, waiting for you. There is however another thing that you should know right now: both Pan Am 110 and TWA 124 disappeared from our radars when they reached an altitude of 6,000 feet and while still climbing towards their cruising altitude. Associated with the fact that the Pan Am survivors said to the Port Authority Police that they heard and felt an explosion aboard their plane just before their plane broke up in pieces, this raised heavy suspicions in me about the possibility of bombs put aboard those two planes. Captain Anthony Fraticelli, our head of Port Authority Police, agrees with me and has ordered all cargo and luggage already loaded on planes to be returned to the terminals, where they and the luggage still awaiting to be loaded are to be closely inspected, using sniffing dogs."

"That certainly sounds like a good precautionary measure to take, Mister Brockovich." agreed Zelanik. "Before going to interview those Pan Am survivors, we would like to quickly interview the air controllers who were directing the two missing flights."

"Of course! Both of them are here. Follow me!"

After leading the NTSB investigators to his two air traffic controllers, Brockovich returned to his duty desk but barely had time to sit down before four men in business suits showed up and flashed badges at him.

"FBI! We came to investigate reports of a possible dual case of bombs aboard airliners. The New York Port Authorities contacted us to ask for our assistance."

"I see! A team from the NTSB just arrived as well, so you may want to liaise with them and coordinate both of your investigations."

"That certainly sounds like a good idea, mister. Where is that team right now?"

"Follow me: I will lead you to them."

Getting up from his chair again, Brockovich led the FBI agents to the NTSB investigators, who had already started to ask questions to his air traffic controllers. The two teams were still exchanging handshakes when yet another visitor showed up in the control tower. That one however made everybody pause and stare: it was a very young and beautiful woman with reddish-brown hair and blue eyes who wore the uniform of a five-star general.

'My god! Her! Who else is going to show up next? The President?' thought to himself Brockovich before greeting Ingrid Dows.

"Good evening, General Dows! What can we do for you?"

Ingrid kept a sober expression while answering him.

"Well, I mostly came by aircar from the Pentagon in order to check on my three teenage children, who were traveling on Pan Am 110, but I also came to bring the assistance of the Pentagon in this sad affair. I was told already by my children what they saw and heard on their flight and there is definitely something very suspicious about this double 'accident'. The one thing that I can tell to both the NTSB and to the FBI is that both planes were not shot down by missiles. My operations center reported no hostile warship in this area of the Atlantic and no missiles were detected on military radars."

"That is certainly one good thing to know, General." Said Max Sellers, the senior agent from the FBI. "Do you want to be present when we will interview your three children?"

"I certainly do, mister! While they certainly have nothing to hide, I would like to help in particular my daughter Nancy to manage the information about her special nature."

"Uh, does that mean that you are also a half-angel, General?" asked Jeff Zelanik, making Ingrid grin in amusement."

"Me? No! I am only a Chosen of The One: my powers don't come close to those of my daughter."

Zelanik exchanged glances with both Sellers and Brockovich before asking her another question.

"You are known to have helped design the Boeing 717 decades ago, General. Do you have a theory of your own to explain what could have happened to both Pan Am 110 and TWA 124?"

"I do!" replied at once Ingrid, making everybody listen carefully to her words. "I don't believe much in coincidences or in strings of bad luck. From what I heard up to now, I would bet that both aircraft were destroyed by bombs planted aboard, probably in some piece of luggage, and detonated via barometric initiators. To have one aircraft breaking up while climbing is one thing. To have a second do the same, and at the same altitude, is another and is a sign of a deliberate act."

The three men facing her again exchanged glances, with Senior Agent Sellers about to ask her a question when an air traffic controller shouted from his watch station while holding up a telephone handset.

"BOSS, IT'S CAPTAIN FRATICELLI ON THE LINE: THEY JUST FOUND A BOMB IN ONE PIECE OF LUGGAGE THAT HAD BEEN DISEMBARKED FROM A DELTA AIRLINES BOEING 717."

"CHRIST!" swore Brockovich while hurrying to take the call. "ARE WE FACING A COORDINATED MASS TERRORIST ATTACK AGAINST OUR AIRLINES?"

23:40 (New York Time)

Baggage handling area of Terminal # 3

J.F.K. International Airport

"The bomb is now fully defused, sir. It is safe to approach it."

Ingrid, the FBI agents and the NTSB investigators left the cover of a nearby concrete passage and approached the bomb, now lying on top of a table, alongside the suitcase in which it had been found. Max Sellers threw a dirty look at the bomb before looking at the bomb disposal expert who had defused it.

"What can you tell us right now about this bomb, Officer Jones?"

“Actually, I was surprised by the lack of measures taken to camouflage its origin, sir. The detonating mechanism is definitely of the barometric type and was set up to explode the bomb when it registered an altitude above sea level of 6,000 feet. It was also a very powerful bomb for its size, as it packed a total of nearly seven pounds of Semtex plastic explosives. No wonder those two airliners broke up in flight.”

“Seven pounds of Semtex?” exclaimed Sellers. “Whoever did this sure wanted to be certain that its target would not survive its blast. What else can you tell us, Officer Jones?”

The bomb expert answered him without hesitation.

“I can tell you that this bomb is ‘Made in Russia’, sir. The detonator and other non-explosive parts of this bomb all bear markings and serial numbers in Cyrillic and none in English. The mechanism is also quite sophisticated and of military grade quality. This is no amateur job, sir. I will probably be able to tell you more after we will analyze this bomb in a lab.”

“And to whom belonged the suitcase into which this bomb was found, Officer Jones?” asked Jeff Zelanik of the NTSB. An airport baggage handling manager answered his question, a weird look on his face.

“Actually, I doubt very much that the owner of this suitcase is guilty of anything in this case, Mister Zelanik: she is a 73-year-old nun who was going to the Vatican for a special religious ceremony. Furthermore, there was no lock or other safety mechanism on that suitcase, so anyone handling it could have opened it, slipped the bomb in it and close it back before putting the suitcase back into the loading line.”

“But,” objected FBI Special Agent Chris Woutten, “the bomber could not know in advance which suitcase would not be locked or secured. He had to put his bombs in the bags he could open, which meant that his targets would have been picked totally at random.”

“Which means in turn that the bomber was not targeting a specific aircraft or passenger and was instead meaning only to kill American and other citizens who were using American airliners.” said Ingrid, a hard expression on her face. “That means for me that the ones who ordered these bombings to be done have a serious grudge against the United States but don’t want to attack us directly, in the open. Does this sound familiar to you, people?”

"The Russians!" spat Sellers. "They tried recently to attract one of our carriers into a submarine ambush mounted by three Caucasian submarines. But why be so clumsy with this lack of covering their tracks with those bombs, General?"

"Maybe they were so sure that all the evidence would disappear when those planes broke up over the ocean that they deemed unnecessary to hide the origin of their bombs. Or..."

"Or someone else is trying to make the Russians wear the hat for those terrorist attacks."

"But who would want to do that, General?" asked Agent Gary Pleasance, a bit flustered by now. Ingrid looked negligently at her fingernails while answering him.

"Oh, I don't know! Maybe the Chinese, who could thus get rid of its two biggest rivals in the World without getting directly involved in a war. Maybe some Islamic terrorist organization who would love to see us and Russia mutually blow the shit out of us. Maybe even the British."

"The British!? Why?"

"Remember a certain Falklands War, in which Great Britain suffered one of its worst naval defeat in history, a war in which we logistically supported their opponent, Argentina, after finding out that the British were trying to convince Chile to enter the war at their side, something that positively enraged President Reagan? Believe me, mister: there is no shortage of duplicity and backstabbing in World geopolitics. I thus believe that we will have to catch the person who put these bombs in unsecured suitcases before speculating further."

Something then hit Max Sellers mind, making him swear.

"Shit! Fingerprints! Officer Jones, were you wearing gloves while manipulating that bomb?"

"Yes!"

Sellers then turned to look at one of his agents while pointing at the bomb.

"Mike, take out your fingerprint kit and dust off that bomb before anyone touches it again. Hopefully, that bomber will prove to be an overconfident one."

Next, he looked at the airport baggage handling manager.

"Mister, I will need a complete list of your baggage handlers who worked today's shifts, with their addresses and employment records. We will need to peel those records in detail. Let's get to work, people!"

“Uh, before you all disperse around, I would like you to do something concerning my daughter Nancy. Please do not publicize her role and actions in saving the people who survived the Pan Am 110 tragedy. She has already been hounded too often to my taste by the medias in the past.”

“But the other survivors from her flight are liable to talk about her when reporters will interview them. This is going to be big news, General.” objected Jeff Zelanik, making Ingrid nod once.

“I will talk personally with those survivors and will ask them to keep mum about this. That will probably turn out to be a pious hope but I will still try my luck with them.” The sole female NTSB investigator, Sylvia Krystal, gave her a sympathetic look in response.

“General, your daughter is simply no less than a hero in this, on top of revealing publicly her powers and true nature. Being known to be an angel shouldn’t really hurt her.”

“You really think so, miss? How about the hordes of paparazzi who would then hound her everywhere and would invade her privacy constantly? How about the legions of religious nuts who will follow her everywhere, trying to gain her favors or asking to be healed of some ailment by my daughter? How about other kinds of nuts who will clamor that she is a demon rather than an angel and is trying to get people to sell their souls to her?”

“Er, forget what I said, General: I was not thinking straight.”

“That’s alright, miss. I will only remember that you admire my daughter. Now, if you don’t mind, lady and gentlemen, I have an urgent call to place to the White House. Then, I will go kiss my daughter on her four cheeks. Who wants to kiss her too?” That last joke did its job, lowering some of the tension and attracting a few short laughs.

08:12 (New York Time)

Sunday, February 25, 1996 ‘C’

Hotel room, The Holiday Inn

Near the J.F.K. International Airport

When Leonardo woke up in the morning and stepped out of one of the two double beds nearly filling the modest but comfortable hotel room given to him, Lucy and Nancy by the FBI, he found Nancy already watching television and using the headset

provided by the hotel, probably in order not to awake Lucy and himself. One look at the television screen told Leo that Nancy was watching the morning TV news, something not too surprising in view of what had happened yesterday. Even less surprising was the fact that the news presenter was obviously covering the loss of the Pan Am 110 and TWA 124 flights and the death of over 700 persons. Looking down at Nancy, who was sitting in the sofa facing the television, Leo asked her a question.

“So, what are they saying, Nancy?”

“Too much! I am in deep shit, I tell you! By the way, make sure that you are decent before approaching the patio doors of our balcony: there is a big crowd of paparazzi outside the hotel, some of them armed with cameras sporting zoom lenses the size of field howitzers.”

Cautiously approaching the double patio door of their room and staying mostly hidden in a corner, Leonardo peeped outside and down at the parking lot of the hotel, one level below. There, he saw a good half dozen N.Y.P.D. policemen busy preventing what looked like an army of reporters and photographers from invading the hotel where he and the other survivors of Pan Am 110 had been assigned rooms by the FBI, who wanted all of them to be close at hand, so that they could be interviewed methodically for their investigation. Stepping away from the patio doors and looking at the television set, he saw a file picture of Nancy on a screen behind the news presenter, with a big title accompanying it and saying ‘ANGEL GIRL PERFORMS MIRACLE RESCUE’. That made Nancy throw her hands up in frustration.

“You see, Leo? Now I am the ‘Angel Girl’ for them!”

“Well, aren’t they right, Nancy? You are an angel, at least one half of it, and you certainly are a girl, the last time I checked.”

Her reply to him was a one-finger obscene sign, making Leo laugh briefly. However, his laugh quickly strangled in his throat when he thought that he could have been in Rome today, rather than in this rather bland hotel in New York. He then chastised himself nearly at once: over 700 innocent people were now in a much worse place than him, Lucy or Nancy.

08:27 (New York Time)

Employees’ locker room, J.F.K. International Airport

“Come on, Belle, sniff! Good... Next locker, Belle.”

The policeman dog handler kept encouraging 'Belle', his sniffer dog, while they methodically went around the large employees' locker room in the basement of Terminal Number Three, which contained over a hundred individual lockers. Up to now, Belle had not given signs of smelling anything out of the ordinary. That changed when she arrived at a particular locker, sniffed it a couple of time, then sat down, a sign she had been trained to give when she found something unusual or illegal. Due to the urgency of the case and the severity of the crime, Officer Bernard Hoggs had been given permission to cut the lock on any suspect locker his dog would find and he did just that, using a large bolt-cutter he carried with him. First writing down on his notepad the number of the locker and the name on it, he then opened it and examined its content. His heart jumped in his chest when he pulled a canvas bag out of the locker and opened it to look what was inside: there were two bomb devices in it, complete with plastic explosive blocks and detonator mechanisms! Grabbing at once his hand-held radio, he made an urgent call to his team supervisor that attracted the latter, along with a bomb disposal expert, within minutes. The team supervisor needed only one look inside the canvas bag before saying one word.

"Bingo!"

Hoggs felt pride at that moment but not for himself: it was 'Belle' who had done the job after all. He thus took out a dog biscuit from a pocket and gave it to his sniffer dog while caressing her side.

"Well done, Belle! Well done!"

09:06 (New York Time)

Baggage Handling room, Terminal Number Three

J.F.K. International Airport

A group of five baggage handlers were busy putting dozens of bags on a rolling carpet, so that they could go up to the station outside where a tractor towing four luggage containers was waiting to be filled, when one of the workers noticed something.

"Hey! What is this?"

The other baggage handlers looked up as one and saw at least seven policemen in uniform and three men in suits approach, all with guns drawn and pointed. Four of the workers raised their hands up at once, realizing that something serious had to be happening and wanting to prevent any misunderstanding. However, the fifth worker, an

Asian man, reacted very differently and bolted at once, sprinting towards a nearby staircase entrance that led up to the tarmac. He however had to break hard, as three more policemen emerged from that entrance with guns drawn.

“FREEZE! HANDS UP!”

The Asian man did stop running but, instead of raising his hands up, grabbed a pennant suspended by a chain around his neck and quickly opened it.

“I SAID FREEZE OR I’LL SHOOT!”

The man ignored that ultimate warning and, taking a pill out of the opened pennant, put it in his mouth, grinding it with his teeth. It took only a second before he started convulsing and collapsed on the ground, where his body shook uncontrollably for a moment before becoming immobile, foam coming out of his mouth. FBI Senior Agent Max Sellers cautiously approached the body, his revolver still pointed, and looked at the dead man for a moment before lowering his handgun, disgust apparent on his face.

“That bastard committed suicide rather than let himself be arrested. Only a fanatic would do that. We got the right man but now the question is: did he have accomplices and for whom was he working?”

Looking at one of his agents, he gave him an order in an urgent tone.

“Gary, take a team with you and go at once to the home of that man. Search it thoroughly to see if we could find something that would point to us who he worked for. Don’t be shy about thrashing that place and opening up walls if need be.”

“Got it! Mike, Chris, you come with me!”

As his agents walked away, Sellers gave more orders at the policemen around him.

“Prevent at once that baggage tractor from moving and have all its content returned to this room: that bastard may have hidden another bomb into a piece of luggage. Also, check if any plane left this terminal within the last hour. Any such plane that has not already lifted off is to return to this terminal for detailed luggage inspection, no ifs or buts!”

CHAPTER 16 – YET ANOTHER WAR IS LOOMING

16:52 (New York Time)

Sunday, February 25, 1996 'C'

White House Situation Room

Washington, D.C., U.S.A.

“Alright, what did the FBI find, Special Agent Sellers?”

Maxwell Sellers, having been invited to this special session of the National Security Council, stood up from his chair before answering President Perot’s question.

“Mister President, I can now say with confidence that the man who put bombs inside our airliners and caused the deaths of 736 innocent people, most of them American citizens, was a clandestine agent of Communist China. If not for the fact that we were able to identify him quickly, hundreds more would have died. After he committed suicide rather than let himself be arrested, we found out that he had just placed a bomb similar to the ones that destroyed Pan Am 110 and TWA 124 inside a suitcase which was about to be loaded aboard a Pan Am Boeing 717 carrying 340 people. Furthermore, we found two more bombs inside his individual locker at J.F.K. Airport. When our agents went to his apartment and thoroughly searched it, they found documents and materiel, including a code book, that showed this Li Wang Peng to be a Chinese agent. Him committing suicide by biting on a cyanide pill also shows that he was a true fanatic to his cause. Now, about the pattern of those bombings, we believe that it was totally random, with the only criteria used by Li being that he put bombs only in American airliners. He was thus not targeting any person or aircraft in particular. His only goal was to kill Americans and possibly cause a panic through our commercial air transport system.”

“But why? Why do this and why would the Chinese government order such monstrous actions?” asked Barbara Sue Levy Boxer, the Transportation Secretary, who had clearly been made angry by all this. Sellers took a moment to think over his answer to that question.

“Frankly, this baffled us at the FBI. The fact that this Chinese agent used Russian-made bomb components which could be identified easily made us suspect that

China was possibly trying to incite us into retaliating against Russia for those terrorist attacks. As for the true motive of the Chinese government to both disrupt our commercial airlines industry and cause us to accuse the Russians, we at the FBI can only speculate. However, General Dows, who also reacted to these bombings and went to J.F.K. Airport because her three teenage children had been aboard the Pan Am flight 110, has proposed to us a possible explanation for the Chinese government motives in ordering such an outrageous clandestine operation. I will thus let General Dows expose her theory.”

President Perot nodded his head and looked at Ingrid, present at the table and wearing her uniform.

“You may tell us about your theory, General.”

“Thank you, Mister President. You must all remember the China-Taiwan-USA War of December 1973, when the Chinese coup leaders who had deposed and imprisoned Secretary Deng Xiao Ping had initiated an invasion of Taiwan and launched two nuclear missiles which destroyed Taipei and the nearby airbase that was home to one of our air wings. We in turn destroyed the Chinese invasion fleet and both Beijing and Shanghai with nuclear weapons, stopping cold that war and killing the instigators of that invasion. Counter-coup officers then freed Deng Xiao Ping, who had been about to be executed at a secret prison, and allowed him to reestablish his government and sign a peace treaty with us. Unfortunately, neither us nor Deng Xiao Ping knew at that time that the coup leaders had secretly given two thermonuclear bombs to North Korea. Then, in September of 1975, Deng Xiao Ping, finding out about those two bombs, urgently warned us about them. Unfortunately, that warning came too late to save Honolulu from destruction, when one bomb arrived in Hawaii aboard a Soviet cargo ship. I say all this because Deng Xiao Ping, whom we came to trust as being a reasonable man who didn't want war with us, was voted out and retired by his party six years ago. Since then, a succession of party leaders has ruled China, often squabbling between themselves, until a new strongman, a Chen Shangkun, became Chairman of the Communist Party some fourteen months ago. That Chen Shangkun is known as a true hardliner who hates the United States and who is pushing for expanding the power and reach of China around the World. However, up to now, he had not initiated anything that could have provoked us militarily. In view of yesterday's bombings of our airliners I now believe that Chen Shangkun has decided to initiate some hostile action around China,

with the hope that we would accuse Russia and possibly retaliate militarily against the Russians, thus distracting us from whatever China is planning to do.”

“And do you have an idea about what China could be planning to do, General?” asked Daniel Inouye, the Secretary of State.

“I now do, Mister Secretary. Right after that Chinese agent at J.F.K. was unmasked, I immediately ordered a number of orbital reconnaissance missions to be launched at once, with the goal of photographing the coastal areas of China and also to spy on their military communications nets. I reviewed the preliminary results from those reconnaissance missions one hour ago and they reveal that China is indeed preparing a new offensive military move.”

“Don’t tell me that they again want to invade Taiwan, Ingrid!” said Secretary of Defense John McCain. “The Chinese know too well that we would be ready to defend Taiwan, with nukes if necessary.”

“It’s not Taiwan, John. The unusual Chinese military activities we spotted and the augmented military radio traffic we intercepted are centered on Hainan Island, on the southern coast of China. In view of that, the only objective I can see that would make sense to me as a target for a Chinese attack is the Paracel Archipelago, in the South China Sea, which is presently controlled by Vietnam but whose ownership is contested by both China and Taiwan.”

“Wait a minute!” objected Brent Scowcroft. “China would have ordered a campaign of bombings of our airliners and possibly push us into retaliating against the Russians, thus risking a nuclear war, just so that it could distract us while they invaded some obscure group of islands in the South China Sea? That doesn’t make sense, General!”

“For us, it definitely doesn’t.” agreed Ingrid. “However, you have to put yourself in the minds of those Chinese leaders. They don’t care if we go to war against Russia. In fact, that would delight them, as they would then be rid of their two biggest rivals for World power. On the other hand, the Paracel Islands are near from Hainan Island, which is a Chinese territory and would constitute an ideal base of operation for an invasion of the Paracel Archipelago. Also, while known by very few people, the Paracel Islands are surrounded by waters rich in fish stocks of enormous commercial value. To top it off, recent exploration drillings made on behest of Vietnam around the Paracel Archipelago have revealed the existence of potentially very large deposits of oil and gas. The Paracel Islands thus constitute an economic prize that is considered by the present

Chinese leaders as well worth starting a war with Vietnam and possibly risk a reaction from us.”



The Paracel Islands archipelago.

John McCain, who had flown combat missions during the China-Taiwan-USA War, shook his head in disbelief.

“What a twisted, ruthless way of thinking on the part of those Chinese leaders! However, I believe that you are right, Ingrid. With the results from your orbital reconnaissance missions, it is difficult to deny your hypothesis about a possible invasion of the Paracel Islands by China.”

“I also believe that General Dows is correct in her analysis of this crisis.” said Secretary of State Inouye, making President Perot nod his head.

“I do so as well. Normally, a Chinese invasion of those Vietnamese islands would not in my mind be worth reacting militarily to it. However, those Chinese leaders had two of our airliners destroyed, killing hundreds of our citizens, and THAT is not something I will let pass! In a way, their plan was too ambitious for their own good when they thought that they could provoke a war between us and Russia on top of creating a distraction for their coming invasion. General Dows, what do we have available in that region to counter such a Chinese attack on the Paracel Archipelago?”

“Unfortunately, due to the war in Armenia, we have moved many of our assets to the Mediterranean and Black Sea areas. We presently have only one carrier group present in the Pacific, the one based in Japan. The other one we had in the Pacific transited to the Mediterranean via the Suez Canal two weeks ago and is now cruising off the Turkish coast. Our heavy bombers in Guam and the Philippines were also transferred temporarily to airbases in Europe in response to the Armenia crisis. Right

now, the fastest way for us to reinforce our forces near the South China Sea area would be to fly combat squadrons from the United States to the Philippines. We could also seek the collaboration of Vietnam, which is after all the primary target of this Chinese plan, and ask them permission to use our old airbase in Da Nang. That would greatly cut the distance our planes would have to cover to reach the Paracel Islands and would also help us coordinate our moves with the Vietnamese. In terms of naval power, I can order the U.S.S. NEPTUNE, which has just replenished its stores of aviation ordnance and jet fuel, to transit the Suez Canal and head for the South China Sea at top speed, where it could join up with our cruisers and destroyers of the Pacific Fleet.”

“Do that, General!” said Perot while pointing an index at her. Next, he looked at Daniel Inouye. “Close our embassy and consulates in China at once and have our citizens on visit or business trips there leave China at once. Once our people will be safely out of China, you will then call in the Chinese ambassador and tell him that we are breaking all relations with China.”

“Mister President,” said Ingrid in an urgent tone, “in view of the ruthless thinking of this Chen Shangkun, I am afraid that he won’t let our citizens leave China without reacting, possibly taking them as hostages. We will have to consider plans for that eventuality.”

“Damn, you are too right, General! Secretary Inouye, how many American citizens could presently be inside China?”

“Uh, I couldn’t give you a precise answer right now, Mister President, but just in terms of diplomatic personnel and their dependents, we are talking about 230 people at a minimum. If the Chinese decide to detain our citizens before they could fly out of China, then I am afraid that we won’t be able to do much about that.”

“Damn those Communist Chinese! I think that it is high time that they be taught a lesson they will not forget.”

“Mister President, a full-scale attack by us against China, however successful, will inevitably cause a lot of collateral damage, considering the fact that the Chinese own close to a hundred nuclear-tipped missiles, on top of dozens of nuclear aircraft-launched bombs.” objected at once Ingrid. “It would also most probably result in the mass execution of our citizens presently in China.”

“Then, what do you propose, General?” asked Perot, getting frustrated. Ingrid, equally frustrated, thought quickly about her options.

"Mister President, we have been handed a very weak hand by China and I will need to review in detail our assets presently available and think about what we can do without risking the lives of our citizens in China. However, I see one thing that we can do right away: we should discretely warn Vietnam of this threat to the Paracel Islands, so that the Vietnamese could start at once to reinforce the garrisons they have there. With luck, that could discourage China from attacking the Paracel Islands, but that warning should be communicated right away to the Vietnamese government. This is definitely not the time for flowery diplomatic letters or bureaucratic red tape. Ideally, I would like to initiate direct communications between the Pentagon and the Vietnamese High Command, no disrespect meant to Secretary Inouye."

Daniel Inouye himself replied to that in a most sober tone.

"I realize the urgency of the situation, General, and won't feel slighted if you contact directly the Vietnamese. Go right ahead!"

"Thank you, Mister Secretary. If you don't mind, Mister President, I would like to leave now and return to the Pentagon in order to start giving orders about this Chinese threat."

"You are welcome to go now, Ingrid."

"Thank you, Mister President!" replied Ingrid, who then got up and walked out with her secure briefcase. The others watched her go, with John McCain speaking to Perot once she was gone from the Situation Room.

"We can count ourselves lucky in having her in her present position right now, Mister President: nobody could possibly do better than her in dealing with this crisis. You made the right decision by creating her position as supreme military commander some three years ago."

"And we will need all of her talent to get out of this crisis without major damage. What a shit pit!"

Ingrid was about to leave the White House and return to her parked Hiller AIR BIKE when she had a thought and went instead to the offices of the defense liaison staff of the White House, where she called her command center at the Pentagon via an encrypted line.

"Hello! This is General Dows! Please get the Space Corps duty officer on the line and tell the Air Force duty officer to stand by to talk with me afterward."

She had to wait only a few seconds before a male voice answered her.

"Lieutenant Colonel Matthews on the line, General!"

"Colonel Matthews, a very serious situation is developing with Communist China and we may have to effect massive strikes against their nuclear arsenal. First, I want all of our spacecraft capable of orbital bombardment to be reserved and dedicated for that possible strike. Any spacecraft in need of maintenance should be repaired at once, without delay. Second, how many OGM-2 orbital bombardment missiles with non-nuclear warheads do we have and do we have enough concrete-piercing precision strike warheads to arm all of those OGM-2s? I need an answer now but I want you to give me a hard figure. I will talk with the Air Force duty officer while you get the answers and pass the alert to our armed space squadrons."

"Understood, General! I am putting Colonel Hendriks on the line right now."

"Thank you!"

There was a short delay before a female voice replaced that of Matthews on the line.

"Colonel Hannah Hendriks on the line, General!"

"Colonel, as I said already to Colonel Matthews, a very serious security situation is presently developing between us and China and we have to discretely prepare for the eventuality of war. Presently, the heavy bomber squadrons we had in the Philippines and in Guam are in Europe, because of the war in Armenia. I want them back at once in the Pacific, ready to strike at China if need be. For the moment we are not contemplating the use of our nuclear weapons but we may want to deny to the Chinese the use of their own nuclear arsenal. Apart from moving our bombers back to the Pacific, I want as much of our arsenal of conventional-armed precision attack air-to-ground missiles to be shipped to our airbases in the Philippines and Guam. Again, be discrete about all this: I don't want China to suspect that we are up to their game."

"I perfectly understand, General. I will take care of all that right away. Uh, I believe that Colonel Matthews has some data for you."

"Then, put him on the line, please."

Matthews' voice returned on the line a second later.

"General, I have an answer to your question about OGM-2s: we can have a total of 113 OGM-2s armed with terminally-guided concrete-piercing conventional warheads ready to be loaded within twelve hours aboard our space interceptors and orbital reconnaissance craft. We will only need then to designate their targets and program them into our missiles."

"Excellent! I should be back at the Pentagon in at most three hours."

"Anything else, General?"

"Only one thing: tell General Richardson to alert, again discreetly, our Marine Corps units, carrier group and air wings in Japan and also our Marine Corps division on the West Coast to prepare for possible action against China. We just don't know how China will react once it realizes that we are preparing our forces for war."

"Got it, General! Will you be returning to the Pentagon soon?"

"I have another errand to do inside Washington, then I will fly back to the Pentagon. See you then!"

Having just done in less than two minutes something that would have taken hours or even days of discussions and debates to the old Joint Chiefs of Staffs command system before taking firm decisions, Ingrid put down the encrypted telephone receiver and ran with her secure briefcase towards the parking lot where her AIR BIKE was parked. As she often said to other generals and admirals, too many cooks tend to spoil the sauce.

Jumping in her AIR BIKE and closing its cockpit door, Ingrid started her engine and took off, to immediately turn towards the Northwest and fly over Downtown Washington. She had to fly for only 1.5 kilometers before arriving at her destination and landing in front of the tall building housing among other things the embassy of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Parking her AIR BIKE properly and folding up its four ducted propellers, Ingrid then stepped out of it and entered the building, attracting quite a lot of public attention with her Space Corps uniform and five-star rank insignias. She didn't pay attention to that and went up to the floor housing the Vietnamese embassy, where she presented herself to the Vietnamese security officer manning the armored access airlock adjacent to the visitors' waiting lounge. She presented herself to that officer in fluent Vietnamese, which had been the native language of one of her more recent incarnations.

"Good afternoon, sir! I would like to speak urgently with Lieutenant Colonel Vo Dien Bien. I am General of the Army Ingrid Dows."

The Vietnamese security officer didn't miss the ribbon of the Order of Vietnam First Class among the multiple rows of decoration ribbons on her chest and unlocked at once via a button the outer door of the armored security airlock while nodding his head in respect.

"Please enter, General: I will warn at once Colonel Bien of your visit."

“Thank you, sir!”

The man then cycled her through the security airlock before placing a quick phone call, then led her down a hallway inside the embassy proper. They were about to arrive at an office door when a Vietnamese Air Force officer emerged from that office, apparently with the intent of going to meet her halfway. The man was in his early forties and wore the rank insignias of a lieutenant Colonel. Ingrid smiled at once on seeing him, having recognized him as the son of an old adversary of hers turned ally decades ago, General Vo Nguyen Giap.

“Colonel Vo Dien Bien! It is a pleasure to meet you again. You have gone up quite a lot in the ranks since I last saw you in Vietnam.”

“And receiving the visit of such a distinguished heroine and master strategist is a true honor for me, General. Would you like to talk with me in my office or in our staff lounge, in front of a nice cup of tea?”

“I am afraid that both urgency and discretion is driving me right now, Colonel: we need to discuss in private a matter of grave importance for Vietnam.”

“Then, please come into my humble office, General.”

On entering Bien’s office, Ingrid saw that he had not used the words ‘humble office’ simply out of modesty: it was in fact a rather small office that, while comfortably-enough furnished, had nothing luxurious about it. She however didn’t comment and sat down with Bien on a well-used sofa next to the windows of the office.

“So, General, what is this matter of grave importance for Vietnam?”

“A possible incoming invasion and takeover of the Paracel Islands by China, Colonel Bien.” replied at once Ingrid while opening her secure briefcase. Her words made the Vietnamese officer stiffen at once.

“The Paracel Islands? The Chinese have indeed been claiming ownership of them for decades and often harass our fishermen in the waters surrounding the archipelago, but are you sure about this, General?”

“Sure? No! Strongly suspecting so? Yes! You probably are wondering how the United States are getting involved with the Paracel Islands, Colonel. The answer to that is both simple and tragic. You must have heard about yesterday’s crash of two of our commercial airliners which had just departed J.F.K. Airport?”

“Of course, General! Such a tragedy! Have you found yet the cause of those accidents?”

"They were not accidents, Colonel: they were caused by bombs, bombs planted inside them by a Communist Chinese agent. Bear me out and look at those pictures." Bien took the first photographic print offered by Ingrid and examined it closely before looking back at her.

"This is effectively a bomb device and a sophisticated-looking one at that. It also bears Russian markings. Where was it found?"

"In a piece of luggage that was going to be loaded inside another airliner about to fly out of J.F.K. The detonator mechanism is actually a barometric fuse of the exact same type as the one found in many models of large caliber anti-aircraft shells of Russian manufacture. The fact that it was so easy to figure out its origin made me suspicious at once and we immediately pushed our investigation. We then found more similar bombs hidden in the individual locker of a baggage handler working at J.F.K. Airport. When we tried to arrest that worker, he committed suicide by swallowing a cyanide pill. That man was an ethnic Chinese and the search of his apartment revealed that he had been in reality a deep-cover Communist Chinese agent."

That left Bien speechless for long seconds before he could ask a question.

"But why? Why would Communist China bomb American civilian airliners?"

"Because China was hoping to both distract us and make the Russians wear the hat for those criminal acts. Why? To find out the reason, I ordered a number of orbital reconnaissance missions to be flown over China. What we found is this."

Ingrid then handed over to Bien a series of overhead reconnaissance pictures bearing 'Top Secret' security classification stamps on them.

"Before you ask why I am showing you such highly classified intelligence products, the answer is simple: we now have a common enemy and that enemy has to be stopped...at all cost, before he could cause the start of a devastating nuclear war. In fact, if we would have gobbled up their trap, we could well be at war with Russia now, a war that could then quickly turn nuclear, with tragic consequences for everyone on this planet. What you see are massive reinforcements in planes, ships and troops from Mainland China to Hainan Island, next to the Paracel Islands. Since we saw only minimal reinforcements along the direct Chinese border with Vietnam, we deduced that the Paracel Archipelago had to be the actual objective of China. The fact that large oil and gas reserves were recently found off the Paracel Archipelago only reinforces our belief that the Chinese are about to invade it, while trying to create a conflict between us and Russia as a diversion."

Bien, his expression grave, looked carefully at each of the pictures before raising his nose and looking at Ingrid.

"These pictures are truly shocking and alarming, General. I believe that we should go see my ambassador at once about this."

"I fully agree with you on that, Colonel. Know that I have ordered U.S. forces to prepare to counter this attack by China on Vietnam and that we are ready to support you militarily in the defense of the Paracel Islands. However, I must emphasize that we must both move quickly and discretely, so that China does not realize that we are in on to their plans. I believe that the most urgent thing to do now is for Vietnam to quickly reinforce its garrisons on the various islands of the Paracel Archipelago. If you need help in terms of troop and equipment air transportation, we are ready to help, Colonel."

Bien slowly nodded his head while fixing her in the eyes.

"My father once told me that you were the most honorable enemy he ever faced, before you became a friend and ally to him. I see that he was not exaggerating in his praise of you, General. I will now lead you to my ambassador. This truly can't wait."

04:22 (Egypt Time) / 21:22 (Washington Time)

Monday, February 26 / Sunday, February 25, 1996 'C'

Navigation bridge of the U.S.S. NEPTUNE

Passing through the Suez Canal, Egypt

"So, what kind of weather can we expect around the Paracel Islands, Mister Wescott?"

"Mostly, tropical hot and humid, Admiral. We are talking about daily averages above 78 degrees Fahrenheit and relative humidity averages around 81 percent. Thankfully, we will be in the dry season there, with an average of around five precipitation days with less than one inch of rain per month, contrasting with up to thirteen precipitation days with a total above nine inches of rain per month in the wet season between June and November. However, that area also sees frequent typhoons. This could prove to be a challenging environment for our pilots, sir."

"As it will be to the enemy, mister. Pass this climate info to Colonel Wilkinson as well: I suspect that he will want to obtain stocks of tropical uniforms and kit before we get to the South China Sea."

"I will, sir!"

The meteorological section officer then saluted him and walked off the bridge, leaving Benson free to continue observing the waters of the Suez Canal around his ship. At night, and with his ship being basically invisible to most radars, the risks of collisions in this heavily used waterway were far from inconsiderate, which was why he was having his ship navigate with all its navigational lights on.

19:45 (Vietnam Time) / 14: 45 (Egypt Time) / 07:45 (Washington Time)

Docks of the Vietnamese Navy base in Hue, Vietnam

One of the crewmen in the parked column of PT-76 light amphibious tanks waiting next to a boat ramp in Hue naval base looked questioningly at his officer, a young captain.

“Sir, do you know where we are going?” His captain, who was one of the few persons in his unit to have been briefed about this surprise deployment, lied to his tank gunner while smiling to him.



“It’s just a snap amphibious readiness exercise called up by our High Command, Minh. We are going to be landed on a beach along our coast and prepare it for defense against a hypothetical enemy amphibious force. That’s why you can also see a lot of anti-aircraft guns next to our column.”

“That’s effectively a lot of anti-aircraft guns, sir.” replied the tanker while looking up and down the anti-aircraft artillery convoy that had just joined them on the quays of the naval base. He could count no less than twelve S-60 towed 57mm guns, 24 ZPU-4 towed quad 14.5mm heavy anti-aircraft machine guns and eight ZSU-23-4 self-propelled anti-aircraft guns. There were also eight vehicles which looked like four-wheeled armored reconnaissance vehicles but with a sort of pedestal supporting long boxes instead of the usual machine gun turret. He then looked ahead of their own column of twenty PT-76 amphibious tanks and at the three large landing ships waiting with their bow doors open and loading ramps down. Behind his tank unit was also a column of trucks, presumably carrying extra supplies and ammunition for this exercise. If they would be given time to prepare adequate defensive positions on that piece of beach to defend, then the tank gunner felt quite confident that they would be able to hold it against about any enemy force. Some eleven minutes later, the order was given to start

the loading of the vehicles and guns inside the three waiting landing ships. While the Vietnamese soldiers didn't notice it, an elderly man in a wheelchair and wearing a uniform covered with medals was watching discreetly the loading up of the three POLNOCHNY LSMs³¹ from a distance, a military aide and four armed soldiers next to him. Army General Vo Nguyen Giap, now 84 years old, had tears of pride in his eyes as he watched on the loading of the tanks and guns into the landing ships.

"Go, men! Fight and defend our country!"

20:53 (Arabian Sea Time) / 23:53 (Vietnam Time)

C.I.C. of the USS NEPTUNE

Sailing southeast through the Arabian Sea

Rear Admiral Mack Benson was standing next to the big electronic situation plot table of his C.I.C. when Lieutenant Colonel Wilkinson presented himself to him at attention, saluting.

"You wanted to see me, Admiral?"

"Yes, Colonel! That C-90 VSTOL cargo aircraft that landed on our carrier some twenty minutes ago, loaded with tropical uniforms and kit for your marines, also brought a set of operational orders and a few Vietnamese and Chinese language specialists from the DIA³² who will join our mission. There were also stocks of tactical photo-maps aboard that C-90. Those orders concern both me and you. Here is your copy. Read it now and tell me if you will need something extra to fill your mission."

Taking the large envelope and roll of photo-maps offered by Benson, Wilkinson first opened the envelope and extracted a thin pile of documents and photo prints, then started to read the main document, a detailed mission order. He didn't speak until he finished reading that document and looked quickly through the other documents joined as annexes to it.

"So, I am to select one company from my battalion, along with reinforcing heavy weapons sub-units and forward air control elements, and fly to the Paracel Islands, where my marines will join up with Vietnamese Army units just landed there, to both

³¹ LSM : Landing Ship Medium. A category of landing ships able to carry tanks.

³² DIA : Defense Intelligence Agency. The American agency in charge of military intelligence at national level. Part of the American national intelligence apparatus with the CIA and the NSA.

support them and direct our aircraft if they will be needed to repel a possible Chinese invasion of the Paracel Archipelago. That sounds quite straightforward to me, Admiral, and those DIA linguists will be most welcomed in order to properly liaise with the Vietnamese forces now on those islands. But why use only one company from my battalion, sir?"

"For the simple reason that the actual land surface of those islands is quite limited and mostly offer little cover, except on the two bigger islands. My own warning orders, which are tasking my battle carrier to provide your marines with both air and fire support, also told me that we may get other targets assigned to us later on and that you should reserve the rest of your battalion for those possible future targets. Right now the situation around China and the Paracel Islands is very fluid and we are still unsure about the intentions of the Chinese. Don't forget that the main role of your marines on the Paracel Islands will be to support the Vietnamese units landed there and provide them with access to airpower and fire support from this battle carrier. The Vietnamese forces there are said to have plenty of anti-aircraft weapons and heavy mortars and they even have light amphibious tanks, so any Chinese invasion that will show up is bound to get a really nasty surprise on arrival. Do you have any questions at this time?"

"No, Admiral! I will wait until I can review all this and those photo-maps in detail with my staff before returning to see you with our proposed plan."

"Good! Out of curiosity, which company will you send to the Paracel Islands, Colonel?"

"Bravo Company, Admiral!" answered Wilkinson without hesitation. "It is still my best infantry company and, as you know, it did very well on those raids inside the C.I.R."

"It did indeed! We should be close enough from the Paracel Islands to launch your PELICANs in about 36 hours. Have your marines ready to go by then."

"They will be, Admiral!" replied Wilkinson before saluting Benson and walking out of the C.I.C., his envelope and maps roll under one arm.

07:17 (China Time) / 06:17 (Vietnam Time)

Tuesday, February 27, 1996 'C'

Departure terminal, Jinan International Airport

Jinan (capital of China since the destruction of Beijing in 1973 'C')

Province of Shandong, People's Republic of China

The senior officer from the Ministry of State Security on duty in the departure terminal became quickly alarmed when a number of his security agents started reporting to him that dozens of Americans with diplomatic passports, along with their families, were lined up at the ticket counters of a number of foreign airlines offering flights out of China. A few such American diplomats at a time would be normal, but this started to sound like a mass exodus to him. In his mind, such a mass exodus of diplomats with their families often equated in history with preparations for war by the country those diplomats belonged to, in this case the United States. That he had not been notified in advance of such a large moving out of diplomats only made this doubly suspicious. Major Ling thus went at once to see his agents watching those foreign ticket counters, to get more precise numbers about how many American diplomats were actually getting airplane tickets out of China. What he was told alarmed him.

"But, that's the whole of the American embassy staff, along with their families, all leaving on that Singapore Airline flight, plus over 59 other Americans with tourist or business visas getting seats on an Australian Qantas flight. What the hell is happening? I wasn't told about this!"

With irritation and suspicion growing in him, Ling hurried to the MSS office situated in the departure terminal, where he called his superior at the MSS ministry building. That superior, a colonel, was instantly alarmed by the information from Ling.

"But...I wasn't told either about this! Let me check with our Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Major. In the meantime, let those Americans go to their departure gate lounges but don't allow them to board their planes until I give permission to let them leave."

"Understood, sir! I will get security officers to those lounges at once. What about our officers watching the American embassy, sir?"

Ling heard a pungent swear word at the other end of the line before the colonel spoke again.

"Thanks for reminding me about this, Major. Our unit there should effectively have warned me of such a large move. Have someone ready near this telephone, to answer it once I have a clearer picture of what is happening here. Thanks again for calling, Major: that was a good job on your part."

"Thank you, sir!" replied Ling, who waited for the colonel to hang up before putting down his own receiver. Thinking quickly about where his officers were around the airport, he then decided to call by radio his backup security section, formed of 26 armed officers, to tell them to go to the gates of the Singapore Airlines and Qantas

Airline. With that done, Ling tasked a young lieutenant to stay near the phone and to contact him by radio once new instructions came, then hurried to go to the Singapore Airlines departure lounge: a job was better done by one self, especially in this case.

Having met on his way with his backup security section, Major Ling was arriving with his men at the Singapore Airlines waiting lounge when he got a call from his office on his hand-held radio and answered it at once.

“Major Ling here!”

“Sir, we got a call back from the ministry: we are ordered to arrest at once every Americans we find and bring them to our main detention facility in the city. It appears that the United States may be about to declare war to our country. The ministry is sending buses with reinforcements to the airport.”

A sudden wave of anger and hate filled Ling at those words: his own parents, who had been living in Beijing, had been killed when that city and Shanghai had been destroyed by American nuclear-tipped missiles in 1973. He didn't ask why the Americans would want to go to war now. In fact, he just didn't care about their reasons to do that. He had over 200 of those imperialists at hands and had the okay to arrest the lot of them. Walking resolutely to the departure gate and posting himself in front of it, he ignored the confused Singapore Airlines employees manning the departure desk and shouted out loud in his passable English.

“LISTEN TO ME, AMERICANS! YOU ARE ALL UNDER ARREST! DON'T BOTHER SHOWING ME YOUR DIPLOMATIC PASSPORTS: I WILL SPIT ON THEM IF YOU DO. DON'T RESIST ARREST EITHER, OR THINGS WILL ONLY GET WORSE FOR YOU.”

“BUT WE HAVE YOUNG KIDS WITH US! YOU CAN'T ARREST THEM TOO!” protested a woman who had two toddlers with her. Ling stared at her for a moment, hesitating. He hated Americans, but such young children could not possibly bear any culpability in the crimes of those imperialists. However, his sense of discipline won over: he had his orders.

“THEY WILL COME WITH US BUT THEY WILL BE WELL TREATED, MADAM.” said Ling, before switching to Mandarin. “CUFF ALL THOSE ADULT AND TEENAGE AMERICANS, BUT DON'T TIE UP THE YOUNGER CHILDREN, MEN.”

Things got a bit rowdy then, with a few American men trying to protest their arrest and offering some resistance at first, but liberal use of the batons carried by the MSS officers

quickly brought back order. Before the Americans were led out of the lounge under escort, Ling pointed an index at the senior Singapore Airlines employee manning the gate's departure desk.

"Your airplane is to shut down its engines at once and open its baggage holds. We are going to take out the luggage of those Americans. If your crew does not comply, then it will be arrested as well."

"But why all this? This is madness! You are arresting diplomats, which is against every international convention."

Ling's eyes stared hard at the Singaporean as he spat out his reply.

"I don't give a damn about your hypocritical conventions, mister. Now, pass my directives to the pilot of this aircraft, or you will also end in jail."

Thoroughly intimidated, the man nodded his head, then ran down the jetway leading to the waiting airliner. That gave a chance to Ling to pass orders via radio to get a security team to empty the holds of the airliner and start searching the luggage of those Americans. Next, he checked with the team sent to the Quantas Airlines departure lounge, learning that 59 more Americans were being arrested there. Satisfied and happy, Ling then left the departure lounge, to go supervise the transport of all those prisoners to the city's main MSS detention center.

01:39 (Washington Time) / 14:39 (China Time)

Presidential apartments suite, The White House

Washington, D.C., U.S.A.

President Ross Perot was deeply asleep with his wife Margot in their bedroom on the upper floor of the White House when someone started shaking him gently while speaking in a low voice.

"Mister President... Mister President... Wake up, please!"

"Uh?!" could only say at first Perot, his eyes still unfocused. Sitting up and swinging his legs out of bed, he rubbed his eyes for a second before looking up at an officer of his military liaison office.

"What is it, Captain? And what time is it?"

"It is one thirty-nine in the morning, Mister President. We just got an urgent call from the State Department: our whole diplomatic staff in China has been arrested by the

Chinese, along with their families, as they were about to board an airliner at Jinan Airport.”

Perot nearly shouted out in anger on hearing that but restrained himself in time not to wake up his wife. Regaining control of himself, he then got up on his feet and walked a few paces from the bed, in order to discuss with the officer without waking Margot.

“What do we know exactly, Captain? Is this confirmed?”

“The details are still sketchy, Mister President, but the State Department said that they were contacted by Singapore officials who relayed the reports from the crew of the airliner our diplomats were about to board when arrested. Even the young children of our embassy staff were taken away by the Chinese. The State Department is presently doing everything to get more details about this and promised to keep us informed.”

“Those Chinese bastards! I am truly getting fed up with them! Alright, Captain, start calling the following people and tell them to be at the Situation Room for eight this morning: all the members of the NSC, plus our UN ambassador. Tell them that we have a growing crisis with China. Oh, also tell a steward to prepare a pot of strong coffee for me.”

“Right away, Mister President!”

As the captain walked out of his bedroom, Ross Perot started putting on some clothes while doing his best to finish waking up: that pot of coffee was going to be his first priority in this very early morning. He tried to remember if there had been any historical precedent to what China had just done but couldn't think of any: even the Nazis and the Japanese in World War 2 had simply expelled the American diplomats in their countries rather than arrest them. Perot thought for a moment about having the Chinese ambassador arrested, along with his staff, but quickly ruled that out: he was not going to lower himself to the level the Chinese had just stooped.

By the time that the NSC convened in the Situation Room a few hours later, Perot had received more information on the incident at the Jinan Airport and had copies made of that information for the benefit of the NSC members. After declaring the meeting open, Perot then told Secretary of State Inouye, who had brought that extra information with him, to brief the other participants on the new crisis.

“Mister President, ladies and gentlemen, the news from China are grim. We now know that the Chinese government, apart from arresting our diplomats and their

dependents in Jinan, is now in the process of arresting every American citizen it can find on its territory. All its borders are now closed to American citizens and the Chinese government is refusing to talk with neutral diplomats concerning our arrested diplomats. In fact, it is not even acknowledging that it is holding our diplomats and citizens, who have been brought to the main Ministry of State Security detention center in Jinan. All diplomatic or legal access to them have been denied and I am afraid that about anything could be happening to them right now.”

“What about the marine detachment of our embassy?” asked Ingrid, who had been a certified member of the National Security Council for many years already.

“Our marines were also at the airport, but unarmed, and were also arrested along the rest of our diplomatic staff.”

Ingrid clenched her jaws at those words.

“You do realize that they will be the first to be mistreated, not to say tortured by the Chinese, Secretary Inouye?”

“I realize that too well, General, but there is little that we could do now about that.”

With anger growing in her, Ingrid looked at President Perot and spoke to him in a firm tone.

“Mister President, I believe that we have had to endure the duplicity, hypocrisy, arrogance and treachery of the Communist Chinese regime for far too long now. First, they attacked our forces in Korea over 45 years ago, during the First Korean War, doing so without prior warning. Then, they used two nuclear-tipped missiles against Taiwan in 1973, destroying both Taipei and an airbase used by our Air Force, and secretly gave two nuclear bombs to the North Koreans, who then destroyed Honolulu with one of those bombs two years later, while New York City was saved in-extremis. Now, after putting bombs in our civilian airliners, bombs which cost the lives of 734 innocent victims, simply to create a diversion to their incoming invasion of the Paracel Islands, they just violated every international rules of behavior by arresting our diplomats and their families. I say: ENOUGH! China needs to learn that its actions will have consequences and I firmly believe that we need to defang China, for good!”

“But, General, what about their nuclear arsenal?” objected Olympia Snowe, the ambassador to the U.N.

“I have a plan in mind on how to destroy their nuclear arsenal, using only conventional weapons, Madam Ambassador. Once their nuclear arsenal will be gone,

then the Chinese won't be able anymore to hide behind it and threaten us with it. That will be when we will start methodically destroying their navy, air force and defense industries from both the air and from space. China must stop representing a military threat for the countries surrounding it, like Taiwan, Japan and Vietnam. Anything less than that would in my opinion only attract more trouble from China in the future. Their arrogance and sense of entitlement must be crushed, for good! You all know that I am no warmonger and that I have fought up to now to either prevent or stop wars but, in this case, I believe that we must use maximum force, short of nuclear strikes, to put China back in its place."

"General," said Ross Perot, "know that I am furiously tempted to follow your advice on this. I too have had enough of China's arrogance and outrageous conduct. However, we now have hundreds of American citizens, including children, at the mercy of the Chinese. If we strike them hard militarily, then the Chinese may well execute our citizens."

"I am very conscious of that, Mister President, believe me. However, once the Chinese nuclear arsenal will have been destroyed, then we will be free to use our own nuclear arsenal as a threat: free our citizens or else! Right now, I have absolutely no faith in any promise the Chinese would give us now. Only concrete actions will count."

"I fully agree with General Dows on this, Mister President." said in a resolute tone Secretary of Defense John McCain, who was at once seconded in his opinion by Secretary of State Daniel Inouye, National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft, Secretary of the Interior Joe Lieberman and Secretary of Energy John Glenn. Olympia Snowe hesitated a bit but finally declared her support for Ingrid's plan of action, something that convinced the remaining members of the NSC to also declare their support for it. Satisfied but still angry at China, Ross Perot nodded once his head and spoke to the members assembled around the long table.

"Then, I will call in the leaders of Congress in the Oval Office this morning, to explain the situation to them and announce my intention to talk to the assembled House and Senate this afternoon and declare war on China. I doubt very much that any member of Congress will object to such a declaration of war after what China just did in the last few days."

"Never underestimate political cowardice or hypocrisy, Mister President." said Ingrid in reply.

15:11 (Washington Time)
Senate Chamber, Congress
Washington, D.C.

"...the recent actions of the Chinese government, which included a terror bombing campaign against our commercial airliners and the illegal arrest and detention of our diplomatic staff and of other American citizens who were in China, thus give me no other option but to declare war on the People's Republic of China. I will now ask the ladies and gentlemen of the Congress to vote to approve and ratify that declaration of war."

Ross Perot, who was speaking in front of the assembled members of both the Senate and the House of Representatives, with camera crews from all national television channels transmitting his speech live, barely had time to stop speaking before Senator Ronald Preston, a member of the Libertarian Party from Texas, got on his feet and shouted out loud.

"I OBJECT! THIS IS THE SECOND WAR THAT THIS PRESIDENT HAS IMPOSED ON US IN ONLY TWO MONTHS AND..."

"SIT DOWN, YOU ASSHOLE!" shouted in turn the Senate Minority Whip, a Republican well known to say bluntly what he thought. More Republican senators sitting close to Preston also berated him, with more than one calling him 'traitor'. The President of the Senate, which also happened to be Vice-President Stockdale, banged his gavel twice while staring hard at Preston.

"THE JUNIOR SENATOR FROM TEXAS IS RULED OUT OF ORDER AND WILL SIT DOWN AND VOTE WHEN HIS TURN WILL COME."

With harsh words and even insults continuing to pepper him, Preston had little choice but to sit down before his own Senate leader would formally discipline him. From there, the vote to approve and ratify a declaration of war against Communist China was nearly unanimous, with only one vote against it: that of Ronald Preston.

What the members of Congress didn't see or hear once President Perot left the Senate Chamber was Perot entering with his aides and Secret Service bodyguards the nearby office allotted to Vice-President Stockdale, where he picked up an encrypted telephone and called the NC4 operations center in the Pentagon, getting Ingrid Dows on the phone nearly at once.

“General Dows speaking!”

“General, this is the President. Congress has just voted to approve our declaration of war against China. You may launch Operation MJOLNIR³³ when ready.”

“I acknowledge that Operation MJOLNIR is now a go, Mister President. I will keep you apprised of the situation as it will progress, Mister President.”

“Thank you and good luck to your people in this war, General.” replied Perot before putting down his phone receiver.

16:08 (Washington Time)

Department of music, Juilliard School

Manhattan, New York City

Nancy was conversing with Lucy as the latter was finishing to put some of her school books inside her individual locker, located with dozens of other lockers along a hallway of their school, when a group of five teenage boys came to them, with one of them pushing Lucy hard while nearly shouting at her.

“LEAVE THIS SCHOOL, CHINK! DON’T YOU KNOW THAT WE ARE NOW AT WAR WITH YOU YELLOW BASTARDS?”

While Lucy was too shocked at first to react and defend herself, Nancy did not waste time in replying by grabbing the loud mouth by his collar and then projecting him backward violently, sending him flying off the floor and making him slam his back against the steel lockers lining the opposite side of the hallway, where he slid down to the floor, half-knocked out. She then stared hard at the boy’s four followers, who were now looking with disbelief at their leader.

“YOU FOUR! GET OUT OF MY SIGHT BEFORE I GET ANGRY!”

Positively scared by her incredible strength, the four teenagers didn’t insist and fled at once, watched by the few other students present in the hallway. Next, Nancy went to the loud mouth and, grabbing him again by his collar, forced him on his feet before going nose to nose with him while holding him a few centimeters from the floor.

“Listen, asshole, and listen well! I catch you again insulting or attacking my sister and I will make you regret it. Now, FUCK OFF!”

³³ Mjolnir : Name given to the mythical magical hammer of the Norse god Thor.

The badly shaken teenager, still none too steady on his feet, walked away while looking one last time at her, then disappeared at the next hallway intersection. Nancy, worried about the psychological effect of that racist attack on Lucy, returned to her and gently took hold of her shoulders.

“Are you okay, Lucy?”

“I will be, Nancy. Thank you for defending me. What was this guy meaning anyway? What war was he talking about?”

“We will certainly know as soon as we can listen to the televised evening news tonight, Lucy. However, I suspect that the United States has declared war on China because of the bombs that Chinese agent put in our Pan Am flight and on another airliner. I could always call my mother and ask her about this but I am loath to do that, mostly because I wouldn’t want to make her compromise some military secret information but also because, if we really are at war now, then she will be extremely busy for the next few days and weeks. I am however afraid that racial insults and attacks against ethnic Chinese, both verbal and physical, will become too common during the coming days. Remember what happened to the Japanese-Americans during World War 2.”

“I am afraid that you are right about that, Nancy. What should I do then?”

“Stick to me like melted cheese, sis: with me around, nobody will dare attack you.”

CHAPTER 17 – DEFANGING THE DRAGON



Woody Island, Paracel Islands, South China Sea, with Rocky Island to the left.

05:06 (Vietnam Time)

Wednesday, February 28, 1996 'C'

Woody Island, Amphitrite Group, Paracel Islands

440 kilometers to the Northeast of the coast of Vietnam

South China Sea

It was still dark when Colonel Van Minh Trung went to pay a visit to the American forward air control team that had been landed during the night by a giant VSTOL cargo aircraft. Their vans, camouflaged with nets among the coconut grove covering part of the 2.1 square kilometer surface of Woody Island, included a truck carrying a command shelter and a surveillance radar mounted on a telescopic mast. That mast was presently raised up, elevating its radar antenna just above the summit of the coconut trees, with the antenna rotating. Trung had been happy to see that American radar unit arrive on the island, something that would help a lot his anti-aircraft gunners to be alerted early to any incoming Chinese aircraft, but he had been equally happy to see the American FAC team arrive with a mobile sea water desalinization plant, complete with a trailer-mounted diesel generator set and flexible fresh water bladders. With no natural source of drinking water on the island except for collected rainwater, potable water was a truly critical resource for him and his men. To help alleviate that lack of water, the landing ships which had dropped his various units on four of the islands of the Paracel Archipelago had also dropped both dozens of barrels of fresh water as well as hundreds of clean empty plastic barrels with open tops, which were now dispersed on those four islands with the goal of collecting fresh water during the frequent local rainfalls. Another agreeable surprise that had come with the American giant cargo planes had been three

bulldozers, which had been dropped respectively on Woody Island, Pattle Island and Triton Island, the three islands on which American FAC teams had been landed. Those bulldozers had then dug protective scrapes for the precious radar and radio vans of the American teams and, in a gesture that Trung had greatly appreciated, had subsequently been made available to dig scrapes for the PT-76 of his three light amphibious tank companies which were part of his defense force. Now, Trung felt ready for about anything but still would like to see the American marines announced by his High Command arrive in the archipelago: you never refused reinforcements when you could get some...unless you were a total idiot.

Trung was challenged by an American soldier when he approached the radar van but gave the short password provided to him earlier on by the translator attached to the American unit, so was allowed to get to the van, where he knocked on the door of the command shelter. Captain Eugene Blanchet, the U.S. Air Force officer in charge of the FAC team dropped on Woody Island, opened the door and smiled to the Vietnamese colonel, whom he knew to be able to speak a fairly good English.

“Good morning, Colonel! What’s up?”

“Good morning, Captain! I came to see when we could hope for your marines to arrive here.”

“Unfortunately, they are still one day away, Colonel. Their ship is going about as fast as it could but it is still in the Indian Ocean. However, if this could reassure you, a squadron of fighter-bombers landed at night in Da Nang and will be on call to give us some air support whenever we will call for their help.”

“That is good news indeed, Captain. I feel better already. Beware, though: my personal experience tells me that the Chinese like to attack at dawn, so don’t be surprised if you see lots of spots appear on your radar in the next couple of hours.”

Trung then turned around and was about to walk back to his command dugout when someone inside the radar van said something in an excited voice. Stopping and pivoting around, he listened on as an operator inside the van spoke with Captain Blanchet, who finally looked at Trung.

“Our long-range patrol aircraft turning over the ocean some distance from Hainan Island has just reported that a large number of ships of various sizes just sailed out of the Haikou Chinese Navy base. There is also a lot of activity reported on the ground at the Chinese airfields on Hainan Island.”

"They are going to attack this morning!" said at once Trung. "They should have sailed earlier than that in order to arrive at dawn but I bet that the Chinese are so confident of themselves in thinking that those islands are not truly defended that they will come in like a bunch of tourists, in full daylight. As for that airfield activity, I bet that they will send either paratroopers or heliborne troops first as a vanguard."

"That makes sense, Colonel. I will warn Da Nang about that possibility, so that our command element there could warn your own air force. We came to support you in the defense of these islands, but we also wish to let Vietnamese soldiers and airmen the honor of fighting the Chinese first. That was the word from General Dows."

Trung slowly nodded his head at that, his expression sober.

"General Dows is a great military commander and fighter: she truly understands what honor and pride implies, on top of being a master of the art of war. I will now go put my anti-aircraft gunners on full alert. Please advise me when you will have those Chinese aircraft on your radar."

"I will, Colonel! I will advise you via field telephone."

"Perfect!" replied Trung before nearly running back to his command dugout. That dugout was quite shallow, compared to what Trung held to be a well-made dugout, but the surface layer of dirt on Woody Island was quite thin, with hard coral right under it. Explosives actually had to be used to make that dugout, while Trung's men had only been able to dig very shallow foxholes instead of proper trenches. Passing by field telephone orders for his gunners to stand ready next to their weapons, Trung then waited for the enemy to show up.

Some forty minutes later, his telephone connected to the American radar van rang, making Trung swiftly pick up its handset.

"Colonel Trung speaking!"

"Colonel, this is Captain Blanchet. We have now two groups of three aircraft each approaching at medium altitude from the Northwest. I read them as cargo aircraft, possibly carrying paratroopers. We have as well two groups of what appears to be helicopters approaching at low altitude, also coming from Hainan Island. One pair of groups is heading for our island, while the other pair of groups is heading towards Triton Island. They should arrive in visual range in about ten minutes. Your air force and our fighter-bombers in Da Nang have already been alerted to these Chinese aircraft and helicopters, Colonel."

"Thanks for the warning, Captain!" replied Trung before putting down the receiver and picking another telephone receiver connected to his anti-aircraft batteries.

"Attention to all gunners! We have Chinese cargo aircraft approaching from the Northwest at medium altitude, plus helicopters approaching from the same direction at low altitude. Estimated time of arrival: ten minutes. Our 57mm gunners are to concentrate on the cargo aircraft, while our 23mm and 14.5mm guns will concentrate on the helicopters. Our anti-aircraft missiles will only target enemy jet fighters and bombers if they come down to attack us."

Trung then passed the same warning, this time via radio and using pre-selected codewords to warn his units dispersed on three other islands of the archipelago. With that done, he grabbed his binoculars and started watching the skies to the Northwest as the Sun started rising in the East.

The telephone linked to the radar van rang again some eight minutes later, making Trung pick it up in a hurry.

"Colonel Trung speaking!"

"Colonel, three cargo aircraft will be over Woody Island in one minute, while another three cargo aircraft will arrive over Triton Island in three minutes. They have now descended to an altitude of 500 meters, which suggests to me that they intend to drop parachutists. As for the helicopters, ten of them will arrive here in five minutes, while another twelve other helicopters will arrive at Triton Island in fifteen minutes. That information has been passed to my other FAC teams, who in turn are passing it to your men on the other islands. We now have on radar over a hundred fast jets approaching at high altitude, probably to act as fighter cover for the cargo aircraft and helicopters."

That last piece of information made Trung pause for a moment: a hundred fighter-bombers represented a lot of firepower, even when accounting for the generally limited ordnance payload Chinese jet aircraft could carry.

"We will concentrate our fire on the cargo aircraft and the helicopters, Captain. Again, thanks for the warning."

Trung's next move was to pick up a megaphone and, cranking it to maximum volume, spoke in it to pass last minute orders.

"ALL GUNNERS, BE READY TO FIRE ON MY COMMAND! ENEMY CARGO AIRCRAFT WILL BE HERE IN ONE MINUTE, COMING FROM THE NORTHWEST. ENEMY HELICOPTERS WILL BE HERE IN FIVE MINUTES. REMEMBER: THE 57MM

GUNNERS WILL CONCENTRATE ON THE CARGO AIRCRAFT, WHILE THE OTHERS WILL CONCENTRATE ON THE HELICOPTERS. HOLD YOUR FIRE UNTIL I GIVE THE ORDER TO OPEN FIRE.”

With that done, Trung resumed his observation of the northwestern sky with his binoculars. Only a few seconds later, he saw three dots appear in the sky at fairly low altitude, while dozens of condensation trails were appearing at higher altitude. He nearly shouted out in joy when he saw dozens of other condensation trails come in: those were coming from the direction of the Vietnamese coast. Next, Trung saw the newcomers from the Vietnamese coast start launching salvos of missiles at the Chinese jets acting as fighter cover for the enemy invading force. Many of Trung's men screamed in joy when many of those missiles hit their targets, transforming them into flying torches, to which Trung screamed at the top of his lungs.

“SILENCE! CONCENTRATE ON THESE CARGO PLANES AND HELICOPTERS INSTEAD!”

A minute later, as the air battle went on overhead, he saw the expected helicopters appear on the horizon, flying very low. By now, the cargo aircraft were only a few seconds from overflying Woody Island. Trung then decided that he could wait no longer.

“57MM GUNNERS, OPEN FIRE!”

Six S-60 57mm towed anti-aircraft guns, positioned and camouflaged in shallow scraped, then started pumping out shells towards the incoming three Y-8 medium transport aircraft. The four-engine turboprop aircraft, having to fly straight and slow at an altitude of 500 meters in order to drop their paratrooper loads, were easy targets for the 57mm gunners, with two S-60 guns aimed at each cargo aircraft. The result was nearly instantaneous, with shells from the first burst of fire either hitting directly the transports or exploding near them, thanks to their proximity fuses. One Y-8 transport broke up in midair, with a second Y-8 then turning into a flying torch. The third Y-8, with two engines on fire, tried to veer away but a direct hit against its cockpit killed its pilots and sent the aircraft into an uncontrolled spiral dive. None of the 180 paratroopers carried by the three Y-8s had a chance to jump out before their aircraft crashed into the sea in direct sight of the jubilant Vietnamese gunners. Trung now expected the pilots of the incoming helicopters to turn around after seeing the volume of anti-aircraft coming from Woody Island. However, those Chinese pilots kept coming: either they were very brave or they were loath to disobey their orders. That was when Trung saw twelve twin-engine jet aircraft come down to medium altitude, heading towards Woody Island. A look through

his binoculars allowed him to easily recognize the distinct shapes of Il-28 light bombers, or rather their Chinese H-5 copies.



"57MM GUNNERS, SWITCH TARGETS TO INCOMING LIGHT BOMBERS! THE ZSU-23-4s AND SA-9s WILL ENGAGE AS SECOND LINE OF DEFENSE!"

The first ones to fire at the bombers were actually two Vietnamese fighter pilots who were chasing them in their Mig-21 supersonic jet fighters. Firing their infrared-guided air-to-air missiles from beyond the effective range of the Chinese bombers' tail gunners, they downed in quick succession four of the Il-28s before prudently deciding to veer away when they saw the first 57mm shells explode around the remaining bombers. Now not needing anymore to worry about shooting friendly aircraft, the Vietnamese gunners on Woody Island fired bursts after bursts at maximum cadence at the approaching bombers. To their credit, the Chinese pilots did not flee from that murderous fire and pushed their attack all the way. Only seven of them were still in the air when the four ZSU-23-4 self-propelled anti-aircraft guns started opening fire as well, filling the sky with 23mm shells, their fire directed by radar. Each burst that hit a bomber in turn ripped that aircraft apart, killing their crews and putting them on fire. With the 57mm guns continuing to fire on them as well as the deadly ZSU-23-4s, only two of the light bombers survived long enough to overfly the island and drop their bomb loads before falling down in flames. Captain Blanchet and his FAC team, having wisely decided to jump into their shallow protection trenches, were not hurt by the few bombs that exploded on the island but were still shaken enough to make a female radar operator briefly raise her head for a look while swearing out loud.

"SHIT! THAT WAS CLOSE!"

"IT WILL GET CLOSER IF A CHINESE PILOT SEES YOUR PRETTY HEAD ABOVE GROUND, BERMANN." replied Blanchet from his own trench. Then, more guns barked as the Chinese helicopters came within firing range of the waiting ZPU-4s quad heavy machine guns of the Vietnamese defenders. Being much slower than either the cargo aircraft or the jet bombers and flying close to the sea surface, the Z-5 medium transport helicopters proved to be easy targets for the ZPU-4s. None of the ten helicopters trying to reach Woody Island in order to drop off their troops made it past the

coral reef circling the island. Then, as quickly and abruptly as the battle had started, silence fell back on the island.

Trung's men, as well as the members of the American FAC team, started to cheer that victory out loud but Trung quickly returned them to reality.

"CALM DOWN, ALL OF YOU! THIS WAS ONLY THE FIRST ROUND. WE STILL HAVE A NAVAL INVASION FORCE TO FACE! I WANT FRESH RESERVES OF AMMUNITION TO BE BROUGHT NEXT TO THE GUNS, QUICKLY!"

As his men obeyed him, Trung looked up at the sky and saw that the big air battle overhead was still going on, with planes after planes going down in flames. Being unable to say which of those burning aircraft were Chinese or Vietnamese, he refrained from cheering that battle on and instead took news by radio of what was happening at the other islands of the archipelago. His garrison commander on Triton Island soon reported that the Chinese air armada attacking him had turned around after the three Y-8 aircraft carrying paratroopers had been shot down, probably discouraged by the news of what was happening over Woody Island. The helicopters and aircraft approaching Pattle Island and Drummond Island had similarly turned around and were fleeing back towards Hainan Island and China. No losses or casualties were reported on the Vietnamese side. Quite satisfied by this battle performance, Trung walked to the American radar van, where he found Captain Blanchet speaking with someone on the radio. He patiently waited until Blanchet had finished his conversation before asking him a question.

"Any casualties or damage on your side, Captain?"

"None, thank God! And you, Colonel?"

"Nothing as well. Do you know how this air battle overhead is going?"

"It has overwhelmingly been favorable to our side up to now, Colonel. Those Chinese jet aircraft have either obsolete missile decoy systems or none at all and their radars and electronics are a good twenty years behind ours. Their level of pilot training also appeared to be quite low, from what I was told by the air controller in Da Nang. Now, that was about the air battle. Next, we will have to face the Chinese amphibious fleet and its escort ships. From what I was just told, a total of about thirteen destroyers and frigates, plus close to seventy smaller armed craft and over forty landing ships and landing craft are now sailing towards the Paracel Archipelago."

“Damn! I don’t even have enough gun ammunition to stop that many ships. Do you Americans have something in reserve able to stop such a fleet?”

That question made Blanchet grin devilishly.

“Oh, we certainly have something nice in store for these Chinese ships, Colonel.”

09:29 (Vietnam Time)

Control room of the nuclear attack submarine U.S.S. SAN JUAN (SSN-751) On silent running mode, midway between Hainan Island and Woody Island

“...I count over 120 ships and craft of all sizes, sir. If we launch missiles at that fleet, their radar homing heads risk becoming confused with so many targets.”

Commander Jack Kramer, the captain of the U.S.S. SAN JUAN nuclear attack submarine, thought those words over for a moment before taking a decision and replying to his weapons officer.

“Then, we will set our missile seekers to home on the largest targets ahead of them and will fire our first four missiles in a spread, to cover the length of that fleet. Let the Devil sort these Chinese out! Prepare to fire our first salvo, Mister Donatello.”

“Aye, Captain!”

As Lieutenant (Navy) Ronald Donatello was preparing four sub-launched SQUID anti-ship missiles to be fired from periscope depth, Kramer went to have a look through his search periscope. He was able to see on the horizon the small dots marking the bigger ships in the Chinese invasion fleet. From the latest orbital reconnaissance missions flown over this area and Hainan Island, Kramer knew that the largest ships in that fleet would be four destroyers and eight YUKAN-Class LSTs³⁴, with each LST displacing over 4,000 tons at full load. If his missiles would hit any of those targets, then he would be plenty happy. Of course, if one or more of his missiles would choose to hit one of the nine Chinese frigates instead, then he would also gladly take that.

Three minutes later, his weapons officer spoke up from his station.

“FOUR SQUIDS READY TO FIRE, CAPTAIN!”

³⁴ LST : Landing Ship Tank. Large amphibious ship with low draught able to carry ten or more tanks and equipped with a bow ramp.

“THEN, FIRE THEM IN QUICK SEQUENCE, MISTER DONATELLO!”

“AYE, CAPTAIN! FIRING FIRST MISSILE NOW!”

The noise of a burst of compressed air ejecting one SQUID missile from one of the four torpedo tubes of the SAN JUAN was then heard in the control room. Three similar bursts followed at five seconds intervals, following which Kramer gave a series of orders.

“RELOAD ALL TUBES WITH WIRE-GUIDED TORPEDOES! HELM, TURN TO HEADING 295, DIVE TO DEPTH OF 200 FEET AND ACCELERATE TO TWENTY KNOTS. LOWER PERISCOPE!”

Once his search periscope was down in its storage well, Kramer walked to the sonar room, situated aft of the control room, in order to observe the results of his missile firing. Some two minutes later, four short-lived noise spikes told him that all of his missiles had hit a target, making him smile with satisfaction.

“Excellent! We will now continue with torpedoes, so will be able to be more discriminate with our weapons.”

On the surface, some 22 nautical miles away to the Northwest, the situation of the Chinese invasion fleet could not be called ‘excellent’. Two of the LUDA-Class destroyers of the fleet had each been hit by one SQUID missile, while one of the eight YUKAN-Class LSTs, by far the largest ships in the fleet, had attracted to it two SQUIDs, with their 250-kilo high explosive warheads ripping big holes in the Chinese ships and starting fires. The antiquated air defenses of the Chinese ships, which relied on old-fashioned anti-aircraft guns of mostly 37mm caliber and had only a few short-range surface-to-air systems with limited performances, were basically powerless to stop the American anti-ship missiles, which had arrived at supersonic speed just above the waves before performing a final steep climb-and-dive maneuver, both to throw off enemy gunfire and to be able to dive at near vertical on their target, coming in at an angle most gun systems could not elevate to point their tubes. Then, the fires created aboard the stricken YUKAN LST reached the reserves of artillery and tank ammunition carried by it. The 4,170-ton landing ship then erupted into a spectacular series of explosions that ripped it apart and cut it in two. What was left of the landing ship then sank in less than a minute with the ten medium tanks it was carrying.

The ordeal of the Chinese invasion fleet was however only beginning. Eight more anti-ship missiles, fired from the nuclear attack submarines U.S.S. PROVIDENCE

and U.S.S. BIRMINGHAM quickly followed the SQUIDs fired by the SAN JUAN. Seven of those missiles hit their targets, while the eighth one was downed by a lucky 37mm shell. The Chinese were now experiencing a deadly tactic invented by the German submarine fleet in World War 2: the wolfpack. This time, Ingrid Dows had directed that all the American attack submarines able to reach the Paracel Islands by this morning would speed to that area, while the other available submarines in the Pacific sailed towards ambush points along the Chinese coast, near the main port areas.

Despite having now three of his four LUDA-Class destroyers and two YUKAN-Class LSTs seriously damaged, plus one LST sunk and one frigate hit and in the process of sinking, the Chinese admiral in charge of the invasion fleet decided to push on, hoping to land his troops and equipment before losing too many of his ships. However, the first combined salvo of twelve wire-guided homing heavy torpedoes from the three American nuclear attack submarines soon made him reconsider his decision. A second torpedo salvo finished to convince him to turn around but it was now much too late for that, as his own flagship received two torpedoes and started sinking, forcing the admiral to order his ship to be abandoned. Now left with no major escort vessels and with only 54 fast attack craft armed only with light guns, anti-ship missiles or torpedoes and depth charge racks, the remaining collection of 62 landing ships and craft had no other option left but to turn back towards Hainan. However, that didn't save them from destruction. The duplicity of the Chinese government's recent actions had decided both President Perot and Ingrid Dows in showing no mercy to the Chinese forces in this war, with Ingrid ordering that every Chinese vessel, however small, that was encountered be sunk and every aircraft seen, either in the air or on the ground, be destroyed. The attempted retreat of the Chinese landing craft, loaded with soldiers, vehicles and guns, soon turned into a shooting gallery, with squadrons of both Vietnamese and American fighter-bombers continuously attacking the fleeing landing craft and fast attack craft with guns and rockets. The few old Chinese diesel submarines deployed in the area in support of the invasion fleet could do nothing then to help the landing craft. Worse, they themselves became the targets of the three American nuclear attack submarines, which went into full hunting mode against the ageing and noisy Chinese submarines. In the space of a few hours that day, China's South Sea Fleet basically ceased to exist. This was however only the first phase of Operation MJOLNIR.

11:06 (China Time) / 10:06 (Vietnam Time)

Long range surveillance radar station near the coast, east of Jinan.

People's Republic of China

The radar operator watching the display screen of his long-range air surveillance radar swore out loud when his screen suddenly filled with hundreds of dots.

"MAJOR, WE ARE BEING JAMMED! MY SCREEN IS FULL OF FALSE ECHOS."

His shift supervisor quickly walked to the operator's station and looked briefly at the radar screen.

"Switch to our alternate frequency."

"Yes sir!" said the operator before obeying him. However, that helped only for a couple of seconds, with the radar screen again filling with dots. The operator switched again three more times the working frequency of his radar, still without success. The Chinese major then picked up the telephone linking him with the other coastal surveillance radars which formed the main eastern warning line of the Chinese air defense network, but was told by the commanders of the other radar stations that they were also experiencing severe and persistent electronic jamming. The last station commander the major called was in the process of giving him a report when the line went dead in mid-sentence. The major looked at his receiver with alarm, not understanding at once why the line had been cut like this. Before he could figure out what was happening, one of the concrete walls of the control center exploded under the impact of an air-to-surface heavy missile, projecting chunks of concrete and debris all around the control room and killing or wounding the radar operators. Another missile hit the big rotating radar antenna seconds before that, ripping it off its base and mangling the antenna beyond repair.

In a coordinated strike by two squadrons of B-51 heavy supersonic bombers that had been planned years ago for such a contingency, all the air surveillance radars along the eastern and southern coasts of China were first jammed, then destroyed, rendering much of the Chinese air defense network blind. The low technology, obsolescent state of much of the Chinese military equipment, which lagged by at least two decades or more behind American military technology, again proved that numbers were not enough to compensate for low quality in a technologically-based war. As soon as the Chinese

surveillance radar network went dark, three more squadrons of B-51s flew in at low altitude and high speed to deliver a massive volley of heavy air-to-surface missiles from standoff distance. This time, it was the various military airbases and surface-to-air batteries defending Eastern and Southern China which turned out to be their targets. With the Chinese air defense network now rendered both blind and impotent, the B-51 bombers returned to their bases in the Philippines, in Taiwan and in Japan to rearm and refuel. As soon as the Sun went down over China, those bombers came back to fire more missiles, this time targeting the various military and political command center of the country, plus key defense industry installations and major power plants, sowing both chaos and confusion across the whole country.

As the Chinese leaders bitterly debated among themselves how to respond to the American strikes, one of their primary options for retaliation mostly evaporated when over a hundred heavy orbit-to-ground missiles rained down on Central China. Armed with deep penetration high-explosive warheads, those missiles suddenly hit the Chinese bases housing the silos and reinforced tunnels sheltering China's intercontinental ballistic missile force, which counted only 20 missiles at the time, plus 22 more missiles with medium range capabilities which could not reach the continental United States. Penetrating deeply into the ground before exploding or squarely smashing their way through the concrete overhead protection of the ballistic missiles, those orbital missiles collapsed or caved in the walls and roofs of the Chinese silos and tunnels, destroying or sealing in the ICBMs inside them.

20:28 (China Time)

Deep underground command bunker under the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee building, city of Jinan, Eastern China

The morale inside the command bunker complex was about as low as it could get as report after report of more destruction of military installations flowed in by landlines or, less frequently, by radio. One of the telephones, connected to a non-encrypted communications network, then rang, prompting an aide in answering it.

"Central Party Command Center!"

The political leaders around him, including Chairman Chen Shangkun, then saw the aide's face reflect utter disbelief as someone spoke at the other end. Covering the microphone of his receiver with one hand, he looked at Chen with a haggard expression.

"It's...it's Washington calling, Mister Chairman. A General Dows wants to speak to you. She spoke in fluent Mandarin."

After a moment of stunned surprise, Chen got up from his chair and went to the telephone while speaking to his aid.

"Put the line on speaker, Wang."

"Yes, Mister Chairman!"

Bending over the telephone set, Chen then spoke in a voice full of rage.

"What are you trying to prove by calling me here, General? And why isn't President Perot talking to me, rather than you?"

"First off, President Perot doesn't wish to talk with a criminal like you, Chairman Chen. Second, I am calling to pass a warning to you. You better listen to it carefully because I won't repeat it. By now you should know that all your nuclear-tipped missiles able to reach the United States have been destroyed, along with your other missiles able to reach Japan, the Philippines or Europe. We have started this morning to methodically destroy your navy and air force and will continue doing so until they are completely destroyed, along with your armament industry. Now, for the warning by the United States to China. Up to now, we have limited our strikes to using conventional explosive warheads. However, if we learn that you have executed any of the American citizens and diplomats you illegally detained two days ago, then we will switch to nuclear strikes and will destroy one target in China for every American citizen you will have executed or cannot be proven to be alive. I say again: one American hostage killed will equal one nuclear warhead exploding in China. Your duplicity and thirst for power caused this war. Don't let them also cause the utter destruction of China."

"You pretentious little imperialist bitch! China will never bend to..."

POW

The other party leaders watched with wide eyes Chen Shangkun's body crumble down to the floor, a bullet having exploded one side of his head. The old leader of the People's Liberation Army, Marshal Li Wang Je Ming, then stepped close to the telephone speaker while still holding his pistol in his right hand.

"General Dows, this is Marshal Li Wang Je Ming speaking. I believe that you know my name already."

"I knew that you were the senior commander of all Chinese military forces, Marshal Li. From what I just heard, can I conclude that you are now also the top leader of China?"

"You concluded right, General. Can we now talk like two reasonable people?"

"Only to a point, Marshal Li. Too many crimes have been committed lately by China against the United States to simply wipe the slate clean and forget all that happened. I will refrain from using nuclear weapons as long as none of our citizens you are detaining are hurt or killed. However, the systematic destruction of your arsenal of weapons will continue, as President Perot has decreed that China must be defanged for good, the same way Germany was defanged at the end of World War 2. China can only blame its own aggressiveness and bullying for this. I would thus urge your men to evacuate your ships, your military ports, your army garrisons and your airbases before they are destroyed from the air. Lives will always be more important than hardware. I know that this will be hard for you to accept but the alternative is the utter destruction of China as an industrial country. You have 24 hours to accept my terms. Past that delay, our strikes will progressively switch to civilian heavy industries and communications links, including bridges and railroad lines. I will now let you discuss with other Chinese leaders. Remember: one nuclear warhead per American hostage killed. I will wait for your return call within 24 hours."

The line was then cut, leaving a shaken Li to face the Party leaders present in the bunker.

"General Dows threatens to hit us with one nuclear warhead for every American hostage we would kill. With the destruction of our own nuclear missiles, we now have no means left to retaliate. We also have 24 hours to accept to be demilitarized before the American airstrikes will start to switch to our industrial base and communications lines. If we don't, then we may see China return to the Stone Age."

07:36 (Washington Time) / 20:36 (China Time)

The Oval Office, The White House, Washington, D.C.

President Perot, who was sitting close to Ingrid, with his main cabinet members and advisors also present, looked at her as she cut the line with Jinan.

“Do you think that the Chinese will accept to be demilitarized, Ingrid?”

“Frankly, I don’t know, Mister President. The Chinese are an extremely proud people and they are very conscious of their imperial past. I can understand how painful my ultimatum was to this Marshal Li Wang Je Ming: no old soldier would like to have to surrender without a fight. Unfortunately for him, he realizes that any effort to resist our strikes would only cause severe casualties among his men. He is now truly in an impossible bind. There is also the matter of the other Chinese leaders. Will they bend or will they want to fight on out of pig-headedness and misplaced pride, the way the Japanese did in 1945? Only time will tell, Mister President.”

Perot digested that for a moment, then nodded his head once.

“Very well! We will see if the Chinese accept our ultimatum. In the meantime, I will have a communiqué prepared and put on national television and radio to reassure the American public about how this war is going up to now.”

“A good idea, Mister President: the American people could use every reassurance that we can give to it now.”

20:00 (China Time)

Thursday, February 29, 1996 ‘C’

Deep underground command bunker under the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee building, city of Jinan, Eastern China

Marshal Li Wang Je Ming was ready close to the telephone when it rang at eight o’clock sharp in the evening. Taking a deep breath first, he then picked up the receiver and spoke calmly in it.

“Marshal Li speaking!”

“Marshal Li, this is General Ingrid Dows. I believe that my 24-hour period has just expired. What is China’s answer to my demands?”

“General Dows, my answer, which is China’s answer, is that we will fight and will not simply abandon our equipment, ships and bases. You may still be able to destroy them eventually but you will have to fight for that and you WILL lose people in the process.”

There was a moment of silence on the line and Li started to think that he had shaken Dows’ resolve. Then, she spoke again. However, what she said both surprised and pleased him.

"Marshal Li, I can only respect and admire your will to fight on despite of the odds against you. You just proved to me that you are a true soldier. I will still regret all the lives that will be lost after this, on both sides. I however promise you that my forces will not engage in indiscriminate bombing of purely civilian targets."

"I truly appreciate what you just said, General Dows. On my part, I can do something that will at least partly erase the shameful conduct of the late Chairman Chen and of his band of sycophants. Two of our civilian airliners are standing ready to fly to Hong Kong tonight your diplomats and citizens Chen had arrested, where they will be handed over to the British representative there. I am not going to try to protect my country by using hostages as shields. Just try not to shoot those two airliners down, please!"

"Marshal Li, I thank you from the bottom of my heart for this. Did you get lots of opposition on that from the leaders of your Communist Party?"

"None at all, General! In fact, I preempted their objections to this by having the lot of them executed. Such idiots didn't deserve to live. I am now in sole charge of China."

"Marshal Li, you are definitely a soldier to my liking. I wish that we could have met in friendlier circumstances. Emperor Wou Ti salutes you!"

On that allusion to her most famous historical past incarnations, Ingrid Dows then closed the line, leaving Li Wang Je Ming thoughtful in his command bunker.

12:02 (New York Time)

Monday, March 04, 1996 'C'

Students' cafeteria, Juilliard School of Music

Manhattan, New York City

Out of a habit she had gained from her mother, Nancy had sat for lunch with her friends at a table close to the large television screen installed in the school's cafeteria and tuned to the CBS channel. She was thus able to easily see and hear the latest Pentagon communiqué concerning the war with China. Her four band members, knowing how interested she was about that subject, fell quiet as the Pentagon spokesperson announced that China had already sustained huge losses at sea and in the air, with very few casualties on the American side thus far. One teenage boy eating at a nearby table sneered on hearing that last part.

"Yeah, sure! They always want to make things appear rosier than the reality." Nancy threw him a dirty look but kept silent, wanting to listen to the rest of the communiqué. When the spokesperson announced that the Chinese nuclear arsenal of long-range missiles had been completely destroyed a few days ago, Lucy blew air out in relief.

"Thank God for that! The last thing we needed was a nuclear exchange."

"Don't thank God for that, Lucy: thank Ingrid instead. All this is exactly her style: to preempt an enemy's move before he can hurt us. She is a genuine military genius, and I am not saying that just because she is my mother. She has been winning wars for our country for over fifty years now."

Lucy, Sarah, Carmen and Erika could only nod their heads at that, then continued eating their lunch in Nancy's company.

They were about finished with their meals when some kind of commotion in another section of the cafeteria made them twist their heads and pivot in their chairs to see what was happening. What they saw was an Asian young man being attacked verbally as he was carrying a tray of food towards an empty table. Then, one of a dozen teenagers threw a plastic glass full of soft drink at him, splashing soda all over him. Nancy shot up of her chair when she saw that dozens of students started laughing at the humiliated Asian teenager and also added insults and racist epithets. Walking quickly to the area where the trouble was happening, she sent out a mental shout that shook everybody around her.

'STOP THIS!'

Most of the laughing students recognized her then and quickly returned to eating their meals. Those who didn't then made the mistake of provoking further her ire, with one beefy teenager in particular getting up to face her.

"You're a chink-lover, hey, girl? We don't like chink-lovers here and..."

Before he could finish his sentence, he felt his feet come off the floor as Nancy used her power of telekinesis to make him rise quickly until his head bumped none too gently against the ceiling of the cafeteria, some four meters high, then held him there.

"The boy you insulted and sprayed with soda is an American citizen, just like you and me. What he isn't though is a racist or a bully like you. Leave him alone or I will then get really angry at you."

Nancy then released her mental hold on him, making him fall down screaming and landing hard on his feet and bum. Next, Nancy glared at the bully's companions who had also laughed at the Asian boy.

"As for you morons, learn to respect the others around you, irrespective of their races or color of skin."

Turning around to return to her table, Nancy collected in passing the Asian teenager, who had watched all this with bulging eyes.

"Come eat at my table, friend: you will be welcomed there."

"How...how did you do that?"

"Don't you know? I am the resident angel in this school. By the way, my name is Nancy...Nancy Dows. And your name is?"

"Ken...Ken Lee. My family emigrated from Taiwan after Taipei was destroyed by a Communist Chinese nuclear missile in 1973."

They then arrived at the table used by Nancy, where the latter invited Ken to sit before making the presentations.

"Girls, this is Ken Lee. Ken, these girls form with me the 'D.C. Five' band. They are: Lucy, Carmen, Sarah and Erika. Lucy is my sister by adoption, by the way."

Ken smiled to the four girls, getting smiles in return. Nancy noticed at once that Carmen's eyes had lit on Ken's arrival at their table. To be fair to Carmen, Nancy had to recognize that Ken was actually a handsome boy.

"So, you are a musical band?" asked Ken while starting to eat his food. "What kind of music do you play? Rock? Jazz? Classical?"

"We mostly play historical instruments but also play pop music with vocals and dancing, plus a fair amount of classical." answered Lucy. "And you, Ken, do you play an instrument?"

"I sure do!" replied the boy, warming up to the conversation. "This may sound strange to say for an ethnic-Chinese boy like me but I adore playing the saxophone and I play mostly jazz music."

Both Lucy, Carmen and Nancy took a deep breath then, surprising Ken by their reactions.

"What? What did I say wrong?"

"Nothing!" replied Nancy, who was now grinning from ear to ear. "We were actually missing a brass player to complete our repertoire of instruments. We have presently in our available repertoire of skills the piano, the electronic synthesizer, the

harpichord, the violin, the bass, the guitar and electric guitar, the flute, the harp, the drum kit, the lute, the Persian Qanun, the goblet drum and the maracas, but only one brass instrument: the cornet.”

“My God! That is actually a very impressive repertoire, girls. I am impressed!”

“Thanks! Can you play other instruments apart from the saxophone, Ken?”

“I can honestly say that I am fairly good with the clarinet and the bass clarinet.”

“Excellent! Would you be interested to play with our band, Ken?”

“Uh, that’s certainly a tempting proposition, Nancy. I will have to think about it.”

“You could come to our place after school and have supper with us while we discuss this.” then proposed Carmen Estrada while devouring the boy with her eyes, making Nancy roll her eyes.

“Another fish being baited by Carmen, and this one looks ready to bite her hook.”

Once Ken had finished eating, the girls exchanged contact information with him and agreed with him on a time and place to meet him after school. While Nancy nearly giggled to herself at the lascivious thoughts coming from Carmen concerning Ken, she herself was quite pleased about having met the boy: his instrumental skills would fit very well with her band and would fill a hole in their list of instruments which had impeded the band from enlarging its repertoire of music and songs. As for convincing Ken Lee to join her band, she was going to let that job to Carmen Estrada.

16:08 (Washington Time)

National Combined Combat Command Center (NC4)

The Pentagon

The junior officer who approached Ingrid’s desk in the open area of the NC4’s operation center had a somber expression on his face as he handed her a printed message.

“General, we lost another aircraft over China: a B-51 heavy bomber was shot down by anti-aircraft guns while doing a low-level bombing pass over a military airfield near Jinan. Nobody ejected.”

“Thank you!” simply said Ingrid while taking the message. She then read it carefully before sitting straight in her captain’s chair, her mind at work. This was the third American aircraft lost since the start of this war. While that would be considered as

a very light casualty rate for any war, she still hurt every time American casualties were reported. As for Chinese casualties, she was far from indifferent to them, even though the Chinese were presently declared enemies of the United States. The vast majority of those dead Chinese had probably been simple conscripts doing their mandatory years of service with the Chinese armed forces and bore no responsibility in starting this war. As for Chinese civilian casualties, she had given specific and strict orders not to deliberately target them. Pamphlets had been dropped over the various defense industrial plants to be bombed, warning them not to man the plants at night, as that would be the period when the plants would be bombed. Quite a few officers in Ingrid's staff had protested such warnings, saying that would put at higher risk the crews of the American bombers tasked with destroying the plants, but she had firmly told them to put up and shut up.

Getting up from her chair, she went to the big electronic situation board covering half of a wall of the operations center and looked at the general situation in and around China. By now, the Chinese Air Force had basically ceased to exist, its planes destroyed either in the air or on the ground and its airbases extensively bombed, with all of their runways cratered by bombs and inoperable. As for the Chinese Navy, its ports and naval bases had been devastated by both bombs and missiles and all the ships and boats at quay had been sunk. Those ships which had been at sea at the start of the war had been systematically hunted down and sunk when found. However, Chinese diesel submarines had been a lot more difficult to find and sink, due to their stealthy nature as submarines, and too many of them had not been found yet in Ingrid's taste. She then concentrated on one isolated blue dot off the eastern coast of China and called to her the duty board supervising officer.

"Major, what is the present status of the U.S.S. NEPTUNE?"

"It has reached its newly assigned patrol area late yesterday night, General, and has since been on the lookout for Chinese ships and submarines. Do you have new instructions for the NEPTUNE or for its embarked marines, General?"

"To its marines, no! I had originally planned to use them for a possible hostage rescue mission, to free our diplomats and citizens held in Jinan, but Marshal Li's gesture of good will made that operation redundant. As for landing them somewhere in China, that is the last thing I want to do right now: the Chinese Army, while mostly equipped with obsolescent or obsolete weapons and equipment, is still mostly intact and would grossly outnumber any ground unit we could land in China. Our marines will stay on

stand-by on the NEPTUNE until further notice. As for the NEPTUNE, signal to it that it is to concentrate on finding and destroying the Chinese submarines still at sea in the Eastern China Sea.”

“Right away, General!” said the major before turning around and going to his duty desk to write a message. Ingrid, left alone in front of the situation board, then thought about how this war should end eventually. She had never believed in open-ended wars and in fact loathed those who started or entered wars without thinking about a plausible endgame scenario. However, she would need to consult first with President Perot and his cabinet in order to gain his approval about the exact terms and conditions on which he wanted this war to end. She may be the supreme military commander of all American armed forces, but the President was still their Commander-in-Chief.

16:49 (New York Time)

Tuesday, March 5, 1996 ‘C’

Grand Street Station, Sixth Avenue Line, New York City subway

Chinatown District, Manhattan, New York City

Ken Lee was quite excited as he and Carmen Estrada exited their subway car at Grand Street Station, then climbed the stairs to the surface access and emerged in the open near the corner of Grand Street and Chrystie Street, in the Chinatown District. Both of them had very quickly become enamored of each other and Ken had thus invited Carmen to go visit his family home and shop in Chinatown after the end of classes today. He next led Carmen south, walking with her along Chrystie Street towards Hester Street, on which his family home and commerce was. Holding hands together, the young couple was about to reach the corner with Hester Street and turn west on it when they slowed down and hesitated: a large crowd had started gathering at that corner, with a few policemen containing the crowd and blocking that corner of Hester Street. There was also loud noises and shouts from some kind of ruckus happening along Hester Street.

“My God! What is happening? My parents’ home and shop are in that section of Hester Street.”

Still holding Carmen’s hand, Ken made his way through the growing crowd, arriving at the police cordon as a fire truck sped by, all sirens and flashing lights on. Unable to see

clearly what was happening on Hester Street, Ken asked a question to one of the policemen blocking the street.

"Excuse me, Officer: my family home is in that part of Hester Street. What is going on down there?"

"There's a riot happening there, mister. A big mob screaming anti-Chinese slogans started attacking the residents of Chinatown and vandalizing the shops and houses there about half an hour ago. We have officers trying to break up and restrain that mob but the crowd of rioters counts a few thousand people and our officers are heavily outnumbered. We are waiting for more reinforcements but, right now, the situation down Hester Street is chaotic and very dangerous. I thus can't let you pass."

"But my parents' home is over there! I must check to see if they are safe, Officer!"

"I am sorry, mister, but it is simply too dangerous at this time. Please stay behind the police yellow cordon."

Ken tried again to see what was happening down Hester Street but both a large, agitated crowd and smoke presumably coming from some kind of fire blocked his view. He next looked at Carmen, who also appeared deeply worried by all this.

"What should we do now, Carmen? The police won't let us pass and that crowd of rioters seems to be ready to attack and murder any ethnic Chinese within reach. I can't expose you to that kind of danger. You better stay here while I try to find a way past the police lines."

"NO!" was Carmen's immediate reaction. "Don't do that! You may well get hurt or even killed."

"But I can't stay here and do nothing while my parents are in danger, Carmen." Looking again down the street at the raging mob of rioters, armed with a variety of sticks, steel bars and hammers, Carmen then had an idea and took out her mobile pocket phone, an expensive and still relatively uncommon item which she had received as a gift from Nancy. Quickly punching in Nancy's telephone number, she waited impatiently as the telephone rang at the other end.

"Come on, Nancy! Pick up!"

Carmen felt immense relief when Nancy's voice finally came online after three rings.

"Nancy speaking!"

"Nancy, this is Carmen! I am presently with Ken at the corner of Chrystie and Hester Streets in Chinatown. We were going to visit Ken's family home but there is

presently a big crowd of rioters on Hester Street, busy vandalizing the shops there, and the police will not let us pass. What should we do?"

When Nancy answered her, it was in a noticeably firmer tone.

"Stay where you are and don't take any risks! I am coming in!"

"Thanks, Nancy! I will call you back if anything new happens." said Carmen before cutting the line and pocketing back her mobile phone.

"Ken, Nancy told me that she is coming to help and for us to stay put for the moment."

"Nancy? What could she do about this?" asked Ken in an incredulous tone.

"Plenty, Ken! Don't forget what she is."

On that, Carmen concentrated her attention on the rioters, some 150 meters up the street. Some television cameramen and reporters had been allowed by the police to pass their cordon and approach the rioters to within about thirty meters, but no closer. She also noticed that the few policemen near the rioters were actually doing nothing to stop them and simply led to safety the residents who tried to flee the zone being vandalized. Even the couple of fire trucks which had responded to the crisis to snuff out a fire burning inside a shop were unable to approach, threatened by the rioters. Even from that distance, Carmen could make out the shouts of the rioters and their signs: this was clearly a racist mob with anti-Chinese sentiments, something that was not very surprising in view of the ongoing war with China. Still, that made Carmen truly angry.

"Those bigoted assholes probably think of themselves as patriots dealing with what they consider to be enemy fifth columnists."

"But the police are doing nothing to stop them." replied Ken, desperate about the possible danger to his parents. Those police reinforcements better arrive soon, or the whole of Chinatown could end up being burned down or vandalized."

Carmen nearly added to that by saying that the police officers on the scene didn't show up much zeal in protecting Chinatown's residents and property but kept her mouth shut.

Three minutes later and with still no sign of police reinforcements arriving on the scene, someone in the crowd of onlookers around Carmen and Ken suddenly shouted out while pointing at the sky.

"HEY, WHAT'S THAT?"

Looking up in the direction pointed at, Carmen felt sudden hope and joy fill her.

"IT'S NANCY! SHE'S FLYING IN!"

With the onlookers, police officers and television crews watching on with a mix of awe and incredulity, Nancy, wearing a pair of jeans and a sweater, landed smoothly on Hester Street, some twenty meters away from the nearest rioters. When a policeman approached her to tell her to stay away from the rioters, she shut him up with an imperious gesture from one hand.

“Don’t try to stop me, Officer: I am going to disperse that crowd.”

The policeman was about to protest and interpose himself but took a step back when Nancy’s eyes turned into two bright spots of white light and she sent him a telepathic message.

‘Let me deal with this crowd before someone gets hurt, Officer.’

Nancy then started to calmly walk towards the rioters, who were now staring at her with indecision.

‘STOP THIS AT ONCE AND GO HOME, OR I WILL HAVE TO BECOME ROUGH. THIS WILL BE MY ONLY WARNING TO YOU. LEAVE CHINATOWN, NOW!’

Some of the rioters, intimidated by her, started to turn away and leave the scene but the majority, mostly those armed with pick axes, sticks, iron bars and hammers, stayed where they were, with one big man holding a tire iron shouting angrily at her.

“WHY ARE YOU PROTECTING THOSE DAMN CHINKS, GIRL? DON’T YOU KNOW THAT WE ARE AT WAR WITH THEIR KIND?”

“THOSE ARE AMERICAN CITIZENS, NOT ENEMIES OF THE UNITED STATE, YOU MORON! LEAVE! NOW!”

The man did not respond to that and instead advanced on her with his tire iron held up. He suddenly flew backward and off his feet as if pushed back by an invisible giant hand, landing among the crowd of rioters and knocking half a dozen of them to the ground. The nearest rioters to Nancy then started to be slowly forced back by a sort of invisible wall pushing against them. Unable to fight back that invisible force and utterly baffled by this, the whole crowd started withdrawing up Hester Street as Nancy and her telekinetic wall kept advancing at a slow pace. The police officers present, not believing their luck, then escorted the two waiting fire trucks to the store put on fire by Molotov cocktails, allowing them to start combating that fire. All the while, the reporters and cameramen present filmed Nancy’s actions while commenting about them in their microphones. Utterly discouraged and deterred after a couple of minutes of being pushed back, the

rioters finally started to disperse and melt away, either using the local subway stations or returning to their parked cars. However, Nancy kept advancing until all the rioters left, then stopped and turned around, walking back the way she had come while inspecting the state of the shops and homes located along Hester Street. She was pained to see that dozens of shops, boutiques and restaurants had been heavily vandalized by the rioters, with their front windows shattered and some of them having been visibly looted. A senior police officer then cautiously approached her, making her stop and look at him, while her eyes returned to normal.

“Yes, Lieutenant?”

The officer, thoroughly intimidated and not sure how to react to her, wisely chose diplomacy over authority.

“First, thank you for turning away those rioters, miss. Second, could I have your name and address? You will understand that you are now to be considered a principal witness to this riot, miss.”

“Of course, Lieutenant! Here is my driver’s permit. My name is Nancy Dows and I live in the Hell’s Kitchen District, at 607 West 51st Street, Apartment Number Four.”

The police officer noted that information, then gave her back her driver’s permit while looking at her cautiously.

“How did you do all this, miss, and why?”

“The why is that I simply wanted to protect innocents from physical harm, Lieutenant. I believe that this is the duty of all good citizens: to render assistance to persons in danger. The how is through my powers as a half-celestial. I believe that I am already fairly well known as the ‘Angel Girl’, Lieutenant.”

“Indeed, Miss Dows.” said the police officer, already imagining the reactions of his superiors to his future report about this incident. “While I do not intend to charge you with anything or arrest you, may I ask you to come to my precinct in order to fill a witness report?”

“That I will do with pleasure, Lieutenant. Just give me a minute to reassure two of my friends who want to talk to me.”

“Go right ahead, Miss Dows.” replied the police lieutenant, relieved to see that she was ready to cooperate. Nancy then walked to meet Carmen and Ken, who were running towards her. Ken was the first to get to her and warmly hugged her while thanking her profusely.

"Nancy, I can't say how grateful I am for what you just did. You probably saved my parents from harm at the hands of those damn rioters."

"Thank you but I came to save all the residents of Chinatown, Ken. It was the least I could do to stop this infamy."

Carmen then reached Nancy and also hugged her.

"Nancy, you were fantastic! I am proud to be your friend."

"Thanks, Carmen. If you will now excuse me, I will have to go fill a witness deposition at the local police station. Go check on your parents and reassure them, Ken: those rioters are not about to come back. Go with him, Carmen. I will see you later on at our apartment building."

Ken, like Carmen, felt very humble as he watched Nancy return to the side of the police lieutenant and then get into a police car, while a number of policemen had to prevent over a dozen reporters and cameramen to approach Nancy and harass her with shouted questions.

"What an extraordinary girl your friend is, Carmen. When I think that I am now part of her band."

"Talking of the band, we will probably have to change our name, now that you are part of it. We are now six, not five. However, I will wait for Nancy to take a decision on that. In the meantime, let's go check on your parents."

"Right!"

17:51 (New York Time)

Fifth Precinct, New York Police Department

19 Elizabeth Street, Little Italy, Manhattan

The police officers present in the large room where she was filling a written witness statement kept a respectful distance from Nancy, not because they feared her but out of awe and respect for what was for them a real angel. The one officer who approached her when she completed her statement and signed it, a petite Asian young woman, did so to collect her statement and make photocopies of it. Seeing that the young policewoman wore glasses, Nancy gently smiled to her and extended one hand out to cover her eyes.

"Don't be afraid and stay still, Officer Zhang. I would like to give you a personal gift."

Not knowing what Nancy meant, the policewoman nonetheless stayed still as Nancy's hand gently covered her eyes and glasses. The other police officers present held their breath as they saw Nancy's hand starting to glow, becoming brilliant in seconds and staying so for maybe fifteen seconds before becoming normal again. The policewoman, opening her eyes once Nancy withdrew her hand, did a doubletake and took off her glasses when she saw that her vision was blurry. However, her vision then proved to be a perfect one once she had removed her glasses.

"You now have a 20/20 vision, Officer Zhang. You can now put away your glasses."

For a moment, Zhang was unable to say a word as tears of joy came to her eyes. Then, she happily hugged Nancy.

"Thank you! Thank you, miss! I don't know how I could thank you properly for this."

"Just be happy and that will be plenty for me, Officer Zhang."

A couple of policemen present, who were ethnic-Italians and devout Catholics, signed themselves at that scene as Zhang took Nancy's statement and went to the nearest photocopier. That was when Captain Tony Mancuso, the police precinct commander, showed up. Going first to see Zhang and read the first copy she produced, he spoke for a moment with her, then walked to Nancy and nodded his head in salute to her.

"Miss Dows, let me first say that what you did in Chinatown, while most fantastic in nature, was completely lawful, as you simply protected innocent people from illegal rioters, and this without truly hurting anyone. Thus, you don't need to worry about being charged in any way, on the contrary. Some in that crowd may be stupid or bull-headed enough to register a complaint against you but I can assure you that any judge will then laugh them out of court."

"That is certainly nice to know, Captain. But I sense that you want to discuss something with me. Please, have a seat and let's talk."

Disarmed by her simplicity and openness, Mancuso sat opposite Nancy at the small table and eyed her beautiful, youthful face and big blue eyes before starting to speak.

"Miss Dows, I must confess that the questions I have for you are really personal questions from me, and not official questions. I thus assure you that whatever you will tell me will stay strictly confidential."

"I appreciate that, Captain Mancuso. I anyway have the feeling that I will soon need to make some kind of public declaration about who I am, mostly in order to avoid having an army of paparazzi camped in front of my door."

"I am afraid that, public declaration or not, your actions of today already guarantee that those paparazzi will be following you from now on, miss."

Nancy sighed in discouragement at that before smiling to Mancuso.

"They say that no good deed goes unpunished, Captain. So, what questions do you have for me?"

Mancuso wiggled his fingers a bit, still unsure if his questions were appropriate, then committed himself and spoke in a low voice.

"Miss, did God send you to New York? First, there was this miraculous mass healing of AIDS patients and other sick people last September, then this today. Were you sent by God to help our city?"

Nancy had a gentle smile at that and answered as diplomatically as she could, not wanting to hurt the feelings of the police officer, who appeared to be a decent man.

"First off, Captain, the September mass healing was the work of a full-fledged angel, not my work. I did help at first by healing a handful of AIDS patients though, in private and in an anonymous way. Second, the one you call God did not send me. I was born in a very natural way thirteen years ago aboard the spaceship U.S.S. PROMETHEUS, which was at the time approaching the Saturn System. My mother, as you may know already, is General of the Army Ingrid Dows, who herself possess some supernatural powers. My father was a full-fledged archangel and his name is Michael. With this said, I must point at a very important distinction here. When I talk about angels, I am talking about beings of pure spiritual energy who can manipulate both matter and energy nearly at will. They can thus take human forms if they wish so and are then able to do what humans can do, including having sex and procreate. Also, those angels I speak about are not agents of the one called 'God' by the Catholic religion. Instead, they are parts of an immensely powerful spiritual being I call 'The One'. While The One is not the God you worship, some of its acts in the past were wrongly interpreted as acts by your 'God', so it would be easy to think that 'The One' is your 'God'. Contrary to what people believe about the 'God' of the Bible, 'The One' did not create the Universe, or even this Earth. The One was created at the same time as the Universe and then attached itself to our Solar System and Earth in a sort of psychic symbiosis. The One does not ask to be worshipped, nor does he wish so. He is only

following the progress of Humanity and hoping to see us gradually improve as sentient beings. The one part that The One plays in all of our lives is that all human beings on Earth have a tiny fraction of The One in them at birth. That part would be properly called by us as our soul and that soul stays with us until our death, when the soul leaves the deceased body to eventually join with a newborn. That is basically what the Hindus call the process of reincarnation, but souls from The One only go to inhabit human beings, not animals or objects, contrary to Hindu beliefs. Now, about me. I am half human and half celestial and as such possess a number of supernatural powers, including the ability to fly by myself, read minds and communicate telepathically, move objects via telekinesis, plus many other powers as well. The important thing to understand about me is that I am a human girl, was born so and only wishes to live as a human girl, even though I can do things that appear fantastic to other people. I came to New York City to study music and not as part of some celestial mission. However, I am more than ready to help the good people of this city in cases of dire need, but intend to do that mostly on an anonymous basis. That is it in a nutshell, Captain Mancuso.”

Mancuso stayed silent for a long moment as he digested her revelations, then nodded once his head to salute her.

“Miss Dows, you may not be what I first thought that you were, but that in no way diminishes my utter respect towards you. By the way, thank you for what you did for Officer Zhang.”

“That was my pleasure, Captain. Am I free to go now?”

“You are, miss. If you wish so, I can have a police car drive you back to your apartment in Hell’s Kitchen.”

“Thank you, but that won’t be necessary: I will use the subway instead, like any normal person in New York.”

Nancy then got up from her chair and walked out of the police reception lounge, followed by the eyes of every police officer present.

“What an incredible girl! A half angel, living in New York...” said Mancuso to himself.

CHAPTER 18 – UNWANTED CELEBRITY

20:17 (New York Time)

Tuesday, March 5, 1996 'C'

Apartment # 4, 607 West 51st Street

Hell's Kitchen District, Manhattan

New York City, U.S.A.

"Let's see now! Religious cultists dancing in front of our building: check! Nutcases calling to ask to be 'initiated' by me: check! Paparazzi army camped on the sidewalk on the opposite side of our street: check! Reporters calling to ask for an interview: check! Studio executives offering me a contract to play a superhero in a film: check! My face being on all the television news programs:



check! Priests wanting to exorcise me in public: check! Did I miss anything, Lucy?"

"You forgot the editor of the porn magazine calling to offer you a zillion dollars to appear as a 'divine' centerfold in his magazine." answered Lucy, who was sitting with Nancy, Sarah and Erika on their lounge's sofa and watching their television set, tuned to the CNN news channel.

"Right! I forgot that one. That one was a real doozie, though." said Nancy before sighing in discouragement. "When I think that I came to New York simply to study music."

"Well, at least Carmen is escaping this looniness tonight: she stayed for supper at Ken's home in Chinatown." said Sarah, who shared with Carmen the apartment under Nancy's apartment. Just as she finished saying that, the telephone in the lounge rang...again!

"I'll take this one!" announced Nancy before getting up from the sofa and going to the telephone, picking up its receiver.

"Hello?"

"Am I speaking with Miss Nancy Dows?" asked in a business-like tone a female voice.

"That's me!" replied Nancy, automatically becoming on her guard.

"Miss Dows, this is Christiane Amanpour, from CNN. I suspect that you have already received many calls today from various people and organizations but please hear me out. I am presently at the CNN New York studios on Sixth Avenue, also named Avenue of the Americas, near the corner with West 50th Street, and would very much be honored to interview you, either at our studios or at your home."

"Well, Miss Amanpour," replied Nancy, switching to Farsi, "I would strongly counsel you to avoid coming to my place, as the street below is full of dancing and singing religious cultists and with also an army of paparazzi waiting in ambush along the sidewalk. My mother likes very much the news coverage from CNN and I also appreciate it, so I accept to be interviewed at your studios. What is its exact address, Miss Amanpour?"

There was a second of delay on the line, probably because Amanpour had been surprised by her quick acceptance.

"Our studios are at 1271 Avenue of the Americas, Miss Dows."

"Then, I should be there in about twenty minutes at the most. I will see you there. Thank you for calling."

Putting down her telephone receiver, Nancy then saw that her three friends were now looking at her with surprised expressions.

"You accepted to give an interview, Nancy?" asked Sarah Weissman. "But you previously refused at least five requests for interviews by reporters and newscasters."

"Let's say that I like CNN over the other channels' news shows. Well, I better go now."

"How are you going to get out? The street downstairs is full of cultists, nutjobs and paparazzi who are only waiting for a chance to jump on you."

"Simple: I will fly out! Let me get my windbreaker, then I will go on the roof of our building and take off from there. I would however need someone to secure back the roof hatch after I go out."

"I'll do that, sis!" volunteered at once Lucy. Grabbing her jacket, Nancy then went to the staircase at the back of her apartment which led up to both the improvised musical practice room built above the two bedrooms of the apartment and to the roof

access, closely followed by Lucy. Once out on the flat roof, Nancy waved goodbye to her sister by adoption.

“See you later, Lucy!”

She then levitated from the roof and flew off, taking the precaution of doing a detour towards the DeWitt Clinton Park in order not to be seen by the cultists and paparazzi waiting along the West 51st Street. With the CNN studios located only two kilometers from her apartment building, it took her less than ten minutes to fly to it, all the while being cautious to fly high enough to avoid the multitude of wires and cables strung above the streets of New York. Her landing on the sidewalk in front of the CNN studios did startle quite a few pedestrians but she hurried inside the CNN building in order to avoid a full-blown incident and went to the reception desk on the ground floor, where a young woman greeted her with a big smile.

“Good evening, miss. May I help you?”

“You certainly can! My name is Nancy Dows and Miss Christiane Amanpour is waiting for me.”

“Let me warn her that you are here, miss.” said the receptionist, who probably did not realize who Nancy really was. Making a short call and speaking a few words on the phone, the receptionist then smiled again to Nancy.

“Miss Amanpour’s assistant is coming down to guide you to her studio, miss. Would you like to sit down while waiting?”

“No, thanks: I will be fine, miss.” replied Nancy, who then walked slowly around the lobby to look at the various pictures hooked to the walls. Less than three minutes later, a young man nearly ran out of one of the elevators situated in the back of the lobby and then walked to Nancy, presenting himself to her.

“Miss Dows? If you will follow me, please.”

Nancy followed the man to the bank of elevators, where they took a cabin and went up by two levels before stepping out in a large hallway. Next, the man led Nancy to a recording studio where a pair of television cameras were pointed at a stage furnished with a desk and a sofa. A tall woman in her late thirties came at once to Nancy when the latter entered the studio.

“Miss Dows, I am really happy that you accepted to be interviewed by me. I am Christiane Amanpour, international correspondent and newscaster for CNN.”

“Please to meet you, miss, but please simply call me ‘Nancy’. May I call you ‘Christiane’?”

"Of course, Nancy! About the interview I will do with you, do not worry: you are under no obligation to answer my questions if you deem them too personal or inappropriate."

"I came with an open mind, Christiane. I must however tell you in advance that I have absolutely no connection with the 'God' on which the Bible is centered. There is already an army of religious nutcases camped in front of my apartment building and who believe that I am some kind of new messiah, but I am no such thing."

"Well, you will be able to explain that fact to our viewers during the interview, Nancy. A makeup artist will first apply some touchup on your face, then we will go sit on the stage, in front of the cameras."

"Will the interview be live or recorded for future broadcasting?"

"It will be live, Nancy. We will however have to wait a bit in order to start the interview at the right time for live broadcasting. However, the wait won't be long. Let's go to the makeup room now."

Going with Amanpour to a small room adjacent to the recording studio, Nancy sat in one of the barber's chairs in it and let a makeup artist work her face and hair, while another artist prepared Amanpour. As she was having some powder brushed over her forehead and face, Nancy spoke in a casual tone to the CNN reporter.

"Christiane, know that what I will say during this interview may disturb some viewers with deeply seated religious beliefs. This may cause some public backlash but on the other hand I hate hypocrisy and I will only tell the absolute truth, religious fanatics be damned."

"The truth should always win over dogmas, Nancy. As long as you don't use insults or swear words, I invite you to say what you believe in."

"Thanks, Christiane. I have another warning for you: some of the things I will say are considered by some in the government as classified matter, but are in reality fundamental truths that need to be told."

"But...your mother is in charge of our military forces. Couldn't your revelations hurt her in return?" said Amanpour, looking with concern at Nancy.

"No! Nobody will be able to blame her for what will be revealed tonight. As a half-celestial, I have contacts with a spiritual being of immense power, a being I and my mother call 'The One'. The message I will pass tonight will come from The One."

That left Amanpour truly wonder what was going to come from the incoming interview. The makeup artists then declared both ready for the cameras. Returning into the recording studio, Amanpour invited Nancy to sit on the sofa of the stage, while she sat behind her interviewer's desk and waited for the signal from her studio producer, which came after about two minutes of waiting. Amanpour then smiled to the camera facing her.

"Good evening and welcome to this special report, dear viewers. I have with me in this studio Nancy Dows, who created quite a sensation earlier this afternoon by literally flying into Chinatown and stopping and dispersing a large crowd engaged in racist anti-Chinese rioting, using some fantastic powers of hers. Before I start interviewing Miss Dows, who gracefully accepted to be interviewed by CNN, let's review the media recordings of the events of this afternoon in Chinatown."

A large television screen set behind Amanpour's desk then started playing a film of the rioters vandalizing shops on Hester Street. Then, Nancy was seen flying in and landing in the middle of the street, near the rioters, then pushing them back with some invisible giant hand. The recording ended with reporters filming as Nancy got into a police car to go to the local precinct. Amanpour then looked back at the camera, her expression most sober.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this may have been the latest demonstration of the powers possessed by Nancy Dows, who has been nicknamed in the past as 'Supergirl', but it was not the first time she did so, by far. In May of 1988, then five-year-old Nancy, seeing one of her school friends being kidnapped by mobsters, flew in to the rescue, caught with those mobsters, killed three of them and captured a fourth one before police arrived on the scene, by which time she had freed her young friend. In June of that same year, the same gang of mobsters who had tried to kidnap her friend attacked her house in Arlington. Her mother, the famous Ingrid Dows, fought off those mobsters in an intense firefight but it was young Nancy who actually brought an end to that fight, by throwing what has been described as blue balls of pure energy which vaporized those mobsters. Then, a year later, coup plotters in Moscow placed a bomb on Red Square that killed the leaders of the Kremlin, then arrested a number of American citizens, accusing them of being CIA agents and of having placed the bomb in Red Square, torturing them to obtain confessions. In a series of extraordinary events during and following the public trial of those unfortunate American citizens, General Ingrid Dows revealed more of her rumored powers by getting those Americans out of Moscow and

transporting them instantly to her Arlington house in a manner still unexplained, where her daughter Nancy healed them all in seconds. A few years later, in 1992, Nancy Dows was a witness to an ongoing sex slavery trafficking operation in New York. Not content to alert the police about it, she also intervened to save one New York policeman who had been shot by Chinese Triad thugs, killing those thugs before healing that policeman with the touch of her hands. Then, last year, Nancy Dows was rumored to have healed a number of people dying from AIDS, earning the nickname of 'White Angel' in the process. That happened only a few days before a glowing angel appeared in Mount Sinai West Hospital and produced a huge burst of white light which covered the whole New York State area and healed all its inhabitants of all their ailments, be they cancer, diabetes, myopia, heart diseases and lots more. As you can see, young Nancy Dows has already proven time and again that she possesses some fantastic powers of supernatural origin, with the events of today in Chinatown being only the latest demonstration of her powers. Let's now ask Nancy about herself."

Amanpour then pivoted her chair to face Nancy, who had been quietly watching while sitting in her sofa.

"Nancy, many people are understandably extremely curious about you and your fantastic powers. What could you tell us about yourself?"

With one of the cameras zooming on her, Nancy replied in a calm, matter-of-fact voice.

"Well, first, I was born naturally on November fourth, 1982, aboard the spaceship U.S.S. PROMETHEUS, which was at the time approaching the Saturn System. My mother was indeed Ingrid Dows, a fact attested officially by the ship's chief medical officer. However, the identity of my father was withheld at the time by my mother, who didn't want to feed rumors on the ship about which crewmember was my father. In reality, my father was not a crewmember, but rather an angel of a hugely powerful spiritual being my mother and I call 'The One'. Before people would speculate about 'The One', I will say that he is not what the Christian Bible calls 'God'. The One did not create the Universe or even Earth. Rather, it was created as part of the Universe by natural cosmic forces. The One, a being of pure spiritual energy possessing immense powers, then attached itself to this solar system and has been with it for over five billion years now. I say 'it' to describe The One because it doesn't have a human form, unless he wants so, and has no defined sex. The One is intimately linked to the growth and history of the Human race by one crucial factor: our souls. Most of us already believe that we have individual souls as human beings. In that they are correct. The catch is

that each of our individual souls is actually a tiny part of The One which inhabits us from just before birth until our death. In a sense, that is the one main factor that differentiates us humans from all the other species living on this planet. When we die, our soul leaves our body and returns to The One for a period of cleansing. Then that soul goes to inhabit another newborn. That is basically what the Hindus call 'reincarnation'. However, contrary to Hindu belief, the souls from The One only inhabit human beings, never animals or plants. The vast majority of us are unable to access the memories from the past incarnations of our souls, but a very few do, thanks to the help of The One, who has graced this way in the past a few people it chose to be one of its 'Chosen'. My mother Ingrid is one of those rare 'Chosen' and so was her adoptive mother, Nancy Laplante, the celebrated Canadian time traveler from the year 2012 who was involuntarily transported to the year 1940 by scientists from the future who wanted to use her as a sort of guinea pig for their time travel experiments. As a Chosen of The One, my mother was able to remember all of her past incarnations, which covered over 7,000 years in history, plus gained a number of supernatural powers. However, this did not change the fact that my mother was and still is a patriotic American officer who swore to protect the United States from its enemies, both external and internal. She is in fact doing this right now, directing the war against China, which had instigated terrorist attacks against our civilian airliners only a week ago."

"Nancy, when you talk about internal enemies of the United States, who are they, in your mind?"

"They are the Americans who are opposed to our democratic rules or who use violence to impose their beliefs on other Americans. The Ku Klux Klan is one prime example of an internal enemy of the United States, along with its supporters who wants to perpetuate racial segregation and white supremacy, often through violence and intimidation. Organized crime would be another example of internal enemies of our country. That includes both home-grown crime syndicates and foreign-related organizations, like the Chinese Triads, the Italian Mafia and the Japanese Yakuza."

"I see!" said Amanpour, whose heart was now beating faster after hearing Nancy's revelations: this was going to be one dynamite of an interview! "Tell me more about yourself as a person, Nancy. What are your goals in life and your motivations?"

"Right now, my main goal and occupation is to study music and eventually become a professional musician and artist. I am actually studying at the Juilliard School of Music, here in New York, and have formed an amateur band with a few friends. As

for my motivations, they are simple: to help others around me as much as I can and to encourage the notions of generosity, compassion and tolerance among us. I also of course would like to have fun while doing all that: after all, I am still a teenage girl.”

“Of course!” said Amanpour, a grin appearing on her face. “All girls...and boys, wants to have fun in life. However, some may say that, as an angel, you should promote a, uh, more prudish lifestyle. What do you say to that?”

“I say ‘B.S.’ to that!” replied firmly Nancy. “First off, I am only half-angel. My other half is as a human girl. Second, the rules about morality pushed by various religious scriptures and dogmas are in my mind pure hypocrisy, intolerance and, too often, instituted misogyny. What I am going to say now may shock and scandalize many in the United States and around the World, but it needs to be said, because it is the truth, plain and simple. All those religious scriptures, dogmas and beliefs around the World are pure fiction, written and propagated by men from the past, men who were ignorant of the true nature of our planet and of the Universe and who mostly invented religions in order to gain power, prestige, money or all three of those. In turn, their intolerant views and beliefs caused an untold and horrific amount of cruelty, intolerance and suffering throughout history, all the while preaching devotion to God and obeisance to their religious rules. You just need to remember the Christian Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, the Thirty-Year War, the English Civil War, the widespread torturing and burning of supposed ‘witches’, the Russian pogroms against Jews and now the various Islamic ‘holy wars’ or ‘Jihad’ afflicting the Middle East. I could also mention the sexual and physical abuse inflicted during many past decades on girls and boys in too many religious schools and hospices in places like Ireland, the United States, Canada and Great Britain. Organized religion is basically a poison for Humanity. If you want to believe in something, I have nothing about that, as long as you don’t use that belief to persecute, hurt or exploit others. In contrast, The One does not want to be worshipped or prayed to. It simply wants Humanity to evolve and improve on its own.”

“Then, why does your ‘One’ sends angels to Earth or name a few ‘Chosen’, Nancy?”

“Mostly to encourage us in becoming more compassionate and tolerant, Christiane. As for me, as I said earlier, I was born as a girl and only wish to have a productive, happy life while helping the others around me.”

“That is a most normal and commendable goal, Nancy. However, many will still question your motives and may even dispute what you said to me tonight. What do you say to that?”

“I will let my father answer that question, Christiane.”

At first, Amanpour did not understand what she meant by that. Then, her studio producer, who was sitting behind the television cameras, became white as a sheet while uttering an exclamation in a strangled voice.

“Oh my God!”

Looking behind her, where her producer was looking, Christiane nearly passed out from a rush of blood to her brain at the sight of a four-meter-high brilliant, semi-translucent humanoid shape standing next to the back wall of the studio. With the two cameramen present showing commendable professionalism and nerves of steel and pointing their cameras at the luminescent being, the latter made a gesture with both hands while speaking in a male voice that resonated around the studio.

“DO NOT FEAR ME, AS I CAME IN PEACE. MY NAME IS MICHAEL AND I AM NANCY’S FATHER. I ALSO AM WHAT YOU WOULD CALL AN ARCHANGEL AND AM PART OF ‘THE ONE’, LIKE NANCY IS PARTLY A PART OF ‘THE ONE’. I WILL NOW CHANGE MY ASPECT, IN ORDER TO STOP SCARING YOU.”

Still being filmed by the two cameras, the giant translucent shape gradually shrank in size while becoming a solid figure, ending up into a tall, extremely handsome man appearing to be in his thirties and wearing a white robe and sandals. The one thing that stayed abnormal about him was the fact that his eyes were brilliant points of white light. Christiane Amanpour, like the two cameramen, the studio producer and the two makeup artist women who had been watching the interview from the back of the room, watched the ‘man’ walk to the sofa where Nancy was sitting and bend over to kiss her on her forehead.

“It is good to be with you, my daughter.”

“And it is a great joy to me to be able to see you again, Father.”

Christiane nearly jumped out of her chair when Nancy turned her head to look at her: Nancy’s eyes were now dots of white light, like those of her father.

“I believe that this should convince the non-believers about my story, Christiane. If you wish to ask questions to my father, go right ahead.”

Christiane Amanpour, feeling close to passing out from the intense emotions she felt now, did her best to regain control of herself. Still, her voice came out much weaker than usual.

“I certainly have questions, many questions for you, Michael.”

“Then, let’s make it easy for you, Miss Amanpour.” Replied Michael while sitting next to Nancy on the sofa. However, both of them still had their eyes project white light as he spoke.

“I will only say this about ‘The One’: it is not the ‘God’ of your Christian Bible, nor the ‘Allah’ of the Koran, nor any of the gods venerated in the past of Humanity. It is simply a spiritual being who has no wish to be worshiped or venerated and who only want to see Humanity improve. The One has been following the progress...and regress, of Humanity for millions of years by now. It has rarely intervened in the past, mostly through its chosen and its angels, and intends to continue to do so. Unfortunately, some of its interventions were either misconstrued or, more often, hijacked by ignorant men bent on using its interventions in order to exploit them for personal gain. In the colorful words of this time and place, much of what you will read in today’s so-called sacred scriptures are pure baloney, fictions invented by ignorant, intolerant and often misogynistic men in order to subjugate and exploit the gullible ones around them. Even today, too many of these religious leaders and their gullible followers keep denying science. Yes, humans have evolved from primitive hominids. No, there was never such things as the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve, the Devil, Hell, Heaven or Purgatory. There is only this Earth and Humanity. However, Humanity is not alone as a sentient race in the Universe, far from it. This galaxy, like the rest of the Universe, is full of life, always have been. Your own recent discoveries of primitive forms of life on Mars and in the Jupiter and Saturn Systems are proof of that. Right now, the main worry of The One is that Humanity could wipe itself out through a nuclear war that would destroy life around this planet. You already have come close to such a catastrophe, mostly due to the admirable work and dedication of Ingrid Dows, who is both your top military commander and a Chosen of The One. Beware, though! The patience of The One has limits. If someone tries again to trigger a nuclear war, then The One may be forced to intervene. Those who will have caused his wrath will then bitterly regret it. This is the warning I came to pass to you in the United States and around the World. I will now leave you in peace.”

Michael, getting up from the sofa, gave another kiss to Nancy, this time on her cheek, before walking towards the back wall of the stage. Watched by the incredulous Amanpour, the studio producer and the two makeup women, while filmed by the two cameramen, Michael simply walked through the wall and disappeared, like a ghost would do. Christiane Amanpour had to take a deep breath before being able to speak while looking at the cameras.

“This was Michael, father of Nancy Dows and an angel of the entity he called ‘The One’, ladies and gentlemen. This was easily the most shattering report or interview I ever made and I have no doubt that this will also be an Earth-shattering scene you ever watched. We will now take a break for a commercial before continuing this interview of Nancy Dows.”

As soon as the red lights on the cameras switched off, signaling that they were not filming anymore, Christiane Amanpour buried her face in her hands while resting her elbows on her desk, emotionally drained.

“My God! This...this was so incredible!”

She then felt the left arm of Nancy gently taking hold of her shoulders and raised her head to look up at Nancy’s face. The latter’s eyes were now back to their normal blue aspect.

“I still have difficulties believing all this, Nancy. Yet, it is impossible to deny what I saw.”

“That is quite normal, Christiane. Only a dead person would not be moved by all this. I think that I should go soon: Michael said all that had been important to be said, while I already talked quite a lot about me. I still want to be able to study music like a normal girl and I sincerely hope that it will still be possible for me to do after tonight.” Christiane Amanpour shook her head slowly in response.

“Nancy, for me and all those who watched this interview, you will now be an angel girl, whether you like it or not.”

Christiane Amanpour quickly concluded the interview a few minutes later, thanking Nancy for accepting to be interviewed before the latter left the studio to return to her apartment. Landing on the roof of her building and entering it via its roof access hatch, Nancy walked into her apartment’s lounge only to be nearly assaulted by Lucy, Sarah and Erika, who competed to kiss and hug her.

"Oh, Nancy, you were positively fantastic during your interview." ranted Sarah.
"And your father Michael is a hell of a nice-looking man!"

"You mean 'archangel', Sarah?"

"Bah! Archangel...man: he was incredible-looking either way!"

"I suppose that's one way to look at it. I..."

Her telephone rang at that precise moment, cutting her off and making her throw an irritated look at it.

"I hope that this is not yet another request for an interview."

"You won't know until you will answer the call." replied philosophically Erika.

"Right!"

Going to her telephone and picking up its receiver, Nancy then spoke in a facetious tone.

"This is the home of Nancy Dows, the Angel Girl. For an interview, press..."

She was then interrupted by a clear laugh which she recognized at once.

"Mom?"

"Yes, it's me, Nancy. I just watched your interview on CNN and I must congratulate you on it: you said all the right things the right way and Michael's appearance was also a nice touch. By the way, The One discretely warned me that he would appear during your interview. But I mainly called you for another reason. I have a possible good news to pass to you, as long as you will promise me to keep quiet about it until further notice."

"You know me, Mom: my word is golden. So, what's that good news?"

"It is still tentative and will depend on how President Perot will react to it, but the Chinese just contacted me to say that they are ready to negotiate peace with us. I told them in return that I would suspend immediately all the bombings and attacks while President Perot considers their offer."

"That is great news, Mother! I hope that the President and his cabinet will prove reasonable about it. Please, keep me posted about the developments about this."

"I will, Angel Girl!"

Nancy's response to that was to make a noise with her mouth before hanging up.

CHAPTER 19 – THE WAR IS OVER



Ingrid Dows



Nancy Dows



Lucy Dows



Leonardo Dows

20:15 (Washington Time)

Friday, March 29, 1996 'C'

326 South Grove Street, Aurora Hills

Arlington, Virginia, U.S.A.

“Welcome home, Leonardo! How was your flight from Boston?”

“Quite normal, Mom: there was no bomb in the baggage hold this time.”

“You joker! Come in: your two sisters have already arrived from New York.”

Dragging his suitcase behind him, Leonardo entered the main door of his family house, then took the time to share a hug and a kiss with Ingrid.

“It is nice to be home, even if only for the weekend, Mom.”

“And it is great to see you again, my son.”

Leonardo, who had turned nineteen only two weeks ago, couldn't help chuckle then.

“That actually feels funny, Mom: you may be 71-years-old but you look as young as me and Nancy.”

“And your sister Nancy is actually thirteen-years-old, despite looking to be eighteen, while my first adopted child, Hien, is now approaching fifty, is married and has a son. I know that we make for quite a weird-looking family, but we are a happy family, which is the most important thing about us. Go upstairs to your room and drop your suitcase and coat, then come back down to the kitchen. I have a nice bottle of champagne ready to celebrate the official end of the war with China. Nancy is also waiting to tell us about something else but she has been treating it like a national secret: she even closed her mind to me in order to hide her secret.”

“Oh?! That should be something truly important, then. I will make it quick upstairs.”

As promised, Leonardo showed up in the house’s kitchen three minutes later, finding his two sisters Nancy and Lucy waiting for him there with Ingrid. There was also a bottle of champagne and four flute glasses on the service counter. Taking the time to share hugs and kisses with Nancy and Lucy, Leonardo then gave a questioning look to Ingrid.

“Mom, I know that you want us to celebrate the end of the war with China but the medias have been quite avaricious about the terms signed between us and China.”

“That’s because the medias haven’t been given yet the details of the peace accord, Leo. They will be officially announced tomorrow, once everybody involved will have signed the accord. However, knowing that you and your sisters can be depended upon to keep secrets, here are the main points of the accord: in exchange for us stopping all attacks on China, the Chinese have promised that they will never again initiate hostile military or terrorist acts against the United States or its allies. That includes Taiwan, Japan, Vietnam, the Philippines and Korea. The Chinese also renounced officially their sovereignty claims over the South China Sea. Such claims would anyway be impossible to sustain now that the Chinese Navy has practically ceased to exist, along with much of their air force and all of their nuclear forces. By the time that the Chinese asked for negotiations, we already had destroyed their navy and air force. Only their army is still intact but without its supporting defense industries, whose plants have been bombed to rubble.”

Ingrid then turned and looked at Nancy and Lucy.

“Now that I have revealed my big secret, time for you two to reveal yours. What did you want to announce to me and Leo?”

Nancy had a big grin on her face as she answered Ingrid.

“Well, my newfound celebrity as the Angel Girl has attracted the attention of a small music recording studio in Manhattan, Mom. I was able to sign a deal with them to record the first album of our band, which by the way is now called ‘The D.C. Six’. The studio will record and edit our album in exchange for a minor percentage of any sales or royalties we will collect for our music, and will also let us keep the masters for our album. On my part, I will pay the sound engineer and technicians involved in the production of

our album, plus a minimal fee for renting the services of their studio. We will start recording our album there next weekend.”

“But that’s great news, Nancy!” exclaimed Ingrid, overjoyed. “Your band members must be ecstatic!”

“Oh, they are, Mom!” replied Lucy, also smiling widely.

“And what will be the title of your first album, Lucy?” asked Leonardo, both curious and happy for his sisters. Lucy nearly shouted her answer then.

“Sometime, Somewhere! In view of our mainly historical and ethnically diverse repertoire, we thought that it would be a very appropriate title for it.”

“ Sometime, Somewhere... That sounds great! I am sure that your album will have a great success.” declared Ingrid before filling the flutes with champagne, then raising her glass high.

“TO PEACE AND THE D.C. SIX!”

“TO PEACE AND THE D.C. SIX!”

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