

CODENAME: ATHENA



A SCIENCE-FICTION NOVEL

BY

MICHEL POULIN

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Translated and adapted from the novel in French by the same author

NOM DE CODE: ATHÉNA

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WARNING TO POTENTIAL READERS

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

DEDICATION

This novel is dedicated to all the brave women who served or lived through World War Two and who were too often ignored, discounted or ridiculed by men while risking their lives for their countries or their families. Those women include, but are not limited to: the British and German female auxiliaries who served behind the front lines; the women of the various European Resistance cells who too often endured a fate worse than death at the hands of the German secret police; the military nurses who cared for wounded soldiers, and the patriotic female Soviet soldiers, combat pilots and partisans who helped turn the Nazi tide around.

ABOUT THIS NOVEL

This science-fiction novel is the first installment in a collection of five novels depicting the adventures through time of Nancy Laplante, a female Canadian war correspondent and reserve army officer from the year 2012. The second installment, ADVENTURES THROUGH TIME, will be published as soon as it is ready, sometime in 2012.

TABLE OF CONTENT

TABLE OF CONTENT	3
CHAPTER 1 – HOME	5
CHAPTER 2 – TIMELINE	12
CHAPTER 3 – REVELATIONS.....	43
CHAPTER 4 – ACCEPTANCE	56
CHAPTER 5 – CODENAME: ATHENA	63
CHAPTER 6 – COMBAT TEST	76
CHAPTER 7 – CABINET MEETING	89
CHAPTER 8 – JUMP TRIALS	97
CHAPTER 9 – COUNTERPUNCH	104
CHAPTER 10 – NIGHT JUMP	118
CHAPTER 11 – RETREAT	132
CHAPTER 12 – REST AND RECUPERATION	149
CHAPTER 13 – NEW JOB	162
CHAPTER 14 – CRUSH.....	179
CHAPTER 15 – SHOOTOUT	193
CHAPTER 16 – PROMOTION.....	212
CHAPTER 17 – KITTING OUT	227
CHAPTER 18 – RIFLE TRIALS	242
CHAPTER 19 – PROJECT BLOWHARD	249
CHAPTER 20 – PHANTOMS IN THE NIGHT	263
CHAPTER 21 – OUT OF REACH.....	281
CHAPTER 22 – NEW WEAPONS	297
CHAPTER 23 – TRANSATLANTIC COOPERATION.....	311
CHAPTER 24 – RAID ON WISSANT	337
CHAPTER 25 – DUEL AT SEA	372
CHAPTER 26 – INGRID	383
CHAPTER 27 – BATTLE PLANS	401
CHAPTER 28 – OPERATION BACKSTABBER	413
CHAPTER 29 – NEW INMATES	434
CHAPTER 30 – SUMMIT CONFERENCE	455
CHAPTER 31 – INVESTITURE	467

CHAPTER 32 – CAPTURED	479
CHAPTER 33 – AGONY	489
CHAPTER 34 – HOSPITAL STAY	501
CHAPTER 35 – COLDITZ CASTLE	518
CHAPTER 36 – BURNING BRIDGES	579
CHAPTER 37 – 3384.....	603
CHAPTER 38 – COLLECTING FRIENDS	629

CHAPTER 1 – HOME

15:10 (Eastern Standard Time)

Thursday, October 11, 2012

Boucherville, Province of Québec

Canada

Nancy Laplante stopped her red Mitsubishi Outlander 2010 sports utility vehicle in her reserved parking spot in the underground garage of her condominium building, then cut the V-6 engine and let out a sigh of relief. Home at last! Home and a well-deserved vacation after five weeks on a hard, dirty and dangerous assignment in the border area of Eastern Afghanistan. As the top field correspondent for the military and international affairs magazine CONFLICTS, she spent many months per year traveling to such dangerous, chaotic places around the World. She had however been helped greatly in that assignment by the fact that two of the nine languages she spoke fluently were Pashto and Dari, languages she had opportunities to improve and practice in the past during two six-month operational tours in Afghanistan as a Canadian Army reserve officer. Nancy always had an affinity for languages, something also helped by her phenomenal memory and her IQ of 153, which made her officially a genius according to the Mensa Institute.

Stepping out of her car, Nancy stretched her six foot tall frame to take out the kinks in her muscles. The superintendent of the condominium, who had been changing one of the light bulbs lighting the garage, approached her with a large smile on his face. At 45 and still single, he was fond of Nancy, probably because he fantasized about dating the athletic young woman. At least he kept it to himself and never bothered her.

“Welcome back to Boucherville, Miss Laplante. How was your trip?”

“Tiring, I’m afraid. I’m going straight to my lakeside cottage for a needed vacation. Do you have any mail for me?”

“Oh, your usual mountain of magazines, a few letters and more than a few bills! I’ll go and get them. You will be going up to your condo?”

“Yes, I have to pack for my leave. Could I abuse you and ask for the help of your little luggage cart later? I have to bring down a ton of things.”

The short, stocky man understood her immediately. Nancy's cottage had been burglarized a year ago, with all of her appliances and electronic equipment taken away. Since then, she made a point of hauling back and forth anything of value when she went to her lakeside residence, situated in the Laurentian Mountains.

As the man went towards the elevator, Nancy surveyed her luggages in her car and decided against bringing them upstairs: she would need her notes and portable equipment in order to prepare and edit a full report on her trip during this incoming vacation. As for her dirty clothes from her trip, she could wash them at leisure once at the cottage. She locked her car before going to the staircase of the garage and running up the stairs to the second floor. She fumbled for her keys in her coat pocket and opened the door of her suite, stepping in her comfortably furnished lounge. The first thing she did before anything else was to go in her bedroom's closet to check on her firearms. To her relief, the solid polymer carrying case was still locked and at the exact same place she had left it. Unlocking it, Nancy verified that all five handguns were still there. A smile appeared on her face when she took out her favorite gun from the case. Heavily customized and with gold plating on its frame, the Desert Eagle caliber .50 Action Express pistol weighed heavily in her hand, its 72 ounces of normal weight further increased by a Simmons 3 X 28 scope and a muzzle compensator. That gun had helped her outshoot that braggart American at the last metallic silhouette target shooting competition she had participated in near Albany, in the American state of New York. The moron had claimed that no women could shoot that kind of gun without being knocked back by the recoil. The only things that kept being knocked back when Nancy started shooting then had been the steel plates of the targets at 150 and 200 yards. Putting back in place the huge pistol, she brought the gun case in the living room, then took out a few boxes of ammunition from a separate, fireproof strong box and loaded them in the gun case: the small outdoor range she had built behind her cottage would see some use during this vacation. A quiet knock on the door announced the superintendant, his arms full of mail.

"Oh, thanks, Claude. Could you put these on the kitchen table?"

"No problem, Miss Laplante. When do you want me to help you with your stuff?"

"Not for another hour, at the least. I will come for you when I will be ready. By the way, you can call me Nancy, and thank you for everything."

Claude beamed as if he just had won the lottery.

"My pleasure, Miss La... er, Nancy."

He then closed the door behind him, leaving her to her packing.

It took about two minutes for Nancy to sort out her mail into four piles: one for the junk mail; one for personal letters; one for bills and another, the biggest, for the various specialized military and international affairs magazines she subscribed to. Opening and reading the various letters and bills took her another ten minutes. Finally, she selected the magazines she wanted to bring on vacation. Then the serious job of packing began, with extra caution taken in putting her computer and electronic appliances in their shock-resistant transport boxes. She packed a small but diverse wardrobe, with the emphasis on informal and sports clothing. When she was finished, Nancy started heading towards the entrance door to get Claude to help her move the small mountain of boxes and suitcases, but stopped in midstride.

“Shit! I forgot to check my damn answering machine.”

As expected, the tape was filled to near capacity. Only two calls were worth noting: one was from her editor at CONFLICTS MAGAZINE, reminding her that he needed her story ready in two weeks time; the other was from her army reserve unit.

“Captain Laplante, this is captain Lemire, calling at 15:05 hours on Thursday, October eleven. I would need to speak to you as soon as possible about an operational matter. Please call me as soon as you can. Thanks.”

Nancy swore quietly and called back the regular army officer at the Fourth Intelligence Company, which was housed in a converted warehouse building in the Longue-Pointe garrison in Montreal. To her relief, Captain Lemire answered after the second ring, speaking in French.

“Fourth Intelligence Company, Captain Lemire speaking.”

“Marc, this is Nancy. You wanted to speak to me about something urgent?”

From formal, the tone of Lemire immediately became friendly.

“Effectively, Nancy. You just came back from your latest trip to Afghanistan, I suppose?”

“I just arrived from the airport. Before you ask, my trip was a bit rough: the Afghan Army still has a long way to go before it could control effectively its country...if ever. I also have a few new shrapnel holes in my civilian tactical vest.”

Marc Lemire hesitated a bit before coming to the reason of his call. Nancy Laplante, a junior officer he considered extremely competent, apart of being an extraordinary linguist, already had accumulated in her thirteen years of part-time service more operational tours overseas than any other officer in the whole Quebec Sector, be they regulars or reservists. Her language skills were just too rare and precious for the staffers at Canadian Forces Headquarters in Ottawa for them not asking for her when facing a special manning crunch overseas. The fact that she had

always performed brilliantly and with exemplary courage also endeared her a lot in the eyes of Ottawa.

“Uh, Nancy, I know that you just came back from a working trip in Afghanistan and that your last operational military tour, as part of our expeditionary force for Libya, was completed only twelve months ago, but the Army needs you...again. One of our officers training Afghan Army recruits in Herat, one of our rare people able to speak Dari or Pashto, has been wounded in a Taliban attack and is being repatriated for treatment. Would you be ready to volunteer as a quick drop-in replacement? I promise you that you will be able to skip that whole chicken shit pre-tour training process.”

Nancy giggled at those last words: she and many others at her unit despised the normally mandatory period of pre-deployment training, which went on for months, imposed by Ottawa staffers. While useful to a point, that training was conducted under the aegis of regular combat arms officers and NCOs who too often showed disdain or even contempt towards non-combat trades soldiers. They forgot or overlooked the fact that those non-combat trades soldiers were highly trained specialists whose particular skills were the reason for their inclusion in the mission, and not their skills as frontline combat soldiers. In Nancy's mind, judging the suitability for a mission of, say, a vehicle mechanic on his or her ability to do assault tactics or effect long road marches while wearing heavy backpacks was positively stupid. Reservists were looked upon with even more prejudice by these same combat trade instructors, for their lack of experience and generally less in-depth training. She had herself experienced many times that sort of attitude before during her past tours and had not hesitated then to shut up those instructors by equaling or bettering them at their own game.

“I accept to volunteer, Marc, on one condition: that I am allowed to take first the two weeks of vacation I had planned for on my return from assignment. I really need to decompress and also have to write my tour report for my editor, especially if I have to tell him that I won't be available for another six months...again.”

“Don't worry about that, Nancy. I will advise Ottawa to be patient. With your operational record, I don't think that any of those desk-bound paper pushers will be able to accuse you of slacking off. My only request would be to see you on Saturday, so that I could make you fill and sign your deployment papers and also arrange a visit to the base quartermaster, so that you could replace your used combat gear with new or improved kit. Uh, could you bring your going out uniform with medals at the same time? We are holding as well a short unit parade for the unit's honorary colonel.”

Nancy sighed, seeing her vacation plans already being nibbled away bit by bit.

“Very well, Marc, I will show up on Saturday with my kit and uniforms. Anything else?”

“No! Thank you for accepting to volunteer. You decidedly are an irreplaceable asset.”

“I know.” Replied Nancy maliciously. “See you on Saturday.”

Putting down the receiver, she went back in the bedroom and started stuffing another bag, along with her big military backpack. The camouflaged, shapeless combat uniforms went in first, along with her web gear and kevlar helmet, followed by her goretex camouflaged coat. Last to be packed was her dark green-coloured service dress uniform, with medals. Nancy caressed the rows totaling ten ribbons on the left side of the tunic, feeling pride as she looked at them. At age 30, with thirteen years of part-time service in the Canadian Forces reserves, she wore more medals than most regular officers and NCOs of the Canadian Army, with the ribbon of the Medal of Bravery topping the three full rows of ribbons. She had up to now served on a total of seven operational field missions overseas: two times in Afghanistan and once each in Kosovo, the Syria-Lebanon-Israel region, Haiti, Darfur and near Libya. These tours, along with her experiences as a war correspondent in various war zones around the World, had helped satisfy her unending appetite for adventure and travel. Skydiving about every spring and summer weekends, apart of helping to keep current the parachutist qualification badge on her uniform, also satisfied that craving for action and thrills that had possessed her since being a young girl. She knew her limits, but tried to push them as much as possible by staying in top physical shape, keeping her mind alert, learning constantly and improving herself in every way possible.

Finally done with her preparations, Nancy made a quick trip to the superintendent's office on the ground floor. Claude had already put aside his baggage cart, which made it possible to haul all of the young woman's equipment in one trip via the building's elevator. Another five minutes were used to make all her kit fit in the rear of the Mitsubishi Outlander. She then returned the cart before going back to the garage and driving out. Her first stop was at her bank, where she paid up her accumulated bills and took out enough cash money for her vacation. Crossing the central hallway of the commercial center, she visited a newspapers and magazines store to check for the latest novelties, buying three magazines and a newspaper. Acting on an impulse, she also bought the latest edition of the PLAYGIRL magazine after its cover had hooked her eyes. Going to the big grocery store of the commercial center, Nancy bought a few bags of groceries to stock up her cottage and finally went to fill up her car's tank before heading Northwest towards Lake Manitou and vacation.

17:54 (local time)

The Laurentians

This vacation was shaping up to be as agreeable as she expected it to be. Contrary to normal for a late afternoon, the roads were not packed solid and she was able to make good speed, crossing first into the island of Montreal via the Louis-Hippolyte-Lafontaine tunnel, then passing through Montreal and Laval in record time, taking Highway 15 North towards the Laurentians. The region, a succession of hills and eroded mountains sprinkled with a multitude of lakes and covered with thick forests of mostly pines and firs, was normally beautiful at most times. Now, with the pastel colours of autumn, it was positively gorgeous. Despite the fresh temperature, Nancy rolled down a bit her window to smell the scent of the region, cranking up at the same time the volume of her radio so as to keep listening to the latest song by Shakira, herself singing along in Spanish. Many of her friends had often wondered why, with her fine voice and devastating good looks, she had not gone into professional singing, comparing her to a more muscular and much taller variant of the famous Canadian singer Shanya Twain. Her answer had been that she was too much of an adrenaline junkie to be simply a singer.

Going off Highway 15 at Saint-Sauveur-Des-Monts, she rolled on Road 364, then Road 329, passing near three of the numerous ski resorts in the area, all of which were actively preparing for the hordes of winter skiers to come. The ski resort of Lake Manitou soon appeared, telling her she was closing in on her cottage. A brief stop at a service station let her both fill her car and empty her bladder prior to taking the unpaved road leading to her lakeside cottage. Her now growing joy as she neared the log house in the approaching darkness would have been doused if she had known that she was being watched. Hiding behind a curtain of trees, a large ovoid object floated near the ground in silence. Inside, two bald men with Eurasian features were watching the approach of the car on a holographic screen. One of them used a six-fingered hand to zoom in on Nancy through the windshield of her Outlander. He then spoke in a variant of English that would have been incomprehensible to any human of this time period.

“This is truly a perfect specimen for our first field test of the time distortion analyzer. She should be able to cause massive disruptions of the timeline, hence producing an easily detectable distortion signature.”

“Quite correct. Once our system is proven, we will be able to selectively shape and manipulate an alternate timeline of our liking.”

Nancy finally stopped her car near its side entrance and turned off the engine. As she was ready to step out, a large object suddenly moved into her field of view. She only had time to watch for one second the impossible craft visible through the windshield, her mouth opened ajar in surprise, before a bright beam hit the car and knocked her unconscious. The craft then floated to within a few feet above the car. Both soon disappeared together in a halo of white light.

CHAPTER 2 – TIMELINE

Somewhere in time

Somewhere west of London, England

Both the craft and the Mitsubishi Outlander, with an unconscious Nancy still collapsed on the steering wheel, reappeared in a small clearing near a two-lane paved road. As soon as the car was deposited softly on the ground, the craft moved slowly sideways to a safe distance, then started to gain altitude. It barely had time to start clearing the top of the surrounding trees before a low flying aircraft overflew the opening, heading directly into the craft. Both pilots were equally surprised by the appearance of the other and were unable to avoid the collision.

The resulting explosion was seen and heard by a young woman named Megan Thomas, who was hitchhiking back to Northolt from Aylesbury after having attended her grandmother's funeral. The traffic was still very scarce at this time of the morning and she was wondering if somebody would pick her up after that last ride that had dropped her before turning towards Uxbridge. She was only a few hundred yards away from the fireball and alternatively ran and walked towards the now rising column of smoke. Finally arriving at the site, she saw the burning debris of at least one aircraft dispersed over a wide area. She then noticed a red car in a corner of the clearing opposite the debris. It was immobile and silent as Megan cautiously approached it. Something about the car was weird. It certainly was not a model she had ever seen before and the paint scheme was definitely not military. While it had a rugged, utilitarian air to it, it was also quite attractive and futuristic in appearance.

Megan saw a form, unmoving, in the front passenger seat and circled the car towards it. She understood her mistake only when she was close enough to touch the door handle: the person was sitting in the driver's seat, which told Megan that it was foreign-made, with the steering wheel on the left side instead of the standard right side position in England. Suspicion and fear took hold of her for a moment, but her natural curiosity finally made her look closer. She then saw that the driver was a woman, tall, with neck-length black hair and wearing a brown leather coat. The woman was apparently unconscious. Deciding that she had to do something, Megan opened the driver's door and checked the woman for a pulse: it was slow but strong and she also heard her breathe softly. Reassured, she dragged the woman out of the car and laid her in a more comfortable position on the ground. The stranger was indeed very

tall for a woman and quite heavy, even if she was athletic-looking. It reminded her of ballet dancers, who had strong but svelte bodies. The stranger was certainly pretty, with a well-developed figure further enhanced by skin-tight black pants and short, elegant black leather boots. Her face was smooth, with a small nose and large, still closed eyes.

Those eyelids finally started fluttering, revealing pale green pupils. Megan hovered above her face so that she could see her easily. A soft moan was followed by a few weakly spoken words that sounded like French. Trying to remember her school years French lessons, Megan spoke slowly, hoping that the stranger would understand her. She did.

“How do you feel, Miss?”

“My head... hurts. Where am I?”

“I just dragged you out of your car. You were unconscious.”

The stranger hesitated a moment, then switched to English, to Megan’s relief.

“Your... accent. British?”

“That is correct. My name is Megan Thomas. And yours?”

“Nancy... Nancy Laplante. Where am I?”

“Near Uxbridge. I was hitch-hiking towards Northolt when I saw the explosion and came here.”

Megan was surprised by the sudden look of alarm on the stranger’s face.

“Uxbridge? Northolt? What explosion? Could you help me sit?”

“Certainly, Nancy.”

Megan had to use most of her strength to help her, as Nancy was still quite groggy. The French woman surveyed her surroundings with apparently increasing dismay and panic.

“My cottage, the lake, where are they?”

“I don’t know what you are talking about, miss. You are near Northolt. Where are you from?”

“Boucherville. I know of no Northolt near Montreal.”

Megan was not able to speak for a few seconds. Was this woman crazy? At least she now knew that this Nancy was Canadian, not French.

“Montreal is in Canada. This is England, miss!”

“...England? I...”

Nancy rose on her feet slowly and shakily. Megan had to help keep her from losing her balance. She finally steadied Nancy against the car. The Canadian, or so she claimed, looked around with horror.

“My cottage, gone! I was just arriving there for a vacation when that thing showed up over the lake and somehow knocked me out.”

“What thing?”

“Some sort of flying craft of an impossible kind. I...”

Nancy surveyed the crash site at the end of the field, where two twisted aircraft propellers were visible among the debris, along with a piece of fuselage bearing a black swastika, then turned towards Megan, a sick expression on her face.

“You said earlier that this here is near Northolt, England. Were you serious?”

Megan suddenly started to be irritated by all this nonsense.

“Of course I was! What kind of game are you playing? There is no cottage or lake here and, as for going on a vacation, you chose a funny place and time for one. We are at war, don't you know?” Megan had nearly screamed her last sentence, which made Nancy flinch. She now looked at Megan's uniform as if she was seeing it for the first time, scrutinizing in particular the various patches sewn on it. She suddenly looked sick.

“A British Women Auxiliary Air Force uniform, old style. God, no! **NO!**” She said as she banged her fist furiously on the car's hood. After a prolonged silence, Nancy turned again towards Megan.

“What is the date today?”

“The date? Well, september the second.”

“And the year?”

“Are you kidding me?”

“THE YEAR?”

It was Nancy's turn to scream and Megan's one to flinch.

“But, 1940, of course!”

“Of course... “

Another moment passed in silence.

“Megan, you know what was the date when I arrived at my cottage outside of Montreal?”

Megan suddenly felt uncomfortable.

“September second, 1940, I presume!”

“Not even close! Try October the eleventh, 2012.”

It was Megan's turn to feel funny. What Nancy just said was impossible, pure nonsense, but why would anybody try to push such a ridiculous story? She suddenly realized that Nancy was walking away, going towards the crash site.

“Hey! Where are you going?”

"I'm going to see if I can get some answers. You're coming?"

Megan had to nearly run to keep up with the resolute pace of the much taller woman. What they came across was a typical aircraft crash site: lots of twisted, charred pieces that bore little resemblance with their previous appearance, mixed with a few larger, more recognisable pieces. One of the large pieces was an aircraft propeller. Nancy looked at it for a few seconds, her face grave.

"Bomber propeller, probably German."

Megan was taken aback by the assurance in Nancy's voice.

"How could you be so sure of that?"

"Look at the propeller hubcap. It is large and semi-spherical. Most fighter propellers in World War Two had smaller hubcaps, with German ones having an axial opening for a cannon or heavy machinegun barrel. If I remember my historical references, R.A.F. bases in this area belong to Fighter Command, not Bomber Command."

Megan looked at Nancy with suspicion.

"What do you do actually for a living? You seem to know a lot about military matters."

That made Nancy smile wryly.

"My main occupation is as a war correspondent. I also happen to be a reserve captain in the Canadian military intelligence. Believe me, I have seen quite a few crash sites, although they were of jet aircraft instead of propeller-driven aircraft."

Megan gave her a blank look.

"What is a jet aircraft?"

Nancy started to answer but reconsidered.

"I will show you later."

Continuing her inspection, Nancy was led by the sickening smell of burned flesh to what was left of a person. Megan took one look and immediately turned away before throwing up. Nancy had to brace herself mentally before starting to move away debris from the corpse with a twisted metal bar. She suddenly had a good look at a six-fingered hand and became as pale as a sheet.

"NO! It can't happen to me! Not this!"

"Nancy, what's wrong? What did you see?"

Nancy, shaking like a leaf, sat down away from her discovery. When she looked at Megan again, it was with eyes filled with absolute despair and with tears in her eyes.

"Whoever brought me here against my will is dead. I am now stuck forever in this rotten time period, with everything that means anything to me now 72 years away in the future!"

She then lowered her head on her knees and started sobbing. Megan could not help then to feel sorry for her, even if her story was completely unbelievable. She knelt besides Nancy and hugged her until she had controlled her tears. It took a long time.

Her lips still trembling, Nancy raised her face toward the WAAF and spoke in a broken voice.

“What am I going to do now? Nobody knows me. I have nothing left except my car and what is in it and I will probably be locked up in a mental institution if I tell anybody what happened to me today. Even the money I have on me is probably now worthless. I am a castaway!”

Megan silently thought that Nancy was right about the mental institution. However, she couldn't help feel bad for her and tried to comfort her.

“Look Nancy, the one thing of importance now is that we are at war and that England needs everybody's help. You said that you are an officer in you military intelligence. I am sure that they could use your talents.”

“They?”

“My superiors at R.A.F. Northolt. Believe me, we can use all the help we can get these days!”

Which was too true unfortunately. England's situation was truly desperate as it was facing alone the might of the German war machine and was expecting a German invasion at any time. Nancy seemed to think on that for a minute. When she spoke again she sounded like she had finally accepted her situation.

“O.K., I will drive you to Northolt and see what happens next.”

She then got on her feet and led Megan back towards the car. The minute Megan stepped in the car and looked at the interior, she started reconsidering her opinion on Nancy's story. She had seen before the war pictures of supposedly futuristic concept cars at automobile shows. The interior of those cars now looked downright primitive compared to what was now in front of her. If this was a con job, it was indeed an extremely good one. Nancy, on her part, started the engine, then pushed a button on the central console while looking at a sort of small square screen.

“It was to be expected: my GPS navigational unit is not receiving any signal. Too bad: I will have to navigate the old way.”

“A GPS? What's that?” Asked Megan, confused. Nancy answered while tapping the small screen on the central console with one finger.

"It is a navigation system that uses a network of many radio emitters to triangulate its position. Since the sources of those radio signals still don't exist in 1940, my unit is now useless."

Megan threw her a cautious look then.

"Do you still say that you really come from the future, miss? I have to warn you that I don't think that anyone in Northolt will buy your story."

Nancy stared at her for long seconds before speaking again.

"Do you want me to show you now what a jet aircraft is?"

"Er, yes."

Nancy threw her right arm over the space between the two front seats, digging inside a kind of duffel bag and finally handing Megan a magazine with a large colour picture of an impossible aircraft on its cover. Megan's hands started to shake when she noticed the publishing date on the cover, while Nancy looked gravely at her.

"Do you believe me now, Megan? I assure you that I have enough advanced technology stored in this car to render obsolete most of your science."

Somehow, the WAAF knew she now believed Nancy.

08:45 (GMT)

Monday, September 02, 1940

R.A.F. Northolt, England

"There, the base main gate is only 300 yards away. You will have to stop at the barrier and identify yourself. Let me speak first."

"Yeah, just tell them that I am from the year 2012 and that I have no valid papers. That should do it!"

Megan threw an exasperated look at Nancy.

"Do you have a better idea? We just need to..."

A loud explosion followed by the staccato of machineguns cut off the young WAAF. A shark-like twin-engined propeller aircraft then overflew the main gate just after the small shack disappeared in a multitude of puffs of dust. Nancy understood immediately what was going on.

"German air raid! That was a Junkers 88 bomber!"

"God, what do we do now?"

"Get inside the base. What else?"

That plan immediately changed when Nancy turned in the base main entrance: a soldier was writhing in pain besides the ruined shack, while two other soldiers lay still on top of the sandbags protecting an antiaircraft heavy machinegun position nearby to the left of the gate. Nancy stopped the car abruptly and jumped out.

“Meg, help me get that man in the car. We will drive him to the base infirmary.”

“I’m with you!”

Running to the soldier near the shack, Nancy quickly inspected the large wound on his left leg. Her tours in Afghanistan and the Middle East had given her a wide experience in this kind of matter. She decided to put a temporary garrot on the leg, as the femoral artery had been touched and was pumping out blood massively. The young soldier was still fully conscious and watched on as Nancy, helped by Megan, used his belt as a garrot, then put him back on his good leg. With one woman on each side of the wounded man, the trio slowly covered the distance to the car. Nancy then rapidly threw in the back compartment the luggages covering the rear seats. She was helping Megan to sit the man inside when she heard the sound of approaching piston engines. The soldier turned his head and yelled in alarm.

“THEY ARE COMING BACK FOR A SECOND PASS! TAKE COVER WHILE YOU CAN, LADIES!”

“Like hell we will! Meg, take care of him!”

Nancy then ran towards the machinegun position.

“Nancy, what are you doing? Come back!”

Not bothering to answer, Nancy took hold of the weapon’s firing grips and cocked twice the stiff cocking handle. It was a Browning M2 .50 calibre heavy machinegun, a weapon she was well familiar with and had fired before many times. Planting firmly her feet on the base of the weapon’s antiaircraft pedestal, with feet well separated, she straightened her arms and let her whole body weight fall back, thus using her legs to bodily point the machinegun. She then chose a lead angle in front and slightly above the approaching Junkers 88 and kept her sight on that point as she opened fire. The noise was deafening as she hammered away, letting the bomber cross her line of tracers instead of trying to follow the aircraft. Luckily for Nancy, the bomber was performing a turn and was not coming directly at her, thus giving her a bigger target. Her first burst missed by a few feet. The german nose gunner then returned fire with a wild burst of 7.92mm machinegun fire, with a few bullets striking the sandbags around Nancy and two whistling by her ears. Something slapped her left arm but, not feeling any pain from it, she ignored it and fired a second, longer burst. Tracers hit the right wing and engine as the Junkers 88 turned directly towards Nancy, probably to help its nose machinegunner target

Nancy but also at the same time facilitating her aim. As the German bomber started trailing smoke from its damaged engine, Nancy fired a series of short aimed bursts, targeting the cockpit and nose of the aircraft and hitting it hard. The medium bomber suddenly entered a steep dive as it was about to overfly Nancy, who was pumping burst after burst in it from nearly point blank range. Passing a bare fifty feet above the base main gate, the German plane crashed in the open field on the other side of the road, exploding on impact into a huge ball of fire. A concert of delighted screams greeted Nancy as she scanned the sky to watch for another threat. She did not see any other aircraft nearby but she now saw the group of four WAAFs that had been taking shelter in a trench besides a nearby brick building. The four women were now running towards her, cheering.

“THAT WAS FANTASTIC SHOOTING, MISS!”

“YOU REALLY PLUGGED THAT KRAUT HARD, MISS!”

Nancy grinned at the compliments but had to excuse herself and run to her car. A WAAF NCO looked towards the Mitsubishi Outlander and let a surprised yell out.

“LACW Thomas, is that you there?”

“Supervisor O’Connors? It’s me alright! We have a wounded man here to take to the infirmary. I could use some help here.”

“Coming, deary!” Replied the matron while running towards the car.

The airman was cautiously installed on the rear seat, with Megan at his side to help steady him, while Nancy signaled the NCO to sit in the front passenger seat.

“Alright, Supervisor, show me the way to the infirmary.”

“Go straight on this road. You will have to turn left in about 300 yards.”

Nancy accelerated smoothly, avoiding potholes as much as possible. The wounded man clenched his teeth but remained silent during the short trip. They finally stopped and parked in front of the infirmary’s main entrance. Nancy and O’Connors used their arms to form a chair for the wounded, while Megan helped support the damaged leg and opened the door. Two nurses and a doctor then quickly took charge of the airman, leaving the three women to await the prognosis in the reception area. O’Connors, grinning, extended a hand, which Nancy shook firmly.

“That was really good work on your part, Miss. I will make sure to commend you to the base commander when this mess is straightened out.”

“Thanks but that was no big deal, really.”

“No big deal? Shooting down a Junkers 88 with a machinegun? You are way too modest.”

"No, I assure you. By the way, my name is Nancy Laplante."

"French?"

"No, Canadian. I was giving a ride to Megan here when we stumbled into the raid. I..."

"NANCY, YOU HAVE BEEN HIT!" Suddenly shouted Megan, pointing at Nancy's left arm, where a hole was visible in the leather of her jacket. The nurse on duty at the reception desk, on hearing this, immediately came to Nancy and inspected her arm.

"I don't see any blood. Please take your jacket off, Miss."

To everybody's relief, it turned out that the hole was a very near miss, with the skin barely scratched by the passing bullet, with a very light bleeding. The nurse smiled at Nancy, who was looking at the scratch with wide eyes.

"You are one lucky lady, Miss: a couple of inches further in and that bullet would have shattered your arm."

O'Connors looked at Nancy with renewed respect.

"Miss, you deserve a medal for your act. Where did you learn to fire a machinegun so well anyway?"

"I'm a Canadian army reserve captain. I'm actually in military intelligence but I saw my share of action. I... OUCH! That hurt!"

"I'm sorry, captain, but I had to disinfect this scratch before bandaging it." Replied the nurse apologetically as she applied a small bandage to Nancy's arm. The R.A.F. doctor who had taken charge of the wounded airman then returned. A greying man wearing the uniform of a squadron leader, he was now suited up in clean surgical garb.

"Leading Airman Johnson is now being prepared for emergency surgery. He has lost a lot of blood but, thanks to you ladies, he will eventually recover fully in a few weeks. He keeps babbling about you shooting down a Junkers 88. Is this true?"

"Damn right it is, sir!" Volunteered O'Connors in a proud tone. "This tall lass here plays the heavy machinegun like a virtuoso. She even kept firing after a bullet punctured her jacket's sleeve. Fortunately she was not really hurt."

The doctor looked down briefly at Nancy's bandaged arm before smiling at her.

"Good show! I suppose this will make the base WAAFs insufferable for the next few weeks, like, no more bit about women being defenceless. Oh, I believe that Flight Lieutenant Harris, the base security officer, is looking for you, Miss."

Nancy turned and watched a R.A.F. officer, accompanied by two military policemen, as he approached quickly. She did not like the look on his face. The stocky officer stopped three feet in front of Nancy. There was no hint of friendliness in his voice.

"This is your car parked in front of the infirmary?"

"Well, yes, but..."

"Miss, I arrest you for unauthorized entry on this base and for suspicion of espionage. You will come with me now. Handcuff her!"

A chorus of protests exploded as soon as Harris had stopped talking.

"Are you crazy, sir? Nancy just shot down a jerry and helped save one of our lads!" Protested Megan, with O'Connors immediately backing her up.

"That's true, sir: this lady stood her ground against a Junkers 88 and shot it down near the main gate."

"Flight Lieutenant," added the doctor, "I can personally vouch that this lady helped bring in Leading Airman Johnson, who will confirm the story about the Junkers."

Harris looked and acted like a mean bastard, which was probably why he got the job of security officer in the first place. His response to the doctor was barely polite.

"Excuse me, sir, but I have here a complete stranger with a car full of weird-looking equipment inside a R.A.F. base. We are expecting a German invasion at any time and I have multiple reports of fifth columnists around the area. I have to take her in and check her out. Leading Airman Brannigan, take her away!"

As Nancy was led away, her hands cuffed behind her back, the enraged doctor got nose to nose with the security officer.

"Flight Lieutenant Harris, you have pulled some real boners lately, but this takes the cake! I will report this outrage to the base commander."

"You do that, sir! Good day, sir!"

Harris then saluted and walked out. The doctor, livid, shouted at the duty nurse sitting at the reception desk.

"GET ME THE BASE COMMANDER ON THE PHONE AT ONCE! WE WILL SEE ABOUT THIS!"

The base security office was adjacent to the infirmary and was housed in the same kind of low brick building. Nancy was marched into an interrogation room, flanked by the two military policemen, and left standing in the middle of the room. The policemen withdrew to the corners behind her after taking her handcuffs off, while Harris sat at a desk in front of Nancy. She tried to plea her case, even as she was under the shock of what was happening to her.

"Look, Flight Lieutenant, I assure you..."

"SILENCE! YOU WILL SPEAK WHEN ASKED TO!"

The man must have been a boxer before: his nose was crooked and his ears deformed. It just made him even more intimidating than what his powerful built and brutal manners made him already. He reminded Nancy of a particularly nasty Serb commander she had met once in Kosovo during her tour with the NATO forces there.

“Empty your pockets on the desk! Quickly!”

She complied reluctantly, taking out her keys, money, wallet and a comb and putting them on the desk.

“Take your watch off too!”

“I...”

“SHUT UP!”

After Nancy had put her watch alongside her wallet, Harris seized it and examined it closely. It was a Seiko sports digital watch with nightglow feature and waterproof casing. At first, the man was confused by the digital display of the watch. Then he made a mean smile.

“AH AH! Made in Japan, it says here. This looks more like some kind of timer for a bomb than a watch.”

She had to mentally agree that her watch was not the actual run off the mill one now found in 1940 England. She suddenly realized with horror that any of her personal belongings that bore ‘made in Japan’ or ‘made in Germany’ could put her in real trouble. That must have applied to about half of her equipment. Putting aside her watch, Harris started going through the content of her wallet. First out was her money, with the word ‘Canada’ printed prominently on the dollar bills.

“AH! Trying to pass up as a colonial?”

She could not control her anger at this ignorant remark and started stepping forward as she spoke.

“Listen, you...”

The two policemen immediately stepped forward and seized her, roughly placing her back in the middle of the room. Nancy was now starting to be really scared: there was no way to know at what they would stop and spying was, at least here and now, punishable by summary execution. That was exactly what had happened to many German agents captured in England, as she recalled her history of World War II. Harris next looked at her numerous bank and identity cards and various permits. He suddenly started laughing hard, to Nancy’s puzzlement.

“What kind of twit forged those papers? All the dates on them are wrong!” He then showed her the magnetized strip on the back of her credit card.

“Some kind of microfilm, I suppose?”

“No, it’s just a piece of magnetic tape with my credit authorization number encoded on it. Look...”

“Encoded information? You are finished, Lady!”

Nancy was by now seriously beginning to believe that last statement.

“Which ones are your car keys?”

“My car doesn’t use a key to be opened. It uses a personalized proximity detector.”

“A what?” Said Harris, totally lost by those words. Taking a deep breath, Nancy then explained herself as simply as she could.

“A personalized proximity detector. It is attached to my key ring. It will unlock my car when you bring it close to it.”

“What kind of crap are you trying to push on me, miss?”

“The truth! If you don’t believe me, just try it.”

Shrugging, Harris then put aside the set of keys taken from Nancy. Next, he examined carefully Nancy’s Defense department identity card.

“It says here that you are an officer in the Canadian Army reserves.”

“I am a captain in the Canadian military intelligence, yes.”

The R.A.F. officer raised an eyebrow at her reply.

“Clever! That would have been a good cover story for an agent, if whoever made this I.D. card had not muffed the dates on it like on the rest of your cards. Besides, the Canadians, like us, have the good sense of not letting women in as officers. I thought that the Abwehr¹ was more professional than this.”

“They are professionals! It’s just that my cards show the correct dates.”

Harris looked at her with disdain as he picked up again her military I.D. card.

“It says here born 820613. Explain!”

Realizing that the real crunch time had come, Nancy explained in as calm a voice as she could muster.

“It means that I was born on June 13, 1982. I know it sounds incredible, but I came, quite against my will, from the future, from the year 2012 to be more exact. I can prove it.”

Harris’ response was simply to laugh.

“A likely story!”

He then became very serious and loud.

¹ Abwehr: German military intelligence in World War II

"I HAD ENOUGH OF YOUR LIES! NOW, STRIP!"

"WHAT?"

"I SAID, STRIP! OR DO YOU PREFER THAT MY MEN DO IT FOR YOU?"

One of the policemen laughed in anticipation. The other, a young private, suddenly looked ill at ease.

"Er, sir, we are supposed to use WAAFs to search women and..."

"AIRMAN, IF THIS BOTHERS YOU, THEN MAKE YOURSELF USEFUL AND GO SEARCH HER CAR!"

Harris then threw Nancy's set of keys to the rattled policeman, who glanced apologetically at her before leaving the interrogation room. Nancy, on her part, could not move or talk. The shock of realizing that she was stuck in the past, plus this humiliating treatment, was starting to be too much for her.

"WELL, I'M WAITING!"

Throwing a hateful look at Harris, she undid her jacket and took it off. Harris immediately seized it and thoroughly poked through it.

"THE REST OF IT, NOW!"

Nancy then took off her boots, shirt and pants, keeping only her underwear. 'This cannot be happening to me!' she thought to herself, mortified. Harris quickly went through her clothes, then faced her with a sadistic smile.

"ALL OF IT!"

"You will pay for this, I swear, you bastard!"

Slowly, she undid her bra and left it fall to the floor, then, more quickly, slipped off her panties. She immediately covered her groin and breasts with her arms, feeling totally humiliated. After glancing at the inside of her underwear, Harris pulled up a chair behind her, then pushed her down on it and went in her back, solidly grabbing both of her wrists.

"Cuff her to the chair, Brannigan!"

Nancy tried to free her hands but, despite her own significant strength, could not break free from Harris' grip as the other policeman tied her hands to the legs of the chair. Now helpless, Nancy could only glare at Harris as the man positioned himself in front of her, admiring her nudity.

"Now, you will start answering seriously my questions. Who are you?"

"I told you! I am Captain Nancy Laplante, of the Canadian Forces. I'm a mil..."

Harris interrupted her with a savage slap on the face that made her head snap to the right.

"THE TRUTH! YOU ARE A SPY FOR THE GERMANS, ADMIT IT!"

"No! I am a Canadian officer and..."

Harris slapped her again with all his strength.

“STOP LYING TO ME, BITCH! HOW DID YOU CROSS INTO ENGLAND? BY SUBMARINE?”

“I came into my car.” Said Nancy, actually saying the truth. That earned her a third hard slap. Another flight lieutenant entered the room just in time to witness the slap. A tall and handsome blond man in his early twenties, he looked at Harris with rage.

“YOU BASTARD! WHY DIDN’T YOU USE A WAAF TO SEARCH HER, AS REGULATIONS CLEARLY SPECIFY? AND WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU ARE DOING, BEATING HER LIKE THIS?”

“That’s my business, Wilson! Now...”

“NOT ANY MORE! The base commander sent me to take charge of the lady here. I should have come quicker! You will pay for this! Now, you and your goon, free her and then get out!”

As Harris and Brannigan stomped out of the room, Wilson turned halfway towards Nancy, avoiding directly looking at her. His voice was now soft, apologetic.

“Please dress now, Miss Laplante. I will be waiting for you in the hallway. Take your time.”

He then left and closed the door behind him. Nancy, who had covered her groin and breasts with her hands as soon as she had been untied, wondered then if this Wilson had really come to help her or if he was playing the role of the good guy in the old ‘Mutt and Jeff’ interrogation technique. That technique used a good guy came in unexpectedly to save the prisoner from a bad guy, thus gaining the prisoner’s trust. Unable then to decide which was correct, Nancy quickly dressed and pocketed back her things. Last on was her watch. Sitting on the desk, she tried to collect her wits back and figure out what to do next. Right now, she saw very few courses of action possible. Either she could prove that she was indeed a time traveler, or she could try to invent some more plausible story about herself. She however rejected nearly immediately the second option. Apart from the fact that it would contradict what she had said to Megan, thus hurting her credibility, her car contained too many high technology items to explain them, except if they came from the future. Even the Germans, whose technology the British held in awe, couldn’t obviously produce what she had: her equipment was simply too advanced for that. Another hard question then came to her mind. If she was to claim that she was an involuntary time traveler, then did she have the right to divulge to the British of 1940 information that could very well rewrite history, thus destroying the World as she knew it in 2012? Would it instead create some sort of parallel timeline, as so many science-fiction novels had speculated

about? Nancy felt her head spin as she tried to answer those impossible questions. She finally decided to see how the British would treat her from now on before taking firm decisions.

As she was about to walk to the door of the interrogation room, a deluge of mental images then struck her suddenly, making her vacillate on her legs. She nearly threw up as horrible scenes paraded in her head, showing the atrocities and unspeakable crimes committed in this war. Even closing her eyes didn't make the pictures stop. The visions of horror went on for nearly a full minute before stopping as suddenly as they had come, leaving a shaking Nancy to wonder what had just happened to her. The one thing she knew was that she didn't want to see those images, ever again. She then realized that those visions represented what was going to happen in this war if she didn't do anything to prevent these horrors.

"My God!" Whispered Nancy to herself, shaken by that realization. She was pale and felt sick to her stomach when she finally went out of the interrogation room.

Flight Lieutenant Douglas Wilson took two minutes to phone Wing Commander Denison, the base commander, to inform him of what had just happened. The way Denison told him then to order Harris to report immediately to his office pleased him. Informing Harris on a dry and severe tone of the order from the base commander was another thing that pleased him. He heard later from Denison's secretary that Harris, apart of having his head ripped off in a memorable dressing down session, was busted back to the rank of flying officer and thrown out of the base, all of which caused considerable joy to Wilson. He, however, was not totally happy with himself: while he had been careful not to look at the poor woman that had been so badly treated by Harris, what his peripheral vision had shown him of the woman's perfect body had been enough to cause an involuntary erection. Reacting like a matting bull to a naked girl in distress was not his idea of how to be a gentleman.

The closing of the door behind told him that Nancy Laplante, or whatever her real name was, had finished dressing. He turned and had his first good look at her. She appeared understandably pale and shaken as she stood near the door, looking hesitantly at him. She was really tall and broad-shouldered for a woman and appeared in top physical condition. Her black hair fell to her neck and her face had soft features, making her a definite beauty. Her large, intense green eyes captivated Wilson at once, while her very feminine curves and long shapely legs would certainly make her a pole of attraction at any officers' mess he knew. More

importantly, she seemed to have regained most of her composure. This did not surprise him, considering her earlier exploit with the Junkers 88.

“Miss Laplante, I’m Flight Lieutenant Doug Wilson, the base intelligence officer. Please accept the base commander’s sorriest apologies and mines for the odious treatment you were subjected to. I can tell you that the bastard who did this is going to pay for it, dearly!”

Her green eyes scanned his face while she kept her distances.

“Is this a Mutt and Jeff number?”

“HUH?”

This was the last question he expected from her. While he knew about the Mutt and Jeff interrogation technique, where a mean interrogator gets in first, to be followed by an indignant nice guy who would put you back at ease and milk you out of information, this was not the case today. The simple fact that this young woman knew about that technique was worth noting. But wait! Didn’t LACW Thomas say something about Laplante being a reserve intelligence officer?

“Meaning, are you here to arrest me, interrogate me, shoot me as a spy or all of the above?”

He could not help smile at her: she was a cool customer indeed.

“Oh, none of that, I assure you! I just need to establish exactly who you are.”

“Didn’t Meg Thomas tell you about me?”

Wilson rolled his eyes upward.

“You bet she did! However, I... ah... have some difficulties believing all of what she told me!”

“Why does this not surprise me?”

She then looked him straight into his eyes.

“Do you think that a German agent would try to use such a story to try infiltrating a R.A.F. base?”

“Never!” Was Wilson’s instant reply.

“I believe there is a way to back up my story, Mister Wilson. Thomas told you about the crash site and the six-fingered hand corpse?”

His reaction told her that Meg had forgotten to tell him something.

“About the crash site, yes. About the corpse, no. Excuse me for a moment.”

Wilson then picked up a telephone on a nearby wall.

“Hello, this is the I.O., Wilson. Is Supervisor O’Connors there? Put her on please... Supervisor O’Connors? Flight Lieutenant Wilson here. I need the assistance of LACW Thomas

to guide an investigation team to the crash site she told me about... Yes!... Have her report immediately to the maintenance shop and liaise with the chief mechanic there.”

He then made another call, to the maintenance shop that time, where he ordered the sending of a crash site technical team, with Thomas as a guide and with specific instructions to bring back any body parts found. He then hung up the telephone and smiled at Nancy.

“That’s taken care of. We should hear something from them by the end of the afternoon. What’s next?”

“Well, I have a number of items in my car that should convince you that I come from the future. I...”

Wilson was alarmed by the sudden look of horror on Nancy’s face.

“What? What’s wrong?”

“That M.P. that Harris sent to search my car: everything must be in little pieces by now!” Wilson swore and limped out of the building as fast as he could, an anxious Nancy in his back.

“There! The red car in front of the infirmary!”

“AIRMAN! STOP THIS SEARCH IMMEDIATELY!”

When both of them arrived near the Outlander, Nancy was relieved but also puzzled to find that nothing had actually been disturbed in her car. Only the engine hood had been opened. Wilson was as puzzled as her.

“Weren’t you ordered to search this car, Airman?”

The young policeman was red with embarrassment and stammered a bit at first while standing rigidly at attention in front of Wilson.

“Well, sir, Miss... this car itself was so fascinating that I had no time yet to search its content. You see, before the war I worked in a small racing car shop and I kept pretty well up to date in terms of car engineering and design. But this...”

He then pointed excitedly at the Outlander.

“... this blows away everything I know about cars!”

A sudden owl made Wilson pivot on his heels, in time to see Nancy collapse from uncontrollable laughter. Wilson and the airman exchanged a puzzled glance and waited for Nancy to put herself back together. She finally leaned on the side of the car, holding her tummy.

“I... I’m sorry about that. I could not resist. Here I was, scared to find my only belongings left to me scattered to the four winds, only to be saved by a car enthusiast.”

Wilson shook his head, a half-smile on his face, then returned his attention to the policeman.

“So, what did you find interesting in this car?”

“Everything, sir! For starters, there is no clutch pedal!”

“What do you mean, no clutch pedal? How are you supposed to change gears then?”

“I believe that this car has a self-changing gear transmission, sir.”

“It’s called an automatic transmission, actually.” Cut in Nancy.

“Er, right. Next, I could find no carburetor as I know it. Instead, there is something described as electronic fuel injection. The brakes look like disks instead of drums and the instrument panel must be seen to be believed!”

“Alright,” replied Wilson, walking toward the driver’s door, “let’s go see it!”

He made the same mistake as Megan, going for the passenger seat and ending up in the driver’s seat. Nancy smiled apologetically.

“It’s made for the North American market.”

Wilson scanned with growing confusion and bemusement the multitude of electronic controls and LCD displays on the futuristic, yet elegant dashboard, also duly noting the lack of a clutch pedal, before looking at Nancy.

“I start to understand how LACW Thomas could believe you. Uh, what is this rectangular glass panel on top of the central console?”

“Oh, that’s the display screen for the navigation and entertainment unit.” Answered Nancy, purposely using a dismissive tone in order to prepare her effect. “Let me show you what it can do.”

Going around the car to go sit in the front passenger seat, Nancy then started the engine and switched on the display screen, on which appeared a number of colored symbols and words. Using the touch-screen feature of the display unit as she explained its functioning made Wilson and the young policeman open their eyes wide from wonderment.

“This unit is actually controlled by a computer with a thirty gigabyte-capacity hard drive, which is able to store up to 100 hours of recorded music, or a few dozens movies. It also can display navigational maps but the positioning system associated with it won’t work here: the network’s signal transmitters don’t exist in 1940. I can also switch the display to a rear view camera image, for safer backing up, or use it to tune the radio or select a recorded song or video. If you prefer, you can also control your music by using the buttons on the steering wheel or, if you are really lazy, use the voice recognition system. Play The Corrs, Breathless!”

Wilson and the policeman nearly freaked out when the song by the Irish pop group started playing after only a very short delay. Nancy then spoke again.

“Raise sound volume by two!”

The volume of the music then increased, even though Nancy had not touched any buttons or controls. Wilson passed a hand on his face, beads of cold sweat on his forehead: what he was seeing and hearing now could nearly be called magic...or sorcery.

"This...this is truly incredible!"

"Actually, the car is fairly low tech stuff. The really interesting equipment is in the back!" Replied matter-of-factly Nancy. There was a near race between the policeman and Wilson to the back door, where she interposed herself with a smile.

"Before you start throwing things around, Mister Wilson, is there a safe and quiet place around where I could store and display my equipment?"

"Sure! How about the base intelligence section?"

"I knew you would say something like this."

"Could I come, sir?"

The eager request of the MP got him a severe look from Wilson.

"Airman, I think it's time that you return to your duties. Another thing: not a word to anybody about what you saw or heard today, understood?"

"Yes sir!"

He was about to walk away when Nancy cut in front of him, looking at Wilson at the same time.

"If you may let me, Mister Wilson, this young man nearly got his head twisted by Harris for trying to save me from the strip search. I would like to leave him a little something as a thank."

"Hum... alright! But nothing compromising."

Nancy then opened the left rear door of her car and searched inside a duffel bag for a few seconds before handing over a magazine to the airman, whose eyes immediately bulged.

"Please keep this strictly to yourself, eh!"

"Yes maam!"

The young man then walked away with his head in the magazine. Wilson could not resist asking.

"What the hell did you give him?"

"Oh, just a magazine on cars...from 2012. Hop in, I'll drive you to your office."

10:36 (GMT)

Sector Headquarters, R.A.F. Northolt

The base intelligence section was actually colocated with the sector operations room in the same low brick building, not far from the airfield's control tower. Nancy was surprised to see that the operations room, which coordinated the actions of all the fighters in the sector, was not underground or inside some bunker. Instead, it occupied a large ground level room of the building, with a few sandbags as a token for protection: the whole thing was hideously vulnerable to any kind of bomb. Yet, the young WAAFs manning the situation map worked as if it was perfectly safe. Nancy admired their courage, since they certainly knew better. To Nancy, Wilson's intelligence section had the familiar setup that all intelligence units seemed to share: a collation desk near the entrance, where an airman was sending and receiving documents, answered the phone, made the coffee (tea in this case) and generally was run to the ground trying to serve everybody; then there were some worktables for the 'experts', where the information was treated, including air photos; the officer's or supervisor's desk, watching the others and coordinating the intelligence effort; and last but not least one or more maps on walls or boards, covered with either pins or ink symbols on transparent plastic. The main differences between Nancy's unit in Montreal in 2012 and Wilson's 1940 Northolt section was the lack of computer equipment and (horror!) no photocopier. The Northolt building was actually of the same vintage as the building that had housed her own 4th Intelligence Company until 2006.

Enlisting the help of three of his men, including of course the collator, Wilson had the content of the Mitsubishi Outlander unloaded and put in a locked storeroom that was part of his section. Nancy looked sadly at the bags of groceries she had bought to stock her cottage as they were brought in.

"Do you have a refrigerator around here? It would be a sad waste to let rot all this!" The way heads snapped up at the mention of food reminded her that the whole of England was being rationed because of the losses in merchant ships bringing in supplies. With Wilson's approval, Nancy started sorting her groceries between perishable and non-perishable items, the first ones going to the refrigerator in the small kitchen adjoining the sector operations room. Hungry eyes followed the steaks, pork cutlets, chicken legs and fresh eggs on their way out. As for the non-perishable items, Nancy simply lined them on the table supporting the tea kettle and cups of the section. She however put aside a loaf of whole wheat bread and a jar of hazelnut chocolate spread for the WAAFs working in the operations room. By this time, her stomach was growling.

"Mister Wilson, would you mind if we put the display of my equipment after lunch? I'm famished!"

"No problem, miss. The mess will open for lunch in about twenty minutes, in fact."

"Should I wear a uniform to go to the mess?"

"If you have one, it would be better: as a civilian, you will keep being bounced by security patrols around this base. In fact, this reminds me that I should procure you an access pass. Please don't take it badly but, until further notice, I want you to be escorted at all times while on base."

"An armed escort?"

"No, no! Just someone vetted by me or by the base commander. You will probably bunk in the WAAFs barrack tonight."

"Could you arrange for LACW Thomas to be my escort at night? She already knows everything about me."

"A good idea! I will see to that. Now, you can change in the storeroom, where your luggage is."

"Thanks, I won't be long."

Going inside the long, narrow room, she made sure that the storeroom's door was well closed before starting to change.

Flight Sergeant Bernie Sanders, Wilson's most senior N.C.O., approached his boss as soon as Nancy was out of sight, keeping his voice low.

"How much can we trust her, sir?"

"I don't fully know yet, but my distinct and profound feeling is that she is no threat to us. She may know in fact a lot more on either the Germans or us than we would believe possible. Anyway, we will hold a meeting of the section after I talk to her following lunch."

"Understood, sir."

The sudden surprise on the face of Leading Airman Sutcliffe, who was sitting facing the storeroom's door, made Wilson turn around a few minutes later. Himself, along with the rest of his personnel, then stared at Nancy, now in military uniform. It certainly was no uniform Wilson had ever seen before. It consisted of a camouflage pattern, loose fitting two-piece field uniform with numerous baggy pockets. The camouflage pattern itself was most strange, consisting of thousands of black, brown and light green squarish dots on a dark green background. The badge on her dark green beret consisted of a silver star on a red and green field divided by an oblique silver band. She wore a rank slip-on with two light green bars on the front of her shirt, a nametag on her right chest and paratrooper wings over her left chest pocket. That last one took

the cake for Wilson: a jump-qualified female officer. Some senior officers at the mess this noon hour were about to choke on their false teeth.

Leaving Nancy's car in the sandbag-revetted parking lot behind the operations building where they had driven it from the infirmary, Wilson walked with her to the officers' mess, situated a mere 200 yards away. She didn't make a remark then on seeing limp slightly from one leg, something Wilson was grateful for. He didn't even try to keep count of the number of stares Nancy attracted during that short walk. The first problem showed up when the duty officer sitting at the entrance of the dining room insisted that Nancy buy a meal ticket, since she didn't have a ration card. Since her Canadian money was worthless here, Wilson had to buy the ticket, to her profound embarrassment. She felt even worse when she saw him hesitate before digging in his pocket: he was probably broke himself and she was making him pay for her meal.

The reason Wilson hesitated before paying her ticket had nothing to do with lack of money or stinginess. As a matter of fact he was quite well off, his family being the holder of a large and successful brewery. It was simply that Nancy just had given him about the best proof that she was no German spy: all the captured agents he had heard about until now had invariably large sums of money on them. Furthermore, spies needed money so they could travel, buy new clothes to change disguises and so on. Nancy's story of being a time traveller was already too unbelievable in his mind to have been thought of by a typical German professional intelligence officer. Sending an agent out with no money on top of that was downright implausible. Nancy never understood afterwards why Wilson became even more polite and charming after buying her meal ticket.

The second problem was the stares that followed her around the dining room. At least, Nancy had expected it and was able to psyche it out after a while. The third problem was the food itself. After the steward had put a bowl of clear cabbage soup and a small plate of cold mutton sandwiches in front of her, she revised her opinion of British military rations in her time: they had made great strides in seventy years!

A raucous group of pilots entered the dining room soon afterwards and started arguing with the duty officer, who didn't like the state of their uniforms and refused to let them eat until they washed up. Nancy followed the exchange with amusement from her table: the young men

obviously had just returned from a flying mission and were in a hurry, probably because they knew they could be called to take off again at any time. A senior officer finally intervened and told the duty officer to take it all in context, but also warned the pilots to behave. The group of pilots stared at Nancy as they passed near her table, but she stared herself even more: these were Canadian pilots! One of the men, intrigued by her interest in them, saw the 'CANADA' patch sewn on her rank slip-on and stopped dead in his track, with the result that the pilot following him bumped into him and swore.

"Aye, regarde ou tu vas, cocombre!"

Nancy shot up from her chair when she heard the French words spoken with an unmistakable accent.

"You're from Québec?"

The pilot who swore was speechless for an instant, then extended a hand that Nancy shook vigorously.

"Jean Daigle, from Trois-Riviere. These clowns here are other pilots from the First Fighter Squadron, R.C.A.F.². What is a nice-looking Quebecer like you doing in this hole?"

"Oh, I'm just passing for a few days. I'm Nancy Laplante, from Boucherville."

Jean and Nancy then started chatting in quick French. As a group, the other Canadian pilots decided to join them at the table and sat for lunch. Wilson kept eating in silence, since Nancy was obviously their center of attention. To her credit, she kept the story of her arrival to a fictitious but believable scenario.

As they were finishing lunch, Wilson saw Wing Commander Denison and his aide, Flight Lieutenant Smythe, heading towards their table. Calling the group to attention, Wilson stood up, imitated by the others. Denison stopped in front of Nancy and smiled to her.

"Captain Laplante, I wish first to apologize for what happened this morning. Second, I am happy to announce that your shooting down of a Junkers 88 with a machinegun has been confirmed by multiple witnesses. You may not have an aircraft to paint it on but you are authorised to paint on your car a German aircraft kill. Congratulations!"

Denison then left after shaking Nancy's hand, leaving the Canadian pilots to stare at Nancy in admiration. Then, as a chorus, they pressed around her and congratulated her. At that

² R.C.A.F.: Royal Canadian Air Force

moment, the head steward emerged from the kitchen and shouted loudly around the dining room.

“ALL PILOTS TO THEIR AIRCRAFT! INCOMING BANDITS³!”

“Damn, our Hurricanes are parked nearly one thousand yards from here! We’ll never make it in time!” said Daigle.

“I’ll give you a lift in my car. Follow me!” answered Nancy. The pilots and her then ran out of the dining hall, leaving Wilson to limp back to the intelligence section.

Nancy beat the pilots to her car by a good margin and threw open all the doors, including the rear gate. All six pilots piled in, out of breath.

“Christ, miss,” said one of them to Nancy, “how come you’re in such good shape?” Nancy couldn’t help shooting a barb at them.

“Easy! I’m army, you’re air force.”

The roar of the V-6 engine covered the grumbles and teeth grinding. Playing the horn to clear a path in the men running in all directions, she sped towards a group of planes that Daigle was pointing to her.

“Want another one, guys? What’s the ultimate in air superiority?”

The speed indicator was closing on ninety kilometers per hour now. Burned by her first joke, the pilots didn’t know what to answer. Daigle looked at her with a guarded expression.

“What is it?”

“A tank in the middle of the runway!”

They choked collectively on that one. The Outlander then slid to a stop on the grass, thirty yards from the nearest Hurricane. Before jumping out with the others, Daigle patted Nancy’s shoulder.

“Thanks for the ride anyway, pongo⁴!”

She returned to the intelligence section at a more reasonable speed and arrived there as Wilson, limping badly from the effort, was getting there too.

“You’re already back? Christ, the control tower will get your ass for speeding like this across the airfield!”

³ Bandit: Air Force designation for enemy aircraft

⁴ Pongo : Derogatory term used by aviators to designate ground soldiers.

“Oh, in view of the circumstances, I doubt that they will complain. I think I have something in my gear that could be useful now. I will show you.”

She then headed inside to the intelligence section’s storeroom, where she took what looked like a handheld radio out of a duffel bag. However, it had a large window-like display on its face and too many buttons for Wilson to understand what it was. Nancy turned it on and a broken line underlined with what looked like frequency settings appeared on the display.

“What is this?” Asked Wilson, mystified.

“A radio scanner. Something very useful to war correspondents like me. It can scan the various frequency bands and show which frequencies are in use. You can also select a particular frequency so that you could listen to the radio traffic on it. This model can receive all aviation bands, apart of many others. I only have to go outside to get a good reception and, with luck, be able to listen in on the incoming German planes.”

Wilson’s jaw dropped wide open on hearing that. What Nancy held in her hand could supposedly do what took the R.A.F. a large room full of radio equipment and numerous operators to do. If the rest of her equipment was like this, his head would spin before the end of the day. Since he had to direct his section during the incoming action, Wilson told Leading Airman Sutcliffe to go outside and stay with Nancy.

The two of them took position besides the sandbag wall protecting the entrance to the building. Selecting in turn the different frequencies that were now being pinpointed by the scanner, Nancy let Sutcliffe identify the British users.

“O.K., this is the radar controller vectoring our fighters. This one sounds like the Biggin Hill boys. Wait...”

Nancy had just stumbled on a transmission in German and raised the volume.

“Can you understand German, Miss?”

“It’s one of the eight languages that I speak fluently.”

That was said without boasting, while she was intently listening to the German words.

“OOPS! I think that the German raid leader just told his bombers to split into two groups.”

“I will advise Mister Wilson of that immediately.” Said Sutcliffe, running inside. Once told, Wilson took the phone and called the sector commander sitting in the operations room nearby to advise him of the German move. The air commodore told him to hold for an instant, as he was receiving another report. When Wilson told him about the German split there was a moment of stunned silence on the telephone.

"How the hell did you know that? Radar informed me only now about it!"

"Er, I have someone monitoring the Jerries' transmissions, sir."

"You do? Good show! Tell me immediately of anything else you hear!"

"Will do, sir!"

Wilson then pointed at his specialist on the Luftwaffe⁵, Sergeant Latham.

"Sergeant, how's your German?"

"I'm still fair at it, sir."

"Good! Go outside, where Miss Laplante is, and relay immediately to me any intercepted German transmission you deem significant."

Latham then nodded his head and left on the run.

From what Nancy could hear from the Germans, the raiders were having a hard time against the R.A.F. What worried her was that she could identify only one group of Germans being engaged. The other one was silent, as if they had disappeared. Inside the operations room, a duty officer advised the sector commander that one group of German planes was no longer visible on radar.

"They must have dropped under our radar coverage, sir."

The commander agreed to that. However, this didn't help him figure out where they were heading.

Nancy suddenly saw another spike appear on the scanner's display. Switching to the new frequency, the German words she heard then made her blood freeze. Latham, beside her, also paled before running back to the intelligence section.

"Sir, one group of Germans just reported coming into visual range of this base!"

"Christ!"

Wilson picked up the phone again and passed the word to the sector commander, who started shouting orders to his staff.

"Sound the air raid alert! Recall our first squadron and tell them to get back here immediately!"

⁵ Luftwaffe: German air force

Nancy, now scanning visually the low horizon to the east, saw a group of about twelve little dots growing steadily. When she faced Latham, it was with cold sweat appearing on her smooth skin.

“Sergeant, this is going to become interesting!”

They then both retreated behind the sandbags and crouched.

The first German bombs bracketted the control tower, blowing in the glass panes and cutting to ribbons the air traffic controllers. The maintenance hangars were hit next, hard. Luckily, the operations building, being similar in appearance to other base buildings, was not targeted and suffered only some broken windows. Two precious Hurricanes were destroyed on the ground, while one squadron dispersal hut was blown away. The air defence gunners did their best under murderous German fire but were not enough to stop the attack. What decided the Germans to retreat was the return of 1 Squadron R.C.A.F.’s Hurricanes. The Junkers 88 bombers immediately dispersed and fled, but it was too late already for one of them. With one engine on fire, it started to climb, pursued by a Hurricane. A frantic German transmission on the scanner made Nancy smile.

“He is going to bail out. Sergeant, are you game for prisoners?”

“You bet I am, miss!”

“Then hold this, I will be back in a second.”

Handing over her scanner to Latham, Nancy ran inside and to the intelligence section’s storeroom, where she unlocked a solid-looking case under the curious stare of Wilson. She then took out two handguns, inserted full magazines into them and pocketed spare ones before running back out while ignoring his pleas not to take risks.

She collected Latham outside and they ran together to the Grand Cherokee, still parked behind sandbags. Latham’s eyes bulged when he saw the monstrous pistol she inserted between her legs after sitting behind the steering wheel. She handed him a much smaller pistol as she raced out of the sandbag revetment.

“This one is loaded and ready to fire. You just need to pull the trigger. You have ten rounds. Questions?”

“Uh, yes. Why the elephant gun you have there?”

She smiled in amusement at his question.

“An old trick in a gunfight: scare them and you may not have to kill them!”

For the second time of the day she raced across the airfield, heading towards a plowed field where the two visible German parachutes were likely to land.

“Damn,” swore Latham, “it looks like the local farmers have their own ideas about prisoners!”

Nancy also saw the three civilians armed with pitchforks and axes that were running towards the parachute landing points. The two German pilots then landed within a hundred yards of the farmers.

“Hold on, it’s going to be bumpy!”

Barely slowing down, Nancy drove through the plowed field as the farmers reached the Germans. Latham, holding on to dear life in the car now bucking like a mustang, suddenly yelled.

“WHAT IS THIS IDIOT DOING?”

One of the Germans was being kicked by one of the farmers armed with a pitchfork, while the two other civilians were approaching the second German, who lay still on the ground. Nancy slipped to a halt between the two groups and jumped out, followed by Latham. She then raised her big pistol towards the sky.

BOOM

Latham nearly fell on his ass. That shot had sounded to him like an aircraft bomb. Everybody stopped moving, except Nancy, who walked quickly towards the farmer who had been kicking one of the Germans.

“GET AWAY FROM HIM! HE IS A PRISONER OF WAR AND UNDER MY PROTECTION!”

The civilian did not argue and backed away at once. Nancy stood besides the German until she was sure that the farmers were not coming back, then addressed the aviator in German.

“Are you hurt?”

The man hesitated, surprised by her good German and intimidated by the huge pistol pointed at him.

“Nein, my leather jacket prevented the worst. I may have a few bruises, that’s all. Thank you for saving me, miss.”

“It was my duty to protect you as a prisoner. Can you walk?”

As an answer, the German slowly rose to his feet and unclipped his parachute harness. Without taking her eyes from him, Nancy yelled at Latham.

“How is the other one, Sergeant?”

"In a bad way, I'm afraid! He is badly burned and in shock."

"O.K., we will drive them both to the infirmary. Make sure first that your German has no weapons."

She next spoke in German to the aviator facing her. He had finished taking off his harness and had raised his hands of his own accord.

"Good, you are being reasonable. Continue like this and I promise you that you will be well treated. We will now drive you and your comrade to the base infirmary. First, you throw me that pistol you're wearing on your belt, slowly."

The German pulled out his Luger with two fingers and threw it at her feet. She bent her knees to pick it up, keeping her eyes and her weapon on him. She decided to delay a full search of him until after the other German had been taken in for treatment, as he was obviously in great pain.

"You will help my sergeant put your friend in the back of my car. Go!"

Nancy then jumped back in the Outlander and moved it close to the burned German, then opened the rear gate and put down the rear seats to the horizontal, thus giving a relatively comfortable flat surface for the wounded to lay on. The second German sat besides his comrade. Letting Latham, still armed with her Glock 26 9mm pistol, keep an eye on both Germans, she drove back to the base at a slow pace, to avoid unnecessary pain to the burned man. By then she could see Hurricanes starting to land back carefully on the crater-strewn airfield.

Ten minutes later the wounded was admitted at the infirmary, freeing her and Latham to search the other German, who had been quickly checked over by the doctor and declared fit. She found only a few personal papers, a small picture showing a young woman and a baby and some German and French money. She handed them all back to him.

"Your baby is cute. How old is he?"

"My son is now nine months old. I'm afraid I will miss him and Frida very much while in captivity."

He was now obviously relaxing after seeing that his captors would treat him correctly. Nancy knew from talking with qualified interrogators at her Montreal militia unit that this was about the best time for a few cautious questions.

"I am sure you will be able to write to them in France."

"They're in Germany," corrected the German, enjoying a cigarette given to him by Latham. "They do not permit families to come to Rosieres-En-Santerre."

Repressing a smile of triumph, Nancy quickly changed the subject before the German could realise that he had just given away his home base.

“Would you like something to eat or drink?”

“I would appreciate a cup of coffee. God, I’m tired!”

“I can believe that: your squadron has kept us busy here. You must be flying non-stop all day!”

He made a weak smile at her remark.

“It’s funny, but one good thing about being a prisoner of war is that I will finally be able to get some rest. Those three missions a day were putting us on our knees!”

“You should let Goering⁶ fly some of those missions for you!”

The German aviator broke out in laughter.

“That effeminate pig? He would never be good enough to fly with KG1. Well, maybe with those idiots of JG51 in Wissant!”

“My sergeant will get you a coffee now. How do you want it?”

“Black, with one lump of sugar, please.”

“Sergeant Latham, could you bring one coffee, black, with one sugar?”

What the German didn’t see was Nancy’s mouth telling Latham silently to call Wilson to pass the information on. Latham left the small lounge where they had searched the German and went directly to the infirmary’s reception desk, cornering the head nurse with an urgent plea.

“Can you have somebody quickly get a cup of coffee, black, with one sugar? That German is singing like a bird and we may be able to get more out of him yet. I need also to make an urgent phone call.”

“The phone is right here, deary. I will personally take care of the coffee. Good luck!”

Flight lieutenant Wilson picked up the phone at the other end after two rings.

“Jesus, Sergeant, where have you been?”

“Me and Miss Laplante are at the infirmary, with two German prisoners. One of them is being treated for deep burns but Laplante is milking the other one out! You have some paper and a pencil, sir?”

There was some shuffling noises before Wilson answered back.

“Go ahead!”

⁶ Goering: Commander of the Luftwaffe

“O.K., first of, the squadron that attacked us is KG1, based at Rosieres-En-Santerre. Also, JG51 is at Wissant. The German says that they have been flying three missions a day and are dead tired. We may get more as it goes.”

“Christ, Sergeant, if I’m not careful about it, she’s liable to steal my job by the end of this day! Good work anyway, both of you!”

Latham put down the telephone with a chuckle: him, having to work under a smart and attractive woman? Anytime!

CHAPTER 3 – REVELATIONS

15:40 (GMT)

Monday, September 2, 1940

Base intelligence section, R.A.F. Northolt

“Please sit down, miss.”

Wilson waited until Nancy was installed comfortably before talking again. The door of his office was firmly closed and he had told Flight Sergeant Sanders that only a group captain or above could disturb them. It was time that he dealt properly with Nancy’s case and that he clarified a few things with her. She cut him off first.

“Mister Wilson, you may not have women who are commissioned officers in the R.A.F. but I am a captain. We thus have equivalent ranks, I believe. You can call me by my rank or simply call me Nancy.”

“Er, alright, Nancy. As you can understand, I must produce a report and an assessment on you as soon as possible, so that the sector commander can relay some recommendations about you to London. I have to say that, up to now, he is very much impressed with you and feels like me that you are no security threat. However, it is not his decision to make. I suspect that the intelligence and security services will in fact have the most to say about that. This said, I would like you to tell me yourself, from the start, how you ended up here.”

Nancy complied good-naturely, starting her story when she left for her cottage in 2012, until her arrival with Meg Thomas at the base main gate. Wilson took copious notes of her account, then straightened himself in his chair. If he was doubting her story, he was not letting it show up.

“So, you do not know who or what sent you here, how or why. Do you have any ideas or theories of your own on that?”

She contemplated her answer for an instant.

“The only things I can go on are that strange craft that I saw over my cottage and the six-fingered hand in the crash site near here. Let me say first that the craft was way beyond the technology of 2012, and I can say that I know a lot about aerospace and military technology. It was thus either extra-terrestrial in origin or, more probably in view of my own time displacement, some kind of time machine from a far future. The six-fingered hand, if it belonged to a human rather than an extra-terrestrial, would tend in my mind to indicate an evolved human, something

that would put him or her thousands if not tens of thousands of years in our future. If that is the case, then it will probably be next to impossible to fathom their motives in abducting me and sending me here. Now that they are dead, I will probably be stuck here forever.”

Wilson detected the bitterness in her last sentence and hurried to try to reassure her.

“Nancy, if this means anything to you, I can assure you that you now have friends here that are ready to help and support you. You are not alone, Nancy.”

“Will that really count to the bureaucrats and security officials in London?”

“I frankly cannot promise anything, except my full support. That is why you must give me convincing proofs that you are really from the future, so that I can go and convince them.”

“Doug, I have to warn you that some people will probably react violently when they learn of what I know. You could get hurt!”

“I will deal with that as it comes. Please help me, so that I can help you.”

“Alright! I propose that we do two things: first, you inspect my equipment; then I give you a list of things to pass on to specific persons and wait for a reaction.”

“Christ! You are that sure that your info will disturb someone that much?”

“Actually, Doug, I expect that they will send immediately some of their top dogs here once I whisper certain words in chosen ears. You have no idea of what I know about this time period. Let’s see my equipment now, if you will.”

It took fifteen minutes to set up her equipment and prepare her belongings for inspection on top of two tables inside the intelligence section. The junior ranks were then told to take a long break, leaving only Nancy, Wilson, Sanders and Latham inside the section. She let first Wilson search her personal items and her wardrobe. Apart of some very modern and scanty underwear that brought some red to Wilson’s cheeks, he found nothing of interest in her civilian clothes. Her guitar got Nancy a questioning look from Wilson.

“Are you a musician?”

“No, but I play guitar as a hobby. My friends say that I’m not bad at it. I also like singing.”

Nancy’s dress uniform earned a good look from Douglas Wilson, who then examined the mounted medals that went with it. Her Medal of Bravery attracted a respectful look from Douglas, while her various peacekeeping medals, with the words ‘IN THE SERVICE OF PEACE’ and ‘U.N.’ struck on the medals, left him wondering. Nancy’s Diamond Jubilee Medal, with the words ‘ELIZABETH II DEI GRATIA REGINA’ and the profile of an old Queen Elizabeth II confused Wilson at first. Frowning, he looked sideways at Nancy.

"Is this who I think it is?"

Nancy gave him a disarming smile.

"It is in fact the one presently being called Princess Elizabeth of Windsor, Doug. She will sit on the throne after the war, at the death of King George VI. I will not talk further about this if you don't mind, as I would consider it bad taste in the present situation."

All the British men around her nodded their heads slowly, understanding her misgivings. Her web gear and kevlar helmet were next to grab the British's attention, along with her tactical and undershirt bullet-resistant vests. Nancy put on her tactical vest and helmet to show them the overall appearance, attracting an amused comment from Sergeant Latham.

"You look like one of those imperial guards out of 'Flash Gordon', Miss."

Next came her weapons. They already knew about her Glock 26 and Desert Eagle pistols from her adventure with Latham and the Germans, but saw her three other handguns for the first time. Wilson quickly put aside the Ruger Mark II .22 calibre target pistol and the Colt Python .357 Magnum revolver as being fairly contemporary weapons. The Glock 17 9mm pistol was another matter. For one thing, the frame of the weapon was made from a polymer, not from metal. The other feature that caught Wilson's eyes was the Bushnell Holographic sight, which looked like a small, one-inch square window on top of an elongated support base.

"What is this?"

"An holographic 3-D combat sight. I use it in combat pistol competitions. It places a red illuminated cross hair in line with the bore and the target. You can acquire the target much faster, without having to line up two sets of sights. Try to point at something quickly, but keep both of your eyes open."

Wilson did just that and was suitably impressed.

"This really makes pointing faster and easier. I wish we could have something like that for our Hurricanes and Spitfires!"

"Actually, Doug, this was adapted from a system used in modern jet fighters for target tracking. My smaller pistol also has another type of targeting system used in a way on aircraft."

Nancy took out her Glock 26 and showed to Doug that it was unloaded before touching a small contact on its side and then pointing the pistol on Sergeant Latham.

"What is this red light under the muzzle?" Asked Latham.

"You mean the red dot dancing on your chest?" Corrected Wilson.

"Sergeant Sanders, please close the lights." Requested Nancy. Once the room was dark, the laser beam became visible, attracting a chorus of exclamations. She played the dot around a bit.

“This is a laser targeting beam. It places a dot of red light where you point your weapon, thus making it easier in combat.”

“What is a laser?” Asked Latham.

“It is a beam of coherent light, where all the light waves are parallel, thus tightly focused. At very small power levels, like this, it can be used to point a target or as a rangefinder. At medium power levels it can blind a person temporarily or damage optical sights. At high power levels, meaning 100 kilowatts or more, a laser can actually damage or destroy soft targets. Lasers have not been invented yet in 1940.”

Wilson quickly noted that down: they were definitely getting somewhere now.

Nancy passed over her radio scanner, since Wilson already had seen what it could do. Next was a device about the same size as the scanner, with a display screen on it. She looked at it sadly, then put it besides another item.

“These, I’m afraid, are totally useless here: the communications infrastructure needed for them to work do not exist yet anywhere. Your scientists will be free to study them at will. This one on the left is a Magellan global positioning system receiver, or GPS in short. It could give you your exact location down to less than 30 yards anywhere in the world, that is if the support satellites would be in orbit yet!”

“...A satellite? What is that?”

“How is your knowledge of astronomy, Doug?”

“Well, I’m not a regular observer but I do read on it from time to time.”

“Good, then you know a bit about orbital mechanics?”

“Yes, of course: a celestial object will stay around another body if it is on the right path and space velocity.”

“Excellent! Now, this GPS receiver is made to receive signals from emitter stations orbiting around the Earth, then calculates its own position from the time difference between multiple signals. In 2012, there were thousands of varying types of satellites in orbit, plus one permanently occupied orbital space station.”

The three British looked at her in awe: space flight was really possible? Wilson scribbled frantically on his notepad. Nancy went on.

“This one besides the GPS receiver is the latest in communications technology in 2012 and a ‘must have’ item for a war correspondent like me: it’s a cellular telephone capable of transmitting computer data and images from anywhere in the World via satellite. Unfortunately,

it is now useless, like the GPS. I will take the batteries out of them and save them for other electronic items I have.”

Opening small access panels in the back of the devices, she took out the ‘AA’ batteries. Wilson took one of them between two fingers and examined it.

“If this can make you happy, Nancy, we have similar size batteries available here.”

“You do? Thank God for that! I was afraid that most of my equipment was going to turn into dead junk within days.”

“O.K., now tell me what are exactly computers.”

“I believe that words would not suffice for that. The best way to explain is by a demonstration. Come here, please.”

They all moved in front of Nancy’s MAINGEAR F131 Super Stock desktop computer, already hooked up to a multifunction center, a UPS power regulator and a small transformer.

“I was bringing this equipment to my cottage in order to work on a story that my editor was screaming to get. I also was just back from a five weeks field trip in Afghanistan, where I used some of my portable equipment, including my portable notebook computer. It also explains the duffel bag full of dirty clothes: I was due to wash them at my cottage.”

The British smiled at her explanation and at Nancy’s embarrassed look.

“I can have a steward from the officers’ mess wash and press your clothes and uniforms without a problem, if this is convenient for you.” Proposed Wilson. She beamed at him at those words.

“You’re a darling! I am certainly going to take you on your offer, Doug. Alright, here we go. Computers like this one are essentially data storage and handling machines, plus are used to communicate World-wide via an international network called ‘Internet’. In 2012 they are everywhere and were being improved constantly. In 1940, there are only a few clumsy, ultra-slow and dumb electro-mechanical computers in service that are used mostly to break codes. They take up complete rooms and are less powerful than my pocket calculator. What you are going to see is way beyond even the imagination of your technology. You can’t even duplicate this, since your materials technology is not advanced enough yet to produce the necessary semi-conductors.”

Wilson looked at her with a dubious expression on his face.

“We will try to follow you through. Proceed!”

“In my intelligence unit, we used a list of what we called Priority Intelligence Requirements, or P.I.R.s. Do you have such a list here?”

“Yes. Do you need to see it?”

“Not if you can remember some of it. Give me one of your top requirements and I will see if I can find something about it in my computer database.”

Sweat appeared on Wilson’s forehead: if she was telling the truth, she may be about to give him in minutes the answers to questions that had been bothering the R.A.F. for months now.

“One of our top priorities as a Fighter Command airbase is to find anything about new German aircraft and their performances and armament in particular.”

“Fair enough! Here we go!”

Nancy turned on her desktop computer, then the monitor and the multifunction center. The three British held their breath while the monitor screen came alive in seconds and the computer self-checked for glitches and viruses. In the meantime, Nancy opened a small briefcase, showing the dozens of laser discs and memory cards inside. She took one laser disc out and showed it to Doug.

“This briefcase holds my professional war correspondent database and historical files, enough to fill a small public library with the equivalent in books. While the embedded memory inside my computer possesses a huge capacity, I reserve it to save in it my current professional files and programmes, while I keep on disks and memory cards historical data and other information that I use less often. This particular disk is used by me to store data on World War II military equipment and armament, collected from scanning books and copying available datafiles.”

She inserted the 700 megabytes-capacity laser disk in the computer’s DVD/CD drive, then turned towards Wilson.

“Have you seen anything yet on the Focke-Wulf 190 fighter?”

“Er, no!”

Nancy’s reply to that was to select a file on her disk’s menu and access it. The black and white picture of a small, compact propeller-driven aircraft appeared on the screen, along with lines of text. The three RAF men crowded behind Nancy, examining every detail on the screen. Nancy initiated a print program as she spoke.

“Focke-Wulf 190A fighter. Entered service in September of 1940. Maximum speed of 653 kmh, or 408 mph if you prefer. Armament of two 13mm machineguns above the engine, plus two 20mm cannons in the wing roots and two 20mm or 30mm cannons in the outer wings. It is equipped with a BMW 801 radial engine rated at 1700 hp, with emergency boost to 2100 hp. Extremely agile and very robust.”

“My god!” Exclaimed Latham, “It is faster and better armed than our own Spitfire!”

“Yes and, starting next year, it will cause you a lot of grief. Here, the printout on it is starting to come through.”

The men looked at her portable multifunction center as two pages of pictures, drawings and text were coming out with a low humming noise. Taking the first page off the printer’s tray, Wilson scanned it with growing excitement. He finally returned his eyes on Nancy, grinning to her.

“Do you realise what your machine and its data could mean to us?”

“I understand that very well, Doug.” Replied Nancy, her face most serious. “I thought hard during the last hours about the possible consequences of what I just did. By giving to your government access to my knowledge and technology, I will most certainly change history and shake the future as I knew it. On the other hand, doing nothing would have condemned over 57 million people, most of them civilians, to die in this war, as dictated in my history. If my actions now can save at least a few millions by shortening this war, then I will be able to look at myself in a mirror after this war.”

“And what if you would have decided not to give your knowledge?” Asked Wilson, after he had gone over the shock caused by the number of dead mentioned by Nancy.

“Then, I would have torched my car, with my equipment inside, and would have shot myself in the head.”

Looking into her green eyes, Wilson could see that she was not bluffing about that.

“Very well! Latham, take these pages and have them retyped in three copies, along with photographs of the pictures and drawings.”

“Wait! No need for that!”

Nancy’s shout stopped Latham as he was halfway to the door. The three men looked at her in puzzlement as she smiled and pointed at her multifunction system.

“Why do it the hard way? This can also be used as a copying machine. Give me those sheets. Three copies you said?”

“Correct!” Answered a bemused Wilson.

As the British stared at the machine that was soon spitting out pages after pages, Nancy selected more files on the disk’s menu and ordered a fresh print program. When Wilson had just picked up what he thought was the last of the copies he had asked for, more pages kept pouring out on the tray.

“What is this? I have three cop...”

He strangled on his words when he realised that these pages concerned a totally different aircraft. Nancy chuckled at his expression.

"I took the liberty of ordering a printout run of three copies each of the files on the Messerschmitt 262 jet fighter, the V-1 flying bomb, the V-2 ballistic missile and the radar-equipped night fighter variant of the Messerschmitt Bf 110. You don't need to touch anything. If it stops printing, do not attempt anything and wait for me."

"Where are you going?"

"To the washroom: my bladder is about to burst!"

When she returned to the intelligence section, Nancy was directed again into Wilson's office.

"Nancy, even after seeing it, I can barely believe it. Did you say that you have complete historical files on these disks?"

"Correct, Doug. I have on file the main political, military and technological events up to the year 2012, plus details on weapons systems to be produced between now and then."

"My god, this means..."

"... That I could show you what the RAF looks like in 2012, or how this war was won by 1945, according to my own history of course!"

Wilson paled at that. Nancy kept going on, becoming very serious.

"Doug, I believe that now is a good time to place a few phone calls."

Taking a notepad, she wrote for a short while on it, then passed it to Wilson.

"Please call Group Headquarters at Uxbridge and ask to speak to the officer in charge of the Special Liaison Unit attached to Air Marshal Park. Then tell that officer those words and from whom you got them. Then warn the sector commander that a rocket may be coming down his way on my account." Wilson looked at the notepad, then at her and finally picked up the telephone. As he was waiting for a connection with Uxbridge, Commodore Nicholls entered the office, making Doug and Nancy shoot up to their feet at attention. Signaling Doug to continue with his call, Nancy spoke politely to Nicholls, a man with graying hair wearing one of those moustaches so popular in the R.A.F..

"Commodore, Lieutenant Wilson is in the process of calling Marshal Park's headquarters in Uxbridge at my request. You may want to stay to see the result of that call."

"Uxbridge?" Said Nicholls, surprised. "Who exactly is he calling, Captain?"

"The officer in charge of the Special Liaison Unit attached to Marshal Park, sir. You probably don't know the exact mission of that unit, as it deals with highly classified materiel."

"Uh, I effectively don't know well that unit, but I do hold a 'Most Secret' security clearance, Captain."

Seeing that Doug had finally been connected to the officer he wanted to speak to, Nancy made a sign to Nicholls to listen, which he did with some impatience.

“Hello, this is Flight Lieutenant Wilson, Northolt’s intelligence officer. To whom am I speaking, please?...Sir, a person that arrived on this base this morning has asked me to read a few words to you and wait for your reaction... No Sir, I’m dead serious! That person, apart of shooting down a Junkers 88 and capturing two Germans, gave us truly valuable intelligence on German aircraft and weapons...Yes sir! Here are the words for you: Ultra, Bletchley Park, , Hut 3...”

At that point, Wilson had to take the phone away from his ear, as even Nancy could hear the officer at the other end yell. Wilson also seemed irritated by what he heard, as he then also raised his voice.

“Commander Kelly, before you continue talking about putting that person in jail, let me remind you that she suggested contacting you!...Yes, it’s a she, sir! She also brought with her some equipment that is, in my humble opinion, well beyond our technology or that of the Germans... What I am trying to say is that we have here a young Canadian woman with extremely valuable information and some amazing equipment, who claims to be coming from the year 2012...Yes sir, I believe her and I think that she can convince anybody of it... Sir, I’m sorry but I refuse to put that woman under arrest!”

“Give me that telephone, Wilson!” Grumbled Nicholls, who then took the receiver from Doug’s hand and then spoke on a firm tone.

“Commander Kelly, this is Commodore Nicholls, Commander of the Northolt Sector. I have met this woman and seen her information and I am ready to put my trust in her. I do not know what is bugging you so much but I can assure you that nobody here will put Captain Laplante in jail, unless someone much higher in rank than you gives me the order to. Don’t worry about informing Marshal Park about this: I will do it myself.”

Nicholls then slammed the phone down and looked at Nancy, a question in his eyes.

“What do the words you made Wilson say on the phone mean, really Captain? That Commander Kelly seemed positively furious.”

“They are connected to the most important military secret held presently by Great-Britain, Commodore.” Answered soberly Nancy. “That secret is known by only a select few senior officers and politicians, including the Prime Minister. Its importance in this war is actually priceless and I can thus understand perfectly why this Commander Kelly was so agitated.”

“But, if this secret is so important, how come you know about it, Captain?”

“Simple, Commodore: the ULTRA file will be declassified and opened to the public nearly forty years after the end of this war and was part of the historical archives in 2012. Believe me, sir, when I tell you that I know about every dirty little secrets in this war and the years to come, be they German, British, American, Japanese, Soviet, Italian or French. If I was in fact a German spy, do you think that I would reveal such information to you? The Germans would in fact kill to learn that you are able to decipher their coded messages, Commodore.” Nicholls, beads of cold sweat appearing on his forehead, nodded slowly his head after a few seconds and spoke in a subdued tone.

“I now fully believe you, Captain. I will go call Marshal Park right away on my encoded telephone line. Do you think that you could produce more information on the Germans in the meantime?”

“Certainly, Commodore! I will go select and print a chronological list of significant events for the months to come. I must however warn you right now about a radical change to German air tactics soon. On September 7, in five days, the Luftwaffe will cut down on its attacks against R.A.F. airfields and radar stations and will launch a massive bombing campaign against the city of London. The first raid, in the late afternoon of September 7, will be made by a total of 900 bombers and fighters and will target the London East Docks area. A smaller raid will follow that night, then daily raids on the city. The German goal will be to break the morale of the British population.”

“My God!” Said Nicholls, becoming pale. “Are you certain about that information, Captain?”

“Positive, sir! I will have more informations on paper within an hour.”

“In this case, I will not take more of your precious time, Captain. I will now go make that call to Marshal Park.”

As Nicholls walked out of the intelligence section at a near run, Doug looked with near reverence at Nancy.

“God must have sent you, Nancy.”

Nancy smiled gently at that.

Maybe! Doug, I need a favor from you.”

“Anything you ask!” Replied Wilson with a smile.

“Doug, the more people will know about me, the better the chances that some of them will want to eliminate me. Know this, but keep it strictly to yourself: your government is thoroughly infiltrated by communist sympathizers working for Moscow. What do you think Stalin

will do when he learns that someone knows everything about his post-war plans for Europe or about his secret operations?”

Wilson suddenly looked like he was going to be sick.

“He will probably order you kidnapped or killed. Your life would become a hell.”

“The favor I ask of you, Doug, is to not let me be defenceless. Too many people will want me dead too soon.”

Wilson hesitated for a moment.

“If I let you carry a gun and my government tries to arrest you, what will you do with it?”

“I will probably shoot myself.”

Wilson’s look was now one of pure horror. Nancy kept on.

“Understand me, Doug. I love life, passionately! I do not want to die young, but I do not want to end up spending my life in a jail or a mental asylum.”

“Alright, you can have your gun, but don’t be obvious about it.”

“Thank you, Doug. It is very much appreciated.”

17:15 (GMT)

Headquarters, British Secret Intelligence Services (MI 6)

54 Broadway Street

London

The RAF officer excused himself with the young scientist he was talking with before picking up the telephone.

“Air staff liaison office, Winterbotham here!” He suddenly paled as his interlocutor spoke.

“What do you mean, ULTRA may be compromised?”

Doctor Reginald Victor Jones’ head snapped up when he heard the horrified exclamation of his superior: ULTRA was the codename for the code-breaking operation in charge of intercepting and decyphering the German high command radio traffic, encoded via Enigma machines. The Germans were certain of the impossibility of Enigma being ever decrypted and were using it for all their high level traffic, including Hitler’s orders to his field commanders. ULTRA was probably the most sensitive and best kept secret in Great Britain. Until now that is, if he could go by what he could hear now. Winterbotham was by now completely agitated.

“Thanks for warning me. I will make sure that that woman does not endanger ULTRA anymore. Inform me of any new developments on this.” He then put down the receiver and faced Jones.

“This morning, a young woman showed up at RAF Northolt and served up a ridiculous story, claiming to be coming from the year 2012. The base staff claims that she has some amazing equipment with her and that she has given them valuable information on German weapons. What do you think of that story?”

“A rather fantastic one, sir, but even if she is lying I would like to see that equipment of hers and her information. Why do you say that she is compromising ULTRA?”

“She had the base intelligence officer call our SLU at Uxbridge and read out the words ULTRA, Bletchley Park and Hut 3, supposedly in order to prove her story of being a time traveler.”

Jones thought furiously for a moment. Bletchley Park was the name of the estate north of London where the Enigma decyphering was done, while Hut 3 was the one where the decyphering was done. This was shaping up to be a most interesting case.

“Sir, I think that we should not be hasty in judging that woman: she obviously knows about ULTRA but chose to warn us directly instead of, lets say, go to the Germans with that information. On top of that, she gave supposedly good intelligence to our own people. These are not the actions of a hostile person.”

“So, what kind of person could she be?”

“Think about it, sir! You know better than me how rigid our security around ULTRA is. How could a complete stranger know about it? Furthermore, if the Germans knew somehow that we are breaking their Enigma codes , telling us about it would be the absolute last thing they would do.”

Winterbotham was silent for a moment, bobbing his head up and down.

“What you are saying makes sense. But a time traveler from 2012?”

“I don’t know about that, sir. However, ULTRA will be eventually declassified and become public knowledge. 2012 is 72 years in the future: the chances are that ULTRA will be by then an open secret. Whoever she is, I would love to go meet her and check her equipment. If she really is from 2012, the technology in that equipment should be a good indicator for someone like me. Imagine what one of our radars would look like to a radio technician from 1914!”

Winterbotham nodded at Jones’ metaphor.

“Alright, you leave for Northolt as soon as possible and check that woman out, but not alone. A security team will accompany you in case she reveals herself to be dangerous. Let me just arrange your transpor...”

The telephone cut him off again.

“Winterbotham here!”

The officer suddenly straightened up in his chair: the caller must have been a very high-ranking officer.

“Yes sir... I was just informed, sir... Sir? But... Alright, sir, we will proceed softly. Good day, sir!”

His hand was shaking when he lowered the telephone.

“Christ! That was Air Chief Marshal Dowding, the commander of Fighter Command. He was calling to warn me to treat that woman in Northolt decently. He damn near threatened me with armed resistance if, and I quote, any secret service goons showed up in Northolt to arrest or manhandle her.”

“WOW! Fighter Command became that fond of her in one day? She must be quite a number!”

“Indeed! Anyway, you’re going to Northolt this evening, without the goon squad. I will call the base and warn them of your arrival.”

CHAPTER 4 – ACCEPTANCE

18:55 (GMT)

Base intelligence section, R.A.F. Northolt

As Nancy locked her computer and got up from her chair, interrupting her work to go eat, Doug Wilson approached her and patted her shoulder.

“Let’s pack away your gear and put it back in the storage room: we need the space to get back to work.”

“Just let my main computer and printer in place, will you? I still need to do a lot of work on it tonight.”

“I certainly won’t complain about you getting more information on paper. By the way, I have made arrangements with a mess steward to pick up your laundry in fifteen minutes, so you better collect it now.”

“Thanks Doug, I won’t forget this.”

Nancy picked up her various suitcases and started hauling them to the storeroom behind her. The moment she was inside, Wilson turned towards Sanders.

“Did you collect from all the men?”

“Yes sir. It leaves only you, sir.”

Wilson dug in his pocket and took out a ten pound sterling banknote.

“Christ, sir! You’re mighty generous!”

“You know how rare steaks are these days? She is pennyless and probably won’t see a paycheck for a long time. If we eat her groceries, it’s only fair that we reimburse her for it.”

“Talking of eating groceries, sir, those steaks went out like snow in the sun. If you don’t eat yours soon, it might evaporate.”

“I think that the men know what would happen if they touch my steak, Sergeant.”

“Er, actually, it was the commodore who was targetting your steak in the refrigerator.”

“OOPS! I better have supper now! Please make sure that Captain Laplante takes the money and that her laundry is picked up and speedily processed.”

Wilson then left at a trot. Sanders then waited for Nancy to come out, picking up one of the files printed earlier by her. It was about the nazi ballistic rocket. Sometimes, German technological sophistication scared him and made him wonder if the war could be won. Nancy’s affirmation that Great-Britain would win by 1945 had taken an immense weight off his shoulders. Next he

picked up a magazine titled International Defence Review, dated October 2012. He had browsed through it earlier but kept returning to it and an article titled 'RAF: future in the balance'. His reading was interrupted by the return of Nancy from the storage room. Taking a deep breath, he took her duffel bag full of dirty clothes and put it down near the entrance door, then handed her an envelope containing the donated money. If she was true to character, then he could expect a hard sell to try making her accept it. He was correct on that. He had to finally use his ultimate argument.

"Look, Miss! Do you prefer having to borrow money from poor Mister Wilson every time you go eat at the mess? A flight lieutenant's pay is nothing to shout about!"

Knowing she was being had somehow, Nancy reluctantly accepted the money and put it inside her wallet. An airman arrived at that moment and announced that he was sent to pick up her laundry. Nancy grabbed her duffel bag and gave it to the young man.

"When do you expect to have it returned here?"

"It will be ready no later than tomorrow afternoon, maam!"

"Excellent! Please accept this."

She handed him one shilling that came from the money donated by the section. Sanders nearly chocked as the happy airman left with her duffel bag. She couldn't resist throwing him a barb.

"It's your fault, sarge! You forced me to accept that money, it's thus mine to spend at my convenience."

Knowing that he couldn't win that fight, Sanders changed the subject.

"Er, I am afraid that the mess' dining room is now closed for supper, maam. You can however get something at the small kitchen adjacent to the operations room. Mister Wilson is there already, having supper."

"Good idea. Thanks!"

The building's kitchen was really more like a large relaxation lounge, with a small counter and a sink in one corner. An electric hot plate and a small refrigerator complemented the mandatory tea kettle. Wilson was enjoying his steak and chatting with Commodore Nicholls at one table, while four WAAFs and a duty officer were relaxing and drinking tea in a corner. Those last five couldn't help stare at Nancy and her foreign uniform when she entered. She ignored the stares and went to the kitchen corner to prepare for herself two sandwiches and a glass of milk before going to sit with Doug Wilson and Commodore Nicholls. Wilson was still eating with delight his steak. Nancy looked at the WAAFs, who seemed bored.

"I suppose that this lounge is used by off-duty personnel. What do they do in their off time?"

Wilson answered that between two bites.

"Most people go to the pub near the base when they have a few hours off. On base, unfortunately, there is little to do apart of drinking at the various messes: the base theatre was destroyed in a raid days ago and we haven't been able to get hold of a new projector or films yet."

Nancy suddenly grinned.

"Wait, I can provide some entertainment! I have an electronic entertainment unit that can play films, of which I have a selection. I could install it in this lounge, if you agree with that, sir."

Nicholls was immediately enthusiastic about the idea.

"Anything that will improve morale in these bleak times is welcome! Do you need anything to make it work here? I understand that your equipment is to North-American specifications."

"As a matter of fact, I will need a 220 to 110 volts transformer and an extension chord with adaptors compatible with american sockets. Do you have these around here?"

"No problem at all, Captain. With the supplies we are getting from the United States, we have quite a lot of American equipment on base. Squadron Leader Burns!"

The duty officer drinking tea in one corner jumped to his feet.

"Sir!"

"Get hold of the duty electrician and tell him to come and immediately install in this room a transformer and extension chord to power American specs equipment. Then pass the word to everybody that movies will be available for viewing here this evening."

Cheers came from the WAAFs as the duty officer walked out in a hurry. Nicholls turned his attention back on Nancy.

"I hope that those movies are not too, uh, futuristic, Captain."

"Most are, but they could always be passed off as science-fiction movies. I have however a few movies where the action is set in these times or earlier still. The viewing quality will be of course up to 2012 standards. Mister Wilson could always vet movies before they are projected."

"A sensible idea. Please do that."

"To return to more serious things, sir, I have to warn you about one thing, sir: the more you use my historical information to influence the war, the more the Germans themselves will

react to these changes and alter their tactics. In short, my historical information, while dependable at first, will become more and more inaccurate as it is used. Any technical information will however stay mostly current.”

Nicholls brushed his moustache with one finger, thoughtful.

“That makes sense. I will keep that in mind. Know that I contacted Marshal Park about you, who contacted in turn Air Chief Marshal Dowding, Commander of Fighter Command. Be assured that you are now well considered in very high places, Captain.”

“You just took a heavy weight off my shoulders, Commodore. Thank you very much.”

“My pleasure, Captain.”

Once they had finished their respective meals, Nancy and Doug went back to the intelligence section, to go get her television unit, a large flat screen model, and a game system able to play as well movies on DVDs. Wilson felt embarrassed as he followed Nancy, who was carrying a heavy piece of electronic gear, with only two small suitcases. They found an electrician already plugging in a small transformer in a corner outlet of the lounge. Moving a small table near the outlet, Nancy put her Sony TV unit on it and inspected the connector at the end of the extension chord: the electrician had done his job correctly. As she was plugging in the unit, a group of WAAFs entered the lounge.

“Hey, Nancy!”

“Meg! I didn’t know you worked in the operations room this evening.”

“I just finished my shift there, in fact. We were told there would be movies shown here. Is it true?”

“Sure! Grab a seat. We will be ready to start in a few minutes.”

One of the WAAFs whispered in Meg Thomas’ ear as they took place on a sofa.

“Who is your friend?”

“She’s a Canadian Army intelligence officer. There is more about her but I’m not sure how much I can tell you about her.”

As Nancy was ready to insert a laser disk in her game unit, Doug asked her what kind of film it was, obviously remembering Nicholls’ directive. She reassured him with an amused expression.

“Actually, you will like this. It’s about an American archeologist of the mid-thirties battling nazi stooges to find the cup of Christ, which is supposed to give immortality if you drink from it.”

“Hey, this sounds fun! Any futuristic items in it?”

“None at all. In fact, the Germans use at one point an old souped-up Mark II tank from World War I. The action is riveting and there is quite a lot of humor in it.”

“I may just stay for it! What’s the title?”

“Indiana Jones and the last crusade.”

The movie was well under way, with the RAF personnel cheering as Indiana Jones was throwing out of the window of a German airship’s lounge a Nazi colonel, when Flight Sergeant Sanders came to fetch Nancy and Doug with a discreet message.

“Someone from London has arrived to see you, miss.”

Leaving the lounge as quietly as possible, they made their way back to the intelligence section, where they found a tall young man in his late twenties and wearing a light grey civilian suit stooped over Nancy’s computer. Doug saw with puzzlement a triumphant smile appear on Nancy’s face, as if she had expected that particular man to show up. She offered her hand to the visitor, who shook it while gazing at her camouflaged combat uniform.

“Doctor Reginald Jones, you can’t imagine how excited I am to be able to meet with you in the flesh.”

The said Doctor Jones was taken aback by being recognized by a complete, albeit attractive stranger.

“You know me? How?”

“I read your book many times. A fascinating document!”

Nancy’s answer somehow seemed to puzzle him even more.

“What book? I haven’t published any books yet!”

“It will be titled ‘Most secret war’ and will be published, if I remember well, in 1978. You married earlier this year and your wife Vera is expecting your first child, a girl by the way. You live in Richmond Hill Court and work at 54 Broadway Street under, I believe he is now a wing commander, Fred Winterbotham, as an air ministry scientist attached to the RAF liaison office at M.I.6. Your main line of work at present is the study of German radio-navigation aids for their bombers and the state of German radar technology. You have not yet succeeded in getting an assistant for your work, but you have personally briefed Prime Minister Churchill during a cabinet meeting last June, where you gave him a good impression of yourself. Shall I continue?”

Jones had to sit, his legs feeling weak and his head spinning. Doug Wilson, although already knowing her as a time traveler, was himself stunned by her knowledge of the young scientist.

“Wha... what year are you supposed to be from already, 2012?” Asked Jones with difficulty.

“That is correct. Let me present myself: Nancy Laplante, correspondent for CONFLICTS MAGAZINE and reserve captain in the Canadian military intelligence. I assure you that I did not come to 1940 of my own free will. I suspect in fact that I may never be able to go back to my real time. By the way, Doug, that crash survey team should have been back by now: it’s dark outside.”

“You’re right, I should check on them.”

Jones, who was starting to get colors back in his face, looked at them quizzically.

“What crash?”

“That of what I suspect was the craft that abducted me in 2012 and deposited me near Northolt. It may have collided with a German aircraft.”

As if on cue, an excited Sanders ran in the office, panting.

“The crash team is back. You better come and see this, sir.”

The four of them rushed out of the building towards a five ton Bedford truck parked on the road in front of the building’s entrance. A number of airmen and mechanics were busy lining up on the grass a number of objects. Some flashlights were used to help them in unloading the objects from the truck. A senior technician came to attention in front of Wilson and saluted him. Wilson saluted back and looked at the various forms on the ground.

“So, what did you find, Warrant Officer Hill?”

“Sir, as we were told to expect, we found the debris of a German aircraft, probably a Junkers 88, plus those of an unidentified aircraft. We also found some bodies and partial remains. We have brought back the unidentified parts and the human remains. The German debris were left under guard at the crash site.”

“Good work, Warrant! Let’s see the human remains first!”

Hill turned towards his men and yelled.

“Let’s get some flashlights here to help the flight lieutenant!”

Hill guided Wilson, Jones and Nancy to a row of five canvas bags. The technician warned them before opening the body bags.

“I’m sorry, Miss, but the sight and the smell are ghastly. You better brace yourself.”

“I have seen similar things many times already, Warrant. Go ahead!”

The opened bags revealed the remains of five persons in various states of damage. Two of them appeared to have been much taller than the three others. Nancy, Wilson and Jones were immediately attracted to the larger remains. Hill was looking at them too.

“Even burned up and dismembered, those two attracted our attention right away: they must have been well over seven feet tall.”

“Seven feet!”

Jones was obviously shocked, but was in for an even bigger surprise as Nancy crouched besides a body bag and cautiously, using a flashlight as a lever, raised a burned arm so that all could see it.

“My God!” whispered Jones, while looking at the hand attached to it: it had six fingers!

CHAPTER 5 – CODENAME: ATHENA

22:14 (GMT)

Base Intelligence section, R.A.F. Northolt

Nancy put her hand on Jones' shoulder to get his attention: he had been totally immersed in reading her printed data and her technical and military magazines for the last hour, taking masses of notes and preparing his report to London.

"Doctor Jones, if you don't mind I will go sleep now: I have crammed 36 hours inside 24 hours and I'm bushed."

He looked at her with a sheepish smile.

"Go ahead. I'm afraid I am too caught up in this to be able to sleep much tonight. However, I will wait tomorrow morning to examine with you in detail those strange craft remains and your two devices you were so generous to give away."

"Well, they were useless to me without the orbiting satellites to make them work. By the way, Mister Wilson just told me that the autopsy report on those tall men will not be ready before the morning. I will be on the camp cot inside the adjacent storeroom. Good night!"

Jones worked for another half hour, then got on his feet and stretched his back a bit. Excusing himself with Leading Airman Sutcliffe, who was on night watch duty, he went out of the intelligence section office and walked to the building's orderly room, where he picked up a telephone and dialed London. Winterbotham answered within two rings.

"Winterbotham here!"

"This is Jones, calling from Northolt. You can tell General Menzies that the woman is for real. She is also extremely cooperative. I still have a lot to do here, so don't expect me before at least tomorrow night."

"Are you positive about her story? Any doubts?"

"None at all! I can't tell you much on this line, but I have heard and seen things here that would knock your pants down. Her equipment is way too far beyond our technology to leave any doubts at all about her origins."

"That much?! Alright, I will pass the word to Menzies. Take all the time you need to investigate this case: I want no doubts left about her."

"Understood, sir. Good night!"

As he was returning to the intelligence section, he took the wrong corridor and stumbled on the lounge, where Air Commodore Nicholls and Flight Lieutenant Wilson were about to watch a movie on Nancy's TV unit. Jones had heard about it but had been too busy to have a look at it. Maybe now was a good time, he told himself. The commodore greeted him and pointed the other end of his sofa.

"Please sit, Doctor Jones. I may have a few things for you."

Accepting the seat, Jones folded his legs, enjoying the comfort of the sofa. He watched Wilson as he was putting a shiny disk inside a small box linked by a cable to the television unit.

"What kind of movie are you going to watch, sir?"

"It is one of Captain Laplante's futuristic movies which I restricted the viewing of to people in the know about her. The title is TERMINATOR 2. Welcome to the club!"

There was a short moment at the start of the movie used to present the movie company's logo. Nicholls used it to talk with Jones.

"What do you think of our pretty visitor from the future, Doctor?"

"She's positively fascinating. She is also most friendly and cooperative, contrary to what some of my superiors in London were thinking."

"You can also tell them that she has a lot of guts: just as she was arriving at this base, the Germans started bombing it. She replaced dead ack-ack gunners on the spur of the moment and shot down a Junkers 88. A bullet went through her jacket's arm sleeve but she kept firing until that German crashed. Later in the day she gave us early warning of a second raid, thus saving many lives, then ran out in her car to capture two Germans who parachuted out. She was very skillful in interrogating one of them shortly after."

Jones's eyes went wide open.

"Quite a woman we have here!"

"Indeed! In fact, I sent today an urgent recommendation for her to be awarded the Military Cross for her actions under fire. This is also not apparently her first war. I saw her personal resumé and it was quite impressive. Apart of serving as an intelligence officer in a number of operational missions in the future, she also happens to be a war correspondent with extensive field experience. Also know this: shortly after her arrival, the idiot in charge of base security had her arrested, interrogating and beating her naked in front of his men. The bastard has been since run out of the base, but she was seriously traumatised by that incident. What I am getting at, Doctor Jones, is that she has rendered valuable services to the RAF and that I,

along with Air Chief Marshal Dowding, would take a very dim view of anybody mistreating her again.”

“Message understood, sir! I will pass it along.”

“Good! Ah, here we go.”

“My God!” Suddenly gasped Jones, appaled by the opening scene: a dead city at night filled with skeletons. Everybody jumped in their seats when a robot’s foot suddenly appeared, crushing a skull. The rest of the movie left them nearly speechless. Jones looked at Nicholls with an awed expression when the film came to its end.

“Well, apart of saying that this was the most incredible movie I have ever seen, I think that it showed us a few things.”

“And what would they be, Doctor Jones?” Asked Nicholls.

“First, I think you will agree that the city scenes had to be shot in actual, real cities and not in some makeup set. It thus probably showed us the urban life circa 2012 or a bit earlier. Second, electronics and especially computers, like the one Miss Laplante is using here, have made strides in seventy years that I would have never thought possible. Third, do you remember that awful bomb that was shown blowing up a whole city?”

“How could I forget that?”

“Well, I think that I can safely assume that such weapons really exist in her time, as work is already being done on them today.”

“My God! I hope we don’t use such bombs in this war! It is already barbaric enough as it is.”

“Well, there are speculations now about if these weapons are indeed possible, as I believe that nobody has advanced yet beyond the purely theoretical studies stage. After seeing this movie, I’m afraid any doubts I had have just evaporated.”

“It may be a good idea to ask Captain Laplante tomorrow about what she knows on those bombs, especially about the German research program on them.”

“I will keep you informed on that, sir.”

“Please do, Doctor. Good night.”

01:36 (GMT)

Tuesday, September 3, 1940

Base intelligence section, R.A.F. Northolt

Lying on a camp cot set up in the small storage room of the intelligence section, Nancy was tossing and turning, unable to sleep despite her fatigue. The possible consequences of her acts today weighed heavily on her conscience, making her anxious and agitated. Finally, unable to find sleep, she sat on her camp cot and held her head with both hands, trying to convince herself that she had made the right choice. The fate of her own world of origin in the future was worrying her in particular. Will it be irremediably changed by her actions in 1940 or did her actions create a new, parallel timeline? Would she be ever able to return to her original life in 2012 or did she disappear for good from it when she was abducted? As she despaired of finding answers to those questions, a soft voice resonated inside her head.

"You did what had to be done, Nancy. Stop tormenting yourself and go to sleep."

Nancy looked around her, trying to find the one who had just spoken, but didn't see anyone.

"My God, am I becoming crazy?"

"No, Nancy! Believe in your humanity." Said the voice inside her head in a tone that was neither male nor female.

"Who are you? Are you from the future?"

"I am the past, the present and the future. I already spoke to you once, when your name was Jeanne. You have a destiny to accomplish and I will guide you on your way."

"What destiny? What am I suppose to accomplish?"

Despite her repeating her questions, the voice was not heard again in her head. Someone then knocked gently on the door of the storage room.

"Maam, this is Airman Sutcliffe. Are you alright?"

"I... I will be okay. I was having nightmares. Don't worry about me." She replied in a weak, hesitant voice.

"In that case, good night, Captain."

"Thank you, Airman Sutcliffe."

Still confused, Nancy lay back on her cot, trying to go to sleep. This time she was able quickly to close her eyes and fall asleep, as if someone had given her a sedative.

08:10 (GMT)

A gentle shake on her shoulder awoke Nancy in the morning.

"Nancy, Nancy, wake up! It's ten past eight."

She opened her eyes to see Wilson's face over her. Passing her hands on her face, she moaned softly.

"Damn, what a lousy night that was!"

"I heard about it." Said a concerned Wilson. "Anything I can do to help you about it?"

"Yes: find me a time machine!" She replied bitterly before softening her voice and looking apologetically at him as she sat on the camp bed.

"Forgive me, Doug, I'm a bit on edge right now. I realise that you're doing your best to help me and I thank you very much for that."

He nodded his head in understanding: many, if put in her situation, would react with much more despair than her. His cheeks suddenly reddened as she rose from the camp bed and went to her bags to get one of her uniforms: she was only wearing her underwear. Seeing his reaction, Nancy shot an exasperated look at him.

"Are you British ever prudish! What would you do in my army, where men and women share tents on field exercises?"

"They do?" Said Wilson, not a little shocked by that. "Do you have many women in the army in 2012?"

She replied matter-of-factly as she put on her baggy camouflage uniform.

"About ten percent of the Canadian Forces members in 2012 are women, in specialties ranging from infanters and sailors to fighter pilots."

"Women fighter pilots?" Exclaimed Doug, surprised and incredulous.

"Yes, women fighter pilots. By the way, you don't need to go as far in time as 2012 to find them: the Soviet air force will use many women as combat pilots in this war. As we would say in my time, Doug, wake up and smell the coffee!"

Still digesting that information, Wilson watched as Nancy put on a gun belt supporting her holstered Glock 26 pistol and two spare magazine holders, then covered it with the bottom of her baggy combat shirt. Remembering something then, he handed her an official mess meal card and a temporary security pass.

"Here, so that you're not harassed by security patrols around the base. I'm afraid though that you're too late for breakfast at the mess. However, there are some of your eggs and bacon left in the lounge's refrigerator."

"Thanks!"

She smiled to him before walking out of the storeroom. Wilson sighed, the sight of her nearly naked body still in his mind.

She was back at 08:45, having taken the time during her breakfast to start a new movie on her TV unit for the outgoing WAAF shift. Wilson wondered aloud about the absence of Doctor Jones. Somehow, Nancy knew why.

“He’s the type who works late at night but also starts late in the morning. You won’t see him before ten, probably.”

Jones showed up at five past ten, as predicted by her. Doug shot her a bemused look, which made her laugh.

“20/20 hindsight can be so much fun!”

Nancy and Jones then tried together for an hour or so to figure out the pieces retrieved from the crashed time machine, without success: the technology involved was so advanced that they just couldn’t understand it. The only useful conclusion was about the markings on some pieces: they were written in a highly evolved form of English, as different from modern English as had been medieval old English. Jones, having a classical education she didn’t have, could barely make out a few random words. He shook his head in resignation.

“This is hopeless! Whoever these men were, they must have come from thousands of years into the future. We are like bronze age farmers trying to understand a radio.”

“Alright then, how about looking at 2012 era equipment?”

He took her suggestion with enthusiasm and they were soon looking at the innards of Nancy’s now useless GPS receiver. What really fascinated Jones were the transistors and microprocessors.

“Not having to use tube valves saves a lot of volume.”

“Yes, also, transistors are a lot more resistant to shock and dependable, apart of generating less waste heat than tubes. The only problem for you here is that you need extremely pure gallium or silicium semi-conductor crystals to make them. I doubt that your industries can produce them before at least a decade.”

He looked at her resolutely.

“If we put our heads and hands to it, I promise you that we will produce these in less than six years.”

“I doubt it, but good luck to you anyway! This is now yours, along with the cellular telephone. I hope they will be useful to you.”

“Useful? These are worth their weight in gold, and more! Too bad you didn’t bring any items related to radar technology.”

Jones saw Nancy’s face suddenly change, as she had a look of sudden realisation.

“What an idiot I make! I’ll be back in a moment.”

She then ran out of the room, followed by the surprised look of the British. Jones then looked at Wilson.

“Does she do that often?”

“Oh, about once a day!” He quipped. She was soon back, putting a very small black box with round corners on the table in front of Jones. There were a few small buttons and a thin strip of plastic at one end.

“What is this?”

He took it in one hand: it was light, about the same as a lighter.

“That, Doctor Jones, is a miniature radar and laser beam detector. I used it to warn myself of police speed traps that used portable radars.”

She smiled in embarrassment as she concluded.

“It’s also illegal, which is probably why I didn’t think about it at first, until your remark.”

He stared at the box in the palm of his hand. Even Wilson, who was rapidly becoming blasé about 2012 technology, had his mouth ajar in wonderment.

“This can truly detect radar emissions?”

“Yes, absolutely. It searches automatically for any radar emissions in the X to Ka bands, which cover roughly the 3.75cm to 7.5mm wavelength range, plus laser beams.”

“MILLIMETRIC WAVE RADARS? But, we are still trying to develop centimetric wave radars!”

Jones sat down with a thump, apparently stunned by such technology.

“Miss Laplante, you just made my whole year!”

“Glad to be of help.” She replied with a smile. Jones seemed to force his mind to calm down.

“Miss Laplante, you seem incredibly knowledgeable in military technology, even for your time.”

“I have to! I’m a reserve intelligence officer, plus a regular correspondent for a military and international affairs magazine. I hold a Masters degree in international relations and am fluent in French, English, German, Russian, Spanish, Arabic, Pashto and Dari. I also hold a B.A. in military history.”

Jones looked at her with frank admiration.

“Jolly good! Are there many women like you in 2012?”

“Er, I have to say in all honesty that I was considered an oddball.”

Jones was silent for a minute, turning the next question in his mouth.

“Miss Laplante...”

“Please, call me Nancy!”

“Well, Nancy, what do you know about atomic bombs?”

Her joviality disappeared instantly. She then turned towards Doug.

“Could we speak in private, me and the doctor?”

Doug nodded, then cleared his men from the room before closing the door behind him. Nancy kept looking directly at Jones all the time.

“Why do you ask about nuclear weapons, Doctor?”

“Well, my main concern is whether the Germans will be able to produce an atomic weapon. After seeing your movie ‘Terminator 2’ last night, the thought of them being able to destroy whole cities is, to say the least, horrifying!”

“Believe me, Doctor Jones: nuclear weapons are horrible, no matter who uses them. However, you can relax: by this war’s end the Germans will still be a long way from producing a fission bomb. The only ones who will succeed in time will be the Americans, who will then use it twice against the Japanese to force their surrender.”

“But, neither the Americans nor the Japanese are at war now.”

“By December of 1941 they will, Doctor. Another thing you should know is that those nuclear weapons will create more than forty years of terror and tension between the great powers. At one point, an incident in the Caribbeans nearly resulted in massive nuclear exchanges. The World came to the edge of armagedon. By 2012, many long range nuclear weapons had been eliminated, but small rogue countries were trying to acquire them in order to play local bully. Believe me, Doctor, the World is better off without nuclear weapons.”

“Nancy, I agree with you totally. However, I would like to know for the benefit of my superiors if you would agree to help us develop an atomic bomb if you were asked?”

“No!”

Her answer had come without a hesitation.

“First of, I’m not a nuclear physicist. There would be little I could teach to the collection of Nobel Prize recipients already studying the subject. Secondly, giving the British government information on the bomb now would result in the Russians getting it also.”

“How can you say that? Churchill will probably keep this knowledge from Stalin.”

“Doctor, Stalin will not need to ask for it. He has communist sympathizers spying for him throughout the British government. Two of them works at the M.I.6 as a matter of fact.”

“Who?” Asked Jones, shocked.

“Guy Burgess and Kim Philby. He is part of a group that will be called ‘the Cambridge five’, because they were five young men recruited by the Russians while studying in

Cambridge. These five are all highly placed and will cause immense damage to your country. Donald Maclean, working out of the British embassy in Washington in 1944, will help pass American atomic secrets to Stalin. Another one, Anthony Blunt, is a close friend of the royal family and works at the M.I.5. The fifth one is John Cairncross, the secretary of Lord Hankey, the minister in charge of the Secret Services.”

“My god! General Menzies must be told about this!”

“If you are willing to pass the information on, I can do a printout on what I have on those spies and on many others in Great-Britain. Will Sir Menzies act on it, though?”

“Menzies is a dedicated professional and a patriot. He will do what is necessary for his country!”

“For England’s sake, I hope that you are proven right, Doctor Jones.”

Nancy then walked out, in need of some fresh air. She found Doug standing besides the building, watching a flight of Hurricanes in the process of landing on the grass airstrip. She stood besides him, silent for a moment as she also watched the airplanes land.

“You piloted one of these before, right?”

“Yes. A month ago I was badly hit in the leg during a mission. The damage was permanent, so I was taken off flying duty. At least I am still useful today, the more so now that you are around.”

She slowly caressed his left ear with the tip of a finger, making him shiver.

“Do you miss flying, Doug?”

“You bet I do! Flying, any kind of flying, is, or rather was my passion.”

“Maybe I can do something about giving you back some of the fun of flying.”

He looked at her with puzzlement.

“What do you mean? Don’t tell me that you have a way to heal my leg and so make me fit to fly again!”

“Unfortunately that’s impossible. What I had in mind is, if I could say so, a kind a substitute to real flying.”

“I’m afraid you lost me there.”

“Come inside and I will show you.”

They did not do more than ten paces towards the entrance of the operations building before a black staff car, preceded by an armed escort vehicle, stopped before the entrance. Two guards and a driver jumped out, the last one hurrying to open a passenger door of the big

Bentley. A tall and lean high-ranking officer of the R.A.F. stepped out, followed by a Canadian Army General.

“My God, it’s Air Chief Marshal Dowding himself!” Explained Doug as he snapped to attention and saluted, imitated by Nancy. She strongly suspected that she was somehow responsible for Dowding’s visit to Northolt. As the commander of Fighter Command was about to enter the operations building with the Canadian general in tow, he noticed Nancy and stopped, then walked towards her. Nancy felt a surge of adrenaline in her veins: unannounced surprise visits by general officers tend to do that to military subalterns. Dowding stopped in front of Nancy, who saluted him again. He returned the salute and looked her over from head to toe while the Canadian general also examined Nancy with interest.

“I gather that you are the young person who has caused so much commotion around this base since yesterday, Captain?”

“I... I’m afraid that I am the guilty party, sir.”

“Since I was coming here with General McNaughton to discuss your case with Air Commodore Nicholls, you might as well accompany me to the operations room, Captain.”

A captain does not normally argue with an air chief marshal, so she fell in behind Dowding and General McNaughton, leaving Doug Wilson to hurry back to his section to order a panic cleanup of the room. Everybody they met in the hallway snapped to attention and saluted, then ran away, probably to clean up their own desks or work areas.

The whole operations room snapped to attention at Dowding’s entrance, with Commodore Nicholls hurrying down from the observer’s gallery surrounding the plotting board. Nicholls saluted smartly his commander after coming to attention in front of him.

“You did not need to bother coming here on account of my reports, sir. I would have been glad to bring you all the facts at Stanmore, sir!”

“In view of the content of your reports, I felt I had to see for myself, Commodore. Could we speak in your office?”

“Of course sir! This way please.”

Nancy was left to wait with Dowding’s Aide-De-Camp in the operations room for what seemed to her like an eternity. Meg Thomas, who was on duty at the plotting board, smiled at her in encouragement. Nancy smiled back, still tense.

“Captain Laplante! In here please!” Boomed Nicholls’ voice.

“Yes sir!”

She walked into the commodore's office to find Dowding sitting at the desk, with Nicholls and McNaughton standing behind and on each side of him. She stopped in front of the desk and saluted again. Dowding examined her at length, silent. He finally pointed to a chair near a corner of the desk.

"Please sit down, Captain Laplante."

"Thank you, Sir."

She positioned the chair in front of the desk before sitting. She then noticed on the desk some of her computer printouts.

"Captain, you handed yesterday to Air Commodore Nicholls a number of reports you claimed to be historical facts, with you being an involuntary time traveler. Frankly, I and the rest of the General Staff had a thin time believing in any of this..."

Oh shit! I'm cooked! Thought Nancy.

"...Until today."

He seemed to enjoy the look of surprised relief on her face.

"Those alien bodies and your hardware finally cut the cake in your favor, Captain. The question for me now is what to do with a Canadian Army captain from 2012 who has a 20/20 hindsight knowledge of this war and of the coming decades. The fact that no women yet hold commissioned ranks in either the British or the Canadian forces made you even more of a problem. I thus contacted Major-General McNaughton, of the Canadian Military Planning Staff in London, for advice about your legal status as an officer. General..."

"Thank you, Air Chief Marshall. Miss Laplante, according to existing Canadian military regulations, you would not be entitled to the rank of captain. In fact, you would not be allowed in the army, period, except as a nursing sister or as a civilian employee. Yet, I am told that you are proficient with heavy weapons and have extensive combat experience. Am I right up to now?"

"Yes sir! I have been a commissioned officer of the Canadian Forces Reserves for thirteen years, with my specialty being military intelligence. I participated in two wars and four peacekeeping operations and am a war correspondent in civilian life, sir. I am also parachute-qualified."

"Hmm, quite impressive, actually. I still doubt that the Canadian Parliament would be ready to accept women as officers in the army, yet. You are clearly a special case, however. As the senior commander of all Canadian military forces in England, I am ready to issue you a special commission and to confirm you in the rank of captain."

Nancy discreetly sighed with relief at those words: she had been afraid that military mysoginism would prevail over common sense.

“Thank you, sir! I will do my best in the service of my country, sir.”

“What do you think that we should do with you, young lady?” Asked Air Marshall Dowding.

“Use me to the utmost to help win this war quicker, sir!”

“You may already have started doing just that, Captain. Know that your predictions on today’s chosen targets for German attacks were correct. As of now, anti-aircraft artillery units are being quietly moved to form a protective ring around the Vickers aircraft factory in Brooklands. If your predictions are correct again tomorrow, you may well save the lives of many precious workers and help us give the Germans a bloody nose.”

“What about the coming raids on London, sir?”

Dowding looked suddenly tired and discouraged for a short moment.

“We will have to wait and see. 20/20 hindsight or not, the Germans still have a dreadful numerical superiority on us.”

“How can I help, sir?”

“Captain, I like your attitude! What would you say to being officially employed by the R.A.F., with R.A.F. pay and amenities, as an exchange Canadian officer with the title of assistant base intelligence officer here? You would of course be tasked from higher headquarters and would be available to help the other services as needed, but you would be part of the R.A.F. and be under our official sanction. What is your answer to that?”

Nancy felt triumph and relief suddenly submerge her.

“Would I have to wear a R.A.F. uniform, Sir?”

“I knew I should have expected this question: army people seem to be allergic to air force uniforms. Alright, you can keep wearing your own uniforms as an exchange officer.”

“Then I accept your offer gladly, sir! May I ask a politically-oriented question, sir?”

“Go ahead, Captain.”

“Sir, at one point I will have to pass some of my information to the Americans, since they will get involved in this war sooner or later. Would I then be permitted to do that?”

“Hum, you are right in saying it is a political decision to make. However, I see no problems in this and, in fact, will advise the prime minister to get in touch with the Americans on your subject. Do you have any more questions before you return to your duties, Captain?”

“No, sir!”

Air Chief Marshal Dowding then rose from behind the desk and positioned himself in front of Nancy, who stood up.

“Captain Laplante, as of now you will be known under the codename ‘Athena’ for the purpose of reporting your information. One last thing.”

Dowding then took out of his vest pocket a small box that he opened, revealing a medal. He then pinned it to her combat shirt with a solemn expression.

“Captain Laplante, I, Air Chief Marshal Dowding, by the powers invested in me by His Majesty the king, am honored to award you the Military Cross for bravery under fire. Congratulations, Captain.”

She could barely hold tears of emotion as Dowding, McNaughton and Nicholls shook hands with her. Going out of the office, she was greeted by applause from the WAAFs and the duty officers in the operations room. The tears then came out.

CHAPTER 6 – COMBAT TEST

18:45 (GMT)

Tuesday, September 3, 1940

Base intelligence section, R.A.F. Northolt

The rest of the day was hectic for Nancy. After receiving her medal, she had to show her equipment to Dowding and McNaughton, printing some datafiles as a demonstration. They had then visited the infirmary to look at the bodies of the men from the future. The doctor could not tell much on them apart that they were perfectly human, except for six-fingered hands, heights above seven feet and apparent total lack of body hair. The two senior commanders looked at the corpses for a long time, visibly shaken by actual proof of time travelers before their own eyes. The afternoon had then been occupied by the myriad administrative steps and paperwork needed to officially accept Nancy in the RAF as a Canadian Army exchange officer. The fact that a Canadian fighter squadron was already resident on base had however helped the process. Just before supper, Wilson's men moved her personal belongings to the WAAF's barrack, where a small room had been given her. After another disappointing meal at the mess, Nancy was now back at the intelligence section, ready to bid goodbye to Doctor Jones. He had now a briefcase full of computer printouts, apart of her GPS, cellular telephone and radar detector. She handed him a last few pages containing what information she had on the 'Cambridge Five' and other Soviet agents in Great Britain.

"I hope that General Menzies will have enough influence and power to clean up that mess. If not, and if the Soviets get hold of my presence here..."

"I understand your fears. Stalin can be a very vindictive man indeed."

"You can say that again, Doctor. Have a good trip home and say hello to Vera for me."

"I will. Thanks for everything, Nancy, it will help my work immensely. I hope I will see you again in the near future."

He then gave Nancy a last handshake and stepped in the car sent from London to retrieve him. No doubt that Menzies and Winterbotham were anxiously awaiting his return to 54 Broadway Street to hear his report.

Returning inside the operations building, Nancy found Doug sitting at his desk with little to do. She smiled at his idleness.

“You know, probably the biggest difference between now and modern warfare is night operations: in Afghanistan, much of the action came at night, making it normally my busiest time. Now, you guys can only barely operate at night or can’t find anything smaller than a city with your navigation techniques.”

“Well, this is all very interesting but it still leaves me bored!”

“Not for long!”

Under his questioning gaze, she took out of one of her equipment boxes what looked like a small aircraft control stick attached to a sort of miniature instrument panel. Telling Doug to come with him, she led him to the relaxation lounge, where she hooked her panel to her wide flat screen television. Loading a laser disk in the side of the panel, she lit the screen and initialized the program. Doug suddenly got excited when the screen showed what looked distinctly like the inside view of a Hurricane fighter cockpit.

“What is this?” He asked as he sat with her on a sofa facing the television.

“A video game that simulates air combat. It’s called FIGHTER ACE and you can choose between flying a Spitfire, a Hurricane or an American Mustang, among many other models of airplanes.”

Nancy then explained to him the different controls on the game control pedestal and stick. Since the cockpit visible on the screen was an exact replica of one from a real Hurricane, Doug got the hang of it very quickly. He was soon involved in a ferocious dogfight with a pair of German Bf 109 fighters and became as excited as a kid at Christmas. His squeels and comments seemed to attract the attention of Air Commodore Nicholls, who was passing in the hallway. Sticking his head inside the lounge, he watched with surprise a Doug Wilson jumping up and down on his seat, frenetically playing with the control stick.

“What the hell is this now?”

Doug and Nancy were taken by surprise by Nicholls sudden appearance. The moment of distraction was enough to result in Doug’s simulated airplane receiving a salvo of 20mm German shells in the engine.

“Aw gee, sir! You got me shot down!”

Nicholls walked to them, watching as the screen showed the results of the simulated engagement. He then got excited too.

“This looks like fun! Can I try this too?”

Not wanting to argue with a commodore, Doug reluctantly gave his place to Nicholls. To his secret satisfaction, his superior got himself quickly shot to pieces just after taking off.

“Blast! I’m rusty at this. Can I try again?”

Having fun herself watching two grown men turn back into kids, Nancy restarted a new game for him. He didn't fare much better the second time. Doug nearly shoved Nicholls aside.

"Let a pro show you how it's done, sir!"

"Pro? I was flying fighters in combat when you were still wearing diapers! Alright, show me if you are really that good!"

As Doug was about to start an engagement, Nancy changed some of the parameters of the game.

"What are you doing, Nancy?"

"Making it more interesting! You will now fly a Spitfire and you will need one: you will now go against FW-190 fighters."

"That new German plane you told us about?" Asked Nicholls.

"Exactly, sir. Remember, the FW-190 is very fast, agile and heavily armed. It is also a much smaller target than the Bf 109 you are accustomed to. Be careful!"

That warning was of little help, as Doug's Spitfire was quickly shot to pieces in a one-on-one engagement against a FW-190. Nicholls was suddenly thoughtful, as he watched Doug get shot down another time.

"You know, Captain Laplante, this could be a good way to help train our pilots to face this new German fighter."

Doug suddenly realized the truth in Nicholls' comment.

"You're right, sir! It could make the difference between life and death to our rookie pilots about to get in their first air combat."

"By jove, I like this idea! Do you see any problems with this, Captain?"

"Not at all, sir! Simulator training is actually an important part of a fighter pilot's training in my time period. When do you want to start training your pilots on this, sir?"

"How about right now? I can have some of the off-duty pilots report here in minutes."

"Very good, sir, but you will get a fight with the outgoing WAAF shift, who expect to be able to watch their movie at 20:30 hours."

"I will deal with that! What's the scheduled movie tonight anyway?"

"STAR WARS, a science-fiction movie with a lot of space dogfights."

"Oops! Alright, simulator training will conclude at 20:30 hours. It is time anyway that our pilots enjoy those movies also: God knows they deserve some entertainment."

It is thus that Nancy was bombarded with the title of special morale and entertainment officer and was put in charge of scheduling both simulator games and movies in the lounge.

The simulator games were immediately a huge success, with off-duty WAAFs cheering on young pilots competing in flying skills against one another. Both the morale and dogfighting skills shot upwards from that evening on.

23:15 (GMT)

WAAFs barrack, R.A.F. Northolt

Nancy looked around the small room assigned to her, Doug Wilson standing behind her in the doorway. Everything looked so antiquated to her, starting with the metallic frame bed and the Victorian style sofa. Opening a door near the room's entrance, she found a small bathroom with a shower stall, a toilet and a sink. Finally sitting in the sofa, Nancy was struck by the awful reality of her situation: this antiquated world was probably where she was going to spend the rest of her life. She tried to keep a brave face in front of Wilson but couldn't keep in her tears of despair and bitterness. She suddenly felt Wilson's reassuring hand on her shoulder. The RAF officer was now sitting besides her, a concerned look on his face.

"What's wrong, Nancy? Can I help in any way?"

She stared in his eyes, finding only genuine worry in them. From the first time she had met him he had proved to be decent and kind, never trying to take advantage of her. In her actual, precarious situation, he would have been well placed to pressure her to his profit. Instead, he had been nothing short of an absolute gentleman. Her hand came up to his left cheek, caressing it slowly.

"Thanks for being such a nice man, Doug. Could you stay for a while? I really could use some company now."

"Sure! What is troubling you, Nancy?"

She bowed her head, trying not to see the antiquated surroundings of her room as she replied in a low voice.

"This whole world is wrong! I don't belong here, Doug."

He bit his lip, taking a moment to respond.

"What are the chances that you could find your way back to the future?"

"Next to nil!" Was her discouraged answer. "Nobody now has a clue about time travel technology, including me. The ones who abducted me and brought me here are dead. My only hope is that someone from the future will come for me and bring me back to my own time."

"So, what are you going to do now?"

“Doug, I can’t wait for that improbable someone and simply watch this awful war go on as dictated by history. By giving away my historical data, I probably already have affected the course of history. Thinking about it, that was possibly what those two persons who abducted me were after: somebody who would change history by its mere presence here. If that was their goal, then they chose well: I could easily turn this war upside down with my knowledge.”

“Do you think it would be wrong to change history this way?”

“Normally, I would say yes. However, I realized only today that those two from the future would not have dropped me here if that meant that their own time would be disturbed by my actions here. Somehow, this must mean that normal history is safe from my interference.”

“But how could that be?” Asked a puzzled Wilson.

“You know, time travel was a popular theme in science-fiction literature in my time. One of the theories often put forward in such books is that any attempt at changing history would create a parallel history, or timeline if you prefer. That way, you would have both the original history, still intact, plus the new, revised history.”

Doug Wilson scratched his head, obviously overwhelmed by such a concept. However, he could see no logical flaw in her thinking.

“So, if that’s the case, it would mean that you would be free to completely modify the history of this war, without having to worry about destroying the main historical timeline?”

“Basically, yes! And I may be happy to do just that, after all.”

“Oh, why?”

“Because I know about the horrors to come in this war and it makes me sick to think that I would let them happen while having potentially the power to prevent them. This obscenity of a war will cost the lives of over 57 million people, most of them innocent civilians. If my involuntary presence here is going to create a new timeline, then I might as well make it a better world.”

Doug Wilson stared in silence at the wall, thinking over Nancy’s words. He finally looked at her questioningly.

“Do you think that you can truly change the war and save some of those people?”

Nancy rested her head on his shoulder before answering.

“Alone, no! In collaboration with your government, yes! Understand though that my fight will be against the present German government, not against the German people. I will not be part of any deliberate attack against civilian targets.”

Doug caressed her head while smiling at her.

"I wish that everybody would be as discriminate as you in this war. Thank you for helping us: I'm sure you will be able to save many lives."

Some tears reappeared at the corner of her eyes.

"I hope so. God help me if I made the wrong decision and end up destroying my own history."

"Nancy, nobody can say for sure now. You can only do what you think is best. Fate will decide."

Looking into her eyes, Doug still saw traces of fear and doubt. She also looked exhausted.

"Look, I better let you catch some sleep: tomorrow will be a busy day."

For a moment, it appeared like Nancy would not let him go, staring at him with something that looked like a cry for help. Doug, as much as he was furiously tempted to stay with this lovely and fascinating woman, knew that he could not: this barrack was full of female auxiliaries and the base commander would have his head if he stayed overnight. He thus simply gave a tender kiss on Nancy's forehead before getting up and leaving. With Doug now gone, Nancy resigned herself to a night in this antiquated setting, alone with her demons.

10:40 (GMT)

Wednesday, September 4, 1940

Sector operations room, R.A.F. Northolt

Everybody was tense as the German aircraft were reported approaching the sector. RAF fighters had already started engaging them and the situation was getting confused. Nancy, sitting besides Air Commodore Nicholls on the observers' gallery, watched as WAAF plotters pushed little aircraft symbols in place on the large plotting board. A duty officer listening on a telephone turned his head towards Nicholls.

"Sir, our ground observers posted along the railway track near Guildford just signaled a large force of Messerschmitt Bf 110 overflying them, heading towards Brooklands and following the track."

Nicholls looked sideways at Nancy, glee in his eyes.

"Just as you predicted, Captain. Now is time to teach the enemy a lesson."

Picking up one of the telephones, he got the air controllers on the line.

"Tell First RCAF, 303 and 504 squadrons to leave their orbiting stations and dive on the Bf 110 force following the railway track near Guildford."

He then picked up another telephone.

“Tell Brooklands to be ready for incoming bandits. Make sure the Vickers workers are in their shelters.”

Nicholls grabbed yet a third telephone after putting down the others.

“Air Marshal Park, please! Sir, the trap is closing now. Bf 110s have just been spotted over the railway tracks as predicted. My three squadrons are diving on them now, sir... Yes sir, I'll do that!” Putting down the telephone, Nicholls concentrated back his attention on the plotting board. An excited duty officer soon shouted.

“Our squadrons have the Bf 110s on visual. They are engaging!”

“Yes!”

Nancy felt a surge of pride for the young pilots now in the midst of air combat: with luck, they could really hurt the Germans today.

The next ten minutes were extremely confusing, with reports, sometimes contradictory, arriving often simultaneously. One thing was clear, though: the Germans were not going to make it to the precious Vickers aircraft factory. If the British, Polish and Canadian fighter pilots radio reports were anywhere near accurate, it was then turning into a real massacre, with the Germans doing the bleeding. After another five minutes, the German aircraft were reported turning back and fleeing, still pursued by Hurricane pilots like by sharks smelling blood in the water. Cheers echoed along the gallery. Nicholls waited for further confirmation of this before getting back on the various telephones.

“Hello, Brooklands? What shape are you in?... No damage?... Excellent!... Air Marshal Park? Nicholls here! The enemy has turned back, with reportedly heavy losses to them. The Vickers factory is intact, with no casualties there... Sir?... Gladly, sir!”

He then smiled at Nancy.

“Air Marshal Park sends you his thanks for a job well done.”

“Sir, I think that these young pilots doing the fighting deserve the praise, not me. I just printed some reports, for God's sake!”

Nicholls had a look of fondness in his eyes as he answered back.

“Captain, between you and me, I would have been proud to have a daughter like you. Don't undersell yourself.”

The voice of the duty officer came back, more subdued this time.

“Our fighters are on their way back. We have three aircraft confirmed lost and four damaged.”

Nancy's heart sank. She would later learn that Jean Daigle was among the dead pilots.

11:54 (local time)

Abbeville-Drucat airfield, France

Hauptmann Groth threw his flying helmet against the wall of the airfield's debriefing room, furious and grieving: only three of his squadron's Bf 110s, including his own, had returned from that catastrophic mission against the Vickers factory. The second squadron of ZG 76 was finished for long months. From what he could hear, the two other squadrons of the wing had not fared better. The intelligence officer started to ask a question, but Groth seized him by the collar, nearly strangling him.

"THE BRITISH WERE WAITING FOR US! I WANT TO KNOW WHO TOLD THEM! UNDERSTOOD?"

He then threw away the half-choked officer and left the room to start a monumental drinking binge at the canteen. When the harried intelligence officer called his counterpart at the first squadron, it was to learn that the man had been punched in the eye by an enraged pilot and that the wing's intelligence officer was just now having a screaming match on the telephone with the duty officer at the air division's headquarter in Wissant. Another few missions like this one and the division would be finished!

20:40 (GMT)

Base intelligence section, R.A.F. Northolt

Meg Thomas, asking first the permission of Sergeant Latham, who was on evening shift duty, entered the intelligence section and approached Nancy, who was absorbed with some work on her computer. The Canadian smiled weakly when she saw her, which alarmed Meg: Nancy was normally much more effusive than that.

"Hi, Nancy, still working at this hour?"

"I'm nearly finished here. Just give me a moment to save my document and close my program." After a minute or so, Nancy took out her laser disk and shut down her computer, then turned towards Meg.

"What can I do for you, Meg?"

"Well, everybody is celebrating the outcome of today's battle and I thought that I could invite you for a drink at the pub just outside the main gate. Some of the girls would like it very much if you could join us there."

“Yes, the celebrating, of course.”

Her voice had no enthusiasm and her eyes gazed through Meg without really looking at her. Meg had seen this kind of expression before.

“Nancy, what’s wrong? Did you know one of the pilots killed today?”

She nodded, silent for a moment.

“His name was Jean Daigle. He was from Québec, like me. I hardly knew him. In fact, Meg, that’s exactly the point: we never had the time to know each other. He was killed only two days after we first met. That’s not fair!”

“Nancy, me and the other girls have lived through this many times already, believe me. Don’t let it eat you: there are too many other people left to care for who also care for you. You may grieve but you also have to go on. Come, let’s have a toast in his memory.”

“Alright, I will do that. You girls need a lift?”

She was finally showing a real smile as she looked straight into Meg’s eyes. Meg smiled back: she was going to be okay, at least this time.

“That would be appreciated, Nancy.”

“Then let’s go! You show me where that pub is.”

Less than fifteen minutes later, Nancy was parking her Mitsubishi Outlander in front of a brown wood and brick pub. Apart from Meg Thomas, three other WAAFs had joined in for the ride, including Supervisor O’Connors. The place looked lively and sounded like it was full. Nancy thought to herself that she could use a change of atmosphere after all.

“O.K., girls, let’s crash this place!”

Sean Brady had to say that his pub had rarely been that full of fantastic rumors, unlikely stories and outright blarney. What was strange about it was that it all centered on one person, which made him really curious. The fact that it was about a supposedly attractive young woman made it even more interesting to Sean. Today’s German debacle in the air, of which he had been told plenty already by many drunk pilots, was pushing everybody into celebrating and cheering up, which was very good for business. Sean was in fact starting to worry about running out of beer, which would definitely be a first for him this year. Seeing the sign from one of his customers sitting at the counter, he hurried with a fresh mug of ale, putting it in front of a fairly drunk RAF Leading Airman who was one of his most regular customers. That one, apart of being full of beer tonight, was positively overflowing with blarney as well.

“No kidding, Sean, she... this Canadian girl... a real special woman I tell you ... She his taller than me... with nice curves everywhere... Would have loved it...”

“I can imagine that. We Irishmen like our women well shaped.”

“Bet you do, Sean. They sure make really nice girls in the 21st Century.”

That last remark made Sean wonder whether Sutcliffe was too drunk or was delusional.

The young man sitting besides Sutcliffe bobbed his head in agreement with Sutcliffe. He had drunk much less beer than his comrade, but had nowhere near his capacity to stand alcohol. He was nearly falling off his stool as he tried to speak to Sean.

“She’s cute alright...also got a nice car.”

Sutcliffe broke in laughter, slapping John’s back and nearly making him spill his beer.

“Count on a young virgin boy like you to like cars as much as women.”

“Hey! I dated that WAAF last month, remember?”

John’s cheeks were reddening rapidly by now.

“So? Did anything with her yet?” Was Sutcliffe’s stinging reply. Shaking his head in amusement, Sean went to serve another customer at the other end of the bar. That one was however left alone, for good reasons: nobody liked that Brannigan, not the least Sean himself. The man was a thug and a troublemaker. This beer would be his last one here, lest he started another fight. Brannigan had obviously heard Sutcliffe and John, as he snickered to Sean, who kept at arms length while serving him.

“That young weasel! He couldn’t do it if he wanted to! He missed an opportunity to see that Canadian girl butt naked. I didn’t.”

“What do you mean?”

“Mister Harris had her strip-searched. She had arrived on base with some tall tale about being a time traveler from the year 2012. She has a real nice body, though.”

Sean had heard about the demise of Harris, but not the reasons for it. Now he knew and didn’t feel sorry for him: any Irishman who would treat a girl like this would end up sooner or later with a knife in his guts. Now, that tale about her being a time traveler was by far the biggest piece of blarney he had heard yet tonight. Another customer at the bar looked at Brannigan with daggers in his eyes. Brannigan saw that and would have jumped on him if not for the fact that Airman Peters was even bigger and tougher than him: Brannigan, like many bullies, was really at heart a coward. Peters’ voice was low, dangerous.

“You speak ill of that lady again and I’ll flatten you. She saved the life of my best buddy, who would have bled to death without her, apart of her manning that machingun and shooting down that darn Junkers 88.”

Sean couldn't believe his ears.

"She, a girl, shot down a German plane? I thought that was pure blarney."

"Blarney, like hell! She received the Military Cross from Dowding himself yesterday. You have to respect a lass like that."

Sean couldn't agree more with Peters. While refilling Peters' mug, Sean tried to tie up all the things he had heard about that Canadian girl in the last three days: everybody agreed that she was tall and pretty; she had proved that she had guts aplenty; there was a lot of talks about her bringing in her car some strange and fantastic equipment; and now this story about her being a time traveler from the year 2012. He shook his head, wishing he could meet such a woman. The sudden silence that fell inside the pub made him turn towards the door. He saw four WAAFs, preceded by a tall woman in camouflage pattern uniform, taking a table near the door, with other customers giving away their seats to make room for them. Peters whispered excitedly to him.

"That's her! The tall one in field uniform."

Suddenly interested by all this, Sean decided to see for himself and grabbed his serving tray before heading towards her table. He got more confused as he got near: he had seen all kinds of uniforms here in the past months but none like this one. In fact, the closest thing to this outfit had been worn by a paratrooper. He dismissed that idea as ludicrous, until he saw the paratrooper's wings above the left breast pocket of her camouflaged shirt. She noticed his gaze and smile in amusement.

"I'm sorry if this distracts you. I have to agree that it is a bit unusual to see this on a woman around here."

"Er, I find no offense about that, miss, on the contrary. What can I get you?"

She must have detected his Irish accent, as she tried to order in halting Gaelic. That made him right then more respectful of her: she had both brains and diplomacy to add to her claimed virtues.

"You visited Ireland before, miss?"

"Yes. I spent about a month travelling back and forth between the Republic and the Ulster to write a story once. I never had the chance to learn Gaelic properly. About our order, could you bring us five beers, please?"

"Coming right away, miss"

Sean hurried back to the bar and filled five large mugs to the brim: no point in being cheap with ladies. That was an elementary rule of women dating that too many men ignored at their own

peril. Besides, she certainly deserved the extra attention. Sean brought the mugs to her table and raised a hand to stop her from digging in her pocket.

"These are on the house, miss. Anybody who bothers to try learning Gaelic on a short trip to Ireland deserves a free ale!"

"Why, thank you very much!"

She then raised her glass while looking at him.

"Long live Ireland!"

That was spoken in Gaelic. Sean was touched by her words. She had said it with respect, contrary to many of these bloody British, who turned everything Irish in derision. As he was turning away, one of the WAAFs called her Nancy. So, her name was Nancy Laplante. Thank God for nametags!

Sean had returned behind the bar for about fifteen minutes when he saw Brannigan walking towards the door. Remembering what the bum had said about the Canadian woman, he watched him closely to make sure he didn't create some trouble. Sure enough, the idiot stopped in front of her table and spoke to her. The shocked and infuriated looks of her WAAF companions told Sean immediately what he needed to know. He hurried towards Brannigan as the latter raised his voice to a near yell.

"You slut have no business wearing an officer's uniform: you're a fake and a spy!"

The woman got to her feet, her face red with anger. That was when Brannigan tried to slap her across the face. Tried was the operative word: Brannigan's hand never touched her. With reflexes and speed that left everybody in the pub, including Sean, flabbergasted, the Canadian deflected the blow and, seizing and twisting his wrist, forced his arm in a painful hold behind his back. She then hit his immobilized elbow with a sharp blow delivered with the side of her hand. Brannigan yelled in pain and fell to his knees, holding his right arm. Sean grabbed him by the collar and forced him to his feet, getting ready to throw him out. Then a massive silhouette got near them.

"Let me get rid of this trash, Sean!"

That was Private Peters' voice, full of anger and hatred. Sean did not insist and let the big man drag Brannigan out of the pub. The sound of muffled blows that came from the outside after that sounded like music to the barman's ears. Sean then approached Laplante, who was still standing by her table.

"I'm sorry for this incident, Captain. I assure you that this bum will not get inside this pub anymore!"

She nodded and smiled at him. He noticed that she was the same height as he was.

“By the sound of it, I doubt that he will be able to go anywhere for a while.”

“Quite true! Those were incredible reflexes you showed earlier, Miss.”

“Oh, I just practice regularly karate and judo: they are oriental forms of martial arts which develop speed and agility to a high degree.”

“Indeed?”

So, she was also deadly in hand-to-hand combat. Sean thought about the faces that the Germans who would receive his next written report via Dublin would make while reading it. This was however one of the times when he didn't enjoy doing his secret work: Nancy Laplante may be an enemy of the Germans, but she had earned Sean's respect and admiration. He sincerely hoped that his report would not endanger her. Sean then went to the bar and got her a second free round.

CHAPTER 7 – CABINET MEETING

10:00 (GMT)

Thursday, September 5, 1940

Cabinet room, 10 Downing Street

London

Reginald Jones entered the conference room at a hurried pace, having arrived a bit late at the Prime Minister's residence in downtown London. He was putting his briefcase on the table in front of the seat reserved for him and was about to take out his documents when he froze, fixing a man sitting behind the chair occupied by Lord Hankey. The man was John Cairncross, the private secretary of the minister in charge of the British Secret Services, Lord Hankey. Cairncross was also, according to the informations Jones had gotten from Nancy Laplante, a spy in the pay of the Soviets. Jones looked with incomprehension at Brigadier Stewart Menzies, the head of Military Intelligence, better known as 'M.I.6', sitting to the right of him. Menzies seemed furious, with his face hard. Despite his surprise, Reginald managed to keep his voice low, so that Cairncross or Lord Hankey could not hear him.

"Sir, what is Cairncross doing at this cabinet meeting? I thought that you had him arrested yesterday."

"That was my intention, Doctor Jones, but Lord Hankey refused to believe the information given by Laplante and forbid me from arresting anyone on the list suspected spies."

"But...Air Chief Marshal Dowding is due to announce the existence of Nancy Laplante during this meeting. If Cairncross is allowed to stay, then the Soviets will learn about Laplante"

"I realize that too well, Doctor Jones, but Lord Hankey is my superior, as well as yours in fact. My hands are tied."

Reginald clenched his teeth but did not sit. Taking a quick decision, he went around the table to go whisper in the ear of Marshal Dowding, while Menzies watched him with incredulity.

"Air Chief Marshal, please do not speak about Captain Laplante for the moment. A spy in the pay of the Soviets and denounced by Captain Laplante's historical data is here, in this room."

"Good God! Who is he and why wasn't he be arrested yet?" Exclaimed Dowding, making heads turn around the table. That also attracted the attention of Lord Hankey, who stared angrily at Reginald.

"What do you think that you are doing, Doctor Jones? Go take your place and stop circulating those absurd rumors."

Fully realizing that he was risking his post, Reginald faced firmly his minister.

"Lord Hankey, I am only acting to protect the security of our country. I will not present my information here, not as long as your secretary is present in this room."

Hankey then became truly angry, raising his voice to a shout.

"DOCTOR, I DON'T GIVE A DAMN ABOUT YOUR SUPPOSED SOURCE FROM THE FUTURE! SIT DOWN OR GET OUT!"

Prime Minister Churchill, who had just entered the conference room, looked coldly at Reginald and Lord Hankey as the rest of the conference's participants watched in silence the confrontation.

"What is happening here, gentlemen?"

"We have here in this room a spy in the service of Stalin, Mister Prime Minister." Answered firmly Reginald, making Hankey turn red with anger.

"NONSENSE! Mister Prime Minister, I fear that young Doctor Jones bought the lies of a demented woman who has thrown wild accusations of espionage against members of the government and also against distinguished citizens."

Marshal Dowding then jumped on his feet, to then speak in a strong voice.

"Mister Prime Minister, the woman Lord Hankey claims to be crazy has given the R.A.F. priceless information in the last three days. That information in fact made possible an important air victory yesterday. I have met this woman and I am ready to vouch for her as a source of intelligence."

"How could you believe such inanities, Marshal Dowding?" Replied Lord Hankey. "If you would believe that woman, men as distinguished as Lord Rothschild would be Soviet spies. She is probably nothing more than a disinformation agent sent by the Germans."

Reginald Jones felt uneasy when he saw the expression of incredulity and irritation that appeared then on Churchill's face: Lord Rothschild was a good personal friend of the Prime Minister and spoke with him regularly about highly classified matters. Churchill then threw a cold look at Reginald.

"And what kind of proofs do you have against Lord Rothschild, Doctor Jones?"

As Lord Hankey smiled, expecting Jones to be admonished by Churchill, the young physicist didn't flinch under the Prime Minister's stare.

"Documents provided by a person that came from the future, Mister Prime Minister."

Churchill, like the ministers and senior military officers sitting around the table and the secretary that was ready to take the minutes of the meeting, stared at Reginald as if he had become crazy. The latter quickly returned to his place and took a magazine out of his briefcase, then brought it to Churchill.

"This is one of the documents provided by that woman we are talking about, Mister Prime Minister. I personally inspected the equipment brought by her and I can assure you without a single doubt that nobody now could produce or even comprehend fully the technology contained in that equipment."

Churchill involuntarily let his cigar fall from his mouth as he stared at the color picture of an impossible aircraft shown on the cover of the magazine. He then saw the date of publication: October 2012. Dowding came to the rescue of Reginald at that moment.

"Mister Prime Minister, the information provided by that woman allowed us yesterday to stop cold a German air raid against the Vickers aircraft factories and to shoot down a total of 31 enemy aircraft. That same information also proved exact concerning three other separate German raids during the last two days. This new source also knows the existence of ULTRA, despite the fact that she is not on the list of those that have authorized access to the project." Now seriously shaken, Churchill looked at Reginald with a much less severe expression.

"Who is the supposed Soviet spy present here, Doctor Jones?"

"John Cairncross, the private secretary of Lord Hankey, Mister Prime Minister."

Churchill threw a sharp look at Cairncross, who now appeared to verge on panic and who had visibly paled, then eyed Lord Hankey.

"When did you receive the information claiming that your secretary was a Soviet spy, Lord Hankey?"

"Uh, early yesterday morning, Mister Prime Minister, but I could not give any credit to that information without some solid proofs, and..."

"Did you discuss these accusations with Mister Cairncross?" Interrupted Churchill, his tone dry and sharp. Hankey wiggled in his chair before answering, now very much less assured of himself.

"Yes, Mister Prime Minister."

Brigadier Menzies became red with anger at this answer, but he managed not to explode. Churchill's next question cracked like a whip.

"When?"

"Yesterday morning, Mister Prime Minister."

Reginald saw a flash in the eyes of Churchill at those words.

“So, you receive information on the possible presence of Soviet spies in our midst and you go to discuss that information with one of the suspects? What were you thinking, Lord Hankey?”

“But...but my secretary has been working for me for years and I have total confidence in him, Mister Prime Minister.”

Brigadier Menzies, whose face had just reflected a horrifying thought, then jumped in the exchange.

“Excuse me, Mister Prime Minister. Lord Hankey, I hope that you did not discuss with Mister Cairncross the names of the other suspected spies?”

Cold sweat appeared on the forehead of the minister, who answered hesitantly.

“I...I showed him the list of suspects, in order to point to him his name in it.”

Menzies swore aloud while passing his hands on his face, while Churchill tightened his fists as he stared angrily at Hankey. He then shouted towards the door of the conference room.

“GUARDS!”

Two of the Prime Minister’s bodyguards entered immediately, fully alert and with their right hands going for their revolvers hidden under their vests. Churchill pointed John Cairncross, who was shaking in his chair, to them.

“Put Mister Cairncross under arrest for high treason and espionage. I want him to be discreetly brought to the Tower of London, where he will be locked up. Nobody will be allowed to visit him or contact him until further notice, not even family members or lawyers.”

As the two bodyguards grabbed forcefully Cairncross and dragged him out of the room, Churchill returned his eyes on Lord Hankey, who was now in his small shoes.

“Lord Hankey, you are going to vacate your office and will refrain from discussing this matter further with anyone. In particular, you will avoid contact with any of the persons named in this list of suspected spies. Brigadier Menzies will take over your position immediately.”

“Yes, Mister Prime Minister.” Said weakly the old aristocrat before getting up and putting back his files in his briefcase. Churchill however extended a hand as he was about to leave.

“Leave your papers with Brigadier Menzies, Lord Hankey. Consider your security clearance revoked as of now.”

Lowering his head, the old bureaucrat gave his briefcase to Churchill, who then put it on the table, and left the room, followed by the eyes of the shocked witnesses around the table. Churchill was not finished however and looked at Menzies.

"Brigadier, how substantial are the accusations against those suspects, especially Lord Rotschild?"

"The information against most of the suspects is solid and detailed and consist of newspaper articles and book extracts from the future, Mister Prime Minister. In fact, many of the suspects later fled to the Soviet Union. To be honest, the source of our information agreed that the case of Lord Rotschild was mostly circumstantial and was never conclusive, but there are many troubling links between Lord Rotschild and a number of the suspects that later fled to the Soviet Union. In view of what Lord Hankey just said, I am afraid that many of the suspects will now have had time to disappear since yesterday."

"You are unfortunately right, Brigadier Menzies. I want you to have all those suspects arrested immediately. Lord Rotschild is however a more delicate case. Just put him under discreet surveillance and make sure that he doesn't leave the country until further notice. Put also the Soviet embassy under tight watch."

"Understood, Mister Prime Minister." Said Menzies, who then grabbed his briefcase and the one that had belonged to Lord Hankey before leaving the room in a hurry.

As a flurry of whispered comments went around the table, Churchill sat in his assigned chair and looked around at the ministers and officers present at the meeting.

"I know that Lord Rotschild is a friend of many of you, as well as being a friend of mine. However, until the accusations of espionage against him are formally dismissed, I will ask you all to politely refuse to meet with him or even speak to him except to exchange pleasantries in passing."

Churchill then stared hard at Reginald Jones.

"Doctor Jones, in view of the seriousness of what just happened, I hope that you can convince me that this mysterious woman of yours is really from the future."

"Certainly, Mister Prime Minister. It all began on Monday morning, near Northolt." Reginald spoke for a good ten minutes, listened religiously by Churchill and the other persons around the table. He emphasized in particular the impossibly advanced level of the technology in the equipment brought by Nancy Laplante. At the end, Churchill stayed silent a long moment, then looked resolutely around the table.

"Gentlemen, as fantastic as this may appear to be, the important point is that we just were given a providential help in our fight against the Nazis. The knowledge from this Nancy Laplante could prove crucial for our cause and I have the firm intention of using that knowledge

to the maximum. Marshall Dowding, I would certainly like to meet that young woman soon, in order to discuss with her her future with us.”

“Well, Mister Prime Minister, she is presently very busy helping us plan a reply to a major incoming change of tactics by the German Luftwaffe. According to the information from that woman, who is now designated under the codename ‘Athena’, the Luftwaffe will change its target priorities after tomorrow and will launch a massive bombing raid against the London docks in the afternoon of Saturday. That raid will arrive around 16:30 and will involve 300 German bombers escorted by 600 fighters. A night raid is supposed to follow the first raid, with at least one raid per day against London following for the next few months.”

“My God!” Said weakly Churchill, shaken, before looking at Commander Winterbotham.

“Commander, have you received confirmation of this raid via ULTRA?”

“Uh, not yet, Mister Prime Minister. However, Athena predicted that an ENIGMA message will be finally decoded by ULTRA at around eleven o’clock this morning and will be sent here within minutes.”

“This woman can predict ULTRA traffic?” Nearly shouted Churchill, who knew how deeply secret and tightly protected was the whole ULTRA program. Dowding nodded his head.

“To a point, Mister Prime Minister. Captain Laplante explained to me that her historical data, while quite detailed, does not contain everything available in 2012. She also told me to expect her historical information to become less accurate as we use it, since the Germans will eventually react to our moves. Her technical information should however stay accurate for the months and years to come. If you will allow me, Mister Prime Minister, I would now like to present you the preliminary sketch of a plan to defend London against the bombing raid announced for Saturday.”

“Go right ahead, Air Chief Marshall Dowding.”

Dowding, then walked to a mapboard and uncovered it, revealing a map of airfields throughout Western France, Belgium and the Netherlands.

“Without Athena’s information, the plan I am going to propose would have been both impossible and unthinkable. While my command is too weak to simply stop the Germans from bombing London, I think that we can hurt them badly and, with some luck, cut their balls off.”

Dowding talked for a good half hour to present his plan, with supporting briefings from Sir Charles Portal of Bomber Command and from the chief of the air staff, Sir Cyril Newall. At the end of it, Churchill was obviously sold on the plan. He scanned the faces around the table.

“What is your opinion, gentlemen? Do we go with Operation Counterpunch? If you say no, however, you better be prepared to present an alternative to it: I won’t sit still while London is reduced to rubble!”

A knock on the door interrupted the polling. The Prime Minister’s aide then entered and walked to Winterbotham’s place, handing him a sealed envelope. The room fell silent as Winterbotham read the classified dispatch.

“Gentlemen, I... well, this is an ULTRA message decoded at 11:03 hour today. In it, Goering is ordering his Luftwaffe to attack the London Docks on the afternoon of Saturday the seventh, to be followed by a night raid.”

He then stood up and brought the dispatch to Churchill, who read it carefully before looking again at the participants.

“Gentlemen, the threat to London is for real. I need your opinion on Operation Counterpunch, now!”

The vote that followed was unanimously in favor of the plan. Dowding was ecstatic, while Sir Charles Portal, whose Bomber Command would play an important role in the operation, was smiling with anticipation. Churchill then took back control of the meeting.

“Gentlemen, Operation Counterpunch is on. Furthermore, I direct that, in view of the sensibility of this Athena as a source, she is to stay a most secret source and the knowledge of her is to be limited to persons authorized by me, and me alone. Thank you and good luck!”

As the participants filed out of the room, Churchill intercepted Air Chief Marshal Dowding before he could leave and led him to a quiet corner.

“Air Chief Marshal, I would like to congratulate you on the idea for Counterpunch. You created quite a bold and ingenious plan there.”

Dowding suddenly looked embarrassed by Churchill’s compliment.

“Prime Minister, I have to say in all honesty that I didn’t come up with the idea. Someone else’s did.”

Churchill seemed amused by that.

“So, who is the brilliant strategist behind the plan, so that I can promote him to air marshal?”

“Actually, sir, Athena suggested the plan to me.”

Churchill was speechless for a moment, then started laughing.

“Decidedly, I will have heard everything today! Maybe we should accept women in the armed forces after all.”

Brigadier Menzies returned to the conference room at that moment, looking agitated. Churchill rose an eyebrow on seeing his expression, expecting bad news. He was not disappointed in that.

"Mister Prime Minister, I am pained to inform you that three of the suspected spies on Athena's list seemingly fled in a hurry and cannot be found. One of them unfortunately worked at our cipher school in Bletchley Park, where copies of our latest diplomatic and naval codes are now missing, taken by that individual."

"BLOODY HELL!" Swore Churchill. "Anything else, Brigadier Menzies?"
Menzies hesitated, knowing how hard what he was going to say would hurt the Prime Minister.

"Yes, Mister Prime Minister. Lord Rotschild and his wife have left their London residence yesterday at noon with a large quantity of luggage. Lord Rotschild drove by himself, refusing the services of his driver. None of his servants could tell my men where Lord Rotschild planned to go. I believe that this is enough to confirm the suspicions raised about him by Captain Laplante, Mister Prime Minister."

Churchill had to sit, profoundly shaken by the treason of such a long friend. He however regained most of his composure after a moment and pointed an index at Menzies.

"I want all ports and airfields alerted and all non-military flights cancelled for the moment. Have posters with the faces and names of the fugitives made and distributed in the whole of Great-Britain and warnings passed to all police stations and military camps, with orders to apprehend them on sight or, if they are about to escape, to shoot to kill."

"Even in the case of Lord Rotschild, Mister Prime Minister?"

"Yes! He betrayed his country and he will pay the price for it. If anyone disputes these directives or refuse to cooperate with your men, then arrest them for aiding spies. I will take care personally of the mediatic and political consequences of this affair. Finally, I want the access to the Soviet embassy tightly controlled and the movements of the Soviet diplomats watched: one of the escaped spies may try to find refuge in the Soviet embassy or at the residence of a Soviet diplomat."

"I will take care of this immediately, Mister Prime Minister." Said Menzies, saluting Churchill before leaving again. Churchill, now alone with Dowding, gave him a discouraged look.

"After this, I swear that Lord Hankey will never serve as minister again. What an imbecile!"

CHAPTER 8 – JUMP TRIALS

11:10 (GMT)

Thursday, September 5, 1940

Base parachute maintenance shop

R.A.F. Northolt

Warrant Officer second class George Culvert stopped in front of one of the hangar's walls, showing proudly to Nancy the work that had kept his two men and six women up most of the night. The hangar was filled with suspended parachutes drying up or awaiting repair. The one on the wall, though, was distinctly different from the others: for one, it was of rectangular shape instead of the classic round canopy form; it was also made of a much darker shade fabric.

"It was actually much easier to make this than I expected: rectangular panels are simpler to sew than the regular pie-shaped ones. As you requested, it also has a larger total surface area than the regular models, with small directional slots in it as per your design drawing. The second one will be finished shortly after lunch."

"Excellent! Good work, Warrant Culvert. Now, if you can call in your two parachute folders, I will show them how to fold this new model. If this works as I expect it, our downed pilots will have a much better chance of escaping injury on landing and will be able to choose somewhat their landing point."

"That, I believe, would be very much appreciated by our pilots, Captain. I'll be back in a minute."

While waiting for Culvert to return with his men, Nancy examined in detail the new parachute: it was an exact copy of the model of directional parachute she used regularly for her skydiving jumps back in 2001. She could not detect any manufacturing flaw in it, to her satisfaction. It took her forty minutes to explain to Culvert's men the folding of the parachute, along with one demonstration and two practices. She was pleased to see Culvert note down in detail her explanations during her demonstration. Promising to return after lunch to practice folding again on the second parachute, she used Culvert's telephone to call Doug Wilson back at the intelligence section.

“Doug? Nancy here! I’m at the parachute shop and I would like to test the new model I told you about, this afternoon if possible. There is this old biplane sitting near the maintenance hangars: do you know about it?”

“Sure I do! It’s an Avro 504 twin-seater and it is used from time to time for training and for liaison flights. I believe that Air Commodore Nicholls is quite fond of it: it must remind him of his own flying days as a fighter pilot. I suppose that you would like to have the use of it, along with a pilot, for your tests this afternoon?”

“Right! If you could arrange that for, say, 15:00 hours and have it available for two or three short flights, I would appreciate it very much, Doug”

“I’ll jump on the phone right away. See you at lunch!”

14:50 (GMT)

Maintenance hangars

R.A.F. Northolt

Nancy was shocked when she saw that her assigned pilot for the tests was none other than Air Commodore Nicholls himself.

“Sir, this was not necessary. You are more needed at the sector operations room.”

“Bah, humbug! The day’s action is winding down and, besides, I love flying this old bird. I also needed some fresh air. By the way, Captain, congratulations: Operation Counterpunch is on!”

“Hot damn! Yes!”

Nicholls watched in amusement as she danced with joy besides the Avro 504. Warrant Culvert and his two servicemen were also watching, a weighed duffel bag attached to a parachute waiting by their side to be loaded in the rear seat of the biplane. The second new model parachute was ready to be strapped on Nancy. When she calmed down, Nicholls ordered one of the servicemen to take place in the rear seat. The duffel bag and its parachute was then put in his lap. Nicholls reviewed the procedure with Nancy as he performed his pre-flight checks.

“Alright, first we drop the dummy using lanyard opening from about one thousand feet. If it opens properly and falls at a safe speed, I then come back to pick you up for a live trial, correct?”

“Correct, sir! In that case, I will ask you to go up to 10,000 feet before dropping me over the base, so I can test thoroughly the handling of this parachute. I will freefall for the first 5,000 feet before opening the parachute, so don’t worry if you don’t see it open right away.”

Nicholls looked at her with genuine concern.

“Captain, you are very precious to us now. Isn’t this too risky?”

“Sir, I was doing this as a hobby back in 2012. Besides, I folded the parachute myself. If this works, your pilots will stand a much better chance to land in one piece if they have to bail out.”

“True! God knows our fighter pilots are about the most precious commodity in England these days. If all goes well today, I will make sure that this new model of parachute is given to all our fighter pilots. O.K., here we go!”

Its engine started manually by a mechanic, the biplane slowly rolled away from the hangar before picking up speed and taking off. It took Nicholls a good five minutes to get to his planned altitude, minutes that felt like hours to Nancy. The bag was finally dropped, with the parachute opening seconds later. To her joy, everything went well. Culvert was impressed as he watched the unguided parachute slowly fall down in wide circles.

“By jove, it really flies smoothly and the forward speed on it is surprising. You should be able to choose your landing point pretty accurately, Miss.”

“I’m counting on it, Warrant.”

Culvert then left and jumped with his second airman in an old truck, racing towards the probable landing point of the parachute to retrieve it. He was back at about the same time that the biplane rolled back to a stop near Nancy. Nicholls was all smiles.

“This is going even better than I expected. Let’s do it for real.”

Helped by Culvert’s men, Nancy put on a thick insulating suit over her combat uniform, then strapped on the second parachute before putting on her kevlar helmet, circa 2012, plus a pair of goggles. She jumped in the rear seat, all excited by the anticipated thrill of the jump.

“Warrant Culvert, you can go now and deploy the landing spot marker as we discussed. See you soon!”

They then exchanged salutes as the Avro 504 started rolling again.

15:20 (GMT)

1 R.C.A.F. Squadron dispersal hut

R.A.F. Northolt

The pilots slouching around the dispersal hut were watching with curiosity the goings of the old biplane and commenting on the strangely shaped parachute that had been dropped from

it earlier, when a truck approached from the hangars and stopped besides the hut. Warrant Culvert and an airman jumped out and immediately started fixing solidly on the ground with the help of stakes an orange X-shaped marker. Flight Lieutenant Durling, the senior pilot present at the dispersal hut, walked to the warrant, who stood at attention and saluted him.

“What are you doing here, Warrant? Marking our hut as a target for the next German raid?”

“No, sir! This is for the trial of a new model of parachute and it has been authorized by Air Commodore Nicholls, sir.”

“What is the marker for, guiding the parachutist to here?”

“Yes sir! That new parachute can be controled during its fall and I expect that the jumper will be able to land right on the marker.”

“From what altitude will he jump?”

“Ten thousand feet, sir.”

Durling, along with the other pilots, broke into laughs of derision.

“You expect someone to jump from high altitude and do a pinpoint landing? I bet you that he will be no closer than a thousand yards from this marker.”

Culvert grinned from ear to ear.

“Are you ready to put money on this, sir? A shilling that the jumper touches the marker.”

“Are you daft? You want to lose money that badly? Alright, I'll raise your shilling to ten shillings that he will land no less than two hundred yards from the marker.”

Another pilot also put in a bet against the jumper, followed by his companions. Culvert was soon holding biddings worth over twelve pounds. He smiled to himself at the faces those pilots were about to make.

Nicholls had to yell to be heard over the wind and the engine noise of the open cockpits of the old biplane.

“We are now at 10,000 feet. Can you see the orange marker?”

“Yes, easily. I will unbuckle my seat belt, then you will roll on your back, so that I will drop away. O.K.?”

“Understood! I will follow your fall from a safe distance. Good luck!”

At her thumbs up signal, he rolled the biplane on its back. Nancy fell smoothly out of her seat. Keeping his eyes on her, Nicholls dove behind her and followed from about 400 yards away. The low stalling speed and superb handling of the old Avro 504 made that relatively easy. He was amazed at the way Nancy used her arms and legs to actually control the direction of her

fall: he had never heard of this being done before. To his immense relief, her parachute opened as planned at around 5,000 feet. After making sure that she was in full control, Nicholls then left her and proceeded to land close to the dispersal hut. Flight Lieutenant Durling met him as he climbed out of the cockpit. The Canadian's eyes bulged when he recognised the air commodore.

"Sir? I didn't know you were the pilot. This trial must be really important."

"Quite, young lad. If it works well, we could then equip all our pilots with this new parachute and give you a fighting chance if you have to bail out. Now, let's go see how the jumper is doing."

They walked to the dispersal hut with their heads craned upwards. The parachute was now at about 2,000 feet of altitude and 400 yards to the south of the hut and its marker, slowly dropping in a large spiral. Durling smiled with glee.

"Nice try but he won't make it near the marker. You better get out your money, Warrant."

"It ain't over yet, sir."

The parachute suddenly stopped spiraling and headed in a straight line directly towards the marker. Durling felt sweat on his forehead as the parachutist approached on a controlled glide path.

"Christ, he's going to make it to the marker!" Exclaimed one of the pilots. Effectively, under the cheers of Nicholls, Culvert and Airman Smithers, the parachutist overflew the marker, touching it by simply tapping the tip of a boot on it and landing two feet past it in a remarkably smooth touchdown, running to a halt. The pilots were left stunned: they just had bet away over two days' pay. They then all ran to the jumper to congratulate him. Durling, trying to forget his loss, extended his hand.

"That was an incredible jump, man. Good show! I... "

His voice strangled as Nancy took her helmet and goggles off, feeling like she was on top of the world.

"Hi guys! Can I drop in for tea?"

The discomfited pilots had to borrow money to go drink at the pub that night. Sean Brady laughed with genuine amusement at their story: that young woman was getting more incredible every day. He wished to himself that he could end up in life with a woman like her at his side.

20:15 (local time)

Friday, September 6, 1940

Abwehr headquarters, Berlin

Admiral Wilhelm Canaris handed over two files to the man dressed in civilian clothes that just sat in a chair in front of his desk. Klaus Manheim was about his best agent and one of the very few Germans to have gone on a mission in Great Britain and returned safely. The fact that Manheim used a completely separate network run by Irishmen, which used only written means of communications while in England, probably had a lot to do with his success.

“The first report is from the Luftwaffe, complaining that the British must have been informed in detail and in advance of one of their raids last Wednesday. Up to now, we have been unable to find the source of the presumed leak. The second report was just received today via Dublin. It’s from one of your agents running a pub outside R.A.F. Northolt. What he says in it baffled me, to say the least.”

Canaris let Manheim read carefully both reports. The first one made Klaus sneer in disgust.

“This one reeks of treason. The orders for the raid had been transmitted by ground courier, so that it is impossible that the British would have learned of it by intercepting and decoding a radio transmission, even if they could do it. The way they knew all the details of the raid means either that a staff officer of the Luftwaffe works for the British or, more plausibly, that an enemy agent has infiltrated our headquarters out there. Either way, it sounds very bad.”

“Agreed! What do you think of the second report?”

Klaus smiled and read back aloud a passage of Sean Brady’s report.

“Approximately 182 centimeters tall, athletic and very pretty, black hair, green eyes; shot down a Junkers 88 with a machinegun; expert in hand-to-hand combat; speaks many languages, including German and French; parachute-qualified; very bright. Admiral, if you would have been a marriage counselor, I would have said that you had just found the woman of my dreams.”

Canaris smiled at the joke, then became dead serious.

“What about the part about her being a time traveler from the year 2012?”

“I would say that our good Sean had drunk too much of his own beer, Admiral.”

“What if his report was correct?”

Klaus’s smile also disappeared. He looked at Canaris hesitantly.

“You can’t be serious, Admiral.”

“No? Then read this! It just came in from Dublin by top priority air dispatch: it seems that your Sean Brady just broke one of his own security rules and made a direct phone call to his Irish contact in Dublin. He claims that the information could not wait.”

Klaus took the sheet of paper and read it with growing astonishment.

“An electronic flight simulator? A parachute that permits landing smack on a marker after a 3,000 meter jump?”

He looked back at Canaris in disbelief.

“Can those things be done by us or anybody else today?”

“The parachute, maybe. The simulator, definitely not. My opinion is that this woman may possibly come from the future, but I can’t act on such wild, unproven suppositions. I want you to leave as soon as possible for R.A.F. Northolt, via Ireland, and find the truth about her.”

“And what if this is all true?”

“Then we must get access to her knowledge. If you can capture her, you can be assured of all the support I can give you.”

Klaus suddenly felt sick to his stomach. He read again the woman’s description in Sean’s report before looking back at the admiral.

“This young woman deserves better than to die under slow tortures, Admiral. What if she is really from the future and capturing her is impossible?”

“Then you will have to kill her. The British must not be allowed to be able to use the services of such a person.”

CHAPTER 9 – COUNTERPUNCH

16:05 (GMT)

Saturday, September 7, 1940

Fighter Command operations room

Stanmore

The operations room at Stanmore was much larger than the one at Northolt, but the biggest improvement was about protection. While the Northolt operations room was on the ground floor of a standard brick building, the one at Stanmore was in the heart of a concrete underground bunker. Nancy, wearing her combat camouflage uniform and her pistol belt, was on the observers' gallery on the request of Air Chief Marshal Dowding, to assist him during Operation Counterpunch. For that purpose, she had brought her laptop computer, along with her multifunction center and UPS unit. Her equipment was now ready to function on a small table in front of her. It attracted a lot of attention and whispered comments, but the proximity of the air chief marshal prevented excessive hogging. A senior air control officer then spoke.

“Massive German formations are forming up over airbases in France and Belgium, sir.”

Dowding acknowledged the information, then gave an order to his chief of operations.

“Scramble the phase one squadrons! Have them orbit over their airfields at 20,000 feet.”

The WAAFs manning the big plotting board started to get busy, receiving plot information from radar control on their earphones. The symbols denoting the German aircraft started to head towards the British coast, now overflying the English Channel. Nancy noted that they progressively formed one huge formation as each squadron and wing joined in. Dowding saw that too.

“Confirm that the raid is not splitting up for multiple objectives.”

Radar control confirmed that within a few minutes. Dowding smiled then with satisfaction.

“Launch the phase two squadrons and have them head for their objectives.”

After a few minutes, squadrons of light bombers were plotted on the board as leaving their airfields Northeast of London, heading towards the French coast at very low altitude and being careful to stay out of the path of the incoming German air armada. Dowding turned towards his chief signals officer, who was obviously waiting for his orders.

“Commence jamming the German air-ground radio frequencies.”

He then addressed his chief of operations.

“Phase one squadrons are to climb to their maximum ceiling and wait above the designated kill zones, now!”

In an area East of London and about halfway between the city and the coast, over 300 Spitfire and Hurricane fighters were now climbing to their maximum altitude. All the resources of the R.A.F. were now concentrated in Operation Counterpunch to defend London. The rest of the country had been stripped temporarily of all its fighters, which had then flown secretly to airfields in southern England in the morning. Such a gamble would have been unacceptable to any sensible military leader without the kind of intelligence it was based upon. Dowding was risking everything in one big move and hoping for the jackpot.

Unknown to both German aircrews and their command staff in occupied Europe, who were trying to break through British radio jamming, four squadrons of Bristol Beaufighter fighter-bombers and eight squadrons of Blenheim light bombers, 132 aircraft in all, were about to cross the French coast at extremely low altitude, heading towards the German air defence radars dispersed along the coastline. The general locations of these radars had been extracted from Nancy's historical datafiles on World War II and had been pinpointed during the last two days by reconnaissance aircraft. Most were only lightly defended or had no defences at all and were about to regret it, as they did not detect the approaching aircraft flying at treetop level. The Beaufighters struck first, concentrating on the air defence weapons protecting the radar sites. Their 20mm cannons and .303 calibre machineguns strafed the German defenders with little chance for the latter to fire back. By the time the Blenheims arrived, they mostly had a clear field to play on. The German radar stations fell silent within minutes of the start of the attack, with German headquarters receiving only a few panicked telephone calls for help. The irony of it was that the head of the Luftwaffe, Herman Goering, had also made a big gamble that day. Nearly all the German fighters in flying order in France, Belgium and the Netherlands were now escorting the bombers headed for London, thus no help came to the radar sites. As soon as they had completed their mission, the Beaufighters and Blenheims turned for home and a quick rearming and refuelling stop. Two Blenheims were lost, but the German defences were now blind.

16:28 (GMT)

The skies South-East of London

The first pilot to visually spot the German flying armada was Flight Sergeant 'Grumpy' Unwin of 19 Squadron. Well under the Spitfires of his comrades, over one thousand German aircraft were flying by as if they were on a parade. Unwin reported his sighting to Squadron Leader 'Sandy' Lane, who warned his pilots not to dive on the enemy yet and to wait for the signal. That signal came as soon as the British fighters were left slightly behind the German armada. Then, 24 squadrons of Spitfires and Hurricanes dove for the attack, having the advantages of surprise, altitude and speed to add to the fact that they were above and behind their enemies, where they were hardest to spot. The first salvos of the battle were by far the most devastating, as they were fired against an unsuspecting enemy flying in a predictable straight line. After that, the sky became an incredibly confusing ballet of twisting, turning and diving aircraft.

16:40 (GMT)

Fighter Command operations room

Stanmore

"How are our fighters doing?"

Dowding couldn't help be nervous, like everybody else in the bunker. Nancy was also nervous, remembering the first days of the NATO air campaign against Libya. Looking around reminded her though that this was not 2011: the only computer in the center was her own laptop, which screamed of anachronism in this austere room.

"Sir, our phase one squadrons are running low on ammunition and fuel. They will have to break contact in a few minutes."

Dowding acknowledged the information from the duty officer with a nod of the head.

"Alright, scramble the phase three squadrons and have them head to their preplanned orbits. Let phase one squadrons break contact at their own discretion."

All around the South and East coasts of England, another 234 Spitfires and Hurricanes were soon taking off. These fighters belonged to Groups ten, twelve and thirteen of Fighter Command and were normally stationed in the West, center and North of Great Britain. Their

mission was now to wait in the sky for the Germans to turn home, then harass them all the way back while they were short of both ammunition and fuel. But before that, the Germans had another hurdle to cross: London itself.

Like Fighter Command had done with its fighters, the army's anti-aircraft artillery units all around England had been moved out of position during the night and concentrated in a deep semi-circular belt of guns East and South of London. After the air raid, the area roads were going to be jammed with convoys of anti-aircraft units rushing back to their normal locations.

Finally breathing a sigh of relief after the short but murderous air engagement that had left gaping holes in their formations, the Germans stumbled into the anti-aircraft belt. Since all RAF fighters had broken contact by then, the British gunners were free to engage at will any aircraft flying over London. What the guns missed in accuracy, they made up with volume of fire, with over 400 3.7 inch guns opening fire at their maximum rate of ten rounds per minute. The air defence gunners did not shoot down more than a few aircraft, but their concentrated barrages damaged dozens of bombers and played havoc with the precision of the German bombing. The London Docks area, while suffering heavily, got a lot less than it was feared.

At Stanmore, Nancy was using a special computer program to check the remaining fuel of the German fighters. Given to her by an American friend during the Libya air campaign, the program was set up to accept the performance and fuel consumption parameters of any aircraft and then, by punching in its speed, time in flight, flying attitude and other data, be able to predict its remaining fuel and flying time left to the aircraft. She had used the last days to prepare program profiles on the main types of German aircraft, with the help of both her historical data and the technical data found by the British on downed aircraft. As the first bombs were falling on the London Docks area, Nancy turned her head towards Dowding.

"Air Chief Marshal, sir! The German Messerschmitt 109 escort fighters should be Bingo fuel in about five minutes."

Bingo fuel was the American term for the point when an aircraft had to turn towards its base if it didn't want to run out of fuel. A group captain sitting on her right sneered in disdain: what did an army captain and a woman to boot know about combat aircraft? Two minutes later, the chief fighter controller reported that the German fighters were turning around and heading Southeast at cruising speed, leaving only twin-engined Bf 110 long-range fighters to cover the bombers.

The group captain who had sneered at Nancy reddened under the severe look Dowding threw at him.

“Captain Laplante, how tight on fuel are these Bf-109s?”

“They now have probably a ten minute fuel reserve, if they stay at cruising speed and if they don’t have to maneuver for air combat, sir.”

“Excellent! Chief fighter controller, pass the following to the phase three squadrons: they are to concentrate on the German fighters returning to their bases. Make those Bf 109s burn their fuel over the Channel. Also, have the phase one squadrons follow and attack the bombers as soon as they are rearmed and refueled.”

Dowding then picked up one of the telephones in front of him, a direct line to Bomber Command headquarters.

“Hello, Charles? Dowding here! Everything is going according to plan here. You may get your big boys airborne now. Keep in touch.”

In the next ten minutes, some 260 heavy and medium British bombers took off to head towards German airfields in France and Belgium. Their hope was to arrive over the airfields and bomb them shortly after the German aircraft had landed, when trucks loaded with fuel and ammunition would be circulating around hastily parked aircraft.

17:03 (GMT)

The British coast

Major Adolph Galland, commander of the third squadron of JG 26, was apprehensive as he led what was left of his unit across the British coast and towards France. He kept looking back at the fuel gauge of his Bf 109: those full power climbs he had to perform earlier to fight off the British Spitfires had burned a lot more fuel than he had wished. He suspected that most of his pilots were at least as low on fuel as himself: they would barely make it back to Caffiers. His legendary eyesight was suddenly attracted to a group of tiny dots above and in front of his aircraft. Could it be a second wave of bombers heading for London? Even if those aircraft were effectively coming from the Southeast, they now were apparently diving on his squadron. Trying to contact the newcomers, he got only the growl of British jamming. Galland then recognised the shapes of those diving aircraft: Spitfires! Yelling a warning to his men on the radio, he started climbing, pushing his engine to maximum power. Unfortunately for Galland’s pilots, they either didn’t understand his warning over the jamming or were too stunned by surprise to react immediately: either way, it cost them dearly. Already low on ammunition and nearly out of fuel,

the 452 Bf 109 fighters remaining out of the 597 who had started on this raid were caught by surprise over the waters of the English Channel by the 234 Spitfires and Hurricanes who had been waiting for them. The Germans had a cruel choice to make quickly: fight and run out of fuel over the channel or flee and be easy targets for the British. Most chose to fight, like Major Galland. He had time to shoot down one Spitfire and damage another one before his engine started sputtering. He swore when he saw that he had been only three kilometers away from the French coast. Galland looked down at the Channel: the sea was choppy and the water was certainly frigid at this time of the year. Still, he now had no other choice but to bail out of his falling fighter.

17:22 (GMT)

R.A.F. Northolt

“Come on, come on!”

Flight Lieutenant Durling of 1 R.C.A.F. Fighter Squadron wished he could go out of his Hurricane and push it to accelerate his climb. He had just taken off from Northolt with three other Hurricanes after a quick refuelling and rearming stop and was hoping to catch up with the now fleeing German bombers. Other fighters were similarly being sent back in small packets as soon as they were replenished from airfields surrounding London. The fight had been brutal and costly up to now but the time for the real reward was approaching.

With a speed advantage over the retreating German bombers of at least 100 miles per hour, the Canadians caught up with their enemies as they were crossing the British coastline. Durling whooped as he looked at the group of sixty Heinkel 111 bombers trying desperately to get away from his Hurricanes: not one German fighter was in sight.

“Alright men, split in pairs and get those bastards! I don’t want to see any ammo left in your guns upon landing. Good luck!”

German gunners fired away at them like madmen, but the defensive armament of the Heinkel 111 bomber was totally inadequate against modern fighters. Durling’s four Hurricanes had shot down six of the twin-engined bombers by the time they crossed the French coastline. Totally caught up in the fight, he did not notice it until his wingman warned him.

“Bob, we’re over France! Time to go back, pal.”

“You’re kidding? Not before I finish this one off.”

Another two bursts from his machineguns finally sent his target down in flame. He was about to follow his wingman and turn towards England when a German coastal flak crew opened fire on him. 20mm shells slammed in his wings, ripping off his starboard aileron. Durling parachuted out of his doomed Hurricane just in time, simply to land practically in front of the jubilant German gunners, who quickly disarmed him and took him prisoner.

17:53 (GMT)

Lille-Nord, France

Major Winkler, commander of Second Squadron, KG 53, promised himself to get drunk once safely on the ground: this mission had been a total disaster. Lining up his Heinkel 111 carefully for landing, he lowered his landing gear, hoping that none of the numerous fresh holes in his aircraft had resulted in a hydraulic fluid leak. All worked well, thankfully. He was about to cross the threshold of the runway when all the anti-aircraft guns around the airfield started firing at once.

“What are these fools doing? These are our aircraft circling the airfield.”

“BRITISH WELLINGTON BOMBERS OVERHEAD!”

The scream from his dorsal gunner was tainted with panic, for good reasons: this was the worst possible time to be caught by the enemy. Winkler immediately pushed his throttles to maximum power and raised his landing gear for an emergency go-around. German air defence gunners had to hold fire as Heinkel 111s scattered all over the place. The first bombs fell in the midst of a group of bombers that had just landed and were lined up besides fuel trucks. The huge fireballs nearly swept away Winkler's aircraft. He looked behind at the airfield as it was becoming a death trap for his comrades and shivered. He then looked at his horrified bombardier/navigator.

“You better find me a safe place to land soon, Hans, or you will be practicing your parachute jumping somewhere over France.”

He then swore to himself: how come those idiots at the radar sites didn't warn them of those British bombers?

18:25 (GMT)

Fighter Command operations room

Stanmore

“The bombers are on their way back, sir. No Germans in pursuit.”

“Thank you!”

Dowding looked at Nancy with guarded optimism.

“It looks like everything worked pretty well, Captain. Now we wait for the butcher’s bill and see who gets out the winner.”

“Sir, as a war correspondent, I have seen and documented a lot of conflicts. The one thing that it taught me is that, in war, there are no winners, only losers. In this case, we can only hope to be the smallest losers.”

“How true, Captain Laplante.”

Dowding’s shaking hands showed how much he hated it everytime he had to pay the butcher’s bill with the blood of his men and women.

At 19:40 hours, the chief of operations silently handed a sheet of paper to Dowding. The air chief marshal read it slowly twice, then turned towards Nancy.

“Captain Laplante, you suggested this plan for approval: it is only fair that you see the results of it.”

She took the paper he was presenting and, with a dry throat, read it. Nancy then looked back at Dowding with haunted eyes.

“I hope that ULTRA will soon tell us it was worth paying such a price, sir.”

She sat slowly on the table supporting her laptop.

“So many young men...”

A total of 73 British fighters and 14 bombers had been lost. 59 fighter pilots and 41 bomber aircrews were dead or missing, with 48 more men wounded. Civilian casualties in the London area were in the hundreds.

Approximately 200 kilometers away to the Southeast, General-Major Osterkamp, commander of Jagdfliegerfuhrer 2, was closing the door of his office in Wissant. He had just received his own butcher’s bill and had to advise GeneralFeldMarschall Kesselring. He could not finish writing the first sentence of the message to be coded and sent before grief overcame him and he started crying.

22:35 (GMT)

Fighter Command operations room

Stanmore

Nancy saw the officer in charge of the Special Liaison Unit, the section that handled the distribution of ULTRA messages, come out of his sound-proof cubicle, where she knew there was a teleprinter with a direct line to Bletchley Park, the decoding center for German ENIGMA messages. The squadron leader was obviously looking for Dowding, as he walked towards the air chief marshal's desk, near where she stood with a cup of tea in her hands. Not seeing Dowding, Squadron Leader Reeves looked at her.

"Do you know where the air chief marshal is, Captain?"

"I believe that he is taking a nap on a cot in his office. Is this the latest from the guys in Hut 3?"

Reeves stared at her for a moment. He knew the story about Nancy and that she probably knew more about ULTRA than he did himself, but she was still not officially cleared for ULTRA material.

"Er, yes, but you can't see it. Sorry!"

She rolled her eyes upward.

"One fine day in a million years time, common sense will catch up with military bureaucracy. Can you tell me at least if it is good or bad news?"

"It is very good news, Captain."

Reeves had a large smile as he went to knock on Dowding's office door. Three minutes later, Dowding burst out of his office, Reeves in tow, to stop in front of Nancy.

"Read this, Captain!"

He then handed her a teleprinter page. She took it with a sarcastic look at Reeves, who rolled HIS eyes upward.

"HOT DAMN!"

The message was addressed to the commander of Luftflotte 2, Kesselring, from the commander of his fighters, Osterkamp. In extremely terse terms, Osterkamp was basically telling his superior that his command had been destroyed. Out of the original 597 Bf 109 and 56 Bf 110 fighters he had sent on the London raid, a staggering 489 had been lost, many of them being Bf 109s that had run out of fuel over the English Channel. Osterkamp was concluding by

requesting an all-out rescue effort by the Kriegsmarine to find as many of his pilots as possible before it was too late. Taking out her pocket calculator, Nancy did a quick calculation.

“WOW! Their fighters suffered a 75% loss rate on this raid. This means that German bombers will have to operate with little or no escorts...”

Her eyes suddenly sparkled with malice,

“... And that our own bombers will have a mostly free hand from now on.”

Dowding suddenly stopped staring at her pocket calculator and snapped his head up, a look of revelation in his eyes.

“By jove, I didn’t think of that! I’ll get Portal on the telephone right away.”

He then ran back in his office, leaving a bemused Reeves facing Nancy. She handed him the teleprinter page.

“Here, you can have it back. Thanks!”

Reeves didn’t know if he was supposed to get angry or to laugh at that.

Four more ULTRA messages arrived at Stanmore that night, all being casualty reports from units of Luftflotte 2 and 3. The grand total at 03:05 hours for Luftwaffe units in western Europe was by then of 524 fighters and 181 bombers destroyed, plus another 46 fighters and 106 bombers seriously damaged. While the majority of fighter losses had been due to fuel starvation over the Channel, the bombers had suffered most on landing, when they had been caught on the ground by British bombers. What was going to hurt the Germans the most by far was the loss of the large majority of their experienced fighter pilots. The Luftwaffe would never be the same after this, the same way that the Japanese navy never recovered from the battle of Midway in 1942. The atmosphere at Stanmore was one of jubilation by the morning of September 8, a Sunday.

Nancy was just finished packing away her computer equipment so she could return to Northolt for a well deserved rest when Squadron Leader Reeves walked out of his office with another teleprinter page in his hand. He handed it to Dowding with a shaking hand. The air chief marshal’s face paled as he read the ULTRA intercept.

“My god, the poor bastards...”

He then handed the message to Nancy and turned away, trying to hide his tears. Her heart sank as she read the dispatch. It was a message from the head of the Luftwaffe, Herman Goering, to Kesselring. It directed him to hand over all RAF aircrews captured over France on Saturday to the Gestapo for detailed interrogation. They were to be transported to a small local

prison near Gravelines by no later than 24:00 hours on Sunday, September 8. Goering further stated that everything had to be done to find the source of the leaks, which, in his mind, had doomed the London raid. She looked at Reeves, sobs breaking her voice.

“The bastards are going to torture our pilots to death to try to find out that source and I’m the one who started all this. Oh my god, what have I done?”

The three of them were silent for a moment, horrified by the turn of events. Reeves saw Nancy’s jaw suddenly tighten as the tears cleared from her eyes. Dowding noticed it too. Her voice came out firm, resolute.

“Sir, we have to get those men out of there.”

“Agreed! I will contact Sir Newall right away.”

“And, sir...”

“Yes?”

“I want to be part of it! I’m responsible for what is happening to them.”

Dowding stared at her for a long moment. No woman would normally be allowed to go as a combatant on a mission. He was however starting to wonder how wise that rule was in view of Laplante’s overall performance. She had earned his full respect for her gutsiness and intelligence and he could see that she fully understood what she was getting into. Besides, she may well be the key to the success of any rescue operation. Air Commodore Nicholls had told him about her incredible precision jump. He finally grinned and gently tapped her shoulder.

“Captain, you want to help? Then you plan the operation on my behalf.”

06:05 (local time)

Berlin

The telephone woke up Klaus Manheim in his hotel room. Admiral Canaris was on the line, his voice sounding shaky.

“Manheim? I’m afraid that you will have to delay a bit your departure for England. Something very big happened yesterday and I need your brains in France.”

“In France? Where and for what?”

“I will explain the what in my office. The where is near Gravelines, on the Pas de Calais. Our Canadian friend from Northolt may just have played a very nasty trick on the Luftwaffe. Come as quickly as possible.”

“I’m on my way!”

16:05 (GMT)

Sunday, September 8, 1940

Fighter Command operations center

Stanmore

Captain George Townsend, of the Royal Commandos, was led to a small conference room of the underground bunker, where a Royal Navy lieutenant-commander was already sitting at a long table. The navy officer shook his hand warmly.

“Peter Stilwell, commander of His Majesty’s patrol boat SEA DRAGON.”

“George Townsend, Royal Commandos. I gather that you have also been loaned to help the RAF on short notice?”

“You could say that, by jove! Everybody seems to be in an awful hurry on this, whatever it is. Oops, there’s the Air Chief Marshal.”

Both stood rigidly at attention and saluted as Dowding, followed by a tall, foreign female officer wearing a camouflaged combat uniform, entered the room. Townsend couldn’t help stare at the nasty looking pistol of unknown design slung low on the female officer’s right hip. Dowding’s voice then returned him to reality.

“At ease, gentlemen! Please take a seat.”

Once they were in place around the table, Dowding addressed both newcomers.

“As you may know already, the RAF stopped a German bombing raid on London yesterday, causing very heavy losses to the Luftwaffe. The Germans now seem to think that we have a secret source giving away their plans and are trying to find that source. Unfortunately, this has led them to order that our pilots captured after jumping over France yesterday be handed over to the Gestapo for questioning.”

“My god, the poor bastards won’t survive it!” Exclaimed Townsend.

“Exactly the point, Captain. We have to get these men out of France as quickly as possible, thus we will have no time for practice runs or complicated planning. Time wasted will mean more pain for our men. Captain Laplante, to my right, is in charge of planning and preparing this rescue operation. She will also participate in it.”

“But, sir,” protested Townsend, “this is going to be a delicate, most dangerous commando operation. I’m not going to put my men at risk by letting a woman plan this mission, let alone having her come with us to second-guess my orders while in enemy territory.”

Dowding nodded in understanding at Townsend’s protest: the commando officer’s reaction would have been considered a sensible one by any British commander in normal times, as

women were widely considered unfit to command men in combat in Great Britain, or in most other countries as a matter of fact. Laplante was however no normal woman and the present situation could not suffer delays caused by bruised egos. Prime Minister Churchill himself had agreed that time was of the essence and that Nancy had unique special talents that would be vital for the rescue operation.

“Captain, your objections are duly noted. However, Captain Laplante is still in charge of this operation. She has the full support of both myself and of the Prime Minister on this and will have the final say on everything. I will now leave you with her, as there is a lot to do and little time to do it. Good luck, all of you.”

When the door closed behind Dowding, an uneasy silence filled the room. The female captain looked at both of them calmly, appearing supremely confident.

“Look, we are here to help men facing the imminent threat of torture and execution. Let’s work together to help them, instead of fighting each other.”

“Why did you push Air Marshall Dowding to put you in charge of this operation, Captain?” Replied Townsend, his tone clearly hostile and with the word ‘Captain’ pronounced derisively. “Do you have the least idea of what to expect in France, or of the dangers we will face? What the hell are you trying to prove?”

Nancy stared back at the commando officer and answered in a firm but calm voice.

“Captain Townsend, I don’t give a shit about what you think of women in uniform. I can tell you without hesitation that I can shoot a pistol better than you, have made more parachute jumps than you and that, in terms of combined special operations, know more about them than you or any other officer in Great-Britain presently. I can also demonstrate to you on the spot that you don’t measure up to me in unarmed combat.”

Townsend gave her a contemptuous look.

“You dumb bitch! You really believe what you say? And I should let my men be killed because a delusional opportunist like you wants to show off to the big brass?”

Nancy’s reaction surprised both Townsend and Stilwell. Jumping out of her chair, she went around the table and grabbed Townsend’s chair, making it pivot brutally to make him face her.

“You want to show your male superiority on me, Captain Townsend? Then, here is your chance. This room is sound-proofed and nobody will hear us. Get up and strike me if you can!” As Townsend hesitated, not really ready to strike a woman, Nancy suddenly swung a leg up, kicking him in the chest with her combat boot and sending him violently on his back. Now

furious and with his chest hurting, Townsend jumped back on his feet and faced Nancy while taking a combat stance.

“You bitch! You asked for it!”

He then took a step forward and swung his right fist in a hook, targeting her ribs. Nancy reacted with a speed that left Stilwell, who was watching the fight, wide-eyed. Sidestepping at the same time she deflected Townsend’s fist with her forearm, she punched him in the ribs, then swept her left leg around, making Townsend fall hard on the concrete floor, his lungs searching for air. The commando officer, grimacing with pain, got back on his feet more slowly this time.

“You got me once, but you won’t get me twice. You...”

He didn’t have the time to complete his sentence, Nancy then delivering a lightning-quick punch to the forehead accompanied by an ear-piercing shriek. Stilwell, despite the fact that he was following closely the fight, barely saw the punch before it connected. Nearly struck unconscious by the hit, Townsend staggered on his legs and would have fallen on his knees if Nancy had not grabbed him firmly.

“Mister Stilwell, put back up Captain Townsend’s chair, please!”

Stilwell hurried to obey her, allowing Nancy to sit Townsend back in his chair before returning to her own chair and sitting down.

“Well, where were we already? Ah yes: the mission in France.”

If the situation would not have been so serious and if he would not have been so stunned by Nancy’s performance, Stilwell would have probably laughed then. Townsend, still half knocked out, looked with incredulity at Nancy.

“Where did you learn to fight like this?”

Nancy gave him her best smile.

“Sorry, Captain Townsend, but you don’t have the necessary security clearance to know that now. Know that, apart from being an experienced parachutist and being an expert in pistol shooting and unarmed combat, I also speak German fluently. I intend to jump at night above the objective, neutralize the German sentries while wearing the uniform of a German female auxiliary and then unlock an entrance door for your commandos. Mister Stilwell’s job will be to embark us on his boat at the end of the mission and bring us back to England. I have here in my suitcase air photos of the objective taken recently, which we will study together now...”

CHAPTER 10 – NIGHT JUMP

20:30 (GMT)

Monday, September 9, 1940

R.A.F. Northolt

“Do you have any more questions before you go, George?”

“None, Nancy. We are as ready as we will ever be.”

They were all inside one of Northolt’s hangars, where Townsend and his 28 men had just completed a last check of their equipment and weapons. They were loaded as light as possible, since they may have to carry wounded prisoners out of the prison. Their plane, a Douglas DC-3, was parked just outside the hangar. Nancy looked at the commandos as they prepared themselves: they were quiet, professional soldiers who did not waste time on unnecessary matters. Many of them looked sideways at her as she walked around for a last inspection. She was already wearing a blue-grey Luftwafe female auxiliary’s uniform, with the skirt a little short and showing much of her legs: the base tailor had run into problems while fitting her because of her unusual height for a woman.

The pilot of the DC-3, who was talking with Air Commodore Nicholls, looked at his watch and gave a thumbs-up signal at Townsend. The commando officer then called his men’s attention.

“Alright men, the bombers will overfly the base soon. Get your equipment and get in the plane now.”

As the soldiers walked single file towards the DC-3, Nicholls shook Townsend’s hand with vigor.

“The best of luck to you, lad! A lot of good men’s lives will depend on you tonight.”

“Thank you, sir, but I have to say that all of us will in turn depend on Captain Laplante.”

“True, but I know that she will make it: you should have seen that precision jump of hers.”

Townsend was about to reply that it had not been done under combat conditions but decided wisely to shut his mouth. After a last salute to Nicholls, he turned and got on his plane. The DC-3’s engines sputtered to life and the transport aircraft soon started rolling, lining up in the wind and taking off on the grass field as the noise from a squadron of Wellington bombers was growing steadily. The DC-3 eventually took tail position in the bomber formation and

disappeared to the Southeast in the quickly darkening sky. The first element of Operation Redemption was on its way. The second element was Nancy.

She excused herself with Nicholls and made a last trip to the restrooms before starting to put on her equipment: it would be a while before she had time for another comfort stop. Then watched by Nicholls and the pilot of the Westland Lysander who would fly her out, she methodically put on her gear. She first took off her regulation German shoes and stuffed them in a large belly pack containing her weapons and equipment, then started putting on the thick trousers of the Irvin thermal suit that would protect her from the cold wind at high altitude. She encountered a problem there, trying to pull up the trousers at the same time she was attempting to hold her skirt up to avoid it getting excessively wrinkled, something that could give her away after landing. She finally had to ask for the help of the delighted Lysander pilot, who got to pull her trousers up as she held her skirt above her hips, thus giving him an eyefull of her panties from up close. Nicholls had a chuckle at that.

“Consider that as an extra bonus for this mission, Flight Lieutenant Turner.”

“I don’t get this kind of bonus too often, sir.”

“You mean you don’t fly with women as backseaters on all your missions?” Asked a grinning Nancy.

“I wish I would, maam. I’m afraid it would distract me from my navigation, though.”

“Well, you better not get distracted this time: my fanny is on the line tonight.”

“Yes, and such a nice one too, no disrespect intended.”

“None taken, voyeur!”

They all laughed, then Nancy resumed her preparations. With the Irvin trousers now up, she buttoned her skirt just under her breasts, so that it would hang down with as few wrinkles as possible, then put on the thick sheepskin leather Irvin jacket. She next took a chair and sat down in order to put on and lace her combat boots: her combat uniform and web gear were already tightly bundled inside her belly pack. Before strapping on the pack, she put on her directional parachute, which had been dyed black by Warrant Culvert the day before. The Lysander pilot had again to help her strap the parachute on her.

“Watch where you put your hands, or Flight Lieutenant Wilson will skin you alive, MisterTurner.”

“A small price to pay for this pleasure, maam.”

Nancy strapped to herself and on top of her belly pack a small oxygen bottle connected to a mask. Her canadian Army kevlar helmet was on next, supplemented by a pair of protective

goggles. She finally put a flare signal pistol in one of the Irvin trousers's pockets, along with spare flare cartridges. Nicholls looked at his watch.

"Lieutenant-commander Stilwell must be about to leave port soon and Captain Townsend must be hitting the ground now: time for you to go, Captain Laplante. May God take care of you all."

"Thank you, Sir! We'll get your pilots back."

Nicholls felt his heart sink as she walked to the Lysander with Turner. He had to remind himself that she was doing no more than many men were doing now. That was however what she wanted and it was time for him to treat her like all the others under his command. Once the Lysander had disappeared into the night, he went to a telephone and got a line to Stanmore, finally getting Air Chief Marshal Dowding on the telephone.

"Sir, Operation Redemption is now running."

21:41 (GMT)

Area of Gravelines, France

Captain Townsend unclipped his parachute while his men were still landing around him in the large clearing in the woods near Gravelines, an old fortified town between Calais and Dunkirk. Everything had gone well up to now. Quickly and silently, he regrouped his men, seeing with relief that nobody had been hurt on landing. They hid their parachutes before splitting up, with the majority heading for the objective while six men stayed in the clearing. The role of the smaller group was to provide security for what would become an improvised landing strip and, more importantly, to guide Nancy during her freefall by lining up coloured lights skyward and by forming a line pointing towards the prison that was their objective. Townsend left Sergeant Winters in charge of that group and led the assault team at a quick pace towards his target, about one mile away.

Ten minutes later, Townsend stopped and crouched at the limit of the woodline. Between him and the road linking Gravelines and Dunkirk stood a large brick building partially surrounded by a high brick wall, about 200 yards away. He studied the old prison in the little light provided by the moon. It was a three-storey building with a flat roof and a high brick wall surrounding a small courtyard facing the road. He and his men were looking at the rear facade, where he could see a small secondary entrance. That was the door that Nancy was supposed to open for them after gaining access inside via the roof. One of the two corner guard towers of

the front wall was visible. He smiled when he saw the red dot of a lit cigarette appear for a moment on top of the visible tower: the guards were relaxed, thus less vigilant. Townsend's smile suddenly changed to a grimace: another red dot had just appeared on the roof, where there was supposed to be no sentry posts according to yesterday's air photos. Swearing to himself quietly, he took his binoculars and examined the roof area. There was now a sandbagged position alongside the rear facade parapet, with one German and what looked like a machine gun planted on top of the sandbags. That German had 200 yards of cover-free ground in front of him, which would be more than enough for him to see and shoot anybody attempting to run between the woodline and the prison. Furthermore, Townsend didn't think it possible to take out that German with a rifle with any degree of certainty in this poor light condition. Worst of all, Nancy was going to land on that roof, expecting it to be deserted. There was no way he could communicate with her at this moment: the mission was nearly doomed to failure now. Townsend felt despair overtake him then.

22:40 (GMT)

Above Gravelines, France

"There are your lights, Nancy!" Said Turner, pointing a finger downward. Nancy looked down and saw with satisfaction three lights in a line: one white, one green and one red. The red light was supposed to be the one closest to the prison. She knew also that, the lights having baffle tubes on them, they would see them only if they were at or near the vertical from them: it was time for her to go. She switched the oxygen supply to her mask from the Lysander feed line to her own small bottle. She then checked that her now silencer-equipped Ruger Mark II .22 caliber target pistol was easily accessible inside her belly pack. She had also adapted to it the laser dot sight originally attached to her Glock 26 pistol. That combination would give her a stealthy and easily aimed weapon for the first phase of her mission. She then tapped Turner's shoulder.

"Slow down to your lowest airspeed possible: I'm ready to jump."

He acknowledged her with a nod, then performed a wide 360 degrees turn, slowing down at the same time he repositioned himself above the beacon lights.

"We are now flying at 60 knots and an altitude of 24,000 feet. Ready?"

"Ready! Pass the word home when I'm gone. Have a good night."

She slid open the canopy, stood on her seat and stepped into the night sky. Turner closed the canopy, stopping the cold hurricane blowing around the cockpit, and activated his radio.

“Fox one, Fox one, this is Falcon zero. The angel is on its way. I say again, the angel is on its way.”

A long way below, Sergeant Winters stared at the sky, wondering if he would see her glide over them.

She nearly became disoriented at first in the dark sky, but the beacon lights helped her gain back control. Luckily also for her was the fact that the Germans in this area didn't seem to care about night light curfew, as she could see lights from both inside and outside the prison and from the nearby town of Gravelines. Being an isolated building in a forested area, that made the beacon lights hardly necessary. Checking briefly the altimeter attached to her oxygen pack, Nancy calculated her descent rate and the glide path needed, then positioned her arms and legs in a double rearward V, picking forward speed towards her objective. She was at an altitude of 5,000 feet when she pulled her opening chord. The parachute deployed without a problem. Nancy immediately took off her oxygen mask and her goggles to have a better vision, then roughly aligned her glide path using the beacon lights as a reference line. Her descent should take another ten minutes, she calculated.

22:40 (GMT)

Gravelines prison, France

“Sturmbannfuhrer Boemelburg! Who's speaking?”

The Gestapo man suddenly took a more rigid position, surprising the Feldgendarmerie men relaxing in the prison's administrative office.

“Admiral Canaris?! What can I do for you, sir?”

Boemelburg listened for a while, surprise then scepticism appearing on his face.

“Are you certain of your information, Admiral? I would...”

The policeman listened for long minutes before talking again, taking out at one point a pen and a notebook.

“Laplante, is that it?... In Northolt? Wait, we do have a pilot here from Northolt... Yes, I will wait for your man. Good night, Admiral!”

He then put down the receiver with a sardonic smile before facing one of the Feldgendarmerie soldiers.

“You, get me the pilot from Northolt, Durling I believe, and bring him down for interrogation.”

“What about the pilot you were already interrogating?”

“Oh, the other one from Northolt should be more interesting than him. Get him out of the interrogation room and bring him to the doctor at the infirmary.”

The Feldgendarmerie warrant signaled a corporal to follow him and went to obey Boemelburg's orders. He hated Gestapo men but had strict orders from his commander to obey them, at least in this case. He hoped that the poor bastard who was next would not be too stubborn for his own good.

22:51 (GMT)

Above Gravelines prison, France

Nancy suddenly felt a shock through her body when she saw the incandescent red dot of a lit cigarette on the roof of the prison, still one thousand feet down and 200 feet to her front. Quickly searching in her belly pack, she took out her night vision goggles and hooked them to her Kevlar helmet, using the adapter already fixed to its front. She scanned the roof of the prison with it and saw in the characteristic green glow image of the light intensification device a German soldier with a medium machine gun standing behind a sandbag parapet. He was looking at the woods where Townsend and his men were supposed to wait for her signal. Thinking furiously, she ruled out trying to shoot the guard on landing: she may miss and she would need both of her hands anyway to direct her landing with precision. There was only one thing else she could do. Bracing herself mentally and physically, Nancy hoped that the sentry would not be a sharp one.

Helmut Kolner was glad to have sentry duty outside in the fresh air: it would help him keep awake after the long day he and his comrades just had. Besides, here at least he would not hear the horrible screams coming from the basement. He looked at the quiet scenery in front of him, trying to forget what he had heard and seen by dreaming about his young wife in Breslau.

Warrant Higgins urgently tapped Townsend's shoulder, then pointed at the sky above the prison.

“There she is, sir, above the roof sentry post.”

His captain looked for an instant, then nodded his head.

“I see her. Now what do we do?”

His voice showed his frustration and despair as he watched the young woman fall in a corkscrew path towards the prison’s roof. Higgins, on his part, watched the path of the parachute with increasing wonder.

“What kind of parachute is she using? I have never seen one able to maneuver like this one before. It also looks square instead of round.”

“To be frank, Warrant, I know very little about her, apart that there are some very strange rumors going around about her.”

“Rumors? Like what, sir?”

“I’ll tell you later. Get the men ready to move in case she makes it.”

Helmut suddenly heard a soft noise, like the one a gentle breeze would do. He turned his head to the left and froze in total surprise: a dark mass was coming quickly at him, falling from the sky. He never had time to react before the heavy-duty soles of Nancy’s combat boots smashed his face, sending him sprawling and unconscious on the roof. Nancy landed four feet from the inert German, quickly gathering her parachute in a bundle and unclipping her harness while she kept an eye on the knocked out sentry. She used one of the parapet’s sandbags to hold down the parachute, then took out her silenced pistol and pointed it at the German’s head. She hesitated at first to press the trigger: the man was probably a decent one and was clearly not from the Gestapo. Nancy then thought about what the Germans may be doing right now to British pilots inside the prison and about all the decent men whose lives depended on her now. The noise of her two shots was barely audible. Nancy then walked to the parapet and took out her flashlight.

George Townsend was expecting with dread the noise of the shots which would seal the fate of a very brave young lady. Instead, nothing happened at first. He exchanged a baffled look with Higgins, who suddenly barely held down a yell.

“The signal! She made it, by jove!”

“My god, you’re right! Let’s go, single file at the double!”

Twenty-nine men rushed towards the prison secondary entrance, hoping that the Canadian captain would pull another surprise and unlock the door for them.

Still on the roof, Nancy quickly took off her boots and the thick Irvin thermal suit, then readjusted the skirt of her German uniform and put on the low heel shoes. The wedge cap then replaced her helmet, which went in her pack like her boots. Pistol in one hand, she walked in a low crouch to the front facade. She was now looking down both the guard towers and the sentry post at the front gate, all less than 30 yards distant from her position. Using a ventilation duct as a support, she carefully aimed at the left guard tower, where she could see a German soldier slouched in a chair. A soft plop and the man quietly collapsed inside the tower. She then took out the right tower's sentry as well, but left the main gate alone: no point in attracting attention too quickly. Dragging her equipment pack by one hand, Nancy opened the skylight giving access to the inside and cautiously went down the steep stairs.

"You say that you don't know a female officer named Nancy Laplante in Northolt? How unfortunate for you. Hans, another toenail, please."

The burly man kneeling besides Durling started pulling with his pliers again, sending a searing wave of pain to the brain of the pilot tightly bound naked to a chair. Durling could barely contain his screams of pain.

"A tough one, eh! Tell me, tough guy, did you know that she comes from the future, from the year 2012 to be more exact?"

Boemelburg didn't believe that fantastic story for a second, but he was a methodical man and wanted to try everything, even if it was a hare-brained idea from the Abwehr. He was thus surprised to see an expression appear on Durling's face, one that, as an old policeman, he had seen before during interrogations: Durling was reacting as if what he had just said had suddenly explained something misunderstood or mysterious up to now to him. Boemelburg's throat dried out: if this crazy notion about a time traveler was true, it would explain a lot of things, including how the British had prior knowledge of the raid on London. He had to be sure about this.

"No more games, Mister Durling! Who is really this Nancy Laplante?"

The pilot refused to say a word.

"You will be sorry for that. Hans, the electrodes!"

Nancy left her pack in a small closet near the stairs she had just climbed down, then took with her a small leather briefcase similar to that used by bureaucrats transporting files and dossiers. The briefcase actually contained her weapons and maps with information critical for the rescue. She straightened her hair and uniform before resolutely leaving the closet and walking with assurance towards the main staircase, looking every bit like a Luftwaffe female

oberhelferin bringing in requested files about the RAF. She was holding the briefcase with both hands against her chest, which allowed her to hold discreetly her silenced pistol behind her briefcase. The top floor was used for prisoners facilities like restrooms, showers and kitchen, and was deserted at this hour. Going down the staircase, she saw that the second floor was used as a cellblock. She was stopped there by a German soldier guarding the door giving access to the cells.

“HALT! Who are you?”

His tone was more curious than aggressive: here was a tall and pretty German woman showing up during a boring shift. Nancy answered back in fluent German.

“I’m from Jagdfliegerfuhrer 2 headquarters in Wissant and I am bringing intelligence files on the RAF to help the work of the Gestapo officer. Where could I find him? I seem to have been misdirected by the idiot at the entrance.”

The soldier lowered his MP-38 submachinegun, a grin on his face.

“That would be typical of Friedrich. The Gestapo man is in the basement, to the left of the staircase. Just follow the screams.”

As if on cue, a muffled scream echoed inside the building, making Nancy pale. The German laughed, taking her reaction for squeamishness. His laugh stopped abruptly with a bullet in the throat and another in the forehead. She quickly caught his weapon so that it would not clatter loudly on the concrete floor, then put it in a corner of the staircase, along with the dead German, while being careful not to stain her German uniform with his blood. Nancy then resumed her trip down the stairs.

The ground floor was used for administrative facilities and guards’ accommodations and was fairly quiet, with only a muffled conversation in German audible at one end of the corridor. Nancy saw with immense relief that the rear entrance door was just down a short corridor from the foot of the stairs. She had to control herself in order not to run to it. Just before the door, she noticed a large cloakroom which would be ideal to temporarily hide Townsend’s men. Luckily, there was no lock on the rear door and she had only to pull two bolts. A darkened face appeared when she quietly opened the thick wood and steel door.

“Everything is okay?” Whispered Townsend.

“Yes, get your men in the cloakroom to the right, quickly!”

“Why not charge in now?”

“Because they are interrogating someone now and may kill him when they hear gunfire. I must go first and get that one quietly. Now, move in the cloakroom. Charge in if you hear gunshots.”

Townsend didn't argue further and led his men in the cloakroom while Nancy took the stairs leading to the basement. A horrible scream greeted her downstairs, along with two Germans, to whom she repeated her story about bringing in files. One of the guards stayed with her as the other went into a room nearby. The soldier came back in an instant and signaled her to come in. Bracing herself, she entered a large room, empty except for a table and a few chairs. Two Germans were surrounding a naked man tied to a chair in the middle of the room. The older man showed her the table.

“Welcome, fraulein! Please put your papers there and leave us.”

They didn't pay any more attention to her as she walked past them towards the table. The sobbing from the prisoner broke her heart, but also reinforced her resolve. Taking her silenced pistol out discreetly, she pulled a stack of blank files out of her briefcase and put them on the table, then turned towards the interrogators. The two of them had their back to her, but turned their heads when the prisoner raised his head and stared past them.

“Nancy?”

“What the...” Said one of the Germans, looking with disbelief at Nancy.

The older German got it first between the eyes, then the big one. Nancy next walked quickly to the door and shot both guards before they could react. She took the time to put a fresh magazine in her pistol before kneeling besides Durling. Tears came to her eyes when she saw the pitiful state he was in.

“My god, how can anybody do this to others?”

“So... sorry I'm not ... decent, Nancy. Glad you're here... though.”

“Wait, I'm going to untie you.”

It took her a minute to undo the rope tying his hands to the chair: it had left bloody marks on his wrists. She then cautiously disconnected the electrodes attached to his genitals, trying to ignore his spasms of pain as she removed the wires. When she tried to help him to his feet, his face suddenly reflected agony and he fell back heavily on the chair.

“My feet...can't walk.”

Nancy looked at his feet and was horrified by what she saw.

“The bastards! I will get some help. Take this and stay put.”

She handed him the pistol that had belonged to the senior interrogator, which he took firmly in his hand, then walked out towards the stairs. She did not meet other Germans on her way to

the cloakroom, where she explained Durling's problem to Townsend. The commando officer then turned towards a group of his men.

"Warrant Higgins, take two men and go provide security to that pilot while we clean up the building."

"Announce yourselves first, Warrant: I gave him a pistol from one of the Germans."

"Glad you warned me of that, Miss."

"You can call me Captain instead of Miss, Warrant." Replied Nancy, a bit miffed. Higgins nodded, then left quietly for the basement, two other commandos in tow. Nancy then faced Townsend.

"Give me another five minutes before starting the assault. I want to find and secure the infirmary first: some aircrews are probably held there. The cells are on the second floor. I shot the guard there. I saw nobody on the third floor."

"Christ! You didn't leave much for me to do."

"We're not out of this yet, George. Both guards in the towers are dead, but the main gate sentries are still in place. See you in a moment!"

Nancy hesitated a bit at the junction of the hallway, then decided to head towards where she had heard conversations previously. She was still holding her briefcase, her pistol hidden by the briefcase. She was nearly at the end of the hallway when she saw with relief a door with a red cross sign on it. She was about to enter the infirmary when a German shouted at her from behind.

"Hey! Who are you?"

She turned around and saw a warrant of the Feldgendarmerie standing in a doorway, ten feet from her. He was looking suspiciously at her, with a hand near the holster at his belt.

"I'm from the Luftwaffe headquarters in Wissant and I just dropped off some intelligence files requested by the Gestapo officer. He asked me to go to the infirmary and sit besides the prisoners there in case they talked while sedated: I happen to understand English."

The German warrant raised an eyebrow, hesitated, then nodded towards the infirmary.

"Alright, you may go in, fraulein."

Secretly relieved, Nancy turned around and put her hand on the doorknob. That was when the German took out his luger pistol and shot her once between her shoulder blades.

The warrant felt immediately that something was wrong here: no self-respecting female senior auxiliary of the Luftwaffe would let one of her girls go around with such a ridiculously

short skirt. The young woman then made two mistakes: first, there was only one prisoner in the infirmary, not many; Second, the Gestapo man had expressly forbidden the doctor to use pain killers or sedatives, so that the prisoners would be in constant pain, thus lowering their resistance threshold. His 9mm bullet slammed the woman against the door of the infirmary. She bounced on it, turning towards him at the same time, pain reflecting on her pretty face. She dropped her leather briefcase, revealing a silencer-equipped pistol in her right hand. 'I knew it!' he thought to himself, then shot her once again, this time between her breasts. Incredibly, she did not fall immediately and started to raise her pistol at him. Feeling sudden panic, he put three more bullets in her chest before her pistol sputtered, sending him into eternal darkness. His last sight was that of a strange bright red point of light under the muzzle of her gun.

Townsend jumped to his feet when he heard the first gunshot and waved to his men, yelling.

"LET`S GO! CLEAN THIS PLACE!"

He turned the corner of the hallway in time to see with horror a German shoot three bullets in Nancy's chest before being shot dead by her. She then slid to the floor, her back against a door.

"NOOO! NANCY!"

The door she was leaning against suddenly opened, making her upper body fall with a thud inside the doorway. Enraged like he had rarely been before, the commando cut down with a submachine gun burst the German soldier who then emerged from the infirmary. Townsend burst in the room, ready to shoot any German inside. He found only one prisoner, his face a mass of bruises, being attended by a doctor and a nurse. The doctor and nurse were German but were not armed and were cowering besides the prisoner's bed. He decided to spare them as long as they behaved.

"You and you! Get her in here and do whatever it takes to save her!"

The German doctor, wearing a white blouse over a Luftwaffe uniform, obviously understood English, as he immediately dragged Nancy inside with the help of his nurse. Townsend picked up the pistol that had fallen from her hand and slid it in one of his uniform's pockets. The doctor suddenly looked at him while crouching besides Nancy, astonishment in both his eyes and voice.

"There is no blood! She doesn't seem to be really hurt."

"WHAT! That's impossible: I saw her get shot at least three times in the chest."

"Look for yourself then."

He did just that. The doctor was right: there were four bullet holes in her vest, around the heart area. Such wounds would immediately spill an awful amount of blood, as he knew from experience. There was however no blood at all visible. He and the doctor exchanged a baffled look that was cut by Nancy's weak voice.

"Can you guys help me sit up, while you are here?"

Helping her to a sitting position, they looked at her as though she was a ghost, which seemed to amuse her.

"But, how..." Said Townsend, flabbergasted.

"I'm wearing body armor. Please help me remove this vest and shirt."

The doctor and nurse did that, watched by Townsend, who was also listening to the noises of the battle. It was already winding down, which was a good sign for him. Once the shirt was off, it revealed a sort of thick, tight-fitting vest made of a front and a back panel, with extensions covering her ribs area. There were four distinct imprints in the front panel and one in the back one. Nancy dug inside one of the imprints and extracted a bullet. The eyes of Townsend and of both Germans bulged.

"Thank god for the Safariland Company. It makes good products."

"Let me see under that thing, young lady."

Nancy undid some kind of side straps with a ripping sound and took off the contraption to let the German doctor examine her. She grimaced with pain when he touched the large bruises starting to darken on her chest and back. Townsend couldn't help stare when the doctor had to take off Nancy's bra, revealing large, firm breasts now pocked with bluish marks. She noticed it and gave him an understanding smile. The doctor quickly completed his examination.

"Without this incredible vest of yours, you would have been dead nearly instantly. However, I can see no real damage at all."

"Alright then, let's take care of the prisoners, George."

She put her bra and armored vest back on, then retrieved both her silenced pistol and her briefcase, taking out of the latter a much meaner looking pistol with a weird looking sight on top of it.

"George, I'm heading up to the third floor to change into my combat gear. I will be back in less than fifteen minutes."

"Wait, I'm going with you!"

"No you're not! You have to take care of the prisoners and of your men. I can take care of myself."

Nancy then threw away the low heel shoes and ran out in the hallway, leaving him to examine the bruised prisoner. The doctor reassured him with a grim expression on his face.

“He is in pain now but there is no permanent damage. I am ashamed that such pigs as that Gestapo man could disgrace the German uniform by committing such atrocities.”

Townsend looked at him intently, but the man seemed perfectly sincere.

By the time Nancy ran back to the infirmary in her combat dress, pistol in hand and her kevlar helmet and web gear on, the situation was firmly under control. No Germans had survived except for the doctor and the nurse. British casualties were limited to one soldier dead: they would have unfortunately no choice but to leave his body behind. A total of nine aircrews had been collected, two of them including Durling being incapable of walking by themselves. They found stretchers for them and got ready to leave. Townsend let go the doctor and nurse with a warning as the commandos were about to exit the prison.

“Don’t bother trying to phone for help, Doctor: the wires have been cut. Thank you sincerely for having treated our men.”

“I’m a doctor, even if I’m German. It was my most basic duty. Can you tell me one thing before you go?”

“Depends! What is it?”

“Do you have many women like this one in your army?”

He could not help laugh at his question.

“No, but I wish we had more.”

Turning to his men and Nancy, he pointed towards the rear exit.

“Let’s get out of here!”

CHAPTER 11 – RETREAT

23:48 (GMT)

Monday, September 9, 1940

Area of Gravelines, France

The file of soldiers and aviators, led by George Townsend, slowly made its way through the forest, impeded by the two loaded stretchers. Nancy had taken tail position and was scanning periodically their rear with her night goggles. She could see the small fire on the prison's roof, where her parachute was burning: no point in giving away its design to the Germans. Apart of the walking silhouettes of the German doctor and nurse on the road, she didn't see any movement. They should be able to make a clean break from the area.

Ahead of the column, in the wood clearing, Sergeant Winters had been advised by radio that they were on their way and had already called for the pick-up planes which would take out the aviators. The column and Winters' group linked up at 00:16 hours and hid in the wood line, except for six men holding vertically beacon lights with baffles. Shortly after the link-up, Townsend crouched besides Nancy, who was hiding behind a bush, and spoke quietly in her ear.

“One of the aviators wants to speak to you.”

“Alright, guide me to him.”

They walked a short distance to the woodline of the clearing, where the stretchers had been put down. Warrant Higgins was already kneeling over one of the wounded pilots. Nancy then saw that it was Durling.

“I'm here, Mister Durling, what can I do for you?”

“Nancy, the Germans... they were asking me questions about you.”

Those words sent at once a chill down her spine.

“The Germans know me? How could they?”

“Don't know, Nancy. They also said strange things about you.”

“What kind of things?”

“They told me that you were from the future, from the year 2012. Isn't that crazy?”

Nancy was stunned, made speechless by this. Townsend and Higgins were on their part staring at her in awkward silence. She finally spoke softly to Durling.

“Look, you just proved you could keep a secret, so here is another one for you: I am really from the year 2012. You did well not telling anything about me. Here is for a genuine hero.”

She then kissed him gently on the lips. When she straightened up, she noticed that Higgins had unconsciously tightened his grip on his submachine gun. So much for her secret if the Germans knew about it already.

“Look guys, wherever or whenever I come from is not important. What is important is that I’m on your side. Just don’t talk to the others about this. This is classified Most Secret information.”

“My god!” was the soft reply from a stunned Townsend.

The first Westland Lysander landed at 00:53 hours. Obsolete as a reconnaissance aircraft in 1940, it was perfect for the role that gained fame for it during the war: clandestine trips into German-occupied Europe. Large and slow, it could land practically anywhere and quickly drop or pick up passengers and supplies. The normal payload was one passenger and a piece of luggage, but this time it had to cram two aviators in the back seat. Durling was quickly but carefully loaded first, then a still fit aviator went with him in order to take care of the wounded. As soon as the Lysander took off, using less than 200 yards to do so, a second one landed. Two more aviators boarded it and it was gone less than three minutes after landing. The third followed, leaving three aviators for the two more Lysanders expected. Unknown to Nancy, Townsend had decided discreetly with Higgins to put her on board the last plane, by force if need be. When the fourth plane stopped besides the commandos, its pilot stuck his head out and yelled over the noise of the engine.

“This is the last ride. The fifth plane had engine trouble and had to abort. How many are left to pick up?”

Townsend swore to himself. The three aviators left were in no state to try a night forced march in enemy territory.

“Can you take four persons?”

“Are you crazy? With three men, I’m not even sure I can take off from this field.”

“Okay, you just got yourself three passengers. Alright men, load up!”

The overloaded Lysander soon took off, barely clearing the top of the trees at the end of the field. Relieved to be rid of his charges, Townsend turned towards his men, only to bump into a clearly displeased Nancy.

“What was that nonsense about four passengers?”

“Er, well...”

“CUT THE CRAP, GEORGE! I’m an army officer and expect to be treated like one, even in this period of rampant male chauvinism. You try another stunt like that with me and I’ll shoot your kneecaps off. Now, I suggest we get the hell out of here.”

An embarrassed Townsend then assembled his men, some of them still quietly chuckling over Nancy’s angry outburst, for a quick review of things to come.

“Listen up, all of you! We will now head on foot to the Northwest, to the small port of Petit-Fort-Philippe, a little over a mile from here and along the Aa canal. From there we will either steal a boat or, if none is for the taking, walk to the coast, where Mister Stilwell’s patrol boat will pick us up. Questions?”

A young soldier raised his hand.

“What kind of opposition can we expect, sir?”

George and Nancy looked at each other: the mission had been launched on such short notice that nobody really knew about that.

“I’ll be frank about that: you know as much as me on that, Private. We will run for the next few minutes, so tighten up your gear.”

Nancy approached Townsend a few moments later with a request that truly shocked him.

“You want to take point scout position? Are you nuts?”

“George, I’m not doing this to show off, but because I can be useful in the lead for the following reasons: I have special equipment that you don’t have; I have a silencer-equipped weapon and can deal quietly with sentries; and I speak German fluently. Do you have anybody else better for the job?”

He was about to say that no woman would lead his patrol but shut up in time: she would probably have ripped his balls off for that.

“What kind of equipment do you have with you?”

"I have night vision goggles, a directional amplifier microphone and a radio scanner." She then took two minutes to explain the capabilities of her equipment to him. He shook his head in disbelief.

"First, your parachute, then your body armor, now, this. You really are from the year 2012, aren't you? Christ! Alright, you have the lead. We will stay about fifty yards behind you, or as far as possible without losing sight of you. You have a map and a compass?"

He was going to ask if she knew how to use them but thought better of it. Warrant Higgins nearly choked to death when he saw Nancy go forward of the file of commandos. He whispered to his captain.

"With all due respect, sir, are you daft? You're sending some kind of Flash Gordon woman as point scout for a platoon of Royal Commandos?"

"Yes Warrant, I am. It's called command decision. Anything else?"

"Er, no sir!"

Townsend let Nancy run to the opposite edge of trees before signaling his men forward. They quickly established a routine, with Nancy running a while and stopping to listen and observe, then run again, with the platoon following at a slower but constant pace. He was nearly hoping to burn her out and thus have a good excuse to replace her, but he found out that she was as fit as she had claimed. After about fifteen minutes of this, Nancy suddenly signaled him to join her behind a row of trees. Followed by his men, Townsend soon knelt besides her. She was barely breathing faster, which was proof enough of her fitness. She pointed to a small village visible about 300 yards away along a canal. He could barely see the outline of the houses in the darkness as she spoke in a soft whisper.

"I don't see any boats in the harbour: the Germans must have removed or destroyed them. I think I also saw a couple of German sentries."

"Can I try these night goggles of yours?"

Instead of taking her goggles off her helmet, she simply undid her helmet chin strap and handed him the helmet and goggles, which he donned. Townsend was nearly spooked by the clarity of the greenish picture he saw.

"This thing is incredible! I can see everything past a thousand yards. You're right about those sentries and the boats, though. It looks like we'll have to walk all the way to the coast."

"Then, I suggest that we slow down and go cautiously: we must be closing in on what coastal defensive lines the Germans have certainly established to repel coastal raiders."

"I think you're right. Let me first call Stilwell by radio to warn him that we are closing on the coast."

Townsend was back at her side after five minutes.

"Stilwell is about two miles off the coast, in front of the Aa's estuary. He will close in when we report next from the coast."

"Good! I will move forward now if you're ready."

"Go ahead, Nancy, but be careful."

They covered only another 400 yards before Nancy urgently signaled them to take cover. Joining her as quietly as he could behind a bush, Townsend looked in the direction pointed by her. He then saw with the help of moonlight a German anti-aircraft position about a hundred yards ahead, situated at the edge of a small patch of trees. Nancy's voice was tense.

"Quadruple 20mm ack-ack gun. It could make minced meat of this platoon. There are also more Germans in the trees. Listen!"

She handed him a small earplug attached by a wire to a sort of metal tube. Once inserted in his ear, he was able to hear weak conversations in German.

"Damn! What do we do now?"

That was when the Germans in the woods came alive.

01:35 (GMT)

Tuesday, September 10, 1940

Gravelines prison, France

Klaus Manheim was standing in the prison's infirmary with the Luftwaffe doctor and nurse who had alerted the nearby garrison in Gravelines about the raid. Klaus could not stop staring at the Luftwaffe female vest he held in his hands: four holes riddled the chest area, while another hole had pierced the upper back. By all rules, the owner of that vest should be dead. Yet, there was not a single trace of blood on either the vest or the equally holed shirt now resting on the bed. The same could not be said of the Feldgendarmerie warrant whose body had just been taken away.

"You say that she suffered nothing more than superficial bruises?"

"That's correct, Herr Manheim. She even extracted herself a bullet from that incredible vest of hers, which she called 'body armor'. She was also a tough young woman: those bruises to her breasts must have been very painful, but she ran away with the rest of the British soldiers without complaining. I was able to hold that armored vest by the way: it was flexible and very light, less than five kilos actually."

"Anything else you could tell me, doctor?"

"Er, yes! I remember now that she changed into a camouflaged combat uniform shortly before they ran away. It had officer's ranks on a front slip-on flap, two large stripes. There was also the word 'CANADA' sewn on her rank slip-on, plus a sewn nametag on her right breast. The British officer also called her by her first name. Her full name is Nancy Laplante. She spoke fluent German."

"Captain Nancy Laplante visited us in France, then. Interesting! Why?"

"But, to deliver the British pilots, obviously."

"Why her, doctor? Why send a woman along with a platoon of trained commandos for a job like this?"

"Don't underestimate her because she is a woman, Herr Manheim. She proved herself to be very dangerous."

On that Manheim had no arguments with the doctor. Dismissing him and the nurse, he walked up the hallway to the prison's administrative office, where he found a major of the Feldgendarmarie looking at various pieces of equipment. The officer's face was grim: the men killed by the British belonged to his unit. The major looked at the Abwehr agent, obviously hoping for more information about the massacre of his men. Manheim spoke first.

"What did your men find, Major Brock?"

"A few things of interest: first, a third of my men were killed with a small calibre pistol, shot mostly in the head; second, a burnt parachute was found on the roof, besides the body of one of my men; third, that female Luftwaffe uniform full of holes found in the infirmary; lastly, a dead British Royal Commandos corporal. What do you make of all this?"

"I would say that a woman disguised as a Luftwaffe auxiliary landed by parachute on the roof, killed your sentry, then gave access to the British commandos through the rear entrance. At one point she killed the Gestapo interrogators, probably to deliver one of the prisoners, then got in a gunfight with your warrant near the infirmary. She survived it, he didn't."

“How could she survive that?” exploded the frustrated major.

“She was wearing a sort of bullet-proof vest, Major. By the way, her name is Nancy Laplante and she is a captain in the Canadian military intelligence currently stationed in Northolt, near London.”

The major’s eyes opened wide with surprise.

“How do you know all this?”

“I have my sources.” Said Klaus non-committally. “I also suspect that she used a new type of parachute which was recently tested in Northolt. It is said that that parachute can land somebody within meters of an objective after jumping from high altitude.”

Brock looked at the melted mass found on the roof, now sitting on a table.

“That would explain why the British felt they had to burn it. What else do you know about that woman? “

“Well, she speaks many languages fluently, including German. She is an expert in hand-to-hand combat. She has green eyes, black hair, is athletic and is about 182 centimeters tall. She was also decorated for bravery recently after shooting down a Junkers 88 with a machine gun.”

“Mein gott! This is quite a dangerous woman. A trained assassin?”

“Oh, I believe she is a lot more than that, Major.”

01:40 (GMT)

Area of Petit-Fort-Philippe, France

“What is happening, Nancy?”

“Shhh!”

She was listening with the help of her directional microphone to the shouts coming from the small wood. Townsend suddenly saw her tense up, her face getting pale. She reached for his hand and pressed it tightly as she spoke.

“They just have been told about us and are going to send patrols out. Furthermore, they have strict orders to find me.”

She then looked at him.

“Their orders are to capture me alive at all cost. George, whatever happens, don’t ever let them take me alive.”

For the first time that night her voice reflected fear and anguish. Townsend, remembering in what state they had found Durling and the other aviators, didn't blame her for that one bit. He kissed her hand gently.

"Don't worry, Nancy, we'll play bodyguards for you."

The noise of engines being started up attracted their eyes back to the small wood. Nancy lowered again her goggles, which she had flipped up and out of the way to speak with Townsend.

"I see two trucks about to leave the woods. There is a third one further back but there is no activity around it."

Nancy's report made Townsend smile.

"They are sending out possibly two thirds of their force on patrol. Great! We could use that opportunity to slip through right here. Talk about dumb luck."

"Er, we will still have to deal with the ack-ack crew and whatever is left in that wood, quietly. If they see us while we're in the open, we will be dead meat."

"You're right, let's do it!"

This time, it was Townsend's turn to prove that he and his men were professionals. Nancy didn't have to use her silenced pistol at all, the commandos killing quietly all the Germans in less than twenty minutes. She met Townsend afterwards near the captured anti-aircraft weapon. What she saw there made her jump with excitement.

"It's mounted on a half-track! George, I suddenly have this crazy idea..."

02:30 (GMT)

Channel coast, France

The SdKfz 7/1 half-track stopped with a jerk behind a thick line of shrubs. From there, 300 yards of sparse vegetation and low sand dunes separated them from the sea. The German truck that they had captured along with the half-track also stopped behind the shrubs, disgorging the commandos it carried. Nancy, standing on the gun platform at the rear of the half-track, scanned the area with her night goggles, using them in conjunction with her directional microphone. She then lowered her head towards the driver's window, where Townsend was sitting behind the steering wheel.

“There is a barbed wire fence along the shore, about one hundred yards from the water. The fence is not thick and should be easily breached. However, I can see a dug-in position on top of that low hill to the right, about 800 yards away. There is also a possible machine gun position dug in this sand dune to our front. I can hear at least two voices from there.”

Townsend had to think a few seconds before formulating a plan.

“Alright, here is what we are going to do. The majority of the men will be led by Warrant Higgins in a left hook around that machine gun position, while Sergeant Winters will take three men with him and quietly take care of the machine gun crew. Me, you and Private Dobbs will stay with the half-track to provide fire support if need be. The tricky part is to stay clear of that position to the right. Let’s also be careful about mines: there are probably a few along the barbed wire fence. First, I have to contact our navy ride.”

The radio operator sitting besides Townsend in the cab fidgeted for a moment with his radio before handing the headset and microphone to his captain. Townsend had difficulty hearing Stilwell, the quality of the transmission being poor.

“Hello, Dolphin Zero, this is Fox One, do you hear me, over?”

“Fox one... phin Zero. Where are you now, over?”

“Dolphin Zero, we are 300 yards short of the water, about one mile west of the Aa’s estuary, over.”

“Fox one, Dolphin Zero on its way. We will send you two inflatable rubber boats once in position: the water is too shallow for us to get nearer than about 300 yards from the shore. We will probably have to do two trips, over.”

“Fox One, understood. Be advised that there is a German dug-in position about 800 yards east of my location, on top of a low hill.”

“Dolphin Zero, I copy that. I will be there in fifteen minutes. Hang tight!”

Satisfied, Townsend gave back the headset and microphone to Dobbs, then held a quick orders group with his men around the cab of the halftrack.

“Sergeant Winters, take three men and get rid quietly of that machine gun crew. Start now!”

While the four men departed, Townsend turned his head to face Higgins.

“Warrant, take the rest of the men and start a left hook around the machine gun position. Be careful about mines and stay out of sight of that German position to our right. We are expecting two rubber boats in fifteen minutes or more. So, in fifteen minutes and once every

minute thereafter, flash the reconnaissance signal towards the sea. Your job will be to get the men safely and quickly on board our patrol boat. I will stay with the half-track with Dobbs and Captain Laplante to provide fire support if needed. Questions?"

Higgins glanced briefly at Nancy, tempted to say something about bringing her on the first boat. She looked back at him resolutely, standing besides the anti-aircraft gun mount.

"No Sir!"

"Then go!"

The next fifteen minutes were very tense, with Nancy keeping Townsend informed of the progress of his men with the help of her night goggles. Sergeant Winters succeeded in eliminating the German gun crew, waving an arm to advise them he had done his job, then went to join up with Warrant Higgins' column. After another ten minutes, the radio beside Townsend started making noises again. Private Dobbs listened for a moment, then passed it to his captain.

"Fox One, Fox One, this is Dolphin Zero, over!"

"Fox one here, go ahead!"

"Dolphin Zero, we have seen your signal. My rubber boats are on their way. Make it fast: I suspect that a German patrol boat is sniffing over the area."

"Fox One, I copy, out!"

Townsend then stuck his head out of the cab.

"Nancy, Stilwell is here. He says that there may be a German patrol boat around. Can you see it?"

"Wait one!"

She looked through her night goggles, commenting as she swept the sea's horizon.

"Nothing...wait! I see Stilwell's patrol boat. YES! I see the two rubber boats: they have started to take in our men."

"Good show! What about the German boat?"

"Hmm...woah! SHIT! I see a boat approaching: it is about a mile from Stilwell and to his port aft side."

Townsend was transmitting that information when Nancy got an idea.

"George, tell Stilwell not to open fire yet and to keep a low profile, then start this vehicle and advance a bit while turning left to give me a good field of fire."

“You got it!”

By the time he started the half-track and crashed through the shrubs and into the open, Nancy had rotated the quadruple automatic cannon mount roughly towards the German boat.

“DRIVER STOP!”

Using her night goggles, she lined up the German boat in the gun sight, using her hands to work the elevation and traverse mechanisms. After a last careful adjustment, she pressed the trigger and fired a short burst of 20mm explosive tracer shells. The burst fell short but not by much. Frantically working the elevation mechanism, she compensated and fired a second burst two seconds later. The tracers bracketed the boat that time, with what looked like a couple of hits as a bonus.

The fire from the mobile air defence gun took everybody else in the area by surprise, the commander of the German Schnellboot being the least pleased about it. Two 20mm shells had just exploded on board, killing one of the sailors on the rear deck.

“What are those Wehrmacht idiots think they are doing?” Raged the commander. “Engines full ahead! Steer to port, heading 180!”

On the hill to the right of the half-track, excited sentries reported to their officer, a young lieutenant, that one of their air defense guns was engaging a boat near the coast. The lieutenant, seeing next to nothing with his binoculars, jumped on his field telephone to request that his company’s mortar section fire an illuminating shell over the sea, off his position. Two minutes later, a bright spot ignited in the night sky over the sea, clearly silhouetting a small boat. The German lieutenant, being inept at the art of recognizing ships, then ordered his men to fire on it.

“SHOW TIME!”

Nancy exulted when the starshell illuminated the German patrol boat. Folding up her night goggles, she was able to look directly through the gun sight and to adjust her fire, bracketing the Schnellboot with five successive bursts. The last one hit one of the reload torpedoes stored amidship, detonating it and destroying the patrol boat in a ball of fire.

Lieutenant-commander Stilwell screamed with joy at the sight of the fireball. Jumping down from the tiny bridge of his patrol boat, he went to meet the two first boatloads of commandos now arriving alongside. As soon as the sixteen soldiers were aboard, he replaced the tired sailors that had been rowing the boats with fresh men and sent the boats back for the rest of the commandos. He shook the hand of Sergeant Winters, the senior ranking commando now on board.

“Jolly good show! Getting a Schnellboot on top of completing your mission is fantastic. Who was doing the shooting?”

Winters grinned from ear to ear at his question.

“Captain Laplante is manning the flak gun, sir. Captain Townsend is driving the half-track, with radioman Dobbs besides him. I guess that Miss Laplante loves playing with big guns.”

The commando took great pleasure at watching Stilwell’s jaw drop to the deck of his boat.

The German lieutenant now felt like crawling under a rock as his very irate battalion commander was screaming at him on the telephone. When his superior slammed the phone after giving a terse order, the lieutenant looked at his warrant officer.

“We engaged the wrong target: that air defense half-track was stolen earlier on by British raiders. There is also a woman with them. Our orders are to destroy the raiders but also to capture the woman alive at all cost.”

The warrant officer winced: orders finishing with the words ‘at all cost’ were not his favorite ones.

Things were now getting dicey around the half-track. A starshell was illuminating their area and Nancy could see at least twenty German soldiers running down the hill towards them. She engaged them with two short bursts, hitting some of them and forcing the rest to take cover. Bullets started to bounce on the half-track.

“DRIVER, ADVANCE! HEAD FOR THE WATER!”

The mortar firing on them had now switched from starshell to fragmentation bombs. The first one landed fifty yards from their vehicle, while the second one was much closer. A scream followed the third explosion, as fragments were pinging on the gun shield protecting Nancy. Her heart stopped for a moment.

“GUYS, ARE YOU ALRIGHT?”

“Je... Jesus! Dobbs just punched the ticket. Hang on, I’m going to go full speed.”

Another bomb exploded close to the half-track, its blast sprawling Nancy against the gun. She felt like she had been punched all over her body and became numb. Looking at herself, she saw blood on her right arm and right leg but didn’t feel pain, yet. Taking back the gunner’s seat, she resumed firing on the advancing Germans, only to hear the breeches close on empty chambers: she was out of ammunition. That was when a mortar bomb exploded just in front of the speeding half-track, sending it crashing in a sand dune and blowing her off the vehicle. She now had a constant buzz in her ears as she slowly got back on her feet and walked on the loose sand to the immobile half-track, which was starting to burn. Another blast projected her hard against the vehicle. She felt more punches to her body but ignored them, focused solely on getting Townsend out and to safety. The driver’s door had opened on impact, showing her the commando captain sprawled over the steering wheel. She felt an immense relief when she found that he still had a slow but strong pulse. Pulling him out with the strength of despair, she draped him over her shoulders in a classic fireman’s carry and headed towards the water. Bullets were now hitting the sand around her and whistling past her head. She was only thirty yards from the water when a hard blow hit her in the back, sending her and Townsend face down in the sand. Getting up was really hard that time. She never understood later how she did it, but she managed to put Townsend across her shoulders again and resumed walking. By then her vision was blurred and she was feeling increasingly dizzy. Another blow hit her leg as she was splashing in the surf. This time she screamed in pain and could not get up.

“NOOO! NOT NOW!”

Raging at her weakness, Nancy seized Townsend’s collar and started dragging him along with herself. Booted feet suddenly surrounded her and George. She thought in panic at the treatment she could expect from the Germans. Somebody then spoke to her in English.

“Hang on, maam, we’ll get you out of here.”

“NO! GET TOWNSEND OUT FIRST! I CAN MANAGE BY MYSELF.”

“But, maam...”

“THAT’S AN ORDER! TAKE TOWNSEND FIRST!”

They obeyed her and carried away Townsend, leaving two men to protect her and help her up. With a supreme effort she managed to walk by herself towards the nearby rubber boat. Her escorts were now firing away their submachine guns, while Stilwell’s boat added to the covering

fire with its heavy machine guns. As they were finally reaching the rubber boat, somebody spoke softly with alarm in his voice.

“Oh my god!”

That was when she collapsed into the inflatable boat, knocked for the count.

16:03 (GMT)

Tuesday, September 10, 1940

Folkestone, England

The Royal Commandos colonel looked at Warrant Higgins in disbelief.

“Is there something she didn’t do during this mission, Warrant? Are you sure this is not hearsay or second hand information?”

“Sir, I was there!” Higgins replied in an aggressive, angry tone. “Captain Laplante made that mission a success. The fact that she is a woman had no impact on my answers: I would admire as much any man who would have done half of what she did. In fact, you should get her to join the Royal Commandos, sir.”

“Alright, Warrant, that will be all.”

Higgins hesitated as he was about to leave the small room.

“Sir, how is she?”

“She is being treated at the local hospital. The doctors told me that she will be fine in a few weeks.”

“Thank god for that! Thank you sir!”

Once the door was closed, the Royal Commandos colonel reread the notes he had taken during Warrant Higgins’ mission debriefing. They correlated perfectly with the statements of all the other members of Operation Redemption, including those of Captain Townsend, who was recovering from a severe commotion. Taking the file containing his debriefing notes, he left the office and walked to another office that had been temporarily loaned to General Joubert, chief of the Combined Operations Staff. After saluting, the colonel handed the file to the general and sat down in front of him, letting him read in silence. After about ten minutes of reading, Joubert looked at the colonel with awe in his eyes.

“Colonel, let’s go to the hospital. I would very much like to see this Captain Laplante.”

“With pleasure, sir! My car is outside.”

A short drive got them to the local hospital, where the chief-surgeon was expecting them at the reception desk. The civilian doctor looked at his visitors with intense curiosity.

“Gentlemen, I suppose that I would be wasting my time if I tried to ask you who this Captain Laplante really is.”

The general and the colonel looked at each other. Joubert knew about Athena, the commando officer didn't.

“What do you mean by this, Doctor?” Asked Joubert innocently.

“Follow me please and I will show you.”

He led them to a small room used to store the personal effects of the patients. Opening a numbered locker, he then spread its content on a table.

“She was brought in here directly from the boat that took her back from France, with her equipment and weapons. What really got my attention was this.”

He raised Nancy's battered body armor vest, now stained with blood and ripped in numerous places.

“I had to take this off her before operating her. Without it she would be long dead.”

“Explain!” Said Joubert tersely. The doctor did just that.

“She arrived here with multiple bullet and fragment wounds, plus some spectacular bruises to her torso. The point is that nothing, including 7.92mm ball ammunition, penetrated that vest fully.”

He then searched in his pocket and emptied a small paper bag on the table. A number of bullets and metal fragments rolled out of it.

“This is what I extracted from her wounds: one 7.92mm bullet, one 9mm bullet and 27 pieces of shrapnell, all from her arms, legs and buttocks.”

He then pulled out another paper bag and also emptied its content on the table.

“This is what was extracted from inside the layers of her protective vest and from the outer shell of this helmet over there: one 7.92mm bullet, five 9mm bullets and 23 pieces of shrapnell.”

“Please take note of this, Colonel.” Joubert ordered. The commando officer took out a notepad and had the doctor repeat the information. Joubert used that time to examine the vest, marveling at its flexibility and light weight. He looked next at Nancy's kevlar helmet, which had quite a few indentations in it, including one obviously made by a bullet that had struck the neck

guard and had penetrated over halfway through the outer shell. Joubert then faced the surgeon.

“We would like to take those things and her equipment back with us, Doctor. Consider all of this as a military secret.”

“Of course, General! Would you like to see her now?”

“Very much so, Doctor.”

“Then please follow me.”

They went to the ward reserved for female patients, where the doctor showed them a young woman unconscious in a bed, covered with bandages and with tubes attached to her. ‘So, this is Athena’, thought Joubert to himself. Her information had already saved thousands of lives. Now she was paying the price for saving personally some more lives. After a long moment contemplating her in silence, Joubert faced the commando colonel.

“I want your full report and debriefing comments on Operation Redemption by tomorrow evening at the latest, with suitable recommendations for awards for your men. You will have the full backing of both myself and the Prime Minister on this.”

“What about her?” Asked the colonel while pointing at Nancy, still unconscious.

“Me and the Prime Minister will work out something, be assured of that.”

Nancy was transferred the next morning, still semi-conscious, to St-Thomas Hospital in London, just across the river Thames from the parliament. One of the consequences of the debriefings was the posting of a guard besides her bed on a continuous basis: the Germans obviously knew already too much about her for her own good.

17:15 (Berlin time)

Tuesday, September 10, 1940

Abwehr headquarters, Berlin

Klaus Manheim sank with relief in the comfortable sofa opposite Admiral Canaris’ desk: he had just arrived by car from France, a long and uncomfortable trip when done in a military vehicle. Canaris seemed amused by his fatigue.

“I send you all expenses paid to beautiful France and look at yourself!”

The admiral then became serious.

“How bad was it?”

“The trip or the mission?”

Klaus quickly became serious when his superior shot him an irritated look.

“Alright, sir, here is what I found: a lot of dead Germans, no British prisoners, a burned parachute and an awestruck Luftwaffe doctor and nurse. All this courtesy of our good Captain Laplante and a few British commandos.”

“She was in Gravelines?” Said Canaris, his voice showing his bemusement.

“Only long enough to kill by herself half of the German staff, including the Gestapo men, and survive five 9mm bullets in her chest and back.”

“WHAT? Stop feeding me by dribs and drabs! Explain!”

Klaus talked for a good fifteen minutes while Canaris took copious notes. At the end of it, the head of the Abwehr passed a hand on his face.

“This woman is truly incredible.”

“And extremely dangerous, sir. I am now convinced that she is a time traveler from 2012 and that she is the source that warned the British about our raids. It is not the end of it either. Do you realise that she probably has historical knowledge of all our plans, all our best kept secrets? Worse, she may give to the British some of her advanced technology, like that parachute she used to land on the prison’s roof. She may well cost us the war, sir.”

“Mein gott!”

Canaris was dumbstruck as the truth of Klaus’ statement sank in. After some reflexion, he picked up the phone and asked the operator to patch him with Heinrich Himmler. Klaus raised an eyebrow at the mention of the head of the SS, a sworn opponent of Canaris.

“Hello, Heinrich? Canaris here! I am afraid I have bad news for you... One of my agents is back from France and he just informed me that two of your Gestapo men were killed yesterday in Gravelines, France, by a British commando team... Their names were Boemelburg and Kinkel... Look, Heinrich, I believe we have just unmasked a most deadly threat to Germany. I would like to brief the Fuhrer and yourself on this.”

CHAPTER 12 – REST AND RECUPERATION

09:14 (GMT)

Thursday, September 12, 1940

St-Thomas Hospital, London

The first thing she saw when she woke up was Doug Wilson's smiling face. She smiled back weakly, still groggy from the effects of the painkillers. Her voice was coarse, her throat parched.

"Doug... good to see you."

"Good to see you too, Nancy. God, you scared me this time."

"Think you scared... how about me? Could I have some water?... My throat... dry."

Doug Wilson looked around the small private room given to Nancy and filled a glass from a pitcher on a bedside table. She winced in pain when he gently helped her to a sitting position but didn't let out even a moan. She emptied the glass quickly.

"Do you want more water?"

"No, thanks. I think I will keep sitting... Tired of being on my back. Where am I?"

"St-Thomas Hospital, in London. You were transferred to here from Folkestone yesterday. The doctor told me that they extracted quite a collection of bullets and shrapnell from both you and your bullet-proof vest."

She suddenly had a worried expression. Doug tried to reassure her.

"Don't worry about your special equipment: it is back in Northolt and is being cleaned up."

"I wasn't thinking about my equipment, Doug. What about Townsend and all the others? Did they make it?"

Wilson mentally kicked himself for his choice of priorities.

"I was told that everybody made it back, except for one corporal and one private."

Nancy suddenly felt down.

"Dobbs... He was killed by mortar fire while in the half-track with me. Doug, could you find out about Townsend and Durling?"

"I will try to find out about Captain Townsend. As for Flight Lieutenant Durling, he is right here, in this hospital. I was going to see him after you."

She grinned at that news.

"Hell, I must see him! Can you get a wheelchair for me?"

"Sure! Give me a minute."

He was back with a wheelchair after a few minutes and an argument with a nurse. Nancy insisted on stepping out of bed and into the wheelchair without assistance, which gave another fit to the nurse who had argued with Doug. Nancy gave the British woman a dubious look.

"Look, nurse, I know you mean well but I can take care of myself. Besides, the best therapy is to be active. Furthermore, tell the doctor that I won't accept any more morphine shots from now on: I need to have a clear mind if I want to be able to work."

The nurse then left, thoroughly scandalised. Nancy's chuckle stopped when she started stepping out of her bed, her face paling. Obviously in pain, she still managed to make it on the wheelchair alone, attracting a tender kiss on her forehead from Doug Wilson.

"You are the gutsiest woman I ever met."

As they left the room, the guard at the door, a military police corporal, started following them. Nancy made Doug stop her wheelchair and faced the MP.

"Corporal, do you need to follow me everywhere?"

The young man, a bit embarrassed, held his ground.

"Sorry, Miss, orders from General Joubert. He is afraid that the Germans know enough about you to make them try to kill you. I have orders to escort you around, ma'am."

Recognising the good sense in Joubert's logic, Nancy suddenly had an uncomfortable thought.

"Doug, it is true that the Germans know way too much about me, which means only one thing: somebody in or near Northolt has been feeding information about me to the Germans. I'm afraid this means I will have to leave Northolt."

She pressed Wilson's hand against her cheek.

"I hate the idea that I would have to be away from you but, if I stay, I may attract more air raids on Northolt. I can't place others at risk because of me."

Doug crouched besides her wheelchair, his eyes moist.

“Nancy, your safety is the most important thing for me now. I don’t mind you working in London. In fact, Air Chief Marshal Dowding is arranging something about that right now. We still can see each other from time to time.”

They exchanged a long kiss, with the corporal turning his back timidly. Resuming their trip, the trio arrived at a large ward with about twenty beds in it, most of them occupied. Wilson and the guard were surprised by Nancy’s yell as they were about to enter the ward.

“WOMAN ON THE FLOOR! PUT YOUR UNDERWEAR ON IF YOU’RE SQUEEMISH!”

A concert of laughs and crude jokes answered her. Doug wheeled her towards a patient whose bed was surrounded by four pilots in dress uniform. Nancy recognised one of them as Durling’s squadron leader. He suddenly called the pilots to attention, then saluted her. Deeply touched, she returned it despite the pain from her right arm: a captain was supposed to salute a squadron leader first. His salute was thus a mark of respect towards her. The Canadian squadron leader then shook gently her hand.

“It’s an honor to meet you, Captain. That was a fantastic job you did in France.”

“I was not alone on that mission, sir. You may also thank the Royal Commandos that were with me: they paid with the blood of two of their men.”

“I know and I agree, Captain: the squadron has sent condolence cards to their families, along with a jeroboam of scotch to their unit. I can see you paid a price too. Nothing serious, I hope?”

“The doctors say that there should be no permanent damage. I was lucky. May I see Durling, sir?”

“But of course! I’m afraid though that he is half-asleep from those painkillers. He is due for repatriation to Canada once out of this hospital.”

Wheeling her chair next to Durling’s bed, she saw that he was probably incapable of recognising her: he was too far gone into drug-induced dreams. She held his hand a moment and decided she would be better off to return another day to talk to him. She then faced the squadron leader.

“How is the air battle going, sir?”

“You have not been told? We are on the offensive now. We have been flying escort missions for Bomber Command for the last two days.”

“YES! What about London? Has it been bombed again after that first big raid?”

“The Germans tried once a day later, but their fighter escort was very limited and we bloodied their nose bad. They have not tried again since.”

Nancy nearly jumped with joy in her wheelchair.

“So, the price we paid on that Saturday was worth it.”

“Well worth it, Captain. Air Chief Marshal Dowding’s plan was a masterpiece of air strategy: it has broken the back of the Luftwaffe in France and Belgium.”

Wilson noisily cleared his throat, attracting the look of the squadron leader.

“With all due respect to Air Chief Marshal Dowding, the plan was suggested to him by Captain Laplante. I think that he would be the first to concede that, sir.”

The Canadian pilots all stared in awe at Nancy, who blushed. She tried to minimise her role in this but could not escape having to promise to have a round of beer on them the next time she was in Northolt. As she was wheeled back by Wilson to her room, the guard still in tow, she could not resist giving him a piece of her mind.

“Doug, I know you meant well, but please keep my role as low profile as possible. I don’t want to be considered as an omnipotent goddess.”

“You mean that you’re not one? Your name is Athena, isn’t it?”

“Doug, fuck off!”

Climbing back in her bed was no fun at all, even with the help of both Doug and the guard. It left her covered with sweat and nearly out of breath from keeping her screams in.

“Doug, I will need to keep my mind occupied if I don’t want to go insane in this place. Could you write down a list of things to bring to me here on your next visit.”

“Of course! Shoot!”

She explained for a few minutes what she needed and where to find it. Once that noted down, Doug promised to bring it all before supper, then left after another kiss. Nancy then went to sleep for a while, tired by her short excursion and by what was left of morphine in her system.

She was finishing an incredibly bland lunch when she got another visitor at 13:10 hours. Doctor Reginald Jones dropped on the bedside table a bag containing a stack of Nancy’s 2012 magazines that he had borrowed a few days ago. She whooped with pleasure and grinned at the young scientist.

“Doctor Jones, you don’t know how much this will help me here. I’m starting to hate hospitals: they are so boring.”

“I can believe that. Since my workplace is an easy walking distance from St-Thomas, I decided it was a good time to have another chat with you. But first, how are you?”

“To say that I’m well would be an obvious lie, but I will go over this. A few holes and bruises here and there but no broken bones or severed nerves: I was damn lucky. My body armor also proved its worth more than once that night: I would certainly be dead without it.”

Jones shivered in horror at that thought, his smile replaced by a deeply concerned look.

“Nancy, what I’m going to say is no simple flattery. You are too damned precious, downright irreplaceable actually, to risk your life like that. Look at what you have accomplished already: you have saved London from months of bombardments; saved thousands of lives and completely reversed the course of the air war over Great Britain. On top of that, the electronics you gave me to look at are already advancing significantly our technology. That radar detector of yours has already helped us solve the problems we were having in developing decimetric wavelength radar. We are now looking at producing centimetric radars in the near future. That is not the best part yet. You remember telling me that we could not duplicate those transistors for lack of means to produce semi-conductor crystals pure enough to be used?”

She looked at him with growing disbelief.

“Don’t tell me that you already did...”

“Not me, but a friend of mine who is a chemist. It happens that he is an expert in crystal structures but has had little success getting grants or support for his research...until now! Would you believe that he had already developed a process to purify such crystals but had not been able to market it due to lack of funds? Now, he has just been given a laboratory, a dozen staff members and unlimited funding with the goal of producing eventually transistors like the ones in your equipment. He told me just this morning that he thinks he will succeed within six months.”

“Six months! I was thinking ten years would have been more realistic.”

“You see! I’m telling you again: you are too damn precious to England to play soldier around.”

“I agree fully with Doctor Jones, Miss Laplante.”

The newcomer's voice took them both by surprise. Looking at the doorway, Nancy's eyes bulged when she saw Prime Minister Winston Churchill standing in the entrance, with Air Chief Marshal Dowding directly behind him. The Prime Minister seemed amused by her reaction.

"I never seem to fail to unsettle people wherever I go. May I come in?"

"S...sir, you do not need to ask permission for that."

"Ah, but where would good manners be then? Please stay, Doctor Jones: what I came here to say may be of interest to you also."

An aide-de-camp hurriedly brought in extra chairs, then left Nancy with Churchill, Dowding and Jones sitting in a semi-circle around her bed.

"Sir, this is too much of an honor. There are many young men in this hospital who would deserve your visit even more than me."

"Modest too? Miss Laplante, be assured that I will not forget them today. As for the person who saved London from destruction, I present to her the heartfelt thanks of the British people."

"Sir, saving lives is the best reward I could hope for."

"Miss, I am here to offer you a way to keep saving more British lives. As Doctor Jones said so well, your talents are wasted as a simple combattant. You have proved lately that your advice can be invaluable to this country. I thus offer you a position as my special advisor on military and foreign affairs. You will have direct access to all echelons of the government and armed forces, along with my full backing."

Nancy swallowed hard: this would open to her fantastic opportunities to correct or prevent many of the costly mistakes yet to be made in this war. The consequences of her future actions could be enormous.

"What would be my job specifically, sir?"

"Help us fight this war more efficiently, by either improving our military or by advising me on strategic matters in order to make a quicker victory possible. You would attend all committees concerned with the war effort and general staff meetings on strategic planning. You will answer to no one but myself and I promise you that your advice will be listened to."

"With all due respect, sir, I have found out up to now that very few people in this time period are ready to listen to a woman's advice, or even to consider one the equal of men."

Churchill smiled in mild embarrassment at that.

"I must confess that I am normally one of the worst offenders in that respect. However, you are no ordinary woman, Captain. Do you accept to be my advisor?"

"Sir, how can one refuse such an offer? I accept with great pleasure, sir. Can I ask a couple questions, sir?"

"Sure, go ahead!"

"First, will I be considered a civilian or a military officer?"

Churchill looked at Dowding with a questioning expression. The air chief marshal then took over the conversation.

"You still have the status of exchange officer with the RAF and can wear your uniform if you want to. However, I foresee problems for you trying to convince generals and admirals while wearing captain's stripes. You may be better off as a civilian specialist on military and foreign affairs, which you actually are if I refer to your civilian job in your own time. You will thus be officially seconded to the Prime Minister's Office, with the rank of senior government advisor. This should remove much of any resistance towards using your advice. I can guarantee you though that you will not encounter such resistance from within Fighter Command."

"That sounds fine to me, sir. My second question concerns foreign affairs. As you may readily agree, the future roles of both the United States and the Soviet Union will be crucial in this war. How much can I get involved there? I ask this question because I have vital information to pass to both of these countries."

"Miss Laplante, as long as it is vetted in advance by me, I can assure you direct contacts with both American and Soviet officials, as long as you hide your true origins."

Churchill thought for a moment before continuing.

"However, your nature as a source must be kept secret. Any information passed to non-British persons will bear the codename 'Athena', without further precision on how it was obtained, apart that it is considered as totally accurate and reliable by us."

"Neat! I like this, sir. I..."

A loud exchange outside the room interrupted her. Recognising Wilson's voice, she looked at Churchill.

"Prime Minister, I believe that Flight Lieutenant Wilson is here with some personal equipment of mine I requested him to bring in order for me to do some work during my stay here. Can he come in?"

"Of course! TRAVIS, LET THE OFFICER IN!"

A somewhat flustered Wilson was then admitted in, carrying two bulging bags, only to stop in his track and stand at rigid attention, putting down the bags before saluting both Churchill and Dowding.

“Flight Lieutenant Wilson, here on request of Captain Laplante, sir!”

“Carry on, Flight Lieutenant!” Responded Dowding. He and Churchill watched with curiosity as Wilson emptied the duffel bags, distributing and installing various pieces of equipment close to Nancy’s bed. She explained them to her visitors as the installation went on.

“Mister Wilson has brought my portable computer, a data processing machine, along with peripheral equipment like a printer, a power regulator and a transformer. This little suitcase there contains my computerised library, from which I got most of the information you already used. It is equivalent in volume of knowledge to several dozen encyclopedias.”

“Amazing!”

Churchill examined one of her CD ROM disks handed to him by Nancy before giving it back.

“In fact, sir, during the next few days, I will be preparing briefing notes for both the American and Soviet ambassadors, which will of course be vetted by you prior to delivery.”

Churchill smiled in appreciation.

“You do not waste any time, Miss Laplante. I like that.”

“Thank you, sir. As for the rest of my equipment, they are simply for recreational purpose: this place needs some music if I’m not to go crazy in this bed.”

Doctor Jones then timidly raised his hand, like a schoolboy asking permission to speak from a stern teacher.

“Yes, Doctor Jones?” Said Churchill.

“Sir, you said when you arrived here that some of the discussion may concern me. May I inquire about that?”

“Of course! What I meant to say is that, as far as any of Miss Laplante’s technological knowledge is concerned, she will be able to use you as a contact point for any transfer of technical information. I believe that you have already started applying such an information transfer: you now have my personal blessing to continue.”

Jones face was now radiant.

“Thank you very much, Prime Minister. This should advance our science tremendously.”

“Now, gentlemen, I propose that we leave the young lady alone: she is obviously in need of a rest. Again, my sincere congratulations for a job well done, Captain Laplante.”

They then filed out of her room, leaving Nancy to digest the implications of what had just been said and decided. She then realised that she was effectively exhausted, as Churchill had noticed. Within minutes she was asleep to the music of Sarah Brightman’s CD ‘DIVE’.

She spent the next few days preparing briefing notes, enduring painful change of dressings sessions and chatting with Flight Lieutenant Durling about Canada, both the 1940 and 2012 versions. He particularly loved listening to Nancy’s modern music on her portable radio/cassette/CD player, singing along the tunes with Nancy. She was by now the unofficial queen of his ward, with each of her visits greeted by cheers and blown kisses.

On the afternoon of Monday, September 16, she was in the middle of a conversation with Durling by his bedside when she heard a commotion and loud voices in the hallway. She instinctively reached for her Glock 26 pistol, which she was wearing hidden under her hospital garb, ready to pull it out if this turned out to be a German assassination attempt on her. She however withdrew her hand quickly when she heard the respectful exclamation of one of the patients.

“The king! The king is coming here!”

Nancy’s blood accelerated in her veins. She had come to measure in the last days how much veneration King George VI attracted: a timid monarch afflicted with chronic stuttering, he was loved for his dedication to his people and attention to the welfare of all. The king, dressed in a field marshal’s uniform and accompanied by numerous aides and senior officers, including Air Chief Marshal Dowding, stopped in the doorway of the ward while the patients hurriedly returned to their respective beds. Nancy saw a doctor point Durling’s bed to the king.

“Oh shit! He’s here for you, Jack! Let me get out of the way.”

She wheeled her chair away, past the next bed, and watched the king as he slowly approached, shaking hands with patients and giving words of encouragement. Once at the foot of Durling’s bed, the monarch made a sign to his aide-de-camp, who started reading from an official citation.

“On the seventh day of September, 1940, Flight Lieutenant Jack Durling, of the First Fighter Squadron, Royal Canadian Air Force, was on his second combat sortie of the day in defence of the city of London, then under German air attack. Pursuing a group of German

bombers all the way to the French coast, he succeeded in shooting down two Heinkel 111 bombers before being shot down by German air defence guns and being captured. Subjected to severe tortures by his captors, he heroically refused to give any information until he was freed in a commando raid on the prison where he was being held. For both his prowess in the air and courage under torture, His Majesty George the Sixth awards him the Distinguished Service Order.”

Nancy applauded and cheered along with the rest of the ward as the king pinned the medal on Durling’s chest, then shook the hand of the overwhelmed pilot. The king suddenly turned and walked to her, stopping directly in front of her with a tender smile on his face. Nancy suddenly felt very uncomfortable as everybody but the king stepped away to form a semi-circle around her. The king’s aide-de-camp then started reading from a second citation.

“On the night of the ninth day of September, 1940, Captain Nancy Laplante, of the Canadian Army Military Intelligence, participated in a commando raid suggested and planned by her, with the goal of freeing RAF aircrews being held and tortured in German-occupied France. Parachuting at night from high altitude, she landed on the roof of the prison where the aircrews were interrogated and succeeded in giving access to a platoon of Royal Commandos, personally killing a number of German soldiers in the process. During that phase of the operation she was nearly killed, but refused to be evacuated with the liberated aircrews, even though she knew that capture would mean certain torture and death for her. When a German patrol boat threatened the Royal Navy patrol boat sent to evacuate her group, Captain Laplante engaged it with a captured anti-aircraft gun, destroying the enemy patrol boat and making possible the escape of her comrades. Furthermore, when the captured vehicle she was using was destroyed, Captain Laplante, already wounded twice and under mortar and small arms fire, extracted a fellow officer from the burning vehicle and carried him to safety. Before she was helped to the rescue boat, she was hit a further two times but continued to drag her unconscious comrade, even ordering the commandos coming to her help to take him away first before accepting to get onboard the boat. For the extraordinary acts of courage and dedication to duty in the presence of the enemy shown by Captain Laplante, His Majesty George the Sixth awards her the Victoria Cross.”

Tears came to Nancy's eyes as the king took out of a small box a medal with a deep red ribbon, pinning it on her hospital gown and kissing her on both cheeks under the wild applause of everybody in the ward: only the best and bravest of all could aspire to the Victoria Cross, the highest award for courage in the British Empire. Her modesty was in for more battering, as the aide-de-camp started reading from a third citation.

"During the first week of September, 1940, Captain Nancy Laplante, of the Canadian Army Military Intelligence, actively participated in the defence of Great Britain against German air attacks. Providing critical and timely intelligence of her own, she was a crucial factor in preventing the destruction of vital aircraft factories by German air bombardment. Furthermore, by providing more critical and timely intelligence of her own and by suggesting a plan that resulted in very heavy German aircraft losses, Captain Laplante was a key factor in preventing the destruction of the city of London by massive and repeated enemy air bombardments, potentially saving the lives of thousands of innocent civilians by her actions and initiatives. For this invaluable help to the British Empire, His Majesty George the Sixth is naming Captain Nancy Laplante a Commander of the Order of the British Empire."

"I'm looking forward to inviting you for dinner at the palace, Captain Laplante." Whispered the king as he was putting the ribbon of the C.B.E. around her neck. She could only nod in agreement, incapable of speaking. The king solemnly saluted her and turned away, followed by his aides and the senior officers. She was still speechless as the patients of the ward ganged on her with congratulations. Wheeling her chair besides Durling's bed, they embraced each other for a long moment. He finally looked at her with gleaming eyes.

"Nancy, do you realise that you are the first woman ever to win the Victoria Cross?"

"I am?" Was the only thing she was able to say then.

09:46 (Universal Time)

Wednesday, December 10, 3383

Zeta-Alpha orbital city

Earth geostationary orbit

The Global Administrator for Sciences, Daran Mien, stopped dictating to his computer when his desk videophone buzzed, announcing an incoming call. He activated the video

screen, making the face of Doctor Farah Tolkonen, one of the top World experts in physics, appear.

“Doctor Tolkonen, what can I do for you today?”

“I believe that I am the one who can do something for you today, Administrator Mien. I believe that I found the cause of the space-time distortions that have been shaking our universe for two weeks now.”

“I’m listening!” Said Mien, immediately interested. Those distortions were causing grave perturbations throughout the Solar System, scrambling the most sensitive clocks and throwing interplanetary ships out of their trajectories without apparent reasons or explanations. The first wave of distortions had been by far the most severe, but subsequent waves were still being felt from time to time. Farah Tolkonen, who was like all the citizens of the Global Council a bald giant standing over two meters and with six fingers per hand, crossed her fingers and spoke in a measured tone.

“You remember the two scientists who disappeared two weeks ago, Administrator Mien?”

“Uh, yes! Are they implicated in these distortions?”

“Most definitely, if I can go by what I found. I went through their research notes in their lab in New Lake City and I can now tell you with certainty that they were engaged in illegal experiments in time travel.”

Daran Mien jumped on his feet at these words, a rare demonstration of excitement for a typical human of the 34th Century. Despite their highly advanced technology and social organization, the most charitable word a typical man from the 20th Century would have used to describe the citizens of the Global Council in general would have been ‘wimp’.

“By the stars! That would explain those space-time distortion waves. Those two scientists must have damaged the integrity of the historical timeline by their actions. Are you able to find out what they did exactly, Doctor Tolkonen?”

“Not yet, unfortunately. I must first build a time travel machine, hopefully with the help of the notes left behind by our two scientists, before I could start to investigate what they did. Do I have your authorization for that, Administrator Mien?”

“You have it, Doctor Tolkonen. As of today, your project has absolute priority over all other scientific projects. Find out what those two scientists did to the timeline, then report back to me.”

“And once we will know, what then?”

“We will see at that time. Good luck, Doctor Tolkonen!”

15:38 (GMT)

Tuesday, September 17, 1940

St-Thomas Hospital, London

England

Doctor Charles Ramsay examined at length the X-ray photographs taken this morning of Nancy Laplante, unable to believe his eyes. The rib that had deflected a 7.92mm bullet barely eight days earlier and which had suffered a long fracture line was now apparently fully healed. Even more, the muscle mass in Laplante's left leg, which had been seriously shredded by the passage of a bullet through the upper leg, looked intact. According to his long medical experience, Ramsay would have expected Laplante to lose a significant portion of the muscle strength in her left leg. Another unexpected find was the fact that, despite her body having been peppered by dozens of pieces of shrapnel, not a single infected spot had developed. In truth, Nancy Laplante's wounds should have forced her hospitalization for weeks and left her with permanent sequels. However, those same wounds were healing at an incredible rate and in a way he would never have realistically hoped for. The word 'miracle' came to his mind when he tried to find an explanation for all this.

CHAPTER 13 – NEW JOB

10:35 (GMT)

Wednesday, September 18, 1940

St Thomas Hospital, London

“Enter!”

Nancy looked up from her laptop computer and put her CD player on ‘pause’ as a RAF officer with a large briefcase opened the door of her room.

“Good day, Captain Laplante, it’s pay day!” announced the officer with an infectious grin.

“My god, you’re right! If it’s pay day, it must be a good day.”

“Eh, I like that turn of phrase. Can I borrow it?”

“Sure! Er, how much is my pay anyway? I don’t even know how much I earn a day.”

The officer looked at her with feigned shock, as if she just had declared herself as being a heretic. He leafed quickly through a thick ledger book and pointed in triumph at an entry.

“Ah ah, here we are! Captain Laplante, Nancy, Canadian Army exchange officer with the RAF, effective September 3, 1940. Daily pay rate of one pound and three shillings. Your accumulated pay balance to date, minus various dues, is fifteen pounds, two shilling and eight pences.”

As the officer counted her money, Nancy realised that she knew very little about the cost of living in 1940, apart from the price of a pint of beer. She promised herself to talk with Durling about that, him having been in England for months now.

“Can I put your money on this bedside table, Captain?”

“Of course! You’re too kind.”

As he put the money on the table, his eyes fell on her dress uniform’s jacket, suspended besides the bed from a wall hook. Her medals, including her newly won Victoria Cross and C.B.E., were still pinned to the tunic. Even the undress ribbons for them were in place, as the hospital’s seamstress had insisted on immediately sewing them on her uniform. The pay officer stared at the V.C. for a moment, then saluted her.

“Captain, it was a real pleasure meeting you. I wish you the best of days.”

He then left, closing quietly the door behind him. Amused by all this, Nancy put the money in her wallet and continued to work on her laptop.

Her second visitor of the day showed up at 11:15 hours. It was a junior secretary from the Prime Minister's Office who had already visited her the day before to pick up her completed briefing notes for the American and Soviet ambassadors. Jennifer Collins handed the briefing notes back to Nancy and sat.

"The Prime Minister has read your notes and agrees to send them after a few minor corrections. I understand that you have some equipment here that allows you to do that quickly and also produce copies easily. A total of three copies of each are needed."

"Did you bring some official letterhead paper, as I asked you yesterday?"

"Yes! 8 ½ by 11 inch sheets, letter quality paper with the Prime Minister's Office seal. I brought 300 sheets, will that be enough?"

"For the moment, yes."

Nancy looked for the corrections on her notes and found a few hand-scribbled remarks.

"Damn! I keep forgetting that Americans and British don't spell certain words the same way. Give me two minutes, please."

Jennifer watched, fascinated, as Nancy corrected the notes on her laptop and initiated a print program after loading the official paper in her portable printer. She had been told not to ask questions about that woman's equipment but what she was seeing now was unsettling, to say the least.

"Wow! That's what I call efficiency." Exclaimed Jennifer as Nancy gave her the requested copies five minutes after her arrival. The secretary looked at the words 'ATHENA INFORMATION' printed in large bold letters at the top and bottom of each page.

"Athena: funny name for a security classification. Anyway, I have more things for you here."

She took out a bundle of documents from her briefcase and gave them to Nancy, who sifted through them.

"The Canadian High Commission has acted quickly on our confidential requests on your behalf. You have here a Canadian passport and birth certificate, a driver's permit and a Canadian Army identification card. We also joined an official British government security pass

good for up to and including 'Most Secret' level clearance. I brought you a bundle of personalised calling cards with the P.M.O.'s seal: there are more at our office if you need them." Nancy looked carefully at her new identity documents. They had used the pictures taken of her at Northolt shortly after her arrival there. Everything was as on her 2012 identity cards, except for the date of birth, which now reflected her actual age.

"Born June 13, 1910..."

"Beg your pardon?"

"Oh, nothing! Do you have anything else for me?"

"One last thing, yes. Here is a schedule of meetings and committees concerned with the war effort that you may want to attend once you are out of the hospital. By the way, my next job will be to find you a furnished apartment in London, with room and board paid by the government of course."

Nancy smiled at her: Jennifer was really making life much easier for her today. She scanned the schedule and did a doubletake.

"Damn! There is a meeting of the land armament committee this afternoon, where they are to plan future tank design and production. I must attend it!"

Jennifer looked at her with disbelief.

"But, you are still covered with bandages and in a hospital bed. You can't go in your present state."

Nancy gave her a determined smile.

"Watch me! Could you please arrange for a car to pick me up and bring me there this afternoon? I would also need an empty briefcase to put my notes in."

Bewildered, Jennifer nonetheless checked the schedule, then looked at Nancy.

"The meeting starts at 14:00 hours at the War Office on Whitehall Court, in room 233. I can have a car show up here at 13:30 hours."

"Make it 13:15 hours. I may be slow going up the stairs at the War Office."

"Alright! I will also tell the driver to come to your room with the briefcase, so you can fill it here."

"Perfect! Thanks for everything, Jennifer. Now, I better prepare my notes for that meeting."

The secretary then left her, shaking her head in wonderment.

As promised by Jennifer, a government service chauffeur showed up at 13:14 hours, bringing to her room an empty briefcase. Nancy was already in full dress uniform, thankful that the weight she had lost while in hospital made up for the bulk of the bandages around her legs and arms. She also had her Glock 17 pistol worn from her heavy-duty belt holster: she was now going nowhere without a weapon. Packing her laptop with a spare battery, some CDs and DVDs and a number of printouts freshly produced into the briefcase, she let the chauffeur wheel her to the hospital's main entrance before stepping out of the wheelchair and walking slowly and stiffly to the car. The chauffeur, a mild-mannered man in his forties named Jarvis, offered to help her but she politely declined with a smile.

"Thanks, Jarvis, but I have to impress those paper-pushing bureaucrats if I'm going to have them listen to a simple captain."

In response, he pointed at the ribbon of the Victoria Cross on her chest.

"Captain, if they don't respect you with this visible, then they are bigger fools for it."

He then closed her door and took his place behind the wheel. The drive itself took less than five minutes, the hospital being just across the Thames from Whitehall and its government buildings, with the Westminster Bridge linking them directly. As Jarvis was helping her out of the car in front of the War Office, Nancy told him that he was free to go.

"I don't know how long this will be and I can take a cab ride back to the hospital." She explained. Jarvis saluted her and left.

13:40 (GMT)

Committee room, War Office

Lord Beaverbrook had been anxious to see that mysterious Athena in person since that cabinet meeting where Air Chief Marshal Dowding had revealed her existence. Now that a secretary had advised him that she would be participating today as Churchill's special advisor on military and foreign affairs, he could barely contain his excitement. He had no illusions about the real state of the British Tank Corps: what equipment that had not been lost in Dunkirk during the panic evacuation of the British Army from France was inadequate in both numbers and capabilities. Since Athena was supposed to be an expert on military affairs in 2012, maybe she could teach something to everyone here on the committee: armored warfare should have evolved quite a bit in 72 years, after all.

There was suddenly a small commotion at the door of the committee room. Lord Beaverbrook got closer and saw a Tank Corps colonel trying to block a tall female officer from entering.

"This is a closed committee meeting, Junior Commander. You are not on the access list and cannot enter."

"And I tell you that I've been sent by the Prime Minister's Office. Besides, I am a commissioned officer with the rank of captain, sir, not an auxiliary."

"Like hell you are! Did they send you to serve tea, or do you claim to be an expert on tank warfare?"

The tone of the colonel had been contemptuous and deliberately insulting. The Minister of War Production hurried to the door and interposed himself between the colonel and the female captain, whose height and built surprised him. She wore a dark green dress uniform, complete with trousers, which was an oddity for a female uniform. A 'CANADA' patch was sewn on each shoulder and she wore a nametag on her right breast, with the name 'LAPLANTE'. What really got Beaverbrook's attention, though, were her paratrooper wings insignia and her medal ribbons, which included that of the Victoria Cross, the CBE and the MC.

"Please, Colonel, let me handle this. I was in fact expecting Captain Laplante and she is really from the Prime Minister's Office."

"She is?" Sneered the colonel, as if a beggar had just been admitted to one of the king's receptions. He then turned his back on her and walked away. Laplante looked at the colonel with daggers in her eyes. Looking then at Beaverbrook, she became a lot more friendly and presented her right hand.

"Captain Nancy Laplante, Special Military Advisor to the Prime Minister. You must be Lord Beaverbrook, sir?"

She winced in pain when he, as was his custom, vigorously shook back her hand. Alarmed, he started to apologize but she cut him off.

"Sorry, my fault! I should have warned you that I was coming straight from the hospital: I collected a few bullets and pieces of shrapnell eight days ago in France."

"And you are already up and running?"

"Well, up and walking at the least. May I take my seat right away, if it's not impolite: I'm tiring quickly."

“But of course! Follow me, please.”

Her walk was stiff and deliberate as she followed him towards the long conference table. Signaling an army steward to help him, Beaverbrook had his own chair, presiding at one end of the table, pushed a bit to the left so that a second chair could be placed immediately to its right. Inviting Laplante to sit, he whispered in her ear as he positioned her chair.

“If these dinosaurs don’t get the message, I should have them fired.”

Effectively, a number of senior officers and bureaucrats had been watching him sit her at the table’s end with growing bemusement. They then watched her take out of her briefcase a small pile of printed sheets, a notepad and a curious-looking flat box. She opened the lid of the box, revealing to Beaverbrook what looked like a typewriter keyboard and a dark grey glass panel.

“What is this, Captain?” Asked the minister, immediately curious. She looked up at him as she explained.

“It’s called a computer. Basically, it is an information processing and storage machine. There is no equivalent to it today.”

She touched a few keys and buttons and the dark glass panel suddenly turned bright blue, with columns of words and numbers parading on it at an amazing speed. Beaverbrook could not help stare at it in wonderment, as did an officer and an engineer who happened to chat close by. Once the picture on the panel had stabilised, Laplante inserted in a slot on the box a small shiny disk, then declared herself ready. Checking his watch first, then the attendance list to see if anybody was late, Beaverbrook called the committee meeting into session.

The minister looked around at the faces of the senior officers, bureaucrats and civilian engineers sitting at the conference table. There were more than a few curious glances at Captain Laplante, with some being less than friendly.

“Gentlemen, before we formally start the discussion, I would like to present Captain Laplante, Special Military Advisor to the Prime Minister. Captain Laplante is still recovering from wounds received recently in France, so do not be offended if she may not follow all the protocol procedures.”

“The Prime Minister has chosen a woman as his military advisor?”

That remark, said as much with contempt as with disbelief, had come from the same colonel who had tried to block Laplante from entering. From their expressions, Beaverbrook saw that all

the other senior officers and most of the civilians seemed to agree with the colonel's attitude. The latter then piled more sarcasm on.

"How can a woman give advice on tank warfare to battle-proven officers?"

"May I answer this, Minister?" Asked eagerly the target of his cynicism. Beaverbrook nodded his head as he fixed severely the Tank Corps colonel.

"Fire away, Captain!"

"Thank you, sir! Gentlemen, this may seem to you very irregular, but the Prime Minister had very good reasons to name me as his special military and foreign affairs advisor. I am not however at liberty to explain the details concerning my background, that subject being classified 'Most Secret Eyes Only'. As for combat experience, would the Victoria Cross and the Military Cross be proof enough that I am a combat-proven officer, Colonel?"

The colonel, like all other officers present, stared at the ribbons on her tunic with utter amazement.

"You have the C.B.E. too, Captain? How did you get those medals, if I may ask?" Asked a major general of the Armored Corps.

"You may, sir! I won the C.B.E. for devising the plan for Operation Counterpunch, while I won the V.C. during a commando raid in France, where I also collected an assortment of scrap metal."

An army brigadier general looked at Nancy Laplante with both curiosity and incredulousness.

"What is this Operation Counterpunch, Captain?"

"Sir, that was the defensive plan used to decimate the Luftwaffe when they tried to bomb London earlier this month. The commando raid on which I participated, which I also planned and led by the way, was intended to free some of our pilots captured during Operation Counterpunch. I am sorry that I cannot go further into the details for security reasons."

"Don't you think that our security clearances are high enough, Captain?" Replied the still hostile colonel. By now, Beaverbrook had about enough of him.

"Colonel, there are a few facts about Captain Laplante that nobody here apart of myself are cleared to know about. Suffice it to say that she is a genuine expert on military affairs and that she has the full confidence and support of both myself and of the Prime Minister. You may all learn something from her today, gentlemen! Are there any more objections to Captain Laplante's presence or role here?"

Nobody had anything to add, at least publicly. The colonel clenched his jaw but did not reply, realising that Beaverbrook was very close to ejecting him from the committee room.

“Good! Now, the goal of this meeting is to review the status of both the equipment and design doctrine of the Tank Corps, so that we can plan the reequipment of our armored units in the most efficient and diligent manner possible. Captain Laplante, do you have an opening statement of your own to present?”

She smiled at him, visibly relieved that he was giving her an early opportunity to speak. Her voice was clear and strong, with a hint of a Quebec accent in it.

“Lord Beaverbrook, gentlemen! In order to put this discussion into its proper context, I can announce to you today that the Germans have postponed indefinitely their plans to invade Great Britain. We can thus plan for a proper replacement to our tank losses instead of rushing into producing obsolete designs. Furthermore, since we have to consider the calibre of the potential threat to face our tanks, I have brought information sheets on both improved and new German tanks that are going to oppose our own tanks in the near future. These sheets are classified and are to be handled accordingly.”

She then enlisted the help of army stewards to distribute her papers around. The general relief that had permeated the room at her announcement of the end to the invasion threat was soon replaced by an oppressive silence, as the participants digested the information on the sheets. One general finally raised his head, concern on his face.

“How reliable or accurate is this information, Captain Laplante? If it’s true, our standard 40mm tank gun will be worthless against such a monster as this TIGER tank.”

“It is totally accurate, General, and I’m glad that you raised that particular point: the tank design that we have to decide on here will have to be armed powerfully enough to deal with such an opponent, apart of having sufficient protection to match.”

The obnoxious tank colonel then seized on her last statement.

“What do you mean, one tank design? We need both an infantry support tank and a cruiser tank. Also, it is not the job of tanks to destroy other tanks but rather that of anti-tank guns. What you are saying totally goes against our armored doctrine.”

Beaverbrook saw that Laplante contained her anger with difficulty.

“Which demonstrates that your precious doctrine is good only for the garbage can, Colonel. Were you paying attention when German tanks invaded Poland and then France?”

Look at what they did with your doctrine. Let me state the following very clearly to you all, gentlemen: I am ready to veto any design proposal based on such outdated concepts.”

“And what do you propose instead, Captain?”

The colonel was literally livid by now. As a reply, Laplante signaled the army stewards to pick up and distribute a small pile of sheets she took from the table.

“This is what I propose, Colonel.”

Beaverbrook then realised with amusement that she had manipulated the colonel into a trap. Reading her latest sheet convinced him that she was no amateur about armament systems. Laplante underlined aloud the main points of her brief.

“Gentlemen, what we need is a main battle tank. Its role is to be a mobile armored gun system capable of engaging enemy tanks, field fortification, enemy troops and soft targets. Its main armament is to be a high velocity gun of a calibre no smaller than three inches and a muzzle velocity of at least 2700 feet per second when using armor-piercing rounds. The minimum acceptable power to weight ratio is to be 15 horsepower per ton, or ideally up to 25 horsepower per ton or more. The suspension is to be independently sprung and have as much vertical roadwheel travel as possible. Its armor is to be well sloped, with possible use of new, special armor that I will describe in a few moments. The crew should consist of a commander, gunner, loader and driver and the maximum combat weight of the tank should be 45 tons, but no smaller than 30 tons.”

The tank colonel read over the sheet, then threw it away.

“Captain, you are dreaming. Nobody can produce a tank like this today. This is pure fiction.”

Beaverbrook saw a dangerous smile appear on Laplante’s face as she gave another series of sheets to the stewards for distribution.

“Really, Colonel? Funnily enough, the Soviets are just now starting to field such an impossible tank: the T-34. Its only drawback compared to my suggested list of specifications is its two-man turret instead of the desired three-man turret. But again, we could look at the KV-1 tank or, if we look a bit further off, at the german PANTHER tank.”

More sheets were distributed as she spoke. Beaverbrook looked at them, then at the tank colonel, eyeing him severely.

"Colonel Bosworth, your services on this committee are no longer needed. As for your position at the Tank Corps Doctrine Office, I will have to speak seriously to the Chief of the General Staff about it. Good day, sir!"

The crestfallen colonel packed up his briefcase and left, slamming the door behind him. Lord Beaverbrook then looked at the remaining men around the table, his exasperation evident.

"Gentlemen, we will get nowhere today if you persist in opposing systematically the ideas presented by Captain Laplante. Those ideas in fact represent much more than simply her opinion: they represent the future of armored warfare, a future the Germans are already following. My question is: do we want to follow that road, or do we persist in ignoring the lessons from the recent past just to cling to an official doctrine? If you still want to follow the latter road, then I will simply dissolve this committee and work directly with Captain Laplante and the engineers from our tank manufacturers."

The Commandant of the Armored School then jumped on his feet, stung.

"Lord Beaverbrook, I find your last suggestion insulting. Why are you putting such blind confidence in this woman? What has she done to obtain her position at the Prime Minister's Office? I have more than thirty years of service and fought in the Great War, sir!"

Nancy then touched Beaverbrook's arm before he could answer harshly to the major general. If she wanted to avoid a misunderstanding that would severely delay or even prevent the production of a new tank, then she had to give something to these generals and engineers.

"Lord Beaverbrook, if I may?"

The minister looked at her, then nodded his head after a second.

"Go ahead, Captain."

"Thank you, sir! Gentlemen, you want to know why the Prime Minister has full confidence in me? Well, I will tell you, but you will have to promise me that you will not reveal this to anybody else. The truth is that I come from the future, more exactly from the year 2012. What I know about war and military equipment basically renders much of what you know and believe obsolete and irrelevant. As for my experience of combat, I was in 2012 a war correspondent and I have seen and experienced personally about all the types of combat you could think of."

As the generals and engineers were looking at each other, mostly incredulous, Nancy quickly opened a video file saved in her laptop's hard drive and started it, putting it on widescreen mode

and maximum volume before pivoting her laptop on the table so that the British could look at its screen. Nancy spoke quickly as the music of the video documentary started playing.

“What you are going to see now is a documentary made in 2010 about the latest and best models of main battle tanks in service in the World at that time. We will talk again at the end of the documentary.”

Lord Beaverbrook hurried to move from his chair, in order to be able to watch himself the video. While most of the generals present watched with shock and incredulity the documentary, the engineers around the table listened to it with awe, taking notes frantically during the fifty minutes that the video played. At the end, Beaverbrook looked around the table and saw that all resistance to Nancy’s idea had apparently evaporated.

“Gentlemen, I propose that we start discussing the specific points of the design of a new battle tank.”

The meeting really took off from that moment and went on for hours, with the bulk of it used by Laplante to explain new concepts such as multilayered and ceramic armours, discarding sabot projectiles and sloping of armor. She also proved to be realistic, always trying to facilitate the eventual production of such a tank design by using proven, existing components. Her concept of a family of armored vehicles, where a basic design was adapted to various specific roles by using fairly simple modifications, met with Beaverbrook’s enthusiasm, since it would greatly simplify series production and repair by the extensive use of common parts and would benefit from the economy of scales inherent to a large production run. He finally had the engineers from Vickers-Armstrong agree to a meal break at 19:15 hours. They were sucking up her knowledge like leeches and would have continued non-stop all night long if he had not called a recess. He could see also that Laplante was close to exhaustion, probably from fighting off the pain of her wounds.

The break seemed to help her, as some colours returned to her face. They resumed the discussion at 20:10 hours. Half an hour later, Laplante, in the middle of a dissertation on tank gunnery systems, started hesitating in her speech. Beaverbrook noticed how pale she was and got closer to her, just in time to catch her from collapsing out of her chair. Helped by the stewards, he laid her on the carpet and saw that she was now as white as a sheet.

“GET HER TO ST THOMAS HOSPITAL, QUICKLY!”

As she was being hurriedly transported by four men to the ground floor level, Beaverbrook picked up her computer and papers lying on the table and stuffed them in her briefcase, along with her beret. Following her bearers to the main entrance, both her briefcase and his own attaché case in his hands, he was about to jump into the big Bentley in which Laplante was being loaded when a sarcastic voice in his back made his blood boil.

“What’s the matter? The lady can’t take the workload?”

Turning around, he saw colonel Bosworth standing in the front rank of the gathering crowd, a smirk on his face. Bosworth never saw the minister’s punch that knocked him flat on the sidewalk.

08:25 (Berlin time)

Thursday, September 19, 1940

Abwehr headquarters, Berlin

“ONE WOMAN DID THAT MUCH DAMAGE TO US IN TWO WEEKS?”

Reinhard Heydrich, head of the RSHA, the Nazi state security apparatus, looked up from the briefing paper he was reading while sitting in Admiral Canaris’ office. Tall and handsome, his angelic face did not reflect the human monster Canaris knew him to be. Heydrich flipped back to a specific page.

“Let’s see if I got this right. This Captain Nancy Laplante, a Canadian from the year 2012, appeared in Northolt on or around September second with a car full of advanced equipment. On the fourth, one of our Bf 110 units was cut to pieces by British fighters waiting for them. On the seventh, our first major bombing raid on London is savaged in a similar manner, with such heavy losses that it reversed the course of the air war in the West, not mentioning the accurate strikes on our radar network. On the night of the ninth, she is seen leading a commando raid in France in a manner any professional soldier would be proud of. On the eleventh, our secret weapons research center in Peenemunde is bombed to rubble, putting back our efforts there by at least one year. On the thirteenth, the Norwegian factory producing heavy water for another secret program is bombed. On the fifteenth, ALL of our radio-guidance transmitter stations used to guide our bombers are hit by accurate strikes. There are also these reports of a new type of precision landing parachute being both tested and then used in that raid on the ninth. Is there anything else?”

Admiral Canaris nodded his head.

“In fact, there is: a recent report says that she may be now in London, working as some kind of special advisor to Winston Churchill.”

“GREAT! Now she is in a position to counter everything we do. Do we have at least a picture of this she-wolf?”

Canaris handed him a file as he explained.

“A picture, no, but the doctor and nurse that saw her in France described her in detail to a police artist. This is a copy of the sketch he produced.”

Heydrich looked carefully at the sketch and memorized her main features: black hair falling to the neck; large green eyes; smooth facial features; delicate nose and resolute but sensual mouth. He then reread her physical description in the briefing papers. There was also a medical assessment on her made by the doctor who had briefly examined her during the raid in France. He didn't like that bit about a bulletproof vest: it would definitely complicate any assassination attempt against her. There was also the fact that she may be deadly with a pistol. He shook his head.

“A most interesting woman, but also a very dangerous one and one that cannot be allowed to continue helping the British. We will have to either capture her or, failing that, kill her. This should become a top priority mission for all the state security agencies. Do you have agents in England who could do the job?”

Canaris nodded his head and pointed at Klaus Manheim, sitting in a corner of the office.

“Agent Manheim controls a network of Irish operatives in England. In fact, one of his agents was the first to spot and report on Captain Laplante. He is ready to leave for London on short notice.”

“Excellent! You can count on the full cooperation of my services on this matter. I will also make sure that all the German forces and security services get briefed on how to handle this Laplante if she sets foot again on our territory. How do you plan to proceed?”

Canaris then started describing Operation Nemesis to Heydrich in detail. Manheim listened on in his corner, thinking about his incoming mission in London. Heydrich would probably have been shocked to know that his heart was not in it: it was in fact starting to pound for a tall Canadian woman. Refusing this mission would however result in his probable demise and death.

09:31 (GMT)

Soviet embassy, London

Anatoli Borissovitch Gorski put down the telephone receiver with a shaking hand. That request to meet immediately with the ambassador in his office could mean only one thing: he was being recalled to Moscow to answer for the disaster that had struck his net of British informants. The NKVD would not pardon him the loss of such valuable assets as Guy Burgess, Anthony Blunt, Donald Maclean and John Cairncross, all arrested recently. Even Kim Philby, a promising recruit not even in the British government service yet, had been arrested. A dozen lesser informants had also stopped responding to his instructions, with more disappearing every day. Knowing what was awaiting him in the U.S.S.R., Gorski took his pistol out of his desk, put the muzzle of the gun against his head and pressed the trigger.

09:40 (GMT)

Editor's office, The Daily Telegraph

Fleet Street, London

"What's up, Chief?"

Peter O'Neal sat down in front of the cluttered desk of his editor-in-chief, Malcolm Burns, who was just putting down his telephone receiver.

"Remember this piece about Lord Beaverbrook decking an army colonel in front of the War Office?"

"How could I forget about it? It was about the juiciest article in this morning's edition."

"Well, it seems that the incident was caused by the colonel being insulting to a female officer who was being transported to St-Thomas Hospital at that precise moment. She is supposedly a Canadian Army captain who had attended the same meeting from which the said colonel was ejected by Beaverbrook. One of our regular sources at St Thomas Hospital just told me a good one about that female captain: she received the Victoria Cross from the king himself on Monday."

“What? And we didn’t get hold of such a story before now? This would make her the first woman ever to receive the V.C.. Why keep secret an event that would boost the morale of all our women auxiliaries?”

Burns looked at O’Neil with a smile.

“Why do you think that I pay reporters like you, if not to find out about such things? Find all you can about that Canadian female captain, especially about how she won that V.C.. You are off all other assignments in the meantime.”

10:48 (GMT)

American embassy, London

Major Michael Crawford, Assistant United States Army Attaché in London, was reviewing a list of military supplies requested by the British when he saw his boss walk towards his desk with a document in his hands. Brigadier General Emmet Walker dropped the document on the desk and took a chair. He looked disturbed, which was unusual for him.

“I would like your opinion on this British intelligence report, Major. We received it early this morning directly from their Prime Minister’s Office, with a personal note from Winston Churchill attached to it.”

Crawford raised an eyebrow before starting to read: if Winston Churchill had personally vetted a report, it must be considered of primordial importance by the British. He started to understand quickly why as he went through the report.

“THE JAPS ARE GOING TO ATTACK US IN ONE YEAR?”

“Wait, the best part is about how the British got hold of the Japanese detailed attack plan.”

Crawford read through that plan: the attack on Pearl Harbor with a fleet of six aircraft carriers and their escorts; the two successive waves of aircraft; the radio codewords to be used by the Japanese and... He leafed repeatedly through the document to find the source of that fantastic information but found only the bold letters printed in red ink on top and bottom of each page: ATHENA INFORMATION. He looked at Walker with a perplexed expression on his face.

“Who or what is this Athena, sir?”

“Good question, Major. The only thing I can tell you about it is that Churchill explained in his attached note that it is also this Athena that warned them of the German bombing raid on

London on the seventh. It looks like this Athena has full access to both German and Japanese plans.”

“CHRIST! This Athena could win the war for the British by himself if that is true.”

Crawford suddenly got suspicious.

“Wait a minute, sir! Why do you really come to me with this? I am no spy, sir, just an army officer and an ordnance engineer.”

“Ah, but a very handsome and good looking army officer, Major. Barbara, come here for a moment!”

The blond secretary passing through the office at that moment stopped in her tracks and walked to Mike’s desk. Brigadier General Walker smiled at her, malice in his eyes.

“Barbara, describe the major to me, please.”

She grinned, sparkles in her eyes: she had more than a crush on this gorgeous hunk of a major.

“Well, I see a six foot four inch tall athlete with a most handsome face, fascinating green eyes to match with his black hair, a perfect smile and beautiful hands that are said to be very, very soft.”

Mike’s face reddened noticeably as Walker dismissed the secretary.

“So, women like me. What does it have to do with this report?”

Walker became indignant at those words.

“Women like you? Major, since your arrival here a few months ago, we common mortals had to be content with the crumbs left in your trail.”

“Hey, I was born that way, sir! Sorry!”

“Well, anyway! The reason I gave you this report is that there is a new military advisor in Churchill’s office who is in charge of all Athena information and who is the official contact point for any queries concerning that information. I want you to meet her and try to find as much as you can about this Athena. We need to assess the accuracy of this information.”

Mike Crawford smiled in anticipation.

“Her?”

“Yes, a Canadian Army captain named Nancy Laplante. She is actually in St-Thomas Hospital, recuperating from recent combat wounds received during a commando raid in France.” Mike’s eyes suddenly sparkled.

“A fighting woman and a Canadian to boot? I’m from a Montana farm near the Canadian border. I like Canadian women.”

“Major, I rest my case. Drop everything, except your pants of course, and get on her as soon as possible and...”

Walker caught himself.

“Let me rephrase that. Try to get as much information on Athena out of her as possible. You will have access to my entertainment funds if you need to take her out to the restaurant or whatever you need to do. We need that information.”

Mike liked especially the part about the whatever.

“Nancy Laplante, in St-Thomas Hospital, you said?”

“Correct, Major. Jump on it right away.”

Rising from his chair, Walker left the smiling major with a remark about the same ones having all the fun all the time.

CHAPTER 14 – CRUSH

13:20 (GMT)

Thursday, September 19, 1940

St-Thomas Hospital, London

Nancy was reading the October 2012 edition of the International Defense Review magazine, half-sitting in her hospital bed, when someone knocked on the door. Hiding the magazine under her blanket, she called for her visitor to enter. One of the two military policemen assigned to protect her stuck his head in the doorway.

“Excuse me, maam. The American embassy major that was previously announced is here to see you.”

“Let him in, Corporal.”

The guard then stepped aside and let a tall, powerfully built American Army major in before closing the door behind him. They looked at each other in silence for a long moment, both appreciating what they saw. He finally smiled, showing his perfect teeth, and got close to her bed before offering his hand.

“Major Mike Crawford, Assistant U.S. Army Attaché.”

“Captain Nancy Laplante. Please don’t shake my hand too hard: my arms are still sore.” His hands proved to be as soft and gentle as they looked strong.

“What can I do for you, Major?”

Nancy noticed that he had green eyes, like hers.

“Please call me Mike. Can I call you Nancy?”

He smiled when she nodded.

“Well, Nancy, as you may guess, I’m here because of this intelligence report from the Prime Minister’s Office we received this morning. Could I ask you a few questions about it?”

“You got the right person for that. Fire away!”

“Thanks. First, we at the embassy need to assess the accuracy of the information in that report, for obvious reasons.”

“I understand, Mike. I’m a reserve military intelligence officer: using information without checking its credibility would not be professional.”

“Well said! The problem is that the report was, let’s say, vague about the source. Could you tell me more about it?”

She was silent for a moment, which Mike Crawford used to scrutinize her closely: she had a resolute, intelligent face and a strong body. Her light hospital gown showed muscular arms and shoulders, like he had seen once on a female gymnast he had dated back in the States. She was tall, possibly close to six feet. Her large green eyes fascinated him. Those eyes suddenly looked straight at him with amusement: she had noticed his interest in her. He started to apologize but she put an index on his lips, cutting him off.

“Mike, let’s make a deal: you can stare at me as long as you let me stare at you.”

“Why, this sounds fine to me, Nancy.”

“Good! To answer your previous question, I can’t divulge the source or its nature, but I can tell you that it has proved its accuracy many times already. In fact, I can give you an example of the type of information Hourglass has access to. Can you write this down?”

She handed him a sheet of paper and a pen that had been on her bedside table. She then resumed talking.

“A few months ago, President Roosevelt received a letter signed by a physicist, Albert Einstein, but initiated by another physicist, Leo Szilard. That letter requested your president’s support for a project to study the feasibility of producing a new type of bomb based on nuclear fission. The president agreed and ordered that project to be supported. Secretary of War Stimson knows about it. You can have this checked out through him.”

Mike looked at her with concern: if this verified out, that meant that this Athena also had wide access to American secrets.

“How much does this Athena know about American affairs?”

“I can tell you that... AAAH!”

She suddenly tensed her body in apparent pain and lifted her left hand to her right shoulder.

“Cramp... in my back... help me change position, please!”

He held her forward and shifted the pillows behind her. He saw a muscle under her right shoulder blade pulsate frantically. As a serious football player, he had to deal with such cramps a lot in the past.

“Scapular muscle spasm. Let me massage it: I know about athletics first aid.”

She was in too much discomfort to argue. With his help, she turned on her belly while he partially opened the top rear of her hospital gown. He had to push away a magazine that had

been under the blanket in the process. Mike's eyes suddenly were stuck on the cover of that magazine and his face paled. A moan of pain from Nancy reminded him that he had to be careful not to raise her suspicions. He started massaging her back with one hand, the other turning down the magazine and pushing it under the blanket before joining in the massage work.

"Ooh, aah, that's good! A little down, please. Yes, just there."

"Your whole back is full of knots: you've been in this bed too long."

"Tell that to the damn doctors. They won't let me exercise. On the other hand, a thorough massage is a good alternative. Could you do me a favor?"

"Yes, what?"

His answer came out by itself, his mind still boiling about that magazine cover.

"Please don't stop. And could you undo the back of my gown?"

That snapped him out momentarily of his thoughts. Pulling open her gown revealed firm but nicely shaped buttocks and long, muscular legs. He was shocked by the multiple scars of shrapnell wounds covering the back of her legs and arms, with a couple of wounds on her buttocks.

"My god! What happened to you?"

"I ran into two bullets and 27 mortar fragments while holding a beach party with the Germans near Dunkirk."

"Some party! What were you doing there?"

She snapped her head to look at him.

"Meaning what was a woman doing into combat?" She said testily.

"No, no! Meaning what was your mission in France?"

Jesus, Mike thought, she sure wasn't your typical housewife type.

"Oh, we were rescuing some of our pilots from the clutches of the Gestapo, which was torturing them to know how we learned about their planned raid on London. It went quite well."

"Except for that?" He said while pointing at her wounds.

"Except for that, yes. They gave me a medal for it and now I'm supposed to be happy and content. I wish I could do my job instead of wasting my time here."

Mike saw her uniform hanging from a hook, with three rows of medals on its front.

"May I look at your medals, Nancy?"

"Go ahead. The ten medals of the bottom rows are Canadian service medals. The three of the top row are British ones."

He had a short look at them and snapped his head towards her.

“YOU GOT THE VICTORIA CROSS?”

“You know, I think I’m going to hide that thing if everybody keeps reacting to it like this.”

“But, you should be proud of it.”

Her smile faded away and she stared at her pillow, sounding melancholic.

“I suppose I should, but I believe I shouldn’t be treated differently because of it: I was simply doing what needed to be done. Many others have done as much or more than me. I guess I would feel a lot better back home, doing my civilian job as a military affairs correspondent.”

“Where is your home?”

“In Boucherville, a small town on the South shore of Montreal. It is a nice, quiet place with friendly people.”

Mike then decided to go for broke: he needed to know, for his peace of mind.

“Nancy, when is your home?”

She looked at him, completely stunned by his question.

“How...”

“...Do I know?” He completed for her. “I saw that magazine under the blanket. It is a fantastic explanation, but it would easily explain how you got such detailed information about everybody.”

She shook her head, angry with herself.

“DAMN, I’m getting careless! Alright, the British and the Germans know about me: you might as well join the club. I am from the year 2012, but I did not come by my own free will and have no way to go back to my time. Mike, please promise me that the British will not learn that you know about this. The Soviets also must be kept in the dark about me: the moment they know, my skin won’t be worth a damn.”

Overtaken by all this, Mike Crawford sat on the edge of her bed, caressing her back while he let his mind calm down.

“Nancy, would you mind telling me your story?”

Her smile came back then.

“On two conditions, Mike: first, I want you to handle personally any liaison between me and your government.”

“Agreed! What’s the second condition?”

"You keep massaging me while I talk."

09:03 (GMT)

Monday, September 23, 1940

St-Thomas Hospital, London

This morning was a good one for Nancy. The first good news was when her doctor signed her release papers. The second good news was brought by Jennifer Collins as Nancy was packing up her things. Having no other clothes with her at that time, she was back in dress uniform when the secretary showed up.

"Hi! I found a nice place for you in central London: you're moving in today."

"YES!"

Her grin suddenly faded as she looked at herself.

"But I got next to nothing to wear: I will need my belongings back from Northolt soon."

Jennifer then had a malicious smile.

"I've got another surprise for you downstairs, Nancy. Let the guard bring your stuff down and follow me."

The trio went down to the main entrance of the hospital fifteen minutes later. Nancy was happy to see that she could walk now without feeling pain at every step. She promised herself to get back in shape as soon as possible. A delighted scream greeted her as she exited the hospital.

"NANCY!"

"MEG! What are you doing here?"

Nancy and Megan Thomas hugged each other for a moment before Nancy's eyes caught a familiar shape.

"My car! You brought it from Northolt?"

"That's right, along with your belongings, all of them."

The last part of her sentence sounded as if she was ready to pout. Nancy looked at her, not understanding what she meant. Megan then continued.

"Your television is in the car, too: Air Commodore Nichols nearly had the WAAFs riot on him when we took your stuff out of the lounge. By the way, we brought the transformer too: the base electrician wrote it off as unserviceable and beyond repair."

"That's really nice of you all. Give my thanks around when you return to Northolt."

"I'll do that. So, can I drive you to your new home? Your car is such fun to drive."

"Please, be my guest, Megan."

Helped by the guard, they loaded her bags in the already crowded rear compartment of the Jeep Grand Cherokee. When he tried to get in the car with them, Nancy flatly refused to let him in.

"I'm sorry, Corporal. I know that you have orders, but you would only attract attention to me now. Besides, I can take care of myself."

She patted the pistol on her gun belt as she spoke. He could only salute her and watch as her car sped away. Another car parked nearby then left its spot, following the Mitsubishi Outlander.

"So, where is this new place of yours, Nancy?" Asked Meg while driving slowly towards Westminster Bridge.

"I don't know yet. Jennifer?"

"It's in St James district, number 24 St James Place."

Meg then looked at Nancy with envy.

"You lucky you! It's bordering Green Park, behind Buckingham Palace. How did you get an apartment in such a nice corner, Jennifer?"

"Oh, one of my aunts, who is a rich widower, owns the apartment block in question. It also happens that the previous occupant of your new apartment, a naval officer, died recently. He had no family, so the flat became available. That, plus the Prime Minister's name thrown around, sealed the deal. It is on the first floor on the Southwest facade, overlooking Green Park. The building is an 18th century Georgian style town house. We have also rented a closed garage in Blue Ball Yard, near your street: your car is definitely too much of an eye-catcher."

Crossing Westminster Bridge, they turned right on Horse Guards Road, driving alongside St James's Park, then turned left on the Mall, still bordering the park. A right turn on Marlborough Road and they were soon looking at St James's Palace. As they were about to turn on St James's Place, Nancy, who was staring at everything along the way, suddenly told Meg to slow down at the corner with St James's Street. She then craned her neck out, looking at a particular store on the corner. Meg and Jennifer looked at it too, intrigued by her interest in it.

"A gunsmith's store!" Exclaimed Jennifer. "Why are you so interested in it?"

Meg answered for Nancy, a large grin on her face.

“You should see the arsenal she has in the back, particularly that hand cannon she used to capture two German pilots. I think she is somewhat of a gun nut.”

“Wrong, Meg: I am a gun nut.”

Turning the corner of the L-shaped dead end street, they finally stopped in front of a stone and brick, four storey building.

“Let’s go see my aunt and the caretaker before we unload your stuff, Nancy.”

To Jennifer’s disappointment, her aunt was out at the time, so they knocked on the caretaker’s door on the ground floor. A woman in her early thirties answered, with a little girl crowding in the doorway besides her.

“Hi, Madam Stanley. I have your new tenant for room eleven here, Nancy Laplante. She works like me at the Prime Minister’s Office.”

The woman and Nancy exchanged greetings, then went up to the first floor, the little girl still in tow. Nancy scratched her head playfully, rewarded by a giggle.

“What is her name, Madam Stanley?”

“Emily. She’s five years old and quite a bundle. I’m afraid that she is bored day long, with nearly all her friends having left the city because of the threat of German bombardments. My other child, Peter, is eight years old: he’s at school now. Do you like children?”

“I adore them. Maybe I will have something to cure her boredom this afternoon: I have as part of my belongings a home movie projector, with some nice films she should love.”

Joan Stanley looked delighted.

“That would be really nice of you. You’re sure this will not bother you?”

“Positive! Nothing makes me happier than a little kid’s smile.”

“Then we have a deal. Ah, here we are!”

She unlocked the door number eleven, pushing it open and inviting Nancy in. The apartment was furnished with conservative style but comfortable furniture and consisted of a good-sized lounge, one large bedroom with adjoining bathroom and a small kitchen. Nancy walked to the large patio doors of the lounge and opened them. Beyond was a small balcony overlooking Green Park, with Buckingham Palace visible to her left. She immediately felt good about the place.

“This is perfect. I will start moving my things in right away.”

“I can ask my husband to help you, Miss Laplante.”

“That would be appreciated, Madam: I’m afraid I’m still a bit weak after my stay in hospital.”

“Oh dear! Nothing too serious I hope?”

“I’m up and running, so it couldn’t be that bad. Let’s go down.”

Before leaving the apartment, Joan Stanley handed her a set of keys, along with a proposition.

“If you don’t want to have to cook, you can have your meals with us, as long as you tell me in advance. A couple of my tenants already follow this arrangement. If you’re interested, it will cost an extra two pounds per week.”

Nancy thought for a moment: she was going to be quite busy every day of the week and probably would have ended up constantly eating at restaurants or rushing through quick snacks.

“This would be of great help: I’m taking you on this offer.”

Jennifer stopped Nancy from taking out money to pay an advance, opening her own briefcase instead and giving an envelope to Joan Stanley.

“The Prime Minister’s Office will take care of the expenses, Madam. Here is the room and board amount for until New Year. I will contact you then.”

“Why, Jennifer, your people are treating me like royalty.” Exclaimed Nancy, embarrassed by so much attention. Jennifer smiled in response.

“For the person who saved this city from destruction, this is nothing indeed.”

With the help of Mister Stanley, her belongings were brought upstairs in less than fifteen minutes. After tipping the man, Nancy went with Meg and Jennifer to park her car at the Blue Ball Yard, an old horses barn on St James’s Street that had been converted into private garages. Nancy got the key to her stall from the owner, then came back to her new place on foot while Meg and Jennifer went away in a cab. On her way in, she stopped to browse in the gunsmith’s front window, finally deciding to go in. The ring of the doorbell made a man in his fifties appear from the back of the store.

“May I be of help, Miss?”

“I hope you can, sir. Do you reload cartridges in your shop?”

“Certainly, Miss. What calibre is it?”

“That could be a problem. It is a rare type of pistol calibre: .50 Action Express.”

The gunsmith thought for a moment.

"I'm sorry, I don't know that type of ammunition. However, if you give me the precise specifications, plus both a live and a spent cartridge, I will probably be able to duplicate them."

"Excellent! I will come back this afternoon with some cartridges."

Nancy glanced around the weapons displayed in the shop but saw nothing of interest for her and went out. Looking at her watch, she found out that it was already 11:35 hours. Seeing the Stafford Hotel nearby, she went in and had a quick lunch at the hotel's dining room. By now she was starting to be able to ignore the stares and whispers that her Victoria Cross ribbon on her chest caused around her. It was a relief for Nancy when, forty minutes later, she closed her apartment's door and could take off her dress uniform at last.

Now in a loose fitting two-piece sports outfit, she spent the next hour arranging her things around the apartment. For discretion's sake, her desktop computer went in her bedroom, with only her TV/VCR and her sound system to add a modern touch to the lounge. Finally satisfied with her work, Nancy took a sports bag and put in it her Desert Eagle pistol, along with two full magazines and three spare rounds. Her Glock 26 also went on her belt. Putting on a light goretex windbreaker that hid her pistol, Nancy then went downstairs and knocked at the Stanley's door. Joan Stanley answered her after a few seconds.

"Ah, Miss Laplante! How is it going upstairs?"

"I'm finished unpacking, actually. I wanted to ask you at what times I should show up for meals."

"Breakfast starts at 06:30 hours, lunch is at noon and supper is at six. Is this convenient for you, Miss?"

"It's perfect, thank you. Another question, if I may: at what time could your two kids come up to watch a film?"

"Oh my goodness, you're sure it's no problem for you?"

"Absolutely not! It would make me very happy indeed."

"In that case, I could bring them around four, after Peter returns from his school. Would that be convenient?"

"Yes! I will wait for them at four. In the meantime, I will go and walk around a bit to familiarize myself with the area. Goodbye!"

It was nice to walk around in a casual dress for once: nobody to stare at you and free to wander at will. Her first stop was at the gunsmith's shop. The man's eyes bulged when she handed him the three spare .50 calibre Action Express rounds.

"My god! What do you shoot them out of, Miss?"

"Out of this!" Answered Nancy, taking out her gold-plated and engraved Desert Eagle pistol, opening the chamber to show him it was not loaded and handing it to him so he could examine it. Another customer, a thin man in baggy civilian clothes, entered the store at that time. He stared for a moment at the huge pistol in the hands of the gunsmith but had the good taste not to bother them about it, browsing instead around the shop. After handling the Desert Eagle for a while, the gunsmith gave it back to Nancy.

"This must be the most beautiful weapon I have seen in a long time. It's not for sale, by chance?"

"No way! I'm too proud of it to ever sell it away. So, do you think you can duplicate those cartridges?"

"I'm pretty sure that I can use old rifle cartridges and cut them down to the proper size. As for the powder charge, I will make sure to duplicate the exact same amount and type of powder. Come back in a week and I will be able to tell you more then. How many cartridges would you need anyway?"

"Let's go for a first batch of fifty rounds. If I'm satisfied after test firing them, I will go for a much bigger batch, say five hundred."

"Are you planning on a hunting trip, Miss?"

"To hunt Nazis, maybe. I owe them a few holes in my skin that I wouldn't mind paying them back for."

The gunsmith smiled sympathetically at her.

"I can understand that: I still have a few German shell fragments in my leg, souvenir of the 1914 war. You're in the army, Miss?"

"Canadian Military Intelligence, actually. At least I can say that the Germans didn't get me cheap."

The gunsmith's smile turned into a grin.

"Care to tell me the story, Miss?"

"Why not! It's not as if the Germans don't know about it: they were at the same beach party I was."

Restricting herself only to the fight around the beach, Nancy talked for a few minutes, staying vague about the details. It felt good to talk to someone who could understand her experience in France. The gunsmith also seemed to be a nice man, with lots of interesting experiences of his own to tell. They ended up talking for nearly an hour, with only two interruptions to let the gunsmith take care of other customers. She finally left his shop at around two O'clock, dropping in for a few minutes at the locksmith's shop next door, where she had her apartment and garage keys duplicated. The next hour was spent walking around, browsing at shop windows, buying a few items and admiring the architecture of St James District.

Once back at her apartment, Nancy took some time to check thoroughly the equipment she had brought with her on the commando raid on Gravelines. She felt relief when her electronics and weapons proved to be in good order: Doug Wilson had done a good job of cleaning them. Her body armor was another matter: the nylon carrier was full of holes and had a large rip in its back. Luckily enough, she still had the spare carrier she had brought back from her Afghanistan trip in 2012. She shivered in horror when she examined the front and back kevlar ballistic panels of her vest. What must have been the 7.92mm bullet that the doctor had taken out of her armor had ripped through a good two thirds of the kevlar layers in a spot level with her left lung on the back panel. It must have been a ricochet hit or a shot from afar, since her vest was not designed to stop a direct hit from such a calibre. It was now seriously weakened in that spot. Multiple indentations on the panels showed where more metal junk had hit. However, the kevlar had not been seriously damaged in those locations. Putting the kevlar panels inside the spare nylon carrier, she hung the vest in her bedroom closet and threw the old carrier in the kitchen's garbage can.

She just had inserted a laser disk in her TV/DVD unit when someone knocked on her door. She looked through the peephole, smiled and unlocked the door.

"Hi, kids! Hi, Madam Stanley!"

"Hello Miss Laplante! Here they are! Peter, Emily, say hello to Miss Laplante."

With grins on their faces, Emily and her big brother whispered a quick hello before rushing in the lounge.

"Something tells me that they are anxious to see that film." Nancy remarked as both kids started munching on the plate of mixed nuts she had put on a low table in front of the main sofa. Joan Stanley rolled her eyes upward.

"Tell me about it! By the way, what kind of movie is it?"

"It's the story of a little pig who wants to become a sheep keeper. They should love it."

"Can I watch a little, if you don't mind?"

"Of course, take a seat!"

Nancy then turned on her television and started the DVD unit. Her visitors were immediately impressed by the quality of the picture.

"Hey, it's in color!" Yelled excitedly Peter.

"You don't have color films in England yet?"

Nancy tried to bluff through that little forgotten detail: color pictures would not actually be widely available until after the war.

"My god, it's of incredible quality, too. How can you project a movie inside a small box like this one?"

"Oh, it's a brand new American system: it projects the film on a mirror inside, which reflects it on the inside surface of this glass screen."

Nancy thought that the inventor of television must be spinning in his grave by now.

"Hey, it's a brilliant idea! Oh, look, Emily: there's the little pig!"

After about twenty minutes, Joan Stanley regretfully got up from the sofa, her eyes still riveted on the screen.

"Well, I'm afraid that I have to go and get supper ready. This is really nice. Do you have many movies that would be suitable for kids?"

Nancy had to think and review mentally the content of her video library.

"Well, apart of this one, I have four more films designed for kids: I'm still a small girl at heart. If you push the limits, I would say another eight or nine movies would be suitable, although not ideal for kids. The rest of my collection has scenes of violence or crude language suitable for adults only. I tell you what: whenever I have an afternoon off, I will tell you in advance so that your kids can come watch a film. Would you like that?"

Joan looked ecstatic.

"That would be marvelous. By the way, you are coming down for supper?"

"Of course! I will bring them down with me at that time."

“Oh, thank you so much again.”

After locking the door, Nancy went to the sofa and sat between Emily and Peter to finish watching the adventures of Babe the little pig. The kids giggles and laughs proved to be the best therapy for her convalescence.

The first thing that Emily did when Nancy brought her and Peter down for supper was to ask a question to her mother, a hopeful smile on her face.

“Mommy, could we have a little pig in the house?”

Joan Stanley looked with mock anger at Nancy, who was now laughing hard.

“You see what you have done?”

She then crouched besides her little daughter.

“I’m sorry, Emily, but I’m afraid that pigs are not allowed in this building. I promise you that next time we visit Uncle Alfred’s farm you will be able to play with a little pig. Is that alright with you?”

As the disappointed Emily went to wash her hands before supper, Joan led Nancy to a huge kitchen with a large dining table in the middle. Two other persons were already sitting at the table, chatting and drinking beer. Nancy stopped dead in her track as she was crossing the doorway of the kitchen.

“MIKE! What are you doing here?”

Mike Crawford turned around in his chair and nearly spit out his beer when he saw Nancy.

“What are you doing here yourself?”

Nancy suddenly grinned as she realised the truth.

“Don’t tell me you are a tenant too?”

It was Mike’s turn to grin.

“I’ll be...! When did you move in?”

“This morning. How come you can afford such a nice place on a major’s salary?”

“Hey, I have diplomatic status: the embassy pays the rent. The American embassy is only half a mile away, so there are two attachés lodged here for convenience sake. The other is one of those typical foreign service bureaucrats, a real stiff ass type.”

The other man sitting at the table rose from his chair and shook Nancy’s hand.

“Daniel Adams, stiff ass bureaucrat, at your service, miss.”

“Nancy Laplante, northern neighbour presently attached to the Prime Minister’s Office.”

She didn't see any reaction in Adam's face to show her that he knew who she really was. Mike discreetly confirmed her impression by shaking his head left and right.

"So, Nancy, how come you can afford the rent here?" Asked Mike as she sat to his left.

"The Prime Minister's Office pays for it. So we both live on the back of the taxpayers." Joan Stanley heard that as she was bringing in a steaming pot of soup.

"Stop there, you two! I'm one of those poor taxpayers you are talking about. Now, have some of this leeks and potatoes soup while I get the steak and kidney pies out of the oven."

The supper turned out to be excellent and the atmosphere friendly and relaxed. It was a good touch to an already good day for Nancy. There was only one thing missing to make it perfect for her. As Joan Stanley was clearing the dishes, Nancy excused herself and followed Mike in the hallway. The big American seemed to expect that and waited for her before climbing the stairs slowly, knowing that Nancy was still not fully healed. She took his hand gently, an inviting smile on her face.

"Mike, would you be interested in watching a movie with me?"

"That would be really nice. Where are we going?"

"To my apartment: I have a television set, along with a few recorded movies from 2012."

"Then I'm in. What's the movie?"

"I was thinking about an action movie that showed a really out of the ordinary couple. The title is 'Mister and Misses Smith'."

"That sounds rather ordinary to me, Nancy."

She laughed at his remark as she unlocked her apartment door.

"Believe me, Mike, that couple is nothing like ordinary."

Nancy waited until they were both inside, with the door closed, before hugging Mike, looking at him with sparkling eyes.

"Like us, Mike."

CHAPTER 15 – SHOOTOUT

05:45 (GMT)

Tuesday, September 24, 1940

24 St James's Place, London

Nancy was awakened by a kiss from Mike Crawford, who was ready to go back to his apartment and prepare for his workday.

“See you at supper, Nancy. Have a good day.”

“You too, Mike.”

She rose from her bed as the door closed behind the American. After brushing her teeth and washing up, she prepared herself a cup of instant coffee, promising to herself to buy a coffee machine as soon as she could. Then she had to decide how she would prepare for her first day of work at the Prime Minister's Office. She already had decided on wearing a pine green two-piece classic style ensemble with trousers and a deep vee jacket. It was anyway her only civilian formal outfit in her limited wardrobe. She then thought for a moment about the personal security aspect of her situation. With what the Germans already knew about her, she must now be a high priority target for them. Encountering a German assassination team here in London was thus not impossible. Going into her bedroom's closet, she pulled out her body armor vest and slipped it over a light T-shirt, then adjusted the velcro retaining straps for a snug fit. A dark green blouse covered the vest, making it nearly unnoticeable on her muscular body. Putting on the trousers with their elasticized waistband, she added a light gun belt supporting her now mandatory Glock 26 9mm pistol. Once she put her jacket on, the gun was effectively out of sight. A pair of shiny black, low heel leather boots completed her dress. Nancy then took five minutes to apply some light makeup and comb her hair. A nice gold chain with a gold and amethyst medallion went around her neck, left plainly visible by the deep vee of her jacket. She then clipped on a pair of matching earrings before looking at herself in a full-length mirror. Dressed to kill, she thought with amusement before getting her heavy-duty computer carrying bag. She loaded inside it her laptop computer, her transformer/recharger unit, a few selected laser disks and memory cards and her iPad with light earphones. Looking at the space left in the case, she thought again about a possible attempt on her life. The Glock 26 was a fine little

weapon for conceal and carry and for close range fighting. However, the Germans could well come at her with sub machineguns, in which case she would be heavily outgunned. Since the computer case would be a constant companion at work, it would be ideal to carry a more serious weapon close at hand. Taking her guncase out of the closet and putting it on the bed, she loaded a full magazine in her Desert Eagle pistol and chambered a round with a vigorous pull on the slide. She had to dismount the scope on top of the weapon to make it fit in the outside compartment of her computer case, along with two spare magazines. Passing the case's carrying strap over her shoulder, she tried a couple of times to take out quickly the .50 calibre pistol. After a small adjustment to the strap, she was satisfied with the results and went downstairs for a quick breakfast.

Mike Crawford and Daniel Adams were already at the dining table, eating English muffins with jam on them. They, along with Joan Stanley, stared in admiration at her.

"WOW! Where can I get an outfit like this one, Miss Laplante?"

"I'm afraid you won't find anything like this in London, Madam Stanley."

"A shame, truly." Interjected Adams. "They should adopt this style here: it has a very modern look to it."

Mike Crawford looked with amusement at his colleague: Adams didn't know how true his statement was.

"You are truly resplendant this morning, Nancy."

"Why, Thank you all. Unfortunately, this is my only formal outfit, so I will have to be back in uniform tomorrow. Maybe I should have this outfit duplicated by a good tailor."

"Excellent idea! Now, have a seat and I will bring more muffins for you." Joan Stanley soon brought her a plate of muffins along with a cup of tea. Nancy munched quickly, glancing at her watch: it was already ten to seven. She finished a second muffin in a hurry, gulped down some more tea and kissed Mike Crawford before walking out. Daniel Adams watched her go, then looked at Mike.

"Don't tell me you broke your own record and bagged her in a single evening."

"Wrong, Dan: she bagged me."

Following St James's Place, Nancy turned right on St James Street, adopting a long, regular step. Two hundred yards down the street, she came across the gateway towers of St

James's Palace, with their red bricks and stone trim. Taking Marlborough Road, she walked for three hundred yards before crossing the Mall Road and taking the pedestrian trail through St James's Park. By then she was conscious that somebody was following her. Looking discreetly behind her, she recognised the thin man who had gone in the gunsmith's shop while she was talking with the owner yesterday. He was keeping at least a one hundred yards distance from her, so he was not an immediate threat, yet. Her heart pounding faster, she kept her regular pace while casually getting her right hand closer to the velcro-fastened flap of the case's outer compartment containing her heavy pistol. Her attention was suddenly attracted to a man walking towards her on the park trail: he was about six foot tall, broad-shouldered and wore a long trenchcoat, with his right hand stuck in a pocket. He was now about forty yards away. What had attracted Nancy's attention was the way he was staring at her. She cut her pace and put her hand inside her carrying case. The man saw that and hesitated, then pulled out a revolver from his coat pocket and pointed it at her.

Two things played against Klaus Manheim: first, his personal emotions about Nancy, which made him hesitate and lose the initiative; second, his own pistol training, excellent by 1940 European standards, was no match for Nancy's championship-level style of American combat pistolcraft of the 21st Century. He had time to fire one .38 calibre round from the classic but inefficient single hand stance, missing by a few inches at forty yards, before Nancy's gun erupted in a monstrous blast. The full jacket .50 calibre slug tore through his right shoulder, slamming him backward to the ground while his own revolver flew well out of reach.

As the man was going down, Nancy saw from the corner of her left eye two men come out of a car parked fifty yards away on the Mall Road and run towards her with submachine guns in their hands. Checking quickly the position of her follower, who had stopped a hundred yards away, she faced both men but held her fire: they could be British security men coming to her aid. That notion quickly went down the drain when half a dozen bullets zipped past her head. She leveled her own gun in a two-handed combat crouch stand and fired.

BOOM BOOM

Both men went down like broken puppets. The car from which they had exited started to pull out of its parking spot but never had a chance to cover more than thirty yards, as Nancy

plugged it with four .50 calibre slugs. It crashed in the low stone perimeter wall of the park, with nobody coming out of it.

As people around her screamed and cowered or ran away, she cautiously walked towards the wounded assassin, her pistol at the ready. She stopped six feet from him: he was conscious but unable to move and obviously in great pain. His right shoulder was a mess. Moving closer with her pistol still pointed at him, she spoke in German.

“Who sent you? The SD Ausland? The Abwehr?”

He looked at her in pain and fear, barely able to talk.

“Why should I tell you anything? The British will execute me anyway as a spy and a saboteur.”

“If you are a SD or Gestapo man, then I will let you die without remorse. If you are from the Abwehr, then I could intercede in your favor. Do you want to live?”

“Of course I want to live, Nancy. I... I wish that we could have met on better terms.”

Nancy slowly lowered her pistol, taken aback by his use of her first name and his statement.

“What do you mean? You just tried to kill me.”

“It was my duty to try. You just did yours better than me.”

Intrigued by all this, Nancy knelt besides the wounded man, who was bleeding profusely. She took a handkerchief from her inside jacket pocket and tried to stop the bleeding as best she could while keeping the conversation on.

“I saw you hesitate before drawing your weapon. Why?”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you, Nancy.”

“Try me!”

“I... I think that I was falling in love with you. You are so... special.”

Instead of laughing at him, as Klaus expected Nancy to do, she simply smiled at him.

“You may actually be a nice man. You simply serve the wrong masters.”

“I serve Germany. I will never be ashamed of that.”

She nodded her head in understanding and spoke softly.

“I won’t blame you for that. I have nothing against Germans per say, only against Nazis. What is your name?”

“Manheim... Klaus Manheim.”

They were interrupted by the arrival of a number of running British soldiers, rifles at the ready.

“DROP YOUR GUN AND RAISE YOUR HANDS UP!”

Not wanting to get stupidly killed by an overexcited soldier, Nancy complied and turned slowly towards the officer leading the soldiers.

“I’m Captain Laplante. I work at the Prime Minister’s Office. I can show you my security pass.”

The officer approached slowly, his revolver pointed at her.

“Alright, take out your pass slowly and throw it at me.”

“I’m going to take it out of this side pocket of my carrying case. Have someone cover that man there: he is a German agent. Check out also the two men and the crashed car by the Mall Road: they were his accomplices.”

Once the Guards officer had examined her pass, he relaxed and shouted orders.

“She’s with us! Private Lumley, cover that man on the ground. Corporal Smith, take four men and check out the two bodies and the crashed car by the Mall Road.”

“Do you or one of your men have a first aid kit or a bandage for this man, Lieutenant?” Asked Nancy. The officer nodded and directed two of his men to start treating Manheim. He looked in awe at the huge pistol that she picked up and put back in her carrying case.

“My god! Where did you find such an elephant gun, Miss?”

“I bought it in the United States. Do you know what will happen to this man, Lieutenant?” The Guards officer shrugged as he looked at Manheim, who was grimacing with pain as two soldiers applied a field dressing to his gaping wound.

“Even if he is a German soldier, he was caught out of uniform while trying to kill you. He’s in at least for attempted murder.”

Corporal Smith returned a moment later, reporting at rigid attention in front of the lieutenant.

“Sir, both men on the grass are dead. The driver of the car is seriously wounded but should make it. By the way, sir, he speaks with a strong Irish accent. All of the three men were armed and we found grenades and explosives in the car, sir.”

The lieutenant then smiled at Nancy.

“It looks like you bagged quite a catch today, Captain. Congratulations!”

“Thanks! Look, I got to go to my office or I will be late. If anyone asks for me, tell him to go see Captain Nancy Laplante at the Prime Minister’s Office. Here is my calling card.”

That was when she saw her previous follower, now twenty yards away and taking pictures of her with a camera. She yelled at him.

“YOU, IDENTIFY YOURSELF, NOW!”

She then walked quickly towards him. The man did not move, probably scared that she would shoot him down if he did. Nancy went nose to nose with him.

“You’ve been following me since yesterday. Who the hell are you?”

He cautiously handed her an official press card with a sheepish smile.

“Peter O’Neal, reporter at the Daily Telegraph. I was just preparing a story on you about the Victoria Cross you won recently. It is all legal and legitimate, I assure you. Could you tell me what just happened here, Miss?”

Her smile had a dangerous quality to it.

“Simple: the Germans tried to kill me but they failed. Look, Mister O’Neal, I don’t care if you publish your article or not, except for one condition: do not mention the street or even the district I live in. There are children in my building and I don’t want them to be caught in the crossfire if somebody else tries to kill me again. If you break that condition, I will personally come to blow your kneecaps off. Do you understand me?”

“I... I understand.”

He let out a sigh of relief as she walked away on the trail towards Whitehall. He suddenly thought about something and yelled at her.

“MISS, WHY WOULD THE GERMANS TRY TO KILL YOU?”

“BECAUSE THEY ARE SCARED OF WOMEN.” Was her sarcastic reply. O’Neal then heard the Guards officer behind him start laughing.

07:51 (GMT)

Prime Minister’s Office, London

“Hi Jennifer! I’m ready to start working.”

“Good morning, Nancy! You made it with a few minutes to spare. What kept you?” The secretary asked jokingly.

“Oh, I had to shoot my way through, that’s all.”

Jennifer looked at a grinning Nancy with a raised eyebrow.

“So, we have a funny person here this morning. Come, I will show you your desk.”

She then guided her to an old empty desk in the corner of the office.

"I'm sorry that we could not find you a closed office but space is at a premium in this building and your position is so new that we could not get better than this."

Nancy went through the desk's drawers and found them supplied with various office items and stacks of empty paper. She noted down the number of the telephone on her desk, then came back to Jennifer's desk.

"Two things: first, do you have stuff for me to go through yet?"

"Certainly, Nancy: you are now a bureaucrat. Here you go!"

She handed her a three inches thick pile of files and correspondence.

"What's your second thing?"

"About me shooting my way through: I was not kidding. The Germans tried to plug me in St James' Park on my way in. You may want to inform the Prime Minister before he gets a call from the M.I.5."

"My god! Do you think they know where you live?"

"I don't think so: St James' Park is close to Buckingham Palace and is a dangerous place to attempt an assassination. If they knew exactly where I lived, they would have tried there instead of the park. Anyway, they are not about to try again soon: out of four, two are dead and the two others are wounded and in our hands."

Jennifer was speechless for a long moment, while the other secretary, Mary Miles, stared at Nancy in disbelief. Finally picking up her phone with a shaking hand, Jennifer called the Prime Minister and asked him if they could see him for a minute. She then hung up and looked at Nancy.

"Decidedly, life is not dull around you. Let's go see the P.M."

She led her through a short hallway to a polished wooden door and knocked, opening it after hearing a gruff answer. Winston Churchill was sitting at his desk, a cigar in his mouth and a question in his eyes. Jennifer talked first.

"I'm sorry to interrupt your work like this, sir, but something serious happened this morning. Nancy?"

Nancy then spent the next minute explaining to Churchill what happened. He in turn had only one question.

"Do you wish to be moved out to another flat, Captain Laplante?"

"Certainly not, sir. Also, I don't want a security detail around me: it would just attract more attention to me. I can take care of myself, sir."

“Considering your track record, I would tend to agree with you, Captain. Carry on!”

They were about to leave the office when Churchill’s voice stopped Nancy.

“Captain! Good shooting!”

He was smiling with amusement now.

“Thank you, sir!”

Nancy and Jennifer returned to the secretarial office in time to greet two men from the M.I.5, who took down her detailed version of the events while Jennifer and Mary listened on, captivated. Nancy finally had one question for the M.I.5 men.

“What is going to happen to the German I shot?”

The senior agent looked briefly in his notepad before replying.

“For the moment, he is being treated in St Thomas Hospital. His life is not in danger but his shoulder wound is quite serious. He will probably be offered a chance to work for us in exchange for a jail sentence. If he refuses to cooperate, then he will most probably end up in front of a firing squad.”

“Look, mister, this may sound strange but I would like to avoid execution for that man. He was doing his duty as a German, even if he was not in uniform. Jail would be enough to neutralize him for the rest of the war.”

The agent looked at her as if she just had stated a heresy.

“Miss, you are talking about an undercover German agent caught within sight of Buckingham Palace. At least he will not be brutalized or tortured, like our own agents captured by the Gestapo in Europe. Why do you care for him?”

“Mister, I am very much aware of what the Gestapo does to our people. My point is that killing this German instead of jailing him will not advance our cause further. He may even think again while in jail and offer us information in order to reduce his sentence. Dead men don’t talk, mister.”

“Miss, I fail to understand your interest in this particular German. He is just a Kraut, after all.”

Nancy shot up from her chair and glared at him.

“Mister, know that my fight is with the Nazis, not with the German people per say. Germans are still human beings, contrary to what you may believe.”

“I see!” Said coldly the agent. “Good day, Miss!”

The two M.I.5 men then stomped out of the office, slamming the door behind them.

There was an awkward silence in the office while Nancy sat at her desk and started sifting through her paperwork. She suddenly let the file she had in her hands flop on the desk, then massaged her temples with both hands.

“Look, girls, I nearly got killed less than a hour ago and I’m still a bit on edge, so could we just pretend that it didn’t happen and carry on?”

A few minutes later, Jennifer approached her desk with a sheepish smile on her face.

“Er, could we talk a little, Nancy?”

“Sure, have a seat.”

Jennifer shifted a chair to the front of Nancy’s desk and sat, staring at her for a moment before speaking.

“Nancy, I was told very little about you and I am getting to hear all kinds of strange rumors concerning you. I just don’t know what to think.”

Nancy looked at her with surprise.

“You mean to say that we are going to work in the same office and that you were not told about me? What security clearance do you hold?”

“Most secret.”

“And you don’t know where I come from?”

Jennifer shook her head. Nancy signaled her to get close and whispered in her ear for about a minute. Jennifer’s eyes progressively got bigger with surprise and shock, until Nancy sat back in her chair. Jennifer then swallowed hard.

“Well, that certainly puts a different light on things.”

“You could say that. By the way, could you tell me what this file here is all about?”

The secretary looked at the cover, reading Churchill’s hand-written note on it before answering.

“This has been pending your arrival here for a few days already: you have to fill the blanks and sign the sworn affidavit attached to the forms, so that you can be reimbursed for the personal equipment that Scientific Intelligence requisitioned from you. You have to give the value of each item here, here and here, in pounds sterling of course.”

Nancy stopped for a moment to mentally thank the good Doctor Jones. She had to ask Jennifer to find the current exchange rate of the Canadian dollar before she could price correctly her GPS receiver, her cellular telephone and her radar detector. The amount totalled over 1,500

pounds sterling, which impressed Jennifer. Nancy, not knowing the purchasing power of the 1940 British pound, wondered aloud about it, making Jennifer smile.

“Oh, with 1,500 pounds, you could buy yourself a real luxury car, you know. Alright, sign here and I will take care of the rest.”

Nancy speedily complied: it was not that she was greedy but, with her limited wardrobe, she would soon look like a pauper if she didn't buy some clothes quickly. Somehow she suspected that the twelve or so pounds left in her wallet would not purchase much of a wardrobe.

Feeling better about life now, Nancy went through her files methodically. Most were background information on planned meetings that she would need to attend, while some were outright requests for her expert knowledge on weapon systems. She was particularly happy to see a draft from the Vickers-Armstrong Company for a proposed new tank design: it incorporated all the points she had argued for at that War Office committee meeting. She was soon making phone calls left and right, arranging appointments, confirming future attendances or giving technical information if it was not considered classified. Using her laptop computer constantly, she kept switching between datafiles as she talked on the phone. She got so engrossed in her work that she completely lost track of the time. Winston Churchill reminded her of it by sticking his head in the secretarial office.

“Would you care having lunch with me, Captain Laplante?”

She looked at her watch and saw that it was already 11:46 hours.

“Sir, it would be truly a great honor. I accept with pleasure.”

“Good! By the way, bring that hand cannon of yours along. We are leaving in ten minutes: meet me at the main entrance.”

Once Churchill had disappeared, Nancy looked at Mary Miles, Jennifer being out of the office at the time.

“Doesn't he have his own bodyguards, Mary?”

She looked as surprised as Nancy was.

“He sure does. I don't understand why you would need to be armed.”

“Anyway, an order is an order. Do you have an old rag I can use to clean my gun? It still has powder stains on it.”

“Sure, give me a minute.”

Nancy used that time to pack up her computer and put it back in the carrying case, then took out the Desert Eagle pistol and unloaded it. By the time Mary was back, the pistol was disassembled in its main components and ready for a rough cleaning. Nancy wiped the parts as best she could with the rag while Mary looked at the gun pieces with awe. She touched the gold-plated pistol slide with Nancy's name engraved on it, admiring it.

"Such a beautiful but deadly thing! What do you use it for, usually?"

"Long range target practice. I normally have a scope installed on it, with which I can drop metal plate targets at distances past 200 yards."

"Wow! You must be a pro at this, then?"

Nancy smiled with pride as she finished reassembling the pistol.

"I have a respectable record."

She then looked at her watch and did a doubletake.

"Oops, I better get moving."

Putting the pistol in the side pouch of her carrying case, she shouldered the carrying strap and hurried downstairs.

She had to wait only a minute or so inside the main entrance of the Home Office administration building before Churchill showed up with two very fit men in business suits.

"I'm ready, sir."

She then looked at the bodyguards, who were themselves sizing her up.

"Let me guess, guys: Parachute Regiment?"

They both smiled, with the older one answering her.

"Correct, Miss. What do you know of the Parachute Regiment?"

"Enough! I once participated in an escape and evasion exercise with your guys playing the hounds. The handling I got when I was taken was, well, rough. But it was all part of the game."

They were all grinning now.

"By the way, Miss, that was good shooting this morning: first round hits from forty yards and while under fire. We should have a friendly pistol match one day at our barracks."

"You're on! Beware before you place bets: I was ranked 12th at the last American combat pistol shooting competitions and fourth at the long range pistol target competition in Texas."

“In the female category?”

“No, overall!”

She liked the way he winced. Churchill, on his part, loved the exchange.

“Alright! You gun nuts can continue this conversation in the car or we are going to be late.”

A dozen reporters rushed towards them when they emerged on Downing Street but were contained by the uniformed policemen surrounding Churchill’s car. They then shouted questions at Nancy about the morning’s shootout as they were about to get in the car. She put her head near Churchill’s ear.

“Should I ignore them, sir, or do you prefer that I throw them a bone to calm them down?”

“Give them a short statement: this is an open democracy after all. I will wait for you in the car.”

The reporters grew quiet as soon as she announced that she would speak. Nancy tried to look as relaxed and unconcerned as she could while facing them.

“As you know by now, four men, at least one of which was a German agent, tried to kill me in St James’ Park early this morning. They failed and paid the price for it. I will allow you three questions: I have little free time on my schedule.”

She then pointed at one of the reporters trying to attract her attention, who then presented himself.

“John MacDougall, London Time. Why would the Germans send an assassination team to London to try to kill a mere advisor? Besides, how come a woman was named military advisor to the Prime Minister? Who are you really, Miss Laplante?”

“As for the why, you should ask the Germans, not me. About who I am, I can only say this: I am a Canadian military intelligence officer. Next question!”

“Mike Turner, Daily Mail. Is it true that you recently won the Victoria Cross during a commando raid in German-occupied France?”

“Yes! Next question!”

The reporter she had confronted in St James’ Park then pushed his way to the front rank.

“Peter O’Neal, Daily Telegraph. We met in the park this morning, miss. I have been gathering information about you around London and Northolt, where you apparently first

appeared. Most would agree by now that you are way out of the ordinary as a woman goes, especially in regards to your military skills and knowledge. Is it true that you are a time traveler from the year 2012?"

The crowd fell dead silent as she looked at the reporter, trying to stay impassive.

"Where did you get such a wild idea, Mister O'Neal?"

"From interviewing a number of servicemen and people who met you. Your own car, which I had an engineer discreetly look at, is a complete anachronism and even bears a mechanical inspection sticker dated May 12, 2012. You are also said to own a television set that shows color pictures."

The reporters saw her hesitation then. Many who had thought that their colleague had gone nuts started to pay attention to her answer.

"I will not comment on such speculations. Now, if you will excuse me, the Prime Minister is waiting."

She then hurried inside the official car, sighing in relief as it sped away from the shouting reporters.

"Sir, this is getting out of hand. Soon, everybody's cat will know the truth: it's bad enough that the Germans know about me. Is there something that can be done to kill these speculations, sir?"

Churchill looked glumly at her.

"I'm afraid that the cat is truly out of the bag now, Captain Laplante. Besides, you are too much of an oddity not to attract attention around you. The cabinet will have to decide on a policy about you soon."

Seeing her look of alarm, he gently pressed her hand.

"Don't worry, my friend: we will not put you away in some kind of cage or parade you like a prize horse. Maybe the best thing to do is to tell the truth about you and then make them understand that it is in the interest of all to respect your privacy and need for personal security. You may need a security detail after all."

Nancy looked down at the car's carpet in discouragement: she may be about to learn first hand about the plight of celebrities hounded everywhere by reporters and photographers. It didn't look like it would be fun at all. She was so absorbed by her thoughts that she didn't realise where they were going until the car stopped and the bodyguards opened the doors. They were at Buckingham Palace! A bit overwhelmed, Nancy simply followed Winston Churchill as they

were guided through the magnificent corridors of the palace. The old politician at one time bowed politely as he passed a teenage girl in the corridor. Nancy suddenly stopped dead in her tracks, her eyes widening, then put one knee down and bent forward.

“Your Majesty!”

The girl, as well as Churchill, looked surprised by her reaction and stopped. The teenager then smiled at Nancy.

“Miss, my proper title is ‘Your Highness’. ‘Your Majesty’ is a title reserved for the King and the Queen.”

Nancy looked up at Elizabeth Windsor, not knowing at first what to say. The fourteen years old girl was still only a princess in 1940.

“You will always be the Queen for me, Your Majesty.”

Churchill, looking grave now, spoke softly to the confused princess.

“Captain Laplante means no disrespect to your father, Your Highness. Keep this strictly to yourself, but she is a time traveler from the year 2012. I believe that you were the Queen by then.”

Elizabeth stepped back under the shock, looking with her mouth wide open at Nancy.

“How... how could this be?”

“I came quite involuntarily to this time period, Your Majesty. I believe that persons from the far future abducted me and transported me here to perform some kind of experiment.”

Nancy then thought about something and, taking out her wallet, quickly searched in it, pulling out a Canadian one-dollar coin and presenting it to Elizabeth.

“Please accept this little souvenir from the future as a token of my respect to you, Your Majesty.”

“This... this is me? But I look so old on this drawing.”

She then saw the printing date of the coin.

“2010? My god!”

Looking back at Nancy with awe, the princess smiled to her.

“Thank you sincerely for this, Miss, I will keep this precious. Good day, Miss!”

“Good day, Your Majesty!”

Churchill let out his breath as the excited teenager walked away, then looked at Nancy, who was getting back to her feet.

“There are decidedly no dull moments around you, Captain. Er, do you have more money from 2012 with you, by chance?”

“Sure! Here is a lucky coin for you, sir.” Said Nancy, handing him a two-dollar coin with the effigy of Queen Elizabeth II on one side. The Prime Minister examined it for a moment, then pocketed it while grinning at her.

“We better move on or the King will grow impatient.”

They soon arrived at a relatively small dining room where King George VI was waiting for them. She realised then that she knew next to nothing about royal etiquette and bowed her head.

“Pardon my ignorance, Your Majesty, but I’m afraid that I don’t even know how a proper curtsy looks like.”

The King, wearing a civilian suit, laughed at her embarrassment before replying, his chronic stuttering making his speech laborious.

“Don’t worry, Captain: we won’t chop your head off for this.”

Churchill then replied for Nancy.

“It’s partly my fault, Your Majesty: she did not know that we were coming here. In fact, she doesn’t even know why we are here.”

George VI smiled and pointed at his watch.

“For lunch, of course! What else could it be for at this time of the day? Let’s serve ourselves.”

To Nancy’s astonishment there were no servants in the room, only a small buffet table from which the king and Churchill filled their plates themselves. Picking up a plate, she quickly found out that the menu was extremely modest for such a setting. Churchill laughed when she remarked on it.

“At last, something she doesn’t already know. Well, let’s say that the King and I have recently started to have lunch together on most Tuesdays, in order to discuss the affairs of the state. As for the limited menu, one of the reasons that the British people love their King is that he is willing to endure the same hardships as they do.”

“In that case, Your Majesty, please accept my humblest apologies for my ignorant remark.”

“No offence taken, Captain. Now, let’s sit and talk.”

Once they were seated, the king looked at Nancy, who appeared ready to ask another question.

“In case you are wondering what a junior officer is doing having lunch with me and the Prime Minister, I can tell you that there are two reasons for it: first, you may play a crucial role in the near future for Great Britain; secondly, I am fond of firearms and I have been wondering what kind of cannon you used this morning to wake the Queen up. Don’t present excuses for that: I have been trying for years to find a way to get her out of bed early.”

“In that case, Your Majesty, I would be glad to show you my wakeup piece. May I?”
With the king’s approval, she took out her Desert Eagle pistol, removed the magazine and locked the slide in the open position before handing the gun to George VI, whose hand dropped noticeably when he took it.

“By jove it’s heavy! What calibre is it?”

“.50 Action Express. In 2012, it is the most powerful cartridge in use in a semi-automatic pistol. Originally, this gun was made in Israel, but its manufactured switched then to the United States.”

“Israel?”

The King seemed confused by that. Nancy suddenly understood why.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Your Majesty. Israel is the Jewish state to be founded after the war from parts of the actual Palestine.”

She took out one of the bullets from the pistol magazine and gave it to George VI, whose eyes widened.

“No wonder it woke up the queen. May I keep one bullet, Captain?”

“Please do, Your Majesty.”

George VI handed her back the pistol and pocketed the cartridge, then looked at her soberly.

“Now, to pass to more serious matters, let’s talk about your future.”

Churchill cleared his throat.

“I’m afraid that this has become still more complicated just now, Your Majesty.”

He then explained the encounter with the reporters to the King, who made a face.

“So, we may have to go public on this much sooner than we hoped.”

“If I may say so, Your Majesty,” interjected Nancy, “this looks by now to be a fairly open secret. I expect to be soon chased constantly by reporters, photographers and other pests. May I ask your advice on this: how do you deal with constant scrutiny from these people without going nuts?”

The King turned very serious at her question, thinking for a moment before replying.

“The only way is to simply ignore them. Do your normal daily routine and don’t pay attention to them, but be courteous. Losing your temper will only make matters much worse. If they really overstep their bounds, let either lawyers or policemen deal with them.”

“Hmm, a good thing that television direct newscasts do not exist yet.”

“What is that?”

“A form of electronic media where a reporter with a cameral and telescopic lense can watch your every moves from a distance and retransmit them instantly worldwide for all to see.”

“My god! This sounds positively dreadful.”

“It can be, Your Majesty, but they say it’s the price of freedom.”

“Maybe! Now, let’s see what we can do about you.”

14:23 (GMT)

Prime Minister`s Office, London

“Hi girls, I’m back!”

Nancy dropped her carrying case on her desk under the amused looks of Jennifer and Mary.

“I’d say you’re picking up bureaucratic bad habits quickly: a two and a half hour lunch break.”

“Well, it’s pretty hard to walk out on the King.”

“YOU HAD LUNCH WITH THE KING?”

Both Jennifer and Mary had yelled at the same time.

“Pah, it’s nothing! He just wanted to see my pistol.”

“Oh yeah? Well, if you’re so well treated now, I guess you don’t need this cheque anymore.” Jennifer waved an envelope, smiling.

“WHAT? Gimme that cheque or I’ll tickle you to death!”

After a few seconds of mock fighting and giggling, Nancy finally got hold of the envelope. Ripping it open, she took out a cheque and read it aloud.

“Payable to Nancy Laplante, the sum of 1,551 pounds...”

“Don’t forget the 26 pences at the end.”

"You're right! How could I be so negligent? Damn, I better go open a bank account quickly."

"WHAT? You took half of the afternoon for lunch and now you want time off to go to the bank? You'll make Prime Minister in six months at this rate."

"AHEM!"

Jennifer turned her head, only to see Winston Churchill in the doorway, a severe expression on his face. The look turned into a malicious smile when she blushed to a deep red. Nancy couldn't contain a giggle at that, prompting Churchill in pointing her.

"Captain Laplante, that giggle just earned you the rest of the day off. I want you back tomorrow morning at eight in full dress uniform. Please try not to get into a gunfight on your way in tomorrow."

"I'll do my best, sir. What about on my way out?"

"Shootouts are permitted after working hours. You'd better go now: banks close at 15:30 hours."

"Thank you, sir! Good afternoon, girls!"

Jennifer stuck her tongue out as Nancy walked out gingerly, her carrying case by her side.

Nancy was lucky in finding a small bank on St James' Street, not far from her own street. With her government papers, it took only twenty minutes to open a bank account and deposit most of her cheque, leaving her with enough cash for a serious shopping spree. That idea was however quickly forgotten as she walked out of the bank and encountered a boy selling newspapers by yelling the main titles.

"DAILY TELEGRAPH SPECIAL EDITION! SHOOTOUT IN ST JAMES'S PARK! READ ALL ABOUT IT!"

"I'll take one, kid."

She gave him two pences and grabbed the newspaper he was offering. The large front page picture froze her on the spot before she could make another step: it showed her, clearly recognisable, approaching Manheim with her Desert Eagle pointed at him while he lay on the ground. Three more pictures showed respectively the crashed car, the two dead accomplices of Manheim and finally a close shot of herself talking with the Guards officer. A caption under that last picture really got her attention. She read it aloud.

"Is this woman a time traveler from the year 2012?"

She shook her head in disgust: there was no way for her now to do any shopping without becoming a traveling circus scene. Nancy suddenly realised that the newspaper boy had stopped yelling. Turning her head, she saw that he was looking at her with his mouth wide open. She smiled at him in return and took out a fifty pence coin, putting it in his hand.

“Do me a favor, boy: just pretend that you never saw me today.”

She then walked away quickly, the newspaper still in her hands.

18:40 (GMT)

Appartment eleven, 24 St James`s Place

Nancy let Mike Crawford in her apartment, then locked the door. The supper had been a tense affair, with Joan Stanley and Daniel Adams throwing sidelooks at her but at least being considerate enough not to ask about her adventures of the day. She got some solace from Mike, who had squeezed her hand discreetly under the table.

She went to her portable radio/CD player and put on a favorite song of hers, then tightly embraced Mike, slowly dancing to the music. He followed the rythm along with her, enjoying the close contact with her most feminine body.

“What are you going to do now that about everybody knows your secret?”

“I’m not sure and it scares me, Mike. The only thing I know is that my life is going to turn around abruptly for a second time in less than a month. I hope that I’m not going to become some kind of exotic animal to be stared at by everyone.”

She was silent for the rest of the song, desperately hugging him in search of comfort and reassurance. Mike was starting by now to love her a lot more than just in the physical sense: she possessed a rare combination of intelligence, beauty, courage and strength he had never encountered before in such intensity.

“Can I stay with you tonight? We could listen to more music, dance a bit, maybe watch a movie together.”

Nancy looked at him, tears starting to come out of her eyes.

“Oh please do, Mike! I don’t want you to leave my side.”

CHAPTER 16 – PROMOTION

07:10 (GMT)

Wednesday, September 25, 1940

24 St James' Place, London

Thankfully there were no reporters waiting for her as she stepped out of her building. It seemed that they still didn't know where she lived...yet. She was wearing her dark green Canadian Forces dress uniform but she was now openly armed: a heavy duty black gun belt supported a custom-made combat speed holster designed for her Glock 17 9mm pistol. The custom design had been made necessary by the bulky holographic sight unit fixed to the top of the pistol. Spare magazines retainers were fixed to the left side of her belt, while a small plastic case contained an ASP telescopic baton. Retracted, it looked like a six inches steel rod, but it could instantly be deployed to a length of 21 inches, then becoming a very effective argument in any hand-to-hand fight.

While there were a few people already out, she did not attract attention at first: armed soldiers were a common sight in 1940 London. Turning on St James' Street towards St James' Palace, Nancy saw the same boy from whom she had bought a newspaper yesterday and crossed the street towards him. The boy did a double take when he saw her but smiled immediately after that.

"Good morning, Miss! Do you want a newspaper?"

"I'll certainly have one. Here!"

He caught the two pences and handed her a paper. She quickly reviewed the first page on the spot, finding that she was still front-page news. At least she was not the top story. Putting the newspaper in her computer carrying case, she slung it on her left shoulder and continued on her way.

Apart of whispered comments and stares, she arrived at the Prime Minister's Office at 07:40 hours without incident. She breathed in relief as she entered the Home Office building: it had been easier than she had expected after all. Nancy was pleased to see that she had beaten the dedicated Jennifer to the office this morning. Her computer was already set up and

running by the time the secretary showed up. She was excitedly waving yesterday's special edition of the Daily Telegraph as she entered.

"Nancy, you're already here? Did you see this?"

"Oh, I sure did. That was when I decided to delay my shopping spree."

"Aw, I'm sorry for you, Nancy: those reporters can be such a pain."

"You can say that again."

Nancy stood from her chair and walked to a bookshelf, taking out the big Webster's dictionary there: she was still mixing up British and American spelling. Jennifer's eyes fixed the low-slung, front-break holster strapped along Nancy's right leg. The pistol's holographic sight unit stuck out prominently from the front of the holster, making the whole thing look like it came out of a Flash Gordon story.

"WOW, a ray gun!"

Jennifer's comment made Nancy grin. She waived a finger at the secretary.

"Didn't I tell you that I was from the future and not from Mars?"

"Is there a difference?"

"A slight one: there are living people on Earth in 2012, while there is no life on Mars, at least today."

"How would you know there are no green men on Mars?"

"Easy: probes have landed on Mars and had explored its surface for years by 2012."

"Gosh!"

Jennifer's awed look suddenly changed into a grin.

"Hey, do you think you could help my ten years old son with his astronomy class assignment?"

"Would not this be called cheating, Jennifer? Anyway, I may be more of a problem than a help to your son: 2012 astronomy facts would contradict most of what he is learning now in his class."

"Oh!"

That deflated the secretary quickly. Nancy took pity of her.

"I tell you what: if you bring your son tonight at my place, we could all watch a good science-fiction movie together. Or even two."

"We could? You're on!"

They then went about their work until ten O'clock, when Churchill's principal secretary, John Martin, stuck his head in the office.

"Captain Laplante, the conference is about to begin."

"Thank you, I'm on my way."

Nancy undid her gun belt and put it in one of her desk's drawer, then put on her uniform jacket.

"Jennifer, I will be at the ambassadors meeting. Please take my calls and don't touch my gun."

Taking her computer case with her, she crossed to the Foreign Office part of the building and met John Martin at the entrance of a conference room. By then, ambassadors and their staff were starting to fill the room. One of them came to Nancy with a big grin and a handshake.

"Captain Laplante, I'm Vincent Massey, Canada's High Commissioner in London. I wanted for days to tell you how proud we all are of you in Canada."

She couldn't help blush at the compliment but he cut off her protests.

"Don't be overly modest, Captain. I know who you are and what you did. By the way, here is an information you do not know yet..."

He then whispered in her ears something that made Nancy smile.

"Please try to act surprised when they will tell you later. I'll see you inside."

The High Commissioner then entered the conference room with his aides, leaving Nancy by the door with Churchill's secretary.

John Martin described discreetly to Nancy each of the ambassadorial parties as they filled the room. The countries represented as the doors were closing were the United States, France (through its government-in-exile), Australia, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa. Nancy finally entered behind Winston Churchill's staff and, as an officially junior advisor, sat off the main conference table, besides John Martin. Churchill rose from his seat at one of the table's ends at 10:25 hours to open the conference.

"Good morning to you all, gentlemen. You have been invited to this conference because you have one point in common: you all recently received some intelligence from a source codenamed 'Athena'. As you well know, that information was largely responsible for the recent defeat of the Luftwaffe and is considered by the British government to be totally accurate and reliable. Many of you may still wonder what or who is this Athena. Wonder no more, gentlemen. On September the second of this year, a person from the year 2012 was brought involuntarily to our time, near the RAF base of Northolt. That person happened to bring along

numerous pieces of very high technology and a fantastically detailed knowledge of this whole war, plus knowledge about the political and military affairs of the decades to come. As you may understand, we were at first very skeptical about that source, but we changed our minds when we studied her equipment and compared her predictions to actual German actions.”

The American ambassador raised his hand then.

“Prime Minister, would this source have anything to do with yesterday’s gunfight, or should I say massacre, in St James’ Park?”

“Ambassador Kennedy, you have obviously read the newspapers. Yes, the woman involved in the gunfight with a German assassination team is the source codenamed Athena. The simple fact that the Germans tried to kill her right here in London is proof enough that they consider Athena a mortal threat to them. Unfortunately, it also proves that they know already way too much about her, which is why we have decided to go public with her existence.”

The South African ambassador was next to talk.

“If the Germans know about her, then they will obviously change all their operational plans accordingly. This means that your Athena is now useless.”

“Let me disagree with that, Ambassador. While the Germans can change their battle plans, changing their whole war program is next to impossible. We now know about everything concerning German weapons programs and on future German military equipment: this they cannot change. Also and not least, we have started the studies to duplicate part or all of the 2012-era technologies brought along by Athena. This alone is a bonanza that will certainly help us in shortening this war and save lots of lives.”

“But who is this Athena, finally?” Exploded the South African, attracting a smile on Churchill’s face.

“Come, Mister Ambassador, don’t tell me that you haven’t read the newspapers. If so, let me introduce you to my new special military advisor, Captain Nancy Laplante, of the Canadian Army military intelligence.”

On Churchill’s cue, Nancy stood up and took place to his right. She let them have a good look at her before starting to speak.

“Gentlemen, let me first say that I did not come to this time period of my own accord. I was abducted in 2012 by people I believe to be from a very distant future and used in some kind of ill-fated experiment. I say ill fated because their craft exploded shortly after transporting me and my car to this timeline. Debris and bodies from that craft were incidentally a major factor in convincing the British government that I was not a fake.”

She saw a wave go through the foreign staffs: their diplomatic couriers would probably be busy today. A French officer had a question for her then.

“Captain, how come you know so many details of this war? You could not memorize it all, especially since you were brought here by surprise.”

“I did not need to memorize anything, Colonel, although I have in fact an excellent memory. I had with me at the time of my abduction all my historical and military files I use as an international military correspondent. I was on my way to my lakeside cottage for a working vacation and was ready to write up a travel report for my editor. Believe me, sir, I have plenty of information with me.”

The Australian ambassador was next.

“How did you manage to eliminate a German assassination team all by yourself, Captain? Did you have some kind of super weapon from 2012?”

“Mister Ambassador, I did use a 2012-era pistol, but it differs little from what you use in 1940. I made the difference: I happen to be an expert in combat pistol shooting. Lets say that the Germans’ shooting standards did not measure up to American pistol shooting techniques.” She could see that the American army brigadier general sitting besides his ambassador loved that remark. The Australian ambassador was not finished with her yet.

“Are you ready to share your knowledge with all of us?”

“Absolutely! I have ideas for new anti-tank weapons that will be available to all of you once they are experimented and tested.”

Churchill then took back control of the conference, but everybody kept glancing at her during the rest of the discussion. She now was in up to her neck and there would be no turning back for her from now on. At the end of the conference, the Canadian High Commissioner came to see her with his Military Attaché, eager to speak to her.

“Captain Laplante, I believe that my Military Attaché, Colonel Francis Thompson, wanted to talk to you.”

Nancy saluted the tall, slim army officer, who saluted back with a smile for her.

“Captain Laplante, in consideration of your outstanding services, both in the field and as an exchange officer with the British government, I am pleased to announce to you that Major General McNaughton has decided to promote you to the rank of major, effective immediately. I believe that you may need these.”

He then handed Nancy a pair of epaulette slip-ons with the crown that was the symbol for the rank of major. She took them with one hand while shaking his right hand.

“Sir, I don’t know what to say.”

“You fully deserved it, Major.”

“Sir, this raises a subject that was bothering me for a while. You can see that my present uniform, which is by the way the regulation one in 2012 Canada, is not the same as that worn today by the Canadian Army. I also came to 1940 with a very limited wardrobe, military or otherwise. My question is, in view of my somewhat unusual status, what should I wear? Should I wear civilian clothes or military uniforms? If it should be the latter, then I’m afraid that I’m running out of them: One of my two combat uniforms was shredded to pieces when I was wounded in France.”

Colonel Thompson was thoughtful for a while.

“Well, since you just got promoted on the authority of General McNaughton, you are certainly entitled to be issued with a full set of current Canadian uniforms, which you should wear for your work.”

“Would they issue full battledress to a woman, sir?”

Thompson grinned in amusement at that.

“Major, if any quartermaster is dumb enough to refuse the right to wear a battledress to a Victoria Cross recipient, then that quartermaster deserves a swift kick in the butt. I will advise our depot in Camp Aldershot to expect you and to provide you with anything that you will request. Here is my card. If you have any problems or questions, don’t hesitate to call me.”

“Thank you, sir! I will probably go to Aldershot during the course of next week.”

“Excellent! It was a pleasure to meet you, Major. Continue the good work.”

Thompson then left with Massey after a last round of handshakes.

Nancy was whistling as she came back to the secretarial office. Jennifer handed her a small piece of paper with a note on it.

“A Major Crawford from the American embassy called you about ten minutes ago, asking that you call him back.”

“Thanks!”

She got on her telephone right away, with Mike answering within two rings.

“Hi, it’s Nancy! You wanted to speak to me?”

“Well, if I could do more than speak on the phone I would do it, but I have to live with today’s limitations. Actually, I wanted to extend to you an invitation from the embassy’s Marines to come use their indoor range and teach them your combat shooting techniques. If it could convince you to come, I would be attending the sessions too.”

“Hot damn! You got my attention right there, Mister. How about if we start tomorrow afternoon at five? I think I could give your guys three sessions a week, at least for the time being. Do you have .38 Special and 9mm ammunition available?”

“We certainly have .38 Special ammo by the crate. As for 9mm ammo, I will have to check. Can I see you tonight?”

“You can, but you will have to share me with one kid and a female friend for the first few hours after supper: we’re having a movie night”

“What are we going to watch?”

“One, maybe two science-fiction movies. You should like them.”

“Then I’ll see you at supper time. Bye!”

Nancy waited for his phone to click down before putting down her own receiver, then turned towards Jennifer, who had half-listened to the conversation.

“Jennifer, do you mind if a six foot four inch handsome hunk comes to watch the movies with us tonight? That is, if your husband is not prone to jealousy.”

Jennifer’s smile faded at those words.

“I... Nancy, my husband was killed in France. Anyway, I’ll be happy to meet your friend. Can we come at, say, seven O’clock?”

“That will suit me fine. Do you live far from my place?”

“We live in the Tower Hamlets district, about three miles away, but we can take the subway without a problem.”

“Then I’ll expect you at seven. Jennifer, about your husband, I’m sorry. Please accept my sincere condolences.”

“Thanks, Nancy!”

She then looked at her watch.

“What do you say if we go eat now at the first floor cafeteria?”

That made Nancy grimace.

“I suppose that it is the most convenient place to eat quickly. No offence to you, Jennifer, but I’ll have to find a good ethnic restaurant in my district: I don’t think that British cuisine and I are compatible.”

Nancy then put her gun belt back on as Jennifer was grabbing her purse, attracting a puzzled comment from the secretary.

“Do you really need this to go eat?”

“Yes, for two reasons: first, if the food at the cafeteria is as bad as last time, I may just shoot the cook.”

“And your second reason?”

“Well, I have to cultivate my image as a space woman from Mars, don't I?”

10:45 (GMT)

Thursday, September 26, 1940

American embassy, London

Brigadier General Emmet Walker pointed to a chair in front of his desk as Nancy Laplante entered his office.

“Please have a seat, Major. By the way, congratulations on your promotion.”

“Thank you very much, sir. You wanted to speak to me about new weapons programs for the American forces?”

“That's correct, Major. Would you like a coffee first?”

“Oh yes, please! You can't know how fed up of tea I am.”

Walker chuckled, then called for an orderly, who took Nancy's order. The general took that time to scrutinize her a bit more: she was the key to so many things now. Walker was particularly surprised by the speed with which everything happened around her. She had arrived in England less than a month ago and she was already literally turning the war upside down. They exchanged pleasantries until the orderly came back with her coffee. He then went straight to the point.

“Major, I am told that Winston Churchill has authorized you to pass to us any information you wished to give us. Is this correct?”

“Quite correct, sir. I believe that the United States is the key to winning this war quickly, either as a source of armament or as a fighting ally. What can I do for you, sir?”

“Major, as you must know, the United States is still not involved officially in this war. However, I can tell you that President Roosevelt is taking the Japanese threat very seriously and is working hard right now to convince the Congress to put our forces on a war footing in order to preempt any Japanese attack. I am happy to tell you that he believes that he will

succeed soon in passing a War Bill. As a consequence, I have been directed by Secretary of War Stimson to enlist your aid in planning new weapons to reequip our forces as soon as possible.”

“But, that is marvelous news indeed. In that case, could I suggest something to you?”

“Of course! What do you have in mind?”

“It happens that I have been working during the last few days on a list of short and medium term weapons programs that could improve dramatically the performance of the British forces in the least time possible and by using existing technology. Maybe you could adopt or adapt to your needs some of the projects on my list.”

“Do you have this list with you?” Asked Walker eagerly, instantly interested. Nancy answered by searching in the black leather carrying bag she had brought with her, taking out a document and handing it to him.

“The list is separated in a number of sections for the users’ convenience: army, navy, air, amphibious and common equipment projects. I will leave you a few extra copies if you want.”

“Please do, Major!”

Walker then reviewed the list with growing excitement: this was going to make the various chiefs of staffs water at the mouth. He looked back at her with a grin on his face.

“I like this! Could I ask you to stay here this afternoon, so that you could discuss these various projects with my staff? It would help us tremendously in making a preliminary assessment of this list.”

She thought for an instant, then nodded her head.

“I could do that, sir. I will only need to go out for a couple of hours to visit somebody in hospital and have lunch. I could be back by one O’clock at the latest.”

“Agreed! I will expect you after lunch, then.”

Going out of the embassy and jumping into her car, Nancy drove to St-Thomas Hospital, on the other bank of the River Thames, parking in front of the old hospital. She was greeted at the reception desk by a nurse who couldn’t help look at her combat uniform and her pistol, slung low on her right hip.

“Can I do something for you, Miss?”

“I believe you can. There is supposed to be a wounded German prisoner treated here. His name is Manheim. I would like to see him.”

The nurse looked at her suspiciously before checking her registry.

"He is in room 315, under guard, but..."

"Thank you!"

Without giving a chance to the nurse to protest, Nancy walked to the nearest staircase and ran up the stairs to the third floor, where she easily found room 315: two military policemen stood guard at the door. They came to attention and saluted after a short hesitation when she approached them. She returned their salute and faced the most senior MP.

"I'm Major Laplante, from the Prime Minister's Office. I would like to see the prisoner for a few minutes. Could you let me in, Corporal?"

The man hesitated for a moment before opening the door.

"That kraut is not going anywhere with his wound. Be careful, though, Major."

"Thanks, Corporal!"

Nancy entered a small private room similar to the one she had occupied not long ago. Klaus Manheim's bored look turned to one of surprise at her sight.

"You?"

She answered him in German while still halfway through the doorway, attracting suspicious looks from both MPs.

"Hi, can I come in?"

"Er, sure. Why not?"

Nancy examined closely the German as she took a chair besides his bed. His right arm and shoulder were immobilized in a massive cast and his face reflected pain and fatigue.

"You don't look so well today, Klaus." She said softly.

"That's because I am not well. Even if I was not going to be executed by the British, the doctors told me that I would lose fifty percent of my right arm's mobility from my wound. Your hand cannon tore a gaping hole in my shoulder."

"I am truly sorry about that. As you said yourself, I wish that we had met in better circumstances. Were you serious when you said that you were falling in love with me?"

Klaus looked away, apparently embarrassed.

"It may sound crazy but, yes, I was starting to have feelings towards you. It won't mean much now, however."

"It does to me, Klaus. I can't return your love but you certainly proved to me that you are a decent man. Is there anything I can do for you?"

Manheim was silent for a while, thinking his answer over.

"I have one favor to ask of you, Nancy: I want to see you when they will execute me. At least my last vision will be one I can bring with me in the afterlife."

Deeply touched by these words, she raised a hand and caressed his face.

"I will be there, I promise. Don't despair: you are not dead yet."

She then kissed him on his forehead before leaving him.

On her way back to the American embassy, she drove around Piccadilly District, in search of a good ethnic restaurant. She was quickly attracted to a bilingual sign in English and Arabic advertising Lebanese cuisine, something she was fond of. Parking her car nearby, she went in the small restaurant, which was furnished with six tables, a few chairs and a service counter. Three Lebanese men were having lunch at the time, while one waiter was relaxing behind the counter, drinking a small cup of strong Arabic coffee. Ignoring the stares from the customers, Nancy went to the counter and nearly made the waiter choke from surprise when she ordered her lunch in fluent Arabic. Taking place at one table, Nancy exchanged polite greetings in Arabic with the customers, which they returned eagerly. One of them, a small man in his early fifties, inquired about where she had learned her Arabic.

"At McGill University, in Montreal. I did have a lot of practice on the ground, though. I am an international correspondent in civilian life and I spent many months in various Middle East countries, including Lebanon."

"So, how did you like Lebanon, Miss?"

Nancy had to be cautious about her answer: the Lebanon she knew and visited had gone through nearly two decades of civil war, plus repeated fighting along the border with Israel.

"It is a nice country and I do love Lebanese cuisine, but too many people are coveting its territory for its own good."

"That is very true." Agreed the Lebanese man, who then lowered his voice and bent forward. "Is it true that you come from the future? How will Lebanon be like in the years to come?"

"Mister, I can only say that it will face some hard years in the decades to come, like the rest of the Middle East, in fact."

The man was thoughtful for a while. He then took out a calling card and gave it to Nancy.

"My name is Rafik Shamoun. I own a jewelry shop near here. You will always be welcome there, miss."

Nancy thanked him and pocketed the card. The waiter then showed up with her order. She enjoyed her lunch of Shish Taouk and lentil rice, then paid, leaving a generous tip before walking out of the restaurant after wishing a good day in Arabic to the other customers. She found a growing crowd of curious passersby gathered around her Mitsubishi Outlander 2010 and sighed with annoyance: this was becoming far too frequent an occurrence lately. Taking out her car keys, which were attached to a remote control unit, she pushed in succession two buttons. The onlookers stepped away nervously when the engine seemingly started by itself after the headlights blinked, followed by the doors unlocking as if by magic. Nancy then stepped in the car and, ignoring the numerous questions thrown at her, drove off towards the American embassy.

13:15 (GMT)

American embassy, London

“Er, Major Laplante, what does an air cushion vehicle look like?” Asked the U.S. Marine Corps officer, Major Ken Dows. Nancy tried to describe it at first but could not make him picture it. She suddenly realized: pictures! Taking General Walker and his four assistants by surprise, she rose from the table around which they had been discussing her list of projects and started packing up her laptop computer as she spoke.

“Gentlemen, I just realized that we may not be in the best setting to discuss this. I suggest that we move to my apartment in order to watch some documentary films and magazines on military equipment. General?”

“You say that you have films showing 2012-era equipment?”

“I do, sir.”

“Then what are we waiting for? Let’s go!”

Mike Crawford, General Walker and Major Dows piled eagerly in her car, while Navy Commander Johnson and Major Bagley got in an embassy car. The Americans stared admiringly at the dashboard, with its LCD indicators and gauges, radio/CD system, navigational map display with GPS unit, wideband radio scanner and CB transceiver radio. Nancy had loaded in her car nearly all the options available in 2010, plus some more equipment in line with her job as a correspondent.

“So, this in a 2010 car.” Said General Walker. “It’s a beauty!”

"I do like that car, General." Agreed Nancy before driving off. She however didn't remind him that it was also a Japanese car. They arrived at her apartment in less than five minutes, parking in front of the building. Once inside, the five Americans sat on the sofa and chairs facing her television set in the lounge, taking out notepads and pens while she roamed through her video library.

"What you will see first, gentlemen, are two documentaries called respectively 'Desert Shield' and 'Desert Storm', about a war in the Persian Gulf in 1990-91. It pitted an international coalition that included the U.S.A., Great Britain, France, Canada, Egypt, Syria, Saudi Arabia and a number of other countries against Iraq, which had invaded Kuwait and was threatening Saudi Arabia. Desert Shield was the defensive phase of the campaign, with lots of air action for you, Major Bagley. Desert Storm was the offensive phase of the war. I have lots more documentaries if you still are eager for more after these, including one on the Russian 'AIST' class air cushion vehicle."

Nancy then started the 'Desert Shield' documentary and took the place reserved by Mike Crawford for her, snuggling besides him with a purr. Often putting the film on pause or going back to review something quickly, she explained some of the finer points of what they were seeing, putting the emphasis on what was or was not achievable with 1940 technology. Once the first film was finished, they took a short break before starting the 'Desert Storm' video. At one point, she froze the picture of a British infantryman standing besides his MCV-80 WARRIOR Infantry Combat Vehicle.

"Look at his rifle, Mike: that's a bullpup design."

"Wow, is it ever compact! This would be ideal for our tankers and paratroopers."

"Exactly! The fun of it is that it is very basic technology: you could probably take the mechanism of your Garand semi-automatic rifle and modify it to turn it into a bullpup rifle pretty easily."

"Hey, you're right! We also have a few Browning Automatic Rifles at the embassy. Once shortened into bullpup variant and lightened, they would make perfect assault rifles."

"Now you're talking! Thinking of it, the British Bren machinegun would also be a good candidate for bullpup modification."

"Then, I offer my services to help you modify both of these weapons, Nancy: I owned a gunsmith shop before I joined the Army as an ordnance engineer. I could produce bullpup models of the B.A.R. and of the Bren in a few days, with the help of your advice, of course."

"Hot damn! I love the idea! Could we do this, General?"

"If you think that it could be done that quickly and easily, then I am all for it. Where would you do the machining work, though?"

Nancy thought for a moment, then grinned.

"I may know a place for that. Would you be able to free some funds quickly for that project, General, so that we could rent the shop time needed and get some basic materials?"

"With Secretary of War Stimson already pushing me for your help? Just name the price and it will be done."

Nancy and Mike looked at each other with glee, attracting an amused comment from Commander Johnson.

"Two gun nuts in love. This is going to be some fireworks."

They all laughed at that, then returned their attention on the documentary.

22:18 (GMT)

Room 315

St-Thomas Hospital, London

Klaus Manheim was still thinking about Nancy's kiss as he was trying without success to get to sleep in his dark hospital room. He had received in the afternoon the visit of two British counter-espionage agents that were offering to save his life and get only a reduced jail sentence. In exchange, he would agree to become a double agent. Klaus had politely but firmly refused their offer, thus sealing his fate. Now, he could only wait for the day he was going to be executed by firing squad in the Tower of London.

Movement in a corner of the obscure room suddenly made him turn his head. Seeing a dark form approach silently his bed, Klaus thought with renewed hope that maybe one of the members of his network had come to help him escape. Now close to his bed, the dark shape gently covered his mouth with one hand as he was about to ask who was there. Klaus then realized that the newcomer was a woman, a tall one at that. While keeping one hand on his mouth, the woman approached her other hand to the cast covering Klaus' right shoulder. To the German's amazement, that hand soon started to glow brightly, sending a sensation of well-being through his thorn shoulder and chasing away the pain of his wound. Unable to move or speak, Klaus watched with wide eyes as the hand glowed for about a minute before becoming normal again. The woman then bent down over him and whispered in German.

"You will live, Klaus, near me."

"Nancy?" Could only say the Abwehr agent before he and the woman disappeared from the room in a silent flash of white light.

About one hour later, two new military policemen came to replace the two that had stood the evening shift outside the door of the room. The corporal in charge opened the door of the room, intent on doing a quick inspection before starting formally his shift. The sight of the empty bed froze him for a moment before he took out his service revolver and switched on the light of the room. Looking everywhere in the small room, he saw nobody but noticed that the window of the room was wide open. Cold sweat appeared on the corporal's forehead. How could a man with his right arm immobilized in a cast escape through a third storey window? Swearing violently, he then ran out of the room.

"THE PRISONER HAS ESCAPED!"

CHAPTER 17 – KITTING OUT

09:48 (GMT)

Wednesday, October 2, 1940

Canadian Army depot, Camp Aldershot

England

Nancy parked her 2010 Mitsubishi Outlander between two light army trucks in the parking lot across the road from the long, low building housing the quartermaster services of the Canadian Army in England, then got out of her car as two Canadian Army drivers looked on, completely overwhelmed. The senior soldier then saw the major's rank slip-on on her combat uniform and snapped to attention, saluting her crisply.

“Good morning sir! Er... Miss!”

“Good morning, Private.” Replied Nancy while saluting back. “At ease!”

Leaving the two excited soldiers to follow her with appreciative eyes, Nancy walked briskly to the QM building and, jumping the three wooden steps at the main entrance, entered it. She found herself in a short hallway with a number of doors bearing signs. Using the door marked ‘clothing’, she entered a long, wide hall with a service counter running along its length. About twenty young soldiers under the control of a sergeant and of a corporal were already lined up at the counter, with two army store clerks busy issuing them pieces of uniforms and military gear. All eyes immediately went to Nancy as she walked calmly to the service counter. The sergeant present hesitated for a moment before coming to attention and saluting while shouting out loud.

“ROOM!”

All the soldiers froze at attention as Nancy saluted back.

“Good morning, maam!”

“Good morning, Sergeant. Please put your men at ease and carry on with your kitting out process.”

“Yes maam! Section, at ease!”

One of the army store clerks quickly came to Nancy as she leaned against the service counter while eyeing the countless rows of storage shelves.

“May I help you, maam?”

"You may." Answered Nancy while taking a sheet of paper out of a breast pocket of her camouflaged shirt and unfolding it. "I have an appointment for ten O'clock this morning, to be kitted out with both battledress and service uniforms. I already have my own web gear and helmet."

The corporal looked down at the Glock 17 pistol hanging in the low-slung holster strapped to her right leg before smiling in embarrassment.

"I'm afraid that we are running late in kitting out this batch of soldiers, miss. I can however have Private Welland take care of you now."

"Don't! These soldiers were here first. I will wait my turn."

The corporal looked scandalized by her words.

"But, maam, you're an officer. I can't make you wait."

"A good officer takes care of his men first, Corporal. I will wait."

"Er, yes maam!" Replied the store clerk, both surprised and delighted, before returning to serve the waiting soldiers.

Walking away from the counter, Nancy sat on a wooden bench set against the wall, next to two young soldiers busy trying on new boots. She looked at the shoulder patches and hat badges of the nearest soldier and smiled to the young man, who was no more than twenty years old.

"How long have you been with the Edmonton Regiment, Private?"

"Eight months, maam." Answered timidly the soldier while eyeing her rank slip-ons. Nancy noticed that and grinned.

"Not accustomed to see female officers I bet, Private?"

"No, maam. May I ask when the army allowed women in, maam?"

"Actually, the Canadian Army normally doesn't, except for Nursing Sisters and civilian employees. I'm a special case."

Nancy could guess by the soldier's expression then that he probably was imagining the kind of favors or strings he believed that she had pulled to be such a special case. Given the mentality of the period and the very low professional status given to women in 1940, Nancy had to agree that the soldier had good reasons to wonder. The arrival in the clothing store of two young Canadian Army captains and the shouted order by the sergeant present for his men to come to attention then took Nancy out of her thoughts. Seeing the two captains jump the lineup of soldiers and go to the service counter, Nancy got up from her bench and calmly walked to them

as one of the captains started demanding to be served. Tapping that officer's right shoulder, she put on a stern expression as both captains turned around and looked up at her with surprise.

"I believe that there is a lineup, Captain. You will have to wait your turn."

The captain directly facing Nancy looked at her rank slip-on and her low-slung pistol before looking back up into her eyes.

"What is this masquerade, miss? There are no women in the Canadian Army, much less as officers. I could have you arrested for impersonating an officer."

"First of, Captain, I am a commissioned officer of the Canadian Army. Second, I was recently promoted by General McNaughton himself to the rank of major. You want to argue that point with him, fine! In the meantime, either wait your turn or leave."

Too stunned to reply at first, the captain hesitated for a second, then started walking away, followed by the other captain. A stern command from Nancy stopped both officers dead in their tracks.

"STOP! Aren't you forgetting something, Captain?"

Anger visible on his face, the captain she had admonished saluted her, then walked out as soon as Nancy saluted back. The waiting soldiers watched the whole episode with growing expectation, but their sergeant quickly returned their attention to the kitting out process.

Nancy's turn at the counter came ten minutes later. The corporal store clerk took out a form and smiled to her.

"Now, maam, what do you exactly need?"

"Four sets of battledress uniforms, with boots, two service dress uniforms with four shirts and ties, two pairs of female service shoes and two senior officer's service caps, along with a winter greatcoat. As I said before, I already have my own web gear and helmet."

The corporal scratched his head as he thought over that.

"Er, you do realize that we do not have battledress uniforms made for women, maam. As for female dress uniforms, we were told to requisition British models just for you. We brought a rack for you to chose from."

"They will do just fine. I wasn't exactly ready to go around dressed as a Nursing Sister."

"I can believe that, maam. By the way, the tailor shop is just next door, in this building. You will be able to have adjustments made to your uniforms right away."

"Excellent! Let's begin, then."

Putting down Nancy's particulars on his form first, the store clerk then started going through the rows of shelves, picking up selected pieces of uniforms and bringing them to the service counter for Nancy to try them on. Going in and out of a nearby dressing cabin, Nancy finally had the desired number of uniforms with an approximate fit. The store clerk then looked at the patches and insignias on her uniform and beret, taking out from under the counter a number of patches and badges.

"Hmm, major's rank slip-ons, Canada patch, General Staff cap badge. As for medal ribbons, if you have medals, the tailor shop can put them on."

"Please add paratrooper wings to those, Corporal." Said calmly Nancy, making the man's head snap up in surprise.

"Uh, right! Paratrooper wings... I will show you to the tailor shop now."

The corporal then insisted on carrying both of the kit bags filled with Nancy's new uniforms but she would have none of it.

"One man, one kit, Corporal. I'll carry those."

"As you wish, maam. This way, please."

A short walk out of the clothing store and into the building's central hallway led them to the tailor shop, a large room where two civilian women were busy mending or adjusting uniforms. The older of the two, a thin woman in her forties, came to the service counter and looked up and down Nancy with a critical eye.

"Hmm, whatever they gave you here, miss, it must be too short and too narrow at the shoulders. By the way, what is that uniform you are wearing, Miss? I never saw this kind before."

"That's understandable, miss: it is unique here. This is a Canadian Forces combat uniform. Now, can you make these battledress and service uniforms fit better on me? I'd hate to see my shapes not being put to their best values."

"I'm sure that all those young soldiers would hate that too. I will try to keep everyone happy... within dress regulations. You may leave now, Corporal."

Waiting for the store clerk to leave, the seamstress then led Nancy behind a screen and asked her to undress to her underwear. Nancy's competition pistol belt, with its Glock 17 pistol, made her look at Nancy with some misgivings.

"This doesn't look like army issue gear, Miss."

"It isn't! This is professional competition gear."

The seamstress kept any further remarks to herself and started measuring Nancy and making her try her new uniforms. It took her over an hour to try and adjust every uniform, with a lot of sewing still left to be done. Seeing that it was close to lunch hour, the seamstress grabbed a form and a pen.

“Alright, Miss. I will note down your medals, if any, then we will break for lunch. How much in a hurry are you to get all this ready?”

“In a big hurry.” Replied Nancy, taking out her PMO’s pass and showing it to the seamstress. “My time is very precious to the Prime Minister. I hate to push you, but it must be all ready by this evening at the latest.”

The woman couldn’t help step back, somewhat intimidated.

“Miss, who are you, really?”

“Major Nancy Laplante, Special Military Advisor to the Prime Minister. About my medals, you will need to install ribbons for the VC, CBE and MC. Do you have any VC ribbon here?”

“Er, I will have to check, Major.” Said the stunned woman before hurrying to her work desk and searching for a moment in its drawers.

“You’re lucky, Major: I have some VC ribbon left. Er, do you mind if we go now for lunch?”

“Not at all. In fact, you could guide me at the same time to the mess. I have a car.”

“Oh, good! We eat with the army nurses at the officers’ mess, which is a good fifteen minutes walk from here.”

“Then, close this place and bring your friend. My car is in the parking lot across the road.”

The two seamstresses didn’t have to be told twice. The tailor shop, with Nancy’s uniforms put aside in a corner, was locked up in a moment. Leading out the seamstresses, Nancy walked out of the front door, only to stop abruptly.

“Aw, not again!” She said in a disgusted tone at the sight of the mixed crowd of soldiers and civilian workers milling around her car. The senior seamstress then saw with alarm Nancy’s right hand move to her right hip as she imitated an American western drawl.

“Well, time to scare those critters away!”

Instead of going for her pistol, Nancy’s hand went into her hip pocket, coming out with a key holder. Pointing the key holder towards her car, Nancy then pressed the button of the remote engine starter, making the V-6 engine roar to life. The crowd of onlookers immediately stepped back from the vehicle, taken by surprise.

“Works every time.” Said Nancy, smiling, as she resumed walking towards her car, the two seamstresses right behind her.

“How did you do that, Major?” Asked the younger one.

“Remote control device. Nothing fancy, really.”

The soldiers around her car came to attention and saluted as Nancy closed in. Returning their salute but also ignoring the barrage of questions, she unlocked the driver’s door and got in, unlocking the passenger doors for the two seamstresses. The older woman, taking place in the front passenger seat, couldn’t help stare in bewilderment at the electronic equipment and displays cluttering the car’s dashboard.

“My god! What’s all this?”

“6,400 dollars worth of options and special equipment.” Replied Nancy laconically while backing out of her parking spot. She inserted a laser disk in her CD player as she drove away from the crowd.

“Would you like some music, girls?”

“Er, why not?” Answered the head seamstress, still fascinated by the interior of the car. “Turn right on this street, Major. The mess is half a mile down the road. Where did you get this car, if I may ask?”

“In Montreal, but it is now a one-of-a-kind car.”

“Like you, Major?” Asked the senior seamstress, staring at Nancy, who shrugged her shoulders.

“I’m sorry, miss, but I am not permitted to talk much about myself. The Germans seem to know everything about me, yet those dodos at M.I.5 insist that I don’t speak to our own people.”

The music from her CD player then got the attention of both of Nancy’s passengers, with the younger one bending forward to stick her head between the two front seats.

“That’s really nice. Who is singing?”

“An Irish group called ‘The Corrs’.”

“They are really good. By the way, my name is Rachel Sinclair.”

“And mine Mary Corey.” Added the senior seamstress. Nancy shook hands with both women quickly, driving with one hand.

“Your car seems very easy to drive, Major.” Said Corey. “I also did not see you change gears once.”

“I don’t need to: this car has an automatic transmission.”

Both British women exchanged a glance: that major and her car were certainly out of the ordinary.

Guided by Mary Corey, Nancy soon pulled up in the parking lot of the officers' mess, which was nearly full with jeeps and staff cars.

"Alright, girls: let's go eat!"

Carefully locking up her car first, Nancy then let Mary and Rachel lead the way to the mess, saluting the senior officers she met on their way in. While those senior officers returned her salutes, most of the junior officers who should have saluted Nancy either stared blankly at her or ignored her, sneering in disdain at her rank insignias. She stayed apparently oblivious to this, following the seamstresses to the officers' dining room. The young duty officer selling meal tickets at the entrance of the room pointed at the pistol on Nancy's right hip.

"I'm sorry, Miss, but weapons are not allowed in the dining lounge: Camp Commandant's orders."

"I'm equally sorry, Lieutenant, but I have to be armed at all times: Prime Minister's orders."

She showed her PMO's pass as she spoke. The duty officer hesitated but finally relented and sold her a meal ticket. By that time, Mary and Rachel were already sitting at a round table between two tables occupied by Canadian Army Medical Corps Nursing Sisters. The latter, like all the other officers in the dining lounge, had fallen silent and were staring at Nancy as she sat besides Mary Corey. Nancy flashed her best smile at the Nursing Sisters sitting at the nearest table.

"Hi, girls! How is life treating you?"

"Unfairly of course, Major. Isn't this a man's world?" Replied a young, baby-faced blonde with neck-length hair.

"Aaah, a fellow feminist. Do not despair, Nurse: those men will one day see the light and understand who is on top. By the way, I'm Nancy Laplante, from the Prime Minister's Office."

"And I'm Patricia Wilson, Nurse at the First Canadian Field Hospital. My two friends are Sylvie Comeau and Diane Crandell."

"Pleased to meet you." Said Nancy while shaking hands with the three nurses. One of them pointed a finger at her.

"Hey! Aren't you the one who shot four German spies in London's St James' Park a week ago?"

“First, they were assassins, not spies. Yes, I shot them when they tried to kill me. One of them was an Irishman, actually.”

“How did you manage that, Major?” Asked Diane Crandell with poor tact. Patricia Wilson glanced unhappily at her as Nancy answered calmly.

“Easy, Nurse: I’m a better pistol shooter than they were.”

“Why would the Germans send a hit team to London to kill you, Major?” Asked Patricia as politely as she could. Nancy pointed at her temple.

“I have knowledge that the Germans don’t want the British to be able to use. I’m sorry but I can’t say more on this.”

A mess steward showed up then to take Nancy’s order and those of the two seamstresses. Sylvie Comeau waited until the steward was gone before pointing at Nancy’s Glock 17 pistol.

“Was this the pistol you used, Major?”

“No! I had a more powerful weapon then.”

A British Army colonel stopped at that moment in front of Nancy and put forward his hand.

“Give me your pistol! Weapons are not authorized in my mess.”

The short, overweight colonel then saw Nancy’s rank slip-on.

“What’s this? What the hell are you trying to prove, miss?”

Nancy got up from her chair and stood at attention before answering the irate colonel.

“Sir, I have strict orders from the Prime Minister to be armed at all times.”

“What’s this baloney? Don’t you lie to me, miss! And what is this phony uniform anyway?”

Nancy managed with difficulty to keep her voice respectful as she took out her PMO’s pass and showed it to the colonel.

“I am not lying, sir, and I am a major in the Canadian Army. You can vet my story with Lieutenant General Ismay, sir. I have his telephone number.”

Nancy’s resolve only made the colonel angrier.

“Miss, I don’t give a rat’s ass about your stories! No female will ever be accepted in any decent army as an officer. You’re a fraud!”

Nancy became livid with rage as the male officers present stared at her, many obviously enjoying her dressing down. Taking a small box from a pocket of her camouflaged shirt, she opened it and showed the medal inside to the colonel, whose eyes popped open at its sight.

“Sir! His Majesty King George VI pinned this Victoria Cross on me in St-Thomas Hospital three weeks ago. If you persist in demeaning me in front of subalterns, I will put a redress of grievance against you in General Ismay’s hands, sir. May I have lunch now, sir?”

“Like hell you are!” Shouted the colonel, too stubborn to back down. “Get out of my mess, now!”

Seeing that the colonel was beyond logic, Nancy turned away and started walking out of the dining lounge. A Canadian infantry major with a sarcastic smile on his face turned in his chair to watch Nancy leave.

“Better luck next time... Majorette!”

As the male officers around burst out in laughter, Nancy stopped abruptly next to him and stared down into his eyes, pointing an index at him.

“The base gymnasium, this evening at seven. We will have a demonstration on unarmed combat. Be there or be called a coward!”

The major was too surprised to reply before Nancy walked out of the dining lounge.

Still full of rage, Nancy nearly charged headlong into a Canadian brigadier general as he and two other senior officers were about to enter the dining lounge. Stepping aside while excusing herself, she saluted the general and was ready to leave when the general stopped her with a gesture of the hand.

“Major Laplante? I was hoping to meet you one day. We have a lot to talk about.”

“You know me, sir?”

“General McNaughton briefed me and the higher division staff about you, Major. I am Brigadier Salmon, Deputy Commander of the First Canadian Infantry Division. Could we talk over lunch?”

“I would love to, sir, but the base commander just threw me out of the dining lounge.”

“Why?” Asked Salmon, frowning.

“He called me a fraud, sir.”

That made Salmon shake his head in frustration.

“Major, this may be a good time to set things right. Follow me!”

Sandwiched between the Brigadier General and his two staff officers, Nancy went back the way she had come, reentering the dining lounge behind Salmon. The base commander, now sitting at a table, turned deep red at their sight and got up, hurrying to the Brigadier.

“Sir! That woman can’t come here: she doesn’t belong in this mess!”

Salmon stared severely at the British colonel and replied in a voice loud enough for all present to be able to hear him.

“Colonel, Major Laplante was recently promoted by order of General McNaughton. She is a commissioned senior officer of the Canadian Army and has every right to be in this mess. She is also a highly decorated officer worthy of respect. Anyone who will dispute her rank would also be disputing General McNaughton’s authority. Am I clear, Colonel?”

“But... she brought weapons in this mess, in contravention of base regulations, sir.”

“Colonel, in case you never read newspapers, Major Laplante was recently the target of an assassination attempt by German agents in London and has to be armed for her own protection. It seems actually that the Germans saw her real value better than anyone here in this mess. Now, go back to your lunch and leave Major Laplante alone from now on!”

“Er, yes sir!”

Feeling deeply humiliated, the colonel returned to his table as the other officers in the mess looked down at their plates, smarting from the Brigadier’s not too subtle collective reprimand. On their part, the seamstresses and the Nursing Sisters smiled gleefully as Nancy was invited to sit at the table reserved for general officers. Salmon let Nancy time to order her lunch before bending forward and lowering his voice to a near whisper.

“Major, very few people in Aldershot know even part of the story about you. I was given the short version of it and I have to say that I found it quite fantastic.”

“Sir, how I got here is now irrelevant. I am now here and will do my best to shorten this war. There are plans in motion now to produce a number of new weapons and equipment based on the technological knowledge I brought with me from the future. These weapons will eventually have to be tested in combat, most likely during a commando raid in occupied France. I already suggested to Prime Minister Churchill that, as the only fully equipped army formation now deployed on British soil, your division should be involved in that raid, in conjunction with British commandos.”

“Super!” Exclaimed Salmon, obviously pleased. “Do you have any more details about that future raid?”

“I do, sir. You must however understand that it will take weeks and months before we are ready for it. I believe that it should involve a night surprise attack on a German submarine base along the French coast. Those submarines are hurting us badly and must be taken out. Your division will probably provide mechanized support to commando troops in the form of Bren

Carriers. These machines are small, fast and light enough to be loaded in quantity on amphibious transport vessels.”

“A good idea. Such a force would indeed be highly mobile. Major, may I ask you a personal question?”

“Go ahead, sir.”

“I was told that you came from the future, but not from which year. Could you...”

The two colonels dining with Nancy and Salmon bent forward to hear better, intense curiosity on their faces.

“Sir, the Germans know it already. There is no point in hiding it from you. I come from the year 2012. I am not even born yet.”

“Good god!” Could only whisper the shaken general.

18:36 (GMT)

Camp gymnasium, Aldershot

Patricia Wilson couldn't help stare in wonderment at Nancy when the Mitsubishi Outlander came to a halt in the parking lot of the camp gymnasium: Nancy, wearing her night vision goggles, had just driven at night in blackout conditions at full speed, as if it was daylight, scaring to death Patricia and the three other Canadian Army Nursing Sisters in the car.

“Those goggles are incredible, Major. When will the army get more of them?”

“Decades, Nurse! Let's kick some male ass.”

Nancy took off the night goggles and their head harness and carefully stored them back in their protective case before leaving her car and following the four nurses inside the gymnasium. She was not overly surprised to find over 200 men, officers as well as junior ranks, waiting inside and obviously not being there to practice sports or to get fit. Patricia Wilson looked at the crowd, which was now staring at Nancy, and whispered to her.

“I don't like this, Major. It seems that your opponent wants to have as many witnesses as possible for this fight. He obviously hopes to humiliate you publicly. Are you sure that you want to do this, Major?”

“Nurse Wilson, if I back down now, I might as well turn in my commission. Besides, I intend to win. Let's get close to those floor mats in that far corner.”

As they made their way to the mats, Nancy saw her opponent, in T-shirt and boxer shorts, practicing with a punching bag and making a show of it. She kept from smiling at the sight: the

man was too confident for his own good. His boxing technique, while fair, was not very impressive to a master-level black belt karateka like her.

The crowd of spectators quickly formed around the surface covered by the floor mats as Nancy put down her small carrying bag on a bench and took off her gun belt, handing it to Patricia. She next took off her combat shirt, revealing a khaki muscle shirt underneath. Whispers went around the spectators as her wide shoulders and muscular arms became plainly evident. More whispers followed as she started stretching and warming her muscles, showing the suppleness of an accomplished gymnast. Patricia, who was watching Nancy's opponent, was pleased to see doubt appear on his face for an instant. She then saw two more persons enter the gymnasium and tensed up: they were Brigadier General Salmon and the divisional chief of staff, Colonel Murray. Someone yelled an order and everybody in the gymnasium came to attention. Making his way to the front rank of the crowd, the brigadier looked at both Nancy and her opponent.

"What is going on here, Major?"

"I was going to give a demonstration on unarmed combat, sir." Answered Nancy while standing rigidly at attention. Salmon nodded his head.

"Then proceed, Major. Do as if I was not here."

"Thank you, sir!"

Stepping on the mats, Nancy faced her adversary from ten feet away and addressed the crowd of soldiers and officers.

"Ladies and gentlemen, there is only one rule that applies to unarmed combat in time of war: that there are no rules. Your only concern is to win and survive. Forget about cricket and gentlemanly rules. If you think that this is not right, then you might as well go home, because your German or Japanese opponent won't bother about rules and will eat you for breakfast. There are however a few important points about unarmed combat. One of them is to not underestimate your adversary."

Nancy then adopted a combat stance, both fists up and legs apart, with the left leg forward.

"Come on, Major! Show me what you got."

The infantry officer, who was slightly smaller than Nancy, came forward in a boxer's stance, visibly hesitant to strike a woman. Nancy decided to make him shed his inhibitions and struck first. A side kick to his plexus sent the man reeling backward while holding his chest and

gasping for air. A low sweeping kick then made him fall flat on his back. As he painfully got back on his feet, Nancy addressed the crowd again.

“As you can see, unarmed combat is much more than simply using your fists to pound your opponent. If you have to bite your adversary to get out of a tight corner, then go for it. Remember that hits are better concentrated on the sensitive parts of your opponent or opponents. Apart of the good old groin, those parts include the articulations.”

As the infantry major swung a fist at her face, Nancy easily deflected his blow, then his follow-up uppercut before kicking his left kneecap. The man screamed with pain as Nancy calmly took a step back.

“An immobile opponent is as good as dead if unarmed. Kneecaps are always good targets to strive for. Other good targets are the plexus and the throat, to cut his airflow.”

As the now enraged infantry officer advanced on her and swung at her with a powerful right hook, Nancy ducked under his swing and hit the man's throat hard with the palm of her right hand. The major reeled backward, gasping for air, as Nancy spoke again to the crowd.

“Once your adversary is out of air, you then can do many nasty things to him.”

That was when Nancy really started hitting in earnest, spending on her opponent her pent up frustration and anger at constantly being put down by misogynistic and overrated snobs. Pummeling his face systematically with all her strength, she then finished him off with a high-flying kick to the forehead accompanied by a piercing kiay scream. His face bloody, the man fell heavily on the floor mats, out for the count. Two of the Nursing Sisters present hurried to him as the crowd of men looked on in stunned disbelief, finally braking out in applauses. Brigadier General Salmon looked as impressed as everyone else when he stepped forward to shake Nancy's hand.

“Good show, Major! That was quite a demonstration. I wish I could have you as an instructor for my troops.”

“I unfortunately am already extremely busy, sir: Prime Minister Churchill is counting on me for many things. In fact, now that my new uniforms are ready and in my car, I will have to drive back to London tonight. I have a meeting with the minister of war production, Lord Beaverbrook, tomorrow morning.”

“Then I wish you a safe trip back, Major.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Waiting first for the general to be gone, Nancy then went to examine her opponent, still unconscious, as two nurses cared for him.

"How is he, girls?"

One of the nurses looked up at Nancy briefly.

"Don't worry, Major. He will be alright, if you discount the two black eyes, split lips and the bruises he will be sporting tomorrow. Where did you learn to fight like this?"

"In a martial arts club near Montreal. I have been practicing for over nineteen years now."

"Nineteen years!" Exclaimed Patricia Wilson as she handed back the gun belt to Nancy. "No wonder you are so good at it. Maybe I should find myself a similar club in Toronto after this war."

"You won't find any, Patricia." Replied calmly Nancy.

"Oh, why? What do you have in Montreal that we don't have in Toronto?"

"Real smoked meat sandwiches, for starters." Said Nancy, grinning. Patricia pulled out her tongue at her.

"You French Canadians think only about food."

"Not true! We also think a lot about sex."

That remark made the men around them smile, attracting a retort from Patricia.

"Did you really have to say the S-word, Major? We nurses will now have to deal with these men's false hopes."

"Not my problem. I have my own horde of men to keep at bay in London, including a lovely hunk of an American major. Do you need a ride back to your barrack, girls?"

"Please, Major. That man is coming about now and I will ask his friends to keep an eye on him for the next few hours. Right, sirs?"

"We will." Agreed a captain bent over the battered major. He then looked with newfound respect at Nancy.

"Sorry for the disrespect we showed at lunch, Major. You were just so... unusual."

"I know. In time, you may find that I'm far from unique, Captain. I am sure that those nurses could handle themselves just fine on a battlefield."

That made Patricia snap her head up, hope on her face.

"Do you really think that they would let us serve in the first lines, Major?"

Nancy stared gravely at Patricia.

"Do you want to serve in battle, Nurse Wilson?"

"Of course, Major! That is where we will be most needed."

"Then I will see what can be done. We will talk further about this in my car."

Letting Nancy's opponent in the care of three other infantry officers, Patricia and her comrades waited for Nancy to put her shirt and gun belt back on and to grab her carrying bag before following her to her car. As Nancy was unlocking the front passenger door, Patricia couldn't help ask a question that was burning her.

"Major, I know that you have secrets to keep, but could I ask how you managed to become an army officer when Canadian women are not even allowed in the army yet?"

Nancy slowly faced Patricia and the other nurses as she mentally debated her answer.

"Ladies, you will have to promise me not to repeat what I'm going to tell you to anybody. Do I have your word?"

All four nurses eagerly agreed.

"Good! Patricia, the army I belong to employs women in all the military trades. I am a reserve officer of the Canadian Forces and I come from the year 2012. Someone dumped me back in time against my will and I am now stranded in this time period."

"You... you're a time traveler?"

"An involuntary one without the means to go back. Now, how about a ride in my Mitsubishi Outlander 2010?"

CHAPTER 18 – RIFLE TRIALS

10:15 (GMT)

Wednesday, October 16, 1940

Ash firing range, Camp Aldershot

England

There were more generals and civilian V.I.P.s at the Ash firing range this gray morning than you could shake a stick at. There was even an American delegation present, led by Secretary of War Henry Stimson, who was said to be shopping around to reequip in a hurry American troops that were still ill prepared for the now expected war with Japan. General Philip Joubert, of the Combined Operations Staff, excused himself with Lord Beaverbrook and Sir John Dill, Chief of the British Imperial Staff, before getting a fresh mug of tea from the mobile canteen truck parked besides the 400 yards firing line of the range. He nearly bumped into an American brigadier general on his way back.

“I’m sorry, sir. Aren’t you the American Defense Attaché?”

“That’s right, General! Brigadier General Emmett Walker, at your service. This big major besides me is my Army Assistant Attaché, Major Mike Crawford.”

They all shook hands while eyeing each other professionally.

“May I ask what is the interest of the American delegation at this weapons demonstration, General Walker?”

“Oh, it is twofold, really. First, you may know that we are looking at new weapons to reequip our army and we hope to see interesting things here this morning. Secondly, Major Crawford has somewhat of a vested interest in the coming rifle demonstration.”

“Oh, how so, General?”

Joubert then noticed Crawford’s ordnance specialty insignia on his uniform, as Walker answered him.

“Well, he happens to have worked closely with your Major Laplante in modifying both a B.A.R. and a Bren Gun into automatic assault rifles.”

Seeing Joubert’s surprised look, the tall major offered more explanations.

“I happen to be both a gunsmith and an ordnance engineer, sir. While the design idea came from Nancy, er, Major Laplante, I did the actual gunsmithing work on the prototypes with

the help of a local British gunsmith who loaned his workshop to us. Both the modified B.A.R. and Bren Gun were test-fired first at our embassy's indoor firing range."

"Well, this is certainly a fine example of transatlantic cooperation. Do you know Major Laplante well, Major Crawford?"

Brigadier Walker answered that one, smiling, as Crawford started to blush.

"They know each other very well, General Joubert. How about yourself?"

"I met her a few times, the first one being when she was in hospital, just back from her raid in France. A very gutsy lady indeed."

They all nodded in agreement to that. Walker then spoke in a very deliberate tone.

"You know, General, her example makes me wonder how much good talent we may be wasting by relegating women to secondary, non-combat roles. They may not be ready for the infantry or the artillery, but what about trades like signalers, intelligence specialists, bomber crews and truck drivers?"

"We are actively reassessing this aspect right now, General Walker. However, you can imagine how acrimonious the debate can be on this subject. A lot of old attitudes and preconceptions will have to be thrown out the window, along with quite a few regulations, before women are accepted on the battlefield, or even simply in the Army. The only women that could actually see battlefield service soon are nurses."

Major Crawford tightened his jaws in irritation.

"We know, sir. I hope that today's demonstration will change a few minds."

"What do you mean? You know something I don't about this demonstration?"

Walker grinned from ear to ear and pointed at Crawford.

"Let's just say that Major Crawford has a very well placed source, General."

Joubert suddenly saw the connection and smiled in amusement.

"Major, you are one lucky man."

"And a happy one, sir."

An announcement on the range's loudspeaker system suddenly got everybody's attention.

"May we have your attention, please. The demonstration team is on its way and will arrive shortly."

The crowd of V.I.P.s and senior officers turned their attention towards the access road leading to the range. After a minute or so, an engine noise was heard approaching. However, it came from the air and not from the ground. The crowd's heads went up, surprised, to see a small

twin-engined transport aircraft approach just under the cloud ceiling. Its mission became clear when five small dots dropped from the aircraft.

“By jove! They are parachuting in. Splendid!” Exclaimed Anthony Eden, the British war minister. Spontaneous applause and cheers showed that this unexpected twist in the demonstration was well appreciated. More exclamations soon followed.

“Hey, what kind of parachute are they using?” Asked a Canadian colonel standing near Joubert, who answered him.

“These are of the new model of directional parachute introduced by Major Laplante. Our airborne and commando units are now equipped with it, along with the RAF.”

“Ah, yes, her.” Said the colonel with little enthusiasm now in his voice. His reaction irritated Joubert to no little degree. Walking away from the colonel, he saw the American secretary of war talking to Brigadier Walker while pointing at the parachutes, with Walker taking notes frantically. Under the watchful but incredulous eyes of the crowd, the five parachutists lined up besides each other in mid-air, using a series of tight turns, and approached the range in extended line. Touchdown was incredibly smooth compared to that of standard military parachutes, the soldiers actually hitting the ground running towards the targets and unclipping their parachutes in quick motions. A dozen enlisted men waiting on the sidelines ran up and retrieved the parachutes while the five soldiers of the demonstration team, wearing full battle gear, took hold of their rifles and started firing short bursts while on the run. The noise and muzzle flashes from their weapons were impressive.

“Hell, that’s a lot of firepower for a five-man team.” Exclaimed a brigadier general, sounding envious. He got even more envious when the soldiers started firing some sort of rifle grenades at the targets, ripping them apart from 200 yards. Contrary to known rifle grenades, which needed special muzzle devices and blank cartridges, the soldiers simply plugged grenades on the muzzle of their rifles and fired away, alternating between bullets and grenades without pauses. Whispers of disbelief went through the crowd then. Two of the soldiers suddenly went up from their prone positions at the 200 yards firing line and ran full tilt towards the 100 yards line, supported by intense automatic fire from the three other soldiers. Once they flopped down at the firing line, they opened up with short rifle bursts while the three others joined them at a dead run. The brigadier nodded his head in appreciation.

“These men know their job alright.”

Joubert took his binoculars and examined closely the five soldiers. He smiled but didn’t say a word.

"Now, what the hell is that?" Muttered the brigadier as one of the soldiers, the apparent team leader, unslung what looked like a short, fat steel container tube and, after taking off the end covers, pointed it at an old tank parked besides the targets. A cloud of gray flakes suddenly erupted from the back of the tube, while Joubert thought he saw some kind of projectile fly out from the front end. While the departure noise, incredibly enough, was a barely audible 'POP', the powerful explosion that rocked the tank and blew its hatches open was very audible indeed. Wild cheers came from the crowd as the tank went up in a ball of flames. The team leader picked up the now used tube and led the four other soldiers at a trot in single file towards the V.I.P.s. The applauses and cheers redoubled, to suddenly stop cold, replaced by surprised grunts as the demonstration team stopped ten yards in front of the spectators. Pushing his way through, General Joubert walked to the team leader, offering his hand and smiling.

"Well done, Major Laplante! That was quite a demonstration."

The American secretary of war, with a beaming Major Crawford and Brigadier Walker in tow, was next to congratulate her.

"Major, I meet you at last. I see that you are up to your reputation. You will have to show me more about those weapons you just used, though."

"With great pleasure, sir. We will open the static display now. I'll be happy to answer all your questions there, sir."

The crowd of senior officers nearly parted like the Red Sea before Moses as Nancy and the four Royal Commandos went to a few folding tables in front of a tent, to put their weapons down after unloading them. Joubert sensed with growing anger that the other generals were acting out of contempt towards Laplante rather than out of simple courtesy. Brigadier Walker whispered in his ear.

"Do I feel a bunch of stiffs around us, General?"

"You are certainly correct about that, Brigadier."

Nancy then raised her voice, yelling to be heard.

"If I may have your attention, gentlemen! I am Major Laplante, Special Military Advisor to the Prime Minister, and my goal today was to demonstrate new weapons and equipment that are to be put into service soon with the British Army. First was the Mark III directional parachute which, I am happy to say, is already in widespread service with the RAF and special units of the British Army. Next, the rifle you saw us use. It is called the Enfield Assault Rifle, or E.A.R. in short, and is a compact variant of the Bren Gun. It is meant to equip at first airborne,

commando, royal marines and mechanized units. It is hoped later to equip all infantry units with it. It fires the standard .303 round and uses the same 30-round magazine as the Bren Gun. It can fire in either in semi-automatic or full automatic modes, up to a maximum cyclic rate of 500 rounds per minute. The rifle grenades we used are a new concept called Bullet Trap, or BT grenades. They are launched by simply firing a normal rifle bullet, which then traps itself in the base of the grenade and propels it by imparting it with its kinetic energy. Proposed variants of the BT grenades are dual fragmentation/anti-tank, smoke, incendiary and flare. As for the anti-tank weapon I used last, it uses the Davis counter-shot principle to fire a shaped charge projectile to a maximum effective range of 250 yards. It can actually pierce over ten inches of steel armor. I am now open to your questions, gentlemen.”

Nancy was immediately surrounded by Stimson, Beaverbrook and Eden. The latter, after handling the rifle on display for a while, looked at Stimson with pride, like a kid showing off his new toy.

“I guess you would love to have a rifle like this one for your army, Mister Secretary.”

The American politician smiled and patted the shoulder of Major Crawford.

“Ah, but we’ll have one, be sure of that. The good major here was co-designer of this variant of the Bren Gun and of a similarly modified B.A.R. squad weapon, the latter of which we are adopting now. He modified both guns under the direction and guidance of Major Laplante.” Anthony Eden’s military aide, a colonel, muttered a remark to himself at those words.

“So, a man made this rifle, not her.”

That remark made both Eden and Beaverbrook snap their heads angrily towards him. Eden then shouted loudly, genuinely angered by so much bad faith and prejudice.

“ARE YOU DAFT OR WHAT, COLONEL? YOU WOULD REJECT SUCH A WEAPON JUST BECAUSE A WOMAN MADE IT POSSIBLE?”

“But... sir...” Protested meekly the colonel, suddenly feeling very small.

“BUT NOTHING!”

Totally infuriated by now, Eden turned towards the assembled British and Canadian senior officers who, except for Joubert and a handful of others, were still keeping their distances with Laplante.

“LISTEN NOW, ALL OF YOU! AS WAR MINISTER, I SUPPOSEDLY DEPEND ON YOUR ADVICE TO RUN THE ARMED FORCES. HOWEVER, YOU HAVE UP TO NOW COLLECTIVELY TREATED MAJOR LAPLANTE, WHO HAS MORE THAN PROVEN HER WORTH BOTH IN BATTLE AND ON STAFF DUTIES, LIKE A PARIAH. WHETHER YOU LIKE

IT OR NOT, MAJOR LAPLANTE IS DEEMED BY THE PRIME MINISTER AND BY MYSELF AS VITAL TO OUR WAR EFFORT. I INTEND TO USE HER TALENTS TO THE UTMOST, IRRESPECTIVE OF WHAT YOU MAY THINK OF HER. DO YOU GET MY DRIFT, GENTLEMEN?"

A timid chorus answered the minister, who then signaled to the Chief of the Imperial General Staff to approach him. Sir John Dill did so cautiously, as if expecting his head to be ripped off. He glanced angrily at Eden's aide, who all but shrank out of sight.

"Sir Dill, what is your professional opinion on the weapons demonstrated today, starting with this rifle?"

"Well, sir, this rifle is without a doubt far superior to our present Lee-Enfield bolt-action rifle. Since it is essentially a shortened Bren Gun, its dependability should be as good as the Bren, which is considered excellent in that respect. As for the rifle grenade and this anti-tank launcher, we have nothing comparable in our arsenal. I have no objections to seeing these weapons being adopted by the British Army. They would in fact help greatly our soldiers fight German armored units."

"Excellent! Please note down the following: first, I want this rifle to quickly equip all of the army as soon as possible. The Lee-Enfield rifles thus made available will go to the Territorial Army or will be sold overseas. I want also both this rifle grenade system and this anti-tank launcher to equip as speedily as possible our frontline troops. Furthermore, I want to be kept informed to the fullest about any other new weapon idea originating from Major Laplante. Lastly, scrap that commission we formed on Monday on the revision of the status of women in the armed forces. I will make the new policy by myself. Your generals have just proved that they cannot think straight on that subject, even when winning the war is at issue."

Nancy, both stunned and overjoyed as she was listening in the background, had a hard time to keep from grinning. Eden was not finished however, turning next towards Beaverbrook.

"Can you arrange quickly for the mass production of those new weapons, Lord Beaverbrook?"

"I certainly can, Sir Anthony. Steps have already been taken to mass-produce the new rifles at the Enfield factories."

Major General McNaughton closed on them at that moment.

"Lord Beaverbrook, do you think that it would be amenable to the British government if the Canadian government eventually requested the right to license-produce these weapons in Canada?"

"I see no problems with that, General. I will talk to Enfield about selling a production license to the John Inglis Company of Toronto. In the meantime, we could always share the production between British and Canadian units in England."

"That would be splendid, sir."

Eden turned to face Nancy, who looked like the cat who had just swallowed the canary.

"Major, may I presume that you have plenty more ideas like these in your pretty head?"

"You may, sir, you may."

CHAPTER 19 – PROJECT BLOWHARD

04:06 (GMT)

Thursday, October 24, 1940

Bristol Aircraft Factories

South-West coast of England

“Start the lift engines!”

On Lieutenant-Commander Stilwell’s command, the petty officer sitting at the engines control console in the small bridge of LCMAC-1 started up the four fan engines one after the other. The 86-ton hovercraft started lifting from the hangar’s floor as air blew inside its multiple rubber skirts, the noise and vibrations forcing Stilwell to raise his voice for his next orders to be heard.

“Signal the hangar doors to be opened. Start the main engines, neutral pitch on the propellers.”

The three pairs of Hercules radial engines with their variable pitch propellers came to life on top of the back of the 100-foot long hovercraft. Peter Stilwell turned briefly in his command chair to give a thumbs-up signal to Nancy Laplante, sitting in the starboard corner of the bridge with an excited United States Navy Commander Johnson. The American naval attaché was there on invitation from Nancy as a representative of the American Navy, which was a potential buyer for the hovercraft, in order to evaluate the initial sea trials of LCMAC-1. Further crowding the small bridge was the Bristol Factories engineer who had directed the building of the hovercraft under Nancy’s supervision, a Royal Navy commander from the Admiralty whose task was to officially record the trial performances of the hovercraft, the helmsman, two bridge signalers manning the radios and two watch seamen.

“Lift fan vectoring only. Clear the hangar!”

“Aye, sir!”

The helmsman, sitting in front of Stilwell’s elevated command chair, took hold of a small stick on the right side of his console and pushed it forward. The thirty bag-like air skirts, individually mounted under the craft’s belly on swiveling joints and surrounded themselves by a low pressure external skirt, pivoted rearward, the vectored airflow creating a forward thrust and propelling the hovercraft gently towards the open doors. The gray-painted prototype emerged out of the hangar where it had been secretly built and into the obscurity of the early morning.

"Helmsman, head for the river! One quarter power ahead!"

"One quarter power ahead, aye, sir!"

The petty officer turned the wheel on his aircraft-like control stick in front of him and pushed it forward while the engines petty officer sitting to his right pushed the throttles open a little. The hovercraft, loaded with extra fuel instead of military vehicles in its cargo deck, turned towards the Avon River and picked up speed. Leaving the perimeter of the Bristol Aircraft Factories, it crossed a small ditch as if it did not exist, the large angled nose with its cargo ramp barely pitching down, then up. Picking its way through a specially cleared lane, the hovercraft finally went down a gentle slope and slid on the surface of the Avon. A dark mass on the river, the noisy craft then headed for the Bristol Channel and the open seas.

06:58 (GMT)

Destroyer H.M.S. HESPERUS

Bristol Channel

"Sir, a message from the admiralty."

Navy Captain Richard Jones took the dispatch from the signalman and read it. Puzzlement reflected on his face and he sat on his command chair to read it a second time aloud, so that his First Officer standing near him could hear.

"From Admiralty to all Navy ships in Bristol Channel and St George's Channel areas. Be advised that experimental high-speed craft LCMAC-1 will conduct sea trials in the previously mentioned areas during the morning of October 24. Exercise caution and effect full identification before engaging any contact in those areas during that day. End of message."

Commander Patrick Renfrew raised an eyebrow.

"LCMAC-1? LCM stands for Landing Craft Medium, not normally a very speedy craft. What could the letters AC stand for, though?"

Jones shook his head, obviously at a loss himself.

"It does not matter anyway, Mister Renfrew. Pass the word around: keep an eye for that LCMAC-1 and make sure that all safeties are kept on all weapons until I say otherwise."

"Yes sir!"

The First Officer then walked away, leaving Jones to observe the sea from his bridge command chair.

Another hour passed quietly. The sea was calm and the sky was covered with low clouds. Only one small coastal freighter had been spotted lately as it headed towards Cardiff. That did not mean that Jones and his crew could relax, far from it. Dozens of ships had been sunk in the last few months by German submarines in this area. The low clouds, preventing aircraft patrols, would undoubtedly embolden German submariners in making more use of surface attacks, in order to save precious torpedoes by using their deck guns. If they did that around here, H.M.S. HESPERUS would be ready to deal with them. An alarmed report from the radar room suddenly put Captain Jones on the alert.

“Sir, radar contact from the East, approaching fast. Approximate range seven miles. Speed...”

After a few seconds, Jones grabbed the intercom set in frustration.

“Well, what is its speed, damn it?”

“Er, sir, my radar must be malfunctioning, sir: it is clocking that contact at over sixty knots.”

“WHAT?”

The whole bridge crew snapped their heads toward him when he yelled in surprise and disbelief.

“THAT’S IMPOSSIBLE! CONFIRM THE SPEED!”

One of the lookouts suddenly reported on the intercom.

“Visual contact to port, approaching fast!”

Jones grabbed his binoculars and ran to the open bridge.

08:02 (GMT)

LCMAC-1

The commander from the Admiralty stopped his precision chronometer as the log thrown by a seaman in the water swept by. This was his third clocking in order to confirm the results of the speed run trial without a doubt.

“Lieutenant-Commander Stilwell, your craft’s trial speed is officially confirmed at 65.5 knots.”

All the persons on the bridge, including Nancy Laplante and Commander Johnson, yelled and cheered: they were now by far the fastest naval craft in the world. Nancy went to shake Stilwell’s hand.

“And I thought that all that armament you had added on last week would ruin its top speed. Congratulations!”

“Hell, Nancy, we had to do something about that tail-heavy imbalance. No sense in simply loading inert ballast in the nose if good weapons could do the same thing.”

She had to agree with him on that point. As a result of this, LCMAC-1 was probably the most heavily armed LCM around: it packed one 5.5-inch gun recently removed from the battlecruiser H.M.S. HOOD following a refit, four 20mm cannons, four .50 caliber heavy machineguns and six 21-inch torpedo tubes. A beaming Stilwell signed the logbook entry, followed by the Admiralty's commander. Stilwell then had one of the signalmen send a coded message to the Admiralty announcing the official results of the speed trial. He thought with glee at the number of admirals that would soon choke on their false teeth.

“SHIP DEAD AHEAD! DISTANCE SIX MILES!”

The shout from the lookout got everybody sobered up: it could be a German ship or submarine. A quick glance with his binoculars reassured Stilwell, who passed the word to his now tense passengers.

“It's one of ours! ‘H’ class destroyer, number H57. Hey, that's the HESPERUS, Jones' ship! Hell, let that stiff ass croak on this. Helm! Alter course to cut path 500 yards in front of the HESPERUS.”

08:14 (GMT)

H.M.S. HESPERUS

Captain Jones and his crew were crowding the open bridge and the deck to watch with intense interest the approach of the experimental craft. Lamp signals started flashing from the craft as it was still one mile away. Renfrew read it aloud, slowly.

“LCMAC-1 to HESPERUS. Sending 65.5 knots good day to Captain Jones. Signed Stilwell.”

Renfrew saw his captain suddenly turn deep red.

“WHAT! That opportunist is commanding this wonder?”

“That craft is a wonder alright, Captain. Sixty-five point five knots! The Royal Navy certainly has something to toast about now. Look at the armament on this speedy bugger.”

A signalman ran to them, a dispatch in his hands.

“Sir! Distress call from a freighter about 24 miles West from here: it is under attack from a surfaced German submarine.”

“Bloody hell! Alter course to intercept! Full speed ahead! Mister Renfrew, pass this information by lamp to the LCMAC-1. Maybe they can chase away that submarine before it is too late for that freighter.”

The destroyer turned westward, forcing its engines to its maximum top speed of 36 knots. LCMAC-1, on its part, was soon little more than a dot on the horizon.

08:30 (GMT)

LCMAC-1

“Gunners, load armor piercing! Prepare all torpedo tubes, depth setting: twelve feet.” Nancy waited until Stilwell had his crew ready for combat before tapping his shoulder. He looked at her with an amused smile.

“You really attract trouble, Major. Can you tell me something about hovercraft operations that I should know?”

“As a matter of fact, yes. Since you are floating on a cushion of air, you can pivot on your vertical axis without changing your direction of travel, like a speeding car skidding on ice. You can thus use lift fan vectoring to spin around while putting your main engines at idle. I would not do it in a rough sea, but today you could do it without risk of capsizing. This will make you present the least target area to the enemy while making it easier to point your torpedo tubes.”

Stilwell’s eyes lit up as he saw the possibilities of such a maneuver.

“Of course! I’m also traveling at a high angular speed relative to the German gunners, which should make us difficult to hit. Nice move indeed. Thanks, Nancy!”

She then went to see the Bristol Company engineer, who was sitting besides the Admiralty’s officer. The middle-aged man was mostly succeeding in hiding his nervousness and smiled sheepishly at her when she crouched near him.

“What can I do to help, Miss Laplante?”

“Simple, Mister Price: stay alive! We need you so that you can build more of these hovercraft. So, no heroics, please.”

“What about you, Miss? Your knowledge is vital to us. You should not take risks.” She wiggled her index at him, as if berating a child.

“Mister Price! I thought that you knew me better than that.”

Taking a pair of binoculars, Nancy joined Peter Stilwell in scanning the horizon. Not being a trained sailor, she didn't see anything until he spoke.

“Smoke at two O'clock! Steer to heading 290!”

After another minute, he gave another warning.

“Target, twelve O'clock! Surfaced submarine. There is also a ship that appears to be listing heavily at our one O'clock. Gunners, submarine at our front! Wait for my order to open fire.”

Stilwell then turned towards Commander Bennett and Commander Johnson.

“Commander Bennett, I will ask you to take over if something happens to me. Commander Johnson, as a neutral observer I cannot ask you to participate in this fight, but I will not stop you if you want to help. My best advice is to stick with Major Laplante if you want to be in on the action.”

“I think that I will just do that.” Replied the American. By now, the German submarine and its prey were plainly visible to the naked eye. The freighter's stern was already under water and its superstructures were on fire. A flash from the submarine, followed by an explosion on the freighter's hull, showed that the Germans were not finished yet with the cargo ship. Stilwell then got on the general intercom.

“Main gun, target the sub's conning tower and fire at will. Cannons and machineguns will concentrate their fire on the submarine's deck guns. Do not give them a chance to reply and open fire at a thousand yards range. Tubes one and four, open the forward caps and stand by to fire.”

A flash and a loud boom announced the firing of the first 5.5-inch shell. It fell long by 300 yards. The second shot was still long, but by less than fifty yards. The third one splashed just in front of the submarine. The gun crew then started to feed shells in their weapon as fast as they could. Shells splashes bracketed the submarine at a rate of over nine rounds per minute, with a solid hit on the conning tower with the sixth round. The Germans were not taking it lying down either. They were now firing their 105mm and 37mm deck guns at the hovercraft, apparently confident that they could get the best of the exchange. Under the direction of Stilwell, the helmsman kept steering the hovercraft sideways by using lift vectoring, making themselves more difficult to hit. At a range of 2,000 yards, as the submarine had already taken four hits and with its 105mm gun destroyed, a 37mm shell exploded against the guardrail in front of the starboard bow 20mm cannon. Fragments cracked some of the armored glass bays of the

bridge and swept both cannon servants. Nancy cringed as the explosion rattled the bridge. Looking around her, she saw with relief that nobody on the bridge had been hurt. Continued gun barks told her also that the rest of LCMAC-1 gunners were still alive and kicking. Leaving the bridge by its aft door, she ran out to the two blood-covered gunners and checked them out. One, a young boy barely old enough to be drafted, was dead. His partner was still alive but had taken multiple fragments in his torso and arms and was bleeding profusely. Nancy took out her regulation first aid dressing from the left leg pocket of her battledress and applied it to the worst hit area. She suddenly felt someone besides her and turned her head, to see Commander Johnson kneeling close by the wounded man and opening a first aid kit. She patted him on the shoulder.

“You take care of him, sir. I have customers to serve.”

She then took position behind the 20mm cannon and started firing at the submarine.

Realizing by now that they were in serious trouble, the Germans piled down the deck hatches as their submarine started to move forward, ready to dive. That was when Stilwell launched two torpedoes at short range before speeding past the submarine, all weapons still blazing. One of the torpedoes barely missed the stern of the submarine. The other did not. The sub was bodily raised out of the water by the underwater explosion at the level of its engine room, splashing back down and immediately taking a list by the stern. Nancy and the rest of the LCMAC-1's crew cheered wildly as a few Germans started jumping out by the forward deck hatch. She abruptly stopped cheering when she remembered the freighter that had started this whole business. Its bow was now the only part visible above water, vertical and sinking in a cloud of steam. She could see some movement in the layer of floating oil and debris around it. Nancy went to see Stilwell inside the bridge as he was finishing a damage and casualties check. It appeared that the 37mm shell that had knocked down the two gunners had been the only hit on LCMAC-1.

“Mister Stilwell, I see survivors in the water from that unfortunate cargo ship. What do you say if we go pick them up?”

The British looked at the sinking freighter, then at the eastern horizon, where a smoke trail was announcing the approach of the hard-driving HESPERUS. He then nodded his head.

“You're right. The HESPERUS can take care of those German submariners. Helmsman, one third ahead! Come to heading 098! We will pick up the survivors from the freighter.”

Him and Nancy then went to the back of the bridge, where Johnson, Bennett and Price were taking care of the wounded and still unconscious gunner. Stilwell's face reflected genuine concern.

"How is he doing?"

Johnson shook his head in frustration.

"I'm not sure. One thing I can say is that he will die if not brought quickly to a hospital."

"Where is the nearest port with a hospital?"

Nancy's question made Stilwell hurry to his chart table. He pointed at a position due West of the Southwest tip of England.

"This is where we are now. Plymouth is the closest port but Portsmouth is our largest naval base in the area, plus it has a much better-equipped hospital than Plymouth. At top speed, we could be there in about four hours and still have a comfortable fuel reserve. Let's pick up those survivors in the water as fast as we can, then we will dash for Portsmouth. I know that we are supposed to be still a secret experimental craft, but I'll be damned if I'm going to waste lives on account of it."

Nancy smiled at him and gently took hold of his hand on the chart table.

"Thanks, Peter! That's the way I like you."

"You're welcome, Nancy. Now, let's see how many people made it out of that freighter."

Stilwell then turned towards Commander Bennett.

"Mister Bennett, could you advise Portsmouth that we will dash there with wounded on board? Also, please ask the HESPERUS to take care of those Germans in the water."

Bennett nodded and went to the radio room, situated aft of the bridge.

What they soon saw around the wreckage from the freighter horrified them: mixed with a few merchantmen, dozens of children ranging from toddlers to adolescents clung to what they could at the surface of the oily water.

"NOOO!" Shouted Stilwell. "Those German bastards sank a ship transporting children to Canada for safekeeping."

Nancy had read before about such transports being sunk, but it did nothing to help her as she heard small, desperate voices crying for help. Tears in her eyes, she scrambled down the ladder to the vehicle deck and rushed to the bow vehicle ramp, followed by Horace Price and one sailor. She punched the opening button of the ramp and grabbed the telephone besides it. The big ramp was nearly down in the water by the time Stilwell answered.

"Listen to me carefully, Peter. We won't need to put boats in the water if we do it right. First, send me all the men you can spare down to the vehicle deck, along with warm blankets, stretchers and first aid kits. Then, using lift fan vectoring only, maneuver the craft as I will tell you: I will scoop up the survivors by using the bow ramp as an elevator. Understood?"

"Got it!"

The whole operation went better than she hoped for, LCMAC-1 proving to be a very agile craft indeed. The big bow ramp, meant to unload tanks and other vehicles, scooped up whole groups of survivors with ease. The last load was a survival raft filled with nine children and a Red Cross nurse, all shivering and wet. The nurse handed to Nancy a small girl covered with burns before crawling out of the raft: her left leg had a nasty compound fracture just under the knee. Horace Price rushed to her with a medical kit as Nancy hugged the small girl, who was severely burned and in a state of shock. Closing the bow ramp, Nancy advised Stilwell by intercom that he could get on his way, then wrapped the little girl in a blanket. Sitting besides the wounded nurse, now lying on a stretcher and with Price applying a rudimentary splint on her broken leg, Nancy gently caressed the woman's hair.

"We are now heading towards Portsmouth's hospital, Miss. You are out of danger now. Do you know the name of this little girl?"

"Yes: her name is Betty Myers." Answered the nurse with difficulty, obviously in great pain. "My name is Julie Hargrove. Me and six other nurses were escorting 183 children to Canada when that submarine attacked us. Our ship was the JOHN IRVING."

Nancy's mouth opened in horror: they had picked up only 43 children, six merchantmen and this nurse. Excusing herself for a moment, Nancy went back to the intercom to pass that information to Stilwell, with the request that he passed it further on the radio. She hesitated for a second as she was going to put down the receiver, looking at little Betty Myers. The child's burns were extensive and she was undoubtedly going to suffer horribly once the sedating effects of shock subsided. There was one way to get to Portsmouth even faster, a way she was alone on board to know fully about and one she was not supposed to disclose today because of the presence of Commander Johnson. Making her mind, Nancy climbed the ladder to the bridge, little Betty still in her arms. Emerging on the bridge, she signaled Stilwell to join him discreetly in one corner.

"The sea appears still to be fairly calm, Peter. Do you think that this craft could handle a faster speed?"

“Yes, if we could go faster. Our engines are however already at full power.”

“Not all of them, Peter. That mysterious tubular device I had installed between our two ducted propellers last week is an experimental aircraft engine. We were going to test it another day, when only British personnel would be present, but this is an emergency situation.”

“How powerful is that experimental engine?”

“Quite powerful, actually: it is meant to provide a 200 miles per hour speed boost to our heavy bombers. The whole thing is a self-contained unit, with its own fuel tank, and is designed so that it could be quickly bolted on top of a bomber as a booster engine. I know how to activate it but you will have to evacuate the weather deck and the open bridge first: the relative wind of our speed would blow away any sailor standing outside.”

“Christ! That I need to see. Alright, give me a minute.”

As Stilwell shouted orders to his men, Nancy approached the engines control console and, taking a key out of one pocket, unlocked a small box that had been bolted on it. Inside were three indicator gauges, two switches and a control knob.

“All the outside decks are clear, Major.” Announced Stilwell.

“Then, hang on to your suspenders.”

Switching on the circuits of the experimental pulse jet unit, Nancy then pressed the starter button. A deafening noise similar to that of a giant motorcycle then erupted, making everybody but Nancy jump in surprise. At the same time, the hovercraft was accelerated forward as if kicked by a giant.

“What the hell is that?” Exclaimed Commander Johnson. Nancy turned gradually the control knob to full thrust, making everybody brace against the acceleration, before answering.

“Something you were not supposed to know about, Mister Johnson. However, little Betty here can't wait.”

09:50 (GMT)

H.M.S. HESPERUS

It was some very stern-faced British sailors who picked up the few German submariners floating on the ocean. The latter had by then seen more than a few small bodies on the surface of the water and had realized with horror what they had done. They didn't expect any favors now from the British and got none either. One of the Germans had a last look at the departing LCMAC-1 as he climbed a rope ladder alongside the HESPERUS.

“Gott und Himmel! What chances do we have against things like this?”

A British officer who spoke German heard him and bent over the guardrail to look at him with pure hatred.

“Better chances than what you gave those kids in the water, bastard!”

13: 08 (GMT)

Harbormaster’s Office

Portsmouth

“Sir, another message from LCMAC-1.”

“Put it on loudspeaker, Leading Seaman Cross.”

Commander Matthew Vernon took the radio microphone in his hands as he listened to the short-range radio guard frequency.

“Portsmouth Harbor, this is LCMAC-1, come in, please.”

“LCMAC-1, this is Portsmouth Harbormaster, go ahead.”

“Portsmouth, we have severely wounded children on board. Request high speed approach to the harbor point, over.”

Vernon looked out through the windows of the office, then at the ships schedule before answering.

“LCMAC-1, there is no traffic in the harbor at this time. You are cleared for fast approach, over.”

“Portsmouth, how wide is the boat concrete ramp at the end of Gunwharf Road?”

“Wait, out!”

Vernon looked in puzzlement at Chief Petty Officer Sutton. Gunwharf Road was just behind the harbor point and close to the navy hospital. They could actually see it from one of the East side windows of the office. CPO Sutton grabbed a pair of binoculars and examined the boat ramp.

“I’d say that it is at a minimum a good fifty feet wide, sir.”

Vernon passed that information on the radio, which was acknowledged by LCMAC-1.

“Why would they need to know that?” Asked Vernon to nobody in particular. Sutton’s face suddenly lit up in comprehension.

“I got it, sir! This LCMAC-1 is some sort of landing craft, right?”

“Er, yes. So?”

"Well, sir, those kind of craft often have large bow ramps to unload vehicles and troops: they probably want to disembark their wounded as near as possible to the hospital. It all makes good sense."

"I think that you are right, Mister Sutton. Please call the hospital and warn them that they will receive casualties soon, most of them children."

"I'm on it, sir!"

As Sutton was calling the hospital, the shaken voice of the captain of a minesweeper currently twelve miles West of Portsmouth came in on the radio's loudspeaker.

"Portsmouth Harbormaster, this is the COVINGTON. A... thing just drove past us, heading towards Portsmouth. I don't know what it is but it was going at over eighty knots of speed and it was flying the Royal Navy ensign."

"EIGHTY KNOTS? Are you sure, COVINGTON?"

"Positive, Portsmouth. I have never seen a craft like it before. I am not even sure if it is a ship or an aircraft."

"Er, thanks for the warning, COVINGTON. Out!"

Everybody in the office, including Vernon, ran to the westward windows, grabbing any binoculars available. Vernon was the first to spot what looked like a smoke trail low on the horizon. That grew quickly into a speeding dot, then into the weirdest thing he had ever seen. Vernon then contacted the radar room by intercom.

"Radar, do you have a fast approaching contact about ten miles West of the harbor?"

"Yes sir, but you won't believe its speed, sir."

"Try me!"

"We just clocked it three times, to make sure we were not making a mistake, sir. That thing is going at 87 knots, sir."

Vernon was swallowing hard when Sutton yelled a warning, his eyes still glued to a pair of binoculars.

"Something that looks like aircraft airbrakes just deployed on that thing, sir. It is now slowing down fast."

A minute later, Sutton confirmed that the fast craft was flying the Royal Navy flag, making Vernon smile with glee.

"Hell, the Germans are in for quite a surprise when they will meet this baby!"

"I believe that they have already met it, sir: LCMAC-1 is flying the Jolly Rodgers."

Vernon then saw himself the black flag with skull and crossed bones, a traditional sign to announce that one had destroyed an enemy ship. Cheers rang out as the strange craft sped by the harbormaster's office, heading towards the boat ramp. They were not at the end of their surprises for the day, though. Lining up on the boat ramp, the craft started climbing the gentle slope, leaving the water and making Vernon's jaw drop to the floor.

The heavy hovercraft finally stopped right in front of the hospital's main entrance, dropping open its bow ramp as the rubber skirts deflated, the lift fans and main engines cut off. Nancy, with little Betty Myers in her arms, was the first to go down the ramp, followed closely by sailors carrying four stretchers. Walking at a rapid pace towards the small crowd of curious medical personnel who had emerged from the hospital to stare at the hovercraft, she waved at them.

"Don't just stand there! There are wounded to bring in."

Her shouted order finally got the doctors and nurses moving. It then took less than five minutes to bring the wounded and the unhurt children inside. Nancy saluted when four sailors passed by her, carrying the covered body of the young gunner to the hospital's morgue.

"Thanks for caring, Nancy."

She turned her head and saw Peter Stilwell standing besides her, his face solemn.

"It is a shame to die so young. Damn war!"

Stilwell nodded gravely.

"Right you are. If you will excuse me for a moment, I will get to a phone and arrange for our refueling and rearming. I will also advise the Admiralty that we are here."

Left alone in front of LCMAC-1, Nancy looked at the sea, visible between buildings, letting her mind wander aimlessly. The sound of approaching footsteps brought her back to reality half a hour later.

"Major Laplante?"

The newcomer was a tall and thin man wearing a white coat over a navy captain's uniform.

"Yes, Doctor?"

"I just wanted to thank you for bringing those wounded to Portsmouth so quickly: your diligence saved at least two of them."

"You should thank Lieutenant Commander Stilwell: he is the commander of this craft, not me. How are the children?"

“Doing mostly well for the moment. They should all recover in the physical sense. As for their psyche, I don’t know: they went through a very traumatic experience. Did you know that the little girl you carried in, Betty Myers, lost her big sister in the sinking of their ship?”

“Oh god! No, I didn’t know that.”

The doctor hesitated before speaking again, visibly troubled.

“Betty’s big sister was named Nancy, like you, Major. I believe that Betty has subconsciously adopted you as her surrogate sister.”

That brought uncontrollable tears to Nancy’s eyes, leaving her sobbing on the doctor’s shoulder, who had half expected her reaction. He let her cry all she needed, then spoke to her softly.

“Betty has asked for you. Will you come?”

Nancy wiped her face dry.

“Could I stay with her for the night, sir?”

“Major, you can stay here all you want.”

CHAPTER 20 – PHANTOMS IN THE NIGHT

09:58 (GMT)

Monday, October 28, 1940

Vickers Armament Factories

Newcastle, England

“NO, NO, NO! One vision periscope on the commander’s cupola is not enough. How do you expect him to see around in a fight?”

The shop supervisor standing with Nancy besides the prototype main battle tank, nearly completed now, shrugged.

“You should pick a fight with the second engineer: he decided to save on production costs by cutting what he thought unnecessary.”

Nancy nearly exploded then but restrained herself, to the supervisor’s relief: she had proved in the last few days that she was not to be trifled with lightly.

“He did, hey? Where is that little weasel now?”

“Probably having tea in the canteen: it’s tea time, miss.”

She raised her arms in frustration.

“Damn tea time! We can’t get anything done around here: everybody is drinking tea all the time. Stay here, I’ll be back soon with this pencil-pushing asshole.”

The supervisor was wringing his hand as he watched her storm inside the canteen, whose door opened directly on the experimental shop. A commotion in the canteen was followed by its door being kicked open and Nancy going out at a fast walk. Trailing behind with one of his ears firmly pinched in Nancy’s left hand was the second engineer, a little man with a normally big ego. The supervisor giggled at that sight: the man was far from popular with the shop workers. The engineer was nearly out of breath by the time Nancy stopped in front of the tank prototype. She then pointed at the 45-ton machine.

“Mister Green, or should I call you Mister Bean, did you read the War Ministry’s specification for this vehicle lately? Did it occur to you that we are trying here to build a main battle tank and not an economy family sedan?”

“But, this idea about putting eight periscopes on the commander’s cupola is an extravagant waste.” Replied hotly the engineer as he rubbed his reddened ear.

“Oh, is it really? Mister Green, get up there and sit inside the commander’s cupola. I will show you why we need eight periscopes instead of one or two.”

“But...”

“NOW, MISTER GREEN!”

Was it the fact that Nancy was fully seven inches taller than him, the Victoria Cross ribbon on her battledress or her right hand on the grip of the nasty-looking pistol on her right hip that decided the engineer to climb up? The supervisor bet on the pistol. The engineer hesitated as he crouched besides the commander’s hatch, making Nancy push him on.

“Come on, Mister Green, get inside and keep your head under the level of the hatch.”

The little man disappeared inside the turret. His muffled voice then came out.

“Now what?”

Nancy moved to the right of the tank before answering.

“Now, imagine that I am a German soldier about to throw an anti-tank charge on your tank. Do you see me?”

“No, but I can always...”

Green’s head started to emerge from the commander’s cupola. The loud bang of a pistol shot and the ping of the bullet ricocheting on the steel armor of the turret sent his head back inside.

“Correction, Mister Green: I am an armed German soldier about to throw an anti-tank charge on your tank. Do you see me?”

“N... no, Miss.”

“Then, Mister Green, your little cost cutting idea just cost us a whole tank with its four-man crew. You may come out now.”

The engineer cautiously emerged from the turret, then slowly made his way to the ground. Nancy drilled her eyes on him.

“Now, will there be one or eight periscopes on the commander’s cupola?”

“Er, eight, Miss Laplante.”

“It’s Major Laplante to you! Go get your cup of tea now!”

She then turned towards the supervisor, who was trying hard not to laugh, as the engineer ran away from her.

“After this damn tea break is finished, have seven extra periscopes installed around the commander’s cupola, to cover the arc from the eight O’clock to the five O’clock positions. What’s the matter, you never saw a woman blow a fuse before?”

“Never with such panache, miss, er, Major.”

A clerk emerged from the shop's office at that moment and shouted at Nancy.

"Telephone call for you from London, Major."

"I'm coming!"

She sprinted the fifty yards or so to the office and picked up the telephone a secretary pointed to her.

"Major Laplante here!"

"Hi, Nancy!" Said a familiar voice. "Would you care to join me on another beach party soon?"

"George? How are you these days?"

"Pretty good! They promoted me not long ago. Look, I'm in London, at the War Office with General Joubert. We are preparing something interesting that would involve your new baby, LCMAC-1. Would you be interested in going along with us?"

"Hell yes! Er, what does the Prime Minister say about sparing me for that party?"

"Since this would be the official combat test of LCMAC-1, he agreed to spare you as long as you don't take unnecessary risks."

"And what is the definition of unnecessary risk in time of war, George?"

The Royal Commando officer chuckled.

"Beats me! Anyway, could you be in London before supper?"

"No problem! I'll be there by four O'clock. Where do we meet in London?"

"How about the War Office officers' mess, for six O'clock?"

"I'll be there! See you soon!"

Excited at the prospect of some action, Nancy ran to the small office where she had worked and slept to pack her things. She gunned her car out of the parking lot an hour later, only taking time for a quick snack and a filling up for her Jeep Grand Cherokee.

02:55 (GMT)

Sunday, November 3, 1940

LCMAC-1 on approach to port of Lorient

South coast of Brittany, France

LCMAC-1 was in blackout condition, approaching the German submarine base in Lorient on the French coast of Brittany and using only its lift fans in order to be quieter. The extensive minefields and protective nets defending the base had already been penetrated without

problems, since they were essentially useless against a hovercraft. The night was dark, with only the light from the stars and a quarter moon to provide illumination. That was however sufficient for Nancy's night goggles. Standing besides the helmsman, she guided him towards a part of the shore some distance West of the submarine docks. Thankfully for the LCMAC-1 and its occupants, the German fortification works that would turn much of the French coast into the so-called 'Atlantic Wall' were still months away. That meant no extensive minefields or beach obstacles and no lines of coastal bunkers...yet. High above the port, a squadron of British bombers was conducting a diversionary raid to keep the Germans' heads up and to cover LCMAC-1's engine noise.

A nervous major Townsend stood besides Nancy, wearing like her full battledress and helmet and armed with one of the new Enfield assault rifles. Apart of her own E.A.R., Nancy had her customary Glock 17 pistol in its holster on her right hip and a few rifle grenades in ammunition pouches hooked to her black 2012 tactical vest. She was also wearing her modern Kevlar helmet instead of the standard British steel helmet.

"I don't see any gun emplacement or fortification to our front or immediate area. We're two hundred yards from the beach, which seems to be free of obstacles."

She handed her night goggles to Peter Stilwell, who was standing behind the helmsman.

"Here, Peter. You will need these until we get back on board. Take good care of them." Stilwell looked at her with concern and doubt.

"Do you really need to go ashore, Nancy? We can be replaced, while you can't." She looked at him with a little annoyance.

"We discussed that already, I believe. Nobody is truly irreplaceable. Besides, how can I plan a mission and send others into danger while sitting safely on my fanny back in London?" Townsend's white teeth showed up in the darkened bridge as he smiled.

"Ah, but such a nice fanny should be protected at all cost."

"How would you know how nice it is? You never saw it."

"I have a vivid imagination. Besides, maybe you'll get hit in the butt and I'll have the chance to patch it up. Remember our earlier raid in France."

Nancy blushed at his sneaky comment: when the German doctor had removed her shirt and body armor to examine her after she had been shot in the back and chest during the raid on the prison near Gravelines, Townsend had had the opportunity to look at her bare breasts for a few

minutes. He had been discreet about it at the time, but she knew that he had not looked away either. She decided to change the subject.

“Time to go down to the vehicle deck, Major, before you get your hopes up, or something else up anyway.”

Chuckling at the joke, they both went down the steep ladder connecting the bridge with the vehicle deck, where the other members of the commando team were waiting, anxious for action after four hours spent at sea.

“ALRIGHT MEN, ER, PEOPLE: TIME TO HIT THE BEACH!”

Giggling at Townsend’s slip, Nancy went to the second last of the fourteen Bren Carrier light armored vehicles crowding the vehicle deck. Her driver and a two-man anti-tank team were already in the little open-top tracked carrier. She jumped lightly in it, then looked at the medical team’s carrier besides hers, giving it a thumbs up signal. Like the carriers and their drivers, the three medical personnel had been borrowed from the First Canadian Infantry Division for the raid. Apart of being one of the rare fully equipped army formations now in England, the division’s location in the Surrey put it conveniently close to Portsmouth, their departure point for the raid. Corporals Métivier and Brown, along with Nurse Patricia Wilson, gave back a thumbs up. Wilson’s baby face showed a wide grin as the blond woman, dressed like everybody in battledress but carrying a large medical kit instead of weapons, sat in her carrier. It had taken all of Nancy’s influence to have a female nurse included in the raid, but she was sure that Patricia had both the stamina and the guts to do the job. The voice of major Townsend then got their mind back on the mission.

“START YOUR ENGINES! GET READY!”

A few seconds later, the bow ramp was lowered, showing a patch of dark sky and a sandy beach. Townsend’s carrier raced out of the hovercraft first, followed by twelve other carriers and heading towards the nearby coastal road before turning right on it. Nancy’s carrier veered left, heading towards the base main gate, some 500 yards away. The carrier soon stopped behind an old, abandoned hut by the side of the road. Nancy and the anti-tank team jumped out and ran cautiously to a clump of trees some 100 yards from the hut, taking cover and setting up their weapons. They could hear in the distance the faint engine noise of their hovercraft as it went back to sea, heading towards the docks of Lorient. Pointing her directional microphone towards the distant main gate, Nancy heard only faint voices speaking calmly in German. The lights of the barrack housing the guard force were visible through the trees.

Six minutes later, the noise of an intense firefight erupted from the East, in the direction of the submarine docks. Six loud explosions and cannon fire soon added to the noise: LCMAC-1 was engaging the port's defenses after firing its torpedoes at the submarines docked in the Great Basin. Nancy could now pick up in her microphone the noises of running boots, yelled orders and vehicle doors slamming, followed by the cough of a truck engine being started. She turned towards the two commandos crouching besides her with one anti-tank launcher at the ready.

"The Germans are sending a reaction force this way, probably in one truck. Corporal Stone, you fire your anti-tank launcher at no more than fifty yards range: I want a first round hit on the driver's cabin. Private Muldoon, you and me stand by with fragmentation rifle grenades and shoot at the truck's rear section once it is stopped. We will then clean up any Germans still alive. Any questions?"

"No, Major!" Replied Stone, just before he shouted a warning.

"I see a pair of headlights coming our way, Major."

"Stand by to fire from short range."

Nancy plugged a rifle grenade on the muzzle of her E.A.R., raised the grenade launching sight and adopted a prone position between Stone and Muldoon. The German truck was soon nearly on top of them.

"Fire!"

With a popping noise, the anti-tank projectile flew out in a short arc before hitting the truck's radiator and exploding, destroying the engine and the cab. Out of control, the truck veered off the road and slammed brutally against a large tree, coming to an abrupt stop. The first German soldiers were jumping out of the rear section when Nancy and Muldoon fired their rifle grenades. Both hit the disabled truck and exploded, peppering the surviving Germans with steel fragments. Short rifle bursts followed, downing more Germans. There were now no more than five Germans returning rifle fire from behind the wrecked truck but their fire was starting to be too accurate to Nancy's taste.

"Stone, Muldoon, give me covering fire: I'm going to turn the flank of these Germans."

She rolled away in the high grass and low brush before either of the commandos could protest. Crawling quickly for twenty yards towards the left of their position, Nancy then got up to a crouch and ran across the road, diving behind the cover of shrubs and trees once on the other side. None of the Germans saw her in the dark night, too busy exchanging fire with Stone and Muldoon. Putting a full magazine in her rifle before resuming her progression, Nancy then

advanced cautiously and as quietly as she could towards the Germans hiding behind their truck. After a minute or so she was close enough to see them through the trees, barely fifteen yards away. Taking out a hand grenade and pulling out the safety pin, she let fly the safety lever and counted to two before throwing it. The grenade rolled just behind one of the Germans and exploded, killing or wounding all five Germans in a concert of screams. Nancy then rushed in, firing her rifle and finishing off the Germans who were still moving: in the dark, she could take no chances about trying to figure out who was wounded and who was still dangerous. Her heart pounding, she looked at the now still German soldiers and shouted to the two commandos.

“THEY ARE DONE IN! JOIN ME BY THE TRUCK!”

Rifle at the ready, she then cautiously inspected the rear section of the truck. She saw some slight movement in the dark and heard moaning amongst the pile of bodies inside. Climbing inside after slinging her rifle and grabbing her pistol, she took her flashlight and switched it on. She now could count nine Germans, all of whom but one were still. The one that was moaning was holding his stomach with both hands, his uniform jacket soaked with blood. Kneeling by his side, she saw that the soldier was very young, barely out of his teens, and was conscious. As Nancy inspected his wound by the light of the flashlight, he looked at her face and opened his eyes wide.

“Die Wolfin!”⁷

Nancy snapped her head around in surprise and spoke in German.

“What? Why do you call me like this?”

The German held in a scream of pain before answering her. As he spoke, she took out a morphine shot from her emergency medical kit and injected the drug in his left leg. The soldier soon relaxed somewhat.

“You are the Canadian from the future, no? There are posters everywhere with your picture on them, instructing that you should be handed to the Gestapo if you are ever captured. They have been put up three weeks ago and every officer has one. The nickname became popular at once.”

Nancy was silent for a while, stunned by these revelations. Being a celebrity amongst the Germans was definitely not something she wanted, especially if it earned her a torture session at the hands of the Gestapo.

⁷ Die Wolfin: the She-wolf

“Relax, soldier: I’m not as savage as my nickname would imply. I don’t have much time but I can give you a field dressing.”

She quickly ripped open a dressing pad and applied it on the wound.

“Do you need more morphine?”

“Please!” Answered eagerly the German, still in great pain. She gave him a second shot, then patted his head.

“I have to go now. Don’t die on me. That’s an order!”

Her attempt at relaxing him with a joke made the German stare at her in disbelief.

“Why would you care about me? I’m German.”

“I will let you in on a secret, soldier: the German people are not my enemies. The Nazis are.”

Nancy then left him. She was about to jump out of the truck when her eyes saw a medium machine gun sticking out from under a dead German.

“A MG-34! We could use this.”

Pulling the machine gun free, she then gave it to corporal Stone, who had been watching her speak with the wounded German. Next, she took the extra belts of ammunition from the dead machine gunner and jumped out.

“Where is Muldoon?”

“Dead, Major! Bullet through the head.”

“Damn! We can’t leave him or his equipment here. Tell our carrier to come closer and load his body and weapons inside. I will take that machinegun and cover you. I doubt that these are the only Germans who will show up here tonight.”

“Do you know how to operate this, Miss?”

She gave the commando a dubious look.

“I have plenty of experience with German machine guns, Corporal. Carry on!”

“Yes, Major!”

Giving her first the MG-34, Stone then ran towards their Bren Carrier. The small vehicle soon rolled out from behind its cover and advanced close to where Muldoon’s body lay. Stone and the driver loaded him inside the open-top crew compartment, then joined Nancy by the truck.

“Alright, men, here is what we will do: We will go forward by 200 yards towards the main gate, so that we can ambush anybody approaching this truck. Stone, you will stay in the carrier, which will stay under tree cover, and man this MG-34. I will take our two remaining anti-tank launchers and stay fifty yards down the road from you. If any German column shows up, I will

shoot up the most dangerous vehicle. You will then pepper any German infantry that tries to dismount. Got that?"

"Yes, Major!" Replied Stone and the Canadian driver in unison.

"Then, let's move!"

03:11 (GMT)

Medical team carrier

Patricia Wilson was nervous as her carrier was heading at top speed towards a specific part of the docks area, from which the noise of a firefight had just died down. This was her first experience of combat. She wondered what her parents would say if they could see her now. When she had interrupted her studies in medicine just two months short of obtaining her doctor's diploma in order to join the Army Medical Corps, her parents had vehemently opposed her decision to do so, claiming that war was no business for a young woman like her. Her first months in England had then been a disappointment, with male soldiers treating her and the other women as mere servants and sexual prizes unworthy of combat. Nancy Laplante had recently changed all that with a swift kick at established male attitudes. To say that Patricia now held Nancy in high esteem would have been a severe understatement.

As her carrier was driving along a line of warehouses, a series of powerful explosions reverberated in the night, coming from the Long Basin, where the German submarines that were their main targets were. Patricia understood that the explosive charges that the commandos were supposed to set on the submarines were now detonating one by one. Patricia's carrier suddenly decelerated, returning her mind to reality. A British commando had flagged down the carrier after emerging from behind the corner of a large brick building. The soldier then jumped on the carrier and directed the driver down a side street, towards the port's Long Basin. The noise of shooting was now very close.

"Stop here!" Ordered the commando as they got to a corner giving a direct view on the port. Patricia could now see rows of German submarines, at least twelve of them, lined alongside the docks of the Long Basin. She felt elation when she noticed that many had already sunk, their conning towers barely emerging at odd angles from the water. One of the still intact submarines visible to her left suddenly shook as a large underwater explosion raised a geyser along its side, then started to settle by the stern. Patricia then understood that the

commandos were now fighting to deny to the Germans a chance to find and defuse the demolition charges they had laid.

The commando, now guiding Patricia and her two stretcher-bearers on foot, arrived at an open area by the side of the basin. A number of corpses and wounded littered the ground, the large majority of them German: the fight had been hard and nasty here. The British soldier ran to a moaning man on the ground and waived to them.

“Quick, get Private Thuttle to safety. I have to join the rest of the group.”

As Patricia and the two medics ran towards the wounded, bearing a stretcher, a hail of bullets from their right swept the commando and both stretcher-bearers. A bullet cracked past Patricia’s head as she stumbled to the ground, tripping on the stretched dropped by Métivier and Brown. Looking up from the paved ground, she saw with terror a dozen soldiers with the characteristic helmets of the Wehrmacht run towards her. They were less than thirty yards away when a storm of automatic fire downed half of them, forcing the rest to stop and take cover behind large wooden crates littering the quayside. Patricia then found herself literally in the middle of a firefight, with bullets passing barely inches above her as she hugged the ground. To make her feel even more vulnerable, she was well illuminated by a nearby lamppost. Hoping that the light made plainly visible to all the red cross markings she wore on her uniform and helmet, she cautiously crawled to the inert bodies of her stretcher-bearers and of the commando and checked for a pulse: all three men were dead. A moan then reminded her of private Thuttle. Dragging her medical kit behind her, she crawled to the side of the wounded. He was very young, maybe nineteen, and was delirious. Checking him out quickly, she found a bullet wound to his abdomen that bled profusely. Patricia, cringing as each bullet passed close to her head, ripped open a sterile field dressing and started applying it to the wound. A loud crack and fragments of the pavement flying in her face were immediately followed by a scream from Thuttle, telling her that somebody was firing directly at them. Thuttle’s left leg was now bleeding too. Despair overtook Patricia momentarily: if she could not protect him, all the care she could give him would be worthless. She hesitated for an instant, then switched her position around the wounded, getting in the process a bullet that ripped the back of her jacket without touching her skin. Deliberately using her body as a shield between the Germans and Thuttle, Patricia then proceeded in giving him first aid, ignoring the bullets flying over her.

The German sergeant leading the squad caught in the quayside fight looked angrily at one of his soldier.

“Do not fire at that medic or the wounded! We are Wehrmacht soldiers, not murderers.” Major Townsend and warrant Higgins, who had intervened with a few commandos to stop the Germans, had plainly seen Patricia’s actions and looked at each other.

“Bloody hell, sir! That girl has a set of commando-size brass balls if you ask me.” Townsend fired a short burst before replying with a grin on his face.

“You would think that she is following in the trail of someone we know, hey, Warrant?” He then looked around at his men nearby.

“Listen up! Load fresh magazines and plug in a fragmentation rifle grenade. On my signal, we fire a grenade volley, then storm their positions. Fix bayonets!”

Giving his men a few seconds to prepare themselves, Townsend readied his rifle, then yelled.

“UP! FIRE!”

Seven rifle grenades flew in a low arc trajectory and exploded around and within the German positions, wounding or killing most of them. Not giving the Germans time to recover, the commandos charged them, screaming like madmen. Only the German sergeant, dazed by the blast of a grenade, survived the charge, to be taken prisoner.

Wondering why she was still alive, Patricia Wilson was finishing her first aid job on Thuttle when major Townsend crouched besides her. She thought for a moment that she saw admiration in his eyes. He patted her on the shoulder.

“Damn fine job you did here, Nurse Wilson. Can your patient be moved now?”

“Cautiously, yes, sir. The medical carrier is nearby.”

“Good! My men will help you.”

Shouting a few orders, Townsend regrouped his men and his Bren Carriers and got them to pick up their wounded and dead, making sure that none of the new weapons were left behind. As they were about to depart the basin area, Townsend suddenly saw a poster nailed to a pole. Attracted by the picture on it, he went to it and ripped it free, then examined it quickly. The picture was that of Nancy Laplante but he could not read the German text on the poster. Swearing to himself, he folded the poster and pocketed it before rejoining his men. That was when he received a radio call from Nancy.

“Alpha two, this is Alpha three, over!”

“This is Alpha two. Send, over!”

“Alpha two, you better get out now: I have a heavy party of guests on its way. I will try to delay it as much as I can but make it quick.”

“Alpha three, we are leaving the docks now. We can be in position to support you in less than ten minutes.”

“Negative, Alpha two! Get out! I will join you in a short while. You show up here and I will rip your balls off.”

“Alpha three, this is no time for heroics.”

“Heroics like hell! My job is to cover your retreat, remember? I’m simply doing it now. Besides, if the big suckers lining up now at the main gate get through me, none of us will make it back to England, so move your butts and leave!”

“Alright, Alpha three, we are on our way out.”

Sighing heavily, Townsend then jumped back in his carrier and called LCMAC-1 as it started rolling.

03:43 (GMT)

Anti-tank team

Nancy had to steel herself as the German column approached on the road: following the SdKfz 251/1 halftrack troop carrier that was in the lead were three Panzer III medium tanks and three trucks full of infantrymen. She had only two anti-tank launchers left, along with two anti-tank rifle grenades and half a dozen stick grenades taken from the dead Germans in the destroyed truck. She had only corporal Stone and the Bren Carrier’s driver to support her with one machine gun, two assault rifles and a few rifle grenades. That was quite meager in the face of the column now less than 100 yards from her hiding place by the side of the road. Making her mind quickly, she put down the ready to fire anti-tank launcher she had shouldered, grabbing instead her rifle and plugging an anti-tank grenade on its muzzle. At night, the infantrymen scanning the area from the open top of the halftrack were going to be more dangerous to her than the tanks with their limited fields of vision. The halftrack, which had its headlights off, suddenly slowed down as its occupants saw the wrecked German truck ahead of them, to the right of the road. It stopped just after passing Nancy’s hiding place, making her grin with satisfaction: the vehicle was now less than fifteen yards away from her and presenting its rear right corner to her. Taking a stick grenade from her web belt, she armed it and waited two seconds before throwing it, then grabbed her rifle again as the grenade flew out. Nancy nearly

yelled in triumph when the grenade exploded inside the halftrack, butchering the nine men riding it. Quickly pointing her rifle at the nearest tank, less than thirty yards distant, she fired her anti-tank rifle grenade, hitting squarely the side of its turret. A typical modern main battle tank from 2012, with its thick multi-layered armor, would have laughed at the small warhead of the rifle grenade. The Panzer III, with its average armor thickness of less than one inch of steel, was in comparison a cardboard box. The plasma jet from the grenade's shaped charge easily penetrated the tank's turret, killing the gunner inside and seriously wounding the commander and the loader. Without wasting a second, Nancy put down her rifle and shouldered one of her two anti-tank launchers. Taking a deep breath in order to steady her aim, she forced herself to press gradually on the launcher's trigger, so that she would not disturb her aim. The projectile flew off with a small popping noise, while a cloud of dark green plastic flakes was ejected from the rear. The launcher's design principle made it a very discreet weapon that was capable of being fired even from inside a building without risk for its user. The commander of the second Panzer III never saw Nancy before her anti-tank projectile hit the front hull of his tank and exploded. The powerful plasma jet cut the bow machine gunner in half before burning through a 50mm shell stowage bin, igniting the shells inside it. The crew of the third Panzer III watched with horror as the turret of the tank in front of them flew off skyward in a ball of flames. Unsure of the number and position of their attackers, the tank commander yelled to his driver to leave the road and to drive through the bushes and trees along the right side of the road, then told his bow machinegunner to spray the area to his front. The 23-ton tank swerved off the road as Nancy was grabbing her last anti-tank launcher. She barely had time to duck and roll away before machine gun fire ripped through the trees behind which she had been hiding. Her anti-tank weapon in one hand and her rifle in the other, she ran to the front of the first tank and took cover behind the right track sprocket. The light from the burning second tank was now illuminating the third Panzer III as it advanced along the shallow roadside ditch, its bow machine gun firing long bursts while the turret pivoted left and right, searching for targets. Nancy fired her last projectile at the side of the tank's hull from a distance of only twenty yards, barely far enough away to give time to her projectile's fuse to arm. That shot was nearly impossible to miss. The explosion rocked the tank and sent it crashing into a clump of trees. Three Germans tried to jump out as flames erupted from the rear engine compartment. However, Nancy could not afford now to have enemies running around in her back. Pointing her rifle, she methodically picked the Germans one by one. Elated by her successes, she got up, ready to go help her comrades, who were firing at the three trucks at the back of the column. A movement caught

the side of her right eye, making her duck just as the bow machine gunner of the tank she was leaning against, halfway out of his exit hatch, shot at her with a pistol. The 9mm bullet grazed her Kevlar helmet but did not penetrate it. It did shake her seriously, though, sending her sprawling on the ground. Drawing her own pistol in a purely reflexive reaction, Nancy shot four times from the prone position, her aim helped by her pistol-mounted Holsight unit. The German jerked twice, then collapsed inside the hatch. Made furious by her close escape from death, Nancy took a stick grenade from her belt, armed it and dropped it through the hatch. The explosion blew open the nearby driver's hatch. Now reassured that that tank was no longer a threat, Nancy went to the nearby halftrack. The armored rear doors were already half open, with a dead German stuck in the opening. Forcing the doors wide open, she climbed over the dead man and took the MG-34 pointing aft from its pintle mount, along with a long belt of 7.92mm rounds. Making sure that a round was chambered, she then slung her rifle across her back before draping the belt over her left shoulder and climbing down from the halftrack with the machine gun. Cautiously advancing in a crouch, she walked past the two destroyed tanks on the road, machine gun at the ready besides her right hip.

Corporal Stone was getting quite worried by now: his MG-34 was nearly out of ammunition, while the Canadian soldier besides him in the carrier was on his last rifle magazine. Together, they had slaughtered the majority of the German infantrymen riding in the three immobilized trucks, but at least ten Germans were still firing at them from behind the vehicles. Concentrating on his shooting, Stone only knew that the three German tanks and the halftrack thankfully appeared to be neutralized, but he didn't know if Laplante was still alive or not. Bullets were pinging on the frontal armor of the carrier constantly, with more cracking over Stone's head. The angry bark from another MG-34 then came from behind the burning tank on the road. He saw a number of Germans topple to the ground, with the others looking to their left in confusion. A second burst hit more Germans and was followed by a harsh command in German. Caught from two sides and with their armor support gone, the five surviving German infantrymen threw down their weapons and raised their hands. A tall shape then emerged from behind the burning tank, waiving a machine gun from the hip.

"Bloody hell! She made it!" Shouted Stone, overjoyed. "Come on, start the carrier!" The driver obeyed readily and drove the small vehicle out of its hiding place amongst the trees and onto the road. Jumping out, Stone lined up the Germans and pushed them against the side

of a truck, then quickly searched them, throwing away any weapon or ammunition he found. Once finished, he smiled at Laplante, who had covered him during his search.

“Major, I could follow you in hell after this!”

“Well done yourself, Corporal. Let’s join up with the others, now.”

“What about those Germans, Miss?”

“They would slow us down too much. Let them go back towards the gate.”

“Let them go?” Repeated Stone, somewhat shocked by that. Before Laplante could speak again, twenty commandos led by major Townsend emerged from the woods at a run, obviously expecting the worst. Townsend and his men then looked around in disbelief at the destroyed armored vehicles and at the dead Germans as Laplante addressed them.

“I thought that I told you to fuck off, Major Townsend. What are you doing around here?”

“Trying to save your bacon... I think. You managed to destroy three tanks and a halftrack?”

“It appears so.” She replied calmly. In reality, she was still as tense as a loaded spring from the frantic action of the last minutes. Townsend shook his head in mock disgust.

“Alright, we will talk about this once back in Portsmouth. The LCMAC-1 is waiting for us on the beach, past these woods. Let’s go!”

“Wait! Could you let one of our prisoners behind? There is a seriously wounded German in that truck over there that will not survive if someone doesn’t stay to care for him.” Townsend gave her a dubious look, to which she replied with her softest stare.

“Please, George. One less prisoner won’t make a difference.”

“Alright! Choose the lucky one and let’s go!”

“You’re a sweet guy, George. Thanks!”

Nancy then went to select the youngest of the five prisoners, giving him a first aid kit and some instructions. Warrant Higgins, watching this with Townsend, shook his head in puzzlement.

“Women! She blows up three tanks and a halftrack, yet cares about one wounded German. Go figure!”

“She is definitely not out of the standard mold, Warrant. Assemble the men: Mister Stilwell must be getting nervous, sitting on the beach like a stranded whale.”

04:48 (GMT)

Captain's cabin, LCMAC-1

English Channel

"You wanted to see me, Peter?"

"Yes, Nancy. Please close the door."

She did so and looked at Stilwell and Townsend, who were standing at one end of the small cabin, their face grave. Townsend then produced the German poster he had found on the docks in Lorient.

"I found this in the docks area. Could you translate that for us?"

Nancy was fearing this moment: this could very well mean the end of her combat missions in occupied Europe.

"Yes. It says 'Wanted dead or alive, preferably alive. Nancy Laplante, 182 centimeters tall, approximately 65 kilos, black hair, green eyes. Canadian time traveler from the year 2012. Expert in hand to hand combat and pistol shooting. Speaks English, French, German, Spanish, Russian and Arabic. Extremely dangerous. Approach with caution and safeguard any equipment or weapon found with her for future analysis. If captured alive, she is to be handed over immediately to the GeheimeStaatsPolizei for special processing'."

"Which means," volunteered Townsend, "that if the Germans would have captured you during this raid, you would be now in the hands of the Gestapo, probably destined to be tortured slowly to death."

"I know, George: that wounded German I cared so much about told me about this. He also told me the nickname they use for me: die wolfin, or the she-wolf."

"The she-wolf..." Said Stilwell pensively. "Quite a fearsome name, but one you earned. Three tanks and a halftrack, all by yourself. General Joubert will have a hard time believing this."

"Our new weapons made the difference, Peter. With standard British weapons, I would be dead and those tanks would have crushed George's unit. I will now push so that these new weapons be produced at an accelerated rate."

"I will counsel the same for LCMAC-1. This hovercraft simply performed miracles on this mission. Together, we just halved the German submarine force on the Atlantic coast."

Wanting them to forget about the poster, Nancy smiled maliciously and stepped forward, caressing both men's chests.

“Let’s forget about war for a while, guys. I already invited Patricia Wilson for a party at my place tonight. Both of you are also invited.”

Their huge grins were enough of an answer for her.

16:34(Berlin time)

Monday, November 4, 1940

Abwehr Headquarters, Berlin

Admiral Canaris was concentrated on reading a report when admiral Doenitz, followed by a Kriegsmarine Intelligence officer Canaris knew well, stormed in his office. Doenitz dropped a ‘wanted’ poster of Nancy Laplante on Canaris’ desk and fingered it, obviously angry.

“I need to know everything about that damn woman, Admiral Canaris.”

Canaris had to repress a smile at this: the Canadian time traveler tended to infuriate Nazi officials a lot lately.

“Now, what did our good Miss Laplante do to put you in such a state, Admiral?”

“SHE SANK FIFTEEN OF MY SUBMARINES IN LORIENT LAST NIGHT.”

Doenitz’ angry retort shook Canaris: even for Laplante, that was quite a feat.

“Er, could you tell me more about this, Admiral?”

Calming down somewhat, Doenitz sat heavily in a sofa and pointed the Kriegsmarine officer accompanying him.

“Kapitan Woerner will give you the sordid details.”

Woerner bowed briefly, then took a file out of his soft leather briefcase, handing it to Canaris.

“This is my report on the attack on Lorient, compiled from the testimonies of a number of German soldiers who survived the British raid. At about three O’clock Sunday morning, a force of British Royal Commandos mounted on small tracked carriers struck our submarine base in Lorient. They were apparently landed on a nearby beach by a most strange craft that seems to be skimming the sea at high speeds. These commandos possessed incredible firepower and swept away the soldiers guarding the submarine docks before placing demolition charges on twelve submarines, sinking them. Three more submarines were sunk by torpedoes launched by the British skimmer craft.”

“And I suppose that Miss Laplante was with those commandos.”

“Not with those ones. She was actually seen near the base main gate, where she ambushed and destroyed a truck full of troops rushing in to react to the commando attack. She

then destroyed in quick fashion one halftrack, three Panzer III medium tanks and three truckloads of soldiers, all apparently with the help of only a handful of British soldiers. They did not have any anti-tank guns or tanks with them, according to two survivors, using instead portable weapons of unknown design. This Nancy Laplante then personally treated one of our wounded soldiers.”

“So, what do you know about this woman?” Asked Doenitz impatiently. Canaris smiled and took a red file sitting on the corner of his desk.

“Here is everything I know about her, Admiral. I am getting to use this file quite often, lately. That skimmer craft and the new portable weapons the British used in Lorient are probably designs she imported from the year 2012.”

Doenitz read through the file for a few minutes, dismay growing on his face. He finally looked back at Canaris with a haggard expression.

“That woman could be the death of us.”

“I know, Admiral! Believe me, I know!”

CHAPTER 21 – OUT OF REACH

07:46 (GMT)

Wednesday, November 6, 1940

Home Office Building, London

“My god, listen to this front page article in the Daily Telegraph.” Said Jennifer Collins to Mary Miles as they were having their first tea of the morning. Jennifer then read aloud the article in question.

“Fifteen German submarines sunk by British and Canadian troops. In the early morning of last Sunday, a mixed force of British Royal Commandos and of Canadian soldiers raided the German submarine base in Lorient, on the French coast of Brittany. Using an amphibious ship and light armored vehicles, the raiders blew up fifteen submarines that were in port at the time, on top of causing heavy casualties to the Germans, at the price of five killed and four wounded. Major Nancy Laplante, Special Military Advisor to the Prime Minister, was part of the raiding force, along with a Canadian Army female nurse. Both Major Laplante and Nurse Patricia Wilson, along with five other members of the raiding force, are due to be decorated for bravery at Buckingham Palace tomorrow. While many still think that Major Laplante owes her special status to unspecified political favors, this newspaper believes that she is a genuine Canadian Army officer, apart of being a time traveler from the year 2012. Her uncommon military abilities are more proof that she is a lot more than simply a woman in the good graces of the Prime Minister.”

Jennifer looked at Mary with sparkles in her eyes.

“Count on Nancy to show these men that women are more than simply office decorations.”

“Yes, but listen to this crappy editorial in The Times. They say, and I quote, an impostor is about to be honored again. Miss Nancy Laplante and a Canadian nurse are going to be decorated for bravery in combat tomorrow. What was the General Staff thinking when they let not one, but two women participate in a combat mission in France on Sunday? How many additional risks did our brave Royal Commandos had to take in order to protect two women who had no business in combat? Furthermore, on what grounds are these women going to be decorated? As usual with Miss Laplante, the War Office refused to provide any details about

her, invoking military secrecy. This is too convenient an excuse, especially when used repeatedly to cover the numerous irregularities concerning Miss Laplante. Women never were and never should be allowed as combatants in any army worth its salt. Fighting is for men, not women. Someone should remind Miss Laplante of her proper place and status before she endangers more men by running around the front lines.”

“May I see this?”

Nancy’s voice from behind her back nearly made Mary Miles jump out of her skin: that Canadian woman could be as quiet as a cat when she wanted to. Without a word, Mary gave the newspaper to Nancy, then sat at her desk and started typing a letter, not daring to look at the Canadian. Jennifer cleared her throat, trying to deflect the conversation.

“By the way, Nancy, you are to attend a meeting at the Prime Minister’s cabinet room at nine O’clock. They are going to discuss the status of your thing on an air skirt, whatever its name is.”

“It’s called a hovercraft, Jennifer. I will have to pay a visit to the editor of The Times soon. They have gone too far this time. Any messages for me in the last two days?”

Jennifer looked at a notepad and ripped off one of the pages before giving it to Nancy.

“One call only, from somebody named Perkins at A.V. Roe Aircraft Company. He called twice actually.”

That information got Nancy scrambling for her telephone.

“Damn, I hope that this is about what I think!”

She dialed the number written down by Jennifer and waited impatiently for an answer. She finally had the person she wanted to speak to after one transfer.

“Mister Perkins? Hi, this is Nancy Laplante. How are you?... Fine! How did the rotor test go?... Really?... What about the incidence control system for the blades?... Super! Do you feel ready to go to a full scale prototype?... Excellent! In that case, use two Hercules XVII engines. I will clear our project with the Prime Minister this morning. Thanks, you did a great job. Goodbye!”

Jennifer and Mary exchanged befuddled looks as Nancy cheerfully put down her telephone receiver and started working at a furious pace on her laptop computer. This was not the first time that they had their minds muddled by strange technical terms or even totally unheard of words proffered by Nancy.

At a quarter to nine, Nancy left for the meeting with her computer carrying case. Crossing the street to Number Ten, Downing Street, she returned the policemen's salutes and went to the cabinet room, where a number of ministers and high-ranking officers already sat around the big conference table. The welcome she got was out of proportion with her meager rank of major, but that was something she was accustomed to by now. Anthony Eden showed her the seat next to his, giving her a wide smile.

"Please, Major, would you sit besides me for this meeting?"

She gratefully accepted and took out her laptop, activating it while scanning discreetly the occupants of the room. The admiralty was out in force this morning, starting with the First Sea Lord, Admiral Pound. Three seats to his right was Commander Bennett, the officer who had certified LCMAC-1's sea trials. They exchanged smiles briefly before Winston Churchill entered the room. Everyone else rose from their seats, sitting back at his signal.

"Major, gentlemen, this meeting has been convened to review a few defense and war production matters needing decisions. First of, I am pleased to announce to you that Mussolini has secretly contacted us through our embassy in Spain to request an armistice. He is ready to withdraw progressively to pre-war positions and to stop immediately all hostile acts towards us and our allies. In exchange, he requests that we do not take any further actions against Italy and that we be ready to assist him in case the Germans attack him. What do you say to that, gentlemen?"

The ecstatic looks around the table said it all: while not a very lethal adversary, Italy, by its actions around the Mediterranean Sea, had forced Great Britain to keep precious military resources there that could have better served elsewhere. Anthony Eden spoke then, curious.

"Sir, may I ask what prompted the Italians to offer an armistice?"

Churchill took out a sheet of paper from one pocket, unfolding it and showing it for all to see.

"This prompted them to throw the towel, Anthony."

A wave of exclamations and whispered comments went around the table as Nancy blushed: the paper was the 'wanted' poster with her picture. Air Chief Marshal Portal, chief of Bomber Command, looked in puzzlement at the Prime Minister.

"The poster of a woman made the Italians surrender? I knew that they are the passionate type, but this is ridiculous. What does this poster say anyway?"

"It describes Major Laplante as a very dangerous time traveler from the year 2012, to be handed to the Gestapo if ever captured. It seems that, while we are still officially denying her true origins, the whole of occupied Europe has known about her for three weeks now. The

Italians got hold of this and, not being stupid, realized the extent of her knowledge of this war and connected that to the Luftwaffe debacle over London. Mussolini now knows that he and the Germans can't win this war, so he has decided to minimize the damage to himself and Italy as soon as possible. It certainly makes me wonder about hiding further Major Laplante's origins if it can scare away one of our adversaries."

"Sir," said Nancy firmly, "it was my knowledge that did this, not my physical person. Anybody from 2012 could have achieved this."

"But not everybody from 2012 would have confronted a German armored column at night with the help of only two soldiers and destroyed single-handedly three medium tanks and one armored halftrack. Major, your bravery sometimes borders on folly. What if we had lost you that night? What if the Germans had captured you? From now on, you better have a hell of a good reason before I will let yourself risk capture or death like this."

"Sir, I am a soldier!" Replied vehemently Nancy. "If Sir Pound decided to go to sea in his flagship and participate in a sea battle, would you stop him, sir?"

Admiral Pound nodded his approval at those words.

"She has a point, Mister Prime Minister. Nobody should be excused from combat because of his or her rank or position. Commanders are supposed to lead by example. Major Laplante's conduct is a credit to her qualities as an officer and I can say that, at least as far as the Royal Navy is concerned, her actions have boosted morale tremendously."

"Mister Prime Minister," insisted Nancy, "if losing my knowledge scares you so much, then give me assistants I could train and pass my knowledge to."

"You don't have assistants, Major?" Asked Admiral Pound, surprised. Churchill raised one hand, stopping the exchange.

"Alright, I give up! In fact, I have been mulling about this business of assistants for Major Laplante for a while already, especially considering the dizzying number of projects she has initiated. This raises a contentious point, though. General Ismay, would you not agree that a commander should be at least one rank above that of the subordinates he or she commands?"

"That is a given, sir."

"Then, Major Laplante, as of this day consider yourself promoted to the rank of lieutenant colonel. General Ismay will see to it that you be properly dressed before the end of the day."

Nancy sat speechless for a moment, stunned by her good fortune, as Eden and others shook her hand to congratulate her. Churchill soon called the meeting back to order.

"Gentlemen, we have unfinished business here. First of, we still have to decide how to react to the Italians' offer of an armistice. Suggestions?"

Anthony Eden was the first to speak.

"Sir, an armistice such as this would suit me fine, but do we have the forces to protect Italy from the Germans? Personally, I doubt it."

Sir John Dill, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, nodded his head in agreement.

"I concur with the War Minister, sir. We should agree to this armistice but we can't promise any military help to the Italians: we are already stretched too thin."

Churchill, seeing Nancy's right arm shoot up, nodded to her.

"You have a suggestion for us, Lieutenant Colonel, as always?"

A few polite laughs echoed around the table as Nancy smiled in embarrassment at Churchill's deadpan joke.

"Gee, sir, am I that pushy at meetings?"

The laughs became widespread.

"Let's say that you have strong opinions. What do you have on your mind?"

"Well, Sir Dill and Minister Eden are right about us not being strong enough to stop the Germans from attacking the Italians, so why not make the Germans believe that the Italians are still in the war?"

"And how would we do that?"

"By having the Italians announce a major reorganization of their forces that would force them to suspend all offensive operations during the period of the said reorganization. You know how long and involved such a project could take. In the meantime, we would do our maximum to keep the Germans busy, notably by making more efficient our bombing raids on Germany."

Air Chief Marshal Portal seemed irritated at once by her last sentence.

"Don't you think that we are not doing our best right now, Miss?"

If she was intimidated by his rank, Nancy didn't let it show one bit.

"The aircrews, yes! But our choice of targets and tactics frankly sucks, sir. What are we doing still bombing German cities, which are purely civilian targets? I will tell you why, sir: because our navigation and bomb aiming is so inaccurate that our bombers can't hit anything smaller than a medium size city with any certainty, since they fly at high altitude. Have you tried low penetration flights supported by radar suppression aircraft, sir?"

"But flying in low would be murderous to our bombers."

"Would it, sir? Why then is low penetration used so much in 2012 against fighters often twice as fast as the bombers?"

"It's easy to criticize when you are not flying those bombing missions, Miss. You may be a good intelligence specialist, but an aircrew you are not."

Nancy stiffened in her chair, stung by the criticism. She then looked straight at Winston Churchill.

"Sir, I believe that our bombing policy is in dire need of change if we are to hurt the German war effort to the maximum. I request your permission to plan and execute a bombing mission on a target of my own choosing, following tactics decided by me. Furthermore, I request your permission to direct that mission from the lead aircraft, sir."

A stunned silence followed her twin request. Churchill stared at her, then showed her the German poster.

"Did you forget about this, Colonel? You must know what you are risking if you go on this mission. Do you really want to finish your days strapped to a torture table?"

"Sir, that is an acceptable risk in view of what is to be gained. If we are to win this war quickly, we must then find out now what works and what does not. The right tactics could save thousands of our bomber crews."

Churchill looked at Sir Portal, who still appeared skeptical about this.

"For that reason alone, I would authorize her to do that bombing raid, Air Marshal. In view of the skills she has already demonstrated in the past in planning combined operations and of her knowledge of future warfare, I would also give her a complete veto in the preparation of this mission. She is risking a lot more than you would."

"Alright, sir!" Replied Portal impatiently. "I don't like this one bit but she can have her mission."

"Excellent! Then, we will accept the armistice offer from the Italians and promise in exchange to keep the Germans busy. Lieutenant Colonel, you have my full backing to plan and execute a bombing raid on your initiative. General Ismay will issue the warning orders for you."

"Thank you, sir."

"Now that this is cleared out, please present the status of your various projects."

Nancy thanked the Prime Minister, then passed around copies of a summary she had prepared earlier on in the morning.

"If you look at your copy of the summary I just passed around, gentlemen, you will find a list of the various projects, along with their present status and recommendations from me if any."

Four of those projects have been completed and are now at the production stage: the bullpup rifle; the bullet trap rifle grenade; the disposable anti-tank launcher and the directional parachute. The next item is, I believe ready for mass production but needs approval of this cabinet to do so. I am talking about LCMAC-1, our hovercraft project. LCMAC-1 has achieved a recorded top speed of 65.5 knots on trial on its normal engines and has a proven range at high speed of over 600 nautical miles. It can lift up to fifty tons of vehicles or equipment in the amphibious assault role, where it can move as well over the ground as over the water. The production model will have uprated engines, a sixty-ton cargo capacity and longer range, as well as a slightly beefed-up armament. The decision is yours, gentlemen.”

Admiral Pound looked at his subalterns, then at Nancy.

“Could your hovercraft be adapted to other roles apart from amphibious assault?”

“Yes, Admiral, even though it is at its best in its initial role. Hovercraft can be used for coastal patrols, anti-submarine patrols and even for minesweeping work. This model is however not well adapted to high seas long-range work: it is too small and has insufficient range. If you are looking at something to do fast patrols in the mid-Atlantic, another design I had in mind would be much better suited.”

Nancy then passed around copies of the picture of a strange ship.

“This is a picture of the SES-100B, an experimental ship built in 1971 by the Americans. It is a surface effect ship, a kind of hybrid between a hovercraft and a catamaran. Compared to a pure hovercraft, a SES is more stable and more maneuverable in a rough sea and has more endurance. It is however not amphibious like a hovercraft, although it has a very shallow draft when operating on its air cushion. The SES-100B displaced one hundred tons and reached a record speed of 89.48 knots in 1976.”

“NINETY KNOTS?” Shouted Sir Pound, his eyes sparkling. “I hope that you have been thinking about such a design for us, Colonel Laplante.”

“Fear nothing, sir! Here is a preliminary study by Bristol Company for an 800-ton SES Hunter-Killer Ship, or HKS. It will be capable of doing over 55 knots on cruise engines, plus will be able to reach a dash speed of over ninety knots on pulse jet boosters. It will have oceanic range and will specialize in anti-submarine patrol, coastal patrol and in fast surface attack. It would be armed with two twin four inch guns, eight 20mm cannons, one anti-submarine multiple rocket launcher, eight torpedo tubes and two depth charges racks.”

Admiral Pound and the other naval officers gave her a blank look.

“Er, what is this anti-submarine multiple rocket launcher?”

“Another new weapon in the design stage, Admiral. Do I have a buyer for the LCMAC and HKS designs, sir?”

Admiral Pound conferred with commander Bennett, then with two other admirals before answering her.

“The Royal Navy certainly has a pressing need for as many LCMACs as can be produced, in order to fill our needs in amphibious lift and coastal patrolling. As for your HKS, we will certainly be most interested in it if it fills its promises.”

The Royal Navy order was quickly worked out and approved by the cabinet, with Lord Beaverbrook taking charge of production arrangements. Feeling ecstatic by now, Nancy went down her list of projects gingerly, with all of them being approved by the cabinet, including the heavy helicopter project. The meeting finally concluded just before noon. A jubilant Nancy returned to her old office, only to find her desk gone.

“Where the hell is my desk, Mary?”

“In your new office, of course! Didn't the P.M. tell you about it?”

“Well, not really. Where is that office anyway?”

“Just down the hallway, Nancy. Jennifer is already there with your four new assistants. By the way, Jennifer is now officially your administrative secretary.”

“Hey, I like that! Could you show me the way?”

“Sure! Follow me!”

Mary Miles led her down the hallway and stopped in front of an open door just twenty yards from the old office.

“Here is your new kingdom, Nancy: the Athena Section.”

A chorus of male voices greeted Nancy when she stepped inside the large central office of the suite.

“GOOD MORNING, MISS NANCY!”

She covered her face with her hands in mock despair.

“Alright! Who let in those four clowns?”

Sitting around with their feet up on desks and grinning like idiots at her were Peter Stilwell, George Townsend, Douglas Wilson and Doctor Reginald Jones.

09:41 (GMT)

Wednesday, November 13, 1940

Briefing room, 7 Bomber Squadron

R.A.F. Station Oakington, Cambridgeshire

England

The pilots, aircrews and ground crews of 7 Bomber Squadron were surprised to see the bitter expression on the face of their commander, Squadron Leader Mark Shannon, as they filled the squadron briefing room. This was supposed to be the preliminary briefing on their first mission since they had reequipped with the new Short Stirling Mark I heavy bomber. The fact that their new bombers had just been retrofitted with strange booster engines should have announced an exciting mission. Yet, Shannon looked like the Squadron was about to be disbanded again. His voice was none too cheerful either.

“Alright, gentlemen, pipe it down and take your seats. Our briefer is about to arrive.” His bombardier/navigator couldn’t resist his curiosity and went to him.

“Is something wrong, sir?” He whispered to Shannon.

“Yes: our briefer! I got a message saying that someone from the Prime Minister’s Office is coming with the orders for our first mission on our new Stirlings. I’m told not to argue with that staff weenie or dispute his orders in any way. I smell a political scam.”

Flying lieutenant Charles Berresford winced at that: bomber crews liked to have some leeway when planning their missions. The missions were already dangerous enough without having to contend with political interference, which usually meant botched planning and unreasonable expectations. Berresford sat back besides sergeant Mac O’Neil, the nose gunner of their bomber. He was about to whisper in his ear when the room fell eerily silent and everybody snapped their heads towards the door. Looking himself, he saw a tall, beautiful woman walk in with a briefcase in one hand and a roll of maps under the other arm. She also was wearing a Canadian Army battledress with the crown and pip insignia of a lieutenant colonel on her epaulettes. Before Shannon could recover from his surprise and call the room to order, she smiled left and right and spoke in a clear voice while walking towards the lectern.

“At ease, men! Let’s keep this informal and to the point.”

Returning Shannon's hesitant salute, she then put down her briefcase and gave her maps to two airmen, instructing them to pin them on the display board behind the lectern. She then faced the sitting aircrews.

"Good morning, gentlemen! You are probably thinking three things now. First, what is a Canadian pongo⁸ doing here? Second, what is a woman doing here? Third, how can I manage to get her into my bed tonight?"

Raucous laughs greeted her joke.

"To answer your third question, you will first have to pass by my six foot four inch hunk of an American boyfriend. About your two first questions, I am Lieutenant Colonel Nancy Laplante, VC, DSO, CBE, MC, Special Military Advisor to the Prime Minister. I also happen to be from the year 2012."

She let the excited whispers die down before continuing.

"The world is a very different place in 2012. It has advanced in many ways, especially in military technology, tactics and doctrines. It however didn't progress much in other ways, with hunger for power, greed and intolerance still too much in evidence. There are still wars in 2012, many wars, vicious and bloody. I have been experiencing and covering those wars for years, both as a soldier and as a military affairs correspondent. Women can be soldiers in many countries in 2012, including Canada and Great Britain. You may laugh now at this notion but I can assure you that the Nazis are not laughing about me. I planned Operation Counterpunch, the defense of London on September 7. I jumped over France to help get back our pilots held there by the Gestapo. I planned the recent raid on Lorient and landed with the Royal Commandos there. I initiated the project that produced the booster engines now mounted on your bombers. Now, I am not telling you all this to flatter my ego, gentlemen. I simply want you to have confidence in my military abilities, so that we could execute the next mission together as a team, not as rivals."

Nancy then pointed at the map now pinned on the board behind her.

"Our targets will be the Germania and Deutsche Werke submarine yards in Kiel. We will attack low and fast, using the new bombs you received recently."

"We?" Said Squadron Leader Shannon, rising from his chair.

"Yes, we! I will be in the lead bomber, Mister Shannon."

"Out of the question, Colonel! You are not a R.A.F. aircrew."

⁸ pongo: Airforce derogatory term for army soldiers

“That point is not open to discussion, Mister Shannon. I am here to show you tactics from 2012 that will help this squadron fulfill its next mission with maximum success and minimum risks. I won’t do that by staying behind on the ground.”

Shannon glared as he and Nancy stared at each other in silence, watched by the tense aircrews.

07:51 (Berlin time)

Friday, November 15, 1940

Short Stirling MG AU

North Sea

“What is our altitude, Mister Shannon?”

The pilot of the Short Stirling four-engined bomber looked quickly at his altimeter, afraid of losing sight of the surface of the sea for more than a fraction of a second.

“Two hundred feet, more or less. The altimeter is not very accurate this low.”

“You call this low?” Replied playfully Nancy, sitting behind the copilot and wearing a bulky Irvin thermal suit and a parachute, like the rest of the crew. “In the Persian Gulf War of 1990, the British Tornado fighter-bomber aircrews considered anybody flying over fifty feet as being wimps. And that was while flying at 500 knots.”

“Christ! They must have had nerves of steel.”

“Not really: that close to the ground you are flying on top of the ground effect created by your aircraft’s shock wave. You basically float on a cushion of compressed air.”

Mark Shannon looked briefly at her with newfound respect: the more he knew of her, the more he found her to be both competent and articulate.

The sixteen Short Stirling bombers of the Seventh Squadron were now sixty miles West of the coast of Jutland and 125 miles away from their objective: Kiel. Flying lower than they had ever dared during training, the heavy bombers didn’t seem to have been detected yet. The radio operator suddenly spoke on the intercom.

“Sir, our submarine is transmitting his beacon signal, heading 084. The diversion force has also just sent the codeword for commencement of radar jamming operations.”

“Good show! Altering course now to heading 084.”

As Shannon was steering his bomber on its new course, followed by the other fifteen Stirlings, Nancy smiled to herself in satisfaction. The submarine, operating at periscope depth in view of an easily identifiable landmark on the coast, would give them an accurate initial point to start their final run on Kiel. Meanwhile, the Wellington bombers feigning a raid on Cologne would first attract the attention of the German air defense system, then confuse it by releasing in midair tons of strips of aluminum foils which would create massive false echoes on German radar screens. A squadron of Beaufighter fighter-bombers were also due very soon to destroy half a dozen German coastal air defense radars, thus adding to the confusion.

Suddenly feeling an urge to empty her bladder, she asked the copilot where to go and headed down from the cockpit. Her indignant scream made Shannon and his copilot laugh. Nancy came back in a flash.

“How am I supposed to use a funnel on a bulkhead to relieve myself?”

“I’m sorry, Colonel, but that is all we got as facilities on board bombers: after all, the aircrews are supposed to be all male.”

She gave him a dark look, then headed back down again. The bombardier/navigator came up to the cockpit shortly after. Shannon looked at him in puzzlement.

“What are you doing up here, Berresford?”

“Well, the colonel wanted privacy while she relieved herself, so she ejected me temporarily from downstairs. As for Mac O’Neil in the forward turret, she threatened to shoot him if he looked aft. In view of her reputation, I don’t think that Mac is about to risk a peep.”

“So, she found a way to use the funnel after all?”

“You bet she did, sir. She’s using your cup right now.”

“WHAT?”

The copilot’s laugh strangled in his throat when Shannon stared angrily at him. The pilot barely had time to cool down before Nancy came back up and sat back without a word, a grin on her face. Shannon shook his head but decided to leave it at that: she had won that exchange fair and square after all.

A few minutes later, as the coast of Jutland was clearly visible, the voice of the radio operator came back on the intercom.

“The beacon heading just turned 180 degrees, sir: we overflew our submarine.”

“Alright, send the codeword for starting the final run. Here we go boys... and girl!”

"Final heading 091, time to target at 220 knots: 15 minutes." Reminded the bombardier/navigator. Nancy switched on her portable radio scanner and started sifting through the German communications.

"I think that I have their air defense net now, Mister Shannon. Nothing about us yet."

"Good! Lets see now how many cows we can scare to death between here and Kiel."

Still followed by the rest of his squadron, Shannon, as instructed by Nancy before the mission, started flying barely high enough to avoid trees and the occasional buildings. Nancy's stomach felt like she was in a roller coaster now. Twelve minutes later, the Kiel Canal came abruptly into sight. Nancy then tapped on Shannon's shoulder.

"Time to pick up speed, Mister Shannon, but stay low."

The squadron leader nodded and switched on the squadron's frequency.

"Doberman callsigns, this is Doberman one: light up your booster packs now!"

He then smiled at Nancy.

"Time to see how your gadgets perform, Colonel."

The flight engineer sitting besides Nancy took hold of the makeshift control box connected to the two recently retrofitted underwing booster engines and flipped a switch. The intake and exhaust cover panels on the rectangular section pods lowered, letting air through the pulse jet engines. Another flip of a switch and a push on a large button started the engines. The additional ten tons of thrust shoved the crew of the Stirling against their seats. Shannon yelled in delight over the deafening motorcycle noise of the pulse jet engines. Actually a German invention intended to propel the V-1 flying bomb, a pulse jet engine was nothing more than a tube with venetian blind-like flaps at the entrance and fuel injectors in the middle. When fuel was injected inside and ignited, the pressure from the detonation closed the front flaps and forced the gases to escape through the rear, creating thrust. The front flaps opened again when pressure fell inside the tube and the sequence repeated itself. While a pulse jet engine could not work at zero airspeed, it was a very simple design to build and made a good booster engine. Nancy had the booster packs designed with their own built-in fuel tanks inside their support pylons. The only thing you had to do to install a pack was to bolt it to an appropriate point of an aircraft and to pass a set of control wires through to the cockpit.

The heavy bombers were doing over 380 knots by the time their objective was in sight, faster than any German fighter in service at the time. The second of 'Nancy's gadgets' on board was now about to be used.

“Doberman nine through sixteen, split up and line up on your target now.”

While seven Stirlings stayed with Shannon’s bomber to attack the Germania submarine yards, the eight other bombers formed up and headed towards the Deutsche Werke submarine yards, situated in another part of Kiel.

“Open the bomb bay!”

A pull on a lever by the copilot, Jeremy Snyders, exposed to daylight ten 500-pound bombs. The tail sections of those bombs were however of a new design imported from 2012 by Nancy. They would permit what was impossible to do with 1940-era bombs without blowing your own aircraft to bits: low level, high-speed straight bombing runs.

“Objective in sight! Bombardier, get ready!”

“Arming the bombs now!” Answered Berresford on the intercom. Nancy suddenly jerked her head up.

“They are giving the alert now on the Stade Luftgau radio net. Use those buildings as a shield. Stay low!”

Jumping over the last row of buildings, the heavy bombers flashed by bemused air defense gunners who never had a chance to point their 88mm guns: the British were not playing by the usual rules today. The eight Stirlings, chased by a few 20mm cannons firing in desperation at impossible targets, were soon about to overfly the Germania yards at an altitude of one hundred yards.

“Bombs away!” Yelled Berresford, releasing the ten bombs in quick succession. As soon as they cleared the aircraft, a timer in the bombs’ tail sections blew open the valve of a small compressed air bottle. The pressurized air then activated a piston that deployed four airbrakes around each tail sections, like petals of a flower opening. Their aerodynamic drag suddenly increased over tenfold, the bombs quickly fell behind their bombers. Eighty 500-pound retarded bombs landed in the midst of tightly packed submarine hulls in various stages of construction and exploded. While their effects on the steel hulls were devastating, the blasts and fragments caused nothing short of a slaughter among the highly specialized yard workers and technicians of the morning shift.

Looking back at the explosions rocking the yard, Nancy yelled in the intercom.

“Turn back now for a bomb damage assessment, Mister Shannon.”

The pilot complied, having already been briefed on that part prior to the mission. Taking out her Sony digital camcorder out of a canvas bag, Nancy filmed the scenes of destruction as they

overflowed again the Germania yards before doing the same over the Deutsche Werke yards. By then, the air defense gunners were starting to get their wits back. Two 20mm shells slammed in the fuselage, but without causing any real damage. As they overflowed the German naval base area of the port of Kiel, Nancy opened a side window of the cockpit and emptied in the air stream the content left in her canvas bag.

"Hey, we are dumping some papers or what?" Yelled the tail gunner on the intercom. Shannon looked with surprise at Nancy.

"What did you just do, Colonel?"

She smiled like a kid who had just made a good prank.

"Don't worry, I was just returning something to the Germans."

She then explained to Shannon the wanted poster produced about her by the Germans. The pilot looked at her with a mixture of horror and admiration.

"You are marked for torture by the Gestapo and you still insisted on going on this mission? You must be crazy!"

"No, just pig-headed."

One of the papers falling from the sky was picked up on the quay by a submariner, who then ran to bring it to his commander. Kapitänleutnant Gunther Prien, who had watched the bomber raid from the conning tower of his U-47 docked at quayside, looked at the paper and had a sardonic smile. There was a copy of the same poster prominently displayed in the submarine's tiny officers' mess. This one however had hand writing in German and a signature in red ink on it. He read it aloud to his men in the conning tower.

"Back with love, from Nancy."

Prien looked in the direction where the British bomber had disappeared.

"This woman has a lot of gall. But then, I admire gall. I wish I could meet her one day." His first officer read the poster again.

"182 centimeters tall, black hair, green eyes. I bet you would want to meet her, sir."

Prien shook his head as the sailors around him laughed at the crude joke.

"Hans, did you ever wonder what Germany would be like in 2012?"

"Er, not really, sir."

"That is why I would like to meet her, Hans."

19:21 (North American Central Time)

Thursday, December 19, 3383 A.D.

Campus of New Lake City University

Great Lakes area of North America

Farah Tolkonen looked at the computer screen with frustration. In all the records left behind by Pran Osef and Telvi Ran on their time machine, she could not find the schematics for the time distorter, a key component. They must have intentionally left it out of their records so that somebody else could not duplicate their invention. However, they must have kept it on another data file, but where? She had no choice: either she found the missing schematics quickly or she would have to start designing from scratch the missing part. The way that timeline distortions were increasingly playing havoc with spacetime, she doubted that the latter solution would be attained fast enough to avoid some disaster. A number of ships had already suffered damage from spacetime ripples while traveling through the Solar system. With a sigh, Farah started the long, methodical search of the laboratory.

CHAPTER 22 – NEW WEAPONS

10:25 (GMT)

Tuesday, November 19, 1940

Vickers-Armstrong Tank Plant

Newcastle, England

“My god, it’s a beauty!”

“It effectively has quite a look to it, George.”

Both Nancy and George Townsend were looking for the first time at the completed tank prototype inside the Vickers-Armstrong’s experimental shop. The well-sloped lines of the tank armor, designed to deflect projectiles, did in fact give a decidedly sporty silhouette to the vehicle. Its low profile, as directed by Nancy to keep it a difficult target, belied its mass of 43 tons. The long, thick barrel of a 3.75 inch caliber high velocity gun stuck out of the rear-mounted turret, with its muzzle still protruding in front of the chassis. Townsend walked slowly around the tank, checking its features in detail. Finally climbing on the front of the tank, he pointed at the engine’s radiator, visible under an armored louver on the left front side of the chassis roof.

“Why did they put the engine in the front of the vehicle, instead of the usual rear position?”

“For two good reasons, George: first, the engine and the transmission provide additional protection to the crew from projectiles fired from the frontal arc; second, this permits the same chassis to be easily adapted to other roles. In this case, we also produced prototypes of armored personnel carrier, self-propelled artillery gun, command vehicle and engineer vehicle variants from this chassis.”

The awed expression on Townsend’s face made her most uncomfortable.

“George, don’t go thinking that I’m such a genius. I did not invent all these things, I merely imported the ideas from my era.”

“If you say so. Shall we look inside?”

“By all means.”

Nancy deftly jumped on the tank and entered the turret via the commander’s hatch, sliding forward in the gunner’s seat. At her request, Townsend took the commander’s

seat, behind and above hers. Nancy then checked the position and accessibility of the various controls and was mostly satisfied. Taking out a notepad and a pen, she started noting down the few points that she felt could be improved. Townsend, for his part, was like a kid playing with a big new toy.

“This is fantastic! Do tanks look like this in 2012?”

“Externally, yes. Internally, no. There are practically no electronics inside this tank, apart from the radio set behind you. Nearly half of the price tag of tanks in my era is for the electronic systems that fill them.”

Townsend looked behind him and saw a radio on a shock-absorbing rack behind his seat. Besides the radio was an ammunition storage rack for the main gun’s shells. On the left side of the turret, across from the massive gun breach, was the seat and working space for the loader. Nancy’s voice then got his attention.

“Alright, George, imagine that you are the commander of this tank. You are leading it into combat, hatches closed. You have a ring of eight periscopes on your cupola, to help you see outside. You also have in front of you a large optical device with something like handlebars on each side of it. Grab them and look in the sight.”

“Wow! How much magnification does that sight have?”

“Ten! Now, if you wanted to pivot the turret yourself to, let’s say, designate a target to the gunner, you would just need to turn and twist those handle bars to do it. Since the power is off, it won’t work right now. You know, I think that I’d like to do a little road test of this beast. Let me just advise the chief engineer, I will be back soon.”

“You can drive a tank?”

“I was once a liaison officer with a Russian unit participating in a peacekeeping operation in the Balkans. They became quite fond of me and let me try all their equipment, apart of giving me short courses in how to drive their armored vehicles. Now, let me go out to talk to the engineer.”

She squeezed by him through the hatch, then disappeared at a trot inside an office giving directly into the experimental shop. She was back after a few minutes, a map in her hands. She climbed back on the tank and handed Townsend the map.

“This is a map of the Vickers facilities, including the tank dirt track, here.”

“I see it. Where are the intercom box and earphones?”

“To your right. Do not switch it on before the engine is well started.”

Nancy then disappeared inside the driver's hatch, forward and to the right of the turret. After a minute or so, the powerful Rolls-Royce Meteor engine came to life in a low rumble. Townsend flipped the intercom on and put the protective helmet with its integrated earphones and microphone on his head, then activated his microphone.

"Can you hear me, Nancy?"

"Loud and clear! Are you ready to roll?"

"Anytime you want."

The feeling of power that surged inside Townsend as the heavy vehicle started moving was overwhelming. Passing through the doors of the shop, which had just been opened by a Vickers worker, the tank rolled into the gray daylight, taking up speed cautiously as Nancy gained familiarity with the manual transmission. They stopped at the start of the dirt track, where Nancy tried on-the-spot turns. While it all seemed to go well to Townsend, she was not too pleased and said so on the intercom.

"I can't reverse the tracks' motion to make a pivot turn. They will have to rethink the steering system. Let's try the turret traverse. On my mark, turn the turret one full turn to the left at full speed. Mark!"

Townsend then twisted his control handlebars to the left. The massive, rectangular turret started rotating quickly, stopping on the order of Nancy.

"10.8 seconds for a full rotation. That's better than I expected. Try the elevation."

Once satisfied with that too, Nancy started rolling on the dirt track. She found the prototype tank speedy but a bit short on torque. Also, the gearbox was relatively easy to use but the turns were jerky.

"I bet these idiots used a simple clutch and brake steering system instead of a multi-gear regenerative steering system as I requested."

"Whatever you say, Nancy." Replied Townsend, out of his depth in this matter.

Lord Beaverbrook was enjoying this trip to the Vickers factory with the chief of the Imperial General Staff: it gave him an excuse to get out of the confines of his office and let him see some nature. They were about a mile from the factory's main gate when movement to his right and the roar of a powerful engine attracted his attention and that of Sir Dill. They were startled to see a huge tank with an impressively large gun racing

with Dill's car on a dirt track running parallel to the road. The tank was actually nearly keeping up with the car.

"Look at that thing go, Sir Dill!"

"By jove! Jarvis, how fast are we going?"

The government driver looked at his speedometer, then at the tank.

"We are doing 45 miles per hour, Sir. I didn't know that any tank could go this fast."

"Me neither." Echoed Sir Dill, his eyes riveted on the speeding tank. He saw that the tank was now approaching a fairly pronounced bump on the dirt track.

"These maniacs better slow down soon or they will break their suspension on that bump."

The tank effectively flew off the ground as it hit the bump at full speed, but it crashed back down in a cloud of dirt and simply kept going, only rocking back and forth on its suspension for a second. Lord Beaverbrook looked at Sir Dill, a wide grin on his face.

"I'll be buggered if the army doesn't buy this beast, Field Marshal."

"I will certainly pass along a commentary to this effect if the rest of the demonstration proves as impressive as this, Lord Beaverbrook."

As the official car was entering the Vickers factory, the tank swung behind it and followed it to the experimental shop, where both vehicles stopped inside, side-by-side. The driver and commander of the tank emerged from their hatches and, jumping on the ground, saluted as Dill and Beaverbrook stepped out of their car. The field marshal returned their salute smartly, then walked to the tank to shake their hands. He then hesitated and stopped, staring at the driver.

"You! God and heaven, you are to be found everywhere, Colonel Laplante."

"It's part of my job, sir, and I love it that way. May I present you my army assistant, Major George Townsend, from the Royal Commandos?"

As they exchanged greetings, the shop's chief-engineer hurried to join them. Nancy presented him to Dill and Beaverbrook.

"Sirs, this is Charles Taylor, chief designer at Vickers-Armstrong. He built this tank for us."

"Congratulation, sir, your tank was most impressive on the track."

"Er, how did it go, by the way? This was the first time that the prototype left the shop."

“Indeed? This makes it even more impressive then.”

“If I may, Sir Dill,” said Nancy, “I took notes during this road test. May I brief Mister Taylor on it?”

“By all means! Do you mind if I eavesdrop, Colonel?”

“Even if I minded, would you leave, sir?”

“Touché! Go ahead, Colonel, I’m listening.”

Lord Beaverbrook and Sir Dill listened with growing bemusement as Nancy then launched in a highly technical discussion with the chief designer. They did not fully understand half of the terms she or Taylor used. Beaverbrook finally could not resist tapping Nancy’s shoulder to get her attention.

“Er, Miss Laplante, are you some sort of engineer on top of everything else you do?”

She smiled with candor, obviously flattered.

“No sir! It is just that, as a professional military affairs correspondent, I routinely interviewed weapons experts and engineers, apart of the soldiers who use the equipment they design. You have to study widely to learn their techno-babble. If not, you end up looking like an idiot.”

“Mister Taylor,” cut in Sir Dill, “how long before this tank can be put into production?”

“Well, count about a month to correct the few things noted by Miss Laplante and to improve the gearbox, then another two weeks for us to tool up for production. We should be starting low rate production of this tank and its variants before New Year.”

“Variants? What are these?”

Charles Taylor pointed towards the door of the adjacent shop, guiding the visitors from London towards it.

“Let me show you some of the surprises we have in store for the Germans, Sir.”

11:06 (GMT)

Friday, November 22, 1940

Coastal Command Short Sunderland seaplane

Northwest of the Irish coast, North Atlantic

“Ah, smart man! Thanks, Gridley!”

Flight lieutenant Bill Hurst accepted the steaming cup of tea from the forward gunner while looking at the sea through the windshield of his big four-engined Short Sunderland seaplane.

“How is our PhD doing, by the way?”

Gridley shrugged. Since the new radar mounted in the nose had broken down an hour ago, the pilot had been asking him the same question about every ten minutes.

“Last time I checked on him, he was still fiddling around the guts of that radar set, sir. Er, could I ask a question, sir?”

“Ask, my fellow forward gunner.”

“Well, sir, I wanted to know if this Doctor Jones knew well that woman from 2012, Nancy Laplante. Is it true that he works directly with her?”

Bill Hurst and his copilot, Steve Cheshire, smiled at Gridley’s question: a lot of RAF crews dreamed about the Canadian woman popularly nicknamed ‘Super Nancy’. Many argued that a woman couldn’t possibly have done half of the things she had been reported to have done. Others, particularly the women auxiliaries, swore by her. Gridley was in the latter category.

“Yes, he works directly with Super Nancy. Why didn’t you ask him yourself?”

“Well, he was so busy that I didn’t dare disturb him for that, sir.”

“You didn’t want to disturb me for what, exactly?”

Gridley nearly jumped out of his skin at hearing Jones’ voice from right behind him. The physicist’s hands were dirty from the repair work he had been doing and he had taken off his tie and suit jacket. He was smiling as he used a rag to clean his hands as best he could.

“The radar set is up and operating, Mister Hurst. It was simply a bad connection inside the emitter. What did Mister Gridley want of me?”

Despite the discreet but frantic signs by Gridley not to say it, Hurst was too happy to pay him back for the countless practical jokes the gunner had made in the past.

“Airman Gridley is a big fan of Major Laplante and wanted to know if you knew her well.”

The young scientist’s eyes sparkled with amusement as he looked at the gunner. He then pointed an index at the pilot.

“You owe Lieutenant Colonel Laplante a beer, Mister Hurst.”

“She’s a lieutenant colonel already?” Exclaimed Gridley.

“She is! To answer your question, yes, I know her well.”

“Could you tell us about her, please, sir?” Asked the gunner like a kid asking for his Christmas gifts.

“Well, no wrong in that, but I should watch my radar set...”

“Take the time, Doctor Jones.” Said Hurst. “We are still forty minutes away from our patrol area.”

The pilot, even if he wouldn't publicly acknowledge it, was as interested as Gridley in hearing stories about the woman that had only recently been officially and publicly confirmed to be a time traveler from the year 2012. The terse official statement in the newspapers and on BBC radio had however been short on details about Nancy Laplante and her personal background. Jones smiled and nodded his head before taking out his wallet and producing a small picture of Nancy, taken while she was visiting his home. She was seen sitting besides Vera, Jones' wife, and with his baby daughter in her arms, a warm smile on her face. He passed the picture to Gridley as he spoke.

“Alright! I suppose that you know that she arrived on September the second near Northolt. I met her for the first time on the night of that same day, in Northolt. I had been sent from London to check the personal equipment she had in her car when she was abducted in 2012 by unknown persons and transported back in time here.”

“Who could be those persons, sir?” Interrupted Gridley.

“Our best bet is by persons from the far future. I saw their burned bodies that same night: their craft had collided with a German bomber shortly after leaving Laplante and her car in a field. It seems that she is now with us for the duration.”

“No offence to her,” said Hurst, “but I have some problems believing that a woman could do everything they say about her.”

“You better believe it, Mister! Everything they said in the newspapers about her is true. Yet, they don't know half of the things about her.”

“There are rumors about her being quite a libertine, Doctor.”

“By present British standards she is, but you have to remember that she comes from a society that has little in common with ours. I saw films produced in her time that depicted life in 2012. Sex by then is not the taboo subject it is now. In fact, I find her tolerance and open-mindedness quite refreshing compared to the hypocrisy I encounter so often. Now, if you will excuse me, I better return to my radar set.”

An hour later, the radio operator advised Flight Lieutenant Hurst that an unescorted convoy had been attacked by submarines and was calling for help. Checking the location of the convoy on his map, he saw that they could be there in twenty minutes. Hurst switched on the intercom.

“Attention all crew! We are heading towards a convoy hunted down by German submarines. Man your stations!”

Hurst then thought about where the Germans could be now. Against an unescorted convoy, they would probably attack on the surface, diving only if necessary and probably using their wolfpack tactics. In that case, one or more submarine would follow the convoy on the surface, relaying its position by radio to other submarines lying in ambush ahead of the convoy. In that case...”

“Doctor Jones, start watching your scope carefully: we may be over some submarines very soon.”

“Don’t worry, Mister Hurst.” Came the reply on the intercom. “This radar can detect a periscope at over five miles or a surfaced submarine at twelve miles. If they are there, we will get them.”

Hurst silently wished that he could be as confident as the scientist.

After another tense ten minutes, Jones’ voice came back on the intercom.

“Contact! I have an isolated echo at heading 290, distance three thousand yards, possibly a periscope.”

“Alright everybody, keep your eyes open for a periscope.”

Hurst then turned his big seaplane on the heading given by Jones.

“Radar to pilot, heading of echo now 005 relative, distance two thousands yards.”

“I see it!” Suddenly yelled Gridley on the intercom. “Right to our front! Definitely a periscope, sir.”

“Good work, Gridley! Steve, open the bomb bay doors.”

“Bomb bay opened!”

“Arm the experimental weapon.”

Flipping a switch, the copilot activated the one-ton anti-submarine munitions dispenser in the bomb bay. Jones’ voice came again on the intercom.

“Radar to pilot, if I may make a suggestion, do a wide turn once over the submarine and approach it from the rear at an altitude of one hundred feet at your lowest

airspeed, then fire the dispenser just before you overfly the periscope. Set the firing sequence to fast ripple.”

“You’re the scientist, we’ll do.”

Hurst then nodded to Cheshire to do as Jones had said. Performing a wide turn, the Sunderland dipped low and came up on the unsuspecting submarine from the rear.

“Now, Steve!”

The copilot then savagely pushed the firing button of the dispenser. The 25 depth bombs, each weighing sixty pounds, were quickly ejected downward at pre-calculated angles in a noise resembling that of a machine gun burst.

“Nice pattern.” Commented Hurst as he did a tight turn to observe the results of their shooting. There were now 25 splashes on the sea, bracketing the periscope in a wide oval pattern. One, then two geysers suddenly erupted.

“HIT! MY GOD, WE HIT IT TWICE!” Screamed Hurst. “Gunners, get ready for action! Steve, arm our two 250-pound bombs!”

Cheers rang out when the submarine broke through the surface. They soon saw men run out of the conning tower to a 37mm cannon mounted aft of the periscope. Even then, Hurst could see that the submarine was already developing a list.

“The bastards still want to fight. Gunners, fire at will!”

The Short Sunderland was not nicknamed ‘The Porcupine’ for nothing. Its twelve machine guns raked the top of the submarine, toppling the Germans trying to man their cannon. The submarine soon started sinking nose first, its propellers bursting the surface and turning in the air. More Germans ran out, but this time to jump in the sea.

“Cease firing! They are abandoning their sub.”

“Should we land to pick them up?” Asked Steve Cheshire. Hurst thought for a moment.

“Naah! The sea is too rough for that. We will drop a rubber raft and signal their position.”

As his copilot took care of that, Bill Hurst contacted Jones by intercom.

“Congratulations, Doctor! Both your radar and this munitions dispenser worked magnificently. We will now be able to make life much harder for the German submarines.”

“The Athena Section is always glad to be of help.”

15:06 (GMT)

Monday, November 25, 1940

Athena Section, Home Office Building

London

“Hey, look who’s back!” Exclaimed loudly George Townsend, as weary-looking Doug Wilson and Reginald Jones entered the Athena Section’s office.

“God!” Added Peter Stilwell, raising his nose from his paperwork. “You both look spent.”

“Not spent, just... well, I don’t know how to say it.” Answered Wilson as he sat heavily behind his desk. Townsend and Stilwell looked at each other in puzzlement. The Royal Navy officer turned towards Reginald Jones, who was at the section’s tea table, preparing himself a steaming cup with an absent-minded look on his face.

“Well, something went wrong during the demonstration of the new bombs?” Jones shook his head and answered in a monochord voice.

“No, everything went very well, too well in fact.”

“What do you mean, Doc?”

“What I mean is that both de demonstrations of the 1000-pound dual purpose munitions dispenser and of the Fuel Air Explosives bombs went perfectly. What got to Doug and me was when the Handley Page Halifax bombers dropped the two-ton and four-ton F.A.E. bombs on the target area. Even with Nancy’s warnings about the blast power of F.A.E. weapons, I was not ready for the effect they made. Nobody was! Their power was just overwhelming. We stood over a mile away from the target, with the bombs hitting close to the center of the target, and we were still nearly thrown to the ground by the blast of the four-ton bomb. That thing had the blast power of at least thirty tons of TNT, for god’s sake! This was the most powerful weapon I have ever seen in my life. May god pity the Germans when we drop it on them.”

All four men, along with Jennifer Collins, who had been typing at her desk, were silent for a moment, thinking about the consequences of their work. Doug Wilson finally looked around the office.

“Where is the boss, by the way?”

“In her office.” Answered Stilwell. “She received minutes ago a wooden crate from some ceramic factory and insisted on opening it by herself in her office. I guess that she wants to make a surprise of it.”

“A ceramic factory?” Repeated Jones with a dubious tone.

“That’s right! It must be one of those little pet projects of hers that she keeps to herself until it is proven to work satisfactorily. I wonder what it could be about.”

“Wonder no more, guys. What do you think?”

They all looked at Nancy, now standing just outside the door of her office, and paused.

“My god! An imperial stormtrooper, here?”

Townsend’s remark was close to the truth: Nancy was wearing a helmet with armored faceplate and a vest of plate armor over her torso. The armored vest was actually a khaki canvas vest with armor plates inside its lining and with numerous large equipment pouches sewn on the outside. The helmet looked like an antique Greek hoplite helmet, with a curved plate protecting the neck and cheeks. The faceplate had a narrow horizontal eye slit in it and could be pivoted upwards to uncover the face. Nancy did just that, a wide grin becoming then visible to her assistants.

“How do you like our new assault vest and helmet?”

They crowded around her at once to examine the armor in detail. The helmet had an integrated radio headset and microphone, with a standard connector dangling at the end of a short corkscrew wire. It also had an integrated flashlight mounted on the left side of it, with a red filter lens that could be flipped over the normal lens for blackout conditions. The armor plates inside the carrier pockets of the vest covered the chest, abdomen, groin, ribs, back, shoulders and throat. There were enough pouches sewn to the front and sides of the vest to carry the normal load of a soldier. There were even front and back epaulettes so that the wearer could bear his or her rank slip-ons. Townsend, as the ground-pounder of the group, was particularly impressed with the kit.

“This is really well designed. How much protection does it give?”

“The plates and the front of the helmet will stop a 7.92mm machinegun bullet from close range.” Answered Nancy. Townsend looked at her in total disbelief.

“This must weigh a ton, then.”

“Actually, the vest weighs about forty pounds, while the helmet weighs eight pounds. They are too heavy for everyday use by infantrymen but this kit is intended for special high-risk missions and possibly for mechanized infantrymen.”

“How could it stop 7.92mm bullets and weigh no more than that?”

“The plates are made of aluminum oxide ceramic sandwiched between two layers of aluminum. The ceramic is of the same type used in the special armor of our new main battle tank. Let me show you some test plates that were sent along with this kit.”

Going back in her office, Nancy brought out two curved armor plates with bullet impacts on them. One had received three widely spaced bullets and had stopped them. The other had four bullet entrance holes tightly grouped together. Turning the plate around, Nancy pointed to an exit hole in it.

“These plates are meant to stop isolated bullets. Once hit a couple of times, you simply insert a new plate in the canvas carrier vest.”

“Damn, I like this! Can I try it on?”

“Certainly!”

Nancy took off the helmet, then undid a pair of straps holding the bottom of the front and back halves of the vest and another strap holding the groin plate from flapping between her legs, then slipped it over her head. Townsend put the vest and helmet on, then jumped up and down on the spot to test its comfort.

“Hey, it doesn’t feel that heavy, actually.”

“That’s because the weight is equally distributed around your torso. Wait until you try to do a forced march while wearing this.”

The telephone rang in Nancy’s office, cutting her off.

“Excuse me for a moment, guys.”

She was back after a minute, a malicious look on her face.

“General Ismay wants to see me for a minute. Can you lend me back this armor? I’d like to see if he scares easily.”

They all chuckled as Nancy put the armor back on. After thinking for a moment, she went in her office and got her personal Enfield assault rifle.

“I might as well look like a real stormtrooper.”

She then left the section’s office, her faceplate lowered and her rifle at the ready, with her assistants grinning in anticipation. A scream of fright was followed by the angry voice of Mary Miles.

“YOU BLOODY MANIAC!”

The four men and Jennifer Collins broke out in laughter then.

Nancy passed two secretaries and a bureaucrat in the hallway, on her way to Ismay's office. Their frightened expression as they glued themselves to the walls to let her pass was proof enough to her that the new armor could have a significant psychological impact on enemy soldiers, apart of its main function as a protective equipment. The layers of neoprene foam sandwiching the plate pockets, apart of making the vest more comfortable to wear and cushioning any eventual impact, prevented the plates from clanking between them. She soon entered the Prime Minister's office suite, passing in front of a startled secretary before coming to attention and saluting in General Ismay's office.

"Lieutenant Colonel Laplante, reporting as ordered, sir!"

General Ismay stopped reading the file he had in his hand and raised his eyes to her with a greeting smile on his face before nearly jumping out of his chair.

"Jesus, Colonel!"

He took a few seconds to calm down before continuing, time Nancy used to raise the faceplate of her helmet.

"What are you up to now, Colonel? Playing the role of Joan of Arc?"

"Actually, sir, she always has been one of my childhood role models. Her name was Jeanne the maiden, though, not Joan of Arc. I wanted to show you the new assault armor and helmet I had designed. If you and Sir Dill like it, it can be put into production quickly."

Ismay got to his feet and went to examine more closely her armor. Nancy took a good five minutes to describe it to Churchill's Military Aide, who was most impressed.

"We will have to go see Sir Dill about this armor, right after I show you what my call to you was about."

Returning to his desk, he took an official-looking document and handed it silently to Nancy, who started reading it. It was an Act of Parliament, signed by the king. She felt growing joy as she read, finally looking at General Ismay, who smiled to her.

"I thought that you would appreciate learning first hand about this. It was the last act of Anthony Eden as War Minister. As of today, all women auxiliaries in the British Forces are to be fully integrated, with equivalent ranks and pay to male soldiers. This act also opens to women a number of combat and combat support positions, including

bomber aircrews, anti-aircraft artillery crews, army signalers and Coastal Command aircrews.”

“Oh, sir, this is so...”

Overtaken with joy, she took a step forward and kissed Ismay, who, while surprised, did nothing to stop her. He then cleared his throat.

“Well, I have to say that this is the first time I get to be kissed by a woman wearing armor.”

“Sir, this is such a nice surprise. How could I ever thank you and the Prime Minister?”

“By accompanying Sir Anthony Eden to Washington on his first trip abroad as the new Foreign Minister. You will go preach to the Americans about our new weapons and the need to help us with their industrial might.”

CHAPTER 23 – TRANSATLANTIC COOPERATION

16:10 (Washington Time)

Monday, December 2, 1940

Washington-Hoover Airport

Washington, D.C.

United States

The British passengers of the American Army Air Corps C-47 DAKOTA transport aircraft looked with bemusement through their windows as their plane was rolling on the ground towards the air terminal of the Washington-Hoover Airport. Situated near the Arlington National Cemetery, the installations of the sole airport to serve directly the American capital could be described at best as limited, if not to say primitive. The dirt strip they had landed on was cut in the middle by a public road, with the vehicle traffic having to be stopped temporarily by guards every time a plane landed or took off. The airport was also dangerous for planes, being in close proximity to a factory high stack, a huge dirigible hangar, a high voltage line and a public waste dump. The new British foreign minister, Sir Anthony Eden, looked at all that and wondered aloud.

“By jove! I think that the Bombay airport was better equipped than this.”

Mike Crawford, sitting besides Nancy two rows behind Eden, reddened with embarrassment, prompting Nancy in gently touching his arm while whispering in his ear.

“Don’t worry, Mike. The new national airport will open soon early next year.”

“Thanks for sparing my ego, Nancy.”

Brigadier General Menzies, head of the British Secret Services, who was sitting just behind Eden, then saw something that displeased him seriously.

“Sir Anthony, I see what appears to be a crowd of reporters and photographers in front of the air terminal building. Somebody blew the secret about our visit.”

Eden swore when he saw the reporters, numbering over fifty. His visit to Washington, meant to discuss with President Roosevelt a joint armaments production program, was supposed to be a secret. So much for discretion!

“Bloody hell! How did they learn about our visit?”

Hearing that, Nancy got up from her seat and went to bend over Eden’s shoulder.

“Sir Anthony, this is only a theory of mine but the source of this leak may be the ex-American ambassador in London, Joseph Kennedy. He was just replaced by President Roosevelt and is a staunch partisan of American isolationism, especially where the war in Europe is concerned.”

“You may well be right on that, Colonel. Thanks!”

As Nancy was returning to her seat, Eden got up and faced rearward, looking at the members of his delegation.

“May I have your attention, please. It seems that our visit to Washington will not be as discreet as we wished. I will however ask you to stay mum about the true goals of our trip. If questioned on that subject by reporters, say simply that I am paying a courtesy visit to President Roosevelt, in order to reaffirm the friendship between our two countries. If you are asked about Lieutenant Colonel Laplante, say that she is simply one of my personal aides.”

“Some reporters could interpret that in a spicy way, Sir Anthony.” Said Nancy with a malicious smile. “You may have to explain yourself to your wife on your return to London.”

Many in the plane laughed, while Eden smiled, amused.

“That would be quite a juicy way to put them on a false track about you, Colonel. We will see how things will go from here and will adjust our story if need be.”

“Uh, things may already be getting more complicated, Sir Anthony.” Warned Brigadier Menzies, who was still looking outside through his window. “I see a group of civilians carrying large banners, just along the crowd of reporters.”

All the occupants of the plane then looked outside, towards the terminal. Mike Crawford swore before looking at Eden.

“Sir Anthony, I’m afraid that this group is made up of members of an isolationist lobbying organization called ‘America First Committee’. That group is rather small but is very influent right now.”

“Damn! We will have to play it tight, then.” Said Eden, frustrated.

Their plane finally stopped in front of the terminal, a two-storey building of modest size that also supported the control tower. A convoy of large official cars then rolled towards the plane, stopping by its side as the passenger door of the C-47 was opened.

When Anthony Eden exited the plane first, he was greeted with a vigorous handshake by the American Secretary of War, Henry Stimson.

“Welcome to Washington, Sir Anthony. I hope that your trip was comfortable.”
Eden smiled weakly at that question: his trip had taken two days and three stopovers, including a change of plane in Newfoundland.

“I am afraid that the trip and change of time zones have reduced my brain to mush, Secretary Stimson. I will need a good night of sleep before I could see President Roosevelt tomorrow.”

“In that case, I can assure you that the Willard Intercontinental Washington Hotel is most comfortable, Sir Anthony. I you will take place in my car, the other cars will take care of your delegates and their luggage.”

“Thank you, Secretary Stimson. Do you know by chance how these people in front of the terminal learned about our visit?”

Stimson threw a frustrated look at the reporters, who were shouting questions in their direction.

“I would like to know as well, Sir Anthony. The President certainly wanted to keep your visit discreet. Well, let’s ignore these people and get in the car.”

Showing a typically British phlegm, Eden followed Stimson to the large sedan at the head of the convoy, while the other passengers of the plane set foot on the airfield. Eden however stopped besides the car, shocked, when the reporters shouted questions at a redoubled pace, not at him but towards Nancy Laplante.

“MISS LAPLANTE, IS IT TRUE THAT YOU ARE FROM THE FUTURE?”

“MISS LAPLANTE, ARE YOU HERE TO GIVE SECRETS FROM THE FUTURE TO THE AMERICAN GOVERNMENT?”

“DOES YOUR VISIT MEAN THAT THE UNITED STATES WILL JOIN THE WAR, MISS?”

Eden looked at Stimson, who appeared as shocked as him.

“How could they know all this? This is supposed to be classified information?”

“I don’t know but I certainly will have someone dig into that, Sir Anthony.”

As he was taking place in the back seat of the sedan, Eden looked with worry at Nancy Laplante, who was supervising the unloading of the trunks containing her special equipment. She was wearing a female British dress uniform but also wore a gun belt. A number of reporters suddenly bent under the simple chain that marked the zone

reserved for aircraft and ran towards Nancy despite the futile efforts of the handful of policemen present. The rest of the reporters then followed, along with many of the protestors, surrounding Nancy and her precious trunks and assaulting her with questions. Now livid, Stimson, grabbed the shoulder of the Secret Service agent sitting in the front passenger seat of his car and pointed the reporters surrounding Nancy.

“Chase away those jackals and don't mind becoming physical!”

“Yes sir!” Answered the agent, who then stepped out of the car and called other agents to help him.

Near the plane, Nancy was now as tense as a loaded spring as reporters and protestors pressed against her and the trunks containing her equipment. Mike Crawford was doing his best to keep the crowd away from her but was simply overwhelmed. While the reporters shouted questions at her, protestors, some with placards clamoring against the entry of the United States in the war in Europe, were aggressively taking her to task. A few protestors were even trying to intimidate her by pushing and insulting her, or were trying to get at the trunks of equipment. Despite all this, Nancy was more worried about a potential assassin mixing up with the crowd. There was after all a rather large Nazi movement in the United States called ‘The Bund’, complete with swastikas, Nazi uniforms and portraits of Hitler. Now would be an excellent occasion for them to try to get at her. Scanning constantly her surroundings for a possible gunman or sniper and ignoring the questions thrown at her, she suddenly noticed a man standing on the roof terrace of the terminal building. He was partially hiding behind a corner of the control tower and was pointing something at her. Nancy's blood froze at once: she had seen often enough snipers during her career as a war correspondent in places like Beirut, Bagdad and Mogadishu to be able to recognize the stance of a man holding a rifle. Her right hand flew to her pistol, while her left hand grabbed Mike Crawford's right shoulder, who stood between her and the sniper, pulling him down as she herself crouched quickly. The loud ‘crack’ of a bullet missing her head by a few inches just before the bullet hit the ground behind her. As the reporters and protestors around her froze or turned around to see where the shot had come from, Nancy got back up, holding her GLOCK 17 pistol in a two hand stance and pointing it at the sniper. Nearly all the rifles of this time were of the bolt action type and needed two or three seconds to chamber a new round and point again at the target. For an expert in combat pistol shooting like her,

two seconds was nearly an eternity. The sniper, situated about 35 meters away, didn't have time to shoot a second time before Nancy shot once. She saw the head of the sniper jerk backward before he crumbled to the ground. Not wasting a second, Nancy started to run at once towards the terminal, pushing the reporters and protesters out of her way. The Secret Service agents that were coming to disperse the crowd saw her running towards them with a pistol in her hand and hesitated, not realizing yet fully what had happened. Nancy shouted at them as she was about to run past them.

"SNIPER ON THE ROOF!"

She still had to push away an agent that seemed not to believe her and entered the terminal by its main door, then ran up the stairs leading to the terrasse. With her pistol held with both hands and ready to shoot, she pushed open the terrasse access door and jumped on the terrasse, pointing her pistol towards the rear corner of the control tower while scanning quickly her surroundings. The sniper lay in his blood, very still, while a rifle equipped with a scope and a long silencer was at his side. Still scanning visually the terrasse around her, Nancy approached cautiously the sniper with her pistol pointed. She soon saw that her bullet had hit the man in the throat and had then gone through his spine, killing him instantly. She recognized the man after a few seconds: he was a Soviet clandestine agent who would be unmasked after the war in the history she knew. His face was familiar to her since she had written and assembled a detailed report with pictures on Soviet spies in the United States just before her trip.

The first American agents soon emerged on the terrasse, their revolvers pointed. Keeping her own pistol pointed towards the ground, she threw a severe look at the three agents now facing her and pointing their weapons at her.

"This is how you protect your important guests, you clowns? Lower your weapons and help me instead to check if this man had an accomplice."

As they hesitated too much to her taste to lower their revolvers, Nancy raised her voice, close to losing patience.

"HEY, YOU TWITS! WAKE UP! YOU LET A SNIPER GET CLOSE TO GUESTS OF YOUR GOVERNMENT. NOW, LOWER THOSE DAMN REVOLVERS!"

A fourth American agent then stepped on the terrasse and embraced the scene before shouting an order.

"Lower your guns! Check if that sniper had a getaway car ready nearby."

As he said that, Nancy heard a car speed away and ran to the guardrails of the rear façade. She saw a four door sedan that was accelerating away on the road behind the terminal. She however could not be sure if this was an accomplice fleeing or simply someone panicking because of her pistol shot. She thus didn't shoot, despite the fact that she was confident that she easily could have hit the car. Now truly pissed, she faced back the American agent that seemed in charge.

"Now that your government has proved incapable of keeping a secret or of protecting V.I.P. guests, would you mind being kind enough to chase away those reporters and protestors, or will I have to do the job myself?"

The agent tensed up, offended by her remarks.

"Miss, you are not in Great Britain now and you do not make the law here. Holster your pistol before I confiscate it."

"Excuse me? A foreign dignitary that you were supposed to protect just got shot at and you want to disarm her? If your government really wants the technological information I am bringing, then it better do a better job as a host. In case you are interested to know, this man on the ground is named Jake Golos and he is a Soviet spy. Now, if you will excuse me, I will go make sure that my special equipment is safe."

She walked towards the access door of the terrasse, her pistol still in one hand. The head agent then shouted at her.

"MISS, YOUR PISTOL!"

Turning her head, she stopped briefly but kept her pistol in her right hand.

"First, you may call me 'Colonel' instead of 'Miss'. Secondly, nothing tells me that there are no other assassins left around, since you failed to secure this terminal before our arrival. Be assured that your President will hear about this lamentable security debacle."

Ignoring from then on the American agents, Nancy entered the building and walked down the stairs, only to hit a crowd of reporters and photographers waiting for her at the foot of the stairs. Repeated camera flashes partially blinded her as Mike Crawford was brutally clearing his way to her through the reporters. He finally got to her and examined her anxiously.

"Are you okay, Nancy? Where is the sniper?"

"I'm alright, Mike. As for the sniper, he is dead, on the terrasse. I hope that somebody is watching my equipment right now."

"Sir Menzies and two of his men are watching it. Sorry if I took some time to get to you, but some of the protestors and reporters wanted to open your trunks."

"You did what you could, Mike. Don't worry about that. Let's get back to the plane and the cars."

Ignoring the questions shouted by the reporters, Nancy followed closely Mike, who opened the way for her with liberal use of his elbows and shoulders. When they emerged outside, they saw that Stimson and Eden had come out of the lead sedan and were anxiously waiting for them, while Menzies and two British agents stood besides the precious trunks. Nancy went directly to the two politicians, stopping at attention and saluting Eden after holstering her pistol.

"There was a sniper on the roof, equipped with a rifle fitted with a scope and a silencer, Sir Anthony. He is now dead. I recognized him as a Soviet agent by the name of Jake Golos, who ran a spy network in New York. I suspect that an accomplice just fled by car after I killed Golos, sir. I can now add the Soviets to the list of those who want me dead, Sir Anthony."

"But, why would they want to kill you, Colonel?" Asked Henry Stimson, confused and frustrated. Nancy gave him a no-nonsense look.

"Because Stalin is probably scared that I will reveal to you his future plans of conquest of Eastern Europe, Mister Secretary. One of the things that we wanted to discuss with your government was a detailed report on Soviet spy networks inside the United States. Believe me when I say that these networks thoroughly infiltrate your government and include a considerable number of highly placed officials."

She then spoke firmly to Anthony Eden.

"Sir, in view of what has just happened, added to what we know about those Soviet networks, I have no other choice but to keep my technological information to myself until a complete sweep of those networks can be effected. Giving my information now to the American government would be tantamount to giving it direct to Stalin, sir."

Stimson froze, horrified, as Eden nodded his head at Nancy.

"I concur with you, Colonel. The lack of discretion concerning our arrival did nothing to reassure me."

"But, but President Roosevelt is expecting to receive you tomorrow morning, Sir Anthony, with the information brought by Lieutenant Colonel Laplante." Objected

Stimson. Eden sighed, torn between the need to protect Nancy's information and his wish to conclude quickly a cooperation pact with the Americans.

"Secretary Stimson, please understand that Stalin and the Soviet Union constitute in Prime Minister Churchill's opinion a long term threat at least as great as the Nazis. We simply can't risk provide indirectly to Stalin the information we got from the future. I thus suggest that the director of your F.B.I. talks with General Menzies and Lieutenant Colonel Laplante, so that he could neutralize those Soviet spy networks quickly."

"But, this could take weeks! We can't arrest hundreds of people, especially if they are government officials, without further proof than just your documents: a judge would free them at once for lack of proof. The F.B.I. will need time to organize the surveillance of suspected spies and collect files on them. On the other hand, our industries are already on standby, waiting for your technological information to start producing new weapons. They can't stay inactive for very long."

"Mister Secretary, if I could make a suggestion." Said Nancy. "One quick way to neutralize those Soviet spies would be to revoke their government security clearances, which would then force them out of the way without the need to have to prove their guilt in front of a judge. A security clearance can be suspended or revoked in an instant, without the need to provide an explanation. Some key persons will however need to be arrested at once, before they could alert the members of their networks. Armed with the information I have on those networks, a good interrogator should easily be able to make them confess by offering them plea deals."

Brigadier Menzies, who had approached the trio, then jumped in the conversation.

"I support the suggestion from Lieutenant Colonel Laplante, Mister Secretary. We already have arrested dozens of Soviet spies in England and most of them confessed when we confronted them with what we already knew on them. Withdrawing a security clearance would be a quick, effective way to take any Soviet spy out of the loop until the F.B.I. could build legal cases."

"Hum, I believe that this idea has merit." Said Stimson, desperate to gain access to the British technological information. I will alert the F.B.I. as soon as I am able to drop you at the Willard Intercontinental Hotel."

"I believe that the F.B.I. will have to be involved even sooner, Mister Secretary." Said politely Nancy. "A gunman just tried to kill a foreign dignitary invited by your government. That would make it clearly a federal police case."

"You are quite right, Colonel."

"Then, I am ready to wait here for the arrival of the F.B.I., since I am the main witness in this affair. I will also take that opportunity to bring myself to Director Hoover the file on the Soviet spy networks that I have in my briefcase. That way, things will be able to start quickly."

"Thank you for your cooperation, Colonel." Said Stimson before calling in the head of his security detail. "Mister Fielding, have you alerted the F.B.I. yet about this assassination attempt?"

"Yes, Mister Secretary. A team should arrive in a few minutes."

"Good! Make sure that the F.B.I. treats Colonel Laplante with courtesy. If I ever hear that she was forcefully interrogated or accused in any way, then Director Hoover can expect to lose his job."

"I will pass the word, Mister Secretary."

With Stimson and Eden then returning inside their car and with the American agents finally getting busy dispersing the reporters and protestors with the help of a newly arrived contingent of local policemen, Nancy helped Mike load their luggage and the precious trunks full of equipment in a car of the convoy. Once this was done, she watched the convoy roll away, protected by two policemen while waiting for the arrival of the F.B.I. team. That team arrived in two cars and one van half an hour later. Thankfully, the agent in charge of the team proved to be both polite and comprehending, taking Nancy's statement and reviewing with her the crime scene. He looked gravely at the dead man on the terrasse and at his rifle as one of his agents took pictures.

"Jake Golos, you said, Colonel?"

"Actually, his official name is Jacob Golos, a naturalized Ukrainian immigrant. He led from New York a spy network of the Soviet NKVD. Before saying more on this, know that I have with me a detailed classified report about Soviet spies in the United States that the British government is ready to give to your director. I would thus like to meet Director Hoover as soon as possible after we are finished here, so that he can start

a cleanup of those networks. This assassination attempt actually concerns a lot more than just me.”

“Hum, I understand. You have that file with you, you said?”

Nancy patted the briefcase in her left hand.

“Right here, Mister Ralston. Taking out quickly those Soviet spies will be critical for your government, so that we can exchange safely with it important technological information about new weapons.”

“In that case, I will drive you myself to our headquarters right away. Let me just give some instructions to my men before we go.”

Ten minutes later, Nancy sat with Ralston in his car, which rolled away from the airport and crossed the Potomac River via the bridge on 14th Street, entering downtown Washington. As they were approaching the building occupied by the Justice Department on Pennsylvania Avenue, Ralston thought for a moment that a car was following them. His rear view was however cut by a truck and he lost sight of the car in question. Dismissing it, he soon turned off the avenue and entered the underground garage of the headquarters. Having warned in advance by radio his superior to notify Director Hoover, Ralston guided Nancy around the huge building, leading her to the door of Hoover’s office. Hoover’s secretary gave a disapproving look at the pistol on Nancy’s hip before introducing her in Hoover’s office. A short, squarely-built man with a round face, Hoover came from behind his desk to shake hands with Nancy.

“Colonel Laplante, it is a honor to meet you in person. So many things have been said about you in the last months.”

Nancy smiled in turn while pressing his hand.

“And it is a honor to meet the most famous policeman in American history.”

Hoover raised an eyebrow at those words but didn’t remark on them, inviting Nancy to sit with him in a sofa.

“So, the Soviets tried to kill you at the airport. I don’t know if Sir Anthony Eden should be insulted by you stealing the show from him.”

“Oh, I think that he is actually quite content about that: he is not an expert pistol shot, contrary to me, and would be dead if he would have been Golos’ target.”

“What do you know about that Golos, Colonel?”

"A lot!" Said Nancy before taking out of her briefcase the thick M.I.6 file on Soviet spies and handing it to Hoover, who immediately started to sift through it.

"He was heading a NKVD network from New York and also had agents and sympathizers here in Washington, including a number of important government officials. You will find in this file a detailed list of Soviet agents and networks operating in the United States, compiled with the help of information from the future. As you can see, the extent of those networks is quite alarming and they thoroughly compromise many government departments. That is unfortunately preventing me and Sir Anthony Eden from passing on to your government critical technological information needed by your armament industries. You may thus expect the White House to press you on this matter."

"I know, Colonel." Said Hoover with meek smile. "Secretary Stimson already contacted me on this subject, insisting about making the utmost speed in this dossier. On the other hand, your idea about revoking or suspending the security clearances of suspected spies is an excellent way to allow us to rapidly prevent those Soviet agents from accessing your information without involving an army of lawyers. Since you are the source of the information in this file, could you point to me the spies that will need to be neutralized the most quickly?"

"I certainly can, Director Hoover. In fact, you will find in the annexes the line diagrams describing these networks and their key agents."

Nancy spent a good twenty minutes commenting the file to Hoover and pointing important details to him. Hoover may have been known in her history as a bigot and a man who abused his authority in order to maintain his influence and position, but he also was an experienced, able policeman. In return, Hoover stayed most polite with her, not showing his habitual disdain for women who meddled in police affairs. When Nancy left him with her precious file, she felt that things were in good hands. Then going down to the reception lobby of the building, she exited on Pennsylvania Avenue, her briefcase containing her laptop computer carried with its transport strap across her chest. The Willard Intercontinental Hotel was situated on the same street, less than 600 meters away in the direction of the White House. She thus decided to walk in the cold, humid air of the early evening, following the north side sidewalk. Having already being the

target of one assassination attempt today and knowing how notorious she would be in the United States, Nancy stayed alert along the way.

She had covered maybe 250 meters when she heard a car approach her at low speed in her back. Wanting to check that car without raising the suspicions of its occupants, Nancy stopped facing a shop front, pretending to examine the dresses exposed in the store. The street lamps along the avenue helped her see the reflection of a big four door sedan that was nearly level with her. Its windows were down and two men sitting on the right side were pointing objects at her. Reacting out of experience as well as instinct, Nancy crouched at once and took refuge against a parked car while grabbing her pistol. Loud bursts of automatic fire reverberated as she bent, shattering the store's front and the windows of the car protecting her. As she hurriedly took off her briefcase and let it down on the sidewalk, she heard loud swears from the occupants of the car, followed by the noise of doors opening. The car then sped briefly to turn at the next, nearby intersection and stop, blocking the way to her hotel. The voices of three men exchanging short orders were then heard over the panicked screams of other pedestrians. Nancy felt a shock on realizing that the assassins were speaking in Japanese. Getting up in a flash and pointing her pistol in a two-hand combat stance, her holographic targeting sight activated, she saw less than ten meters away two men carrying heavy THOMPSON submachine guns loaded with drum magazines. The Asian men were going around each end of the car she had used as a cover, their weapons at the ready. Choosing the nearest gunman, the one to her left, Nancy shot once, hitting him in the heart. The man fell back, his index pressing on the trigger of his submachine gun and sending bullets all around, increasing the panic among the passersby, who were running away in all directions. Taking a quick sidestep, Nancy shot a second time as the assassin on her right was starting to fire a burst from the hip, peppering the car and sidewalk with .45 calibre bullets. Shot between the eyes, that gunman went down with a jerk of the head, spraying the next car with his brains and blood.

Nancy was stepping cautiously forward to check the gunman when she caught movement from the corner of one eye. Pivoting quickly to point her pistol, she barely had the time to see a young Asian man holding a long knife before a side kick took her pistol out of her hands. A ferocious smile on his face, her third attacker then jumped

towards her while shouting a piercing scream. Nancy caught him in midair with a side kick of her own to his face. The man fell to the sidewalk but, demonstrating remarkable agility and reflexes, rolled back onto his feet to face her, his knife held in a combat stance typical of Japanese martial arts. Not wasting time to try to get back her pistol, Nancy took out from her gun belt her ASP telescopic baton, deploying it with a flick of the wrist. She then smiled to her opponent and bowed to him quickly before taking a combat stance of her own.

“AY! KIOKUSHIN KARATE!”

The Japanese smiled on hearing her and returned her salute, then advanced quickly on her with a piercing scream, slashing with his knife. Nancy took two steps back while parrying the knife with her ASP baton, then struck her opponent with a lightning punch to the plexus. The man backed off from the hit, searching for his breath. He however proved incredibly tough, staying on his feet and still holding high his knife. The two combatants now having a healthy respect for each other, Nancy and the Japanese searched for new attack positions for a moment before resuming the fight. Nancy attacked first, using both her ASP and her feet, with her adversary managing to avoid a hit but unable in return to touch her. After a few seconds of a furious exchange they faced each other again, breathing faster. The Japanese was not smiling anymore but he saluted her again and spoke in a passable English.

“You were well trained, Colonel. Who taught you karate?”

“I studied in Japan.” Said simply Nancy before pushing a terrifying shriek and resume her attack. Two Washington policemen approaching at a run with revolvers drawn hesitated and stopped on seeing the mad, deadly ballet between Nancy and the Japanese man. They then saw the two dead gunmen and their submachine guns, along with the cars and storefronts full of bullet holes.

“Hell! Who’s that fury?” Said one of the policemen as Nancy used a nearby car to bounce high in the air and do a summersault above the head of her assailant while parrying with her ASP another knife thrust.

“We’ll ask questions later!” Replied his partner before advancing cautiously with his revolver pointed.

“POLICE! THROW DOWN YOUR WEAPONS AND FREEZE!”

Nancy stopped moving then but held to her ASP baton while keeping her eyes on her opponent. The latter glanced quickly at the policemen, then went at a run, jumping over

the hood of a parked car. Nancy was going to follow him when a passing car that had no time to brake hit violently the Japanese, projecting him high in the air. The broken body then fell on the roof of a parked car, not moving anymore.

"Damn! I wish I could have captured him alive." Raged Nancy. She was about to go check if the Japanese was dead when a sharp order froze her on the spot.

"I SAID DO NOT MOVE, MISS! THROW DOWN YOUR WEAPON AND RAISE YOUR HANDS, NOW!"

She reluctantly obeyed and spoke to the policemen approaching her.

"CALM DOWN, OFFICERS! THESE MEN TRIED TO KILL ME AND I SIMPLY DEFENDED MYSELF."

"WE WILL SEE ABOUT THAT. LEAN AGAINST THAT CAR AND SPREAD YOUR LEGS."

One of the policemen was just starting to search her, covered by his partner, when three agents of the Secret Service arrived at a run from the direction of the Willard Intercontinental Hotel, revolvers in hand.

"SECRET SERVICE! WHAT HAPPENED HERE?"

"This chick in uniform was fighting with a man. She pretends that she was attacked and was just defending herself. You have a badge?" Said the policeman covering his partner doing the search. Agent Fielding took out his badge and identity card from the Secret Service and showed them to the policeman while looking at the scene of carnage.

"Wow! Decidedly you attract trouble, Colonel Laplante."

"You know this woman?" Asked the senior policeman.

"Yes, and she is one of the guests of the President. I will have to ask you to release her and let her go."

"No way! There are three dead men here and more bullet holes than I can count. We will have to bring her to the police station."

Fielding, frowning, looked coldly at the municipal policeman.

"This woman is part of a British diplomatic delegation. Furthermore, another assassin tried to kill her at the airport less than three hours ago. This is a federal case and the Secret Service will take charge of it."

After a hesitation, the policeman gave up and left with his partner. Nancy then used that chance to retrieve her precious computer briefcase, then her pistol and her baton.

Thankfully, her GLOCK 17 and its holographic sight were not damaged. Fielding, having just examined the three dead men, gave a somber look at Nancy.

"These men, are they who I think they are, Colonel?"

"They are effectively Japanese, Agent Fielding. I heard them talk when they came out of their car."

"Decidedly, you are a marked woman today, Colonel. Brown, call for reinforcements and alert the F.B.I., so that they can send a crime scene team here."

"Right away, boss!"

Mike Crawford arrived at a run a few seconds later and immediately hugged Nancy tightly.

"My god, Nancy, you scared me! You're okay?"

"Yes, I am alright. These three Japanese men tried to kill me but I without luck. One of them was however a really good martial artist and gave me a run for my money." Mike looked with concern at the submachine guns still lying on the pavement, then at the three dead Japanese.

"Damn! They really came at you with the heavy artillery this time. I wonder who will try next."

To his surprise, Nancy giggled with amusement, attracting a confused look from Mike.

"Did I say something funny?"

"Not really. It is only just that, when I heard your remark, I thought about the Italians. Instead of pistols, they would probably have showed up with bouquets of flowers and boxes of chocolate."

Mike smiled as he pictured that scene, then kissed her.

"I am happy to see that you can take all this with a pinch of humor, Nancy. Are you free to come to the hotel now?"

Nancy looked at Fielding, who nodded his head.

"Go ahead, Colonel. One of my men will escort you, even though you don't seem to really need us to defend yourself."

"Thank you for your comprehension, Agent Fielding."

Fielding then watched her walk away with Mike Crawford and one of his agents, then looked back at the dead Japanese and shook his head.

“This woman is a real demon when it comes to fighting. I wonder if many women are like her in 2012.”

08:34 (Washington Time)

Tuesday, December 3, 1940

Oval Office, White House

Washington, D.C.

“Welcome to Washington, Sir Anthony!” Said jovially President Roosevelt, rolling his wheelchair towards his guests to shake their hands. “I am sorry for the rather brutal welcome you got yesterday.”

“It’s nothing, Mister President.” Replied Eden with a wide smile while pressing Roosevelt’s hand. “Colonel Laplante is accustomed to that type of welcome.” Roosevelt then pivoted his wheelchair to face Nancy and shook hands with her while smiling to her.

“I have to say that you make a lot of people talk around Washington, Colonel. The local newspapers are certainly full of you this morning. My wife is anxious to be able to have a cup of coffee with you sometimes today.”

“And I will be honored to speak with her, as I am honored to be able to meet with you, Mister President.”

“In that case, let’s sit and talk!”

Eden, Menzies and Nancy sat in a sofa forming a ‘U’ with two other sofas in which already sat Secretary of War Stimson, Secretary of State Cordell Hull, Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox, Vice-President Henry Wallace, Presidential Counselor Harry Hopkins and the chiefs of staff of the Army, Navy, Army Air Corps and of the Marine Corps, plus Admiral Leahy, the President’s chief of staff. On his part, Roosevelt rolled his wheelchair to the side of the ‘U’ left opened and looked at Eden with a serious expression.

“I was informed yesterday evening about this business concerning Soviet spy networks that have supposedly infiltrated my government. I was also told that you would not release your technological information until those spies would all be neutralized. Is that correct?”

"Yes, Mister President. These Soviet agents occupy many important positions in your administration and in various federal departments. You even have one here in the White House."

"Who is it?" Asked at once Roosevelt, shocked. Nancy put one hand on Eden's arm to ask him to answer that, with Eden nodding his head to her.

"Your economics advisor, Lauchlin Currie, Mister President. He is part of the network headed by the man that tried to kill me yesterday at the airport. His NKVD codename is 'Page'."

"Are you certain about that information, Colonel?"

"It his historical knowledge in 2015, Mister President. In many years in your future, the encrypted communications between the NKVD and its agents in the United States will be decoded as part of a project called 'Venona'. Much later, after the dismemberment of the USSR in the 1990s, the NKVD archives will become available and will confirm the informations from Venona."

"My god!" Said softly Roosevelt, shaken. "Why did he betray me like that?"

"He didn't betray you personally, Mister President. Like most of the other persons implicated in those spy networks, he betrayed the United States by sympathy towards the communist cause, as represented by the USSR."

"But the United States is not the enemy of the USSR! I was ready to help Stalin against an eventual German invasion, and Currie knew that. Why would Stalin risk losing that help this way?"

"Why, Mister President? Because Stalin has fixed ideas about the kind of world he wants to see coming out of this war. What he wants in the medium term is to control Eastern Europe and, in the long term, to become the most powerful man in the World. For that, he needs all the information he can get to produce new weapons and build his empire. He will not hesitate to lie in your face to get what he wants from you. I personally believe that Stalin is a bigger long term threat to the United States than Germany or Japan. I set up in your conference room my television set, so that I can show you a few documentaries made in the future. One of these documentaries will cover the period that will be called the 'Cold War', between the USSR and the western democracies. Another documentary will cover the events both before, during and after the planned Japanese attack to come against Hawaii in 1941."

Roosevelt looked at his officials and generals at those words.

"In that case, what are we waiting for? Let's go watch our future, gentlemen!"

11:06 (Washington Time)

Presidential conference room

White House

Franklin Delano Roosevelt was silent for a long moment, like his officials, admirals and generals, after the documentary of the Cold War ended. Nancy had specifically selected that documentary because it showed to the utmost the duplicity and thirst for power of Stalin, as well as his monstrous brutality. The documentary about the attack on Pearl Harbor had also struck Roosevelt hard. The President finally looked at his political advisor, Harry Hopkins, who had taken copious notes during both documentaries.

"Harry, what do you make of all this? What should be our policy towards the Soviet Union now?"

"Well, Mister President, we certainly will have to modify drastically our Soviet policy and relationship with Stalin. We obviously cannot continue as it is. This however raises a dilemma: do we let the Soviets fight the Germans alone when the latter will attack the USSR next year? If we do help Stalin, then do we risk that way to eventually give him Eastern Europe and let him plan all these wars by proxies against us?"

Roosevelt, a hard expression on his face, then looked at Nancy.

"Colonel, you are the expert about the future. What would you counsel me to do in this case?"

Nancy bit her lips, not liking what she was going to say. World politics was unfortunately too often a case of having to choose the least bad solution.

"Mister President, I will hate myself for saying this, but your duty is clearly to insure the long term security of the United States and of its allies. Stalin already made himself an accomplice of Hitler in this war, by signing a non-aggression pact with the Germans in 1939 and then invading half of Poland in conjunction with the Germans. During and after the war, Stalin will have millions of persons killed or sent to camps in Siberia and he will support the North Koreans in a war that will cost a lot of American lives. Stalin is in my mind a big long term threat to your country and does not deserve your support. Most of the Soviets that may die because of a decision by you not to

support Stalin materially will anyway die at the hands of Stalin and his NKVD. I say: let Stalin pay for his pact with Hitler and let him deal alone with the German invasion to come, Mister President. You may also consider the fact that the assassination attempt against me yesterday had to be ordered by no less than Stalin himself, which amounts to a hostile act against your country as much as against me.”

Roosevelt nodded, apparently convinced.

“And, as for our policies concerning Japan, do you think that we should change anything, in order to avoid a war with Japan?”

Nancy bent forward and fixed Roosevelt as she answered him.

“Mister President, are you ready to accept the continued occupation of China by Japan, or the future occupation of French Indochina? In my history, you sent many clear messages to the Japanese to curb their imperialistic appetite, to no avail. The militarist faction that presently dominates Japan will accept nothing less than what they are already planning to annex and which they call the ‘East Asia Coprosperity Sphere’, and will certainly not put an end to the Japanese atrocities in China. According to my history, the Japanese succeeded at first in their war of conquest around the Pacific because the allied forces were poorly prepared, poorly equipped and poorly led. This, however, can still be changed, if no time is wasted. I already advised Prime Minister Churchill to get rid of his worst military commanders in Asia, starting with Air Chief Marshall Brooke-Popham, the commander of the fortress of Singapore.”

“And...did he fire them?” Asked General Marshall, the chief of staff of the Army. Nancy answered calmly while looking straight into his eyes.

“Yes, General!”

A ripple went through the generals and admirals present: a simple lieutenant colonel, and a woman to boot, with enough influence to have an air marshall replaced, sounded like a near sacrilege to them. Many around her then started to take her much more seriously from that moment on. On his part, Roosevelt stared for a moment at Nancy through his small round spectacles before looking at his secretary of state, Cordell Hull.

“Secretary Hull, I believe that this only reinforces the legitimacy of our present policies towards Japan. We will thus continue in the same vein while reinforcing our military capacities in the Pacific. As for the USSR, we will keep discreet for the moment about that spying business but will refuse privately any request for support from Stalin. Secretaries Stimson and Knox, I believe that it is now more urgent than ever to rearm

and reorganize our forces. I thus authorize Director Hoover to arrest the most important Soviet agents and to revoke immediately the security clearances of every person named in the file brought by Colonel Laplante, so that we can have access to the good colonel's technological information. Vice-President Wallace, make sure that all the officials that will lose their security clearances will effectively leave their offices for good no later than noon tomorrow. Coordinate that with Director Hoover. I will take care myself of Mister Currie. Secretary Knox, I want all our defense plans for Pearl Harbor and the Pacific reviewed in order to prevent or defeat the kind of Japanese attack that we saw in Colonel Laplante's documentary. I want a list of deficiencies in men and materiel done and then submitted to me soonest."

"It will be done, Mister President."

Lieutenant General Henry Arnold, chief of the Army Air Corps, then raised his hand.

"Mister President, the conception and production of military aircraft is a business that takes months and years. Is there a way to get some of that technological information from the future now, instead of having to wait for the F.B.I. to clean up all those Soviet spies?"

Roosevelt in turn looked at Nancy.

"Colonel?"

Exchanging a glance with Eden, Nancy took out of her briefcase a number of documents and distributed one copy to each person present.

"Mister President, this is a short list of recommendations made by me concerning the various existing armament programs that should in my view be cancelled in order to avoid serious wastes of resources and time. The second part of that list names programs that, in contrast, should be improved or accelerated. Concerning the programs to be improved, I am ready to meet immediately with the chief designers responsible for those projects, to discuss with them the various technological improvements that could be made. Since the various officials compromises as Soviet agents do not generally get implicated at a detailed technical level, I believe that my information could then be kept secret from the Soviets, as long as it is not discussed above the level of the conception or production shops."

"This sounds like a reasonable solution." Said Roosevelt before starting to read his copy of the list of recommendations. A number of generals and admirals let out

exclamations when they saw that some of their pet projects were recommended to be terminated.

“You want me to cancel the XP-75 FISHER?” Exclaimed General Arnold. “But we need desperately a long range fighter.”

“And that is why your were ready to order 1,500 copies of that flying monstrosity, even before the first prototype was built, General? The XP-75, like too many other military projects, is the perfect example of how not to procure military equipment. I don't blame you personally for that but I believe that you let yourself be sold a mirage by your officer in charge of aircraft acquisition. Have you noticed that the XP-75 is being conceived by General Motors, a car company with no experience in producing planes, or that your official is actually a recent director of GM? You already have a real long range fighter, the Lockheed P-38 LIGHTNING, which is now in pre-production stage. The P-38 is in my opinion your most promising aircraft project at this moment and I know many ways to make it even better. In fact, I was planning, with your permission of course, to go visit soon the chief designer of the P-38 in California, to discuss a few things with him.”

The head of the Navy, Admiral King, was the next to ask her a question.

“And this new concept of modified aircraft carrier, could you talk to my chief naval designer about it?”

“I will speak gladly with him, Admiral. I now believe that I should let poor Sir Anthony, who is anxious to talk about joint armament production, speak before he strangles me to shut me up.”

A concert of laughs went around the group, with Eden smiling to Nancy before starting to present his own points.

17:32 (Washington Time)

Friday, December 13, 1940

Oval Office, White House

Washington, D.C.

“You wanted to see me, Mister President?”

“Yes, Colonel!” Said Roosevelt in a friendly tone. “Please sit down.”

Nancy took place in one of the sofas in a corner of the Oval Office as Roosevelt approached her in his wheelchair, then fixed her for a long moment before speaking.

“Colonel, what are your personal projects for after the end of this war?”

Taken by surprise, Nancy hesitated for a moment.

“Uh, to be frank, Mister President, I am presently content to simply do my best to survive this war in one piece, something that is not assured as things goes. My only personal project concerns marriage.”

“Oh?” Said Roosevelt, smiling. “And may I ask who is the lucky one?”

“Major Crawford, the American officer accompanying our delegation since London.”

“I have to say that my Eleanor thinks highly of the good Major Crawford, Colonel. She would approve of your choice.”

“Really, Mister President?” Said Nancy, an idea then coming to her head.

“Really! But let’s go on to serious matters. If you have not made plans for the future, then let me offer you an option. You have proven indispensable during the last two weeks and have helped tremendously our rearmament effort, apart of warning us about a serious internal threat. What I am proposing to you is a position as a presidential advisor, be it for me or my successor. I doubt that even a Republican candidate would refuse to employ you as an adviser. Your project to marry an American officer only makes my offer more pertinent, I believe.”

Nancy immediately found Roosevelt’s proposal most interesting. Even though she respected enormously Prime Minister Churchill, many aspects of British imperial policies grated on her. On the other hand, American policies, foreign and domestic, also had a lot to be criticized about, starting with racial segregation.

“Mister President, I must be completely frank with you. When I accepted to become Prime Minister Churchill’s advisor, I warned him in advance that would often be brutally frank about my opinions concerning his policies and decisions. I also warned him that I would keep to myself any information that I believe could ultimately harm Humanity as a whole. If I am to become your advisor, then I will insist on the same terms and conditions.”

Roosevelt stared at her, surprised to hear that a man as pig-headed as Churchill could have accepted such conditions.

"Do you truly believe that the policies of the United States are so different from your ideals, Colonel?"

"In the case of racial segregation, certainly, Mister President. American policies concerning Latin America also strike me as being often paternalistic and unjust towards the poor classes. As I said earlier, I tend to be brutally frank, Mister President."

"I see that you would irritate many people around Washington, Colonel. On the other hand, it would be nice to have in the White House at least one voice that could not be considered that of an ass-licker. My offer still stands, even with your conditions, Colonel."

"In that case, I will keep it seriously in mind for the end of the war, Mister President. Could I ask you a favor before my departure on Sunday?"

"You may ask anything of me, Colonel." Replied a smiling Roosevelt.

"Then, would you accept to marry me to Major Crawford, here at the White House, Mister President?"

The smile on the President's face became a grin.

"Colonel, me and Eleanor would be delighted to grant you your wish."

09:42 (Washington Time)

Sunday, December 15, 1940

Washington-Hoover Airport

Nancy gently pressed Mike's hand while smiling tenderly at him as their plane took off from Washington, heading for Newfoundland with the British delegation. At least her misfortune in time would have brought her a positive personal point. Mike gave her a long kiss before whispering to her.

"Would you like us to have children, Nancy?"

"Yes, but not before the end of this war, Mike. I would not wish for our first baby to possibly become a war orphan."

"I can understand that. I will be patient."

"No need to stay chaste until then, Mike." Said Nancy, giggling, making Mike smile.

"Chaste? What's that?"

They then kissed again, with the other occupants of the plane turning their heads away to preserve the couple's intimacy.

14:58 (GMT)

Tuesday, December 17, 1940

Athena Section, Home Office Building

London, England

Jennifer Collins let out a huge sigh when a proud and happy Nancy announced to her assistants at the Athena Section that she had married Mike Crawford.

"I knew that a widow with a young boy had no chance against you. Damn, damn and thrice damn!"

Peter Stilwell also sighed, a false air of sadness on his face.

"Single life, here I am again!"

Nancy laughed good-heartedly at the faces made by her assistants.

"Don't worry, guys: I still love you all."

Mary Miles showed up then at the door of the section.

"Nancy, the Prime Minister would like to see you right away."

"Is there any other way he wants me?" Asked Nancy before running to the office of the Prime Minister and knocking on his door.

"ENTER!"

Nancy, still wearing her dress uniform, opened the door and came to attention three paces in front of his desk, saluting him.

"Lieutenant Colonel Laplante, reporting as ordered, Mister Prime Minister."

"At ease, Colonel!" Said Churchill, a cigar in his mouth. "Sir Anthony just briefed me on his visit to Washington. He reported that your performance there was exemplary and that you displayed extraordinary talents of organization, administration and leadership during your stay in Washington."

"Thank you, Mister Prime Minister!"

"I am the one who needs to thank you for your performance, which gave us a lot of credits in the eyes of the Americans. Know that, in return, I will contact General McNaughton of the Canadian Army and advise him that I recommend you strongly for an

immediate promotion to the rank of full colonel, a rank that would better reflect your real abilities and present responsibilities.”

“Thank you again, Mister Prime Minister!”

“One last thing before you go, Colonel: you are now free to chose a one week period between now and New Year, week that will be your wedding vacation with Major Crawford.”

Nancy’s eyes widened with joy on hearing that.

“Thank you one more time, Mister Prime Minister!”

Nancy saluted, pivoted on her heels and left the Prime Minister’s office. She waited until she was back in the Athena Section before screaming with joy, making her assistants jump in their chairs.

15:35 (North American Central Time)

Friday, December 20, 3383

Time laboratory, New Lake City University campus

Great Lakes region, North America

Farah Tolkonen shut down Pran Osef’s computer, completely discouraged. The schematics of the time distorter were nowhere to be found in the laboratory, either in print or electronic form. Pran Osef and Telvi Ran must have brought those blueprints with them before disappearing. She thus had no choice left but to try to reinvent that said time distorter, using as a basis the drawings of the auxiliary systems used by the two missing physicists. That promised to be a long and difficult job. Farah got up from her chair, intent on having a decent meal before passing the bad news to Daran Mien. She suddenly started to see double just as the space-time analyzer let out an alarm and as all the instruments in the laboratory seemed to go wild. Farah understood that another wave of temporal distortion was hitting the continuum. The ghost image of the lab then split from her normal vision of the room. To Farah’s surprise and horror she saw another her walking across the fathom lab. Her double was however dressed in a totally different manner. Worse, her double carried on her hip what appeared furiously to be a weapon. In the society of the Global Council, all weapons had been banished for close to four centuries now. Her double then looked in Farah’s direction and opened wide her eyes with surprise: they could both see each other! Farah started running out

of the lab while screaming hysterically but had to stop soon: the disorientation caused by the ghost image was too severe for her. Focusing her attention, she was able to see more people inside the fathom lab. All were bald and had six fingers per hand, like Farah's compatriots of the Global Council. They however appeared much more muscular as a whole and wore military style blue uniforms, apart of being armed. To Farah's relief, the ghost images faded away after a few minutes, allowing her to get back up again.

Her legs still shaky, Farah tried to make sense of what she had seen. What had been at first simple space-time distortions were now something much more serious in her opinion. What she had just seen was probably a complete duplication of the space-time continuum, with the ghosts she had seen being copies of Global Council citizens now populating a new continuum, or timeline. Something in the past had changed drastically history, creating distortions and finally splitting the timeline in two. Farah returned at a run in the lab and looked at the indications recorded by the instruments during the period of distortion. Her heart accelerated when she saw the screen of the space-time analyzer: instead of the single frequency line that had always appeared on it, there was now two lines, with the second line coming from the first but being now distinct. Farah then understood that she had the frequency of the new continuum and jumped at once on the lab's videophone to call Daran Mien.

CHAPTER 24 – RAID ON WISSANT

01:25 (Paris Time)

Thursday, January 2, 1941

Field East of Wissant,

Coastal area of the Pas de Calais

France

Nancy landed in a field near Pihen-les-Guines, a small French village six miles East of Wissant, on the coast of the Pas de Calais. She was heavily loaded with an armored assault vest and assault helmet, her assault rifle, night vision goggles, directional microphone, two pistols, a radio, a signal lamp and ammunition. Nobody had heard her plane or seen her land, since she had jumped in HALO mode, like on the raid on the prison near Gravelines. The nearest known German positions were two miles away and the night was pitch dark. Gathering and hiding her parachute took less than two minutes.

Her first task was to orient herself and determine accurately her position, so that she could guide the platoon of commandos due to join her in less than an hour. She wished silently that she had a functioning GPS receiver with its constellation of satellites, but had to make do with a compass and a map. Walking directly North from her landing point, she hit a road after covering half a mile, then turned West and followed the drainage ditch alongside the road. She soon encountered a road sign indicating that she was following the Départementale 244 road. After another 500 yards, she arrived at a tiny village. Searching for a good five minutes, she finally found a sign indicating that she was in Wadenthun. Checking her map, she saw with satisfaction that she was where she wanted to be. Taking off her equipment pack and grabbing her silenced Ruger target pistol, fitted with a laser dot sight, she explored the quiet village to make sure that no Germans were in it. After fifteen minutes of cautious searching, she was satisfied that none were around and returned to the spot where she had hidden her pack. Putting her pack back on, she walked southward for 300 yards through the waist-high grass and brush before stopping and getting out her signal lamp. The lamp had a

long black tubular baffle to avoid being seen from anywhere but directly in front. At precisely two O'clock, she switched on the lamp, directing it skyward and blinking its light in a precise pattern.

17,000 feet above, Major George Townsend, standing in the opened door of the converted Armstrong Whitworth Whitley Bomber, saw the blinking light at the same time as the navigator. Turning towards his twenty Royal Commandos and the four RAF personnel they were escorting for this mission, he then talked through his oxygen mask.

"The beacon light is on, directly below us. Get ready!"

He watched on as the commandos, wearing assault armor, formed up in single file behind him. Mixed within their ranks were the two men and two women of the RAF, much less heavily loaded than the commandos and without assault armor. The four of them had been chosen for this mission for their good knowledge of the German language and for their familiarity with air traffic control and radar procedures.

"Grab the leashes!"

Everybody took hold of the short elastic rope with handle dangling from the back of the person in front. The leashes, if everything went well, would keep the group together as they fell through the night sky. During the practices, it had worked well three out of four times.

"Remember, step lively and jump out without hesitation! On my mark, one, two, three, GO!"

Running out of the plane door back-to-belly, the 23 men and two women fell together in the dark sky, towards Nancy's blinking light. At 6,000 feet, Townsend tapped on the arm of the commando behind him, who in turn made the same signal to the RAF woman next in line. The signal went down the line, then back up, each parachutist loosening their grip on their handle after passing back up the signal. As soon as he received back a tap on his arm, Townsend opened his parachute, followed in quick succession by the others. Now gliding at altitudes ranging between three and four thousand feet, the 25 British converged on Nancy's light. To Nancy's delight and considerable relief, all of them landed safely within one hundred yards of her position, with Major Townsend and another commando actually landing practically on her back. It took ten minutes to regroup the raiders, after which Nancy led them single file towards Wadenthum. From

there, using her night vision goggles and directional microphone, she guided them in the direction of Wissant and the coast.

05:23 (Paris Time)

Wissant

Nancy silently came back towards George Townsend and the other British soldiers kneeling alongside a wall in a dark and narrow alley of Wissant. Her voice was barely above a whisper.

“The French resistance reports were accurate. The headquarters of the JagdFliegerFührer 2⁹ are in the town hall, on the other side of this block of buildings. I could see a total of four Luftwaffe sentries in front of it. There is a house and bakery shop just across the street from the town hall’s main entrance. The street is less than twenty yards wide at that point. I found a back entrance to that bakery shop that should be easy to break in without making a noise.”

“Excellent!”

Townsend was still amazed at how easy it had been up to now. There were actually three good reasons for it being so: first, the fact that the local German Wehrmacht troops were watching the sea and had all their heavy weapons pointed that way; second, with the area being so heavily used by the Luftwaffe for its fighter airbases, rear area security had naturally been handed over to Luftwaffe troops who, in Townsend’s opinion, made poor sentries; and, last but not least, Nancy’s planning itself. When it came to combined arms special operations, she had revealed herself to be a real genius at them, being both fiendishly devious and innovative. Nobody on General Joubert’s staff could come close to her when it came time to plan an apparently impossible mission. The general had clearly seized on her qualities and had made sure a number of times that the War Office staff in London knew about that. As a result, she had already earned the nickname of ‘dirty tricks Nancy’, apart of her German nickname of ‘Die Wolfin’.

⁹ JagdFliegerFührer: Fighter division

Following Nancy along a narrow alley between two house blocks, the British raiders stopped behind a brick house as Townsend quietly broke open a door. The 26 men and women then disappeared inside the bakery shop.

Jean Poissant was startled out of his sleep by the firm contact of a hand covering his mouth. His wife Marthe was similarly awoken besides him. With a feeling of panic, they looked at the two large silhouettes looming over them in the dark upper floor bedroom. A woman's voice, speaking in perfect French, calmed them down a bit.

"Do not be afraid, we don't want to harm you. We are British soldiers and need your house to hide in it for a while. If you agree to be quiet, nod your heads."

They both nodded and the hands came off their mouths. The middle-aged couple then cautiously sat in their bed, still watched by the woman and her companion.

"Is there anybody else in the house, mister...?"

"Poissant, Jean Poissant. This is my wife Marthe. My eight year-old daughter Diane is sleeping in the bedroom next door."

"Please have your wife wake her up and bring her here. We don't want to scare her."

"Can I switch on the light first?"

"Wait!" Said urgently the woman's voice. "At what time do you routinely wake up in the morning?"

"Er, no later than six O'clock: I have to prepare the day's batch of fresh croissants and bread."

"Then, switch you bed lamp on."

He did so and his eyes bulged with surprise, while Marthe took in her breath. Both the man and woman wore armored vests and helmets that made them look like medieval soldiers. The woman got most of their attention: extremely tall and broad-shouldered for a woman, she had the expression of someone you didn't want to mess with. Jean then saw her rank insignia and twitched: he had fought alongside the British in the 1914-18 war and still could recognize the crown and two pips of a colonel.

"You're a colonel?"

Marthe looked at Jean, then at the woman with disbelief. The woman then urged them on.

"Please bring your daughter here now, we have much to do."

“Marthe, go get Diane!”

While his wife went to fetch their daughter, Jean scrutinized both soldiers. Their expressions, while not exactly friendly, were not hostile either, maybe just cautious.

“What do you want from us?”

“Mister Poissant,” answered the woman, still in perfect French, “I simply want you and your family to follow your normal morning routine, serve your customers and keep quiet about our presence here, that’s all. We plan to attack the German headquarters across the street later in the morning. We were going to leave you tied-up and gagged so that the Germans would not harm you after, but...”

Jean understood her hesitation. He would have been willing to take his chances with the Germans, since he and Marthe could cling to a likely story. With Diane, it was another matter: an exuberant and talkative little girl, it would not take much of an interrogator to make her divulge the truth, even without using the dreadful methods of the Gestapo. What followed anyway sent that solution down the drain. Marthe came back with little Diane, still half-asleep. Instead of being frightened by the soldiers, Diane instead became all excited after a single look at the woman.

“Mom, dad, it’s Nancy Laplante, the she-wolf from the future!”

“Oh dear...” whispered Nancy, as Jean and Marthe stared at her while Diane jumped up and down with joy.

08:05 (Paris Time)

Bakery shop, Wissant

“Where is your cute little girl, Mister Poissant?” Asked in fair but slow French the young German female Luftwaffe helperin as she was about to leave the shop with the customary daily order of croissants. Jean, a nervous wreck inside, forced a smile on his face.

“I’m afraid that she is feeling sick today and has to stay in bed. In fact, I believe that I’m coming down with the same virus as hers.”

The German teenager instinctively stepped away from the counter.

“I’m sorry to hear that. Please wish her a prompt recovery on my part.”

“Thank you, Fraulein Weiss, I will do that. Have a good day.”

The German girl then left the store, crossing the street and entering the headquarters with her bags of croissants. Nancy Laplante left the corner where she was hiding but stayed away from the shop window.

“The local Germans seem to be fairly decent with your family, Mister Poissant.”

“They are on the most part polite, some like this young one being actually friendly and likeable. I have seen worst Germans than this bunch.”

Nancy nodded her head. Luftwaffe personnel generally had a reputation for being more civilized as occupants than the Wehrmacht, probably because they were on the whole a better educated and more technically oriented lot.

“That last one looked awfully young to wear a uniform. She looked no more than seventeen years old to me.”

Jean smiled at Nancy’s comment.

“Her NCO confided to my wife once that she suspected as much, but that she could not prove that Ingrid was underage. Personally, my bet is that she is sixteen, no more. She told me once that she lost her whole family in a British bombing raid.”

Nancy bit her lower lip, looking thoughtfully at the German headquarter across the street.

“We will try to keep casualties to a minimum. Our plan is to take them prisoners anyway, not to kill them if we can help it. I...”

The arrival of a German staff car escorted by two motorcyclists cut her off. The driver of the staff car hurried to open the rear right door as the Luftwaffe sentries presented arms. A very senior-looking German officer then stepped out of the vehicle, followed by an aide. Nancy, grabbing her small binoculars, swore quietly in surprise and delight.

“It’s GeneralFeldMarshal Kesselring, commander of Luftflotte¹⁰ 2!”

“Is he that important?”

“You bet he is! He must be here to conduct an inspection. What a piece of blind luck!”

She then looked at her watch.

“It is nearly time now. Remember, once the shooting starts, stay low and especially stay away from glass panes: there may be a lot of flying glass later on.”

On a short order from her, the commandos hiding on the floor above the shop came down, taking position behind the counter. When they were all ready for the assault,

¹⁰ Luftflotte: Air fleet

Nancy ordered Jean Poissant upstairs and, kneeling besides the entrance, cautiously poked out of the slightly opened door the muzzle of her silenced pistol. After carefully selecting the order of her targets and waiting for the sentries to look away from each other, she quickly fired five shots, then grabbed her assault rifle and flung the door open before starting to run towards the German headquarters. Twenty-five British men and women rushed to follow her.

08:17 (Paris Time)

JagdFliegerFuehrer 2 headquarters

Wissant, France

“What more do you want me to do, Herr GeneralFeldMarshal?” Exploded General-Major Osterkamp. “My fighter division is at less than forty percent of nominal strength and I lost nearly all of my experienced pilots in September. Add to that the fact that the British bombers are now faster than my fighters. I need more aircraft and faster ones too!”

“That is out of the question for the moment.” Answered Kesselring in a resigned voice. He knew that Osterkamp was right but had been ordered by ReichMarshal Goering to gain back air supremacy over France, or else.

“Our fighter aircraft factories have been hit very hard by these new British bombs and are having problems resuming production. As for faster fighters, we have something in the works but they are still at least one year away.”

“Then, GeneralFeldMarshal, you can tell that fat effeminate in Berlin that we have lost the air war over France and Belgium.”

Kesselring didn't reply at first. Osterkamp was a competent commander and had done as best as anybody could in the present circumstances.

“If it would not have been for that damn Wolfen!” Osterkamp nodded at Kesselring's frustrated remark.

“She sure played a trick or two on us. Her knowledge is costing us the war. Too bad the Russians didn't get her in Washington.”

“What can you expect from those incompetents? It seems that they only succeeded in making her meaner.”

They both looked in frustration at the 'wanted' poster with the picture of Nancy Laplante pinned to one of the walls of Osterkamp's office. That was when loud automatic fire rang out from inside the building. Reacting instinctively, Kesselring took out his pistol and flung the door of the office open, stepping in the large air operations center. He was immediately confronted by several armed soldiers wearing armored vests and helmets with faceplates.

"DROP THE GUN, NOW!"

The command had been shouted in German. Sensing that he would only endanger the lives of his airmen, Kesselring let his pistol drop and raised his hands above his head, imitated by Osterkamp, who slowly walked out of his office. They were quickly searched and then pushed towards the line of Luftwaffe personnel facing one of the walls, their hands crossed behind their necks. Kesselring was placed besides a very young helperin¹¹ who was sobbing, completely terrorized by her ordeal. By then all firing had stopped, proving that the British were now in full control of the building. They had to be British, even with those weird armored suits. Kesselring saw that the British were now methodically searching the Germans one by one, starting at the other end of the line he was in. Using the best English he could muster, he shouted, still facing the wall.

"I'm GeneralFeldMarshal Kesselring. I want to speak to your commander."

He heard footsteps approach before somebody grabbed him and turned him around. He looked at the tall British soldier, who was still wearing his faceplate down, noticing the slip-on with the crown and two pips of a colonel. The officer spoke in good German, the voice muffled by the faceplate.

"What do you want?"

"There are female auxiliaries here. Your men must not search them."

"Agreed! I will thus search them myself."

"You bastard! How can..."

Kesselring's sudden rage died down as soon as the colonel raised her faceplate.

"YOU?"

Kesselring was now staring at the same face he had just looked at on the poster inside Osterkamp's office.

¹¹ helperin: German female auxiliary, with rank equivalent to a private

“Correct, Herr GeneralFeldMarshal. Colonel Nancy Laplante, at your service. Your concern for your female personnel is appreciated. I assure you that all of your people will be treated correctly, as long as there is no resistance.”

“You don’t seriously expect to get away with such a hare-brained raid, Miss Laplante?”

“Oh, I think I will, Albert.”

“Don’t call me by my first name, you...”

“THEN CALL ME BY MY RANK, GENERALFELDMARSHAL!”

Laplante then slung her rifle across her back and pulled out a huge gold-plated pistol before grabbing the young helperin besides Kesselring. She then pushed the small teenager with reddish-brown hair towards Osterkamp’s office. The girl squealed in terror, probably expecting to be executed. Laplante patted gently the girl’s back, speaking softly in German to her.

“Don’t worry, Ingrid, I am just going to do a quick search on you. You have nothing to fear. By the way, you should have given your real age to the Luftwaffe recruiter.”

Ingrid’s look of terror changed abruptly to one of complete surprise. Staring at the smiling face of her captor, she then walked by herself in the office. Nancy closed the door behind her before starting to search the German teenager. She didn’t find any weapon or interesting document on Ingrid Weiss, exactly as she had expected. Nancy then examined closely the girl, trying to guess her real age. She was tall for a girl, standing about 175 centimeters tall, and had a well developed, feminine body with long, shapely legs. Her angelic and very beautiful face was framed by medium-length reddish-brown hair and she had big sparkling blue eyes. Her youth however showed up on her face, something Ingrid seemed to have tried to hide with some makeup and lipstick. Nancy spoke to the girl in a soft tone, keeping her volume low.

“What is your age, Helferin Weiss?”

She saw a flash of apprehension in the eyes of the girl before she answered.

“I am nineteen, Colonel.”

Nancy gave her a critical look.

“Ingrid, don’t take me for an idiot. I was myself a precocious girl in my youth. I promise you that I will keep your answer to myself.”

“I am seventeen, Colonel, truly.” Replied Ingrid in a voice she tried to keep firm.

"And I'm Prime Minister Churchill. Listen, Ingrid, I respect your desire to serve your country but being a prisoner of war is no picnic. On the other hand, the Geneva Conventions forbid the taking of children as prisoners of war."

"I'm not a child!" Replied heatedly Ingrid, before realizing that she had overreacted. Nancy looked at her with sadness.

"Ingrid, you joined the Luftwaffe because of the death of your family in a British bombing, right?"

Tears came out of the teenager's eyes at that question and she lowered her head, answering between sobs.

"Yes! All my family died that day, including my grand-parents, my uncles and my aunts. We were celebrating my grandfather's birthday and my father sent me out to go buy more wine and beer. When I came back, there was nothing left of our house but burning ruins. I was about to be fifteen and..."

Ingrid couldn't go on then and cried, her hands covering her face. Feeling bad for the girl, Nancy got close and hugged her in her arms.

"I am sorry for your family, Ingrid, truly. I myself lost my parents in a car accident when I was sixteen. I have been managing alone since then. So, you are now fifteen?"

"Yes! My anniversary is on September the seventh." Nancy thought with bitterness about all the suffering and tragedies caused by wars, still holding Ingrid in her arms. She finally stepped back and looked the teenager in the eyes.

"Ingrid, I promise you to keep your real age a secret if you really want to stay with your comrades. I am also ready to let you go now, if you wish so, in view of your age. Think well about that: captivity is no fun."

"I...I can't abandon my comrades like this, Colonel. What would they think of me after that? What would I think of myself?"

Nancy nodded her head, impressed by this young girl with such a tragic past but who had kept her sense of honor and self-esteem through such adversity.

"Very well! For me, you are officially nineteen, Ingrid. You can now go and join back your comrades, Helferin Weiss."

The teenager wiped away the last of her tears, then came to attention and saluted Nancy, using a military salute rather than the Nazi salute. Nancy returned her salute

before escorting her back to the line of prisoners and then picking up another female auxiliary to search her.

After all the Germans had been searched, including the seven female auxiliaries, they were bound and gagged before being lined once again against the western wall of the air operations center. Kesselring then noticed with no small surprise that two of the four British in RAF uniforms were women. One of the telephones near the main plotting board soon rang. One of the RAF women then answered it in fluent German.

“JagdFliegerFührer 2 headquarters!... No, no problems at all, sir. A group of French underground terrorists tried to attack us but were repelled with heavy casualties to themselves. Our men are hunting them down right now... Thank you, sir!”

“Good work, Corporal Martin!” Said Nancy Laplante to her after she put down the telephone. Another telephone rang a minute later, picked up by the other RAF woman.

“JagdFliegerFührer 2 headquarters!... British bombers heading towards us? One moment please!”

The female sergeant then yelled towards the corporal standing by the plotting board, making sure the caller could hear her.

“British bombers on the way! Stand by to plot!”

She then returned her attention to the caller, yelling the bearing, distance, speed and altitude as she got them.

“We are scrambling a wing of fighters as I speak, sir. Keep us informed.”

Nobody of course called a fighter airbase to pass that information on. Mortified, Kesselring started to understand what game the British were playing: by seizing this headquarters, they would temporarily paralyze all German fighter activity over Northern France, Belgium and the Netherlands, thus opening the skies to massive British bomber attacks. His own bomber airbases were likely in for a terrifying pounding. Four more calls from radar stations were similarly decoyed before Laplante yelled in English.

“Two minutes to first air strike! Take cover and stay away from the windows!”

She then switched to German for the benefit of her prisoners.

“Our bombers are about to pound the coastal defenses and airfields around Wissant. It will probably feel like judgment day but don't worry: we are not part of the target list, at least not the intentional one.”

Kesselring didn't find her joke funny. Young Ingrid didn't either. The noise of heavy bombers approaching then got their full attention.

"EVERYBODY DOWN!" Yelled Laplante, doing so herself. Less than a minute later, what sounded and felt like the end of the world shook the whole building, shattering all the windows. Seven more huge blasts quickly followed, the last one close enough that the blast wave, penetrating through the broken windows, temporarily knocked out the breath of everybody inside. Kesselring understood that the British were using the same dreadful blast bombs that had literally blown away the fighter factories in Germany. Ingrid was by now hysterical, her screams of terror only muffled by her gag. Laplante crouched besides the teenager and firmly grabbed her by the shoulders.

"Ingrid!... Ingrid! You wanted to prove something to yourself by enlisting, right? Then prove it now by being brave. Control yourself!"

The teenager looked at her briefly before starting to cry. Laplante held her in her arms, trying to soothe her with calming words. Kesselring and Osterkamp looked at each other in puzzlement. Then, another wave of heavy bombers approached.

Karl Gross watched with horror from his company's dug-in positions on a hill Northeast of Wissant as the battalion's forward positions along the beaches were swept by gigantic blast waves. The British bombs were falling over half a mile away, yet each blast knocked him flat against the earthen back wall of his trench, nearly taking his breath away. He thought that everybody in those forward positions must have been crushed to death by the overpressure. Then another wave of bombers approached at low altitude. He followed one of them with his eyes as it was coming directly at him, its bomb bay opened. A single, huge bomb fell out of it, a parachute deploying from its tail and braking its fall. Gross could do nothing but watch in abject terror as the bomb headed directly towards his trench.

09:22 (Paris Time)

JagdFliegerFuehrer 2 headquarters

Wissant

After the fourth wave of bombers was gone, Nancy Laplante let go on Ingrid, who had mostly quieted down by now.

“Are you alright, Ingrid?”

The teenager nodded her head. Laplante then went to talk with another British officer. She next went to a soldier wearing a field radio on his back and talked in the microphone for a while. After another few minutes, what sounded like multiple aircraft engines approached from the direction of the sea. That was when Laplante got moving and yelling again.

“THE RIDE HOME IS ARRIVING! PACK UP AND GET READY TO MOVE! WARRANT HIGGINS, GET THE PRISONERS TO THE MAIN ENTRANCE!”

Still gagged and with their hands tied, the Germans were firmly but not brutally put on their feet and walked to the main entrance. Laplante, waiting by the opened door, saw them shiver as the cold outside air blew in on the Germans. She then looked at the nearby cloakroom, full of German overcoats.

“Warrant Higgins!”

“Yes, Maam?” Answered the British NCO in charge of the prisoners.

“Bring each prisoner in turn inside that cloakroom and have them find and put on their coats. Make sure there are no weapons or interesting papers inside the pockets first.”

“I’m on it, Maam!”

As Kesselring was putting on his own overcoat, he heard the noise of heavy tracked vehicles approaching. His anticipated joy at seeing a Wehrmacht armored column deliver them was doused by the attitude of the British soldiers, who did not look alarmed one bit. He then understood with a pang that the column must be British. As they were being lined up outside by the British, the Germans saw the first of four tanks turn a corner towards them. Kesselring could see immediately that the machine was no German tank: the impressive beast now close by could apparently eat raw for lunch a Panzer IV, the most powerful German tank in service at this time. The four tanks, followed by what looked like four armored troop carriers, sped by them before taking position at the next corner. Three British trucks then stopped in front of the headquarters building. Three of the six British soldiers who jumped out of the trucks were women. Nancy Laplante pointed at the middle truck and yelled in German.

“All male prisoners will now get on this truck. Move!”

She then took aside the seven female auxiliaries and the two general officers.

“You go in the last truck.”

Letting two armed commandos escort the Germans to the truck, Nancy walked quickly to the bakery shop, where Jean Poissant was locking the door of his house, his little family standing on the sidewalk with six suitcases at their feet. The baker had tears in his eyes as he looked for a last time at his home.

“We are abandoning our whole life but I suppose it is better than waiting for the Gestapo to visit us later. For the sake of my little Diane, let's go.”

Nancy escorted the Poissants to the third truck, helping at the same time to carry their belongings. By then, the rapid fire of tank guns could be heard from the South. Nancy shouted at both German generals.

“That, gentlemen, is the rest of our mechanized force finishing off what's left of a couple of your airfields.”

Stepping aside from the truck, she then signaled to Major Townsend, standing besides the lead truck, to start rolling. Climbing in the cab of her truck, Nancy sighed discreetly in relief as the convoy rolled out, escorted by the four tanks and four armored personnel carriers: this mission had gone even better than she had hoped for, with no British casualties so far in her group.

Both the German prisoners and the Poissant family opened wide their eyes in surprise and awe when they got to the beach: lined up on the sand, their vehicle ramps lowered, were fourteen LCMACs.

“Mein Gott!” Exclaimed Kesselring. “I have never seen such machines before.”

“Colonel Laplante designed them, General.” Said proudly one of the German-speaking female RAF NCOs escorting the prisoners of the third truck. Kesselring swore when their truck approached a machine with the marking LCMAC-1 on its side: visible between the two large shrouded propellers sitting on top of the big machine was a tube-like apparatus he recognized easily enough.

“Himmel!” He said in a low voice to Osterkamp. “That damn woman stole our pulse jet engine design. It was meant to equip one of our secret weapons, one I saw during a recent inspection in Germany. Is there anything she doesn't know about us?” Those words then struck Osterkamp hard, as they made him realize something awful.

“Our Enigma encoding machines. She must know everything about them as well.”

Kesselring's jaw dropped at those words. Before he could say something, the female RAF sergeant waved her revolver at him.

"No more talking, General. Sit down and stay quiet."

Their truck soon climbed the aft ramp of LCMAC-1 with the two other trucks. As soon as they were on board, Nancy climbed down from the truck cab and yelled above the din of the hovercraft's engines.

"THE PRISONERS WILL STAY SEATED IN THEIR TRUCKS, EXCEPT FOR QUICK TRIPS TO THE HEADS. NO TALKING WILL BE PERMITTED BETWEEN THE PRISONERS."

She then repeated the same thing in German. Before going to the bridge of the hovercraft, she helped down from their truck the Poissant family, then led them up a steep ladder. Nancy was greeted upstairs by Peter Stilwell, still officially LCMAC-1's commander. He reported to her after saluting her.

"The rest of the force is returning now, Colonel. No casualties or damage reported by the landing force. It seems that nearly all the Germans in the area were already dead when they arrived at the airfields. They have collected an additional eleven prisoners."

"At ease, Mister Stilwell! Let me present you Jean, Marthe and Diane Poissant. They were forced to abandon their bakery shop and home in Wissant for fear of German retaliation."

Stilwell surprised Nancy then by speaking a few sentences in a fair French. He then installed the Poissants in the seats alongside the aft bulkhead of the bridge. Nancy used the first opportunity to speak discreetly with stilwell.

"You still plan to bring LCMAC-1 back to Bristol via the Thames River and the canal system?"

"That's correct. You need a lift up to London, I suppose?"

"It would be appreciated, Peter. I'm thinking of offering the Poissants the hospitality of my apartment until I can arrange something else. After all, I put them in hot water. It's only fair that I help them now."

"You have a point, Nancy. I will wait for you while you transfer custody of your prisoners in Chatham."

"Thanks!"

Nancy then went in the radio room to send a brief post-mission report to London and a short message to the Royal Navy base in Chatham to warn them of the impending arrival of the Luftwaffe prisoners. As she was coming out of the radio room, she saw that the mechanized unit landed by the hovercrafts was now back on the beach and was in the process of reentering the LCMACs. She also saw a group of British soldiers pushing in front of them a dozen or so German prisoners towards LCMAC-1.

“Ah, more guests! I am going down to the vehicle deck to greet them, Peter. As soon as all our troops are back aboard our hovercrafts, then give the signal to return to Chatham.”

“Understood, Nancy.”

Going down rapidly to the vehicle deck, Nancy asked three commandos to follow her and went to the bow ramp to greet the soldiers escorting in the extra eleven prisoners, who were wearing various Luftwaffe uniforms. The sergeant in charge of the group saluted her at rigid attention.

“Eleven more prisoners for you, Colonel, courtesy of the Coldstreams Guards.”

“Thank you, Sergeant! You may return to your hovercraft. Give a Bravo Zulu ¹² from me to your commander for a job well done.”

“It will be done, Colonel.” Nearly shouted the sergeant before saluting her and pivoting on his heels to walk down the ramp. Nancy then looked at the group of eleven Germans, who wore long faces, and spoke to them in German.

“Gentlemen, if you may get in the second truck. Our next stop will be England. Do not speak during the trip and stay sitting. If you need to use the latrines, raise a hand and ask permission to one of your guards.”

She then signaled to the corporal in charge of the commandos.

“Get them in the second truck, Corporal.”

“Yes maam! COME ON, JERRIES, STEP LIVELY!”

As the new prisoners were walking past the truck carrying the two generals and seven female auxiliaries, young Ingrid Weiss suddenly got up from her bench and shouted at one of the new prisoners.

“KLAUS! ARE YOU ALRIGHT?”

¹² Bravo Zulu: Military expression often used on the radio to congratulate someone for a job well done.

The young German fighter pilot she had addressed turned his head, surprised, then started to walk towards Ingrid's truck.

"Ingrid? And you? Are you alright?"

One of the commandos escorting the pilot then pushed him brutally back in line.

"Back with the others, Jerry!"

Ingrid then protested at once in English and started to swing one leg out of the truck.

"DON'T TOUCH HIM, YOU BASTARD!"

The R.A.F. women grabbed her quickly, dragging her back in the truck and pushing her down on the cargo floor. That seemed to enrage the young German fighter pilot, who pushed back his own guard. Nancy ran to them as two commandos were starting to pummel the fighter pilot with their rifle butts.

"STOP THAT! EVERYBODY CALM DOWN!"

She arrived just in time to prevent a commando to shoot a bullet in the pilot's gut.

"I SAID STOP! I'LL TAKE CARE OF THIS."

As the commandos stepped back, Nancy grabbed the German pilot by his collar and, with a strength that surprised the man, pulled him on his feet.

"So, Lieutenant, what happened here?"

"They were brutalizing Ingrid. I couldn't let them do that." Protested the young man, who was quite handsome.

"So, you know each other, hey? Come with me, Lieutenant!"

She guided the pilot towards the back of Ingrid's truck and shouted an order.

"Sergeant, let Helferin Weiss come down."

As soon as her guards let her go, Ingrid ran to the rear gate of the truck and jumped down on the vehicle deck, then immediately hugged the pilot. Nancy couldn't help smile at that scene as the two Germans covered each other with kisses. She finally patted the pilot's shoulder.

"I am sorry to interrupt your lovers' reunion, but I need a few answers. First, what is your name, Lieutenant?"

"Klaus Bayerling, Colonel. Thank you for your intervention."

"Don't thank me yet, Lieutenant. You have known Ingrid for a while?"

"Since about three months ago, Colonel."

"And is that a serious relationship?"

Ingrid then answered for Klaus.

“Klaus is a really nice man, Colonel. I like him a lot.”

“I see! Listen, I hate to be a bearer of bad news but you are now both prisoners of war and you will probably end up being separated for a few years. You better accept that fact and avoid a repeat of the latest stunt, which could have killed you. If it may make you feel better, Lieutenant, I promise you that Ingrid will be treated humanely, as you will be. With some luck, you may even end up in a camp in Canada. You may now exchange a last kiss.”

Klaus and Ingrid didn't have to be told twice, exchanging a long, sensual kiss that drew amused encouragements from the other female German auxiliaries. Nancy was amused as well and waited patiently for the couple to be finished, then had the pilot escorted to his truck. As Ingrid was about to climb back in her truck, Nancy whispered in her ear.

“You have a good taste in men, Ingrid.”

That made the teenager grin.

“Thanks, Colonel!”

11:03 (GMT)

Chatham naval base

Thames River's estuary

England

One good and one bad surprise awaited Nancy at the naval base in Chatham as her truck rolled off the bow ramp of LCMAC-1 and onto the cobblestones of the quay. The good surprise was when she saw her Mitsubishi Outlander parked near the quay, with Mike Crawford standing besides the car. Directing her driver to stop near the Outlander, Nancy jumped out and ran to Mike, kissing him passionately. He returned her kisses, oblivious of the German prisoners watching them from the truck. They finally parted, both grinning from ear to ear.

“You lovely hunk! How sweet to think of meeting me here.”

“Hey, anything to be close to you, baby.”

“Hmm, I see! Well, you will have three more passengers to bring back to London. Wait here, I won't be long.”

Walking to the back of the truck, Nancy signaled the Poissants to come down and helped them unload their suitcases. Once the French were down, Nancy presented

them to Mike, explaining the reasons for the Poissants to be on board LCMAC-1. After more than four months of seriously dating Nancy, Mike Crawford's French, while not fluent, was good enough for him to exchange a few greetings. That helped put at ease the Poissants, who gingerly loaded up their suitcases in the Outlander and got in the car. Nancy grabbed Mike by his right arm and spoke to him in a low voice.

"Since you are here, could I use your services as a diplomatic attaché from a neutral country?"

"I suppose it has to do with those German prisoners?"

"Bullseye! Can you follow my truck to the transfer point? It should not take long."

"If it is for a humanitarian reason, I will be happy to help."

"Thanks, Mike, I appreciate that."

Climbing back in the truck's cab, Nancy had the female driver join up with the two other trucks on a nearby parade square. A navy commander greeted her there, a sheepish smile on his face.

"Colonel Laplante, I'm Commander Paul Hart, delegated by the base commander to take charge of your prisoners. A section of RAF policemen should arrive from RAF Gravesend anytime now to take care of your Luftwaffe prisoners. Er, you should have specified that you had female prisoners too: I have no facilities for women prisoners of war here."

Nancy sighed. It was actually mostly her fault: she had assumed, based on her era's experience, that female prisoners facilities would be available as a given.

"Alright, Commander, where are the nearest facilities for female prisoners of war, then?"

Hart looked embarrassed by her question.

"Well, that is a sticking point, actually: there are no such facilities in the whole of England, short of using prisons for female criminals. This, I believe, is the first time in this war that we have captured German women."

Nancy stared at him with a mix of disbelief and anger.

"Commander, I'll be damned if I'm going to let you lock up those German women alongside criminals. There must be a proper place for them somewhere."

"If there is one, I'm afraid I don't know about it. I'm sorry, Colonel."

A truck loaded with RAF policemen screeched to a halt besides them then, followed closely by two empty trucks. A RAF officer jumped out of the cab and yelled to his men

to get out. Being on the opposite side of the truck from Nancy, she could not see him, but his voice was all too familiar to her. She turned red with rage and yelled at Hart.

“You expect me to give up custody of seven young women to HIM?”

“What are you talking about? He’s the base security officer at RAF Gravesend after all. What’s your problem?”

“Don’t you know why he was demoted and transferred out of Northolt, Commander?”

Hart shook his head, truly at a loss to understand her anger.

“The why, Commander, is because he likes performing strip searches on women by himself, starting with me.”

Hart paled, realizing the magnitude of his gaffe.

“What shall we do then?”

“I will tell you what I will do, Commander. I will give you custody of my male prisoners and will hold you responsible if they are mistreated in any way by Flying Officer Harris or by his men. As for my female prisoners, I will keep custody of them until I can find suitable facilities with female military guards for them. Major Crawford, from the American embassy, will now take a detailed list of the prisoners handed to you. Be advised that you have as part of the lot a Luftwaffe field marshal and a major general.”

“Christ! You bagged some truly big fish, Colonel.”

“Let’s say that the fishing was better than expected, Commander.”

Mike Crawford soon had a complete list of the prisoners and joined Nancy before she went to see Kesselring. The couple saluted politely the Luftwaffe Field Marshal before Nancy spoke.

“GeneralFeldMarshal, I have to separate from your group the seven helferinen, in order to find suitable facilities for them. Again, I give you my word that they will be well treated. Major Crawford, from the American embassy, has a list of all the Germans captured in Wissant today. That list will be transmitted to German authorities via diplomatic means.”

“I will personally insure that the rights of your auxiliaries are fully respected, sir.”
Added Mike, getting a nod from Kesselring.

“That is most satisfactory, Major. Colonel Laplante, I wish that everybody would be as humane as you during this war.”

“Thank you, GeneralFeldMarshal. Maybe we will see each other again at the end of this war.

“Maybe, Colonel.”

Nancy and Mike saluted again Kesselring, who returned their salute before he was led to the truck that would bring him to a prisoners of war camp. Nancy took back her place in the cab of the truck still carrying the seven female auxiliaries, while Mike sat behind the wheel of the Mitsubishi Outlander, which screamed of anachronism besides the British trucks. Both vehicles then went up the stern ramp of LCMAC-1. Once its ramps were up, the hovercraft inflated again its air skirts and went back on the Thames, sliding speedily on the river’s surface.

11:55 (GMT)

LCMAC-1

Thames estuary

“Hey, how are you, T.L.G.? Married life is still good?”

Peter Stilwell vigorously shook Mike’s right hand as he stepped on the bridge of LCMAC-1, followed by Nancy. The Lucky Guy smiled back at Peter.

“Everything is just fine, especially with the married life.”

“I’m truly happy to hear that, Mike. Couldn’t happen to a better guy...except me, of course.”

“Peter,” said Nancy, “would you have a problem if I wanted to bring my female prisoners on the bridge? It is awfully claustrophobic on the vehicle deck.”

“Christ! You should try submarines before complaining about my hovercraft.”

“I visited one once: I hated it. So, can I bring them up?”

“As long as they are kept under armed guard and stay quiet, yes.”

“Done deal!”

Nancy then headed down towards the vehicle deck, to come back up after a few minutes with the seven German women, three female guards and the Poissants. Stilwell offered them the jump seats around the bridge, with some having to keep standing in the now crowded bridge. Stilwell partially solved the problem by sitting little Diane Poissant in the

lap of the helmsman and offering his command chair to young Ingrid Weiss, who was quite surprised by being given that honor by an enemy officer.

A while later, as Stilwell was using a deserted stretch of the Thames to show little Diane how to steer, Ingrid suddenly looked embarrassed and closed her legs tighter. Nancy, watching her at the time, got close to her and whispered in her ear.

“Is it your time of the month, Ingrid?”

She nodded her head, blushing slightly.

“I... I don't have tampons with me. I'm also afraid that I stained my only underwear.”

“Go to the lavatory and use toilet paper for the moment. I will take care of the rest once in London.”

Nancy then switched to English and looked at one guard.

“Corporal Martin, please escort Ingrid downstairs to the lavatory.”

Nancy then checked discreetly the amount of money in her wallet and made a face: she would have to stop at her bank first.

13:48 (GMT)

London

“Here we are folks! Old, picturesque London.” Said Stilwell as they were about to pass under the Tower Bridge. Nancy looked up at the crowd of pedestrians now forming on the Tower Bridge, staring and waving at the hovercraft.

“Well, we are certainly a tourist attraction now, Mister Stilwell. Anyway, the LCMACs are now old news for the Germans. No harm done here.”

“Colonel, you can be sure that I cleared my itinerary in advance with the Admiralty. I am authorized to transit in public view with this craft: it is not secret anymore. Now, I believe you should go down and get ready to disembark: I am about to dock.”

“We'll do! Thanks for the ride.”

“It was a pleasure. See you at the office on Monday morning.”

Nancy and the RAF guards then gathered the German prisoners and led them down to the truck, while Mike had the Poissants take place in the Mitsubishi Outlander. The

Outlander was the first to roll off when the bow ramp lowered. Mike, following Nancy's directives, sped immediately towards her St James' Place apartment, where the French would stay temporarily. Nancy, carrying her assault rifle, preceded the truck on foot as they rolled on the London Tower Pier. As soon as they were off, the bow ramp rose and LCMAC-1 backed off before speeding upstream.

Nancy was met in front of Middle Tower, which guarded the main entrance of the Tower of London, by a captain of the Royal Fusiliers Regiment, the resident army unit at the Tower. She returned the captain's salute and showed her PMO's pass.

"I'm Colonel Laplante, Military Advisor to the Prime Minister. I have with me seven female German prisoners captured this morning in France. I was told on my return at Chatham that there are no proper facilities in England for female prisoners of war. Would somebody here be able to help me or at least tell me where to go? After all, this place is famous for having held quite a few female prisoners in the past."

The captain smiled at those words.

"True, Colonel, but I doubt that your prisoners would appreciate using the cells in the Beauchamp Tower, or trying the chopping block. Maybe Gaoler's House would do. Let me ask the advice of the Governor of the Tower on this."

"You are most kind, Captain."

The infantry officer came back fifteen minutes later.

"I'm sorry for the delay, Colonel. The Governor said that he may be able to help you out but needed a couple of hours to do some phone calls and arrange something. You can leave your prisoners with us in the meantime."

"Thanks for the offer, Captain, but I first need to procure some personal female hygiene items for my prisoners. We should be back in a few hours. Would this be convenient to the Governor, Captain?"

"I believe so, Colonel. We will be expecting you then."

He saluted her again before she climbed in the cab of the truck. Nancy looked at the female army driver, a big woman with rugged features.

"Do you know London well, Corporal Woolsey?"

"I sure do, Maam: I'm from the Marylebone District."

"Excellent! Our first stop will be my bank on St James' Street, near the corner of King Street."

“On my way, Colonel!”

With 300 pounds sterling in cash now in her pocket, Nancy left her bank and stopped briefly to buy the day’s newspaper. She then gave the paper to corporal Woolsey, still sitting in the cab of her truck, before entering a nearby drugstore. She went out ten minutes later with two large shopping bags and climbed back in the truck.

“Proceed to Piccadilly and turn right on it. We are looking for a women’s clothing store selling underwear, bathrobes, informal outfits, that sort of stuff.”

“I know just the place for that, Colonel. We will be there in two minutes.”

After a short trip, the truck stopped in front of a nondescript store near Piccadilly Circus.

“Here you are, Colonel: lots of variety, reasonable quality and low prices.”

“Spoken like a sensible woman, Corporal. This stop will be a bit longer.”

“Take all your time, Maam. I will read the newspaper in the meantime.”

Jumping down from the cab, Nancy went in the store alone at first and asked for the manager. A middle-aged woman came to her, eyeing with some nervousness her weapons.

“What can I do for you, Miss?”

“Actually, madam, I have outside seven German female prisoners that were captured with no kit or spare clothes whatsoever. I need to buy things for them, if you don’t mind. Don’t worry about rationing stamps: this is a military cash purchase.”

“Are these women dangerous?”

Nancy smiled and shook her head.

“Not as much as me. Do you have another exit apart of the front door?”

The store manager showed her a curtain covering the entrance of a narrow hallway ending on a back door. Satisfied, Nancy went outside and to the back of the truck.

“Sergeant, we will escort the prisoners inside this shop so that they can kit themselves out. Corporal Martin, go first inside and stand guard at the rear exit. It is covered by a gray curtain. Sergeant, you will guard the main door once the prisoners are inside.”

Nancy then switched to German.

“Listen to me carefully, ladies! You will enter this store and choose spare clothes for yourselves. Don’t worry about paying the bill: I will! I will also vet your choices of items, so keep your tastes to somber colors, preferably gray, black or dark blue.

Unterfuhrerin Hauser, you and your girls are still military personnel. I expect you to keep your subordinates under control.”

“Understood, Colonel!”

The seven delighted Germans then jumped down from the truck and entered the store, watched by the nervous manager and her young sales clerk. Nancy went quickly to see corporal Woolsey, handing her thirty pounds.

“I believe that I saw a shop close by that was selling some travel bags and suitcases. Try to find seven kit bags of the same color. Duffel bags would be perfect if you can find some. Also, try to find seven pocket English-German conversation books. Make it quick, please.”

“On my way, Colonel.”

Nancy then reentered the store, finding the Germans happily going through the shelves and racks under the curious eyes of the store manager. Nancy grabbed unterfuhrerin Hauser and showed her a number of various clothing items, telling her how many of each her subalterns could take. She then stood besides the cash register and waited patiently while the Germans made their choices. Corporal Woolsey joined her twenty minutes later, her arms loaded with gray duffel bags.

“Excellent work, Corporal! Did you also find the conversation books?”

“Yes, Maam! They are in the top duffel bag. Here is your change, by the way.”

“Thank you!”

Nancy lined up the seven duffel bags in front of the service counter and distributed evenly the books, along with the hygiene items she had bought at the drugstore. As each German showed up at the counter with her selected items, Nancy had them priced and registered by the manager before they were stuffed in one of the duffel bags, which was then given to the waiting German woman. Nancy paid the happy store manager, ensuring to get a certified copy of the bill for future reimbursement. The delighted Germans were not at the end of their surprises for the day, though. Going back in the truck with their stuffed duffel bags, they found themselves stopping again after only a short ride. Nancy jumped out of the cab and pointed her favorite Lebanese restaurant to them and the guards.

“Everybody out! It’s lunchtime!”

A group of off-duty RAF pilots walking down the sidewalks of Piccadilly Street watched on in utter amazement as seven Luftwaffe women and three RAF female auxiliaries

eagerly jumped down from the truck and entered the restaurant. Young Ingrid Weiss winked at the four fighter pilots and playfully blew a kiss at them, attracting a disgruntled comment from one of the British.

“Bloody hell! Wait until I try explaining to the lads back at the squadron that a German Luftwaffe girl tried to bag me in downtown London.”

“Yeah, but what a girl!” Replied another pilot, smiling while following Ingrid with his eyes. “Did you see those legs?”

15:51 (GMT)

Tower of London

Corporal Woolsey's truck stopped on the Tower Wharf just past St Thomas' Tower. This time a high-ranking officer greeted Nancy alongside the Royal Fusiliers captain who had met her earlier. Nancy was relieved to also see a detachment of army servicewomen standing inside the entrance of the fortress. Climbing down from the truck's cab and slinging her rifle, she signaled to the RAF escorts to stay in the truck with the prisoners, then walked to the senior officer and stopped in front of him, saluting him smartly. The brigadier general, a tall, slim graying gentleman with a large moustache, returned her salute as she presented herself.

“Colonel Laplante, reporting from France with seven female prisoners of war, sir.”

“At ease, Colonel! I'm Brigadier General Browning, Governor of the Tower. I'm happy to tell you that I was able to solve your problem, Colonel. As you suspected earlier, there were no camps for female prisoners of war in England, mostly because we had no female prisoners of war... until now that is. Your scrupulous respect of the laws of war is both noted and commended, Colonel: too many officers would have washed their hands of this problem and would have dropped those German women in whoever's hands they found. Anyway, since I know very well Sir John Dill, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, I was able to arrange for the Tower of London to become our first official camp for female prisoners of war. Hopefully, you will not bring too many more of them in the future, since our capacity for prisoners is strictly limited.”

Nancy smiled warmly at the brigadier. The man conducted himself more like a grandfather than a prison warden, which suited her just fine.

"I see that you have female guards available, sir. Do any of them speak German, sir?"

"I am told that at least one guard per shift speaks German. I believe that you speak German yourself, Colonel, correct?"

"Correct, sir. May I prepare the prisoners for your inspection, sir?"

"Please do, Colonel."

Saluting before turning around, Nancy made the RAF escorts line up the seven Germans besides the truck, then returned to the brigadier.

"The prisoners are ready for your inspection, sir."

"Very well, Colonel."

His officer's stick under his left arm and looking very much like an old style aristocrat, Browning went to the first German and, stopping in front of her, inspected her from head to toe before surprising both the Germans and Nancy by speaking in perfect German.

"I gather by your insignias that you must be the highest ranking member of this group, miss?"

"Yes, sir! Unterfuhrerin Anna Hauser, sir. Where did you learn such good German, sir?"

"In Colditz Castle, while I was a prisoner of the Germans during the First World War. Having spent four years in an old fortress myself, I can appreciate what you are facing now. I can assure you that you and your subalterns will be treated with respect here. Are you or the others in need of anything at the moment?"

"No, sir! Colonel Laplante provided us with spare belongings."

"Indeed? Colonel Laplante, report to me, please."

Browning glanced at the stuffed duffel bags lying behind the prisoners, then at Nancy.

"Colonel, did you kit out those women out of your own pocket?"

"Yes sir, I did! They had nothing with them, not even a change of underwear, and it was becoming urgent to do something about it, sir."

"Very well, then. I will forbid the guards from confiscating any of those items now in the prisoners' possession. Do you have receipts for all this?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Then I will handle the reimbursement procedure for you, as the Camp Commandant."

"Very well, sir."

Nancy gave Browning her receipts. The brigadier pocketed them before going to the second prisoner in the lineup, who shouted her rank and name.

“Oberhelferin Bertha Reinholdt, sir!”

Browning had a quick look at the brunette in her early twenties before stepping in front of the next German.

“Flugmeldhelferin Ingrid Weiss, sir!”

The British brigadier frowned as he examined the teenager, her angelic face framed by shoulder-length reddish-brown hair. Browning turned his head to look at Nancy.

“This one is making me feel like a grandfather, if you see what I mean, Colonel.”

“She definitely has a ‘Lolita’ look to her, but she is a girl of character, Brigadier. She is also a war orphan: she lost her whole family in an air bombardment.”

“A tragedy, truly.” Said Browning, then taking two steps. The next girl in line also made Browning frown. She was a baby-faced blonde with pretty features and a pair of spectacles that gave her the looks of a college girl.

“And how old are you, Helferin...”

“Ilsa Bauman, sir! I’m eighteen, sir!”

Browning looked briefly at the three last girls, Martha Pfalz, Gertrud Schwarz and Ruth Brandhauer, who appeared barely older than Bauman, and shook his head.

“The eagerness of youth...”

He then walked to a position five paces in front of the prisoners and faced them.

“Ladies, welcome to the Tower of London. I am Brigadier General Charles Browning, Governor of the Tower and now responsible for your well being for the rest of this war. If any of you know about the rather sinister past history of the Tower, do not be afraid: we are rather more civilized now than in the sixteenth century. Female guards will be available at all times, so that your dignity as women is fully respected. You are however still military personnel: I expect you to salute the officers you see when you are in uniform. When in civilian clothes, then simply stand at attention when speaking with superiors or guards. If you have a problem of any kind, you have only to ask to speak to me or to my adjutant, Captain Nicholson. This is a right, not a privilege. You will be permitted to send and receive letters and parcels, subject to revision by censors, as well as to receive periodic visits from International Red Cross officials and from neutral diplomats. Sports and recreational facilities will be made available regularly. You will

eat the same food as my men and will take your meals at the Waterloo Barracks. Please do try not to wet the appetite of my young men too much, ladies.”

A couple of the younger Germans smiled at his joke. Browning then went on.

“Since Colonel Laplante has taken such good care of you up to now, I will grant her permission to visit you at will and to bring you any comfort or basic necessity items, except of course for alcohol.”

Nancy then snapped to attention and shouted.

“Thank you, sir! May I recommend as a neutral diplomat a friend of mine who happens to be the American Assistant Army Attaché? He could also arrange for these women’s mail to be forwarded quickly to Germany via the American embassy in Berlin.”

“That sounds fine to me, Colonel. Please give his name and telephone number to my adjutant after this. Now, follow me all to your new quarters, ladies.”

With Browning in the lead and Nancy tailing, the prisoners passed through the Middle Tower gate, where four female British guards joined them, then passed the Byward Tower gate. Once inside the outer walls, the group walked down Water Lane, passing by the Bell Tower on their left before turning left and entering the inner yard of the fortress through Bloody Tower. They were then confronted to their front right by the massive square structure of the central keep, White Tower. Climbing a few steps, the group soon turned left and found itself on a paved surface surrounded by a grass lawn. Browning waved his right arm around him.

“This is Tower Green, where the public executions were held centuries ago. The big building behind and to the right is the Waterloo Barracks, where you will eat. To your right is the royal chapel of St Peter ad Vincula, where those of you who wish to pray can go. It is a protestant chapel, by the way. The big, bleak tower to your front is the Beauchamp Tower. It was used in the past to hold many prisoners and is none too comfortable. You will end up in one of its solitary cells if you don’t behave, ladies, and I assure you that you will not like your stay, especially during winter. To your immediate right, this wooden block marks the spot of the scaffold where a number of young women, including Queen Ann Boleyn, lost their heads. The youngest person to be beheaded here was Lady Jane Grey, executed in 1554 at the age of seventeen for usurping the throne of England.”

Browning glanced discreetly at Ingrid Weiss and saw her pale as she unconsciously raised her hand to her throat.

“Do not be worried, ladies: we do not behead prisoners anymore. We simply shoot them these days. Now, to your left is King’s House, my official residence. Your own quarters will be in an annex of King’s House: Gaoler’s House. It is named like this because it was the residence of the Gentleman Gaoler and of his family.”

Quite sobered by now by Browning’s speech, the seven Germans followed him inside the three-storey, timber-framed Tudor house. The prisoners’ eyes opened wide at the sight of the varnished wood interior and fine wood furniture in the ground level hall they found themselves in.

“Mein Gott, I was not expecting such luxury for us!” Exclaimed Anna Hauser, to Browning’s delight.

“Wait until you see your room, Unterfuhrerin Hauser.”

Going up a decorated wooden staircase, the brigadier led them to the first floor, where he invited Hauser to enter the Gaoler’s bedroom. He then swept his hand around the large room, which was comfortably furnished with antique pieces of furniture, including a large canopy bed and a huge wooden chest. A large fireplace occupied half of one wall, while a triple window helped illuminate the oak-paneled room. Three electric lamp fixtures were the only modern concessions in the room.

“This is now your room, Unterfuhrerin Hauser.”

The 24 years old beautiful brunette slowly went around the bedroom, touching the old wood furniture, before sitting on the edge of the bed and looking at Browning with her fascinating gray eyes.

“This is incredible, General. You are spoiling me.”

“Not at all! Leave your duffel bag here while I show the other ladies their rooms.”

Browning showed them four more bedrooms, with the last and smallest one in the attic reserved for young Ingrid Weiss.

“This was originally the room of the Gaoler’s youngest servant. It was also used by Lady Jane Grey’s lady-in-waiting while she was imprisoned in the Tower. That servant followed Lady Jane to the scaffold, but was not beheaded herself, contrary to her young mistress. The frame of the bed is still the original one from the 16th century, but the mattress itself is a bit more recent. Will this room do, Helferin Weiss?”

“It will do perfectly, sir. Thank you for your kindness.”

“It’s my pleasure, Helferin Weiss.” Said softly Browning, who was already starting to feel affection towards the young German girl. “I will now show you the various

facilities in this house. It may be old but it was retrofitted some years ago with standard plumbing and electrical appliances. You should be quite comfortable here.”

They ended up back in the ground-level hall fifteen minutes later. Nancy thanked the brigadier, then looked at the seven Germans.

“Ladies, I will now contact the American embassy so that an attaché can visit you and collect your first letters for home. The war is still on for me but be assured that I will regularly check on your well-being. I will also try to arrange for periodic recreational activities for you.”

“Colonel,” said Anna Hauser, “you are much too kind with us. How could we thank you?”

“By showing to Brigadier Browning and his men that you are true soldiers worthy of respect, Unterfuhrerin. Conduct yourselves properly and be proud of being Germans. In my time, Germany had been able to redeem its nazi past and was a good ally of Canada and Great Britain. There are no reasons to hate each other. I certainly don’t hate you and I hope that you will be able to consider me as a friend, not an enemy.”

“You are certainly a strange woman, Colonel.” Said Hauser cautiously.

“Of course! Don’t I come from the future? Have a good evening, ladies.”

After a last salute to Brigadier Browning, Nancy left Gaoler’s House and walked out of the fortress, linking up with the three RAF women still waiting besides corporal Woolsey’s truck.

“You performed splendidly today, ladies. Before I dismiss you back to your respective units, I would like to invite you for a beer at my place. We could also watch a film together.”

“What kind of film, Colonel?” Asked corporal Martin. Nancy grinned maliciously.

“An erotic film made in 2012, with lots of nice-looking studs in it.”

“Hell, let’s go then!” Replied eagerly corporal Woolsey, starting up her truck.

Back in Gaoler’s House, the seven German young women took the time to unpack their duffel bags and to put away their things in their respective rooms before meeting again in the ground level hall of the building. Anna Hauser looked at her six subalterns, now sitting with her at a massive oak table. Most of those girls would still be

in college or working on a farm if not for the war, but they all had volunteered to serve their country instead. Anna knew them quite well, well enough in fact to know that none of them were what one could call fanatical Nazis. Most had enlisted out of a thirst for adventure and a desire to see more of the world. Some had joined to break out of the suffocating mold the average German woman was normally forced into, where she was relegated to taking care of children and doing housekeeping chores. Anna herself was one of the former ones, while Bertha Reinholdt and young Ingrid Weiss were probably in the same category as her.

“Girls, while this is not my idea of fun, we still can thank our luck: we all are in one piece and healthy. We were also lucky in having to deal with enemies that were correct with us. As Die Wolfin said herself, we are still German military personnel and we will conduct ourselves as such. If we have to go somewhere as a group, we will then march as a military group. I also will not tolerate a sloppy dress from any of you. While I won’t expect you to spit your shoes every day, I want you to show to those British that we are worthy of respect. Am I clear on that?”

Her six subalterns nodded as one, their faces solemn.

09:01 (Berlin time)

Tuesday, January 7, 1941

Luftwaffe headquarters, Berlin

Germany

General Major Karl Reinholdt, Chief of personnel services of the Luftwaffe, rose from behind his desk and returned the salute of the American Army Air Corps attaché before shaking his hand and showing him a comfortable sofa in the corner of his office.

“What can I do for you, Herr Major Stanfield?”

The American officer elected to stay on his feet, offering to Reinholdt a box as he spoke.

“General Major, I am here on a humanitarian mission. This parcel from our embassy in London is destined to your department. It contains personal letters from seven German female Luftwaffe auxiliaries captured last Thursday in France by the British. They are now being held in the Tower of London. One of our attachés in London visited them, along with our ambassador and a photographer, and forwarded these letters for delivery to the families of these women.”

“They put them in the Tower of London?”

Reinholdt’s voice was both indignant and horrified. He was a well-educated man and knew enough of the bloody history of the Tower of London to make his hair rise at the thought of young German women being held there. The American officer speedily reassured him.

“Sir, I assure you that things are not what you think them to be. Our ambassador in London filled a report on the living conditions of your women. Here it is, along with two sets of pictures taken both of each prisoner and of their quarters.”

Major Stanfield was surprised to see tears appear in General Reinholdt’s eyes as he went through the photographs and the report.

“Is something wrong, sir?”

Reinholdt looked tearfully at one of the photographs before passing it to the American.

“My daughter Bertha is one of those auxiliaries, Major. I had feared her dead after she went missing in Wissant. Please pass my heartfelt thanks to your ambassador and to your attaché in London. I will make sure that those letters and pictures get to the families of the other women.”

“It was truly a pleasure, General. I am also authorized to tell you that our embassy would be happy to speedily forward to these women any personal mail or parcels for them, as well as to continue to deliver their mail to Berlin.”

Reinholdt’s face reflected at once joy and gratitude.

“You would do that? In that case, expect a few letters to be delivered to your embassy within a week. Again, thank you so much, Major.”

Reinholdt vigorously shook Stanfield’s hand and accompanied him to the main office of his department on his way out, then returned in his office to carefully inventory the content of the box. Apart of the letters, photographs and the American ambassador’s report, there was a list of both the seven women and of the 26 men captured in Wissant, with their full names and service numbers. Putting aside the list, visit report, photographs and Bertha’s letter, he looked quickly at the addresses on the five remaining envelopes: two of them were destined to the Berlin area, one to Hamburg, one near Hanover and one to Bavaria. He then picked up his telephone and ordered his aide to come and see him. Hauptmann Maier was in nearly immediately. Reinholdt explained first to him the reason for major Stanfield’s visit, then told him to take notes.

“Get two dispatch riders now. One will deliver immediately those two letters with attached photographs in the Berlin area. The other will deliver the other letters to our central post office, for priority shipping. The first rider is to wait for the two families he will contact to write response letters. He will then pick them up and return here to hand them to me personally. You will attach a note with each of the letters from London, explaining the mailing arrangement and giving our address for forwarding any further mail they would want to send. Any questions?”

“No, sir!”

“Then get to it!”

As Maier left his office, Reinholdt realized that there had been seven auxiliaries named on the list, but only six letters delivered. Looking at the list again, then at the group picture showing seven women plus the American ambassador and a tall American army major, he isolated the individual picture of a very young looking auxiliary, along with her name and service number. Bringing those to his secretary, he ordered her personal file to be brought to him, along with finding out about any family she could have. Another aide was then tasked by Reinholdt to personally call the families of each man and woman on the list of prisoners and advise them that their loved ones were alive and well. Only then did Reinholdt go back to his desk to open and read his daughter's letter. He had to read it twice, so incredible was the story of her capture, her trip to London, including her shopping spree, and of her internment in the Tower of London. He whispered to himself as he contemplated Bertha's signature.

“Thank you, Colonel Laplante.”

Reinholdt then called his wife and spent ten minutes giving her the good news.

Reinholdt was nearly finished writing a report on the whole affair, for the attention of the Luftwaffe's Chief of Staff, when his secretary came in his office, Ingrid Weiss' file in her hands.

“Here is the file you requested, sir. I also found out about her family: all her relatives were killed in the British bombing of Berlin in August. There are however some anomalies in her file that I could not explain, sir.”

“Like what exactly, Frau Fischer?”

“Well, there are no copies of her birth certificate anywhere, while the civil office she named in her enrolment form was conveniently destroyed in the air bombardment in August. She looks and smells like a minor, sir!”

“Mein Gott! An underage German girl, prisoner in the Tower of London. The propaganda ministry would have a field day with this. Frau Fischer, tell Hauptmann Maier once he has finished with his present task to study this file and verify the real status and age of this Ingrid Weiss.”

Frau Fischer looked at Ingrid’s picture, pity on her face.

“Such a young girl, prisoner in that awful fortress. Didn’t the British execute women there in the past, sir?”

“They certainly did, Frau Fischer. In fact, if I remember my British history well, one of the prisoners beheaded in the Tower of London was a teenage girl accused of usurping the throne of England.”

The secretary’s eyes went wide with horror, but Reinholdt quickly reassured her.

“Do not worry about her or the other German women jailed in this tower: that Canadian woman from the future has taken on her to protect their rights and to insure their good health.”

“You mean that Nancy Laplante, the she-wolf? How considerate of her.”

“Yes, particularly when you think that she captured them in the first place. Damn the Gestapo and their awful directive about her.”

As if on cue, a huge blast shook the building, quickly followed by three more explosions. Running to the windows, both Reinholdt and Frau Fischer saw a huge column of black smoke rise from a particular point of the city. The belated fire from numerous anti-aircraft guns told them that it was another British bomber raid, albeit a very localized one.

“Isn’t the Gestapo headquarters situated in that area, sir?” Asked the secretary. She thought afterwards that she detected some pleasure in her boss’ answer.

“I do believe so, Frau Fischer.”

CHAPTER 25 – DUEL AT SEA

10:46 (GMT)

Friday, January 17, 1941

Admiralty headquarters, London

England

“Sir, we just received a message from H.M.S. RAMILLIES. While on convoy escort duty in the North Atlantic, it spotted the SCHARNHORST and the GNEISENAU. Both German battlecruisers refused combat with our battleship and slipped away.”

Admiral Pound got up from behind his desk and went to the large naval chart on one of his office’s walls, followed by the duty operations officer.

“Show me their last known position, Captain.”

“They were last spotted about 200 nautical miles Southwest of the Faeroe Islands two hours ago, heading West. The RAMILLIES had to stay with her convoy and we are very thin in that area at this time. H.M.S. HOOD and H.M.S. QUEEN ELIZABETH are in Scapa Flow but they would need at least twelve hours to be ready to leave port. The QUEEN ELIZABETH would be too slow to catch those battlecruisers anyway.”

“Show me the roster of ships available in Scapa Flow.”

What the operations officer showed to Sir Pound was very thin indeed. None of the few destroyers and the single cruiser now in or around Scapa Flow could get to the target area quickly enough to have any chance of catching the two German battlecruisers. Pound’s eyes slipped to a part of the roster listing ships under repair or not commissioned yet.

“What about those two?” Said Pound, pointing at two names.

“The DOLPHIN and FLYING FISH, sir? But they are still not officially commissioned yet and just barely completed their acceptance trials.”

“Are they provisioned and ready for combat, Captain?”

“I can check, sir, but I believe that they are loaded and fuelled up.”

“Then, if they are, send them to intercept those battlecruisers.”

The navy captain hesitated for a moment before objecting again.

“If I may, sir, those are unarmored craft displacing only 810 tons each at full load. I know that they are very fast, but to send them against two 40,000 tons armored battlecruisers would be condemning them to their destruction, sir.”

“Captain, if those two German warships slip through into the Atlantic and are allowed to attack our merchant convoys, hundred of merchant sailors and thousands of tons of precious supplies could be lost. If our craft could at least slow down the SCHARNHORST and the GNEISENAU enough for our heavy units to catch up, then their sacrifice would be well worth it. Send them out within a hour, Captain.”

“Yes sir!”

The operations officer left the office of the First Sea Lord, his heart heavy with gloom.

11:15 (GMT)

Scapa Flow naval base

Orkney Islands

“Commander, get your men ready! You are going out for a combat mission in half a hour.”

The navy captain had not even waited to be on board to shout his order while still crossing the access plank. The H.M.S. FLYING FISH, like its sister craft H.M.S. DOLPHIN, was at rest at quayside in Scapa Flow harbor. Commander Bennett, standing on the port open wing of his bridge, looked at the navy captain as if he was completely crazy.

“Sir, do you realize that we have barely finished our acceptance trials and that I still don’t have my full regular crew yet? Christ, I still have on board RAF mechanics I had to borrow in order to complete the trials.”

“RAF mechanics?”

“Yes, sir! This craft is propelled by Hercules XVII radial engines, the same used on RAF bombers. We are still short of navy personnel qualified on these engines, so we had to borrow some mechanics from the RAF. The DOLPHIN is in the same shape as I am.”

“Well, tough luck! We have an emergency on our hands. Are you ready or not for sea combat, Commander?”

Bennett controlled his anger with difficulty. This was not a very good start for what he had hoped to be an exciting new command. The paint on his fast attack surface effect ship was barely dry. Added to that was the motley crew on board. At least he was loaded up on fuel and ammunition.

“Alright, sir, what’s the emergency?”

The navy captain handed him an official dispatch as he spoke.

“The SCHARNHORST and the GNEISENAU were spotted this morning Southwest of the Faeroe Islands. Your mission is to take the FLYING FISH and the DOLPHIN and to intercept those two surface raiders. You are to slow them down and damage them enough to give a chance to the HOOD and the QUEEN ELIZABETH to get out of port and catch them.”

Bennett’s eyes widened in disbelief at those words.

“They are sending my two crafts against two battlecruisers?”

The navy captain looked at him with what seemed like pity, his voice coming out subdued now.

“I realize that this could be a one-way mission, Commander, but it has to be done.”

Bennett’s face hardened before he came to rigid attention and saluted solemnly the navy captain.

“Then we will leave port within the hour, sir.”

“Good luck, Commander.”

The navy captain was about to leave the bridge when he saw on the open deck a young woman wearing a RAF coverall, a toolbox in one hand. His face reflecting shock, the senior officer faced Bennett.

“What are women doing on a Royal Navy craft, Commander?”

“Those RAF mechanics I told you about are women, sir.”

“All of them?”

“All five of them, sir. There are three more RAF women on the DOLPHIN. I guess that, when we asked the RAF for spare mechanics, they decided that this was a good time to pull a swifty on us. The problem is that we won’t be able to put to sea without them, sir.”

The captain swore violently and pounded his fist on the bridge railing but managed to calm down after a few seconds.

“We have no choice then. Put to sea, Commander!”

The captain then left the FLYING FISH and headed towards the DOLPHIN, moored just aft. Bennett put his intercom on ship-wide mode.

“Attention all hands! We are departing base for a combat mission within the hour. Stop all maintenance work and prepare for departure. All department heads are to report to the bridge now.”

Within three minutes, his five officers and single chief petty officer, along with Flight Sergeant Ann Sheldon of the RAF, were around the navigation plotting table with Bennett. He briefed them quickly on the orders he had just received, then requested a status report from each of them, starting with Lieutenant Commander Waddington, his first officer. Waddington was ready to protest their orders but kept his mouth shut on seeing the expression on Bennett’s face.

“We have full provisions, spares and enough crew to man the craft, sir. We are ready for sea.”

Waddington could not avoid looking at Flight Sergeant Sheldon when he mentioned the crew. Lieutenant Tyne, the weapons officer, was next.

“Our ammunition load is complete, sir, including a total of sixteen torpedoes on board. Unfortunately, half of our four inch ammunition is of the high explosive-fragmentation type instead of armor piercing.”

Bennett grimaced: H.E.-frag shells would not do much damage on the armor of a battlecruiser.

“Too bad but we don’t have the time to load the proper shells. Just make sure that the armor piercing rounds are first on the gun mounts. Lieutenant Lawrence, how is your motley crew of mechanics?”

“Well, sir, I have enough qualified mechanics on board to do the job and the engines are just fine. I doubt however that the admiralty would have given us this job if they had realized beforehand that we have female RAF mechanics on board. No offense meant to your crew of course, Flight Sergeant Sheldon.”

Everybody smiled at that little barb, including Ann Sheldon, who raised one hand to make a comment.

“Sir, in case you become short on 20mm gunners, myself and one of my girls, Corporal Moran, are familiar with Oerlikon cannons. Once operating, you really need only two persons to run your engines, sir.”

Bennett had a wide smile while he stared at the small brunette in her mid-thirties.

“Do I smell a Nancy Laplante virus around, Flight Sergeant?”

Sheldon’s eyes lit up at his remark.

“You met her, sir?”

“Met her? Hell, she was with me on board LCMAC-1 for its initial sea trial. We sank a sub during those trials, with then Major Laplante jumping behind a 20mm cannon to replace a dead gunner. Lieutenant Tyne, how are you on 20mm gunners?”

“I could use a couple more loaders for them if combat becomes real heavy, sir.”

“It will become heavy, Mister Tyne. Use those women once we meet the enemy.”

“Yes, sir!”

The signals officer, Sub Lieutenant Burbanks, and the navigation officer, Sub Lieutenant Carpenter, had nothing to say. Chief Petty Officer Putnam had one look at the smiling Ann Sheldon and, lowering his head in mock disgust, said that he had nothing to add. Bennett strongly suspected that what Putnam would have liked to say would not have been fit for sensitive ears.

“Alright men, er, people, let’s put to sea. Flight Sergeant Sheldon, start the engines now.”

Ann Sheldon sat at the engines control station to the right of the helmsman’s station and started the lift engines one by one, then the propulsion engines. The bridge configuration of the FLYING FISH was actually very similar to that of the LCMAC-1. One thing that had however been improved compared with LCMAC-1 was the armor protection of the bridge. Since it was the vital point of the craft in combat, the bridge was protected by a thick layer of aluminum and ceramic laminated armor. Bennett did like the arrangement of his bridge, even if he was unsure about how really effective its armor was.

Its catamaran hull lifting nearly completely out of the water as air pressure built up between its bow and stern rubber skirts, the FLYING FISH soon moved away from the quay, propelled by its three shrouded contra-rotating propellers. Followed by the DOLPHIN, it sped towards the harbor’s entrance, passing close alongside the HOOD and the QUEEN ELIZABETH, which were building up steam pressure before they could depart themselves. On the spur of the moment, Bennett had all of his crew, including the female RAF mechanics, line up the open decks on the side facing the two

battleships. The big ships blew their horns on their passage as they saluted. Bennett grinned when he saw that at least one senior officer on the bridge of the HOOD dropped his binoculars in surprise. The two surface effect ships were soon out of the harbor and heading West in the North Atlantic at maximum cruising speed.

12:20 (GMT)

Admiralty headquarters, London

The duty operations officer's face had a strange expression on it as he handed silently a message to Admiral Pound, who stood in the operations center. Sir Dudley Pound read it, did a double take and looked at the navy captain.

"Those slimy RAF bastards! Colonel Laplante will die laughing on this one." He was told much later that she nearly did just that.

14:50 (GMT)

North Atlantic

The Short Sunderland seaplane had to fly low to clear the gray clouds. However, its centimetric wave radar compensated much for the low visibility. The radar echoes of the two German heavy battlecruisers were anyway impossible to miss once within detection range. Knowing that two high-speed crafts were on their way, the pilot had the position, speed and heading of the German ships sent immediately by radio. He then started a dangerous game of hide and seek with the two battlecruisers, constantly sending updated position reports as exploding anti-aircraft shells shook his aircraft from time to time.

15:53 (GMT)

H.M.S. FLYING FISH

Bennett plotted the report they had just received, then invited Waddington and Tyne to join him at the plotting table.

"Gentlemen, we are now less than twenty nautical miles from the SCHARNHORST and the GNEISENAU. Now, in a straight long-range slugfest with those two big bullies, we would not stand much of a chance. Our one big advantage is speed, angular speed to be more precise. Let's use it to the maximum."

"What do you mean, sir, angular speed?" Asked Tyne, perplex.

"Think of it as with trying to shoot at flying ducks. If they pass far from you, you will have no problems laying your shotgun on them and to follow them in your sights. However, if they fly right across your face, you will never have a chance to point your shotgun before they are gone. This is what we are going to do: fly across the face of the Germans at very close range and maximum speed. The first pass or two will be used by our gunners to spray the battlecruisers' superstructures and kill as many anti-aircraft gunners as we can. Those anti-aircraft guns will actually be our worst enemies, not those big eleven inch guns. Once they are softened up enough, we will then make our torpedo runs. Questions? No? Then let's go to battle stations!"

As Bennett sat back in his command chair, Flight Sergeant Sheldon, still sitting at the engines controls, turned her head towards him, her face somewhat pale.

"Sir, what kind of armament do we actually have?"

"This craft has two twin four inch gun mounts, eight 20mm cannons, eight torpedo tubes and two dept charges racks, plus one anti-submarine projector."

"And... the bad guys, sir?"

Bennett recited from memory.

"The SCHARNHORST and the GNEISENAU have each nine eleven inch guns, twelve 150mm guns, fourteen 105mm guns, sixteen 37mm cannons, eight 20mm cannons and six torpedo tubes, apart of sporting steel armor up to fourteen inches thick." Sheldon swallowed hard.

"Frankly, sir, what are our chances of getting out of this alive?"

"Flight Sergeant, believe it or not, but we may hurt them badly yet. The trick will be to use our speed to best advantage."

The radar operator sitting to the left of Bennett's chair suddenly yelled in excitement.

"Enemy in range, sir! Bearing 263, distance nineteen nautical miles."

"Gunners, load armor piercing! Helmsman, steer to 263! Flight Sergeant Sheldon, start the booster engines now!"

Everybody on the bridge suddenly became too busy to be scared. The surface effect ship, helped by a relatively calm sea and its air cushioned ride, accelerated quickly to over 100 knots under the additional thrust of its pulse jet booster engines.

“Gunners, once level with the targets, keep firing until we are passed. At our present speed, you will have the targets in front of you for only about four seconds. Shoot at the superstructures, not the hulls!”

15:59 (GMT)

SCHARNHORST

“Two high-speed crafts approaching from our six O’clock, sir.”

The captain of the SCHARNHORST took the time to raise his binoculars to look at the newcomers. They were very fast indeed.

“It must be two of these damn new skimmer boats. Battle stations! Ready for surface action!”

The disbelieving voice of the fire control officer then came on the intercom.

“Captain, according to the rangefinder readings and triangulation calculations, those craft are going at over one hundred knots.”

Everybody on the bridge of the battlecruiser looked at each other in consternation. The captain finally came back to life with new orders.

“Fire control, use our anti-aircraft guns, forget the main turrets.”

The German captain then watched on anxiously as the first British skimmer craft was on a heading straight to crash in the stern of his battlecruiser. At the last possible moment, the British craft veered slightly off and flashed along the starboard side at high speed, making it nearly impossible to target. Heavy cannon and gun fire then erupted for a few seconds, before the second British craft did the same, also raking the starboard superstructures with gunfire. None of the German gunners had a chance to fire, the British craft passing so close that the battlecruiser’s guns could not depress low enough to bring their fire to bear.

“Damage report!” Yelled the captain as distant cannon fire told him that the GNEISENAU was getting the same treatment. He got the bad news a minute later.

“Number two 150mm turret destroyed! One third of the 105mm and 37mm servants are dead or wounded, sir.”

“Damn! Where are the British now?”

“Enemy craft approaching from our starboard bow side, sir!”

The crew of the Short Sunderland, circling around the German battlecruisers, looked on with excitement as the two surface effect ships repeatedly raked the starboard side of both German ships. The seaplane hangar on the GNEISENAU suddenly erupted in flames: the aviation fuel tank inside must have been hit.

“Come on guys, keep picking at them!” Urged the pilot. One of the starboard 105mm turrets of the GNEISENAU exploded on the third attack pass, with secondary ammunition explosions lighting up the nearby turrets. The DOLPHIN, sensing that the GNEISENAU was in trouble, then performed a wide circle and headed into the starboard side of the wounded battlecruiser.

“She’s launching torpedoes now!” Yelled the forward gunner of the seaplane. “I count eight torpedoes in the water. They’re going to hit!”

At that moment a 105mm turret, finally presented with a manageable target by the DOLPHIN’s maneuver, achieved two direct hits on the surface effect ship. One destroyed the craft’s bridge, while the other blew open the forward skirt section. The craft’s nose then dipped and, since it was already starting to perform a high-speed turn, hit the water at an angle while still going at 105 knots. Under the horrified eyes of the crew of the Sunderland, the 810 tons craft literally cartwheeled on the surface of the sea and crashed on top of the middle starboard side of the GNEISENAU, dousing it with over 150 tons of aviation fuel from its punctured tanks. The 54 men and women of H.M.S. DOLPHIN, along with over 300 of the GNEISENAU’s gunners, died in the huge fireball that resulted. More Germans died when the eight torpedoes of the DOLPHIN’s ultimate salvo, tightly grouped and running slower than the craft that had launched them, hit the starboard underbelly of the battlecruiser. The eight huge geysers were greeted by triumphant yells aboard the Sunderland. Its machinery space ripped wide open by the torpedo salvo, the GNEISENAU quickly started listing to starboard, then capsized in less than two minutes.

The combat was suspended for a few minutes as the surviving protagonists looked on, stunned and grieving. The massive gun flashes from the SCHARNHORST’s aft eleven-inch gun turret, chasing a receding FLYING FISH, marked the battle’s

resumption. On its next pass, the British craft chose to fire a volley of four torpedoes from astern of the battlecruiser, braving heavy automatic cannon fire to do so. Three of the torpedoes hit under the stern, their explosions destroying the battlecruiser's propellers and rudders and breaking the ship in two just aft of the rear eleven-inch gun turret. The SCHARNHORST was now doomed. Amidst the cheers of his crewmen, the Sunderland's pilot contacted his radio operator on the intercom.

"Max, send the following to Scapa Flow, along with our position: GNEISENAU capsized, SCHARNHORST sinking with stern broken off. H.M.S. DOLPHIN lost with all hands. H.M.S. FLYING FISH apparently intact and returning to base."

The pilot then looked at the departing craft and saluted it.

"Jolly well done, men!"

23:11 (GMT)

Scapa Flow naval base

Admiral Holland looked on from the quay as H.M.S. FLYING FISH bumped gently against it and stopped its engines. Holland and five other senior officers could now clearly see the numerous impact holes of cannon fire hits on the craft's superstructures. Two sailors from the FLYING FISH deployed the access ramp, permitting the admiral and his aides to climb aboard. Holland stared for a moment at the obscenely young ship's boy saluting him, his uniform splattered with blood, before saluting back. Lieutenant Commander Waddington then went to him to greet him on the open deck, wearily saluting him.

"I'm sorry that Commander Bennett could not greet you, sir. He was wounded during the battle and is still on his bridge."

"Then lead me to him, Mister."

The officers had to pass besides one of the 20mm cannons on their way to the bridge. A dead gunner still hung from the mount's harness, frozen in place.

"My god!" Whispered Holland, staring into the dead eyes of the gunner.

"This is Corporal Cynthia Moran, sir, one of the five RAF mechanics we had on board." Explained Waddington in a tired voice. "She replaced the original gunners after they were killed. I'm sorry that we couldn't take care of her properly, sir, but we had

barely enough people left intact to take care of the wounded and to bring the boat back to port.”

Still looking in the woman’s lifeless eyes, Admiral Holland came to attention and solemnly saluted her, imitated by the other officers. The shaken admiral then stepped inside the bridge of the craft. What he saw there appalled him: what looked like heavy cannon fire had raked the bridge, blowing in all the Plexiglas viewing ports. There was blood everywhere, covering shattered instruments and deck alike. In the middle of the bridge, sitting on the deck and with his left leg blown off below the knee, was Commander Bennett, looking blankly in front of him while caressing the head of a dead Ann Sheldon.

Admiral Holland found afterwards that, out of a crew of 46 men and five women on the H.M.S. FLYING FISH, 29 were dead and sixteen others wounded. On the german side, only 147 shivering survivors out of a total of 3,682 men were found on rafts in the icy North Atlantic.

CHAPTER 26 – INGRID

07:36 (GMT)

Saturday, January 18, 1941

24 St James' Place, London

Nancy took a deep breath of the cold air once out of her apartment building. Dressed in her sky blue and pink lycra skin-tight exercise suit, a light matching Gore-Tex windbreaker and a pair of white and pink Nike running shoes, she had decided to use her scheduled weekly visit to the German women in the Tower of London as an excuse for a good exercise session. The blue and pink windbreaker covered a belt supporting her holstered Glock 26 pistol, a small fanny pack containing money, keys and identity cards and, finally, her iPod with light earphones. A pink sweatband around her head completed her outfit. Using a small alley on the side of her building, she jogged to Green Park, then stopped by a park bench besides a tree to do her stretching and warming up exercises. She next did a few balance exercises, performing front and back summersaults and walking on her hands, to the astonishment of a few early strollers. After doing sixty sit-ups and fifty push-ups by the park bench, Nancy started playing a tune of fast-paced music on her iPod and, following a trail leading to St James' Park, started running at a good pace. Alternating between quick run and a more sedate jogging pace, Nancy crossed the arched bridge over St James' Park Lake and took Birdcage Walk once out of the park, turning left on Victoria Embankment to follow the bank of the Thames River. During the three miles of her run, she used every opportunity to practice her balance and upper body strength, walking on top of guardrails or pulling chin-ups from the steel bars of façade scaffoldings.

By the time Nancy arrived at the Tower of London, she had worked up a good sweat. She also had made the day of a group of off-duty sailors, nearly caused two accidents by distracting male drivers, scandalized a few old ladies and was even called a slut by a fat banker. She ignored everybody but the banker, who got a resounding slap in the face for his troubles. Presenting briefly her security pass at the two soldiers standing guard at the entrance of Middle Tower, jogging on the spot as they checked the

pass, she then went through it and the Byward Tower, then the Bloody Tower, to finally enter the inner yard of the fortress. Nancy was happy to find Ingrid Weiss doing warm-up exercises in front of Gaoler's House, dressed in a loose-fitting two-piece fleece outfit and a pair of short, laced boots. On her first visit a week ago, Unterfuhrerin Hauser had told Nancy that Ingrid was turning into a real fitness nut, exercising and jogging constantly around the confines of the fortress.

"Hi, Ingrid!"

The teenager snapped her head around and smiled at her sight.

"Hi, Nancy! It's so nice to see you again. You were out jogging?"

"Yes! Would you like to jog outside with me this morning?"

Ingrid's face lit up in anticipated joy.

"Could I do that?"

"Of course! I'll act as your escort."

She looked at Ingrid's boots, which were made more for hiking than for running.

"Maybe at the same time I'll get you a proper pair of running shoes."

That really made the young German girl happy. Getting up from her stretching position, she looked with envy at Nancy's exercise outfit.

"I wish I could get a suit like yours. Your running shoes also look really comfortable."

"They are. Unfortunately for you, they were bought in the year 2010: you won't find anything like them or my suit these days. Are you warmed up enough now for a jog?"

"I am. Should I tell Anna before we go outside?"

"Please do, Ingrid."

While the teenager went inside, Nancy spotted a guard nearby and jogged towards him. He immediately presented arms to her with his rifle.

"Good morning, Colonel!"

"Good morning, Private! Can you advise Captain Nicholson that I am escorting outside of the Tower prisoner Ingrid Weiss for a jog? We should be back in two or three hours at the most."

"Yes, Colonel!"

The young soldier then ran towards Waterloo Barracks. Ingrid emerged from Gaoler's House shortly afterwards and, Nancy at her right side, jogged through Bloody Tower.

Nancy stopped briefly at Middle Tower to advise the two guards of her intentions. The corporal in charge was unsure if he should let them go out, saying he had no instructions about that. Nancy finally raised the right side of her windbreaker, revealing her pistol.

“Look, Corporal, I am armed, I can run faster than the prisoner and I could beat her with one arm in my back. We are going out now. Captain Nicholson has been advised, so good day to you, Corporal.”

Ingrid looked like a bird escaping its cage as she jogged westward with Nancy along Lower Thames Street. She appeared in fairly good shape already, as she sustained Nancy’s pace with no problems while chatting with her.

“So,” asked Nancy, “how are you girls doing in the Tower?”

“We’re okay, apart of being bored. This exercising however really helps me to kill the time. General Browning told us yesterday that there would be an informal dance at his residence tomorrow night for us and the British soldiers. He also invited me to a guided tour of his residence this afternoon. That should be interesting: his house looks really nice from the outside and I always liked historical things.”

“Good for you! So, you’re having a dance tomorrow night. Maybe I should ask the general if I could bring some 2012-era music and films.”

“YOU WOULD?”

Ingrid nearly stopped jogging from the excitement.

“It would be a real pleasure for me, Ingrid. I will talk to General Browning once we return to the Tower. Let’s turn right onto the next street.”

Both women turned on St Mary-at-Hill Street, following it at a jog while talking.

“We got letters from Germany two days ago. Your Major Crawford is really sweet in providing us this mail service: it is helping our morale tremendously. He is also a really attractive man. I think that Bertha has a crush on him. I wouldn’t mind dating him myself.”

Nancy laughed hard at seeing the way Ingrid’s face lit up when she said that. She then patted lightly the teenager’s shoulder.

“You girls better remember that Mike is my private property. Did you get a letter yourself, Ingrid?”

“Er, yes, although I didn’t send any myself.”

“Then, who sent you a letter?”

“Bertha’s father did: he works at the personnel department of the Luftwaffe and has discovered that I’m fifteen years old.”

Nancy swore silently to herself: that could cause some problems.

“Did he say what he was going to do about it?”

“Yes: nothing!”

Ingrid smiled at the puzzlement on Nancy’s face.

“He understands the reasons why I decided to stay with the other girls and he respects my decision. He also said that he would keep it a secret if you do the same yourself. There is a note for you from him that I will give to you once back at the Tower.”

“That is really decent of him, but can he really keep it a secret from his superiors?”

Ingrid grinned at that.

“I believe so, Nancy: General-Major Reinholdt IS the head of the Luftwaffe personnel department. I’m telling you this because I know that you will not use this information against her daughter.”

“Ingrid, you are truly a devious, crafty young thing.” Said Nancy while looking with fondness at the teenager: in many ways, the German girl reminded her of herself at a younger age. Nancy then saw Ingrid slow down noticeably as she stared at something. Looking in the same direction, Nancy saw a small synagogue, clearly marked with a star of David. Ingrid’s expression as she eyed the Hebrew symbol was one of regret, not hatred. Puzzled, Nancy waited a few seconds before speaking in German to the teenager.

“Ingrid, what religion do you practice exactly?”

The girl seemed taken by surprise by her question and hesitated, lying badly.

“Uh, Lutheran. Why, Colonel?”

“Ingrid, you can call me simply ‘Nancy’ when in private, like right now. You can also tell me the truth: I promise you that it will stay strictly between us. So, again, what is your religion?”

Ingrid hesitated still before finally answering in a near whisper while jogging at her side.

“My father was Lutheran, but my mother was Jewish, something my parents hid from everyone. According to my Luftwaffe personnel file, I am a non-practicing Lutheran. None of my comrades know that I am in reality a Jew.”

Nancy took a moment to swallow that information. If true, then Ingrid was in an even more precarious situation than as a simple German prisoner of war. Her future after the war, even following an allied victory, would probably not be rosy. She then changed subjects, not wanting to upset the teenager.

“So, how are the girls doing? Not too depressed, I hope?”

“They are okay, apart of being bored. Your suggestion to study and stay in shape however helped me a lot to pass the time. I learned both English and French in high school and I am now working on improving my English. Brigadier Browning told us yesterday that he will throw an informal reception at his official residence in King’s House for us and the soldiers of the garrison tomorrow evening. He also invited us girls to a guided tour of King’s House this afternoon. That should be interesting: his residence looks nice and I like historical things.”

“Very good! Maybe I should offer to Brigadier Browning to bring something to play both music and movies from the future.”

“YOU WOULD DO THAT FOR US?” Exclaimed Ingrid, joy and excitement on her face.

“It would be a pleasure for me, Ingrid. I will talk to Brigadier Browning once we return to the Tower of London. Let’s turn onto that street.”

The duo turned on St Mary-at-Hill Street while continuing to talk and jog.

“We received some letters from Germany two days ago, Nancy. Major Crawford is really kind to offer us this mail service through the American embassy. It really helps our morale. He also is a hell of a nice-looking man. I envy you, Nancy.”

“Well, I have to say that Mike makes the heads of many women turn in his path, including mine.”

After another fifteen minutes of jogging, Nancy slowed down and looked at the front window of a sportswear boutique.

“This looks like a good place to get your running shoes. Let’s go see inside.”

If Nancy didn’t exactly expect a 2012-era display of sporting equipment and clothing, she found even less than what she was afraid to find. The best she could find in the store was low quality canvas running shoes with rubber soles.

“Damn rationing system! I should go to the United States for a shopping spree soon.”

She had Ingrid try a pair of the least awful-looking shoes so that she could find the proper size, then chose for the teenager a gray fleece sports outfit. Ingrid looked at her with confusion when Nancy asked her to try the outfit.

“Why are we buying those anyway?”

“So that you can change into clean clothes after taking a shower in my apartment.”

“Oh...”

Nancy waited for Ingrid to be dressed again, then paid for the items before leaving the store with the young German. This time, they walked to Nancy’s apartment, which was only two blocks away.

The teenager’s eyes sparkled when she entered the apartment behind Nancy and saw Mike Crawford sitting in the lounge, reading a newspaper. The American smiled to her, which made Ingrid even happier. Nancy looked at her with mock severity.

“Didn’t I tell you that he’s mine, Ingrid?”

“Can’t a girl dream from time to time?”

“Dream, yes! Now get in the shower, you young pervert.”

Ingrid giggled as she went in the bathroom. Nancy kissed Mike, who wrinkled his nose at the odor of her perspiration.

“I believe that you could use a shower too, Nancy.”

“Really? I didn’t notice... OWW!”

Rubbing her buttock where Mike had applied a gentle slap, Nancy joined Ingrid in the bathroom. She jumped under the shower as soon as the teenager was finished and stepped out to dry herself.

“Ingrid, do you mind if I ask you a few intimate questions?”

“Uh, alright!”

“Are you still a virgin? Be honest now, I only want to give you some advice.”

Ingrid blushed slightly before answering.

“No! I had my first boy two years ago, in my school years. I also was dating Klaus Bayerling, the pilot who was captured at the same time as me.”

Ingrid then grinned devilishly.

“Klaus is much less clumsy than the boys I had at school. I recommend him to you.”

"Hmm... I'm sure that he would love that. You certainly are sexually precocious for your age, Ingrid. Do you realize in how much trouble this could put you here?"

"What do you mean?" Said Ingrid, looking alarmed.

"What I mean is that you are a prisoner of war surrounded by enemies, most of them men. The majority of your guards may be disciplined and respectful enough not to abuse you, but life has taught me that there will always be people ready to do about anything to satisfy their lust. Being a German may be an additional excuse in their mind to justify abusing you. If you were already showing yourself to be promiscuous, then they would have an easy time raping you, then blame it on you or even deny the whole thing. If you make advances to British soldiers here, you will soon be considered fair game by the whole garrison and left open to all kinds of abuses. As a German, your word will count for very little against their word. Even your female guards shouldn't be trusted just because they are women."

"There could be lesbians in the lot?" Asked Ingrid, suddenly looking horrified.

"I didn't say that, Ingrid. I just said that you could never know. It would be a lot better for you to lay low and cool down, especially since your young age may make you even juicier to some. Like it or not, you are in a very dangerous and precarious situation."

"What am I supposed to do then for the next few years? Turn into a nun?" Protested the teenager, close to tears. Nancy took the girl in her arms to comfort her.

"Look, you don't need to go to such an extreme, although abstinence would be your safest course for now. This may sound ludicrous to you but your hand is your safest friend right now."

"You are right: it is ludicrous."

"You prefer risking rape by British soldiers, or even beatings from your own comrades if they find you fraternizing with the enemy?"

Ingrid paled and lowered her head.

"Could it really be this bad?"

"It could actually be much worst. Count yourself lucky that you are not a French or Dutch woman interned in the Ravensbruck concentration camp, Ingrid."

"Ravensbruck? What is happening there?"

The girl's ignorance seemed genuine, so Nancy explained herself calmly.

“The Ravensbruck concentration camp is reserved for female political prisoners and captured resistance women from various occupied countries. Tens of thousands of women will be beaten, tortured and starved to death in Ravensbruck alone during this war. On top of that, over six million Jews, men, women and children, will be exterminated by the Nazis, along with millions of Tzigans and Soviets.”

Ingrid looked at her with absolute horror.

“You... you are not serious. How could anybody do that?”

“Ingrid, the Nazis will not be alone in this war to commit such atrocities. Stalin already had nearly 4,500 Polish officers executed in 1939 in the Katyn Forest. As for the Japanese, you can't count the number of massacres of civilians they committed in China. The worst is however still to come.”

Seeing that Ingrid was about to be physically sick, Nancy hurried to come out of the shower and hugged her to console her.

“Ingrid, I could still with some luck prevent the worst of this war, but you will have to behave as if the worst will happen. I don't want to see anything bad happen to you during your captivity.”

“Why? Why care for me like this? I am just a German after all.” Said Ingrid in a shaking voice.

“Why? Because I believe that you deserve it, Ingrid. You are an orphan and, whether you like it or not, still a minor. I also became an orphan while still a minor and I know what you are going through.”

The façade that Ingrid had built after the death of her family then crumbled and she started to cry, watched by a sad Nancy who was still hugging her. Attracted by the noise of Ingrid's crying, Mike then knocked on the door of the bathroom.

“Nancy, is everything alright in there?”

“Not really, Mike. Come in!”

Alarmed, Mike opened swiftly the door but then froze on seeing Ingrid, still naked in Nancy's arms. The latter then insisted.

“Come in, Mike. Ingrid needs us, seriously.”

The big American entered but stayed two steps away from Ingrid and avoided looking directly at her, so that she would not think that he was abusing the situation. Nancy smiled to him to thank him for his sensitivity.

"Mike, I now know things about Ingrid that you should know as well. I will however ask you to not to repeat it to anyone else."

"You got my word on that, Nancy."

Nancy then told him Ingrid's real age, the tragedy that had struck her family and the fact that she was a Jew. Mike, deeply moved, gave the teenager a sorrowful look.

"What can we do to help her, Nancy?"

"I am not sure, Mike. The one thing I am sure about is that I do not wish to consider her an enemy anymore."

Ingrid, still in tears, looked hesitantly at Nancy with surprise.

"But, what am I then to you, Colonel?"

Nancy smiled tenderly to her while caressing Ingrid's hair with one hand.

"A girl in need of help. Do you feel strong enough to watch a movie about the reality of this war, Ingrid? I have to warn you that it will not be a nice film."

The teenager nodded her head after a short hesitation.

"If I must learn the truth one day, then I might as well learn it today, with you two."

"Thank you for your trust in us, Ingrid. I believe that you have the potential to become a truly formidable person."

12:18 (GMT)

Tower of London

Parking her Mitsubishi Outlander near the main entrance of the Tower, Nancy then escorted Ingrid back to her room in Gaoler's House. The subdued teenager followed her in silence, still shaken by the film she had seen. Nancy left her after kissing her on the forehead. Ingrid was still sitting on her bed, her mind in turmoil, when her friend Ruth Brandhauer stuck her head inside and knocked on the open door.

"Can I come in, Ingrid?"

"Of course, Ruth." Said Ingrid without conviction. Intrigued, the redhead sat besides her on the bed and passed an arm around her shoulders.

"What's wrong, Ingrid? You look depressed."

"I am depressed, Ruth. Please don't repeat this to the others but I am now wondering if I am not on the wrong side in this war."

“Why are you saying such a thing?” Replied Ruth, scandalized by this. “What did Colonel Laplante tell you to make you think like this?”

“She showed me a film made decades after this war, Ruth.”

Ingrid then described the film about Nazi concentration and extermination camps she had seen at Nancy’s apartment.

“And you believe that?”

“Yes, Ruth! Coming from a British, I would think this to be fabrications. From her...”

Ruth fell silent herself as Ingrid retreated in her thoughts. Ingrid was the first to speak again a minute later.

“You know, Ruth, my family in Berlin had as neighbors a quiet family of six, years ago. They were nice, kind people who were ready to help anyone in need. The father in that family owned a prosperous commerce, yet lived modestly. One night, the Gestapo came and arrested the whole family. We all heard their pleas for help but nobody did anything for them. I was thirteen at the time and wanted to tell those Gestapo men that our neighbors had done nothing wrong, but my father stopped me. He was terrified that I would be arrested too and told me then that we would all end up in a camp like our neighbors if we intervened. At that time I didn’t understand what kind of camp my father was alluding to and he wouldn’t tell me anything more. Now I know what kind of camp he was talking about.”

“Your neighbors... did they ever come back?”

“No! I learned soon enough why they had been arrested: they were Jewish and had harbored a Jew that had been on the run from the Gestapo. Their store and all their belongings were confiscated and given to a local Nazi party official, a man I loathed for being arrogant and corrupt. While that incident brought bitterness to me, I thought that this had to be an isolated case and that Germany was simply doing its best to keep the public order. Was I ever naïve then.”

Ruth had nothing to reply to that. In fact, something very similar had happened in her own neighborhood in Koln ¹³ eight years ago. In her case, it had been Nazi Brown Shirts and not the Gestapo who had beaten and arrested some Jewish neighbors. Ruth felt shame as she remembered how she had cheered the Brown Shirts on then, mostly

¹³ Koln: Cologne

because everybody else was doing the same. Getting on her feet, she patted gently Ingrid's back before leaving the room and closing quietly the door behind her.

13:15 (GMT)

Sunday, January 19, 1941

King's House, Tower of London

The ground floor hall in which Nancy was standing was now packed with excited British soldiers as well as with the seven German female prisoners, who were sitting in the front row of seats with Brigadier Browning and his senior officers. Mike Crawford was also present, along with Marine Corps Captain Ken Dows and six of the Marine guards from the American embassy, invited as neutral personnel for the benefit of the seven German women. Her TV/DVD unit was on top of a buffet behind her, in order for everybody to have a good view of the screen. Nancy, dressed in a very sexy black leather outfit made of knee-high boots, a very short skirt and a sleeveless jacket covering a silver silk blouse, raised her hand high and called for silence. The room quickly became quiet, with all eyes fixed on her.

“General, Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome! We are here to both forget the war for a few hours and to have some good time. In order to do this, we will have a mixed program of movies, dance and music, with a buffet thrown in so that we could keep enjoying ourselves right here all evening and night. On behalf of Brigadier General Browning, I will invite all of you to refrain from smoking inside, as we are many in a rather cramped space. Smokers are invited to use the ashtrays that have been installed outside near the entrance. Today's program will start with a science documentary, followed by a historical drama. Supper will follow, then some dance and music. The evening will then conclude with a science-fiction movie and some more dance. To help loosen the atmosphere a bit, Brigadier Browning and I pitched in and brought in some beer and wine. You will each get three tickets good for a glass of beer or wine at six O'clock. I will now repeat my announcement in German for the benefit of our guest residents.”

That took only a minute, after which Nancy started the first viewing. Gasps came out of the spectators when a space shuttle appeared, sitting on its launch pad.

“This documentary is about the construction in Earth orbit of an international space station. It was produced in 2007. Everything you will see will exist by then. Enjoy!”

Sitting on the chair reserved for her besides Brigadier Browning and Mike Crawford, Nancy watched discreetly the spectators’ reactions as the documentary went on. She was amused to see the women present, both British and German, cheer in unison when the astronauts appeared and took place in the shuttle: two of the astronauts were women.

At the end of the one-hour documentary, Nancy announced a fifteen minutes smoke and restroom break before the showing of the next film. Ingrid Weiss, sparkles in her eyes, came to see her as the others dispersed.

“That was like magic, Nancy! The Earth was so beautiful from orbit.”

“It really was. The more reason to try preserving it. Maybe you will be able to go in space one day, like those Americans.”

“Oh, I hope so, Nancy.

Everybody rushed back to their seats when Nancy announced the start of the second presentation at about three O’clock. She waited for everyone to be sitting before addressing the excited crowd.

“What you are going to watch is a film recorded on a digital video disk, or DVD. A DVD has a huge data capacity and commercial films recorded on DVD in my time typically contain numerous options like special scenes, director’s cuts, bloopers and side stories. They also routinely come with a capacity to be viewed with sub-titles in a variety of languages. With this particular DVD, I will play it with German sub-titles.”

Anna Hauser shook her head, overwhelmed by such advanced technology.

The showing of the movie ‘GLADIATOR’ brought forth powerful emotions in the audience, which had never experienced anything as sophisticated in terms of cinematic technology. All the women present, along with more than a few men, either cried or had big lumps inside their throats as the dead Maximus was shown meeting his wife and son in the afterlife. Brigadier Browning spoke to her as soon as the movie was finished.

"This was a fantastic movie, Colonel. Do you have many films of the same caliber as this one?"

"I do have quite a few, sir. I gather that your people would like regular viewings from now on."

"Like? They would be crazy about it. If a simple film can excite an old man like me, think of what these young men and women feel like now."

"Then I propose that we have a weekly film show every Sunday, sir."

"Splendid! This will help the morale of my men tremendously."

Browning then walked away to organize the buffet and the distribution of alcohol. Nancy went to the nearby ballroom, where the buffet and drinks were being served. Going first to a table on which her portable radio/CD player was laid with a pile of CDs, she started a CD of songs by Sarah Brightman and cranked up the volume before getting a glass of white wine from one of the stewards. Nancy then went back to the viewing room and put on a DVD on which she had recorded some of her favorite music videos. That immediately attracted a crowd curious about modern music. Leaving them to gawk at the often very skimpy or downright outrageous costumes worn by some of the female stars and dancers shown in the videos, Nancy returned behind the table on which her portable sound system was and sat down. She then arranged her CDs in neat piles according to the type of music. It didn't take long before someone came to speak to her. It was Bertha Reinholdt, looking happy and excited.

"All this is so fascinating, Colonel. I wish I could have lived in your time period."

"Be careful about what you wish for, Bertha: my time was no utopian paradise. We still had more than our fair share of wars, famines and injustices in 2012. By the way, you can call me Nancy when I'm in civilian clothes."

"As you wish, Nancy. May I ask what kind of movie will be shown after the dance? You said that it was a science-fiction one but, for us, even films about 2012 are science-fiction movies."

"True! The next movie is called 'AVATAR' and is a classic in my time. It is also visually stunning. You should love it."

One of the invited American Marines then came to Ruth to ask her for a dance. The German teenager smiled to the big, fit American soldier and accepted readily, starting to dance a slow in the ballroom, to a song by Sarah Brightman. Ingrid Weiss quickly imitated Ruth, dragging Captain Ken Dows to the dance floor and gluing herself to him to

the delight of the young and very handsome Marine officer. Nancy also got in the act and grabbed a delighted captain Nicholson to dance with him. Things heated up from there, with Nancy concluding the first dancing period with a provocative solo dance number that left the men present cheering wildly.

The showing of 'AVATAR' after the supper was even more appreciated than the previous movie, impressing the audience with its visual effects and stunningly beautiful imagery. A second period of dancing and music followed the movie. By then, few persons cared who was dancing with who. Nancy didn't miss the fact that Ingrid seemed to have connected very well with Captain Ken Dows, while Dows was obviously mesmerized by her beauty. Nancy thought to herself that those two would make a truly beautiful couple. Mike then grabbed her for a dance, making her join the other couples on the dance floor.

08:46 (GMT)

Saturday, January 25, 1941

24 St James' Place, London

"We are not running more this morning, Nancy?" Asked Ingrid, surprised, when she saw that they were now approaching Nancy's apartment after only twenty minutes of running. She was now in good physical shape and could run for much longer, while Nancy was barely starting to sweat.

"No: we have something to discuss in private, Ingrid."

Surprised by that, Ingrid nonetheless followed Nancy inside her apartment block, smiling in passing at the small girl playing in the lobby. Once inside her apartment, Nancy locked the door behind Ingrid and invited her to sit in a sofa of the lounge. Ingrid smiled when Mike Crawford came out of the small kitchen to go sit down with her on the sofa. On her part, Nancy approached a chair and sat facing Ingrid. The German girl looked alternatively at the American and at the Canadian, intrigued.

"Uh, what is going on? Did I do something wrong?"

"The only thing you did was to win our hearts, Ingrid." Said softly Mike. "You are a nice, intelligent, kind and brave girl, but you still have a major problem."

"I'm a German?" Replied Ingrid, trying some humor. Mike shook his head.

"That is not a problem for us, Ingrid."

"Neither for me." Said Nancy.

"But, you are fighting alongside the British, Nancy. You could be accused of fraternizing with an enemy."

"Do you really want us to be enemies, Ingrid?"

"Of course not! In fact, I don't want to be the enemy of anybody. So, what is my problem, if not for the fact that I am a German?"

"You don't have a family, Ingrid." Replied Nancy. "You risk finding yourself alone at the end of this war, in a devastated country that would have nothing to offer to a girl like you. Me and Mike would like to offer you an alternative."

Ingrid looked at Mike, who was smiling tenderly to her.

"What kind of alternative?"

"Ingrid, would you like to go live in the United States after the war? I could arrange something through my embassy."

"But, I don't know anybody in the United States."

"You know me and Nancy." Replied Mike, who then became most serious. "As an American citizen, if I adopt a minor, that minor immediately gains the right to become an American citizen and to reside in the United States. Nancy is my wife and, as such, already has a permit to reside in the United States. She in fact intends to go live with me in the United States at the end of the war and would love for you to accompany us."

Ingrid opened her eyes wide, unable to believe her ears.

"You...you want to adopt me, both of you?"

"Unofficially, yes. Officially, I will be the one to adopt you. You were unfortunately right about Nancy being accused of fraternization with the enemy if she filled papers to adopt you. We must however act before the end of this year, before the United States enters officially this war, which would make it impossible to adopt you. So, what do you say, Ingrid?"

Tears came out of the teenager's eyes and her lips trembled as emotions overwhelmed her. Nancy then got close to her to hold her hands.

"Ingrid, you are made of gold and we got to love you very much in the last few weeks. I would be most proud to be your stepmother and would also be very happy to help you become the exceptional woman that you promise to be."

“What...what else could I say but yes? You...you are such good people. I accept! Thank you so much, both you and Mike.”

“We are the ones to thank you, Ingrid. Please keep this strictly to yourself, though. You risk a lot if your comrades or the British find about this. I also risk a lot personally if the British learn that I want to adopt a German prisoner of war. Mike has some official forms for you to fill, so that he can start the adoption procedures quickly and get you an American passport. While that procedure is initiated, I will take on me to educate you discreetly...to the standards of 2012. If you are going to start a new life, then you might as well start it with an advantage on others.”

Nancy smiled with malice while saying those last words.

23:11 (GMT)

Gaoler's House, Tower of London

Ingrid was tired but happy when she finally closed the book on aeronautical science that Nancy had bought for her in town, along with other books to advance her education, before bringing her back to the Tower of London. Those were however only the official part of the education offered by Nancy. Her future stepmother had started right away to teach her knowledge from the 21st Century, showing to Ingrid a video documentary on modern aircraft and then discussing with her about the progress and breakthroughs to come in aeronautics. With now good reasons to hope for a better future, on top of having gained a new family, Ingrid quickly fell asleep in her small room.

Barely half an hour later, a bizarre dream came to her. It was as if she was reliving at accelerated speed the life of a black man, somewhere in the South of the United States. Despite of the speed of her visions, everything was of impossible clarity, as if she always had those visions store deep inside her brain. Even more shocking was the fact that the visions came with physical sensations, some of them intense. She woke up with a startle after one hour of visions, covered with sweat, shaking and in tears. The man whose life she was reliving, a black slave named Thomas Green, had been cruelly flogged by the sadistic manager of the plantation he was working in, to die two weeks later from infected wounds, this in March of 1876. Ingrid had felt the atrocious pain from the lashes as if she had really lived through the experience. Not

knowing what to think, she then tried to go back to sleep. Only a few minutes later, new visions filled her head. This time the visions concerned a peasant from Indochina who had lived in the 18th Century and whose name was Tran Qui Khiem. Tran had lived with his wife and five children in a small village of the Mekong Delta and had died from a tropical fever in 1786. Since his death had not been as traumatic as that of Thomas Green, it didn't wake up Ingrid, who started to review a third life of the past, as clear and vivid as the two others. That one concerned an humble Iranian woman of the 17th Century named Aisha, dead of old age in 1685 in the city of Hormuz. The life of an Ukrainian woman of the 16th Century, Nadia Romanova, and the one about a Masai warrior of the 14th Century, Luwasi, followed.

Ingrid was reliving in dreams her sixth past life, that of a tax collector for the Inca king in Peru in the 13th Century, when a hand shook her, abruptly cutting her dreams and waking her up. Opening her eyes, Ingrid saw that Bertha Reinholdt, bent over her bed, was looking at her with worry.

"Are you okay, Ingrid? You seemed to be having nightmares and were saying something incomprehensible."

"Uh, I am alright, Bertha. What time is it?"

"Ten past seven in the morning. You better hurry if you want to have breakfast."

"Damn! I will make it quick." Said Ingrid, throwing away her blanket and jumping out of bed. As she was brushing her teeth after going to the washroom, she wondered if her visions would return next night, and if she would remember them. Out of curiosity, she tried to remember a song in Ukrainian that had been a favorite of Nadia Romanova. Ingrid surprised herself by remembering easily all the lyrics, along with the rhythm. More incredible still, she could think in Ukrainian, as well as in Vietnamese, Persian, Masai and Quechua.

07:23 (GMT)

Sunday, January 26, 1941

Apartment 11, 24 St James' Place

London

“MONTJOIE!¹⁴ SUS AUX ANGLAIS!”

The scream in French from Nancy, who was sleeping beside him, brutally woke up Mike with a startle. Getting up on his elbows and turning his head, he saw that Nancy was still in bed but was agitated, as she was having nightmares. Since her eyes were still closed, Mike let Nancy sleep and got up to go prepare himself a cup of coffee in the small kitchen of Nancy's apartment, where he was pending most of his nights since they had married.

He was sipping his coffee, sitting in the kitchen, when a scream of pain from Nancy nearly made him spit out his coffee. Grabbing a kitchen knife, he ran to the bedroom, only to find Nancy sitting in the bed, her eyes opened and her body covered with cold sweat.

“Nancy, are you alright?” Asked Mike, worried. Nancy looked at him with eyes full of horror, then spoke in French.

“Les Godons¹⁵, ils me brûlaient vive!”

Mike, who now understood much French, looked at her with confusion.

“Burning you alive? What are you talking about, Nancy?”

Nancy only realized then that she had spoken in French. She was then quiet for a moment, thinking about her nightmare.

“Joan of Arc? Why was I dreaming about her life, or about the lives of the others before?”

“The others before? Decidedly, you don't make much sense this morning, Nancy.”

She bit her lips as pieces of the six past lives came back to her mind.

“I suppose that I effectively don't make much sense today. Sorry about that, Mike.”

¹⁴ Montjoie : War cry of the French knights during the Hundred Year War.

¹⁵ Godons: Nickname given to English soldiers by the French during the Middle Ages, due to their habit of swearing by saying 'Goddam'.

CHAPTER 27 – BATTLE PLANS

09:18 (GMT)

Tuesday, March 4, 1941

Hourglass Section, Home Office

London, England

Nancy was reading a progress report concerning Project Afterburner, the program for an advanced jet engine, when somebody knocked on her door. Closing and putting aside the secret file folder, she told her visitor to come in. Reginald Jones then stuck his head in the doorway.

“Can I enter or is your trigger finger itchy today?”

“Come in, Doctor! What can I do for you?”

As an answer, Jones simply put a laser printer’s ink cartridge on her desk while smiling. That was enough to make Nancy fly out of her chair in excitement.

“Don’t tell me that your chemist friend was able to duplicate the ink and reload that printer cartridge.”

“He sure did and he says that he can guarantee it will be as good as new. Do you want to try it?”

“You bet I do!”

Followed by Jones, Nancy went to the computer desk installed in a corner of the main office of the Hourglass Section. Doug Wilson was working on her desktop computer at the time. All the members of her section, including Jennifer Collins, were by now thoroughly proficient in the use of her computer equipment and of the different software programs contained in it.

“Excuse me, Doug, but I have to take the printer off-line for a moment.”

“No problem, Nancy. I don’t need it yet.”

Switching off her multifunction center, Nancy then replaced the now nearly empty laser ink cartridge by the newly refilled one, closed the machine and turned it on again.

“Doug, I need you to test that new printer ink cartridge. Choose any file and print it.”

She crossed her fingers as Doug initiated a print program: if this reloaded cartridge didn’t work properly, then her multifunction center would very soon become useless and the

work efficiency of her office would take a dramatic plunge. She silently congratulated herself for having produced copies of all her digital files in the past months by having a photographer take a picture of each page of data directly from the computer's screen. At least they had now backup files in microfiche form in case of a major computer malfunction.

The first printed page started to come out, face down. Nancy had to control herself not to rip it off the printer. As calmly as she could, she turned the page over and looked at it, her four assistants and Jennifer crowding around her. An immense relief overtook her then: the print quality was the same as before. Looking at the four other pages on the printer's tray, she saw that the quality was also consistent. Without a word, she turned to face Doctor Jones and gave him a hugging kiss, to the protestations of her three other assistants. Nancy then handed to the blushing physicist the old ink cartridge.

"Please tell your friend that he did a superb job and ask him to also refill this unit and the other one he still has."

"Er, before I can do that, I have something else to show you."

"HEY," warned jokingly George Townsend, "NO DIRTY ACTS HERE, MISTER!"

"Will you sex maniacs calm down?" Fumed the young scientist. Nancy, barely controlling her laughter, patted Jones' shoulder.

"Please ignore them, Doctor. What do you have for me?"

"A gift from the Marconi company."

Jones went to a crate behind his desk and pulled out of it a standard British Army field radio. It was a large, heavy and clumsy unit barely worthy of the qualification man-portable. He then pulled out a much smaller radio less than one third the volume of the first one and presented it to Nancy with obvious pride.

"This small radio is the transistorized version of the standard tube valve radio there. We did what you said could not be done."

Nancy took the radio and examined it with a look approaching reverence. The controls were still clumsy by 2012 standards but it was definitely a vast improvement compared to the bulky radio pack on Jones' desk. Jones went on.

"Apart of being much more compact and of weighing less than half the weight of the original radio, it is much more dependable, has a longer battery life and is also more powerful. While the Mean Time Between Failures, or MBTF in short, of the standard

radio is measured in hours, the MBTF of the transistorized pack is measured in hundreds of hours. Field signalers should love this.”

“I believe you, Doc.” Said George Townsend as he examined the radio. “My old platoon radioman would kiss you on your four cheeks to get this radio. Are the frequencies compatible with the ones on the older set?”

“They are. The only real change was the replacement of the tube valves by transistors.”

“Do you think that Marconi could produce quickly an ultra-compact, hand-held radio unit for use by small size units?” Asked Nancy. Jones thought about that for a moment.

“I can’t see why not. It would have less range and a shorter battery life but they could produce a radio that would fit in a battledress breast pocket.”

Townsend’s eyes opened wide with glee.

“Doc, you do that and it will be all the junior officers in the British Army lining up to kiss your four cheeks.”

“Gee, can I take the doctor’s place then?” Joked Nancy. Townsend looked at her with a famished expression.

“Then, it will be the whole British Army lining up, including me.”

“Now now! Don’t tell me that my faithful assistants are having dirty dreams about me.”

She then looked around at the four men gazing at her with wishful eyes.

“Er, alright, let’s say that my last assumption was wrong. Can’t you guys get married or something? You could then concentrate on your jobs instead of on my chest.”

She shook her head in mock desperation when they answered her by grinning like idiots.

“Perverts, all! Doctor Jones, would you like to go and present your new radio to General Ismay?”

The smile on Jones’ face was enough of an answer to her. Grabbing the older, bulkier radio pack, she let the physicist lead the way out of the section’s office with the new radio in his hands.

10:48 (GMT)

Friday, March 7, 1941

Public swimming pool, Endell Street, London

Jane Vernon saw as she entered the indoor pool hall that only a few people were using it this morning. Walking to the lifeguard sitting in the elevated chair on one side of the pool, the teenager patted the young man's foot.

"You're relieved, Jack. Go take your break."

"Do you mind if I stay a while longer, Jane?"

That surprised the young blonde to no little degree: Jack Burton, skipping a break? Suddenly suspicious about his reasons to stay, Jane looked at the people in the swimming pool. Sure enough, a tall and athletic young woman was swimming lengths at an impressive speed. In fact, most of the men in the pool simply watched her going from end to end. Something was wrong about her, though.

"Jack, is she wearing a skin-colored bathing suit or what?"

"Yes, she does but..."

Jane looked at him with reprobation before walking to the opposite side of the pool to examine more closely the swimmer. She stared open-mouthed when she saw that the woman's swimming suit looked a lot more like a combination of bra and panty rather than the proper, standard one-piece female swimming suit. That swimming suit was nothing less than scandalous. Ignoring the desperate signs from Jack Burton, Jane yelled at the woman still speeding along in the pool.

"Hey, miss, could you get out of the water, now?"

The tall, black-haired woman pulled herself out of the water at the end of the pool and walked towards Jane with an exasperated look on her face. Jane had to look up to face the woman who, apart of appearing to be very strong, was about six-foot tall. She then had a close look at the woman's swimming suit. Consisting of a tiny top and of an even tinier bottom piece that were glued to her body, it was made of a light cream-colored fabric that let Jane see the dark protuberances of the woman's nipples.

"Miss, you will have to leave the pool. Your swimming suit is most improper."

The woman's green eyes glared at Jane, making her wince as if expecting to be hit.

"Miss, are you new here, or didn't you hear about the understanding between me and the director?"

"What understanding?"

"I have an arrangement with your director that I will not be disturbed during my exercises, except for calls from the Prime Minister's Office. Now, why don't you inform yourself while I return to my swimming?"

The woman then dived back in the water without giving time to Jane to protest. Jane was about to yell at her again when Jack Burton tapped her shoulder.

"Cool it, Jane! She is not to be disturbed: orders from the director."

"But she is wearing less than what a prostitute would."

"Don't ever use that word about her again!" Replied Jack forcefully. "That woman is Nancy Laplante, the Canadian from the future."

"So? That doesn't give her the right to swim practically naked in public."

By then, Jack looked like he was getting seriously pissed off at her.

"Listen, Jane! Colonel Laplante is helping us win this war and is a decorated veteran. That swimsuit of hers was made in 2012, when social and moral customs are quite different from now. That doesn't make her a whore, though. Besides, the director's orders are quite clear: you leave her alone or you are fired."

Jane tightened her jaws in frustrated anger.

"Anything else I should know?"

"Yes! Her pistol belt is hanging from the lifeguard's chair. Just make sure that it doesn't disappear and don't touch it."

"What the hell is she doing with a pistol here?"

"Protecting herself, you nitwit! There have been already three assassination attempts against her. Don't you read newspapers?"

"Alright, go take your break: I will watch her pistol."

"Good!"

Jane slowly walked to the lifeguard's chair while watching Laplante swim. She had to say that the Canadian displayed a level of physical fitness worthy of Olympic standards. Jane examined briefly the gun belt hanging from the chair before sitting in it and starting her watch. Laplante got out of the water half an hour later and picked up her gun belt without a word before leaving the pool hall.

After showering and changing into her Lycra exercise outfit, Nancy went to the small but well equipped gymnasium that was part of the sports complex. The gun belt was strapped around her waist, exercise session or not. She went to a large trampoline and waited for the teenager using it to finish. It was the lifeguard who had been replaced

by the young twit in the pool. The moment he saw her, the young man stopped jumping and climbed down from the trampoline, offering her its use. When Nancy told him to continue, he insisted.

“Please, Maam, go on it. I heard that you were pretty good at it and I would like to see it by myself.”

“In that case...”

Jack soon found out that she was much more than just pretty good. He applauded when she jumped down ten minutes later.

“Where did you learn to use a trampoline like this, Miss Laplante?”

She passed a hand on her sweaty forehead before answering, obviously flattered.

“I was top in my gymnastics classes at the university. Also, skydiving does a lot to develop your sense of orientation.”

“Skydiving? What’s that?”

“Parachuting from high altitude and freefalling most of the way down before opening your parachute. How old are you, if I may ask?”

“Sixteen, miss. I am still too young for military service. About the incident in the pool, please excuse Jane for her reaction: she does not normally do watches on Fridays and didn’t know about you.”

“That’s already forgotten. Now, I need a partner to hold that punching bag over there. Would you be interested?”

“Certainly, miss!”

Not believing his good fortune, Jack ran to the big punching bag suspended from a beam and went behind it, holding it with both hands. Nancy took position on the opposite side of the bag and adopted a stance that puzzled Jack.

“That’s not a proper boxing position, miss.”

“I’m not boxing either. I practice an oriental martial art called karate. Beware, the bag is going to take a beating, so hang tight.”

Both her blood-freezing scream and lightning quick leg kick on the punching bag nearly stunned him. He had to anchor himself with all his strength to keep the punching bag from flying out of his grip under the series of savage blows she gave with both her feet and fists. Two men, who were practicing boxing in a corner of the gymnasium, stopped to watch her beat on the bag. A last flying kick proved to be too much for Jack, who was thrown back by the punching bag. Both of the onlookers applauded as Jack took back control of it. The older man shook the hand of Nancy, an enthusiastic grin on his face.

“That was quite a demonstration, Colonel Laplante. By the way, I’m Major John Fielders, of the Grenadier Guards, and this is Captain Mark Smith, my second in command.”

“Pleased to meet you.” Said Nancy politely as she shook hands with Smith.

“Do you think that you could teach this kind of fighting technique to our men?”
Asked Smith.

“I would love to, Captain. However, I’m afraid that I’m kept so busy that I do not have any time left for it. I’m truly sorry.”

Fielders nodded his head in comprehension.

“I can believe you, Miss. We are now fully reequipped with your new weapons, including the assault armor and the new infantry fighting vehicles. Our regiment is now packing quite a bigger punch, thanks to your equipment. We are just dying to try it in combat, though.”

Nancy smiled devilishly as she looked at his eager face.

“How influent is your commandant, Major? I was looking for candidates for a really crazy idea I’ve been cooking up in my head for weeks now.”

Fielders’ grin became even wider.

“Colonel, our commandant is no less than the King himself.”

“Oh, I suppose that should do.”

The three of them laughed together. Nancy then lowered her voice and showed a deserted corner of the gymnasium.

“Let’s talk a bit away from other ears.”

Once in the corner, she lowered her voice even more.

“What I have in mind would actually be a job for a complete brigade. Do you think that the other Guards regiments would like to go?”

One look at Fielders’ and Smith’s expressions convinced her.

“Alright, that was a stupid question. Are all Guards regiments fully equipped with new weapons and vehicles?”

Fielders reviewed mentally some status reports before answering her.

“Well, all seven Guards regiments now have the new portable weapons. Both the Blues and Royals and the Life Guards have their full complement of CHARGER tanks, while us, the Coldstreams, the Welsh and the Scots Guards are fully equipped with the WOLVERINE infantry fighting vehicle and its variants. The Irish Guards are halfway through their reequipment.”

“Excellent! Now, the idea I’m going to tell you about has not been seen or approved by anybody. It may still be shot down the moment I present it, so I will ask you not to talk about this with anybody. Wait until I contact you again before telling anyone about my plan. Here is my idea...”

She whispered for a good five minutes, then looked at Fielders and Smith with anticipation. Both officers looked shocked and awed by now.

“Colonel,” finally said Fielders, “I now see why the guys at Combined Operations Headquarters call you Dirty Tricks Nancy. This is the most devious, kick in the teeth idea for an operation I ever heard. I love it!”

“In that case, I propose a name for it, if it ever gets off the ground: Operation BACKSTABBER.”

“Perfect!” Said both Guards officers at the same time.

16:56 (GMT)

Friday, March 14, 1941

Athena Section, Home Office building

Reginald Jones raised his eyes from the October 2012 edition of the International Defense Review when the two guards outside came to attention. Nancy Laplante then entered the office, her computer carrying case in one hand and a big smile on her face. Her triumphant yell made Jennifer Collins, who was typing a report with her back to the door, jump.

“OPERATION BACKSTABBER IS A GO! THEY BOUGHT IT LOCK, STOCK AND BARREL!”

A concert of cheers and applause greeted her announcement, with everybody in the office rushing to her to congratulate her. They all got a kiss on the cheek from the jubilant Nancy in exchange.

“So, when will it be?” Asked George Townsend.

“Probably not before another month. In fact, what Bletchley Park deciphers will do a lot in deciding the actual date of the operation. By the way, how many German divisions have been moved eastward towards the Soviet border by now, according to ULTRA intercepts, Reginald?”

“We are close to 200 divisions by now, Nancy. What is left along the French coast is meager indeed.”

“Excellent! The less there is on the Western front, the easier it will be for Operation BACKSTABBER. Now, I need three volunteers to fill positions for the operation. Who is ready to kiss ass to go?”

In less than five seconds she had three officers and one scientist on their knees and lined up in front of her. The two military policemen inside the office looked at each other with knowing smiles: Since they had started to be on duty at the Athena Section, they had learned not to take that crazy group of officers too seriously during the lighter moments of the day. When working on a task, that was another matter. Nancy gently took Doug Wilson and Reginald Jones out of the lineup with an apologetic smile.

“I’m sorry, Doug. That is a ground combat mission: your limp could get you killed. As for you, Reginald, I need somebody to run the office who knows how to use this computer equipment.”

Facing again the dejected Wilson, she patted his shoulder.

“Doug, if it can make you happy, I booked you with A.V. Roe to be copilot for the initial flight tests of our first helicopter prototype. You’re leaving in a week for intensive familiarization classes at A.V. Roe.”

Doug was speechless at first. Then his eyes became moist as he vigorously shook Nancy’s hand.

“Nancy, do you know what this means to me, to fly again?”

“I know, Doug. You deserve it.”

They hugged each other for a few seconds. Nancy then looked at George Townsend.

“Major Townsend, a top Royal Commando officer like you should not be wasted on paperwork. I gained approval from General Joubert to have you lead the raiding team on objective number four. You will have a lot of stuff to blow up!”

“YES!” Shouted Townsend enthusiastically. Nancy looked next at Peter Stilwell, still kneeling in front of her.

“Mister Stilwell, how would you like to go wallow in the Kriegsmarine headquarters’ secret papers?”

“I would love to, Nancy.”

“Then you’re it for objective number one.”

“What about you, Nancy?” Asked a suddenly apprehensive Reginald Jones. “Which objective are you taking?”

“I will go on objective number six, Doc.”

The room suddenly became very still. Stilwell finally spoke for everybody.

“Why objective number six, Nancy? I still don’t think that the risks there are worth the results.”

“Why? Because that will give me a chance to work with French Army troops. Who else here speaks perfect French?”

22:03 (GMT)

Apartment 11, 24 St James’ Place

London

Nancy finally unglued herself from Mike after their last coupling and rolled on her side of the bed with a content smile. Both were glistening with sweat from the long session of passionate lovemaking. One extra nice thing Nancy found about Mike was that, being a non-smoker like her, he would not like some of her past lovers ruin good fun by lighting a cigarette and fill the room with the acrid smell of tobacco. However, this was one night where she was going to have to be the pleasure killer.

“Mike, I’m afraid that I have to tell you something you may not like.”
The American tensed up immediately as he stared at her.

“You have to go on a mission in Europe, is that it, Nancy?”
She caressed his concerned face, her eyes sparkling with tenderness.

“Mike, you don’t have to worry about that mission. I’m not going to play lonely pathfinder this time. I will be part of a big operation and will be well protected. Anyway, it is only in two months time.”

Mike looked at her silently and then hugged her in his powerful arms.

“Please be careful, Nancy.”

“I will, I promise you.”

11:19 (GMT)

Saturday, March 15, 1941

Apartment 11, 24 St James’ Place

“Very good, Ingrid! You are really making amazing progress in your studies. Let’s pack your things now and run to the Tower of London before someone there becomes suspicious about us.”

"Uh, before we go, could I ask you a question?" Said Ingrid, hesitant and fearing that Nancy would think she was crazy. Nancy, who had gotten up from the sofa and was going towards the door of her apartment, stopped and pivoted to face her.

"Go ahead, Ingrid. What is bothering you?"

"Nancy, I have had nightmares for about a month now. They leave me agitated and covered with sweat, apart of bringing me strange souvenirs."

Ingrid was surprised in turn by the reaction of Nancy, who hurried to join her on the sofa and to take hold of her hands.

"What kind of souvenirs, Ingrid?"

"Visions of the lives of people from the past. Those visions started with the life of an American black slave dead in 1876. They then followed each other from progressively further in the past. I...I believe that I now have attained a sort of limit, as I have not had visions from a further life since about a week. Do you have any idea of what those visions could be, Nancy?"

Instead of answering her, Nancy asked her a question on an urgent tone.

"Those visions, did they give you the ability to speak a number of ancient languages?"

Ingrid did a double take, shocked.

"How could you know that, Nancy?"

Nancy looked herself overwhelmed as she answered.

"Ingrid, I have lived through such visions for a month as well, starting the night after you accepted to be adopted by me and Mike."

"But, my visions also started that same night. What is happening to us?"

Nancy hesitated before exposing a theory that had come to her mind after a week of visions.

"Ingrid, I believe that, for an unknown reason, we both started to remember our past incarnations. You know about the Hindu concept of reincarnation?"

"Yes!" Said weakly Ingrid while lowering her head. "I also thought about that but believed it to be too fantastic...until now. The most ancient life I can remember is as a nomadic woman who lived in the Sumer region of the Middle East, about 7,000 years ago. The life that shook me most was however that of an Egyptian slave girl bought the great patriarch Abraham, over 3,500 years ago."

Nancy's reaction at those words stunned Ingrid, who found herself suddenly in her arms, with Nancy crying profusely while speaking in Ancient Sumerian.

“Agar! You were Agar! My god, I meet you again after chasing you away so many centuries ago.”

“Sarai? Is that you?” Asked Ingrid, also in Ancient Sumerian. Nancy, her eyes full of tears, went at arms length to look at her with infinite tenderness.

“The last time I saw you, I was chasing you and your son Ishmaël in the desert. If you knew how much remorse I felt after committing that injustice. That we were able to meet again after all these millenniums is nothing less than a miracle.”

Ingrid then also burst out in tears and hugged Nancy, overwhelmed by this revelation.

CHAPTER 28 – OPERATION BACKSTABBER

21:46 (GMT)

Tuesday, May 13, 1941

Chatham naval base

Private George Lewis stuck his head out of one of the troop hatches of his 25-ton Infantry Fighting Vehicle, or IFV in short, and stared at the rows of hovercrafts visible in the moonlight and waiting for his comrades and their vehicles to be loaded aboard.

“My god! It looks like an invasion from Mars.”

“Yeah,” replied his friend, Corporal Peter Jones, “but we’re the ones that are going to do the invading. Isn’t that a nice change of scenario for you?”

“Sure is!”

They watched as an officer equipped with a loudspeaker sorted out which vehicles went in which hovercraft. Their turn soon came.

“Force Six, get in the hovercrafts numbered 195 to 219, in the last row to your right.”

Lewis’ WOLVERINE IFV followed the eighteen CHARGER main battle tanks, seventeen other WOLVERINES IFVs and six Bedford QL 3-ton trucks of their column towards the 24 hovercrafts assigned to Force Six. The rear loading ramps were already down, with Royal Navy ground guides waiting besides each hovercraft to help the loading. Lewis’ IFV was paired with one of the tanks before it rolled up the ramp of one hovercraft and stopped in the large cargo bay, the tank following them inside. Lieutenant Ralph Smith, Lewis’ platoon commander, then ordered everybody out of the hovercraft, assembling his men and the tankers supporting his platoon near the stern ramp of his hovercraft.

“Alright, men, it should take a couple more hours before the force is ready to depart. The force commander should be around soon to brief all of you on our mission. Stay close to your assigned hovercrafts. If you need to relieve yourselves, ask one of the sailors to show you where the latrines are on your hovercraft. Now, try to relax as much as possible in the meantime.”

“Sir,” shouted Lewis, “could you at least tell us now where we are going?”

“The force commander will tell you everything, Private. Just be patient.”

As the British were settling in for some waiting, they saw a long column of American-made trucks approach their group of hovercrafts. Each truck had the letters FFL and the Cross of Lorraine painted on their doors, while the troops riding the trucks wore the distinctive helmets of the French Army.

“Free French, on this operation?” Exclaimed Corporal Jones. “What for?”

“Beats me!” Replied George Lewis. “The six last hovercrafts are still empty: they must have been reserved for these frogs.”

The jeep leading the column of trucks stopped besides their hovercraft long enough for a tall woman in battledress and full combat gear to jump out. As the jeep sped towards one of the empty hovercrafts, the woman, wearing assault armor like the Welsh Guardsmen, walked to Lieutenant Smith, who saluted her crisply.

“The men are ready to be briefed, Colonel.”

“Excellent! Have them assemble around me.”

“Bloody hell!” Swore Lewis quietly to Jones. “We are going to be commanded by Colonel Laplante? Then we can expect one crazy mission.”

“Right you are, mate.”

With Major John Brannigan, the company commander, hurrying his 193 men and the 72 tankers supporting them, it took less than a minute to gather everyone in a semi-circle around Nancy Laplante. The British were then surrounded by about 500 french soldiers, with a few polish and Dutch officers mixed with them. Lewis glanced quickly at a nearby Frenchman, noticing the shoulder patches on his battledress.

“Infanterie de marine? Sounds like our own Royal Marines.”

Nancy Laplante then started speaking, cutting short his thoughts.

“Good evening to all! I’m Colonel Nancy Laplante and I will be commanding Force Six. Up to now, we have kept secret our mission from you, for a good reason: if the Germans are actually waiting for us on the objective, then we will all die today. Surprise will be of the utmost importance for this operation. Your officers have already been briefed in detail, so I will only need to tell you the main outlines of this mission. Before I do that, though, I will quickly translate what I just said to our French allies.”

Laplante then spoke for a while in French before switching back to English.

“As you can all see, this will be a combined multinational operation. We will be provided both air and sea support all the way to our objective. In turn, the other forces that are also part of this operation will strike five other major objectives. If we succeed in our respective missions, the Germans will be dealt a severe blow indeed. Some may

ask why we have French troops with us tonight. Well, once you see what is our objective, you will quickly understand why.”

Two junior officers then brought up a light display board on which a map and a number of air photos were pinned, with one of the officers then holding a flashlight to illuminate the board. Lewis opened his mouth wide in stunned surprise as Laplante explained their mission and described the objective. In turn, the French soldiers around him became enthusiastic when she translated her briefing for their benefit. Once the briefing was over, the soldiers started to disperse to relax a bit before departure. Lewis and Jones didn't have time to walk away, though: Lieutenant Smith signaled them to join him and Laplante near the hovercraft. A bit apprehensive, the two guardsmen walked to the two officers and saluted crisply. After returning their salute, Laplante smiled to them.

“Corporal Jones, Private Lewis, you have been assigned to me as my personal bodyguards for this operation. Lieutenant Smith here says that you are two of his best men.”

The guardsmen puffed their chests with pride at those words. Besides, many of the men of the regiment would have fought to get to be close to such an attractive woman.

“We will do our best, Colonel.” Shouted Jones.

“I'm sure you will, Corporal. I will ask only two things from both of you: follow me everywhere and don't let the Germans capture me alive. If you see that I am about to be taken and that I ask you to, then you will have to kill me.”

“Maam?” Said Jones, shocked.

“You heard me, Corporal. If the Germans will capture me, they will torture me slowly to death, whether I answer their questions or not. If I ask you to, kill me without hesitation.”

“Er, yes Maam!”

“Good! From now on, stay with me and cover my flanks.”

At precisely eleven O'clock, all the soldiers were told to get on board their respective hovercraft. The hovercrafts started their engines soon afterwards and lined up one behind the other to go down the boat ramp. At 23:20 hours, 57 LCMACs formed up on the waters of the Thames Estuary, escorted by eleven surface effect ships, and headed East. The other forces of Operation BACKSTABBER, dispersed between four other bases, followed according to a precise schedule. All around Great Britain,

hundreds of bombers and fighter-bombers were getting ready to support the 214 LCMACs, 31 surface effect ships and seven regiments of guardsmen now on their way.

05:12 (GMT)

Wednesday, May 14, 1941

North Sea

“WAKE UP, RISE AND SHINE!”

The yells of the Welsh Guards sergeant got the sleepy soldiers out of the stretchers hooked up alongside the bulkheads of the hovercraft's vehicle deck. Storing the stretchers away, the guardsmen then lined up at the service counter of the tiny galley for a cup of hot coffee and a bowl of porridge. They were not a little surprised to find themselves served by none other than Colonel Laplante.

“Call it a little comfort before battle, guys.” She said while pouring hot coffee and serving porridge. Lewis and Jones got their portions, then sat in some of the jump seats lining the bulkheads. A Polish major soon sat next to them, followed by a Dutch captain. The guardsmen knew that both officers were acting as liaison officers and were here because of their language skills. Every one of them ate in silence, their mission on their minds and feeling stress build up progressively as they got nearer to the coast of Germany. Ten minutes after finishing their breakfasts, the noise of multiple explosions made the guardsmen jump nervously. Laplante's voice came on immediately on the deck's loudspeaker.

“Do not worry: these are our flotilla's guns firing on Hamburg's port installations and defenses. You will also soon hear our bombers doing some work ahead of us. Get to your vehicles and be ready for combat.”

“Hamburg!” Said Lewis to Jones. “I never thought that we would find ourselves in the heart of Germany so soon in this war.”

Climbing inside their IFV, they sat besides Major Konrad Terleki and Captain Pieter Lunds and watched Laplante as she came in through the commander's hatch. The Canadian smiled at them and gave a thumbs up signal.

“So far so good, gentlemen: the other forces are now at their respective objectives and have achieved complete surprise. Everything is going according to plan. We should be at our own objective in about half an hour.”

“Do you know how many of my compatriots we could find there, Colonel?” Asked Terleki. Laplante’s face became grave as she answered.

“A few hundreds, maybe two or three thousands, Major. Some of them will be women and most of them will be in very poor physical shape. I will need you to get them moving towards the hovercrafts without delay once the guards are taken care of. We won’t have the time to celebrate over there, as various German units may react to us quickly and we are deep inside enemy territory.”

Terleki nodded in comprehension.

“I realize that, Colonel. Thanks for including Neuengamme in your operation.”

“That’s nothing, Major. There are so many other places I would have loved to raid, starting with Ravensbruck. The thoughts of what is happening there every day is like a nightmare to me.”

“What is this Ravensbruck, Colonel?” Asked the Dutch captain. Jones and Lewis listened discreetly as Laplante answered with a haunted look on her face.

“Women’s hell on earth, Captain. It is a concentration camp reserved exclusively for female prisoners. Political dissidents, resistance members, Jews, ethnic minorities and others deemed enemies of the Nazis are sent there. Starvation diets, overwork, beatings, tortures and executions will kill close to 100,000 of the inmates who will go through Ravensbruck during this war. There is one point you and Major Terleki must know: the Germans use inmates to help discipline the other prisoners in their concentration camps. They generally use common criminals or others ready to do anything to get a better treatment and then put them in charge of a barrack. These blockowas and stupowas, as they are commonly nicknamed, are to be treated like the Germans and segregated from the other camp inmates.”

“It will be done, Colonel.” Said Lunds firmly. “Anyone who collaborates with the Nazis will eventually pay the price for it.”

“Alright then! Let’s review the operation one last time.”

Twenty minutes later, the cargo deck loudspeaker came alive, making everybody look up.

“OBJECTIVE IN SIGHT! LANDING IN ONE MINUTE!”

Nancy stuck her torso out of her hatch and connected her helmet’s integrated headset to the IFV’s radio set, then activated her microphone.

“All call signs Six, this is Six Niner! Bingo in one minute! Acknowledge, over!”

Her four subordinate commanders answered in turn. Nancy confirmed reception, then shouted to the crew of the tank behind her IFV.

“LOAD H.E.-FRAG! THE GUARD TOWERS ARE YOUR FIRST OBJECTIVES, THEN THE GUARDS BARRACKS! GOOD LUCK!”

06:04 (Berlin time)

Neuengamme concentration camp

25 km Southeast of Hamburg

The German SS Totenkopf soldier manning the Northwest guard tower of the Neuengamme concentration camp was the first to spot the incoming British hovercrafts. He at first looked upwards on hearing their engines, thinking with dread that another bomber raid would soon follow the one that had just pounded to bits a nearby refinery. Seeing nothing in the sky and looking to the Northwest, where the noise was coming from, he saw a long line of the strangest machines he had ever seen, approaching fast on the nearby Elbe River. Grabbing his binoculars, the German examined for a few seconds the incoming craft, swearing out loud on seeing the British flag flying from the mast of the first hovercraft. Grabbing his field telephone, he frantically cranked it and shouted in it as soon as his Scharfuhrer¹⁶ answered.

“The British are coming! I see about two dozens fast boats approaching on the Elbe, coming from Hamburg.”

“Sure, Finkel!” Replied the clearly skeptical NCO. “I suppose that the port defenses in Hamburg let them pass after making them pay a toll fee? Don’t you have better things to do than to disturb me with such nonsense?”

“But... these boats are flying the British flag.”

“Listen, Finkel! You keep on like this and I ...”

The shrieking noise of a shell flying by was followed by an explosion, which blew a large hole in the top floor of the guards barrack block. Dozens more shells followed in quick order as the British craft opened fire on the camp, concentrating their aim on the part occupied by the guard force. Shaking from fear, Finkel saw with amazement the British craft leave the water, seemingly jumping over the low bank of the Elbe and continuing to race towards the camp at speeds of at least sixty kilometers per hour. Grabbing his

¹⁶ Scharfuhrer: SS sergeant

machinegun, Finkel was transferring it to the Northwest side of his guard tower when a hail of 20mm cannon fire from the leading craft cut him down.

Nancy patted the shoulder of her IFV driver as soon as the bow ramp went down.

“Go for the camp’s main gate!”

The driver gunned his engine and raced down the bow ramp, closely followed by the tank assigned to support their IFV. Nancy shouted more orders in the radio as they rushed towards the barbed wire gate of the concentration camp.

“This is Six niner! Call signs Six One and Six Two will clear the guards’ barracks now. Call signs Six Three and Six Four will follow me inside the prisoners compound. Out!”

Fourteen tanks and fourteen IFVs formed up in assault line as soon as they left their hovercraft, rushing towards the brick buildings used by the German guards and the camp administration. The 23 trucks carrying the French naval infantry and the six empty trucks meant to help evacuate the sick and wounded followed Nancy’s eight armored vehicles as best they could on the marshy terrain between the Elbe River and the camp. The 4-inch guns and 20mm cannons of the 24 hovercrafts kept a steady fire in the meantime, raking the guards barracks from end to end. Nancy’s IFV didn’t slow down as it crashed through the camp’s main gate and crossed the large empty surface used for prisoners callouts. The tank following her stopped in the middle of the parade grounds and fired two 3.75-inch shells in quick succession, blowing up the two guard towers still intact, from which some machinegun fire was coming. The French infantry dismounted right in front of the wooden barracks housing the prisoners and immediately entered them, looking for any German guards. Nancy, followed by her bodyguards, Major Terleki and Captain Lunds, was actually the first to enter a prisoners barrack block. What they saw inside appalled them. Over 600 men, skinny and wearing rags, filled the stinking barrack.

“STAY DOWN! WAIT FOR THE ORDER TO MOVE OUT!” Shouted Nancy in French, with Terleki and Lunds repeating her instructions in Polish and Dutch respectively. Running down the rows of triple bunk beds, Nancy went to the other end of the block, searching for Germans. Finding none, she ran out of the block and into the next one, which was set somewhat apart from the others. That one turned out to be full of women, all of them already lying down on the floor. Her suspicions raised, Nancy

scanned the block quickly, just in time to see a fleeting silhouette in gray uniform disappear in a doorway at the other end.

“Major, stay here with Captain Lunds! Jones, Lewis, with me!”

She had a hard time running down the length of the barrack, so packed was the floor with fearful prisoners. One of the inmates stretched out one arm, pleading as Nancy ran by her.

“I’m British! Please take me out of here.”

Nancy braked, hesitant, then pointed the woman to Lewis.

“Private, stay with her and get some info on her. Me and Jones will chase that German down.”

Jones at her back, Nancy stopped besides the doorway where the German had disappeared and gave a quick look inside. A pistol shot greeted her, with the bullet whistling by her head. Lowering her armored faceplate first, Nancy then jumped inside what was the latrine and washing area of the barrack block, her rifle at the ready. A lone German tried to line up his pistol on her but she beat him to it. A short burst cut down the SS guard, who fell over the line of latrine seats, dead. That made Nancy smile.

“A fine place to die for that piece of shit.”

Her remark made Jones laugh.

“Colonel, you talk like a real guardsman.”

“No point in being polite in combat, Corporal. Let me just do a quick check by radio.”

She activated her backpack radio, using her helmet microphone.

“All call signs Six, this is Six Niner: give me a short situation report, over!”

“Six One, the guards barracks are about leveled now. Resistance is down to a few isolated Germans. No losses to my unit yet, over.”

“Six Two, we just took what seems to have been the camp’s punishment block and have freed twelve inmates in very bad shape, apart of capturing four Germans. I have one man seriously wounded, over.”

“Six Three, all the inmate barracks have been secured. Request permission to start loading the inmates in the hovercrafts, over.”

“Six Three, from Six Niner, you may proceed now. Have Six Four help you with that, out.”

Nancy then returned to the main room and knelt besides the British woman that Lewis was protecting. A dozen French soldiers had also entered the block and were being cheered by the inmates.

“How do you feel, miss?”

“Weak but happy, Colonel. My name is Janet Harlow and I worked for the Special Operations Executive as a clandestine radio operator. I was captured in France six months ago. I...”

“Take your time, Janet.” Said softly Nancy, seeing that the young woman was having a hard time recounting her past nightmares. Choking back her tears, the British went on.

“The Gestapo tortured me, then sent me here with the promise that I would die here, slowly. You can’t imagine how wonderful it was to see you and the other soldiers.” Harlow then broke down and started crying. Nancy gently hugged her, herself close to tears: to free such a camp had been a longtime dream for her. This alone made her exile in the past worthwhile. She then helped Harlow to her feet and shouted in French at the soldiers present.

“Help these women towards the hovercrafts. Be careful: they are very weak.”

“What will you do with the German guards, Colonel?” Asked Harlow as Nancy supported her while walking out of the barrack block. That made Nancy hesitate: the laws of war would dictate that the guards were entitled to a trial, even though they were all probably guilty of atrocities against the inmates. Seeing the emaciated state of the women around her was however tempting Nancy into having the guards shot on the spot. One of the four military press correspondents accompanying her force then approached and started taking pictures of the ex-inmates and of their liberators. He took five pictures of Nancy and Janet before running towards another group of women. Only then did Nancy answer Janet in a low voice.

“I know that they deserve much less, Janet, but I intend to bring them to Great Britain, where they will be tried for war crimes. I promise you that you will have a chance to testify against them, like all the other ex-prisoners here.”

Janet didn’t reply to that, too weak to do much more than simply walk towards the row of hovercrafts, which had closed in on the camp and were now parked less than a hundred yards from the main gate. Janet looked with awe at the big machines.

“What are those things, Colonel?”

"They are called hovercrafts, Janet. Over 200 of them are involved today in coordinated raids against a total of six targets inside Germany."

"Payback, at last!"

As they were passing by a long line of female ex-inmates, they saw a French soldier suddenly start running towards a small brunette.

"Claudette! Mon dieu, Claudette!"

"Maxime?" Said the teenager, disbelief in her voice. She then ran to meet the soldier, hugging him tearfully. Putting Private Lewis in charge of escorting Janet Harlow to the nearest hovercraft, Nancy approached the French couple and waited for them to part before smiling and speaking to them in French.

"You two know each other?"

The soldier answered her, choking off tears while holding the girl's hands.

"Claudette is my sister, Colonel. This must be the nicest day of my life. I can't thank God enough for this."

Nancy had to turn away as tears came to her own eyes. A radio call then echoed in her headset.

"Six Niner, this is Six Two. We have found about a dozen small children that were held near the camp's infirmary. Some of them seem to be pretty sick. I will need a medical team from callsign six four, over."

Something she had seen on the Internet in the year 2006 then flashed back in Nancy's mind.

"Six Two, be careful when handling those children. I believe that the camp doctor injected them with tuberculosis as part of some sick medical experiments. Cover your mouth and nose and keep them away from the other inmates, over."

There was a marked pause on the radio.

"Six Two understood! We have taken the camp doctor and his two nurses as well. What should I do with them?"

It was obvious from the tone of Major Brannigan that he would have liked to simply shoot the said doctor on the spot. Nancy was furiously tempted to tell him to do just that. She however knew that such an order would be an illegal one.

"Six Two, just throw them in an hovercraft and keep them under tight guard. They will be judged in England. Six Niner, out to you. Six Four, send a medical team to the location of Six Two, over."

"Six Four, I copy, out!"

“Six Niner, this is Six Zulu, urgent message, over!”

Nancy frowned: Six Zulu was the call sign of the lead hovercraft of her flotilla. It was probably relaying a message from one of the other forces or even from Great Britain.

“Six Niner listening, over.”

“Six Zulu, from Five Niner: call sign Five is under heavy attack from what looks like a Waffen SS regiment and is in danger of being overrun. They need reinforcements urgently, over.”

“Six Zulu, tell Five Niner that I’m on my way and will be in his location in half an hour, out. Six One and Six Two, did you copy the last transmission, over?”

“Six One, affirmative.”

“Six Two, affirmative.”

“Six One, send your callsign Six One Delta to my location near the main gate. Six Two, join me as well with your whole sub-unit as soon as Six Three will relieve you. Six Three, send immediately your callsign Alpha to relieve Six Two. I will also need Six Three Niner at my location now for a snap orders group. All call signs, acknowledge, over!”

Every one of her sub-units answered back promptly. As she waited for the designated elements to join her, she signaled her IFV and its support tank to get near her. They arrived besides her at the same time as Commandant Charles Grondin’s jeep. The tall French naval infantry officer jumped out of his jeep and ran to her, then saluted.

“Trouble in Hamburg, Colonel?”

“It seems so, Commandant. I will leave you with most of our tanks in support, so that you can finish the job here. I want all the ex-inmates and our men and vehicles loaded up and gone out of here in less than an hour. I will leave by road with one tank troop and our mechanized company to go help Force Five. We will meet back in Hamburg. Do you have any questions?”

“None, Colonel! I will wrap up things here as quickly as possible.”

“Good! You are in charge of this location as soon as I’m gone, Commandant.”

Nancy then climbed on her IFV and took place in the commander’s hatch. Four tanks and seventeen IFVs soon joined her two armored vehicles. She then gave the signal to move and sped away with her mechanized force. After a last look at her, Grondin returned to his jeep and jumped in.

“She certainly knows her job... for a woman.” He said to his driver before having him head towards the men of his first company.

06:53 (Berlin time)

South suburbs of Hamburg, Germany

Nancy's mechanized column had to cut somewhat its breakneck speed as it left the main highway and started to follow the city's streets towards the Blohm & Voss submarine construction yards, the objective of Force Five. By now, Colonel Winters, commander of Force Five, had given her by radio a detailed report of his situation: he was pinned down along the docks and the submarine launching bays of the yard by a large German infantry force positioned within the unfinished submarine hulls and construction equipment. The cluttered grounds of the yard were preventing Winters from fully using his own tanks. However, his tanks had in turn been the only thing stopping the overwhelming German force from swamping him. What Winters needed and had requested from Nancy was to have an infantry force enter the yards and take the Germans by surprise from the rear. Nancy knew that she was going to be heavily outnumbered during a close quarter fight but had no choice. If she didn't succeed in stopping the Germans, Force Five could be wiped out entirely, something that could also prevent her own force from going back down the Elbe River through Hamburg on its way to the open sea and Great Britain. She gloomily thought that she was probably going to suffer heavy casualties in the next hours, something she dreaded.

Having made her mind on an attack plan, Nancy activated her radio microphone.

"Six Two, this is Six Niner. Six Two Alpha, along with Six One Delta, will go up on Alter Wall Strasse, then left along Jungfernstieg and Feld-Strasse, in order to approach the submarine yards from the Northeast. The enemy must have left their transport vehicles in that area. Six Two Alpha will destroy them and prevent any enemy retreat in that direction. The rest of us will go down Ost-West-Strasse and Reeperbahn before dismounting and entering the yards on foot. Acknowledge, over!"

Major Brannigan answered her quickly, then relayed her orders to his first platoon and the tank troop accompanying them. As they arrived at the junction with Alter Wall Strasse, Nancy had her IFV slow down and stop long enough for her to point her tanks and the four IFVs of six two alpha in the right direction. That prompted a remark on the intercom from her driver.

"You seem to know Hamburg well, Colonel."

"I visited it a few times... after the war. Forward, driver!"

The driver scratched his head, somewhat confused, before pushing again on his accelerator pedal.

The noise of a heated battle was evident in the distance as they rolled down the nearly deserted streets. The rare civilian cars and trucks they met either assumed that they were German military vehicles or turned precipitously into side streets. At one street corner, as Nancy's IFV slowed down to negotiate a sharp turn, they passed in front of a young boy ready to sell his bundle of newspapers. Nancy grinned to him and flashed a victory sign with two fingers, leaving the stunned boy to stare at her and the British flag flying from her vehicle's radio antenna. As for the pedestrians and the people out on their balconies, they could only look on in disbelief and helpless rage as the British soldiers sped by while taunting them with mocking greetings. Nancy couldn't help giggle at some of the juicier exchanges between German civilians and her soldiers. Seeing a number of wanted posters with her picture plastered on facades at a street corner, she made a point of taking off her helmet for a few seconds and combing her shoulder-length hair as a dozen civilians waiting at a bus stop looked on.

Just before arriving at the limits of the submarine yards, Nancy turned her column of fourteen IFVs up a side street and rolled for another 300 yards before turning again towards the Blohm & Voss facilities. They soon had to stop: the terrain was now too cluttered with steel structures and wood blocks for any vehicle to advance.

"Get out and follow me in single file!" Yelled Nancy over the noise of the nearby battle between the Germans and Force Five. "Make sure that you have a full ammunition load on you first."

Herself grabbing two extra rifle magazines and two more rifle grenades, Nancy got out of her IFV and assembled her troops. She now had 128 infantrymen with her.

"Alright, listen up! We will now deploy in extended line across the submarine yards, then will turn left to face towards the docks, where the battle is presently taking place. Be quick but keep low: there is a lot of stray bullets flying around right now. Once in position, we will advance towards Force Five and attempt to take the Germans in the rear. We are heavily outnumbered now, so surprise will be an important factor for us. Also, fire on semi-automatic only, as we may run out of ammo quickly. Everybody will now fix bayonets."

Once that was done, she pointed at the company sergeant-major, sitting in the commander's hatch of Major Brannigan's IFV.

"CSM O'Really, you will lead the vehicles towards the docks and link up with Force Five to provide it additional support. We will link back with you there."

Brannigan looked at her questioningly.

"Colonel, we may need the vehicles if we have to withdraw."

"Major, if we pull back, Force Five will be finished. There will be no withdrawal today. Is that clear?"

"Er, perfectly, Colonel."

"Then let's go!"

07:21 (Berlin time)

Blohm & Voss docks

Hamburg

Peter Lasker was starting to regret his decision to volunteer as a war correspondent for this operation. His desk at the Daily Telegraph looked decidedly a lot safer now as he glanced furtively at the German soldiers massing for an assault less than 200 yards away. Only the heavy firepower of the Life Guards' eighteen tanks positioned along the limits of the yards had kept them from advancing further. The Guards commander, Colonel Fred Winters, was only a few yards away, talking in a radio over the din of the ongoing firefight. German mortar bombs were exploding regularly around the British positions and bullets were flying as thick as a swarm of mosquitoes in a swamp. Colonel Winters suddenly yelled at his deputy commander, crouched besides Lasker behind a pile of steel plates.

"Callsign Six Two is deploying now in the enemy's rear. Pass the word to be careful at where we shoot from now on."

As Major Turner was about to run away to the left, Lasker tapped his arm to get his attention.

"Isn't Force Six under the command of Nancy Laplante?"

"She is! I'm sorry, Mister Lasker, but I have to go now."

As Turner went around his men, Peter Lasker frantically loaded a fresh roll of film in each of his two cameras: he may have the chance to photograph the mysterious Nancy Laplante in the thick of combat. As he was finishing that, loud cheers made him turn his

head to the right, in time to see over a dozen British armored troop carriers join the beleaguered Force Five along the docks.

07:38 (Berlin time)

Blohm & Voss submarine yards

Nancy suddenly stopped and crouched behind a large steel pipe, signaling her men to do the same. Less than a hundred yards to her front she could see about thirty German soldiers busy crewing four medium mortars. She looked to the British soldiers on her left, then on her right.

“The first twenty soldiers on each side of me will advance with me and take out those mortars. The rest of the assault line will stay put. Pass the word!”

Once the designated soldiers were ready, she signaled them to go forward, then cautiously approached the Germans, who were too busy firing their mortars to check their backs. Once twenty yards only away from them, Nancy realigned her men so that they were directly behind the Germans. Her heart thumping hard, she took three deep breaths, then raised her assault rifle, aiming at the German mortar team commander.

“FIRE!”

The Germans, totally taken by surprise, were all shot down in a few seconds without being able to fire back. Running to the mortars, Nancy saw with delight that there was still a good quantity of mortar bombs available near the intact weapons.

“Alright, I need eight men who know how to point and fire mortars.”

As the word went around her men, she grabbed the German field radio lying near the dead mortar team commander and examined it. It was still functioning and was in fact on, with a continuous light buzz coming out of the handset.

“Damn, I really feel like screwing around with someone right now.”

Activating her own radio, she then notified Colonel Winters of her success.

07:45 (Berlin time)

Blohm & Voss docks

Peter Lasker sighed with relief when the mortar bombs stopped falling. Quite a few British soldiers had been wounded by shrapnel, although their assault armor had prevented any fatalities yet. Colonel Winters then yelled in triumph.

“SIX TWO HAS TAKEN OUT THE GERMAN MORTARS!”

Cheers went up and down the British lines.

Colonel Hans Zimmermann was not pleased at all at that moment. The British tanks were effectively stopping him from overwhelming the British infantry and he had no effective anti-tank weapons to deal with them. The massive firepower of the British infantrymen had also come as a shock to him and his men: these were no Lee-Enfield bolt-action rifles facing him. In contrast, most of his men were armed with the regulation Mauser 98K 7.92mm bolt-action rifle, a powerful and accurate weapon but one surpassed by whatever the British were using right now. To make it worse, his own mortars had stopped firing for some unknown reason. He was about to call them by radio when a mortar bomb whistled overhead. Instead of falling on the British, though, it exploded just in front of his men, making him swear.

“Got und Himmel! What is Feldwebel Brundig doing?”

Grabbing the radio handset from his nearby signaler, he shouted in the microphone.

“Archer, this is Point Man, adjust your fire! Your last bomb fell less than twenty meters in front of my men.”

A voice deformed by static answered him in German.

“Sorry about that, Point Man. We will adjust our fire now.”

Twenty seconds later, another bomb fell, this time squarely in the middle of the German lines.

“Point Man, this is Archer. How is it this time?”

“Have you gone senile, Archer? This one squarely fell on our heads.”

“I am really, really sorry to hear that, Point Man. This is Die Wolfen. Have a good day.”

A dense salvo of mortar bombs followed that as Zimmermann was still swearing. Dozens of Germans fell, dead or wounded.

“THAT DAMN WOLFEN HAS TAKEN OUR MORTARS! OBERST STEINER, COME HERE!”

Zimmermann quickly gave orders to his deputy commander, leaving him his machineguns and one quarter of the regiment to hold in place the British line along the docks. He then

took the remaining 1,350 men and led them back with the firm intention of wiping out that new nuisance quickly before finishing the main enemy force. He was looking forward in particular to make that damn Wolfen choke on her insolence.

07:49 (Berlin time)

Blohm & Voss yards

Nancy swore when she saw a thick wave of Waffen-SS soldiers appear to her front, advancing towards her unit through the maze of unfinished submarine hulls and building equipment. Her bait had attracted quite a bit more than she was ready to swallow.

“MORTARS, CEASE FIRE! EVERYBODY, GET READY TO REPEL ASSAULT! LOAD RIFLE GRENADES!”

As her soldiers scrambled for cover, she activated her backpack radio and called Colonel Winters.

“Five Niner, this is Six Niner! We have what looks like the whole of the Waffen-SS Corps coming at us. We will need some serious backup, over!”

“Five Niner understood, hold tight, out!”

A bullet splattered against her armored breastplate, with many more whistling by her head, forcing her to lower herself even more.

“GUARDS, RIFLE GRENADES, RANGE 150 YARDS, AT ENEMY TO OUR FRONT, FIRE!”

She fired her own rifle grenade shortly after those of her men. The salvo landed in the midst of the Germans as they were running from cover to cover. Hundreds of them fell, either dead or wounded.

“GUARDS, RELOAD RIFLE GRENADES!... READY! FIRE!”

The second salvo caused more casualties still and forced the Germans into taking cover wherever they could. Unknown to Nancy, Colonel Zimmermann and most of his officers were now dead or seriously wounded. There was however still close to a thousand German soldiers fit to fight and they poured intense and accurate rifle fire at the British. Soldiers started to fall around Nancy, shot either in the face or in the legs or arms. Her losses would have been catastrophic if not for the assault armor they were wearing. Using their superior numbers and weight of fire, the Germans, showing their skills as infantrymen, started creeping forward. The Royal Guardsmen, no less professional than

the Waffen-SS, poured slow but steady fire into them, shooting down SS men by the dozen. Despite very heavy losses, the Germans kept advancing, showing a fanatical courage that was boosted by the fact that they were actually fighting to defend German soil.

Nancy was firing at a group of Germans now less than fifty yards away when the firing pin of her rifle struck an empty chamber. Extracting the now empty rifle magazine, she then realized with horror that she was out of ammunition. Looking left and right, she saw that many of her men were in the same situation. Sensing the noticeable slowing down in the British fire, the Germans became bolder and took more time to fire accurately. British casualties then increased dramatically. Nancy herself got a bullet on her faceplate, very close from the eye slit. Shaken by the impact, Nancy nearly panicked then, not knowing at first what to do to save her men. She then bitterly realized that there was only one course of action left to her if she didn't want to see her men shot down one by one while helpless.

“GUARDS, LOWER YOUR FACEPLATES! FOR THE KING, CHARGE!”

Leaving the cover of the steel pipe behind which she was crouching, Nancy rushed the Germans with her rifle extended, bayonet fixed, screaming as she ran. Her remaining 76 guardsmen charged on both sides of her. The Germans were not expecting that desperate act from the British and were caught with their own bayonets still in their scabbards. They had time to fire only once before the British were on top of them. Nancy's bayonet impaled the first German in front of her as he was frantically reloading his rifle. Kicking him out of the way, she barely had time to slap away a German bayonet with her rifle, then stuck her blade through the throat of her attacker. The next minute or so passed in a blur, with ferocious close quarter fighting all around her. As Nancy was stabbing her fifth German in the stomach, another one took the opportunity to plunge his bayonet deep in her upper left leg, with the point of the blade going all the way through and sticking out by a good two inches. Screaming with pain, Nancy collapsed on her right knee. Drawing out in a flash her Glock 17 pistol, she erased the German's triumphant smile with a 9mm bullet in the forehead. Ignoring the searing pain from her left leg, Nancy shot quickly the Germans closest to her, then started shooting Germans more indiscriminately. Bullets were splattering on her armor continuously by the time she put a fresh magazine in her pistol. One bullet went through her upper left arm as she was emptying her pistol again, making her scream but not stopping her from

firing. German bodies were now piled all around her, with the Waffen-SS starting to keep their distance from her. Her pistol's slide suddenly locked in the open position, signaling an empty magazine. However, with her wounded left arm, Nancy could not get to her spare magazines in her lower left vest pocket. A German screamed triumphantly.

“THE BITCH IS OUT OF AMMUNITION! TAKE HER NOW!”

Nancy's blood froze in terror as half a dozen Waffen-SS rushed her to grab her: her worst nightmare, being captured alive by the Germans, was becoming reality. A big British guardsman then jumped in front of Nancy with a savage scream, interposing himself between her and the German and firing his ultimate bullets before lunging with his bayonet. Using that providential help, Nancy transferred her pistol in her left hand, then used her right hand to take out a fresh pistol magazine. Cringing with pain as she forced her wounded left arm to stay stiff, she inserted the full magazine in her GLOCK 17 and pulled the slide, chambering a round. Transferring back her pistol to her right hand, she resumed fire as the guardsman who had been protecting her fell, dead. Nancy fired another ten rounds in quick succession, making the Germans around her recoil somewhat. Heavy automatic fire and savage screams suddenly took the Germans by surprise: concentrated on their close quarter fight with Nancy's unit, they had not noticed the approach of Colonel Winters' men, who had finally managed to walk over the German holding force with the help of their tanks and IFVs. Already seriously weakened by the ferocious fight with Nancy and her guardsmen, the Waffen-SS suddenly panicked at being attacked again from their rear and fled, pursued mercilessly by the Welsh Guards. The luckless Germans who escaped the guardsmen then fell in the gun sights of Nancy's four tanks and four IFVs, who had just completed the destruction of the fleet of trucks used to bring in the Germans. Many Waffen-SS, utterly demoralized by now, threw down their weapons and surrendered.

Nearly overtaken by pain and still up on one knee, Nancy flipped up her armored faceplate and avidly gulped some fresh air. Looking slowly around her, she saw only piles of dead and wounded, both Germans and British, plus a few stunned British survivors from her unit. The battle had moved away from them by now. She called out in a coarse voice, weak from blood loss.

“Corporal Jones, Private Lewis, are you alright?”

Her call attracted a young private who looked exhausted but otherwise intact.

“Corporal Jones is lying in front of you, Colonel. I think that Private Lewis is also dead. Let me help you.”

“Dead? God, I’m sorry! Private, please help me take off my helmet: I can’t use my left arm.”

The soldier was doing that when two guardsmen and an unarmed British with two cameras slung around his neck showed up.

“Please help me, mates. The Colonel is seriously wounded.”

The two guardsmen obliged and helped lay down Nancy in a more comfortable position, then started applying field dressings to her wounds, careful not to pull out of her left leg the protruding German bayonet, which had a serrated upper edge. The cameraman took numerous pictures of her and of the surrounding battlefield as they treated her. Looking up at a surviving sergeant from her unit that had just joined the group around her, Nancy spoke slowly, near fainting.

“How many of us are left standing, Sergeant?”

The NCO scanned the battlefield and gave her a pained look.

“I see maybe twenty of our people still up, including us, Colonel, but we made the Germans pay very dearly for that. You can be proud of yourself, maam!”

Tears rolled on Nancy’s cheeks at those words.

“Proud? With twenty left out of 129. How can I be proud of myself?”

She then started sobbing quietly. The guardsmen respected her grief and left her alone for a while, chasing away the photographer who was still hanging around. A number of stretcher-bearer teams soon showed up, with a team stopping besides Nancy. She asked them to find her pistol and rifle, plus her discarded empty pistol magazines, before letting them load her on the stretcher. A 400 yards walk brought them to the docks, where hovercrafts were waiting for the troops to reembark. The hovercraft she was brought on turned out to be one from her force, loaded to near capacity with french soldiers and ex-inmates from Neuengamme. Janet Harlow was also on board and came to see her as a medic was injecting some morphine into Nancy and preparing a plasma transfusion. The S.O.E. agent gently pressed Nancy’s hand while smiling to her.

“Colonel Laplante, a lot of people owe you much today. What you did will not be forgotten, I assure you.”

“I simply did my duty.” Replied Nancy weakly. Janet shook her head.

“You did a lot more than your duty, Colonel. You did the impossible! Take it easy for the rest of the trip, Colonel.”

“Do I have a choice now?” Managed to say Nancy before the combined effects of the morphine and of her wounds knocked her out.

CHAPTER 29 – NEW INMATES

19:08 (GMT)

Wednesday, May 14, 1941

Tower of London

England

Unterfuhrerin Anna Hauser called her six subordinates to attention, then did an about-face and waited nervously. They had been told only an hour ago that more German auxiliaries had been captured and were to be interned with them in the Tower of London. Hauser had been ordered by the head female guard to vacate her room and to move in with Bertha Reinholdt, while the other auxiliaries had to double up as well, except for Ingrid Weiss. The teenager's room was in fact too small to accommodate a second bed. They then had put on their Luftwaffe uniforms in order to receive properly the newcomers. While this had to mean that the British had conducted a successful raid on German-controlled territory, the prospect of new faces and more comrades was exciting to the seven women, who kept looking towards Bloody Tower.

Brigadier General Browning soon appeared through the gate of Bloody Tower, leading a group of fifteen German female auxiliaries escorted by six female British soldiers. Bertha Reinholdt immediately noticed something peculiar about the newcomers.

“Hey, I see some Kriegsmarine auxiliaries in this lot.”

“My god, you're right, Bertha.” Said Ruth Brandhauer. “There are a lot of prisoners also: this British raid must have been a big one. I wonder where they struck this time.”

“We will know soon enough, girls.” Interrupted Hauser. “Now, keep quiet and hold still.”

The new inmates, led by a tall, blond Luftwaffe gruppenfuhrerin ¹⁷, came to a halt in front of Hauser's group, itself standing in front of Gaoler's House. Hauser waited for the gruppenfuhrerin to line up her charges before goose-stepping towards her and stopping

¹⁷ Gruppenfuhrerin: auxiliary rank equivalent to captain

two steps in front of her, then saluting. She used a standard military salute, while the newcomer replied with the Nazi salute.

“Unterfuhrerin Anna Hauser, reporting with six subordinates from Wissant, Gruppenfuhrerin!”

The gruppenfuhrerin, a blue-eyed blond beauty in her mid-twenties, looked at Anna and her group, then at Gaoler’s House. She was obviously still under the shock of having been captured. She then spoke hesitantly, with apprehension.

“I... I’m Gruppenfuhrerin Lisa Hartmann. I was captured in Stade, along with nine of my auxiliaries.”

“STADE? The British came that close to Hamburg?”

A wave of surprise went through Anna’s group when they heard that. Hartmann nodded her head, looking both tired and dejected.

“They actually went all the way to Hamburg. As far as I know, they also attacked our naval base at Wilhelmshaven and the area of Bremen this morning. I’m afraid that they did an awful lot of damage in the process.”

That left Hauser speechless. Brigadier General Browning used the opportunity to approach and talk to them.

“Gruppenfuhrerin, I realize that these are unsettling times for you and your group. Why don’t you let Unterfuhrerin Hauser show you your rooms and explain the routine around here? You will find personal hygiene kits and spare clothes in your rooms. Curfew is at midnight and you are allowed free access to the inner yard of the fortress, except for the Wellington Barracks, where you have to be escorted in. If you wish to pray later on, you can go to our protestant chapel of St-Peter ad Vincula. I will expect all of you to be ready at eight O’clock tomorrow morning for the call-up. Have a good evening, Ladies.”

Hartmann and Hauser saluted him before he walked away. Hartmann sighed in relief.

“He is so... gentlemanly. And his German is really good.”

“General Browning is a kind man, Gruppenfuhrerin. Between him and Colonel Laplante, we have been nearly spoiled since we arrived here in January.”

Hartmann gave a sharp, suspicious look at Hauser.

“Die Wolfin? What does she have to do with your group?”

“Everything, Gruppenfuhrerin! She captured us in Wissant, then arranged for us to be kept here and has been visiting us regularly since then, providing entertainment and comfort to us.”

“What kind of entertainment?” Asked Hartmann, her suspicions renewed.

“Films, music, sports activities, dance nights. Why don’t I show you to your rooms now, Gruppenfuhrerin? We have a lot to talk about and you must be tired.”

“That, I am.” Recognized Hartmann. “Show us in, Unterfuhrerin.”

Leading the fifteen newcomers inside Gaoler’s House, Anna Hauser guided them to her ex-room, now assigned to Lisa Hartmann as the highest-ranking prisoner in the Tower. Lisa looked at the polished wood furniture and the large canopy bed with enchanted disbelief. She went around the bedroom, then noticed a pile of items on the bed. Going through it, she found towels, soap, shampoo, female tampons, a complete hygiene kit, a small makeup kit, a bathrobe and a pair of slippers.

“Gruppenfuhrerin, I have as well spare clothes for all of you, in various sizes. After I show you all to your rooms, you will be able to choose the sizes that fits you.” Hartmann pointed at the articles on her bed.

“Only a woman could think about some of these items. Did you ask the British for all this, Unterfuhrerin?”

Hauser smiled and shook her head.

“Colonel Laplante did! When we arrived here from Wissant we were like you, with not even spare underwear with us. Laplante actually led us on a shopping trip in London, paying everything from her own pocket. She is our contact for morale and entertainment. In fact, you will probably see her here this coming Sunday, at the weekly film show.”

“I don’t think so, Unterfuhrerin Hauser. During our trip to here, I heard a number of British talk about her being seriously wounded in Hamburg this morning.”

Lisa saw alarm immediately appear on the faces of Hauser and of her subordinates.

“You do seem to like her a lot, you and your comrades, do you?”

“Yes, Gruppenfuhrerin, for many reasons. She has always been kind, generous and fair with us and I’m sure that she will treat you all the same way. Also, don’t forget that she comes from the future: she has no hatred of Germans or of Germany, unlike the present day British. In fact, she told us that she worked alongside a German army unit in her time. Now, if you don’t mind, I will show to your girls their respective rooms.”

Totally befuddled by all this, Hartmann meekly followed the rest of the group out of her bedroom.

After showing the newcomers their respective rooms, Hauser distributed spare underwear, clothing and running shoes to them from the inventory kept inside Gaoler's House. There was even a choice of colors according to the arm of service, with blue clothes for the Luftwaffe, gray ones for the Wehrmacht and black ones for the Kriegsmarine. There were ecstatic cheers when Hauser also distributed envelopes and writing supplies and explained the mail arrangements with the American embassy. Lisa Hartmann suddenly felt a lot better.

"They really treat you well here. All this is incredible, especially this mail system."

"Wait till you see the American major who takes care of our mail: he's gorgeous!" Exclaimed Bertha Reinholdt. That made a lot of the newcomers smile in interest. Anna Hauser felt obliged to cool their expectations quickly.

"Major Crawford is effectively a hell of a nice hunk. He also happens to be Laplante's husband. Keep your hands off him if you don't want an explanation with her."

"She is married to an American officer?" Asked the Oberhelferin Susanna Berghof, a tall blonde auxiliary of the Kriegsmarine who could have easily become a model. Ingrid Weiss took on her to answer Berghof.

"They were even married in the White House in Washington, with President Roosevelt officiating. I have to say that I was at first jealous of her when I saw Major Crawford for the first time."

"And...what was she doing in Washington?" Insisted Susanna, whose perspicacity didn't escape Ingrid's attention.

"She was accompanying the British minister of foreign affairs, Anthony Eden, for an official visit. Both the Soviets and the Japanese tried to kill her in Washington, but she was the one that killed her would-be assassins."

"Damn! She is decidedly a very special woman."

"Of course she is!" Replied Ingrid while grinning. "She is from the future, after all."

"Okay, we will talk further about this after a good shower and a change of clothes." Announced Hartmann. "Once washed, we will all go down to the main hall and discuss our situation."

As Anna Hauser was watching the newcomers go up the stairs, she noted that Ingrid was stepping back to keep her distances with a young auxiliary from the SS Corps. The latter noticed Ingrid's frigid attitude towards her and threw her a suspicious look as she

climbed the stairs, while Ingrid stared back at her. Anna waited for the others to be gone before leading Ingrid to a discreet corner of the hall, speaking to her in a low voice.

“Do you know that girl, Ingrid?”

“No, and I don’t want to know her, Anna.”

“Why?”

“Because she is a SS. I can’t stand those fanatics.”

Anna stared at Ingrid in silence for a moment. Ingrid had changed a lot in captivity, especially during the last three months. Apart of practicing sports and fitness with energy under the tutelage of Nancy Laplante, she had started to study many things in order to improve her education, again under the guidance of Laplante. What had however struck Anna the most was the way Ingrid had gained in maturity at an incredible rate in the last few weeks. She had lost a lot of her youthful exuberance, while her innocence had melted like snow under the Sun. Despite the fact that Ingrid was the youngest of their group, she now often spoke with the wisdom of an old matriarch that had seen everything.

“Ingrid, I won’t ask you more about this, but I will ask you not to prejudge that girl. We must stay together as a group and avoid internal conflicts.”

“Okay, I understand, Anna. I will do my best to be polite with her.”

“Do more than that, Ingrid. Be as friendly with her as with the others.”

Ingrid’s face hardened at those words, clearly not convinced.

“Anna, you have no idea what this girl and other SS auxiliaries could have done in this war. I will reserve my judgment on her but don’t ask me more.”

Ingrid then walked away without asking her permission. Anna didn’t say a word about that, not knowing anymore how to handle her young subaltern.

They all joined back an hour later and sat around the long table in the main hall. Anna Hauser was the first to speak once the group was complete.

“Gruppenfuhrerin, why not tell us all in turn where you are from and what happened to you? That way, we could get a good idea of what happened in Germany this morning. We were not told anything about it by the British.”

Hartmann looked at the concerned faces of Hauser’s group and nodded: some of them probably had families in the areas that had been attacked this morning.

“Well, I myself can only talk about what happened in Stade. Basically, me and nine of my girls were working the night shift at the Luftgau headquarters when the British

attacked and seized the base around six O'clock. There were hundreds of them, with huge tanks and armored troop carriers. They came on board at least thirty of those new skimmer crafts of theirs and destroyed everything before pulling back with us and many of our men as prisoners. The most damning part about it was when that old British RAF officer walked in, speaking perfect German, and answered the telephones in our place. Somebody in Hamburg called for help while he was there and the bastard sidetracked the call. As a result, not one of our aircraft got off to defend either Stade or Hamburg." Hauser and her subordinates exchanged knowing glances.

"Gruppenfuhrerin, if this can make you feel better, that was the exact same tactic used against us in Wissant." Declared Hauser. "The operation against Stade looks like it has Nancy Laplante's name written all over it. From what we heard around here, she doesn't only participate in those raids against us: she also plans them."

"How could a woman do all of this?"

Ingrid Weiss cut in to answer Hartmann's question.

"Gruppenfuhrerin, I may be the youngest here, but I believe that I know Nancy Laplante the best. The thing that she keeps drilling in me all the time is that women can do about everything as well or better than men, apart of brute force, as long as they put it in their heads to do it. She told the British how to build all their new weapons and equipment, like the hovercrafts that so impressed you. She told me that she doesn't think much of many British generals, calling them incompetents as far as combined arms operations are concerned. Don't forget that she knows about everything about the future of war for the next 71 years. Judging Nancy according to common standards about women would be a very big mistake indeed."

"Mein Gott! That woman could cause the destruction of Germany."

"Wrong, Gruppenfuhrerin! Yes, she could cause our defeat, but I firmly believe that she does not wish the destruction of Germany. In her future, Germany is a good ally of Great Britain. That is why she insists that German prisoners of war be treated correctly and that German civilians be spared as much as possible."

"Why do you mention German civilians, Helferin?" Asked Hartmann, intrigued.

"Can I ask you if the British did bombard German cities in the last months, Gruppenfuhrerin?"

"Er, they did not, in fact. They concentrated their bombings against weapons factories and military bases, striking from low altitude in daylight. That switch from their

previous night raids from high altitude has caused heavy damage indeed. Why did you ask?"

"Because it proves a point that I want to make about Nancy. She is violently opposed to bombarding civilians and I believe that she convinced the British to abandon such bombardments."

Lisa and the other newcomers kept silent for a moment, digesting this. A Kriegsmarine unterfuhrerin named Grete Meissner resumed the conversation.

"As for me and my three girls here, we were working the night shift at the telephone exchange of the Kriegsmarine headquarters in Wilhelmshaven when a fleet of British skimmer boats entered the harbor and sank every ship in it, including the battlecruisers HIPPER and LUTZOW. While our men tried to defend against them, the base was attacked on the landside by British mechanized forces with dozens of tanks. Apart of completely destroying both the port and the Kriegsmarine headquarters, they also took the senior officers quarters. I'm sorry to say that they captured Admiral Donitz, along with most of his staff."

"They took Admiral Donitz?" Yelled a number of the women at the same time. Grete Messner nodded her head dejectedly. Without Donitz, the German submarine force would never be the same again. A petite Luftwaffe oberhelferin of about thirty years of age who had sat quietly at a far corner of the table then spoke with a resigned voice.

"I'm Katharina Fischer, from the air liaison office at the Focke-Wulf factories near Bremen. Apart of seizing and completely destroying the factories this morning, the British also captured many of the top design engineers there. I also saw them destroy the Vulkan submarine yards and the port installations in Bremen. Later, on their way out, they stopped in Bremerhaven and also destroyed that port."

The 22 women, stunned by so many bad news at once, were quiet for a while. Ingrid Weiss, who was looking with insistence at the SS helferin, suddenly asked her a question in a neutral tone.

"And you, where were you captured?"

"Me?" Said the SS auxiliary, apparently made uncomfortable by Ingrid's question. "I was captured near Hamburg, in Neuengamme."

"And what is there in Neuengamme, apart from a concentration camp for political prisoners and European resistance members?" Insisted Ingrid, making the SS even more nervous.

"Why are you asking this?"

"Why? Because I am not ashamed about my work in Wissant, where I was plotting British raids over France. You were working in the Neuengamme concentration camp, right?"

"Uh, yes! I was one of the camp telephone switchboard operators."

Anna Hauser, made suspicious by the hesitations of the SS auxiliary and remembering Ingrid's previous words, bent forward to fix the young SS woman in the eyes.

"Then, you can certainly tell us what happened in Neuengamme, no?"

"Uh, of course!" Said the SS, while her body language screamed the opposite. "The British came in the same sort of machinties than at the other places, coming with tanks and troop carriers and then destroying the camp. They massacred the camp guards and then left with the prisoners held in the camp. Colonel Laplante was personally in command of the British and French soldiers that took the camp. I saw her as she was giving orders to her soldiers."

"Wait a minute!" Said Susanna Berghof, seeming confused. "I understand that the British would attack the other places, which were military bases or weapons factories, but why attack a prison camp? Neuengamme is even further up the Elbe than Hamburg, making it a riskier target for the British. Was there an important French or Belgian politician or general held in Neuengamme?"

"How could I know?" Protested the SS auxiliary. "Why harass me with questions like this? I was just a telephone switchboard operator, dammit!"

"And what is your name, if it isn't too much to ask?" Said Anna, now skeptical about her story.

"Helferin Erika Muller, Unterführerin."

Lisa Hartmann, herself feeling somewhat ambivalent about Muller, then decided to intervene, to avoid a split in the group.

"I believe that it is getting late. Let's cut this discussion and go to bed. Be all ready for tomorrow morning's inspection at eight."

As the auxiliaries were starting to disperse to their respective rooms, Susanna Berghof blocked the way of Erika Muller to ask her a question in a low voice, her expression cold.

“Tell me if I’m wrong, Muller, but I believe that the SS auxiliaries working in the transmissions department wear a double rune insignia on the chest, plus a transmissions insignia patch on the left arm. You are wearing none of those patches, Muller. Maybe you could explain that to me?”

Susanna didn’t miss the look of alarm in Muller’s eyes, something that only reinforced her suspicions.

“It is simple, indeed: we did not receive enough patches for everybody in Neuengamme.”

“I see!” Said Susanna, not believing her for a second but not wanting to push her further...at least not yet. “Then, good night, Helferin Muller.”

“Good night, Oberhelferin Berghof.” Replied Muller, then hurrying up the stairs. She grumbled to herself once Berghof was out of sight.

“Damn traitor! All traitors, starting with that young bitch of Weiss.”

07:12 (GMT)

Thursday, May 15, 1941

Waterloo Barracks, Tower of London

Ingrid Weiss was finishing her breakfast, sitting alongside her inmates at the table reserved for them in a corner of the dining room of the Waterloo Barracks, when a female guard came to her and dropped a British newspaper in front of her.

“Here, Ingrid, I thought that this could interest you and your comrades.”

Grabbing with curiosity the morning edition of the Daily Telegraph, she immediately caught on the big title on the front page. Ingrid was now by far the most proficient of her group in English. Urged on by her curious comrades, she translated the main points of the newspaper for them.

“The Royal Guards raid Germany. Yesterday morning, the Royal Guards Brigade, reinforced by soldiers from the Canadian 2nd Infantry Division and by a battalion of Free French troops, landed in Germany and devastated the ports of Hamburg, Bremen, Bremerhaven and the German naval base of Wilhelmshaven, on top of destroying the Luftwaffe regional headquarters at Stade, near Hamburg. Also attacked and destroyed were the western lock gates of the Kiel Canal and a number of refineries along the Elbe River, plus the concentration camp of Neuengamme. The Guards were

transported with their tanks and armored troop carriers by a fleet of over 200 hovercrafts, which also sank all the German warships docked in Wilhelmshaven, including the battleships HIPPER and LUTZOW, plus over a dozen submarines and seventeen other warships. Another raiding force, led by the famous Colonel Laplante and composed of British and French troops, liberated the inmates of the concentration camp of Neuengamme, situated near Hamburg. One of the inmates that were liberated there was a British female intelligence agent named Janet Harlow, who was found nearly starved to death and who bore the marks of repeated beatings and torture. Over 9,000 prisoners were freed in Neuengamme. See pages two to five for more details on this fantastic operation.”

Quickly turning to page two, Ingrid scanned the various pictures and text on it. Her eyes caught on a picture showing Nancy Laplante helping a gaunt-looking woman walk.

“Colonel Laplante, consoling and helping Janet Harlow immediately after her liberation in Neuengamme.”

Ingrid was shocked by the pathetic state of Harlow and threw a dirty look at Erika Muller, who sat tense on her bench. Anna Hauser, along with others who were reading over her shoulders, was also repulsed by the picture.

“Turn the page, Ingrid, before this makes me throw up.”

Ingrid had no longer turned the page that she yelled in alarm.

“MY GOD, NANCY!”

All the other German women from Wissant then crowded Ingrid to look at the large picture of Nancy Laplante, as she stood on one knee in Hamburg, a bayonet impaling her left leg, a pistol in her right hand and piles of dead German soldiers around her. Her voice shaking, Ingrid translated the caption under the dramatic picture of her wounded mentor and secret stepmother.

“Nancy Laplante leads a bayonet charge by the Welsh Guards in Hamburg. The Prime Minister’s Special Military Advisor prevented a major disaster by counter-attacking a whole regiment of Waffen-SS which was threatening the main landing force in Hamburg. In turn overwhelmed by an enemy ten times more numerous, with herself and most of her men out of ammunition, she led a bayonet charge that broke the enemy’s back. Seriously wounded in the left leg and left arm and surrounded by enemy soldiers, Colonel Laplante kept resisting, killing in the process over thirty Germans by herself before being rescued by the main landing force. She is expected to recover fully from her wounds within a few weeks.”

Tears came to Ingrid's eyes as she looked in detail at another picture of Nancy, showing her lying down and receiving first aid. Erika Muller saw that and became incensed.

"How dare you cry for an enemy? You should care for the brave German soldiers she killed instead, you traitor!"

All heads in the dining room turned towards them, with two of the female guards starting to take out their clubs. Now angry herself, Ingrid jumped to her feet and faced the SS woman.

"You call me a traitor for admiring a woman like Nancy? You're not worth a tenth of her, German or not!"

"YOU FUCKING BITCH!" Screamed Muller, jumping on the table and then throw herself on Ingrid. To everyone's surprise, the SS woman was grabbed in flight by the young teenager and violently thrown over Ingrid's shoulder, slamming her back hard on the floor with a loud thud. The female British guards then interposed themselves before the fight could go on further. Sergeant Mary Bailey roughly pulled Erika Muller up on her feet, while a second guard simply grabbed Ingrid by the arm. She was however much more delicate with Ingrid than her superior was now with Muller.

"FINISH EATING, ALL OF YOU, THEN GO BACK TO YOUR ROOMS AND STAY THERE UNTIL TOLD OTHERWISE!"

Bailey then looked at Muller and Ingrid.

"You two, come with me!"

Anna Hauser shook her head as both Lisa and Ingrid were led away.

"I was afraid that something like this would happen one day."

Nobody noticed when Susanna Berghof, using the commotion of the fight, grabbed the newspaper and hid it under her jacket.

07:48 (GMT)

Brigadier General Browning's office

King's House, Tower of London

Browning looked successively at Ingrid Weiss and Erika Muller, both standing at attention in front of his desk. He then looked down at his own copy of the newspaper that had started the fight. He had just heard the versions of both Germans and the account of the incident by Sergeant Mary Bailey, who spoke German. This was not going to be easy. Browning finally looked back at the now much less combative Muller.

He sensed that she was going to be a potential source of trouble, especially if given the chance to either influence or intimidate the other Germans into following her hard-line attitude. However, he had seen her type many times before, in both men and women: big on volume but short on real resolve.

"Helferin Muller, do you know what real courage is?"

She stared at him, confused by his question.

"Courage? Er... I believe that it is about how to face danger, sir."

"Wrong, Helferin! Courage is about admitting that you are afraid and then do what has to be done despite that fear. Do you admire courage, Helferin Muller?"

"Of course, sir!"

"Then, why deny to Helferin Weiss the right to admire someone else for her courage?"

"Sir, she was admiring an enemy who had just killed a number of my compatriots. I found her admiration misplaced, sir."

"To the point of calling her a traitor and attacking her? Helferin Muller, you are starting your stay here on the wrong foot. Coming from a place like Neuengamme, you should realize how lucky you are to be interned here, in the Tower of London, where officers like Colonel Laplante do care about the wellbeing of German prisoners. You however don't seem to appreciate fully the privileges you have here. To bring you back to reality and to punish you for starting a fight, you will spend today and tomorrow in solitary confinement in a cell of the Martin Tower, with water and bread to sustain yourself. Sergeant Bailey, take her away!"

"Yes sir!"

Bailey and another female guard then pushed Muller out of the office, leaving Ingrid alone with Browning and still standing at attention.

"At ease, Ingrid!"

Browning then contemplated in silence the young German for a moment. His experience and his impression of her to date told him that Ingrid Weiss was a most decent girl. The manner in which she had quickly developed a bond of friendship with Nancy Laplante, while as shocking for many British as for a number of Germans, was another proof of her goodness in Browning's eyes. He could easily understand Ingrid's admiration towards Nancy Laplante, a truly exceptional woman. Without wanting to confess it openly, Browning felt a near fatherly affection towards Ingrid and would not

have hesitated to adopt her if not for the fact that it would have clearly constituted an act of fraternization with the enemy, a crime punishable by death in time of war.

“Ingrid, did you agree with the version of events as described by Sergeant Bailey?”

“Yes sir! I believe that Sergeant Bailey described well the incident.”

“Then, I can only conclude that you acted only to defend yourself against an unjustified attack from Helferin Muller. You will not get any punishment and can now return to Gaoler’s House.”

Ingrid hesitated then, staying where she stood.

“Sir, could you tell me more about the state of Colonel Laplante? Will she really recuperate fully from her wounds?”

“I don’t know, Ingrid, but I will inquire about it and will keep you informed.”

“Thank you, sir, from the bottom of my heart.”

Ingrid was about to pivot on the spot to leave when Browning’s voice stopped her.

“Wait, Ingrid!”

The old brigadier then got up from behind his desk and came to her, stopping a bare pace in front of her and looking gently into her eyes.

“Ingrid, what do you intend to do after the war?”

The teenager understood nearly at once his intentions and eyed him with gratitude.

“I plan to emigrate to the United States and to start a new life there, sir. Thank you for caring about me like that.”

“You don’t want to go back to Germany?” Said Browning, a bit surprised. Ingrid shook her head firmly.

“Not after what Nancy told me about this war, sir. Please keep this strictly to yourself: I am actually a German Jew and Nancy told me what the Nazis will do to the Jews of Europe in this war. For me, the Nazis are now as much enemies of me as of you. One day, when Germany will have washed thoroughly the stain that the Nazis will leave in history, maybe I will come back to visit my country of birth.”

Browning was actually more shaken by her anti-Nazi declaration than by her confession of being a Jew.

“But, how can you be sure that the Americans will accept you?”

Ingrid thought for a moment before answering with a question.

“Sir, could I ask you why you asked me what I would do after the war? Was it because you were thinking of adopting me?”

"I...I would be both proud and happy to do so, Ingrid."

That answer brought tears to Ingrid's eyes.

"So much kindness have I found here. I thank you with all my heart for this, sir, but I can tell you that the Americans will take me. Why? Because I am in reality only fifteen years old and thus a minor, and because I have been adopted already by an American three months ago. I already possess an American passport, which is presently held for safekeeping at the American embassy."

Stunned, Browning however understood quickly who could have adopted the young German.

"Major Crawford! I should have known! But, then...that would mean..."

"That Nancy Laplante also adopted me? That's correct, sir. She is risking a lot to help me like this but she acted strictly out of love for me, not because she has any sympathies towards the Nazis. Too many people here in England would however be glad and too ready to ask for the firing squad for her if they ever learned that she adopted a German girl, and that despite all that she has done to help you win this war. I know that you are a good, kind man and that you will keep that secret to yourself, sir. I would have been happy to have you as a grandfather.

Both happy and overwhelmed, the old brigadier took one step and hugged Ingrid, tears in his eyes.

"Thank you, Ingrid. I hope that you will be happy in your new life in the United States."

08:31 (GMT)

Sunday, May 18, 1941

Tower Green, Tower of London

Sergeant Bailey had just finished the morning prisoners' call-up and was ready to dismiss them when a delighted scream from Ingrid Weiss made her turn her head towards Bloody Tower.

"NANCY! NANCY IS HERE!"

Effectively, Bailey could now see Nancy Laplante coming through the gate of Bloody Tower in a wheelchair pushed by Major Crawford. Following the couple were three British officers pushing a cart filled with Nancy's electronic equipment, plus a thin woman in civilian clothes who was walking besides Nancy's wheelchair.

“Hold it there, Ingrid!” Ordered Bailey as the teenager was about to run out of the ranks. All the new inmates were now looking with curiosity at the woman they had heard so much about in the last days. Nancy Laplante had her left arm in a sling and her left leg was sticking out, lying on a support frame. Otherwise, she seemed well and waved at Ingrid while smiling. As was customary for her Sunday visits at the Tower, she was dressed in civilian clothes, in this case a loose-fitting two-piece fleece outfit. Mike Crawford was also wearing informal civilian clothes and attracted a lot of attention from the new inmates. Anna Hauser, who was standing behind the group of auxiliaries, saw a sudden expression of panic appear on the face of Erika Muller as she was eyeing Nancy’s group. Intrigued, Anna made her mind to watch closely Muller in the minutes to come.

While the three British officers following Nancy turned towards King’s House with the equipment cart, the thin woman followed Nancy and Mike up to Tower Green, where the prisoners and their guards stood. Sergeant Bailey greeted Nancy with a salute.

“Would you like to inspect the prisoners, Colonel?”

“With great pleasure, Sergeant! However, I would like to make this as informal as possible, to put the new inmates at ease. Would you mind if I inspect them alone with Major Crawford?”

“You’re the boss, Maam!”

By now, Mary Bailey was accustomed to the easygoing manner in which Nancy dealt with the Germans, something which would have raised cries of indignation if done by any British soldier. She was however a special case. Nancy was about to present herself to Lisa Hartmann when the civilian woman, who was very thin and gaunt, raised an accusing index while staring with pure hatred at Erika Muller.

“YOU?”

Muller started to back up, possibly in a futile attempt to flee, but Anna Hauser cut her path.

“Get back in the ranks, Helferin Muller!”

Muller, in a near state of panic, pushed Anna aside and started to run but was stopped in her track by a baton strike to the belly from one of the British female guards. The SS woman, her breath taken out, collapsed to her knees, then was brutally put back on her feet by two guards and dragged towards Nancy, who eyed her severely.

“Why are you so afraid of Janet Harlow, Helferin?”

"Because she knew that I would recognize her, Colonel." Answered the S.O.E. woman. "This woman was one of the worst guards in the Neuengamme camp. She like nothing better than to beat a prisoner. She even flogged to death a French resistance woman and bragged about it in front of us."

"But," protested weakly Lisa Hartmann, "Helferin Muller told us that she was just a telephone switchboard operator in Neuengamme."

Nancy shook her head slowly while pointing Muller's vest.

"She wears the uniform of a SS-Kriegshelferin, the SS general auxiliaries charged with guarding female prisoners in concentration camps. She doesn't wear the breast insignia with runes or the sleeve insignia of transmission specialist of a SS-Helferin. The way she tried to flee when she saw Miss Harlow, who was interned in Neuengamme, was by itself a confession of culpability. If she would have really been only a telephone standardist, then she would have had nothing to fear from Agent Harlow. Sergeant Bailey, put this woman under arrest for war crimes and advise Brigadier Browning of this at once."

"Right away, Colonel! Corporal Donovan, go warn the Governor of the Tower. Privates Barclay and Anderson, go lock Helferin Muller in a cell of the Martin Tower and keep an eye on her until further notice."

As Erika Muller was pushed towards Martin Tower by two British female guards, with three British soldiers backing them up, Nancy looked at Lisa Hartmann, who was now confused and didn't know anymore what to think.

"Well, now that we are here, why not continue with the inspection, Gruppenführerin Hartmann?"

"Er, of course, Colonel! Please, proceed!"

Pushed by Mike Crawford, Nancy slowly went through the three ranks of the prisoners, asking a few polite questions to each of them. Mike couldn't help smile in appreciation when they stopped in front of Frida Winterer and Susanna Berghof. Frida was the perfect embodiment of a jailbait, while Susanna could have won hands down most beauty contests. Both blondes were smiling warmly at Mike. Nancy smiled herself as she looked at Mike's face.

"Hmm... looks like stiff competition for me, Mike."

"Six months ago, maybe. Now, only you count."

“You smooth talker! However, I want to be present as a chaperone if you massage them.”

Frida and Susanna giggled at that as Nancy stopped next in front of a petite Luftwaffe oberhelferin who appeared quite nervous. Nancy offered her hand.

“And you are?”

“Oberhelferin Katharina Fischer, from the Focke-Wulf factories in Bremen, Colonel.” Answered the German while shaking Nancy’s hand.

“Welcome to the Tower of London, Helferin Fisher. I would like to talk with you about the Focke-Wulfe factories after this parade, if possible.”

“Uh, no problem, Colonel.” Answered weakly the auxiliary, who was in her thirties and clearly older than the average of the rest of the auxiliaries. Nancy then went on to the third rank, which was made up of the women captured in Wissant. Nancy exchanged happy greetings with each of them before letting Ingrid hug her. The teenager had tears in her eyes as she kissed Nancy on the cheek.

“Nancy, I was so afraid for you when I saw your picture in the Thursday newspapers.”

“Tell me about it.” Said Mike, a trace of bitterness in his voice. Nancy made a brave face of it.

“Come on, you two! You know that I’m harder to kill than weeds.”

“Yeah, but you’re not invulnerable either.”

Her inspection finished, Nancy returned to speak to Hartmann.

“Gruppenfuhrerin, you can dismiss your subordinates now, except for Helferin Weiss and Oberhelferin Fischer. I would like to speak to them in private.”

“As you wish, Colonel!” Replied an intrigued Hartmann. Lisa then yelled a few short orders to her subalterns, making them go back in Gaoler’s House with Mike Crawford and Janet Harlow. Letting Ingrid push her chair, Nancy went with Fischer to a deserted spot near the inner wall of the fortress and made sure that no British soldier was near before speaking in a low voice to the petite auxiliary.

“Sorry about all that cinema, but you will be the first to agree with me that what we will discuss will stay strictly between us, Flugkapitan Hanna Reitsch.”

As Ingrid stared at ‘Fischer’ with wide eyes, Nancy smiled to the Nazi female test pilot.

“Hanna Reitsch: first woman test pilot in history; first woman to pilot a helicopter and, at least in my history, first woman to have piloted a rocket plane. You know that you were one of my childhood’s heroines, Flugkapitan Reitsch?”

"Your childhood's heroine? But, I don't understand, Colonel. If you know me that well, then you must know that I am devoted to the Nazi cause."

"I know, Flugkapitan, but I know enough about you to also know that you are able to accept the bitter reality once you will be aware of everything the Nazis did, and to then reject that criminal regime. Before you ask why I am ready to protect your identity, I will answer you right away: by simple humanity. I'm an open-minded person and I am also not from this time period. The British of 1940 are actually as alien to me as the Germans of 1940. The British are much less barbaric in this war than the Germans, Soviets or Japanese. They do however interrogate thoroughly important prisoners, though, sometimes for months, using harsh mental techniques that are very close to physical torture. Prisoners like you, Flugkapitan Hanna Reitsch."

The German test pilot stepped back, apprehensive. She had been involved with most of the German secret aircraft projects and had even flown a piloted version of the V-1 flying bomb, earning an Iron Cross medal from Adolph Hitler himself in the process. If the British learned about her, she would indeed be in for a lot of unpleasantness. Nancy was now looking at her with hawkish eyes.

"I would normally give you away to the British for interrogation, except for one small detail: I already have files about you that would make your eyes pop out. About the only thing I am not sure of about you is the complete list of your lovers."

"Thank God that the historians didn't research that part of my life." Replied Hanna, trying some humor to relax. That made Nancy smile.

"Don't yell victory yet on that point. I know that you were due to meet, and date, another childhood hero of mine: Otto Skorzeni, a Waffen-SS officer due to become the most famous expert on special operations in this war."

"You... you are plain incredible, Colonel! What am I supposed to say to this?"

"Nothing! I simply wish to avoid you a lot of unnecessary unpleasantness. I may be fighting against Germany now, but I am not a barbarian or a sadist. Just keep masquerading as Oberhelferin Katharina Fischer and keep quiet about the whole thing. I am playing with my head on this. In return, I am only asking you to open your mind to the realities of this war and to think hard about what the Nazi cause really represents. Ingrid has already been educated by me on these realities, of which Janet Harlow is a living example."

"Ingrid? Why do you put such confidence in her, Colonel?"

“Because she is a fifteen year-old war orphan. Because me and Major Crawford secretly adopted her three months ago. She is now legally an American citizen and could in theory leave this fortress anytime, but you can imagine what the consequences would be for me if the British learned about that. I know however that you will keep that secret to yourself, like I will keep your secret.”

“You, the infamous Die Wolfin, you adopted a German girl? But, you could face the firing squad for that!”

“Quite true! My life is thus in your hands, while your mental health is in my hands.”

“You can count on my discretion, Colonel.” Said Hanna gravely. “I see that Ingrid’s admiration towards you was well deserved.”

“Blah blah blah!” Replied Nancy, grinning. “All in a time traveler’s work! How about going out to talk a bit with the other women? I brought with me a sales catalog from a big retail store in 2012. We could discuss future female fashion before we go see a few films made in the future.”

“Now you are talking! Let me push your wheelchair.”

“Are you cleared to pilot wheelchairs, Hanna?”

“Another joke like that and I will pilot you out through a window, Colonel.”

10:14 (GMT)

King’s House, Tower of London

The new inmates stopped cold as they entered the reception room in King’s House now used weekly as a TV lounge: standing around Nancy’s television and DVD unit where the three British officers who had brought in her equipment. Lisa Hartmann growled at a graying RAF wing commander and walked to him, then pointed an accusing finger at his face.

“YOU? How dare you come here and taunt us?”

Wing Commander Humphreys pointed at himself with an air of pure innocence.

“Me, taunt you? My dear Gruppenführerin, I was just bringing in Colonel Laplante’s equipment.”

Grete Meissner charged towards Lieutenant Commander Stilwell, forcing him against a wall.

“And him? He was in Wilhelmshaven. Is he also a simple mover for Colonel Laplante?”

“Me? A mover? Please, I have my dignity.”

“Please, people, no need to get excited here.”

All eyes turned towards Nancy, who smiled sheepishly.

“Alright, I confess: these are two of my assistants, while Wing Commander Humphreys was loaned to me for the operation in Germany. I brought them here, not to taunt you, but to make things up at a personal level. If Miss Harlow was able to visit you, then I hope that you won't resent my officers visiting you. Now, please relax and try to be civilized to each other while I prepare the first film of the day.”

“Which one is it, Nancy?” Asked Ingrid eagerly.

“It is called ‘WHAT WOMEN WANT’ and it is a comedy about a man able to read women's minds.”

“That would be the day!” Said dismissively Susanna Berghof, making Peter Stilwell puff up with fake indignation.

“I beg your pardon, miss! I know perfectly well what women want.”

Susanna grinned as the others around her listened to the exchange with anticipation.

“Let me see, now. Weren't you the one who pointed a pistol in my face in Wilhelmshaven and said to me quote move your ass, Blondie unquote?”

“Sorry, that was purely business talk, miss.” Replied Stilwell, making Nancy, Ingrid and a few others giggle. The exchange was not finished, though.

“Oh, I'm now miss, instead of Blondie?”

“Well, unless you prefer Blondie...”

“Susanna will do just fine, Lieutenant Commander.”

“Just call me Peter, like my friends and other perverts do.”

“Hey, talk for yourself, Peter!” Objected George Townsend, standing nearby. “At least, I have more male clothes lying around my apartment than there are female clothes.”

“Is it my fault if women keep forgetting their things at my place?”

“Like panties and bras?”

“At the price bras are, I sure wouldn't leave them behind.” Interjected Nancy, making heads snap around. Mike gave her a funny look.

“Was your last visit at Peter's place before or after our marriage?”

“It was before and it was at my place, not his. Ask George about the sordid details.”

A concert of giggles and exclamations followed those words, as Susanna looked with amusement at blushing Peter Stilwell and George Townsend.

“My! A two on one? Kinky!”

“Pardon me, but there was another woman present. We just swapped around a bit.”

“Better and better. Any other perversions I should know about?”

“Well, I’m in the navy. What else do I need to say?”

“I’m in the navy too, you know.”

“Alright, enough!” Shouted Nancy, plugging her ears. “There are young persons around here.”

“So?” Replied Ingrid. “Do I look like a virgin to you?”

“Er, could we get on with the film, Colonel, before this degenerates into an orgy?”
Asked Anna Hauser, getting a nod from Nancy.

“Good idea! ALRIGHT, EVERYONE: PLEASE SIT DOWN! THE FILM WILL NOW START!”

As Susanna Berghof took one of the front row chairs, Peter Stilwell sat besides her and whispered in her ear.

“Actually, it went down to a three on one.”

Susanna nearly strangled herself with laughter at those words.

CHAPTER 30 – SUMMIT CONFERENCE

09:07 (Berlin Time)

Monday, May 19, 1941

Eagle's Nest, Berchtesgaden

Admiral Canaris could see as he took his seat that Adolph Hitler was in one of his black moods. Looking around the conference table, it was obvious that all the participants were bracing themselves for the incoming storm. Reichsmarshal Herman Goering in particular was in his small shoes, with many secretly hoping for his downfall. The Luftwaffe had been humiliated by the British for too many months now: excuses were not going to cut it this time.

Rudolph Hess rose from his chair and declared the conference open before announcing the first briefer, General Jodl, Chief of Operations of the O.K.W.¹⁸. Jodl let two subordinates install an easel with a map board on it near Hitler, then started speaking, pointing to various spots on the map with a stick as he went.

“Mein Fuhrer, gentlemen! I'm going to describe for the benefit of our East Front commanders present here the attack that the British mounted against Germany last Wednesday. As best as it could be reconstructed, the British, using over 200 of their new skimmer crafts, showed up on the German North Sea coast just before sunrise, with a heavy mechanized brigade of Royal Guards on board. Our coastal radars, which had been pounded continuously for weeks from the air, were out at the time and could not alert our own troops. The British then split up and attacked the following objectives: the naval base and submarine yards at Wilhelmshaven; the port, submarine yards and the Focke-Wulf factories in Bremen; the port of Bremerhaven; the port and submarine yards in Hamburg; the Luftwaffe regional headquarters in Stade, near Hamburg; the concentration camp of Neuengamme, near Hamburg; various refineries along the Elbe River, downstream from Hamburg; and, finally, the western locks of the Kiel Canal. All of these objectives were either completely destroyed or heavily damaged, with the ports of Hamburg and Bremen in particular being obstructed by numerous sunken ships. The

¹⁸ O.K.W.: OberKommando der Wehrmacht (German High Command)

Kriegsmarine headquarters in Wilhelmshaven was also taken and destroyed, with Admiral Donitz and most of his staff taken prisoner. Heavy bomber raids and even gunfire by battleships were used by the British to support these operations. A detailed list of the damages and losses incurred by us are part of your briefing packages if you have any questions on that subject.”

Feldmarshal Von Kluge, commander of the Eastern Front, exploded, banging his fist on the table.

“And what did we do, while the British were having their little excursion on German soil? Watch them and sit on our thumbs?”

Canaris saw Hitler nod his head at Kluge’s question. Jodl looked embarrassed, having probably taken heat before on that same question.

“Please, Feldmarshal! The British attack was over within hours and their taking of the Stade Luftgau HQ prevented any of our aircraft from reacting to them. Also, the British that landed were equipped with a panoply of new and impressive weapons and equipment, against which our troops were comparatively ill-equipped to resist.”

“What kind of new equipment, precisely?” Asked a now worried Von Kluge.

“You will find details on these new weapons at Annex B of the intelligence study in your briefing packages. They include a long range fast attack skimmer boat, a heavy tank, an armored troop carrier, new infantry weapons and personal armor kits, plus very compact radios.”

Marshal Von Kluge and General Von Rundstedt got progressively more agitated as they read the annex concerning the new British equipment. General Von Rundstedt looked at Jodl, intrigued by a particular point.

“General Jodl, I have problems believing this personal armor. To stop rifle and machinegun bullets as it is claimed to be able to do would make it too heavy to be worn for any length of time. Did we capture any of these?”

“Unfortunately, no! The British were very careful in picking up their casualties and damaged equipment before leaving. We have only eyewitness accounts of it.”

“If I may, Gentlemen, I think I could be of help here.”

All heads turned towards Admiral Canaris, who was taking a set of large prints out of his briefcase as he explained himself.

“A British photographer accompanied the British force that attacked Hamburg on Wednesday. His photos were published in London on Thursday and one of my agents posing as a Spanish press representative was able to buy a complete set of his pictures.

I received them just as I was leaving Berlin to come here, which is why I didn't have a chance to disseminate them. May I, Mein Fuhrer?"

Hitler nodded, then the chief of the Abwehr walked to the map board and pinned to it a number of large pictures. Whispers immediately ran around the table as Canaris pointed to a particular picture.

"This is the armor that is interesting you, General. It consists of a vest covering the torso, shoulders and groin, plus a helmet with armored faceplate. In this particular case, that armor stopped dozens of bullets, giving a chance to its wearer to shoot down every German around her."

"Mein got! Is it her?"

"Yes, General, this is Nancy Laplante, as she stood after leading a bayonet charge in Hamburg."

Canaris unpinned the picture and passed it to Von Rundstedt, who shook his head in disbelief.

"If this woman would have been fighting on our side, I would have given her the Iron Cross First Class on the spot."

Many heads nodded in agreement, including that of Hitler, who had been decorated for bravery during the vicious trench battles of the First World War.

"She seems to be a woman of remarkable courage indeed." Said the Fuhrer, to the hidden satisfaction of Canaris.

"Mein Fuhrer, I could show you a psychological profile of Nancy Laplante, done by an eminent female psychologist that I hired recently. I believe that Colonel Laplante did a lot more than participate in those British raids: she also planned them."

A wave of disbelief went around the gray-haired generals and marshals sitting around the conference table as Canaris went on.

"The patterns of the attacks are proof of this in themselves, Gentlemen. No known British general could have combined ground, air and sea elements in an operation as audacious as the one on Wednesday. The attack on the Neuengamme concentration camp itself is the perfect signature of Colonel Laplante's planning."

The chief of the SS, Heinrich Himmler, was intrigued by that statement.

"Could you elaborate on that, Admiral?"

"Certainly, Reichfuhrer! Most of you here will readily agree that Neuengamme had little to no value as a strictly military target. It also was the most dangerous one to attack, since it was located deepest in our territory and the force attacking it had to sail

by the port of Hamburg while the battle there was just starting. The force that attacked Neuengamme also included a sizeable unit of French infantry, according to the rare guards that escaped that day.”

“French troops, on German soil?” Exclaimed Hitler, suddenly agitated.

“Yes, Mein Fuhrer! All this makes Neuengamme a target of psychological value only, one that fits perfectly with Colonel Laplante’s profile. Laplante may be a very efficient soldier and a first class strategist, but she is also a humanitarian with an unusually open mind, and a feminist to boot.”

Canaris then went back to his briefcase and took out a single picture before passing it to Himmler.

“This shows Laplante, who seemingly commanded the raid on Neuengamme, helping one of the female inmates she had just liberated. You can even see some French soldiers in the background.”

Himmler looked for long seconds at the picture, then passed it to Adolf Hitler as Canaris spoke again.

“Gentlemen, my conclusion from those pictures is that, in terms of military technology, the British now hopelessly outclass us and are further widening the gap every day. Furthermore, we can thank that on one woman alone: Laplante! In the future, as long as she holds a position of influence with the British, we can expect more such amphibious raids, commando operations and the like, plus pinpoint bombings of our industrial centers. The one thing that we will probably be spared is area bombings against civilian targets, as Laplante seems to have convinced Prime Minister Churchill to discontinue such raids.”

“And why would she have done that, Admiral?” Asked Albert Speer, the new minister of armaments.

“For both military and humanitarian reasons, Herr Speer. She has demonstrated to the British that pinpoint bombing from low altitude is more effective than high altitude carpet bombing, even going to the trouble and risk of flying one low level mission against Kiel to prove her point to the British.”

“And...her humanitarian reasons?”

“Put simply, Herr Speer, Colonel Laplante does not hate the German people per say, contrary to many British. She even became friend with a group of female German auxiliaries held in London and is acting as their morale officer. She will simply not

condone the deliberate killing of German civilians, even though she knows what to expect from us if captured.”

Canaris then took a sheet of paper out of his briefcase and gave it to Speer.

“Hundreds of copies of this wanted poster were dumped from Laplante’s plane as it flew over Kiel during that raid.”

“Is she a qualified pilot on top of everything else?” Asked a shocked Goering.

“No, Reichmarshal! She probably flew as an observer.”

Goering looked at the wanted poster of Laplante, with Nancy’s sarcastic message written in red ink on it, then looked at Canaris as Von Kluge grabbed the paper to examine it.

“Is this a joke, Admiral?”

“No, Reichmarshal! She was dead serious about this. Her message is that she is not afraid of us but that she will still respect the laws of war, irrespective of our attitude towards her. That raid could have caused thousands of civilian casualties, since the submarine yards in Kiel are so close to civilian areas. Yet, not one civilian house was touched in that raid, while the submarine yards were devastated.”

FeldMarshal Von Kluge then held up the wanted poster as he looked directly at Heinrich Himmler.

“Colonel Laplante is a military officer who is scrupulously respecting the laws and customs of war. She also seemingly went to great lengths to avoid German civilian casualties. Why this, then?”

Himmler clenched his teeth, his eyes focusing on the poster.

“Laplante is still Germany’s most dangerous enemy and she holds priceless military secrets. We need those secrets.”

“Even in a way that would bring dishonor to Germany?”

“State security is my business, Feldmarshal, not yours.”

“Gentlemen, I will make Colonel Laplante my personal business.”

All heads turned towards Adolf Hitler. The Fuhrer then looked at Admiral Canaris.

“Admiral, do you have that psychological profile on Laplante with you?”

“I do, Mein Fuhrer.”

Hitler took the file Canaris handed him, then looked at the conference participants.

“Let us return now to the main point of this conference. German soil was trampled by invaders Wednesday and it will be the first and last time that this happens. Since the Luftwaffe is incapable of defending the Fatherland, then I want the Wehrmacht

to reassign sufficient divisions from the Eastern front to ensure that such raids do not occur again. As for Operation Barbarossa, it will still be launched, but after we relocate the necessary forces to defend Germany.”

As Goering was smarting over Hitler’s vote of non-confidence, Von Kluge tried to protest the cutting down of his invasion force but was silenced by Hitler’s dark look.

“My decision stands! You have your orders, Gentlemen. You are dismissed, except for Minister Speer and General Milch.”

Hitler waited until the others had left the conference room before looking at Speer and Milch.

“I believe that, after this presentation, the subject of our secret weapons programs is becoming even more urgent now, if we want to still win this war. Herr Speer, I directed you a few months ago to study the new weapons introduced by Colonel Laplante and to apply the lessons to our own weapons programs. As the minister of armaments, I also gave you total freedom to implement these new programs. How are we progressing up to now?”

“Mein Fuhrer,” said cautiously Speer, “we had little to go by in terms of information about the new British weapons. However, I was able to surmise a few important facts from the British actions against our own weapons programs. For one thing, the speed with which the British struck with uncanny accuracy at our rocket program showed how important Colonel Laplante thought it was for the outcome of this war. Also, she borrowed part of our secret technology, which she probably knows everything about, to adapt it to her own projects. An example of that was the probable adaptation of pulse jet engines to British bombers, which made them fast enough to outrun our fighters. I thus ordered our rocket and jet programs to be accelerated and given top priority. Another area that was given higher priority was in the matter of our infantry weapons. The new British weapons have plainly shown their superiority by now, so I pushed for the accelerated production of a new automatic rifle for our troops, along with better tanks. The latest British raids just proved how far behind we have fallen by now in those areas.”

“Yes, yes, I know!” Said Hitler impatiently. “What are we doing precisely about that now, though?”

“Mein Fuhrer, the V-2 rocket program is now at the trials stage, with mass production to follow in a few months. As for our V-1 flying bomb, it is now considered

inadequate for its original purpose and has been abandoned. We are however in the process of adapting its pulse jet technology to our own bombers. Our jet-propelled fighter program is also going well and we should have a flying prototype before the end of this year. On the subject of our infantry weapons and tanks, we were lucky in having programs already in place, but running at a slow pace. I boosted the priority of those programs as well. The first new StG-41 rifles should get to our frontline troops in two months, while the new TIGER heavy tanks will start rolling out of the assembly lines in three months. The PANTHER medium tank will be next to roll before the end of the year.”

“Excellent!” Exulted Hitler before looking at General Milch, the inspector-general of the Luftwaffe. “General, the new bomber tactics introduced by Laplante have proved devastating, especially those fast, low-level attacks, as used in the raid on Kiel. I want you to study those tactics and to introduce them into the Luftwaffe if feasible. Do not be afraid to be innovative. Colonel Laplante may yet prove to be our best teacher in these matters.”

“It will be done, Mein Fuhrer.”

15:02 (GMT)

Saturday, May 24, 1941

Apartment 11, 24 St James' Place

London, England

Nancy answered her door and found herself facing Doctor Reginald Jones and Peter Stilwell. Both men were smiling widely.

“My, you guys look quite happy. Is it the thought of visiting me that makes you smile like this?”

“Partly!” Replied Peter. “We are also bringing some very good news.”

“Really? Please, come in!”

Both men entered Nancy’s apartment and sat down in a sofa. Nancy, limping around with the help of a cane, sat between them and passed her arms around their shoulders.

“So, what is that good news of yours?”

Reginald Jones handed her a sealed envelope taken from the locked briefcase he had brought with him. The envelope bore stamped markings in bold red letters saying ‘MOST SECRET’ and ‘ULTRA’.

“We just intercepted and decrypted two Enigma messages coming out of the German O.K.W. that we believe you should know about right away. The first is iffy news. The second one is definitely good news.”

Intrigued, Nancy opened the envelope and, extracting from it two sheets of paper, read the first one and frowned.

“Hmm! Herman Goering has been dismissed as head of the Luftwaffe and was replaced by General Milch. That is definitely a so-so news: General Milch is a competent man, unlike that fat buffoon of Goering. The Luftwaffe may become a serious threat again. Let’s see the second message.”

Nancy’s eyes widened as she read the second decrypted message.

“On the personal authority of the Fuhrer, General Directive 196 directs all German units and authorities to apply normal prisoner of war treatment to Colonel Nancy Laplante, of the Canadian Army Intelligence, if she is ever captured. The previous Gestapo warrant on her head is therefore rescinded and no longer valid. Furthermore, the Gestapo is prohibited in taking any part in the handling of Colonel Laplante upon her capture.”

Nancy happily kissed both Reginald and Peter and pressed them against her.

“This is the best news I had in weeks. Thank you so much for bringing this to me here.”

“We were as happy as you are now when we got that, Nancy.” Said softly Peter. “We were really worrying about you, you know.”

She looked at both men with glistening eyes, tears rolling on her cheeks.

“Guys, I love you all. How could I thank you for caring like this?”

“By letting us invite you for supper at a good restaurant tonight.” Said Peter. “All the people of the office will be there. It would make them really happy if you could come.”

“Then I will be there. Can Mike come too?”

“Of course! Jennifer Collins was hoping for that.”

“Hmm, point well noted.”

All three then laughed. Nancy insisted on opening a bottle of chilled white wine and sharing it with Peter and Reginald before they left. She then sat back in the sofa and blew out air in relief, feeling like a huge weight had just been taken off her shoulders.

09:55 (Tokyo Time)

Wednesday, May 28, 1941

Headquarters of Japanese Imperial High Command

Tokyo, Japan

General Hajime Sugiyama, Chief of Staff of the Japanese Army, looked around the table and, seeing that all those who should be present had arrived, signaled them to sit. He then spoke in a firm, grave tone.

“Gentlemen, the Guardian of the Imperial Seal, Marquis Kido, informed me a few days ago that His Majesty the Emperor wishes to know the possible impacts on our imperial policies and on the future of Japan that the actions of the Canadian woman from the future, Nancy Laplante, could cause. His Majesty the Emperor is particularly concerned by the military reverses sustained recently by our German allies because of that woman, and by the introduction in service of new British weapons. This meeting was thus convened in order to provide answers to His Majesty and to allay his fears. Thankfully for us, Major General Yamashita just returned from a lengthy tour in Europe, where he was able to study personally the subject of this meeting. I will thus let General Yamashita speak first to give us his report, so that we can then discuss the situation on a firm footing. General Yamashita?”

Yamashita Tomoyuki, a squarely built man in his fifties, rose from his chair and saluted Sugiyama.

“Thank you, General! In view of the very particular nature of our problem, I believe that it would be better for me to start by presenting a few personal details on the person of interest to us. Lieutenant!”

A junior officer who was standing at attention in a corner then slid open a curtain covering a projection screen and lit a retro-projector that already held a transparency. The meeting participants were then able to see on the screen the picture of a tall and attractive woman wearing a sort of female suit and pointing a huge pistol at a man lying on the ground of a parc.

“Gentlemen, here is the source of our problems: Colonel Nancy Laplante, a Canadian woman and time traveler from 71 years in our future. I can assure you that she is no typical woman and that the Germans are actually terrified of her.”

Many of the officers present gave him skeptical looks, including General Tojo Hideki, the head of the Army Aviation and a long-time rival of Yamashita.

"The Germans, terrified of her? You can't be serious, Yamashita."

"I am very serious, General Tojo. Lieutenant, next transparency!"

Tojo and the others then saw one of the photos taken of Nancy Laplante as she was kneeling in the Hamburg submarine yard, surrounded by piles of dead German soldiers. Incredulous whispers went around the table.

"You see here one of the photos taken of Laplante just after she had led a bayonet charge in Hamburg against an enemy force ten times more numerous than her unit. The soldiers she killed that day were from the SS Corps and were considered elite soldiers. Much more significant than her courage, however, is her military genius, recognized by even the most conservative British generals. As a special counselor of Prime Minister Churchill, she exert a considerable influence on the policies and the strategies of the British, an influence out of proportion to her rank or sex. Because she comes from the future, she knows about everything about this war, including most probably our own long term plans and intentions. Her knowledge of 21st Century technology also allowed the British to introduce new weapons that the Germans are presently trying to counter or even copy. The next few pictures will show some of the weapons and equipment introduced thanks to her knowledge. Some of the pictures are from the British press, while others were taken by German civilians while some of the new British air cushion vehicles were attacking the port of Hamburg, in Germany."

More whispers and exclamations came up as the lieutenant showed a number of transparencies. Admiral Yamamoto Isoroku, Commander of the Combined Fleet, examined gravely the pictures of the LCMACs and of the surface effect ships.

"Do we know something about the performances of those new craft, General Yamashita?"

"The Germans did gave me copies of their intelligence reports concerning those new craft, called hovercraft by the British. Thankfully for us, while they are incredibly fast, their range is limited, making them of little use in the Pacific. They are however very useful for amphibious operations."

"How fast, exactly?"

"Uh, between seventy and one hundred knots at maximum speed, Admiral."

Yamamoto frowned, not liking at all the implications of this for his own ships.

"Then, they should be very dangerous if encountered during coastal operations, if I can judge from their armament."

"That is the opinion of the German navy, Admiral."

"I would like to see later a copy of those German intelligence reports, General."

"With pleasure, Admiral. Another point concerning that woman, a point of direct interest to us, is the fact that she visited Washington in last December. We now believe that she gave to the Americans detailed plans of all the new weapons put in service by the British during the last months."

Yamamoto slammed a fist on the conference table, visibly frustrated.

"Great! With their huge industrial capacity, the Americans will now be able to swamp us with those new weapons within a year."

"More reason for us to attack them earlier, Admiral." Cut in Tojo. "The more we will wait, the more the Americans and the British will have time to rearm. Eventually, they will feel so powerful that they will then not hesitate to dictate to us our external policies. If we do nothing now, then Japan will soon be reduced to dancing on the Anglo-saxons' tune. How could we then show ourselves in front of His Majesty?"

Yamamoto eyed Tojo for a moment while he thought furiously. He didn't want a war with the Americans, knowing their huge industrial capacity. However, Tojo was right about the American external policy. President Roosevelt was showing no sign of flexibility in terms of letting Japan rule its empire as it wished. The recent decision to send Japanese troops to Indochina, to help the Vichy French there to resist the British based in Malaya, had resulted in an American steel embargo, an embargo that already had painful effects in Japan.

"Let's say that we decide to attack the Americans and the British, General Tojo. What tells us that they don't already know everything about our plans, thanks to that Nancy Laplante? Look at what happened to the Germans since her arrival in England. The German airforce was decimated when it attacked London, because the British were waiting for them. What tells us that the same thing will not happen to us?"

"How should I know, Admiral?" Exclaimed Tojo, frustrated. "She has the crystal ball, not me!"

Yamashita then jumped in the exchange.

"If I may, gentlemen. A recent remark from Admiral Canaris, the head of the German military intelligence, struck me. Basically, he believes that, the more time passes and the British change the course of the war thanks to the information from Laplante, the less precise those informations will become. If she had not appeared in England last September, when would you have suggested that we should attack the Americans and the British colonies?"

Tojo and Yamamoto looked at each other, with the former answering.

“Well, the idea was to wait until the end of October of this year, to see if the American policies for the Pacific would become more acceptable to us. After, if Roosevelt stayed inflexible, we would attack, probably in December of this year.”

“Then, I propose that, if we decide to attack the Anglo-saxons, that we do it well before December, as much to prevent the Americans from reequipping their forces as to surprise them concerning the date of our offensive.”

Yamamoto nodded his head at that, imitated by Tojo and the other officers around the table.

CHAPTER 31 – INVESTITURE

11:07 (GMT)

Friday, May 30, 1941

Buckingham Palace, London

“Commander William Bennett, Royal Navy!” Called the Royal Master of Ceremonial. Nancy whispered a last comforting word to the woman sitting to her left before she got on her feet and walked hesitantly towards the royal dais. Bennett’s widow, all dressed in black, stopped three paces in front of the king, who took a medal from a red cushion held by a page as the Master of Ceremonial resumed his announcement.

“Commander William Bennett, VC, Commander of HMS FLYING FISH, is to be awarded posthumously the Distinguished Service Cross for his gallantry shown on May 14, 1941, when he led his squadron of fast attack ships into Wilhelmshaven’s harbor and sank the german battlecruisers HIPPER and LUTZOW. His widow will now receive the DSC on his behalf.”

The king then pinned the small medal on the widow, who was quietly sobbing. George VI then hugged her, moved by her distress, and had a page escort her back to her seat under the respectful applauses of the other recipients, guests and journalists present. The ceremony had been specially arranged to honor the participants of Operation Backstabber and many journalists, both foreign and British, attended the ceremony, along with a few diplomats. The audience was however mostly military, with over 200 medals to be presented.

“Colonel Nancy Crawford, Canadian Army Intelligence!”

Nancy nearly missed the call, still unaccustomed to be called by anything but her maiden name. Still limping a bit, she hurried to her assigned position in front of the king, who smiled and winked at her.

“All present will rise! Colonel Nancy Crawford, born Laplante, VC, CBE, DSO and Bar, DFC, MC, of the Canadian Army Intelligence, is to be awarded the Bar to the Victoria Cross for most conspicuous bravery in the presence of the enemy shown on May 14, 1941, when she led a bayonet charge in Hamburg, Germany. Wounded twice in the ensuing fight, she kept resisting against an enemy ten times more numerous until

relieved by the rest of the raiding force. His Majesty King George the Sixth will now award Colonel Crawford the Bar to the Victoria Cross.”

Numerous camera flashbulbs exploded as the king pinned the small bronze bar to the deep red ribbon of her Victoria Cross, fixed to her chest along with her other medals. Nancy felt a rush of blood to her brain that nearly overtook her. Taking a deep breath, she was about to step back and salute to return to her seat when the King whispered to her, smiling.

“Wait, Brigadier Crawford! I am not finished with you yet.”

Nancy could not hide her surprise then, as the master of ceremonial spoke again.

“His Majesty King George the Sixth will now promote in the name of the Canadian government Colonel Crawford to the rank of brigadier general, as an acknowledgement to her exceptional talents in the planification, coordination and execution of large scale special combined operations.”

The King, helped by his equerry, changed the shoulder rank slip-ons on Nancy’s parade uniform before congratulating her and shaking her hand. After saluting the King, Nancy pivoted on her heels and returned to her seat, not believing yet her good luck. Once seated, she wiped the cold sweat on her forehead and forced herself into breathing more slowly.

Nancy was starting to feel better when a small, brief speck of light attracted her attention to what seemed to be some kind of fly floating in front and above her. Its movements were all wrong for an insect, however: it flew in slow, deliberate and level trajectory around her. Before she could see it better, it flew away and disappeared, leaving her puzzled. By then, the ceremony was at an end, with the King leaving the ballroom and with the audience getting ready to do the same. Mike Crawford, who had to stay in the back rows reserved for the non-recipients during the ceremony, then joined her and gave her a long kiss, making her forget about the strange insect.

10:03 (Universal Time)

Sunday, June 21, 3384

Zeta-Alpha Orbital City

Earth geo-synchronous orbit

Global Science Administrator Daran Mien showed a seat to Farah Tolkonen before sitting back behind his desk. He contemplated his top field researcher for a long moment.

“You look terrible, Farah. Is it because of your research down the alternate timeline?”

She nodded her head absently, as if still caught in some kind of nightmare.

“I knew from the few historical archives still available that our past was violent and barbaric, but nothing prepared me for the horrors I saw in the video recordings brought back by the automated probes. However, I can report to you that I found the cause of those timeline distortions shaking our space-time continuum.”

Daran Mien suddenly straightened up in his chair.

“Do you mind if I record your report, Farah?”

“Not at all. In fact, you would be negligent not to.”

Daran activated his office recording system, then turned back his attention to Farah, who inserted a data chip in the holodisplay system on Daran's desk. The science administrator watched in fascination as a 3-D recording started playing, showing a crowd of strangely dressed people sitting in a large room. The picture quickly focused on a young woman with dense, long black hair on her head and a set of fascinating green eyes. Her hair made her most unusual for Daran, since all humans in the 34th century were naturally bald, but he had to concede that the young woman from the past was very attractive.

“So, she is the one responsible for the distortions in the space-time continuum? She doesn't look like a criminal to me.”

Farah shook her head vehemently at Daran's last remark.

“She is not a criminal, Daran. She is a victim of the irresponsible experiments of Pran Osef and Telvi Ran. These pictures were taken in the summer of the year 1941 of Timeline 'B', the alternate timeline created by Osef and Ran's manipulations. The young woman we now see was abducted by those two scientists in the year 2012 of our own timeline, then dropped 72 years in her past, in the middle of a terrible war. I was able via a number of micro-probes to reconstruct what happened to her once she was marooned in the past. By the way, Pran Osef and Telvi Ran have already paid for their crimes: they were killed in a collision with a 1940-era aircraft just after dropping off this unfortunate woman and her vehicle.”

As she spoke, the recording showed to Daran the events in quick motion. The science administrator could not help feel sorry for the woman with the black hair.

“It must have been a traumatic experience for her. What is her name, by the way?”

“Nancy Laplante. She did go through some hard times but I have to admit that she adapted very well to the challenge. In fact, she did much better than you or me could have done if put in the same situation.”

“Oh! How come? We would have had a 1,400 years technological edge on those people, while she had only 72 years of hindsight.”

Farah smiled at Daran as if he was a student who had missed an important point during a class.

“Technological advance had little to do with her surviving her ordeal. Physically and mentally, this Nancy Laplante has a toughness that is just simply incredible. I myself would have been broken quickly by what she went through. Let me show you. A warning, though: these were times of war, so prepare yourself for some very gruesome pictures.”

Daran Mien watched with growing horror as Farah Tolkonen played the recordings of Nancy Laplante taken during her first mission in Gravelines and during her bayonet charge in Hamburg. When the recording stopped, Daran looked at Farah with reprobation.

“She is nothing more than a killing machine. You expect me to admire such a woman?”

Farah shook her head in disappointment at Daran’s reaction.

“Maybe I should have explained to you better the historical context she was in. The Twentieth Century was a most violent period of human history, with values and attitudes totally alien to us. Nancy Laplante was simply trying her best to shorten that war and limit the carnage.”

“By killing?” Asked Daran, dubious. Farah’s hot reply surprised him by its violence.

“Yes, by killing if necessary! As she said herself to someone, sometimes you have to kill to prevent more killings. We have not known war for centuries now and can count ourselves lucky for it. Preaching words of peace would have achieved nothing then and there, believe me.”

Daran was shaken by the conviction in her voice.

“So, what do you propose that we do with this Nancy Laplante?”

“As I said before, she is a victim of the experiments of two of our own people. We are thus responsible for what happened to her and must help repair the wrongs done to her. The best course would be to return her to her own time, with suitable reparations from us to compensate her for what she went through. However, there are a number of complicating factors at play here.”

“Such as?”

“Such as the fact that she fell madly in love and married a man from 1941 ‘B’. She also adopted a teenage girl orphaned by the war. I am not sure that she would agree to return to her own time and leave those two behind. Forcing her to return without them would be a very cruel act that I would never do or condone. On the other hand, if we do not extract her soon, she will die a most horrible and painful death.”

Without warning, Farah started again the holo projection. Daran Mien could only look for a few seconds before turning his head away from the screen and throwing up on the carpet of his office. A janitorial robot automatically appeared from its hidden cubicle to clean up the mess. Looking back at the holoscreen, Daran saw that Farah had frozen the picture of that awful scene on it. She looked at him with little sympathy in her eyes.

“Daran Mien, stop judging people from behind this safe desk of yours. We have a responsibility to save that young woman from a death she does not deserve, while at the same time leaving her with her beloved ones.”

“But, she cannot stay in that timeline. The distortions her presence there is causing could rip our world apart.”

“I agree on that point. However, I think that I found an acceptable solution to the problem. You must give me your approval before I can proceed, though.”

“Alright, what is your plan, then?” Said Daran, his eyes still fixed on the holoscreen.

16:20 (GMT)

Saturday, May 31, 1941 ‘B’

Gaoler’s House, Tower of London

London, England

“Good afternoon, ladies! I have the latest batch of letters from Berlin for you.”

Captain Kenneth Dows, Assistant Attaché for the Marine Corps at the American embassy in London, was nearly immediately surrounded by excited German women in the great hall of Gaoler's House. The letters and parcels he had brought from the American embassy were snatched in less than two minutes by the happy auxiliaries. Tomorrow afternoon, following a now well established routine, Ken would return to collect the response letters written by the auxiliaries, letters that would then be sent to Berlin via diplomatic mail. As he was about to leave, his hands now empty, Ken gave a discreet look at Ingrid Weiss, sitting at the big table of the hall and studying an algebra book. He had been attracted to the teenager since the first day he had seen her in January. That attraction had been physical at first but, as he learned to know her better, Ingrid's personality had reinforced his interest in her. Ken knew her real age, but her astonishing maturity for a fifteen year-old girl had only made her more desirable. Seeing that she was also eyeing him discreetly, Ken approached the table and smiled to her.

"Can I sit near you for a moment, Ingrid?"

"Of course, Captain!" Said Ingrid, her blue eyes shining as she looked at him with a smile. In truth, Kenneth Dows could have been used as a recruiting poster for the Marine Corps, being a 187 centimeter-tall handsome athlete. The 25 year-old officer had also proven to be a caring and open-minded man.

"So, how are your studies going, Ingrid?" Asked Ken, pointing the algebra book.

"Pretty well! My detention leaves me plenty of time to study and Nancy does not hesitate to help me when I have a problem understanding some concept. And you, Ken? How do you find your work at the embassy? Does commanding Marines miss you?"

"Actually, yes. However, I expect to be posted out of London in two months." He didn't miss the fleeting look of disappointment on her face.

"Oh! Do you know where you will be transferred?"

"Not yet, but I am hoping for a posting somewhere in the Pacific."

"The Pacific..." Said Ingrid in a dreamy tone. "I would love to see it, to be able to walk along its beaches and swim in the ocean."

What she didn't say to Ken was that many of her past incarnations had been in the Pacific region, from Indochina to China, from Japan to the Philippines and Tahiti. Ken smiled at her declaration.

"Maybe, one day, you will be able to realize your dream and see the Pacific. If I am still around there then, I would be happy to greet you there."

Ingrid smiled to him again while putting one hand on top of his left hand.

“Really, Ken? I would love that very much.”

Ken looked around him to make sure that nobody else was in the hall, then lowered his voice to a near whisper.

“Ingrid, when will you finally ask to be freed from this fortress, so that you could go to the United States? It pains me to see a girl like you being imprisoned like a vulgar criminal.”

Ingrid lowered her head, thinking over her answer.

“It is not so simple, Ken. First, even if I hate the Nazi cause, I still hesitate to abandon my comrades, many of which are good friends. Secondly, I cannot risk exposing the fact that Mike and Nancy adopted me, something that could well have very negative consequences for Nancy if the British learn about my adoption by her.”

Ken had to recognize that she had a point there. An idea then popped into his head.

“Eh, why not publicly renounce the Nazi cause, proclaim that you are a Jew and then ask for political asylum in the United States? Of course, my embassy would play along, while accepting you as a naturalized citizen. That way, Mike and Nancy would not be implicated directly and the British would have no reasons to suspect anything. I doubt that the British would be mean enough to insist interning you until the end of the war. Besides, once officially known as a Jew, the British would have no choice but to take you out of the Tower of London, to avoid reprisals against you by some of the auxiliaries held here.”

Ingrid nodded her head, knowing what Ken was talking about. Erika Muller had been transferred out of the Tower of London shortly after her arrest on charges of war crimes. However, a small group of pro-Nazi auxiliaries led by Unterführerin Grete Meissner had become hostile to her for her admiration towards Nancy. Despite the friendship and protection of her other comrades, Ingrid didn't feel completely safe here in Gaoler's House, hearing too often the words 'fraternization' and 'favoritism' being whispered around her. Meissner even had suggested once that Ingrid was having a lesbian relationship with Nancy, an accusation fueled by the regular absences of Ingrid from the Tower of London, when Nancy came to run with her. Meissner would probably have been furious to learn the truth, which was that Ingrid was being educated in secret by Nancy. In truth, Ken's plan made a lot of sense and had the big merit of not implicating directly Mike or Nancy. There was also the fact that Ken was a very handsome man that had attracted her for months now. Ingrid finally raised her head to look into Ken's eyes.

"I like your plan, Ken. However, what would I do once in the United States? I know nobody there, don't have any money and don't know if anyone will offer me a job." It was Ken's turn to think for a moment. His parents were rigid Catholics, something that had in fact created a rift between him and them, as he was a non-practicing Catholic. Ken doubted that his parents would be thrilled to greet a Jewish girl. An idea then made him smile tenderly to Ingrid.

"Why not get married, Ingrid? You would make me very happy and I would then be able to help you adapt to life in the United States. I love you, Ingrid, and this since the first time I saw you. We could have a fantastic life together." Ingrid's hand on his hand tightened as she looked at him with emotion.

"Ken, that would be the best thing that could happen to me since Mike and Nancy adopted me. Any girl would dream of marrying a man like you and I would be happy to live with you. We should however talk to Nancy and Mike before marrying, to prevent possible problems with the British."

"That seems reasonable to me, Ingrid. I can wait a few more weeks if need be. I will go talk with Mike after this visit. Him or Nancy could then contact you later on to tell you how things are going."

They then exchanged a tender kiss, happy dreams dancing in their heads.

07:30 (GMT)

Friday, June 13, 1941 'B'

RAF Northolt, England

Cheers rang out of the small crowd waiting in front of a hangar at Northolt when a very distinctive shape became visible, low on the eastern horizon. Everybody soon could hear the sound of the tandem rotors as the heavy helicopter made its approach. Piloted with flair, it finally landed smoothly fifty yards away from the crowd. The aft cargo ramp immediately went down, revealing a double line of soldiers standing in the wide cargo hold. More cheers rang out when the soldiers walked down the ramp, pushing along five disgruntled German prisoners. General Joubert, Air Commodore Nicholls and Nancy met the soldiers halfway with vigorous handshakes and wide grins on their faces. In addition, Nancy planted kisses on the cheeks of beaming George Townsend and Reginald Jones.

“How did it go, guys?” She asked to Townsend, who had been the mission commander. He took the time to take off his heavy assault helmet and wipe some sweat from his forehead before answering.

“It went even better than expected: surprise was total and the German defenses were next to nil. We were able to seize and then dismantle the German radar main components with no losses or damage to the helicopter. We also took prisoner five German radar technicians, including a new inmate for the Tower of London.”

Nancy looked briefly at the young German Luftwaffe auxiliary being escorted away by two RAF female guards, then looked at Reginald Jones, who was wearing a battledress now stained with grease spots. A belt at his waist supported both a holstered revolver and a tool pouch.

“So, Reginald, what do you think of present German radar technology?”

“Oh, a year ago I would have been impressed by it. Now, they are the ones looking backward, thanks to you, Nancy. Still, it will give us some precious information on how to better jam them. Overall, I would say that it was a most exciting and rewarding mission.”

“You know,” confessed Nancy, “I now realize what you guys felt while I was gone on a mission: another hour and I would have had no fingernails left.”

“Ah, sweet revenge!” Exclaimed Reginald. He then patted Nancy’s left upper leg. “Keep limping for a few more weeks, pretty little leg.”

“That pretty little leg is going to boot your ass if you pat it again in public, Doc.” Doug Wilson joined them at that moment, his flying helmet still on and with Nancy’s night scope fixed to the specially designed helmet swivel mount. He was given two kisses by a clearly proud Nancy.

“For a grounded fighter pilot, you seem to have a knack for flying helicopters, Doug.”

“Tell me about it.” Protested George Townsend. “He nearly made us all puke by the way he hugged the ground in total darkness.”

“Hey, you prefer that I fly a nice, soft approach so that the Germans can pepper us at will? Nancy, I will never be able to thank you enough for giving me a chance to fly again. I feel like I was reborn.”

“Doug, seeing you happy like this is the best reward I could ask for.”

Nancy then pointed at the Avro VULTURE, its shape made even more intimidating by the machinegun turret in its nose.

“How did our baby perform?”

“Superbly! She is as agile as a cat and I was able to hit 150 knots of airspeed on my dash back to here. My strong recommendation will be to go to series production right away.”

“You can count on my backing about that, Flight Lieutenant.”

They both turned and saluted General Joubert, who saluted them back, then examined the helicopter with sparkles in his eyes.

“This machine has so much potential for so many useful roles that I can’t start to list them all. It should make as nasty an impression on the Germans as your hovercraft did, Brigadier Laplante, er, sorry, Brigadier Crawford.”

“No harm done, General: in 2012, women use their maiden names on all official forms and papers. As for the roles this helicopter could fill, you have the choice of shipborne anti-submarine aircraft, ship-to-ship resupply at sea, search and rescue, artillery spotting, ground support aircraft...”

“Stop!” Exclaimed Doug Wilson. “You will make me stain my pants at that rate.” Nancy took a step back, mock disgust on her face.

“You would prefer six tons of aluminum and steel over 135 pounds of female flesh? You’re one sick puppy, Doug.”

They were all still laughing when Sergeant Latham came to them at a run and slid to a halt, saluting General Joubert as he tried to catch his breath back.

“Sir! The radio just announced that the Germans have started invading the Soviet Union.”

“Here goes my medical leave!” Said Nancy, rolling her eyes skywards.

15:24 (GMT)

Gaoler’s House, Tower of London

London, England

Oberhelferin Eva Dittmar looked in disbelief at her room, obviously expecting something much worse. Her roommate, a petite blonde with blue eyes, showed her a newly installed metallic frame bed that sharply contrasted with the antique wood frame bed besides it.

“I’m sorry that you don’t have more space than this, but we are starting to run out of it here. Still, it’s better than the medieval cells in Beauchamp Tower. By the way, I’m

Oberhelferin Katharina Fischer, from the liaison office at the Bremen Focke-Wulf factory.”

“Oberhelferin Eva Dittmar, from radar station number 16, near Antwerp.”

They shook hands, then sat besides each other on Eva’s bed.

“A radar station? How did the British capture you?” Asked a curious Katharina Fischer, a.k.a. Hanna Reitsch. Eva shook her head, seemingly still overtaken by the events of the day.

“They came in a very strange aircraft, one with two large propellers pointed skyward and which could land vertically...”

“The British have helicopters?” Exclaimed in alarm the test pilot. She bit her lips but Eva was already looking at her with curiosity.

“You know about those things?”

“Er, Focke-Wulf did produce a few helicopters. Can you describe to me the helicopter you saw?”

“Sure! I did spend nearly two hours in the damn thing after all. It had two propellers, one above the cockpit and the other above the tail, with four blades per propellers. The fuselage was big and roomy, with a cargo hold big enough for a large car or a light truck. There were actually over twenty British soldiers on board that thing. It had a ramp at the rear to help unloading and there was even a machine gun turret in the nose.”

Hanna gulped hard: that British helicopter was way ahead of anything she knew. It probably was another design imported from the future by Nancy Laplante.

“How fast was it? Could you tell?”

“It easily approached 300 kilometers per hour. It was also incredibly agile. We do have something comparable, do we?”

“Er, yes, of course!” Lied a suddenly downcast Hanna Reitsch.

17:59 (GMT)

Apartment 11

24 St James’ Place, London

A tired Nancy was about to unlock the door of her apartment when she heard at least two men whisper inside. Immediately moving to one side of the door so that somebody shooting through it would not hit her, she drew her Glock 17 pistol and

cautiously unlocked her door, then shoved it open and jumped inside, pistol pointed. The group of men and women in the lounge either dived for cover or froze on the spot under Nancy's bemused eyes. As she was slowly lowering her gun and looking at the plates and glasses lying around on the furniture, Mike Crawford's head cautiously appeared from behind a sofa.

“Er, happy birthday, Nancy!”

CHAPTER 32 – CAPTURED

09:41 (GMT)

Monday, June 23, 1941 ‘B’

RAF Northolt, England

The Lockheed A-29 HUDSON twin-engined aircraft was barely off the ground when Nancy took her laptop computer out of her carrying case and started working. The flight from RAF Northolt to the naval base of Scapa Flow would take at least three hours and she wanted to be fully ready on arrival to discuss with the senior naval commanders there the future naval use of helicopters. She was the only passenger on board of the small Coastal Command reconnaissance aircraft, with three crewmen to keep her company during the flight. Airman Jack Wallace, the dorsal gunner, came to her with a thermos bottle in one hand.

“Coffee, Maam?”

“Oh yes! You’re a darling.”

She gratefully took a steaming cup from the smiling young man.

“There is already cream and sugar in it, maam.” Added Wallace, obviously pleased to take care of such a famous (and pretty) passenger. Nancy temporarily put away her laptop computer, worried that she could spill coffee on it while drinking. The HUDSON was not renown for its bump-free ride, however good it was in its numerous roles. The coffee did help clear a bit her tired mind. Since the success of its first combat mission, the Avro VULTURE helicopter had become very popular with the higher staffs, with many useless concepts about its eventual use being pushed around constantly by overenthusiastic officers who understood nothing about helicopters. Nancy had her hands full with bringing some common sense to the whole business.

Halfway through the flight she had to store away her computer, the bumpy ride making any work on it nearly impossible. Looking through her window, Nancy noticed that they were not flying over land anymore. The pilot, Flight Lieutenant Biddle, came to see her shortly afterwards, an apologetic smile on his face.

“Brigadier Crawford, I’m afraid that a bad storm front will delay a bit our arrival. We are going to go around it but it could be a rough ride. You should keep your seatbelt on until further notice.”

“We are going to pass to the East of that storm, right?”

“Correct, maam! It should add half an hour to our flight, no more.”

“Thank you for the info, Mister Biddle: I’ll keep quietly to my seat.”

An hour later the situation worsened noticeably, with the aircraft jumping up and down in the midst of dense black clouds. Nancy was now starting to be seriously concerned. A blinding flash of light accompanied by a loud detonation suddenly made her cringe. The pilot’s yell from the cockpit didn’t do anything to reassure her.

“WE HAVE BEEN STRUCK BY LIGHTNING! ALL OUR INSTRUMENTS ARE DEAD! I WILL TRY TO FIND A PLACE TO LAND. HANG ON, MAAM!”

The next fifteen minutes were terrifying, with the plane thrown around by the storm like a simple toy, surrounded by frequent lightning bolts. Flying Officer Tom Carpenter came to her with a parachute in his hands and concern on his face.

“Brigadier, I’m afraid that we are totally lost now. We can’t even judge our altitude correctly. You better put this on.”

“What about the three of you?”

“We have our own parachutes, maam. Mister Biddle will go down now to try to find a hole in the cloud cover. Please hurry!”

Swearing quietly about their bad luck, Nancy quickly put on her parachute: at least it was one of the new models that could be steered. Carpenter also gave her an inflatable vest and helped her strap it on. Looking at her computer carrying case, she understood that she would not survive a jump into the stormy sea if she tried to hang on to it. Its loss would be incalculable but she had no choice. Her heart heavy, she buckled herself in her seat, hoping that they could find some piece of land. By now, they were flying barely a few hundred feet above a sea covered with furious waves. Carpenter came out of the cockpit again and took a large rubber bundle out of a storage locker, then walked to the passenger side door. He signaled Nancy to come near him and then jettisoned the door. He had to yell above the owl of rushing winds.

“We are nearly out of fuel, maam. I will throw out this rubber boat, then Mister Biddle will turn around to overfly it. You will jump at that time.”

“I am not going to abandon you. If I jump, we all jump, right?”

“That’s the idea, maam. Now, be ready for my signal.”

Pulling the inflation chord as he threw out the rubber raft, Carpenter watched it fall in the sea, then used signals relayed by Airman Wallace to direct Biddle’s turn back towards the yellow raft. He patted Nancy’s shoulder as they flew over it.

“GO!”

Keeping her eyes on the yellow spot dancing on top of the waves, Nancy jumped out and waited a little before opening her parachute, then let her laptop computer drop and fall into the sea. The winds were fierce and it took all her experience to be able to direct her glide and splash in the water fifty feet from the raft. The contact with the icy water was a shock to her. Quickly undoing her parachute harness, she then swam frantically towards the raft, finally pulling herself in it, both exhausted and freezing. Scanning the horizon and the sea around her, Nancy felt her heart sink: nobody else was in sight. Praying that the aircrew of the Hudson would make it somehow, she inventoried the content of the rubber raft’s storage pouch: it was limited to a flare pistol with a few spare cartridges, a water canteen and two chocolate bars. Loading the flare pistol, she pointed it skyward and fired, sending a red flare high above her in order to guide the airmen towards the raft, if they were still alive. She fired another flare five minutes later, then reloaded the pistol and waited, shivering. Tossed around and sprayed constantly by the still stormy sea, Nancy waited and hoped for hours, firing periodically signal flares, before going to sleep both from fatigue and from the onset of hypothermia. She was in a near coma when the sound of approaching diesel engines became audible. Barely managing to move her right arm, she pointed her flare pistol skywards and fired a flare, then passed out.

17:51 (GMT)

Submarine U-47

North Sea

“Captain, I confirm one person on board that raft.” Yelled the lookout atop the conning tower of the submarine.

“Very well!” Replied Kapitanleutnant Gunther Prien. “Steer hard port! Engines one quarter ahead! Rescue team on the forward deck!”

Six sailors scrambled out of the forward hatch with ropes and gaffes. Skillfully steered by Prien, the submarine soon bumped into the yellow raft, which was promptly seized and pulled aboard by the sailors. One of them examined the inert body inside the raft and raised its head towards the conning tower.

“IT’S A WOMAN! SHE’S STILL ALIVE!”

“A WOMAN? GET HER INSIDE, QUICKLY!”

Giving back the con to the watch officer, Prien went down the ladder leading to the control room, then walked into the forward torpedo room, where the sailors were gently laying the limp woman on the deck gratings. The men respectfully stepped back, letting their captain have a good look at her. Prien took her left wrist and found a slow but strong pulse. Her body was frigid.

“Get some warm blankets for her. You two, strip off her wet clothes but be respectful about it. The others, out!”

Prien examined closely the woman’s clothes as the two sailors undressed her. He straightened up in surprise at seeing the rank insignias and the patches on the woman’s vest, along with the impressive row of medal ribbons on the left chest.

“A Canadian female brigadier general from Army Intelligence?”

Prien’s exclamation made the senior sailor’s eyes bulge.

“Sir, you’re not saying that we got our hands on THE Nancy Laplante?”

“There is one way to know.”

Searching the pockets of the jacket and finding a soaked wallet, Prien emptied its content on a nearby bunk bed. He soon took out of the soggy pile a personalized calling card that was still readable.

“Brigadier Nancy Crawford-Laplante, VC and Bar, DSO and Bar, DFC, MC, Special Military Advisor to the Prime Minister.”

Petty Officer Klaus Hummel looked at the still unconscious woman, now wrapped in blankets and with a pillow under her head.

“Mein Got! Talk about catching a big fish.”

22:37 (GMT)

Submarine U-47

The first thing that Nancy saw clearly when she regained consciousness was the bearded faces of several men looking down at her with curiosity. Her heart sank when one of them spoke in German.

“She’s got green eyes alright. Beautiful ones too.”

“Thank you!” She replied weakly in German. The men smiled at her, with one turning his head and shouting at someone else.

“Tell the captain that Brigadier Laplante is awake.”

The man then looked back at her.

“Welcome aboard the U-47, Brigadier. Don’t worry about your uniform: it is being dried out now.”

Looking under the blankets covering her, Nancy saw that she was effectively stripped down to her underwear. She sat up cautiously, still feeling weak from her exposure to cold seawater. The dried salt on her skin made her itch like crazy. She looked at the older sailor, the one who had spoken to her.

“I suppose that you don’t have showers on board this submarine.”

“Correct, Colonel. If you want to wash, I can provide you with a basin, soap and a towel.”

“And a captivated audience?”

The sailors laughed at her joke and became noticeably friendlier.

“I can have this compartment evacuated for a few minutes if you need to wash.”

“That would be much appreciated, mister.”

An officer wearing the rank of Kapitanleutnant entered at that moment, stopping two paces from her. Nancy got to her feet and faced him, holding a blanket around her. She was actually taller than the officer.

“Brigadier Nancy Crawford-Laplante, Canadian Army, requesting permission to come aboard, Kapitanleutnant Prien.”

Prien’s jaw dropped from the surprise.

“How do you know my name?”

“I know you from history books, Kapitanleutnant. By the way, thank you for picking me up. You wouldn’t have seen anybody else floating around, I presume?”

Prien shook his head.

“There was nobody else around, sorry.”

She looked down at the deck, her jaws tight.

“There were three aviators with me. What are their chances of being still alive?”

“Nil! When we picked you up, you were already close to death by hypothermia. If nobody picked these men up soon after you were rescued, then they are long dead by now.”

Prien was silent for a moment, respecting her obvious grief.

“Brigadier Laplante, I have to inform you that my orders are to return to port and to deliver you to the Abwehr as a prisoner of war. We should be in Wilhelmshaven in about half a day. In the meantime, do you have any needs or wishes?”

“Yes, Kapitanleutnant! I would like to wash, then eat something, if it’s possible.”

“It certainly is, Brigadier. Klaus!”

“Yes sir?” Replied the petty officer, coming to attention.

“You will make sure that Brigadier Laplante gets what she wishes for. Until we are in port, she is to be considered as a guest, not a prisoner.”

Nancy smiled to him, relief in her eyes.

“Thanks, Kapitanleutnant. Once I’m finished eating, I will be more than happy to chat with you and your men about life in the future, if you are interested, of course.”

The wide grin on Prien’s face was enough to tell her that she was going to have a captive audience.

13:10 (Berlin time)

Submarine U-47

Wilhelmshaven harbor

Germany

“Where is Brigadier Laplante, Klaus?” Asked Gunther Prien, just back from the open bridge of the conning tower. The petty officer turned away from the ballast valves he was checking inside the crowded submarine control room.

“She is in the forward torpedo room, sir, doing some sort of relaxation exercise.”

Prien’s eyebrows went up in curiosity. Nancy Laplante had been a most charming, albeit unusual guest during their trip back to Germany.

“Have eight armed men ready on the forward deck, just in case the Gestapo shows up. Have also the 20mm cannon discreetly manned and ready to fire.”

Klaus Hummel nodded in understanding and started assembling his armed party. The consensus on board, decided during a general crew meeting earlier on, was that they would fight if the Gestapo tried to pick up Laplante. The fact that a Fuhrer’s directive

specifically protected her from the Gestapo had made things a lot easier in that matter. Walking to the forward torpedo room, Prien bent and entered it through the large, round hatch. He immediately froze in surprise when he saw Nancy. She was sitting cross-legged near the torpedo tubes, her back straight and eyes closed. Her hands were resting palm upwards on her knees and her face was the image of tranquility itself. Shaking his head in amusement, Prien walked to her and gently tapped her shoulder.

“Brigadier, it’s time to go on deck.”

She took a slow, deep breath, then opened her eyes and smiled to him.

“I am ready.”

Getting up, she put on and adjusted her green beret before walking to the forward hatch ladder and climbing it behind Prien. They emerged to a gray, cloud-covered sky. Surrounded by armed sailors, Nancy looked around the devastated port of Wilhelmshaven. Only 400 yards away, two giant floating cranes were still trying to upright the sunken hull of the pocket battleship LUTZOW. Prien swept his arms around.

“As you can see, Brigadier, your British friends did quite a proper job on their visit in May. I understand that you were yourself quite busy in Hamburg at that time.”

“You could say that. In fact, I nearly left my skin there.”

Prien nodded his head, then looked towards the quay, where a big black sedan car and four men in civilian clothes were waiting.

“I am afraid that the vultures are here to pick your bones, Brigadier. I sincerely wish that I didn’t have to give you up.”

“That’s alright, Kapitanleutnant. The Abwehr has always been correct in their handling of prisoners of war. Besides, another day on board this nest of sex-starved perverts and I would have been forced to start raping your sailors, starting with that cute young one over there.”

The young seaman pointed by Nancy turned red as the other sailors and Prien exploded in laughter.

As soon as the walkway between the quay and the submarine was in place, the four civilian men walked on board and stopped in front of Prien, who was shielding Nancy from them. The apparent leader of the group, a tall, slim man with a prominent nose, produced an identification card that Prien examined closely.

“Field agent Paul Steiner, Abwehr. We have been sent by Admiral Canaris to pick up Brigadier Laplante and bring her to the Abwehr headquarters in Berlin.”

Sadness in his eyes, Prien turned to face Nancy, saluting her.

“It was truly a pleasure to meet you, Brigadier. I wish that the rest of this war will not be too rough on you.”

Nancy returned his salute while smiling maliciously.

“Don’t fear for me, Kapitanleutnant. Pity rather the stalag guards that will be stuck with me.”

Prien grinned in turn and shook her hand.

“Good luck, Brigadier.”

He then reluctantly let an Abwehr man handcuff Nancy, then handed to Steiner Nancy’s gun belt, with the Glock 26 pistol and spare magazines hanging from it.

“This was on her when we picked her up in the North Sea.”

“Thanks!” Was the curt answer of the man before he turned away and walked off the submarine, following his men and Nancy towards the black car. They piled in quickly, two burly men sitting with Nancy in the back seat, then drove off. Gunther Prien looked a last time at the receding car before turning towards him men and shouting orders: he had a sea patrol to resume. He didn’t know yet that it would be his last one.

18:16 (Berlin time)

Berlin, Germany

The five-hour drive to Berlin was spent in silence between Nancy and her guards, with only one short stop at a small roadside restaurant for a visit to the washrooms and a snack. While the Abwehr men ate, they didn’t give her any food or water or let her take any. By the time their car finally stopped in front of a large stone and brick building in the Kreuzberg District of Berlin, Nancy was dying for a glass of water. Craning her neck past the guard seated to her right, she saw with a sinking feeling that the guards in front of the building were soldiers of the Waffen-SS.

“Hey! This can’t be Abwehr head...”

The butt of a pistol then struck her hard on the back of her head, knocking her unconscious.

18:21 (GMT)

24 St James' Place

London, England

Mike Crawford looked tearfully at George Townsend, who was still standing in the doorway of his apartment.

“She... she is alive? Is she alright?”

Townsend, worn out mentally from worrying about Nancy, shook his head slowly.

“We don't know, Mike. The only thing we know is that she was picked up, alive, in the North Sea by a German submarine. That submarine was then ordered back to port to deliver her to the Abwehr. Luckily for her, the Abwehr is known to play clean with prisoners of war. Maybe we could ask later on the International Red Cross or a neutral embassy in Berlin to check on her well-being.”

Mike Crawford suddenly looked at Townsend as if he was the Messiah.

“That's it! A neutral embassy! I could ask the American embassy in Berlin to check on her tomorrow.”

“Not so fast, Mike! We can't let the Germans know that we learned so quickly about her capture: it would tip them off on our radio intercept capabilities.”

“Do you expect me to sit on my ass and do nothing while Nancy could be mistreated?” Raged Mike.

“Mike, calm down! Why don't we go see together my boss tomorrow and propose to him your idea?”

“Alright, I'll wait until tomorrow. But, if your boss says no, I will go ahead with my plan anyway.”

“I know! In your place I would do the same.”

19:03 (Berlin time)

Abwehr headquarters, Berlin

Admiral Wilhelm Canaris was growing more impatient by the minute: his team should have been back with Nancy Laplante by now. He literally jumped on the receiver when his telephone rang. It was his regional director from Wilhelmshaven. What the man told him did not help Canaris' state of mind.

“What do mean, they were ambushed?... Are they all dead?... Listen, I want a round-the-clock vigil on that agent at the hospital. Anything he says can help us find who grabbed Laplante and to where she was taken.... Of course it must be the Gestapo! Who else could it be?... Keep me informed!”

Putting down the receiver, Canaris thought for a moment, then picked up the telephone again and dialed a number.

“Hello, this is Admiral Canaris. I need to speak with the Fuhrer urgently.”

CHAPTER 33 – AGONY

18:56 (Berlin time)

Monday, June 23, 1941 ‘B’

Gestapo interrogation centre

Berlin, Germany

Nancy woke up in what looked to her like the masonry basement of a building. She was suspended spread-eagled from the ceiling by chains, with more chains tied to the floor and forcing open her legs. All her clothes had been removed. Looking around her, she saw with increasing dread a number of torture instruments that filled the room, including a brazier with branding irons plunged in the red-hot coals. She had to close her eyes and concentrate in order to prevent panic from overtaking her. Her spirit had lived through such tortures fourteen centuries ago, when her persona of Yasmin, a young Persian slave girl, had been horribly tortured before being beheaded for trying to flee the harem where she had been held. Looking again around more carefully, she then noticed a movie camera mounted on a tripod and sitting in one corner, with extra rolls of films ready on a small table nearby. Cold sweat appeared on her forehead as she understood the implications of this: someone was intent on making an example out of her, whether she answered questions or not.

The noise of heavy bolt locks being pulled made her turn her head to the right, in time to see two men enter via a heavy wooden door. One of them was dressed in a civilian suit and looked like a doctor or a lawyer. The other one was a huge brute in a SS uniform. His function was immediately too obvious to Nancy. The civilian smiled when he saw that she was awake and stood in front of her, examining her at length with professional interest.

“So, I meet at last the famous She-Wolf herself. You have quite an enviable reputation, Brigadier Laplante. However, are you up to it? It seems to me that it is a lot for a simple woman to achieve all those things you are credited with.”

“Just try me!” Replied Nancy, who realized too late that the man had played on her feminist ego.

“Oh, I will! Now, I don’t have much time to waste and I’m sure that you want out of here as soon as possible, so why don’t you make it simple and just answer a few questions?”

Nancy took a deep breath, then spoke with the steadiest voice she could muster.

“Nancy Crawford-Laplante, Brigadier, number N75 834 504, born June 13, 1971.” The civilian shook his head as if she was a student who did not grasp a particular lesson.

“Brigadier, I am sure that you read in some history books about the interrogation methods of the Gestapo. However, reading about them and experiencing them are two totally different things.”

The man then went to the camera and switched on a powerful lamp mounted on it, then carefully pointed the camera on Nancy and adjusted the focus. He started the camera before returning in front of Nancy.

“We will now review the different techniques we may use on you while my friend Karl actually practices them on you. Should I go on or are you ready to be more cooperative?”

“Nancy Crawford-Laplante, Brigadier, number N75 834 504, born June 13, 1971.”

“As you wish! We will go gradually, from the most benign method to the most painful one. First is of course this old, time-honored instrument: the whip.”

On cue, the big SS man, who had grabbed a long bullwhip, savagely lashed Nancy’s chest with four vigorous strokes. The first one made her scream in pain but she was able, barely, to keep her mouth shut during the three other strokes. The civilian nodded in appreciation.

“Next is another old method: the pulling of nails.”

Nancy clenched her teeth and closed her eyes as the SS man knelt beside her right foot and approached a pair of pliers to her small toe. Karl took his time, slowly pulling the nail out with occasional side twists, sending waves after waves of searing pain through Nancy’s brain. Still, she did not scream. By the time Karl held up the nail, Nancy was quietly sobbing.

“Next, Colonel, is a decidedly more modern method: electric shocks. The electrodes are of course applied to the most sensitive parts of the body. I am sure that you know what the most sensitive parts of a woman’s body are.”

She could not help scream in agony when Karl applied a pair of electrodes to her genitals.

“Please note that this was only the half-power setting. Finally, we will try an old but very effective instrument: the branding iron.”

Nancy shook with fear as Karl approached, holding up a red-hot iron. He applied it to her belly, rolling it on her skin and making her scream horribly. He finally took off the iron and put it back in the brazier. The civilian got close to Nancy, who was now crying.

“Guess what, Colonel: this little demonstration took only five minutes. I have been able to make some of my past customers survive through over a week of this treatment. Do you really want to go through this?”

Nancy thought desperately about her options as she cried out her pain. This was worse than anything she had imagined, yet she could not let this sadistic coward break her: a lot of lives could be lost if she talked. Her voice broken by sobs, she looked directly at her interrogator.

“Nancy Crawford-Laplante, Brigadier, number N75 834 504, born June 13 1971.”
The civilian stepped back, genuine respect on his face.

“You do honor to your reputation, miss: many strong men do not resist past this stage. Karl, work her up thoroughly on both sides with the whip.”

22:46 (Berlin time)

Wednesday, June 25, 1941 ‘B’

Gestapo interrogation centre, Berlin

“What new weapons have you introduced to the British, Brigadier?”

Nancy, strapped to a massive steel chair, her naked body covered with burns, bruises and wounds from two days of continuous tortures, could only shake slowly her head, her voice nearly extinct from all the screaming. The civilian patiently stepped back.

“Karl, smash her left big toe.”

Nancy screamed for long seconds when Karl swung down his five-pound hammer and smashed her big toe, which already missed its toenail.

“So, miss, are we talking yet?”

Nancy kept shaking her head while crying.

“Karl, use the irons again.”

The SS man looked with near pity at Nancy: he normally didn’t enjoy doing this job, even if he was efficient at it. This time, he was close to hating himself for what he had done to

this incredibly brave woman. Going to the brazier, he took a long, thin iron rod and approached Nancy again but hesitated at the last moment, infuriating his superior.

“What are you waiting for?” Exploded the civilian. “Do it!”

Karl then reluctantly applied the iron rod to her body. Nancy screamed for long seconds, then passed out. Karl looked at her limp body, then at the interrogator.

“Sir, this is the fifth time that she passes out today. Shouldn’t we stop until tomorrow morning?”

“You’re right. No point in killing her so soon. Throw her in a cell and go to bed. We will start again at eight O’clock.”

“Yes sir!”

The interrogator then left quickly after switching the camera off, leaving Karl alone with Nancy. Karl undid the straps tying her to the steel torture chair, then took her limp body in his strong arms. He looked at her mutilated body and at her face, swollen, bruised and with one eye shut by multiple blows. Shaking his head, he carried her out of the interrogation room and down a narrow corridor leading to the cellblock. The Waffen-SS NCO in charge of the night shift there looked in revulsion at the torture marks covering Nancy’s body.

“And you are proud to do this kind of work? Did she talk, at the least?”

Karl gave the NCO a mean look: the man, along with other SS guards, had been quick enough to gang-rape Nancy in her cell the previous night, ignoring her screams of pain as they fondled her bruised body.

“She didn’t say a word.”

“Alright, put her in cell number four.”

“Could we give her a blanket or two for the night?”

The SS NCO thought for an instant, then nodded his head and went to get blankets while Karl entered cell number four with Nancy still in his arms. The cell was a tiny, bare room with concrete walls and floor and no furniture save a sanitary bucket. Karl laid Nancy down as soon as the guard came back and put a wool blanket on the hard floor, then covered her with a second blanket. He left the cell feeling a bit less awful about himself.

02:58 (Berlin time)

Thursday, June 26, 1941 'B'

Cell number four, Gestapo interrogation center

Berlin, Germany

Farah Tolkonen appeared seemingly out of nowhere in the middle of the small cell, a wave front of compressed air expelled from the volume she was now occupying being the only side effect of her apparition. Nancy was plainly visible in the crude light provided by the ceiling-mounted light bulb, which was on at all times. The Canadian was rolled in a tight ball in a corner, covered with a gray blanket. Her body shook continuously and she was also alternatively moaning and sobbing. Farah felt immense pity for her: she had never seen someone suffer so much, alone and at the mercy of sadistic monsters. Putting down the medical kit she had brought besides Nancy, Farah then knelt and gently put a hand on her shoulder to wake her up. Nancy's reaction both surprised and frightened Farah. Awaking with a startle, she yelled with despair in her voice.

"NOOO! LEAVE ME ALONE!"

Nancy froze in surprise as she stared at the 220 centimeter-tall bald woman with smooth Eurasian features kneeling besides her. The giant's eyes were golden yellow and she had six fingers per hand, while her skin was of very light brown color. She wore a kind of jumpsuit made of a shiny fabric whose color changed continuously from burgundy red to royal blue depending on the angle one looked at it. A wide belt at the stranger's waist supported a number of equipment pouches and she wore what looked like a large watch on her left wrist.

"Thank god! Someone finally came for me. Take me out of here, please!"

"I will, Nancy. I..."

They were still facing each other when the cell's door was slammed open and two guards rushed inside, submachine guns pointed at Farah.

"PUT YOUR HANDS ABOVE YOUR HEAD, NOW!"

Having assimilated German, along with other ancient languages, by direct mental transfer before leaving on her mission of mercy, Farah complied immediately, totally terrified. That was when Farah's pacifist upbringing and education, typical of a civilization that had known no wars for over five centuries, played against her. She

froze, not knowing how to react when faced with a threat of violence. Both guards stared at her with bulging eyes for a moment.

“Who are you?” Shouted one of the guards. Farah was nearly sobbing from fear now.

“I... I'm Farah Tolkonen, from the year 3384.”

The German then noticed the six fingers on each of Farah's hands. Near panic, he raised his weapon and put the muzzle of his submachine gun against her bald head.

“You move or try to touch any of your equipment and I blow your head off. Hans, get some reinforcements here, quickly!”

Farah then started crying, completely terrorized. Nancy then tried to plea with the guard.

“Don't you see that she's harmless? Please don't hurt her!”

The guard's answer was to kick her in the stomach, sending her to the floor, doubled up in pain. The cell soon filled up with SS guards who roughly picked up both Farah and Nancy and dragged them out. One guard also picked up Farah's medical kit and followed the group towards the interrogation room. Nancy sobbed in desperation when she recognized the room.

“Nooo! Please spare her this!”

The guards didn't reply as they strapped Nancy on a horizontal X-framed torture rack. Farah was then stripped of her equipment and told to take off all her clothes. She complied while crying with despair: she knew what was awaiting her, as her probes had shown her what had happened to Nancy in this awful room. She was next suspended from the ceiling spread-eagled by chains. However, contrary to Nancy, her feet still touched the floor, so tall she was. Except for two men, the guards then left the interrogation room.

After a couple of minutes, Nancy risked some words in English.

“Farah, whatever they do, please don't give them your time machine: it would doom our whole history.”

“I know! I will try my best.” Answered hesitantly the scientist. One guard shouted at them.

“DO NOT SPEAK!”

Not wanting to attract blows to the giant, Nancy shut up, thinking furiously about how to handle this new situation. The giant woman, while seemingly ready to risk her life to save her, was obviously useless in any fight and looked totally helpless when faced with

violence. On her part, Farah tried to think of a way out of her predicament. Her time ship, cloaked from normal human vision, could be recalled by a simple mental command from her, relayed via the tiny implant in her brain. However, this did not free her or the unfortunate Nancy Laplante from this awful room full of barbaric instruments. Glancing at Nancy's mutilated body, Farah wondered how anybody could resist so much pain. She had no illusions about her own pain tolerance threshold: it was next to nil. On the other hand, Nancy was right about the consequences of giving away her time ship to those Germans. She had thoroughly studied this time period in order to prepare for her quest and understood what such a monstrous political entity as the Nazi Party could do to humanity if in control of a time ship. Not only this alternate timeline was at risk: her own timeline would be shredded to pieces by the repeated distortions caused by multiple manipulations of history. Her dilemma was that, while she understood the implications of giving in under torture, she doubted that she was able to put up any significant resistance. Nancy Laplante, who was looking at her, seemed to read her mind.

"Farah, if you put in your mind that you can do it, you will do it."

She barely had time to finish speaking before an enraged guard slammed the butt of his weapon on her swollen and bruised right breast, making Nancy scream hideously.

"I said do not speak!"

"BARBARIAN!" Yelled Farah, surprising herself with her own audacity. A vicious look on his face, the guard approached her and examined her, then passed his left hand on her large, firm breasts, fondling them for a few seconds.

"You have a nice body, whatever you are. You better behave or you will soon look like your friend."

The German then viciously twisted her nipple and pulled her breast, making Farah cry out with pain. The guard then stepped back and waited. The interrogator, followed by Karl, soon came in the room. He had obviously been awakened in a hurry and seemed in a foul mood. Stopping two paces in front of Farah, he carefully examined her, noting the six fingers per hand and even examining her vagina to check for any differences with normal women. He then turned towards the senior guard.

"What do we know about her?"

"She was found inside Laplante's cell, with no obvious way for her to get in unnoticed. She said that her name is Farah Tolkonen and that she is from the year 3384. Her equipment and clothes are on the table, near Laplante's clothes."

The interrogator went to the table and sifted through Farah's equipment. What he saw there was so advanced and alien that he couldn't even tell if there were weapons in the lot. He then approached Farah, his face impassive.

"Miss, you will tell me who you are and why you came here."

"I... I am Doctor Farah Tolkonen, from the year 3384. I came to rescue Nancy Laplante and return her to her proper time period, where she belongs, before she can cause irreparable damage to the space-time continuum."

"How did you get in her cell without being noticed?"

"By time shift."

Seeing that he didn't understand that, she elaborated.

"I came in the cell while in a phase of time out of synchronization with this present time. Think of it as being like a temporal ghost."

"Hmm, a most useful trick indeed."

He then pointed at her equipment on the table.

"Describe to me the function of each of these items."

"Well, from left to right, you have first a medical kit, a tool kit to open locks if need be, a multi-spectral detector, a communicator and my watch."

"Where are your weapons?"

"I don't have any weapons."

That angered the interrogator, who came closer to her.

"Do you take me for a fool? You expect me to believe that you came back over 1400 years to deliver somebody from a guarded facility during a war, without bringing any weapons? Karl, give her a taste of the whip."

"Wait!" Yelled Farah, near panic. "I didn't bring weapons because there are none in the 34th century: all weapons were banned over 400 years before my time. We have not known wars for five centuries."

He looked at her, thinking for a moment.

"It may be so. We will come back to that later. Now, who else came with you on that mission?"

Farah lowered her head in embarrassment.

"Nobody! Everyone I asked refused to come: they thought it was too dangerous to go, so I had to come alone."

"Couldn't you order them to go?" Asked the interrogator in total disbelief.

“No! In my society, which is totally non-violent, individuals cannot be forced to do anything against their will that could endanger their mental or physical well being.”

Nancy, who was listening carefully to all of this, had to rethink her opinion of the scientist: Farah may be useless when faced with violence, but she was no coward. The interrogator shook his head in disgust.

“What a bunch of weaklings.”

The Gestapo man then stared at Farah, his eyes focusing behind his round spectacles.

“Where is your time machine?”

Farah hesitated, biting her lower lip.

“It has gone back to my own time. I pre-programmed it to jump back to the future if I didn’t return to it within thirty minutes.”

The interrogator smiled in a way that Farah didn’t like.

“Doctor Tolkonen, have a good look at your friend.”

Farah did so, examining with growing sadness the countless bruises, cuts and burns covering Nancy’s body. Even in her own time, it would take the full facilities of a hospital for Farah to bring Nancy back to full health. Here, even with her medical kit, the Canadian would probably be left with long-term sequels and may even be crippled for life. There was still a look of determination in those green eyes, though. Farah spoke to her in French.

“I will not tell them, Nancy.”

“I believe you. Be strong, Farah.”

A vicious lash of the bullwhip struck Farah’s back, making her yell in pain. The interrogator was now furious.

“Miss, you either tell me now where is your time machine or you will soon look like your friend.”

She contained a spasm of fear before answering, resigned to whatever was coming: the whole of history was at stake.

“I told you: it has gone back to the future.”

“Karl, the whip!”

04:02 (Berlin time)

Gestapo interrogation center

Admiral Canaris got out of his car and, surrounded by armed Abwehr agents, entered the Wilhelmstrasse Gestapo interrogation center. A company of Luftwaffe troops had already surrounded and seized the building, disarming the few Waffen-SS guards on the ground level and upper floors. That left only the basement floors, where the cells and interrogation rooms were. Canaris walked to the senior Gestapo official, closely guarded by two Luftwaffe soldiers, and handed him a paper.

"This is a warrant signed by the Fuhrer himself, ordering the release into my custody of Brigadier Laplante, wherever she is to be found. You either cooperate now or you will be shot for disobeying a Fuhrer's direct order."

The Gestapo man paled and nodded his head.

"She is downstairs, in the second basement. I assure you that I was just following ord..."

"I will listen to your garbage later. Now, you will come with me and order the guards in the basement to surrender immediately. If I find Colonel Laplante dead, you will be all executed on the spot. Am I clear?"

"Er, yes Admiral!"

"Then lead on!"

The Gestapo official quickly got the rest of the Waffen-SS guards to surrender without resistance, then guided Canaris and the Abwehr agents to a thick, reinforced wooden door. As they got to the door, a blood-curling scream froze them momentarily in place. One of the agents looked at Canaris, apprehension on his face.

"It was a woman's scream, sir."

"RUSH THAT PLACE!"

Six Abwehr agents slammed the door open and rushed in, closely followed by Canaris. Two bursts of fire rang out as the old admiral stumbled on a horribly mutilated woman tied to a horizontal X-frame rack. He recognized her despite her swollen, badly beaten face: it was Laplante. Walking quickly to her, he delicately turned her head so that she could see him.

"Brigadier Laplante, I am Admiral Canaris, chief of the Abwehr. We are getting you out of here."

Laplante, who had been crying when they entered, implored him with her sole eye not swollen shut.

"Help my friend, please!"

Surprised by her request, Canaris looked around the room and stepped back at seeing a giant of a bald woman, suspended naked from the ceiling, unconscious. Lying on the floor in large pools of blood were a man in civilian clothes and a big SS guard. Moving closer to the giant, Canaris saw that two electrodes were clamped to her nipples and that her torso was covered with whip marks.

“Lower her to the ground and untie her, quickly! You two, free Brigadier Laplante and call an ambulance!”

Looking around the room, Canaris saw a table with a number of objects and a box on it, plus a camera mounted on a tripod. There was a stack of film rolls near the camera, some used, some still sealed in their boxes. He pointed the camera and the objects to three of his agents.

“Make sure to grab all these films and the things on the table. We are taking them back with us.”

“Sir!” Called an agent holding Laplante’s head. “Brigadier Laplante wants to speak with you.”

Canaris was at her side in seconds. Laplante’s voice was hoarse, barely audible.

“My friend’s name is Farah Tolkonen. She is from the year 3384 and tried to free me. There is an advanced medical kit as part of her equipment: bring it with us.”

“Relax, Brigadier, we will take good care of you and your friend. An ambulance will bring you to a hospital soon.”

Gently putting her head down, Canaris looked at his senior agent.

“Rudolph, make sure that the items on the table accompany those two women to the hospital. If the giant one asks for her medical kit, let her have it. The films will go to our headquarters for immediate development. Also, get some blankets to cover their nudity.”

“Yes sir!”

The ambulance showed up ten minutes later. Canaris got in it along with the two women and their effects, plus two armed agents. Two trucks full of Luftwaffe troops followed as additional escort. The convoy took only a few minutes to arrive at a hospital reserved for Luftwaffe aircrews, near Tempelhof Airport. Canaris met with the chief-surgeon in the reception hall, as Laplante and Tolkonen were being brought in. The doctor’s eyes opened wide when he saw Farah, her lower legs sticking out of the

stretcher bearing her. Canaris waited until both women were admitted and started receiving medical care before collaring the Luftwaffe doctor.

“Herr Colonel, as far as those two women are concerned, you saw nothing, you heard nothing and you will say nothing!

CHAPTER 34 – HOSPITAL STAY

09:51 (Berlin time)

Thursday, June 26, 1941 'B'

Tempelhof military hospital

Berlin, Germany

Farah Tolkonen emerged slowly from her sleep to find an ancestor woman sitting by the side of her bed and watching her. By the dryness of her throat and the difficulty she felt in concentrating, Farah understood that she had been given pain-killing drugs. She didn't like the idea much, as such drugs were not used any more in the 34th century due to their habit-forming effects. She had to get access to her own medical kit. A wave of searing pain went through her body when she tried to move, making her cry out in pain. The ancestor woman held her down gently, concern on her young face.

"Please stay still, miss." Said the nurse in German. "Your wounds will be quite painful for a while. Do you want more morphine?"

"NO!" Shouted Farah, surprising the nurse. "I don't want your primitive drugs. Let me have my own medical kit instead."

"Are you a doctor, miss?"

"Yes! My kit contains very advanced medical equipment. I will need it if Nancy Laplante is to be saved at all."

The nurse straightened up, clearly offended.

"Miss, we have the best doctors of the Luftwaffe here. We will be able to care for your friend."

"You people don't even know about antibiotics yet. If I am not allowed to treat her, she will soon die of a generalized infection. Where is Nancy Laplante now?"

The nurse hesitated for a moment before answering in a subdued voice.

"She is due to be operated on soon. Her breasts were beaten and burned so badly that they have to be amputated."

"NOOO! Cancel that operation immediately! I want to see the chief-surgeon right now!"

"Calm down, miss! Colonel Mandell is very busy right now and you..."

“GET HIM NOW! YOU ARE GOING TO MUTILATE NANCY LAPLANTE UNNECESSARILY!”

“How could you pretend to do better than us?” Replied the nurse, now angry. Farah herself then became angry, maybe for the first time in her life.

“BECAUSE I’M A DOCTOR FROM THE 34th CENTURY, YOU IDIOT! I MIGHT AS WELL BE IN THE STONE AGE AS FAR AS YOUR SO-CALLED MEDICAL SCIENCE IS CONCERNED. GET ME YOUR COLONEL MANDELL, IMMEDIATELY!”

Badly shaken, the nurse got up from her chair and went to the door of the small room, knocking on the door. An armed Luftwaffe soldier answered her and spoke briefly with the nurse before letting her out and closing the door behind her. Farah heard the noise of a door bolt being pushed as she slowly, painfully sat up in her bed, which was too short by a good foot for her. The whip marks and the electrical burns to her breasts were causing her intolerable pain, yet what she had endured was nothing compared to Laplante’s ordeal. And all this had been started by two scientists from the Global Council.

Farah was still bitterly thinking over that fact when the door of her room opened and the nurse came back in with two men. One wore a white overcoat over a military uniform, had a stethoscope around his neck and had graying short hair. The other man was much younger and looked athletic. The open jacket of his gray suit let Farah see a holstered pistol for a moment. The older man spoke first.

“Miss, I’m Colonel Reinhardt Mandell, Chief-Surgeon of this hospital. I am told that you are a doctor yourself?”

“Yes I am, Colonel. You must cancel the operation on Nancy Laplante and let me treat her right away with my own medical kit.”

“What tells us that you won’t use your equipment to escape, Doctor?” Asked the younger man, suspicious. Farah gave him a poisoned look.

“Escape? How? Have you seen what you barbarians did to me and Nancy?”

“She’s right, Herr Braun.” Cut in the chief-surgeon. “Brigadier Laplante is in no state to go anywhere right now. In fact, she may very well die if we don’t do something soon for her.”

“Please, let me have my medical equipment so that I can help her.” Implored Farah, close to tears. Braun thought for a second, then left the room to speak to one of the soldiers on guard. He then came back and fixed Farah, his face hard.

“A guard will bring the belongings of both of you here. I will however have to vet any equipment you wish to take before it is given to you. If you try to trick us, you will be separated from Laplante for good. Do you understand me?”

“Yes!” Replied Farah weakly, lowering her eyes under his intense gaze. This situation was well beyond anything she had experienced before in her life. Braun was not finished, however.

“While we wait for your equipment, Doctor, I have a few questions for you. First off...”

“Before you go on, Herr Braun, I want Nancy Laplante brought here immediately, so that I can treat her without delay. If you don’t do that, then forget your questions.” Taken aback for a moment by Farah’s sudden combativeness, Braun then nodded to Colonel Mandell, who in turn sent away his nurse with orders to bring in Laplante.

“Happy now, Doctor?” Said Braun in a cold voice. “Do understand one thing, miss: I am from the Abwehr, not the Gestapo, but I still place the interests of Germany first. As a spy and suspected saboteur, you still are liable to the firing squad. If you do not cooperate fully...”

“B... but I’m a doctor! I am incapable of violence. My society hasn’t known war for over 500 years.”

“You still broke into a German jail to try freeing the person widely considered to be Germany’s most dangerous enemy, miss.”

“But Nancy is not an enemy of the Germans per say. She has always treated German prisoners the best she could. She even served alongside a German Army unit in the year 2004.”

That seemed to shock the two Germans present to no small degree. Farah then pushed that little gain for all its worth.

“Look at what happened since she appeared in September of 1940: within two months after her arrival, the British stopped bombing indiscriminately your cities. Why? Because she convinced the british Prime Minister to stop such bombings.”

“For the good it did us.” Replied Braun sharply. “The new British weapons she helped introduce are destroying systematically our war industries.”

“So, they now target machines instead of people. I can live with that. Nancy Laplante is not a butcher or a sadist, contrary to some of your leaders.”

“Watch what you say, miss, or...”

“Or you will torture me and Nancy again? Don’t you have any shred of human decency left in you?”

Farah, at the end of her nervous resistance, then started crying, still sitting on her bed and wearing a hospital gown too short for her 220 centimeter-long body. Braun watched her in silence for a moment, unsure how to react. That was when Nancy Laplante was rolled in on a gurney. Still in a semi-comatose state and with most of her body covered by a linen sheet, it was still plainly obvious that she was in constant, severe pain, with her teeth clenched together and her body shaking constantly. Mandell looked at Farah apologetically.

“We already gave her as much morphine as we dared. More could kill her.”

Farah, fighting off her own pain, stepped slowly out of bed and laboriously walked to Nancy’s gurney. Tears came back to her eyes as she gently caressed the Canadian’s hair.

“Please forgive my people for dropping you into this hell, Nancy.”

Nancy responded by slowly moving her right arm to touch Farah’s face with her bandaged hand, while looking at her with her one good eye.

“Not... your fault... friend.”

Those words and the touch of Nancy’s hand gave back some courage to Farah, who glared at Braun.

“Where is my medical equipment? Has your guard stopped for a lunch break or what?”

Sighing in exasperation, the Abwehr agent left the room, locking the door behind him. He was back two minutes later with the Luftwaffe guard, whose hands were full with a cardboard box and Farah’s medical kit. The guard put both the box and the kit on the bed and left. Farah was eagerly reaching for her kit when the noise of Braun’s pistol being cocked froze her.

“Remember, miss: no tricks!”

Moving in slow, deliberate gestures, Farah opened her medical kit and took out two headbands with circuitry attached to them. Putting one around Nancy’s head, she then pushed a switch on it. The Canadian immediately sighed with relief, her body relaxing all of a sudden.

“These headbands are pain inhibitors. They block the pain messages from nerve endings from being registered by the brain. You won’t need to administer drugs to her

anymore, but that headband is not to be removed for any reason until I say so: taking it off could kill her from the pain backwash.”

Farah then put on a headband herself and activated it. Sighing with relief, she then searched in the cardboard box and took out of it a hand-held instrument and what looked like a big wristwatch.

“These are a medical scanner and a data storage unit. I will now examine Nancy.”

Strapping first the so-called data storage unit to her left wrist, Farah then pulled away the linen sheet covering Nancy’s body and approached the medical scanner to inches of Nancy’s swollen, mutilated breasts, hoping all along that Braun would not be too insistent on inspecting her equipment. The unit now strapped to her wrist was in reality a portable time distorter, which permitted her to effect short space-time jumps. Nancy was however in no shape right now to escape with her. Farah had to heal her first before they could think about leaving. Switching her scanner to thermal mode, Farah swept it slowly around Nancy’s breasts first, then the rest of her body, while explaining her actions to the fascinated Germans.

“My scanner is now on thermal vision mode and gives me a view of Nancy’s internal temperature zones. Blue zones are coolest and red zones warmest. It is evident that much of her breast tissues are dying due to extensive blood clots and electrical burns. The same applies to her genitals and most of her skin surface. There is also a large blood clot blocking partially her left femoral artery. I am now switching to echo-sounding mode to check for fractures.”

Starting her scan at Nancy’s head, Farah quickly found something and pointed it on the scanner’s screen to Colonel Mandell.

“There is a fracture line along her right cheekbone, around the eye lobe. She also lost three teeth, with a fourth one loose.”

“This scanner of yours is incredible.” Marveled Mandell. “I wish that we could have such equipment.”

“Forget it, Colonel: your science is not advanced enough to even understand this equipment if dismantled for examination.”

Going down along Nancy’s legs, Farah swore as she scanned her feet.

“The bones in her toes are all smashed to bits. What the hell did they do to her?”

“An old Gestapo technique, Doctor.” Explained Braun in a subdued voice. “After pulling the toenails out, they smash the toes one by one with a hammer: an excruciatingly painful treatment but a generally effective one.”

That earned him a murderous look from Farah.

“You barbarians! How dare you call yourselves civilized people?”

“Miss, don’t confuse the Gestapo with the average German people.”

“Oh? What about the hundreds of thousands prisoners being beaten and starved to death right now in your concentration camps? What about the six million Jews and Gypsies that will be exterminated in specialized German death camps during this war? I bet that you will plead ignorance or obedience to orders, like your leaders will do at the end of this war. Forget it anyway: I have more urgent things to do than to discuss your personal guilt in those atrocities.”

Still furious and ignoring Braun from then on, Farah took out of her kit a small gray box and a flat case. Opening the case, she revealed a display screen and a control keyboard. Next, she took out of the box what looked like a syringe and carefully inserted its large needle in the femoral artery of Nancy’s left leg.

“For those of you who care, I’m going to remove that large blood clot before it travels to Nancy’s heart or brain.”

The Abwehr man, thoroughly shamed by now, left the room with his head bowed low. Now more relaxed, Farah started punching directives on her control keyboard as Mandell and his nurse watched her intensely.

“How are you going to proceed, Doctor Tolkonen?”

“I will destroy that blood clot from within, using a microscopic probe that I am about to inject in the femoral artery.”

Mandell looked closely at the syringe and shook his head.

“But I see only a clear liquid inside that syringe.”

“That’s because the probe is only a few microns in diameter. You would need a microscope to see it.”

“Microns?” Said Mandell, overwhelmed.

“Yes, Colonel. Watch this display screen now: it will show what the probe’s camera will transmit.”

“That thing has a camera? Mein Gott!”

Pushing a button, Farah sent the nanoprobe on its preprogrammed mission. She, Mandell and the nurse soon were watching a view from inside Nancy’s artery as the

nanoprobe traveled towards the blood cloth. The latter soon became plainly visible on the display screen. Hugging it, the nanoprobe quickly started destroying it methodically.

“My probe is now using a special solvent to dissolve the blood cloth. While it is working, I will start another part of Nancy’s treatment.”

Farah took out of her kit a hypodermic injector and a small bottle full of clear liquid, plugging the bottle in the base of the injector. After setting the shot dosage on her injector, Farah made a number of quick injections into Nancy’s breasts, face, genitals and toes.

“What I just injected is a mixture of two products: one will dissolve and wash away the dead tissues inside her body; the other will stimulate and accelerate the regeneration of body cells. As for her external wounds, I will use a dermal regeneration unit.”

Farah took out yet another instrument that looked like a small flashlight and, activating it, started slowly playing its yellow beam of light from up close on Nancy’s whip marks and burns.

“Watch carefully how I do this, Colonel: you will have to do it on me afterwards, when I’m finished with Nancy.”

Farah had to work for nearly an hour on Nancy, so extensive were the Canadian’s wounds. Finally satisfied that she had done all she could for her for the moment, Farah then gave her dermal regenerator to Mandell and took off her hospital gown, standing naked in front of the German doctor.

“Your turn to get to work, Doctor.”

Mandell spent a good twenty minutes treating Farah. Finished with his task, he looked at Nancy Laplante and nearly jumped back.

“Mein Gott! Much of her facial swelling is gone already. I also see some pink back in her toes. This is a miracle.”

“No, it is 34th century medical science for you, Colonel.” Replied calmly Farah while putting on her 34th century clothes that had been in the cardboard box brought in earlier by the guard. Putting on last her boots, she went back to Nancy’s side to inspect her progress. Her eyes still unfocused due to the morphine still inside her body, the Canadian smiled weakly to Farah while taking hold of her right hand.

“Thanks, Farah. You will be my friend forever.”

“And you will always have my most sincere admiration: you are the bravest woman I ever met.”

“I could point a few others to you. You wouldn't have some sort of contraceptive in your kit, by chance? The SS guards gang-raped me in my cell.”

That brought tears back to Farah's eyes. Going back to her medical kit, she took out of it a small aerosol can and held it in front of Nancy's mouth.

“Open wide, Nancy.”

Farah then let go a short spray inside Nancy's open mouth.

“There! Don't worry anymore about having an unwanted baby from one of those monsters. Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“Yes!” Replied Nancy, switching to French. “Get both of us out of here as soon as possible if you still can.”

Farah lowered her voice and also switched to French.

“I am afraid that is not possible anymore: I ordered my ship back while they tortured me, since I was afraid of breaking under the pain. I however still have a way to get us to England. We will go in a few days, when you will be able to walk.”

“With my smashed toes?”

“They will be mostly healed by then. Have faith.”

“Then, I guess that I will have to fake it out for a few days.”

“A good idea. Now, rest. You need to get rid of all those drugs in your body.”

The Abwehr agent then came back in the room. He went to Mandell and was about to say something to him when his eyes fell on Nancy. Utter surprise on his face, Braun ran to her and looked closely at her face. He then pulled away the linen sheet covering her and contemplated her half healed wounds.

“But... this is impossible! How did you do this, Doctor Tolkonen?”

“You want a five minute résumé on 34th century medical science, mister? You should have stayed during the class. You will however have another shot at watching me: I intend to treat the patients of this hospital afterwards.”

“You what?”

“You heard me well, Herr Braun. I am ready to help your wounded as well.”

“Please, Herr Braun!” Said Mandell. “We have dying patients that Doctor Tolkonen could save. Let her help them.”

Visibly moved, Braun's expression softened.

"I sincerely appreciate this, miss, but it will have to wait: an important visitor is about to arrive to see both of you."

"Could I have my clothes, then?" Asked weakly Nancy from her gurney. "If that visitor is the one I think, then I want him to see me as Brigadier Laplante, of the Canadian Army."

"That is a legitimate enough request, Colonel." Agreed Braun. "You are a prisoner of war and this is a basic right. Are you well enough to put on your uniform, though?"

"Except for my shoes and socks, yes."

Braun then went to the cardboard box on the bed and took out the pieces of Nancy's uniform, handing them to Farah.

"Here! I will leave now so that Brigadier Laplante can have some privacy while dressing."

"You already saw me naked, Mister." Cut in Nancy. "You might as well show your muscles to Farah by helping her to dress me up. I will need a wheelchair, though."

"I will get one." Volunteered the German nurse, leaving the room at a quick walk. Braun, a bit embarrassed at first, helped turn and move Nancy around as Farah dressed her up. Nancy was nearly dressed when the nurse came back, pushing a wheelchair. Braun then gently picked up Nancy in his arms and sat her in the wheelchair. As she had suspected, Nancy could not put on her socks or shoes without deforming her healing toes permanently. The nurse put Nancy's shoes and socks in her lap instead, then covered her legs and feet with a blanket. Last, Farah adjusted Nancy's green beret on her head, covering as much as possible the pain inhibitor band.

"Remember, Nancy: do not take off your pain inhibitor for any reason for at least another week, or it could kill you. Another thing: you will need one daily injection of my regenerative solution for the next three days if you are to recover to any fair degree from your wounds."

"What if we get separated or your medical kit is taken away?" Asked Nancy, apprehensive. The German nurse found the solution to that.

"I could get a syringe set for Colonel Laplante to use. She could then keep her needed drugs on herself."

"Good idea, Nurse Stauberger." Replied Mandell. "I will sign a medical ordnance authorizing her medication. I doubt that anybody will countermand that."

"Perfect!" Said Farah, delighted. "Let's do it!"

Five minutes later, Nancy had in a pocket of her uniform a small case containing four syringes already filled with daily doses of Farah's regenerative solution. The giant gave her as well a dozen large medical patches wrapped in sterile plastic packaging.

"These patches are soaked with regenerative cream and are meant to heal third degree burns. They are self-adhesive. You will need them to regrow your nipples." Nancy barely had time to pocket the patches before the sound of boots came from the hallway. Farah retreated behind Nancy's wheelchair, fear overtaking her, as four big SS soldiers armed with submachine guns entered the room, weapons at the ready. Two of them immediately took position behind and on each side of Nancy and Farah, while the two others faced them with stony looks, fingers on the triggers of their weapons. Adolph Hitler was next to enter the small room, half a dozen high-ranking Nazi officials behind him. As the Germans present gave the Nazi salute to Hitler, Nancy's eyes zeroed in on a tall, handsome SS officer close behind the Fuhrer.

"Heidrich!" She said in a low voice full of hatred. The man was both dangerous and ruthless, apart of being highly intelligent and ambitious. Most Nazi officials justly feared the head of security of the SS Corps. Reinhardt Heidrich, as well as Hitler and the others, heard Nancy and glared back at her as Hitler looked on in apparent amusement.

"It seems that Die Wolfin doesn't like you, my dear Heidrich."

"Why did we spare her, Mein Fuhrer? She has too many important secrets to tell for us to show manners with her."

"I decided so because she showed mercy to our own people, Heidrich. I will not go back over this."

Hitler's final tone made Heidrich snap to attention.

"Yes, Mein Führer!"

Hitler then looked up and down Farah with intense curiosity.

"So, this is what women will look like in the future. Are men also bald in your time, miss?"

"Everyone in the 34th century is bald and has six fingers per hand, sir."

Farah's polite answer got her an angry correction from one of the SS guards.

"You will call him Fuhrer, not sir!"

"S... sorry, I didn't know." Pleaded Farah, shrinking from the SS soldier. That made Heidrich snort in disdain.

“Tall but cowardly. These future humans are clearly an inferior race.”

Nancy had to control herself in order not to shout at Heidrich.

“She is a pacifist and her people have not known war for centuries, yet she came unarmed and risked her life to try saving me. She is not a coward.”

Hitler contemplated Nancy for a moment, thoughtful.

“Like a true she-wolf: dangerous, cunning, yet protective. You have a lot to be admired for, Brigadier Laplante, starting with your consideration towards the safety of German civilians and your scrupulous treatment of German prisoners of war. You will be treated as a genuine prisoner of war, but you are however too dangerous to be sent to a normal prisoner of war camp. I have thus ordered that you be transferred immediately to Oflag ¹⁹IV-C, in Colditz Castle, where you will be kept in solitary confinement for the rest of the war.”

Nancy couldn't help feel despair then: Colditz Castle was a forbidding castle fortress in Saxony reserved for prisoners deemed too high risk for other camps. The prospect of spending years in solitary confinement there would be daunting even to the toughest persons. Farah reacted with dismay and horror to Hitler's announcement.

“But... long term solitary confinement could drive her mad.”

“I am sure that Die Wolfen can stand up to that trial, miss. You should worry more about your own faith, as you don't benefit from the status of legitimate prisoner of war.”

Nancy's face hardened at those words.

“Reich Fuhrer, my friend is a doctor and a pacifist: she knows nothing about war or advanced weapons and can't possibly help you in those matters. If you want her help, then let her treat the patients of this hospital with her advanced medical knowledge and equipment.”

That made Hitler pause a moment before glancing at Heidrich, who shook his head.

“She can't be seen in public, Mein Fuhrer: the British must not learn about her. What we need from her is her time machine. With it, we could procure advanced weapons in the future and win this war, which our good Brigadier Laplante has tipped so heavily in the British's favor.”

All eyes then went to Farah, who realized that she was now backed up in a corner from which she could not escape anymore. Terrified of what would happen to her next, she slowly collapsed to her knees, sobs raking her.

¹⁹ Oflag: prisoner of war camp reserved for officers

“Do what you want with me, Reich Fuhrer: my ship is no longer in this century. It went back on a preprogrammed return trip to the 34th century while I was being tortured.” Hitler glared at her, with Heidrich turning to face the Fuhrer.

“Let me punish her properly, Mein Fuhrer. She must learn who to obey now.”

“YOU DAMN SADIST, HEIDRICH!” Shouted Nancy angrily from her wheelchair. “Reich Fuhrer, don’t listen to him! Let my friend stay here, where she can do the most good. This is a Luftwaffe hospital after all: you give the order and nobody here will divulge my friend’s presence.”

Furious, Heidrich went to Nancy and slapped her hard.

“SILENCE! How dare you give advice to the Reich Fuhrer?”

“HEIDRICH!” Snapped Hitler harshly, making the SS officer turn and snap to attention, a surprised expression on his face.

“But... Mein Führer...”

“Enough! Her suggestion actually makes sense. Many of our best pilots are here and could use her expertise. As for the loyalty of the Luftwaffe, it is certainly less questionable than that of the Gestapo, which openly defied one of my directives.”

Field Marshal Milch, head of the Luftwaffe, then cut in politely.

“Mein Fuhrer, I agree with Brigadier Laplante’s idea. We are critically short of experienced aircrews and this woman could help my men here. Torturing one more woman will help neither Germany nor my wounded pilots.”

“Then it will be done.” Said Hitler with finality. “Doctor Tolkonen will stay here under strict guard. Milch, make sure that no one speaks about her outside of this hospital. You will also take care of transferring Brigadier Laplante to Colditz immediately under Luftwaffe escort.”

“Yes, Mein Führer!” Said Milch, pleased. As he was calling in two Luftwaffe soldiers, Nancy noticed that Heidrich was starting to eye suspiciously the pain inhibitor around her head, which was only half hidden by her beret. Deciding to preempt him and maybe gain something in exchange, Nancy touched Farah’s shoulder while taking off her beret and speaking in German so that Hitler could understand her.

“Farah, if you are going to help the wounded here, you will need this.”

“NO! The pain surge could kill you.”

“I will survive it, Farah. Take the inhibitor and make the best use of it.”

Understanding that Nancy was giving her an extra excuse to stay in the hospital and away from Heidrich, Farah looked tearfully into the Canadian's eyes while taking hold of the pain inhibitor.

"Brace yourself: this will feel like agony."

She then switched off the headband. Nancy's eyes immediately closed, while her body arched out of the wheelchair from the jolt of pain. The two Luftwaffe soldiers called in by Milch hurried forward as a frantic Farah lay Nancy down on the floor. The giant checked her pulse, but found none.

"SHE'S IN CARDIAC ARREST! NURSE, MY KIT, NOW!"

The German nurse thankfully reacted quickly and grabbed Farah's medical kit, putting it down on the floor besides her. Farah then opened a panel on one side of her kit and grabbed two defibrillator electrode handles. Flipping on the defibrillator unit's power switch, she quickly opened Nancy's jacket and shirt, then grabbed back the electrode handles and approached them from Nancy's chest.

"STAND BACK!"

She then applied the electrodes and fired the pulse. Nancy's body arched up under the jolt of electricity. Hitler watched on, confused, as Farah checked again for a pulse.

"What is going on? What is she doing?"

Mandell answered him at the same time as he was kneeling besides Nancy to help Farah.

"Laplante's heart has stopped, Mein Fuhrer. Doctor Tolkonen is trying to revive her."

The German doctor then checked Nancy's pulse as Farah performed artificial respiration on the Canadian.

"Her heart is still stopped. She is dead, Doctor Tolkonen."

"Not yet! Stand back!"

Farah then administered another defibrillator jolt. As soon as her body fell back flat on the floor, Nancy's mouth and eyes opened wide and she sucked in a deep breath, causing Farah to shout in triumph.

"She's back with us! Way to go, Nancy!"

Hitler stared in wonderment as Nancy was laid on the bed and given oxygen by Farah and Mandell.

"Colonel Mandell, what the hell happened to Laplante? Why did her heart stop like this?"

The Luftwaffe doctor looked at Hitler gravely.

“That headband she wore is called by Doctor Tolkonen a pain inhibitor. It stops pain from being felt but, if taken off too early, results in all the suppressed pain coming back in one surge. Her heart stopped from a massive pain jolt but Doctor Tolkonen was able to revive her, something I couldn’t have done. Mein Fuhrer, Brigadier Laplante effectively died for a moment, so that our wounded could use her pain inhibitor. Does she really deserve years of solitary confinement, Mein Fuhrer?”

Hitler didn’t reply, instead walking slowly to the bed where Nancy lay, her body shaking continuously. He crouched and looked closely at her face, pale, covered with cold sweat and reflecting constant, severe pain. Looking next at her still denuded chest, Hitler touched lightly one of the burns covering her left breast. The slight contact was enough to cause Nancy to flinch as she barely stifled a scream of pain. Getting back up, Hitler faced Field Marshal Milch.

“Cancel the requirement for Brigadier Laplante to be held in solitary confinement: she is already confined to her crippled body. Have her moved to Colditz as soon as it is safe for her to do so.”

While Milch smiled and saluted, Heidrich left the room, clearly furious about Hitler’s decision. Hitler himself then left without another word, followed by the staff officers and his bodyguards. Mandell caressed Nancy’s sweaty forehead and spoke to Farah in a low voice.

“Her place now should be here, where she could receive proper care, but I can’t contradict the Fuhrer’s order, Doctor. I am sorry that I can’t help you more on this.”

“You already did a lot, Colonel. Thanks for speaking out on Nancy’s behalf.”

They were interrupted by Braun, who grabbed Farah by an arm and forced her to her feet.

“I’m sorry, Doctor, but you must leave this room for a while: Brigadier Laplante is getting two visitors who can’t be allowed to see you.”

“But... Nancy...”

“Colonel Mandell and his nurse will take care of her. Follow me!”

Braun grabbed Farah’s medical kit, then led the giant out of the room. Five minutes later, Braun escorted in two men wearing civilian clothes. The newcomers shook hand briefly with Mandell as they presented themselves. The first one was a small, thin man with thick glasses.

“Johan Strassberg, from the International Red Cross. This is Mister Frank Bollinger, from the American embassy. We are here to ensure that Brigadier Laplante’s rights as a prisoner of war are respected... from now on. We are deeply shocked by what was done to her by the Gestapo and regret that we couldn’t get to her sooner.”

“Not as much as me, gentlemen, believe me. She is in constant pain and needs rest, but I can allow you some time with her. Do you prefer to be alone with her?”

“That would be much appreciated, Colonel.”

The Swiss and the American waited until Mandell and his nurse were gone, then pulled up two chairs and sat besides Nancy’s bed.

“Brigadier Laplante,” said Strassberg, “I am a doctor as well as a representative of the Red Cross. I would like to quickly examine you, to judge the extent of your wounds. Mister Bollinger will take some pictures of you, if you don’t mind of course. Those pictures will then be sent to your husband, Major Crawford, in London.”

“Go ahead, gentlemen. Beware: I’m not a pretty sight right now.”

“I realize that, Colonel.” Replied Strassberg softly. He then gently undressed her, so that he could check her out and to let Bollinger photograph her wounds. Both men shook their heads in disgust when they were finished and they had dressed her up again.

“Brigadier, I had yet to see such cruelty as what was done to you. I frankly am not even sure that you will ever fully recover from such treatment. We were told that you are to be transferred to Colditz Castle today.”

“That’s right! Could I give you a few requests to pass on to my husband in London, along with a short note?”

“Certainly, Brigadier! I will write this down for you.”

The Swiss took ten minutes to write down a note and a list of her requests, then looked back at her.

“Anything else, Brigadier?”

Nancy was thoughtful for a moment: telling those two men about Farah would bring no good and could even endanger their lives, apart of possibly attracting reprisals on Farah’s head and herself. She finally shook her head.

“No! Just make sure to tell my husband that I will be alright and that I love him and our stepdaughter very much.”

“I will do that. Good luck from now on, Brigadier.”

Nancy couldn't help feel apprehension when the two men left the room: they were probably the last friendly faces she would see in a long time once out of this hospital. Agent Braun showed up ten minutes after their departure, alone but with a tray of food in his hands.

"I know for a fact that the Gestapo doesn't feed well its prisoners, Brigadier. You must be starved."

"I am. They actually didn't give me anything to eat or even drink during my detention."

"Then, have some apple juice first."

Braun cranked up Nancy's bed, raising her torso to a near sitting position, then presented her a glass of apple juice that she quickly drank while he held up the glass, since her hands were useless. Braun then helped her eat the bland meal of black bread, cabbage soup and small slice of cheese. Gently cleaning her mouth with a napkin, he then rose to his feet, the food tray in his hands.

"Your Luftwaffe escort should be ready by now. Are you ready to go?"

"As much as I ever could, Agent Braun."

A group of Nazi Party and German press photographers were waiting for Nancy in the main hall of the hospital, along with the Luftwaffe major in charge of Nancy's escort. The photographers then took numerous pictures of her, with the Luftwaffe major standing besides her wheelchair. The whole thing was obviously staged for propaganda purpose and no questions were asked by the reporters before Nancy was wheeled out of the hospital and put in the back seat of a staff car. Her wheelchair and her shoes were put in the trunk of the car as the Luftwaffe major sat besides her without a word. Sandwiched between two trucks full of Luftwaffe soldiers, the staff car then drove off southward. Nancy had a last thought for Farah as the Tempelhof hospital disappeared from her sight.

The trip went on in silence as they drove through Berlin, then headed towards Leipzig on secondary roads. Nancy used the time to think about what was awaiting her and about trying to remember everything that she knew about Colditz Castle, which was actually a lot, as she had visited it in 2003. The place was reputed to be impossible to break out of, but she knew better. Dozens of allied prisoners had actually escaped from it, at least in the history she knew, and had fled to Switzerland, mostly by dressing up as

German soldiers to walk past the guards. As a woman, that subterfuge was a non-starter for her, but she had the advantage of speaking German fluently. Her big problem now, however, was her crippled body. It was going to probably take weeks for her just to start walking normally, if she ever achieved even that. Her morose thoughts were cut by the German officer sitting besides her, who spoke to her in a polite, gentlemanly tone.

“So, Brigadier, what are you planning to do after the war is over?”

“Well, the moment I’m back in London, I will check on my friend Farah, whom we left behind in Tempelhof Hospital. Once I am assured that she is alright, I will get my stepdaughter out of the Tower of London, grab my husband and my friend Farah and throw a huge party.”

The German gave her a confused look.

“Your stepdaughter... in the Tower of London? But that’s a military fortress used as a prison, no?”

“Correct, Major. Ingrid is actually a Luftwaffe auxiliary held there as a prisoner of war. I helped capture her, along with other Germans, during a raid in France a few months ago.”

“She’s a German prisoner of war and the British let you adopt her?”

“The British don’t know about it, Major.”

The German officer, along with the armed soldier sitting besides the driver, looked with stunned surprise at Nancy.

“You’re pulling my leg, Brigadier.”

“I’m very serious, Major. Her name is Ingrid Weiss and she is fifteen years old, apart of being a war orphan. I myself became an orphan at the age of sixteen and felt a lot of empathy for Ingrid, who is a really nice girl. I have a couple more dirty secrets I keep from the British that would probably land me in front of a court martial if they ever learned about them.”

“Brigadier, you’re a strange woman.” Pronounced the major while shaking his head. Nancy smiled at that and positioned herself in the most comfortable position she could so that she could sleep.

“Maybe! Just wake me up when we will be in Colditz. I had a couple of very rough days lately.”

CHAPTER 35 – COLDITZ CASTLE

15:04 (Berlin time)

Thursday, June 26, 1941 'B'

Inner courtyard, Colditz Castle

Saxony, Germany

Major William Anderson, from the Royal Engineers, was chatting with Major Pierre Renaudin of the French Foreign Legion in the west corner of the inner courtyard when a German guard suddenly ran past them, coming from the main gate and going towards the sick ward. He was soon back in the courtyard, pushing a wheelchair and followed by the German Army doctor, Major Hans Frankel. As the two Germans were passing near Anderson and Renaudin, another German guard inquired in German about what was happening, getting an excited response from the soldier pushing the wheelchair.

“The She-Wolf is here! She was captured a few days ago and is going to be held here.”

“Die Wolfin? Mein Gott! This could put some life in this place.”

“Too true, Hans.”

Anderson, who had a fair knowledge of German, couldn't help scratch his head as the Germans walked away.

“I don't believe this, Pierre: the Germans are bringing in a female prisoner nicknamed the She-Wolf. As far as I know, we have no women serving in combat arms, especially one considered dangerous enough to be sent here. Could she be French?”

“We have women only in our auxiliary services. But again, we have both been stuck in German prison camps since the spring of 1940, like most prisoners here. Things could have changed. Too bad that our clandestine radio receiver set is still not completed: we could have learned about that woman from the BBC.”

“Yes! Still, a woman here should improve the scenery greatly.”

“Naah! With a nickname like hers, she must be a real matron.”

“Well, we'll see soon enough.”

“What's all the excitement about, lads?”

Anderson and Renaudin turned around to face Squadron Leader Mark Lindsay, a RAF Bomber Command bomber pilot who had arrived in Colditz only three weeks ago.

“It seems that a female prisoner nicknamed the She-Wolf by the Germans has just arrived. You were captured much later than us, Mark. Maybe you know who that woman could be?”

Lindsay thought only for a short moment before replying.

“It must be Colonel Nancy Laplante, the Prime Minister’s Special Military Advisor. She’s a Canadian Intelligence specialist who won the Victoria Cross in the fall of last year while on a commando raid in France. I can see nobody else.”

Anderson stared in disbelief at his friend.

“A woman, winning the Victoria Cross on a commando raid? You must be pulling my leg! Besides, how could the Prime Minister be dumb enough to take a woman as a military advisor?”

“Look, William, I know little about her, but this I know: that Laplante was considered important enough by the Germans to send a team of assassins to kill her in London. She plugged all four of them in a wild shootout in Green Park.”

“My god! I can’t wait to see her. Is she cute?”

Lindsay smiled at Anderson’s question.

“Cute? The whole of Bomber Command wished that they could jump her bones.” Before Anderson could reply to that, their attention was caught by the opening of the main gate. A group of five Germans then entered the inner courtyard, one of whom was pushing a wheelchair on which sat a tall young woman dressed in a dirty, wrinkled Canadian Army female dress uniform and wearing a dark green beret on her head. She was also barefoot and sported bandages around her hands and feet, apart of having prominent bruises on her face. Her beautiful face reflected both pain and fatigue. Colonel Ernst Schmidt, the camp commandant, hurried out of the parcels office where he had been conducting an inspection and walked to the newcomer, his adjutant at his back. What followed both surprised and shocked the two British and the Frenchman. The woman on the wheelchair spoke in German with the commandant, apparently making a joke that made him laugh. The other Germans also conversed with her in friendly tones. One officer who had escorted the woman in then gallantly kissed one of her hands before saluting her and leaving.

“Merde! C’est une collabo ou quoi?”²⁰ Said Renaudin in a low, hateful voice. Anderson knew enough French to understand that. He himself felt doubt about the woman as Lindsay spoke to him while staring at the newcomer.

“It is Laplante alright. She seems in pretty bad shape.”

“She’s in good shape enough to joke with those Germans.” Replied Renaudin, getting a warning look from Lindsay.

“Listen, Pierre, don’t judge her too quickly. A lot of new, very advanced equipment and weapons entered service with us since she appeared out of nowhere last Fall. I am led to believe that she is at the center of it.”

“How could she? She’s just a woman!”

“A woman who won the Victoria Cross and who has the full confidence of the Prime Minister, Pierre. So, cut her some slack.”

As the woman was wheeled past them, Anderson saw the impressive double row of medal ribbons on her vest, which effectively included the Victoria Cross... with Bar. She also wore the rank insignias of a brigadier general. Snapping to attention, he saluted her crisply. Laplante returned his salute slowly, the mere movement of raising her arm apparently causing her pain, then stared at him with a surprised expression before speaking in German to the guard pushing her wheelchair.

“Stop! Back up! I need to speak to Major Anderson.”

“How the hell could she know me?” Muttered Anderson as Renaudin and Lindsay looked at him, as surprised as him. Laplante was smiling as the guard stopped her wheelchair in front of the Royal Engineers officer. Anderson could now see plainly her battered face, bandaged hands and feet and even some whip marks on her lower legs.

“Major William Anderson, Colditz’s resident painter and artist. Maybe I should pause for you, when I will be a prettier sight.”

“How do you know all this about me, Brigadier?”

“Because I saw your paintings and drawings... after the war. You are a quite talented man, Major.”

“After the war? I don’t understand.”

Laplante’s smile was then replaced by a serious expression.

²⁰ Shit! She’s a collaborator or what?

“Major, I’m a time traveler from the year 2012. You didn’t know it because this was not a publicly known fact at first when I arrived last September in England. I hope to see you again later, maybe at supper time.”

Colonel Schmidt then cut in politely.

“If I may be bold enough, Brigadier Laplante, I was actually hoping to invite you for supper this evening. As you may guess, we don’t get female prisoners very often here.”

“Hmm, another first in my list of achievements. I accept your kind invitation, Colonel.”

Laplante then looked back at Anderson.

“Tomorrow then, Major?”

“Any time will be my pleasure, Brigadier.”

She smiled again as the guard pushing her wheelchair turned her around and headed towards the sick ward, Doctor Frankel in tow. Anderson stared hard then at the Camp Commandant.

“Who did this to her, Colonel?”

Schmidt lowered his head in embarrassment.

“The Gestapo did it, against the explicit directives of the Führer.”

“And why would your beloved Führer care about what happens to one woman?”

Renaudin’s sarcastic question made Schmidt snap his head up.

“Major, believe it or not, but not all Germans are like the Gestapo. Brigadier Laplante, while a formidable opponent, always fought cleanly and avoided as much as possible to cause German civilian casualties. That earned her the respect of the Führer, who personally ordered her transfer to Colditz.”

“Great! A friend of Hitler, here.”

Renaudin’s disdainful remark got him hard stares from Schmidt, Anderson and Lindsay. It was however Schmidt, stepping forward and staring hard into his eyes, that gave him the reply.

“Always trying to pass as the toughest one around, Major Renaudin? Beware not to screw around Brigadier Laplante: when healthy, she could break you in two with no problems, something I would love to see.”

“HA! A woman, break me in two? You must be joking, Colonel?”

“You have never seen a woman like Laplante before, Major. The world hasn’t, until she arrived from the future. If not for this war, you would probably be in a jail

somewhere, for knifing somebody in the back or some other petty crime. You will be no match for her, I am sure of that, Major. And if you dare attack that woman while she is helpless, you will pay dearly for it.”

As Schmidt and his adjutant, Captain Eggers, walked away, Lindsay looked towards the sick ward and spoke softly.

“The year 2012... that actually explains many things.”

Renaudin then shook his head angrily.

“She’s still way too friendly with those damn Germans. We should keep an eye on her.”

Anderson gave the Frenchman a dirty look.

“Pierre, leave her alone.”

Inside the infirmary, Major Frankel pulled a set of curtains around one of the beds, to give some privacy to Nancy as three German soldiers helped Captain Schirrie, the British military doctor of the camp, to take Nancy off her wheelchair and lay her on the bed. Nancy clenched her jaws and managed not to cry out in pain when their hands touched her wounds, but her suffering was evident enough to her handlers. Frankel then sent away the soldiers, keeping only Schirrie with him to help him. He then spoke gently in English to Nancy as he started undoing her jacket.

“I will have to undress you in order to examine you, miss, unless you object to that.”

Nancy, sweat on her forehead, shook her head.

“Don’t worry about that, Major: I just spent two days completely naked while the Gestapo was torturing me. Go ahead!”

Frankel, like Schirrie, became progressively more horrified as they took delicately her clothes off, with the extent of her wounds now fully evident.

“Fucking Gestapo!” Said Schirrie as he examined visually Nancy’s body. Frankel listened to her heartbeat and lungs before paying particular attention to her hands and feet. Nancy spoke before he could comment on them.

“The bones in my fingers and toes were crushed with hammers and screws, Major. I already expect to lose permanently the use of my hands.”

Frankel gave her a pained look.

“I am truly sorry for you, miss.”

"I am not the only one to have suffered in this war, Major, and it would not do me any good if I started crying on my fate. I have the firm intention to continue acting like a brigadier, tortures or no tortures. Captain Schirrie, could you tell me who is the most senior ranking prisoner here, apart me of course?"

"Un, there are a number of lieutenant colonels of various nationalities here in Colditz, Brigadier. The most senior British officer until your arrival was Lieutenant Colonel Guy Robertson, from the Gloucester Regiment."

"Then, Captain, could you inform Lieutenant Colonel Robertson that I will take from him the charge of senior British officer tomorrow morning, after the roll call? Also, could you have someone clean and press my uniform before tomorrow morning? I would do it myself but my hands are useless."

"I will take care of your uniform, Brigadier." Said Frankel. "Captain, you may go and pass the Brigadier's message to Colonel Robertson."

"Thank you, Major!"

As Schirrie left the infirmary, Frankel called to him one of his German medics and gave him Nancy's clothes, with the order to have them washed and pressed quickly. The medic was about to leave when Nancy recalled him.

"Wait! I have in my pockets some special medications given to me in the Luftwaffe hospital of Tempelhof."

Frankel went through her pockets, putting on the bedside table the set of syringes and the medication patches. He examined with curiosity the compresses in their sterile plastic wrappings.

"What are these, Brigadier? I do read English but I can't read those labels."

"That is because they come from the future, Major. I will tell you how to use them on me."

"Not before I could wash you and clean your wounds, Brigadier. Let me go get a few things for that."

16:17 (Berlin time)

Room 217, senior officers quarters

Colditz Castle, Saxony

Captain Schirrie found Lieutenant Colonel Robertson in his room, apparently holding a meeting with other senior allied officers of the camp. He came to attention

once inside the room and saluted Robertson, a solidly built man but also an officer that could be quite obtuse.

“Colonel, Brigadier Laplante asked me to pass to you the following message: she will take the charge of senior British prisoner tomorrow morning, after the roll call.”

“We will see about that.” Replied coldly Robertson. “Where is that supposed brigadier right now?”

Schirie, surprised at first by Robertson’s attitude, then tightened his jaws with anger, understanding what was happening.

“In the infirmary, being treated by Major Frankel. Colonel, this woman wears the insignia of a brigadier, along with the ribbons of the VC with Bar, the DSO with Bar, the CBE, the DFC and the MC. To refuse to accept her authority would amount to insubordination, Colonel.”

Robertson shot up from his chair, irritated by the tone of the military doctor.

“And you really are ready to believe that a woman can attain the rank of brigadier, earn twice the VC and also be the military counselor of Prime Minister Churchill? If yes, then you are more naïve than I thought, Captain. She is probably an impostor sent by the Germans to sow confusion in our ranks.”

Schirie stared at him with big eyes, as if Robertson was an utter imbecile.

“Colonel, I am a doctor and I just examined that poor woman from up close. She was flogged on most of her body, was branded dozens of times with red hot irons, had all her nails pulled out and also had all her fingers and toes crushed. I doubt that any German would be ready to endure such a treatment just to confuse us, Colonel. On my part, I have the firm intention to recognize her as my senior commander here, despite whatever you may think.”

Schirie then left, ignoring the furious order to stay from Robertson. The latter was about to run after him when a tall French lieutenant colonel got up and blocked his path.

“Let him go, Robertson! What your doctor just said changed many things in my mind. For one thing, I agree with him that no German woman would go through such tortures just to play a trick on us.”

“And you would let a woman take command of the prisoners in Colditz, Colonel Brunet?”

“If she is really a brigadier general, then yes! I believe that I have nothing left to do here anymore. Good evening, gentlemen!”

To Robertson's fury, the majority of the senior officers which had been discussing with him about what to do with Laplante got up and left, leaving him alone with two French and two Polish officers.

16:32 (Berlin Time)

Prisoners' infirmary

Colditz Castle

Doctor Frankel, helped by his medic, was nearly finished washing delicately Nancy with the help of a wet sponge when he heard the voice of Captain Schirie, who was speaking to him through the curtains surrounding Nancy's bed.

"Major Frankel, Lieutenant Colonel Brunet and his batman²¹ are here to see Brigadier Laplante."

"She is not decent right now. They..."

"Wait, Major!" Said Nancy. "Cover me from the groin to my chest, so that I could speak with Colonel Brunet."

"As you wish, Brigadier." Replied Frankel, who then quickly covered her partially with a bed sheet before inviting Schirie, Brunet and his batman to come close to the bed, letting Nancy look at them. Brunet was a tall and lean man but he was also fit and quite young for his rank, while his batman was a young corporal of the French Army with a sympathetic face. Brunet came to attention and saluted Nancy as he spoke in French.

"Lieutenant Colonel Fernand Brunet, of the French Chasseurs Alpains. I came to propose to you the services of my batman, Caporal Jean Bigras, whom I frankly use very little. In view of your medical condition, I believe that you will need someone to help you go around and do certain tasks for you, General."

"You are a true gentleman, Colonel." Said Nancy, smiling and repressing her pain for a moment. "I accept the offer of your batman's services with pleasure. I have to inform you that my uniform has already been sent for washing by Major Frankel. Corporal Bigras can thus relax until tomorrow morning. While you are here, Colonel, you may confirm to me something I heard about Colditz. Is it true that, after the arrival of a

²¹ Batman : military term for a low rank subaltern assigned to a senior officer in order to clean and maintain the uniforms and personal equipment of the said officer..

large group of French officers in February, some of them objected to the presence in their ranks of officers of Jewish denomination, then had them segregated?”

Brunet nodded his head, embarrassed.

“You are well informed, General. I was part of that group and saw it happen. I objected to it but Lieutenant Colonel Vermandois, who is senior to me, ignored my objections.”

“I see!” Said Nancy, irritated by that state of affair. “You will tell tonight to Colonel Vermandois that I expect him to reintegrate those Jewish officers with the rest of the French officers by tomorrow. If he doesn’t, then he will have to explain himself to the senior officer of the camp: me! I will not tolerate any racial or religious discrimination between prisoners that could undermine us as a group.”

Brunet smiled, satisfied.

“I will certainly pass that point to Colonel Vermandois, General. Before I go, I must however warn you that some are ready to dispute your authority as senior prisoner and are even calling you a fraud.”

Nancy took a deep breath, exasperated.

“How often will I have to prove myself before the misogynistic morons of this world will take me seriously? Who leads those doubters, Colonel?”

“Lieutenant Colonel Robertson, General.”

“Hum! I should have known. Thank you for everything, Colonel Brunet. I will deal with that Robertson personally.”

“In your present state? But, you are basically confined to a bed, General.”

“Maybe, but I am not dead yet.”

19:21 (Berlin time)

Room 217, senior prisoners quarters

Colditz Castle

Guy Robertson had managed after some talking to gain the support of a dozen more senior allied officers and was in the process of expounding his case against that female supposed brigadier that was cozying up to the Germans. The noise of the door of his room opening made him twist his head to check if it was not the Germans conducting a surprise search or inspection. He stiffened in his chair when he saw that the newcomer was a woman sitting in a wheelchair pushed by Corporal Bigras, followed

closely by Captain Schirrie, Major William Anderson and Lieutenant Colonel Brunet. The woman wore a British female dress uniform, complete with the rank insignias of a brigadier general, and had a stern expression on her face as Bigras pushed her wheelchair towards the sole table in the communal room. The woman made the young French soldier stop her wheelchair three paces from the table, then looked severely at Robertson, who had been the ranking British officer in the room. She waited a few seconds, saying nothing and apparently expecting something, while Robertson debated in his mind what to do.

“Well? You always ignore like this the entrance of a superior officer and a twice recipient of the Victoria Cross, Colonel?”

Robertson was then faced with a dilemma: if he saluted her, he automatically acknowledged her authority over him and thus made baseless all the arguments he had just used to convince the allied officers present in the room. On the other hand, if he refused to salute her, he opened himself to charges of insubordination. His stubbornness finally won over his fears and he stayed on his chair, not saluting.

“Your scandalous conduct with the Germans disqualified you as an officer of the King...if you are even one.”

Seeing that Robertson was even more obtuse than she had expected, Nancy decided to take off the gloves with him.

“So, you would deny my commission, my rank and my two VCs, which were pinned on me by the King himself, just because you never heard of me before being captured? By doing this, Lieutenant Colonel Robertson, you are not only insulting me. You are also insulting Prime Minister Churchill, who took me on as his special military advisor, as well as King George the Sixth, by showing disrespect to a VC recipient. As for your stupid notion that my conduct with the Germans was scandalous, did it enter your thick head that the Germans would not torture a collaborator the way they tortured me?”

Robertson was about to reply to her but Nancy cut him off, raising her voice to a shout.

“NOT A WORD FROM YOU, COLONEL! YOU JUST DEMONSTRATED GROSS INSUBORDINATION TOWARDS A SUPERIOR OFFICER AND CONSPIRED TO DENY MY AUTHORITY AS THE LEGITIMATE SENIOR PRISONER IN COLDITZ, WHICH AMOUNTS TO AN ACT OF MUTINY. YOU NOW HAVE ONE LAST CHANCE TO ACKNOWLEDGE MY AUTHORITY WITHOUT RESERVATION, BEFORE I CHARGE YOU OFFICIALLY WITH INSUBORDINATION AND MUTINY. WE MAY BE

PRISONERS OF WAR OF THE GERMANS RIGHT NOW, BUT BE ASSURE THAT YOUR CONDUCT WILL BE REPORTED TO THE WAR OFFICE AND TO FIELD MARSHALL BROOKE. NOW, WHAT WILL IT BE?"

Seeing that the other officers around him were starting to take their distances from him, Robertson swallowed his pride and got up at attention, saluting Nancy.

"It won't be necessary, Brigadier. I see that my initial misgivings about you were unfounded."

Nancy saluted him back, then said only four words.

"Good! Carry on, Colonel!"

She then had Bigras turn her wheelchair around and push her out of the room, leaving a discomfited Robertson to face the other officers still inside. Nobody said a word to him as the small group dispersed to their respective rooms. Those who lived in the same room as him went to their beds, ignoring him and making Robertson feel even more bitter.

In a room of the guardhouse thirty yards away, a German linguist finished scribbling down frantically what he was hearing from a microphone hidden in room 217, then stopped his recording machine and passed his written transcript to a waiting soldier.

"Corporal, bring this at once to Colonel Schmidt: most urgent!"

As the corporal hurried out of the listening room, the army linguist smiled to himself.

"Die Wolfen sure plugged that loud mouth well. I wonder who will fall next in her gun sights."

20:04 (Berlin time)

Sick ward, Colditz Castle

With the help of the German soldier assigned to guard the sick ward, Corporal Bigras lifted Nancy from her wheelchair and laid her gently on her bed, then touched softly her right hand.

"Do you need anything else, Brigadier?"

"Yes." Said Nancy weakly, tired by the constant pain. "This is the only uniform I have. Could you help me take it off, so that it doesn't get all wrinkled up?"

"Anything you ask, madame."

Again helped by the German soldier, whom Nancy asked to stay, Jean cautiously took off her uniform, careful not to cause her too much pain. The severity of the torture marks on her body shocked him as well as the young German soldier.

“And they accused you of faking your wounds. What a bunch of fools.”

With Nancy now down to her bra and panties, Jean delicately covered her with a linen sheet, then saluted her.

“Permission to leave for the night, madame.”

“Permission granted, Corporal.”

Bigras then left after suspending carefully her clothes so that they would not be wrinkled. The German soldier, on his part, saluted Nancy as well before posting himself near the entrance of the ward. As for Doctor Frankel, he took five minutes to brief the German Army medic due to take the night shift, then left for his quarters.

22:43 (Berlin time)

Sick ward, Colditz Castle

Nancy was sobbing quietly in her hospital bed as she thought about her friend Farah, wondering how the gentle giant was faring in Berlin, when a male voice startled her.

“First, you give away a precious medical device, so that others could use it, even though that would leave you in agony. Now, you are crying for a friend while you lie crippled and in pain.”

Turning her head towards the ward’s entrance, from where the voice had come, Nancy saw in the semi-darkness of the ward an old man with long white beard and hair standing about six feet from her. He was small, wore an ancient-looking robe and had Semitic traits. Nancy then realized with a shock that the man had spoken in Ancient Sumerian.

“Who... who are you?”

“Someone who cares for you deeply. Once, thousands of years ago, your spirit was that of my wife, Sarai. You are destined for great things, Nancy, but your road will be long, arduous and painful.”

Nancy looked with alarm towards the ward’s office, where the soldier on guard duty had been playing chess with the German medic. To her stunned surprise, both men sat as if in a frozen state, the medic’s arm hanging over the chessboard in absolute stillness.

The two allied soldiers presently being treated in the infirmary were also frozen in their beds.

"I froze them in time." Explained calmly the old man. That statement brought sudden hope to Nancy.

"You can travel through time?"

The old man nodded.

"What is your wish, Nancy?"

"My friend, Farah Tolkonen, can you help her out?"

The man smiled with satisfaction and nodded his head.

"Again, you think of the needs of others first. Yes, I can help her. You are being tested, Nancy, and have been found very promising so far. However, your courage cost you dearly, to the point where you cannot go on without help. The One has thus decided to help you directly. As long as you act out of kindness and compassion, The One will be with you. One day, you will be at his side, like me. You will now start the second phase of your life as a Chosen of The One. Be strong and generous, my beloved Sarai, and take also good care of Agar. She, as well as you, has been tested."

The old man's eyes then turned into bright spots of white light. A white halo enveloped Nancy, who felt herself levitate off her bed as a marvelous sensation ran through her body. A bright light also exploded silently inside her mind and she lost completely track of her surroundings and of time as seemingly countless spirits fused together in one huge mass mingled with her own spirit, filling her with new images, notions and knowledge.

The German medic and guard, along with the two patients in the infirmary, came out of their frozen state to see Nancy's body enveloped in a bright white halo and levitating silently above her bed. They however could not see the old man, who had vanished before they became unfrozen.

"Mein gott!" Whispered the medic before grabbing frantically his telephone and dialing the number for Major Frankel's room. Frankel answered his phone after two rings.

"Major Frankel!"

"Major, this is Obergefreter Winkel, in the infirmary. Something is happening to Die Wolfin, something incredible."

"What is happening exactly, Winkel?" Asked Frankel impatiently, irritated by the vagueness of the medic's report.

"She is floating above her bed and is as bright as a spotlight, sir. You better come here quickly."

"Floating above her bed? As bright as a spotlight? Is this a joke, Winkel, or are you drunk?"

"I'm very serious, Major, I swear!"

"Very well, I'm coming, but this better be serious, or you will hear me, Winkel."

Frankel then put down his receiver, cutting the line. The medic then looked at the soldier that had been playing chess with him. The guard appeared to be as dumbfounded as him.

"You better get the officer of the watch here, right now!"

The soldier nodded and grabbed his rifle before running out of the infirmary, sprinting to the guard house while shouting.

"CAPTAIN EGGERS! CAPTAIN EGGERS! THERE IS AN EMERGENCY AT THE INFIRMARY WITH DIE WOLFIN!"

His shouts, apart of getting Captain Eggers out of the guard house at a run, also were heard by Captain Schirie, who was in his room and taking some fresh air through his opened window. The British doctor assumed at once that Nancy's medical state had suddenly deteriorated and hurried to put back on his shirt before running out of his room and going down the stairs towards the inner courtyard. He nearly bumped into Major Frankel, who was also on his way to the infirmary.

"What is happening with Brigadier Laplante, Major? Did she collapse or pass out?"

"I don't know yet, Captain." Answered Frankel, unwilling to say more at the time. He however let Schirie follow him inside the infirmary. What he saw there, along with Captain Eggers and a number of German soldiers plus the two allied patients, made him stop dead in his tracks, stunned.

"Mein Gott! What is happening to her?"

As Frankel slowly approached the floating, shining body of Nancy, Eggers pointed one of the soldiers near him and gave him a curt order.

"GO INFORM COLONEL SCHMIDT OF THIS AT ONCE!"

The soldier left at once with a last disbelieving look at Nancy's body. Schmidt had time to come to the infirmary at a run and see the incredible spectacle there before Nancy floated down to her bed and became normal again.

Nancy now felt none of the intense pain that had dodged her all day. Sitting up in the bed, then getting up besides it, she inspected her hands and feet and found them normal and healthy, with nails grown back fully. Taking off her bra and ripping away the two medicinal pads covering the tips of her breasts, she saw with immense joy that her nipples had grown back as well and that all her recent wounds had disappeared. Only the scars of her old battle wounds were left on her now smooth skin. Touching her nipples, she found out that they had their original sensitivity. Tears of joy in her eyes, Nancy realized only then that a small crowd was watching her from beyond the curtains surrounding her bed. Too shaken by what had happened to her to care about her nudity, she walked past the curtains and looked at the assembled Germans and British while sobbing.

"A... a miracle! A miracle happened to me."

"Gott und Himmel!" Swore quietly Colonel Schmidt while looking at her from head to toe, seeing no wounds left on her body. He then made three steps to go grab a blanket on an empty infirmary bed and went to Nancy, draping her with the blanket.

"Please, Brigadier, you should preserve your dignity. Let's go back to your bed, behind the curtains, so that Major Frankel can examine you in detail. DOCTOR, COME EXAMINE HER! THE OTHERS, EXCEPT CAPTAIN EGGERS, GET OUT!"

"Can I stay and examine her as well, Colonel?" Asked Captain Schirie, not moving as the others filed out of the infirmary. Schmidt thought for a second before nodding his head.

"Very well, Captain Schirie. You may be useful in convincing the other prisoners that this was not staged by us."

"Thank you, Colonel."

Schmidt guided Nancy, who was still under the shock of what had happened to her, back to her bed and, letting Frankel and Schirie examine her in detail, went to see his adjutant.

"Eggers, get a camera quickly and come back here to photograph Brigadier Laplante in detail while she is still naked. We need to document this as best as possible,

as I suspect that it will be very hard to convince Berlin that we did not hallucinate or something like that.”

“I understand, Colonel. I will be back in less than five minutes.”

Once Eggers was gone, Schmidt approached again Nancy's bed and, forcing himself not to ogle her beautiful naked body, watched Frankel examine Nancy with the help of Schirrie. He already expected the verdict that Frankel finally delivered after a few minutes with a disbelieving look on his face.

“This should be impossible, Colonel, but she is now in perfect health. Her nails have regrown, the bones of her fingers and toes are now intact and well formed and all her external wounds have disappeared. The only proper word to describe this is ‘miracle’, Colonel.”

Schmidt then looked gravely at Nancy, still lying naked on her back on her bed.

“Do you have an explanation for all this, Brigadier? Could some science from the future do this?”

Nancy shook slowly her head, still digesting what had happened to her and all the new things she now knew thanks to her brief mental contact with The One.

“No human science could do this, Colonel. A scientist and doctor from the 34th Century that tried to bring me back to my own time period and is now being held in Berlin treated my wounds yesterday and, while her medical science was far in advance of your German medical science, what happened to me tonight was completely beyond her. Colonel, you have shown yourself up to now to be a decent, understanding man, so I will tell you this: during my miraculous healing, something touched my mind, something too powerful and wonderful to be human.”

“God?” Asked Schmidt, his heart accelerating suddenly as he thought of the only possible explanation. Nancy nodded gravely her head.

“I believe that you may call him so, Colonel. It presented itself to me as ‘The One’. I say ‘it’ because it is neither male nor female, but rather a spiritual entity of unbelievable power.”

“Why? Why did God decide to heal you like this?”

“I am not sure, Colonel. The one thing I understand is that The One expects me to act with kindness, compassion and generosity.”

What Nancy didn't tell Schmidt, so that he would not be alarmed and think of her as a possible threat, was that she had received a number of supernatural powers during her

healing, powers she was only now starting to review. She would definitely need a few days to sort out her mind and know what exactly she had become. One thing was for sure in her mind: she was no ordinary human anymore. Captain Eggers then came back in the infirmary at that moment, a camera in his hands. Nancy smiled on seeing the camera and winked mischievously at Eggers.

“Would you like me to take a sexy pose for you, Captain? I can be a really bad girl when I want to.”

Eggers, a man with a deep sense of humor, swallowed hard while eyeing with lust her now pristine, magnificent body.

“Uh, I will keep this professional, Brigadier, unless I want Colonel Schmidt to skin me alive afterwards.”

Schmidt laughed at that, then patted Eggers' shoulder.

“Take this as a test of your self-control, my good Eggers. I will now let you alone with Brigadier Laplante. I have an urgent phone call to do to Berlin.”

07:18 (Berlin time)

Friday, June 27, 1941 'B'

Sick ward, Colditz Castle

Corporal Bigras entered cautiously the sick ward, not knowing what to expect after whatever happened here last night. The only thing he and the other prisoners knew thanks to Captain Schirrie was that Laplante had been healed in some miraculous way. Of course, Lieutenant Colonel Robertson had wasted no time then to insinuate again that her previous condition had been faked. He then saw Nancy, sitting on her bed and combing her hair, wearing only her bra and panties. None of the hideous scars that had been plainly visible yesterday were left on her back now. Approaching slowly, Bigras was even more surprised when she turned her head and smiled to him. The missing teeth knocked out by her interrogators were now back in place, her smile a perfect one.

“But... how could this be possible, Brigadier?”

“A miracle happened last night, Corporal.” She replied softly. “It may sound impossible, but it is the truth.”

“And all your wounds are gone?”

“All! I will now be able to attend the eight O’clock roll call without your assistance.”

Those words immediately made Bigras uneasy.

“Some other prisoners may take this as proof that you faked your wounds, Brigadier. Your explanation of your healing through a miracle won’t get too many buyers, madame, even with the testimony of Captain Schirie.”

Nancy got up and stepped to Bigras, stopping close enough for her chest to nearly touch the young Frenchman.

“You saw my wounds yesterday, Corporal. Did they look faked to you?”

Jean had a hard time not staring at her large, firm breasts, so tantalizingly close.

“No, Brigadier. Still, a miracle is not something easily believed by those who didn’t witness it.”

“Right now, the only opinion that counts to me is yours, Corporal. If you believe that I faked my wounds and that I am a collaborator, then I will understand if you choose to quit as my orderly.”

Jean only hesitated for a second before answering her.

“Brigadier, I still believe in you. I want to stay as your orderly, even if it gets me in trouble with the other prisoners.”

Nancy smiled and kissed him on the forehead.

“Your confidence in me warms my heart, Corporal. If anyone causes you trouble, I want to know about it, though. I will see you on the roll call parade. Thanks again for helping me yesterday.”

“It was a pleasure, Madame.”

As he was leaving the ward, Jean saw the look the German guard was giving to Nancy. It was not fear, nor was it admiration. Rather, it had a sort of religious quality to it. Jean himself felt somewhat like that now. In the inner courtyard, he met Major Anderson and Lieutenant Colonel Brunet, who were loitering around the entrance of the sick ward. Brunet signaled him discreetly to join him and got close to the chapel’s entrance with him and Anderson.

“Corporal, can you tell me how Brigadier Laplante is this morning?”

“Brigadier Laplante is fully healed from her wounds this morning, sir. She herself doesn’t know how it happened, apart that it is a miracle. I saw her from very close and

there are no bruises or burns left on her body. Even her missing teeth are back. She will attend the morning roll call, sir, so you will be able to see this by yourself.”

Anderson and Brunet looked at each other, not knowing what to believe. Anderson shook his head slowly, bewildered.

“I’m going inside to see her: all this is too incredible.”

“I will come with you, Major.”

Both senior officers resolutely walked into the sick ward, where the German soldier on guard duty challenged them.

“Halt! What is your business here, sirs?”

“We are here to see Brigadier Laplante, Gefreter²².”

“She is still getting dressed, Colonel.”

“Then we will wait here.”

“No need to!” Shouted Nancy from behind a mobile curtain hiding her bed from the entrance area. “You can come close, gentlemen.”

Somewhat hesitantly, the two male officers walked to the mobile curtain, behind which they could see the silhouette of Nancy as she was putting on her uniform. She then spoke again.

“I suppose that you are here to ask me how come I am healthy only two days after being tortured by the Gestapo, gentlemen?”

“Something like that, miss.” Replied Brunet, keeping his voice neutral.

“Then, I can only say that I have God to thank for that.”

She then drew the curtain open, revealing herself to Anderson and Brunet. She wore her dress uniform, complete with her green beret and a pair of black shoes. The gap in her front teeth was now gone, something revealed by her friendly smile.

“Good morning, Colonel Brunet. I need to thank you for providing me Corporal Bigras as a personal orderly: he is an able young man.”

“It was the least I could do, General. About yesterday, may I say that I am sorry about my colleagues’ haste in accusing you?”

Nancy nodded her head gravely, obviously concerned.

“I was kind of hoping for a better welcome after all that I went through, Colonel. I however am not planning on changing my ways with the Germans: I fight them but I don’t hate them... generally. This war is already bad enough without adding racism to it.

²² Gefreter: corporal

By the way, I have to inform you that Colonel Schmidt offered to let me go under escort in the town, so that I could buy some essential female supplies and clothes: until I can receive a parcel from England, this will be my only uniform... and my sole set of female underwear.”

“I see no problem with that, General. Colonel Schmidt is a true gentleman.” Brunet fell silent, not knowing how to go on. Anderson then jumped into the fray.

“Were you awake when that miracle occurred, Brigadier? What happened exactly?”

“I was awake, Major. The only thing I can say is that a bright light hit me and I felt myself levitate from my bed. When the light went out, I found myself healed completely, as you see me now. I know that this is very hard to believe but I can’t provide you more information. Shall we join the others for the roll call, gentlemen?”

“Er, why not?”

Nancy led the two officers out of the sick ward and into the inner courtyard, where about a hundred prisoners were already slowly assembling for the morning roll call. All eyes immediately turned on her, with most being less than friendly. Hauptman²³ Eggers and an old feldwebel²⁴ stood on one side, along with a dozen German soldiers. Flanked by Brunet and Anderson, Nancy joined the officers’ platoon, where Lieutenant Colonel Robertson greeted her with a poisonous look.

“So, you faked your wounds, after all.”

Anderson expected Nancy to lash back at Robertson, but she instead looked at him coldly and kept her voice controlled.

“Think what you want, moron. I don’t expect you to be able to understand what happened to me last night.”

The German feldwebel then started the roll call, preventing Robertson from replying. The prisoners were called in order of rank, with Nancy being first to be called.

“BRIGADIER GENERAL NANCY LAPLANTE!”

“Present!”

Hauptman Eggers then briefly took over from the feldwebel.

“Brigadier Laplante, please see me after the roll call, so that you can be assigned a room.”

²³ Hauptman: captain

²⁴ Feldwebel: warrant officer

“Yes, Hauptman!”

Major Renaudin, standing four steps to the left of Nancy, stuck his head out to mock her.

“Nobody will want to be with you, you German-loving bitch!”

“MAJOR, WATCH YOUR WORDS!” Growled Brunet. Nancy touched his arm to calm him down, then stared at Renaudin.

“Major, if you want an explanation with me, I will be more than happy to meet you between four walls, just the two of us.”

That brought a mean smile on Renaudin’s face.

“You won’t stand a chance.”

“Don’t bet on that, asshole!”

All the while, Eggers was watching carefully the verbal confrontation from a distance. When the roll call was completed, Nancy went to him as the others were dispersing. Eggers then gave her a warning.

“I see that you have met Major Renaudin, Brigadier. Be careful: he is a dangerous man. He is known to have attacked other prisoners before, and not always from the front.”

“I will deal with him at the proper time and the proper way, Hauptman. So, what do you have to offer me?”

“I actually have a choice for you, Brigadier.” Said amicably Eggers, then pointing at the four-story building on the east side of the courtyard.

“In this building, we have a few cells for prominent, meaning high risk prisoners. They are a bit Spartan but you will have the proper privacy a woman deserves in a place like this. The other choice is the senior officers quarters, in the southwest corner of this courtyard. The accommodations are nicer but you will be surrounded by men, with no separate shower or washroom facilities for women.”

“Put me in the southwest wing, Hauptman.” Replied Nancy without hesitation. “I don’t want to be separated from the other prisoners. There are already enough nasty rumors about me running around this place.”

Eggers gave her a warning look.

“Brigadier, you would be safer in the east wing. Think again.”

“Hauptman, I appreciate your concern for me, truly, but my mind is made up and I can fend for myself. I will arrange a schedule for my use of the showers with the senior prisoners.”

"As you wish, Brigadier. Don't say later that I didn't warn you. Now, before I show you to your room, I will guide you to our clothing store: you could use some spare clothes."

"Don't tell me that you have female uniforms here, my dear Hauptman."

"No such luck for you, Brigadier. We do have however things like bathrobes, slippers, T-shirts and shorts that can basically fit anybody. You will also get towels and other hygiene items."

"Then lead on, Hauptman."

The visit at the clothing store took less than twenty minutes, at the end of which Nancy had enough items to fill a suitcase. Eggers then led her back out in the courtyard and in the southwest building, climbing the spiral stone staircase up to the fourth floor. Many of the prisoners who met Nancy either avoided her eyes or looked at her with open contempt. Eggers noticed that too and looked worriedly at Nancy.

"You are sure that you don't want to change your mind, Brigadier?"

"Absolutely sure, Hauptman."

Once on the fourth floor, Eggers led her around a light well, opening the door of a small room facing South and inviting Nancy in.

"Your new home for the rest of the war, Brigadier."

Putting her pile of clothes and personal items on the bed pushed in one corner of the room, Nancy quickly glanced around her new surroundings: a large window with steel bars provided ample light, while the furniture consisted of a storage cabinet, a small table with a chair, a single wall shelf, a table lamp and a steel framed bed. Going to the window and opening it, she admired the outside view through the steel bars for a moment before turning to face Eggers.

"This will be perfect, Hauptman. Thank you!"

"You are welcome, Brigadier. A feldwebel will come at ten O'clock to pick you up for your shopping tour."

"I will be ready then, Hauptman."

Eggers was about to leave when Nancy stopped him.

"Before you go, I must warn you, Hauptman. I may be polite and correct with German soldiers, but we are still at war. I will try my best to escape, except on the occasions when I give my word not to, and I will cause as much trouble as I can. I will

however not use deadly force in any escape attempt. Please pass this to Colonel Schmidt.”

Eggers stared at her in silence for a moment, then came to attention and saluted her.

“Brigadier, I expected no less from Die Wolfin. Have a good day.”

“You too, Hauptman.”

Once Eggers was gone, Nancy put away her new possessions in the storage cabinet, which took her a mere two minutes. She then returned to the window to examine in detail the countryside surrounding the castle. She had already visited the place in the future while accompanied by a German Army officer and her knowledge of Colditz would probably send Colonel Schmidt in a nervous fit if he ever learned of the extent of it. Nancy was relieved to see that the village outside the South moat of the castle was basically the same as when she had toured it in 1993. With any luck, that could simplify her oncoming shopping trip. She was still examining the countryside ten minutes later when someone knocked on her door.

“Come in!”

Nancy smiled when Corporal Jean Bigras timidly stuck his head inside.

“Please come in, Corporal.”

“Er, I’m not disturbing you, Brigadier?”

“Not at all! Make yourself comfortable.”

Jean closed the door behind him and stood near it, facing her.

“Since you don’t need me anymore to push your wheelchair, I came to inquire about what you will be expecting of me as your orderly, Brigadier.”

“About your duties as my orderly, you will find me a most undemanding boss, Corporal: I am from a time period when most of the privileges the officers of this present time take for granted have been abolished. I will serve myself at the kitchen and I will do my own washing. I also don’t believe in those barrack room inspections this time period is so fond of. Actually, your biggest task as my orderly will be to guard the entrance to the showers when I will be using them.”

“Madame?” Exclaimed Jean, turning red.

“You heard me well, Corporal. By the way, what room are you in?”

“In room 504, just under the attic, Brigadier. If you want, I could give you a tour of the building.”

“That won’t be necessary: I know the whole castle well.”

“You do?”

“Corporal, I hold a Masters degree in International Relations and a B.A. in Military History. Apart of visiting extensively this castle in the future, I read many books about it and studied its history in detail, with particular attention to the period of this war. I probably know things about this castle that Colonel Schmidt himself doesn't know.”

“That... that is a pleasant surprise, Brigadier. Do you plan to escape from Colditz?”

Nancy grinned devilishly at that.

“What do you think, Corporal? Anyway, time for you to go: my escort should show up soon.”

“Then, have a good walk in town, Brigadier.”

On his way out, Jean nearly collided with an old feldwebel about to knock on Nancy's door. Excusing himself, the Frenchman then left in a hurry, watched by the suspicious German. Nancy, grabbing her beret, got out of her room and closed the door before smiling to the German.

“He's my orderly, Feldwebel. I was giving him my instructions for his daily routine.”

“Ach so! Ready for your shopping trip, Brigadier?”

“I certainly am, Feldwebel. Lead on!”

Going down the stairs to the inner courtyard, the two of them walked to the wide, arched passage leading to the entrance gate. Five armed soldiers were waiting for them in front of the massive doors. Before one of them knocked on the doors to have them unlocked by an outside sentry, the feldwebel took out a pair of handcuffs and looked apologetically at Nancy.

“I'm sorry, Brigadier, but I have orders not to take any chances with you.”

“Do what you have to do, Feldwebel. Just don't clamp them on too tight.”

The German was actually careful when he put the handcuffs around Nancy's wrists, tightening them progressively and leaving some loose in them. With the soldiers surrounding her, Nancy was then escorted out of the entrance, along the ramparts and the outer courtyard and through the Clock Tower gate, emerging on the moat bridge and the street leading into the medieval town of Colditz.

Nancy's group immediately attracted the curiosity of the civilians present in the streets or visible at windows or balconies. While the words 'Die Wolfin' could be heard a

number of times, nobody showed real hostility or hurled insults at Nancy. Seeing a street she recognized from her 1993 visit, Nancy pointed it to the feldwebel walking besides her.

"I believe that there is a jeweler's shop down that side street. I would like to go see if I could sell my engagement ring there, Feldwebel."

The German looked at her with unmitigated surprise.

"How could you know about that shop, Brigadier? You just arrived yesterday!"

"Actually, I visited Colditz before, in 2003. The shop was run by a Herr Molders, who succeeded his father in his business."

The feldwebel shook his head in disbelief while the other Germans stared at her as if she was a witch.

"Brigadier, you're one different woman, I'll give you that. Let's go see that jeweler."

Moving down the side street with Nancy in the lead, they soon stopped in front of a small shop with a name displayed on the front window.

"Molders and Son, jewelers. It didn't change a bit in 63 years." Said Nancy playfully before entering the store. A man in his forties was sitting behind a glass counter where jewels and watches were displayed. A small boy was also sitting near the door giving into the rear of the shop, reading an illustrated book. Both looked up at Nancy and nearly jumped out of their chairs.

"Dad, it's Die Wolfin!" Shouted the boy excitedly, running to Nancy to examine her from head to toe. The boy was maybe ten years old and had blond hair and blue eyes. Smiling to him, Nancy crouched in front of him.

"Hello, Hans! You're quite a handsome boy."

The jeweler instinctively made the sign of the cross at those words.

"How do you know my son's name, miss?"

"Let's say that I spoke at length with him before... in 2003. Do you buy gold, Herr Molders?"

"Er, yes. What would you like to sell, Miss?"

"My engagement ring. I need some cash to buy female articles: those incompetents at the castle don't have size 40C bras in stock."

The jeweler and the soldiers burst out in laughter as Nancy took off her engagement ring. Molders took it and, using a magnifying lens, examined it carefully.

"Nice little diamonds on this ring, miss. The gold is 18 karats."

The jeweler then weighed the ring on a precision scale before looking back at Nancy.

“I can give you 1600 Reich marks for this ring, miss.”

“I will take your word on this, Herr Molders. Deal!”

As the jeweler counted out Nancy’s money, the feldwebel got close to the counter and extended his right hand.

“I’m sorry, Brigadier, but I have to hold on to your cash: prisoners can’t keep large sums on them. Whatever is left after your shopping tour will be held for you and a receipt will be given to you.”

“Fair enough, Feldwebel. You certainly follow all the rules on the proper treatment of prisoners of war.”

“We are not the Gestapo, Brigadier.” Replied softly the German. Nancy gave him her money, then caressed the jeweller’s son’s hair playfully.

“See you in 63 years, Hans.”

“I will never forget your visit, Miss Wolfin.” Said proudly the child. Something enormous then struck Nancy, who paled visibly. The older Hans Molders did not remember her at all in 2003, meaning only one thing: she was now in a parallel timeline. Simply waiting a few decades would not return her to what she knew as her own time.

“Are you alright, Brigadier?” Asked the feldwebel, seeing her wobbling.

“I... I will be. Let me go out for some fresh air.”

The six German soldiers accompanied her out of the shop, concern on their faces. It took her a minute or so before she felt well enough to continue on.

“I’m alright now, Feldwebel. Let’s find a women’s clothing store now.”

Going back on the main street, the group walked slowly along it. They encountered a newspapers stand one block down, where a big front-page title and a picture in a Berlin newspaper immediately caught Nancy’s eyes. Grabbing a copy with her cuffed hands, she detailed the picture showing her in a wheelchair, flanked by Luftwaffe soldiers in front of the Tempelhof Hospital.

“Die Wolfin caught.” Read Nancy aloud. “The infamous Canadian time traveler will now spend the rest of the war in Colditz Castle.”

Nancy then looked at the feldwebel.

“Could I buy a couple of copies of this newspaper?”

“Er, I don’t see a problem with that. Go ahead, Colonel.”

“Could you pay, then, since you have my money?”

“Oh... of course! Silly me!”

Folding the two newspapers under one arm, Nancy resumed her slow walk, stopping eventually in front of a clothing store.

“This looks like a good place for me. Let’s go in!”

Nancy filled two shopping bags in that store, then went to a nearby drugstore, where she bought various female hygiene and beauty items. On leaving the drugstore, the feldwebel looked at his watch and shook his head.

“Twenty past eleven already. You’re as bad as my wife when she goes shopping. We better hurry up or we will be late for lunch. Brigadier?”

Nancy, who had been gazing at a storefront display, looked at him, hopeful.

“Could I please buy one last item? It would mean a lot to me.”

“What it is now, Brigadier?” Said the German, sighing.

“Just a plain, used guitar.”

“A guitar? Er, I don’t know about that.”

“I could serenade you from my balcony.” She said playfully. The old soldier just didn’t feel like saying no to her: she was so attractive and nice in many ways. Besides, a guitar, even broken down into its components, could hardly be of any use in an escape.

“Oh, alright! I’ll probably catch hell for this but I’m counting on you being a good guitar player, Brigadier.”

“I can play it nearly as well as I can fight, Feldwebel.”

“Himmel! That’s enough of a reference to me. Let’s buy it!”

As the ecstatic Nancy got out of the music store five minutes later, her newly acquired guitar in her hands, the noise of a convoy coming up the street made her and her guards look to their right, in time to see a column of Luftwaffe trucks appear at a bend. Led by a Krupp Boxer light vehicle in which sat a Luftwaffe lieutenant colonel, twelve trucks full of troops rolled past Nancy, followed by six anti-aircraft quad 20mm cannons mounted on half-tracks. Twelve more half-tracks followed, six of them towing 88mm anti-aircraft guns.

“Mein Gott!” Exclaimed the feldwebel. “Did they bring all this just because of you, Brigadier?”

“Yes!” Said Nancy gravely. “I sincerely hope that my presence here will not bring death and destruction to this town.”

The six German soldiers stared at her, not knowing how to react to those words.

13:09 (GMT)

Cabinet conference room

10 Downing Street, London

England

Everyone in the conference room rose to their feet when Prime Minister Churchill entered, his face reflecting deep concern.

“Please sit down, gentlemen, and let’s deal with this situation at once.”

Churchill sat, then nodded to Brigadier General Menzies, head of the M.I.6, who was one of the nine ministers and senior officers sitting around the conference table with Churchill.

“Brief us on your findings, General.”

“Yes, Mister Prime Minister.”

Menzies, with his deputy Claude Dansey to his right, took a pile of papers and photographs lying on the table in front of him and extracted a document out of it as he spoke.

“Gentlemen, we finally have some news about what happened to Brigadier Laplante after her capture four days ago. Unfortunately, those news are mostly bad. To resume quickly what became of her, the Coastal Command aircraft she was traveling on apparently crashed in the North Sea due to extremely bad weather. A German submarine then picked her up, still alive, and was told to turn back to port to bring her to Germany, where Brigadier Laplante was supposed to be picked up by Abwehr agents. Unfortunately, it seems now that it was a team of Gestapo agents masquerading as Abwehr agents that picked her up in Wilhelmshaven.”

“My god!” Said softly Anthony Eden while lowering his head in despair. General Ismay also appeared shaken by this. Menzies went on, showing the document taken from the pile.

“What followed is still a bit confused to us, but it seems that Brigadier Laplante was brought to a Gestapo center in Berlin and tortured for over two days until the Abwehr, acting on Hitler’s orders, found her and freed her. She was then brought to a Luftwaffe hospital near Tempelhof airfield and briefly treated there before being shipped under escort to Colditz Castle, an old fortress in Saxony used to keep prisoners of war deemed dangerous by the Germans. We learned of all this via this report from a representative of the Red Cross, who was able to see and speak with Brigadier Laplante

in the Tempelhof hospital, thanks to the good offices of the Abwehr. An attaché of the American embassy in Berlin was also present and took numerous pictures of Laplante, apart of writing down for her a note meant for her husband, who is the American Assistant Army Attaché in London. The Red Cross representative also happened to be a doctor, so we have a medical assessment of her as well. It is not pretty, gentlemen.” Menzies passed around the table two sets of pictures and gave a third set directly to Churchill. The old politician winced as he looked at the pictures one by one.

“My god! The poor woman.”

Similar exclamations went around the table as the sets of pictures passed from hand to hand. Menzies waited until most of the participants had seen them before speaking again.

“According to the Swiss doctor from the Red Cross, Brigadier Laplante bore extremely severe marks of tortures and was in constant, severe pain. All her nails were pulled out and her fingers and toes were smashed, among other atrocities done to her. According to a military doctor working at M.I.6 who looked at both this report and the photographs, Brigadier Laplante was subjected to the worst tortures imaginable. This raises a crucial point: did she reveal any secrets to the Germans while under torture?”

“Could anyone actually resist such barbaric treatment?” Asked Admiral Pound, the First Sea Lord. General Ismay looked resolutely at him.

“If anyone can, it is Brigadier Laplante. She is the toughest and bravest woman I ever met.”

“But can we go only on presumptions, General Ismay?” Cut in Menzies. “Brigadier Laplante is possibly the one single person who holds the most precious secrets in this country. Anything that she could have given up under torture would cause grave damage to our war effort. Besides, she may have given secrets to the Germans even without the tortures. Before you all jump in indignation at this, hear me out, gentlemen.”

Menzies then took a sheet of paper out of his pile of evidence.

“This is a copy of the small note that Laplante dictated to the Red Cross doctor, to be given to her husband in London. We managed to copy the original before Major Crawford received it. Brigadier Laplante was under the effect of morphine when she dictated it, which would explain its slightly disjointed text. My deputy, Claude Dansey, analyzed it and came up with a few interesting points. Claude...”

The old Secret Service bureaucrat cleared his throat and consulted a notepad as he spoke slowly.

“That note actually confirmed a few things we already suspected about Brigadier Laplante, gentlemen. I...”

Anthony Eden’s fist slamming on the table cut off Dansey. The Foreign Minister glared at the bureaucrat as he shouted angrily at him.

“That woman lies physically broken in a prison cell in Germany and you dare try to dirty her name when she can’t even be here to defend herself? I haven’t seen you on the frontlines lately, mister. Mister Prime Minister, why do we even listen to this?”

“Sir Anthony, while I am furiously tempted to call Mister Dansey to order, this subject is too important not to consider all the possibilities. Mister Dansey, you may continue, but be convincing if you want to keep your job.”

“Er, yes, Mister Prime Minister.” Said Dansey, now sweating, before looking back at his notepad. “Apart of the expected declarations of affection to her husband, Laplante also wrote, and I quote, tell our beloved daughter Ingrid that I love her very much and that I want her to still be proud of what she is, unquote.”

Dansey looked up from his notepad and examined the now confused expressions on the faces around the conference table.

“As you may know already, Brigadier Laplante doesn’t have a daughter, either here or in the year 2012. She however helped capture a young German female auxiliary during a raid in France last January, along with other female German prisoners. The name of that girl is Ingrid Weiss.”

Dansey then held up high a black and white picture of a most beautiful teenage girl wearing a Luftwaffe uniform.

“The said Ingrid Weiss has apparently forged quickly a special bond with Brigadier Laplante while being held in the Tower of London, to the point where she was called a traitor by another German prisoner, who attacked her. The guard staff at the Tower of London is unanimous in saying that there is a lot of affection between Laplante and Weiss. Then, a week ago, our hidden microphones in the prisoners’ quarters of the Tower told us that Major Crawford has managed to obtain the American citizenship for Private Ingrid Weiss. We thought at first that he had done this on his own, without his wife’s knowledge, but Laplante’s note shows that they must have secretly adopted that German girl.”

“But... that is tantamount to treason!” Shouted Clement Attlee, the Deputy Prime Minister. “Why would Brigadier Laplante do such a thing?”

“Because she is a germanophile, sir.” Replied Dansey, making many eyebrows rise around him. “She has always been overly scrupulous about treating German prisoners well and on insisting on not targeting German civilians.”

“That makes her a humane person in my books, Mister Dansey, not a germanophile.” Shot back Anthony Eden.

“Then, what about this, sir? When we found out about that Ingrid Weiss, we reviewed our information on all the other female prisoners held in the Tower of London. We then made quite a discovery just yesterday: one of those German women who was masquerading as a simple Luftwaffe auxiliary is in fact none other than Flugkapitan Hanna Reitsch, a famous female test pilot and a hardcore Nazi to boot.”

“So? Brigadier Laplante must have been fooled by her, like the rest of us.”

“I don't think so, sir. The electronic files in Laplante's computer were checked this morning to find out as much as we could about that Hanna Reitsch. To our surprise, we found a very extensive file concerning that test pilot. That file was in fact bigger than any other file on Germans of this war, save for one on Adolph Hitler and another on a Waffen-SS officer named Otto Skorzeni. The file on Reitsch was in fact so extensive that it is nearly unthinkable that Brigadier Laplante didn't recognize her the minute she saw her in the Tower of London.”

“So, what are you saying, Mister Dansey?” Asked pointedly Clement Attley. “That our greatest war hero is a traitor?”

“If fraternization with the enemy is considered a treasonous act, yes sir.”

“Wait a minute!” Shouted General Ismay. “All this makes no sense! Why would the Gestapo torture Brigadier Laplante if she is on such good terms with the Germans?”

“On that, I don't have an answer, sir.”

They were then all silent for a long moment, until Attley spoke again.

“What do we do about Brigadier Laplante, then? She is still held prisoner in Germany, where she can give away information, either willingly or under torture. Do we try to break her out of prison or do we let her rot in a cell for the rest of the war?”

“What about killing her, so that the Germans have no more chances to get secrets out of her?”

Dansey's suggestion got him a few angry stares, but also a few nods. Churchill then decided that it was time to take personal control of this meeting.

“Gentlemen, we are now speculating with very few facts in our hands. I personally will not tolerate public accusations of treason against Brigadier Laplante without a lot more evidence than what we have now. We also need as much information as we can on that Colditz Castle, to see if we can in fact break her out of there. I thus want a photo-reconnaissance mission of Colditz as soon as possible.”

“I will take care of that, sir.” Replied at once General Ismay. Dansey was next to speak.

“What about those two Germans, Weiss and Reitsch? We should at the least have them interrogated to see what they could tell us about their true relationship with Brigadier Laplante.”

Churchill thought that one over for a moment.

“Leave the young girl alone, Mister Dansey. I will do the inquiring about her myself. You may question the test pilot, though. However, I don’t want any brutalities involved.”

“I understand, sir.”

“Then this meeting is adjourned until more information becomes available. Have a good day, gentlemen.”

Menzies and Dansey met with an anxious Wing Commander Winterbotham outside of the conference room. Winterbotham went straight to Menzies.

“Sir, what is the word about ULTRA? Is it still safe or should we consider it compromised?”

“We don’t know yet: the Prime Minister judges that there is not enough evidence to accuse publicly Brigadier Laplante of treason, yet. He also won’t speculate on whether she talked under torture. Personally I fear that our biggest secret, along with many others, have been compromised, either willingly or unwillingly, by Laplante. We will have to analyze ULTRA traffic carefully to watch for inconsistencies from now on. Wing Commander, I want you to especially watch for any intercepts from Colditz Castle, where Laplante is being supposedly held. Any transmission from there will be analyzed on a top priority basis. Claude, you go to the Tower of London with a security team and grab that German test pilot. I want to know exactly what were Laplante’s motivations about her.”

“She will talk, sir. I can guarantee that.”

Menzies gave a warning look to his deputy.

“The Prime Minister said no brutalities, Claude. I don’t believe in using torture myself, so don’t go overboard with that German.”

“No need for tortures, sir: there are other, non-violent means that are as effective.”

“Hmm, alright! Keep me advised of your progress on this.”

The three men then went their separate ways, none having many thoughts about Nancy Laplante’s well being in their minds.

14:48 (GMT)

Tower Green, Tower of London

Ingrid Weiss was cutting the grass around the inner yard of the Tower of London, with her comrades similarly busy around her, when three men in civilian suits showed up, escorted by Brigadier Browning. The group stopped in front of Katharina Fischer, who was gathering cut grass in large canvas bags. The lead civilian, a tall and lean old man in his sixties, spoke to Katharina in a most unfriendly voice.

“Flugkapitan Hanna Reitsch, you are coming with us. Grab her!”

Ingrid, now alarmed, saw Katharina pale instantly as the two burly men following the tall civilian stepped forward and firmly grabbed the petite woman by the arms before pushing her towards Bloody Tower’s gate. Abandoning her hold on the lawnmower she had been using, Ingrid sprinted towards the group. A female guard ran after her, trying to catch her, but the teenager was too fast for her and braked to a halt in front of the civilians and Katharina, cutting off their path.

“Where are you taking Katharina?”

The tall civilian looked at Ingrid with something akin to morbid interest.

“Your friend’s real name is Hanna Reitsch, Private Weiss. Now, get out of the way before we get rough.”

Ingrid gave a fake blank look at her friend, who appeared quite scared.

“Katharina, what are they talking about?”

“I’m sorry, Ingrid, but they are right: I am in reality Flugkapitan Hanna Reitsch, a test pilot.”

The female guard caught up with Ingrid and grabbed her by one arm to try to pull her away. Resisting the guard, Ingrid shot a poisonous look at the tall civilian.

“Don’t you hurt my friend!”

“Or you will do what, Private?” Replied the civilian, mocking her. That turned the teenager into a fury. Breaking free from the female guard, she jumped on the civilian and kned him in the groin with savage strength. As the British bent over with a groan of pain, Ingrid followed up with an uppercut on the man’s nose, breaking it and starting some serious bleeding. The female guard then immobilized her two arms in her back as the two M.I.5 security men flanking Hanna Reitsch finally reacted. One of them was tripped by Hanna and fell flat on his face, while the other swung his right fist at Ingrid’s face. At the last second, the teenager bent her torso forward, ducking under the swing. The British female guard was the one who got the fist on her jaw. As the guard fell backward, knocked out, Ingrid punched the security man in the throat, using every bit of the teaching on martial arts and fighting that Nancy had given her. The man emitted a gurgling sound and stepped back two steps before Susanna Berghof, having sprinted towards the scene of the fight, tackled the British to the ground while Frida Winterer and Johanna Fink jumped on the other security man, who had been struggling with Hanna Reitsch. Female guards and male soldiers were now coming at a run from every direction, some of them with guns drawn. A pistol shot suddenly froze all the protagonists of the fight: it was Brigadier Browning, now looking furious, who had fired once skywards.

“EVERYBODY WILL NOW CALM DOWN! PRISONERS, FORM IN ONE RANK OVER HERE!”

Slowly, reluctantly, Ingrid and her friends picked themselves up and joined the lineup of female prisoners now forming. The three Secret Service men were clearly the worst for wear, with the tall civilian putting a handkerchief under his heavily bleeding nose and the two security men sporting long, deep scratches on their faces, where Susanna, Frida and Johanna had clawed their fingernails. Dansey shook a fist at Ingrid.

“One day you will pay for this, Weiss.”

“OOOH, I’m scared! If you think that this is bad, wait until Nancy gets her hands on you.”

“Your stepmother is in no position to hurt us: she is rotting in a cell in Colditz right now.”

Everybody except for Hanna Reitsch looked with stunned surprise at Ingrid at the mention of the word ‘stepmother’, making the teenager blush. Gruppenführerin Hartmann appeared particularly shaken by this.

“Brigadier Laplante adopted you? Mein Gott!”

Ingrid kept her head up and looked resolutely at her officer.

“Yes, she did and I am proud and happy to have her as my stepmother, even if she is technically supposed to be my enemy.”

“Alright, we will discuss this later.” Cut in Brigadier Browning. “Oberhelferin Berghof, Helferin Fink and Winterer, you will spend the next two weeks in the cells in Beauchamp Tower, with rations of water and bread, for joining this fight. Helferin Weiss, for starting this fight and assaulting a British security official, I condemn you to four weeks of solitary confinement in the basement of Beauchamp Tower. Guards, take them away!”

“Hang tight, Hanna!” Shouted Ingrid to Reitsch as two guards grabbed her by the arms. The test pilot gave Ingrid a military salute.

“You too, Helferin Weiss. You are a brave girl.”

The security men then dragged her away, leaving the rest of the prisoners facing Brigadier Browning, who gave a quick order to Hartmann.

“Gruppenführerin Hartmann, have your women resume work.”

“Yes sir!” Replied Lisa, coming to attention and giving him the Nazi salute in a gesture of defiance. That drew a dark look from Browning, who turned and walked away in exasperation. Lisa then directed her subalterns back to work. As Anna Hauser walked past her, she whispered softly in the ear of the NCO.

“Decidedly, this Brigadier Laplante is full of surprises.”

“Are they good or bad surprises to you, Gruppenführerin?” Replied Hauser cautiously. Lisa thought over that for a second.

“Mostly good. Ingrid is lucky to have her.”

A big black government sedan car was waiting outside Middle Tower for the Secret Service team. Before being pushed inside on the rear bench seat, Hanna Reitsch was handcuffed and blindfolded. As they drove away, Hanna spoke to no one in particular.

“What do you want from me?”

“Answers!” Replied Dansey. Saying that one word sent pain from his broken nose to his brain. Clenching his jaws tight, he swore mentally at Ingrid Weiss. The rest of the trip to M.I.5 headquarters was spent in silence. By the time the car stopped in front of the main entrance, the bleeding from his nose had mostly stopped but not the pain, putting him in a foul mood indeed. Hanna Reitsch was roughly led inside and

down towards the basement, where cells and interrogation rooms were. She was sat forcibly in a chair, then had her blindfold removed. She blinked a few times, partially blinded by a spotlight directed at her. Dansey sat in front of her, across from a small table, then lined up a series of photographs on the table. Hanna looked at them and immediately winced in revulsion: they showed Nancy Laplante, naked and bearing the marks of horrible tortures.

“Mein Gott! Who did this to Brigadier Laplante?”

“Don’t you recognize the handy work of your Gestapo, Flugkapitan?” Said Dansey softly, trying to minimize the pain from his nose. “How would you like for us to give you the same treatment in return?”

“You’re bluffing! I know for a fact that you British don’t commit such atrocities on prisoners. As for the Gestapo, I may be a German but I don’t approve of their methods.”

“Miss, right now I need answers and I don’t care much how I will get them. You will now tell me why Brigadier Laplante hid your true identity from us.”

“I don’t know.” Lied Hanna. Dansey gave her a black look.

“Think carefully, miss. There are ways to make you speak that won’t leave a single mark on you. Why did Laplante hide your identity? Just answer that question and we will leave you alone.”

The truth then hit Hanna, making her stare in disbelief at Dansey.

“You are not after me. You are after Brigadier Laplante. Why?”

“Because she may be a traitor.” Replied Dansey, getting angry.

“A traitor? Are you mad or stupid? She was making you British win the war.”

“She is way overrated.” Said Dansey disdainfully. “We would be winning the war even without her. The fact is that she acted treacherously by protecting your identity and by attaching herself to that Ingrid Weiss.”

Hanna stared at him with open contempt.

“No! The true facts are that you are a petty, small-minded man who can’t accept that a woman did all the things that Brigadier Laplante did. Now that she lies in a cell in Germany, her body broken by tortures and unable to defend her name, you try to stab her in the back with your senseless accusations. She is not a traitor, only a woman of great kindness and tolerance. As for you, you are nothing more than a cowardly bureaucrat and a man beyond contempt.”

Dansey returned her stare for a moment, then looked at the two security men flanking Hanna.

“Make her talk! I don’t care how as long as there are no marks on her body. Keep at it until she breaks.”

Dansey then left the interrogation room. One of the security men looked at his comrade with a mean smile.

“Fred, go fill a nice, cold bath for the Flugkapitan. Then get Jim and Mark here: we will need some extra hands.”

The petite Hanna couldn’t help feeling scared as Fred left the room: she had heard before about the bathtub interrogation method, which was used by the Gestapo among others. It consisted of dipping the head of a person in a tub of icy water and of holding it under the water until the person was nearly drowning. If the prisoner didn’t speak after that, his or her head was promptly dipped back under water. That treatment could be kept on for hours and left absolutely no telltale marks, apart of complete physical exhaustion and of the horrible and repeated feeling of suffocation. The security man then proceeded to strip Hanna of her clothes, leaving her only with her bra and panties. He looked down with cold eyes at his nearly naked prisoner.

“Questioning that young Weiss bitch would have been much more fun: she’s quite cute actually.”

“Go to hell, you damn sadist. I will not tell you anything.”

The man did not answer. Instead, he pushed away the small table and the chair that were in front of Hanna, then fetched a thick telephone directory book and a heavy club.

“As you can see, there are a lot of people living in London, miss. Do you want to hear their names?”

Hanna didn’t understand him until he applied the telephone directory against the right side of her face and, holding it there, struck it hard with his club. The blow, its force distributed along the surface of the book, shook her brains to bits and made her right ear buzz. The man then hit again and again, alternating between both sides of her head. Five minutes of this was enough to make Hanna dizzy and confused. Fred then returned to the interrogation room.

“The Flugkapitan’s bath is ready.”

Both men grabbed Hanna and dragged her to a nearby bathroom, where two burly men were waiting besides a bathtub filled with water. Fred pulled Hanna’s hair hard while staring into her eyes.

“This is your chance to talk. Why was Laplante hiding your identity?”

“Screw you!”

“You asked for it.”

Hanna was forced to kneel besides the bathtub, then a piece of foam mat was put on top of the tub's edge, so that it would not leave a bruise on her belly when she would bend forward. The first contact with the icy water on her face was a shock to Hanna, but the bursting of her lungs after over a minute of being held under water felt much worse, with Fred pulling her head out only after she had actually swallowed some water. Hanna had only two seconds to vomit the water and struggle for air before the man pushed her head back in the water. His first question came only after the fourth immersion.

“Why did Laplante protect your identity?”

Half suffocated and with her lungs on fire, Hanna could only shake her head in denial, prompting an immediate immersion. That process went on for forty minutes, until Hanna passed out. Fred looked coldly at the inert German.

“Time for a smoke break, guys. We will continue the dipping as soon as she regains consciousness. I will keep watch over her.”

Waiting for the three others to leave, Fred then pushed the locking bolt on the door of the bathroom, then pulled down Hanna's panties and raped her while she was still unconscious. He had ample time to dress up and pull her panties back in place before the others came back.

“That little Ingrid would have definitely been much nicer.” He said to himself while unlocking the door.

17:35 (GMT)

Basement cells, Beauchamp Tower

Tower of London

Ingrid rose from the hard wooden bench that doubled as her bed in the tiny, damp stone cell when the locking bolts were pulled. A British soldier pushed the massive door open and Mike Crawford entered, a briefcase in his left hand. Ingrid immediately ran to him and hugged him happily.

“Mike, I'm so happy to see you now. I knew that you would come and help me.” She then saw the sad, dejected expression on his face.

“What's wrong, Mike?”

“Many things are wrong, Ingrid. You better sit down.”

Ingrid did so hesitantly, with Mike sitting besides her on the bench and opening his briefcase. He took a letter and a set of photographs out of it and handed them to Ingrid.

“Nancy fell in the hands of the Gestapo. Before the Abwehr could free her, she was tortured severely. These pictures were taken by an American attaché in Berlin after she was brought to a Luftwaffe hospital.”

Taking the photographs with shaking hands, Ingrid forced herself to look at them. She had to stop after the fifth one, tears choking her.

“Bastards! I hate them all. I don’t want to be a German anymore.”

Mike grabbed her solidly by the shoulders and spoke firmly to her, looking straight into her eyes.

“Ingrid, listen to me! Nancy left a message for both of us. She says that she will be alright and that she wants you to still be proud of what you are. She also asked me to take care of you during her absence. I will however not be allowed back in the Tower after this. I already called Major Dows, who agreed to take over my duties here as a neutral representative. I however managed to convince Brigadier Browning to seek permission from higher British authorities to let me bring you with me to the United States.”

“The United States? Why? Are you leaving England?”

Mike nodded his head slowly, more moved than he wanted to show.

“I have been recalled to the United States. I will leave in two weeks, hopefully with you. My ambassador is backing me up on this.”

“And... and Nancy?”

Mike’s shoulders sagged at Nancy’s name.

“I already miss her terribly, but there is nothing I can do for her at the moment. The most I can do is to ensure that you are well and safe. Lieutenant Commander Stilwell promised me that he will safeguard Nancy’s apartment and belongings during her absence. As soon as she is repatriated after the war, we will come back for her.”

Ingrid lowered her head, then started crying quietly. Mike hugged her until the worst of her tears had dried out.

“Mike, if you can, take me with you: England will only remind me of Nancy’s loss.”

“I will do my best, Ingrid. By the way, I was told about your fight with the British security men. Nancy would have been proud of you.”

Ingrid’s smile at those words faded when she thought about Hanna Reitsch.

“I wasn’t good enough to protect my friend from being taken away, Mike.”

The noise of footsteps approaching and of the locking bolt being pulled open made their heads turn as they were still holding each other. The iron door opened and, to their utter surprise, Prime Minister Churchill entered, accompanied by General Ismay, Brigadier Browning and two of Churchill's bodyguards. Mike and Ingrid got up at once and saluted Churchill, who was looking around at the old stones dripping with humidity.

"Well, this certainly isn't a palace." Said Churchill on a jovial tone. He then saw the pictures of Nancy on the bench and gave a sad look to Ingrid.

"I see that you already got the bad news, miss. Do you mind if I sit down?"

"Uh, of course not, Mister Prime Minister."

Inviting Ingrid to sit as well, Churchill took place besides her and examined her juvenile face for a moment before speaking again.

"You could indeed be my grand-daughter, miss. How old are you in reality?"

"Fifteen, Mister Prime Minister." Answered Ingrid in a resigned tone, not seeing any utility left in that charade. Churchill exchanged a look with General Ismay before looking back at her.

"Miss, I came here because I was curious to see what kind of German girl could have conquered the heart of my special counselor. Could you quickly tell me how she came to adopt you?"

Ingrid did so with good grace, explaining first what had happened to her family in Berlin, her being a Jew and how she had been captured and then had learned to know and admire Nancy. She also revealed to him Nancy's project to send her to the United States, so that she could start a new life far away from Germany. Churchill was left thoughtful at the end of her story.

"A simple cry from the heart, prompted by kindness. When I think that some of my ministers are calling her a traitor for that."

"How could anyone in England call her a traitor, Mister Prime Minister? You are winning the war because of her. And why would the Gestapo torture her if she was really a traitor to you?"

Churchill scrutinized her face, looking into her big blue eyes.

"You seem to know her very well, miss. Maybe you could clear out another mystery about her. Why did Nancy hide the true identity of Flugkapitan Reitsch?"

"To prevent Reitsch from being tortured, Mister Prime Minister. Nancy did recognize her the first day she saw her. I was with her and pushing her wheelchair when she spoke in private with Flugkapitan Reitsch. In fact, Hanna did not understand

at first why Nancy wanted to protect her. Nancy's answer was that she and your government already knew everything of importance about Hanna and that she was afraid that some zealous secret services official would use harsh mental techniques on Hanna. Nancy acted only to avoid unnecessary suffering to a woman who was no more a threat to England. Now, Hanna is probably being brutalized by the goons of that old bastard whom I broke the nose this morning."

Churchill surprised Mike and Ingrid by smiling in amusement then.

"You broke the nose of Dansey? I can't say that I will cry for that old fart."

As Ingrid eyed him, confused, Churchill exchanged a knowing look with Ismay, who nodded slowly his head.

"It seems that we have the answers to our questions about Brigadier Laplante, Mister Prime Minister. I now recall numerous mentions of information concerning that Hanna Reitsch in the reports I was getting from Laplante. I thus don't see any valid reasons left to interrogate that test pilot. She should be returned to the Tower of London and be allowed to spend the rest of the war here."

"I agree, General. We will pass by M.I.5 headquarters after this to get that Reitsch. Brigadier Browning, you are someone in whom that Reitsch could probably trust. Could you come with us and two female guards in a vehicle?"

"I will take care of that right away, Mister Prime Minister."

Browning was about to leave when Churchill recalled him.

"Brigadier, do not advise M.I.5 of our impending visit. Mister Dansey had an order from me not to brutalize that pilot. I would like to make this a surprise visit, in order to see if M.I.5 is following my instructions."

"Could I come as well, Mister Prime Minister?" Asked eagerly Ingrid, making the old politician smile.

"I don't think that this would be appropriate, young girl. I am afraid that you will have to stay here in the Tower of London...until your departure for the United States." Ingrid and Mike were left stunned by that, not believing their luck, allowing Churchill to continue.

"Miss Ingrid Weiss, do you swear before me that you will not fight anymore against Great-Britain and its allies in this war? Do you also swear never to help the Nazi cause?"

Ingrid got up at attention before answering in a firm voice.

"I swear on my honor, Mister Prime Minister. After what the Gestapo did to Nancy, I now consider myself an enemy of the Nazis."

"Excellent!" Said Churchill while getting up. "I think that the good Brigadier Browning could move you to a more comfortable cell until your departure for the United States, miss."

Browning understood the implicit order from Churchill and faced the soldier that had opened the cell door for them.

"Private Thomas, once I will be gone with the Prime Minister, you will transfer Helferin Weiss to the same cell occupied by the three other prisoners upstairs."

Ingrid, moved, exchanged a long embrace with Mike once the Prime Minister and his group were gone.

"I will finally be able to live with you and, eventually, with Nancy in the United States. I am so happy, Mike."

"And I am happy for you, Ingrid. I promise that you will not regret your choice.

18:09 (GMT)

Interrogation room, M.I.5 headquarters

London

"Now!" Ordered George while he helped hold Hanna Reitsch's head in the water. Fred, sitting on a stool, rapidly turned the handle of the field telephone, which was wired to the denuded nipples of the German test pilot. The German's body stiffened as the electricity went through her, making her let go the little air left in her lungs. Now totally naked and about to pass out, she had her head pulled out of the water for a moment, enough for George to scream a question at her.

"WHY DID LAPLANTE PROTECT YOUR IDENTITY?"

"S...scheisse²⁵ !" Said weakly Hanna.

"WRONG ANSWER!" Screamed George before dipping again her head under the water. He then looked at Fred with a mean smile.

"Turn the crank non-stop from now on, Fred: it is high time to break her."

"With pleasure!" Said Fred. "Two fried tits, coming up!"

²⁵ Scheisse : Shit in German.

He then started turning the crank as fast as he could, making Hanna convulse under the pain while she tried desperately to hold her breath. The four M.I.5 agents in the room were too busy with Hanna to notice the entrance of two of Churchill's bodyguards, followed closely by General Ismay and Churchill himself, then by Brigadier Browning. Fred, still turning the crank, turned his head a bit late, assuming that it was Claude Dansey coming to check on their progress with Reitsch. His smile changed to a horrified grimace at the sight of Churchill, who was turning red with anger as he contemplated the scene.

"STOP THIS IMMEDIATELY!" Screamed Churchill, furious. His two bodyguards, as well as Ismay and Browning, took out their revolvers and pointed them at the M.I.5 agents. The latter, realizing that they were now in very big trouble, raised their hands high immediately and stepped away from the bathtub. Sergeant Bailey, who had just entered, hurried to the bathtub and raised out of the water the head of Reitsch, who was drowning. The German coughed repeatedly and spat out water while taking air in. Bailey swore on seeing the wires taped to Reitsch's nipples and delicately removed them. She then eyed the German's face, red and swollen from hundreds of blows through a telephone book and with eyes red.

"My god! Those bastards really went at it with you, Flugkapitan."

"Bailey?... Would never believe to...to be happy to see you."

"Thanks! We will take you out of here, Flugkapitan. Don't worry anymore."

In the meantime, Churchill's bodyguards had disarmed the agents and forced their back against a wall, while the Prime Minister eyed the M.I.5 men with disgust.

"Never in my whole career have I seen something more disgraceful than this. Who ordered you to torture this German like this?"

Fred, who had no intention to take all the blame to protect Dansey, answered him at once.

"Mister Dansey did, Mister Prime Minister. He told us to make this German say why Laplante hid her true identity, also saying that he didn't care what methods we used as long as they didn't leave marks on the prisoner, sir."

"Is that true?" Asked Churchill while looking at the other agents, who nodded their heads.

"Yes, Mister Prime Minister." Said George. "We were simply following orders, sir."

Instead of calming him down, that made Churchill even more furious.

“Orders? You want to excuse your conduct the same way the Nazis do? You damn bastards! General Ismay, take the names of these men: they will be judged for torture on a prisoner of war and abuse of power. Brigadier Browning, find the clothes of Flugkapitan Reitsch and get her to the infirmary of the Tower of London. Until further notice, nobody from the Secret Services will be allowed inside the Tower of London, not even Brigadier Menzies. As for Mister Dansey, I will deal with him personally. So, where is your boss, misters?”

“Probably in his office on the second floor, Mister Prime Minister.” Answered George. “He was quite anxious to get answers from the prisoner.”

“I see!”

The two female guards were about to pass in front of Churchill, supporting a Hanna Reitsch too weak to stand by herself, when the Prime Minister stopped them briefly so that he could speak to the German.

“Flugkapitan, I am Prime Minister Churchill. I am truly sorry for what happened to you. Please accept my excuses in the name of the British government. You will now be returned to the Tower of London, where you will not be bothered anymore.”

“Th...thank you, sir.” Managed to say weakly Hanna. The two female guards then left the room with her, followed by Brigadier Browning. Churchill, still inside the interrogation room, then heard the voice of Claude Dansey, who was screaming in the corridor.

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING THERE? WHO PERMITTED YOU TO TAKE THAT PRISONER?”

Churchill, followed closely by a bodyguard, rushed in the corridor and, seeing Dansey thirty paces away, walked rapidly to him. Before Dansey could try to find some excuses, Churchill slapped him furiously on his left cheek. The hit reverberated in his broken nose, with the pain making Dansey fall to his knees, while his nose started bleeding again. Churchill eyed him with contempt as he wimpered.

“Mister Dansey, you are a disgrace to the government of His Majesty. You are fired as of now and will have to answer to your acts in front of a judge. Now, get out and never step foot in this building again!”

17:51 (North America Central Time)

Saturday, August 8, 3384 'A'

Time laboratory, New Lake City University campus

American Great Lakes area

Maran Tolvek, feeling total discouragement, looked blankly at the screen of his videophone as the communication link with the Global Science Administrator was terminated. Pivoting his chair around, he looked up at Mona Zirel, who had been listening quietly to the conversation. Like Maran, Mona was a young engineer in her early twenties. The two of them were the sole assistants Farah Tolkonen had on the time travel project, which was housed in an annex of New Lake City University.

"What do we do now? The Science Administrator has impounded the time ship and has forbidden any further time travel. The laboratory will be closed down in a week, after we dismantle the equipment here."

"But... what about Farah?" Protested the young, shapely Mona. "She will be trapped forever in that barbaric time period."

"I know, but what could we do? We have no other time ship."

A look of revelation then downed on Mona's face.

"Why use a ship? We still have that experimental time distorter we used in our remotely controlled heavy probe. We could adapt it to my personal air scooter, which can seat three persons."

"By the stars, you're a genius, Mona! I could kiss you."

"Only after the scooter is ready, you handsome boy. We have a lot of work ahead of us and we must be gone before someone comes in to check on us."

With hope returning to them, the two young engineers then got back to work frantically.

21:16 (Berlin time)

Friday, June 27, 1941 'B'

German military quarters

Southwest wing, Colditz Castle

Germany

Old Feldwebel Buhlingen, his duties finally over for the day, sat tiredly on his bed and pulled off his dusty boots before throwing them in a corner of his small room. Wanting some fresh air after sweating all day in his uniform, he went to his window, which faced East into the outer courtyard, and opened it. A woman's voice singing a love ballad in English and accompanied by the music from a guitar then caught his attention. Looking up and to the left towards Nancy Laplante's window, which was a mere ten yards away, the old soldier saw the Canadian sitting on the inner ledge of her opened window, her new guitar in her hands. She saw him and, continuing to sing in her lovely voice, winked at him. Feeling his fatigue evaporate, Buhlingen sat on the inner ledge of his window and listened to her with contentment.

"God, that was lovely." Said softly Mark Lindsay, lying in his bed while writing a letter to his wife. Laplante's voice and music could be heard easily through the opened windows, as well as from the central light well.

"Maybe we should name her our morale officer." Suggested William Anderson, making Lieutenant Colonel Robertson wince.

"A German lover as our morale officer? No thank you, Major! She even sang in German this afternoon."

"So? She sang in French, Spanish and Russian as well, sir. She simply proved that she is a cultured woman, and a hell of a singer and guitar player. Thinking about it, I'm going to take a break from our routine tomorrow. Laplante accepted to pause for me."

"Drawing or portrait?" Asked Lindsay.

"I will try a drawing at first. She told me that she was not planning to stay here long enough for me to complete a painting of her."

"HA!" Snickered Robertson. "She is not the one deciding when she will attempt to escape: the escape committee decides that. She will have to wait her turn."

22:40 (Berlin time)

Room 413, senior officers' quarters

Southwest wing, Colditz Castle

Like every night, the German soldier slowly went around the prisoners' quarters, checking the doors of each room. As a routine security precaution, the prisoners were

locked up in their rooms at night, a tribute to their reputations as inveterate escapees. The soldier looked through the peephole of each door, checking the number of occupants against a list he held in one hand. Most of the prisoners were already asleep and the soldier had to use his flashlight pointed through the peephole to check on them. The German found light showing under the door of room 413, though. Being intensively curious about the prisoner occupying it, the German quietly approached the door and looked inside. His eyes bulged immediately in both surprise and fear: her legs crossed and her hands on her knees, palms up, Nancy Laplante was in a classic meditative position, her eyes closed. She also was floating a foot or so above her bed, her back to the door. The German could see no way for her to be suspended in midair like this through some kind of trick. Nancy then slowly rotated around and faced the door, still floating above her bed. Her face was serene and her eyes reflected indifference as she looked back at the soldier. Making the sign of the cross, the German ran away, nearly panicked, to report on this to the night duty officer.

08:04 (Berlin time)

Saturday, June 28, 1941 'B'

Inner courtyard, Colditz Castle

Feldwebel Buhlingen, Hauptman Eggers at his back, had just started the morning roll call when the sudden noise of twelve 88mm anti-aircraft guns opening fire all at once made him and all others present jump. Looking skyward with alarm, he saw the condensation trail of a lone, fast flying aircraft crossing the sky over the castle from South to North at high altitude, pursued by exploding 88mm shells.

"AIR RAID! TAKE COVER!" Shouted Hauptman Eggers over the din. The prisoners and the guards dispersed at once, running inside the buildings surrounding the courtyard. To Eggers' surprise, Nancy Laplante was the only one not running for cover. Instead, she calmly walked to the center of the courtyard and, facing East, looked skyward while raising her right hand and making the 'V' sign. Eggers was thinking that she had gone crazy when a British jet fighter-bomber overflew the castle from an altitude of at most a thousand feet, coming from the East. The quad 20mm guns stationed around the castle, caught by surprise, opened fire too late and the British aircraft, dropping back to extremely low altitude, made good its escape.

“Mein Gott! A photo-reconnaissance run.” Said Eggers to himself. He then understood that Laplante had caught on to that fact from the start. Walking angrily to her, he stopped one pace from her and pointed an accusing index.

“How did you know that this wasn’t a bombing raid, Brigadier?”

The Canadian woman grinned to him, making Eggers angrier.

“How? Hauptman, I rewrote the book on British air reconnaissance tactics.”

“And what is next? A British commando raid?”

“Now, now, my dear Hauptman. You know better than expect me to answer that question.”

Eggers then fully realized how dangerous that young, beautiful woman was. Last night’s incident had already brought many unnerving questions about her to him and Colonel Schmidt, the latter becoming more and more nervous about hosting that troubling time traveler. Looking around, he shouted at the top of his lungs.

“EVERYBODY BACK IN THE COURTYARD! THE ROLL CALL WILL RESUME!”

He then looked back at Laplante, who was looking calmly at him.

“Get back to your place, Brigadier.”

“Yawol, Herr Hauptman!” She shouted back sarcastically before walking away with a big smile. Lieutenant Colonel Robertson, taking back his place in the ranks, gave Nancy a dark look.

“You had to show off again, Brigadier?”

Something in the look she gave him back scared Robertson, shutting him up.

19:28 (Berlin time)

Shower house, Colditz Castle

Jean Bigras returned to the entrance of the showers and baths house, where Nancy was waiting, dressed in T-shirt and shorts and with her washing kit in her hands.

“All clear, Brigadier. I will guard the entrance while you shower.”

“Thank you, Jean. You’re a sweetheart.”

Jean couldn’t help stop imagining what the tall Canadian looked like naked as he posted himself just inside the entrance to the shower room. Absorbed in his dreams, he didn’t see a group of prisoners approaching silently until it was too late.

Nancy undressed in the locker room, then walked into the shower room proper, her bar of soap and a towel the only items she kept with her. The water coming out of the showerhead was none too hot, since she had booked the showers just after the hour of usage of all the other prisoners. She was already soaked and was about to soap up when she heard a short, interrupted shout from Jean Bigras.

“Brigadier, watch...”

Alarmed, she stepped out from under the shower and was going for her towel when five men ran in the shower room, led by Pierre Renaudin. He, along with the others, was armed with an improvised club and the hatred on his face told plenty about his intentions. Nancy knew immediately that she was going to have to fight for her life. Renaudin, not even slowing down, raised his club and charged her. Stepping sideways, Nancy grabbed the Frenchman as he swung his club and, pivoting on her heels, sent him slamming hard face first in the stone wall of the shower room. She next blocked a swing from another attacker and hit him hard in the plexus. The man collapsed to his knees as a club struck Nancy’s exposed left ribs. Despite the sharp pain, she managed to break her attacker’s nose with a foot kick before another club hit her, this time on the back of the head. Stunned for a second, she staggered on her feet. That gave a chance to the two attackers left standing to deluge her with punches and club hits. Her face and head bleeding, Nancy collapsed on the cold floor, where her attackers kept kicking and hitting her until she passed out. Renaudin, his own face bruised and bloody, looked down at her with hatred and took a pair of scissors out of a pocket.

“Time for her to look like the dirty collaborator she is.”

Quickly and roughly, Renaudin cut off Nancy’s hair. When she had only a few very short clumps of hair left, he gave her a last punch, breaking her nose and starting a heavy bleeding.

“Let’s go now before the Germans find us.”

Helping the two men Nancy had hit, Renaudin and the three other men that made up his group left the shower house as discreetly as they could, walking past the inert body of Jean Bigras.

Nancy, still unconscious and lying naked in a pool of blood, was found along with Bigras just before eight O’clock by two German soldiers doing a last patrol before the curfew was enforced on the prisoners. Quickly alerted by them, Hauptman Eggers

arrived in the shower house at a run with Feldwebel Buhlingen and four more soldiers. What Eggers saw angered him to no small degree.

“The stupid, cowardly bastards! Feldwebel, take four men and bring Brigadier Laplante quickly to the infirmary.”

Colonel Schmidt arrived at the shower house as the soldiers were carrying Nancy out. The feldwebel had summarily covered her nakedness with her towel. Schmidt looked down with concern at the battered face of the Canadian, then at Eggers.

“What happened, Hauptman?”

“We don’t know yet, Colonel, but I would say that some prisoners attacked Brigadier Laplante while she was in the shower. They also beat up her orderly, Corporal Bigras. They then cut off her hair, probably to mark her as a collaborator.”

The two officers had to step out of the way as two soldiers carried out Bigras, unconscious and with a nasty bruise on the side of his head that bled profusely. Schmidt swore loudly.

“Himmel! Hauptman, round up immediately any prisoner that shows marks of a fight. I doubt that Brigadier Laplante went down without giving back a few punches.”

“Yawol, Herr Colonel!”

A group of four prisoners taking a late walk in the courtyard watched on as Feldwebel Buhlingen and his men carried Nancy Laplante past them, only a few feet away. The taller one of the lot, a hulking blond Norwegian fighter pilot, looked on in disgust at Nancy’s battered face and shaved head. He and the three others with him refused to believe that she could be a collaborator, having heard tales of her war exploits in the past months before her arrival.

“Some bastards went way too far this time. If I find them, I will squash them.”

“Count me in, Sven.” Said firmly Flight Lieutenant Jim Milner, a tall American who had enlisted with the RAF as a navigator/bombardier, out of lust for adventure.

“Me too!” Added Captain Jan Nierman, a Dutch Army Engineers explosive expert. The fourth man of the group, an American Jew named Samuel Goldman who had also joined the RAF, swore as the unconscious Jean Bigras was carried past them: Bigras was his best friend in Colditz. A German soldier then came to them and, after suspiciously examining their faces for a few seconds, walked away towards another group of prisoners to check them out as well. Sven Larsen nodded his head in understanding.

“They are looking for any of her attackers who may have been hit. Knowing Laplante’s reputation, the Germans should find quite a few bruised faces around.” Effectively, French major Pierre Renaudin and a Polish Army lieutenant, both with blood on their faces, were escorted out of the Southwest wing a few minutes later and led roughly by grim-faced German soldiers to the solitary confinement cells. Nierman spat out in contempt at their sight.

“Renaudin! I should have known. It takes only a jackal like him to attack a naked woman.”

Feldwebel Buhlingen then walked out of the sick ward and shouted at the prisoners present in the courtyard.

“ALL THE PRISONERS WILL GO BACK TO THEIR ROOMS NOW! THE CURFEW IS LENGTHENED TONIGHT.”

Nobody knew then that this simple change to the castle’s routine would have important consequences in the hour to come.

20:31 (Berlin time)

Lead Gloster METEOR fighter-bomber

18 miles West of Colditz

Squadron Leader Peter Welland, breaking radio silence for the first time since crossing the British coast, clicked on his microphone.

“All Blue Angel call signs, this is Blue Angel leader. We have just overflown our final point. Veer 095 and accelerate to 500 knots. Arm your bombs now.”

Turning his own aircraft sharply eastward while staying barely above treetop, Welland then pushed his two turbofan engines to military power setting and armed the two rocket pods under his wings. He and the three other aircraft in the lead flight were tasked to take out the self-propelled quad 20mm German guns first with rocket fire, in order to let the eight other aircraft of his squadron launch their bombs with maximum accuracy. The whole idea of this raid was to cause maximum damage to the part of the castle occupied by the German garrison, while keeping the prisoners quarters intact. If they could achieve that, either the prisoners would be able to escape through breaches in the walls, or the Germans would be forced to transfer them to a less secure facility, which would help any later attempt to break Brigadier Laplante out of captivity. Accuracy was thus everything on this mission.

The high pitch sound of jet engines alerted the German anti-aircraft gunners only seconds before salvos of air-to-ground rockets hit their positions. To make things worse, the British fighter-bombers were coming with the low, setting sun at their back. One of the quad 20mm gunners, protected by the forward shield of his gun, saw both of his loaders and his gun crew commander swept away by a hail of shrapnel. Rendered deaf by the nearby blasts, he could not point his guns quickly enough to track the first wave of attacking aircraft. With the two other self-propelled flak guns in his position destroyed, the desperate German was able to fire a long burst at one of the aircraft of the second wave. The gunner's joy at seeing that aircraft being hit turned into horror when the fighter-bomber, still loaded up with its bombs, dropped out of the sky and plowed into the houses of the old town of Colditz, exploding in the middle of the houses in a giant fireball. The grief stricken German then died when the bombs of the second wave bracketed the South part of the castle.

The series of terrifying explosions from rockets and bombs made Doctor Frankel, who was examining Jean Bigras in the sick ward, jump out of fright. The whole castle shook repeatedly while Frankel prayed fervently that the sick ward would be spared a direct hit. It was, although dust fell from the ceiling and most of the windows broke into pieces. Luckily, the drawn curtains prevented the flying glass from showering the occupants of the sick ward. The screams from wounded men then told Frankel that he was going to be busy tonight. Incredibly, the air attack was over in less than two minutes. Drawing open the curtains of the windows facing out of the castle, the German doctor saw with horror that the town itself had been hit hard, with dozens of houses destroyed or burning. He called up his medic at once and ordered him to prepare a field medical kit, then went in the dispensary to prepare his own medical bag. When he emerged back into the ward, he saw Nancy Laplante sitting up in her bed and looking around her with a confused expression. Frankel ran to her and tried to force her to lie back down.

"Please, Brigadier, stay in bed: you suffered quite a few blows to the head and need some rest."

"Those explosions, what were they?" She asked, still looking dizzy.

"British air raid, I'm afraid. I have wounded soldiers and civilians to take care of now. Now, rest."

“Civilians?” She said, alarm appearing on her face.

“Yes. I’m afraid that a few bombs went astray in town, Brigadier.”

“Then I must help.” She replied resolutely while throwing away the bed sheet covering her. “I was probably the reason why the British bombed Colditz.”

Only then did she catch on to the fact that she had been naked under the sheet. Frankel tried again to push her gently back on the bed.

“You are in no state to go anywhere, Brigadier. Now, please stay in bed: I have wounded to take care of.”

As an answer, Nancy closed her eyes and concentrated for a few seconds while resisting Frankel’s push. The German doctor recoiled in surprise and disbelief when her facial wounds started healing at an incredible rate, her broken nose even straightening up by itself as well. In less than thirty seconds, only her shaved hair was left to show that she had been attacked earlier. Frankel, completely overwhelmed by this, fell on his knees.

“How... how could this be possible?”

“No time to explain, Doctor. I need my clothes now, so I could go heal those unfortunate souls outside.”

“OBERGEFREITER HIRSH, GET ME BRIGADIER LAPLANTE’S CLOTHES NOW!”

His nearly panicked scream brought the German medic out of the pharmacy at a run. Hirsh then braked to a halt at Nancy’s sight, his jaw dropping. Running inside the guardroom of the infirmary, he grabbed Laplante’s clothes and went back to her bed, only to find the Canadian standing naked besides Jean Bigras’ bed. He looked on, along with Frankel and two soldiers on guard duty in the sick ward, as Nancy put both of her hands on each side of Bigras’ head. Her hands then started glowing with a faint white halo. Bigras opened his eyes a few seconds later and spoke in a weak voice.

“Brigadier? Are you alright?”

“You should ask yourself that, my dear Jean. Yes, I am fine now. Stay here and rest. There was a bombing raid on the castle and the town and I’m going out to help the wounded.”

“Then I want to help too, Brigadier.”

“I’m sorry, Brigadier,” objected the senior German guard, “but you are to stay in the infirmary.”

Still naked, Nancy walked to him and looked calmly into his eyes while raising both of her hands, which started to glow again.

“There are lots of wounded outside, most or all of them German. Can you really afford not to let me go out and help them?”

“Let her go under escort, Obergefreiter.” Intervened Doctor Frankel. “I will take full responsibility for this with Colonel Schmidt.”

“Then I will escort you, Brigadier.” Replied the soldier after a last hesitation. “Please dress now.”

“What’s the matter? You never saw a naked soldier before, Obergefreiter?” Joked Nancy while grabbing her clothes from the German medic. The soldier grimaced at her humor.

“I never got this horny before because of a naked soldier, Brigadier.” She didn’t reply to that, instead looking at Jean Bigras.

“Corporal, I want you to stay here and help Doctor Frankel as much as you can: he will most probably become swamped quickly with wounded here.”

“But...”

“That’s an order, Corporal!”

Nancy was just finished getting dressed when the two first wounded German soldiers were carried in the infirmary by four of their comrades. The senior soldier of that group shouted at Frankel as they were entering the sick ward.

“Doctor, Feldwebel Buhlingen is stuck under a pile of debris and is gravely wounded. We need your medic at the guards quarters quickly.”

“Stay here: I will go!” Cut in Nancy. Ignoring the bewildered stares from the German soldiers, she quickly inspected the two wounded just brought in: they had been peppered by shrapnel and were bleeding heavily. She took two minutes to heal them with the touch of her hands, then ran outside with her escort, leaving behind six awestruck soldiers. She was about to reach the main entrance of the inner courtyard, whose heavy doors had been blasted down, when a shout froze her.

“HALT OR I SHOOT!”

Slowly raising her hands while turning around, she saw Hauptman Eggers approach her, his pistol drawn and pointed at her. He looked angrily at the soldier accompanying her.

“Are you mad, Obergefreiter? Why were you letting out our most important prisoner?”

The soldier came to rigid attention and nervously told Eggers about what had happened in the sick ward. The German officer listened on with growing disbelief to the soldier before looking at Nancy. Only then did he notice that her facial bruises were gone. He lowered slowly his pistol while staring at her with bewilderment.

“What... what are you?”

He expected her to boast about her supernatural powers. Instead, she looked humbly at him while answering in a soft voice.

“I am just a woman whom The One was kind enough to grace. There is a man in need of help, Hauptman. We should go now.”

“Then I will go with you, Brigadier.”

The trio then walked over the broken gate and turned left towards the guards' quarters. In the growing darkness they saw that the building housing the guards had collapsed in a pile of stones and wood beams. A lone soldier was kneeling by the debris, comforting a man whose legs were stuck under a beam covered with rubble. Kneeling besides them, Nancy saw that the wounded man was the old feldwebel who had escorted her on her shopping tour. The soldier standing vigil besides him looked with discouragement at Eggers.

“I was hoping that more men would show up, Hauptman: it will take at least a dozen men to even start moving that beam.”

“I don't even know if I have twelve intact men left, Schwartz. Most of them are dead.”

“Then the feldwebel is finished.” Said sadly the soldier. “He is bleeding badly and won't last very long.”

“Wait!” Said Nancy. “Let me try! Be ready to pull the feldwebel away from the debris.”

Eggers looked at her as if she was crazy.

“How do you expect to move that beam by yourself? There must be at least a few tons of rubble holding it down.”

“Just be ready to pull him out.”

Bracing herself against the beam, Nancy concentrated for a few seconds, then tensed her muscles.

“Ready?”

“Ready!” Answered Eggers, still wondering why they were even bothering to try. Nancy then pushed upwards on the beam. To Eggers amazement, the beam and the

rubble covering it moved at once. Despite his surprise, he and the soldier pulled quickly the wounded feldwebel from under the beam and dragged him away from the rubble. Nancy then joined them besides the wounded and put her hands on his crushed legs. Eggers' eyes nearly popped out when Nancy's hands started glowing and Buhlingen's wounds healed in seconds. The feldwebel soon opened his eyes and looked at Nancy, who was bent over him.

"Brigadier Laplante? What are you doing here?"

"Helping save lives, Feldwebel. Take it easy for a while: you lost a lot of blood." Getting back on her feet, Nancy looked with sorrow at the burning houses in the town below the castle. Eggers could swear that tears were running down her cheeks.

"All this killing... just because of me. I have a lot to atone for. Hauptman, there are probably civilians down there who desperately need help right now. Please let me go in town."

Eggers didn't know at first what to do or say. Here was what had been considered Germany's most dangerous foe, now transformed through some kind of miracle into a being with supernatural powers. His superiors would have Eggers' head on a platter if he ever let Laplante escape. Yet, she had just proved that she both could and would save German lives out of simple kindness and compassion. The sad fact was that there were actually many Germans, including civilians, who were in need of help at this moment.

"I will go with you, Brigadier. Obergefreiter, advise Colonel Schmidt that I am escorting Brigadier Laplante into town to provide assistance to our citizens. Follow me, miss."

With Nancy behind him, Eggers started cautiously climbing down the steep slope formed by the rubble from the destroyed guards' quarters. Ten minutes later, they were in the town itself, walking towards the burning houses. In the light provided by the fires, they could see and hear dozens of civilians running around, either trying to put out the fires or to save some of their personal belongings. Most of them were women or old men and few paid notice to Eggers or Nancy, being too busy or scared. The pair soon arrived near a house, which was half engulfed by flames. A fire truck was parked in front and half a dozen firemen were trying to fight the fire, without much success. Nearby were a young woman and two small children, all dressed in nightshirts and looking anxiously at the top floor of the house. Nancy saw tears on the woman's face and decided to approach her. Eggers followed close behind her.

“Excuse me, Frau, is anyone left inside this house?”

The woman looked only briefly at Nancy and, probably not recognizing her, answered while looking back at the house, her voice choked by tears.

“My younger sister’s room is in the attic. Nobody saw her come out and the staircase is already on fire.”

Nancy looked at the house and grimaced: the whole ground floor was already engulfed in flames and anyone trying to put up a ladder would be roasted alive before getting to the top floor. Nancy looked back at the woman.

“Which window is the one of your sister’s room?”

“The second attic window from the left. Why?”

“What is her name?”

The German woman then looked more closely at Nancy, surprised by her questions.

“Her name is Ingrid. Why do you want to know all this? Nobody can get inside that house now.”

“Maybe, maybe not.”

Nancy then went to the firemen manning a high-pressure water hose.

“Spray me! I’m going in.”

“Are you crazy, Fraulein? Nobody can enter that inferno.” Replied the senior fireman.

“I have a way in. Spray me, now!”

The fireman swore quietly but had his men turn the hose on Nancy, dousing her copiously before returning the spray on the burning house. Eggers grabbed Nancy’s arm as she was about to walk towards the house.

“Brigadier, this is suicide! You don’t need to do this to win my respect: you already have it.”

Nancy smiled at the German officer and took his hand, forcing it off her arm.

“I’m not doing this to gain anybody’s respect, Hauptman. I’m doing it to save a life.”

Under the incredulous eyes of the Germans present, Nancy then flew off the ground and floated silently upwards towards the attic of the house. The German woman, imitated by her two children, went to her knees and made the sign of the cross.

“Mein Gott! Who is she?”

“I’m not sure anymore, Frau.” Answered Eggers as he anxiously watched Nancy disappear through the attic window. Thick smoke was already pouring out of the top

windows. After a long minute, Nancy reappeared at the window, the inert body of a teenage girl in her arm. As she stepped out of the window, a back draft sent flames through the window, enveloping Nancy for a second. Eggers heard her scream briefly with pain, then saw her fly down towards him, the teenager still in her arms and the clothes of both of them on fire. The firemen, despite being overwhelmed by the show of Nancy's powers, quickly reacted and directed their water hose on them. Nancy landed in front of Eggers and promptly put down the unconscious teenager on the street pavement. Eggers saw immediately that both women had been burned badly, yet Nancy concentrated on healing by the touch of her hands the young blonde. Only after Ingrid started coughing and moving again did Nancy heal herself, a halo of light enveloping her for a few seconds. Eggers joined the others in kneeling around Nancy and looked up in her green eyes.

"Brigadier Laplante, you must be an angel."

Nancy shook her head slowly, sadness on her face.

"After all the killing that I did? An angel of death, maybe. Let's move on: there may be more people in need of help."

08:36 (Berlin time)

Sunday, June 29, 1941 'B'

Inner courtyard, Colditz Castle

"Has anyone seen Brigadier Laplante this morning?" Asked William Anderson to Mark Lindsay, keeping his voice low as the prisoners' roll call went on.

"No! She must be still in the sick ward, recovering from yesterday's beating."

Being reminded about that made Anderson angry again at Nancy's assailants.

"That Renaudin! I'm going to kill him once he gets out of solitary confinement."

"You better take a number, then. That big Norwegian fighter pilot has claimed first rights on Renaudin, followed by Milner."

Whispers and exclamations then made Anderson and Lindsay look towards the main entrance gate. They saw with dismay Nancy Laplante and Captain Eggers walking in through the main gate at a tired pace. Laplante in particular seemed exhausted and was covered with soot and dust. Her clothes were also half burned away and the little hair she had left after being attacked yesterday was now badly singed.

"My god," exclaimed Lindsay, "it looks like she walked through fire."

All the prisoners on roll call parade followed with their eyes Nancy Laplante as she made her way to the sick ward, still accompanied by Eggers. The latter went in with her for a minute, then got out of the infirmary, alone this time, and walked out by the main gate. Whispered comments went around the prisoners during the rest of the roll call, until dismissed by Feldwebel Buhlingen. Both Anderson and Lindsay quickly walked towards the infirmary as soon as they were let go, only to nearly bump into six more prisoners heading the same way. Anderson saluted Lieutenant Colonel Brunet, who was accompanied by Corporal Bigras. The four others, Sven Larsen, Jim Milner, Jan Nierman and Samuel Goldman, were following close behind the two Frenchmen.

“Good morning, Colonel Brunet. It seems that you are heading the same way as me and Squadron Leader Lindsay.”

“And for which purpose are you heading towards the infirmary, Major?” Asked Brunet, suspicious. “Not to accuse Brigadier Laplante of treason, I hope?”

“Of course not, sir. We were just worried about her, since she looked to have been burned somehow.”

“In that case, follow me.”

The eight of them arrived at the entrance of the infirmary only to be stopped by two German soldiers who put their rifles at the ready.

“Halt! Prisoners are not allowed in the infirmary at this moment.”

“Gefreiter,” said Brunet with authority, “a number of prisoners are already inside the infirmary, wounded. It is only our right to visit and comfort them.”

“They should be out soon, Colonel: Brigadier Laplante is taking care of them now.”

The prisoners exchanged confused looks at those words. Brunet finally looked back at the German sentry.

“Gefreiter, at least tell Brigadier Laplante that I want to see her, now!”

The German seemed tempted for a second to just ignore those bothersome prisoners, but finally looked at his comrade.

“Johan, go tell Brigadier Laplante that she has visitors.”

The younger soldier then disappeared inside the infirmary, reappearing after a minute or so and addressing Brunet.

“She is very busy, Colonel, but she will receive you for a short while.”

“How considerate of her.” Muttered Lindsay to Anderson, attracting a warning look from Jim Milner as they followed the German inside the infirmary. The group

stopped cold and fell silent when they saw Laplante in the sick ward. The ward had been full to overflow with both German soldiers and Allied prisoners wounded in yesterday's air raid. Now, five of the previously wounded men, four of them German, stood besides their beds, apparently healthy again. Nancy was just then healing a sixth man, her hands glowing as she touched the wounds of the patient. Her face was one of absolute concentration.

"Sweet Mother Mary!" Whispered Anderson to himself, unable to take his eyes off that impossible scene. "Nobody will believe me back in England when I will tell them this."

They watched in fascinated silence as Nancy healed two more men before stopping, looking haggard. Brunet took that opportunity to approach her respectfully, the others behind him: he just didn't know how to treat a person able to do what she had just demonstrated.

"Brigadier Laplante, are you alright? You look awful."

She somehow managed a weak smile as she looked up from the bed on which she was sitting.

"I actually feel both happy and grateful, Colonel Brunet: happy for being able to save lives and grateful to The One for making this possible. It is true though that I am dead tired: healing drains my energy quickly."

"And... may I ask how you manage to accomplish such miracles, Brigadier?"

She looked down at the floor, silent for a moment.

"Colonel, the human spirit is something poorly understood in this time, or even in my own time. When I was healed over two days ago, my own spirit went through a radical metamorphosis and became fully attuned with my body, making possible things you can hardly imagine. As a result, I am now a better being and am able to atone for all the violence I caused."

"And... who gave you this power of healing, Brigadier?"

"One you may call The One, Colonel Brunet." Said Nancy humbly. "And before you ask, I am not an angel. I am still a woman, with faults and still able to make mistakes."

"Why you, Brigadier?" Asked cautiously Samuel Goldman. "Why were you chosen to receive these powers and not someone else?"

Nancy looked at Goldman, then at the others.

“Gentlemen, my spirit has been under scrutiny for millenniums, being tested during the course of many past lives. The final factor that designated me was when I was transported back in time to 1940 and, by my actions, split time in two. Feel free to believe me or not but you, the persons in Colditz, this whole world you and I live in presently, were created involuntarily and unconsciously by my actions. This timeline would not exist without me.”

Goldman, Brunet and the others could only stare silently at Nancy, so enormous were the consequences of what she had just said. Brunet had to sit down, close to fainting.

CHAPTER 36 – BURNING BRIDGES

14:20 (Berlin time)

Monday, June 30, 1941 'B'

Senior officers' quarters, Colditz Castle

Germany

Brunet, Larsen, Milner and Nierman were killing time by playing cards in the junior officers' room when a remark from Samuel Goldman, who was looking through the window facing the outer courtyard, got their attention.

"Colonel Schmidt is back, guys. His staff car just arrived."

Jim Milner raised his nose up from his card hand for a moment.

"I wonder where he had been for the last 24 hours."

"That's not hard to figure out." Replied Jan Nierman, facing him across the table they were using for the card game. "He was probably in Berlin to brief his superiors about our resident angel."

"I wonder what the Germans will do about her." Said Brunet. "The ones here in Colditz positively venerate her."

"After half of the surviving ones were healed by her, I can understand their reactions to Nancy." Added Sven Larsen. "I hope the Nazis in Berlin will not dissect her to try to find how she ended with her power of healing."

"Well," said Milner, "some here in Colditz are still far from venerating her."

"That Robertson is an idiot, pure and simple." Grumbled Brunet. "As for that bastard of Renaudin, I am going to make sure after I get back to France that he is booted out of the army."

Goldman's voice then rose by a pitch in excitement.

"Hey, Schmidt and Eggers are coming this way! Schmidt's driver is already refueling his car. I wonder..."

The four other prisoners rushed to the window to look. Brunet understood first what was happening.

"Damn! I'm afraid that they are going to bring Nancy to Berlin. It was to be expected, after all."

"We better warn her, then." Replied Nierman. The five of them rushed out of the room and climbed the stairs to the fourth floor, only to find that Nancy was not in her room. Milner swore, and then raised a finger.

"Wait! I think that Anderson was planning to draw a picture of her today." That made the others race down the stairs again. They found the door of room 217 closed and had to knock.

"Who is it?" Asked the muffled voice of William Anderson.

"Colonel Brunet! I have urgent news for Brigadier Laplante."

They heard a short exchange in muted tones inside before Anderson shouted for Brunet to come in. He entered, the four others close behind him, and stopped cold, his eyes nearly popping out: Nancy Laplante lay on her side on a bed, posing nude for Anderson in a most lascivious posture. Nancy smiled at the newcomers and waved a hand playfully. Her bald head, freshly shaved by Jean Bigras this morning to get rid of the burned remnants of her hair, made a weird contrast with her fabulous, athletic body. The men could also see that her groin was shaved clean as well. Anderson, his face impassive, sat five feet in front of her, a drawing board in his lap and a pencil in his right hand. As for Brunet and the others, they had a hard time keeping straight faces.

"What is it, gentlemen?" Purred Nancy, amused. Brunet swallowed once before answering.

"Er, we just saw Colonel Schmidt arrive back from his trip out of Colditz. His car is being refueled right now and he is heading this way with Captain Eggers. We think that they are going to ship you to Berlin."

Nancy's smile faded and she looked at Anderson.

"How long do you still need, William?"

"I'm nearly finished. Maybe five minutes." Said Anderson, concentrating on his work. Nancy looked back at Brunet.

"Thank you for the warning, Gentlemen. I will advise you as soon as I know more from Schmidt."

The five men left the room after a last look at Nancy. Milner growled with frustration as they got back in their room.

"God! What a woman! I nearly couldn't resist jumping her."

"She does have quite an appeal." Replied Brunet, understating his own reaction.

Anderson was finished with his drawing and Nancy was dressing quickly in her shorts and T-shirt when someone knocked on the door again.

“One minute, please!” Shouted Nancy. Once dressed, she gave a quick kiss on Anderson’s forehead.

“Thanks for your time, William. You are really a first rate artist.”

“I’m the one thanking you, Nancy. You make one hell of a model.”

“Just don’t show this one to your wife, though: she may not be too understanding about it. Have a good day.”

Nancy then opened the door and faced Schmidt and Eggers, who had been waiting patiently in the hallway.

“Sorry to have made you wait, Colonel. I was posing for Major Anderson... nude.”

Schmidt’s eyebrow rose in interest as he smiled at Nancy.

“I will have to see the result of his work one day. I see that you did something quite drastic to your hair, Brigadier.”

Nancy sighed as she passed a hand on her bald head.

“It wasn’t something I enjoyed, Colonel, but it was the only way to ensure that my hair will grow evenly instead of in ugly clumps. Now, what may I do for you, Colonel?” His face now somber, Schmidt straightened up.

“I have new orders concerning you, Brigadier. You are to leave for Berlin within the hour. I will have to ask you to pack quickly and to put on your uniform.”

“Where in Berlin am I to be brought?” Asked Nancy, apprehensive. Schmidt smiled, trying to reassure her.

“Do not worry, Brigadier: the Gestapo will not be allowed anywhere near you. My orders are to bring you to the Tempelhof Luftwaffe hospital, where you will assist the medical staff in treating the wounded. Your special talents are clearly wasted here.”

Schmidt was half expecting Nancy to object to this, which could be construed in directly helping Germany’s war effort, something prisoners of war were not supposed to do. Instead, his words brought immediate joy on her face.

“Tempelhof Hospital? Hell, I’ll be down in half an hour.”

Despite being surprised, like Schmidt, Eggers handed a duffel bag to Nancy.

“Then you will need this to pack your things, Brigadier.”

He then took an envelope out of one pocket and handed it too to her. Nancy looked at it blankly.

“What’s that?”

“The rest of the money from the sale of your ring, Brigadier. Bring it with the rest of your things to Berlin. Your face is so famous anyway that your chances of wandering unnoticed in Germany are next to nil, so the risk of you escaping from Berlin are quite slim.”

Nancy took the envelope and pointed an index at Eggers.

“Don’t underestimate me, Hauptman.”

“How could I underestimate an angel, Brigadier?”

“I already told you that I’m not an angel, Hauptman.”

“Sorry, Brigadier, but I don’t believe you! By the way, I will be escorting you to Berlin.”

Nancy’s smile warmed him instantly: her charm was nearly demonic in its strength.

“That will please me, Hauptman. See you at the main gate in half an hour.”

She then left the two German officers and went to her room, quickly changing into her Canadian Army dress uniform and packing her meager belongings in the duffel bag given by Eggers. Her next step was to go upstairs to say goodbye to Jean Bigras. She found the Frenchman having a nap in his bed. Ignoring the other prisoners around her, Nancy bent over him and gently woke him with a kiss. Jean opened his eyes in a startle and looked in confusion at her.

“Madame? What are you doing?”

“Kissing you goodbye, Jean. I am being transferred back to Berlin, to a Luftwaffe hospital where I will help heal the wounded. You are a very nice man, Jean. I hope to see you again after the war. I may have something for you then.”

“I will follow you anywhere, Brigadier. Good luck to you in Berlin.”

“The same to you, Jean. It was a pleasure knowing you.”

She then left him, sadness in her heart. Bigras was a young man with so much potential and kindness: he deserved better than this, like some others in the same building. Returning to her room and grabbing her duffel bag and her guitar, she then went down to Milner’s room, where he found him, Brunet and the others still playing cards. They all rose from their chairs when she showed up, apprehension on their faces. Nancy smiled gently to them.

“I am being transferred to the Tempelhof Luftwaffe hospital in Berlin, Gentlemen. You don’t need to worry about me: I will be treated correctly there. I am here to say goodbye to you.”

“What are your plans for after the war, Brigadier?” Asked Jim Milner softly.

“Something quite grandiose, actually. I may need a few good men to help me out then.”

“Count me in.” Replied eagerly Milner. Nierman, Larsen and Goldman echoed him, making Nancy grin.

“On one condition: that you would be prepared to work alongside a few German women.”

They looked at each other hesitantly, then back at her. Jim Milner spoke for the group.

“As long as the war is over, we have no objections to that, Brigadier.”

Nancy looked at Samuel Goldman, who appeared more hesitant than the others. She then spoke to him in a language the others did not understand, with Samuel answering her in the same language. Nancy next went to Brunet to shake his hand.

“Goodbye, Colonel Brunet. You proved to be a real gentleman.”

Nancy then left after a last look at the others. Milner looked questioningly at Goldman, who appeared deep in thoughts.

“What language did she use, Sam?”

“Hebrew. She was quoting a passage of the Torah about forgiveness.”

“Hebrew? Where would she have learned it? She never mentioned it before.”

“She learned it in Israë, thousands of years ago.” Said Samuel softly. “She started remembering it after her first healing.”

The others could only look at him in stunned silence.

At the main gate, Nancy found Eggers waiting patiently for her. She also found 26 German soldiers lined up at attention, rifles at their feet. She had healed every one of them, as a matter of fact. On Eggers' orders, they shouldered their rifles and presented arms to Nancy in parade precision. Eggers then saluted Nancy.

“The garrison of Colditz Castle is bidding you farewell, Brigadier. We all admire you for your kindness and tolerance.”

Deeply moved by this, Nancy saluted back Eggers, then the soldiers.

“Thank you, all of you. I hope that this war will be soon over, so that we can formally be friends. I wish you all good luck.”

Eggers gave the command to shoulder the rifles, then escorted Nancy out. Schmidt's staff car, a military version of the Volkswagen with a folding canvas top, was waiting for them in the outer courtyard. Eggers put Nancy's bag and guitar on the rear seat, then

invited her to sit in the front passenger seat before taking place behind the wheel. Nancy sat in the car, then smiled maliciously to Eggers.

“No escort this time?”

“No, Brigadier, for two reasons: first, an escort could attract an air attack; and second, I trust you not to try to escape during this trip. Besides, you could probably overpower any escort easily.”

“True enough. Let’s go, then.”

More German sentries saluted them as they drove out through the Clock Tower gate, over the moat bridge and into the town itself. As they were rolling down the main street, Nancy suddenly jerked her head to the right and shouted.

“STOP! BACK UP, HAUPTMAN!”

Eggers braked to a halt but did not back up, instead looking where Nancy was looking.

“What? What did you see?”

“That store...” said Nancy while pointing at a large window, “it has wigs in its display. Could I go in there and buy one?”

Eggers looked at her bald head, covered only by her green beret, and understood: her lack of hair must make her feel shameful in public. Reversing gears, he backed up and parked in front of the store. It wasn’t long before they were both back in the car, with Nancy now wearing a wig of long black hair that went down past her shoulders. Eggers looked at her and nodded with approval.

“You look much better now, Brigadier.”

“Thank you, Hauptman. Sorry for the delay.”

“That was nothing, Brigadier.”

Eggers then drove off, heading towards the main highway and Berlin.

18: 12 (Berlin time)

Tempelhof Luftwaffe hospital

Berlin

There was still plenty of natural light when they arrived at the Tempelhof Hospital. Eggers parked in front of the main entrance, then gallantly offered Nancy to carry her things, which she agreed to. She felt growing joy at the thought of being reunited with Farah Tolkonen as she followed Eggers inside. They were met in the reception area by Colonel Reinhardt Mandell, who looked in disbelief at Nancy.

“Mein Gott! When I remember your crippled body as it was only four days ago...”

“I am alright now, I assure you, Doctor. Is my friend Farah very busy right now?”

While Eggers, who didn't know about Farah Tolkonen, looked on with confusion, Mandell seemed more than a little embarrassed as he answered Nancy.

“I'm sorry, Brigadier, but your friend is not here anymore: she escaped last night.”

“ESCAPED?” Shouted Nancy in astonishment before lowering her voice to a normal level. “But she was harmless. She couldn't fight her way out of a paper bag.”

“We thought so too, but she simply vanished during one of her evening ward tours: one minute she was there, the other she was gone.”

“Thank god!” Whispered Nancy. “Someone finally brought her back to her time. At least she is safe now.”

Mandell hesitated as he stared at her.

“I was told about your miraculous healing powers, Brigadier, but you may understand that I have a hard time believing in such things.”

“I understand you perfectly, Doctor. Give me a place to drop my things and time to eat something and I will start helping your patients. I suppose that Agent Braun will be my escort in the hospital.”

Mandell lowered his head, clearly bothered by her question.

“Herr Braun was accused of negligence for letting Doctor Tolkonen escape and was arrested by the Gestapo.”

The mention of the Gestapo and of the arrest of Braun was enough to infuriate Nancy: the Abwehr agent, while probably faultless, was certainly being tortured now to make him confess to being an accomplice in Farah's escape. She kept her voice low with difficulty.

“Do you know how to contact Admiral Canaris, the head of the Abwehr, Colonel?”

“I do, miss. In fact, he left me his calling card four days ago. Why do you ask?”

“Because I want to speak to him urgently. Now, who will escort me around this hospital during my stay?”

“A squad of Luftwaffe soldiers has been assigned to that task, miss. Er, you are not planning to escape, Brigadier?”

Eggers rolled his eyes skyward at Mandell's naïve question, while Nancy smiled sarcastically.

“Not at all, Doctor. I love to be a prisoner and to have my privacy invaded all the time. Be reassured, though: I will help your patients, then leave.”

A group of nine Luftwaffe soldiers arrived in the reception area as Nancy said those words. The feldwebel in charge of them snapped to attention in front of Eggers and saluted him.

“Feldwebel Martin Druckers reporting, Herr Hauptman. Me and my men will take custody of Brigadier Laplante from you.”

“Very well, Feldwebel. What were you told about Brigadier Laplante?”

“That she is very dangerous and must be kept on sight at all times, sir.”

Eggers and Nancy exchanged a knowing glance, with Nancy then smiling at the feldwebel.

“Well, this assignment should be an educative one for you and your men, Feldwebel. Will I be able to enjoy some privacy while under the shower or in the restroom, or are you planning to set up a MG-34 in the women’s showers?”

If he was amused by her attempt at a joke, Druckers didn’t show it, keeping a straight face as he answered her.

“I haven’t considered that aspect yet, Brigadier. Please follow me to your new quarters.”

“That guy is a million laughs.” Said Nancy to Eggers as he was about to go with the soldiers. “Thank you for your kindness, Hauptman. It was a pleasure knowing you.”

“And it was an honor to know you, Brigadier. Good luck!”

21:46 (Berlin time)

Private room, Tempelhof Hospital

Tired by the expenditure of energy spent on healing patients during the evening, Nancy was about to go take a shower when someone knocked on the door of her small private room.

“Come in!”

The small, graying man who entered the room was no stranger to Nancy, even though she had only met him once, briefly: Admiral Wilhelm Canaris’ career and secret agenda held no mysteries to her, thanks to a number of books and historical articles she had read about him. They both looked at each other in silence for a moment before Canaris spoke softly.

“I have heard a lot of disturbing things about you lately, Brigadier Laplante.”

“And you play some dangerous games, Admiral. I wanted to speak to you about your agent, Heinrik Braun.”

Canaris sighed and sat on her bed, his head bowed low.

“I think I know what you have in mind, Brigadier. Unfortunately, I have already tried everything in my power to free him, including pleading with the Führer, and I failed. Testifying in his favor won't help him.”

“What about breaking him out by force?”

Canaris' head snapped up at those words.

“Are you crazy? Himmler is just waiting for such a mistake to get rid of me and the Abwehr entirely.”

“What if someone else than the Abwehr makes him escape?”

Canaris looked at her with disbelief.

“You would be ready to break him out of jail? What do you have for this man?”

“Nothing, apart that he does not deserve his present fate.”

“Miss, you really are a weird person.”

“What is so weird about caring for others around you? Is this world so out of love and kindness?”

That left Canaris mute for a moment while he stared at her.

“They said in Colditz that you are now an angel. Now, you speak like one too. What are you exactly, Brigadier Laplante?”

“Someone who is getting quite pissed about this whole war and who is trying to make it less awful, even if it is through minute details. You know that I will never help Germany's war effort and that I will eventually break out of here and escape back to England. Why not cooperate for once towards a common goal?”

Before Canaris could answer, someone knocked on the door again. Doctor Mandell then entered without waiting for Nancy's permission. She was about to remind him about common courtesy when she saw his ashen face.

“What's wrong, Doctor? Is one of your patients in trouble?”

“I wish it was something this simple, Brigadier. I just got a call from a Luftwaffe officer who was part of the battalion defending Colditz Castle. A massive British bomber raid just leveled the castle and the town around it. Only a few dozen people from the town and from the Luftwaffe battalion survived the raid. As for the prisoners and the garrison inside the castle itself, they are all dead.”

Unable to talk, Nancy sat on the bed, trying to control a sudden burst of tears. She could not and started crying, her shoulders shaken by violent sobs. Mandell could only watch her, helpless. Getting on his feet, Canaris took the chief-surgeon by the shoulders and led him outside the room.

“What else did that officer tell you, Doctor?”

“Not much more, actually. He did say that the British used a mix of explosive bombs and of those awful vapor blast bombs of theirs, then finished off Colditz with a carpet of incendiary bombs. What’s left of Colditz is now an inferno.”

Canaris was silent for a second, digesting that information.

“They wanted Brigadier Laplante dead this time. If not for her last minute transfer, she would be dead now.”

“But why? Why would the British try to kill her, especially if it meant killing hundreds of their own people in the process?”

“Doctor, have you ever heard about Mers El Kebir?”

“No! What’s that?”

“Mers El Kebir is a port on the coast of Algeria that was used by the French fleet. In July of last year, the French warships anchored there received an ultimatum from the British: either accompany them to England or be sunk. When the French refused to follow them, the British fired on them, sinking or disabling three battleships and killing hundreds of French sailors in the ensuing battle. My point is that the British will do everything to protect their interests, even if it means attacking an ally. Brigadier Laplante holds many of the most precious secrets the British have. Rather than risking that she gives them away to us, they probably decided to kill her to ensure that she won’t betray those secrets.”

“But... that’s monstrous!”

“That’s politics, Doctor.”

Canaris then looked towards Nancy’s room, from where they could hear her cry still.

“Poor woman. She will now have to live with the guilt of having indirectly caused the death of all those people in Colditz. From what I heard from the commandant there, she cared about as much for the Germans as for the allied prisoners there. The worst part is that some of those prisoners were stupid and mean enough to hold it against her and to call her a traitor.”

Canaris knew that this would be a perfect time to exploit her distress and emotions in order to turn her against the British, but he wasn’t ready to do that with her. The fact

was that the British would actually deserve a rich payback for what they just had done for a second time in this war: strike a friend in the name of national security. He patted Mandell's shoulder and led him away from Nancy's room, which was guarded by two armed soldiers.

"Let's leave her alone, Doctor: she has a lot of emotions to sort out right now."

It took a long time for Nancy to run out of tears. Even then, the feeling of guilt she now bore about the death of all those people in Colditz was a crushing one. With the door of her room now closed and locked from the outside, she slowly undressed and went to bed. Sleep eluded her, though, the images of all the ones she had known in Colditz flashing through her mind and haunting her. At one point the image of Farah Tolkonen entered her mind. The thought of the gentle giant being safe in her time brought some comfort to Nancy. She then realized that Farah, as she appeared in her mind, actually looked sad. Close to tears again, Nancy invoked mentally her friend's name.

"Farah, don't be sad. I will be alright."

To Nancy's astonishment, the Farah in her mind snapped her head around, as if she had heard her. The background in which the scientist was in now became clearer to Nancy: Farah was sitting in a cell.

"Nancy? Where are you?"

Nancy saw Farah's lips move as she heard her: she had spoken normally, unlike Nancy, who had only used her thoughts. Nancy saw a man appear behind the bars of Farah's cell, looking at the giant with suspicion. The man wore a British uniform! Anger filled Nancy as the man seemingly spoke harshly to Farah. Contrary to her friend, Nancy could not hear him. She then understood that all this was not a dream. She was in actual telepathic communication with Farah, who was being held somewhere in England. Nancy concentrated hard on sending another message to Farah.

"Farah, speak through your mind only. I am in the Tempelhof Hospital in Berlin. Where are you?"

This time, she saw Farah close her eyes and concentrate.

"Nancy, how could you communicate like this?"

"It's a long story, Farah. Where are you?"

"In a British cell in London. I heard one man refer to this place as M.I.5 headquarters."

“What are you doing there? Why are they holding you?”

“I escaped from Berlin by using my portable time distorter. It however has a small range only and I chose to go to England. The British however arrested me and took away my time distorter. They also interrogated me, but without violence.”

“Don’t despair, Farah. I will come soon to free you.”

“But you are a prisoner yourself. How will you escape?”

“Leave that to me, friend. As for the British, they just crossed the line. I am through with them. Hang on: I will contact you again once I’m out of Berlin.”

“Be careful, Nancy.” Thought Farah before her image faded from Nancy’s mind. The Canadian woke up abruptly and sat in her bed, thinking about what had just happened. She obviously had powers that she still didn’t control or even understand fully. It was now time to see the full extent of what she could do. Walking through the dark room, Nancy got her uniform from the closet and put it on quietly, careful not to attract the attention of the two soldiers guarding her door. The beret went on last, on top of the wig she had bought in Colditz. Then going to the room’s window, she opened the blackout curtain covering it and slid open the window. Being on the fourth floor, the Germans had not judged useful to nail shut the window of her room. Not that it would have really mattered to her, actually. Stepping over the ledge, Nancy looked at Tempelhof Airfield, close to the hospital. Dozens of aircraft of various kinds were parked around its grassy expanse. If she could steal one of them, she could be in England in a few hours. From her short experience in Colditz, Nancy had found out that levitation was even more draining on her than healing was. She could fly over relatively short distances, but long trips were still beyond her. Concentrating, she stepped away from the building and flew through the air, towards the airfield. It, along with the rest of Berlin, was in blackout condition as a defense against British air raids. No lights could help the Luftwaffe sentries posted around the airfield to see the dark shape that flew silently over their heads.

Nancy landed smoothly between two Fieseler Storch light liaison aircraft. Six other Fi 156 planes were lined up in the same area of the airfield. There were other, faster aircraft available around, but the nimble Storch would be much easier to handle for Nancy, who was qualified only on light piston-engined Cessna aircraft back in 2012. The Storch was renown for its simplicity and, especially, its phenomenally short take off performances. It however had a short range, except for a few Fi 156C-5 models, which

had enough range to reach England. Nancy fervently hoped to find one of them in the lineup as she went from plane to plane. She nearly shouted in triumph when she came to the second last plane: a supplementary fuel tank took the place of the usual rear seat. Opening the right side door of the Storch, she climbed inside and knocked on the tank. It rang full. Sitting in the pilot's seat, Nancy then took a few minutes to carefully study the cockpit's instruments and controls. The dash of the single-engined Storch was actually even simpler than the one of the Cessna Model 210R she occasionally rented at the St-Hubert airport near her hometown of Boucherville. When she was sure she knew enough about the Storch's controls, Nancy cautiously looked around and, seeing no sentries nearby, pressed the starter button, hoping that the engine would start at once. It did, which was a testament to the meticulous care the Luftwaffe ground crews gave to their aircraft. Not even bothering to line up on the grassy field, Nancy pushed the engine throttle forward all the way and launched the Storch on a roll. It took off in less than eighty yards and flew over a row of Junkers 52 transport planes before Nancy turned due West, staying barely above the treetops. The light from the half moon was enough for her to fly her Storch at its cruising speed of 85 miles per hour, but not enough for the anti-aircraft gunners now scrambling to their guns to acquire such a small, low-flying target. Nancy took only enough altitude to be able to fly safely above the buildings of Berlin. Looking briefly back, she saw a number of air defense searchlights now scanning the sky. She was however too low for them or even a radar to acquire her light aircraft. Grinning in triumph, she checked her compass and altimeter and made a slight correction. With some luck, she would be in England in about seven hours.

06:11 (GMT)

Tuesday, July 1, 1941 'B'

Twelve miles North of Southend on Sea

East coast of England

The Home Guard patrol, called in by a frantic farmer, found the abandoned Fieseler Storch in the field where the farmer's young son had encountered it while shepherding his sheeps in the early morning. The old World War I veteran who led the six-man patrol searched the aircraft and, finding nothing inside, put two of his men in charge of guarding it before returning to the farmer's house. The old farmer and his wife greeted him anxiously when he asked to use their telephone.

"Did you find any German around?" Asked the farmer.

"None! They must be long gone by now. That plane must have brought in spies: I have to advise Rochford right away."

Going through the local operator, the Home Guard sergeant soon had the security officer of the RAF Fighter Command station in Rochford on the line.

"Sir? This is Sergeant Beldham, of the Home Guard. I am calling from a farm five miles North of your airfield. My patrol just found a single-engined German aircraft that landed some time last night in a pasture field. There was nobody near the aircraft."

The sleepy voice of the RAF officer suddenly denoted intense interest.

"What kind of aircraft exactly, Sergeant?"

"If I read my aircraft recognition book correctly, sir, it is a Fieseler Storch light liaison aircraft. It was intact and obviously landed without damage. What shall I do with it, sir?"

"Stay with it and prevent anybody from taking it. I will send reinforcements to comb the area and will alert London that we may have German spies around. Good job, Sergeant!"

Quite pleased with himself, the old sergeant put down the phone and smiled to the farmer and his wife, who had been listening on.

"Well, with any luck, we may bag ourselves a real German spy or two today, thanks to your son."

"By god! I better get my shotgun, in case they come back this way."

19:46 (GMT)

Apartment 14, 24 St James' Place

London

Mike Crawford was serving himself a second scotch on the rocks in the small kitchen of his London apartment when he heard someone knock three times on the glass of his lounge's patio doors. Intrigued, he left his glass on the kitchen counter and walked into the lounge, looking at the doors giving on his balcony. He could see a human silhouette standing on the balcony, a tall female silhouette. His heart jumping inside his chest, Mike ran to the patio doors and unlocked them before throwing them open. Nancy, looking tired and with her dress uniform covered with dust and mud, jumped into his arms and started kissing him frantically. Mike gave as good as he got.

“God, Nancy, I’m so happy to see you. How did you escape from Germany?”

“It’s a long story, Mike. Let me in first: I don’t want to be seen.”

Mike did so, closing and locking the patio doors behind her before looking back at his wife, examining her from head to toe.

“You look healthy, Nancy. How could it be so only a few days after enduring such atrocious tortures?”

“It’s a bit complicated, Mike. You better sit down first.”

Sitting herself on a sofa, she patted the cushion next to hers, inviting Mike to sit besides her. He did so, passing an arm around her shoulders and kissing her again. Nancy then spent ten minutes telling Mike about what happened to her in Germany and how she had escaped. At the end of it, the American looked in disbelief at her.

“You... you are joking, right?”

“I was never more serious, Mike.”

He nearly jumped out of the sofa: he had heard clearly her voice inside his head, yet she had not opened her mouth. As if to emphasize her point, Nancy suddenly started floating upward from the sofa while staring at Mike. If she wouldn’t be his wife, Mike would have run out of his apartment as if confronted by a witch. Instead, he swallowed hard and forced himself to stay on the sofa.

“So, why come back so discreetly, Nancy?”

“Because the British tried to kill me by bombing the crap out of Colditz, then took prisoner a person from the future who had come to help me.”

She took another two minutes to tell Mike about Farah Tolkonen. That left Mike both bitter and angry.

“How so typically British! Nothing is too good to protect or further their precious empire.”

“The United States is not exactly innocent in that respect, Mike.” Nancy reminded him softly. “To go back to Farah, I must break her free and help her return to her time period, if that’s possible. If not, and if the British manage to coerce her into showing how to use her portable time distorter, then history may become hopelessly mangled. It cannot be allowed to happen, at any cost.”

“I could help you break your friend out.” Proposed Mike without hesitation. Nancy smiled tenderly to him but shook her head in denial.

“Thanks but no, Mike. This will be a very dangerous undertaking and I need to be sure that you will be alive and able to care for Ingrid when she is released from the

Tower of London. I will go with a much quieter mind if I know that you will be there for our stepdaughter.”

Mike bowed his head, pursing his lips in bitterness.

“About Ingrid, there are a few things you must know about recent events concerning her and the other Germans in the Tower of London.”

It was Mike’s turn to bring Nancy up to speed on local events, including what had happened to Hanna Reitsch. That brought a cold, resolute look in Nancy’s eyes.

“Then, the more reasons for you to play it safe. If something goes wrong tonight, I want you to bring Ingrid to the United States with you and to offer her a new life there. If I make it and go back to the future with Farah, then I will be back soon enough for both of you. Either way, Ingrid needs you more than me. Even if I succeed, my name will become mud with the British, so I am burned in England either way.”

“Can’t I at least help just a little?”

“As a matter of fact, yes: could you pass me the doubles of my car and apartment keys?”

“That’s it?”

“Alright!” She said, feigning annoyance. “I will let you drive me to near the M.I.5 headquarters.”

“That’s better! I suppose that you will clean up and change before going.”

“Correct. An officer going around with a dirty face in the middle of London is going to attract attention.”

“Then, give me a list of what you need and I will get it from your apartment. You would start a riot if anybody saw you in the hallway.”

“A sensible idea. That will let me time to shower while you do that.”

Nancy then wrote down a list of what she needed and gave the piece of paper to Mike before getting up from the sofa and taking off her beret and the wig she wore.

“By the way, I had a small accident while in Colditz: most of my hair was burned and I had to shave the rest off. What do you think of this?”

“Er, I think I prefer you with your hair. I’ll go get your things now.”

Grabbing an empty suitcase from his bedroom, Mike then left his apartment and went three doors down to Nancy’s apartment. Packing her list of things and grabbing her gun case took him only ten minutes. When he came back to his apartment, he found Nancy drying herself up in the bathroom. Seeing her naked reminded him how long he had

been without caressing her. She seemed to read his mind, as she approached him while smiling and glued herself to him.

“This could be the last time that we will be intimate together, Mike. Let’s do it one last time.”

He didn’t want to argue with her on that. In fact, he wanted her, desperately. He let her undress him, then took her in his arms and carried her inside his bedroom.

20:48 (GMT)

Marsham Street, Westminster District

London

Sitting behind the steering wheel of the Mitsubishi Outlander, Mike Crawford looked on with apprehension as Nancy, sitting besides him in the front passenger seat, checked her weapons one last time. She now wore her battledress uniform and her green beret and had her Glock 17 combat pistol and her silenced Ruger Mark II .22 caliber pistol on her gun belt, apart of her ASP telescopic baton. Completing her arsenal was her huge Desert Eagle .50 AE caliber pistol, carried in a special belly holster.

“Do you really think that you will need to shoot your way inside, Nancy?” She gave him a calm, cold look that was enough of an answer by itself.

“Mike, the British tried to kill me and sacrificed cold-bloodedly nearly 300 of their own people to do it. They also arrested a woman who risked everything to save me in Berlin, in order to steal her time machine. If everything goes well, I will only have to use my silenced pistol. If you hear shots, then you will know that I was discovered.”

“Please, Nancy, be careful.” Said Mike while extending his right arm and touching her face. She kissed his hand and smiled to him, then opened her door.

“I will. Say goodbye to Ingrid for me. I love you, Mike.”

“I love you too.” Replied softly the American while Nancy stepped out. Closing quietly her door, she walked away towards the big, eight-storey building nearby, vanishing in the night.

21:04 (GMT)

Holding cell

Basement of M.I.5 headquarters

Thames House, Millbank, London

Farah, exhausted by two days of constant questioning by British officials, was deep asleep on the bunk of her cell and didn't hear the door of her cell opening, nor the noise of the pistol butt hitting someone's head. It took progressively stronger shakes to wake her up.

"Farah!...Farah!... Dammit, wake up!"

"Uh?... What?"

Opening slowly her eyes, Farah tried to focus them in the darkness of her cell. It was finally the voice of her visitor that suddenly woke her up fully, making her sit up.

"Nancy? Thank the stars! You came!"

"Of course I came, Farah." Replied Nancy while sharing a joyful hug with the giant. "You didn't think that I would let you rot like this in a British cell, didn't you?"

"No, but how did you get here from Germany? And how come you look healthy after all those awful tortures in Berlin?"

"It's a long story, Farah. Just know that telepathy is only one of the supernatural powers I now hold. Come, let's get out of here before my bluff is uncovered."

"Wait! I must get my equipment first, especially my wrist time distorter."

"Where is it?"

"In an office on the sixth floor. I know where it is."

"Good! Then, follow me and walk normally, as if I was allowed to take you out."

Fear returned to Farah, who could imagine how dangerous was what they were going to attempt. She however gathered her courage and got up from her bunk, following Nancy out of the cell. She nearly tripped on the body of a British guard lying on the floor of the corridor.

"You...you didn't..."

"I just knocked him unconscious, Farah." Answered quickly Nancy. "Come on and act normal."

The scientist did her best to do just that as she walked besides Nancy towards the door closing the cells section. That door was presently opened and the guardroom on the other side was empty, except for an unconscious British guard sprawled on the floor.

"Farah, you now need to show me how to get to that office." Said Nancy in a low voice while keeping an eye on the staircase leading up to the ground level.

"There is a staircase and an elevator in the back of the main lobby. There was however a person on duty in the main lobby when I was brought in last night."

"I know: I bluffed my way past that receptionist before coming down here. We will just walk past her and get to the elevator, then go to the sixth floor as if I was escorting you upstairs. Got it?"

"Yes! By the stars, I was rarely this nervous before. Is that what you call the thrill of adventure?"

"Yup! I'm actually quite an adrenaline junkie. Let's go up and, for God's sake, look like an obedient prisoner."

For added effect, Nancy grabbed solidly Farah's right arm before going up the stairs with her. They stepped on the ground floor a few paces only from the lobby front desk, occupied by a young civilian woman. The receptionist looked pleased to see Nancy, raising a hand to attract her attention.

"Brigadier Laplante, I just got a call from the Prime Minister's office: Mister Churchill is on his way to here right now and should arrive in a few minutes in order to see the prisoner. Should I call Brigadier Harker to warn him of that visit?"

"Uh, that won't be needed, miss. I will go warn Brigadier Harker myself. He is in his office, I suppose?"

"Correct, Brigadier: sixth floor, office 610, to the left on leaving the elevator."

"Thank you very much, miss."

Nancy waited until she was in the elevator cabin with Farah and had started going up slowly before swearing quietly.

"Damn! Talk about a piece of bad luck. Churchill never moves around with less than two bodyguards, men that are superbly trained and are quite dangerous. We will have to make it quick in recuperating your things. Is your time distorter able to transport two people at once if we glued ourselves together and, if yes, how far could it transport us?"

"Well, I am pretty sure that it could handle both of us safely, but that would certainly cut on its range, both in space and time."

"By how much?"

"Depends! How much would you weigh right now, with all your weapons?"

"A bit less than seventy kilos."

"Hum..." Said Farah, making a quick mental calculation. "Then we should be able to do a space jump of a few hundred kilometers, if no time displacement is involved. I am sorry but, if you were thinking about us returning to your home in 2012, my wrist time distorter won't be able to handle it."

"What about my original emergence point near Northolt?"

"That it could do easily. But what would we do once there?"

"I don't know yet, but the important thing right now is to get you and I out of the hands of the British. We could discuss further once safely out of London. Ah, finally, the sixth floor: those antique elevators are so slow."

Opening the accordion-like door of the cabin once it stopped, Nancy got out of the elevator with Farah and turned left along a wide corridor. Only one office on the floor was lit at that late hour. Farah pointed the lit office to Nancy and whispered to her.

"That's the office where my equipment was taken from me."

"Harker's office." Said Nancy after looking at the door numbers they were passing. "I can bet that this asshole acted solely on his own authority by arresting you and interrogating you. He probably hoped to gain favors from Churchill by giving him the key to time travel. Well, he is about to find out that he bit in something a bit too big for him. Keep following me but stay two paces behind me, so that I can deal with Harker first."

"Understood!"

Nancy then took out her silenced .22 caliber pistol and entered the lit office at a resolute pace, pointing her weapon at the officer sitting behind a large desk and writing some kind of report.

"Don't move and don't scream, Harker, or I will not hesitate to shoot you."

The interim head of the M.I.5, a man in his fifties with a moustache, twitched in his chair when he saw the gun pointed at him. His face then reflected pure surprise and disbelief on recognizing Nancy.

"Brigadier Laplante? But, you are supposed to be dead."

"You mean, killed by British bombs in Colditz Castle? So, you knew about that raid. Anyway, I didn't come here to discuss my fate. You took away things from my friend, Doctor Tolkonen, when you arrested her. I want those things, now!"

"But, I don't know what you are talking about." Lied rather badly the now nervous British. To Farah's shock and horror, Nancy then shot once, targeting Harker's

left shoulder. While the gun produced only a weak 'plop', the bullet made Harker cringe with sudden pain as he reflexively raised his right hand to his wounded shoulder.

"Aaah! You...you bitch!"

Nancy walked quickly around his desk and grabbed him brutally by his hair while putting the muzzle of her silenced weapon against his left knee.

"Your left knee will be next if you don't get me those items quickly, Harker. So, where are they?"

With beads of sweat appearing on his forehead and with both fear and pain in his eyes, the British brigadier pointed a safety cabinet in a corner of his office.

"Doctor Tolkonen's things are in that cabinet."

"Then, open it, quickly!"

With Nancy's gun stuck to his head, Harker got slowly up from his chair and went to the cabinet, turning the dial of the combination lock securing it and then opening the second drawer.

"There! Satisfied?"

"Not yet! Farah, grab your things, quickly!"

Farah, still intimidated by Nancy's brutal but effective methods of persuasion, didn't waste time in taking out her equipment, including her medical kit, from the cabinet. Her next action was to put her time distorter around her wrist and to check it.

"My distorter is functional, Nancy, and I have as well all the rest of my things. I will now enter right now the necessary coordinates in the distorter, so that we can leave in a hurry."

"You won't get away with this, Laplante." Said Harker, clenching his teeth against the pain from his shoulder. "You are committing treason right now by helping this woman escape."

Nancy turned him around so that they ended up nose to nose, with her eyes drilling Harker with cold anger.

"The ones who committed treason are you British, not me. You tried to kill me in Colditz and, in the process, murdered hundreds of allied prisoners of war and thousands of German civilians. I don't care what kind of excuse you made to justify that monstrous act but you can tell the Prime Minister this once we are gone: I am through helping you in this war. I will now help my friend return to her proper time and I will not hesitate to kill any British who will stand in our way. As for you, count yourself lucky that I don't kill you for abusing my friend after she sought your help following her escape from Berlin."

Nancy then heard the noise of footsteps approaching in the corridor and threw Harker back in his chair after taking his service revolver from his holster and sliding it in her belt.

“Quick, Farah! Grab your things and hug me thigh.”

Gluing her back to Farah’s belly, so that she could still point her pistol at Harker, she watched the door of the office while Farah passed one arm around her and activated her wrist time distorter. She had time to see Churchill enter the office and brake on the spot while eyeing her with utter disbelief, before a flash of white light enveloped her and Farah.

They materialized at night in the middle of a wood clearing that Nancy knew too well, falling a few centimeters to the grassy ground. Farah then blew out air in relief.

“Thank the stars! We should now be safe for a while. What do we do now, Nancy?”

“We go hide in the trees surrounding this clearing. I don’t want somebody passing on the nearby road to see us and think that we are some kind of Nazi infiltrators sneaking around the woods.”

Farah followed Nancy towards the nearest trees, penetrating maybe twenty meters in the woods before sitting facing each other behind a big tree. Despite putting a brave face on their situation, Nancy was now nearly desperate, realizing full well how bad her situation was. The British would now be as dangerous for her as the Germans, while she could only pray that she would one day be able to see again Mike and Ingrid.

“Farah, tell me what your equipment could do to help us escape from this situation. Also, is there any chance that someone else from 3384 could come to look for you?”

“Well, I do have a micro-radio set implanted inside my left ear, through which I can mentally receive and send messages. If my two young assistants back in New Lake City get the authorization to look for me, then I will be able to hear and to answer their calls. As for my time distorter, my earlier jumps drained about half of the energy out of its power source, leaving us only enough power to make together a time jump of no more than fifty years, or a space jump of 200 kilometers at the maximum.”

“Do you have something that would allow you to replenish that power source?”

“Maybe! I have a small charger unit in my medical kit, but it is made to plug in into 3384 outlets, which are quite different from 1941 British outlets. However, if I could

get some basic electrical parts and wires, along with some tools, I probably could make an improvised outlet adaptor for my charger unit that would fit in British outlets.”

Nancy felt a bit better on hearing that.

“And, once fully recharged, how far could you go if travelling alone, Farah? Could you then go back to your time period?”

Farah looked with shock at Nancy when she understood what the Canadian had in mind.

“You want me to leave you behind? No way! I came all the way from 3384 to get you back and I will leave only with you. Besides, even with a full charge and going alone, my distorter won't be able to bring me back to the 34th Century.”

“But, you could recharge your unit at intervals on your way, no?”

“A nice idea but one that won't work in our case, Nancy. Know that a devastating nuclear war will engulf Earth in 2052, destroying human civilization and leaving alive less than a few million people. It will then take a full 500 years before some semblance of a technological society emerges from the radioactive ruins. That 500 year gap is too long to bridge for my time distorter unit. The only realistic goal would be your lakeside cottage in 2012. We could both get there if I could improvise some sort of portable battery to supplement my power cell.”

“That could be a start.” Said Nancy. “Once there, we...”

The sudden air of utter joy that had just appeared on Farah's face cut her off, with the bald giant then nearly screaming.

“MY ASSISTANTS! THEY ARE HERE, IN 1941! THEY ARE CALLING ME RIGHT NOW ON THE RADIO.”

A wave of unspeakable relief washed over Nancy as Farah seemed to conduct a mental conversation for a few seconds. Farah finally grabbed Nancy by both shoulders, grinning at her.

“My assistants will be here in a few seconds, aboard a modified air scooter able to jump space-time. We are going to be saved, Nancy!”

Both women hugged each other emotionally, then started to walk back towards the clearing. They were about to emerge in the open when a small flying machine the size of an ultra-compact car appeared above the clearing in a brief flash of white light, then started descending slowly towards the ground. Farah broke at a run towards the machine, followed closely by Nancy. They reached the machine just after it landed smoothly and silently on the long grass. A transparent canopy then slid back, to reveal a pair of young bald giants who smiled at Farah.

"Farah, thank the stars, we found you!" Said the young man of the couple. "And this must be Nancy Laplante?"

"Correct! Let's not waste precious time, Maran. As soon as we are in the scooter, jump back to the time lab. We have to arrange a few return trips to this time and place with the time ship."

"Return trips?" Exclaimed the girl sitting behind the young man. "What for? This time is extremely dangerous for us."

"I know, Mona, but we have at least two more people to pick up in 1941 London, along with the car and other belongings of Nancy. I will explain further once at the time lab."

Maran Tolvek and Mona Zirel did not insist further and squeezed themselves to let Farah and Nancy get in the machine, which looked like a small covered sled without wheels. With the canopy closing first, the machine then climbed a few meters in the air before disappearing the same way it had come.

CHAPTER 37 – 3384

09:21 (North America Central Time)

Monday, August 10, 3384 ‘A’

Time laboratory annex, New Lake City University campus

Great Lakes area, North America

The time scooter reappeared in the middle of a large laboratory sporting equipment that would have been worthy of the best science-fiction movie set in Hollywood in 2012. The three giants in the scooter got out of it and immediately broke in a profuse exchange of happy hugs and kisses. On her part, while eyeing with intense curiosity the lab around her, Nancy was much more subdued and took her time to get off the scooter, something that Farah noticed.

“Why the stone face, Nancy? We’re home and safe! We should celebrate this moment.”

“You are home, Farah, but I left behind the two persons I cherish the most. I’m sorry if I play the killjoy like this but I can’t stop thinking about Mike and Ingrid. There is also something else.”

“Oh, what?”

“You did say that your society was a pacifist, unarmed civilization and that your compatriots are mostly risk-averse, right?”

“Uh, I suppose that would be the polite way for your people to describe the Global Council, yes. We are however a gentle society: you won’t have to worry about being threatened by anyone here.”

“What about the reverse? What are your risk-averse, pacifist citizens going to think of an anatomically abnormal woman who is trained to kill and has a kill score in the dozens? As for my weapons, I may be ready to be discreet about them, but I am not going to give them away: I will need them to go get Mike and Ingrid.”

Maran Tolvek and Mona Zirel, catching on to the situation, had by now cooled down their demonstrations of joy and were eyeing Nancy with a mix of curiosity and caution. Mona nodded her head and spoke while keeping her eyes on Nancy.

“She may have a point, Farah. She is physically a most visible oddity, while many may panic on being told she is a soldier, and an armed one at that. Hell, I am not

sure that half of our citizens actually understand what a soldier is, or know the difference between a soldier and a simple murderer. The fact that she doesn't speak Neo-English would only add to the chances of a misunderstanding."

"Then, let's get her through a mnemotronic session." Suggested Maran. "We are on the grounds of a university, after all."

"What is a mnemotronic session?" Asked Nancy, even though she already had a vague idea about it. Farah answered her on that.

"We use mnemotronic techniques to help accelerate the assimilation of complex knowledge in teenagers and adults via direct mental data transfer. I learned 20th Century English, German and French that way in no more than an hour. You will probably need less than thirty minutes to learn Neo-English and, yes Maran, that was a good idea. I suggest that we do that before anything else: I don't want to see Nancy having to face Global Council officials or policemen while incapable of being understood."

"Then, let's go!" Replied Nancy without hesitation.

"Uh, what about your weapons?"

Nancy smiled while patting the pistols on her belt and on her belly.

"Those? They are simply tools of my trade, Farah. Don't worry: I don't intend to turn into a shooting maniac inside that university."

"Knowing how good you are with them, that does reassure me a lot, Nancy. Follow me, then. Maran, Mona, you go hide that time scooter somewhere: I don't want to see it being confiscated or impounded by Daran Mien."

"Who is that Daran Mien?" Asked Nancy, attracting a sardonic smile on Farah's face.

"He is one of those risk-averse compatriots of mine, on top of being the Global Administrator for sciences and my superior. He wouldn't even think of risking anything by himself. His first reaction on seeing films about you was to call you a mass murderer."

"That's nice!" Replied Nancy sarcastically. "It is always better to know with whom you are dealing with. Do you have another superior who could prove more understanding about me?"

"Yes: the Chief Global Administrator, Boran Kern. He is an intelligent, reasonable man. I think that I will call him after your mnemotronic session."

"The Chief Global Administrator... That would make him the leader of Earth, right?"

"Make it the leader of the whole Solar System, Nancy. We have people living in as far as the Neptune System."

"Wow! Humanity did progress a lot in that respect."

"And in many others. Ready to follow me now?"

"Let me just do one thing first." Said Nancy, who then took off her beret and pulled off her wig, showing her shaved head and attracting a shocked look from Farah as she put the wig on a nearby table.

"What happened to your natural hair?"

"I was accused by some allied prisoners in Colditz of being too friendly with the Germans. They attacked me in the shower house, beat me up and cut my hair to mark me as a collaborator."

"I...I'm sorry. I didn't know about that."

"What is done is done. The good point of that is that I will now attract less attention with a shaved head around your university. Show the way, Farah."

Walking out of the lab and into a wide hallway, they soon crossed into the main university building via a steel and glass covered pedestrian bridge. Nancy used that opportunity to examine the surroundings of the university complex, noting the nearby shore of a huge lake.

"Where are we exactly, Farah?"

"In New Lake City, one of the few cities now existing in North America. It is situated on the eastern shore of Lake Michigan, near its northern tip where it links up with Lake Huron. Due to the long term radiations from the 2052 Nuclear Holocaust, most of North America remained a wasteland for many centuries. The Global Council has been working hard now for four centuries to decontaminate and repopulate parts of the continent, but there are still only a dozen cities dotting it. As for the East Coast, it is still virgin territory, so intense were the radiation levels there."

"The folly of man..." Said quietly Nancy while contemplating the countryside and the buildings of the medium-sized city built along the nearby shore. Farah nodded her head to that.

"You are right about that, Nancy. Hopefully, the Global Council will never have to suffer the scourge of war."

They then resumed their walk, crossing path often with groups of teenagers and young adults that in turn eyed Nancy in various ways. Nancy giggled as one particular group of girls passed her, attracting an amused look from Farah.

“What is it?”

“One of those girls just thought that I had atrocious fashion tastes. I can’t say that she is wrong, if you look at my battledress uniform.”

“Nancy, how powerful is that telepathic power of yours? In fact, can you tell me more about what happened to you in Colditz?”

“Farah, I actually have to control my mind in order not to be swamped by all the thoughts emanating around me. If I can see or picture someone in my mind, then I can communicate telepathically with that person. It is in fact only one of the many powers I received from The One when he healed me in Colditz.”

Nancy then took a few minutes to tell Farah about her experience in Colditz, while they walked along the corridors of the university. By the time they arrived at a mnemotronic lab, Farah was sobered up by Nancy’s story.

“This is all quite incredible, Nancy, yet I have seen enough to believe you. However, the society of the Global Council is completely atheistic. Making others believe you about your ‘One’ will be difficult. Ah, here we are!”

The mnemotronic lab turned out to be a large room filled with rows of what looked a lot like dentist chairs. A dozen of the chairs were already occupied by seemingly sleeping giant teenagers, while a technician sat at a control desk. Farah led Nancy to one of the occupied chairs and made her sit in it, then adjusted on her head a sort of helmet with a facial viewing screen.

“Just relax from now on, Nancy. I will go program your session at the control desk.”

The technician at the control desk, a young woman that Farah knew well, smiled to the physicist as Farah joined her and called up a program for Nancy’s mnemotronic chair.

“Who is your friend, Farah? She sure dresses funny.”

“You could say that, I suppose. Her name is Nancy and she is quite special.”

The technician then noticed that Farah was programming a session of Neo-English and looked at her with confusion.

“Why program Neo-English for her? She doesn’t speak it already?”

“No, Anya! She speaks old Colloquial English from the 20th Century.”

"English from the 20th Century? How could that be?"

Farah then stared into her friend's eyes and spoke calmly.

"Anya, keep this to yourself for the moment, but that woman just came with me from the year 1941."

The technician's eyes bulged wide open at those words.

"A...a time traveler? She is an Ancestor?"

"Yes, she is an Ancestor, and a quite remarkable one at that."

Farah then completed her programming and initiated the mnemotronic session before sitting in an empty chair of the control desk, checking in particular a specific indicator. She smiled with satisfaction when the dial gave her a reading after a few minutes.

"Nancy has an I.Q. of 153. Not bad for an Ancestor, wouldn't you say, Anya?"

"But, that's genius level! I thought that Ancestors had to have inferior minds, to do something as stupid as the Nuclear Holocaust of 2052."

Farah looked at the technician gravely.

"Believe me, Anya: Ancestors could be as brilliant as any of us, or as stupid as any of us. They just didn't have our level of knowledge, that's all. My friend Nancy actually originates from the year 2012, but was kidnapped by two of our own scientists and used as a guinea pig for experiments in time travel. I had to go recuperate her in 1941 but she in turn saved my life and made possible our escape. She is the bravest woman I ever saw and she has a heart of gold."

"She is certainly small, compared to us."

"But she is very strong for her size, Anya. Ancestors, contrary to us, practiced sports intensively and most of them were more fit physically than any of us. Nancy could most probably run into the ground anyone in the Global Council."

Farah then stayed silent for the rest of Nancy's session. She got up from her chair when the program ended and went to Nancy's chair. Taking the helmet off her head, she smiled to Nancy and spoke to her in Neo-English.

"How is the little brain of the young lady?"

"The young lady will be polite and won't send you where you should, Farah."

Replied Nancy, also in Neo-English, before laughing with Farah.

"So, what do we do next?"

"I believe that now is a good time for me to call the Chief Global Administrator. There are public videophone stations in a lounge close to this lab. Come with me!"

A short walk brought them to a students lounge that was mostly deserted, classes being in session. Farah entered with Nancy one of the sound-proof glass cubicles containing a chair facing what looked like a computer station. Taking place in the chair, with Nancy standing out of the field of view of the station's camera, Farah composed the number for a station in Zurich, in the European Alps. A young female receptionist answered her, her head and torso appearing on the station's screen.

"Good afternoon! Office of the Chief Global Administrator. May I help you?"

"This is Doctor Farah Tolkonen, member of the Global Science Council and head of Project Tempus. I need to speak urgently to Chief Administrator Kern on a question of life or death."

"Oh!" Said the receptionist, visibly impressed. "One moment, please."

The screen went to waiting mode for a short moment before the head and upper torso of a handsome man appeared on it.

"Doctor Tolkonen, you were reported as lost in time in the twentieth century. How did you manage to get back?"

"It certainly wasn't because of the Global Science Administrator, sir: my assistants had to break a ban on time travel in order to get me back with the help of a friend."

"Are you alright, Doctor?" Asked Boran Kern, appearing genuinely concerned about her.

"I was captured, tortured and nearly killed, but I'm mostly alright now, thanks to Nancy Laplante."

"That Laplante, wasn't she the one who supposedly caused the distortions in the timeline?"

"She's the one, sir, but she is not the one to blame in this: two of our own scientists marooned her in time without her consent or knowledge. Faced with surviving a war she was not supposed to live through, she tried to shorten that war, which caused the distortions. Sir, we owe her: she was nearly killed a dozen times, was tortured horribly and also got wounded repeatedly. Her name is now disgraced in the time we just came from; she lost most of her personal possessions and she has been separated from her new husband and stepdaughter, who are still back in the year 1941. She is now with me in New Lake City and is hoping to be able to go back to the past to retrieve her husband, stepdaughter and various possessions. Simply apologizing to her before

kicking her back to her year of origin will not suffice, sir. Besides, we may need her for something none of us could do.”

“I’m listening, Doctor.” Said Kern gravely. Farah then spoke for a couple of minutes, explaining an idea she had been cultivating for a few days now. At the end of it, Kern nodded his head, apparently won in by her arguments.

“Your idea has a lot of merit to it, Doctor. Besides, that Nancy Laplante sounds fascinating. You can expect me in New Lake City in two hours.”

“Sir, before you hang up, you should know two things. First, my friend was armed when she arrived here. I would like to obtain a waiver for her from the standing global ban on weapons. She will need her weapons when she will go back to the past, for her own protection.”

“Could she be dangerous, Doctor?”

“To us, no! To her enemies, very much so. This brings me to the second point I wanted to bring on. Sometime during her stay in the year 1941, Nancy Laplante acquired some very powerful paranormal powers, which she used to help me escape.”

“Paranormal powers? What kind of powers? How?”

Nancy decided then to jump in the conversation and moved so that Boran Kern could see her.

“Good morning, Chief Global Administrator. Let me present myself : Nancy Laplante, war correspondent and Canadian Army reserves officer from the year 2012. I gained my powers at the same time that I was healed in seconds from the tortures inflicted on me by the Germans in 1941. For that, I owe it to what I call ‘The One’, essentially an entity formed of pure spiritual energy and possessing incredible powers. Some may actually equate The One with God. As for my powers, I can communicate telepathically, use telekinesis and levitation and can heal by the touch of my hands. I was as well given by him earlier on the ability to remember all my past incarnations, spread over 9,000 years and 92 lives. I know that this will be difficult for you to believe, but I am more than ready to prove to you what I say once we meet.”

Boran Kern was silent for a long moment, digesting those words. He finally spoke cautiously, weighing his every word.

“We will definitely need to talk together, Miss Laplante. Could you now wait outside of the booth, so that I could speak in private with Doctor Tolkonen?”

“As you wish, sir.” Said Nancy before leaving the cubicle and closing the sound-proof door behind her, then walking away to the other side of the lounge. Kern followed

her via the camera, then spoke to Farah when he was satisfied that Nancy was far enough.

“Doctor, how could you tell me that an armed woman from a barbaric past who possesses such powers is not dangerous to our society? From what she did, it sounds like she could take on all of our security agents single-handedly.”

“She probably could, sir, but she won’t, unless she is threatened. She may be a soldier but she has a heart of gold. She would do anything to protect innocent people, especially children.”

“Hmm, a trained killer with a heart of gold... Sounds like quite a contradiction to me, Doctor.”

“Please, sir, do not prejudge her without at least meeting her. I would trust that woman with my life, sir.”

“Alright, Doctor. I’ll be on my way shortly. She may keep her weapons in the meantime but tell her not to carry them in public. As for your idea, we will talk more about it once we meet in New Lake City.”

“Thank you very much for your comprehension, sir. I will be waiting for you at the time lab, in the university’s physics annex.”

Farah was nearly jubilant as Kern terminated the communication. It had gone much better than she had hoped for.

11:25 (North Americal Central Time)

Landing pad, campus of New Lake City University

Boran Kern was thoughtful as his personal transport craft was landing vertically and silently on one of the landing pads of the university campus, thanks to its directional gravity drive. Like most citizens of the Global Council, he knew very little about the history of the twentieth century or that of previous centuries. Most of the world’s historical archives had been lost in the mid 21st century, following the nuclear war in 2052 that had almost wiped out humanity from the surface of the Earth. The little he had read about that time period spoke of incredible violence and cruelty. Could that supposedly friendly woman really come from such a barbaric period? To complicate the problem, that woman had lethal weapons with her, weapons that had been technically banned in the Global Council for centuries. If that woman turned to be less than friendly and ran wild with her weapons, there was no way to predict what could happen then. As

for his own personal protection, Kern had brought six of his top security agents, well-trained men armed with non-lethal weapons, but, from what Doctor Tolkonen had told him, those six men may not be enough to face that woman soldier. He could thus only hope that the incoming meeting would go well and that Tolkonen's judgment of that Laplante was accurate. If not, there would be quite a lot of blame coming his way from the High Council, the governing group of global administrators of which he was the chairman.

Surrounded by his bodyguards, the Chief Global Administrator stepped out of his craft by its rear access ramp, setting foot on the concrete of the landing pad as a local government limousine commandeered in advance by a call from Zurich approached slowly. Kern and his security detail took place quickly in the limousine, which then accelerated towards the Physics Annex. The trip was short, less than a minute in fact, with the limousine depositing its passengers in front of the main entrance of the annex. Kern's arrival didn't go unnoticed by the faculty members and students going in or out of the annex, with many of the people seeing him then placing calls on their wrist videophones. Kern realized with a sigh that his visit in New Lake City was going to fuel endless speculations and could very well attract the attention of the medias. He however suspected that the apparition of Nancy Laplante would have done that quickly enough. With one of his bodyguard first asking for directions to the time lab, Kern then started walking down one of the ground level hallways of the annex, still surrounded by his security agents. The latter were now understandably nervous and kept one hand near their stun pistols hidden under their vests. The idea of going to talk with a confessed mass killer had in fact attracted a strong protest from Kern's head of security, but Goran Vedak had to capitulate when faced with the stubborn intention of his boss. Vedak, along with his five agents, actually drew their stun pistols from under their vests just before entering the time lab, to then hold them as inconspicuously as possible while still ready to use them quickly. Kern nearly ordered them to holster their weapons back, but he reasoned that Vedak, as the security professional, knew better than him about how to face a potential deadly threat. The first person they met once inside the lab was Farah Tolkonen, who had been waiting near the door of her office. She bowed her head politely to Kern, who bowed back, and shook his hand.

"Thank you for coming to see me, Chief Global Administrator Kern. I know that you are quite a busy man."

"Not busy enough to ignore a subject as important as the one we need to discuss about, Doctor Tolkonen. Could we speak in private in your office before going to see Miss Laplante?"

"Of course, sir."

With his bodyguards staying outside of the office, Kern entered the small room, which was furnished rather simply, and took a chair opposite Tolkonen. He couldn't help think then that the physicist appeared exhausted.

"Are you alright, Doctor? You seem quite tired. We could always postpone this discussion if you wish so."

"No, no, let's discuss now. I can always sleep later: this cannot wait."

"As you wish, Doctor. So, tell me in detail what happened after you jumped to the year 1941 to save that Laplante, then tell me what you honestly think of that woman. Take all your time."

Farah Tolkonen spoke for a good twenty minutes, with Boran Kern cutting in a number of times to ask questions and clarify points. Their conversation left Kern stroking his chin with one hand as he digested Farah's information.

"This woman seems nearly impossible. Many could see her as a public danger, especially with her weapons and her supernatural powers."

"Sir, Nancy may be good at killing, but that doesn't mean that she enjoys killing. She is a highly honorable woman, with a keen sense of justice and a tolerant mind. She is also a certified genius: her mnemotron session showed me that her I.Q. stands at 153. She is quite far from the picture of the mindless barbarian that some would try to put on her."

"If you say so, Doctor. Well, from what you told me, I think it should be safe enough for me to go speak with her. Is she still armed?"

"No! She voluntarily surrendered her weapons to me for the duration of her present visit to our time period. She will however want them back when she is ready to go back to the past to go get her husband and stepdaughter."

"We will see about that in good time, Doctor. Let's see first how our conversation with her goes."

"Then, may I suggest that your bodyguards holster back their stun pistols, sir? I told Nancy that we are an unarmed, pacifist society, and she may not react well on seeing weapons pointed at her."

"Hum, point taken, Doctor. Well, let's go see your wonder woman."

Both got up and left the office, joining the six agents waiting in the hallway. On being told by Kern to hide his weapons, Goran Vedak hesitated a moment but finally obeyed reluctantly. The six bodyguards then formed a phalange around Kern as Farah led them towards the laboratory proper. After passing a transparent double sliding door, Kern finally had his first direct look at Nancy Laplante, who was sitting behind a table supporting a number of scientific instruments. He was better able to judge her size when she got up on her feet as he entered with his guards and Tolkonen. While small in comparison with adult Global Council citizens, there was no mistaking her for a young teenager, as she had a very feminine, well developed body. She certainly was a beautiful woman and her long black hair only added to her exotic beauty. Kern then caught on about her hair.

"Uh, if I am not mistaken, miss, you didn't have that hair on your head during our videophone conversation earlier this morning."

"You are correct, Chief Global Administrator Kern. I am presently wearing a wig I bought in 1941 to cover my shaven head. Please understand that, for most women of my time, having a shaved head was a stigma, a mark of infamy. Some allied prisoners of war cut my hair because they thought that I was too friendly with our German guards in the prison where I was held after being tortured. Much of what was then left was burned away while I was saving German civilians trapped in houses on fire."

"Doctor Tolkonen told me about that, Miss Laplante. First, before we speak further, I want to thank you in the name of the Global Council for what you did for Doctor Tolkonen."

Nancy smiled to him and nodded her head once to acknowledge his thank.

"I am the one grateful to her, sir, as I would be still marooned in time if not for her brave intervention and that of her assistants. May I ask what you plan to do with me, sir?"

"Be reassured, Miss: we are a pacifist and kind society. You will be fully compensated for the wrongs done to you by the two scientists who kidnapped you, then we will help you return to your proper life. I understand that you had to leave behind in 1941 two persons that are dear to you, along with most of your personal possessions."

Kern saw sadness appear on her face at his words.

"Sir, my husband and stepdaughter are effectively very dear to me. Whatever happens to me, I wish to have them by my side. Could you arrange that?"

Kern turned his head to look at Doctor Tolkonen.

“Doctor, do you see any possible bad consequence for the timeline continuity if we go fetch these two people in 1941?”

“No, sir. Timeline ‘B’ is a creation out of Nancy’s actions. It is quite malleable compared to our own timeline. From what I know of those two persons, they are nice people with a good potential to help in my special project I told you about.”

“Ah, yes, your Time Patrol idea. Did you put that idea across to your friend here?”

“We didn’t have much time to talk about that, sir, but I am sure that she would be interested by it.”

“Do you mind if I ask her, then?”

“Sir, I was counting on that.” Replied Farah, obviously delighted. Kern nodded his head and looked back at Laplante.

“Miss Laplante, Doctor Tolkonen proposed to me the idea of forming an agency that would be tasked to regulate and police time travel, to avoid further distortions of the timelines. That agency would also be used to document history in detail, as most of the world’s archives were lost in the 21st century. Would you be interested in helping organize and run such an agency?”

“With immense pleasure, sir.” Was her instant reply. “My own experience showed me how vulnerable to manipulation history is. A recent experience where I gained my new paranormal powers also gave me another incentive to be interested in protecting history: I can now remember my past incarnations. I am able to recall my 92 ancient lives, going back to the eight millennium before the Christian era. Those souvenirs include ancient languages as well.”

“But...that’s fantastic! This could be invaluable when the time comes to document and patrol history.”

“I know, sir. I will be glad to use this knowledge for the protection of history.”

A thought then came to Farah’s mind at those words and she jumped in the exchange.

“Nancy, those past lives of yours, how varied are they? Were you ever a historically significant person?”

Farah swallowed hard when Nancy nodded her head somberly.

“I was both man and woman, peasant and warrior, slave and merchant. Of my 92 past lives, one was pivotal for history. How well do you know the history of Europe’s fifteenth century A.D.?”

“Er, not very well, I am afraid. Were you some kind of king or queen then?”

“No! I started out as a simple French peasant girl, then turned into a warrior who rallied France against the English troops occupying it. She ended up burned at the stake as a heretic, after freeing much of France. Her proper name was Joan the Maiden, more popularly known as Joan of Arc, and she is a national heroine in France. Ironically enough, Joan was always one of my favorite role models when I was a young teenager. Finding out that I was actually her was a great shock to me, but also a marvelous surprise.”

“Then,” said Boran Kern, “I definitely want you for that Time Patrol project...if it can be accepted by the High Council. That is however far from being a given. What could definitely help convince the High Council to endorse this new organization is the prospect of being able to rebuild our knowledge of past history. The Nuclear Holocaust of 2052 unfortunately destroyed nearly all of the World’s historical archives and artifacts and there is presently a great hunger for historical knowledge in our society. Also, a great number of animal and plant species went extinct after 2052, because of the radiations and of the nuclear winter that followed the war then. A time agency could go to the past and bring back specimens that we then could use to repopulate and regrow areas of the World that are still nearly bare of life. Yes, I think that, with a carefully presented plan and those two points, we could convince the High Council to authorize such a Time Patrol.”

“Then, Mister Kern, your High Council should be ready to accept the following terms, which I would consider as vital if such an organization is to be effective. First, you may be a pacifist, unarmed society, but weapons will be needed by this Time Patrol. If we encounter illegal time travelers, I doubt that simply asking them politely to follow us without a fuss will be sufficient to arrest them. By weapons, I mean individual as well as shipborne weapons. Second, the agents of the Time Patrol would need to have the power of search and arrest to do their job, as well as the authority to use deadly force if need be. Anything short of that would condemn this Time Patrol to irrelevance. As an expert in military and historical affairs, I could help Doctor Tolkonen write down the proposed charter and organization of this Time Patrol, sir, along with its rules of engagement.”

“Hum! I agree with your terms, Miss Laplante, but selling to the High Council the idea of reintroducing weapons will probably be the hardest point. Some could also point out that we don’t produce any weapons anymore anyway, apart from a limited quantity of

non-lethal stun pistols used by our law enforcement agencies. Alright, when could you two have such a draft charter and organizational table ready for the High Council's consideration?"

Nancy and Farah exchanged glances, with the giant physician answering Kern.

"First, sir, I will need to get some sleep: I was forcibly kept awake for two straight days in 1941 and I am about spent. If I and Nancy start working tomorrow morning, I believe that we could have a ready draft by late Thursday or early Friday."

Kern nodded, satisfied.

"Just in time for the weekly Friday meeting of the High Council. Contact me as soon as your draft charter is completed, Doctor, so that I could discuss it with you. I will send my personal craft here on Friday morning to pick you and Miss Laplante up for seven O'clock and bring you to the High Council meeting in Zurich."

Nancy suddenly cut in before Kern could conclude the discussion there and go.

"Administrator Kern, if I may, I would like to discuss a subject of high importance for me before you leave."

"Go ahead, miss." Said patiently Kern, who had been about to walk away.

"It is concerning my husband and my stepdaughter, who are still in 1941 London. I would like to go get them before the reunion of the High Council. I would also use the occasion to recuperate my personal belongings, so that the British can't use them anymore to advance their technology."

Kern was thoughtful for a moment, then looked at Farah.

"Doctor, the time ship used by the two men who originally kidnapped Miss Laplante is still functional, I believe?"

"It is, sir. My two assistants are also quite able to pilot it if need be."

"In that case, I personally authorize the rescue of those two persons in 1941, along with the retrieval of Miss Laplante's personal effects at the same time."

Nancy then made a forced smile, knowing that she was now going to possibly push her luck.

"Er, my stepdaughter Ingrid is presently held in a British military prison, alongside a number of other German young women. Would you authorize as well the retrieval of some of those women, or at least help them out of their jail?"

"Are you planning to enlist those women in this projected Time Patrol, miss? Don't forget that its approval and creation is not a done deal yet."

"As Chief Global Administrator, do you have the authority to offer asylum to refugees, sir? If I can't use them in this Time Patrol, then could they be offered a new life here, away from a World devastated by war?"

"Uh, put this way, I suppose that I could offer them the refuge of our civilization. How many persons are we talking about here?"

"Less than twenty, sir. Some may still decide to stay in 1941. That total includes as well two good men that are in imminent danger of execution."

Kern gave a sober look at Nancy at those words.

"If these men are indeed at risk of death, then you have my benediction to go save them, miss. The death penalty has been abolished for centuries now in our society and that alone would be sufficient to justify an asylum request from those men. I thus authorize you and Doctor Tolkonen to bring those people who wish to leave the year 1941 and ask for asylum here. If the Time Patrol project is approved and they volunteer to join it, then the better."

"Thank you from the bottom of my heart, Administrator Kern." Said Nancy with a sincere smile. "You will not regret this decision."

"I believe so as well, miss. Just don't use that opportunity to bring more weapons to this century. Now, for one last thing before I go."

Kern then took out of a vest pocket a small electronic pad and punched a few commands in it before looking back up at Farah.

"What is your personal bank credit number, Doctor?"

Farah gave it to Kern, who punched it in his pad.

"I just transferred 42,000 solars in your account, to be used by Miss Laplante and her friends from 1941 to equip themselves with a wardrobe and other essentials. If they are to work for us or live in this time period, then they will be entitled to the full social benefits of a Global Council citizen."

"That is actually an excellent idea, sir. Thank you again, sir."

"Then I will be expecting you and Miss Laplante Friday morning in Zurich."

Kern shook hands with both Farah and Nancy and left with his bodyguards. Farah felt good as she looked at Nancy.

"Nancy, I think that we are about to start something really exciting and worthwhile."

"It certainly looks like it, Farah. What next, now?"

“You go shopping for new clothes, while I go get some badly needed sleep. I hope that you like shopping?”

“Me?” Said Nancy while smiling. “After having to contend for a year with the limited, atrocious choice of fashion in 1941 England? Any time! Just give me some money and point me in the right direction.”

“Alright.” Said Farah tiredly. “Let’s find an automated bank teller.” Leaving the lab, the duo went down to the main hall of the building, where Farah went to what looked a lot like the automated bank machines Nancy was accustomed to in 2012. She spoke at the same time she slipped a small plastic card in a slot and put her opened hand on a flat screen.

“These days, electronic crediting and debiting are used a lot more often than cash money. Cash is however still accepted everywhere. Our currency unit is the solar. As an example of its purchasing power, one solar will get you a good pastry or a pair of socks, while a good meal will cost you anywhere between six and fifteen solars. Most basic necessities are provided free to Global Council citizens on presentation of a social services card, luxury products being normally the only items one has to pay for. Since you are not a registered citizen of the Global Council yet, you will have to pay for everything, for the moment.”

“Am I going to become a registered citizen, Farah?”

“Probably. Here are 2,000 solars. This is a lot of money, so be careful about it. While violent crime is rare in our society, petty thieves are not so rare.” Nancy examined for a few seconds the banknotes and coins, particularly their elaborate holograms, before pocketing them and following Farah outside. Their next stop was a tall apartment tower some 400 yards away. Farah led her to an apartment on the sixteenth floor, opening the door by putting her hand on a finger recognition screen besides it. Nancy looked on in appreciation as they walked into a lounge decorated with paintings and art objects.

“Nice place you have here, Farah. You have good tastes.”

“Thank you. I have to say that I haven’t had much chance lately to enjoy the comfort of my apartment: I have been working long hours during the past few months.”

“I bet you did, Farah.” Said Nancy very softly. “I owe you more than I will ever be able to repay you. You risked your life and paid with pain to try getting me out of trouble.”

Farah was silent for a moment while staring at her.

“You didn’t need to say this, Nancy. I would have done it for any other person in trouble. Besides, you would have done the same for me.”

“But I’m a soldier. It is my duty to protect others.”

“I know. At first, the simple notion of soldiers, ready to kill on orders, disgusted me. Then, while watching you through that war we just escaped, I gradually realized that there was a lot more to soldiers than just being killing machines. I still don’t like killing, but I now respect you.”

Nancy stepped forward and gently hugged the giant.

“Thanks, friend. Your respect means a lot to me.”

“And being your friend makes me happy. Now, you better go on your shopping trip now. And don’t go wild while you are at it!”

Farah went to a work desk sitting in a corner of the lounge and foraged in one of its drawers before going back to Nancy and handing her a calling card.

“Here is my address, so that you know where to direct the air taxi on your return. The best place for you to start your shopping trip is on Lakeside Boulevard, in the Core District. There are lots of good shops there. If you need to go eat, then go east one block and try Sunset Pleasure Boulevard. Now, go to the roof level air car pad. I will call an air taxi for you. Have fun in town!”

“And you go to sleep!” Replied Nancy before heading towards the door and leaving the apartment. Farah took the time to call an air taxi for Nancy, then went to her bedroom and crashed on the bed. She was asleep in seconds.

The few people Nancy met on her way to the roof landing pad eyed her with a mix of curiosity and confusion, fixing on her small height, cranial hair and antiquated battledress uniform. Once on the roof, she saw what looked like a standard bus stop cabin besides a wide, reinforced landing pad. She scanned her surroundings before going to the cabin: New Lake City lay less than a mile away to the West, along the shore of Lake Michigan. The city was actually not a big one, with a population Nancy guessed to be around half a million. She found a long padded bench inside the cabin, along with some sort of computer station. The station was actually very simple, with few buttons and easy to read instructions. Nancy suspected that even young children could use this without problems. She was still studying the station when a wheel-less vehicle landed smoothly and silently on the pad. Going to the vehicle, Nancy entered it when a side door opened by itself. Taking place on the comfortable bench seat, she was about

to tell the driver her destination when she realized that there was no driver. There was in fact no driver's seat at all, only two bench seats facing each other. A soft female voice then came out of a hidden speaker.

"May I have your intended destination?"

"Er, Lakeside Boulevard, Core District, please."

"Thank you! Enjoy the trip."

By now, Nancy suspected that the air taxi was remotely controlled by a computer tied to an air traffic control system. She thus relaxed and sat back as the taxi lifted from the pad and headed West. Looking around, she saw dozens of similar vehicles flying over the city. The trip took less than five minutes, with the taxi landing on top of a big building by the shore of the lake.

"You are now on top of the Renaissance Tower, centerpiece of the Core District. Thank you for using New Lake City public transit."

"How much do I owe for the ride?"

"Air taxis are a public service and are thus free of charge. Have a good day."

The side door again opened by itself. Nancy left the vehicle as a couple walked to it. The two giants nodded politely to her before entering the taxi, which lifted soon afterwards. Fantasizing mentally about having a similarly efficient taxi system in the Montreal of 2012, Nancy entered the rooftop reception room and looked at the electronic floor plans of the building, displayed on a large viewing table in the center of the room. She saw with satisfaction that she would have a wide choice of clothing stores right in this building, which would simplify her shopping. One particular publicity item for a women's clothing store situated on the ground level attracted her eyes.

"Custom-made dresses and suits ready in less than one hour. Hell, that sounds perfect to me. With my comparatively small size, I was probably going to be stuck with selections of children's clothes only."

Going to the bank of elevators, she was about to enter an arriving cabin when a woman leaving the elevator caught her attention. It was actually her dress that caught her eyes: it was made of a fantastic-looking fabric that changed colors as it moved with the motions of the owner of the dress. Walking quickly to her and the man accompanying her, Nancy smiled politely to both of them.

"Excuse me for disturbing you like this, miss, but could I ask you what kind of fabric your dress is made of? I never saw the like of it before."

"You never saw holographic silk before, young girl? It's..."

The woman suddenly looked closely at Nancy's face, intrigued.

"Er, how old are you actually, miss?"

Nancy smiled and held up her right hand, clearly showing her five fingers.

"I am 31 years old, miss. If I am so small, it's because I am from the twentieth century. Thank you for your time."

The couple opened their mouths in unison from the shock, but Nancy was already turning around and heading towards the elevators. She heard the man escorting the woman whisper to his companion as she entered an elevator.

"A time traveling ancestor? Is that even possible?"

"It must, Ron, since she is here." Replied the woman in an uneasy tone. "The ComSec should be warned to keep an eye on her: who could say how such a barbarian could behave here, without supervision."

Nancy didn't say a word as she faced them from inside the elevator and pushed the button for the ground level floor. She simply glared at the woman, who quickly turned away, intimidated. The woman waited until the elevator doors closed before punching a call number on her wrist videophone, prompting a question from her companion.

"What are you doing, Lara?"

"Calling the ComSec. That woman is scaring me."

"Aren't you overreacting? She simply asked you about your dress."

"And you saw the way she last looked at me? Whoever brought her here was irresponsible as hell."

As Lara called the Community Security local office, an idea came to the man. Activating his own wrist videophone, he called the local Global News Network station. A young and pretty woman answered him.

"GNN offices. May I help you, sir?"

"Yes, miss: I would like to report something unusual..."

Nancy had to recognize that she was impressed as she walked around the stores of the ground level floor: those people had refined tastes and a highly artistic sense. Allied with very advanced but also discreet technology, it made for a most appealing civilization. The people themselves, while not athletic one bit, took care of their appearances, probably through dieting rather than through exercising. She had not seen a truly obese person yet and many of the men were quite attractive. She stopped first in a luggage store and bought a large suitcase equipped with small wheels and a

pulling handle, like the ones commonly use for air travel in her own time. She also bought a handbag for the beauty products and other small items she intended to buy later. The store clerk nearly freaked out when she saw Nancy's hands, which forced her to tell again about her origins. By the time she got out of that store, she knew that she would be big on the local news by the evening but resigned herself to it: if she was to serve and protect those people, they would have to grow accustomed to her kind. For a moment, she wondered how the local women would react to Mike Crawford and his powerful body. She smiled to herself but forgot about that as she stopped in front of a store specializing in female underwear. She definitely was going to need some of those. That stop took about twenty minutes and resulted in more questions from curious store clerks and customers alike. Going out of that store, she went nearly immediately inside a footwear store and bought three pairs of shoes and two pairs of high boots. The next stop was a drugstore, where she bought hygiene and beauty product. From there she finally headed for the store advertising custom-made dresses and suits. Up to now, her money had not gone down too quickly, which was encouraging: short of buying jewels, the money she had would probably be more than plenty to buy everything she needed. The custom fit store however surprised her to no small degree: the place was nearly bare, save for a few computer workstations and what looked like changing cabins. She was still looking around in puzzlement when a female clerk came to her with a ready smile.

“May I help you, miss?”

“Er, yes. I am new here and expected something else when I came in here. It is so... bare.”

“You never came to a custom fit store before, miss?”

“I’m afraid that there are no stores like this back in the year 2012, miss.”

“2012?”

The clerk, to her credit, regained her cool quickly after Nancy explained herself. She led her to one of the changing cabins while giving her some instructions.

“Before we can work on the designs you want, we will need your exact body measurements. This cabin is actually a holographic measurement chamber, where lasers will map your body in three dimensions. I will need you to step inside the first cabin, where you will remove all your clothes before going into the connecting cabin. There you will stand with arms and legs slightly spread apart. When you are ready, just say so and stay very still for five seconds. I will tell you when everything is done.”

“Before we do that, I would like to make sure that I have enough money for what I want, so that I don’t make you waste your time, miss. Are dresses made of holographic silk very expensive?”

“It depends on your tastes, miss. A nice but simple design can cost up to 100 solars, while a really fancy design can go up to 1,000 solars or more. How much do you have left on you, if I may ask?”

“About 1,600 solars.”

“That’s plenty, miss. If you would please step in the cabin now, Miss.”

Nancy did so, finding herself in a tiny room sporting a chair, a shelf and wall hooks. She undressed completely and stepped in the next room, which reminded her of the transporter pads in the Star Trek science-fiction television programs. As told, she spread her legs and arms and spoke up.

“I’m ready!”

“Thank you! Please do not move now for ten seconds.” Said the voice of the clerk through a hidden speaker. Nancy obliged as green laser beams started going up and down her body from multiple angles. She closed her eyes, even though the laser beams were probably inoffensive. The voice of the store clerk then came back.

“You can now get dressed, miss.”

“Thank you!”

Once dressed and out of the measurement cabin, Nancy was led to a computer station. The clerk sat in front of the keyboard, while Nancy sat to her left, facing a large screen.

“We are now going to select the type of dress you want, along with its colors and features. We can basically produce anything you wish on the spot. The basement of this store is actually an automated fashion design factory, so what you select will be produced to your specifications within an hour. What kind of dress did you have in mind, miss?”

“Actually, I was looking for three or four designs. Two will be casual wear, two-piece designs; one will be a really sexy, skin-tight outfit; while I wish the last design to be a really nice going out dress. If they can be all made of holographic fabric, all the better. Uh, on second thought, I will also need two copies of another design, this one a working outfit made of tough, fire-resistant fabric.”

“Alright, let’s see what we can do.”

Nancy went out of the store an hour and a half later, her suitcase now containing a wardrobe she could be proud of. Even better, she still had over 700 solars with her. Her battledress uniform, beret and boots were now in her suitcase and she wore a light blue and white two-piece outfit with a deep plunging cleavage that turned to various tones of royal blue and gold depending on the angle one looked at it. Her money and wallet were now in a matching purse slung from her right shoulder. Looking at her watch, the same faithful one that had gone through that crazy year spent in World War Two, she saw that it was close to two O'clock. Her stomach growled, as if to remind her of the time. She was heading out of the east side entrance of the building when two giants, a man and a woman, accosted her cautiously. Both wore dark blue uniforms and silver helmets with integrated earphones and microphone. Nancy pegged them as some kind of police officers as the woman addressed her politely.

"Excuse us for taking your time, miss, but could you show us some identity card?"

"I am afraid that what I have may not be valid here, officer. I arrived from the past only this morning and had no time to get a proper identity card from your government yet."

"Just show us what you have, miss." Said patiently the female officer. Both she and her partner tensed up when Nancy opened her purse and started searching through it. They relaxed when Nancy presented a plastic card with her photo on it. The woman looked at it closely but could not read what was on it, being in an unknown language.

"What does this say, miss?"

"It is my military identity card: I am a reserve officer of the Canadian Forces in the year 2012. This is written in modern English and French, two of the languages of the time."

Both officers looked sharply at her, with the woman's voice showing tension when she spoke again.

"You are a soldier? Do you have any weapons with you?"

"Not with me, and yes, I am a soldier. Two of your scientists had kidnapped me in 2012 to conduct some sort of illegal time travel experiment, then dropped me in 1940. One of your scientist then went back to save me and brought me here."

The female officer looked up and down at her new clothes and her suitcase.

"If you arrived only this morning and have no social identity card, how did you find the money for these acquisitions?"

Nancy felt anger surge at the veiled suggestion that she may have stolen money, but managed to stay calm and polite: her story was not a likely one, after all.

“Government officials met with me this morning at the New Lake City University. They are interested in using my services and, since I had nothing save what I had on my back, gave me some funds as an advance to buy new clothes.”

The police officer thought for a moment, then gave back to Nancy her military identity card.

“Then I wish you good luck, miss. Sorry for having taken your time.”

“I was pleased to help, officer.”

Nancy discreetly sighed with relief as the two police officers left: it could have been much worse, actually. Not that she had been physically worried: she had no doubts that she could have defeated them without a problem, but beating up two police officers on her first day here would not have looked very good in the eyes of her new, prospective employers. Above all, she did not want to jeopardize her chances to be able to recuperate Mike and Ingrid from the year 1941. She barely had time to make a few more steps towards the exit when a young man wearing a strange headband rushed towards her, cutting her path.

“Excuse me, miss. I am Den Solman, reporter with the local office of Global News Network. Could I speak with you for a moment?”

Nancy looked up at the man’s headband, examining it critically. What looked furiously like a miniature CCD camera was hooked to it, directly facing her.

“Is this a camera, mister?”

“Yes, it is, miss. Do you object to being filmed?”

Nancy thought for a moment, then decided that she might as well show some good will: pushing him away would only result in being harassed further.

“No, not really. I am however starving and I really need to go eat something, so I will ask you to be brief.”

“I know a good restaurant nearby, miss.” Volunteered the young reporter enthusiastically. “We could talk while you eat.”

“Alright! Show the way, mister.”

As they walked together, the reporter started firing methodical questions at her.

“May I first have your name, miss?”

“I am Nancy Laplante. Since you are going to ask anyway, I will fill you in as much as I can, mister. I originate from the year 2012 but, after being kidnapped by

unknown persons, ended up in 1940, during a major war. I managed to survive there for about a year before one of your scientists found me. We however ran into difficulties and I was forced to fight to cover our retreat. As for what is next for me, I don't know yet how it will go: I am due to meet government officials later on Friday to discuss that. That is all I can say for the moment."

The reporter nodded his head, pleased, while taking notes on an electronic memo pad.

"And from where do you originate, Miss Laplante?"

"From Montreal, Canada. I was told that it doesn't exist any more."

"That is unfortunately true, miss. You said that you ended up in the middle of a war in the year 1940. The historical archives on that time period are however very limited, since most of them were destroyed in the nuclear war of 2052. Could you describe that war and the political situation that led to it for our viewers?"

"Why not? That war was known as the Second World War and went on from 1939 to 1945, causing the deaths of over 55 million persons, most of them civilian non-combatants."

"55 million dead?" Interrupted the reporter, looking truly appalled and shaken.

"Yes! That war also was marred by massive, unspeakable atrocities and concluded with the use of the two first-ever nuclear bombs against Japan, one of the protagonists in the war. The war itself was caused mostly by the ambitions of the then leader of Germany, Adolph Hitler. He formed an alliance with Italy and Japan and proceeded in conquering most of Europe. At first, his armies won the day, but he did not succeed in bringing down Great Britain. Then he tried to invade the Soviet Union in 1941 but met strong resistance and got quickly into big trouble. The United States also joined the war in 1941, at the side of Great Britain and of the Soviet Union. That upset for good the balance of power and ultimately cost the war to Germany, Italy and Japan."

"Since you were stuck in the middle of that war, you must have seen a lot of it, miss. Did you see any of those atrocities you spoke about? After all, any war is an atrocity by itself, right?"

"That is unfortunately too true, mister. Yes, I saw some of those atrocities. At one time, I accompanied allied troops who liberated a German concentration camp. For your information, a concentration camp is essentially a large prison camp where the inmates are slowly starved, overworked and beaten to death as a punishment for sometimes nothing more than being from the wrong ethnic group. There were even

worst places, called extermination camps, where specific ethnic groups were systematically slaughtered by a variety of means.”

The reporter stopped cold in his track, horror and disgust on his face.

“This... this is inhumane! How could anybody do such things?”

“There were plenty of people who did it, mister.” Said gravely Nancy. “Both sides in that war committed atrocities, as a matter of fact.”

“And did you play any role in that war, miss, apart of being a spectator?”

“I was a combatant myself, mister. While my civilian job is as a journalist in military affairs, I am also a part-time soldier. I fought on the side of the British during that war and was wounded a number of times.”

Solman instinctively took a step back away from her.

“You are a soldier? Did you kill anyone in that war?”

“Yes, many times in fact.”

Her subdued tone did apparently little to reassure the reporter.

“How many times?” He asked hesitantly.

Nancy had to think about that one for a moment.

“Directly, close to a hundred. Indirectly, tens of thousands. Believe me, mister: I did not enjoy any of it and I killed strictly enemy soldiers in open combat.”

The man looked at her as if she was Dracula or Satan himself. Her apparent coolness while speaking about such things was especially unsettling.

“Miss, you probably know that our society has never known war. What you just said could be viewed very negatively here.”

“I won’t blame anyone for feeling that way, mister. War is a monstrous thing but, when faced with it, you have no choice but try to make it as short and merciful as possible.”

“What about diplomacy, talks?”

“Mister, monsters like Hitler or Stalin understood only one thing: force. They used diplomacy only as long as it fit their needs. The British and French tried to appease Germany before the war but succeeded only in letting the Germans get stronger. That sort of lesson unfortunately had to be relearned too many times in history, at the cost of millions of lives. The truth is that you can’t understand war fully if you haven’t lived through one. Look, I am simply asking you not to judge me simply because I am a soldier.”

Den Solman hesitated for a moment as he stared at that small, apparently harmless woman. What she said was unsettling, to say the least, and she had as much as confessed to being a killer. For a pacifist society like the Global Council, she was a dangerous anomaly. Something about her however told him to give her the benefit of the doubt.

“Miss, how about talking about you as a person, once we get to the restaurant. You do look like a good person and I would like to give a balanced view of you to our viewers.”

That brought a charming smile to her face.

“You have a deal, mister.”

15:04 (Mid America time)

Time laboratory, Physics Annex

New Lake City University campus

When Nancy walked in the time lab at the Physics Annex of the New Lake City University, she found Farah’s two assistants busy working together in front of a computer station with a large display screen, on which complicated technical schematics were visible. First leaving her suitcase full of new clothes in a corner near the door, Nancy walked to the two young engineers and looked at the screen.

“What are you working on, guys?”

Maran Tolvek turned his head to answer her.

“A design for a new type of space-time probe, Miss Laplante. So, how did your shopping trip go?”

“Very well indeed! I now have some clothes that I can be proud of. I also toyed around with what I thought could make a suitable work uniform for a time agent.”

“Oh? I certainly would like to see it later, miss.”

“You certainly will, young man. Right now, I would need the help of the two of you to go retrieve a few persons and objects from the past. The Chief Global Administrator authorized that this morning.”

“We know, miss: we saw the recording of your conversation with Administrator Kern. The original time ship, along with our time scooter, is all checked up and ready for departure. Just tell us where and when you want to go, miss.”

CHAPTER 38 – COLLECTING FRIENDS

22:51 (GMT)

Tuesday, July 1, 1941 'B'

24 St James Place, London

England

Mike Crawford closed and locked the door of his apartment behind him, then sat heavily on the sofa of his lounge, feeling dreadful: he had no idea if Nancy had been able to deliver that scientist from the future or if she was now safe. The ring of his telephone, sounding loud in his dark apartment, made him jump nervously. Trying to steady his voice, he grabbed the receiver and answered.

“Yes?”

“Hello, Mike. Would you mind coming to my apartment to help me pack?”

“Nancy? My god! Are you okay?”

“I am. I will explain everything to you in a few minutes. Please come quickly: we have a lot to do and little time to do it.”

“I’m on my way!”

Less than a minute later, he was knocking on the door of apartment eleven. Nancy opened immediately and, grabbing him, pulled him inside before closing the door and kissing him in a passionate embrace. Only when they parted did Mike detail her. Nancy wore a tight-fitting dark gray uniform with numerous large pockets, a pair of black leather boots and a glossy black helmet that covered her cheeks and neck. Her gun belt with her Glock 17 pistol was around her waist and also supported a sort of small box with recessed buttons and dials on its top side. He had tears in his eyes when he looked at her.

“God, I thought that I had lost you, again. What happened to you after you went inside the M.I.5 headquarters?”

“It is a long story, Mike, one I will tell you later. Would you accept to follow me to the future and abandon this time, for good?”

Mike did not hesitate one second before answering her.

“Wherever you go, I go, Nancy. Let’s pack up!”

Nancy kissed him again, then showed him a kind of big aluminum crate on small wheels sitting in the middle of her lounge. The top of the crate was open, showing Nancy's television set and DVD unit inside.

"This is a transit crate: it can jump spacetime between prearranged coordinates or marked locations. We need to put my things in it."

"Got that!"

It took only fifteen minutes for them to collect Nancy's personal belongings, pack them and put them in the transit crate. Mike then looked around him for anything they could have forgotten.

"You look about set to go. What do we do next?"

"Pack your own things. Do not forget your razor: there are none where we are going."

"No razors? Are they civilized or not?"

"They are, Mike. They just happen to have no body hair whatsoever. Go to your apartment. I will join you there with the crate."

"Why not roll it right now to my apartment?"

Nancy patiently shook her head.

"Someone could see me. I can't risk that now. I will jump spacetime with the crate from here to your apartment. See you there."

After saying those words, Nancy disappeared in a flash of white light, making Mike nearly jump out of his skin. The crate was next to disappear.

"Hell! Talk about a spooky trick."

Leaving the apartment and carefully closing the door behind him, Mike went to his own apartment, only to find Nancy and the crate waiting for him in the middle of his lounge. She gave him a disarming smile.

"You better get used to it, Mike: you will soon be doing the same all the time."

"Gee, that could make life interesting."

"Indeed! Let's pack quickly. After that, we will drive my Mitsubishi Outlander away and pick up my computer equipment at my old office."

"But... that office must be the most closely guarded one in England. How will you get inside without being seen?"

"The same way I entered your apartment, of course."

"Of course. Silly me!"

Something then came back to Mike's mind.

“We are going to break Ingrid out of the Tower of London, I hope?”

“She’s in my program for the night, Mike. I love that girl too much to leave her behind like this. Come on, we have a lot to do.”

00:18 (GMT)

Wednesday, July 2, 1941 ‘B’

Second floor cells, Beauchamp Tower

Tower of London, England

Ingrid Weiss woke up abruptly when a hand covered her mouth. Thinking that a British soldier wanted to rape her, the young German tried to pull the hand away but without success. The dark shape hovering over her in the dark cell then bent down and whispered.

“Calm down, Ingrid. It’s me, Nancy.”

For a moment, Ingrid didn’t move or speak, stunned at hearing a voice she had despaired of ever hearing again. Nancy then hugged her, with Ingrid returning her embrace.

“Thank god, Nancy, I thought that I had lost you for good. How did you get here?”

“It’s a long story. The British don’t know that I am here either. In fact, I am now a traitor to them.”

“A traitor? Are they dumb or crazy? They owe you most of their victories in this war!”

“I know, but politics can be dirty business. In what shape are you?”

“Apart of smelling from not washing for four days, I am in fair shape. How are we getting out of here?”

“By jumping space-time, the same way I was brought here from the future. Ingrid, what I am going to say is very important. I am ready to bring you to the far future with Mike, but you will have to forget this time period, maybe for good. Once in the future, there is no turning back. Also, a friend from the future is hoping to create with me an agency charged with regulating and controlling time travel. I am looking for good people to help me in that job if that idea materializes. Interested?”

“Hell, you bet I am!” Replied Ingrid enthusiastically. Her smile faded when she thought about her comrades. “Er, what about my friends? Susanna, Frida and Johanna

are in other cells on this floor, serving two weeks of solitary confinement for helping me resist Hanna's arrest."

Her eyes were now accustomed enough to the cell's darkness to see a smile appear on Nancy's face.

"I know about them. I plan to ask them if they are interested as well to go to the future."

"You are? Nancy, you are so sweet."

"Thanks! Get up and hug me: we will go see them now."

"But, how?"

"Don't worry: we are going to jump space-time directly to the other cells. Hold on to me."

Ingrid obeyed her and tightly hugged Nancy, passing her arms around her. Then, a flash of white light briefly enveloped them. When Ingrid could clearly see again, she found herself standing with Nancy near the bars of Susanna Berghof's cell. She then realized that they were inside the cell, not outside.

"Wow! This is fantastic."

"Tell me about it later, Ingrid. Now, I need you to keep an eye and ear out for British guards while I speak to Susanna."

"You can count on me, Nancy."

Going to the cell's door, Ingrid glued herself to the bars, looking and listening. Hearing nothing, she tried to see Frida Winterer, who was in the cell opposite and to the left of Susanna's cell. Moving to the left front corner of the cell, Ingrid managed to see Frida's feet, with the rest of her body hidden by the stone partition wall. The young blonde was asleep on her cot, which lay in a far corner of her cell. Hoping to wake her up, Ingrid called to her in a low voice.

"Frida! Hey, Frida!"

Her friend simply turned on her cot, still asleep. Swearing to herself with impatience, Ingrid called again, a bit louder.

"Frida! Frida, wake up!"

Before she could call again, a hand covered firmly her mouth from behind. She was then turned around to face a clearly displeased Nancy.

"Do you really want to attract a guard here? Keep it down!" Whispered Nancy before taking her hand off Ingrid's mouth. The girl reddened with embarrassment at her foolishness.

“Sorry, Nancy. I only wanted to get Frida ready to leave.”

The sound of footsteps coming from the staircase of the tower then made Nancy swear quietly.

“Damn! Someone is coming. Go hide under Susanna’s bunk, quickly!”

Ingrid did so, while Susanna Berghof pretended to go back to sleep. They nearly shouted in surprise when Nancy disappeared from the cell in a brief flash but managed to stay quiet and lay still as a young British soldier emerged from the staircase, looking sharply around and with his rifle at the ready. The soldier pointed a lit flashlight at Susanna, then around the other cells on the floor, trying to find a possible intruder. A dark shape suddenly crept silently behind the British, delivering a sharp blow to his neck that sent the soldier sprawling on the floor. Taking out of one of her cargo pockets a roll of duct tape, Nancy quickly tied the hands and feet of the British, finishing by covering his mouth as well. Grabbing the keys hanging from the soldier’s belt, Nancy quickly unlocked the cell’s door, then went to Frida’s and Johanna’s cells, unlocking them as well and waking up the two young German girls. Both, like Susanna and Ingrid, took only a minute before agreeing to join Nancy in the future. That made Nancy smile with satisfaction.

“Excellent! We will now go discreetly to Gaoler’s House to pick up your things and the other girls. Those who won’t be interested to come live in the future will be dropped back in Berlin.”

“But, the British will consider you a traitor for that.” Said Susanna, shocked. Nancy nodded her head slowly.

“I know and I don’t care. The British already tried to kill me, sacrificing hundred of their own men and thousands of German civilians by bombing Colditz Castle to a pile of burning rubble, all that simply to prevent me from disclosing my secrets to the Germans. Then, they took prisoner a scientist from the future who came to return me to my time. I am through with these British.”

She then handed to each of the four Germans a small cylindrical object.

“Hang on tight to these and don’t drop them: these are transit probes that will transport you on short distances through time and space. They are remotely controlled from a ship presently above London and will bring you to Gaoler’s House. Beware: you will reappear a few inches above the floor, so that you don’t run the risk of having your feet meld with it. Be ready to absorb the short fall. Once in Gaoler’s House, keep quiet and go pack your things quickly.”

“Could we have a quick shower and change?” Asked timidly Johanna Fink. “We stink!”

“Go ahead, but make it real quick. I don’t want to have to start a fight with the British here because we were discovered. Get ready and hold your transit probe against your chest.”

Nancy then spoke apparently to herself.

“Mona, four to transport to the ground level hall of Gaoler’s House, now!”

“Who is that Mo...”

Before Ingrid could finish, she disappeared in a flash of white light. Her three friends followed in quick succession. Nancy activated her own time distorter, which was hooked to her belt, and joined them in Gaoler’s House. The four Germans were understandably excited by their short trip and had to be reminded to keep quiet.

“Remember what I told you. Make it quick. If you change, make sure to pack your Luftwaffe uniforms: we may need them in the future so that you could help save a few more Germans. Now, go!”

As the four young women went to their rooms, Nancy started waking up one by one the occupants of Gaoler’s House, quickly explaining to them what was happening and telling them to dress and pack. Only the ones she felt suitable were offered a chance to go to the future. The ones deemed by her to be too sympathetic to the Nazi cause were told only that they would go to Berlin.

Thirty minutes later, she had 22 German women with their bags facing her in the ground level hall.

“Alright, ladies, those I will name will assemble to my right, to be transported to the future. Ingrid Weiss! Susanna Berghof! Frida Winterer! Johanna Fink! Hanna Reitsch! Anna Hauser! Bertha Reinholdt! Martha Pfalz! Helena Groth! Eva Dittmar! Gertrud Schwarz! Anabel Kleinburger and Ruth Brandhauer! The ones I didn’t name will be transported to Berlin.”

Führerin Greta Manheim looked with dismay and growing anger at the thirteen Germans now lined up besides Nancy.

“What do you think you are doing? You are abandoning your fatherland in its time of greatest need, so that you could have some fancy new life in the future?”

“Keep it up and I will leave you here by yourself, Führerin Manheim.” Snapped back Nancy. “Those girls are going to be much more useful to humanity as a whole working for me in the future than fighting a lost war.”

“Who said that Germany has lost the war?” Replied Manheim.

“History said it, twice! In my timeline, Germany lost the war in 1945. In this timeline, it will lose even faster. Even more, the Nazi cause is not only a lost cause: it is the wrong cause.”

Still staring hard at Manheim, Nancy spoke apparently to herself.

“Mona, start sending back the group for Berlin.”

A few seconds later, a small object appeared in front of Greta Manheim and glued itself to her belly. Before she could react to it, she floated off the floor, then disappeared in a flash of white light. The other nine German women slated for Berlin disappeared in a similar fashion within a minute, leaving their comrades to gawk in disbelief.

“Are they really in Berlin now?” Asked Martha Pfalz, getting a nod from Nancy.

“They are actually in the Luftwaffe Headquarters in Berlin. Those objects were transit probes, able to transport a person anywhere in the World and over 400 years to the past or future. This time, the trips were strictly spatial, like the ones you will take to join our ship over London. I will ask you to grab your bags and put it the transit crate that will appear behind you. Another crate will take care of the bags of your comrades in Berlin.”

As she said that, two large metallic crates appeared in the hall. Letting the overwhelmed Germans load their bags in their assigned crate, Nancy quickly loaded the bags left behind by the Germans now in Berlin in the other crate. Once that was done, she called up Mona Zirel again to tell her to send away the crate destined for Berlin and to start ferrying the Germans remaining in Gaoler’s House up to the ship. Nancy waited until she was left alone, then jumped space-time to Berlin, appearing there only long enough to make sure that the crate now sitting inside an empty lounge of the Luftwaffe headquarters had been emptied of its baggage by the auxiliaries present. Seeing that the crate was empty, she sent it back to the time ship, then faced the nine German women who were still under the shock of experiencing their first space-time trip.

“This is where we have to say goodbye, ladies. I sincerely hope that you will be able to survive this war and the harsh peace that will follow it. Gruppenführerin Hartmann, tell your superiors once I’m gone that the girls that followed me to the future will be alright and that I am now neutral in this conflict.”

"I will pass your words, Brigadier. Thank you for your kindness and for your compassion. Adopting Ingrid was a marvelous gesture on your part. May you live happily with her in the future."

Nancy simply smiled, then activated her time distorter, jumping to the time ship still hovering above London. She smiled at seeing Ingrid hugging happily Mike Crawford. As for the other Germans, they were gawking at the giant Mona Zirel, who was sitting at the control station installed in the small cargo bay of the time ship, which was now quite crowded. Nancy clapped her hands repeatedly to attract everybody's attention.

"Ladies, I would like now to present to you two good men that I went to save first, since they were in danger of being executed."

Two young men, one dressed in a battered gray suit and another wearing a hospital pajama, got up from their jump seats. They bowed their heads in turn as Nancy presented them.

"This is Heinrik Braun and Klaus Manheim, ladies. Both are from the Abwehr." The thirteen German women and two German men eyed each other in silence for a few seconds, then exchanged handshakes and greetings. Frida Winterer kept close to Heinrik Braun, attracted to the fit, handsome man. Heinrik noticed that and smiled to her after the exchange of greetings.

"Your name is Frida, if I remember well."

"Correct! You have a good memory... Heinrik. So, what kind of trouble were you in when Nancy picked you up?"

Braun made a wry smile.

"Big trouble! The Gestapo had arrested me on charges of negligence and complicity after a woman from the future detained in Berlin escaped from my custody. I was about to be executed."

"A woman from the future? In Berlin?"

"Yes. Her name is Doctor Farah Tolkonen. She came to 1941, trying to return Nancy to her proper time, but was captured and briefly held. Doctor Tolkonen then escaped to England thanks to a device of hers and I got the blame for her escape. Nancy thought that I didn't deserve my faith."

Frida digested that for a few seconds, then pointed at the other man, who was conversing with Ingrid Weiss and Susanna Berghof.

"What about him?"

“Klaus? Actually, I knew him from before the war: we were in the same Abwehr class for new agents. He was sent in September of last year in London, to assassinate Nancy. He lost a gunfight against her and ended up in hospital, awaiting execution at the hands of the British.”

“Then, why the hell did Nancy save him?”

Manheim heard her and looked down somberly at Frida.

“Because I was secretly in love with her, which was one of the reasons I failed to kill her: I hesitated when time came to shoot her. She saw that and tried to spare me the death penalty. When the British refused to show mercy, she came one night to my hospital room and brought me on this ship.”

“Wow! Nancy will never stop to amaze me.”

Something then occurred to Frida.

“Wait! You said that you were in hospital, yet you look perfectly healthy.”

“Now, yes. An hour ago, I sported a big cast, along with a large hole in my right shoulder. Nancy healed me.”

“She healed you? I don’t understand.”

“That is understandable: I myself couldn’t believe my eyes when she healed me in seconds just by touching me with her hands.”

All the German women who heard that, including Ingrid Weiss, then snapped their heads towards Nancy, who shrugged.

“Sorry, but I had no time to tell you about that.”

“Can’t I know what my stepmother is now?” Objected Ingrid. Nancy looked gently at her.

“You will soon know everything about me. I will just say that, a few days ago, an envoy sent by a superior being healed the crippling wounds I sustained from the tortures the Gestapo inflicted on me. He also gave me a few powers, like that of touch healing. The same being opened the memories of our past incarnations to you and me, Ingrid.”

“Are you talking about the same concept that the Hindus believe into?” Asked Susanna Berghof.

“The same. I can remember now my lives for the last nine thousand years, both as a man and as a woman. Well, now that we have you, let’s jump to the future. Mona, tell Maran that he can jump now.”

“Got it!”

A short moment later, a flash of white light suddenly bathed briefly the cabin, making them look up in confusion.

“What was that?” Asked nervously Johanna Fink. Susanna Berghof answered her calmly.

“I think that we just traveled through time. There was the same kind of light flash when Nancy sent the others to Berlin and when those baggage crates appeared.”

“Good thinking, Susanna.” Said Eva Dittmar, meaning it. Susanna shrugged it off.

“Hey, I am a blonde but I’m not dumb.”

That exchange made Nancy laugh briefly. She then raised her voice to get the attention of the others in the cargo bay.

“Ladies and gentlemen, there are still a few things I need to do in this year, then we will all jump to the year 3384, where you will start brand new lives. If the project me and Doctor Farah Tolkonen are pushing for is approved by the authorities of the Global Council, the World government in the 34th Century, then you will be eligible to volunteer for it and thus work under me. If not, you will still be able to start new lives in a peaceful, highly advanced society. Please, take place in the seats along the walls and make yourselves comfortable while me, Mona and Maran do our things. Thank you!”

10:03 (Berlin Time)

Abwehr headquarters

Berlin, Germany

Admiral Canaris was still looking at the report about the Luftwaffe helperinen that had appeared early this morning in Berlin when his telephone rang. The old Kriegsmarine officer took his time to answer, grabbing the receiver after the third ring.

“Admiral Canaris.”

“Canaris,” nearly shouted a furious voice at the other end of the line, “this time you will hang for this!”

“Now, now, my dear Heidrich, on which flimsy pretext do you want my head now?”

“Pretext? You broke your damn agent out of my jail!”

“You mean agent Heinrich Braun, your scapegoat for Doctor Tolkonen’s escape from Tempelhof?”

"He was no scapegoat, Canaris. By his incompetence, he let a priceless prisoner escape. He deserved his death sentence. Where have you sent him?"

"You better ask that question to Die Wolfin, Heidrich, not to me."

"What do you mean?" Said the SS man, his voice toning down somewhat.

"What I mean is that Brigadier Laplante is no longer simply Brigadier Laplante: she is now some kind of supernatural being with incredible powers. Furthermore, she escaped by stealing an aircraft last night and I suspect that she went to England from here."

"What is this hogwash? How could Laplante escape Colditz and then steal an aircraft?"

"First, she didn't escape from Colditz: she was transferred to Berlin yesterday afternoon with the approval of the Fuhrer himself, so that her healing powers could be used to treat our own wounded. Weren't you informed?"

Canaris enjoyed asking that last question, which made Heidrich look like an incompetent and a fool. He should have known about all this, what with all the intelligence and security services at his disposal. The fact was that the handsome SS officer spent too much of his time chasing women instead of doing his work. That actually had been the reason he had been sacked from the Kriegsmarine years ago. Heidrich's voice lowered even further, contained anger clear in it.

"What does that have to do with your escaped agent?"

"A lot, since she has started traveling through time again. She broke free our Luftwaffe helperinen held in the Tower of London early this morning, then sent part of them to the Luftwaffe headquarters in Berlin, using some kind of time travel technique. The rest of our helperinen followed Laplante to the future. She probably snatched my agent to bring him as well to the future. She obviously can come and go as she wishes now, which should be of special concern to you."

"How so?" Said Heidrich, sounding less than reassured.

"Because I believe that she hates your guts. With her time travel abilities, what can stop her from appearing in your room one night to slice your throat open, my dear Heidrich?"

The receiver at the other end of the line was then slammed down hard. Canaris laughed hard at the effect of his joke: he sincerely hoped that this SS monster would spend many sleepless nights from now on. His laughter strangled abruptly when a female voice came from behind his chair.

“An excellent idea, Admiral. I will consider it seriously.”

Canaris swiveled his chair around and found himself facing a Nancy Laplante grinning like a demon while leaning casually against the wall. She had weapons at her belt but had not drawn any of them, instead crossing her arms as she smiled down at him.

“Sorry to scare you like this, my dear Admiral. By the way, you have nothing to fear from me: you did save my life and that of my friend Farah after all.”

“Then, why are you here, Brigadier?”

“Call me simply Nancy, Admiral: I do not work for the British anymore. The reason I am here is simply to recuperate my Glock 26 pistol that was left behind in Berlin over five days ago. I gather that you have it.”

“I do, but not in this office. I can call and have it brought in, though.”

“That would be much appreciated, Admiral.”

Cautiously grabbing his telephone again, Canaris dialed the number of the Abwehr’s weapons section.

“Hello, Kurtz? This is Admiral Canaris. I will need you to bring me immediately that small pistol that belonged to Brigadier Laplante... Yes, I am in my office... Thank you, Kurtz.”

Looking back at Nancy as he put down his telephone, Canaris eyed her uniform and helmet quickly.

“It seems that you have found a new employer, Miss Laplante, or do you prefer to use Misses Crawford as a name?”

“Miss Laplante will do. My husband is not sticky about that and women routinely use their maiden names in Quebec in my time. As for my new employer, the Global Council of 3384 is definitely an equal opportunity society. Talking of employers, yours could decide to do away with you if you are not careful, Admiral. Political intrigues will bring you nothing but death, believe me. In my timeline, your counterpart ended up at the end of a rope.”

Canaris then grew somber indeed: he knew perfectly well what Nancy was alluding to. He, along with a number of other high-ranking officers, had been secretly plotting for the downfall of Adolf Hitler and of his Nazis, to stop this crazy war before Germany was totally destroyed.

“In view of your historical hindsight, would you have some advice to give to me, then?”

Nancy looked down at him with what seemed like genuine concern.

"I do! Stop all your political activities and concentrate on doing your present job as honestly as you can while hoping for the best in the future. Tell your friends to do the same, unless they want to end up the same way I was when you found me in that Gestapo center. You and them will be needed to rebuild Germany after this war. Promise me that you will do that, please."

Shaken by her conviction and concern, Canaris replied softly while bowing his head.

"I promise, miss. Thanks for caring about an old man like me. About that Gestapo center..."

Canaris then rose from his chair and went to a nearby filing cabinet. Opening the lower drawer, he took out with some effort five big rolls of films in their round steel boxes and gave them to Nancy, who looked at them blankly.

"What are those?"

"The films taken by the Gestapo during your interrogations. They are yours to do as you wish with them. By the way, I reviewed them, even though they made me sick. You are one very brave woman, Miss Laplante."

Nancy, her face pale now, could only look at Canaris while tears appeared in her eyes.

"Do you know how hard I have been trying to forget that episode of my life, hoping that some Nazi official was not actually enjoying viewing those damn films?"

"Nobody else saw those, miss. I can swear to that."

Nancy then stepped forward and kissed the old admiral on the forehead.

"Thank you, Admiral. That means a lot to me. May I ask you something else?"

"Go ahead, miss."

"Who betrayed my presence in England so quickly in 1940, Admiral?"

Canaris tensed up but kept a straight face. Sean Brady was his most valuable agent in England right now and he was not about to give away his identity, even to an apparent angel.

"You know that I can't answer that question, miss."

She smiled down to him and nodded her head.

"I know, but I had to try. That person caused me no end of grief."

Someone then knocked on the door of the office. Nancy glanced quickly at the door, then back at Canaris.

"That must be your man, bringing my pistol. I will be back shortly."

She then disappeared with the rolls of films. Canaris was stunned speechless for a moment before calling to his visitor.

“Enter!”

A clerk from the weapons section then entered, a gun belt in his hands. After saluting Canaris, he walked to the Admiral's desk and put the belt down on it. Canaris looked briefly at the pistol and spare magazines hanging from the belt, then dismissed the clerk with a thank you. Nancy reappeared mere seconds after the door of the office closed, this time in front of the desk. The rolls of films were not in her arms anymore. She flashed a big smile to Canaris as she picked up the gun belt.

“Thank you very much, Admiral. You were very helpful.”

“Miss, could I ask why you came to Berlin just for a simple pistol? This sounds a bit trivial as a reason for your visit.”

“It is not that trivial to me, Admiral.” She explained calmly. “While the money value of my pistol is not important to me, it is still a registered firearm. Explaining to the police in 2012 how I lost it could have been embarrassing.”

“So, you are going back to live in the year 2012, miss?”

“There and in the 34th century. Let's say that I intend to live a dual life from now on.”

Canaris nodded in comprehension, then looked up with pleading eyes.

“Before you go, miss, please tell me: did you see God when you were transformed?”

Nancy's face sobered up as she reminisced about her experience.

“All I can say is that I met the creator of all the human spirits that ever existed. It is a being of infinite wisdom and vast power, but it is not human, nor is it God, as it did not create the universe. In fact, it is not even a material being, although part or all of it could take any shape it wished. Above all, it is a being of tolerance and kindness. Those who kill or persecute others in the name of religion displease The One greatly. It transformed me so that I could act in its name, promote its wishes and help the ones in need.”

“Then, you could help end this war?” Said Canaris, hopeful. Nancy shook her head sadly.

“The One is wise, but it is also realistic. War has been a constant of humanity for all of history, a fact that is not about to change quickly. I can only help in small ways, while humanity slowly improves itself over the millennias. If I ever stop this war, it will be as a leader of the Time Patrol, not as The Hand of The One. Do not despair, though, Admiral: even nightmares have an end. Nearly everything has an end.”

On those words, she disappeared in a flash of light, leaving Canaris to ponder their meaning.

11:17 (GMT)

Prime Minister's office

Home Office building, London

England

Winston Churchill, sitting behind his work desk, looked up from the report handed to him by General Menzies, clearly displeased by what he had just read. Standing in front of his desk with Menzies were General Ismay and Commander Stilwell.

"What was Brigadier Harker thinking, holding and interrogating a person from the future like this for two days without me being even aware that this person was in London? In fact, what were you thinking, General? Why wasn't I warned earlier?" Menzies shifted uncomfortably on his feet. He himself had been embarrassed and angered by the rather late admissions from Harker.

"Harker wanted to secure her time machine first, sir. He told me about all this only late on the second day, just before I called you about this."

"And since when does Brigadier Harker has the authority to arrest such important people without telling anyone else about it?"

"I would agree that he showed poor judgment in this case, sir, but the fact is that Laplante still shot Harker without hesitation and attacked two M.I.5 agents to help that giant woman escape."

"Mister Prime Minister," cut in Peter Stilwell, "Nancy Laplante must have had a good reason to act like she did. In view of what she recently endured at the hands of the Gestapo, I suspect that the M.I.5 was brutalizing, maybe even torturing that giant, the way they had done with the German test pilot, Hanna Reitsch. Seeing others suffer would have been enough of a provocation for her."

"That is not a justification for attacking British agents." Replied heatedly Menzies. "Added to the fact that she made those German women escape from the Tower of London, this confirms in my eyes that Brigadier Laplante is a traitor. Look at the way she emptied the Athena Section of its computer equipment last night. Maybe she wasn't even tortured by the Gestapo after all. How else would you explain the fact that she looked perfectly healthy and fit when she broke that giant out of M.I.5 headquarters?"

"We don't know what future technology can do, General. She may have spent months recovering in some future century before coming back in time to 1941. As for attacking British agents, why are you so upset about that? You are the one who pushed for that bomber raid that destroyed Colditz, so that Nancy Laplante would be killed. Killing her didn't bother you, sir."

"Gentlemen!" Intervened Churchill. "This is no time to squabble between ourselves. Grave and significant events occurred in the last few days and we unfortunately have very few hard facts to go by. We have a number of important questions to answer, starting with the security of the ULTRA program. Was it compromised or not by Brigadier Laplante?"

"I would answer yes to that, sir." Said Menzies. Stilwell was about to reply to that when his eyes popped open as he stared past the Prime Minister. Menzies and Ismay also stared in disbelief as Churchill swiveled his chair around, finding himself facing Nancy Laplante. The Canadian, wearing a complicated helmet and a sort of gray uniform, looked bitter and angry.

"How the hell could any of you think of me as a traitor, after all I did for you in this war? You disappoint me, gentlemen."

Menzies reached for his holstered service revolver, panic on his face, but Nancy easily beat him to the draw, taking out her stun pistol and shooting him squarely in the chest. The thin beam of yellow light, accompanied only by a faint buzzing noise, made Menzies jerk backward before he collapsed on the carpet, unconscious. Nancy looked with contempt at him as Ismay kneeled down to check him out.

"Don't worry about him, General: he is only knocked out for about an hour and my weapon leaves no residual effect, apart for a temporary headache. As I was saying, I am disappointed... and pissed! After all I did for England, you tried to kill me, then brutalized my friends. Now, you are ready to brand me a traitor on the strength of a few innuendoes."

"Attacking British agents and breaking free German prisoners are more than just innuendoes, Nancy." Said severely Churchill. "Now, be reasonable and give me your weapon and I promise you that you will be treated fairly and will be able to defend your name."

Nancy shook her head, clearly unrepentant.

"No, sir! I came here to say goodbye and to tell you that I am from now on strictly neutral in this war. I also wanted to return this to you."

Nancy took from a large pocket her British military medals, which included her Victoria Cross with bar, and threw them on Churchill's desk. As the British were staring at them, a box appeared over the desk before falling down the few inches to the desktop.

"You can tell General Menzies that, if he doubts the fact that I was tortured, he can review the films in this box. The Gestapo took them during my interrogations. Maybe he will get his rocks off by watching me naked while they flog and brand me."

She then looked with fondness at Peter Stilwell.

"Tell the guys and Jennifer at the Athena Section that I love them very much. It was a pleasure to work with them. Good luck to you in this war, Peter."

"Nancy..." started to say Stilwell. However, the Canadian disappeared before he could go on. The British stared for a long time at the spot where she had been before Churchill shook himself back to reality.

"Damn! What a waste."

"What shall we do now, sir?" Asked Ismay, bringing a grimace on Churchill's face.

"There are too many sensitive things involved in this affair. The morale of our troops would also suffer greatly if this story was to break out. General, Brigadier Laplante is to be officially declared dead, killed by the Germans. I want all the witnesses to her appearances in England in the last two days to be sworn to secrecy. For the record, Brigadier Laplante died a hero."

"What about that giant that was held by M.I.5, sir?"

"She never existed. Anyone who will break the silence on all this will be prosecuted for divulging Most Secret level information. Make sure that everybody understands that, General."

Looking at the box on his desk, Churchill got up from his chair and took a round film container out of the box. A sticker with German words and a set of times written on it was glued to the side of the container.

"General Ismay, when General Menzies wakes up, have him review those films with you. Look at all the films in their totality, then report to me. If Laplante was indeed tortured, I want it to be established as official fact, along with whether she gave up information or not. It may also be a good therapy for General Menzies, to cure him from his distrust of her."

"Yes, sir!" Replied weakly Ismay, already feeling sick at the idea of what those films would show him.

09:51 (Western Europe Time)
Friday, August 14, 3384 'A'
High Council Chamber
Global Council government complex
Zurich, Western Europe Region

The High Council Chamber impressed Nancy by its sobriety and by its eminently practical arrangements. A large round table open at one end to let staffers circulate in the middle was used by the global administrators when in session, while a straight table sat near the larger table's opening to accommodate visiting witnesses and experts. The whole space was in turn enclosed inside a transparent, sound-proof shell itself surrounded by multiple rows of padded seats for members of the public that wished to view the sessions. While the public could easily follow the debates inside the shell via loudspeakers and giant viewing screens, the sound-proof shell in turn prevented would-be agitators from disrupting the sessions. The whole was in turn retransmitted worldwide via the various news agencies of the planet and even beamed out to the human colonies around the Solar System. Nancy told herself that it would be difficult indeed to imagine a more open political process than this. On their arrival in the complex, an assistant of Boran Kern had guided Farah and Nancy to a small waiting lounge adjacent to the chamber, where a large wall viewing screen allowed them to follow the High Council's debates in comfort while waiting their turn to appear before the global administrators. Some politicians, special interests representatives and expert witnesses were already waiting in the lounge for their turn to come when the two women walked in. All eyes immediately concentrated on Nancy, who was wearing one of her new holographic silk dresses. That prompted her to whisper to Farah as they went to an empty sofa.

"Imagine that you would get this kind of reaction in the past, then think that, in most time periods, different often equated to suspicious or possibly hostile."

"I see what you mean, Nancy. Fortunately, here in the society of the Global Council, violence and aggression are rare."

As Farah sat, Nancy saw a table supporting an assortment of drinks and a cold buffet. She went to pour herself a glass of apple juice, then returned to sit with Farah, watching the discussions via the wall viewing screen.

The same young political assistant came back to them forty minutes later, bowing politely to them.

"If you may follow me, ladies, the discussion about the creation of a time agency will start in a few minutes."

The two women got up from their sofa and followed the assistant out of the waiting lounge and in the High Council Chamber proper. They did their best to hide their nervousity as they sat behind the table reserved to witnesses. Facing them now were twelve members of the High Council, including Boran Kern, that were physically present. Added to that were ten more members whose holographic images occupied seats at the round table. Those images were actually so realistic that Nancy thought at first that they were real persons. In turn, it seemed that these members participating via holographic link could see and hear as if they were in the chamber, thanks to batteries of cameras and microphones. All the 22 members of the High Council, save for Boran Kern, were now looking with intense curiosity at Nancy, as did the spectators and reporters present around the transparent dome covering the chamber. However, two members of the High Council also looked at Nancy with suspicion. Boran Kern then banged three times his mallet on the table.

"The High Council will now review the subjects under 'New Business'. The first item of new business is a proposal for the creation of a new government agency charged with controlling and regulating time travel and also with effecting on the spot research in the past in order to rebuild our historical archives and collect specimens of now extinct animal and plant life. As the members of the High Council can see by the presence here today of Miss Nancy Laplante, the concept of time travel has now become a reality. Doctor Farah Tolkonen, the autor of the proposition we are to discuss, will now give us a short presentation on the subject. Doctor Tolkonen..."

Having previously put a data chip in the computer reader in front of her, Farah got up and bowed politely to the High Council members, then pushed a button on her computer. The giant viewing screen behind and above her lit up, showing the pictures of two men of the Global Council.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the High Council, good morning. Ten months ago, two high-level physicists, Pran Osef and Telvi Ran, disappeared from their laboratory on the campus of New Lake City University. Shortly afterwards, our universe was shaken by a series of space-time distortion waves. After being put in charge by the Global Science

Administrator of finding the cause of these distortion waves, I found out that Ran and Osef had been conducting illegal research on time travel and had managed to build a small time ship, in which they disappeared. Unfortunately, they had brought with them the detailed plans of their ship and of its key components, including what I call a time distorter. Reinventing and then building such a time distorter took me months, time during which it became evident to me that a catastrophic event in our past was responsible for the space-time distortion waves. Those distortions grew until the continuum itself was ripped in two, creating a new timeline, named by me 'Timeline 'B'', parallel to our own original Timeline 'A'. Visions of this parallel universe during the worst distortions showed me a modified copy of our own civilization, including a double of myself that I saw. My double also saw me, which demonstrates that some interactions between our two timelines are possible. That parallel timeline is however quite different from ours, if I could judge from my visions. For one thing, it seemed to be a militarist world, where weapons are common. Armed with this information and with a few scientific clues, I built with the help of two young assistants a series of automated reconnaissance probes able to travel through space-time. With those probes, I was finally able to find the exact cause of those space-time distortion waves: an illegal travel to the past by Telvi Ran and Pran Osef. The major factor in causing so much damage to the space-time continuum was the fact that our two scientists had kidnapped a person from the 21st Century against her will, to then abandon her in the middle of a terrible war in 1940. That person was Nancy Laplante, who is now sitting to my right. Nancy?"

Nancy got up as Farah sat down and made a map of Great Britain appear on the giant screen behind them, with a red dot superimposed on Northolt. She saluted the members of the High Council with a short bow, then spoke in a strong but calm voice.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the High Council, I come from the year 2012 and lived in the area of Montreal, in Canada. Then, I had two professional occupations: one as a reporter specializing in the coverage and analysis of armed conflicts; the other as a part-time reserve officer in the Canadian Armed Forces. In my time, nearly all the states and nations on Earth possessed armed forces and wars were unfortunately too common. On its part, Canada was a democratic country with a liberal tradition and it used often its armed forces in peacekeeping missions meant to circumvent or limit wars. Without really knowing the true motives for my kidnapping, I believe that my expertise in military affairs, including military history, designated me to the attention of your two scientists,

Ran and Osef. Using a time ship, they knocked me unconscious as I was arriving at my lakeside cottage near Montreal for a period of vacation. I had at that time my personal vehicle and all my reporting equipment, along with much of my military kit. Your scientists then transported me in my car to a location near London, Great Britain, in the year 1940. When I regained consciousness, I was disoriented at first and didn't know where I was. I then certainly didn't know yet that I had traveled to the past. When I realized that I was in 1940 England, I was at first unsure what to do. England was at the time at war and its situation was quite desperate, being left alone to fend the attacks of the German military machine. I understood easily enough that helping the British in that war could change history, but I also faced the possibilities of either being accused by the British of being a German spy, in which case I would have been executed, or of being thrown for the rest of my life in a mental asylum. In both cases, the British would have had then full access to my equipment and historical data. I finally decided to help the British, with the goal of shortening that war as much as possible and thus saving millions of lives. Know that, in conventional history, the Second World War, which was fought from 1939 to 1945, cost the lives of over 57 million people, the large majority of them being innocent civilians."

Horrified exclamations went around the High Council table, while the crowd of spectators, which Nancy could not hear, appeared shocked by her last sentence. One of the members of the High Council, a thin man with a severe expression, stared coldly at her.

"And you willingly participated in such a butchery, Miss Laplante?"

Nancy stared back at him, making him lower his eyes after a second.

"Mister, know that playing the lamb when you are surrounded by wolves will bring you only one thing: you end up being eaten alive. I chose the option that would help save the most lives and did my best to convince the British to avoid hitting innocent civilians. I will not hide the fact that I killed during that war, many times in fact, but I was a soldier and only killed other soldiers that were armed and trying to kill me in turn."

"And how many persons did you kill in this war, miss?"

"Directly, I killed or gravely wounded over 120 enemy soldiers in battle. Indirectly, my information helped kill a few thousands more."

As most of the High Council members and spectators reacted with revulsion, Farah whispered in Nancy's ear.

"The man you are talking with is the Global Administrator for Security, Golen Bartok. You could say that he is the chief policeman in the Solar System."

"I see! Thanks, Farah."

The said Bartok pushed a button on his computer keyboard, replacing the map of Great Britain on the giant screen by a scene familiar to Nancy. Bartok then froze the recording immediately and spoke to the other members of the High Council.

"Fellow members of the High Council, I would like to show you what the numbers quoted by Miss Laplante truly mean. I must warn you that what you will see is extremely graphic and violent."

Bartok then played the recording taken by one of Farah's probes during the desperate battle in the Hamburg submarine yard between Nancy's unit and a regiment of SS troops. The camera was centered on Nancy and showed her as she fought furiously with both bayonet and pistol, killing dozens of Waffen-SS soldiers while sustaining a number of wounds herself. She was finally shown at the end of battle, on her knees, wounded and surrounded by dozens of bodies. Most of the members of the High Council now looked at Nancy as if she was a monster, while two members seemed ready to run away from her. Farah swore to herself while throwing a furious look at Daran Mien: she had no doubt on who had provided that recording to Golen Bartok. Rising from her seat, she addressed Boran Kern, who himself seemed shaken.

"Grand Administrator Kern, I must protest the totally out of context use of this piece of recording. My friend did not hide the fact that she was a soldier and that she killed during that war. That battle we just saw was fought strictly between armed soldiers and, as you could see, Nancy and her soldiers were severely outnumbered by their enemies. I agree that war is a horrible thing, but that battle doesn't make a criminal of my friend, far from it. Nancy Laplante showed many times her kindness and compassion during that war, even adopting secretly an German teenage girl orphaned by the war. Painting her simply as a mass killer would be profoundly unjust."

"Doctor Tolkonen, be assured that we will reserve our judgment until all the facts have been presented. Miss Laplante, you may continue your presentation."

"Thank you, Grand Administrator Kern." Said Nancy, who was still standing. "Ladies and gentlemen of the High Council, to continue at the point where Mister Bartok interrupted me, I helped during nearly a year the British to counter the invasion projects of the Germans, who were trying to complete their takeover of Europe. I also participated directly in a number of raids and battles, including a raid during which I

captured a young German auxiliary named Ingrid Weiss. I then brought her and six of her comrades to an old fortress in London where they were interned as prisoners of war. I became the morale officer for these young women and protected their rights, visiting them often. That is where I learned to love Ingrid, who was a war orphan. I eventually adopted secretly Ingrid with the help of my husband, an American officer that I married a month before and who was still neutral in that war.”

“Excuse me, Miss Laplante,” interrupted an old man with wrinkled skin and a dignified look, “but why did you adopt her in secret? Such an act appears to me to be both honorable and laudable.”

“Because, for me, adopting a German during that war would have been considered by the British as an act of fraternization with the enemy, a crime punishable by death at the time. I was in fact risking death by adopting Ingrid, but I never regretted doing it.”

The old man nodded slowly his head.

“I see. My name is Sten Vargas and I am the Global Administrator for Justice. As such, and with many decades of experience, I can say that I am a good judge of characters, Miss Laplante. Know that I believe you to be a good person, despite what was said or shown about you. Please continue your story.”

“Thank you very much, Administrator Vargas.” Said Nancy, smiling to the old man. “Not long after adopting secretly Ingrid, something happened to me, something that changed my life drastically. Basically, I started remembering my past incarnations. For those of you not familiar with the concept of reincarnation, it implies that each human has a spirit inside during his or her life, spirit that leaves the body at death to go inhabit a newborn and start anew the cycle of life. We normally do not remember the past lives of our individual spirit, because the connection between the spirit and the brain is incomplete. However, in my case and that of Ingrid, something completed that connection and we started remembering our past lives simultaneously during the same night. After two months or so, I was able to remember all of my 92 previous lives, spread over a period of 9,000 years, with my first life ever on Earth being that of a Neolithic woman named Nataï, who lived in the ancient city of Jericho around 7,000 B.C.. Furthermore, my souvenirs include the ancient languages I spoke and the skills I practiced. On her part, Ingrid now remembers her 73 past lives, spread over 7,000 years. I know that many of you will think that I am making this up in order to make myself more interesting, but there is more. Much more. A few weeks after the battle

that Mister Bartok showed you, I was captured by the Germans following the accidental crash of the plane I was traveling into. I was then brought to Berlin, the German capital, and was horribly tortured for two days. That was when Doctor Tolkonen appeared in my cell at night, trying to save me and bring me back to my time. Unfortunately, she was captured by the Germans and then tortured with me, until a moderate faction of Germans was able to find us and free us. By then I was in atrocious physical condition, while I was mentally close to go mad from the pain. We were brought to a German hospital, where Doctor Tolkonen did her best with her portable medical kit to heal me. Despite her best efforts, I was still a cripple when I was sent to a military prison in Colditz, to be interned for the duration of the war. During my first night in Colditz, while I lay in bed, helpless, someone appeared to me. That someone was an envoy of the one who had made me recall my past incarnations, a spiritual being of incredible power that I call 'The One' and who many would call 'God'. In only seconds, I was completely healed by The One, apart of gaining a number of supernatural powers, powers that I am still exploring. In exchange, I became a Chosen of The One, tasked with being his intermediary and promoting tolerance, compassion and justice in the World. Again, many of you will think that I am making this up, but I can prove it, and I will."

Nancy then concentrated her eyes on a pitcher of water sitting on the larger table, over twelve meters away from her. Surprised exclamations went around the table when the pitcher rose in the air, then floated sideways to a hover above the empty space at the center of the circle of tables. Still floating, the pitcher soon let out vapors, then the water in it started boiling, causing more exclamations around the table. After a few seconds, the water calmed down, then started freezing. When Nancy finally let go her mental grip on the pitcher, it fell to the ground and broke in pieces, leaving on the floor a big chunk of ice. As the members of the High Council looked at her with disbelief, Nancy rose slowly in the air, levitating to a height of two meters before sending a powerful telepathic message to all around her while keeping her mouth firmly shut.

"You saw some of the things I could do. Know that I am capable of much more. Despite of my powers, you have nothing to fear from me, as I have vowed to use them strictly to promote tolerance, compassion and justice, values that are dear to The One. Use me for the good of Humanity and to relearn history, so that you do not repeat its mistakes. Thank you for having listened to me, ladies and gentlemen."

Nancy then slowly floated down to the ground and sat back. There was a long, ominous silence before a woman of the High Council spoke to her, still appearing shaken.

“Those powers, do anybody else possess them, Miss Laplante?”

“No! I am unique in that respect, to the best of my knowledge. My stepdaughter remembers her incarnations but is not a Chosen. Before someone asks, those powers were also unheard of in the past. As for The One, he has no wish to be worshiped in any way and I have no intentions to play the prophet for him. The best way to please The One is to show tolerance, compassion and kindness towards others.”

“Such conduct would certainly meet with my approval, Miss Laplante.” Said softly Sten Vargas. “Is there something else you would like to say?”

“Definitely! I will now speak out of my experience as a war correspondent and military historian. You may be a pacifist society and abhor weapons but, if you refuse to look at reality and insist on letting time travel unregulated and uncontrolled, you will eventually pay a high price for it and may even see your civilization disappear altogether, rewritten out of history by someone wishing to rebuild the World according to his own personal vision. To effect such control of time travel, you will need brave men and women equipped with the best technology available, including weapons, both portable and shipborne. We do not know what the future of that alternate timeline will be like, but chances are that it will not be as pacifist as your civilization. I am not advocating for you to rearm, far from it. If you decide to create a time regulation agency, then provide it with the tools it will need to do its job and defend itself if faced with armed, hostile time travelers. Anything less would be a copout and a recipe for potential disaster.”

“But, we have no weapons.” Objected a High Council member. Nancy nodded slowly her head in understanding.

“I realize that, miss. However, there is an abundance of weapons available to us...in the past.”

“And what tells us that, once you have with you a bunch of ancestors with weapons, that you will not then take control of our civilization?” Asked harshly Golen Bartok, attracting a dark look from Nancy.

“Always ready to paint ancestors as power-hungry, bloodthirsty barbarians, Mister Bartok? In my time, your attitude would be considered quite racist. Know that, by myself, I could easily take over your civilization. Would I do such a thing? Of course not! Why would I do that anyway? To have more power or money? The only thing I wish for is to live happily with my husband and my stepdaughter, and to help others as much as possible. The Global Council has however to face a few truths. Two of your scientists kidnapped me and marooned me in 1940. Your civilization made possible the

creation of an alternate timeline. Your civilization will now have to face its responsibilities and take the actions needed to regain control of this mess and to prevent an even bigger mess in the future. That is all I had to say for the moment. Thank you for listening to me, ladies and gentlemen of the High Council.”

There was again a long silence around the High Council table, as the members looked at each other, quite shaken by Nancy’s forceful presentation. Boran Kern finally banged his mallet on the table.

“If no one has an objection, I propose that we now vote on the formation of an armed time travel regulatory agency to be called the Time Patrol and that will be directed by Doctor Tolkonen and Miss Laplante... No objections? Then let’s vote!”

As Farah and Nancy watched on nervously, the 22 members of the High Council voted one by one, with Boran Kern voting last. Both women sighed in relief when the final result was twelve ‘yes’ against ten ‘no’. Boran Kern then declared the proposition officially accepted and looked at the Global Administrator of Finances, Pedro Salmash, and at the Global Administrator for Industries, Rina Kappel, who was also Vice-Grand Administrator.

“Now that the formation of the Time Patrol is approved, I will request that Administrator Salmash free initial funds totally one billion solars for the construction or modification of ships and vehicles and for the recruitment, equipment and training of members for the said Time Patrol. I will also ask Administrator Kappel to lend her assistance to Doctor Tolkonen and to consult with her concerning her precise needs in equipment and infrastructures. Doctor Tolkonen, have you chosen a location for the operating base of your Time Patrol?”

“Yes, Grand Administrator! I would like to continue operating from New Lake City, where the time travel project originated from.”

“Very well! In this case, I will let you and Miss Laplante free to start organizing your new agency and to recruit suitable members for it.”

“Thank you, Grand Administrator.” Said simply Farah, rising from her chair with Nancy and bowing to the High Council. The two women then left the chamber, returning to the waiting lounge. There, Farah and Nancy were finally able to express their joy, exchanging triumphal hugs and kisses.

“I can’t wait to tell our people that they will finally be able to start working with us, Farah.”

"Hey, they probably are already celebrating, Nancy. Don't forget that this meeting of the High Council was broadcasted all over the planet."

"Then, counting ourselves, we already have twenty volunteers for our agency here in this century. What we need now is to recruit more members, design or choose our equipment and build our ships. I will also need to find weapons for us in the past, a risky job by itself."

"I am sure that you will be able to handle that part quite well, Nancy. First, though, let's go back to New Lake City, so that we can celebrate with our people."

"I won't say no to that, Farah. This is possibly one of the most important days of my life...and of the lives of our volunteers."

08:41 (GMT)

Friday, July 4, 1941 'B'

Athena Section, Home Office building

London, England

Anger and bitterness filled Peter Stilwell as he read the morning edition of the Daily Telegraph. The object of his ire was a front page article with a big, bold title.

"Nancy Laplante killed by the Gestapo. Yeah, sure! What a nice bunch of hypocrites we make."

"Relax, Peter." Said George Townsend, sitting at his desk in the Athena Section. "You know as well as me that we will not be allowed to publicly tell the truth about this sordid affair."

"Sordid is the word, indeed." Added Douglas Wilson, standing behind Peter and reading the newspaper over his shoulder. "But what makes me really puke is that picture."

Peter nodded as he eyed the picture in question. It was one of the pictures taken by the American embassy official in Berlin, showing Nancy Laplante in a bed, her body covered with hideous torture marks and her face swollen and bruised. For someone who didn't know the real story, that picture could easily be interpreted as showing Nancy's dead body, photographed after she had been tortured to death. In fact, that was exactly what the article, the gist of which had been provided by officials from the War Office, was saying. No mentions were made of the bombing of Colditz Castle, or of Nancy's appearance in London to free her giant friend and the German women in the Tower of

London. The whole article had been written to provoke the maximum outrage and to inflame British public anger towards their enemies. Peter had to recognize grudgingly that the article was likely to be a success in that aspect. Throwing the paper away, he got up from his chair and stomped towards his office. With or without Nancy, they still had a war to win.

08:45 (GMT)

Sean Brady's pub, Northolt

England

Sean Brady put down the morning newspaper, which he had been reading in the kitchen of his pub, and started crying.

"Forgive me, Nancy. This was all my fault."

"I know, Sean."

Sean, completely taken by surprise, turned around in his chair to face Nancy Laplante, who had sneaked close to him from behind. She was wearing a dark gray uniform and a black helmet. She also had an impressive sword in her right hand. Sean looked briefly at the long, massive blade, then stared into Nancy's eyes, tears still rolling on his cheeks.

"You have every right to kill me, Nancy. I let my love of Ireland and my desire to see it free from British tyranny blind me into supporting those Nazis. I... I didn't want you dead, but I still betrayed you. Do as you wish with me."

Nancy, her sword firmly held at the ready, looked at him in silence for long seconds. The blade then went down, slowly. Nancy extended her left hand towards Sean and smiled gently.

"Sean, I forgive you, on one condition: that you follow me to a better life in the future, to work for me."

Sean got up slowly from his chair and hugged Nancy while sobbing.

"I will follow you in hell if you ask me, Nancy."

17:49 (Paris time)

Monday, July 7, 1941 'B'

French Resistance hideout

Farm 14 miles South of Paris, France

Jacques Bigot, discouragement and disgust visible on his face, threw down on the kitchen table the four newspapers he had just bought in the nearby village. His wife Mariette and Pierre Soulange, who was officially his farm hand, looked up in alarm from their bowls of clear cabbage soup.

"What's wrong, Jacques?" Asked Mariette, a bit of fear showing in her voice. The head of the local resistance cell shook his head in answer.

"Nothing to do with us, dear. Just read the front page of the Paris-soir newspaper."

Mariette took the folded newspaper and put it flat on the table in front of her. The picture of a famous woman, along with the title under it in bold letters, immediately attracted her attention.

"The She-wolf betrayed and killed by the British. How could they say that? The British radio news said on Friday that Brigadier Laplante was killed by the Gestapo."

"Well, either the BBC or these newspapers are lying. Unfortunately, the Paris-soir's facts seem to be quite solid. Read the article and tell me what you think of it."

Mariette started reading, suspicious at first: most French newspapers these days were either collaborating openly with the Germans or had to print the articles submitted by the German propaganda machine. The article of concern to her was however supported by numerous good quality pictures showing Nancy Laplante with the German staff of Colditz Castle and the castle itself, both before and after what appeared to have been a bombing raid of devastating power. Mariette read aloud a part of the article that was quite damning.

"Not content of stabbing France in the back in Mers el-Kebir one year ago, the British did not hesitate this time in deliberately murdering hundreds of their own captive soldiers, along with thousands of innocent German civilians, with the sole goal of killing Brigadier Nancy Laplante, apparently to prevent her from ever divulging her precious military secrets to Germany. Being pulverized by British bombs was thus the ultimate reward the Canadian time traveler got for helping so much the British with their war effort. Who will be able to trust the British after this latest act of treachery?"

Another picture at the bottom of the page upset Mariette. It showed two badly burned bodies lying in the ruins of the town of Colditz. One was that of an adult, the other that of a baby. The fact that the baby was German did nothing to make that picture less repulsive to Mariette. Whoever had written that article had produced a very convincing, powerful piece of news. Just then, Mary Coleman came in through the back door of the kitchen, having just returned from using the outhouse. The young British clandestine radio operator stopped in her track as the three French stared at her in a most uncomfortable way.

“What? Is there something wrong?” She said in her usual timid voice.

“You tell us, Mary.” Replied calmly Jacques Bigot. “Have a look at the latest copy of the Paris-soir.”

Mary, codenamed H el ene by the British Special Operations Executive, hesitantly took the newspaper from the table and read its front page slowly, going over it twice. Her face was pale and her hands were shaking when she looked up at Jacques.

“That is... impossible, unthinkable.”

“Unthinkable, yes. Impossible? No! The BBC never mentioned anything about Laplante being taken to Colditz.”

Mary, feeling suddenly a tremendous weight on her shoulders, sat heavily in a chair, a haunted look in her eyes.

“They could never do that. She was a heroine to me and to the British people.”

“And she was tortured to death by the Gestapo, without saying a thing, if the BBC is to be believed.” Replied Jacques. “A fitting end for a heroine. One thing is sure in my mind, though: the Germans certainly didn’t destroy Colditz, so the British had to do it. I also know that allied prisoners were held in there until at least very recently: my sister got a letter from her husband, held in Colditz, which was dated back from two weeks ago. At the very least, that makes the British guilty of killing hundreds of allied prisoners of war. Why would they ever do that, unless they had to get rid of someone who could cause them a lot of damage? Someone like Nancy Laplante, who knew everything about that war, including the dirty little secrets of everybody. That woman was our best hope for a quick end to this damn war. Now, she’s gone.”

Jacques’ last statement, made in a bitter tone, was too much for Mary Coleman. Unsure what to think now, she closed her eyes and started crying quietly.

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